Chapter 106 - Request (1)

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As Kynemon and Lampades stepped out of the office, they were greeted by , who still wore that suspicious, sly smile.

"So, did that clear up your questions?"

In a way, it did. But as their curiosity was satisfied, a gnawing sense of unease began to grow in its place.

Neither of them had the energy to respond to ' jovial demeanor. They simply nodded once before walking off, their footsteps heavy as they made their way to their assigned lodgings.

Kynemon broke the silence first.

"Did you figure it out?"

"What?"

"That so-called ‘employee’ who barged in."

"...It was Kaicle, wasn’t it."

"You're not even surprised?" Kynemon found Lampades' calm, almost indifferent reaction puzzling. Lampades was no coward—no one who survived the frontlines as a fixer could be—but Kynemon doubted Lampades had anticipated this development.

Lampades' thoughts were far more resigned. "I give up. I just don't know anymore."

Initially, Carisia seemed like a completely different breed from . "Was that just an act?" he wondered.

Today's events had only muddled things further. bowed his head to Carisia, and her subtle displays of cunning were enough to swallow the world whole. A force capable of calling an elusive tower master like Kaicle nothing more than an employee—there was a weight to that title.

"Employee" carried layers of meaning. It wasn’t just about having control over someone like Kaicle. It was a statement: to her, even someone like him was no more significant than any other mage. It was also a declaration—seeing Kaicle here would go nowhere; no one would dare reveal such information. Whether through espionage or simply silencing them directly, Carisia could make sure of that.

Lampades figured it was probably both.

While Lampades struggled with the stark reality of Carisia’s true power, Kynemon found an odd sense of relief.

He’d been living his life constantly on edge, even though no one had been chasing him. He had been forever haunted by the shadow of , fearing the day he would emerge from the darkness to claim what was "owed."

Even in his home, that fear had never left. He imagined waiting just outside his window, lurking in a dark alley, or maybe even hiding inside the walls, ready to demand payment for the relic Kynemon had fled with.

Now, that long-held anxiety was finally gone. Being dragged back to face and the ominous evil he served had severed that invisible chain of dread.

By confronting the very situation he feared most, there was nothing left to be afraid of. A strange peace was born from resignation.

"This all feels like some kind of multi-level marketing scam."

He had followed Lampades, met again, and now stood before Carisia, each encounter pushing him higher up the pyramid.

"So, are you really going to tell them everything?"

"And you? Still planning to follow ' every order?"

The two former fixers, bound by the strange camaraderie of those who had survived death together, walked on. Though they were on the path to hell, at least they weren’t alone.

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While Lampades and Kaicle were lamenting their situation elsewhere, was summoned to Carisia's office.

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"Yes, Madam."

"What were you doing?"

"Huh?"

Carisia picked up a lock of her hair, twirling it around her finger—a habit she had when there was much to say, but it wasn’t quite organized in her mind.

"So, you said you'd stand guard outside the office, right? But somehow, Kaicle managed to wander in. That wouldn’t have happened if you'd stayed where you were."

 let out a sigh. He’d briefly stepped away when he got an urgent message, and in that short span—disaster.

"I had to make up a story on the spot, you know."

"How did you manage?"

"I just said he was one of our employees."

"With all due respect, Madam, neither Lampades nor Kynemon have particularly bad eyesight."

Carisia shrugged.

"If I say he’s not Kaicle, what can they do?"

"Oh, Madam...!"

Carisia hadn’t just blurted out the ‘employee’ excuse recklessly. She understood that as long as she insisted, there was no way Kynemon or Lampades could refute it.

Sometimes, power is its own form of persuasion. The force of persuasion is still a kind of force, after all.

rubbed his forehead. Sure, it was his fault for stepping away, but Carisia could have come up with a better solution with her intellect, couldn’t she?

"If you say things like that, it makes the company sound like some shadowy organization plotting world domination—like when villains say things like, 'That guy was the weakest among us.'"

"What are you talking about? We are a shadowy organization plotting world domination."

"Oh."

Now that thought about it, she wasn’t wrong. After all, the founding purpose of Hydra Corp was to destroy the White Light Tower. He quickly changed the subject.

"It’s about time we consider revealing the company’s true purpose to the board members."

"It would be best to announce it once the Artificial Commandments are complete."

"Unfortunately, it’s hard to say when that will be."

Carisia nodded at ' words, but then she looked up, something occurring to her.

"So, what was so important that you had to step away?"

"A message from the Divine Cult. It was half a thank-you for the last time, and half them fishing for how exactly I managed to take down a Tower Elder."

Carisia stroked her chin. Indeed, aside from herself, the only group aware that had taken down a Tower Elder was the Divine Cult.

"Does this mean they need you for something again? Even if they’re outsiders, it feels like they’re relying on you too much."

She didn’t press for details on the Divine Cult’s message. If assistance were needed, he would report back when the time came.

Otherwise, as usual, he would work his magic and later groan, "That was exhausting."

A memory from the Talo incident flashed in her mind—when the Tower Elders had chased after .

Even for , it would have been nearly impossible to win a battle against multiple Elders without injury. Carisia pulled out a crystal she had stored in her pocket and tossed it to him.

"Madam?"

"Take this with you, just in case. I don’t want you getting caught in another dangerous situation like last time."

 shook his head, placing the crystal back in her hand.

"No need. I haven’t set a specific date for a meeting with the Divine Cult yet."

Carisia reluctantly pocketed the crystal, and shrugged casually.

"So, what exactly did you tell them?"

"I was straightforward. But I made it seem like most of the ideas were mine. I framed you as just some poor salesman forced to drag his friends into things under the orders of a grumpy boss."

 couldn't help but be impressed. For Carisia to take the blame and tarnish her own reputation for the sake of her subordinates? That was unexpected.

"Oh, right. I forgot to discuss Kynemon's payment. Could you ask him about that when you get the chance?" nodded.

Which is why, the next morning, Kynemon found standing right outside his door.

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"Ugh!?"

"Ha, what’s with the overreaction?"

flashed what he believed was a warm, friendly smile.

"I must say, you're still quite disciplined. Waking up at the same time as you did during your fixer days."

"What brings you here?"

"Haha, so we've become the kind of people who only meet when there's business, huh?"

Kynemon clamped his mouth shut. What was the point of bringing up their past friendship now? Was it a jab for running away?

"But yes, I do have business today. Would you mind sparing me a bit of your time?"

Kynemon glanced at , then reluctantly nodded. He knew there was no point in refusing.

They walked down the hall of Hydra Corp, eventually arriving at the employee cafeteria. had prepared the meeting here to soften the mood before they had to talk about work.

Though Kynemon was baffled, he grabbed a tray of food.

"Please, eat while we talk."

As suspicion welled up within him, spoke.

"Our CEO is quite the fair person."

"Fair?"

"Indeed. While I called you here out of old friendship, work is work. The CEO says she's willing to meet whatever conditions you want for your payment."

"Payment..."

Kynemon swallowed the thought: *What use is money or anything else if your plan comes to fruition?*

"I don't really want anything."

"Come now, don't say that. Have I ever lied to you?"

Suddenly, an image from the past flashed through Kynemon's mind—his mage tower, crushed by the hands of the Dark Mages.

If the world is going to turn upside down anyway, why not satisfy a personal grudge along the way?

Resigned to his fate, Kynemon finally spoke.

"There’s one mage tower I want to see burn to the ground."

Chapter 107- Request (2)

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A mage tower that Kynemon wanted to see completely destroyed?

What was he talking about?

I recalled Kynemon's personal history. Though I didn't have a wide circle of friends, it wasn't that I had no interest in the few I did have. Kynemon had once been the heir to a regional mage tower—a position of some power—until the day a Dark Mage Tower coveted the unique magic developed by his tower.

Then came the all-too-familiar tale. The local mage tower couldn't stand against the tyranny of the Dark Mage faction. Kynemon's tower was absorbed, and he was forced to live in exile, becoming a fixer.

So...

Was he really asking me to wipe a mage tower off the map?

I fought the urge to massage my temples. There was this odd tendency among people from my fixer days to vastly overestimate my abilities.

Did they truly believe I could walk straight into a mage tower and annihilate everyone? I wasn't some ninja who could suddenly appear and slash my way through hordes of enemies. In fact, I wasn't exactly built for head-on battles.

"Kynemon."

I couldn't outright refuse his request—after all, Carisia had promised to reward him. However, now wasn't the best time to approve a plan to topple the Dark Mage Tower.

The risk was too high.

Sure, it was possible. If we left Etna City's affairs to the directors and Carisia and I went on a business trip to handle this...

But what happens when the Dark Mage Tower collapses? Would we be able to redirect the blame to someone else, like Argyreon or other organizations, while dodging the ever-watchful eyes of Panoptes?

The timing just wasn't right.

So what I needed to do now was—

"Let's look at this from a different angle."

—negotiate.

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Kynemon's brows furrowed in confusion.

"Different angle?"

He wanted to wipe his enemies off the face of the earth. What more straightforward, satisfying form of revenge could there be?

Orthes' smile deepened.

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. You've heard that saying, haven't you?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"Kynemon, your family's mage tower is still in their hands, isn't it?"

Kynemon gave a slow nod. Even after hiding away in his hometown, trying to live quietly, rumors about the city's rulers had reached his ears. It was impossible not to know.

"How many years has it been?"

"What?"

"How many years since they took your tower?"

Kynemon began counting the years. From the day he had fled, hiding his identity, until now—it had been nearly two decades.

"Eighteen years. What does that have to do with what I asked for?"

"Isn't it a waste?"

"A waste?"

The question spilled from Kynemon's lips in pure confusion. A waste of what?

Flashes of memory surged up—the early days when Orthes had first started to make a name for himself. His cryptic questions had always left people puzzled at first, but eventually, the answers had come to light.

"Don't listen to the purple sparrow's orders."

"What kind of nonsense—get lost."

Back then, many had dismissed Orthes' words, but those who did... ended up dead.

"The purple sparrow..." It was an inscription on an ancient ruin's stone wall. People had followed the instructions carved into it, believing it was a way to escape, but it had been a trap.

The chilling part? The carving of the sparrow had long since faded after millennia. Its colors had weathered away until all that remained was a dull gray bird. It was only through intense investigation that experts found traces of purple pigments—suggesting that the bird might have once been purple.

This must be another one of Orthes' cryptic questions. Kynemon felt a mixture of fear and excitement—the kind of tension that had always accompanied his dealings with Orthes.

He feared Orthes, yet he couldn’t forget the glory of their joint expeditions into the extra-dimensional ruins, where they had never failed.

To Kynemon, Orthes was both destruction and triumph wrapped in one.

"If that’s the reward you seek..."

Orthes lowered his voice, the tone causing an automatic spike in tension. The faint blue glow under Orthes’ slitted eyes was like a flame that lured a moth to its doom.

"It will only take one night."

"..."

The short time frame didn’t surprise Kynemon—he had always believed Orthes was capable of such feats. What confused him was the use of the word "only." What did he mean by "only one night"?

"Eighteen years of suffering for you. And their fall will take only one night. It’s hardly fair, is it?"

"You..."

Now Kynemon was starting to understand.

The saying "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" finally made sense.

"Rather than destroy the Dark Mage Tower, wouldn’t it be far more satisfying to hold it in your hands?"

Kynemon was speechless. The clues had pointed him toward this possibility, but to hear Orthes so casually suggest handing him the reins to one of the most powerful mage towers?

Kynemon swallowed repeatedly, overwhelmed by the proposition. And then Orthes' quiet voice continued to pour poison into his ears.

"Eighteen years—6,480 days of hardship for you. Meanwhile, their collapse would only take a single day. So, isn’t it only fair..."

Kynemon's body trembled with an unholy thrill as Orthes’ voice lowered even further.

"...that they suffer through just as much as you did?"

"As much as I’ve suffered..."

"What do you think would be their greatest humiliation? Being ruled by the very heir of the tower they once destroyed—seeing the power they thought was absolute turned against them."

If the devil’s temptation existed, it would sound like this. Kynemon felt an overwhelming urge to grasp Orthes' outstretched hand, his sinister nature momentarily forgotten.

No... It wasn’t forgotten.

Something deep inside was urging him to ignore the madness that accompanied Orthes’ plans.

Kynemon was afraid, not just of Orthes, but of how he was drawn to this temptation despite knowing what it entailed.

But...

"Is it possible?"

The rage he had buried long ago began to resurface. The resentment he had carried ever since fleeing from Orthes clung to him like a shadow.

"It will take longer than a single night, but..."

Orthes smiled and nodded.

Perfect! He’s hooked.

Watching Kynemon grapple with his conflicting emotions, I felt a slight twinge of guilt. My old friend was a pragmatic leader, as I'd known from our days running fixer crews together.

Even if he managed to take over the Dark Mage Tower, Kynemon wouldn’t act as some tyrant. In fact, there was a good chance he would cut out the rotten parts and run the place properly—though that outcome was far from the bloodthirsty revenge he had originally envisioned.

Still, right now, I had other priorities—Carisia’s mission came first.

Sure, wiping out a mage tower would feel satisfying, but installing a friend as its leader? That was a much more lucrative move. I felt bad for slipping in a cost-benefit analysis into my friend’s heartfelt revenge request, but this was the best outcome for everyone involved, right?

Finally, Kynemon nodded as if he had made up his mind.

"...There’s something I need to know."

"Anything."

"How long would I have?"

Ah. Kynemon was asking how long he could stay as the head of the Dark Mage Tower.

Carisia wasn’t concerned with anything beyond the fall of the White Light Tower. I could promise Kynemon a lifetime appointment as tower master, and it wouldn’t bother her at all—especially since this was related to the Divine Investigation project.

Still, making such promises on the spot might earn me a scolding later.

"As long as the President wills it."

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Kynemon wavered once more. Strangely enough, Orthes genuinely seemed to be serving his President with sincerity.

"Are you really the type to follow someone else’s orders?"

From his conversation with Lampades the previous night, Kynemon knew that the friendship between Orthes and Carisia wasn’t just for show, but it was still hard to believe.

Had the faceless Orthes ever bowed to anyone like this?

Despite the provocative question, Orthes' smile only deepened.

"Come on now, Kynemon. What employee doesn’t look out for their boss?"

"It’s funny to hear that from you. I never thought anyone could be your boss..."

"Well, if they’re providing meals and a salary, that makes them a good boss, right? And Madam Carisia makes sure I’m well taken care of."

The notion that someone plotting the end of the world was concerned about something as trivial as meals and wages—what a strange irony.

The end of the world...

Kynemon pondered the time limit implied by Orthes' words.

"So, until the world ends, then..."

Orthes raised a brow but didn't dwell on it. He knew Carisia well enough to trust that she wouldn't revoke anything she'd given away unless it was necessary. If anything, she was generous in that way.

Guess she's meticulous about payroll. Kynemon has no idea she's giving him a lifetime guarantee.

Although Orthes felt a slight annoyance at the thought of his friend trying to swindle the President,

he quickly brushed it aside. After all, Kynemon's upcoming role was vital to Hydra Corp's future.

He decided to give his friend one last push in the right direction.

"Yes, you've understood perfectly."

Chapter 108- Request (3)

Chapter 108- Request (3)

Kynemon stood up abruptly, the thought of finally getting his revenge on the Dark Mage Tower igniting a fire in him. The notion of not just destroying them, but also bringing everything they once took from him under his control, was too alluring to resist.

"I'll need to start working on that list of sacred artifacts hidden by the mage towers," Kynemon muttered to himself.

It had been years since he'd collected that information, back when he still believed he could leverage it to drive divisions between the mage towers by exploiting the grey areas of using the power of ancient gods through sacred artifacts. He wasn't up-to-date on the latest trades and dealings of the mage towers, but his old records should still hold some value.

Artifacts and relics are the hidden trump cards of the towers. They're not something you can just buy and sell openly.

The fact that these items rarely changed hands only increased the attention they attracted when revealed.

By combining his old records with more recent auction transactions, Kynemon felt confident he could compile a useful report.

As he walked out, Orthes' voice called after him.

"Oh, and if you need any manpower or equipment for your investigation, just go to Director Arabella. Tell her the Divine Investigation Office sent you, and she'll take care of you."

Kynemon couldn't help but shudder. It seemed that no matter what he thought or planned, it all led back to Orthes. A chilling but convenient truth. He had no choice but to acknowledge that the more capable his allies were, the better.

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Carisia was carefully reviewing the directors' reports. The propulsion system development overseen by Bertrand was progressing smoothly.

"So, what exactly did your friend request as compensation?" she asked, not looking up from her documents.

"Ah, he initially wanted me to destroy one of the Dark Mage Towers. But, given the current circumstances, I convinced him otherwise," Orthes replied.

Carisia paused and raised an eyebrow. A request to destroy a mage tower wasn't so different from her own mission to bring down the White Light Tower. She could understand such a desire for revenge.

What puzzled her, though, was Orthes' claim that he had talked him down. After all, vengeful desires rarely subsided so easily, and without proper care, they could easily grow more intense if one tried to temper them.

"What exactly did you say to convince him?" she asked, now fully attentive.

"Not much. I just asked him if he was really satisfied with destroying them after everything they put him through. Why not take over the tower instead and make them suffer under his control?"

Carisia sighed, the situation now clearer. Orthes, in his characteristic way, had likely said something so suspicious that it defied logic. There was no point in critiquing his words—Orthes believed his respectful tone helped avoid suspicion. But it was Orthes himself, with his odd presence, who always came off as suspicious.

She looked at him, considering his appearance. His face, if taken purely by facial structure, was flawless. But it was always those half-closed eyes that caused trouble.

"Sigh."

She exhaled, pushing aside her wandering thoughts to focus on the compensation for Kynemon.

"So, tell me, why is taking over the tower a cheaper solution than destroying it?"

"Simple. Destroying it would bring us no profit. It would create chaos and force us to expend resources cleaning up the aftermath. A tower collapsing out of nowhere would draw attention from the Ten Towers and require us to handle the fallout for a long time."

"But couldn't the ease of the destruction outweigh the cost of managing the fallout?" she countered.

"Madam, you're not thinking of sending me on a solo mission for this, are you?" Orthes shot back with mock indignation.

"You can handle it, can't you?"

Carisia's gaze cut into him as if asking, Why the complaints now?

Orthes shrugged, realizing he was pushing his luck.

"You're overestimating me, Madam. I haven't done that much," he said, trying to steer the conversation back on track before she could dwell on his past achievements.

Carisia, having witnessed Orthes' many feats, raised an eyebrow. Hasn't done much? He's practically done everything, she thought.

Realizing he was at a disadvantage, Orthes quickly continued, "But the point is, even if the ease of destruction balances the aftermath, the profits afterward are non-existent. We'd have nothing to gain from the ruins, maybe a bit from selling scraps, but that's negligible compared to the tower's operational value."

"However, if we install Kynemon as the new tower master, we don't have to deal with cleanup costs. Instead, we get long-term returns. Even if the process is a bit more complicated, the outcome is far more profitable."

Carisia nodded slowly. "You're right, the Ten Towers don't usually interfere with succession battles. Assassinations over tower seats are just business as usual in our world."

She understood that Orthes was making a pragmatic choice, and she didn't oppose it. She had only been scrutinizing the logic to ensure it held up under consideration.

"So, what's the name of the tower we'll be handing to Kynemon?"

"Amimone Tower," Orthes answered.

Amimone Tower? Carisia felt a pang of recognition. There was something familiar about that name, something tied to her own past and the White Light Tower.

No... it wasn't that old a connection. It felt more recent.

"Ah, of course. It's one of the roots of the Lernian faction."

Amimone Tower had been the origin of the Lernian faction, the very tower that had once owned the Hydra Corporation's current headquarters. However, it wasn't a matter of the Lernian faction being a splinter from Amimone—rather, the opposite was true.

Amimone Tower had cast out the individuals who later founded the Lernian faction.

"A curious coincidence, wouldn't you say?" Orthes commented, flashing his usual knowing smile. "I hadn't expected our paths to cross like this."

"A coincidence?"

Carisia knew, of course, that all of this was just a series of unintended circumstances. But would Kynemon see it that way?

"Our company has no formal ties to the Lernian faction, so even if something happens to Amimone Tower, no one would suspect us of being behind it."

"You sound confident. Does that mean you've already planned everything out?"

"Nothing so grand," Orthes chuckled.

He pieced together the clues from Kynemon. Being the tower that Kynemon harbored the greatest grudge against, Amimone was also the one he had collected the most dirt on over the years.

"Amimone Tower is solid enough to be considered a Dark Mage Tower candidate. Its strength lies not just in raw magical power, but in its political maneuvering. They've placed many of their mages into key positions in security forces like Argos."

It was impossible for them to have absorbed Kynemon's tower without resorting to underhanded tactics—most of which were likely covered up by Amimone's wide-reaching network of connections.

Orthes planned to target those very connections.

"Besides, wasn't L13 from Blasphemia just ordered to investigate Argyreon's infiltrators within Argos?"

Orthes' smile widened.

By Panoptes' rules, its members were supposed to be independent from any particular tower, ensuring they could make unbiased judgments. But, of course, that was only the official stance. Everyone knew that old allegiances ran deep, and most mages leaned towards the towers they were once part of.

"As we start casting doubt on the Amimone-affiliated Argos agents, suspicion will eventually reach the tower itself. And to stir things further, we can leak some information about their hidden sacred artifacts, which will destabilize the situation even more."

That's only the beginning?

"And have you explained this to Kynemon?"

"Of course. I made sure to let him know this is just the start, so he wouldn't be disappointed."

Carisia had the distinct feeling that Orthes wasn't fully aware of the weight his words carried—or if he was, he didn't care.

Today seemed like one of those times when he severely underestimated their gravity.

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Meanwhile, Salmosia, head of inspections at Blasphemia, was in a foul mood.

The authority to pursue Argyreon had been stripped from Blasphemia altogether.

She knew the reason. It was a reasonable decision to prevent Blasphemia from facing a group powerful enough to kill a Ten Tower Elder alone. But still...

Panoptes should investigate as a whole unit, not leave it to just a part.

But how could they trust Argos, knowing Argyreon might have infiltrated them? The jealousy and insecurity gnawed at her.

Just then, a message popped up on the restricted channel used exclusively by inspectors.

It was from L13.

Seeing that name, a surge of anticipation welled up within Salmosia.

Chapter 109: Each One's Preparation (1)

Chapter 109: Each One's Preparation (1)

Kynemon felt a sense of confusion at Carisia's sudden summons.

He had never once slacked off in the tasks assigned to him. In fact, he hadn't even had time to attempt such a thing.

It had been less than three days since he'd been dragged to Etna City. Even if he had failed to do his job properly during those days, anyone would have considered it an adjustment period.

'Was my requested payment too high? …No.'

Thinking about his compensation, Kynemon shook his head.

Orthes had promised him the position of the master of Amimone Tower. His original demand had been simple destruction. Orthes' proposal, however, was far more sophisticated and intelligent than mere retaliation.

The fact that Orthes had made such a bold proposal indicated just how powerful Hydra Corporation was. If it wasn't something Hydra could pull off, Orthes wouldn't have suggested it in the first place.

With lingering doubts, Kynemon made his way to the president's office.

Inside, Carisia sat alone. The absence of Lampades made the solitary meeting all the more oppressive for Kynemon.

"Have a seat."

Carisia gestured. The elegance in her movements exuded the confidence of someone in absolute power, reigning from the shadows.

"I apologize for disturbing you when you're so busy."

"…Why have you called for me?"

A mysterious smile played on Carisia's lips. Kynemon couldn't help but think that smile resembled Orthes.

'Lampades said this woman is a lot like Orthes…'

Now he understood what was meant by that.

"There's something I'm curious about."

“Are you talking about Amimone Tower? I’ve already delivered all my findings to the Head of the Divine Investigation Office, and as for the relic holdings of the other towers, I’m still in the middle of investigating.”

“Oh, no. This isn’t about official matters. I’m talking about your ‘friend.’”

“Orthes?”

You should know him better than I do. Kynemon wisely refrained from speaking the thought that had flashed through his mind.

‘…There’s a rumor that Orthes can read minds sometimes, but surely the president doesn’t possess such powers.’

If the president could handle everything on her own, subordinates would be pointless. Orthes must have some irreplaceable value that led her to keep him in her service.

“Yes. I’m talking about Orthes, the Head of the Divine Investigation Office.”

Kynemon waited anxiously for what would come next.

“What did you do during your time as a troubleshooter?”

“…?”

The unexpected question only deepened Kynemon’s confusion.

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I was busy making calls. Here I was, working hard so I could live a life of idleness, yet I was starting to realize just how exhausting life could be, even without much physical activity.

“Yes, Chief Auditor. I assure you the line is secure…”

Lately, most of my calls had been with Salmosia. I had to lay the groundwork in advance, making the net tighter around Amimone Tower.

“Demus, it’s me. Are you making the necessary preparations?”

My second contact was Demus, the negotiator for the Divine Cult. I had called him around the time Lampades brought Kynemon to us.

‘The surveillance from the Ten Magic Towers has become more intense due to their connection with Argyrion. How do we get through this crisis?’

I had also added that we only needed a little more time, and once we extracted the power of the relics and received the temple’s blessing, we’d have the strength to stand against the Ten Magic Towers. I saw this as half bluff.

Their power would certainly increase, but not enough to overwhelm the entirety of the Ten Magic Towers.

If adding a few more relics to a temple could have defeated the Ten Towers, why had the Divine Cult lost during the Mage King's era when they had at least thirteen temples?

That's why I didn't bother questioning or casting doubt on such empty boasts. Criticizing them would only risk creating animosity.

Instead of harsh words, I offered them a way to break through the current situation.

Truthfully, it was a way to break through 'in my favor.'

And this method was the key to toppling Amimone Tower.

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Demus gazed at Erichthonia, the high priestess of Glaucus, who stood before him. Since the acquisition of the Grand Temple of Pluton, the Divine Cult had undergone a massive transformation.

The most significant change was the rise of 'factions.'

In the past, the Divine Cult had been united purely for survival, with no room for factional disputes.

There could be disagreements, but once a decision was made, it was followed with absolute obedience, and the entire cult would devote itself to supporting the outcome.

If this hadn't been the case, they would have long ago been crushed by the power of the Ten Magic Towers.

But now, they had a new source of power. The relics and the temple presented the cult with a different future.

It was no longer necessary for everyone to obey a single will. Even divided, they could still survive or even achieve something greater.

This potential for division became most apparent in response to the Pope's plan.

There had always been those who opposed the Pope's plans, but they had set aside their objections when his plan narrowly passed a vote at the gathering.

Even when the Pope's plan seemed like the only means of survival, a significant number of votes were cast in opposition. The radical and unfamiliar future the Pope envisioned was too unsettling for many.

But now, the situation had changed.

A new means of survival that didn't rely on the Pope had appeared. The cult had succeeded in finding the remnants of ancient Mythical Era power.

Of course, this alone would not have been enough to form a faction opposing the Pope.

What united the once-scattered opposition—whose only common trait had been vague dissatisfaction—into a cohesive faction was the Grand Temple of Pluton.

More specifically, it was the priestess of Pluton who controlled it.

After the temple came into the cult's possession, the Pluton sect had no choice but to step out from the shadows and into the spotlight. The priestess of Pluton, as the rightful and legitimate heir to the temple, gained authority second only to the Pope.

At some point, word quietly spread that the priestess had been opposing the Pope's plan all along but had cooperated only out of necessity. The source of this rumor was impossible to trace.

Thus, the Divine Cult split into two factions.

Those who supported the Pope, and those who stood with the priestess. The future that Priestess Kore of Pluton had feared—the future of division—had arrived.

'…'

However, not everyone had made a quick decision on which side to join, like Hyacinth with the Pope's faction or Proditor with the priestess's.

Demus was one of the undecided, those still hesitating to choose a side.

"So, Erichthonia, what's your assessment of Orthes' response?"

Erichthonia was someone who had immediately decided to support the priestess upon her emergence. She agreed with most of Kore's views, but she had withheld judgment on one matter—Orthes.

She had used Demus to ask Orthes a question in order to test him.

"When I asked how we could hide our presence, he didn't say to hide. It wasn't the answer I expected."

"Isn't that plan too clever to dismiss?"

When asked how to avoid the attention of the Ten Magic Towers, Orthes had given a completely unexpected response.

“Don’t hide.”

“You’ve been labeled as an excuse to justify Argyrion’s campaign. Panoptes and the Ten’s elders may believe that excuse.”

“Therefore, your traces shouldn’t be found. But if they are, magical society will be thrown into even greater chaos.”

With the Ten Towers tightening their surveillance under the pretext of relic enforcement, Orthes advised them to use this pretext against them.

By actively leaving false traces, they could make the world believe that Argyrion and the Divine Cult were acting together, thus diverting attention away from the cult as the Ten focused on pursuing Argyrion.

‘If he were truly a threat to us, as the priestess claimed, he wouldn’t have provided such an effective strategy…’

The priestess remained silent about why she viewed Orthes as a danger.

Thus, they had asked him this question to test his loyalty. If Orthes truly intended to betray the Divine Cult, he would have used this moment, when the cult was still growing, to offer a trap-laden response.

Once the cult had fully mastered the power of the temple, they would hold strength comparable to the Ten Magic Towers of old.

However, Orthes’ response, while risky, contained no traps.

Erichthonia nodded in acknowledgment, recognizing the brilliance of Orthes’ strategy.

“Yes, it’s not bad. But I wonder if it’s feasible. For the plan to work, the chaos would need to reach at least a legitimate magic tower.”

“He’s already prepared for that.”

“Prepared?”

Demus muttered the name of the tower Orthes had identified as the most suitable place to leave traces.

“Amimone Tower.”

Chapter 110: The Storm Sweeping Amimone (1)

Chapter 110: The Storm Sweeping Amimone (1)

Hydra Corporation had no significant presence in the magical society.

It was only natural. In a world where ancient towers with centuries, even millennia of history existed, a fledgling magic tower that hadn't even lasted a full year—let alone a decade—was no more than a floating weed, likely to disappear at any moment.

Of course, there were exceptional cases where newly established magic towers made their mark immediately upon birth.

Sometimes it was a tower that had uncovered the ancient wisdom of a destroyed magic tower in old ruins, or perhaps a disciple from one of the Ten Magic Towers who struck out on their own, or a sudden genius who developed an extraordinary, unique magic. Such elements could draw the attention of magical society.

However, Hydra Corporation was none of these. Carisia wanted it that way, and Orthes made it happen.

