

I SAVED TOO MANY GIRLS AND CAUSED THE APOCALYPSE

LITTLE

8



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We received a much warmer welcome than expected.

"Hero!"

"Lady Marissa too!"

"The missing hero has returned!"



Mio's beautiful singing voice flowed across the battlefield, reaching the hearts of all who listened.

"I can crush you right here!"

"So you've finally shown yourself."

"So this is Spirit Armor...?"

"Maybe if spirits and humans sat down and talked it out properly, we'd be able to understand each other."





**"NOW,
ELLICIA!"**

*The blade of the Hero's
Sword returned to its
physical form, cracking
the blue jewel down the
middle like a wedge.*

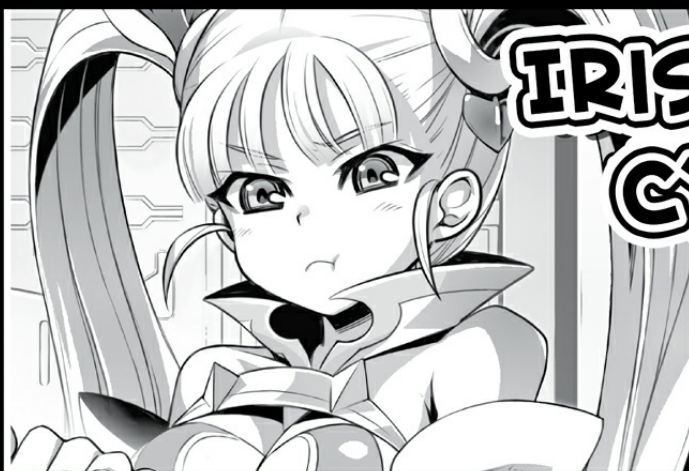


REKKA NAMIDARE

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 CYPHERCALL

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

HARISSA HOPE

A sorcerer from
another world. After
much effort, she's
created a new spell to
return to her world.



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 G. BATHORY

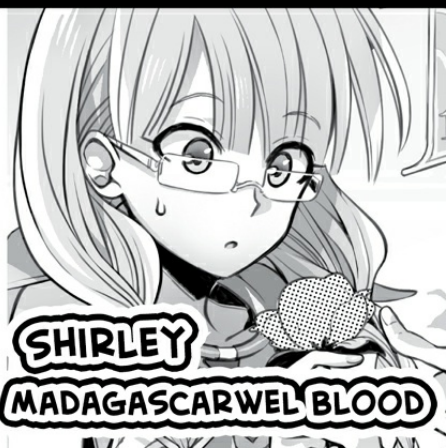
A high school freshman. Also a centuries-old vampire. She has strong opinions about maids.

A wandering treasure hunter. Currently in Japan with the head of her family.



CHELSEA MARGARET

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



**SHIRLEY
MADAGASCAR WEL BLOOD**

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



SUZURAN

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



RAIN WATERCHILD

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. A certain course of events has led her back to the organization, where she joins in on their plan.



ELLICIA OTTO

A high school freshman, and a famous pop idol. The reason she lost her memories is unknown.



MIO KOTOZUKA

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



LYUN SYLPHEED

The former hero of Aburaamu. Her true identity is the Demon King that once terrorized the spirit world.



**ZAIA GARDENDOS
CORONA**

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Prologue 2

“Something terrible will happen to Earth on July 27th.”

That was the ominous prophecy Mio gave as we were fleeing from the pursuers sent by the Spirit King.

“...Huh?”

It was so sudden that I didn’t even know what to say in response.

“You mean... our Earth, right? Like, where we live?”

Trembling, Mio nodded silently.

This would make the third or fourth time the world was in danger... but this time, I couldn’t understand why. What could Mio’s story and the fate of the planet possibly have to do with each other? I thought her story was just about her getting pushed off a building and losing her memories. And we already knew the cause of her amnesia. Yang had sealed away her memories with his telepathy.

All that was left to figure out was the identity of the person who’d pushed her... No, wait. That’s right. There was an even more pressing question about Mio’s story—why the all-knowing Magic of Omniscience indicated that Mio Kotozuka had never been pushed off a roof.

The Magic of Omniscience was magic that accessed the Akashic record, a detailed history of everything that had happened in the universe since the dawn of time. It was impossible for anything but the truth to be recorded in it. In other words, if it said that Mio wasn’t pushed off a roof, it was safe to assume she hadn’t been.

But that would mean Mio lied to me... and I couldn’t see her motive for that. For starters, her memories were sealed by Yang right before she met me. It was dumb luck that she remembered being pushed off a roof in the first place. But how was it that her account of what happened didn’t match the Akashic record? That was the greatest mystery of her story.

Could this prophecy of hers possibly be the key to solving it?

“...”

As I was lost in my thoughts, my prolonged silence prompted Mio to approach me nervously. Her shoulders were trembling.

“Mio, I have some questions. You can take your time thinking, but could you answer them for me?”

“Okay...”

“Firstly, what is this ‘something terrible’ that’s going to happen?”

Mio hesitated for a moment before answering.

“A Psychic Hazard.”

“Psychic Hazard?” I repeated.

“You could call it a psychic disaster,” R mumbled as she hung upside-down in the air.

“On the last day of my tour... After I sang my first song, I heard a man speaking to me inside my head.”

“A man?”

And what did she mean by speaking to her “inside her head”?

“He called himself Yang.”

“Yang?!”

“Y-Yeah,” Mio nodded, startled by me raising my voice.

Was this it? Was this where everything clicked into place?

“...So, what did Yang do?”

I wanted to mull this all over, but I knew I wasn’t going to get to the bottom of it without Mio finishing her story, so I urged her to continue.

“Yang changed us... He changed us powerless humans,” she said.

“What do you mean by ‘changed’?”

“He changed us into psychics.”

“Psychics...? Wait, what?” I interrupted in confusion. “You’re saying he transformed normal humans like you into psychics?”

“Yes...”

“What kind of powers were you given? Was it different for every person?”

“No. Everyone was given the ability to read minds.”

“The ability to read minds...?”

That was a type of telepathy, right?

According to Satsuki, magical telepathy and psychic telepathy were fairly similar, but the latter was a lot more versatile. The ability to read people’s minds, the ability to send thoughts to others, the ability to seal memories... The applications were different, but at their core, they all involved messing with people’s minds in some way. That was psychic telepathy.

But did psychic telepathy somehow have the power to change normal people into psychics, too? It might be better to get an expert opinion from Ellicia, who was a real psychic, or Shirley, who was researching psychic powers. But neither of them were here right now, so I put the thought aside for the time being and rubbed Mio’s trembling back to try and comfort her.

“Sorry, I know it might be a scary memory, but I need to hear more about it. Can you continue your story?”

“Yeah, I’m fine...” Mio took a deep breath and continued. “The audience was immediately in chaos... Fights broke out everywhere and spread like wildfire.”

“Why did that happen?”

“You know, you really could try using your own imagination for once,” said an exasperated Tsumiki from behind Mio.

We were currently sitting in a line along Lea’s back as she flew in Leviathan form, but everyone was huddled up close enough together that even Corona and Harissa in the back could hear what we were talking about. Tsumiki was sitting behind Mio and facing me.

“What is there to imagine?” I asked.

“That’s why I said... Okay, let’s say there’s tens of thousands of fans gathered together at a concert. When you’re packed together like that, you might start thinking about how the person next to you stepped on your foot, or how the person in front of you smells bad, right? And even if that wasn’t the case, everyone attending the concert is going to be a serious fan of MIO, some with pretty strong opinions... If everyone suddenly knew what everyone else was thinking, that’s bound to cause a little bit of discontent and discord, don’t you think?”

Out of consideration for Mio sitting right in front of her, Tsumiki chose her words carefully as she spoke. She was a fan of MIO herself and had actually been to one of her concerts before, so she was probably speaking from experience on this. At any rate, I understood what she was getting at.

“So everybody’s negative thoughts like ‘Ew, gross’ or ‘I hate this guy’—the kind you normally think but keep to yourself—were basically broadcast all of a sudden, and that started fights?”

“I think that’s about the size of it.”

Mio was shaking like she was remembering the incident.

“...So, what happened after that?” I asked.

“The last thing Yang told me was that he wanted to cause that kind of chaos throughout the world. I tried to run from the concert hall after that, but... it was like a riot outside... I was so scared... and then Rekka saved me.”

“Huh? M-Me?”

I pointed at myself, a bit confused. I certainly didn’t remember any of this.

“Yes. You came to see my concert,” Mio said, then turned around. “With Tsumiki. The two of you helped me run away.”

“I-I was there, too?” Tsumiki asked in a confused voice as she pointed at herself, too.

She’d said she was MIO’s fan, so it wasn’t that hard to imagine Tsumiki at one of her concerts. And I would probably go with her if she asked. That much I could buy. It was the rest of what Mio had said that concerned me. The

dramatic rescue that neither one of us had any recollection of. That she was talking about this all in past tense. And above all, the date... July 27th.

“Mio, how do you know what happens on July 27th? Today’s only the 24th.”

It sounded like she was talking about something that was going to happen in three days. So why was she talking about the future in past tense? It was as if she’d already experienced it...

“I don’t know if you’ll believe this, but...”

“Don’t worry. I’m pretty experienced in the hard-to-believe.”

“I...” Mio took a breath before continuing, “...time traveled here from the future.”

Chapter 5: Psychic Hazard (July 25th-26th)

By the time the calendar flipped over to July 25th, we'd reached the edge of the spirit world in our attempt to shake off our pursuers.

"If there's an outer edge to this world, then does that mean it isn't round like ours?" Tsumiki asked.

"Maybe," I said with a shrug.

"It's like a fantasy world," she said quietly.

"Yeah," I agreed.

Of course, we hadn't fled to the ends of the world for nothing. The gate we needed to use was here. We'd finally made it, and the gate itself dwarfed the World Tree in the capital. Its towering figure was majestic, reaching higher than the eye could see. And on the other side of it was the demon world.

As long as we were in the spirit world, the Spirit King's men would come after us. That was why Corona had suggested we hide in her world—the realm of demons. And here we were at the gate, getting ready to cross over.

"..."

I glanced at Mio to check on her.

In two days, the Psychic Hazard she spoke of would overtake Earth. She'd witnessed it herself, but then traveled back in time. More precisely, her mind from the future had entered her current body on July 20th. Apparently, she'd jumped right out of bed when it happened, and that put us at the start of the story she'd told us before. We still had no idea why she was able to do something supernatural like time travel, but we'd managed to clear up several other things.

We knew how Mio knew my name when I first found her—she knew me from the future. We also knew why she'd abandoned her tour to come to our town—she was trying to find me for help. And most importantly, we now knew why

her story conflicted with Satsuki's Magic of Omniscience—the Akashic record only contained a history of things and events that had already happened. It wouldn't tell us anything about the catastrophe Mio had experienced in the future.

“Huh? What's wrong, Rekka?” Mio noticed my glances and looked up at me curiously.

“Hm? Nothing... Can you recall the last bit of your memories yet?”

“Not yet...”

The final mystery of Mio's story was who had pushed her off the roof. She still couldn't remember. She said she'd run to the roof to get away from the rioting crowds, but that was where her memories stopped. Most everything right before and after that crucial moment was a blank. It was possible that the roof incident was linked to her missing memories and how she'd managed to time travel.

“Sheesh, that Yang guy sure caused a lot of trouble...”

This whole thing seemed like it'd be a lot easier to solve if Yang hadn't sealed her memories. We'd probably be able to handle things much more directly that way. Considering the circumstances, it was sheer coincidence that Mio ran into Yang again... It would be putting it mildly to say it hadn't been her lucky day.

But the good news was that we still had time. The Psychic Hazard originally happened on July 27th, but that was in time-traveler Mio's world. History should have changed greatly when she met me on July 20th.

I now knew that Yang was trying to cause the Psychic Hazard, a disaster that probably involved Ellicia's story, as well. And this turn of events should have had some effect on Yang's plans. There was no guarantee that the Psychic Hazard would still happen on July 27th in this time line. That's right... there was still time for us.

My chest suddenly throbbed in pain. I knew why. It was because I had left Lyun in the capital. I wasn't able to save her little sister. By the time I reached her, it was already over.

Still... I couldn't just give up.

Even if I couldn't save her sister, Lyun's story wasn't over yet. Both her fate and the fate of the spirit world were on the line. Only me and my Namidare bloodline could save them.

Even if I could manage that, it wouldn't bring Lyun's little sister back... She might never forgive me for that. But I still wasn't going to abandon her and her story.

"Let's go, Corona," I said.

"All right, stand back."

Corona placed the palm of her hand against the enormous structure and started to chant something quietly. Apparently, this gate could only be opened by the hand of either the Demon King or the Spirit King.

I took a deep breath.

First, to the demon world. We'd head to the Demon King's castle and borrow something from Corona to use in Harissa's new spell. With that, we'd head back to Earth via Aburaamu. Once we made it, we'd go to Ellicia—no, first we'd exchange information with Satsuki and the others, then...

Oh, right! Before all that, we'd have to stock up on Red Threads while we were in Aburaamu. After we stopped the Psychic Hazard, we'd need those to get back to the spirit and demon worlds.

Man... I'm starting to panic.

I was even pacing back and forth without realizing it. As I was telling myself to calm down, the gate that connected the spirit and demon worlds slowly creaked open.



On the other side of the gate lay a vast expanse of dusty yellow land—the polar opposite of the lush, verdant spirit world.

"So, this is the demon world..."

"That's right," Corona said with a small nod.

"There aren't any trees or flowers."

“We have an abundance of minerals instead. You can make any weapon conceivable here.”

Corona explained the demons here used weapons to hunt savage beasts as their primary food source. They apparently did plenty of fighting amongst themselves, too.

“It’s probably the reason demons seem uncivilized in the eyes of the spirits.” Corona sighed and pointed diagonally to our right. “My castle is in that direction. If it hasn’t been weathered away by now, that is.”

Come to think of it, Corona was sealed away for several hundred years. What were we going to do if her castle was gone?

I had the fingerless glove Hibiki gave me, so we still had a way to get back to Earth, but Harissa could only cast her spell once more as things stood. If we used it now, Harissa wouldn’t be able to return to her home in Aburaamu, and we wouldn’t be able to come back to the spirit world later. Using it would have to be a last resort.

“...”

I could see Harissa clutching her staff tightly.

“How long will it take to reach the castle?” I asked Corona.

“Let’s see... if your snake lady keeps flying without rest, then we’ll make it in half a day.”

“...Call me Lea.”

Lea didn’t seem too pleased about being called a snake lady. Her cheeks reddened in indignation.

“My bad,” Corona apologized lightly.

“Lea, can you make it?” I asked.

Lea had been working nonstop for the past few days. I felt bad asking her to do more, but...

“Of course. If it’s to protect the people I love, this much is nothing.”

“Thanks, Lea.”

That meant it was time to set off again. Lea transformed, and after we all climbed aboard, we made a beeline for the Demon King's castle.



After fending off the beasts that rashly tried to attack Lea's flying dragon form en route to the castle, our destination finally came into view.

"That's the castle," Corona said.

She pointed to a great stone castle built into the side of a mountain. It reminded me of how the Spirit King's palace had been incorporated into a giant tree. Perhaps spirits and demons weren't as different from each other as they thought.

"Well, I'm glad it's still standing," I said.

"Yeah. At least there's something left," Corona replied.

"Now all we have to do is borrow something you have from Aburaamu..."

"If everything goes smoothly, that is."

"Huh? Is there another problem?"

"It's highly likely someone else has inherited my position, just like how I passed my title of hero in Aburaamu on to you."

"Are you saying there's another Demon King?!" I yelled in surprise.

"There are three royal families here, each ruling their own territory. But interaction between them is basically nonexistent. They all signed a non-aggression pact and went their separate ways. The House of Gardendos, the family I'm from, governs the land closest to the gate to the spirit world." Corona paused for a moment. "There are many things that only a Demon King can do, other than managing the gate. That's why the king must be of royal blood. But I had 25 siblings, you know. One of them has likely taken my place."

"B-But they wouldn't just completely disregard your position as the former king, right...?"

"Who knows? Demons live long lives, so one of my retainers might still be alive, but... there's no familial love between demons. If anything, it's more likely

they'll see me as a threat and attack on sight. If the current Demon King ordered my execution, my retainers would obey."

Corona's household sounded pretty brutal...

"So that means we might end up fighting your family?"

"Don't hold back. You're a hero, so make sure you fight like one."

That would be easier said than done.

Despite all my worries, we approached the front gate of the castle.

"Oh? Your Majesty. When did you leave the grounds?"

"Huh?"

I was quite taken aback at the unexpected greeting from the goblin soldier guarding the castle gate.

"You know who I am?" Corona asked.

"Of course. There's no way I'd forget the face of the great Demon King. But it sure is rare to see Her Shut-In Majesty out and about for a change."

It was hard to tell if he was being polite or just plain rude. Did all demons talk like that...? Well, whatever.

"I know you said demons have long lifespans, but is this guy one of your former underlings?" I whispered to Corona.

"I don't know him. Well, I never remembered most of my underlings' faces... And if I've become known as a shut-in in my absence, then it wouldn't matter anyway."

"Figures."

Corona's response left me intrigued.

"Well, it doesn't matter. Whatever the reason, they seem to think I'm still the Demon King. Let's use that to our advantage." Corona turned to the gatekeeper. "Hmph. I just went for a walk. Hurry up and open the gate already."

"Of course, Your Majesty... Wait, who are your guests? I didn't realize the Demon King had any friends."

“...”

“What’s this? Are they even demons...?”

“Gatekeepers who take up more than three seconds of my time will be fed to a roc.”

“I’m opening it right now! Give me a break!”

The goblin hurriedly threw open the gate.

“What’s a roc?” I asked.

“A ferocious bird of prey with a body three meters long.”

We all followed Corona into the castle after that.

“The layout of the corridors hasn’t changed... but the interior design has gotten worse.”

“Hmm... Does that mean someone’s changed things in here?”

The only one who should have the authority to make changes in the Demon King’s castle should be the Demon King, right...? And since Corona had been sealed away, we knew it wasn’t her.

I had some doubts about the situation, but at least we’d made it inside safely. Now all that was left was to collect one of Corona’s possessions from Aburaamu.

“Corona, where’s the item you mentioned?”

“In the throne room.”

“The throne room? Why would you put it there and not in your room?”

“My last day here in the castle was two days before I was sealed in the Ruler’s Dungeon. I hid it in the throne itself so it would be safe. I suspected my successor would throw out anything and everything in my private quarters.” Corona answered my questions in rapid succession as we hurried down the corridor, but her voice slowly faded into a mumble. “...And it was precious to me.”

What could she have wanted to leave behind even after she was sealed?

Either way, no one we passed dared to stop a party led by the Demon King, so we arrived at the throne room without a problem. It was heavily decorated with flashy gold and silver treasures. It was impressive, sure, but pretty tacky.

“This isn’t your style, is it, Corona?”

“Of course not.” Corona scoffed and looked down at the floor of the throne room. “There’s even a carpet now.”

“Is that unusual?”

“There simply aren’t many demons with the skill to craft this kind of thing. While blacksmiths are a dime a dozen... Well, even the guys you passed in the corridor just now were only wearing the top half of their armor. They were basically naked from the waist down.”

“What?!” the girls all shrieked at Corona’s offhanded comment.

“Well, they hide what they need to.”

“No one wants to see naked men in armor, after all,” R said.

For once, I agreed with her.

Wait, that meant the goblins, werewolves, and other unidentified creatures we passed just now were all... Nope. I had to stop that train of thought right there. I was about to hurl.

Overwhelmed by the sudden urge to leave this place, I pointed to the back of the throne room and tried to get things back on track.

“So, is that the throne?” I asked.

The intricate throne seemed to be carved into a polished boulder. It sat rather modestly among the other extravagant decorations in the room.

“This throne has been used by generations of kings. No scoundrel would dare lay a hand on it.”

Corona mumbled to herself as she approached the throne, which was placed atop a dais. One by one, she ascended the familiar steps up to it... and someone suddenly jumped out of the shadows and swung a bladed object at her. The attacker leaped forward with a yell.

“Kyeeeh! En garde!”

“Who are you?”

“Ack!”

Corona promptly knocked her attacker down with one hand. He was surprisingly weak...

“Hmm? Is that you, Eskro?” Belatedly coming to a realization, Corona muttered the assassin’s name.

“G-Gah! M-My arm! My arm’s broken! S-Someone help, gyah!”

The demon she called Eskro looked like a bipedal lizard. Unlike the other demons we saw earlier, this guy writhing in agony on the floor was wearing clothes. He was also wearing gold accessories around his wrists and ankles, and a small crown had fallen from his head.

“Ah... I see now. So you were the one pretending to be the king this whole time. I knew something was weird.”

Corona narrowed her eyes as she looked down at Eskro, but she didn’t appear to be angry. If anything, she looked exasperated.

“Gweh! M-My legs are broken, too! I’ll die if you hit me again, gyah!”

“Your acting is as terrible as ever.”

“Gyah!”

Corona planted a kick in Eskro’s gut and sent him rolling along the floor. He bounced two or three times before hitting the wall, then stood up on wobbly legs. Apparently they weren’t broken after all. It seemed Corona had gone easy on him.

“Um, Corona? Who’s that?” I asked.

“Eskro. A strategist in my army. He was valued as one of the few demons that could actually use his brain. His only flaws were his compulsive lying and occasional backstabbing. Oh, and his affinity for flashy things that often led to him pocketing army funds. That caused some trouble, too.”

“Aren’t flaws like that normally considered pretty damning...?”

“He was originally a refugee from the neighboring territory. In a situation where he only had himself to rely on, he was able to survive this violent world with just his silver tongue. This is the same man that won over the demon leaders, people who are more inclined to talk with their fists than anything else.”

When she put it that way, it did sound kind of impressive.

“And his prowess in illusion magic made him useful on the battlefield... You used that magic to deceive the retainers, right?”

“W-Well... yes. That’s correct, gyah.”

Eskro confirmed Corona’s theory, then took a folding fan from his breast pocket and started fanning himself.

“You’ve been living it up in my place, so when I suddenly returned out of the blue, you made a spur-of-the-moment decision to assassinate me.”

“Y-Yes, gyah....”

He cowered under Corona’s stone-cold gaze, averting his from everyone. There was a tense pause as the real Demon King glared at the lizard like a predator staring down its prey. Then her expression relaxed as she sighed.

“Whatever. You’re forgiven.”

“That was fast!”

I was surprised at how quickly Corona forgave him.

“Everything was placed on his shoulders after I was sealed, after all. He could’ve easily elected a new Demon King to do the work instead. And while I didn’t expect him to be slyly impersonating me this whole time, well... from what I saw of the land, he’s been governing the territory well enough. I have no complaints.”

“Heheh... What royal graciousness, Your Majesty! So understanding, gyah!”

Eskro picked up the fallen crown and placed it on her head. In his relief at being forgiven, he had immediately turned to flattery. What a suck-up...

“But why didn’t you use your signature illusion magic just now? You would’ve

had a better chance of landing a scratch on me with trickery.”

“Only a scratch, gyah...? Anyway, I’m out of mana right now.”

The lizard scratched at his head and laughed sheepishly. Corona cocked her head in confusion.

“What do you mean you’re out of mana? You lasted three days and three nights during the Spirit War, shielding our base from the prying eyes of the enemies all the while.”

The Spirit War that Corona was referring to was probably the conflict between spirits and demons that occurred just before she was sealed.

“Oh, well, about that. It’s Magic Deficiency Syndrome, gyah.”

“Magic Deficiency Syndrome?” Corona asked.

“Oh, right. Your Majesty never falls ill, gyah. It’s a sickness. The same magic-draining sickness that spread through our army during the Spirit War, gyah.”

“Oh... that kind of rings a bell.”

“You were there! It was a really rough time for us, gyah. The afflicted soldiers were sapped of their energy along with their mana. They became sluggish and fell behind in marching... Fortunately a strange sickness spread through the spirit army at the same time, so we managed to make it through alive, gyah.”

“So you’re suffering the same illness again?”

“It’s pretty much chronic now, gyah. The symptoms subside once all the mana in your body is used up, but they resume once you’ve recovered enough mana, gyah. I can only use my illusions for short periods of time because of it, so now everyone thinks Your Majesty is a shut-in who never leaves her room, gyah.”

“I see... You’ve had it tough, too.”

“That’s right, gyah. All the other demons rely on strength rather than magic, so they’ve barely suffered at all while I’ve lived in constant fear of being discovered and killed.”

Eskro spoke sadly about his woes over the last few hundred years.

...Wait, this wasn’t the time to be waxing nostalgic!

“Hey, uh, Corona... could we wrap up the reminiscing here?”

“Hm? Oh, that’s right.”

“Come to think of it, who’re these guys, gyah? Acquaintances of Your Majesty, gyah?”

Finally taking note of our presence, Eskro curiously tilted his head as he looked at the group of us.

“Oh, they’re the ones who broke my seal. I owe them my life.”

“Is that so, gyah? Then thank you for taking care of Her Majesty... unnecessary as it was, gyah.”

Might wanna watch your tongue, buddy. Got a little honest there at the end.

Although Corona probably heard Eskro’s mutterings loud and clear, too, she ignored him and headed for the throne. Reaching into a gap between two engravings, she pulled out a small ring.

“Is that it?” I asked.

“Yes. This ring belonged to the sorcerer who summoned me to Aburaamu... Pastel. She entrusted it to me when I returned to this world.”

“I see.”

I took the ring when she presented it to me, then turned to Harissa.

“Harissa, do you think you can use this?”

The only way for us to get to Aburaamu from here was with Harissa’s new spell. And for that to work, we needed an item that had a strong connection to Aburaamu. Would this ring do the trick?

“Lady Pastel has long passed,” said Harissa. “But there’s a splendid grave for her in the capital. If this ring was hers, that’s where it should take us.”

“All right!”

In that case, we should head off immediately—wait!

“We’ll need to take something with us that has a connection to the spirit world, too.”

Without that, we wouldn't be able to return and save Lyun's story. There was no time to do anything about it while we were fleeing from the Spirit King and his men, but we really should have thought about this sooner. Returning to the spirit world now to get something would waste so much time...

"Then use this," Corona offered.

She took Eskro's folding fan and tossed it to me. The lizard demon protested with a screech.



“This guy’s been using that thing for hundreds of years now. I can open the gate to the spirit world anytime, so all we’ll really need to do is get back here.”

“I see.”

“Your Majesty! That’s a memento from my great-grandmother!”

“Liar.”

“Ugyah!”

Corona delivered a swift karate chop to his throat to shut him up.

While I kind of felt bad seeing Eskro snivel so miserably, we didn’t have any more time to waste here. I decided to go with it and borrow the fan for now.

“All right, let’s head to Aburaamu!”



A blinding flash of white light and a weird floating sensation later, we crossed the boundary between worlds. The first thing that came into view as the magical light faded was a well-maintained grave.

“There’s no mistaking it. This is the same grave I once saw in a memorial service for Lady Pastel,” Harissa said, nodding with certainty as she looked at the grave.

At last, we’d finally arrived in Aburaamu.

“So, this is Harissa’s hometown, huh?” Tsumiki muttered while looking around.

There wasn’t anything in the immediate area other than the grave.

“...”

Harissa seemed a little speechless at her own homecoming, but unfortunately, we didn’t have any time to waste here.

“That just used up the last catalyst for your new spell, right? We’ll have to get our hands on some more Red Threads.”

“Ah, yes!” Harissa snapped back into the present.

“Where can you find them?” I asked.

“They’re sold at just about any magic shop, but I don’t have any Aburaamian currency on me right now...”

“You need currency to buy things here?” Lea asked curiously.

“I have my savings in the bank, but in order to withdraw it, I’d need to go back to the dorms I was living in to get my national sorcerer’s license. It’s pretty far from here, so let’s go to the castle instead.”

“The same castle you summoned me to before?”

“Yes. There’s a national magic research facility next to the castle that has all kinds of magical items stocked. You need permission to take them... but I’m sure you could make something work, Sir Rekka.”

“So, you’re saying I should go throw around my name as the hero to get what I want, and then come back and apologize later?”

“That... is exactly what I’m saying, yes.”

It was quite a bold suggestion coming from the usually docile Harissa.

“But you and your world are in trouble! There’s no time to be fussing over the details.”

“Yeah...”

I had to agree with her there. Tsumiki, Lea, and Mio didn’t seem to have any objections to the plan, either. So with that settled, we made to leave... Well, most of us.

“...Sorry, could you go on ahead? I’ll catch up later,” said Corona.

Her eyes never left Pastel’s grave. The expression on her face was hard to describe. Her eyes were filled with emotion as she gazed at the name carved into the tombstone. I guess this was the grave of a former comrade of hers...

“All right. We’ll go ahead.”

“It’ll take a while to make catalysts from the Red Threads anyway,” Harissa added.

Corona only nodded in response, not saying a word.

We left her behind for the time being and headed for the magic research

facility. Because the graveyard where Pastel was buried was reserved for the royal family and a select few important people, it wasn't exactly close to the city. Fortunately, however, the tower of the royal castle was visible even from this distance, so I figured Corona would be able to use that as a landmark to find us later.

"Come to think of it, we were planning on visiting your village while we were here, Harissa."

Now that we were here in Aburaamu, I recalled the reason Harissa had made this new world-jumping spell of hers in the first place. We'd finally made it to her home world—after a few complications here and there—but now we were rushing to leave just as soon as we could. I felt kind of bad for her.

"Don't worry. That can wait until another time. Once everything is over, maybe."

"Sorry."

We all ran down the road leading to the castle. There seemed to be some people in town who recognized me as the hero, but we were hustling along at such a brisk pace that no one stopped us. We couldn't afford to waste time chatting with the citizens right now. Of course, however, things didn't go as smoothly once we reached the research facility.

"Hero!"

"The missing hero has returned!"

"Lady Harissa, too!"

We received a much warmer welcome than expected. Before we knew it, we were surrounded by people clad in robes like what Harissa wore.

"L-Little ole me ain't anyone worthy uva title like that!"

Embarrassed by the way she was being addressed, Harissa's country accent slipped out. I could sympathize with her. I was pretty embarrassed myself.

"You really have saved people from everywhere, huh? I guess I knew that already, though," Tsumiki sighed.

"Lady Harissa! There are no summoners in the country right now. Please lend

your powers once more for the good of Aburaamu!”

“U-U-Um... you see... I’m in a hurry right now! The fate of the world is on the line!”

“What! D-Don’t tell me the Overlord is...?!”

“I-It’s something like that! Now please let us through!”

When Harissa raised her voice, her fellow sorcerers parted like receding ocean waves on either side. She asked the crowd where the stock of Red Threads was kept, then led us away.

