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KEI SAZANE

Illustration By

Ao Nekonabe

*Our Last*  
**CRUSADE**

OR THE RISE OF A

*New World*

Secret File

“Thank you.”



### Sisbell Lou Nebulis IX

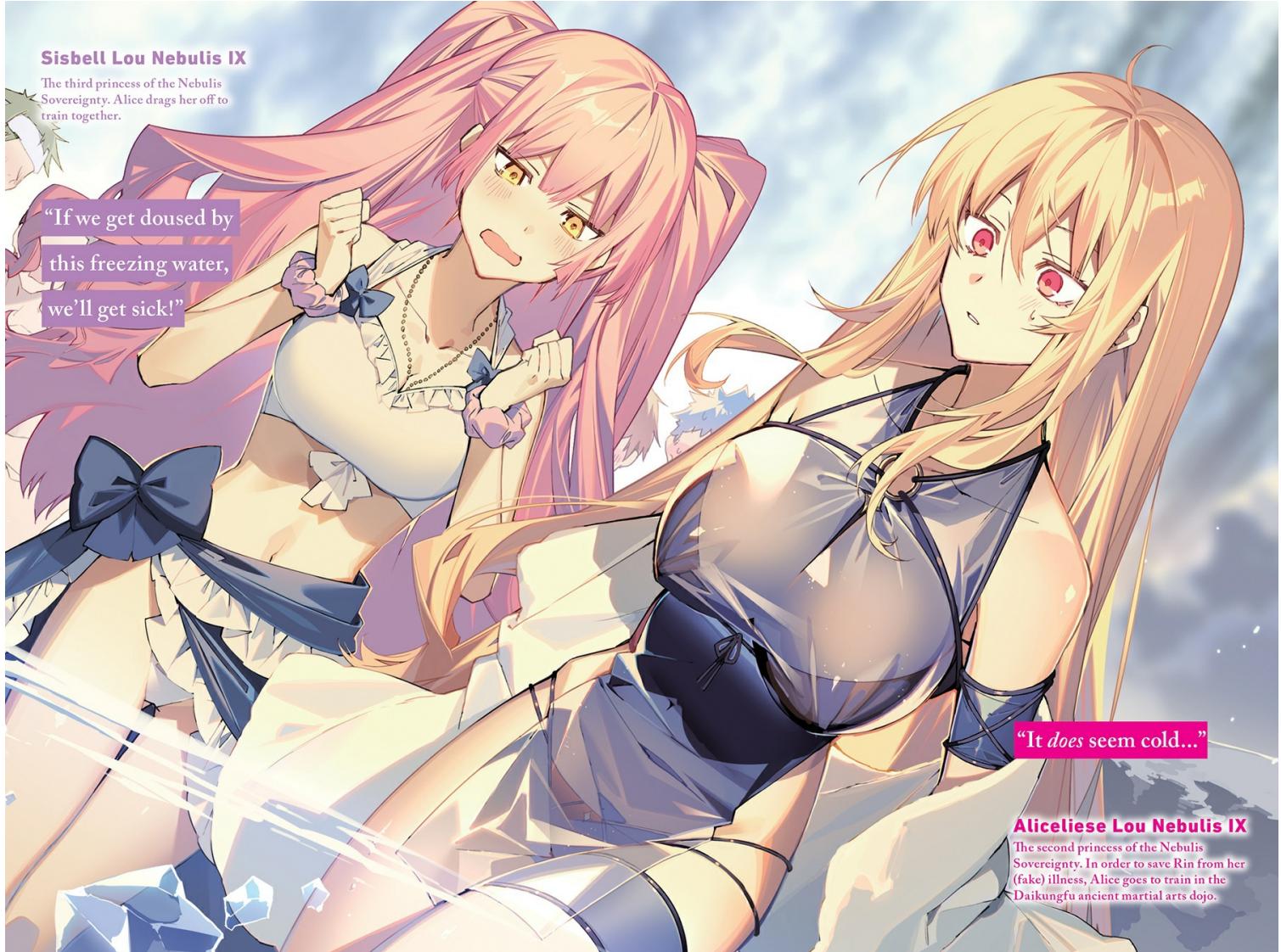
The third princess of the Nebulis Sovereignty. Alice drags her off to train together.

"If we get doused by this freezing water, we'll get sick!"

"It does seem cold..."

### Alicliesse Lou Nebulis IX

The second princess of the Nebulis Sovereignty. In order to save Rin from her (fake) illness, Alice goes to train in the Daikungfu ancient martial arts dojo.





*She's probably had  
an easy life.*

### **Joheim Leo Armadel**

A young man who barely makes a living in the Sovereignty. He suffers from astral power deficiency, so he's given up on having a future.

### **Elletear Lou Nebulis IX**

The Nebulis Sovereignty's first princess. She has weak astral power, so she's ridiculed because she will never be queen.

# Our Last CRUSADE OR THE RISE OF A NewWorld

## Secret File

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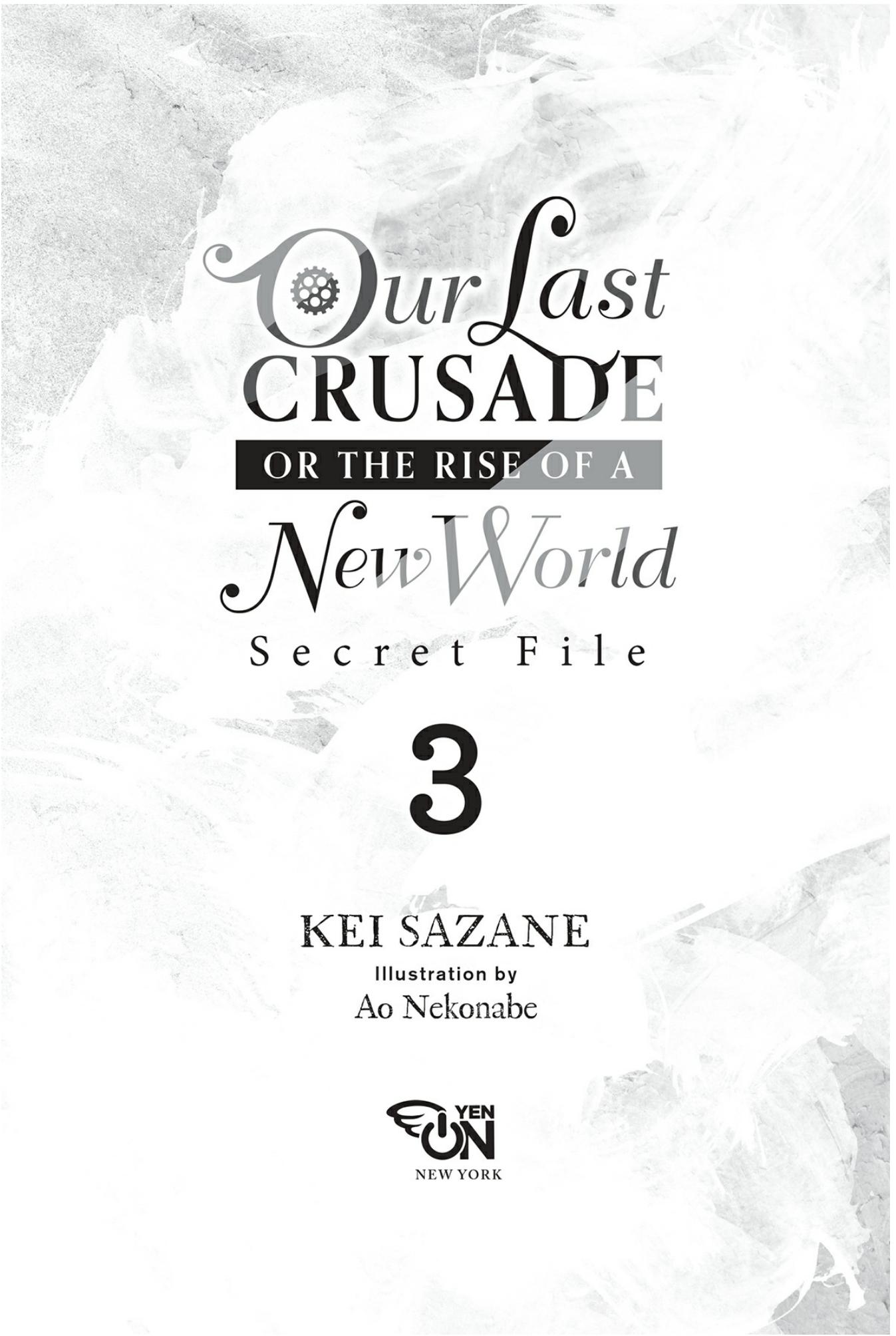
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# Our Last CRUSADE

OR THE RISE OF A  
*New World*  
Secret File

3

KEI SAZANE

Illustration by  
Ao Nekonabe



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KIMI TO BOKU NO SAIGO NO SENJO, ARUIWA SEKAI GA HAJIMARU SEISEN  
Secret File Vol. 3

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

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First Yen On Edition: December 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Leilah Labossiere Designed by Yen Press Design: Liz Parlett Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Sazane, Kei, author. | Nekonabe, Ao, illustrator. | Cash, Jan Mitsuko, translator.

Title: Our last crusade or the rise of a new world: secret file / Kei Sazane ; illustration by Ao Nekonabe ; translation by Jan Cash.

Other titles: Kimi to boku no saigo no senjo, aruiwa sekai ga hajimaru seisen secret file (Light novel). English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2023-Identifiers: LCCN 2023015916 | ISBN 9781975344290 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975344313 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975372514 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Knights and knighthood—Fiction. | Princesses—Fiction. | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Short stories. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S297 Ov 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

ISBNs: 978-1-97537251-4 (paperback) 978-1-9753-7252-1 (ebook) E3-20241126-JV-NF-ORI

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So Se lu, Ee yum lavia.

*We cross.*

Ee yum miel-Ye-dia peqqy. Pie nes hec sioles Ee dyid hiz eis..

*You likely will complete each other and begin to walk. But that is not where your true self is.*

Shie-la So tel. Sew sia toola Eeo miqvy.

*Please turn around. I will never forsake you.*

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 lovable.

### 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.

### Nameless

The Saint Disciple of the eighth seat. He wears a full-body optical camouflage suit and speaks in an electronic voice. He originated from the assassin unit and boasts superior physical abilities.

## Paradise of Witches

# THE NEBULIS SOVEREIGNTY



### Aliceliexe 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

Third-born Nebulis princess and Aliceliexe's little sister. Her astral power uses illumination, which allows her to reproduce the past, including sounds. She was once saved by Iska while captured in the Empire.



### Elletear Lou Nebulis IX

Eldest princess of Nebulis. Focused on traveling abroad. Often absent from the palace. She's known for being the weakest of the purebred types.



# Secret File

File 01

*Our Last Crusade or the  
Personal Belongings  
Searched in the  
Name of Justice*

Our Last CRUSADE  
OR THE RISE OF A New World  
Secret File

**CONFIDENTIAL**

# 1

*The witch's paradise, the Nebulis Sovereignty.*

With a single command from the Nebulis queen, a tremor seemed to run through the entire nation.

"This afternoon, we will conduct a surprise inspection of your personal belongings," she proclaimed.

Those within the palace stirred.

The meeting had been on the verge of concluding. The ministers murmured among themselves after the queen's abrupt declaration.

A check of their personal belongings?

And without notice?

But why? Did the queen suspect her own vassals of some wrongdoing? Surely not.

"Your Majesty...what in the world is the meaning of this...?"

"You don't suspect one of us is a traitor...?"

The ministers muttered frantically, one after another.

"Silence." The queen's order cut their grumblings short. "I have no particular reason for this. I simply would like to ensure that the palace is conducting itself with discipline."

"...Discipline, you say?"

"Yes, that's right." The queen nodded. "I believe some have allowed themselves to become lax."

*An hour later...*

"Mmm... What nice weather."

Alice was taking a leisurely stroll around the palace courtyard.

## Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX.

The princess was known for her brilliant golden locks and charming face. On the other hand, the Imperial forces—the Sovereignty's enemy—knew her as the Ice Calamity Witch and feared her great powers as an astral mage.

However...

...at that moment, she hardly looked like she belonged on a battlefield.

"Ahh...I've been cooped up in my study from morning until dusk every single day signing documents. My shoulder is stiff, and my whole body hurts. I'm so sick of this!"

In a word, Alice was currently *ditching*.

She had given up on her arduous work as a princess and escaped into the courtyard to take a break. But in the afternoon, she would need to attend a meeting.

"Whew... I feel refreshed now, but if I skip out on any more work, Rin will give me an earful. I should go back to my chambers."

So, she returned to the palace.

Once Alice reached the hall, she came to an abrupt stop.

"Oh?"

A few dozen people had gathered there. They held all sorts of positions within the palace—from soldiers to ministers and even attendants. They had formed a line.

"I wonder what's going on?" she wondered aloud.

"You've come just at the right time, Alice," the queen said when she noticed the princess.

"Your Majesty, what is this?" Alice asked her mother.

The crowd was surprising enough to Alice, but the fact that the queen herself was in the first-floor hall was also shocking. Normally, she would be in the Queen's Space at this time.

"We're inspecting everyone's personal belongings. Every single person who

travels through the hall will have their belongings thoroughly searched.”

“...Huh?”

“This is the perfect opportunity,” the queen said, nodding. “Alice, I will personally inspect your belongings.”

“W-wait, Mother?!”

“Come now, Alice. Hand over your bag.”

The queen started to close in on her. It seemed she wouldn’t take no for an answer. Alice flinched and shrunk back.

“Wait, Your Majesty! What in the world...? No one informed me of an inspection!”

“That’s because it was *purposefully* never announced.”

Alice was surprised. However, the princess’s resistance seemed incredibly suspicious to the queen.

“We’ll begin with a body search.”

“You’re even doing a pat-down?!”

“Alice, stand still.”

The queen held a metal detector, which she passed over Alice from her neck to her hips.

“Oh?” the queen muttered.

“Th-that tickles, Your Majesty!”

“All right, then... Nothing turned up during the search.”

“O-of course! Well, then I’ll just take my le—”

“Stop right there, Alice.”

The princess froze.

Alice had tried to casually leave the hall, but the queen wasn’t letting her off that easily.

“We haven’t finished the most important part of the inspection. We need to

check that handbag under your arm.”

“Y-you mean this...?!”

She had done it almost unconsciously. Alice had tried to hide her bag behind her back.

She was concerned about one item in it. Something that she didn’t want anyone from the Sovereignty to know about.

“Y-you won’t find anything improper at all, no matter how much you inspect my belongings!”

“Oh?”

The queen’s eyes glinted.

It seemed that Alice’s response had sounded quite suspect to the queen.

“Nothing improper, you say?”

“Th-that’s right!”

“Then why are you hiding your bag behind you?”

“Urk?!”

“Alice, just give up,” her mother insisted.

“Uh...ugh... All right.”

Alice handed over her bag, and the queen promptly peered inside.

“It appears empty.”

“A-as I said, there’s nothing inappropriate in it at all—”

“Oh? And what is this?” The queen held up a piece of cloth that had been in the bag by the tips of her fingers. “It seems to be a handkerchief.”

“Th-that’s...!”

“Is something the matter, Alice?”

“N-no...”

All Alice could do was avert her eyes.

It looked like a perfectly ordinary handkerchief. Though it was a rather

masculine color and style, there was nothing particularly questionable about it. Or so Alice hoped.

“Mm-hmm.”

“...”

“Well, nothing seems to be amiss. I don’t believe it’s suspicious.” The queen returned the handkerchief and bag to Alice. “You’re all done, Alice. I’m sorry for taking up your time.”

“Phew...”

“Were you that worried?”

“N-no! Not at all! I was certain there wouldn’t be any issues! Ah...ah-ha-ha...”

She stuffed the handkerchief back into her bag. Or rather, she hid it away again, to be precise.

.....*Oh, that was a close call.*

.....*What would I have done if she had noticed?*

It was, in fact, a man’s handkerchief.

It hadn’t originally belonged to Alice.

She had borrowed it from her rival—Iska the swordsman—under circumstances she hadn’t ever expected. If anyone realized the handkerchief had originated from the Empire, it would cause a huge scandal.

“That had me on edge...,” Alice murmured.

“Alice.”

“Y-yes, Mother?!”

“Inspecting every person is time-consuming.” The queen let out a fatigued sigh. “Please help me with the inspections.”

“Would I simply need to do what you currently are? If that’s the case, I can certainly help.”

And so, Alice was roped into becoming an inspector.

She looked over the soldiers and attendants in the hall waiting in a line for

their inspections.

“Oh?”

That was when she recognized a small figure among them. This person was trying to sneak away from the inspection line and into the elevator.

“Stop right there!” Alice rushed over to the person and grabbed them by the back of their collar. “I’ve got you, Sisbell!”

“Eek! Wh-what are you doing, Alice?!”

Sisbell—a girl with striking strawberry-blonde hair and enchanting features—was another princess. She was also none other than Alice’s little sister.

“What has gotten into you? I was just going back to my room.”

“You can’t trick me. You headed this way to skip the line, didn’t you?”

“I—I...I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.”

“Very suspicious.”

Alice pinned her sister with a glare as the girl avoided eye contact.

Alice herself had been scared out of her wits while trying to hide Iska’s handkerchief, but now that she had made it through an experience of her worst fear, she was on top of the world. In fact, she’d say it was Sisbell’s turn to go through what she had.

“Sisbell, you’re always cooped up in your room. You never even attend the meetings. What are you doing every day?”

“I’m focused on my studies,” Sisbell replied proudly without missing a beat. “Unlike you, I engage in battles of the wits, because I’m the intelligent type.”

“...I feel like that was an insult. Well, if you’re going to act shameless, I suppose you wouldn’t feel ashamed if I inspected your things!”

“Uh?! Hey!”

“I’ll do your inspection personally!”

Alice grabbed her sister by the back of the collar again.

First, she’d start with the body search. She waved the metal detector her

mother had handed off to her along her sister's entire body.

"Your back, torso...uhh, and sides."

"Th-that tickles! Please, Alice!"

"I see. So you didn't have anything suspicious on your person, after all."

"Of course I wouldn't!" Sisbell let out a long sigh. "Well, that's two minutes and forty seconds of my time I'll never get back. I'll be goin—"

"Not yet, Sisbell. I haven't finished!"

"Oh!"

Alice had relieved Sisbell of the bag on her back.

"What are you doing now, Alice?!"

"If you have nothing to worry about, then submit to the inspection!"

As it so happened, Alice's mother had said more or less the same thing earlier.

"Let's take a look in your bag... Oh, it's just a dictionary and other books."

Sisbell had said she was the type to engage in battles of the wits, and the tomes packed in her bag were a testament to that. She had specialized books on math and physics, as well as a rather advanced-looking language dictionary.

"Nothing looks suspicious..."

"Obviously. Now, will you please let me go, Alice?"

"Oh?"

Deep below the layer of books, Alice's eyes stopped on a particular piece of reading material.

It looked oddly thin for a book. On top of that, it was a garish pink. She wondered what it could possibly be.

"What is this...? Hiyah!" Alice pulled the book right from the bottom of the bag.

"Agh?!" Sisbell, who had been the picture of composure until that moment, turned pale. "S-sister, I can explain!"

"The monthly *Maiden's Bible*? I've never heard of this magazine before. Let's see." She couldn't judge the book by its cover. She opened to a page and scanned through the novel section. Then Alice froze. "...'Sh-she drugged him with a sedative...and once he was unconscious...t-took him to the bed'... Whuuuh...?!"

"N-no, you can't! Don't read it!"

"Sisbell!"

Alice batted away Sisbell's hand as she tried to snatch back the magazine.

Sisbell's face was bright red.

"What is this?!"

It was a romance novel. And on top of that, it was full of scenes in which the main characters were in wholly improper situations.

Though they were just words, the descriptions were shocking to Alice's inexperienced mind. She had no idea such a hedonistic adult world existed.

"What did you just make me read?!"

"You're the one who started reading it on your own, Alice!"

"Th-then why are you sneaking around with this on you? You were simply camouflaging it with that dictionary and math book and all those other textbooks on specialty subjects. When you were really just...just smuggling in this smut!"

Yes. Actually, when she looked very closely, Alice saw that the magazine was marked with an over-eighteen warning. Alice wasn't old enough to buy the magazine, much less Sisbell.

"What is it?" the queen asked.

After noticing the sisters' spat, their mother, the queen, had made her way over.

"Oh, you're here too, Sisbell?"

"Your Majesty!"

Alice thrust the magazine right into the queen's chest.

“Mother, this is a national emergency. Look at what Sisbell had!”

“No, don’t, Aliiice!”

“Oh my!” The queen’s eyes opened wide. “Sisbell!”

“I-it isn’t what it seems like, Mother. It’s...”

“Alice, you’re in charge of inspections now. I think Sisbell and I need to have a personal chat...about decency and morals.”

“Nooo! I’m sorry, Mother! I’m sorry! I was just curious!”

Alice watched as Sisbell, the first person to be caught in the inspections, was dragged off down a corridor.

“It seems the wicked do receive their punishments.”

She wiped the sweat off her brow.

But she wasn’t satisfied yet. The fact that Sisbell had been found out during the inspections meant that they were necessary after all.

“Now, who looks suspicious...?”

“Lady Alice, may I have a moment of your time?”

“Oh, Shuvalts?”

A silver-haired elderly man in a suit approached her.

This was Shuvalts, one of the royal family’s attendants. And this gentleman also happened to serve Sisbell, the one who so happened to have been found guilty of indecency.

.....*He couldn’t have.*

.....*Shuvalts wasn’t the one who got Sisbell that book, right?*

If he had, that would be a huge problem.

“Lady Alice, have you seen Lady Sisbell? She left her room but hasn’t returned yet...”

“She’s with Her Majesty at the moment.”

“Oh? She hardly ever has meetings with Her Majesty. If she is simply with her

mother, then I can rest easy.”

“She’s being scolded, actually...”

“Scolded, you say?”

“Yes, and Shuvalts...” Alice held the metal detector out toward the elderly attendant. “I’m afraid I need to check you and do an inspection of your belongings.”

“As you wish. This must be the inspection Her Majesty instated this afternoon.”

“Yes. And everyone must go through one.”

Shuvalts was practically born to be an attendant. Alice had been reminded time and time again that he was perfect in his role and had always acted irreproachably.

.....*And he is my little sister’s attendant, after all.*

.....*But she had that on her person.*

He served a master like Sisbell. Now that Sisbell had been found guilty of indecency, it was only natural that her attendant should be investigated thoroughly as well.

“I’ll begin by inspecting your belongings,” Alice said.

“I have no qualms. Please inspect them to your heart’s content.” Shuvalts nodded confidently.

As though to prove his words true, all Alice found on him were his pocket watch, a handkerchief, and a comb to fix his hair.

He was flawless. He only carried the bare minimum, just as an attendant should.

“You’re amazing, Shuvalts... You’re always impeccable.”

“I’m touched. Well, I will be taking my leave.”

The attendant left without any humiliation.

The inspections went swimmingly after that. Even Sisbell’s crime had been

revealed, but when a certain man appeared, Alice scowled.

“Lord Mask...”

“Hello there, my dear Alice. You’re as fair as ever today.”

The tall man who approached her was wearing a metal mask. He was a member of the Zoa family, one of the three Nebulis royal families. The Zoa were secretly fighting for power against Alice’s family, the Lous.

Lord Mask was something of a veteran adviser.

“So...” Lord Mask looked around.

A number of soldiers had gathered to inspect everyone visiting the first-floor hall.

“There seems to be quite a crowd assembled. What’s happened?”

“We’re inspecting everyone’s personal belongings.”

“Oh? Another interesting idea.” Lord Mask placed a hand against his forehead and went silent for a moment. “Then who are you inspecting?”

“Everyone who travels through this hall. Without exception.”

*And you’re definitely not an exception.*

Even if she didn’t say it out loud, a man as intelligent as him would be able to glean her meaning.

“I see. However, Alice, my dear, I’m here to attend a meeting that will be starting quite soon. And as you can see, all I have with me is this plastic file of documents for the meetin—”

*Beep.*

When Alice wordlessly brought the metal detector up to him, it began to go off.

She had waved it in front of his chest.

“You were saying?”

“...”

“Would you mind producing whatever it is you have near your chest?”

“You’re much too cautious...”

The man shrugged, seeming resigned. As though it were only natural, he produced a gigantic knife from his black suit. He claimed it was only for “self-defense,” but the blade seemed too sharp for that.

“Did you intend to bring this knife with you into the meeting?”

“Hm, nothing gets past you, Alice. Your words are as sharp as any knife.”

Lord Mask gave her a forced smile. Was he trying to throw her off by smiling? For a moment, Alice was cautious about that possibility.