Despite its aggressive expansion and formidable combat capabilities, its power was only enough to contend for dominance over Etna City. To the influential forces that could sway the entirety of magical society, Hydra was just another tower, indistinguishable from the countless others.

Even considering the skill Carisia had demonstrated during the Elysion Terror Incident, it remained that way. Carisia had deliberately avoided flaunting her position as Hydra's president.

Hydra Corporation was merely a name that surfaced when people mentioned the unfavorable factors affecting the stock prices of the Kaicle Tower, whose master had mysteriously disappeared.

Because of this, Amimone Tower's interest in Hydra Corporation far exceeded the average curiosity of the magical society.

There was only one reason Amimone Tower was interested in Hydra. It was because Hydra had been the one to bring down the Lernian Tower.

The founders of Lernian Tower were exiles from Amimone Tower. If Hydra were to leverage Lernian Tower's legacy to fully enter magical society, Amimone Tower would have welcomed it with open arms.

Given the founders' origins, it was inevitable that Lernian Tower's research carried a trace of Amimone's influence. If one were to expand upon this interpretation, one could argue that Lernian Tower's legacy was essentially a stolen result of Amimone Tower's own heritage.

Using this as leverage, Amimone Tower could slowly extend its influence over Hydra, potentially even attempting to absorb Hydra as it had with countless other towers before.

However, contrary to Amimone Tower's expectations, Hydra Corporation was merely engaging in a small-scale land grab within Etna City. Eventually, Amimone Tower lost interest in Hydra altogether.

It would later be remembered as one of Amimone Tower's gravest miscalculations.

Even if they had continued to monitor Hydra, it was uncertain whether they would have realized that Hydra was behind the storm that would soon crash down upon them.

***

The misfortune began with Panoptes. Any tower of significant stature knew to exploit legal gray areas to their fullest, placing their own mages within key positions at Panoptes.

And then, a scandalous accusation arose concerning an Amimone-affiliated agent within Panoptes, named Argos.

"Colluding with Argyrion?"

Amimone Tower's master, Danao, screamed. What madness was this?

While his predecessors might have been more ambitious, Danao himself had no such grand designs. Join forces with Argyrion to bring down the Ten Magic Towers and rise to the pinnacle of all towers?

Ridiculous. He was already enjoying nearly the highest level of wealth and power, even if not quite at the summit. Why would he engage in such a risky gamble, which wasn't even worth being called an adventure?

His ideal life was a pastoral one—quietly collecting patents from minor towers that would generate steady income for years to come.

"Damn it, what the hell is going on? I'm sure I sent enough bribes to the higher-ups in Argos."

Danao ruffled his hair in frustration as he reread the report slowly.

"Blasphemia?"

These bastards. Danao gritted his teeth. Though Argos, Eidolons, and Blasphemia were nominally equal branches of Panoptes, Argos wielded the real power.

Argos had the most members, was assigned the broadest scope of work, and its duties were the most widespread and universal.

Blasphemia and Eidolons were more like secret organizations, operating for specific purposes, which made them less visible.

However, any master of a legitimate magic tower was expected to be well-versed in the internal power struggles of Panoptes.

“Damn it, have I been caught in some hierarchy war between these two factions?”

Or maybe it wasn’t just a simple hierarchy war. Rumors had been quietly circulating that Argyrion had once been a Blasphemia agent who had turned into an Eroder. The more non-Blasphemia members Argyrion gathered as collaborators, the less burdened the organization would become.

“It’s odd that the suspicion is being directed at my tower. Is there a mage within Blasphemia trying to undermine us?”

Danao recalled the rival magic towers that had been expanding in the same fields as his tower. There was no need to count how many rival towers resented his indiscriminate expansion, but few would view him as a serious competitor.

The accumulated knowledge and expertise they had built over generations couldn’t be overturned by a few patents from minor towers. Danao himself wasn’t trying to directly compete with these established towers, but rather diversify his business by acquiring patents.

‘That narrows down the potential enemies to those who have a real grudge against my tower. Maybe another tower whose expertise overlaps with ours, competing over the market….’

Danao considered the possibility that a rival tower might be orchestrating the current situation but ultimately shook his head. Amimone Tower was only the first target. The Ten Towers’ policies, such as relic audits, meant that most towers were too busy managing their internal affairs to focus on external rivalries.

So that left only one remaining suspect.

The losers who had been defeated by Amimone Tower.

It was entirely plausible that the survivors of some minor tower had joined Panoptes in a desperate attempt to find a way forward. If any of them were talented enough to be recruited by Blasphemia, it was possible they had orchestrated this retaliatory accusation.

“Hmph. A pathetic attempt at revenge, that’s all they can muster.”

Anyone with a decent mind could think of accusing Amimone Tower’s agents by taking advantage of the tensions between Blasphemia and Argos.

But unless they could present concrete evidence of actual treason, the accusers themselves would face backlash instead.

Naturally, Amimone Tower had no traitors. Danao was a man who loved his institution more than anyone.

With the authority and power that a legitimate magic tower held, vague suspicions would soon be buried with time. By then, the false accusers would be ostracized within Blasphemia, and the chance to eliminate them would come naturally.

True power struggles didn't play out like this.

Even if the accusations were false, the accusers needed to prepare thorough evidence that could make the lies seem real. The defeated lacked the capacity to fabricate such evidence.

This was the difference between the powerful and the defeated.

"To resolve this quickly, I'll need to find out who's behind this. I'll have to seek out people who have connections to Blasphemia."

And the very next day…

Amimone Tower was hit with additional charges: the crime of hiding relics.

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"Wow, it's off to a smooth start!"

Kynemon trembled as he listened to Orthes' explanation. From the very first step, the plan to accuse Amimone Tower's Argos agents through Blasphemia was beyond Kynemon's comprehension.

How could Orthes manipulate Blasphemia, control their intentions from Etna City?

This time, though, it was even more dramatic. A large quantity of relic fragments had been discovered in the city where Amimone Tower was located.

"They may only be 'remnants,' as the divine power has been extracted, making them not true relics. But we can easily pin this on Amimone Tower. We can claim that they stripped the divine power from the relics to avoid detection during inspections, only to re-empower them after the inspections were over."

Orthes kindly explained the intent behind the grand performance. It was a plan that could only be realized by manipulating both Blasphemia and Argos while procuring an unknown quantity of relics.

Kynemon realized that Orthes wasn't kidding when he said it would take some time before he could give Kynemon the title of tower master.

If this was just the first step, how far would Amimone Tower fall into the abyss?

“What’s the second step?”

“Oh, nothing much. Isn’t the reason the Ten Towers are acting so defensively because of Argyrion?”

“If it’s because of Argyrion, are you going to summon them?”

“Oh, Kynemon, you’re as sharp as ever!”

‘What kind of insane nonsense is he talking about now?’

Kynemon stared at Orthes in shock.

Orthes smiled as he recalled the core of Adoosiam, which he had secured from the grand temple of Pluton.

Chapter 111: The Storm Sweeping Amimone (2)

Chapter 111: The Storm Sweeping Amimone (2)

On the way back from wrapping up matters at the Grand Temple of Pluton, Carisia had analyzed the core of Adoosiam.

‘According to Carisia’s analysis, this golem—codenamed Adoosiam—was sending distress signals to two different entities.’

One was the Ten Magical Commandments. The other was to the Mage King’s subordinates, beings of the same kind as the golem.

Orthes suspected that this "Mage King’s subordinate" might be none other than Argyrion.

The simplest way to prove this was to tamper with Adoosiam’s internal circuits and trigger another distress signal.

However, Orthes couldn’t choose this option. For the time being, he had to entertain guests at Hydra Corporation, and if Argyrion really did invade Etna City in response to the signal, it would inevitably attract unwanted attention from the Ten Magic Commandments.

It also wasn’t something that could be tested in some remote area. If Argyrion had indeed responded to the first distress signal, there was no guarantee he’d respond to a second or third one.

‘If the attack on the Grand Temple of Pluton was indeed due to this signal, I can only use it once or twice more, at most.’

The Ten Magic Commandments would undoubtedly assume their distress signal had been compromised.

In fact, given that the forces sent to the Grand Temple were annihilated, it was likely that any further signal would be regarded as a trap.

Still, I thought there was a fair chance that Argyrion might fall for the bait at least once or twice more.

The results of the battle at the Grand Temple of Pluton were simply too spectacular from Argyrion's perspective.

He had killed an Elder of the Ten Magic Commandments. How much more heroic and glorious could that appear to Argyrion?

Normally, a trap would mean certain death. But paradoxically, it’s also where the enemy’s forces are concentrated.

If Argyrion believed he could crush the trap, he might also believe he could shatter the enemy’s plans in one fell swoop.

From Argyrion's perspective, having killed an Elder of the Ten, he might believe that intentionally falling into the trap once or twice more could decisively turn the tide in his favor.

Both Argyrion and the Ten knew that taking down Argyrion's special forces would require at least one Elder. But the Ten couldn't afford to mobilize that kind of power easily.

At best—a term that usually wouldn't apply, but compared to the Elders, it fit—he'd face a siege of Panoptes-affiliated combat mages, which was their usual limit.

And Argyrion wouldn't pass up the chance to crush Panoptes veterans.

This is why I predicted he might fall for the bait one or two more times. Argyrion, overconfident from his victory over an Elder, would not realize that the situation wouldn't always go as he anticipated.

It was entirely possible he could suffer a defeat at the hands of Panoptes.

Argyrion might endure one tough battle, maybe even one defeat. But if he had any common sense, after two successive failures, he would realize that his forces had been overestimated.

At that point, he wouldn't willingly step into another trap unless he had a truly revolutionary strategy in place.

There was also the chance that Argyrion might not show up at all. Even with the glory of killing an Elder, if another Elder was indeed waiting in ambush, there was no guarantee of victory.

And most importantly, there was still no definitive proof that Argyrion had responded to a distress signal meant for the Mage King's subordinates. The entire hypothesis could fall apart.

If that happened, the person in the most trouble would, of course, be me.

If Argyrion didn't show up, how could I tie Amimone Tower to him?

Naturally, I had prepared a backup plan.

Under the alias L13, I had sent Salmosia a message, claiming that the distress signal Adoosiam sent to the Mage King's subordinates was likely one used by Argyrion's forces.

At this point, it no longer mattered whether Argyrion showed up or not.

As long as there was evidence that the signal originated from Amimone Tower, Blasphemia would be forced to act.

"Still, I can't entrust such an important task to someone else."

I still hadn't shaken off the absurdity of Dimedes' unexpected and gruesome demise while on a similar mission. If Argyrion did show up, I'd need to be there to respond appropriately. I was the best candidate for the job.

"If only Kine's magical abilities could improve more quickly."

But expecting so much from someone who hadn't even been under Hydra's care for a year was too much. I brushed aside those thoughts and headed to see Carisia.

At the very least, I had to report my travel plans.

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Orthes didn't even bother to bring a formal itinerary, simply stating, "I'll be heading out." His attitude was almost cold.

Carisia didn't offer any comments on Orthes' plans.

"Why don't you take the crystal with you?"

Instead, she left him with a concerned reminder. Orthes shook his head with a smile.

"I would normally take it, but this time I'm headed out to expose Amimone Tower's 'relic concealment' and their 'collusion with Argyrion,' right?"

Referring to his mission as "exposing" those crimes, rather than fabricating or framing them, was likely Orthes' way of joking.

"But if I get caught in a search and it's discovered that the crystal is a relic, wouldn't that be a problem? I could be accused of treason against the Ten Commandments."

Carisia, who had been about to insist that Orthes bring the crystal—citing the last ambush by Talo as an example—found herself reluctantly agreeing with his excuse.

"You're the kind of person who's more likely to commit proper treason than just some makeshift crime like relic concealment."

She made this remark half-jokingly, feeling a bit annoyed.

"This time, I'm going as a Blasphemia inspector, so I need to dress the part."

Orthes deflected her complaint with a calm laugh, then added,

"I suppose I could use the crystal if I needed to persuade a real Argyrion collaborator within Amimone Tower, but that's highly unlikely."

Hearing Orthes' words, Carisia thought to herself.

‘…There might really be a collaborator.’

From her long experience, Carisia knew that most of Orthes’ schemes were planned in such a way that, at least until the plot was over, the lies would be impossible to expose.

Most of the critical evidence Orthes provided was usually the result of carefully arranged fabrications. Yet, there were times when his fabrications provoked a real response from the world, occasionally bringing forth genuine situations.

What Carisia couldn’t quite be certain about was whether Orthes had already premeditated a trap to lure out a real collaborator with his false accusations. It was unlikely he had orchestrated such a meticulously calculated scenario in advance, given how logical and practical Orthes typically was.

‘Still, that man has his careless moments.’

Orthes preferred solving issues on the fly with force when things didn’t go according to plan.

A delicate, intricately plotted scheme like this didn’t really suit his style.

‘This time, the move to corner Amimone Tower has been exceptionally well-planned. But knowing him, this could be the unintended result of his usual impulsive actions. If only he put that brain of his to proper use...’

Carisia’s assessment of Orthes was remarkably similar to how Orthes viewed Carisia.

***

The plan to modify Adoosiam into a Mage King alarm system, which I had entrusted to Carisia, had produced meaningful results. For one, she had reworked the core’s circuits to allow it to be turned on and off. Second, I could now control whether the distress signal was sent while it was powered on.

The final feature was a power regulation device. This was a contingency in case the Mage King returned and unlocked the golem’s higher functions.

If a higher-ranking authority appeared and the shutdown command no longer worked, the idea was to physically cut off its power source to disable it.

‘I can’t use it as a proper alarm system just yet since one key element remains unresolved…’

For it to work as an alarm, it had to be left in a state where it could communicate with the Mage King. This also meant that the moment the Mage King appeared, he would be able to locate Adoosiam’s position immediately.

I still hadn’t found a suitable place to store Adoosiam’s core. It needed to be somewhere distant from Etna City but close enough for me to monitor its status. That would be a difficult condition to fulfill unless our company opened a branch office nearby.

Arriving in Algoth City, where Amimone Tower was located, I discreetly contacted Blasphemia.

In fact, Blasphemia had already reached out to me once they discovered relics near Amimone Tower. They wanted me to provide military support in case Argyrion launched an assault to back up Amimone. I responded by gladly agreeing to Salmosia’s request, and upon arriving in Algoth City, I quickly made contact with a field agent.

Fortunately—or perhaps unfortunately—I knew the agent in charge of Algoth City.

“Oh, senior?”

“Niobe, long time no see!”

Chapter 112: The Storm Sweeping Amimone (3)

Chapter 112: The Storm Sweeping Amimone (3)

“So, Blasphemia is in quite a predicament. All the external evidence is solid, but there’s nothing that links it directly to an insider,” Niobe said, leading me into a private room at a nearby restaurant. She scanned the room with an artifact-detecting magical device, checking for any eavesdropping spells with a practiced ease.

‘She’s been climbing the ranks quickly, both in skill and position, even in the short time since I last saw her.’

She was a remarkable talent. Had she not been affiliated with Blasphemia, I might have considered recruiting her for Hydra Corporation.

I briefly recalled the vacant position at Hydra left after Dimedes’ sudden death. It wasn’t a critical issue that one of our executive positions remained unfilled. The real problem was that he’d taken his entire organization with him, leaving a sizable gap in our manpower.

‘If I could sway Niobe and her subordinates, it would more than make up for the loss of Dimedes and his Chimera unit.’

But such thoughts were nothing more than fantasies. Unless Blasphemia were to collapse entirely, its agents’ loyalty wouldn’t falter.

‘Not unless they drank the same extra-dimensional madness as Argyrion…’

Then again, even if they were tainted by the extradimensional realm, it was unlikely they would turn into the kind of people I wanted. In fact, they’d be useless.

Their unwavering loyalty to the Ten Magic Towers would simply shift to the extradimensional forces. Whether Argyrion or Blasphemia, the fanatical devotion was essentially the same, only directed differently.

“Senior, are you even listening?”

Did my distraction show? Usually, with my eyes half-closed all the time, it was hard for people to tell even when I was dozing off. Niobe’s sharp observational skills made me reevaluate her once again.

“Haha, of course. You’re saying Amimone Tower hasn’t revealed anything yet, which is becoming problematic.”

“I thought you were nodding off for a second there.”

Having survived both my time as a troubleshooter and my escapades with Carisia, my multitasking abilities had only improved over time.

If I were a mage, I could've used these skills for something like multi-casting, but since I lacked any magical power, all I could do was split my focus between other tasks—like listening to a briefing while daydreaming.

"Let's summarize. So, the accusations against the Argos agents from Amimone Tower have yielded no concrete evidence?"

"We interrogated them thoroughly after receiving the tip, but nothing came up. And without any substantial proof, and Argos backing them, we can't resort to physical means either."

Of course, there was no evidence. This entire situation had been fabricated from the start, with me, under the alias L13, pulling the strings.

"At this rate, we would've been pushed back by Argos' counterattack, but then the sudden discovery of those relics in Algoth City gave us a lifeline."

"Even with that, it's still difficult to charge the entire tower with treason? I'd say the relics are pretty damning evidence."

"Well, Amimone Tower is a legitimate magic tower, after all. Their defense is that it's all a plot by 'superstitious cultists' to isolate them from magical society, and that excuse is holding up for now."

"Hm…"

I stroked my chin. Amimone Tower was handling the attacks far more calmly than expected, parrying the blows with the poise of a legitimate magic tower. Centuries of political machinations had clearly honed their defenses.

But with my arrival, things were about to change.

"Very well. Let's wait patiently for now. There's a limit to how long they can keep covering their tracks. If Amimone Tower really does have a collaborator, they'll eventually reach out to Argyrion for further instructions on their next move."

"You're talking about the communication signal we picked up? They don't know we've intercepted it, so if we wait long enough, they're bound to attempt contact."

Niobe nodded, then sighed deeply.

"But without any real evidence, time is on their side, not ours."

"Argos again?"

"Yeah. Right now, Algoth City is like the eye of a storm. Blasphemia and Argos are locked in a power struggle over Amimone Tower, which is why everything seems so calm. But as soon as one side shows a weakness, there will be a fierce strike."

Niobe's insight was impressive. I gave her an encouraging smile and nodded.

"I understand your concern, but impatience leads to mistakes. Our enemies are just as anxious as we are. This is a battle of who blinks first."

I emptied my cup of tea and let a brief silence linger before continuing, projecting the image of a composed senior agent.

"We'll wait and see."

Tonight, I'd activate Adoosiam's core.

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Danao was losing his mind. Blasphemia and Argos were in a deadlock, neither side willing to back down an inch.

Blasphemia was dead set on conducting a full investigation of Amimone Tower, while Argos insisted that the internal affairs of magical society fell under their jurisdiction, staunchly blocking the way.

Although the relics unearthed in Algoth City had slightly tipped the scales in Blasphemia's favor, it seemed like they could drag things out for some time.

Danao had no intention of wasting this precious time. He gathered the Argos agents who had been accused alongside Amimone Tower members and began a meeting.

"What the hell were you all doing?!"

It was less a meeting and more of an outburst.

"If you make enemies, at least clean up after yourselves! The fact that such a precise operation was pulled off means this wasn't the work of a bunch of failed rejects. Someone powerful must be backing this. Did you cross someone inside Argos?"

What baffled Danao most was the discovery of the relics buried in Algoth City. How had someone managed to break through the tower's defenses and the city's surveillance without leaving a trace?

This was not something an ordinary mage could accomplish. Even after reviewing all the CCTV footage, there was no sign of anyone planting the relics, which only attested to the skill of whoever had done it.

…Or perhaps, it was the CCTV manager. It hinted that Amimone Tower might have been in league with whoever had planted the relics.

Blasphemia had seized on this suspicion to pressure Danao.

It was a crude form of manipulation, achieved through high-level magical prowess. Yet it was a deft political move, one that made all the evidence point toward a collaborator within Amimone Tower.

Grinding his teeth, Danao looked around the room once more.

“Talk! Did any of you stash too much on the side? Did you execute someone who turned out to be the illegitimate child of a magic tower master? If you have any suspicions, spill them now!”

But silence was all that greeted him. With a deep sigh, Danao waved them off.

It was a silent command to leave. Slowly, the mages of Amimone Tower filtered out of the room.

“Which bastard… What the hell started all this?”

Danao growled in frustration, unaware that the real reason behind the plot was his tower’s substantial value. The opportunity cost of destroying Amimone Tower was simply too great.

As Danao seethed, one of the dismissed Argos agents, Gorgov, had his own thoughts.

‘It’s time to awaken my fellow brothers of the tower to the cause.’

His sunken eyes scanned his surroundings. Surely there were other Argos agents—technically, full Argos employees, but most of those recommended by magic towers considered themselves more affiliated with their original tower than Argos. These individuals still called themselves “dispatch agents.”

Gorgov was certain that some among them had been contacted by Argyrion as well.

The truth that Argyrion had revealed—the primordial truth—was nothing short of shocking. It had made their current lives of obedience to the Ten Magic Towers feel utterly disgraceful.

‘If I can reach out to those who’ve joined Argyrion’s cause, things will become much easier…’

Gorgov briefly considered sharing Argyrion’s truth with Danao, wondering if he could sway him to their side. But he shook his head.

‘That pig is too far gone.’

Danao was a bloated swine, contentedly feasting on the sweet fruits of the Ten Magic Towers’ order. Even if he were told the truth, he’d likely scoff and dismiss it with a “What’s that got to do with me?”

Gorgov stroked his mana proxy device. He could enter a secret code at any moment to send a support request to Argyrion. But it wasn’t the right time.

First, he needed to connect with the hidden allies who shared his views. Only after taking control of Amimone Tower's secrets and ousting Danao would it be worth sending that request.

As Gorgov schemed his next move and Danao fumed in frustration, Orthes, with his half-lidded eyes, was already slipping past Amimone Tower's surveillance.

In a quiet, empty room within Amimone Tower, Orthes opened the box containing Adoosiam's core.

The box that had shielded Adoosiam from the outside world was now open.

Click.

It was the sound of Danao and Gorgov's desperate efforts being undone.

Chapter 113: The Storm Sweeping Amimone (4)

Chapter 113: The Storm Sweeping Amimone (4)

Orthes opened the box and repeatedly turned Adoosiam’s power off and on.

If the signal was detected only once, they could claim it was a malfunction or a coincidence, but if it was picked up multiple times like this, such excuses would be impossible.

‘This should do it.’

Blasphemia had likely set up surveillance radars everywhere to gather evidence, and they would certainly have detected the waves emitted by Adoosiam.

With a satisfied smile, Orthes left Amimone Tower.

However, what Orthes overlooked was the situation inside Amimone Tower, specifically the state of the Argyrion collaborators trapped within.

The public accusations against Amimone Tower had spread throughout magical society via the Ether Space network. It was an open accusation that couldn’t be hidden.

Naturally, Argyrion became aware of the danger looming over his operatives in Amimone Tower.

Argyrion didn’t act directly because they had already agreed on a contingency plan with their agents. If things truly became dangerous, the operatives would send a distress signal.

That "dangerous situation" didn’t include death. The collaborators fully believed in Argyrion’s "cause," and they had pledged their loyalty to it, willing to die without revealing anything.

But there was a time when death could not be allowed—like when a necromancer from the Black Dark Tower, known for their soul-capturing magic, had prepared to harvest souls for interrogation.

If their souls fell into the hands of the Black Dark Tower, they would dissect the soul, tearing apart every strand of mana to extract all the secrets.

That was precisely when the collaborators had agreed to send a distress signal.

There were other agreed-upon scenarios for sending the signal, like acquiring a powerful artifact but being pursued by the Ten Magic Towers and facing imminent capture. The common factor was always the immediate danger to Argyrion’s cause.

The leakage of this distress signal posed a significant threat. After the incident at the Grand Temple of Pluton, Argyrion assumed that the Ten Magic Towers had somehow mimicked their distress signal—although this wasn’t true—and had been developing a new signal with a different frequency.

Had they completed it, Argyrion would have approached their operatives one by one, providing them with information about the new signal to replace the old one.

But they hadn't had enough time.

Even if they had completed it, another significant problem remained.

It had been less than a month since the Elder of the Ten Magic Towers was killed at the Grand Temple of Pluton. With the Ten Towers now on high alert, it was nearly impossible for Argyrion to make contact with the collaborators in Amimone Tower.

Argyrion had no opportunity to reconnect with his agents.

Thus, the distress signal Orthes sent was a storm of confusion.

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"How are we supposed to interpret this?"

One of Argyrion's senior leaders, a veteran of the Golden Desert Operation, spoke up. The debate over the distress signal from Amimone Tower had been going on for over an hour.

"We must exercise caution. We already know from that black cliff incident that the Ten Magic Towers can imitate our signals."

"But the comrades in Amimone Tower don't know that. The current distress signal pattern is the only one they have."

"What if it's another trap? Killing an Elder was certainly a victory, but the complete annihilation of our dispatched force was a tragedy!"

The debate among Argyrion's leaders showed no signs of ending. Some argued for sending a task force immediately, while others insisted it was another trap laid by the Ten Towers. Both sides had valid points.

If the debate couldn't be resolved among the leaders, only one person could make the final decision.

As the voices gradually quieted, the leaders' gazes all turned toward one person. The round table where Argyrion's leaders gathered symbolized equality, but there was still one person who had received the greatest blessing from the cause.

Everyone in Argyrion turned to look at Halto. He had held the highest position among them since their time in Blasphemia, and he was, without a doubt, the leader most favored by the cause.

Halto let out a deep sigh.

“This matter…”

His hollow gaze swept across the round table. Every one of Argyrion’s leaders, even Nastion, who usually hid in the shadows and concealed his emotions, was waiting for Halto’s decision.

“It is undoubtedly the work of our great adversary.”

“…?”

Everyone in Argyrion knew who this "adversary" was. Though blessed by the cause, which had blurred their memories of the world, they could never forget the enemy who had devised the Golden Desert Operation.

Though their appearance might have been distorted by the blessings of the extradimensional realm, it was impossible to forget the hated enemy who had caused so much suffering during their time in Blasphemia.

But why was that name being mentioned now?

“The great cause foretold that our adversary would become our greatest obstacle. This situation is a challenge unlike any we’ve faced before. I sense the shadow of our adversary behind this.”

Nastion pondered Halto’s words from the shadows.

They were incomprehensible.

‘He’s saying it’s the work of our adversary because he can’t decide? Has Halto already lost his sharpness?’

Unlike the rationally minded Nastion, other leaders of Argyrion agreed with Halto’s words.

“Indeed! This kind of dilemma! It’s the signature of our adversary.”

“Absolutely. Creating a situation where any choice results in loss, while escaping before the trap even springs… This is exactly that accursed enemy’s style!”

Nastion couldn’t understand why everyone else was so in sync with Halto’s thinking. Halto, however, nodded as if he had expected this.

“We have never succeeded against the adversary outside of the Golden Desert Operation. No matter how tight our net, if there’s even the smallest gap, they always slip through. It was only through the bold and unexpected tactics of the Golden Desert Operation that we were able to face them head-on.”

“And so?”

“To counter their trap, we must respond with an even bigger trap if we want to seize victory.”

Halto snapped his fingers.

A hologram appeared, showing the locations of the Silver Thread hosts scattered across Algoth City.

“If we can use all of them to catch a trace of the adversary, victory will be ours.”

“Wait…!”

Nastion wanted to protest, arguing that it was an insane waste of resources, but his voice was drowned out by the enthusiastic applause of the other leaders.

From the shadows, Nastion lamented.

‘Argyrion’s leader has already lost his judgment. It seems he was never truly fit to carry the cause…!’

***

Orthes returned to his accommodations immediately. The place had been arranged by Blasphemia, meaning he hadn’t spent a single penny of his own money.

‘It’s not the most luxurious place, as I didn’t want to attract attention, but it’s still decent.’

As expected, Niobe would likely rush to him soon. No doubt she would have detected traces of communication with Argyrion through Blasphemia’s surveillance equipment.

Once that happened, Orthes would have a legitimate reason to enter Amimone Tower.

No matter how resourceful Orthes was, entering the personal quarters of the tower’s master would require significant effort and luck.

But if he had a valid excuse to search the tower like this, Orthes could simply walk in with his eyes barely open, confidently heading toward the location of the ancient relics.

‘With this, Hydra Corporation’s objective will be complete.’

Aside from handing Amimone Tower over to Knemón, Orthes also needed to find the ancient relic hidden within Amimone Tower.

Once the relic was located, he could use it to tighten the noose around Amimone Tower even further, achieving two goals at once.

Smiling at the thought of investigating Amimone Tower alongside Niobe and the Blasphemia agents, Orthes imagined the scenario unfolding in his mind.

Bang bang bang. There was a hurried knock on the door.

“Senior!”

Just as expected. Orthes opened the door leisurely.

“What brings you here at this hour? Did some evidence come to light?”

Of course, it must have. She was probably about to say something like, "We need to head into Amimone Tower right away!"

“It’s not about that! Look outside!”

‘Huh?’

Something was wrong. Orthes, confused, was pulled outside by Niobe.

She pointed to the sky, and Orthes’ eyelids twitched.

‘Why is *that* here?’

A black vortex was swirling in the sky, with flashes of multicolored mana radiating from its center.

“An extradimensional storm…”

It was the precursor to an extradimensional flood—a supernatural disaster Orthes had grown tired of seeing during his days as a troubleshooter.

And that storm was circling directly over Amimone Tower.

Chapter 114: Amidst the Storm (1)

Chapter 114: Amidst the Storm (1)

Can I stop this extradimensional storm?

If it were Carisia here instead of me, she could probably stop it with a fairly high success rate. The challenge would be generating enough power to neutralize such a supernatural disaster…

I could confidently say that *White No Name* from the original story would manage it, but since this is Carisia, I can't be so sure. If I had prepared enough relics to back her up, there's a good chance that nine times out of ten, it might work.

Cautiously, I looked up at the sky. I opened my eyes as wide as possible, trying to gauge whether I could resolve this in time using the relics I brought.

'I think I could pull it off…'

But the problem is what comes after. Even if no one notices my suspicious eyes, if I use the relic to erase that storm, it's inevitable that I'll be questioned about what exactly it was.

The vision I had of the two elders of the Ten Magic Towers showing up last time was so shocking that I had prepared this insurance.

I shamelessly borrowed the relic from Kynemon, but it's best not to use it unless absolutely necessary. If Blasphemia seriously analyzes it, they'll discover how deeply it's been touched by extradimensional forces, and then my identity as L13 will be ruined.