I guess it was true our Demon King was a lot like the Demon Overlord they knew, and the fate of the world *was* at stake... It was just Earth, not Aburaamu, and the Demon King was on our side this time.

“That was some quick thinking. You saved us, Harissa.”

“I-It was nothing. This is an emergency, after all.”

Anyway, we made our way to the basement where the Red Threads were stored after that. The storage room down there was a disordered mess, but Harissa was familiar enough with it to locate a wooden box of Red Threads right away. She got to work crafting the catalysts immediately while the rest of us waited for Corona, who showed up eventually. In order to avoid rousing suspicion, she’d hidden her horns and tail and was wearing the clothes Tsumiki had lent her.

“Sorry for the wait.”

“No worries. You okay?”

“Hm? Well, this place was easy enough to find, but I panicked a little when one of the sorcerers said I looked like the portrait in the hall.”

When I’d asked if she was okay, I really meant about Pastel. Seeing her friend’s grave must have been hard and brought some dark feelings like sadness or grief to the surface. But wait a minute... If there was a portrait of the former hero Corona, then did that mean there was one of me, too? Wow, that made this all even more embarrassing than before.

Putting that aside, I decided to ask Corona about something that had gotten

me curious.

“Corona, um... what was your relationship with that Pastel person?”

“Hm?”

“I mean, this Pastel lady was the sorcerer that summoned you to this world, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

“I was pretty confused when I was first summoned by Harissa, so...”

The first thing I did when I was summoned was ask for Harissa to send me back home. It was a complicated situation with extenuating circumstances, but I honestly thought it was impossible for me to be the hero.

“In the end, I managed to defeat the Overlord and save Harissa, but I was wondering why you accepted your role as a hero... I’ve never really met anyone who went through the same thing I did, so I was curious how it was for you.”

“I see.”

Corona closed one eye and let out a deep sigh. Then she shrugged her shoulders.

“They might both be sorcerers, but Pastel’s personality was completely different from Harissa’s. She threatened to keep me in this world until I defeated the Demon King, so I reluctantly agreed to be the hero.”

“O-Oh...?”

Her answer was so unexpected, I couldn’t even form a proper response.

“She was stubborn, unyielding, a self-proclaimed genius, and a pretty smooth talker, too. I don’t think I ever won a single argument against her... She used to hit me in the head with the end of her staff. Maybe saying she stabbed me would be more accurate. Anyway, it hurt. The people called me a hero, but I was being tyrannized by her.”

The more I learned about her, the more incredible this Pastel person sounded...

“She’d snap at me if I did anything wasteful, make me save every single

civilian in need we came across, and force me to drink root soup, do her laundry, wash the dishes, bathe together to save water, stay in the same room to save rent, sleep in the same bed—”

But the more she talked about her, the more it sounded like...

“Honestly, she was an incredible person.”

Corona was recalling fond memories.

“Yeah, she sure sounds like it.”

“Yeah... She hasn’t changed at all since the last time I saw her.”

Huh? That... seemed like an odd thing to be saying about someone whose grave she just visited...

“Well, anyway, she was extraordinarily odd, even for a summoner. After all, she was the one who summoned the Spirit King.”

“Wait, what?! As in the guy we just met in the spirit world?”

“No, his predecessor. Normally, the summoners of Aburaamu can only summon a spirit’s astral body and not the entire spirit. But Pastel could perform a complete summon, material body and all. Even with the Spirit King himself. Well, that might be hard for you to appreciate since you’re not a sorcerer.”

“No, I mean, I don’t understand the details, but that’s incredible, right?”

“That’s what I said. She was extraordinary.” Corona chuckled before continuing. “Granted, the moment the previous Spirit King suddenly appeared before me, we nearly killed each other. It was the middle of the war, after all. But Pastel stopped that, too. With the pointy end of her staff, no less.”

“...”

“The Spirit King and I were made to kneel and promise to get along.”

“I’m surprised the two of you agreed to that.”

They were the leaders of opposing armies. It was hard to imagine that was all it took for them to get along.

“I suppose I would have been surprised as well under any other circumstances... but for some reason, we just accepted it. She was simply that

good at getting people to bend to her will.”

“She really was something, huh?”

“That’s right. Pastel hit it off with that blasted stuffy Spirit King before I knew it. Perhaps that was her greatest talent, even more so than her magic.”

Corona then nodded towards Harissa.

“You know how I just said normal summoners can only summon a spirit’s astral body?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

“You’ll probably get the gist of what I mean if I just call it a spirit form, but an astral body actually has a very faint shape. That’s why spirits are perceived as higher beings by the summoners in this world.”

“I see...”

I’d seen Lyun the sylpheed and plenty of other spirits in the spirit world. They had humanoid bodies and talked just like normal people. That was why I didn’t register them as “higher beings.” But it would have been a different case for summoners who could only see their astral bodies—their ghost-like, ethereal forms. Ghosts were certainly mystifying and otherworldly to normal people.

“Maybe it was because Pastel could summon their material forms, too, but unlike other summoners, she thought of spirits as beings to work with, rather than beings to put to work. She treated them as equals. She’d even sit down and eat meals together with them.”

“...But didn’t she lecture them and hit them with her staff, too?”

“Only because she treated them as equals. You don’t get mad at your tools, right? Even if you did, you’d know how pointless that was, wouldn’t you?”

“Huh... Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Just like how you don’t actually expect a frozen computer to fix itself by angrily whacking it a few times.

“They might talk about spirits as higher beings, but most summoners only treat spirits as tools or means to an end. That’s why spirits hate summoners.

But the more resistant they grew to the idea of being summoned by such people, the harder summoners focused on their spirit-controlling abilities to try and keep them in line. Yet that only made the spirits hate them more.”

“I see...”

It was a vicious cycle. Hearing that made me understand just how extraordinary Pastel really was. But that wasn’t the only thing I understood now. This whole summoning thing was the reason why Lyun acted so coldly to Harissa in the spirit world. She probably pushed us away like she had because of her hatred for Aburaamu’s sorcerers. Harissa had also looked totally shocked when we first saw the spirits there. She must have been confused by how vastly different they were to her image of them.

“So, that was how I ended up traveling with Pastel and the Spirit King. Well, the Spirit King only accompanied us when Pastel summoned him, but... for some strange reason, I had lost the will to fight with that stuffy king by the time we finished our journey. And the feeling was mutual by then.”

So that was how the war between spirits and demons ended... But if they’d reached an understanding, why was Corona sealed in the Ruler’s Dungeon? I asked her about it.

“There were a couple of reasons, but the biggest was to set an example. My defeat would equal the spirits’ victory. It was the most convenient and efficient way of making it clear to both sides that the demons were defeated and the war was over. My long absence and the Spirit King’s frequent disappearances had caused the war to drag on long enough at that point, so everyone was already worn out. It was a chance to put a decisive end to things.”

“...”

“Without me, the demon army had no resistance against light magic and had to retreat. While some lives were lost as we fell back... the Spirit King stopped pursuing the demons once they reached the other side of the gate. Then he closed it and declared that the war was won. After all, the demons would never be able to open the gate without me, meaning they’d never attack the spirit world again.”

“...”

“All that was left was my execution... But that stuffy king somehow managed to convince his people that I should be sealed in the Ruler’s Dungeon instead. The rest you already know.”

Before I knew it, I was complete engrossed in Corona’s story. Maybe it was just that I didn’t know what to say in response. How had Corona felt about all this? How had the previous Spirit King felt to seal her away like that? Did Pastel know what would happen when she sent them back to their own worlds? I could only imagine what it was like, but it didn’t feel right to speculate about their feelings out loud. That was between the people who’d been involved.

As we were talking, Harissa finished making catalysts for her new spell and excitedly called out to us.

“Sir Rekka, sorry to have kept you waiting! We can now go back to Earth!”

“All right, sounds good.” I looked over at Mio, Lea, and Tsumiki. “You three will stay behind as planned.”

“But...”

Lea seemed a little uncertain as she glanced between Mio and me. Her face seemed to say “I want to go, too.”

“I can understand how you feel, Lea, but we can’t leave Mio here by herself, right?”

“Right, but...”

“I’m counting on you, too, Tsumiki. We didn’t have time to meet the king and use my hero privileges to ask for somewhere to stay, but...”

“Whatever. We’ll work it out somehow. The people here saw us with you earlier, so we’ll find some way to explain it,” Tsumiki answered offhandedly with a look on her face that said she wanted me gone already.

“Well, then, Harissa—”

I was about to say it was time to go, when suddenly...

“W-Wait!”

An unexpected voice called out, halting me in my tracks.

“Mio?”

“Um, I...” Mio hesitated for a moment as everyone in the room turned to look at her. “P-Please take me with you, too!”

“Huh?!” I raised my voice in surprise. “M-Mio? We’re about to go to a really dangerous place right now, you know?”

Originally, we’d planned on hiding Mio in Aburaamu since we still didn’t know who’d pushed her off a roof. Even the Magic of Omniscience hadn’t been able to give us any leads. That potentially meant we were up against someone powerful enough to deceive the great Omniscient Magic, which is why we’d gone as far as trying to hide her in another world. Just to be safe. But now that Mio’s memories had returned, we knew what had happened to her was a result of future events. That was why the Magic of Omniscience hadn’t worked. The Akashic record was the history of the universe, and it didn’t include things that hadn’t yet come to pass. While we still didn’t know who’d pushed Mio, we at least had a better idea of what we were dealing with. I wasn’t as scared knowing we weren’t up against someone who could fool Satsuki’s magic. But even then...

“Yang is extremely wary of Mio’s knowledge of the future. He might have just sealed your memories the first time, but that might not be the case next time, you know?”

“I know, but...” Mio clenched her trembling hands together. “What if my knowledge of the future is useful to everyone?”

“Well, it could be, but...”

“I was really scared when I found out I had amnesia,” Mio whispered. “That’s why having you constantly by my side saying that you’d save me really made me feel safe. I was a little unsure at first, but... you really were my pillar of support.”

Come to think of it, Mio was always clinging to my waist.

“Yesterday when my memory finally returned... I couldn’t remember everything, but I knew that even in the future, it was you who saved me. You’re always saving me... so I want to be as useful as I can to you, Rekka!”

“You don’t need to worry about that. It’s just who I am.”

Nevertheless, I was happy that Mio felt that way. As I was contemplating whether or not I should let her come along...

“I think it’d be better if you took her with you,” R suddenly came up to me and whispered in my ear.

I didn’t want the others to see me converse with a girl they couldn’t see, so I reluctantly excused myself from the group and turned around.

“...What do you mean?”

I tried to reply to R as quietly as possible, but I could still feel everyone staring at me as I stood in the corner. No doubt I looked suspicious. But the girl from the future was unsympathetic to my suffering as ever.

“What do you think Mio’s story is about, Rekka?” she asked.

“What? Isn’t it about who pushed her off the roof?” Finding the perpetrator should solve her story, right? “Isn’t that obvious...?”

“You really think that’s Mio’s story?”

“Yes?”

“Think about it.”

R held her palm open in front of my face.

“Through some kind of method—though that in and of itself is another mystery—Mio returned to the past where you then found her and took her to another world.”

R counted off the events on her fingers as she recounted them in brief.

“And now here we are. Don’t you think Mio has taken fairly different actions compared to her past self—or rather, her previous future self? She’s already met you and canceled her tour. Do you really think she’ll still be pushed off the roof like she was before? I mean, just put the Psychic Hazard aside for a second. That doesn’t really have anything to do with her anyway.”

I almost hated to say it, but R was right. If everything went as Mio remembered, she met me when we were running from the riots and fled to the

roof. It was probably the same roof that she was pushed off... But the fact that she ran to the roof of her own will meant it was a coincidence. Did the perpetrator even push Mio with the intention to kill her? And why do it in the middle of the huge disaster known as the “Psychic Hazard”? If Mio was pushed off the roof by accident... would rewinding everything mean that Mio’s different actions up until this point had prevented the past (future?) from repeating itself?

“Besides, the conditions are weird. The Namidare bloodline only gets you caught up in ongoing stories. That means they need, in the present continuous tense, an incident or mystery to be *actively occurring* to trigger your involvement. Otherwise it’d be possible for heroines that need help 50 years from now to appear, you know?”

“Huh...”

“So regardless of whatever happened to her before, not much has happened this time around. She had her memories sealed by Yang, sure, but that’s not enough for the Namidare bloodline to get you caught up in it,” R declared. “So there must be some other reason you met her there in that empty lot.”

Just when I thought the mysteries of Mio’s story were finally unraveled, I got put right back at square one. But either way, I understood what R was getting at. Mio’s story was still uncertain and nowhere near being solved, so I shouldn’t leave her side.

“All right. Come with us, too, Mio,” I turned back to the others and said.

“Okay!” Mio answered happily.

Her story might be a real doozy, but I was determined make it a happy ending this time! With my newfound resolve, I stepped into the sending circle Harissa had drawn on the floor.



When I opened my eyes, Hibiki and the others stood before me.

“Rekka...?”

“Hey. Long time no see.”

Reuniting after five days, I waved to Hibiki...

“Don’t give me that!”

But I was abruptly cut off by her yelling. It seemed I’d worried her.

“Yeah, um... sorry I’m late.”

We’d gotten waylaid by one unexpected thing after another, but apologizing seemed like the best thing to do right now. The other girls were also glaring at me pretty hard... Looking around at them, I realized there was someone I hadn’t expected to see in the room.

“Huh? What are you doing here, Chelsea?”

“It’s been a while, Rekka. And, well, it’s a long story.”

After I resolved Chelsea’s story last time, she’d departed on an overseas journey to continue her life as a treasure hunter. When did she meet up with Hibiki and the others?

“It seems you’ve also picked up another girl, hmm?” Rosalind said as she looked back and forth between me and Corona with narrowed eyes.

“...”

Suzuran was silent, but the look in her eyes told me she was on her master’s side.

“It’s a bit of a long story, too, but...”

“Yeah, you’re right. We have a lot we need to talk about,” Hibiki said with a furrowed brow.

That was when it hit me. We had returned from Aburaamu, but we’d warped automatically to wherever Hibiki and the other girls were. I didn’t recognize the room, and the furnishings didn’t look very Japanese. Not to mention the place was easily big enough to fit all 11 of us without a problem. Had they gone somewhere, then? Another country, maybe? Did it have something to do with Chelsea joining them? I had plenty to tell them about what had happened in the spirit world, but it seemed like it went both ways.

Everyone found something to sit on, and we started exchanging information.



“Satsuki was kidnapped by Ellicia?!”

I stood up so suddenly when Hibiki told me the news that my chair toppled over behind me.

“I’m sorry... We let our guard down.”

Hibiki lowered her head and apologized so sincerely that I could only be so mad about it.

“No, I’m sorry, too. For yelling like that...”

I picked up the chair I’d knocked over and sat back down.

“But... why did Ellicia kidnap Satsuki?”

“About that... There was a letter from Ellicia in Satsuki’s room. A blackmail letter from the organization she’s a part of. According to the letter, what the organization is really after is something that Ellicia gave you.”

“Ellicia gave me something?”

That could only be one thing. I took the earring out of my pocket.

“What’s that?” Hibiki asked.

“Ellicia slipped it into my pocket when we met.”

“Then that’s probably it. The organization wants to exchange Satsuki for that earring. The deadline written in the letter is nightfall tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, huh?”

Should I be happy we’d made it back in time? Or should I be lamenting how little time we had left?

“Okay, so that’s the time limit, but where’s the exchange taking place?”

“It says ‘the place where you fought for Satsuki.’ The letter also demands that you come alone and bring the earring. Do you know where they mean?”

“Well, I have an idea.”

It was most likely the open field where I fought Messiah. The letter was probably written that way so that even if someone from the Margaret clan read

it, they wouldn't know where the exchange would take place. Who knew what would happen to Satsuki if I didn't bring them the earring tomorrow night... I didn't really want to think about it. I just stared at the earring in my hand as my thoughts wandered to Satsuki. I was praying for her safety.

"By the way, what is that? It looks like a normal earring," Hibiki asked, peering over at it.

"Holding on to this lets me use the same wall walking ability as Ellicia."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know how it works, but it lets whoever's holding it use Ellicia's power."

There was just one problem with that.

"This was stolen from Chelsea's family, which means it's a magical item, right? So why does it give the ability to use psychic powers?" I asked.

"That's..."

Chelsea was about to answer my question when...

"Hello, friends! How are we all?"

A girl in a bright red dress suddenly threw open the door, announcing her presence loudly as she walked in. Behind her trailed numerous maids.

"...Wait, what?"

"Oh? I had heard an uninvited guest appeared, but I didn't expect it to be a familiar face," the girl said with a grin.

Her face was familiar to me, too.

"What? You know her, Rekka?" Rosalind asked, looking unhappy for some reason.

"Um, she's the girl I met when Mio collapsed in the empty lot..."

"You're the boy who gave me a ride on your shoulders," said the girl. "Thank you for that."

"What?!"

Rosalind was looking even more unhappy... but I ignored her as I turned to the girl in red.

“So, who are you?”

“Hm? Ohohoho... Now that you mention it, I didn’t introduce myself, did I? I’m Nartessia Margaret, the head of this family.”

The girl named Nartessia sat down on a chair Chelsea brought to her and introduced herself with an arrogant smile on her face. I’d heard from Hibiki that they got in touch with the Margaret clan, but... the head of the family was a child this young? Judging by the attitudes of Chelsea and the maids, it sure seemed like it...

“And what’s your name, boy?”

“I’m Rekka Namidare.”

“Oh? So you’re the Rekka mentioned in the letter?” Nartessia said, narrowing her eyes.

I could only assume she was talking about the blackmail letter from the organization.

“How strange indeed. To think we would actually meet again like this...”

Come to think of it, she’d said something about meeting again when we parted ways in the vacant lot. Well, having met her already made it a little easier to talk to her now, so I guess our encounter was fortunate in that regard.

“Nartessia, is the organization demanding this earring in exchange for Satsuki?”

“That would be correct.”

“...And is there any chance of you listening to their demand?”

“None.”

She answered so flatly... I guess it made sense since the organization was demanding a treasure that belonged to the Margaret clan. To her, there was no reason to give something like that up for Satsuki. But I wasn’t about to give up that easily. I racked my brain for another way to negotiate this.

“Wait, Nartessia, I’d like to confirm one thing,” Hibiki said with a discerning look.

“Hm? And what is that?”

“From what we heard already, this earring—this Margaret clan treasure—has the power to destroy every major city on the planet and throw the world into chaos. But Rekka says all the earring does is give him the power to walk through walls. What’s the meaning of this?”

“It’s nothing that concerns you.”

“Yes, it is. We agreed to cooperate with you after hearing the world was in danger. Now explain why you lied.”

“Hmph, fine. I’ll oblige, though it’s a bother...”

Nartessia shrugged her shoulders and winked cheekily. Her target, Hibiki, crossed her arms in an unimpressed manner.

“The Scarlet Doppel Stone in that earring has the ability to remember powers.”

“Remember powers?”

“It’s exactly as I said. The earring can recall either magical or psychic abilities and replicate them. That’s exactly what Rekka experienced.”

Aha, so the reason why I was able to walk through walls was because the earring remembered Ellicia’s psychic powers!

“Right now it’s been overwritten with that wall walking power, but originally it held the Margaret clan’s heirloom magic, the Fire Dragon’s Breath, which is wide-area annihilation magic.”

“So when you said it could destroy the world, you meant the Fire Dragon’s Breath?”

“That’s right. So, really, I didn’t lie. The earring held the power of the Fire Dragon’s Breath when it was stolen. I had every reason to believe that the fate of the world was at stake.”

What Nartessia was saying seemed to make sense. There was no way for her

to know that the Fire Dragon's Breath was overwritten with something less destructive, so it was only natural for her to take action based on the worst-case scenario. But... the "Psychic Hazard" Yang had caused in Mio's future didn't sound like that kind of direct destruction, either. Which meant...

"Do you understand now? If so, kindly hand it over already, would you?"

"That's..."

If I returned the earring, Satsuki would...!

"That scary-sounding Fire Dragon's Breath thing isn't on this earring anymore, right? That means it should be safe to hand it over to the organization as it is, so..."

"So you want to trade it for the return of your friend? Not happening. It's out of the question. This is hardly a negotiation, Rekka," Nartessia tutted with a smirk. "Negotiation 101: first and foremost, hide your own weaknesses, and then after that, explore mutually beneficial options with the other party. You've done neither of those things."

She paused for a moment and then looked me dead in the eye.

"But there is *something* you're trying to hide, isn't there?"

"H-Hide?"

"That Satsuki person was kidnapped by Ellicia herself, no? The same girl who stored that wall walking ability in the earring. In other words, the organization already knows that it no longer contains the Fire Dragon's Breath. So why do they want the earring?"

"That's..."

"That means they want the earring itself and not the power stored in it. In other words, their goal lies somewhere else."

Crap, she was onto me...

The truth was that I already knew Yang's objective. He was going to cause the Psychic Hazard, and he probably needed the earring to do it. He'd probably get away with it too if I handed over the earring. But if I didn't, Satsuki would be in danger.

“...”

The only possibility now would be to meet the organization and negotiate for Satsuki's return, then try and protect the earring... Yang and his telepathy would see right through me if I didn't actually bring it with me. But it was too dangerous to take the earring anywhere near Yang. Nartessia wasn't wrong for thinking that it was best to keep it away from them at all costs, but still...

“If they have another objective, the organization isn't going to relent.”

As I struggled to find the right words, Hibiki spoke up.

“So regardless of whether we meet them for the exchange, they'll come for the earring eventually.”

“That might be true,” Nartessia admitted.

“If Rekka pretends to accept the organization's exchange, we can then go back him up for the fight.”

“Oh? So you're willing to fight for a chance to get your friend back? From the sounds of it, you're saying that if I reject your plan here and now, our alliance is over.”

“That's right.”

“Well, you're better at this than Rekka is, at least.” Nartessia twirled the end of her hair around her finger and nodded in interest. “But your proposal is still weak. There are big flaws. The opponent is a psychic that can read minds, you know? How are you going to pretend to accept the exchange?”

“A comrade of ours will be arriving soon with an item that should help. As long as we have that, we should be able to resist Yang's telepathy.”

“Oh? How convenient. Just what kind of comrade do you have that can get their hands on such a thing?”

“An alien.”

“Ha!” Nartessia laughed like it was the best joke she'd ever heard.

“Just so you know, she's not lying,” I said to back Hibiki up.

But even then, Nartessia clutched her stomach and laughed for a good long

while. When she finally collected herself, she looked back up at the two of us.

“Either way, it’s not happening. The Margaret family has more than enough power to annihilate the organization outright. The only reason why I sought you out was for the girl with the ability to locate Yang’s whereabouts... Satsuki, was it? All of you were just extras.”

“You...!” Rosalind was seething after being talked to like that. “So the reason why you made us waste day after day just sitting around in this mansion was...”

“Because you weren’t needed. A Margaret family pursuit team was dispatched the moment that girl revealed Yang’s location.” Nartessia grinned at Rosalind provokingly. “Granted, Yang managed to shake them off. Just as we were about to ask the girl to find his location again, she was kidnapped. We were in quite a predicament... until the earring returned, that is. Now there’s no reason for us to make a move. If we wait, the organization’s remnants will launch an attack on their own. All we have to do then is exterminate them. Of course, we can that do without you.”

“This little girl...!”

“Wait, Rosalind... Huh?” As I reached out to hold Rosalind back from exploding, something struck me about what Nartessia had said. “Wait a minute. What do you mean by the organization’s ‘remnants’?”

Nartessia paused at my question.

“Oh, you don’t know, Rekka? I’m pretty sure I informed Hibiki over there.”

“I haven’t heard a thing.” Hibiki denied her statement with narrowed eyes.

Nartessia continued to smile wryly under her glare, then said, “We destroyed the organization’s headquarters some time ago. I believe it was on the afternoon of the 20th? It was the day I met you in that empty lot, Rekka.”

The organization’s headquarters had already been destroyed?!

“Mistress Nartessia! You haven’t said a word about this to me!”

“Hmm? And what would you have done if I’d told you, Chelsea? Wouldn’t you have gone to Hibiki? There’s a reason I didn’t tell you, you know.”

Nartessia quieted Chelsea’s protests with a sharp glare, but her words proved

to me that she never had any intention of telling us in the first place. And the fact that she had considered everyone other than Satsuki to be extras... She was only showing her hand now that Satsuki was out of the picture.

“You specifically said you wanted Satsuki to discover Yang’s location,” Hibiki said. “Even though you knew you were up against the organization, that’s why you never asked where their base was, isn’t it?”

“There’s no need to ask about something that’s already been obliterated, is there?”

“Yeah, that’s true. And thanks to that, I’ve figured out why Ellicia kidnapped Satsuki.”

Hibiki then explained her theory with a grave look on her face. According to her, Ellicia was on the run from the organization, but she had no desire to make enemies with them. Ellicia’s goal was most likely Yang—or really, to stop the Psychic Hazard. She didn’t hold any feelings of contempt towards the organization itself. Which meant...

“With the organization gone, Ellicia has lost everyone and everything that meant anything to her. Can you imagine that despair? She’s probably gone off the deep end. Overwhelmed by her anger and grief, she...” Hibiki trailed off, biting her lip in frustration.

Ellicia probably heard about what happened to the organization after Yang took her back. Maybe Hibiki was regretting letting her get taken...

“...”

I knew I was. Ellicia had been trying to stop the Psychic Hazard until the organization was decimated, but now she was working with Yang to try and make it happen. In other words... Ellicia’s story was...

“Are we done with the questions now? Kindly hand over the earring, then.”

Nartessia extended her hand. Everyone’s gaze fell on me.

Should I give her the earring and watch her take on the organization’s remnants from the sidelines?

“...”

Or should I head to the exchange point and risk endangering the world in order to rescue Satsuki and save Ellicia from her despair?

Even if all that was left of the organization were the so-called remnants, it wasn't going to be easy to get Satsuki back. On top of that, refusing Nartessia here would make enemies out of the Margaret clan. And if we ended up losing to the organization, the Psychic Hazard would spread chaos across the world. I didn't even know if I'd be able to save Ellicia's story.

But... But even so....

There is no progress without struggle. And without progress, there's no way I'd be able to make it to the people who needed to be saved. Was I just going to sit there and watch quietly as Nartessia wiped out Ellicia and the others? What a joke.

"Sorry, everyone."

I apologized in advance for involving everyone in my own selfishness.

"...Don't worry about it." Hibiki picked up on my intentions and let out a big sigh.

I glanced around and saw the other girls with similar expressions. Only Corona and Mio seemed somewhat uncertain. It seemed they'd picked up on the negotiation fallout and knew something was about to go down.

"Hmm? What's the matter?" Nartessia asked after witnessing our exchange.

She still had the same grin on her face, too. The look in her eyes made me worry she'd seen right through me, but... there was no backing down now!

"Rosalind!"

"I should've done this from the start!"

With an ominous reply, Rosalind's eyes flashed red. About half of the maids that had started bracing themselves after things had gotten tense were immediately charmed by Rosalind. They then moved to restrain the other half that weren't charmed. The charm couldn't handle all of them after all...!

"Heehee..."

Of course, Nartessia herself was unaffected by the charm, as well. She merely sat where she was, looking at me calmly. Just what was she thinking? No, now wasn't the time to be distracted!

"Lea! Take care of Tsumiki and Mio!"

"Leave them to me!"

Lea picked up the petite Mio, and Tsumiki ran over to them in a hurry.

"The window!" Hibiki yelled as she tossed something cylindrical into the center of the room.

A large volume of smoke started pouring out of whatever it was, impairing the vision of Nartessia and the maids. A smoke screen? Count on Hibiki to be prepared! It was serious enough to even fill one of the oversized rooms of the Margaret estate.

While they were distracted, we made a break for the window. With their vision obscured, it looked like we might just get away... But as I was thinking that, a gust of wind suddenly blasted through the room and blew the smoke outside.

"Go on, get going already."

Nartessia ordered the maids to come after us. It must have been her magic that cleared out the smoke. But lucky for us, the gust had also blown open the window. That was one less thing we had to worry about, at least.

"Wait!"

A maid yelled after us and then started to chant a spell. And she wasn't the only one. The other maids followed suit. Before I knew it, bolts of fire, water, lightning, and wind were all flying at us!

"Wha?!"

Any one of those would knock me out instantly!

"Rekka!"

"Young man!"

Lea's water magic and Corona's dark magic scattered the spells closing in on

me. What we lacked in numbers, we certainly made up for in power thanks to the two of them. They blasted away most of the elemental torrents all at once, but one still managed to slip through.

“Hah!” Harissa shouted as she cast a barrier to protect me.

“Thanks!”

“It was nothing!”

And with that short exchange, we resumed running.

“Pardon me.”

Suzuran apologized as she threw a silver knife. It pierced the leg of an approaching maid. She tumbled to the floor, and several maids behind her tripped over her.

“Take this!”

Iris grabbed a large grandfather clock standing against the wall and threw it in front of the maids. Instead of hitting anyone, she was trying to block their way. Then Hibiki threw another smoke screen. We knew Nartessia could clear it out in a second, but a second was all we needed. The window was right in front of us. All we had to do was jump.

“Lea! Please!”

I glanced back at Lea, who was running while protecting Mio and Tsumiki.

“Tsumiki, take Mio,” she said.

“Got it!”

Leaving Mio with Tsumiki, Lea stepped out onto the balcony.

“...Are there too many of us?” I asked, a little worried.

On top of the five of us who returned from the other world, we now had Iris, Hibiki, Rosalind, and Suzuran in tow. I didn’t know if Lea could handle carrying nine people all at once.

“I can fly by myself,” said Corona.

“It’ll work out. Give me a moment.”

With that hopeful answer, Lea began transforming.

“Speaking of which, where’s Chelsea?” I asked Hibiki.

“Her position in the Margaret family is somewhat complicated... She won’t be able to come with us.”

“I see.”

I hadn’t spoken with Nartessia for long, but I could tell she was going to be difficult to handle. Her intentions were hard to read, too... She gave a somewhat cold impression. There was probably no double-crossing a leader like that.

“All right! Get on, everyone!” Lea called to us telepathically.

“Let’s go!”

Everyone quickly climbed up on Lea’s back once she was fully transformed. Mio was so short that Iris had to help her up.

“Hang on tight!”

Leviathan’s large snakelike body rose into the sky without a sound. As soon as we took off, one of the maids burst through the smoke.

“Damn you!”

She started to cast a spell, but the instant the words left her mouth, she rapidly began to shrink. Her head and limbs became tangled in her uniform, and I could hear a squeaky screaming from underneath it all.