“It’s time for tea. Well then, I bid you adieu.”

He disappeared.

It happened in an instant, right before Alice’s eyes.

“Hey! He ran away!”

Lord Mask had a type of astral power that could manipulate space-time.

It seemed that he’d teleported himself away. The meeting he was supposedly going to had likely been a lie. He must have wandered into the hall specifically to find out what Alice and the others were doing.

“He knows exactly how to push a person’s buttons...”

Regardless, the inspections were going well.

Though he had escaped her, Alice was confident in her skills as an inspector after encountering Lord Mask.

“All right, who’s next?!”

“So this is where you’ve been, Lady Alice.”

“Oh, Rin.”

Alice was raring to go, when none other than Rin, her attendant, appeared before her.

“What’s wrong, Rin?”

“Why are you asking *me* that when you were the one who snuck out of your study, Lady Alice? And you still have so much work...hm?”

Rin had caught sight of the metal detector that Alice was holding.

“And now, you’re playing some strange game...”

“It’s not a game. I’m doing official work. Her Majesty asked me to.”

The queen had yet to return from scolding Sisbell. In other words, Alice was in charge of the operation.



It was her responsibility to oversee the situation.

“Rin, come over here,” she said.

“Huh?”

“I’ll do your inspection myself.”

“On me?!”

Rin was flabbergasted.

It was as though she had assumed she was exempt from the screening process.

“Wait, Lady Alice! It’s me! How long have I been serving you? Surely, you could allow me to skip the inspection!”

“No, Rin, there are no exceptions.”

Even Alice had been inspected by her own mother. Not a single person who came through the hall would be an exception to the rule.

“Since you’re my beloved attendant, I’ll personally inspect you. I trust you that much.”

“I see...”

“I inspected Shuvalts as well. You’re just as good of an attendant as him, so please do not resist further.”

First, she’d start with the body search. The moment Alice held the metal detector in the vicinity of Rin’s hips, the sensor started to blink bright red.

“It’s going off!”

Alice was flabbergasted.

This was the second time the metal detector had gone off since Lord Mask. She was certain she’d found something.

“Rin! What in the world are you hiding?”

“What? Oh, this is...”

“So it’s under your skirt!”

“Wait, Lady Alice?!”

Alice ignored Rin, who attempted to stop her, and reached under Rin’s skirt.

“Ouch?!” she cried out when a sharp metal needle pierced her finger.

“I was trying to warn you...” Rin sighed as she pulled up her skirt.

She revealed knives, needles, wires, and all sorts of other things that would have set off the metal detector.

“As your guard, they’re necessary for my work. This is the bare minimum I walk around with to fulfill my duties.”

“It completely escaped my mind...”

Alice’d had a lapse in judgment. After dealing with Lord Mask, she’d gotten ahead of herself and forgotten she was dealing with Rin.

“Right, right. Of course the metal detector would go off for you.”

“As long as you’ve realized that... Well then, I’ll be going—”

“Wait a second.” As Rin tried to leave, Alice called her back in a chilling voice. “Rin, that’s not like you.”

“What?”

“Normally, you would insist on working with me.”

But Rin hadn’t done that this time. Instead, she’d tried to walk right out of the hall as quickly as could be. Just like Sisbell had.

“Rin, could you show me the inside of your bag?”

“Y-you mean this?!”

Rin was clearly flustered. Alice had actually felt something was off from the start because Rin had been clutching her bag—something she never did.

“There’s nothing in here! It’s just my things!”

“That’s exactly what we need to inspect. Let’s begin!”

“Wha?!”

Alice snatched the purse from Rin. Then she started looking through the bag

without letting Rin get a word in. What she saw was entirely unexpected.

It was milk. As well as almonds and chopped cabbage.

...And a cryptic hand-written note that was labeled, "Growth Recipe."

"Th-that's...just my lunch! I brought whatever I had in my fridge!" Rin said in a panic.

However, Alice was more interested in the recipe than the ingredients.

What was she growing? Why milk, almonds, and cabbage? And why was Rin panicking so much? The only conclusion Alice could draw from all of this was...

"You didn't!" Suddenly, an answer appeared in Alice's mind like a spark. "All of these things supposedly help with developing a bigger bust size! And this says 'growth'! Rin, you're not trying to increase your bust size, are you...? Wait, Rin! Where did you go?!"

"Waaaah!"

Rin had taken off running. Her face was as red as a cherry as she went.

"No, I'm not! I'm not! It's a friend's!"

"Rin! Then why are you running?!"

"Why, Lady Aliiice!"

And with that, the Sovereignty's surprise inspection came to a close after catching one offender and one poor girl off guard.

2

*Several days later...*

Far away from the Sovereignty, in a land called the Empire, certain events were unfolding.

"Wait, Isk. Stop right there."

"What is it, Ms. Risya?"

“Ha-ha, we’re inspecting everyone’s belongings right now.”

“...Come again?” When Risya suddenly called out to him, Iska had paused on the spot. “What do you mean?”

This was the third base of the Imperial forces. To Iska, who was an Imperial soldier, the place was so familiar, it was like his own backyard. That day, he’d sensed something was off as soon as he’d neared the entrance.

“Just look around, Isk. The line for the inspection is right over there.”

“Actually, now that you mention it...”

The entrance to the base had seemed crowded. He’d wondered what could have been happening, but he never would have guessed this was the reason for the gridlock.

“Ms. Risya? Why are you suddenly inspecting everyone’s belongings?” Iska asked.

“Hee-hee. It’s a surprise inspection. Doesn’t that make things more interesting?”

Risya pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and smiled mischievously.

Risya was the Saint Disciple of the fifth seat and the adviser to the Lord. She knew Iska because he had once been a Saint Disciple, too.

“We decided it during a meeting at HQ. Because the Imperial forces haven’t been disciplined lately.”

“Really?”

“Participation is mandatory for all soldiers in the base. So, put your bag on the desk and stand up straight right here.”

Iska did as he was told.

Risya approached with the metal detector.

“Hm. Nothing, huh? Well, that’s a letdown. You really don’t have anything hidden on you, Isk?”

“I think it’d cause problems if I *was* hiding something...”

"Your body search is done. Next, I'll check your personal belongings."

Risya opened the bag as if it was her own. She peered inside.

"Huh? You don't have anything suspicious here at all?"

"Why does it sound like you were *expecting* something...?"

"Not even a lewd book?"

"Of course not!"

"...Oh?" Risya's voice took on a different tone.

She pulled a handkerchief out of the bag.

"Now that's unexpected. This is quite the fancy-looking handkerchief you've got here."

"Th-that's just—!" His voice broke.

"Hm? What's wrong, Isk? Your voice sounded cute there for a sec."

"I-it's nothing..."

All Iska could manage was to avert his eyes from Risya.

It looked like a perfectly ordinary handkerchief. It was expensive, just like Risya had said, but she wouldn't be able to recognize what it really was.

At least, he hoped.

"Mm?"

"..."

"Well, nothing seems to be amiss. It doesn't look like you are carrying anything inappropriate."

Risya gave him his handkerchief and bag back.

"Thanks, Isk."

"...Whew."

"Oh? Were you that worried?"

"N-no! Not at all! I was sure that you wouldn't find any issues! Ah...ah-ha-ha..."

He quickly put the handkerchief back into his bag. Or to be accurate, he hid it away again.

.....*Wow, that was close.*

.....*I can't believe she found it. Ms. Risya is really smart, so I was worried she'd realize what it was.*



Risya had found the expensive handkerchief.

Iska hadn't bought it himself. His rival—the Ice Calamity Witch Alice—had given it to him to pay him back. It was technically an item from the Sovereignty, so if anyone had discovered that, he would have been in a world of trouble.

"That really had me on edge..."

"Isk."

"Y-yes, Risya?!"

"So, about this inspection. It takes a very long time to inspect every single soldier." Risya let out an exasperated sigh. "Can you help me out?"

"With the inspections?"

"That's right. It's a whole lotta fun. Last year was pretty ridiculous." A wicked smile formed on Risya's face. "Things just kept turning up, and you wouldn't believe what we found."

"What sorts of things...?"

"Someone from HQ upper management said if I kept quiet about it, they'd pay me a twenty percent higher bonus that year. I was living it up."

"What's the point if you let them get away with it?!"

"Oh, it's fine. So anyway, you're in charge now, Isk."

"Only until morning exercises, though..."

Iska took the metal detector and headed into the inspection tent. He saw a face he recognized.

"Huh? Jhin?"

"Hm? Oh, it's you, Iska."

It was Jhin, the silver-haired sniper. He was in Unit 907, just like Iska, and had also just entered the inspection tent.

"Are you on inspection duty?" Jhin asked.

"Ms. Risya asked me for help, or rather...forced me into it."

“Right, thought so.”

Jhin placed his bag on the desk. Iska didn’t need to be told to open it.

“There you go.”

“Nothing strange in here...”

“Yeah, that’s a no-brainer. What kind of person would bring something suspicious into the base, anyway?” Jhin let out a sigh.

He also passed the metal detector test, then gallantly exited the tent.

“See ya, Iska. Make sure you come back before morning exercises.”

“Got it. And make sure to take care of Commander Mismis and Nene.”

After that, Iska heard something from behind him.

A flurry of footsteps approached.

“Ahhhhh?! Wh-what are you doing, Risya?!” someone cried out.

“Everything’s fine. We’re just doing a teensy little inspection.”

Risya entered the tent, dragging someone in behind her. It was a petite soldier wearing a backpack.

“Commander Mismis?!”

“Help me, Iska!” Commander Mismis waved her hands with all she had when she spotted him. “Risya is trying to kidnap me!”

“I just called you over because I happened to spot you walking by. And then you tried to run from me.”

“Urgh...” Mismis, who had been dragged over, finally gave up and put her bag down. “I-I’m telling you I don’t have anything!”

“Oh? First, I’ll start with a body search. Oh, Isk, check Mismis’s bag, would you?”

“There’s nothing in there!” Mismis shouted.

“Well, that’s something we get to find out for ourselves. Hm, right... Nothing from the metal detector.”

That should have cleared up any doubts. However, Risya still seemed unsatisfied and crossed her arms distrustfully.

“Isk, how are things over there?”

“Nothing odd.”

Iska was looking through Mismis’s things. He hadn’t found anything suspicious even after digging through each pocket.

“Great job, Commander. I feel proud to work under someone who’s so perfectly disciplined.”

“What? Ah-ah-ha-ha... Y-yeah. I’m a commander, after all...” Commander Mismis was being evasive, for some reason. She couldn’t seem to meet Iska’s eyes, and she immediately turned away from him to leave once she had her backpack.

“Th-then, I’ll head out. Back to work, Iska—,” Mismis said.

“Please, wait.”

“Eek!”

“You look so scared, Mismis.” Risya’s eyes glinted. “Say...are you sure you’re not hiding something?”

“I’m not! Iska didn’t find anything when he did his inspection!”

“Hmm, really?” Risya opened the backpack and peeked inside. “Your packed lunch, a change of clothes, and a canteen. I see. There’s nothing suspicious *at first glance*.”

“That’s what I said—”

“Then, how about this?” Risya reached in and pulled out the canteen. “I wonder what this could be?”

“Th-that’s!” Commander Mismis went pale. Her adorable face froze up. “I-it’s just a canteen. You can see that. It’s just got a protein shake in it for after training!”

“A protein shake, huh?”

Risya pulled off the cap of the canteen. Then she poured its contents into a

clear glass.

“Huh?!”

Iska couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

It wasn’t a protein shake at all. The brown, glistening liquid gooped out of the canteen. Iska couldn’t quite place what it was right away.

However...

“Hm? Wait, this couldn’t be...!”

It was as if a light bulb had flicked on above Iska’s head.

He caught a whiff of a sweet-and-sour scent from the liquid. It was something everyone had probably eaten with a meal at least once.

“Is that barbecue sauce?!”

“Urk!”

*Oh, shoot!* They could practically hear Commander Mismis shout her thoughts out loud.

“Iska, calm down! This is just a protein shake!” she insisted.

“But the color and smell are just like...”

“Protein shakes can come in chocolate and yogurt flavor, too. This is just barbecue-sauce-flavored!”

“What?!”

“You should have faith in me, Iska! I’m your boss!” Commander Mismis placed her hand against her chest. Her eyes glistened as she looked up at him. “Do you think I would betray you, one of my own, Iska?”

“No.”

“Do I seem like the type of boss who would sneakily have barbecues every night?!”

“Actually, yes.”

“What, Iska?!”

“Heh-heh-heh.” Risya took a firm hold of Mismis’s shoulders and gave her a daring smile. “We’ve finally caught the culprit.”

“Risya?!”

“Lately, we’ve been discovering small fires of unknown origin on the base’s grounds. I never imagined someone would be having barbecues on the lawn, where flames are prohibited.”

“I’m so sorry!” Commander Mismis shouted behind her as she made a run for it, leaving the sauce behind.

“Geez... When I saw the charcoal scattered around, the thought *did* occur to me. So it really was you, then.”

Risya sighed. She went after Mismis, who had dashed out of the tent.

“Oh?” Risya called out to a red-haired girl who was passing by. “Nene, is that you?”

“Huh? What is it, Ms. Risya? And you’re here too, Iska Big Bro?”

Nene turned around.

Jhin, Commander Mismis, and Nene were all part of Unit 907.

“Nene, we’re doing a surprise inspection of everyone’s belongings. Could we check yours, too?”

“What?!” Nene flinched.

She always seemed so innocent, which made her reaction seem strange to Iska.

“Um, so, Ms. Risya, I just have a little thing I’ve gotta do. So if you could let me go through the inspection after I go to the meeting room...,” Nene said.

“Nope! Now, put your bag down right here on the table.”

Risya had caught Nene. Apparently, one of Risya’s underlings had gone in pursuit of Commander Mismis.

“Let’s see what we find in here.” Risya looked positively gleeful as she peered into the backpack. “A screwdriver, electric drill, saw, file, and wood filler?”

"Th-they're just tools. See, Ms. Risya? Nothing suspicious."

"Hmm..." Risya nodded as she scrutinized the items in the backpack. "I don't see anything contraband in here. You've always been an exemplary person, so I guess we could give you the benefit of the doubt."

"...Huh? What's this?" Iska interrupted Risya.

At the bottom of the bag...

...he had spotted a zipper. It practically screamed *hidden compartment*.

"A double bottom..."

"Aghhh!" Nene screamed. "You can't, Iska Big Bro!"

She was too slow. When Risya realized what Iska had discovered, she opened the zipper and pulled out what had been hidden underneath.

It was...

"Oh, a magazine?"

She'd found a strange, thin book with a flashy pink cover.

"Ms. Risya, Iska Big Bro...I-I can explain..."

"The monthly *Maiden's Bible*? I've never heard of this magazine before. Let's see. Is this a romance story? Let's look at it together, Isk."

Risya opened a page to read and started skimming the novel section.

Iska froze.

"...‘Sh-she drugged him with a sedative...and once he was unconscious...t-took him to the bed’...Uh, ahhh..."

"No! Don't! You can't read that!"

"The youth these days sure are reading some interesting stuff."

"Please no, Ms. Risya!"

It wasn't just *any* romance novel. Both Iska and Risya were blushing bright red from shock.

"Nene...my little innocent Nene...is reading this adult book!"

“No, Ms. Risya!”

“And it says right here only those eighteen and above can buy it. This doesn’t fall within military guidelines, but I don’t think you should be doing this...”

“It’s not like that!” Nene hollered. Her voice was loud enough to echo throughout the tent. “It’s, um...a book my friend loaned me...and...waaaaah!”

Then she ran off.

“This is your fault, Iska Big Bro!” she called out.

“Why me?!”

Iska hadn’t meant to do anything bad. He’d just found the double bottom and pointed it out. He hadn’t expected something like that to be in it.

“I feel like I did something horrible to Nene...,” he said.

“It’s okay, Isk. Even if you’ve unearthed a young lady’s secret, it was all done to uphold discipline within the—”

Risya was never able to finish.

A commotion ran through the tent, then it went quiet. The force members who had been chatting quickly clammed up and fell into order.

“Hey, don’t mind me.”

*“An inspection? Ridiculous. Why would you subject us to this? What idiot came up with the idea?”*

A motley pair had entered the tent. The man and woman were clearly on an entirely different level from the tense rank-and-file soldiers.

“Ah-ha-ha. Look, Names, you’re gonna get it for every single knife that metal detector picks up.”

One of them was a feral-looking, petite female soldier who was snacking on cookies. She was Mei, the Saint Disciple of the third seat. And next to her was...

“.....”

“Oh? Did I hit too close to home, Names?”

*“I’m simply appalled you would truly think that my knives could be caught by*

*any metal detectors.”*

The other person was a man wearing a gray suit that covered him from head to toe. He was Saint Disciple of the eighth seat, Nameless. The man was part of the clandestine unit and supposedly boasted the greatest physical abilities in the forces. The odd pair were part of the upper brass and were charged with protecting the Lord.

“This way, you two.” While the other soldiers shrank around them, Risya welcomed the two with a radiant smile. “Please set your things down there.”

“There ya go.” Mei tossed the leather bag slung over her shoulder onto the table with a thump.

Meanwhile, Nameless said, *“Does it look like I’m carrying anything?”*

He appeared empty-handed. This was his way of saying he didn’t have anything suspicious on his person, but it also meant he didn’t have the many necessary items required of a soldier, which wasn’t good, either.

“Oh? But what about your documents for meetings, Nameless? We have a meeting with Their Excellency today.”

*“I memorized everything.”*

Nameless was indifferent toward Risya’s critique.

“Hmm, all right then. Next, we’ll... Wait, Ms. Mei?! What is this?” Risya yelled as she opened Mei’s bag. “There’s nothing in here!”

“What? There are jerky and cookies.”

“Where did your meeting documents go? Did you memorize them like Namele—”

“No way.”

“Then bring your documents with you!”

“Let’s sit next to each other for this meeting, Risya.”

“So you’re planning on looking at my documents...” Risya sighed loudly.

If Mei had been lower in rank, Risya would have scolded the other soldier, but they were both Saint Disciples.

"Well, fine... I'm not the one who'll get in trouble. Okay, you two go in. I'm busy, you know."

"*You're the one who stopped us.*" Nameless let out a sigh.

"See ya!" Mei wandered off.

They both had very strong personalities, which seemed fitting for Saint Disciples.

"Whew... Guess this is the last one." Risya wiped her forehead. "Okay, Isk, let's get back to our regular duties."

"Morning exercises should be starting soon. I have my training, and you have your meetings, right, Ms. Risya?"

The Imperial forces were starting their daily routine. Most of the soldiers had gone to work already. No matter how long Iska and Risya waited at the base's entrance, no new arrivals came through. Or so they both thought.

"Haah... Haah... I've completely miscalculated! I can't believe both my alarms broke at the same time!" A petite female commander was running in, completely out of breath. "I, Pilie, have made the greatest mistake of my life. I can't believe I'm late due to sleeping in."

"Commander Pilie?"

"Oh, it's P."

Iska and Risya both called out to her when they saw her.

Commander Pilie Commonsense. Though she had soft black hair and looked put-together, she secretly had a terrifying amount of ambition and wanted to scale the social ladder. It was common knowledge that she saw Commander Mismis as a rival in all aspects of their lives.

"P, over here."

"Risya?!" Pilie's eyes glittered when she turned toward Risya. "Good morning, Risya! If you're speaking to me...does that mean you've finally decided to recommend me to headquarters?!"

"No, not at all."

"Oh...I see. But even if you aren't, you're wonderful, Risya. What is it that you need?"

She stopped to stare at something next to Risya. She was looking at Iska.

"Hm? Aren't you one of Mismis's? I'm in a hurry to get to morning exercises, you know. If you need something—"

"We're inspecting everyone's personal belongings."

"...Come again?"

"Headquarters has asked us to do a body search and bag inspection of everyone in the base. You're our last one."

"A-an inspection?!"

She jumped, or rather, she flinched back with such intensity that her beautiful hair turned into a bird's nest.

"N-no thank you!"

"Commander Pilie?"

"Don't come near me, you crony of Mismis! Someone as upright and honorable as me would never have anything suspicious on her person!"

"Yes, of course. So we'd just like to confirm that with an inspection..."

"You pervert!"

"Pervert?!"

"I-if you lay a hand on me, I'll scream! Then everyone will know you're a deviant for the rest of your life—"

"P?" Risya firmly gripped Commander Pilie's shoulders from behind. "You seem pretty flustered right now. I think that means doing an inspection will be worthwhile."

"Risya?!" Pilie said.

"Okay, Isk, open up P's bag."

"Nooo! St-st-stop! Don't you dare put a finger on my—mrph?!"

"Shush, P." Risya was holding Pilie back and covering her mouth. "Do it, Isk!"

“Got it.”

The bag looked like it was from a luxury brand, which seemed too fancy to bring into an Imperial base. Iska opened it and started pulling everything out, one object at a time.

“Ms. Risya, it’s a foldable umbrella.”

“That’s fine. Okay, next.”

“A change of clothes for exercises.”

“Okay, next.”

“A sports drink.”

“Okay, next.”

“An electronic notepad.”

“Uh!” Pilie gulped.

Risya noted the commander’s slight distress.

“That’s it! Isk, that seems suspicious. Inspect what’s on it!”

“Okay. Oh, but I can’t. It starts up, but there’s a lock screen.”

“Well, P will give us the password. Won’t you, P?”

“...” Pilie was silent. After a while, she said, “I-I forgot it...”

“Feigning ignorance, are we? All right, then. We’ll work through the combinations. Isk, try 0909.”

“What’s that?”

“P’s birthday.”

“Oh, it unlocked.”

“Oh noooo!” Pilie’s scream echoed all around.

Several hundred lines of what was titled Commander Pilie’s “diary” showed up on the screen.

“Isk, read it aloud.”

“Uhh... ‘I went shopping at the capital’s department store today. Staff officer

A from headquarters appears to prefer wine over sweets. They're old and can't taste much, so anything expensive will work fine. Female manager B just had a baby last year, so I'll prepare a stuffed animal as a gift. This will get me top marks in the next evaluation for sure.' Wait, she's bribing everyone!"

She was trying to get on the good side of management through gifts. It was obvious she was trying to improve her assessment scores.

"Ms. Risya, this seems like a problem..."

"Keep reading, Isk."

"All right. 'But the one to target is obviously the Saint Disciple Risya. I need to kick Mismis off her pedestal and become her favorite. I'm sure that I'll get into headquarters this year.' ...Wow..."

"P? You were really going to use me like that?"

"No, I wasn't! I wasn't!" Pilie started wrenching herself out of Risya's grip. "This is all a misunderstanding! It was the work of a hacker, obviously. Someone got into my notes and changed them!"

"Who would do that? Let's get this reported to headquarters..."

"Nooo!"

Commander Pilie was dragged off by some underlings. She would probably be scolded by headquarters and forced to write an apology.

"Well, looks like the last one was the biggest catch."

Risya crossed her arms, looking content. She had a giant smile on her face as though she'd accomplished something momentous.

"It's so nice doing the right thing... Oh, wait?" Risya blinked in surprise.

At some point, she had been apprehended on both sides by the arms.

"Nameless? Ms. Mei?" she said.

It was the two Saint Disciples. Though they'd left the tent earlier, they'd returned.

"Um, what are you doing...?"

“Well, Risya...”

“*There is one last person who hasn’t gotten an inspection yet.*”

Iska observed dumbfoundedly from the sidelines. Though Risya hadn’t had a worry in the world until that moment, now her eyes opened wide.

“You can’t be serious?!”

“Yes. We still need to do your inspection, Risya.”

“*You didn’t think you’d get out of it after inspecting us, did you?*”

While Nameless had Risya apprehended, Mei held up Risya’s standard-issue bag.

“That’s my...?!”

“I brought it from your locker room, Risya. Well, let’s take a look inside.”

“N-no, Ms. Mei?! That bag has a huge secret in it! There are very important documents only me and Their Excellency are allowed to seeeee!”

“Huh?” Mei turned around. She was holding a can of beer that she’d pulled out of the bag. “Hey, Risya, is that documentation you’re talking about this cold can of beer?”

“Th-that’s not...”

“Looks like there’s more.”

Mei turned the bag upside down. Cans of beer clattered out one after another. Risya didn’t have just one or two in there.

“Aghhh!” Risya screamed.

It was too late to try to pick them up. Everyone in the tent, Iska included, had witnessed it all.

“Drinking on the job, Risya?”

“*That looks like a breach of guidelines to me. What would Their Excellency think?*”

“I-it’s not what it looks like!” Risya shook her furtively. “This is, um... Someone obviously stuffed beer cans into my bag! Right, Isk?”

“...”

“Um? Huh?” Risya said.

“I’m not sure what to say...”

“Isk?!”

“*Then it’s settled.*”

*Ka-chak.* Nameless handcuffed Risya.

