

Tales of Zestiria Novel I Prologue and Chapter 1

Tales of Zestiria
THE ANIMATION

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ufotable

バンダイナムコ
エンターテインメント



SPECIAL STORY

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AND OF COURSE THE
SERAPHIM MEMBERS



Prologue

'The Legend of the Shepherd'-----

It was a legend from long, long ago, reaching back to the age of myths.

A legend of those who appeared whenever the world was enshrouded in darkness, wielding the power of the Seraphim themselves to bring back the light.

A legend sung by the people whenever the world fell into turmoil, praying for salvation, no matter how many ages had passed.

And always, in those times, the Shepherd appeared and banished away the darkness. Or so the story goes.

However, they always disappeared with the coming of peace.

Nobody knew where they went.

In time, they faded from the people's memory, once more disappearing into legend.

The years passed.

Now, once again, darkness threatened to cover the world.

The darkness wreaked havoc with the order of the land. The sun scorched the earth. The mountains spewed fire. The seas raged.

Nature turning its fangs on all that lived and breathed.

The disasters had even made barren the human heart, the pestilence of despair and weariness giving birth to the 'Malevolence', and the Malevolence further dyed the world in darkness.

Ten years after people began to call it 'The Age of Calamity', the legend and the name of the Shepherd was passing through people's lips once more.

Wishing for salvation, the people prayed.

But as of now,

There was no one whom their prayers could fall on....

The wind whistled as it rushed through the sea of green grass.

His light chestnut brown hair waving in its passage, the young man---Sorey---turned.

"What's wrong, Sorey?"

Walking by his side, his childhood friend Mikleo also stopped in his tracks, turning to look at Sorey's face.

"It's just....I just had a feeling that someone was calling me...."

Sorey looked around him in confusion like he had no idea what was going on, either, before finally stopping to look at something far into the distance.

Realizing what lay at the end of Sorey's gaze, Mikleo, too, turned to look..

It was far, far away and hidden behind clouds so they couldn't see it, but it was certainly there. The place where they grew up. Their home.

The place where everyone who raised them up so lovingly still lived. A precious place.

"Are you homesick already?"

Mikleo asked, teasing. Sorey's answer was a laughing "No way!"

"We've got things to do. Let's go before it's all too late."

As Sorey began to walk forward, so did Mikleo, falling into step beside him.

Before the two of them sprawled a world that they had never known.

Years later, the tale of a boy's journey would be told in the same breath as the myriad legends. The boy who would be called the paragon of all Shepherds.

And now, that journey was about to begin.

Chapter One

1.

Dame du Lac, the city on the lake.

A city blessed with lush waters in the north of the continent of Glenwood, the capital of the Kingdom of Highland.

Even in times so difficult as to be called the Age of Calamity, it still bustled with life as the heart of the kingdom. Especially moreso now, with the 'Festival of the Holy Sword' being held for the first time in years.

"Amazing! So this is the capital of Dame du Lac....! It's so lively!"

Sorey said, eyes shining, not even bothering to hide the excitement at the first city he had ever seen.

Everything was so new and strange that he kept looking everywhere at once as he walked down the street. Both sides of it were lined with stores, so many that if he paid attention to the fruit stalls on the right, he'd lost sight of the tool store on the left. He ended up turning in all directions at once while walking, and as a result almost bumped into someone he didn't notice coming down the street from the other side.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!"

Sorey apologized, flustered, and stepped out of the way. Mikleo shrugged at him in exasperation.

"Sorey, you're getting too excited."

"Sorry, it's just that everything's so strange!"

Sorey answered with a bashful smile, and Mikleo had to sigh at that. Even so, he did mentally agree : *Well, I do know how what you feel.*

He couldn't afford to be excited together with Sorey, though. Holding back the incessant urgings of his curiosity, Mikleo did his best to reply in a calm and rational manner.

"We're not here to sightsee, are we?"

"I guess not. Now then, where should we start looking....?"

*Hmm....*Sorey muttered, raising a hand to his chin. It was then that they heard somebody calling out to him.

"Hey, Mister! You over there! You here to sightsee all alone!?"

Both Sorey and Mikleo turned at the voice to find a shopkeeper at one of the stalls smiling in their direction, holding out a scarf in one hand.

"From the way you look, I daresay this must be your first time in Dame du Lac! Well, what do you think of this scarf? It's real silk, and if you buy it now it'll only cost 860 gald! A total steal, eh?"

"Is it?"

Sorey tilted his head blankly. He could tell that the silk was of high quality just by looking at it, but the problem was, he had no idea if it was cheap or not.

After all, there was no such thing as 'currency' back in Elysia, where he had lived his entire life.

As he left the stall behind, he realized once again that he really, truly was in 'The Outside World' now.

And currency wasn't the only difference here, either.

Sorey flicked a glance at Mikleo, who was walking by his side.

Hair the color of pale aquamarine, skin so fair as to seem almost translucent, sophisticated violet eyes.

Even from his perspective, Sorey thought that there was a beauty to Mikleo that would draw the eyes of others. Yet nobody's gazes lingered on him at all. Some even charged straight into him as if they didn't realize that he was there, even though they were walking right on the very same street.

Everyone passed them by as if Mikleo didn't exist.

"Is something the matter?"

Mikleo asked, noticing Sorey's gaze.

"Nothing.....I was just thinking that ordinary humans really can't see Seraphim, after all."