'L13 is still useful for now. I can't afford to waste it here.'

"Senior! What should we do!?"

Instinctively, my hand reached for my temple, but I consciously redirected it to my chin.

As calmly as possible. I had to project the composed image of L13 that Niobe believed in.

"You shouldn't be here."

"What?"

"One of us has to report what's happening in this city. And between you and me, I have a higher chance of surviving inside the extradimensional storm."

"So—"

"Run, Niobe."

My voice wasn't loud, but it was firm. Authoritative, but not rushed.

Niobe's lips trembled. She was likely about to argue, unwilling to accept it. I searched for a line suitable for this kind of situation.

"Don't mistake your role."

"You're part of the command unit for this mission. I'm the field agent. Your job is to oversee the agents and ensure results, not to throw yourself into the frontline, especially not into an extradimensional rift."

The time left before the storm broke through the world's barrier and unleashed the extradimensional flood was less than ten minutes. If she started running now, she could reach the outskirts of Algoth City.

And if she kept running, she could barely escape the flood.

"Retreat with all your might and report to headquarters."

***

Niobe, who had intended to stay and fight, had no choice but to close her mouth.

She couldn't dismiss the determination she saw behind L13's resolve. The kind of resolve that came with the willingness to die, if necessary, just to report Argyrion's atrocities to Blasphemia.

Leaving only a short "Understood" in response, Niobe sprinted out of Algoth City as instructed.

This was the best way she could honor the determination her senior had shown.

As she ran, she sent concise explanations of the situation along with urgent requests for support, repeatedly transmitting them toward Blasphemia's headquarters.

The extradimensional rift had destabilized communications in the vicinity, but if even one out of hundreds of transmissions got through, it might be enough to turn the tide.

While Niobe, with her senior's resolve firmly etched in her mind, ran for her life, Orthes gazed at Amimone Tower.

'How can I bring this to Kynemon without collapsing the whole tower…?'

The plan had been to plant just enough suspicion for a smooth takeover of the leadership, but now that things had escalated, I had to resort to more active improvisation.

***

"This is a ridiculous waste."

After Argyrion's leadership meeting ended, Nastion emerged from the shadows, addressing Halto directly.

Halto merely nodded slightly, signaling that Nastion should continue.

"There is no plausible evidence to suggest that this so-called 'adversary' exists. I would have understood if you proposed a powerful strike under the assumption that this was a trap laid by the Ten Magic Towers."

Nastion went on for some time, voicing his frustrations about the irrationality of the plan. It was a sharp critique—perhaps overly so, considering he was a subordinate speaking to his superior.

Yet Halto's expression remained unchanged, which unsettled Nastion.

Despite ordering such an unreasonable operation, Halto maintained an eerie calm, far removed from what would normally be expected.

"Listen."

Halto's words were brief but heavy. Nastion, suppressing his emotions, resumed his place in the shadows, waiting for the leader of Argyrion to issue his command.

"When you're hunting, there comes a moment when you've cornered your prey. Everything falls into place like a complex machine, all at once. You feel the intellectual thrill of solving a difficult puzzle, the satisfaction of defeating a worthy opponent, and the relief of knowing the job is done."

The story seemed irrelevant. Nastion began to wonder if Halto was truly losing his grip on reality.

"And then the adversary shows up at that very moment and says, 'You're trapped in here with me.'"

"What do you mean?"

"A hunter who chases prey into a cave is just as trapped as the prey, with only one way out. The adversary doesn't hesitate. They blow up the cave."

"…Excuse me?"

Nastion didn't know this, but Halto was speaking from personal experience.

Orthes had once been cornered in some ancient ruins, only to collapse the entire structure and escape unharmed. Halto could recount several such experiences.

The entire leadership of Argyrion had faced numerous failures in chasing down Orthes—failures they could hardly count on both hands, and each time, their lives had been in danger.

One time, Halto had ordered teams to hunt in pairs after a failure, only for the two agents to turn on each other and end up incapacitated. Another time, they had rigged an entire extradimensional ruin with explosive magic, only for it to detonate selectively when the chase team arrived, trapping them instead of Orthes.

And every time, before these disasters struck, they had been confident they were just moments away from catching Orthes.

After several such experiences, the adversary became a living dilemma.

‘He toyed with us, like a matador…’

For Halto and the others in the Blasphemia pursuit team, it was the moment Orthes deliberately left a trace that gave them migraines.

It was always a clue discovered after a desperate chase, leading to the rational conclusion that Orthes could not have had the time to prepare a trap.

They would think, "If we act now, we might catch him. If we hesitate, we’ll lose the trail again."

The moment they gave in to that urgency, they fell into a trap.

Should they press on? Or bite their tongues and turn away?

If they turned away, was there any other way to find him?

The suffocating pressure that came with approving every mission.

Orthes would have described it as "the feeling of getting matched with that guy who plays like trash in a game, only to lose to him again." A combination of anger, fear, and an overwhelming desire for revenge, all melded into an unshakable sense of frustration.

Halto felt the same rage as he contemplated the distress signal from Algoth City.

…After hearing this, Nastion thought:

‘Is he insane?’

“I’m sure of it. That nauseating sensation can only be caused by *him*…”

Halto muttered with certainty. Nastion felt both pity for the man Halto had become and a growing unease about his fitness to lead Argyrion.

***

Gorgov was thrown into confusion by the sudden storm.

‘What on earth is happening?’

There was no natural way for an extradimensional storm to occur like this. Only Argyrion could disrupt the stability of a city protected by a magic tower and summon such a storm.

Gorgov tried to rationally assess the situation.

‘Could there be a coward among our ranks?’

Perhaps someone, unable to withstand the worsening situation and Blasphemia’s tightening net, had sent out a distress signal.

Argyrion must have acted immediately upon receiving the signal, causing this situation.

‘There’s no way to contact Argyrion right now. I have no choice. I’ll gather the comrades inside the tower and strike Danao after the storm passes…!’

It was clear that after the extradimensional storm came the flood. The complacent Danao wouldn’t be able to adjust to the sudden shift in mana. A swift strike from the comrades would easily remove the corrupted tower master.

Looking out the window, Gorgov saw an unknown man with narrow eyes gazing at the tower.

Something blue seemed to gleam faintly from the corners of that man’s eyes.

‘Blasphemia agent?’

That eerie appearance. He gave off a feeling of foreboding. Perhaps he was a Blasphemia agent who had detected the disturbance and was preparing to arrest everyone in the tower.

Just as Gorgov was about to prepare a spell, the man’s lips moved slightly. Gorgov repeated the words he thought he saw.

“Truth and… the Cause?”

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Good. Gorgov.

You’re the one I’ve chosen.

Chapter 115: Amidst the Storm (2)

Chapter 115: Amidst the Storm (2)

The moment Gorgov flinched at those ominous words, Orthes acted swiftly.

‘Staying here would be suicide.’

Getting engulfed by the waves of the extradimensional storm wasn’t just dangerous—it was often fatal.

‘I may not have magic, so my risk of mutation is lower, but...’

Extraterrestrial mutations usually happen because of magic, but magic isn’t the only trigger. Even plants or rocks exposed to an extradimensional storm can turn into monstrous weapons of destruction. So the idea that a human without magic would somehow be immune was a fantasy best forgotten.

Orthes needed to find the optimal way to survive immediately.

Clunk!

He decided to barge straight into Amimone Tower.

“Summon all the mages in the tower at once.”

“Who are you…”

Orthes raised his hand. He clutched the identity card he had received from Niobe, disguised as part of Blasphemia’s Panoptes Special Investigation Unit.

“Who else would come at a time like this?”

“Blasphemia…!”

The gatekeeper of Amimone Tower gasped. From his reaction, Orthes could deduce a few things.

‘Hmm. Looks like the Tower Master has briefed them well.’

The executives of a formal mage tower like this would naturally know about the secret Panoptes divisions, but for a low-level mage like this young gatekeeper—who seemed to have only recently entered as an official apprentice—to also be aware of this was significant.

‘His name was Danao, wasn’t it? It seems like the Tower Master has made sure all the mages here understand the gravity of the situation.’

The fact that the Tower Master, Danao, was taking the situation so seriously, even informing low-ranking mages about who was really pressing down on Amimone Tower, was telling.

The second impression Orthes noted was the raw confusion on the face of this young mage.

‘On the other hand, he doesn’t seem to have any ties to Argyrion. He’s like a university student who simply follows orders—no lofty ideals here.’

When Orthes scanned the mage’s thoughts, he saw no grand notions of truth or cause—just modest desires, like looking forward to a snack after his shift.

If there were a strong pro-Argyrion faction, they would’ve ensured that a gatekeeper was in place to prevent a surprise Blasphemia raid.

‘If the Tower Master himself were a collaborator, he would’ve fortified the gates. He’s not a collaborator. And there’s no well-organized pro-Argyrion faction secretly operating behind his back.’

Though the Tower Master was confident that there were no traitors within the tower, Orthes knew that it wouldn’t be difficult for real collaborators to plant agents throughout the tower without the master’s knowledge.

But from seeing Gorgov, Orthes realized that the collaborators in Amimone Tower weren’t well-organized enough to act systematically yet.

Sensing the atmosphere within the tower, Orthes began to formulate his plan.

‘The Tower Master and the Ten Magic Towers’ loyalists—no, the status quo supporters—are the majority. The pro-Argyrion faction, led by Gorgov, is a small minority.’

‘But with a disaster like this, even the Tower Master will start to harbor suspicions.’

‘If I can harmonize the Tower Master’s doubts with Gorgov’s ambitions...’

Orthes could finish the job before the extradimensional flood fully hit.

With a friendly smile, Orthes aimed to appear as non-threatening as possible. The mage, however, shivered, feeling an inexplicable chill.

***

It didn’t take long for the mages to gather. Thanks to the ominous energy detected above Amimone Tower, an emergency alarm had already been raised.

Gorgov kept glancing at the man who had introduced himself as a “Panoptes agent.”

‘Didn’t he mention truth and the cause?’

“We have less than five minutes before the extradimensional flood hits. If we push the tower’s mana core to its limits, we can protect the surrounding area from most of the extradimensional effects.”

“But we’ll be isolated from the outside.”

Danao muttered grimly.

“Yes. Once you’re cut off in this contaminated zone where the extradimensional and this world have merged, there’s no telling how long you’ll last or how long rescue will take. But rest assured.”

The man with his eyes half-closed spun around with exaggerated gestures, spreading his arms wide.

“The highest-ranking Panoptes officer in Algoth City has already fled and is requesting reinforcements. The time needed for rescue will be minimized!”

The mages of Amimone Tower didn’t react much. After all, weren’t these the same people who had been pressuring their tower for the past few days? Sensing their skepticism, Orthes carefully chose his next words.

“Hmph. Let me put it differently. You all already know, don’t you?”

“Let’s drop this Panoptes Special Investigation Unit nonsense and talk plainly, shall we?”

Orthes clasped his hands together. All eyes turned toward him.

“Blasphemia is going to take this opportunity to declare that you’re in league with Argyrion. A rescue team? More like a purge squad.”

His voice was devoid of coldness or harshness. He simply spoke as if he were stating a fact—a calm explanation of what was to come.

“You’re all going to die.”

“The Amimone Tower is a recognized mage tower! You think they’ll allow such tyranny?!”

“You’ll be labeled as Argyrion’s conspirators and traitors to the truth. The moment that storm began to form above your heads, your tower’s fate was sealed.”

Danao’s eyes narrowed. His instincts, honed over decades, told him that this Blasphemia agent wasn’t provoking them without reason.

“Enough of your taunts. Get to the point. I know your kind. You don’t throw insults without reason. You’re not some masochist with a death wish, hoping to be blown to bits.”

“Haha. Such sharp insight, Tower Master. Yes, of course, I have a purpose.”

Orthes began to walk slowly, stepping out from the center of the gathered mages.

“But for now, let’s pray to the Mage King. I’m sure none of you want to be swept up by the extradimensional flood and turned into mindless monsters.”

One, two, three…

The sound was strange, layered, as if it were both glass shattering and a massive bell ringing at the same time. It echoed across the sky above Algoth City.

The sound of reality crumbling. The garbled fragments of extradimensional information finally poured into the city like a violent storm.

A massive hemispherical barrier expanded from Amimone Tower. The translucent barrier glowed faintly as it collided with the extradimensional fragments, saturated with indescribable colors. As the extradimensional mana was repelled, it spilled over the surroundings, eroding the fabric of reality.

The ground liquefied, and water flowed downward, while chunks of the fallen sky sprouted mouths that moved to devour whatever came near.

Algoth City was now surrounded by an extradimensional contamination zone.

Those who lived on the weaker outskirts of the city, or those who had fled but hadn’t gotten far enough, were dissolved by the extradimensional rain.

Niobe clenched her teeth as she watched the multicolored chaos unfold in Algoth City.

She had to make it to the next city as fast as possible and request aid.

***

The air was filled with a cacophony of tremors, screams, and polluted mana currents. But more terrifying than the sound or the shaking was the strange mana wave that seemed to scrape at the very bones of the mages.

Even with the barrier shielding the tower, the nauseating presence was palpable. After a brief but intense moment of suffering, Danao was the first to raise his head.

He saw the Blasphemia agent—still standing steadily—calmly walking toward the window, seemingly unaffected by the tremors.

Eventually, the man looked up at the sky beyond the glass.

“So, it’s come to this.”

“Get to the point.”

Danao stood up, struggling to maintain his composure. Taunts usually had a purpose. Since this man had already spoken of death, he would likely offer a way to avoid it.

“Even though you’re a recognized mage tower, if the collective will of the Ten Magic Towers aligns, dismantling your tower will be easy. But it would be such a waste.”

“A waste? Argyrion has never moved this boldly before. There’s much to gain from interrogating such deeply connected collaborators.”

‘I can guess what this man is suggesting.’

Danao’s expression twisted. This man was essentially telling them to "start killing each other."

“I’m offering you an opportunity. Find the vile traitors among you who have disobeyed the Ten Towers. Before Blasphemia’s purge squad arrives, you must sort the wheat from the chaff.”

Orthes shrugged.

“Ah, and if you want to kill me and silence my mouth, be my guest. But the moment you act on it, you’ll lose your last chance.”

The mages looked at each other, eyes full of suspicion.

“Tower Master Danao, could you spare a room? I’d like to begin personal interviews with each of the mages.”

Orthes gestured toward a few mages, pointing as if he had randomly selected them.

“You, you, and you. One of you come inside first, while the others wait outside.”

Among the chosen was Gorgov.

***

“Truth and the cause.”

‘W-what…?’

Gorgov was thrown into confusion as he watched Orthes whisper Argyrion’s motto.

Chapter 116: Amidst the Storm (3)

Chapter 116: Amidst the Storm (3)

As Gorgov chanted a soundproofing spell, Orthes immediately recognized the magic. It was one that had originated in a mage tower specializing in creating high-frequency blades.

‘The kind that drowns out voices with noise, huh?’

Once the spell was fully activated, Gorgov’s suspicion became evident as he asked cautiously.

“What’s your game?”

“What do you mean?” Orthes replied innocently.

“I’m asking why you uttered such ominous words.”

‘Ah, he’s deflecting,’ Orthes thought, unsurprised.

“There’s no need for that. I already know the situation.”

“...”

Silence—a sign of distrust, but still within expectations. Orthes slowly raised his hand, slipping it into his coat.

Gorgov’s suspicion deepened, his eyes narrowing. Orthes moved too slowly for an ambush, which was why Gorgov didn’t immediately retaliate.

What Orthes pulled out was... a lantern.

“...?”

“Look closely, not with your mortal eyes, but with the eyes of truth. You’ll feel a power that’s not from the Ten Towers.”

Gorgov activated his mana to examine it. Sure enough, the energy emanating from the lantern was distinctly different from mana or magical power.

“This... is from the cultists!”

“If I truly served Blasphemia, would I have kept this artifact intact? If I were following their orders, I would’ve destroyed it by now.”

It was a clever manipulation. While not every Blasphemia agent destroys relics immediately upon discovery, they do hold on to them for analysis. Artifacts are only destroyed after thorough research deems them unfit for the Ten Towers’ use.

However, this nuanced truth wasn't common knowledge, especially outside the inner circles. And now, with the Ten Towers enforcing a strict relic ban, Orthes was using public perception to his advantage.

Gorgov hesitated, still trying to argue, though now less certain.

"If you were really on our side, you wouldn't have acted that way with Danao. He'll sniff out and imprison our comrades one by one."

'Ah, I figured he'd bring that up.'

"Think about it differently."

"Differently?"

"Yes. There are definitely comrades within Amimone Tower. But you only know that they exist—you don't know exactly who they are, do you?"

"How are you so sure?"

Gorgov tried to bluster. His annoyance stemmed from Orthes acting as though he knew more than a mage who had been stationed here for some time. It was a light power struggle, a bid to regain control of the conversation.

"Don't doubt the cause. ...Well, you probably will anyway. But the reason is simple."

Orthes smiled as he answered.

"You weren't the one who sent the distress signal, were you?"

***

Gorgov's face stiffened at my words. He must be wondering how I know this.

Of course, I sent the distress signal myself. Gorgov has no idea who actually sent it.

"If someone else sent the signal, it means there's at least one more person aside from you—someone who can contact Argyrion. Your dedication to the cause is plain to see, but it seems you lacked the charisma to gather more followers."

"...I admit that."

"Now, we don't have much time before Blasphemia's purge squad arrives. You need to gather your comrades as quickly as possible."

"And then what? Even if we gather them, like you said, if the purge squad breaks through the extradimensional contamination zone, we're finished. Unless Argyrion sends more than just you, there's no hope."

Gorgov, rubbing his forehead as if a headache were setting in, suddenly looked up sharply.

“Is that it? Are you suggesting we break through the contamination zone with the comrades? There will be losses, but it’s not a bad idea—”

“You lack imagination.”

“What?”

Gorgov was taken aback by my sudden remark. I slowly looked him over, as if appraising him.

He didn’t display the unique otherworldly aura of a fully inducted Argyrion member. I still couldn’t figure out how Argyrion managed to recruit people.

‘Do they really have some kind of hypnotic device?’

“I mean exactly what I said. What you need to do doesn’t change.”

“What do you mean it doesn’t change? You just said if we turn over the traitors to Danao, we’ll be spared! You’re telling me to hand over my comrades?”

“No, I’m telling you the opposite.”

Gorgov’s expression now hovered somewhere between anger and confusion—a fascinating sight, really.

“Why should *you* be the traitor?”

“What are you getting at...?”

“Kill Danao and present his head to Blasphemia. Then you’ll be able to serve the cause with the full resources of a legitimate mage tower.”

“...!”

As Gorgov gaped in astonishment, I shook my head, raising a finger to my lips to signal silence.

“Don’t speak too loudly. I’ll stall for time, gain Danao’s trust, and make him lower his guard. Meanwhile, you gather our comrades. Understood?”

“I understand now. So this is why Argyrion didn’t send additional forces—they didn’t need to!”

I shrugged. ‘Let him believe whatever he wants,’ I thought.

“Now, I’ll go out and tell Danao that you’ve been cleared of suspicion and will assist me as my aide. Use that opportunity to identify our comrades. When I give the signal, you’ll know what to do, right?”

Gorgov’s eyes lit up as if he’d found a lifeline. I added one more piece of advice.

“If someone approaches from outside, remember my words and act accordingly.”

After confirming Gorgov’s enthusiastic nod, I opened the door and shouted loudly.

“Tower Master Danao! Please come here!”

***

Danao stood face-to-face with Orthes, deeply displeased by the audacity of this Blasphemia agent.

“First, would you kindly cast a soundproofing spell?”

“What? Did Blasphemia abandon all their so-called skills?”

“I’m only trying to ensure no extradimensional mana is detected in the magic’s mana trace.”

Danao’s face twisted with irritation, but he snapped his fingers, casting the spell.

“You think I’m one of those Argyrion scum?”

“No, Tower Master, please hear me out.”

Orthes, who had been so domineering outside, now took a completely different tone. Danao’s brow twitched at the sudden shift to deference, with Orthes even adding the honorific “sir.”

“Let me first clarify. Most of what I said outside was grossly exaggerated.”

“What?”

Orthes calmly explained.

While it was true that a distress signal had been sent, gathering enough forces to deal with a mage tower of this scale was unrealistic.

“As you likely guessed, the surveillance of Amimone Tower is more of a political struggle between Argos and Blasphemia. Argos will vehemently oppose any full-scale purge of this tower.”

“Even after all this?”

“It’s precisely because of all this. Would Argos prefer the narrative that ‘Amimone Tower was entirely infiltrated, and Argos was unaware’? Or would they prefer ‘there were a few traitors within the tower, but they were provoked by Blasphemia, and the Tower Master and core members were innocent’?”

Danao paused to consider this. True, even after all this, he had been maintaining his connections with Argos. At the very least, Argos would believe he wasn’t a traitor.

“So, why are you telling me this, Blasphemia agent?”

Referring to Orthes’s title was Danao’s way of probing his ulterior motives. Orthes handled the challenge deftly.

“At this moment, I’m keeping everyone intimidated with threats of a purge squad. But what happens if someone starts thinking and realizes there’s no such squad?”

“Ah. So your life is still intact because of the threat of retaliation.”

Blasphemia agents could only make such brazen threats if they were sure that any attempt to kill them would result in everyone’s death. But if the threat turned out to be an illusion?

Then Orthes’s life would be worth nothing.

“Which is why, Tower Master Danao, I propose a temporary alliance to ensure both our heads stay attached.”

“Brutal interrogations and threats alone won’t root out traitors. Do you have a plan to draw them out?”

Orthes pulled out Estia’s lantern from his coat. Danao sensed the ominous power emanating from the artifact, a blasphemous energy as deep as history itself.

‘To possess such a dangerous relic… He must be a high-ranking member of Blasphemia!’

“This is a relic I confiscated from a cultist nearby. I was on my way to submit it for analysis when I was urgently dispatched to Algoth City, so I haven’t had time to turn it in. With this, I’ll frame myself as an Argyrion spy.”

“You’ll use yourself as bait to lure the traitors, and then I and the loyalists will subdue them, presenting them to the Ten Towers?”

“Yes. When the time comes, I’ll give the signal. If everything goes smoothly, both your position and my life will be spared.”

Two birds, one stone. Orthes smiled inwardly at his clever manipulation.

Chapter 117: Amidst the Storm (4)

Chapter 117: Amidst the Storm (4)

Carisia rolled the crystal in her hand. Unlike before, the relic didn't show any visions.

It wasn't strange, though. It would be unusual if trouble followed her every step.

But Carisia couldn't help but feel that Orthes was like a human totem that summoned storms wherever he went. After all, wasn't Carisia herself a storm that had shaken the entire magical society?

After adjusting Phoibos' crystal several times to no avail, Carisia let out a sigh.

"Hopefully, this time, he'll return without causing too much trouble."

"?"

Kine, who was receiving a one-on-one magic lesson from Carisia, tilted her head, confused by the comment.

***

"You treacherous spies! How dare you try to deceive me with such lies!"

Gorgov activated the magic that was pre-loaded into his Enchantware. Deadly poisonous water poured down on those who had surrounded Amimone Tower.

"You crazy bastards! You sent the distress signal, didn't you?!"

Having received strict orders from Halto, Argyrion's rescue squad was met with fierce resistance from the very people they were sent to save.

***

Halto was a sharp individual.

If he wasn't, he wouldn't have risen to the position of Deputy Leader in Blasphemia. He combined keen intelligence, which allowed him to adapt and apply his knowledge, with an extraordinary instinct that had saved him from countless deadly situations.

On top of that, he had accumulated vast experience from numerous real-world battles. These three elements—intellect, instinct, and experience—formed the foundation of Halto's survival instincts.

And right now...

"I have to go personally. None of the other leaders can handle this adversary."

“What nonsense are you talking about?! Absolutely not! You, as the leader of Argyrion, can’t take such a foolish risk!”

His closest subordinate, Nastion, was beginning to suspect that Halto’s three key traits had all vanished.

“No one in Argyrion knows this enemy better than I do. I’ve seen their handiwork ruin every situation I’ve encountered.”

Halto’s experiences and instincts were screaming that this had to be the work of their greatest foe.

Unfortunately, his keen intellect had little to offer in this case. The enemy’s tactics were too subtle and deceptive to be deduced through logic or cause-and-effect reasoning. However, Halto’s instincts and experience both pointed unmistakably to their adversary.

Nastion believed Halto had absorbed too much extradimensional energy and lost his grip on reality.

It was out of the question. Without a chosen successor, if Argyrion’s leader fell in battle while recklessly assaulting a mage tower, what would happen?

They might destroy the city and seize the tower, erasing all of the political power it held. Even then, there would be something to gain from such a victory.

But the worst-case scenario would be if the Elders of the Ten Towers intervened. Though the odds of that were low, if the Elders laid siege, even in an extradimensional incursion zone, Halto’s success could not be guaranteed.

If Argyrion’s leader were to fall without a successor, the entire organization would collapse.

Nastion desperately argued against Halto’s decision to lead the charge personally.

After a short but exhausting debate, Nastion managed to dissuade him. As Nastion sighed in relief, he couldn’t help but wonder:

‘Why...’

Why had none of Argyrion’s other leaders stopped Halto?

When Halto declared that only he could handle the situation, the other leaders had shown discomfort but offered no objections.

‘What kind of deeds has this adversary committed...?’

Nastion couldn’t believe that the collective paranoia surrounding Halto and the other leaders was rooted in any real threat.

Surely, the mysterious enemy Halto feared wouldn't conveniently emerge right at this moment in Algoth, causing all this turmoil.

Still, he agreed that the mission to rescue their allies from the extradimensional contamination zone would be difficult.

While Argyrion was familiar with such zones, announcing their involvement so openly gave Amimone Tower time to prepare for an attack.

To handle the mission carefully, Nastion had selected a skilled plant-based mage, one capable of direct combat and swift escape. The mage had replaced his body's biological tissues with those of plants, granting him extraordinary resilience.

"Sprigo. The priority target for rescue is Gorgov. If possible, aid him and the other comrades in capturing Amimone Tower and securing its mana core. But if that proves impossible, focus solely on the rescue."

If it became publicly known that there were traitors within a legitimate mage tower, the magical society would face another upheaval. Though the plan wasn't originally to expose the traitors so soon, now that it had come to this, it had to be used to its fullest advantage.

Sprigo, summoned by Nastion, nodded. However, as if something was bothering him, he glanced around before whispering.

"What should I do if I encounter the adversary?"

Sprigo's bark-covered body trembled as he asked. Nastion felt both exasperated and angry.

'How could this make any sense? The "adversary" who vanished during the Golden Desert operation, leaving no trace for years, reappears now, at this very moment?'

And yet, Nastion didn't berate Sprigo or force him into the mission aggressively. There was no need to reduce his motivation.

"Remain highly flexible and adapt to the situation as needed."

"?"

"You have full authority on the field. Do whatever you deem necessary if the adversary truly shows up."

What else could he do? There was no manual for handling urban legends. Giving the team maximum freedom to respond as they saw fit was the best option.

Though still perplexed, Sprigo nodded, reassured that he had the freedom to retreat, request reinforcements, or make any other decision.

Of course, Sprigo wasn't heading into the incursion zone alone. Alongside him stood an orderly squad of silver beings—silver soldiers, or "Drachma"—who looked eerily similar to Nastion but lacked distinctive features.

These silver soldiers were the next stage after "Silver Thread Hosts," deployed to prevent the situation from escalating before the Ten Towers could intervene.

This was the rescue team that...

"I've come to find the comrades Argyrion sought! Those of you who have not yet awakened to the cause, join us and rise against the Ten Towers' vile dominion—"

"You're crazy!"

"Treacherous spies! How dare you try to deceive me with such twisted lies!"

—faced fierce resistance from their supposed rescue targets.

***

Sprigo couldn't understand.

"Our Amimone Tower doesn't negotiate with people like you! Leave Algoth City at once!"

Yelling from within the tower's maximum expanded barrier was none other than Gorgov, one of Argyrion's own.

The infiltration report from Argyrion included Gorgov's photograph and a detailed character evaluation. Even in the brief interview Sprigo had reviewed before deployment, Gorgov had been described as "notably devout to the cause."

"People of truth and justice! Open the doors and unite with us!"

"Shut your mouth, idiot!"

How could such a devout comrade show so little faith now?

But at the same time, Sprigo understood everything.

'It's the adversary.'

The very person Halto had identified from the start of the operation. Though the memories of his past life had faded after being reborn through the blessing of the cause, his soul still bore scars of malice.

If this adversary was behind the scenes, anything was possible.

***

“As you suspected, there are indeed those impersonating Argyrion to approach us.”

Gorgov abruptly shifted from informal to formal speech, his initial suspicion now turning to respect.

It seemed that he truly believed in Argyrion’s “cause.” The more I acted in Argyrion’s favor, the more favorable Gorgov became toward me.

“When the Ten Towers' forces arrive, let them in. But if they claim to be from Argyrion, attack them immediately. I hadn’t expected such an underhanded tactic from Argyrion, especially with you here.”

“My cover is flawless. Blasphemia has protocols in place to disguise themselves as comrades and infiltrate to reclaim the tower from within in case our allies succeed.”

I smiled, adding a few more words.

“It was a brilliant plan.”

Of course, it was all a fabrication. The so-called "external force guidance" was merely a precaution in case Argyrion did indeed assault Amimone Tower.

When Argyrion actually showed up, it was nerve-wracking. Thankfully, Gorgov had taken my words to heart and turned hostile toward Argyrion.

“Blasphemia didn’t realize they were dealing with the cunning craft of the true cause.”

“The unawakened cannot possibly follow the wisdom of those who serve the true cause!”

Gorgov laughed loudly, and I thought to myself.

‘Argyrion’s forces have arrived. Simply deceiving Gorgov isn’t enough—I need to bring Danao into this.’

It was time to execute Operation "Temporary Alliance!"

Chapter 118: Amidst the Storm (5)

Chapter 118: Amidst the Storm (5)

Danao frowned as he faced the Blasphemia inspector, who had requested yet another private meeting.

"Gorgov is one of those assigned to Argos. Honestly, it was hard to believe you vouched for his innocence, given how high the suspicion of treason was."

He had just witnessed Gorgov earlier, cursing Argyrion with genuine venom and casting a deadly curse. Such an attack could only come from someone who genuinely saw Argyrion as the enemy.

