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Using Rekka's name
was surprisingly
effective on both Iris
and Rosalind.

"Yeah,
let's get
moving!"

"What
are we
standing
around for,
Nibiki?!
Let's go!!"



FORMER HERO
ZAIA GARDENDOS CORONA

GREATER WIND SPIRIT
LYUN SYLPHEED

"Pastel..."

"Every-
thing will
be fine.
Just don't
let go of
your big
sister!"

"Where
do I go
now?"

POP STAR
MIO KOTOZUKA

"Thanks
for coming
to see my
concert
today,
everybody!"

PSYCHIC
ELLICIA OTTO



Lea used her water magic to shoot them down one after another.

"Grrr!!"

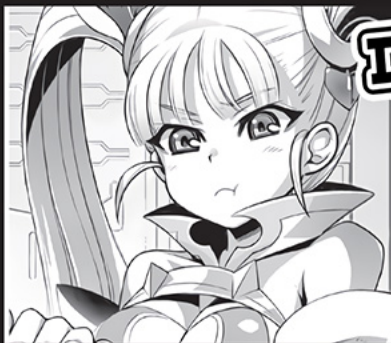


REKKA NAMIDARE

A high school freshman.
Thanks to the Namidare blood-
line, he keeps getting involved
with girls that are in trouble.

SATSUKI OTOMO

A high school freshman.
She is the girl-next-door
childhood friend, and heir
to the Omniscient Magic.



IRIS FINERITAS GYPHERCALL

A high school freshman.
A space princess who's
presently studying to
be a bride on Earth.

HARISSA HOPE

A sorcerer from another
world. She can't go back
home anymore, so she's
now living at Rekkia's
house.



R

A demi-material being sent from the future in order to get Rekka together with a girl.



TETRA METRA RETRA

Daughter of the mole people.

After moving her people to the artificial world, she started a part-time job at Nozomiya.

A high school freshman. She works at her family's restaurant, Nozomiya, and practices her cooking every day.



TSUMIKI NOZOMUNO

A second-year high schooler. A relative of Rekka's who carries the Banjo bloodline.



HIBIKI BANJO



LEA

Leviathan, the Strongest Beast. After losing most of her power, she's now living in human society.



ROSALIND C. BATHORY

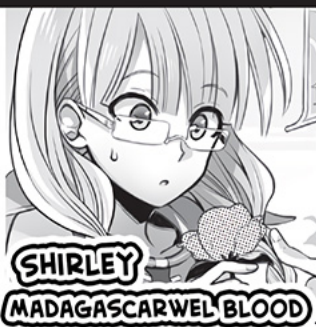
A high school freshman. Also a centuries-old vampire. She has strong opinions about maids.

A wandering treasure hunter. After curing her little brother's illness, she went home to see her family.



CHELSEA MARGARET

A research scientist. Sent to Earth with Fam and Rain to keep an eye on them.



SHIRLEY
MADAGASCARWEL BLOOD

A former homunculus. Now a normal girl working as a maid for Rosalind.



SUZURAN



RAIN WATERCHILD

A second-year middle schooler. Princess of the merfolk who's come to Earth to broaden her horizons.

A first-year middle schooler. Also a gremlin and a former space pirate. She's come to Earth to learn about education systems.



FAM

A psychic. She betrayed the organization she's been with for a long time and fled to Japan.



ELICIA OTTO



MIO KOTOZUKA

A high school freshman, and a famous pop idol. Lately she's been worried about her music.



LYUN SYLPHEED

A greater wind spirit. She and her little sister are fleeing from a sudden outbreak of disease in her village.

A girl who was once called a hero. Currently sealed at the bottom of a massive dungeon.



ZAIA GARDENDOS
CORONA

Prologue 0-1: Mio Kotozuka

“Thanks for coming to see my concert today, everybody!”

The voice of the girl on stage echoed through the concert hall as the crowd began to roar her name. “MIO! MIO!” they cried. MIO was Japan’s top loli idol, and her popularity was undeniable. The 10,000-seat venue was filled to the brim with her fans.

“I’m so happy to meet all of you! I hope you have a great time today!”

“Hooraaay!”

A deafening cheer erupted from the audience for MIO, a.k.a. Mio Kotozuka. She waved at her fans and took a deep breath, trying to exhale the exhaustion that was building up within her.

Uh-oh... I think I’m a little dizzy.

First it was the traveling, then the costume fitting, then the rehearsal, and now the concert itself. Of course she was taking breaks, but she was a petite girl with the stamina to match. She was in good shape because of her job, but she still had her limits. And even though she was starting to feel it get to her, she never stopped smiling in front of her fans.

“All right, let’s kick things off with our first song!” she yelled.

After a short pause, a cheerful song intro began to play. It was her hit single that had been used as the opening song to an anime. One of her music videos even had her cosplaying as the anime’s heroine, which was how many of her current fans had

discovered her. As she started to sing, the crowd began waving their light sticks in unison. It was so pretty. Mio always loved to see it.

Oh, but I do feel a little slow... Maybe...

She was so tired, but all she wanted to do was sing. At least, that's what she told herself.

If I was doing a ballad, at least I wouldn't have to dance.

With a slow, emotional number, she'd look better if she just stood there and sang her heart out. They could dim the lights and use some smoke to set the perfect mood for a sad song. But unfortunately, the set list for today was nothing but anime themes and upbeat music, not ballads. It wasn't that she couldn't sing ballads, however. In fact, she thought they were one of her strong suits. Her debut song had been one... Granted, it hadn't sold at all.

No, wait... I need to focus.

Mio tried to clear her mind and focus on her singing, but it didn't work. It felt like the exhaustion was wearing down her concentration. She gazed out at the audience, almost glassy-eyed.

Huh?

When she did, she spotted a strange boy in the crowd. It wasn't that what he was doing was strange... In fact, he wasn't doing anything at all. He wasn't dancing or waving a light stick. He was just staring at her.

Of course, the other fans were staring at her intensely, too. But they were looking at MIO the singer, and he was... Somehow it felt like he was just looking at her.

What's with that guy? I've never seen him at any of the fan club meetings. He looks kind of grouchy... Is he in high school, maybe?

The young boy didn't even seem to be paying much attention to her song, which annoyed her a little.

Oh, no!

She lost her focus for a second, throwing her dancing out of sync. She quickly tried to get back into the rhythm, but it didn't work. Mio mustered all the energy she had just to keep her singing in time with the music.

Oh, jeez!

She thought about just flinging her microphone at the boy that had thrown her off as she managed to make it through the end of the song. There was supposed to be a 30-second pause before the next number.

But Mio never got to sing it. She couldn't.

Prologue 0-2: Ellicia Otto

Ellicia had no parents. Of course, that's not to say she sprouted out of the ground. Someone had given birth to her, sure, but there was no one she could truly call a parent.

Fortunately (or not, she wasn't sure), she only found herself alone after she was old enough to think for herself and manage subsistence on her own. If she'd been abandoned before that, she likely wouldn't have survived.

Living alone wasn't easy, but fortunately (or not, she wasn't sure about that, either) she had a special talent. The best way to describe it would be "wall walking." She could walk through the walls of houses, buildings, or even bank safes like they simply weren't there. She was what people would call a psychic.

But that wasn't the only interesting thing on her résumé. She was also a thief. At least for a time. Ellicia got out of the thievery business at the age of 13.

Back then, she'd worked for the mafia. Her ability to sneak in anywhere to get information or steal things made her extremely valuable to them. She was treated well and didn't have to suck up to the boss to survive. She was special. But it was exactly because she was so special that they were prepared to kill her at the first sign she might run away.

Now, that wasn't particularly an issue for Ellicia. She had nothing else to do, and she had no real plans for her life. If they were willing to keep her fed, she was planning on staying with them forever. That is, until someone came along one day and

wiped them all out except for her.

“We’ve come here for you.”

“...?”

Ellicia stared suspiciously at the man who offered her his hand. He was wearing a suit that was black, almost too black. The sharp look in his eyes, the scar on his cheek, the blood on his suit, and his apparently taciturn nature set off all kinds of red flags for her.

“I’ve gotten offers from other families before, but none of them were this enthusiastic,” she eventually said.

“I’m glad you understand our interest.”

The man didn’t move so much as an eyebrow. She couldn’t tell if he was serious or joking.

“Well, I never swore loyalty to this family. So if you’re willing to feed me, I’ll go with you... But I would like to know who my new owner is.”

This man’s small group had wiped out an entire mafia family. Ellicia stayed on her guard as she observed him.

If I’m willing to go just on appearances... Is he Japanese? Chinese?

Each country’s underworld had its own traditions. If she unknowingly did something to offend him, there was a chance she might get hurt. And at this point, Ellicia was far more interested in keeping herself safe than running.

When she’d said she’d go anywhere as long as they fed her, she was serious. Yet even so, she still wanted to know who she was

dealing with.

“Let me start by saying, Ellicia, that there is no need to categorize us as a ‘race’ like humans do. The bonds between us are bonds of the soul, not of blood.”

“Huh? What are you talking about...?”

It was only then that Ellicia realized how strange what she was hearing was.

Huh? How does he know my name? And... it's like he somehow knows what I'm thinking.

“That’s right.”

“Wh-What?”

“I can read people’s minds. I’m a psychic. Like you.”

“Like... me?”

Ellicia’s jaw nearly hit the floor.

“How did you know I’m a psychic?” she said, but then laughed at herself. It was a silly question to ask someone who could read minds.

“Hmm. I said I read minds, but that’s not quite it. What I should have said is that I read people. Reading minds is only part of my power. More specifically, I can see the waves that humans unconsciously put out.”

“Waves?”

“Something like a signal from your soul. The waves normal humans and psychics emit differ in a very subtle way. I happened to see you in town, and your waves indicated you were a psychic.

That's how I knew."

There was no way for Ellicia to tell if he was lying or not, but she decided to believe him. Regardless of how he knew, he did know she was a psychic. That much was clear, but there was still something she couldn't make sense out of.

"Okay. Then I understand how you knew who I was, but what's this about coming to get me? And why did you wipe out an entire mafia family to do it?"

"To save you from them, of course."

"...Huh?"

They'd come to save her? Ellicia hadn't really had any problem with the way she was being treated. There was no need for anyone to save her. And now the only people she had were gone again. It was going to be the same no matter where she went. She was always going to end up alone.

"Yang, I'm about done here."

"I see. Good work, Lucy."

As Ellicia stood there in silence, the man's associates gathered around him. The woman called Lucy looked at Ellicia and smiled a little. Then she suddenly disappeared.

"Hi there."

Ellicia gasped as someone grabbed her from behind. She thought her heart was going to burst out of her chest. She turned around and saw Lucy standing there with the same smile still on her face.

"As you can see, I'm another kind of psychic. A teleporter. I

can't jump that far, though. We're all psychics, too, so relax."

"Relax...?"

"Yes. We share a special bond. Around us, there's no need to feel guilty about having a power that other people don't. So, like I said... relax. From now on, we're your family."

Ellicia gasped. The reason her parents had abandoned her was exactly because she had a power other people didn't. It made her different. Creepy. Weird. And Lucy spoke like she knew... No, she'd probably gone through the same thing. Maybe all of them had.

That would explain things. They had something that bound them together more than blood or words. It was a bond of the soul. A resonance, perhaps, that only those on the same wavelength could experience.

"I haven't introduced myself yet, have I? My name is Yang Danshey," the man said. "I'm the leader of this organization. Ellicia, I want you to come with us and join us."

The only part of what they'd said to Ellicia that bothered her was the part about saving her. While she wasn't allowed to leave, she'd joined the mafia of her own free will. She was resigned to her life there and never asked for anyone's help escaping. But apart from that, what these strange people said really struck a chord with her.

Ellicia had wanted a home. She'd always hated herself for being abandoned by her parents. For not being normal. She'd thought she'd die of old age before anyone understood her. And yet now someone had appeared out of nowhere to tell her that she was wanted. That made her happy. That much, she was sure of.

"All right, Yang. I'll join you."

And so, a new line was added to her résumé. But Yang's organization had no name. It was just "the organization."

"We don't need a name to differentiate us from everyone else. Anyone can tell that we're comrades" was what she'd been told.

Everyone in the organization was a psychic, and they were all without a doubt her comrades. After Ellicia joined, they recruited a few more people, and their organization gradually, little by little, grew bigger.

Yang, their leader, would risk his life for his comrades but was incredibly suspicious towards normal people. His distrust had saved them many times, but often it seemed to go too far. Ellicia tried to ask Lucy about it, but all she did was laugh nervously. She never got a real answer out of her.

Of course, Ellicia didn't have any real problem with the organization or Yang's policies. They worked hard to protect psychics. Sometimes Yang would discover them himself, but more often, they would keep their ears to the ground about anyone with special powers and then go seek them out.

As time went on, more and more of the psychics they brought in were younger than Ellicia. Many of them had been mistreated or abandoned by their parents, and she took care of them like they were little brothers and sisters. Her goal was for the organization to be a haven for all psychics, and that became her reason for helping Yang and Lucy.

Of course, the organization was like a home to her, too. Yang, Lucy, and her little brothers and sisters were her family. She wanted to protect them no matter what. That's why she never thought the day would come when she betrayed the organization.

"Hahh... Hahh..."

Ellicia gasped for breath as she ducked into an alley to escape the organization's pursuers. She was in a town far away from the city centers of Japan.

The organization often used ships to move about. While she was on one crossing the Pacific to get back to the organization's base in China, she'd learned of Yang's plan. She jumped ship on a lifeboat and made her way back to Japan.

I never thought this would happen...

Ellicia was almost in tears, but she kept a watchful eye on her surroundings. She had Lucy the teleporter and Ail the clairvoyant to worry about. Both of their powers were strong enough that they had lots of restrictions, but they could easily work together to find and catch her. Ellicia, on the other hand, only had the power to move through walls. It gave her an advantage in a chase, but that was about it. She was clearly at a disadvantage compared to the others. Yet even so, she couldn't stop. She couldn't let Yang get away with his terrifying plan.

But... where do I go?

She'd finally found a place to call home. Now that she'd given it up, where would she go? Ellicia asked herself, but no answer was coming.

Prologue 0-3: Zaia Gardendos Corona

The place once known as “the Dungeon of the Ruler” was a massive underground labyrinth with one hundred floors and countless traps. At the very bottom, however, its darkest depths held a girl who’d been sealed away there. Her name was Corona.

Corona once had many names, and right now she was dreaming of a time she’d been called one in particular by the people of another world. They’d called her “hero.”

A staff came down on Corona’s head.

“That really hurts!”

“Get yer durn head in the game, hero!”

“Hnngh...”

Corona turned her tearful eyes towards the holder of the staff—her traveling companion who was also the female wizard that had summoned her to this world.

“Pastel!” Corona whimpered. “What was that for?!”

“There’re some mountain vegetables growing there. I was sayin’ we should pick them together,” Pastel replied in her heavy accent.

“What? You want me of all people to pick weeds? And to eat them?”

“That’s ’zactly what I’m sayin’! Ya blew all the money the king

gave us, so now we gotta get food ourselves!”

“Hmph! You’re the first person to ever make such a foolish suggestion to me. Who do you think I am? I’m—”

“Shaddup and do it!”

SMACK!

“That really hurts!”

Pastel showed no mercy to anyone, not even a hero. She was also pretty strong for a wizard. Her staff was a force to be reckoned with in more ways than one.

“Wh-Why you...”

Corona wasn’t happy. It was all Pastel’s fault that she’d been summoned to this world and made to be this strange “hero.” In fact, when Corona first arrived and was asked to defeat the Demon King, she’d answered instantly: “Not happening. Send me back.”

Pastel, the one who’d summoned her, had responded: “Only a genius like muhself can send ya back, but I’m ain’t doin’ it unless ya save my world.”

No one had ever refused her before.

“If ya wanna go back that badly, maybe I should make ya beg,” she’d suggested darkly. “If the Demon King invades, it’s all over, anyhoo. So, even if ya kill everyone but me, I’m not sendin’ ya back. Honestly, it would be faster to just kill the Demon King, if ya ask me.”

Corona and Pastel glared at each other, threatened each other, and argued with each other for three days straight. And in the

end, Corona gave in. She'd always been lazy, but she wasn't stupid, and she did like fighting. She was also up against Pastel's unrelenting stubbornness and the fact that it really would be faster to defeat the Demon King than to persuade her to change her mind.

"Tch! I'm sick of this! I'll just threaten that woman into sending me—Gyah!"

"I heard that."

"Y-You...! Stop hitting me with the pointy part!"

"Ya keep talkin' like that, and dinner will be tree root soup."

"Anything but that!"

Their whole journey had been like that, and she relived it now in a dream. Her sleeping lips whispered Pastel's name with a smile.

But this dream was endless for Corona. She would never wake up. Not until someone came and freed her from her seal.

Prologue 0-4: Lyun Sylpheed

There exists a magical realm called the spirit world. In its center lies the tiny village of Windsong Valley, surrounded by mountains on all sides.

Two young wind spirit sisters were desperately running between the trees of those mountains, panting and out of breath.

“Hahh... Hahh... Hahh...”

“S-Sis... wait!”

“Don’t stop! Just run!”

Lyun scolded her younger sister, Sophie, as she pulled her along by the arm.

“Rrrgh...”

“Come on, just keep moving!” Lyun urged her sister on as she turned around.

“Rrrgh...”

“Hrrrgh...”

“Rrragh...”

Chasing after them were wind fairies, moaning oddly as they ran.

The wind fairies, or sylphs, were smaller than the wind spirits.

They were 30 or 40 centimeters tall at most, but some were even smaller. They had tiny wings and short limbs. Normally they were a cheerful race known for their charming laughter whenever the wind blew. But now their eyes were bright red, and the color had drained from their skin. Perhaps most unsettling of all was the constant groaning from their mouths, which hung slack.

The two sisters ran as fast as they could, faces frozen in terror. Their bare feet were bleeding from running across so many twigs and exposed tree roots.

The two girls were wind spirits, or sylpheeds. Spirits were more powerful than fairies. They could of course run faster and fly higher, too, but there were two things keeping the sisters from flying away right now.

One was that the sky overhead was filled with other sylpheeds who'd gone mad, as well. Lyun was one of the more powerful spirits, but Sophie was still too young to have the power or speed she'd need to escape while flying, and Lyun certainly wasn't going to abandon her.

The other thing holding them back was maneuverability. Though sylpheeds could fly fast, they lacked precise control while doing so. So, while taking to the skies overhead wasn't an option because of the maddened sylpheeds, trying to fly through the forest wasn't a good idea, either. They could easily run into a tree and badly injure themselves.

And so the sisters' only choice was to escape by foot. Thankfully, it gave them something of an advantage. The tree cover helped keep them hidden from the sylpheeds overhead, and even if they were spotted, the sylpheeds were in such a crazed state that they would likely just crash into the trees before they got to them. Lyun was also confident that they could outrun the slower sylphs behind them now.

But none of that solved the real problem. There were just far too many of them. Every time she tried to escape the valley, sylphs would appear and block her path. The two sisters lacked the stamina to get around them all and escape up the road out of the valley, so the only way to escape was to go back down into the valley, go back up a different side, hide to catch their breath, and then try again.

Why... Why is this happening?!

Lyun gasped. She knew the answer.

It was the virus that was driving all the fairies and spirits crazy. Anyone infected by it went violently insane. They lost all sense of themselves and started to attack others. Worse yet, anyone who was bitten by an infected sylph or sylpheed also became sick and went on to attack others.

It started with one, then spread to another, and within a day, the whole valley had been infected. Lyun thought it was too unbelievable to be true, but there was no denying what was right in front of her. The outbreak had already happened. Why wasn't as important right now as how they were going to get out of this mess.

“Big sis...”

She had someone to protect.

“Everything will be fine. Just don't let go of your big sister,” Lyun said with as bright a smile as she could manage to comfort her sister.

She was going to save Sophie no matter what it took. That's what she told herself as she grabbed her little sister's hand and held it tightly.

Prologue 1 (July 20th)

The rainy season was over, and exams were finished, meaning it was finally time for summer vacation—my first summer break as a high schooler. It was a time of hopes, dreams, and infinite possibilities. But in reality...

“It’s just too hot...”

Ever since the start of July, temperatures had been on the rise, and they were hitting new records almost every single day. It was only morning now, and it was still stupidly hot.

“Can’t you just turn the air conditioner on?” R asked as she floated nonchalantly in the air.

“No, Harissa doesn’t like it.”

“But she’s not here right now, is she?”

R was right. Harissa had left to go do some kind of magical experiment. And for some reason, she’d taken the remote control with her. Was that part of her experiment or something?

“They say it’s bad for you if there’s too much of a temperature change when you go into a house. It can send even healthy people into a kind of shock.”

“Well, if you don’t mind, I certainly don’t, but let me remind you that heatstroke is still possible indoors, so it might not be a bad idea to avail yourself of the blessings of modern civilization. Also, make sure you drink plenty of water.”

“Are you my dad or something?”

“I just don’t want you dying over something stupid. And besides, shouldn’t you have said ‘mom’ there?”

“Yeah, well, my dad was the one who took on that role in my family. The stay-at-home type.”

“I see.” R nodded, then seemed to remember something. “Which means that the last big hurdle for the heroines won’t be your mom, but your father, Jigen, right?”

It wasn’t exactly what I was expecting her to say.

“What?”

“You know how it is, right? ‘If your miso soup tastes this bad, I can’t let you marry my son!’”

“That’s what a mother-in-law would say...”

“You never know. A stay-at-home dad might say it, too.”

“Well, mine wouldn’t... He wouldn’t... He wouldn’t, right?”

I started to feel less confident each time I said it. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed frighteningly possible.

“No, my dad would never... No. No way.”

Ugh... Why did I have to imagine something so creepy?

“Oh, isn’t this song...”

“Hm?”

I looked up to see what R was talking about. She was watching a commercial on TV with a bunch of idols at a concert hall.

“This song has been playing a lot lately, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah. MIO, right? She’s going on tour, isn’t she?”

I wasn’t into idols, but I knew MIO. She was a petite, particularly young-looking pop star who’d made her debut two or three years ago. She was incredibly popular now, and it was understandable why. She had a great singing voice. The song playing from the TV was one of hers, and the commercial was a preview for her upcoming tour.

“R, I didn’t know you were into music.”

“Hmm, I’m not really. I’m usually watching variety shows when the music programs air, but I suppose I might be interested one day. If that happens, I look forward to your cooperation.”

“Ugh...”

That’s right. If R ever did get into music, I’d be the one who had to download songs for her. I could already imagine how expensive that would get.

“At least wait until you’re done with your foreign dramas before you switch hobbies, okay?”

“That won’t be for a while.”

“I mean, you are watching 20 different series right now.”

“If you’re willing to stay up with me, we could watch most of them this weekend.”

“I need sleep, you know. Also, there’s the money...”

“I’m sure.”

As we chatted on about nothing of particular importance,

something inexplicably fell down from the ceiling onto R's head without warning.

“Huh?”

R was demi-material, and nobody but me could touch her, so it passed right through her and landed on the ground.

“What's that? A TV remote?”

Actually, if I wasn't mistaken, it was our TV remote. The very same one Harissa had walked off with earlier. As little question marks appeared above both our heads, I heard the sound of the front door opening.

“Is that Harissa, you think?”

“Probably.”

As we guessed, Harissa appeared in the living room a few moments later. She was wearing a thin summer shirt and shorts. But she was also holding a big wooden staff, which seemed strangely out of place.



“Sir Rekka, did the TV remote show up here?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s right there.”

I pointed at the remote on the floor, and Harissa smiled brightly. Her cheeks were flush, but it didn’t look like it was just from the summer sun.

“You said you were working on a magic experiment. Was it a success?”

“Yes!” Harissa answered cheerfully as she picked up the remote.

“Glad to hear it. What kind of magic is it?”

“Um, do you remember a magic item called the Red Thread?”

“The Red Thread... Is that the thing that lets you go back to your world?”

Harissa had once given it to me. I’d used it to get back to her world after returning to Earth.

“More precisely, it uses the karmic bond between two people to connect them.”

“Oh, is that how it works?”

“Yes. People are connected by something called karma, and the closer they are, the stronger that connection is. The Red Thread follows that connection and brings one person to the other.”

Huh...

“That’s pretty interesting. You’ve heard of the red thread that

connects lovers, right?” R asked.

I nodded.

“Do you know where that story comes from, then?”

I shook my head.

“Basically, there was a terrible monster that lived deep in a dungeon. In order to keep it from coming out and hurting people, the king would sacrifice someone to it every year. A hero appeared to defeat the monster, but the dungeon it lived in was no ordinary dungeon. It was a long, treacherous maze. People who went in never came out. So the princess, who was in love with the hero, gave him a long, red thread and said she’d hold on to one end and wait at the entrance for him. That way, the hero was able to defeat the monster and follow the thread back out of the dungeon.”

“Interesting...”

“What is, Sir Rekka?”

“Oh! N-Nothing!”

Oops. Harissa couldn’t see R, so it must’ve looked like I was talking to myself. I quickly tried to change the subject, but kicked myself a little. I needed to be more careful.

“By the way, the hero and the princess split up after that.”

“!”

Gah! I almost laughed at such an unexpected twist of an ending. I glared at R to remind her not to do stuff like that to me when people were around, but she just ignored me.

“So, anyway... what were we talking about? The Red Thread?”

“Oh, yes. Um, it’s what I used as the inspiration for a new spell.”

Ah, so that was where it came into play.

“You see, the Red Thread connects two people through karma.” Harissa pointed to her chest, then mine. She seemed to be saying there was a connection between us. “I was curious if I could use a variation of that to connect different things, so I took apart the inner workings of the Red Thread and reformed it into a catalyst for a similar but different spell.”

“How would that work?” I asked.

She paused for a breath and declared, “Simple! It just follows the connection between two things!”

Her eyes weren’t quite screaming, “Now tell me how awesome I am,” but she was beaming with confidence and pride. Me, on the other hand... I was baffled.

“...”

“...?”

Harissa seemed confused by my lack of a response.

“Sorry... I don’t really follow.”

“No, I’m sorry. ‘The connection between two things’ is pretty vague, isn’t it?” Harissa stood up and cleared her throat, clearly ready to try explaining it to me again. “I believe I just told that you that people are connected by karma. Objects can sometimes be connected in much the same way.”

“With karma?”

“Yes. For example, I’ve used this staff for years, so there’s a strong connection between me and it. It’s one of my prized possessions, and we have something of a bond.”

“Oh, I see. That kind of thing.”

It was true that when you used something for years, even if it was just a mass-produced consumer good, it often became special to you. In that sense, I could see how you could develop a karmic bond with an object.

“So... what’s with the remote, then? Everybody who lives here uses it.”

From what Harissa had just said, it sounded like there needed to be a bond between a particular person and a particular thing.

“That’s what’s special about the new spell I developed.” She puffed out her chest a little like she’d been waiting for that question. “Sometimes a thing can have a connection with a specific place rather than a specific person.”

“A specific place?”

“Yes. In the case of the remote, it has a special connection to this room.”

“Hmm...” I mulled over what she was saying in my head. “So, let’s say I brought the flag home from school and used this new spell of yours on it. It would go right back to the flagpole at school?”

“Probably, yes. Connections with people are stronger than connections with places, so if there was anyone who was particularly attached to that flag, it would go to them instead.”

“Huh... In other words, you’ve created a spell that transports an object to the person or place it’s most strongly connected to?”

“Exactly!”

“Wow, you’re amazing, Harissa. Making your own spells like that...”

“Heehee!”

Harissa’s smile grew even brighter when I complimented her. She really had done something incredible, but there was one thing I still didn’t understand.

“This is really cool and all, but what will you use it for? And you said you need some kind of... catalyst, right? Does that mean there’s a limit to how much you can use it?”

“Yes. I only have the spare Red Threads I brought to this world with me, so I can only create two more catalysts with them,” she said with a nod.

So this wouldn’t be like her other magic spells. She could only cast it two times... Well, three, if you included the experiment she’d just done. What was she planning on using it for?

“So, um, Sir Rekka... I have a request...”

“A request?”

“Yes... I actually had a very specific reason for making this spell.” She hesitated for a moment and then looked up. “I’d like to go back home.”

“Home? Like... to Aburaamu?”

“Yes.”

“H-How?”

“If I use this magic on the Hero’s Sword, it should take me back to the castle there. It spent several centuries sealed underneath the castle, so it should have a powerful connection to the place.”

“I see...”

“The hero who originally used it has been dead for a long time, I’m sure, so the strongest connection now should be to that basement.”

I’d once used the Red Thread to go to Aburaamu myself, so it wasn’t hard to imagine that her plan would work. The Red Thread was a powerful item, and was probably just as effective modified.

“I came here without saying anything to anybody but the old lady who worked in the kitchen, so I want to see them again and let them know I’m okay.”

“Yeah, I would, too.”

Even if she was fitting in here, Harissa was still from another world. Iris and Rain were from deep space, but they could still go home anytime they wanted. Not Harissa. She was literally from another dimension, and she’d left her whole life behind there. It made perfect sense she’d want to go back.

“All right... I’ll miss you, but okay.”

“Huh?”

“When are you going back? I’d like to get everyone together and have a farewell party or something first.”

“W-Wait! Wait just a durn minute!”

When she saw how sad I looked, Harissa began to flail her arms about.

“H-Harissa?”

“I didn’t mean forever! I’m just going back to pay a visit!” She drew her face right up against mine and emphasized the “visit” part. “I don’t want to leave you! Not ever! Don’t even joke about that, Sir Rekka!”

“Okay, okay! I get it! Just calm down!” I yanked her off me. “Y-You’re just going back for a visit, and then coming back here?”

“That’s what I meant the whole time! If I go back to Abu-raamu, I can get all the materials for the catalyst I need. Then I can go between here and there as much as I want!”