"So it seems. That shopkeeper from before also thought that you were travelling alone, too."

Sorey frowned a little upon hearing Mikleo's blithe answer.

Mikleo was not a human, but a Seraph.

The Seraphim were beings unlike ordinary humans, living through time spans that humans could not experience, wielding powers called the Celestial Artes that no human could use. Legends told of how they once lived alongside humans, but their existence had long since been relegated to myth, turned into objects of reverence and figures of worship for the people of Glenwood.

That was just how the humans saw it, however.

The Seraphim were still living in this world even now, quietly, avoiding all contact with humans.

Elysia was one such place. And Sorey was the sole human to have been raised there.

"We've always lived together normally, but what's 'normal' for everyone else is a world where Seraphim don't exist, I guess...."

"Sorey....."

This time Mikleo, too, frowned at the tinge of loneliness in Sorey's voice. The somber atmosphere didn't last long, however.

"It'd be *so* nice if there's a way for Seraphim and humans to live together, though!"

Sorey exclaimed cheerfully. Mikleo stared at him for a short moment before breaking into a smile.

Because in the words 'if there's a way', he could feel Sorey's wish of 'I want to find that way'.

"To do that, you'll have to do something about the problem of mankind's spiritual power first. If nobody can see Seraphim, then nothing can be done."

Mikleo said, and Sorey happily chirped "Yeah, that's right~!" in turn.

"If people can see Seraphim by having high spiritual power....then, can't we do something to raise it for everyone somehow?"

"I've never heard of a way to do something like that, though.....whoa!"

Mikleo was crossing his arms over his chest thoughtfully when he suddenly lost his balance. He fell forward, headfirst, but a startled Sorey jumped in to catch him.

"What's wrong, Mikleo!?"

"Something just suddenly...."

Bewildered, Mikleo turned back. To see a large pig standing before him.

"A pig!?"

Their eyes widened in unison. It was then that they heard a cheerful voice.

"Excuse me! That pig's part of our wares!"

A girl was running towards them.

The girl, whose hair was as bright as her voice, slapped the pig's back lightly before giving them a wry smile.

"Sorry for startling you, he just ran off while we were delivering him to the client. You're not hurt, are you?"

"Um...."

Sorey struggled to find words. The pig had bumped into Mikleo, not him, but of course she couldn't see Mikleo himself. But while he was racking his brains for something appropriate to say, Mikleo threw him a glance that clearly spelled said *'Don't mind me, just act normal'*.

"I'm all right. Everything's fine."

The girl sighed in relief at his answer.

"Oh, that's great to hear. If it turns out that we injured a civilian while on the job, the name of the Wagtail Wing merchant's guild would've been ruined forever!"

After saying that, she started to push the pig away in an attempt to get it back.

The plump----and frankly delicious-looking---pig refused to budge, however. The girl tilted her head quizzically and muttered 'huh?' to herself, and Sorey decided to offer her a hand.

"Here, let me help you."

Together, they managed to get the pig walking to the horse-drawn cart it came from. Along the way, Sorey asked.

"By 'merchant's guild', do you mean you travel to all sorts of different places?"

"Sure! If there's a job to do, we'll go anywhere in the world!"

"The *whole* world? That's amazing! But isn't it hard to travel across different countries all the time?"

"Well, yeah. We're all protected by treaties of commerce, though, so we basically get a free pass to every city."

"Wow!"

As they finally got the pig to the cart proper, they brought the pig back on the carriage with the help of guild members waiting there.

With everything done, Sorey exhaled in relief. The girl then held her hand out for him.

"Thanks a lot, you were a big help there. I'm Rose, and you are?"

Sorey shook her hand and told her his name in return.

"We'll be staying in this city for a while, so just holler if you ever need anything! We'll make it extra cheap for you."

Rose winked, grinning. With how she said 'cheap' but definitely not 'free', it looked like she really was a shrewd merchant after all.

As he waved Rose and her crew goodbye, Mikleo spoke up after staying silent through it all.

"That was careless of me."

"What was?"

Sorey asked. Mikleo gave him a slightly exaggerated shrug.

"Animals can see us."

"Mmm. So they can, now that you mention it."

"Other people might end up giving you odd looks for it. We've got to be careful, especially in cities."

*That's true.....*Sorey nodded. But Mikleo wasn't done.

"In other words....even if humans can't see me, there are things that know I'm here."

Sorey turned with a jolt towards Mikleo.

Even though he was the one who said it, Mikleo was turning away with a huff, as if he

was embarrassed.

-----it's not as if everything treats Seraphim like we don't exist.

Mikleo had said that just for him. He was trying to alleviate Sorey's loneliness in what little way he could.

Sorey broke into a smile at this, at his kind childhood friend who somehow couldn't be straightforward at all with his kindness, and pulled his enthusiasm back together.

"All right, let's go and look for Alisha already, then!"

"Isn't that what I've been saying all along?"

Sorey smiled wryly at how not straightforward that was once again, then began to walk ahead.

2.

After walking through the city and collecting some basic information, Sorey and Mikleo ended up in front of a large mansion in the nobility's district.

Apparently, this was where Alisha---the person they were looking for---lived.

Since Dame du Lac boasted hundreds of times more population than Elysia, they were prepared to break their backs looking for one woman in it all, but it was unexpectedly easy to find her house. Even moreso after they learned the identity that she adamantly would not say.

"So Alisha's the princess of Highland, huh?"

