14

KEI SAZANE

Illustration By

Ao Nekonabe



Our Last CRUSADE

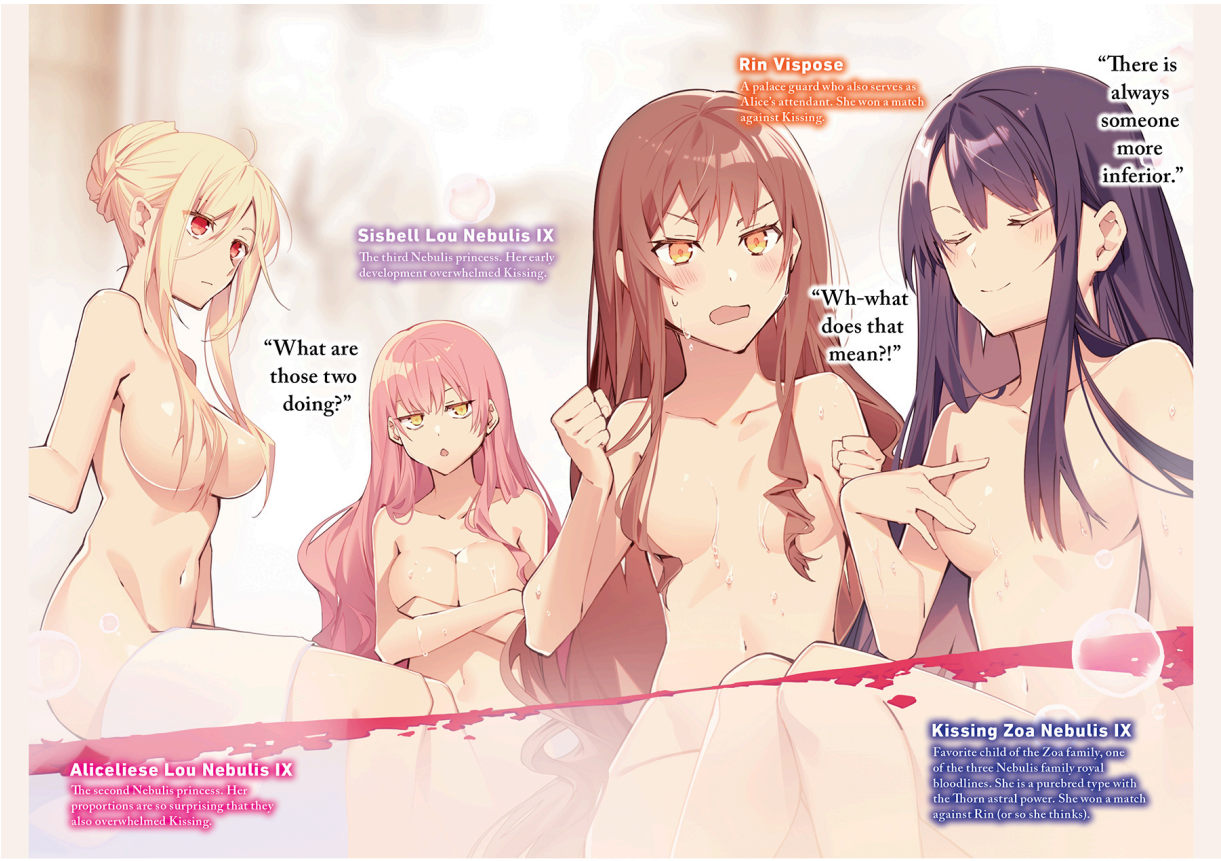
OR THE RISE OF A New World

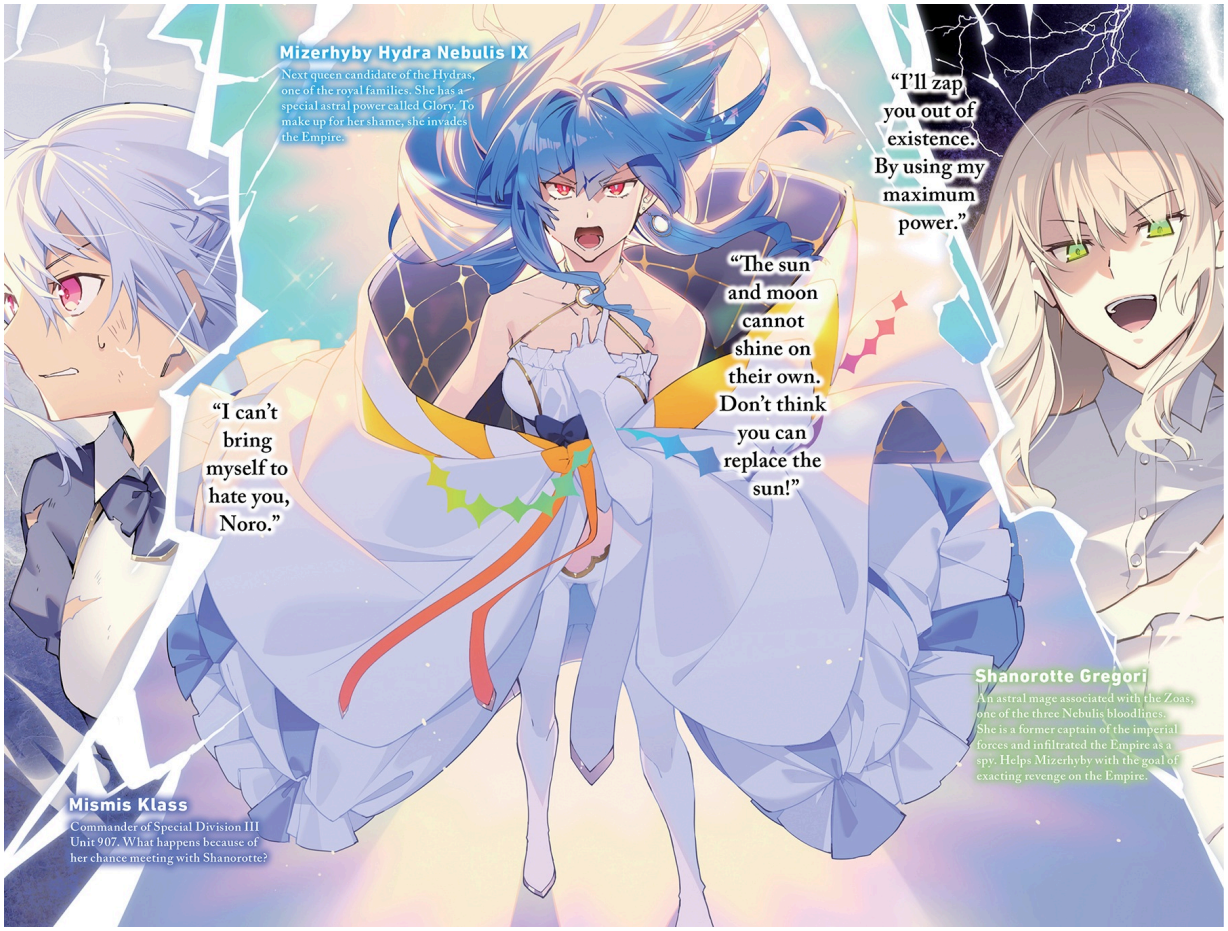
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Our Last
CRUSADE
OR THE RISE OF A
New World




Rin Vispose
A palace guard who also serves as Alice's attendant. She won a match against Kissing.
"There is always someone more inferior."
Sisbell Lou Nebulis IX
The third Nebulis princess. Her early development overwhelmed Kissing.
"Wh-what does that mean?!"
"What are those two doing?"
Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX
The second Nebulis princess. Her proportions are so surprising that they also overwhelmed Kissing.
Kissing Zoa Nebulis IX
Favorite child of the Zoa family, one of the three Nebulis family royal bloodlines. She is a purebred type with the Thorn astral power. She won a match against Rin (or so she thinks).


Mizerhyby Hydra Nebulis IX
Next queen candidate of the Hydras, one of the royal families. She has a special astral power called Glory. To make up for her shame, she invades the Empire.
"I'll zap you out of existence. By using my maximum power."
"The sun and moon cannot shine on their own. Don't think you can replace the sun!"
"I can't bring myself to hate you, Noro."
Shanorotte Gregori
An astral mage associated with the Zoas, one of the three Nebulis bloodlines. She is a former captain of the imperial forces and infiltrated the Empire as a spy. Helps Mizerhyby with the goal of exacting revenge on the Empire.
Mismis Klass
Commander of Special Division III Unit 907. What happens because of her chance meeting with Shanorotte?

Our Last CRUSADE OR THE RISE OF A New World

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KEI SAZANE
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YEN ON
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So Se ris, Ec wision nes ria feo.
For whom do you shine?

elmei xel lihit Ec flow. Uhw kis lin song-pilis flow.
All the stars of this world seek your light.
Your light more noble than anything in the world.

Shie-la So nec kfen. Fert Ez ema siole pile..
So do not be mistaken, you of true pride.

Utopia Powered by Machines

THE HEAVENLY EMPIRE



Iska

Member of Unit 907—Special Defense for Humankind, Third Division. Used to be the youngest soldier who ever reached the highest rank in the military, the Saint Disciples. Stripped of his title for helping a witch break out of prison. Wields a black astral sword to intercept astral power and its white counterpart to reproduce the last attack obstructed by its pair. An honest swordsman fighting for peace.



Mismis Klass

The commander of Unit 907. Baby-faced and often mistaken for a child, but actually a legal adult. Klutzy but responsible. Trusts her subordinates. Became a witch after plunging into a vortex.



Jhin Syulargun

The sniper of Unit 907. Prides himself on his deadly aim. Can't seem to shake off Iska, since they trained under the same mentor. Cool and sarcastic, though he has a soft spot for his buddies.



Nene Alkastone

Chief mechanic of Unit 907. Weapon-making genius. Mastered operation of a satellite that releases armor-piercing shots from a high altitude. Thinks of Iska as her older brother. Wide-eyed and loveable.



Risya In Empire

Saint Disciple of the fifth seat. Genius-of-all-trades. A beautiful woman often seen in a suit and glasses with dark green frames. Likes Mismis, her former classmate.



Paradise of Witches

THE NEBULIS SOVEREIGNTY



Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX

Second-born princess of Nebulis. Leading candidate for the next queen. Strongest astral mage, who attacks with ice. Feared by the Empire as the Ice Calamity Witch. Hates all the backstabbing happening in the Sovereignty. Enraptured by fair fights against Iska, an enemy swordsman she met on the battlefield.

Rin Vispose

Alice's attendant. An astral mage controlling earth. Maid uniform conceals weapons for assassination. Skilled at deadly espionage. Hard to read her expressions, but has an inferiority complex about her chest.



Sisbell Lou Nebulis IX

Youngest princess of Nebulis. Aliceliese's little sister. Possesses Illumination, which reproduces footage of past events. Saved by Iska when she was captured in the Empire.





Lord Mask On

A member of the House of Zoa, which directly competes with the princesses for the throne. A conspirator whose true motives are unclear.



Kissing Zoa Nebulis

A powerful astral mage. Called the favorite child of the Zoa. Possesses astral power of thorns.



Mizerhyby Hydra Nebulis IX

Queen candidate of the Hydra. Possesses the special astral power of Glory.

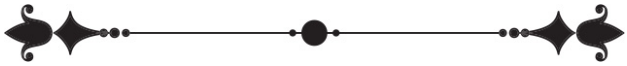


Elletear Lou Nebulis IX

Eldest princess of Nebulis. Focused on traveling abroad. Often absent from

the palace.

PROLOGUE 1



Called the Cowardly Princess

"Elletear will evolve into a true witch. Into a being no one can stop."

"Now, how do we fight her? We only have one option."

"The Planetary Calamity is a threat to all creatures. She just happened to have a higher resistance to it than others. So all we have to do is pour more power into her than she can resist."

"That's the undiluted solution."

They were at the northern extremities of the continent.

The gigantic cavern leading to the planet's core known as the Gregorio was right before their eyes.

"Urgh?!"

The witch's screams echoed throughout the space.

The mad scientist Kelvina from the Empire had given Talisman a small ampoule of undiluted solution.

That flipped the tables on the battle.

"It's an overdose. And now, my dear Elletear, because you have power you cannot possibly adapt to, it will run rampant within your body. The calamity isn't your friend, Elletear, my dear."

Talisman, the patriarch of the Hydra family, tossed the empty syringe aside.

The witch before him was crumbling as she lost her form.

She writhed on the ground as her limbs tore and evaporated into a black mist. The black mist was her true form as a witch.

"Hgh!"

The black mist began to form a current midair, whirling round and round into a vortex.

It formed something like a cocoon. At that moment, Elletear didn't even have the power to keep her human form. She was using all she had to preserve her very existence.

It was either disappear or fight to survive.

"You won't be able to withstand it."

Talisman's words seemed to pierce her, as though attempting to crush any last will she had to struggle.

Then he spoke softly. "The calamity's undiluted power will destroy even you."

"No..." In that moment, the sound Elletear made as she formed into a pitch-black cocoon wasn't a cry but a howl. **"Not...alone!"**

Fwoosh.

An undulation traveled through the dark cocoon and a long, thin, black tentacle shot out from it. It grasped Talisman by the neck and coiled around him.

"What?!"

"I'd like an escort. Let's go down together!"

Talisman had been caught.

Then he was dragged into the eddying black cocoon.

From within the cocoon, the head of house and the witch both screamed as though their worlds were ending.

As she watched the events transpire, Princess Mizerhyby of the Hydra forgot to even breathe.

"Uncle…?!"

What had happened to the head of the family?

What had happened in Elletear's cocoon? What in the world had occurred inside of it?

"Vichyssoise!"

"I wouldn't know either, Princess."

Behind her was the witch Vichyssoise. The witch's hair was red as rubies but opaque, and her body was transparent like glass. In other words, she was a monster.

She had also been turned into a witch through the power of the calamity, but even she had no idea what had just transpired.

"But I think our leader won. Even a monster like Elletear wouldn't be able to withstand being injected with undiluted power from the calamity. It should beat her, and she'll disappear…"

But then at that moment, they heard a cry.

The echo of two death throes.

The cocoon split.

As it cracked in half like an egg, it turned into a current of black vapor that dissipated into the air.

As the mist cleared, they saw Elletear collapsed face down on the ground. Talisman stood with his back to them.

The witch had fallen.

The head of the house was still standing.

"You dreadful man…"

Elletear's voice was raspy. She was barely managing to keep her human form; small pieces of her arms and legs were breaking away, turning into wisps of smoke.

She was breaking apart.

To anyone's eyes, it was clear these were her last moments.

"This was why…I didn't want to fight you…"

She began to crawl along the ground, slowly, ever so slowly. She was moving away from them.

Did she mean to escape?

The vortex was ahead of her. If she reached the yawning crater and pitched herself in, she would both escape and reach the planet's

core. However…

"Uncle…?" Mizerhyby was more concerned for Talisman, the head of her family.

He hadn't turned around.

Why?

Elletear continued to drag herself along the ground. If Mizerhyby simply walked to her and grabbed her by the neck, it would be so easy to end her.

"How truly unfortunate." Elletear abruptly turned to look at Mizerhyby.

She was a monster without eyes, a nose, or a mouth.

It was strange that Mizerhyby even knew the monster was looking at her. The strange, frightful sensation that assaulted the Hydra princess caused her to jump back with a cry.

"Lord Talisman…your misfortune was that you never found anyone who could match your talent. Had there been two of you here, I would have undoubtedly perished. For all this time, you must have been disappointed that this spineless princess was your heir."

"Huh!"

"You were a brave and wise head of house. On the other hand, this princess is too afraid to even finish me off."

She crawled forward, continuing on and on until she had reached the edge of the vortex.

The Gregorio.

This was the gigantic hole the Hydra had once discovered, which led to the planet's core.

"Ah-ha! Ah-ha-ha! This is the calamity's power…amazing. If I make contact with its primary form at the center of the planet, I'll gain even greater power!"

"Stop…!" Mizerhyby yelled, having regained her spirit.

The witch was on the verge of death. This was her one chance to stop Elletear.

"Stand up, Vichyssoise! Get that monster—"

"Sit."

Thump…

Mizerhyby almost lost consciousness for a moment as she felt something jab and pierce into her side.

"Ah!"

As she regained her senses, her knees buckled beneath her, and she knelt on the ground.

Deep in her throat, she felt the urge to vomit.

"You…?!"

As her vision blurred, she saw a red-haired man looking down at her. He wore a coat that was integrated with armor and a heavy two-handed sword. Mizerhyby only knew of one person who matched such a description. He was an Imperial.

"Saint Disciple Joheim…"

She recognized him.

That was because of the intelligence on the Empire that Elletear had offered to the Hydra. Among the top secret files had been the list of Saint Disciples. Then she made the connection.

……How cunning.

……So Elletear gave us that information on the Saint Disciples for when this time came!

He was the Saint Disciple of the first seat, Joheim.

This man had another identity outside of the Empire.

……Elletear's faithful dog!

……She kept him a secret until the very last moment!

She couldn't yell or say a word.

Vichyssoise couldn't make any sudden moves either because of Mizerhyby's position.

"The head of the Hydra truly was amazing."

Joheim picked Elletear up with one arm. "It was a close fight, just like we anticipated."

"I'm…so sorry, Joheim. I made you go through so much trouble for my sake."

The witch's voice was faint.

It was a strange scene. Elletear, the merciless witch of unmatchable power, was apologetic toward Joheim. She even seemed to show a tender side of herself to him.

She was like a ferocious beast who was kind only to her sole caretaker.

What relationship could these two have?

"We're going down."

After saying only that, Joheim threw himself into the gigantic hole. He kept Elletear cradled in his arm. They fell deep, deep, deep into the Gregorio vortex. They would fall for tens of thousands of meters toward the planet's core.

"Huh! They got away…"

They were gone.

Mizerhyby bit the inside of her cheek as she saw the truth before her.

The Hydra's plans were ruined. They had been planning to reach the calamity before Elletear could. This was the worst thing that could have possibly happened.

"Uncle! What do we do now?!"

"…"

"If Elletear reaches the calamity, we have no idea how much more she might evolve! At this rate… Uncle?"

Her uncle hadn't responded. He simply stood there, his back to her.

This was strange.

Why? Why hadn't he said a word? The situation was becoming more and more disquieting. Mizerhyby and Vichyssoise shared a look.

"I touched it."

The man finally spoke. Though he still would not turn to face them, his voice had its usual mirth.

"I made contact with the greatest knowledge and power in this world."

"Uncle…?"

What was he saying?

Though her uncle rarely spoke in such a cryptic way, it wasn't the

time to analyze his every word. Mizerhyby was simply thankful he had come to his senses.

"Uncle! I-I'm glad you're all right. Are you hurt…?"

"Hurt? Of course I wouldn't be hurt. And I wouldn't care if I had been."

"Y-yes, of course! Then we must hurry to—"

"After all…"

The man turned around.

The left side of his face was covered in black fibers and his eye was twice its usual size.

"I have attained it!"

"Huh?!"

She screamed. A cry of shock, grief, pity, and anger broke from Mizerhyby's throat.

What was that?

What had the head of the family turned into?

"That…!"

Vichyssoise pointed at Talisman's neck, which had been impaled with Elletear's pitch-black proboscis.

"It was Elletear?! Of course…she couldn't have handled the power of the calamity on her own. So she injected the rest into him!"

She had shared the poison with him.

That was why she had said she would take him down with her. That was why Elletear had dragged him into her cocoon.

She had forced the power of the calamity onto him.

"Uncle!"

But her uncle was still standing before her eyes, which was reassuring.

Though half his face had been transformed.

"Uncle, are you in your right mind…? Your face!"

"You have nothing to worry about, Mizy."

He laughed mirthfully and shrugged.

He acted the part of a gentleman as if nothing had changed. At

first Mizerhyby felt relieved—until fear froze her heart.

"I…I-I'm…"

His face swiveled. His left eye began to wriggle as though it were an entirely separate organism.

The calamity had started to take control of him.

"Princess!" Vichyssoise's voice was tight as she cried out. "That's not the head of family anymore! He'll capture both of us!"

"It can't be!"

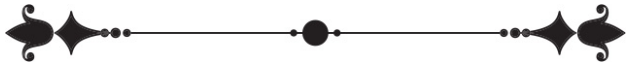
"Just hurry! He's calm now, but if he starts to rampage, we'll be no match for him!"

"Elleteeeeeear!" Mizerhyby bit her lip and cried out the name of the witch who had caused this tragedy. "You'll see! I'll get back at you for this disgrace!"

The head of their family had been transformed into something else.

As she looked at the thing that had once been her uncle, the princess of the Hydra clamped down on her lip until she drew blood.

CHAPTER 1



The House of Lou Is Unfair

1

The mechanical utopia, the Empire, laid on the southern side of the continent.

To the north was the witch's paradise, the Nebulis Sovereignty.

The two superpowers divided the world into north and south.

Between them were the neutral cities which didn't affiliate themselves with either nation, but rather served as a buffer in between.

The Empire, the Sovereignty, and the neutral cities. Most of the land inhabited by humans existed within one of those three areas. Everyone knew that.

However…

There was an unexplored territory so polluted with poisons that no humans could settle in the place.

This was Katalisk.

Not a single insect or scrap of vegetation survived in this land of deadly temperatures and toxic, bubbling waste.

But why did poisons bubble to the planet's surface in Katalisk? Those who had learned the truth throughout all of history could be counted on a single hand.

But now…

Iska knew the secret of how Katalisk had been created.

"Look, Sisbell…"

"This is all I can take!"

The road stretched into the horizon.

As their large vehicle drove through the gray wilderness, Sisbell suddenly yelled from the front passenger seat. That had also been the moment Iska had attempted to speak to her.

"That gas that was bubbling up everywhere! I already found the smell of that vile stuff so offensive—like raw sewage—that I could hardly stand it! But I cannot accept the fact that such malodorous stuff is covering my entire body!"

"Quiet," Jhin muttered from the back seat. "We've gotta keep the windows up for the AC. That means your stupid voice echoes in the car."

"I'll have you know that I have a voice as beautiful as birdsong!"

"Pretty sure that little bird ran off the moment it smelled that stuff on you."

"……What?!"

Sisbell turned around, no longer able to stand it. Her charming face had instantly turned a shade of beet red.

"I am not smelly! It's not my fault! It's the mud and gas that's clinging to my hair and clothes!"

"See, you've got it. That offensive odor *is* coming from you."

"It's not me!" Sisbell huffed after speaking so quickly, then she let out a strangled cry because of the odor from her clothes. "This is awful… No, it's horrid!"

She leaned all the way back in her seat.

"I cannot believe it… It was a red swamp spewing deadly gas without a single insect or bird in sight. The land was dead. If the Planetary Calamity caused that, do you mean to say Elletear was tempted by that power…?"

Sisbell looked into the car's rearview mirror.

Several large vehicles traveled behind theirs. Inside them were

Sisbell's older sister Alice, her servant, Rin, and also Kissing from the House of Zoa.

Yes.

All of them had learned the truth.

"I understand why the Lord told us to go here now…"

In the middle of the back seat, Commander Mismis spoke to herself.

Before they had come to this place, Lord Yunmelngen, the ruler of the Empire, had told them this:

That the center of the planet used to be the home of the astral powers, until a foreign entity sent it into chaos.

That it deserved its name—the World Enemy.

That this calamity transforms humans and astral powers into grotesque forms we cannot fathom.

The calamity remade beings.

The Lord had turned into a beastperson with silver fur.

The princess had become a witch whose form was a shadowy mass.

Astral power had turned into a twisted thing called an eidos.

And it had turned the planet itself into a place that even a single living thing couldn't inhabit. It had all started here, in the contaminated land of Katalisk.

"We can't pretend not to know what's up now," Jhin muttered.

"I never intended to turn away from the issue." Sisbell bit her lip from irritation as she replied. "As soon as I learned that Elletear herself committed such a grave crime against the Sovereignty, it became my duty as her little sister to stop her."

"Uh-huh, good luck."

"Excuse me?! Isn't this where you tell me you'll do everything in your power to help?!"

"We've each got our own motivations."

Jhin signaled with his eyes. Iska, who also sat in the back seat, was likely the only one who had noticed.

"Most people would be motivated just because we can't let the calamity roam free. It's fine if your goal is to stop your sister, too. And also…right. There's Iska, who got the astral swords from our teacher."

Jhin had signaled because of the black and white swords at Iska's waist.

Here, in Katalisk, the Astrals had told them how the astral swords had been created.

"There is hope."

"If you gather all the abilities of the astral powers together."

These crystals were the accumulation of all astral powers. Once they had all of them, they would finally be able to challenge the calamity that threatened the planet.

"At any rate… Huh?" Jhin stopped talking.

The comm at the driver's seat had let out a shrill ring.

"Think it's Miss Saint Disciple behind us? Hey, Nene," Jhin said.

"This is the first vehicle," Nene answered the comm.

They got an answer.

"This is the third vehicle."

"Uh, Miss Rin?"

"That's right. I, Lady Alice's faithful and flawless servant, have a matter of great importance to convey. It concerns Lady Alice, of course."

"Something important? Um, what is it?" Nene said before she could even think about it.

In the backseat, Commander Mismis was suddenly serious as well, and Sisbell uttered, "Something happened to Alice?" while looking on with curiosity.

"We plan to return to the Empire. While we from the Sovereignty have some reservations over this use of the word *returning* when applied to the Empire…there is a more pressing concern. In order to return, we must use one of the Imperial forces' aircrafts, which we will be on board for

nearly a dozen hours."

"But we had to do that on the way here, too," Iska said into the comm. "What's the issue?"

"Imperial swordsman, use your peace-addled brain to consider the issues."

"I'm actually asking because I don't know. There's no reason to make me out to be a buffoon!"

"My word… There was no issue when we were coming here, but there is a large one in returning. I cannot believe you do not see it." Rin let out an exasperated sigh.

Several seconds passed before Sisbell clapped her hands together in realization. "Oh! It's because we smell, isn't it, Rin?!"

"Indeed, Lady Sisbell. Yes, how can we board a transport while covered in this offensive odor? Do you understand, Imperial swordsman?!"

"Uh… Not really. I mean, I don't like being smelly either, but we can cleanse ourselves in the Imperial capital—"

"Then it will be too late!" Rin's voice was full of vigor. **"If we board the transport smelling like this, the other Imperial soldiers will assume the Nebulis Sovereignty's princesses all stink! They'll think we're savages. That we're witches! They'll surely disparage us!"**

"Uh… Imperial soldiers are pretty used to stink."

Nene and Commander Mismis seemed perfectly fine with the smell.

Bogs and moors reeked. All Imperial soldiers had experienced situations in which they spent days without showers or running water in such places.

"No, this will not do! I will not have my lady called a stinky witch!"

"R-Rin, please?!" Alice's quiet voice came over the comm.

It seemed Alice could no longer just stand by and watch. Iska heard her whispering something to Rin.

"It's not as though…I care what the other Imperial soldiers think, as long as it's not Iska…"

"You are the one who wanted to take a bath, Lady Alice!

And please do not make the Imperial swordsman out to be special like it's second nature to you!"

"Don't yell that!"

"In any case...!" Rin's loud voice reverberated throughout the car and echoed against the closed windows. **"Until we wash off this stench, Lady Alice will not ride any Imperial transport!"**

2

Neutral city, the Volcanic City, also known as the Shio Crescent.

Communal baths.

A scent wafted on the steam that floated through the air. As over ten bathers sank into the milky white water, more was poured into the tub, keeping it filled to the brim.

"Ahhh! I've waited so long for this bath. Good-bye, stink!" Sisbell's voice was full of joy as she looked at the bath from the changing room. "Even as we were coming here, I couldn't stand the walk along the main road. Why, the tourists all gave us dirty looks and a child we passed put the nail in the coffin when he said we smelled!"

Sisbell had already stripped to her underwear.

She had given her soiled, stinky clothing to the cleaning service to deal with while she planned to bathe.

"Ugh, why bother?"

On the other hand, a certain soldier sat cross-legged in a corner of the changing room.

She was Mei, the Saint Disciple of the third seat.

She was there to guard the four Sovereignty citizens who insisted on having a bath—Alice, Sisbell, Rin, and Kissing. Mei herself still wore her soiled clothes.

"A bath every other month should be plenty. And your clothes are barely even dirty."

"Two months?!"

Alice and Rin widened their eyes when they heard Mei's grumbling.

"Did you hear that, Rin? That soldier Mei said that she…"

"Yes, Lady Alice. Imperial soldiers truly are savages. No, they're a nation of Neanderthals. I believe even wild elephants take baths more frequently…"

"Have you really got the time to waste talking?"

Mei carried a stopwatch in her hand.

"We've got one hour and thirty-seven minutes until the transport takes off. You've gotta take a shower, change, and finish eating all in that time, so hurry up. I hate baths."

"Then me first!" Sisbell was the first to take off.