"Indeed, if he were a disguised spy, it would be hard to believe he'd attack his own people so fiercely."

Orthes merely shrugged. There was no need to reveal the full truth—that Gorgov *was* an Argyrion agent, but he genuinely believed the Argyrion squad he attacked were spies from the Ten Towers.

"The Inquisitor's judgment is sharp. It's no wonder your reputation precedes you. But tell me, why have you come to me when you're supposed to be hunting down Argyrion?"

"Because Argyrion has come directly to us, hasn't it?"

"And yet they retreated under Gorgov's attack, didn't they? If they came so hastily, there's not much to worry about."

Danao's words reflected his confidence in the defensive magic installed throughout Amimone Tower.

A tower's defensive spells usually mirror its history and wealth.

As one of the Ten Towers, with a long history and vast resources, Amimone Tower would be an overwhelming challenge for any attacking force. This was Danao's judgment.

'And I need to shake that confidence,' Orthes thought.

Orthes quickly formulated his strategy: exaggerate small examples, distort a singular case, and emphasize low probabilities.

His opening line came with certainty.

"That's not true."

"What?"

"Argyrion's forces have far more power than what you've just seen."

“Even so, can they truly break through the tower's defenses? Not even your Blasphemia commander could hope to take down a Ten Tower directly.”

“Of course not. The fact that even in the face of such a powerful extradimensional incursion, only a few areas on the outskirts of Algoth have been affected, while the city as a whole remains intact, is a testament to your tower’s strength. However…”

Orthes paused deliberately, just long enough to stir Danao’s discomfort.

“Do you think Argyrion will face you head-on?”

“What?”

“Consider this: How do you think Argyrion’s forces even made it into Algoth?”

“A mage capable of creating such an extradimensional storm must have already been in the city, arriving with other fiends.”

“I don’t think so.”

Orthes began to unveil a secret, his voice hushed, as if sharing confidential intelligence.

“I suspect they’ve obtained an artifact capable of long-range teleportation. When Elder Talo was assassinated, multiple assassins appeared simultaneously, even though he was far away on an external mission.”

“What?!”

“Blasphemia believes this technology was provided by a cult of ‘Gatekeepers,’ a sect that worships the ‘God of Gateways.’”

“So, you’re saying Argyrion is preparing an invasion using this artifact?”

“You saw the silver soldiers, evolved from Silver Thread Hosts. Blasphemia has developed effective countermeasures against Silver Threads.”

Algoth had been thoroughly searched by Blasphemia in recent days. If any Silver Thread Hosts or their variants had been present, they would have been detected.

Orthes lowered his voice further.

“Blasphemia found no trace of Silver Threads in Algoth. So, what does it mean that these new variants have now appeared?”

In reality, Orthes’ explanation was far from the truth. Argyrion had developed methods to evade Blasphemia’s Silver Thread detection magic. By placing the hosts in a state of

suspended animation, they minimized both magical and life-force signatures, allowing them to go undetected.

But none of that mattered. What was important was not reality, but *perceived* reality—the art of deception.

“You’re suggesting Argyrion’s mages used long-range teleportation to enter the city from beyond its borders?”

“Yes. The cultists’ artifact must have been involved.”

“Damn…”

“And without an anchor or focus, unlimited teleportation is impossible. That’s why they didn’t directly transport themselves into Amimone Tower, instead appearing within Algoth, at a distance.”

Danao understood what Orthes was implying. If Argyrion’s forces lacked an anchor for teleportation, then the risk would disappear only if there was no way for an anchor to be created within the tower.

But within Amimone Tower, there were mages who could, in desperation, become such an anchor.

“The only ones we can be absolutely certain of are you, me, and, if we include Gorgov, perhaps three in total. We don’t have enough eyes to watch every mage.”

‘If the traitor uses this moment of chaos to cast the necessary spell to connect with the artifact…’

The threat of enemies within and without. Danao clenched his teeth.

“Then, what do you propose we do?”

“Simple. We need to pursue and annihilate the retreating Argyrion forces.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If everyone, including the traitors, is engaged in battle, they won’t have the opportunity to establish the anchor for teleportation.”

A traitor was only dangerous if they could assist the invaders from within. But if they were forced outside the tower, even if they cast the teleportation spell, it would be meaningless.

While Argyrion had already broken through Algoth’s external barriers, Amimone Tower’s defenses still held firm.

“And in the heat of battle, high-level spells like teleportation become difficult to focus on. In such moments, a single well-placed attack or a defensive spell to save one’s life takes priority over casting a massive spell.”

“And if the traitor abandons teleportation and simply stabs us in the back?”

“Pair every group with multiple mages. If any sign of betrayal emerges, the others can deal with it immediately.”

Once Orthes sensed Danao’s trust crossing a threshold, he revealed his true purpose.

“If we eliminate the mage who fought Gorgov—other than the silver soldiers, they’re the only notable enemy—we’ll significantly increase our chances of survival.”

But that mage was undoubtedly skilled, sent alone by Argyrion. It would require a mage of equal power to defeat them.

“We’ll need someone strong to take them down.”

“You’re suggesting I be the one to fight them?”

“Think of it as a strategic shield. If you personally defeat Argyrion’s mage, Amimone Tower’s loyalty will be proven beyond doubt.”

After some hesitation, Danao asked a final, logical question—one that Orthes had been waiting for.

It was the last piece to complete his plan.

***

Argyrion’s mage, Sprigo, found himself deep in thought.

“To face the adversary or not—that is the question.”

Had the adversary shown themselves, Sprigo wouldn’t have hesitated to retreat. That being carried with them an unspeakable evil and madness.

The adversary didn’t set traps.

They *were* the trap.

Sprigo believed this horrifying figure could turn even the air he breathed into a snare.

However, Sprigo was also a member of Argyrion, having survived countless battles. If the adversary wasn’t present themselves but only their remnants, Sprigo believed he could navigate through it.

Was the monster lurking inside Amimone Tower, or was it merely a trap left behind in the shadows?

As Sprigo ordered a retreat from the tower, his brief contemplation was interrupted by simultaneous warnings from his Draxima scouts, hidden throughout Algoth.

“What?”

An attack?

Not a defense?

The remaining forces in Amimone Tower were minimal. If the Ten Towers were truly planning to purge the tower, there should have been supervisors overseeing the divisions that Danao had absorbed through acquisitions.

But even so, Amimone Tower was a Ten Tower. With almost all personnel shifted to an offensive posture, their capabilities far exceeded expectations.

“There you are.”

The ground beneath Sprigo turned into a pool of corrosive acid. The moment he felt his shoes melt, Sprigo extended his tree-like arms, climbing up the side of a building.

In the next instant, an entire wall of the multi-story building transformed into a deluge of poison, aimed directly at him.

Leading this fierce attack, of course, was none other than Tower Master Danao.

***

The final question Danao asked me before engaging the enemy was this:

If the tower’s strongest mage, its master, steps outside, who will maintain the barrier powered by the mana core?

As an outsider, I obviously couldn’t do it.

But was there not a capable mage from Amimone Tower who had been validated as trustworthy by Blasphemia, one with enough skill to be sent to Argos?

Gorgov.

“Oh… Oh! To think we’d gain entry into the Tower Master’s chamber without shedding a drop of blood!”

Those whom Gorgov had “verified” as pure were left as the minimum defense inside the tower. Naturally, they were all Argyrion’s infiltrators.

“Praise the leader of Argyrion’s vanguard! Hail the wise one who claimed victory without bloodshed!”

I now stood before Amimone Tower’s mana core, flanked by an army of traitors.

Chapter 119: Amidst the Storm (6)

Chapter 119: Amidst the Storm (6)

Gorgov’s admiration was genuine.

According to the guide’s explanation, the so-called Argyrion forces that had invaded Algoth were nothing more than Blasphemia’s disguised agents.

In other words, they were lackeys of the Ten Towers.

The conflict between the servile Tower Master of the Amimone Tower—one of the most obsequious to the Ten Towers—and Blasphemia, who acted as the Towers’ enforcers, was deeply ironic.

What a ridiculous and yet sweet victory this was!

Even though he had been forewarned, Gorgov had been taken aback by the fully evolved silver soldiers, seemingly mutated from Silver Thread Hosts. But Orthes’ explanation—that it was the handiwork of the Silver Iron Tower—made perfect sense.

Despite their loathing for the Ten Towers, there was no denying their power. If the Towers had intervened directly, such feats were not beyond them.

“Look, our guide! It is your accomplishment!”

Twelve awakened mages now stood at Gorgov’s side. These twelve were the exact number of mages Danao had deemed necessary to maintain the defense of Amimone Tower.

The Tower was now fully under Argyrion’s control.

“But guide, what if Blasphemia reveals their true identity?”

“Haha, at this point, if they claim such a thing, it will be dismissed as a lie.”

"Danao may not be noble as a mage, but he possesses a sharp political instinct. What if he realizes the truth?"

“It is precisely that political instinct that will compel him to eliminate Blasphemia.”

Orthes whispered to Gorgov.

If Blasphemia survived, could Danao truly expect them to submit a favorable report on him? While it was possible, it wasn’t likely.

Danao, obsessed with the Tower’s survival, would reason that Blasphemia remaining alive would only pose a future threat to him. Killing Blasphemia’s agents and blaming it on Argyrion would result in no real loss to him.

Danao's cold calculation would inevitably lead him to kill Blasphemia's operative.

"Logical."

A wicked smile crept across Gorgov's lips. How laughable it was that logic would lead him to slay his own allies.

How could Danao be so incompetent, failing to see that the real enemy was already among them?

Danao's inability to discern the truth was, in itself, proof of his incompetence. Gorgov saw himself as the rightful successor to the position of Tower Master.

He would hand Amimone Tower over to Argyrion and rise to the rank of Tower Master, becoming a prominent figure within Argyrion.

Gorgov's ambition was as clear as day to Orthes.

"First, we need to assess the situation. Try listening in on Danao's communications through the mana core."

"Ah, yes. If we attempt to hack the core, a warning will be sent to Danao immediately. We need to do it at the height of battle. Just give me a moment."

Gorgov began to adjust the mana core. The core also served as the primary communications relay for the entire area. Unless one had an independent channel like Argyrion or Blasphemia, all communications had to pass through it.

「Master! The Silver Thread mutants are acting strangely!」

「They're converging and combining!」

「Their resistance to acid is increasing—」

「Form squads of at least three and counter them! I'll pursue the fleeing commander!」

"Haha. Did you hear that? How absurd, to see our enemies fighting each other so fiercely."

Orthes stroked his chin. This wasn't good. If Argyrion's mage managed to escape and report to the main forces, a larger, more organized group would descend upon them next.

"Hm, Gorgov, no…"

Gorgov turned, sensing the change in Orthes' tone. What did he mean, "no"?

"Gorgov, Tower Master."

A thrill surged through Gorgov's spine. To hear himself addressed as Tower Master—it was exhilarating.

"Hm, hm. Is there some unexpected development, guide?"

"I hadn't anticipated that Blasphemia would abandon their pride so easily. If that mage escapes and calls for reinforcements, Argyrion's next move will be a full-scale invasion."

"Of course. And Danao will undoubtedly welcome them with open arms."

"If that happens, even if we successfully hack the mana core and take control of the tower, we'll face a much tougher battle. It's questionable whether we can hold out until Argyrion's main force arrives. The Tower Master will need to act."

"And how should he act?"

"Assist Danao under the pretense of stopping the escapee from calling for reinforcements."

"Wouldn't that be to our disadvantage?"

"Not at all. You'll help Danao block the escape route, but leave the actual combat to him."

This would focus all of Danao's mana and energy on the battle. And when Danao finally defeated the Blasphemia operative…

"That will be our opportunity."

Gorgov swallowed hard. No matter how much they exhausted him, Danao was still a Tower Master.

Could he really face Danao in a one-on-one fight?

Even with the perfect ambush, could he successfully strike down a Tower Master still in combat mode? Gorgov's anxiety grew.

Sensing his unease, Orthes proposed an alternative plan.

"There's another way. Once the battle is over, bring Danao and the others back inside the tower to rest. After fighting alongside you, Danao will trust you. He'll let his guard down while recovering his mana."

"An ambush inside the tower…"

Once Danao was dealt with, gaining control of the mana core would be much easier. Gorgov nodded heavily in agreement.

“I, along with two others, will assist Master Danao. The rest will stay with our guide and safely manage Amimone Tower!”

The Argyrion infiltrators shouted in unison, “Truth and righteousness!” as Gorgov strode confidently from the tower chamber.

「Master! We’re coming to assist! Just hold on a moment longer!」

「Gorgov! What are you saying?」

「If that mage escapes and brings reinforcements, Amimone Tower will be in even greater danger! I’ve left plenty of others behind, so don’t worry!」

Through the mana core, Danao and Gorgov’s conversation echoed.

‘Temporary alliance—successful.’

An alliance between Argyrion’s infiltrators and the loyalists of the Ten Towers.

Orthes nodded in satisfaction.

Though there had been some misunderstanding—where the infiltrators mistook Argyrion for Blasphemia, and the Tower Master considered the infiltrators loyalists—it was indeed a case of “like attracts like.”

“Now, I’ll search for the authorization codes for the mana core. I’ll sweep the tower in the meantime. Alert me if there are any unexpected developments in the communication.”

***

It was a dangerous balancing act, but I breathed a sigh of relief.

My narrow eyes may be a nuisance at times, but without them, surviving in this world would have been far more difficult.

Leaving behind the infiltrators gathered around the mana core in the Tower Master’s chamber, I slowly opened my eyes just enough.

“The ancient artifact must be hidden somewhere—”

I had already checked the Tower Master’s chamber earlier when I entered with Gorgov. There was nothing of note besides the mana core. Not even any other significant relics or treasures. Danao certainly didn’t seem like the frugal type, so his real wealth must be hidden elsewhere.

“With the artifact inspection decree, it would’ve been difficult to hide anything outside the tower. It must be somewhere inside.”

If it wasn’t in the highest point of the tower, then it was likely hidden in the lowest place—the basement.

There was no officially recognized basement in Amimone Tower, though.

I descended to the first floor and carefully examined the ground.

“As I thought.”

People are all the same in their habits.

I slowly lowered my head toward the floor.

***

“Truth and righteousness!”

“Truth and righteousness? You speak of truth, but you hold none! The righteousness I pursue is far higher than your wretched purposes!”

Sprigo wanted to grab his head in frustration as he listened to Gorgov’s ranting. Was the man brainwashed?

The way he was talking, he *was* aligned with Argyrion, wasn’t he?

Danao, on the other hand, thought to himself:

‘I thought he was just a sneaky snake, but to think he had such courage and conviction to fight!’

When I return to the tower, I’ll have to reward him. Though I’ll still have to reprimand him for leaving the tower in the hands of that suspicious Blasphemia agent.

***

Orthes cast a detached glance around the area. All of Danao’s accumulated wealth—everything that the previous masters of Amimone Tower had collected over the years—was here.

But he had no interest in glittering jewels or crowns. Slowly, he moved deeper into the hidden vault.

Deeper wasn’t the right word. Orthes stopped at a relatively obscure corner, where some of the lower-priority treasures were stored.

He picked up a dusty artifact from that corner. Beneath the dust, a faint golden glow could be seen, but beyond being made of gold, there was nothing remarkable about it.

It had no ornate carvings or jewel inlays—just a simple set of scales.

However, this was Aegio’s Scale, an artifact of a god.

Chapter 120: Neither Truth nor Good (1)

Chapter 120: Neither Truth nor the Greater Good (1)

Orthes wiped one side of the scale with his sleeve. As the dust cleared, the golden dish underneath regained its shine.

A pair of blue eyes reflected in the golden balance.

After gazing at the scale for a moment, Orthes finally tucked it into his coat. The object was far too large to physically fit into his inner pocket, but wasn't overcoming such limitations the very essence of magic?

His jacket, imbued with spatial magic down to every fiber, had pockets far more expansive than they appeared.

The clattering of the lamp and the scale echoed together. Orthes dusted off his jacket, straightened his attire, and looked around the storage room.

‘Originally, my interest was only in ancient relics...’

But in a secret warehouse holding suspicious items like this, it was only natural to find other unsettling objects that shouldn’t be shown to the public.

Illegal experiments, secret ledgers, or even the records of forbidden items forbidden by the Ten Towers.

I rummaged through the warehouse with a willing heart.

This was the final preparation to unseat the Tower Master of Amimone Tower.

***

The silver soldiers mass-produced by Argyrion, known as the Drachmas, possessed a considerable level of magical prowess. Even under the harshest scrutiny, they were still several steps above greenhorn wizards who were newly deployed to the battlefield.

First and foremost, they carried out their commander’s orders without hesitation, whether it was engaging the enemy or acting as a shield. This quality was highly important for soldiers sent to the frontlines.

However, Sprigo was unable to fully utilize the potential of the Drachmas.

It wasn’t because Sprigo was unfit to be a commander. Rather, the wizards of Amimone Tower, who were clashing with the Drachmas, were actively preventing any cooperation with Sprigo.

The Drachmas had the ability to regenerate endlessly as long as there was residual mana, and the peculiar circumstances of the extra-dimensional overflow made it difficult for the

wizards to completely defeat them. However, the Drachmas were equally unable to inflict fatal damage on the wizards holding them in check.

Such was the nature of the wizards of the Pure Towers. As long as the extra-dimensional overflow continued, if a war of attrition were forced to the very end, the Drachmas would eventually gain the upper hand, but how long that would take was anyone's guess.

A decisive move was needed.

Beneath Sprigo's bark-like skin, his muscles—made of wood fiber—began to writhe, shifting something stored between the fibers.

It was the elixir of angelification, used by Argyrion's forces at the Temple of Pluton.

For an ordinary wizard, using the angelification elixir would mean an irreversible transformation, unable to return to their original body. But for Sprigo, such an irreversible choice carried little weight.

Not because of blind faith in some greater cause. The process of angelic ascension was somewhat religious, and in fact, strong faith would make the burden even heavier.

Sprigo was already a wizard who had transformed his body into plant matter. He had already abandoned his original flesh once.

Thus, with quick resolve, Sprigo absorbed the elixir into his body without hesitation. The potion spread through his bloodstream, circulating throughout his system.

Gorgov and Danao watched as parts of Sprigo's body began to turn silver.

'Huh?'

Gorgov thought. Something seemed... off. That elegant transformation into a silver hue was a characteristic of Argyrion's Silver Thread worms. Had Blasphemia, and the Silver Iron Tower behind them, succeeded in recreating that process to such a degree?

Danao's thinking was much simpler: Don't let him transform.

Without hesitation, Danao ripped off his left prosthetic arm. The arm stored a variety of solidified reagents. As the magic of poisonwater soaked his hand, the solid reagents began to melt.

A terrible stench spread, indescribable in its intensity. Just breathing it in was enough to dissolve one's lungs. With a wave of his hand, Danao hurled the poison-laden solution toward the silvering Sprigo.

As more reagents melted into the poison, it began to morph, taking on new properties. It was a kaleidoscopic poison that constantly changed, ensuring that even those with antibodies against poison could not defend against it.

Sprigo countered it in a very simple way.

From beneath his silvered bark, root-like tendrils exploded outward. It was as though every single fiber in Sprigo's body had transformed into roots in an explosive expansion.

The deadly poison Danao had created instantly corroded, dissolved, and destroyed any surface it touched, ensuring no regeneration would occur.

However, the sheer physical volume of the poison couldn't match Sprigo's massive growth. Having rooted himself in Algoth City, Sprigo drew in the mana of the extra-dimension, growing even larger.

"Yggdrasil..."

Gorgov muttered in awe. The legendary tree that the elves sometimes babbled about—a colossal tree so immense that it could support an entire world.

The silver-streaked, towering form of Sprigo resembled the world tree of legend, its massive form evoking a kind of divine reverence. From the roots to the trunk to the leaves, everything gleamed with a brilliant, holy silver.

「Truth and the Greater Good!」

Gorgov was overwhelmed by even greater confusion. There was no reason to pretend to be Argyrion at this point, not when things had reached this level.

'Think about it. In a situation where there's no reason to pretend to be Argyrion... why claim to be him?'

There was none. The only reason left to claim to be Argyrion was if...

'Could this really be the true Argyrion?'

What in the world was going on? Wasn't the one who revealed the truth to him still inside Amimone Tower?

Sprigo's expanded senses now felt everything. Every branch extending from him, every leaf sprouting on those branches—they were all his eyes and ears. With hundreds, no, thousands of eyes, he looked upon the two wizards standing against him.

Danao's face was filled with a sense of defeat, while Gorgov's showed clear signs of shock. On top of that: confusion, and fear.

That expression... Sprigo had once worn that very same expression himself, after suffering defeat at the hands of an enemy.

「Listen, Gorgov. The true truth and the grander cause are with us.」

“Im-impossible! That can’t be! I was instructed by the Guide!”

While listening to Gorgov’s conversation with Sprigo, Danao steadied himself. He didn’t know what relationship the two had, but the fact that they were lost in their own world, rather than launching an immediate attack, was fortunate.

「The Guide? No! What you encountered was no guide of Argyrion!」

“Huh?”

Danao let out a baffled sound. If Gorgov had met someone, it could only have been that Blasphemia agent.

‘Did that agent claim to be Argyrion’s guide in front of Gorgov? Does that mean Gorgov is the traitor working with Argyrion?’

The plan to lure out Argyrion’s accomplice by using the Blasphemia agent as bait... If Gorgov had fallen for that, why had the agent tried to make Gorgov acting tower master?

Danao’s survival instincts quickly began deducing possibilities.

‘In the best-case scenario... that agent only just figured out that Gorgov is the traitor. That's why they covertly sent Gorgov to the frontlines to have him engage in a civil war with the real Argyrion.’

If the Blasphemia agent was also working for Argyrion, there would be no reason for Sprigo and Gorgov to be fighting now. If Gorgov had gained access to the tower’s mana core, they would have launched a two-pronged attack, making Danao’s position far more precarious.

Still, Danao couldn’t shake an ominous feeling. Something told him that the agent’s schemes weren’t over yet.

“That’s impossible! He promised me the position of Tower Master of Amimone!”

Gorgov shouted in frustration, heedless of Danao’s presence beside him. Having already unleashed his ace in the form of the poison blast from his prosthetic, he calculated there was no immediate threat.

「Did he now? Haha. Can you truly trust him?」

“Of course I c—”

「If you really trust him, then why haven't you attacked me? Didn't you feel, upon seeing this sacred silver glow, that I am your true ally? Tell me, Gorgov.」

When you first saw him, didn't you feel a sudden surge of hostility for no reason?

And at the same time, didn't you find yourself strangely drawn to his words...?

In the end, whatever he said, didn't it just feel true?

Danao watched as Gorgov's eyes grew wide, his expression frozen in shock. From the way they were talking, it seemed that this Blasphemia agent had clashed with Argyrion several times, toying with them over and over.

As Danao felt a strange sense of relief, Gorgov clutched his head in agony.

Everything Sprigo said was true. Gorgov trembled in confusion and doubt, his mind swirling with suspicion.

Sprigo's cold, unforgiving judgment came next.

「Tell me. Have you ever heard that man's true name?」

"Name?"

「Even once, have you heard something that could be called his real name?」

Gorgov racked his brain. But the '

Guide' had never once revealed his name.

「That is our enemy—an unnamed demon who hides in shadows and mocks us all.」

Unconsciously, Gorgov turned back to gaze at Amimone Tower.

At that moment, Danao also realized that he had never heard the agent's name.

Chapter 121: Neither Truth nor the (2)

Chapter 121: Neither Truth nor the Greater Good (2)

Silence descended. Gorgov turned to face Danao.

“You were in on it, weren’t you, Danao! You planned this whole scheme!”

His cry was more of a desperate wail than a shout—an accusation born from the self-justification that often accompanies a deep sense of betrayal.

It would be hard to call it pure paranoia, though. Danao himself had indeed been given a hint about such a situation by the so-called ‘Guide.’

‘We’ll use the relic as bait to draw out Argyrion’s traitor...’

However, he could never have anticipated that such a simple bait plan would end like this. He had thought the traitor would be swiftly dealt with, restoring order to the tower without incident.

In Danao’s mind, the image of the now-empty Amimone Tower kept replaying. Gorgov had been the only one who’d requested access to the mana core, and it had been Danao who approved his temporary access.

But as for what the ‘Agent,’ the one Argyrion called the "Enemy," was doing inside that tower now, he couldn’t even begin to guess.

Although formal access to the mana core required authorization from the Tower Master, who’s to say there weren’t ways to hack it, or some other underhanded tactic at play?

Amimone was a Pure Tower, and therefore had sophisticated security measures in place. But if Blasphemia—one of the most secretive organizations—was involved, they might have already found ways to bypass such safeguards.

‘No...’

Danao couldn’t help but confront a fundamental question: **Was that person really an agent of Blasphemia?**

The only proof that person had offered was an ID card identifying them as part of Panoptes. If they were truly from Blasphemia, then everything on that card would be a well-crafted lie.

And to make matters worse, Danao himself hadn’t even seen the card. A wizard who had been playing gatekeeper at the time claimed to have seen it, testifying that the man was indeed from Panoptes, and Danao had accepted that.

‘Strictly speaking, I assumed he was a Blasphemia agent hiding behind the massive front of Panoptes...’

But now, Danao had to question everything.

It was a well-known secret to Tower Masters like him that Argyrion's leadership included former Blasphemia agents.

But would they really refer to someone they called "The Enemy" as a Blasphemia agent? That particular title seemed too specific.

As confusion clouded his mind, Gorgov lunged toward him. Gorgov's misunderstanding was clear, but he believed in Argyrion now, and he was driven by the nagging fear for the safety of his fellow wizards left behind in the tower.

Danao quickly dodged. An ordinary evasive move wouldn't have sufficed at this range. He had to use Amimone Tower's secret spell, one that allowed him to momentarily transform parts of his body into poisonous water.

But it was a mistake.

「Water!」

Roots sprouted from the ground, piercing through Danao's liquefied body and greedily absorbing the dissolved flesh. Although he hurriedly re-solidified his body, the damage was already done.

'Not enough blood... My liver too?'

Handling poison required a high degree of safety, and for that, it would have been better to increase the ratio of prosthetics in his body. However, Danao had always believed that a wizard's own blood and flesh made for the best catalyst, which is why he had kept his prosthetic ratio low.

In close-quarters combat, his signature technique of transforming body parts into poison was usually a strength, but in this situation—where his flesh had been absorbed—it became a liability.

His vision blurred. He tried to use alchemy to replenish his blood, but the silver root fragments lodged in his veins, like splinters, hindered the circulation.

As Danao panted, he heard the oddly clear sound of footsteps.

Step. Step.

Forcing his sluggish body to move, he looked up. In the blurred, alcohol-soaked vision that swayed before him, a dark silhouette stood at the center. Its face was strangely indistinct, but the eyes and the corners of the mouth glowed with a faint, eerie blue.

"You…"

Danao wasn’t sure if he or Gorgov had muttered those words.

The man’s lips twitched in what seemed like a grin. That ominous smile was the last thing Danao saw before he blacked out.

***

“Traitor!”

Gorgov screamed, unleashing his fury. He disabled the limiters on all of his cybernetic combat enhancements, readying every spell in his arsenal and locking onto his target. But something was wrong.

His basic thermal-sensing enchantware, a cheap mass-produced model, could register the figure clearly. Yet his higher-end enchantware, the kind capable of distinguishing the fine magical patterns of individuals, couldn’t recognize the impostor.

‘Is he covered in artifacts, causing severe magical interference? Or is it Blasphemia’s signature mana suppression technique?’

Mana suppression had its limits, so it was more likely the result of artifact interference.

Grinding his teeth, Gorgov manually connected his targeting system directly to his brain, switching to manual aim.

He now had eight spells fully charged and aimed at the impostor, ready to be fired at a moment’s notice.

But Gorgov couldn’t bring himself to launch them. It wasn’t just hesitation. It was something deeper—an emotion he couldn’t quite put into words. After all the deception and lies, why had this impostor left Amimone Tower and come here, to this very spot?

The mana core’s communications network would have exposed the impostor by now, revealing his true identity as Argyrion’s enemy.

‘...The mana core’s comms relay.’

The thought that the impostor might have heard those transmissions filled Gorgov with dread.

The tower’s mana core room held his fellow wizards.

“What did you do to my comrades!?”

“Oh, don’t worry. They’re just taking a little nap. They might have a few nightmares, but nothing life-threatening.”

The impostor’s voice was disturbingly calm, almost mocking.

Gorgov’s urge to attack surged. But he knew that if a battle broke out, there was no telling what might happen to his incapacitated comrades.

He glanced behind him, at the now-giant form of Sprigo towering into the sky. Normally, a massive form like that would be a liability, making one an easy target. But for Sprigo, who had transformed himself into a living plant, the risk was outweighed by the potential rewards.

The roots that had pierced Danao’s poisoned belly were now spread throughout Algoth City, drawing in extra-dimensional mana from all around.

With such a massive influx of power, Sprigo could unleash an explosive amount of mana. If the impostor made any sudden moves, Sprigo could vaporize him before he had a chance to act.

The silver tree’s voice rumbled, vibrating the very air.

「This…」

***

Sprigo’s senses had expanded across the entire city of Algoth, thanks to his ever-growing roots. Wherever his roots reached, he could feel every movement.

It didn’t take long for him to notice someone approaching Amimone Tower.

Yet Sprigo deliberately chose to ignore the humanoid figure coming closer. His instincts warned him that to focus on the enemy too closely was to court danger.

He wasn’t just repeating an urban legend about a monster whose mere gaze could kill. There was a reason why the being had revealed itself now.

—At least, that was what the fragmented memories left behind by Argyrion’s inner circle had suggested.

Sprigo needed to grow faster, to secure a psychic signal strong enough to send a message beyond the extra-dimensional storm, back to Argyrion’s main forces.

He had to warn them about the "Enemy." To tell them that **Chairman Halto** was needed.

But there were limits to how long he could avoid direct confrontation. Once that entity stood before him, speaking, he found himself reflexively focusing several hundred of the thousands of eyes lining his silver leaves on it.

The rage bubbling up from his very core demanded attention.

In that brief moment when his mind hadn’t yet fully registered the focus, Sprigo’s many consciousnesses—spread across his roots—began debating.

How should we deal with this enemy?

Of course, the optimal choice would be to attack without engaging in conversation.

At the same time, that would be foolish. The very fact that the enemy had revealed themselves meant they were confident. Sprigo did not overestimate his own strength.