She had a good point. And if she could go back and forth freely, then there wasn’t really any difference between being from another world or being from outer space... or something? I was kinda starting to lose faith in my perspective on things.

“I see.” I was relieved to know she wasn’t leaving for good. “Okay, I’ll get the Hero’s Sword out of the storehouse. How long do you think you’ll be gone? If there’s anything you need for the trip, I’ll go buy it with you.”

“Um, about that...”

“Hm? Oh, right. You said you had a favor to ask. What was it?”

My misunderstanding had gotten the conversation a little off track, so she hadn’t yet told me what it was that she wanted.

“Uh... Um...” She started to fidget and mumble. “I-I want you

to come back with me...”

“Oh, is that it? Sure.”

It wasn't like I'd expected her to ask for anything impossible, but this was easier than I thought it'd be.

“A-And maybe I can introduce you to the elder of my village...”

“Introduce me? Sure, I guess.”

“That would be okay?”

“Yeah. It's not like it's a big deal, right?”

I didn't really understand why, but maybe it was some kind of village tradition. I was an outsider, so maybe it was a good idea to introduce me to the village elder, anyway. Still, if that was all she wanted, there was no need to be so nervous about it.

“Hmm... So that's what this is?”

R was mumbling about something, but I couldn't ask her what with Harissa around. I just had to ignore her.



After promising Harissa I'd go home with her, I went out for a bit. I didn't have any real reason, but I figured if there wasn't any TV in the world Harissa was from, I might go to the bookstore by the station and get some light novels or manga or something. I headed there at a leisurely pace.

“Rekka, Rekka. Don't forget to get a portable DVD player,” R said.

“Those are way too expensive,” I immediately responded.

“But you’ll be there four or five days, right? What am I supposed to be doing then?”

“I understand, but... Just put up with it, okay? I did just buy you a portable TV, in case you forgot.”

There was no way I had the money for another splurge like that.

“Hmm... When do you get your next allowance?” R asked, upset.

“It’s always at the start of the month, so a little under two weeks, I guess.”

“Can we wait for her to go back until then?”

“Of course not. Harissa’s really looking forward to this.”

“Hmph.” R puffed out a single cheek in a pout.

And actually, looking at her then, I realized her expressions had gotten a lot more... I don’t know... expressive lately. Back when we first met, she was practically emotionless. She was still weird, and still a boob-obsessed pervert, but she was quite different now. Was it because of all the TV shows and movies she’d been watching?

“I was going to get some manga and light novels to read. Can you make do with those?”

“I’m willing to try new things, but I won’t be able to read them at night, right? They didn’t have electricity or anything in that world.”

“Hmm, that’s true.”

R didn't need to sleep, so the whole reason I'd bought her a portable TV was so she'd have something to do at night. But since I was going to be visiting Harissa's hometown, I'd be staying in someone else's house. It would be rude to ask for a light all night so R could read.

"And the TV is one thing, but having you turn all the pages of a book for me is going to get annoying. My hands are small, too."

"That's true... I'd even have to hold the pages down for you while you read."

The TV was convenient because all I had to do was hit a button to turn it on for her to watch it. That wasn't the case with a book.

"I guess you'll just have to go without."

"I guess so. Way to be useless, Rekka."

"Don't say that."

I guess even artificial life forms didn't want to give up their entertainment. I hated to say it, but this time she would just have to make do. If I started spoiling her, it would have a bad effect on my everyday life. Anyway, we kept chatting as we turned into an alley.

"Is this the right way?" she asked.

"It's a shortcut," I said.

"I've never been here before."

"It's narrow and dusty, so I only come this way when I'm in clothes I don't care about getting dirty."

I was dressed pretty casually—an old T-shirt, jeans, and san-

dals—so I didn't have any problems walking down the old alleyway with its cracked pavement. It was a shortcut I'd found in elementary school. The rows of buildings and walls made it hard to see where you were going, and the path took so many twists and turns that it was all too easy to get lost if you didn't know the way. I know I did the first time I was there. I cried and cried until I finally made it out.

"Rekka, Rekka, isn't the station that way?" R asked, pointing to an intersecting alley as we passed it.

I was impressed that even though she'd never been here before, she hadn't lost her sense of direction.

"That's a dead end. You have to take this past the empty lot up ahead."

Two more turns after that and we'd be right in front of the station.

"Is this really a shortcut?" she asked skeptically.

"Probably," I said and looked away.

"What?"

"You know how when you're a kid, you think you've found a really cool shortcut to somewhere... but then when you get older, you sometimes realize that it wasn't much of a shortcut at all?"

"Nope. You lost me."

That was weirdly depressing... Did that only ever happen to me?

My shoulders slumped as I passed by the empty lot. I actually didn't know why the lot was empty, but it was plenty big enough

for a game of soccer. Since it was summer now, the weeds and grasses had all grown high. If you cut through the lot, you could actually hop the brick wall on the other side and end up right in front of the station, but I felt like I was a little too old to do that. But as we started to walk around it...

“Augh...”

I heard a small moan from somewhere nearby.

“Hm? R, did you hear that?”

“No? But if you did, why not check it out?”

Yeah, she definitely heard it... But it sounded like somebody in pain. I couldn't just pretend I hadn't heard it. I went back up the road some and into the empty lot.

“It must have been coming from over here.”

There was a house on the left side of the lot, but it was too far away for the voice to have come from there. The voice was also quiet enough that it couldn't have come from inside. That meant it had to have been from somewhere in the lot.

The lot was filled with tall weeds, but there was something of a trodden footpath from the entrance to the center of the lot where the kids would come and play. There were also several large pipes toward the back of the lot near the wall. I followed the path to the middle of the lot, but there was no one there.

“I don't see anyone,” R said.

“Maybe they're behind the pipes, or hiding in them?”

I decided to give the pipes a look.

“Let’s see...”

I checked each of the pipes in turn, but there was no one there, either. I even looked behind them and still didn’t see anyone. Had I just imagined the voice? I looked up to scan for any possible hiding spots I might have missed... just in time to see a girl appear from the street.

“Hahh...! Hahh...!”

She was clearly panicked, like someone was chasing her. She dashed into the lot and turned to look towards the street. When she whipped around, her long, black hair fluttered, and I saw her earrings glimmer in the sun.

“Hey, excuse me.”

“?!”

Apparently she hadn’t seen me standing over by the pipes, and it was only when I said something that she realized I was there. She looked totally shocked to see me.

“I-Is something wrong?” I asked.

With how she was staring at me, I couldn’t think of much else to say. She frowned without answering, but then her demeanor changed. She seemed resolved to do something, and she walked towards me with broad strides.

“Stay put!”

“Huh?”

Suddenly she grabbed me and dragged me towards the far back of the lot.

“Hey, that’s a dead end. There’s a wall...”

I tried to stop her, but...

“Don’t struggle!”

“Uwah!”

She pulled me hard, and I lost my balance. We both slammed face first into the wall... Or at least that’s what I thought was going to happen.

“Huh?”

The impact I was expecting never came, and when I opened my eyes, we were in a narrow alley.

“...Huh?”

I recognized this street... I turned around to see if I was remembering things right, and sure enough, there was a brick wall right behind us.

“Is this...”

The other side of the brick wall? It sure seemed like it. I could see the sign for the station at the end of the street. It was almost exactly as I remembered it from jumping the wall as a kid. So, did that mean... we’d gone through the wall?

“Hey, are you okay?”

I gasped a little and turned around when I heard the girl speak.

“Did you do that?” I asked.

“Forget about it...”

Yeah, that's not exactly the kind of thing you can just forget about...

“What's your name?”

“Me? Rekka Namidare.”

“Rekka... Rekka, huh...?”

She ran her fingers through her hair as if she was thinking about something. I was just about to ask her what was going on, but she suddenly threw her arms around me.



“Huh? Wh-What are you...”

Th-Those breasts!

“My name is Ellicia, and I’m being chased by scary men. You should run away so you don’t get caught up in this.”

“You’re being chased?”

She certainly was acting like it.

“If you’re in trouble, I can help...” I said.

She didn’t seem to expect my offer, because she looked quite surprised for a moment before shaking her head.

“No. Just get away from here,” she repeated. “Got it? You have to get away.”

“W-Wait!”

She started to run before I could stop her.

I quickly went after her, but by the time I made it out to the main street, she was gone.

“...What was that all about?”

I stood there for a second in shock at what had just happened. The way we’d gone through that wall... That definitely wasn’t a normal power. But she’d looked human. Was it magic, then?

“Was she a heroine?”

“So it seems.”

“Can she use magic, too?”

“Who knows?”

As usual, R wouldn't tell me the important stuff.

But was I supposed to go after this girl? If she could go through walls, it would be hard to catch her. I wanted to try and think up something, but she'd been insistent about getting away from here. I dropped into the bookstore for a moment and pretended to read a book. Sure enough, shortly after, a man in black showed up near the alley entrance. He had a big scar on his face, and even with his jacket on, I could tell he was pretty built. Yup, that definitely looked like a scary man.

He let his gaze wander for a minute, then ran off to the right. I briefly thought about chasing him, but decided against it.

“Aren't you going to go after him?” R asked.

“Nah.”

I'd lost sight of Ellicia in an instant. The man was probably just guessing where she'd gone. And besides, I was more concerned about where she was than that man. Lucky for me, I had a friend who was great at finding people.

“We can use Satsuki's Magic of Omniscience to figure out where she is. That's more certain and probably faster...”

But then something crossed my mind.

“Crap! I never actually finished checking out the empty lot!”

I quickly headed out of the bookstore and back to the empty lot.

I'd gotten so caught up in the chase with Ellicia that I'd forgotten all about the noise I'd heard coming from the empty lot. If

someone was lying there hurt, they were probably in a lot of trouble. I'd search the whole lot this time just to be sure, although if it was really just my imagination and I was hearing things after all, maybe that would be for the better.

I went back around the alleyway, and when I arrived at the lot, I came across a girl in a crimson dress with a matching parasol.

"H-Huh?"

"Hmm?" The girl turned toward me. "Do you perchance need something from me?"

There was an elegance about her as she ran a hand through her bronze hair and looked up at me. Her face made her look younger than me, but her mature expression made me think I was dealing with someone older.

"No, just... When did you get here? To this lot, I mean."

"I only just arrived."

"I see."

Then the voice couldn't have been hers. But then something else crossed my mind. I turned to R.

"No, it doesn't look like she's a heroine."

After just running into one, I guess I assumed I was in for more trouble. It turned out I was wrong though, which meant that the girl in the red dress was probably just a passerby.

"You."

"Who? Me?"

"Yes. I answered your question. In exchange, will you do me a

favor?”

I looked away.

“You see, I’m in a bit of a hurry...”

“Don’t worry. It won’t take long.”

She beckoned for me to come closer. I felt like it would be rude to ignore her, so I reluctantly approached.

“So, what do you want me to do?”

“Let me ride on your shoulders.”

She smiled and pointed at the ground, clearly expecting me to kneel down. Well, if that was all she wanted, I figured... why not? I got on my knees and leaned forward some for her. The hem of her dress was all I could see for a moment, and I could feel the smooth fabric of it rub against my hair as she climbed on.

“You don’t need to grab my legs, thank you.”

Once I felt her tiny body lean up against the back of my head, I braced myself and slowly stood up. She was as light as she looked, so lifting her wasn’t a problem.

“Approach the wall, please.”

“Sure thing.”

I did as she asked.

“I’m sorry, this will get your shirt dirty,” she said as she stood up on my shoulders.

It was an old shirt, so I didn’t really care what happened to it, but I was definitely curious about what she was going to do from

here. I thought about asking, but suddenly the weight on my shoulders was gone.

“I couldn’t cross this wall alone, so thank you. I am grateful for your assistance.”

I looked up and saw the girl looking down at me with a smile. I guess the favor was being her stepping stool...

“What are you going to do up there?”

“Nothing of importance, truly. I’m in the middle of a game.”

A game? Was she trying to chase after a cat or something? Well, it sounded innocent enough.

“You, however, seem as though you were looking for something,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“Is it perhaps the person lying in the grass over there?”

“Huh?”

The girl pointed over to a particularly thick patch of overgrown grass. It was too dense and tall for me to see anything, but she must have had a better vantage point up on the wall.

“Thanks, that’s a big help.”

“I’ve done nothing to earn your thanks. If anything, I owe you for helping me. You’re a good person. Perhaps we’ll meet again. Farewell for now,” she said before jumping down onto the other side of the wall.

It was only a brief encounter, but she seemed pretty memorable. Granted, that was true of most girls I was meeting lately.

“Oh, well, I guess...”

I then pressed on and went to investigate the area she'd pointed out. I found a girl who looked like an elementary school student lying on the ground. She was so petite that the grass had completely hidden her. There was a big hat on the ground next to her. I figured it was probably hers.

“Hey, are you okay?”

I lightly slapped her cheek, and she moaned in response. It was a good sign. She was alive, at least. She didn't look badly hurt, either.

“Are you sick or something?” I asked.

“No, she's probably just tired. Let her rest and eat something, and she'll be fine,” R answered.

“Shouldn't we take her to a hospital to get checked out just in case?”

“Rekka, Rekka, Rekka... You would believe some local doctor before you believed me, a product of future technology?”

“Hmm...”

R was probably right there. It was almost never useful, but she was a multifunctional being from the future.

I was wondering what to do next, when suddenly...

“Help... me...” the girl said weakly. “Rekka...”

Shocked, I stared at her blankly.

“How did she know my name?”

I knew better than anyone that Rekka was a pretty uncommon name. And I'd never met this girl before, either. I'd only stumbled on her by chance, so how did she know my name? It was all so bizarre that it made me wonder...

"She's a heroine, isn't she?"

"Yup. This one's a heroine." R nodded. "Good things come in threes, don't they, Rekka?"

Ugh...

"Oh, but in your case, this happens all the time, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess it does..."

I looked up into the summer sun and wondered what I was about to get myself into.

Chapter 1: Intersecting “Stories” (July 20th)

Harissa was surprised to see me back home so soon. She was surprised to see the girl I was carrying on my back, too, but when I explained what had happened, she knew it was more of the usual.

I laid the girl down on Harissa’s bed and left her in Harissa’s care. I then went into my room to get my phone. I would have called Satsuki on the way home, but I’d left my phone on my desk thinking I wouldn’t be gone all that long. I’d have to be more careful about that in the future.

I opened my address book and called Satsuki. It only rang a couple of times before I heard the click of her picking up.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Satsuki, where are you right now?”

“The library. I was going over some material from the first quarter.”

She was studying on the first day of summer vacation? I was honestly shocked. It wasn’t all that important, though, so I shrugged it off and moved on to the heart of the matter.

“I need your help. Can you come by my place?”

“All right,” she said, suddenly sounding serious. She must have been able to tell something was up. “I think I can be there in

20 minutes. Does that work?”

“Yeah.”

“All right, I’m on my way.”

I closed my phone and sighed. Now I’d be able to find Ellicia, the girl who could go through walls. But that wasn’t enough on its own. She was being chased by that man with the scar. If I caught up with her at the wrong time, I might have to fight him. I would need some way to protect her if I did. I hated to say it, but I was weak.

After a few more quick phone calls, there was a knock at my bedroom door. It was Harissa, who’d come to let me know that the girl had woken up. I thanked her and followed her back to her room.

“Can I come in?” I asked when we got to the door.

“Sir Rekka, this is your own home, so you don’t need to be so polite.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

But I still felt like I should ask.

Harissa’s room smelled really good. She wasn’t the type to buy much, so most of the furniture in it was still my parents’, but there were little things here and there that Satsuki and Iris had given her. It was very much a girl’s room now. Even though it used to be my parents’, I felt my heart starting to pound as I approached Harissa’s bed... And yeah, I know how perverted that sounds.

“Oh...”

The girl was already sitting up, and she was clutching the big hat I'd found her with against her chest. She flinched a little when I walked over to her.



“Um, are you okay?”

“Um... yes.” She seemed confused, like she didn’t really know why she was here yet. “What... happened to me?”

“You were passed out in an empty lot. I happened upon you while I was passing through.”

“I see... Thank you.”

The girl smiled slightly, but she still seemed uneasy. I could understand why.

“Can you tell me your name?” I asked.

“...Mio Kotozuka,” she said after a long pause.

“Mio, huh? Do you remember what you were doing in that empty lot?”

“I don’t know...”

“Then I guess you don’t know how you got there, either?”

“I don’t know...”

“Do you know your home address?”

“Um...”

She looked down like she didn’t know what to say. Honestly, I didn’t know what to say, either.

“Is there anything you *can* tell me?”

“I... don’t know. I can’t remember anything.”

I looked at Harissa, and then R too for good measure.

“Is this... amnesia?”

“Probably...”

The girl put the hat on so I couldn't see her eyes, and she refused to look at either me or Harissa. Awkward silence filled the room. I couldn't imagine how scary it must be for a young girl like her to wake up in a strange place with no memories, but... surely there had to be some clue to help us figure out what was going on. Oh, wait... That's right. There was. The reason I'd thought she was a heroine.

“Do you know the name Rekka Namidare?” I asked.

Her eyes went wide.

“Ah... aah!”

She put her hands to her head like it was about to explode. She looked like she was in terrible pain.

“H-Hey, Mio?”

“The building... The roof... I...”

She was choking out words, but I couldn't make sense of it. What building? What roof? I was lost, but then she said...

“I was pushed.”

It sounded like she was saying she'd been pushed off the roof of a building.

“Is that what happened?”

Wait, was that...

“If she was pushed, that means someone had to have pushed her,” R interjected.

I knew that, obviously, but the thought made me feel like someone had stuck something unpleasant down my throat. Even if it was only off of a single-story building, that wasn’t the kind of thing you did as a joke. There was only one way to take it. Whoever did it wanted to kill her. Fortunately, she’d survived and didn’t appear to be hurt badly, but still...

We tried waiting for her to calm down before talking to her more.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yes...”

She actually looked far worse than she had earlier, but she nodded. I could understand why she was feeling down. The first thing she’d remembered was being pushed off a building.

Amnesia, an attempted murder... It seemed her story wouldn’t be an easy one to resolve.



Satsuki arrived about five minutes earlier than she said she would. She must’ve hurried, because there were beads of sweat on her face. I led her into the living room, turned on the air conditioning, and brought her some barley tea.

“Thanks.”

She gulped down the tea. She must’ve been hot. She’d even tied her hair up. I took a sip of my own tea as I looked at her.

“Rekka, are you the kind of guy that gets excited when you

smell girls' sweat?"

"Bwuh?!"

I involuntarily spat out my tea.

"Kyah! H-Hey, what are you doing, Rekka?!"

"S-Sorry..." I apologized to Satsuki and then glared at R.

Begrudgingly, I turned on the TV and turned down the volume to give R something else to do. I was hoping that she'd watch whatever show was on and leave me alone.

"So, what have you been caught up in now?"

"Well, you see..."

I explained the situation so far to Satsuki, then told her there were two things I wanted her to look up. The first was where Ellicia, the girl who'd been chased by the man with the scar, was now. The other was what had happened to Mio, the girl with amnesia.

"Okay, I think I've got enough to go on. Where should I start?"

"Ellicia comes first. She might be in danger. Can you see if she's okay and give me a general location?"

"Yeah, I think I can do it if you give me a few minutes. About what time did you meet her? Also, tell me as much about her as you can."

"Let's see. It must have been about..."

I told her everything I could remember. The Akashic Record that she could access with her magic contained the annals of the universe. But for all its vast knowledge, it was essentially just a

database. In order to learn anything from it, you needed to narrow down your search as much as possible. It contained so much information that it was literally impossible to look through it all.

“All right, I’m going to consult the Akashic Record now,” she said.

I watched on as she closed her eyes and started to concentrate.

“I ask the records of all things...”

As she whispered an incantation, particles of light appeared and cast a gentle glow throughout the room. I wasn’t a mage, so I didn’t really know the details, but the light was a manifestation of magical power. Apparently everyone’s was a different color, and Satsuki’s happened to be pale blue. The bluish specks of light formed a circle around her, then disappeared up through the ceiling like they were delivering her voice somewhere on high.

“I’ve found her data. Her full name is Ellicia Otto. She’s currently moving west... She doesn’t seem to be under anybody’s control.”

“I see. Good.”

That meant the man with the scar hadn’t found her yet.

“Can you tell how far away the scarred man is from her?”

“Probably, but if all I have to go on is ‘men with scars on their cheek’ and ‘somewhere in this city,’ it’s going to take time to narrow it down and find him.”

“Hmm...”

Maybe it would be better to just go see Ellicia then? The Magic of Omniscience was helpful, but it had another limitation, and

that was Satsuki's magic powers. The more powerful the magic and the longer she used it, the more it drained her power. And if I was going to have her find out what happened to Mio or monitor Ellicia in real time, I'd need Satsuki to conserve her magic.

"Can you look into Mio next?"

"Of course. Just give me a second." She opened her eyes and wiped the sweat off her brow. "Actually... Can I take a little break? Using the Magic of Omniscience this much makes me light-headed."

"Oh, sorry..."

I realized I'd been pushing her to use her magic without really thinking of how she was feeling. She was clearly pretty spent. I went to get the pitcher of barley tea from the fridge. I got some ice from the ice maker, too. I plopped it into the tea, but I could see it start to melt immediately.

"Want me to turn up the air conditioning a bit?"

"I'm fine. I don't want to get too cold, either."

She took a deep breath and used her handkerchief to dab the sweat off her collarbone. It was... strangely sexy. I could feel my heart skip a beat, but no! Now wasn't the time to be thinking about that kind of thing! Was it the heat? Maybe it was the heat getting to me.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"N-Nothing!" I said, louder than I really needed to.

Satsuki seemed confused, but didn't say anything more... Thank God.

“Okay, moving on,” Satsuki said as she cast a glance toward the stairs leading to the second floor. “You said she had amnesia. Are you sure?”

“Well, she said so, and she didn’t seem to be lying.”

“But she’s not hurt? Like, did she hit her head?”

“I had Harissa check her over for me, and she seems to be fine.”

I lied a little. I’d actually asked R to look, but I couldn’t tell Satsuki that. She couldn’t see R.

“Then it wasn’t an accident... Huh?” Satsuki suddenly seemed to realize something wasn’t right. “Didn’t she say she was pushed off a building?”

“Yeah, but...”

I knew what she was trying to say. If she was pushed off a building, then why wasn’t she hurt? Unfortunately, I didn’t have an answer to that, but...

“It would help if you could find that out for me, too.”

“I see.”

With the Magic of Omniscience, Satsuki had access to the entire history of the universe. She could look up anything that had happened in the past, so it would be a surefire way to find out if what Mio was saying was true or not.

“By the way, I didn’t catch her last name. Does she know it?” Satsuki asked.

“Yeah, it’s Kotozuka.”

“Huh?” Satsuki looked dubious for some reason.

“I said her name’s Mio Kotozuka.”

“I heard you... but are you sure? Is that really what she called herself?”

“Yeah. Why?” I asked, not understanding why she was so skeptical.

“Listen, Rekka. Do you know who Mio Kotozuka is?”

“The girl upstairs...?”

What was she talking about? She was acting like she knew something I didn’t.

“Rekka, that...” she said as she pointed behind me, “is Mio Kotozuka.”

“Huh?”

I turned around and saw a commercial playing on the TV that I’d turned on to get rid of R. An idol with a stuffed heart-lion was talking about her upcoming tour. It was MIO. Hmm... Was that what Satsuki was trying to say?

“Wh-What? Come on, they just happen to have the same first name, I bet.”

“Kotozuka is MIO’s last name. You don’t know anything about idols, do you, Rekka?” she said with a sigh.

“No, I mean, I know MIO. She’s super famous. But it’s not like I know her real name, and besides, the girl upstairs doesn’t look anything like that.”

“She doesn’t?”

“Nope.”

MIO on TV had long, blond pigtails that reached down to her knees, but Mio upstairs had shoulder-length, black hair. Sure, maybe they had about the same height and build, but...

“That hair could just be a wig. What about her face? Did that look the same?”

“I’m not sure...”

The idol on the screen had a bright smile as she winked and energetically talked about making the concert fun. But the girl upstairs was quiet and shy. They had totally different vibes.

“W-Well, can’t your magic tell us?”

“That’s true.”

Satsuki closed her eyes and accessed the Akashic Record again. This time she opened her eyes again before even ten seconds had passed. Maybe it was easier to find information on someone if they were famous?

“Hmm...”

“What is it?” I asked, a little worried when I saw the uneasiness in her expression.

“It’s about halvesies, I guess.”

Halfsies? What was halvesies?

“First, the girl upstairs is indeed the real Mio Kotozuka.”

“Which means...”

She was the idol MIO. But if that part was true, then the other

half...

“It’s not a fact per se that she was pushed off a building.”

I should’ve figured.

“You’re sure about that?” I asked without thinking.

“The Magic of Omniscience is never wrong.”

I couldn’t argue with that. I’d seen its power firsthand, and it had saved me more than once. So, if Satsuki said so, then it meant Mio really hadn’t been pushed off a building.

“But why would she lie to me about that?”

“That I don’t know...”

Satsuki’s magic could reveal the secrets of the universe, but it couldn’t reveal the secrets of a person’s heart. The Magic of Omniscience was a record of facts and events, and that didn’t include people’s thoughts and feelings.

“Wait... Mio’s concert tour is today, right?” I suddenly remembered the commercial we’d just seen.

“Oh!” Satsuki gasped, then nodded.

What was she doing out here in the countryside if her concert was today? Something wasn’t adding up.

“Come to think of it, how did Mio know my name?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“When I found her in that empty lot, she was mumbling

‘Rekka.’”

“Hmm, that is unusual, but it must have been on purpose. She probably wasn’t asking for a wrecker.”

We had a few strange clues to go off of now. Mio was totally unharmed, whether or not she’d been pushed from a roof. She was here in a town with no concert hall on a day she should have been performing for her tour. She knew my name even though we’d never met. To top it off, she had amnesia and couldn’t explain any of it. Adding it all up, one thing was pretty clear to me at this point. It wasn’t a coincidence.

“Let’s look into it a little more. I’ll see what she was doing yesterday. Maybe we can find out why she came here or how she lost her memories.”

“Yeah, good idea.” I nodded and watched as Satsuki closed her eyes.

“Yesterday she went to a meeting about the concert, then a rehearsal, then a costume fitting... It seems like she was really busy. That night, she went home to her condo and went straight to sleep.”

There wasn’t anything unusual about that. What happened to her must have come next.

“...Huh?”

“What’s wrong?”

“She got up in the morning, left the condo... and got on a train headed here.”

Satsuki sounded confused, but she wasn’t alone.

“...Did something happen when she was asleep?”

“Nothing. She slept the whole night, then got up and came here.”

So she spent all day yesterday prepping for the concert, and then today she just decided to blow it off and come here? Why? I couldn't even imagine what might've happened to her. Actually, from what Satsuki was saying, nothing at all had happened to her. Even with the Magic of Omniscience, we were stumped. The cause of all this was still one giant question mark. It was a mystery. There was no explaining what she'd said or done.

“Don't tell me she came here to see me.”

Mio had known my name and where to find me. That was all I could really put together with the information I had. If she had come to see me, that *might* explain her behavior. But even if that were the case, I was at a loss as to how she knew who I was in the first place.

“Just to make sure, she and I have never met, right?”

Satsuki closed her eyes to consult her magic.

“That's correct.”

“Thought so.”

Normal people didn't know pop idol superstars. The plot was only getting thicker at this point, but turning it over in my head, I realized something.

“Let's say she did come to this town to meet me... That means she had her memories when she got here, right?”

“Well, yes... You're exactly right.”

Whatever her reason for coming here was, she clearly knew what she was doing at the time. That meant she had to have lost her memories after she'd arrived in town. That was another hint, so we pushed forward to try and find the answers we needed in order to get to the bottom of this. This time I had Satsuki look into what Mio had done once she'd gotten to town.

“By the time she got here, Mio was barely able to stand. She didn't eat breakfast, it looks like... She was also in a big hurry on the way here, so she may have been exhausted.”

“I see...”

“She staggered into an alley that led to an empty lot. There's no way she knew that path, so she was probably lost.”

“And she passed out in the lot after that?”

“She may have just wanted to rest a little... but yeah, she passed out in the grass.”

“That's where I found her.”

So nothing had happened between her getting off the train and passing out, either. It wasn't long after she collapsed that Ellicia and I went by, but we certainly hadn't done anything to her. I had Satsuki keep looking.

“She was unconscious when you showed up, and she was still out cold when... Wait, someone touched her while she was unconscious!”

“Who?!”

“Hang on... It's a man. His name is Yang Danshey... He's, um... got a scar on his cheek?”

“A scar on his cheek?”

That sounded familiar.

“Is it the guy chasing Ellicia?”

“I’ll check in a minute, but it seems like it. The timing and the description match.”

“But why would he do that when he was chasing someone else?”

It wasn’t like he’d done it out of concern for her. I gulped as I waited for Satsuki to tell me what Yang had done.

“Yang sees Mio and approaches her...” Satsuki said, trailing off.

“Then what?” I asked eagerly after a long pause.

“Yang used his psychic powers to seal away her memories.”

“Psychic powers?!”

“Yeah...” Satsuki said with a weak nod.

Psychic powers, huh? I hadn’t expected that, but Ellicia had used something similar.

“Then is Ellicia’s wall-walking ability a psychic power, too?”

“Most likely.”

So, one psychic was chasing after another. But why? I had all kinds of questions, but the one thing I was sure of at this point was that these psychic powers probably had something to do with Ellicia’s story. If I was going to help her, I’d have to keep that in mind while forming my team.

“Why would Yang seal Mio’s memories, though? What was the point?”

“I... have no idea. It appears that they were strangers and hadn’t met before.”

“What in the world is going on here?”

