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Prologue

A young girl was walking through a white corridor alone. This event, though mundane, was enough to catch the attention of those who'd gathered in the castle's reception room. It was as though time had stopped.

Her beauty was ethereal, as if God had crafted her every feature with great attention. Her hair looked like fine gold threads flowing freely over her shoulders, her skin was smooth and unblemished, her large, bright-green eyes sparkled, and her pure white dress swayed with every step.

Her name? Ellize, the living legend—the greatest saint to have ever graced the land of Fiori.

Looking at her was like resting one's gaze on an old master's painting. She exuded perfection from every angle. Simply existing in the same space as her brought with it a sense of accomplishment and pride.

Still, a dark emotion—guilt—soured the pleasure of those who were currently looking at Ellize. Gathered in the reception room were the kings, queens, ministers, and leaders that ruled over the countries of the world—in other words, those who'd betrayed the saint. They'd convinced themselves that they'd done it for her, for the world. Even if they had to suffer the stigma of dishonor, Ellize couldn't be allowed to die. And so, these people had betrayed her trust and locked her up.

Today, they'd returned to the saint's castle to accept their punishment. No one had done more for the world than Ellize had; no one had saved more lives or done more good. And yet, they'd betrayed her. Surely, the price for such treason was high.

However, the very person who'd suffered from that betrayal did not look angry. She simply smiled at the crowd.

"Please raise your heads," she said softly. "You haven't done anything wrong. I shall not blame you."

"But Saint! How can we atone like this? Please bestow a fitting punishment upon us..." the king of the Lutein Kingdom cried.

His country had recently been attacked by an army of monsters, and it would have been destroyed had it not been for Ellize's intervention. Nevertheless, he'd repaid that heavy debt with nothing but treachery.

He'd come here ready to be derided, to face Ellize's scorn. Surely she'd say that she'd never forgive him. Had the saint ordered him to die to atone for his sins, he'd have gladly slit his own throat—a sentiment shared by the rest of the royals in attendance, he believed.

Ellize did not demand blood, though. Instead, she smiled once more. "If you seek to atone... Well, accepting my forgiveness will be your penitence, then. If you throw a rock at me, I'll forgive you. If you stab me in the back, I'll forgive you. I'll forgive you, again and again, regardless of what happens to me, for I love this world and everyone in it," she stated.

At her words, the leaders of the world broke down crying where they knelt.

I will never betray her trust again, they swore inside their hearts. Whatever she needs, I'll do everything in my power to give it to her.



Ellize's mercy touched the hearts of everyone present in the room. They wept, thinking of how much they adored and respected their saint—the most outstanding, compassionate, and beautiful young woman to be born into this world.

Little did they know that the saint they revered so much...was nothing but the most cunning fraud in history!



Yo! Ellize here.

Once again, the looks of envy directed at me feel amazing! Oh boy, do I love this feeling!

I'm the gender-bender saint who transmigrated into the world of Fiori from the twenty-first century! What's up with the gender-bender part, you ask? Well, as you may or may not know, it's a common trope in light novels and the like. It actually refers to protagonists changing sex as a plot device, and has very little to do with trans identity. Plus—actually, let's skip the lengthy explanation! You probably get it already, right? My point is: I'm a man, but I ended up in a girl's body after transmigrating.

I still didn't really know what had happened to me, but after I'd died, I'd ended up in the game I was playing right before my death—Kuon no Sanka, a dating sim from hell that constantly offed its heroines. To be perfectly accurate, I hadn't really died—I'd stayed in a state of suspended animation for such a short time that only part of my soul had ended up transmigrating...or something. I know this doesn't make much sense, but it doesn't really matter. Just remember the important part: I transmigrated.

Anyway, instead of becoming the protagonist or one of his friends, I'd found myself in the body of Ellize—the fake saint and antagonist. What did I do to deserve that, huh?

In case you were wondering what kind of character Ellize was meant to be... Well, she was pretty much one of these noble villainess types that've been all the rage recently—only ten times worse! Villainesses usually had some sort of redeeming quality, and to be fair, most of the time the *true* villains were their

trashy-yet-handsome fiancés who tried to dump them after they'd taken one look at the heroine.

Ellize, on the other hand, was a piece of shit through and through. She had absolutely no redeeming qualities. She was trash. A living trash pile. The worst trash pile of the year. The biggest trash pile in existence. And I'd ended up transmigrating into that very piece of shit. *Life's tough sometimes*.

If you looked at things from a different angle, though, it was the perfect opportunity to fix this hellish dating sim. Most of its terrible storylines were Ellize's doing. All I had to do to lead my favorite characters toward a happy ending was to avoid being as trashy as her. *Simple, right?*

I'd fixed my appearance—hell, I was probably the most beautiful person in this world—and I'd made sure the saint had a stellar reputation by going around killing monsters and saving people. I might've overdone it just a teensy bit, but let's not dwell on that.

All that was left was to give Eterna—the real saint—her rightful place, give up my life to take down the witch, and the perfect ending I'd always dreamed of would be within my grasp. I'd be dead, sure, but I didn't really mind. I wasn't scared of dying. I'd already died once, and it honestly wasn't the big deal people made it out to be. I had never been all that attached to life, but after going through the whole ordeal once, my survival instinct had essentially disappeared altogether.

Getting to this point hadn't been a walk in the park, though. Not so long ago, I'd been betrayed and confined inside my castle by my own guards. Well, to be fair, they'd been spurred on by the royals. I was far less popular than I'd assumed. They'd all betrayed me! All of them!

As the dude from K*men Rid*r Bl*de once said: "HaVE YOu reAlLY bETrayED uS?!"

That said, I couldn't really blame my guards. Their duty was to protect the saint. I was nothing but a fake, so as far I was concerned, they owed me absolutely nothing. If anything, I was the one who was continuously betraying them by pretending to be someone I wasn't. I couldn't really complain.

Anyway, fast forward to now: while I'd decided not to blame anyone, the

royals somehow weren't satisfied. They'd decided to gather at my castle once more so they could kneel before me and beg for my forgiveness—which I'd already given them—properly.

Is this a rerun? I have a feeling I went through all this with Aiz already.

Anyway, I didn't think any of them were actually in the wrong, so I'd forgiven them again. And then they'd cried, just like Aiz—c'mon, we know how this goes. We've seen the previous run, move on.

Don't laugh, me... Don't laugh... I was currently trying my hardest not to burst into a fit of evil cackling befitting the god of the new world.

The royals asking for punishment was fine and dandy, but I doubted I even had the authority to punish them in the first place. It was easier to give them some bullshit about how I loved everyone and couldn't bear to punish them. I sure have a way with words, if I say so myself.

Someone who truly loved this world and everything in it wouldn't massacre monsters on the daily until they'd become a critically endangered species, but oh well! No one ever seemed to notice the obvious contradictions in my speeches anyway.

Besides a few hiccups, I was still doing pretty well. I just needed to get rid of the witch, Alexia—who was currently hiding in the basement of the Training Institute for Magic Knights of Alfrea like a rat—and I'd finally reach my long-awaited happy ending.

So...let's hurry back to the academy! The fake saint's witch-crushing RTA speedrun is about to begin! Wait, no, it's not a speedrun at all. I've taken my sweet time, haven't I?

Chapter 47: The Trembling Witch

The Training Institute for Magic Knights of Alfrea had a large basement. The teachers seldom entered it, much less the students, but it had been prepared to allow students to gain experience against real live monsters.

This underground facility was entirely covered in steel walls to make sure the monsters wouldn't be able to escape. It had a radius of around thirty meters and a high ceiling that stood over ten meters. Most monsters could unleash their abilities without being constrained by space (there were a few who were too large still, but there was no helping that).

The main reason the training facility had been built underground was to avoid innocent people getting hurt. Outside, a monster could overpower a student and flee all the way to the closest village. Even if it didn't reach a village, it could attack a traveling merchant or a worker. The school often received deliveries of food and other goods, after all, so such people were often found in close proximity.

In the past, this training had been completed outdoors, in arenas delimited by fences. Since that had changed, it was most likely because a tragedy *had* occurred, although no one was familiar with the details. Monsters could leap over fences, dig holes under them, or break them. A breach was far from impossible. *How* the monsters had escaped and what exactly had happened didn't really matter, though. The school had learned and changed its ways to avoid any future mishaps.

In this underground training facility was a secret stairway that not even the teachers knew about. Dias, the previous headmaster, had built it himself to shelter his master, Alexia. If you went down this flight of stairs, you'd first be faced with a stone door. Beyond this door were two stone statues, and between them, a pathway. After a few meters, the pathways would branch off into several small corridors that led to the witch's bedroom, kitchen, living room, toilet, and bathroom. There was also an antechamber where monsters

could stay.

The witch's bedroom was so luxurious that anyone who saw it would have trouble believing it was hidden deep within a basement. The spacious, rectangular room seemed to be straight out of a noble's mansion, with snakeskin wallpapers hiding the crude stone walls. Parquet covered the floor, and fancy rugs had been added. The room was also extensively furnished; it included a bed, a table, chairs, several bookshelves, and even a pendulum clock. Paintings, mostly of magnificent landscapes and wide blue skies, decorated the walls. The person who'd picked them—Dias, in this case—had obviously tried to make sure Alexia wouldn't feel trapped. You could feel his solicitude in his choices. He wanted her to live in the most pleasant environment possible.

Dias had hidden her right under the knights' noses. And what better place to hide? After all, who could have thought that the witch was hidden in the basement of the academy—the very institution that was tasked with raising knights that would go on to defeat her alongside the saint?

Alexia, the witch, was currently sitting on her bed and biting her fingernails, an annoyed look on her face.

Alexia was a gloomy woman. Her silver hair reached her lower back, but it had absolutely no shine. At first glance, it looked just like the gray hair of an old woman. There was no hint of life in her half-lidded eyes, and large dark circles rested underneath them. Her cheeks were sunken, and her skin was rough. Her lips were a strange shade of purple, and her nails had turned yellow.

Her beauty had faded, and those who'd laid eyes upon her in her prime would surely struggle to recognize the former saint. There were portraits and bronze statues of past saints at the academy. In these pictures, Alexia was a beautiful woman with lustrous silver hair—an accurate representation of what she'd looked like in her prime. Now, however, she was but the shadow of her former self. Even her clothing had changed. In the past, she wore pure white dresses, just like the ones Ellize wore so often. Now, she was clad in a pitch-black robe. She almost seemed to merge with the darkness as she sat silently on her bed.

It wasn't like witches *had* to trade in their white dresses for dark, villainous outfits. Their faces didn't necessarily have to look like that either. In fact,

several saints hadn't changed one bit after becoming witches. If the truth about the saints becoming witches hadn't spread so far, it was purely because the royals did an amazing job at muzzling those who expressed doubt. Alexia, however, looked like an entirely different person. Most probably wouldn't believe she was the saint who'd once saved the world.

"Dias, oh, Dias. Tell me, has that girl..." she whispered. "Has Ellize left the school yet? Did you drive her out? I know... You're the headmaster so you can expel her, can you not? You can, right?"

"My saint, Ellize has yet to notice your presence," the voice of the Stil's bird came. "You have already asked me to expel her, but I'm afraid I cannot do so. She's the saint. If I do something so conspicuous, she'll surely come to distrust me. She may even demand that I step down from my position as the headmaster. If I'm cast away, there won't be anyone left to protect you. Please be patient, my saint."

The bird was perched on the table, repeating Dias's message to Alexia.

These days, Dias didn't visit her at all. With Ellize at the academy, he couldn't risk it, he'd said. He'd told her he didn't want Ellize to follow him and uncover the truth.

"I know that, Dias. But how long are you going to make me wait? I can't help but worry she'll notice. I'm so anxious that I haven't had a good night's sleep ever since she showed up," Alexia said.

"I know that, Dias. But how long are you going to make me wait? I can't help but worry she'll notice. I'm so anxious that I haven't had a good night's sleep ever since she showed up," the bird repeated.

The bird could not understand the meaning of Alexia's words. All it knew to do was imitate the voices of stronger, bigger animals. The bird would surely repeat these words once more—to "Dias."

After she'd sent the bird away, Alexia laid down and wrapped herself in her blanket. She was scared of Ellize, the new saint. As a former saint herself, she could see clearer than anyone else that Ellize was a monster.

Ellize most likely hadn't noticed, but Alexia had personally seen her fight

once. She'd led monsters to attack a city when Ellize—who was twelve at the time, if memory served—had showed up. She'd slaughtered them all in a matter of minutes. Alexia had given up on her army and fled at once.

Ellize wasn't human; she couldn't be. She could fly and rain down blades upon her enemies. For some reason, the soldiers who'd picked up the blades of light she'd created had become strange too. On top of that, whenever a monster tried to attack her directly, its attack would be reflected right back at it tenfold. Ellize had trampled her army down like it was the easiest thing in the world.

Alexia knew that saints were stronger than most ordinary humans, and they were also immune to most sources of damage, but that was all there was to it. Saints weren't some sort of demigods.

Alexia was good at magic. That was how she knew that Ellize's magical powers made absolutely no sense. At twelve, she had already been a hundred times stronger than Alexia was. Five years had passed since that day. Ellize was now seventeen, and far from getting weaker, her powers had only grown with the years. The strength of a spell depended on the amount of mana you could pump into it. The same spell would be very, very different depending on whether you used ten points of mana or thirty. The way this all worked was fairly straightforward: the latter would be three times as powerful. In short, your mana capacity determined your firepower, and Ellize's firepower, at twelve, had been a hundred times that of Alexia's.

There was no way Alexia could ever beat such a monster. In fact, there was nothing in this world that could stand up to Ellize. Alexia didn't need to fight to realize that. From that day onward, she'd lived in fear, hidden in the basement.

Dias kept her up to date, but she couldn't believe what he told her. Ellize had overturned what several generations of witches had accomplished in a matter of years. She'd taken back an island witches had needed decades to invade in a *single* day. She'd killed an archmonster Alexia had been forced to avoid back when she'd been a saint for fear it would kill her. Meanwhile, Ellize had destroyed it in a mere *three seconds*. The more she heard, the more she realized her initial fear had been right: Ellize wasn't someone she could handle.

Alexia thought it was unfair. When she'd been the saint, the world had been a

dark, gloomy place. The responsibility for that dark age lay with Lilia, the saint who'd preceded her and had died without carrying out her duty. As a result, Alexia had been forced to overcome ridiculous odds in her quest to defeat the witch. The pressure she'd been forced to bear had been tremendous. The people had needed her to defeat the witch—they wouldn't have accepted failure. Plus, Griselda, the previous witch, had lived longer than most, since she'd gone unchallenged by Lilia. This meant she had far more underlings than most witches in history.

And yet, Alexia had managed to overcome her fears. She'd known she had to fulfill her duty, so she'd refused to listen to the little voice inside her head that screamed at her to run. She'd watched many of her comrades die, but in the end, she and Dias had prevailed—they'd fought and killed the witch.

All that awaited her after defeating Griselda, though, was a terrible betrayal. The king of the Bilberry Kingdom, Aiz, had trapped her in her own castle and had thrown monsters at her. In the end, these monsters had sided with her, and she'd been able to escape, but Alexia's entire world had shifted in an instant. She'd gone from being an acclaimed saint to a feared witch. Alexia had felt crestfallen, frustrated, and, more than anything, resentful toward those who'd betrayed her.

That didn't mean Alexia had let herself become the witch. She'd hid and resisted her compulsions. After all, if she were to truly become the next witch, those who'd betrayed her would be in the right. She'd refused to give them that. However, the deep-seated grudge she'd received from Griselda had continued to eat at her soul day after day. Becoming a witch didn't mean suddenly changing personalities overnight. They'd receive the previous witches' memories, and those dark emotions would slowly pile up within them until they'd devoured them whole. They'd see everything humans had done ever since the days of the first witch. They'd see their unsightly behavior. They'd feel the betrayal the other witches had experienced deep in their gut. And, eventually, their heart would be stained black. The white canvas that they'd been would be dragged through the mud until there was no hope of cleaning it up anymore.

A saint's heart was white—devoid of any impurity or stain. But no color was

easier to dye than pure white.

Alexia had been no exception. After she'd resisted with all her might for a certain time...she'd finally given in and started hating the world. She'd become the next witch.

She was in so much pain. She'd suffered so much and overcome her greatest fears, only to be betrayed and forced to fight once again—forced to resist the dark thoughts that spun inside her head. So how could others enjoy the peace without a second thought for her? She couldn't let that go.

If the world had made her go through all that suffering, then surely the world itself was in the wrong. Once she'd realized that, Alexia gave up on fighting and embraced her new condition.

After she'd become the next witch, though, Alexia had once again been forced to endure fear. She'd defeated Griselda, one of the most powerful witches in history, and was now faced with Ellize, the greatest saint in history.

She wanted to cry. Surely, the world was playing a cruel joke on her. Why did it hate her so much? It wouldn't even allow her to express her rage.

Why me? Why do I have to go through all this?

The coup de grâce had come when Ellize had transferred to the academy. From that point onward, Alexia had been plagued with insomnia.

She was scared Ellize would discover her if she made the slightest noise. She now flinched at the smallest of sounds. When would Ellize notice her? *Had* she noticed something already?

She wanted to flee, to teleport and disappear to somewhere far, far away. If she did so, though, she truly wouldn't have anyone left. The witch could only teleport alone. She wouldn't be able to bring the monsters that dwelled in the basement or Dias with her. What would she do then? She'd be left weakened and alone in a world that did not welcome her... A world shaped in Ellize's image.

The saint had completely reclaimed the land. There was nowhere left for Alexia to hide, no allies to turn to. They were all on Ellize's side now.

Even though she knew all that, Alexia couldn't take it anymore. Staying there was taking a toll on her in ways she couldn't bear. She needed to get out.

Please, please! Don't notice me, she'd pray every day, shivering under her blanket.

"I humbly greet you, Lady Alexia..."

"O-Oh... Hello, Shadow."

A shadow approached Alexia's trembling form. The shadow was a very peculiar being. Although Alexia dwelled in the basement, torches and lanterns still lit up her living quarters somewhat. A path of dim light illuminated the way through the corridors and into Alexia's bedroom so that the Stil's birds could find their way. However, the shadow remained pitch black. It was as though light couldn't reach it.

The walking shadow put its hand—could that dark lump truly be called a hand?—on Alexia's shoulder to comfort her.

"Shadow... I'm so scared. Why do I have to go through all this? Why does the world despise me so? I don't know what to do anymore. Help me, Shadow... Tell me what to do..."

"I believe you should flee at once. You should teleport."

"I-I can't do that! I have no allies outside! They'll find me in no time, and *she'll* come for me! Don't you know how that dreadful spell works? It's forbidden for a reason. I'll have to break my body apart... It'll reform when I reach my destination, but I'll lose all the strength I've acquired over the years. I'm already too weak to face her. What am I to do if the gap between us widens even more? It's foolish... Teleporting is out of the question."

The shadow silently looked at its master. Constant fear had robbed her of her beauty.

Had Alexia been able to compose herself and think, she would have realized that staying in the basement was a terrible idea. Ever since she'd transferred to the academy, Ellize had been using it as her base. According to Dias, she hadn't discovered the basement and didn't know about Alexia. However, that raised a question—why had the saint remained in the academy?

Even if she didn't know about the basement, she must have found some sort of hint. She had to know that the witch was hiding somewhere *in* or *near* the school, even if she didn't know where exactly. At any rate, remaining in the academy was suicide. The witch needed to escape as soon as possible and rebuild her strength somewhere else.

The issue, as Alexia had pointed out, was that the witch didn't have any other allies. Ellize had returned the land to human dominion, and Alexia was terrified of having to fend for herself alone in enemy territory.

Ellize had won their game of othello. The entire board was white, except for one piece, and she was about to pick it up and turn it over. There was no coming back from that.

Even so, Alexia couldn't bring herself to run away. Her fear had entombed her in this place.

"I understand, Lady Alexia... Would you allow me to get rid of your fears for you?" the shadow said.

"I-It's impossible! You can't beat Ellize!"

"Don't worry. I do not mean to confront Ellize directly. I know I am no match for that monster. I just think that she remains here because she believes that you, the witch, are here too. If we dispel her suspicion, she'll leave this place. I have a plan..." the shadow said, wiggling in an uncanny way. Its eyes—or rather, the dark space where its eyes should have been—gleamed.

Chapter 48: Oct, the Archmonster

The shadow—Oct—was an archmonster who served Alexia. He'd been born in the Gonzales Sea, in a place so deep under the surface that not even the rays of light could reach. The sea he'd been born in had been named after Sir Gonzales, a fine knight who'd thrown himself into the sea after he'd fought the first witch alongside Alfrea.

Oct was a puppet octopus—a species known to be as smart as a three-year-old child. Puppet octopuses' brains were larger than other octopuses, which gave them a disproportionately large head and made them comparatively slower and clumsier. The most notable thing about them, though, was the ingenious—yet dreadful—strategy they used to hunt. Puppet octopuses made up for their lack of fighting prowess by creeping up on their target silently and attaching themselves to their victims. They'd then use the secretion from their suction cups to turn them into obedient puppets they could control however they liked. They wouldn't immediately eat said puppet, though. They'd force it to hunt for them until it died of starvation. The puppet octopus would then devour the corpse before looking for its next puppet.

One day, many years ago, one such octopus was carried to the shore by the waves. Griselda, the witch at the time, had found it and turned it into a monster. That was how Oct had come to serve the witch.

While Oct was smart, he was no use in direct combat, and Griselda hadn't cared much for him. If he controlled another more powerful monster, he could be useful, but she'd failed to see the point. Why would she have gone through such a convoluted scheme when she could have simply ordered the more powerful monster to do her bidding?

Having Oct enslave key figures to deal a blow to the humans from the inside could have been helpful to some witches, but Griselda hadn't had a need for that. She'd already been so powerful that she hadn't needed to create dissension in order to attack. Lilia, the only person who had been able to

challenge her, had gotten herself killed foolishly. Griselda knew that her dominion would be unchallenged for years to come. All she had to do was grow her army of monsters during that time, and she'd be untouchable.

Griselda had believed herself so superior that she hadn't feared the next saint in the slightest. In the end, her arrogance had caused her downfall. Her failure to plan had left her at Alexia's mercy, and she'd died just as foolishly as Lilia.

Back when Griselda had been alive, she hadn't given Oct a second thought. She'd simply turned him into a monster and left him to his own devices.

As for Oct, after he'd become a monster, he'd followed his new instincts and started attacking humans. Oct had originally been an octopus, which meant that he'd never seen a human before. He'd assumed that humans had to be strong since they were much bigger than he was, so he'd defaulted to his usual strategy. He'd crept up on a fisherman and used his secretions to turn him into a puppet before sending him to attack a nearby village. What he hadn't expected, though, was that the fisherman would be overpowered by the guards and caught in the blink of an eye. Oct, who was stuck to the fisherman, had been captured alongside him.

On that day, Oct had learned that not all humans were created equal. He'd made a mistake and picked a weak human. Had he tried to attack the village with a bear or a tiger, things might have turned out very differently, he thought. It was too late, though.

Oct had been brought to King Aiz And Ai Bilberry XIII, who'd ordered him to be thrown in the basement of the saint's castle. The king was gathering monsters that he'd hoped would kill Alexia after she came back victorious.

Oct had been haphazardly placed into a jar filled with seawater and left to rot...until he'd masterfully opened the lid of the jar while the guard was napping. He'd escaped and stolen the master key from the guard on his way out. He'd proceeded to enter another cell by making use of his flexible body, latch onto a powerful monster, turn it into his puppet, and use the key to open the door of the cell.

After that, he'd opened another cell and forced the monster he'd controlled to fight the monster from that cell. He'd waited until they'd both exhausted

their strength, then devoured them. He'd instinctively known that killing other monsters and devouring them was the way to get stronger.

If, after rousing from his nap, the soldier had informed his superiors that the number of monsters had decreased, Oct's progress would have been nipped in the bud. There were obvious signs of fighting and fewer monsters in the cells. Oct hadn't taken that into account, and the guard had naturally noticed immediately. However, he'd decided not to report it. It would've meant admitting he'd been sleeping on the job. He would've been reprimanded, that much was certain, but what if he was also fired...or worse, executed? And so, the soldier submitted a false report, and no one else was any the wiser. The soldier's negligence and self-preservation instinct had saved Oct.

One day, Oct had a fateful encounter. Alexia, who'd just come back from defeating Griselda, had been locked up in the basement of the saint's castle, and the monsters who were being kept in the castle—including Oct—were let loose on her.

Oct hadn't attacked Alexia, though. He'd felt in his flesh that she was the master he ought to serve. So instead, he'd sided with her and ordered the other monsters to help them escape.

By then, Oct was already much more powerful than your regular monster. He'd become the group's undisputed leader, and everyone else abided by his command. Alexia had successfully escaped, and from that day onward, Oct started serving as her closest advisor.

He'd survived the process of becoming an archmonster and soon became as intelligent as an adult human. He also learned how to wield magic and used it to replicate the environment he knew best—the depth of the sea—around his body. That way, he became able to survive on the surface.

Fast forward to the present. Oct was currently slithering soundlessly inside the academy in the hope of saving his master.

The biggest threat to his master was Ellize. If Oct was able to kill her or control her, he could free Alexia from her fears. Sadly, Oct knew that this was impossible. He didn't think he could even touch Ellize.

Even putting aside her saintly powers, Ellize was terrifying. If he were to try to

latch onto her, he'd be sent flying by her strong magic defenses. And if, by some kind of miracle, he managed to get his suction cups on her, he'd be blown apart by her magic before his secretions could enter her bloodstream. He wasn't even sure his poison would work on her in the first place.

He might've had a shot if he'd been able to target her while she was asleep, but Layla, her guard, was always posted in front of her door. Besides, he'd heard from Dias that she always put up a powerful barrier around her room before heading to bed. Ellize was careful—she made sure not to leave herself open to attacks while she was defenseless. She hadn't let her outstanding abilities go to her head. She was, without a doubt, the hardest kind of person to face.

Oct had long since concluded that attacking her was meaningless. He had a different goal: diverting her attention away from the academy. He was convinced that Ellize had stayed in the academy because she thought Alexia was hiding there. He simply had to change her mind.

If the witch appeared somewhere else, Ellize would be forced to leave.

Obviously, Oct couldn't move the real Alexia. He wanted nothing more than for Alexia to teleport far away, but his master was against this idea. There wasn't much he could do about it.

Oct's current plan was to find another witch—a fake witch—who could pretend to be Alexia and wreak havoc somewhere away from the academy. Alexia would be able to flee while Ellize was busy with the fake.

That was why Oct was currently lurking in the shadows and looking for the perfect student to take on the role. He hoped to find someone like Griselda—haughty and arrogant, and if possible, hated by her peers. A student with too many friends wouldn't do. If her friends started arguing that she'd never do something like that, his plan would fail. He wanted someone who'd make the other students say, "No wonder. I always thought that girl was shady."

After observing the students for a while, a crying girl ran past him. Oct knew who she was as soon as he saw her silver hair—Eterna. She knew Ellize, and she'd been taken hostage by Farah in the past according to Dias's report. She didn't fit his current criterion at all. Ellize herself had told everyone that Eterna

wasn't the witch. However, she could be useful in another way—he could use her to lure Ellize out.

Oct resolved to look for a fake witch later and capture Eterna for the time being. He carefully approached her, hidden in the shadows.



A day had gone by since I'd given Verner and the others new weapons.

I was waiting to see who would come to me after school before I devised a plan. I couldn't help but worry about what I'd do if no one came, but there wasn't much I could do about it now. The decision was in their hands. To be fair, I didn't think someone who didn't want to fight would survive a battle against the witch. If they were unwilling, I'd prefer it if they didn't come at all.

If some of them *did* join me, though, I'd send them to the basement and move forward with my initial plan.

It was all Alexia's fault! If she'd acted like a proper final boss, everything would be over already. The fact that she was such a scaredy-cat made her even more difficult to face than a strong fighter.

If Verner and the others stormed the basement, though, they'd most definitely have to fight. It'd be tough for them. If things progressed like they had in the game, there'd be a couple of archmonsters down there. One in particular would be waiting for them in front of the boss room.

The name of that archmonster was Oct, although the witch herself called him Shadow. He used dark magic to continuously block light, wrapping himself in pitch-black darkness. He was kinda gross, honestly, and looked like some sort of ominous crawling shadow. He was Alexia's closest adviser and she relied on him heavily.

Actually, I'd seen him once after coming into this world. Three years ago, a weird shadow had tried to lure Verner to the dark side, remember? That was Oct. He was able to control living creatures, and he was most likely hoping to turn Verner into one of his hosts. The boy was outstanding, after all.

Before he'd become an archmonster, Oct had originally been an octopus. That was actually why he always shrouded himself in darkness—he was trying to

replicate his life at the bottom of the sea. In fact, his "shadow" was also full of water.

You may be wondering how an octopus managed to become an archmonster, but the critters were apparently very smart. They were ingenious enough to figure out how to twist the lid of a jar to escape, for instance. Apparently, octopuses had nine brains—so as to control each of their eight legs independently—as well as three hearts! Every single leg also came with over two hundred suction cups—more than one thousand six hundred suction cups in total—and each of them could not only feel, but also smell and taste its surroundings.

Oh, and there was another bit of info I remembered hearing—though it was kinda dubious—that claimed octopuses would have ruled the Earth instead of humans if they just lived a little longer. Anyway, my point was that octopuses were not only tasty but also ingenious, smart, tough, and...did I mention tasty?

Amazing, right? I wanna have takoyaki.

Now that I'm done singing his praise, I can also add that this monster—and the rest of the archmonsters in the basement—are small fries compared to me.

I could kill them all in a matter of seconds. Honestly, I was kinda tempted to do so, if only to cook the octopus and eat it.

Verner and his friends, on the other hand, would struggle against them. In the game, the witch only showed up after you were done taking out her minions. There was no telling what would happen in this world, though. The witch wasn't as relaxed and certain of her victory—she wouldn't be complacent.

If the witch immediately joined her minions to attack Verner and his party, they'd definitely have a hard time. I'd given them new weapons to make up for that, but... I guess I'll also buff them before sending them to the basement. It can't hurt.

The time for our appointment finally rolled around, and I heard a knock on the door.

"Please come in," I said.

Verner, random dude (real name: John), Fiora, Marie, Aina, Four-Eyed

Pervert, and...erm...the dude from last time came in. What was his name again? It had to do with dogs and...eating? Crunchy Doggybag? No... That doesn't sound right... Crunchybite Dogman? I don't know. I'm not sure anymore. Whatever. I'm more concerned about the fact that Eterna isn't here.

I wasn't expecting her to come, to be honest. She had no reason to risk her life at my request. She'd followed Verner to the academy out of worry, but Eterna had never dreamed of becoming a knight.

I completely understood her choice. If anything, I was surprised that the seven others had all come. I should be happy about that.

I was about to thank them for joining me here when Verner said, "Excuse me, Lady Ellize, but have you seen Eterna?"

I hadn't. And now that he mentioned it, I had a feeling I hadn't even seen her in class today. I had so many things to think about that I admittedly hadn't paid much attention to anyone else. I hadn't even taken the time to enjoy my daily dose of eye candy, so I wasn't entirely sure.

Was she sick? If so, I'd immediately head to her room and cure her.

"I asked Eterna's roommate, but she told me she hadn't returned to the dorm yesterday night," Verner said.

And that girl hadn't worried about it?!

Now, to be fair, it wasn't all that strange. Students often trained or studied until late in the night and only went back to their rooms in the middle of the night. Her roommate must've simply thought Eterna was busy and had gone to bed without waiting up for her. When she woke up and Eterna wasn't there, she must've assumed that she'd woken up early and left already. She'd probably only noticed that something was strange when she saw that Eterna wasn't in class.

"Do you know where she might be?" I asked.

"I've looked through all the places she usually visits, but I couldn't find her..." Verner said, dispirited.

Eterna was pretty much family to Verner. He must've been incredibly worried

about her.

"Do you think she might be hiding because she's feeling guilty for refusing to help the saint?" Layla asked.

"I don't think she would do that..."

Layla's theory made sense. Eterna could've immediately decided she wouldn't heed my request. Maybe she felt so bad about it that she decided to hide to avoid facing us. It wasn't impossible, was it? Or...did she want to show me that she'd never take orders from me? Maybe she'd thought something along the lines of, Don't try to involve me! This isn't my problem! You can deal with the dangerous stuff all on your own! I'll hide so that you guys can't force me!

If so, that was fine. I'd just have to apologize for being a terrible human being with no delicacy.

If Eterna was in trouble, though...the situation might prove difficult to handle.

All right. I don't have a choice, so change of plans. I need to make sure Eterna's safe before we can discuss anything else.

"Let's look for her," I said. "If nothing happened, it would be for the best, but I'd rather not take any chances."

I didn't think anything serious had happened to her, but you know what they say—better safe than sorry, right?

The search for Eterna starts...now!

Chapter 49: A Poor Imitation

Right after I'd launched the search for Eterna, I made my way to the pond behind the school. Sure, I could've wasted my time looking through the entire school...but why would I bother with that when I knew a much more convenient method?

I approached the pond. The area was incredibly quiet, as though no one was there. I rested my palm on the surface and poured some mana in. After a couple of seconds, a turtle's head surfaced.

"Why, hello. Did you have business with me, Ellize?"

"Yes. I need your help."

"Sounds like something happened."

The turtle I was currently engaging in conversation with could see everything that happened all over the world. However, she only had one brain and obviously couldn't process all of that information at once. Thus, she was only aware of the events she actively observed. To give you an example, if she were to observe New York, she wouldn't know what was happening in Tokyo at the same time. Another good way of putting it was to think of places like they were TV channels. As a viewer sitting on your couch, you were free to put on any channel you liked—you had access to all of them. However, once you picked one, you couldn't simultaneously watch all the others. You could either watch the game or the TV show you liked, but not both.

That was also why the witch's teleportation ability was so tricky to handle. Even if the witch put up a barrier, Profeta could technically still find her. She simply had to look for a place she *couldn't* observe. Besides, our resident turtle was good at making predictions, which could help her figure out where the witch was. The issue was, predictions and estimations weren't infallible—far from it. In the event that Profeta failed to guess where the witch had teleported, she'd have to check the *entirety* of Fiori until she found a spot she couldn't observe.

Anyway, my point was: the turtle's abilities were very handy, but not all-powerful. Profeta wasn't omniscient.

As it turned out, Profeta had been looking at some place other than the academy. She would've known exactly what had happened otherwise.

"Yes. I'm afraid we have a missing person situation on our hands," I said.

"I see. I shouldn't have been watching Turtalyn and Turtleo's lovers' quarrel."

What in the world are you looking at?! This is so not the time for that crap! Besides...isn't it pretty messed up to snoop on other peop—erm, turtles'—marital issues?

Whatever. Profeta's twisted personality wasn't my business. I just needed her to use her clairvoyance for something more useful.

"You know who Eterna is, right? Could you help me find out where she is at the moment?"

"All right."

As expected, Profeta didn't need me to explain who Eterna was. She already knew I was a fake, which meant she most likely knew who the real saint was as well.

The turtle closed her eyes, and after a few moments spent "looking," she opened her mouth and spoke. "I found her. Something strange is happening, though."

"Something strange?" I repeated.

"She's at the school, but...she's stuck in a weird place."

A weird place, huh? Did she get stuck inside somebody's locker?

"She's in...a hidden passage? Yes, that's what it is—an empty space in the outer walls of the academy. Eterna's locked up there. She's not alone. Several students are trapped with her."

A hidden passage? I didn't even know there was one. I guess it's yet another modification that Dias made while abusing his authority as the headmaster.

I thought Eterna was the only one missing, but as it turned out, other

students had disappeared too. I had absolutely no idea why they'd been abducted, but I could figure that out after catching the culprit. Even if I didn't manage to get their objective out of them, I still had to rescue the students.

"Do you know who's responsible?"

"There's...a girl shrouded by some strange darkness. She seems to be the culprit."

"Is it Alexia?"

"No. Alexia is still in the basement."

A girl shrouded in darkness, huh? I was obviously inclined to believe that was the witch. In fact, without Profeta, I would've assumed she was Alexia. I'd never met her, after all.

I'd seen her in the game, of course, but colors never quite looked the same in real life. As long as her hair color and outfit were similar enough to the illustrations, I probably would've mistaken her for Alexia.

I mean, I'd even thought I was Eterna for a while even though our hair color is nothing alike.

"Oh," Profeta said, "she's on the move. She's using the secret passage to head toward the rooftop. She's grabbed the other students with tentacles made of darkness. She's going to take them with her."

I had no clue what the culprit was trying to achieve, but if she was going to the rooftop, she wouldn't be hard to find.

Perfect. I'll just follow her there. No, wait—I'll arrive before her and conceal myself with my light magic!

"Thank you, Profeta."

"You're going to them, aren't you? You probably don't need me worrying about you, but be careful, Ellize."

After thanking the turtle, I flew toward the rooftop.

Sorry, but I'll be solving this case before you get to do anything, Miss Culprit.

A female student was walking toward the rooftop. The name of the young girl Oct had chosen to stand in for the witch was Elizabeth Ibris. She was no beauty, but she wasn't ugly either. She was an ordinary girl with unremarkable monolid eyes and an unremarkable nose—neither particularly big nor small. Her face wasn't quite symmetrical, and her teeth were crooked. Her light brown hair went down to her hips, and she wore a flower that looked very much like the one Ellize always had in her hair. Hers was already withering, though.

Elizabeth looked up to Ellize. She both adored and hated her, for she was jealous of her. At first, Elizabeth had only envied her. She'd met her for the first time at a ball. The young girl had been eleven then, and she hadn't been able to take her eyes off Ellize. She'd wanted to become just like her.

And so, the girl had started imitating the way Ellize spoke. She'd grown her hair out and decorated it with a flower. At first, it had been truly innocuous—a child playing pretend. There was a saying: "fake it 'till you make it." The girl had tried to become like Ellize, so she'd decided to imitate her appearance first. It wasn't all that weird, especially not for an eleven-year-old girl.

However, as she grew older, Elizabeth's hair—which had been blonde when she was a child—gradually darkened until it became a light brown. When she looked at herself in the mirror, she couldn't see Ellize anymore. It shouldn't have come as a surprise—she wasn't Ellize, after all. Different people had different appearances; that was a matter of course.

Most kids would have taken this reality check in stride, realized that they were their own person, and discovered that things were just fine that way. Elizabeth, however, did not react that way. Her admiration had long since turned into a twisted feeling she couldn't ignore.

The little girl who'd first wished to "become just like Ellize" now thought it was unfair that she wasn't Ellize herself. Everything would've been better if I were you, she'd think.

This twisted feeling had only grown after she'd started attending the academy in an attempt to get closer to Ellize. She could feel her heart break whenever she looked at the saint.

Why aren't I you? she'd think. If I'd been born to different parents, I might've

been you.

Elizabeth started convincing herself that the only reason she wasn't Ellize was that she'd been born in the wrong place. Ellize's beauty could have been hers. No, it *should* have been hers.

The worse she felt, the more her mind twisted reality to bring her some sort of comfort. She hid in her delusions to avoid facing the truth. She dreamed about a world where *she* had been born as Ellize. The applause and adoration were hers. The glory was hers too. Whenever she lost herself in her reveries, Elizabeth was truly happy.

Eventually, her delusions started going too far, and the line between reality and daydream blurred.

I'm the real Ellize, so why is she being revered as the saint?! She stole my glory! My name! She's a crafty snake! I'm the real deal! She's nothing but a fake imitating me!

Astonishingly, Elizabeth had started believing that she was the real Ellize. It was completely illogical, but she was adamant. Elizabeth had become completely unable to distinguish between her fantasies and reality.

She behaved like she was the saint, and she'd somehow convinced herself that she looked just like Ellize. She also spent a good chunk of her time spreading rumors about the "fake" saint. She greeted her classmates with her angelic—according to herself, at least—smile every day, and assured them she would protect the world for them.

Needless to say, her classmates all thought she was a disrespectful clown. Her "angelic" smile was more of a creepy grin and her way of speaking—a poor imitation of Ellize's—didn't suit her in the slightest. She was the picture of hubris. No one wanted to be friends with someone like her. The Training Institute for Magic Knights of Alfrea was an institution created to train knights who'd serve the saint. Insulting the saint all day obviously did nothing to make you popular with that kind of crowd.

Elizabeth had ended up isolated—a nuisance, as far as everyone else was concerned. In fact, word of her outrageous behavior had even reached the ears of her parents. They'd sent a heartfelt apology letter to the school and had

requested that their daughter be allowed to drop out. The school had immediately accepted, and Elizabeth was to be formally expelled at the end of the month.

Elizabeth's father had also sent a letter to his daughter, where he'd told her in detail how ashamed he was in a very colorful way. Elizabeth's mind had only become more twisted.

Why won't anyone understand me, even though I'm Ellize? Even though I love this world and everyone in it so much...