Only **Chairman Halto** could match and defeat this being’s malevolent wisdom. All Sprigo needed to do was buy time, time to grow into a living beacon that could send a signal through the dimensional storm.

He decided to project a sense of calm confidence.

‘Something like, “Oh, you wretched heretic dog, still slinking about without a face or name?” That should be enough.’

Just as he settled on that approach, hundreds of his eyes—blooming in place of fruits—finally took in the enemy’s face.

***

「You fucking piece of shit—!!」

Driven by a tidal wave of unfiltered rage, Sprigo roared, his words utterly raw and unrefined, brimming with fury.

Given the size of his emotions, the fact that his outburst amounted to nothing more than crude swearing—revolving around genitalia and reproduction—spoke to the remnants of his intellectual upbringing.

Orthes shrugged lightly.

“Have we met before? My apologies if I don’t remember.”

Then, calmly, he added:

“Let me make sure you won’t have to see me again.”

Chapter 122: Neither Truth nor the (3)

Chapter 122: Neither Truth nor the Greater Good (3)

I revised my hypothesis about Argyrion. Carisia had told me a story about meeting Argyrion in Elysion.

‘At first, it seemed like he didn’t recognize me,’ she said, ‘but once we started interacting, his memory came back.’

Typically, an Eroder—someone whose mind has been consumed by the mana of the extra-dimension—becomes a mindless force bent on destroying the present world. It’s extremely rare for an Eroder to retain their sanity, and even when they do, it’s usually limited to tactical knowledge or magical expertise—anything that serves destruction.

There are a few, however, who manage to preserve both their memory and their intellect, despite the overwhelming influence of the extra-dimension. But if such Eroders were common, would the Ten Towers be so concerned about Argyrion?

The truth is, Eroders like Argyrion are not just rare—they’re exceedingly rare. The Ten Towers assessed Argyrion’s potential danger at the highest level. Better to overprepare and avoid catastrophe, even if it meant committing excessive resources, than underestimate him and suffer devastating losses.

But I had a slightly different opinion from the majority in the Ten Towers, one informed by my extensive experience living in the Eroded Zones of the extra-dimension and encountering countless Eroders.

There are different kinds of erosion.

When a person is alive and their mind is eroded by the extra-dimension, their consciousness resists the erosion. A chain reaction begins—an ongoing battle between the person’s sense of self and the extra-dimensional force trying to dominate them. Most often, the result of this struggle is the collapse of the self.

This is the type of Eroder people are most familiar with: a mindless, destructive weapon. The person’s core sense of identity disintegrates, leaving them capable only of reflexive destruction.

On the other hand, corpses do not resist erosion. The extra-dimensional mana seeps into a dead body much more easily. In this case, the mana, which replaces the departed soul, pieces together fragments of memory from the still-intact brain, creating a counterfeit soul—a kind of magical replica of the deceased’s mind.

This counterfeit soul can replicate much of the deceased’s abilities but is not truly the same as the person in life. The counterfeit always prioritizes the will of the extra-dimension.

It’s only natural that there would be gaps in the memories pieced together from a dead brain. However, if a catalyst is present—something strong enough to trigger a memory—some fragments of the original person’s memory may return.

I suspected that Argyrion’s officers were corpse Eroders.

The problem, though, was the mission during the Golden Desert Operation. Both Carisia and I had been focused on incapacitating the enemy and driving them into the extra-dimensional storm, rather than outright killing them.

‘Could it be that someone else? Perhaps a hidden traitor in the pursuit team killed them after we incapacitated them?’

If that were the case, I’d need to add a new assumption: a doomsday fanatic within Blasphemia who had the knowledge of how to create corpse Eroders, a rare phenomenon that only occurs under very specific conditions when fresh corpses are left in the Eroded Zones.

But the situation was bizarre enough to justify such a hypothesis. How could so many pursuers end up as self-aware Eroders? There was no magic I knew that could explain that.

Even with my trained eye, distinguishing between a counterfeit soul and a genuine one requires significant effort. It’s not something I can do in the middle of combat—it demands careful, focused observation.

Meanwhile, Sprigo’s ever-growing mass assaulted my mind with an overwhelming flood of information. It was like someone was digging directly into my brain. Still, I kept smiling.

The more I maintained my calm expression, the more their unease would grow.

I pierced through the fragmented surface consciousness Sprigo was projecting with his thousands of eyes, going deeper into the core of his being.

‘...No?’

My hypothesis was wrong.

A soul created by extra-dimensional mana is always subtly different from the body it occupies. The "colors" of the soul and the body don’t match. To use a metaphor of written language, the content may be similar, but the handwriting is different.

However, Sprigo’s soul, though tainted and muddied by extra-dimensional mana, matched his body perfectly. He still had his original soul and body.

The result was unexpected, but I couldn’t afford to keep the heightened awareness of my eyes active for too long. If I pushed it any further, I might pass out from vertigo before the fight even began. I had seen enough. It was time to shut off my vision.

***

‘We won’t meet again.’

There wasn’t a single naive mind present who would interpret those words as a simple farewell. It was a death sentence.

It was an arrogant declaration, but it was precisely this arrogance that brought Sprigo back to his senses.

The figure standing before him now was the enemy of Argyrion. The one who had single-handedly toppled Blasphemia...

‘No, wait.’

Sprigo recalled Halto’s careful explanation about the enemy.

‘There are two enemies.’

One is the Beast of White Light, and the other is this con artist.

Halto, Argyrion’s chairman, had given the man standing before him the dignified title of “con artist,” but to Sprigo, this bastard was just a filthy dog.

The difference between the two enemies—the "Beast" and the "Con Artist"—was simple.

The Beast was, in every sense of the word, a beast. It had faced off against Argyrion’s elite forces and had overwhelmed them with sheer magical power—a force of pure destruction.

The Con Artist, on the other hand, never used such brute methods. He hid himself obsessively and toyed with Argyrion.

In theory, the Beast, despite its overwhelming strength, shouldn’t have known how to hide itself. It was a creature of immense power, a giant whose every step left massive traces.

But everything changed once the Con Artist got involved. The Beast began lurking in the shadows, suffocating them with its presence. This was the fatal flaw in the plan when the White Light Tower first commissioned the hunt for the Beast.

「Con Artist. Where is the Beast you’ve been raising?」

As the first of Argyrion’s group to directly confront the enemy, Sprigo had a duty to gather as much information as possible.

He didn’t expect the nameless Con Artist to give up anything easily, but even a conversation could reveal clues.

‘It won’t be long before I secure enough output to send a message to the main forces...’

“Raising? Me?”

***

I was taken aback. The "Beast" he was talking about must have been Carisia, but how on earth could I be raising her?

If anything, the opposite was true. I was the one who depended on her for my paycheck.

“That’s ridiculous. You still don’t get it, do you?”

「Get what?」

“The one you call a Beast... I don’t control her.”

***

What nonsense is this?

This was the question floating through Gorgov’s mind as he found himself excluded from the conversation. That nameless impostor, the man Sprigo called a Con Artist, had clearly been entangled with Argyrion for a long time.

But how long, exactly? Gorgov couldn’t even guess. Despite being the first to awaken to the cause at Amimone Tower, even he had only learned of Argyrion’s enemies today.

“I serve her,” the Con Artist said, “as I have from the beginning. That has never changed.”

「What……?」

“Haha. You called her a Beast and thought she was nothing more than an animal? How foolish.”

A thick, mocking smile spread across the Con Artist’s face.

“She is far more just than your so-called truth, and far greater than your so-called cause.”

「How dare you insult our cause!」

“There’s no need to fear something that hasn’t even entered this world yet, something still beyond the walls. The only one I fear is her.”

Orthes shrugged as he turned to look at Danao, who was still alive, his chest barely rising and falling.

Then he looked back at Sprigo. In the process of breaking down and analyzing Sprigo's soul earlier, Orthes had uncovered Sprigo's ploy.

Sprigo had been expanding his roots, trying to break through the extra-dimensional storm and relay information about Orthes to his superiors.

Orthes had suspected as much. Anyone who had suffered so many defeats at his hands wouldn't be foolish enough to engage in idle conversation without a backup plan.

'Halto... still remembers me?'

It was a surprising revelation. Despite Orthes's talent for blending into the background and his faint presence—a trait made even more elusive by becoming an Eroder—Halto still harbored animosity toward him. And Sprigo, despite the risk, had decided to gather intelligence in the middle of all this chaos.

Even so, Orthes had played along. It wasn't only Sprigo who needed time.

After all, the longer Orthes kept his eyes open, the more he could see.

By now, he had a full view of every part of Sprigo's body, which was rooted all over Algoth City.

And within Orthes's coat was an extra-dimensional artifact he had borrowed, one he had promised a friend he would use for a very special purpose.

Chapter 123: Neither Truth nor the (4)

Chapter 123: Neither Truth nor the Greater Good (4)

Sprigo hadn't been trying to expand using only his own power. The silver soldiers, the Drachmas, were mass-produced soldiers that had proved useful even in their basic form. But for the now-enormous Sprigo, he saw another way to utilize them.

The Drachmas were filled with extra-dimensional mana, and as a master of plant magic, Sprigo could easily absorb the extra-dimensional energy within them.

At the same time, Sprigo held command over the Drachmas. He ordered them to relocate to places where it would be easier for him to absorb them throughout Algoth City.

This retreat gave the wizards of Amimone Tower, who had been locked in a stalemate, a brief moment to catch their breath. They suspected there was some connection between the gigantic tree that had sprouted in the city center and the Drachmas' sudden withdrawal, but they dared not make any hasty moves.

Nearly simultaneously with the explosive growth of the silver tree, all communications were cut off. In the ominous silence, the surviving wizards of Amimone Tower had no choice but to focus on their immediate survival.

At the root of this silence was Orthes.

***

Sprigo's expansion seemed endless. Perhaps he sensed that expanding further while I watched would risk detection, so he continued extending his roots underground, devouring the Silver Thread Worms species below Algoth City, furthering his growth in secret.

I was waiting for Sprigo to finish devouring all of the Silver Thread Worms. If even a few had been left behind as reserves for Argyrion's headquarters, my future plans would unravel with more problems than I could count.

'No. I should already assume problems have arisen.'

Why was Halto so eager to blame me the moment something unusual occurred?

Sprigo had now consumed all of the Drachmas. This meant that I no longer had to strain myself by dividing my attention across multiple points. I could focus solely on Sprigo.

Quickly, I reached into my coat and grabbed the container of bubbles. Sprigo reacted immediately.

「Gorgov! Stop the enemy!」

Mana gathered at every branch of the tree. He was drawing in the vast power from his roots, attempting to focus it into a single point, strong enough to send a message through the storm to Argyrion's base.

Despite being drained of mana and wounded, Gorgov attacked without hesitation. But it was in vain.

Before he could use his magic to turn his body to poison or transform the ground beneath me into a swamp, I was already holding a bubble wand.

Whoo.

I blew into the wand, and a bubble formed, floating up toward the sky. Through the distorted surface of the bubble, Gorgov's face appeared enlarged and grotesque.

At least, that's how it looked in the visible spectrum. What I was seeing, however, was not just physical features but the very information embedded in their existence.

I discarded what was unnecessary. My task wasn't to erase Algoth City or Amimone Tower. Even if the tower's mana core was linked to the Ten Commandments, erasing it wouldn't have been easy, and besides, Amimone Tower was meant to fall into Kynemon's hands.

What I was focused on was the physical entity of Sprigo, and Gorgov, who was now charging at me.

Gorgov's expression showed confusion. *In this situation? He's using that?*

From the traitor's grasp, countless spells exploded forth. Normally, a wizard would specialize in a few specific elements based on their talents, but with enchantware and magical engraving devices, those limitations could be temporarily bypassed.

The first spell Gorgov unleashed was lightning—one of the quintessential offensive spells. As soon as the first bolt landed, many more spells would follow, riding the lingering traces of mana. It was a clever choice.

But too slow.

The lightning spell, which should have struck at the speed of light the moment it was fired, was fortunately delayed, thanks to Sprigo's unintended mana absorption effect as a result of his transformation into a giant tree.

Even Sprigo hadn't expected this effect. Naturally. The mana absorption wasn't some deliberate magical construct of his, but rather a byproduct of his transformation into this massive tree—a kind of biological trait of the species.

Just as normal plants absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen, the extra-dimensionally eroded tree absorbed mana, converted it into extra-dimensional energy, and released it.

In human terms, it was as natural as breathing. The enchantware Gorgov relied on lost some of its charge as it was siphoned by Sprigo, lowering the overall potency of the spell. This granted me a brief moment of respite.

The mana flowing along the structure of Gorgov's spells was projected into the bubbles.

I saw everything I needed to see.

I raised a finger.

Pop.

***

Danao opened his eyes. The sky was still shimmering with chaos, but the silver tower-like figure of the wizard he had last seen was nowhere to be found.

Instead, in front of him stood the man who called himself an "agent," his blue eyes glowing faintly.

"You…"

"Rest assured, Amimone Tower is safe," the man said calmly.

"What?"

"The wizards who followed you out to chase Argyrion—they're not dead. The tower's strength remains intact."

Danao couldn't detect any emotion in the agent's voice. No mockery, no deception—just cold detachment.

'I don't know why he's keeping me alive… but...'

If he wanted to survive, Danao knew he had to try something.

"You must need me for something."

"No."

The answer was calm but felt brutally final to Danao.

"Then why are you keeping me alive?" Danao's eyes darted around, taking in his surroundings. The massive form of Argyrion's officer, or the tower's traitor—neither of them was anywhere to be seen.

"Because I have to keep a promise. Now, please listen for a moment."

With a *thunk*, the agent placed something down from within his coat. It was the very relic they had intended to use to lure Argyrion.

“In truth, this relic has already been used once. Not as bait, but for its original function.”

“What?”

“This is the Lamp of Estia.”

Slowly, the man began to explain what he had done while he was in Amimone Tower.

***

The Lamp of Estia isn’t particularly useful in combat. All it does is provide peaceful sleep to those who rest in its light.

Yes, I see that part caught your attention.

Indeed, it affects multiple people at once. I’ve experimented with its effects because ‘peaceful sleep’ can be interpreted in many ways. For some, it’s a deep, dreamless sleep. For others, it’s waking up refreshed after reliving pleasant memories.

The measure of “peace” in the sleep it offers is determined by the user of the relic.

When you and Gorgov began your conversation with Sprigo, I knocked out everyone gathered in the Tower Master’s chamber and disabled the mana core’s communication relay.

And then I lit the lamp.

Yes, even when they were unconscious, lighting the lamp still fulfilled the condition of ‘sleeping in its light.’

I showed them a dream.

A dream in which, after passing out, they awoke bound, and a broadcast from the mana core revealed that both you and Gorgov had been traitors working for Argyrion.

In the dream, I revealed myself as a Blasphemia agent, proclaiming that this vile conspiracy was finally over.

The dream likely ended with the captured traitors losing consciousness once again.

***

Danao muttered in confusion.

“You… why?”

His first thought was how needlessly convoluted this plan was. Whether to kill him or keep him alive, there were far simpler ways to achieve the agent's goal than manipulating events from the shadows.

And yet, the agent had gone out of his way to implant a false reality in the minds of the traitors, making them believe they were Argyrion's collaborators.

Like a teacher answering a curious student, the agent's voice was gentle as he explained.

"My goal isn't to kill you. It's to pass your position to someone else. That's why you cannot simply die in battle. I had to prepare the situation so that Danao would be deemed unfit to remain as Tower Master."

"So, you plan to frame me as an Argyrion traitor?"

"Yes. Your position will be stripped from you, and it will go to someone ideologically pure from among Amimone Tower's many factions."

"Hah. Hahaha…"

Huh—hahahaha! Danao laughed bitterly. The very position he had fought to protect until the end was now gone forever.

"I'll ask… just two things."

Resigned to his fate, Danao felt a strange sense of peace as he watched the man nod in acknowledgment.

"Who will take my place?"

"Kynemon."

"…Who?"

"The last direct descendant of the Tavning Tower you destroyed with your own hands. This is his revenge."

Danao's memory of it was vague. He had destroyed so many towers that it was hard to keep track.

"One of my friends mentioned this at a bar once. He said he wanted to carve his name into your mind, just as you did when you brought down his tower—one by one, listing how he dismantled it."

This was that moment.

"I've come to fulfill that request."

Danao chuckled softly before asking his final question.

“Names, huh? Yeah. Names.”

It was the mention of a name that had suddenly made Danao realize everything was wrong.

“What’s your name?”

“How many letters would you like?”

“All of them. The shortest one first.”

“With three letters, it’s Utis.”

Nobody. Nobody at all.

What a ridiculous name.

The irony of being bested by someone named “Nobody” was the last thing Danao ever felt.

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“I think I’ve gone through most of the three-letter names. There’s one I haven’t mentioned, but no one here would recognize it anyway, so let’s skip that. As for the four-letter one… well, I’m not particularly fond of calling it my true name, but…”

Still, if I had to pick the name that most resembled a ‘real’ name in this world, it would be this one. It was the name I had chosen for myself.

“Orthes. That’s what my friends call me. There was also a time when I used a five-letter or even six-letter name, but—”

As I continued listing the names in order of length, starting with Utis, I suddenly realized there was no one left to hear the next one.

Danao’s eyes were closed. His nerves were gradually flickering out, the body that had already been pushed to its limits finally giving up its fight to stay alive.

“Phew...”

This had certainly deviated far from my expectations, but somehow, it was over.

Damn Argyrion. I never expected to waste the extra-dimensional relic I borrowed from Kynemon just to deal with them.

Originally, my plan was simple: secretly plant the extra-dimensional relic in the hidden vault and then frame the Tower Master socially. But Argyrion’s sudden and erratic involvement forced me to improvise at every turn.

“Well, for now…”

I needed to head back to the Tower Master’s chamber and restore the communication relay I’d cut from the mana core.

The traitors, who had witnessed the illusion, would testify that Danao had been one of their own. It wouldn’t be hard to spin the situation into what I had intended.

***

Since the news broke about the murder of one of the elders of the Ten Towers, the magical society had been on high alert.

It’s not that things were quiet. Quite the opposite—every other topic had been swept away by the furious current of the Ten Towers’ collective rage, leaving no room for anything else to gain attention.

And now, another storm hit the magical world.

Traitors aligned with Argyrion were nothing new. But this time, the scale was unprecedented.

A Tower Master had betrayed them.

More than a dozen Argos agents raised within Amimone Tower, and even the Tower Master of Amimone himself, had sided with Argyrion.

This was all that the common populace knew. However, among the higher echelons, those who occupied key positions within the towers and had access to the hidden truths of the magical world, a rumor began to spread—that the one who had uncovered this grand conspiracy was a Blasphemia agent. The internal power struggle within Panoptes had shifted dramatically.

Salmosia clapped her hands in joy at the boon brought about by L13.

“So, what did he ask for? No requests for enchantware maintenance or artifact upkeep?”

“He didn’t ask for anything,” Niobe replied, trying to hide her dismay. Her senior had finished everything before the reinforcements even arrived, leaving only cleanup for her to handle.

Salmosia praised him as the ‘paragon of inspectors,’ but Niobe felt that something was off.

It wasn’t a noble sense of duty or professional pride that she sensed from him. It felt more like... a deep and mundane fatigue.

‘It’s as if…’

It seemed like he was being chased by something. Even through his smiles, there was an unmistakable sense of urgency. While it could be explained as a hatred for Argyrion, Niobe felt there was something different about her senior’s behavior now compared to when he had previously pursued Argyrion.

***

‘Damn.’

The moment the extra-dimensional storm cleared and the global communications network was restored, my gauntlet-shaped communicator began buzzing with dozens of alarms.

They were messages from Carisia, asking why she hadn’t heard from me.

***

Kynemon sat across from Orthes, who, for some reason, looked particularly exhausted. Kynemon, of course, had ears and eyes everywhere. It was obvious this man had been involved in the catastrophe that had taken place in Algoth City.

Kynemon knew Danao well. Danao was the embodiment of greed—not all the greed in the world, perhaps, but enough to account for all of the greed in Algoth City. On top of that, he was a man driven by an even greater desire for self-preservation.

Danao always targeted weaker towers. His method was simple: slow, calculated growth by hunting down easy, safe prey.

For a man like that to team up with Argyrion? Impossible. Someone like Danao, who valued the balance of risk and reward more than any wizard, wouldn't have made such a reckless choice.

Yet the world now believed that Danao had colluded with Argyrion.

Kynemon's prize was the Amimone Tower, but could a tower known for betraying its own survive for long?

The only reason it hadn't been torn apart yet was due to its Pure Tower status, but in all other respects, Amimone was a dead tower walking.

"Haha, Kynemon. I'm sorry."

The sudden apology at the start of their conversation was the last thing Kynemon had expected.

"…Huh?"

"I have a lot to apologize for… First, that bubble wand. I used it once."

"What?"

Kynemon had already abandoned any hope of getting back the Bubble of Erasure when Orthes first requested it, saying he needed it to deal with Amimone's Tower Master.

It's rare for something to actually be returned after someone says, "I'll give it back later."

Kynemon raised the container of bubbles, examining it in the light. The liquid inside had diminished ever so slightly.

"I originally planned to use this as leverage to dethrone the Tower Master, then quietly return it to you once it was all over. But things went awry, so I had to use it. If you ever need help with anything, don't hesitate to ask."

"Ah, well... sure."

Kynemon mumbled in response, trailing off. He had assumed Orthes took the Bubble of Erasure as a preemptive measure in case Kynemon ever decided to turn against the Hydra Corporation—a way to ensure loyalty.

Orthes had given him the relic with the same nonchalance he'd shown when he'd handed it to him back in the extra-dimensional contamination zone.

"And as for the matter of your appointment as the new Tower Master of Amimone..."

Kynemon nearly choked. Orthes had personally torn Amimone Tower to pieces—what kind of position was there left to inherit in a tower that was about to be dissolved and its assets redistributed?

"I'm sorry about that as well. My plan was for you to receive your official Tower Master credentials the moment I returned, but things got a little... complicated."

"What?"

"Amimone Tower won't be dissolved. I've already made arrangements with Blasphemia."

Orthes casually admitted to pulling strings within Panoptes while delivering an even more shocking revelation.

"Kynemon, you've been listed as one of the candidates for Amimone Tower Master. Best of luck to you."

***

Kynemon, who hadn't fully grasped the situation, pressed Orthes for more details. Orthes explained:

"If the Pure Tower is purged entirely, the repercussions would be too great. There are many neutral factions who engaged in trade with Argyrion without knowing their true nature, and once they saw Argyrion's true colors, they were paralyzed, unsure what to do."

"If the Ten Towers were to completely erase a Pure Tower like Amimone, then every tower that had ever dealt with Argyrion, even unknowingly, would have no hope of redemption."

"So they're keeping the Amimone Tower as a signal of goodwill, even if it's in name only. The idea is that as long as the Tower Master changes, the tower itself can continue to exist. The implication is that if you bring them the head of the traitorous Tower Master, even if the tower itself collaborated with the enemy, it can still be spared."

Kynemon sighed. "That's all fine, but how am I one of the Tower Master candidates?"

"Haha. Amimone Tower is infamous for its sprawling expansion. It crushes towers that resist, but the ones that surrender are absorbed as subsidiary branches. I made sure to prepare some documents indicating that your old tower had been absorbed as one of those branches."

Kynemon finally realized Orthes's true intention.

This was a test. A chance to prove himself by showing that he could rise to the occasion. It was also a way for them to assess whether Kynemon, who had been out of the field for some time, still had what it took.

At the same time, the reward couldn't have been sweeter. This competition to select Amimone's new Tower Master was an official process certified by the Ten Towers. In other words…

It was an opportunity to rewrite history, to turn the narrative so that Kynemon's lost tower had, in fact, taken over Amimone Tower instead.

"I'm truly sorry things turned out this way."

Orthes's sly grin now seemed almost welcome to Kynemon. Even the cunning phrasing, asking him to "prove his abilities," now felt like a pleasant challenge.

"I'll do my best."

***

I was glad Kynemon had understood the situation. But my relief was short-lived.

"Hmmm."

Because the boss was now standing right in front of me. I had used Kynemon as an excuse to avoid this conversation earlier, but now I was cornered, and there was no escape.

"You're a bit late."

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Her voice was soft, but the tension in the air skyrocketed, inversely proportional to the smoothness of her tone.

It wasn't a bad thing that Carisia was looking for me.

That is—if I had answered her request in a timely manner. I forced a smile, trying to brush off her pointed remark about my lateness.

"Haha, things turned out that way."

"That way?"

...I tried to brush it off.

"I'm pretty sure you said you'd be back soon this time. Yet you only returned after a city got swallowed by an extra-dimensional storm and the Tower Master of a Pure Tower was dethroned."

Carisia's lips were smiling, but her tone carried none of the warmth that her expression suggested.

"That's why I told you to take Phoibos' crystal with you."

I couldn't tell if it was a complaint or a sigh of disappointment. I quickly pulled out an excuse.

"But, boss, the crystal didn't exactly warn of any real danger, did it…?"

If Carisia had seen any truly catastrophic danger through the crystal, like when we encountered the Temple of Pluton, where two or more Elders of the Ten Towers ambushed us, she would've dropped everything and rushed to the scene herself.

Sure, she had left me dozens of messages asking if I was okay, but she hadn't shown up in person. That was a clear sign. Carisia wasn't the type to let go of an asset like me so easily.

Yet somehow, my words only made Carisia's gaze grow even colder.

"Relics aren't omnipotent, you know?"

"Rest assured. I may not be a relic, but I *am* omnipotent."

"..."

A heavy silence fell between us. It was meant as a joke. After a moment, Carisia sighed and waved her fingers, gesturing for me to sit closer.

“So, you said you had to meet with Kynemon first before seeing me. What did you talk about?”

For now, she seemed willing to let it go. Strange. I hadn’t done anything wrong, but I was still feeling stifled.

“I went ahead and sorted out some payroll issues. There were a few unexpected events in Algoth City, and I wasn’t able to perfectly prepare the payment I owed that friend of ours.”

***

Carisia listened quietly as Orthes explained. Argyrion had gone berserk, raising an extra-dimensional storm, and Orthes had cleverly used the incident to frame Danao as an Argyrion collaborator, misleading Blasphemia’s leadership and manipulating the documents to get Kynemon into the competition for Amimone Tower Master.

“The part where Danao personally handed over mana core control to Gorgov was especially useful. Even if I had testimony from the other traitors about the dreams they saw, without hard evidence like that, it would’ve been difficult to completely deceive Blasphemia.”

Carisia sat with her fingers interlaced, resting her chin on them, as she considered something.

For a brief moment, she imagined simply letting Orthes work for the Ten Towers for a couple of months, then stepping back to watch as the Ten Towers collapsed.

Of course, that was an impossible thought—too absurd. But the man sitting in front of her, this strange man with his half-closed eyes, excitedly boasting about the schemes he had set in motion, was one of the farthest people from the concept of “common sense.”

As she listened to Orthes’ smug recounting, Carisia finally spoke.

“So, what about Argyrion? What happened to them?”

There were a few things that needed clarification. There had been an extra-dimensional storm, and Argyrion had appeared. This part gave Carisia a very bad feeling.

“It’s true that Argyrion summoned the storm, and that they can use it to travel between contaminated zones. It seems that the extra-dimensional entity corrupting them has bestowed this kind of magic upon them.”

The beings beyond the extra-dimension are often referred to as “entities” for convenience, but they are not singular. Just as this world’s gods are many, the beings of the extra-dimension are also numerous, each with their own unique intentions. They don’t operate as a single, unified force.

Most of these beings view this world as a meal. They have no interest in understanding human individuals or societies—they just want to break through the dimensional walls and consume the world. The destructive nature of Eroders stems from this very inclination.

However, the entity backing Argyrion seemed to be very, very different.

Carisia raised her assessment of Argyrion's capabilities. If they had direct "sponsorship" from an extra-dimensional entity, then the abilities she had encountered when Argyrion had once been Blasphemia agents were no longer relevant.

Carisia's own magical prowess had changed dramatically since the Golden Desert Operation. While her raw mana reserves and output hadn't significantly increased, the depth of her magic had.

In the days when she was being hunted right after her creation by the White Light Tower, she hadn't had time to fully explore the magical knowledge buried within her subconscious. As a result, her only form of attack was a brute-force approach, where her magic output was directly proportional to the amount of mana she pumped into it.

Now, after spending time with Orthes, who had helped her evade Blasphemia's hunters and allowed her to focus inward, Carisia had been steadily mastering the knowledge buried within her. The strange death-on-sight spell she had tested in Elysion was just one application of that internal wisdom.

Among modern magicians, Carisia likely had more magical knowledge than anyone—except perhaps the Tower Masters of the Ten Towers. Maybe even including them.

However, the extra-dimension was filled with phenomena beyond even her vast knowledge.

Orthes. As capable as he claimed to be, he was not invincible. As the Phoibos Crystal had hinted, if he got caught up in truly unpredictable events, even he could be in danger.

The idea of her Orthes being put in such peril did not sit well with her.

Tap. Tap. Carisia's index finger drummed rhythmically on the table. Sitting across from her, Orthes began to feel like a job applicant being scrutinized by an interviewer.

"This won't do."

"What won't do?"

"I think it's time I got personally involved."

The central head of Hydra had come to a decision.

If you're unsure of what someone's going to do, just kill them all before they get the chance.

***

Carisia's declaration was chilling. I wasn't sure which part of this situation had triggered her, but… wasn't this basically a way of saying she didn't trust me to handle things anymore?

Normally, if my boss told me I didn't have to do any more work, I'd raise both hands in celebration. But this time, the situation had a very different, more ominous tone.

A cold instinct told me I might be facing something akin to… getting fired.

"Uh, boss, don't you think it's enough that I handle all the annoying tasks and minions by myself?"

"Every time you go out on your own, things spiral out of control in unexpected ways. Instead of worrying about what might go wrong, I'll just go with you from the start."

I tried to process her words. It took a moment to fully sink in.

"So… you mean you're going to come along on my missions?"

Carisia nodded lightly.

"For a while, yes."

This was far scarier than getting fired.

As I rubbed my temples, trying to absorb the gravity of this new arrangement, Carisia posed another question.

"Kynemon's going to be part of the Tower Master Selection. You're planning to help him, right?"

"Ah, yes. The agreement was to reward him with the Tower Master title, not just a spot as a candidate."