She quickly stripped off her underwear and made a beeline for the bath.

"Oh, Sisbell… Don't run like that! Think of the other customers!"

"There's no need to worry, Lady Alice. The moment we entered, the other bathers caught a whiff of our stench and ran. We have the entire place to ourselves."

Rin helped Alice remove her clothes.

They wrapped themselves in bath towels once they were done, but one from their group simply stood in the changing room stock-still. The black-haired girl was nearly left behind.

"…"

She was Kissing, the Zoa princess.

She was in her underwear after having left her clothes to the cleaning service, but all she did was stand and stare into space.

"What's wrong? Do you not like baths?" Alice asked when she noticed Kissing.

Some people hated baths as a rule, like Mei behind them. Perhaps Kissing was a fellow bath-hater?

"Huh?! No, Lady Alice, I do believe…" Rin's eyes opened wide.

She signaled to Alice with her eyes, then bowed before the Zoa princess.

"Lady Kissing, if it pleases you, would you like help preparing for your bath?"

No. She hadn't hated baths after all.

Kissing had been so sheltered and pampered in the Zoa household that she had never even had to dress herself.

"…Yes." Kissing nodded.

Rin skillfully helped her out of her remaining garments and wrapped a towel around her.

"There, you are ready now."

"…"

"Lady Kissing?"

The Zoa princess still refused to move.

For whatever reason, while still wrapped in her bath towel, she stared right at Alice and refused to budge.

"What's wrong?"

"…"

When Alice asked that, Kissing looked at Alice's breasts and narrowed her eyes.

The two round mounds pushed her towel up. The deep, deep valley between them was exposed, as the towel failed to hide her entire bosom.

"Adult…" was all that Kissing said.

"Wha—?!" Alice's face instantly turned bright red. "Wh-wh-what are you suddenly talking about?!"

She couldn't hide her discomposure after hearing such an unexpected response from Kissing. Alice tried to hide her cleavage with her hands.

"How do you get them to become that big?"

"I—I have no idea!"

Alice was aware she was an early bloomer. She had similar exchanges with Rin on a regular basis, after all, but she simply couldn't help her embarrassment when someone else said the same.

"And even your little sister…" Kissing turned to the bath.

Beyond the glass, Sisbell was happily taking a shower.

"It's not fair…that even she has matured so early, even if it's only her body…"

They caught glimpses of her through the steam. Though Sisbell had a youthful face, the rest of her body had begun to blossom, and they could clearly see she had the curve of a bosom.

"And yet…"

In contrast, Kissing was flat as a board. In other words, she still

hadn’t hit puberty.

As Kissing had been allowed few opportunities to see other girls her age, Alice and Sisbell’s development had come as a shock.

“House Lou has formidable weapons… I cannot win against them yet…”

However, Kissing was a princess.

She hadn’t been trained to be so weak that she would allow this to dampen her spirits.

“*You cannot give up.*”

“*Rather than fight an opponent you have no hope of winning against, find one you have a solid chance of defeating.*”

This was what Lord Mask had taught her.

In that moment, Kissing attempted to faithfully put her uncle’s words into practice.

“…”

She looked to the side, away from Alice, to where Rin stood.

“Hmm? What is the matter, Lady Kissing?”

“Found one.” Kissing looked as serious as could be as she answered.

She stared with such intensity at Rin’s breasts, hidden by the bath towel, that her gaze was likely to bore a hole right through them. Rin’s bosom was just as flat as hers.

“There is always someone more inferior,” Kissing said.

“Wh-what does that mean?!” Rin’s voice cracked.

Kissing turned to the side to avoid Rin’s gaze.

“I’m afraid that even I have more than you, Lady Kissing!”

“Ha…”

“Did you laugh?! Guh…all right then! I accept your challenge!”

Two bath towels fluttered into the air. Rin and Kissing had not a scrap of clothing between them as they faced off in the neutral city’s bathhouse.

“Sisbell, what are those two doing?”

“I haven’t the slightest clue. Perhaps they’re exercising and

enjoying their time together?”

Alice and Sisbell both were soaking in the bath. Alas, the two sisters had no idea that Rin and Kissing had challenged each other to a duel of busts.

“Haah… Haah…”

Their shoulders heaved. And then…

“You put up a fair fight, Lady Kissing!”

“You as well!”

As a result, they both came to a mutual understanding. In their heroic battle of life and death, they found that they were alike.

“Lady Kissing, I believe we can call ourselves rivals *and* comrades!”

“Rin!”

It had been a close match indeed.

After their strenuous duel, the two clasped hands.

“We’ll win together someday against those Lou.”

“Yes! Lady Alice and Lady Sisbell are simply early bloomers. We’re not the problem. In one or two years, we will also grow up and catch up to them.”

“Yes. There is still hope for the future.”

Kissing had wrapped the towel back around her chest and looked deeply moved.

“We’re still developing. Once we grow taller and become adults, they’ll naturally grow in.”

“Yes! And in order to—”

At that moment, the door from the bath to the changing room slid open.

“Whew… I hate being stinky.”

Beyond the steam, they saw the hazy silhouette of a small figure.

Rin and Kissing had turned around in reaction and saw an Imperial soldier holding a towel. It was Commander Mismis, and her voluptuous body was on full display.

Unfortunately, they saw her.

“Uhhh?!” Kissing let out a strangled scream.

Rin also lurched back as though someone had punched her. “Guh!” she cried out.

“What? What happened to you two?”

“Ah…uh …urgh …”

Kissing, unable to hide her fear and anguish, pointed a quivering finger at Mismis. She was pointing directly at the commander’s heaving chest.

Though her face made her look Kissing’s age, the breasts below her head were so large, they would have overflowed from her hands had she tried to hide them.

Her body was downright sensuous.

“Uh? Is there something on me?”

However, Mismis had no idea what was happening. Just as Alice and Sisbell had had no idea what Rin and Kissing’s hangup had been, Mismis couldn’t understand why they were so distressed.

“Oh, Miss Kissing, why don’t you let me wash your back for—”

“Huh! Get away!”

When Mismis attempted to approach her, Kissing couldn’t hide her fear.

Though she was short in stature and her face looked youthful, Mismis’s body was overwhelmingly voluptuous and erotic. Kissing had thought that Mismis’s bosom looked rather large when the commander had been wearing clothes, but she hadn’t imagined that Mismis’s breasts were like this under all that fabric.

She’d never imagined that Mismis’s clothes could make the commander look smaller than she actually was.

“What destructive force…Imperial soldiers have…”

“What?”

“Our opponent has revealed she has even greater assets than expected after removing her armor… Rin, what do we do?”

“We must retreat, Lady Kissing.”

Kissing had been incredibly serious as she spoke.

Rin moved forward as though to protect Kissing and spoke between her gritted teeth.

“Unfortunately, the enemy’s assets far surpass ours. We have no chance of winning even if we fight here… We should make a valiant retreat!”

“……Yes. We have no chances of winning against such massive

assets…!”

“What are you both talking about?!”

She had no idea.

Mismis felt entirely lost as Rin and Kissing fervently whispered to each other.

3

The Lord’s offices.

This was the oldest structure in the capital. It was of unique construction, comprising five buildings.

On the topmost floor were the Lord’s chambers.

“Seriously… I can’t believe you delayed your departure by a whole two hours just to take a bath at a neutral city. When Risya reported that back, I doubted my own ears.”

The silvery beastperson propped an elbow against the legless chair they sat in.

Lord Yunmelngen gleefully looked down on the collected faces present.

“It was such a disrespectful, offhand request that I had to allow it. I’m just glad you’re all clean as a result. I wouldn’t want to smell all of you, either.”

There was Iska’s unit, the 907. Then there were the guests from the Sovereignty: Princess Aliceliese, Princess Sisbell, and the servant Rin. Princess Kissing from the Sovereignty was present as well, though she was there after surrendering to the Empire with her handler, the Saint Disciple Mei. With Risya, there were ten of them present altogether.

“Your faces have started to become familiar to me. Well then, what do we start with…? First, the Black Steel’s Successor.”

“Huh?!”

When the beast’s eyes landed on him, Iska’s lips pressed together slightly.

“First, let’s hear from you.”

“Yes, to report back on Katalisk—”

“Not that.”

The Lord waved a hand dismissively.

“You heard about the astral swords from the Astrals themselves. I can see from your face. So, what say you? Are you prepared to keep wielding those swords?”

“…”

When he thought about it, the role they were asking him to play had changed since he had first accepted the swords.

……I wanted peace between the Empire and the Sovereignty.

……That hasn’t changed. Not even now.

That was why he needed the astral swords.

He’d wanted to capture a purebred type from the Sovereignty and use that to force everyone into peace talks. In other words, he had thought of the astral swords as weapons that were a means to achieving peace.

“Those swords are the world’s only hope to rise again.”

He had thought that when his teacher, Crossweil, had given him the swords, too.

At the time, he had been convinced that his teacher had been talking about putting a stop to the century-long war.

Until now, that was.

“I know the truth now, so…,” Iska said.

“Hmm?”

“Your Excellency, I know what happened to you, my teacher, and the Founder a hundred years ago.”

The Lord, the Founder Nebulis, and his teacher, Crossweil…

Everything had changed for them a hundred years ago.

“Nebulis… You still think you need to fight the Empire?”

“…Silence, Yunmelngen. My hatred for the Empire has not abated in the slightest. You want to change the Empire? I’d like to see you

try…”

The conflict between the Empire and the Sovereignty had continued for a hundred years.

The cause of the conflict had been the astral powers, and also not. The powers had simply been trying to flee. They had feared the calamity that had come into being deep in the center of the planet and dug their way to the surface.

That had become the vortex that had formed in the capital.

“I…”

He looked back at the beastperson, who stared down at him.

He looked into the eyes of someone who had been patiently waiting a whole century for this moment.

“All I wanted was peace, but that was also where I stopped. I never thought about what would happen beyond that. I didn’t think the future beyond that was something I should reach for alone.”

But his teacher had thought differently.

Crossweil had looked beyond peace—to when the planet would rise into a new world.

“But we found hope.”

“We might be able to defeat the calamity at the planet’s core with these swords. Once we do that, the astral powers on the surface should return to the core, too.”

Once the calamity was gone, the astral powers would likely return to the planet’s core. No other astral mages would be created. The witches and sorcerers that the Empire feared would disappear, leaving no reason for anyone to fight.

“The end of the war…”

Iska looked up at Lord Yunmelngen, who had lived and watched over these events for a century. He gripped the hilts of his astral swords.

“As long as we can achieve that, I have more than enough reason to fight.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Lord Yunmelngen smiled mischievously, then turned to someone else.

“Well, we’ve heard from one side. That’s done. Risya.”

“Yup, I’ve got this.”

Risya, who had been strangely quiet until then, clapped her hands together as though this was her moment to shine.

“So, 907 unit, you did a great job. The Lord says you may go. You can rest up in your rooms. Oh, but Mismis, you’ll need to submit a report before the day is over.”

“Just me?!”

“That’s what it means to be a commander. Okay, off you go.”

“No, why?!”

Commander Mismis was pushed from the room by Risya.

Iska also left after her.

“…”

For a moment, right before he left, his eyes locked with Alice’s. He had no time to figure out what emotion lay behind her eyes.

“C’mon, you too, Isk.”

Risya tugged his hand, and Iska was ushered out of the Lord’s chambers.

The four Imperial soldiers had left the room.

“Now, let’s hear from the other side.”

Yunmelngen leaned back in their seat and looked down at the astral mages who were still in the room.

Alice, Sisbell, and Kissing.

Considering the strife between the Empire and the Sovereignty, no one would have ever imagined three Sovereignty princesses would gather in the Lord’s chambers like this.

“What grandeur you three princesses have. And the extra.”

“Who are you calling an extra?!”

“Hee-hee. You really are so entertaining. You immediately shifted to anger, just as I thought you would.”

Rin had shouted, but the Lord seemed satisfied with her response.

“But you all look so stone-faced. And you haven’t said a word.”

“…”

The Lord’s words and eyes held a challenge in them.

The beastperson had seen through them. Alice told herself this, half because she had already resigned herself to what was to come, and half because she was resolved. Alice curled her hands into fists.

“You’re not wrong. There has been something on my mind.”

“Shall I guess?”

The Lord rested an elbow on the chair’s armrest.

“What has you apprehensive is what happens to your ability to fight after we defeat the calamity.”

“…”

It was true. However, Alice couldn’t admit that. She couldn’t let her guard down in front of the leader of the Empire yet.

“You’re putting the cart before the horse. You’ve already assumed we’ll be able to defeat it and that there’ll be a future, which is proof you still don’t understand how dangerous it is.”

The Lord shrugged.

“But we’re all free to dream. Allow me to humor your thoughts. Once the calamity has been defeated, all the astral powers will return to the planet’s core. In other words, the astral powers will leave the astral mages. You won’t be mages anymore.”

The Lord’s pupils were thin as slits, like a predator that had caught its prey.

“A Sovereignty without astral mages would fall within two days under a full attack from the Empire. What a

terrible thing… That's your fear, isn't it?"

"…"

The Lord was so correct that she felt chagrined; she could say nothing.

In these hundred years, Lord Yunmelngen truly had thought about the future more than they ever had. The beastperson must have considered every possibility.

In other words, they had two options:

If they didn't defeat the calamity, then the entire planet would be destroyed.

If they did, then the Sovereignty would be destroyed instead.

No matter what they chose to do, only unhappiness waited.

That was the ultimate internal conflict all the astral mages present struggled with. It was the issue just barely keeping them from taking the final step they needed to commit to fighting the calamity.

And that was why…

"Then why don't I give you a reward?"

Alice couldn't immediately understand the Lord's motive.

"A reward? Are you trying to take advantage of our weakness?"

"Oh, Princess Aliceliese, it seems you don't trust me."

The Lord gave her a strained smile.

"I hope to destroy the Planetary Calamity both on a personal level and as the Lord of the Empire. But I know there will be obstacles. Elletear will block us before we can reach the calamity."

"Yes, she likely will…"

"The calamity is harmful both to the world and to Elletear. And just as I said before, though Elletear has abandoned her human form, she still can't fully rid herself of her human emotions. They're still there, but just barely. If you go to face her, she might let her guard down."

But would she?

Alice wasn't sure she could trust the Lord at their word.

"And I think I've changed my mind. I can't stand to see you in such pain."

"Alice, I think I would like you to disappear right here and now."

She recalled her sister's warped sadism.

She had no idea if the calamity's power had made her a monster on the inside as well, or if that was Elletear's true personality. In any case, Alice hadn't sensed any kinship from the sister she shared blood with.

"I don't think Elletear will be any less belligerent toward us for being her sisters. I believe we shouldn't assume she will be, either."

"Hmm?"

"So, I—"

"Even if that may be the case, we have to defeat her." The black-haired girl had interrupted Alice. "The witch is the Zoa's sworn enemy. It doesn't matter whether she will let her guard down in front of her sisters. We must go in with a definitive plan regardless."

Kissing Zoa Nebulis IX.

She gripped a black knife in her right hand, almost the same way Iska had gripped his swords.

It was very similar to the black astral sword. The knife was an imitation that Kissing had asked the Astrals to forge for her.

"I won't question how we do this, though I don't know what your plan is."

The Lord glanced at the knife and narrowed their eyes.

"Let's return to the subject at hand. If we're able to defeat the calamity and Elletear, I'll prepare a great reward for you. So help us."

"Don't kid yourself!" Rin's bark echoed throughout the Lord's chambers. "None of us are guaranteed to survive a fight against the Planetary Calamity. If you want Lady Alice to risk her life, then tell us what this reward is you have!"

"Ah, yes. I had something to speak to you about, too,

Princess Sisbell.”

“Are you listening?!”

“Of course. You want to know what the reward is, don’t you? But it’s not you I should tell, Rin. There’s someone else who should know. Risya, please prepare it.”

The Lord snapped their fingers. They beckoned Sisbell, who had been silent all this time, to come over.

“I think you should be the messenger.”

4

Lord’s office, second building, fourth floor.

A long-unused office had been turned into Alice and Rin’s room for the night.

“Pardon me.”

Iska used a spare key to enter the place.

The ceiling sported a magnificent chandelier. There was a tasteful rug and a table.

Thanks to Rin’s grandiose remodel, the room hardly looked like the office it had once been.

“Now what do I do since I’m here…?”

He was Alice’s watcher.

But Alice was currently talking in the Lord’s chambers. In other words, he had to wait here until she returned.

But…

He didn’t feel uncomfortable as a man in what was clearly a young lady’s room.

“This weirds me out… I feel restless.”

He had the right to do anything he wanted.

He had permission to open the closet or even to rifle through their bags. That was also his duty as the one in charge of them, and the most appropriate time to look through Alice’s things was now, when she wasn’t present, however…

He just couldn’t bring himself to do it.

It wasn't that he was opposed to watching Alice. He just couldn't bring himself to ransack their things and get a step ahead while they weren't present.

……Alice and Rin are helping us defeat the calamity.

……It feels wrong not to trust them.

On the other hand, if he wasn't going to search their things, he didn't know what else to do with his time.

"I guess I'll get some tea ready while I wait… Even though it'll feel like I'm not working…"

He started prepping tea for three—himself, Alice, and Rin. He prepared the tea and teacups, but as he was getting the water ready to boil, the door opened.

"Oh, Alice, sorry, but I got to the room first… Huh?"

"Pardon the intrusion," someone said.

"Hey, good work keeping watch."

Kissing, the princess of the Zoa, had entered the room. Her beautiful hair fluttered behind her as she entered.

Following her, someone with messy hair that seemed her exact opposite entered the room. It was Mei.

"Aren't you the popular one, Isk."

"Excuse me?"

"She said she'd prefer you to me."

Mei gave Kissing a cold look. She looked down on the princess, her charge, with exasperation.

"I'll leave her in your care. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Yes." Kissing quickly nodded. "I surrendered to the Empire in order to fight alongside Iska. I do not wish to be watched by a vulgar Imperial soldier who can't even be bothered to take baths."

"Well, there you go. She's all yours, Isk." Mei let out a huge yawn. "I'm gonna take a nap."

"Wait, Mei?! You can't just push this on me—"

He was too late. Before Iska could protest, Mei escaped out the door. He was left alone with Kissing before he knew it.

"Why are we in Alice's room without her…?"

"This sofa isn't so bad."

"You're already making yourself at home?!"

Kissing settled in as though it was her own room. She sat right down on the sofa Alice liked so much and sank right in.

"Iska," she said.

"What is it…?"

"I'd like milk tea."

"Isn't there something else we should discuss first?!"

Just as he said that, the door to Alice's room opened again.

"Hmm?! I sense someone is already in here. Stay back, Lady Alice!"

Rin leaped into the living room.

As soon as Rin saw Iska, she tsked and looked disappointed, putting away her knife.

"Oh, it's just you…," she said.

"Who else would be here?"

"Her, right there."

Iska heard the clacking of someone's footsteps outside. Alice had been the one to point out Kissing. She stared at the princess lounging on the sofa.

She was plainly annoyed.

"……Iska. I gave you permission to enter my room. However, I never said you may allow anyone else in."

"I didn't let her in. She let herself in."

"……I see."

Alice folded her arms beneath her breasts and glared at the Zoa princess.

"Kissing, I seem to remember hearing that you have your own room."

"Yes."

When Kissing answered innocently, Alice looked at her more sternly.

"What are you doing here?" Alice asked.

"I want Iska."

"Guh."

Alice's eyebrow twitched.

In contrast, Kissing didn't seem concerned about Alice's reaction whatsoever.

"I cannot fight the witch on my own, so I want his help. That was why I surrendered to the Empire. Naturally, I should be in his company."

"No, you shouldn't!" Alice put a hand on her hip and showed off her bosom. "Iska is my guard! He needs to be in my presence every waking moment; therefore, he has no time for you!"

"Iska, where is that milk tea?"

"Are you ignoring me?! And what are you even planning with that blade?!"

Alice pointed at the black knife that Kissing protectively held. It was the replica of the black astral sword. Since it had no scabbard, the blade was exposed. She wouldn't let go of it even while sitting on the sofa.

"You have such a tight hold over that thing. Is that really your secret weapon against Elletear?"

"Yes."

Kissing gave an eager nod as she finally looked up at Alice.

"You heard what the Astrals said. The astral swords are the accumulation of pure, crystallized astral energy. This knife is not as pure and is also smaller, but it should still be poison to the witch. And it seems the blade is also able to store astral energy."

Kissing stood.

She held the knife in her right hand as she cutely trotted over to Alice.

"Let's test it."

"What?"

"I see an opening."

Stab.

Kissing had thrust the knife right at Alice's undefended breast.

"Ow?!"

Her cry echoed throughout the room. Even Iska had never heard such a pitiful cry come from Alice.

"Wh-wh-what was that?!" Alice leaped back as she held her injured bosom. Her tears of pain and embarrassment quickly gave way to burning anger. "Answer me, Kissing! Depending on how you reply, I may never forgive you!"

“Princess Kissing! How could you do this to Lady Alice?!”

“Hmm.”

Alice and Rin questioned her, but Kissing seemed unconcerned. She looked between the knife in her hand and Alice’s bosom several times.

“How odd…” Kissing tilted her head. “I’ve wondered since we were in the bath. Those breasts of yours seem too large for your age. I thought it was likely they had grown larger from storing astral energy. But if that were the case, this knife would have absorbed the energy when it pierced them…”

“What a profound hypothesis!”

“Why are you so impressed by this, Rin?!”

Alice scolded her attendant, who seemed convinced by Kissing’s reasoning, then she glared at Kissing again.

“And don’t describe my breasts as though they’re balloons!”

“In that case, your breasts truly are not storing astral energy? You mean they’re real?”

“What else would they be?!”

“…” Kissing went silent.

But that simply served the purpose of making Alice lower her guard. Kissing thrust the knife at Alice’s breast again.

“Hyah!”

“Ow!!!”

“The House of Lou is my enemy.”

Alice screamed again.

Kissing seemed satisfied when she saw Alice looking so pathetic for once. The Zoa princess wiped her forehead.

“The evil has been defeated…”

“I’ll never forgive you for this, Kissing!” Alice howled.

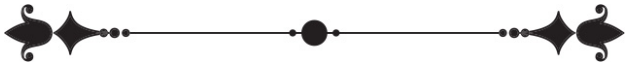
Her eyes flared as she attempted to attack the Zoa princess.

“Wait, stop!”

“Lady Alice, please keep your composure!”

Iska and Rin tried their best to mollify the seething princess.

PROLOGUE 2



What I Need Is Power

Around the same time that the 907 unit had returned to the Empire.

Imperial territory, eighth closed checkpoint.

Elletear had used her Song power to decimate the Imperial forces stationed at the checkpoint. They had fallen into a strange comatose state they could not wake from.

At the town nearest the checkpoint…

"…Damn it! The Imperial capital's defenses are just too strong! I can't find a route to get in!"

Shanorotte sat in the corner of a decrepit café.

She brought her fist down on a map of the Imperial capital she had spread over a table.

Shanorotte Gregory.

She was a Zoa spy who had been working on a plan to infiltrate the Imperial forces for a long time. Shanorotte had once been the commander of the 104 unit in Special Division V and had been undercover in the Imperial forces for an extended period.

She couldn't hold back her frustrations.

"Why did they strengthen their defenses? The capital's advisory level is at its max!"

The Imperial forces knew that she had been a Zoa spy, but she should have still been able to use her forged certificate of residence from when she had been a soldier.

But she'd been turned away at the capital.

"They need three people to verify it, and they changed all the

residential codes. Everyone's been given a new number… They've strengthened their defensive line of soldiers… Why are they being so cautious?!"

Shanorotte had no way of knowing what had happened.

Elletear had seriously damaged the Imperial forces. That was why the Imperial capital was at its highest advisory state.

"I can't get into the capital like this!"

She gripped her empty glass and opened her sleep-deprived eyes.

Her reason for being here was incredibly simple.

Because the Sovereignty's royal family had been so useless, she had decided to attack the Imperial capital on her own.

"There's no point in being in this run-down town. I need to wreck the Imperial capital where the Lord and their soldiers are and burn it all down!"

But all of it had come to naught.

All because the capital was at highest advisory.

"Ridiculous!"

She was about to throw her glass on the floor. But then the wide-screen TV in the café began broadcasting an urgent alert.

"This is an emergency announcement."

"The Imperial forces have issued a warning. Today, the ninth Imperial checkpoint was attacked. Nebulis Sovereignty forces are believed to be the culprits."

"……? Huh? This has gotta be a joke."

She doubted her own ears.

After the Zoa's elite forces had attempted an infiltration, the Imperial forces would have been on guard. The Imperial capital was in a state of high alert, after all. But for some reason, now some fool had gone ahead and attacked a checkpoint?

"What…idiots… However…"

This wasn't displeasing to hear, either.

She had done the same.

She had infiltrated the Empire on her own and was in the process of trying to get a jump on them. She felt like whoever it was must have been trying the same.

Curiosity bubbled within her.

If this person had destroyed an Imperial checkpoint, that meant they had to hate the Empire.

But who was it?

"Even if they got through the checkpoint, the Imperial forces would try to pursue them from the trail they left behind. If they were trying to make the forces lose their trail, they'd need to head to…"

She thought it over. What route would someone use to get away from the Imperial forces from the ninth checkpoint?

"Huh! There is a forest nearby!"

Shanorotte kicked away her chair as she stood up and ran out of the café.

She headed to the car that was parked on the main road.

"If I drive at full speed, it'll take me an hour. I need to make it in time!"

Who had it been?

She felt a strange sense of hope and nervousness as her heart raced.

Near the ninth checkpoint, Great Lily of the Valley Forest.

The woods were filled with white bell-shaped flowers. Though the fragrance they emitted was charming, the pure-white blooms were poisonous.

Surrounded by the beautiful but dangerous flowers was…

"Huh! But isn't that…?!"

Shanorotte doubted her eyes.

She saw men in suits who seemed to be part of the royal guards and a girl in a pure-white coat.

Mizerhyby.

The princess of the Hydra, one of the three royal houses. She was a girl with a chiseled, deep-set face, and hair the color of lapis

lazuli that was startling to behold.

"I never would've expected someone so important… That makes sense. A purebred type would be able to get through an Imperial checkpoint."

But why?

Why would one of the Nebulis Sovereignty princesses head into the Empire herself?

"And where is the head of their household?" The next thing Shanorotte noticed was that Talisman was missing.

There was no end to her questions.

He was a veteran with overwhelming charisma. So why was Mizerhyby acting on her own without him?

"Hurry!" Princess Mizerhyby's voice was rough.

They showed no signs of spotting Shanorotte lurking in the shadows of the trees as they loaded what seemed to be items they had stolen from the Imperial checkpoint onto a large truck.

"I…I have no options left! I need more power!" Mizerhyby's canines flashed as she barked at them.

Her face was a terrifying sight to behold. What in the world could've happened to make her be in such a rush?

"Hmm? What is that…?"

Shanorotte saw something else.

A gigantic container was among the items they had yet to load. Was some wild animal inside of it?

Something was clanging around inside.

The container's walls also seemed thick. If she could hear this much noise from outside it, something powerful must have been rampaging inside.

"What is in that thing?"

She had a bad feeling about this.

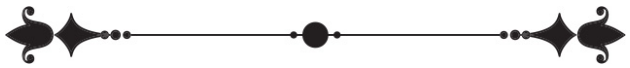
Something unthinkable had to be in the gigantic metal container. Just seeing what she had made shivers run down her spine.

"Princess Mizerhyby, what are you transporting?"

She thought she heard it bang on the wall, scratching from within the container.

What was inside it?

CHAPTER 2



Two Types of Revenge

1

Lord's office, second building, fourth floor.

In Alice's room.

"Good morning, Iska."

"Hey, Isk. Could you watch this little witch today, too?"

"Again?!"

It was six in the morning.

Kissing walked in as though it were her own house. The Saint Disciple Mei, who was her watcher, walked out of the room as though it were second nature before Iska could manage a response.

"Iska, I'd like two pancakes for breakfast. One should have whipped cream, and please make the other a honey pancake."

"You're asking me?! Why not ask the chefs?!"

"I couldn't possibly trust the Imperial forces' chefs. Actually, correction. Instead of whipped cream, I'd like chocolate… No, I'd like chocolate still, but please make the other one honey instead of whipped cream."

"I have no idea what's going on anymore!"

As they had that exchange, Alice yelled, "Keep it down!"

She had stopped combing her hair to turn toward them.

"I will not put up with this any longer, Kissing!"

"Good morning."

"What? Oh…yes, hello, Kissing… Wait, never mind morning greetings! How dare you come into my room again? And how dare

you come in here with the ulterior motive of having Iska make your breakfast for you?!”

“What if he made yours as well?”

“What?”

Alice put a hand to her chest when Kissing offered that bait.

“I thought that you were also interested in having a homemade breakfast from him.”