How did she know anything about me, a boy she’d never met before? And why would a stranger like Yang want to seal away her memories? Was there some connection between us that would be the key to solving her story? Just as I was starting to worry my head might explode, the doorbell rang.



“...So to be honest, I don’t understand most of what’s going on with these stories. I’d appreciate it if you all could help me figure it out.”

“Before that, may I say something?”

“What is it, Shirley?”

“It’s really cramped in here!”

Well, she was right about that. There were nine of us in total. Harissa was upstairs taking care of Mio, so I was downstairs with Satsuki, Iris, Tsumiki, Tetra, Lea, Hibiki, Rosalind, Suzuran, and Shirley. We weren’t packed in the living room like sardines or anything, but yeah... It was a bit cozy.

“I’m glad I left Fam and Rain with Garnet,” Shirley said with a sigh.

The two of them were supposedly doing summer homework under Garnet’s tutelage right now.

“Why is everybody starting off summer vacation studying?” I couldn’t help asking.

“Part of my job is supervising their education. Of course, I’m not keeping them cooped up the whole day, you know.”

Shirley’s policy was to get them to do a little bit every day, she explained. But since the two younger girls were at home doing schoolwork, Shirley had come to my impromptu meeting on their behalf. They weren’t happy about it, however. Shirley had taken so long to convince them to stay home that, despite living just across the street, she hadn’t arrived until about the time that Rosalind and Lea had.

“Enough talk,” Rosalind declared. She was sitting right in front of the air conditioner. Perhaps she didn’t like the heat. “We have a lot to do. We should divide and conquer on this.”

“I agree,” Hibiki said as she raised a single finger. “We’ll divide the responsibilities between us, but let’s start with going over exactly what needs to be done.”

“Okay, we should tackle Ellicia first. That should be simple enough. All we need to do is make sure she’s safe for now.”

“This Yang guy with psychic powers is after her, right?” Iris asked.

“That’s right, so we need to find her before he does.” Hibiki nodded and turned towards Satsuki. “Yang’s power is what you’d usually call ‘telepathy,’ right?”

“Yes. It’s essentially the power to affect the mind.”

“Is it different than the telepathy I use?” Lea asked.

“Your magic connects people by bringing their thoughts to-

gether. Yang's power is a little different," Satsuki explained. "He can directly affect someone's mind, or their soul. In this case, you can think of them as the same thing. Memories and thoughts are recorded in your brain, but also imprinted on your soul. Yang can read people's memories by accessing those."

"Huh? I don't really understand how that's different," I said.

"It's the same in some ways. Think of it like this: magic spells or psychic powers are more or less specialized skills with an explicit function, typically. But Yang's... His is versatile."

"Versatile?" I asked.

"Let's say you have something you need to cut. You could use scissors, or you could use a knife. Either would work, but knives can cut a lot more than scissors can. You can use them on lots of things and in lots of different ways. Yang's power is a little like that. He can use his telepathy to alter people's minds and memories, not just read them."

Huh... So that's what he'd done to seal Mio's memories. There was more than one way he could use his power, but the problem was that not even Satsuki knew the extent of what he could do with it.

"This kind of feels like seeing someone walk toward you with a baseball bat in the park. You have no way of knowing if they're going to hit you or if they just want to play baseball."

"Sounds like someone who'll be annoying to fight," Rosalind said with a sneer.

"Yes, and Yang seems to be the leader of a group of psychics like him and Ellicia. Only a few are chasing after her, but if we screw up, there could be more," Satsuki added.

“Then we should pick people who are competent in a fight,” Rosalind suggested.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “We’ll need Satsuki on the Ellicia team to keep track of her whereabouts. How about we send Iris and Rosalind, and have Satsuki guide them? Does that work for you guys?”

“Sure.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“Very well. Suzuran, come with me, too.”

“Yes, mistress,” Suzuran complied.

“I’m in, too,” said Hibiki. “But too big of a group will just slow us down, so this is probably enough people.”

So Satsuki, Iris, Rosalind, Hibiki, and Suzuran would be the team that went to save Ellicia.

“Shall I join them as well?”

“You too, Shirley?”

I was a little surprised to hear the space scientist volunteer for what could be a bodyguard mission. She wasn’t much of a fighter.

“I won’t be running and jumping like the others, but if we’re up against a psychic, I may be able to help a little.”

“What do you mean?”

“Planet Estashion did extensive research on psychics, as well.”

Just how far had their research gone?

“There are many different kinds of creatures in the universe, including some species that only communicate with each other via telepathy. If you’re going up against someone who has a power like that, I won’t be much help in a fight, but I can at least share my knowledge on the subject.”

“I see.”

It was a good enough argument, and I had no reason to turn her down. Shirley would join the Ellicia team, then.

“So me, Iris, Rosalind, and Suzuran are the assault force while Shirley and Satsuki are our support. Satsuki can keep tabs on Ellicia and keep us informed over the phone,” Hibiki suggested.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“By the way, where is she now?” Hibiki asked.

“Hmm... She’s nearing the city limits. We have a little more time,” Satsuki said.

“Can you guys hang back for a bit then? I’ll fill you in on what we’ll be doing, too.”

Of course, by “we,” I meant the rest of us who would be tackling Mio’s story.

“I don’t see why not,” Satsuki said as she sat back down on the couch.

“Now that you mention it, why aren’t you joining the rescue operation? Normally you’d be the first to volunteer for that kind of thing,” Tsumiki, who’d been leaning up against the wall, chimed in.

“That may be true, but let me explain.” I paused and took a

breath. “While you guys deal with Ellicia, I’ll be taking care of Mio.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mio said she was pushed off a building. That means somebody pushed her, right?”

“But Otomo said that she wasn’t actually pushed, right?” Tsumiki asked.

Nobody knew the power of Satsuki’s magic better than me, but...

“Mio’s story is a little strange. There’s too much about it that doesn’t make sense. How she knew my name, why Yang sealed her memory...”

Even the Magic of Omniscience couldn’t read people’s thoughts. There was no way of knowing what Yang—a perfect stranger who was literally just passing by—had been thinking when he sealed Mio’s memories.

“Whoever pushed her off that building, if someone really did, is one problem, but Yang and his crew are another issue altogether. He stopped at sealing away Mio’s memories, but that might only have been because he was busy chasing Ellicia. If someone else from his group comes after Mio now, there’s no telling what they might do.”

“I see. You’re saying it’s not safe to leave Mio alone while we focus on Ellicia’s story.”

“If nothing else, there’s a chance that Yang means Mio harm,” Hibiki added.

“Yeah, so I want to make sure we keep her safe, too. She’ll

need a guard or something.”

“Is that why you didn’t ask me to go with the Ellicia team?” Lea asked, seemingly somewhat confused. “I am strong, but if these people are really that dangerous, you might need somebody who can do more than fight. And unfortunately, I’m afraid that’s all I can really do. Well, I guess there is my water magic.”

“That’s why I want you to come to Aburaamu with me.”

“Aburaamu?” Lea asked, even more confused.

“Harissa’s home world,” I explained.

“Harissa can go back to her world now?” Satsuki asked, eyes wide.

At that point, I explained to everyone where Harissa had come from and the new magic she’d invented to try and get back.

“So, you’re going to hide Mio in another world, huh? I suppose that’s as safe as you could get, yeah,” Shirley said with an exasperated shrug.

She seemed to feel like I was cheating. And maybe I was. If this were a game of chess, what I was planning on doing was akin to keeping my king safe by taking it off the board and hiding it. But as long as it kept Mio safe, I didn’t care if anyone called me a coward for doing it. It wasn’t like I had a way to fight Yang’s group head-on.

“Shouldn’t you let the two upstairs know what’s going on then?” Tsumiki asked.

“I’ll go get them,” Tetra offered and ran up the stairs.

As she left, Hibiki turned to me.

“I understand where you’re going with this, but what happens after you get to Harissa’s world?”

“The first thing we’ll do is find a safe place for Mio. Then I’ll come back and join your team. That’s the plan, anyway. Speaking of, can I have something personal of yours?”

“Of mine? Why?”

“When I come back, I’m going to use Harissa’s new spell. It’ll be faster that way.”

“I see. In that case...”

She took off one of the fingerless gloves she always wore and handed it to me.

“The more personal, the better, right? This is about as good as you could ask for.”

“Cool, thanks. I’ll come back as soon as I can.”

“Oh, but...” Suddenly Hibiki started to mumble. “D-Don’t do anything weird like smell it, okay?”

“Do you think I’m a pervert?”

“That’s exactly why I’m telling you not to smell it!”

“I wouldn’t!”

“That’s not fair, Hibiki! He should take one of my boots or my hairpiece!” Iris jumped in.

“Wait, I’ll give him my ribbon,” Rosalind offered.

“I’m still not smelling anything!”

Is that what they really thought of me? It was a little unsettling, but I didn't have time to waste on something so stupid. Instead of arguing, I cleared my throat and got things back on track.

“Anyway, my plan is to keep her in Aburaamu until we figure out how to resolve her story. We can focus on Ellicia's first, and hopefully catch Yang. If we do that, we might be able to learn how to get Mio's memories back, and we can go from there.”

“Understood,” Hibiki said with a firm nod and stood up. “If we have a plan in place, I think it's time for us to get moving.”

With our plans hammered out, everyone got ready to do their part.

“The Ellicia team will be using our house as a base,” said Shirley. “You've got plenty of preparations to make before leaving, so there's no reason for us to crowd you here.”

Shortly after Shirley and her team left, Mio, Harissa, and Tetra came down into a now much emptier living room.

“Rekka...”

As soon as Mio saw me, she dashed across the room.

“Huh? What's wrong?”

“This just makes me feel better...” she whispered softly as she wrapped her arms around my waist.

She'd practically freaked out when she heard my name the first time, so I was a bit stumped by the apparent one-eighty.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Tsumiki glared at me with narrow

eyes.

“She’s just a little girl. Maybe she’s scared?”

“MIO the idol is our age, you know.”

“What?!”

How?! She looked just like an elementary school girl!

“She made her debut three years ago when she was in middle school. You do the math.”

“How does everyone know so much about idols?”

“I’m a fan, duh.”

“Oh, I didn’t know.”

“It’s not a big deal or anything...” Tsumiki turned away, perhaps embarrassed to admit that right in front of an idol.

But Tsumiki wasn’t the only one. With Mio refusing to let go of me, all the girls were giving me dirty looks. I tried to ignore it and fill in Mio and Harissa on the plan.

“Psychic powers? Magic? Other worlds?” Mio looked absolutely baffled.

It’d been a while since I’d encountered a heroine who didn’t know about that kind of stuff, so I had Harissa use her invisibility magic to prove it was all real. Mio still seemed a little confused, but she agreed to my plan nonetheless.

“All right. We’re going to use the Hero’s Sword to get back to Aburaamu Castle. I’m considered a hero there, so the king should give us all a safe place to stay. Then we’ll gather enough Red Threads to allow us to travel between worlds as we please. Then

we'll come back here and meet up with Hibiki's team."

Tsumiki, confused, raised her hand and said, "I don't need to go, do I? I can stay here and help Shirley or something."

"Well, you see... We don't know how long Mio's going to have to stay there, so..."

I actually wanted Tsumiki there so Mio would have someone to talk to. I was hoping she'd be less lonely and scared that way. It could have been anyone, really, but Tsumiki had said she was a fan of MIO's, so it seemed like a good idea. And Tsumiki seemed to figure it out. She sighed and shrugged.

"All right, I'll go with you guys."

"Then I'll stay here and help Shirley," Tetra offered.

"Thanks, both of you."

With that all agreed upon, it was time to work out the rest of our preparations.



Everybody split up to take care of what they needed to before travelling to another world, and we all met back up at my house a little while later. We gathered in the backyard with backpacks of food and clothing, and we waited for Harissa to finish drawing the magic circle that would transport us back to her world.

"Whew, it's done."

Harissa took a deep breath when it was finally complete. The magic sending circle was a complicated series of interlocking patterns, and in the middle of it sat the catalyst from a Red Thread and the Hero's Sword. With that all in place, we were finally

ready to go.

“All right, it’s time,” Harissa said.

She began her incantation and touched her staff to the circle. Both of them began to glow with green magic.

“Eclena Cashu!”

With those words, her magic energy began glowing so brightly that it looked like it was on fire. And it only got brighter. White light filled my vision. I then felt myself floating, and for a moment I had no idea where I was. The one thing I felt was Mio’s warmth as she clung to me.



And so we crossed the boundary between worlds. As my senses returned to me, I felt my feet touch the ground.

“...Hmm?”

When I opened my eyes, the first thing I did was make sure everyone was okay. I was glad to see that they were.

Next, I looked around a bit. We’d ended up in a huge room with two doors, one in the back and one in front of where we were. There wasn’t anything else in the room, but the ornately decorated pillars holding up the stone ceiling told me it wasn’t just any old room.

Thinking back on it, Aburaamu Castle was a stone building, so with all I had to go on, it seemed like we’d ended up in the right place. At least, that’s what I thought...

“H-Huh?” Harissa was looking around, apparently confused.

“Harissa, what’s wrong?”

Seeing her like that made me a little nervous, and that feeling only grew worse when she could hardly answer me.

“U-Um, I...”

“Don’t panic. Take your time. Just tell us what’s going on.”

I put my hand on her shoulder and had her take a deep breath to calm herself down.

“I don’t think... this is the room where the Hero’s Sword was kept.”

“What?!” Tsumiki gasped, then put her hand over her mouth when she realized she’d made a mistake.

But it was too late. Harissa was already starting to panic. I could see tears in the corner of her eyes.

“I’m so sorry. I failed...” Harissa hung her head.

I looked around the room again. Come to think of it, this place did seem a lot bigger than the basement I remembered. The chamber with the Hero’s Sword in it was much smaller. More than a basement, this seemed like a proper castle dungeon.

“Well, we’re certainly not in my yard anymore, and it’s not like there are a lot of stone buildings around. Maybe we’re just in a different part of the castle?”

“I thought so too at first... but the air is different here somehow. It doesn’t feel like I’m home.”

“I-I see...”

“I’m sorry...”

So, we were lost in a *different* other world. It was at that point that a certain thought crossed my mind: Maybe this wasn't great.

Chapter 2: The One Boring Way to Clear an Underground Labyrinth (July 20th)

“Anyway, we’ve got another catalyst, so we can still return to Earth,” Harissa said.

She then took the Red Thread catalyst out of her pocket to show everyone. With that and the glove Hibiki had given me, we’d be able to get home.

“Whew... So, it’s not like we’re stuck here.” Tsumiki sighed in relief.

“But, um...” Harissa looked glum as she started to mumble.

I wondered for a moment what might be wrong, and then it dawned on me.

“That’s right... You only have one more of those, don’t you?”

“Yes...”

I knew what that meant, but the other three girls looked confused.

“The spell she used to get us here—and the same spell we need to get home—takes a magic item called a Red Thread. It’s something made in Harissa’s world, and can’t be replicated in ours.” Since Harissa didn’t look up to it, I explained. “And we only have one more of them. In other words, if we use it to get home, she can’t go back to Aburaamu.”

“Then...”

“Yeah. She’ll never be able to go home again.”

The whole point of this originally was for Harissa to be able to visit her home world. And since she was going anyway, I thought we could take Mio too to keep her safe.

“It’s fine... It’s my fault this happened. You don’t need to worry about it,” Harissa said, staring down at the floor. She clearly felt responsible, but she was also hesitant to use the last catalyst. To go home, or not...

Everyone fell silent, unsure of what to do.

“Hey, listen, everyone. Don’t worry.” I spoke up, hoping to cheer everyone up. “We need to find out what happened before anything else. We can wait until then to decide what we do with the catalyst, right?”

“Yeah. You’re right, Rekka,” Lea agreed.

The first thing you need to do in any situation is think. The only reason I’d managed to survive all my stories was because I never stopped thinking. And it seemed Harissa had taken my words to heart. She looked like she was gradually calming down. Mio was still worriedly clinging to my waist, but I figured she’d be doing that regardless.

“First, I want to check something important, Harissa.”

“O-Okay!”

“Did your spell really fail?”

“Huh?”

Harissa's eyes went wide. It was such an unexpectedly simple question that it threw her completely for a loop.

"Um... I mean, we're in the wrong world..."

"Sure, we're not in the world we wanted to be in. But that doesn't mean your magic didn't work."

"What do you mean?" Tsumiki interrupted.

"Let's say you have a car accident on your hands. Maybe the driver made a mistake, but there also might be something wrong with the car. Maybe a traffic light wasn't working properly, or maybe another driver is to blame. My point is that even if you have an accident, it's not necessarily the driver's fault."

"Oh... I see." Tsumiki nodded.

"I've been to other worlds a bunch of times, and when you go, there's this feeling of weightlessness. It's weird. And I definitely felt that when she used the spell. Harissa says this isn't her world, but I think the spell still worked."

I was sure of what I felt. It was unmistakable. It was something like the feeling you get when you close your eyes on a roller-coaster and can't tell whether you're going left, right, up, or down.

"It worked with the remote, right? Did you do anything different this time?"

"No, I don't think so..." she said hesitantly.

"So if there was nothing wrong with the spell, then there must be another reason we didn't make it to Aburaamu."

"Another reason?" Harissa asked, a glimmer of hope in her voice.

“Like what?” Tsumiki asked.

“Well, that’s what we have to find out. And first things first, we need to figure out exactly where we did end up. So... let’s look around some more. We haven’t even seen what’s behind those yet.”

There were two doors in the room, and I had no way of knowing which went where. I took a stab in the dark and pointed to the door closer to us. Everyone walked over to it. The door itself was made out of what looked like carved stone, but there was no handle. How were we supposed to open it?

“What do we do? Should I break it down?”

Lea began to wind up for a punch. She would probably be able to break through it with ease, but Harissa stepped in and stopped her.

“Wait a moment. This is... Let me give something a try. Lugol Arie!”

She raised her staff in front of the door, and it began to slide open.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“I once went to an ancient temple in Aburaamu, and they had doors that worked with magic. I thought I could try the same thing here.”

Hmm... So maybe this place was connected to Aburaamu somehow? It would seem strange that they used the same system for doors otherwise. Feeling encouraged, we all went through the door and were met with a sight not a single one of us had expected.

“ ... ”

It was a naked girl.

“Why isn’t she wearing any clothes?” I wondered.

But that wasn’t the only question I had. Her pale limbs were trapped in some kind of strange stone that melded with the floor. It looked like a statue of a woman tied to a stone cross, but it was definitely a real girl... and, um... her long hair was covering her delicate parts, but it was hard to look at, honestly.

“Rekka, look carefully. That’s what a real woman looks like.”

“Don’t you dare stare.”

R and Tsumiki said the exact opposite thing, but I was taking Tsumiki’s side on this one. R was a terrible role model.

“Is she... asleep?” Lea asked the question we were all wondering.

The girl wasn’t moving at all, so she appeared to be sleeping... or even dead. It was hard to tell.

The base of the restraints confining her was shining with a pale light. It was similar to the light I saw when Satsuki or Harissa cast spells. I figured there was a good chance it was something magical.

“Harissa, Lea, do you know what that is?” I asked the two girls I thought would be most likely to know something.

“It’s probably some kind of binding spell.”

“I think so, too. It’s not the one that bound me, but it feels similar.”

Their answers were more or less what I figured. But that left me with the question of what to do about it. If it really was magical, I could probably use the Hero's Sword to break through it. Before making a move, however, I asked everyone else what they thought.

"I feel bad for her. We should save her," Tsumiki said pointing at the helpless girl.

I couldn't blame her for feeling that way, either. She certainly did look like she needed saving. But...

"I don't know why she was sealed, but there must be some reason. It might not be a good idea to set her free," Lea said.

She'd once released a powerful being, Bahamut, who'd been sealed away for a very good reason. That made her cautious, and she wasn't interested in making the same mistake twice. Harissa declined to say anything, and Mio just silently clung to me as she had been. With them abstaining, the vote was one to one.

"Hmm..."

This strange stone room was probably underground, and this girl was sealed away with magic.

"Wait..."

Something suddenly crossed my mind, and I turned to R. She was usually the first person I consulted when I came across something strange like this. But she didn't notice. In fact, she wasn't looking at me at all. I discreetly tugged her sleeve so the rest of the girls wouldn't see. She finally turned around, but looked strangely upset.

"What are you doing? I'm trying to find the best angle right now."

I started to ask what she meant, but then it hit me. She was trying to figure out if she could see through the girl's hair. She wanted to see her completely naked. I tugged her sleeve harder and told her to knock it off.

“Jeez, what do you want?”

I was glad that she was starting to show some emotion, but why did her personality have to end up like this? A little peeved, I gave her a stern look. She then seemed to realize what I wanted.

“Yes, it looks like she's a heroine,” she said like I'd asked a dumb question, and then promptly went back to trying to sneak a peek at the girl.

Hmm... I needed to have a long talk with R, but that would have to wait.

If this girl was a heroine like R said, that meant she needed my help somehow. And if I was going to help her, that meant I needed to save her first. Step one would be releasing this seal. Maybe she'd been kidnapped or something? Compared to Mio's confusing story, this seemed a little more straightforward.

“All right, let's save her,” I said.

Just in case, I had the girls step back. Mio was reluctant to leave me, so I had Lea take her.

It had been quite a while since I'd last held the Hero's Sword, and it felt awkward in my hands. I'd fought by just flailing it around before. Swords just weren't my thing, it seemed. But I could lift it up, and bring it straight down...!

“Yaaah!”

I swung the sword down on the shining part of the dais.

Clang!

The dais shattered, and the bonds restraining the girl seemed to shatter along with it. The next thing I knew, something fell down on top of me.

“Hmm... Dwaaah!”

It was the naked girl!

“Well, you destroyed the seal, so of course she’d fall down,” R said.

She was right, but I’d realized it too late.

“Oww...”

How many times now had somebody landed on top of me? I tried to move her off me without really thinking about it... and grabbed something soft. It was another feeling I was really familiar with...!

“What are you doing?!”

“Fgyah!”

The sole of Tsumiki’s shoe came down square on my forehead so hard that it rattled my brain. I thought she was trying to split my head open.

“Don’t even think about looking up for a while.”

“...Okay...”

This didn’t really seem fair, but I decided to just go with it. Eventually Tsumiki told me it was okay, and I slowly stood up. As soon as I did, Mio ran over and grabbed on to me again.

When I looked, the girl was wearing some of Tsumiki's spare clothes and was lying on the ground with her head in Lea's lap. Fortunately, it didn't look like she'd hurt herself falling from the dais. Soon she began to fidget a little, and then she slowly opened her ruby-colored eyes.



“Who are you...?”

She looked around at each of us. She was probably more interested in what we were doing here than our names.

“Um... we’re lost?”

She frowned. Apparently that wasn’t the answer she was hoping for, but unfortunately it was the truth, and I didn’t have a whole lot else to tell her. Suddenly, however, her eyes seemed to hone in on specific spot. She was looking at the Hero’s Sword.

“That sword... why do you have it?”

“Oh, do you know it?”

She seemed to recognize it. But if she recognized the sword, and the sword was from Aburaamu, did that mean that this was Aburaamu after all?

“Hey, can you tell me—”

“I’ll ask you one more time. Who are you, and why do you have that sword?” the girl cut me off.

The look in her eyes was the very image of seriousness. It was pretty clear that she wasn’t going to answer my questions if I didn’t answer hers.

“My name is Rekka Namidare. I used this sword to defeat the Demon King when this girl, Harissa, summoned me to her world, and I ended up taking it home with me.”

If she knew what I was talking about, that could be a good sign.

“I see. I understand the situation.”

She raised her head off of Lea's lap. She still looked pale and didn't have her strength back, but she managed to stand up on her own.

"First, my name is Corona. Thank you, boy from another world, for releasing the seal."

This girl—Corona, apparently—seemed to have a strange air of authority about her in everything she said and did.

"S-So, about the sword..." I gently tried to remind her.

"Don't be in such a hurry. The answer is yes, I know that sword you're holding."

"Really?!" I asked without thinking, and she nodded in response.

"Although, I suppose there's a more precise answer to your question."

"Huh?"

"That sword originally belonged to me."

"What?!"

Both Harissa and I were shocked. But if that was true, then that would mean...

"I am the hero who saved that world. At least, I once was. If you're the current hero, then I suppose I've passed the title on to you."

"No way..." I shook my head in disbelief.

I mean, that would still make her a hero. And the real deal to boot. But that was one heck of a surprise.

“H-Huwah...” Harissa was so shocked that she could barely speak. Instead, she was flailing her hands about to express her surprise.

“By the way, you there...” Corona said, looking at Harissa.

“Y-Yes?!” She froze.

“What is your name?”

“H-H-Harissa H-H-Hope. It’s a p-pleasure to meet you, Her... Corona.”

Harissa cast a glance my way as she stopped herself from calling Corona “Hero.”

“Hmm, I see.”

Corona ignored her, however, and seemed to be lost in thought.

Was there something unusual about Harissa’s name? I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious, but I had more immediate concerns.

“Hey, Corona. Where are we right now? Is this not Abu-raamu?”

“Unfortunately, it’s not. This place is known as the spirit world.”

“The spirit world?!” Harissa gasped.

“Harissa, do you know it?”

“Know it? This is where the spirits I summon live.” Harissa then looked around, whispering to herself in pure amazement. “So this is the spirit world...”

“Then are you a spirit, Corona?”

“Hmm... Well, something like that.”

“You’re a spirit...” Harissa whispered as she looked down at the ground.

I wasn’t sure why she had such a serious look on her face after finding out Corona was a spirit of some kind, but I decided to let it be for the time being.

“My next question is, where are we specifically? What is this building? It feels like it’s underground.”

“This is the lowest floor of an underground labyrinth called the Ruler’s Dungeon, I believe...”

“A labyrinth? And we’re all the way at the bottom?”

“You don’t know anything about it? Surely you had to traverse the dungeon to get down here to me.”

“Well...”

I proceeded to explain to her how we’d actually gotten here. When she heard our story, she simply said, “That sounds rough,” and nothing more.

“So, it’s your turn now. What were you doing sealed down here?”

Corona didn’t answer.

Before we’d undone the seal, Lea had suggested that there must be a reason she was here, but why would anyone have to seal away a former hero? I was definitely curious about that, but it wasn’t the only thing I wanted to know. And if she wasn’t going

to answer, I decided I might as well try asking her something else.

“By the way, do you have anything from Aburaamu? Something with a strong connection to that world?”

“You mean for the connection magic you were talking about?”

“That’s right.”

I could piece together why we’d arrived here instead of Aburaamu now. We were using the sword to try and make the bridge between worlds because it had a strong connection to Aburaamu. We’d known from the start that connections to people were stronger than connections to places, but Harissa had never considered that the original owner of the Hero’s Sword could still be alive. That meant, however, that her spell was indeed a success. And now that we knew that the magic worked, all we needed was an item to connect us to Aburaamu, and we’d be fine. Of course, we might be out of luck if Corona didn’t have anything like that.

“Certainly.”

“Yes!” I cheered.

That would make this a lot easier. We could just— “I do, but not here.”

“...Of course.”

Corona had been sealed away in this dungeon completely naked. She didn’t have anything on her, much less personal possessions. If she had something that connected her to Aburaamu, it wasn’t going to be down here.

“Then let’s go get whatever it is. I’d like you to let us borrow it for a bit. I promise we’ll bring it back.”

“That’s fine, but...” Corona looked calmly up at the ceiling.
“How are you going to make it out of this labyrinth?”

“Oh.”

I suddenly remembered where we were: the lowest level of an underground labyrinth called the Ruler’s Dungeon. I only knew that because it’s what Corona had said, but it didn’t seem like she had any reason to lie to us. And that meant that the dungeon above was standing between us and whatever Corona had that could get us back to Aburaamu. In other words, without getting out of this dungeon, we were never getting home. I broke into a sweat, but R was casually doing somersaults in the air above me.

“So, it’s a dungeon this time, huh? Too bad there’s no princess with a string waiting to lead you outside. Will you be able to make it?”

I honestly didn’t know. RPGs weren’t exactly a specialty of mine or anything.



“Uwaaaaah!”

We were running down the corridors of the Ruler’s Dungeon as fast as we could manage. Why, you ask? Well...

Rrrrrumble...

“A giant rock is rolling after us!”

“It’s your fault for pushing that weird button!” Tsumiki yelled.

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! It’s all my fault for finding the weird button!” Harissa yelled back.

“Stop talking and run!” shouted Lea, who was carrying Mio.

We were all booking it for everything we were worth, but we were quickly coming up on a dead end. It looked like we were going to get squished.

“Into that room over there!” Corona pointed to a door just up ahead.

We made a dash for it, and Harissa immediately started casting her opening spell.

“H-Hurry!” Tsumiki yelled.

Harissa shouted the spell as loudly and as quickly as she could, and the door slowly started to slide open. Damn, did I say it was slow yet? Come on, go faster!

“Nwaaah!”

We forced ourselves through the narrow gap that had opened up. I could hear the boulder rolling past us on the other side of the door, but before we had time to catch our breath...

Rumble, rumble...

“Huh?”

I heard what sounded like stones grinding together, and when I turned around, I was met with the sight of an earthen giant raising its equally giant sword overhead.

“That’s a golem!”

“Huh, sure would help if this dungeon had an easy mode or something.”

Thank you, R, captain obvious!

Rumble, rumble...

The golem swung its huge sword downward. It was trying to slice us all apart!

“Yah!” Lea shouted and stopped the blade by grabbing it with her bare hands.

“Lea!”

“It’s quite heavy, but...”

SNAP!

Lea clenched her fist, and the sword shattered between her fingers.

“It’s not as powerful as that vampire’s fists.”

Without missing a beat, Lea then stepped in and destroyed both the golem’s legs with a single kick. Now unable to move, it gradually shut down.

“Whew...”

Nothing else in the room moved, so it looked like that was the only trap. We could finally take a break.

