



Our Last **CRUSADE**

OR THE RISE OF A

New World

13

KEI SAZANE

Illustration By

Ao Nekonabe

A full-page illustration of a young woman with long, flowing blue hair and pink eyes. She is wearing a white dress with blue ruffles and a large yellow and orange bow at the waist. She is surrounded by large purple roses and falling petals. The background is a mix of white, blue, and yellow. In the top right corner, there is a logo for 'Our Last CRUSADE' with the subtitle 'OR THE RISE OF A New World'.


Our Last
CRUSADE
OR THE RISE OF A
New World

“Now I will show
you the most
sublime power in
the world.”

Mizerhyby Hydra Nebulis IX

Member of one of the three Nebulis royal families and the Hydra's next queen candidate. Holds the astral power of Glory and is traveling with Talisman and Vichyssoise to the planet's core.





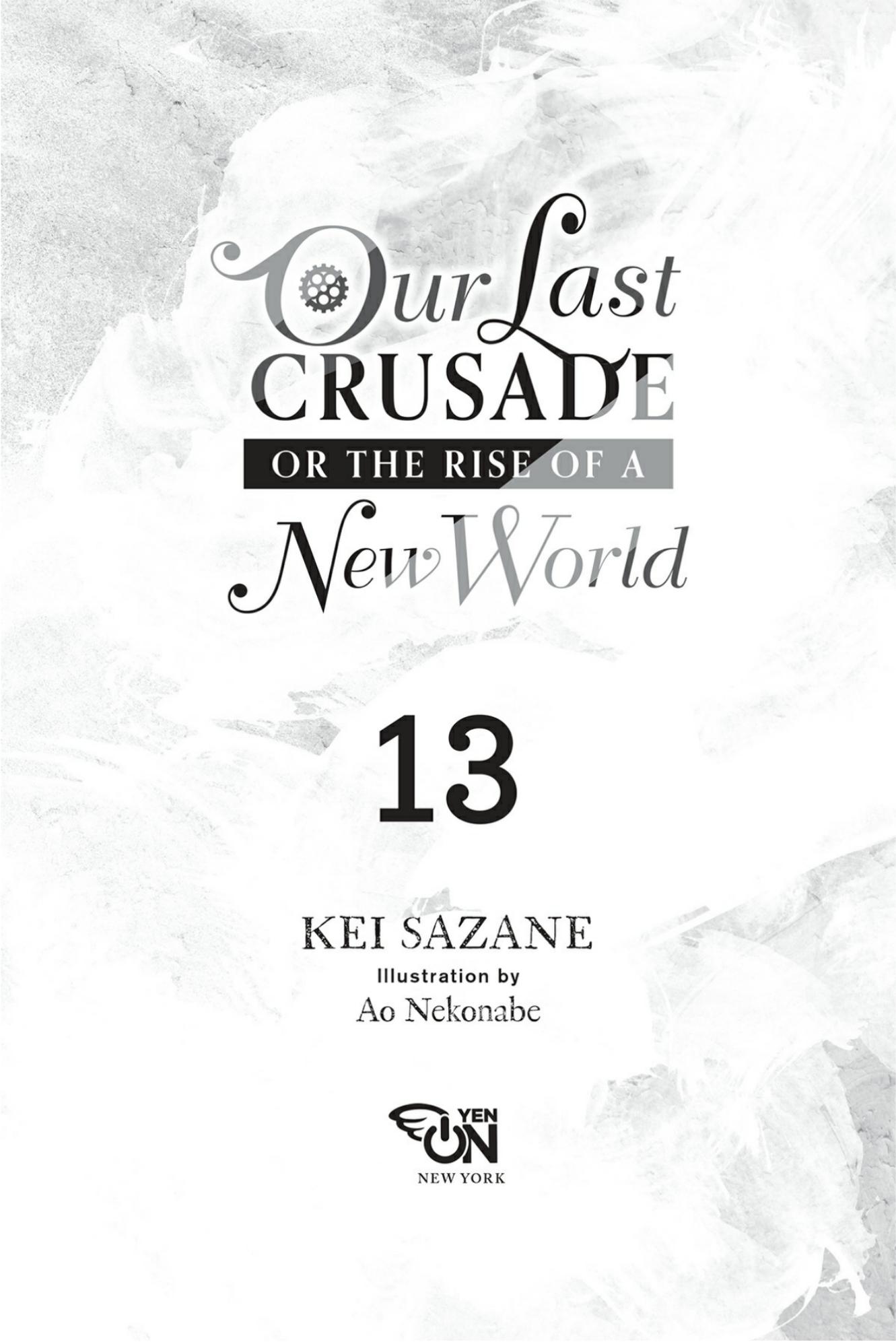
“I don’t even have any
powers to lose.”

Iska

A young swordsman in Unit 907 of the Imperial forces and a former Saint Disciple. Has arrived at his own decision about the coming future.

Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX

The second Nebulis princess. Ponders what the future of the astral mages will be like after the calamity hiding inside the planet is defeated.



Our Last
CRUSADE
OR THE RISE OF A
New World

13

KEI SAZANE

Illustration by
Ao Nekonabe


NEW YORK

Copyright

Our Last Crusade or The Rise of A New World 13

KEI SAZANE

Translation by Jan Cash

Cover art by Ao Nekonabe

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

KIMI TO BOKU NO SAIGO NO SENJO, ARUIWA SEKAI GA HAJIMARU SEISEN
Vol. 13

©Kei Sazane, Ao Nekonabe 2022

First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo,
through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2024 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com

facebook.com/yenpress

twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: July 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Maya Deutsch

Designed by Yen Press Design: Liz Parlett

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Cataloging in Publication data is on file with the Library of Congress.

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-7005-3 (paperback)

978-1-9753-7006-0 (ebook)

E3-20240702-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Prologue 1: End of the Zoa](#)

[Prologue 2: All My Thorns](#)

[Chapter 1: Like a New Couple](#)

[Chapter 2: The Moon Mounts an Assault](#)

[Chapter 3: The Corrupted Land](#)

[Chapter 4: The Entire Planet's Memories](#)

[Chapter 5: Too Much Suffering to Call a Happy Ending](#)

[Chapter 6: Evils Near Unspeakable](#)

[Epilogue 1: What Are You Saying Happened?](#)

[Epilogue 2: The Great Sun](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

So Se lu, Ec I nes flan-I-dizis.

Your world is cold and dark.

Be-lit E yum haul getis corna-Te-xeo noi bie phia, *There, you start a flame that
burns itself out,*

hiz mis cia dia noi bie flow lef Ec girid.

but in the glow of your light, someone will surely begin to walk forward.

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.

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

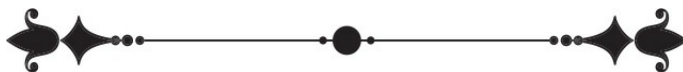
Eldest princess of Nebulis. Focused on traveling abroad. Often absent from the palace.

Our Last **CRUSADE** *New World* OR THE RISE OF A

CONTENTS

Prologue 1	End of the Zoa
Prologue 2	All My Thorns
Chapter 1	Like a New Couple
Chapter 2	The Moon Mounts an Assault
Chapter 3	The Corrupted Land
Chapter 4	The Entire Planet's Memories
Chapter 5	Too Much Suffering to Call a Happy Ending
Chapter 6	Evils Near Unspeakable
Epilogue 1	What Are You Saying Happened?
Epilogue 2	The Great Sun
<i>Afterword</i>	

PROLOGUE 1



End of the Zoa

The Zoa are gone.

Those words echoed in her mind over and over again, like the toll of a church bell.

“Impossible...”

She was Shanorotte Gregory.

Born with a powerful constitution and strong astral powers, she had volunteered herself for a mission to infiltrate the barbaric Imperial forces. That was to say, she had lived her life as a perpetual spy, leaking Imperial secrets to the Sovereignty.

But at that moment...

...she could only watch as the Zoa’s most elite members were hauled off by the Imperial forces one by one.

None of her compatriots so much as resisted. She was unsure whether they were dead or simply unconscious. The ten or so of her allies who had disguised themselves as businesspeople were carted into the aircraft.

They were now prisoners of war.

.....*What happened?*

.....*We were supposed to rendezvous here! What happened to them all?!*

Imperial territory, eighth checkpoint. The Zoa had planned to infiltrate this checkpoint and enter the Imperial capital. But by the time Shanorotte arrived, everyone involved in the operation had been taken into custody.

Among the prisoners was a man wearing a metal mask.

Lord Mask On.

He was the temporary head of the Zoa household and the mastermind of the Imperial invasion plan. Yet now he was a captive of the very Empire that had been the target of his subterfuge. Even he was being dragged off.

Only a single noteworthy member of the Zoa was missing: Princess Kissing, their secret weapon. Shanorotte couldn't imagine the girl would flee on her own.

"What happened here...?"

She was near the entrance of the eighth checkpoint.

Just watching from the brush was already as much as she was capable of. The shock had left her weak in the knees. Then she lost the ability to even hold herself up, and her legs gave way.

"We lost...?"

Everything seemed to fall away. In that moment, the loyalty and absolute trust she had built up for the Zoa, one of the three Nebulis royal families, dropped off like collapsing building blocks.

They had lost.

She had no way of knowing what had transpired, but the Zoa had likely been defeated by the Imperial forces.

In other words, by their sworn enemy.

"..."

Her vision grew blurry.

And...

"Ah... Ha-ha..."

A dry, self-deprecating laugh escaped her lips.

"We were idiots... What was the point of everything I've done...? I disguised myself as a despicable Imperial and even acted as a spy in the forces... I did my part."

She had done everything she could.

Despite being from the Sovereignty, she had lived as one of the very Imperials she despised.

She had pretended to be one of the abominable people who called her kind—the astral mages—witches.

She had endured the mortification.

Shanorotte had even helped the Imperials attempt to secure the vortex in Mudor Canyon. During the operation, she led an advance unit as an Imperial commanding officer and leaked the forces' movements to the Zoa. The mission had been extremely dangerous, yet her loyalty to the Zoa had compelled her to see it through.

But now all her suffering meant nothing.

"Must be nice, being in the Imperial forces right now..."

She stifled a cackle and watched as the aircraft carrying the Zoa's elite forces took off one after another.

"Looks like the Imperial forces ended up being superior to the Zoa family after all..."

She couldn't allow any deed to go unpunished.

She couldn't excuse the Imperial forces, of course, but the upper echelons of the Zoa family weren't innocent, either.

This was *her* error.

She had believed that martyring herself to the Zoa's cause would eventually allow her to take revenge on the Imperials, yet they were annihilated just as their goal was in sight.

The royal family and the purebred types—all of them.

She never should have believed them.

All useless.

The members of the royal family were simply mages who had been born with stronger astral powers. But one could only be so ill-prepared for a battle. Had

she known what folly that would lead to, she never would have followed them in the first place.

“Guess I’ll just go it alone...”

She planted a hand on her knee, rising unsteadily to her feet.

The Imperial forces had left. Some personnel had stayed behind to staff the checkpoint, but she could easily slip past them.

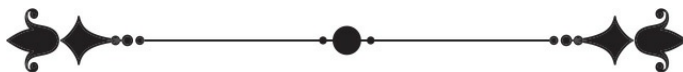
She would go all on her own into the Empire.

“Well, who’ll I take down with me...?”

Her allegiance to the Nebulis’s royalty ended there.

But her desire for revenge against the Empire would be everlasting.

PROLOGUE 2



All My Thorns

It was fantastical.

That was the only way to describe the scene.

The black-haired girl stood out hazily against the moonlight.

She was both captivating and ethereal. She looked so fantastical that she could have easily served as a muse in a painting.

However...

The girl fell to her hands and knees.

"I surrender."

Iska stared down at her in dumbfounded amazement.

He was holding his astral swords. Until moments ago, he had been battling against her.

"I wanted to test your abilities. I apologize for my impoliteness," the girl said.

He knew she would have rather died than utter those words in the past.

He was Iska, an Imperial soldier.

And she was Kissing Zoa Nebulis IX, an Imperial princess.

In other words, a Sovereign princess had lowered her head to an Imperial soldier. Iska knew the mere act of bowing to him was torture for her. This couldn't be an act.

"Please fight the witch Elletear alongside me. I will offer you all my thorns."

Kissing was the Purebred of Thorns.

The several thousand purple thorns she had produced simultaneously clattered to the ground. Her ghastly astral power allowed her to wield thorns that erased any matter they came into contact with.

Even now, the walls of the Imperial training area were dotted with gaping holes from Kissing's thorns.

Silence hung between Kissing and Iska.

The black-haired girl held her head down and didn't so much as budge.

In that moment, Iska couldn't even utter a sound.

Kissing waited for his answer, and the Imperial soldier failed to find one.

"Yo, Isk!"

A cheerful voice broke the silence of the training grounds.

Then he heard footsteps.

Through a gigantic hole in the wall from which the moon was visible, he spied a feral-looking female soldier. She jumped through the hole, landing right in front of them.

"Mei?"

"Heard that a witch girl was going on a rampage around here! I've been waiting for this!"

She was the Saint Disciple of the third seat, Mei the "Incessant Tempest."

Her hair was unkempt, and her skin was tan. The glimpses of her arm that her combat uniform offered revealed muscle as strong as steel. There was something catlike—and predatory—about her.

Her eyes glinted ferociously.

"Heard she was pretending to be good during the day when she went through questioning. So she's finally shown her true colors? All right, girlie, this is where your life... Huh?"

Mei blinked in surprise.

It seemed she had finally noticed Kissing wasn't putting up any resistance. The

witch hadn't budged from her position on the ground.

"Hmm? Far as I heard, the black-haired witch escaped and went on an uncontrollable rampage. Didja strike her down and make her bow to you or something, Isk?"

"Uh, about that..."

He had also rushed over.

Kissing, the Purebred of Thorns, *had* been going berserk. Upon hearing that, he'd hurried over under the assumption that he would find massive casualties at the Imperial base, but when he got there...

"Apparently, she only did this to test my skills..." Iska said.

"What?"

"I'm glad you came over as soon as you could, too... But, uh...as you can see, she's fully surrendered and doesn't seem to intend to fight."

"But I ran all the way over here!"

Mei let out a long sigh.

She and Kissing had no ordinary connection. They were meant to battle to the death.

"I am Kissing Zoa Nebulis IX."

"How about I teach you why I'm called the Incessant Tempest?"

Their fates had been sealed when the Imperial forces had tried to attack the Nebulis palace as part of a covert operation.

Mei and Kissing had engaged in mortal combat with each other at the Moon Tower. Iska figured that Mei had only run all the way over for a rematch.

"Haah, this blows..."

Mei looked up at the sky.

The witch wasn't putting up any resistance. She'd taken all the fun out of fighting for Mei.

"Okay, okay. Let's get this going. I'll just keep watch from over here, so you

apprehend her, Isk.”

Mei sat down on the rubble and urged him to hurry it up.

However...

Before he could do that, Iska had a question for the witch.

“Kissing, why me?”

“Um.” The black-haired girl shuddered.

“The Zoa planned to attack the Empire. You were taking advantage of the Founder’s awakening. But they were annihilated when they ran into Elletear... So if you want revenge on her, why would you choose me?”

“...”

“There should still be other members of the Zoa royal family in the Sovereignty. So why would you ask an Imperial soldier like me for help?” he asked Kissing, who was keeping her head down.

Until she offered him a response he could accept, he couldn’t simply go along with her request.

“I...,” the Zoa princess said, beginning to speak, “...saw Elletear’s astral power.”

“...What did you just say?”

“No one knows the nature of that witch’s power. But when she used it against us, my uncle saved me alone, allowing me to escape its range.”

“Oh, hey. Now this I’ve gotta hear.” Mei, who had been silent until then, languidly shifted. She still had her chin propped in her hand as she raised her head. Her eyes glinted dangerously. “It must’ve been the same move she used back then, right? At the base, where she made all my people start catchin’ z’s. So nobody’s been able to find out what her powers do. But you’re saying that *you* know what it is?”

“It’s her voice.”

“Hmm?”

“Elletear Lou Nebulis’s astral power is called ‘Voice.’ But during our

encounter, she said that she'd evolved it into the astral power of Song."

"Listen to the world's last witch and the blight of her song."

"I will let you listen to the requiem of the planet."

"You're telling me a song did that?! They all just flopped over when they listened to it?!"

"Yes." Kissing's reply came quickly. "Everyone who heard her song fainted. They went down, one after another...even Uncle. I could find no way to protect myself. My thorns cannot guard me against sound. My automatic astral defenses didn't even react. Elletear's song—her curse—can slip through any manner of fortification."

"It bypasses them?" A chill ran down Iska's back.

Did that mean there was no escape from Elletear's astral power once someone was in range? Would hiding behind steel shutters and gigantic fortifications still not save them?

.....If this is true, then we're basically done for if she uses her power.

.....We'll have no way of defending ourselves.

Even the Imperial forces' defense system would be useless...

Elletear's power could bypass the abilities of any astral mage from the Sovereignty. And it had an unbelievable area of effect.

"But..." The Zoa princess raised her head, imploring Iska with her eyes from her position on the ground. "I think your swords could still cut through her."

"I see..."

Then he understood.

He knew why she had chosen him; why a Zoa princess would surrender and prostrate herself before an Imperial.

It was because the only thing Elletear feared were the astral swords in his possession.

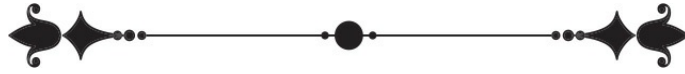
"Ah, that hurt..."

“It’s just like Kelvina said. My natural enemy would be incredibly high purity astral energy. And if the astral swords are the most potent form of it, I see that it’s true.”

“I, Kissing Zoa Nebulis IX, capitulate to the Empire. I—”

She lowered her head again, pressing her small forehead into the cold earth as she said in a quavering voice, “I will not allow that witch to get away with this.”

CHAPTER 1



Like a New Couple

1

The Empire accepted the surrender of Nebulis Sovereignty Princess Kissing.

Since the princess had confessed and showed no desire to fight, they decided to hold her at the Imperial forces' base. But she was still the Witch of Thorns. Consequently, the Lord ordered the Saint Disciple of the third seat to accompany and supervise Kissing for the duration of her stay.

"So there you have it. Simply put, she's to be treated as a guest—who will be watched, of course."

The sound of their footsteps echoed through the hall. Risyā's tone was blithe as she walked down the Lord's deserted offices.

"Besides, we already have two other guests under supervision with us—Princess Aliceliese and Princess Sisbell. Now there will just be three. There are plenty of empty rooms in the Lord's office for them."

"...That's unexpected."

"Unexpected how, Isk?" Risyā turned around, giving him a curious look.

Iska forced a smile.

"I was sure you'd say something like 'I hope things don't get any busier around here.'"

"Nah. None of this is under my jurisdiction." Risyā nonchalantly waved her hand. "Mei is watching Princess Kissing. And you and Unit 907 are watching

princesses Aliceliese and Sisbell. I don't need to do anything."

"That might be true, but still..."

"Besides, this is in my best interest. Kissing is an important witness—she's the only person who's seen Elletear's astral power and is still lucid."

Elletear's astral power, Song. Her singing could overcome any barrier and doom anyone who heard it to eternal slumber. They had yet to find a way of rousing people who had been put to sleep.

"The Lord will probably have more specifics about what we'll do."

Beyond the glass corridor they were walking down was the topmost floor of a collection of four buildings known as the Heaven Between Insight and Nosight. The three other members of Unit 907 were there already, standing in front of the large reception hall that served as the Lord's chambers.

"Oh, Risy, Iska! You're late!" Commander Mismis, their blue-haired leader, crossed her arms and stared at them with exasperation.

Behind her were Jhin and Nene.

"C'mon, Risy, you're the one who told us to be on time for the meeting with Their Excellency!" she said.

"I only said it'd be in the afternoon," Risy replied.

"Yeah, and it's already twelve thirty!"

"I was having Isk do an interrogation. I mean, who wouldn't be worried about the Witch of Thorns breaking out and going after him? But it turns out our fears were unfounded." Risy shrugged. "We've got Mei keeping an eye on her, but Kissing's done a one-eighty since last night. She's even answering our questions now. I guess she wasn't lying about surrendering to the Empire. I only hope the princesses will all keep being this cooperative. It'll sure make things easier."

"Hey, Imperial!" A sharp shout rang through the hall. Rin glared at Risy from behind Commander Mismis. "Are you trying to start something? I have no idea what Lady Kissing is trying to do, but neither Lady Alice nor Lady Sisbell will bow to the Empire. So you'd do well not to assume they'll do the same."

"Oops, how rude of me. Did that bother you?" Risy smiled wanly. She looked

ahead at the three astral mages.

Rin, the attendant, continued to glower at Risya. With her were Princess Aliceliese, whom she had sworn her loyalty to, and Aliceliese's sister, Sisbell.

"Princess Aliceliese and Princess Sisbell are our valued guests. I understand that perfectly well," Risya said.

"That's not exactly what I was hoping for..." Alice sighed abruptly, crossing her arms wearily under her ample bosom. "All I want to do is to talk to the Lord. I want to figure out how Elletear ended up the way she did. In fact, I *need* to figure that out, to stop her."

"I fully agree," Sisbell chimed in. "I heard about Princess Kissing, but that's the Zoa's business. It has nothing to do with us."

The Zoa wanted revenge. By contrast, the two Lou princesses were intent on stopping the atrocities their sister was committing. Though they had both pledged to bring down Elletear, their motives were entirely different.

"So. May we go inside?" Sisbell pointed at the door. "It's closed."

"Oh, you're right. It's usually gets left open... I wonder..."

The moment Risya flung open the two sliding doors, the sharp scent of rushes wafted out from inside. The chamber had been outfitted with dozens of tatami mats. A catlike beastperson was curled into a ball in the center of the hall.

This was Lord Yunmelngen. The Lord was one of the people who had been bathed in the astral power of the world's first vortex. Though the exposure had transformed them into something other than human, the Lord was still the leader of the Empire.

"Oh no..." Risya looked down at the sleeping beastperson, then turned to the heavens. "The Lord is fast asleep. They must be tuckered out from using Phage, the Planet's Defense, to fight Elletear. It'll be days before they wake up."

"What?!"

"You never mentioned this could happen!"

Rin's and Sisbell's eyes widened.

“W-wait! Is the Lord really asleep?!” Alice went up to the Lord as fast as she could and stared intently at the curled-up beastperson. “Can we wake them...?”

“You can try, but it won’t work. Once Their Excellency gets like this, they’re impossible to wake up. A missile could blow up a few meters away from them, and they would still stay asleep.”

“But this isn’t what we discussed!”

It was no wonder that Alice was getting worked up. She was on enemy soil. She must have wanted to go back to the Sovereignty as soon as possible.

I’ll tell you the secret behind your older sister’s transformation.

They had all gathered here because they’d believed the Lord’s promise.

“Lady Alice, would you like to go back to the Sovereignty?” Rin asked unassumingly. “I can stay here and wait for the Lord to tell us what happened to Lady Elletear. I’m sure that Her Majesty is worried for you and Lady Sisbell, so you should leave quickly, to—”

“No, we can’t do that.” Alice shook her head. Then she looked at Risya, who was standing across from her on the opposite side of the Lord. “You said it would be a few days? Are you sure about that?”

“If the Lord doesn’t wake up, then it’ll be an issue for me, too. We can’t have them sleeping for months on end.”

“...”

The two women faced each other.

Their gazes locked in a stare, almost as though they were waging a cold war, as they silently waited for the other to act first. Alice was the first to look away. “Let’s stay.”

Rin and Sisbell turned to her and nodded.

“We need to hear what the Lord has to say. I don’t know whether it’ll be a few days or a whole week, but I think we should wait until they wake up.”

“Leave this to me, Princess Aliceliese.” Risya flashed a businesslike smile. “I’m sure you’ll be bored until Our Excellency wakes, but at the least, you won’t be

uncomfortable.”

2

The Lord’s office, second building, fourth floor. The place was almost entirely deserted, without a single worker in sight. Only the automated cleaning machine whirred as it scrubbed the hallway.

“Okay, this is the last time we’ll check in!” Commander Mismis clapped her hands. “Starting today, we’re out of Special Division III and joining Special Division II! And our first task is to look after Miss Alice, Miss Sisbell, and Miss Rin.”

“By ‘look after,’ you mean keep tabs on them,” Jhin continued seamlessly. “Two Sovereign princesses and an attendant. Normally, we’d need way more than the four people to keep guard over them. And we’re already short-staffed as it is.”

This was because of the witch Elletear’s raid. After eliminating the Eight Great Apostles, she had gone straight to attacking the Imperial forces’ base, leaving many casualties in her wake.

They didn’t have enough soldiers to mobilize. Tending to the wounded and reorganizing the chain of command was the priority now.

With their colleagues occupied, Unit 907 would have to watch over their guests on their own.