“*You can give your excuses to headquarters.*”

“Let’s get going, Risya. You’re such a dummy. Soda’s a million times better than alcohol.”

“Noooo!”

Risya was escorted away by Mei and Nameless.

“I—I—I was just stressed from having to work overtime and never getting a break!”

She disappeared from the tent, and Iska was left all on his own.

“Are the Imperial forces okay...?”

With the inspections only leaving him anxious, Iska sighed deeply.

File 02

*Our Last Crusade or the  
Princess Who Masters  
the Military Arts?*

Our Last CRUSADE  
OR THE RISE OF A New World  
Secret File

**CONFIDENTIAL**

# 1

*The witch's paradise, the Nebulis Sovereignty.*

Alice's sad wail echoed throughout the palace's medical office.

"Rin, hold on! Rin!"

"..."

"Rin?!"

Rin, a brown-haired girl, was lying on a bed. Alice cried as she held the girl, whose eyes remained steadfastly closed.

"Rin, please wake up!"

"It's too late," someone said to Alice.

"Your Majesty!"

The queen—in other words, Alice's mother—had arrived.

"Rin has been tired frequently as of late. She must have reached her limit. I believe her duties as an attendant have left her exhausted."

"What?!"

"Alice, are you sure you haven't been relying on Rin too much? Perhaps you've put a large strain on her by doing that?" her mother said.

"But...I didn't mean to!"

Alice was deeply troubled.

Rin twitched on the bed in front of her.

"Oof...koff...!" Rin was struggling to breathe.

"The doctor told me just now that Rin only has a week to live," the queen said.

"What?!" Alice screamed again when she saw Rin coughing. "Rin, open your

eyes! Please!"

What, exactly, had happened to Rin? It all started the day before...

"Lady Alice!" Rin, the attendant, had been scolding her mistress, Alice, from the crack of dawn. "You skipped the regular meeting again! The ministers had no idea what to do without you!"

"I had a headache..."

"You seemed to be just fine when you were eating right before the meeting!"

Alice was a princess many were calling upon to become the next queen. She was dignified and as charming as a fairy from a children's storybook. Though she was only seventeen, she had a body even adults would envy. She was also one of the most powerful astral mages around.

She was a princess beyond reproach. Except...

...Alice hated her duties as a princess and would do anything she could to shirk them.

"You take every opportunity to run out of the palace to frolic about, and you push all the meeting paperwork onto me... But not today!" Rin shouted, clenching her hands into fists. "With all due respect, as a princess, you don't have enough self-restraint, Lady Alice!"

Rin knew the reason this kept happening—because *she* was the cause. Because Alice had such a great attendant, she believed she could rely fully on Rin and slack off on her work.

"Go to your meetings! Study culture! And make sure to go to morning greetings, too! That's only the first step to becoming the future queen!"

"Nuh-uh!"

"Lady Alice?!"

"I'm a princess. That's exactly why I shouldn't only focus on the palace all the time. I need to leave the castle and wander the streets to broaden my horizons. This is just as important as meetings and paperwork!"

"All you're doing is buying bread and ice cream from the shopping district and

watching movies!"

"But that's good enough!" Alice puffed out her chest. "I'm trying to be a new kind of princess. How am I any different from a bird in a cage when I'm working according to a schedule dictated by others?! A true princess should live each day according to her own desires!"

"Again with those excuses..."

"So, anyway, I'm going out!"

"What?! Wait, Lady Alice!"

Rin had no time to stop the princess. She watched dumbfoundedly as Alice's back retreated into the distance, then sighed.

"...Ahh. I can't believe this is our future queen..."

"It seems you're having trouble, Rin?"

"Your Majesty?!"

Alice's mother, the queen, had walked into the room, as though taking the princess's place.

"Did you see that...?" Rin asked.

"You have your work cut out for you, Rin. Especially when it comes to Alice." The queen sighed. "But this is the perfect opportunity. Rin, would you like to do a little performance with me?"

"What kind...?"

"Let's help Alice correct that habit of hers." The queen's eyes glittered. "Alice can only be so carefree and uncontrollable because you're with her, Rin. She knows she can be negligent, because she has you to pick up the slack."

"You're right..."

"So, Rin, why don't you pretend to be incapacitated?"

The queen had an entire production planned: Rin would act as if she had collapsed from exhaustion because of Alice's repeated selfishness.

"Even Alice would be forced to reflect on her actions. She should finally do

her work if she can't bother you with it."

"I see!"

"We must strike while the iron is hot. Let's carry out the plan tomorrow morning."

And so, the next day had come.

Alice had been fooled by Rin's act.

And now they were in the medical office.

Rin was (pretending to be) unconscious on the bed and was convinced that their plan was going exactly as intended.

"L-Lady Alice..."

"Rin?! You're awake!"

"Y-yes..."

Rin weakly opened her eyes. She gasped as though it was hard to breathe, but it was all an act. Alice was fully immersed in the deception as she gazed at Rin.

"Lady Alice...I have just one wish..." Rin groaned.

"Tell me!"

"Please...become a princess...who doesn't burden her attendant..."

"I will! I definitely will!" Alice's eyes were red as she nodded. "I promise!"

"From now on...don't doodle on the back of important documents or run away from your dance lessons to watch a movie..."

"Of course I won't!"

On the inside, Rin was grinning, celebrating, and jumping for joy. However, she couldn't let Alice realize it was a performance, or there wouldn't have been a point to the production.

"Koff...koff!"

"Rin! Does it hurt?!"

"D-don't worry about me... Please, just promise me. Become a wonderful

princess..."

"I will! I promise!"

"Then...you'll attend the next meeting?"

"I won't!"

"Excuse me?" Rin accidentally asked in her regular voice.

What had Alice just said?

"I won't go to the meeting!" Alice wiped her tears away. "How could I when my dear attendant is in critical condition!"

"...Huh? No, I ended up this way because you wouldn't go to meetings."

"Just wait, Rin!" Alice clutched Rin's hand. "I'll find you a cure. I can't simply sit around!"

Then she stood up. She gallantly put on a coat to go out.

"I'm leaving the castle for a while. But I'll be back before the week is up, so stay put!"

"Lady Alice?!"

It seemed the plan had backfired spectacularly.

Alice was doing this to save Rin. She now had a justification that allowed her to abandon her duties as a princess. And with that, Alice left the room.

*Two hours later, in the palace courtyard.*

Having finished preparing for her journey, Alice had her suitcase in hand.

"Skipping meetings and indulging in these books paid off. I remember reading this one."

She held a very old book in her hands. Alice had borrowed it from the library.

"There is a legendary sacred mountain far to the south in the Sovereignty. After taking an arduous path up to its summit, there should be a legendary medicinal herb that can cure all sicknesses. The herb of Kittokiki..."

She had remembered it after seeing Rin.

With this legendary herb, she could save her attendant.

“A rugged mountain path and dangerous beasts. This will definitely be a journey full of hardships...” She balled her hand into a fist. “But I won’t let it beat me! I’ll brave any difficult journey or overcome any unforgiving path if it means getting my hands on the herb of Kittokiki!”

“You’re planning to take me with you on that dangerous excursion?!” a small, adorable girl with strawberry blonde hair shouted.

This was Alice’s little sister, Sisbell.

Alice had dragged her out of her room where she had been sleeping.

“No! I don’t want to go to some sacred mountain that’s in the middle of nowhere! Why me?!”

“Because you seemed like you were the least busy,” Alice said.

If Alice was a meeting-skipper, then Sisbell was an extreme shut-in. Because she had spent the better part of a year holed up in her room, she was seldom even seen walking the halls.

“This will be a rigorous journey. I would barely scrape by alone. So I think I need someone with me.”

“Then please don’t bring *me*, either!”

“All right, let’s go!”

“Wait a moment!”

She dragged the recalcitrant Sisbell along and triumphantly headed off on her journey to the legendary sacred mountain without a moment to spare.

2

*The legendary sacred mountain Hikenkabura.*

The mountain path, which was shrouded in a light mist, was a steep slope littered with rocks. And in addition to that, to reach the summit that was their

goal, they had to climb a total of 5,555 steps.

The air was thin and cold. Because the ascent was so rigorous, most visitors gave up halfway.

“I think this is as far as I go...”

“Sisbell?!”

“I-I’m at my limit! My thighs are tuckered out after all those stairs. And the bottom of my feet are blistered! And don’t get me started about the exhaustion!” Sisbell screamed from behind Alice, dripping with sweat. “We’ve been climbing all this time and have yet to reach the peak! There’s fog all around us reducing visibility, and on top of that, I’ve started to hear the growls of beasts!”

“Push through, Sisbell!” Alice panted as she turned to her weary little sister. “I’ve had a headache from the thin air, too, but we’re doing this to save Rin. I’m sure the peak is just ahead.”

“But we can’t even see what’s ahead of us because of all the fog!”

Yes. The farther they climbed, the thicker the mist became and the less they could see of the mountain. They couldn’t tell how close they were to the peak.

“Also I’m certain you said an hour ago that ‘the peak was just ahead,’ Alice!”

“That’s because it really did feel like it was close.”

“So all of that was baseless, then?!”

“It was a hunch. And I counted until we got to step 3,000. We should be near the peak soon... Oh! Look at that, Sisbell!” Alice pointed at the stairs in front of them.

The fog finally cleared, and it seemed they were indeed almost at step 5,555.

“Is that the summit?!” Sisbell sounded delighted. “We’ve reached the top! The legendary herb should be here!”

“That’s right, Sisbell. The herb of Kittokiki is here!”

They started to run up the stairs. At the same time, Alice and Sisbell both heard strange and unfamiliar shouts.

“Hup, hup!”

“Hagh!”

“Hrrah!”

These shouts echoed around the sacred mountain. It sounded like several dozen people.

“Alice? What is that commotion?!”

“Odd... This is supposed to be a sacred mountain. Not many people should come here, but it does sound rather rambunctious...”

They finished climbing the stairs. There, Alice and Sisbell saw what was at the summit...

“Hup, hup, hup!”

“Hiyah!”

They found a group of monks training in martial arts. Not only that, all of them were horribly injured, but not even one showed any sign of stopping.

“Alice?” Sisbell suddenly stopped in place, dumbfounded. “We came here to find the legendary herb.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“All I see are some dirty monks, though.”

“That is, in fact, what I’m seeing, too...,” Alice agreed.

Where were the herbs? And what were these monks doing here?

“Hm?! Who?!?” The monks had noticed the visitors. “Who are you?! You can’t be here to challenge our dojo...”

“Two women have made their way up the sacred mountain... How suspicious...”

“W-wait?!” Alice said in a panic.

They had come to find the legendary herb, but all they’d found waiting for them were some brawny monks. The girls were the ones who wanted an explanation.

“We’re just normal people! We heard there was a legendary herb here...!”

“Waaait!” They heard a loud battle cry.

*Zwoosh.*

A large and fierce-looking man had appeared among the monks.

“Oh? It’s not often we see two young ladies in the mountains.” The man looked them both up and down from head to toe. “Welcome to the Daikungfu ancient martial arts dojo. I am the assistant instructor, Kurobi!”

“Ancient martial arts?!”

“This is a dojo?!”

“That’s right.” The man named Kurobi nodded. “This is a place where practitioners gather from around the world to practice legendary ancient martial arts.”

“Legendary...?”

“Oh, I see. There must have been a mix-up in legends, Alice.” Sisbell clapped her hands together once. “So the punchline is, instead of a legendary herb, there was actually a legendary dojo on this sacred mountain the whole time.”

“We can’t let this end as a punchline!”

This was no joke to Alice. She’d left the castle and risked her life to scale the mountain and save Rin.

“Oh?” Kurobi’s eyes glittered. “You came to this mountain in search of the legendary herb?”

“Do you know about it?”

“Nope.”

“That was so misleading! Agh, how did this happen? I was sure that we would be able to save Rin by coming here...only to find this!”

It had all been a fool’s errand. In low spirits, Alice began to trudge back down the mountain.

“Wait!” Kurobi’s powerful voice echoed. “Lost maidens, it is too early to lose

hope! You should meet Grand Master Daikungfu, who runs this dojo.”

“A grand master...?”

“That’s right. He knows all there is to know about this mountain. He should know about the legendary herb as well.”

“Please let us meet your master!”

“Excellent!” Kurobi turned sharply on his heel. He led the pupils of the dojo and the two girls deeper into the mountain. “You show promise. You were able to best these Foot-Destroying Demon Stairs, so we’ll treat you as guests.”

*So that’s what those stairs were called*, both young women thought.

Kurobi continued on quickly, “This is our headquarters. Our grand master will be inside.”

They headed deeper into the training grounds to a giant temple built at the summit of the mountain.

“That thing is huge!”

“It’s as large as the palace! I’ve never seen a temple so large!”

The grounds were also vast. And on top of that, the temple had been built on a legendary sacred mountain.

“Say, Sisbell, what do you think that is?” As they walked through the grounds, Alice caught sight of something. “That gigantic tree has been cut in half.”

“You did well to notice!” Kurobi, who walked in front of them, turned around with enthusiasm. “That is the legendary Karate Kick Tree. Our Grand Master Daikungfu himself felled this tree with just his foot.”

“That’s amazing!” Alice yelled.

“That’s ridiculous!” Sisbell followed up immediately after. “Please wait, Kurobi, and all of you others. I cannot possibly believe that. How could he kick down such a large tree?!”

“It is possible for our great and grand master.” Kurobi’s eyes were filled with steadfast confidence. “This is a legend from Grand Master Daikungfu’s days of training when he kicked one tree after another. It was as though a storm had

been called up and struck the tree with lightning... Before anyone had realized it, the tree was felled."

"Are you sure that it wasn't struck by actual lightning?!"

"Our master's overflowing spirit is what summoned the lightning. And that was how Grand Master Daikungfu's No. 519 special deadly skill, Sacred Tree Roaring Thunder Kick, was perfected!"

Kurobi was talking about the legends of his master, but who was this master, anyway? Though Alice and Sisbell were already questioning the possibility of Kurobi's claims, it seemed this was only the start of the legends.

"Oh?" Sisbell pointed at the mountainside. "The stream that was running through here seems to stop there."

"Excellent observation. This is yet another legend of Grand Master Daikungfu."

"You mean, that river?!"

"That's right. It's a tale of back when the master was in the river bathing. The mountain burned with a fire that almost consumed it...and all the water in the river evaporated before anyone knew it. The master's raging energy likely sparked the mountain fire."

"That was definitely just a natural fire!"

"That was how Grand Master Daikungfu's No. 40 deadly special skill, Mount Tai Howling Fire, was perfected!"

"A master fraudster, more like!" Sisbell quipped again.

On the other hand...

"What an amazing master!"

Alice's eyes glittered as she listened to the stories about the master.

Rin's life was on the line, after all. Alice was ready to grasp at straws for a solution, so the master's legends sounded amazing to her ears.

"Alice...," Sisbell whispered into her ear. "What are you expecting? We have no idea who this master is or whether he actually knows about the legendary

herb. I think we should be rather dubious.”

“There’s no need for doubt, Sisbell!” Alice’s head was so full of dreams of reviving Rin that her sister’s warning didn’t get through to her. “Kurobi! If your master is that amazing, I’m sure he must know about the legendary herb!”

“Of course he does!” The assistant instructor’s reply sounded confident. “However, the master has many pupils. In order to get an expedited meeting, you’ll need to pay for the Master Meeting Plan and also for an extra Same-Day Line-Skipping Plan.”

“This is obviously a scam!”

“I’ll pay it immediately, for me and Sisbell both!”

“Sister?!”

Alice shook Sisbell off and whipped out her coin purse.

“Would this work?”

“It will do. We also have a Special Meeting Plan that will extend your time with the master from one hour to two. And for a limited time only, you’ll also receive a commemorative photo with the master!”

“I’ll buy it all!”

“Sister!”

Despite Sisbell’s protests, Alice made the payment. And that was how Alice and Sisbell got a meeting with the master.

“Okay, let’s go! Now that it’s all settled, I’ll lead you through the dojo.”

The temple of Daikungfu-style martial arts...

Once they were past the gates, they found several hundred pupils wiping the floors of the hallways.

“Th—that’s amazing...”

“This is a part of their training.”

Kurobi walked down the hallway. Alice and Sisbell both removed their shoes and went barefoot from there.

“The master’s hall is up ahead.” Kurobi pointed at an entrance. “Normally, only the pupils who have trained long and hard are allowed to enter, but we will allow you the privilege, because you’ve gotten the Special Meeting Plan.”

The moment they took a step inside...

“Eek! I-I’m so sorry!” Sisbell screamed after stepping on a monk who was collapsed on the ground.

There were other unconscious monks littered across the floor.

“Kurobi...uh, um...is there a reason so many people are unconscious here?”

“Don’t worry about it.” He walked forward without even glancing at the pupils on the floor. “The master used his Hundred-Strong Karate Combo to take them down.”

“H-hundred strong?!”

“Behold! That is our master.”

He pointed ahead.

The master, clothed in black martial arts robes, stood surrounded by a crowd of pupils. The most remarkable thing about him was his magnificent beard. He was as slender as a willow.

“What? That’s your master?” Sisbell was taken aback. She blinked. “He looks pretty lanky and not very reliable. All the pupils are young and muscular...and look way stronger...”

“No, pay close attention!”

Just as Kurobi said this, the master howled, “Haah!”

He punched the empty air. At that moment, all the pupils screamed and fell over, though he hadn’t touched them. And by all, that meant not only the ones on either side of him, but even the ones behind him.

“That’s obviously fake!” Sisbell immediately yelled, but for better or worse, her voice was drowned out by the pupils’ screams.

“Whew...” The master exhaled and withdrew his hand, looking rather satisfied with himself. “Void, form, body, spirit, strength, reason. These things together

make up the heart... Use all of your heart. Then you will have the entire universe within your fist."

"Thank you! Thank you!" All the pupils on the ground sprung up simultaneously and bowed deep and low.

Everyone watched the scene play out.

"This is complete nonsense!" Sisbell blurted out. "I thought it was suspicious... Alice, this is a dangerous place! We mustn't meet him, and we should leave immediately!"

"How wonderful!"

"Sister?!"

"Sisbell, you saw it too, didn't you?! The master made all his pupils go flying without so much as touching them!"

*This truly is a grand master.*

Alice was certain of that. As far as she was concerned, someone who had mastered a technique that went beyond human logic would know where some medicinal herb would be. In fact, he might know about a couple legendary herbs.

And also...

In the back of her mind, Alice thought of her one and only rival, the Imperial swordsman Iska.

It occurred to her that learning a thing or two about martial arts could help her compete against him.

"Oh-ho-ho-ho. So we have ourselves newcomers?"

After hearing Alice's and Sisbell's voices, the grand master made his way over to them. He was draped in those black martial arts robes and looked like a thin old man. However, hundreds of pupils stood behind him.

"You did well to come here. I am Daikungfu, the founder and teacher of the ancient ways of Daikungfu."

"My name is Alice! And this is my little sister, Sisbell. So, Grand Master..."

“Wait!” the grand master howled. His voice was so impressive, one had to wonder how his small frame even had the lung capacity. “Say no more, young girl...or rather, Alice.”

The grand master stared into her eyes. “I see some trouble has beset you. And you came here seeking a way to fix it. Isn’t that right?”

“What?!” Alice’s eyes went wide.

He’d hit the mark. Rin’s life was in danger.

“How did you know?!”

“Oh-ho-ho-ho. Nothing escapes the sights of Daikungfu.”

He seemed rather confident.

Meanwhile, behind them, Sisbell was muttering to herself, “We came all this way into the mountains. Obviously, there was some issue that led us here.” Alice, however, was so giddy that she never heard her sister.

“Not to worry.” The grand master stroked his beard. “You would do well to train your body and mind at the dojo. Then your worries will leave you.”

“I’ll do the very best I can!”

“Wait, Sister?! What about the whole reason we’re here? Aren’t you going to save Rin?!”

“Oh-ho-ho-ho. Do not worry, small maiden.”

“Who are you calling small?!” Sisbell narrowed her eyes.

Alice was the older sister, so it seemed the grand master thought of Sisbell as a little girl.

However, Sisbell had some hangups about the part of her body that was actually small, so this was a slight she couldn’t ignore.

“Answer me, Grand Master! What makes me small?!”

“So, about the herb of Kittokiki that you are seeking...,” the grand master said.

“Did you just ignore me?!”

“You need not worry. You are already close to it.” The grand master’s eyes

glistened. “We cultivate the herb of Kittokiki here at this dojo, as it gives us inexhaustible strength. Steeping it and drinking it will create a well of strength within you.”

“Will it really?!” Alice took the grand master’s hands. “Grand Master, please give us the herb...!”

“Mm-hmm. Alas, only those belonging to our dojo may have the herb of inexhaustible strength. If you join us, we would gladly give you some of the herb.”

“W-wait, I cannot believe what I am hearing. You want us to join your dojo?!” Sisbell yelled, unable to hold back. “You want two women to join a dojo of all men in this cold mountaintop, where the air is too thin to breathe...?”

“Do not worry, small maiden.”

“Who are you calling small?! I—I realize I’m not nearly as developed as my sister...but I have some of my own assets as well!”

“Once you consume the herb of endless strength, various parts of your body will mature.”

“What?”

“Small girl, wouldn’t you like to surpass your own sister?”

“Guh!”

The moment the grand master said this to her, Sisbell’s entire opinion reversed.

“I’ll join! Oh, great Grand Master!”

Thus, Alice and Sisbell began their training under the great Grand Master Daikungfu.

They had signed up for the Special Grand Master Course. Because they were beginning instruction directly under the grand master’s tutelage, Alice and Sisbell changed into white martial arts robes.

“Grand Master, I changed clothes!” Alice tightened her belt as she came back to the dojo. “Let’s start the training immediately!”

“Oh-ho-ho-ho. What great passion. But how long will your spirit last? My training is rigorous, you know.”

“I want to become stronger!”

“Alice, that wasn’t our original goal!”

However, they ignored Sisbell’s quip.

“As you wish!” The grand master nodded with approval. “This is a holy and sacred mountain. As you climbed this mountain from below, we must first start your training by purifying you of your worldly filth.”

“We’re being purified?” Sisbell blinked, taken aback. “What do you think that means, Alice?”

“How should I know? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

Alice and Sisbell were both princesses. As the two had been raised in a palace, everything about the dojo’s training methods seemed new and novel.

“Grand Master, what would purification entail?”

“You will soak yourself in water to cleanse yourself.”

“In a shower?”

“In a waterfall.” The grand master’s reply was succinct. “The water from the melted snow on this mountain is perfect for training.”

“A waterfall?!” Sisbell’s eyes went wide. “Surely, you must be joking! We would catch our deaths under water that cold! Wouldn’t we, Alice?!”

“Y-yeah, we would...”

Alice had to agree there. Her goal, when it came down to it, was to acquire the herb of inexhaustible strength to save her attendant. Engaging in the dojo’s training had been just a means to an end.

“I’m not sure...I could actually do training like that...”

“You need not be afraid!” the grand master exclaimed. “Alice, you have what it takes. Complete my training and become the most skilled woman martial artist in the world!”

“In the world?!” Alice’s heart skipped a beat.

The whole world...

Though she was a princess, that phrase sounded so sweet to her ears that she couldn’t help but latch on to it. Also, the Imperial swordsman Iska flashed through Alice’s mind again in that moment.

“The best woman in the world at martial arts... Then even Iska will have to acknowledge me... All right!”

She took the grand master’s hand.

“I, Alice, shall put myself in your care!”

“Excellent!”

Alice and the grand master shared a firm handshake as they made a vow between teacher and student.

“What? Alice, you don’t need to learn martial arts. What happened to saving Rin?”

Sisbell’s murmur didn’t reach the two, who were fired up to start training.

The waterfall was gigantic. Descending from a towering cliff, an impressive rush of water mixed with snow poured from overhead.

“Ah, this takes me back...” The grand master squinted as he took a trip down memory lane. “When I see this waterfall, I recall another small girl who visited the dojo.”

“Grand Master? Who do you mean?”

“It’s all in the past...” The master shook his head at Alice’s question. “All I will say is that she was a young maiden who spread her wings and left our dojo. But you have what it takes to rival her. Under my tutelage, you will seek to become unequaled!”

“All right!”

“I’m not going to try that hard, personally...”

Alice and Sisbell headed to the base of the waterfall. Shirtless pupils were already standing below the falls for their training.

“Well...this looks like it really will be cold.”

“Alice, look at the pool below the waterfall. There’s ice floating in it!”

Sisbell, who wore a towel, cautiously reached a fingertip toward the waterfall’s spray. She jumped the moment she felt it.

“Cooold!”

Sisbell’s lips were already blue from simply touching the fall with her fingertips.