“Kissing! You understand!”

Homemade pancakes…

She imagined the batter turning golden, the steaming stacks topped with a handsome helping of chocolate sauce and one scoop of ice-cold ice cream for the finishing touch. The perfect combo of warm pancake and cold ice cream.

Plus, it would be made by Iska. She had no reason to hesitate.

“I’d love some!”

“I never said I’d make them!”

“Iska.” Kissing’s nervous voice rang throughout the room. “We are about to fight Elletear, which means we must go as a united front, just like how whipped cream and honey go with pancakes.”

“You just wanted to bring that back around to breakfast…”

“Then let’s talk about more serious things.”

Kissing pulled the knife, which was now wrapped in bandages, out of her bag. It was the same replica of the astral sword she had carried the day before.

“As far as I estimate, this is our secret weapon to use against Elletear, but according to the Astrals, the stone isn’t pure enough or hard enough because it lacks astral energy.”

“Right…”

“So I have a proposal. If it is not hard enough…”

Kissing pulled off the bandages.

She held the glittering black blade up so the light traveled through it.

“May I break it?”

“I beg your pardon?!”

Iska was so shocked, he stood from his seat.

This wasn’t anything he had imagined she would say.

Could something so reckless even be called a real proposal?

"What happens after you break it?"

"It should be easier to carry. And it's a bit late now, but I don't have the physical prowess to swing a knife about."

"You only realized this now?!"

But this was the perfect opportunity, since Iska had wanted to know something, too.

There was information he needed on how to defeat Elletear.

"I want to ask you both something—Alice and Kissing. And try to give me your most honest opinion."

"What is it?"

"All right."

The two princesses of the Lou and Zoa houses looked at him.

He spoke to both of them.

"The witch said that her natural enemy is incredibly high-purity astral energy. The astral swords are the main example we have of that, but doesn't that mean astral powers would also work on her if astral energy is what she's weak to? I'm not wrong, am I?"

He was met with silence.

The moment Iska said this, the entire room went silent as though it had frozen over.

The excited banter of earlier was nowhere to be heard. Alice and Kissing pressed their mouths into lines at the same time.

"What is it?"

"Iska, so you think that Elletear would really reveal her own weakness like that?" Alice weakly shook her head. "I don't think you're wrong. If the calamity and astral powers are opposites, then my sister likely does consider astral power to be poison to her after her transformation; however…"

"Our powers are too weak," Kissing whispered in a heavy voice as though she had confessed to a crime. "If Elletear's powers are like molten magma, our astral powers are like…"

"A clump of ice at best," Alice finished for her.

Their powers were nowhere near as strong. Even admitting that made Alice's balled-up fist quiver on her lap.

"Throwing an ice cube into magma wouldn't cool it down. We

can’t stop her.”

“That’s how powerful she is in comparison?”

It wasn’t just Elletear.

They had an even more powerful monster lying in wait after her—the calamity. Alice and Kissing, some of the most powerful astral mages, couldn’t individually face off against the calamity. And that was why…

They needed to gather all the astral powers’ abilities.

Iska understood once again why the Astrals had told them that.

“Do you see now?” Kissing gripped the knife. “Aliceliese and I cannot oppose the witch with our powers. That was why I wanted this. This will even out her overwhelming power… No, it’s the wedge that will put a crack in her wall.”

“But…”

How would they get the blade near the witch?

Before Iska could finish asking his question, someone called out, “Breakfast is ready.”

A sweet aroma wafted through the air.

Rin, who had been in the kitchen, brought in fresh pancakes.

“As the Imperial swordsman refused to make them, I did. And, Lady Alice, I am sorry for interrupting such an important discussion, but Lady Sisbell is departing soon. You need to prepare to see her off.”

“You’re right…” Alice pushed aside her bangs and took a deep breath. “We’ll continue this discussion later, Iska. It pains me, but we can’t stop Elletear at this ra—”

A ringing sound interrupted her.

It was Iska’s comm set on high volume.

“Iska, are you in Miss Alice’s room?!”

It was the commander over the comm. She sounded out of breath.

“Do you remember Altoria, to the far east?!”

He could only think of one thing associated with that place.

It was the underground lab where Sisbell had been taken hostage by Kelvina.

The place had also been used to secretly research how to create witches using the power of the calamity, resulting in the creation of Elletear and Vichyssoise, subjects E and Vi.

"The lab exploded!"

"Pardon?!" He doubted his own ears. "Wait, you mean the facility that the Imperial forces built is closed down?"

It had been a lab that could create witches.

Because the facilities had also contained unprecedented dangers, all the materials had been confiscated by the Imperial forces. Not a single beaker or piece of paper should have been left inside.

And the Imperial forces should have been deployed to guard it as well.

"If it was attacked…"

"We saw them on the surveillance cameras. They were astral corps!"

"Uh."

He gripped the communicator in his hand more firmly.

……Are they survivors from the Zoa's elite forces?

……Or are they getting revenge after losing communication with Lord Mask and Kissing?

Or…

"Alice, Kissing…" Iska held the comm out to the two princesses. "Help us. The Empire and the Sovereignty shouldn't be fighting at a time like this."

The far east, Altoria.

Underground laboratory, Elza's Sarcophagus. Though the Eight Great Apostles had named the facility in the past, Kelvina the mad scientist had referred to it by a more direct name.

The land where witches were born.

On its premises…

"Damn it! Look what the Imperial forces did!"

She kicked an empty metal barrel.

After returning to the surface from the dust-covered lab, Mizerhyby yelled in anger. The dozen or so subordinates with her saw it all.

She couldn't hold back her rage.

"They left nothing. Not even a single scrap of paper… I can't believe they would clear it all out. How dare they!"

The lab was empty.

Even the samples of the calamity that Kelvina had left, the research materials—all of it was gone.

She hadn't found what she wanted.

"We braved danger by going into the Empire for nothing! This is no laughing matter after we came all the way here!"

"Interim head…"

As Mizerhyby trampled the grass, someone approached from behind her.

It was a girl with a gruff look in her eyes and dull red hair. She had also emerged from the underground lab. It was Vichyssoise's human disguise.

She had already gone through the transformation into a witch, meaning that her human form was no longer her natural state.

"It may not sound very convincing coming from me, since I became a witch here at this lab, but I think this is a good thing."

"What do you mean by 'this'?"

She glared at Vichyssoise.

Mizerhyby didn't even hide her displeasure.

"Do you mean preparing to have an all-out conflict with the Empire as we invaded their domain and picked a fight with the Imperial forces in order to make our way to this facility, only to find that the ampoules we were looking for are gone? You consider that a good thing?"

"I understand why you're going an eye for an eye…" Vichyssoise scratched her head and ruffled her red hair. "You want the same

power as Elletear to get revenge on her. If you wield the calamity's power and are as compatible, then it'll be an even fight. But if you fail, it's all a tragedy… You should know that, too."

She silently looked at the container behind her that had been brought in on the large truck.

"I don't want to lose you, too," Vichyssoise said.

"I know…"

Mizerhyby tsked and shook her head back and forth.

She understood, too. She knew the terrible the fate of those who had no compatibility with the power of the calamity. She had seen it and understood it all too well—to a painful degree.

However…

She also knew she could never beat the witch in her current state. She was certain about that as well.

"My apologies for interrupting you."

"Wha—?!"

At the same time she heard footsteps and someone addressing her, Mizerhyby spun around.

There, she saw a blond woman in an Imperial forces uniform.

"Tsk! The Imperial forces again…!"

"I am one of your kindred."

In front of Mizerhyby, as she stood ready to fight, the woman in the Imperial forces uniform tugged a self-adhesive patch off the base of her neck. This revealed her lightning astral crest.

"I am Shanorotte Gregory, a Zoa spy. Or I should say, a former Zoa spy. Oh, I used these clothes when I was trying to blend in with the Imperial forces, so please pardon me."

"And you are here because…?"

Mizerhyby observed this woman, Shanorotte, from the top of her head to her toes.

The astral crest was probably real.

And though she wore an Imperial forces uniform, she likely wasn't one of their soldiers. Had she been a real soldier, she

wouldn’t have come out in the open but would’ve called reinforcements instead.

“It seems you are Princess Mizerhyby Hydra Nebulis. I would like to speak to you.”

Shanorotte gave her a friendly smile, yet from the tone of her voice, it was clear Shanorotte had an ulterior motive.

“It seems you are looking for something, and this place—”

Shanorotte stared at the building.

Though she smiled gently, her eyes looked frighteningly sharp as they inspected the walls of the building.

“Wow. It looks like those are astral energy extraction ducts along the walls. So this is an astral power research facility? And an illegal one?”

“Make yourself scarce.” Mizerhyby had spoken over Shanorotte’s mutters. “I’m in no mood for this right now. I do not care what some Zoa straggler is scheming. If you want to follow us—”

“Would you like me to tell you the destination?”

“Guh.”

Shanorotte had produced a gun from her chest pocket.

Mizerhyby retreated reflexively. However, Shanorotte shot not Mizerhyby, nor any of her people, but a surveillance camera in the bushes.

“There was a camera there?!”

“I wasn’t an Imperial commander just for show. I know where they tend to hide their cameras.” Shanorotte also tossed aside her gun. “Our conversation until now was being listened to by the Imperial forces, but now we’re safe. See? Do you feel like listening to me?”

“Just this once…”

Mizerhyby folded her arms and indicated for the Zoa operative to continue by gesturing with her chin.

She was telling Shanorotte to be quick about it.

“If you’re looking for research material from this laboratory, I can think of a place where it might be.”

“Huh!”

Spit it out!

Before she could issue the order, Shanorotte had already continued. “The astral power research organization, Omen. It’s the only astral power lab recognized by the Empire, and they have deep ties to the Imperial forces. The materials here were likely taken there.”

“You know where it is…?”

“Of course. I, Shanorotte Gregory, used to be an Imperial forces commander,” the Zoa spy answered with a radiant smile.

But there was something lurking behind it. Ironically, it was reminiscent of Lord Mask.

“Shall we make a deal, Princess?”

“Tell me what you want first.”

“I’d like you to power me up with your astral power.”

“……Huh?”

Mizerhyby couldn’t help but let out an exclamation.

She had expected the woman to ask to join her or to ask for something that would benefit the Zoa.

“You followed me to bargain for something as personal as that?”

“I want revenge against the Empire.”

A spark sizzled into existence. Shanorotte’s ochre astral crest glowed as she created small sparks from her fingertip.

“I’m tired of the useless Zoa. I’m going to mess the Empire up all on my own. And you can pull that kind of power out of me, can’t you?”

“…”

All were silent for a while.

“Not bad.”

Mizerhyby smirked at the Zoa operative.

“I will use the most noble power in the world to strengthen your powers to their ultimate form. I can only hope we both achieve our revenge.”

2

"Mizerhyby!"

"Noro?!"

Lord's office, second building, meeting room.

After taking one look at the surveillance camera footage, Alice and Commander Mismis both exclaimed in astonishment.

This was footage from the Altoria jurisdiction at Kelvina's lab. They saw a group of men who seemed to be subordinates in black suits surrounding two women.

Princess Mizerhyby of the Hydra.

And the Zoa spy, Shanorotte, who was disguised as an Imperial soldier.

"It looks like one of the Sovereignty's royal families, the Hydra. I think she's their princess…"

Alice stared intently at the footage.

She also felt a strong sense of doubt.

Why would Mizerhyby be in the Empire?

And why would she attack Kelvina's lab?

"Hey, Iska." Jhin, who had his sniper rifle over his shoulder, knit his brows in confusion. "Isn't that the princess we butted heads with on the top floor of Snow and Sun?"

"I think she is, too…," Iska replied.

"You don't think she came all the way to the Empire just to get revenge on you?"

"…"

He couldn't deny that was a possibility.

Even though Princess Mizerhyby's ability, Glory, had brought them to the brink of death, they had managed to get out of Snow and Sun in the end.

……Is this retaliation?

……Is she invading the Empire like we infiltrated Snow and Sun?

It seemed too simple to believe.

But he couldn't think of any other motives she could have.

"Wow, so that girl with the bright blue hair is a princess?"

As Mei looked up at the monitor, her canines were on full display like a beast's. A corner of her mouth lifted.

"We've got ourselves a big shot. So the witches from all three

royal families are in the Empire… Ha-ha, think it's safe to be excited? She's not gonna turn out to be a fake or anything?"

"She's real," Kissing confirmed.

The purple in her eyes slowly glittered brighter and brighter.

"She radiates astral energy like the sun. Considering how strong she is, this is unlikely to be someone who has used an astral power to transform into her."

"So she's the real deal." Mei seemed in an even better mood as she let out a whistle. "But why's this happening? Did she plan to duke it out with the Empire when she's barely got any cronies with her? Since she's out in the open, there's gotta be a trap."

"A trap?"

"They're planning an all-out war, duh. They're probably gonna attack us with all they've got!"

Instead of answering Kissing, Mei looked directly at Alice.

"So, what's going on, witch princess? Or should I say, the daughter of the queen?"

Mei and Alice stared at each other for a few seconds.

"We don't wish for that." Alice shook her head. "Even if the Hydra's princess decided to infiltrate the Empire, they don't represent the Sovereignty. Even I know that can't possibly be the situation, and Her Majesty doesn't wish for an all-out war with the Empire, either."

"And how are you gonna prove that?"

They stared at each other, and as a chill swept through the air…

"I'll prove it."

Alice snapped her fingers.

She took a comm from Rin, who had been waiting at the side.

"My comm can communicate directly with Her Majesty. I'll call her right now and we can hear exactly what she intends to do."

"Great, that's more than what I wanted." Mei opened one eye wider than the other and gleefully looked at Alice. "But I dunno if that really is the queen. If you're gonna talk to her, do it now, before you have time to be up to any tricks. And the Lord gets final call."

"Do as you wish."

Mei, Rin, Kissing, and Iska watched as Alice gripped her comm.

White clouds floated along.

The clouds that lingered in the deep blue of the sky turned to wisps at the edges of her vision and disappeared.

As she watched that scene…

"Alice?!"

The queen, Mirabella Lou Nebulis IIX, held her comm in her hand.

She stared at the name on the device for a while.

"It is me."

"Your Majesty!"

She heard her daughter, out of breath, on the other side of the comm.

"I need to talk to you right this moment!"

"Right now? All right. I'll prepare immediately, so in five minutes I will—"

"No."

Alice's voice was firm.

"I would like you to answer now like this. This is a request as a princess."

"……I see."

She realized that this was no small matter.

On her personal comm, Alice called her "Mother."

……She wants an official response.

……Someone else is listening to this conversation. Did she call knowing that?

That had been why she had asked for five minutes. She would have called others in to record and tap the line.

"Then let's hear it. What is it, Aliceliese?"

"Your Majesty, I will be straightforward."

"Yes."

"Do you have plans for an all-out war?"

"Huh?"

“I understand that it is disrespectful to ask. If…Your Majesty had the choice of destroying the Empire at the cost of sacrificing many of the Sovereignty’s citizens, would you decide to fight?”

The queen knitted her brows without realizing.

What is the meaning of this? she wanted to ask reflexively, but she stopped herself and thought about what could possibly be behind her daughter’s words.

All-out war.

She had been born a princess and had been selected as queen following the Conclave. How many thousands of times had she heard those words until now?

“Aliceliese, I have only one reply to that.”

She didn’t intend to lie to her daughter. She had no idea who else was listening to this conversation, but she knew her daughter wished for the truth.

“Under those conditions, I would not seek an all-out war.”

“_____”

“Do you need my reasoning?”

“…Please,” Alice said.

“I witnessed things while in the astral corps. The Imperial forces are strong. In an all-out war, we would not simply have a large number of casualties. We would have an unprecedented number of sacrifices and would soon reach a place of no return.”

That was what the queen truly thought. She had no other reason.

……In an all-out war…

……I may lose my daughters. What parent would wish for that?

When she thought about it, in her days as a princess, the man who had known her most had said something to her.

“Mira, you’re not fit to be queen.”

“Why, Salinger?! Why would you come all the way here just to say that?!”

“You’re a dreamer. You’ll never have the ability to be ruthless.”

She couldn't do it.

If she could have been like Lord Mask and used her family as pawns, then perhaps an all-out war would have been possible.

……If we had the Revered Founder as our secret weapon, this might have been different.

……But she left after awakening.

When it came down to it, they didn't have enough firepower. They didn't have some miraculous weapon that could change the power dynamics between the Empire and the Sovereignty.

"You were the one who said, Aliceliese, that the greatest threat to the Sovereignty wasn't the Empire but Elletear."

"It's true, Your Majesty."

She could see Alice nodding on the other side of the comm.

"She plans to destroy both the Sovereignty and the Empire indiscriminately."

"…"

"She plans to do this by awakening a monster at the planet's core. I want to go after her. And stop her."

"Then allow me to ask a question." The queen addressed her daughter. "Is this an urgent matter? I would think it difficult to consider it one."

"The Zoa and the Hydra have joined forces."

"…What did you say?"

"They overcame the Empire's borders and were on the security feeds. I saw a Zoa spy and Mizerhyby."

"…"

The news was so unexpected that it was difficult to believe.

Did the Zoa and the Hydra plan to start an all-out war through sheer force?

But what about their leaders?

Without Lord Mask and Growley, the Zoa were far from their full strength. And Talisman was unlikely to take such shortsighted action.

"Are you certain? Do you think that after their losses, the Zoa are betting it all on a reckless attack? Would Talisman really do something so thoughtless…?"

"No."

No, what?

Before she could ask, Alice answered, **"Mizerhyby is the one leading them."**

"Her?!"

The surprise came through in her exclamation.

If Mizerhyby was leading the charge, this changed things entirely.

It wouldn't be the same as just the astral corps attacking. Since she was a princess, the Empire might see her as representing the Sovereignty.

……This won't end in a small skirmish.

……I see. This must be why Alice is so flustered.

The queen gripped the comm and nodded slightly.

"I see now. We must stop Mizerhyby at once. Her assault of the Empire may be seen as representative of the Sovereignty as a princess."

"Yes, I plan to go stop her."

"That's quite a reassuring thing to say, but Mizerhyby is already in the Empire, isn't she?"

"You have nothing to worry about, Your Majesty."

She doubted her ears when she heard what her daughter said next.

"Because I am in the Empire as well. I was invited to the Lord's residence as an honored guest."

"……Excuse me?"

Her daughter? In the Empire? At the Lord's residence?

Why? How had she entered Imperial territory?

Had she been captured? Then why had she said she was an honored guest?

And was Rin with her? If she was in the Lord's residence, did that mean she had met him?

The queen was holding back a geyser of questions; she had no idea where to start.

"Um…I believe you said you were going to Katalisk—"

In that moment, a servant with brown hair appeared on the screen of the comm.

"I apologize, Your Majesty! We normally would have

reported to you immediately…”

“Rin! So you’re with Alice!”

She accidentally said her daughter’s nickname. But she couldn’t correct herself now. She had so many questions to ask, regardless.

“Lady Aliceliese and I are safe. We are in Imperial territory, but we have not been captured by them.”

“I feel relieved… Hearing that is enough for me.”

“Lady Sisbell has a letter from the Lord and is headed to the Sovereignty. It will have information about what caused the conflict between the Empire and the Sovereignty.”

“I must correct myself. I truly am worried about the state of affairs.”

The queen let out a large sigh.

She hoped that her emotions would be conveyed to Rin and Alice even through the comm.

A letter from the Lord?

What was going on?

“I’ve lost my composure… But……”

She opened the window of the vehicle.

The cool air fluttered through her hair and felt pleasant against her skin, as she had flushed from all the excitement.

“Sisbell just called to inform me that she is returning to the Sovereignty just earlier. I am currently out of the palace and on the way to a neutral city.”

Yes.

At that very moment, she was in a car driven by Schwartz, Sisbell’s attendant.

The queen was going out to retrieve the princess herself.

Sisbell’s homecoming had been blocked over and over again until then.

In which case, the queen thought it would be best for her to retrieve her daughter herself. She had brushed aside the ministers’ anxieties and left a few hours ago.

“Rin, hand the comm back to Aliceliese again.”

“I am here, Your Majesty.”

“I have so many things to ask, but it seems Sisbell knows the

same information that you do about the state of affairs. In that case, the fastest remedy is for me to take charge of Sisbell, is that right?"

"Yes."

"Then I will ask Sisbell about everything. I will take care of her."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

The comms cut off.

In the now-quiet car, she exchanged a look with the elderly driver.

"Really now. It's so difficult having such rambunctious daughters."

"I am glad you've come to understand my plight of thirty years ago when I was once your custodian, Your Majesty."

"That is a separate matter entirely…"

The queen turned away from the rearview mirror and averted her gaze from the man.

3

"Hunh. So that was the queen?"

Lord's office, conference room.

Mei sat cross-legged on a desk as she stared at Alice.

"Well, fine… The Lord makes the final call, but I'll bite that you guys aren't itching to fight the Empire. So that means that Hydra witch decided to attack Kelvina's lab all on her own."

"That is what I have to assume," Alice said.

Alice quietly agreed as Mei continued to watch her.

"The Hydra were also responsible for the explosion that attempted to take Her Majesty's life. I cannot forgive them for that. I will stop Mizerhyby."

"Cool. I'm all for witches fighting each other." Mei smiled, showing her canines. "They already disappeared into the wind, but I'll take you as far as we've tracked them."

While Mei and Alice were talking, Iska turned to the side and saw Commander Mismis looking down with a frighteningly serious expression on her face.

"Commander? Is something the matter?"

"Huh?!" Commander Mismis raised her face and seemed to come back to her senses. "E-everything's fine! I'm fine!"

"You obviously aren't fine whenever you say that, boss," Jhin muttered. Beside him, Nene seemed to have noticed, too.

"Did something happen?" she asked, sounding worried.

"No… I was just thinking about something, really."

Commander Mismis laughed and gave them a strained smile.

The smile was forced.

The commander normally wore her heart on her sleeve, so seeing her with such conflicting emotions was unusual. That just showed how worried she must have been.

"Well, Ms. Mei and Miss Alice are worried about the Hydra, but… I'm more worried about Noro."

"You mean Shanorotte?"

Jhin looked up at the monitor.

Only a few minutes earlier, the former Imperial forces commander, Shanorotte, had been on that screen. She had talked to Mizerhyby about something.

"Noro, huh? Geez, that name's just like you, boss."

"…"

"She betrayed you like that at Mudor, electrocuted you, and even tried taking you as a prisoner of war."

"Yeah…I know that, but…" Mismis awkwardly let out a large sigh. "I just can't see Noro as an enemy yet… Oh, but I'm not trying to be friends with her, either. It's just…"

Mismis trailed off.

They had worked together.

They all knew that the kindness Shanorotte had shown Mismis had all been calculated.

Mismis should have known that the most. But still…

"I wish I could talk to her again…"

"Don't," came Jhin's quick reply. "Instead of answering you, she'll probably electrocute you or shoot you. If you really need to talk to her, wait until she's locked up in our custody."

A long, long silence followed.

"You're right…" Commander Mismis smiled wanly and nodded

again.

4

The sun scorched the land.

After being baked under the heat, the loess had dried and cracked. Small weeds had established themselves in the crevices, but the land had turned into a wasteland.

In one corner of the wilderness there stood a city of the arts, the neutral city, Ain.

Iska and Alice had encountered each other in this very city multiple times, and had faced off against the Founder Nebulis right near the city's entrance.

"Mother! And Schwartz, you're here, too!"

The car was stopped in a parking lot. Sisbell ran straight for the blond-haired woman and elderly gentleman whose faces were visible from the car.

"Sisbell, is that you?!"

"My lady, I am glad to see you are safe!"

They both exited the vehicle.

The queen spread her arms, which Sisbell jumped into, out of breath.

"Mother!"

"I'm so glad you're safe…"

The blond woman hugged Sisbell.

She wore an elegant jacket, a hat with a large brim similar in shape to a straw hat, and sunglasses to cover her face.

She looked like a famous actress trying to go out. Had anyone in the city of Ain realized her true identity, they would have still been taken aback, however.

She was Queen Mirabel Lou Nebulis IIX.

She was the queen who ruled one of the two largest superpowers in the world.

"Mother, your outfit is so unusual, I hesitated for a bit."

"I feel a bit bewildered wearing it as well."

She smiled awkwardly behind the sunglasses.

"It's been so long since I left the Sovereignty for anything other than official business. Are these clothes strange?"

"They are… You look super suspicious and like you're trying not to be recognized."

Still in her mother's arms, Sisbell let out a quick breath, then breathed in.

It was her mother's perfume.

Even if she wore different clothing, she still smelled the same.

"I doubted my ears when you said you would come all the way here to get me, Mother. Are you sure you should be here?"

"I shouldn't, but it was more important to see that you were safe. For both me and Schwartz. I'm glad you made it back."

"Huh?! Oh, yes! Schwartz, you're here, too!"

She turned but still held on to her mother.

Schwartz had been so naturally standing to the side that she had forgotten about him…

"Schwartz, you were taken away by the Hydra!"

"I'm embarrassed to say that indeed I was…"

He bowed his head slightly.

Had they been in the palace, he would have bowed down until Sisbell told him he had done enough, but this was a parking lot in a neutral city. There were tourists around.

"Tell me all the details in the car. There is an airport just an hour or so away, so we can take a transport to the Sovereignty from there."

"Oh, wait, Schwartz! Actually…"

"Will you introduce us soon?"

Another person had spoken from behind Sisbell at around the same time.

Clack…

The person approached just a few footsteps behind Sisbell.

“Your Majesty, I believe this is our first meeting.”

A woman wearing black-rimmed glasses and a suit politely lowered her head.

She had said “Your Majesty” with no hesitation in a place where passersby were coming and going. Sisbell was likely the only one who noticed the slight sarcasm.

“I am Risya. I had the honorable role of accompanying Princess Sisbell here.”

“I am grateful,” the queen answered in a low voice, nodding. “You must be the guard Sisbell hired in the desert nation of Alsamira, then.”

“Oh, I must correct you.” Risya shrugged. “I am a guard, but I serve Lord Yunmelngen.”

“Wha?!”

The queen felt a shiver run through her.

Had this not been a neutral city, she undoubtedly would have readied herself for combat.

“But, wow, this is a surprise. I didn’t think Your Majesty would come here personally. I can rest assured that my duties are complete now. Well, if you’ll excuse me…”

“……?”

The queen narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

She naturally drew Sisbell close to her with a hand.

“If you are a Saint Disciple, then isn’t this the perfect opportunity to attempt to kill me?”

“What an apt thought, Your Majesty. However, I’m afraid we’re not in the situation for that.”

“What do you mean…?”

“The Empire and the Sovereignty shouldn’t be fighting in the current circumstances. Oh, we’ve left a letter from the Lord with Princess Sisbell. You may burn it once you are done reading it, if you like. We have not bugged it or tracked it, but if it makes you feel more at ease…”

“…I see. So this is what Alice meant.”

The queen’s face contorted in annoyance.

To anyone from the Nebulis Sovereignty, those from the Empire

were their sworn enemy. And their motives were a complete mystery.

"Won't you tell me about what this letter says?"

"It's about the terrible thing your oldest daughter has done. That's all."

"Huh!"

"Well, with that, I'll be on my way."

She bowed to the queen, who placed a hand on her daughter's shoulder protectively, and then turned her back to them.

Risya had left the parking lot.

After crossing a large street, she was in a back alley.

"Whew… Ahh, that chilled me to the bone. So that's the queen of the witches."

Risya leaned against a gloomy wall.

A beast would be most ferocious when protecting their young. The queen had been so hostile with her daughter present that Risya had been afraid she might attack with her astral power.

Though she had feigned composure, on the inside Risya had been on the edge of her seat.

"I'm just glad the queen was a lot more reasonable than expected. —Oh, hello, Ms. Mei?"

She pulled out her comm.

Mei was still in the Lord's office.

"How are things over there? Any big developments?"

"There was one, actually. The one who destroyed the Imperial checkpoint was Princess Mizerhyby of the Hydra. And there was a Zoa there… She's too low down in the ranks. I don't remember her name."

"Well, that's a VIP."

"Things aren't looking so good. Supposedly, they have no

idea what's going on."

The screen on the comm lit up.

Mei sent footage of two princesses speaking behind her.

Aliceliese and Kissing.

"We've got the Lou and Zoa princesses here, but they say they haven't got a clue why the Hydra would infiltrate the Empire."

"And we're sure they're not just pretending…?"

"Dunno. And there's no way to tell anyway, is there?" Mei yawned. **"So we're letting them duke it out. Next time the Hydra princess shows her face in the Empire, we'll send those two out to crush her."**

"Where do you think she'll show up next?"

"If we knew that, things would be easy."

On the other side of the comm, Mei tried to hold back another yawn, then she *tsk*ed.

"If she just attacked the Empire without any other goals, this would be quick. But seems to me like this is gonna be a chore."

"Oh, and why do you think that?"