Wait, that’s right! Chelsea’s magic was being able to make people smaller! Even though she was in such a complicated position, and even though we’d had the smoke screen to defend us, she was still trying to help... I thanked her silently in my head as we flew off.

“All right...!” I started to say.

“It’s still too early to relax! They’re following us!” Lea warned me.

“Seriously?!”

I glanced back in a hurry to see maids holding their skirts as they jumped through the window. Was it normal for magical families to have flying maids?!

To make matters worse, other Margaret family mages had come when they'd heard the fuss. They were coming after us too now. Just when I was thinking there was no way we'd be able to shake them all off, a light suddenly shone down on us from overhead.

"Huh?"

The next moment, we were rising into the sky as if the light was sucking us in.

"Wh-What is this?" Lea gasped, unable to hide her surprise.

She'd returned to her human form. The light was lifting us up and away, and had pulled us right off her back. That meant whatever this was... it was strong enough to make ten people float.

The maids and mages of the Margaret family were dumbfounded as they watched us rapidly rise into the sky. They were probably wondering what the light was. Honestly, I was, too. But I had a faint idea...

I looked over at Iris as we were being sucked up into the sky.

"Hey, Iris, was this your doing?"

"Nope, wasn't me," she said with a shake of her head.

"I see," I said.

"How can you two be so casual? What's going on here?" Lea asked with a worried expression.

"Oh, yeah, Lea hasn't experienced this before. Don't worry, we're just being abducted by aliens."

A silence fell upon the Strongest Beast for a few seconds.

"...Huh?"



Surprisingly—or perhaps unsurprisingly—we were abducted and beamed up into a spaceship. Any possible quips about how we were able to breathe air in space could likely be countered with two simple words: "alien technology." But as for the identity of our alien saviors...

"I was delayed a bit, but it looks like I arrived at a good time."

“You were right on time. Thank you, Shirley.”

“You’re welcome,” Shirley replied, pushing her glasses up and smiling.

“It seems you went through a lot while we were on Berano,” Rain said.

“Were you guys all right without me?” added Fam at the same time.

“I was worried, too,” said Tetra.

Tetra was the one who’d pinpointed our location after they returned from Berano, and all three of them looked relieved to see us alive and well. The android Garnet was passing drinks around to everyone who was exhausted after the escape.



“Speaking of which, you guys sure took your time. Did something happen?” Iris asked between sips of the juice she’d gotten from Garnet.

Shirley and the others had gone to planet Estashion, which was researching psychic powers, in hopes of retrieving something that might be useful in confronting the psychics.

“Nothing in particular, but... Well, you know how I’m a wanted criminal on Estashion? We couldn’t get what we needed off the planet without a little favor from Squallow and the former Seageists. As for everything else, we had to rely on Rain’s mother’s influence and connections.”

The now-disbanded Seageists were a group of space pirates that Fam used to belong to. If the girls had to go to them, it probably meant they were doing something that wasn’t exactly aboveboard.

“So, how did it go?” I asked, cutting to the chase.

“Perfectly,” Shirley said.

She then turned and pressed a few buttons on the ship’s console. When she did, a section of the wall in the room opened up to reveal a line of what kinda looked like bulletproof vests.

“Is this it?” I asked.

“That’s right,” Shirley replied.

“They look like clothes... and they don’t seem to cover the head, huh?”

“Not what you imagined?”

“Well, the other side has the ability to read minds, so I guess I just figured we’d need something like a helmet, you know?”

When I said that, Shirley giggled.

“Understandable. That’s how the stereotype goes, after all.” Shirley approached the psychic-resistant vests and placed her hand on one of them. “Telepathy can be used to read memories and thoughts, but not by intercepting the electric signals in the brain. It reads information from the spirit, or rather the heart.”

“Hmm... Oh, I see.”

If the information was being read from the heart and not the head, then it did kind of make sense that psychic armor would be more like clothes.

“Well, don’t sweat the details. It’s just a countermeasure for the enemy’s mind-reading abilities.”

“Yeah,” I nodded.

“Wearing this jacket will prevent telepaths from being able to read your heart. It’s thin, so you can wear it under your normal clothes and no one will notice.”

“So, if I wore this to the exchange point...”

“Exchange point? What are you talking about?”

Come to think of it, we hadn’t told Shirley’s group yet. I gave them a quick rundown concerning what had happened with the organization, mostly that they’d kidnapped Satsuki and what they wanted in return. What was going on with the spirit and demon worlds would have to wait for later.

“I see. So that’s the situation...” Shirley said pensively.

“Yeah. So can this jacket block other types of psychic powers?” Hibiki asked.

“The jacket can also prevent spontaneous human combustion and mind control, but it has its limits against specific psychic powers. Powers like teleportation and telescopic vision would require something much more serious, I’m afraid,” Shirley said rather regretfully.

But even then, just having our minds shielded would make a big difference.

“All that’s left is... I guess we start with saving Satsuki first,” I said.

Yang had probably read both Satsuki and Hibiki’s memories, so he most likely knew about each of us and what we were capable of. That meant that even if we wore the jackets to prevent him from reading our minds, he’d already be prepared for us to try and sneak our group in using Harissa’s invisibility magic. It would never work now. Was it even a good idea to walk straight into the exchange in the first place...?

Hang on...

“What if that was actually something we could use to our advantage?” I muttered.

Everyone’s eyes fell on me. I looked back at them one by one.

Yeah... She was probably the only one who could take Yang by surprise. Which meant if we did this, and then that and that...

I started to explain the plan I came up with to the girls.



After putting our heads together for a bit, we all realized that none of us had slept properly since fleeing from the spirit world to the demon world and then returning to Earth. We decided to rest until the evening of the 26th, the day Yang had declared for the exchange.

“Aaah! That was refreshing.”

Sitting up in bed, I had a good stretch and then checked the hands of the clock. I must have slept a good eight hours or so. My head felt nice and clear now. It was the best sleep I’d had in ages. Thinking back on it, the beds at the spirit inn were a little firm. Compared to those, the beds on Shirley’s spaceship were soft and supportive. It was like being hugged by a cloud while you slept. Was this some kind of space-age technology, too? Maybe I could order one like it from Shirley when I wore out my bed at home. I didn’t have any alien currency, though, so I’d have to come up with another way to pay her... That’s what I was pondering as I passed through the silent sliding door into the hall.

“...What are you all up to?”

“N-Nothing,” everyone answered in unison.

What were they all gathered outside my room for if they weren’t doing anything? It looked like they were all glaring and grabbing at each other. A few of them were even on the floor. There wasn’t any evidence of a particularly violent battle or anything, but it felt safe to deem the hallway a war zone. It was weird. Very weird. I quickly made my exit. I’d already asked Shirley where the bathroom was, so I headed there to wash my face.

“Maybe they all bumped into each other when they came to either wake you up or stare at your sleeping face?”

“Why would anyone wanna see my sleeping face?”

Deflecting R’s typically irrelevant remarks, I made my way down the hall. She spent the whole time I was washing my face just floating behind me and sighing hopelessly.

After that, I ate breakfast(?) with everyone—Rosalind and Iris were still glaring at each other—and returned to my room to do some stretches and prepare myself mentally. Yang hadn’t specified an exact time for the exchange, but if this deal didn’t work out, then the organization’s survivors would charge headlong into the Margaret estate. We had until the end of the day, so they’d wait until just before midnight before making their move. But I didn’t intend on keeping them waiting that long.

“Time to get going...”

I stood up and left my room. When I entered the spacious common area of Shirley’s ship, everyone else had already gathered there. It seemed like I was the last one to arrive.

“You’re late. Did you fall back asleep?” Hibiki joked.

“I did not!” I retorted before changing the subject to the matter at hand. “The fight with Yang this time will be about who can read the other better.”

Yang knew all about us from reading Satsuki’s memories. But I knew what he knew about us. That meant this would be a matter of how well I could predict his countermeasures and continuously adjust our plans to counter his in turn—that would be the key to this battle.

“Our objective is to get Satsuki back,” I declared.

The worst-case scenario would be if they somehow managed to keep me from doing that. If that happened, we’d be cornered into deciding whether or not to hand over the earring.

“So, let’s go launch this surprise attack.”

“Yes!”

Harissa was the one who answered me with enthusiasm. She pointed the tip of her staff to the floor of the spaceship where a sending circle was drawn and started chanting.

“Eclena Cashu!”

The next instant, a white light filled my vision.



Harissa’s new spell had transported me somewhere totally unfamiliar. It seemed to be the inside of a coal mine. The ceiling, walls, and floor were all made of dirt, and the air smelled of damp earth. Bare lightbulbs strung up here and there illuminated the place well enough that I could see without an issue. Their orangey light shone down on about ten or so people, most of whom I didn’t know. The ones I did recognize were Ellicia, Yang, and...

“Satsuki!”

“Rekka!”

Satsuki called out to me when she saw me. Her hands were restrained behind her back by one of Yang’s female followers. We’d used her personal belongings and Harissa’s new spell to launch a surprise attack on Yang without having to go to the exchange point. While Yang knew about Harissa’s magic thanks to his telepathy, he had no way of knowing when we might show up. And that let us get the drop on him.

“Rosalind! Garnet!”

They didn’t even need to respond. Without a sound, the two of them ran in to retrieve Satsuki.

“Don’t move. Or I’ll kill the hostage,” Yang ordered in his intimidating voice.

“Just try laying a hand on Satsuki. We’ll immediately return to the spaceship and throw the earring into outer space,” I threatened him right back.

“...!”

A wrinkle appeared on Yang’s brow for an instant. He’d probably realized that he couldn’t read our minds. That meant he couldn’t tell whether I was serious or not, but as far as he knew, it was a totally valid threat. He knew I had the

means to do it.

And if he hurt Satsuki and I really did get rid of the earring, he wouldn't be able to carry out his plans anymore. On top of that, the Margaret clan had already destroyed the organization's headquarters, so he would have practically no recourse now. They'd been driven up against a wall, leaving them practically no choice but to resort to the Psychic Hazard.

That was why even a veteran soldier like Yang would hesitate—he feared losing his last way of getting revenge on the world. So much so that one bluffing kid could scare him.

But in the end, a bluff was a bluff. It wouldn't last long. He would eventually see through me even without using his telepathy. The purpose of this surprise attack was to prevent that from happening.

Rosalind and Garnet quickly closed in on the psychics, but the shock of our sudden ambush didn't last forever. Their opponents stood ready to take on the rapidly approaching pair.

“Out of my way!”

Rosalind let her fists fly at speeds faster than any normal human could keep up with. But the man she was facing didn't give up. He methodically countered her attacks with a knife. I honestly never thought he'd hit her, but...

“Gnuh!”

The trajectory of his knife suddenly twisted like a snake, winding upward and scratching Rosalind on the cheek.

“That's probably a type of extrasensory perception! He probably sees the world in slow motion, where one second lasts for ten!” Shirley yelled to Rosalind.

We'd investigated the organization's psychics to try and make up for the fact that Yang already knew our hand, and Shirley's knowledge on his team compensated for that disadvantage nicely. But even then, it wasn't exactly smooth sailing. Garnet had also been intercepted by a psychokinetic.

“Ellicia!”

At Yang's order, Ellicia and several other psychics closed in on me. It seemed they were intent on capturing all of us now. Yang had a good handle on us and our stories based on what he'd gathered from Satsuki. So if he captured us all here, there would be no one left to get in his way or eject the earring into space—that's probably what he was thinking.

"Iris! Lea! Hibiki! Suzuran! Please!"

The four of them moved to intercept Ellicia and the other psychics, but they could only go so far. Behind me were Tsumiki and the other girls who couldn't fight. If their line of defense fell, I would have to step in as their shield. We'd planned for that possibility, of course, but ideally Rosalind and Garnet would retrieve Satsuki before they had to face that danger. And then...

"Aargh! How annoying!"

Infuriated, Rosalind transformed into a mass of countless bats.

"What?!"

Even the psychic she was fighting yelled out, surprised at this turn of events. He slashed at the swarm of bats in a panic while Rosalind returned to her human form some distance away. No matter how slow the world seemed to him as he dodged her fists, there was no way he could keep up with Rosalind's instantaneous speeds. She left him behind in a flash. With Ellicia and the other psychics coming after me now, the only obstacles left for Rosalind were Yang and the woman restraining Satsuki.

"You're mine!" Rosalind cried as she ran in.

"Not a chance!" Yang yelled back.

Yang darted over and intercepted Rosalind's fist as she tried to push away the woman holding on to Satsuki. Good grief, even with his psychic powers made moot, his eyesight and reaction time were crazy!

"Lucy!" Yang yelled to the woman.

I'd heard that name before... Hibiki had said she was Yang's comrade that could use teleportation.

"Got it!" she called back to him.

“Re...!” Satsuki cried.

But in the blink of an eye, Lucy activated her powers and vanished, taking Satsuki with her.

This was probably the reason why they’d chosen to hide in a place like this. Regardless of when we arrived, Yang knew about Harissa’s new spell. That meant there was no way he hadn’t considered the possibility of a surprise attack. And here in a coal mine, there were plenty of shafts, tunnels, and chambers. Someone who could teleport would be able to move about freely, and it would be nearly impossible for normal humans to chase after them. Thankfully, however...

“Harissa! Use your spell to follow Satsuki one more time!”

“Y-Yes, Sir Rekka!”

We could use Harissa’s new magic to track Satsuki as long as we needed to now. Of course, Yang knew that, too.

“Don’t let them!” he yelled in his loudest voice yet as he deftly slipped through Rosalind’s attacks.

That’s right. Harissa’s new spell, her connection magic, was going to be our trump card in this fight. We’d only been able to launch such a daring surprise attack because she’d been able to get us in here in the first place.

Normally when a hostage was taken, there was no way to confirm whether or not they were safe. Crime dramas often showed kidnappers getting the abductee to talk over the phone, but that could easily be faked with a recording. And the biggest problem with someone getting taken hostage was that you had to listen to the kidnapper’s demands in order to get them back. If this were a normal kidnapping, then we could have just called the police and let them handle it, but no. Our opponents were a group of psychics. The cops didn’t stand a chance against people who could do things like teleport.

But we had Harissa’s connection magic, which negated the upper hand the psychics had after taking a hostage. They’d never be able to hide Satsuki if we could always warp to where she was. That would be the make-or-break factor for us in all this.

“Oh! The ground is too firm...!”

Harissa was trying to draw another sending circle on the floor of the coal mine with the end of her staff, but the earth was too dry and hard for her to do it properly. In that moment of panic, someone broke through Iris and the other girls’ line of defense.

It was Ellicia. I called out to her, but she completely ignored me with a stern expression on her face. The girl who gave me the earring to prevent the Psychic Hazard in the first place was now trying to steal it back and cause it.

“Tch...!”

Conflicting emotions were surging in my chest, but I had to put all that aside to face Ellicia. She had the power to pass through walls. I wasn’t sure how it would be useful in a fight, but...

“Move!” Ellicia said darkly and reached out for me.

Was she going to throw me? Or put me in joint lock? A number of scenarios flashed through my head, but none of them were correct.

“What?!”

The instant Ellicia grabbed my wrist, my line of sight dropped by several feet. Looking around, I saw my lower body buried in the ground... Wait, what?!

“There’s another room below. In other words, this isn’t the ground—it’s a ceiling.”

Was that why she could use her wall walking power to make only my lower body pass through it? No, hang on... While it was true that this could be a ceiling depending on how you looked at it, it was still definitely the ground... Did that mean this wall walking power relied on the perception of the person using it? As long as Ellicia saw it as a wall or ceiling, she could pass through it? Come to think of it, Satsuki had once said that psychic powers weren’t techniques like magic, but rather talents with versatile functions. So this was just another one of those functions...

“Wah! Waaah!”

With me taken care of, Ellicia continued on to Harissa and snatched her staff

away.

“Giv’it back!”

Harissa tried to grab the staff back, but she was easily evaded. Even with Tsumiki, Tetra, Rain, and Mio helping, the result was the same. Fam was faster on her feet, but Ellicia instantly buried her like she had with me. Then she took Harissa’s staff and stuck it into the ground, too—or should I say ceiling? She thrust it so far down that not even the tip of it was visible anymore. And without her staff, Harissa couldn’t use her connection magic.

“It’s over. So you’d better not make any rash movements,” Yang declared.

“As if! It’s not over yet...!” Iris snorted.

“Hey.”

Ignoring Iris, who was still raring to go, Yang approached my half-buried self. Several of the girls moved to stop him, but I raised a hand to tell them to stand down.

“You should understand,” Yang said. “You can no longer confirm the safety or location of the hostage with the powers at your disposal. Now you have no choice but to go through with the exchange if you want your friend back.”

“You sure look proud of yourself, but I’m pretty sure you panicked for a moment there,” I replied.

“Whether or not it would go as planned was a gamble. You were our opponent, after all, a truly exceptional human capable of more than any psychic or mage.”

I’d never had one of my enemies speak so highly of me...

“That’s because he knows everything you’ve accomplished, remember? There’s no way he’s underestimating you as just some normal teenage boy,” said R.

She was right. Yang didn’t lower his guard for a moment as he glared down at me with his sharp gaze. Even with everything going his way, he wasn’t about to take that for granted.

“That spaceship can’t come this far. And in a space this narrow, you can’t use

your laser gun, and the monster woman can't transform. The mermaid's weather control is meaningless here, too. The vampire and mages are a bother, but... we won't be defeated in hand-to-hand combat," Yang muttered as though he was reconfirming that he'd crushed every single one of our options. "Do you have anything else?"

"Dunno. What do you think?"

"I can't believe there really exists a way to shield yourself against telepathy... I can't read your thoughts at all. Alien science... What utter nonsense," Yang spat, clearly annoyed.

For a moment, his calm gaze wavered.

"If only Earth's science had progressed that far..." he muttered to himself, sounding regretful about something.

"...?"

But before I could figure out what that something was, the hesitation in his eyes disappeared.

"Now hand over the earring already. You brought it, didn't you? Or did you hide it somewhere?"

"Maybe it's still with the Margaret clan?" I bluffed.

Yang scoffed in response.

"Hmph. If that were the case, you wouldn't have launched a surprise attack on your own. You would have teamed up with the Margaret clan instead."

That was fair. Yang seemed rather irritated at my evasive answer and kicked dust up at my face.

"Just spill it already. I don't know how you're blocking my telepathy, but if you're using an item, then we'll just strip you. If that doesn't work, then torture."

"No one wants to see a naked man, much less a naked Rekka. Blech," R said, sticking her tongue out.

Wasn't it enough to say "No one wants to see a naked man"?! Why did she

have to call me out personally?!

“If you don’t want to be tortured, then stop wasting my time and—wait...”

Crap! He’d realized that I was just doing what I could to buy time!

“Tch!”

Yang moved swiftly once he caught on. With a murderous look in his eyes, he reached for my throat. I could hear the girls screaming. And just as Yang was about to snap my neck...

“What are you doing with that young man?”

I finally heard the voice I’d been waiting for, and Yang went flying off to the side.

“Gwah!”

He spit up blood as he rolled along the floor. This time, the psychics were the ones screaming.

“Tch! Rekka, if you do anything rash, these girls will...!”

Ellicia suddenly pointed a knife at Mio, but—

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“?! ”

She too was blown back by an invisible kick. It was softer than the one that’d hit Yang, but it was still merciless.

“Guh... What was that?! ”

With a hand on his stomach, Yang staggered to his feet. Sensing their leader was in danger, the psychics gathered around Yang to protect him. One of them came to lend Ellicia a shoulder, and then the two of them joined up with the rest of their group. The battle was temporarily halted, so Iris and Rosalind returned to our side, as well. They helped pull out the others who’d been half-buried in the floor, and Lea gave me a hand, too.

“Harissa, that’s enough,” I said.

“All right.”

Harissa waved her dirt-covered staff, dispelling the invisibility magic she'd cast beforehand. Corona then seemed to appear out of thin air.

"Wh-What..." Yang stammered in surprise.

That much was to be expected. He had no idea who Corona was. Yang had relied on reading Satsuki's memories to find out everything about us and our team, but Satsuki—who had yet to meet Corona—knew nothing about her.

"I even brought the non-fighters on our team like Tsumiki and Mio to give the impression that we were all here," I explained.

Yang obviously knew about Harissa's invisibility magic, so if we'd left the non-combatants on the spaceship, he would have been suspicious and kept his guard up for anyone that might be invisible. We had to bring everyone in order for him to overlook that possibility. It was dangerous to get the normal girls to tag along with us, but they'd all agreed to it when they heard my plan. It was their bravery that had made this a success.

"It was checkmate the moment you assumed that I didn't have any invisible allies."

"What are you saying? I still have the hostage."

"Corona, could you go get Satsuki?" I asked.

"Gotcha."

Yang's face sunk in shock. Corona vanished from where she stood and returned a few seconds later... with a safe Satsuki and an unconscious Lucy.

"How did you track Lucy's teleportation?"

Only Harissa could follow her with her connection magic. At least at first.

"By overwriting the connection magic onto the earring and giving it to Corona, plain and simple."

Honestly, it actually wasn't plain or simple at all. We hadn't learned how to overwrite the magic in it from Nartessia, so figuring that out took quite a bit of trial and error.

"..."

Yang bit his lip as his expression twisted up. Surely he hadn't forgotten what the earring could do. But connection magic required a catalyst, an intermediary item, and most importantly, a sending circle.

It would have immediately been obvious what was going on if someone other than Harissa started drawing on the floor. If anything, it would be like advertising the location of the earring... as long as the user was visible, anyway.

But Yang had unconsciously disregarded the possibility of someone else using connection magic when he assumed that he could see all of my allies.

"Rekka... Thank you," Satsuki whispered in my ear. She kept her voice low, almost as though she could tell that this wasn't over yet.

"..."

And her intuition was right.

We had accomplished our main objectives for this battle, which were retrieving her and protecting the earring. But this wasn't the end of the story.

"Ellicia... and Yang."

I got the girls to stay back, and then I approached the psychics. Several of them stood ready to take me on, but Yang raised his hand as a signal for them to stand down.

"Will you stop the Psychic Hazard?" I asked.

Yang's face twitched.

"If possible, could you tell me why you wanted to do such a thing?"

"Why would you want to know that?"

"Yang, you know about my bloodline, right? Then you should know why. As long as they haven't met the worst possible endings yet, I want to bring everyone's stories to a happy resolution."

I shifted my gaze from Yang to Ellicia.

"And I'm caught up in Ellicia's story right now. As long as my blood still screams that she can be saved, I'll go out on a limb for even the slightest chance. I'll do everything I can to save her. No, that's not quite it..."

I looked back at Yang.

“No matter what my blood tells me, I’d offer a hand to anyone who needs saving.”

“...”

Yang and I made direct eye contact with each other.

“It’s impossible for you to save us.”

“Don’t decide that before you even let me try.”

I wasn’t about to let him give up so easily.

“Then let’s test you.” Yang stood up and wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth. “Stop blocking my telepathy. I’ll connect my comrades’ minds to mine, then I’ll show you all their memories. Experience for yourself the path we psychics have been forced to walk.”

Was connecting minds the same thing as Lea’s telepathy that let us share our thoughts with each other? So, he was going to gather everyone’s memories into his mind and then project them into mine... Okay, I got it.

“All right.”

I pulled my arms into the sleeves of my jacket, then took off the mind-shielding vest like it was just a sweaty undershirt.

“...You were serious?”

For some reason, Yang seemed surprised.

“Did you doubt me?”

“How many times do you think I’ve seen the truth behind human hearts? Words hold no value. But you...”

Could he be looking into my heart already? Yeah, that had to be it. Well, it worked out for me if he could tell that I was serious now.

“I’ve changed my mind,” he said. “I’m going to test you after all.”

“Hey, hey, now...”

What? Did that mean he was lying when he said he was going to test me just

a minute ago? Was he just planning on taking me hostage when I took off whatever I was using to block out his telepathy then?

“That’s right.”

“At least show a little remorse!” I snapped back at him despite the serious atmosphere.

“Sorry.”

“Apologizing straight-up is also a little...”

“I’m still sorry.”

“Argh, fine! Stop apologizing and just do it.”

Yang nodded silently and placed his hand on my forehead.

“...!”

The next instant, a giant wave of something deep and dark surged into my head.



Where am I? It’s pitch black.

Who... Who am I? What happened?

“Hey.”

Hearing that low, threatening voice in my ear, my vision cleared instantly.

“...Huh?”

Light returned to the world, and the first thing I saw was a large fist.

Slam!

“Gah!”

I heard a twisted scream. It took a moment for me to realize that it had come out of my own mouth.

“?!”

Violence I couldn’t understand. Loud jeers all over the place.

Why... Why was I suffering like this?

The answer immediately came to me via a scene that flowed through my brain as I was punched.

Yeah, that's right... The man before me stole food and alcohol from a street stall. He punched the stall lady when he was running away and broke her teeth. When I read that from his heart, I told him to go back and pay up. Then he got furious and hit me.

"Watch your mouth, brat!"

He kicked me in the stomach.

"I don't have any cash!"

He stomped on my foot.

"Don't go looking into people's heads!"

He grabbed me by the collar and threw me against the wall.

Finally, the man said, "That woman just had to leave behind a creepy brat and disappear..." and vanished from my sight.

That was the last I ever saw of him. That man was my father.



I was thrown away by my parents.

One day, I realized that I could walk through walls and surprised my mother by coming into the house without opening the door. After that, my mother avoided me. She only paid attention to my little sister. My father would feed me less during meals. When I tried to climb into my parents' bed, they'd hit me and throw me out. The only place I had to go was under the stairs.

Then one day, they tried to sell me to some shop. But before they could do anything weird to me, I walked through the wall and ran away.



Wh... What? Huh?

Suddenly, I remembered who I really was. Rekka Namidare. And once I got that sense of self-awareness back, I could look down and see my own body with clarity again. Yang had thrown me into the memories of the psychics, and now

their lives were flashing before my eyes at super high speed.

When Graham was young, he couldn't control his powers of spontaneous combustion and burned his entire family to ashes.

Ail became isolated after she saw her friend's secrets with her clairvoyance.

After being passed around her relatives due to her teleportation power, Lucy no longer trusted humans.

Then there was Stun, the telekinetic.

Yang.

Ellicia, too.

All of their memories that flowed into me were filled with so much anger, grief, and sorrow that it made me want to claw at my face and throat. Their memories started to mix with my own sense of self again.

What? Why? Why me? Me? Why this?

But eventually, all of their memories came together at a certain point. It was when Yang established the organization and gathered everyone together.

The organization did everything. Normal humans didn't stand a chance against a group of psychics. They took on work, using their powers to meet their clients' needs, and established a name for themselves in the underworld. The jobs they were given were always shady, always shrouded in darkness. They were forced to dirty their hands time and time again.



The torrent of memories suddenly cut off, and my vision returned to reality—the coal mine. I blinked several times... then looked at Yang, who was standing directly in front of me.

"Well?" he asked.

"..."

The things I wanted to say were on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't put them into words. Perhaps I was overwhelmed by all the anger, grief, and sorrow that had haunted their lives. Somewhere in my heart, I was even doubting that

a normal human like me could understand what they'd been through.

"That is the path we psychics have been forced to walk. Ostracized for simply being different, we've seen and done things none of us ever wanted to. But it was the only way for us to survive."

"..."

"Do you really think you can save us?"

I could feel the glares of not only Yang, but all the psychics behind him stabbing into me. I had to choose my words carefully.

"So, Yang, you're trying to cause the Psychic Hazard because you can't let go of the hatred you hold for the normal people who hurt you?"

"That's right." Knowing that there was no point in hiding that much, Yang gave a small nod.

I had seen Yang Danshey's memories from his childhood to the present, and there was a dark jumble of emotions constantly clinging to his heart. Hatred for his demon of a father. Hatred for his mother who'd abandoned him. Hatred for the strangers who looked down on him and his comrades. Being able to see the dark truths of people's hearts, Yang had suffered endless misfortune.

And it all added up, pushing him towards the Psychic Hazard as revenge. The seeds of hatred—each of those terrible memories—had taken root in him, entangling his heart so that it was no longer possible to pull them apart. The same was true for the other psychics that had gone along with Yang's plan. However...

"Within those memories you just showed me... It was faint, but I felt something like a warm light."

"Light?"

"It wasn't from a single person in particular, either. I'm certain I felt the same warmth in everyone's memories."

I thought Ellicia might know what that light was.

"Ellicia."

“What?”

“Why did you try to stop Yang at the cost of betraying the organization?”

“Huh...?”

“Your past is just as painful as the others’, right? So why did you choose to try and stop Yang instead of getting revenge?”

“Why? I...” Ellicia hesitated to answer.

The faint light in my head slowly started to take a distinct shape.

“Everyone wants the best possible happy ending for the story of their life. Whether you’re a psychic or not doesn’t matter. People reach for the light because they want happiness.”

“Happiness...” someone whispered.

“Ellicia, you wanted to protect that light, didn’t you? Because if the Psychic Hazard happened, that light would disappear.”

Ellicia wanted to protect something.

“What you were trying to protect was...”

I tried to express the vague form the light was taking within me in words, but then a violent red flash of light tore through everything with a roar.

“Gwaaah!”

Blown backwards by the impact, I helplessly rolled across the ground.

“Rekka!”

Someone ran to help me up. Blinded by the light, I couldn’t tell who it was. In a few moments, something warm wrapped around my entire body. When the pain slowly ebbed away, I realized it was Satsuki and Harissa’s healing magic. Thanks to the two of them, my vision eventually recovered... only to witness the tragedy before me.

The smell of burnt flesh and blood permeated the coal mine. It was far more intense than the memories Yang had just put me through. Half of Graham’s body was burned. One of Ail’s arms was gone. Lucy had a hole in her stomach. And Stan...

“Stan! Hey, Stan! Get up! Answer me!”

Ellicia was desperately yelling for her fallen friend to get up. The telekinetic who’d probably protected her had a large chunk of his back missing like it was gouged out.

“Hrgh...”

I couldn’t look at it any longer. Clamping my hand over my mouth, all I could do was hold back the urge to puke.

“Hello, my friends.”

The author of this tragedy appeared, a crowd of followers in tow. Everyone in the tunnel knew exactly who it was.

“Nartessia!”

“Hello there. I suppose it’s been a whole day since we saw each other last.”

With a maliciously cheerful smile on her face, Nartessia turned her contrary expression my way and waved. The greeting was completely inappropriate for the situation. She and her mages had just attacked the organization in cold blood.

“You!”

Howling like a beast, Yang launched his injured body at Nartessia. Before he could get to her, however, it looked like he hit an invisible wall and was flung backwards at several times the speed he’d been running. He smashed into the dirt wall that caved a little under his weight before he slid down it and hit the ground.