“I can’t feel how cold it is—it just hurts! Master...I’m pretty sure I’d die if I stood under this waterfall!”

“Do not hesitate, small girl!” the master exclaimed again.

The master pointed at the pupils under the falls.

“Look at them. They don’t even shiver under this extreme cold. Do you know why that is? Because they’ve abandoned all worldly desires!”

“Worldly desires?”

“That’s right. The purifying cold has washed away all hesitation and temptation!”

This was martial arts training for the mind. By standing under the rushing water of the falls, one could unite with the great outdoors, thus ridding oneself of any hesitancy of the heart or unwanted desires. This was supposedly the truth the grand master had reached.

“I don’t really understand it...”

“First, you should step right into the waterfall. Then you will understand it with your entire being.”

“Ugh, come on... Okay, I’ll do it! I’ve come this far!”

Sisbell made up her mind, pulled off her towel, and threw it to the side.

Her pale skin was exposed; however, she wasn’t naked. She had borrowed a white bathing suit for women from the dojo.

*...Splash.*

The moment the spray from the waterfall splashed onto her face, a scream emerged from deep within Sisbell as she felt the stabbing cold.

“Coooold!”

After all, when it came down to it, it was melted snow. A single droplet was enough to make the chill sink right into her bones.

“If we get doused by this freezing water, we’ll get sick!”

“It *does* seem cold...”

“Alice! It’s not fair of you to just watch. You’re not even near the waterfall!”

“I-I know!”

Alice let her towel flutter off. In that moment, Alice’s voluptuous curves were exposed. They seemed about to burst out of her clothes. She was wearing a black swimsuit that alluringly showed off her impressive and fully developed bosom, as well as her curvy, prominent backside.

In other words, her assets were revealed for all to see.

“Urgh?!”

“Gaah...!”

All the pupils under the waterfall cried out in agony.

One of them gripped his chest, another started to pant, and all of them slipped and fell right into the pool at the base of the waterfall, one after another.

“The pupils! What happened to them, Grand Master?!”

“Hmph...” A grim expression came over the grand master’s face as he looked between his pupils and Alice in her swimsuit. “They interact with no women in their day-to-day training. It seems your lascivious body was a bit too much stimulation for them to handle.”

“You’re saying this is my fault?!”

“Wait, Master! Why didn’t they act the same way for me?!” Sisbell in her white swimsuit placed her hand on her breasts. “You cannot ignore me this time! If they reacted in that way to my sister’s swimsuit, they should at least

swoon over mine!"

"Hmm..."

"Grand Master?!"

"It seems no little sister is capable of outdoing her older sibling."

"But I can!"

"The small can never triumph over the large..."

"Exactly what about me are you calling small?!" Enraged, Sisbell pointed below her at the pupils in the water. "And they don't seem very disciplined. If they're falling over just because of my sister's swimsuit, it seems to me they haven't trained enough."

"...Right." Alice agreed on this point. "If seeing a girl in a swimsuit is enough to make them fall over, I'm not sure they're people we can really depend on."

Alice and Sisbell whispered to each other.

This was bad—something like this would besmirch the honor of the dojo's art. Sensing the danger, the grand master quickly made a decision.

"So be it! I, Daikungfu, will show you the proper way to stand below a waterfall!"

He pulled off the top of his robe and threw it to the side, then leaped into the waterfall himself.

"Whoa?!"

"The Great Grand Master himself has jumped into the falls!"

The pupils were all atwitter.

"Ladies, join me!"

And so, Alice, Sisbell, and the grand master all stood together below the falls.

"This is much too cold!" Sisbell screamed.

"Oh? This actually isn't too bad."

Next to her, Alice was perfectly unbothered as the water poured over her. Alice was an ice astral mage. She was used to cold temperatures, so the snow

water was tolerable. In fact, she could have withstood freezing cold weather in general.

“Urgh, I can’t accept this... How are you able to do this without blinking an eye, while I’m suffering so much...?”

“Sisbell, a little fat can keep the cold at bay.”

“Are you saying I’m too skinny?!”

About half an hour passed. After being continually pelted by the ice-cold water, Sisbell finally crawled out of the waterfall.

“I-it’s finally over... I-I thought I was going to die...”

“E-even I’m at my limit...”

Alice’s lips were purple. It had been all right at the start, but after being in the shower of freezing water for so long, she couldn’t help but feel the chill, too. She couldn’t stop trembling.

“I almost lost consciousness partway through and was this close to falling into the pool below.”

“You too, Alice...? The grand master is amazing. I can’t believe he didn’t have any trouble over there next to you.”

“He wasn’t next to me?”

“Huh?” Sisbell blinked. “He wasn’t next to me, either.”

“Oh? That’s strange.”

They couldn’t see hide nor hair of the master anywhere. After realizing that, Alice searched around the waterfall.

“Grand Master?!”

She looked over the surface of the pool of water below. Everyone present turned white as sheets when they saw his unmoving body floating in the pool.

“Grand Master?!”

The pupils leaped into the pool and pulled him ashore in a panic.

“...Hah?!” The master was quick to open his eyes. “Where am I...?”

“You fell into the pool,” Sisbell immediately answered. “Grand Master, I can hardly believe it... But did you fail the training Alice and I succeeded at? Did you faint?”

“.....”

He said nothing.

The atmosphere felt awkward.

But then the grand master got to his feet before anyone else could.

“That is it! My pupils, I’m close to uncovering another truth that will lead to a new form of art!”

“Grand Master?!”

“I didn’t lose consciousness! My mind unified with the waterfall, so my body became one with the ice drifting along with its flow. I’ve perfected a new secret art! The Running Water Ice Boulder Technique!”

“Whooooaaaa!”

“You came up with a new secret technique by falling into the water?!”

“You’re amazing, Grand Master!”

The pupils and Alice yelled, impressed.

However, behind them...

“He just fainted!” Sisbell’s umpteenth exclamation disappeared into the roar of the waterfall.

After they had purified themselves, it was finally time for their real training to start.

They would learn by doing.

“There is an ancient phrase—‘Wind, forest, fire, shadow, mountain, and lightning.’ You are to be as fast as the wind and as quiet as the forest.”

They were in a bamboo grove deep in the mountains.

The grand master turned around to face his pupils, as well as Alice and Sisbell.

“In ancient times, martial artists would learn their art through nature itself.

This is our ultimate initiation technique. This is what I will confer to you today.”

“Yes, Grand Master!” Alice nodded firmly. “What should we do then?”

“Mm-hmm. You will punch the bamboo. By exchanging blows with the bamboo, and thus nature, you will feel its power.”

“Is there a point to this?”

“Stop that, Sisbell!” Alice muttered under her breath to scold her sister. “The grand master’s teachings are absolute.”

“No, Alice. These methods are fundamentally unscientific!” Sisbell pointed at the master. “Grand Master! I didn’t believe it during the waterfall purification, and I don’t believe it now! Are your abilities even real?!”

“Oh-ho-ho-ho. You’re a feisty one.” The grand master easily laughed off Sisbell’s accusatory question. “I have seen hundreds of young waifs like you, but —”

“Enough talk. Please show me how much progress can be made by punching a bamboo stalk.”

“All right!” the grand master shouted and tightened his belt. “These are the fruits of my training. Hwah-chaah!”

He kicked the bamboo.

*Slap.* To Sisbell’s eyes, it just looked like a flimsy kick from a haggard old man.

However, immediately, the bamboo warped, and a black lump fell out of it.

“Hm?”

“Oh?”

They heard something buzzing, only to realize it was wings. Dozens of yellow, winged insects darted out of the object.

“It’s a wasp nest! Waaah!”

This was bad. The grand master had kicked a nest out of the bamboo stalk. The wasps were furious about losing their home.

“W-we need to run! Huh?” Sisbell was taken aback. She blinked.

The wasps weren't after her or Alice. They headed into the bushes that happened to be in front of the nest. Several hundred wasps flew into the shrubbery, and after a bit, a snake emerged.

"A snake?!"

"It must have been hiding in the bushes!"

The wasps directed their anger at that snake. It seemed they'd mistaken the snake as being the perpetrator that had disturbed their nest. However...

"Is that a venomous snake?!"

The pupils stirred.

"It definitely is! That's the snake!"

"It's the snake that we dedicated our lives to hunting—the venomous dragon cobra! That's the snake that's so poisonous a single bite can land a bear in the grave!"

"What?!"

"The snake was that dangerous?!"

Alice and Sisbell were both taken back. If they had approached the bushes without knowing, they could have been bitten.

"The grand master drove back the enemy!"

"Yes... The grand master knew from the start. He knew that the snake was hiding in that bush!"

The pupils were all moved.

The grand master, who had been silent that whole time, hollered, "This is it!"

The snake was attempting to run away. They watched as the wasps followed it.

"This is the way of the arts and our hearts. Nature responded to my burning heart. This is the Thousand Insect Heart Echo Kick! I have perfected a new secret technique!"

"Waaaah!"

“Grand Master?! Grand Master!”

“You’re amazing, Grand Master!”

The cheers for the grand master were overwhelming. Alice’s and the pupils’ applause resounded throughout the bamboo grove.

“That’s not possible!” Unfortunately, Sisbell’s cries were drowned out by the praise.

*The next morning.*

It was a race against time to save Rin.

Alice and Sisbell were already on their last trial, just two days into training.

“Your last trial will be to fight one of my pupils!” Daikungfu’s firm voice rang throughout the dojo. “He won’t fight back and will only take what you give him. Attempt to break through his iron wall, young ladies! If your fiery enthusiasm is true, then you’ll overcome this hurdle!”

If they passed, they would graduate. And if they did that, they would receive the legendary herb of Kittokiki (aka the herb of inexhaustible strength) as a reward.

This was the time for them to show their passion.

“Wonderful!” With a headband on her head, Sisbell tugged her belt tight and stood. “I’ll display the results of my training from yesterday!”

“Then go forth, my pupil Kongou!”

“Yessir!”

A large man with a shaved head stood up. He was muscular, and his dojo robe displayed his brawny chest, which was so stout it looked like it could stop a bullet.

“Urk... He seems even stronger than anticipated! But I’ve finished my training. Something like this can’t frighten me!”

Sisbell went on the offensive. She headed toward the pupil standing at attention.

“Haah!”

*Slap.*

Sisbell's flying kick connected with his broad chest, and she bounced off.

"Haah! Daah!"

She tried punching, then kicking. However, his tough muscles took it all in stride. He reacted as though a dandelion had tickled him.

"H-he's so strong!"

"I'll help you, Sisbell!" Alice barged in.

Now, it was two against one. The sisters coordinated like the siblings they were to punch and kick the man. However...

"Yaah!" Kongou let out a loud shout, and Alice and Sisbell both fell to the ground.

"Eep?!"

"Urgh?!"

"I-it didn't work at all?!"

"But we worked together!"

It was no use. Even at full power, their fists had no effect on the man's body of steel.

"...Guh! I'm not giving up yet. I need to do this to save Rin!" Alice began grappling with Kongou.

She tried to throw him in order to break his unshakable stance. Unfortunately, because he was several times her weight, it didn't work.

So, what was she to do?

"...Ugh. I'm sorry. I need to do whatever it takes!"

Alice was an ice astral mage. So she created a fragment of ice that no one could see and sneakily placed it under the pupil's feet.

"Daah!"

"Mgh?!"

The pupil lost his balance.

The moment he slipped, Alice attacked him with her full body weight.

The two of them fell over.

“Now!” Alice got on top of the pupil and used all she had to push him down.  
“I’m holding him down!”

“Guh gaah!”

The pupil flinched. Based on the sheer difference in weight between them, Alice obviously had used some underhanded trick. Despite that...

“What is this...?!” The grand master’s eyes went wide.

The brawny pupil was pinned under Alice. Alice’s ample bosom covered the man’s entire face and hid it from view. He couldn’t move recklessly.

If he tried to push Alice off, he would end up touching her breasts. Because of that, the pupil was bewildered and had frozen up.

“The girl has quelled her foe with her great affection! What magnificent love...  
The pupil, Kongou, has lost the battle!”

“She’s just holding him down with her breasts!” Sisbell cried out. “You’re all too impressed by this! All she did was seduc—”

“No ordinary person could use this technique!”

“Are you calling me a small-boobed ordinary person?!”

“This is the way of the arts and our hearts. And now also of love!”

The grand master produced a folding fan from somewhere. The message *Bravo!* was revealed to be written on the fan once the grand master proudly opened it.

“The way of Daikungfu secret technique: Grandmother’s Embrace Dance. You did an excellent job of acquiring it. You’ve passed with flying colors!”

“I can’t believe this!”

Thus, though Sisbell was distraught, Alice was initiated into the dojo with a black belt and obtained the herb of Kittokiki (aka the herb of inexhaustible

strength).

Now, they were back in the palace.

After a long journey home, Alice was out of breath when she dashed into Rin's room.

"Rin, I've gotten my hands on the herb!"

"...Come again?"

Alice walked in on Rin, who looked perfectly fine, as she was cleaning the room.

"Right, I was fak—I mean, the disease I had is gone now."

"You're already better?!"

"Yes, as you can see."

As it so happened, as soon as Alice had left the castle, Rin had stopped pretending she was sick and had gotten right back to work, but Alice had no way of knowing this.

"But Lady Alice, I was only sick because of the original issue that caused it." Rin coughed. "If you had acted as a princess as you should have, I never would have gotten sick. So please conduct yourself in a—"

"This is perfect!"

"...What?" Rin was taken aback.

Alice grabbed her hands and declared firmly, "Rin, let's train together!"

"Train?"

"We'll train in the mountains, so you'll become healthy and never get sick again. It'll be all right, Rin! I'm sure the grand master will see your potential!"

"The grand what now?!"

"Right now, the Special Short-Term Concentrated Course and Special Grand Master Direct Teachings are both on discount. And we'll even get an autograph from the master thrown in!"

"Wh-what are you talking about?!"

It seemed that this plan had also backfired. Now that Alice had learned martial arts, Rin had to spend a week holding her lady in check.

A few days passed.

In a land far away from the Nebulis Sovereignty, called the Empire...

"Iska, this is huge! The Nebulis Sovereignty is showing activity!" When Commander Mismis spotted Iska walking down the hall, she ran over to him, out of breath. "Some strange martial arts technique is becoming popular in the Sovereignty. And no one's heard of the ancient school it comes from!"

"Ancient martial arts?"

"Yes. They're learning some inscrutable form of ancient martial arts to use with their astral powers to fight the Imperial forces. This is a huge deal!"

"Ancient martial arts...? Who would try such a fishy training method nowadays...?"

"People would, Iska!" Commander Mismis stopped Iska as he voiced his doubt. "I should know. This is the Nebulis Sovereignty's scheme... If we don't find a way to fight back, then the Empire is done for!"

"You don't have to be so dramatic. It's just a rumor, right?"

"We can't just sit around doing nothing!"

She wasn't listening to Iska. In her head, Commander Mismis could see the powerful Nebulis Sovereignty getting stronger.

"Fight fire with fire. I'm going to train in ancient martial arts, too!"

"What are you talking about?!"

She was definitely barking up the wrong tree. Iska did all he could to stop Commander Mismis from heading out to some remote mountain.

File 03

*Our Last Crusade or the  
Anonymous Consultation Box*

Our Last CRUSADE  
OR THE RISE OF A New World  
Secret File

**CONFIDENTIAL**

# 1

*The largest military state in the world, the Empire.*

The most secure place in the country was the Lord's office, which towered over the Imperial capital. In other words, the Lord's residence.

At the deepest point in the structure...

**“Hwaaah...”** Someone let out a loud yawn.

The voice behind the half-transparent curtain in the room sounded rather endearing.

**“I have nothing to do. I’m so bored, I could just melt away.”**

Lord Yunmelngen.

The shape of the most important being in the Empire was faintly visible behind the curtain. The Lord had large ears and a tail, forming a faint silhouette of...not a human but a beast.

**“Who was it who said boredom could kill the gods? Say, Risya, that’s how I feel right now. I’m so bored it’s painful.”**

“That’s a good thing, Your Excellency,” Risya curtly replied as she raised her head.

Risya In Empire.

She was a clever-looking woman who wore black-rimmed glasses. Though she occupied the important position of the Lord's staff officer, for the most part, her duties were just to chat with them like this.

“The world has been at peace for about a week. We haven’t seen any significant movement from the Nebulis Sovereignty. Though, of course, we’ve had small skirmishes with them in some places.”

The war between the two world superpowers...

The industrial utopia called the Empire was pitted against the witch's

paradise, otherwise known as the Nebulis Sovereignty. These two countries had been battling for over a century and still had yet to conclude their war.

However, they had been at a standoff, never reaching a point of all-out war.

**“It’s fine that things are peaceful. I don’t want to hear stories about bloodshed. But figuring out a way to relieve my boredom is a pressing matter. That’s what you’re here for as my staff officer.”**

“Then how about a chat?”

**“You don’t have any news to talk about except peace.”**

“Then how about a game?”

**“No. Whenever you come close to losing, you always say you have a meeting and run off.”**

“Then a nap?”

**“I just had an eighty-nine-hour nap. I’m bored because I’m tired of napping.”**

The Lord sighed from beyond the curtain. “Oh, yes! I know.” The Lord’s voice sounded invigorated. **“All right, Risya. Let’s do that.”**

“By ‘that’ you mean...?” Risya tilted her head in puzzlement.

Though the Lord would regularly propose things on a whim, every scheme would be so sudden that even Risya would have a difficult time predicting what would come up.

“Your Excellency, what have you thought of this time?”

**“That event from a decade ago. Let’s do it again.”**

“Uh?!” The moment Risya heard that, the blood drained from her face. “You mean *that*?! Please, Your Excellency! Don’t tell me you want to make a hopeless attempt at *that* again!”

**“I won’t repeat myself.”**

Behind the curtain, the lord nodded.

**“I leave it to you, Risya. Have it done while I’m asleep.”**

“Wait, you’re going back to sleep, anyway?! Wait, Your Excellency!” Risya

screamed, but she soon heard snoring from the other side of the curtain.

## 2

A few days passed.

In a corner of an Imperial forces' base...

"Haa...haah...This is huge, everyone! Something big is happening!" Commander Mismis of Unit 907 ran into the conference room carrying an unfamiliar poster. "Something huge is happening!"

"Boss, whenever you say that there's huge news, it's never a big deal."

The first to react was the silver-haired sniper sitting in the corner of the room, Jhin.

"Wait... Let's hear her out, at least. What happened?"

"This really is amazing this time! They're reviving a legendary event from a decade ago!"

She seemed very proud of herself. Mismis unfurled the poster.

"It's called the Lord BOX! It was a hugely successful event ten years ago!"

"...Huh? What is that?"

"Oh? You don't know, Jhin? Well, Iska must know at least," Mismis said.

"I haven't heard of it, either."

Iska met Jhin's eyes and shook his head.

What was the Lord BOX?

Iska was born and raised in the Imperial capital, but any events from a decade ago had occurred when he was a child. It was far, far off in his memories as far as he was concerned.

"Ten years ago, Jhin and I weren't even ten years old. Now that you mention it, I might have heard about something like that..."

“Wait, then if I can remember it clearly, does it mean I’m that much more mature than the two of you?!”

“N-no, that’s not quite...”

“Are you saying that since I’m a mature, twenty-two-year-old adult that you don’t know what I’m talking about?! I guess that makes it a generational difference!”

“That’s a complete misinterpretation of what I meant!”

He somehow stopped Commander Mismis, who had started to talk very fast.

“A-anyway, Commander... What’s the announcement on the poster about the event?”

“Right. I saw it near the entrance to the base. I think they’ve probably been put up in the stations and all over the streets, too.”

The announcement was printed in gaudy colors on the poster.

THE LORD BOX IS OPEN!

A GIGANTIC EVENT IN WHICH THE LORD TAKES QUESTIONS, CONCERNS, AND REQUESTS FROM THE PEOPLE AND MAKES WISHES COME TRUE!

That was what was written on the poster Iska was looking at.

“What kinds of questions from the people?” he asked.

“Well, you know how the Lord hardly ever goes out. It’s like we don’t even know them. So you can ask stuff like ‘What kind of stuff are you normally up to, Your Excellency?’ or ‘What’s your favorite food?’ and things like that. Anyone’s allowed to submit. That way, we feel closer to them! That’s what it’s all about.”

“Oh, I get it... Yeah, they are kind of mysterious.”

Iska had met the Lord just once in the past. But even then, the Lord had been on the other side of a curtain, and they hadn’t met face-to-face.

Everything about the Lord seemed mysterious.

And now they could learn more about the personality and background of such an important figure through the Lord BOX.

“Commander, what is this part about requests from the people?”

“That part’s amazing, too! For example, ten years ago, someone asked them to increase the number of national holidays, and they actually did it! And someone else asked for a theme park, and they actually built one on the outskirts of the Imperial capital.”

“That was why they made that theme park?!”

Even Iska knew about that. Back when he’d been a kid, for some reason, the theme park had been built out of the blue.

“Then this event really is huge!” he said.

“I already told you that! The event from ten years ago was really popular, too! And now, the legend’s back!” Commander Mismis’s eyes sparkled. “Each person in the Empire gets one submission slip. You’re allowed to write whatever you want on it! You can write any concern, question, or request, and the Lord will respond!”

“Wow... That does sound interesting.”

Naturally, the people would be happy to have their wishes come true. The Lord would also probably gain approval by granting those wishes. It was a win for both sides.

“There are probably going to be a lot of submissions. Does the Lord get to choose which ones to fulfill?”

“No, it’s a lottery. I’m pretty sure the Lord selected them at random ten years ago, too. There are probably hundreds of thousands of submissions, so it’s tough to get selected, but I think that makes it all the more exciting for the people who are.” Commander Mismis exhaled dramatically after her passionate spiel. “It’s a fun event, so I wish it’d happen every year, but it takes a lot of effort and money. I mean, they made a whole theme park and increased the number of holidays we have, so it must have been a lot of work for people in all sorts of departments.”

That was why it only happened once a decade. Iska could understand why Commander Mismis was so excited.

“Are soldiers allowed to join in, too?”

“Of course!” Commander Mismis nodded. “We’ll each get one submission slip. So I’m counting on you two, Iska and Jhin.”

“Counting on what?”

“You’ve got to write the same thing on your slips: increase the adorable, charming Commander Mismis’s salary by three times.”

“No way am I writing that!”

“It’ll be fine! I’ll write it, and I’m going to ask Nene, too. That increases the chances of us being selected! And I’m sure you’d be happy if my salary were three times as large, Iska!”

“I wouldn’t, though!”

“I’ll loan you this ballpoint pen!”

“You’re getting way ahead of yourself!”

Commander Mismis was already trying to push the pen into his hands. They hadn’t even gotten their submission slips, but she was already raring to go.

“I think there are better things we could ask the Lord...”

“For sure. This is stupid,” Jhin murmured. “We only get one slip, which means one chance at a request. I’m not gonna use something so important on something that silly. Besides, if you want more money, just work more. In the first place—”

As Jhin was making his very reasonable point with a lecture, the conference room door burst open.

“I’m back!”

A girl with vibrant red hair came in. It was Nene.

Nene had just gotten back from her lunch break. Iska and the others zeroed in on the unfamiliar white pieces of paper in her hands.

“Iska, big bro! Do you know about the Lord BOX?”

“We were just talking about that. So, Nene... Are those things in your

hand...?"

"Yup! I got the submission slips for us!"

There were four slips in total, enough for Iska, Jhin, Nene, and Commander Mismis.

"We were waiting for you, Nene!" Commander Mismis turned gleefully to Nene. "Okay, so make sure to write on your submission slip 'Increase the adorable, charming Commander Mismis's salary by three times its size.' Iska and Jhin are going to, too!"

*I'm not.*

*No way.*

Iska and Jhin grumbled as Nene opened her eyes wide in surprise.

"What?! You can ask for something like that?!"

"That's right, Nene!"

"Then I could have three times the salary... No, actually, I think I'd ask for an uninhabited island near the Empire to use as my exclusive secret base!"

"That's ridiculous!" Iska shouted before he could stop himself.

Commander Mismis's demand had been pushing it, but Nene's was going way beyond that.

"You can't just ask for whatever you want in the Lord BOX—"

"I've heard everything!"

*Slam!*

The door, which had most certainly been locked, blew open.

"Morning, Unit 907! Allow me, the Lord's very own staff officer, to tell you all about the Lord BOX!"

"Huh? Ms. Risya?" Iska was caught off guard and tilted his head when the staff officer suddenly appeared.

Why had she come to their conference room?

"Hee-hee-hee. I heard all of you talking."

“This room was locked, and it should be fully soundproofed...but it’s good you came, Ms. Risya. We have some questions.”

“Oh? What is it, Isk?”

“Commander Mismis and Nene want to ask for something ridiculous during the Lord BOX event...”