"It's the place she attacked. Kelvina's underground lab… If she were some incompetent idiot whose only goal was to attack the Imperial capital, why would she go all the way to an abandoned facility? She's after something."

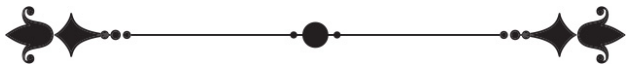
"Got it. Well, the Lord has got my hands full, so I'll have to leave the rest up to you."

Risya hung up.

She turned around, looking far into the distance as though she were trying to see the Imperial territory. She muttered to herself,

"Then the next place they'll go after is…"

CHAPTER 3



The Strongest Power in the World

1

The Imperial forces strengthened defenses in all parts of the Imperial territory.

In addition, the Imperial capital had increased security for all those coming in and out by two levels. They had taken special arrangements to catch Princess Mizerhyby, who was believed to be in hiding within the Empire.

But where was she hiding?

And what was she after?

"I have no idea!" Rin's shout echoed throughout Alice's room.

The chandelier on the ceiling nearly swayed from the force of her shout as she huffed and folded her arms.

"Listen here, Imperial swordsman! Lady Alice and I have no idea what Princess Mizerhyby could possibly be scheming!"

"I haven't asked you anything yet…"

"I can see it on your face!"

"I was just going to ask what you wanted for lunch."

"Shut up!"

Iska had ended up being scolded even though he'd answered honestly.

Their living arrangements in the Lord's office were so cramped that he had just wanted to make sure they at least felt they had some autonomy over their meals.

"Lady Alice would like pancakes with jam, and I would like an omelet with potatoes."

"You could have just said that from the start!"

"Read between the lines. The Imperial forces are not the only ones on edge about Princess Mizerhyby," Rin said, looking rather surly and unhappy. "The Hydra are the ones behind Lady Sisbell's abduction. I hope that they're caught by the forces soon. We have no sympathy whatsoever for them."

"I'll keep that in mind… What about you?"

"What is it, Iska?"

Tap, tap, thunk…

Kissing was fully immersed in tapping a hammer on something. As she turned to him, her glossy black hair fluttered.

"I'm a bit preoccupied, but allow me to guess… You want to know what the Zoa and the Hydra are after because they infiltrated the Empire? And you want my opinions?"

"I'm glad you're quick on the uptake."

Kissing nodded without speaking. She seemed to be inviting him to ask whatever he wanted.

"Is it possible that the Zoa might have infiltrated the Empire to rescue you? Since Lord Mask is unconscious, are they trying to at least save you?"

"I don't think so," Kissing said without missing a beat. "If the Zoa household knows anything, it's that there was a break in communication between my Uncle On and me. They wouldn't have any idea that I was saved from Elletear's Planet's Song."

"Then do you think they're here to look for clues about what happened?"

"Doubtful," she said, shaking her head.

In all that time, she didn't once stop hammering away.

"If that were the case, they would hide in the Empire and dedicate themselves to investigating what had happened to my uncle and myself. But they destroyed a checkpoint and attacked an Imperial facility. If they had wanted to know my whereabouts, they never would have done anything to attract attention."

"You're right…" Iska could only nod.

……We actually talked about this in a meeting room as a unit.

……And we came to the same conclusion as Kissing.

That was why they were brooding over this.

If they didn't know what the enemy wanted, they wouldn't know where the Sovereignty would appear next.

"Then what do you think the Hydra and the Zoa are after?"

"Only one person from the Zoa was shown on the camera footage. Her name was Shanorotte, I believe? Then perhaps she was working on her own rather than with the Zoa?"

"On her own…?"

That was possible.

Shanorotte was a former commander. She knew how to act the part of an Imperial soldier perfectly. She probably could walk around town without ever being questioned. He could think of no one more dangerous than her.

"I know I'm asking for a lot…but do you think you'd be able to mediate with her? Commander Mismis also wanted to talk with her if possible."

"That would be difficult."

"Right. But also, why is that?"

"I think that's quite obvious." The black-haired girl put a hand against her face and feebly looked down. "Because…I'm not good with words…"

"You're talking a ton right now! You actually talk a lot!"

"I can speak to someone I'm familiar with. In the Imperial forces, that's only you, Iska."

In that moment, Alice, who had been quietly sitting on the sofa, grunted and glared at Kissing, but the Zoa princess didn't seem to notice.

"I'm curious what the Hydra are after. I don't think this is the order from their leader."

"You don't?"

"Where could Talisman have gone? I saw the princess on the security footage, but their family leader wasn't there."

Thump.

Kissing brought the hammer down a bit harder than before.

“Uncle On said Talisman is the one who lights the Hydra family, just like the sun. The princess and their people are all only saplings growing under his light. So where has he gone?”

“So he’s the sun…?”

Iska had deep ties with the man.

When Talisman had made his way to the Lou’s villa, his eyes had been filled with mirth and a gentle quality like the sun—as he had attempted to annihilate everything within the residence.

He was a sly, deceitful man, and also an experienced soldier. That was the impression Iska had had, and it seemed the other royal families had the same impression of him.

“To put it another way, why is Mizerhyby acting without their lead —ow!”

Kissing let out a small cry. It seemed she had brought the hammer down on her finger.

“You distracted me by talking to me.”

“You’re only complaining about that now?!”

“I’d like an apology.”

“Sorry…”

“I’d like you to pay—through a physical act.”

“A physical what?!”

“Physical in what way?!” Alice shouted as she stood from the sofa.

Her eyes glinted and her eyebrows were raised.

“I have been silent until now…b-b-but what is the meaning of this?! How do you want Iska to pay with a physical act—?”

“I’d like him to pour me a cup of tea.”

“Oh…is that all? All right then…”

Alice seemed relieved, but Rin stuck her head in at that point.

“Lady Alice, what in the world were you imagining when she said ‘physical act’?”

“N-nothing at all! I was simply—”

The interphone to the door rang.

The electronic sound rang over and over again.

“Iska dear?!” Commander Mismis practically tumbled into the room. “We’re under attack! By Princess Mizerhyby!”

"So she really is after the Imperial capital?!"

"No!" Jhin *tsk*ed as he shouldered his sniper rifle. "We know what they're after. It's astral power."

"…Astral power? Where would we have that in the Empire?"

"There is one place. It's the only research facility that's been approved by the Empire. We were treated like test subjects by them, remember? The same place that made the artificial astral crests."

"You mean Omen, the research lab?!"

"The Empire military have tried to infiltrate the Sovereignty for the past century, and they would end up being seen through immediately, but… This time, I think this'll work."

"These are the fruits of the labors of the combined abilities of researchers of Omen and their skill."

For example, there were the artificial astral crests.

Risya had brought a small cylinder which could apply an astral crest to a person's skin.

The ones who had developed that were Omen, a unitary conglomeration of the most intelligent researchers.

It was the only facility allowed to do astral power research in the Imperial territories.

Put another way…

That was why we knew Kelvina's lab was illegal.

They had been after Kelvina's lab first.

And now Omen?

"We've got an update!" Nene came running in, out of breath. "Over half the facility in the fourth province has been taken over! The Imperial forces are on the scene, of course, and the researchers there are trying to fight back, but over ten people have already been captured…and Iska Big Bro, look at this!"

He looked at the screen on the comm.

There, he saw a woman with glittering blue hair. That was unmistakably Mizerhyby.

She walked down the halls of the lab as though she owned the

place, but Iska's eyes stopped on the person walking behind her.

It was a witch who was emitting violet flames from her entire body.

"Vichyssoise?!"

She had the power of the calamity, just like Elletear.

She had always been operating behind the scenes, and had even been involved in Sisbell's abduction, but Iska had never believed she would reveal herself to the Imperial forces like this.

……They don't care whether we know about Vichyssoise?!

……Do they not need to care anymore? Or are they so desperate that they need to use their full power to invade the facility?

Princess Mizerhyby seemed restless.

She didn't have the composure or smile from when they had faced her at Snow and Sun. Her mouth was a tight line, and her eyes were bloodshot as she looked this way and that.

It was as though she were searching for something.

"Commander Mismis, do they have any demands? If they've taken over the lab and taken people captive, they must have something they want from the Imperial forces."

"She hasn't sent any yet…" Commander Mismis nervously shook her head. "HQ sent in a rescue unit to save the hostages, but they've only surrounded the facility and haven't been able to get inside. They say they have no idea what kind of astral powers the enemy might use…"

"Would you entrust the matter to me?" The person who spoke was none other than Alice, who had been silent until that moment. "Commander Mismis, I will stop Mizerhyby. And I promise to follow the Imperial forces' orders, of course."

"R-really?! But Miss Alice, she's one of—"

"She is no kin of mine."

She spoke without a trace of reluctance. Alice's tone was cold and sharp.

"I don't think I can forgive the Hydra for what they've done. To me, they're nothing more than a criminal organization."

"Then I will join in, too." Kissing, who had been hammering away, turned to them. "It was Shanorotte, wasn't it? As Iska said, if she is

working in accordance with the Zoa's wishes, then my presence may put a stop to this."

"Hey, even the Thorn Witch is getting in on this now?"

A voice carried to them from the hallway.

Mei looked between Alice and Kissing, scratching her bird's nest of a head.

"I've gotta put my foot down. Sure, you say you're trying to capture the Hydra princess…but you better not be using that as a pretext to get to her so you can change sides once all the royal families are reunited."

"I already showed that we have no plans to do that," Alice immediately said. "You heard Her Majesty over the comm—"

"Nope, nuh-uh. But none of the soldiers in the forces heard it. There are a lot of them who're scared of witches. You gotta be aware that's something they'll always be afraid of."

"Guh."

Alice faltered with displeasure.

"……Yes, right. But Kissing and I still would be able to help face Mizerhyby. You don't want unnecessary casualties in the forces, do you?"

"Of course not." Mei's grin deepened. "We'll have you witches fight each other. But since we've gotta take into account all the soldiers on the field, I think I've gotta go with you to keep an eye on you. And you come, too, Isk. Plus one more… I want somebody in charge of communications, since I think it's gonna be a pain in the tush."

"Oh, then maybe I should go?" Nene, the girl with orange hair, pointed at herself. "Iska Big Bro, should I?"

"Wait, Nene. Say, Ms. Saint Disciple, I've got a question for you."

As Nene had raised her hand, Jhin stopped her.

"The 907 unit just joined Special Division I. Who's supposed to guard the Lord's office? Aren't you supposed to be one of the Lord's guards, too?"

"I'll leave it to you guys." Mei pointed at Jhin and Commander Mismis. "You two are in charge of protecting the Lord's office. Risya should be home soon, too."

“What happened to the Saint Disciple of the second seat?”

“Oh, that one…”

Unusual for her, Mei sighed.

Mei was the Saint Disciple of the third seat. The first seat was Joheim, the traitor, but no one had seen the second seat anywhere. The Saint Disciple should have been somewhere in the Lord’s office.

“We can’t ask the second seat.” Mei seemed exasperated as she waved a hand. “That one hates witches more than I do. Threw a fit the moment we brought the witches to the Lord’s office. And you haven’t seen any other Saint Disciples here, right? That’s because the second seat’s been at HQ instead.”

“Which means that the boss and I are actually the only guards who’ll be here…?”

“We got a whole lotta problems right now, but you guys don’t have a problem with this, right? You won’t have a lot of people around, but the Lord’s office is filled with sensors and surveillance cameras. Anyway, let’s get ready to head out.”

Mei about-faced.

She turned her back to all of them.

“We got an emergency alert from Omen. They’re requesting urgent rescue. We haven’t got time to be scrupulous about prep work. The aircraft’s taking off in fourteen minutes.”

Elevation: 10 kilometers.

They had passed through the cloud barrier, leaving only droplets of precipitation on the windows as though they had just traveled through rain.

The white sea of clouds was right below them.

“Mother, that is all I have to report.”

Sisbell hesitantly exchanged a look with her mother, who sat in the seat next to her.

"I hesitate to say this myself, but I had a series of great adventures after going to Alsamira."

"Yes, indeed. I'm shocked in two different ways."

The queen put a hand to her temple.

Though they were sitting next to each other, the seats of the aircraft were spaced such that she and her daughter were an entire meter apart.

"I know that I did some reckless things when I was a teen, but they don't compare to what you've done… But the Eight Great Apostles shocked me. I can't believe that shadow leaders were in charge of the Empire in addition to the Lord. What true evil…"

"I'm certain it's true. I saw it all using my Illumination power."

"And you defeated the Eight Great Apostles?"

"Yes, Mother!"

Sisbell nodded firmly.

However, she had only fought Luclezeus. And even then, Sisbell had only helped the 907 unit, who had really been the ones to bring him down.

"And you vied with Lord Yunmelngen as an equal?"

"I am certain I did."

Sisbell was brimming with confidence as she nodded again.

Though she had not "vied" with the Lord in any fight or negotiation. Instead, she had "vied" against the Lord in board games, but Sisbell had conveniently left this out of her report.

"The Lord was a formidable opponent. But I refused to withdraw one step, and reaped many rewards as a result of our skirmishes!"

"You did?!"

"Mother, I've done my duty as a princess."

Those "rewards" she had reaped had come from winning those board games against the Lord.

First, she had asked to have more furniture in her room.

Next, she had asked for fruit with every meal.

And so on…

She hadn't lied about anything, so it was all fine as long as her mother was happy.

……*And I believe I've told her all the important points.*

……*There were five in total.*

Those were the five pieces of information that Sisbell had reported on in the plane.

One, the Sovereignty's true enemy was not the Empire but Elletear and the calamity.

Two, due to Elletear's violence, Lord Mask and the best of the Zoa forces had been taken down.

Three, her sister Alice was still in the Empire and learning more about how to take down Elletear from the Lord.

Four, Lord Yunmelngen was an astral mage (or at least a type of one) and an old acquaintance of the Founder.

Five, if they didn't defeat the calamity, the entire planet would be destroyed.

But by defeating the calamity, all astral mages would lose their astral powers.

Though Alice had already reported some of these things, the news was still gut-wrenching to the queen nonetheless.

Especially points four and five.

"You said that you were shocked in two ways…?" Sisbell asked.

The queen raised her head.

"First, that you went through such an ordeal. Second, by the fifth point that you shared with me."

"Yes, Mother. I know that it's difficult to believe…"

"But I do believe it."

She realized that her mother was looking at her with clear, serious eyes.

"You were captured by the Hydra family, and ventured into the dangerous Empire, putting your life at risk for this information. I have no reason not to believe you."

"Thank you…"

"Honestly, I wish there were two of me," the queen muttered.

It was difficult to tell whether she was joking.

"If Schwartz agrees to take up the political duties in the

Sovereignty, then I will go to stop Elletear myself."

"Huh?! Oh, yes! Schwartz, I have something to ask you!"

Sisbell had forgotten she was wearing a seatbelt and wriggled in her seat to look at the elderly man sitting in the rear of the plane.

"To continue with what we were speaking about earlier, what happened after you were caught by the Hydra family? And how were you saved?!"

All she knew was what Iska had told her.

——*Schwartz was being held captive in Snow the Sun's underground floor.*

——*But Iska and his unit weren't able to save him because they were too preoccupied with even escaping the facility.*

She had no idea what had happened following that.

If the 907 unit hadn't saved him, then had the queen's rescue unit gotten to him?

"I am afraid to say…" In that moment, the elderly man exchanged a look with the queen that Sisbell didn't understand right away. "… the one who released me from Snow and Sun was Salinger."

"The sorcerer?!" Sisbell doubted her own ears.

She had never met him herself, but three decades ago, he had attacked the last queen, Nebulis VII, and had recently had a rampage at Orelgan's prison spire. He was as bad as they come.

And that terrible person had helped someone else?

"Schwartz, do you know what his motive was for releasing you?"

"I'm sure it was on a whim. I can't think of a clear motive for him to have helped me."

Schwartz knitted his brows.

"But it seems he has a grudge against the Hydra."

"Salinger, you…freed me from them…"

"Just to pester them. They got on my nerves a little. I'm sure losing their prisoner will cause them some trouble. "

But really?

She didn't mean to doubt Schwartz, but if Salinger didn't like the

Hydra, he could have just destroyed Snow and Sun, too.

Would he have released their prisoner and taken Schwartz to a safe place just for that reason?

……It seems almost as if he really wanted to save Schwartz.

……It would make more sense to interpret his actions that way.

But in that case, her image of Salinger, the ruthless and villainous sorcerer, would change slightly.

"Mother…"

Sisbell turned again to her mother, who had been quiet the whole time.

"I do not know Salinger, but as I understand it, he is the man you fought thirty years ago and captured. So…well, is he a villain with a heart of gold? Would Salinger be the type to save Schwartz for that reason?"

"……I'm not sure," her mother said after a long, extended pause.

When Sisbell looked at her mother from the side, she saw the queen was frightfully serious and had pressed her lips together as if she was brooding over something.

"The Salinger I know might do something so capricious. However, the Salinger who attacked the former queen would never even think of helping another person."

"?"

What could that mean?

She was speaking almost as though there were two Salingers.

"I was cowardly, Sisbell."

She looked out the window.

"You've witnessed many things at the risk of your life. You have experienced it all personally. In order to learn the truth, one must have courage in some cases. I think I ought to take a page from your book… I have a request once we reach the palace."

"I know, Mother. You would like me to recreate the scene of the explosion that attempted to take your life using my astral powers so we may find the culprit!"

"No, there's another part of the past I would like to see instead…"

"What would that be?"

"I will tell you once we reach the palace. Now, we've gone off

topic quite a bit. I've also let my personal feelings come into this, but from here on, I will speak as the queen."

She breathed out a sigh.

"We cannot turn a blind eye to Elletear or the Planetary Calamity. That is the conclusion I have come to. And now I see. An unprecedented threat is encroaching on the entire world. That explains why the Empire was willing to make concessions."

The skirmish between the Empire and the Sovereignty was meaningless now.

If they couldn't defeat the calamity, the entire world would be destroyed anyway.

"However, the future will be difficult…"

The queen leaned back deep into her seat.

"In the future that awaits after we defeat the calamity, all the astral mages will lose their powers… That would be as painful as prying off a bird's wings. So we must decide whether we still have the resolve to defeat the calamity. I can't immediately come up with an answer, either."

"I believe I understand how you feel, Mother…"

Sisbell herself felt about the same as the queen.

There were two reasons for this.

To an astral mage, losing their astral powers was like losing a piece of themself.

In addition, if the Sovereignty lost all the astral powers and the Imperial forces attacked, the Sovereignty had no chances of survival. The queen couldn't accept this as the leader of the Sovereignty.

"Sisbell, Alice knows this as well?"

"Why, of course."





"And what did she say?"

"…"

Sisbell hadn't discussed this with her sister directly, but she had seen it in her face. After Alice had spoken with the elder at the Astrals' homeland, Alice had been just as pale as Sisbell had been.

"I think…that she's grappling with the same worries."

2

Empire, capital of the fourth province, Visgehten.

This was where the one and only "unburied" vortex within the Empire had been preserved.

The one in charge of its maintenance was…

Omen's first laboratory.

All astral power research was done here.

The facilities were always under the guard of the most state-of-the-art security system in addition to the Imperial forces stationed on the grounds.

However, both the security system and the forces had been crushed.

They couldn't have ever known that they would one day be under attack by powers equivalent to those of ten purebred type mages.

Black smoke spewed from the facility.

The smoke billowed throughout the area, spreading black soot all over.

The facilities had been rendered to smoking ruins in some parts, while others had caved in to form gigantic craters. Some of the concrete walls had even been pulverized from existence.

Guns were scattered everywhere.

All over, there was proof of the Imperial soldiers putting up a fight only to be forced to withdraw.

"Well, none of this looks good. They gave us a good thrashing."

Mei looked through night vision binoculars.

It was the middle of the night.

By the time she had arrived in Visgehten, the sky had already turned into a curtain of black.

As she looked over the facilities that made up Omen and its illuminated, whitewashed structures, Mei pulled out a comm with her free hand.

"Hey, Risya. You're not at the Imperial capital yet?"

"The Lord ordered me to do some chores around here. Since I'm out and about, I'm supposed to go around visiting the neutral cities as the Lord's staff officer. Since we'll need to call for help from all over the world when we fight the calamity. It's all in preparation for that."

"Well, diplomacy's good and all, but have you seen what it looks like over here at home?"

Mei let out a deep sigh.

"So, where's Names? I'm pretty sure he was supposed to be here getting looked at. You know, for that Vice astral power he got doused with that's supposed to be a Curse-type astral power."

"He already finished his treatment and headed out on missions again."

"Bad timing."

As she answered, Mei signaled to the forces behind her to come close.

This was their strategizing headquarters.

A military tent had been set up about a dozen meters from Omen. Along its walls were an array of monitors.

The screens showed the blueprints of the facility.

There were the entrances, back exits, and even the emergency doors. They had marked out where they believed the hostages had been gathered and where the enemy forces were likely located.

"Commanderino, any contact from the other side?"

"Enemy forces have been quiet." The HQ commander

straightened himself up. “We considered the possibility they may have already left the facility, but our sensors recently picked up several strong astral energy signals. We believe it may be a purebred type’s power.”

“That must be Mizerhyby.”

As Mei held her comm, she stared at the monitor.

“If we have a signal from the second floor, then they’ve gotta be in the control room. In other words, they’re probably using our security cameras. Why are they holing themselves up in an Imperial astral power research lab? And why won’t they come out? Right, Isk?”

“I’d like to know, too…”

Iska shook his head slightly at Mei’s question.

……Everything about this is abnormal.

……Even if they have their best soldiers here, is their plan really just to go on a rampage with barely a dozen people?

Mizerhyby’s astral power Glory allowed her to power up mages to their greatest potential.

She alone had the power to create a legion with the equivalent of ten purebred types’ powers, which made her one of the greatest threats around.

……But that only applies in battlefields outside the Empire.

……As long as they’re in the facility, we have the home advantage.

In the end, the Imperial forces could resort to bombarding the facility with missiles.

Mizerhyby had to know that.

So Iska didn’t know what was happening, either. What was the Hydra princess’s aim?

“…*Tsk*. Looks like this is gonna be drawn out.” Mei ruffled her hair, seeming in a particularly bad mood. “We’ve lost the surveillance cameras to the enemy. And if we try to burst in, they might even have astral powers that can track our movements. This is a pain.”

“Um…”

The soft voice came from behind Iska.

A girl with bright orange hair in a ponytail hesitantly raised her

hand.

"Is Ms. Risya still listening in over the comm? I have a question," Nene said.

"Hmm? What is it, Ne?" Risya's voice came from the comm in Mei's hand. **"You rarely have questions, Ne. I'm curious, so let's hear it."**

"Um… Kelvina wasn't researching the astral powers, but the calamity, right? I was wondering if the Imperial forces confiscated the materials?"

"Yeah. A while ago."

"Where are they now?"

In that moment, Iska's and Mei's eyes opened wide as Risya went silent on the other end of the line.

"I considered that possibility, too…"

Risya smiled wanly.

"The Hydra's astral power research is leagues beyond anything at the Empire. I wondered why they would want our primitive research. The return and risks involved wouldn't make sense, but they might if they're after Kelvina's experiment files. If she was the only one researching how to turn mages into witches."

"Do you have the docs, Ms. Risya?"

"I'm afraid not, Ne. The Imperial forces did confiscate the documents, but they were still about astral power even if the experiments were illegal. We relinquished them into the care of the Saint Disciple with the most knowledge about them. That would be—"

"Newt." Mei sighed, which echoed throughout the tent. "There's only one Saint Disciple who's interested in astral power research. And Newt is at this facility… Wait? Is he a hostage, then? Hey, Commanderino?"

"W-we're still investigating!"

"Well, investigate faster. Newt's real smart but he can't fight. If he's one of the hostages, that means all kinds of trouble." Mei leaped into the commanding officer's seat. "Kelvina's research materials would be in a warehouse, but there are too many of those around.

They've got eight big ones on the grounds."

"Maybe the Hydra are having trouble finding it, too?" Nene muttered.

She had been talking to herself, but in the silent tent, her words were broadcast instead.

"Oh, s-sorry! I was just speaking out lou—"

"No, basically that means if we can get Newt, we win." Mei crossed her legs in her seat. Her eyes glinted. "They've cloistered themselves in the lab because they're still searching. They could stay here for a week without finding what they're looking for. And Newt is the only one who knows where the stuff is."

"But Ms. Mei, what if he's already been taken prisoner…?"

"I know, Isk. We've gotta assume that he's already been taken hostage. Like I said before, there are three things the rescue team needs to consider."

One, where was Mizerhyby in the lab?

Two, where was Newton? (With the assumption that he was already being held captive.)

Three, where would be the appropriate place to attack from?

However, if the control room had already surrendered, the surveillance cameras would also be used against them.

They didn't know the answer to question one.

They're definitely wandering around the facility trying to find Kelvina's documents.

Their assumption about question two was likely correct.

If he was captured, he's probably in the first-floor hall. If he's hiding, then he's probably in the underground emergency shelter.

But moreover, from Iska's point of view, number three was the most trouble.

Where should the Imperial forces enter from?

It was likely that Mizerhyby had someone on her team who could track the Imperial forces' movements using their powers.

……If they can tell where we're going, that'll threaten the lives of

the hostages.

……And that's not all. If they know where we're entering from, they might beat us to the punch and be there waiting for us.

Which route they chose would determine the mission's success.

"Iska Big Bro." Nene was whispering into his ear.

She pointed at the monitor that displayed the layout of each floor.

"If the researchers are in hiding, they'd be in the underground shelter, right? If the rescue unit goes in, then the most direct route is through the fifth emergency door."

"That's if the emergency door is still functioning…"

The enemy was made up of an elite group of soldiers, but only ten people couldn't guard every exit. They likely would melt and seal the emergency doors to prevent a raid.

"Let's think of another route. We can break a window on the north corridor of the first floor and go down the stairs to the underground floor? But the stairs are huge, so they might hear our footsteps?"

"Iska Big Bro, they'd hear the window breaking, too."

"Then they'd know we're there right away…"

"How about a helicopter, Isk? We can get on the roof and go down from the top floor."

"They'd bring it down," Iska hesitantly replied to Mei's proposal. "Based on experience, we have to count each mage who's been strengthened by Mizerhyby as a purebred type. Attempting reconnaissance using a helicopter or any large fighter craft would be dangerous."

This was extreme, but if they entered the facilities and had to face mages who were powered up until they were as strong as Alice, they would be goners.

……We need to avoid fighting them.

……Basically, we have to get into the building without them noticing.

They had a clear goal, but no way to make it happen.

Mei crossed her arms in frustration. The commanders on either side of her were silent as they waited. Nene and Iska exchanged a look.

"Iska."

"Imperial swordsman."

He heard two people address him from a corner of the tent.

He turned around.

Behind two soldiers holding guns and sweating from nerves, there sat three witches on simple folding chairs.

"That plan…" Kissing pointed. "If we help, then it should be possible, shouldn't it?"

She pointed not at herself, but at Rin, the earth mage.

"We can go from below the ground!"

"Don't get the wrong idea, Imperial swordsman! I'm only doing this to ruin the Hydra's plan."

Before continuing, she crossed her arms as though her hand was being forced.

"If you assume that the researchers are hiding in the underground shelter, I can dig a hole from the tent and we can just get to the shelter directly, can we not?"

They wouldn't need to travel from the first floor.

Rin's astral powers could get them an underground path directly to the shelter. Then they could erase the concrete of the shelter walls using Kissing's thorns.

And if they approached from underground, they couldn't be sensed.

"W-wait!"

"Keep quiet…!"

However, the commanders had turned red in the face.

This was an Imperial forces strategic headquarters. Witches should not have been openly sitting in such a place, and it seemed that the commanders had found it a disgrace for them to comment on their tactics on top of that.

"Why not? Don't worry about it, commanderinos." Mei seemed unconcerned as she waved her hand at them. "We brought them here to put them to work. Don't get worked up about it."

"T-to work…?"

"The witches can say what they want, and we'll take what we can use. The ones making the decisions are the Imperial forces. So chin

up.”

“…I see. All right.”

It seemed that had addressed their concerns. Both of the commanders stood down.

Meanwhile…

“Tell me all the deets. I dunno about that brown-haired girl, but I know your astral power is gonna be useful in a raid, Thorn Witch. You can *erase* walls and dirt and everything, right?”

As Mei looked at Kissing, she gave her a cold, provocative sneer that was anything but friendly.

“You surrendered to the Imperial forces, too. I like your stance, witchy.”

“I am not here to help the Imperial forces.” Kissing was serious in contrast. “I have a grudge against the Hydra family as well. That is all.”

“I feel likewise. I said it earlier, too, but don’t get the wrong idea.”

Rin nodded with a serene look on her face.

She actually seemed much more composed than the commanders when she talked.