“So let’s get to the important part: How are we divvying up the work?”

“Jhin, Ms. Risya already decided that for us!” Nene pulled out her comm.

She checked the message on the screen.

“I’ll just read it for you,” she said. “Unit 907 is responsible for Princess Aliceliese, Princess Sisbell, and their attendant, Rin. Isk should focus on surveilling Princess Aliceliese and Rin, since they have the greatest combat ability. Jhin-Jhin, you help him out by watching the feed from the security cameras.”

“I don’t have a problem with that. How about you, Iska?”

“I think I’m fine with that, too.”

It sounded just like the type of proposal that Risya would make.

.....We’re separating the three of them based on combat ability.

.....I bet Risya’s thinking we can use Sisbell, who can’t fight, as a hostage if we need to.

They were going to separate Sisbell from the others. Even if the other two girls went on a rampage through the capital, they could use Sisbell to make them stop.

“Then Miss Sisbell is with me and Nene...” Commander Mismis nodded demurely. “Yeah... That seems good.”

“Captain?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, Iska. Just a little personal thing.” Commander Mismis smiled, then turned to Nene.

“Miss Sisbell has gotten up to some mischief in the past... We’ll need to keep a close eye on her.”

“If we let our guards down...she’ll sneak right into Iska’s or Jhin’s room... Ha-ha...,” Nene said.

The two were whispering to each other. Their voices were so quiet that it sounded like they didn’t want anyone else to overhear.

“Iska.”

Suddenly, Jhin interrupted Mismis and Nene’s conversation. That was unusual, even for him.

“I need to make sure you know this. Or rather, that you keep this in mind,” he said.

“What is it, Jhin?”

“...” The silver-haired sniper hesitated. After mulling over his words, he spoke. “You should assume that Sisbell’s older sister, Aliceliese, is the Ice Calamity Witch.”

“Huh?!”

“What?!”

“Whaaaaaa?!”

Iska, Nene, and Commander Mismis all reacted in more or less the same way. Iska was slightly shocked. Nene was bewildered. And Commander Mismis was surprised that Jhin had realized the truth.

“Wh-why would you think that, Jhin?!” Commander Mismis asked.

“Back when I fought that eidos monster thing, Aliceliese used ice astral power. You saw it, too, Boss.”

“I—I suppose I did...”

“Sisbell is a princess, and so is Aliceliese. That means she has to be a purebred.”

The Sovereign royals were few in number. The forces didn’t have a full picture of the family tree, but they did know that the Ice Calamity Witch was a purebred and that Aliceliese was a purebred ice mage. So wouldn’t it stand to reason that she and the Ice Calamity Witch were the same person?

Jhin had simply connected the dots.

“Y-you think Miss Alice is the Ice Calamity Wi...?” Nene gulped before she could finish.

Commander Mismis was giving Iska a meaningful look. They couldn’t let Jhin or Nene know.

.....But since it’s come to this point, should we just reveal Alice’s identity to Jhin and Nene?

.....I’m not sure. It’d be dangerous to have the secret spread.

The Ice Calamity Witch was the largest individual threat to the Imperial forces. Even if she wasn’t currently at odds with them, no one in the forces would easily accept that as true.

.....We shouldn’t do anything that leads to unnecessary conflict.

.....We’ll have to keep Alice’s identity a secret as long as she’s in the Empire.

And so...

“I’ll keep that in mind, Jhin,” Iska said, nodding at the silver-haired sniper as naturally as possible. “We can’t be sure whether Alice is the Ice Calamity Witch, and if we ask her, she’ll be even more wary of us, so I want to avoid that. But I’ll watch, her assuming she is.”

“That’s right.” Jhin leaned against the wall. “I’m going to the intel room on the first floor. I’ll track your movements on the security cameras, but make sure you’re ready to draw your astral swords at any moment.”

“I got it. But...I’m not too worried about Alice and Rin making trouble.”

They split up.

Jhin headed to the intel room. Iska went to the fourth floor, where Alice and Rin were waiting. Nene and Mismis made their way to the third floor, where Sisbell was.

They went their separate ways.

The Lord’s office, fourth floor.

An empty office had been repurposed into a shared room for Alice and Rin. Iska remembered that as he opened the door.

The first thing he saw was the extravagant chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Next was the floral wallpaper all along the walls. Both were clearly new luxury items that couldn’t have been easily procured.

“Huh?” Iska rubbed his eyes.

He’d heard the office had been abandoned for decades, but somehow, it had been turned into the living room of a high-class hotel suite.

“Were the offices always this fancy...?”

“Don’t be stupid.” Rin’s hands were in his face. She held several thick furniture catalogs up to show him. “I picked out all of these furnishings, and we’re currently in the middle of remodeling this place. I rush ordered the new wallpaper, lighting, and carpet.”

“Wow, you’re quick.”

“I also scrambled to set up the makeshift shower and bath, which is in the back.”

“I don’t think you could call any of this makeshift!”

“Oh, this place has a long way to go. Look at that antiquated desk!”

Rin slapped the top of a rather old piece of furniture. She hadn’t replaced it yet.

“I’d much prefer Sovereignty-made items, but we’ll make do with the best brand-name desk the Empire has to offer for now.”

“You’ll ‘make do’?”

“Anything to create the most fitting living arrangements for Lady Alice.”

Rin speedily flipped through the furniture catalog on the desk.

“And we’ll need a grand piano, a clock to hang on the wall, and—”

“Say, Rin...,” a lethargic voice called into the room.

Iska turned to find Alice sinking into an expensive-looking sofa.

“I’m entirely satisfied. Just look at this couch. I’ve sunk so deep into it that I’m struggling to even get up...even if you order the most expensive things in the catalog, that won’t mean they’re actually any good.”

“No, no. We still have a long way to go until any of this is satisfactory, Lady Alice.”

Rin continued marking the catalog with red circles and writing out a list of things to rush order. Iska watched the attendant work away for a while.

“Pardon me.”

Then he walked into the back of the living room.

He used the ladder that had been brought into the room to place a small surveillance camera in a corner of the ceiling. Then he put another under the clock on the wall opposite. He also set one up on the floor in another corner of the room. The cameras were the same color as the wallpaper, making them difficult to spot.

“Oh?” Alice observed him with deep curiosity. “Iska, what might those be?”

“They’re security cameras. They’re pretty handy. They don’t need a power cable, so you can set them up like this, and they’ll function a full forty-eight hours straight.”

“I see... Well, the furniture sellers are coming in soon, so please be quick about it.”

Alice sank into the sofa once more. She had a faraway look in her eyes. “I’ve never had anyone openly set up surveillance cameras around me.”

“I’ve never had to do this, either.”

Alice and Rin knew they were being watched, and they were aware that there would be cameras.

But I won’t double-cross them.

He assumed that Alice was accepting the presence of the cameras to show her willingness to cooperate.

Iska needed to set up eight of the devices in total. Four were in the living room at various angles, and another two were in the hallway. Now he just had to think about how to set up the last two.

“Uh, so the living room and hall are done... Oh, what about here?”

He found a frosted-glass door at the end of the hall.

“Hold it, Imperial swordsman!” Rin rushed over. “That’s the bathroom! Do you really mean to set up a camera there?!”

“What? Oh, sorry! So this is the makeshift restroom...”

Iska quickly backed away. He’d been so caught up in placing the cameras that he’d almost put one in the last place where one should be.

“Imperial swordsman...are you trying to sneak a peek at Lady Alice?!”

“It was just a misunderstanding! This is an assignment, so I wanted to set them up to have a larger view.”

“Yeah, a larger view of Lady Alice in the nude!”

“I never said that was what I was trying to do!”

They heard footsteps behind them.

“What’s wrong, Rin? Iska?”

“Lady Alice, you must listen to this!” Rin turned around. She pointed plaintively at Iska as she began to tell Alice what had happened.

“Do you know what this Imperial swordsman was trying to do?!”

“No, don’t!” Iska cried.

“He was about to set up a security camera in the bathroom!”

“He was what?!” Alice’s eyes went wide. “Iska, you weren’t going to...?”

“This is all a misunderstanding! I just have eight cameras, so I was looking to install them in places besides the living room...”

Alice was speechless. In situations like these, Iska was more afraid of her silence than of her yelling. After that unnatural pause, what words would spill from her lips...?

Iska unconsciously held his breath as he watched her.

“I understand everything...” Alice nodded. She sounded entirely serious, too. “So I suppose this means you’re so obsessed with seeing me naked that you’re even willing to set up cameras to sneak a peek.”

“How did you get to that conclusion from this?!”

“But now that I think about it, you have seen me in the nude once before...”

Alice looked up at the ceiling. She looked serious, too, but for whatever reason, she was clearly turning red.

“B-but no! Even if you caught a glimpse of me once, I’m not going to just allow you a second look! Not that easily! At least don’t get cameras involved! Well, I suppose it couldn’t hurt to give you a small—”

“What are you saying, Lady Alice?!” Rin clamped a hand over Alice’s mouth. “You can’t, even if there weren’t any cameras around! Please compose yourself, Lady Alice! Do not be swayed by the swordsman’s wiles!”

“What?! So he was trying to trick me!” Alice said.

“In what way was I trying to trick you into anything?!”

After Iska and Alice finally sorted that out, the security cameras ended up in the living room, hallway, and bedroom. However, the bathroom was left without surveillance.

The following day, nine o’clock in the morning.

When Iska arrived, Alice’s room was even more elegant than before.

“You’re late, Imperial swordsman,” said Rin, pouring some tea. “Is the Lord awake?”

“No luck. Ms. Risyā is watching them, but she said it would take days, at this rate. She wants you to stay here until then.”

“We thought this might happen...”

Alice got up from the sofa.

Until yesterday, she’d been wearing an expensive-looking dress, but today she was wearing a T-shirt and long pants. She was probably trying to look like an ordinary Imperial citizen.

“We have no other option. I suppose you’ll just have to keep watching over me.”

“That’s simply how it is, Imperial swordsman. I am personally reluctant to allow this, but I shall give you half the honor of looking after Lady Alice.”

“Uh, this seems like it’s going to be a lot of work!” Iska quipped.

Then again, it was all part of his duties. Though he was technically supposed to surveil Alice and Rin, they were also the Empire’s guests at the moment.

“... Okay, fine. But the most I can do is get you daily necessities and order some food. Just let me know if you want anything.”

“I do, actually. Right now.”

Alice pointed at a large screen on the wall. The Lord’s office had no windows to speak of. Instead, the outside world was shown through screens like the one she was pointing at.

It showed people walking down a large road. It was early in the morning, so many of them were wearing suits and seemed to be on their way to work. She pointed at the pedestrians.

“Should they really just be walking around outside like this, without a care in the world?”

“...What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the Empire’s pollution!” Alice pointed at the sky above the building. “You’re the most mechanized, industrialized culture in the world...but that also means your air is clogged with exhaust. Plants wither and die, flowers shrivel up, and people break out into coughing fits simply from breathing. You’re quite infamous for your smog, you know.”

“We’re not!” Iska countered. “That’s just plain misinformation!”

“Is it really?”

“You can see it for yourself on the screen. See, the sky is clear.”

“I don’t believe it! Are you saying that the ministers were lying when they told me that the Imperials walked around wearing gas masks?!”

“You should probably fire whoever told you that!”

Iska was so taken aback that he was appalled. He couldn’t believe anyone would really think such a far-fetched lie was true, even someone from the Sovereignty.

“Lady Alice.” At that moment, Rin’s eyes glinted as though she’d seen the perfect opportunity to pounce. “You mustn’t let your guard down. This is only an image on a screen. The people on the street could simply be elaborate robots, and that clear sky might be doctored...”

“You’re right!”

“No, not right! The Empire has good water and air!”

“...” Alice lapsed into thought. “You’re right...”

She held up a half-empty water bottle. “I was worried I’d struggle to acclimate to the air and water here. I’ve had that happen in another country where the

water didn't agree with me. But this seems to be fine."

"I find it acceptable as well," Rin reluctantly agreed. "Though if I must say, I do find the water somewhat bitter to the tongue, but I believe that's a result of the difference in minerals in the soil between the Empire and the Sovereignty. Ignoring that, I suppose the water and air quality here is tolerable."

"See?"

That was a relief to Iska. To Rin and Alice, the Empire was enemy territory. Though he could keep them physically safe, he couldn't do anything if the environment didn't agree with them. It would just cause more problems.

"What would you like to eat for lunch?" he asked. "It's still early, but if we order now, then it should come right on time."

"Hmm..." Rin's eyes glinted as though she'd found another opportunity to strike. "Lady Alice, this may be an excellent opportunity for research."

"How so?"

"We can observe the enemy. Instead of finding cuisine that resembles what we eat in the Sovereignty, why not sample the fare of the Imperial masses?"

"In that case, I have an idea!" Alice got up from the sofa, then picked up a pile of flyers on the desk. "How about this? We can try this Titan Burger place that's based in the Imperial capital! It's a famous Imperial burger joint, and I've seen a branch in Ain as well. I've always been curious about it. They're particularly well known for their titan burger, which is loaded with spices and—"

"Lady Alice."

"Uh?!" Alice came back to herself when she heard Rin's cold tone of voice. "Ahem... Pardon me."

"You seem very well informed about it. I remember you were also quite passionate about the Imperial court painter, Vibran."

"Th-that's not relevant here!" Alice quickly tried to deny it and waved her hands. "In that case, Iska, we would like to have those titan burgers for lunch. I'll have a salad side, and Rin will have fries. And be sure not to forget to get their specialty salt on the fries, either!"

“You sure do know their menu well.”

“I-I’ve just heard about them in passing! Don’t look at me like that, too, Iska!” Alice quickly said, turning away.

That afternoon.

The freshly made meals from Titan Burger’s main location had arrived.

“It’s here.”

“It really is!” Alice exclaimed.

“As I’ve said before, Lady Alice, please do not pounce like that...”

Alice pulled off the lid on the box of food. Steam and the delicious smell of the burgers wafted out.

“So these are the famous titan burgers!”

“People from here just think of it as any old burger joint, though,” Iska said.

“That’s all right. Let’s eat right away!” Alice’s voice was jubilant as she picked up a burger.

Since she and Rin had acclimated so well to the Empire’s air and water, Alice must have been somewhat less anxious about the food. She bit right into her burger.

“Guh.” But then she stopped. She seemed to be scrutinizing all the layers of the vegetables and meat between the bun.

“What’s wrong, Alice?”

“I-it’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

She took another bite.

Silently, she got through half her burger.

“Uck!” Alice coughed abruptly, holding her burger in one hand and putting her free hand over her mouth as she kept sputtering.

“Lady Alice?!” Rin exclaimed. “Imperial swordsman, you couldn’t have! Did you poison her?!”

“O-of course not! I didn’t!”

Iska knew it wasn't poisoned because he had been eating the same meal as they were. He'd finished his entire meal, and nothing about it seemed wrong. It had tasted just like any other titan burger.

"Uck... I-it's not that..." Alice downed her glass of water and held a hand to her chest as she took a deep breath. "The flavors are so strong that I started to choke..."

"What? You think *that's* strong? It's just a little spicy."

"That's it!" Alice enthusiastically nodded. "There's too much pepper and mustard on this! The spices are so stimulating that they detract from the flavor of the ingredients themselves! And it's plain too salty!"

"Personally, I like food this salty after working up a sweat." In Iska's opinion, the best thing you could do for your body when you were tired was eating flavorful food. That was why the populace loved Titan Burger, and was how it had made a reputation for itself.

"It's too much!"

"You think so?"

"Yes, I do. It's far too intense. Don't you think so, Rin?"

".....Huh?" Rin was taken aback. She had gotten the same hamburger as Alice and had even finished the fries. All she held in her hands was the paper wrapping.

"..." Rin stared at it intently for a while. "You're right, Lady Alice! Hey, Imperial swordsman, you thought we'd actually like these terrible burgers? Get them made again!"

"But you already finished it!"

"You better watch yourself when you order dinner, Imperial swordsman."

Rin poured water into Alice's cup.

"As you can see, Lady Alice has a delicate palate. Prepare a meal where the ingredients sing and have no unnecessary alterations. That said, the meal shouldn't be lacking anything. Make sure it is rich and will also move her heart."

“That’s way too demanding!”

Iska had no idea how he would fulfill Rin’s request.

That fateful dinnertime.

Iska had selected an upscale bento prepared by a hotel restaurant that served classic Empire cuisine. To find somewhere that would suit Alice’s tastes, he had asked Commander Mismis and Nene if they knew any restaurants, then had used Risya’s connections to ensure he could order.

Rin was the first to taste it.

“Guh!”

She winced as soon as she took a bite of the main protein of the meal, then planted her elbows on the tabletop and swayed.

“You’ve really done it now, Imperial swordsman!”

“D-done what?!”

“This is delicious!”

“That was so misleading!”

“As much as it pains me to do so, I really have to hand it to you. It’s an Imperial meal, but its flavors are incredibly delicate. I believe Lady Alice wouldn’t reject this. Lady Alice...?”

“This is delicious!”

“That was quick!”

Alice had started eating right after Rin’s first bite. She hadn’t been able to wait.

No wonder the hotel was famous. Since it served guests from all over the world, even the two citizens from the Sovereignty could enjoy it. Neither girl so much as uttered a complaint as they finished their meals.

“Mm... I can’t believe the Empire has food that’s this good,” Rin said as she wiped her mouth. “How was it, Lady Alice?”

“I can’t find anything to complain about.” Alice was enjoying black tea after

her meal. “Amazing, Iska. I knew you could do it.”

“I’m relieved to hear that,” he replied.

“Yes. Even I could eat this every...” Alice stopped in her tracks.

Just then, she returned her teacup to its saucer, and her smile disappeared from her face. It looked like she was mulling something over. She folded her arms and started muttering to herself.

What in the world had happened?

While Iska and Rin observed her, Alice suddenly opened her eyes wide.

“Wait, Iska! I have to revise that statement!”

“What?”

“This meal won’t do at all! I can’t eat it!”

“But you already finished it!”

What was she talking about?

She’d just had a deluxe bento from a famous hotel that even Rin had admitted to enjoying. Rin also looked confused as she stared at Alice.

“The meal was of top quality. I found that it was indeed elegant and delicately flavored.”

“But it was bad?”

“It was! Because there wasn’t any compassion in it!” Alice stood up. “Iska, do you know what the most important thing about a meal is?”

“That it tastes good and is nourishing?”

“No, it’s sincerity!”

Alice placed a hand on her chest. As she acted the part of an opera singer onstage and looked up at the ceiling, Iska and Rin watched her with their mouths wide open.

“Yes, the food was indeed delicious. The ingredients were top class, and the flavors were delicate, but that isn’t enough to sway someone’s heart! The people who made this have no fondness for the person who will be eating the

meal... Do you understand?”

She stared at them.

Even as she had made her speech, Alice stole glances at Iska.

“This meal was made for me, so someone who understands me well should be preparing it. Someone close to my side!”

“You heard her, Rin...”

“Well, if you so insist, I suppose I’ll cook for you starting tomorrow, Lady Alice.”

“No!” Alice said, turning bright red. “Rin, you’re meant to be a guest like I am. In which case, you know what we must do...!”

“In which case what?” Iska had no idea what she was getting at. Never mind all the stuff she was saying about sincerity—why did she want someone who knew her *well* to prepare her meals?

“He’s so dense...,” she whispered.

Iska thought he heard Alice say something, but it was so quiet, he couldn’t be sure.

“Ugh, fine! Then I’ll just come out and say it! Iska!”

“Wh-what?”

“Didn’t you say you make pasta for yourself on your days off? Whip up some of that tomorrow. I’ll judge the quality of your meal!”

“Why are you judging me now?!”

And so, thanks to Alice’s strangely insistent request, Iska was now going to make her and Rin a home-cooked meal.

The next day.

Iska donned an apron and began a staring contest with a boiling pot of pasta. He was in the middle of cooking for Alice.

“Why am I doing this...?”

“Come now, Imperial swordsman. Work your hands, not your mouth.”

“I already am.”

As he boiled the pasta, he got started on the sauce in the frying pan next to it. Though, it was only a simple sauce of salted and peppered cherry tomatoes.

“Mm-hmm.”

Rin was watching him with a great deal of interest, which he found surprising. She'd claimed to have come to the kitchen to make sure he wouldn't poison the food, but once Iska got cooking, she grew fascinated with what he was doing.

“What a simple method of cooking. You're not doing anything special at all.”

“That's because it's pasta I make on a regular basis. I even bought these cherry tomatoes at a grocery store in the capital.”

“Hmph... Lady Alice is so oddly intrigued by this.”

Rin set out the utensils. She was trying to show that she could help in her own way.

“Lady Alice has grown up eating food from the palace chef. You couldn't possibly make a meal that would satisfy her delicate palate.”

“Honestly, I agree.”

“Oh dear... Fine, we can agree on something for once.” Rin put a hand on her hip and let out a long sigh. “You should consider it a victory if Lady Alice can eat a single bite of your meal. At worst, you should be prepared for her to reject it upon tasting it.”

Ten minutes later, and the meal was ready.

Iska brought over the finished tomato sauce pasta.

“This is delicious!” Alice exclaimed.

“No way?!”

“What?! Lady Alice, are you sure you're feeling okay?!”

Alice had suddenly brightened. Both Iska and Rin were surprised that she'd praised his cooking.

“Lady Alice?! Wh-what do you mean?!” Rin panicked and tried the pasta

herself. “It isn’t bad, but it’s simply normal pasta. Not even restaurant quality. This tastes like a typical home-cooked meal.”

“It’s not simple; it’s homey.” Alice nodded and ate another bite of the pasta. “I can have dishes that have the best of ingredients prepared with the most time-consuming cooking techniques at the palace anytime. But I never wanted Iska to make something fancy like that. You said Iska’s food is typical home cooking, Rin, and that’s exactly what I wanted... Oh, it’s like something from a two-person household!”

“Why are you turning so red?”

“B-because you said something weird, Rin! I started imagining things!”

“Imagining what?”

What was she talking about? Iska and Rin exchanged glances as Alice finished her pasta.

“This is it! This was exactly what I was looking for!”

“R-really?”

Her praise was unexpectedly exuberant. But Iska wasn’t going to complain about a compliment.

“I want you to make all three meals per day from now on!”

“That’s unreasonable!”

Naturally, he protested that idea. He could cook for the two of them every once in a while, but he didn’t know enough recipes to make them three dishes a day.

“And if I do make your meals, I’d need to know your likes and dislikes, Alice...”

“You’re right, so I’ll tell you them. So, I— W-wait!”

“What?”

“Don’t talk to me! I-I’ve realized something!”

Alice put up her hand to stop him. Then she brought her palm to her forehead and started to murmur quietly to herself. “Think carefully, Alice. If I only enjoy his meals, that’s too one-sided. Maybe I should make him something, too? Then

he might say, ‘I expected nothing less from you, Alice. I really can’t compete with you.’ ‘Heh. Your cooking wasn’t so bad, either, Iska...’ This is it! That would be so much better!”

“Alice?”

“Lady Alice?”

“All right, I’ve decided.” Alice turned around after she was done talking to herself. She looked as though she’d figured out the solution to everything.

“I’ll make dinner tomorrow! I need to treat you, too, Iska!”

“Pardon?!”

“Wait, Lady Alice?!” Rin tried to intervene, of course. “You seem oddly determined about this...”

“I feel like cooking. Rin, please prepare my apron as soon as possible!”

“Please wait!” the attendant yelled, which was unusual for her. This was the first time Iska had seen her scold her own lady so harshly. “Though it is presumptuous of me, I would like to make a request.”

She knelt before her lady. “I understand your sentiments, Lady Alice. However, please reconsider.”

“Why would I need to do that?”

“I believe your cooking could kill. And I do not think it would be wise to poison the Imperial swordsman right now.”

“I never said I’d poison him!”

“If he were to die eating your cooking, you would become a prime suspect, Lady Alice!”

“Why do you think he would die in the first place?!”

He couldn’t believe it. Iska shuddered as he listened to them converse. “Alice, you wouldn’t do that, would you?”

“This is a misunderstanding!” Alice frantically shook her head. “I—I really just wanted to make you a nice meal!”

“No!” Rin firmly denied her. “I apologize for my discourtesy, but I’d much prefer a loaf of bread exposed to the elements for a week in an Imperial dumping ground than my lady’s cooking!”

“That’s the height of discourtesy!”

Rin’s comment had endangered her like never before. Iska felt a chill.

At their insistence, Alice reluctantly gave up on making a meal herself.

Around the same time.

Sisbell, who was staying in a room apart from Alice and Rin, had already finished her meal.

She was bored.

If she were in the palace, she could be reading one of her favorite books right now, but she didn’t have anything of the sort in the Lord’s offices.

She was in low spirits. Normally, Sisbell would cling to a stuffed animal to fall asleep at times like these.