“You know, I kind of figured it would be something like this when you called it a dungeon, but... there are way too many traps here.”

Since leaving the room where we found Corona, we’d run into at least 30 of them. Considering dungeons were supposed to get tougher the further down you went, that meant that we—beginning adventurers at best—had started off with the hardest part. Actually... Forget it. It was probably best not to think about it.

Lea was still okay, but the other girls were at their limits. Mio was physically fine since Lea had carried her the whole way, but I could see the fear on her face. She was stressed out, which wasn't helping her previous exhaustion any.

“Is this just going to keep going... Corona?”

Corona, pale and spaced-out, took a moment to realize I was talking to her.

“...Hm?”

Apparently she was tired, too.

“Are you okay?”

“Mm... Oh, I'm fine.”

Even though she said she was okay, she didn't look like it. The long time she'd spent sealed away must have had an effect on her. Come to think of it, how long had she been sealed down here, anyway? She saved Aburaamu... several centuries ago, right?

That meant that even though she looked like she was our age, she was way, way older than that. How long did spirits live? Or had she just not aged while she was sealed? I had a lot of questions, but she looked out of sorts enough that I decided to stick to what was most important. And right now, our most pressing problem was how to get out of the dungeon.

“Corona, how many floors does this dungeon have?”

She thought for a minute and said, “A hundred, I believe.”

That many, huh? We still hadn't found a single staircase, so it was a tough number to get my head around. We'd managed to cheat our way straight to the bottom and save the sealed hero, but

because of that cheat, we had no real way to get back up.

“Well, no point in crying about it.”

I knew these girls wouldn’t make it through another 99 floors of this, so we needed to come up with an easier way to get out. A shortcut.

“Let’s try to come up with a way to bypass all the monsters and traps.”

Like usual, it wasn’t the standard way of doing things, but I wasn’t concerned about the details on this impromptu dungeon crawl.

“I don’t know about that...” Tsumiki said with a frown.

What I was saying probably sounded crazy.

“Let’s just go over what we know about the dungeon for now.”

It was a huge labyrinth filled with traps. It was a hundred floors deep. It had traps and doors that seemed to be magical.

“I... guess that’s it.”

“It’s hard to even comprehend.”

“Yeah...”

Tsumiki and Harissa sighed. I looked at Corona.

“How much do you know about the way this dungeon is laid out?”

“...Hm?”

She was still pale. If anything, she looked worse than before.

“Are you really okay? Want something to eat?”

“Sorry, but I don’t think I could eat anything right now,” she said, stopping me when she saw me starting to go into my backpack. “This dungeon... Unfortunately, I don’t know a lot about it. I wasn’t the one who made it, after all.”

“I see...”

It was a fair point. If she’d known how the dungeon was set up, we wouldn’t have fallen for all those traps.

“Hmm...” I scratched my head.

“Rekka.”

“What is it, Lea?”

“I might have a plan.”

“Really?!”

“Yes,” she said, looking up at the ceiling. “I can take my Leviathan form, and everyone can get on my back. Then I can just break through ceiling after ceiling until we get to the surface.”

“What?!”

Well, that would be a lot faster than walking.

“But there’s a hundred floors to this dungeon. We don’t know how sturdy it is. Damaging it too much might cause a cave-in.”

“...I’d rather not be buried alive.”

“With plenty of energy, I could protect everyone, but I don’t think I have enough right now.”

“Then...”

I looked at Tsumiki. The dark matter she created while practicing cooking was energy-dense and Lea’s favorite source of fuel. We had some food with us. It was mostly just preserved goods, but maybe...

“No, um... I didn’t bring any cooking utensils or anything...”

Okay, maybe not.

“Why didn’t you?!”

“I thought if we needed any, we could just use the castle kitchen! Besides, I had lots of clothes and things to pack...”

Come to think of it, I had asked her to pack clothes for Mio, too. I didn’t think that would come back to haunt me...

“What do we do, Rekka? If we’re careful when we break through the floors, we might be fine. But who knows how long that will take...”

“Anyone have any other ideas?”

Since I still had Ellicia’s story to worry about, I wanted to get to the surface as soon as possible, but I wasn’t willing to risk everyone’s safety to do it. As I was pondering the dilemma...

“Ugh...” Corona groaned and fell over on the floor.

“Corona?!”

“Hahh... hahh...”

She was panting heavily. Had we pushed her too hard too soon after breaking the seal? I was kicking myself, but there wasn’t much point in dwelling on it. I had Harissa use a healing spell on

her and tried to feed her a little food, but none of it helped.

“Ugh...”

“It’s no good. My magic’s easing her pain, but it isn’t fixing the real problem.”

“The real problem? She’s not just tired like Mio was?”

I patted Mio, who was now clinging to my waist again, on the head.

“I’m not an expert in healing magic, so I don’t really know... but I believe she’s suffering from some kind of illness.”

“Like what?”

“That I don’t know.” Harissa looked down.

“Don’t sweat it. Thanks for your help, Harissa.”

Even though her magic spell had actually worked properly, Harissa still felt guilty for bringing us to this world. I wanted to keep the conversation light so she didn’t end up feeling any worse.

After I talked to Harissa, Mio tugged on my sleeve.

“Rekka... what are we going to do?”

If Corona was sick, then we needed to get her to a doctor. But any doctors would be on the surface, and the only way to get up there right now was the brute force method. It was dangerous, but if we took the slow and steady route instead, we’d just be wasting time. And with each passing minute, Corona’s condition might be getting worse...

But hurrying meant more danger. Maybe we should just give

up on Aburaamu and go back to Earth? No, there was no way to be sure that normal doctors could help Corona. We'd have to get her to the surface here to save her. But the only way there was risky, and I was hesitant to take it.

I leaned up against the wall and looked up at the ceiling. If there were some way we could get through the ceiling without destroying it, that would probably make the trip up a lot less dangerous. Something like what I'd seen Ellicia do.

"If only we could just pass through the ceiling..."

The instant I said that, it felt like the wall vanished from behind me. Since I was leaning up against it, I lost all my support and fell straight backward. Everything went black for a moment, but the light returned just in time for me to feel the back of my head colliding with something hard.

"OW!"

I grabbed my head, not knowing what had happened. It hurt so bad that there were tears welling in my eyes, but that wasn't what was on my mind.

"...Huh?"

Everyone was gone, and I couldn't hear anything.

Where was I? The walls were still made of stone, but... No, something was wrong.

Why were the pillars sideways and coming out of the walls? And why was my face so close the ground? And this feeling on my back... Wait...

It took me that long to process that I was lying face up on the floor.

“How...”

The instant I started to say something, I heard a sound I recognized.

Rrrrrumble...

“Is that...?”

Yup. It was a large boulder rolling straight towards me.

“Uwaaah!”

I quickly sat up to get out of the way, but then my vision went dark again. What... What was going on? I couldn't be a hundred percent sure, but I could almost swear that...

“Did I just sit up into the wall?”

That's certainly what it seemed like.

“Huh?”

I was talking to myself out loud, but I couldn't hear my own voice. It was like someone had their hand over my mouth. Or my ears. Maybe both. But in the midst of my befuddlement, I felt someone grab my ankle and yank hard.

“Waaa... ah?”

Now I could hear myself screaming just fine. I timidly opened my eyes to see the girls again, and they looked worried.

“Rekka! Are you okay?”

“Huh? Wh-What happened to me?” I stammered.

“You fell behind the wall!”

“Huh?”

Tsumiki explained that while I was leaning against the wall, I’d suddenly fallen backwards through it. All that was left sticking out on this side was my foot at the base of the wall, and the rest of me appeared to be inside it. They’d all panicked, but Lea had taken it upon herself to try and pull me out of the wall.

“Sheesh... I’m glad you’re okay. I was worried that all that would come off would be your ankle when I pulled.”

“That’s terrifying! I don’t even want to think about that!”

Quickly purging that thought from my mind, I tried putting it all together. I must’ve literally fallen through the wall and landed on the other side, which was out in the hallway. That big rock coming for me was probably the same one that had tried to crush us earlier. It was weird enough as it was, but weirder still that I’d just been thinking about doing exactly that.

“Is this... Ellicia’s power?”

It was precisely what I’d seen her do, and it didn’t seem like there was any way that was a coincidence. There had to be some reason I could do it now, too.

“Hmm...”

I thought back to when I’d met her. Going over what had happened in my head, what stuck out to me was that she’d hugged me while she was telling me that Yang was after her. I could understand why she’d told me that, but why the hug? It didn’t make sense. And let’s see... Just before that, I remember her running

her fingers through her hair...

“...”

I started patting myself down.

“Sir Rekka?”

“Rekka, what are you doing?”

The girls seemed confused, but I kept searching until I found something. It was a small object in my back pocket.

“What is that? An earring?” Tsumiki asked when she saw me pull it out.

She was probably wondering why I had something like that. Of course she would be. It was clearly a girl’s earring. But it was Ellicia’s, not mine.

When Ellicia was pretending to run her fingers through her hair, she was really taking off this earring. And when she’d hugged me, it was so she could slip it into my back pocket. As for why she’d done it... Well, she probably didn’t *want* to share her wall walking ability with me. She probably wanted to keep Yang from getting his hands on it. Giving it to me was just her way of making sure it would stay safe even if she was captured.

There was no way of telling what power the earring really had, but the one thing I knew for sure was that it gave me the ability to pass through walls. It was probably something very important in Ellicia’s story, but for now it was going to be our ticket out of here.

“Lea, I’ve got an idea.”



After that, I tried going through several walls to figure out the limits of the wall walking power. First, I learned that the power needed to be activated. You had to imagine going through a wall for it to work. Next, it couldn't go through the earth. You would just sink downwards through the floor until your feet hit whatever natural ground was below.

Lastly, and mostly importantly, I learned the power didn't just work on one person. It affected the person holding the earring as well as anyone or anything they were touching, but the important part was that they had to be in direct contact. For example, if I held Harissa's hand and Harissa held Tsumiki's hand, Harissa and I could go through the wall but Tsumiki couldn't. That meant the easiest way for us to get out would be to have Lea hold the earring while we clung to her and she flew up through the ceiling, but...

"All right, let's go."

"R-Right."

I nodded timidly. Lea was still in her human form. That made c-clinging to her a little difficult for me...

Our first plan was to get all of us to ride on her back while she was in Leviathan form, but there was a passed-out Corona to consider. Since we'd be going straight up, there was a danger that she'd fall off. So instead, we decided that Lea would carry Corona on her back, and everyone else would grab on to her body somewhere.

"Rekka, don't be shy. Squeeze tighter. I'm holding Corona, so if you fall, I won't be able to grab you, too."

"Y-Yeah..."

Lea was right, but...

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Tsumiki and Harissa were glowering at me.

But I had to ignore them. I didn't want to die, so I took a deep breath and squeezed Lea tighter... Wow, she was really soft. There were plenty of... handholds... to grab on to, but I knew if I picked the wrong one, I'd be the one needing a doctor. Tsumiki was vicious when it came to that stuff.

“Okay. Tsumiki, Harissa, Mio, are you ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Yup.”

“...Yes.”

Mio answered last and the least enthusiastically, but her arm was wrapped tightly around Lea's waist nonetheless. With all of us clinging to her, she looked like some kind of tree that grew people instead of fruit, I thought.

“All right, here I go,” Lea said, and then her feet floated off the floor.

When we got high enough in the air that we were closing in on the ceiling, I closed my eyes. It looked like we were going to crash straight into it... but then the power activated, and we passed right through. Lea started picking up speed, but I couldn't feel anything pulling me downward. Her flight magic completely freed us from gravity, so as long as no one let go, there was no way we'd fall on the way up.

Eventually, we passed through all one hundred floors that

way...

“Whoa!”

And were welcomed to the surface by the light of a brilliant sun.

Side Story: Hibiki Feature (July 20th)

The Ellicia rescue team, led by Hibiki, started by travelling to the next town over by train.

She's staying in places where there are lots of people... No, lots of buildings? Her wall walking power is probably more useful in places like this.

Hibiki called Satsuki on her phone as she and the others left the station.

"I just got off the train. Where's Ellicia?"

"Just a second..."

The Magic of Omniscience was powerful, but it was draining. Satsuki didn't have that much magical power left, so she couldn't keep using it forever. With that in mind, they were having her conserve her energy until it was really needed. She was the only way they had to track down Ellicia, so they couldn't have her running out of gas at a critical moment.

"She's 300 meters west of the station. It's... a department store. She's inside there. Yang hasn't gone inside yet, but he's close, it looks like."

"Got it. I'll call you when we get there." Hibiki hung up the phone and turned around to the rest of the party. "There's a department store west of here. Let's move out."

"..."

“What’s wrong, Rosalind?”

“You’re not a very inspiring leader.”

“...Sorry for not being Rekka.”

Hibiki sighed and rubbed her temples. She looked and saw that Iris also had an unimpressed look on her face. Only Suzuran was neutral.

Shirley and her group went to Berano to get tools and intelligence regarding dealing with psychics... Satsuki’s tracking the target with her magic, and Tetra’s with her for support. The four of us are supposed to actually find Ellicia. I’d like to think the jobs were divided properly, but...

Hibiki was losing confidence. She wondered if she should have borrowed Garnet from Shirley. Garnet was an android, but she was good at what she did. She might’ve been more useful than these two unenthusiastic teammates. But right now, Garnet was in space with Shirley. Hibiki knew there was no sense in whining about what she couldn’t have.

“But... if you can find Ellicia before Rekka gets back, I think he’d really be impressed, you know?”

“Then what are we standing around for, Hibiki?! Let’s go!”

“Yeah, let’s get moving!”

Rekka’s name works wonders on those two...

Hibiki had used the same trick on them several times on the way here, and it was surprisingly effective on both Iris and Rosalind. But she kept her astonishment to herself and chased after the two girls, trying to keep up as best she could. Since they were both using their superhuman strength, Hibiki was quite a bit

slower than they were.

“Miss Hibiki, are you all right?” Suzuran asked as she ran along beside her.

Though she was once a homunculus, Suzuran was a normal human now. She couldn’t run any faster than Hibiki could, so the other two girls were quickly leaving them behind.

“I’m not out of breath or anything.”

“No, I merely mean to say that my mistress doesn’t take orders from others often.”

“...Well, that’s true, isn’t it?”

It seemed that Suzuran was worried about her mental state rather than her physical condition. Really, Hibiki wasn’t used to being in a leadership position. She’d been caught up in lots of stories before just like Rekka had, but she’d never had to rely on others like he did.

In that sense, maybe Rekka has a special talent...

Even Rosalind would do exactly what he told her to. Her romantic attraction to him was probably to thank for that, but that wasn’t all it was about. What it really boiled down to was that people relied on Rekka the same way he relied on them. That was Rekka’s true power. People trusted him. They trusted him to help them, and he could trust in their help in return.

Even me... I keep thinking that he’ll come up with some way to solve all this.

Hibiki didn’t personally know if that was a good or a bad thing, but there was something else she was afraid of.

What will happen to Rekka when he gets involved in a story he can't save?

Both the Namidare and the Banjo bloodlines were more or less last resorts. With the way things worked, they only got caught up in stories that still had the possibility of a happy ending. Hibiki wanted to have faith in their team and embrace that possibility... but what was she to think in a situation like this? Rekka was in another world while his heroine was being chased down by some kind of psychic mafia.

Of course, the reason Rekka had taken off to go hide Mio in another world was because he trusted Hibiki's team to save Ellicia for him. If it weren't for that, he would've come up with some other plan. But even then, Rekka Namidare was just a normal teenage boy. He could only be in one place at one time, and there was a limit to what a normal boy like him could do. One day, he might...

...No, there's no point in thinking about what might happen.

Perhaps it was just Hibiki's naturally defensive instincts getting the better of her. She was used to working alone, but Rekka had friends to help him. Hibiki was even one of them.

I just need to take care of this myself. That way I won't have anything to worry about.

Since Rekka wasn't here, she'd have to save Ellicia for him.

Eventually, Hibiki and Suzuran reached the department store.

"I don't see Iris or Rosalind..."

"Did they go in ahead of us?"

That seemed to be the case. Hibiki sighed and called Satsuki.

“I’m here. Is Ellicia still inside?”

“Hold on... Yes, she is. She’s on the fifth floor.”

“Got it. I’m not going to hang up, so just stay on the line and keep me posted. Do you have enough magical power left?”

“I’ve got about 30 minutes left.”

“That should be plenty. Where’s Yang now?”

“Hold on... This isn’t good. He’s inside... on the second floor and going upwards.”

Hearing that her enemy was closing in on her target, Hibiki knew that they needed to act swiftly.

“Suzuran, let’s go!”

“Right!”

The two of them dashed in through the door to the department store. Since it was the first day of summer break, it was rather busy. Hibiki and Suzuran darted their way through the crowds, dodging people left and right.

Yang is reading people’s minds as he tracks her down, so it’s best if we avoid him. Which means...

Hibiki ignored the stairs and the elevator, and instead ran up the escalator. What floor were Iris and Rosalind on? They might just be running around the department store searching on their own, but Hibiki didn’t have time to track them down.

First, I need to make contact with Ellicia.

When she made it to the fifth floor, Hibiki grabbed her phone again.

“Where is she?”

“Still on the fifth floor. On your left... in the toy department.”

Hibiki let Suzuran know what was happening, and they proceeded to the toy department on Satsuki’s instructions. The aisles there were filled with children browsing the shelves of toys and dolls. Hibiki didn’t want to trip over any of them, so she was forced to slow down in this part of the store. Proceeding carefully through the area, she spotted a girl who matched the description she’d been given of Ellicia.

“Ellicia Otto?”

“Who are you?!”

The girl, who had a windmill-shaped mark under her left eye, looked up at Hibiki in fright. Someone she’d never met before had just called her by her full name. It only made sense that she’d be surprised.

“Don’t worry. Do you remember the name Rekka Namidare?”

“...Rekka?” Ellicia’s brow furrowed. She hadn’t expected to hear that name.

“He told us you were being chased, so we came to save you.”

“You came to help me?”

“That’s right.”

“...Even if that’s true, how do you know my full name?”

Crap... Did Rekka only get her first name?

Hibiki was kicking herself for making that mistake, but she had no time to dwell on it. She quickly had to come up with a way

to get Ellicia to trust her. She was a psychic, so maybe she'd be willing to believe something that was a little out of the ordinary.

"I know how this is going to sound, but the truth is that we learned your name and location via magic."

"Magic?! Are you pursuers from the Margaret clan?!"

"Margaret...?"

Hibiki knew that name. She'd dealt with someone from the Margaret clan once before.

Chelsea... Her last name was Margaret, I think.

But Chelsea had left home at an early age, and she'd never really talked much about her family with Hibiki. All she really knew was that they were supposedly known for being powerful mages.

Maybe it's not really Yang and his group she's running from, then... Why would she be worried about the Margarets, though?

It suddenly seemed like there was more to this than they'd first suspected. Hibiki grabbed her phone and lifted it up to her ear to ask Satsuki about it, but when she did...

"Hibiki! Behind you!" a panicked voice cried from the other end of the line.

When Hibiki heard that, she immediately jumped forward. She could feel something pass through the air right behind her head not a second later. She turned around to see a man dressed in black now tangling with Suzuran. Suzuran dodged his punches, then moved in to strike him in the head and knock him out. But...

"Suzuran, no!" Hibiki screamed, but it was too late.

The man almost seemed to know that her attack was coming. He blocked it with hardly any effort, then countered with a hard punch to Suzuran's solar plexus.

“Gah...!”

Suzuran doubled over, then backed away to keep her distance. The children around them screamed and scattered.



“Yang!” Ellicia screamed.

That’s right! He can read minds. We’ll never beat him in a close-range fight...

Yang’s gaze suddenly shifted from Ellicia to Hibiki.

“How did you know that?”

“Tch!”

Realizing she was outmatched, Hibiki turned around, grabbed Ellicia’s hand, and started to run.

“H-Hey!”

“Just come with me! You don’t want to get caught, right?!”

Hibiki glanced back over her shoulder as she ran with Ellicia in tow. Yang was currently stepping over a collapsed Suzuran as he followed after them.

Suzuran should be fine. The question is whether we can escape.

“Ellicia, does your wall walking work on floors?!”

“How do you know about all this stuff?!”

“If it does, then use it!”

“...!”

Hibiki then suddenly felt like she was floating. Her field of vision began dropping rapidly as she passed through the floor and then the ceiling below it.

“Damn it!” Hibiki hit the floor and rolled. “Ellicia!”

“...Are you really trying to help me escape?”

“You still doubt me? If I was with the Margaret clan, why would I have asked you about Rekka Namidare first?!”

Hibiki and Rekka both knew Chelsea personally, but they didn’t exactly have anything to do with the Margarets.

“If anything, I’d appreciate you telling me how the Margarets fit in to all this!”

“...I guess that really means you don’t know, doesn’t it?”

“Good. I’m glad we’re on the same page now. But for the time being, we just need to get out of here,” Hibiki said as she got up and made to start running again. “...Huh?”

What is this? I can’t move!

It was like she was suddenly paralyzed.

“Stun?! So, you’re here, too...”

Ellicia was frozen, too, but she was shouting at the hooded man coming up the escalator.

Some kind of telekinesis? This guy must be with Yang’s organization... Did they gather here because Yang found Ellicia?

But he wasn’t the only one Hibiki had to worry about. Suddenly, a girl she didn’t recognize appeared out of thin air along with Yang. It happened in the blink of an eye, much like the way Iris’s warp watch worked.

No, this isn’t alien technology... It’s magical teleportation. But if they have that kind of power, they should have been able to

catch up to her sooner. Does it have distance limitations like the warp watch?

Hibiki's mind had no trouble keeping up with what was going on, but her body wouldn't respond.

"Lucy..."

"Ellicia, I've finally caught up with you." The girl called Lucy looked at Ellicia with a mixture of relief and uncertainty. "Ellicia... why did you leave us?"

"To stop Yang's plan."

Hibiki's ears perked up at the word "plan."

Yang's plan? That's why she's on the run?

Hibiki tried as best as she could to follow their conversation.

"Lucy, Stun, how can you go along with this?! If he goes through with it, it'll mess up the whole world!"

The man in the hood—the one Ellicia called Stun—said nothing.

"Just come back with us. We'll talk things through, and then you'll see for yourself." Lucy looked a little sad as she turned to Yang. "Yang?"

"No, wait. Before we go, I'm going to read this girl and figure out who she is," Yang said as he put his hand on Hibiki's head.

Hibiki felt an awful feeling in her stomach when she heard him say the word "read." Yang's psychic powers allowed him to read people's thoughts and memories like a book.

"Banjo? Namidare? Who are you people?"

“Get out of my mind!” Hibiki yelled, knowing there was nothing else she could do.

But he put his hand on me to do it... So even if he can read minds from a distance, it seems he has to make direct contact to read people's memories...

“You’re smart, girl,” Yang said with a smirk as he made a fist.

Now that he knew about the Banjo and Namidare families, he wasn’t going to make the mistake of underestimating Hibiki as a normal teenager. He decided to eliminate the potential threat right here and now.

“...Gah!”

Hibiki’s body was still paralyzed by Stun’s telekinesis, so she had no way to defend against Yang’s attack. Her eyes flitted about, searching for anything that might help her. That was when she saw two figures running up the escalator, but that would work against her. Since Yang was reading her thoughts, he was alerted to the ambush from Iris and Rosalind coming at him from behind and dodged accordingly.

“Huh?!”

“Tch!”

Iris and Rosalind both came in with flying kicks, but once they missed, they spun around in mid-air and landed on the other side of Yang.

“Hibiki!”

Iris picked up Hibiki and started to run. Rosalind followed.

“It looks like that telekinesis hold isn’t perfect. External force

can break it, apparently.”

It might be unique to Iris because her strength was out of this world, but either way, Hibiki could move again. Now she just had to figure out what to do next. Neither side had planned it, but Hibiki’s team was facing off against Yang’s organization.

The problem is that they’ve got Ellicia. And they’ve also got someone who can teleport...

But she had Satsuki and Iris on her side. And that wasn’t all.

“Rosalind, can you use your charm?”

“It would be difficult. I need to stare into someone’s eyes for several seconds, but if they know what I’m doing...”

“I see.”

But Rosalind’s charm would work instantly on someone who was passed out. If they could take down even one opponent, they would be able to form a strategy around that. With all these cards in their hand, it wouldn’t be easy for their foes to get away.

“...”

Since Yang could read her thoughts, however, he seemed to be weighing whether or not it was worth it to try and defeat them here. But then something strange happened...

“?!”

“?!”

Suddenly, both Rosalind and Yang reacted violently to something.

“What is this?!”

“Rosalind, what is...?”

Hibiki knew something was wrong, but she couldn't tell what. With little else to go on, she followed Rosalind's gaze across the room. A girl dressed in crimson had emerged from one of the aisles.

“Hmm, you finally caught up with her?”

The girl had bronze hair and was wearing a bright red dress. It was closed, but she was also carrying a parasol in the same red. She approached the group, eyeing everyone with a grin. She looked to be hardly more than a child, but there was nothing to compare her to. All the children in the store had fled with the adults when the fight broke out. Only the police or an idiot would approach a group willing to brawl like this in a department store in the middle of the day. That, or someone who was involved somehow.

“Lucy!”

“Right!”

Yang quickly made his move. He called to the girl with the teleportation powers, who responded immediately. In the blink of an eye, they were gone with Ellicia.

“Oh, no! They're leaving, Hibiki! What do we do?” Iris shouted.

But Hibiki didn't know the answer. The simple assumption was that it was time to go after them, but...

“Hmm? They left again, huh?”

Was it okay to ignore the girl in red?

It's obvious she's got something to do with Ellicia's story. And things between Yang and Ellicia don't seem to be as bad as I thought. Being caught by him probably doesn't mean an immediate bad ending...

The more important matter at hand seemed to be finding out about Yang's plan and what his group was after. Hibiki figured that before going after Ellicia, it would be a good idea to get some information from a new source. One, in fact, had just presented itself.

"You there."

"Hmm?"

The girl in crimson tilted her head at Hibiki's question. The people she'd caught up with had vanished, though it didn't seem to concern her at all. It was a bit creepy, but Hibiki took a deep breath to steel herself.

"Are you with the Margaret clan?" she asked.

"Why, yes. My name is Nartessia Margaret... And it seems you have something to do with that group," the girl said with a haughty tone as the corners of her lips curled up into a grin.

Chapter 3: Valley of the Undead (July 20th-21st)

Once we were out of the labyrinth, we went in search of civilization to try and find a doctor. We looked for a while, but the sun set earlier than we expected, so we were forced to make camp. Harissa used her magic to start a fire, and we all sat around it.

“How’s Corona looking?” I asked as I nibbled on some food.

“She’s still unconscious...”

“I see.”

Corona’s condition hadn’t improved even after we’d escaped the labyrinth. We needed to find a village or a town and get her help as soon as possible.

“Okay, let’s get some rest for now. I’ll take first watch.”

“Good night, Sir Rekka.”

“Good night.”

“Wake me up in two hours.”

Harissa, Tsumiki, and Lea all turned in for the night. They were using the extra clothes they’d brought for blankets and pillows. We were lucky that Lea’s water magic made it easy to do laundry... It was pretty dispiriting to have to wear dirty clothes. I mean, I was fine, but it must’ve been hard for the girls.

“Mio, you get some sleep, too.”

“Okay...”

Mio, who looked as young as Harissa or maybe even younger, came over and laid down next to me.

“...”

Once I could tell everyone was asleep, I started to stare into the crackling fire to think. We’d spent the whole day riding around on Lea’s back (in Leviathan form, of course), and we hadn’t come across anything that looked like civilization. Considering the state she was in, we couldn’t ask Corona for help. And considering how long she’d been sealed up, there was a chance she wouldn’t know anyway. But in the few hours we’d spend up in the sky, we’d learned a few things about this world.

First, the environment here was incredible. There were untouched mountains, rivers, and forests stretching as far as the eye could see. It made it easy enough to gather water and plants for food, but since we hadn’t seen any signs of people yet, I was on the fence about whether or not it was a good thing.

Next, despite all the greenery around us, we hadn’t laid eyes on a single wild animal. We’d gone into the forests and down the rivers several times to get food, but there wasn’t a single bird or fish to be had. It seemed safe enough to assume there just weren’t animals in these parts. It was nice that we didn’t have to worry about getting attacked by wildlife at night, but Lea was a little upset that there was no meat to eat. It was hard to say if that was good or bad, either... But I guess it played out in our favor. The real question at hand was when we’d be able to head back to Earth.

“I wonder if Hibiki and the others are doing okay...” I whispered to myself as I stared up at a night sky. It was more amazing

than anything I'd ever seen on Earth.

“Mmmph...”

Mio began tossing in her sleep as she lay next to me. She seemed uncomfortable, but she was curled up in a ball like a tiny animal as she slept.

“...”

Maybe this whole thing was harder on her than anyone else. I still didn't know what her story was, but she seemed normal enough. And now here we were, lost in another world somehow. I guess that part was my fault, really, but she had to have been scared. She'd barely said a word since we'd gotten here, too...

If nothing else, the idol known as MIO who I sometimes saw on TV was cheerful. She was always giggling and loved to talk. She looked young, but when she sang, she seemed like a grown-up. Yet the Mio sleeping next to me was nothing more than a petite girl. And an introverted one at that. Maybe it was because of everything she'd been through, including losing her memories. Maybe that was why she refused to leave my side. Maybe it was bad enough that she couldn't sleep unless she was next to me...

“...Mmph.”

Suddenly, she sat up.

“Can't sleep?”

“No...”

She shook her head a little, then inched over and leaned up right against me.

Just like you'd expect from an idol, she was incredibly cute

even without her usual outfit and persona. But perhaps because of her size and the way she was acting, she looked more like a child than someone my age. It didn't really bother me, but Tsumiki and Harissa hated it.