“Kissing and I will be able to create a direct path to the underground shelter by digging. I could even make an earth golem as a decoy. The decoy can distract them on the surface while we take that time to dig the tunnel to save the hostages.”

“Wow, Rin. That’ll be great,” Iska said.

“Huh. Looks like you are useful.” Mei’s eyes glinted in curiosity as she leaped from her seat. “Question time. Tell us exactly what your astral powers can and can’t do. We’ll make a plan based on—”

“Wait!”

The tent went silent.

The golden-haired witch had gallantly stood from her seat. Everyone’s eyes gathered on Alice, who hadn’t had a chance to speak until then.

However…

Though she had yelled loudly, she was pale for whatever reason.

“Um…uh …what about me?” Alice faltered.

She had realized that in this plan to dig underground to save the

hostages, she was the only one who was useless.

"I-is there anything I could help with…?"

"Just stay out of the way."

Kissing was merciless.

"You can only freeze things. There's nothing you can help with in this daring plan when what we require is delicacy."

"Please rest assured, Lady Alice." Rin bowed. "You needn't trouble yourself, Lady Alice. I, Rin, will do this important task!"

"Uh? No, that's not what I mean… Um, where do I come in…?" Alice muttered in a quiet voice.

But the group had all already left her behind to gather around a round table.

"Hey, little witch, you sure the tunnel's going to be strong enough? Wouldn't want to be buried alive partway."

"You won't need to worry about how sturdy it is. In the worst case, we'll dig a new path."

"I can help with digging," Kissing added.

Both she and Rin seemed confident in their abilities.

"All right, commanderinos! Get together the size and location of the underground shelter. Make sure it's accurate. I'm leaving it up to you to figure out the plans for the tunnel we need dug."

"Yes, right away!"

"Let me in on this, too!"

The strategic headquarters was bustling.

Only Alice, who had nothing to do in the operation, wailed to herself.

3

Omen, first laboratory.

Down the central stairs toward the underground floor, there was an area sectioned off by fire shutters. This was the emergency shelter.

"This is terrible, Michaela!"

An emaciated, bearded man yelled, unable to hide his excitement.

The Saint Disciple of the tenth seat.

Sir Karossos Newton, the laboratory's chief.

His nickname was "the sickliest researcher." The man's shoulders and limbs looked as though they would snap with a light breeze. They showed he was an exception—a civilian among the greatest military force called the Saint Disciples.

He spread his arms out as though testing whether the world had more to throw at them.

"The power of these purebred types! I had heard that the Founder Nebulis's bloodline had the strongest astral powers there are…but this is the power of barely more than ten of them! They have enough firepower to drive out a whole battalion of Imperial soldiers! It's meaningless to resist!"

"Please don't sound so gleeful about it!"

The medical officer next to him who had been crouched down stood up before she had realized it.

"And please don't yell, Chief. Even if we're in the underground shelter, they might hear us…"

"Oh, pardon me. Ah yes, Michaela, you're right. This is no time to be shuddering in delight."

"You are the only one who feels happy about this, Chief."

"Then let us analyze this situation logically. The enemy forces are likely Nebulis Sovereignty assassins. We believe there are ten or so individuals from the astral corps. And several are likely purebred types. And purebred types are—"

"Chief, I think this is quickly moving away from analysis and going into lecture territory."

"Oh, pardon me. Though…"

As he stroked his full beard, Newton cleared his throat.

"I do wonder what has brought the enemy here to attack this facility. I can think of several possibilities…"

"Found you!"

There was a roar.

Violet flames engulfed the shelter.

The fire that burned on the other side of the door slowly seeped in through the crack that was less than a fraction of a centimeter wide.

"A fire?!"

"No! This light…it's astral power, Michaela!"

They screamed. The ten or so researchers hiding in the shelter all turned pale. Only Newton dared to slowly approach the flames.

"So, what are you, then…?"

"A monster."

The witch's coquettish voice echoed around the shelter. From beyond the wall of violet flames, a human outline emerged.

"Since it seems you like exposition, allow me to explain it to you. This isn't astral power, it's pure astral energy. The same astral flames that burned the Imperial capital to a crisp."

"Eep?!" Michaela let out a gasp of terror.

The witch hadn't been human after all.

What appeared from beyond the flames was a grotesque monster. Her ruby hair had solidified into something metallic, while her skin was transparent like glass.

"Now what do we have here…?"

As he hid the cowering Michaela behind his back, Newton couldn't help but give the monster a rare, strained smile.

He knew what the monster was.

"Kelvina Sofita Elmos… As far as I knew, she was a peculiar yet brilliant astral power researcher who was passionate about her field. I wanted to see this once in my lifetime. One of her 'experiments' or what have you."

"Oh?"

The experimental subject herself blinked several times.

"You recognized what I was on sight? And you even know a lot about Kelvina. Interim Head, there's an interesting Imperial over here."

"I'm glad that this will go quickly, then."

The violet flames silently disappeared.

From beyond the melted shelter door, they heard the bright sound of the clack of shoes as a woman with blue hair revealed herself.

"Why, aren't you a beautiful young lady. I see that you're no ordinary person."

"I'll tell you who I am, since you seem to know enough to make this go quickly. I am Mizerhyby Hydra Nebulis IX. Or perhaps I should introduce myself as a princess of the Sovereignty."

Mizerhyby took one step, then another, into the shelter.

She looked at Newton and the other researchers who had withdrawn to the wall, their faces drained of blood.

"I'll tell you this now. I do not intend to let a single one of you live."

The Hydra princess's tone did not fluctuate in the slightest as she spoke.

"You and the rest of this lab will be rendered into ash. However, you have one way of saving yourselves."

The researchers had fear in their eyes.

They had all likely thought the same thing: *It was a lie.*

"Oh, but don't worry. I have no interest in whether you live or die. I don't have the time for that. To put it in a way that's easier to understand, there is someone more loathsome than any of you Imperials whom I must have revenge on."

"I see. How curious, indeed, Princess Mizerhyby." Newton faced the princess. "What would a Sovereignty princess such as yourself want from a place like this?"

"The strongest power in the world."

"Oh?"

"You should know already. Bring me all the research materials Kelvina left behind."

"All I can say is, I thought as much…"

Newton narrowed his eyes from behind his monocle.

She had declared her demand so firmly that he knew she wouldn't believe him if he said the research materials didn't exist. If he attempted to negotiate in the wrong way, he would risk all the

lives of the hostages, including his own.

"The materials left by Kelvina are indeed in this facility. But she left behind so much. If you tell me exactly what you are looking for, I will be able to procure it much more quickly and with more precision. Does that sound fitting to you?"

"No."

The Hydra princess smirked.

She seemed to have seen through him. The glint in her eyes telegraphed it clearly.

"If I tell you what I want, then you'll change your tune and never give it to me. So I will not tell you."

"How harsh of you… I was simply trying to be considerate."

He jokingly shrugged.

But that was the goal. He had meant to make a tempting proposal so he could find the enemy's weakness.

"Do you know how many battlefields I've survived? You're obvious." Mizerhyby extended her hand. "Now, bring it all out without another word. Bring me all of Kelvina's things from her lab. You have all of tonight… Yes, I would like to have it before the sun rises tomorrow."

The Imperial capital was asleep.

Few lights remained on in the buildings of the business district, and one could count the number of people still on the streets.

The same held true for the Imperial forces.

Most of the soldiers had retired for the night at the women's barracks.

"Ugh… I finally finished with work."

As she shivered in the cold evening wind, Mismis quickly walked to the barracks.

"Ugh! Nene would normally be so happy to help me write a

report, but Jhin was so stubborn and told me to do it! And I finished so late!”

She hadn’t eaten any dinner.

She thought of cooking something light from what little she had at home. Then again, taking a shower and burrowing into her sheets sounded nice, too.

Would she eat? Or have a shower?

Or maybe she would skip both and just go straight to bed?

“I know! I’ll eat while showering! Oh, but I need a good way to shower without getting my food wet… Oh?!”

A gunshot rang in her ears.

It was close enough that she could feel the sound waves against her skin. She couldn’t see anything in the dark of the night, but she knew it had happened right in front of her.

“Huh?! Who’s there?! Did something happen?!”

The gunshot had been close.

But no one answered her. Should she run over to the barracks? Before Mismis could decide, the bushes rustled.

“Who’s there?!”

She saw two figures behind the bushes.

One was sprawled on the grass, and the other ran toward her out of the bushes.

No one said anything.

Mismis quickly leaped back from the silent figure. She felt a draft right in front of her face. It was only a moment later that she realized it had come from the person swinging a fist at her.

Who was it?

The streetlights were behind the person—a blond woman of large build who glared at her. It was then that Mismis came back to her senses.

“Noro?!”

Former commander, Shanorotte Gregory.

She had been Mismis’s friend and a coworker since she had graduated the forces’ academy…or so Mismis had been led to believe. But Shanorotte had been a Nebulis Sovereignty operative all along.

And she had been hiding in wait at the Imperial forces' barracks.

"What are you doing here?!"

The last time they had seen each other had been in the Sovereignty.

But what was she doing here in the Empire on an Imperial base?

"Tsk!"

Shanorotte held out her right hand.

This was bad. She was a Lightning astral mage, which made this deadly range. Could she run? Or would it be better to draw the gun at her hip? The moment Mismis wavered, Shanorotte let out another, "Tsk!"

Instead of firing off lightning she looked up from the corner of her eye and turned around.

The barracks were equipped with astral energy sensors. If she fired at Mismis, she would be discovered. She was likely afraid of that.

"…"

Shanorotte turned and fled.

Mismis immediately gave up on the idea of running after her.

"Are you all right?!"

"…Ugh!"

The woman on the grass weakly mouthed something.

She had a gun in her hand. She had likely fired it after Shanorotte had jumped out of the bushes at her. Then they must have had a scuffle.

"Took…it…"

Shanorotte had taken something?

But what? It wasn't the gun. What would Shanorotte want?

"Huh! Your ID?!"

"…"

The soldier weakly nodded.

She had known it. Mismis felt a chill run up her spine upon realizing she had guessed right.

An Imperial soldier's ID.

With just that card, Shanorotte would be able to get through an Imperial forces' gate as though she belonged there. She was a

former commander, so she even knew how to act like an Imperial soldier.

But why?

It couldn't have been easy sneaking into the forces' barracks. Why had Shanorotte gone to all the trouble to procure an ID? What was she planning?

"I need to tell someone! Uhhh, HQ? I know! Risya!"

She was a lot smarter than Mismis.

But it was the middle of the night.

"Risya, please wake up!"

"Hello! What is it, Mismis? Are you doing overtime?"

"Risya!"

When she heard that cheerful voice, all of her anxieties disappeared and she loosened.

"It's awful! You know the one who was on the security footage, Nor…I mean Shanorotte, the ex-commander?"

"You found her?"

"She was hiding in the Imperial forces' women's barracks!" Mismis yelled into the comm. "Someone was assaulted, and she stole her ID. Shanorotte already ran off, but I think she'll head to an Imperial base soon! With that card!"

"Hmm..." She heard Risya let out a low groan. **"An Imperial, huh? But why would she want to go into a base?"**

"I—I have no idea! But Imperial bases have secret information…"

"I suppose so. I'll talk to HQ. You go talk to the barracks' surveillance room. Once the attacked soldier recovers, we'll question her as a witness and a victim."

"Got it!"

"I'm counting on you."

The line cut off.

The area around her went quiet until only the sound of the insects in the grass could be heard.

"Hold on to me! I'll take you to the medical room!"

Mismis helped her fallen colleague up and started to walk the path into the night.

"Noro…"

Her former coworker had disappeared as quickly as the wind.

Recalling the hate toward Imperials that had glistened in Shanorotte's eyes, Mismis bit her lip.

4

Omen, first laboratory.

Second building, northern area, underground storage.

It was hermetically sealed and under three locks. Only the top five percent of researchers were allowed access into the storage area.

All of Kelvina's research material was there inside of it.

"This isn't it."

Princess Mizerhyby took one look at the stacks of documents and turned away.

She looked at the computer screens and monitors, the gigantic cisterns and test tubes. All sorts of research apparatuses were lined up in rows, and yet…

"One hour until sunrise. Hurry, everyone!"

None of them paid attention to the irritation in Mizerhyby's voice.

All those working for her felt the same. They searched each shipping container they were assigned, and upon not finding anything, they would move on to the next.

"Now, Chief Newton, was it?"

"What is it, Princess Mizerhyby?"

Chief Newton turned to the princess, his hands in restraints.

"This is the fourth room. And this is the last of the storage facilities with Kelvina's research. That's what you said, isn't it?"

"A gentleman never goes back on his word."

"Hmm?" Mizerhyby looked into his monocle. "You're a smart man. So maybe you're feigning ignorance and already know what I'm after? That's why you led us to this room last, isn't it?"

"It's very kind of you to offer me such praise, but I am a scientist. And a scientist only speaks according to the records and

demonstrable proof that he has accumulated. I do not have the supernatural ability to read minds, I'm afraid."

"Oh?" Mizerhyby responded plainly and looked farther into the storage room.

"So, Vichyssoise, what do you think? He says this is the last storage area."

"He might not be lying."

The violet flames glowed.

Deep inside the flames, Mizerhyby could see Vichyssoise looking around the storage area.

"The moment I entered this warehouse, I smelled something. I'm sure, Interim Head."

"Then we must hurry all the more. The Imperial forces are no fools. They'll eventually force their way in."

"Oh?"

She heard the sound of a door opening.

It was a false wall inside one of the containers. Vichyssoise had melted it with her flames and wrenched it open to reveal a space of just a few centimeters all around behind it.

It was a tiny refrigerator.

And inside of it, nestled among the white mist, were three ampoules of different colors.

The one that Mizerhyby was most drawn to was the darkest purple liquid.

Gas bubbled out from the surface of the liquid. Had any travelers to Katalisk been present, they would have recognized the odor to have been the same as the swamp's.

"That's!" Chief Newton bent forward in curiosity.

Vichyssoise began to laugh as she watched him. "Ah-ha-ha! You knew she would hide it in a false wall. That's right, we wanted the extract of the calamity's power! It doesn't look like it's undiluted, but it seems concentrated and fresh enough."

"Excellent work!"

Mizerhyby took the abandoned ampoules and shuddered.

She felt both excitement and fear.

"If I inject this into myself…then I'll become like Elletear!"

"I'll say this one last time."

Vichyssoise, the one to have found the ampoules, was also the one to stop her.

Though the princess looked at the ampoules with glistening eyes, Vichyssoise looked at them as though she had been awakened from a dream.

"There are two conditions to getting revenge on Elletear. First, your body needs to be able to handle the injection. That's how I was created. But as you know, there's a difference in how great of a monster I became compared to Elletear."

The concentrations they had been able to handle had been different.

Vichyssoise had only been able to withstand the power several hundred times diluted. In contrast, Elletear had survived a fifty-one percent dilution.

The more concentrated the power, the more powerful a monster one would become.

"Even if you are able to withstand what is in that ampoule, you'll need something closer to the undiluted solution to become stronger than that monster… If this goes wrong, I think you'll be bawling from regret."

"I know."

"And one other point. I think the key to affinity with the calamity is weak astral power. The weaker your power is, the greater the affinity you have with the calamity. That was what made Elletear ideal. But Interim Head, your astral power is…probably going to be the least compatible with the calamity."

"I know that, too."

"I see…"

Vichyssoise went silent and watched her.

Mizerhyby, the princess of the Hydra, placed her finger on the cap of the ampoule. All she needed to do was…

“Erase.”

She heard a voice echo from the other side of the wall.

In that moment, a gigantic hole appeared. Mizerhyby saw several more open before her eyes, like corks being pulled from the wall.

“Those thorns!”

The purple thorns that had appeared almost looked like those of a sea urchin.

The moment Mizerhyby saw a peek of them from one of the holes, she leaped back.

“No!”

“I found you.”

Beyond the wall filled with holes, a girl with black hair lightly landed inside the storage room. Countless thorns had been formed around her. And then next…

“Mizerhyby!”

A girl with thick golden hair and a mature look to her jumped in through the wall.

“I have a message for you in place of Her Majesty. Surrender!”

“Oh my…”

More princesses had appeared in the warehouse.

What a twist of fate it was that princesses from all three royal houses had appeared here, in the Empire.

“What an odd bunch we are. Not only Alice, but also Kissing.” Mizerhyby had a chilling and bitter smile. “Don’t tell me that you two have ties to the Imperial forces, too? Oh my. Whatever shall we do if the citizens of the Sovereignty find out?”

“…”

“What?”

Mizerhyby knitted her brows at the slight irritation she felt.

The Lou and Zoa princesses were looking at her.

And yet they were also not.

Mizerhyby could easily guess the reason why. They were wondering where Talisman, the head of house, was. They weren’t truly looking at her.

"I have no idea what Lord Talisman ordered you to do…"

Princess Aliceliese of the Lou pointed at the sloshing liquid in the ampoule.

"But I can see you're here for the power of the calamity, just as we thought."

"…"

"It's over for the Hydra. We know that you have ties to the Empire's Eight Great Apostles. We'll be able to expose your crimes through Sisbell's Illumination—"

"Quiet!"

A ripple ran through the room.

Mizerhyby, the beautiful princess, was erupting with astral energy that emitted from her blue hair. It all flew up, each tendril wriggling like a snake.

She looked almost exactly like the legendary monster Medusa.

This was a bad habit of Mizerhyby's.

When she was consumed by rage, she couldn't hold back the great astral energy she had.

"You're all so irritating…"

She gritted her teeth and balled up her hands.

I am livid. I just had one wish.

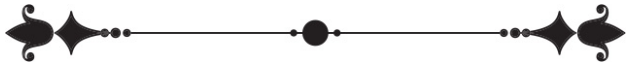
And that was to have power to destroy that witch.

What was so wrong with that?

Why did everyone keep getting in her way?

"I don't have time or any other options! The sun and moon cannot shine on their own. Don't think you can replace the sun!"

CHAPTER 4



The Witch Who Gave Up Being an Imperial Soldier, and the Imperial Soldier Who Became a Witch

1

"This way!"

Omen, first laboratory.

He was now deep underground in the emergency shelter. With the many researchers in front of him, Iska pointed beyond a wall.

"If you climb up this tunnel, you'll get to the surface. You'll arrive at an Imperial forces tent!"

Kissing had created the hole in the wall.

Beyond that was a tunnel that Rin had created using her astral powers.

"Iska Big Bro!" Nene's head popped out from deeper in the tunnel. "The first five arrived at the tent. Rin is showing them the way partway through the tunnel!"

"Got it… This is going even better than planned."

It was going frighteningly smoothly.

Just as Iska had been about to say that, he had to swallow his words.

There were twenty-three researchers in the shelter. None of them had been injured and they had encountered no Hydra guards.

……We expected Mizerhyby's troops to be waiting for us here.

……Or even Mizerhyby herself.

But when they had actually arrived, the researchers had been almost anticlimactically unharmed, and they hadn't even found anyone watching over them.

"Ms. Mei! How's everything there?!"

"Boring."

Mei, who had been watching the corridor, kicked open the melted door and came back in looking unsatisfied.

"Nobody's out there. I didn't see anyone on the underground floor. I was kinda excited about Mizerhyby's legion, though."

"Um, Ms. Mei…!" a female medical officer in a suit carefully called out. "Just as I reported before, Princess Mizerhyby and her people all left at the same time. They took Chief Newton and went to find Kelvina's research materials…"

"I know, Micky. You said it was the second building, northern area." Mei held a comm in her hand. "We already sent over the bombs we had on reserve over there. So, how's it look?"

"……"

"C'mon, answer, Thorn Witch."

"We are engaged in battle." Kissing's voice was faint.

Was it Iska's imagination that her normally carefree tone sounded a little more rushed?

"Mizerhyby is in front of us. I see Chief Newton, a man with a beard as well."

"Good. Then hurry up and capture them and come back."

"That will take some time."

Mei's eyes narrowed into slits.

"Ms. Mei."

"I know, Isk."

Mei's mouth slowly grew into a bold smile.

"So, even the Thorn Witch is having trouble with this enemy. Ah, well. Doesn't matter what happens to the witches, but we can't have Newt dying. Guess I'll go check things out."

"You think I'll let you go?"

"Huh!"

Mei stopped in her tracks.

A heat wave grazed the tip of her nose. Violet flames scorched the ceiling, making it drip down onto them from above as several tons of rubble also fell over them.

The heat and the rubble closed off the corridor before their eyes.

"Are you trying to barricade us in? Ha! Are you that desperate to stop us?"

"Barricade? Oh no, this is a cage."

From within the flames, they saw a strange shape.

It was a monstrous girl Iska knew well.

"Vichyssoise!"

"Heeey, Iska, the Black Steel's Successor. You always seem to survive. Oh, isn't there a little birdie named an Iska, too?"

The witch waved her hand as though she was greeting a friend she hadn't seen in a long time.

"So you're birds in a cage."

She spread her arms wide.

Behind her, the violet flames grew until they howled and roared loudly.

"I can't let you go forward. The interim head of the Hydra has reached the moment when she'll see if she can become the true head of the house. You guys can twitter about over here in the meantime."

The star, moon, and sun.

These represented the founders of the three houses and progeny of Alicerose, younger sister of Nebulis.

Though the three families supported each other in overthrowing the Empire, under the surface, they were vying fiercely in the

conclave to claim the throne.

Their greatest enemies were not from the abominable Empire but rather their own flesh and blood.

"Isn't it laughable, Aliceliese, Kissing?!"

Omen laboratory, storage facility.

There, Mizerhyby's scornful laugh echoed throughout the space.

"The final stage where the three houses face off is in the Empire of all places! And in this gloomy, dusty warehouse! None of this is beautiful or refined! Now, my beloved legion!"

The Hydra princess took a step back.

As though to take her place, soldiers in gas masks and protective gear advanced forward.

They were her bodyguards, the legion of Dawn.

"Glory."

Her mark glittered.

The astral crest on Mizerhyby's forehead glowed and lit the foreheads of her soldiers like halos.

"Shriek, scream."

That was Mizerhyby's command.

Like a gigantic gong had reverberated, a shock wave traveled through the space, swelling like a storm surge.

This was bad.

The moment she saw it, Alice placed a hand on the ground.

"Ice, cover and block!"

A towering wall of ice formed.

The ice that formed in front of Alice covered her in all directions, forming a dome-shaped barrier.

Creak…

It began to make its own sounds under the pressure of the gargantuan sound wave that hit it.

"Uh? That wasn't a decision made in the moment, was it? You must have done your research, Aliceliese!"

"I have a reliable source of information!"

She yelled through her ice barrier.

This sound astral power was called the Shriek. It far surpassed even the Imperial forces' sonic weapons in destructive force.

……Being hit with it means losing consciousness immediately.

……Iska said he had the most trouble with this astral power. I'm glad I heard about it ahead of time.

In practice, dealing with this left her in a cold sweat.

Sound was a multidirectional attack that would bounce off the walls of the warehouse.

Even if Alice had used an ice wall to block it, the sonic waves would have spread in all directions, ricocheting off the walls and showering her with a sonic wave that would have made her collapse.

……It must be convenient to be in a warehouse.

……They don't need to do much to get the sound to rebound.

"No."

The sound of Mizerhyby's voice conveyed her charming smile just faintly.

"They've always said ice and fire are in direct opposition. You thought I didn't have fire in my legion?"

Roar!

At the same time Alice heard the sound of a loud combustion rip through the air, she saw the space in front of her barrier of ice turn crimson.

It was a chain reaction of explosions.

Hundreds and thousands of flames burst as they rammed into Alice's protective dome.

The intense flames spread and violently exploded.

Crack.

When Alice saw a fissure break open in her ice, she doubted her eyes.

"You're not too bad!"

"Aliceliese, please release the ice."

"Guh."

"We trade places."

The ice barrier suddenly disappeared.

Alice was left unprotected as dozens of gigantic flames fell over her head.

"Erase."

The flames disappeared one after another as the thousands of

thorns Kissing had unleashed did just as she had asked them to.

"Tsk!"

Mizerhyby and her soldiers on either side of her showed their confusion on their faces.

"How infuriating. Since when have the Lou and the Zoa become so close?"

"What about you Hydra?"

Alice's hair stood on end as she coldly beckoned Mizerhyby over.

"Leave the hostages unharmed, hand over the ampoules, and tell us where Lord Talisman is. If you fulfill those three conditions, we may reduce your sentence."

"Hah! You speak like a queen even though you're nothing more than a princess!"

"I'll ask the queen."

"Shut up!"

Mizerhyby smiled fiercely.

She pointed at Chief Newton, who was restrained by her people.

"What an adorable bluff. I am the one with a hostage. I have the ampoules of the calamity's power. What do you have?"

"…"

"You don't want to hurt the hostage. You also don't want to damage the facilities. Of course. Any damage a Nebulis Sovereignty princess causes the Empire would be a great ordeal. It might even become the cause of an all-out war. So you're thinking of buying time. You're waiting for the Imperial forces to arrive."

"I'm surprised…" As Alice faced off against Mizerhyby, she rubbed soot off her face. "You look like you're angry, but is that an act? You seem so cool and collected as you observe us."

"I am livid. But I enjoy being cold when I'm angry."

Even Alice thought that Mizerhyby had analyzed everything perfectly.

She was so sharp, Alice found it vexing.

She and Kissing couldn't use the entire extent of their abilities. If they did as they wanted, the facility would be destroyed without leaving a trace.

……And how would that look to the Imperial forces?

……I can see them deciding that witches are terrifying, then.

She wanted to avoid that.

She couldn't spread more misconstrued information between the Sovereignty and Empire.

"But you've misunderstood. What Kissing and I are waiting for isn't the Imperial forces."

"Oh?"

"What we're waiting for is—"

"You to lose power."

Kissing's eyes glowed.

She had been born with a very rare trait. Her astral crest was in her eyes, so Kissing had the gift of seeing the flow of astral energy.

"Mizerhyby, you have a great amount of astral energy that is large like the sun. However, when you give some of it to your subordinates, you consume your energy, which I can see."

"…"

"This is a war of attrition. Aliceliese and I simply need to wait until you run out of power."

"I'll never run out!"

As she screamed, the warehouse quivered.

Along with her cry, Mizerhyby's whole body surged with the light of Glory.

"You! Will! Disappear now! I'll put a stop to this trifling battle between the royal families. Because I'll be the one to win!"

In that moment, the hate Alice felt for the Hydra flickered out. The passion in her had been stifled as though it had been doused in water, and she felt her feelings subside.

Instead, another emotion replaced it.

"Mizerhyby, I was upset once to the point I didn't know what to do with myself, too. I screamed and did some things I truly am not proud of."

"Huh? Why are you suddenly talking about this?!"

Mizerhyby spread her arms out.

Alice allowed Mizerhyby to glare at her as she quietly faced the other princess.

She had remembered.

She had been angry and shouting. Back then, she had believed that the Imperial forces were fully to blame for the attack on the Queen's Palace.

"Iska, this is what will end our battle."

"We can only feel regret for the fate that forced us to settle things in a way we never sought!"

Yes, of course…

Back then, perhaps when she had viewed Iska with rage, she had felt the same emotions Mizerhyby did now.

But at this moment, she only felt she must reject continuing her crusade for such a meaningless reason.

"Come to me, Mizerhyby!"

That was why she yelled as loudly to the Hydra princess as she could.

"I'll agree with you on one thing. I think this fight between the royal families is as asinine as it gets!"

2

The Lord's offices.

The inside of the facility was more or less empty.

Even the guards from Special Division I generally stood watch from outside and rarely entered the Lord's office.

"Basically, we've got the whole place to ourselves."

The hallways were silent.

Jhin, who leaned against a wall, peered at a screen in his hand. It flipped through different images of feeds coming from surveillance cameras all over the Lord's office.

There were enough for all the floors, 239 cameras in total.

The footage was divided into twenty-four images that were all shown for twenty-second intervals before switching. In other words, the entirety of the Lord's office could be seen in about two hundred

seconds.

"No changes. No intruders. Actually, even if there were one, the Special Division I guards outside would notice first."

"…Yeah."

Next to Jhin, Mismis stared up at the ceiling.

She held a comm in her hand.

She checked it nearly every minute but hadn't received any new information from headquarters.

"Still waiting for news on ex-commander Shanorotte?"

"…Yeah."

Mismis only silently nodded at Jhin's blunt question.

Shanorotte was somewhere within a military base.

Headquarters had confirmed that the ID she had stolen was already inside a base from its electrical signal.

"What is Noro planning…?"

"Definitely nothing good."

Jhin never turned away from the security footage.

"The base is too big. It's the perfect place to hide…but we know what Shanorotte looks like, too. She won't be able to saunter around the base at least."

Yes.

Just like Jhin said, even if she was on the base, it wasn't as though she could accomplish anything here.

All the surveillance cameras suddenly turned off.

"What?!"

Mismis, who had been looking up at a security camera, saw the light that indicated the camera was functioning turn off.

"Jhin?!"