As he looked up at Alisha's mansion, Sorey recalled his memories of her.

Alisha was a dignified woman.

Even though she was clad in armor, there was a gracefulness to the way she talked and moved, and the white ornament she used to tie her pale blonde hair up was lovely and suited her well. She might have been hiding her identity, but her elegance still shone through, and it didn't surprise him in the least to learn that she was royalty.

Alisha and Sorey had met in the ruins close to Elysia.

She had lost her footing, slipped and injured herself, and Sorey helped her when she was incapacitated. That was how it began.

They were both avid readers of the Celestial Records, a book which documented legends in different locales throughout the world. Thanks to that, they immediately hit it off, and got along well after that.

To Sorey, Alisha was the first human friend he ever had.

"To think that she'd go exploring the ruins all by herself, though, even if they call her the 'Knight Princess' over here...."

"Maybe she's just that desperate. Even though we still have no idea why Alisha went to the ruins in the first place, looking at this city, I think I can understand why she'd look to legends as her last resort."

Mikleo glanced at a street corner. His face darkened slightly at the sight of a black mist swirling in that place.

"Can you see it?"

He asked, and Sorey turned to look at the same street corner. He saw nothing but ordinary bricks and stones, however.

But a Seraph like Mikleo could see it----the Malevolence that was driving this world mad.

"Mmm...anyway, the Malevolence is strong here in this city. It's hanging everywhere, and it makes me feel a little sick, to be honest."

"Are you all right, Mikleo?"

Sorey asked, concerned, and Mikleo gave him a little smile.

"I'm still fine. I'm starting to feel that I'd rather not stay here long, though."

Then the sudden sound of a dog barking furiously startled them both, and they stiffened. His experience with the pig still fresh, Mikleo immediately turned to look behind.

"What is that?"

"Mikleo, over there!"

Sorey pointed to the mansion's garden. A dog was barking wildly at empty space, head low, tail high, as if it was ready to pounce at any moment.

A wisp of fire burst into life in the empty air in front of it.

"What!?"

Sorey inadvertently cried out. The fire convalesced into a ball, then many more appeared, a curtain of fireballs circling the dog threateningly. The dog, too, couldn't help but take a step back in fear.

"Tch....pipe down, you damned mutt."

Something shaped like a man soundlessly appeared in the middle of the swirling ring of fire. And yes, it was a man, clad all in black with his long hair tied back in a crude ponytail.

"You! That fox guy!"

Sorey shouted as he came into view. This was the other person they were searching for like Alisha----although for entirely different reasons. The foxlike man, Lunarre, the turned towards Sorey and peered at him with insect-like eyes.

".....What a pain in the ass."

He spat, then leapt away.

"Hey, wait! Mikleo, let's go after him!"

The two of them hurriedly ran after Lunarre, but the latter was fast. He moved as if he was weightless, rushing through the streets and jumping from rooftop to rooftop like the wind. After rushing through a number of twisty little streets, Sorey and Mikleo found themselves ending up in a dark back alley.

"What is this place....?"

No one was there. However, Mikleo could see a much greater Malevolence swirling here than any other alleys they had passed along the way.

"This feeling.....he's here, no doubt about it."

Sorey could sense something, too, even though he couldn't see it. He drew out the ceremonial sword he carried for self-defense and began to step ahead cautiously. Mikleo, too, readied his staff and followed close behind him.

".....More annoyances I don't need. Great."

Lunarre's voice rang through the alley. It echoed through the dim back courts like it was nowhere and everywhere at once, and it was impossible to tell where it originated.

Mikleo was slowly walking forward when the sound of something rending the air reverberated through the alley.

"Mikleo!"

"!"

Before he could turn to look, Sorey tackled him to the ground. At the same time, something buried itself into the brickwork with a loud *clank*.

"Tch!"

Lunarre pulled his claws up from the engouged streets, whipping his head to face Sorey and Mikleo.

Both of them got to their feet immediately and reassumed their combat stance.

"We won't let you do as you please, Fox!"

"And just who the hell are you.....?"

Lunarre looked at them in irritation, then his lips spread into a grin.

"Oh, I see, I see. The hors d'oeuvres that I didn't get around to eating back in that village, huh? To think you'd come all the way here to be eaten after I let you go---"

"We're here to stop you. -----You're not going to kill Alisha."

Sorey involuntarily tightened his grip on the sword. Their opponent was a Hellion--- someone turned into something inhuman by the Malevolence. And Hellions were not an enemy a regular person could fight.

Still, he couldn't just turn a blind eye to someone who tried to kill his *friends*.

He had come all this way to stop Lunarre from killing Alisha, after all.

"Oh, so you're going to get in the way no matter what? Fine. I'll just have my appetizer before the main course, then.....I'll kill both of you."

A strange glint lit up in his golden eyes, then Lunarre simply disappeared.

Sorey raised his sword up without thinking. In an instant, a sharp *clank* rang through the alley with a rain of sparks. Lunarre had jumped up and brought his claws down on Sorey, and Sorey had blocked it with his sword.

"Well, now.....that was a good parry, eh?"

".....!"

Lunarre said cheerfully, as if he was greatly enjoy all this. In contrast, Sorey was in no position to be talking, gritting his teeth and holding his sword tight.

There wasn't any opening for him to push back against Lunarre's attack even if he wanted to do so. His arms were also growing numb. Sorey grimaced.

This is bad.....!