Elizabeth had started to hate everyone around her. Although it might have sounded quite contradictory, it most definitely wasn't. Elizabeth had only convinced herself that she loved everyone. She did not. In fact, she'd never really considered the world as a whole. She'd simply thought that Ellize would likely love everyone, and so she must too. Even though Elizabeth herself was no longer aware of it, it was all an act.

I'm so jealous. I hate her so much. If only Ellize didn't exist... Then I would be Ellize. I'd be the one basking in glory.

The very premise of her reasoning was mistaken, but that did nothing to stop Elizabeth from despising Ellize. It went without saying, but Ellize's position and glory wouldn't have fallen into her lap, even if Ellize were to suddenly disappear...or if she had never existed, for that matter. Elizabeth Ibris wasn't Ellize. She was an entirely different person.

If—and it was a purely hypothetical *if*—Elizabeth had been born as Ellize, would she have basked in fame and glory? If Fudou Niito, the irregular, hadn't wandered into this world, and Elizabeth's soul had been the one to enter Ellize's body, would she have been as loved and respected as the current Ellize?

Obviously not. She would have gotten drunk with power. The fake saint's every whim would be satisfied—she got to be as selfish as she wanted. Elizabeth would have grown arrogant and twisted, and she would have surely turned into the worst saint in history. She would have dirtied the name of the saint until people lost faith and hated her. She would have wasted her natural beauty by indulging herself. Her guards would have given up on her. Eventually, she would have been overthrown by Verner and Eterna...and died a dog's

death.

Naturally, Elizabeth couldn't see that. How could a girl who couldn't even tell the difference between her fantasies and reality assess herself accurately? All that made Elizabeth the perfect target. Besides, she was supposed to leave the academy as it was.

It was all very convenient for Oct. No one would think it strange if that girl was revealed to be the witch. She wasn't quite threatening enough, but Oct could fix that. He simply had to help her look the part. The most important thing was that she had no friends and that everyone despised her. She'd also been bad-mouthing the saint every chance she got—a nice perk, as far as Oct was concerned.

Everyone must've wanted that girl to disappear. She always disrespected their dear saint, after all. Oct was certain that most of them secretly hoped that Elizabeth was an underling of the witch. It would've given them an excuse to take her out and shut her up for good. Surely, that thought could easily shift to become, I wish she were the witch so I could kill her.

People were always eager to believe convenient new pieces of information that fit with their worldview, even if they weren't logical. Even if a little voice inside their head were to tell them that Elizabeth couldn't possibly be the witch, they'd be inclined to believe it regardless, just as long as they wanted it badly enough. Oct knew that before long, the students—no, the entire school—would simply think, *I knew it*. In fact, getting as many of them as possible to think that was his job. Humans were weak toward mob mentality. They'd easily discard their own doubts to fit in with the group.

Ellize was smart. She'd surely figure out that something was up and understand that such a weak girl couldn't possibly be the witch. But would she still be able to stand her ground if everyone around her was convinced of the opposite? If everyone thought that Elizabeth was the witch, Ellize wouldn't be able to ignore her. And, before long, the group's perception would alter Ellize's own. A thousand fools could make a sage doubt himself.

Therefore, Oct's goal was simple: he needed to put on a perfect show and get everyone to believe. He'd bring Elizabeth to the rooftop—where everyone

could see her—and display dark magic. He'd use his tentacles to bully the poor students he'd brought. Hell, he might even kill one or two of them for the sake of credibility.

Then, he'd run away with Elizabeth before Ellize could get there and leave her to handle the outrage. They'd surely push her to go after the witch, and Ellize would be forced to leave the academy.

To carry out the first step of his masterful plan, Oct went to the rooftop. If he wanted people to look at Elizabeth, he'd need to do something eye-catching. And so, Oct unleashed a blast of dark magic toward a group of students training on the sports ground.

Chapter 50: The Fake Witch

I was hidden on the rooftop with Layla when the culprit recklessly barged in with Eterna and the other students in tow. Just as the turtle had said, it was a female student. A weird cloud of darkness was stuck to her back, though, and writhing, black tentacles were coming out of it. They'd restrained Eterna, as well as five other unconscious students.



Tentacle play with Eterna, huh? I like that! Dammit, I'm too early. I should have been five—no, ten minutes late!

Anyway, the most important person here, the culprit, was... *Yeah, she's pretty plain*.

To be honest, I'd always thought that the girls in dating sims would all be as cute—if not cuter—than idols. Well, I'd been completely mistaken. If anything, there were more pretty girls in modern-day Japan!

I probably should've seen that coming.

The continuous food shortage meant that people grew up without eating balanced meals. Besides, research about which vitamins were good for the skin or for the hair didn't even exist here. There weren't any supplements or cosmetics. *Oh, there's a pervert called Supple Ment, though.*

In my previous world, you could find a decent skincare routine on the internet in all of five minutes. How could the people of Fiori compete with that?

That said, the lucky few of Fiori were so beautiful that they didn't even need skin care. Take Layla and Eterna, for instance—their faces were naturally perfect. I...well, Ellize really, also fell under that category.

The only difference was that I used my modern knowledge and my magic to cheat my way into having perfect skin and hair, making my shell even more flawless. I was a piece of shit on the inside, but I never made any compromises when it came to my appearance! It was nothing short of perfection—I was a multilayered, gold-plated pile of rusty scrap metal. Then I was covered in gold leaf for good measure. The defects wouldn't show even if one or two coats were scraped off.

Role-playing as the saint was pretty fun, and I took it very seriously.

Anyway, getting back to random dudette over there. That thing on her back bothered me the most. At first glance, it seemed like she was just using some sort of dark magic spell, but I had a feeling it was something else entirely.

It's so dark that I can't really see, but there's something stuck to her back, isn't there? It's not just a shadow. I guess I'll find out if I rip it off her back.

I was about to do that when random dudette suddenly fired a blast of dark magic at the sports ground.

Whoa. What're you doing?

I immediately intercepted it with light magic and flicked it right back at her—like a boomerang.

"Who did that?!"

Random dudette was furiously looking around but, sadly for her, I was currently hidden. She couldn't see me.

Though I guess she knows someone else's on the roof now. Whatever. Capturing her is more important than observing her.

I figured there was no point in hiding anymore, so I disabled my camouflage and took a step forward.

"The saint... Ellize! Impossible! Why are you here?!"

Random dudette took a step back. The shadow on her back started moving restlessly, and the tentacles wiggled.

Oh! Am I finally gonna witness some nice tentacle porn?! Nooo, please don't! No one will benefit from that! Nah, for real, calm down, dudette.

"Let me return the question. What are you doing here?"

Answering her question with another question felt like the most appropriate option for the time being. I couldn't really tell her the truth—which was that I'd come here because a turtle had dropped a major spoiler.

The turtle's clairvoyance was too good of an asset for me to reveal. I didn't want the witch targeting Profeta.

"That much is obvious..." random dudette said. "The world has forgotten how terrifying the witch is. I'm here to remind you all that you should fear me!"

What in the world is she saying? We've forgotten how terrifying the witch is? Why's that any of your business? Are you a die-hard fan of hers? Hang on. She said that we should fear her, didn't she?

"You're making it sound like you're the witch," I answered.

"Because I am. I'm the witch, Elizabeth! You came to this academy to look for me, did you not?"

?

???

Huh?! The witch's name is Alexia. If you're trying to pretend to be the witch, at least introduce yourself as her. Are you dumb or what?!

I really wanted to let out a big sigh and make fun of her, but I had to keep it together.

Breathe, me. You're the saint. Act like it.

Layla sighed. "After role-playing as the saint, you're pretending to be the witch now? I already knew you were a disrespectful brat, but you've outdone yourself."

She looked positively pissed off. She'd already reached for her sword.

Scotterbrain! Stay! Be good!

I had no idea what was going on with this chick, so I hoped to hear a bit more before Layla beat her up.

Actually, if you know who Miss Random Dudette is, why don't you just tell me, Scotterbrain?!

"Do you know who she is, Layla?"

"She's just a fool. She's definitely not worth your time, Lady Ellize. I'll get rid of her for you."

"I'd really like it if you could tell who she is, Layla," I said again.

Layla hesitated before finally answering me. "She's Elizabeth Ibris—a secondyear student and the second daughter of Count Ibris. She's to be expelled at the end of the month."

I could feel the disdain dripping in Layla's voice. She must really hate her. How had a student managed to piss Layla off so much? Jeez, Random Dudette, did you steal her panties or something? If so, could you give them to me? I'll treasure them, I promise.

I couldn't take them, though, could I? My perfect image would crumble in an instant if word got out that I kept my subordinate's panties.

"What did you mean when you said she role-played as the saint?"

"It's truly not worth your time, Lady E—"

"Layla."

"This foolish girl tells anyone who will listen that she's the real saint. She's infamous for copying everything you do, Lady Ellize. The flower she wears is a crude imitation. If that was all, it would still be fine, but she also pretends that every achievement of yours is, in fact, hers. She claims that you're taking credit for things she has done. If she wasn't the daughter of a count, I would have already run her through with a sword myself. She's an unsightly, disrespectful girl."

All riiiight. I finally understood. That girl had been imitating me, huh? Did that really matter, though? Copying the behavior of someone you admired was completely normal. Tons of people copied the hairstyle or signature pose of famous athletes. If anything, hearing that someone admired me enough to copy me made me feel pretty good. Besides, I used to do that stuff too when I was younger. I would imagine myself in the place of my favorite baseball players and pretend the applause and cheers were all for me.

Anyway, now that Layla'd mentioned it... Yeah, her white flower does look a lot like mine. Hers is starting to wither, though.

By the way, the flower I always wore was real. I'd done...stuff...with my magic to make sure it wouldn't wither, so it was probably the only eternal flower in this world. It was my way of wishing for a different ending. I was in the world of *Kuon no Sanka*—the *Eternal Scattering Flowers*—after all.

Oh yeah, my flower wasn't purely decorative either—it also acted as a mana tank. I was wearing an angelo—a particular type of flower that naturally stored mana in its petals. One petal could amass around a hundred MP. One angelo had seven petals, which meant I had around seven hundred MP just lying around in my hair. I didn't think I'd ever need that mana, but you know what they say—better safe than sorry, right?

Random fact—we had the similarly named angelonia flowers on Earth, but the flowers here didn't look like them at all. Angelos had white petals that spread out as if to form a heptagon. They were incredibly popular for their mystical appearance, but sadly, they withered very fast after blooming.

Why mystical, you ask? Because in this world, heptagons were believed to be charms against evil spirits. The number seven itself was also supposed to be auspicious because of the number of magic attributes. There were technically eight of them: fire, water, earth, wind, thunder, ice, light, and darkness, but if you removed the inauspicious one—darkness, that is—you'd end up with seven.

Anyway, like I was saying, the flower on random dudette's head was already beginning to wither, but, uh...it wasn't an angelo. It was a lucifero—a type of flower that looked almost identical to angelos.

It could be difficult to tell them apart at first glance, but luciferos had eight petals. Because of that, they were said to bring misfortune. Their petals didn't stock mana, and their pollen was toxic. It wasn't potent enough to kill anyone, but long exposure would lead to hallucinations. Apparently, once they were intoxicated, people wouldn't be able to tell the difference between their hallucinations and reality anymore! Pretty scary, right? From what I'd heard, lucifero pollen was even used to make drugs in some places. Unlike angelos, luciferos also bloomed for a fairly long time.

Did that girl go crazy because she wears such flowers in her hair all day long? I thought they were supposed to be harmless so long as you didn't consume the pollen, though...

"As it would seem, she's now decided to pretend to be the witch. How ridiculous," Layla snorted.

Dang, Miss Layla, you're being savage! We can let the fact that she imitated me slide, it's no big deal! She didn't even make any profit.

Pretending to be the witch was a big no-no, though, especially in front of a knight. It was like bringing an airsoft gun or a realistic fake knife to a police station full of armed cops and screaming, "I've just killed ten people, and you're next!" The cops definitely wouldn't laugh at the prank.

Random dudette cackled. "You don't believe me, do you? That's fine, I'll make you. Behold my powers!"

She extended her hand and two tentacles flew at us.

You're really into tentacle porn, aren't you? I can respect that. While I'd love to see you have a go at Layla, I absolutely refuse to have these things touch me. I'm just into watching, thank you very much!

I raised my hand, ready to blow the tentacles away, when...

"I won't let you touch a hair on Lady Ellize's head!" Layla screamed, jumping in front of me and using her sword to deflect the tentacles.

Scotterbrain, you're in my way!!!

The tentacles didn't relent. They hit the guard of Layla's sword and knocked it out of her hand. They immediately lunged at me, but I used a blade of light to protect myself. I felt my magic make contact with something solid. Sure enough, something hit the floor. The dark fog that covered the fallen piece of the wiggling appendage disappeared, and I got to have a good look at what had attacked me: a delicious-looking piece of octopus tentacle.

Oh! Okay... I get it now.

"I understand now. I know what you are," I said.

I can see right through you! Hehe, I'm so smart!

I used light magic to dispel the black fog that was still covering the girl. Just as I'd expected, a gigantic octopus, as big as a person, was coiled around her.

I knew that octopus. He was the mini-boss you had to face in front of the boss room—the archmonster that had tried to kidnap Verner three years ago. He was now controlling random dudette and making her pretend to be the witch.

The leg I'd cut had already started regenerating itself. That's amazing! It means this guy could provide me with an endless supply of takoyaki ingredients! That's super eco-friendly!

"A monster!" Layla exclaimed.

"He's an archmonster," I explained. "And I think I understand what he's trying

to do. I believe his goal was to use Elizabeth to lure us out of the academy."

The witch's name was Alexia. If that monster wanted us to think that this girl was the witch, he should've made her introduce herself as Alexia, or else his plan was doomed to fail. That said...we were only able to realize that because we *already* knew who the witch was. Obviously, the octopus didn't know that we were aware of Alexia's identity. That was why he'd made such a terrible mistake. As far as the octopus was concerned, revealing Alexia's identity would've been a mistake, so his choice made sense. Unfortunately for him, his decision had led to his plan crumbling before it had even really started.

"I was wondering what you'd say... But you seem to have recognized the archmonster serving me. You must understand that I'm the witch now," random dudette said—or rather, the octopus forced her to say.

The octopus was still trying to sell us his story. It wasn't going to work, though. We knew Alexia was the witch, and he'd very kindly informed us that this girl wasn't Alexia. Case closed.

Still, the archmonster didn't seem to have realized that we knew. I could exclaim, You won't fool me! I know that Alexia's the witch! But that would be pointless, not to mention dangerous. I didn't know if there were any more spies left, and random dudette could very well be carrying a listening device...or the magical equivalent of it, anyway, since I doubted the technology existed here. I was pretty confident I'd notice if the witch was using the same kind of spell I did—the ones that allowed me to pick up sound from a distance—but I couldn't be a hundred percent sure that she wasn't.

That stuff always happened in manga, right? Villains would be so certain of their victory that they'd start blabbering about their plans for no reason until, ultimately, they failed. *The dead can't speak, so I'll tell you about my plan before sending you to hell*, they'd say before giving out super crucial pieces of information.

I wasn't about to become a monologuing villain.

I'll just make something up to avoid giving out any information.

"You probably cannot hear it...but this poor child is crying out for help."

I also can't, but whatever.

That was my usual modus operandi. I always pretended I could hear someone calling out for help. Thanks to the game, I knew tons of things I wasn't supposed to know. If I pretended it was just a lucky guess every time, people would start questioning me, so I usually defaulted to this excuse. And today was no different! I wouldn't mention Alexia at all and put all the blame on random dudette.

Yep. I didn't figure things out because I already knew who the witch was. Far from it! I'm only here to help this random chick because she called for me inside her heart, or whatever.

For some reason, tears started flowing out of random dudette's eyes. LMAO.

Chapter 51: Vermin

Now, now, I don't really want to spend too much time dealing with this small fry. Let's finish this quickly.

Mister octopus—I don't mean to be rude, but you're just a random obstacle meant to sit in front of the boss room. I'm gonna cut you in pieces, cook you, and turn you into a nice plate of takoyaki! Wait. Can I even make takoyaki in this world?

In Japan, you could just buy takoyaki mix at the supermarket. Here, I'd need to make the batter from scratch using flour... Not to mention flour itself was hard to come by...

Whatever, I'll destroy him first and sweat the small stuff later.

Random dudette—or rather, the octopus—clicked her tongue.

The octopus must've noticed I was starting to get serious, because he hid behind the girl's back. He maneuvered his tentacles to put the students he'd dragged along, including Eterna, in front of them. Hey! That's not fair!

Actually, he was using the six students he had caught—as well as random dudette—to protect himself from all sides. He would only be able to use two of his eight tentacles to fight, but he could count on a circular meat shield protecting him from all 360 degrees. He'd even used a student to cover the top of his head!

Meat shields can be a bit annoying to handle, but that won't help you, you know? I have a hundred ways to deal with that.

"Don't move, Ellize! If you take a single step, they're dead meat. Slowly put your hands behind your back."

I walked right past the octopus while he was threatening me with the most cliché lines ever and got behind him. I was using the very strategy I'd used in the past to trick my knights. In the octopus's eyes, I was helplessly following his orders, unable to disobey for fear the hostages would be hurt. Needless to say,

that Ellize was nothing but a trick of the light.

The archmonster's human wall wasn't exactly airproof, so I fired ice magic through the gaps.

To survive on land, the octopus needed to continuously use water magic to create a bubble around himself. If I could simply freeze that water, it would be game over for him. It only took one second before the hostages were released. I canceled my illusion and my stealth mode. It probably looked like I'd teleported to Layla.

"L-Lady Ellize, what in the world...?"

"I didn't want the hostages to get hurt, so I had to cheat a little," I said.

I wanted to keep my cards hidden, so I didn't explain the details to Layla. Never reveal your tricks!

I hadn't planned for any of this to happen, but I was pretty happy that the octopus had willingly left the basement. That left me with one less thing to worry about when I'd send Verner and the others to the witch. They wouldn't have to face the mini-boss on top of the final boss.

It was about time I worried about random dudette, uh... What was her name again? Isabel? No. Elizabeth, maybe?

Whatever, it doesn't matter.

She was sitting on the floor, befuddled. I held out my hand in front of her.

"It must have been hard for you... Are you all right?" I asked.

Her face wasn't really my type, but if she copied everything I did, she was probably a fan of mine. You should always be nice to your fans.

Random dudette grabbed my hand with both of hers, and after staring at my palm for a couple of seconds, she started rubbing it.

Huh? What do you want? I don't have any treats for you.

"Ah, your hand is so white and soft... Your fingers are so pretty and delicate..."

For some reason, the girl was literally panting as she rubbed my hand all over.

Then, she stood up and embraced me. She started touching my hair, my waist...everything.

"Ah, thank you. Thank you so much... I was waiting for someone to save me that whole time, but my voice wouldn't come out. I would never have done that otherwise. As the saint, how could I ever pretend to be the witch? That's insane."

Huh? What's she on about?

I supposed that's what Layla had meant when she'd told me that this girl liked to role-play as the saint. To be honest, I was a little impressed. She'd only narrowly escaped death, and she was already reprising her role.

"Your hair is so soft, and your waist is tiny... Ah, so that's what the saint is like, huh? Why? Why aren't I you? I should have been the one born with this hair, this face, and this body... So why? You've heard my voice, right? That means you must know I'm the real saint, right? You get it, right?"

Ooookay? It was my first time meeting someone like her. The only thing I "got" right now was that she was absolutely insane. Maybe I shouldn't have saved her...

I'd relied on that same pattern of pretending to hear someone's voice too many times. Sometimes, you'd meet people who reinterpreted and twisted your words until they fit their narrative. That'll teach me to speak without thinking.

"You should give everything to me... Your hair, your nails, your face, your body...give them all to me! I want to be the saint too. It's fine, isn't it? You don't mind, right? I'm sure you don't! I'm the saint, so it's only natural that—"

I was wondering what to do with the weird girl patting me all over when Layla grabbed her head and pulled her off me. She threw her to the ground like she was handling a full garbage bag.

"That's enough, vermin!"

Aren't you going a bit overboard, Scotterbrain? That girl's a noble lady from a great house, isn't she? Scotterbrain's from an even more influential family, so I guess she has no reason to care about that, huh? No, wait! That doesn't change

the fact that she just manhandled a teenage girl!

"Not only have you disrespected Lady Ellize countless times, but now you're also assaulting her?! I won't let this slide any longer. You're guilty of lèsemajesté! I'll dole out your punishment and make your filthy head roll on the floor myself!"

Random dudette was sitting on the floor and staring at Layla blankly as if she didn't understand what was going on.

Layla unsheathed her blade and thrust it at the girl.

Random dudette seemed to snap out of it. She crawled back and exclaimed, "Ah, w-wait! P-Please, Layla, could you calm down? Y-You're my knight, the leader of my guard! You really can't do something like that! Can you please recall all those times we fought side by side... Pretty please? Remember how we stood up for the weak together!"

Random dudette had suddenly decided to speak politely, even throwing in a "please" or two. *Is she imitating me? I'd never whine like a little girl and say "pretty please," though.*

In fact, the only reason *I* was so polite all the time was because I didn't want to speak like a girl, but also felt weird talking like a man with that face. The easiest way to get out of this predicament was to keep a professional and neutral tone at all times. My manner of talking was a compromise of sorts.

"Shut up..." Layla growled with her teeth gritted. She was beyond herself with rage.

Random dudette squealed.

Whoa. I've never seen Layla so mad.

I almost couldn't believe Layla was making such a face. She looked like someone who'd just found a gigantic cockroach crawling at their feet. Her face was a strange mix of visceral anger and disgust which only that sort of vermin could provoke. Her eyes were so cold, they looked like they could burn a hole through the girl. *Ice burns are the worst, they say.*

"I'm done," Layla said. "I can't take it anymore. Her grating voice is

unbearable. I'll cut her head off and get this over with."

Uh-oh. Layla's snapped.

If Layla killed random dudette now without a trial, she'd be the guilty one. You couldn't just off nobles without even bringing them to trial. Layla's noble background wouldn't help her either.

I lightly tapped her shoulder to get her to calm down. "Please calm down, Layla."

Stay, Scotterbrain. C'mon, chill.

"Please don't stop me, Lady Ellize. I need to get rid of that thing."

"That thing"? Is she not even human to you anymore?

Seriously, I'd never seen Layla in such a state. I supposed she'd been like that when she'd rebelled and confronted Ellize—the real one—in the game, but I'd never witnessed it in this world.

What should I do to get her to calm down?

I couldn't let her kill random dudette; she'd lose her position. I had to stop her. Oh, and I probably needed to heal the wounds Layla had already inflicted on that girl when she'd shoved her down. No matter how crazy she was, that girl was still the daughter of a count.

I used healing magic on random dudette, but for some reason, Eterna's surroundings started glowing.

Huh? I didn't send any magic that way, though. Hang on, what the hell is that? There's more and more mana flying around Eterna. If that keeps up, everyone on this rooftop—except me, since I can protect myself with magic—will be blown away!

I created a shield to block the wild mana erupting from Eterna and carefully observed her to figure out what was going on.

Eterna—who was surrounded by a blinding light—slowly got up and looked at me. White magic particles were twirling around her, and her hair was swaying gently despite the lack of wind.



The octopus had vanished without a trace, destroyed by her mana.

Hey! I wanted to make takoyaki out of him...

At any rate, I finally understood what was happening. The others probably had no clue what was going on, but I could feel Eterna's power. She had at least...one six-hundredth of my power. No normal human could achieve that.

Yep... My girl's just awakened as the saint. But why now? I don't get it...

I wouldn't be able to pretend to be the saint for much longer now that Eterna had awakened. *Imma need to think of a good excuse.*



Even though someone asked for help, they wouldn't necessarily feel grateful to the person who'd stepped in to rescue them. People were quick to seek help when they were in danger, but as soon as they felt safe again, they'd quickly forget about their benefactor. There were plenty of people who behaved like that in this world as well.

As Layla looked at the vermin in front of her eyes—the girl named Elizabeth—she couldn't help but think about what Ellize had said. She'd heard Elizabeth calling for help; that was most certainly true. After all, Ellize had already come to King Aiz's rescue in a similar fashion in the past.

The previous saints didn't have such powers, but Ellize wasn't just any saint. She was known as the greatest in history. It wouldn't be all that strange for her to have a few more abilities.

However, not everyone was like King Aiz. People wouldn't necessarily change their ways and feel indebted to their savior. Some people were rotten to the core, and they didn't understand what gratitude even meant.

And yet, Ellize surely wouldn't change. She'd continue to extend a helping hand to everyone who needed her. After all, Ellize didn't help people out of self-interest. Even if her goodwill was trampled on, she would simply smile and continue to help.

Ellize didn't seem to blindly believe that nobody would ever betray her, however. If anything, it was the reverse. She knew full well that she would be

betrayed and trampled on, but she didn't seem to mind.

Her master was so noble and pure...that Layla couldn't forgive the filthy vermin that tried to dirty her. These lowlifes couldn't be allowed to sully Ellize.

And so, Layla was ready to go against her master's order this time and cut down this disgusting vermin with her own two hands. However, Ellize stopped her with a light tap on her shoulder.

"Please calm down, Layla."

"Please don't stop me, Lady Ellize. I need to get rid of that thing."

Ellize silently shook her head. Layla couldn't see any anger on her face. She wasn't the slightest bit mad even though she'd been disrespected. As always, all she wanted to do was to protect others. As always, Ellize unconditionally loved everyone.

Ellize didn't hesitate to raise her hand and use healing magic on Elizabeth, just as she always did.

Ah... Her benevolence knows no bounds...

Layla forced herself to return her sword to its sheath.

She knew that Ellize didn't need her protection. She was strong enough to protect herself—and everyone else, for that matter—all on her own. The issue was that she never seemed to focus on her own security. That was why Layla had sworn to herself that she'd always do everything in her power to protect Ellize.

She'd betrayed her master once, but Ellize had forgiven her. She'd even gone as far as to gift her a weapon. Layla needed to repay that debt. The least she could do was shield her master from the dirtiness of the world.

But Layla had put her sword away too quickly. The archmonster was frozen solid, and the foolish girl had finally quieted down. Layla had assumed that everything was over. All they needed to do, she'd thought, was take care of the hostages.

However, one of the hostages in question suddenly started emitting light. Ellize had reacted quickly enough to block her magic, but the parts of the rooftop she hadn't managed to protect were filled with a bright light. The frozen archmonster had also been destroyed in the blink of an eye.

There was now a gaping hole in the rooftop, and Layla couldn't help but shiver at the mighty mana filling the air.

It didn't make any sense. There was no way a student could use a spell capable of ridding the world of an archmonster in a single blow. Layla herself was incapable of such a feat.

Only the saint could do something like that, but Ellize was the saint. She'd performed hundreds of great feats that only a saint could achieve, and hundreds more that the rest hadn't been able to. In fact, she'd achieved more than all of the other saints combined.

And yet, it was *Eterna* who slowly got up, surrounded by a divine light. There was no mistaking the glow—Eterna was a saint.

As far as Layla knew, two saints had never been born in the same generation...but that unprecedented, unbelievable event was happening right in front of Layla's eyes.

Chapter 52: Awakening

In the game, the timing of Eterna's awakening would change slightly depending on the route you were on, but it more or less always followed the same pattern.

On Eterna's route, she would first become aware of her abilities during the Farah event, but she still wouldn't fully awaken until the real trigger: the monster attack during the third semester. The army led by the demon monkey would reach the academy, and as she witnessed the students and teachers die one by one at the monsters' hands, Eterna would finally awaken.

Obviously, that event wouldn't happen in this world—I'd already taken care of that army a while ago.

However, as it turned out, Eterna had still awakened under entirely different circumstances. She didn't even seem aware of what was happening around her. Considering what happened in the game, that didn't surprise me as much. In *Kuon no Sanka*, Eterna was overwhelmed by her new powers and lost control after awakening. She basically moved on autopilot with only one goal in mind: to fulfill her duties as the saint.

In the game, Verner and the rest of her team had helped her come to her senses by calling her name. Before they managed to do that, though, Eterna had mindlessly slaughtered all of the monsters that had stood in her path. She'd even pushed those who tried to stop her from doing her duty out of her way. She hadn't actually *hurt* any of them, so I'd always assumed Eterna wouldn't attack humans, but...

"No. You can't...take Verner away. He can't die—not again. No. I won't allow it... I need...to kill them all. All of the monsters..." she whispered, a vacant look in her eyes.

It sounded like Eterna was confusing us with monsters. *She's gonna attack us, isn't she?*

Eterna pointed the staff I'd given her at me and started gathering mana at the tip.

"What are you doing, Eterna?!" Layla exclaimed, reaching for her sword moving to shield me from Eterna. "I won't stand by and let you hurt Lady Ellize!"

I immediately rested my hand on Layla's shoulder to stop her and walked right past her.

"Eterna seems to be mistaking us for monsters, Layla," I explained.

"She thinks we're monsters?!"

"Can you see the lucifero flower on the floor next to her? The pollen of that flower can cause hallucinations and a loss of reality."

Lucifero pollen could be used as a drug. It didn't even have side effects. From what I knew, there weren't many users anymore, but in the past, tons of people had turned to drug use to escape their harsh living conditions.

Random dudette's flower must've fallen off when Layla had pushed her and landed next to Eterna's face. I wouldn't have expected something like that to work on the saint, but now that Eterna *was* out of her mind, the situation would be...tricky to handle.

The lucifero flower had been stuck to random dudette's head the entire time the octopus had her covered in dark magic. Some of its mana had probably seeped into the flower. Besides, Eterna was unconscious, so she was unable to snap out of it. The combination of these two factors probably explained why the lucifero toxins had worked on her.

Eterna didn't wait for me to finish pondering over the situation before firing her first spell. It was a large sphere of light, about as big as a balance ball.

Layla understood how powerful her magic was at first glance, so she panicked. "Lady Ellize! Please dodge—"

"There's no need," I stated.

I flicked it away with one hand and dispersed it. You've barely awakened, but you wanna fight me?

Even if we ignored the gap in abilities, Eterna would never be able to kill me with the staff she was currently using. I'd actually put some of my magic in the precious stone that decorated her staff. Whenever Eterna used it to attack, my healing magic would activate at the same time.

To put it in game terms, it was the kind of weapon that always left your enemy with at least one HP no matter what you did. Eterna would never be able to kill anyone as long as she used that staff.

If you're wondering why I'd played a little prank on her... Well, it was obviously to avoid Eterna dealing the finishing blow to Alexia. Eterna's powers worked on the witch. That meant, in theory, that it was entirely possible for her to kill Alexia. If that happened, my entire plan would crumble on the spot.

Eterna had earned her spot in the top eight of the tournament, though, so I couldn't pass her up—it would've looked too shady. Besides, Eterna was capable of following Verner to the basement out of worry even if I didn't ask her to fight the witch.

To avoid her acting alone and messing up my plan, the easiest way was to ask her to participate while making sure she couldn't kill the witch. Having her on the team also meant that Verner and the others had a better chance of surviving.

There was just one little issue—I'd learned the hard way that Eterna *could* kill if she attacked without using the staff. The octopus had vanished without a trace, after all.

"Lady Ellize... What happened to Eterna? Sh-She's using the saint's powers, isn't she?"

Um... Yeah, I guess it was a little too obvious for Layla not to notice. What should I say?

I didn't really mind people finding out that I was a fake. If anything, I'd always intended to give Eterna her rightful place eventually. The thing was...I hadn't killed the witch yet.

I'd very happily accept exile afterward, but the timing was pretty damn terrible right now! If I walked away now—when we had the witch up against

the wall—everything I'd done so far would be meaningless. Eterna and Verner would kill the witch themselves, and we'd get the same ending as in the game.

I felt bad for Eterna, but I needed to keep up the lies a little longer.

"Those are Eterna's powers. I assume this is why she believed herself to be the witch. Verner's powers resemble the witch's, and it would appear that Eterna's resembles the saint's," I explained.

"Is that...truly possible?" Layla asked. "I've never heard of anyone being able to use the saint's powers without being the saint... It would be unprecedented."

"Everything is unprecedented the first time it happens," I said. "The birth of the first witch, followed by the birth of the first saint, Alfrea... Both of those events were unprecedented as well. There must be some sort of irregularity in this generation."

I gave Layla some bullshit answer. To be honest, I was almost scared of my genius. I was crazy good at spouting the most random lies without batting an eye.

I missed my calling here—I should've become a con man!

Hello, mom? Yeah, it's me, me! Yes, me! Unfortunately, I was in a car accident and I'm in big trouble. They're asking me to pay compensation or something. I need your help! Can you gimme some money? All I need is your credit card number, the three digits on the back, and the expiration date. But you've gotta be quick! I've only got till tomorrow to pay them back. Huh? You're not mom? You're dad, but you're currently cross-dressing?

Yeah, I would've been good at it.

"At any rate, we need to get her to calm down first," I said.

I created a barrier and made sure Layla and random dudette were safe before I stepped out of it. Eterna looked at me calmly, her face entirely devoid of emotion. She lifted her hand and attacked me with her magic once more. A sparkling silver sphere flew straight at me.

I caught it and crushed it with my hand. Eterna had made this sphere much smaller in order to concentrate the mana and amp its destructive power, but it was still no use against me.

Sorry to disappoint! You can boost your attacks all you want, but you still won't surpass me!

"Don't come closer..." she whispered, launching another attack.

This time, she simultaneously created seven beams of light. The silvery rays came flying at me from every direction at once. Actually, the shape of the trajectories was very reminiscent of a whisk. Her magic was trying to turn me into whipped cream!

It won't work, though.

I spread some light magic around my body and used it to drown out Eterna's beams.

Even though she was the real deal, she was nothing but a little chick who'd just barely emerged from her shell. She couldn't compare to me. I'd leveled up countless times by bullying monsters over the years. It was like seeing a newbie in an MMORPG trying to look cool in front of an experienced max-level player just because they'd gotten their hands on some brand-new equipment.

"No... Noooooo!!!" Eterna screamed.

She'd completely lost her grip on reality. Eterna threw her staff and lifted both of her hands, pointing her palms at the sky. *Hey! Don't throw it away!*

She created a humongous sphere of light and started pouring more and more mana into it.

Uh-oh. This doesn't look good.

She was trying to do something only a newbie who didn't know the first thing about fighting would do: pour all of her MP into one single attack. She obviously didn't care about the consequences.

Taking her low level and the spells she'd already used into consideration, I estimated Eterna had around a thousand MP left. If she dumped all of it into one attack and used the saint's magic—one of the most powerful things out there—the destructive power of her attack would be quite something.

She'll blow this entire building up and kill all the students in the path of her

attack.

She still wouldn't leave a scratch on me, but if I stayed here, the students inside the building wouldn't be as lucky.

"Lady Ellize! Please don't!"

I ignored Layla's plea and rose in the air.

If Eterna aimed for me now, she wouldn't hit anyone else. As I expected, she immediately shifted to attack me.

Good girl. You can fire whenever you're ready, sweetie.

Just then, Verner opened the door of the rooftop and screamed, "Eterna, stop!"

Damn. That guy always has the worst timing!

Apparently, his grand entrance did have an effect, though.

Eterna's shoulder shook as she softly asked, "V-Ver... Ver?"

"You have to stop this, Eterna. I know you're not the kind of person who'd hurt others. I'm begging you—come back to your senses!"

Verner's words seemed to reach Eterna. The spark of reason returned to her eyes, and her huge light ball started shrinking.

Perfect. Everything will be fine now. Verner just needs to comfort her with some lame speech.

If he could take this chance to hop onto her route, our long-awaited happy ending would finally be in sight too.

Hang on... This is bad! If she comes back to her senses right now, we're doomed!

"Eterna... Please go back to your usual self," Verner said.

"No, Verner!" I exclaimed. "Don't tell her that! Not now!"

Verner, you goddamn moron! Although I suppose I'm not much better considering how long it took me to realize how dangerous the situation was!

Eterna still had a gigantic light ball looming over her head! If she came back to

her senses now, how was she supposed to control it? She was using her powers on autopilot, but that wouldn't work once she started thinking clearly again. Besides, she'd been having hallucinations a couple of minutes ago. She'd obviously panic and let her magic run wild the second she was pulled back to reality.

"Verner? I... What am I... Huh? What is...? Wait— Wh-What is that thing?! What is it?! No way! Why am I holding that?! What's going on?!" Eterna screamed, staring at the huge ball of mana above her head.

She'd snapped back to reality, and sure enough, she was absolutely freaking out. I told you that'd happen!

Now that Eterna had lost control over it, the humongous light ball started descending toward her, pulled down by gravity. *Damn*.

I let myself fall down sharply. I'd gained too much altitude earlier when I'd tried to make sure she wouldn't hit anything but me. I was flying down as fast as I could, but would I make it? No... I'm not going to make it! The bad ending just found its way back to us!

The ball had fallen down onto Eterna, but it hadn't collided with her yet. Verner had jumped in, and he was currently using his dark powers to keep it at bay.

You're doing amazing, Verner! He'd awakened at the last moment! Just what you'd expect of the protagonist! It's kinda your fault we're in this situation in the first place, but I'll forgive you out of respect for your last minute save.

I slipped under the light ball without hesitation and went to stand by Verner.



Eterna had met Verner for the very first time when she was fourteen.

Her birth village, Terracotta, was also where Ellize—the greatest saint in history—had hailed from. For this reason, many people—mainly youngsters who hoped to become knights and people who'd received Ellize's help—visited the village as a form of pilgrimage. Despite all the tourists, Terracotta was a small unassuming village with nothing but fields.

The lord who ruled over the region hoped to expand the village and turn it into a Holy City where people could head to revere the saint, but he had yet to kick-start his project for lack of resources. And so, Terracotta remained a small village like any other. Until Ellize had introduced potatoes to the population, children had often died of hunger there.

The humble village, like many others of its kind, was mostly inhabited by old people and children. Young adults often left to find work in the closest city.

Eterna, who'd never had a friend around her own age, also idealized the city. That was until one day, when she'd finally met a boy her age: Verner.

She still remembered their first meeting vividly.

On that day, Eterna had taken her family's pig to the forest. The wind was ice-cold, and she could tell winter was close. The people of Eterna's village would always bring the pigs to the forest during fall so that they could grow as fat as possible. They would then slaughter them, process the meat, and keep it for the winter.

On that day, though, Eterna was unlucky, and she encountered a bear who'd gotten closer to the edges of the forest in search of food. With winter approaching, the bear must also have struggled to find prey.

To the bear, Eterna and her pig were the perfect meal—nutritious and appetizing. It wasted no time intimidating the girl and immediately attacked, baring its sharp teeth and claws. Eterna should've died on the spot, but she hadn't.

Unbeknownst to her, she was the saint—a bear couldn't hurt her. At that time, though, Eterna hadn't had the mental space to worry about whether she'd been injured or not. Fear had taken over her, and all she could think about was the huge bear in front of her.

The one who'd saved her was Verner.

After hearing Eterna's screams, he'd thrown himself at the bear, armed with nothing but a little twig, and stabbed it into the bear's eye. The pig, which had been blissfully unaware of the danger of the situation, also charged at the bear when it noticed its owner was in danger. It rammed itself into the bear's leg,

making it topple down. The bear groaned in confusion at the pain.

Verner was quick on his feet. When he noticed the bear was down, he made use of the opportunity to stab another twig into the bear's other eye. He then picked up a large rock and bashed it over the creature's head repeatedly. The animal eventually stopped moving, and Verner passed out the next moment.

Eterna later learned that Verner hadn't had anything to eat or drink for days after he'd been chased out of his home. He'd wandered through the forest the entire time and used the last of his strength to defeat the bear.

Eterna's family warmly welcomed Verner to thank him for saving her, and after they'd heard his story, they immediately offered to adopt him. As for the pig, it was promoted from emergency food ration to family pet.

Eterna was drawn to her savior, but she could tell from the very start that Verner wasn't looking at her. He had someone else on his mind—Ellize, the saint. She knew that he trained diligently every single day in the hope of becoming her knight.

Part of Eterna wanted to cheer for him, but she couldn't stop herself from secretly wishing that Verner would fail. If Verner's dream didn't come true, he'd remain a simple villager. He'd remain in Terracotta forever with her. She realized how despicable she was for wanting that, but she couldn't help it.

Sadly for Eterna, Verner was a talented boy. He aced the entrance exam and secured himself a spot at the magic academy. And he'd done nothing but improve after enrolling. He soon rose to the top of his year. By now, he'd become the strongest student in the entire school.

Eterna could only watch Verner's back as they grew further and further apart. An indescribable feeling had started plaguing her—a strange mix of irritability, anxiety, and sadness. That feeling had grown even stronger after the recent battle to protect the Bilberrian capital.

Verner had become Ellize's shield, and he'd...died. Ellize had performed a miracle and brought him back, sure, but he'd still died. It had been terrifying.

Eterna could still remember how her mind had turned completely blank. The person she loved would never smile again. He'd never breathe or move again...

Eterna had once thought she understood what death meant. She had never been one to take it lightly. The reality of it, however, was much heavier than *anything* she'd ever envisioned. At that moment, accepting that Verner was dead had felt almost impossible. In fact, had Ellize not resuscitated him, she would most likely still be in denial. That was just how shocking the event had been to her.