“So that’s why I’m here! Good evening!”

Sisbell had come to the Lord’s chambers. In that solemn hall—outfitted with dozens of tatami mats—she began acting as though she were in her own home.

“Ms. Risyā, I can’t sleep without a stuffed animal. And it needs to be a warm one that’s very fuzzy... Huh? Ms. Risyā?”

The Lord’s staff officer was missing. The only one there was Lord Yunmelngen, who was still fast asleep.

“C’mon, I don’t know what to do. I simply must have a stuffed animal. A fluffy, warm, finely made stuffed animal... Oh my!”

Sisbell’s eyes opened wide. She looked right in front of her.

A silver beastperson with plenty of fur was slumbering before her eyes.



“They’re just like a fluffy stuffed animal...”

She gulped unintentionally.

“So fluffy... Oh no... And they’re right in front of me... So very fluffy...”

She couldn’t turn away. She was especially fascinated with the Lord’s furry, foxlike tail.

Lord Yunmelngen’s tail.

It was undoubtedly of the best quality in the world. She wondered how amazing it would feel to hug.

“Haah... Haah... Ahh... I—I can’t... B-but after seeing that tail... The beast inside me compels me...”

She couldn’t hold back any longer.

Sisbell launched herself toward the tail of the defenseless, sleeping beastperson.

“Found you!”

But someone grabbed her by the shoulders and stopped her before she could.

“Miss Sisbell?”

“I was wondering what you were doing out of your room in the middle of the night.”

“Oh no?!”

The moment Sisbell turned around, her face went pale with fear.

It was Commander Mismis and Nene. They both had a glint in their eyes, like hunters who had just spotted a predator.

“Come on, let’s go back to your room.”

“Good girls should be in bed by now.”

They dragged her away.

She tried to resist, but they were grasping her so firmly that she couldn’t even move.

“Aaaaaah! But the most fluffiest thing in the world is right in front of me!”

Sisbell’s regretful wail echoed throughout the Lord’s chambers.

3

Night drew in on the Imperial capital.

The curtain of black lowered in the sky, and the lights in the business district blinked off one by one.

However...

From within the windowless building of the Lord’s office, the evening activity of the Imperial capital was imperceptible. Was it even night? The only indication of the evening hour was the clock on the living room wall, but who knew? Perhaps the sun hadn’t even set yet.

One couldn’t help but feel that way in the building.

“...”

Water sprayed from the showerhead, accompanied by steam. Alice allowed it to pour over her, even though she would normally find it too hot.

“I don’t know what to do...”

Her hair clung to her wet skin. She turned away from her foggy reflection in the mirror and pressed her wet forehead to the wall.

“I really shouldn’t even be doing this.”

As she showered, she thought back on everything that had happened the day before and on *that* day. She remembered the day she’d spent in the company of only Rin and Iska. She ordered food with him and had forced him to make dinner for her.

It was thrilling to do something so outside the confines of her usual life.

She was doing this even while in the enemy territory of the Empire. In fact, she was enjoying herself because she *wasn’t* in the Nebulis Sovereignty. It was as though she had been liberated from her stifling role as a princess...

That was why she was conflicted.

“I wonder how deeply Elletear considered those words before she said them to me...?”

The more she relished these unusual days, and the longer she spent them with Iska, the more keenly she felt her sister’s words.

“This is the difference between the two of us. I have a knight by my side.”

“Alice, do you have a knight who will fight beside you?”

“...”

This would likely be her first and last opportunity to feel this way.

Iska could only be at her side while she was in the Empire. She could simply talk to him out in the open. However, that wouldn’t last forever. But maybe, she could even ask him to become her knight...

.....My sister has made an enemy of the Empire.

.....So it wouldn’t be entirely inconceivable for me to ask him to be my knight.

But.

Was that what he wanted?

Everything would change the moment she asked Iska to be in a fully united front with her.

And in that moment...

I know we won’t be rivals any longer.

“I wonder what Iska thinks...?”

She kept ruminating over the same scenarios again and again.

If...Iska would answer her plea, was she really within her rights to want this?

“Ugh... I can’t! That’s enough of that for today. Overthinking this is as good as being stuck under my sister’s spell!”

She abruptly raised her head. Then she wrapped her wet golden hair in a towel and ran out of the bathroom. After wiping away the droplets clinging to her skin, she quickly donned a bathrobe and made her way to the living room.

“I’m sorry for the wait, Rin. You can go—”

The moment she entered the living room, her eyes met another person’s.

But they didn’t belong to Rin. There stood Iska, the boy who had been assigned to watch over her.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

This felt like déjà vu.

Now that she thought about it, they had been in a similar situation before.

“Uh?! A-Alice?!”

“I-I’m sorry!”

She quickly tightened her bathrobe around herself. She had been planning to change in the bedroom right away, so she had left it loose. Her chest was as good as exposed.

“Um... Alice...” Iska was holding a small surveillance device. He must have been inspecting the cameras. “This place is under video surveillance... So you probably shouldn’t make a habit of walking around disrobed...”

“I don’t have any such habit!”

Now he had gotten the wrong idea.

Though Iska’s misunderstanding was reasonable in light of what had happened just now, Alice normally wasn’t one to walk around half-dressed.

Rather...

She had almost let out a shriek when she’d laid eyes on him.

She was still a young lady, after all. Of course she was embarrassed to be seen in the nude. If any other Imperial soldier had seen her, she would have been mortified.

.....But.

.....It was Iska who saw me.

For reasons she couldn’t explain, she found that tolerable. The

embarrassment had lost out. She didn't want him to think she was weak because she'd shrieked from showing a little skin.

That was why she ended up holding out.

"A-actually, if I must say anything, it's that I'm not ashamed if people see my body! That's right! It's because I'm a whole year more mature than you!"

"I think you really should be ashamed, actually..."

He turned away.

But Alice found his discomfort delightful.

He had such a sharp glint in his eyes on the battlefield.

But now he seems so pure and young.

Just a little more... She wanted to tease him just a little more. She couldn't help but think that.

"This seems like a great opportunity. I'll show you just how mature I am!"

Alice glanced at the ceiling. Then she slowly sat down on the sofa in a spot where the cameras couldn't reach.

"Y-yes, I think that I'd like to cross my legs."

Alice made sure Iska was watching as she made a show of crossing her legs. A peek of her white thighs showed from her bathrobe, but it was all calculated, of course. Yes, this was what it meant to be calm, collected, and mature.

She was a full year older than he was. She could be a little daring.

"I—I—I—I feel completely a-a-a-at ease!"

"You definitely aren't, though!"

"I am, too!"

The moment she blurted that out, Alice accidentally crossed a line she couldn't come back from. Since Iska was completely correct, she *had* to deny it.

"No, this isn't enough, Iska!" She got up off the sofa and grabbed the neckline of her robe that she had fixed earlier.

"Wh-when I'm really serious..." She started to pull open her bathrobe as

though she was going to bare it all.

“Lady Alice, about tomorrow’s plans...” That very moment, Rin stepped into the living room from outside. She looked stunned. Her own lady was attempting to expose herself to the Imperial swordsman.

“...”

“...”

“Wait, Rin...” Alice barely managed to get the words out. She still was holding the lapels of her bathrobe. “It’s not what it looks like. This wasn’t what I was trying to—”

“Lady Alice.” In an entirely deadpan fashion, Rin picked up a bag from a corner of the room, then started to stuff it with their things. “Let’s return to the Sovereignty. You must be so stressed by life in the Empire that you’re even throwing open your bathrobe and exposing yourself because of your need for approval—”

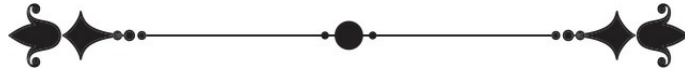
“It’s not like that! It really isn’t, Rin. Please, listen to me!”

“I’m starting to suspect that you might have a penchant for disrobing, Lady Alice...”

“Even you?! But I don’t!”

Rin continued to pack. Alice latched on to her and pleaded for them to stay.

CHAPTER 2



The Moon Mounts an Assault

1

Iska and Alice were five days into their new living arrangement.

“The Lord is still asleep. They must need a little more time to recover.”

“All right,” Rin replied to Iska after he returned from the Lord’s chambers.

For the last few days, all she had done was read magazines. She would read dozens of Imperial-issued newspapers and publications a day.

“I think you might know more about the Empire than me at this point,” Iska commented.

“I’m just passing the time. I’m not even gathering intel,” Rin said as she perused a thin gossip rag that was sold around train stations. “It looks like little Mixy, a kitten lost on Third Street, was found a week later. I don’t really care about the article, but I’m so bored that it’s simply riveting right now. Especially considering we’re not allowed outside.”

“I’m sorry about that...”

The Empire saw Alice and Rin as witches. The two girls couldn’t exactly go out and sightsee.

“Where’s Alice right now?”

“She’s practicing.” Rin’s eyes never left the magazine. “I’m not sure what’s gotten into her, but she’s attempting to cook, since there’s nothing better to do. As you’re aware, she tried making sunny-side-up eggs yesterday, so I think today she’s—”

“I’ve made an omelet!” They heard Alice’s shout from the kitchen. “Rin, won’t you try it? It’s the best omelet I could muster!”

Alice ran in, carrying a large plate. Though it was a bit charred here and there and far from shapely, it did smell sweet and was an omelety shade of yellow.

“Iska, you’ve come back at just the right time!” She thrust the plate at him. “I’ve learned how to make an omelet today. What do you think? Doesn’t it look wonderful? Even I feel a little frightened by how far my cooking skills have come!”

“Yeah, it looks great,” Iska responded.

“Right?!” she said without missing a beat.

They’d also had an identical conversation the day before. But Rin had told Alice with a straight face that anyone would be able to make such a simple meal, which had led to her sulking for half a day. Iska had kept that in mind when he’d replied just now.

“That’s great, Alice. You’re a quick learner.”

“Oh, of course you’d say that, Iska. I knew you’d understand my genius!” Alice’s spirits were quickly lifting. “Oh, I know, Iska. I’ll give you the honor of trying my first omelet ever!”

“What? I don’t think I can do that. I mean, it’s your very first one and all.”

“I want you to have it.” Alice pushed the plate toward him. “Here, have it!”

“...Oh, but...” Iska faltered for a second.

And as he did that, someone held out their hand from his side.

It was a black-haired girl.

“Then I shall try it,” she proclaimed.

“What?”

“Huh?”

“Whuh?”

Iska, Alice, and Rin were all taken by surprise.

Princess Kissing of the Zoa quickly took the omelet. Then she popped it into her little mouth.

“I give it a four...,” she declared.

“Wh-wh-wh...?” Alice quivered. She tossed aside the now empty plate and pointed at Kissing.

“Why are you rating it?!” she bellowed, looking angrier than she had in all the days she’d been there.

The Lord’s chambers.

Two female soldiers watched Lord Yunmelngen slumber.

“They’re not waking up.”

“They won’t. The Lord takes a long time to wake while in this condition.”

Mismis was sitting directly on the floor with her legs folded under her. Next to her, Risya was making herself at home and lounging about.

“Don’t bother sitting too formally, Mismis. You could bring a magazine and lie down while you wait. Or even pet the Lord’s tail.”

“I could never!”

Mismis was supposed to be watching Sisbell. She had asked Nene to handle things for a bit and couldn’t relax while her partner was working.

“...”

“So. What is it? Is there something you want to say to me?”

“Huh?” Mismis looked up when Risya addressed her abruptly. “Could you see it on my face?”

“You were fidgeting. And you left Princess Sisbell to Nene so you could come over here. That doesn’t seem like you.”

Risya looked serious.

Mismis stared her in the face for a while, then suddenly gazed up at the ceiling. She looked at each of the corners of the hall, as though searching for something.

“I was wondering—does the Lord’s office not have astral energy detectors? You know, the kind that go off when a witch passes by.”

“It doesn’t.”

“Because they would go off for the Lord, too?”

“That’s it.” Risya pointed at the Lord, who was lying down in almost the same position as she was. “A century ago, the Lord ended up taking this form after being exposed to both a large amount of astral energy and the calamity’s power at the same time. Their entire body exudes astral energy, so we can’t even use those self-adhesives for covering astral crests.”

“...”

As Risya explained the situation, Mismis silently placed her hand on her left shoulder.

That was where her astral crest was hidden.

“It must be difficult for the Lord, too...”

“Mismis,” Risya said as her eyes dully glistened behind her glasses. “Just ask me what you really want to ask. Don’t be so roundabout.”

“Um...”

“You don’t have to be worried about it. Okay?”

“Th-then I’ll ask it...” Mismis stared at Risya. “Your astral crest is artificial, unlike mine, right?”

“Yep. It’s an improved version of what Jhin-Jhin and Nene had. It’ll disappear on its own after a while, unlike yours.”

“What happens to Imperial forces members who’ve turned into actual witches?”

“I’ve never seen a story that ends in a happily ever after.”

“That was a bit blunt!”

Risya had been so quick and direct to respond that Mismis didn’t even have the time to feel sorry for herself.

“C-could you be a little more considerate...?!”

“It’s been like that since a century ago.” Risya managed to shrug even as she reclined. “Astral mages were originally Imperials, you know. They just left the Empire and set up the Nebulis Sovereignty. So these days, things are even worse for members of the Imperial forces who get turned into witches. They end up stuck between the Empire and the Sovereignty because they would be despised no matter which side they decided to go to.”

“Right...”

Mismis sighed. She had lost the willpower to even nod. The sigh was all she could muster.

“It’s like you say, Risya.”

“So why don’t you just become the first Imperial with an astral crest to get a happily ever after?”

“.....Huh?”

“I was talking about the past. All I said was that I haven’t seen anyone do it yet.”

Mismis’s jaw dropped.

Risya raised herself up.

“You can try to become the first witch in the Imperial forces who winds up happy. I can’t promise that it’ll actually come true, though. Isk and the rest of Unit 907 seem to understand that.”

“...”

“The Lord won’t treat you badly, either. Especially since we’ve given you so many difficult missions. Like taking care of the Ice Calamity Witch in Nelka, or dealing with the vortex at Mudor.”

“That’s right! Wait, but you were the one who assigned all of those!”

Mismis bounced up and down while maintaining her formal posture. She pointed at the Saint Disciple in front of her.

“I only ended up a witch because you forced us to do that stuff, Risya!”

“Oh, one moment. I’ve got an incoming call.”

“Are you trying to get away?!”



“No, no, someone’s actually calling me. Oh, it’s from Mei.” Risyā pulled out her comm. “What is it?”

“Sorry, Risyā. The witch got away from me.”

“.....Excuse me?” Risyā’s eyes went wide. “You mean Kissing?”

“She went to the bathroom. That’s when it happened. I had a camera set up in there, too. Then she just broke a wall and went into the hall from the bathroom, right on footage.”

“She escaped?!”

“Dunno. Trying to confront her would be dangerous, so I called you. I’ll make sure she doesn’t go out of the Lord’s office, though. That’s all!”

Mei hung up on them.

The Thorn Witch Kissing was loose in the Lord’s office. Mismis and Risyā both felt chills go down their spines at the news. This seemed like it was going to blow up.

“Wh-what do we do, Risyā?! I thought that she was behaving?!”

“We’ve been interrogating her since we captured her.” Risyā stood up, seeming resigned. “Well, this isn’t good. And she just had to this while the Lord is fast asleep.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“Right, Your Excellency. Wait, Your Excellency?”

“Hwaaah.”

Risyā and Mismis turned around. The silver beastperson yawned. They got up off the tatami mats, sat down cross-legged, and looked at the two women.

“You’re up?!”

“Your shouting is what roused me, yes. Now, putting aside Mei’s game of tag... Risyā, fetch the Nebulis princesses.”

“R-right away!”

“You have two minutes.”

Risya and Mismis practically flew out of the hall. Watching them, Lord Yunmelngen yawned again.

The Lord's office, fourth floor.

Iska, Alice, and Rin all leaped backward in the makeshift living room.

“Kissing?!”

Iska had jumped back out of caution. Alice and Rin had leaped back because they were simply surprised to see her.

The Zoa princess was silent.

Though that might have been because she was still chewing on Alice's omelet. Alice was the first to approach her.

“You! Isn't a Saint Disciple supposed to be watching you? Wait, actually, how could you just waltz into my room and eat my omelet?! That was for Iska!”

“...”

“Could you say something?!”

“Blech!” Kissing spat out the omelet.

“Ah! Wh-why did you do that?!”

“Uck!” The princess coughed weakly. “That was close... The taste was so bad, I might have died if I hadn't spat it out...”

“That's so rude!”

“May I have some tea to get the flavor out of my mouth?” Kissing asked.

“And now you're acting like you're a guest?! First, tell us why you're here!”

“Uncle used to get anything I asked for,” Kissing said.

“Guh.” Alice's lips stiffened.

The Zoa princess's uncle was Lord Mask. Alice saw him as another victim of Elletear's barbarity. Kissing was as good as reminding Alice that her sister had put Lord Mask in such a state.

“All right, fine...” Alice ran her hands through her hair. “Well, you heard her,

Iska. I'd like a decaf black tea. And you, Rin?"

"Just hot water for me. Hurry up, Imperial swordsman."

"Why me?!"

This should have been the attendant's job. Iska almost said that out loud, but just then, Kissing quickly tugged on his sleeve.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'd like milk tea. With a ratio of eight to two for the milk and tea. And my tongue burns easily, so please make sure it's lukewarm."

"I'll do what I can..."

Iska reluctantly headed to the kitchen to fulfill the three girls' requests.

"You sure do talk a lot... I had no idea you even could."

They were sitting around the table. Alice, who had finished her cup of tea first, was also the first to address the princess across from her.

"You were always by Lord Mask's side. And whenever the ministers or I tried to talk to you, he would speak in your place."

"It's because I shiver."

"?"

"I'm so frightened of speaking that I shiver when I have to. But I need to do this. Otherwise, Uncle will never wake."

"I see... All right, then."

Alice seemed displeased as she fell silent.

The Zoa princess stared directly at Alice with her glittering amethyst eyes.

"If I may ask another question, do you not need to hide your eyes?"

"I have no need to now," Kissing replied. "At least, I believe that is what my uncle would say. The Imperial forces and the Lou already know my secret, after all."

Kissing Zoa Nebulis's astral power dwelled in her eyes. In other words, her eyes contained her astral crest. It was an incredibly rare phenomenon and may

very well have been particular to her.

“I can see the flow of astral energy. I’m much better at finding it than any of the Imperial forces’ detectors. I also discovered the vortex in Mudor.”

“Uh...”

As Iska gulped, Alice and Rin seemed to have a similar reaction next to him. An astral mage could become more powerful after being exposed to the astral energy of a vortex. And Kissing had the ability to find those sources of power before anyone else.

.....That means she can monopolize them!

.....So that’s why the Zoa treated her so well.

She wasn’t just a princess to them. As long as they had Kissing’s eyes, the Zoa would be able to claim all the vortexes for themselves and strengthen their troops in perpetuity. That was no mere pipe dream for them.

“Are you sure you should be giving the Zoa’s secrets to the Lou?”

“I’m not telling *you*.” Kissing shifted her gaze. “I’m telling Iska.”

“So you’re trying to prove that you’ve surrendered by showing your hand to the Empire?”

“Please,” she said.

The Zoa princess rose from her seat. The next moment, she pressed her forehead to the floor, not minding that her lustrous black hair was touching the ground.

“You can see I’m serious about this. Please help me take down Elletear.”

“Huh?! Please refrain from doing that, Lady Kissing!” Rin ran over to Kissing’s side, grabbing the Zoa princess and forcing her to stand. “Lady Kissing, this boy is an Imperial soldier! If a Sovereign princess like you lowers your head to him —”

The princess turned around and responded to her. “Then who will be upset if I do?”

“Wha?!” Rin was at a loss for words.

“I’ll ask again. Who will be upset if I bow to Iska? My uncle would, but he’s still unconscious.”

“Th-then...”

“All right, Kissing, that’s enough,” Iska said.

“Rin, let her go,” Alice intervened.

They both spoke at the same time. Iska’s and Alice’s voices harmonized in an almost beautiful way.

“Rin, this isn’t something we should be interfering with.” Alice slowly shook her head. “We all want to stop Elletear. In fact, now that I’ve seen Kissing in this state, I think I’m the one who wasn’t prepared enough for this.”

“Lady Alice?!”

“I don’t intend to surrender to the Empire. However...” Alice hesitated to say more. She looked up into the air. She kept glancing at Iska, then turning away again. “Um, so, Iska. There’s something I want to say to you, too—”

“Hwaah... Time to rise and shine.”

A tired voice echoed around every section of the Lord’s office. Then they heard a loud yawn, as though the speaker would fall asleep at any moment.

“I still need about eighty more hours of sleep, but Risya’s shouting woke me up. Wait, what was I trying to say again...? My memory goes whenever I fall asleep... Oh, right, it was about Elletear. Allow me to tell you what caused her transformation.”

2

Iska, Alice, Rin, and Kissing arrived at the Lord’s chambers to find that everyone else was already there. Meaning Unit 907 and Sisbell. Behind them stood Risya and Mei, the latter of whom looked quite peeved and was crossing her arms.

“Hey, witch girl. You’ve sure got some guts just breaking yourself out like that.

“

“ ... ”

“Did you just ignore me?!”

“Are you the Lord?” Kissing walked past Mei, who was glaring at her, and gazed up at the person behind the bamboo blinds.

The beastperson looked down on her in delight.

“Nebulis princess, what lovely eyes you have.”

The silver-furred beastperson put their elbow on their armrest.

“You can decide for yourself whether I’m the Lord or not. All I’ll do is talk. You came here for that, didn’t you?”

“This is about Elletear?”

“Yes, she’s the ex-first princess of the Nebulis, isn’t she? Something caused her to transform into that monster. I’ll start there.”

Lord Yunmelngen pulled out a model of the planet from behind them. The blue orb showed the oceans and the continents. The Lord pointed at the center of it.

“Take a look at the planet’s core.”

The globe split in two. It was broken up into layers: the brown crust, light green mantle, and bright blue core.

“The deepest part of the planet, what was originally the core, was where the astral powers once lived. Deep in the past, an irregularity found its way into the core. That’s the calamity that the Astrals fear, which they call the Planet’s Demise.”

The Lord pointed at the core.

“It also goes by another name: the World Enemy. Now, you may wonder why it’s a calamity. You can see the answer right in front of you. Just look at the state I’m in and you’ll understand. “

The silver-furred beastperson pointed at themselves. They were an abomination.

“This calamity transforms humans and astral powers into grotesque forms. I’m an example of that, as is Elletear and the eidos.”

The calamity remade living beings.

The Lord had turned into a silver-furred beastperson.

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

Kelvina had grown gigantic tumorous wings and become a fallen angel.

It had turned astral power into eidoses of the earth.

And it had turned other astral power into eidoses of the sea.

“Wait!” Alice’s lips were pale. “Were the eidos monsters we fought originally astral powers?!”

“Do you understand the danger we’re in now? Yes. The astral powers were afraid of the calamity and fled the planet’s core. Ignorant of this, the Sovereignty believed the flight of the astral powers to be the blessing of the planet and took to calling them vortexes.”

“The Sovereignty...? Ignorant...?” Alice murmured.

A vortex was an eruption of astral energy. Deep in the core, far from where the Empire and Sovereignty were fighting over the astral energy, the astral powers had been trying to flee from the calamity.

“I see... Please keep going. Though I don’t want to believe it.” Alice looked up at the Lord. “So my sister was transformed by that power.”

“Elletear is an exception. She wasn’t transformed. She wanted to be changed, didn’t she? She was looking to become that way. I don’t know her motive, either. I think you might know more as her sister, Princess Aliceliese. “

“Well...” Alice wasn’t sure what to say.

Kissing took a step forward in the silence. “Please just tell me.”

“Tell you what, Zoa Princess?”

“I want revenge. At first it was only against Elletear, but it seems that someone also gave her the powers?”

“That’s right. And this isn’t a revenge mission. We’re looking to save the planet. You should be proud of yourselves for the undertaking.”

The Lord nodded.

“Until we reverse the calamity, every human being and astral power in the world will be corrupted. They’ll end up like me.”

“Your Excellency... When will this happen?”

“It already has.”

The Lord was quick to reply to Rin’s question.

“If you would like to see for yourself, then just go ahead and check. The Planet’s Demise has already made a visit to one place earlier than the rest. Look at the state of the polluted land of Katalisk.”

“Where?”

“You don’t know of it, despite being a citizen of the Sovereignty? It’s to the far northwest of the Empire. The land is so thoroughly petrified that it cannot support even vegetation or insects. In a sense, neither the Empire nor the Sovereignty have anything to do with it. It’s more barren than a burnt plain.”

The Lord spun the planetary globe. They pointed at a narrow region on the northwestern side of the continent.

“Katalisk is the most warped area on the continent. You’ll need a guide to cross it. They should be here soon.”