Lunarre cackled as Sorey continued to be pushed back on the defense.

"What's wrong now? Is it over already?"

"Twin Flow!"

Lunarre clicked his tongue, then jumped out of the way of the oncoming rush of water.

"Sorey, are you all right!?"

"Thanks, Mikleo!"

As he replied to Mikleo, who was running to his side, Sorey tightened his grip on the sword again.

"Is it just me, or is that guy stronger than he was before?"

"Maybe he was weakened by Gramps' Domain of Divine Protection back in Elysia."

"Shut up, brats, you're annoying. Hurry up and burn to a crisp already!"

Lunarre said, reaching out towards Sorey. A ball of fire appeared from his hand and launched itself at them like bullets. The sheer force of it knocked both of them backwards.

"Ngh!"

Sorey's face twisted in pain as he hit the ground. Across the alley, he could see Mikleo crumpling against the wall on impact, limply sliding to the ground like a rag doll.

"Mikleo!"

Mikleo didn't move no matter how many times Sorey called his name. He simply lay there, completely still, his eyes closed.

Then a shadow came to stand before Mikleo's unmoving form. Lunarre.

"I'll kill you properly this time. For having the gall to get in my way when you're such puny weaklings!"

Lunarre made a show out of licking his claws with his long tongue, as if he wanted Sorey to see, then raised it above his head.

"Stop it!"

Sorey screamed. In that moment, a sharp knife whistled through the air and buried itself in the ground next to Lunarre's feet.

"What!?"

Both Sorey and Lunarre instinctively turned to the origin of the knife. Leaving themselves open in the process.

"Don't move."

Something cold and metallic pressed itself against Sorey's neck.

Snapping to attention even if he couldn't move, he glanced at Lunarre and saw that he, too, was being held from behind with a knife to his neck.

Who.....!?

Just as Sorey was trying to find out who his opponents were, Lunarre suddenly cried out to the one holding the knife to Sorey's neck, his voice filled with unexpected fear.

"Ch....Chief.....!"

"Lunarre, have you forgotten our rules?"

A voice came from behind Sorey that could've belonged to either a man or a woman. Lunarre shook his head at the sound of it.

"There will be no second chances. Is that clear?"

Lunarre nodded vigorously, and then person behind Sorey spoke once more.

"Go."

More people suddenly appeared from nowhere at all. Grabbing Lunarre, they disappeared as quietly as they came.

Someone who could make that Lunarre so afraid....

Cold sweat ran down his neck, dripping on the knife held just above his collarbone.

"The assassination order on Princess Alisha is a mistake. We will target her no more."

Sorey frowned at those words, spoken with a quiet voice at his ear.

".....Are you telling me to believe you?"

"We have our pride."

The knife quietly left his neck. He immediately tried to turn, but a thundering cry stopped him.

"Don't turn!"

Sorey froze in place.

"You don't have the leisure to be investigating us now, do you? If you're worried about

the Princess, best hurry up and go to the Altar of the Holy Sword."

".....What do you mean?"

"The Princess has many enemies. Assassination is but one way to bring her harm."

"Are you saying there are other people trying to put Alisha in danger!?"

No answer came. The figure, too, was gone. Even so, Sorey still asked.

"Why did you tell me about that?"

"As I said, we have our pride."

Only their voice rang through the alley. Sorey was lost in thought for a moment, then felt tension leaving his shoulders.

"Maybe.....I should've thanked them for that, I guess?"

He thought he could hear a woman laughing softly, but that soon faded away with a gust of wind.

3.

'The Festival of the Holy Sword'.

It was a festival deeply linked to the legend of the Shepherd as told in Dame du Lac.

According to the legend, anyone who could pull the holy sword out of the altar in the shrine would receive the blessings of its guardian, the Lady of the Lake, and they would be able to become the Shepherd.

Held for the first time in many years, the festival was bustling with activity. The line of challengers for the holy sword reached all the way outside of the shrine, thanks to a number of people just trying it out for fun.

With the line being so long, Sorey and Mikleo deemed the front door to be a lost cause and decided to find another entrance.

The only way to know if they could believe the assassin's advice or not was to see if Alisha was really at the shrine, after all.

"Still, the architecture here is amazing...."

Sorey said, remembering the decorative stylings on the front door, his voice more like a sigh.

"Probably built during the Age of Faith, I'd surmise."

"No, the decor doesn't add up. I'd say that it's from a later date."

"Is it? I wonder."

"Of course it is."

Their discussion began to heat up.

With exploring ruins being their shared hobby, the two of them tended to get *intense* when archaeology-related things came up. They had always been like this ever since their childhood days, so enthralled by the study of ruins that they often stayed up talking about it together well past their bedtime, the hours all but forgotten.

"Come to think of it, didn't the Celestial Records say that there are even older ruins here in Dame du Lac?"

Sorey clapped his hand in realization, reaching for the volume of the Celestial Records he always carried before catching himself.

"Wait, wait, no. Alisha's more important right now!"

He put it back, flustered, then continued to look for the alternate entrance.

Walking around the shrine, they found a back entrance at the end of a staircase leading upwards. However, the soldiers guarding it naturally prevented Sorey from getting in.

"After we've come so far...."

Denied entry and given no chance to bargain, Sorey hung his head down in disappointment and began to descend the steps.

"Should I give you a hand?"

Someone said, waving at them from the bottom of the stairs. It was Rose.

"Rose? Why are you here!?"