A number of the still-conscious psychics from the organization called out to him, but no one could go help him. That was how seriously injured they all were from the surprise attack.

Despite their proximity to everything, Satsuki and the other girls were completely unharmed. As the closest one to Yang, I’d taken a little bit of collateral damage, but it was a scratch compared to what happened to him and his people. Nartessia had clearly come to take out the remaining survivors of the organization.

“Nartessia! Stop it!” I shouted.

After Satsuki and Harissa healed me, I stood up and stopped Nartessia from approaching Yang any further. She was still creepily grinning.

“I almost had Yang persuaded! Please, Nartessia, don’t attack anymore!”

“Ha! Are you an idiot?”

“?!”

It was a pretty run-of-the-mill insult, but... what was that shiver that just went down my spine?

“They stole the Margaret clan’s treasure with the Fire Dragon’s Breath in it, you see. There’s no way you could understand how serious a crime that is in magical society. Heirloom magic is something very special that ancestors of a family have devoted their lives to studying and developing. Inheriting it is my pride and honor as a mage. There is nothing more valuable. I too must refine this magic and pass it down to the next head so that one day the Margaret clan can reach the ultimate truth of magic... Do you understand?”

The expression on Nartessia’s face suddenly flatlined. No, that wasn’t it. It was like the look in her eyes suddenly became inhuman. They were frightening. Empty. Just looking into them made my blood run cold.



“This is a war, you see. One that they started. Do you think you can just wave a white flag and ask for forgiveness after doing something like that? No, I’m afraid it’s not that simple.”

“Wait, then...”

By that logic, was she after us too for stealing the earring?!

“Ohoho, don’t be so tense.”

Nartessia smiled at my nervousness. She wore the same malicious sneer as before.

“When you took the earring away, it no longer held the power of the Fire Dragon’s Breath, remember? It was just some rubbish ability from the scum lying over there. While the earring itself is a fairly rare magical item, I’ll let you off the hook for making off with it.”

Nartessia patted my shoulder and glared over at the fallen psychics.

“After all, it was thanks to you lot proceeding with this that they were distracted enough for us to take them out so easily.”

“What? What are you saying?!”

That made it sound like we were working together with Nartessia! Don’t tell me she’d purposely let us go so she could use us like this...

Come to think of it, she was strangely calm when we fled the Margaret estate. She hadn’t done anything herself to try and stop us. Maybe she’d already planted a tracer or some kind of spell on us by then... We were completely set up!

“Damn it!”

Anger rose within me at the thought of being used, but Nartessia had always been mysterious and the Margaret clan mages were the dominant force here. Most of Yang’s side was already seriously wounded and down for the count. The girls and I were okay, but with Tsumiki and Mio to protect, we weren’t in a position to stop Nartessia. At this rate, I was just gonna have to sit here and watch as she ended the organization once and for all.

Surely there had to be something I could do...

I desperately racked my brain to try and come up with a way out of this situation. Nartessia just giggled, watching me while twirling her hair around her finger as if she knew that it was impossible.

“Now, I think it’s high time you returned that earring to me.”

I gave Corona a resigned nod. She silently handed the earring over to Nartessia with an unhappy look on her face.

“Ugh...”

Huh? Just now, in my head...

“Ngh... You...”

“You... Yang?!”

He’d been slammed into the wall by Nartessia just moments ago, but Yang, bloody and beaten, was trying to get himself back on his feet. Was it his voice I was hearing in my head? His eyes, filled with a burning hatred, locked onto me.

“You deceived me...”

“No! You’re wrong!” I yelled back reflexively.

Something was weird. Yang was a telepath. He could read minds, so he should know I wasn’t working with Nartessia. So why...

Suddenly, flames rose up right in front of me. I jumped back in surprise, but the fire was gone in an instant. But in its place, other fires started breaking out here and there throughout the mine shaft. Unnaturally, they didn’t seem to burn anything, and they too disappeared just as quickly as they’d appeared. Were they not real?

Nartessia couldn’t use fire magic, and nobody in either my group or Yang’s was doing anything. The flames that appeared at my feet weren’t even hot... That meant they had to be illusions.

“Whoa!”

But they still startled me. One broke out right next to me again, and I reflexively jumped to the side.

“Sir Rekka, is something wrong?” Harissa asked worriedly.

Could she not see the fire? I looked around carefully, and it only seemed to be me and the Margaret clan mages that had noticed anything. Hibiki and Rosalind were just standing there watching me with puzzled looks on their faces.

“Just what is this...?”

I was bewildered by how the phantom flames were gradually increasing in energy and clarity.

“Hmm, this is...” Nartessia murmured. She was the only one whose mouth was still turned up in a calm smile.

“Unforgivable...”

Hearing Yang’s voice echoing in my head again, the scenery suddenly changed.

“What?!”

I was no longer in the mine. The sight of what spread out before me was completely different.

Flames. Flames. Flames.

A crumbling building.

Burning. People and things. All on fire.

The whole world was dyed in the red hues of blood and fire.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“Nothing’s happening. It’s already happened,” Nartessia answered in a leisurely voice, apparently witnessing the same scene I was. “This is the memory of when my clan burned down their headquarters.”

“What?!”

“Well, I wasn’t present at the time, but... Look there. The one shooting fireballs over there is the same man standing behind me right now, see?”

It certainly did look exactly like the man she pointed out. So one was real and the other an illusion—past and present versions of the same person. And

according to Nartessia, this was what had gone down when the organization was destroyed. In other words, the one who was showing us this vision was...

“Rekka! What’s gotten into you?” someone suddenly called, grabbing my shoulders and shaking me.

“Shirley...?”

“You’re acting strangely. Are you all right?”

“I can see... fire...”

“Huh?”

“Yang’s memories are...”

Yeah, it was probably Yang’s telepathy conveying this vision. Just like how he’d shown me everyone’s memories earlier, but on a much larger scale. Shirley and the others couldn’t see it because of the jackets they were wearing. Corona had even given Satsuki one when she’d rescued her, so she couldn’t see it, either.

“Is his telepathy out of control?” Shirley muttered after hearing my response.

Out of control? Was that why he incorrectly assumed that Nartessia and I were working together? He could no longer see the truth with his eyes. The light no longer reached him. The only thing left in him was...

“Hate.”

Hate, hate, and more hate...

It all flowed into me with the fiery vision. Memories of comrades being killed. Memories of the home built from scratch being destroyed. I could feel all the torment and sorrow Yang had experienced.

But even with all that weight on his soul, the Yang I’d been talking to just before Nartessia showed up still had light in his eyes, however faint it was. It was within him, and within his comrades who’d survived these flames. He was trying to bring about the Psychic Hazard to get his revenge on the world... but he was still barely holding on for the sake of the comrades he still had left. There was still a part of him that wanted to reach for the light.

But now... seeing those remaining comrades being blown away before his eyes—or perhaps hearing from Nartessia that I'd betrayed him—he'd completely lost it.

“UOOOAAAAARRRRRRRR!”

He let out a vicious roar like a wounded beast.

“Yang! Get a hold of yourself!” I shouted “Yang!” Ellicia, who was unharmed, yelled along with me.

But neither of our voices reached Yang. His eyes, ears, and heart were a prisoner to the flames and hatred of his memories.

“My goodness, this is getting on my nerves.”

Nartessia glanced indifferently around at the scenery of Yang's mind and sighed. A cold light glimmered in her eyes.

“Nartessia!”

I went to try and stop her from making another move, but I felt someone's eyes fall on me and looked around.

I was surrounded by tragic images from Yang's memories brought on by his rampaging telepathy. It was hard to recognize the illusions from the real victims lying helpless and wounded on the ground. Among them was a woman, Lucy the teleporter, who was staring intently at me and Nartessia while pointing at us. It was... She was real. And so was the wound on her stomach.

“Oh?”

Suddenly, Nartessia raised a questioning voice. I glanced over to see her looking around in confusion, opening and closing her palm as though something was missing. If I wasn't mistaken, that hand was the hand Corona had just put the earring in...

Uh-oh.

Psychic powers were talents. They were versatile. So if a teleport power could move their body from one location to another... they might be able to move objects, too. Wait, that meant Lucy had the earring now!

I suddenly had a terrible premonition.

“Yang?!”

Someone was standing next to Yang, who was now short a hand after the explosion. The woman—Ail the clairvoyant, based on the memories I saw earlier—was reaching out to put something in his remaining hand.

“Yang... the rest is up to you.”

Ail opened her tightly clenched fist and handed the bloodstained earring to Yang. After fulfilling her duty, she collapsed to the floor, no longer moving. The phantom flames wrapped around her body, hiding her from view.

Did that mean... she overwrote the earring with her powers of clairvoyance? What she said before she collapsed... The reason the organization wanted that earring in the first place... And Yang’s rampaging power and emotions...

“Yang, no! Don’t do it!”

“Experience... my pain... for yourself...”

With those five words, the Psychic Hazard began.

Turning Point (July 27th)

Yang connected the minds of everyone with his telepathy. And once they were all connected, that meant people could freely read each other's thoughts.

Normally, minds were only connected to a certain extent in order to prevent too much information from being shared. Like how Lea's magical telepathy only shared the thoughts we wanted to send out. Like how Yang had specifically showed me only the memories of the past.

But with this, Yang connected people's minds without any restrictions or limits. Memories, thoughts, ill will, consciousness, unconsciousness. Everything flowed freely.

When Mio had experienced the Psychic Hazard in the future, she'd mistakenly assumed that everyone had been given Yang's power—in other words, that they'd all become psychic. It was easy to see why she'd thought that, but it wasn't quite the case. If people had become psychics, they would have eventually learned how to use and control their powers. But Yang was the one behind all this. He was controlling all of it, and he was the only one who could pull the plug on it. People had their minds connected against their will, and no one had the power to stop him.

Originally, this wouldn't have been possible. Yang could only connect the minds of people he could see. That meant, effectively, that his abilities were limited to line of sight—a fairly short range.

But Yang had used Ail's copied clairvoyance to extend his range to the entire world. As a result, everyone on the planet had their minds connected, and as expected, all hell broke loose.

That was the start of the Psychic Hazard. The catastrophic disaster Mio had experienced in her future was happening all over again. And Yang, the one who caused it all... was now dead.



A heavy gloom fell over the spaceship. It was like the very air we were breathing was dark and heavy.

“I think that when Yang used the clairvoyance to extend his power to the world, he probably couldn’t handle the amount of information flowing into his head at once. It likely burned out the circuits in his brain,” Satsuki hypothesized.

After initiating the Psychic Hazard, Yang had spurted blood from nearly every orifice and dropped dead on the spot in the coal mine. Satsuki used search filters to control the amount of information that passed into her brain when she used the Magic of Omniscience. But Yang hadn’t had any such protection.

Now he was dead, and we were left with the Psychic Hazard in the wake of it all. Even though the man who’d caused it was no more, the psychic connection couldn’t be undone. It was like he’d put a dying curse on the world.

Thankfully we were all protected by the psychic-resistant jackets Shirley had brought us... but she couldn’t have prepared them for seven billion people. Not even Rain, Fam, or Iris could do that.

I actually hadn’t been wearing a jacket when it all started, so I’d gotten a taste of the disaster in the initial fallout. There weren’t that many people in the coal mine at the time, but even then...

The anger and bitterness the psychics felt towards Nartessia.

The contempt and rage the mages felt over having their precious treasure stolen by the organization.

And the deep darkness I’d felt from Nartessia.

I’d only briefly suffered the effects of the Psychic Hazard, but I was never going to forget any of that.

“Ha! Is that all they wanted to do?”

Nartessia was the only one who’d been able to stay calm after what happened. Something was off about her. Even the other mages had gone mad and started screaming.

“Don’t be so afraid, Rekka.”

She amusedly smirked at me as I broke out in a cold sweat.

“Humans are quick to change and adapt. They can get used to anything. This fuss will all calm down eventually... Though I don’t know how much will be left when it does.”

With that, she gathered what she could of her people and departed, passing over everyone who’d already collapsed “from just this much,” she said. But it wasn’t just her own people she left.

“...”

I looked over and saw a girl curled up in the corner. It was Ellicia.

“...”

She was huddling with Yang’s glove and the earring clutched to her chest.

“You lot can keep the earring as something of a consolation prize to commemorate that man’s accomplishment. Our only objective was retribution, after all. And I’d say we’ve accomplished that,” Nartessia had said with a grin as Ellicia watched Yang breathe his last. “I’d kill you, too, but... you’ll remember the faces of your dead comrades forever, won’t you? They protected you from my magic and died in your place. For that, you’ll suffer. You’ll spend your days wallowing in regret and despair, and you’ll die on your own eventually. But you can’t kill yourself, you understand? If you do, their sacrifices will have all been in vain. Don’t worry. You’ll get to see them again. All humans die in the end. Have fun reflecting on your actions until death finds you.”

After Nartessia left, Ellicia had staggered to her feet and dutifully retrieved the earring from Yang’s lifeless hand. But nothing more. We took her, completely unresponsive, back to Shirley’s spaceship. Even as the calendar flipped over to the next day, she didn’t make a sound or move an inch.

“What shall we do now, Rekka?” asked R, the only voice on the otherwise silent spaceship.

What... What could I do? I didn’t have an answer. I just grit my teeth. Had I been too late again, just like when I couldn’t save Lyun’s little sister?

“R...”

“Yes?”

“Did Ellicia’s story come to a bad end?” I asked R weakly.

I was merely confirming the hopeless situation at hand, but...

“Nope. Ellicia’s still a heroine, it seems.”

My heart skipped a beat. Suddenly, I felt the strength returning to me.

“Really?”

“Oh, please, have I ever lied to you?”

“I... don’t think so?”

Her attitude was usually... Well, whatever. It was at the very least true that she’d never lied when it came to stories. Granted, she hardly ever told me anything at all. But if Ellicia was still a heroine, that had to mean there was still hope... But how?

As I was mentally going through the stories I’d gotten caught up in the past few days, I felt someone tug my shirt.

“Um, Rekka...”

I looked down to see Mio blinking back up at me.

“Can you... use my power?” she asked quietly.

“Your power? You mean your songs? It’s true that your singing helped Corona recover, but the Psychic Hazard is...”

“No, not that one... the time traveling one.”

My eyes went wide.

“I don’t know why I was able to return to the past... but if I could do it once, maybe I can do it again.”

“Aha!” I yelled.

I hadn’t thought of that, but it was the best idea I had right now.

“What’s wrong, Rekka?” Satsuki asked worriedly.

“Satsuki, there’s something I want you to look up!”

“Oh?”

I explained to everyone how Mio had traveled back in time from July 27th—the first July 27th, I should say, since we’d caught up to it now in the present. After that, I asked Satsuki to use her Magic of Omniscience to find out if it was possible Mio had some kind of time-traveling power.

“Here we go. Mio possesses a psychic space-time reversal power called ‘One More.’”

“Huh? A psychic power?”

So, Mio was also a psychic?

“I had no idea,” Mio muttered, apparently also surprised at this news.

“Psychic powers are essentially talents, after all. It’s completely possible to have one and not be aware of it,” Shirley explained. “If you don’t use it, you might never learn you had it. But it’s also possible that coming into close contact with other psychics powers triggered her latent abilities.”

“Other psychic powers?”

The first time around, Mio had been subjected to Yang’s telepathy in the Psychic Hazard. Was that what caused her dormant psychic powers to activate?

“But my knowledge on the subject is incomplete. I’ve only studied psychic powers in space. The abilities of human psychics on Earth may vary or follow different rules. As a local of this planet, what do you think?” Shirley directed her gaze to Ellicia in the corner of the room.

“There were some kids in the organization who had their powers awakened that way, yeah.” Ellicia, who had been dead silence until now, cast a sidelong glance at Mio and continued. “That girl... Probably her, too. It would explain why Yang didn’t kill her back then.”

“Back then? You mean in the vacant lot?” I asked.

When I saved Mio on July 20th, Yang had already made contact with her. And since she’d just come back from the future, she knew about Yang’s plans and the Psychic Hazard. With how hell-bent he was on it, there was no way he could

just let her go with that information.

“Now that you mention it, killing her would have been a lot less risky than sealing her memories... Although sealing her memories was pretty effective, too, I guess.”

But looking back on it, Mio had regained her memories little by little, so Yang’s seal wasn’t perfect. He likely knew that. So why had he intentionally chosen the riskier method?

“Yang... He drew a hard line between psychics and non-psychics. He never hesitated to put his life on the line for one of us.”

Huh...

“He said that psychic souls emitted a different wavelength than human ones. He could tell them apart by just looking into their eyes... so he would have known Mio was a psychic the moment he met her. That’s why he tried to save her even when he was pursuing me... but when he realized she could be a danger to his plan, he had to seal her memories.”

“So, that’s how it went...”

Why hadn’t Yang just killed Mio? Why had he even approached her while he was chasing Ellicia? I hadn’t thought about those things too hard, but now it made sense.

“But what kind of power is this ‘One More’ anyway?” Suzuran asked Satsuki with her head tilted to the side.

“It’s the ability to return one week into the past when your life is in danger. But you can only use the power once in your life.”

“Once in your life? So if you return to being your past self, you can use it again?” asked Tetra.

“Hmm... No. Once it’s used and you return to the past, it’s unusable again. I think it’s perhaps because Mio’s memories and consciousness are what returned, Mio is still herself, and therefore it’s the same lifetime for her.”

“That can’t be...”

Hearing that her power was already used up, Mio recoiled in horror. She’d

used it to return to the past from the “first” July 27th, and she wouldn’t be able to do it a second time. However...

“Guys, we still have Nartessia’s earring. Mio can copy her power into it so I can use it,” I said as I walked over to Ellicia.

Even though she was sitting in the corner away from everyone, she’d heard everything. She slowly raised her head as I approached.

“Ellicia, that’s the gist of it. I’m going to use it to return to the past and redo everyone’s stories, so would you mind lending me the earring?”

“Do what you want.”

Ellicia threw the earring at me as though she didn’t care about it or what I did with it. Picking it up, I started to worry about her indifferent attitude.

“I’ll definitely stop Yang and Nartessia this time. I’ll save your story, too, Ellicia.”

“You think you can do that?” Ellicia glared at me angrily. “You can only go back one week—in other words, to July 20th. The Margaret clan destroyed the organization headquarters that afternoon.”

“That’s true... but...”

Lyun’s sister also lost her life on the night of July 20th. I’d have to get to the spirit world and save her by then, too. And then there were still Mio and Corona’s stories...

“The organization stole the earring from the Margaret clan long before the 20th. Do you really think Nartessia would just withdraw quietly? Yang can’t be stopped, either... He wouldn’t even listen to me.”

It was true that there would be too much to do and too little time on the 20th.

Yang had told me about what was going on while we were in the coal mine. The organization’s headquarters had been destroyed, the Margaret clan was chasing after them, and they’d even kidnapped Satsuki... They were cornered and grasping at straws, so that was probably a spur-of-the-moment decision.

But even before all that had happened, Ellicia had tried to talk him down and

failed. Under normal circumstances, there was no way an outsider like me could convince Yang to stop the Psychic Hazard. However...

“Listen, Ellicia... Based on the conversation I had with Yang in the mine shaft, I think I have a real shot at stopping him if I return to the past.”

“Do you... really think so?”

I nodded fiercely. A single tear rolled down Ellicia’s cheek as she looked at me.

“Can you really save everyone? The organization... was the only place I ever belonged...”

I watched Ellicia hang her head in regret.

“It’s not like I didn’t hate the people or society that treated psychics so terribly... But the Psychic Hazard would only make things worse. The organization wouldn’t survive it unscathed, either.”

“That’s why you betrayed the organization and took the earring?”

“Yes...”

“It wasn’t for nothing. I’ll make sure of it.”

I kneeled down and hesitated for a moment... then hugged Ellicia.

“I’ll make sure Yang knows that, too. Do you have anything you want to say to him? I’ll return to the past and pass on your message.”

“I do... I have so much I want to say...”

With that, Ellicia started talking about her feelings. She told me what she wanted to say to Yang in the past in order to stop him for sure this time.





After making all kinds of preparations, I was now standing on the roof of a building holding the earring overwritten with One More. In order to activate its power, my life had to be in danger. I couldn't exactly ask my friends to attack me. When Mio had first used it, she was falling from the roof of a building—allegedly—so we decided to recreate that situation as best we could.

“W-Well, we’re going to leave now... You’re really, really sure you’ll be all right?”

“Yeah, thanks, Iris. Everything will work out.”

“O-Okay...”

With that, Iris took the other girls back to the spaceship that carried me here, which took off into the sky and eventually disappeared from sight.

“Are you okay, Rekka?” R asked once everyone else was gone.

“Haha, what? You think I’m afraid of heights?”

I tried to respond as cheerfully as possible in order to hide my fear. It was obvious what would happen if One More didn't activate when I jumped off the roof. However, if I'd had Iris and the others on standby for the worst-case scenario, my life wouldn't *really* have been in danger. The power likely wouldn't activate if I kept thinking that there would be someone there to catch me. That's why I'd had Iris and the other heroines retreat. I mean, it was the whole point, but the danger of this all now seemed very real.

“I keep hesitating, R, so could you like... give me a light push?”

“No can do. It would violate the stipulations of my mission.”

“Yeah, well, it feels like you’ve been awfully helpful lately, so I figured it wouldn't hurt to try my luck.”

“That's just your imagination. Please don't joke about things like that.” With one eye closed, R sighed heavily. “My actions are monitored by my superiors in the future. It's not an issue if I accidentally let something slip and you assume what you will from it, but there will be severe consequences if I help you on purpose.”

“Oh... kay?”

She seemed to be putting a lot of emphasis on the “assuming” part. Was she trying to say it was up to me to connect the dots? She did say something about severe consequences...

“Why don’t you just jump already? If you dawdle too much, it’ll become the 28th and you won’t be able to return to the 20th anymore.”

“Ugh... I know.”

It was still morning, so the date wasn’t about to change any time soon... but she was right. There was no point in wasting any more time.

“All right, here goes... Time for a little trip!”

I shouted loudly to encourage myself as I stood on the edge of the roof.

“Oh, God...”

Looking down, I got dizzy. We were *way* up there. I was the one who’d chosen such a tall building to make sure the fall would kill me, but I was regretting it a bit now. My stomach was churning.

“Rekka, one warning before you jump.”

“What, are you going to tell me that if I jump feet first I won’t die?”

“There you go thinking cowardly thoughts again. Don’t worry. At this height, you’ll be a pancake no matter how you jump.”

Well, that was a relief to hear... A pancake, huh? It wouldn’t be a problem if One More activated before I became minced meat... right? Right? Damn it, my legs were trembling.

“S-So? What’s the warning?”

I kept talking to R to hide my fear.

“It’s nothing certain, just something to keep in mind.”

“You keep beating around the bush... What is it?”

“Yes, well...” R took a deep breath. “Changing the past can mean taking on an unimaginable risk. Even if everything goes well, you should never let your guard

down.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s exactly as I said. Figure out the rest yourself,” R said and turned away with a huff, no longer responding to anything I said.

“All right, I got it. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Sighing helplessly, I looked down at the ground again. No matter how many times I looked at it, it didn’t seem any less scary. The cars looked like little ants...

“You know, I think I’ll jump feet-first after all...”

Still turned away, R let out a sigh.

Chapter 6: One More Try (July 20th)

Crap, the wind blew me upside down! I was falling headfirst! Oh God, oh God, oh God!

“AAAAAAAAAaaaaaaa... ah?”

The upside-down world suddenly turned right-side up, but the scenery before me had totally changed. I was at... my house?

“Sir Rekka, what’s the matter? You were yelling a lot.”

“Huh? What?”

I turned around to see Harissa standing in the doorway, peeking into the living room with a puzzled look on her face.

But... this all meant... I was alive, didn’t it?

“Ah, it was nothing, Harissa. I just remembered something scary.”

“I-Is that so?”

She seemed a little doubtful as she looked me over, but said nothing more.

“Then I’m going to go test my new magic.”

“Okay... Wait, huh?”

Did she just say her new magic?

“Hold it! Hang on a second, Harissa!”

Harissa stuck her head back into the living room when I called her name. She was holding her magic staff in one hand and the TV remote in the other. Seeing her like that, the fog hanging over my brain cleared, and I snapped to my senses.

That’s right... What was I wasting time for?

“Harissa, what’s today’s date?!”

“Huh? Um, it’s July 20th. I believe you mentioned summer vacation started

today, Sir Rekka.”

“The 20th?! All right!”

So the time travel seemed to have worked. It was worth the near-death experience.

If I recalled correctly... after Harissa tested her new magic, she came back in the room, and we chatted a little before I left for the bookstore by the station. I’d run into Mio and Ellicia on the way there. So if Harissa was about to go outside to test her spell, then I had roughly 30 to 40 minutes before everyone appeared in the vacant lot. There was no time to lose.

“Harissa, you don’t need to test your magic after all!”

“Huh? Um... B-But this new spell is important...”

“It’s fine. I can tell you that it’ll definitely work and you can cross between worlds with it. That won’t be a problem.”

“Huh? Oh, r-really? D-Did I tell you about connection magic already?”

Harissa had a very confused look in her eyes, so I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her lightly.

“Listen, I don’t have the time to explain everything right now! But please, come with me!”

“Oh...”

A look of understanding passed over Harissa’s face as she realized something was going on.

“I see. Yes, of course I’ll go with you.”

“Thanks.”

I thanked her and went to go grab my phone from upstairs. I was going to need the other girls, too. But when I set one foot on the staircase, I remembered something else important.

“Oh, that’s right! After everything is over, I’ll visit your village with you, so don’t worry!” I turned back and declared rather forcefully.

I hadn’t been able to keep my promise last time, but I would this time for

sure!

“A... Ahhh...”

I had probably said too much about the future with no explanation whatsoever. Harissa seemed a little confused again... But why was her face bright red?



After contacting Iris and Nozomiya, where Tsumiki and Lea were, Harissa and I hurried to the empty lot where Mio was collapsed.

“Mio!”

Pushing my way through the tall grass, I found Mio and got her sitting up.

“S-Sir Rekka, who is this girl?”

Catching up from behind me, Harissa looked between me and Mio in surprise.

“I’ll tell you later. Please use your healing magic on her, Harissa.”

“R-Right!”

Leaving Mio in Harissa’s care, I picked up my phone and made a call.

“Iris? Where are you?”

“At the station. Tsumiki and Lea are here, too.”

“All right. I’ll be there in a minute.”

I left the lot and headed to the station where the three girls were waiting.

“Sorry for calling you here so suddenly,” I said.

“It’s fine, but what’s up?” Iris asked.

“I don’t have the time to explain. Iris and Tsumiki, did you bring what I asked?”

“Yeah. Well...”

“It was so sudden, we couldn’t bring a lot.”

Iris and Tsumiki showed me bags they were carrying.

“So? What do you want us to do?” Lea asked.

“Yeah, give us a proper explanation. I had to leave the restaurant to Tetra for this,” said Tsumiki.

“Come with me,” I said, beckoning.

Unfortunately, I was serious about not having time to explain, so I took the three girls back to the vacant lot with me.

“Sir Rekka!” Harissa ran over to me as we approached.

“How’s Mio?” I asked.

“She’s a lot better now, but she hasn’t woken up yet.”

Harissa glanced back at Mio, who was now lying in the shade of a tree.

“Who’s that girl?” asked Tsumiki.

“The idol MIO.”

“M-MIO?!”

Tsumiki’s eyes widened in astonishment. She took a long, hard look at Mio’s sleeping form. She told me last time that she was a fan of MIO, but it was pretty hard to recognize her without her usual wig.

“Thank you, Harissa. So, Tsumiki and Lea...”

“Yeah?”

“What is it?”

“Sorry, but could you carry her back to my house? I just called Satsuki and asked her to go unlock the door for you.”

“Hmm... Well, all right. But you owe us an explanation later. A *real* one, got it?”

At times like this, having friends who understood my bloodline was incredibly helpful. As soon as I got serious, they knew something was going on.

“Thanks, you two. I’m counting on you.”

After seeing off Tsumiki and Lea, who had Mio on her back, I turned to Iris and Harissa.

“So, what do you want me to do?” Iris asked.

“I’d like you and Harissa to hide for now.”

“Hide... where, exactly?”

“In that pipe.”

“What?!”

Despite Iris’s very vocal complaints, the two of them heard me out and crawled into the pipe anyway. And once all the preparations were in place, I waited for Ellicia to arrive. Not ten minutes later...

“Hahh...! Hahh...!”

Just like one week ago, a clearly panicked Ellicia came running into the lot.

“Hey, excuse me.”

And like last time, I called out to her. I didn’t want to change her actions here, if possible.

“?! ”

“Is something wrong?”

Ellicia stared at me with a frown on her face.

At this point in time, she was probably thinking about how she wanted to give me the earring to protect it from Yang. If I said or did anything suspicious now, she’d probably just run back to the road. All I had to do was wait like a totally clueless passerby and... There we go!

“Stay put!”

“Huh?”

Ellicia walked towards me with broad strides as I pretended to watch her in confusion. I tossed a glance over to Iris, who was still hidden in the pipe. Ellicia grabbed me and dragged me towards the far back of the lot. She was going to escape with me by going through the brick wall there. That was her plan, but...

“Iris!”

I was going to change things up a little this time.

“Wh-What?!”

“I don’t know, either! But if this is what Rekka wants, then you’re mine!” Iris yelled as she jumped at Ellicia.

Not even Ellicia expected being attacked in a place like this. Iris managed to take her by surprise and restrain her without much trouble.

“A-Are you people from the Margaret clan?!”

She probably couldn’t think of anyone else who would try to capture her other than the Margarets or the organization, but I shook my head.

“No. You might not believe this, but I know about you and Yang and even Nartessia, and I know everything about what you’re trying to do and what’s about to happen.”

She looked aghast.

“I’m here to do something about it all... To resolve your story.”

And the only time I could do that was now. Here in this empty lot, before the organization was destroyed, the three main characters of Ellicia’s story would gather together. This was where everything would be decided.

“...Hm?”

Not long after, the second key player appeared in the lot—Yang. Seeing that we’d restrained Ellicia, he gave us all a very wary look.

“Yang.”

I called his name and took a step forward.

“Stop.”

I didn’t go any further.

“Who are you?” he asked skeptically. “How do you know my name?”

“Just look into my head if you want to know.”

Yang’s face twitched at being called out for his power like that, but he didn’t seem upset. He really was a calm and composed man.

“...Are you one of the Margaret clan?”

“Do I look like I know magic? No. I’m just a regular human who got dragged

into this mess.”

I continued speaking without waiting for a response, then took another step towards Yang.