“What exactly would that be?”

“Commander Mismis wants three times her salary, and Nene wants her own deserted island.”

“Seems possible.”

“It does?!”

“Well, this is the Lord we’re talking about.” Risya crossed her arms, acting as if the whole matter was obvious. “Isk, you should know. The Lord is the most important person in the largest country in the world. In other words, the Lord has the greatest authority in the world. Anything is possible.”

“I can see that, but...”

“Look, I get it, Isk. You’re planning on asking for something moderately reasonable, aren’t you? But it’s all right. There are going to be tens of thousands of requests like theirs from all over the Empire. Everyone thinks the same thing.”

Apparently, that had been taken into consideration.

Even if Commander Mismis and Nene submitted a different request, many people in the Empire would submit similar ones.

“Oh, one correction, though. It’s not accurate to say the requests are similar to theirs.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s worse than that. For example, some of the worst ten thousand are things like ‘Make a law where all the beautiful women in the Empire have to be naked all the time.’”

“That’s going too far!”

Apparently, at least ten thousand bottom-feeder perverts lived in this vast Empire.

“Unfortunately, Their Excellency wanted to do this event on a whim. Do you understand the dangers that are lurking, Isk?”

“What do you mean?”

“If the Lord picks that submission in the lottery, it’ll actually become a law.”

“You can’t be serious?!”

A law that required beautiful women to live fully in the nude. If that actually happened, everything would be over. The whole world would look coldly on the Empire.

“B-but surely, the Lord has some common sense, at least...”

“Quite the opposite! The Lord might actually do it, because of how Their Excellency is! This happened because the Lord was bored! Their Excellency would be thrilled to make something impossible happen!”

“Isn’t it your job as staff officer to stop them?!”

“That’s not gonna happen.” Risya’s answer was immediate. “Their Excellency will do anything when they’re bored! And the Lord doesn’t think about the consequences of these jokes! Or about budgets or deadlines!”

“Should a person like that really be leading the nation?!”

“So we need to sift those out ahead of time...”

Risya swiftly turned around. She pointed at the four submission slips Nene held.

“This is insider information, but we secretly filter the submissions before the Lord BOX is sealed up. Even though we get millions of Lord BOX submissions and lots of ridiculous ones like those, we also get trivial questions and concerns.”

“For example?”

“Things like ‘My husband’s snoring is too loud, so please do something about it’ or ‘My cat ran away. Have you seen it?’ and things like that.”

“That perverse submission is ten times worse than I expected the trivial ones to be!”

“But we get crazy requests like those!” Risya smacked the desk. “So we try to get rid of as many of them as we can. We can’t do that with a machine, so we need to use manual labor. That’s why I need to gather help from the Imperial forces.”

In that moment, the atmosphere in the conference room changed. The friendly atmosphere turned frigid.

“...”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“Oh, what’s wrong, Unit 907? Why did you all go quiet?”

Risya just kept smiling.

But the four of them knew better. When Risya smiled like that, they were in danger.

“So, Mismis, are you free next week?” Risya asked.

“What?” Commander Mismis raised her head. She looked entirely confused, as though she hadn’t been listening. “Oh, sorry, Risya. I was just thinking about something else and didn’t catch that.” As she said that, Commander Mismis cleaned up the pens that she had left out and quickly gathered the papers on the table into a binder. She was making a quick exit. “All right!” Commander Mismis swiftly turned away. “Good luck with gathering people to help with the Lord BOX, Risya. I need to head to our next training prac—”

“Oops, my hand slipped.” Risya pressed a button and the door of the conference room promptly sealed shut right in front of Mismis, who was trying to leave.

“You locked us in?!”

“Ohhh, Mismis, where do you think you’re going?” Risya swayed as she stood

up. Her black-rimmed glasses flashed eerily as she slowly herded Mismis into a corner of the room. “I’ve got a teensy favor to ask you. Would you be so kind as to hear me out?”

“No, no, no! I’m not going to do something that’d require that much work!”

“But I need a few more helpers to sort through the Lord BOX submissions. About four more.”

“I said I’m not doing it!”

“Oh, what a coincidence. Looks like I’ve got four reliable people right here. You must have come here for me!”

“But you’re the one who came to us, Risya!”

“Mismis.”

“Urgh?!”

She was truly cornered. Risya looked serious as she looked down on Mismis, whose back was to the wall.

“We are friends, aren’t we?”

“Uh...urgh...!”

“Pretty puh-lee-suh?”

A short silence followed. As Iska and the others watched, Mismis held out for nearly a full minute.

“.....Okay...”

Then Commander Mismis abandoned all hope.

### 3

Thus, they began taking submissions for the Lord BOX.

Word spread far and wide as boxes were established all over the Empire for the Imperial subjects to submit their slips, one after another. Each day, they

received tens of thousands of slips.

Those were delivered to the Imperial capital.

“I’m gonna open it!”

*Zwoooosh.*

An avalanche of thousands of sheets of paper flowed out of the box Risya had opened and upturned.

“These are the ones that came in first thing today. More are coming in, so don’t dawdle.”

“...”

“Right, Mismis?”

“Uh-hwuh...,” Mismis gave a tired reply. “Ugh... It’s supposed to be my day off. Why do I have to be in a conference room at the base at four in the morning...?”

“Okay, let’s get started, Unit 907!” Risya brushed off Mismis’s grumblings and clapped her hands. “We need to do this before the Lord sees them! Get rid of all the bad requests and complaints, okay?!”

“Um, Ms. Risya?” Nene timidly raised her hand. “What kinds of questions and requests should we remove? Do you have anything to reference?”

“I wouldn’t have anything like that, Nene.”

“What?”

“Basically, just use your best judgment. If you had to bother with checking a reference, it’ll just never end. You can simply use your own judgment about whether the submissions should be seen by the Lord.”

“I-I’ll do what I can!”

Nene and Risya grabbed pieces of paper.

The others also started following their lead.

They grabbed their first ones. Iska picked up the top slip from the pile on the table and started to read it.

“Whoa! This one’s already horrible!”

After seeing the question, Iska grimaced.

“Ms. Risya, could I ask your opinion? I’ve already gotten a problematic one.”

“Oh? Read it out loud for us, Isk.”

“Uhh... ‘Hello Your Excellency, I have a question for you. What color is your underwear right now? What type of underwear are you wearing? Hee-hee-hee.’ That’s obviously a joke. I can throw this out, right?”

“That one’s okay.”

“It is?!”

He hadn’t been expecting that. Iska was surprised.

“B-but Ms. Risya, isn’t this making fun of Their Excellency?!”

“Their Excellency has a large heart and will forgive it. Also, as the Lord’s staff officer, I can tell you Their Excellency normally doesn’t wear underwear.”

“Wait, what?! Uh, how does the Lord normally live day-to-day?!”

At that point, Jhin cut in.

“Hey, Ms. Saint Disciple, this one is a request. ‘To my dear Lord, I have something to ask for. I would like the old nightclothes of Michaela, a doctor at Imperial headquarters. Also her pillows as a set.’ What a pervert. That seems in poor taste. I should throw this out, right?”

“That one is fine.”

“How?!” Iska called this into question again.

Risya, however, replied full of confidence, “It’s all right. It’s a lottery, after all. There’s only a one in some million chance the Lord will pick it.”

“Y-you think so...?”

“Of course, Isk. We’ve only just started the selection process. If you scrutinize everything, then we won’t get through this.”

At that point, Commander Mismis came up to Risya with a slip.

“Risya, Risya!”

“Yup, Mismis? Did you find an interesting submission?”

“Um... I have a request for Your Excellency. All the male soldiers in the Imperial forces smell gross. Please order them to take care of their personal appearance. They should always have groomed hair, they should use deodorizing spray whenever they sweat, and they should clean the dirt off of their clothes during trainings.”

“We really should adopt those measures.”

“If we did that, we wouldn’t be able to do any training at all!”

The Lord BOX was a frightful thing.

Though adopting those as requirements would cause big issues in Iska’s eyes, he realized that the vetting process was a lot laxer than he’d expected.

“Ah! I’ve found a big one!” Nene yelled at that moment. “Commander, Ms. Risya! This request has Commander Mismis’s name on it!”

“Mine?!” Mismis pounced on it.

It seemed she couldn’t believe that her name was on a request written for the Lord.

“Do I have a secret fan?! Oh, the woes of being popular! Can you read it, Nene?”

“Sure. I have something to ask, Your Excellency. As a fellow female commander in the Imperial forces, I cannot overlook the fact that Commander Mismis is in the good graces of our superiors, despite her misconduct and terrible marks. I’m also irritated that she has the stature of a child but a full bust. Please issue an order to have her breasts torn off.”

“What have my breasts got to do with anything?!” Commander Mismis quickly made to hide her large bosom. “A fellow female commander... Was this written by P?!”

Pilie Commonsense. She was a female commander who saw Mismis as a rival in all aspects of life. It was likely that Pilie was trying to harass Mismis.

“She can’t have my breasts torn off, even via a request to Their Excellency! We’ve got to throw this out!”

“No, that one’s fine.”

“Risya! It’s not fine! What’ll happen to me?! What about my breasts?!”

“Oh, there, there. Calm down.” As Mismis got worked up and turned various shades of red, Risya patted her head. “Don’t be a child, Mismis. Anyone can tell that this is just a prank. I’m sure Their Excellency will laugh at it, too.”

“You think so...?”

“That’s right. The Lord BOX is completely anonymous. And because anyone can submit one, it allows people freedom with their ideas!” Risya spread her arms. “So because of that, we’re allowed to tear off a bit of your breasts!”

“But I wouldn’t allow it!”

“The fact that Their Excellency would allow it shows how generous they are.”

Risya and Mismis quibbled with each other like the old friends they were. Everyone else continued with their work as they watched the two.

“Ms. Risya?”

“What is it, Isk?”

“Oh... Sorry. I wasn’t asking for you. It’s just that your name was written on here.”

“Oh?” Risya’s eyes glittered with curiosity. “Well, I’m the Lord’s staff officer, after all. I’m famous, so it would only be natural for a letter to Their Excellency to mention me. Isk, why don’t you try reading it out loud.”

“... ‘I have a question for our great Lord. Risya In Empire, your staff officer is known by everyone in the Imperial forces. She’s attractive, smart, and has a great bod. She’s also well-liked and trusted by her direct reports and is popular...’”

“Ha-ha. They get it.”

“...At least, that’s what she believes...”

“...Huh?”

“...She shouldn’t be so stuck-up. She’s just a little smart and had good enough grades in military school, but that’s no reason for her to treat her direct reports

roughly or to be so stingy. She doesn't even try to do her makeup. Can't she do something about those unsexy glasses? Everything about her offends me...”

“.....” Risya was frozen. Right before Iska's eyes, her affectionate expression gradually became something sharp and disturbing.

“...When it comes down to it, Risya just puts on airs. I'd like a chance to give her a right straight hook to break those glasses in half and bruise up her face—”

“Isk.” As Iska tried to continue, the staff officer stopped him.

“Y-yes, Ms. Risya?”

“Give me that paper.”

“O-of course!”

Risya gripped the submission tightly in her hand.

What was she planning to do with it?

In front of the tense Unit 907, Risya pulled out a see-through plastic bag from her pack.

“Risya, what's that?” Mismis timidly asked.

“It's a vacuum bag. I'm making sure no further fingerprints get on it.” Risya had answered with a straight face.

After placing the submission into the vacuum bag, Risya closed it. She stuffed it into her pack and then pulled a comm from her pocket.

And then...

“Oh, hello, is this the appraisal department? It's me. I've got a request.” Risya's voice echoed throughout the room. “I just collected an important piece of evidence from the Lord BOX. I'd like a fingerprint and handwriting analysis done on it. Based on the content, the perp is definitely affiliated with the forces in some way. Check against all the databases you've got and find a match for the fingerprints. Once you have the culprit, apprehend them immediately.”

“You can't do that?!” Iska said in a panic. He couldn't keep quiet when he was witnessing this. “Wait, Ms. Risya! You're not allowed to try figuring out who the person is. That's the whole point of the Lord BOX. You're the one who said that

event is so valuable in part because it's anonymous!"

"Anonymous...right," Risya murmured in a terribly cold tone of voice. "But Isk, in some cases, anonymity must be sacrificed for the sake of greater justice."

"This submission is in bad taste...but it's just them messing around. I mean, the one about Commander Mismis was considered okay, right?"

"Yes, that one was."

"And the one about the Lord's underwear was fine, too?"

"It was."

"Th-then this one should be..."

"Disqualified, yes."

"You only do something when it's about you?!"

"No, Isk! This one seems like it could develop into an incident!" Risya hollered, gripping the vacuum bag with the submission slip in her hand. "They're a terrible criminal who's planning on bringing down the Lord's staff officer. We need to find the culprit!"

"You think so...?"

"That's right. I'm not biased about the submissions that mention me!"

As Risya ranted, Commander Mismis thrust out another submission slip toward her.

"How about this one, Risya?"

"Hm? What about it, Mismis?"

"Um... 'Hello, Your Excellency. I adore you. Just thinking about you keeps me up at night. I'd like your (unwashed) eating utensils from a meal. A knife, fork, and spoon, please. And it would be ideal if you included a plate with some leftover sauce on it as well. Hee-hee-hee.'"

"They must be a huge fan to want Their Excellency's used utensils."

"But Risya, that laugh at the end seemed really suspicious."

"Hardly! If anything, it shows how loved Their Excellency is."

Risya didn't hesitate to let that one through.

Mismis pulled up another submission right in front of Risya.

"There was another similar request... 'Greetings, Your Excellency. I'm a huge fan of Risya, your staff officer, and I can't sleep at night just thinking of her looks. Please give me a shirt she's used and her underwear (unwashed). It would be ideal if they're very dirty and sweaty. Hee-hee-hee.'"

"Disqualified."

"Say what?!"

"That laugh at the end was really creepy. They must be some pervert."

"But what about what you just said twenty seconds ago?!"

"Come, let's hurry! We've got our work cut out for us!"

"You're being ridiculous!"

Thus, guided by Risya's (un)fair standards, they went through ten thousand submissions and successfully finished their work.

Then the special day arrived.

The Lord BOX was a huge success. The event came to a close to the disappointment of many, which should have made this a "happily ever after."

"In the end, there weren't any submissions picked about tearing off my breasts or what color the Lord's underwear was... That's too bad. Most of the submissions were quite reasonable..."

"Was there any point to us filtering them...?"

"I'm so tired," Nene said.

"I've never doing this again," Jhin chimed in.

Behind the scenes of the well-received Lord BOX, Iska and the others were lying down, groaning and corpse-like.

They'd had enough of the event.

On the other hand, a girl without any idea of Unit 907's plight in a land far, far away was fired up from a sense of rivalry.

“The Lord BOX?!”

This was in the Nebulis Sovereignty’s palace.

Alice was eagerly reading a magazine about the Empire.

“Considered a huge success... I see. They’re putting on what sounds like a fun event, even if they’re the enemy. The Sovereignty can’t lose to them!” Her eyes burned with fervor as she shouted. “Rin! Rin, are you around?!”

“...”

“Can’t you answer if you’re right next to me?”

“...Well, I simply assumed you had another terrible idea, Lady Alice.”

The brown-haired girl next to Alice let out a long sigh. She was Alice’s attendant, Rin.

“‘Another’? Why would you say that? I’ve thought of a great idea.”

“I know you plan to do something to compete with the Lord BOX... Do you plan to set up a Queen BOX?”

“I wouldn’t do something that would cause my own mother so much trouble.”

“So then?”

“I’m creating the Alice BOX!”

“It sounds like you’re just wanting to waste time, Lady Alice!”

“We’ll collect troubles and questions from people in the Sovereignty. Then I’ll address them myself. What do you think?”

“What do I think...?” Rin looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “You’re already set on doing it?”

“Of course!”

“All right. But, Lady Alice, this will take a lot of money and time if you do it all over the Sovereignty. Let’s start with the palace and its vicinity first. How about we start with a thousand submissions?”

“But the Empire collected hundreds of thousands.”

“If it works out well, then we can expand it. We won’t consult Her Majesty

about the plan, so I believe it's enough to start with this."

"All right..." Alice wasn't that stubborn, so she decided to agree with Rin's suggestion.

They started with one thousand submissions for a limited event and handed out the slips to citizens in and around the palace.

"All right, Rin! We've decided, so let's start getting ready. We'll spread the Alice BOX all over the world!"

"She's plagiarizing the Empire..."

"Did you say something?"

"No. Well, let's set up boxes tomorrow. We'll limit the submission window to three days."

"All right!" Content, Alice nodded and her eyes glittered. "Oh, I'm so excited! I wonder what kinds of problems and questions will come in!"

They set up the Alice BOXes. She waited, her heart thrumming with excitement for the next three days.

"Here's what you've been waiting for, Lady Alice."

"You have no idea!"

Rin brought in a gigantic box. A whole mountain of hundreds of slips was in it, and they all were written for Alice.

"There are 387 in total." Rin started to lay out the pile on the table. "Honestly, this was more than I expected. The submission period was only three days, so I thought we'd only receive a few... Who would have thought we'd have so many of them? No wonder the Empire had such a good turnout."

"No, Rin, this is my accomplishment!"

There were piles on the table. Unfortunately, they didn't have enough time to address all of them, so they would need to resort to a lottery.

"I'm the one who will respond to them, so you'll be in charge of choosing which ones I'll address."

"As you wish. Well, I'll begin." Rin picked one from the middle of the pile. "It's

a question for you... Oh? This was all anonymous, but it seems to be from a soldier in the astral corps."

"Read it!"

"Well then... 'To my beloved Princess Alice. I hesitate to ask this question, but I've wondered about it for a while...'"

"What could this be about?"

"...You are an ice astral mage. And you always dress in beautiful royal garb, but don't you think it's a bit thin?"

"Oh? It's a question about my clothing?"

Alice's royal garb had been custom-made to fit her. She wore a beautiful, elegant dress made as though she was going to a ball. It showed off quite a bit of skin.

"I wonder what it is about my dress that they're concerned about?"

"...This is my question. When you wear that thin dress into the battlefield and use your ice astral power, are you not cold?"

"I am..."

"You are?!" Rin's eyes went wide with surprise.

"Oh, you should know, Rin."

"I had no idea... You always seem like you don't feel any cold when you use your ice astral powers, Lady Alice. It's as though you're unconcerned."

"I'm just bearing it. I wouldn't look very good if I showed I was cold."

She didn't let anyone else know, but when Alice used her ice astral powers, she felt a slight chill. But wearing a scarf or any gloves would look bad, so she never showed she was cold on the battlefield.

"I feel a little cold from using my astral powers, but what's really cold is standing right on top of the ice. You have no idea how difficult it is to stop my legs and shoulders from shaking."

"Collecting these questions seems to be paying off. That's not something I expected to learn." Rin nodded in admiration. "Shall I give you the next

question?"

"Of course!"

"The next one uses a pen name since it's anonymous."

"Please read it."

"All right. The pen name is Youngest of Three Sisters. I would like to ask Princess Alice a question. I have two elder sisters who cause me such trouble..."

"Oh, what a coincidence. Since I have two sisters too, I'm also one of three."

Alice was the middle child. It seemed the question-asker was the youngest, however.

"So, what troubles her?"

"Well, here's the rest... 'My problem is that both of my sisters were early bloomers and are fully developed as women. And on top of that, both of them refuse to acknowledge it. They always wear risqué clothes that show peeks of their cleavage or rub it in my face, and I'm so jealous—I mean, irritated. How can I compete with them?' You don't think this question is from...?"

"Rin?"

"Oh, I was just speaking to myself. Lady Alice, what do you think of the question?"

"Right..."

She pondered it for a bit. Since she felt a rapport with this girl who had two sisters, she needed to answer seriously.

"Something is bothering me. Rin, this girl wasn't clear about what she meant about 'development.' What exactly do you think she's referring to?"

"Lady Alice." Rin suddenly looked serious. "Based on the tone of the question, it sounds like she's a girl at a delicate age. I think it's generally accepted that a sensitive and sharp young lady's concern would be her bosom!"

"Really?"

"Well, you have breasts to be proud of, Lady Alice. It may be difficult for someone who's never been troubled about her bosom to answer this

question.”

“No, Rin!” Alice declared, turning around to look at Rin, who stared at her with reproach. “There is no such thing as a question I can’t answer!”

“Where did that confidence come from?!”

“So I’ll say this. That question-asker has made a huge mistake!” She inhaled deeply. “Everyone’s different, and everyone’s bodies are great! She doesn’t need to worry about her older sisters as the youngest. To compare herself to others just hurts her own value!”

“Whoa?!” Rin was clapping before she realized it. “That’s wonderful, Lady Alice! What a very rare, good opinion from you!”

“Just look at you, Rin!” Alice pointed at her. Or more accurately, she pointed at Rin’s flat chest. “You do exercises to make your bosom larger every single night. She should learn from your optimistic example!”

“Please don’t reveal my private matters to the people!”

“...Whew.”

“And why are you acting as though you actually answered that question with a fitting response?!”

“Well, I’m simply telling the truth.” Alice thrust out her chest in pride and nodded firmly. “I face my people’s struggles head-on and reply with love. That’s it! That’s what a princess is! It seems that there was merit to establishing the Alice BOX!”

“You’ve only answered two so far... Oh, but it’s almost time.” Rin looked at the clock on the wall. It was three in the afternoon. Alice had a meeting with the ministers scheduled. “Unfortunately, this is as far as we can get. Lady Alice, we’ll continue this after the meeting.”

“But things were just getting interesting. Then Rin, just one more. After answering that one, I’ll be done.”

“All right. Last question.” Rin casually pulled another slip from the mountain. “This one is from an anonymous person. ‘To dear Lady Alice...’ Oh...this is...”

Rin stopped. She scrutinized the rest of the writing and seemed to realize

something that made her feel uncomfortable. “Let’s do a different question.”

“What are you talking about, Rin? The rule is that I have to answer if it was selected. Now, come. Read it.”

“Well, if you insist...” Rin’s mouth formed a tight line. “To dear Lady Alice, I have an issue I’d like to consult you about. I have a master whom I’ve pledged my life to serve. However, lately, that master has formed an attachment to a man. And he’s even an Imperial—the Sovereignty’s enemy. And worse, he’s a repulsive soldier.”

“Oh?!” When she heard the submission, Alice couldn’t help but let out a genuine exclamation of surprise. “That’s no good! Someone from the Sovereignty can’t let her heart be stolen by an Imperial. That’s a failing on the part of the master. The attendant who submitted this must have so much trouble on their hands!”

“...”

“Right, Rin?! Oh...” When she turned around, for whatever reason, Rin seemed strangely and obviously fed up with Alice. “Rin?”

“Yes...it’s so much trouble.”

“What?”

“There’s more to the submission. Here it is: ‘I’m worried. It seems that her attachment has grown so strong that she’s lost sight of herself. If that person were someone you knew, what would you do, Lady Alice?’”

“Why, that’s obvious!” Alice didn’t hesitate in her reply. “I would set her right immediately with a lecture. Actually, that servant ought to bring her here to me right now!”

“Oh?” Rin’s eyes glinted. “So you strongly oppose the situation then, Lady Alice?”

“Of course I do. I’m answering based on concern for the master of this servant. Having a connection to an Imperial soldier as a member of the Sovereignty is disastrous. The Empire and the Sovereignty are like water and oil!”

“...”

“Rin?”

“That’s exactly right, Lady Alice!” Rin howled. Her hands were clenched into fists as though she were waiting for Alice’s reply.

“What’s wrong, Rin? You seem a lot more excited about this than I would have expected.”

“Lady Alice! Hold your hand to your heart and think over it carefully.”

“What?”

“Think about the question and your own circumstances!”

“My circumstances?”

Her eyes went wide as she blinked. She had just answered a question about a relationship of two people from two countries that couldn’t be. But she couldn’t imagine what that had to do with her own circumstances.

“I can’t think of anything in particular.”

“Of course you can!”

“What are you talking about, Rin?” Alice cocked her head to the side.

“Ugh!” Rin said, scratching at her head. “Then allow me to answer for you. It’s that Imperial swordsman. You can’t tell me that you don’t remember Iska!”

“What are you talking about?!”

When Rin blurted out the swordsman’s name, Alice couldn’t help but turn red. The Imperial swordsman, Iska. He was someone she had met on the battlefield. They had been on such equal footing that their duel had ended in a draw. Alice most certainly had a very deep bond with the Imperial.

“Wh-what about Iska?!”

“You must know what I mean if you’re saying that. You’ve been acting strangely since meeting him!”

“...What did you say?!”

She couldn’t believe it. She couldn’t believe her own attendant would dare to

say something like that.

“Me? Attached to Iska...? Rin, a-are you really accusing me of falling in love with Iska?!”