"My friends are helping with setting up the 'Festival of the Holy Sword'. I'm here to cheer them on, and then I saw you arguing with the guards. You want to get in no matter what, right?"

"Yeah, Alisha is...."

In danger, he was about to say, but then Mikleo elbowed him lightly in the ribs.

"Too much information, Sorey."

As Mikleo pointed it out, Sorey caught himself and began to stammer, waving his hands up and down frantically. "Um! A-anyway, I'd be glad for any help you can help! If you'll help, that is!"

He covered up his gaff clumsily, but Rose didn't seem to find him suspicious at all. She grinned.

"Okay, then. You're going to need some money."

"Money?"

"That's right. Something to bribe Sir Guard over there with. Cash *always* make everything go faster."

"How much do I need?"

"Hmm, let's see.....well, it'll work out for sure if we can get a thousand gald, I guess."

"A thousand gald!?"

Sorey involuntarily raised his hand to his chest. Of course, just touching his wallet wouldn't change the fact that it contained far, far less than a thousand gald any.

"I don't have that much...."

Sorey stammered. Rose then asked, "Okay, how about I buy something from you?"

"Something that's worth money....?"

His hand still on his chest, Sorey tilted his head thoughtfully. He reached back to the pouch hanging behind his waist just to see what was there, and something brushed his fingertips.

"How about.....this?"

Rose and Mikleo's eyes widened when they saw what he took out.

"Wow, that's unexpected! That's a great pipe~!"

Taking the pipe from him, Rose scrutinized it intently.

"It's been well cared for, hasn't it? It's old, but there are no scratches here at all. This thing has got to be worth more than a thousand gald, we've got to get it properly appraised...."

"No, it's okay! More importantly than that, please help!"

Sorey looked at Rose as if he was urging her to go.

"Nnnghh...okay, then!"

Lightly jumping up the stairs, she began to talk to the soldier guarding the back door.

Sorey watched her go, wistfully, and Mikleo watched him in silence.

The pipe Sorey just gave Rose was a farewell gift from Gramps, Sorey's foster parent. Though he had forbidden Sorey from coming down to the Lower World right to the end, he gave his favourite pipe to Mikleo and asked him to give it to Sorey as the latter was about to leave the village alone without telling them.

Rose gave them a wave a few moments later. Transaction successful, apparently.

"All right. Let's go, then!"

Mikleo said to Sorey with clearly intentional exuberance, giving him a push in the back.

"Mmm."

Sorey closed his eyes once, lightly. When he started walking forward again, he was looking straight ahead once more.

Alisha was standing next to the shrine's altar talking to Maltran, the head organizer of the festivities, when she noticed someone approaching. As she realized who the new guests were, her face melted into a smile like a flower coming into bloom.

"Sorey!"

Alisha immediately ran to him.

"Welcome to our city! Are you here for the Trial of the Sword!?"

There was a joy in her expression that wasn't just because she was happy to meet him again.

It was because she had been hoping and hoping, against all odds, that if there was anyone who could pull the holy sword out of the altar and become the Shepherd, it'd be someone like Sorey.

Sorey shook his head no, however.

"I'm here to tell you that you're in danger, Alisha."

"Huh.....?"

The princess inhaled sharply, and Sorey explained why he was there.

How Lunarre appeared in Elysia after Alisha's departure.

How a mysterious group of assassin appeared and told them to come here after they had followed Lunarre all the way to the capital.

After Sorey finished his story, Alisha's face darkened and she whispered, "I see..."

"What that mysterious group said is true. There are many people who do not think well of me. I cannot afford to be craven because of that, however."

"But, Alisha....."

"Thank you, Sorey. I am truly grateful for your concern."

The strength of Alisha's resolve rendered Sorey speechless.

His friend was already prepared to face danger by herself, right here before his eyes. There was nothing more to be said.

"The last ceremony of the festival, the lighting of the Flames of Purification, will begin soon. Please do stay and watch it to the end."

Alisha said, then headed to the altar with Maltran.

Mikleo had been watching everything quietly. Sorey leaned close to him and whispered.

"So that's the resolve of a statesman....."

"It's incredible...."

It made him sigh deeply without thinking.

"Well, we've came this far. Let's have a look at the Festival of the Holy Sword, shall we?"

All right, Mikleo agreed, and both of them also headed to the altar.

Peering at it from the side hall, both Sorey and Mikleo cried out all at once.

"Huh!?"

They weren't surprised at seeing the holy sword buried deep into the dais, the symbol of the altar.

They were surprised because a long-haired woman was sleeping on it, as if she had collapsed onto the dais and stayed there.

"Mikleo! That's.....is that the Lady of the Lake!?"

"Looks like it...."

"No one here can see her, that means she's got to be a Seraph!"

Sorey said excitedly. She was the first Seraphim he had met ever since leaving Elysia. And what's more, she was a person the legends told of.

"This is amazing! The legends are real!"

"Indeed. It must be that you can't pull that sword out unless you talk to her. So *that's* why normal people can't do it."

Mikleo agreed, then continued.

"She's sleeping really soundly with all this noise, though."

The altar was filled with the groans and shouts of participants trying to pull the sword out. Despite this entire racket, the Lady of the Lake was still sleeping soundly, comfortably. She was *something*, all right.

"Try talking to her, Mikleo!"

"Me!? But, it's...."

As Mikleo hesitated, the last challenger stepped down from the dais. In return, Maltran and Alisha appeared on top of the podium.