“Stop.”

“No, I’m going to walk straight to you. If you want to stop me, go ahead. I won’t do anything to you.”

Yang furrowed his brow. He could probably tell with his telepathy that I was telling the truth. That I was going to walk straight up to him without doing anything. If he’d wanted, he could have easily taken me out right then and then. And I was prepared for that—oh, yup, then came the fist.

“Ack!”

The blow nearly knocked me out, but...

“Hrngh...”

I gritted my teeth and withstood it. Then came another blow, this time a kick to my knee.

“Guh...!”

This asshole sure didn’t hold back... My head was spinning. My vision was blurry. Everything was starting to go dark...

“...Ngaaah!”

I regained my balance just before I faceplanted into the ground.

My vision was coming and going... but so what? At this rate, not only everything in front of me, but Ellicia, Yang, the whole world... Everyone’s future would go dark. I had to hold out.

“...The future?”

I could faintly hear Yang’s perplexed voice past the ringing in my ears.

“Yes. I came here from the future.”

I raised my head and looked directly at Yang. Or tried to. My vision was still blurry.

“That’s nonsense.”

“Shouldn’t you be able to tell if it is or not?” I replied.

Yang fell silent.

So far so good... The first victory was mine. I was within arm’s reach of Yang, and he was willing to listen to my story. That meant we’d cleared the first hurdle for resolving the story.

“Yang, I know what you’re trying to do... and how it ends.”

Even Yang couldn’t hide his surprise hearing a declaration like that.

“Yang, just read my memories,” I said as I pointed at my forehead.

“...What?”

“The result of the Psychic Hazard you caused... Just look at it. It’s all in there.”

“...”

“What’s wrong? Just by putting your hand on my head, you should be able to see everything I know from the future. What do you have to lose?”

I realized that no matter how I couched it, what I was saying was the very definition of suspicious. However, I also knew that Yang could tell I wasn’t lying thanks to his telepathy. He was still probably too overly cautious to agree to do it, though...

“...Don’t you want to know how your comrades end up?”

“...!”

That was the last straw. Without a word, Yang finally reached out and put his hand on my head.

My memories from the future began flowing into Yang. The showdown in the coal mine over Satsuki. The exchange between us after that. And then... Nartessia and the Margaret clan showing up.

“No...!”

I could hear a gasp escape Yang’s lips. He’d probably just seen the moment his comrades were annihilated. But what I really wanted him to see came after

that. After that, when he lost control of his telepathy...

“What...?!”

When he showed me his memory of the devastated organization headquarters. The sight of all of his comrades disappearing into the flames... That was probably the tragic memory he was seeing right now.

“Ngh... ugh!”

Yang staggered backward, removing his hand from my head.

“That is what lies in your future.”

“That’s a lie... It can’t be...”

“You should know better than anyone that it’s not.”

Telepathy was a power that read information directly from the soul, not the electrical signals in the brain... or something like that. Okay, to be honest, I didn’t understand half of what Satsuki and Shirley had explained to me, but at any rate... The point was that not even a master con artist could tell a lie in their soul. What was held there was absolute truth. And while Yang’s power meant that no form of deception would ever work on him, it should also mean that he would be forced to recognize the truth when he saw it.

“Yeah, you might be a clever and composed guy. You probably planned your moves down to the finest detail before executing them...” I continued.

Two time lines ago—in the time line where Mio had used One More—Yang had pulled off the Psychic Hazard almost flawlessly. More recently, he’d killed himself trying to do it when he short-circuited his own brain. But two time lines ago, Yang had connected people’s minds successfully and told them all that the chaos he caused would spread across the world. In other words, something was different between the two attempts. He hadn’t been as desperate the first time around, and he’d been able to suppress the range of the clairvoyance to a manageable limit, meaning he could spread the Psychic Hazard as far as he wanted just by traveling the globe.

“But you know... no matter how perfect your plan is, something unexpected can happen at any time and ruin everything. In reality, last time you failed...”

“Then I’ll simply have to erase you here!”

“!”

Yang’s thick arm closed around my neck and lifted me up.

“Rekka!”

“Sir Rekka!”

I could hear Iris and Harissa yelling, but I raised a hand to try and tell them it was okay.

“Urgh...! Do you believe that the reason your plan failed... was because of me... and my bloodline?”

I had let Yang read my memories, which meant that he had to know about my bloodline now and what that meant. It wasn’t unreasonable to think that if I died here, there would be no one to get in the way, and his plan would go smoothly... Yes, that was a possibility. By eliminating me now, it was entirely plausible that things would play out like they had two time lines ago. But...

“Revenge... or your comrades? Which is more important to you?!”

“?! ”

But in the end, possibilities are only possibilities. The idea of failure always seems so remote. Without personally experiencing it, it was no different to an imagined fantasy. But what Yang had seen in my head had definitely happened. The threat of the Margaret clan wiping out the organization... That potential reality was far more persuasive than I could be.

“You can still make it in time! So stop your revenge plot before it costs you your friends! Listen to me, Yang!”

“Tch...!”

Thud!

Yang loosened his grip, which sent me falling to the ground. I coughed violently, wheezing for air. I-I thought I was a dead man...

“Rekka!”

“Sir Rekka!”

“Yang!”

Iris and Harissa ran over to me, and Ellicia ran to Yang.

“Yang... You probably didn’t read my memories to the very end, but I have a message for you from Ellicia in the future.”

“...Me?”

Ellicia was surprised to hear her name suddenly come up. Yang just stared at me silently.

“I understand the pain and hatred we psychics felt, and of course I understand the anger that you feel personally, Yang. Part of me wants revenge on the world, too, and it’s a desire I could no longer deny once I heard the organization had been destroyed.” I passed on Ellicia’s message, careful to repeat it down to the word. “But even so, Yang... I believe these words from the future me will surely reach you through Rekka, so I’ll say it once more...”

Last time, before she betrayed the organization, Ellicia had tried to stop Yang from going through with the Psychic Hazard. His heart was too set on revenge against the world, and he hadn’t listened to her. But now that he knew what he would be losing in the future for the sake of vengeance over the past, surely her words would pierce his frozen heart like a sharpened pickax.

“Yang, don’t destroy the future over the past. No matter how miserable our lives have been until now... I’m happy today in the here and now, living together with you and everyone else as part of the organization. I want to treasure that, treasure every day, and move forward towards a brighter future with all of you... End of message.”

After silently listening to Ellicia’s message, Yang clenched his hands into fists. The reason why those fists were shaking was probably...

“This is your last chance,” I said to Yang. “I know what kind of life you’ve lived. I won’t deny that the world deserves to be punished for what it’s put you and the other psychics through... But even so, if you choose to go down that path, I’ll have to stop you with all my might.”

Yang still didn’t say a word.

“But that isn’t because of my Namidare bloodline or some sense of justice. It’s to protect my life and everyone else’s.”

I wasn’t a hero. I was just a normal high school student. Really, I wasn’t out to save the world or anything that grand. I just wanted to protect myself and the people I loved, just like anyone would. That was what kept me going.

“So ask yourself this: does Ellicia’s wish to live peacefully with her comrades mean less than your desire for revenge on the world? What do you think, Yang?”

Yang looked away from me and towards Ellicia standing next to him. His clenched fists finally relaxed.

“Our comrades may die. I’m prepared for that... that’s what I said when you tried to persuade me to stop this.”

“Indeed.”

“...I was wrong.”

Ellicia looked shocked at his sudden apology.

“It was easy to talk about being prepared... I thought that I was. Lucy and Stan were earnest when they agreed to it, too. Their hearts were ready, so I thought that... But foreseeing the deaths of our comrades just now... I can only say that I wasn’t prepared enough.”

“But you don’t need to prepare yourself for losing anyone,” Ellicia answered as she looked into his eyes. “Children born with psychic powers may be unhappy, but that unhappiness doesn’t have to last forever. The powers we have, and the power we have as the organization... Shouldn’t we be using all that to find happiness instead of wallowing in misery?”

“...Find happiness, huh? I’ve never thought of that before.”

“Honestly, you’re reliable, but you’ve always been dense... Haven’t you ever noticed the way Lucy looks at you?”

“What...?”

Ellicia teased Yang, who was looking at her questioningly.

“Um, I don’t really get it, but is everything solved now?” Iris asked.

She’d agreed to help me without knowing the first thing about what was going on. Her question disturbed the calm that had started to settle over the lot.

“...It may be too late for that,” Yang muttered solemnly.

“What do you mean?” asked Ellicia.

“We’ve already stolen the Margaret clan’s treasure. They’d never let us off easily.”

Yang was right to be worried. I was very familiar with how merciless the Margaret clan was, specifically Nartessia.

“Leave the negotiations with Nartessia to me,” I said.

“Do you have a plan?” Yang asked.

“Technically, yes.”

I wasn’t sure if it would work, but...

“Oh, my, to think I’d find you in a place like this.”

The last main character necessary to solve Ellicia’s story finally appeared—Nartessia, the head of the Margaret clan. I had to stand my ground. I stepped in front of Ellicia and Yang to protect them.

“Oh? And who might you be?” Nartessia raised an eyebrow at me. “Are you a psychic of the organization, too?”

“I’m not.”

“Hmm... Then what do you think you’re doing?”

The crimson girl grinned my way. She seemed to be amused, but I couldn’t let my guard down. I knew just how fearsome the girl behind that smile was, and I had tasted her wrath firsthand.

“I’m here to stop the war between the Margaret clan and the organization.”

“...Really now?”

Her smile unchanging, Nartessia’s eyes narrowed. Her interest must have

been piqued by this stranger who knew the state of affairs between the Margaret clan and the organization.

“Let’s hear your name.”

“Rekka Namidare.”

“Rekka...That’s a nice name.” Nartessia complimented me with something of a threatening grin. “It’s true that it seems like you have nothing to do with the organization, but you don’t understand the serious crime they’ve committed by stealing my earring... If you did, you wouldn’t dare stand in my way.”

Ellicia and Yang silently listened as Nartessia spoke.

“So, tell me... what will you do, Rekka? How do you plan on stopping this war?”

Nartessia had once told me to highlight the benefits for all parties involved in negotiations. And I could only think of one thing that might get her to consider backing down.

“If the Margaret clan is willing to accept a ceasefire with the organization, then...”

“Then?”

“I’ll supply you with information on magic from other worlds.”

“Oh!”

Nartessia’s eyes went wide. It didn’t seem to be an act.

“A mage I once knew explained to me just how important heirloom magic is in magic society.”

Heirloom magic was passed down through generations of mages in a family, and they took great pride in it. In other words, it was like a precious family treasure. But Nartessia had also said something about wanting to refine the Margaret clan’s ancestral heirloom magic for the next generation.

“Unlike money or a regular inheritance, magic is constantly being researched and developed... The duty of the head of a magic family is to take heirloom magic to the next level before passing it down, so that one day you can arrive at

the truth of magic.”

“That’s right. It seems you know your stuff.”

Yeah, well, I learned it from you, technically...

“So, Nartessia, if you had knowledge of magic from other worlds, wouldn’t that open another door to what you seek?”

“Oh? I don’t recall giving you my name...”

Oh, right... I still hadn’t told her yet. Well, it wasn’t something I could hide from someone like her.

“I came here from the future. We’ve met before, and... Well, a lot happened.”

“So, you know a mage, have knowledge of magic from other worlds... and on top of that, you’re from the future? You’re quite an outrageous fellow!”

Nartessia laughed, spinning her parasol in her hands.

“If you don’t believe me, then... Harissa. Show her any of the magic spells from your world.”

This was why I’d brought Harissa along. Seeing was believing, after all. It would be easier to convince Nartessia if she could actually see this magic for herself.

“Oh? That girl is a mage from another world?”

“Y-Yes... I am.”

Harissa cowered under Nartessia’s gaze. Nartessia had yet to do anything scary this time, but it wasn’t hard to guess her true nature...

“Um, then... Ealim Nekram!”

Harissa disappeared from sight the instant her chant ended.

“It’s not teleportation... but invisibility magic?”

“Y-Yes,” said the invisible Harissa.

“While it’s not that interesting of a spell, the chanting pattern and activation circle are nothing like the ones I know...” Nartessia mumbled with a hand under her chin in thought.

Would she accept or not? Her decision here would determine the outcome of Ellicia's story. If she still said no, then...

"..."

In the worst-case scenario, we'd have to shake Nartessia off here and run away with Ellicia and Yang. Once we escaped, we'd take Iris's spaceship to the organization's headquarters and evacuate everyone before the Margaret clan attacked. Then we'd have to hand the psychics over to Shirley to hide them on another planet somewhere. Not even Nartessia would be able to hunt them down in space.

But that was all a last resort. There were still children in the organization. They shouldn't have to live their lives on the run away from their home planet. And to that end, I prayed Nartessia would give us a positive response.

Then at last...

"All right. I'll take you up on your offer, Rekka."

"Really?!"

My shoulders fell in relief.

"But I have several conditions."

"C-Conditions?"

"Well, it's hard to believe everything you said after seeing just one spell," Nartessia said with a laugh. "First, I'll have you perform the ritual for a magical contract with me, ensuring that you have to bring me information on magic from other worlds."

Perform a ritual for a contract? Like the one Satsuki performed for my duel with Messiah? Then it would be a demonic contract that was binding in a very literal way. If I recalled correctly, breaking it would rip your soul apart... Okay, so Nartessia wanted a way to make sure I wasn't lying and wouldn't run away.

"All right," I accepted.

"Good. Next, let's decide your time limit."

"Time limit?"

“I mean the time limit for you to bring me said information, of course. Without that, you could easily delay the delivery by a decade or two.”

I had no intention of doing something that underhanded... but I guess it was only obvious that Nartessia would be concerned about it.

“Let’s see... There’s Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto... Your time limit is three days. Bring me the information on magic from another world by then.”

She was totally going to go sightseeing while she was waiting! This girl... Anyway, three days, huh? It had taken six days to get from the Ruler’s Dungeon to the Demon King’s castle, but Iris’ spaceship was faster than Lea’s Leviathan form. There was even an autopilot so we could sleep on the go, so three days should be more than enough.

“Fine, three days it is. But Nartessia, you won’t be staying in the same place, will you? So how do I get it to you?”

“I’ll give you the details on the time and place later. If you call this number, I’ll come meet you.”

“So, you have a phone...”

“I do not. It’s the number of the attendant I brought along with me.”

She probably meant Chelsea.

“My last condition is for the organization’s members to stay confined to their headquarters until we meet again. If you miss the deadline and break the contract, I’ll burn everything down immediately.”

“...!”

Ugh, of course she would think of something like that, too... There would be no point to anything if the organization ran off while she was waiting for me.

“Can you exclude Ellicia from your last condition? I need her to bring back the information you want.”

Technically, I needed Ellicia’s wall walking ability to clear the Ruler’s Dungeon, but there was no reaching Aburaamu without getting through the underground labyrinth, so it wasn’t a complete lie.

“I suppose. You may include that girl in the contract ritual if you wish,” said Nartessia.

With the negotiations wrapped up, Ellicia returned the earring and I exchanged contact info with Nartessia. Then we performed the ritual for the contract. With that, there was no backing down from this.

“Then I’ll see you in three days. I’ll be waiting to hear good news, Rekka.”

With those parting words, Nartessia left. Once I saw her spinning red parasol disappear around the corner, I turned to Yang.

“Yang, please take the comrades you were chasing Ellicia with and return to your headquarters. I promise I’ll return from the other world within three days.”

“I leave the rest to you then.” Yang glanced at Ellicia, then looked back to me. “In the worst-case scenario... look after Ellicia.”

“It won’t come to that.”

Yang and I nodded at each other, then both headed our separate ways.

“Now, let’s hurry!”



Without even pausing to take a breath, we went straight to the Ruler’s Dungeon in the spirit world via Harissa’s connection magic. Our team was eight people strong this time: me, Satsuki, Iris, Harissa, Tsumiki, Lea, Mio, and Ellicia. I wanted to bring Hibiki and Rosalind, too, but they lived pretty far away, so meeting up with them would have taken a while. We were in a race against time, so I brought everyone who could gather immediately. There were other reasons why I limited our numbers, but we’ll get to that later.

“Wow, it really is like an underground dungeon...” Tsumiki was the first to speak up as she looked around the ornately decorated stone room.

“So, where’s this Corona girl you mentioned?” Satsuki asked.

Before we came, I gave everyone a rundown on the time traveling deal and what our objectives would be in the spirit world. Thanks to that, they already knew what we were up against and what we’d be doing from here.

“In the room back there! Everyone, follow me!”

Hero’s Sword in hand, I led the girls to the far room. Just like before, Corona was sealed in the stone dais.

“All right! Now I’ll just use the Hero’s Sword to...”

“Wait a moment!”

“Gwah!”

Satsuki whacked me on the head as I moved to release Corona’s seal.

“Wh-What are you doing?!”

“Corona’s obviously naked under there! What do you think would happen if you release the seal like that?!”

“This isn’t the time for that...”

“Wait, this is your second time coming here, isn’t it? Don’t tell me you came charging into this room knowing she was naked!”

“That’s not... Argh, there’s no point to this! Someone else release the Corona’s seal with the sword, then! I’ll wait outside!”

“I shall,” Lea answered as she stepped forward.

I handed her the Hero’s Sword and left the room.

“That was quite the amusing skit.”

“Shut up.”

I grimaced bitterly at R’s teasing. Honestly, I wasn’t trying to get a look at Corona’s naked body. Really. I was just in a hurry. In a rush. That’s all.

“Actually, Rekka... Considering your efficiency, you really must have come here from the future.”

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot to ask, but do you have any memory of the 27th, R?”

“Who knows? I can’t answer that.”

“Not that again...”

It was about what I expected, though. But there was something behind R’s

words that sounded a little like concern... Did it have something to do with what she said before I jumped?

“Changing the past can mean taking on an unimaginable risk.”

Even though she couldn't tell me whether she had her memories or not, R was still the same girl she'd always been. I told her I'd come back to the past to change the future... It wouldn't exactly be strange for her to be a little worried about that.

But unimaginable risks, huh? I had to wonder what. Everything had gone smoothly so far. I hadn't expected Nartessia to demand a time limit, but that wasn't a problem with Iris's spaceship. Yeah, everything was going fine... but for some reason, I kept getting this nagging feeling in the back of my mind that I just couldn't shake.

“Rekka, we're done.”

Satsuki gave me permission to go back into the room with Corona, who was already dressed and awake.

“...Who are you people? Why do you have that sword?”

Corona's eyes were locked on the Hero's Sword, formerly known as the Demon Blade while it was in her possession.

“My name is Rekka Namidare. We don't have much time, but in short...”

It wasn't exactly easy to summarize a story that involved hero successors, time travel, and the end of the world as we knew it, but I did my best.

“...So, you're saying you know who I am, and you saved me anyway?”

“Yeah, that's right.”

“...”

Corona lowered her head with an uncertain expression. Last time, she only told us that she was the former Demon King after we'd been through thick and thin together. Bringing it up immediately like this may have been a little inconsiderate, but time was ticking, and we couldn't stick around here much longer.

“Corona, this all may seem rude, considering what your intentions were when you were sealed here. But...”

I offered her my hand.

“Whether you’re a former Demon King or a former hero, the Corona I know cherished her ally Pastel and was nearly drowning in her own loneliness... You’re a normal girl, and one of my heroines.”

“...!”

“So, please, take my hand. If you want to atone for your past sins, I’ll help you out. Please let me save you, Corona.”

“You... No, Rekka...”

Corona hung her head, hesitated for a few moments, then nervously looked up... And grabbed my hand.

“Thank you,” I said. Then I turned back to everyone else. “Now, let’s get out of this labyrinth already!”

Our escape route would be the same as last time—straight through the ceiling. Everyone would hold on to Ellicia, then we’d go straight up with her wall walking power. We couldn’t use Iris’s spaceship or Lea’s Leviathan form for fear of destroying the dungeon and burying ourselves alive in a collapse. Considering the number of people we had with us—and this was one of the reasons I’d wanted to keep it low—I had Satsuki and Lea use flying magic to lift us all, but...

“Rekka, aren’t you clinging to Ellicia a little *too* tightly?” Satsuki asked.

“Look who’s talking! You’ve got your arm around his waist! There’s no need for that, is there?!” shouted Iris.

“Wouldn’t it be better for Rekka to hold Ellicia’s ankles?” Tsumiki pointed out.

“But then I... um... I’m wearing a skirt, so...” mumbled Mio.

And on they went...

“I don’t mind where he touches me,” Ellicia said, trying to put an end to it.

But...

“We do!”

The other girls were immediately opposed.

“...I’ll wear a blindfold and hold her ankles. Will that do?”

Somehow, that managed to appease everyone. Then we all got into position and grabbed on to Ellicia.

“Won’t this be too much weight for me to move...?” Ellicia asked skeptically.

“Once the flight magic activates, the effect of gravity will be negated completely. You won’t feel the weight at all,” explained Satsuki.

“I see.”

Ellicia sounded relieved.

“All right. Ellicia, Satsuki, Lea... Let’s do this,” I called out.

Satsuki and Lea cast their magic on everyone, and our feet lifted up off the floor.

Once we got going, we saw the same scenery as last time. A hundred floors of underground labyrinth steadily passed by us and, before long, we reached the surface.

“So, this is the spirit world...” Harissa looked around at the green landscape, whispering to herself.

I knew her relationship with spirits was complicated, but now wasn’t the time to dwell on that.

“Iris, can you bring out your spaceship?”

“Yup, yup!”

Iris opened her shoulder bag. Thanks to the wormhole technology it used, she reached in and pulled out exactly what I asked her to.

“Wah!”

“It’s a real spaceship...”

Mio and Ellicia both were both rightfully stunned to see a spaceship for the first time.

“All right! Hurry up and get in, everyone!”

We all climbed aboard and set off. Our destination was the valley overrun by Ghostdemon sickness and swarming with zombie fairies: Windsong Valley, where Lyun and her sister lived.



Ghostdemon sickness caused those infected to attack sources of mana on sight, so we couldn't send just anyone into the valley. I took Iris with me, and we descended in search of Lyun and her sister, who were running around the forest right now.

"So, where are they?"

"Satsuki checked before we came down and said they're towards the southern side of the valley. But they're being chased by zombie fairies, so they won't stay in one place for long. Let's hurry!"

We could have stayed in contact with Satsuki through Lea's telepathy and tracked them in real-time, but having spells cast on us would have just made us targets for the zombie fairies.

Iris and I ran through the valley overgrown with trees, heading south. That was the only clue we had to go off of. The physical abilities of an Earthling and a Fineritan didn't even compare. I never would have been able to keep up with Iris under normal circumstances, but I was desperately moving my legs just as fast as I could.

Memories of last time lingered in the back of my mind. The sound of Lyun's screams. The tears in her eyes when she told me I didn't make it in time...

"This isn't good, Rekka! The sun's almost gone down!"

"Iris! Leave me and run ahead!"

"How about I carry you on my back?"

"What are you going to do if your hands are too occupied to save Lyun's sister?! Forget about me! Let's split up!"

"...Fine!"

Iris nodded with a serious look on her face, then took off at full tilt.

“Man...”

There was honestly no way I could match her speed like that. But that didn't matter. I had to try! I never even had the chance to try and save Lyun's sister last time. I'd gotten to come back thanks to Mio, but this was it. My last chance to make things right. I was determined to save her this time!

Which meant, of course...

“Wah!”

That I had to go and trip! Damn it!

“Ow...”

I groaned and pressed a hand against my forehead, which I'd bumped in the fall. Fortunately, it seemed like my only real injury was a sprained ankle from tripping over that tree root, but this was really going to set me back...

“Hm?”

Why were the zombie fairies looking over there? Actually, it was hard to tell which way they were looking when their eyes were completely red, but for some reason, they were all facing the mountain summit. I looked towards the mountain, too, but it was too dark for me to see anything. That should have been true for the zombie fairies, too... Wait a sec.

“These guys go after sources of magical energy...”

But magical energy was usually stored inside the body, right? That was why Harissa seemed to glow when she used magic. She was tapping into that energy. If it were constantly active, then she would sparkle all the time... So did that mean they'd spotted Lyun?! I couldn't know for sure, but they weren't looking in the same direction that Iris had gone.

“Oh no!”

Hedging my bets, I took off in the direction the zombies were looking. With the sun going down, the woods had gotten pretty dark. I didn't know exactly what time Lyun's sister slipped. She'd only told me that it was on the night of the 20th. But that could be any second now...

“Eek!”

Wait, who was that screaming?! Should I call out to them?! No... Everything would be ruined if they got scared and ran the opposite way.

I desperately ran towards the voice. I was almost completely out of breath at this point. And my vision was only getting worse in the darkening forest. I lost count of how many times I nearly tripped again, but I caught myself every time and pressed on.

Before long, I arrived at a clearing in the trees. Grateful I didn't have to actively avoid tree roots here, I ran up the slope. Not a few seconds later, two girls appeared at the top of the hill.

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

Lyun and I both reflexively came to a stop at the sight of each other. But before either one of us could say anything...

"Oh!"

The other girl—most likely Lyun's little sister—slipped when she came to a stop and lost her balance.

"When we were running, she slipped on a slope and hit her head on a tree stump."

What Lyun said last time flashed through my head.

"!"

I didn't even have the time to yell anything. I immediately broke into a sprint and headed for the bottom of the slope Lyun's sister was tumbling down.

"Gah!"

Lyun's sister was small like Lyun was, but her rolling into me at full speed felt like getting hit by a cannonball. I'd braced my legs for the impact, but that didn't stop me from flying backwards. At this rate, we were both gonna hit that tree stump!

No, I couldn't fail here!

"Fnnnggghhh!"

I kicked my leg out behind me towards the tree stump and cushioned our impact as we slammed into it.

“Aaaaah!”

The foot I kicked the stump with was throbbing like crazy. The force of two people falling at once was no joke.

“Uwah!”

“Kyah!”

Unable to stay on my feet any longer, I fell on my butt while still holding Lyun’s sister to my chest. She let out a little squeal.

Ow... I hurt my back falling against the tree stump.

“Sophie!”

But nothing else mattered once I saw Lyun running towards us.

“Sophie! Sophie!”

“Sis...”

“Thank goodness! Are you all right?!”



Lyun hugged her sister, completely unconcerned that she was basically still sitting in my lap.

Whew... I managed to protect them this time. Both of them.

“Um... Thank you.”

“No, it’s nothing.”

I waved my hand and stood up.

“Rekka!”

That was when Iris appeared in the clearing from the opposite direction. She’d probably chased the zombie fairies in a circle...

“Aaagh...”

“Hurrgh...”

“Rrrgh...”

Which meant that the zombies were here, too.

“Iris, we’ve saved Lyun and her sister. Let’s get outta here.”

“Leave it to me!”

Now that Lyun and her sister were safe, the rest was easy. A large horde of zombies was trying to surround us, but with the press of a button on Iris’s warp watch, we were out of the valley in a flash. From there, we took Lyun and her sister back to the spaceship.

“Huh? What? What is this place?”

“Look, sis! The walls are shiny too!”

The siblings were extremely confused over suddenly finding themselves aboard a spaceship, but at least they were alive. I was finally starting to feel relieved, but...

“Rekka, Corona is in trouble!”

The next problem was upon us already. Satsuki led me to one of the spaceship’s bedrooms, where Corona was on the bed struggling to breathe. Fortunately, I knew how to deal with this, too.

“It’s all right, this is the same as last time. Corona will get better if she hears Mio sing.”

“Really?” Harissa, who was caring for Corona, let out a sigh of relief.

I then asked Satsuki to bring Mio over.

“Mio, I’m sorry for asking so suddenly, but could you sing for Corona? We need your song.”

“My... song?” Mio hesitated, her voice wavering at the sudden request.

“Yes, please.”

“...”

“What’s wrong?”

“Well... um...” Mio mumbled.

Looking at her, I realized the hand she was holding to her mouth was quivering. Was she scared?

“Mio? Are you okay?”

“U-Um... Yeah, I’m all right...”

Mio stood next to the bed and tried to sing, but the only sound that came out of her mouth was the chattering of her teeth.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“I’m... I’m sorry.” Trembling, Mio shook her head.

What in the world could be wrong? Confused at how strangely she was acting, I patted her on the back. I was trying to calm her down, when suddenly...

Thud!

“Sophie?!”

I turned back to see Lyun’s sister on the floor, panting for breath.

“Snap out of it, Sophie! Get up! Please!”

“What?! What’s wrong?!” I asked.

Lyun looked up at me with tearful eyes.

“It’s Ghostdemon sickness.”

That was a shock.

But now that I thought about it... the two of them had been running around the valley for a while now. It was possible they’d contracted the disease and the symptoms just hadn’t manifested... until now.

“You can purge the infected mana from the astral body, right?! Won’t that work?!”

“No! Sophie doesn’t have much mana to begin with! She can’t purge any more than this!”

“S... Sis...” Sophie called out weakly.

If memory served, Ghostdemon sickness worked by wearing away at your material body until you couldn’t move before it gradually ate away at your astral body. Sophie had collapsed and couldn’t move, but that at least meant her astral body hadn’t been taken over yet.

“So if we can restore her mana, she’ll be okay, right?!”

As long as she was still in her right mind, all we had to do was restore enough mana for her to be able to purge the infected part without putting her in any danger. I turned around to Tsumiki.

“Tsumiki! You brought your dark matter, right?!”

“Huh? Yeah. You told me to bring some when you called, so I filled up a whole tupperware container with it.”

“Go get it! And cut it up as small as possible!”

“R-Right!” Tsumiki rushed out of the room to fetch her bag.

“Rekka, what are you going to do with the dark matter?” Lea asked me with a curious look.

“We discovered that dark matter restored mana last time. In fact, it works so well that it’s hazardous for a normal human, but it’s fine for species that can handle large amounts of mana. Like you and spirits.”

From what Lyun had said, it didn’t sound like Sophie had anywhere near the

amount of mana Lea or the Demon King had. We'd have to give her as little dark matter as possible...

I was worried, but we placed Sophie on the bed next to Corona and waited for Tsumiki.

"Sophie..." Lyun muttered her sister's name as she held her hand.

It was a little worrying to have someone else collapse after Corona, even though we had a plan to counter it.

"Mio, you still can't sing yet?"

Mio's song had a special power that could do more than just alleviate the sickness. It instilled peace in the hearts of all who heard it. If she would sing for us, we could probably calm this whole situation down a fair bit.

"G-Give me a moment..." Mio said, taking deep breaths.

Even her exhale was shaky... It wasn't like this last time. She'd sung for us several times in the spirit world. What had changed?

"...!"