“I never said that...”

“Or that I would marry him?”

“Now this fantasy is going too far!”

“So you’re trying to say we’ll end up cutting a yard-tall wedding cake while holding the knife together, are you?!”

“You’re getting too worked up, Lady Alice!”

“Uh? Huh? What am I...?” As Rin held her down, Alice finally came back to her senses.

“See? Whenever we talk about that Imperial swordsman, you change.”

“It’s because you’ve gotten the wrong idea, Rin! Ahem... Well, this is the perfect opportunity. It seems that you’re still under a false impression, so I’ll tell you this.”

She took a deep breath in front of Rin. But she didn’t show on her face that her heart was still pounding in her chest.

“Iska and I are rivals! We’re nothing more, nothing less. We do have a connection—a pure, perfectly acceptable one—as enemies. But we are not a ‘thing,’ as people call it.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anyone describing a relationship between enemies as pure and acceptable...”

“Anyway! That’s it. That must have been your question, wasn’t it, Rin?”

“I drew it by coincidence.”

“Ugh... That was supposed to be the last one, but it doesn’t count. The next one will actually be the last one. Okay?”

“As you wish.”

This would really, truly be the last one. As Alice watched, Rin pulled another

submission from the pile.

“This is the last one, Rin.”

“All right. ‘Dear Alice, I have a problem. I have three daughters, my lovely girls, Elletear, Aliceliese, and Sisbell.’ ... Wait, what?”

“Those are names I know very well...”

Those were the names of the three princesses—Alice included. It seemed the person who had written in was the sisters’ mother.

“Say, Rin, I have a bad feeling about this...” Alice felt sweat dripping down her face. There was only one person who could call her a daughter in the palace. In other words...

“Lady Alice, would you like to hear the rest?”

“Continue...”

“All right. Um. ‘I love all my daughters, and they’re lovely girls, but I’m having trouble with my middle daughter, Alice. Whenever she has a break, she abandons her work as a princess and holds grandiose events to fool around. It seems that this time she’s decided to set up Alice BOXes all around the palace...’”

“...”

“...Alice, have you finished signing those documents that were due a week ago?”

“I-I’ll do it immediately, Mother!”

She pushed the Alice BOX aside, then ran to the princesses’ study.

Secret

*Even a Flash Is Enough*

Our Last **CRUSADE** New World

Secret File

Sometimes, it comes to me.

A question I want to ask.

To someone other than myself. I just want to know the answer, and it doesn't matter who it comes from.

It could be the dead-tired suit ahead of me, the security guard standing at attention by the roadside, or even the young lady doing her makeup as she walks. Anyone would do.

Do you have a goal for ten years from now?

Do you have a dream you would risk your life to achieve?

When you were a kid, did you ever write an essay on what kind of adult you wanted to grow up to be?

With an assortment of colored pencils that made up the rainbow, did your eyes sparkle as you drew yourself as an adult?

When you talked about your dreams and future with your parents, were you excited?

I did. I was.

But I've forgotten it all since.

The Sovereignty calls itself the witch's paradise.

That was what I was raised to believe, but an astral mage with no powers like me eventually has to realize that there's no place in this country for someone who's powerless.

That was when all the childhood dreams I'd drawn of my future came crumbling down.

All the dreams of what I would do once I was an adult...

I lost them all.

And that all happened in this lousy place that calls itself a "paradise."

I didn't know...

How was I supposed to live? How was I supposed to die?

I had no idea what to do with my life.

And then, I learned...

...Elletear Lou Nebulis IX, the princess, was my exact opposite.

She was everything I wasn't.

She knew how she would live and how she would die. She knew those things better than anyone.

I was certain that I had no dreams I'd risk my life for. I'd lost all the things I'd imagined that I would become once I grew up, but she'd latched on to those things and never let go.

However, she didn't have the astral power to make those dreams a reality.

She had no one to share her ideals with, either.

She needed a knight who could support her.

And I, Joheim Leo Armadel, wanted to live and die for her.

# 1

*The Nebulis Sovereignty.*

In the place called a paradise for all witches, winter had fallen.

The temperatures were cold enough to make the outside lights freeze over and settle deep into a poor guy's teeth, even through the protection of a thick scarf. And yet this so-called paradise didn't even give its people money to run their heaters.

So what did the country suggest its civilians do?

Work, that was what. Work the job we wouldn't be guaranteed tomorrow to scrape enough together for today's bread and heating. And if we were lucky enough to have an employer in a good mood, they might give us enough for soup.

"How is this a paradise...?"

I had four coppers.

That was all I'd earned working in the cold wind that felt as though it'd tear my ears to shreds. And as it so happened, my employer wasn't in a good mood.

His precious cat had burned itself by getting too close to the hearth, so my soup money was eaten up by the vet bills.

"So I'm worth less than a cat..."

That was right.

To the rich, the poor were worth less than animals.

I knew that. Compared to a mean-looking lug, a pet that brings tranquility to their home is much more important.

But...

I'm still free to feel humiliated by it, aren't I?

I can't accept my everyday life.

The slight malaise I've felt this whole time has built up and burgeoned throughout the years.

Why is it that the rich can spend all that money on their little darling pets while I struggle through each day just to survive? While I try to sate my hunger with free water from the park during the nights, they revel in drinking as much wine as they wish.

What sets us apart?

We're both human and both astral mages.

If the Nebulis Sovereignty is celebrated as a paradise for all witches, then how can it explain the difference between us?

Yes, I know.

These are just the gripes of a penniless loser. If I'm frustrated, then it's time to work—until someone acknowledges me, and my work ethic brings me success.

"I'm supposed to crawl my way to the top, aren't I...?"

That's the color of the world. What color was the paper that I drew on with

that rainbow of colored pencils as a child? Wasn't the paper supposed to be pure white?

Well, mine was black.

No matter how bright my pencils were, I never could draw the rainbow of my dreams. And the world told me that if I didn't like that, it was time to crawl my way up...

"Yo, Joheim!" As someone called my name, I felt a hand clap onto my shoulder.

"..."

I didn't want to turn around. I didn't like smelling the stench of alcohol on his breath. And yet the offender still came around to face me, anyway.

"Ha-ha-ha! Didja finally lose your touch? I know you didn't notice me coming. This time, I'll win the bet—"

"You turned two corners with me and used a car's left turn to hide it."

"Huh!"

"Pay up, Lauzen."

I didn't have to hold out my hand. The brown-haired man sucked his teeth and tossed a copper at me.

Now I had my soup money for tonight.

"You're high-strung, you know that?!"

"No, I'm *sensitive*."

Lauzen used to be a pickpocket and had since graduated to magician. Apparently, he'd done his damage in this part of town as a pickpocket, but even after washing his hands of his former occupation, he still performed vulgar tricks on the streets. The only difference was that now he'd return the wallets he stole as part of his tricks.

"The issue's the same as it's always been. You just chose the wrong person to bet against."

Apparently, being aware of my surroundings was deeply ingrained. No matter

how dead tired I was, I always seemed to be prepared for *something*. Maybe that was why I always had a mean look in my eyes, too.

“Joheim, how about you use my copper to buy a round, eh?”

“I’m using this to get myself some vegetable soup.”

“Tsk... For how poor you are, you never seem to scrimp on yer meals.”

“Better than booze. And keep your distance. You smell like a drunk.”

He leaned against me as I walked down the streets.

It was twilight, but the sky was an ashen gray, as though the heavens were about to unleash rain or sleet on us. I turned up the collar of my old coat and kept walking.

I heard a song.

It was a woman.

It was so faint, that was all I could make out.

“...?”

When I realized that, I stopped in my tracks.

It wasn’t because the song was beautiful. An uncultured man like me couldn’t tell the difference between good singing and bad. I stopped because it was unusual.

I was on a major street.

At first, I thought it’d come from one of the speakers on the roadway, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“...”

“Hm? What’s wrong, Joheim?! Hm?!?”

Lauzen started hassling me from the side, but I had no obligation to answer him.

I had no idea what to say, anyway. It’d just occurred to me that hearing a song on the street was strange. I followed the inconstant voice, turning corners.

It led me to a plaza. There, I saw a crowd of several hundred people.

“Is this...an outdoor charity concert?”

A group had gathered around a water fountain. The singer seemed to be standing on its edge and performing. She must have been very softhearted—and pretty strange, too—to do this in the middle of winter.

I just wanted to get a look at her face. Then I’d head out.

I silently pushed my way through the packed crowd until I was right in front of the fountain. Then I looked up at the woman standing there, and all words escaped me.

“...”

She was the goddess of beauty in the flesh. Her fluttering hair was an incredibly beautiful emerald tinged with gold. Her features were perfectly sculpted, and her eyes were filled with love. She seemed to be the same age as me, just on the cusp of twenty. Her face had an adult look to it, and it was impossible to overlook her mature physique.

Her ample bosom was constrained by a plain dress. She had the beautiful looks of a goddess but the seductive body of a devil.

Who was she?

Well, anyone in the Sovereignty could probably answer that question.

The current Nebulis Queen had three daughters. This was one of the three Lou sisters—the oldest, Elletear Lou Nebulis IX.

That was her name.

“Why would someone so famous be in such a small plaza...?”

No wonder there was a crowd.

The rumors about her beauty were right. If anything, they didn’t do her justice. Seeing her in person, she was much more beautiful than on TV...

But what did that matter?

Among all the people who watched her in rapture, my cool gaze likely stood out. She was beautiful. But that only annoyed me. She had been born with a beauty that could capture men and women alike.

.....She's probably had an easy life.

.....She has the beauty of a goddess, and she was born in a position of absolute authority as a princess.

She'd won the lottery at birth. I wasn't jealous of her but resentful of what she had.

“...”

It was time to head home. But as I turned around, a feeling like an electric shock ran up my spine.

“Huh?” I spun back around.

Why hadn't I realized it before?

“Why...?”

The princess standing on the edge of the fountain, surrounded by a group of several hundred, being watched from every direction as she stood with the gray winter sky behind her, had a loving smile like a goddess's on her face.

“How is she smiling...?”

She was acting so normally that it hadn't even crossed my mind.

It was cold out. So cold the freezing temperatures found a way to sink in and make my gritted teeth chatter. The entire crowd was clothed in winter coats, scarves, and mittens. That was natural. Without those, anyone would be shivering in the cold in an instant.

But Princess Elletear wasn't.

She stood up there in only a dress.

.....Is it because more layers would restrict her voice?

.....But isn't she cold?

She had to be.

Her lips had lost their color and were turning blue.

“That must be torture...”

She continued singing for the crowd in the freezing cold wearing only one

layer.

That was what had caught my eye.

She was born with beauty, but she couldn't have been born with that beautiful smile that refused to break even in the freezing cold. I couldn't imagine what kind of willpower she had. She was anything but ordinary.

.....*If I'd been in her shoes...*

.....*would I have been able to do it?*

I was probably the only one who had thought of things that way in the first place.

But as I realized that...

“Boooring. She’s just singing. How’s that supposed to keep us hooked?”

...I heard someone mutter.

My unwanted companion behind me had whispered those coarse words into my ear.

“The little princess could try singing in a man’s voice for us or somethin’. That’d be a riot, at least.”

“Hm?”

“Ha! She’s gotta be using her astral powers right now.”

“Oh, you mean that...”

The first Lou princess’s astral power was Voice. It was common knowledge in the Sovereignty that she’d lost the lottery on her powers. She could reproduce any voice she’d heard in the past using her astral power.

It was nothing more than a party trick.

Lauzen was right. If a woman as beautiful as her suddenly started singing in a hoarse old man’s voice, it would give the crowd a shock.

“She wouldn’t do that. It would just make her a laughingstock.”

“Ha! What are you talking about, Joheim?” Lauzen sneered. “That’s what her role’s always been. She doesn’t belong in the palace. Just look! Which of the

other princesses would show up here in the streets during the winter? They're probably sippin' on their milk tea in the warmth of their own rooms in the palace."

"I see..."

I finally understood what he meant to say.

Princess Elletear would never become queen. If she had to spend her life in obscurity in the palace, then she might as well become something to laugh at if she wanted the people's attention. That was apparently his reasoning.

But why could she never become queen?

That was because the other princesses were absurdly powerful astral mages. And when it came to selecting the next queen, astral power was their top priority. As the symbol of the nation of astral mages, the queen had to have great powers herself. Even a child could understand that logic.

.....*The woman who wasn't loved by astral power.*

.....*Though she's a princess, she's like me in that way.*

Though she was technically a candidate to become the next queen, she must have felt inferior in the palace after being born with a disappointing astral power. I had to agree with Lauzen.

"You seem to know a lot about her, Lauzen."

"All part of the job. I hear a lot about the royal family. Even knew about this outdoor concert." He laughed. "Nobody'll give Princess Elletear the time of day in the palace. Seems natural. No vassal is gonna back the princess who's as good as lost her right to the throne. The Lous have got Aliceliese and the Hydra have Mizerhyby as their top contenders. No idea about the Zoa...but their vassals will choose a promising princess without a doubt."

"So she's been ostracized?"

"Yep. Look, when a pretty princess treats the people to a concert, they're gonna fall for it and cheer for her... But that's all just a joke to everybody in the palace. Because all she can do is charm the people."

In other words, though the other princesses rarely left the palace, Princess

Elletear proactively came outside. And she was having a charity concert outdoors in the streets. She was also well-known for going on campaigning tours to various other countries.

“So she’s not here in front of us for that, but because she can’t stand being by herself in the palace then...?”

“That’s what the rumors say. Well, most of the people don’t have a clue what’s going on.”

So they didn’t...

Only the princess herself would know the truth, but it was an acceptable reason for me.

To be frank, that must have been how much Princess Elletear hated the palace.

.....*She has two terrible choices.*

.....*Braving the freezing cold must be better than staying cooped up in the palace.*

I had some opinions about astral power, but I wasn’t going to sympathize with her.

Even if she hadn’t been “loved by astral power” either, in the end, I was still a pauper at the bottom of the social ladder. And it made no sense for a ruffian like me to sympathize with a princess in the first place.

If anything, the first thing I thought of was whether I could use her. Treachery.

“Lauzen, so she’s been abandoned by the vassals? You’re sure about that?”

“Otherwise, she wouldn’t be out here.”

“I see...”

So the princess had no allies.

In other words, she had a weak spot.

But could a commoner rise to become a princess’s close associate? It wouldn’t be possible normally, of course. But when it came to just this princess, there was an opening for someone like me to get to her side.

.....*Guess it's time to crawl up.*

.....*If money and social status are the standards we're judged by in this world, then so be it.*

I would lick her shoes to be by her side. I would gladly take the humiliation.

"Lauzen, for argument's sake, what would catch the princess's attention?"

"Huh?" Lauzen scratched his dull brown hair and turned. "What are you aiming at, Joheim? Did you fall in love with the princess at first sight?"

"I'm just asking how."

"The astral corps."

"That was quick..."

"Because that's the only way I know. Anyone can try out. But that's it—you can *try*."

The song had ended. As the crowd gave her a boisterous ovation, only Lauzen and I stared at the Imperial guards standing behind the princess.

That's right.

I planned to crawl up to their level.

"If you want success in this country, then joining the astral corps is the fastest way. They're the heroes fighting the Imperial forces. And the more you distinguish yourself, the faster you'll find yourself getting close to the royal family. And if they like you, then it might open doors to reaching a point like them."

"That seems a lot more achievable than I would have expected."

"Plenty of blokes dream about it. But, four days is enough to wake 'em up... That's when the work *begins*." Lauzen staggered as he turned away from me. He dragged one of his feet behind him as he parted the crowd. "See ya, Joheim. Hope to meet ya again, if you come back in one piece."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Try not to let 'em break ya in four days like they did me."

A week passed.

And I learned...

...that was his way of warning me—but only after I felt the repercussions myself.

## 2

The taste of sand.

Even the taste of iron.

“You there... Number...”

What was it?

Were they talking to me? Damn it. My head felt like it was splitting open. No, wait. Maybe it really was splitting? That was how much it hurt, at least.

“Stand up, volunteer number 0091!”

“...Huh?!”

Blood trickled down from the wound on my head. I realized it was running into my mouth and opened my eyes while I was still lying face down. That was right. I’d volunteered for astral corps training.

“Failed. Pack your bags and go home.”

What irony.

Those words from the exam instructor made me recall everything.

Right, I was going through the astral corps selection process. I’d always been confident about my physical abilities. I’d passed the fitness selection process without issue. But next came the combat selection.

“I...”

“Good thing this wasn’t a battlefield and that wasn’t an Imperial soldier. Hey, volunteer number 0084, you pass. Continue to the next part of the selection

process."

The tip of my opponent's shoe made contact with my skull—he'd kicked me.

My vision was blurry as I watched the volunteer who had hit me over the head with an iron bar bow to the instructor and walk away.

.....*Was I eliminated after one blow?*

.....*Lauzen must have been joking... How did he last four days here?*

It all sunk in.

I realized exactly what I had gotten myself into.

I'd been too prideful to think that I could figure this out without having anything to back up my abilities. And I also realized that the others with me were the cream of the crop.

.....*Damn it. This is no joke.*

.....*So the guy who just beat me in one blow hasn't even gone through training yet? He's just an ordinary citizen?*

How could these people be so good?

And what kind of monsters would they become once they officially joined the corps?

"Tsk. You, bring a stretcher."

"...N...no..."

The instructor sucking his teeth was like an alarm clock waking me up.

I held my smarting forehead and clenched my jaw as I stood up.

Hah! What a joke!

And I thought I could find a place by the princess's side. I thought I could find success by crawling my way to the top. Me...Joheim, a weak young boy with eyes apparently bigger than his stomach.

The true jester wasn't the princess but me.

And that infuriated me.

That was the moment I felt anger toward myself.

.....*There's one more thing.*

.....*Your eyes. Your cold eyes as you look down on me on the ground!*

They were disgusted by me.

As though this was a place I didn't belong, because I didn't have the elite pedigree that all the others gathered here had.

“Remember...my face...!”

This wasn't over.

I took one step, then another.

I struggled for breath, exhaled, and turned my back to the instructor who looked down on me.

“Next time I face you...I'll throw you down on the ground...”

I felt the grit between my teeth as I went to the gate.

That was how my ties with the astral corps began.

---

“Hey, Joheim, came back alive? Ha-ha! If you made it out only with bandages, they must've let you off easy.”

“...”

Someone slapped my back.

I knew that Lauzen had been secretly following me since three streets ago. I couldn't call his face pretty, even as flattery. He hovered around me, inspecting the bandage wrapped around my forehead.

*Told you so.*

I could tell what he wanted to say.

However...

I didn't care anymore.

Before, I probably would have pushed him aside and told him to get his alcohol-tainted breath away from me.

“Hm?”

Just as I expected, he seemed to think it odd that I didn’t respond.

Lauzen walked around me, feigning dramatics.

“Ha-ha! Yer a funny one. Say, Joheim, didja end up getting yer ass handed to you? That why yer so down? Told ya, didn’t I? You’d get shaken out of yer dream before you knew it.”

“.....”

“Seems like fate, doesn’t it? Little guys like us haven’t got anything going for them, so our best shot at making a name for ourselves is getting military achievements in the astral corps. But that place is full of monsters. They’re all super geniuses. They’re nothing like us.”

“You’re right.” I didn’t look at him. I just went straight ahead, walking toward the outskirts of the Central State. “I was wrong. Of course the selection process for the astral corps wouldn’t be so easy.”

“R-right... Of course. So—”

“I moved out of the place I was renting.”

“Hm?”

“I’ve woken up from my dream.” The corner of my mouth lifted into a smirk. I’d meant to give him a relaxed smile, but it must have looked ghastlier than I thought based on his surprise. “You were right, Lauzen. They’re all geniuses in the astral corps. I went to the selection process without any idea, and they enjoyed walking all over me.”

“S-sure...”

“It’d probably feel great to beat those geniuses.” I realized something. I hated the upper classes that looked down on me. I couldn’t just crawl up. While clawing my way to the stop, I needed to beat the geniuses. I needed to show I was superior. “Fine then... I’ll train until my body breaks down.”

“What?! W-wait, what are you saying?”

“Wait and see.”

I wasn't even listening to him anymore.

After that...

I don't remember much. I chose a training area at the edge of town. During the day, I worked myself to the bone training, and at night, I worked as a watchman in a place that was crawling with ferocious beasts. I built up my body and honed my five senses.

I also went to the astral corps' training grounds. I would cling to the chain-link fence and with bloodshot eyes, watch their training to learn. I needed to know what methods they used to train and become stronger.

Yes. I would become strong. I would copy them. I planned to go one step beyond them and to train myself to the brink of death.

I didn't know how long I continued with that, but one day...

When I felt that the training beyond the fence seemed slow, I trembled with joy.

I could do it now.

"Just wait..."

I let go of the fence. I'd been clinging to it for so many hours each day that the chain link had warped into the shape of my hands.

"I'll beat you all."

It was time for the selection. The second one I would have.

I was disqualified a second time.

"..."

A cloud of dust hovered in the air.

I was in the maneuvering grounds after all the applicants for the corps and the instructor had all left. I was in a daze as I touched my forehead. I felt my burn—one from an astral attack.

"I...lost...?"

I had gotten a superior score in the fitness selection. Another superior score

in the combat selection. But on the fourth day, in other words, the astral power selection, I had nothing.

“Ha...ha-ha-ha...”

Right, I had realized somewhere on the inside. I couldn’t use any astral power. I had astral power deficiency.

I hadn’t been loved by astral power—I had astral power but not the energy to produce any attacks.

That was why there wasn’t much difference between me and Princess Elletear. We were both persecuted within the Nebulis Sovereignty, where astral power was the be-all and end-all.

She had an astral power that made her a laughingstock. Meanwhile, I was less than an astral mage for not being able to use my power.

We were both considered comical.

“I...”

That was why I’d lost.

I couldn’t compete against someone with astral powers.

I’d been burned from a distance I could never reach with my fists. I’d nearly trained to death believing I didn’t have enough combat abilities, but it was as though that was useless once the difference in our abilities was shown.

They had another talent: astral power.

There was a difference between us I would never be able to make up through hard work.

“So what?!” In the deserted space, I howled to the skies. “So...what?!”

I couldn’t give up. Was I supposed to throw in the towel because they were born with talents that let them trample over me?

Never.

Thanks to the anger that motivated me, I finally realized what I truly wanted to achieve.

Did I want to reach the top? Had I trained in order to reach the upper echelons?

No.

I didn't care for those things. It had all started from my hate for this country and all the astral mages who looked down on me.

To make them all acknowledge me, I wanted to become stronger.

"What am I supposed to do?!"

I got on my hands and knees and stared at the ground below my feet.

I saw the vestiges the flames had left behind.

Then I inspected the scorch marks with my eyes wide open.

"The astral corps is a gathering of monsters. The only way to get them to acknowledge me is to defeat them with something other than astral power... That's it, I need to become so powerful that they realize they can't win against me!"

The biggest obstacle was how I could win against genius astral mages when I had no powers of my own.

.....*I'm an idiot.*

.....*All I have is tenacity.*

I couldn't think of a strategy that could work. Only one possibility flashed within my mind that I liked for its simplicity and straightforwardness.

That was to defeat them before they could use their astral power.

From that time on, I changed the way I trained.

I went from trying to surpass the astral corps' training to pursuing a path in which I was trying to defeat the corps—in other words, I was on track toward developing a method to kill astral mages.

"Right... I'm trying to develop the ultimate instant knockout..."

There's a momentary pause before an astral power can be invoked. If I could

beat them before they activated their astral powers, then I wouldn't fall behind in the selection process.

What I needed was for it to happen in a flash.

I needed a technique that would stop them in an instant, before they could use their astral powers.

"This is the Sovereignty. I can get as much information as I want about astral power. I can study about all the kinds of astral attacks there are... Then it just depends on my training...the ultimate first strike..."

Then...

I began training like a devil.

At some point, I'd even forgotten about being by Princess Elletear's side.

This was the origin of the one who would later be called the “Flash” Knight.

Joheim himself still had no idea that the ideal he searched for—the way to kill astral mages, in other words, his ultimate first strike, would inevitably converge...

...with Iska the Black Steel’s Successor’s method of battle.

The two would only find this out many years later.

### 3

The training to kill an astral mage...

It didn’t matter how many years it had taken. I found out for myself how much someone could change after being subjected to so much carnage in such a short time.

This would be my third attempt.

I had the feeling this would be the final time I’d try out for the astral corps selection process.

“...”

“Hm?! I remember your face! You’re ba—”

This was the third time I had seen the instructor. As he tried to say something to me, I knocked him down with my fist.

“Volunteer number 0009, Joheim Leo Armadel.”

The crowd stirred.

The volunteers who surrounded me, as well as the current members of the corps who watched from afar, appeared shocked that I’d taken down the instructor.