The voice of Maltran, Highland's 'Blue Valkyrie' rang through the room majestically.

"My people of Dame du Lac! This long-awaited Festival of the Holy Sword had been held off for many years, with our world in turmoil. This year, however, Her Highness Alisha has granted us her understanding and complete cooperation, and that is why we are able to hold the festivities today!"

Urged by Maltran, Alisha stepped forward.

"Strange things have been happening as of late. Cases of unnatural events, pestilences, bad harvests, and political instability with our neighbours. I believe, however, that it is precisely in times like this that we must not neglect our customs and traditions."

The gathered civilians all gave her a loud applause at the end of her dignified speech.

Alisha nodded at them in return and glanced at Maltran, who took a torch from a retainer at her side and waved it theatrically.

"Now come, Lady of the Lake! Come, and show us your power!"

She said, throwing the torch into the pyre stacked behind her.

The fire quickly consumed the stacked logs, turning into a roaring blaze.

The noise of the fire woke up the Lady of the Lake, who got up and corrected her posture as if she was embarrassed to be caught sleeping late, then looked around her as if she wasn't entirely sure what was going on. Alisha, of course, didn't notice her antics as she resumed her speech.

"Lady of the Lake! Purify our sorrows! Purify our sins with your inferno!"

She threw an offering into the fire, making it burn brighter and brighter. Lit up by the light, the Lady of the Lake turned her head downwards, a strangely somber expression on her face. Both Sorey and Mikleo looked at her.

"Why does she look so sad....?"

"Who knows....? Because no one ever talked to her even though she's been right there all along, maybe?"

"No one, huh....."

Sorey leaned forward and peered at her.

With the offering burnt, the rite of the Purification Fires was over. Maltran spoke up solemnly, heralding the end of the festivities.

"Hear me, people of Dame du Lac! Let us pray together! May this ceremony bring us peace and prosperity!"

Everyone cheered and clapped at the sound of her authoritative voice----however,

"Prayers!? To hell with your damned prayers!"

A man pushed his way through the crowd, approaching the front of the podium.

"Will praying bring back our jobs!? Can you answer me that!?"

The man shouted, glaring at Alisha.

"The entire reason the cabinet's withholding exclusive trade agreements for crops and weapons is because they're going to start a war, right!? Are you going to let us die like dogs!?"

His aggressiveness sent a wave of uncertainty rippling through the crowd of festival-goers, who had all been enjoying themselves before. Their faces darkened with anxiety, and conflicting whispers of 'but....' and 'he has a point....' began to spread from corner to corner.

"This isn't a very good turn of things...."

Mikleo frowned. Beside him, Sorey stared at the Lady of the Lake. She had been glaring at the sky ever since the man appeared, looking as if she was afraid of something.

"You're only doing this to justify the cabinet's ego! We're not falling for this farce!"

The man's shouts began to get to people's hearts, and murmurs in his support increasingly grew louder. A guard standing below the dais started, as if he sensed danger, and thrust the spear towards the man, bellowing.

"Silence! Do not disturb the festival!"

Though Alisha had been enduring this entire dialogue without a word, even she couldn't stay silent at that.

"Stop!"

Before she could even finish saying it, however, the soldier hit the man with his spear.

That was the start.

The crowd exploded in rage. Fueled by their discontent, they came rushing in, fists raised at the guards. Both sides soon joined the fray, turning the scene into utter pandemonium.

"This is bad.....!"

Sorey was about to run to protect Alisha when Mikleo noticed a guard running outside the shrine, mixing in with the insurgents. On a closer look, it was apparent that he was the guard who caused all this by attacking that man. Somehow, the citizens he was supposed to be fighting were helping him get away from the shrine.

"That's it! They've planned for this all along....all this violence!"

Sorey stopped mid-run at the sound of Mikleo's voice, then turned to Alisha and shouted.

"That guard!"

Alisha immediately spun toward the direction Sorey was pointing to and saw the guard just as he got away. Maltran, also looking at the same thing, narrowed her eyes icily.

"This is the minister's handiwork, no doubt about it."

"He'd go so far as to get citizens involved with their power games!? Is he so far gone!?"

Alisha bit her lips. An insurgent ran to her, fists raised.

"Is there truly no other choice....!?"

Alisha's face crumpled in anguish. Then, she turned to strike back at the insurgent.

As angry cries and screams filled the shrine, a voice reverberating with extraordinary purity rang through the halls.

"This cannot be! You cannot give yourself to aggression!"

It was none other than the Lady of the Lake, standing on the top of the podium. It looked like she was trying to talk to the citizens, but nobody could hear her voice.

And yet she continued.

"Please, calm your hearts! If this keeps up, a 'Hellion'....a Hellion would be born!"

Of course no one heard her, even if she had waited there alone for so long---or so it seemed.

"A Hellion!?"

The Lady of the Lake turned to Sorey and Mikleo at that. At the same time, an insurgent raised his face upwards and wailed as if he was a beast.

"What is that!?"

Alisha exclaimed in surprise. She turned to Sorey and Mikleo.

"This is....!"

It was right there in plain sight for Sorey and Mikleo. A swirling black fire, rising to engulf the man as he cried out, turning him from man to something else.

The man stopped shrieking then, spinning to face Sorey and Mikleo.

His face was no longer human, but a monster covered in bristling fur---a werewolf.