“Yeek!” Commander Mismis suddenly shrieked. “Wh-who did that?! Someone touched my butt... Nene?!”

“It wasn’t me.”

“Then Miss Sisbell?!”

“I’m on your right side, Captain. There isn’t anyone behind you.”

“...What?” Mismis turned around. Everyone looked behind her, too, but no one was there, just like Sisbell had said.

“Hmm? Oh, so you were there all along. Come here.”

The Lord beckoned to someone.

They heard a faint rustling, no louder than the flutter of an insect's wings.

"I-is someone here?!"

"Hey, who is it? Who's there?"

Iska and Mei turned and stared right in front of the bamboo blinds that the Lord was sitting behind. The air shimmered with heat haze, and a small person wearing tattered clothes appeared. They would come up to the average adult's waist, at most.

"Wh-what is that creature?!" Commander Mismis leaped back. "Is that what touched my butt?"

"They're an Astral."

The Lord patted the Astral's hooded head. They acted as though they were interacting with an actual child.

"I'm not sure if they're the result of fusing with astral power a long time ago or if this was their form from the beginning. They're not sure, either, and it doesn't matter. What's important is that the Astrals have lived alongside the astral powers longer than anyone."

"———" The Astral clung to the Lord's leg.

The Astral removed their hood; the easiest way to describe their face was that it resembled a fairy straight from a tale of fantasy. They had gigantic eyes, and their hair was every color of the rainbow.

"How adorable!" Sisbell shouted with delight. She stared at the Astral, who was still clinging to the Lord, with sparkles in her eyes. "It's so fantastical and cute! Um...may I hug it? Or even take it to my room?!"

"——!" The Astral leaped up, shrieking like a bird and hiding behind the Lord's seat.

"Ah... If you huff and puff and approach them like a predator, this is what happens..."

"I'm a predator?!"

“The Astrals are a fearful bunch. They live in a sacred land protected by the astral powers and typically never stray from there. Moving out to an area where humans live must have felt like a great and perilous journey to this one here.”

The Lord gave a wan smile. Then they gazed at Iska meaningfully.

“Though they’re cowardly and slight, the Astrals know more about astral power than anyone. They also crafted the astral swords.”

“They did?!” Iska cried, looking beyond the blinds at the Astral who was peeking at him from behind the Lord.

“That’s right, Successor. They are the ones who forged the swords that have saved you on countless occasions. But this isn’t just about the swords. What we’re talking about affects every human being and astral power on the planet.”

The Lord’s voice carried to the Saint Disciples Risyā and Mei, as well as to the girls from the Sovereignty and Unit 907.

The Lord posed a question to everyone.

“The answer to the question of what will happen to the planet once the calamity awakens lies at Katalisk. So I ask you this: Who would like to go? Raise your hands.”

A tense silence followed the Lord’s inquiry. Everyone was nervous now that the Lord had asked them to raise their hands and demonstrate their willingness to go.

“ ... ”

“Oh? That was quick, Zoa Princess.”

The Lord looked down at the girl who had raised her hand first and smiled.

“Ah, yes, if I recall correctly, you’re able to see astral energy, yes? Then this role seems most suitable to you.”

“This is relevant to how I’ll get my revenge, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. Katalisk was destroyed because of the calamity. It won’t hurt

to see it.”

The corners of the beastperson’s mouth raised in a smirk.

“Any other volunteers? What’s wrong, Princess Alice?”

“I believe there is no need for me to raise my hand...” Alice let out a dramatic sigh. Rather than raise her hand, she crossed her arms. “And I assume the same goes for Rin. Are you staying here, Sisbell?”

“I-I’ll go!” Unlike her sister, Sisbell raised her hand with gusto. “So please protect me, everyone!”

“More babysitting...”

“Hey, Jhin! Who are you calling a kid?!”

“The squirt right in front of me, duh. Oh, but I have a question, Your Excellency,” Jhin said, being uncharacteristically deferential as he addressed the Lord. As he posed his question, he kept Sisbell from grabbing him by pushing on her forehead. “Our captain is still unstable. What would you like us to do for her?”

“She’s unstable? Oh, I see.”

The Lord’s eyes widened slightly. It seemed they had just noticed that Mismis was clutching her left shoulder.

“So you’re the captain who fell into a vortex. It seems it’s taking quite a while for you to familiarize yourself with your astral power. Please let me take a look at your crest.”

“What? Oh, y-yes!” Mismis pulled off her outer layer. She exposed her left shoulder and tore off the self-adhesive covering her astral crest.

The mark glowed a bright blue-green. It was soft and round and was shaped like a twisty heart.

“Hmm?”

The Lord slowly started to move, sticking out their neck and shifting so far forward that they could no longer lie against their armrest.

“Hmm... Hmm? Oh. I see...”

“Wh-what is it? Is there something wrong with my mark?!” Mismis asked.

The Lord said nothing. They continued to stare at her crest with a sparkle in their eyes. They were silent, almost as though they hadn’t heard Mismis.

“Um... Your Excellency?”

“Eve would have been surprised to see this if she were here.”

“What?”

Eve was the name of the Founder. When the Lord mumbled that to themselves, Commander Mismis’s eyes went wide, and her mouth fell open.

“Um, what do you mean?”

“The color, position, and shape are all exactly the same... Is that you, astral power? Or rather Alicerose? I suppose instead of choosing her descendants, she picked an Imperial in the same situation as her.”

The beastperson squinted as though remembering something from the past.

“Commander Mismis Klass of Unit 907.”

“Y-yes?!”

“That astral crest is nothing bad. You don’t even need rest right now, so you should go with them.”

“Oh... O-okay.”

Mismis bowed but still looked unconvinced.

The Lord had muttered such cryptic things. She’d been convinced that the astral crest was dangerous, so it almost felt like a letdown to know there was nothing wrong with it.

“Um... Your Excellency, do you know what my astral crest is?”

“I recognize it. The distant past.”

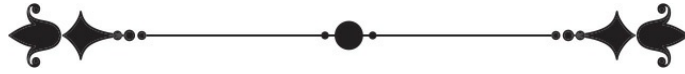
“What?!”

“Good. It looks like everyone here will be going, then.”

Instead of revealing the nature of Mismis’s crest, Lord Yunmelngen nodded to themselves in satisfaction, keeping its workings a secret.

“Go forth and bear witness to the forbidden land where the Planet’s Demise paid its visit.”

CHAPTER 3



The Corrupted Land

1

The Imperial capital Yunmelngen.

Two military aircraft lifted off from the central base in Sector Three. Normally, they would have been seen off with a salute from a crowd of air force soldiers. But this time, only a dozen or so people from the upper brass were there, along with a few mechanics.

They were on special duty.

At the Lord's orders, the secret Imperial dispatch mission had begun.

In the blink of an eye, everyone was nearly ten thousand meters in the air. They had a fine view of the horizon and the slowly darkening sky.

"Mei, do you understand what's happening?! You're approaching the truth of the world!"

"..."

"This is Katalisk we're talking about! The forbidden land, where humankind hasn't been allowed to set foot for years. I'm jealous you get to blaze a new trail through it!"

"Yeah, I don't get it at all."

"If I didn't have patients to take care of, I would have done anything to get on that trip! Make sure to do a thorough investigation!"

"Newt, I'm not really all that jazzed about this place. I could take it or leave

it.”

“But you should be jazzed!”

“All I can think about is keeping an eye on that witch. I don’t care about Katalisk or Catalyst or whatever it’s called. Anyway, we’re almost out of range. I’m hanging up.”

Mei sulked as she threw the comm behind her. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor instead of in a seat. The next moment, however, she tipped over and splayed out on her back.

“Ugh, he gets on my nerves! And I can’t even sleep or anything ’cause I’m so worked up!”

“Mei, don’t you feel dizzy from lying down while we’re in the air?”

“Hmm? Nope.”

Risya was next to her and reading. She was sitting in a chair like she was supposed to and even had her seat belt on.

“You’ve been in a bad mood for a while now.”

“It’s not that I’m in a bad mood. It’s just taking a while to sink in... Agh...” Mei stared at the ceiling. “The witch completely surrendered... Seriously...? What happened to my rematch...?”

“That won’t be happening. At this point, you should sheathe your weapons and start calling her Princess Kissing, as international law recommends.”

“Are you kidding me?!” Mei sighed like her soul was leaving her body. “If I can’t beat the hell out of a purebred witch who’s practically on top of me, then why am I even here?”

“Times are changing.” Risya turned a page of her book. “The conflict between the Empire and Sovereignty isn’t a priority anymore. We’ve got an even worse enemy on our hands.”

“Guess so...”

“The witch Elletear is extremely dangerous. She did a number on our central base. Not to mention headquarters and your subordinates.”

“Right...”

“Taking her down is our top priority. The lovely witches sitting in the back are Elletear’s own blood relatives, too.”

“So we’re pitting them against each other.” Mei smiled cynically, as though resigning herself to what was in store. “Fight witches with witches. And you’re all right with family being pitted against family?”

“Yes. As long as the princesses are willing, the Imperial forces just need to sit back and watch.”

While the members of the Imperial forces talked among themselves, the three astral mages listened quietly from the back seats.

“I can hardly believe they’d say that...,” Rin grumbled. As she looked out the reinforced glass window, she listened carefully to the conversation. “What a vulgar habit the forces have. Who would talk so loudly on purpose about others?”

“Very true.”

“Guh.” Rin whipped around when she heard Alice’s reply. “But, Lady Alice, please don’t let it bother you...”

“Even if she is family, we can’t ignore what Elletear’s done. That’s all this fight is. We can’t turn from the truth.”

She placed her hands on top of each other in her lap. Then she finally opened her eyes, which had been closed since takeoff.

.....We’re not simply being pit against each other.

.....It’s not just the Lou. Even the Zoa are involved now.

She was ready for it all. But Alice couldn’t help but feel shocked by Princess Kissing’s about-face.

“Please fight the witch Elletear alongside me.”

“Who will be upset if I bow to Iska?”

She was so pure of heart. She had surrendered to the Empire and pleaded with them for help. Even as a princess, she hadn’t shown any reservations.

Kissing Zoa Nebulis IX had set her pride aside to do what she needed.

Alice found it shocking—almost chilling.

Kissing had abandoned everything for her cause. Thinking about her determination sent shivers down Alice's spine.

.....It's no different from how Elletear abandoned her humanity.

.....Kissing has abandoned the title of princess.

But what about Alice? Had she ever shown comparable determination to those two? No. She still hadn't, not yet. She'd never had to sacrifice anything.

Was she truly ready to fight her sister?

"So, Alice. You're facing something much more powerful than yourself."

"Do you have a knight who would protect you?"

He wasn't here now. Iska had boarded another aircraft, which was following behind them.

"My determination..."

She felt removed from him. Did she have the determination to accept him as a knight, instead of facing him as a rival?

"..."

"Lady Alice?"

"I'm going to rest for a while... Let me know if anything happens," she told her attendant, who had been checking in on her. Then Alice closed her eyes again.

The flight was long. They had left at around one o'clock in the afternoon. They would spend all night in the aircraft and land the next afternoon in a neutral city with an airport.

.....There'd be an uproar if anyone found out.

.....That three Nebulis Sovereignty princesses are on an Imperial aircraft.

No one could know about it.

Or at least not anyone who didn't know the circumstances. Especially not the Nebulis queen.

Fifteen hours later.

Three Imperial aircraft secretly touched down in a certain neutral city's airport.

And almost immediately...

"Alice! Oh, good, you're safe!"

Nebulis Sovereignty, the Queen's Palace.

In a land far from the Empire, Queen Mirabella was pressing the comm to her ear so firmly that it hurt. She hadn't heard her daughter's voice in days.

On top of that, she couldn't help but be shocked by her daughter's report.

"Elletear is behind everything. She invited the Imperial forces into the Sovereignty and worked with the Hydra to kidnap Sisbell."

"You're sure about this...?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Elletear revealed it all herself."

"..."

She practically dropped the comm.

Her palms were sweaty. She transferred her comm from her left to right hand before it could fall and asked her daughter another question, "Alice, what exactly did Elletear say to you?"

"She told me about her goals."

"What is she after?"

"She wants something stronger than astral power. She wants to be more powerful than the royal family or the Founder, and she almost is already."

"Something greater than astral power?"

Alice's report was beyond her comprehension. On the one hand, Elletear wanted more power. As her mother, the queen keenly understood this.

Elletear was perfect.

If only she had a strong astral power, she would have been the next queen.

But her natural abilities were incomparably weaker than either of her sisters'. Those were the circumstances of her birth, and no matter how she struggled, nothing could fix that. Elletear's grief over her situation might have given rise to her lust for power.

"That's alarming. What kind of power did she mean would be greater than astral power?"

"_____"

Alice went silent.

"Mother, do you know anything about the Planetary Calamity?"

"What?"

"I don't understand it enough to explain it yet, either. But I've learned that the secret of the calamity lies in Katalisk."

"Um? In Katalisk?"

That was an area in the northwestern part of the continent. As far as the queen was aware, it was a dangerous place that was filled with malodorous, poisonous gases. The Empire and Sovereignty hadn't once fought there during the war.

"Alice, isn't that place just a stretch of toxic land?"

"I'm sure about this information. There's a clue to the power Elletear seeks in Katalisk. Right now, the greatest threat to the Sovereignty is Elletear. She single-handedly annihilated Lord Mask and an entire Zoa unit at the Imperial border."

"She what?!"

"She's attempting to destroy both the Sovereignty and the Empire. Sisbell and I both want to stop her...so we're going to Katalisk."

The queen was speechless.

One of the Sovereignty's greatest veterans, Lord Mask, had been defeated? The man had survived many deadly battles. Yet Elletear had managed to wipe

out him and his elite band of troops?

“That news is difficult to accept...”

“Be careful of the Hydra, Mother.”

Alice’s voice was firm.

“Since Lord Mask is unconscious, the Zoa won’t be able to do much. So the issue is the Hydra. Lord Talisman might take advantage of the unrest and send an assassin for you...”

“I will take that to heart.”

She looked out the window. After glancing at the brilliant sunlight that streamed in, Queen Mirabella nodded.

“You be careful, too, Alice. I leave Sisbell and Rin in your hands.”

She hung up.

The Queen’s Space fell quiet.

“The Zoa are missing... And the fact that the Hydra have been silent is disquieting. What are you scheming, Lord Talisman?”

The queen still had no idea.

The Sun Spire that towered over the palace was already deserted.

His breath turned white as he exhaled. It was a chilly night.

During the darkest part of the morning—the time just before daybreak—a group slipped through the Nebulis Sovereignty border.

“Come now, hurry. We can’t allow dear Elletear to beat us to the punch.”

The gentleman wearing a white suit looked back.

Talisman, the head of the Hydra.

He was a burly man with dignified features that made him look like a movie star, and he had a mild-mannered smile. Even the scarf he was wearing to stave off the cold made him look like he’d stepped straight out of the big screen.

“As you all know, the Zoa’s main forces were eliminated.” Talisman surveyed

his people. “Elletear is making her way to the planet’s core, so we need to get there first. She’ll be a serious threat to us if she grows more powerful.”

They were crossing the Sovereignty’s border.

To the northern reaches of the continent, there was an old vortex. It was the oldest cavity in the planet and was believed to have formed around the same time the Planet’s Navel had erupted in the Imperial capital.

It was the Gregorio, the sun’s path. Supposedly, the vortex led directly to the planet’s core.

“It seems we have come to a critical juncture... We had planned with the Eight Great Apostles to chart the vortex in five years’ time. All our schemes have been twisted awry.”

The Hydra had developed a proposal to travel to the planet’s core in secret. They’d called it the Gregorio plan and detailed it in confidential documents called the Gregorian Descant.

“Those were three decades’ worth of plans...”

Talisman’s predecessor had started it. Since the Hydra saw value in the calamity, they had decided to band together with the Eight Great Apostles.

The Hydra wanted to strengthen astral power to its limits using the calamity’s power.

The Eight Great Apostles had tried to obtain their ideal bodies through that power.

That was also why the Hydra family had prepared “gifts” for the Eight Great Apostles time and time again. They had even given Vichyssoise over to Kelvina, who served the Eight Great Apostles, as an experimental subject.

But now the Hydra realized that they had blundered in gifting them Elletear, who had gained uncontrollable power from Kelvina’s experiment.

“The Gregorio is in the far northern reaches of the continent. We’ll switch to an air route at an airport, but no matter how quickly we go, the earliest we’ll get there is tomorrow night.”

Beyond the border was a highway, where several large vehicles were waiting

for them beyond a sprawling parking lot.

They continued to pave the way ahead.

“Ten years ago, Kelvina managed to descend forty-six thousand meters below the surface of the planet. However, the calamity is believed to lie two hundred seventy-four thousand meters below. It’s completely unknown territory down there, the most mysterious place in the entire planet.”

“Oh? So basically you’re saying there’s no guarantee we’ll make it back,” someone said from behind him. That was the red-haired girl Vichyssoise, who wore flashy piercings. Though the predawn air was freezing, she only had on a thin shirt. “That’s what you mean, right, family head?”

“I suppose you are correct, Vichyssoise.”

“...” Vichyssoise tilted her head at Talisman’s vigorous nod. “Are you sure about this? You’re our leader. You could wait at the Sun Spire while the rest of us go down. Isn’t it dangerous?”

“It’s *because* I’m your leader that I’m accompanying you,” Talisman said, pulling his scarf from his neck and wrapping it around Vichyssoise’s.

“?”

“You can’t be comfortable in such a skimpy outfit.”

“What? No, sir, I can’t feel heat or cold anymore.”

“I mean your fashion sense. You’re at an age when you should think about your appearance.”

“Uh-huh... Am I...?”

“Of course you are.”

After wrapping the red-haired girl in the scarf, Talisman assessed her and nodded in satisfaction.

“Let us return to the subject at hand. Indeed, we are planning to delve down into the Gregorio, a hitherto-unknown underground cave. I would be setting a terrible example for my people if I didn’t attend the mission.”

“Even though there’s no guarantee you’ll be able to make it back out?”

“Ha-ha. The greater the risk, the greater the reward. I’m broad-minded enough to accept that.”

Talisman shrugged as though the thought was humorous.

In response, Vichyssoise replied, “Hmm. Well, as long as you feel that way.”

Vichyssoise smiled slightly at him. Normally, she always glowered at others, but for just that moment, her lips curled upward.

Just then...

“I apologize for my lateness, Uncle.”

A princess wearing a white coat made her way over to stand by Talisman.

It was Mizerhyby Hydra Nebulis IX.

She had a chiseled, deep-set face and striking hair that was the color of lapis lazuli. Though her hair had originally been as blond as Talisman’s, her powerful astral power had transformed it to blue as it manifested.

“It seems it’s time to leave.”

“Yes, you’re right. We can’t afford to butt heads with Elletear as soon as we get to the vortex. I’ve prepared a countermeasure, but it would be best if we were simply able to avoid her altogether.”

Talisman gallantly approached one of the vehicles. Mizerhyby watched him from behind.

“It’s quite cold... It’ll be some time until the sun rises.”

Princess Mizerhyby of the Hydra exhaled a puff of white.

3

The Northwestern part of the continent.

They traveled by a military transport aircraft to the closest airport to Katalisk. From there, they drove by highway. They plunged forward, deeper and deeper through the endless expanse of gray wasteland.

“Um...” From the passenger seat, Sisbell’s voice rasped. She’d turned pale hours ago, and her lips were verging on blue. “Miss Nene...”



“What is it? Are you still carsick?”

“Yes... I’m actually feeling worse than before. I’m terrible with long-distance travel... At this rate, I’m going to throw up my sandwich from lunch...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jhin said firmly from the back seat. “You can always swallow it down again.”

“Excuse me?!”

“It’ll be pretty bad if you throw up in the vehicle, though.”

“I’m asking that we do something before it comes to that!” Sisbell turned around, still looking queasy. “Urk! I feel even dizzy after shouting...”

“*Tsk*. Hey, Boss.” Jhin gestured at the car’s rearview mirror.

They were in the vanguard. He was looking at the other two cars behind them in the mirror.

“Let the Saint Disciple know that we’ve got an invalid in here. We’ve already been going for a few hours. She shouldn’t give us trouble if we ask for a break.”

“Uh, right!”

“I see it! We’re here!”

It happened nearly at the same time.

As Commander Mismis was nodding, Nene pointed out the front window from the driver’s seat.

There was a barbed-wire barrier on the horizon, blocking the expanse of land ahead.

“So we’re here.” Jhin heaved a sigh of resignation. “Then let’s just keep going. No break.”

“I can’t possibly agree to that!”

Even though she was railing against the plan, Sisbell seemed relieved they were almost there.

Their long journey through the air and over land had finally ended.

KATALISK CONTAMINATED LAND: NO ENTRY

The cars passed through the wire barricade that sported a large, antiquated sign.

That instant, they all noticed that the air quality in the vehicle had changed.

“Um? Huh?” Nene scowled. “Do you smell something?”

“Boss, don’t fart in the car.”

“Women don’t pass gas! It’s not me. Maybe Miss Sisbell actually threw up...!”

“I can assure you I haven’t! It’s coming from outside!”

The air had come in through the air-conditioning vents. This was what the climate was like in Katalisk. The air smelled putrid, as though someone had left raw sewage to rot, and was choked with hazy yellow smog.

“Oh, you should be able to see it now.” Risya’s voice came over the comm.

The passengers in the other two vehicles must have been experiencing the same phenomenon.

“Watch out ahead, everyone.”

They didn’t need to be told.

They could all see it on the horizon.

A bright red swamp lay before them, bubbling away.

This was Katalisk.

The vehicle came to a halt. The moment Iska stepped out of the car, he broke out into a full-body sweat.

.....This isn’t right. It’s as hot as a desert.

.....Being here is unpleasant enough as is, but even the humidity is so high, I can barely breathe!

They were in the northwestern part of the continent. It should have been much colder than the Empire, yet the weather had changed the moment they crossed into Katalisk.

It felt like the air could kill them. With enough time, the atmosphere itself might very well become deadly.

“Ack... *Cough!* The smell is coming from the gas bubbling up here!” Sisbell sputtered.

She held up a handkerchief to her nose, though it was likely little more than a placebo against the pungent air. Gas masks would have been much more appropriate here.

“Are you all right, Miss Sisbell?”

“Y-yes, Commander Mismis. I’d like to propose something.” The princess pointed at the parked vehicles. “Let’s go back.”

“But we just got here!”

“And it already seems terribly dangerous! Just look around you!” Sisbell flung out her arms.

There was nothing specific to look at. They couldn’t find a single plant in the bright red swamp that was Katalisk. Not even a withered twig or a bit of grass. There were no signs of birds or insects, either.

The area looked downright post-apocalyptic.

“A swamp, huh...? The way these bubbles keep rising up, and with the heat, it feels like magma,” Mei said as she got as close as she could to the edge of the swamp, gazing at the surface of the liquid.

“I’ve seen plenty of swamps teeming with leeches and alligators, but never one that was lifeless. How ’bout you, Risya?”

“This is a first for me, too. But we’ve come all this way on Our Excellency’s orders...” Risya pulled off her glasses and wiped her forehead. “If this is what happened to the land the calamity transformed, then we can’t afford to ignore it. Especially if it were to eventually spread across the entire continent.”

“I misjudged my sister...” Alice’s voice was quiet but full of anger. She bit her lip. “So Elletear sought power from something as abhorrent as this... Is this land the future my sister is seeking?”

“What now, Risya?” Mei pointed at the bright red swamp.

It was boiling away, hundreds of yellowish bubbles popping on its surface and emitting a malicious odor.

“So, these Astrals or whatever, their sacred land is somewhere beyond all this, right? Don’t we need gas masks or something? ’Cause it seems like these fumes might kill us on the way there.”

“Right, there’s that.” For once, Risya seemed unsure about what to do. “That’s odd. I think Their Excellency would at least mention needing respirators if they were aware of the poisonous gas. So the fact that they didn’t tell us means...”

“There would be no point.”

With a *splish*, the Zoa princess dipped a finger into the red, almost-bloodlike swamp.

“This isn’t poison gas. It’s the flow of warped energy.” Kissing’s eyes slowly glittered a brighter and brighter shade of purple. “This land was transformed by the calamity, which means these bubbles were brought to the surface by its power. It seems more warped and less stable than astral energy.”

“Oh? You can see all that, witch girl?” Mei curled her lips as though she was amused. “So if these bubbles are from corrupted energy, not toxic gas, that basically means wearing a gas mask is useless ’cause we’d get poisoned if we touch the swamp?”

“...”

“Hey, don’t ignore me.”

“Iska.” Kissing ignored Mei’s grumbling and turned to Iska. She pointed at the swamp filled with deadly energy. “I will do you a favor, so repay me during the fight against Elletear.”

“What?”

“Come with me.”