Ever since that day, Eterna lived in fear. She was terrified at the thought that Verner might genuinely die the next time something happened. She knew that it was completely absurd, and that her bitterness was misplaced, but she'd started resenting Ellize. Somehow, she knew that *she* would take him away from her—for good.

And, as if to confirm her doubts, Ellize had decided to send Verner to a place so dangerous that even she couldn't tell whether he'd come back alive or not.

No! Don't take him away! Don't take Verner from me! Don't let him die again!

When Eterna opened her eyes, all she could see were vicious monsters trying to kill Verner.

I have to kill them, she thought. I need to kill all of the monsters.

She pointed her hand at the "monsters," and light came flying out of her palm. However, the strongest "monster" easily flicked it off. Then, it started approaching her. Eterna was scared. She raised her hand, once more, and tried to get the "monster" to back off. Several rays of light came out of her hand. They flew in neat curves directly for the "monster." They didn't even reach it, though.

The "monster" resembled Ellize somewhat, Eterna thought, but that only scared her more. Verner's death flashed in front of her eyes, and the "monster" in front of her became a grim reaper in her eyes—one who'd come to take Verner.

She needed to drive that grim reaper away. She needed to protect Verner.

Eterna's mind was hazy, but she somehow knew that she had to raise her hands toward the sky. She started condensing all of her mana into a sphere.

The grim reaper tried to run away and flew into the sky.

I won't let you go. I'll get rid of you here and now. I won't ever let you have Verner.

"Eterna, stop!"

She suddenly heard the voice of the person she'd been continuously thinking about—Verner. Eterna calmed down at once. She could feel herself slipping out of a strange dream. It was as though the fog in her mind was finally beginning to clear up. Her sight had been blurry this entire time—as if she was deep underwater—but she was starting to see clearly again. Verner's voice had pulled her to the shore.

The grim reaper was actually Ellize, she realized. And they were currently on the school's roof.

Eterna didn't know why she was there. She didn't know why she was fighting Ellize. None of that made any sense to her. She couldn't tell what was part of her dream and what she'd actually seen and done... The ball of light above her head was real, she noticed, but she didn't understand why she was holding something like that.

"Verner? I... What am I... Huh? What is...? Wait— Wh-What is that thing?! What is it?! No way! Why am I holding that?! What's going on?!"

Eterna had unconsciously controlled that magic, but now that she'd been brought back to reality, she couldn't do it anymore. The next second, she fully lost control over the strange lump of light, and it started falling toward her.

Eterna didn't know her right from her left. She could only crouch down and protect her head with her hands.

With the spell caster relinquishing control like that, the spell could only go haywire. Still, blaming Eterna would have been cruel. After all, the poor girl wasn't even aware she'd created this gigantic lump of light. And so, Eterna simply closed her eyes and waited, unable to comprehend what was happening.

The impact she'd braced herself for didn't come, though.

Eterna thought it strange, so she opened her eyes. That's when she saw Verner's back. He was holding the light at bay with both hands. A dark mist swirled out of his palms as he desperately tried to protect her. It obviously wasn't easy—the veins on his arms were bulging, and his otherwise handsome face was ruined by his strained expression. His palms were burnt, and an ominous sound filled the silence. In spite of Verner's efforts, the light was slowly closing in on them.

The few seconds he'd bought, though, had been enough for Ellize to reach them. She slipped under the light and joined Verner. She immediately put her hands up and started releasing her own mana.

"We can push it back," she said. "Please work with me, Verner."

"Yes!"

A blinding light began to overflow from Ellize's palms, while a dark glow came out of Verner's. The two spiraled around one another as they rose toward the sky, pushing the ball of light away.

Chapter 53: Broken Heart

Phew! That was close!

When all was said and done, this had been a pretty productive day. Both Eterna and Verner had awakened, and the octopus had died. Eterna was back under control, and no one had been hurt too badly.

We're doing great, if you ask me!

Obviously, some people had sustained a couple of injuries—including random dudette—and there was a bit of material damage, but it wasn't all that bad.

Random dudette's expulsion had been moved up, though. Instead of being dismissed at the end of the month, she would be expelled today. I wasn't sure she'd done anything worthy of immediate expulsion, but she was so gross I didn't bother opposing the decision.

Besides, I was worried Layla would actually off her if she stayed at the academy for too long. As much as I wished I could say that Layla would never kill a student...uh, I'd seen her eyes earlier. She hadn't been joking around. The farther that weirdo was from Layla, the safer she'd be. Hopefully, she'd find something to like about herself instead of obsessing over me.

Several students had seen us fight on the roof, but we'd pretended this was all a mock battle.

After the sun had set, I headed back to the roof. I wanted to fix the damage before I was sent a bill. That way, I could pretend nothing had happened.

Moreover, the roof was practically a holy place for loners—um, I mean proud and independent students. I knew that for the people who barely had any friends—or none at all—the roof was the only place where they could eat lunch without having to worry about how others viewed them. If this holy place was closed off for repairs, these kids would despair. As a fellow hopeless member of society, I didn't want to add to their pain.

As I approached, though, I heard a voice.

Who could it be at this hour? Wait, is it a couple getting frisky? Are they gonna go:

"Nooo, doing it on the roof is so embarrassing..."

"Keep your voice down, babe, people will hear."

If something like that was actually underway...I couldn't intrude. No, I'd simply watch discreetly.

"I can't believe I'm the one who did all this..."

I recognized that voice. I cracked the door open and peeked through the gap. Eterna and Verner were alone together on the roof. *Oh my, these two are the frisky couple!*

Kuon no Sanka was a PG game, so there was nothing explicit going on onscreen. There were the occasional hints, though—just like in old games when the characters would say, "I had a lot of fun last night."

Nice. I was definitely not against seeing them "hint" at something.

C'mon... It's time for you guys to discover the joys of adulthood! I support your love...from the bottom of my heart!

"So, what did you want to tell me?" Verner asked.

Verner! There's only one thing she could say after calling you out alone at this hour of the night!

My heart was beating like crazy, but I didn't want to disturb them, so I meticulously used my usual stealth technique.

I won't bother you guys, and I certainly won't let anyone else get in the way!

If anyone so much as approached the rooftop, I'd kick them out myself.

"You know, Verner... I know that you're always looking at someone else, and I know who that someone is. Still, I also need to move forward. I think that if I don't tell you how I feel, I'll never be able to move on..." Eterna said, looking straight at Verner.

Her cheeks were red, and her expression was serious. We were approaching the climax. The stars shone brightly above them as if to give them their

blessing... Yeah, no, I guess they always shine like that. Whatever.

I was tempted to help the mood by creating a meteor shower or something, but that definitely would've given my presence away, so I stopped myself.

"I... I loved you!"

SHE SAID IT! FINALLY! YESSSSS!!!

This is a grand slam, player Eterna wins the game!

I finally managed to break free from Ellize's cursed route and hop onto the route of love! It's a miracle! The main heroine is truly above everyone else! That's a win! I'm gonna treat myself and enjoy a nice meal and an extra long bath after this.

In *Kuon no Sanka*, confession scenes would either succeed or fail depending on your girl's affection level. The failed scenes all had one thing in common: Verner would be the one to confess, and he'd be rejected by the girl. Successful scenes usually went the opposite way, where the girl would confess to Verner. Verner never refused, so once that event happened, you were pretty much set on that heroine's route for good.

That meant...this was a surefire victory! This couldn't fail anymore!

I'm over the moon! This is a once-in-a-lifetime miracle! A divine blessing! The stars have aligned! You did great, Verner! You're the best! Congratulations! Congratulations!

Wait. Hang on. Did she say she loved him, past tense?!

"I guess that's not really true—I do love you, but like a family member. I don't think my feelings for you are romantic."

Huh? What?!

There's got to be something wrong. I've heard these lines before! This is what Eterna tells Verner after he confesses if her affection level is too low! For God's sake, Verner! Her affection's still too low! This is all your fault! That's what you get for training all day!

"You know," Eterna continued, "I was always scared. You always felt so distant, and I always worried that you'd go somewhere far away and leave me

behind. So I did my best to catch up with you. I was always chasing your back with my eyes, and eventually...I got confused. I started thinking that I was in love with you."

Eterna let her hand emit a pale glow. She wasn't using any tricks, like I did—this was pure, unaltered saint power. It seemed like she'd already mastered it.

"After I suddenly got this power," she said, "I finally felt like I'd caught up with you. I finally felt like I wouldn't be left behind anymore. And that's when I understood that what I'd been feeling wasn't romantic love. I was simply scared of losing a member of my family."

Nope. I am not having this.

This is the speech she makes when she has low affection, word for word. If her affection level was high enough, Eterna would've said, "I was always chasing your back with my eyes, and eventually, I realized that I was in love with you."

Kuon no Sanka was a dating sim, after all. It wouldn't have made any sense for Eterna to be in love with Verner from day one. She had to fall in love over the course of the game. She was the main heroine, so she did start with a higher affection level than other girls, but that still didn't mean she was head over heels for him from the beginning. If you didn't make an effort to raise her affection, she wouldn't actually fall for him. Eventually, she'd notice that she'd confused familial love for romantic love—just like she had now.

Verner laughed. "What's up with you? I feel like you just dumped me."

"I am dumping you," Eterna replied with a smile.

I could see how close they were, but they interacted like a pair of siblings. There was absolutely no spark between them.

Noooo! This can't be... This can't be!

I could almost hear the sound of Eterna's route shattering like a fragile piece of glass. Neither Eterna nor Verner thought of the other as a potential romantic partner.

"That's all I wanted to say," Eterna said. "Aah! I feel much better."

"You're heartless. You really called me out here just to tell me you aren't in

love with me?"

Eterna looked like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders now that the confession scene (?) was over. Verner also looked relieved, a smile plastered on his face.

Are you for real?! Why're you smiling?! The main heroine just dumped your ass, Verner! Don't you get it?!

"Just to make sure," Eterna started. "The one you're in love with is—"

"Lady Ellize, obviously," Verner answered.

HUH?!

WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU, VERNER?!

Eterna laughed. "That was fast. I expected as much, but let me warn you—it won't be easy. Lady Ellize isn't the type to hold special feelings for one person in particular. I don't know how to say this, but...I can't imagine her being in love with anyone."

"I know that, but it's okay. Even if my feelings never reach her, I'm free to love her, aren't I?"

No. This isn't "okay," Verner. It's not too late! You can still find another heroine to love! Eterna doesn't have feelings for you at the moment, but I'm sure there's still hope with her too!

Eterna sighed. "I'm not sure if you're devoted or just stupid. How did I ever think I could be in love with an idiot like you?"

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize. It's all good. I'll root for you from now on. I've caused you a lot of trouble, so I owe you that."

Eterna's smile under the moonlight was a sight to behold. She truly was worthy of being the main heroine.



Eterna's such a saint! She's the best!

I had to face reality: there would be no coming back from this. My last hope of seeing Verner and Eterna end up together had died out.

Why did it end up like this...?! Who's the homewrecker who destroyed the happy couple?! Damn! It's all me!

"Well then, see you tomorrow, Verner."

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

Eterna started walking away. She looked invigorated.

I moved out of the way to avoid bumping into her. Right as she ran past me, I heard her whisper, "Goodbye, my first love."

V-V-Verner! You can still patch things up! Run after her! Don't let her wave her first love goodbye! Scream something like, "You're the only one for me, baby!" Hurry up! You'll lose your shot for real if you don't go now!

Verner didn't move. He was still standing in the exact same spot, completely silent.

That boy's so stupid! Don't watch her run off with a smile on your face!

Ah... To be honest, I'd already noticed his feelings a while ago. Even though I was thickheaded, I wasn't blind—this world seemed to be set on Ellize's route. Still, why'd he have to fall for me?! Hearing Verner say it directly was something else altogether.

I'd never managed to have a serious relationship with a girl in my previous world, and I was still a virgin. Now, to top things off, a dude was in love with me. What kind of punishment is this?!

If my new body had somehow changed my soul, or if living as a girl for years had turned me into one, it would've been easier. Unfortunately, transmigrating hadn't changed my orientation or my personality—those were already set in stone. I'd simply been transported to another world with my memories intact. There was no changing who I was at this point; it was far too late.

I also couldn't change my preferences by telling myself that this kind of stuff

wasn't such a big deal these days, or that—back during the Sengoku period in Japan—men used to do other men all the time, so it was fine. From what I knew, kids developed their personality during the first three years of their life. There'd still be minor adjustments after that, but by ten, it was pretty much formed. If a child's parents were too harsh on them during these years, or if they grew up isolated and without friends, they'd drag the resulting personality traits into adulthood. For example, they'd be subservient or lack self-confidence.

In my case, I'd lived for around thirty years on Earth before I'd ended up here. That was more than enough time to fully form a personality. Even though my appearance had changed, I hadn't. As far as I was concerned, I was Fudou Niito, not Ellize. Even if I were to live in this body for another ten years—or, heck, for another hundred—that still wouldn't change anything. I'd still be Fudou Niito, even if I lived longer as Ellize than I had as me.

Anyway, my point was: I felt very sorry for Verner and all, but I'd never return his feelings. I couldn't imagine myself ever falling for another man. At this rate, no one would be happy.

Ellize's body was like a prison to me. I used to like gender-bender stories, but living in one myself had made me see them in a new light. It was dreadful, really.

There were some things I still liked—having everyone fawn over me, for one. Being revered and told that I was gorgeous, even by guys, felt incredible. I was an attention whore, after all.

However, I only welcomed that attention from afar. It was like using a female character in an online game. Anyone would be happy getting treated like a princess, right? Most people just wanted to feel valued and bask in a sense of superiority. However, they wouldn't necessarily be down to start dating one of the guys that fawned over them in real life. I mean, some probably would, but definitely not the majority...I think.

Anyway, enjoying the attention and wanting to date people was super different.

I was the kind of guy who sometimes used a female avatar online—especially

if the game had decent graphics and you could see the character's panties. In those cases, I wouldn't even think about it; female it was. I'd make my character jump for no reason all the time. Anyway, I'd also let other guys treat me like a princess. And although I'd never done it, I probably wouldn't have even minded marrying one of them online. It sounded like a very specific type of fun you could have in those situations. It wasn't like I'd be the one marrying the guy—my game character would be! It was like...playing a female character for a tabletop role-playing game. I could totally enjoy role-playing as the heroine.

What I couldn't do, though, was do this stuff as *myself*, not as a character. I simply couldn't answer a guy's feelings no matter what. I didn't *want* to.

What am I supposed to do about Verner?

At the end of the day, my goal was to save Eterna. I couldn't bear to see her die. That was why I'd done my best up until now, and I intended to keep pushing forward. I wasn't far from succeeding either. I wouldn't let Eterna kill the witch. I'd do it myself and break the cycle. I'd always believed that it was the only way to reach a happy ending, and I was still absolutely convinced it was for the best.

I thought that everyone would be happier if I could also get Verner and Eterna to end up together, but...that dream had just been blown to smithereens. And it was all my fault.

Urgh... This sucks.

Eterna seemed to have reached some sort of conclusion and was ready to move on. Even if she didn't end up with Verner, she'd probably be happy. That meant I hadn't completely screwed up my goal, but...

Wait. To be fair, I was the one who wanted to set them up together. They'd never asked for any of it, had they? It wasn't like they needed to end up together to be happy, right?

Therefore, there was only one thing for me to do now: pretend I hadn't heard anything! Que será, será!

Chapter 54: Crash Course

I hadn't witnessed anything last night. Nothing at all, got it?

Between random dudette being hijacked by some octopus and Eterna going haywire, a lot had happened yesterday. Thankfully, everything had turned out all right in the end! Yep, everything was just fine and dandy!

What about yesterday night, you ask? I just said I didn't know a thing about that! After Verner had left— No, I mean, uh... After I'd returned to the rooftop at night—alone—I'd fixed the damage and went back to my room. End of story. I hadn't run into anyone, because no one was there. Got it?! Yes, I said it twice. You gotta drive the important points home!

Moving on to this morning. A few hours had passed since I'd officially decided ostrichism was a perfectly valid way of life. I'd be the perfect (fake) saint today too!

The usual gang—Verner, Eterna, Marie, Aina, random dude, Fiora, and Four-Eyed Pervert—as well as that buff dude, uh...Crunchy...something... Oh, right! Crunchy Doggybag. Yeah! He was the only one outside of Verner's group who'd made it to the top eight during the previous tournament. Anyway, the eight of them had gathered in my room, and they were currently waiting for me to explain why I'd summoned them.

Eterna, are you sure you don't wanna leave? I'll allow it!

It wasn't that I didn't want her here. In fact, her help would be precious. Who better to tire out the witch than an awakened saint? However, as far as Eterna was concerned, I was the reason her crush hadn't answered her feelings.

Wait, what was I saying? No one had confessed yesterday! I couldn't know that for sure. I was just assuming. Yep, that's right, this is all just a theory.

Leaving all that romantic business aside, I also doubted Eterna wanted to risk her life for my sake. Only a saint would— Oh, right, she was the saint.

"Lady Ellize?" Layla called, urging me to start speaking.

"Yes. Excuse me for the delay."

Hey, I was on the verge of starting my explanation! No need to rush me!

Still, I wanted to make sure everyone was on the same page one last time. I didn't want anyone crying that I hadn't warned them afterward.

"First of all, I'd like to warn you again. As I said last time, there will be no turning back once you hear my request. Are you sure you wish to hear it?"

Even though I'd tried to scare them, no one left. They'd all made up their minds before coming here. As expected of the protagonist and his party. They're filled with determination—unlike me.

To be perfectly honest, I didn't have a scrap of that in my body. Thankfully, I'd been blessed with such overpowered abilities that I didn't *need* determination.

Someone great once said that only those who knew fear could know courage. Triumphing over your greatest fears was what made you brave. I was different —I had no fears. I knew just how powerful I was compared to my enemies. All I had to do was show up, and I'd breeze through any fight.

There was nothing glorious or virtuous about the way I fought, but I was fine with that. I wasn't the kind of person who deserved to embrace such noble ideals anyway. I was a piece of shit through and through—the complete opposite of Verner and his friends.

"I acknowledge your determination," I said. "Since you've all made up your minds, I'll get straight to the point. The witch, Alexia, is lurking in the basement of this academy."

A mix of surprise and anxiety swept through my audience. Layla and Four-Eyed Pervert were the only ones who didn't lose their composure. They'd both known for quite some time, so the revelation hadn't come as a shock to them.

By the way, Crunchy Doggybag was the most shaken by the news. "Huh?! Lady Alexia is the witch?!"

That's the part that surprises you? Everyone's known that for ages... No, wait, this quy didn't.

"The only reason the witch has yet to flee is because she believes I'm not

aware of her whereabouts. Conversely, if she ever comes to suspect that I do know where she is...she'll immediately use a special spell called 'teleport' to escape far, far away. I'm sure she'll make dozens, if not hundreds, of people suffer in the place she chooses to settle next. This is why I can neither go after her myself, nor send my knights down to the basement."

No one said a word. I wouldn't be against a little feedback, guys. I feel like I'm bombing my speech.

"The witch cannot be allowed to escape," I continued. "But if I wish to end things while she's here, at the academy, I will need the help of strong individuals who aren't knights in an official capacity. As you've probably guessed by now, I need *your* help."

"E-Excuse me, Lady Ellize, but how could we stop the witch from using this 'teleport' ability?" Aina asked.

I started explaining my plan to create a magic vacuum. I'd create a barrier to separate the mana inside the academy—basement included—from the mana outside of it. Then, I'd suck up all of the mana contained within the barrier to prevent the witch from recovering her MP. If I stopped there, the witch would still be able to escape by using her reserves of MP to teleport, which was why it was paramount that she fought *someone* right before I launched my plan. That way, she wouldn't have enough mana left to teleport.

Their role would be to be that "someone." When those words left my mouth, they all tensed up.

"We'll need to...fight the witch," Verner said, his voice shaky.

Marie's face was grim as she whispered, "A most heavy responsibility..."

The rest all had similar reactions, except for Crunchy Doggybag. He didn't seem worried in the slightest.

"Interesting," he said dramatically. "I've become way too strong after entering this school, so I forced myself to only use fifty percent of my abilities back when I competed in the tournament. It looks like I'll finally face an adversary worth unleashing my full power on—how exciting. I sure hope the witch is worth her salt."

Oh boy. This guy is so gonna die.

He'd raised so many death flags in just a few sentences that I was half-convinced he was doing it on purpose.

I guess this is better than having him run off 'cause he's too scared to face the witch.

In passing, Crunchy Doggybag was trying to show off by saying he'd only used half of his strength during the tournament, but he'd been defeated in a split second during his last match. He hadn't *chosen* not to unleash his powers, he simply hadn't been given the time to do so. He was the furthest thing from cool and mysterious, really.

"As you must have understood by now, no official knight will take part in this operation—and this includes Layla. In addition, while we've managed to get rid of the 'shadow' that always protects Alexia, there will still be monsters in the basement. I expect them to be quite powerful since their duty is to guard the witch."

There wasn't anything too crazy down there. They'd only face monsters that were slightly weaker than dragons.

Of course, while they were a total breeze for me—I could destroy a hundred dragons with a flick of my fingers—it normally took several knights to defeat one of them. I estimated that only Layla, Fox, and Dias could take a dragon one-one. Eterna had awakened as the saint, and Verner had gained control over his dark magic. The two of them were most likely stronger than Layla, but it'd still be a tough fight.

They'd have a much easier time if they could find a way to get rid of all of the witch's underlings before they fought her, but I had no idea whether that was even doable. What if they supported Eterna from the rear while she took care of the monsters? Who'd face the witch during that time, though? Verner was the only viable option, but he'd need help. Would he manage if one or two of them covered him?

Regardless of the strategy they chose, it wouldn't be easy. The weapons I'd given them would surely help, but they were in for a tough time.

"I know I am asking a lot from you, but I hope you'll help break the cycle of suffering that plagues our world. Everything can end with our generation," I said.

I'd put it in a roundabout way, but I was basically asking them to give up their lives for a greater cause.

I'm evil, I know.

I'd been deluding myself into thinking I'd end up in NEET paradise after the whole ordeal ended, but perhaps I'd been mistaken all along—for all I knew, I might've been headed straight for hell.

Hmm... I probably won't go to hell if none of them die...right?

"I have a question," Verner said. "Has a solution been found...to prevent the saint from turning into the next witch after slaying her?"

Verner had found a way to politely say: "If you turn into a witch, the cycle won't be broken now, will it?"

Crunchy Doggybag, who was hearing about this for the first time, was taken aback. "Huh?! Saints always turn into witches?!"

While I understood Verner's worries, I didn't even need to find a solution. I was a fake, so I couldn't turn into a witch, period.

Given my absolute certainty that it wouldn't be an issue, I could smile and confidently answer, "Yes—I won't turn into a witch even if I kill Alexia. I'll end this curse with my generation, I promise."

"I understand... I believe you, Lady Ellize."

You can rest assured, Verner. I won't become a witch, if only because I can't. I'll just depart for the afterworld and enjoy NEET paradise forever!

"We've been able to confirm the number and type of the monsters remaining in the basement thanks to the powers of the Prophet," I continued. "I would like you to undergo special training in order to prepare yourselves to face these monsters."

In the game, Alexia had five guards: a dragon, a baphomet, a griffin, a chimera, and a basilisk. However, according to the turtle, Alexia had a

completely different guards this time around. Apparently, the monsters I'd killed during the Farah incident *had been* the witch's original guards. Anyway, they'd been replaced by four more monsters: a wyvern, a minotaur, a hippogriff, and an orthrus.

Putting aside their respective myths, these monsters were all weaker than dragons... Well, according to the logic of *Kuon no Sanka*, that is. Dragons were as strong as archmonsters, but these new guys weren't quite on that level. They were strong, sure, but much easier to defeat than dragons. Still, they were difficult opponents for most knights, let alone students. That was why I intended to train Verner and the others before sending them off to the basement.

"Special training?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "I've reclaimed the land we lost to the monsters over the years, but this doesn't mean the world is entirely free of them. There are still places where monsters terrorize people."

Hey! You in the back! Stop saying I'm incompetent!

Fiori was a smaller planet than Earth, but it was still a planet nonetheless. It was huge! Even though I could fly at high speed, kill heaps of monsters in a matter of seconds, and rely on an army of soldiers and knights, it was virtually impossible for me to rid the entire planet of every single monster.

Hang on—when I put it like that, it actually does sound doable. All things considered, I might actually be pretty incompetent.

Either way, I'd definitely been more efficient than Alexia, her predecessor, and the predecessor of her predecessor combined. They'd let the monsters take control of over eighty percent of the land, not to mention the twenty percent that had supposedly been under human control had still been riddled with monsters.

This world was very much like most old RPG games—you risked running into monsters the second you went past the city gates. Villages suffered regular attacks, and people died to monsters left and right. To be perfectly honest, it might've been more accurate to say that Fiori's citizens weren't safe *anywhere*.

Seriously, how dangerous is that?

I'd managed to reclaim ninety percent of Fiori's surface under human control. People didn't have to worry about running into monsters in human territory. If you asked me, that was plenty praiseworthy! The world had gone from a dreadful place where you could encounter a monster on your doorstep to a world where monsters were an endangered species. The before and after was pretty remarkable, wasn't it?

So I'm not incompetent! Really, I'm not! I'm a talented, efficient, competent individual! Probably...

"We will be departing for Fuguten, the furthest island from this continent. The people there still suffer at the hands of monsters. You will help them and train at the same time."

The official name of the country we were headed to was Ordinary Fuguten. It was a distant island country ruled by a king named Yoru.

I'd left Fuguten alone for the time being because it had once been the safest place in Fiori, comparatively speaking.

Over the long history of saints and witches, monsters had spread across every corner of this planet. However, not once had a witch made an island country her base of operation.

The logic behind it was fairly simple: the witch's main objective was to maximize the damage to humanity, so islands were impractical and of little value to her. She had to attack as many countries and claim as much land as possible. It made a lot more sense for the witch to settle down on one of the land-locked countries so that she could attack a bunch of different regions at once. Plus, she'd have to leave over half of her army behind when she left the island—even if she were to create thousands of monsters there, most of them wouldn't be able to reach the rest of the continent. What goal would that accomplish besides creating an island paradise for monsters?

Naturally, if getting monsters off an island was difficult, the reverse was also true—only the monsters that could fly or swim ended up on islands.

Anyway, all that just to say the people of Fuguten weren't affected by the

witch in the same way as those in Giardino. Monsters were still an issue, sure, but they were manageable.

Anyway, that was why I'd left Fuguten alone up until now. It was far away, and it wasn't like they desperately needed the help of the saint either.

Oh, and there were also political reasons—namely, the king there didn't really like me. He'd never told me not to come to his island, but he'd specifically said I wasn't needed there. He probably hadn't wanted me stepping on his toes.

In an interesting turn of events, the safest place in the world had become the most dangerous one in a matter of years.

I'd enjoyed hunting down monsters so much that I hadn't considered the consequences. There were barely any left on this continent. In fact, since I'd taken care of all the monsters that had gathered in a last-ditch effort to take the Bilberrian capital, I wondered if there were any left at all. I'd looked around a bit, but I hadn't had any luck so far. And it wasn't just me—I hadn't heard a peep from any soldiers or knights reporting monster sightings ever since. It was terrible of me to think, but I was kind of glad I'd left Fuguten for later. Thanks to that, Verner and the others would have the perfect training grounds.

I really went and annihilated an entire species, huh? There isn't even a little jackalope running around! You know, those weak bunnies with horns that're becoming even more common than slimes in fantasy stories!

To be fair, slimes were still popular, but they'd recently been reappraised. They were often depicted as strong monsters nowadays. The jackalope had replaced them as the weak-ass, gimmicky monsters you encountered at the very beginning. They weren't cute enough to be mascots, though.

Whatever! None of that mattered! There were still monsters somewhere! There was no point in crying over spilled milk, right?! No!

Now was the time to depart for the island of Fuguten!

Chapter 55: Island Training

We were in Fuguten, the last known monster habitat in Fiori.

I'd used Festina Lente at full speed to get us here in a little under an hour. All the way across the world in an hour sounds cool, right?

I'd brought along Layla, Profeta, and the eight members of the party that would soon face the witch. Since Four-Eyed Pervert wouldn't be in the academy for a little while, we'd tasked the old man Fox to communicate with the witch in his stead.

Four-Eyed Pervert had sent one last bird to Alexia right before we'd departed, informing her of the success of the octopus's plan. He'd explained that Oct wouldn't be returning for the time being since everything was going well, and that the saint would soon be forced to go after the fake witch he'd created.

I'd dragged the turtle along to keep an eye on the witch while I was away. Alexia had no way to know my whereabouts, so I doubted she'd try anything anyway. Then again, even if she were to somehow learn that I'd left the academy, I had a feeling she'd stay right where she was. If I knew anything about her, she'd probably just rejoice at the fact that I was so far away from her. Still, I couldn't be sure, so having Profeta around was safer.

Oh, but I digress! Anyway, Verner and the others had been flabbergasted when they'd seen that the revered prophet was, in fact, a giant turtle. Not that I blamed them—it was absurd.

"This is Fuguten, the end of the world... No, I suppose I should say it's the other side of the world..." Layla muttered, as if to convince herself that she was truly there.

As Layla had pointed out, Fuguten was at the antipodes of Giardino, the continent on which we lived. That wasn't why she'd called it "the end of the world," though. Until fairly recently, the people of this world believed that Fiori was flat, hence why Fuguten was the end of the world. Means of transportation

weren't all that developed here, so there was barely any communication between Giardino and Fuguten. Most people had heard of its existence, but they had no clue what kind of place it was.

The disconnect between the two regions was the main reason there were still monsters here—the last place in Fiori, as far as I knew. It also meant that once we eradicated the monsters here, only the witch and her four guards would be left.

"I don't know how to put this, but...this place is desolate," Aina said, looking around.

Her words were spot-on. All around us were dry earth, sand, stones, and mountains. The ground was cracked all over as if all its moisture had been sucked out. I had yet to see a hint of green *anywhere*.

Actually, I'm not sure "desolate" is the right word. This land is just plain dead.

"This sight isn't as unusual as you may think," Four-Eyed Pervert said. "Until a few years ago, most of Giardino looked much like this."

He was right. I also remembered how the land had been before I'd started going around and fixing things. My go-to method had been to cast a large earthmagic spell to plow the earth, create water veins with water magic, and sow seeds all over the place. Then, I'd used healing magic in excess to promote and accelerate growth. With enough mana, this kind of place could turn into a durable, luxurious forest in no time.

You may be wondering what excessive use of healing magic did to people. Truth was, I also didn't know—I'd never tried it. However, I'd experimented on monkey monsters, which I expected were still pretty close to human beings. They temporarily became super-duper strong. The extent of their buffs was almost scary...although they obviously still hadn't been a match for me! I hadn't seen any particular side effects, but the buffs I'd given them had been so freaky that I'd never tried it on another creature again.

"As long as there are still monsters in this world, there will be places like this," Layla said. "No matter how much effort we devote to caring for the land or planting trees, monsters will destroy everything. All animal species, even the ones we humans treat like pests, have a role in the cycle of nature. Monsters

don't fit in this cycle. They do nothing but destroy. We shouldn't ignore this country's suffering just because Giardino is faring better nowadays. Monsters are everyone's problem."

Layla's hatred for monsters was apparent with every word.

If you'd allow me to play devil's advocate, monsters were also victims. They'd initially been animals that the witch corrupted. As the greatest monster-killer of all time, I probably wasn't the best person to call for the understanding of monsterkind, but still.

Anyway, it was time to look for a strong monster we could use to train Verner's party.

"Profeta, could you tell me if there are archmonsters in this country? Or at least monsters that are almost as powerful as them."

"There are a few. The closest would be a giant squid near the coast, located five kilometers to the south."

First we faced an octopus, now we're facing a squid? Is it seafood season?

A squid sounded like a good training opponent, though, since it'd be difficult to fight. Why, you ask? Because squids usually remained in the water. Fighting them was pretty different from fighting monsters on the ground. If anything, those who forcefully left the water, like the octopus, made themselves weaker. An archmonster in its natural habitat was more powerful—all the more so if that habitat was the sea.

The difficulty level was just right for these guys.

"I'll ask just in case, but do you think anyone would blame us if we defeated this monster?" I asked.

"I don't think so," Profeta answered. "Quite the opposite, in fact—they're offering a cash prize to anyone who can beat it."

Verner and the others seemed puzzled by my question, as if they found the idea of someone complaining that we rid the world of a monster absurd. Their confusion was clearly written on their faces. It was the natural reaction for people from Giardino.

If a monster were allowed to remain near the coast, it would kill all the creatures in the area—including the fish, shellfish, and coral. Besides, it would prevent boats from sailing. When one looked at it from that perspective, it sounded like there were only demerits to the monster's presence.

However, that was only our point of view on the matter. It was entirely possible that someone was using the squid monster to their benefit. If we were to slay it without permission, we could get in trouble. That said, given the bounty on the monster's head, it was probably safe to assume that the people here wanted it gone too. Killing it should've been fine.

"I see. There shouldn't be any issues then. Let us proceed."

Time for some practical training!



Once we'd arrived at the beach, we immediately spotted the squid monster. It hadn't bothered to run away or hide after it had heard us approach. Instead, it was wiggling its tentacles over the surface of the sea, its large head poking through the waves.

Including its tentacles...it seems to be around forty meters tall.

It reminded me of that photoshopped picture of a gigantic squid on the beach in Santa Monica. It was like that hoax had come to life, and boy, was it *huge*.

How many people could we feed with this?

Leaving aside the size of the monster, what bugged me the most was the elephant trunk sticking out from its head.

Is this thing...a squid and elephant chimera?

"It's huge..."

"Who cares? That doesn't mean it's strong."

Random dude faltered, but Crunchy Doggybag didn't seem scared at all. He took a step forward.

Whoa! Someone's feeling confident!

Crunchy Doggybag's hands curled into fists, and he smiled. "I'll take care of it

myself. You guys just watch—I'll show you sixty percent of my might."

Hm... Don't you think you should try using all of your strength? Just in case?

Crunchy Doggybag started running toward the squid before I could say a word. He got into the water without dropping his speed, splashing water everywhere in the process. He'd almost reached the monster, fist raised, when...a tentacle sent him flying.

"AAAAAAH!!!" he screamed.

Oops.

I felt bad for him, so I used a little bit of wind magic to steady his fall. I always knew you wouldn't be up to the task, but nice try, Mr. Doggybag.

Actually, I wasn't sure his pathetic attempt even qualified as a "nice try." I still had no idea how strong the squid monster was since Doggybag'd been defeated in less than a second. Speaking of the monster, it had obviously lost interest in Crunchy Doggybag. Now, it was extending one of its tentacles toward me.

I've gone through this already! I totally support tentacle play, but aim for one of the actual girls, thank you very much! Eterna, Marie, Aina, and Fiora are right there, bro! I guess Layla would count more as a "woman" than a "girl," but she's there too!

As much as I loved watching tentacle porn, I wasn't even remotely interested in trying it out myself. I manifested a barrier in front of myself, blocking the slimy appendage.

"Lady Ellize!" Verner exclaimed, glaring at the monster. "You little—I'll take you on!"

With that, he slashed at the cephalopod with his large sword. The issue was that his opponent was inside the water. The squid had long tentacles, so it could attack us on the shore, but Verner couldn't reach *it* unless he also went into the sea. The water was shallow, but it was more than enough to make Verner's speed drop significantly. As things stood, Verner would soon be flung in the air, just like Crunchy Doggybag had been.

What will our dear protagonist do?

"Squidit!" the squid cried as it tried to hit Verner with one of its tentacles.

Squids don't make that noise...do they?

Verner rearranged his grip on his sword hilt and severed the tentacle in one clean swing. He'd been waiting for the monster to attack first all along.

That's my protagonist! He's nothing like that idiot Doggybag!

That seemed to motivate the other members of his party. They started shooting arrows, firing magic spells, and hacking at the monster alongside Verner. In the blink of an eye, the squid was on the verge of death.

Oh my, I see the weapons I gave them are helping. They're quite incredible, if I do say so myself.

One attack from Eterna later, the monster had turned into calamari. She hadn't poured all that much mana into her spell, but its destructive power was impressive.

The saint's magic sure is something else!

The squid didn't know when to give up; one of its severed limbs started crawling my way. Verner stabbed it with his sword until it finally went still.

"Eterna's magic is prodigious. She's just as strong as the saints of old," Layla said, offering a levelheaded analysis of Eterna's performance.

My smile froze. It was no wonder she'd be as strong as a saint...because she was the saint of this generation!

"If our saint was anyone other than you, we might have mistaken her for the real deal and raised her as the saint."

"I...suppose."

Could Layla have noticed? Was she trying to trick me into saying something incriminating? Was she starting to believe that Eterna might be the real deal?

Thanks to the dark powers I'd borrowed from Verner three years ago, I was technically able to do things only a saint—or a witch—was able to do. My credibility ought to have been pretty high, even though I was lying through my teeth. That said, my saint powers were *not* on par with Eterna's.

Take a saint—Eterna, for instance—with a saint power value of a hundred. Let's assume that to inflict a hundred points of damage to the witch, she'd need to use one MP. Since my saint power value was only ten, I'd need to increase the amount of MP I used if I wanted to match that damage. Naturally, if I used a hundred MP, I could artificially dish out more damage than the real deal—but that didn't mean my saint powers were stronger.

"I'm afraid I miscalculated," I said, changing the topic. "They won't be able to train, given how easily they won."

"Indeed..."

I was happy that Eterna had awakened, but it made her way too strong compared to your average monster. It had its pros and cons. It meant that they most likely wouldn't struggle against the monsters that guarded the witch, but I had no clue how their fight against Alexia herself would pan out.

I'd wanted them to go through a few close calls to toughen up, but...

<--llize... Ellize...>

Shut up! I'm trying to focus here. Which idiot's trying to talk to me?

<My name is Alfrea... I'm trying to talk to you, the current saint.>

Yeah, yeah, Alfrea.

I totally remembered her. She never showed up in the game, but her name was mentioned a few times. She was the first saint.

WAIT WHAT?! ALFREA? AS IN THE FIRST SAINT IN HISTORY, ALFREA?!

She was long dead. How could she be talking to me? No way... That didn't make any sense at all!

<I'm sure hearing my voice for the first time must surprise you, Ellize. I'm finally able to talk to you because you rid the world of most of the dark magic that had corrupted it. Since you're the saint, I should have been able to contact you much earlier than this, but somehow it didn't work... My powers must be growing weak. However, everything is fine now. Your arrival to this island made it much easier for me to reach you.>

A clear voice was echoing directly through my head. I looked around, but it

didn't seem like the others had heard it—not even Eterna.

<It's very peculiar, but I'm experiencing a lot of trouble maintaining my connection with you,> the voice said. <I'm afraid this conversation can't last long. There's something I absolutely need to discuss with you, so I'd be most grateful if you could come see me. I'll be waiting for you at the grave of the first saint. It's located in this country, and—>

Our "call" suddenly came to an end.

Girl, has no one told you to be careful with your cellphone's battery?! You gotta charge it before going out! So I have to go meet Alfrea at her grave, huh?

I was very puzzled as to why Alfrea—who was supposed to be long since dead—had suddenly started talking to me. And why was her grave in this country? There were so many things that didn't make any sense, but the worst of them all was that...

She was the first saint and she couldn't tell I was a fake?! Eterna was right there! How could you ignore her, you quack?!

Chapter 56: Alfrea, the First Saint

We'd gotten rid of the squid, and we were currently flying over Fuguten, surrounded by my light. Why were we in the sky, you ask? Well, because we were on our way to Alfrea's grave.

After my call with Alfrea had been cut short by connection issues, I'd told everyone what had happened. I hadn't expected them to believe me, but surprisingly enough, none of them had questioned what I'd said. Instead, they suggested that we set out for Alfrea's grave as soon as possible.

Since Alfrea was the very first saint, she hadn't had a guard. In fact, people had only truly begun to acknowledge her existence after she'd defeated the witch, which was why her life had been lost to history. No one knew her birthplace or birth date. So with all that said, if someone suddenly were to suddenly tell you that her grave was located on an island on the other side of the world, you'd be at least a teeny, *tiny* bit doubtful, right?

I was still baffled that everyone had accepted what I'd said on the spot. "If Lady Ellize says so, it must be true," they'd said.

I couldn't help but worry about them. I mean... I did hear Alfrea's voice. I didn't lie, but I could have! If I were a con man, you'd all be out your money, you know!

"Profeta, are you sure we're heading the right way?" I asked.

"Yes. Alfrea is sleeping over there," the turtle answered.

I'd really made a good call bringing the all-seeing turtle along. Without her, we would've had to spend hours collecting information. We still had a little time until we reached our destination, so I figured I might as well ask Profeta a few more questions.

"Do you know why Lady Alfrea's grave is in this country?"

"Yes, I do. This place is the first saint's homeland, you see," Profeta explained. "Most of the fighting between the witches and the saints happens on Giardino

nowadays, but it all started here, on this small island."