"Did he turn into a Hellion....."

Sorey gulped, staying on his guard.

Mikleo remained alert, too, as he looked around the shrine-turned-battlefield.

"The Malevolence is born from the wicked hearts of Man, and from the Malevolence the Hellions are born....more Hellions are going to appear if this isn't stopped!"

Sorey turned and cried out to the Lady of the Lake, standing there on the podium, her head hung low.

"Lady of the Lake!"

The Lady of the Lake started with a jolt. Then she turned to Sorey.

Alisha turned to look at him in surprise, too, but he paid it no mind.

"Lady of the Lake, can't you do something!?"

"You have the power of purification, right!?"

Mikleo shouted, too, and the Lady of the Lake widened her eyes as she saw him, as if she had frozen to the spot.

"Can.....both of you.....?"

Can both of you see me?

Sorey nodded at the question she wasn't able to articulate.

It was then that the werewolf made its move.

Rushing it with a speed far surpassing that of ordinary men, it brought its claws down on Sorey. He dodged, rolling, and its claws connected with the pyre instead.

With a terrible sound, the pyre collapsed. The fire roared, rising up into a conflagration, sparks flying everywhere. Tendrils of fire rose to the ceiling, burning darkly. The black fire soon spread to the ceremonial banners hanging down from the ceiling, filling the shrine with screams.

"Mikleo! Put out the fire!"

"You can say that dark fire is the same thing as the Hellion itself! I only know what to do with ordinary fires!"

Mikleo produced his staff and called forth a surge of water with the Celestial Artes, directed it on the roaring fire.

Standing in front of Mikleo and protecting him, Sorey looked around the room.

"It's getting worse, Mikleo....! The Hellions just keep popping up!"

"Huh.....!?"

Mikleo quickly scanned the room, too. Indeed, several more werewolves have appeared while both of them were preoccupied with the flames, rampaging through the shrine.

"It's not just the violence, the fear and the confusion here are also giving birth to the Malevolence.....!"

"If this keeps up.....!"

Sorey turned to the Lady of the Lake for help, but she only shook her head sorrowfully.

"The power of purification is not for me to use, but for the one who takes out this sword, one who becomes a blade for me to wield."

"Then!"

Sorey immediately leapt to the dais and reached for the sword embedded in it.

Both Mikleo and Alisha exclaimed in surprised at his sudden action.

"Sorey!?"

His fingertips were about to touch the blade when---

"Please wait!"

Looking up, he saw the Lady of the Lake standing before him with sorrow written on her face.

"To become my sword is to become my vessel, and there will be a fate that you must bear."

The black fire swell and rose. The heat was so strong that it felt like it could burn their throats off, but the Lady continued speaking as if it was nothing, quietly, as if she was admonishing herself.

"In return for wielding the power of purification and abilities far greater than that of the average man, there will be those who find you terrifying, and there will be times when their terror wears down your heart. And you will have to face terrible decisions, too, in order to save mankind and Seraphim alike from the Hellions...."

The Lady of the Lake stopped speaking then, clasping her hands together over her chest.

As if she was praying.

"It will a lonely battle, lonely beyond imagining."

The Lady cast her eyes downwards, brimming with the colors of sadness. Sorey looked straight ahead at her.

"Is that the fate of the Shepherd....? Are you saying that he has to accept *that* right now!?"

Mikleo objected as he battled with the flames. It was a fate revealed to them for the first time, and in terrible circumstances like this, too.

That's just like intimidation tactics!

"Yes. That's why....."

The Lady pressed her hands together more tightly, as if she could hear Mikleo's inner voice. Her fingertips were white.

Sorey stared at the Lady as she stood before him, hands clasped together.

He was being forced to make a terrible choice, but his heart was calm.

After all, he'd finally found it. Found the path he'd been searching for all this time.

"May I ask for your name?"

"Huh?"

The Lady of the Lake looked up to find Sorey's gentle gaze meeting hers.

"Oh, um, of course. It's Lailah."

"Lailah."

Sorey said, softly. A lonely name called by no one for who knew how many decades, he thought.

"I want to travel the world and visit all its ancient ruins. It's because I believe, you see, that somewhere in times long past lies the knowledge of how humans and Seraphim can live together in happiness...that's what I believe."

Both the black flames and the Hellions' onslaught were bearing down on them, but Lailah didn't move at all. She listened intently, so as not to miss a single word of Sorey's quiet voice.

"That's my dream. To find a way for humans and Seraphim to live happily together. If purifying Hellions means saving humans and Seraphim both, that's got to be connected to the dream I'm chasing somehow. Or at least I think so."

"Sorey.....you're....."

A light of anguish shivered through Mikleo's eyes. He looked at Sorey's face and could see an unyielding resolve there, as plain as day. It was easy to see for him. They had been together for that long, together ever since they were born.

Sorey took a deep breath. His throat felt like it was on fire.

His heart, however, was racing, the heat soaring up in his chest from finding a bridge to his dream at last was far stronger than any fire could be.

"I'll become the Shepherd! I'll give this body as your vessel, and I'll bear that destiny!"

As he made that dauntless declaration, Sorey grabbed the holy sword.

Lailah put her hands on top of his.

"I have long been waiting for this day. For a person with a heart so pure that the Malevolence cannot form."

She said, somehow sounding as if she was on the verge of tears, and light swelled from her hands. An intense pain shot through Sorey's left hand at the same time. Then Lailah gently released her hands from his, and on Sorey's hand was a mark of the dragon.