The ground splished.

The Zoa princess didn’t hesitate to take a step onto the bright red surface. She didn’t seem to mind that her beautifully tailored garments were being sullied as she took another step.

“Kissing?!” Iska couldn’t help but shout. “Are you okay?”

“It’s about as hot as a bath. And it only reaches to my knees.”

“That’s not what I mean. Isn’t that swamp poisonous?”

If Kissing was to be believed, the gas was the power of the calamity bubbling up from below the planet’s surface.

That was why the land had been contaminated.

.....It makes sense that there aren’t any plants or insects around.

.....This polluted energy is harmful to all life.

Iska knew that they couldn’t progress any farther unscathed. The toxic swamp would be impossible to cross.

“That’s why you owe me.” Kissing pointed up ahead. “You see where the large gas eruption is? To the left of it is a fifteen-to-forty-centimeter-wide route where the gas is thinnest.”

“You can see that?!”

Now it made sense. This was why the Lord had sent Kissing along with them. Only she could see the density of the gas in the contaminated swamp.

“This way.” The mire squelched as Kissing continued through it.

“A-are we really going through this swamp?!” Sisbell asked.

“You’ll go in after me. Commander Mismis and Nene will be with you, so don’t worry.”

After saying that to the scowling princess, Iska stepped into the swamp.

It spluttered the moment the tip of his shoe touched its bright red surface. White smoke started to emit from the sides of his shoes.

“Iska?!”

“I’m all right, Captain. It’s just my shoe. It doesn’t hurt, and I don’t feel it on my skin. At least not right now.”

He walked behind Kissing.

But he wasn’t simply following along; he was copying her precise route through the swamp. Otherwise, he would risk coming into contact with

contaminated energy.

.....Based on what Kissing said, the safe route is only a few millimeters wide.

.....If I'm off by even a step, I'll be exposed to the contaminated energy of the swamp.

Kissing hadn't gone in a straight line.

At times, she zigzagged. At others, she turned sharply to avoid the contaminated energy deposits. Iska was getting exhausted just following her lead.

And it was hot. Yet they continued to trudge through deadly desertlike heat and air as humid as a sauna. Or rather, they couldn't stop. The swamp would suck them in if they paused to rest.

.....This should be fine for soldiers like us. Rin should be able to handle it, too.

.....But are Alice, Sisbell, and Kissing going to be all right?

Iska was especially worried about Kissing.

Under normal circumstances, she would freeze if she were asked to lead a group through such an eerie swamp. On top of that, she had to bear the responsibility of scouting the corrupted energy deposits ahead.

She must have been far more exhausted than he was.

Should I say something to her?

Or would that distract her?

Iska hesitated for only a few seconds. The black-haired girl in front of him staggered.

"..."

She was like a marionette whose strings had been cut. Her knees buckled, and she slowly fell to the side and into the mire. The moment Iska saw that, he cried out and caught her.

"Kissing!"

"...Ugh!"

He yanked her by the arm and cradled her.

If he had been a moment later, she would have fallen face-first into the swamp.

“...I’m all right,” she rasped. “I was a bit dizzy, but I can still walk... Promise...”

Kissing tried to start walking again, but Iska pulled her onto his back, not giving her a moment to argue.

“.....Huh? Wh-what do you think you’re doing?!”

“I’ll carry you on my back. Just focus on the corrupted energy and point the way.”

“ ...”

Kissing squeezed tighter and leaned into him.

“I’m touching an Imperial soldier...”

“I’ll make it up to you later.”

“All right. Go two meters ahead in a straight line. Then go diagonally to the left.”

“Got it.”

They started moving forward again. Iska followed Kissing’s directions as from his back she pointed out the way.

“.....I see,” Sisbell murmured from behind him. “Ah! I’m at my limit now! If no one catches me, I might just fall right into the swamp! Oh, Jhin—”

“Looks like you have enough strength to shout, at least.”

“I do not!”

“C’mon, just walk. If you stop, you’ll hold everyone up.”

“Have you no compassion?!”

Everyone behind them seemed to be doing fine. Iska was distracted for a moment by their conversation. He heard water droplets splatter in front of him.

“...Oh.” Kissing lifted her head off his back.

She pointed to a group of small figures approaching them from up ahead.

“Astrals?”

“_____”

Three small beings in tattered clothing watched them. These were the demihumans called the Astrals.

They stood atop a small stretch of land, much like one would on a small island in a vast ocean.

“Is that the Astrals’ sacred land? It looks very small.”

“This way.”

One of the Astrals beckoned them. Or so Iska thought. Instead, the Astral and their two compatriots began skipping across the surface of the swamp.

They made their way farther and farther in.

“Are we still walking?! What is the problem with this place?!”

“Come now, Princess Sisbell. We plan on camping here tonight.”

As Risya pulled herself up, she sighed and wiped the sweat off her forehead.

“According to Their Excellency, the Astrals are a cowardly group and will be frightened if we all approach them. Only a few of us should enter the sacred land, and the rest of us should stay behind here.”

“Who should go?”

“Anyone with deep ties to Elletear. In other words, her sisters, Aliceliese and Sisbell. And Princess Kissing, who wants revenge.”

Risya looked at the three princesses.

Rin seemed somewhat dissatisfied with the arrangement, but sighed in resignation.

“I’ll be going as Their Excellency’s messenger, and Iska will also come, because he has the astral swords.”

“All right...”

Risya winked at him, and Iska nodded discreetly.

The astral swords. They already knew the blades worked against Elletear. That was why he needed to learn more. He needed to know why Crossweil had bequeathed them to him.

“Do not let them go. Those swords are the only hope for the rebirth of the world.”

Iska had always thought Crossweil had entrusted the swords to him to fight the Sovereignty. He was convinced that peace negotiations between the Empire and the Sovereignty could only begin if the Empire had weapons that could work against astral mages.

But he had been wrong.

Since when had he started to reassess his assumptions? If the astral swords really were just mere tools to fight the astral mages, then he wouldn't have been able to use them to save the world, as his teacher had said.

“Please keep watch here, Mei.”

“I got it, I got it. You won't catch us going after you. We'll set up camp and hunker down to wait.” Mei nodded and yawned. “Let's us know if anything happens, Risya.”

“I will. All right, let's go, Isk.” Risya tied her hair up. Once she cooled down a bit, she pointed at the red swamp.

“To the astral power's sacred ground!”

4

Just as boiling-hot deserts contained verdant oases, so was there a place hospitable to life in the barren landscape of Katalisk.

Deep in this dead, polluted land, there was an oasis called the “sacred ground” that stretched a few hundred meters in all directions.

It was a place where the astral powers that had erupted from the planet's core had gathered.

“Is this a dream?” Sisbell seemed taken aback. “There’s a whole forest in that deadly swamp?”

Yes. Ahead of where they had followed the Astrals, they found a lush forest flourishing with plants and trees. They saw flowers of all colors. Some of the fruits and nuts were ripe on the trees, and birds had gathered to eat them.

“I can’t believe an oasis like this exists in the middle of the contaminated land. It looked like the end of the world...”

“The air is clear, too,” Alice said as she took a deep breath and looked around at the trees. “It really emphasizes how strange the poisonous air was earlier. I’m worried about having to go back through it.”

“There’s almost no corrupt energy here.” Still clinging to Iska’s back, Kissing pointed above the forest. “Look over there. The astral energy is whirling overhead, almost like a curtain that blocks off light. I believe that’s how the calamity is being stalled.”

“I can’t see it, but I think I can feel it...,” Iska remarked.

The air felt different here. He could feel on his skin that the astral energy was purifying the putrefaction of the calamity.

“By the way, Kissing,” Alice said, seeming slightly annoyed, “how long are you going to stay there?”

“Where?”

“On Iska’s back! It’s safe now, so you should be able to get off.”

“No.”

When the Zoa princess replied without hesitation, Alice’s expression hardened.

“Oh? Well, why do you not want to?”

“As I’m the only person here who can guide everyone to safety, Iska ought to treat me with respect. Unlike you, I’m not simply deadweight to be lugged around.”

“Deadweight?!”

“Princess Aliceliese,” Risya called out to Alice. The princess barely managed to contain herself.

“Ahem... Pardon me.”



“Please be a bit quieter. It seems like this is where the Astrals live.”

The undergrowth quivered. An Astral peeked out from the brush that Risya was staring at.

The diminutive creature looked curious, albeit frightened. As soon as their eyes met, the Astral fled.

“It’s so cute... It’s even adorable when it runs away!”

Sisbell was entranced as she watched the Astral dash off.

“What cute people live in this green garden! By the way, Ms. Risya, how far must we walk?”

“I have no idea. According to the Lord, we’ll know when we get there.”

The group continued down a small path through the woods. As the Astrals peeked out from the brush to watch them, they arrived at a small dome of white bricks. It was the size of a large storehouse.

The door to the dome opened, as though its occupants were expecting them.

“...Yunmelngen?”

There were three Astrals inside the structure. Two of them parted to stand by the walls, while the one in the middle sat on top of a pile of broad leaves gathered into a cushion. Though they all wore cloaks that looked more or less identical, the one in the middle was adorned with jewelry.

“Nice to meet you. I’m sorry for addressing you in the human tongue.” Risya knelt as soon as she entered the dome. She sat down and bent her head low, showing that she meant no harm. “I am Lord Yunmelngen’s messenger, Risya. I presume you are the elder.”

“Elder...?”

The Astral looked into the air for some time. It took well over a minute for them to process Risya’s statement.

“Elder. Yes, Elder. It has been some time...since I have used human language.”

“I presume about seventy years. Lord Yunmelngen told me that they came

here that long ago.”

Sit, sit, Risya beckoned. Iska, Alice, Sisbell, and Kissing sat on the ground.

“And where is Yunmelngen?”

“They are in good health in the Empire. But they have almost used up their medicine and asked me to obtain more if we may.”

“Hmm... Very well.”

The elder stood up and drew back a curtain farther inside, which revealed a black stone. It looked like obsidian. It was almost as though...

“Wait, is that?!” Iska nearly leaped up on the spot.

It wasn’t just that he recognized the stone—he could tell it was the same material his black astral sword was made of.

“Hmm...?”

The elder turned around. The Astral stared so hard that Iska felt as though their eyes were boring a hole straight through his entire body.

“Did you shrink, Crow?”

“That’s not me!”

He couldn’t believe he’d been mistaken for someone else. It seemed like the Astrals weren’t good at telling humans apart.

“But you have the astral swords, so you must be...”

“I’m just taking care of them. Master Crossweil lent them to me.”

He unsheathed the black and white astral swords, then placed them on the ground so the Astral could see.

“The Lord informed us that you made these swords. I came here to learn more about them.”

“So you did.”

The elder brought over a black crystal. It was the same color as one of his astral swords.

“We created them because Yunmelngen told us they would stop the

calamity. Use it like this.”

With a *tap*, the elder hit the black crystal on the ground.

“So Sez xeph—awaken.”

The black crystal burst.

Or so it seemed. The bright flash of light that erupted from it made it seem like it had.

“Astral light?!”

“What? It can’t be!”

Alice rose to her feet, and Sisbell followed.

She held her hands to her chest.

“It’s the same light as my Illumination?!”

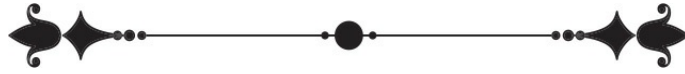
“This is no mere stone. It’s a crystal that formed from astral powers gathering in the same place for centuries.”

The elder caressed the crystal.

“I tire of speaking in the human tongue. It will be better for the astral powers to speak to you instead.”

The events of seventy years ago sprang to life before Iska’s and the others’ eyes.

CHAPTER 4



The Entire Planet's Memories

Thirty years had passed since the Planet's Navel, a vortex located in the Imperial capital, had erupted with multitudes of astral powers, giving birth to the world's first witches and sorcerers.

In that time, the crown prince, Lord Yunmelngen, ascended to the throne. Refugees fled to the north of the Empire, establishing a new nation called the Nebulis Sovereignty. And as history wrote itself...

"What a long trip this has been. Are you sure this is the land of the Astrals?"

The voice of someone of indeterminate gender filtered through the woods. The individual who had spoken was a silver-furred beastperson. They were looking around the verdant meadow.

"Crow, you said you'd take good care of me. Couldn't you at least have carried me on your back across that unpleasant swamp?"

"You're the one who decided to come with me," retorted a boy wearing a gigantic backpack. His hair was black and overgrown, and his face looked haggard. He wore a dagger that peeked out from a scabbard at his hip—a weapon for self-defense.

"And I said I would protect you, not that I'd take care of you," he added.

"It's all the same. Mmm, after going through that stifling swamp, the air here sure is refreshing."

Lord Yunmelngen narrowed their eyes at the brightness. Like a kitten basking in the sun, the beastperson stepped into the light passing through the trees.

"We've traveled a long way from the Empire to get to the outer reaches of the continent. But thanks to that, we have all the time in the world to talk... I

thought that what happened thirty years ago would never occur again.”

The Lord looked up at the sunlight and trees. They enunciated each word, as though deliberating on every syllable.

“The explosion at the capital was caused by spirit-like wraiths called astral powers bursting out of the ground. They’re responsible for transforming me into a beast.”

The Lord took a knee. They leaned forward, meeting the eyes of the short-statured people who had come from the brush.

“Is my assessment incorrect?” the Lord asked.

“Entirely,” one of the Astrals said. There were three in total, and the one in the center was wearing a necklace made of small stones. **“The astral powers only fled. They came from the planet’s core.”**

“So they’re not ill-intentioned? It’s not just the Empire that’s in turmoil over them but the whole world, you realize.”

“Not them.” The elder among the people pointed down at their feet. **“The astral powers did nothing wrong. Something threatened them beneath the planet.”**

“...So that’s the baddie we’re up against, then?” the black-haired boy said in place of the Lord.

Crossweil Gate Nebulis. He had also been exposed to the vortex’s power and become one of the first sorcerers in the world. He was a brother of the Nebulis sisters, whom he had parted ways with, to remain in the Empire.

“The Empire was excavating a hole five kilometers underground for resources. I was one of the miners, so I’ve always felt guilt over causing the vortex—are you saying it wasn’t our fault?” he asked.

“What you did was irrelevant.” The elder didn’t hesitate in the slightest when replying. **“The astral powers created the vortex to escape. They could no longer remain in the core of the planet, so they fled. Your digging a hole in the ground was irrelevant to them.”**

“So you’re saying that even if nobody had mined there, a vortex would have

still formed in the capital either way?”

“Yes, just as one formed in these woods.”

The Astrals called this forest the “sacred ground.” Crossweil and the Lord had both understood why it had that name the moment they had stepped into the place.

The ground of the forest was filled with small vortex pockets. Though each one looked like a small hole—the kind a mischievous child might make—they were all glowing with iridescent light from the astral energy inside.

They were like fountains of light. Because the land was protected by the astral energy that surged out of those holes, it was the only area in the corrupted land of Katalisk that was still vibrant and green.

“Vortexes form naturally. Because they are the paths by which the astral powers flee.”

In which case... If they wanted to fully uncover the secrets of the events from three decades ago, would they need to determine why the astral powers had run in the first place?

“The World Enemy, huh...?” Crossweil spat out the words. “So there’s some sort of bogeyman called the ‘Planetary Calamity,’ and that’s why the astral powers fled from the planet’s core? And until we deal with it, more vortexes will just keep forming?”

The incident at the capital was just the start. If more vortexes formed in the capital, more people would become witches and sorcerers, whether they liked it or not.

“What if we get rid of it?”

“If the planet’s core is safe, the astral powers will return to it. And they will steer clear of the surface.”

“So they won’t possess any other humans?”

“That’s right. They don’t live within humans because they want to. The astral powers are very weak, so they require a ‘home.’ That was what the planet’s core used to be.”

To summarize, the astral powers had come from the planet's core, but because a monster had appeared, they'd lost their homeland and fled to the planet's surface.

"Then all we need to do is defeat this calamity. How do we do—?"

"Wait, Crow. We have a lot of other questions we need to ask first," the Lord finally chimed in, after keeping quiet for a while. They were staring at the three smaller beings. **"I understand we need to do something about this calamity, but do we really need to travel to it? According to you, it's in the center of the planet. Does that mean I should rally everyone in the Imperial forces to dig a hole even deeper than the Planet's Navel?"**

"That." The elder pointed at a small hole in the ground that sparkled with blue astral energy.

"Oh... So you're saying we should dive into a vortex?"

"All vortexes lead to the planet's core. But they are for the astral powers to travel. You will need to find a larger opening that a human may fit through."

"All right. I'll try it out. I'll use my authority as the Lord or whatever else I have to." The Lord gave them a forced smile and waved a hand. **"Crow, you can keep asking questions. I have an idea about how to get to the depths of the planet. But are you sure we can defeat it? This thing sounds horrifying—even the astral powers are running from it."**

Humans possessed by astral power obtained terrifying abilities. Crossweil's adoptive sister, Eve, was an example of the most powerful astral mage, but if even her astral power had run from the calamity...

Did that mean humans wouldn't stand a chance against it?

"Tell me," Crossweil said, staring straight into the elder's eyes as he gulped. "Can human beings win against the calamity? If we sent the Empire's troops down there, what are the odds they would win?"

"None."

"What?!"

He was at a loss for words. He had expected them to say that chances were

slim, or to give them a low percentage, at least. Even that faint possibility had been crushed.

They had no hope of winning.

“The calamity will eventually destroy the world. No one on this planet can defeat it alone. A human would be incapable of harming it in the first place.”

“Is it really that hopeless?”

A bead of cold sweat ran down his face.

“Then what are we supposed to do?! Yunmelngen and I only came here because *you* called us. Are you saying it’s hopeless?!”

“_____”

Just then, the two Astrals who had remained still until that moment began to move.

They stepped forward and took their places to the right and left of the elder, whispering as they did. They were speaking in a completely alien language to humankind. Crossweil couldn’t understand anything they were saying, even when he strained his ears.

“Hey—” He was about to say more.

“There is hope.” The elder pointed at the vortex at their feet again.

“If you gather all the abilities of the astral powers together.”

Their words were beyond Crossweil’s comprehension.

“...What do you mean by that?”

“The astral powers are weak and timid. And they are scattered, some on the planet’s surface, others still hiding within the core.”

Some of the astral powers had made their way to the Empire. Others to the Sovereignty. If some had made it to this sacred ground, other astral powers would be in some region yet unexplored. The astral powers were scattered all over the world.

“If you gather all of them, there may be hope.”

All of the Astrals made a half-turn simultaneously. Then the three started walking away from Crossweil and the Lord.

“Huh?”

“Looks like they want us to follow them. Let’s go, Crow.”

The beastperson got up and began to walk. Crossweil rushed to follow them. Eventually, the group arrived at a dome made of white bricks. They filed through the opening.

“What are those black stones...?” Crossweil murmured the moment he got inside.

By all appearances, they were just rocks. There were several of them—enough to fit in someone’s arms—piled atop one another on a pedestal in the center of the space.

Each of the rocks tapered into sharp points, like the teeth of a beast.

The Astrals seemed to have deified the rocks. Flowers of every color had been set around the pedestal, along with offerings of fruits and nuts.

“It is astral power.”

“Hmm?”

“Astral powers cannot live alone. That is why they possess humans. These rocks are gatherings of the astral powers that were not able to find human hosts. After hundreds of years, they have crystallized.”

“These used to be astral powers?! Wait, I need a sec to process that...!”

Crossweil peered at the black crystals. They didn’t look like astral powers at all. As far as Crossweil knew, astral energy was supposed to be colorful and faintly luminescent. In contrast, these crystals were just black. They looked nothing like astral power to him.

“Oh! I see!” Yunmelngen clapped their hands together in that moment. **“Do you like the arts, Crow? Painting and such?”**

“What are you talking about?”

“You don’t know the first thing about art, do you?” The beastperson

shrugged, seeming to find it amusing. **“I’ll give you a little lesson. Consider the primary colors. Now, take red, blue, green, and yellow, orange, and purple, too, along with all the other colors that exist in the world. If you add them together, what do you get?”**

“Um, I have no idea...”

“Black. You get the color of those crystals.” Yunmelngen made their way over to the crystals. **“Black is the color that you get after adding all the other colors together. And...”**

They set their hand on the black crystals, caressing their sharp, bladelike edges.

“Crow, you need to know this, too. The astral powers each have their characteristic colors.”

Flame astral power would create a red astral crest. Ice astral power, a blue one. Wind astral power, green.

Those could be subdivided. For example, a version of wind astral power might result in an emerald astral crest.

“I don’t think there are *just* a hundred or even a thousand astral powers. You probably need tens of thousands or maybe even hundreds of thousands of different-colored astral powers to make one of these crystals. Just look at them. The fact that they’re pitch-black means that many astral powers have gathered inside them.”

The rocks were an amalgamation of all manner of astral energies. If even one color of astral power had been missing, the crystals likely wouldn’t have been such a pure shade of black.

“It doesn’t seem real, but are you saying that these rocks are the key to winning?”

He cautiously reached his hand toward them. Like Yunmelngen, Crossweil also touched the crystals.

“To take down the calamity, we need to gather every last astral power... So if these crystals contain them all, do we already have the secret weapon we

need?”

“Technically, yes, but this isn’t enough.”

The elder extended both arms.

“This crystal contains only the astral powers here in this sacred ground. It is not enough. In order to fight the calamity, you will need all the astral powers scattered throughout the world. We conversed with the astral powers and had them store their abilities in these crystals.”

“The entire world?! That’s basically impossible, though!”

The Astrals had only just taught them this. The astral powers that had fled from the planet’s center had scattered upon reaching the surface. Some had erupted out of the Empire, while others had emerged from the Sovereignty. There were likely vortexes in undeveloped forests, deserts, and wastelands, too.

They would need to account for every one of these astral powers...

“You only need their elements.”

Their arms still outstretched, the elder looked up into the air.

“One ice astral power. If you gather one, then the ice and snow and blizzard astral powers that are related to it will gather.”

“So that’s what we need to do...”

Though the astral powers had scattered after fleeing the core, they were all still kindred spirits. The ice, earth, lightning, flame, and wind astral powers were tied together.

“The astral powers originated from the energies on this planet. Collecting all of them would mean bringing all the energy of the planet together, along with its memories.”

All the energy on the planet and all its memories. Once they had every single one, they would finally be able to challenge the calamity that threatened the planet.

“Well, there you go, Crow.” The Lord mischievously smiled and poked him in

the side. **“So, based on all of that, we know who’s the right person for the job, right?”**

“Damn it... Don’t act like I’m going to agree to something this important. And it’s all unprecedented, too.”

He scratched the back of his head. After sighing, the black-haired young man looked at the crystals in front of his eyes.

The black crystals.

He stared at the sharp edges of the rocks, which looked like the teeth of a gigantic beast.

“I want to ask for something, then.” He turned back to the Astrals. “I can’t carry these around when they’re in this form. Could you turn one of these into a sword?”

“A sword?”

“Yeah. I’ll need a weapon to fight the calamity, won’t I?”

And just like that, the largest crystal of astral energy in the world was remade into a sword.

The black astral sword, a vessel that could absorb all types of astral energy. But a second of its kind could never be made again.

“I think I get how important this is. I’ll do what I can.” Crossweil took the black blade from the elder.

And then the memory from seventy years ago cut out.

The Illumination astral power faded.

But it hadn’t come from Sisbell. It had come from the stone right in front of Iska’s and the others’ eyes—the black astral crystal. One of the astral energies in the crystal must have had the power of Illumination.

“Oh-ho. I see.”

The room went quiet.

Risya nodded, seeming convinced of something. “I didn’t know much about

Isk's sword. And the Lord only told me I'd find out in time. Isk, you could have told me about such an important secret."

"Y-you've got it all wrong, Ms. Risya! I didn't know about it, either!"

As Risya grinned at him, Iska waved his hands, in a fluster. His teacher hadn't told him a single thing about the astral swords.

.....But I might have done the same in his shoes.

.....The scope of this is way too big.

He had fought hoping for peace between the Empire and the Sovereignty. The secret of the swords would have been irrelevant. When he was fighting against astral mages, they were just a way to cut through astral attacks.



It had been too early to tell him. That was probably what his teacher and the Lord had decided.

.....But then things changed. Now this isn't about the war between the Empire and the Sovereignty.

.....It's about stopping the calamity and Elletear.

They had finally reached a juncture where the astral swords were necessary. That was why they had told him now.

And...

...all of this effort until now hadn't been in vain. That was what he believed.

In his many battles, his blades had absorbed the energy of the astral powers of his foes.

Iska's desire to achieve peace talks with the Sovereignty had led to him collecting the astral powers of the world.

"Oh, right, in that case..."

There were two astral swords on the ground. Iska pointed at the white one and turned to the elder.

"You only told us about the black blade. What about the white one?"

"The white astral sword?"