I'd never heard about that! It was a pretty important piece of information, but the game never mentioned it.

Uh-oh. The longer this goes on, the more worthless the intel I already have becomes.

By the way, just for the sake of clarity, I'd like to reiterate that the first witch and the first saint were two different people. The witch was the first to be born into this world. As the world's proxy, she was given the duty to rule over the humans. However, she eventually went mad, which prompted the world to give birth to Alfrea—the first saint.

"We're there," the turtle notified me. "You can bring us down."

I slowed down and landed in a valley surrounded by rocky cliffs on both sides. The turtle trudged toward a cave and entered. We followed her inside, and after a few steps, were greeted by an incredible sight.

The ceiling was entirely made of some sort of beautiful white stones; I assumed they were marble. The light that came pouring in from the entrance reflected itself on the possible-marble and onto the body of water inside the cave. The result was breathtaking rays of blue glimmer that almost didn't seem to belong in this world. An array of plants were growing freely inside the cave, adding to the wondrous spectacle.

A battered, rusty set of armor stood a bit farther into the cave. The armor was empty, but it somehow held a rusty sword as it teetered forward, the metal clanking against the stone floor with every step. It looked like it'd come crashing down if I so much as poked it.

"What is—"

"That's Alfrea's knight," Profeta answered before I could even ask the question. "That's not exactly accurate—at the time, the saint didn't have knights, let alone a guard. The people didn't know of her, so how could they have thought to create one? However, there was one person who vowed to protect her. Even after his death, his soul has remained in this world, and he continues to fulfill his oath."

We approached. While the armor let me pass through, it stood in Layla and the others' way.

"It would seem like her knight won't allow anyone but the saint through," the turtle said, looking at me and then at Eterna.

What?! You freaking set of rusted junk, do you not have eyes?! Oh right, you don't. My bad. That doesn't mean you get to disrespect the saint, though!

Sadly, I couldn't really complain out loud unless I wanted to out myself, so I simply frowned and moved forward.

Are you sure it's okay for me to be here? I'm just a fake, you know?

No one tried to stop me, so I kept on walking. Eventually, I reached the deepest part of the cave and discovered a huge crystal. Inside it was a young woman who was... NAKED?!

N-N-Naked! Naked! She's NA☆KEY!

I screamed inwardly for a couple of seconds before forcing myself to calm down.

The woman seemed to be about as old as Layla. She had beautiful silver hair, just like Eterna, though hers was shorter—it only went down to her shoulders. A couple of strands stuck out on each side of her head, and for some reason, only the tips of those locks were black. It made her look like a puppy. Her features were very defined and, unsurprisingly, she was absolutely gorgeous.

Saints are all beauties, aren't they?

Moving on to her boobs: they were huge! Two massive melons! Even *Farah* had nothing on her.



Speaking of which—you know those weird-ass futuristic capsules that always have a naked pretty girl trapped inside? They were a staple in manga and anime! Well, I absolutely *loved* those. Those scenes always got me hot and bothered. This time, the mysterious beauty was trapped inside a crystal instead of a futuristic capsule, but it was still right up my alley. Props to whoever had done this!

Leaving my sexual preferences aside, I wasn't really sure what I was supposed to do here. I could try touching the crystal, but would that do anything? I decided to try it, and—lo and behold—my surroundings changed as if by magic. I found myself floating in an ocean of light. I also somehow happened to be naked.

Hey! Why am I buck naked too?! Come on, who wants to see that?

I hid my private parts with my ultimate defensive light spell, but I still felt uneasy.

I seemed to be in some sort of spiritual realm. If I concentrated hard enough, I could still feel my physical body and move it slightly.

"Welcome, current saint. I've been waiting for you."

A voice came from behind me. I turned around and saw the pretty lady I'd seen in the crystal a few moments ago...still completely naked.

Wow! Now there's a sight for sore eyes!

Girls being defenseless around me was the greatest perk of this whole gender-bender thing. They weren't shy about showing skin in front of another girl. I was all too aware of how gross I was being, but... Heh heh, I would so have an erection if I still had my little Niito.

"Are you Lady Alfrea, the first saint?" I asked. I was already pretty sure she was, but it wouldn't hurt to confirm.

"Yes, I am. You're Ellize, right? The current saint."

"Yes... I'm currently acting as the saint," I answered.

"Acting as the saint? What do you mean?" she asked, looking genuinely confused.

Boy, she really doesn't have a clue, does she?

She was good at posing and looking majestic and all, but I'd just confirmed the sad truth—the girl was an idiot. I didn't have the heart to tease her for much longer, so I decided to give it to her straight.

"I'm not the saint," I replied calmly. "I simply happened to be born in the same village as the true saint. I have strong magical powers, so I was mistaken for her."

Alfrea stared at me, dumbfounded. "Huh?!"

There goes her dignified behavior.

It was nice actually. I couldn't let my perfect facade slip off because there was nothing but a mountain of trash under it, but Alfrea was super cute. Dropping her cool exterior only made her more likable.

"N-No way... But you succeeded in doing what no other saint in history has been able to accomplish. You? A fake mistaken at birth? This has to be a lie! Do you mean to say that any ordinary person could have done what the saints struggled to do for generations if they simply put in a bit of effort? But then...our raison d'être as saints would be... What about our heritage?! Our thousand years of struggles? Were we all just incompetent?! Are all of us less worthy than one regular girl? You have to be kidding me, right?! No... Now that I think about it, I've always thought it was strange. I've never met anyone with as much mana as you, and yet, you have less saint power than any other in history. And you couldn't hear me, no matter how many times I called out to you... Actually, that girl, Eterna, sometimes seemed to react to my pleas, and—Wait. Could she be the one?!"

Alfrea seemed to be at her wit's end or on the verge of having a panic attack. She'd apparently felt my saint power, but that was nothing more than the dark magic I'd taken from Verner. It was only natural that I had the least amount of saint power in history—it wasn't even mine to begin with.

Eventually, after some more muttering to herself, she raised her head and started scrutinizing me from top to bottom.

Random thought, but aren't Alfrea's and Alexia's names way too similar? They

both start and end with the same letter, and they have the same number of letters. Then again, I suppose Ellize and Eterna are kinda similar too.

I had a feeling I'd slip up and say one name instead of the other if I wasn't paying enough attention.

"There's no way you're just a common girl!" Alfrea finally shouted. "You look even more saintly than all the previous saints! You're the saint of all saints! You con woman!"

"Well... I'm sorry, I suppose. Anyway, what would you like me to do? Do you want me to bring Eterna here? She's the real saint, so I'm assuming you may want to share what you had to say with her, right?"

"No, stupid! If you do that, I'm going to look like an idiot who can't even recognize the saint! No, no, no! I didn't make any mistakes! You're the saint now, and that's final! I'm the first saint, so I get to decide. I don't accept complaints. See? I was never wrong! In fact, I was right all along!"

Huh? Damn, this girl isn't just an idiot—she's an absolute nutjob.

I knew she wasn't all that smart when she'd mistaken me for the real deal, but her reaction was out of this world. I'd originally assumed her IQ was a little below average, but it was actually rock bottom. In fact, she had to be the least saintly saint in the history of saints.

Continuing this conversation wouldn't lead anywhere, so I decided to try changing the topic.

"Lady Alfrea, I have two questions for you. I've seen your body in the cave. Now that I've also met your spirit, I must say...it doesn't seem like you turned into a witch. There's only one thing I can infer from these facts, but I'd appreciate it if you could confirm it for me: you...didn't kill the first witch, did you?"

Alfrea averted her eyes very, very blatantly and didn't answer.

Yeah... I expected as much.

If she'd killed the witch, she wouldn't have had a grave now, would she? If she'd killed the witch, she would've naturally turned into the next one. Then,

she would've been hunted down by the following saint. Even if the saint who'd defeated her had left her body be, I doubted anyone would've wanted to erect a grave for her, a hateful villain.

Alfrea's grave was still guarded to this day, and now that I'd met her, she didn't seem the least bit like a witch. There was only one way to explain all this: she hadn't fulfilled her duty.

"I-It's not what you think. I did defeat her once... The thing is, she pretended to be dead to fool me! After a couple of years of peace, she took me by surprise while I was drinking—um, I mean, while I was...distracted! Anyway, she trapped me in that crystal and left me in a state of suspended animation."

So, all in all, you didn't subdue the witch.

To be fair, pretending to be dead had been a pretty smart move on the witch's part. After diverting the saint's attention away from her, she would've had all the time in the world to plan her next move and increase her army of monsters.

I should be mindful so Alexia doesn't pull a fast one on me.

"I suppose that also answers my second question," I said. "You've been trapped in a crystal, and you're still being protected to this day. I was going to ask who had done that to you, but now I know it was the first witch. I'd like to switch to a different question, if you do not mind... Why did the first witch trap you in a crystal instead of killing you? She allowed someone to remain there to protect you. She even went through the trouble of putting you in a state of suspended animation so another saint could be born. I can't seem to understand why she'd do all this."

Alfrea groaned.

Putting the saint in a state of suspended animation was also incredibly smart. It was such an obvious thing to do, and yet no one on the saint's side had ever thought to do it. I supposed it always was—people never figured out the most straightforward solutions.

It's hard to see what is right under your nose, huh? The human brain sure is lacking.

A new saint was born when the previous one turned into a witch or when the world recognized the previous one as dead. To put it in other words, making the world believe a saint was dead just long enough for another saint to be born before bringing the other one back to life would allow you to have *two* saints.

While this was an incredible advantage for the saint's side, I couldn't see how it'd benefit the witch in any way. The first witch's behavior simply didn't make a shred of sense to me. I would've understood it if she'd trapped the saint without killing her to prevent another saint from being born, but she hadn't done that. She'd gone out of her way to put Alfrea in a state of suspended animation, which let another saint be born. It was way too strange.

"Y-Y-You're so annoying! I was about to explain everything and surprise you," Alfrea grumbled, "but you've already figured everything out... You're even trying to guess why my mother trapped me in that crystal instead of killing me."

"Wait a minute!"

Hang on! Did I really hear what I just heard?! Her mother?! The first witch was her mom?!

Everything suddenly made sense. The first witch had let Alfrea defeat her once, and she'd pretended to be dead so that her daughter's reputation could grow. Then, she'd attacked her by surprise. She'd been very careful not to kill her, even though she most definitely could've. Instead, she'd chosen to let her sleep for a long time. I was starting to get it. The first witch had done that because she absolutely did not want her own daughter to turn into the next witch.

Actually, Ijuuin-san had once told us something interesting:

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.

I'd assumed Alfrea had defeated the first witch, but now that I thought about it, he'd never said a word about *Alfrea* being the one to do it. He'd simply said that a saint had turned into the next witch.

To be fair, I was pretty sure Ijuuin-san had only heard about the general setting from the scenarist. He probably didn't know that Alfrea wasn't the second witch; he'd most likely just repeated what the scenarist had told him, hence the vague wording.

To think a clue was hiding there...

"I think I understand everything now," I said after a pause. "The first witch—in other words, your mother—pretended to be dead so she could get the chance to put you in a state of suspended animation. She held on to her last human emotions, and it pushed her to protect you from the tragic cycle that plagues the saints and witches. That's why she used such a roundabout method. She wanted to make sure that even if she was killed by a saint, it wouldn't be you... All so that you wouldn't have to go through the pain of becoming a witch. Did I get it right?"

Alfrea didn't know how to reply, so she simply groaned softly. Her reaction told me everything I needed to know—I was right.

Tears welled up in Alfrea's eyes, and she started shivering. "Why are you like this?! I wanted you to let me explaaaaaain! Why are you making deductions all on your own and assuming you're right? I mean you *are* right, but... It's not fair! Let me speak! I wanted you to be shocked and shudder at my awesome revelations!"

Man, what should I do? She's already starting to get on my nerves.

She seemed to be mad because I'd drawn my own conclusions. I figured it'd probably be best if I asked her something to make her happy.

"Lady Alfrea, could you explain why you called me here?"

"Wouldn't you like to know? I'm sure you're *dying* to know, even. You are, aren't you?!"

Oh god, she's such a pain! I don't care anymore, I'm leaving.

As soon as she saw me beginning to disappear, Alfrea screamed, "WAIT! HANG ON! I'LL TELL YOU, SO WAIT!"

I could see the tears threatening to fall, so I gave up on going home.

Chapter 57: The First Saint and the Fake Saint

The first saint, Alfrea, had been born into this world a millennium ago. Well, to be a little more accurate, she'd been born a thousand and twenty-something years ago. Not even she could recall exactly when it had been, and—to be fair—it didn't matter much.

Alfrea had never got to meet her father growing up, but she hadn't been lonely. Her mother, Eve, was by her side, and she could perform a ton of cool tricks no one else could. Alfrea was very proud of her mother.

For some reason, her mother was a highly wanted fugitive. Alfrea lived the first years of her life on the run. Still, she was perfectly content, and it never once occurred to her that her life was difficult. She didn't need anything else but her mother—as long as they were together, she was happy. Her beloved mother was also so strong that she utterly destroyed anyone who attacked her.

However, everything had fallen apart when Alfrea was eight. One day, as she'd been playing with one of her mother's faithful pets—a monster—a peculiar light had appeared in her hand, and she'd burned her poor playmate. While Alfrea hadn't understood what had happened, her mother had, and she'd been filled with a sense of dread. She'd screamed at the world—why was it doing this to her? Why did it have to be her own daughter?!

It wasn't long before Alfrea had been thrown into an orphanage. Her beloved mother had abandoned her, and she couldn't figure out why. After a few years, Alfrea, who was then fourteen, learned that her mother was referred to as "the witch." Everyone feared her. She'd attacked several countries, destroyed nature, and murdered countless people. There was no end to the list of her hateful crimes.

That revelation had been a shock to Alfrea, who'd then resolved to stop her mother. She wanted to find her—both in part to discover why she'd been discarded, and in part because she was tired of being despised by everyone for her mother's doings. Or at least, that was what she'd thought at the time. In

hindsight, Alfrea suspected that her sudden eagerness to stop the witch might have been drilled into her by the world itself.

Either way, Alfrea had what it took to fight the witch. She was also lucky enough to meet like-minded individuals who decided to help her in her quest. And, after two short years, she and her party found and defeated the witch.

Alfrea became a hero to the people and was nicknamed Alfrea the saint.

Four years went by. During those peaceful times, Alfrea got engaged to one of her comrades. She felt blessed, and she enjoyed every single day as she waited eagerly for her wedding.

One day, she invited her old companions and held a banquet to celebrate her upcoming wedding. They all drank alcohol and partied. She had a feeling she might have thrown her pet turtle in a ditch while intoxicated...um, maybe. Alfrea didn't really remember everything. All she knew was that they were having a great time.

However, as it turned out, letting her guard down had been a terrible mistake.

Monsters suddenly marched into her village, led by a woman—her mother. The combination of alcohol intoxication, complacency from the times of peace, and the shock of seeing her mother—whom she'd thought was dead—prevented Alfrea from fighting properly. She was quickly defeated.

Her mother dragged her away and sealed her in a crystal. Alfrea lost consciousness for a long stretch of time. When she awoke, a new saint had already been born, defeated her mother, and turned into the next witch. Yet another saint had already been born too.

Alfrea had been created by the world to put an end to the witch, however, the world had assumed her dead during the time she was unconscious. It had given up on her and decided to rely on another proxy.

She'd also discovered that someone was protecting her body. While it was one of her former comrades, it was not the man she'd been engaged to. Apparently, her guardian had always been infatuated with her, even if the feelings hadn't been reciprocated. While her former fiancé had been greatly

saddened by her death, he'd eventually moved on. He wasn't the type to live in the past. After he'd met another woman, he'd married her and even had children. Her guardian, however, hadn't been able to let go of her. He'd decided to protect her until his death, and, even after he'd passed, his soul remained in that cave. He haunted the armor and continued to act as Alfrea's protector.

Alfrea couldn't help but think it was kind of creepy—he was a little *too* devoted.

Alfrea also used to have a third knight, but he'd thrown himself into the sea after his wife discovered that he'd been five-timing her. Apparently, that sea had been named after him.

Alfrea couldn't free herself from the crystal, but she soon noticed that her powers resonated with the current saint's, and that she could form a connection with her. She sometimes caught glimpses of the outside world through the saint's eyes, and—though such occurrences were much rarer—she could even speak to her occasionally.

The saint wasn't originally supposed to have such powers, but after sleeping for so long in the crystal, Alfrea had somehow developed this ability.

Alfrea's sporadic interferences did not change the bigger picture: the saints invariably turned into witches after defeating them, or they died trying. Those were the only two paths available, and neither of them would fix the root cause of everyone's suffering—the witch's existence. The world gradually became a dark place overrun with monsters. Nature suffered, and people died.

It always took a long time for a saint to mature enough to defeat the witch, but it only took a few years for her to lose control and turn into the next one. Destroying things was easy, but fixing them was a tedious process that necessitated much more time and dedication. And so, the situation did not—rather, *could not*—improve.

The struggle of the saint and the witch felt very much like a fixed game. The world struggled and dragged things out, but the ending was certain: it would eventually be entirely destroyed.

Alfrea was put through a living hell. She knew full well how things would end, but she was forced to watch the cycle unfold, powerless to do anything but

pray. And pray she did. She wished someone would appear and break this gruesome cycle.

Although she knew her prayers wouldn't be answered, she continued to do so day after day, hoping for a miracle.



Alfrea had never imagined her prayers would be answered.

The current saint, Ellize, was an anomaly. Compared to her predecessors, she was ridiculously strong. Her talent seemed to know no bounds, and she was consistently improving. She was a true monster.

She was already strong enough to defeat a seasoned saint at a young age, and after she'd invented bizarre training methods that no one else had imagined before, she'd continued to improve dramatically. As a result, she'd grown strong enough to easily defeat all the past saints and witches together at once. She truly was the strongest in history.

A flick of her wrist was enough to make the ground shake, and she could manipulate the seas as easily as she could breathe. Even the weather was under her rule. She could summon storms, drop bolts of lightning, and summon tornadoes to annihilate monsters and their dwellings in one fell swoop. She could also make volcanoes explode and erase her enemies from existence with her all-powerful light.

She wasn't simply good at offensive magic—her defensive skills were flawless too. She repelled even the most powerful of attacks without breaking a sweat, and she'd never suffered so much as a scratch. She could also heal any wound or illness, no matter how grave. As long as the person was still breathing when she got to them, Ellize would fix it. The same went for nature itself—she'd brought it back to life, making barren lands flourish once more.

What the hell is that girl? Alfrea had thought.

Had the world gone mad after losing to the witch for so long? Had it decided to create an overpowered counter because it had grown tired of the status quo?

Ellize's might was unparalleled. The young woman appeared to be goodness

and justice personified. A few years had been enough for her to cast light upon a world that had slowly, over the course of a thousand years, been dyed black by the witches.

Alfrea had started to hope that maybe, just maybe, Ellize would be able to bring everything to an end. If Ellize didn't end the cycle, the world would be doomed anyway. If Ellize became a witch, no one would be able to stop her.

That was why she'd been trying her hardest to get in touch with Ellize. Oddly enough, however, while Ellize was overwhelmingly powerful, her saint power was the weakest Alfrea had ever seen. She had some of it, sure, but it was barely one-tenth of what the average saint possessed. Her mana reserves were remarkable, though, which had convinced Alfrea that she could easily knock down the past saints, even with far less saint power.

All in all, she wasn't a very well-balanced saint.

Alfrea had tried getting in touch with Ellize countless times, but no matter how hard she'd tried, she hadn't been able to reach her. Instead, for some reason, she often connected with Eterna—a young girl who was sometimes near Ellize, but wasn't the saint.

One day, fortune smiled on Alfrea, and Ellize came to Fuguten, the island on which Alfrea remained imprisoned. With Ellize so close, Alfrea was certain she could reach her. She'd been successful, so she immediately asked Ellize to visit her cave.

When Ellize had arrived, she'd entered her spiritual realm, and the two had finally been able to meet.

Alfrea had lost her self-confidence the second she saw Ellize with her own two eyes—the other girl was something else altogether, like a work of art. Her skin, her hair, and every other particle that made up Ellize was simply perfection. For the first time, Alfrea felt a spark of attraction for another girl. She was even somewhat irritated by the fact that Ellize's privates were hidden behind some sort of light.

Her erotic thoughts had disappeared as soon as Ellize had opened her mouth, though—her mind was too busy trying to process the bomb Ellize had dropped.

"I'm not the saint. I simply happened to be born in the same village as the true saint. I have strong magical powers, so I was mistaken for her."

How could that be?! The greatest saint in history who'd achieved what no one else before her had been able to...wasn't a saint at all? Ellize was a fake?!

It's terrible news, Alfrea thought. What did that make the real saints? They were wastes of space who couldn't accomplish a fraction of what the fake did. Alfrea couldn't accept that. She couldn't let her self-worth crumble like that, so she decided to proclaim Ellize a saint instead. The newly appointed saint's reaction had been yet another blow—she'd simply looked at Alfrea like she was an idiot, making her feel even worse.

Still, she'd put those feelings aside and had taken another look at Ellize. Mistaking an ordinary girl for the saint was absolutely unheard of, but with Ellize in front of her, Alfrea understood. She was the very embodiment of what a saint ought to be. If you polled people and created a perfect saint based on their opinions, you'd get Ellize—the very picture of beauty.

In fact, it was no coincidence she looked that way. Sometimes, imitations appeared to seem even more genuine than the real deal. Ellize had deployed every effort and used magic to shape herself into that image from the day she'd awakened in this world. Not a single part of her persona was genuine, but it was so believable that even Alfrea—the first saint—had been deceived.

Needless to say, Alfrea didn't know all that. She simply assumed that she'd mistaken Ellize for the saint because she looked like one. Even if Ellize hadn't pretended, Alfrea would've assumed she was the saint if the two ever crossed paths. That just went to show how perfect Ellize looked—anyone would assume she was the saint.

It's not my fault—anyone would agree, she thought in an attempt to justify herself.

After that, she'd explained her relation to the first witch—or rather, she'd watched Ellize reach the right conclusions all on her own. Either way, Ellize had understood her. That was the important part.

Ellize isn't the real saint, but I guess that's for the best, in a way, Alfrea thought.

After all, she'd called Ellize here for two reasons. The first had been to make sure she wouldn't turn into the witch. Ellize wasn't the saint to begin with, so there was no risk! Her worries were unfounded, and she could relax on that front. That meant she could focus on her second goal: entrusting Ellize with the task of ending this all. Alfrea knew how to do that.

"Lady Alfrea, could you explain why you called me here?" Ellize asked.

"Wouldn't you like to know? I'm sure you're *dying* to know, even. You are, aren't you?!"

Ellize had figured out most of what Alfrea wanted to tell her before she'd gotten a chance to explain, so she wanted to tease her a little before saying anything. Unfortunately for her, Ellize started disappearing from the spiritual realm.

"WAIT! HANG ON! I'LL TELL YOU, SO WAIT!" Alfrea screamed through sobs.

Chapter 58: A New Way Out

"So," I started after entering the spiritual realm once more, "could you please tell me why I'm here?"

I wasn't in the mood to play any more games, so I really wanted that major pain in the as—um, I mean, the first saint—to tell me what she wanted. There was no way she'd called me here just to tell me about her mom...was there? I wouldn't have expected that from anyone else, but I couldn't rule it out when it came to this girl—she was a true idiot. If that was all, I'd leave for real this time.

"Well... There are two reasons actually," she said. "The first is that I wanted to warn you not to turn into the next witch. You're so powerful that the world would be doomed. Though I suppose there's no point worrying about that now..."

Same as Dias, huh?

I still couldn't believe the first saint, of all people, hadn't noticed I was a fake, but if I ignored that part, her fears were perfectly legitimate. As she'd just said, though, it wasn't an actual issue—I wasn't the saint, so I couldn't turn into the witch, period. If anything, letting me—an outsider—kill the witch was for the best.

"The second thing I needed to share with you...is the way to end the cycle that started with my mother."

"The way to end the cycle?" I repeated.

Only the saint could defeat the witch. If she did, though, she'd become the next witch. That cycle had repeated itself over and over again over the past thousand years. The only way to end it—as far as I knew about, at least—was to have someone else besides the saint kill the witch. Well, that's what I'd believed until I saw Alfrea. I was finally noticing I'd overlooked something huge.

The first witch had locked up Alfrea while she was in a state of suspended animation, which had prompted the world to create another saint. We could

simply do the same.

I'm so stupid. How did I not think of that?! It has to be the most overused cliché in the history of manga!

"I see... We could very well seal her. If we do that instead of killing her, her grudge won't pass to the saint... It was always so simple..."

"Wait! Why are you beating me to the punch again?!"

Tears had welled up in Alfrea's eyes—again—but I couldn't be bothered with that. I was currently incredibly pissed off at myself for failing to figure out such an obvious solution.

That's right... I just need to seal her. The hell with the cycle! If killing her transfers the grudge, there's no reason to kill her! Damn, it was all so simple! What do you do when you shouldn't do something? Any kid could answer that question: you don't!

I could see why no one had thought of it before, though. First of all, I didn't think anyone knew how to seal someone. Even if they did, magic didn't work on the witch, so they wouldn't think of trying it.

Only a saint had a shot, but they wouldn't have tried it either. Why? Because they were usually kept in the dark to prevent them from running away from their duties. Lilia was the only exception I was aware of, and look where that had gotten her. Not exactly enviable.

A saint who learned the truth was more likely to surrender to despair rather than think of sealing the witch, so no one told them anything. And since no one told them anything, they couldn't figure it out. It was a vicious cycle.

Everything was different in my case. I'd simply been dumb enough to switch my brain off after I'd realized that I could break the cycle by killing the witch.

"Whatever! I don't care anymore!" Alfrea exclaimed. "You're right! Sealing the witch, just like my mother did to me, should do the trick. I called you here to teach you the skill."

She was looking at me like I'd just cheated on her...or worse. What a stroke of luck, though! It'd help a lot if she could teach me the spell that had trapped her.

She'd been in that crystal for over a thousand years, so its effectiveness was guaranteed.

I wasn't sure whether I'd use it or not, but there was no harm in learning it. After all, sealing the witch meant leaving a potential calamity to future generations. In that regard, ending everything myself as I'd planned was probably for the best. On the other hand, there was no way to be sure another witch wouldn't appear eventually. The world might decide to birth another proxy, and there was no guarantee she wouldn't go crazy like the first witch. If that happened, everything I'd done would've been for naught.

Regardless of the path I chose, the spell ought to be preserved. If I passed along the sealing spell, the future saints would most likely manage. Even if it took a couple of saints to get it right, it surely wouldn't take a thousand years of pointless fighting.

I had to be careful, though—I was pretty sure some people would jump at the chance to use it for evil, so I needed to think of a way to pass it down as safely as possible.

That left me with one remaining doubt. Alfrea had never used the sealing spell—her mother, the first witch, had. Had this idiot really mastered it?

"Hey! What's with that face?! You don't think I can really cast that spell, do you?"

"I'm skeptical..."

"There's no point denying it! It's literally written on your face and— HUH?!"

"As I was saying, I have my doubts," I repeated.

Alfrea started shivering, and tears gathered in her eyes. The dam was just waiting to break.

She's gonna start bawling her eyes out again. I just know it. Yeah, here it comes. Three, two, one...

"WAAAAAAH!"

...aaand there she goes. Sure enough. There's no way she's any good at magic, is there?

Whatever. It was fine. I'd keep that sealing spell idea in the back of my head and figure out a way to cast it when I went home.

Using ice magic as a base sounds doable... I'll just need to think of a way to keep it from melting.

A normal person would quite literally freeze to death in a heartbeat if you trapped them inside a block of ice, but the witch wouldn't die so easily. If I did go through with that, though, Alexia would be encased in a frigid hellscape without even being able to die for eternity.

That's too mean, isn't it? I'm starting to feel bad for her.

"What's your problem, huh?! I can do it! I can totally do it!" Alfrea cried.

Our glorious first saint was still crying, so I patted her hair to get her to calm down. Doing that to an adult was kind of rude, but Alfrea's mental age being what it was, it seemed appropriate. Alfrea smiled and pressed her head into my hand as if to encourage me to pet her some more.

Are you a puppy or what?

"Lady Alfrea," I said. "Your mother was the one who used the sealing spell, right? How did you learn to use it?"

"My mother explained it all right before she sealed me," she answered.

Seriously?

I'd been racking my brain for an answer to that question, but it turned out the witch had literally *told* her. I didn't know whether I should laugh or cry.

Had the first witch been the kind of villain who loved to spout off monologues before dealing the finishing blow, or had she told her daughter on purpose to help future generations?

"It's fine if you don't believe me. I'll teach you right now so you can see for yourself that everything I said was true!" Alfrea said before she suddenly grabbed my shoulder.

The method to cast the sealing spell seemed to pass through her hand and flow into me. I assumed this was because we were in a spiritual realm. There was no need for words—Alfrea was teaching my body directly. I felt like I could

cast that spell perfectly at any time now. I also learned a few other things, such as the fact that the pile of junk guarding Alfrea's grave was, in fact, a stalker. I hadn't particularly wanted to know that tidbit of info, but here I was.

"So? You'd better be grateful. This is an amazing spell that's kept me trapped here for over a millennium!"

"I get it now... This is quite something, indeed."

It was hard to explain, but the spell Alfrea had taught me was incredibly complex. It felt like some sort of surgical procedure. It essentially stopped the flow of time inside a limited area by using dark magic to entrap that space itself.

Darkness was, by nature, a space that light could not reach. In other words, controlling darkness meant being able to create spaces that not even light could enter. It was all about creating spaces from nothingness. If you created a space that was, in its essence, perfectly still, you could pretty much stop the flow of time itself inside of it. That was what the first witch had done.

I'd finally understood why the saints and witches were invincible. They unconsciously created spaces around themselves that wouldn't let attacks through. Everything made sense now: only someone capable of doing the same could break through their defenses.

There was one issue though—although I'd understood everything to a T, I couldn't use this spell...because I wasn't a saint! I could barely cast any dark magic at all!

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm afraid I can't use this spell," I told Alfrea. "Huh?"

What do you mean "huh"?! I already told you I wasn't the saint, so it shouldn't even come as a surprise! It'd be a waste to give up on this spell altogether though... Isn't there a way I could use it against the witch?

Teaching Eterna was an option, but the mana cost was pretty damn steep—a whopping two thousand MP, I estimated. Eterna had only just awakened, so I worried this spell would be too much for her to handle.

I, on the other hand, had more than enough MP to cast it. What I didn't have

was an affinity with dark magic. Alfrea could've probably pulled it off, but she was out of commission.

Wait a minute... This is a no-brainer! I just need to get Alfrea out of her crystal!

As with most things, destroying something was much easier than creating it. I couldn't seal anyone—the dark powers I'd borrowed from Verner weren't enough—but I was pretty sure I could break through a seal if I put my mind to it.

I'll just bulldoze my way through obstacles, as always!

"Lady Alfrea, you do wish to regain your freedom, do you not?" I asked.

"Hang on! You could free me?! Of course I wanna be free! I've been cooped up alone here for soooooo long! I'm so, so, so bored! If you can free me, do it! Go on! Right this instant!"

I wanted to test the waters, but Alfrea was so desperate that it was almost off-putting. I kinda got it, though—she'd been trapped here for ages with nothing but a set of stalker armor for company. Besides, she was buck naked all day long. Honestly, I was suspecting the armor dude of clinging to life just so that he could get his fill.

Regardless, Alfrea had just given me her consent. There was no need to hesitate anymore. I'd just smash the seal along with the damn crystal.

I left the spiritual realm and stepped away from the crystal. I raised both of my hands and gathered my mana above my head, continuously increasing its output while making sure it was concentrated enough to keep the impact area small. I added my dark power on top of it all so that it could bypass the space's defenses, then aimed for the crystal.

I felt like the crystal was shaking, but that might've been my imagination. Also, Alfrea was screaming right into my brain, but, nah—definitely my imagination.

<NO! WAIT! WAIT!> she most definitely didn't yell. <If you blast that thing at me, I'm gonna die! Hang on... Let me prepare myse—>

Fire!

My light beam went right through the crystal—albeit without piercing a hole in it—and destroyed the large boulder behind it. The recoil forced me to take a few steps back as well. If I hadn't braced myself for the impact, I surely would've been sent flying.

My attack had been effective, though—a crack appeared on the crystal, soon followed by a couple more.

Guess I gotta crank the power up.

I fired a second beam twice as thick as the previous one. The crystal couldn't take any more damage; it finally started crumbling down in earnest.

I canceled my spell on the spot, dispersing the remaining light. I'd been a bit rough, but the seal was officially broken. All that was left in front of me was a naked beauty. Alfrea was on her butt, in a daze. There wasn't a scratch on her body, but she started bawling her eyes out nonetheless. The experience had been a little too intense for her, and she couldn't stand up.

I couldn't drag the poor girl out like this, now, could I? I needed to do something about her state of undress first.

The only issue is...I don't know any spells to create clothes...

Chapter 59: Meeting Again after a Thousand Years

After undoing—or rather, crushing—Alfrea's seal, my next ordeal was figuring out what to do with the naked saint in front of me.

I could technically craft her a set of armor with earth magic, but wearing armor on her bare skin was bound to be uncomfortable.

For the time being, I created a thin barrier that would isolate her skin from the outside and wrapped it around her body and feet. She still looked naked, but she was essentially dressed...in a way. Obviously, I couldn't stop there, so I used light magic to create the illusion of clothes.

I decided to name her new outfit "clothes even idiots can see." In Alfrea's particular case, she looked like she was wearing clothes, but she was still stark naked.

Alfrea was patting her body with a mix of admiration and marvel. The feeling had to be off. After all, all she had on was a barrier. No matter how good at magic I was, I couldn't make it feel like fabric. This was a makeshift solution, though—I'd have her wear a proper dress when we got home.

Alfrea and I walked to the entrance of the cave. As soon as the walking armor saw her wearing (fake) clothes, he crumbled down—the shock must've been too much.

I knew it, this guy was only sticking around to stare at Alfrea's body.

Layla closed her eyes and offered a prayer to the fallen warrior. "He's gone to rest after accomplishing his duty. That man continued to protect his master even after death. He's truly worthy of his title... He will be remembered as a most exemplary knight."

I'm sorry, but this guy was probably a piece of shit, Layla, I thought. I really wanted to say it out loud, but I didn't want to burst Layla's bubble, so I kept my mouth shut.

Everyone's attention soon shifted from the armor to Alfrea.

She looks so smug.

"Lady Ellize, is she..."

"Indeed. This is Lady Alfrea, the first saint. She was trapped in this cave by the witch a thousand years ago."

Everyone here knew Alfrea's name—she was the first saint, after all. Without her, there'd be no Training Institute for Magic Knights, no fighting back against the witch, and certainly no reason for us to be gathered here today.

It was quite something for the others to suddenly meet such an illustrious figure. Alfrea smiled gently and brought her hand to her chest.

Oh my, she does look like a saint now.

"I'm glad to make your acquaintance, brave warriors. I'm Alfrea. I was the first person to be entrusted with the position of saint. The witch sealed me, and I spent the past thousand years trapped in this cave. Thanks to Ellize's help, I was finally able to break free."

She'd spun the story to make it sound like she'd done most of the work while I only "helped her." She probably wanted to show off a little, since she was meeting them for the first time. To be honest, I didn't really care. In fact, I simply wondered how long such a clumsy girl could manage to sell the whole perfect image.

"The first witch...sealed you? How does that work? And how come you haven't turned into a witch, Lady Alfrea?" one of the students asked.

"Allow me to recite the epic tale of my mother and I," she started. "Sing, O Muse, of how this tragic cycle came to be...and, more importantly, of how we can come to end it. As for the circumstances surrounding my state of being—that is, why I have yet to turn toward the path of darkness—I suppose one could say it was a cruel twist of fate. Chance, destiny, love, and hatred... All of these factors intertwined in a laden web of the highest complexity and led to this..."

God, do you have to speak in such a convoluted way? None of it was even "complex" to begin with! The witch bamboozled you, caught you off guard, and sealed you up! That's all there was to it!

Profeta was the one to say what I'd been thinking out loud. "None of it was complex—Eve tricked you by pretending to be dead, then attacked you by surprise. You were so drunk you didn't even put up a fight when she sealed you."

"Hey!" Alfrea exclaimed. She couldn't hide her surprise and bitterness at being called out.

I got the feeling that our resident turtle didn't like Alfrea much. Leaving that aside, I'd just learned something new—Alfrea's mother was called Eve. It was my first time hearing about the first witch's name. It didn't come up in the game or on the official website.

"How do you even know that I'd been drinking?!" Alfrea screamed before looking around. "Oops..."

Alfrea's dignified gold plating had peeled off in less than two minutes. Verner and the others were staring at her, flabbergasted. Alfrea put her saintly smile back on and pretended nothing had happened, but I could see her lips twitch in annoyance.

That's one sloppy job, Alfrea...

Not that it really mattered. Even without a layer of plating, Alfrea was still a saint. I supposed that explained why she was so terrible at acting—unlike me. I had to be careful not to slip up, but Alfrea was gold itself. Was there any need to cover gold in another layer?

"B-Brave warriors, do not let yourselves be fooled. There is absolutely no way I—the first saint, the saint of saints—would ever partake in alcohol so much that I'd end up blind drunk, sneak out of the party to sell my comrade's sword in order to buy another bottle, and be caught by the witch. Do trust me when I say something like that could never happen!"

I think you shared a little too much here. No one ever said that.

Layla looked like her world had come crashing down. She looked at me helplessly, begging me to do something, but I simply shook my head wordlessly. I knew it was hard to believe, but that was what the first saint was like.

Look reality in the eye, Scotterbrain.

"Who are you, anyway?!" Alfrea exploded. "You're a turtle, why are you acting like you know me?!"

"I see you don't remember the pet you threw in a ditch while you were drunk," Profeta retorted coldly.

So that was why the turtle disliked her so much—they knew each other. Throwing a turtle in a ditch is a bit much, though...

"P-P-Profeta?! It's not my fault! What else was I supposed to do? You were so damn big I didn't know what to do with you. The neighbors were always bugging me about how you scared the kids or something! I just thought you'd be happier living in a big river..."

"Oh, shut up! Even if you couldn't keep me, there are ways to do this! Besides, you didn't put me in a river—you threw me in a dirty ditch! Do you even know how much I suffered after that?!"



Dumping turtles in the street just because they're bigger than you'd envisioned is animal cruelty and an absolute safety hazard. Don't do that, kids. Although I suppose this isn't Earth. People may view this differently here...or not. Verner and the others were looking at Alfrea in disgust.

"That's on you! Why did you have to become so big, huh?! And you didn't even come to see me after I got sealed! I can't believe you're so ungrateful when I took such good care of you!"

"Oh, so using me as a living shield every single time you fought monsters was 'taking good care of me' now, was it?"

Verner and the others were watching Alfrea and the turtle bicker. For the peanut gallery, it was like it was the end of the world. As I'd mentioned earlier, Alfrea had always been depicted as an illustrious ancestor. Since they studied at an academy that had borrowed her name and carried her legacy, Verner and his friends were even more sensitive to that image. They'd always pictured Alfrea as the perfect saint. They couldn't believe their eyes now that they were faced with the real deal.

"Excuse me, Lady Ellize... Could it be that this lady only happens to share a name with Lady Alfrea? No, I apologize... I know you, of all people, wouldn't mistake someone else for the first saint. It's, um, simply hard to believe..." Aina said.

"I understand why you don't want to admit it, but I'm afraid she truly is the first saint. I can guarantee it, young lady," Profeta answered, crushing the students' last hope.

Aina and the others looked even more depressed than before. After all, there was no doubting the words of a person—um, turtle—who'd lived a thousand years.

"I apologize if I crush your delusions, but saints are simply humans," Profeta continued. "They're not anything special, nor are they the embodiment of miracles or lofty ideals. They're simply people on which the world dumped the power to kill the witch. Beyond that, they're just like any of you."

She stopped to sigh. She looked at Eterna and me before continuing, "I've

seen plenty of saints up until now. If anything, only a handful of them were what you'd call 'saintly.' Some of them ran away, terrified by their heavy mission. Some even hid until their death so that they wouldn't have to fight. I remember a muscular girl who fought by swinging a battle-ax around, and there was even one saint who couldn't speak because she'd been raised by wild animals."

As for the current generation, we had a village girl and a fake saint that was nothing but a pile of turds in disguise. I knew full well that saints were never meant to be perfect. I simply pretended to be that way because I didn't think anyone would believe me otherwise. I was a fake so I had to do *more*. I had to seem *more* real than the real deal, or else I'd be found out.

"But Lady Ellize is—" random dude started.

"Ellize is an exception in more ways than one," Profeta cut him off, then let out a strained laugh. "You shouldn't compare her to other saints or assume she's the standard. That wouldn't be fair to the others."

Profeta wasn't wrong. I was an exception in every way since I was a fake. There was no point in comparing me to other saints since I wasn't even part of that group.

"Ellizeeeeeee! Profeta is bullying me!" Alfrea whined, clinging to me.