"Of the 239 cameras, 181 turned off. The ones that are still on…"

"There are fifty-eight!"

"Now twenty-seven. Even more turned off."

Jhin put the screen away into his breast pocket and pulled out a comm.

He quickly worked the monitor.

"A power failure… Multiple cables at the base just so happened to cut out without warning.

"How about dedicated emergency generators?! Risya said that the Lord's office has a separate powerline from the base, so—"

"That's also malfunctioning. But the cables should be buried underground."

Jhin was silent for a while. He was looking at the page dedicated to the base's maintenance management system.

"I got it. The emergency generators aren't malfunctioning because of the cable. It's because of unusually high voltage."

"Uh…"

"It's like when lightning strikes and breaks a computer. The high voltage took out three of the seven emergency generators."

Lightning.

The lightning strikes Shanorotte could unleash flitted through Mismis's mind.

"This is bad, Jhin! If this is happening because of Lightning astral power, then the person behind it is—"

"Well… It's not all that simple."

Jhin shook his head.

"The generators have got SPDs—surge protective devices. These electrical surges are pretty common when lightning strikes. The base's maintenance management department would've made sure to have some preventative measures for these situations."

"S-so the SPDs failed?"

"No."

As Jhin looked at the monitor, he clucked his tongue.

"The surge was higher than what the SPDs could handle. I'll put this in a way you'll understand. The lightning strike was a little stronger than what they expected, so the countermeasures didn't help."

"……Huh?"

Something felt off.

Shanorotte's astral power was only strong enough to knock a single person unconscious.

For a spy, that was more than enough, of course, and it was dangerous at point-blank range…but it shouldn't have been more destructive than natural lightning.

"Then this electrical failure is different?"

"Like I said, it's not so simple."

Jhin pushed away from the wall.

He scowled in irritation.

"This is probably Shanorotte's doing."

"What? B-but Jhin, how do you know that?!"

"The base's security cameras are all down and there are only four emergency electrical generators left. On top of that, the electrical lines were cut, so it'll take a while for power to be restored. Those are the exact conditions Shanorotte needs to do whatever she wants."

"B-but the electrical system failure—"

…couldn't have been caused by Shanorotte.

Mismis had started to say, but in that moment…

They felt an explosion from below that shook the Lord's office.

"Wh-what was that?!"

They heard a shrill warning alarm go off.

The astral energy sensors that were still barely holding on were blinking a striking red color. It was the first time they were seeing this in the Lord's office.

"That was pretty fast… So she's prepped to do this, then."

Jhin quickly strode down the corridor.

He put his comm away into his breast pocket and took his gun, which had been hanging from his shoulder, into his hands.

"Let's go, boss. It's the first floor of the Lord's office. Shanorotte is here."

"Whuh…?"

"Mizerhyby from the Hydra has the power to make others' astral powers stronger, right?"

"Wha?!"

That was right. Why hadn't she thought of that?

Even if Shanorotte's astral power was weak, if it was powered up to its maximum potential, she could create a lightning strike more powerful than a real bolt of lightning.

"Right now, our defenses are focused on the astral power research facility, Omen. She's using that as an opening to attack us solo. That's what's going on."

"B-but all on her own…?"

"She doesn't care about her own life. She just wants to land a blow on the head honcho."

In other words…

Shanorotte's aim was to kill the Lord.

That was exactly the type of thing a witch would be obsessed with.

Shanorotte was part of the Zoa's faction, which wanted to burn the entire Empire to the ground. She had likely realized something.

Once Lord Mask fell, she knew that her dream would never come to be.

In that case, she had decided to cast aside her own life in order to kill the Lord.

"Then that explosion we heard below us…," Mismis said.

"There are two possibilities. She either clashed with the guards outside, or she's already—"

The silver-haired sniper suddenly came to a stop.

A gigantic door around the corner had been blown off as though someone had blasted through it with a superpowered laser beam.

"No…way …"

Mismis was so shocked she could barely speak.

She felt her cold sweat dripping down her face as she held her breath.

"This isn't something a single astral mage could do with Lightning…"

"She's not the Shanorotte we knew. We should operate under the

assumption she has as much power as a Lightning purebred type."

Jhin jerked his chin forward.

The remnants of the door smoldered.

The trouble was that the area ahead was split into two paths.

"Right or left, which way did Shanorotte go? She must've chosen one—"

"Jhin…"

As Jhin looked down the two paths, Mismis hesitantly continued. "The surveillance cameras aren't working. If she gets away here, then we won't be able to track her down… So we should split up and look for her."

"That's too dangerous," Jhin replied immediately, not hesitating for even a second.

However, the silver-haired sniper still slowly turned around.

"But it looks like you knew that already. So why'd you propose it?"

"Well, I…"

She placed her fist over her chest.

Her legs quivered slightly. She stared at her knees.

"There's something I still want to say to Noro. But I think if we're together, she might be too on guard and won't listen."

"And you think she'll be more relaxed if she's just around you?"

"I think she looks down on me. So if we meet, I don't think she'll use her astral power or try to shoot me."

"…"

Jhin went silent.

Before he could say anything else, Mismis gave him a reassuring nod.

"But that's all right. As long as she'll listen to me…!"

"You can do what you like when you find her, boss. But you've gotta call me right away, and you've only got until I get there. I don't know how many dozen or so seconds that'll get you, but if it doesn't work out, then give up."

"Okay!"

"Turn on your comm's transmitter."

Jhin headed to the right.

Mismis headed to the left.

Shanorotte had chosen one of these paths. She would be right there in front of one of them.

"Noro…where are you…?!"

Mismis's footsteps echoed as she ran.

She had no idea where Shanorotte could be lurking. It wasn't the best plan to make her movements known while not knowing where Shanorotte was, but Mismis was okay with that.

It was fine if Shanorotte looked down on her.

That Shanorotte thought of her as someone who would do something this careless.

Because then she might stop and listen to what Mismis had to say, even for a moment.

"Norooo!"

"Heeey, Mis! You called?"

Her heart skipped a beat.

It couldn't be.

How could Shanorotte have found her so quickly? It had happened so fast that Mismis wasn't even ready yet.

"Hmm? What's wrong? Why'd you suddenly go silent?"

"…"

"Oh, this? I caught him just earlier."

Shanorotte held a man by his collar in one hand. He dangled in the air as she lifted him up.

He was a black-haired, middle-aged man with a mustache. He was slightly large, even for a man, and probably weighed twice as much as Mismis.

Even for an ex-commander, she had to have incredible strength to hold him up with one hand.

But who was she holding?

It was the Lord's body double.

He was the Lord Yunmelngen who would show up on TV, in magazines, and in front of the Imperial people.

Shanorotte didn’t know who the real Lord was.

That must have been why she had attacked the body double and captured him.

“He’s a fake, isn’t he?”

“Guh.”

“Ah-ha-ha. You don’t need to hide it. Even I never believed the guy on the TV was the real Lord. I caught him so somebody would spit out the location of the real one. That’s all.”

Thud…

The body double fell to the ground at her feet.

Shanorotte didn’t even look at the man as she smiled and squinted.

“Since they’ve set up such a strong-looking man as the fake Lord, maybe the real one is a weak old man? Or maybe just a young kid? Also, Mis, you were promoted to Special Division I? Congrats.”

Mismis shuddered when she saw Shanorotte’s inhumanly cold smile.

“In other words, you know who the real Lord is, don’t you?”

“…”

“I’m so glad that we bumped into each other. I mean it. I’m not lying about how I feel. After all—”

Shanorotte placed a hand on her chest.

She bent forward as though to be at eye level with Mismis.

“I was prepared to die instantly at the hands of a Saint Disciple the moment I got in here, but instead I came across an idiot like you!”

“Huh!”

An intense sound rang out through the space as Shanorotte charged forward.

She rushed at Mismis with the force of a beast.

Mismis used everything in her power to leap back, but they had both taken action at the same time. Shanorotte’s larger physique meant she also had longer strides.

One of them charged and the other retreated.

For every step, the distance between them shrank by a meter.

“Ah-ha-ha. You’re so adorable, Mis! You think you can get away

from me like—”

Shanorotte spun around.

She had felt a strange presence at the four-way intersection of the hall.

It was a bipedal mechanical soldier. It wore a massive armor covering, reminiscent of the Object, which could withstand multiple astral power attacks and bullets.

Over thirty of them stood in the hall.

“Oh? Looks like the security system is up to snuff here. But……”

Bzzt.

A flash of lightning appeared from Shanorotte’s right hand.

The moment Mismis realized what she was seeing, Shanorotte created dozens of lightning bolts thicker than a human torso and a laser beam concentrated at the center of the bolts that flashed as it shot off.

“Could you not get in my way?”

As she cleaved away parts of the hallway, she also slashed through the security cameras and astral energy sensors on the ceiling.

She blasted away every single one of the mechanical soldiers and scorched the back wall black.

“No way…”

Appalled, Mismis looked over the scene.

The lightning bolt had been bigger than what should have been possible.

The flash of light had filled the entire corridor. No one could have avoided being hit if they’d been in Shanorotte’s path.

“What do you think, Mismis? Impressive, right?”

Shanorotte turned around.

She held up her right hand as if showing it off as it continued to crackle.

“Oh, but I won’t use it on you, of course, Mis. I need to get the Lord’s location out of you, after all. I’ll torment you with little zaps one at a time.”

“Ah! Noro, please listen to me!”

She glared back at Shanorotte, who looked down on her.

She knew it.

Shanorotte really did look down on her. Shanorotte didn't even see her as a threat. That was why she would listen to what Mismis said. She was so sure that Mismis could do nothing to her.

"There's something I need to tell you, Noro…"

"Hunh. Okay, I'll give you twenty seconds. But you only get to talk."

"…"

She stared back at the eyes that looked down on her.

"Even I think it's odd, but I still don't think of you as an enemy, Noro…"

"Hmm?"

"So please stop! You are amazing right now, Noro…but the Empire isn't so weak that your infiltrating the Lord's office will actually hurt it! You're throwing away your life, Noro! It's difficult to watch!"

"…Hunh? Are you an idiot?"

The blond witch openly showed her disdain.

Deep wrinkles formed on her forehead.

"Look. You guys think I'm a witch, so that's why I stole an ID from an Imperial forces member, snuck into the base, and came here for the Lord's head. What's the point of you trying to change my mind? Oh, I get it, this is your roundabout way of telling me to surrender."

"But it's not. That's not true, Noro."

"What isn't true?"

"I just…can't hate you, Noro…"

"Even though I loathe Imperials?"

"…"

She knew.

Shanorotte Gregory was born and raised in the Nebulis Sovereignty. She had trained as a spy under the Zoa household and had snuck into the Imperial forces knowing she might die.

She had done it for all her kindred.

She had done it all to destroy the Empire.

Mismis knew that the smiles they had shared since military school

had all been fake.

"You hate Imperials, Noro?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"What about astral mages?"

"What about them?"

She blinked in surprise for a moment.

Then Shanorotte gave her a large, cheerful nod and a smile.

"The astral mages are my precious comrades. Unlike you."

Of course.

Of course she would say that. To her, being an Imperial or an astral mage was mutually exclusive.

"Then…I'm one of your comrades, too!"

"What?"

There was no point in talking now.

Mismis just silently and quickly pulled off her jacket. With her shirt exposed, she used the momentum to tear off the self-adhesive bandage on her left shoulder.

Light overflowed from it.

The green astral crest on her shoulder was exposed.

"I'm the same as you, Noro! I'm an astral mage… I became one."

"Wha?!"

Shanorotte's face froze.

The truth that had been thrust before her was so unbelievable that her heart stopped for a moment.

"How…?" Shanorotte murmured.

To her, astral mages were born the way they were. She couldn't fathom an Imperial like Mismis awakening as an astral mage.

But there was one exception.

"Oh, I get it now."

She let out a sigh.

Irritation came over Shanorotte's face.

"The vortex."

"…Yes."

"You didn't jump in though, I bet. You must have slipped or tripped into the hole."

"That's why I wanted to tell you… I don't think of you as an

enemy, Noro."

She held her left shoulder.

Even as she tried desperately to hide it, the light overflowed through the gaps in her fingers.

"Ever since I ended up in this position, I've come to understand a little of how you felt, Noro. I know how suffocating life in the Empire feels."

The Empire was a place where witches weren't allowed to live.

Astral energy sensors were everywhere, and if they reacted, Imperial soldiers would rush in.

Ever since this happened to me…

Even my home in the Imperial forces' barracks feels like a cage for a witch.

She had no idea when the sensors might go off.

She had no idea when the Imperial units or her coworkers might find out about it. She had no idea how they would look at her. Just imagining it chilled her. It was as though all the blood in her body would freeze over.

"Once I realized that, I wondered what I would even do from that point on…"

As an Imperial forces member, the Sovereignty would despise her.

As an astral mage, the Empire would hate her.

She had ended up in such a position that she didn't belong in either country.

"So as an Imperial soldier, and as someone who used to work with you! I can't help but think of you, Noro, since you're an astral mage!"

The closest person to have ever been in her position was Shanorotte.

"So please, Noro! I don't want—"

"I take back my words."

A bullet grazed Mismis's left shoulder.

"Ow…" Mismis yelled when she felt pain the like of which she'd never experienced before.

Her astral crest had been hit.

It had only been grazed. The very center of her green astral crest had split and oozed a drop of red.

"No…ro…?"

"Say, Mis, I think that I hate you even more than Imperials."

It was an Imperial forces gun.

The former commander fidgeted with the gun with experienced hands. She had likely stolen it at the base.

"Must've been so nice for you. You've got excellent subordinates working for you and a smart superior officer looking out for you. They spoiled you rotten until you got to where you are now."

"Huh?!"

"You get on my nerves! Each and every one of your tepid words!"

Shanorotte flexed the finger on the trigger of the gun she held.

While trying to withstand the searing pain in her left shoulder, Mismis lunged. She tumbled into the four-way cross of the corridor and hid behind a corner of it.

"Gah…?!"

All the nerves in her bones from her head to her toes screamed in pain.

Her bones felt like they were burning.

She couldn't move and collapsed like she had lost all control over her body. She had felt this pain once before.

"Too bad for you, Mis. A wall can stop bullets, but not my lightning bolts."

Thunk.

Shanorotte threw aside her gun; it was out of bullets.

"Oh? What's wrong? Why are you lying there? You did all of this to make friends with me, didn't you?"

Mismis's vision grew hazy. In front of her, Shanorotte leaned forward with her arms outstretched. She acted as though she wanted a hug.

"Come on, Mis. If you walk over here, I'll give you a hug. You like me, don't you? Then I'm sure you'll be able to stand up."

"…"

"What's wrong? You can't get up? Then you definitely are—"

"Don't test me…"

"?"

"No matter how much of a fool you make of me…I can't bring myself to hate you, Noro."

Mismis gritted her teeth.

She just barely held on to her fading consciousness as she tried to lift herself using her arms.

Her limbs twitched. She couldn't get up. She was face down on the floor and couldn't pull herself up.

But she was able to look at Shanorotte with the eyes she was barely able to move.

"Noro…I don't want to talk to you like this… Please…"

"That's enough."

The atmosphere in the place changed.

Mismis heard a crackle. Lightning curled itself around Shanorotte's body like a snake, converging on her right arm.

This was a real Lightning bolt.

That was what Shanorotte's eyes told her as the former commander stared down at her like she was something dirty.

"I'll find the Lord myself. I don't want to see your shifty eyes or yappy mouth anymore."

"Huh?!"

"I'll zap you out of existence. By using my maximum power."

Her right arm glowed a golden yellow.

The Lightning, which was as strong if not stronger than natural lightning, came down with Shanorotte's hand. An earsplitting screech followed it…

……

……Huh?

But instead of the roar of Lightning, Mismis heard the voice of the Wind.

So E lu emne xel noi Es—accept me.

She wasn't sure when or where she had heard it.

It was curious.

Shanorotte's Lightning was so close and roared so loudly.

But she felt the rustle of the Wind was much louder.

That was because…

She heard the sound coming from within herself.

"Commander, have you heard the voice of the astral power before?"

Deep in the past, after promising to deliver Sisbell to the Sovereignty, the princess had asked her that question.

But…

Why had she remembered that at a time like this?

"You must hear something when your mind wanders, yes?"

"That is when you will awaken as an astral mage."

When her mind wandered…

She would hear a voice? And awaken?

So E lu emne xel noi Es—accept me.

Sez nemne Es tury—I will give you a blessing. Uhw kis melras wop kyel eis pheno—a power that connects you to her.

E ema evoia fert Ez lihit—you will become everything you want to be. Xel cia miel bie shel—I will fulfill your wish.

She felt something violently sweep over her.

The green glitter of light whirled from Mismis's left shoulder as it filled the corridor in the Lord's office.

It felt warm.

The gust as gentle as a spring breeze eddied as the lightning raged.

"Huh?! Is that Wind?!"

Shanorotte, who was an experienced astral mage, realized this was Mismis's astral power.

Wind?

But there were all varieties of Wind. There were squalls that turned wind into razor-sharp gusts that would slice through an opponent, or the queen's blasts that could scatter an enemy.

Or was this type of Wind a barrier?

She couldn't see Wind. Attempting to identify it would be exceedingly difficult.

However…

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! You've got the perfect astral power for yourself, Mis!"

Shanorotte gave her a charming smile.

She fired the lightning stockpiled in her arm at Mismis, unleashing the greatest blast of power she could.

"Wind is slow to invoke, just like you! So buh-bye!"

And…

Nothing happened.

"……Huh?"

The Lightning astral mage doubted her eyes.

The raging lightning that seemed to represent Shanorotte's mind flickered out as soon as it touched the current filling the corridor.

It had vanished?

No, it was almost as though the wind had gently caressed the lightning and made it go away.

The lightning had seemed to subside like a bawling child being comforted by a gentle mother.

The lightning had quieted.

"……Huh? Th-this isn't a joke!"

Shanorotte came back to her senses and once again invoked her Lightning astral power.

The lightning collected in her hand and she fired at Mismis, who

remained on the ground. First one shot, then two, then three.

All of them fizzled out.

As the glittering wind touched them, they flickered into gentle flashes of light and disappeared.

"What?!"

Shanorotte was speechless and stood there without saying a word.

All of this was beyond her wildest expectations. She had been bewildered by Mismis's transformation into a witch, but even more so, she couldn't believe this peculiar astral power.

Could this astral power quell the destructive impulses of other powers?

She had never heard of such a thing. She didn't even know of any similar examples.

It must have been exceedingly rare. In addition, it had so easily quelled her lightning bolts, which had been strengthened to the point they rivaled a purebred type's powers. This astral power must have been strong enough to be on par with a purebred type.

"How…?"

She staggered.

The shock robbed her of all her strength. Shanorotte leaned against a wall.

"How could an Imperial like you get astral powers like that?!"

"Is that what you think? I think it was actually inevitable."

Far off in the Lord's office, someone bemusedly muttered some words, but Shanorotte could never have heard them.

"The citizens of the Sovereignty have a bad habit of

believing they were chosen by the planet."

The Lord's offices.

They were inside a structure made of five towers, in the very top of the center structure on a level called the Heaven of Insight and Nonsight.

A charming and androgynous voice with a sagacious tone filled the space.

"Even the Sovereignty's beloved founding Nebulis siblings were once Imperials. It's not odd at all for an Imperial to end up with some slightly rare astral powers."

Clack. Clack…

The silvery beastperson sat among dozens of board games, amusing themself as they sat on a tatami mat.

They were playing both sides of the boards.

The Empire and the Sovereignty. They moved the pawns labeled as such of each side in alternation all on their own.

"This feels nostalgic…"

Lord Yunmelngen's large eyes narrowed into slits. They looked up at the ceiling as if they were reminiscing.

"Commander Mismis… The green astral crest on her left shoulder… I was surprised when I saw it, too. Since I've seen it once before, deep in the past."

Long, long ago, when the Lord had still been a crown prince, the citizens of the Imperial capital had been showered in an inexplicable energy that had come from deep underground. Soon after, Imperials began to find marks appearing on their bodies.

"Ahh, no, it was Crow who saw it. He simply described it to me."

"Alice?!"

"A green mark shone on his sister Alicerose's left shoulder."

The Nebulis sisters were twins.

They had led a mass exodus of astral mages out of the Empire.

The older sister, Elletear, was called their Founder.

The younger sister, Alicerose, had become the first queen of the Sovereignty and had left behind three children who started the royal lines: the Lou, the Zoa, and the Hydra.

Incidentally, unlike Eve, Alicerose had almost never been documented to have used her astral power.

"Alicerose's astral power was the Gift of Wind. She had the ability to quell other astral powers that had grown worked up. She could dilute the effect of combative astral powers and offset them."

Yunmelngen lifted a piece off a board.

This was the Sovereignty's queen.

Yunmelngen placed it on top of a soldier on the Empire's side.

"This is likely the embodiment of her wish for the astral power not to be used for battle. It's the first Nebulis Queen Alicerose's astral power."

Yunmelngen still remembered it.

The day the Imperial capital had burned.

"Knock it off, everyone!"

"We're just trying to leave the country! Please, listen to us. No one wants this war!"

In the world that was filled with gunfire and shrieks, only Alicerose called for peace and begged in front of an Imperial soldier.

She loved peace more than anyone.

"Shall I say it again? I think it was actually inevitable. When the Lou, Zoa, and Hydra bloodlines are vying against their own family for the queen's throne, why would she leave her astral power to them?"

Yes.

The power of the former Imperial and first queen had not gone to any of her progeny.

Her astral power had chosen an Imperial whose circumstances were the same as Alicerose's had once been.

"You can't be serious!"

Lord's office, third tower.

In the corridor filled with the eddying and glittering air current, Shanorotte screamed with such force her lips seemed as though they were about to split.

Every lightning bolt she created was neutralized.

But Mismis's powers couldn't be limitless. Naturally, they had to have a range, and Shanorotte was sure there would be other weaknesses in the power, too. Then again…

"I'm no scientist. I never planned on studying astral powers!"

She leaped toward Mismis.

Then she grabbed Mismis by the throat and heaved her small body up.

"Guh… Ah…!"

"Ha-ha! You're so cute, Mis! You don't have astral power that prevents anyone from hurting you! It's just the astral power that can't be hurt! But it sure isn't useful now!"

Shanorotte felt certain now that she was strangling Mismis.

Mismis's astral power was no threat.

Even if Shanorotte couldn't use her own astral power, she could still fight. She could use guns or even her fists. Shanorotte was so much larger than Mismis, she practically looked like an adult alongside a child.

"Would you prefer it if I strangled you like this or beat your face in?"

"——ah——eii——"

"Oh, Mis? Am I crushing your throat so bad that you can't even talk?"

"Huh!"

Mismis's eyes opened wide.

She grabbed at Shanorotte's wrists, which gripped her throat.

"I…don't need to…win alone…"

"What?"

"As long as you can't use your astral power, we've won!"

A gunshot rang out.

Blood sprayed from Shanorotte's right thigh and right shoulder.

Only two bullets had been fired.

They had come from far down the corridor.

"Agh!"

"Two shots. Since you hurt the boss twice."

The sound of footsteps echoed in the corridor as the sniper with silver hair approached them.

"First at Mudor and now here. Seems like there won't be a third time, though."

"Jhin!"

After being thrown to the ground, Mismis coughed and stood up.

Shanorotte gritted her back teeth as she watched, then she pulled an egg-shaped object from her breast pocket. She couldn't use one of her arms. As she held the object with her functioning hand, she pulled a pin from it with her teeth.

"A hand grenade!"

The silver-haired young man pulled Mismis's hand and tugged her back.

At the same time, there was a flash.

The stun grenade, made for the purpose of quelling mobs, erupted with a loud bang and flash. Once Jhin and Mismis raised their heads, Shanorotte had disappeared.

Ahead of them, they saw a trail of blood from her dragging her leg that continued down the corridor.

3

Omen, first laboratory.

Underground, in the hallway that faced the emergency shelter, a

three-fold cacophony of sound swept through the space like a storm.

Every minute there was a barrage of several thousand bullets.

Then there was the crumble of ceiling and dust rising up as each piece of rubble rammed into the ground.

And finally, there was the witch Vichyssoise's beguiling laugh.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! This is epic! If you keep shooting bullets at me, I'll be full of holes soon!"

"Ugh, this is such a chore…"

A spent cartridge clattered to the ground.

As Mei, the Saint Disciple of the third seat, glared at the floating witch engulfed in violet flames, she muttered with deep-seated irritation.

Countless bullet holes scarred the walls.

However… Vichyssoise was unharmed despite having been their target.

The bullets had gone straight through her.

"Hey, Saint Disciple, I've never seen anything like that before. Is it one of the Imperial forces' latest and greatest weapons? Or is it a special piece made just for you?"

"No idea. Ask the R&D department."

Mei carried a Gatling gun. It was a thirty-sixth electronic-control autocannon—the Ruined King Hurricane.

The gun could discharge a whopping thousand rounds a second working at maximum capacity, showering the target with a storm of bullets, just as its name implied. No astral power had been able to perfectly intercept the barrage.

However…

The weapon had been made to be used against humans.

The developers hadn't made it to take on a monster.

"What's your body made of? Are the bullets going straight through you?"

"That's right. Doesn't matter if you shoot me tens of thousands of times, either. Just give it a rest and let me turn you into ash."

An ember roared into existence.

As it rotated on the witch's palm, it grew large enough to swallow

an entire person. As Mei watched that, she *tsk*ed and retreated.

She was in a corridor on a basement floor.

It was too narrow to avoid the attack.

Fwoom!

The astral flame surged up and licked the ceiling, melting it right before Mei's eyes. Several hundred kilos of rubble rained down over Mei's head.

"Ugh, this is BS! You're not even gonna try hitting me with that."

"You'll dodge it anyway."

The witch floating in the air squinted as though bemused even by Mei's disparagement.

"I hate it, but I've learned my lesson. You Saint Disciples are stubborn and tenacious. Anyway, I never planned to fight any Imperial forces anyway."

"Then get lost. And stop bringing down the ceiling. It's annoying."

"All right. After I finish burying this entire floor!"

Another flame lit in Vichyssoise's palm.

As it grazed the walls, Vichyssoise's eyes slowly roamed around as well, as though she were looking for something.

"I'll bury this floor. I'll put the stairs and elevators and any emergency exits you have under rubble. That's good enough. I just need to make sure you can't get through."

"That's a real convoluted way of getting what you want. You're putting in an awful lot of effort just to steal some research materials on the calamity."

"It's what the Hydra's interim head wants. So all I can do is follo—"

Clatter.

Mei was near a pile of rubble about two meters high. When she sensed a small fragment of the rubble fly off, the witch Vichyssoise opened her eyes wide.

"Vichyssoise!"

"Ah-ha-ha! I knew it, Isk!"

The pile of rubble erupted and scattered.

Iska burst out the rubble swinging his black astral sword. He grazed the witch's skin but ultimately swiped through air.

“I went through all that work catching you by surprise to bury you in that rubble, but you just really won’t die!”

“This is the third time.”

Iska wiped the red liquid running down his forehead and glared at the witch above him.

“Don’t think I’m going to just chat with you. Get down here.”

“You want to finish this once and for all? Don’t think I’m going to play along. I told you I’m just here to buy time.”

Iska and the witch were five meters apart.

Normally it would just take him one leap. He could have gotten close enough to strike her in an instant, but the piles of rubble in the corridor were in the way.

On top of that, her violet flames continued to burn along the walls and ceiling.

……It’s like she doesn’t plan to attack.

……She’s not playing a leading role. Is she really just here to buy time for Mizerhyby?

This was the basement.

The central stairs and elevators leading to the first floor had all collapsed. And the witch was barring them from the remaining emergency stairs.

But why?

Why was Vichyssoise being so haughty?

……Does she really mean all she has to do is buy time? Really?

……But Alice and Kissing are headed to Mizerhyby.

There was a difference in battle power.

Mizerhyby’s Glory excelled in pitting one person against multiple people, but he doubted she could handle both the other princesses.

……No, think about it from the other angle.

……What if, in this situation, Mizerhyby really thinks she has the advantage?

How would she obtain the advantage, though?

“Wait, no!”

The moment he thought of the possibility, a chill seemed to strike his head and go through the rest of his body.

The answer was right in front of him.

Vichyssoise herself was an example of what they were buying time for.

"Ms. Mei!" Iska yelled at the Saint Disciple behind him.

He pointed at the witch floating in midair.

"Mizerhyby is trying to become a witch herself!"

"Wow…!"

"Tsk…"

Mei reacted with admiration, while the witch clucked her tongue.

Her carefree, intrepid mask now gone, Vichyssoise stopped smiling. Her gaze turned cold as her face fell and stopped showing emotion.

"You idiots. You really are idiots."

Vichyssoise floated all the way up to the ceiling and spread her arms.

An uncountable number of sparks followed her.