With a snap of Carisia's fingers, several holographic displays appeared above the table, showcasing detailed information about the various factions within Amimone Tower.

"...Interesting."

The news that the position of Tower Master had been left vacant and would soon be filled by one of the Tower's factions spread quickly. At the same time, forces scrambled to align themselves with one of the candidates, or manipulate them from behind the scenes, in order to seize control of Amimone Tower's future vision.

"Kynemon's compensation was something promised at the corporate level, not just by you personally. I intend to ensure that payment is fulfilled."

Carisia had already categorized the other candidates into groups based on specific criteria, most of which revolved around the size and influence of the “backers” behind each candidate.

I could sense Arabella’s late-night labor in the neatly organized data sheets.

“The Ten Towers themselves will likely predict that the faction wars will be determined by which candidates have the strongest backers… or should I say ‘investors.’ And if I’m not mistaken, Argyrion is almost certainly going to interfere in this Tower Master selection, either directly or indirectly.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Carisia stared at me for a moment, saying nothing. After a few seconds of silence, I realized what she meant.

“Because of me?”

“Sprigo said so, didn’t he? He told you that Halto was convinced everything in Algoth City was happening because of you.”

I nodded. Damn that Halto. Why did he have to blame me for everything without a shred of proof?

“That means they’re likely to assume that you’ll also be behind the Amimone Tower Master selection.”

“But why? What for?”

This was

pure speculation, right? Sure, I had been involved in the situation to some degree, but there weren’t any clear clues pointing to my presence. To assume I was influencing everything would be a sign of paranoia.

I’d gone to great lengths to leave no traces of my involvement, and now I had to worry about some delusional maniac tracking me down? The unfairness of it all stung.

Carisia crushed my sense of injustice with a single sentence.

“I would assume the same, if I were them.”

Chapter 126: Social Ties and Cult Schemes (1)

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In Carisia's plan, Kynemon was essentially bait.

His role was to participate in the Tower Master selection process diligently and secure the title of Tower Master. In other words, to follow his ambitions to the fullest. Meanwhile, Carisia's preparations for eliminating Argyrion would happen entirely in the background, with no one the wiser.

"We don't know exactly what kind of tasks the Ten Towers will assign to test the candidates' abilities," Carisia mused. "But we can be sure everyone will be using external tactics."

"Are you referring to assassinations?" Orthes asked.

Carisia nodded. The essence of the Tower Master selection was a ruthless pruning process until only one candidate remained.

"If you reduce the number of participants ahead of time, it obviously increases the chances of your favored candidate coming out on top."

"Assassination would be the most straightforward, but there are other ways too. Sponsors might strike deals with one another to unify their support behind a single candidate. Knowledge is a commodity that can be shared."

Carisia twisted a lock of hair around her finger, her voice growing cold.

"We'll start by investigating the ones who are suspiciously quiet."

Argyrion was a group that couldn't afford to be noticed. The fewer people who knew about them, the deadlier they became. But using external tactics would inevitably expose the presence of the sponsors backing each candidate.

"There's no reason not to use external tactics unless they don't have a sponsor or can't afford to reveal who their sponsor is. It's rare, but it could also be that the candidate is so confident in their own abilities that they don't need a sponsor."

"I'll compile a report on any candidates without sponsors."

"No need," Carisia replied. "Arabella will handle that."

Somewhere, a full-body cyborg wizard with a spider-shaped enchantware groaned as she continued her overtime shift.

"Our objectives are twofold: protect Kynemon as the future Tower Master and track Argyrion."

Orthes nodded in agreement. Even if Argyrion didn't move to assassinate Kynemon, the sponsors behind the other candidates certainly would. However, a question lingered.

"Kynemon may have been out of the game for a while, but he's a seasoned fixer who survived in extra-dimensional border zones. Do we really need to assign him protection?"

Here, the question wasn't about the necessity of protection but its effectiveness.

The frontlines of the extra-dimension were treacherous enough to be described as "magic-infested." For someone like Kynemon to have survived such a place with all his limbs intact and now live a—albeit, far from peaceful—retirement was no small feat.

Assassins sent to take out a man of Kynemon's caliber wouldn't be easily stopped by regular bodyguards.

They might send regular killers at first, underestimating him. But the moment it became clear who Kynemon was, any group truly determined to take him out—especially those who wanted to devour the corpse of Amimone Tower—would send assassins of terrifying skill.

'To make a meaningful impact against assassins targeting Kynemon, we'd need someone on the level of Hydra Corporation's directors,' Orthes thought.

But therein lay the problem. Carisia's directors were already drowning in work due to her plans. If Carisia left to hunt down Argyrion, the directors' workloads would only increase further.

"We'll assign Kine," Carisia said nonchalantly.

"Pardon?"

Orthes, who had expected he would be the one protecting Kynemon while Carisia tracked Argyrion, blinked at the unexpected answer.

"I've tested her abilities several times. She's perfect at hiding her holy power and projecting her mana."

Kine's combat prowess lay in her mastery over holy power. Unlike magic, which distorts the laws of the world, holy power reflects the world's natural order, often promoting natural healing regardless of religious affiliation.

Carisia had focused on this aspect while training Kine.

"Kine can use holy power internally while masking it with external mana. It's a kind of supernatural multitasking, you could say."

Kine's technique allowed her to constantly heal herself with holy power internally while cloaking her presence in mana externally, making it seem like she wasn't using holy power

at all. This gave her incredible endurance, allowing her to continue fighting as long as she wasn't killed outright.

"In a worst-case scenario, she can heal Kynemon or, if everything falls apart and Kynemon is killed, she can use necromancy to hold his soul in place. No one would be a better protector."

Orthes had to admit that there was no one better suited for the job than Kine. While he hadn't been paying attention, Carisia had turned a survivor of a fallen cult into a formidable operative.

"If Kynemon pulls ahead in the Tower Master selection thanks to our support, it'll likely provoke other factions. While Kine blocks their approaches, we'll focus on tracking Argyrion among the ones who don't approach."

Carisia nodded reluctantly.

'If I were Halto…'

While trying to claim Amimone Tower's remnants, he would have moved under the assumption that Orthes would interfere. Rather than merely preparing for the possibility of Orthes' appearance, he would have built his entire strategy around the assumption that Orthes was already working against him.

That's why Carisia had hoped to avoid being separated from Orthes. But her rational mind told her that would be a waste.

Among her cards, there was no one stronger than Orthes. If Argyrion decided to face Orthes head-on, they would need to prepare for something as significant as the assassination of a Ten Tower Elder.

Searching in only one direction at a time was terribly inefficient, and the means to threaten Orthes were limited.

Caught between her concerns and logic, Carisia settled on a compromise.

"We'll split up to investigate. But call me immediately if anything seems off."

***

Kynemon adjusted his clothes, feeling a bit uncomfortable. He stood in the grand hall of Algoth City.

Naturally, as a candidate for Amimone Tower's Tower Master, Kynemon had been invited to this gathering. But the reason for his discomfort stood right behind him.

Carisia. Kine. And Orthes.

The main source of Kynemon's unease was, of course, the last one. But the first one could also make him uneasy from time to time.

Like now, for instance.

"Kine is your insurance," Carisia said casually.

"Insurance? What do you mean by that?"

"Against your death."

Kynemon was a sharp man. That was all he needed to understand the situation. At Carisia's subtle signal, Kine lit a small, ominous flame at the tip of her index finger.

It was pure dark mana of the highest quality. Despite her youthful appearance, it was clear that Kine possessed an impressive depth of knowledge in dark magic—more specifically, necromancy, as hinted at earlier.

"I suppose I should be grateful."

The chance to rule over the heads of his family's enemies—Amimone Tower—was now within his grasp. He had no intention of letting a mere assassination ruin his perfect revenge.

Better to continue living as a puppet controlled by necromancy than to be robbed of his vengeance by a premature death. In fact, wasn't he already a puppet in Orthes' hands? It wouldn't be much different.

With that thought, Kynemon decided to stop worrying about his bodyguard—who doubled as his warden—and instead turned his attention to his potential rivals.

Meanwhile, Kine was feeling rather lost.

'What am I even doing here…?'

She'd been summoned by the boss almost daily, dragged around here and there, and now she had suddenly been thrown into actual combat. Wasn't her original purpose to infiltrate Museion Academy, get recruited into Black Dark Tower, and leak information from within?

Orthes had explained that there were other ways to draw attention from the Ten Towers. But this "other way"...

'Stopping assassination attempts on a Tower Master candidate?'

She remembered Orthes smiling as he said, "If you flawlessly handle this mission, you'll be recognized as a sudden genius among wizards, appearing out of nowhere."

'Sure, stopping assassination attempts as a little girl will definitely get me noticed!'

While Kine silently cursed Orthes, he surveyed the surroundings.

Despite being held in a city that had been hit by a magical disaster just days ago, this event was surprisingly luxurious—appropriate for a gathering meant to signal to the traitors that "there's still a chance to redeem yourselves."

'I recognize some of those figures from Pure Tower records.'

Orthes wasn't focused on the candidates themselves, but on their sponsors. If any of them had accepted Argyrion's Silver Thread influence, tracking Argyrion's movements would become significantly easier.

However, his half-closed eyes failed to detect any such collaborators.

'Of course, things won't go that smoothly. …Huh?'

Someone was approaching their group from across the hall. Orthes narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

Chapter 127: Social Ties and Cult Schemes (2)

Chapter 127: Social Ties and Cult Schemes (2)

There were two reasons why Orthes furrowed his brow.

The first was the fact that there was a magician showing interest in Hydra Corporation at all. This alone was unexpected.

Hydra Corporation had gone to great lengths to remain unnoticed by the mainstream magical community. While this policy would gradually shift after the Amimone Tower Master selection, no major power was supposed to be aware of Hydra's true nature yet.

In other words, Hydra Corporation—and by extension, their sponsored candidate, Kynemon—was an unknown entity, expected to fade away without making waves.

‘There’s no reason for anyone to approach us right now.’

Perhaps, after the social gathering had ripened, and people were trying to form alliances with the leading candidates and their backers, such an approach would make sense. But to seek out Hydra Corporation at this moment was highly unusual.

Approaching when there was no need to approach? It meant the other party had an ulterior motive. That was the first reason for Orthes’ frown.

The second reason?

‘Holy power?’

The presence of holy power emanated from the group approaching them. So, to be precise, these people weren’t magicians at all—they were priests.

‘Unless they’re double-jobbing like Kine.’

But from Orthes’ quick assessment, these priests had little to offer in terms of magical prowess. Their many magical artifacts were impressive, but that only made it clear they relied heavily on their tools to present the *illusion* of being magicians.

They weren’t careless about hiding their holy power. It was just that Orthes’ perceptive eyes were borderline cheating.

Two women stood behind the branch leader of this small faction. Both were dressed in elegant gowns befitting the venue, and their beauty was undeniable. The kind of beauty that would normally earn the favor of others at such gatherings—polished, sophisticated, and undeniably attractive.

But this wasn’t the right time or place. Everyone present knew that this was a cutthroat competition for inheritance among magicians. Other candidates had also prepared to

weaponize beauty, making it useless in this context. These women's attractiveness was ill-suited to be wielded as a tool here.

Orthes made a quick mental note.

'Carisia would look good in something like that.'

As he idly mused about the upper-class aesthetics of the event and was thankful the general level of beauty in the room kept them from drawing too much attention, the pace of their approach quickened.

Their movements were subtle but direct. It was clear they didn't intend to draw attention, moving quietly without making their presence known. However, they didn't even glance at anyone else as they approached Hydra Corporation's group.

Orthes exchanged a glance with Carisia.

She gave a short nod. Orthes was given full authority to handle this.

Orthes took a step forward and raised a hand. A passing waiter saw the empty glass in Orthes' hand and refilled it with champagne. Naturally, this maneuver placed Carisia and the rest of the group behind Orthes, positioning him as the one to intercept the newcomers.

When the suspicious group reached Hydra Corporation's position, Orthes was able to block them a few steps before they could approach too closely.

It was a distance just awkward enough that anyone else in the Hydra group wouldn't be drawn into the conversation. This was Orthes' intent.

He prepared to use not only his eyes but also the information Arabella had painstakingly compiled to identify who they were. She had worked through the night to create a report on all the powers potentially interested in Amimone Tower's remains.

Yet nowhere in that report was there any mention of priests or anyone tied to holy power.

With a familiar smile, Orthes buried his suspicion under the guise of casual politeness as he greeted them.

His first words were simple:

"Oh, greetings. You must be the branch leader of Lubrak City."

The man at the front flinched. But he quickly composed himself and responded.

"Well, I'm honored. For you to recognize a small faction like ours right away... You must be the head of the Tabning faction?"

Orthes shook his head.

“I’m Orthes, representing Hydra Corporation and Kynemon in this matter. I’ve been entrusted with external cooperation authority.”

Orthes produced a business card from his jacket and handed it over politely. The title on the card read, “Chief Secretary of Hydra Corporation.”

The branch leader from Lubrak City gleaned quite a bit from this interaction. Hydra Corporation had a much closer relationship with the Tabning faction than he had expected—or perhaps they had completely taken control of it.

Entrusting someone with the authority for external cooperation—meaning social interactions and political negotiations—implied that either the Tabning faction had deep trust in or was tightly leashed by Hydra Corporation.

Lubrak’s branch leader was clearly in the latter category. In his mind, the voice of his “sponsor” echoed. Words to say to Hydra Corporation’s Chief Secretary were planted in his mind.

“Haha, so you’re in charge of external cooperation. Do you think we approached you for that kind of purpose?”

It was a roundabout way of asking if they thought Lubrak’s group was here to form an alliance or negotiate a non-aggression pact for the later stages of the competition.

“Haha, my two employers believe that social interactions are the foundation of all cooperation.”

Orthes responded to the question by offering a subtle hint. He didn’t name Carisia or Kynemon directly but instead referred to them as his two employers, implying that their power was equal.

Of course, that wasn’t the truth, but Orthes had no intention of letting these suspicious individuals know that.

By saying, “social interactions are the foundation of cooperation,” Orthes was effectively saying, “Look, we both know why you’re approaching us. Let’s skip the formalities and get down to business.”

“Direct, aren’t you?”

***

Carisia watched Orthes handle the approaching magicians with a cool gaze. Beside her, Kine nervously clung to her sleeve.

Looking down at Kine, Carisia smiled softly before addressing Kynemon.

“Kynemon.”

“Mm?”

“We have no complaints about how you choose to handle the competition. Win using whatever method you see fit.”

“Harvest, you say.”

‘To them, even deciding the successor of a Pure Tower is just mechanical labor.’

It made sense. Not only was the boss herself here, but Orthes was as well. Kynemon had already experienced firsthand Orthes’ frightening abilities multiple times.

Orthes was the perfect person to deal with assassination tactics, which other candidates would be seriously considering. It wouldn’t surprise Kynemon if he mentioned there were too many candidates, and then found half of them gone the next day.

However, Kynemon had no intention of asking Hydra Corporation for help just yet. Firstly, he sensed that Carisia had brought Orthes along for “another reason” she hadn’t fully explained.

‘Orthes is likely a necessary part of Hydra’s bigger picture. I can’t just borrow him whenever I like.’

Secondly, and perhaps more irrationally, there was a personal, emotional factor at play.

This was his moment to complete his revenge against the Tower that had destroyed his own. For the final step, he wanted to rely on no one but himself.

“If things truly take a turn for the worse, I won’t hesitate to ask for help. But until then, I’ll handle it with my own power.”

Carisia had expected this answer. Based on the stories Orthes had told her and what she’d observed of Kynemon’s behavior in the Hydra building, this response was entirely in line with his personality.

“Good luck.”

With that brief response, Carisia turned and walked toward Orthes. At some point, the branch leader of Lubrak City had taken a step back behind the two beautiful women, while Orthes continued exchanging what appeared to be pleasant conversation—at least on the surface.

Carisia seamlessly joined the conversation. Kynemon felt a slight sense of unease.

‘This is odd. I thought the plan was to let Orthes handle this and extract all the information...’

But since Carisia was involved, there had to be a deeper reason. Kynemon, left with his childlike bodyguard, called over a waiter to order chocolate for the awkward girl and drank his wine.

***

When Carisia joined the conversation, the suspicious group surprisingly withdrew rather quickly. Perhaps they thought her intervention was a signal that the employer herself had come to end the talks, realizing things were dragging on.

I glanced at the champagne in my hand. Clinking glasses with Carisia, I smiled.

“You seemed to be enjoying yourself.”

“No one enjoys work, boss.”

Carisia shrugged, raising her empty hand to gesture at herself. Apparently, if you reach boss-level status, work becomes enjoyable. That was something I’d never understand.

And within that simple gesture was a masterfully concealed spell. An extreme simplification of a hand-sign. A soundproofing spell, to ensure no words would escape our conversation.

“What kind of people were they?”

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully.

“Well, I’m not sure they’re people at all.”

***

“…”

The two beautiful women who had distanced themselves from Orthes were deep in thought. They didn’t need to voice their concerns aloud—they already knew what each other was thinking.

To be precise, they shared a single thought, a single consciousness.

A multi-layered spiritual entity that existed across several humans pondered.

‘What kind of human is that?’

Human? Or not?

Chapter 128: Social Ties and Cult Schemes (3)

Chapter 128: Social Ties and Cult Schemes (3)

The parasite of minds, a being that could be classified as a "mental parasite" in academic terms, and one that was secretly operating as the benefactor of the Lubrak City faction, found the current state of the magical society to be quite amusing.

A world in turmoil meant an expansion of opportunities for its influence.

Long ago, when the Church ruled the world and heavenly orders governed all, the parasite had been sealed away.

The Mage King was the parasite’s savior. During the Mage King's crusade to destroy the Church, the temple where the parasite had been imprisoned was demolished, and the seal was broken.

From that point on, the parasite slowly began to spread its influence again, whispering to fallen priests as though delivering divine revelations, growing its number of vessels ever so steadily.

And now, when another era of chaos dawned on the mortal world, the parasite moved with unprecedented freedom. Artifact regulations? It had been posing as a god within artifacts for centuries. Mastery of deception was practically in its essence.

The parasite could also wield magic with ease. It had long thrived by disrupting the order of the gods, so imitating the equally disorderly craft of magic was as simple as breathing.

A false god, stealing divine names to garner worship, the parasite had become bolder in its movements as it sought a full rebirth, its true mission.

But as of yet, it had not found a vessel capable of fully containing its vast consciousness.

Its mind was simply too large. Even inserting just a fraction of its presence into a human's psyche would bring that mind to the brink of collapse. The stronger a person’s mental fortitude, the more they could withstand its influence, but even the most powerful mages—Tower Masters or commonfolk—were not all that different in the parasite’s eyes.

Thus, the parasite devised a new plan, drawing from its observations of human minds. If it could transfer its will into a mana core and build a colossal golem powered by such a core, then perhaps it could achieve its full potential.

After examining the mana cores of several Towers, it concluded that while the idea was feasible, most mana cores lacked the necessary capacity to fully contain it.

It needed something larger, more intricate.

That’s why the mana core of Amimone Tower became its target. The parasite posed as the benefactor of the Lubrak City faction, using them as a front.

But the parasite was never one to trust a single plan. While most human minds were insufficient vessels, could it be that the candidates vying for the legacy of a Pure Tower possessed something different? Something more?

It searched not only for the mana core but also for a mage whose mental fortitude might serve as a new body for its consciousness.

Admittedly, the parasite didn't hold high expectations for this. After all, if a mage capable of containing its vast mind existed, wouldn't they already be serving as a Tower Master?

Still, the parasite continued its search, exercising patience—until it laid eyes on a woman with white hair flowing like silk.

This mage was not mentioned in any of the magical society records the parasite had gathered. She was a complete unknown, yet the parasite sensed something immensely powerful within her.

It wasn't merely the size of her mana reserves. Her consciousness was deep—profound and dark, like an abyss. There was a chance that her mind could fully accept the parasite, allowing it to be reborn anew.

Fueled by anticipation, the parasite had approached.

But then, a suspicious man with narrow eyes had stepped in.

***

"So, how should I put it... That person? He has a strange way of thinking," Orthes said.

"Do you mean he's ideologically corrupted? More than we are?" Carisia's voice was laced with sarcasm.

We? That's a dangerous thing to say, boss. You're the one trying to blow up the Ten Towers, and I'm just a passive observer.

I didn't voice these thoughts aloud, of course. I pride myself on being perceptive. How else could I have lasted this long as Carisia's right-hand man without getting myself killed?

"I'm not sure about that. I couldn't get a proper read on him."

Carisia's eyes gleamed with interest. If I couldn't get a proper read on someone, it meant their mastery of magic—or the depth of their existence—was on another level. Even without fully opening my eyes, I could easily see through most magicians' shallow facades.

"Their surface consciousness was visible. But their deep consciousness... well, that was a different story."

I carefully chose my words. The deep consciousness of the two women accompanying the suspicious man had appeared as static or corrupted data—glitched, as if something had gone wrong during its processing.

The issue was...

“The deep consciousness of both women was exactly the same. While the surface-level expressions varied due to their individual personalities, their unconscious, inner thoughts were identical.”

To simplify, I had been reading two text files: Priest A and Priest B.

Normally, there’s no way for two human beings to have identical souls unless some divine intervention is at play. So, while their files could be similar, they shouldn’t be exactly the same.

Yet here, Priest A and Priest B had identical contents, down to the corrupted characters.

“A mind-control spell?” Carisia asked. Among the various methods to tamper with human consciousness, this was the most common.

I shook my head. Something about this felt different.

“It’s similar, in that someone tampered with their minds. But... it’s more like...”

It was closer to a golem system governed by a single directive. The difference was that with golems, even the surface consciousness would be uniform, but in this case, only the deep consciousness was.

“Usually, when you peer into a person’s mind, no matter how broken they are, the structure remains consistent. Like whether someone’s mind is a diamond or a rectangle, it's still part of the same family of shapes. But what I saw was... outside the typical human mold. Like a star shape, maybe.”

“You’re saying there’s something inside them that isn’t human?” Carisia’s tone rose slightly, her curiosity piqued.

I felt a surge of instinctual tension. When Carisia became interested in something, it rarely ended well for the object of her fascination.

***

The parasite recalled its encounter with the man who had blocked its approach. Initially, it thought he was merely an intrusive servant.

To acquire such a powerful vessel as the white-haired woman, it would have to proceed carefully. Gaining access to the servant’s mind first to gauge the woman’s interests seemed like the best approach.

It had made the Lubrak Tower Master step back and brought its two avatars forward. Usually, humans responded favorably to the approach of charming strangers.

From that moment, the parasite's invasion had begun. As the emotional distance between it and its target narrowed, infiltration became easier.

The parasite expected it would easily slip into the servant's mind with light conversation.

But it was wrong.

'What... what is that?'

As a being that survived by consuming minds and living in the gaps left behind, the parasite was highly adept at sensing mental activity.

"Mental activity" encompassed everything from the physical brain's processes to supernatural perceptions via mystical abilities—a transcendent form of awareness.

That's why the parasite realized something was off.

This person's cognitive structure was fundamentally different from that of a human.

His perception was bizarre, as though he could see behind himself without turning. How could a person's vision extend to a point where there wasn't even a retina?

The parasite knew that civilization had advanced considerably since its sealing, leading to strange inventions like Enchantware, but the volume of information this man processed was beyond any device's capability.

In fact, it was beyond the parasite's capability as well.

The man was perceiving something. That much was clear. But what exactly he was perceiving? The parasite couldn't grasp it. The only thing it could surmise was that the man had an awareness of the entire space around him.

When the parasite attempted to invade his mind, it found itself drowning in an overwhelming torrent of information. Information about the stone used to build the banquet hall. The origin of that stone. The person who mined it. The life cycle of the fabrics in the carpet...

The parasite quickly realized the truth.

This man was not human. He couldn't be human.

'Is he one of my kind?'

Perhaps this was another being like itself—one who meddled in minds. The parasite sought to possess a physical body because that was part of its metamorphosis into its adult form. In a way, its vessel would be its cocoon.

The parasite wondered if Orthes was another of its kind, one who had been unsealed long before it and had already become proficient in wielding divine powers from within a frail human body.

It remembered the distant past, when it had first been sent to this world by a creator so terrifying it dared not even picture the being's face. The parasite knew it wasn't the only one planted on this world—others had been sealed away by the Church, only to be released later.

'What should I do?'

At a glance, the body Orthes inhabited seemed to contain an immense mind. Perhaps it could utilize more than 70% of its power.

The parasite could summon up to 80% of its own consciousness

across its various vessels, but consolidating its power and overwhelming a single, unified opponent would require careful preparation.

Yes. Preparation.

If it could make the right preparations, it wouldn't be impossible to defeat him. The white-haired woman's radiant vessel was beautiful enough to warrant fratricide...

***

"This smells fishy. Let's find out if they're with Argyrion."

I hesitated for a moment, considering whether or not to stop Carisia from fiddling with her gauntlet.

Chapter 129: Social Ties and Cult Schemes (4)

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Carisia's primary magical attribute is light.

Every mage chooses their magical path based on their elemental affinity. Sometimes, rare cases emerge—those with either no talent or talent in all elements. Naturally, there are also prodigies, gifted in one specific element.

Considering Carisia’s origins, it might seem that her talents would lie solely in the element of light. However, Carisia’s affinity encompasses all ten primary elements as defined by the Mage King.

However, her affinity for light was so overwhelming that it interfered with her ability to use any other element.

This is why no one in Blasphemia ever doubted that she was a monster forged by White Light.

Now, onto the core point.

Carisia is a mage specializing in light magic. And, as it turns out, she possesses an extremely, extremely aggressive temperament.

Light is not typically associated with destructive power.

People often imagine light as something that heals, banishes darkness, or as the natural enemy of unholy creatures like the undead—similar to the powers of a priest.

Some might think of laser beams akin to the space knights of distant galaxies wielding lightsabers.

Once you set aside these classic images of holy warriors or death rays, the destructive potential of light becomes somewhat limited.

Sure, there’s the idea of hitting someone with the speed of light in hand-to-hand combat, but, well… let's just say that close-combat mages aren’t exactly common in this world.

Phenomena often associated with brightness—like lightning or fire—have been classified into separate elements, so they don’t belong under light magic.

For most mages, a simple laser beam would be more than enough to satisfy their thirst for destruction.

But my employer? Well, if we’re talking about destructive tendencies, she could easily be ranked among the top two most aggressive mages in history, standing shoulder to shoulder with the Mage King. A woman so intense, she’d rather bring the world to the brink of an apocalypse than settle for second place.

Naturally, simple death rays weren't enough to satisfy Carisia's insatiable appetite for destruction.

…And so, the strange, terrifying light magic I'm witnessing now was born.

Atomic Fist.

Golden magical light coursed through the engraved grooves of Carisia's gauntlet as she walked forward, lifting her fist as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

And then, she gave a light tap—more like a brush—against the target.

And then...

"Stay behind me," she said.

A barrier expanded around her, enveloping me within it as well. In the next moment, the door she'd tapped began to glow white-hot.

The solid metal melted, and the liquefied remains vaporized, losing all form until only pure light remained—plasma.

A terrifying heat, condensed in the plasma, surged into the space around us. Casually, Carisia twisted her wrist, as though she were plucking an apple from a tree.

The brilliant light, capable of illuminating the entire sky, condensed into a single point, collapsing into a glowing orb. Her gauntleted hand clenched into a fist.

The orb exploded. Wherever the light touched, matter was devoured and disintegrated.

This insane magic Carisia had developed manipulated matter on an atomic level. The name "Atomic Fist" was no exaggeration. It was a literal description of its effects.

I still remember how absurd it felt when she praised me for my "contribution" to the creation of this monstrosity—praise I most certainly didn't deserve.

Sure, I did ask her once, half-jokingly, if there was any way to create light magic that could work like nuclear radiation. But I didn't mean it literally! I just thought it'd be nice to have a nuclear bomb to deal with the endless stream of pursuers we were facing.

And yet, here we are.

Beyond the chaotic storm of light, the priest from earlier stood with wide, stunned eyes, staring at us in disbelief.

"You... what are you...?"

I clicked my tongue.

“I tried to stop her.”

***

The parasite was thoroughly shocked. It had just risen from its rest, sensing a surge of immense mana nearby, only to find one side of the building it had been given melted away.

As the missing wall vanished, the faces of Orthes and the mage from the banquet hall slowly came into view.

But I haven’t even done anything yet!

The white-haired mage, the very one it had chosen as its perfect host, glared at it with blazing eyes. Pure, radiant light mana—no, more than just mana—flowed through her body like liquid brilliance.

Wait a second...

The parasite quickly directed mana to its auxiliary bodies. Something strange had happened the moment it laid eyes on her—some bizarre magic had been triggered. Was it a curse?

One of the parasite’s bodies, standing closer to Carisia, collapsed, its form crumbling like ash.

The parasite instantly grasped what had happened.

Its brain had boiled.

What the hell is this madness?

Using the intellect bestowed upon it by its creator, the parasite rapidly analyzed the situation. The light that had reached its eyes was far beyond ordinary visible light. It was something designed to attack through vision itself.

The atmosphere around Carisia’s golden gauntlet dissolved into light, disintegrating everything it touched. The Atomic Fist hadn’t dissipated yet.

As her arm moved, the air itself melted around her, transforming into light.

The parasite, controlling its remaining bodies, rapidly evaluated the situation.

Looking at her meant death.

Touching her meant death.

Could it flee?

The parasite had no particular attachment to its current vessels. While these bodies had been finely tuned over the years, they were ultimately disposable. Given enough time, it could easily replace them.

It had no idea why it was being attacked like this. Perhaps it was a preemptive strike from a rival, one who had recognized it as a threat.

The one called Orthes, it seemed, had built a close rapport with the vessel known as Carisia. Perhaps Orthes had sensed the parasite's interest in Carisia and launched this surprise attack to keep the parasite from operating within Algoth City.

Even now, Orthes was watching from behind his master, a smile playing on his lips as though everything were proceeding exactly according to plan.

It was a clear message: run. Surrender. Accept the difference in strength and retreat.

For now, I will retreat...

But while Orthes had focused all his energy into a single powerful vessel, the parasite had spread its consciousness across many bodies.

Carisia's overwhelming display of power was a warning: to push any further would be to suffer irreversible loss.

But the parasite had no intention of surrendering to such threats. Just as Orthes coveted Carisia, the parasite knew that there was no vessel in this world more perfect than her.