I didn't really know what to do, so I patted her head once more. She closed her eyes, the picture of pure bliss. Most people would get mad if someone younger than them started patting their heads, but Alfrea must've been in serious need of human contact after a thousand years of being stuck inside that crystal. Her big breasts were pressed against me, but I was absolutely not complaining. *The perks of looking like a girl.*

"Don't indulge her, Ellize," Profeta said. "She'll only act even brattier."

The turtle was really cold toward Alfrea, but I didn't really have an issue with her. Bratty beauties were always in demand.

"Lady Ellize, I'm truly proud of being your knight," Layla said very seriously.

I felt bad now.

I'm sorry, Layla. I'm so sorry for being a fake. I'll be a master you can be proud of until the very end, so please forgive me.

With all that out of the way, I explained to everyone how sealing the witch could prevent her grudge from passing to the next saint and that Alfrea was capable of performing the spell.

Chapter 60: Feeding a Puppy

We went back to the academy after adding Alfrea to our party. Verner and the others had classes to attend, so I'd always intended to take them home when the sun started to set.

I wasn't sure letting Alfrea stay at the academy was a good idea—in fact, I was pretty damn sure it was a *terrible* idea—so I escorted her to the saint's castle after I'd dropped off the students. I didn't want everyone there to be disillusioned—they might even decide to change the school's name altogether if Alfrea showed her face there.

I told Aiz and Fox about Alfrea, and while they were left astounded, they couldn't turn away the first saint. They welcomed her with open (?) arms.

"Whoa! So the saint gets to live in a cool castle now? I'm so jealous! Back in my day, we camped out in the open almost every night. People would often confuse me for a second witch and chase me around. Life was hell until I finally beat my mother, you know?"

Alfrea seemed to have had a difficult life. I was starting to wonder whether her ridiculous personality was a defense mechanism she'd developed to shield herself from her harsh living conditions. Not even Eterna had such an intense life.

"Oh, that reminds me! I haven't had a bite to eat in a thousand years! Do you have any food? Like white bread...or cheese...or meat... Oh, and some wine to go with that would be lovely," Alfrea said, glancing at me repeatedly.

She'd probably asked me for the most extravagant meal she could think of. I remembered learning in a class that tableware hadn't existed a thousand years ago, so people back then had usually eaten everything with their hands. On the plus side, they'd had plenty of food since there hadn't been many monsters around to destroy crops.

I also remembered that there were already several types of bread back then,

although they were all flatbreads. Alfrea was most likely accustomed to eating something similar to naan. White bread—which was made from wheat—was incredibly expensive, so it had only been served to royals and nobles. While that type was still pretty much reserved for the rich, other things had changed. Leavened bread was the norm now, so the texture of whatever Alfrea had would most likely be better than what she was used to.

See? Paying attention in class is useful sometimes.

Needless to say, it still couldn't compare to modern-day Japan's bread.

"Head Chef," I said, "I hope you won't mind me borrowing the kitchen for a while."

"O-Of course not, Lady Ellize!"

I was starting to feel really bad for Alfrea, so I decided to make her the best meal I could.

First, I'd bake her some bread. I wasn't going to make her the regular stuff, though—I planned to grind soybeans and use them to bake soy bread.

Soybeans were the meat of the field. Well, to be perfectly accurate, I'd be using soyaa beans, the isekai version of soybeans. The ones in this world were virtually identical to the soybeans I knew on Earth, so I usually didn't bother making a distinction. Anyway, soy was great because it could easily be grown even on barren land. It was pretty popular in Giappon, but not so much in Giardino. The people here didn't eat soybeans—they used it as animal feed. In their minds, it wasn't fit for human consumption.

This kind of behavior wasn't unheard of on Earth either. People often stuck to their fixed ideas and refused to try new things for a plethora of reasons, including cultural and religious beliefs. I remembered hearing somewhere that most Europeans had refused to eat potatoes for decades—if not centuries—because they didn't appear in the Bible.

I personally thought that missing out on soybeans when they existed was foolish, so I grew my own supply in the castle's backyard. I'd had nobles eat soy bread several times in an attempt to get them to see its potential and spread the word.

I was calling the stuff I made bread, but in truth, it was essentially cake. Baking the modern soft-and-fluffy bread was pretty time-consuming, but cake was fairly easy and fast.

The first step was to preheat the oven. Unlike modern ovens, the stone ovens that existed in this world weren't very precise. Thankfully, magic was a thing here, and it allowed me to make minute adjustments until the temperature was just right. To be honest, I didn't even need an oven—I could technically bake a cake with magic alone.

The second step was separating the egg yolks from the whites. I then mixed the yolks with soy flour and water. I wanted my bread/cake to be somewhat sweet, so I also added some maple syrup. I made sure not to add too much though—I didn't want the sweetness to be overwhelming.

Speaking of the maple syrup, I'd harvested it myself. I'd looked for a tree that produced sweet sap and used plant magic—a specific type of earth magic—to extract it.

After that, I whipped the egg whites into meringue and incorporated it with the soy flour mixture. Then, I slowly blended it all together.

Finally, I poured the dough into molds I'd crafted myself and put them in the oven. Now I just needed to wait.

Alfrea had said she wanted to eat meat, so I decided to cook that in the meantime.

In this world, people were incredibly sloppy when they cooked meat. Getting your hands on meat was such a privilege that people focused on either eating or preserving it. They didn't have the luxury to worry about the taste. In most cases, it was either dried or pickled in salt. It wasn't disgusting by any means, but it was far from great.

Another thing was that cows were only seen as a means to an end. They were around to produce cheese or butter. People didn't really see the value of eating them as far as taste went. Why, you ask? Because they were absolutely terrible at butchering cattle.

While they at least knew about draining the blood before cooking meat, they

tended to cut random morsels out of cows that weren't even raised to be eaten. It was no wonder that the taste was typically subpar, and that the idea that beef was hard, smelly, and generally gross had spread among the population.

Still, meat was precious, so people did eat the cattle that passed away. They usually boiled it along with medicinal herbs that had a strong fragrance to mask the smell, which definitely wasn't the best way to go about it.

All in all, the people here were terrible at cooking.

Since I was the one in the kitchen, I wanted to make sure Alfrea truly enjoyed the meat. While I couldn't be sure she'd share my tastes, I could at least try.

The most important thing was to cut the meat properly. You couldn't simply hack at it aimlessly. You had to separate each cut of beef and remove tendons and excess fat while making sure not to destroy the fiber.

After I made sure my cuts were optimal, I took out a frying pan—which I'd also made myself—and added some olive oil. I put it on the fire and waited until smoke started coming up, then added the meat.

I sprinkled salt on one side of the steak—I wished I could've used pepper too, but it was way too expensive in this world—cooked both sides, and turned off the fire. I didn't remove the meat immediately, though. I let the residual heat cook the inside for thirty seconds. After the time was up, I turned on the fire once more and cooked the steak on low heat. Then, I let it rest in the residual heat for another thirty seconds. I repeated this process a few times before putting some butter in the pan to add some flavor.

Now that it was perfectly cooked, I cut it into smaller pieces, making sure my knife was perpendicular to the meat fiber.

I wasn't sure why I had to do it this way, but I'd seen on TV that it was the best way to cook a steak at home.

I also stir-fried some potatoes and carrots and added them to the plate as garnish.

Alfrea had also asked for booze. The wine we kept at the castle for guests would probably do just fine. To be honest, I wasn't all that fond of alcohol, so I

didn't know much about what was good or not.

My bread/cake was done, so I popped it out of the oven. A touch of whipped cream on top would've enhanced the flavor even further, but I decided against it. This was meant to be a side dish, not dessert.

I probably should've made normal bread instead, but as I'd said earlier, I couldn't be bothered. Bread was a pain to make. Gathering the ingredients was already difficult, and I didn't even have a bread maker. Kneading dough by hand took forever. Baking a low-sugar cake was a much simpler alternative.

As some queen lady once said: "If baking bread is a pain, let them bake cake!" Yeah, no, I have a feeling that wasn't the exact quote.

Leaving French royalty aside, I absolutely abhorred hard work. So I'd decided that the soy cake thing I made was bread, and I'd told the influential people I'd baked for as much. Because of me, the boundary between cake and bread was pretty blurry here, but that wasn't my problem!

Anyway, Alfrea's meal was all ready, so I called a knight in and had them bring the plates to her.

"WHOA! What's all this?! This smells incredible! It looks sooooo good! Can I really eat all of it?! I can, right? Actually, I don't care anymore! I'm eating this, even if you say no!"

Alfrea was basically drooling all over the food as she gawked at the meal I'd made her. I didn't want her to reach for the steak with her bare hands, so I figured I'd teach her how to use a fork first. I'd already cut her meat for her, so she wouldn't even need a knife—she'd simply need to stab the morsels and carry them to her mouth. Simple enough, right?

Alfrea didn't stop staring at the food the entire time I explained the concept of cutlery to her. She kept saying she'd gotten it, but I didn't know if I believed that. She looked like a puppy being told to wait in front of a bone. Having her wait a little longer sounded like fun, but she'd *actually* started *literally* drooling, so I left it at that.

The knights who were standing guard next to us looked like a part of their souls had been crushed.

Yeah, I'd better let her eat before her dignity as the first saint suffers even more.

As soon as the words, "You can dig in" left my mouth, Alfrea reached for the bread and stuffed it whole into her mouth.

"This is crazy soft! And sweet! How is it not hard? Aaaah, it's so good! It's amazing!"

The—fairly large—piece of bread/cake had disappeared in a matter of seconds. Alfrea then reached out for the meat with her hand, so I slapped it away.

Don't try to grab it with your hands, idiot! They'll get all sticky!

Alfrea nervously picked up the fork. Her motions were awkward, but she managed to stick it into a morsel of meat.

I feel like I'm disciplining a puppy. Not that puppies use forks, but you get the idea.

"It'sh sho good! Sho shoft!" Alfrea exclaimed with her mouth full. "The meat juice fills my mouth when I chew it! It's even kind of sweet! How is that possible?!"

Alfrea seemed pleased with the steak too. She wolfed down morsel after morsel. Several knights were watching her eat, but she didn't seem to care about that.

Why did she even bother putting on airs if she was gonna drop all pretenses so fast? Whatever, it's kind of refreshing to see her like this.

The knights didn't seem to share my point of view. They all looked like the world was coming to an end. As for Alfrea herself, she continued to munch on her steak without a care in the world. She looked like a little hamster with her cheeks so full.

It's good to see her eating her fill, but...she really doesn't have a hint of refinement left.

Now that I'd gotten to see what the first saint was truly like, I had the feeling that I'd kind of messed up when I'd built my role as the saint. The first saint was

supposed to be the epitome of saintliness, the saint of all saints, right? If that were the case, I probably should've done whatever I'd liked. I hadn't needed to bother with refinement and grace at all...

No, me, don't let Alfrea lead you down the wrong path! She can only act like that because she is the real deal. A fake doesn't get to be so carefree! I needed to refocus myself. I couldn't lose sight of my goals. Keep up the perfect act, me!

Having swallowed the last bit of steak, Alfrea stood up and screamed, "WHO COOKED THIS?!"

She had meat juices all over her lips. I couldn't exactly leave her like that, so I took out my handkerchief and wiped it off for her. *Gross. Taking care of a puppy is exhausting.*

"I did," I answered.

"BE MY WIFE!"

What in the world is wrong with her?

First of all, I was a man inside. If I were to marry anyone, I certainly wouldn't be their *wife*—I'd be their *husband*.

I didn't think Alfrea meant what she'd said, though, so I simply laughed it off. There was one ancestral skill every adult needed to master: when faced with a question you don't want to answer, always smile and let it slide.

After Alfrea'd cleared her plates, I took her to her bed. She fell asleep in no time.

"I can still eat..." she mumbled, spreading her arms and legs as she twisted into the most unflattering of sleeping postures. "Bring me more..."

Of course she talks in her sleep.

I covered her and stepped out of the room.

"I'm going back to the academy, Rex," I said. "Please take care of her and protect her."

"Certainly," Rex said immediately before timidly calling out my name. "Um, Lady Ellize... I know it's not my place to ask, but... Is she truly...?"

"She's Lady Alfrea, the first saint, yes."

The knight who'd carried the plates for me and had looked like he was on the verge of passing out from the shock the whole evening was Rex, aka Random-traitorous-knight-1.

He looked at Alfrea, sprawled on the bed behind me. She was snoring and scratching her butt from time to time. She looked like some grandpa napping.

Rex then looked at me again. He seemed to be begging me with his eyes.

Give it up, dude.

"She truly is Lady Alfrea," I stated.

He paused for a few moments before saying, "Lady Ellize, I'm truly proud of being *your* knight."

Are they all going to react exactly like Layla?!

This was putting me in a bit of an awkward situation. I initially wanted to ask a few of my guards to serve Alfrea instead, but I didn't have the heart to after hearing that...

Still, Alfrea was a saint, I couldn't leave her without a guard. That was absolutely out of the question. Besides, I didn't even need knights—I could just give Alfrea all of them except Layla. I was adamant about keeping Layla, though. The well-being of my eyes was important, and I needed her there to ensure it.

"I can't begin to tell you how happy that makes me," I told Rex.

"However...I'm planning on transferring a few of my knights to Lady Alfrea in the near future. She does not have a guard, and we cannot leave her unprotected. This is a mission of the utmost importance, and I'm afraid I can only leave it to the people I trust the most in this world—the knights of my guard."

Or in other words: some of you are going to have to deal with Alfrea from now on. Sorry, and good luck!

Rex went still along with the few other knights that were hanging within earshot.

Come on, stop looking like this is the worst thing that could happen to you!

Unlike me, Alfrea is a proper saint! She's not a piece of shit! You should be happy to serve her instead of me!

I knew that serving Alfrea was a better prospect than serving me, so I intended to give the job to my best knights. Being at a real saint's side would make them much happier in the long run.

Rex, for one, is a very skilled and promising knight, so he's going to Alfrea.

Chapter 61: The Saint Willingly Leaps Down from Her Pedestal (Not Really, She's Just an Idiot)

After dumping—um, I mean, entrusting—Alfrea to my trusted collaborators at the saint's castle, I headed to a certain village.

Remember Terracotta, the place where Eterna and Verner grew up? Well, I was heading...to another village located pretty close to that one, Lurf.

You might be wondering why I was bothering going to such a tiny village. There was, in fact, a very good reason—Lurf was actually a rather important location in the game.

I'd mentioned before how Eterna would turn into a heinous witch because a mob would attack her village, kill her friends and family, and cause her to lose her faith in humanity, right? A heart-wrenching story, really.

As always, the main culprit in the game was the original Ellize. She'd pulled so much shit that the saint's image had been at an all-time low. On top of that, she'd caused extra suffering and a famine in the village the angry mob originated from. After suffering silently for a while, they'd lost it and decided to murder the saint's family for revenge.

Sadly for my dear Eterna, they hadn't attacked Ellize's family, but hers. They hadn't known that Eterna, who'd recently taken back her rightful position, wasn't the same saint who'd made them suffer. In their minds, the saint was the saint, and that's all there was to it.

You may be thinking these guys were total idiots. Well, you'd be right! In most cases angry mobs were idiotic.

Allow me to illustrate. Let's go back to modern Japan for a minute here. Imagine that Yamada-san, a store owner, goes on TV and says something absolutely outrageous. Naturally, people will start trashing our dear Yamada-san online and review bomb his shop.

Now, imagine that there's another Yamada-san who owns a similar shop. He's

completely unrelated to the first dude, but his social media platforms get trashed all the same. Obviously, that second Yamada-san hasn't done anything wrong. He's a victim who simply happened to share the same last name.

If that stuff could happen so easily in the modern era—where a quick internet search could tell you that you were messaging the wrong guy—it was pretty easy to picture it happening in this world, where access to information was incredibly restricted. It was no wonder most villagers couldn't tell the difference between Ellize and Eterna.

Anyway, that was how Eterna's family was murdered, leading the kindhearted young woman to go mad.

Of course, Eterna would have turned into a wicked witch either way after killing Alexia. All this incident did was speed up the process by a couple of years. That said, I still wanted to spare Eterna the pain and nip that terrible event in the bud.

After a bit of digging around, I'd finally figured out that the village from where the mob originated was Lurf. How, you ask? The hint that had started me on the right track was the fact that the village was part of Viscount Fox's territory.

According to the original scenario, Viscount Fox should've confronted Ellize about her tyrannical ways. She would then have stripped his status away from him and destroyed his house, leading him and his family to commit suicide... Well, except for Aina, that is.

The Fox family was quite beloved by their people, and seeing them die such a pointless death only spurred resentment toward the saint. If you took the distance between each of the villages of their territory and Terracotta into consideration, the most likely place for the uprising was Lurf.

"We have reached Lurf, Lady Ellize. May I ask why you wanted to visit this place? I'm sorry to say, but...there's nothing here."

A young girl stood next to me and looked at me curiously—Aina Fox, the daughter of Viscount Fox. Her red pigtails and her determined, slightly slanted eyes were as cute as usual.

I didn't really need anyone to show me around, but since I was technically in

her family's territory, I'd asked her to tag along to guide me.

"We're here *precisely* for that reason," I answered. "Your father has served as my knight for years, and now he is doing his best as the headmaster of the academy for the future generations of knights. I'm very thankful, of course, but if we look at it from a different perspective...it means he's been forced to leave his territory behind. I believe it's time I gave back to the people of the viscounty."

It went without saying, but this was just an excuse I'd made up on the spot. I just wanted to make sure the people here knew who I was so they wouldn't confuse me with Eterna later on. Even if an uprising broke out, I wanted them to come to me with their grievances.

I initially thought that since I'd been hunting monsters, taking care of the sick and wounded, and doing my best to keep the people fed, everyone would like me and there'd be no riot at all. Unfortunately, it seemed like I'd overestimated my own popularity. I mean... I would never have expected *all* the royals and *all* of my knights to turn on me so suddenly. How can I be so damn unpopular? I really did my best, you know?

Anyway, what had happened last time made me realize that I'd been way too optimistic. I couldn't count on my not-so-stellar reputation to bypass this event altogether. What I *could* do, though, was make sure that the anger was directed at me and not Eterna.

As soon as we entered the village, a group of villagers greeted me. They bowed all at once.

"Welcome to our humble village, saint. I never thought we'd ever get to meet you in person..."

"How do you do? I'm Ellize. Viscount Fox always takes such good care of me that it made me want to visit his land," I said with a smile.

As expected, the people here called me "saint." I needed to get them to remember my name.

Listen up, guys! I'm Ellize. E.L.L.I.Z.E. Got it? Good! So don't you go attack Eterna's house!

"What are you doing?! Why are there so few of you here to welcome Lady Ellize?! Don't you realize how rude you're being?!" Aina scolded.

I panicked when I heard her harsh tone. Stop, stop! Could you not act like a mafia boss's henchman? They're gonna have such a terrible impression of me!

"Y-You're absolutely right, my lady..." the mayor said, an apologetic expression on his face. "But there's a good reason—"

"And what is it?" Aina demanded, cutting him off.

"Well... The villagers who aren't here are all sick. A child drank from a river the monsters poisoned and contracted an incredibly contagious disease. Those who approached the infected all got sick..."

Aina's face went pale.

Poisoning rivers was one of the monsters' favorite tricks. Because of that, accessing clean water used to be a huge issue, and regular bathing had never really taken off. I thought we were over the whole hassle, but considering the timing, I could only assume some monsters had poisoned that river on their way to the capital.

"Wh-What about my mother?!" Aina exclaimed, flustered. "Is she all right?!"

"Rest assured, my lady. Your mother is fine," the mayor reassured her. "We realized what was happening fairly quickly and were able to isolate the sick to stop this illness from spreading further."

The old man's family seemed to be doing okay. I was also glad to hear that the spread of the disease was under control.

A contagious disease, huh? If memory served, the original Ellize's go-to way of dealing with them was to burn down entire villages. I would obviously purify the river, but I also had to figure out how to handle the victims. If I simply nodded along and left without doing a thing, my image would take a serious blow.

"Dear saint, I'm terribly sorry to ask this of you after you made the trip here, but could you please leave? We've isolated the sick, but I wouldn't know what to do if you were infected..." the mayor said with a contrite tone.

"Could you lead me to the isolation site?" I asked.

"B-But..."

"It's all right," I reassured him. "We've only just met, so I know this won't be easy for you, but please put your trust in me."

To put it bluntly, poison didn't work on me. I was constantly purifying and detoxifying myself with magic, just to be safe. Ah, but there were some exceptions, obviously—I didn't destroy the useful bacteria that lived in my body. The point was, no poison, harmful bacteria, or even a speck of dirt stood a chance against me.

After some more convincing, the mayor led me to a small shed. It had been reinforced with additional wooden planks to cover any gaps, and the door was also carefully secured with a makeshift barricade.

Oh boy... They were planning to let them die in there, weren't they?

"What is...all this?" Aina asked in disbelief.

"We took the necessary steps, my lady," the mayor answered. "The people inside accepted their fate."

His voice was steady, but I could see the hurt on his face.

I could see where they were coming from. If anyone entered this shed to help them out of pity, they'd suffer the same fate. It was heartless, but isolating them and leaving them to die alone was the best way to limit the number of casualties. Well... The second best way, actually. Now that I was here, it was an entirely different story.

I took apart the barricade and opened the door. A putrid smell immediately assaulted my nostrils. To speak candidly, I'd never seen such a disgusting place. Aina groaned and took a few steps back, covering her nose. I wasn't too surprised. I didn't think a teenage girl could handle that.

The shed was a veritable hell. Excrement and vomit covered every surface, and the pungent smell was honestly difficult to bear.

It was no big deal for me, though. I simply extended the range of my purification spell and walked in.

"L-Lady Ellize!" Aina screamed, trying to stop me, but I paid her no mind.

My purification spell currently had a range of about fifty centimeters. I couldn't step on filth because it would disappear before my foot touched the floor. An unnatural clean patch appeared as I walked. It was as though someone was using the eraser tool on a pitch-black monochrome screen.

I made eye contact with a few people so I smiled at them. For some reason, it reminded me of something a friend of mine, an American, had once told me.

"You know, Niito, in the US, we don't bow to greet people. We just smile when we meet someone's eyes!"

I still didn't know if he'd been telling the truth, or if he'd been trying to make a joke, but I liked the sound of it. It was a nice custom, I thought, so I'd decided to learn from it.

When I reached the back of the shed, I found an emaciated kid.

She... Or is it he? I can't tell anymore.

The child had lost so much weight that their bones showed through their ashen skin. They also had purple spots all over their body.

"S-Saint? Y-You...shouldn't come...to such a dirty place... Don't bother...with us... We don't have...much longer...anyway..." the child struggled to sob out the words when they noticed me.

I clasped their hand to make them stop. You're so noisy, kid. Shut it.

I checked how much poison was in their system through their hand. I could feel countless strange bacteria bustling inside their body, and I could tell they were trying to infect me as well. They vanished before they could touch me, obviously.

All good. This is nothing a bit of detoxifying and purifying can't cure.

I'd also throw in a bit of healing magic to give the child's weakened cells a boost. After that, they'd simply need to rest and eat well, and they'd be back to full health in no time.

Victory was in my grasp. I almost started cackling, but I stopped myself at the last second. *Oops, I almost let the real me shine through*.

"It's going to be fine," I said to calm the child.

Then, I unleashed my super detoxification+purification+healing combo! In a mere second, the shed became sparklingly clean...and the pathogen that had caused this mess disappeared for good.

Aina had come a little too close to the shed, so just to be safe, I'd used my combo on her too.

You'd better remember me, villagers of Lurf! This blonde idiot who just put on a show is called Ellize! Ellize, not Eterna! So remember not to attack Eterna's parents, okay?!

The newly cured patients looked around in confusion. They didn't seem to understand what had happened or what to do. The first to move was the child whose hand I'd been holding. They got up and ran to the mayor, throwing themselves at him as they bawled.

LMA— No, I won't laugh this time.

I knew full well how hard sickness could be on someone.

Wait... I'd just realized that I could've done the whole thing without bothering to enter the shed!

This is why I'm so ineffective! I always waste my time with useless extra steps! I'll need to reflect on that.



After the events in the shed, Ellize purified the river and the entire village before visiting the Fox residence. She was then greeted by the villagers on her way home.

The young boy Ellize had saved, the mayor's grandson, kept his eyes on Ellize's back as she walked away. He'd made up his mind, and so had the other villagers.

"The current saint, Lady Ellize... She's just like they say. No, she's even greater than the rumors," the mayor said with a smile.

All of his constituents nodded. They wholeheartedly agreed.

Up until now, they'd always lumped all the saints together. They were some sort of distant concept that had no bearing on reality.

They'd heard rumors about Lady Ellize, though. People had said that she wasn't like the others, and they already believed that. The world had definitely changed for the better in her era.

Naturally, they remembered her name after hearing it so many times, but they still hadn't made a clear distinction between Ellize the person and "the saint"—that mythical role they'd heard about their entire lives.

"Mayor," one of the villagers started. "I always thought that the saint lived in a different world from us commoners. I thought she looked down on us. But Lady Ellize didn't hesitate to approach us when not even our families would... She... She smiled at me," he said as tears welled up in his eyes.

He'd been treated like a pariah that shouldn't be approached. Of course, there had been no other way, and he didn't blame his friends and family. Still, the fact remained that they'd given up on him. He'd despaired in that small shed, surrounded by blood, vomit, and feces...until she'd opened the door for them.

She hadn't hesitated to enter that disgusting shed when she most likely hadn't even needed to. They'd seen how she'd used her magic—surely, she could have healed them from the outside without approaching their filth. But she hadn't. She'd entered the shed to be by their side. She wasn't the kind of person who looked down on others while perched at the top of her ivory pedestal. No, she'd leaped down all the way to the bottom for them.

"Grandpa," the mayor's grandson said. "I thought that there was no point in me being alive any longer... But Lady Ellize told me it would be fine."

The few words Ellize had uttered without much thought had saved the boy. He'd felt as though she'd told him so much more. He would be fine, regardless of whether he was dirty or not.

(Naturally, it was all a misunderstanding. Ellize had only meant that she could treat his illness and he'd be fine as far as health went. If the person who'd heard it had interpreted it differently and had been saved as a result...well, all's well that ends well.)

"The world is a much better place now than it was in the past, but there are still people suffering who need help. I feel like I've finally understood something important. We need her—not just any saint, but Lady Ellize. We should never allow her light to stop shining," the mayor said.

"Yes. There must be thousands of others who, just like us, need her help desperately. We mustn't lose her...or her smile."

"I've made up my mind. I've died once. My life isn't mine anymore, it's hers. I'll become her strength, I swear it."

Just like that, the people of Lurf arbitrarily reinterpreted Ellize's words and actions in the way that best suited them and became even more faithful to her. For better or worse, the people of Lurf were obstinate. Once they made up their minds on something, they'd never relent. They also had a tendency not to consider the consequences of their actions—just like Aina.

They were the kind of people who could infiltrate a school and plan an assassination to avenge their father, as well as start a violent uprising to avenge their lord. They were as faithful and determined as knights when it came to protecting the person they swore allegiance to.

And so, yet another group of people ready to throw away their lives for Ellize's sake was born. As for Ellize's reputation, it skyrocketed once more.

Chapter 62: Confessions and Truths

I didn't stop taking the students (plus Supple) to Fuguten after we'd found Alfrea. We went there several times to train. Just as I'd hoped, their fighting skills gradually improved. They also got the chance to work on their teamwork during real battles.

I also discovered that, while her personality was a bit, uh...you know...Alfrea was a great fighter. I could see how she'd managed to overpower the witch in an era where saints didn't have a proper guard. She took care of most monsters in the blink of an eye, without breaking a sweat. She showcased all the poise and majesty of a glorious saint.

Her shit-eating grin eventually got on my nerves, though, so I used Aurea Libertas to carpet-bomb the forest and annihilate all of the monsters hiding from us in one go. After that, Alfrea spoke to me politely for a little while. I was wondering whether I'd gone a little too overboard, but the turtle had immediately reassured me that it was crucial to show dogs who the boss was when it came to discipline.

Miss turtle, aren't you a little too salty?

At any rate, Alfrea was way better than Eterna. With the final battle against the witch approaching, I was glad to have her here. To be honest, I estimated that Alfrea could most likely defeat Alexia in a one-on-one fight. I would definitely be sending her to the basement as well. Obviously, I couldn't have her kill the witch—even by mistake—so I'd give her the same staff as Eterna.

With that new plan in mind, I had a school uniform tailored for Alfrea.

"Oh! This is pretty cute! So you want me to wear this when I go down to the basement?" Alfrea asked, grabbing her new uniform and moving it around so she could look at it from every angle.

"Yes, please."

I'd brought her to my room on the fifth floor of the academy. Verner and the

others were here too, so she couldn't try it on, but Alfrea seemed pleased with her new outfit all the same.

Our headmaster, Viscount Fox, was also in the room. I'd actually bugged him to get this uniform for me as fast as possible.

"I'm so happy there's green on this! Green's my favorite color!" Alfrea exclaimed.

"Is that so?" I asked.

"Yes. The one I hate most is red, by the way. You're bound to see tons of it every day when you have to fight monsters. I saw so much of it that I eventually started hating it."

So Alfrea's favorite color is green, huh? Could it be that the girls' uniforms have touches of it because it's her favorite?

I glanced at Fox, and he guessed my question before I even voiced it. "The first saint's tastes in colors were passed down for centuries," he replied. "Lady Alfrea's legacy is the reason we do not use red in any way at the academy."

"So that's why," Eterna said.

We were at the Training Institute for Magic Knights of Alfrea. It stood to reason that we wouldn't wear the one color she hated. Everyone seemed satisfied with this explanation except for Verner. He was looking down at his feet, seemingly lost in his thoughts.

Is he thinking that it's a waste because green sucks?

Leaving Verner's distaste of the color green aside, I'd asked Alfrea to wear a uniform for two reasons. First, I totally dug it. Second, I didn't want the witch to notice that something was off.

The story we wanted to sell was that a group of students had unintentionally wandered into the basement. Until the witch's way out was entirely cut off, she had to believe that. According to Profeta, the witch would most definitely choose to fight if she thought the kids who entered the basement were mere students. If she let them go back scot-free, her hiding place would be revealed and she'd be forced to teleport to escape me—something that would inevitably

weaken her.

Alexia's greatest fear was that I'd find her, so we were going to exploit it.

The day of the final battle was getting closer and closer...which also meant that my days here at the academy were numbered.



Night had fallen, and I'd sneaked out to the sports ground without telling Layla. I was currently gazing at the main school building. The wind was messing up my hair, which was somewhat irritating, but I didn't want to move—I wouldn't be able to see this scenery much longer.

I should burn this sight into my memories.

Alfrea's addition to the party had increased my chances of survival, but that didn't really change anything. Once the witch was defeated, I'd reveal everything and I wouldn't be able to stay here.

The rightful saint ought to reclaim her place. As soon as peace was restored, I'd give Eterna the spot that was always meant to be hers. I'd made up my mind a long time ago. After that, I'd go hide somewhere no one would ever find me. I didn't want anyone to find my body after I'd died and mourn for me.

"Huh? Lady Ellize?"

I heard a voice, so I turned around. It was Verner.

Why'd he even come to the sports ground in the middle of the night? Huh, wait—that's the pot calling the kettle black.

"I came out for a jog..." Verner said.

I see, training before the final battle. That's a good mindset to have, Verner.

I hadn't been paying much attention, but this guy had become *super* jacked in the past few months. When I'd first met him, he'd still been a skinny pretty boy —the type worthy of being the main character of a dating sim. Now, though, he looked like the main character of some fighting game. *You've been working out a little* too *much, dude*.

"But I'm glad I ran into you," he continued. "There's something I need to tell

you."

Something you need to tell me, huh? Couldn't you have told me during the day?

I said as much, and Verner scratched his cheek, an awkward look on his face.

"Well, the thing is...Miss Layla is always with you during the day. I wanted to discuss this with just the two of us."

Verner's cheeks were a soft shade of pink, and his eyes kept darting away as he spoke.

I see, I see. You wanted the two of us to be alone together when you told me. Wait. Hang on. Is this what I think it is?

I admittedly didn't have much romantic experience, but he was being way too obvious. Even I could see where this was going.

Veeeeerner! Are you sure you wanna do this?! Please don't! You still have time to think it over! It's not too late!

What do I even say?! Should I just use the most cliché line in the book and answer that I like—note the emphasis on the like—him too?

No, I gotta calm down. He might have something entirely different to say. I'm overthinking this. I'm sure it's a misunderstanding. Please, God, let it just be a misunderstanding!

"Lady Ellize... Ever since you saved me three years ago, I've always had a single goal in mind—to become your knight. But I've been concealing something from you... I know I shouldn't feel this way, but, um... I-I'm not sure how to say this..."

Good. Don't say it, then! You can still back out of this.

The main character stumbling on their words and being unable to confess their feelings was such a staple scene that I couldn't help but give him a mental thumbs up.

You really have this whole protagonist thing down, Verner. Now, the next step is to shut up forever and let our current relationship continue, got it?

"I really can't find the words," Verner continued after a pause. "There are so many things I wanted to tell you, but my mind is blank... I-I really should just say it straight, shouldn't I? Lady Ellize, I..."

"Don't say any more!"

STOOOOOP!!! This is the part when you hesitate and give up, Verner! Why are you pushing through and confessing anyway?! You're not supposed to step right into the huge turd on the sidewalk—you're supposed to go around it! Find someone else, all right?! I'm serious! I mean it! Anyone but me!

"You should say this to someone else, Verner," I said. "I'm not worthy of these feelings."

I didn't know how to continue this conversion. I'd stopped Verner in the middle of his confession, but what was I supposed to say now?

Do I reject him? What if he says he won't fight the witch because he's lost his drive?

A few awkward seconds went by during which neither of us said a word. Verner was the one to break the silence.

"Are you saying this...because you aren't the saint?"

HUH?! HE KNEW?!

My first instinct was to wonder how he'd found me out, but I already knew. That one mistake I'd made had come back to bite me in the ass. Headmaster Fox had jogged his memory earlier.

We do not use red in any way at the academy, he'd said.

When I'd gotten hurt in front of Verner, I'd blurted out a terrible excuse about red thread. While he hadn't seen through my lie at the time, he'd finally put two and two together.

"Since when have you known?" I asked after a pause.

"Right now," he answered immediately. "I wasn't sure, but your reaction just confirmed it."

Damn, he got me. Way to play yourself, me.

"I started feeling like something was off after Eterna awakened," he continued. "Miss Layla said that Eterna was 'just as strong as the saints of old,' and after seeing Lady Alfrea fight, I realized she was right. Eterna isn't as strong as her yet, but she's in the same league. And then...when I heard what the headmaster said earlier today, I remembered what had happened last time."

Verner had been paying attention.

Ah well, I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. The second Eterna had awakened, I'd known that I wouldn't be able to fool them for much longer. I'd done what I could to buy myself some time, but it had only worked because of the powers I'd stolen from Verner. Obviously, Verner knew I'd taken magic from him—I'd done it right in front of his eyes. He simply needed a reason to suspect me to realize what I'd done.

"When I realized that...I finally understood what you'd meant three years ago. When you told me you wished for me to encounter my saint, you were talking about Eterna, weren't you?"

Right on the money.

Boy, I'd been looking down on our main character the entire time, but he was smarter than he looked. I didn't think he'd get it.

It didn't matter, though. At least, now he probably understood that everything had been fake from day one.

"That's right. I'm no saint, Verner," I said. "I simply happened to be born in the same village as Eterna. I had a large reserve of mana, so I was mistaken for her and raised as the saint. I've been lying to everyone this entire time. I'm a fake."

"Then...your powers are..."

"As you've probably guessed, I've been using the dark powers I borrowed from you on that day three years ago to mimic the saint's powers. The rest was all magic—plain old magic. I'm nothing special, Verner. I simply circulate my mana continuously, day and night, to expand my mana pool."

Verner seemed surprised by my explanation.

"You finally get it, don't you?" I continued. "The person you like, Ellize the saint, never existed to begin with. I've been playing a role this entire time. This is all a sham. I've acted out the perfect saint the people wanted to see, but it isn't me. You're in love with an illusion, Verner."

I was a little too direct, wasn't I? He probably hates me now.

Oh well, earning his disappointment and resentment was far better than having him lock himself on a route that made no sense. He'd be far happier this way.

Strangely enough, Verner's face didn't change. He looked, uh...normal? *Huh?*

"You've got it all wrong, Lady Ellize," he said. "You may not be the 'real' saint, but the people you've helped over the years are all real! I'm only standing here right now because *you* were there for me! You say you were playing a part, but when you play a role perfectly, it stops being a role. You *made* it all real! Anyone would agree that *you're* the saint of our generation! You're not an illusion—you're right here! And none of this changes my feelings. *You* are my saint. You always have been, and always will be!"

Oh my, he's all fired up. Slow down, Verner. Chill. I got your point, so there's no need to say anything more! I don't need you to confess to me like you're the main character of some romantic lo— Wait, he is the main character of a romantic love story!

"Lady Ellize, I..."

S-S-STOP!

Don't get carried away, Verner! The mood's going to make you say something crazy! Let's take a little break and breathe, okay? If you think about it for five minutes, you'll realize you don't want a fake! Don't say it! Please, don't say it!

"I love you!"

AAAAARGH!!! NOOOOOOO!!!

ASLDFKGSKLSSKLFKLJAASASL;DKWTJ;LSDG!!!



Even if it was all an act, it doesn't change the fact that she saved me.

A very distinct impression that something was off had struck Verner when he'd seen Alfrea fight monsters for the first time.

Even though Alfrea was a bit, um...wild—no, a bit of a free-spirit—and, generally speaking, the furthest thing from what he'd imagined the first saint would be like, her powers were the real deal. She knocked down monsters in a single blow and couldn't be hurt by anything but the witch or the saint's powers.

Seeing her burn down monsters with a flash of white light had left little room to doubt the truth: she was a saint.

And yet, Verner thought that her performance was somehow anticlimactic. She was amazing, sure. She was strong, it was true. But she wasn't *overwhelming*. She didn't make blades of light fall from the sky, or fire beams that chased after her enemies. And she didn't eradicate dozens—let alone hundreds—of monsters with a flick of her wrist. Verner hadn't seen her command the weather or breathe new life into a plot of dried-out land either.

Alfrea's powers were all too normal in comparison to the miracles Ellize performed.

Verner couldn't think of her as a goddess who'd descended from the heavens. She was simply a girl who won over monsters in battle because her powers happened to be of the right attribute. Besides, she didn't even seem all that much stronger than Eterna. She was a bit better, sure, but the margin was fairly narrow as far as Verner could tell.

While Eterna's powers were very much like those of a saint, he'd always thought she couldn't compare to what a real saint could do...but that was because Verner had always compared her to Ellize.

Profeta had told them that Alfrea wasn't weaker than most saints. If anything, she was even slightly *stronger* than Alexia, the previous saint and current witch. Eterna's abilities fit in right there with them. Without Ellize around, anyone would've mistaken her for the saint. Even Layla, the head of the saint's guard, had said so.

But would that really have been a mistake?

Verner, who'd realized that his frame of reference had been off all along, was assaulted by doubt. His doubts had finally turned into certitude today.

Alfrea had started talking about her taste in colors after seeing her uniform, and the headmaster had commented on it.

"I'm so happy there's green on this! Green's my favorite color!"

"Yes. The one I hate most is red, by the way. You're bound to see tons of it every day when you have to fight monsters. I saw so much of it that I eventually started hating it."

"The first saint's tastes in colors were passed down for centuries. Lady Alfrea's legacy is the reason we do not use red in any way at the academy."

There was no red thread on the uniforms.

Verner had recalled that time when he and Ellize had fallen off a cliff. He'd woken up in a cavern next to Ellize, and they'd chatted. That was when he'd seen a cut on her arm and pointed it out. He could still remember Ellize's exact answer:

"Looks like a piece of thread was stuck to my arm. It must have come off my uniform when I fell."

At the time, her explanation had convinced him. Her wound had disappeared, and Ellize was holding a piece of red thread in her hand. But thinking back on it, Verner had realized that it didn't make any sense. There was no red thread on the uniform Ellize wore.

That got him thinking—had Ellize *truly* been holding a piece of thread? She could create auroras and meteor showers. Someone like her could very well have created an illusion by magic.

Verner couldn't be a hundred percent sure, though. Ellize *could* have had a red handkerchief in her pocket, and it *could* have been shredded during the fall, leaving a thread on her arm. It wasn't impossible.

Besides, Ellize could do things that only a saint could do.

She couldn't fake that, Verner had thought, before he'd remembered

something else.

"It's all right. Don't worry, I'm fine. This power will help you one day. But I understand how much it must make you suffer right now... So I will borrow some of it, all right?"

Ellize had told him that three years ago. His meeting with Ellize on that fateful day had been his starting point, and not a single day went by that he didn't think back on that special moment.

That was why Verner had immediately understood the answer to his question.

She could. Three years ago, she took some of my power. Even if she's not the saint, she'd still be able to do these things.