"I said this was your birdcage. If you only hadn't noticed, I would've been happy to watch over you. I'll just tell you that I won't let you esca—"

"Move."

He didn't intend to wait even a second longer.

If Mizerhyby got her hands on the power of the calamity, he could easily imagine her transforming into something like Vichyssoise or Kelvina.

……No, but…there's also the one in a million chance.

……What if she transforms into a monster among monsters, like Elletear?

They wouldn't be able to touch her.

If Alice and Kissing could take the calamity's power from her, Mizerhyby could turn into a monster of unprecedented proportions.

"Violet Asteroid."

A violet fireball formed, swelling to fill the corridor.

He couldn't dodge this. However…

"You think you can cut it with the astral sword? I already know that!"

Vichyssoise raised both her hands.

Instead of heading to Iska or Mei, the fireball launched into the

hole-filled ceiling.

The concrete wall that was already near collapsing, having been liquefied by the heat of the violet fireball. Once it could no longer hold its own weight, it groaned and crumbled.

"Are you trying to start a cave-in?!"

A sword, even the astral swords, couldn't handle that.

The concrete from the ceiling had to weigh several hundred tons. If that came down, he wouldn't be able to cut through it. In that case…

"Ms. Mei."

"Ruined King Hurricane, start."

Iska and Mei went on the move at the same time.

Iska ran straight for the rubble while Mei told him, "Keep low, unless you wanna lose your head."

The gun that had been made for a warship could shoot one thousand rounds per second.

The Ruined King Hurricane groaned, then immediately produced a storm of black bullets that zipped past Iska's head and blew away anything in his path.

The hundreds of kilos of rubble were broken down into particles of sand.

The liquefied concrete was blasted away.

It even instantly blew away any stagnant smoke.

His vision cleared.

Nothing was in his way now. Iska gripped his astral swords as he leaped from the ground. In that moment, he saw a small dot darker than the night in front of him.

"Ultimate canon—Corpse Magic Bullet."

Vichyssoise created a sphere of darkness that emitted no light between her hands.

"Uh? Hey, what is that?!"

As Mei narrowed her eyes, puzzled as to what was going on, Iska gritted his back teeth.

This was bad.

He knew what this was. That black sphere was a miniature black hole.

Crack.

From Iska's feet—or rather, from all over the corridor—small bits of concrete flew through the air into the black hole.

"So this is what you did that for!"

Vichyssoise had lied about buying time.

The reason why she had been so elusive as she destroyed the walls and ceiling was so she could collect materials for the black hole.

"Allow me to answer you, Isk," Vichyssoise said as she gathered everything she needed to set up her Corpse Magic Bullet.

She took the pieces of concrete and the security cameras that had been set up on the ceiling, even the air ducts along the walls.

She would gather everything around her, press it together, and make a massive bullet of multiple tons.

"This is this third time. Why don't you finally die already?!"

Iska knew he couldn't stop the process.

So what would he do? He had nowhere to run when he was in the middle of the corridor.

Could he cut through the wall and hide in the crack? Or maybe grab the exposed electric wires hanging from the ceiling?

No, then she would aim at him, and he wouldn't be able to escape.

"Now, Isk…"

"Iska Big Bro?!"

He heard a shrill voice right between him and Mei.

Nene had likely heard the destruction from the shelter and come running out the door. She turned pale when she looked up into the air.

She also knew about the Corpse Magic Bullet.

Nene had faced against her at the Lou's villa.

That was why Iska, Mei, and even Vichyssoise herself were all shocked by Nene's instant reaction.

"Move aside, Iska Big Bro!"

Nene pulled out her forces-issued gun and dashed into the corridor.

Her only weapon was this measly handgun. Even if she successfully shot it, she was far away from the Corpse Magic Bullet and her gun's bullet would just go straight through Vichyssoise's body.

It was meaningless.

"Nene?!"

"Move! You're in the way!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! You can't be serious! Is this some sort of joke that's popular in the Empire?!"

She was met with a surprised exclamation, an angry bellow, and derisive laughter.

All three of them had given her different reactions, but Nene also declared, "I belong to Special Division I, unit 907."

Her eyes were like clear water in the winter. She was calm.

"So I know," she said.

A gunshot fired.

That unreliable-looking bullet sped past the Corpse Magic Bullet and grazed Vichyssoise's neck before flying into the wall behind the witch.

"What?"

Vichyssoise opened her eyes wide.

She seemed disappointed and also close to laughing.

"You can't even hit me when I'm standing still? I was kind of excited about what would happen, but there's really nothing to this?"

"…"

"You said you knew something or whatever. What do you know?"

"I've seen something like this in Kelvina's lab," Nene said. The redheaded girl lowered her gun. "This is the astral power research organization, Omen. It's where they research astral energy they draw up from underground."

"What? But—"

Vichyssoise's scornful smile froze.

She finally realized what had happened. Some type of glittering mist was seeping into the corridor from a gigantic duct behind her.

This is an underground floor.

The astral energy that's drawn up has to go through the ducts here.

Nene had shot at the wall.

What if she hadn't missed but had been exactly on target?

"No?!"

At the same time Vichyssoise turned around, the glittering astral energy began to flood the corridor from the hole in the duct.

"Ahhh!"

In the past, when Kelvina had used the power of the calamity to transform into a malevolent angel, she had said this:

"Astral energy, which doesn't have adverse effects on humans, is like poison to me."

"My body is rejecting it."

There was a crash as more rubble fell to the ground.

Another piece fell, then another.

The Corpse Magic Bullet began to break apart in midair.

Because the force keeping the rubble together had disappeared, it was all falling to the ground. Behind the cacophony of the falling rubble, Vichyssoise was silent.

"..."

She had fallen to the ground, unable to even get up.

The vast amount of astral energy was like poison to her.

"An Imperial...ha-ha...used astral power?! That's not even funny..."

Lying face up on the ground, she weakly breathed out.

She probably couldn't even move a finger. Moving just her lips and eyes seemed to take all of her power. Vichyssoise glared at Nene as though she wanted to shoot her.

"The astral powers...are ours, the astral mages'... They're not for...Imperials to use..."

"That might be so," Nene responded sincerely, "but you're the one who abandoned the astral powers."

"Huh?!"

Yes.

Vichyssoise was an astral mage who had abandoned the astral powers after being tempted by the calamity's power.

But an Imperial had used astral power as her secret weapon.

The astral powers had smiled upon the latter.

After a long, long silence…

"Right…" Vichyssoise's voice was surprisingly soft.

It was almost as though she had been released and had transformed from a witch back into a girl.

"I hate…losing to an Imperial… But if this is my punishment from the astral powers…then so be it…"

At the same time, the other battle was also reaching its conclusion.

Like a thread holding her up had snapped, the princess of the Hydra, Mizerhyby, and her guards all fell to their knees.

"…How…could…?"

Mizerhyby fell forward.

Before her enraged gaze was the Lou princess, who was out of breath.

"That most certainly was a tantrum, Mizerhyby…," Alice said in a half-exasperated tone as she wiped away the sweat that dripped off her like a waterfall.

Her face was darkened from soot. Her fingertips had been lightly

singed by flame astral power.

"I would like an apology and recompense," said Kissing, the Zoa princess.

Her glossy hair was in disarray from the strong winds, and her royal garb was also tattered.

A war of attrition.

Or perhaps it would be more accurate to call it a battle to squash your opponent.

Mizerhyby had used her Legion of Dawn in order to launch an all-out attack.

They had used all sorts of astral powers in succession that had been strengthened until they were as powerful as those of a purebred type. Alice and Kissing fought as though their lives depended on it.

"You've fallen and we're now the ones looking down on you. So you realize who the winners are, right?" Alice declared as she held herself up against a wall.

She couldn't stop sweating or feeling cold.

Though she always required a skilled retinue of subordinates to be with her, Mizerhyby's Glory astral power and her legion were that much of a threat.

"I knew your astral power was a joke, but you ran out of energy rather quickly after pouring it all into other people."

"Shut…up …!"

"Why bother glaring at me like that when you can't even move?"

Alice took a step, then another.

She cautiously walked over to Mizerhyby, then bent forward and grabbed Mizerhyby's hand, which held the ampoules.

"Stoppp!" Mizerhyby bellowed.

Though she couldn't get up, her eyes were bloodshot as she gripped her own wrist with absurd vigor to pull back her hand.

"Mizerhyby…you still haven't given up?!"

"Don't…get in my way… I need…this power…!"

She had no grace or dignity.

Mizerhyby had cast aside all the qualities of a princess in order to cling to the ampoules.

"Mizerhyby, why do you want them so badly?!"

"Why?! Hah! How can you say that after knowing what kind of monster your own sister has become?!"

"Guh."

When Mizerhyby had mentioned Elletear, she had eloquently revealed her motive.

Mizerhyby wanted power that could surpass Elletear's. That was why she had sought the power of the calamity.

……I see.

……Then I won't make light of your resolve at least.

Mizerhyby shuddered.

Now she was probably fully out of energy. Alice watched the ampoules slide out of the unconscious princess's hand, then turned to Kissing.

"We'll inform the Imperial forces aboveground that we'll hand off the Hydra princess to them."

Omen, first laboratory, outside of storage facility.

By the time Alice arrived outside with the ampoules, the Imperial soldiers were armed and waiting.

"As you can see…"

Mizerhyby was being taken away by stretcher.

She was restrained with anti-astral power handcuffs. Even without them, she wouldn't have been able to use her powers in her current state of exhaustion.

"As promised, I'll leave the Hydra princess with you."

"Thank you for your cooperation."

The Imperial commander gestured at the tent with a jerk of his head.

"The medic team is waiting. Chief Newton likely needs treatment, but you probably do, too."

"It's just a scrape. Just to be sure, though… Mizerhyby is to be treated as a witness, as promised from the start. She is not to be tortured, and you are not to be violent with her."

Once Alice had said this to the strategy commander, she took a look around the storage facility.

She saw no sign of Rin or Iska.

From what she had heard over the comms, the shelter rescue would take a bit more time.

"Kissing, would you prefer to return to the headquarters tent or stay on the lawn and wait for Rin and the others?"

"I will wait here."

A breeze made her black hair flutter.

"It would be better if Iska was already back, but I don't feel comfortable waiting in a tent full of Imperial soldiers."

"So that's what you mean…"

The breeze made Alice's wounds sting.

She couldn't count all the scrapes on her face, the burns on her hands, and the small cuts covering her body, but in that moment, she could feel each one throbbing.

……I can't begrudge her.

……Mizerhyby attacked this place with the motive of winning against my sister.

She hadn't been able to stop Elletear.

Alice couldn't avert her eyes from such a regret.

"Aliceliese." Kissing pointed far across the lawn. "The Imperial soldiers are moving rather oddly."

"What?"

"What do you think that truck is? It doesn't seem to be from the facilities."

A large truck had been left out on the lawn.

Since it had been left at the facility, Alice thought it might have been some sort of delivery vehicle they used.

"Do you think it's a shipping container?"

The rear doors of the truck were opened, and the soldiers worked as a group to pull the metal container out.

"I wonder what's in that gigantic thing…?"

"Wait…" Kissing narrowed her eyes. "Something strange is inside of it."

"What?"

"I sense something frightening and awful. Something much worse than even being surrounded by ten thousand Imperial soldiers…"

Crack. Crunch…

Right before the soldiers' eyes, the metal container began to warp. It collapsed inward, creating a opening, from which pitch-black gas flowed out.

"What?!"

"That isn't smoke! It's some kind of energy!" Kissing reflexively moved back.

As though in response, a hand reached out from the container. It started to tear apart the sturdy metal like it was tearing apart paper.

"You!" Alice yelled as loudly as she could at the soldiers surrounding the container. She squeezed her voice from her parched throat.

She had no duty to save them.

But nevertheless…

"All of you, get down! I'll handle this!"

Alice had yelled on instinct. She knew that whatever was in the container was a greater enemy than even the concept of the strife between the Sovereignty and the Empire.

"Careful!"

"Something's coming out of it! Everyone, take position!"

The soldiers readied their guns.

Alice and Kissing gulped as they watched.

"Why, my dear Alice. And how lovely to see you after so long as well, Kissing."

A large man in a stylish white suit crawled out of the gap in the container.

It was the Hydra's head of house, Talisman.

He sported what should have been his familiar merry smile.

However, the left side of his face was covered in black fibers and his eye was twice its usual size.

"Eep?!" Kissing shrieked.

After seeing his repulsive transformation and the dark currents that flowed from his whole body that were so similar to Elletear's, like Alice, Kissing had likely realized everything.

"Lord Talisman. You didn't…"

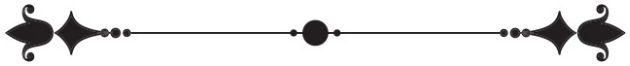
"I have attained it. Now…"

His enlarged eye swiveled around, glinting as it moved, as though it were an entirely different organism.

"What a good girl you are. Hand over those ampoules to me."

Alice had witnessed not the true witch Elletear, but a true sorcerer.

CHAPTER 5



O Glory, the Most Noble Power in the World

1

In the oldest and most deserted tower within the Imperial capital…

Lord's office, third tower.

As she moved, blood splattered along the corridors. The throbbing pain in her shoulder and thigh where she had been shot had almost knocked her unconscious countless times.

"Why…?"

Shanorotte, a former commander of the Imperial forces, continued to drag her leg as she walked.

She had no idea where in the tower she was.

After infiltrating the place with the resolve to kill the Lord, this was how she had ended up.

"Mismis is the only one…with good subordinates and superiors… Why do I…always end up alone?!"

"Noro!"

She heard footsteps behind her.

She felt disgust when she heard the sweet voice. It was the most detestable voice in the world.

"What is it, Mis?"

She staggered as she turned around.

As she expected, the commander with an astral crest stood there. Behind her was her silver-haired subordinate, who held a gun.

"Oh? Looks like I already lost this round of tag. Well, it was bound to happen."

The bright droplets of her blood had made a trail along the floor.

Even a child could have followed after her. She had known that, of course. Even her strengthened astral powers that she had been using as her secret weapon were nullified by Mismis's astral power.

This was checkmate for her.

"Noro…"

"I don't want you calling me that!"

She couldn't move her right arm which had been shot.

She used her left to grab the knife on her belt behind her back.

"Don't," the young man with the silver hair said as he readied his gun. "The moment you lift that knife, I'll shoot your shoulder. I'll shoot your leg if you take even a step forward."

"…"

"A knife can't change things."

"Change things…? Ah… Ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Shanorotte bared her teeth and laughed. As she did, her wounds started to open. But the pain felt comforting to her.

"It won't change anything. But I'm ending things. Like this."

She flipped the knife around toward herself.

In that moment, Mismis and her subordinate likely realized what she was doing.

"No!"

"Hey, wait—"

Shanorotte did not stop.

She aimed for her own neck and thrust…

"Congrats."

That was when she heard a carefree voice.

From behind her came the sound of footsteps that didn't seem human.

"You did well coming here. Though, I can't be bothered to clean. I would appreciate it if you avoided getting my home dirty with your blood."

"……Huh?"

“Oh? Is it your first time seeing me?”

It was a silver-furred beastperson.

The monster looked like it had come straight from a fairy tale. It walked on two legs but had a swaying tail.

“I thought you were after my neck? One would think you’d have done your research beforehand.”

“Huh?!”

Shanorotte instinctively realized that this fox-like beast was the Nebulis Sovereignty’s sworn enemy.

“You!”

She turned and threw her knife.

The blade was aimed directly at the Lord’s forehead, but it bounced away with a dull clatter. Whether that had happened because of the Lord’s thick fur or some invisible barrier, it made no difference to her.

“You’re the Lord?!”

Now empty-handed, Shanorotte picked the beastperson up by the neck.

The Lord was light.

She could pick them up by their neck easily, but the beastperson seemed unbothered even as she tried to crush their throat.

Mismis and her subordinate hadn’t budged probably because the Lord seemed so unconcerned.

“Ah, sorry. That might have hurt when I was human.”

“……Guh! Then I’ll—”

“You’ll…?”

The beastperson looked down at her as she still held their throat.

“You came here intending to kill me, didn’t you? But we’re in the Empire. You think you can escape after that?”

“I never intended to return back home!”

To her, the Empire had been an enemy since birth.

She had lived for this very moment.

“There would be no greater death than to bring Lord Yunmelngen down with me into the grave!”

“Even if I’d like to offer you a place where you would belong?”

"…Hunh? Are you trying to win me over?"

"Just look."

The Lord swung their arms out.

Though they should have been on the verge of death from Shanorotte strangling them, they simply looked down at her, seemingly in no pain at all.

"You destroyed the base's power supply, so the Imperial forces are in disarray. You did catch the Empire by surprise, so you've accomplished your goal in that case."

"…"

"And one more thing. You're proud of being an astral mage, aren't you?"

"Of course."

"Then didn't you feel it instinctively? That I have the same powers as you?"

The Lord slipped right out of Shanorotte's hands and landed on the floor without a sound.

"Just look at me. I'm something very close to astral power. Aren't we comrades, then?"

"You can't— Agh!"

Though she tried to bring her down with all the strength she could muster, her shoulder and thigh rang with pain in that moment.

She heard something dribble down…

As her vision began to fade, she saw her own blood dripping beneath her. She might've reached her limit after losing too much blood, she felt dizzy.

Shanorotte bit her lip as her knees buckled.

"…"

This was enough.

She hadn't even been able to bring the Lord down with her in the end.

As she realized this, the obsession within her seemed to snap. She no longer had the strength to even move, and her entire body started to ache.

"You…"

"Are you talking to me?"

"If you're my comrade… If you're something close to astral power…why are you the Lord? Why aren't you on the Sovereignty's side…?"

"Because there is something only we can do."

…?

Had the Lord just used the royal "We"? She felt there was something odd about the way that the beastperson addressed themself, but…

But she didn't pay it any mind.

"Ha! What can you do?"

"Yes, right."

Lord Yunmelngen raised their head.

Then they looked at Mismis and her subordinate, who had been watching the events transpire from behind. The Lord gave them a wink. Strangely, it seemed the beastperson was used to making such gestures.

"I can make a ceasefire happen through peace talks. Oh, I believe there was someone else who wished for something similar?"

In that moment, Shanorotte heard Mismis exclaim out loud, and her subordinate said, "Of course," under his breath.

Peace talks?

What did that mean? No… Impossible… Not the war between the Empire and the Sovereignty.

"We, Lord Yunmelngen, would be the only one able to accomplish that."

"Nooo!"

Shanorotte wasn't thinking logically.

She impulsively and fitfully shook her head.

"I…it won't change at this point just because of some words! It's too late! Do you have any idea how long I've hated the Empire?"

"Then do you want to be compelled to surrender by force?"

"……"

"Then you can go ahead and try until you feel satisfied. It'll be one-on-one."

"What?"

One-on-one? With the Lord?

Shanorotte looked up to see the beastperson smiling mischievously.

"Hey, Mismis."

"Y-yes?!"

"Come quick! She'll lose consciousness from the blood loss at this rate."

Mismis opened her eyes wide in surprise, and Shanorotte was feeling much the same.

One-on-one? Against Mismis? But why?

"You two go ahead and have your scrap. No guns or astral powers. Listen, Mismis, this is how Shanorotte wants to end things. So accept it."

The Lord spread both their arms out.

"This is the end. Leave all your grudges and anger behind with this."

What was the Lord saying?

Shanorotte truly had no idea.

Why did she have to do as they said? And it wasn't as though Mismis could win against her anyway. Not that small, carefree girl who saw everything through rose-colored glasses.

"Jhin."

Behind her, Mismis pulled off the ribbon around her neck.

"Hold my ribbon and gun. No interfering."

"What? What are you—?"

"Noro, you dummy!"

She wasn't prepared.

She hadn't planned to listen to the Lord at all, nor had she expected Mismis to challenge her to a fight directly.

And so…

"You blockhead!"

"…Guh?!"

By the time Shanorotte realized what was going on, she was screaming as Mismis walloped her with a punch.

She felt a piercing pain in her skull and her vision went white for a moment.

"Do you know…?!"

She felt another blow.

This time it hit the left side of her face, which whipped her head and vision to the right. As the world wobbled, the commander who should have been the most detestable person in the world to Shanorotte was red-eyed and, for some reason, right in front of her face.

"Do you even know how much I wanted to just talk to you, Noro?!"

"Urgh!"

"I don't care if you look down on me! You can treat me like an idiot. But at least listen to me. You're strong, so you can at least do that, can't you?!"

Mismis brought her fist up again.

"Nor—"

"You've got to be kidding me?!"

Shanorotte's left fist made contact with Mismis's forehead.

Mismis was thrown back, but she didn't go down. Just before she fell over onto her back, she grabbed the wall with her hand and kept herself upright.

"You're the one who's getting on my nerves…"

Shanorotte couldn't even wipe the sweat dripping off her as she let out a big breath of air.

"It's always been like that. I was just a little nice to you, and you started following me like a puppy! It's so stupid. You didn't even know I was tricking you!"

"What's so bad about it if I didn't know?!"

"Guh."

"Since I don't have it in me to hate you even though I know

now!”

“I’m saying that’s what makes you stupid!”

Shanorotte brought her fist up.

Mismis did at the same time. They both punched each other in the forehead, shrieked, and retreated back.

They were also both out of breath.

Shanorotte was at her limit, and the pain from her gunshot wounds was still throbbing.

“Imperials and citizens of the Sovereignty will never get along! And what are you, anyway?! You want to try being friends with me? Don’t you have any other friends?!”

“I do!”

“Then just leave me alone!”

Shanorotte couldn’t stand on her injured thigh.

Even forming a fist took everything she had. She felt dizzy from the blood loss and horribly cold.

But still…

“I’d never lose to somebody like you! You’re so weak that your punches don’t even hurt. You runt!”

“Well, your punches hurt, Noro!”

“Wha?!”

“It’s true… You’re amazing…Noro…”

Without putting her fists down, Mismis stood close enough to Shanorotte to punch her at any moment, but she only smiled weakly.

“How can you stay standing when you’re hurt so bad? ……I couldn’t do that. I don’t think I could win…”

“…”

“You’re bigger than me, and put in more effort and you’re more skilled, and sensitive and smarter—”

“……”

“So isn’t that enough? You could at least listen to me, you blockhead!”

“……Guh?!”

Mismis punched her again.

“You… That was dirty! You can’t punch me while I’m listening to you!”

She punched Mismis back.

Mismis staggered and gritted her teeth, then brought her fist up.

They punched each other over and over, screaming and yelling at each other over and over again.

They just kept going, never stopping, over and over.

It seemed foolish.

Why was she going along with something so foolish? Why was she taking it so seriously?

Especially with the Lord right there. Even though her sworn enemy was standing right there, why was she fighting and punching her former colleague until she was out of strength?

"…"

Eventually, she reached her limit.

"You're so stupid…"

"Noro?"

"I'm so stupid for going along with an idiot…"

She exhaled all the air left in her lungs and pushed back her bangs that stuck to her skin from her sweat.

Then Shanorotte fell onto the ground, her limbs splayed out around her.

"Ahh… I lost to Mis."

She couldn't even lift a finger.

She had genuinely used up all her strength.

"I lost. I'll do what you say since you won."

"Noro…"

Shanorotte looked up at Mismis, whose mouth hung open.

Then she closed her eyes.

"You really are an idiot, Mis. You worry about a traitor like me… You're such a pushover… A real pushover—"

That was probably why people gravitated toward her.

That was why she had such amazing subordinates and why a Saint Disciple like Risya stuck around.

Just as the arrival of spring brought all sorts of life with it, Mismis

drew people to her.

"People just can't help gathering… You're like the spring breeze, Mis."

2

"The sun illuminates all."

The horizon turned red.

The freezing night took on the color of crimson, heralding the sun that would illuminate the world. It was dawn, a time bordering night and day.

"Behold, Alice and Kissing!" Talisman joyfully declared, his white coat fluttering around him. **"A new age of knowledge is soon to come!"**

"Ice!"

His voice was closing in on her. His very presence seemed to be pursuing her.

The strange pressure made Alice break into a sweat as she thrust out her right hand before her.

"Wall— Ah?!"

It shattered.

Right before her very eyes, the ice wall created by her astral power blasted away without a single trace.

With a single blow of the man's fist.

Even the Imperial forces' machine guns and tanks hadn't been able to destroy her wall.

"Impossible…!"

"There is nothing to fear, my dear Alice."

Beyond the shattered ice, she saw his enlarged, shudder-inducing eye and smile. She almost felt like vomiting from fright.

"This is the form our new knowledge will take."

His arms swelled until they were the size of logs.

The white suit he had so elegantly worn swelled and, unable to contain his monstrous form, split with a piercing sound.

Not only that, but she saw glowing, blackish-red crystals protruding from the breast of his suit.

They pulsated almost like a heart, but the crystals couldn't have possibly been anything human. Was this really the head of the Hydra who had once been so radiant?

"Lord Talisman! Is this…what you wanted?!"

"Hmm. What a strange thing to ask, Alice."

His neck twisted to a grotesque degree as the man that was once Talisman smiled joyfully.

"It does not matter whether I sought it or not. This is the planet's will."

"Wall—crush!"

The lawn froze and turned white.

Tendrils of ice formed below Talisman's feet, twisting around his legs to bind him. Two ice walls approached him from the right and left in an attempt to squash him.

"Now!" he roared in delight.

Alice hadn't been able to see it. Talisman's eyes seemed to disappear…then the next moment, her three-meter-tall walls shattered.

Had he broken them with just a punch?

That shouldn't be possible. He had cleaved through the walls, which were tougher than steel, as though they were pudding.

……Do I use my ice-flower shield?

……No, I don't have enough time to create it.

She wouldn't make it in time. She couldn't stop him.

"Alice, I am beckoning you into a new world."

"Turn into stars."

Thousands, then tens of thousands of thorns appeared in the night sky.

Behind Alice, Kissing raised both her arms and launched countless thorns from above her head.

They were like meteors.

The terribly dense rain of astral power thorns erased everything they came into contact with. The lawn, the metal container, and even the large truck seemed to melt out of existence.

“How elegant, Kissing.”

“……What?!”

“A waning moon is the most beautiful. Without Lord Mask, the House of Zoa is far from a full moon. But you still glitter in the sky as a crescent. And…ah, what intense, offensive astral power you have!”

As the thorns fell like a meteor shower, Talisman began to run at a terrifying speed, his coat fluttering behind him. He spared none of the thorns a backward glance as he dodged all of them.

Kissing couldn’t hit him.

“So these are your thorns. Anything that the thorns touch disappears… I see, how fitting for someone who fears contact with others. It’s quite pitiful.”

“…Huh?!” Kissing swallowed her breath.

She had realized that Talisman was unscathed. Not a single thorn pierced his white suit, sending a shiver down her spine.

He was toying with them.

“Monster!”

“Monster? Ah, yes, humans only have two designations for things which they do not understand. You are either a monster or a genius. I much prefer the latter.”

Talisman stood before Kissing.

He raised his trunk-like arms, balling his hands into fists.

“Allow me to teach you a lesson. I have reached the pinnacle of knowledge!”

“Ah…ah…”

She couldn’t move.

Because the monster had looked down on her gleefully right before her eyes, she had seen him for what he truly was.

Talisman’s entire body erupted with the dark power of the calamity that had infested him.

“Sorcerer……”

Her whole life, Kissing had only ever felt fear from the bottom of her heart when she faced Elletear, the true witch.

And now she had found it again, another monster created by the power of the calamity. Not only that, but he was a powerful, war-

crazed man. Even Alice's ice hadn't been able to freeze him, and not a single one of Kissing's thorns had been able to touch him.

This was Talisman, the true sorcerer.

"No, Kissing, run!"

"This is my—"

At the same time Alice screamed, delight came over the sorcerer. And…

"I almost didn't recognize you, Talisman."

A black sword flashed.

"And I mean that in a bad way, of course."

"Ugh!"

The sorcerer leaped back.

Though the sorcerer had scoffed at Alice's ice and Kissing's thorns, he shuddered upon facing the astral sword.

"Iska!"

"You're late! That monster was about to make us his playthings."

"Sorry."

Iska couldn't turn around to look at either of the princesses.

He couldn't let Talisman out of sight for even a second. This was the man who would skillfully distract his opponents through his elusive comments, then assault them with his Wave power.

"The tyrannical Talisman. That nickname is a far cry from my true nature, however."

"Why, hello. You seem in good health, romanticist."

Talisman's left eye was bright red and open wide.

Yet his gentlemanly smile still reached his right eye.

The two-faced man, who likely had the most extreme form of asymmetry in the world, raised his right hand in lieu of a greeting.

"This is the Empire. It's not at all odd for you to be present. And I am so happy to see you. I now understand how valuable that astral sword you wield truly is."

"…"

"That is the super-crystallization of astral energy. Or rather, I should say it's the ultimate crystallization. Simply looking at that sword makes the calamity within me shudder. Just how much astral energy must be in there."