That was what I wanted.

*Look at me. Watch what I’m about to do.*

“Who’s the most powerful one here? I want to knock him out and pass the

selection.”

I took the lethal weapon I carried on my back into my hand and readied myself.

I had a large sword wrapped in a scrap of cloth. It wasn’t anything expensive. It was a rusted scrap of iron with no sharp edge, but it worked well enough for my purposes.

“Well, someone—”

In that moment, I sensed something catching fire.

*Fifty yards behind me.*

*I heard the atmosphere flare up. This was Flame astral power.*

I leaped to the side.

I wasn’t even given the time to turn around as a crimson vortex grazed my side. A fireball that could fit in my arms burst against the ground far off and scattered sparks into the air.

“You know what I want...”

I suppressed the laugh welling within me and turned around. I saw a man from the astral corps—he was the one who had thrown flames from my blind spot.

“You dodged that?!”

“You didn’t think I’d sense that? But that’s right. You’ve judged correctly.”

He could never hit me directly. He probably could feel it in his bones. That was why he resorted to attacking me mercilessly from behind. Those instincts were indispensable for a warrior.

However...

I was already beyond that way of fighting.

“Try attacking me from *all* directions,” I spat out, then leaped off the ground.

I’d trained my gait. Because I’d pushed the limits of my muscles and trained my sense of equilibrium, I could wield even a large sword without slowing down

in the slightest.

Though surrounded, I left my position.

“If you can’t hit me, then I’ll cut you down.”

“Huh?!”

As they sensed my animosity, the dozen or so volunteers all readied themselves to engage.

A fireball, a lightning bolt, and a blade made of wind.

They focused a barrage of their assortment of astral attacks on me. The lightning bolt stopped short before it could so much as touch me. I evaded the invisible wind blade by twisting my body, and the fireball I slammed down with my sword.

“Wha?!”

“Impossible!”

Everyone other than me had changed their tune. They couldn’t attack me directly, but they likely hadn’t expected me to evade the attacks.

“Keep it going. Attack more.”

None of it was a coincidence.

I could feel the path each astral attack would take in my skin, just as though lines were being painted in the air. I wasn’t using my senses of sight, hearing, or touch, and naturally, my taste and smell had nothing to do with this either.

I’d developed an infallible ability to sense astral powers.

It was because of my astral power deficiency.

I was a being that conflicted with the astral powers. To me, astral power was a foreign substance, so it seemed I was slightly more sensitive to it than others.

*.....The difference is laughably slight. I’m just slightly sensitive to astral powers, that’s all.*

*.....That’s the only thing I have going for me.*

So I’d gambled on that.

By offering everything I had to training, I'd elevated it into a sixth sense.

"Isn't this wonderful? You have the most powerful volunteer in your history."

I turned to all the volunteers and astral corps members around me, motioning for all of them to join in.

"My selection will be done in a flash."

Then it was over too soon. I knocked out the first, the second, the third and fourth...then, there was no fifth. Neither the volunteers nor the astral corps members would face me. Then a week passed.

I was given notice that I'd failed the third try.

"..."

A rejection?



I crumpled the letter in my hands as I stood in the garden of the royal palace.

*A rejection.*

*The reason for the third one was that I'd potentially hinder the command from an organizational perspective.*

In other words, I'd cause disorder among the ranks. No matter how strong of a soldier I could be, if I couldn't use astral power, I would cause chaos among the corps.

Well, it was a sound argument. I couldn't refute it. And because it was such a sound argument, I doubted I had anyone who would be on my side.

“Hah! Ha-ha...” I let out a dry laugh.

But why?

Of course.

As my conflicting emotions blended to form a mess within me, words worked their way out of my mouth.

“Right, of course...”

Until this very moment, I hadn't been able to abandon the sliver of hope at the bottom of my heart.

I thought if I was the strongest...

If I proved that I was stronger than anyone, then even a failure of an astral mage like me could be acknowledged as worth something.

But...

Now, I'd finally given up. I had no place in this nation.

I was woken up from my dream again.

Only the results mattered.

The Nebulis Sovereignty is paradise for all witches.

It's the ideal place for astral mages. But it seemed they didn't plan to create a space for those who weren't *good enough* astral mages.

“...”

“Eep?!”

The woman at the reception desk of the astral corps shrieked.

She had seen the bottomless fury in my eyes.

“Hm...”

I glanced at the group of astral corps members waiting behind her.

After clucking my tongue at them, I left the courtyard of the palace. I was going home after giving up...

Or so I wanted them to think.

As soon as they seemed relieved that I had left and let their guards down, I quickly hopped behind a hedge and hid myself in the courtyard with bated breath.

I'd just had the impulse.

I hadn't put much thought into the action, but my indignation had driven me like an instinct.

I knew I couldn't let things end here.

I waited for night to fall.

The Nebulis palace was dyed a strong shade of madder red.

It steadily darkened until the time came for the external lights to flicker on, when almost no one was to be seen in the courtyard.

The gardeners and astral corps members had left. Only the guards were making their rounds.

“...”

I crawled out of the hedges. Then I slowly strolled toward the palace with leaves still stuck to my shoulders.

I had no aim. If I had to say what I was doing, I simply wanted to test the strength of those who had looked down on me.

“Who's there?!”

Someone turned a flashlight on me.

Must've been the courtyard guards. It seemed they traveled in packs of three.

"Hey! What are you doing here?!"

One of them approached me as the other two stood by, waiting to see if they'd need to back him up. They were awfully cautious.

All I was wearing was a cheap shirt and a secondhand coat. I had no gun or even any bladed weapons, so I was as good as unarmed.

"Hold both of your hands up and turn toward us. Go slowly. Tell us what you are doing—"

"I'm here to beat you to a pulp."

"Wha?!"

As I turned around, I kicked the ground. I was faster than any gun. I was faster than any astral power. I approached my opponents before they could even blink and drove my fist into a guard's chin.

"You bastard!"

"Suspicious person detected! Exhibiting violence at the entrance to the courtyar—guh?!"

I stopped him as he was talking. This was a courtyard. I figured I could find as many pebbles lying around as I wanted and if I used the darkness, the guards had no hope of avoiding me.

And then there was one.

"Never threw rocks for fun? How about a snowball fight?"

"Huh?! What are you—"

"I guess you're above those sorts of games."

It seemed he was expecting a rock. He immediately raised his arms to protect his eyes. Not too bad. But I barely needed a moment with his guard down. I rushed up to the last one and punched him right in the gut without any tricks.

"...Guh?!"

He groaned and collapsed.

These palace security guards were supposedly the best of the best. And yet here I'd defeated three of them at once... I felt some sort of emotion bubbling up within me.

It wasn't satisfaction or a sense of accomplishment. If anything, I would describe the emotion seething within me as pure rage.

"Is this what you consider good enough...?"

These guards were true astral mages.

How could they be so weak?

The reality was thrust before me. I'd been rejected, and yet these men had been put in important positions in this country simply because they had astral power.

How could things be so unfair?

"Look at me..." I clenched my hand into a fist and howled.

I'd trained like my life depended on it. If I couldn't earn acknowledgment by becoming this strong, then how was I supposed to?! I'd won against the astral corps and defeated the palace guards.

Was that not enough?

"Do I need to push around a purebred type?"

The three royal lines were related to the Founder Nebulis. Because the royal family had come from such a strong lineage and had great astral power, they were called purebred types.

This was the courtyard of their palace. It wouldn't be odd for me to come across one.

"Will it satisfy you if I defeat one of them? Is that how I can be acknowledged?"

No one answered me.

I knew better. If I beat up a purebred type, I'd end up a criminal. Instead of being acknowledged, I'd be put on a wanted list and that would be it. I knew it

was only a path to destruction. But I still couldn't stop myself.

The intangible frustration pushed me onward. I couldn't stop it, nor did I try to as I wandered through the courtyard.

"That's..."

I saw her below one of the outside lights. A purebred type sitting on a bench in the courtyard without a guard in sight.

Princess Elletear Lou Nebulis IX.



\*

But she looked like an entirely different person.

It was like the princess had changed entirely.

Shadows fell on her eyes, her shoulders sagged, and the smile she'd worn in front of the people in the plaza as she sang had withered away. She looked weary. It was as though she was disgusted by everything around her.

I could see it all in her face.

But how did I know?

It was because I'd seen that same expression every day of my life on my face.

"It's like looking into a mirror when I see her eyes."

"Huh?!"

The princess suddenly raised her head.

Had she heard me?

That was unexpected. She'd looked distracted, but it seemed she was paying enough attention to reality to hear me murmur to myself.

"Who's there?!"

Well, fine.

I wasn't going to give her a proper answer, but I at least walked over to the edge of the light.

"..."

"Are you a burglar?"

She probably thought I was a dirty man. It seemed only fitting she would immediately make such an accusation. In fact, her composure and courage as she talked to me in what should have been a tense situation shocked and awed me.

"You're lucky it's only me here."

That was likely enough to relay what I meant. She'd know I wasn't an assassin

after her life or a thief. As I thought, I saw some of the tension leave her.

“Oh, good... Then are you one of my fans?”

“Is that what I seem like?”

“Yes.” The princess with emerald hair giggled. “Since I did see you in a plaza listening to my song in the past.”

“Huh?!”

How did she remember something from so long ago? Actually, did she remember every face in that crowd of hundreds of people? I’d only arrived toward the end of the concert. I’d just been one face replacing someone else in a packed crowd.

If she could keep track of everyone moving around in the crowd, she had to be a very talented woman. A princess blessed with everything except astral power could banter about something so impressive as though it were trivial.

“Unfortunately, I happened to be there by coincidence.”

“Oh, that’s too bad.” Princess Elletear shrugged, seeming disappointed. “Then who are you?”

“Who do I seem like?”

“...” The princess went silent. She remained sitting on the bench as she stared into my eyes. “You seem agitated.”

“Hah!”

I couldn’t hold back the laugh. She was entirely right. It seemed she was a good judge of people, too.

“Amazing.” I clapped for her. “There are two things I simply can’t stand. Until now, first place was me, but today, first and second have been reversed. What I can’t stand...is this country.”

“The country...?” Elletear blinked in surprise. “Are you sure you don’t mean the Empire?”

“I don’t care about a country across the horizon. What’s in front of me is this country.”

I could feel that seething at the bottom of my gut again. The results letter I'd crumpled into a ball—instead of throwing that away in a trash can somewhere in a plaza, I tossed it to the princess.

"Oh, I see..." She straightened out the paper. After quickly reading it, she nodded as though she understood. "So you were trying to volunteer for the astral corps. But now you're sulking because you were rejected."

"That's it."

"Don't feel too dispirited. The astral corps are the cream of the crop. If you try again—"

"This was my third time."

"...Huh?"

"I have astral power deficiency. It seems someone who can't use astral power isn't allowed to stand on the battlefield."

"Pfft!"

I likely would never forget Elletear in this moment.

She burst out laughing. The princess, known for being extraordinarily noble, let out a vulgar guffaw, and not only that, she even clutched her stomach as she did.

She was just like a regular citizen at a tavern.

"Y-you failed three whole times?! And you didn't give up despite astral power deficiency?! A-ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha...oh, sorry. I didn't think I would revel in someone's misfortune like this."

She laughed so hard that tears gathered in her eyes. She was laughing so hard, she could barely breathe.

"Oh, how adorable... I'm in the same conundrum as you. I can't believe I find it so funny."

Right at that moment...

I heard several sets of feet approaching me from behind.

"Hurry, over here!"

“We can’t assume he was acting alone! Hurry and bring reinforcements!”

They were the palace guards. They must have been friends of the three I’d had a run-in with. They changed their tune as they came upon Elletear sitting on the bench.

“Lady Elletear?! What are you doing here?!”

“I was enjoying the evening breeze.” The princess grinned. She had the same exaggerated smile that she’d given the crowd in the plaza. “What’s wrong? Why are you all in such a rush?”

“Please be careful! We found three guards unconscious in the courtyard. We believe someone assaulted them.”

“Oh my. What a violent person.” Elletear sounded surprised. I was sure that only I realized she was feigning it. “But I’m fine. I haven’t seen a single person as I’ve sat here. I’m sure they must have left the courtyard.”

“Thank you! We’re very grateful for the useful information. Now, hurry!”

The guards left.

I waited until their noisy footsteps disappeared into the night, then crawled out of the bushes. The princess squinted as she watched me. She seemed to think this was hilarious.

“Did you need to protect me?”

“It’s a thank-you for making me laugh.”

Her voice lifted as she replied.

But then the emotion disappeared from her beautiful face, making her look almost frightful.

“I hate this country, too.”

Those were likely her true feelings.

I immediately realized that she was telling the truth.

Princess Elletear had no chance of ever becoming the queen. Knowing her background, anyone could have guessed that.

"I hate astral mages... I can't help but find this country horrid for deciding everything based on astral power. It's more despicable than the Empire."

I understood. But that seemed like too clichéd of a response, so instead of saying that, I replied, "Then we think alike."

"..."

The princess went silent for a moment. She turned away from the sky she'd been looking up at to stare silently at me.

"Do you know what I was thinking about until you appeared here? I thought, 'I wish this country and the Empire could both be destroyed.'"

Those were radical words. As I thought that, I nodded.

"Let's get rid of it all."

That was...

...just meant to be an empty reply to her.

I was certain she was joking. Even in the case of the slightest possibility she actually had been thinking that, it wasn't as though someone like me agreeing would result in her seriously engaging with me about it, not with my social status.

She would most certainly laugh it off just like she had before...

"Do you mean it?" she asked.

It all happened in a flash.

But by the time I had realized it, her quivering eyes had captured me.

"Do you mean it? Do you really believe the same thing?"

Elletear's voice wavered. She was like a rain-drenched, shivering kitten. Her feeble voice told me how much courage it had taken for her to squeeze out those words.

And that in itself...

...was beautiful.

More beautiful than the goddess-like smile she had used to entrance

hundreds of people in that plaza. Her eyes, which seemed so ephemeral that she could break down crying at any moment, yet were also still so noble and clear...seemed beautiful to me.

That was because, deep in her eyes, I could see the determination I lacked.

.....*She's serious.*

.....*Princess Elletear, do you really want to destroy the Sovereignty?*

This was treason.

What if the guards came back? If they had heard her saying this, she wouldn't be a princess the next day.

.....*It's such a big secret.*

.....*But she still told me. So she chose me to confide in.*

The moment I realized that, I...

“How would you like to destroy it, Princess Elletear?”

I...

...got on one knee before her and lowered my head.

“Just tell me.”

“You’ll help make it happen?”

“You will be the one who makes it happen. I’ll be your arms and legs.”

Something in me had cleared away.

Because this princess who had been sitting on this bench at night in despair, with no one she could ask for help, was someone I wanted to save.

“I want to help you.”

“...” Elletear went quiet. She hadn’t chosen to not answer. It seemed she wanted to tell me something and was looking for the right words. “You snuck into the palace on your own at night and made your way to me. You must think it was all a coincidence, but I’ve been waiting for you.”

“You were waiting?”

“Of course.” She looked slightly embarrassed. Under the light, she seemed bashful as she spoke. “I was waiting for the knight who would liberate the princess kept locked up in this terrible castle.”

“...”

“So that’s why I’ll tell you a very important secret.”

She placed her hand on her chest. Still sitting on the bench, she looked in the air as though making an oath.

“I want to become a witch.”

“A witch?”

“I want to become the monster that destroys the Sovereignty. No matter what I need to sacrifice.”

I didn’t understand what significance that held.

But I didn’t bother asking for an explanation, either. If that was what she wanted, then...

“All right. I won’t let anyone in the world mock you for your wish.”

“Then lower your head.”

And so I did.

She touched my head with the tips of her fingers.

Princess Elletear stood from the bench and affectionately caressed my head as I knelt.

“Tell me your name.”

“Joheim Leo Armadel.”

“Then Joheim, from this moment on...”

The next morning, I entered the palace as the First Princess Elletear’s personal guard.

It had been one month since I'd become her personal guard. All Elletear ordered me to do was become strong enough to protect her from any trouble.

She didn't limit me at all. My standing as her personal guard was all for show. Instead of staying by Elletear's side, I devoted myself to training. I trained even harder than before, so I would be prepared when the time came. I honed both my body and mind.

"Let's go out, Joheim."

She suddenly summoned me.

Dressed in a disguise, Elletear took me to a neutral city. It seemed this was not a trip for official business. But it was no vacation, either.

I realized that because Elletear steadily spoke less and less as we approached our destination. I realized something was off. Where were we going, and what would we do there?

"This way, Joheim."

Elletear did not hesitate to head toward the outskirts of the neutral city once we arrived. We headed to a deserted-looking house and entered through the back door.

"I was waiting for you, Princess."

A woman in an old-looking white coat greeted us.

She knew Elletear was a princess. Based on the white coat, she must have been a doctor or a researcher.

"Oh? And who is this red-haired man?"

"Kelvina, this is my guard."

"Princess, you cannot reveal the treatment you are about to receive here to anyone in the Sovereignty. Didn't you remind me of that yourself?"

"Yes, that's right," Elletear said.

"Well, fine... I suppose we had a rare turn of luck."

Kelvina shrugged.

She glanced at me but wouldn't meet my eye. It seemed she didn't care who I was.

"Well, come in. If we talk outside, others will see us."

She led us through the back door. We should have entered a living room, but when I felt dizzy, I scowled.

"What is this?"

Every wall, and even the ceiling, was filled with monitors. I saw beakers and flasks on a desk, holding a liquid of some strange color. An exam table stood at the center of everything. I'd never seen an exam table fitted with restraints before.

"Are you a doctor?"

"No, no."

Kelvina didn't face me. As she turned her back to me, I noticed her white coat was dirtier than the one I'd been wearing in the streets.

"If a doctor is meant to fix people, then I'm no doctor."

"...?"

"Because I make people better versions of themselves. A doctor turns a minus into a zero. But I research making a zero a plus."

As she answered, she drew blood from Elletear, who had sat down on the exam table. Then she fed that blood sample into a large machine that seemed to be measuring something.

"Amazing." Kelvina's voice quivered as she looked over the numbers listed on the screen. Her eyes glittered, and her lips twisted up into a crescent. "Oh, how wonderful, Princess Elletear. You have potential."

"Hey."

I couldn't stand it anymore and grabbed her shoulder. I wanted her to cut this out. I didn't care if she wouldn't meet my eye, but what was she looking for when she drew blood from Elletear?

“Is that your research? What are you researching when it comes to Elletear?”

“It’s just a simple patch test.”

Kelvina turned around.

She smiled. When her eyes had glittered while taking Elletear’s blood and looking at the monitors, she’d easily looked like a mad scientist to me.

“The Eight Great Apostles will be jubilant, too. We have a new subject.”

Every word out of her mouth sounded worse and worse.

The Eight Great Apostles? A subject? And what was the patch test for in the first place? But I wouldn’t get any useful answers from the mad scientist.

“Elletear, what research is this?”

“It’s what will make someone a witch.”

“Is it?”

I couldn’t forget that.

The night Elletear and I had met, she’d said the same thing.

.....A *witch*?

.....*That wasn’t just a disparaging word used for astral mages?*

It probably was different.

I could tell that whatever was being done in this dilapidated house had to do with human experimentation, but I had no idea what it meant to be a witch.

“Heh-heh.” Kelvina seemed amused as her shoulders shook. She kept stealing glances at me. “Looks like you’re not very trusted. By Elletear, that is.”

“What?!”

“No, that’s not true,” Elletear protested.

The moment I clenched my hand into a fist, Elletear enveloped it in her own.

“Guh.”

“Please believe me, Joheim. I just didn’t have the courage to tell you until today. So I’ll tell you what I’m doing now.”

"You just told him, didn't you?" Kelvina said. "The princess has lofty ambitions but not the power to achieve them. To get that power, she's going to go through experiments that will make her a monster."

"That's what this experimentation is for?!"

"For better or worse, we've found that Elletear is a perfect subject. That was what the patch test was for. Want to try it, too?"

She gave me no time to argue as she picked up a syringe. In it, a light purple liquid that seemed to be a medicine of some sort undulated in the glass. She pushed that into the vein of my left arm.

Before I could count to three, I felt my heart seize as though someone were squeezing it. It hurt.

"Uh?!"

Then I was assaulted by a chill and nausea. Next, I felt like my whole body was on fire. It was pain I'd never experienced before, and it brought me to my knees.

What was it?

What had she put in my body?

"Was that poison, you shrew?"

"Poison? I guess it could be. It's the most dangerous poison on the planet."

Through my hazy vision, I saw her smile.

"The astral power in you rejected the concoction. Oh, don't worry. That reaction proves you're a normal human. In other words, you're not compatible. You can't be one of my subjects."

"What did you say?"

"Elletear, on the other hand, was able to handle a concoction seven times stronger for her test."

"Wha?!" I couldn't help but cry out.

As I was dumbfounded, Kelvina looked down at me and pulled a beaker from a desk.

The liquid was a dark purple. It looked much more concentrated than the one she had injected into me.

“As you can see, Elletear is fine, isn’t she? That’s what makes her special. She has the makings of a witch. Now all we need to do is slowly increase the dose.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have the time.”

“Hm...?”

Kelvina didn’t even have the chance to turn around as Elletear stood from the exam table. She headed to a desk of five beakers, picked up the darkest one, and removed the lid on it.

Elletear drank the liquid in one gulp, like it was wine.

It all went down her throat, leaving not a drop behind.

“What?! Elletear?!” I shouted before I knew it.

Just a few milliliters of the liquid had been enough to make my body reject it. Elletear had drunk an incomparable amount, and it was at a higher concentration.

She would die. I really believed that.

However...

“Don’t worry, Joheim. Look.”

She wiped away a drop of liquid on her lip. Then, she even licked that up with her tongue. She gave me a composed smile. *See, I’m fine*, it seemed she was saying.

“Impossible...” Kelvina staggered. In awe and wonder, her smile twitched up. “You could withstand that? You drank that solution...ha-ha... You really might become a monster.”

A drop of sweat fell from her forehead.

I understood that Elletear had done something unthinkable. Kelvina was likely more in awe than I was.

“Well then, Princess, I invite you on a short trip. We’ll leave in two weeks. Please prepare to be gone for a while.”

A trip? Where was she taking Elletear?

Before I could ask, Kelvina shrugged.

“My lab is in the Empire, after all.”

“The Empire?!”

I doubted my own ears, but it also made sense.

This rundown house in a neutral city was a camouflaged lab. I’d known that it was seedy, which made sense if it was involved with the Empire.

.....*The Sovereignty’s enemy.*

.....*And they’re my enemy too, of course.*

But it would be worse for Elletear. Was she in her right mind to go to the Empire?

The Empire would be eager to have a princess from the Nebulis Sovereignty. If she was discovered, she would be captured immediately and put through humiliation worse than death.

“...Elletear.” I stared at the princess, who stood still with her hand on her chest. “Are you really going to the Empire? They’re the worst country in the world for you to be involved with.”

“That’s right, Joheim. And that’s the only place I can obtain the power I want.”

I only learned later that Elletear had already traveled to the Empire several times in order to research the effects of the drug on her body.

“...Okay, I get it. Then I’ll go, too.”

“Oh, wait, wait.” Kelvina let out a dramatic sigh. “Are you trying to play knight in shining armor for the princess? I’m only taking Elletear with me.”

“What?!”

“Just think about it. Do you know how hard it is to bring a Nebulis princess into the Empire?”

“...Guh!”

“There are astral energy sensors in every corner of the airport and guards

patrolling the entire country. Smuggling one person in is hard enough. And you're not even a test subject. You're just an ordinary human. I'm not a nice enough person to do all the work of arranging your passage just because."

I had nothing to say to that. If having to arrange my travel somehow made them discover Elletear, there would be no point in me going. I didn't want that to happen, either.

"So I've even been rejected here..."

"Oh, don't be so down. I'll make sure the princess makes it to the Empire. She's a very important subject, after all. I wouldn't hand her over to the Imperial forces."

"Then we're in agreement. But I have a requirement to add."

"Hm?"

"You won't be Elletear's guard, I will."

I turned my back to them and reached out my hand. I was headed for the five beakers on the desk. Elletear had consumed the most concentrated one, so I picked the second-darkest beaker. I wrenched open the top.

"Hey, what are you—?!"

"Joheim?!"

Kelvina and Elletear both opened their eyes wide. Before they could stop me, I poured the liquid on my thigh, where my astral crest was.

.....*Sizzle*.

Smoke floated up into the air. Next, pain I'd never felt the likes of before assaulted me, and I almost lost consciousness.

"—?!"

I felt as though my right leg had been pulverized right down to the bone. Even if I had been stabbed by a thousand swords or tens of thousands of bullets, the pain I was feeling probably couldn't compare to this.

"Guh.....urgh.....!"