"Yes, is it important?"

"Well....."

The elder went silent. The Astral stared at Iska intently.

"Nope."

"Not at all?!"

"What *is* important is to record all the different types of energies. The white sword releases some of the energy kept in the black sword. It consumes the power stored in it."

"What did you make it for, then?"

“Crow asked for it.”

The elder leaned down, then handed the swords to Iska.

“He told us he wanted to be able to use some of the power in the black sword to stop his adoptive sister. The sword is as important as its wielder. So I permitted it.”

“I didn’t know that was part of their history...”

There were two astral swords. One black and one white. And that had a significance to it.

When all the primary colors were gathered, they turned black.

When all the primary colors of light were gathered, they turned white.

The black sword was proof that all the different energies of the astral powers had been gathered. The white sword was proof that the energies could be released again as astral light. The former was the weapon they would use against the Great Planetary Calamity. The latter was the weapon the wielder would use to protect himself.

“Well, I think this is a good time to call it. Mei is probably tired of waiting, too.” Risya pulled out a comm and checked the time on its display. “Any other questions, Iska?”

“I...”

“I have one.”

They all turned to the same person—Kissing had raised her hand.

“It seems like Iska’s sword is effective against both the Planetary Calamity and the witch. So wouldn’t it be best to have multiples of them?”

“_____”

“Are you not able to make a second set of swords?” she asked.

“No.” The elder pointed at the crystals on the pedestal. **“These are too small and impure.”**

So it was impossible. Both Risya and Iska had accepted this, but not the princess of the Zoa.

“I don’t mind if it isn’t the same. And it doesn’t need to be as large as Iska’s. I will use anything made from those crystals—even a dagger would be enough.”

“Kissing?! What are you saying?!” Alice turned to her. She had been lost in her thoughts this whole time, but Kissing’s request brought her back to reality. “You want an astral sword?! What are you thinking?”

“Of course. It’s the key to defeating Elletear.” Kissing didn’t waver. She ignored Alice’s objection and kept her eyes on the Astrals.

“Please,” she said.

“We may be able to make a small one, if we have an evening to do it.”

“Thank you.” The black-haired girl bowed deeply to the floor. “Then my business here is done.”

“I didn’t expect that. What an entertainer you are, Princess Kissing. Now then, Princess Aliceliese, Princess Sisbell, do you have anything else to ask?”

“No...”

“I don’t have anything, either...”

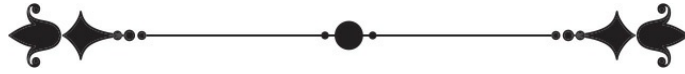
Both the Lou princesses shook their heads. Ever since viewing the past through the Illumination astral power, the two sisters had been strangely quiet, almost like they were different people. Had something happened?

Before Iska could ask, Alice rose to her feet and turned around.

“Let’s go back and tell the others about this. Rin is waiting at the camp.”

Night fell on Katalisk.

CHAPTER 5



Too Much Suffering to Call a Happy Ending

Katalisk.

The region was a marshland filled with a suffocating, malodorous miasma. It was also as sweltering as a desert. They planned to set up camp for the night on the small bit of hospitable land there.

“Are you all right, Lady Alice?” Outside the tent, Rin was illuminated by the glow of an open fire. “Has the smell disturbed your sleep?”

“There’s that, but I also have some things to think about.”

Alice’s back arched as she hugged her knees. She had left the tent to watch the fire for a while, but she still couldn’t sleep.

The things the Astrals had told them in the sacred land had become a seed that had sprouted into further worries. Now she was plagued by insomnia.

“Actually, I’ve been worried for you and Lady Sisbell.” Rin made her way to the fire. “You’ve looked off ever since you came back. Did the Astrals say something they shouldn’t have?”

“Just what we discussed earlier.”

“Ah, yes. Regarding the Imperial swordsman’s swords.” Rin smiled wanly. “I actually feel much better after learning the secret to his blades. They never seemed like the type of weapon the Imperials would make.”

“...”

But that wasn’t the issue. What truly weighed on Alice’s mind was the enemy they would need the black astral sword to defeat.

“I was thinking more about why the astral sword was made,” she said.

“You mean the calamity?”

“Yes. What did you think after hearing what the Astrals told us?”

“Right...,” Rin said, faltering. “As a rule, I only believe in the things I see for myself. The Astral says that a monster sleeps deep below our feet...but that sounds like a fairy tale—like something a child would make up.”

“So you don’t believe them?”

“To be perfectly honest, I don’t want to.” Rin stooped down to pick up a withered branch at her feet. She threw it into the crackling fire. “I only believe in things I’ve seen for myself. But I have seen humans transform into something inhuman three times before.”

The first was when Vichyssoise of the Hydra had turned into a witch. The second was when the mad scientist Kelvina had turned into a fallen angel. And the third was none other than Elletear.

“I think Lady Elletear was the most shocking instance of all. The only way you can explain how she transformed into something so sinister is if the calamity exists.”

“Do you think we should fight it, Rin? The calamity?”

“Of course.”

The attendant nodded firmly. She believed that it needed to be defeated and was ready to fight it herself.

“After seeing the state of Katalisk, it’s clear that we cannot allow the Planetary Calamity to go unchecked. It is clearly a greater threat than the Empire. I also don’t want to see another person turn out like Lady Elletear.”

“Rin.”

Please sit. Alice silently beckoned for Rin to take the spot next to her.

“It’s just as you’ve said. So I’d like you to give me advice on something that’s been worrying me.”

“Anything you wish.”

Rin sat down. Then she waited.

“We need to defeat the calamity,” Alice said. “But there’s something we 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.”

“Are you concerned about how we’ll get to the core? According to the Astrals, it seems we only need to find a vortex that is large enough for a human to—”

“I’m talking about the dismantlement of the Sovereignty.”

The future that Alice spoke of was beyond the comprehension of the attendant sitting next to her.

“...Huh?”

“Rin.” A small, forced smile appeared on Alice’s face.

As Rin gaped at her, Alice stroked her attendant’s hair and gazed up at the night sky.

“Let me talk about the future for a bit. The future after we’ve defeated the calamity.”

At the same time...

The vortex located far north of Katalisk, the Gregorio.

When the Hydra arrived, they saw...

“What is this? It’s just a huge hole.” Vichyssoise peered into the cavern in the ground.

It was pitch-black and extended to a depth beyond the reach of light. Had it been daytime, they might have been able to make out the interior of the opening, but alas, dawn had yet to arrive. They could only see traces of the sun beginning to climb over the horizon.

“A vortex is a hole created through the eruption of astral energy. So shouldn’t it be glowing, sir?”

“Ha-ha. That’s only true the first few weeks after a vortex’s creation,”

Talisman said from beside her. He took out a large flashlight from his coat pocket. “This vortex formed a century ago. The astral powers that came through here are long gone and are now somewhere on the planet’s surface. That means flashlights are indispensable.”

“Shall I light the way with my astral flames? They won’t go out.”

“I’d like you to keep your strength on reserve. It’s only two hundred seventy-four thousand meters below. We’ll get there soon enough by leaping down.”

It was a two-hundred-seventy-four-thousand-meter drop.

An airplane operated at heights of nine thousand meters above the ground, yet he wanted to “leap” into a hole thirty times deeper.

Though that would have seemed ludicrous to any normal person, the people around the vortex were astral mages from the royal family, and their retinue were a band of elite soldiers.

Using the astral power of wind, they would create a powerful gust to carry them to the center of the planet.

And the Hydra had someone who could strengthen astral power to its full potential.

Princess Mizerhyby, also known as the “walking vortex,” wielded the astral power of Glory. She had the ability to make any astral mage as powerful as a purebred.

“What perfect timing.” Talisman glanced at his wristwatch. “The sun should rise in half an hour. That should improve visibility in the vortex. We’ll start our descent then. What say you, Mizzy?”

“As you wish.” Mizerhyby grinned and exhaled a puff of white breath.

Even in the dark, her characteristic hair glowed a beautiful blue.

“Oh, right, Uncle? May I ask a question?”

“What is it?”

“We must arrive at the planet’s core through the vortex before Elletear. You’ve impressed upon us the utmost importance of that quite clearly. But once

we do find the calamity..." Mizerhyby looked at her uncle. "What would you like us to do with it?"

"I'd just like to research it. I want to learn everything there is to know about the most powerful thing on the planet," Talisman replied melodiously. "I've always been more of a researcher than a leader, at my core."

Yes.

This man had previously said something about astral power to Iska.

"The physical conversion of the waves. It took me six years of fine-tuning to understand it. And eight more years to learn how to use it. Another thirteen years to reach this point. Nearly thirty years of hard work. I might be a little ham-handed."

"You'd need to be mad to reach this level of perfection."

He had spoken about a yearning for scientific inquiry that would leave most flabbergasted.

That was the true essence of the leader of the Hydra, Talisman. It was also the thing that most set him apart from the Eight Great Apostles.

The Apostles had wished to use the calamity. Talisman simply wished to learn everything he could about it.

"The calamity itself likely originated from somewhere else." Talisman looked up at the sky. "From above? Or perhaps from a mutation deep below? I'd like to learn whether it's intelligent. If it is, perhaps we could tame it and keep it for ourselves."

"How very like you to say that, Uncle." Mizerhyby smiled wanly at him.

This was Talisman's philosophy: Fools defeat their enemies, but sages tame them.

"Then, ideally, you would keep the calamity as a very large pet—like a dog—rather than defeat it?"

"Yes, that's right. But there is one other thing that's important to keep in mind." The large man suddenly grew serious. He raised a finger to Mizerhyby and Vichyssoise. "Regardless of whether it is right or wrong, we shouldn't

defeat the calamity.”

“What?”

“Hmm? What does that mean, sir?”

Both young women opened their eyes wide.

Talisman pointed at the ground. “Remember, the astral powers only fled to the surface from their home in the core because they feared the calamity. Now, what happens if the calamity disappears?”

“Does that mean they’ll return to the core once the threat is gone?” Vichyssoise answered.

But Talisman nodded at Mizerhyby as though prompting her to reply, too.

“Well, Mizy, can you see the future one step after that?”

“The future?”

“Yes. Once the calamity is defeated, the astral powers will begin a mass migration. The astral powers scattered across the surface and atmosphere of the planet will return to their home beneath the ground. That includes the astral powers dwelling within human beings.”

“What?! No!”

The princess with blue hair widened her eyes.

“So all the astral mages would lose their powers?!”

“That’s right, Mizy. Every last astral mage on this planet would kiss their abilities good-bye. And the Nebulis Sovereignty would decline before long.”

The Founder, the royal family, and everyone in the Sovereignty would be powerless. They would all become ordinary humans.

“That can’t be true...” As she exhaled white breath, the Hydra princess clenched her fist.

She couldn’t let that happen. Astral mages considered themselves the chosen ones because of their abilities. They had built the Sovereignty into what it was now through the blessings given to them by the astral powers. Losing their powers was a more frightening prospect than losing everything they owned.

The possibility of them becoming ordinary, powerless humans was no laughing matter.

“I agree with you, Uncle,” she said in a stifled tone, biting her lip. “We cannot defeat the calamity. I understand why well enough now.”

“There you have it. If the calamity is no more, then the astral mages will lose their powers as well. Therefore, we must protect the calamity.” Talisman turned around. He looked at the sun rising on the horizon. “The more power one has, the more one has to protect. And the more difficult it is to abandon that power.”

The planet had gifted them abilities. It was unlikely that anyone in the Sovereignty would willingly give them up.

“It would be a grave mistake to defeat the calamity. Sooner or later, everyone will realize that.”



“After we defeat the calamity, astral mages won’t have powers anymore.”

The fire crackled. As Rin was illuminated by its glow, her lips went pale, and the blood drained from her face.

“But...that also means the Nebulis Sovereignty is as good as ruined...” Her voice was raspy, almost on the verge of disappearing. She had never been this shaken in her life. “I must apologize, Lady Alice... It didn’t even occur to me...”

“No, Rin, it was just a matter of when.”

Alice shook her head as the attendant bowed hers. She wasn’t going to comfort Rin.

Everyone here would eventually realize it. The Astrals as well. Alice and Sisbell had simply been the first to make the connection. Though it seemed Kissing had yet to notice.

That was likely because the Zoa princess had been too wrapped up in exacting revenge on Elletear.

.....Only Sisbell and I noticed back then.

.....Iska...must have been too concerned over his swords to think about it.

She had realized it immediately because she was an astral mage.

After they defeated the calamity, the astral powers on the surface would return to the core.

The astral powers dwelling in humans would be no exception. And once they left, the mages would be powerless. Of course, it was unlikely that they would lose their abilities immediately.

“It crossed my mind,” Alice said.

She looked up at the embers. They floated up into the air, only to immediately catch on to the wind and disappear. Alice could only think the same thing would happen to the astral mages in the future.

Eventually, all the astral mages would disappear—not one would be left behind.

“If we defeat the calamity, that means no more astral mages. And if the astral mages are gone, then the Sovereignty will decline and fall to ruin.”

“What?!”

“I knew we would need to be prepared for that, which was why I couldn’t say anything right away...”

Of course she hadn’t been able to answer.

.....If only there was something we could get in exchange.

.....I would be so grateful for it.

For example, Alice wouldn’t have hesitated to give up her astral power to achieve world peace. If losing her powers meant that the world would no longer be at war, she wouldn’t have minded giving them up.

But in reality...

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 fall instead.

She couldn’t choose the former, of course.

Alice understood how much was at stake. Rin likely did, too. Even then, few would be able to make the latter decision without hesitation. To astral mages, both options were cruel.

“We’ve lost any chance of happiness in the future— Who’s there?!”

She noticed something in that moment. One of the embers had happened to drift toward a tent, revealing the figure of a person.

“Who’s there?!”

She leaped up.

Had someone been eavesdropping?

“If you don’t come out, then I’ll—”

“O-okay!”

She heard someone walk over to the fire. Alice held her breath when she saw a black-haired boy lit by the flames.

“Iska?”

Someone had left their tent.

After noticing this, Iska left his as well. He heard people talking by the fire, and all he’d been trying to do was approach them.

“I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop.”

He raised his hands.

As Alice and Rin gazed at him stonily, he continued. “I just noticed someone leaving their tent. I was wondering what was going on... Um...”

“So you heard?”

“Uh...”

“Whether it was intentional or not, just tell me if you heard what we were talking about.”

Alice didn’t even blink. Her eyes bored into him with a light even stronger than the fire’s. He couldn’t play this off.

He was even more frightened of the possibility of losing Alice's trust if he pretended otherwise.

"I heard it, yeah... Just what you were saying while I was coming over."

"I see. And what do you think of what you heard?"

Despite her question, she figured that Iska hadn't thought that deeply about the future, since he wasn't an astral mage.

"Are you upset, Alice?"

"I'm not."

"But you sound scary, and you've got this look in your eyes..."

"It's because this is serious!"

"...Okay, I get it. Then I'll be honest."

He looked at Alice, who had squared her shoulders, and at Rin, who was staring at him.

Then he looked into the air.

"I was only thinking about the astral swords, so it didn't even occur to me that astral mages could lose their powers, or that the Sovereignty could fall. I was surprised when I heard you, but I agree that it's a possibility. But I'm not an astral mage, so I can't say anything else for sure."

"Are you not going to think about it at all?"

"I think that if I do think about it, I wouldn't know where to stop." He passed Alice and Rin to crouch in front of the fire. "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."

"So you're saying you're not concerned at all about me?"

"No, the opposite."

"What?"

He turned to Alice.

"Even without astral power, you're still you."

That was all Iska said.

“Rin.”

“...What?”

“If Alice stopped being an astral mage, would you stop being her attendant?”

“Huh? Me? Of course not!” Rin shot back, but halfway through, her eyes went wide.

That was right. Even if they lost their astral powers, their positions wouldn't change.

“B-be that as it may, Imperial swordsman! You can only say that because you're an Imperial. You couldn't understand how we would feel if we lost our astral powers!”

“Of course. I don't even have any powers to lose.”

“...!”

“That's why I think that—”

“Iska.”

For a moment, a very brief moment, everything except the blond princess's voice went still. Even the sound of the crackling fire disappeared. Even the evening wind—giving him goose bumps.

Everything disappeared, and he could hear only Alice's voice.

“Can you swear on that?” As the princess asked him this, her eyes wavered. “If in exchange for fighting the calamity I lost my powers, would you still continue to see me as me?”

“Why wouldn't—?”

Lights of all colors burst into the night sky.

Red, blue, yellow, green...

Though the colors of the rainbow flew up into the jet-black sky like fireworks, they weren't made of gunpowder, but of faintly glimmering astral energy.

“Did that come from the sacred ground?!”

The lights seemed to have come from the direction of the Astrals.

Did that mean that the astral powers of the sacred ground were fleeing into the sky?

“What’s going on?!”

As Rin looked up, the sky grew brighter and brighter. Hundreds or thousands of astral powers were taking to the air, illuminating the sky as bright as daylight.

But why?

Why had they fled to the sky?

“Heeey? What’s all the commotion for? Is there a parade happening in the middle of the night or something?” Mei came out of a tent, scratching her head.

Risya was next to her.

“Care to explain, Risya?”

“Ask someone who knows more than me. So what do you think, Princess Kissing? What do your eyes make of it?”

“...”

The Zoa princess stared at the colorful sky.

“They are very frightened.”

Plip...

Ripples formed on the red swamp’s surface, giving way to a wave larger than any bubble could have made.

Just then, they realized something was coming from the water.

“Iska?!”

“Wh-what is it?! What’s going on with the sky?!”

Commander Mismis, Nene, and Jhin had arrived.

Sisbell, whom they had been guarding, also came out of her tent.

“Keep away! There’s something here!” Iska shouted to stop them.

Coming to the same conclusion, Mei started to sprint. In the blink of an eye,

she ran past everyone and snatched a branch from the fire.

Then she swung it as hard as she could.

“Hah! Who are you?!”

She was heading toward the swamp. She threw the flaming stick into the darkness that even the astral powers hadn’t illuminated.

.....*Sizzle.*

The flames covering the stick went out. But before the glow disappeared, they saw the monster that had appeared from the water.

It glowed ominously, and its upper body resembled that of a human.

“_____”

Its lower body was red, and it had a serpentine tail. Its head was perfectly round, without any indentation. The places where its eyes should’ve been were devoid of light, so they couldn’t even make out where it was looking.

A pattern that was yellow like the sun glimmered on its chest.

Elletear had once called such monsters this: “An eidos?!”

Alice gave a shout, leaping back with Rin.

They already knew what it was. They knew the power of the monsters the calamity had created.

“An eidos? So that’s what you were going on about.” Mei sneered as the monster approached the land. “Looks like some hack-job monster. The eidoses of the sea could reflect astral power, and the eidoses of the earth could reflect bullets. So? Which is this one, Risya?”

“Neither.”

“What?”

“There must be more subclasses. Look at its crest. If it’s got a pattern like that on it, it can’t be of the land or the sea.”

“Then do you think this is an eidos of the sun? Not that I really care.”

“Don’t let your guard down, Mei, or that ‘hack job’ will tear you to pieces.”

“Not if I’ve got anything to say about it.” Mei bared her sharp canines. Just as when she had fought Kissing, her eyes glinted like a beast’s. “Risya, you head over there. I’ll take on this one.”

“Hmm? Over where?”

“Who said there was only one eidos?” Mei replied, prompting everyone there to gulp.

“Huh?!”

“The astral powers fled from the sacred ground. There’s one here, another there. The eidoses were probably trying to corner them from inside and outside.”

“You’ve usually got good instincts about these things...” Risya smiled wanly. “Then we’ll break away for now. Shall we, Mismis?”

“Me?!”

“I won’t be able to deal with the other one on my own. Let’s hurry. The Lord will be upset if anything happens to the Astrals.”

They split. Mei took command of one half of the group, while Risya took command of the other.

“Right, Isk, you come with me. Let’s fight together for once.” Mei pulled on her gloves, opening and closing her hand to check their fit. “You’re not one of my men, so do whatever you want.”

“That’s what I was planning.” Iska nodded and drew his swords. “We have no idea what this thing’s special powers are. Don’t get too close right away, Mei.”

“Got it.”

Its serpentine tail wriggling, the eidos made its way to land.

Mei examined it from head to tail.

“Wow,” she murmured under her breath so no one would hear. “Guess it’s not all bark and no bite.”

At nearly the same time...

...far to the north.

Sunlight streamed into the Gregorio. The large hole that looked like it had been painted black slowly started to illuminate from above, revealing everything within.

“It just looks like it’s covered in moss, sir. I don’t see anything of interest.”

“Ha-ha. That’s actually what’s important, Vichyssoise.”

Talisman stood at the edge of the hole, staring down triumphantly. The hole was so deep that one couldn’t help but think it connected to another world.

“Sometimes large animals take up residence in these vortexes. They’re rare to encounter, however.”

“Do you mean dragons?”

“I’m relieved to know there isn’t one living here. And it seems my fear that Elletear would be guarding this place was unfounded as well.”

Talisman snapped his fingers.

That was his signal that they would debrief about their expedition.

“This is the start of our journey into the planet. It will be exhilarating and delightful.”

“Would you mind if I joined you?”

They shivered.

A dread-inspiring voice had assailed them from within the vortex.

Just then, a current of black mist burst through the air. The vapor that had erupted from the vortex spiraled and condensed in front of the Hydra’s elite troops.

“That voice! Everyone back!” Mizerhyby clicked her tongue.

The near dozen troops all stepped back at her order.

“Oh? Are you frightened of me?”

The black mist transformed until it took on the shape of a woman with goddess-like beauty. Her fluttering hair was emerald tinged with gold. Her

features were flawless, and the cleavage peeking from her wedding dress was so ample, it felt as though one would be sucked into it at a glance.

“... Elletear.”

“Hello, Princess Mizerhyby. It’s been quite a while.”

Elletear Lou Nebulis IX.

Her beautiful face turned devilish as a grin formed on her beguiling lips.

“I wanted to journey to the depths of the planet as well, so I had my eye on this path. And then who did I hear but you all.”

“So you’re not hiding it any longer?”

“Hiding what?” Elletear cocked her head to the side, feigning confusion.

She was so transparent that it was almost refreshing.

This was not the form that Elletear normally traveled in. The woman before them wasn’t her true form—but the black mist they had seen was.

“Good morning, Elletear. It seems great minds think alike.” Talisman cheerfully raised a hand, as though greeting an old friend. “I’m glad to see you doing well. I supposed the Zoa were no threat to you now.”

“Oh, my dear Lord.” Elletear shook her head like she was shocked. “I never thought that I would have to hurt the lovely people of the Zoa with my own hands. Why, I’m simply beside myself.”

“Then pardon me for bringing it up.”

“You see, my heart feels like it’s about to burst even now... Ahh...”

She clutched her voluptuous chest, then directed a suffocating glare at the Hydra.

“And I’m so very sad that I’ll have to do the same to the Hydra, too.”

In contrast...

Talisman smiled as though something was funny. “I can hear you laughing, you realize.”

“Oh, pardon me,” Elletear said, smiling again very easily.

She had only looked at him with pity to toy with him, of course. No one would object to the idea that her amused smile was closer to her true nature as a witch.

“Allow me to tell you my honest opinion at this final juncture. I was hoping that you and the Imperial forces would defeat each other, Lord Talisman—so I wouldn’t have to, that is.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

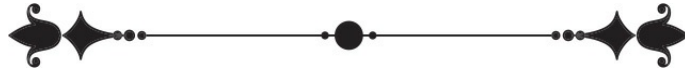
“Because I’m ever so frightened of you.”

“Now, what could you possibly mean by that?”

“Ah-ha! You’re so transparent.” The witch snickered. She blushed from excitement as her voice rose. “It seems we’re both the same in that regard.”

In the northernmost reaches of the continent, the curtains opened on a clash between the witch and the Hydra.

CHAPTER 6



Evils Near Unspeakable

1

Like thousands of fireworks, the astral powers flew from the sacred ground into the jet-black sky, lighting it to a near-blinding degree.

And beneath that light...

...a monster bearing a crest like the sun approached the land. It pushed through the swamp, splashing the water and creating a trail of ripples.

“Looks like we’ve got seven seconds to strategize!”

Even Mei’s shout caused ripples to carry across the water’s surface.

“Isk and I are gonna hunt this bad boy together. The rest of you defend the Astrals! Dismissed!” ordered Mei.

“Got it—!”

“No.”

As Risya nodded, the black-haired princess cut in. “I want to stay with Iska.”

“What? What was that, little witch?! Last I remember, you surrendered to the Empire. So you—”

Roar!

As Mei yelled at Kissing, red water from the swamp splattered at her.

The eidos was almost there.

“Huh!”

Before Mei could ready herself or Iska could cry out, the three-meter-tall monster was just millimeters from her face.

Had it teleported? No, but it had moved with such explosive speed that it had almost seemed like it had.