"Hmm... I honestly thought you were a lolicon, Rekka. Perhaps this is just some sort of paternal instinct?"

I want absolute silence from you, R. Absolute silence.

I flashed an infuriated smile at R as I put the jacket I'd been using over Mio's shoulders. For a while, both of us sat there in silence as we watched the flames of the campfire together.

"Um, Rekka..."

"Hmm?" I turned around.

"I was an idol, wasn't I?" Mio said, sounding a little upset.

"Yeah. I mean, not 'was.' You still are."

"Am I? It doesn't feel real..."

"Yeah, I could see that." I'd already told her that she was an idol. "You can't remember anything about your career?"

"Um, I... think I remember singing," she said with a hesitant nod.

Similar to how hearing my name had caused her to remember that she was pushed off a roof, I'd learned that certain stimuli could trigger memories for Mio. While we'd been flying on Lea's back, Tsumiki had started talking to her about her job as an idol, and it seemed she'd started to remember it.

"Is being an idol as hard as it looks?"

We were mostly just making small talk before bed, but I was also hoping I could jog her memory a little.

“It was hard, I think. Practice, singing, recording, the interviews... Every day was busy, I think. I still can’t remember most of it, though.”

“I see.”

“But there’s one thing in particular I do remember...”

“Oh, yeah?”

Mio’s voice suddenly got softer. It was like the voice you use when you’re talking about something unpleasant, but something that has nothing to do with you.

“I... I wanted to stop being an idol.”

“What?”

That certainly wasn’t what I’d expected her to say. Mio was an idol at the peak of her popularity. Music programs, in stores, commercials, even people’s ringtones when I was out in town... I heard her songs at least twice a day. That was how popular she was. But apparently she wanted to quit?

“Do you remember why you wanted to quit?”

“No...” Mio shook her head. “All I remember is that I didn’t want to do it anymore. I don’t remember why, or what happened then...”

Hmm... Something about this felt odd. It was like my gut was telling me that this was the core of Mio’s story. But a popular idol wanting to quit her job? It was a big deal, but not exactly anything world-shattering. So why...

She'd known my name even though we'd never met. She'd said she'd been pushed off a roof, but she was unharmed. Why were there so many mysteries in her story that not even Satsuki could figure out? Did her amnesia and the reason she wanted to quit being an idol have something to do with it? Right now, there was no way to know.

“I don't think it's that I wanted to stop singing...”

“No?”

“No. I still love singing, I think.”

Mio then started to sing softly. It was a lullaby, and the gentle melody was relaxing. It seemed like she was right. She must have worked hard to have that kind of talent. She really must have loved singing.

“...”

Corona's eyes opened a little. She must have heard the lullaby, too. She still seemed to be sleepy, however. She was staring into space, but I could hear her humming softly. She seemed to know the song well enough that she could sing it even while half asleep. I guess... songs can cross the boundaries between worlds then, huh?

I started to hum along with Mio and Corona. Before I knew it, the tension had drained from me and everyone else around. They all seemed to be sleeping peacefully now, including Corona. I guess that was the power of a real idol.



“It’s nothing that special,” Mio said.

“You have a really pretty voice. It was a little different from the songs I hear on TV, but it was a wonderful song.”

“Th-Thank you.” Mio seemed a little embarrassed.

The idol MIO only sang happy pop songs that fit her girly image, but I guess she was talented enough to sing any kind of song she wanted. It felt rude to say that, though, so I didn’t.

“I think singing that lullaby made me sleepy,” she said, her eyes already half closed.

“We’re going to be on the move all day tomorrow, so get all the sleep you can. I’ll keep watch, so don’t worry.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Mio laid her head back down on a balled-up jacket serving as a pillow, and she curled up like she had been before. I threw another branch on the fire as I listened to her fall asleep.



Dawn came on the morning of what would’ve been July 21st on Earth, and Corona finally woke up.

“Mmmph...”

“Corona, how are you feeling?”

“Still a little out of it, but I do feel better.”

At the very least, she had her wits about her now. She seemed a lot better off compared to yesterday.

“Come on, you can pester her all you want later. If she’s up and about now, we’re going to take her to go get a bath.”

“I-I know.”

Tsumiki and Harissa shooed me away and helped Corona head down towards the river. Lea was currently overhead, flying around and trying to figure out where we should head next. It seemed like the girls had everything covered, so I decided to take a stroll.

“Rekka...”

Just as I was about to head off, Mio came up and grabbed my waist again.

“Want to go for a walk?”

She nodded silently, so the two of us headed out of camp together. We tried getting closer to the forest, but there was still no sign of any wildlife. No animals, and not even an insect... This was a pretty weird world.

“Wait a second...”

Something I’d learned about the natural world in elementary school suddenly crossed my mind. If there were no insects, how did the flowers pollinate? I mean, there were other ways it could happen, I guess, but didn’t flowers mostly depend on insects for that kind of thing? But there wasn’t a single bug to be found here.

And without them, how were these trees growing fruit? I suppose maybe they’d developed in some special way, but one question quickly led to another. For example, how did the food chain work here? Plants were pretty low on that ladder, but they weren’t on the bottom. That distinction belonged to corpses and the like. The bodies of dead bugs and animals turned into nour-

ishment for plants. At least, that was how things worked on Earth.

Maybe dead branches could fill the same role, I guess. Either way, I couldn't be sure. If I'd paid more attention in school, I probably would have had a better idea of how things worked... Maybe once we got back home, I'd get straight to doing my summer homework.

The real question was how these plants got their energy, but I had no way of knowing. This wasn't the world I was from, and I barely knew how things worked there. In short, there wasn't much point in wasting too much brainpower on it.

"I'll just keep it in the back of my mind for now..."

Mio seemed confused by what I'd said aloud. I thought about explaining, but then saw Lea overhead flying back towards the camp, her long, red hair trailing behind her.

"Lea!" I yelled and waved to get her attention.

Was Corona about done with her bath?

"I guess we should head back," I said.

"Okay."

Mio and I turned around and headed out of the forest back toward the others.



"A town at the bottom of the valley?"

"Well, it's hard to even call it that, but it certainly looks like someone lives there."

“I guess that’s where we’ll head, then.”

Even if she was awake now, Corona still wasn’t at full strength. I thought about asking her more about Aburaamu, but I didn’t want to push her until we’d gotten her to a doctor. Even if there wasn’t a doctor in the village, they should at least know where to find one, so nobody objected to us heading there next.

“...!”

When Corona saw Lea transform into a dragon to carry us, her eyes suddenly went wide. Come to think of it, though, she was unconscious before. Go figure she’d be surprised seeing Lea transform for the first time.

“She’s not dangerous, so you don’t need to be so worried,” I said.

“I’m not scared or anything, but...”

It seemed like there was something she wanted to say, so I motioned for her to continue.

“Anyone else would be terrified of a beast like that. If you’re heading into the village, it’s probably smarter not to go straight there.”

“I see.”

She had a point, so we decided to have Lea carry us to the edge of the valley, out of sight of the village, and walk our way into town from there.



The valley itself wasn’t that deep. It took just a little over half an hour to reach the bottom of it by foot, and we found ourselves

entering a tiny village of just a few houses standing in a row.
But...

“So, this is it, huh?”

“We’re here, yeah.”

“Nobody’s here, are they?”

Tsumiki, Harissa, and I all drooped our shoulders in disappointment at the same time. I didn’t expect the village to be abandoned...

“I’m sorry. I got your hopes up for nothing.”

“No, it’s not your fault, Lea. This feels like the cabins at a campground, actually.”

Basically, there were buildings, but no open gathering spaces, fields, or anything like that. The houses themselves were surrounded by trees, so you could only see their roofs from above. There was still a gentle breeze blowing through the area, rustling the leaves and brushing the roofs of the cottages.

“I noticed this when I was coming down, but the wind just keeps blowing here, doesn’t it?”

The wind swept down into the valley where it formed an up-draft. I could see the leaves on the trees being blown upwards.

“A valley where the wind never stops, huh?”

Since the cottages seemed to be uninhabited, we decided to stop in one so Corona could rest. The inside was a bit dusty, but it wasn’t that bad once we opened the windows to let it air out.

“I’m glad this is cleaner than I expected.”

“Yeah, they seem a little too clean, really,” Harissa said. She was the one who always did the cleaning at our house.

“It’s dusty, but not that bad. This village... If nothing else, it hasn’t been uninhabited all that long.”

So, there were people here up until recently? Why did they leave, anyway? Was it just temporary, or permanent?

“And that strange feeling has only gotten stronger since we arrived...”

“Are you talking about how the air feels different again?”

“Yes,” she said with a nod.

If that feeling was getting stronger, did it have something to do with the valley being empty?

“No rest for the weary, huh?” Lea sighed a little and stood up. “I’m going to take a look around. I’ll see if I can figure out where everyone went.”

“Okay, I’ll go with you. I want to get our washing done.”

“There should be a lake nearby. We can head there.”

Lea and Tsumiki left the cottage, carrying the laundry with them. The rest of us stayed behind to look after Corona.

“Corona, did anything hurt while you were walking?”

“No... I still feel sluggish, though.”

Harissa brought a chair next to where Corona was lying and started to ask her about how she was feeling. Mio and I sat on the other bed and watched.

“I’m not sure, but I think you’re sick. Do you have any idea what it might be?”

“I couldn’t say. I was never sick before I was sealed away.”

“So, you’ve got no idea?”

“I feel like I’ve seen other people with similar symptoms, but unfortunately, I can’t remember where. It was several hundred years ago, after all.”

“I-I see.”

Harissa’s glanced awkwardly around the room like she didn’t know what to say. She wasn’t exactly a doctor. If she was out of questions already, that would make it hard to help her. Of course, I didn’t know what to do, either. It would be different if we could give her some kind of physical exam...

“Corona.”

“What?”

“You were suffering pretty badly yesterday, but you feel better today, right? Do you have any idea why?”

“Why I feel better, you mean?” Corona looked down and thought about it for a moment. “Come to think of it, I heard a song.”

“A song?”

“That’s right. While I was slipping in and out of consciousness, I remember hearing it. It was like it soothed my pain and my heart.”

Was that...

I looked at Mio. She was looking back at me.

“Was that my lullaby?”

I was certain it was, but Mio didn’t seem sure. Sure, it would be a miracle if songs could heal sickness, but...

“Mio, can you sing that song again?”

“Huh? Um, but...”

“Please.”

“I don’t think there’s any way my songs can heal sickness...”

“I’d agree with you ordinarily, but....” I let my words hang for a moment. “We’re in another world right now. It’s possible things don’t work here the way we would expect them to. Maybe it is possible for songs to have healing effects.”

“Huh?” Mio said, clearly confused.

“Corona thinks that’s what made her feel better, so I think it’s worth a try.”

“U-Um...” Mio just looked down and mumbled.

I kept asking her, and she eventually relented and agreed.

“A-All right...”

She took a few deep breaths and then glanced over at Harissa and Corona. Her cheeks were a little red.

Was she reluctant because she was embarrassed? Was there some reason she was okay singing in front of me last night, but not the other girls?

“I know things are a little out of the ordinary with Mio, but when she leans on you like that, you’re still the same as ever, aren’t you?”

R was lounging on top of Corona on the bed, scratching her head and talking her usual nonsense.

“Here I go...”

And so we had our own little mini concert with just us—including an awfully laid-back girl from the future—as the audience. Mio’s beautiful voice filled the cottage. I could feel tension I didn’t even know I had leaving my shoulders. Her singing really was relaxing. I looked over and could see that Harissa and Corona felt the same way.

“Um, that was the lullaby...”

“Let me hear more.”

“O-Okay... Here I go, um...”

Cheered on by Corona, Mio began her next song. The next thing we knew, we were all humming along with the rhythm or singing the lyrics softly to ourselves. All her songs were calm and warm. Even if she couldn’t remember anything else... No, maybe the words just came to her naturally as she sang. There was no hesitation in her singing voice.

“Oh...!”

Suddenly her song stopped.

“What’s wrong?”

“Um, as I was singing...”

“Did you remember something?”

“I think so...”

Apparently singing had stimulated something for her.

“What did you remember?”

“That I couldn’t sing freely.”

“Freely?”

I didn’t quite get what she was saying, so I had to ask what she meant.

“I wanted to sing all kinds of songs once I became an idol. But because of the way I look, they only let me sing certain types of songs...”

Mio looked down a little as she explained. But it made sense. She was saying that she couldn’t sing what she wanted to. It was true that she looked young enough to be paying the kid’s fare on the bus, and her image as an idol played off of that. All her songs I’d heard sure sounded like they came from someone with a bright, young personality. Really, she seemed to live up to her reputation as the top lolita idol. But from what we’d heard just now, she had an incredible voice and could probably sing anything well. That’s what she wanted to do, but she wasn’t allowed to... That must have been stressful.

“Is that why you wanted to quit being an idol, maybe?”

“I don’t know, but...”

She still wasn’t sure, huh? Even if she did want to quit being an idol because she couldn’t sing the kind of music she wanted to, what did that have to do with her being pushed off a roof? I guess

it was possible those two things were unrelated.

“Mio, did you get too tired to sing?” Corona asked when we reached a pause in our conversation.

The eager look in her eyes made it pretty clear she still wanted to hear more.

“Oh, no... I’m fine. I’ll sing another one.”

But just as she began to sing...

Bang!

The door to the cottage was violently thrown open. We all turned around to see Tsumiki and Lea at the entrance. Tsumiki was panting, and Lea looked tense.

“Rekka, we’ve got trouble.”

As luck would have it, we were about to face a whole new set of problems.



“What happened?” I asked.

“Well...”

Before she answered, Lea came in and promptly closed the door like she was trying to keep out some kind of uninvited guest. Next, she went over to shut and lock the windows we’d opened to let some air in. She then took a peek outside, grimaced, and beckoned me over.

“What’s going—”

I didn't finish my sentence. Looking out the window, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I blinked several times... and when what I was seeing didn't change, I closed my eyes to calm myself. I'd seen lots of unsettling things before, but this probably took the cake. I slowly opened my eyes again to face the reality in front of me. There was only one way I knew how to describe what I was seeing.

“...A zombie movie?”

“In a fantasy setting, no less,” Tsumiki added.

A fantasy zombie movie? I wasn't sure if that made it more or less scary than a normal zombie movie, but that was what we were up against.

“Rrrgh...”

“Hrrrgh...”

“Gaaah... Gaaah...”

Crazed zombies—what looked like people and small animals with wings, or what you might call fairies in a video game—were surrounding the cottage. One of the cat fairies was even scratching at the walls. It was a pretty surreal scene. As I watched the scary (cute?) cat in utter shock, there came a pounding at the door.

Crap. Whether it was really cute or not, this wasn't the time to get distracted.

“What the heck happened?” I turned to Tsumiki and Lea and asked.

“I don't know. We were doing the washing, and they just attacked us.”

“We weren’t that far from the cottage when it happened. They started to show up soon after we heard that song.”

Were they—I’m just going to start calling them zombie fairies—somewhere in this valley from the start? Had Mio’s singing drawn them here?

“Ah!”

Mio caught a glimpse of the zombie fairies outside the cottage and crouched to the ground, clutching her head.

“Are you okay?”

“My head... hurts.”

The sight of it all was pretty unpleasant. Maybe she was feeling sick.

Krrrsh!

My thoughts were interrupted by a loud crashing sound, followed by what sounded like shattering glass. One of the zombie fairies had apparently smashed in the window.

“Rrrgh...”

“Rekka!”

Mio grabbed on to my leg in a panic. Corona, however, just raised an eyebrow and snorted.

“Sylphs, huh?”

“You know them, Corona?”

“I know what they used to be, yeah. They’re wind fairies. Not very rare in this world.”

“So, are they the ones who lived here?”

I guess we found our first villagers...

“Were they always like this?”

“Nope. They’re usually the cheerful sort. Not monsters... like this.”

In other words, something had recently happened here in this valley. And the first village I chanced upon in another world happened to be infested with zombie fairies. Just my luck.

“Well, either way, we’ve gotta get out of here,” Corona said as she stood up from the bed.

“Are you feeling okay?”

“Hmph. I was just a little out of it ’cause I spent centuries sleeping in the same pose. But trust me. I’m fully awake now.”

Despite what she was saying, it didn’t sound like she 100 per cent believed it herself. Yet even so, her steps were steady, and she moved with confidence. I figured she was probably okay, and more importantly, she was probably right. It was high time to think about getting out of here.

We could probably fight our way out, but I wanted to avoid fighting enemies I didn’t really understand. We’d need another way out of the cottage, but the zombie fairies had us totally surrounded. Whether we went through the door or busted down a wall, we’d be instantly attacked. Which meant...

“We’ll have to head out the roof.”

“Yeah.” Lea nodded, as if she’d had the exact same thought.

It seemed like the sylphs could only fly a few meters above the ground, so hypothetically, if we left by the roof, they wouldn't be able to get to us. That said... I really didn't want to have to cling to Lea again if I could help it. Fortunately, however, Corona was awake this time. We decided we'd have Lea transform so we could all ride on her back.

"Stand back a little," she said as she walked to the middle of the room.

The cottage wasn't that big, but there was room enough for her to transform and us all to clamber aboard.

"Mio, hang on tight."

Mio looked nervous as she clung to Lea's white, snakelike body even tighter than she clung to my waist.

"Okay... We're ready, Lea!"

Lea lifted her head up and looked towards the roof on my signal. When she did, several bowling ball sized orbs of water appeared. She then used her magic to make them explode, blowing off the roof to the cottage. Lea flew upward, moving in a steady spiral so that no one would fall off from the acceleration.

"Rrrgh..."

"Hrrrgh..."

The zombie fairies reached up like they thought they could grab us, but we were far out of their reach. Their bodies seemed to get smaller and smaller as we flew away.

"Rrragh..."

Before long, we couldn't even hear their moaning anymore.

Everyone seemed relieved we'd escaped the immediate danger.

"Whew... What the heck was that about?"

"Who knows?" Corona said disinterestedly.

She was a resident of this world, so I was a little surprised she didn't seem to care. I started to wonder about it, but I quickly had something else on my mind when a bigger problem came along.

"Gyaaagh!"

I could hear Lea scream as her white, snakelike body wound through the air. I don't know why I did it, but I turned around... just in time to see *something* biting down on Leviathan's tail. Was it a zombie fairy? No, it was too big for that.

"Tch! There are sylpheids here, too?!" Corona spat.

Sylpheids? Were those different than sylphs? I didn't have time to ask.

"Gyah!"

Whatever they were, there were lots of them. Three of them were already biting into Lea's torso.

"Gyaaagh!"

"Lea!"

Several of the girls called out to her at the same time I did. We were all concerned. Lea was refusing to try and shake off the sylpheids, probably for fear that we'd fall off, too. And we were too busy clinging to her to help.

"Grrr!"

Lea used her water magic to shoot them down one after another, but they kept coming back. Since they were wind spirits, they were fast and didn't have any trouble catching back up to her. And what was worse...

"It's no good! They're acting like they haven't been damaged at all! They're just like zombies!"

What made zombie movies scary was that zombie hordes always came back, no matter what you did to them. And that was exactly the situation we had on our hands.

"Lea, let's land. We won't make it out of the valley like this!"

"...!"

Lea must have been too occupied to even respond, but she began to drop altitude rapidly. Of course, the sylpheeds followed, but Lea used a massive water shield that blocked their path and allowed us to land safely. Once we hit the ground, Lea was spit out of the white snake's mouth.

"Gwah! Gah!"

"Huh...?"

If she was spit out instead of transforming back, did that mean that she'd separated the core of her body from the energy she'd stored up? But why would she do that?

"When they bit me... I felt something... enter my body," she said between coughs. "To be safe... I isolated that part of me, but I lost a lot of energy in the process."

"It's fine. I think you did the right thing."

There was one other thing that made zombie movies scary.

The infections. Once somebody was bitten by a zombie, they became one, too, going berserk and attacking on sight. I didn't know if movie logic applied here, but I figured it was best to be cautious.

For some reason, the sylpheeds didn't come down to attack us in the forest. At the speeds they flew, maybe it was just too difficult for them to travel through the dense tree cover. But even though we'd just escaped one problem, we immediately had another to deal with.

"Sir Rekka!" I heard Harissa call to me in a panic.

We were free of the sylpheeds, but the zombie fairies had followed us.

"Run! Lea, can you stand?!"

"I'm all right..."

Lea got to her feet and nodded. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, some of the zombie fairies seemed more interested in her dragon body than us. They swarmed to it and bit into the unmoving flesh.

"Sir Rekka, should I use my magic to make us all invisible?"

"Yeah, do it!"

"Ealim Nekram!"

Harissa quickly chanted her spell, and we all became invisible. However...

"What?! They can still see us?!"

The rest of the zombie fairies came straight for us anyway.

Since we were in the forest, maybe they were following our footprints in the dirt. Or maybe the sounds of snapping twigs under our feet as we ran along. Either way, there was no point in staying invisible with them chasing us. I had Harissa end the spell.

We ran as fast as we could through the forest. There was no point trying to fly—the sylpheids would just get us that way. But staying on the ground came with its own problems. We were at the bottom of the valley, so it looked like all we needed to do was climb upward to escape. That was what I thought, but the zombie fairies appeared at every turn no matter where we went. We scaled the hill but then were chased back down, and it wasn't long before we ended up totally lost. Maybe “stranded” was more accurate.

“Hahh... Hahh...”

Trying to get out of the valley was like climbing up a mountain. There was no way anyone—not even someone with proper training—could keep it up forever. We were all starting to reach our limits, but the zombie fairies kept coming and showed no mercy.

“There's more!” Lea yelled.

We all took the cue and started running again. Mio had long since run out of steam, so Lea was carrying her, but the rest of us were on our own. Corona had so much energy that it was hard to believe she'd been sick, but even she was starting to run out of breath. And then...

“Kyah!”

“Tsumiki!”

Tsumiki tripped on a branch and rolled down the slope two or three meters.

“Aah!”

I quickly ran over to help her up.

“Are you okay?”

“Y-Yeah. I don’t feel anything sprained or broken.”

Fortunately it seemed she wasn’t hurt, but...

“Rrrgh...”

It cost us just enough time for the zombie fairies to catch up.

“Rekka!”

Lea turned back, but there wasn’t time. She had her hands full with Mio. I put my hand on the hilt of the Hero’s Sword, which I’d wrapped in cloth to carry. The zombie fairies were slow and small, but I still wasn’t sure my amateur swordsmanship would be any match for them. There were easily seven or eight of them, and only one of me. Should I just try and buy time for Lea to put down Mio? I only had a split second to decide. But then... they walked right past us?

For some reason, the zombie fairies that had been chasing us so doggedly now completely ignored me and Tsumiki. I had no idea why, but I was glad all the same. We quickly got moving and caught up with the others. We ran past the slow-moving zombies as we did, but they didn’t even try and attack us. Were they only interested in certain kinds of people? Whatever it was, we knew they’d attack Lea, so we still needed to make an escape. But at this rate, we’d all be completely exhausted before I could come up with a plan. Visions of a horrible fate flashed through my mind, and as I tried to drive them away...

“This way!”

I suddenly heard someone call out to us. I looked around and saw a disembodied head sitting on the ground.

“Hurry! Before the sylphs see us! Get in here!”

Turns out it was a girl sticking her head out of a hole in the ground. But after calling out to us, she quickly ducked back down like she was telling us to hurry and follow her.

“Guys!”

I turned to the others, but they’d already gotten the hint. We all jumped as fast as we could into the hole.



The hole in the ground was surprisingly big. It was about the size of my living room. It was deeper than I thought, too. I was worried about hitting my head, but it was enough of a drop that I tumbled and landed square on my butt when I jumped in. Once everyone else was inside, the girl who’d beckoned us in covered up the entrance and camouflaged it.

“...”

She held her ear against the sealed entrance for a moment before finally letting out a sigh of relief.

“It’s okay. They’re gone now.”

The rest of us breathed a sigh of relief, too. It seemed the danger had passed.

“Thanks. You really saved us.”

“It’s fine. You helped me, too, I think.”

“We did?”

She smiled when she saw the confusion on my face.

“I was out looking for food when they found me, but it seems like you drew their attention away long enough for me to escape.”

“I see. So we both helped each other out, huh?”

It made more sense once she explained it.

“I’m Lyun. Who are you?”

“Rekka Namidare.”

“Nami... dare? That’s a very long name. It’s too long to remember, so I’ll just call you Nammy.”

“Wh—”

Why did it have to be such a girly nickname? Tsumiki immediately burst out laughing, and Lea looked like she was seriously considering adopting it, too. Please don’t... I tried my best to subtly object to my new name, but it sounded like names as long as four syllables weren’t really a thing in this world.

“So, you came from a place called ‘Earth,’ Nammy?”

And so despite my best efforts, I got stuck being called “Nammy” anyway. At least she was able to learn Tsumiki, Lea, Mio, and Corona’s names just fine. But when Harissa introduced herself...

“Um, I’m Harissa Hope. I’m a sorcerer from Aburaamu...”

“Aburaamu?”

The name seemed to mean something to her.

“Do you know where that is, Lyun?”

She didn't answer, but rather just stared at Harissa for a while before turning away.

“ ... ”

Wh-What was that about? The mood suddenly seemed to turn awkward... I tried to think of something else to talk about, but as I looked at Lyun, I realized there was a strange floating circle just above her head.

“Hey, Lyun, what's that thing on your head?”

“Huh? What?”

Lyun didn't seem to know what I was talking about.

“That's what sylpheeds use to feel the wind, young man,” Corona said from beside me.

Wait. If Lyun was a sylpheed...

“Are you a survivor from the valley?” Corona asked before I could.

“Don't make it sound like everyone's dead...” Lyun said with a frown. “This is the valley of Windsong. Sylpheeds and sylphs alike live here. But two days ago, people started coming down with the Ghostdemon sickness.”

“Ghostdemon sickness?”

“That's right.”

Ghostdemon? That didn't sound like a good name. Just as I was about to ask for more details, Lyun's tummy started to growl.

“Oh...!”

She put her hands over it, embarrassed. Her cheeks were a little red. Come to think of it, she said she'd gone out to get food or something. Was she hungry?

“Hang on a second.”

I took a light meal out of my pack and offered it to her.

“What’s this?”

“Food. Take it if you’re hungry.”

“Hmm...?”

She unwrapped the package, took a nibble... then grimaced and spit it out.

“What is this?! There’s no mana in it at all!”

“Mana?”

That wasn’t a word I was familiar with.

“Mana is similar to magical energy in the world you come from.”

So, they were basically the same thing, huh? Apparently in the spirit world, mana was constantly generated from a place called the mana spring. The mana spring filled all the land with mana. That mana was what made the trees and flowers grow. And when the spirits and fairies ate the mana-laden fruit those plants grew, they took the mana into their bodies, too.

“Spirits have two bodies, a material one and an astral one. The material body is what you humans would call the physical body, whereas the astral body is the mind, or the soul. The astral body requires a lot of mana to sustain, so a lack of it is fatal to them.”

“Hmm...”

Human sorcerers like Harissa used magical power for spells, but they didn't need it to live. Mana was like an external battery for powering magic. Running out of it wouldn't hurt her other than meaning she couldn't cast spells for a while. But since spirits needed it to maintain their astral bodies, their souls would perish without it.

“When the material body is infected with the Ghostdemon sickness, the astral body is also affected via contaminated mana. As the disease progresses, you lose the ability to think for yourself and start to attack everyone around you.”

So, the disease more or less hijacked their astral bodies—their souls—and forced them to attack the people around them... Yeah, this was definitely zombie movie material.

“So, how have you managed to stay safe, Lyun?”

Lyun lived here, too. How was she the only one left standing when everybody else had turned into zombies?

“I'm one of the more powerful spirits in the valley, so my body naturally holds more mana.”

The treatment for Ghostdemon sickness was usually very straightforward: purge the infected mana from your astral body. It was the same way a surgeon would excise a tumor or amputate a badly infected limb. Of course, purging mana from the astral body was a lot simpler than all that. Anyone could do it. Come to think of it, Lea had actually done something similar earlier. After she'd been bitten by a sickened sylpheed, she'd expelled her core from her body of magical energy. Turns out she'd made the right call.

“In other words, since I have more mana, that means I have

more to spare.”

But that didn’t mean her supply was infinite. When she was down to the mana she needed to live, she wouldn’t be able to purge any more of it. Otherwise she’d die. And so even though she had the perfect hiding spot with this underground cave, she still had to go out and find mana-filled fruit to eat and sustain herself.

“...But so how did this Ghostdemon sickness end up overrunning the valley? I thought anybody was able to purge infected mana from their body?”

Based on what she’d said, they could always get more mana by eating fruit, and there was no lack of mana in this world thanks to the mana spring. So how could the disease have possibly wiped out the entire valley?

“The mana spring in the valley dried up,” Lyun finally said with a pained expression.

The mana in the atmosphere and in the fruit of the trees all came from the mana spring. So if that had dried up, then...

“The first thing we noticed was that the mana fruit had stopped growing in the forest. But by then, it was too late. The capital where the Spirit King lives is a long way away, and the sylphs kept collapsing trying to go for help... I did my best to help, too, but two days ago, a child came down with the Ghostdemon sickness and bit a sylphed. From there, it ran rampant overnight...”

Ghostdemon sickness affected the material body as well as the astral body, causing fevers and fatigue. Those who contracted it became too tired to move, and were helpless as their minds were slowly taken over. It was such a cruel, clever tactic that it was hard to believe there was just a disease behind it.

But Lyun said this started two days ago... That would've been the day before we arrived here. While we'd been struggling down in the dungeon, she'd been up here running for her life. Lyun had been all alone in a valley full of zombies. I didn't even have to ask this time. It was obvious she was a heroine.