"What did you do, Joheim?!"

Elletear reached out to support me, but Kelvina grabbed her hand.

“Wait, Princess... Let’s see...”

She’d likely realized that there was white smoke coming from my astral crest. As my body was wracked with intense, fiery pain, my astral crest steadily disappeared.

Good.

Now I could go with Elletear.

“Kelvina or whatever your name is...you said before...”

I felt like I was about to lose consciousness from the pain.

I gritted my teeth, clenched my hands into fists, and focused all I had on speaking.

“This drug is poison to astral power...so I figured my astral crest would disappear if I doused it with the liquid...”

“A gold star for you.”

*Clap clap.* Kelvina was applauding me.

“A procedure to remove an astral crest. The concentration wasn’t enough to remove all the astral energy in you, but it is enough to get rid of your astral crest.”

“So I won’t get caught up in the Empire’s astral energy sensors now, right?”

“If you’re lucky.” Kelvina’s reply was blunt. “I see. So you’re going to leave me to transport the princess while you find your own way into the Empire?”

That was exactly it.

If Elletear flew, I could go by land. I just needed a car to travel by highway to a checkpoint, where I would cross the border.

*.....I had astral power deficiency from the start.*

*.....Now that I’ve burned off my astral crest, I don’t think I’ll be caught by the astral energy sensors.*

I didn’t have any attachment to the Sovereignty, anyway.

“Elletear.” I gritted my teeth. I was out of breath, but there was something I needed to ask her. “I’ll repeat this again. If you’re going to the Empire, then I will be too, unless I’m just in your way?”

“...” Elletear was silent for a while.

Her mismatched green and yellow eyes looked me over.

“You’re a fool.” She suddenly smiled. “If you were in the way, I never would have brought you here.”

“...I see.”

Good.

That was all I needed to know. That was enough for me to jump into certain death. Even if that meant heading into enemy territory like the Empire.

“I have good news, bright and shining knight.” Kelvina was staring at a monitor as she typed something in at lightning speed. “The Eight Great Apostles have shown an interest in you.”

“The Eight Great Apostles?”

“They’re sponsoring my research. They want to use you as a spy both within the Empire and the Sovereignty.”

Kelvina handed me a scrap of paper. They were detailed instructions for how I would enter the Empire. It detailed the gate number of the checkpoint I would enter and the route I would take afterward. Right down to the minute and hour.

“Burn it after you memorize it.”

Kelvina joined Elletear’s side. When she put a hand on Elletear’s shoulder as though they were friends, I silently bit my bottom lip.

“I’ll be waiting in the Empire. With your precious princess,” she said.

I arrived in the center of the Empire, the Imperial capital of Yunmelngen.

Everything had gone according to Kelvina's notes. All that I experienced there was novel to me, including the place I visited over three miles underground.

There, I met them. The supreme authority of the Empire that had the country under its thumb.

"You did well coming here. Joheim Leo Armadel."

We were in a dark assembly room.

I looked up to see eerily glowing monitors covering an entire wall.

"Welcome."

**"What do you think of enacting a drama in which a man abandons his astral crest and country to join the Imperial forces as a Saint Disciple? We could even work killing the Lord into it."**

"..."

In the past month, Elletear had told me everything. Including that, in the core of the planet, there slumbered a calamity that transcended the astral powers. It seemed Elletear and the Eight Great Apostles had conspired to use that power.

.....*The Eight Great Apostles supposedly died a hundred years ago.*

.....*And they want to use the calamitous power to out-plot the Lord and Founder.*

It didn't matter to me.

My duty was to be loyal. I needed the Eight Great Apostles' absolute power to enter the Empire.

Now I would keep silent and act like a dog.

**"Then it's decided."**

I heard a content voice from the monitors. I would allow them to put me through the humiliation and abuse of using me as their hands and legs. In another place, Elletear was fighting agony way beyond my shame.

**"We'll recommend you to Imperial headquarters."**

**“Joheim Leo Armadel, we will recommend you to become a Saint Disciple. You will be a gem in the rough we discovered outside the Empire.”**

And that was how I became a Saint Disciple after the Eight Great Apostles recommended me from outside of the Imperial forces.

There were those who were jealous of me, of course. I received looks from the Imperial forces and even the other Saint Disciples. But luckily, I came when Lord Yunmelngen was asleep. Without a word from the Lord, no one could object to the Eight Great Apostles' recommendation.

**“Congratulations, Saint Disciple Joheim.”**

**“Now you have the right to go anywhere you wish within the Empire.”**

I had an Imperial forces ID.

It was something I'd always wanted. Now I wouldn't be suspected, no matter where I went within the Empire. I used that privilege to pay a visit to Kelvina's lab.

## 6

We'd been separated for over a month.

I was going to see Elletear again after so long. I felt elated and slightly nervous. Even I knew that wasn't like me.

“This is Kelvina's lab...?”

It was an old house. After years of being exposed to the elements, the exterior paint had started to peel. It was an eerie relic. I wouldn't be surprised if it was rumored to be haunted.

I unlocked the door I'd been told to enter ahead of time and headed into the building.

“Is it in the basement?”

Was Elletear locked up in this gloomy place? First, I'd complain to Kelvina. As I decided that, I descended the stairs.

“Who are you?!”

There, I found a monster.

It had the silhouette of a human girl.

However, it was clear like a jellyfish so I could see the door behind it, and its hair seemed almost like a gemstone or molten metal. A human’s muscles and skin couldn’t be see-through like a ghost’s, of course.

.....*What is this monster?!*

.....*Where is Elletear?! And Kelvina?!*

“Hm? Where did you come in from?”

The beast turned around.

When it looked at me, it gave me a belligerent and provocative smile.

“Well, not like I care. You can burn violet.”

“An abomination...”

I pushed off a nearby table and just barely retreated to the basement’s wall. I let out a gasp. *Calm down.* What had surprised me was that this thing had leaped on me when I’d expected to see Elletear.

If we were going to fight...

“I have no reason to hesitate. I’ll settle this in a flash.”

“Hah! Now you’re talking!”

The monster flung out its arms.

“Wait, Vichyssoise.”

A voice resounded from behind the monster.

Kelvina yawned as she approached. Her white lab coat, which looked as threadbare as it had a month ago, covered her shoulders. She’d come from a back room.

“He’s one of our allies, that man.”

“What? This guy? But he’s wearing an Imperial forces uniform.”

“He’s Elletear’s dog.”

“What?! Then he’s from the Sovereignty? I don’t feel any astral energy coming from him.”

“He has no astral crest.” Kelvina pointed at my leg. “He burned off his astral crest with the solution.”

“What?! Ah-ha-ha-ha! You really did that?! You’re a hoot! Were you that desperate to sneak into the Empire?!”

The monster laughed. It was a discordant shriek I couldn’t even call pleasant as a form of flattery. I silently knit my brows.

“Kelvina, what is this monster?” I asked.

“She’s a witch, just like what Elletear wants to become.”

“...What?”

For a moment, my brain froze. I thought of the goddess of beauty that was Elletear and this horrible witch. I simply couldn’t connect them together in my mind.

“*I’m* the monster?” I heard the low rumble of Vichyssoise’s laugh. “Why don’t you call your master that? She’s right in the back, where Kelvina came from. Just take a look.”

“Elletear!”

I dashed off. Was it because I’d wanted to see her this entire month we’d been apart?

Or...

...were my feet compelled to take me to her, because I couldn’t believe the mad scientist and the witch?

I entered a small room at the end of a hall. When I saw the old exam table, I stopped without thinking about it.

Elletear writhed on it in the nude like a beast.

She scratched at her throat.

Her lustrous hair was in disarray, her eyes were wide-open, and she let out strangled screams.

“Elletear?!”

“...”

She stopped screaming right then. The room went quiet. As she lay on the exam table, she weakly turned to me.

“Jo...heim...?”

“Elletear! It’s me! Are you all right?!”

I ran to her. She didn’t even try to hide her body, slick with sweat. She probably didn’t have the strength to. I covered her with my jacket.

“Kelvina! What did you do to Elletear?!”

“I’m pretty sure I already told you. She’s going through the procedure to turn into a witch.”

I heard footsteps. Kelvina was joining us in the room.

“Her body has already started to transform into something that isn’t human. If I was to liken it to anything, it probably feels as though her entire body has been infested with parasitic insects that are eating her alive.”

“Will she end up like the witch from earlier?”

Was she going to turn into a monster? Though I had to squeeze out that question between clenched teeth, Kelvina scoffed at me.

“She’ll become something even more atrocious.”

“...What...?”

“We’ve given Vichyssoise the calamity’s power diluted to 0.0002 percent, which resulted in that. Elletear has a concentration five hundred times that.”

“Five hundred?!”

“That amount wouldn’t kill a normal person—it would obliterate them entirely. It’s amazing that she can withstand it. So no wonder she’s in this state.”

“You!”

My entire body moved on impulse.

I kicked aside the chair in front of me and grabbed Kelvina, who was just past it, by the throat.

However...

Even as she turned blue from asphyxiation, Kelvina’s expression looked serious.

“We can’t have a misunderstanding now. Elletear was the one who wanted me to administer it.”

“Guh...”

As my hands trembled from anger, I let go and reluctantly released Kelvina. She wanted to destroy the Sovereignty. That was why Elletear wanted to become a witch. I knew that for certain.

“Joheim...,” she rasped.

I turned around to see Elletear lying face up and trying to reach out to me. Whether from cold or pain, her hand spasmed weakly.

I took her hand.

Her eyes asked me to do it, and I’d awkwardly obliged.

This was a first. She had never offered her hand to me before. And I’d never taken it into mine before, either.

“.....”

“Ngh!”

Elletear silently looked up at me. I realized what she meant with that motion.

It wasn’t enough.

*Hug me.*

*It hurts too much.*

Her eyes were wet with tears. Her face was flushed from fever.

Even without words, it was clear to me what she wanted. It was only natural. If I couldn't figure out something as small as this, then I had no business being her guard.

But still...

“...”

I hesitated.

Elletear was barely covered by my jacket where she was lying down.

We were so close together, almost skin-to-skin, that for the first time since meeting Elletear, I realized the different positions we were in.

.....*The person in front of me is the first princess.*

.....*In comparison, before Elletear picked me up, I was nothing but a bum.*

Was I allowed to do this?

Could I allow myself to hold this noble princess in my arms?

I hesitated for a moment.

The princess leaped from the exam table with such force she flung aside my jacket.

“Huh?”

When I came to my senses...

I realized Elletear had leaped into my arms fully nude.

“Were you lying back then?” she asked me.

“Huh?! .....It wasn’t a lie! I was just...!”

I...

“I want to be here for you...”

I enveloped her delicate shoulders in my arms and hugged her.

I held her close, and she held me. I held Elletear with all my strength as she—still writhing in pain—clawed at my back.

“Joheim... I’m sorry...”

"I don't remember anything you need to be sorry for." As her voice seemed close to fading, I simply answered with exactly what was in my heart.

"I only feel grateful to you," I said.

"..."

"Thank you for choosing me."

That evening, I held Elletear as she groaned.

Skipping to the end, Elletear hadn't changed at all since that night.

She never turned into a witch with a monstrous appearance. I was relieved by that. I felt complicated emotions about it.

"It takes time to nurture something great."

It was as though she had seen straight into my thoughts.

Kelvina had a serious look on her face as she looked up at a monitor on the ceiling.

"If you felt repulsed by Vichyssoise, then you should be prepared. That was nothing. Elletear will look even more ghastly and hideous. Right now, she's in a transformation period. It's like a larva in a cocoon, but you can't assume that a beautiful butterfly will emerge."

"..."

Each of her words rubbed me the wrong way.

However...

This was Kelvina's way of being nice. My master would become a monster. She didn't want me to go in unprepared.

"I don't plan on being swayed off course."

"All right then."

She kept looking up at the ceiling.

"Joheim, do you know what a catalyst is? It's a scientific term."

"I never got an education. I was never interested."

“Well, listen to this lesson. Say you have a chemical reaction in which combining substances A and B results in substance C. So, a catalyst serves the role of accelerating the chemical reaction, resulting in A and B turning into chemical C.”

“I said I wasn’t interest—”

“You’re the catalyst.”

“What?”

“It was my mistake. I mean, at first, I had no interest in you at all.”

I heard her shoe clunk against the ground. Kelvina turned around.

“Substance A, Elletear, combined with substance B, the calamity’s power, results in substance C, a witch. You don’t belong in this equation, but you have a role. You keep Elletear stable as she transforms into a witch.”

“...”

“The catalyst is emotion. It’s a source of emotional comfort. Because you are here, Elletear is suffering much less.”

“...”

“You should be by her side later, too. It’ll be good for my research.”

I couldn’t reply. I turned my back on her as she stared at me.

“I don’t care about your research. I’m staying by Elletear’s side, for our sakes.”

Then I started to walk. I went to her room at the back of this gloomy underground lab.

*Tap.*

As soon as I knocked on the door, I heard a response.

“Come in.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Terrible, but not as bad as the other times I’ve felt terrible.”

Elletear wore a plain shirt. She sat on her bed and bent forward, holding her head. She was also holding a hand mirror.

“What?”

“I was ready...” I heard a crack. The mirror had slipped out of her hands and shattered. “...But I’m afraid now that the time has come.” She would become a monster. The time when she would abandon her incomparable looks and status to be reborn into a monster was approaching. “No, Joheim.” Elletear raised her head. “What I’m afraid of isn’t turning into a monster. What frightens me is that *you’ll* be frightened as you see me in the process of my transformation. I can’t help but imagine it...”

She smiled but was crying.

Her gorgeous lashes were wet, and her eyes were red and puffy.

“...I’m sorry.” She staggered up. She leaned against a wall in a dark corner of the dark room as she breathed out. “I could bear anyone in the palace betraying me or gossiping about me behind my back... But it’s odd... If you see me when during my transformation into something hideous and scream...for the first time in my life, I feel I would regret my decisio—!”

I stopped her mid-word. I grabbed her and pulled her toward me, enveloping her with my own body.

“Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid of me.”

“...”

“Rely on me. Use me. Take pride in me. Believe in me. I’ll prove to you that you weren’t wrong to choose me... I’ll always stay by your side...”

“Thank you...” Elletear’s voice returned to her.

She hugged me back as I hugged her.

“You’ve become a fine knight—my knight.”

So I was a knight now.

Come to think of it, that was what she had said when we’d met.

“Have I really become your knight now?”

“Yes. You’re the ‘Flash’ Knight Joheim. My one and only knight...”

From that point on, Elletear stopped eating.

She no longer needed to drink water or sleep, and she steadily, moment by moment, left the bounds of what it meant to be human.

Meanwhile...

The day finally came when I had my audience with Lord Yunmelngen.

**“So you’re Joheim, then?”**

I was in the Lord’s office, the deepest part of the Imperial capital.

I was greeted by a silver beast.

They seemed to have a face that looked like something between a cat’s and a human girl’s. I also saw peeks of foxlike limbs from their clothes. I could hardly call them human, given their fur-covered tail.

.....*So this is the Lord.*

.....*The result of astral power and a human merging together during a vortex a hundred years ago.*

Had this been the first time I was seeing them, I would have undoubtedly cried out. But I’d already had an unfortunate encounter with Vichysoise, the monster, and had built up my tolerance.

**“Hmm?”**

The Lord looked down on me silently as I knelt.

Lord Yunmelngen’s eyes opened to near-perfect circles.

**“I wonder what this is... It’s very faint, but I feel astral energy on you.”**

**“Huh?!”**

Impossible. Anxiety, a feeling I’d forgotten, made sweat drip down my back.

Had I been seen through? Had it sniffed me out?

I’d burned off my astral crest.

None of the Empire’s sensors had been able to detect me.

.....*Of course the Lord would know.*

.....*The Lord is a monster in a different way from Vichysoise, just as I can see.*

So what would I do?

The Eight Great Apostles had ordered me to kill the Lord immediately if my identity was uncovered, but would I be able to manage it against this opponent?

**“You seem dangerous.”**

“...”

I chose to remain silent.

I was a thug when it came down to it, after all. I didn’t have the wit to think of something clever to say to fix this.

The Lord watched me for a while.

**“Hwah... So, about that first seat you’ve been wanting...”**

The silver beast let out a long yawn.

**“You’re right that it’s been empty for a long time. I’ve sent Crow out, but who knows when he’ll be back. So, I’ll grant your request.”**

“Huh?! You’ll grant it...?”

The first seat of the Saint Disciples.

I didn’t know why it had been unoccupied for so long. But after making a direct request for it, certain that I would be turned down, I’d been granted it.

I had been prepared to be rejected.

**“Now you’ll be the closest at my side.”**

The recumbent Lord rose up.

They crossed their legs and sat, watching me from a step above.

**“Remember this. When you look up at me, I’m also keeping a close eye on you. Don’t be too inconsistent with your actions.”**

The Lord had seen through me and knew the Eight Great Apostles were backing me. If I was reporting back to the Eight Great Apostles about the Lord, the Lord also expected to see what the Eight Great Apostles were attempting to do through me.

But that was exactly what I wanted.

“Understood...”

The Lord and the Eight Great Apostles would keep each other in check.

But I was on neither side. Because I had only one master in the world—Elletear.

After that, we only had a short time left together.

## 7

Elletear had become less and less human.

Each day, her condition grew worse. She always felt “horrid,” but rarely, she had “tolerable” horrid days.

She had a good day when she could just barely manage to stand.

And there was a day when the skies were clear.

Both these miraculous events happened to coincide one morning.

Somehow, my instincts told me this would be the last day. So...

I took Elletear to a hill in the countryside.

The smell of the grass wafted to us as it rustled.

The morning light that showered over us was blinding but also warm.

This was the Empire.

I was grateful that the enemy territory I ought to have hated had a hill that was so blessed with nature.

That was because...

“This feels nostalgic...”

Elletear smiled.

She’d been stuck so long in the stagnant, suffocating air of the underground

laboratory that she'd slowly lost the ability to show her emotions. But now, in front of me, she smiled.

"I haven't seen the sky in a while, or the sun, or a field of flowers. I don't remember the wind being so nice, either..."

Then she started to run.

"Ngh. Elletear, don't run—"

"I'm fine! Look!"

Her glamorous long hair was in disarray.

Her white dress fluttered in the summer breeze.

She waved her parasol around.

I heard her laughter ring out into the blue sky.

Who else had seen her like this—as excited as a child?

She wasn't Princess Elletear Lou Nebulis IX.

She was my beloved master.

.....Yes.

.....I'm...I'm sure...

I'd wanted to share this final moment with her to see this. That was why I'd brought her here.

"Ah-ha...ha-ha...ahh... I'm so tired from running."

She slowly turned around.

She was out of breath. Her face was red, as though she were slightly bashful.

That moment that passed in a flash was something I would likely never forget.



It was her entire true self, which she showed no one but me. What else could I have wanted?

This day and this moment could have won against a love that lasted for years or decades. Yes.

As long as we had this moment, this flash in time, that was enough for our love story.

Then...

The love that lasted for a moment melted in the rays of the sun, and I returned to being a knight serving my master.

And now...

On the outskirts of the Imperial capital, I heard a beguiling witch's laugh ring out.

In front of me, a vortex of black mist large enough to fill the entire room swirled around and around.

Who would have believed that this black mist was Elletear?

Kelvina had been right. Elletear was more compatible with the calamity's power than anyone and so, as a witch, she was no longer a living creature.

“\_\_\_\_\_”

The black mist whirled around again, coalescing into the shape of a human. Though she had a voluptuous silhouette, she only seemed reminiscent of the former Elletear.

**“Why, I look horrific...”**

She was the witch Elletear. The first thing out of her mouth after being reborn was disparagement toward herself. She looked into the floor-length mirror in front of her.

**“I was afraid every night about what I would become. I wondered whether I would have three eyes, four arms, a horn on my head, or a tail...”**

She had been wrong on all counts.

The correct answer was that she had gained nothing.

Not any horns, a tail, any extra arms or eyes. Elletear had lost all organs needed for an animal, as though to show she didn't need them.

**“I look truly, truly horrific...much worse than I even imagined.”**

“You haven’t changed.”

I hugged her from behind. She was just black mist without a real body. When my hands made contact with her, it felt like I was touching a mass of water.

I didn’t feel warmth. She was so cold, I felt as though I was holding ice.

But still...

“You haven’t changed. Because I’m here with you.”

“.....”

The silence didn’t last long enough for me to take a full breath.

**“No, there has been a change.”**

“Elletear—”

**“No, Joheim, I mean that you’ve changed.”**

She laughed. Even though she had turned into a monster, Elletear’s laugh still sounded the same.

**“You don’t hesitate to hug me now.”**

“Uh.”

When she was more playful than I expected, I didn’t know how to respond.

**“But that’s enough of that.”**

Elletear slipped away.

I was left holding thin air as she stood before me.

She was a step away from me.

We were close enough that I could have touched her if I’d held out my arm.

“Did you not like that?”

**“Oh, you silly thing.”** She sounded exasperated. **“Because if you hold me like that...I feel like I’ll forget everything and want to stay in your arms forever.”**

More than her desire to destroy the Sovereignty or the Empire, she couldn’t help but want to stay in the embrace of her beloved knight.

**“So that’s the last time. But we still have a new beginning, don’t we?”**

Elletear offered her hand. I silently knelt in front of her hand and bowed my head.

**“Let’s go, my knight.”**

“I will fight alongside you so long as I’m alive, my master.”

Until the final moment.

Until the moment the battle ended in a flash, I would remain a knight just for her.

## Afterword

Thank you for picking up the third volume of *Our Last Crusade or the Rise of a New World (Last Crusade)*'s short stories!

This is a special volume that assembles handpicked *Last Crusade* short stories serialized in the bimonthly *Dragon Magazine* from Fantasia Bunko.

The main story is hitting its climax, but these short stories are a step away from that and delve into Iska's everyday life and Alice's ordinary days at the palace.

### ◊ File 01 “Or the Personal Belongings Searched in the Name of Justice”

This one might have had the most characters making an appearance out of all the stories.

Nene and Sisbell have the same magazine, Nameless and Mei have a guest appearance, and everyone has interesting items in their possession. Also, Lord Mask didn't appear in the *Dragon Magazines*, but I've fixed that with this short story.

I love making those sorts of small adjustments.

### ◊ File 02 “Or the Princess Who Masters the Military Arts?” (November 2021)

In this one, Alice learns martial arts.

When Alice and Sisbell cross paths, Sisbell generally goes on a rampage and causes trouble for Alice, but in this story, it's the other way around for once.

Also, one bit of backstory—Master Daikungfu is nostalgic about a girl who spread her wings and left the dojo. That happens to be Mismis.

### ◊ File 03 “Or the Anonymous Consultation Box” (July 2021)

Lord Yunmelngen is bored and does something ridiculous.

This story shows why Risya is exhausted being the lord's staff adviser. And

perhaps, Crow left the Empire because of that, too...

◇ Secret “Even a Flash Is Enough” (New Story) After letting it incubate for so long, this can finally be announced.

This explains where the “Flash” in Joheim’s title comes from, and the story of a witch and her knight that Elletear mentions to Alice. This is how it all began...

This is the only explanation for their relationship and his title that I thought would be right.

And this is also the first time *Last Crusade* has had a first-person story. That was how enthusiastic I was about writing this Secret File.

...Now then. I’ll end things about this book here and get into announcements next.

▼ Season Two of *Last Crusade*, the TV anime, will be airing in 2023!

Thank you for waiting all this time!

I’ve only been able to say that the anime would be continuing up until now, but we finally have a formal announcement. I hope that you’ll enjoy it in 2023!

Also, please check out the official *Last Crusade* account! ([https://twitter.com/kimisen\\_project](https://twitter.com/kimisen_project)) ▼ *Gods’ Games We Play*, Vol. 5 is set to release August 25!

This is a new series that has an anime planned. The fifth volume is the newest release.

It so happens that August 25 is one week after this short story collection releases, so I hope you’ll support it along with *Last Crusade*!

And finally, I’d like to offer special thanks to certain people.

To Ao Nekonabe, who drew another first-rate cover, thank you very much!

Alice in her yukata in the September issue of *Dragon Magazine* was super cute!

And thank you to O, my editor. I can’t thank you enough for all your help with the novels and anime. I hope that you’ll keep helping me as *Last Crusade* makes its foray into the even wider world!

Well then...

On August 25, *Gods' Games We Play*, Vol. 5.

And this winter, *Last Crusade*, Vol. 14 will be out. The main story has finally reached its climax!

I'm going to work on both series in full force, so I hope you have high expectations!

On a mid-summer day, *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. The fourteenth act of the supreme witch and the most powerful swordsman's dance.

*O sun, show me  
the most glorious  
future!*

# Our Last CRUSADE OR THE RISE OF A New World

VOLUME 14

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