“——”

The giant crossed its arms like a pair of scissors.

Mei was about to be cut in half, splattering blood everywhere—or so everyone expected.

“Mei?”

“Hurry up and go! You’re the one who knows the Astrals, Risyā.”

Mei landed on the ground.

She had jumped away from the eidos’s scissor arms with inhuman speed.

But her outfit had been sliced around her stomach, as though it had been seared by a laser, and a red line of blood crossed her bare and muscular abs. She had sustained a cut. Had it been even slightly deeper, then Mei’s internal organs would have been damaged alongside everything else.

“C’mon, hurry up!” she said.

“Isk, good luck fighting alongside Mei!” Risyā swiveled around. After seeing the terrifying attack, Risyā had no objections.

Holding a strategy session in front of an enemy was inane.

Mei had only been able to avoid getting bifurcated because she’d used her superhuman concentration and reflexes to their fullest potential. Risyā decided that Mei didn’t need any more distractions at this point.

“...**Vequs.**”

The eidos said something. It had bellowed in some indecipherable language and raised its serpentine tail high in the air before anyone could process what was happening.

Like a snake raising its head, it shot down its tail to hunt its prey.

And it was after...

“Me?!”

...someone other than Mei—Iska.

Though it had attacked Mei first and had seemed to be focusing on her alone, it turned out that was all a ruse to catch Iska by surprise.

He had no time to avoid it, so he readied himself to meet the tail with his swords. Then he sensed something like the flutter of insect wings expanding into the space above his head.

“Thorns.” Kissing was giving commands.

Hundreds of black thorns pierced the eidos’s tail. She had the power to make matter disappear, and the tail was soon riddled with holes.

“Hssk!”

The bloodred monster let out a strange sound and withdrew its tail.

Kissing emotionlessly pointed behind herself, in the direction of the Astrals’ home.

“Looks like my thorns work on it. The rest of you may go over there.”



“Really?” Alice looked back at Kissing. “Can I actually trust you, Kissing?”

“I do not know what you suspect of me, but I need to help Iska. Because that is what I promised him.”

“...” Alice silently turned around. Then she took off after Risya, who was already going to the Astrals, with Rin and Sisbell following close behind.

“Careful, Iska!” Commander Mismis called out as she, Nene, and Jhin also ran away.

But Iska had no time to see them off.

“Mei, you’re bleeding,” he said.

“Hmm? Oh, seriously? I thought I dodged it.”

As she continued to focus on the eidos, Mei touched her torso. The cut was so fine, she hadn’t felt it.

In fact, she *still* didn’t feel any pain. The eidos’s arms were so sharp that she hadn’t even been able to feel her wound until she touched it herself.

“You still there, little miss witch? I’m not responsible if you get caught in the cross fire,” Mei said to Kissing.

“You’re in the way.”

“What? What did you—?”

“Once I use my thorns, this will be over.”

The princess spread her arms.

Kissing, the Purebred Witch of Thorns, created thousands, then tens of thousands of thorns that blotted out the sky—all to annihilate their enemy.

“Disappear,” she said.

The eidos had nowhere to go.

Thorns appeared in all directions around the eidos and began to assail it.

“——!”

The monster screamed.

The thorns destroyed every part of its body they touched, leaving the eidos riddled with holes. It was as though someone had taken an eraser to it. It attempted to use its arms to cover its head, but even those disappeared.

Its tail, arms, and torso were all gone.

Once Kissing had used all her thorns, the vestiges of the bloodred monster collapsed to the ground. Only its chest and head remained. It had lost its entire lower half, along with its arms. It couldn't stand, much less fight.

They had won. But it had been too fast and too easy.

Iska was reminded yet again of Kissing's incredible power. If the Empire didn't have the astral swords, an entire company would have been powerless against her.

"Have I been helpful, Iska?" she asked.

"You haven't, you dummy. What about my turn?" Mei pouted. She seemed disappointed at the anticlimactic outcome. She turned away and sighed. "Hey, little lady, wasn't there an eidos that could reflect astral power? What would you have done if it sent your thorns back at you?"

"That was why I tested my thorns on its tail first."

Kissing snapped her fingers. The remaining thorns around her disappeared. If the astral power had been sent back at her, she could have used the thorns she'd kept in reserve to counter them.

"If my thorns work, I'm to use my full power. That was what my uncle taught —"

"Wait, Kissing!" Iska shouted, cutting her off. "Don't put away your thorns!"

"What?"

"Les...orb...mihya...lement."

Though the giant was only a torso, its sun mark began to blink, and its bottom half regenerated.

It was like new shoots appearing on a vegetable cutting. Its arms appeared from its shoulders, and its top half sprouted out of its bottom half and tail.

“What...?”

It had taken only seconds.

The eidos of the sun had regenerated in front of Kissing before she could even process what was happening.

“Kissing, your thorns!”

“Huh!” The princess thrust out her arms. She didn’t have a moment to think. She commanded her thorns in a shrill voice. “Expand!”

The monster’s fist came down.

She just barely managed to destroy the creature’s arm—but then it instantly regenerated.

“.....What?!”

Not one of her thorns was left.

The eidos attempted to bring its regenerated fist down over the unguarded girl’s head.

She had no way of blocking it.

“Duck, Kissing!” Iska barked, running at full speed.

He slashed his black sword upward, trying to put himself between the eidos’s fist and Kissing. He could only hope he was on time.

Just as it was about to flatten Kissing, the monster’s fist swiveled. Now it was heading for him.

Iska shuddered.

It wasn’t just the fist.

The giant’s entire head was also barreling toward him.

.....It wasn’t after Kissing!

.....It was targeting me from the start!

He mustered all his strength to twist his body and turn abruptly. The fist traveled through the air where Iska’s face had once been. Had he been even slightly slower, everything from his neck up would have been sent flying.

Iska rushed closer to the monster.

“Hah!”

He thrust his sword upward.

He was aiming for the sun mark, of course. The crest blinked every time the monster regenerated.

.....If this is its core...

.....Then maybe if I destroy it, the eidos might stop regenerating!

Iska’s aim was true, and his sword plunged through the eidos.

But rather than pierce its crest, he had wound up stabbing the creature’s hand, which it had whipped around to protect itself.

“Guh?!”

His sword was stuck. The arm stretched like a tentacle, wrapping around Iska’s blade. It was as though it was trying to take it from him.

Next, the eidos used its absurd strength to try to pry the sword from him.

“So that’s what you wanted!”

Now he got what was going on. The monster had attacked him because it wanted his blade. That also explained why the Astrals’ homeland was being attacked; there were astral crystals there, too.

“That’s pretty convenient. Isk, you keep it held back like that.”

He heard someone from behind him.

“Ruined King Hurricane!”

The weapon on Mei’s back that was concealed with invisible camouflage started up and became visible, turning into a gleaming battering gun. It was a thirty-sixth electronic-control autocannon—the Ruined King Hurricane.

Originally made for warships, the firearm could shoot one thousand bullets per second. The Empire had developed it to use against astral mages, so its rounds could penetrate all kinds of astral power barriers.

“The sun mark is the bull’s-eye, right?” Mei grinned, showing off a peek of her

sharp canines.

She had the charm of a cat and the bloodlust of a lion.

“Buh-bye!”

True to her nickname, the Incessant Tempest unleashed a hailstorm of bullets on the eidos. And the monster, too focused on the sword to defend itself, was struck with thousands of rounds from behind.

Its entire torso—sun mark included—was decimated in less than five seconds. It didn’t even have time to scream.

“All right. Now that’s how you do it, girlie. You can’t leave an obvious bull’s-eye like that untouched.”

“...”

“Did you just ignore me?!”

“I am allied with Iska. And I used my thorns to reveal what the eidos’s special ability was. I’ve done my part.”

She wasn’t even going to look Mei in the eye.

Kissing turned away and patted the dust off the hem of her skirt.

“Thanks to that gun of yours, I’m covered in dust. This outfit is special to me—it was a gift from my uncle.”

“Ugh, cram it.” Mei scratched her head after listening to Kissing. “Isk, let’s regroup with them over there. There are probably one or two eidoses in the Astrals’ homeland.”

“I agree. I think—”

There was a murmur.

A chill ran down their spines at the same time.

“Les...orb...mihya...lement.”

It was that indecipherable spell again.

The sound had come from the remains of the monster. Its lower half began to flap like wings, and with each spasm, it cried out the same strange words.

“C’mon...” Mei turned around. She scoffed. Iska had never seen her do that before. “You’ve gotta be kidding me. We blasted the hell out of that sun mark.”

She gulped.

As the lower half of the monster quivered, its upper half began to regenerate. The sun mark also reformed, along with the head. It was back to normal in seven seconds flat. Way too fast.

.....Mei and I both misread this situation.

.....Was the sun mark not its weakness?!

Iska could never have foreseen this happening.

Would the eidos of the sun keep regenerating forever?

“I think the sun mark is only a weak spot on its body, if anything.” Kissing backed away. She spread her arms and created new thorns. “When it has the mark, it can regenerate in five seconds. Without the mark, it takes seven seconds. There really was a difference in regeneration time.”

“Is that actually useful information, though? *Haah...* This is such a chore.” Mei clicked her tongue. She was annoyed and slightly impatient. “What do we do with this thing? Don’t tell me it’s immortal and indestructible.”

“Don’t you think the sun symbolizes revival?”

The sun was rising above the horizon.

With the light at her back, the captivating witch Elletear spoke in a rapturous tone. She was preaching to the Hydra, whose symbol was the sun.

“Even when the night comes and the light disappears, the sun always rises again the next morning. It’s the most beautiful rebirth in the world.”

“Hmm. And what do you mean by that?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, my lord. I didn’t mean to tease any of you.” Elletear laughed to herself.

A smirk played on her beguiling lips, and her shoulders shook so much that her ample bosom seemed to dance.

“I couldn’t help but speak on something personal at an inappropriate time... Then again, maybe it wasn’t wrong to bring it up. Especially since I revered everything you did to uncover the secrets of the astral powers and perfect your techniques, Lord Talisman.”

“I’m delighted to hear that.” The man in the white suit gave her the perfect gentleman’s smile. “I never considered myself a match for your intelligence.”

“Hee-hee. Despite the knowledge I’ve accrued, no one in the Sovereignty bothered to find worth in a princess with astral power as pitiful as mine.”

“You’re much more forthcoming than usual.” Talisman shrugged. “I suppose the tremendous powers you’ve gained have allowed you to speak freely on the inferiority complex you always harbored.”

“No.” The witch snickered. She didn’t even hide the excited blush blooming on her face. “I’m only beginning to accrue my strength. LaSelahMilahUls—once I make contact with the Planetary Calamity, I’ll grow even more powerful.”

“And then you’ll remake the world as you please?”

“Yes.” Elletear grinned and nodded. With the sun at her back, she spread her arms. “I’ll destroy both the Empire and the Sovereignty and create a true paradise for the weak astral mages, too.”

“That seems like an idea you would have. However...” Talisman tilted his head to the side. “I think that—”

“You can have that world in your dreams, Princess!”

A beguiling laugh echoed around them. The voice came from behind Elletear, who was still talking with Talisman.

“Tsk!”

“I’m tired of listening to you run your mouth!”

Vichyssoise grabbed Elletear’s forehead.

The witch Vichyssoise had transformed. Her hair was hard as metal, and her body was partially transparent, like that of a jellyfish. She’d come down on Elletear from above.

“Burn!”

Violet flames roared into existence.

The fire started at Elletear’s face, then instantly engulfed her, forming a circle around her and Vichyssoise.

It was astral flame.

Though it looked like the astral power of fire, it was actually a mass of highly concentrated energy. Even cold couldn’t extinguish it. It would keep burning forever... Or at least, it should have.

“Oh, that smarts.”

The sparks burst away like flower petals. Vichyssoise hadn’t extinguished them. Elletear had done nothing but fan at them, as though she was feeling slightly warm, but it was enough to snuff them out.

“Ugh, seriously?!” Vichyssoise clicked her tongue when her astral flames disappeared. **“This is why I don’t like fighting monsters...”**

“Oh, you’ll hurt my feelings if you call me that.” Elletear’s smile didn’t so much as waver. Despite the fire, her face was unmarred.

Yes. This scene demonstrated just how different their abilities were. Though they were both experiments created by Kelvina, and they were both failures, they were opposites in terms of results.

The witch Vichyssoise was a failed experiment who hadn’t been compatible with the calamity’s power.

The witch Elletear was also a failed experiment who had been *too* compatible with the calamity’s power.

That was why Vichyssoise knew just how dangerous this overly successful failure was.

“You really get on my nerves!” Vichyssoise raised both her hands. Violet flames burned in them as she tried to engulf Elletear in them again. She had truly used all her power. However...

“Well, aren’t we the same?”

Elletear was the picture of calm in the conflagration.

It was as though the embers were nothing more than a warm shower to her.

“Our powers come from the same source, so I doubt you can hurt me.”

“Ha! I already know that, you idiot!” Vichyssoise smiled fiercely. **“Well, there you go, sir.”**

The astral flames split like the ocean parting. From in between them came a man in a white suit, who leaped at Elletear.

They had used the flames to give Talisman cover. So what they had actually been planning was...

“My lord?!”

“It seems you’re drowning in power, Elletear.”

When Elletear had been the first princess, she would have been able to see through an attack like this in an instant. But now she had gotten used to having overwhelming power. That had dulled Elletear’s senses.

Talisman could create invisible mechanical energy using his Wave astral power. After years of training, he had learned how to convert this mechanical energy into acceleration. He’d used his tremendous speed to make it seem like he had vanished.

“What?!”

“I’m over here.”

He was behind her.

After moving so fast that he left an afterimage in the air, Talisman punched Elletear in the side with a fist coated in astral power.

No. It wasn’t a simple punch—his fist *sank* right into Elletear’s side.

It made a squelching sound. Instead of internal organs, as his hand went through her body, he encountered something cold and wet. It was almost like he was sticking his hand in oil.

“What is this?!”

“Ah-ha! You’ve touched my stomach, my lord.”

Talisman’s fist still inside her body, Elletear turned around and brought a hand toward him.

“Then why don’t I do the same so we’re even...? Oh?”

Her hand met thin air. Her flesh was no longer human. Talisman had made a hasty retreat after realizing that a physical assault wouldn’t work against Elletear.

“Hmm... This was generally within expectations.” Talisman looked at his fist. It had sunken all the way to the wrist, but not a drop of Elletear’s blood clung to it. “Most witches undergo an alteration in bodily composition. Depending on how their bodies change, they can become completely resistant to physical trauma.”

He wasn’t good at fighting witches like her.

Most of Talisman’s astral energy was consumed as physical energy.

And Vichyssoise’s powers were the same as Elletear’s. The two of them couldn’t stop her. And that was why...

“It’s your turn, Mizerhyby.”

“Now I will show you the most sublime power in the world.”

As her hair fluttered, the beautiful maiden spread her arms. The astral crest on her forehead was blindingly bright.

“Glory.”

The sound of something burning emanated. Mizerhyby’s light lit each of the elite forces with her like halos.

“This is Glory?!”

Elletear’s shoulders quivered. She was cautious. Though she hadn’t so much as blinked at Talisman’s and Vichyssoise’s abilities, she opened her eyes wide once she witnessed Princess Mizerhyby’s astral power engage.

She had realized this wouldn’t be good for her.

“Fire, my legion!”

A lightning strike powerful enough to split the earth came down. A chill that was cold enough to freeze over the atmosphere swept through. A flame that could have scorched the heavens roared.

The lightning, ice, and flame astral powers had been amplified to their full potential, and they painted Elletear's surroundings with their colors. The attacks pierced through her defenses and blew her away.

"Hgn!" she screamed.

She wasn't acting this time. Her fear and pain were genuine.

Then there was an explosion. The combination attack had blown Elletear to smithereens.

"You cannot let your guard down, Mizy. That might not have killed her." Talisman stood tall in the flames of the blast. "But well done. Things went exactly according to our predictions—to the point where I'm surprised. It seems Glory is indeed Elletear's poison."

"It's all thanks to the time you bought, Uncle. It takes a while to inject my powers into others, after all." Princess Mizerhyby clapped the two soldiers to the right and left of her on their backs. "If you see Elletear, attack her without hesitation. You'll be all right. You currently are as strong as anyone in the royal family."

"Hah!"

Five of the elite soldiers stood in a line with Mizerhyby at their center.

They were no longer simple fighters. They were now part of her Legion of Dawn and had powers on the same level as the descendants of the Founder.

Mizerhyby was called the "walking vortex" because of her power. She could amplify the astral powers of other mages.

And to witches, astral energy was poison. Just like the astral swords, refined astral energy and astral attacks that used powerful energy were effective against the calamity and witches.

"Yes... I can see...that this is a threat."

Elletear's voice boomed around them.

A dark purple current swirled and condensed into the form of a beautiful woman.

“Princess Mizerhyby, I have only two natural enemies in this world: a boy who wields the astral swords, and you, a girl who can amplify astral energy.”

“I’m not one for idle banter.”

So she had survived.

Mizerhyby pointed at the regenerated witch.

“Fire!”

The five members of the Legion of dawn launched flame, lightning, ice, shock wave, and earth, their powers now on par with those of a purebred.

“How frightening.”

Clap.

A dry sound rang out as Elletear blasted the attacks away. With a simple wave of her hand, she had nullified all five astral powers.

Mizerhyby couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

“.....What?”

“Too bad, Mizerhyby. If you had powered up a purebred instead of those little soldiers, I might have been more worried.” Elletear pointed at her with the same hand she had used to brush aside the Legion of Dawn’s attacks. “But the only other purebred here is Lord Talisman. What a pity. His abilities are a terrible match for mine, so there’s no point in amplifying him.”

“But...?!” Mizerhyby’s voice rasped. “What happened to us being natural enemies?! You’re completely composed...!”

“What I said is true. Right now, I abhor astral energy. Just as fire and water do not mix. But the unfortunate thing for you is that you’re all too weak.”

Elletear spread her arms.

She looked up at the sky.

“It’s like I’m a forest fire and the astral energy of the soldiers around you is a

spoonful of water. You can't extinguish my flames like that."

".....What?!"

"But if you had powered up a purebred type, then perhaps it would have been a bucket of water—no, I suppose it could be more than that. So—"

Her flesh transformed.

The woman with the goddess-like looks transfigured. Her unblemished skin and beautiful hair took on the color of a semitransparent shadow.

"I will be merciless."

She was a monster with a human silhouette. The members of the Hydra opened their eyes wide as they witnessed her transformation.

"You're a monster!"

Some were so shocked that they screamed. This was Elletear's true form. Her Venusian beauty was gone. She was fully a monster now.

Vichyssoise backed away, and Mizerhyby was shocked beyond words. Even Talisman's dismay was on full display.

"So this is what destroyed the Zoa. Keep on guard, my kindred!"

"I will sing to you the requiem of the stars."

The area filled with silence.

Elletear sang the Curse of calamity that would transform the very world.

Her Song was on a spiritual wavelength that went beyond the human hearing range. The Hydra could plug their ears, surround themselves with steel walls, or put up any manner of defense, but her melody would still find its way to them.

No physical material could block the Song that destroyed the mind itself.

That was why...

"No shield can protect the mind."

The true witch looked down and saw that not a single person was left standing. She had defeated them all. Just as the Zoa's elite forces had failed to withstand her Song, the Hydra's forces had dropped helplessly to the ground.

And they would never wake again.

“Now, I wonder if Joheim has grown tired of waiting.”

Elletear turned her back to them.

She took one step toward the vortex that continued to the planet’s core, then another.

...Crunch...

Directly behind her, Talisman’s hand twitched, his fingertips scratching the ground.

2

Katalisk.

In the vast bright red swamp, the sound of gunfire roared like the wind.

“...*Tsk*. This is such a chore!” Mei shouted, shouldering her large warship gun.

All the casings scattered at her feet were empty. In front of her and the thousand bullet casings was the giant, full of holes.

Her bullets had gone straight through the eidos of the sun.

“... ■■.”

It began to move.

Simultaneously, its tail regenerated, and its torn arms reattached themselves to its body as though nothing had happened to it.

“How many more times do we gotta shoot this thing up until it dies?!”

Roar!

The eidos of the sun used its serpentine tail like a spring to launch itself into the sky.

“Huh?! Get away!” Kissing readied herself and stabbed the eidos with hundreds of thorns. But the bloodred giant didn’t relent. Even as it was struck by thorns, it regenerated as though nothing had happened.

“What?!” As Kissing yelled, Iska stepped in.

“Get back!”

“Hylesmihās—Sun’s Seam.”

The eidos’s right arm was now enveloped in flames.

The surge of fire burst away and left in its place a gleaming crimson mace.

“Guh?!” Iska immediately stopped and leaped to the side.

The mace passed by him with such force that it grazed his hair and flattened it as it went by. Had he not protected himself, he would have been obliterated.

.....I can’t get near it.

.....I knew it. It only wants my astral sword!

The monster was ignoring Mei’s gun and Kissing’s thorns.

“I have a theory. I believe the parts of the eidos that have been cut with your astral sword are not able to regenerate,” Kissing said as she retreated. She replenished the thorns over her head as she went. “I will attempt to erase it again. Though it may regenerate, this will stop it from moving temporarily. At that moment, use the astral sword to—”

“That’s not happening.”

Just then, they heard footsteps moving so quickly that it sounded like artillery fire. Wearing the Ruined King Hurricane on her back, Mei gestured at the gigantic eidos with her chin.

“Haven’t you noticed, girlie?”

“What?”

“It’s getting harder to wear down. Your thorns and my gun aren’t cutting it.”

“Oh!” Kissing exclaimed as she opened her glowing eyes wide. She realized that Mei was right. When she looked up at the eidos of the sun, she bit her lip, seeming vexed. “It’s building resistance...”

“The more it regenerates, the harder its body gets. That’s why I said it was a chore.” Mei scratched the back of her head. “As long as any part of it remains,

it'll regenerate... I messed up. If I'd just used the Hurricane from the start, we would be done with this by now. And because I was stingy with my bullets earlier, I don't have enough left. Also, Isk, is it just me, or is this thing after you specifically?"

"I think you're right."

"Why's that? Because of your sword?"

"I think so."

"Well, that's more trouble. Then, Isk, we'll have you... *Tsk!*" Mei readied herself in the middle of her sentence.

The eidos had raised its crimson mace. It was too far away. No matter how long the weapon was, it would have only been met with air if the eidos had brought it down at that range. No one was near it.

That was why Mei was even on guard. The eidos hadn't lifted its mace to crush its enemies—it had done so for an entirely different reason.

"Hssk!"

The creature struck the mace against the earth itself.

Planetary Gash: Unsullied Scene from Flame.

The mace broke into pieces and released a suffocating heat wave, along with tens of thousands of sparks.

Was it trying to spread the flames?

As Iska and Mei adopted fighting stances, they watched the fountain of sparks fill the air and form a cubic wall of fire around them.

It was like the eidos was trying to catch them.

.....A fire barrier?!

.....So we can't escape? No, it must be trying to make sure it gets the astral sword.

"Hot! That's gotta be thousands of degrees!"

After trying to approach the wall of flames, Mei quickly retracted her hand.

It was hot enough to render anything it touched to ash. And the walls were on all sides of them, including above their heads.

“The ceiling is coming down.”

“What?!” Iska looked up reflexively to confirm what Kissing had said.

The flames covered the sky above.

Though it was difficult to tell because the sparks were sputtering everywhere, it did feel as though the layer above them was steadily coming closer.

“And the four walls, too. They’re slowly moving in.” Mei took a step back from the walls around them.

The flames’ advance was slow—only a fraction of a millimeter per second—but they were most definitely drawing nearer. As the cage grew smaller, the temperature climbed.

.....It wasn’t just trying to surround us.

.....This barrier is enough to kill us all on its own!

They only had until the flames reached them.

That meant there was no time.

Having been caught in a trap, all three of them simultaneously realized their predicament and went on the move.

“Astral power expansion.” Kissing pointed at the eidos. The thousands of thorns swiveling through the air multiplied into tens of thousands of thorns. “Turn into stars.”

The thorns all rained down like meteorites.

Though they erased the outer layer of the eidos, the giant itself didn’t budge.

Zoosh...

The unmoving eidos just shifted its gaze. It was following Iska, who had tried to get behind it.

“Guh?!”

Suddenly, he stopped. He’d been trying to get closer to it, but his attempt had

been foiled. The monster wasn't paying any attention to the thorns or the bullets anymore. It was only looking at the astral swords.

.....It just needs to keep avoiding me.

.....We have maybe two minutes until the barrier fully closes in on us. Maybe just one?

This was the worst situation he'd been up against.

If Alice were still there, she could have used her ice to cool down the walls of flame. Even Rin could have used her earth astral power to dig down and get them out of the barrier.