That's right... Her memory. This time, Yang hadn't sealed her memories. That meant she still remembered everything about the Psychic Hazard and about being pushed off a roof before traveling back in time. She couldn't remember most of her memories last time, and never remembered the last moment before being pushed. And... R's words resurfaced in my head.

"Mio's been carrying a story with her from the moment she met you at that empty lot."

Mio had escaped the catastrophe of the Psychic Hazard the moment she traveled back in time. The only thing she'd brought with her were her memories. The current Mio couldn't read hearts through telepathy anymore. Yet even so, my bloodline still drew me to her... Just what was her real story about? If I couldn't figure that out, I wouldn't be able to get her a happy ending.

"Rekka... H-Hold my hand..."

"Sure."

I took Mio's outstretched hand. It was still trembling. And it probably would be until I resolved her story. But for the time being, I held her hand gently to try and keep as much of her fear at bay as possible. And it seemed to help a little. Mio then closed her eyes and slowly started singing. Her voice wasn't particularly high-or low-pitched, and it was slightly shaky, but it began filling the room and seeping into my heart.

Before long, everyone who had been so restless before was captivated by her song. Corona, Sophie, and Lyun... their expressions softened as they listened.

Thank goodness. All that was left was to give Sophie the dark matter... or so I thought.

"What..?" said Sophie in a daze. She suddenly sat up in bed as though nothing had happened.

"Huh?" We all gasped a little at the suddenness of it.

"...Hm?"

Corona opened her eyes after hearing Mio's song, too, but I'd expected that. Wait, this wasn't good... Why had Sophie recovered like Corona had?

"Sorry for the wait! I brought what you asked for... Huh? What's wrong?"

Tsumiki ran back into the room, a little out of breath. After looking around, she sensed the strange atmosphere that had fallen over us and cocked her head to the side.



"...So, Corona is also suffering from the Ghostdemon sickness?"

"Yes, that's how it seems. According to the Magic of Omniscience, they're both afflicted with the same illness."

"So, that's what it was..."

Thinking back on it, Corona's symptoms had included fatigue and a fever so high she was barely conscious. It was the same as the early stages of Ghostdemon sickness. If the two of them had the same condition, then that would explain why Mio's song had healed them both, but something didn't add up.

“Mio sang in Windsong Valley last time, too, but it didn’t cure the zombie fairies... How come?”

“Corona and Sophie still have control over their minds, but the valley fairies were zombies like you said, right? Maybe that’s the difference?” Satsuki theorized.

So, even here in the spirit world, it seemed early detection made a huge difference in someone’s prognosis.

“Who cares?! More importantly...!” Lyun raised her voice and grabbed Mio’s hands tightly. “Please! If your song can heal Ghostdemon sickness, hurry and save the valley...!”

Her request was reasonable, however...

“Ah... uh...”

Mio looked at their hands and whimpered. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead, and her breathing quickened.

“...”

Did Mio have an extreme phobia of singing...? It really seemed like she hated singing in front of a crowd. She seemed to be really troubled last time, too, like when we were on the run from the Spirit King’s many pursuers. Thinking back on it, she wasn’t happy about having to sing to attract the zombie fairies in Windsong Valley, either...

“Come on! Please!” Lyun begged.

But Mio’s song was the only way to cure Ghostdemon sickness. I could tell she didn’t want to sing, but we couldn’t just disregard Lyun’s desperate pleas to save the valley... What were we supposed to do?

“Rekka...” Satsuki whispered.

“Yeah, I know.”

And on top of everything else, Nartessia had given us a time limit. While Iris’s spaceship had saved us time so far, we still didn’t have any to waste. Should we save Windsong Valley from Ghostdemon sickness here and now? Or should we leave, deliver the Aburaamian magic to Nartessia, and solve Mio’s story first

before returning to the spirit world and dealing with the problems here? Considering the time limit we had, it'd be better to go to Aburaamu and stock up on Red Threads to return to Earth, but how would we convince Lyun?

"Rekka, Rekka! There's a big problem!"

Suddenly, Iris came running into the room in a panic. She was supposed to be flying the ship.

"What's wrong?"

"Just come with me!"

Iris forcefully grabbed my hand and dragged me to the bridge. Seeing her panic, everyone else followed.

"There! Look at that!"

Iris pointed at the monitor. Windsong Valley, where we'd just escaped from, was displayed on the screen.

"What?!"

A massive swarm of zombie fairies was currently flying up and out of it.

"No way! Where are they going?!" Lyun looked as pale as a ghost.

"Wh-Why...?"

Had they gone on the move because their only remaining targets—Lyun and Sophie—weren't there anymore? But if that was the case...

"Why are they all heading in the same direction?"

Ghostdemon sickness took over the minds of their victims, turning them into zombie-like creatures whose only desire was to consume mana. They shouldn't be able to coordinate with each other like this if they weren't actively following something. So why did it feel like someone was commanding that swarming mass like a hive mind? Moreover...

"Lyun, the direction they're flying off in... That's the direction of the capital, isn't it?"

"Huh? It... Yes, it seems like it."

Were the sickened fairies headed to the capital because someone had willed them to? I had an absolutely terrible premonition about this...

“Lyun, we’re going to head to the capital first.”

“Huh?! But what about the valley?!”

“I have a really bad feeling.”

The fairies and spirits with Ghostdemon sickness would still get up again after being hit with Lea’s water magic. They weren’t easy to take out. Getting more information about what these spirits were up to became our immediate priority. The mana spring had dried up, causing Ghostdemon sickness to run rampant. If this was happening all over the spirit world, then...



We headed to Arbast as fast as Iris’s spaceship could carry us, and we arrived in the capital by sunrise the next day. We were met with an unthinkable scene—the sky above the city was like a thick black fog of sickened, berserk spirits and fairies, and on the ground, the city was surrounded by an army of demons.

“What’s going on...?” I muttered, dumbfounded.

Lyun was completely at a loss for words.

We flew straight for the Spirit King’s palace in the center of the capital to try and get some information. After the spaceship touched down, we grabbed one of the spirit soldiers panicking in the palace and asked him what was going on.

It was the worst possible scenario.

The fairies and spirits afflicted with Ghostdemon sickness were being controlled... by a Demon King invading the spirit world.

Chapter 7: Dancing Thoughts on the Wind

War had suddenly broken out between the spirit and demon worlds.

“What...”

The situation was so unexpected, I couldn't even work my mouth properly after finding out. I was struggling to think clearly.

Don't tell me... Was this the “unimaginable risk” R had mentioned? Even if it was, all-out war was way too over the top...

“How did the war start?”

As I was still rendered mute, Corona questioned the spirit soldier in my place.

“How would I know their reasons?! Maybe a new Demon King was born and decided to attack our lands! Just like that sealed Demon King did long ago!” The spirit soldier snapped irritably.

Meanwhile, the “sealed Demon King” herself was thinking calmly.

“What about the gate...?” she asked.

“What?” the soldier stammered.

“You have to open the gate to get from the demon world to the spirit world. What happened to it?”

“It's been opened, obviously! That's why the Demon King's army is attacking us!”

Uh-oh... We had to pass through that same gate to get Pastel's ring from the demon world, so if the Demon King's army was coming through it right now, then we wouldn't be able to return to Earth with what we needed. Nartessia had given us a time limit of three days. We'd already used one getting this far, so we only had two days left. In those two days, we had to travel from here to the Demon King's castle, and then to Aburaamu to visit the magic research facility and steal some magic books... All the extra time we'd saved by using Iris's spaceship was gone in an instant.

“All right. I get the picture.” Corona glanced over at my troubled self before turning back to the spirit soldier. “You. Lead us to the Spirit King immediately.”

“Huh?! What are you...”

“Hurry up. We know how to cure those being controlled by Ghostdemon sickness... And who was responsible for all of this.”



The spirits were extremely wary of a group of outsiders like us at first, but fortunately, we had Lyun and Sophie with us. Once they explained how their Ghostdemon sickness was cured, we were granted an audience with the Spirit King.

“So, Corona, what did you mean before? You said someone was responsible for this?”

“If it were just the drying of the mana spring and the spread of Ghostdemon sickness we were dealing with, it could have been written off as a natural occurrence. But those afflicted with Ghostdemon sickness attacking the capital at the same time the Demon King’s army is invading through the gate... That cannot be a mere coincidence. *Someone* planned for these two events to overlap. That’s why I deduced that the Demon King’s army is the one using Ghostdemon sickness to control others.”

“That’s strange. The Ghostdemon sickness is just an infection that turns fairies and spirits into zombies, right? How can someone control that?”

“What if the cause of the Ghostdemon sickness wasn’t an infection?”

“Huh?”

“In other words...”

Just as Corona was about to answer me, the Spirit King appeared in the parlor with several guards in tow.

“I’ll explain the rest to everyone,” Corona said.

She stood up and faced the Spirit King. We all hurried to do the same, but the Spirit King raised a hand to tell us it wasn’t necessary.

“Please leave the greetings for later. We don’t have a moment to lose right now. I left my subordinates in charge just to come hear what useful information you may have. I ask that you make it quick.”

“Your Majesty! Um, there’s a method to cure the Ghostdemon sickness...!”

“Wait.” Corona interrupted Lyun’s rushed words. “That comes later. There’s something more important you need to know first. It’s about the one behind this war.”

“Who?” The Spirit King looked at Corona doubtfully.

“The soldier we met just now said the Demon King’s army was attacking in an attempt to take over... Is that what everyone here thinks?”

“That’s right,” the Spirit King answered.

“On what basis? How did you determine it was the Demon King’s army?”

“Their army is composed of species with the same characteristics as the demons described in the legends of old. But the most conclusive evidence is the fact the gate between the spirit and demon worlds is open. Only myself or a Demon King could have opened it. Why do you ask?”

“I was making sure there were no errors in your judgement.” Corona answered the Spirit King calmly, then leaned in to whisper to me. “My territory is being watched over by Eskro, who’s pretending to be me, is that right?”

“Y-Yeah.”

I had explained the current situation in Corona’s lands to her when we’d saved her from the underground labyrinth and asked to borrow Pastel’s ring. Why was she double-checking that now?

“Spirit King, I have no intention of fighting. Don’t act rashly once you see my true form.”

“...What?”

Black flames suddenly engulfed Corona, eventually burning away to reveal her in all her glory as the Demon King.

“You! Are you the Demon King?!”

The Spirit King's guards seemed to sense something menacing from her, and they moved to surround her immediately.

"Hold it!"

At the Spirit King's order, the soldiers froze.

"Y-Your Majesty?"

"Those sinister horns and tail and that extraordinary aura... It's true this is a Demon King, but this one means no harm."

After the confused soldiers backed down, the Spirit King turned to Corona once more.

"Well, then... What have you come here for?"

Despite recognizing Corona's lack of animosity, the Spirit King's face was stern as he confronted the Demon King.

"I'm glad to see this generation's Spirit King is also sensible."

A bitter smile flashed across Corona's face for a moment, but it was soon replaced with a serious expression.

"I am Zaia Gardendos Corona, the 197th head of the Zaia clan, one of the three royal families of the demon world. I once invaded the spirit world with my brethren before I was defeated and sealed in the lowest floor of the Ruler's Dungeon."

That declaration got several of the guards' hackles up, but the Spirit King held up a hand to tell them to stand back, then motioned for Corona to continue.

"I only left the dungeon yesterday. The Zaia throne cannot be succeeded without the proper rites, so Zaia is currently without a king."

Wait, Corona was lying just now. Last time, she said she had 25 siblings who could have inherited the throne after she was sealed. But it was true that the Zaia throne was essentially vacant right now. Eskro—one of Corona's underlings—was using illusion magic to do what he wanted in her place, so there was no real king... But it would have been weird for Corona to know that since she was only released from her seal yesterday, so she made up a story to go with it. Because...

“This means that the Demon King who opened the gate and invaded the spirit world is from one of the remaining two families.”

That was her conclusion. I was starting to see where Corona was going with this.

“Furthermore, I have a fairly good idea of which of the two royal families it is... Rekka.”

“What is it?”

“Tell the Spirit King about your lineage, and explain how you and I were heroes in Aburaamu, too.”

“R-Right.”

I told the Spirit King about my bloodline and how I defeated the Demon Overlord in Aburaamu with Harissa’s help. When I mentioned that she was a sorcerer from Aburaamu, Lyun and the spirit soldiers all gave Harissa dirty looks, but I squeezed her hand to reassure her.

“Your story is hard to swallow, but let’s suppose it is the truth. What do you make of this situation?” asked the Spirit King.

“It’s all very simple, Spirit King. The overlord that I once fought and sealed in Aburaamu and the overlord that Rekka fought mere months ago are one and the same: the Demon King of the Baran family, one of the three royal families of the demon world.”

“...What?!”

That dragon demon with several forms... was actually a Demon King from Corona’s world?!

“Wait a minute, that can’t be right! Why was a Demon King in Aburaamu? Shouldn’t he have been stuck on his side of the gate?!”

“The Baran family specializes in summoning magic—dimension-crossing magic, to be precise. He used that magic to travel to Aburaamu and tried to take over their world.”

“Now that you mention it... he was summoning armies all over the land and causing chaos.”

The Demon Overlord I defeated *was* sounding an awful lot like what Corona was describing...

“I don’t know how he broke the seal I put on him... but after he came back, he attacked Aburaamu again by summoning his demon followers. Which means that after he broke free of the seal, he regained his status as the Demon King of Baran. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have been able to resume his invasion. But after that, he was defeated a second time by Rekka a few months ago.”

“Is there any possibility of another Demon King emerging after his defeat?” the Spirit King asked.

“There is, but the fight for the throne is a bloody and brutal one. It would be impossible to have a victor in just a few months’ time.”

“Then—”

“Yes, the one behind all this is most likely from the last royal family—the Demon King of Sahab.”

That was apparently who Corona suspected was behind all of the events happening in the spirit world.

“That’s not enough information,” said the Spirit King. “How is the Demon King of Sahab controlling the fairies and spirits with Ghostdemon sickness?”

“The king I knew several hundred years ago was very passionately researching dark magic. He believed he could achieve world domination by mastering the dark magic that only Demon Kings can use. On top of that, he had the worst personality. I hated him the most out of all my fellow demons,” Corona spat out bitterly. “There’s one thing I’d like to ask, Spirit King.”

“What is it?”

“Once, when I invaded the spirit world long ago, a strange sickness spread through my army... a sickness that made moving painful and drained the magic in the body. It slowed my army quite a bit, but fortunately, a strange sickness spread through the spirit world at the same time, so we were able to avoid huge losses.”

“...!”

“I don’t know the name of that strange sickness, but... could the Ghostdemon sickness in the spirit world now be the same thing that spread through my army several hundred years ago, carried into this world when the demons attacked?”

“You’re right,” said the Spirit King, confirming Corona’s suspicions.

“Ghostdemon sickness probably originated from dark magic that the Sahab family created, not a natural infection. The fact that no one realized that until now means it’s been modified quite carefully... The dark magic was probably spread to coincide with my invasion in a highly contrived plot to weaken the spirit world. The Zaia family territory may have been targeted, too.”

Corona explained her theory about the Sahab family’s dark magic. Basically, there were three new traits to the magical sickness that the Sahab family had developed.

The first was that it drained magical power. And this affected everything—fairies, spirits, demons, and even mana springs.

The second trait only affected beings with astral bodies, like fairies and spirits. It took over their minds once their mana was completely drained. They would then attack those who were unaffected, and would spread the sickness even further.

“And the third effect is that those fairies and spirits with their minds compromised can be freely controlled. The ones attacking the capital as we speak are probably being controlled by the Demon King of Sahab.”

“So, that’s how it is...!”

The drying of the mana springs, the spread of Ghostdemon sickness, and the invasion of the Demon King’s army... All of it could be explained with Corona’s theory about another Demon King using dark magic to create the Ghostdemon sickness.

“But... why now? There are still areas around the capital that haven’t been affected by Ghostdemon sickness, and the Spirit King himself is still healthy,” I asked. “No one knew that the Ghostdemon sickness was caused by that Demon King of Sahab, so why did they choose to start a war now?”

At an especially troublesome time for us, no less.

“About that...” Corona mumbled hesitantly, “It’s probably your fault.”

“M-Me?!”

I was so surprised that my voice cracked. Every eye in the room was on me.

“Judging by the effects of the Ghostdemon sickness, the Sahab family’s main target was the spirit world itself. Demons still have ridiculously strong bodies even without magic. They might have an advantage in a battle, but there would still be great losses fighting against magically inclined creatures like spirits. The Sahab family probably created the Ghostdemon sickness with the intention of weakening the entire spirit world before striking.”

“I got that, but how is it my fault...?”

“Rekka, do you remember when you healed the Ghostdemon sickness of that sylpheed there?”

That was actually just a stroke of dumb luck, but looking at the situation objectively, I suppose it would seem that way, yeah.

“The Ghostdemon sickness is key to Sahab’s plans to take over the spirit world. The fact that spirits can rid themselves of the disease by purging the infected mana wasn’t a problem, since that would still lower the overall mana in the spirit world. But the plan would all be ruined if a genuine cure was found.”

A cure for Ghostdemon sickness...

“You mean...!”

I gasped and I looked down at the girl clinging to my waist—Mio.

“The Ghostdemon sickness was probably made to magically inform the Sahab family when someone with Ghostdemon sickness was cured unnaturally.”

In other words, there was a magic alarm on it...

But Corona seemed to be slightly off. She’d said “when someone with Ghostdemon sickness was cured,” and based on what I knew, it couldn’t be just anyone. More specifically, it had to be a spirit or fairy. Corona didn’t know it, but last time, her Ghostdemon sickness was healed by Mio’s song, and that hadn’t set off a war.

What the main reason for that was—whether demons just didn't count, or if the alarm was only triggered on denizens of the spirit world—I wasn't sure, but that didn't matter right now. The problem was that this time, the Demon King of Sahab had realized something was up, and had started a war as a result. So now the clock was counting down to that as well as our deadline to meet up with Nartessia. Honestly, this was the worst possible situation.

"I understand your story so far. However..." the Spirit King said, then gestured to the soldiers around him to prepare an attack.

"What?!"

"Do you have any proof you're not working with this Sahab Demon King? I will not be convinced so easily without evidence."

Corona had been sealed in the Ruler's Dungeon until yesterday. It was literally impossible that she'd been the one to open the door between worlds... is what I wanted to say, but that wasn't exactly evidence. It's not like I had anything to prove it. If this went anything like last time, even if we told them we weren't servants of the Demon King, they wouldn't believe us.

Just then, a lone soldier came running into the parlor.

"Your Majesty! The western barricade has been breached! Please send reinforcements immediately!"

It seemed this worst-case scenario was only getting worse... We didn't have time to pick a fight with the Spirit King!

"It... would be difficult for me to give you evidence I haven't colluded with the Demon King of Sahab here and now. However, I can prove it to you."

"And how will you do that, exactly?"

"Spirit King, you're more troubled by the fairies and spirits controlled by Ghostdemon sickness than you are the Demon King's army right now, no? You don't want the sickness to spread through your army, and you certainly don't want to kill your own people. Am I wrong?"

The Spirit King frowned at Corona's points.

"That's where this comes in... Rekka, my sword, please."

“R-Right.”

I handed the Hero's Sword to Corona. When she unwrapped the cloth around the blade, the spirits started to mutter restlessly.

“That's...!”

“Since you know what it is, I'll skip the explanation. My sword has many advantages in a magic battle. It can neutralize, drain, reflect... and even seal magic.”

“Oh...!”

Last time in Windsong Valley, Corona had shot something out of the Hero's Sword when she swung it at the attacking sylpheeds, neutralizing them harmlessly.

“I'll use my sword to seal the astral bodies of those affected by Ghostdemon sickness so that they can't move. Then, Mio can use her song to cure them.”

“...What? A song? What do you mean? Can the Ghostdemon sickness be cured with that?”

Singing didn't seem to be a part of spirit culture, judging by their clueless expressions. The soldiers all questioned Corona with confused looks on their faces.

“This girl here is Mio. She can cure the Ghostdemon sickness by singing her song.”

I lightly put my hand on her back to get her to step forward, but she clung tightly to my waist and refused to move.

“Your Majesty.... this girl really can cure Ghostdemon sickness.” Lyun, who had been listening silently until now, spoke up.

“Is that true, sylpheed girl?”

“Yes. My sister and I were both saved from the Ghostdemon sickness by her,” Lyun said, placing a hand on her Sophie's shoulder.

Hearing it directly from another spirit seemed to lend a great deal of credence to Corona's story. The Spirit King's serious expression unwound a little.

“I have but one question, Demon King Corona.”

“What is it?”

“As a Demon King that once threatened the spirit world, why are you helping us now?”

“...A fair question. But it’s a long story, and now is not the time.” Corona took a few seconds to find the right words, then continued. “To put it briefly... I simply want to return the favor I owe the previous Spirit King for sparing my life.”

“I see. Then...”

The Spirit King nodded and started to speak, when all of a sudden...

“...Guh!”

A thin, black, needle-like object pierced through the center of his muscular body.

“What?!” everyone gasped.

“To think I’d be hindered by this girl once more...”

An unknown voice echoed through the room, and the black needle in the Spirit King dissipated into smoke that gathered together to form the shape of a skull. When it did, the king collapsed to the floor. Was this smoke the same as the black fog we saw looming over the capital when we arrived? The smoky black skull that took up over half of the room glared at Corona.

“That unpleasant voice... Is that you, Grausam?” Corona asked warily.

The unpleasant voice laughed haughtily as if to confirm her suspicion.

“Hey, who’s Grausam?” I asked.

“The previous head of the Sahab family I mentioned earlier. I’m surprised he’s still alive after so many years.”

“I could say the same about you. I thought for sure you’d have bit the dust after being sealed underground by the Spirit King for hundreds of years. Tch...”

The skull—Grausam—clicked his tongue in distaste. Echoing the sentiment, Corona did the same.

“You’ve sure made some dramatic changes. I recall you looking more like a washed-up old bat in the past.”

“Hmph,” Grausam scoffed. “This is the result of my research.”

“I see your new form didn’t change your personality at all. Now, what did you do to the Spirit King?”

“...So, you’ve seriously taken the spirits’ side, have you? Have you lost your pride as a demon?”

“I’m no benevolent figure myself; I just never liked your prejudiced ways.”

As Corona continued to bicker with Grausam, she signaled for me to stand back.

Things got pretty dire the moment the final boss showed up. There were too many noncombatants on our side. We had to evacuate them while Corona bought us time.

As we gradually inched our way back, Grausam opened his skull mouth again.

“You want to know what I did to the Spirit King? It was nothing fancy. I simply injected the Ghostdemon sickness directly into his astral body.”

“What?!”

So now Grausam had control of the Spirit King?!

“The Spirit King won’t be controlled so easily! Hurry and get Mio before he can...!” Corona cried in a panicked voice.

But Mio’s grip around my waist tightened painfully. Her face was white as a ghost.

“Hey, are you all ri—”

I was trying to ask Mio if she was okay, but before I could finish my sentence...

“I won’t let you!”

Black fog flooded into the room from the window and headed straight for us. Was this stuff controlled by Grausam, too?! It was totally aiming for Mio! Based on the timing of his entrance, there was no doubt he’d overheard that her song could cure Ghostdemon sickness. That had to be why he was attacking like

this.

“I’ll destroy you!” shouted Corona.

“That’s my line,” sneered Grausam.

The spirit soldiers had received the same direct dose of Ghostdemon sickness the king had and attacked Corona, who was brandishing the Hero’s Sword.

“Tch!”

She sliced through the spirit soldiers’ magic, but their constant stream of attacks kept her pinned down. Grausam took that chance to come after us.

“I won’t let you hurt Rekka and the others!”

With a valiant yell, Lea fired a spear of water at Grausam’s skull. The water spear shattered the skull into pieces with a shrill sound, but the black fog immediately regrouped to form the skull again.

“A non-spirit shouldn’t be able to use such strong magic...! But it’s a pity for you that it has no effect on this body!” Grausam roared and used his black fog to attack us from every direction.

“Rekka!”

Ellicia pulled Tsumiki close with one arm and reached out for me with the other.

“Here!”

I grabbed her hand and—realizing what she was trying to do—pushed Mio forward so that Ellicia could grab onto her, too. The next thing I knew, all four of us were sinking through the floor.

“Mio!”

I knew Ellicia’s ability was going to drop us on the floor below, so in order to protect Mio, I held on to her and landed on my back to break her fall... And damned if it didn’t hurt!

“Hurry and get up! We have to run!”

“R-Right!”

My back was killing me, but we'd really be killed if we didn't run. So the four of us ran for all we were worth until we found a small storeroom to hide in.

"Hahh... hahh... hahh..."

The three of who weren't used to being so active were completely out of breath from running just that short distance. The only one who seemed to be totally fine was Ellicia, who was used to a rough life in the underworld.

"What about... hahh... Satsuki and Harissa...?"

"I don't know... but Iris and Lea were there, so they should be fine."

I sure hoped so. Corona was there, too, and having fewer people to protect should make things easier for her. Ellicia had escaped with the three of us who weren't much use in a fight. But that didn't mean we were just going to hide and wait for things to end. We still had something we needed to do.

"Mio."

When I called her name, she started a bit and shrank to the floor. She was as pale as ever. I really felt bad for asking her to do things in this state, but... there was no other option with things this bad. She had to do it.

"Mio, please... Will you sing?"

"Right... here?"

"No, to the fairies and spirits with Ghostdemon sickness. We have to do something about the Spirit King, too, but first we need to do something about the fairies and spirits being controlled by Grausam."

"..."

"I'll have to take you to the front lines. It'll be quite dangerous, but we'll protect you... So, please, Mio, will you save everyone and sing?"

Mio didn't answer. She just hugged her own trembling body. It didn't seem like she was scared of Grausam or going out onto the battlefield, though...

"Mio."

I called her name for the third time. But this time, I wasn't going to ask her to sing. I was going to get to the bottom of her story.

“What happened on the roof?”

She jumped a little again.

“Last time, you told me you were pushed off a roof. In the end, you never recovered your memories of the incident, so I don’t know what caused it... but it’s probably the reason why you want to quit being an idol, isn’t it?”

Tsumiki looked shocked to hear what I said, but Mio only continued to quiver silently. Her memories on the whole were pretty vague last time, but she definitely said that she wanted to quit being the idol MIO. And the reason for that... was also the reason she was so afraid to sing now. This was all a gut feeling, of course, but I had faith in my hunch.

“I... I... After you saved me, we were running through the city in the chaos of the Psychic Hazard.”

Slowly but surely, Mio started to tell her story and recount her memories from two time lines ago.

“There were so many people in the streets, so we entered a building... We went to the roof to try and figure out what was going on.”

Yeah, I could picture that. I’d already seen the way the city looked in the chaotic aftermath of the Psychic Hazard, after all. I wondered what was going through my mind when I looked down on that disaster two time lines ago...

“We’d gotten separated from Tsumiki at the concert hall... You saw her from the roof and said you’d go get her. You asked me to wait for you... And that’s when he came.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know his name. But because of the Psychic Hazard, I could read his heart and I could tell that he was one of my fans. He... asked me who I’d just been with. He probably meant you. I tried to answer, but... before I could, I heard his inner voice...”

“...”

“I had no idea... I had talked to fans before and thought I knew what kind of idol I was, but... I didn’t know my fans looked at me in that way. He didn’t care

about my songs at all. He just wanted to do things to me... and I was so, so very scared...”

Mio hid her face behind her knees and recounted the moment tearfully.

“It seemed like he picked up on my fear... And he got really angry... He cornered me on the roof, and then...”

“He pushed you?”

“Yeah...”

“I see...”

What the hell? Why would he push Mio off the roof? Wasn't he a fan? Didn't he like her? Why would he want to hurt her? Surely this was ultimately the reason Mio was so terrified of singing. She'd seen the true nature of the people she was singing for.

Reality was always different from fantasy. Yang had a change of heart when he was confronted with the inevitable reality of his friends' deaths. But when Mio faced the reality of how her fans felt about her during the Psychic Hazard, she'd closed off her heart and shut down.

One thing was clear for sure now. This was the truth of Mio's story. R had said that Mio succeeded in escaping the Psychic Hazard the second she traveled back in time, but her story was much greater than that. The Psychic Hazard had traumatized her. And since returning to the past didn't erase her memories, naturally that trauma didn't disappear, either. Living with that would be the bad ending for Mio's story that I had to prevent.

But how was I supposed to heal the heart of a little girl who'd been traumatized by the darkness she'd seen in other people? It would've been nice if we had a counselor in the group, but it was just me, Tsumiki, and Ellicia. None of us had that kind of expertise. That was why...

“I don't normally listen to music, and I haven't been to your concert before... but I think your singing is amazing, Mio. It's like your voice reaches straight to the heart. This probably sounds corny, but when I heard it, I really thought, 'Ah, this is what an angel's voice would sound like.'”

I tried to find the words to express how I really felt. The only way to restore her faith in people was with honesty.

“There’s a power in your song, a power that touches people. I believe that’s why you were able to break through Grausam’s dark magic. Won’t you use that power for everyone? Just like when you healed Corona and Sophie.”

“R-Rekka...” Mio stuttered. “Y-You’re the one that saved me... s-so I can trust you... b-because I know you truly wanted to help me.”

Come to think of it, Mio and I had our hearts connected by the Psychic Hazard two time lines ago. What happened back then was probably why she was clinging to me now. She was relying on me because she’d seen the inside of my heart and knew she could trust me.

“But... not other people... They’re scary... I’ve seen what they’re like on the inside, and even though I can’t read their hearts anymore... I’m terrified because I don’t know what they’re thinking now.”

What should I do? How could I help Mio get back on her feet? I’d gotten caught up in her story, the story of an idol who was too traumatized to sing anymore. But it was her inability to sing and continue as an idol that was causing her misery and despair, right?

If she really wanted to quit being an idol, then she could just quit singing. My Namidare bloodline wouldn’t have gotten me involved. If that was what she wanted to do, then it wouldn’t be a bad ending.

But she clearly wasn’t happy with things as they were. That meant Mio’s happy ending had to be her continuing as an idol. She wanted to keep singing. Now and far, far into the future.

“...Being unable to understand people’s hearts is normal, you know.” After listening to our conversation so far, Ellicia spoke up. “Unless you’re a psychic, of course. People weren’t meant to understand the inner workings of each other’s hearts. So you don’t need to be worried about something you weren’t meant to understand.”

Mio looked up at Ellicia.

“I’ve had my psychic powers since I was born, and I’ve suffered a lot for it. I

hated it, too. The suffering you're going through now, the dark side of people... I've seen it all before. People show their bad sides more than they do their good. But that's natural."

"That's... natural?"

"Yes. It's normal for people to have a dark side. But having a dark side means there's a light side, and that's normal, too."