Following the instinct implanted in it by its creator since time immemorial, the parasite would never give up on its metamorphosis. It had already begun summoning additional bodies the moment it laid eyes on Carisia, so it could afford to sacrifice a few.

***

As instructed earlier, I had kept my eyes open wider than usual.

"Is it Argyrion?" Carisia asked me, only turning toward me once the two disintegrated bodies had fully melted away.

I shook my head.

"Nope, this one's a different breed. But boss, wasn't this a bit overboard?"

"What does it matter? If I had intervened directly in the competition, that would've been a problem. But this is just a dispute between sponsors, isn't it? Even if the organizers have something to say, it won't be a big deal."

Well, I guess that's one way to look at it. Carisia had been meticulous in ensuring that the Lubrak City faction leader wasn't even scratched.

If this counts as being "meticulous"...

Carisia brushed off her gauntlet, as clean as it was from the start. Like the disintegrated section of the building, the husks of the two possessed bodies had completely disappeared.

"So, not Argyrion, and it wasn't after you, either?"

I nodded in agreement, though I still checked once more, just in case. As expected, the Lubrak faction leader was still sound asleep, knocked out by the sleeping draught I'd slipped into his drink earlier. He'd remain blissfully unaware of his sponsor's fate until at least the following morning.

Though, there was a chance he'd wake up in a holding cell. After all, blowing up a part of a building like this was sure to draw the attention of Panoptes by the end of the night.

Knowing their investigative prowess, it wouldn't take them long to figure out he was knocked out by outside influence, meaning he'd probably be treated as a witness, not a suspect.

"Well then, I think the message has been received. Let's move on to the next one."

Carisia seemed set on turning the

Argyrion suspects list into a list of the dead.

Sensing my thoughts, she pouted slightly, offering a half-hearted defense.

"…I only went all-out because they seemed dangerous. It's better than holding back and getting counterattacked."

"Sure, sure. And since you dealt with the biggest threat first, we can proceed with our original plan now—splitting up to investigate."

Carisia pursed her lips but still followed me out of the wreckage.

As we'd agreed beforehand, I headed in the opposite direction from her.

Though this wasn't exactly according to plan. Rather than searching for another Argyrion suspect, I was hunting down the parasite's other bodies.

It was true that the creature wasn't Argyrion, nor was it after me.

But trying to mess with my employer?

***

Crack.

A blade slid cleanly into the creature's neck, piercing through its spine with precision—an execution, not a decapitation.

Slowly, the creature's nervous system shut down, its awareness of the ground beneath its feet fading. The sharp, salty scent of the night breeze was replaced with a dull numbness. The stench of rot that clung to the alley vanished, and the dim streetlights blurred into nothingness as its vision was overtaken by total darkness.

The last thing it heard was a voice.

“How many more are left now?”

Chapter 130: Social Ties and Cult Schemes (5)

Chapter 130: Social Ties and Cult Schemes (5)

No answer comes to the question about how many are left, but I wasn't expecting one in the first place.

I was just 'watching.'

A portion of the parasite's consciousness, yet to be fully retrieved, reflects my thoughts. Tonight, I've been running around unusually diligently to deal with this bastard, but the parasite still has enough 'spare parts' to render my overexertion meaningless.

As the husk the parasite has covered itself with exhales its final breath, a fragment of the presence that had been lodged in my mind gets reclaimed. I hurried my steps.

Even the parasite has a brain. It surely knows that acting alone puts it at a disadvantage. In the popular space war RTS game from a while back, didn't you get annihilated immediately if you moved just one unit by itself?

The fact that multiple units should be deployed to handle a single enemy is a universally known truth, from massing air units in games to the brightly colored spandex-wearing heroes on TV.

But, contrary to theory, the parasite couldn't easily gather its forces. The bodies it could call its 'units' weren't spawning instantly from a single building, like in a game. Instead, they were spread across a wide area near Algoth City, and it was in the process of bringing them together.

In RTS terms, it was like hastily gathering scattered scout units. There's always a moment when one of those units is 'alone' before joining the group.

There are still many bodies yet to join the parasite's main force. How much more can it endure before it bleeds out?

***

"Damn bastard!"

The parasite screamed. Its voice rang out in a frenzy as it spotted Orthes, clutching that plank-like sword of his.

"You are one. I am many. Even in these moments as you incapacitate this body, my legion gathers."

"Indeed. You still have hundreds of reserve bodies left, after all."

That nonchalant revelation. The parasite wasn't fazed. It knew well that its opponent was a monster among monsters, who had been active for easily several centuries longer than itself.

Perhaps only the ancient dragons of old could compare to the experiences Orthes had. While cautiously widening the distance, the parasite commanded nearby bodies to close in and form an encirclement as it posed a question.

"Why are you going to such lengths to hinder me?"

The question was partly a tactic to stall for time, but it was also somewhat sincere. On the surface, Orthes seemed to have the overwhelming advantage in this battle of attrition. His body far outperformed the parasite's in terms of individual power.

But from the parasite's perspective, this was merely a difference in their tendencies. It had found a more stable solution by diversifying its investments, while Orthes was a gambler, betting everything on a single body.

The parasite still had plenty of backup bodies, while Orthes likely only had the one he was using.

If, by any chance, Orthes got killed by a lucky strike, it would take a long time for him to find a body with matching wavelengths and tame its spirit. It was no small risk to simply ignore.

Perhaps the question was indeed difficult to answer, because even Orthes, who had thus far shoved his terrifying sword into the parasite's neck—and sometimes its heart or cervical spine—paused for a moment, keeping his mouth shut.

"Why are you trying to ascend?" Orthes asked.

"What a ridiculous question. Does a cocoon need a reason to become a butterfly? Does one need an excuse beyond instinct to desire to become a better, more complete being?"

The parasite deliberately gave a long-winded explanation. If Orthes had been created by the same hands that had made it, he would surely understand that burning desire—the instinct etched into their species.

'Wait a second.'

That question was actually an answer to the parasite's earlier query of 'why are you going to such lengths to bother me?'

In other words, it meant, 'I can't help myself—my very nature compels me to crush you.'

The expression on the face of the body the parasite was controlling warped bizarrely. It had momentarily forgotten to maintain an appropriate expression, overwhelmed by sheer absurdity.

The parasite slowly retraced the steps of its current situation. It already knew that there were others of its kind. It had sensed their presence here and there throughout history, especially those who had attempted ascension.

Among its kin, it seemed there was one given the instinct to ‘exterminate’ its own kind.

Could this be a mutation caused by time, something even the fearsome creator couldn’t control? Or was this, too, part of the creator’s plan?

‘If that thing was specifically prepared by the creator...’

The intention was clear.

To cull the herd. A creature designed to kill off the bugs that missed their chance to ascend.

The parasite shoved the unpleasant thought away. The creator was frightening, but not omnipotent. That thing had to be a mutation, something unforeseen by the creator.

‘There’s no way I’m outdated...!’

Orthes could see the parasite’s inner thoughts.

‘There it is again, talk of the creator.’

This was one of the reasons Orthes had pursued the parasite, against Carisia’s orders.

Though Orthes would never admit it, the main reason he had taken up the chase was worry. He might claim it was concern for his own future rather than anyone else’s, but it was still worry nonetheless.

And from Orthes’ perspective, the parasite’s ramblings about a ‘creator’ carried a high risk of becoming a future problem.

‘This bastard may have shown a clumsy side after being caught in my bluff, but it’s still a monster that’s lived through countless ages.’

Trying to pry useful information out with just his eyes was difficult because the parasite had so many accumulated memories. It was almost impossible to read through them all one by one. The only way to catch anything relevant was to probe its psyche and hope a related term floated to the surface, like now.

While playing along with the parasite’s stalling tactic, Orthes himself needed to extract as much information as possible.

So, Orthes chose his words carefully, aiming to provoke the parasite as much as possible.

“You say a cocoon doesn’t need a reason to become a butterfly? Fine. Let’s assume it’s natural to reject ugliness and pursue beauty. Then wouldn’t it also be natural instinct to clean up the filth that will forever remain ugly?”

“What?”

“I mean you. From the Mythical Era until now, you still haven’t managed to ascend.”

Orthes picked his words meticulously, ensuring that anyone listening would lose control of their emotions.

“A loser of the past era.”

“...!”

It was as if Orthes had looked directly into its mind and ridiculed it. The parasite was suddenly overwhelmed by both anger and a creeping fear that the ‘unpleasant thought’ might not just be a delusion.

A mechanism put in place to eliminate losers.

But.

‘Even if that thing is indeed the executioner the creator made to deal with failed ascensions...’

It didn’t matter as long as Orthes was killed right here, right now. The one who survives in the end is always the victor.

“And you’re one to talk, without having ascended either. Have you gone mad, throwing everything into a single body?”

“Don’t you see? I am merely bait to lure in failures like you. Just like how a rat runs into a trap when it sees food, scum like you get drawn to me. After cleaning up the remnants of this world, I will ascend to my promised glory.”

‘What the hell? Does he think I’m some kind of artificial lifeform?’

Orthes hesitated for a moment. Now that he thought about it, the body he was currently inhabiting could very well have been touched by the hands of a Mythical Era cult.

The parasite’s assumption that they were of the same ‘species’ was a major logical leap, but if there was a special reason behind it, it could lead to a clue about the secrets of this body.

‘What to do...’

One thing was certain: there was no way Orthes could completely destroy the parasite's bodies in this moment. He couldn't think of a way to eradicate all of the parasite's minds at once, scattered across multiple bodies.

'Should I try mind-control magic?'

A truly powerful mentalist—one who had lived for centuries and mastered their craft—might be able to kill the parasite in one blow by overpowering its mind.

But the only mage close to Orthes with that kind of ability was Carisia, and she preferred to vaporize her enemies physically rather than torment them mentally.

She wasn't one for delicate magical brainwashing, but rather an expert in a brutal method—what some called the 'Red-Tinted Mind-Control Method.'

'No matter how long this fight drags on, it's only a stopgap solution.'

While Orthes was contemplating how to deal with the parasite, the parasite itself was also deep in thought.

'Bait, you say?'

Thinking about it, yes. There was no way such a perfect offering could have come into existence naturally. That body, more fitting for ascension than anything in this era, had clearly been created with intention.

Whoever had done so was obviously...

The parasite slowly opened its mouth.

"When were you born?"

'Is it seriously asking my age right now?'

Appealing to seniority? Orthes hadn't expected that. Such things rarely surprised him these days.

But Orthes was far too seasoned a con artist to show any sign of being caught off guard.

"I'm young enough to call your time the 'past era,' if that gives you any indication."

It was a smooth and natural provocation.

Chapter 131: Social Ties and Cult Schemes (6)

Chapter 131: Social Ties and Cult Schemes (6)

Orthes couldn't read the parasite's mind in its entirety, but by catching a few fragments in the storm of words swirling in its consciousness, he could roughly discern the direction of its thoughts.

The parasite suspected that Carisia and Orthes might have been created much later than itself.

'Just a moment ago, it was treating me like an ancient monster. How flexible your thoughts are.'

However, this wasn't an entirely unreasonable assumption.

A normal human body has a limited operational lifespan. Of course, transcendental mages who attempt ascension or cyber-wizards who replace their bodies with machines to extend their lives would be exceptions.

'Perhaps it noticed the passage of time in Carisia's body. Since it thinks I'm a similar mental entity, it wouldn't be odd for me to have a younger body, but Carisia is different.'

It wasn't a completely wrong line of thinking. The only grand mistake was assuming that Carisia and Orthes had been created by the same entity as itself.

"Are you thinking, 'Why is the creator, who has been silent all this time, only now revealing their will?'"

Orthes intended to use this misconception to further irritate the parasite.

"It's because the time has come. The time to dispose of failures like you and for the creator to reveal themselves."

Based on his experiences in this world, Orthes knew that the more outlandish a bluff was, the more effective it could be.

In truth, he didn't even need to bluff.

The parasite had already been deeply shaken by Orthes' declaration that he was younger.

'So it wasn't something far older than me…?'

The parasite knew better than anyone how many obstacles it had to overcome to obtain such a powerful body. Even if it had been active since the Mythical Era, a single misstep would result in being sealed by a cult for centuries, unable to see the light of day. That was the fate of its species.

For this reason, the parasite had considered Orthes to be a patient being, one who had engaged in cautious and secretive activities to locate an exceptionally compatible body. It also believed Orthes to be an ambitious entity, waiting for the perfect offering, Carisia, to finally be within its grasp.

But Orthes had declared himself to be a much more recent creation, contrary to everything the parasite had predicted.

The highly compatible body Orthes possessed, and the perfect offering that even the parasite couldn't obtain after all those years of searching—these must have been gifts from the creator.

Jealousy and inferiority flared. But the parasite could accept it, for the creator was as terrifying as they were magnificent.

It questioned why such blessed conditions, which had not been granted to itself, had been given to such a young being. However, it dared not second-guess the creator's grand plan, for doing so would be blasphemy.

The parasite didn't believe Orthes was superior or more deserving of those gifts.

What truly troubled the parasite was the implication of Orthes' existence—the creator's true intentions.

The creator wanted to purge the parasites of this era.

'Why?' The question filled the parasite's mind. Why had the creator, who had tolerated its kind's activities for countless ages, suddenly decided to intervene?

What had disappointed the creator?

Orthes gripped his sword and scanned the space around him for information. The provocation had worked better than expected. The other bodies of the parasite that had been moving toward him suddenly froze. A sign that the mental shock had been greater than anticipated.

However, Orthes didn't feel entirely pleased with the parasite's shocked silence.

His suspicions about the true nature of the 'creator' were growing stronger.

'No, it could still be my own prejudice. It's not too late to gather more information before making a final judgment.'

"Do you have a plan for after your ascension?" Orthes asked.

It was a bizarre question. The parasite responded with layers of compressed hostility and silence.

Orthes nodded leisurely, though in reality, he was carefully maintaining his calm demeanor.

“You don’t, do you? You must be thinking something like this: Just as a caterpillar becomes a butterfly, or a child becomes an adult, ascension is a natural process. You’ve probably never really thought about what comes afterward.”

Which is why you’re a loser.

“What was that?”

“Isn’t it strange? The creator gave you the instinct to ascend but didn’t provide any guidance on what to do after that? Think about it again. What did your predecessors do after they ascended?”

The parasite thought back to ancient times. In the Mythical Era, those who completed their ascension, embedding themselves in sacred relics, played at being gods. Just as it was trying to do now.

While it had never personally socialized with those beings, it was easy to guess that some of the cults branded as heretical and exterminated by the Divine Cult were its kin.

‘Just as I thought.’

Orthes continued his line of reasoning.

From ancient times, parasites must have quietly infiltrated the cults. They would have gradually turned originally legitimate religious orders into heretical ones.

The parasite in Algoth City had bleached the identity of an entire cult and had acted as a nameless god.

Its predecessors wouldn’t have stopped there. Just as the parasite in Algoth City was attempting to ascend by acquiring a magical core, its kin would have tried to ascend using the relics of their cults as cores.

“Your proud kind. Those who played god, ascended as false deities, and what happened to them? The war with the Divine Cult, their defeat, and eventually, their deaths.”

“Don’t you see that this was the creator’s will?”

Why were those who shed their cocoons and became false gods no longer present in this world?

Orthes’ experience and intuition quickly led him to the answer.

It was a strange thing if you thought about it. From the time the Mage King disappeared after being betrayed by his disciples until now, in all that long period...

Why had the Divine Cult never once regained the upper hand in its war against the Ten Towers?

Despite the fact that, weakened as they were, the Ten Towers had also faced times of internal chaos due to successive conflicts over succession, the Divine Cult had never once reclaimed its former strength.

‘The reason the Divine Cult never recovered its power must have been due to the false gods.’

False gods that caused internal strife at every critical moment when recovery seemed possible. Each time they were purged, the Divine Cult essentially engaged in self-mutilation.

False gods, implanted like ticking time bombs, to prevent the consolidation of divine power and ensure the eternal dominance of magic.

A question arose in the parasite’s mind. If opposing the Divine Cult was a mission given by the creator along with the instinct to ascend, wouldn’t ascension be needed now more than ever to confront the cult, which had become more threatening than ever—

“The efforts of those who ascended before you were admirable, but the command to eradicate the cult ultimately failed, didn’t it?”

“So you’re saying the creator has abandoned me?”

Because others had failed? That unspoken sentence burned within the parasite’s thoughts, and Orthes could sense its overwhelming despair.

“It’s not just you. It’s a failure of your entire species. The creator has grown deeply disappointed in all of you who never managed to break the cult.”

‘The creator isn’t some general constantly handing out reprimands. I doubt they’d discard the entire semi-permanent sabotage mechanism just because it failed once.’

Orthes pondered the fate of the vanished false gods. Surely not all of them had been destroyed.

After all, the parasite in Algoth City had managed to survive to this time without ascending.

What had happened to the false gods who weren’t used to weaken the Divine Cult’s power?

And this question...

This was the starting point of Orthes’ most dangerous hypothesis, one that his intuition warned him about. False gods, who periodically appeared to cause internal strife within the Divine Cult. Once the cult was sufficiently weakened, what would those false gods, now unnecessary for further war, decide to do?

Orthes was aware that even the original novel had gaps in its lore.

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The method by which the Mage King was resurrected.

It was a foggy piece of the narrative, the factor that allowed the protagonist to be revived in 2077. The ‘something’ that had ‘coincidentally’ revived the Mage King.

A mental parasite could attempt ascension by using an object with an immense magical storage capacity, like the magical core of the Dark Tower. If it possessed a body with overwhelming magical talent, like Carisia, it could ascend more perfectly.

Even if it wasn’t a perfect ascension, it clearly had enough power for the Divine Cult to consider it a threat worth purging.

If it had ascended perfectly, it would have naturally become even stronger. Beings that looked human but wielded powers that transcended individuals.

...I know of such beings. The tower lords who wield the powers of the Ten Commandments.

Given that the weakened Divine Cult was still able to exterminate them, it’s clear that the individual strength of false gods couldn’t match that of the tower lords—specifically, those connected to the Ten Commandments. However, in some cases, quantity could replace quality.

Just as Adoosiam had done in the Temple of Pluton, the Mage King was capable of designing magic that functioned even after his physical death.

Now, this creature before me, anguishing over whether it had truly been abandoned for not receiving a post-ascension mission, likely hadn’t been discarded at all.

Once it had ascended, it would receive a new mission. In other words, ascension was akin to an official certification. Only after having that ‘certified ascension’ could it access the mission designed for the post-ascension phase.

If the parasite’s creator was the Mage King...

He would have encoded a conditional command, assuming the scenario in which he was ‘gone.’

The surviving false gods had become sacrifices.

The Mage King’s reserve bodies. If a perfectly ascended false god existed, he would have possessed it. Alternatively, he might have used multiple imperfectly ascended false gods as offerings to forge a new body.

I considered the span of time from the Mage King’s disappearance to now—2074.

How many gods had the Mage King devoured?

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Stay calm.

I repeated this to myself.

In fact, this unsettling intuition had crept into my mind the moment I heard about the creature's 'background.'

The mental parasite had recalled that it gained self-awareness during the middle of the Mythical Era. Given that timeline, the list of suspects who could have created such a being was quite limited.

If the parasite primarily dealt with divinity during its creation, there might have been room for doubt. But no—it had clearly demonstrated proficiency in 'magic.'

And magic was the creation of the Mage King.

Unlike primitive sorceries such as spirit magic or shamanism, the origin of magic, as established under the modern Ten Towers system, always traces back to the Mage King.

If the parasite had emerged in the late Mythical Era—during the full-blown conflict between the Divine Cult and the Mage King—other suspects could have been considered.

But the parasite was created and sealed long before the Mage King's name became known, even before the war between the Divine Cult and the Mage King escalated.

A creature that was optimized for the use of magic before the very concept of 'magic' had even been coined? It was absurd.

The most convincing hypothesis I could think of was that the Mage King had created the parasite ahead of time, before fully revealing his presence.

To weaken the Divine Cult as much as possible and fracture their unity before initiating the war.

He had meticulously prepared for the cult's downfall from the shadows of history, and indeed, he had succeeded in bringing about that downfall.

'And to think he went so far as to instill a species-wide instinct to destroy the Divine Cult, ensuring their continued decline.'

The sheer scale of such an idea was staggering.

I thought I had my own share of chaos-wreaking schemes, but it was clear that I couldn't hold a candle to the exalted status of the original protagonist.

‘An auto-generated chaos spanning millennia?’

Even with a thousand administrators, it would be exhausting to keep up with such a malicious plot. This insane Mage King had essentially reached the level where even his chaos was set on automatic.

And if the number of surviving parasites exceeded a certain threshold, they would be sacrificed to resurrect him. How could any human being come up with such an idea?

Still, it was good news for me.

‘Because now I have a clue to prevent the Mage King’s resurrection.’

I slowly gripped my sword and took a step forward.

***

Orthes. The youngest of his kind and the cruelest of them all approached.

“Your life has been meaningless. The years you’ve lived are crimes in themselves. If you truly serve the creator, you should disappear swiftly.”

Could there be any reason to continue living for one whose very existence had been denied? The mental parasite found itself unable to answer that question.

Its failure to have a purpose after ascension wasn’t because ascension was the final stage of life…

‘It was because the creator had abandoned our species.’

The mental parasite began contemplating self-destruction, just as Orthes had suggested. After all, the joy of their lives came from fulfilling the creator’s will.

If the creator had withdrawn that mission, the right course of action would be to return their lives. The parasite was about to surrender to despair.

As it let go of everything—its regrets, its obsessions—it began to see the world more objectively. It looked, for the last time, at the messenger of the creator who had come to deliver its death sentence.

‘Wait a moment.’

The mental parasite noticed something strange. One of the abilities its species had been granted by the creator was the power to perceive mental activity. This ability extended to sensing all forms of perception, from basic sensory awareness to magical energy.

It was thanks to this power that it had first detected Orthes' strange form of cognition. Overwhelmed by the sheer peculiarity of that sensation, it hadn't been able to think clearly before…

But now, it began analyzing Orthes' cognitive activity more carefully. His five senses, which any human would naturally possess.

His intuition, capable of interacting with spirits and other souls. His energy sense, which allowed him to faintly conceal his usage of combat aura like the knights do.

And then, there was that 'incomprehensible perception' that not even the parasite could fully grasp. Yet, adding everything together…

'No magical energy?'

"…You."

"Use magic."

Damn, I've been found out.

"Magic, you say? Are you so outdated that you can't even sense the magical power I wield—"

The mental parasite felt a surge of renewed vigor.

The fact that Orthes was trying to get by with such sly words instead of actually using magic was proof enough.

"You're not one of us!"

Five distinct locations registered in Orthes' senses—the parasite had begun casting spells. All of them were lethal. There was no more room for words, only a deadly exchange.

Tch.

Clicking his tongue once, Orthes leapt into action. The ground exploded beneath him as spire-like tree roots shot up to impale him. He swung his high-frequency blade, slicing off the tips of the roots.

The severed ends of the roots flew toward the incoming fireball. They wouldn't block the path completely, but they would be enough to reduce the fire's intensity for a moment.

Orthes drew out a magic-engraved drive. A simple Water Ball—the lowest-tier water spell—activated.

"Hah! Do you think that weak splash will stop this firepower?"

But Orthes had been waiting for the lightning spell, a bolt of yellow lightning that streaked toward him. The lightning flowed along the water's path. Orthes' eyes caught the split-second moment.

The lightning traveled along the water and collided with the fireball.

The three elements—lightning, fire, and water—momentarily fused. The conflicting magic from the different attributes caused a violent reaction.

"You bastard!"

BOOM!

The explosion sent a blinding flash, a cloud of mist, and a deafening roar across the night streets of Algoth City.

In the midst of the chaos, Orthes used the cover to vanish.

The mental parasite gritted its teeth. It had nearly been fooled into killing itself by such a scoundrel. If it had truly fallen for that tongue, it would have brought shame upon its entire species.

"Did he escape…?"

Orthes had disappeared into the darkness of Algoth City. Given his bizarre cognitive abilities, even with the parasite's full power, finding him would be no easy task now that he was hiding.

The parasite slowly reviewed the situation. Who would dare impersonate its kind and mock the will of the creator?

'The Divine Cult!'

Indeed, it made sense. The sudden resurgence of the cult after its long decline.

If that silver-tongued trickster was behind their revival, it all started to make sense. Even his anomalous cognitive abilities—if they were related to divine power, it might explain things.

No. Even considering divine power, his abilities were too strange.

'God's blessing or a powerful holy relic? No, that still wouldn't explain his capabilities. This isn't something that can be categorized under divine powers or spirits. Perhaps…'

It could only be explained if he were a demigod, directly inheriting divine blood. The mental parasite conjured images of the ancient monstrosities—the rulers who had once stood at the pinnacle of this world.

The parasite was satisfied with its theory. Whether or not Orthes was truly a demigod, it was clear he posed a threat of similar magnitude. It was logical to assume that he was the most powerful enemy imaginable.

‘Just as we follow the creator’s will, could it be that our old enemies have revived an ancient monster of their own?’

An unnamed demigod resurrected from antiquity, leading the Divine Cult. Overcoming their interference to complete ascension—

The mental parasite felt a renewed sense of purpose.

***

As I eavesdropped on the parasite’s thoughts from the shadows, I nearly let out a sigh out of habit.

Fortunately, I realized in time that making a sound might alert the creature, so I managed to hold it in.

If only it would let its guard down a bit. It’s really overestimating me.

‘A trickster manipulating the world with his silver tongue, huh? Does it think I’m some kind of comic book villain mastermind?’

If I had that level of ability, I’d have retired long ago without worrying about the likes of the Mage King.

Things had gotten far more complicated. Right now, I had no way to wipe out the parasite’s consciousness entirely.

If I worked with Carisia, burning all the bodies in this city would be simple enough, but if the parasite had hidden even one of its bodies somewhere far away, capturing it would be a gamble.

‘Let’s think this through carefully.’

As much as I was wary of the parasite, it was also wary of me. Even now, it was quietly moving its bodies, trying to slip away from this place.

I closed my eyes as tightly as possible, shrinking my supernatural field. If the parasite detected me, things would get annoying.

It wouldn’t be able to act immediately either. That meant I had a bit of time to revise my plans.

I waited until I was sure the parasite had left before I tried to finally exhale.

“What are you doing?”

Gah!

A voice far more terrifying than the looming threat of the mental parasite whispered directly into my ear, as though piercing my spine.

I clutched my left ear, which now tingled uncomfortably, and turned around quickly.

“Boss?”

“I don’t recall sending you here for something like this.”

“Wait, boss. I can explain everything.”

Carisia stood there, arms crossed. Her presence was palpable even in the darkness, her golden eyes glinting dangerously.

“While the boss was personally out there dealing with competitors, what exactly was the chief of staff up to? Care to explain?”

Carisia’s tone was half-teasing, but that only meant the other half was serious.

Sweat beaded on my forehead, starting to trickle down.

But just before the panic set in, an idea flickered in my mind.

Carisia had outsourced—well, not quite ‘outsourced’ since we’re technically part of the same organization—but she had tasked me with investigating the suspicions surrounding the Argyrion.

Because my particular abilities were well-suited for that kind of work.

In that case, wouldn’t it make sense to subcontract the extermination of the false gods?

Who better for that job than the Divine Cult, with all their experience in executing heretics?

Chapter 133: Proxy War (1)

Chapter 133: Proxy War (1)

Orthes could read that Carisia's feelings were half in jest. The other half, as he expected, was mixed with frustration.

But it wasn't the kind of anger he had anticipated.

What kind of state are you in?

They had agreed that if things got dangerous, they would call for each other.

The moment Carisia sensed the surge of magical energy from afar, she dropped everything and headed straight for the source of the explosion.

Only to find Orthes, covered in the aftermath of the blast, grinning as if nothing were wrong. While his usual demeanor brought her some relief, there was a tinge of irritation in her expression.

"Didn't I tell you to call me if things got dangerous?"

It didn't seem like he was hurt badly. At most, he might have some scratches. Still, it was a close call—a blast like that could have easily resulted in severe injuries if he had been caught in its full range.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm the one who set it off," Orthes responded, giving a poor excuse.

Carisia, sharp as always, quickly pieced together what had really happened from his flimsy attempt to brush it off.

"So, it was an explosion you caused, huh? Seeing as you can't use magic, there must have been a magician nearby. And considering the residual traces of multiple attributes, quite a few mages must have gathered just to chase you down."

Damn.

Orthes inwardly cursed. Working under such an astute boss was truly a hassle.

"Boss, before we get into details, let's change locations. Algoth City hasn't finished its extra-dimensional containment efforts. While the Ten Towers did imply we could 'kill each other if necessary' by choosing this place as a testing ground, it wouldn't be good for us to get caught on the very first day of the summons, especially before the real tests have even begun."

Carisia stared at Orthes for a moment, then nodded in agreement.

They had gotten a little aggressive tonight in hopes of drawing out Argyrion, but the efforts yielded little result. If Argyrion had shown up, they could have turned the Ten Towers' attention entirely onto them, but that hadn't happened.

Grumbling at each other, Orthes and Carisia headed back to their accommodations on the outskirts of Algoth City.

When they arrived, the inn they had been staying at was in ruins. Half of the roof had been blown off, and underneath the wreckage, mages lay groaning, half-dead.

***

"I sent word! I warned you!"

Kine shouted, her voice filled with anger. She tried to grab my collar, but since she was too short to reach, she clutched at the hem of my shirt instead, her childish frustration evident.

"An ambush, huh?"

It wasn't unexpected. In fact, that's why I had assigned Kine to be here in the first place—to handle just such a situation. But even so, it had surpassed my expectations.

To think they'd attempt assassination before the official format of the trial had even been announced, during the prelude.

"Strange. I wouldn't have thought they'd move this quickly," I muttered to myself.

Kine, overhearing my words, looked up at me and met my gaze.

"You and the boss flipped Algoth City upside down, didn't you?"

"Wait, why am I just 'you' and the boss gets 'boss'?" I protested, a bit miffed.

Kine ignored my petty complaint. Well, considering Carisia was the top figure here, I guess it made sense. It seemed that old saying about children being perceptive was true.

"Well, yeah, the boss might've gone a bit overboard," I admitted.

"Exactly. I don't know who it was, but someone must've thought, 'We can't fall behind with all that noise they're making.' After all, we're relatively unknown."