The mark of the 'Shepherd' shown in the Celestial Records.

"Now, Sorey-san! Take the sword!"

"All right!"

Sorey gripped the handle of the holy sword once more, gathered all his strength together, and pulled the sword out all once.

He closed his eyes. Something hot, something burning, was rushing from the blade to his very core. At the same time, he could feel the air around him shaking.

Everyone in the room turned to the epicenter of the strange tremor to see a young man taking the sword out of its altar : the birth of the Shepherd.

"Sorey, did you really.....!?"

Alisha stared, unable to take her eyes off him, forgetting how to blink.



"Haaaaah!"

Sorey swung the recovered sword at the black flames. At the same time, Lailah released a number of paper slips into the air as if in response to his attack. The paper slips turned to silver fire, disintegrating the black flames before they, too, quietly faded away.

"The fires are gone....!?"

"What the hell!? He just swung that sword....!"

"O Great Shepherd! My Lord! That person, he's the Lord Shepherd come!"

The crowd began to buzz with talk of Sorey the Shepherd, one person after another. They, too, were unable to take their eyes off him.

Sorey readied his sword once more, looking up at the pyre above the podium. His attack had removed most of the black fire, but it stilled roared in the big bonfire, burning, thundering.

He came to stand before it. Werewolves appeared out of nowhere, and even Hellion slimes no one had noticed before surrounded him, one after another.

"Let's do it, Sorey-san!"

"Yeah!"

In response to Lailah's voice, Sorey swung his sword in a great arc. Lailah's paper slips danced in the wind together with the sound of rending air.

As the paper slips turned into silvery white fire, they surrounded the werewolves rushing in to attack them.

"Gyaaa!"

The werewolves writhed in pain, falling to the ground and returning to human form.

"This is the power of purification...."

"Yes. My fire can purify a 'Hellion' and free the person engulfed by the Malevolence."

"Malevolence....I see. So there's just that much 'malevolence' tainting this world, then."

"Huh....?"

Lailah asked as she aimed for a slime sneaking behind their backs with silvery fire.

"Sorey-san, don't tell me that you can already see the Malevolence!?"

"Yeah....I think so. Is it that thing looking like a black fog hanging here and there?"

Lailah was speechless to hear his answer. Sorey could see the Malevolence, indeed.

Even if he had become the vessel and everything, it was hard to believe that he could get used to it enough to see the Malevolence so quickly.

"Sorey-san, if it's you....!"

"Huh?"

Just as Sorey turned to the sound of Lailah's voice.

Raaaaaaaaaaaahh!!

The black flame in the pyre shook as if it was alive and with a mind of its own, surging forth to engulf Sorey.

".....!!"

"Sorey-san!"

Sorey couldn't breathe in the midst of the searing flames, and he fell to his knees. Lailah immediately cast a healing spell on him, but he still couldn't stop heaving.

To make matters worse, the slimes had also entered the fire, heading straight on top of Sorey. They didn't like the heat any more than he did, it seemed.

"Nnnngh! I'm not going to sit here and let you kill me!"

Using the sword as leverage, Sorey tried to stand up. Lailah whispered to him.

"Sorey-san, it's time to show them the true power of the Shepherd."

"The true power of....."

"I shall give you my true name."

Lailah softly whispered her true name into his ears.

"That's.....your....."

"Please say that name. And then draw all the flow of power into yourself, envelop your body with it. That's the true power of those who call themselves Shepherds!"

"All right! I'll give it a try!"

Using every ounce of strength he had left, Sorey stood up, held his sword high and cried.

"Foes Maema!!"

The mark of the dragon appeared on Sorey's left hand again in that instant, and the same mark also glowed on Lailah's left hand. Her body turned into a wisp of light that soon grew to encompass Sorey.

Sorey's body twitched in this shining light. As if following its unspoken guidance, a change was occurring in him, too. His light brown hair turned gold, a color like that of light itself, growing out behind him like a surge of water that couldn't be contained. His blue clothes turned white, embroidered with gold, his earrings and hair ornament dyed with a red reminiscent of Lailah's fire.

As the light surrounding him finally faded, his eyes slowly opened.

Those eyes, once shining with the green of verdant forests, now burned with the red of blazing fire.

"This is....!?"

In the midst of flames, Sorey looked at himself on impulse, tugging at his own long hair.

"This is called 'Armitization!'"

Lailah's voice rang from inside his head.

"Now, Sorey-san! Use the fire of purification!"

"All right! Let's purify everything at once!"

Sorey lifted his sword. What was once the holy sword had turned into a massive blade, bigger than the entire length of his body.

"Let's go, Lailah!"

"Let's go!"

Sorey swung at the slimes as they readied to attack, as well as the fire surrounding him.

Raaaaaaaarr!!

The pyre sundered with a loud roar. Cleaved in half, the fire no longer rose up, quietly

fading away. All the flames faded away from the shrine, and Sorey quietly landed on the floor.

"Sorey.....!"

Mikleo called him, the joy in his voice strangely unconcealed. Sorey returned it with a smile.

"Sorey....have you really.....?"

Alisha staggered towards him. The shrine was quiet, as if someone had doused the entire crowd with water.

"Mmm. I've become the Shepherd."

Sorey's answer was short, but the quiet shrine erupted into cheers at it, drowning out everything else.

For the first time in decades, a Shepherd was born.