Her happy ending was probably just making it out of here alive. It was simple enough, but it was certainly dangerous. We couldn't hide down here forever. We didn't have that much food, and none if it had mana for Lyun. We needed a way to get out of the valley, and soon.

"Lea, do you think you can protect us and fly at the same time?"

"Doubtful. I might have been able to earlier, but that ambush set me back pretty badly. It cost me most of the energy I'd had saved up, so I don't think I could fly fast enough to outrun the sylpheids anymore."

If only I had been paying more attention when we left the cottage... But it was too late for regrets.

We couldn't fly out. And there were too many zombie fairies to leave the valley on foot. It would be extremely difficult to dodge them all. Everyone was silent, and nobody had a plan.

"There is a way, actually..."

But then Corona spoke up.

"You mean a way to get us out of here?"

"I do. That."

As everyone waited to hear what her plan was, she pointed at the Hero's Sword.

“You just heard that sylph and sylpheed bodies are made out of mana, right?”

“Don’t tell me...”

“No, I imagine it’s exactly what you’re thinking, young man. The Hero’s Sword has unmatched power against any kind of magical energy. Using it will make getting out of the valley easy.”

I grimaced a little when I realized my bad feeling about this was justified. The Hero’s Sword had the power to cut through magic. And since sylphs’ bodies were essentially made of magical energy, it was extremely likely that the sword would work just as well on them.



“Wait! You’re going to kill them?! You can’t do that!” Lyun screamed when she realized what we were talking about.

“Yeah... I’m not okay with that, either.”

The people afflicted with Ghostdemon sickness could be cured as long as they got their mana back. They were sick. There was no way we could just kill them.

But it wasn’t like Corona meant anything bad by suggesting it. And it was true that if we wanted to escape the valley alive, we needed to do something about the infected. The question was how, though. If only we could just pass through the obstacles like we’d done in the dungeon... Wait. Pass through... obstacles? Come to think of it...

“Lyun, there’s something I want to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“What is it that makes the infected attack us?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

Lyun’s face made it clear she didn’t understand the question.

“I don’t know how to answer that... They’ll attack anybody, even friends and family.”

“But they didn’t attack me and Tsumiki.”

I recalled what had happened just before we came across Lyun. Tsumiki had tripped, and I’d gone to help her. We were separated from the group, but the zombie fairies ignored us and walked right past. Was it because we were from another world? No, Lea was, too. It was clear they were interested in her. They’d

attacked, and even tried to infect her. So the difference between me and Tsumiki, and Lea and Lyun was...

“...It’s mana.”

“Huh?”

“Tsumiki and I are normal humans, so we don’t have any mana. But you and Lea do.”

That was it. The Ghostdemon sickness infected the astral body, which was entirely made of mana. That meant that in order to spread the infection, it had to be passed on through creatures with mana. That’s why the zombie fairies were attacking specific people—they could sense mana and were going after those of us with magic power.

“I see... Since the fairies all have mana, it’s only natural that the disease would prey on that, huh?”

“I suppose so.”

That would also explain why Lyun hadn’t realized it. All of the fairies and spirits inherently had mana, so it was impossible to tell that’s what the disease was targeting. As I was thinking about that, Mio looked up at me (she was still clinging to my waist, by the way) and asked an important question.

“But... how does knowing that help?”

We knew that the zombies came after anybody with mana. And we had Harissa, Lea, Corona, and Lyun in our group. They’d definitely be coming after us. Still, knowing how they behaved gave us an advantage. We could come up with some kind of plan from there.

“...There’s something I’d like you to help me with, Mio.”

Mio gave me a puzzled look.

I knelt down so I could look her in the eye, and then shared my idea with her and the rest of the group.



After that, I took Mio and Tsumiki to the village at the bottom of the valley again. I hadn't brought the Hero's Sword with me. It was partly because I could move faster without it, but also because Lyun still seemed to be afraid that I might try and use it. So, in the end, I'd left it with Corona. All that was left to do now was pray that my plan worked so we wouldn't actually have to resort to using the sword.

"I guess this'll do."

I took the girls into the cottage next to the one we'd blown the roof off of earlier and opened the windows. The funnel shape of the valley made it so that noise here in the heart of it easily echoed throughout the area. I'd confirmed as much by asking Lyun if she'd heard Mio's song earlier while she was running.

"Mio, will you sing for me again?"

After a pause, Mio nodded reluctantly and took a deep breath.

"Not far away, not behind me, what's in front of me is..." she began singing.

"That's 'The Day Before The Future,'" Tsumiki whispered.

Tsumiki and I were supposed to survey the surrounding area while Mio sang. We watched the tree line from the windows, carefully listening for any noise in the underbrush and keeping tabs on each other's blind spots. And sure enough, before long, there was a rustling from the woods and our first audience—a tiny zom-

bie fairy—appeared.

As Mio continued to sing, more and more fairies showed up. It was just like the first time we were attacked. I didn't know if they responded to sound in addition to mana, or if Mio's song had some kind of effect on them, but what was important right now was that the zombie fairies of the valley were all being drawn to the same place. It seemed the sylpheeds overhead couldn't hear it, but we'd just have to deal with them later.

“Crap!”

Eventually, one of the zombie fairies tried to come in through the window, so I hurriedly pushed it away.

“Hey! Don't you think we've done enough?”

“Yeah!”

Tsumiki and I moved at the same time to shut the windows.

“Rrrgh...”

“Hrrrgh...”

“Rrragh...”

There was a bona fide zombie fairy horde outside now.

“Mio, that's enough.”

“Okay...”

Mio stopped singing. She came over to grab on to my waist again, but when she saw what was outside the window...

“Aah!”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine... I just got a little headache.”

“Yeah?”

I wondered why that would give her a headache, but I figured it just must be that much of a shock for such a delicate girl. That aside, however, the mission was going well so far.

The plan was for those of us without mana to get all the zombie fairies in one place while Lea and the other girls with mana made their way out of the valley. It was a simple way to ensure that no one got hurt. As for us, now that we were surrounded by zombie fairies...

“Okay, time to go.”

“If this doesn’t work like you said it would, I’m going to hate you forever. You know that, right?” Tsumiki reminded me.

Mio just silently clung to my waist. And then the three of us... Yeah, we just walked right out the front door.

“Aaagh...”

“Hurrgh...”

Of course, right on the other side of the door was the horde of zombie fairies.

“Rrrgh...”

But we were able to walk right through them without provoking them. All according to plan, Tsumiki, Mio, and I—the mana-less team—simply walked away.

“That was bad for my heart. It felt like all of those bloodshot

eyes were staring right at me...”

“I agree with you there.”

Tsumiki and I laughed dryly as cold sweat dripped down our foreheads. Mio’s singing had the power to draw the zombie fairies, but once she stopped singing, she was just a normal girl. In other words, she had no mana or magic power, meaning there was no reason for them to attack her. And as far as I was concerned, the mission was a success. Honestly, the zombie fairies seemed even more spaced out than I’d expected. Or maybe it just felt that way because their eyes were so red. It was hard to tell where they were looking. But nevertheless, things had worked out.

Tsumiki and I took turns carrying Mio as we left Windsong Valley, though we had to stop a few times to get her to sing and lure the zombie fairies away. Once we finally made it up and out of the valley proper, we trekked another kilometer or so and waited. Eventually Lea’s group, who had left the valley from the other side, circled around to meet up with us.

“Rekka!”

“Good, you guys are all safe?”

“That’s my line,” Lea said, and we both laughed in relief.

“Not bad, young man,” Corona said, playing with the cloth-wrapped sword over her shoulder.

“It was all luck.”

“No. I thought the same thing when you escaped from the Ruler’s... You know. But you have the ability to intuitively weave together the threads you have, and the guts to put a plan into action.”

It felt weird getting that much praise. I could feel my face turn red as I tried to come up with some kind of reply, but then my blood ran cold when I saw something appear over Corona's shoulder.

"Sylpheids!" I yelled.

Everyone turned and looked up at the sky. One, two... three of them had followed us from the valley?!

"Everyone, into the forest!"

I called for a retreat, but the speedy sylpheids would close in on us before we would ever be able to manage an escape. My heart skipped a beat thinking about them going after Harissa or Lyun with that kind of speed, but then...

"Hmph. I guess I have no choice," Corona said to herself as she raised the Hero's Sword high.

"No...!" Lyun screamed, thinking that her friends were about to be killed.

"Corona, stop!"

I thought the same thing, too, but...

"Just leave it to me. Let me have my turn in the spotlight."

She then swung the sword long before the sylpheids reached us. It seemed like it would be a wild miss, but when she swung the cloth-wrapped blade, I swear something flew out of it. The next thing I knew, the sylpheids overhead fell to the ground like they'd been struck.

"My friends!"

“Don’t worry. They’re not dead,” Corona said as she shouldered the sword again.

But those words alone weren’t enough to assure Lyun. She ran right over to the sylpheeds now lying on the ground. She leaned in and pressed her ear to one of their chests... then sighed in relief. As promised, Corona had neutralized them without harming them.

“Corona, what was that?”

“You seem to be a very unusual hero, so perhaps you don’t know, but this sword can do more than just dispel magic. It can steal it, reflect it, seal it... all kinds of things.”

All I could do was gasp in awe. Corona was certainly the real deal when it came to this hero business.

“But if you could do that, why didn’t you do it earlier?”

“This technique takes a lot more stamina and mana than just killing something. It would’ve been rather difficult to do it after I’d only just recovered,” Corona said as she idly flipped the sword over and over on her shoulder.

“So what do we do now? Do you have anywhere to go?”

“Hmm... What are you going to do, Lyun?”

We’d made it out of the valley, but we couldn’t just leave Lyun here.

“I’m going to head to the capital. I’ll have to ask the Spirit King for help saving the valley...” Lyun explained as she moved the unconscious sylphs to a bed of grass.

“Hmm... The capital, eh?”

“Something up, Corona?”

“...No, it’s nothing.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

She waved her hand dismissively as if to tell me not to worry about it.

“All right, then I guess we’ll head there.”

Thinking about it, we hadn’t gotten any details about Abu-raamu from Corona yet, but I figured it could wait until we’d safely delivered Lyun. Apparently the capital of the spirit world, home to the Spirit King, was what lay ahead of us.

Side Story 2: Hibiki Feature (July 21st)

It had been one day—15 hours, to be exact—since Ellicia had been taken by Yang. Hibiki's group had now reconvened with Satsuki and Tetra. They explained what happened with Ellicia and Nartessia, then decided to go over how to proceed as a group.

“...Then Rekka's team went to a different world than originally planned?”

“Yes, so it seems.”

What is he doing...?

Hibiki had gotten worried about how long Rekka was taking to come back, so she'd asked Satsuki to use her magic to check on him. The whole group sighed when they learned that he was caught up in another bad situation.

“Well, it's too far away for us to deal with. If he's safe for now, we'll just have to wait for him to come back.”

“You're right...” Satsuki nodded, a little worried.

But what's going on with Rekka? Compared to me, it feels like he's getting caught up in these stories at a crazy rate...

Something seemed off to Hibiki, but she decided now wasn't the time to be worried about it and put it out of her mind.

Shirley's group, which had gone to find a way to fight against psychic powers, wasn't back yet, either. It was possible to just wait until everyone else returned before making their next move,

but with Ellicia captured, wasting time didn't seem like a good idea. And that didn't leave them with a whole lot of other options...

"The problem is how much we can trust them," Hibiki said quietly as she looked up.

She was looking up at a nine-story building: the department store that doubled as a hotel where they'd tracked down Ellicia. It was the biggest building in the area. They were all here because Nartessia had summoned them. After Yang's group had fled, she suggested a mutual exchange of information and arranged this meeting.

"You sure you don't want to wait, Satsuki?" Hibiki asked.

Her family's Magic of Omniscience had been kept a careful secret from other mages. And if she wanted it to stay that way, it was risky to take her anywhere other mages might be.

"I'm the only one here who knows anything about magic, right? I've never met this Nartessia girl, so I don't know what she's like, but if she tries to use magic on you, you'd all be in danger."

For that reason alone, Satsuki had insisted on coming along. Tetra was given the task of staying at home in case Rekka or Shirley showed up in the meantime.

And we don't know for sure that Nartessia wants an equal relationship with us. If something happens, I want there to be one person who knows where we went.

"Okay. Let's go," Hibiki said, leading the way as she entered the hotel.

The group gave Nartessia's name to the person at the front

desk, and they were given her room number without any questions asked. Everyone piled into the elevator.

“...You know, why do these people always get rooms on the top floor?”

“Huh?”

“I’ve been in hotels a bunch of times for different stories, and each and every time, the person I’m after is always staying on the top floor. Is there some kind of unwritten rule about that?”

“Idiots and smoke like high places. At least, that’s how the saying goes.”

The girls spent the elevator ride up talking about nothing in particular, and they reached the designated room on the top floor without event. They knocked on the door, and a girl Hibiki knew answered.

“Chelsea?!”

“Huh? You’re here, too, Chelsea?”

Hibiki and Iris both gasped in surprise.

The girl who had opened the door—Chelsea Margaret—laughed a little.

“I’m here helping the head of the family. Thanks to my work, I know a little about Japan,” she explained.

After she’d healed her brother, Chelsea had said she was going to visit home. Did this mean she’d made up with her family? Hibiki was curious, but there wasn’t time to ask right now.

“By head of the family, you mean Nartessia? She’s the head of

the family?”

“Yeah. Don’t get her mad, okay? She doesn’t snap easily... but if you do infuriate her, she’ll make you regret it.”

“Hmph. Are you talking to me?”

“Yes, I am, Vampire.”

Rosalind snorted in annoyance and put a brazen hand on her hip. Chelsea’s warning seemed to have had the opposite effect.

“...”

Hibiki tossed a knowing glance Suzuran’s way, and the quiet maid nodded. If they had to, the two of them would stop Rosalind.

It’s good to be prepared, but we didn’t really come here to fight. We’re just here to get information on Ellicia’s story to try and help Rekka out a little.

Hibiki took a deep breath, then stepped inside the room. Most hotel rooms have the bed right near the entrance, but this one was split into a bedroom and a living room. The group was incited into the living room portion, which was furnished with a sofa, a low table, and a TV.

“Oh, you’re finally here?”

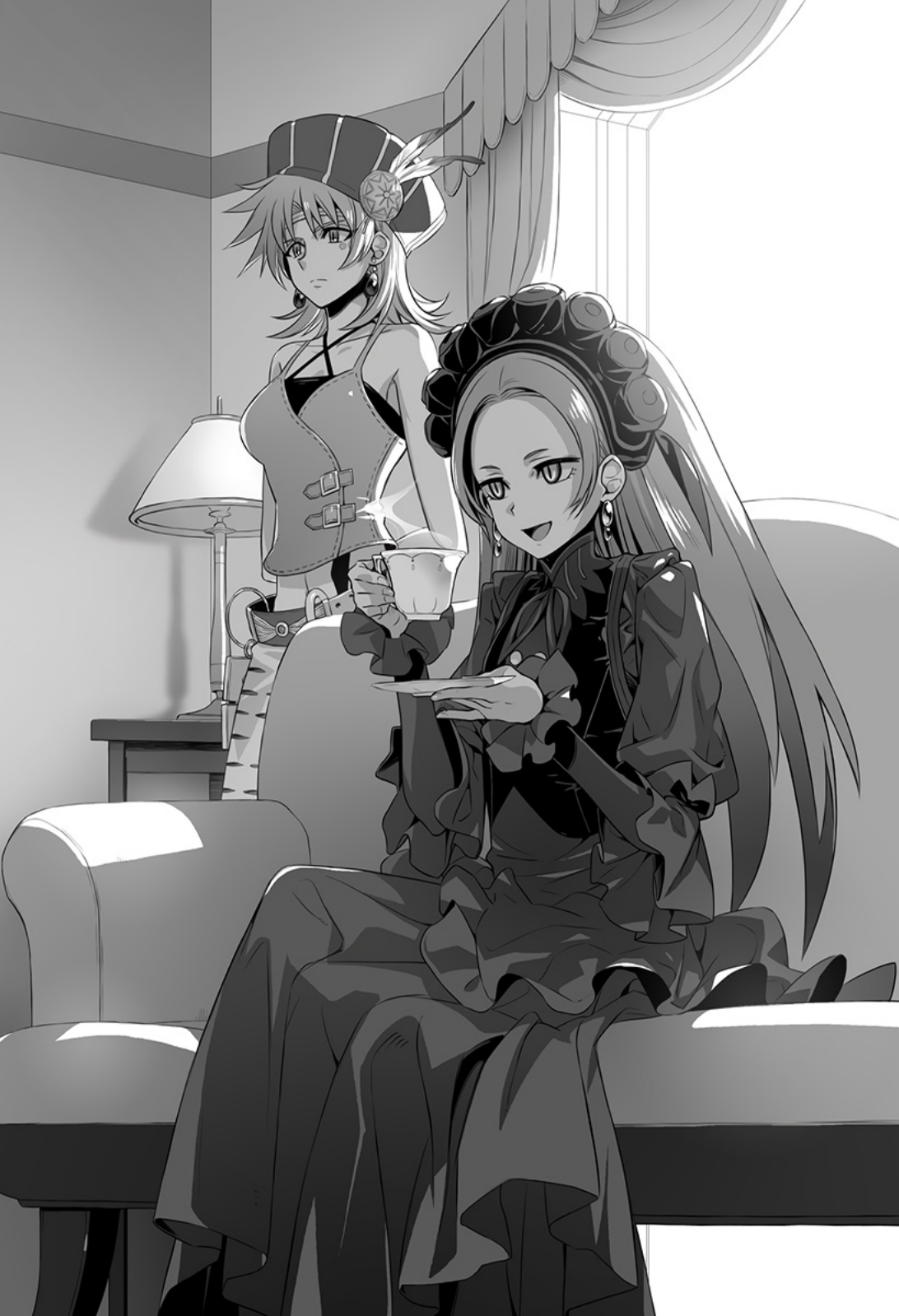
The person they’d just been discussing, Nartessia, was sitting on the sofa. When she saw the group of girls come in, she set her teacup down on the table. The cup seemed to be filled with European tea. Nartessia herself was a beautiful, elegant girl wearing a crimson dress. She was the very image of a rich princess, but there was a terribly sharp look in her eyes.

“Hello.”

“Well, sit down. Though there are a few more of you than I expected. Chelsea, bring some chairs from the bedroom.”

“Of course.”

Chelsea complied and brought three chairs, which meant there wasn't one for her. When she was done carrying them in, she stood behind the sofa where Nartessia was sitting. Nartessia, by the way, was sitting alone in the middle of the sofa meant for three.



“I’d like to get to the point immediately.”

Hibiki was a bit irritated at the way Chelsea was being treated, but knowing it might only make things worse for Chelsea if she spoke up, she swallowed her words and cut straight to the heart of why they’d come in the first place.

“During our own investigation, we found out that Ellicia was being chased by those men, and now we’re trying to save her. In the process of all this, we came to discover that the Margaret family is involved, as well.”

“Your own investigation, you say?” Nartessia took a sip of her tea. “Do you know what their organization is, exactly?”

“A group of psychics.”

“Oh? And how does a group of high school students from a peaceful country like this know anything about that? I suppose I won’t ask. I’m not interested in delving that deeply into your affairs.”

This is tough...

Hibiki tried to relax and act as natural as possible. They’d gone through something similar yesterday when Yang disappeared. Nartessia seemed to not feel panic or uneasiness. If Hibiki was the only one on edge, they’d be at a disadvantage.

“What’s important is whether or not you and I can benefit from each other.”

“For that to happen, we both need to know what the other wants. Why is the Margaret clan chasing Ellicia, no, her organization?”

“I’d prefer you reveal what you’re after first... but it seems you’re close friends with Chelsea. Even if I don’t tell you, you’ll probably find out anyway. Although, if she does share information with you behind my back, she’ll regret it.”

“...”

Nartessia seemed to be amused by the prospect, but Chelsea was doing her best to not react at all.

What’s the relationship between Chelsea and Nartessia, anyway? Sisters? No, Chelsea only had a little brother. And she’s too young to be a mother, so...

As Hibiki tried her best to figure out how exactly the two girls were related, an irritated Rosalind smacked her fingers against the table.

“You. Girl,” she said demandingly.

“Are you referring to me? I suppose I do still look young,” Nartessia said with a giggle.

Rosalind seemed even more annoyed by her attitude.

“Are you going to tell us why you’re after them, or not? Just make it clear already.”

“Heh. I could, but... First, show me something entertaining.”

“If that’s what you want, then so be it.” Rosalind spoke in an icy voice as she nodded. Then her eyes flashed red.

“?!”

Is she going to force it out of her with her charm magic?

It was the fastest way to get what they wanted, certainly, but

they weren't at a stage where they needed to resort to that yet. Hibiki and Suzuran tried to stop her, but it was already too late. Rosalind was gazing into Nartessia's eyes, trying to use her charm spell and make the uncooperative girl her puppet. But...

"I knew you didn't seem human. Is that some kind of species-specific mental control? It doesn't seem to be magic."

"...You endured it?"

"It upsets me that you've underestimated me so."

Nartessia laughed. She showed no signs of being under Rosalind's control.

Not good!

Hibiki thwacked Rosalind hard on the back of the head. There was a dull thud as the blonde girl's head flew forward and smacked into the table.

"Ow! What was that for?!"

"I'm sorry. That was very rude of this idiot."

Hibiki bowed to Nartessia and ignored Rosalind.

"Did you just call me an idiot?!"

"That was your fault, Mistress."

Rosalind wasn't happy about being called an idiot, but Suzuran dragged her out into the hallway before she could protest further.

"...Well, that was certainly interesting."

Hibiki wasn't sure if Nartessia meant the charm, or Rosalind

getting smacked into the table. Either way, she laughed about it and seemed to brush off what Rosalind had tried to do to her.

Chelsea said she didn't get mad easily, and it seems she wasn't kidding... But I don't understand how she's not mad about something like that.

Was she forgiving? Or maybe she just didn't care? Was this the kind of personality it took to run a family of mages?

But then... she's probably really scary when she does snap.

A cold shiver ran down Hibiki's spine.

She couldn't tell if Nartessia knew what she was thinking or not, but Nartessia then looked at her and said, "As I promised, I'll tell you what I'm trying to do. That group stole a certain treasure from the Margaret clan."

"A treasure?"

"I can't tell you the details, of course, but, yes... Something capable of burning every major city in the world to ash."

"What?!"

Nartessia's voice was calm, but Hibiki gasped.

"Is that true?!"

"Why would I lie? Tell them, Chelsea."

Hibiki turned to look at Chelsea.

"What Mistress Nartessia says is true."

"I see..." Hibiki took a deep breath to calm herself.

Don't panic. All our stories are like this.

Hibiki would have preferred negotiations to be less tense than this, but she still had to stay on her game.

“Now it's my turn to ask. What are you and your group after?”

“Well...”

Hibiki proceeded to explain what had happened, but left out the part about Satsuki's Magic of Omniscience.

“So, basically, you want to save this Ellicia girl?”

“That's right.”

“I see... Actually, I don't understand how you feel at all, particularly given that you're willing to fight an entire organization of psychics to save a girl you've never met before.”

“That's right.”

Of course, Hibiki wanted to avoid that if she could, but neither she nor Rekka would ever choose to abandon a heroine.

“Heh. Well, it doesn't matter. I'm not so far gone as to doubt someone's good intentions.” Nartessia laughed louder than before, then narrowed her eyes. “So, can any of you track this Ellicia girl?”

“What do you mean?”

“It's very simple. First, we're essentially after the same thing. The Margaret clan wants the treasure back, and you want to save Ellicia. To do that, you need to be ready to fight their organization. All of you, including that blonde girl with the pigtails, are likely to be handy in a fight. Of course, so are we. Don't you think

it's a good idea for us to cooperate?" Nartessia took one last sip of her tea and put the cup back down on the table.

"Perhaps," Hibiki said warily.

"I believe that the organization's leader, Yang, is the one with our treasure. He's probably also got the girl you're looking for. The problem is how to find him."

"Fair enough."

"We have a way, but it will take time. I just explained what would happen if too much time is wasted, right?"

The Margarets' treasure was something that could turn cities to ash. Chelsea had even confirmed it.

"But you have a way to find this girl again and track her down, don't you? Can you help us?"

"..."

It was only thanks to the Magic of Omniscience that they'd been able to do it the first time. Hibiki's gaze unconsciously shifted to Satsuki, and Nartessia noticed.

"Can you do it?"

"Huh?! Um..."

"Well? Hmm?"

Satsuki fidgeted nervously, unsure of how to respond. She couldn't tell Nartessia about the magic and was at a loss as to what to say instead. But then Chelsea spoke up.

"Satsuki is good with detection magic, Mistress Nartessia."

“Detection magic? So, she’s a mage?”

“That’s right.” Chelsea nodded.

That was the same lie they’d first told Chelsea to conceal Satsuki’s true power when they’d first met. Chelsea had probably remembered it and was using it to cover for her now.

“Hmm... and this magic can locate something even when you have no clue where it might be?”

“Um... yes.”

“That’s amazing.”

For a moment, it looked like there was a glint in Nartessia’s eyes.

“I would love to see it.”

“I-I’m sorry. I don’t know about that...”

“Hmm... Is it your clan’s heirloom magic?”

“Oh! Yes, that’s right.”

“I see... Then I guess I’ll have to give up,” Nartessia said, suddenly willing to drop the subject like she’d never brought it up.

“?”

Hibiki was confused by her sudden change in attitude, but she didn’t want to risk bringing it up again. Negotiations continued smoothly from there, and it was decided that Satsuki would go to another room to locate Yang and Ellicia, and then come report back to Nartessia.

“Satsuki, what’s heirloom magic?”

As they walked down the hallway, Hibiki asked Satsuki about that phrase. She'd never heard it before.

“Powerful clans have magic that only they know about and can use. That’s why they call it heirloom magic.”

“Like some kind of clan secret?”

“Yeah. I’d have to explain a little bit about how magical society works for you to understand how that came about... but basically, the strength of a clan’s heirloom magic determines their status in magical society.”

“I see.”

In other words, there’s no way a clan would share its heirloom magic. Is that why Nartessia relented so easily?

When they reached the room Nartessia had prepared for them, the girls vigilantly stood watch to make sure nobody was spying on Satsuki while she used her Omniscient Magic.

“...Are we really going to work with them?” Rosalind asked as she glared at Hibiki, clearly unhappy.

“It depends on whether or not Ellicia is with Yang... But if their organization really does intend to destroy every major city in the world, we can’t exactly sit this one out.”

Hibiki wanted to talk to Chelsea more, but it didn’t seem like she’d be leaving Nartessia’s side anytime soon. But as long as their interests were aligned, just like Nartessia said, it was worth cooperating. Granted, there were plenty of other things bothering Hibiki right now.

She didn’t seem upset when Yang fled from her in the department store. But she wants our help to find them quickly. She’s

talking about how dangerous they are, but she doesn't seem worried at all. Where does she really stand on all of this?

Was she even the type to take action because the world was in danger...?

“First things first, we need to find Ellicia before we make any decisions.”

Hibiki crossed her arms and fell silent. Shortly after, Satsuki opened her eyes.

“I’ve confirmed Ellicia is with Yang’s group.”

Rosalind grunted in annoyance when she heard the news.

Chapter 4: The Former Hero, the Demon King, and Their Battle (July 21st-24th)

Our trip through the sky to the capital city of Arbast was oddly awkward. There were several reasons for this. For starters, we were running low on food, which meant we had to ration how much everyone got for the day. And as we drew closer to the capital, Corona got more and more on edge. I tried casually asking her what was up, but she wouldn't answer me.

After what had happened to her home, Lyun was outright depressed, too. We'd managed to get out of the valley, but her story wouldn't reach its happy ending until we met the Spirit King and got him to send a team to handle the Ghostdemon sickness outbreak or something. The one thing that seemed to lift her spirits was talking to Mio. Maybe she was just trying to take her mind of things, but Lyun really seemed to have taken a shine to her.

“Hey, Mio, what kind of game is that?”

Mio sung a song to lighten the mood after dinner, and Lyun approached her when she was done. She seemed to have enjoyed the song more than anyone.

“It's a song. Lyun, you don't sing?”

“What's that?”

It seemed like the spirit world didn't have a whole lot going on for it in the way of music.

“Wow, Earth does some interesting stuff for fun, huh?”

After that, Mio had taught Lyun several basic songs, and they spent quite some time singing together. Lyun seemed to enjoy it, perhaps since it made for a pleasant distraction.

Lyun had gotten especially close with Mio, but she was being really nice to all of us even though we were from another world. Everyone except Harissa, that is.

“Um... Lyun?”

“...”

“Um...”

“...”

Whenever Harissa tried to talk to her, Lyun would turn away and give her the silent treatment. And just like with Corona, she wouldn't tell me the reason why. I resorted to asking Harissa if she had any clue.

“It's probably because I'm a sorcerer from Aburaamu...”

That was all she said on the matter. She looked so glum about it that I didn't want to push her.

If we at least had some warm food and warm beds, would that make everybody feel better? I spent two days thinking that before we finally reached the capital city of Arbast.



By the time we reached the city, it was almost nightfall. The red light of the setting sun shone down on groups of homes all made out of wood and mud. Apart from the inns, there were very few buildings taller than two stories.

“I’ve never been to Arbast myself, but a lot of different spirits from around the country come here, so it’s divided into four sections.”

Apparently there was a section each for the four main types of spirits in this world: water, fire, air, and earth. I’d heard of this before. Those were normally called the four elements. Both fairies and spirits had bodies like we did (material ones), but fairies lived out in the wild. Water spirits lived in rivers and lakes, so only fire, earth, and air spirits made houses. Most of them were simple earthen structures.