Mio's eyes went wide.

"It might be hard to believe in people after you've been betrayed. But if the whole world was really that bad, it would have destroyed itself by now. Yang wouldn't have had to lift a finger." Ellicia softly patted Mio on the head as she continued. "You believe in Rekka, right?"

"...Yes."

"Then how about you try believing that there are still other people like him in the world? You've been around a lot of people as an idol, right? Do you think each and every one of those fans wanted to hurt you?"

"..."

"U-Um...!" Tsumiki cut in. "I-I've always been a fan of MIO. I heard your debut song on the radio and thought it was amazing that you were the same age as me, so I've always looked up to you until now, and... and..."

"Tsumiki, calm down."

I patted Tsumiki's back as she started to stumble over her words.

"Shut up! I am calm!"

Tsumiki slapped my hand away and took a deep breath before looking straight at Mio and continuing.

"I just want you to know that you have fans like me who have always liked you for your singing! Sure, there are some people who act rudely at concerts... but not all of them are bad!"

She grabbed Mio's hand with both of hers and squeezed it, desperately trying to get through to her. To get her to believe.

“Mio...” I called out to the cowering girl once more. “Why did you want to become an idol, Mio?”

“Because I loved to sing... and... because I wanted to shine. I wanted to be as brilliant as the idols I saw on TV. That was my dream.”

Mio’s words came tumbling out. I listened intently to what she had to say.

“Because of the Psychic Hazard, you saw people’s true selves. And it was a disappointment. It was different from what you imagined it would be.”

“...Yeah...”

“But not all of your fans are like that, right? There are more fans like Tsumiki who really love MIO and MIO’s music.”

“Yeah...”

“I said this at the start, but I’ll say it again. There’s a power in your singing. Even if someone wasn’t interested in your singing... On the off chance that someone like that actually existed, your voice would draw them in anyway!”

I clenched my hand into a fist to emphasize my point.

“Do you really think so...?”

“If it’s you, Mio, then yes! With your singing, you’ll shine as brilliantly as anyone! I guarantee it!”



Mio's eyes widened as she placed a hand gently over her chest. I must have struck a chord in the heart that lay just beneath her hand. And the beat of that heart would drive her and her dream forward. She had the power to climb to the top of the idol world once, so she definitely had the strength to get back on her feet now.

"I... I want to sing. I want to sing more. More and more," Mio muttered under her breath as if reassuring herself. She then looked at me and said, "And... if it's possible, I'd like you to be my audience again."

"You bet I'll be there to see you shining on stage."

But in order to do that, we first had to return to Earth. And Mio knew what she'd have to do to make that happen. She took my hand and stood up, then nodded.

"Now, let's go release those fairies and spirits. We'll use Ellicia's ability to pass through the wall and get outside, then..."

I got interrupted.

"...I found you!"

All four of us whipped around at the sound of the unwelcome voice and saw black fog seeping into the room from the doorway. We'd been discovered by Grausam!

"Everyone, this way!" Ellicia yelled.

We all grabbed on to her hands and waist to move through the wall to the next room.

"Not so fast!"

However, our enemy was persistent, and the black fog appeared no matter where we went. The parlor where we met the Spirit King was on the fifth or sixth floor. We could still flee down a few floors, but that tactic no longer had any element of surprise.

"Maybe we should just get to the ground floor and leave the palace!" I suggested.

“But he’d catch us instantly if we ran out in the open! I can’t do anything against fog with my power!” Ellicia responded.

She had a point. I couldn’t do anything against it, either. If we could meet up with Lea or Corona or even Iris, we might have a chance. But it seemed like running was our only option for the time being... Wait, what was up with the floating sensation I was feeling? It was like... there was no floor under my feet?!

“Oh, crap!” exclaimed Ellicia in a panic.

I glanced down, and yup... Sure enough, I saw empty space.

“W-We’re falling!”

Had we accidentally left the building while we were running around? As that thought crossed my mind, we continued to fall further and further... W-W- Wasn’t there anything we could do?!

“Guh!”

I held my arm out and stuck it through the wall of the building using Ellicia’s power.

“Ellicia! Turn off your wall walking ability!”

“What are you gonna do?!”

“If you turn it off now, my arm will be stuck in the wall! We’ll stop falling!”

“You’d have to support the weight of four people all at once! Rekka, that could rip your arm off at this speed!”

“At least it’ll slow us down! It’d be better than slamming into the ground like this!”

“...!”

Ellicia’s face twisted in distress.

“Hurry...!”

I was yelling for her to make a decision, when...

“Wind guardian, heed my call!”

I heard a girl’s voice from somewhere above my head. The next moment, the

four of us were enclosed in a cage of wind and lifted into the air, instantly stopping our fall.

“Nammy!”

This unique nickname was...!

“Lyun!”

“What are you doing?! You can’t even fly!”

Lyun just yelled at me as she and Sophie used their spirit magic to carry the four of us to safety.

“Lyun! Mio’s going to sing to the fairies and spirits! Head towards the battlefield!”

“Oh! Got it!”

Lyun and Sophie redirected us west, the direction of the barricade that had been broken through. We’d start from there, and...

“I won’t let you!”

We weren’t the only ones on the move.

“Grausam!”

I looked up overhead. The skull made of black fog was floating above us.

“I’ll shoot you out of the sky!”

Two dark splinters coalesced out of the black fog and went flying at Lyun and Sophie. It looked like the same attack that had gotten the Spirit King earlier! If that hit the sylpheed girls, they’d immediately fall to the Ghostdemon sickness. They’d be unable to move... which meant the rest of us would fall!

“Ugh...!”

Lyun and Sophie tried to dodge Grausam’s attack the best they could, but they couldn’t change directions easily while carrying us with their spirit magic. The splinters were about to hit the girls, but a blade-like projectile came flying from the side and deflected them.

“Bwuh?! ”

“I’m not going to just stand by and let you hurt them.”

Tapping the Hero’s Sword’s against one shoulder, Corona—the one who shot the projectiles—flew towards us. Apparently she could use flight magic, too.

“Where’s everybody else, Corona?!”

“Calm down. They’re just over there.”

I looked in the direction she was pointing to see Satsuki and Lea flying over to us, too. Harissa was clinging to Lea’s back, and Iris was jumping from roof to roof towards us.

“I’m glad you’re all safe.”

“It’s all thanks to Lea and Corona protecting us,” said Satsuki.

“Hey, make sure you tell Rekka about what I did, too!” Iris objected from below.

At any rate, I was really glad they were safe.

“What happened to the Spirit King?”

“We left him behind,” answered Corona.

“You left him behind?!”

“There was nothing we could do at the time. If I tried to excise the tainted mana with my sword, I would’ve cut his entire astral body. I considered sealing him instead, but that would have left him vulnerable to being injected with more dark magic, which would have made more trouble for us. You see, when an astral body is sealed, its ability to recognize and resist the Ghostdemon sickness is sealed, too. So we have to do something about Grausam before the Spirit King falls completely to Ghostdemon sickness.”

Corona glared up at the skull in the sky.

“Hmph... I suppose this is easier than chasing you all over the place. I can crush you right here instead.”

“That’s my line, Grausam.”

Corona smirked and raised the Hero’s Sword with both hands, building up energy.

“You shouldn’t have let us escape outside. Now that you’re in the sky, I don’t have to worry about my surroundings anymore.”

“You...!” Grausam seemed to realize something as he let out a great roar.

“Too late!”

But before he could do anything, Corona swung the Hero’s Sword. The blade shot out something larger than ever before. It flew towards Grausam, cleanly cutting right through the looming black fog.

“GYAAAAAAAAAH!”

A third of the black fog dissipated in that one attack.

“Did that do it?” I asked.

“No. I did some damage, but it wasn’t enough to reach his true form.”

“His true form?”

“You could also call it the core, or his weak point. He’s cast aside his restrictive physical form and taken up a half-magical one instead. That’s why my sword is effective against him, but... we still have to reach his core to fully defeat him.”

There was less fog now, though upon closer inspection, it didn’t seem any weaker than before. We hadn’t really defeated Grausam yet. But he was reeling from Corona’s attack. At least for the moment, he’d stopped attacking us.

“I’d like to take this opportunity to get Mio to sing, but we don’t have time to go around the whole battlefield.”

Corona swept her gaze over the capital. From the air, we could see there were battles breaking out all over the place.

“You can leave that to me!” Lyun interjected.

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“We’ll use the wind to carry Mio’s song to everyone!”

“You can do that?!”

“Sure can. But we can’t keep you and the others afloat at the same time,

Nammy, so we'll have to put you down."

"All right."

Lyun then lowered us onto the roof of a nearby building.

"Wah!"

Incapable of flight, Tsumiki and I clung to the roof and struggled to find stable footing.

Our vantage point was a lot lower than before, but there were even fights breaking out in the sky between spirits and demons that could fly. We could still see plenty of them from where we were.

The spirits were putting up a fairly good fight against the demons, but they were helpless against their own kind that had been taken over by the Ghostdemon sickness. All they could do was try and shake them by flying in circles. If they succeeded in shaking them, they would launch counterattacks against the demons, but it didn't work every time. Sometimes they weren't able to get away, or they were being picked off by the demons as they flew in circles.

"Sophie and I will use our wind magic to project Mio's song all across the capital. Sophie! I'll take the east and south. You take the west and north!"

"Okay, Sis!"

The sylpheed sisters nodded at each other and closed their eyes at the same time.

"Great wind, reach the beyond!"

"Great wind, reach the beyond!"

They chanted the same spell together, and when they did, a soft wind spread out from them like a ripple. That wind would carry Mio's voice to everyone!

"Mio, please!"

"Okay."

Mio took a deep breath...

"Not far away, not behind me, what's in front of me is..."

And she softly began to sing.

It was a song called “The Day Before the Future.” Mio’s beautiful voice conveyed the painful feelings of a girl who was suddenly separated from the person she loved. The girl didn’t know where they’d gone, and she didn’t know if they’d ever meet again. But the girl sang for her love anyway. It was a prayer to see her beloved again, a song of hope for the future.

And because we cherish the present out of hope for the future...

Mio sang. Her voice rang out through the battlefield. And then...

“Look! The spirits who were being controlled are falling.”

I squinted in the direction Iris was pointing to see several shadows falling from the sky. Since they were all species that could fly naturally, they tumbled gently like feathers to the ground.

Mio’s song seemed to take effect much faster than last time, most likely because she was singing with purpose now. Right now, Mio was singing to save the spirits and fairies. Those feelings gave her song greater power, and her voice reached the hearts of all who listened.

“Okay, now the spirit army only needs to contend with the demons. Their fight should be a lot easier,” Corona said with a nod.

That was one less worry, but...

“Curse you! Now you’ve done it...”

A voice deeper than the pits of hell descended from on high, ironically. I looked up to see the sky above the capital cleared of the black fog that had covered it before. In its place, a large mass had formed in the shape of an enormous floating skull. It was almost as massive as the World Tree.

The skull wasn’t made from the black fog, but blue flames. Its eye sockets glowed eerily white as flames billowed out from their corners. Flames also fanned out of its mouth like it was breathing, but the flames had no smoke and simply dissipated into space. Underneath the skull was a heavily distorted spine, lined with over a hundred centipede-like legs that wriggled with a grating screech.

“So, you’ve finally shown yourself, Grausam.”

“Silence, Zaia Gardendos Corona.” Flames spewed out of the mouth of the skull as the unpleasant voice continued. “You’ve foiled my plans once again. If you hadn’t ended the war last time, this world would have been mine by now.”

“And you wanted my territory on top of that? Hmph, seems like I was right to end the war.”

Corona adjusted her grip on the Hero’s Sword.

“Lea, was it? Can you still fight?”

“No problem.”

“Rekka, what about you?”

“I want to fight, but I can’t...”

While I had the will, I had no way.

“Is that so? Then... Harissa.”

“Y-Yes?”

Harissa started when she suddenly heard her name.

“If you’re a summoner, you should know how to create spirit armor, right?”

“Huh? I-I do...”

“Then use it on Lyun and Rekka.”

“H-Huh?! U-Um...”

“I’m counting you.”

After hastily giving her orders, Corona rose into the sky with Lea at her side. She went straight to crossing swords with Grausam.

“Nguuuh!”

Grausam shouted as he activated his magic. There were at least several dozen spells, as far as I could see. Each and every one of them took a different trajectory as they came at Corona.

“No matter how well your sword can cut magical energy, you still need to

swing it. Let's just see you try and cut down all of my magic at once!"

"Tch!"

Corona deflected the attacks with the Hero's Sword, but she couldn't get any closer to Grausam while she was under constant fire. And neither could Lea, though the barrage seemed slightly less intense on Lea's side. It was probably because Grausam was focused on the Hero's Sword, but it might have also meant that his magic was limited. We'd need numbers to get the upper hand here...

"Harissa! What exactly is spirit armor? Could I fight if I had that?" I asked with a sense of urgency.

"Um... Spirit armor is a type of applied magic, a subset of summoning magic. It allows a human to equip a spirit, to become one with them and gain their power. That's how the spell works."

"Become one with a spirit...?"

Corona had told her to cast it on me and Lyun, so did she want us to merge together and fight? But that was... I turned to look at Lyun. We made eye contact, but neither of us said a word.

Harissa and I both knew that spirits hated being used by humans. Could we really ask Lyun to let us cast this spell on her? Wouldn't we basically just be using her? As I pondered the details...

"What are you waiting for? Hurry up and do it," said Lyun.

"Huh?" I involuntarily and dumbfoundedly exclaimed at Lyun's sudden and unexpected declaration.

"I don't want to be used by an Aburaamian summoner, either, but... this isn't the time to be worrying about that, right? The fate of my world is on the line," Lyun blurted out in a rush. She then looked at Harissa. "I always thought the worst of humans because they forcefully summoned us and used us as they pleased."

"That's... um..."

"But now you're fighting to save our world."

Harissa looked up at Lyun when she said that, and the wind spirit's expression softened.

"If there were more humans like you out there... then maybe if spirits and humans sat down and talked it out properly, we'd be able to understand each other."

"Oh..."

"But right now, our world is in big trouble! We'll save the talking for later... So, please, mage of Aburaamu, lend us your power!" Lyun bowed her head deeply at Harissa.

"Okay! I understand!"

Harissa rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand, then braced herself.

"Sir Rekka, please come over here!"

I did as I was told and stood next to Lyun.

"Here we go! Spirit armor! Mudara Waffe!"

"Whoa...!"

White light flowed out of the end of Harissa's staff, enveloping me and Lyun. The next time I opened my eyes, the sylpheed standing next to me had disappeared. In her place, there was a wind wrapping around me. Not only that, but my ankles and chest were covered in greenish armor. I even had huge pauldrons and gauntlets... It was like armor made out of wind!

"Is this... Lyun's magic?"

Looking closely, the wind armor was emitting a green light. It seemed Lyun's magic was a grass green color, similar to how Satsuki's was blue and Harissa's was white.

"Hey, don't space out."

"L-Lyun?"

It was kind of strange to hear her voice directly in my head. It was like we were sharing the same body. But, wow... I could feel the flow of the wind in my fingertips. This had to be one of the sylpheed's abilities. It felt like I could

control the wind freely in this state. Spirit armor wasn't half bad!

"All right, now I can fight! Satsuki."

"What?"

"Corona said Grausam had a core, a weak point. Can you find out what that is with your Magic of Omniscience?"

"I'm on it!"

"I'll have Lea connect me to you telepathically later. Iris and Ellicia, please protect everyone here."

"Leave it to me!"

"Yeah, I can manage that."

Once Iris and Ellicia agreed, I prepared myself to take off.... when suddenly, Tsumiki stopped me.

"Wait! Give this to Lea!"

Tsumiki handed me a container filled with dark matter. Come to think of it, she'd been carrying it with her all this time.

"I forgot about this! Now Lea can use as much power as she wants. Thanks!"

"Enough of that! Get out of here already!"

"Right!"

With everyone's encouragement behind me, I wrapped the wind around my body and leaped into the sky. I had flown with wings before, but using a spirit's wind magic to fly was completely different. Mostly thanks to Lyun's support, I could move around pretty freely.

"...Hm?"

Grausam noticed me as I was ascending. Several boomerang-shaped black blades came flying my way.

"I'm gonna dodge those! Don't move, Rekka!"

Lyun gave me a mental warning, then proceeded to evade each boomerang with my body. It seemed like the spirit armor state allowed her to control my

body, too. Lyun was more used to the sensation of flying than I was, so I left all the evading to her as I charged straight towards Lea.

“Lea! Take this!”

“Hm...? Oh, this will be helpful.”

Lea took the dark matter and went to gobble it down immediately.

“Wait, hold it!”

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

“Corona and I will distract Grausam. Wait for the right moment to replenish your energy, then get him when his guard’s down!”

“Oh, I see. Roger that.”

“I’m counting on you! Also, connect us all with your telepathy! I’m having Satsuki search for his weak point right now.”

Leaving her with those brief instructions, I took off. I charged with Lyun into the barrage of dark magic.

“Hey, can I use magic, too?”

“Sure, just imagine something good!”

“Wow, thanks for the detailed explanation!”

I had no choice but to try. Erm, imagine something good...? Like shooting a wind bullet? I held the palm of my gauntlet towards the dark spears flying my way and shouted.

“Fire!”

A whirlwind-like blade flew out and deflected the incoming attacks.

“Huh, I guess it worked!”

Thank goodness this spirit magic didn’t have any chants or spells...

“Rekka, can you hear me?”

“Hm? Is that you, Satsuki? I can hear you loud and clear!”

Lea had connected everyone together with her telepathy.

“Lea and Corona, I need your attention, too. I’ve found Grausam’s weak point.”

“Where is it?” I asked mentally.

“Can you see the thing that looks like a symbol on the forehead of the skull? There’s a small jewel in the middle of it. That’s the core.”

The middle of its forehead? If I strained my eyes, I could just make out three round symbols on its forehead. There was a blue jewel shining in the middle of the design.

“Corona and I will distract him. Lea, use that chance to change into your Leviathan form and launch an all-out attack.”

“Got it.”

With that sufficing as our strategy meeting, I went to the right of Grausam, and Corona went to the left.

“Raaargh!”

With a yell, I shot wind bullets in every direction.

“Whoa! That was close!”

“What are you doing?!”

I was so focused on trying to distract our opponent that I nearly let his dark magic hit me. Thankfully, Lyun had used her control over my body and her powers of flight to dodge it. Phew.

“Gah! How annoying!”

Grausam’s irritated voice echoed through the air, but he never relented on Corona and her sword. He was attacking Corona and Lea easily three, four, or even five times as much as me. I would’ve liked a little more of his attention, but that didn’t matter! What was important was keeping him unaware of Lea’s true strength.

“I’m gonna take this chance!”

Corona called to me and Lea telepathically, then recklessly barreled right into the next oncoming barrage of Grausam’s attacks.

“Nugh?!”

The white light shining out of the skull’s eye sockets flared brightly. And then...

“Gyaaaoooh!”

Recharged with dark matter, Lea unleashed all her power at once and transformed into a giant white snake.

“What?!”

Grausam was shocked by the sudden appearance of Leviathan.

“Gyaaaah!”

Lea gathered all the water from the rivers and reservoirs in the nearby water spirit areas and brought it to her. She then turned the torrent of water into a raging stream directed at Grausam.

“Nguuuooohhh?!”

One beat too late, dark flames like the fires of hell gathered in the mouth of the skull. Grausam launched them right at Lea’s stream of water, and their magics collided head-on.

“Ugh...!”

“The aftershock is causing a lot of turbulence! I can’t get any closer!”

Lyun wasn’t kidding. We’d had a smooth flight thus far, but this was rough. The fierce magic of both parties colliding unleashed enough energy to shake the very air.

“Lea...!”

As expected of a Demon King, Grausam showed power on par with a Lea powered up by dark matter.

“Guh... Hrrngh...”

But he’d been caught off guard, which gave Lea the upper hand. We could push forward like this! Or so I thought... Just then, a huge cluster of light came flying from a completely different direction and hit Lea dead-on.

“Gyaaaaah!”

The white snake screamed out as Lea’s thoughts were conveyed to us telepathically.

“Tch! What now?!”

The interference just now had thrown off Lea’s water magic, allowing Grausam’s dark magic to blast both spells away simultaneously. I turned to see where the light had come from... and gasped in shock at what I saw.

“The Spirit King...”

There in the sky overhead hovered none other than the Spirit King. We’d last seen him when he fell to Grausam’s Ghostdemon sickness in the palace, which meant...

“The Spirit King’s mind is being controlled by Grausam!”

“That can’t be!” Lyun screamed in my head.

I could hardly believe it, either. Our already bad situation was just getting worse.

“Fwahahaha! Too bad for you!” Grausam cackled.

But...

“I was waiting for you to let your guard down!”

Corona had snuck into Grausam’s blind spot and was lying in wait directly above him. She held the Hero’s Sword in a backhand grip and, the moment the opportunity presented itself, she thrust the blade into his weak point—the blue jewel on the skull’s forehead.

“G-Gaaaaah!” he shrieked in agony.

Corona had the Hero’s Sword buried halfway into the skull, when...

“What? It’s stuck?!”

I could hear her confused voice through our telepathic connection.

“Don’t you daaaaare!”

Grausam shouted out as he attacked Corona with the twisted bones along his

spine that I had mistaken for legs earlier. Each one of the hundred or more spikes dwarfed her in size and mass, and they came whipping around at her all at once.

“Guh!”

Corona held up both of her arms to defend herself against the attack, but taking the blow directly still knocked her off the skull. To make things worse...

Ka-chink!

The Hero’s Sword had been hit, too, and it snapped clean off at the hilt.

“The Hero’s Sword... broke?!”

So, not even the Hero’s Sword—which could cut through magical power of all kinds—could withstand an intense blow to the side of the blade?!

“Curse you!” Corona shouted.

She was able to regain her balance midair after being knocked off, but the hilt of the Hero’s Sword fell to the ground. Its blade remained buried in Grausam’s forehead.

Her surprise attack was our only hope... Now we’d lost everything. And to make matters worse, the unharmed Grausam was still controlling the Spirit King somehow.

“Spirit King, you...!”

Corona was glaring in disgust at the zombie king floating next to the skull.

“Heh heh heh, I was a little worried when you wrested control of those fairies and spirits from me, but that just left me with all the more dark magic to pour into the Spirit King instead.”

So, he was using all the power he had on thousands of fairies and spirits... just on the Spirit King? No wonder Mio’s singing hadn’t worked on him. Maybe we could cure him if Lyun and Sophie focused all of Mio’s singing power directly on the Spirit King, but there was no way Grausam would let us get away with that.

“Leveling my new land leaves a bad taste in my mouth... but I have no choice.”

Grausam sighed as though his victory was a foregone conclusion at this point. He and the Spirit King then both started to prepare their respective spells. Were they going to fire that at the city together?!

“Lea!”

“I know!”

Corona and Lea quickly called to each other and moved into the trajectory of the incoming spells.

“Die!” Grausam roared.

“As if!” Corona roared right back.

Corona’s dark magic met the Spirit King’s light magic, while Lea’s water magic met Grausam’s dark magic.

“Uwah!”

“Kyah!”

Shock waves several times stronger than before hit me, causing me to lose control of my flight powers and fall out of the air.

“Take this!”

Lyun managed to create a cushion of wind to soften my landing just before I crashed into the ground. Thanks to her, I was unharmed, but...

“Lyun, can we still fly?”

“It’s impossible... We can’t get close to Grausam, much less fight him.”

“Damn it!”

A curse spilled from my mouth. Corona and Lea were doing their best, but the shock wave had affected them, too, and they were getting pushed back. Was there nothing I could do but watch...? I chewed at my lip.

“Sir Rekka!”

“Rekka!”

Just then, Harissa and others moved from the roof and ran over to me.

“Satsuki... is there any way I can get closer to them?”

“...”

My all-knowing childhood friend was silent.

“Um... Sir Rekka...”

Harissa called my name and hesitantly offered something to me. It was the hilt of the broken Hero's Sword.

“I picked it up after it fell. Maybe... you could use it...?”

“...”

I was the silent one now. The Hero's Sword was broken. Even if it wasn't, I couldn't imagine myself being able to stab the sword through Grausam's jewel when Corona couldn't do it.

“Guh... gwah!”

“Aaaaahhh!”

I could hear Lea and Corona's pained screams even from a distance. Was... Was there really nothing I could do? Think. Come on, think!

What would happen to the spirit world if it all ended here? Grausam would overrun the place and destroy everything. Not even Corona would escape it unscathed. And what about Mio, who came to me from the future to be saved? Or Yang and Ellicia, who'd given up their revenge and left the organization in my hands?

“Tch...!”

Considering everyone who was relying on me, I couldn't give up! I had to fight it out to the bitter end! But what was I supposed to do? What else *could* I do? I had to think... Think things all over from the top... How could I protect the spirit world, go to Aburaamu, and return to Earth...?

“Return... to Earth...?”

That's right! We could still do that! But the number of times we could do it... No, wait! The difference between this time and last time... R had warned me about changing the past, but that was exactly what gave us hope right now! Hmm... But we still didn't have a way of destroying Grausam's weak point...

“Rekka? What’s wrong?” Ellicia asked me from behind.

“Ellicia... Oh!”

Her worried voice gave me the answer I needed! The last piece to the puzzle!

“Harissa! Ellicia! There’s no time to explain! Please do as I say!”

I explained the new plan to the two of them.

“Don’t worry. That should be possible,” said Ellicia.

“I’ll get ready right away!” said Harissa.

“All right!”

And the three of us immediately got to work.



It didn’t take long to get everything ready, but we were desperately short on time. Corona and Lea were being driven back and could be crushed at any moment. The two of them were holding on as best they could.

“Lea! Corona! Keep it up for a little longer! We’ve got a plan!”

“What are you going to do...?” Corona asked.

Even her telepathic voice in my head told me how worn out she was. They were likely at their limits.

“Watch this!” I declared. “Harissa!”

After sending a few words of encouragement to our two front-liners, I turned to Harissa and gave the sign.

“Here I go! Eclena Cashu!”

With the last word of her chant, the connection magic activated with a flash of white light.

The last time we came to the spirit world, one of the catalysts Harissa had for connection magic had already been used up. She’d had three to begin with, and she’d expended one as a test to make sure the magic was working correctly. The second one was used after that experiment to get us to the spirit world, and the remaining catalyst was used to cross over to Aburaamu.

But this time, I was in such a hurry that I'd stopped Harissa from doing her test. Thanks to that, we now had an extra catalyst with us, which meant an extra use of the connection magic. And we used it on the hilt of the Hero's Sword. The Hero's Sword belonged to Corona, but what would happen if we used the connection magic on just the broken hilt of the sword? Would it still go to Corona? No, it shouldn't! Because...

"?!"

As the magical white light faded, we were in the air... right in front of Grausam's forehead where the blade of the Hero's Sword was!

That was the trick. The broken hilt had a strong connection to its maker and its wielder, sure. But it had a much, much stronger connection to something else—the blade itself! After all, the two of them were meant to be one.

"Lyun!" I shouted.

"Leave it to me!"

Lyun did her best to control the wind blowing all over the place by the force of the fierce, colliding spells around us, and she brought us closer to Grausam's forehead.

"Gwuh?! When did you lot get there?!"

Grausam, who had been totally focused on casting spells, finally noticed our presence. He tried to smack us down just like he had with Corona earlier, but...

"Gyooooaaah!"

Targeting Grausam the moment he was distracted, Lea poured all of her remaining magic into an attack to blow away his dark magic.

"What?!"

In a panic, Grausam tried to repel Lea's tsunami. Thanks to that, he lost his chance to knock us out of the air. Now there was no way he would get to the Hero's Sword before me. However...

"Ha! You clearly inferior races won't be able to destroy my core no matter how much you struggle! Not when she couldn't even do it!" Grausam cackled evilly.

Not even Corona the Demon King could smash through the gem before the Hero's Sword broke. Grausam had probably strengthened his only weakness as much as possible. There was no way a normal human like me had the strength.

Yeah, that much was true. It was impossible for a normal human—but what about an abnormal one?

“Ellicia!”

When I called out to her, Ellicia activated her wall walking ability, passing the power onto me through direct contact.

One of the interesting things about her power was that it didn't just affect living creatures. If that were the case, then my clothes and shoes—or the pouch at Ellicia's waist, for example—wouldn't come with us. That meant her wall walking power also worked on anything we were holding.

In other words, if I held the blade of the Hero's Sword in my hands, then it could pass through anything, no matter how tough or hard it was!

“What?!” Grausam yelled in surprise.

“Okay, Ellicia, that's enough!”

Ellicia then powered down her ability. When she did, the blade of the Hero's Sword—which I'd just pushed the rest of the way into Grausam's forehead—returned to its physical form, cracking the blue jewel down the middle like a wedge. With a little push, the sword split it clean in two.

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

With his core destroyed, Grausam let out a horrific yell as the blue flames and black fog that made up his body started to dissipate. I thought he would melt away just like that, but then...

“S-S-S-Spirit King! Destroy theeem!”

The Demon King was stubborn and refused to give up until the very end. Under Grausam's control, the Spirit King redirected the light magic he was using on Corona to us instead.

“Lea! Connect the Spirit King with your telepathy!” Corona yelled out psychically before he could attack.

Lea complied, and then Corona turned her words on the Spirit King himself.

“How long are you going to be controlled, you coward?! Your father was tougher than that, you know!”

Immediately, the Spirit King froze. It was as though he was offended at being called a coward, however, rather than seeming like he was resisting Grausam’s dark magic.

“Gu... Guooh...”

But it was enough. Before the Spirit King could fire his light magic at us, Grausam’s body completely fell apart. His spiny bones and skull burst into a cloud of tiny fragments and blew away in the wind.

Epilogue

“Thanks for coming to my show today, everyone!”

“MIO! MIO! MIO!”

When Mio called out to her fans filling the venue, a wave of cheers swept across the audience.

“W-Whoa, my ears! The fans are really loud.”

“Really? You can’t tell when you’re yelling along with them,” Tsumiki said.

She was completely unfazed by the explosion of noise. She was part of the screaming crowd, after all. But this was probably normal for a MIO concert. It was pretty amazing.

“Mio!”

I tried shouting, too, though it felt a little different than what the others were cheering for.

Today, I’d been invited to come with Tsumiki to the last show of MIO’s tour. Tickets had apparently been sold out for ages, but Tsumiki said she had an extra one and didn’t want to waste it, so she asked me to come along.

Back in the spirit world, I’d promised Mio I’d come see her perform sometime, so I jumped on Tsumiki’s offer and agreed immediately. Although, for some reason, Tsumiki looked disappointed when I told her that.