But it was only the three of them—Iska, whom the eidos was watching closely because of his astral sword, and Mei and Kissing, whose attacks would be useless after the eidos regenerated. On top of that, Mei was running out of bullets.

.....Wait.

.....We're all out of ideas.

They had used every gambit they could think of.

No. There was one thing they hadn't tried yet—the idea had likely occurred to each of them. But none of them had brought it up because it would have been rejected.

"Tsk... These walls are closin' in faster."

"Mei, there's no time, so this needs to be brief."

As Mei clicked her tongue, Iska pointed his sword at the eidos.

"We don't have time left. We need to defeat it in less than thirty seconds. Otherwise, we're toast."

"Yeah, so—?"

"Let's work together."

"Hmm? Uh, I'm pretty sure I have been?"

"Not just with me." He looked behind himself. Iska continued loudly enough

for the black-haired girl to hear. “I need you and Kissing to work together. Then you’ll be able to overwhelm the eidos’s regenerative abilities.”

“What?!”

“You need enough firepower to fully annihilate it. Without me.”

“Hold on, Isk!” Mei’s jaw dropped. “This is no joke. You want me to work together with a witch? The fact I’m letting this little girlie live is the greatest compromise in history!”

“We’re not at that stage anymore.”

.....If I try to fight, it’ll just avoid me.

.....We need to use Mei’s and Kissing’s destructive abilities to outpace its regeneration without my swords.

He glanced to his side. The Zoa princess was right there with him.

“Iska, even if I’m following your orders, I...”

“Which is worse?” he asked.

“What?”

“Temporarily joining forces with the Imperials? Or dying without defeating Elletear? Which is worse to you?”

“...Huh!”

“You decide the rest.”

Iska left the princess and ran at the eidos. He hadn’t waited for her answer. He didn’t even have the seconds for that. If he could slice the monster just once, that would be enough. He just needed to be in range.

“Fuse—cage.”

“Wha?!”

He sensed something above and looked up. Several streams of flames were coming down from the ceiling on Iska.

The flames were in a grill pattern, so streams of fire came down and struck the ground one at a time, burning brightly as they attempted to block Iska from

reaching the eidos.

“Get these out of my way!”

He slashed diagonally at the flame barricade and went through the gap that formed in the fire.

But during the time when he had been hampered momentarily, the eidos had retreated farther. And even if Iska tried to follow it, the streams of flames would come down, forming more barricades to prevent him from moving forward.

He wasn't getting any closer.

Far behind him, he heard a girl bellow resolutely, “Release! Thorn dragon!”

He sensed something large. Kissing had summoned all her thorns to create a serpentine dragon.

“Destroy it from the roots!”

The dragon soared.

Iska crossed to the side from behind it as it decimated the flame cage and bit into the eidos.

“_____!”

The monster screamed.

It was annihilated. Its energy depleted, the dragon of thorns disappeared after destroying the right side of the eidos.

“...Ah...uh... I...can't use it for a while...” The Zoa princess collapsed. Her breathing was ragged as she knelt on the ground. “Did I...help...?”

“A ton!”

The path the dragon had taken was now cleared of flame. The eidos had collapsed on the ground, having lost half its body. They had driven it into a corner.

This was it. Iska was right about to reach the final step where he would be within range...

“Hngh!”

Just then, the eidos of the sun leaped up. Though it had lost half its body, it used what remained of its tail as a spring to leap right up to the ceiling of the flame cage.

They were out of time. The wall of the cage was right behind Kissing. She had completely expended her energy.

If Iska went after the eidos, then Kissing would be engulfed in flames. He had no choice but to stop and save her. Anticipating that, he leaped up...

“How about I teach you why I’m called the Incessant Tempest?”

Strangely enough, those words had once been directed at Kissing.

But not this time. For this moment, and this moment alone, the Incessant Tempest took aim at not Kissing but the monster ahead of her.

“Ruined King Hurricane, destroy it from the ground up.”

A storm of bullets rained down on the monster.

The thirty-sixth electronic-control autocannon released a flood of silver that went far beyond the average barrage of bullets, concentrating its fire on the giant that had attempted to flee above them.

The other half of the eidos that Kissing hadn’t destroyed was blown away.

Eventually, Mei ran out of bullets.

Only the sun mark was left.

“This is the end.”

Mei stabbed it with her military throwing knife.

Its final scream had been drowned out by the roar of bullets.

The eidos of the sun had been erased from existence.

It had taken both a barrage of thorns and bullets.

By combining their destructive abilities, Mei and Kissing had brought down a being whose regenerative powers had made it nearly immortal.

“Ugh, I feel so grossed out.” Mei picked up her knife off the ground.

She bitterly looked up into the sky. The barrier of flames had disappeared.

“I can’t believe I had to help a witch. Don’t tell Risya, okay?”

“Got it.”

Iska picked Kissing off the ground and put her onto his back, then slowly rose to his feet.

“Guess we should meet them at the sacred ground.”

“If we gotta. What a chore. Can’t catch a break.”

Despite her grumbling, Mei led the way. She had started walking ahead of them because she knew Iska would be carrying Kissing.

“Mei, you care about your subordinates more than I expected.”

“Hmm? I make a point of being a good boss,” Mei answered, as though it were a given. “I’m pretty nice to everybody in the forces. You’re all one of my own. That includes you, Isk.”

“I guess so...”

“It’s not the same in the Sovereignty, right?”

Her words were directed at the Zoa princess on Iska’s back.

“I know all about it. The royal families battle to become queen in the Sovereignty. And each family has its own troops who are divided into factions.”

“That’s right...”

“Sounds so futile.”

“Uncle always said it was fate.” As Kissing clung to Iska, he felt her press her forehead into the middle of his back. “He says the competition forces the royal family to grow. Not just the Zoa, but the Lou and the Hydra, too.”

However...

...none of them had any idea that their “factional” disputes had gone far

beyond what they knew and had turned into an unprecedented battle of life and death.

The most threatening part of Elletear's Planet's Requiem was that there was no way to defend against it.

It didn't matter if one plugged their ears, used a special helmet, got into a tank, or hid inside a steel fortress—any defensive measure was useless. The Song could slip through any wall.

And it would destroy one's mind.

A single phrase could put the strongest of foes into a coma. Elletear was proud that her Song made her invincible against anyone she was up against.

Or so she'd thought.

"Well... What kind of trick are you trying to pull?"

In that moment, the monstrous jet-black witch showed a small amount of panic for the first time.

"I brought down Lord Mask and his contingent of Zoa forces, along with dozens of Imperial soldiers at their base. It was almost entertaining to see them fall powerless at my feet."

"..."

"Did my Song not reach you?"

"..."

The only response she received was labored breathing.

The Hydra had collapsed helplessly. Only three—or rather, *surprisingly* three—of them were still attempting to stand. They muddled themselves as they struggled to lift themselves up.

That group of three consisted of Talisman, the head of the household; Princess Mizerhyby; and the witch Vichyssoise.

In truth, Elletear had suspected that Vichyssoise might not fall after being exposed to her song. They were both witches who had been imbued with the

same powers.

Consequently, Elletear had expected Vichyssoise would have some measure of resistance to the calamity's power.

What she didn't understand were the other two.

"How are you still standing? Knowing you, Lord Talisman, you must have a trick up your sleeve."

"A trick?"

Talisman clutched his chest as he rose to his feet. His face was contorted with pain, and he was struggling to stand.

"What a dreadful power you have. It terrifies me how it invades the senses... But allow me to disabuse you of the notion that I had known about your Song before now. I was utterly underprepared for it. It's a blessing I can even stand."

"What...?"

A note of suspicion entered the witch's voice.

If he hadn't come up with any countermeasures against her Planet's Requiem, then what blessing had he relied on to get through it?

Why hadn't her Song broken him?

"Won't you tell me what this blessing of yours is?"

"You said that no shield can protect the mind, Elletear."

Though he staggered forward, for the first time, Talisman showed her a belligerent smile.

He clutched his chest as he did so.

"But you're wrong. There is a shield for the mind."

"It couldn't be...?"

Elletear stared at the pair in front of her—at Talisman and Princess Mizerhyby. There was only one thing that they both had in common.

"Astral power!"

"Exactly right. Only Mizy's and my astral powers seem to have been enough

to withstand your Song.”

Astral power and the calamity were at odds. They were like fire and water. Theoretically, it was possible for astral power to fight against the Planet’s Requiem.

But in reality, it should have been impossible. That was because people’s astral energy was concentrated in their astral crests. Alice’s was on her back, and Kissing’s was in her eyes. Their astral energy was concentrated in those body parts. In other words, that was the *only* part of their body that was safe from the Planet’s Requiem.

“Your Song assaulted my entire body from all directions.” Talisman smoothed out his hair with a hand. “Now I get how you were able to wipe out the Zoa’s elite forces. The astral energy in our crests protects part of our body, but that’s not enough against your Song, which attacks from all angles.”

Astral crests only ever formed on sections of the body. And since Elletear’s Song affected the entire body, it was still able to knock out astral mages.

Or at least it should have.

“Princess Mizerhyby, it seems you truly are my natural enemy.”

“So it does...”

Still on the ground, the princess looked up. She was too hurt from the Song to stand, but her astral crest on her forehead was glowing even more brightly than it had before.

She possessed the astral power of Glory, which could amplify astral energy to its full potential. This wasn’t just something she could do for others; Mizerhyby could also use Glory to circulate the astral energy within herself.

“I’m grateful for my astral power. It’s the most sublime power in this world...”

That was Glory’s special quality. Princess Mizerhyby’s vast amounts of astral energy circulated around her body, warding off the power of Elletear’s Song like an immune system.

As for the other two who were still standing...

“Uncle, all I can say is that I am impressed and not surprised.”

“It was just a coincidence, Mizy. But if I must say, I believe this was the planet’s will.”

Talisman smiled. Yes, his Wave astral power also applied to his entire body. He would wrap his astral energy around himself, converting it into physical energy. That was why he, too, was Elletear’s natural enemy.

The Zoa hadn’t had any way of resisting Elletear’s full assault. But the Hydra were different. Talisman’s and Mizerhyby’s astral powers just so happened to endow them with natural resistance to the witch’s Song.

“Hah! How do you feel now, Elletear?!” Mizerhyby bellowed. “That Song you’re so proud of fell quite short. So what will you do now? Next—”

She was acting hopelessly idiotic.

The air quivered.

The witch’s rage was enough to send tremors through the atmosphere.

“You really...really...are such a fool. The greatest fool in the world...”

“Ah?!” Mizerhyby exclaimed at Elletear’s voice and when she saw the witch’s form.

For the first time in her life, Princess Mizerhyby shrieked out of fear. The monster, which was nothing more than a black silhouette, suddenly developed bright red eyes. They were almost bloodshot as they swiveled to look at her.

Elletear’s frigid gaze was so terrifying that Mizerhyby felt as though her heart was being squeezed.

“How were you able to endure it?”

“...Huh?”

“This Song was my way of being merciful to my enemies. Now that you’ve shown you can resist it, I’ll have to break you by crueler means.”

Her nails started to grow and twist.

“Mizerhyby, what contempt you have shown. You didn’t even try to understand that lulling someone to sleep is an act of mercy. But it’s time to cast kindness aside.”

“...Uh...ah...?”

She couldn't speak.

Somewhere in her heart, Mizerhyby had thought she was still fighting Princess Elletear of the Lou. But she was wrong.

The thing in front of her wasn't human. It was the embodiment of the calamity.

“If I can't break your mind, then I suppose I have no choice but to break your body instead. Isn't that right, Mizerhyby?”

She finally understood.

But she also realized she was too late.

Elletear would break her. In a crueler, more painful, more distressing, more horrifying way than Mizerhyby could possibly imagine.

“Ah-ha-ha! I'm not used to this, so I might overdo it. I can't allow my mother to see me like this.”

The air went quiet. Mizerhyby was paralyzed with fear. She couldn't move a finger.

Vichyssoise seemed to be the same. Because she was a failed creation, she understood just how much more powerful a successful one was. She couldn't say a word as she sat there.

She wasn't resisting. Both of them had realized that the witch was destined to take them down.

“It seems you're drowning in your power.”

A cloud of dust flew up. Talisman rushed past the two cowering young women, charging at Elletear.

“My Lord?”

Elletear was entirely puzzled. It was as though she'd seen something amusing.

“Are you trying to protect the princess? Oh, how moving! But your foolish attack can't stop me.”

“Oh, but it can.”

He appeared to be throwing himself at her in one last desperate bid to do something.

Muscular though Talisman was, physical assaults wouldn't work on Elletear's current body.

They would just cause her to ripple slightly.

“Right now, you're exactly what Kelvina feared. You could probably destroy the world, just as you've convinced yourself. Humanity would live in fear of you.”

“Oh, yes. That's the witch I've always wanted to be.”

“Which is why Kelvina did this.”

They were shoulder to shoulder.

Just then, the head of the Hydra raised his right hand high.

“She developed a secret weapon to stop you.”

Zoosh...

Talisman stabbed something into Elletear's neck.

It was a syringe. The liquid in it, which glowed a deep purple, flowed into Elletear from the needle.

“Uh?!”

Her eyes widened into almost perfect circles.

Was this because she was being injected with an unknown substance? No. She was frightened precisely *because* she knew what was in the syringe.

“It's an extract of the calamity's power that Kelvina left in her laboratory. Normally, this would be diluted over a thousand times before being administered, but I believe that she gave you a 50 percent formula, Elletear.”

The witch Vichyssoise had received a 0.0002 percent dose, which had been her maximum.

Elletear, on the other hand, had been able to withstand an abnormally strong

formulation. She had a higher affinity for the calamity than anyone else, which had allowed her to become the strongest witch.

However...

“One drop too much, and the cup shall runneth over.”

“You couldn’t...” Elletear’s voice quivered.

Was it from fear? No. It was because she already felt the changes in her body.

“This is an undiluted extract. And now, my dear Elletear, the one-hundred-percent solution—a level which you cannot possibly adapt to—will ravage your body.”

“Urgh?!”

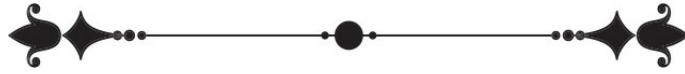
“An overdose, if you will.”

Elletear began to spasm and shake.

She couldn’t pay attention to Talisman anymore. She pitched forward and spread her arms, looking up at the sky.

A bottomless scream and bursts of black mist erupted from her entire body.

EPILOGUE 1



What Are You Saying Happened?

Dawn broke.

The glimmer of the astral powers that had taken to the skies twinkled as they returned to their home.

As that ethereal sight continued...

“Phew. We somehow won! Did you see that, Iska?!”

She wiped the sweat from her glistening brow.

“I suppose that was the eidos of the sun? Ours had a moon mark on it, so I think it was an eidos of the moon. It created illusions that multiplied when hit, so we couldn’t simply shoot or attack them with guns and astral power. It was a fairly difficult opponent. I was surrounded by an infinite number of illusions. It even left *me* in quite the predicament, but then I turned the tables, of course! I realized that the illusions were similar to Sisbell’s Illumination. That meant their weakness had to be— Wait, are you listening, Iska?! This is important!”

“.....Huh?”

He turned around.

“What’s wrong, Alice?”

“Nothing’s wrong, but I was in the middle of telling you all about my courageous fight!” Alice dramatically folded her arms.

While Iska had been fighting his duel to the death, Alice had been waging a pitched battle of her own in the Astrals’ homeland, which had also been attacked by an eidos.

“Now, this is where the real fight starts. So, how do you think I pulled through

against the eidos of the moon? Through some reverse psychology, hard work, friendship, and some crying!”

“Uh, sorry, but I need to report to Commander Mismis and Ms. Risy.

“Then we can resume this right after you’re done.”

“You really want to tell me that badly?!”

“...”

That single statement made Alice stare intently at Iska. She seemed very, very displeased.

“Wh-what?”

“It’s fine. It’s nothing, in fact.”

She turned her face away from him. In her heart of hearts, she had really been hoping for at least a “Great job, Alice!”...

“Sister!”

“Hngh?!”

Someone clamped their hands on either side of her face and gave cheeks a good squeeze. That was her sister, who had attacked her from behind.

“Wh-what are you doing, Sisbell?!”

“I should be asking you that! I was the one who noticed that the eidos’ weakness was similar to Illumination’s!” Sisbell placed a hand on her hip and held her chest high. “This is the age of the little sisters! I’ve definitely surpassed my older sisters!”

“Lady Sisbell.” Behind Sisbell, Rin let out a resigned sigh. “You tripped as you were trying to flee and were immediately captured by the eidos. You had a deplorable time. Who helped you then?”

“W-well...”

“Lady Alice did. Had she not been there, you would have been trampled.”

“Th-the details matter not! I contributed a great deal, and that is a fact...Isn’t that right, Jhin?! Right?!”

“Huh?” The silver-haired sniper made a show of reluctantly turning around.
“What do you want?”

“I contributed greatly to our efforts, did I not?!”

“...”

“Why aren’t you saying anything?!”

As that conversation continued in the sidelines, Alice sneakily produced a small comm that was connected to the Sovereignty. Katalisk was an undeveloped land. The signal there was exceedingly weak, so calls were nearly impossible to make.

“Her Majesty?”

The screen showed a call from her mother—several of them, in fact. Because of the poor signal, the comm had updated all at once the moment it happened to regain a signal.

There were thirteen missed calls in total.

They had all come within the last few hours. Based on the number of them and on how closely they had been made, the issue was likely of great urgency.

.....Did something terrible happen at the palace?

.....What could be so important that Mother needed to call that many times?

What in the world could have happened?

“Rin.”

“Yes? What do you require?”

“As soon as we get out of Katalisk, we will call Her Majesty. Remind me.”

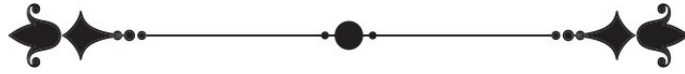
Once she told her attendant that, Alice gripped her comm.

Just what was her mother so urgently trying to tell her?

A half a day later, upon hearing what her mother had to say, Alice doubted her ears.

The Zoa and the Hydra had both sent troops toward the Empire.

EPILOGUE 2



The Great Sun

Half a day before Alice received the call from her mother.

The northern reaches of the continent.

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

And from it echoed Elletear's screams.

"Aaaaaaah!"

Her pitch-black form rapidly disintegrated, black mist erupting from her body.

She could no longer maintain her human form.

"It's working!"

Though her face had been pale from fear until that moment, Mizerhyby gingerly clenched her hand into a fist as she watched.

It was no act.

The mad scientist's research had been right all along. If the witch was injected with the calamity's power at a greater concentration than her body could handle, it would be like poison to her.

But more importantly...what really grabbed her interest was the strength her uncle had exhibited.

Talisman, the head of their house, clutched his chest as he stood back up.

He had somehow managed to hold out against Elletear's Song.

As he rose to his feet, he had staggered and held his breast. Anyone could see the pain the Song had inflicted upon him.

But he hadn't kept his hand on his chest for the reasons one would think. It was not there to steady his racing heart.

He had done it to hide the syringe in his hand. Talisman had already been holding their secret weapon.

"I love you from the bottom of my heart, Uncle."

"The calamity isn't your friend, Elletear, my dear."

Talisman cast aside the empty syringe.

He looked ahead at Elletear, who could no longer even maintain her form. She slowly fell to her knees.

"Your resistance to the calamity is extraordinary. But it is for that reason you forgot it is equally calamitous to all living things."

"Hgn!"

The mist surging out of Elletear's body spiraled in the air.

It formed something like a cocoon.

Mizerhyby realized what was happening instinctively.

She was fighting it.

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. She could no longer adapt to the power of the calamity and was on the verge of vanishing, so now she was fighting desperately to stay alive.

It was struggle or fade away.

"You won't be able to withstand it." Talisman was merciless. "The calamity's undiluted power will destroy even you."

"No..."

"Hmm?"

"Not...alone!" she howled.

A long, thin, and sinister arm emerged from the cocoon. It grabbed Talisman's neck like a tentacle.

“What?!”

“I’d like an escort as I go down!”

Talisman was dragged toward the cocoon.

“Uncle?!”

Mizerhyby reached out for her uncle, but she was too late. Talisman was sucked into the cocoon and disappeared.

And then...

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

Afterword

“Don’t you think the sun is the symbol of revival?”

Thank you for picking up the thirteenth volume of *Our Last Crusade or the Rise of a New World (Last Crusade)*!

This time around, the Empire serves as the main setting, and the three royal families of the Sovereignty—the Lou, the Zoa, and the Hydra—get the spotlight in the first half of the book.

Iska and Alice live together in the Empire and are joined by Kissing. Sisbell is also entranced by the Lord’s fluffy tail. The Lord’s office is certainly busy.

And while that’s happening, Princess Mizerhyby from the Hydra family plays a key role as well.

Just as Kissing has begun to show some self-reliance in Volumes 12 and 13, Mizerhyby from the Hydra family will exhibit some changes in Volumes 13 and 14 as well. I think she’ll truly shine in the next volume.

There will be some exciting moments in future volumes, so I hope you’ll enjoy it, too!

Well, I think that’s enough talking about the books. I have an announcement!

Last time, I included an announcement about the anime continuation in Volume 12.

I still need time before I can make any concrete announcements, but plans are currently moving forward, and I’ve been given opportunities to attend meetings!

I hope that the continuation of the anime lives up to your expectations (and more)!

And there’s more!

I have another anime-related announcement.

My new series from last year, *Gods' Games We Play* (MF Bunko J) is also slated for an anime adaptation!

Last year, it was chosen for the top ten best new light novel works in 2022 for the *This Light Novel Is Awesome!* Prize, which I'm very happy to announce. The fourth volume has just released, so I hope you'll enjoy it alongside *Last Crusade*.

I'm also participating in the anime meetings for this one, and I'm really excited about it.

I hope that you're looking forward to what happens next!

Now I'll move on to my thank-yous.

To everyone who has helped me for this volume.

Ao Nekonabe, thank you for your super-beautiful illustration of Mizerhyby! The beautiful and transparent blue you've rendered for her hair looks exactly as charming as it should. I was also happy to see how cute and cool Mei's character design ended up being!

I'm counting on you for the next anime as well!

To my editors O and S, it's been so reassuring to have your help on the novels every day, as well as with the *Dragon Magazine* short stories and anime continuation. I hope that you'll continue to lend me your assistance this year and next year as we keep amping it up!

Finally, I have a publication announcement.

Last Crusade Volume 14 is coming soon.

A tale of the swordsman Iska and the witch princess Alice.

The head of the Hydra, Talisman, will face off against Elletear, and we'll also see a huge turning point for Princess Mizerhyby.

You'll see to what future the noble power of the Hydra princess leads.

Meanwhile, the ex-commander Shanorotte, who betrayed the Empire and Mismis, will clash when they reunite.

And you'll learn the real significance of Mismis's powers.

This is the final stage of the battle between the Empire and the three Nebulis royal families. Please don't miss it!

And I have one other announcement.

Last Crusade Secret Files is getting a third volume!

We're still figuring out whether the fourteenth regular volume or the third volume of *Secret File* will be released first, but rest assured that some enjoyable new short stories are on the way!

So...

Expect either Volume 14 or *Secret File* Volume 3 to release in early summer of 2022 in Japan.

(And the other volume will follow soon after!) I'm also hard at work on *Gods' Games We Play* Volume 5, so I'll try to make sure there's an announcement for it soon, too!

Well then, I hope to see you again!

It snowed the day before yesterday.

Kei Sazane



Next Volume

"Behold, Imperial soldiers.
I have touched upon the
greatest wisdom in the world.
This is the secret of the
planet!"

After the fatal battle between
Talisman and Elletear, the
princess of the Hydra,
Mizerhyby, has reached a
turning point. At the same
time, Mismis clashes with
Shanorotte, who betrayed the
Empire. Against the backdrop
of the Empire, the Lou, Hydra,
and Zoa cross paths. And the
dance between the Supreme
Witch and the most powerful
swordsman begins.

*O sun, show me
a most glorious
future!*

Our Last **CRUSADE** *New World* OR THE RISE OF A

VOLUME 14

Coming soon from Yen On!

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink

Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Insert](#)
3. [Title Page](#)
4. [Copyright](#)
5. [Prologue 1: End of the Zoa](#)
6. [Prologue 2: All My Thorns](#)
7. [Chapter 1: Like a New Couple](#)
8. [Chapter 2: The Moon Mounts an Assault](#)
9. [Chapter 3: The Corrupted Land](#)
10. [Chapter 4: The Entire Planet's Memories](#)
11. [Chapter 5: Too Much Suffering to Call a Happy Ending](#)
12. [Chapter 6: Evils Near Unspeakable](#)
13. [Epilogue 1: What Are You Saying Happened?](#)
14. [Epilogue 2: The Great Sun](#)
15. [Afterword](#)
16. [Yen Newsletter](#)