After entering the city, we decided we’d find an inn before we met the Spirit King. Mio and Harissa were hanging in there, but they were reaching their limits. Even Tsumiki, though she wasn’t saying it, was getting tired. To be honest, so was I.

I was worried about Ellicia and Hibiki’s group, but if we collapsed from pushing ourselves too hard, it wouldn’t do anyone any good. Once we’d made the preparations for Lyun to go to the Spirit King’s palace to get a medical team to head to Windsong Valley, we would rest for the night. The problem was that we didn’t have any money from the spirit world, but Lyun kindly offered to pay.

“It’s my way of thanking you. I’m really grateful for you helping me,” she said.

There was no point in refusing such a generous offer, so we decided to take her up on it.

“I think you’d be best off at an inn run by sylpheeds,” she said.

“Yeah, probably.”

A fire spirit inn would be really hot, and an earth spirit inn would probably be dirty. From what we’d seen in Windsong Val-

ley, the sylpheeds liked to make cottages, and that kind of taste suited all of us just fine. We rented three rooms on the second floor of an inn run by a sylpheed couple, and gathered to eat supper on the first floor.

“They don’t use any seasonings, do they? It’s a very natural taste,” Tsumiki said as she bit into a fruit that looked and tasted like white fish.

She seemed especially interested in the food here, just like she’d been when we went to outer space. If only her cooking ability was commensurate with her enthusiasm for food...

“I prefer stuff with a little more flavor to it,” Lea said.

“Yeah, you like stuff with strong flavors. Oh, right. I’ll borrow the kitchen and make something for you later.”

“That would be great.”

Lea smiled at Tsumiki’s plan. It might not have been right for Lea, but I liked the simple flavor of the dishes. The other girls mostly seemed to agree. I didn’t get to hear what Corona thought, though. She was still keeping to herself.

“...”

Once we got to the inn, she’d gone into her room and hadn’t come out since. According to Harissa, her bunkmate, she’d said she was tired and had gone to sleep almost immediately.

I took it upon myself to stop by after dinner.

“Hey, are you sure you don’t want to eat anything?” I asked from the door.

All I got in response was a quiet, “Yes.”

She didn't sound like she'd been asleep. But it didn't seem right to force her to come out and join us, so I let her be.

"All right, I guess it's time to head to the palace."

"Yes," said Lyun.

"Everyone else, stay here and get some rest."

With that, Lyun and I left the inn.



The "palace" wasn't, strictly speaking, a building. It was really the inside of a massive, 500- or 600-meter tall tree called the World Tree. It had everything you could possibly need to govern a country on the inside. So, even if it wasn't a real building, it was certainly a real castle. It certainly seemed as functional as Abu-raamu's castle.

Lyun told one of the water spirits who worked there what she needed, and they told her to wait for a while before leaving for another room. Without much choice or anything else to do, the two of us just sat in some kind of waiting room.

"..."

"..."

Time always passes slowly when you're waiting for something. It must've been especially hard for Lyun. Her homeland was in terrible peril right now. If it were me, I might've just shaken the water spirit when they told me to wait. When I told Lyun that...

"Things are really bad, yes. That's why I can't afford to mess this up."

“Honestly, I didn’t think you’d be so clear-headed right now.”

“That’s a little rude, don’t you think?”

“Oh, um... Sorry.”

Maybe it was her dress, the color of fresh green leaves, or maybe it was that she was a fairy, a creature of fantasy, but Lyun struck me as rather young. But when we first met in the valley, she wasn’t panicking at all. And even what happened after that... I wasn’t really sure how to describe it, but she seemed to be carrying a very serious weight. It was probably just her desire to save the valley, but...

“I apologize for the wait. Please come this way.”

The water spirit from before finally returned, and it guided the two of us to a staircase further into the palace. The staircase led up several floors before passing through what looked like some kind of government office. When we reached the end of it, we were led to a meeting room. There, we were finally able to meet with what appeared to be a very important spirit. However...

“I’m sorry, but we can’t send a medical team to your valley immediately.”

It wasn’t the news we wanted to hear.



By the time we got back to the inn, it was already late at night.

“What? Why won’t they help?” Harissa asked when I told her what had happened. She was looking a little pale.

“Apparently it’s not just Windsong Valley where the mana spring has dried up.”

Getting right down to it, that was the heart of the problem. The mana spring, the source of the mana that formed the souls of the spirits and fairies of this world, was drying up all over the country.

Huge amounts of mana would be needed to cure the Ghostdemon sickness plague. The infected parts of a spirit's astral body would need to be purged, then healed with new mana. And that was for each person affected. But even healthy spirits needed the mana-filled fruit of the land to live. The government couldn't take away limited food resources from people to try and heal the sick.

In a sense, you could say that the spirit world was in the middle of a great famine. An infection that created zombies. A famine. It was pretty common in zombie movies for the survivors to struggle to find food in an apocalyptic world, but this was on a totally different level.

There was a moment of silence in the room as everyone thought about the sheer scale of the problem.

"...I have an idea. Could you use dark matter to cure the fairies and spirits who are sick?" Tsumiki asked, unable to bear the silence any longer. "You know, the food I cook makes Lea really powerful, right? It may not be good for humans to eat, but maybe spirits could..."

"Even if that were true, they need to purge the mana that's been infected from their astral bodies. But once someone's been completely overtaken by Ghostdemon sickness, they can't do that themselves anymore. What they told me was that you need a doctor with special skills to perform surgery at that point."

So, not only was there a shortage of mana, there was also a shortage of doctors.

"Maybe you could've restored their mana with dark matter be-

fore the disease took over, but...”

“I see...”

This time, nobody said anything.

“I’ll go tell Corona, I guess,” I said, and then headed to the room she’d locked herself in. “Corona, can I come in?”

“...Fine.”

A cold voice answered from the other side of the door. I opened it hesitantly. Corona was sitting on the bed with her arms wrapped around her knees. She looked at me when I came in.

“Do you need something?”

“Well, um... I went to the palace.”

I told her what I’d just told the others.

“I see... So? What are you going to do?”

“What am I going to do?”

“You wanted to go to Aburaamu and then back to your ‘Earth,’ right?”

“That’s true, but...”

We’d spent three days in this world. That meant that back home, it was just about to become July 24th. I was curious as to what Satsuki’s group was up to, but they were probably worried about me too since I hadn’t come home. I knew I should get back as soon as possible, but...

“I can’t just leave Lyun here... I’d like to find some solution for this.”

“...Why?”

“Huh?”

At some point, Corona had turned towards me, and she was staring deep into my eyes.

“Why are you so intent on trying to help others? That Mio girl’s got problems of her own, right? And you’ve also got other things to do back in your home world. So why are you so willing to get involved in the problems of this world and these people you barely even know? It’s insane.”

“Oh... Yeah, I guess I never had a chance to tell you.”

On our way to Windsong Valley, Corona had essentially been in a coma, and she’d been so standoffish on the way to the capital that we hadn’t had a chance to talk much. She didn’t know about the bloodline of the Namidare yet. It was a long story, no matter how short I tried to make it, so I asked permission to sit down on her bed before I told her all about who I was.

“You’ve got a pretty tough destiny, huh?”

“Not as bad as it was. Now I’ve got friends I can count on. And you were a hero in Aburaamu, weren’t you? So you’re not really in a position to talk.”

“I don’t know... I didn’t exactly volunteer to try and save the world,” she whispered before falling silent.

She was looking at the Hero’s Sword, which was leaning up against the wall in a corner of the room.

“But you managed to seal the Demon King and save Aburaamu, right?”

“Yeah, I guess. At first, I really didn’t want to. The person who summoned me, her name was Pastel... She was just this awful person. I told her to send me home over and over, and she just refused. When I didn’t want to do something, she’d hit me with her staff or kick me. She dragged me all across the land, and before I knew it, I’d saved the world.”

“I-I see...”

Wow. Being the original hero sounded rough. But when Corona talked about Pastel, she...

“Sheesh. Just remembering her ticks me off.”

She had a tiny smile on her face, like she’d kind of enjoyed it. She must not have really hated this Pastel person. Or maybe she’d decided to slay the Demon King for Pastel’s sake, just like I’d done with Harissa. There was not a doubt in my mind that Corona was the real deal when it came to being a hero. But that also made me curious.

“Corona.”

“What?”

“Why were you... Why were you sealed inside the Ruler’s Dungeon?”

It had been on my mind since we first met Corona. Why had she been sealed down there like someone never wanted her to come out again?

“I told you about my bloodline, right?”

“...”

“If there’s some secret you’re keeping—something that’s keep-

ing your story from being over—can you please tell me about it? I'm sure it's something I'm supposed to help you with..."

If Corona still had a problem, I wanted to help. Sane or not, it was what I'd decided to do, and I was going to follow through on that.

"I..." Corona started to say something for a moment, but then choked it back and shook her head. "I don't have any secrets."

"Corona..."

"I was sealed in the Ruler's Dungeon of my own free will. But..." She cut herself off and smiled bitterly. "The loneliness I felt down there in that cold, dark place all alone... It was beyond what I imagined. All I could do was sleep. I lost count of how many times I would dream of the past and awake to disappointment. Perhaps it's fully my fault for getting myself into that situation... but I'm deeply grateful that you got me out."

"..."

"You truly saved me, young man."

I didn't even know what to say to that, so I decided to draw our talk to an end there.

"Okay... I'm heading back to my room. I need to think about what comes next."

"All right."

Clatter...

When I got up, I thought I heard something strange outside. When I went to check, however, there was nobody there. It was strange, but I had plenty of other things on my mind and went to

my room anyway. I laid down on the bed and tried to think, but I must've been more tired than I thought. I started to doze off immediately...



“...Huh?!”

Crap... I must've fallen asleep. I was planning on getting some rest, but I was still annoyed with myself for conking out at a time like this. The room was pitch black. Where was the light again?

“R, what time is it?”

“About 5:00 AM, I think.”

I was the only one in the room, so I could talk to R freely without having to worry. If it was morning, did that mean it was July 24th already?

“I wonder if everybody's awake.”

The girls had split up into two other rooms: Harissa, Lea, and Corona in one, and Tsumiki, Lyun, and Mio in another. I wanted to check on them, but I wasn't sure if it was okay to visit a girl's room at this hour. Just as I was thinking about what to do, the door to my room burst violently open and several spirits came flooding in.

“What?!”

“Stay quiet!” one of them yelled, and then pushed me to the floor before I could respond.

“Who are you people?”

I was yelling, but they just yelled back louder.

“Silence, servant of the Demon King!”

Needless to say, I had no idea what they were talking about.

“Huh? What...?”

All I could do was lie there in shock.



We were taken by the spirit soldiers to a cage made from vines and wood, and from there, we were carted off to the palace. It looked like it would be simple to tear through the woven vine bars, but they were enhanced with some kind of magic. It wasn't going to be easy to escape.

All our belongings were confiscated, and we were given what the spirits called mana handcuffs. They were shackles that drained all the energy from our bodies, leaving us with just enough strength to move our eyes and mouths. When I looked around, I realized Lyun and Mio weren't with us.

“Where are they...?” I whispered to Tsumiki, who'd been in the room with them.

“I don't know...”

She was apparently just as clueless as I was. Maybe they'd stepped out to go to the bathroom and escaped...? I didn't know, but I assumed it was better to stay focused on our situation for the time being.

All the soldiers around us were on edge, and it looked like they were ready to kill us at any time. I hadn't done anything that would make them mad, as far as I knew. I racked my brain trying to figure out what these spirits could have meant by calling me a servant of the Demon King.

“Funnily enough, we actually defeated the Demon King... Two of us have, no less.”

I thought I’d try and lighten the mood a little bit, but Corona said nothing. Maybe this wasn’t the time for jokes...

“What’s going to happen to us?”

“They’ll probably let us go once they realize there’s been a misunderstanding... But I don’t know why this happened in the first place.”

And we didn’t know where Lyun and Mio were, either. Even if we did manage to bust our way out, it would be hard to find them in the capital. We would essentially be abandoning their stories.

My biggest priority now was finding out what was happening. When we got to the World Tree palace, the cage we were in was magically lifted to the top. There was nothing in sight but a door that led further in and a staircase that led up. There were more soldiers present, though, as well as an older man who was dressed quite different from the others.

“Sire, we’ve brought them here.”

“Good work,” the man said as he motioned for the soldiers to step back.

Wait, if the soldiers were calling him “sire,” then...

“Are you the Spirit King?”

“That’s right.”

The man nodded. His dignified bearing suggested both great age and authority. He was looking at the lot of us with strange eyes that were four colors: red, blue, yellow, and green. I couldn’t

tell exactly which one of us it was, but he seemed to have fixated on someone in particular.

“Are you the Demon King and his servants?”

“No,” I said.

“....”

The Spirit King didn’t seem particularly perturbed by my denial.

“There’s no sense in trying to fool me,” he said.

“I’m sorry, but what...? I don’t know who this Demon King you’re talking about is, but have you ever seen him?”

The Demon King I knew was a giant dragon. I thought it was pretty obvious just looking at us that none of us had anyone like that in our family tree. Well, maybe Lea’s Leviathan form was pretty spot-on, but of course she wasn’t the Demon King.

“True... There are many stories of the Demon King who once invaded the spirit world, but there are so many different stories about him that it’s impossible to know what he truly looks like.”

“Then you’re mistaken about this whole thing. I don’t know why you’re doing this, but it’s got nothing to do with us.”

“No, that’s impossible.” Now it was his turn to tell me I was wrong. “There may be no reliable accounts of what the Demon King looks like, but there are two things we know for sure.”

With that, he beckoned to the soldiers to bring something forward.

“This is one of them.”

It was the Hero's Sword, now unwrapped. They must have taken it from our room at the inn.

“But what does the sword prove?”

The Spirit King responded by summoning a small ball of fire with one hand and flinging it at the sword in his other. Of course, the fireball was split in two by the blade and disappeared.

“A sword that cuts through magic. This is the Demon King's sword, the Demon Blade that once terrified our world.”

“...Huh?”

I knew that the sword could cut through magic, or really anything that used mana. But... “Demon Blade”?

“Wait a second! That's called the Hero's Sword...”

“Nonsense. This fearsome weapon nullifies even our strongest magic, and tears mercilessly through our astral bodies! There is no defending from it! You would suggest this is a hero's weapon? Impossible!”

We were just talking past each other... What in the world was going on? Desperate, I looked to R.

“There're two possibilities. One is that the Demon King who once attacked this world had a weapon identical to the Hero's Sword. The other is much simpler...”

As usual, R assessed the situation in a completely deadpan fashion.

“The ‘Hero's Sword’ and the ‘Demon Blade’ are just two names for the same thing. And...” In a flat voice, she said, “In that case, it's likely that the hero and the Demon King are the same person.”

That was certainly a possibility I hadn't considered... Naturally, my gaze turned to Corona, who'd been silent this whole time.

“ ... ”

She didn't seem particularly upset, but her face was pale, and her gaze was downcast.

“And there's one more thing I know for certain about the Demon King,” the Spirit King added. “The Ruler's Dungeon was made by one of the ancient Spirit Kings to seal away the Demon King. What's more, someone tells me you've just escaped from there.”

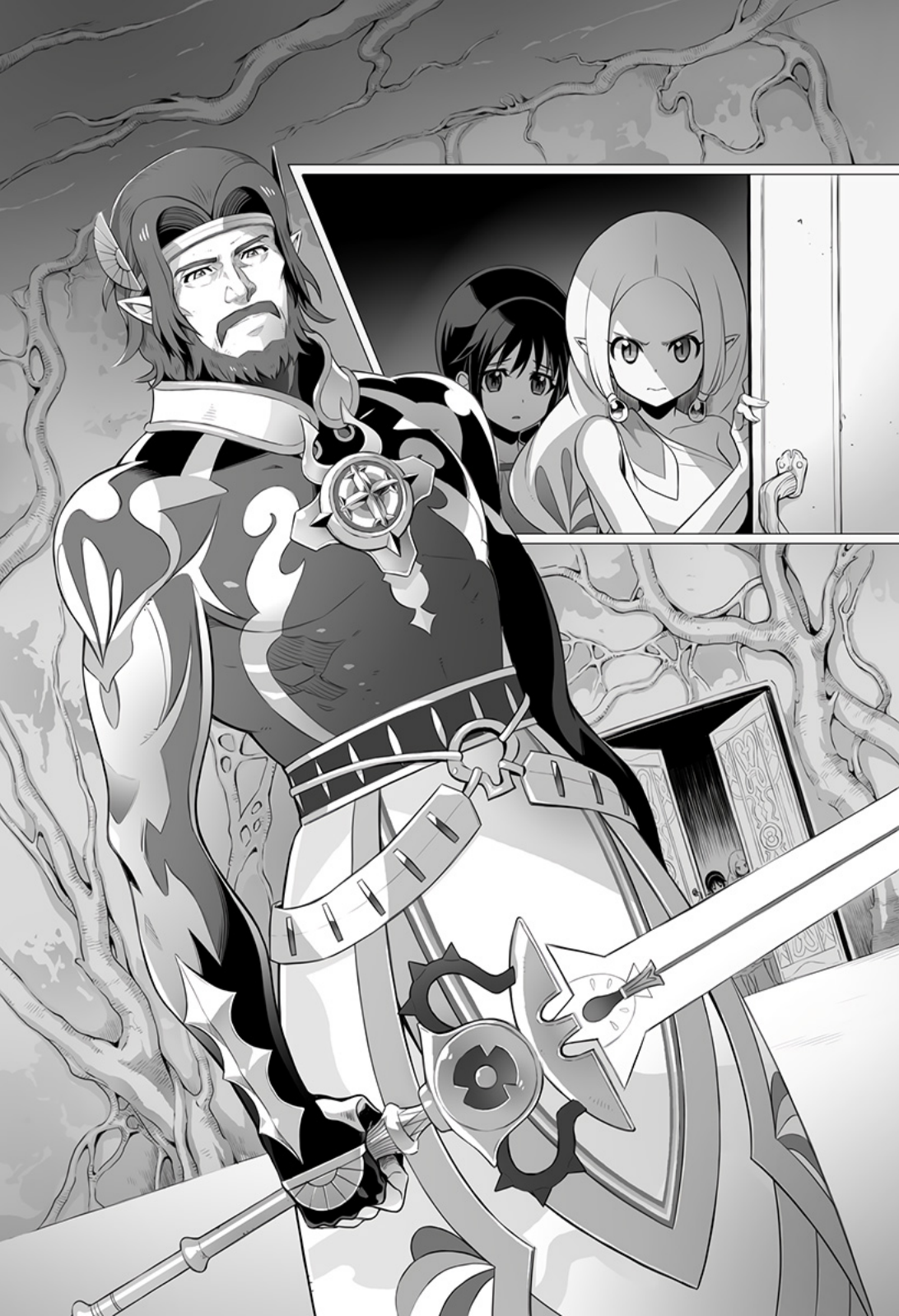
As the king spoke, the door behind him opened, and two girls emerged.

“Lyun... Mio...”

“ ... ”

“Rekka...”

Lyun said nothing, but Mio called my name in a concerned voice. For some reason, she and Lyun were wearing the same outfit now. But more importantly, she was shaking in fear.



“These two sisters told me about you.”

“...?”

The two were both wearing the same outfit, and Lyun’s halo was gone—evidently she could hide it like Iris could hide her tail—so they did kind of look alike, but I knew they weren’t related. I knew saying that, however, would just get both of them arrested, too. There was no way that would help, so I said nothing.

“I heard yesterday... that you came out from the Ruler’s Dungeon,” Lyun declared. Mio was hiding behind her back, looking at us like she wanted to say something.

Wait, Lyun heard that yesterday? Was it her that I’d heard outside of Corona’s door? The Spirit King must have taken our silence as affirmation, because his stern gaze grew even sharper.

“If the Demon King and his servants are behind the mana springs drying up, that would explain things.”

“Whoa, wait a second... Corona was in the Ruler’s Dungeon until just a few days ago! She can’t be responsible.”

Maybe that made it sound like I was admitting Corona was the Demon King, but if they were accusing us of something so ridiculous, I had to defend us.

“How could we trust the servants of the Demon King? Even if what you say is true, you subordinates could have done it.”

“We only arrived in this world four days ago.”

“It’s true that you wear strange clothes. Is this typical demon garb?”

Demons... So, the people here seemed to think we'd come from the demon world? With Corona in borrowed clothes from Tsumiki, we were all dressed in what we could consider normal for Earth. But to them, we were all wearing the same unusual thing. That was probably why they'd lumped us together like that and thought that we were the servants of the "Demon King."

"I have many questions for the Demon King. Take them all to prison. See that they never leave it alive."

The king ordered us to be taken away.



I'd always thought of castle prisons as underground dungeons, but instead, we were kept up at the top of the palace. We were taken up another floor from where we met the king, but there was no staircase leading down anywhere.

Wait, I get it. Unless you could fly, you couldn't escape. But with the mana handcuffs on, Lea couldn't fly and neither could any normal sylpheed. They'd really thought this through, unfortunately.

We were separated from Corona and each given dingy prisoner's clothes. Then we were all put in separate cells. Since we still had the mana handcuffs on, we could barely move. All there was to do was lie on the floor.

"Man... I always have the craziest experiences with you," Tsumiki said.

"Sorry."

"I wasn't really asking for an apology."

Then why did it sound like it?

“Still, what do we do now?”

“Hmm...”

I wasn't sure what to tell Lea, who was talking to me from beyond the wall separating our cells. Really, there were two problems. One: how were we going to get out of here? Two: what were we going to do about Corona?

It seemed Corona was indeed the Demon King... That was a shocking reveal, but given the state we'd found her in, there was simply no way she'd had anything to do with what they were accusing her of with the mana spring. But even though I knew that, it didn't look like there was much of a point in trying to convince the king and the soldiers. They didn't really seem interested in evidence. There was no way they'd believe the Demon King wasn't at fault.

So, should I just save her and run? It was the only option I seemed to have right now... but even if we did escape, what would happen to Lyun's story? I couldn't come up with an answer.

My thoughts, however, were interrupted when someone entered the prison and walked up to my cell.

“Is that you, Lyun?”

I could barely manage to move my head to look up at her through the bars. She was looking down at me with disgust in her eyes.

“...”

She was pulling Mio along behind her, and she still looked scared.

“Did you put your own clothes on Mio and say she was your

sister so that they wouldn't put her in prison?"

"That's right," Lyun said defiantly, as if trying to get a rise out of me.

That wasn't really what I was mad about, though...

"Lyun... Mio... Why did you do this?"

"I learned that the Demon King had revived, so I told the Spirit King. That's all." She looked away a little. "Mio told me that you broke the Demon King's seal. You deserved to be arrested."

"We're not from the demon world, and we're not demons. We came from the same world Mio did. If you talked to her, you should know that, right?"

"I did... But she's lost her memories, right? So maybe you lied to her. And if you can travel between worlds, maybe you could just go between the demon world and Earth as you please."

"That's..."

What Lyun was saying was crazy, but I didn't have any way to disprove it.

"Either way, that woman really is the Demon King, right? If you really have nothing to do with her, you'll be released eventually..."

Lyun sounded like she suspected us, but wasn't entirely convinced. I could see it in the way she protected Mio, too. She didn't really seem to think we were actually servants of the Demon King.

Corona, however, was a different matter. Lyun was absolutely sure she was the one responsible for drying up the mana spring and causing the Ghostdemon sickness to run rampant in Wind-

song Valley.

“Lyun?”

“...What?”

“Even if Corona was the Demon King, there’s no way she could have caused the mana spring to dry up.”

I then told her exactly how we’d found Corona and escaped the Ruler’s Dungeon.

“...See? Corona couldn’t have left, and she was so weak when we broke the seal that she collapsed. She didn’t have the energy to walk, much less do something evil like dry up the spring.”

“Shut up.” Lyun cut me off coldly. “She’s the Demon King. How can you believe her?”

The Demon King... The Demon King, huh? That was the problem. All the Demon King stood for to these people was pure evil. They were judging Corona off of that alone, without bothering to get to know her or anything about her. Granted, if someone had tried to introduce me to the Demon King and I didn’t know any better, I would’ve been just as quick to judge.

“Corona saved the world once.”

“What?”

“You know that Harissa is a sorcerer from Aburaamu, right?” I looked over towards Harissa’s cell. “Corona was summoned to Aburaamu by one of their summoners, and she saved their world. If the Demon King is pure evil, she isn’t the Demon King... She’s a hero.”

Maybe she was the Demon King who’d once threatened the

spirit world. But that was a long time ago. She'd changed. Corona had become a hero.

She'd come back here after saving Aburaamu, and she hadn't destroyed the world then. She even said she'd volunteered herself to be sealed away in the dungeon. If she'd been summoned to Aburaamu during the middle of her invasion of the spirit world, then maybe she'd agreed to be sealed away in order to stop the war? Half of that was just a guess on my part, but if nothing else...

"The Corona I know isn't a bad person. I believe in what I saw."

"Then what are you saying caused this?!" Lyun was yelling. "Are you saying it's nobody's fault? That the mana springs dried up on their own?! That the Ghostdemon sickness in Windsong Valley is natural? That my...!"

Lyun abruptly cut herself off and burst into tears. I was caught off guard by her sudden outburst, but at the same time, I could see why both she and the Spirit King were so eager to blame things on the Demon King.

Unfortunately, I didn't know a lot about how this world worked. I knew on Earth, for instance, water traveled from rivers into the ocean, where it evaporated under the sun. That water vapor rose up into the sky, collected as clouds, and then tumbled back down to earth as rain. It collected in rivers, and then the whole process started over again.

But what if mana in this world wasn't like that? Lyun had talked about purging mana in order to cure the sickness. There was also talk of "expending" mana to use magic. Even the plants also used mana to grow. But did they create mana via photosynthesis? Either way, the plants used mana to grow, make fruit, and spread seeds. And each of those seeds would need mana, too.

So, what happened if the mana here didn't move in a cycle? What if it was used up forever once it came from the spring? That wouldn't matter as long as there was an infinite supply coming from the spring. But now the spring had dried up. If that was because the spring had just run out of mana, what would become of the spirit world? There was only one answer: destruction.

This world couldn't exist without the mana coming from the spring. The spirits' astral bodies required it, and so did the plant life. If the basis of their whole food chain vanished, they'd have bigger problems than Ghostdemon sickness. It would be the end of the world.

And faced with that kind of crisis, they needed a reason for it. The Demon King dried up the spring. So, if they did something about the Demon King, the springs would come back to life. That's what they believed because they needed hope. Maybe it was too easy to say that they were being selfish.

“...”

But I couldn't do it.

“I don't want to hear anything else you have to say.” Lyun looked away and pulled Mio closer. “Come on, Mio. I brought you here because you wanted to see Rekka. Hurry up and say what you need to so we can get back to the inn, okay?”

“Okay...”

Mio hesitantly stepped forward and kneeled down in front of my cell. She grabbed the vine bars and brought her face as close to mine as she could get it.

“I'm sorry... I didn't realize this would happen... I told her about Corona when she asked me...”

“No, it’s okay. There was no way you would’ve known this would happen.”

I shook my head and told her not to let it bother her.

“ ... ”

Mio then cast a quick glance back at Lyun. When she saw that she was looking the other way, she quickly slipped something through the bars into the shadows of my cell. It was Ellicia’s earring, which the guards had taken from me.

“ ...!”

With that earring, I could pass through walls!

“I told them it was mine, and they gave it back.”

Even if it was an item that gave you superpowers, it still just looked like normal jewelry. If Mio had said she’d lent it to me, or that I’d stolen it, and begged for it back, no one would have doubted her.

“Corona’s above... Your things are below...”

Mio whispered the bare minimum amount of information to me so that Corona wouldn’t hear, then stood up. When she saw that we were done, Lyun grabbed her by the hand and left the prison.

“Ngh... Rr...”

I forced my unresponsive limbs to move. I crawled my way to the earring and picked it up in my mouth. I wondered if it would really work if I wasn’t holding it properly... But thinking back on it, it had activated while it was in my pocket before.

All I could do was hope. This was my chance to escape.

But if we were all crawling on the ground like worms, they'd catch us and just drag us back. If we wanted a serious shot at this, I'd have to do something about the mana handcuffs that were sapping my energy.

But the only card I had to play was the wall walking ability the earring gave me. Without her strength, Lea couldn't turn into Leviathan, so she couldn't break them off... Wait, wall walking... When I'd passed through the wall in the Lord's Dungeon, my legs had been in one room, my bottom torso in the wall, and my top half all the way out in the hallway... In other words, it was possible to pass body parts through a wall and not necessarily your whole body.

Could I try that? We'd used the wall walking ability to pass through ceilings and floors in the dungeon, too. We'd been calling it "wall walking" because it was convenient, but maybe you could use it to pass through anything? So, with any luck, I could just pass my wrists through the handcuffs...

Clatter!

The mana handcuffs fell to the floor.

"I'm so glad that worked..."

I sighed in relief. After waiting a few seconds for the strength to come back to my limbs, I stood up. Without a sound, I passed through the bars of my cell the same way and walked over to Lea's.

"Rekka? How..."

"Shh..."

One by one, I removed everyone else's handcuffs quietly so that the guards outside wouldn't notice. I then explained that Mio had brought the earring to me.

"I see... So, Mio helped us out. What do we do now?"

"I guess we'll have to escape first..."

It wouldn't be easy to clear our names.

"For now, there's just too much we don't know. Like why the springs dried up, or what caused the Ghostdemon sickness... But we won't be able to learn any of that in here."

All I knew for sure was that the Namidares were the last hope for stories like this. If I didn't act, this would come to a bad ending. And I couldn't allow that. I didn't know how I was supposed to save Windsong Valley or the spirit world, but knew I didn't have time to waste in this cell.

For now, I needed to get out of the palace and away from the capital. I needed to keep going forward until I found a way to save the stories I'd gotten involved in. But there were two things that had to happen before that. No, three.