"Talisman…"

Iska grit his teeth as he glared at the man who had turned into a monster.

"Do you remember what you once said to me?"

"Hmm?"

"You said that we were similar. You were the one who said that!"

"You need some madness to reach perfection."

"You and I are the same. We are demons who have mastered power."

Though he had said such ostentatious things, Iska hadn't been able to help but believe in those words.

"You said that figuring out the physical conversion of Waves took you six years! And then eight more years to learn it, then another thirteen to perfect it! You spent nearly thirty years on your craft!"

"Indeed I did. Because I am clumsy."

"But that shouldn't be something so easy to abandon!"

Talisman had fought like a demon for thirty years.

Even if those thirty years had been spent without anyone praising the fruits of his labor, once he had put in the work, his identity became that of someone who sought to perfect his astral power. Iska had seen him when he had still been that person.

Iska felt pain seeing him now.

Why had he chosen the calamity's power?

"Instead of the power you spent thirty years building as you fought to the death, are you really going to pick that twisted, destructive power?!"

"Human history is all about the history of energy."

Fwoom.

A shock wave ran through the air.

Talisman was right in front of Iska's face. As the sorcerer brought his fist up, he was so close Iska could hear him breathe.

……He's fast?!

……He's not just fast, this isn't possible for human legs!

It was almost as though he had teleported.

It wasn't as frightening as Kelvina's phototeleportation ability that allowed her to appear anywhere. It seemed all he had done was physically leap to move as quickly as possible.

Since Talisman wasn't using any tricks, that made it even harder to counter.

"We went from the age of fire to the age of coal."

He brought down his right fist.

Iska leaped back using all his strength, and still the attack grazed his bangs. A gigantic crater formed by the fist's impact with the ground.

"From coal to electricity."

He swept his left fist to the side.

As Iska leaped back again, this time Talisman grazed his torso. Iska felt an intense impact against his lungs.

"……Guh?!"

Was that just from the shock wave caused by Talisman's fist?

……It's not enough even if I dodge him perfectly!

……The wind pressure he creates using his fists is enough to smash a person into nothing.

Talisman was using sonic booms.

Those only occurred when something moved through the air faster than the speed of sound, creating a large shock wave and a sound like an explosion.

"From electricity to astral power."

He brought up his right fist.

"And now from astral power to the calamity."

To counter him, Iska gripped his swords and spun like a top. He dodged a blow that would have sent his head flying off his body by a fraction of a centimeter.

However…

Talisman kept assaulting him with successive sonic booms until he lost consciousness for a moment.

"…Ah……"

"Iska?!"

Alice and Kissing both screamed.

He could hear them, but his mind was so shaken that in his confused state, all he saw was the sorcerer calmly looking down on him.

Talisman caught the ice arrow Alice shot at him with one hand.

Then, using Alice's arrow, he knocked away Kissing's thorns, canceling them out.

He treated the two princesses' assaults like a playful distraction as his swollen eye looked down at Iska.

"Mankind is captivated by stronger energies. I have gotten closer to understanding the mystery of this planet. I feel nothing but gratitude toward Elletear. I believe I just need to go a little further…a step, and I will reach the pinnacle of knowledge."

"You're so…wrong…"

Iska still couldn't move.

After being hit with a sonic boom, he experienced a pain so intense that his whole body felt as though it was about to tear apart.

"I will show you the same world I see."

He brought down his fist.

Alice's ice and Kissing's thorns wouldn't work on him. Iska wasn't fast enough with his astral sword.

But then the fist stopped.

"……Huh?"

Alice blinked.

Beside her, Kissing looked at Iska, but he didn't know what had happened, either.

He hadn't done anything.

"Oh my, pardon me."

Flop.

Talisman's left arm fell to the frozen lawn. Iska heard another flop. The right arm had also fallen and seemed to turn white as it withered away.

His body was falling apart.

At least, that was how it appeared to Iska.

"Hmm. Well, this is as expected."

Only Talisman calmly looked down at his own arms.

His left shoulder began to bulge, forming into a new arm, which was even more twisted than the one that had just come off.

"Even Elletear wasn't able to withstand the undiluted solution extract of the calamity's power. It was within my calculations that I might not be compatible. How intriguing. Now, what would happen if I were to inject myself with more? Would my body continue to fall apart, or would that hasten my evolution?"

"Lord Talisman!"

The Lou princess shouted as though she couldn't hold back her emotions any longer.

"Please stop! That form can't be what you truly want!"

Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX had felt conflicted.

Even after confiding in her attendant, Rin, she still continued to brood.

"We need to defeat the calamity. But there's something I need to be ready for in order to do so. Do you know what that is?"

"Are you referring to who we'll need to sacrifice…?"

"I'm sure we'll lose some people as well. But there's something else that's bothering me right now. I'm talking about the dismantling of the Sovereignty."

If they defeated the calamity, the Nebulis Sovereignty would fall.

All the astral powers would leave to go back to the core, and they would also leave the astral mages' bodies.

No matter what she chose to do, only unhappiness waited.

If they didn't defeat the calamity, then the entire planet would be destroyed.

If they did, then the Sovereignty would be destroyed instead.

Naturally, she couldn't allow the former to happen. Though she knew this, she doubted any astral mage could make the second choice so easily.

The options were cruel.

She had agonized over it—until now.

"Lord Talisman!"

Alice yelled so loudly at the monster that had once been the Hydra's head of house that her voice grew hoarse.

"I'll defeat the calamity! I agonized over the decision so much, but you showed me the answer!"

"Oh?"

The sorcerer didn't even turn toward her.

He still faced Iska as he asked, **"And what do you mean by that?"**

"I was worried about what the cost of defeating the calamity would be…but I was wrong. If we don't defeat it, the world will change! Like you have!"

His body had warped. Even now, it was falling apart. The spectacle was repulsive to watch.

However, more importantly, what she truly couldn't stomach was how Talisman's mind had warped.

"I don't think your original self would have been all right with you having the power of the calamity or your transformation. Your mind has been consumed by the calamity, too!"

His body and his mind.

Both were becoming one with the calamity.

"It's not like you. No, it's not like any human being!"

All her hesitations were gone.

She didn't want this to happen.

Even if her astral power left…she would still be her. That was how she wished to be.

"Once we defeat the calamity, no one will know if you will lose your powers days or decades from then, Alice. But I'm not interested in that."

"Even without astral power, you're still you."

Since Iska had told her that…

I won't fear a world where we lose our astral powers, she thought.

"I don't want to see you this way. I want to believe it's precious to live as a human being! So in order to do that, the calamity—"

"What a philosopher you are, my dear Alice."

The wind blew.

No, it wasn't wind but something similar—a wave.

"What makes a human? How is it that we should be? Allow me to answer. I have the answer right here."

It was another sonic boom.

Talisman swept his fist through the air. With that one swipe, Iska, Alice, and Kissing flew like leaves in the wind.

"I am the answer. Alice, I believe you can see that, too."

"N…o…!"

She hit the ground hard.

The force knocked the breath out of her for a moment, and she nearly lost consciousness.

"The future I see, the answer I seek, isn't you!"

O Ice!

Even as she sputtered and coughed, Alice commanded her astral power.

She didn't need a shield to protect herself.

If she could make an ice shield, it was enough to make it for Iska.

"I need to put a stop to your tyranny, Lord Talisman!"

"Knowledge is power. As long as I know the truth, I will be more powerful than anyone."

He mercilessly broke through the ice wall that towered over Iska.

She knew. Even her ice wouldn't buy him more than a second of time. But that was enough. If she could just give him enough time to get up and ready his swords after being blown away…

"My dear, dear Alice, to accept a gracious defeat is what makes a good princess."

"Shut up!"

She bared her teeth as she barked at him.

Who cares about what makes a good princess?

"I only know how to struggle to the end. I'll do it in order to stop you here!"

"Well, then—"

"Uncle, please stop!"

The head of the Hydra was cut off.

Someone's strained voice echoed from behind Alice.

"You…?"

Alice turned around to look at the person.

It was the girl with the blue hair, still in her restraints.

Mizerhyby, the Hydra princess, was a sobbing, swollen-eyed mess.

Mizerhyby Hydra Nebulis IX had been conflicted the entire time.

She had been tormented by a sense of malaise since arriving in the Empire. The emotion that had spurred her on until that point was rage.

She knew that. But…

Who was she most angry with?

Though Elletear had been the direct cause of these events and was the target of Mizerhyby's revenge, the head of the household had been transformed by the calamity.

Then was the true target of her rage the calamity?

……

……But was it really?

She felt something was off.

Though she had thought it hadn't been a mistake to target Elletear and the calamity, in her heart of hearts, she couldn't help but feel some kind of distress building up in her—something dark and oozing.

Who was the true person she couldn't forgive for what had happened?

She couldn't think of anything or anyone except Elletear and the calamity.

She had agonized over it—until now.

"Uncle!" Mizerhyby sobbed and yelled at the head of her house, the person she respected and adored more than anyone in the world.

She had finally figured it out.

This was her repentance.

"I couldn't forgive myself for being so afraid!"

She had been frightened of the witch.

She couldn't help how terrified she had been. That was why she had wanted the same power to face Elletear. But she was really upset at herself for being so weak of heart.

She had finally realized it.

After seeing the head of the family's transformed state, she had realized it all.

She wanted the power to defeat Elletear.

That still held true now.

But what she needed wasn't a stronger power but a more noble one.

"Uncle!" she yelled a third time.

However, the head of the household turned his back on her. He was only interested in his battle against Iska.

So she spoke to his back.

"Even without that borrowed power, you are stronger than anyone, Uncle! You faced Elletear as I cowered. I saw a radiant purpose from you back then!"

"Right now, you're exactly what Kelvina feared. Humanity would live in fear of you."

But her uncle had not.

Or rather, even if he truly had been frightened deep inside, he still had faced that fear to keep Elletear from fleeing.

……I remember.

……That was what I looked up to.

As Talisman had faced the witch, Mizerhyby had found true glory in him.

He had carried a purpose as noble as the sun.

Through this, she had been taught that glory was the manifestation of humanity's courage.

So she shouted, "Open your eyes, my head of house!"

The light shone.

The shadows before daybreak were scattered away.

The astral light of Glory welled from Mizerhyby's entire body.

"You are the head of the Hydra. And the sun must be the most noble of all!"

She bit her lip so firmly that it almost bled.

She ignored her battered, exhausted body.

"…"

She leaned forward, close to collapsing at any moment, and took a step.

She reached both hands out as far as she could toward the two

princesses who had turned to her.

"Re…mem…ber…"

Princess Aliceliese of the Lou.

Princess Kissing of the Zoa.

Though she stooped forward with her arms outstretched, she still reached their shoulders.

"The stars and moon can shine…because the sun is here…"

Show the glory of the light.

She used the last of her strength.

Then the Hydra princess fell to her knees.

Talisman, who had his back to them, noticed none of it. He never even tried.

He had no interest.

His sole interest was the knowledge he would gain from the Saint Disciple Iska's astral sword.

"The calamity is far more powerful than the astral powers. However, that sword is the only exception. Even Elletear was afraid of it."

"Elletear was? You are, too!"

Iska wiped the blood from his mouth.

Talisman's fists were nothing more than concentrated physical energy.

He might even be able to physically destroy the astral sword. Even if Iska avoided a sonic boom or narrowly escaped it, the successive one would hit him.

The astral sword was more or less Talisman's natural enemy.

Everyone had likely sensed that. However, only Iska—

"Romanticist Saint Disciple…"

The sorcerer lifted his fists.

Though his arms had already surpassed their limits while fighting, he was about to bring them down with enough force to threaten his

own life.

“…with this…”

“Atmosphere, freeze!”

A wall of ice that glittered blue formed to protect Iska.

But how would that help?

Talisman’s fists could break anything whether it be metal, diamonds, or even Ice astral power.

Creak.

But his fists that could pulverize anything were brought to a halt.

“What?!”

Alice’s ice shield had stopped Talisman’s fist.

Alice’s ice, which was already harder than steel, had become even stronger.

Why?

Why couldn’t he break it with his fists?

And what was this radiant, blinding light that covered the blue ice?

The radiance of the sun.

The most noble power in the world was contained in Alice’s astral power.

The Glory astral power could make regular astral mages as strong as purebred types.

And so, when Mizerhyby strengthened a purebred type, their power suddenly rivaled that of a true sorcerer.

“But—?”

“I finally got you.”

Something stabbed into Talisman.

Kissing’s thorns were impaled in his chest.

Her thorns had also been strengthened.

They were faster and more powerful than before on an entirely different level. Before Talisman could break them, the thorns began to erase parts of his chest.

“—!”

He let out an unintelligible scream.

Though his body should have been in a state beyond being able to feel pain, he felt it now intensely.

“Kiss—”

“It’s time for you to go down.”

He saw the flash of a sword.

As Iska passed by him, the astral sword sliced through Talisman’s chest, which made up the core of the calamity in him.

“That’s what the princess wants, too.”

“……”

The sun rose on the horizon.

After losing the root of his power, the sorcerer stood with his back to the sun, his eyes empty.

Ahead of where he gazed…

“Uncle…”

…was the Hydra princess, who sobbed.

She was on her hands and knees on the ground, looking up at the head of her family.

“I’m sorry, Uncle… I…was the one who did this…”

“Mizy…”

“Huh?!”

“Don’t be embarrassed by your tears.”

The man in the white suit suddenly smiled. He pulled out a pure white, unsullied handkerchief. With his weak hands, he entrusted the handkerchief to the wind.

“You’re more beautiful than you’ve ever been. You’ve grown into a fine young lady.”

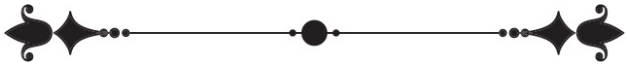
“Uncle…?”

As the Hydra princess looked up, her eyes red, Talisman, the head of the household, slowly fell to the ground, his back still to the rising sun.





EPILOGUE 1



The Sun, Moon, and Star

Empire, capital of fourth province, Visgehten.

Front of Omen lab.

"…"

As the sun rose and its rays of light hit upon her blue hair, it glittered.

Princess Mizerhyby of the Hydra stood still, her hands bound. She gripped a white handkerchief in her restrained hands.

"It doesn't matter what happens to me. I'm a valuable purebred witch. You may experiment on me or execute me as you will. But those two—"

As she said this, she looked at two stretchers.

Talisman, the head of the household.

The witch Vichyssoise.

"Just those two… Those two have enough value that they may live. You fear the calamity. They are invaluable research subjects and witnesses related to the calamity. Allow them to live."

"Chief Newton said just about the same thing."

The princess refused to turn around.

Iska looked directly at her from the side and continued, "But Chief Newton said he will treat them. They won't become experimental subjects, and they won't be tortured. They'll actually undergo treatment."

"…"

Mizerhyby refused to take her eyes off the stretchers. She likely was prepared for this moment to be their final good-bye.

"…So?"

She turned around.

After using all of her astral energy, her face was full of frustration.

"Why would you tell me that? Is it charity? Do you pity me? Are you trying to give me reassurances only to betray me later?"

"It's just consolation."

"?"

"All you were looking at was the ampoule of the calamity. You caused more than enough harm just by taking the researchers at the lab hostage."

"What are you trying to say?

Irritation was in Mizerhyby's gaze. She lifted her restraints up as though to show them off.

"Go ahead say it. You may even be haughty about it for all I care. I can't put up any resistance anyway."

"Then I'll pass it along."

Iska pulled a comm out of his breast pocket.

As the princess watched in surprise, he went through his call history.

"I got a message just earlier, but it's for you, Mizerhyby."

"From whom?"

"The Lord."

A voice came over the comm.

It was unmistakably Lord Yunmelngen's.

"Hello there, Hydra Princess.

"I need your powers. I'll give you a chance to absolve yourself of all your crimes.

"In exchange for fighting the calamity."

The Nebulis palace.

As the sun rose on the Queen's Space, the place was cool and serene.

"It's been so long since I've been here…"

In the center of the room, Sisbell looked over the space many, many times.

"Third Princess Sisbell, I order you to go on an expedition to the independent state of Alsamira."

Ever since then, it had felt like years since she had come back to this place where the brilliant sunlight flooded in, the greenery was vibrant, and the flowers dotted the entire holy space with color. Nothing about it had changed.

If she had to point out anything, it was that after the attempted coup d'état targeting the queen's life, the walls and floors were reinforced more as a precaution.

"Because of the Hydra's scheme, the Inquisition department has ordered an investigation to take place. Sisbell, now that you are back, we will have no trouble establishing evidence."

The queen looked up at the sunlight that filtered through the leaves of the greenery.

In her hand she held a wooden message that Sisbell had given her.

"So you are sure this letter is from the Lord?"

"Yes, Mother."

As the queen narrowed her eyes in puzzlement, Sisbell nodded.

It most certainly was the right letter. Lord Yunmelngen had handed it to Sisbell directly.

"Ah, yes. I had something to speak to you about, too, Princess Sisbell."

"I think you should be the messenger."

"I have one thing to say."

She looked up at her mother.

"The Lord is elusive, but I don't think there is a tracker on this letter, and I do not believe that the Lord has planted a bomb in it, either."

"Well, if you are willing to go as far as to say that…"

The queen gave her a bittersweet smile.

Though her mouth was set in a nervous line, she opened the wooden missive. Inside, she found a piece of paper.

"A blank sheet?"

"N-no, Mother!"

Though nothing was written on the paper, Sisbell pointed at it.

At its center was a small flame which slowly spread over the paper's surface.

"Astral light? How was this done…?"

"This is what the Lord is like. This was done entirely to surprise us. That is the Lord's personality."

The astral light warmed the paper's surface.

What they saw it draw was…

"A world map, Mother! And these three O's must be vortexes? Are they holes that lead to the planet's core?!"

The calamity slumbered in the deepest part of the planet.

Three routes led to it.

The Planet's Navel, the oldest vortex that had formed in the Imperial capital.

The Gregorio, a gigantic vortex that had formed in the northernmost reaches of the continent.

And the third…

"Oh, Yunmelngen, how you get on my nerves…"

Crack.

A fissure opened midair in the room.

The moment a pitch-black line ran through the air, the space broke open and a mighty gust of wind blasted through.

"Ah! Wh-what is this?!"

"Sisbell, behind me!"

She hid behind the queen.

As Sisbell cautiously looked up at the fissure, she caught sight of a dark-skinned girl.

"The Revered Founder?"

Her pearlescent hair fluttered.

She looked as though she was only twelve or thirteen years old, but this girl was the oldest and mightiest astral mage there was.

"…"

"It has been much too long, Revered Founder…"

The queen looked up at the Founder.

Though her voice was reverent, it was also tense. The queen knew that the Founder could be controlled by no one.

She was like a tempest.

The Founder would likely bare her fangs at anyone who recklessly approached her.

But why had she suddenly appeared?

She had gotten rid of the eidos that Elletear had summoned, then disappeared somewhere with Crossweil, Iska's teacher. That was the last Sisbell had seen of her.

"Yunmelngen, I won't forgive the Empire for what it's done.

"But… It seems I have an opponent I need to crush before the Empire. You had better be prepared."

After saying that, she had vanished.

And now…

"Yunmelngen… How far does he plan to pull me into this?"

The Founder let out a loud sigh.

But then she immediately looked down and reached out a delicate hand.

"Give me that letter. That's what this means."

Far away, in the Imperial territory…

In the innermost part of the Imperial capital, where the Lord's office was, in the innermost room…

"Ow, ow, ow! Jhin, be a little gentler!"

"This is the best I can do. Just give up resisting it."

"Don't you give up!"

They were in the Lord's chambers.

Commander Mismis was wrapped all over in bandages, and the Lord watched as Jhin treated her.

"Hwaaah…"

Lord Yunmelngen tried to hold back a large yawn.

"Say, Planet's Will, couldn't you also lend a hand? If we bring in the Hydra princess… We'll leave Eve to her own devices, since she's so moody…"

The Lord looked into the air.

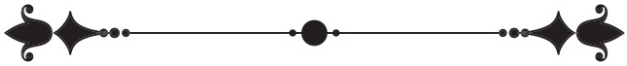
There shouldn't have been anything there.

"One more."

Lord Yunmelngen let out a resigned sigh.

"No, I don't think the sorcerer will help. It's not part of his principles to save the planet."

EPILOGUE 2



In the Heavens Above and the Earth Below, There Is Only One

Nebulis Sovereignty, Central State.

The town was imbued with the morning's glow. There, in an old hotel room in an out-of-the-way part of the town…

"…"

A handsome man with white hair sat on a bed.

Every light in the room was off. The bare muscles of his torso were illuminated only by the light spilling through a gap in the curtains.

"…"

In his hand was a brooch in the shape of a sun.

He had stolen this precious piece of treasure from the Hydra's stronghold, Snow and Sun.

"I suppose you're after the Gregorian Descant?"

"The experiments conducted by the Hydra produce the wildest of beasts. What I want is the original."

All the sins the Hydra family had committed through their research was recorded here, in the Gregorian Descant. He had already finished analyzing all of it. He knew about the "subjects" that the Hydra and the Eight Great Apostles had created.





And more importantly…

"The Gregorio, a vortex that leads to the planet's core, where the nightmares of the planet await…"

If—if the Nebulis Sovereignty's most elite mages headed into the Gregorio to destroy the calamity, they would be annihilated.

And if she herself went with them…

"…"

Mash…

The brooch in his hand began to warp as he gripped it.

"How foolish…"

In irritation, the transcendental sorcerer Salinger crushed the brooch in his hand.

Afterword

"The stars and moon can shine…because the sun is here…"

Thank you for picking up the fourteenth volume of Our Last Crusade or the Rise of a New World (Last Crusade)!

Now that I think it over, I think I wrote this in the thirteenth volume afterword: "This time the three royal families of the Sovereignty, the Lou, the Zoa, and the Hydra, received the spotlight in the first half."

Well, this is the latter half. In the second volume, the Zoa appeared. In the fifth, the Hydra did…and finally, I feel like the princesses representing them have all truly had their chance to shine.

Princess Kissing of the Zoa is making her own way in the world.

Princess Mizerhyby of the Hydra has finally awakened to her glory.

Princess Aliceliese of the Lou has likely made the most monumental choice in her life.

I hope that you'll continue to follow along to see the future the three are heading toward.

And I have one other announcement.

We also reached the conclusion of a very big connection that's not related to the three royal families but is shown on this volume's cover.

The witch Shanorotte, who used to be an Imperial commander.

The Imperial commander Mismis, who turned into a witch.

Now that I think about it, this relationship was introduced in the second volume, where the Zoa were introduced…or I feel it might be a relationship that started with the first queen from a hundred years

ago and has continued until now. This is the second time Mismis has been on a cover. Compared to her first time in the third volume, she's gone through a battle and is beat up, but she seems somewhat cheerful and more mature. I think her expression is proof of her growth.

Though her conflict isn't as intense as the one between the three royal families, maybe Mismis's is the real main story in this volume.

Now that's it for the books.

I have an announcement about the *Last Crusade* anime. I'll announce it again, but Season 2 will be airing in 2023. It's finally starting to feel real…!

I hope that the continuation of the anime fulfills your expectations (and more)!

I have an announcement for another series.

MF Bunko J *Gods' Games We Play* will have its sixth and latest volume out January 25, 2023!

This one has an anime being made, too, and it's been lucky enough to have the most passionate staff and cast. For those who haven't read it, this is a great opportunity to enjoy the original books first!

Now I'll move on to my thank-yous!

To everyone who has helped me.

To Ao Nekonabe—the Mismis cover illustration is a gem on a page!

I can feel how Mismis has matured since the third volume, and I can see her wish in Mismis. It's so tender and beautiful and the vibe is awesome!

I'm counting on you for the next anime as well!

And thank you to O.

Thank you for the novels, of course, but also for the anime, the performances, and the media mix. I'll try taking on new challenges next year, so I hope you'll continue to assist me!

Finally, I have a publication announcement.
Last Crusade Volume 15 is planned for spring of 2023.

It'll be the fifteenth volume of the story between the swordsman Iska and the witch princess Alice.

The princesses of the Lou, Zoa, and Hydra houses are gathered in the Empire. The future of the Nebulis Sovereignty rests in their hands as the time to make the final choice comes.

At the same time, in the Nebulis Sovereignty, after arriving back in the Queen's Palace, the queen herself has a favor to ask Sisbell.

Illumination shows the past.

This will be the story of a sorcerer, and a young princess called the War Doll.

Applause and cheers. Another story about a final battlefield opens, but this one is from thirty years in the past and is full of lamentation after the two never reach their crusade.

Or perhaps this is the volume that will cover the past and future of the other secret protagonists. Please don't miss it!

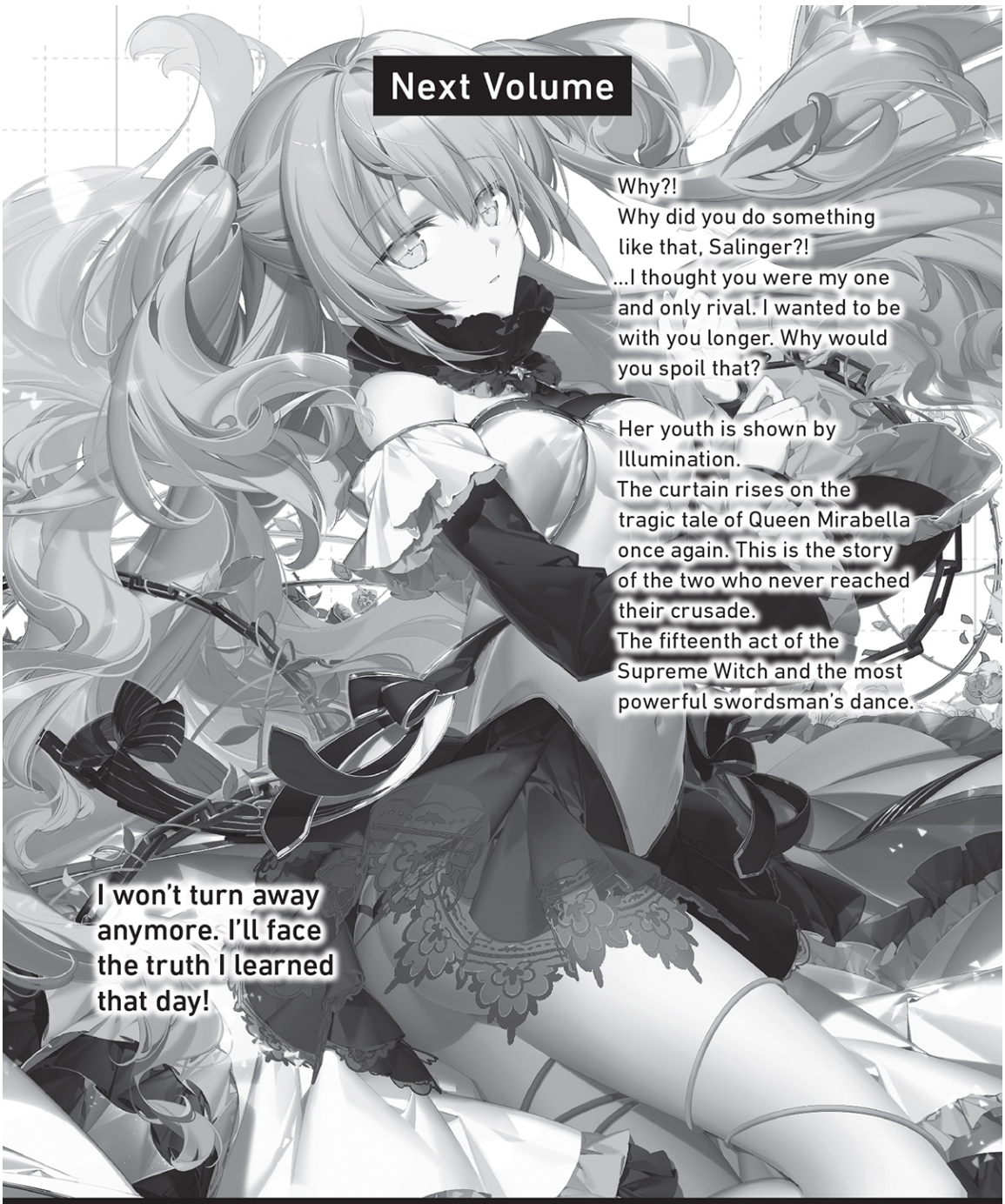
So…
First, *Gods' Games We Play* Volume 6 is out January 25, 2023!
Then *Last Crusade* Volume 15 is planned for spring of 2023.

We're hurtling forward for the anime at full force for both series, so I hope you have high expectations!

Well then, I hope to see you again!

It's already winter before I knew it.

Kei Sazane



Our Last CRUSADE OR THE RISE OF A New World

VOLUME 15

Coming soon from Yen On!

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Our Last Crusade or The Rise of A New World 14

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