Was Ellize the saint, or wasn't she?

To be perfectly honest, Verner didn't really care either way. Ellize had saved him on that day. That wouldn't change, and his resolve to fight for her wouldn't change either.

If Ellize wasn't the saint, it would only mean that a regular girl had managed to do more for humanity than all of the saints combined. If anything, that would only make Verner respect her *more*.

Above all, Verner knew that no matter who Ellize was, his feelings for her wouldn't change. He was in love with Ellize. Nothing could change that—especially not small, unimportant details such as her identity.

And so, when he'd run into her at the sports ground, Verner had let his ardor take over him and tried to confess. With Layla out of the way, it had been the perfect occasion. He hadn't wanted to let it slip away. He still remembered how, at Ellize's birthday festival, Layla had stayed glued to her side the entire time, her watchful eyes preventing him from confessing.

He'd tried expressing his feelings, but Ellize had stopped him and told him the truth.

It had all been a result of hard work. All the miracles she'd shown them had been accomplished through hard work.

Verner knew that taking in the mana around you and circulating it inside your body before pushing it back out could increase your mana pool. He'd learned the method in class, and he'd done it many times when training. It was something that required your full concentration, and above all, put a big strain on your psyche.

Verner wasn't sure how it worked exactly, but people's emotions continuously seeped out of their bodies along with their mana. Accepting that foreign mana inside yourself meant having to bear the brunt of other people's emotions. You'd feel their anger, hatred, frustration, envy, and so on. It was a continuous fight to avoid being tainted by them. Circulating foreign mana felt as though your colors were gradually tainted by other, unknown colors. It was a terrifying feeling. You also risked losing yourself during the process. Maintaining a clear boundary between your own self and the surge of outside emotions was so challenging that people usually didn't circulate mana for too long. In fact, most people hated doing it and practiced as little as possible.

And yet, Ellize had been doing it continuously, day and night.

If anyone else had tried to imitate her training methods, they would have lost their minds. Verner wouldn't have been surprised to see someone who'd gone through that become as twisted as the witch herself. However, Ellize was perfectly fine. It had to be because she was the only person he knew who could accept anything with a forgiving heart. At least, that was Verner's best guess.

Who else could have done what she had? Who else could take her place?

Ellize seemed to look down on herself. She'd told him she was a sham—an illusion. Verner didn't agree.

She wasn't the saint, that much was true. She might have been playing a role, just as she'd said, and acted out the perfect saint people wanted her to be. But that didn't change the fact that people—real, living people—and *the world itself* had been saved by her act.

She'd reclaimed land from the monsters, revived nature, and saved countless lives. Far fewer children died of hunger every winter. Smiles had returned to the faces of those who'd lost hope. Verner himself had found the will to live, and he'd found a new goal after meeting her.

None of that was fake. Ellize was no illusion.

Verner's feelings wouldn't change. He only had one saint. Even if she was a fake who'd been acting this entire time, she was still Verner's one and only saint. To him, she was the real deal. There was no need for him to hesitate or feel embarrassed. He would be true to his feelings and voice them out loud.

Ellize looked at him, a confused expression on her face. Verner couldn't tell what she was thinking, but he didn't regret speaking up. He'd finally said what he wanted to say.

He wouldn't mind if Ellize rejected him on the spot. No, actually, that was a lie. He would be sad. Still, he had no regrets.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, Ellize finally spoke. She looked straight at him, a soft smile on her lips, and said, "Thank you, Verner. Hearing you say that...makes me realize that I haven't done all this for nothing."

Verner felt like a hint of sadness was hidden behind her smile. He would soon understand why.

"But..." Ellize continued. "I can't answer your feelings. I know I'll make you unhappy."

"What do-"

Verner tried to ask what she meant, but Ellize didn't let him finish.

"I don't have much longer to live. I have six more months...at best. It's very likely that I won't be here to celebrate my next birthday."

Verner's mind went blank. He wanted to believe this was a lie—an excuse Ellize had made up to reject him without hurting his feelings—but he couldn't. His brain had already figured out the reason behind Ellize's condition.

Verner's powers were a curse. They ate away at anything and everything, and Ellize had taken away a part of them. While he'd always thought they couldn't have harmed her because she was the saint, he was finally realizing that he'd been mistaken once more. Ellize wasn't the saint. That meant Verner's powers were like a poison to her.

The young man didn't know what to do or think. He was frozen in place.

"Please don't worry about me," Ellize said. "This is what I wanted. I chose to embark on this path knowing full well where it would lead me. Without the powers I borrowed from you, I wouldn't have been able to pose as the saint. So please don't feel guilty. In fact, feel free to resent me instead—you do realize I used you so I could deceive everyone, correct?"

Verner wanted to scream that she was wrong. What kind of fool would doom themselves simply to deceive people? It made no sense. Ellize wasn't an idiot. She wouldn't willingly lose decades of her life to make her act slightly more believable. Besides, Ellize had already been known as the greatest saint in history *before* she'd even met Verner.

Verner could tell she was trying to make herself sound like the bad guy just so that he wouldn't feel guilty, but his voice wouldn't come out. His throat had closed up, and it refused to make a sound. He couldn't stop thinking about the terrible truth—that Ellize would pass soon.

He'd thought that he would've been fine after this conversation, that he wouldn't have regrets even if Ellize dumped him. Even if he couldn't be by her side, he would have been happy knowing that Ellize was alive and well. But this... This was too much.

"So, Verner... You should be with someone else. Find a nice girl who will make you happy. I want you to live with her and lead this world toward a beautiful future. That's the best course of action."

Ellize didn't exist in the future she spoke of, Verner realized. She's so selfish.



Chapter 63: Alterations

A rather unremarkable two-story apartment building stood in the middle of the city. Renting a room there cost fifty thousand yen a month. The rooms weren't all that big, but each still had a living area, a bathroom, a toilet, and a kitchen. It was a little far from the closest station, but there were no other issues with the building itself. All in all, it was a pretty good place for its price.

Today, just as any other day, Fudou Niito—one of the tenants—was seated in front of his computer. He was catching up on the adventurers of Ellize, his other self—or rather, his real self, considering the biggest part of his soul was inside her already—who'd ended up in another world by some trick of fate.

The amount of information he could access had greatly increased, and the game's story was finally nearing its end. The ultimate battle was quickly approaching.

A bunch of new characters, including Profeta, the prophet; Alfrea, the first saint; and Crunchybite Dogman, had been added to the cast. It was becoming more and more apparent that Ellize's route was very different from the rest of the game.

It had only been a few days since this brand-new route had been discovered. Everyone was fervently discussing it online, and all the websites and wiki pages had been altered by now.

Ellize

Profile:

A dateable character from the game Kuon no Sanka.

Was believed to be a non-dateable character for four years until a hidden route was discovered during an RTA Let's Play.

Ellize is referred to as the saint. She's proficient in

magic and swordplay and is one of the most powerful characters in the game.

When she was a child, she was selfish and often acted up, but after realizing the error of her ways, she changes altogether and decides to devote her life to helping others.

Ellize rises as the symbol of light to oppose the witch, the grim symbol of darkness. She often helps the player in times of need.

At the start of the story, she helps the fourteen-yearold Verner control his powers and gives him a pendant. This event becomes a turning point for him.

The main character meets Ellize again when he's seventeen, only to discover that her appearance has remained unchanged. Ellize still looks fourteen.

Saints, just like witches, cannot die of old age and usually stop aging altogether at some point. This prompts people to believe that Ellize's aging process simply came to a stop earlier than most saints' had.

As the saint, Ellize cannot be hurt by anything other than the witch or the saint's powers. She is known to be able to stop swords barehanded without suffering so much as a scratch.

Ellize is also able to purify the witch's powers.

Ellize refuses to abandon even the smallest village and rushes to battle monsters wherever they appear. She also heals everyone she comes across, no matter who they are.

It is said that, until Ellize's generation, monsters were rampant all over the world. It wasn't unusual to encounter one right outside the city gates. When the game begins, Giardino—the continent on which the story takes place—has

already been purged from most of the monsters by Ellize. As such, it is a relatively safe place. Merchants are able to travel freely, and goods are distributed all across the continent.

Ellize is also credited with rejuvenating the land. Thanks to her, harvests are fairly abundant after years of famine. She also introduced new crops, such as potatoes and soybeans, to the people of Giardino. As a result, dying of starvation has become relatively rare in the world of *Kuon no Sanka*.

Unlike previous saints, Ellize isn't only regarded as a shield against the witch and her monsters. She's known as the saint of plenty for having saved countless people from starvation.

Also unlike previous saints, Ellize's birthday has become an auspicious day and is celebrated every year during the Saint's Birth festival.

Ellize is also known for her culinary skills. She's cooked for kings and queens. Her specialty, "Cloud" cakes, are said to be a delicacy.

Ellize is known as the saint of all saints, but in truth...

The wiki has gotten so damn long...

Niito read through the page, getting increasingly grossed out by the endless praise. Apparently, the other him had been having a blast in the other world.

Niito had been living on his own for quite some time. While he had modern culinary knowledge, the food he made was definitely not worthy of being called "a delicacy." In fact, the cakes he bought at the convenience store were ten times better than the ones he baked.

Things must be different in that world, he assumed. The people there barely

had enough to eat. They hadn't had the leeway to develop a culture of cooking. Anything a modern person made must've tasted like heaven to them.

The next bit of text went over Ellize's true identity, but nothing had changed since the last time Niito had read it. He ignored it and moved on to the next category—the one that described game events. He skipped over the parts he'd already read and focused on the new pieces of information.

Game events:

Besides Eterna's suicide attempt, the events of Ellize's route are the same as in other routes. The only other difference in the first half of the game is the special weapon you can unlock during the martial tournament.

The main character will receive a new weapon of the same type as the one you chose to enter the tournament with. Be aware that if you choose to fight barehanded, you will not receive a weapon.

According to the data the players have gathered so far, the strongest weapon you can obtain at that time is the Super Spring Onion Blade. You will receive it if you enter the tournament using a spring onion. Note that the spring onion has an attack stat of one. If you choose this weapon, you will not be able to beat Marie or John. Only select it if you're prepared to sacrifice your rank in the tournament.

Starting with the Dias treason event, Ellize's route takes a different direction.

After defeating Dias, Ellize tells him something the main character cannot hear. It prompts Dias to give up the fight. Most players believe that she reveals her secret to him.

Right before the winter holiday, Ellize is betrayed by the royals. She's confined in her castle in an attempt to keep her alive as long as possible. The knights of her guard join the plot against her. Ellize is unable to escape because her closest aid, Layla, is taken hostage. She eventually escapes her room when the main character breaks into the castle.

Immediately after this event, Ellize rushes to the Bilberrian capital along with the main character and his party to thwart a monster invasion. The main character dies during the battle but is quickly resurrected by Ellize. For some reason, the fake saint can do things not even a real saint can! Note that if Ellize's affection is under fifty, you will not be able to collect the scene's special CG.

During the winter holiday, Profeta, the prophet (a character that was mentioned in other routes, but had never been shown on-screen), will make her first appearance. Ellize creates a pond next to the academy where Profeta elects to stay.

After Eterna awakens, Ellize brings the main character and his party to Fuguten for training purposes. There, Ellize hears Alfrea's—the first saint's—voice, and the group heads to her grave.

Ellize breaks the first saint's seal, freeing her. The player then hears the story of Eve, the first witch, and her daughter, Alfrea. Their relationship is never mentioned in other routes.

As the story nears its end, the main character finally learns that Ellize is a fake saint. He does not let that fact bother him and confesses anyway. Ellize shuts him down by telling him that she doesn't have long to live.

Ellize will always reject Verner during this event, regardless of her affection level.

Niito couldn't see the rest of the page. It seemed like there was more text below, but no matter how many times he tried to scroll down, the page wouldn't load.

He'd recently bought a newer, faster computer, but that hadn't changed anything. No matter what he did, he couldn't see or read about events that had yet to occur in the other world.

New entries had also been added for the characters that had shown up in Ellize's route: Alfrea, Profeta, Crunchybite Dogman, and Elizabeth Ibris. Niito read through them too. Even though they were girls, Alfrea and Elizabeth were very clearly described as non-dateable characters.

After that, he moved on to videos.

On the screen, Verner mustered up his courage and confessed ardently, only to be immediately rejected by Ellize. She proceeded to tell him the truth.

Niito buried his face in his hands and groaned. His other self had managed to dump Verner without telling him that he had no interest in guys. Still, no matter how Niito spun it, it'd been a terrible move. What if Verner lost his will to fight altogether?

Niito understood that he'd tried to avoid hurting Verner's feelings by not rejecting *him* specifically, but couldn't his other self have just said that he wasn't interested in dating or something?! Telling Verner that he wanted time to think about it would've been an infinitely better choice—Verner would've been even more motivated to do well.

And yet, that idiot had picked the worst possible answer.

He panicked, didn't he?

Ever since Niito had realized he wasn't like the others, no one had ever shown him much affection. It was only natural. Who would be attracted to a creepy, weird guy like him? To be fair, Niito didn't even particularly want to be loved.

Either way, it meant that Niito wasn't used to being on the receiving end of so much unbridled affection from anyone, much less someone of the same sex. It

got him thinking.

I'd lose my shit and react like that, huh?

...No. I wouldn't.

Fudou Niito lacked a sense of reality and subjectivity.

Saying that he was able to look at himself objectively sounded good, but—in reality—he wasn't able to look at the situation any other way. Would his heart be moved if someone suddenly showered him with affection? Niito could only picture the situation through the prism of a game. He imagined an NPC confessing to a character he controlled. In his brain, he understood that his life was about him, not some sort of character, but his feelings couldn't catch up. He couldn't stay grounded in reality. Fudou Niito's soul constantly floated around, threading the line between reality and dream.

Even if someone were to confess to him and shower him with love, Niito still wouldn't be able to take it personally. He'd consider the situation objectively, from a third-person standpoint. His brain would understand, of course, but his heart wouldn't.

In a way, the inner workings of Fudou Niito's mind were quite similar to those of the normalcy bias.

A fire in the opposite building was never one's problem. Even if such a terrible event occurred right in front of their eyes, people tended to treat it like someone else's problem—as though it had happened in some distant land.

Fudou Niito's distorted mind worked like this—only for everything.

It was starting to occur to him that Ellize, on the other hand, may not be like that.

She's really...

Niito remembered something she'd said in the past:

"Plus, that world and the people in it... 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."

Niito wondered if Ellize herself had noticed that, on that day, she'd shown

him a genuine smile—the kind that had never appeared on his own face.

They'd both agreed on the conclusion that they wouldn't have any regrets after their deaths, but their reasoning was very different.

Fudou Niito had never smiled from the bottom of his heart for someone else's sake, and he was certain he never *would*. His heart couldn't mellow out for someone else like that.

She's really...changing, isn't she?

Ellize hadn't seemed to notice, but she was starting to ground herself in her new reality. She still treated life like a game—how could she not when Niito had grown up that way?—but something fundamental had changed inside her.

DAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAN!!!

SHE DUMPED HIS ASS!!!!!!

No, but, it's true that Lady El died pretty early in the other routes too.

I knew it. Gonna kms

Seriouslyyyy?! She can't escape her fate even on her own route???

Why does Lady El have to die so young, huh?!

She always says no. I thought I didn't have enough affection so I redid everything from the start but it was the exact same dialogue.

Huh? Did my message send?

ROFL SHE LIT STILL DUMPS YOU EVEN AT MAX AFFECTION!

DESPAIR VERNER!!!

THERE'S NO LOVE IN THIS WORLD!

Idk bro, just resend

Guys, stop spamming! I can't see the screen anymore!

The players' cries of agony covered the entire screen.

Be that as it may, the final battle was approaching. Compared to the original plot of the game, they had an overwhelmingly powerful party ready. Niito also felt bad for the witch.

In the original game, Ellize, the overpowered saint, didn't even exist. She was nothing more than a glorified piece of shit that dragged the main character's party down, rather than helping them.

Her total 180 was already an incredible advantage for Verner and his friends. On top of that, the witch had lost most of her influence, and her monsters were almost all dead.

The countries within Giardino were also much wealthier than in the original game. That meant that the soldiers were healthier and better armed—obviously, making them more effective than starving ones. With the circulation of goods restored, people could easily buy better equipment.

Besides, in the original game, the knights and soldiers showed no loyalty toward Ellize. If anything, they despised her. Even though Eterna had nothing to do with the situation, they still somewhat disliked her by association after she rose to the position of saint. They fought alongside her because it was their duty, not out of some feeling of devotion.

The complete opposite was true in Ellize's current timeline. The soldiers and knights would all gladly give their lives for her sake. If anything, the morale of the troops was *too* high.

With Ellize as their figurehead, humanity was more united than ever. Even if the witch made it out of the basement, she'd find herself in a world full of Ellize's supporters. She'd be truly alone.

These conditions already made things very unfair for the witch. The cherry on top, though, was that the first saint had joined the main character's party. To put it bluntly, Alfrea alone was already more than enough to defeat the witch.

Alexia would be forced to face two saints at the same time with only subpar guards to protect her. It'd be no contest. Saying something so cocky was usually

a death flag, but no amount of those clichés could save Alexia this time.

Niito had already seen dozens of comments along the lines of "I'm starting to feel awful for Alexia," "Talk about overkill," "LMAOOOO! Alexia's gonna go through hell," or "When she was the saint, she had to fight against the strongest witch ever & now that she's the witch, she's gotta fight the strongest (fake) saint ever + two other saints??? Looool how's she so damn unlucky?"

The story was nearing its end... Which meant Niito also had to do his part.

He turned off his computer, dragged his aching body out of his chair, and put on his coat.

The intercom rang as if on cue. Niito stepped out.

"Hi, Ijuuin-san."

The man he'd just greeted, Ijuuin Haruto, had recently moved into his building.

Ijuuin took a good look at Niito's face. Seemingly concerned, he asked, "Are you okay? You look even sicker than before... You can go rest if you want. I'll let you know what Fiori's Turtle said."

"Resting won't make me any better," Niito answered. "I want to use the time I have left to look for the truth. I'll be there in person until I stop being able to walk."

Just as Ijuuin had pointed out, Niito looked even worse than before. Most of his hair had fallen off, but he wore a hat to hide it. His eyes were sunken in, and his cheeks hollow. The man was skin and bones. His arms were so thin that they seemed to belong to a sickly child, not an adult man.

Nonetheless, Niito had a bold smile. Niito didn't know how to smile from his heart, but he'd long mastered the art of forcing his lips to curl into one.

In a way, Niito had never really lived. He'd always gone through life as if he was some sort of spirit looking down on his body—his character—from above and controlling it. And yet, with death at his doorstep, Niito was finally starting to feel alive.

"Shall we go?" he suggested, clasping a piece of paper. "We have to meet the true creator of this world...its scenarist—Fiori's Turtle."

On the paper was an address the two men had found after looking for a couple of days—Fiori's Turtle's.

Chapter 64: Fiori's Turtle

Yamoto Tamaki.

That was the real name of *Kuon no Sanka*'s scenarist, Fiori's Turtle. This one piece of information shouldn't have been all that hard to uncover for someone who'd worked with them—someone such as Ijuuin—but, for some reason, the process had been oddly time-consuming.

Ijuuin couldn't remember their name, and although he'd looked through all the documents he could find at his workplace, it didn't seem to appear anywhere. Searching for information about Fiori's Turtle was like grasping at straws—when he finally thought he'd gotten hold of something, it slipped right through his fingers.

In the end, he hadn't been able to figure out any information about them until the story had progressed on the other side. From that point onward, the search had become surprisingly simple. Ijuuin mysteriously remembered the name he hadn't been able to pinpoint this entire time.

At the same time, something even more peculiar occurred: Ijuuin started having trouble remembering the events of the original scenario. It was as though the two pieces of information had been exchanged inside his mind. If he concentrated hard enough, he could still remember that Ellize used to be a villain and that the story didn't go exactly as it did now, but he was starting to feel more and more like the current story was the *real one*—as though Ellize was always meant to be the saintly character she'd become. He was gradually starting to think like the players.

It seemed like Ijuuin would eventually forget everything about the previous story. Niito didn't know why that was happening or what it was supposed to mean. Some sort of superior power seemed to be at play, and he wasn't sure he'd find an answer even if he kept looking. To be fair, he wasn't even sure a rational explanation existed at all.

At the end of the day, there were limits to what the human mind could

comprehend. Perhaps trying to understand the way the world was shifting was simply too much. He felt like a scientist researching the workings of the universe. Though he could theorize all he wanted, there was no guarantee he'd figure anything out even after a lifetime of research.

He still intended to follow every lead he could, though. If he gave up before he'd tried everything, he felt like he'd be left with the nagging feeling of dissatisfaction.

After getting a hold of Fiori's Turtle's true name, Ijuuin immediately contacted them to set up a meeting. They'd agreed, but requested to meet at an expensive café—Ijuuin's treat, of course.

As far as Niito was concerned, it was a cheap price to pay to finally get to talk to them. They couldn't let this opportunity pass them by, so Ijuuin reluctantly agreed.

The promised day finally came.

The café Yamoto had picked stood out quite a bit. It was a brick building—the type rarely seen in modern-day Japan. Wooden tables and chairs were arranged neatly on the hardwood floors, and beautiful chandeliers hung from the ceiling, giving the café a chic atmosphere. The lights were dim so as not to strain the customers' eyes and the large windows allowed them to gaze at the street freely. All in all, the place had an old, yet refined charm to it.

Ijuuin approached a server and asked them whether the person who'd made the reservation had arrived. They nodded and pointed at a table with a smile.

And there was a woman—a very young woman, at that. She didn't even seem to be over twenty. She had black hair, like a great majority of Japanese people, that was shoulder length. She was wearing a suit and was slightly prettier than average. She wasn't a stunning beauty, but she definitely wasn't unattractive either.



The two men walked up to her table and Ijuuin asked, "Excuse me. Are you Yamoto-san?"

"Yes, I am. You're Ijuuin-san, right? I was waiting for you."

They had the right person. Now that they'd ensured she was the one they were here to see, they sat opposite her. There were already several plates in front of Yamoto. She'd been enjoying expensive delicacies while waiting for them. Obviously, she expected Ijuuin to foot the bill.

"And who might he be?" she asked, glancing Niito's way.

"He's just accompanying me," Ijuuin said.

"Is he...all right? He looks awfully pale," Yamoto said.

"He's fine. Don't mind him."

Yamoto's first instinct had been to worry about Niito. She wasn't the only one —Niito's appearance stood out.

The servers couldn't comment on a customer's appearance, so they'd all kept their mouths shut, but they often glanced their way. Most of them were probably more worried at the prospect of having to deal with him if he collapsed in the middle of the café. God forbid he passed away inside the shop. Even if they hadn't done anything wrong, distasteful rumors were sure to disrupt business for months to come. The owner probably hoped to see him leave as quickly as possible.

"Well then, may I ask what you wanted to discuss with me today? If it's about the sequel, I'm still far from done. As I've told you many times already, I never intended for *Kuon no Sanka* to have a sequel. You announced it out of the blue without so much as consulting me, and now you're asking me to write something I hadn't planned for at all..."

"I'm terribly sorry about that. But, as you know, *Kuon no Sanka*'s popularity has skyrocketed. It's by far our company's best-selling game. Not releasing a sequel simply isn't an option at this point. The players are asking for it. That's why we've offered to have another scenarist write the sequel if you don't—"

"That's out of the question. I can't entrust this story to just anyone. You could

just announce that the sequel isn't happening, and everything would be settled..." Yamoto snapped, looking at Ijuuin as if he were the root of all her problems.

As it turned out, the game company had unilaterally decided to announce a sequel. Niito finally understood why the project was taking so long. If the scenarist had planned for the story to be over in one game, it was no wonder they struggled to think up a continuation.

"That's not how things wo—" Ijuuin started before stopping himself. After a pause, he continued, "I didn't request this meeting to discuss this. The story I'm about to tell you is very strange, and I'm not sure you'll believe it. It's somewhat...occult. Would you care to listen anyway?"

"Occult, you say?" Yamoto repeated, puzzled.

Ijuuin gave her an overview of everything that had happened to him and Niito thus far. He told her about the original scenario and detailed the biggest change of them all: Ellize's storyline. He explained that, for some reason, Ellize was able to materialize into this world and that it seemed like the game's story changed based on her actions. He went on to say that he and Niito were the only two people who had realized something was wrong as far as he knew. All the others seemed to think the game had always been like that. He concluded by saying that a mysterious force was preventing them from seeing or even reading about events that had yet to happen for Ellize.

Yamoto listened without interrupting him. She'd brought her hand to her chin, a focused look on her face.

Once Ijuuin was finished, she murmured, "How peculiar. I'm quite certain I wrote the current scenario from the get-go, but this scenario is familiar to me. It's quite similar to what I saw on the other side. Did the timelines get mixed up, or did the possibilities start diverging...? As I thought, Ellize might just be the key..." Yamoto's mumbling was almost unintelligible. Eventually, she raised her face and looked at her interlocutors. "This is a bit of a crazy story, but I believe you."

"You believed me rather easily. I'm not sure I should be the one saying this, but the story's quite preposterous, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is. However, I've experienced my fair share of absurdity. It makes me more inclined to believe the unbelievable," Yamoto answered with a smile.

So she does know something, Niito thought. He'd expected as much. Someone who hadn't come in contact with mysterious events themselves wouldn't have even bothered listening to the entire story before dismissing it. In fact, Niito and Ijuuin had come to this place prepared to have Yamoto laugh in their faces.

Little did they know that Yamoto would say something even more unbelievable.

"The thing is..." she started, "I didn't invent the story of *Kuon no Sanka*. I simply recounted the events that occurred in Fiori."

"Wait, what? What do you mean?"

"I lived in Fiori. When I died, I was reincarnated in this world. We call that...the samsara, or something? I'm not quite sure how it all works. For some reason, I retained the memories of my previous life. The Ellize I know was always as she is now in the game: a fake more worthy of being a saint than any other before her. I've never met the horrible Ellize you've described, and I've never written about her."

Yamoto had lived in Fiori before being reincarnated? As she'd said, she'd experienced something even crazier than their story.

Niito'd had the time to get used to the idea of reincarnation because of what had happened to him and Ellize, but Ijuuin was flabbergasted.

"Th-There's no way I'd ever believe that! This doesn't make any sense. Even if your soul was to be reincarnated somehow, you wouldn't be able to keep your memories. It's all stored in the brain! You know that, right?!"

Ijuuin's reaction was logical. Memories were indeed stored in the brain. Even assuming that reincarnation existed, it made absolutely no sense for anyone to retain memories from a previous life. Niito, on the other hand, didn't believe common sense applied here. There were countless phenomena science had yet to explain—this was most likely one of them.

"She believed us, Ijuuin-san," Niito said. "Let's do the same. We won't get

anywhere if we start doubting everything she says."

"B-But, this story..." Ijuuin paused. "All right, I get it. You're right, let's move on."

Ijuuin still seemed to have a hard time believing what Yamoto had said, but their conversation couldn't continue unless he accepted it... At least, for the time being. He cast away his doubts and gulped down his glass of water.

"So, according to you...there's nothing wrong with this world or with the scenario, and we're the only ones who believe anything has changed, right?" Niito asked.

"Yes. You told me that you couldn't access the entirety of the game and that you couldn't see what had 'yet to happen on the other side.' That's not the case for me. I know everything from start to finish. From my point of view, everything is over. Actually, the events I wrote about all occurred long before I even started writing."

Once again, Yamoto's answer overturned all of Niito's theories. Up until now, he'd been utterly convinced that the only reason he couldn't see the end of the game was because the events had yet to be set in stone. He thought that he could only see what Ellize had *already* done. It had made sense, and he'd told Ellize as much.

He was now finding out that he'd been wrong this entire time. The future was set in stone. He and Ijuuin just couldn't see it when others could. That meant that the game wasn't changing in real time to match Ellize's actions.

"Then...why can't we see the end of the game? No matter how much we look, we can't access information on anything beyond what Ellize has done. We can't know things Ellize herself doesn't know about," Niito said.

"You said your internet pages just loaded endlessly, right? It's only just a guess, but...I think it might be because our world itself is using its power to revise things. It might be difficult to believe, but worlds have a will of their own. In Fiori, the world's will gave birth to witches and saints. Earth's will must have forced a filter on the two of you to avoid creating a paradox. You're able to talk to Ellize. Let's assume that you knew her future—what if you told her and it prompted her to change her behavior? It would create a time paradox. The

world must be blocking out all the information pertaining to Ellize's future from the two of you to avoid this. It makes sense, doesn't it?"

Niito grunted. If Yamoto was right, the world wasn't changing in real time—it had *already* changed, but their perception couldn't catch up to those changes...or rather, the world *itself* stopped them from catching up. If anything, it was more believable than assuming that the entire world was changing based on Ellize's every action. The world had been like this from the very start, and so had *Kuon no Sanka*'s scenario.

Niito had only learned about the alternative scenario because of his connection to Ellize. As for Ijuuin, Niito suspected that he'd been lumped in together with him only because he'd contacted him. Since Niito had gotten in touch with Ijuuin, the world had been forced to impose the same restrictions on him. After all, if Ijuuin told Niito about the future, it would defeat the point of hiding anything from him in the first place. In other words, Ijuuin was simply collateral damage.

He'd most likely started feeling like the current scenario was the real one because the story was nearing its end. The need for a filter would soon disappear entirely. Before long, Ijuuin would surely go back to thinking that the current scenario was the only one that ever existed and forget about the "old" one.

"Don't you think the world would have revised your memories as well if that were the case?" Niito pondered. "I could ask you about the ending and tell Ellize afterward."

"You couldn't, because I have absolutely no intention to tell you anything. In fact, I'm fairly certain the world would alter my memories if I changed my mind," Yamoto said before sipping her coffee nonchalantly.

It doesn't look like either Ellize or I will be able to learn about the ending before it actually happens for her, Niito thought. He let out an incredibly deep sigh.

Chapter 65: Diverging Worlds

"All right, let's try to summarize everything," Yamoto said. "We'll call the scenario only the two of you know of—the one with the horrible Ellize—'scenario A.' The second scenario, the one everyone else in this world knows with the saintly Ellize, will be 'scenario B.' After reincarnating into this world, I wrote about what had happened in Fiori exactly as I remembered it. My experience is 'scenario B.' This means that, as far as I'm concerned, 'scenario A' shouldn't even exist."

She drank some of her melon soda. Yamoto was essentially saying that the world had never changed. Ellize and Fudou Niito only mistakenly believed it had.

Niito looked at her and brought up something that had been bothering him. "You said you wrote exactly what happened on the other side, but there are several storylines in *Kuon no Sanka* depending on who you pick as the heroine. How does that work? You must have added things in."

"Yes. The other storylines are entirely made up. They're predictions, in a way. I tried to guess what would have happened if Verner had acted differently. The true story is depicted in Ellize's route. I made it so that it would be the most important route in the game, as well as the only one that leads to the true ending."

Besides Ellize's route, all of the others were pure fiction. That explained why Niito had been able to play through them without any issues. The world stopped him from seeing the true ending so he wouldn't create a time paradox, but there was no such risk with the other routes. After all, Yamoto had made them up from scratch.

Niito had always thought of the other routes as potential futures that simply hadn't been picked, but he was realizing he'd been utterly mistaken. There weren't any other possibilities or other futures.

"I'm not sure it really matters, but I'd like to point out my predictions aren't

just wild guesses. I've always been pretty good at predicting the future, even in my past life," Yamoto added.

That's all fine and dandy, but at the end of the day, predictions are just that—predictions. Nothing but guesses, Niito thought. He drank some water to soothe his dry throat and asked another question. "Does that mean scenario A is nothing but a product of our imagination?"

"That's very likely. I can think of another possibility, though. You know how in some sci-fi stories, characters will go back to the past to change it? There are three main schools when it comes to describing the consequences of time travel. Do you know what they are?"

"You're putting me on the spot," Niito said. He was a bit puzzled by the sudden question, but he answered anyway. "I guess the most obvious consequence is that the present would change as a result."

Yamoto nodded. "That's the first pattern, yes. A famous example of this would be that blockbuster movie with the killer android."

"Another option is to create a loop, right?" Ijuuin chimed in. "For instance, a character is saved by someone. They go back to the past, only to discover that it was their future self who'd saved them, and they do it once more. By doing so, they create a loop where all the events are linked and must happen to keep the timeline cohesive. As for a good example...oh, there's that British novel set in a wizarding school."

Yamoto nodded once more. "Exactly. Although that franchise changed its mind midway and went back to the first pattern in their latest play."

"The last option is to go in another direction altogether and say that nothing can change in any particular world, even if the past is changed. Instead, another timeline—a parallel universe—is created," Niito said.

"That would be the last pattern," Yamoto confirmed.

"I still don't understand what you're getting at. How does any of this relate to the matter at hand?" Niito asked. Niito had answered to humor her, but he hadn't dragged his sickly body to this café to discuss time travel or sci-fi novels.

"There's only one main difference between scenario A and scenario B,"

Yamoto said, putting one finger up. "And I think a parallel universe in which scenario A unfolds might just exist. Let's call Fiori A the world in which scenario A unfolds, and Earth A the world in which I write that story for *Kuon no Sanka*. The Fiori I remember will be Fiori B, and the world we're in right now will be Earth B."

As she spoke, Yamoto took out a piece of paper. She set it on the table and drew four circles, one in each corner. She then wrote Fiori A above the one in the upper left corner, Fiori B above the one in the bottom left corner, Earth A above the one in the upper right corner, and finally, Earth B above the last one.

"This is our starting point," she said, motioning toward Fiori A with her pen. "Let's assume that the story you know took place in this world. Another me would have existed there. She observed what happened around her, then transmigrated here, as I did."

Yamoto drew an arrow from Fiori A to Earth A.

"Then, that 'me' wrote about what she'd seen on the other side and turned it into a game, *Kuon no Sanka*. That would be scenario A, the version of the game you originally knew. Obviously, this is nothing but a hypothesis, but I believe the Ellize of scenario B saw scenario A somehow. Now that I think back on it, she often acted in ways that wouldn't make sense unless she knew the future."

Niito understood immediately what had happened. Yamoto had no way of knowing, but she should've added an arrow connecting Earth A to Fiori B.

Ellize (Fudou Niito) had transmigrated from Earth A to Fiori. She'd acted in a completely different way compared to the original Ellize, which had forced Fiori to split into two distinct timelines. Thus Fiori B had been born.

"Ellize's foreknowledge prompted her to change her behavior. The divergence created Fiori B," Yamoto continued. "Then, the same thing happened. I died, transmigrated, and wrote the scenario for *Kuon no Sanka* based on what I'd seen in Fiori B."

"That makes sense... The scenario we know would be the one of a parallel universe," Niito whispered, considering the implications.

The current Ellize had to have existed on Fiori A first. If she hadn't, she

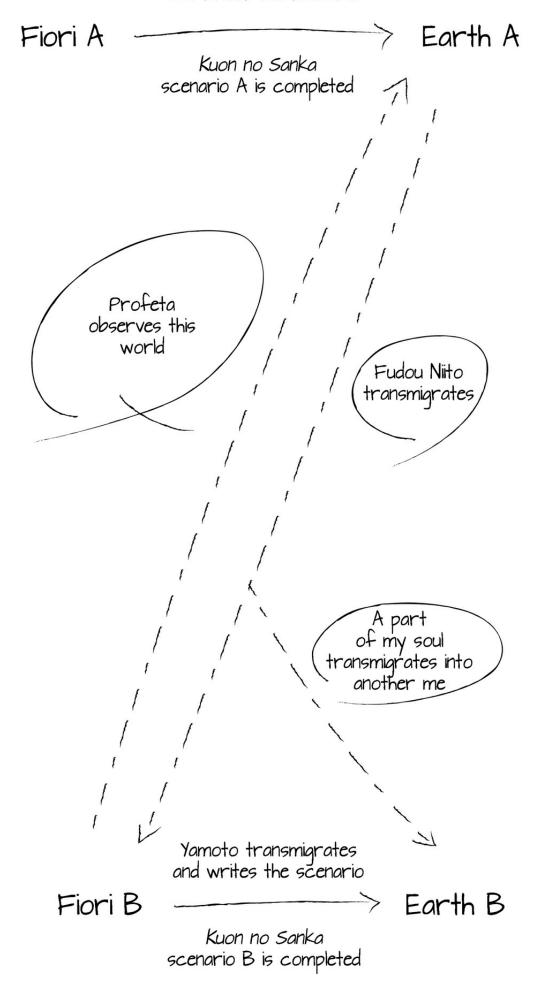
wouldn't have thought of changing the original Ellize's behavior. Everything stemmed from her disgust for the horrible character in the original scenario—Niito was sure of it. That made Earth A the current Ellize's starting point.

The current Niito was a part of Ellize's soul—the part that hadn't managed to transmigrate, so he too had most definitely been on Earth A at the start. Suddenly, a memory popped into Niito's head. He recalled once not finding his coat where he thought he'd left it.

I finally get it. I actually did travel! The main part of my soul—Ellize—pulled me along to this timeline—the parallel universe in which Fiori B and Earth B coexist!

Niito estimated that he'd traveled through the timelines on the very same day the main part of his soul had been reincarnated. Ellize had ended up in Fiori's past, creating a divergence, while he'd been left on Earth. However, the divergence had dragged him into the "correct" universe—Earth B—so as to match Ellize's path. In other words, Fudou Niito had died on Earth A, and his soul had split into two parts. The bigger part had become Ellize, and the smaller part was the current Niito. He was a scrap of his original soul that had failed to transmigrate, so it had taken over the body of the Fudou Niito of this world instead.

Yamoto transmigrates and writes the scenario



That finally explained why Niito's coat hadn't been in the right place. He wasn't the one who'd moved it—it had been the original Fudou Niito of Earth B whose body he'd taken over. That was why he—the current him—didn't remember any of it.

As for Ijuuin, he'd definitely gotten mixed up in this mess because of Niito. He originally only knew scenario B, but the world had been forced to do some damage control after Niito had contacted him. It had forcibly adjusted his perception so that it would match Niito's.

At the end of the day, this whole thing's still only one big unverifiable theory... Besides, this whole parallel universes and diverging timelines business is far too removed from human understanding. The more I think about it, the more confused I get. The only thing I've learned for sure is that Ellize didn't enter the world of a video game—the game's scenario is based on a real world.

All in all, Niito hadn't been able to confirm much. The only thing Niito was certain of was that Fiori existed outside of the game *Kuon no Sanka*. Besides that, he was gradually becoming convinced that figuring out the answer was impossible altogether for one simple reason: no one could confirm their hypotheses. All they could do was decide whether their theory sounded plausible enough to satisfy themselves.

Ellize (me), you're in the real world. Get that through your skull and stop playing around like you're in a video game. If you don't start taking things seriously...you'll end up regretting it.

Niito had a feeling he probably wasn't the best person to warn Ellize, but he still hoped she'd pick a path that wouldn't leave her crippled by regret.



YAHOO! The time has come!

A couple of days had gone by since Verner's unfortunate confession, and it was finally time for the final battle.

Still, I'd very narrowly dodged a bullet on that day. I honestly felt like patting myself on the back for my quick wit. Telling Verner I was dying had been a *stellar* idea.

Leaving that whole confession business aside, the timing was perfect for our attack. With Four-Eyed Pervert having just told the witch that the octopus's plan was a success and that I'd left the academy, she'd never see it coming.

Anyway, it was getting increasingly harder for him to pretend to be Dias. Alexia would eventually figure it out if we dragged it on too much. The same went for me. I was still holding on to my title as the saint, but it was only a matter of time before Verner blurted out that I was a fake. He wasn't a bad guy, but I constantly lived in fear that he'd accidentally let something slip.

I wanted to deal with the witch sooner rather than later so that I could give Eterna her position back. As for what would happen after...well, que será, será! If I made it out alive, I'd vanish in the dark of the night and spend my remaining days lazing around somewhere. If I didn't, I'd laze around in the afterworld. It was all the same to me. Either way, the truth about me would come out, and I was pretty sure no one would mourn a fake—in fact, they might even cheer.

Anyway, the first step of the plan would be to have Verner and the others go down to the second basement level under the guise of a special lesson.

The witch had asked Dias—or rather, Four-Eyed Pervert—to take advantage of my absence by sending her a couple of students who were close to me. She wanted to use them as hostages. Her request worked in our favor. Our biggest headache had been figuring out a way to make sure the witch wouldn't freak out when she noticed a group of students in the basement.

Now that she'd asked for them to be sent herself, she wouldn't think anything of it.

While the witch and the students fought, I'd create a magic vacuum around the academy to prevent the witch from using her teleport skill. Then, I'd head to the basement myself, bash the witch's head in, and let Alfrea seal her.

If everything went well, the only thing left for me to do would be to leave a letter behind confessing I was a fake and to flee before anyone woke up. Everyone would realize Eterna was the true saint all along and worship her—a perfectly happy ending.

If sealing Alexia didn't work, I'd just kill her myself and die alongside her in that basement.