"First of all, we need to get our stuff back. Without Harissa's staff, we won't be able to leave this world. Then we need to save Corona... and if possible, take Lyun and Mio with us."

It might be hard to persuade Lyun, though...

"Okay, off we go."

There was no time to waste worrying about it. We quickly and stealthily got to work.



Being able to partially pass through walls was surprisingly useful. I could poke my head through the floor and see what was below without anyone seeing me. If the room was empty, it was a breeze to take everyone with me to the floor below. And since I could look outside a room without being spotted, it made it easy to remain hidden. It also made it easy to take people by surprise.

The first place we headed was the room past the prison. That was where they kept prisoners' belongings, as well as the interrogation tools they were going to use. Lea knocked out the guards as we searched for our stuff.

"Here we go," I said.

Harissa's staff, everyone's clothes... even Hibiki's glove. It was all there. These were the critical items we needed to return home. The only thing that was missing was the Hero's Sword.

"You'd better not turn around, okay?"

"Right."

Given the situation, we couldn't exactly split up to go change, so we all changed out of our prisoner's uniforms in the same room. Tsumiki, I'm really not going to turn around. You don't need to tell me.

"Come on, turn around already!"

Shut up, you predatory preschooler! Someone really needs to teach R to shut up one of these days. The sound of rustling clothing was already bad for my heart... No, it's not like I was trying to listen!

Anyway, once we were all dressed and ready to go again, the next thing we did was use a combination of Harissa's invisibility magic and my wall walking power to get to the top floor. It

worked well, and we just knocked out the guards who seemed to notice anything suspicious. So between force and stealth, we managed to get to a heavily guarded cell on the top floor without raising any alarm. That was where we found Corona.

“Corona!”

“...Rekka?”

Harissa then dismissed the invisibility spell, so it must have looked to Corona like we’d appeared out of thin air. She sounded like she was pretty surprised.

“I’m impressed you made it out of your cell.”

“Mio helped. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“...No, leave me here.”

“Okay, just hold on while I get you out... Wait, leave you here?!”

I shouted in bewilderment at what she said, and was immediately shushed by all the other girls. I quickly put my hand over my mouth and then turned back to Corona, making sure to speak in a whisper this time.

“What did you just say?”

“I said leave me here... I can’t cause any more trouble for you.” Corona looked down as she said that like she couldn’t meet my eyes.

“What are you talking about?! You’re not causing us any trouble!”

“I am the Demon King,” she whispered in a soft voice. “The

Spirit King only suspected you because I hid who I really was.”

“...”

The fact that she'd been sealed in the Ruler's Dungeon. The fact that she possessed the Demon Blade. Between what the Spirit King had said and Corona's apology just now, I really had to accept at this point that she was the Demon King after all.

“Before you were a hero... you were the Demon King. Was that your secret?”

“Yes...”

“Why didn't you tell me?”

I didn't mean for it to, but it probably sounded like I was blaming her. But still, I wanted to know what she was really feeling.

“I didn't want you to know who I really was... and be afraid of me,” Corona said heavily, as if she were confessing a grave sin.

I remembered what she'd told me the night before: “You saved me when you rescued me from that lonely labyrinth.” I finally realized the fragility hidden behind the arrogant words and attitude of the former Demon King.

“I guess I should've just disappeared when you said you were going to the capital. I didn't want to say goodbye, and this is what came of it. It's my fault...”

“It's not your fault, Corona.” I cut her off. “Whether you were a Demon King or a hero, what's happening in this world isn't your fault, is it?”

“That's... true... But who would believe me? I'm the Demon

King!”

“That doesn’t matter. I believe you.”

“!”

Corona looked up at me once more.

“If you don’t have anything to do with Ghostdemon sickness or the mana spring, then it’s not your fault we were captured. They’re the ones who are in the wrong.”

There was no reason to blame herself for everything. I couldn’t say what had happened in the past, but at least she was innocent when it came to this.

“...Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are you defending me? You know I’m the Demon King, right? You fought a Demon King once... Aren’t you scared of me?”

“Well, I guess Demon Kings in general are pretty scary...”

The one I’d fought in Aburaamu was incredibly scary. I’d managed to win by cheating, but I never wanted to do anything like that again.

“But I’m not scared of you. You’re just, well... you.”

“But... if you escape with me, the Spirit King’s men will work harder to find you. If I stay here, he’ll need to keep more guards here to hold me, so he won’t be able to send them after you. So you need to leave me here regardless...”

“I won’t.”

Don't be stupid, Corona.

"I told you about my bloodline, right? If I abandon you here, your story will meet a bad end. And I can't let that happen."

"And remember what I told you? I was saved when you let me out of that dungeon. So my story is already over—"

"Even if that's true..."

I used my power to pass through the bars of her cell and reached my hand out towards Corona.

"I can't just leave you to loneliness in yet another prison."

"...!"



"The guards are unconscious!"

"Are the prisoners in the cells?!"

"Did they do this? How did they get out of the mana handcuffs?!"

"The Demon King and her servants have escaped!"

I could hear the soldiers shouting below. We'd hidden the unconscious guards in the shadows, but they must have been found by now.

"Lea!"

"Right! Leave it to me!"

Lea nodded firmly and blew out an outer palace wall in a flash with her water magic. We all looked at the hole in the wall and

then at each other.

“Go!”

Right on cue, we all jumped out. Of course, there was a significant drop on the other side. We began to freefall from hundreds of meters up, but...

“GYAAAOH!”

A few dozen meters down, Lea transformed into her Leviathan form and caught us all on her back.

“Let’s head to the inn where Mio and Lyun are staying before the guards catch up!” Lea spoke directly into our brains via telepathy.

“Do it!”

It was a race against time. We would have to escape the Spirit King’s men, get Mio and Lyun, and then escape through the gate to Corona’s home world.

“The things from Aburaamu are in my castle in the demon world... If it’s still there. Either way, as long as we’re in the spirit world, we’ll be followed wherever we go. If we want to escape, we have to get to my world instead.”

I didn’t have any other ideas. If the one way we had to get to Aburaamu was in the Demon World, then it was our only real option.

I could see the spirits on the ground panicking at the sight of the massive white snake that had appeared out of nowhere in the sky. Some of the braver ones attacked us with magic, but Lea merely twisted her long body to dodge their attacks. We sped forward to our destination: the inn in the sylpheed district.

“I’m going in for a landing.”

“Right.”

I took a moment to check behind us. I could see little silhouettes swarming out of the palace. They were probably spirit soldiers, but they didn’t seem to be organized yet. We had the Demon King with us. They wouldn’t try to charge us in small groups. When they came, it would be with the whole army.

But that would only take a few minutes. If they managed to surround the capital with soldiers, we’d also be trapped. I wouldn’t have much time to persuade Mio and Lyun. I kept that in mind as I hopped off of Lea’s back in front of the inn and walked right through the wall to the second floor.

“Mio should be in here, right...?!”

“Yeah, I think they were on the second room on the other side of the hall.”

“Right! Thanks, R!”

“...You didn’t remember? Ah, crap, I accidentally gave you useful advice. I underestimated how stupid you were.”

“I thank you for once, and this is what I get?”

In this case, I really didn’t care if this girl from the future had screwed up. I didn’t have a moment to lose. Compared to losing precious seconds, being insulted to my face was nothing. I wasn’t even wasting time opening doors; I walked straight through one into the girls’ room.

“Mio! Lyun!”

“Rekka!”

“Kyah! H-How did you get here?”

Mio ran over to me when she saw me, but Lyun just screamed. I put my arms around Mio and looked at Lyun.

“Lyun! Please come with me!”

“...Why? There’s no reason for me to go with you, is there?”

“I know that so much has happened you might not believe me, but think about it! What did Corona do to you? Even when she was attacked by the infected sylpheeds, she didn’t kill them, right?”

“..”

“I don’t have time to explain, but... I think I’m the only one who can save Windsong Valley! Please give me another chance!”

“...Is that because of all that stuff you said about your ‘blood-line’ and ‘stories’?”

Oh, that’s right. She’d been listening outside Corona’s door last night. I’d told Corona about my lineage then.

“You may not believe it, but consider that just the fact that you met me is proof of who I say I am. That’s how the bloodline of the Namidare works. I want to help you! So, please... come with me...”

I was going to say more, but...

“What could you possibly save?” Lyun’s icy voice cut me off.

“Huh...?”

Suddenly an invisible wall shot up between us. A wall called rejection that even Ellicia’s earring would let me pass through.

Lyun looked at me with a mix of rage and despair.

“Save my story...? Do you really think you can?”

“Yes! There’s still a lot we don’t know about the Ghostdemon sickness and the mana spring, but we can find out...”

“It won’t make a difference,” she said bluntly.

Sure, I didn’t have a lot to go off of right now. Maybe I just sounded like a lunatic to her. As I tried to think of another way to convince her...

“My little sister is gone.”

“What...?”

I felt the words being choked out of my throat. Lyun’s little sister was... gone?

“I lived in that valley with my sister.”

When we’d met her, Lyun was alone. Did that mean...

“D-Did she get bitten? Then there’s still...”

“No. When we were running, she slipped on a slope and hit her head on a tree stump.”

Then... there was nothing we could do? Wasn’t my bloodline only supposed to get me caught up in stories *before* they reached bad endings?

“Wh-When did your lit... When did this happen?”

“The day before you came. It was dark, and we couldn’t see, and my sister...”

That would've been July 20th, the day before we reached Windsong Valley. We'd escaped the Ruler's Dungeon and were camping that night...

But that didn't make sense! If I had to save her sister to save her story, then shouldn't I have met her before that happened? I mean, there wasn't a hundred percent chance I would have made it in time, but the bloodline of the Namidare was supposed to only work if there was some chance of the story being saved, right?!

“...What's going on here? Isn't Lyun one of my heroines?”

I was so shocked that I yelled at R—the girl who knew more about my bloodline than I did—even though Mio and Lyun were right there. R's voice, however, was as calm and even as ever.

“It's simple,” she began. “Life is a series of stories. The curtain doesn't fall just because you solve one problem. You've been caught up in so many stories that you should know that better than anyone, right? Well, in Lyun's case, the scale of the story is much smaller than yours, but...”

R fell silent for a moment.

“In this case, a happy ending for Lyun's first story would have been escaping the valley with her sister unharmed. That first story ended with her little sister's death. But that doesn't mean her life is over. She was still alive, and still being chased by the zombie fairies. That's where her next story began. A story where the happy ending was escaping from that valley alive. That's the story you were caught up in.”

So I had helped Lyun get a happy ending... But not for the story she wanted? That story, the one where she could have a happy ending with her sister, was already written and done by the time I'd arrived.

“Even you, even the Namidare, can’t save a story that’s already ended. That should be so obvious it goes without saying.”

“I can’t save her...”

I’d been in bad spots before. Plenty of times. But... I thought that if I didn’t give up, if I kept thinking, that things would work out. And with the help of my friends... that I could save them... And now...

A finished story. One that’s already been written. One that couldn’t be saved.

I didn’t know that that could happen. No, maybe R was right and that should have been obvious, but...

“If you really do have that bloodline, then why...? Why didn’t you make it in time? Why didn’t you save my sister...? Why didn’t you save Sophie?!” Lyun screamed. Her voice threatened to blast away my soul.

This was something I probably could have foreseen if I’d thought about it, but I never did. And faced with the weight of it now, my legs froze and my hands started to shake. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t even think about how to persuade Lyun to come with us.

“Rekka! They’re here! Hurry!” Lea’s telepathic voice echoed in my head.

If they were here, I had to run, but...

I looked at Lyun. She was glaring at me.

“I...”

I went to say something, but couldn’t. Her story had already

ended in a tragedy, and there was nothing I could do for her.

“Rekka! Hurry up!”

I ran. I ran from Lyun, using Lea’s warning as an excuse.



I took Mio back to everyone else and got back on Lea.

“Where’s Lyun?”

“...”

“I see....”

Tsumiki didn’t ask anything else.

“The soldiers are surrounding us, but they’re keeping their distance.”

“They’re probably scared of my power,” Corona said as she looked out at them.

“...”

“...Young man?”

“Rekka, what’s wrong?”

“Sir Rekka, are you okay?”

“...Huh? Oh, no. Sorry.”

Everyone was worried when they saw how much trouble I was having focusing. I was shocked by what Lyun had told me, but for now, I needed to get my head together.

“Corona, what do you think they’re after?” I hadn’t totally switched gears yet, but I decided to start with that. “They’re afraid, but they’re not going to let us get away, right? They wouldn’t be following us otherwise. That must mean they have some plan to capture or neutralize us.”

“I don’t know what they think this Demon King is capable of, but... Yeah. If they’re not going to just charge in with no regard for casualties, they’ll probably go straight to using their greatest weapon—the Spirit King’s magic. And we don’t have the Hero’s Sword now.”

“But we have some powerful water magic of our own,” Lea said. “Tsumiki gave me some more dark matter, so I won’t be shot down so easily this time.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

Corona started to say something else when a huge light flared up behind us.

“W-What is that?”

“That can’t be... light magic?!” Harissa screamed when she saw the torrents of light gathering at the palace.

Wasn’t light magic something created to defeat the Demon King in Aburaamu? Why did the Spirit King have that?!

“Tch...! It’ll take more than that...!”

“It’s useless. Don’t even try.”

Lea created several spears of water, but Corona stopped her.

“A massive spell that concentrates the four elements of water, earth, wind, and fire... It’s the ultimate magic that only the Spirit

King can use. Its force isn't the only thing to be reckoned with. What makes it unique..." Corona stood up on Lea's back to face the spell. "Since it contains all four elements, it absorbs any magic that's used against it. It doesn't matter how strong the spell is. Even if it's a simple destructive spell, as long as it belongs to one of the four elements, the light magic will absorb its power and grow stronger."

"Seriously...?"

So, no matter how powerful Lea's water magic was, it would be used against us if she fired it at the Spirit King? That meant that he could neutralize our magic, but still attack... This ultimate spell of his really was something. There was probably no running from that huge ball of light, either. And our one way to stop it for sure, the Hero's Sword, had been taken from us. This was definitely a dire situation, but for some reason Corona chuckled like she was remembering something fondly.

"Only the Spirit King should be able to wield that spell... but that sorcerer was a human, and she did it anyway. She just kept spouting off some nonsense about being a genius..." she whispered, and then her expression changed. "Young man, you said you don't care if I'm the Demon King, right?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Then I shall show you my true form."

The air around her changed. It was like a hidden power being unleashed. An invisible pressure rose up around her, and her body was instantly wreathed in black flame.

"Ah... Aaah!"

I could hear her voice from within the darkness. And just a few seconds later... The darkness was gone, and there stood Corona in

the form of the Demon King.

She now had two twisted horns growing from either side of her head. The prisoner's uniform she'd been wearing was nowhere to be seen. Instead, she was decked out in clothes truly befitting, well... a demon queen. Then there was the pointed tail sprouting from her lower back, twisting in the air like a whip. She was a fearsome sight to behold. This was the visage of the real Demon King.

“This is my true form.”

“...What? You're still you.”

Nothing on the inside had changed.

“Heh...” Corona laughed for a moment, then turned towards the palace.

The Spirit King's ultimate magic—the spell to slay the Demon King—was almost ready to cast.

“There are only two ways to stop that spell. One is the Demon Blade. The other is...”

Before Corona could even finish...

ROAR!

The air around us shook as the Spirit King fired his magic.

“...the darkness magic of the Demon King!”

Just as the light had nearly enveloped us all, pure darkness sprung forth from Corona's arms. It was like day and night colliding.

Corona had said that no elemental magic could stop his spell.

It would only be absorbed and make the spell stronger. That probably meant her darkness magic was special. This looked like it would come down to a contest of sheer power.

“Graaah...!”

Her feet began to slide on Lea’s scales as she was pushed back. She’d been recovering ever since she left the labyrinth, but she still wasn’t in good shape. It was probably incredibly dangerous to have her fighting like this. Yet there she was... What in the world was I doing?!

“...”

“...Young man?”

The next thing I knew, I was supporting her body from behind. I pressed my back up against hers to help her stand and dug my heels in.

“Sorry, this is all I can do. I don’t think I was being arrogant, but I really did think that if I tried my best, things would work out. But now I know how wrong I was.”

“...”

When I’d reached Windsong Valley, Lyun’s sister was already dead. In the end, I only had two arms and legs. There was only one of me. My two eyes couldn’t watch over the whole world. I couldn’t save every story. But...

“I’m still not giving up, though. If you give up, that’s when it’s really all over. Even if I can’t save them all, I can’t give up on saving what’s right in front of me, can I? No matter how pathetic I might be, I won’t stop going until things work out.”

I’d decided I wouldn’t stop even when confronted with de-

spair. As long as my hands could reach out, as long as my legs could move, I would save all the stories I could!

“I couldn’t save Lyun’s sister! But she’s still my heroine, and her story isn’t over! I’m the only one who can save her! I’m not saving her because I want to be thanked! Mio, Corona, Ellicia... their stories aren’t over yet! So, please! Give me another chance, Corona!”



“...Leave it to me!”

Corona answered me, and her magic grew more powerful. The two spells were equally matched now, light against darkness. We were so close! If only there was something else we could do...

“Rekka! Listen to me!”

Tsumiki ran over, being careful not to fall off Lea’s back, and took a Tupperware container out of her backpack. She opened the lid, and a horrible darkness swirled up from inside like a monster.

“Is that dark matter?”

Evidently Lea had left some leftovers.

“Can you use this to replenish Corona’s magic?”

“Huh?”

I was astonished at Tsumiki’s sudden suggestion.

“Lea always used this to restore her strength. Corona’s not human, so I thought maybe...”

“But Satsuki said your dark matter was powerful cursed poison, right?”

“Wolfsbane is deadly poison, too! But if you use it right, it can be medicine. Energy that’s too powerful is bad for the human body, but I think Lea can eat it because she can handle much more energy than the average person!”

Wow, I hadn’t ever thought of that. Every time you got a prescription, it came with specific instructions. And she was right. Taking too much medicine or taking it the wrong way was basi-

cally poison. Maybe they were more related than I'd thought.

For one thing, if it was pure poison, how could it really restore Lea's energy? That couldn't be explained away by her having bad taste in food. There had to be some reason that the dark matter had that effect on her.

The Spirit King and Corona were at a standoff right now, but considering her condition, Corona was at a disadvantage. If I was going to make a decision, if I was going to do something to help her, it had to be now.

"Corona!"

"What?!"

"This'll probably be the most shocking thing that's ever happened to you, but please don't let it drive you insane!"

"What?!"

"Did you really have to go that far?!" Tsumiki screamed as I shoved the dark matter into Corona's mouth.

The next moment...

"GWWAAARRGHH!"

Corona let out an unearthly scream as flaming dark energy burst forth from her hands. Everything went black for a minute, but then the darkness and the light were both gone.

"Lea! Now!"

"Right!"

Lea had been flying even as the Spirit King and Corona were fighting. The soldiers had kept their distance from the magic, so

they were a good distance away from us, too. And now that we had the chance, Lea accelerated to make a break for it.

Before long, the spirit soldiers broke formation and began to chase after us. Since their plan to destroy us with the light magic had failed, they'd switched to attempting to capture us.

"If they have sylpheids with them, won't they catch us?"

The sylpheids were faster than Lea was.

"Maybe, but I can deal with normal spirits with my water magic. The problem is the Spirit King."

As Lea shared her concerns via telepathy, Corona woke up from the faint she'd fallen into after eating the dark matter.

"...We won't have to worry about that for a while. That spell takes an enormous amount of mana. With the mana spring dried up, if the Spirit King falls prey to Ghostdemon sickness, this whole world is doomed. He can't take any risks... Gah! I can still taste it!"

Between the magical showdown and the dark matter in Corona's stomach... I wonder which duel was worse. I felt pretty bad.

"Corona, thank you. You saved me. And I'm sorry."

"No, we were lucky... The Spirit King was probably holding back so I would survive. I'm sure he wants to question me about the spring. Of course, I didn't honestly expect to survive that taste..."

Corona's face was paler than I'd ever seen it before, and she let out a dry laugh. The whole experience had probably left a bad taste in her mouth, in more ways than one.

“Jeez... You could give me a little credit,” Tsumiki said.

“You saved us. Thanks, Tsumiki.”

This time, her idea had saved us. If it hadn’t been for that, who knows what would’ve happened...?

Just as I was trying to find a way to make her feel better... Mio suddenly fell forward, collapsing at my side like she was in serious pain.

“All these people... All these people chasing me...”

“W-What’s wrong, Mio?”

“My head...”

“Another headache?”

Hmm, Mio had said she’d had a headache once before... That’s right, it was when I’d asked her if she knew my name. That was when she’d recalled some of her sealed memories. But when she’d remembered things about being an idol after talking with Tsumiki, that hadn’t happened. There was no headache then.

No, wait... When I’d asked her about my name, she’d remembered being pushed off a building. That was one of the things about her story that didn’t make sense. But the fact that Mio Kotozuka was the idol MIO wasn’t exactly a big secret.

Maybe her headaches were related to the significance of what she was remembering? Mio had lost her memories because of Yang. We knew that much. So it made sense that he would choose the most important or incriminating memories to seal away. In other words, what she was about to remember was...

“Uwaaaaaah!”

“Mio!”

She grabbed her head with her hands and passed out against me.

Side Story 3: Satsuki Feature (July 24th)

Three days had passed since the alliance with Nartessia had been formed. She'd invited the group to a Margaret family mansion outside Japan. Since they'd be working together now, it seemed like a good idea to get to know each other a little better.

Yang's organization was a group of psychics. Of course, preparations would be needed to take them down. But...

"How long is she going to keep me waiting?!"

"Mistress, calm down."

"How can I stay calm? It's been three days! I keep asking when we're going on the attack, and I keep getting vague answers! She's insulting us!"

Suzuran was trying her best to calm her down, but Rosalind's patience was at its limit. She sat back down on the sofa, but kept complaining.

"Wouldn't it be better for us to just get Ellicia back on our own?"

"If we run off now, we might end up making an enemy out of the Margarets. Can we save Ellicia with both groups after us?"

Hibiki sighed, but she was tapping her fingers against her crossed arms, too. She was upset, as well.

There are servants and mages everywhere here, so I haven't been able to use my magic. Nartessia wants her treasure back,

so there's no reason for her to betray us, but...

But it didn't feel right to just sit around doing nothing. When she was caught up in stories with Rekka, there was never time for anything like this. It was incredibly rare to spend days preparing for something in this fashion.

Maybe this was what the norm was supposed to be like rather than the chaos that surrounded Rekka, but... the fate of the world hinged on this story. Satsuki was uneasy. She would feel much better to have this solved already.

What's Rekka doing now, I wonder...?

Her thoughts wandered to her absent childhood friend. It had been four days since he left, and he still wasn't back.

If I can't use my Magic of Omniscience, I can't tell what's happening to him. I had Tetra stay home in case there was a problem and he needed to come back another way than using Hibiki's gloves... but I've heard nothing. Shirley will be back tomorrow, I guess, but...

In the end, the Margarets spent yet another day "preparing," and night fell without the group having a good idea of where things stood. They all went to their rooms hoping that tomorrow would be the day something happened.

Satsuki laid down on the bed and sighed. There was a Margaret family maid outside her room, and chances were good she knew magic. If Satsuki tried to cast a spell, she would surely act quickly. Or perhaps she'd just observe to see what she was doing.

Maybe I should've stayed in Japan with Tetra. But Chelsea's probably in an awkward position here after running away from home. She probably couldn't stop anything Nartessia wanted to do. If Nartessia's up to no good, then everyone who doesn't know

magic is in danger.

Satsuki reminded herself of the reason she'd come. She'd been doing that every night before she went to bed lately. She'd come with the others in order to protect them... and that was probably the right move, but...

Had she made a mistake somewhere? Was there another choice she could've made? Such doubts kept running through her mind.

"I wonder if Rekka worries like this..."

If he made a mistake and screwed up, tragedy could befall him and everyone he was helping. A few days of worrying like this had been enough to wear away at Satsuki and keep her up at night. When she thought about the pressure her childhood friend must be under... Satsuki bit her lip unconsciously.

"I need to at least do what I can."

She reminded herself of that, but still couldn't think of anything she could do. Lying in bed wrestling with such thoughts rather than sleeping, Satsuki suddenly caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of her eye. It was the first time she'd ever seen it before, but Satsuki recognized the purple mark like a windmill under the person's left eye.

"Elli...!" She almost yelled, but put her hand over her mouth.

This was enemy territory for Ellicia. Of course, she'd told Nartessia that they wanted to protect Ellicia, but that didn't mean it was a good idea to announce her presence. Satsuki got out of bed as quietly as she could manage and approached the girl.

"Um... Ellicia?"

“That’s right.”

“Good. I’m glad you’re safe,” Satsuki said with a sigh of relief.

She had lots of questions, but she needed to let the other girls know about this first.

“Can you wait here? I’ll go get the others.”

“No, there’s no need for that.”

“Huh?”

Before she could ask what was going on, Ellicia grabbed her wrist.

“You’re Satsuki, aren’t you?”

“How... did you know my name?”

Satsuki knew about Ellicia, but she’d never met her before. Of course, Ellicia hadn’t met her, either. Even if Hibiki had told Ellicia about her, she shouldn’t have been able to recognize her like that.

“Yang showed me your name and appearance with his telepathy.”

“Huh?”

“Yang read the memories of that Hibiki girl, so he knows that you’re childhood friends with Rekka, the boy I gave the earring to.”

“Um...”

For a moment, Satsuki had trouble keeping up. Ellicia had gotten her personal information from Yang... Why? Yang had cap-

tured her and taken her back, so how was she even here?

“What did you...”

“...come here for?” was what she meant to ask, but before she could finish, a swift fist struck her in the solar plexus. It was Ellicia who hit her.

“Why...?”

“The organization is gone. The Margaret clan’s magic destroyed our headquarters.”

“Ah...”

Satsuki tried to say something, but the darkness was coming so fast that she couldn’t. But before everything turned black...

“So I’m going to follow Yang’s plan... and destroy the world.”

The last thing Satsuki heard was Ellicia’s emotionless declaration.

Epilogue

After we escaped from the spirit soldiers, we headed for the gate to the demon world.

“Ugh...”

“Mio, are you awake?”

Mio had finally woken up. She’d been passed out the whole time we were fleeing.

“Is Mio okay? Should I land for a minute?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Mio politely refused Lea’s offer, and she put her hand up to her forehead. She stared into the void as if trying to find something lost in her mind.

“Rekka... I remember.”

“Huh? Remember what?”

“Everything.”

“Really?!”

So, the headaches were somehow related to her sealed memories. She’d said something about people chasing her earlier. Was the similarity to what was happening right now what had triggered it?

“What did you remember?”

Whatever the answer was, this would be a critical key in solving her mysterious story. I gulped and waited for her answer.

“We have to hurry! We have to hurry back to Earth, Rekka!”

“M-Mio? Calm down...”

The tiny girl suddenly grabbed at my clothes and started to shake me. If I didn't stop her, we might both fall off, so I grabbed her by the shoulders to calm her down. Looking at her, I could see the abject fear in her eyes.

“On the last day... of my concert tour! On July 27th! Something terrible will happen to Earth!”

It was an ominous prophecy from the mouth of a pop star.

—To be continued—

Afterword

Hello again to everyone who's continuing from volume six, and greetings to everyone who's beginning with volume seven.

I'm writing this at the end of the year, and while it feels like a lot's happened this year, when I look around my room, I see that the only thing that's changed is that I have a few more books, figures, and Blu-rays. Turns out I was just imagining it. I still haven't even upgraded to a smartphone...

Now, on to the usual thank yous. Nao Watanuki, this is our first book with four new heroines in it, so thank you again for your wonderful character designs. To Nanbu, my editor; Koji Hasegawa, the manga artist; and the editing and sales staff at HJ Bunko, thank you all. Also, to all the bookstores that put my books on the shelves and to the readers who buy them, I hope you'll continue to enjoy the *Little Apocalypse* series.

I'm Nao Watanuki, the insert art illustrator.

This is my first afterword of the new year!

This rough illustration is of Yang. He looks tough, but parts of his outfit match Ellicia's.

Also, drawing this kind of macho, manly guy is a rarity for me. I had fun coming up with "fantasy world" type elements for this art.

Since I like fantasy, however, the modern idol MIO was a challenge. She just ended up with hearts everywhere. I hope she looks like a dazzling pop star, though.

Bonus chibi character in New Year's mode. (It's currently January 5th.) Here's Mio in her kimono.

To Mr. Nameko and my editors, I know we still have part two waiting, but good work on this.

I'm happy everyone enjoyed Little Apocalypse throughout 2013. I'm sorry my handwriting is so bad, but thank you for reading this afterword!

I'm looking forward to your kind consideration in the new year.

Nao Watanuki



挿絵担当・和狸ナオと申します。

新年初あつがき！

今巻のラフはヤン・ダンチェイ、
強面ですが服装の所々が
エリシアとお揃いだたりします。

他、マッちょなタイプの王様という設定も
私にとっては珍しく、異世界要素も相まって
楽しく考え描かせて頂きました。

ファンタジー好きの反面、難しかったのが現代のMIO。
とにかく♡ハートまみれな子になってしまいましたが、
アイドル姿が華やかに映てくれればと思います。

おまけのちびキャラ：
正月(1月5日現在)らしく？

着物で演歌の
MIOでお送りしました〜

おぼろ月夜の

おぼろ月夜の

なめこ先生、編集様方、後編が控えておりますが
ひとまずお疲れ様、ありがとうございました。

2013年もリトル黙示録を通じ、読者の皆様に乗せて
頂けましたら幸いです。乱文乱筆、恐縮ですが
7巻あつがきお読み頂き、ありがとうございました！

本年も、何卒よろしくお願い致します。和狸ナオ拝。