“Let’s get things started with our first song!” Mio shouted.

A cheerful instrumental then began to play. With a mic in one hand, Mio danced on the stage, swaying her upper body and smoothly moving through the steps as she began singing.

The venue was booming with her newest single, the one I hear in TV commercials sometimes. It had a rather fast tempo, and the lyrics were about a young girl’s love. It suited the idol MIO well, particularly in her big, blonde wig and outfit with hearts all over it. Even I knew the chorus to this one, so I swayed

to the beat while singing along.

The packed crowd was already super pumped up. And this was all because of Mio... No wonder she was the top idol in Japan. I was so glad I was able to bring her back.

By the time we defeated Demon King Grausam and returned to Earth, it was July 23rd. Half of her tour was already over. While we were gone, she'd been reported as missing, and all of her concerts were canceled. Her entire tour was nearly ruined, but after apologizing to several important people, she managed to get things back on track for the second half of the tour as planned. Mio really, really wanted to sing. It was hard to believe she almost quit at one point...

"All riiight! Wow, everyone's so excited! I want to make up for what I missed, so I'm gonna sing lots today! Here comes the second song!"

Honestly, I was thrilled to see her back on her feet. Mio's voice had a wonderful power to it... A power that deserved so much more than being used to defeat Grausam's dark magic.

And the concert raged on as the audience thrived on that power, filling their hearts with the magic of her songs. But eventually, it was time for the concert to end.

"This'll be my last song, everyone. I wanted to sing so much more with you all, but we're out of time."

Her bedewed face was glowing as she held the mic in both hands and addressed the audience.

"I never thought I'd be singing this one for you guys today. It's my debut song... but I never really had the chance to sing it much, so most of you won't know it. But I really wanted to sing it for you today."

A hush fell over the previously noisy audience.

Mio continued, "I experienced something special recently. I discovered some things I never knew before. I saw things I'd never seen before... and had some scary things happen to me, too. I was so terrified, there was a time I thought I would never sing again."

When she said ‘never sing again,’ several cries could be heard across the venue. One fan mistook her words for a retirement announcement and yelled, “Don’t quit!”

Mio quieted them through the mic, then closed her eyes.

“There are lots of painful things in the world. Countless awful things that wait for you in the future. There may be times when you want to avoid or run away from that future....” Mio raised her head and looked around the audience.

“There may be times when it gets scary and painful... but there are also wonderful things in this world and in the future! Even if things are hard right now, happiness could be waiting for you tomorrow, or even moments from now! That’s why you have to try your best right now! To reach that wonderful future! So that one day, you meet your something special...!”

She grew louder as she went on, then looked in my direction. It was almost like she was staring directly at me in this huge crowd of fans... Just as I was thinking that, the spotlights went out. Moments later, they came back on with a click, illuminating Mio’s figure on the stage. The song that started playing was another one I knew. It was a soft ballad, completely different to the cheerful, upbeat songs from earlier.

“This is ‘The Day Before the Future.’”





Let's rewind a bit. Four days before the final show of Mio's tour, we successfully returned to Earth from the other worlds.

"For someone so confident in their side of the deal, you certainly waited until the very last moment to make your delivery."

That was the first thing Nartessia said when she saw our battered crew.

"There were unforeseen circumstances," I grumbled indignantly.

We were in the hotel room that she had designated as our meeting spot after we returned and made contact with her. Harissa and Ellicia sat on either side of me on the couch. Nartessia sat alone on the couch across from us, with Chelsea standing behind her.

"Why don't you let Chelsea sit, too?" I asked.

"She likes to stand. Don't let it bother you."

"...Don't worry about me."

I wasn't entirely happy with that response, but I looked back at Nartessia anyway.

"Here's what I promised."

"Ooh, do let me see."

Nartessia examined the magic tomes and tools I offered.

"We didn't have much time because of the trouble we encountered, so I just grabbed what I could... but these should at least prove the existence of magic from another world."

"Well, yes... This is sufficient proof, but it's not enough for our deal."

I knew it...

"So, you want me to get you more?"

"I'm glad you're quick on the uptake, Rekka," Nartessia chuckled delightedly.

"I didn't think you'd be satisfied with this. You had your earring stolen, after all... We have to compensate you accordingly."

“What an accommodating attitude. Aren’t you afraid that I’ll use what you’re giving me for evil, Rekka?”

“No. I know you’re not interested in anything other than magic.”

“...!”

For the first time, Nartessia looked surprised.

“Honestly, I don’t even think you care about the organization, your subordinates, or even the fate of the world. All you desire is the heirloom magic you inherited from your ancestors... right?”

“I must say I’m surprised... It seems you have me all figured out.”

“Well, a lot’s happened.”

Last time in the mine, Nartessia hadn’t hesitated to abandon her fallen comrades, and it wasn’t like they’d been beyond saving. She didn’t have much attachment for the earring itself, either, despite it being a Margaret clan treasure. The only unchanging constant in her interests was the Fire Dragon’s Breath. That’s how I’d come to my conclusion.

“My, my, you’re an interesting guy, Rekka. I’d like to have a long, lasting relationship with you.”

Personally, I wanted to keep things as short and sweet as possible...

Nartessia smiled, the look in her eyes suggesting she could see through me, and adjusted her position on the couch.

“Well, let’s leave it at this for today. Now, when shall your next deadline be...?”

“Hold it.”

“Oh?”

I stopped Nartessia from wrapping up the negotiations and snatched the magic tomes from her.

“And what, exactly, might you be doing?”

“This!”

I stood up, walked around the table, and handed the tomes to Chelsea.

“Huh?”

Chelsea hesitantly looked between me and Nartessia.

“From now on, I’ll be delivering materials on the other world to Chelsea.”

“I suppose she is part of the Margaret clan. That wouldn’t be against our contract, but... I despise being looked down upon more than anything.”

With that, the smile vanished from Nartessia’s face, and I found myself waving my hands in a panic.

“No, don’t get me wrong! It’s not like I’m going to let Chelsea monopolize the information. I just want her to act as an intermediary in delivering the materials to you.”

“How silly. Why bother with all that?”

“Are you saying you intend on coming to Japan to pick up the materials yourself every time, Nartessia? Wouldn’t you rather spend that time studying the magic from another world and improving your heirloom magic instead?”

“...”

“So, why don’t you hand this job over to Chelsea, who travels around the world for work anyway? To make myself clear, I don’t intend on handing these materials over to anyone other than her.”

Of course, I wasn’t suggesting all this just to make Chelsea a courier. Hibiki had told me before that Chelsea’s position in the Margaret family was complicated. I was hoping that if she had such an important job, they might treat her a little better. Maybe it was a simplistic way of thinking about it, but it was the least I could do to try and give her a hand.

“Hmm... You sure get fixated on the strangest things, Rekka.” Nartessia beheld me like she was observing some strange creature. “Very well. I don’t particularly care... Come now.”

“Huh?”

“Hand me the tomes already. Your role is to deliver them to me, no?”

“Oh, of course!”

Chelsea placed the tomes on Nartessia’s waiting palm.

“Perhaps it’s best to leave this task to you anyway. Rekka trusts you, and you won’t betray his trust. That makes you the least likely of the family to pocket everything and run.”

“I-I would never!”

“I figured. You never had much interest in magic to begin with, now that I think about it. All the better, I say. Just make sure you safely deliver Rekka’s items to me from now on. That’s all. We’re going home now.”

“Y-Yes!”

Nartessia handed the bag with the magic items in it to Chelsea, then grabbed her parasol and twirled it in her hands as she headed for the door.

“Oh, that’s right. One more thing, Rekka.” The crimson girl turned back right before she reached the door and called my name. “Give me another ride on your shoulders sometime, won’t you? It was quite fun. I nearly felt like a child again..”

“Oh, sure—huh?!”

W-Wait a second! I’d only given her a ride on my shoulders in the previous time line! How did she know about that?! It was too late to ask... The door was closed, and she was already long gone.

“Whew...”

I thought I’d had the last laugh by finding something of a loophole in the contract, but I was the one breaking out into a cold sweat in the end. I never wanted to see her again, much less make an enemy of her a second time.

“Rekka...”

Ellicia spoke up from next to me, so I turned to face her.

“Hm?”

“Thank you... so much.”

“Nah, it’s all good. But I have to ask... What is the organization going to do

now?”

“We’re going to keep on protecting those who are suffering because of their psychic powers. We’re planning on gradually washing our hands of our underworld dealings. Looking back now, all those dirty jobs were just an outlet for our frustration and hatred... I don’t want to the new members of the organization to ever experience that.”

“I see... That’s great.”

There would surely be more children with psychic powers in the future. If the organization could become a proper shelter for them, they would always have somewhere to go. That would be a wonderful thing.

“Oh, yeah, I briefly mentioned this before we came back to Earth, but this space scientist named Shirley knows a lot about psychic powers. Next time, we can go get the psychic-resistant jackets together.”

“It’s amazing how everything that comes out of your mouth is so absurd, yet it’s all true,” Ellicia giggled.

“Well, the amazing one here is Shirley, but yeah.”

“Rekka.”

“Yeah?”

Before I knew what was happening, something warm and soft was pressed up against my cheek.

“Aaaaaah!” Harissa screamed on other side of me.



“H-H-Huh?!”

What was that?! D-Don’t tell me... Was it *that*?! That thing men and women do...?!

“You have a bad habit of undervaluing your accomplishments.”

“Wh... Wha... What?”

“You should think about how the people you saved feel about you a little more.”

The people I saved... What? As I was still panicking, Ellicia stood up and stretched her arms.

“Now, I’d love to stay with you a little longer, but the mage next to you has a really scary look on her face, so I think I’ll leave it here for today. I’m anxious to get back and tell Yang everything, too.”

Ellicia then turned on her heel and headed for the door.

“See you later, Rekka. Hopefully sometime soon.”

With a small wave, Ellicia left the room.

“Sir Rekka...”

“U-Um...”

That meant I was now left alone in the room with a rather enraged Harissa. Eek!



Thus, the stories of our two heroines from Earth—Mio and Ellicia—were resolved. But there were two more I’d gotten involved in when summer vacation started. And so, as July passed and a new month arrived, I made my way to Aburaamu once more. Right now, I had my hands pressed together in a prayer in front of Pastel’s grave. Harissa and Corona accompanied me.

“Last time we came here, we barely had any time to properly pay our respects.”

“I see.”

Demons apparently didn't have customs involving visiting people's graves to pay their respects, so Corona watched what I was doing and imitated me. Her form was a little awkward, but she was putting her heart into it. Surely that was enough.

After we carefully cleaned up the area around the grave, we all stood around gazing at the headstone.

"Are you okay for time, Rekka?" asked Corona.

"We should be fine."

I checked my wristwatch to see how many minutes we had left until the next item on our list.

"Lady Corona, what kind of person was Lady Pastel?" Harissa asked.

As an Aburaamian, she was naturally curious about the party that had once saved her world. I stayed silent, expecting Corona to happily start talking about Pastel like she did last time, but...

"Hm? If you'd like, you can ask her for yourself."

"...What?"

Her response wasn't what I expected.

"Wh-What do you mean...?"

"Do you remember this?"

Corona took out the ring we'd borrowed to get from the demon world to Aburaamu.

"What about it?" I asked.

"This is a type of magical item that stores memories. It can project the memories and personality of a person. If you twist it like this..."

Corona explained as she gave the jewel on the ring a twist. There was a flash of bright light, and when it subsided, there was something like a holographic image of a girl projected into the air.

"...Oh? Wha'z all this?"

The girl was clad in what seemed like a mage's robe and held a staff shaped somewhat like a sunflower. Her dirty blonde hair and eyes reminded me of Harissa's.

"Um... Pastel?" I nervously asked.

"Tha'z me," she replied right away.

"Hmm... And who might y'all be? Seein' some unfamiliar faces here."

"Erm, I..."

How should I explain myself? This Pastel was talking like she really was alive.

"Pastel."

"Oh, if it ain't the great hero. Strange, I thought I dun went and sent the great hero home... Ah, tha'z right. I gave ya mah ring. Didja use that sucker?"

"Yeah."

"Then I'ma projected illusion right now, huh, ain't I? What year is it?"

"Not sure. The only thing I do know is that it's been a few hundred years since our journey."

"Golly me! Then I'm as dead as doornail!"

"Yeah, your grave is right behind you."

"Huh? Durn, yer right! Well, I'll be... Feels weird seein' yer own grave... Aww, shucks, they didn't hafta make such a fancy memorial for li'l ole me, neither. Shoulda used that money to buy bread and hand it out instead."

She seemed exactly like the person Corona described. Come to think of it, last time when we came to Aburaamu, Corona had said that Pastel hadn't changed at all after spending some time at her grave. I guess she'd talked to Pastel's projection just like this.

"And? Are these youngins yer friends, Miss Hero?"

"Yeah, this is Rekka and Harissa..."

After introducing us, Corona told her our story.

"My, my... The new hero, huh? To think that ole Demon King we chucked into

the void'a space and time managed to revive... Durn stubborn lizard," Pastel said with a serious nod. "Well, anyhoo, that dun matter no more."

"It doesn't?" Corona asked, eyebrow raised.

"Yeah, who cares? The new hero defeated him in the end, din'cha, Mister Hero?"

"U-Um, well..."

I stuttered a bit, being addressed so suddenly. What a frank person.

"Lessee, I've been wonderin' this for a while now, but... Harissa, ain't it?"

"Huh? Y-Yes, Lady Pastel!"

Harissa straightened up, frozen up with nerves at Pastel turning her attention on her. Pastel got a good laugh out of it.

"Come on, now! None a' this 'Lady' hoocha. It's too formal."

"Y-Yes..."

"Now, ya see here, I was thinkin'... ya seem kinda similar to me, Harissa."

"Huh?"

Harissa stared blankly at Pastel, just blinking as if she hadn't understood a word of it.

"Yeah, that was my first impression of her, too," added Corona.

"Wh-Whaaat?!"

It seemed that only exacerbated Harissa's confusion. I wanted to say something to help out the overwhelmed girl, but even I'd thought that Pastel kinda looked like her when she first appeared.

"Where ya from?"

"I-I come from Kadono Village..."

"Bless me, I knew it! That's mah hometown, too!"

"Huh?! W-Weren't you a noble, Lady Pastel?"

"Hah? How coulda country bumpkin be a noble? Ah... but they did mention

somethin' 'bout a title when I trounced the Demon King. I didn't need it though, so I won't really listenin'."

Pastel was saying some amazing things in a completely nonchalant way. She then crossed her arms and tilted her head. Corona sighed.

"It was probably a matter of prestige," she said. "The aristocracy wouldn't want to leave behind the legend of some mere country mage saving the world, after all."

"Pfft! Wha'z with that?"

"My legend was also rather glorified. Something about how I protected a village from a large group of demons out of the kindness of my heart."

"Heh, the great hero did have quite a love for money and loot. Who knows how many villages ya threatened in total?"

"I fought with my life. Compensation was well-deserved."

"Yeah, yeah... A hero seekin' material rewards over gratitude. Sounds just like a Demon King, I tell ya."

"I *am* a Demon King."

"Oh, yeah!"

Corona and Pastel burst into laughter together.

"Well, I reckon li'l Harissa here is one'a mah descendants."

"N-No way! Someone like me could never be..."

"What are ya sayin', missy? Ya succeeded in the cross-world summoning, din'cha? That's some crazy magic. It'd be durn hard for anyone not of mah genius blood to pull off a stunt like that."

Pastel gave another hearty laugh, but then her image started blinking in and out.

"Welp, looks like time's up."

"Time?" I asked.

"The ring don't last for long. It needs to recharge 'fore it can be used again."

“How long does that take?”

“Lessee... For the great hero, maybe a year?”

“A year?!”

We’d hardly talked with Pastel for ten minutes, but it was going to take a year before we could see her again? I turned to look at Corona, but she didn’t seem as upset as I imagined. She did look a little sad, though.

“Listen, I kicked the bucket ages ago. It’d be borin’ if y’all could talk to the dead any time ya wanted. If yer alive, ya should have yer eyes on the future,” Pastel said as her figure became more and more transparent. “You take care now, Miss Hero. Don’t sleep with yer stomach uncovered.”

“Shut up. Jeez. You’re annoying even in death,” Corona said with an exasperated smile. She then turned away and mumbled, “Well... I guess I could be a little more careful.”

“Tha’z more like it.” Pastel then clapped her hands together and turned my way. “Now, as for you, Mister New Hero... Take care’a the sloppy one over there for me.”

“Huh? R-Right!”

Caught off guard, I responded without thinking. But how exactly did she want me to take care of her...?



“See y’all later then.”

With those as her last words, Pastel disappeared back into the ring.

“Hmph. She always has to throw in something at the end,” Corona muttered with a bit of a sniff after a few seconds’ pause.

Just then, the bells in the distant castle started to ring.

“It’s almost time, Harissa.”

“All right.”

“Is it time already?” asked Corona.

“Yeah. What are you going to do, Corona?”

“Hmm... I think I’ll take a look around this world for a while. I’ll come back here before we return to Earth.”

Corona had left her territory in Eskro’s care and had decided to come stay with us on Earth. She said that was what she wanted to do, so we made it happen. For now, she was borrowing an empty room at Rosalind’s mansion. I’d have to help her find a part-time job like Lea sometime.

“Sounds good. It’ll be about ten days.”

Once Harissa and I finished the next thing on our to-do list, we were planning on heading to her village. Based on how long she said it took to get there and back, I figured we’d be gone about a week and a half.

“All right. See you in ten days, then.”

With that, Corona used her flight magic to rise into the air and have a look around the world she once saved.



After we parted with Corona, Harissa and I went to the castle. We had a very important appointment. And that was...

“So, the hero wishes to abolish the practice of summoning in my country?”

“Basically, yeah.”

All the ministers in the audience chamber were astir over what I said to the

king. Right now, Aburaamu was in the middle of recovering from the damage they suffered during the war, but progress on infrastructural repairs was slow. They were suffering from a labor shortage. And I was asking them to stop summoning, or in other words, to stop using spirits to do things like clear rubble and manage water sources. Their opposition wasn't surprising.

"Sir Hero, why would you ask such a thing?"

But despite what I was asking, the king hesitated to immediately dismiss a request from the famed hero.

"Actually, I visited the spirit world the other day to do something."

"Goodness...!"

The king was surprised. The audience was buzzing once again, as well, though this time they sounded astonished rather than aghast.

I continued, "While I was there, I met real spirits, and even the king of spirits himself."

"I see... What were the real spirits like?" asked the king.

"It'd be faster to see for yourself. Harissa!"

Right on cue, Harissa—who'd been on standby outside the audience chamber—entered with the Spirit King.

"Hero, is that...?"

"The Spirit King I just mentioned, yes."

"What?!"

The king of Aburaamu nearly jumped out of his skin. Well, that was to be expected. Most summoners in Aburaamu could only summon the astral body of the spirits—the only one in history who'd ever summoned an entire spirit, physical body and all, was probably Pastel—which meant this was his first time seeing a spirit's real, human-like form.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, king of humans."

"Ah... yes..."

The Spirit King extended a polite greeting, which elicited a completely

dumbfounded response from the king of Aburaamu.

“Your Majesty, this is what spirits actually look like. They have their own will and live their own lives in the spirit world like any human would. They’re not tools to be used however humans wish. This is why I want you to limit the use of summoning magic.”

The king of Aburaamu was silent. As Corona had once said, it seemed like the people of Aburaamu didn’t consider spirits to be real people themselves. That was why they used them without any consideration for their well-being. Once they realized that wasn’t the case, they’d likely feel guilty about what they’d been doing... But Aburaamu was still in a position where they needed the power of the spirits. The king couldn’t abolish the use of summoning magic so easily.

“King of humans, these two children have informed me of the state of affairs in this world.” The Spirit King spoke slowly and calmly in the otherwise silent audience chamber. “A great disaster befell the spirit world just the other day. I understand the desire for the power to restore your country. Thusly, I come bearing an offer.”

“What is your offer, king of spirits?”

The king of Aburaamu straightened up in his throne and looked the Spirit King in the eye for the first time. They beheld each other with esteem as the rulers of their respective countries.

“We spirits live in harmony with nature’s grace... That is why we do not have any magic-enhancing tools like you humans do. However, after this latest disaster, we have realized we cannot go on like this and wait for the next one.”

The disaster the Spirit King was talking about was Grausam’s invasion. One of the biggest problems he left in his wake was the dried-up mana spring. It had started to rejuvenate little by little and was producing a small amount of mana again, but the Spirit King was trying to plan for the possibility of it drying up again in the future. That’s where the King of Aburaamu came in.

“I’ve heard you can make magic tools to store mana. I would like to request the materials and information needed to produce such tools. In exchange, we will lend our power for the restoration of Aburaamu.”

“I see. So, that’s your offer...”

“Of course, you will also need to stop summoning us without consent as you have until now. We can discuss the details of how to dispatch laborers for another day.”

The king of Aburaamu nodded in agreement.

“I understand. If the spirits are willing to lend us their power, then we both have something to benefit from this. I look forward to our future discussions.”

Until now, the spirits were forced to listen to the orders of the mages that summoned them. And because the spirits were doing things unwillingly, their abilities were less than half as powerful as they ordinarily were. But now that both sides were talking things out, the spirits could work much more efficiently under a mutually beneficial arrangement, and that would speed up the restoration process considerably. And with the spirits working voluntarily, there would be no more need to worry about collateral damage from rampaging spirits. Like the king of Aburaamu said, this would be good for everyone.

After the talk, it was decided that a banquet would be held in honor of the Spirit King’s visit to Aburaamu. In other words, me and Harissa’s job was done. We quietly left the audience chamber.

“Nammy! Harissa!”

Shortly after, Lyun—who’d come with the Spirit King to Aburaamu—came running down the hallway towards us.

“How did the talk with the king go?!”

Those were the first words out of her mouth when she just barely came to a stop in front of us.

“It went fine, just like I told you it would. Everything’s gonna work out.”

“...Of course!”

Lyun’s cheeks flushed as she grinned from ear to ear. She must have been happy that negotiations with the humans were going well. “...”

“Wh-What?” I asked.

Lyun was now suddenly staring at my face, and I had no idea why.

“It’s nothing. I was just thinking that you’re amazing, Nammy. You defeated the Demon King and saved the spirit world, then you solved a long-standing problem for us spirits... And on top of everything, you saved my sister...”

What was this? For some reason, Lyun’s eyes seemed like they were shimmering. She was fidgeting with her hands, and her cheeks turned even redder as she moved closer to me.

“If it were you, Nammy... I could...”

“U-Um, Lyun?”



The atmosphere was getting weird, so I tried talking to her to figure out what on earth was going on, but then...

“Ahem, Sir Rekka! We’ve done our duty here, so let us hurry to my village next! Auntie is expecting us!” Harissa suddenly exclaimed, squeezing herself between me and Lyun and waving her hands in a panic.

“Y-Yeah, it’d be bad to keep her waiting. But isn’t it still early for the horse and carriage?”

“That doesn’t matter! Let’s go already!”

“O-Okay...”

Overwhelmed by the unusually forceful Harissa, I nodded along obediently.

“Hey, could I come with—”

“Please don’t!”

Harissa bluntly shot down Lyun’s request, put her hands on my back, then pushed me with as she hurried away. There was no need to rush that much...



Harissa and I went to visit her village along with her auntie who was from the same town. When we arrived, I was reminded that Pastel was from here, too. We should have brought Corona along. But when I mentioned it to R...

“If you said that to Harissa, even she’d reach her limit and snap on you.”

Well, it’s true that she was being a little scary when we left the castle. But things were different now. After some hubbub, I found myself being welcomed to the village elder’s house with Harissa.

“Oho, to think that little Harissa would bring the hero here!”

The village elder was an energetic old man in his eighties who offered me some sake as a warm welcome. He didn’t understand what a minor was, so I had some trouble refusing him.

“He sure does talk a lot...”

R had been acting grumpy for a while now. She couldn’t even eat, much less

drink sake. But rather than being miffed about the food and drink, I think she was really in a bad mood because the portable DVD player we'd brought along wasn't working. I'd gotten my allowance for August, so I'd bought it to keep her occupied. I bought a foot-powered battery charger along with it so we wouldn't need an electrical outlet, but it took hours of stepping to charge... which I didn't realize until after I'd already bought it. And R couldn't touch things, so it was my job to charge it. But all that aside, I was getting a little tired of the elder's long-winded story, too...

"Hmm, hm, hmm-hmm!"

Harissa, on the other hand, had been in high spirits since we'd arrived in the village. She was humming between bites of fruit even now, despite the fact that we were several hours into this feast... How long was it gonna go on, anyway? Surely there was no way they could afford to waste so much precious food, yet there was no sign the dishes were going to stop coming anytime soon. Huh... I hadn't thought about it before, but was the hero visiting really this big of a deal to them? But even then, my back was starting to hurt from sitting for so long... I politely interrupted the elder's story and stood up.

"Sir Rekka? Where are you going?"

"I'm going to get some fresh air. You keep eating, Harissa."

"Okay."

Harissa nodded and continued to hum happily. I left the elder's house and went for a walk around the village.

"That was quite the feast..."

"You can say that again," R responded.

"Ellicia said something similar, but am I really oblivious about the people around me? I'm technically a hero in this world..."

R sighed and said, "I don't think this is what Ellicia was talking about when she said you should think about the people you save."

"Huh? Then what did she mean?"

"Who knows?"

R feigned ignorance as usual... Well, whatever. The cool night breeze was so pleasant, it blew away all my little concerns. After walking around the village for a while, I returned to the elder's house. I bumped into Harissa's auntie right outside.

"Huh? Why are ya doin' out here, hero?"

"I was just getting some fresh air."

I explained myself for the umpteenth time that night, then looked at the plates she was holding in each hand. Both were huge and piled high with food.

"That's an amazing amount of food," I said.

"I put in extra effort 'specially for today since it's such an important celebration and all," she said with a hearty laugh.

I figured she was talking about the hero visiting, so I gave a strained smile and said, "You guys didn't have to go this far for me, though. Just because I'm visiting doesn't mean anything special will happen."

"What are ya sayin'? Harissa brought the hero to meet the village elder! We hafta celebrate that!"

What? For some reason, something seemed strange about the way she phrased all that. Why was everyone saying that Harissa brought me here? I mean, they weren't wrong, but... why did it sound like everyone's attention was on her, not me?

"Um, ma'am?"

"What is it? Ya should hurry inside, hero. The grub'll get cold."

"Oh, yeah, I will. I just wanted to ask something first... Is it really that important that Harissa brought me here?"

"Course it is!" she exclaimed with another hearty laugh. "The hero and Harissa are finally gettin' hitched!"

"...Excuse me?"

I felt like someone had just dropped an incredible bomb on me.

"Wh-Wh-What do you mean?!"

“What else? When a youngin takes someone to see the elder, they’re basically announcin’ their engagement!”

WHAT?! Was that how it worked in other worlds?! I... I was utterly speechless.

“Though I can’t say I’m not a li’l bit sad. Once she’s a married lady, Harissa’ll hafta live with her husband, so I guess she’ll be livin’ in the hero’s world forever.”

“Um, no, listen...!”

“I know I’m not Harissa’s real family or nuthin’, but... it’d be nice if ya visited every now and then, y’know? ‘Specially since Harissa’s got that magic that lets ya travel between worlds,” she said as she patted me on the shoulder twice. “Now get on in there!”

“Um... I think I might need a little more air...”

“Really? All right, but don’t you keep Harissa waitin’ too long, mister.”

Harissa’s auntie picked up the plates of food again and went inside. I was left alone... standing there completely dumbfounded and with my mind absolutely blank.

“Um... is that what Harissa meant when she brought me here?” I asked R.

“I thought Harissa was acting strange before you left for Aburaamu, but I get it now. Considering the customs of this world, it makes sense that she’d be excited.”

“No, but like... was that what Harissa intended?”

“Who knows? I can hazard a guess, but I’d risk influencing the state of your heart if I shared it with you,” R answered nonchalantly.

Did Harissa bring me here just to visit her village, or did she bring me back with the meaning her auntie implied? What were her true intentions?

“...Achoo!”

The night breeze was starting to feel chilly, but I couldn’t bring myself to go inside and sit next to Harissa quite yet.

—Fin—

Afterword

This was the eighth volume of our romantic (battle) comedy that's now had a story span two volumes for the very first time. The term "two-timing" is looking more and more like "twenty-timing." Hello again to those of you who followed along from volume seven, and greetings to all of you who bought all eight volumes at once.

Like I mentioned before, this was the first two-parter story in this series, but if I'm being perfectly honest, I had no idea whether or not I could save the story at the end of the seventh volume. Thankfully, Rekka managed to do it. As expected of the boy who saw the whole world fall into carnage and chaos! A two-volume story is nothing to him!

Now for my usual thanks. Thank you to Nao Watanuki who had to go through the extra trouble this time of drawing wonderful illustrations for two volumes. I was so glad to see all the heroines that suffered in volume seven smiling happily this time! And to my editor, Nanbu; the manga creator, Koji Hasegawa; the editing and sales departments at HJ Bunko; and all the bookstores and readers who supported the *Little Apocalypse* series: thank you! I hope you'll continue reading!

This is the illustrator, Nao Watanuki.

The rough for volume 8 is the backstabbing-yet-admirable subordinate, Eskro. We could really learn a thing or two from his tenacity!

Some of the other images featured Nartessia, who was very easy to design. I was excited to draw her evil smirk. It's fun being detestable sometimes.

It'd be nice if I could draw that steamed dumpling shaped headpiece again someday.

As our two-parter story comes to a close, I'd like to thank Mr. Nameko, the editors, and the readers. Did anyone notice Pastel in the volume 7 color pages? Let's meet again in the next volume!

[Yang] Thanks!

[Label] Earring: Belongs to the Margaret clan

挿絵担当・和狸ナオと申します。

8巻ラフは裏切るクセにどこか憎めない哀王の部下・エスクロです。めげずに逞しく生きる姿においては、むしろ見習いたいキャラクター！

イメージカラーがはっきりしていたナルデシアもデザインし易く、悪い表情をノリノリで描かせて頂きました。毒々しいのも良いものです。

またいつかあのシュウマイ(🍡)みたいなヘッドドレスを描く機会があればいいですね。

前後編終了という事で、なめて先生・編集様方そして読者様もお疲れ様でした。7巻カラーページにうすら登場していたパステルに気付いた方がいらしたら嬉しいです。ではまた、次巻で元気にお会いできますように！

和狸ナオ拜

ピアス

マーガレット家の



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I Saved Too Many Girls and Caused the Apocalypse: Volume 8

by Namekojirushi

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