Yup, this plan is absolutely foolproof. I don't see how it could go wrong.

"The success of this mission rests on your shoulders," I said. "However, please remember that your job is only to tire the witch out so that she cannot teleport. Once that is done, I want you to prioritize your safety and retreat. Do not throw your lives away. Does everyone understand?"

If anyone else but me were to lose their lives today, I'd consider the whole thing a massive failure—even if the witch was defeated and peace restored.

My goal was to secure a happy ending for *everyone*, and I wasn't interested in making concessions, so I reminded them once again that I didn't want them to give up their own lives.

"Yes!" all but two of them answered.

Instead, one asked, "Hey, can we have some mount before we go?"

Needless to say, the one who'd just spoken was Alfrea, the stupidest person I knew. At least try to read the room, Miss First Saint...

The other was Verner. He hadn't said a word, a grave expression on his face.

"Verner?" I called him.

He scrambled to find the words to reply. "Huh? Oh, um... Y-Yes! Of course! I'll give everything I have!"

Are you really okay? Please don't mess up! You're the main character! I can't have you make a huge blunder because you're in a daze! This isn't training anymore, this is the real deal! No matter what happens, don't lose your focus in front of the monsters, okay?!

Chapter 66: Down in the Basement

Deep under the academy, inside a room that had been built especially for her, lurked Alexia and her guard. Her faithful companion, Oct, wasn't by her side at the moment, so she couldn't help but feel lonely. Still, Alexia felt much better than she had in ages. Color had returned to her cheeks, and she was slowly but surely turning back into the beauty she'd always been.

The reason behind this sudden shift was Dias's last message: "Do not worry, Lady Alexia. Oct's trick has worked. The saint has left the academy."

Oct had left the basement brimming with confidence and promising to lure the saint away from the academy. Apparently, his plan had gone without a hitch. He'd manipulated a student with a twisted adoration for Ellize and had made her out to be the witch. Ellize had fallen for it and had gone after her.

Knowing Ellize's strength, Alexia was pretty sure she'd already taken down Elizabeth, the girl Oct had used. Since her companion had yet to come back, there was only one conclusion she could draw—Oct had lost his life alongside Elizabeth.

Losing a faithful retainer who'd been by her side ever since she'd become the witch pained her, but her relief far exceeded her sadness. If anything, Alexia was overjoyed—the terrifying saint had finally taken her eyes off the academy.

She couldn't afford to be complacent, though—there was no telling when Ellize's suspicions would lead her back here. Alexia needed insurance, and what better way to do so than capturing a few of Ellize's favorite students? She'd turn them into puppets that obeyed her orders, just like that woman called Farah she used to control. If Ellize ever came back, she'd have hostages ready. Alexia patted herself on the back; she truly was a genius.

She'd told Dias to send the students down to the basement and he'd answered with a date. Finally, today was the day.

Dias had pretended that there was a second underground arena most

teachers didn't know about right under the first one. He'd organized a special lesson there, so as to send the unsuspecting students and their teacher right into Alexia's trap.

Including the teacher, nine people were to enter the basement. It was a bit of a large group, but Alexia didn't mind. If anything, she was pleased—the more hostages, the better. If she only secured one or two of them, she'd be forced to handle them carefully, as they'd be her only trump card. With a bunch of them, she could use a few as meat shields, or even kill some to pressure Ellize if push came to shove. These hostages would be her lifeline. The greater the number of students, the more leeway she'd have.

Alexia was certain that hostages were the best way to checkmate Ellize. That pure-hearted goody two-shoes might even commit suicide to save them if she were to order it.

Needless to say, Alexia was aware that she was in for a fight. She'd be faced with one teacher and eight future knights. Still, she felt quite confident. She was the witch, and she had four powerful monsters by her side. A spider's web wouldn't break under the weight of a couple of flies. They'd all be at her mercy before long.

Unfortunately for her, Alexia had yet to realize that she was already trapped in a much larger web.



"Whoa! I never knew there was such a place under the underground arena!" John exclaimed with a cheerful tone as he looked around. The young man was as nervous as could be, but he couldn't let it show. He had to look like a clueless student convinced he was there for yet another mundane class.

The success of Ellize's entire plan rested on the group's ability to act. They couldn't let the witch suspect that they'd been sent here under the saint's order. If Alexia suspected that something was amiss, she'd flee at once. They needed to lure her into fighting them and tire her out without arousing suspicion.

The students led by Supple continued to advance until they arrived in a large, open space. There stood a woman clad in a lengthy black dress, her long silver

hair almost entirely concealed by her black hood. Her cheeks were sunken, she had deep-set dark circles, and her darkened purplish lips stood out against her pale skin. Strange, dark miasma floated around her, and Verner was immediately reminded of his past—it was the same horrible miasma that had plagued him in his youth. She looked every bit like a heinous witch.

Around the witch were a wyvern, a minotaur, a hippogriff, and an orthrus. Each of these monsters was a force to be reckoned with, and even seasoned knights would struggle to fight them.

Wyverns were grotesque monsters that had the head of a dragon, the feet of an eagle, the wings of a bat, and a snake for a tail. They could fly and breathe out fire. They were one of the witches' favorite creatures, and countless of them had been created over the years. The first ever sighting of a wyvern had occurred in Fuguten, and to this day, they were the most infamous monster on the island, where they were seen as a symbol of the witch's dominion.

Minotaurs had the head of a bull and the body of a human—a *very* large human. They were over three meters tall and wielded a gigantic battle-ax. The minotaurs' proximity to humans made them quite similar to archmonsters, but in truth, they were failures—monsters that hadn't succeeded in evolving to the next step. As such, their intellect was fairly low. The one that accompanied the witch glared at Verner and his friends, breathing heavily through its huge nose.

The upper part of a hippogriff's body looked like an eagle, while the bottom half was horselike. They were quite similar to griffons, only much calmer. That tranquil appearance didn't mean they weren't fearsome beasts, though. Their favorite activity? Feasting on human or horse meat.

As for orthruses, they were essentially two-headed black dogs with a snake for a tail.

(Unrelated side-note: there was indeed a strangely high ratio of monsters with a snake for a tail.)

None of these beasts could compare to dragons and archmonsters, but they were still dreadful creatures in their own right. If you took their position as the witch's guards into consideration, though, it was plain to see that something was off. They were obviously too weak for that role. The witch's back was up

against the wall.

"Wh-Who are you?!" Verner screamed, feigning panic. He had to look terrified so that the witch would lower her guard. He was a poor lamb faced against a pack of wolves.

"G-Guys... I don't think we should stay here..." Eterna whimpered, taking a step back.

"Teacher! What is going on?!" Fiora yelled, blaming Supple.

"I-I don't know!" Supple exclaimed, acting out his part as the foolish teacher tricked by his superior. "I have no idea what's going on! The monsters were supposed to be in cages, not running around freely! And who in the world is that woman?!"

His acting was a tad too dramatic, but the witch seemed to buy it. Her darkened lips had curled into a sadistic grin, and she took one step forward, shortening the distance between herself and the students.

Verner and the others retreated, cowering, as Supple let out a high-pitched scream.

"There's no need to be scared, children. If you don't resist, I shall not hurt you," Alexia said, sending a blast of mana into the air to intimidate them.

"Th-This mana..." Marie stuttered. "No way... The witch?"

Alexia smiled, as though to confirm the girl's deduction.

"I'm not staying here! I'm leaving! Right now!" Crunchybite yelled, running away.

"We need to let Lady Ellize know at once!" Aina exclaimed, following right behind him.

Naturally, this was also part of the plan. Had they immediately decided to fight her, Alexia might have realized that something was strange. Trying to flee made a lot more sense.

The human psyche was simple: people instinctively wanted to chase those who ran away. Conversely, people wanted nothing more than to flee when someone chased them. Another important touch was Aina's choice of words.

What she'd just said implied that Ellize didn't know yet, which cemented that idea in Alexia's head.

"My, my, who said you were allowed to leave?" the witch said.

The two stone statues that decorated the entrance of the room moved in unison, blocking the only exit. Alexia created a barrier, making sure their escape path was cut off for good.

Naturally, the students were secretly grateful—Alexia had just wasted a ton of mana, and they hadn't even started fighting.

"I'm sorry to break it to you, but *no one* escapes from the witch's clutches," Alexia said with a warped smile.

Their plan was a success. They'd made Alexia believe that she was the one in control—the hunter who'd managed to entrap her prey.

Alexia had only one fear: Ellize finding her. She'd do anything to ensure the students couldn't escape and tattle.

The students' masterful acting had made Alexia throw away any thoughts of escaping. Now that the stage was set, the second act could begin.

"Hmph. There's nowhere to run for—" Eterna and Fiora both smacked Alfrea's head to stop her from derailing their plan. There was no telling why that idiot had thought it was a good time to talk back to the witch, but Eterna and Fiora's quick reaction had saved them from failure.

"If we can't run away...we have no choice but to fight, everyone!" Verner exclaimed, taking out his sword.

"Verner's right! We can't falter, we're future knights!" John agreed, following suit.

Crunchybite joined them. "We can do this! We definitely can!"

"No! This is madness!" Aina screamed.

Alexia looked at the group of pathetic fools, her warped smile growing. They couldn't even tell how big of a gap existed between their abilities and hers.

A misguided sense of superiority sometimes led people astray. Things they

should have been able to see slipped right past them. In this case, Alexia was so certain that she was leagues above these measly students that she'd based every one of her decisions on that fact. It was self-conceit at its finest.

"Let's do this together, guys!" Verner exclaimed.

They split into two groups. The first thing they needed to do was split the witch and her monsters. The first team, Verner, Marie, and Supple, would be in charge of keeping the witch occupied, while the others killed the monsters. Their goal was to take out the monsters as swiftly as possible and isolate the witch.

The saints could doubtlessly handle these beasts, even one-on-one, so Alfrea was left to take the wyvern. Meanwhile, Eterna faced the minotaur. While they did so, Aina, John, Fiora, and Crunchybite would handle the other two monsters. As soon as they were done, the saints would assist them. Then, they'd all join forces and focus on tiring the witch out. Alfrea and Eterna would attack the witch at the same time. If they could force her to create a barrier to defend herself, they'd have won.

A spell was only as powerful as the amount of mana you poured into it. If Alexia wanted her barrier to handle the powers of two saints fighting together, she'd have to use more mana than the two of them combined.

According to Ellize, she surely wouldn't have enough mana left to teleport if she did that.

We can end this era here and now, Verner and the others thought as they prepared to fight the witch.

Chapter 67: Fighting the Witch

Alfrea was in charge of the wyvern. While they weren't quite as strong as dragons, they still had scales as tough as iron, and they could fly and breathe fire. The terrifying creature didn't faze Alfrea one bit, though. She wore a relaxed smile as she faced it. Wyverns were powerful monsters, sure, but she'd gone through such fights hundreds—if not thousands—of times before she'd been sealed.

For all of her childish behavior, Alfrea was the first saint. She'd risen to the occasion and had battled hordes of monsters to reach the witch at a time when saints hadn't been recognized by society. While she'd been sealed because of her carelessness, she was no pushover.

The main difference between Alfrea and most of her successors—excluding Ellize, who had no need for anyone—was that she'd never had an elite guard, hundreds of professional knights, and an army of soldiers scrambling to protect her. Saints had long since stopped fighting on the front line. They usually stood toward the back of the formation and cast long-range magic while soldiers and knights acted as meat shields, laying down their lives. In Alfrea's day, there was no one to retreat behind. And so, while she undoubtedly was a saint, her fighting style was the furthest thing from one.

"Are you ready to taste my blade, Mister Lizard?" Alfrea taunted, before commenting to herself, "Hang on, speaking of tasting things...wyvern meat's supposed to be yummy, right? I'll bring this bad boy home and ask Ellize to cook it for me."

Alfrea licked her lips without a care in the world.

Her forte was the use of darkness attribute spells—a type of magic that only the saints and witches could use. Such power was all about controlling darkness—a space which not even light could enter. In other words, having control over darkness meant having the ability to affect space itself. It was no wonder why only the proxies of the world could use such overwhelming magic.

Having activated her magic, Alfrea unsheathed two of the short swords she'd brought and threw them into the air. Instead of falling back down, they floated midair, as though held by invisible hands. Then, Alfrea unhooked another pair of short swords from her belt and flung them in the same fashion. She repeated the process another three times before grabbing the turtle shell she'd been carrying on her back and holding it up like a shield. Ellize had been the one to provide her with weapons and a brand new shield, but one could easily guess which unlucky turtle used to be Alfrea's shield in the past.

"Here I come!" she exclaimed.

At the very same time, the ten short swords that had been floating in the air flew toward the wyvern, slashing it violently. Alfrea remained behind her large shield while she attacked the monster from every direction at once. She'd encircled the wyvern with her swords, enabling her to masterfully attack its most vulnerable side at all times.

This was how Alfrea had survived so many fights against numerous opponents alone. Her logic was simple: if there were many enemies, she simply needed just as many weapons. Still, no matter how well-armed she was, she'd risk her life if she fought head-on. She'd concluded that it was better for her to fight while hiding. While it sounded quite contradictory, Alfrea had managed to pull it off. After some trial and error, she'd developed her ideal fighting style—fighting behind a shield prevented her from getting hurt and allowed her to beat up her enemies one-sidedly. Since Alfrea's swords weren't actually being held by anyone, they could move in ways that were impossible for a human. It also meant that Alfrea herself could simply pick up her shield and retreat if things took a turn for the worse. She was practically impossible to defeat. Such strategy was a tad villainous, but she'd still managed to create a strong and effective fighting style for herself.

She was applying the same logic today. She let her swords handle the fighting while she stayed right at the border of her range, a good distance away from the wyvern. She used barriers on top of her shield to block the blasts of fire it sometimes sent her way.

There was no way Alfrea could lose this battle; it was simply a matter of time before the wyvern fell.

Eterna had been feeling conflicted this entire time.

At first, she'd thought Ellize had been joking when she'd asked her to take on a monster by herself. Asking that of Alfrea, a saint, made sense, but she was just a normal girl who happened to have similar powers. She couldn't accomplish what Alfrea could.

According to the plan, the two of them had to deal with their respective targets quickly so that they could help John and the others with the other two monsters. When Ellize had announced that, Eterna hadn't been able to stop herself from feeling like the saint had picked the wrong person for the task. She'd even considered the idea that Ellize wanted her dead.

However, now that she was fighting the minotaur, she'd completely changed her mind. She didn't feel like she could lose.

The minotaur groaned as it swung its axe around. No matter what it did, though, it couldn't touch Eterna.

Ever since that day on the roof, Eterna had become able to use a peculiar power. She only needed a tiny bit of it to intercept any attack monsters threw her way.

Although she wasn't aware of it, she'd create a gap in the space around herself to isolate and block attacks. Needless to say, the minotaur, for all its brute strength, had no way to bypass this.

This little trick was the secret behind the saints' and witches' invincibility. When they warped space, no attack could reach them—unless it also had the ability to warp space. Monsters drew their powers from the witch, so they could do the same to some extent. That was how they were able to hurt saints. However, they had very little dark power—which also explained why regular people could kill them. All in all, it meant that a single monster had no hope of overpowering a saint's defense unless she was particularly out of it.

No way... Am I really going to win so easily?

The minotaur's attacks were *incredibly* ineffective, while Eterna's attacks were *incredibly* effective. It was a no-brainer.

When knights fought monsters, barely half of their offensive power actually reached the monster because of the dark powers they held. On the other hand, Eterna could also control space—and better than the monsters could, at that. As a result, her attacks were ten times more effective against them. In reality, monsters weren't any sturdier than regular animals once the protection that their dark magic gave them was bypassed.

A beam of light surged out of Eterna's fingertip as she exclaimed, "Luce!" It went right through the minotaur's chest, and blood began to gush out freely.

"HA HA HA! Come on, dance!"

The three people who'd been put in charge of distracting the witch—Verner, Marie, and Supple—were currently locked in a difficult battle.



The witch swung her staff, and a barrage of black bullets flew at them. They all managed to scatter and dodge, but a collective shiver ran down their spines when they saw the large holes the impact had left on the ground.

"Restrizione!" Supple chanted.

Supple knew he couldn't hurt the witch, but impeding her movements for a short time ought to be possible. He'd just used an earth attribute spell that made use of stones contained inside the ground to create stone chains. They erupted from the floor, attempting to ensnare his adversary.

"You pest!" the witch roared.

The next second, the chains started to grow. It was as though something invisible was swelling around the witch. Eventually, they shattered to pieces. All Alexia had had to do was expand the space around her.

"Freeze!" Marie said, concentrating her mana into an ice spell.

The witch's lower body, as well as the ground around her, froze, leaving her unable to move. Just like Supple, Marie had no intention to waste her energy trying to hurt the witch. Instead, she aimed to restrict her movements to buy them some time. That was the very reason Marie, who specialized in ice magic, had been chosen for this team.

However, her spell shattered just as easily as Supple's chains.

"How tepid!" the witch mocked. She spun her staff and added, "Take this!"

The earth under Verner's legs trembled, and he found himself pressed against the ground. The chain he always wore around his neck shattered, and the pendant Ellize had gifted him had fallen off.

Luckily for Verner, the witch had held back. She didn't want to kill any of her precious hostages. What would have been the point of asking for students to be sent to her if she mistakenly killed them? She needed to be careful and avoid hurting them too badly.

Alexia was drunk on her sense of superiority, and she'd even gone as far as to put additional restrictions on herself. Without these two weaknesses, the witch would have already gotten rid of Verner and his friends. However, limited by

her own psyche as she was, the witch was merely toying with them—allowing them to buy the time they so desperately needed. Besides, Verner and his friends still had cards to play.

Verner screamed as a dark aura started seeping out of his body—the same as the witch's. His fist clenched around the pommel of his sword, and he slashed at the witch's abdomen. While he'd managed to push her back, he hadn't succeeded in injuring her stomach like he'd hoped.

They both used the same dark power, but Verner put out significantly less of it than Alexia could. As a result, not even a tenth of Verner's strength made it to the witch.

Still, Alexia noticed that her abdomen ached. She rested her hand on that spot, perplexed. She couldn't hide the look of astonishment that painted her features when she removed her hand and saw her blood. She'd been hurt. It shouldn't have been possible, and yet, the witch immediately realized what had happened.

"It's you! You're that boy! The one who inherited part of my powers!"

A long time ago, back when she'd still clung to her humanity and goodness, Alexia had severed a part of her soul in a last act of resistance. After turning into a full-fledged witch, she'd regretted her foolish ways. Still, she'd never forgotten that a part of her soul was out there, somewhere in this world.

Three years ago, she'd succeeded in tracking it down. Even though she'd cut it off herself, that piece of her soul was still hers. It resonated with her. After searching for it for a while, she'd found it. However, when she'd sent Oct to retrieve it, Ellize had intervened. From that point onward, she'd lost her ability to feel her missing powers altogether.

To think the thing she'd been searching for had come to her on its own! A wicked smile warped the witch's face. She was overjoyed to have found her lost treasure.

"What good luck... One of the children I lured here has my lost powers..."

"You're saying I have your powers?!"

"Indeed. I parted with them when I was but a foolish young girl. I knew it had

taken shelter in your soul before you were even born, but I'd lost track of you for so long. I never thought you'd come to me yourself."

While the witch rejoiced, Verner's anger burned hot.

It's all her fault, he thought. I was treated like a monster and cast away because of her... No. None of that matters anymore. The one thing I'll never be able to forgive her for is...

"I don't have much longer to live. I have six more months...at best. It's very likely I won't be here to celebrate my next birthday."

If the witch hadn't left this cursed power inside of him, Ellize wouldn't have needed to save him on that fateful day. She wouldn't have had to shorten her life.

In less than six months, this world would lose Ellize for good. Verner knew that someone like her would never appear again. No one had ever done so much, saved so many people, and yet, she'd be dead in half a year. She wouldn't be able to move or smile ever again.

And this... All of it...

"THIS IS ALL YOUR FAAAAAAULT!!!" Verner roared, a wave of darkness overflowing from him. His powers resonated with his anger. He looked like a demon; even the witch flinched.

Verner saw red; he'd forgotten all about his mission. He wasn't thinking about buying time, exhausting the witch, or even if his attacks were working anymore. He mindlessly slashed at her with his two-handed sword again and again, sparks flying around from his repeated hits.

"Urgh... Wh-What's wrong with him all of a sudden?!" the witch groaned.

Verner's vigor scared her, but she retaliated with magic attacks of her own. Still, none of it could quell Verner's fury. A large burn covered his flank, but he continued to strike at the witch as though he couldn't feel pain.

Echoes of his sword clanging against the witch's barrier rang out in the basement over and over again. Eventually, the witch brought her hands to her head to shield herself.

"YOU! IF ONLY YOU DIDN'T EXIST!" Verner screamed, tears rolling down his cheeks. He threw away his sword and jumped on the witch, straddling her.

While Verner's fury had scared her at first, the witch had managed to regain her cool.

"Don't push your luck, brat!" she cried, unleashing a blast of mana that sent him flying back.

She swung her staff and fired five bullets of fire. Marie used ice magic to stop them. Vapor rose upon the spells' impact, blocking everyone's line of sight.

Even if they couldn't see, they could still hinder the witch if their attacks covered a large range. Supple created dozens of stone bullets and sent them flying in the witch's general direction. Marie imitated him with her ice. As for Verner, he picked up his sword and rushed into the smoke, slashing blindly in front of him.

"Don't you dare look down on me, you brats! I'm the witch!" Alexia spat.

She distorted space. This time she'd used a lot more mana.

The witch's greatest advantage was her quasi-invincibility, but her sizable mana pool also gave her an edge. Since a spell was only as powerful as the amount of mana one poured into it, having a larger reserve directly translated into being stronger than one's opponent. Thus, if the witch were to attack the group seriously, there was no way for a regular person to block.

Verner, Marie, and Supple were blown away by Alexia's sheer power and violently smashed into the wall.

"You're not that bad, but at the end of the day, you're still nothing but—"

"Hey! Look! I see a careless idiot!" Alfrea said, kicking the bragging witch in her side.

Needless to say, the witch's invincibility was practically useless against the first saint. Alexia went flying.

Alfrea turned toward her allies and made a peace sign. "Yeah!"

The next moment, the witch's magic hit Alfrea—who'd stopped looking at her enemy in the middle of a fight—right in the head. *She* went flying.

Enter another careless idiot.

After crashing into the ground, Alfrea quickly got up, tears welling up in her eyes. "That hurts, you big dummy!"

She approached the witch and feigned a punch at her face with her right hand, only to suddenly perform a spear hand strike with her left. She followed up with a foot sweep, grabbed Alexia's head as the witch started falling, and smashed it into the ground.

"Wh-Who the hell are you?! How can you bypass my defense?!" Alexia asked, glaring up at Alfrea.

The witch felt fear well up inside of her. She needed to be cautious; for some reason, this girl could hurt her oh-so-easily. Alexia swung her staff as she jumped to her feet.

Alfrea easily parried with her bare hands before slapping Alexia across the face. The witch tried to respond with a blast of magic shot at point-blank range, as well as another physical attack with her staff, but it was no use.

"Oh my... That was close," Alfrea said. With a carefree tone, she grabbed Alexia's hand, casually twisted her wrist, and forced her to fire her magic into the wall. She also easily dodged the weapon swung at her before leaning in and pressing her fingertips to the witch's throat.

It was plain to see that Alfrea was hundreds of times better at close combat than her opponent.

"Huh? How come you're so weak?" Alfrea asked. "You don't know any martial arts, do you? Have you even fought anyone yourself? I can tell you've always hidden behind others. You know trying to use magic at this distance is a waste of time, right? It just shows you have no idea what you're doing. You gotta punch people when they're this close, got it?"

"Weak? Me...? You dare call me weak?!"

Although Alexia had also been a saint, things had been very different in her era compared to Alfrea's. Alfrea didn't have thousands of meat shields to hide behind. Sure, she'd learned how to keep herself safe by using strategies like the one she'd used against the wyvern, but she'd still had to survive battles where

she was grossly outnumbered. Her body had been forced to adapt and learn to find ways to triumph over hordes of monsters, with their sharp fangs and claws.

Alexia's experience had been worlds apart. Saints weren't allowed to be close enough to monsters to risk getting hurt. She'd needed to train her magic, not her close-range fighting skills. Needless to say, the gap showed.

Alexia's troubles were far from over.

Eterna suddenly jumped in and fired a spell at her. The witch was about to flick it away with one hand, but an ominous feeling suddenly assaulted her. She decided to dodge.

Eterna's spell only barely grazed her shoulder, but a chill rippled through her body.

"N-No way... How? How could she bypass my defense too? This doesn't make any sense..."

The witch had never encountered anyone who could hurt her, let alone three people at once. While she panicked, the students gathered once more. They'd taken care of all the monsters and stone statues. Alexia finally realized that she was all alone.

They didn't give her any time to think, though.

Alfrea raised the staff Ellize had given her and released all of her mana at once. The area around Alexia warped and bent as the saint created a merciless space that destroyed everything within it.

"What?! No... Ellize isn't here, so how could that happen?! How can the saint be here?!" Alexia screamed, frightened.

A couple of seconds later, Eterna activated her magic. Once again, space distorted. Eterna started accumulating light magic inside of the space she'd just created.

"H-Her too?! Impossible... This is impossible! Why?! How?! How can there be two saints?!"

One saint per generation—that was the rule of this world. And yet, an anomaly had occurred. Besides, Ellize wasn't even there. Didn't that mean that

there were three saints in total?!

"Let's go, my little Eterna! Follow my lead!"

"Yes, Lady Alfrea!"

Alfrea and Eterna cranked their output of mana up before hurling it all at Alexia.

"Super killer move! Ultimate Invincible Peerless Alfrea Baaaaaaall!!!"

"Hmm... Super, um...Amazing Ball!" Eterna exclaimed, trying to match Alfrea's peculiar naming sense.

Even though the names of their ultimate moves left much to be desired, their strength was the real deal. The best thing Alexia—who had no idea what was happening—could do was pour all of her mana into a last-minute barrier.

The next second, an eardrum-shattering explosion echoed throughout the basement.

Chapter 68: Pity

After Verner and the others entered the basement, I put up a gigantic barrier around the academy and sucked out all of the mana contained within it. Now, no one inside the academy would be able to regenerate their MP. Then, I waited for Verner and the others to do their part before I could join them underground. I was just starting to think it was about time to head down when the ground shook. It felt like an earthquake.

Profeta, who was next to me, exclaimed, "Now is the time, Ellize! The plan is going well. Eterna and Alfrea just attacked Alexia together. She used a ton of mana to block their spells, so she should be almost out of it! You can finish things now!"

YES!

I was glad to hear that Verner and the others had managed to deliver results without getting hurt. This story was finally coming to an end—I simply needed to head down and keep the witch in check so that Alfrea could focus on the seal. We'd won.

I'm off to the basement!

I took Layla, the headmaster, and a few knights with me and headed down to the underground arena. We proceeded to go down the hidden stairway to reach the floor on which the witch had been staying all this time. We came across a barrier. I assumed Alexia had put it up to stop the students from running away, but I quickly destroyed it and kept moving. Finally, I saw Verner and the others.

Sorry for the wait! I'll treat you all to some good food after this to make it up to you!

I carefully examined each of the students. Thankfully, none of them had been hurt. Ah, wait. One of them—Crunchy Doggybag, no surprise there—was lying down on the floor. Well, they were all alive, so good enough.

Huh? Who the hell is that lady in the back? That's not Alexia, is it? She was a pale woman who looked like your textbook witch. I knew the characters' appearances were bound to change to some extent because of the switch from 2D to 3D, but this was definitely a whole other person. Her route was hidden, but Alexia was technically a dateable heroine—she was supposed to look young and beautiful. Okay, sure, she was a little older than most of the cast, and some players treated her as an old hag because of it, but she was only supposed to appear in her twenties.

I took a better look at the woman who'd started cowering the second I'd walked in. Yeah, I guess she does seem to be in her twenties... Her dark circles and sunken cheeks make her look much older, though. Was she really the witch, or had I—the fake saint—started a battle against a fake witch? Nah, there's no way...right?

"Are you Alexia, the witch?" I asked just in case.

The woman took a step back as though to distance herself from me. Sadly for her, we were in an underground chamber—there was nowhere for her to run.

Wanna try to sneak out? I'll give you a three minute head start. Actually, nah, I lied—I'm not waiting.

"Y-You're Ellize, the saint...right?" the witch asked. As the realization that I was here dawned upon her, the look in her eyes changed. She seemed to want to do something, but soon noticed that she couldn't. Her features twisted into a look of astonishment. "What? How can there be no mana?"

"I absorbed all of the mana in the area," I answered calmly. "There is no way for anyone to regenerate it here."

I knew it. She'd tried to teleport as soon as she saw me! Sorry to disappoint, but this area is on lockdown!

The witch was seething. "Curse you!" she cried, firing a black bullet at me.

I caught it with my bare-but-covered-by-a-barrier hands and crushed it to powder. Darkness attribute spells were pretty much unrivaled, but when they were hundreds of times weaker than my defenses, they were no big deal for me.

The witch seemed surprised.

With the witch constantly protecting herself with dark magic, normal attacks wouldn't work on her. However, I'd borrowed some of Verner's powers a while back. It was a tiny amount compared to that of the witch, sure. I estimated not even a tenth of the damage I dealt could reach her. If I attacked her with a hundred MP, she'd only feel an attack around ten MP. It was all good, though—all I had to do was use a thousand MP from the get-go! By the way, I had more than five hundred thousand MP. That was enough to perform at least a hundred attacks that could override witch's maximum mana output, even if she were in top condition.

Anyway, all that meant I could default to my go-to solution: spam light magic all over the place! I splurged a little and poured around five thousand MP into my spell before chanting, "Aurea Libertas."

I usually fired that spell toward the sky and let it disperse into countless beams of light that'd chase enemies for me, but I only had one opponent this time. I fired it directly at the witch. A large golden beam flew out of my hand and crashed into the witch, slamming her into the wall which exploded under the impact. Eventually, the noise calmed down, the dust settled, and we discovered a brand new tunnel.

Behind me, Alfrea was shivering and whimpering dramatically.

As always, our first saint has no dignity.

I walked into the tunnel. At the very end of it, I found Alexia lying on the ground. I'd held back so that she wouldn't fly too far—I wasn't in the mood to go searching for her body for ages, and I definitely didn't want her to end up outside of my barrier's range.

"You...monster..." she struggled to speak as she used the wall for support to slowly get back on her feet.

Layla and the headmaster—who'd followed right behind me—drew their swords, but I stopped them by raising a hand. There was no point in these two getting involved. They wouldn't be able to touch the witch... Then again, I supposed they *could* hurt her if I gave them magical swords.

"This is the end, Witch Alexia," I said.

The witch looked up at me in despair. She realized that there was no coming back from this. I was more than strong enough to deal with her myself, and I even had a bunch of allies here—including an impossible duo of saints. Even if I left on a whim, Alfrea and Eterna could still finish her off.

I was starting to feel like we were a group of bullies ganging up on a pitiful kid.

Alexia started crying. "No..." she sobbed, her face warped by fear. "No... Don't! I don't want to die! I don't want to die!!!"

She put up a barrier in front of her. She'd probably poured her last drops of mana into this final act of resistance. Considering she couldn't teleport, it most likely wasn't all that sturdy.

I used thirty thousand MP to create a blade of light and cut through the barrier. Unlike laser beams, swords stayed neatly inside your hand, which meant you could use them several times. In the long run, that could save you a lot of mana. If I took the witch's resistance into consideration, my blade could deal around three thousand MP worth of damage to the witch. I estimated that, at best, she had two thousand MP—she'd never have been able to counter my blows.

"Whoa! That barrier was pretty sturdy, but she destroyed it like it was nothing... I'm gonna need to keep buttering her up," Alfrea muttered not-so-quietly.

As always, she'd forsaken her dignity entirely. Can you stop doing stuff like that? Look at the poor knights! They're on the verge of having a seizure.

I could just picture Profeta's face if she'd been here. Speaking of Profeta, she hadn't accompanied us because she was a little too big to get into the basement. In fact, she couldn't even enter the school building.

"This makes no sense... Why...?" Alexia asked, looking at us.

The least I could do was let her get her anger off her chest. I didn't intend to show mercy, but I could listen to her final words—the last things she'd say before getting sealed. She was a villain who'd hurt countless people, but normally she would've been a cool and charismatic final boss. It was probably

my fault if her beauty had withered ahead of time.

"Why?! Someone tell me why there are three saints! This is strange, right? There's supposed to be one saint! Only one! Don't mess with me! Why is it always me?! Why...?"

Alexia's confusion was justified. Leaving Verner aside, only saints could hurt the witch as far as she knew. She'd naturally concluded that there were three saints. In reality, there were only two—the first saint, Alfrea, and the current one, Eterna. The last one was a fraud. Then again, I guess even two saints existing at the same time is already a huge deal.

"This is unfair!" she continued. "This is seriously too unfair! Why do I always get the short end of the stick?! Everyone keeps yapping that they love you, and that you're the best saint ever, but it wasn't like that in my time! The saint before me was so damn useless that everyone just kept pushing their expectations onto me! They kept pressuring me to kill the witch as quickly as possible...and when I finally did, they all turned on me!"

In passing, I'd told the knights I'd taken with me the truth about the witches and saints. Everyone was already aware that this Alexia was the Alexia they'd known or had heard of. I could tell from their eyes that Layla and the others pitied her somehow.

"Since everyone had betrayed me anyway, I decided to destroy everything as the witch! I wanted you all to suffer and die! That's what you deserve! You got your five years of peace because I killed Griselda. Shouldn't you be thankful?! I went through hell to give you that peace! How dare you betray me?! How dare you curse me? As fleeting as it may have been, who do you think earned that peace for you?! Me! It was all me! Don't I deserve to be thanked?! Don't I deserve to finally do what I want?! I gave everything to humanity, so I deserve to reap the benefits!"

Well... She's not exactly wrong.

She'd been taken from her parents at birth and raised for the sole purpose of defeating the witch. She'd lived through that constant pressure until she'd finally headed out and defeated Griselda. She probably thought she'd finally be free to live her life as she wanted, only to be betrayed instead. Besides, her

predecessor had messed up so badly that everyone was at their wit's end. She'd been forced to carry the hopes and expectations of two generations. Alexia had most likely had it the hardest out of all the saints.

On the other hand, the people who were in charge of raising the saint had mellowed out a lot for the next generation. Now that I thought about it, the original Ellize had grown into a spoiled brat. Alexia's achievements and pain had paved the way for Ellize's laziness and entitlement.

That's what created the worst (fake) saint in history in the game.

Alexia had said she deserved to reap the benefits for the work she'd done. It was definitely a natural sentiment—humans expected rewards for their hard work. Doing good deeds without expecting anything in return sounded good on paper, but in reality, it just meant you were being exploited. It was exactly the sort of excuse exploitative businesses used to get their employees to do overtime for free.

I only agreed with about half of what Alexia had said, though. Having suffered didn't give you the right to inflict the same on others. We all would've felt sympathy for her if she hadn't said that bit, but she'd just dug her own grave. I didn't even need to turn around to know that Verner and the others were looking down at her coldly.

"You're all the same! You've been enjoying this fake peace without a second thought for my agony! You left me to suffer alone! You didn't care that I was never rewarded for my efforts! You're so lucky, Ellize—everyone fawns over you and tells you how perfect you are! I'm sure you find it easy to do your best for them when they butter you up so much! The greatest saint in history, huh? Don't make me laugh! You're just a piece of trash who's forgotten her place! You're drunk on your own sense of superiority!"

I was genuinely impressed. I never would've thought Alexia was such a great judge of character. I was fully aware of my nature, so I didn't really mind Alexia pointing it out. Why get mad when she was just dropping facts? She was absolutely right—I was exactly the kind of conceited bastard who loved feeling superior compared to everybody else. I wanted others to see me in a good light, to have them praise and revere me. Sure, I did a few good deeds here and there

to fulfill my agenda, but at my core, I totally operated on this twisted mindset.

Scotterbrain didn't take it the same way, though. She pulled out her sword.

"You were blessed with incredible powers, trustworthy allies...and even two other saints! How can you not see how unfair this all is, Ellize?! You're a coward, a damn coward! If I were as powerful as you... If I had as many knights..." she trailed off before suddenly remembering something. "That's right, Dias! Where is he?! Dias! Save me! You have to save me!"

"Headmaster Dias has long since been arrested. You've been exchanging messages with someone else for a while now...and it was me, Supple!"

Alexia understood that she was truly and utterly alone now. It was checkmate. She tried to crawl away from us, but she was already backed up against the wall. There was nowhere for her to run. All she could do was push against the wall in vain.

"What?! Damn! He's a knight but he can't even protect his master?! He's so useless!"

Layla's grasp on her sword tightened at Alexia's words.

The witch didn't notice. "O-Oct! Where are you, Oct?! How long do you intend to leave me alone, huh? And you, Pochi?! Even a useless dog like you finally has a chance to be helpful, so get here right this instant!"

Oct was already gone, and so was Pochi—Verner had defeated him during the first martial tournament. Verner seemed to have understood which monster Pochi was, because he glared at the witch in rage.

"I can't bear to listen to her anymore," Supple said with a sigh. "Lady Alfrea, please seal her at once—before she disgraces herself any further..."

Supple's zealous adoration for the saint had started with Alexia. Seeing her like this must've been a shock for him.

"Okay," Alfrea replied in a carefree tone, then began preparing her spell.

If nothing unexpected happened, it would finally be the end. The thing was, these sorts of cool sealing spells usually failed big time in stories.

Is it gonna work? I really hope it does...

Chapter 69: Conclusion

"Well then, here I go!" Alfrea said, bringing her hands forward, her palms turned toward Alexia. A faint glow appeared as her magic shook the space in front of her. She slowly spread her arms and started moving them in a circular motion.

A circle of light was left hovering in the air.

All right. It's the moment of truth. Will it work?

Actually... I was starting to seriously doubt it. Alfrea had stopped in her tracks. She wasn't moving anymore, and beads of cold sweat were running down the sides of her face. *Is she out of MP?*

I put my hand on Alfrea's back and transferred some of my mana to her. I hadn't seen her fight, so I had no clue how much mana she'd used during the fight. Knowing her, though, she'd probably gotten carried away and hadn't saved enough to seal the witch.

"Huh? Oh! I can feel power coursing through my body! All righty! I can totally do this!" she exclaimed.

Sure enough, she had run out of MP.

I'd been the one who'd tasked her and Eterna to attack the witch together which forced her to use up her mana, but I'd never told Alfrea to use every last drop of mana *she* had, had I? Wasn't it common sense to keep some juice for the finale?

Whatever, it hadn't been a big deal for me to fix.

"Wh-What are you planning?!" the witch asked, her voice trembling. "Y-You can't kill me! If you do, you—" Alexia blurted out.

"Will turn into a witch?" Alfrea cut her off without batting an eye. "I'm aware. Don't worry, I have no intention of doing that. I'm going to seal you. With this, the cycle of suffering that started with my mother and me a thousand years ago

will finally be broken. There will never be another witch."

Hearing Alfrea's words made me realize all over again how simple the answer had been all along. I'd guessed why, but I still couldn't help but wonder why no one had ever thought of it before.

The circle of light Alfrea had created wrapped itself around Alexia. She tried to move away, but I wasn't about to let that happen. I created chains of lights and used them to bind her in place.

"W-Wait! Don't! You can't seal me! I don't want that! No! Why?! Why does it have to be me?! Why is it always me?!" Alexia screamed at the top of her lungs.

Her misfortune truly knew no bounds. She'd gone through the hardest of times as the saint because of the stunt her predecessor had pulled. On top of being stifled by humanity's expectations, she'd had to fight one of the strongest witches in history—a veteran who'd had all the time in the world to strengthen her rule and create a proper army. As the witch, she'd been pitted against two saints and an overpowered fake. And now, she was about to be turned into a human pillar until the end of time. Since she'd be sealed, not dead, her soul wouldn't even be able to pass to the other side.

Isn't she too *pitiful?*

Should I just kill her myself like I'd initially planned? That way, no one else would have to suffer.

When I was a regular player, I used to hate Alexia's guts. I'd done her route for the sake of completion, but I'd spent the entire time pissed off that she got to smile happily when my poor darling Eterna suffered so much. Obviously, I'd never replayed it.

I'd been utterly convinced that I'd laugh in the face of Alexia's suffering. After all, she'd more than deserved it. And yet, here I was, surprised by my own feelings. Now that the time had come, I couldn't bring myself to laugh. If anything, I felt compassion for her.

Dias's last request to help Alexia came back to me. I'd never agreed to it, so I didn't feel a sense of obligation or anything, but Dias hadn't even bothered to wait for my answer before he'd passed out.

Besides, I wasn't even the real saint—I was a neat pile of gold-plated shit. Why would I ever save people for no reason and without asking for anything in return? Alexia wasn't even an actual victim here! She hadn't done as much harm as previous witches, but that was only because I'd prevented her from doing so. She'd hurt plenty of people in the years before I started doing my job as the saint. If we added the people that she'd indirectly killed on top of those she'd murdered with her own hands, she was responsible for at least a few hundred casualties. In fact, if I also counted those who'd died of hunger because of her, the death toll probably rose to four digits. If we were in modern-day Japan, she would've been sentenced to death without a shadow of a doubt.

I wasn't kindhearted enough to throw away my chance to witness the perfect ending I'd envisioned for someone like her. I couldn't. If I wrote off everything she'd done because she didn't really have a choice, the *actual* victims would weep.

No, Alexia needed to be sealed for the good of this world. I'd then confess to my own crimes and make my escape until I died a peaceful death in the middle of nowhere. That was the plan and I'd stick to it!

"NO! NOOOOOO!!!" Alexia cried. "SAVE ME! DIAS! POCHI! OCT! SOMEONE, SAVE ME!"

The temperature around her was gradually dropping as the space itself froze. Unlike the method the first witch had used, Alfrea's seal wouldn't put Alexia in a state of suspended animation. The first witch had sealed her daughter so that she wouldn't turn into a witch. To achieve that, she'd had to fool the world into thinking that Alfrea was dead so that it would produce another saint. In this case, we didn't want Alexia dead—not even for a second. She had to stay alive and conscious the entire time to ensure her powers wouldn't be transferred to anyone.

This is just too much, isn't it?

This whole thing was already starting to leave a bad taste in my mouth. I'd die soon anyway, so giving my life away here wouldn't be so bad, would it?

If I delivered the final blow, received Alexia's dark powers, and then—right

before they killed me—resurrected her using the same method I'd used on Verner...

As I was pondering my options, Layla came to stand in front of me. "You can't, Lady Ellize. Please hold it in."

What the hell? I hadn't moved a muscle yet, but I was already getting scolded.

"I know you," she continued. "I can tell you're taking pity on Lady Alexia. However, this is a necessary step for the good of the world. I respect your compassionate nature, but just this one time, I must ask you to restrain yourself."

Layla had apparently misunderstood my intention and seemed to think I wanted to save Alexia.

I'm not that kind of selfless angel, you know?

I wasn't thinking of helping Alexia for her sake. It was just that...I don't know, I felt kind of bad. I'd only been considering doing something to make *myself* feel better. I was still an egoistic bastard through and through.

Meanwhile, Alfrea was still working on the seal. Everything seemed to be going well—a crystal that looked almost exactly like the one I'd seen around Alfrea had formed around Alexia.

Unlike Alfrea, though, Alexia was still dressed. That got me wondering why Alfrea had been naked inside the crystal. Had she just stripped on her own when she was drunk?

Why are their names so damn similar? I've been saying them so many times in a row now that I'm getting confused! Maybe I should rename one of them Hanako and call it a day.

"Ta-da! The seal's all done."

Oh, crap! Layla was blocking half of my field of vision! I'd missed the climax! Damn it, Scotterbrain!

I tried to sneak a peak over Layla's shoulder and saw Alexia trapped inside a crystal. She, um...looked absolutely terrible. Alfrea, who'd been sealed inside something similar, had retained her beauty. Alexia's face, on the other hand,

was twisted by fear. Her expression was chilling.

So...in most cases, seals like this one failed big time right when you thought they'd succeeded, right? Would this one hold?

I wasn't the only one staring at the crystal with rapt attention. The others had also yet to let their guard down.

Ten seconds went by without anything happening, then a minute, then ten.

"I-Is it over? It's all over, right?" Aina said, trying—and somewhat failing—to conceal her joy and relief.

Her joy was contagious. Soon, everyone relaxed, finally feeling secure in their victory.

We're done! We won! Kuon no Sanka finally has a proper ending!

...Or so I thought. Right at that moment, a spear of darkness shot out of Verner and pierced through the crystal and into Alexia's body.

Called it.

I'd been so focused on the crystal that I'd totally forgotten about Verner. I wasn't all that surprised. I just knew deep in my guts that it couldn't be that easy.

Verner was in a daze. He didn't seem to understand what had happened, but it was pretty obvious. His dark powers were always Alexia's. They'd probably answered her final wish—to die. What we'd just witnessed was Alexia's suicide.

Still, it was strange. I knew Verner had little control over his powers, so I'd given him a pendant to offset that...

Oh, there it is, I thought, spotting the pendant on the ground. It must've fallen off during the battle.

If I didn't do anything, Verner would end up being the one who dealt the final blow. Alexia's powers, along with the first witch's grudge, would pass onto him. Since he wasn't a saint, he'd die. All in all, the cycle would still be broken, but I wouldn't call that a happy ending.

It's all good. I can fix this.

I hadn't exactly planned for this, but I'd left myself a way out. I poured my mana into the chains of light I'd wrapped around Alexia and stopped her heart, forcing her into a state of suspended animation.

Verner's dark magic was fatal, but it hadn't killed Alexia on the spot. Before it *could*, I'd finish her off myself. I also healed the wound Verner had inflicted, just to be safe. With this, Alexia's powers would flow into me, not into Verner.

Oh well, it is what it is. And it's not that bad—I just went back to the initial plan.

I still wasn't afraid of death. There was no use crying over spilled milk, especially not when I barely had a couple of months left to live. Not to mention I was supposed to have died already.

Something's got to be seriously wrong with me, I thought.

Between a weirdo like me and Verner, the protagonist of the story, it was obvious whose life was more valuable. Mine was worthless; I absolutely didn't mind exchanging it with his. It was better for a piece of trash with no future like me to die.

"L-Lady Ellize? Wh-What's going on? What did you just do?!" Layla screamed, shaking.

The chains I was holding had started glowing out of nowhere, so there was no way for me to hide that I'd gotten involved. It didn't really matter, though—I'd die in a couple of minutes at most. What was the use of lying anymore?

"I killed Lady Alexia," I said. "The witch's grudge and her powers will be transferred to me shortly."

I saw despair on everyone's faces. They probably thought that an invincible witch would be born soon, but it was all good. *There's no need to be scared.* I won't turn into a witch.

Everything would soon be over for good—including my clumsy act.

At last, this story had reached its climax.

I felt terrible about having lied to Layla and gotten her to serve a fake this entire time, so I wanted to keep up the act until the last moment. I wanted

everyone to think that, even though I was a fake and had fooled her, it had all been for the greater good. That way, Layla's honor would be safe...or so I hoped.

And so, I smiled at the very end in the hope that it gave them all some peace of mind.

Chapter 70: Scattering Flower

Something that should never have been allowed to happen had come to pass. Everything was supposed to have ended. The witch had been sealed away, and everything was finally over.

And yet, Verner's powers had gone haywire and ruined everything.

There were several reasons for that. First of all, he'd lost the pendant that helped him control them in the midst of the battle. Second, Alexia's strong desire to die had prompted the powers lurking inside Verner to act. The most crucial reason, though, was Verner's lack of resolve. While controlling his powers was incredibly difficult, it should have been possible at his current level. However, Verner himself had started wishing for the witch to disappear. He'd thought that, if it hadn't been for her, his parents wouldn't have cast him away. Then, he wouldn't have met Ellize and doomed her.

He knew that none of this was truly Alexia's fault—she was also a victim. When he saw Alexia weeping and screaming, he *had* felt a pang of compassion for her. He'd wondered if she truly deserved all this. His mind said *no*, but—somewhere deep down—his heart whispered *yes*. Even though his brain understood, his heart didn't, and he couldn't temper his hatred.

Had someone asked, he wouldn't have been able to swear that no part of him wished for her to be punished.

At the same time, though, another part of him wanted to put her out of her misery rather than let her suffer forever inside the seal. He and the others had painted the witch as the villain the entire time, but in the end, they'd done nothing but avert their eyes from the truth. He couldn't do so anymore. Faced with her distorted expression of fear, screams, and tears, he'd been forced to see the *real* witch. Killing her now would be mercy. He'd even felt an itch to do so. A messy whirlpool of emotions troubled his heart. Verner was caught between hatred and compassion. With him in this state, a little push from within had probably been enough for the dark powers inside to take over.

The result? A dark spear buried deep inside Alexia's chest—a fatal blow.

As far as Verner was concerned, it had been a mishap, sure, but not a tragedy. The first witch's grudge would pass to the person who'd killed the current witch. Since he wasn't the saint, he'd most likely simply die. Even if he did go mad and attack people because the witch's powers overwhelmed him, Ellize, Alfrea, and Eterna were right there. They'd be able to stop him.

You reap what you sow, Verner thought. He hadn't been able to control his own emotions, and now he had to pay the price. That was just how things were.

The real tragedy, though, hit after.

Before Alexia had breathed her last, the chains that'd been restricting her started glowing.

Verner immediately understood what had happened. Ellize had most likely dealt the final blow, and he knew why. He was about to die, and Ellize had thrown away her own life to save him.

"L-Lady Ellize? Wh-What's going on? What did you just do?!" Layla screamed.

No, he tried to calm himself. The chains just glowed, we don't know yet.

He prayed he was wrong, but Ellize shattered his budding hope as quickly as it had appeared.

"I killed Lady Alexia," she said calmly. "The witch's grudge and her powers will be transferred to me shortly."

This was the one thing that shouldn't have been allowed to happen. The best of times could turn into the worst ones in the blink of an eye. The faces of the people present fell at once. Despair had taken over. In a few years, Ellize would turn into the worst witch the world had ever known—or so most of them thought. Verner's despair was different. In fact, it was much greater *because* he knew the truth.

And Ellize's next words would soon plunge the others deep into the abyss along with him.

"Don't worry, I won't become a witch," she said with a smile.

Layla's eyes lit up. Thank God, she thought, she knew what she was doing.

Now that Layla thought about it, Ellize had been saying that she wouldn't turn into a witch from the start. She'd told her she'd change the saint's fate and break the cycle.

However, what Ellize had meant and what Layla had understood didn't exactly match up.

"How could I...when I'm not the saint?" she added.

The thunderous revelation stunned everyone.

She wasn't the saint? The greatest saint in history, the miracle worker Ellize, wasn't the saint? How could she not be?

That doesn't make any sense, everyone but Verner and Alfrea thought. If she's not the saint, there simply can't be one.

As if she'd read their minds, Ellize continued, "Eterna is this generation's saint. And I'm...nothing but a fake who happened to be born in the same village."

"That's a lie..." Layla whispered.

She was frozen in place, as though she'd been abandoned in the middle of a raging blizzard. A striking sense of dread she'd never felt before in her life took over her body, and she shook uncontrollably. She couldn't even tell where she was anymore.

Ellize wasn't the real saint. She'd never heard anything so shocking. In fact, she struggled to believe it. How could she have performed all of those miracles if she wasn't the saint?

Layla shook her head. None of that actually mattered, and she wasn't the slightest bit disappointed. Whether she was the saint or not, Ellize was Ellize, and there was no changing that. She was the master she ought to serve...and the one person she loved more than anything. Her loyalty was to her, even if the real saint was someone else.

What she *did* feel, though, was fear. If Ellize wasn't the saint, only one fate awaited her after taking in the witch's powers.

"I'm sorry for lying to everyone for so long," Ellize said. "My deceit ends

today. I'm giving you back your rightful place, Eterna."

Eterna stared at Ellize, her mouth soundlessly opening and closing. The reality of what she'd just heard hadn't quite sunk in yet, but she understood the weight of the word "end" in Ellize's mouth.

"Someone who isn't the saint cannot inherit the witch's powers. When these powers enter a vessel that isn't sturdy enough to receive them, they break it. But fear not—once I die, they won't pass to the next saint, even if she's present. The incredibly long cycle of suffering ends with me."

"No..." Fiora said, tears welling up in her eyes. She couldn't believe Ellize was saying it as though it was the way things ought to be. She must have planned this from the start, she realized.

Alfrea's appearance and the possibility of sealing the witch had come after. She'd probably decided to go along with Alfrea's plan thinking that even if it didn't work, she could still fall back on her initial idea. She'd always intended to bear all of the burden herself.

"I've always wanted to apologize to you the most, Layla," Ellize continued. "I know you take great pride in serving the saint, yet I tied you to my side when I was nothing but a sham. I don't think you'll ever forgive me, but please know I'm sorry."

"L-Lady...E...llize..." Layla could barely speak through her sobs. "No... I-I..."

She wanted to tell Ellize that she was wrong. She didn't care if she was a fake or the real deal. Her saint was, and would always be, Ellize. She tried her hardest, but her voice wouldn't come out.

Unfortunately, time waited for no one. Black miasma started seeping out of the crystal and flowing into Ellize's body. The transfer was underway.

"Ah... AAAAAAAAAH!!!" Layla roared, pulling out her sword and slashing at the miasma in a frenzy.

However, no matter how many times she hit it, nothing happened. A sword couldn't cut through intangible magic. All Layla achieved was a ridiculous, almost comical-looking fight against the air.

"Layla," Ellize said.

She knew better than anyone how futile Layla's struggle was. Ellize rested her hand over Layla's, and her knight dropped her sword, crushed by her powerlessness. If the miracle worker herself affirmed that something was impossible, then it must be. Ellize brought her hand to Layla's cheek and wiped away her tears. She smiled and gazed at Layla as though she understood everything the knight couldn't say.

"Thank you," Ellize said.

Those two little words carried a plethora of feelings.

Layla desperately wanted to answer, to say something, but her throat betrayed her once more. Instead, she embraced Ellize as tightly as she could in an attempt to convey her feelings. She looked almost like a little girl clinging to her mother, and although Ellize was shorter than Layla, she started patting her knight's head gently. Ellize's last act of kindness made Layla even sadder. She was going to lose her. Soon, Ellize would disappear forever. She'd never smile at her again; she'd never caress her hair again.

That was what death was—an endless separation you had no way to fight.

As she comforted Layla, Ellize looked at the others. "There will never be another witch. This millennium of pain is over. This world can finally start moving forward. I won't be here with you, but...I wish for all of you to be happy."

Cruelly ignorant of the situation, the curse hadn't stopped its transfer. The trail of miasma seeping out of Alexia's body was gradually growing thinner. Before long, the process would be over. And, when that happened, Ellize would die.

Needless to say, Ellize herself was aware of that, but she wanted to devote her last moments to them.

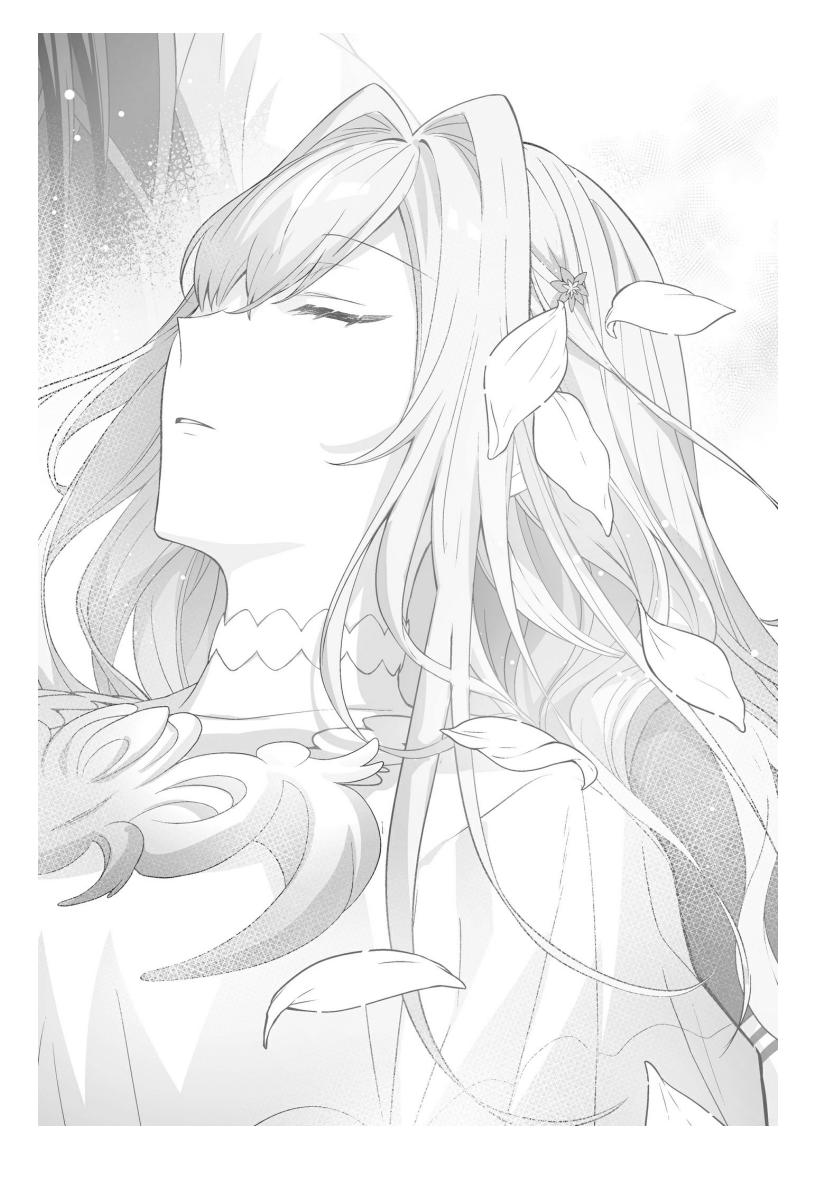
"Your era starts now," she said encouragingly, a final smile on her face. As those last words left her lips, Ellize collapsed.

Layla held her slender body up, hugging her even tighter. She'd felt the girl's body go still. Her body was still warm in her arms, but there was no life left

inside of it—no soul. She was gone for good. She knew there was no coming back.

Ellize's eyes fell shut, and the flower she wore in her hair fell apart. Ellize's magic had kept it in full bloom all these years, but without it, it had turned back into a regular, unremarkable flower. The scattering petals served as yet another reminder that Ellize's time was over.

She was gone.



"No... This has to be a lie... Tell me it's a lie! Lady Ellize, please! Please open your eyes!" Layla sobbed as she hugged her master's lifeless body. Her usual dignified appearance was marred by a mess of tears and snot.

No matter how many times Layla begged her to, Ellize didn't open her eyes. Eventually, Layla was forced to accept that she was clinging to an empty shell.

She suddenly remembered something Ellize had told her once.

"Everything will be all right, Layla. Your saint won't die."

She'd been talking about Eterna, not herself, Layla realized.

"I-I... I don't care...if you're a fake... I just w-wanted you...to stay by my side... To me, y-you're the only one. *You* are the real one!" Layla shouted. Her sobs made her words almost unintelligible.

"Everything will be all right. I promise I'll create a future where everyone can smile. A true happy ending."

Ellize had never included herself in that promise. She didn't exist in the happy ending she'd envisioned.

Layla held on to the last of Ellize's warmth as she wondered, *How could she smile through this all?*

She screamed and bawled like a child, unable to hold her feelings back. She'd forgotten all about the prestige and dignity a member of the saint's guard ought to maintain. No one here would mock her for this.

Around her, everyone wept. Verner fell to the ground, crying silently.

The somber spectacle was nothing like the happy ending Ellize had pictured.

Side Story: The Secrets of Ordinary Fuguten

Yoru, the king of Ordinary Fuguten—a kingdom located on a western island—was sitting at his desk alone, greatly troubled. The failure of his recent politics and the subsequent decline in support he was facing bothered him.

As an island nation, Ordinary Fuguten had always been relatively protected from monster invasions. Witches never settled there because it had little tactical value, so it had historically been much stabler and richer than most other countries.

The opinions of the kings of Fuguten had always carried a lot of weight during international meetings. Even when they forced one-sided deals on weaker nations, no one had ever been able to speak up in protest. The reasoning behind that was quite simple—besides Fuguten and Giappon, two rich island nations, they had no one to turn to for economic and material support.

In a way, these two countries were the lifeline the rest of the world held on to. If other nations displeased them, they stopped sending food aid, dooming the other country.

And so, the other rulers always bent over backward to make sure the king of Fuguten would remain content.

It also explained why Fuguten didn't care much about the saint. They didn't need her, and they certainly weren't interested in pretending she was the leader of the world. While other countries had no choice but to cling to the faint hope the saint represented if they wanted to avoid collapse, Fuguten was different. They didn't need to revere some figurehead. Their kings, in particular, had always refused to give up any part of their authority—even if it were only for show.

In addition, Fuguten's remote island location also meant it was difficult for the saint to visit.

All in all, Fuguten neither won nor lost anything because of the saint. Her

existence was practically irrelevant to them.

Interestingly enough, the rulers of Giappon—which were in a similar situation—didn't behave in the same way. Just like the other countries, they accepted the saint's (apparent) supremacy. From what King Yoru knew, their choice was motivated by a traumatic experience caused by the witch centuries ago.

As far as Fuguten was concerned, Giappon's behavior was quite convenient. It meant that the king of Fuguten, the only one who did not bow to the saint, was equal—no—even higher than the saint herself.

King Yoru groaned. "This is bad... Very, very bad..."

His authority had started slipping away from him a couple of years ago. Needless to say, the main culprit was Ellize, the so-called greatest saint in history.

She'd driven out countless monsters, healed the common people, introduced new crops, and reclaimed land from the witch. She was so overwhelmingly powerful that all the past saints looked like jokes in comparison.

In the span of a short few years, the tables had been entirely turned around. Fuguten had gone from being in the best position to being in the worst.

Ellize, being as powerful as she was, could have very well visited Fuguten to share her blessings. She wouldn't even have needed a boat. However, the nation had continued to insist year after year that they didn't need the saint's help, and that they weren't interested in worshipping her—their king kept them safe enough.

And so, they hadn't been able to bring themselves to ask for Ellize's aid. Worse than that, King Yoru was so scared that Ellize's presence would eat away at his authority that he'd doubled down and told Ellize he didn't need her to come.

He hadn't explicitly forbidden her from entering the country, but after being told her presence wasn't wanted by someone who was technically of the same rank—if not higher—Ellize would naturally find it hard to visit Fuguten.

Add to that the fact that Fuguten was located far, far away from her natal Giardino, and its relative safety compared to other nations, and it was little

wonder why Ellize had prioritized other countries.

In the blink of an eye, Fuguten had gone from the safest, most stable country in the world to the worst one. While Fuguten had always been deemed to be a nation that was well-off, that was only in comparison to other countries. There were fewer monsters, sure, but the land and the people still suffered at their hands.

It wasn't too late to seek Ellize's help, but King Yoru's pride forbade him from doing so. It would be far too embarrassing. Had he not said a word, Ellize would have eventually visited. However, his own stubbornness had led to this situation.

"I'm in such a bind..."

King Yoru had become the foolish king who'd doomed his people out of pride. And, naturally, his people blamed him. They berated him every day.

Why isn't the king asking for the saint's help?!

Wait a minute, our royal idiot was the one who pushed her away in the first place!

Submit to the saint!

What's wrong with being under the saint?! She never even interferes with politics!

You're so useless, it's no wonder your wife left you!

If he didn't do anything, who knew when someone would start planning a coup to drag him down from his throne? And yet, he *really* didn't want to bow to the saint and beg for her help. It would be the same as admitting that his way had been wrong all along. He'd be dragged from his throne all the same for being a terrible politician!

No, he needed to find a way to get the saint to come to Fuguten without apologizing to her. Then, he'd be able to stand tall and keep his status above the other rulers.

King Yoru couldn't forget about his country's past glory. Suddenly, he got an idea—a foolish one that he was convinced would fix all of his issues.



Under the cover of the night, ten men approached the academy. The men that made up Fuguten's Stealth Force were clad in black. At the king's order, they took care of espionage missions, investigated, assassinated, or abducted targets.

Tonight, their target was Ellize.

King Yoru didn't want to bow to the saint, but he wanted her in Fuguten. After pondering over the matter for a while, he'd reached a conclusion: all he needed to do was abduct her. If he kept her in Fuguten, he could monopolize her blessings. Then, his country would rise above all others, and they'd be forced to beg for his help again. Fuguten would be as prestigious and prosperous as it once was.

And if anyone wondered why Ellize had disappeared all of a sudden... Well, he could always blame it on the witch.

Sure, Ellize was strong enough to destroy an army of monsters, but surely she was as defenseless as a regular teenage girl while she was asleep. Not to mention that a merciful and benevolent saint like her probably wouldn't hurt humans even if she suddenly woke up.

As long as they managed to abduct her, they could work everything else out. If need be, they could even feed her drugs to turn her into an obedient doll who'd listen to King Yoru's every order.

And so, the men of the Stealth Force had been tasked with this ridiculous, shoddily conceived plan. As soon as they reached the entrance, though, they noticed that something was off.

"Guys, wait... Isn't one of us missing?" one of them asked, looking around and counting his comrades.

"You're right," another agreed. "Did someone get lost?"

"Whatever, let's leave the idiot behind and carry out our mission," a third one said.

One of them had disappeared, but instead of searching for him, they

prioritized their mission. These men were cruel, and above all else, loyal to their king. They knew that their orders came before their lives or those of their comrades. Besides, if one of them had gotten lost so easily, it proved that he wasn't up to the task. Good-for-nothings weren't worth their time.

The nine men took out their grappling hooks, and after twirling them in the air for a moment, threw them at the academy's wall. Each of them latched on to the window frame on the top floor.

These men had done their homework before coming. They knew that Ellize stayed on the top floor of the academy. They also knew that Layla, the head of Ellize's guard, was carefully guarding the door of the saint's room. However, the window was unattended.

The nine men started climbing the wall one by one, aided by their rope. When the ninth man stepped forward to climb, he suddenly felt a presence behind him.

"Wh-"

His mouth was clamped shut as he tried to say "Who goes there?!" A needle was quickly stabbed into his neck. As the man felt his consciousness slip away, the last thing he saw was a pair of glasses reflecting the moonlight. He was then dragged away by his assailant and disappeared.

"Wait... Something's weird. Another one of our guys's gone," one of the men said.

"Again?"

"We can't write it off as a coincidence. Something must be going on."

"We might be under attack. Keep your guard up."

One deadbeat getting lost made sense, but two was suspicious. Someone had most likely attacked them. One of Ellize's knights might have noticed them and taken action.

The remaining eight men couldn't turn back, though. They continued to climb the wall, their senses on alert.

As he reached the third floor, the man at the rear suddenly felt like he was

being watched. His eyes immediately darted toward the window of the third floor, and sure enough, someone was there! A man wearing glasses was staring at him through the glass panel.

"Ene—" he started, trying to warn his comrades that he'd spotted an enemy. Unfortunately for him, a huge hand suddenly sprung out of the wall and shut him up.

Was it a golem's hand? His enemy was most likely using earth magic, but when had he planted a golem inside the wall? The man finally realized his mistake. The four-eyed man hadn't planted a golem *inside* the wall—he'd turned the *entire thing* into a golem!

He didn't have the time to be impressed by the mysterious man's magical abilities. The large hand grabbed him, and he was dragged into the wall. He was stuck inside!

"All right, that's her room," one of the other men said. "I can't see Ellize because of the curtains, though."

"It doesn't matter, let's break the window," another said, putting a finger on the glass panel and slowly drawing a circle. He used fire magic to cut through the glass and opened up a hole. He put his hand in the hole and fumbled for the lock, successfully opening it. Five men, including him, entered the room.

Five? All of them wondered as they looked around. Where were the others? They'd only noticed two of their comrades going missing. When had the three other men disappeared?

"G-Guys... Why are there only five of us left? Where did the other three go?!" "They might still be climbing."

The five men looked down at the wall through the window, but their allies were nowhere to be seen.

"N-No, they aren't!"

"W-Wait... Did someone else disappear?!"

Indeed, a sixth man had soundlessly disappeared while they'd been busy looking outside.

The four remaining men were terrified, but they were trained secret agents. They knew not to get lost in their emotions. They had to prioritize the mission.

"They've noticed us. We're under attack. That much is certain! There's no need for stealth anymore. Let's grab the girl and escape as quickly as possible!" "Yes!"

The four men rushed toward the bed where the saint must've been sleeping and forcefully opened the canopy. The beautiful young saint...wasn't there! And neither was her bed!

They were finally starting to realize that something was truly off. It was hard to tell in the dark, but was this room truly the saint's room? Everything—from the walls to the furniture—felt sort of...sloppy, like they'd been hastily built.

"A-Are we truly...inside the academy?" one of the men asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Look! Through this window...I-I can see it! The academy!" he exclaimed.

The others ran up to him and looked outside the window he was pointing at. As he'd said, a little farther away was another building—the academy.

It made no sense. They were *inside* the academy, so how could they see it? Or...were they? If they weren't, then where the hell were they?!

"Damn! This is a trap! We need to get out, now!"

"Huh? Wh-Where did the others go?!"

They'd taken way too long to notice that something was wrong and now, it was too late for them to escape. Two of them had already disappeared once again.

The final two men stood back-to-back. They took out their weapons and looked around warily. They couldn't see anyone. An eerie silence surrounded them.

"Damn it! Where are those bastards?! Hey, can you see anything?" one asked his last remaining comrade. "Dude? Hey!"

He turned around to discover he was alone. He couldn't see his comrade, nor

could he see an enemy.

Their squad had been made up of ten men, but in the blink of an eye, he'd been left alone. He'd gone through intense training over the years to build up a mind of steel, but this time, he simply couldn't bear it anymore. His teeth chattered, and his legs trembled.

Suddenly, something shone in the dark. He felt as though the gleam was mocking him. As if to confirm it, he heard someone snicker.

"I thought the cover of the night would help conceal my ruse, but a fake is hard to pass off as the real deal," a voice said. "To think I poured so much mana and energy into this building."

"Wh-Who are you?!" the secret agent asked. He could make out the shape that had gleamed in the dark—a pair of glasses.

In front of him stood Ellize's hardcore fan and a notorious pervert: Supple Ment. He wore a smile on his face.

The man wanted to rush at him and slay him, but his legs wouldn't move. He looked down and finally noticed that he was buried knee-deep in the ground.

"Careful," Supple said. "You're standing inside one of my golems. I must say I'm a bit disappointed. I know I rushed it somewhat, but I'd hoped it'd stand tall for a while longer. It has already started to collapse. I thought that I could save some mana by only building the wall—I'd prepared the wood and glass panels beforehand—but a building of this size certainly is challenging. It looks like one hour was my maximum. I still have a long way to go, don't I?"

"A...golem, you say? This huge building is a golem?!"

"My, my, no need to sound so surprised. It's not like I created this entire thing out of nowhere. I simply molded the clay I'd prepared ahead of time. This is nothing. I'm sure Lady Ellize could build a much better-looking building. She wouldn't overlook the fine details. I wonder if anyone would be able to tell it apart from the real thing..."

"You prepared ahead of time? Did you know that we planned to—" the secret agent tried to ask.

"I didn't," Supple cut him off. "This is simply a little research project of mine. You suddenly barged in, so I figured it was the perfect time to conduct a little experiment."

Despite his multiple shortcomings, Supple was a true researcher. After he'd seen Ellize craft weapons using earth magic, he'd realized that there was still much to discover about this particular branch of magic. While he specialized in earth magic, Supple knew he wouldn't be able to replicate the weapons Ellize had crafted if he was ever asked to. Even if he couldn't achieve a similar level of perfection, though, there still had to be things he could learn. And so, Supple had poured his energy into researching earth magic, day after day.

"Thank you for assisting me in my research," Supple said, angling his head just right so that it reflected the moonlight. "As a reward, I shall help you realize the sheer stupidity of your little stunt by drilling the magnificence of our glorious saint into your brain."

He walked up to the man. It was so dark that the secret agent couldn't see his face properly. All he could see was Supple's warped smile.

"S-Stop!"

He wanted to run away, but he couldn't—he was stuck in the ground.

Supple continued to approach, grinning.

"NOOOOOO!!!"

The man's screams echoed in the dark of the night.



Several days after receiving their mission from King Yoru, the ten men of the Stealth Force returned to Fuguten.

The king rejoiced and invited them to his private chambers at once. With this, his country was back on track. Fuguten would be rich and powerful, while the other nations would decline. He would be revered as the man who made it happen. King Yoru could already imagine the citizens bowing down and praising his courage and determination.

It was just him and the ten men inside his private chambers, no one else.

After all, he couldn't have anyone else learn that he'd abducted Ellize. If word got out, it could mean war. No one but he and his secret agents knew about this plan.

"As expected of my elite force. I'm glad to see you back so soon," King Yoru praised them. "Now tell me, where is Ellize? Have you brought her to me?"

The men of the Stealth Force didn't answer. They silently moved to surround the king. Their faces hadn't shifted, and their movements looked so natural that King Yoru didn't suspect that anything was wrong until he was fully surrounded.

He'd initially thought that they must have stuffed Ellize into a bag, but as he looked around, he realized that they weren't carrying anything large enough to hold a person.

"Well? What is going on?" King Yoru asked.

"For..." one of the secret agents mumbled.

King Yoru couldn't make out the words. "Sorry?"

"For Lady Ellize!" the man screamed.

The other nine started repeating the same thing over and over again. "For Lady Ellize!" they all screamed.

"Huh? What in the world is wrong with you?!" King Yoru said.

His men were acting weird. They kept clamoring about their loyalty to Ellize, their faces distorted. They almost seemed to be in a trance.

While King Yoru had no way of knowing this, they looked exactly like Supple whenever he witnessed another one of Ellize's miracles.

After he'd caught them, Supple had made sure to instill Ellize's splendor into them. He'd made sure they remembered how beautiful, precious, and perfect she was. He hadn't given them a second to rest—he'd waxed poetic for hours about her qualities. After that, he'd dragged them along to observe Ellize from afar. Eventually, he'd succeeded in dyeing these men in his colors.

Why had they been so devoted to a stupid, greedy, horrible old man who didn't even care about his people? All King Yoru desired was power!

Abducting Ellize was bound to lead the greater part of the world down the path of despair once again. If Fuguten was the only country to profit from her blessings at such a juncture, it would soon become obvious that they'd abducted her, wouldn't it? Then the other countries would turn against them and all they'd win was war. Could they resist such a coalition? It was impossible.

Were they really supposed to throw their lives away for an idiot who couldn't even see that? What was the point? It was all so absurd. In what universe would it make sense to follow their king? Wasn't it better for them to pledge their loyalty to the most beautiful girl they'd ever seen?

I can't help it, I'm just a man in the end, they'd all thought.

And so, the men of the Stealth Force had betrayed King Yoru.

"For Lady Ellize!" they shouted in unison, approaching the foolish king who'd tried to harm the sublime saint.

That man wasn't worthy of sitting on the throne. First, they'd beat him up. Then, they could figure something out. Maybe they'd help one of his sons stage a coup.

The ten men lunged at the greedy man they'd sworn to serve.



"Lady Ellize. The king of Fuguten has changed."

"Is that so?"

One morning, after I'd stepped out of my room, I heard the news from Layla.

To be honest, I didn't really care. Besides, I'd barely ever seen the king of Fuguten. He wasn't all that fond of me and always liked to keep me at a distance.

"The new king, His Majesty King Shinya, has sent you a letter to apologize for his predecessor's rudeness."

Rudeness? Huh? Is this about the fact that he said he didn't need me there? I mean, it was a pretty logical standpoint considering his country's position.

Unlike the Bilberry Kingdom, Fuguten's never submitted to the saint's authority—not even as a formality.

"Fuguten has decided to change its ways, and King Shinya wishes to swear allegiance to you and enter your sphere of influence."

Interesting. The son's decided to do a 180, huh? I guess he wasn't happy with his daddy's politics. Sure, I'll welcome them.

Even though Fuguten was to become one of the nations under my authority, it was all for show. At the end of the day, the royal families of each country held the real power. With Fuguten joining my sphere of influence, though, I'd be forced to be more proactive and help them out for real. I didn't really mind, but I couldn't help but wonder what had prompted this change.

Perhaps the son had never agreed with his father. Would he be okay, though? There might be friction with his predecessor if he'd decided that on his own.

"What happened to King Yoru?" I asked.

"The previous king was...imprisoned to answer for his crimes and corruption."

Oh, jeez—looks like a lot was happening over there.

Whatever. Not my problem, I thought, looking through the window.

I was surprised to find a building I'd never seen before...or rather, the ruins of one. What the hell was *that*?

"What may that be?" I asked Layla.

"That's...a golem Mr. Supple made. I believe he tried to build a new building for the academy. Apparently, it collapsed in less than an hour."

A new building, huh? I guess lots of stuff is happening here too.

It was dangerous, though. What if someone mistook that building for the real one and entered it by mistake?

Nah, I'm sure there's no one stupid enough to do that.

Layla had a lot to report this morning, but as always, none of it really mattered to me.

Anyway, time for another day of watching pretty girls in their uniforms!

I was much more interested in that than in kings rising or falling halfway across the world.

Afterword

This story hasn't ended yet! Bear with me a little longer!

Thank you very much for picking up this third volume of *Fake Saint*. I'm kabedondaikou—the archduke of kabedon, the author.

I'll be talking about the content of volume three from here on out, so if any of you have decided to read the afterword first, now's the time to stop. I strongly recommend you read the main story first.

The third volume ends with Ellize's death, but don't worry! As you probably guessed already, this isn't the end. I've kept the conclusion for the fourth and final volume.

I'd also like to announce that the manga version of *Fake Saint of the Year*, which has been in the making for some time, will soon start! Ekakibito-sama is in charge of the manga. Some parts have to be left to the imagination when writing a story, but we'll soon be able to discover scenes anew through Ekakibito-sama's drawings! I can barely contain my excitement.

There were several big developments in this third volume, including the appearance of a new character—Alfrea, the first saint—and the final fight against the witch, Alexia.

I'm sure no one cares, but Alfrea and Alexia's names are way too similar, which was a headache for me. I often mixed them up during my writing.

The third—and most impactful—moment was Ellize finally leaving the stage, just as she'd planned. Ellize had an inkling her death would make Layla and the others somewhat sad, but as you can see, she grossly underestimated the impact it'd have on them.

Ellize (Fudou Niito) was never the kind of person who thought much about others' feelings. Even in her past life as Niito, Ellize only ever regarded others as NPCs or anime characters. When watching a movie, people will get angry when a villain appears on-screen and sad when a character they like dies or suffers.

However, after exiting the theater, they'll simply go home thinking, *That was a nice movie*. Then, they'll take a bath, go to bed, and carry on with their lives. Niito interacts with people in the exact same way. That's why Ellize's convinced that the others will be sad about her death for a bit, but they'll get over it quickly enough.

At her core, Ellize lacks the understanding of how to treat people properly. While she understands the concept of mourning on paper, she cannot truly empathize. Thus, she absolutely fails to realize how deep a wound she'll leave on Layla, Verner, and the others with her death.

That gap in perception is what led to the last scene of this volume. Ellize is under the impression that she's neatly removed anything that could lead to a bad ending and helped the others head straight toward a happy ending. In reality, though, she's achieved the worst ending anyone other than her could think of.

While the contrast is interesting, I can't help but be left with a bad aftertaste, and so, this is not the final ending. From here on, the story will— *Oops! No spoilers!*

I'll stop here, so hang tight until the next volume comes out.

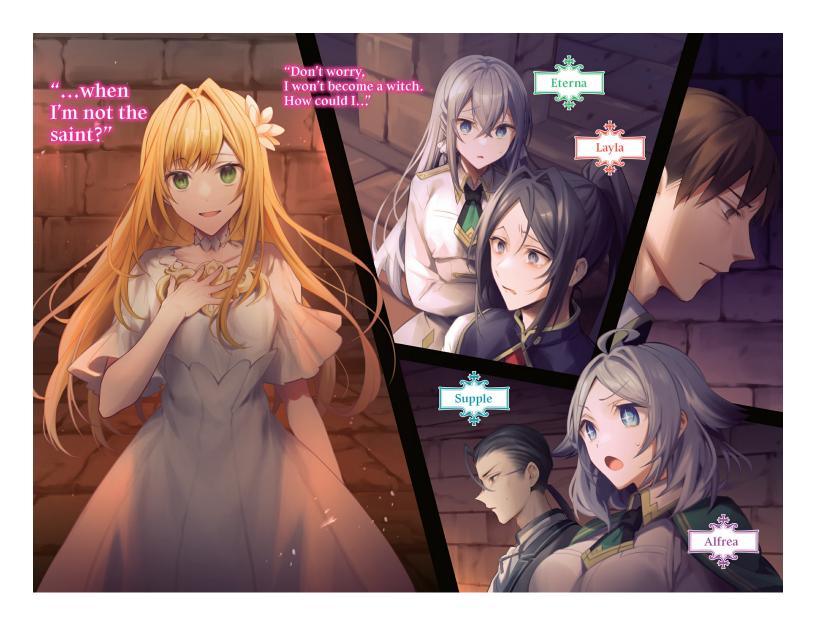
I'd like to thank everyone at Kadokawa for all the work they did so this book could hit the shelves; my wonderful illustrator, Yunohito-sama; and, of course, every single one of my readers for picking up this book. As always, thank you very much.

There's only one volume left, so I'd be most grateful if you decided to stick with me until the end.

See you again in volume four!

kabedondaikou.

















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Fake Saint of the Year: You Wanted the Perfect Saint? Too Bad! Volume 3

by kabedondaikou

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Edited by Maral RahmanPour

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