Kine's muttering had a certain weight of experience to it, despite her young age. It was likely knowledge she had picked up firsthand while wandering as a follower of Bacchus. When chaos erupts, the weakest are always the first to be devoured.

"You did well, though. Dark-attribute magic isn't the best for direct combat, especially without a necromantic catalyst. But you adapted those curses beautifully."

"Well, the thing is…" Kine trailed off, gesturing for me to lean closer.

When I bent down, she whispered, "I used the sacred doctrine of Bacchus to throw them into mental disarray and subdue them. But I'm not sure if that guy, Kynemon, noticed or not."

Ah, the sacred doctrine of Bacchus, designed to lure people into a state of madness. It certainly paired well with curses that gnaw at the mind. Admiring the synergy of magic and the sacred doctrine, I responded to Kine.

"It's fine."

"Huh?"

"Whether he noticed or not doesn't matter. In fact, it's probably better if he did."

"What?"

"I was planning on letting him know about it soon anyway."

I had intended to get people from the Divine Cult involved. There was no way to keep it hidden forever.

"Kynemon isn't the type to blindly follow authority. He might actually like this news."

***

Kynemon's expression was grim.

"You certainly have a rough way of handling your subordinates."

Carisia didn't reply. She simply let out a short 'hmph,' a noise that could have been either a sigh or a murmur of amusement as she surveyed the wreckage around her.

"I understand you're trying to shake things up and influence the Tower Lord competition, and that you wanted to test my abilities in the process. However."

Kynemon shot a glance at Kine.

"That child is one raised by Hydra Corporation, is she not? Leaving someone like her on a battlefield like this seems far too harsh for what's supposed to be a mere trial."

Finally, Carisia turned her gaze toward Kynemon.

Her mind raced. Truths and lies intermingled. What answer would make it easiest to keep this man under control?

'Letting Kynemon continue to believe that this is all part of a planned trial by Hydra Corporation would probably be the most effective,' she thought.

But...

She glanced at Orthes, who was speaking with Kine in the background.

There was a certain confidence she had in Orthes—almost a belief that no matter what she said, he'd manage to throw the situation into even greater confusion with just a single sentence. Trusting that instinct, Carisia decided to be honest.

"To be frank, we didn't anticipate this. We've been focused on finding certain enemies, so we weren't paying attention to our own allies. I apologize."

"Don't be ridiculous. I know the skills of your servant Orthes well. And it's not just him, is it? You're here too. How could you fail to protect yourselves from one mere ambush?"

"Well, that's because Orthes was ambushed."

"What…?"

"If you want the full story, you should ask him yourself," Carisia said, gesturing toward Orthes.

Seeing the signal, Orthes began to walk over at a leisurely pace.

***

"Kynemon."

Orthes looked around as he approached. The attackers had all been dealt with and lay unconscious or worse. There were no surveillance artifacts nearby, either.

Now, he could speak more openly.

"The situation in this city is getting complicated."

"Complicated? How so?"

"Well, a suspicious creature that has lived for a very, very long time has secretly infiltrated the Tower Lord selection process."

Kynemon's brow furrowed. He suspected Orthes might be referring to himself with that description of a "creature that has lived for a very long time."

"It's quite dangerous, actually. Even with me here. And even if I borrow those ephemeral clones, there's no guarantee we can deal with it."

Kynemon was taken aback. He knew the level of destruction Orthes could cause when using his water clones. For Orthes to admit he might not be able to handle something implied that whatever they were dealing with was no ordinary creature.

"So, you were too preoccupied with this thing to pay attention to what was happening here?"

"I tried talking it down, but it decided to ignore me in the end."

Kynemon immediately recognized the creature's wisdom. The fact that it had cut off Orthes mid-conversation and avoided his poisonous words—only a truly clever being would do such a thing. An enemy with that kind of intelligence would be a serious threat.

"So, I called in an extermination team that specializes in dealing with things like that."

Orthes' phrasing was strange. The idea of a company that hunted creatures dangerous enough to stand against Orthes was bizarre.

Kynemon had long since retired from the problem-solver business, but if such an organization existed, he would've heard of it. And if they were part of the Mage Towers, they'd already be here competing in the Tower Lord selection.

"They're not exactly the kind of people who can operate publicly."

"…Surely you don't mean?"

Dangerous names flashed through Kynemon's mind. If Orthes had aligned himself with groups that would plan to burn the world down, it made sense.

"They call themselves the Divine Cult. You might know them as the most powerful sect of priests, often dismissed as superstitious zealots."

Kynemon's vision darkened. Now it made sense.

'Come to think of it, wasn't there an incident where one of the elders of the Ten Towers was killed by Argyrion?'

The Ten Towers had blamed Argyrion's ability to

kill an elder on the wicked methods of those "superstitious zealots." And now Orthes was saying he had called in the most powerful of these priests to deal with a creature.

The implication was clear: the creature Orthes was talking about could very well be a Tower elder.

After all, who but an elder could have the power to slip out of Orthes' grasp?

It was a strange but compelling conclusion.

‘Only an elder would be able to escape Orthes.’

And if Orthes was telling Kynemon this story, it meant only one thing…

Kynemon realized he had passed the test. He was now part of their plan to set the world ablaze.

"I understand. I’ll cooperate fully."

"That’s what I expected from you! I knew we’d be on the same page," Orthes said, laughing heartily and patting Kynemon on the shoulder.

Meanwhile, Carisia, watching from the side as she fed Kine some chocolate, was thinking the same thing.

‘I didn’t even lie this time, not once…’

How did people get fooled so easily?

She wasn’t sure whether to sigh or laugh.

Chapter 134: Proxy War (2)

Chapter 134: Proxy War (2)

The chaos and aftermath from the massive disturbance in Amimone City provided the Divine Cult with ample opportunity to hide their presence.

The Black Dark Tower, one of the Ten Towers, had fallen completely, and the political infighting over its remains was still ongoing. With such unrest, the magic society lacked the stability to organize a wide-reaching pursuit.

At the moment, even the search parties meant to track down traces of the Divine Cult were only operating in Algoth City, making it highly unlikely that the Ten Towers would find the cult's main forces any time soon.

The priestess of Glaucus, the goddess of war and strategy, had analyzed that the decision to hold the Tower Lord Selection Trials in Algoth City was part of the Ten Towers' strategy to make it easier to search for suspects.

Even though the attempt to devour the Amimone Tower had failed, Argyrion wouldn't retreat so easily. This was an opportunity to erase traces and, in some cases, legally claim the remains of the Dark Tower.

By chasing those moving in the shadows of the candidates, the Ten Towers hoped to uncover both Argyrion's allies and any informants within the cult.

However, the Ten Towers were unaware that the Divine Cult had no real connection to Argyrion. Even the sacred relics planted in Algoth City were nothing but husks, their essence completely extracted for the Pope's plan.

While being associated with doomsday fanatics like Argyrion was distasteful, the Divine Cult was willing to accept the misunderstanding if it meant they could distract the Ten Towers.

'While the Ten Towers waste their time in Algoth City, we'll prepare ourselves…'

The cult's members were adapting to the new powers they had received from the Sanctuary of the Deities. Among them, Demus was one of the most fervent.

Although he had distanced himself from the internal power struggle between the Pope's faction and the priestess' faction within the Divine Cult, there was one thing both sides agreed on:

The overarching premise that, 'One day, we will have to fight the Ten Towers.' Whether that fight would end with one side being completely annihilated or result in a climactic battle followed by negotiations depended on individual agendas, but no one denied that a war was coming.

And Demus was a priest of the war god.

He had been in more battles with the Ten Towers' hunting squads than anyone else. His younger brother had even died in one such battle, deepening his personal grudge against them.

However, Demus knew that with their current strength, they couldn't face the Ten Towers just yet. So, he had been waiting patiently for the right time, all while testing his newfound divine powers.

That's when he received a message from Orthes.

"Oh?"

Unlike the more cautious members of the Divine Cult, Demus had a deep trust in Orthes. The war god Enyalius, whom Demus served, symbolized straightforward power rather than complex strategies. Thus, once Demus gave his trust, he stuck to it stubbornly.

While other factions, such as Glaucus' or Phoibos', worried over Orthes' every move, the Enyalius faction was content to focus on training in sacred martial arts and honing their combat aura.

"It's been a while. What do you need?" Demus asked.

「I need your help.」

It was common for Orthes to be called upon by the Divine Cult, but it was rare for Orthes to request help from them.

This was because Orthes usually had so many resources at his disposal that it was hard to believe he was a mere individual. Typically, help flowed from the side with more to the side with less.

Demus was pleased to have an opportunity to repay his comrade.

"Alright, what's the situation?"

However, as the conversation progressed, Demus' expression grew more and more serious. Orthes spoke of the "Rebel Cults" from the Divine Cult's old records and explained how there had been someone pulling the strings behind these rebel groups.

「You know those cults that were excommunicated by the Divine Cult when they suddenly went mad after operating normally for years? That's who I'm talking about.」

"Yes, we called them rebel cults. You're saying there was someone behind them?"

「Exactly. These rebel cults, at their final stage, always summoned the same abomination—a false god embedded in a sacred relic. The one responsible for preparing the birth of these false gods still exists.」

"And how do you know this?"

「Because a larva of a false god has appeared in Algoth City. It's one of your kind—the kind that has a single consciousness but controls multiple bodies. Its abilities are far beyond what I can handle alone.」

Demus immediately recognized that this was not a decision he could make alone. To subdue a false god, which had left indelible scars on the cult in the past, would require the united efforts of the entire Divine Cult.

"It may not be fully matured yet, but it's still dangerous. I'll call an emergency meeting to discuss this."

「Thank you. If you need to find me, I'll be participating in the Amimone Tower Lord Selection under the Tavning faction.」

Even in that short amount of time, Demus couldn't help but admire Orthes for already having made inroads in the battle for the Amimone Tower's succession.

***

The trials for the Tower Lord Selection given by the Ten Towers were traditional in nature.

They largely reused the same evaluation criteria used in previous selection processes, such as the ability to supply magic power and the standards used during the Magic Tower's advancement exams.

Of course, the first posted trial was less a serious exam and more a preliminary screening to weed out unqualified candidates.

In other words, anyone who seriously considered themselves a contender for the title of Tower Lord of Amimone had no reason to fail this test.

Surprisingly, however, candidates were dropping like flies in a test that should have been a breeze.

The backers behind the candidates—the ones who had been moving since the prelude—were now getting more aggressive in their efforts.

Kynemon watched as the candidate in front of him clutched his stomach and collapsed, screaming, “Gaaaaah!” before being carried off to the hospital. That person would now be disqualified.

"Well, they’re certainly not holding back, are they?"

"Is that so? I’d say they’re exercising quite a bit of restraint, given that they’re not killing people left and right like on the first night," Orthes said with a shrug.

Kynemon could only feel a headache coming on, hearing such a statement from Orthes, who had been the ringleader of those “killing people left and right.”

"And you’re just going to keep eating those snacks?"

The candidate who had just collapsed had likely been poisoned. Yet Orthes continued to casually munch on the refreshments provided at the test site, seemingly unconcerned.

"It’s fine. I have ways of figuring things out," Orthes replied nonchalantly, adding quietly, "Besides, I need some excuse to move around and search for that guy, don’t I?"

Orthes had already secured the Tower Lord candidate whom the parasite had first tried to use as a puppet, but since then, the parasite hadn’t made any further moves. As a result, Orthes was busy wandering around the test grounds, trying to trace any influence the parasite might be exerting.

Kynemon wasn’t sure the parasite, who had suffered greatly the previous night, would show its hand again so easily. Still, he trusted that Orthes had his reasons for being cautious.

"Quite the opposite of what I expected. I thought it would try to interfere with the candidates to gain some control over the selection."

Orthes rubbed his chin thoughtfully, as if this was indeed a troubling development.

‘He says that, but I bet in a few hours he’ll come back saying he’s figured it out,’ Kynemon thought dismissively as he headed toward the exam hall for his turn. His task remained unchanged: he had to become the next Tower Lord of Amimone.

After giving a casual wave to Kynemon as he departed, Orthes turned and resumed his search.

If he couldn’t find his prey immediately, he’d just have to tighten the noose.

In his hand, a notification blinked—Demus had sent a reply.

***

None of the events in Algoth City had gone as Argyrion had anticipated.

More specifically, they hadn’t gone as Nastion had anticipated.

Sprigo, who had been expected to return alive, was dead, and none of the Drachmas soldiers sent with him had returned. If their commander had died, they should have immediately returned to the main camp.

The possibility that they had been captured crossed Nastion’s mind, but those units were designed to self-destruct if disabled.

Every single one of the forces they had sent to Algoth City was gone. The stark reality of it all weighed heavily on Nastion, who considered it a personal disgrace.

However, Halto and the other Argyrion leaders didn’t criticize Nastion.

"It’s clear we have a formidable enemy."

"But we have no evidence."

"Don’t you see? The lack of evidence is the evidence!"

"Wait… what?"

Nastion was bewildered, but the other leaders had their reasoning. If a powerful mage from the Ten Towers had been deployed to eliminate Argyrion’s forces, there would have been traces left behind.

That’s how it always was with mages of great power.

Yet there were no records of who this mage was, where they came from, or under what chain of command they had been dispatched. Nothing.

For someone to go to such obsessive lengths to erase their traces, and to succeed in doing so, they could only be an enemy.

Nastion felt uneasy with himself for finding their argument convincing.

Given the situation, he couldn’t oppose the idea of assuming the existence of an "enemy." Surveying the room, Halto made an announcement.

"Our first objective is to identify the enemy’s true identity. We can’t keep chasing vague suspicions forever."

"But we don’t have any leads."

"Then we’ll create some."

Argyrion was willing to endure any losses necessary to catch a glimpse of this “enemy.” Even if it meant sacrificing some of the Tower Lords they had painstakingly allied with.

And so, it was that Argyrion’s faction, who had been planning to create human bombs in Algoth City, crossed paths with the puppets of the mental parasite.

Chapter 135: Proxy War (3)

Chapter 135: Proxy War (3)

Halto was a highly cautious individual. While he could no longer be called "human" in the biological sense, now that he had become an agent of the extradimensional realm.

In his judgment, the best course of action was to deploy immediately upon detecting the adversary in Algoth City. To destroy his opponent, he needed to create a decisive situation where the adversary couldn't intervene or prepare any tricks—a surprise attack of overwhelming force.

Halto reminded himself that it was precisely this kind of decisive situation that the Golden Desert operation had aimed to create. Indeed, during that operation, the two adversaries had been cornered more than ever before. The monstrous enemy, which had previously lurked unseen, had to confront them directly in battle.

However, the operation couldn't be completed as planned due to an unforeseen natural disaster. That storm that revealed the larger cause.

Halto harbored no regrets for being swept away in the storm; it had allowed him to abandon earthly glory and grasp the divine treasure and a true purpose. Yet, if he had one lingering regret, it was the "what if" of whether the storm had only arrived a little later—just enough time to finish off the adversary.

However, the battles against the adversary at both the Golden Desert and Algoth City remained unfinished. Instead, his enemies were brazenly making their presence known.

They were like bullfighters, waving a red flag and provoking him, trying to goad him into a frenzied charge.

But Halto had no intention of rising to that provocation.

He needed a single, definitive strike.

A very definitive strike.

As Orthes had anticipated, Argyrion had already covertly influenced several factions within the Amimone Tower. Some of them were following the cause with genuine conviction, while others remained unaware that their true backer was Argyrion.

The dividing line between the two groups was in their integrity. Those unfit to accept the cause, those morally degraded, would serve as sacrifices to cleanse their sins.

Halto's division of these recruits was purely a precaution against the adversary. He suspected his enemy might be able to see directly into the hearts and minds of others, as easily as if they were in the palm of his hand.

The trap prepared to eliminate the adversary made use of both groups.

This trap targeted the final trial that would culminate the competition to determine the Tower Lord. According to the critical information Argyrion had painstakingly uncovered, the final trial would take place within a barrier specially set up by the Ten Towers.

The mages, aware of their role as Argyrion's collaborators in setting the trap, would actively showcase their skills in the competition.

The adversary would undoubtedly take a keen interest in this competition to select the Tower Lord, carefully observing the most prominent candidates.

Eventually, they would probe into these candidates' minds and detect the "places where traps are set." Then, naturally, they would choose to avoid the trapped areas, seeking to mock Argyrion.

But in that place where they would go to taunt Argyrion, unaware of the dangers, a line of living bombs would await them.

And even if the adversary were to walk into the trap, that would be fine as well. They would only need to trigger the trap at that moment.

However, the message delivered to Argyrion was that a chain of sabotage explosions had already started from the eve of the competition.

Due to concerns about interception, the report had been sent via spatial magic rather than Ether Space communication, and the final paragraph contained a strange message:

"'We share the same enemy'…."

The ink of the letters, slowly hardening to a brown color, was clearly blood. Analysis confirmed it matched the blood of one of the Argyrion members dispatched, but the magical residue within the blood was somewhat unusual.

Halto glanced back. A black form seethed and rose from within the shadows—Nastion.

"Do you have any idea who it could be?"

"……"

Though Nastion had worked for many years to bring the cause to this world, some things remained mysterious even to him. For example, the Argyrion leaders' near-mad obsession with their so-called "enemy."

But this particular mystery was simpler than such obsessions.

Nastion had ancient experience, and the tactics used by the one who had proposed joining forces to confront the "Great Enemy" were quite familiar to him.

The unique magical energy typical of “those who failed to fully manifest” was also familiar to Nastion.

“The biological composition of the blood is identical, but the difference in magical traces indicates that this member has undergone a transformation of consciousness due to possession or something similar.”

“Surely, they wouldn’t be weak enough to be overtaken by something like a ghost.”

“This is beyond a mere ghost. The ones who wrote this message are like me.”

“Like you?”

Halto looked Nastion over. This ancient being, who had long served the whole of Argyrion, possessed a history so strange that it was hard to classify him as either mage or monster.

Halto respected him for his deep commitment to the cause, but many of Nastion’s secrets were still hidden from Argyrion.

“One of the servants of the Higher Cause, spread into the world to carry out His will. I never imagined any would remain in this age.”

“Oh?”

“I’ll go myself. I may be weak, but I have experience, so I’m best suited to handle this.”

And so, Nastion headed toward Algoth City.

***

As expected, the one in charge of the mental parasite control team sent by the Divine Cult was Demus.

They had likely sent someone familiar to me to make things easier.

“It’s good to see you in person, but I’m afraid there’s no time for casual talk. Did you bring the documents I requested?”

Demus pulled out a heavy envelope. The crucial information was concisely organized for easy reading.

“Once you’re finished, please dispose of it appropriately. It’s classified.”

“Of course.”

I had requested records on the subjugation of those whom the Divine Cult considered heretics—specifically, methods for dealing with mental parasites.

I would do my utmost to deal with them before they could fully manifest, but if one did manage to succeed, the Divine Cult's experience dealing with false gods could prove invaluable.

"Binding them to Aegio's Scale using clever words, then killing them when they break the oath… I can't do this."

The art of deceiving a creature that's lived for centuries. I don't have that kind of skill.

"If they manifest within a relic, they develop a core, making it possible to target and destroy it… Damn. Most of these methods involve dealing with fully manifested parasites."

Once a mental parasite fully manifests, its vast consciousness condenses around a single "focal point." The Divine Cult's method of dealing with false gods typically involved destroying this focal point.

On the other hand, mental parasites in their earlier stages have no core. The most reliable solution is to crudely destroy all the bodies they've occupied.

Not that it's particularly feasible.

To truly destroy them, one would need abilities that affect the spirit or mind directly, like Aegio's Scale—a method that's "most effective" if it actually works.

"Oh."

There was indeed an incantation that met my requirements: the power of Pluto, the god who governs souls.

Come to think of it, I had met a priest of Pluto at the Temple of Pluto before.

"Did any priests of Pluto come along by chance?"

Demus shook his head with a grim expression.

"There aren't any priests."

The answer took me aback. Sensing my confusion, Demus slowly explained further.

"There's only one active priest of Pluto, and due to circumstances, he cannot leave the temple."

"Well, that's unfortunate."

It was truly disappointing. If I could exorcise them with Pluto's incantation like a lowly ghost, it would make things much simpler. I looked around, hoping that perhaps the priest who had once secretly followed me from the temple might be nearby again. But, as expected, the shadows in the alley were just dark and empty.

“If we can’t use Pluto’s incantation…”

I quickly read through the documents, focusing on methods from the early days of the heretical cult.

Demus suddenly interjected.

“It will be hard to awaken the minds of those captivated by heretical faith. The Estia Cult, which once handled spiritual recovery, weakened and was removed from the Twelve Cults long ago. And as you know, Bacchus’ Cult took their place.”

“What?”

“If the heretical faith is in its early stages, awakening confused minds to prevent further corruption is possible. Isn’t that the section you’re reading?”

Demus shook his head with a regretful expression.

“You were protecting the last survivor of Bacchus’ Cult, right?”

“Yes, her name is Kine. You saw her in Elysion?”

“At her age, she might have divine powers, but she hasn’t been fully bestowed with an incantation. The ability to handle the mind would require at least a bishop-level skill.”

I recalled Kine grumbling to herself the night before.

She’d said something about using curses to “massage” the mages’ brains and mesmerize them with incantations.

Chapter 136: Proxy War (4)

Chapter 136: Proxy War (4)

The meeting between the Mental Parasite and Nastion took place discreetly, yet swiftly. This was possible because each could immediately discern the other's true identity.

Their discussions and negotiations didn't involve spoken language. Instead, they communicated through mental images, exposing their thoughts to each other.

They exchanged necessary information, assessed each other's goals, and repeatedly evaluated each other's capabilities. Even after multiple exchanges, the time that had passed in the physical world was less than a moment. This efficiency reflected the altered perception of time in beings created to interact through mental realms.

The Mental Parasite's first question was about the detailed members of Argyrion. As one tasked with supporting Argyrion in summoning the Higher Cause, Nastion couldn't help but react warily to this question.

The Parasite revealed its intentions, explaining, "I mean no harm; I merely wish to verify the rumors of an alliance between the Divine Cult and Argyrion."

Nastion was at a loss to understand why the Divine Cult had come up in conversation so suddenly.

However, he was aware that the Parasite's kind had harbored grudges against the Divine Cult since ancient times. If Argyrion were indeed allied with the Divine Cult, the Parasite would naturally hesitate to work together.

"No. That's just an excuse the Ten Towers came up with to cover up their own failures."

"I see. Then what is Argyrion's real relationship with the Divine Cult?"

"Mages, as a rule, fear anything they cannot understand. Superstition exists outside of their understanding, so they use the Cult's name to intimidate magical society. But they are nothing more than tools."

Hearing this answer satisfied the Parasite. Nastion's explanation mirrored the way the Parasite's kin had always regarded the Cult: as tools, whether for manifestation or for propaganda.

"You may be wondering why I brought this up. The 'adversary' you refer to in Argyrion… that is, the one I confronted…"

"Connected to the Divine Cult? That doesn't make sense."

Nastion found himself questioning this. He knew that, after centuries of persecution by the Ten Towers, the Divine Cult had been greatly weakened.

According to what Halto and Argyrion's leaders had told him, one of their two adversaries was a creature created by White Light—a creation of the Ten Towers, albeit treated as a pariah.

The very nature of this being was an affront to the Cult's beliefs. Would a priest from the Divine Cult ever accept such a creature as an ally?

"…Because he's a demigod."

Nastion was taken aback. Was it madness, then, that had caused the Parasite to say this?

No. The Mental Parasite's very nature shielded it from the decay of time. These beings existed with a rigorous sense of sacrifice, their very existence a foundation for future generations. Such beings did not easily succumb to madness.

"Within that being, I felt a power I couldn't comprehend. It wasn't aura, or mana, or even elemental energy. An ability that bore fruit without seeds, an unnatural power. I have only seen such power within the divinity of the Twelve Gods."

"Has it truly lost its mind?"

If the Divine Cult had possessed a demigod, they wouldn't have struggled as they had. They would have unleashed the divine power of their bloodline and waged a holy war against the Ten Towers.

But the Parasite was the only witness who had come face-to-face with "what might be the adversary" and retained a clear memory. Nastion could not ignore its testimony.

"…Very well. Let's assume this Orthes is indeed a demigod. How do you plan to confront him?"

"Even if he's not a true demigod, he's undeniably dangerous. I heard Argyrion acquired weaponry from the Ten Towers' arsenal while preparing for rebellion. So, couldn't they secure a magic core capable of housing my physical form?"

While there were other ways to contain a Mental Parasite, it wouldn't be difficult to create a vessel for it using techniques similar to those that produced Silver Threads or Drachmas.

The idea was to complete the Parasite's transformation, giving it an unexpected and formidable power to strike the adversary. This aligned with Halto's own plans to confront Orthes. Even if they suffered losses in other battles, one decisive victory would allow them to sever Orthes's lifeline.

However, creating an artifact or magic core capable of housing a false god would be a massive sacrifice for Argyrion.

But if even half of what Halto feared about Orthes was true, then it was better to eliminate him here and now. After all, even the semi-delirious Mental Parasite considered Orthes to be as dangerous as a demigod.

Nastion quickly promised to retrieve an item with enough magical capacity to contain the Parasite.

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An hour later.

A group of Divine Cult priests, led by the priests of Agrotera, goddess of the hunt, began exterminating the Parasite's physical hosts.

***

"What… what is going on?"

The moment the attack began, Nastion hid himself within the shadows of one of the priest groups.

The Parasite also reacted swiftly. The body here was only one of many, so it detonated its stored mana, engulfing its surroundings in a blast. The Divine Cult's first hunt concluded that way.

Nastion continued moving from shadow to shadow, staying close to the enemy forces. He needed to understand why the Cult had pursued them.

Eavesdropping on the priests' conversation, Nastion realized it wasn't just Agrotera's Cult conducting the hunt. At least six other groups from the Divine Cult were collaborating in the Parasite hunt.

"How can this be!"

It was only natural for Nastion to be shocked. When faced with survival threats, groups usually prioritized their own interests.

The same was true for the Twelve Divisions of the Divine Cult. Even if one division faced a crisis, it was unthinkable for the others to unite so quickly.

Only a limited number of authorities could orchestrate such an alliance.

"Could it be…?"

Could it really be a demigod?

In this era, thousands of years after the end of the Mythical Age?

Nastion held his breath in the shadows, observing the hunters. Since the priests believed they were pursuing only the Parasite, Nastion was confident he wouldn't be targeted.

Moreover, based on what he knew of the Divine Cult, they should not have been able to use divine incantations consecutively. Their weakened state was widely known, with their divine power fading over time.

But he was wrong.

The priests of Teleia, queen of the gods and goddess of the hearth, established a protective barrier, concealing the flow of divine power from mages. Within this barrier, the priests of Agrotera began using their tracking incantations to pursue their target.

The Parasite attempted to disrupt the tracking spells with its own magic, but the priests continued to invoke their spells, unperturbed by the divine power expended.

Such reckless consumption of divine energy wouldn't have been possible in the age of depleted divine power. Seeing this wasteful yet explosive display gave Nastion an unsettling realization.

For this lavish use of divine power to be possible, the priests must have a new source of divine energy.

Historically, demigods, positioned between gods and humans, served as powerful conduits for divine power.

"Could it be?"

Was it truly a demigod?

Regardless of Nastion's mounting fear, the Cult's hunters continued their pursuit. At this rate, the Parasite might truly run out of bodies and perish.

He had to hide the Parasite somehow. If they were to confront the demigod Orthes, they would need the power of an ascended false god.

"If there's any consolation…"

Perhaps it was that he had planted the gift of grace within the bishop of the Bacchus Cult. He had incited that man's rampage, likely reducing the Cult of Bacchus to ashes. With one of the only groups able to confront the Parasite eradicated, there was a slight reprieve.

As long as the demigod himself didn't appear, they had some time.

***

"Well, isn't this convenient."

I watched the Divine Cult priests moving in formation. Now I understood why people liked automated hunting.

Right. The Mage King had set up automated hunting for thousands of years; they wouldn't call it unfair if we took advantage of it here too.

I'd gotten Kynemon's permission and assigned Demus as her escort. There would be plenty of confrontations with the Ten Towers ahead, so it would be good for the two of them to get acquainted.

In her temporary role as a trainee priest, Kine was receiving rigorous incantation training from the seasoned priests of the Cult.

Though Carisia was skilled in other powers, her specialty was still magic.

Once she received the wisdom of those old-timers, Kine would surely become our trump card against the Parasite.

Chapter 137: Proxy War (5)

Chapter 137: Proxy War (5)

Nastion explained the situation to the Parasite. Somehow, he couldn't say exactly why, but the various divisions of the Divine Cult had united to begin their pursuit.

"So, he really is a demigod!"

The Parasite exclaimed confidently. Though Nastion believed such a thing impossible and thought it should never come to pass, all signs pointed to Orthes being a manifested demigod.

Yet, Nastion's rational mind couldn't accept the arrival of a demigod as plausible.

It wasn't that Nastion himself had the power to predict the birth of a demigod or to see through the providence of gods beyond the extradimensional realm.

But the Ten Towers could.

The Eidolons, who divided Panoptes into three factions, were the very ones tasked with monitoring the heavens.

If a demigod had truly descended, the Ten Towers would have already declared a state of emergency and, with their immense power, resolved to destroy the demigod before he could unleash his might.

All signs indicated the presence of a demigod, yet the one group who should have reacted first was not making a move.

Nastion shared his doubts with the Parasite, his temporary ally.

"Does it really matter if Orthes is a demigod or not?"

"What are you getting at?"

"I've told you all along. Even if he's not a demigod, he's still a comparable threat. Is there any difference in danger between a true demigod and one who can do everything a demigod can?"

'The Parasite is right,' Nastion thought. 'Whether or not Orthes is a real demigod, if he can perform all a demigod's feats, how is he any different?'

In fact, there was a difference.

The Ten Towers hadn't detected him.

An entity possessing the powers of a demigod, yet not a demigod, so that even the Ten Towers could not sense his existence.

This made him even more dangerous than a true demigod.

‘The best card we have right now is still a false god.’

The strength of a false god would be limited by the quality of the core containing the Parasite’s consciousness.

While any material with a sufficiently high mana storage capacity, like the magic core from the Dark Tower, would suffice to attempt the transformation, an ideal vessel would require a physical body with overwhelming magical ability, like Carisia’s.

Of course, Nastion had no way to prepare such a “perfect vessel” as the Parasite envisioned. If the ideal vessel were the same as the second adversary Argyrion’s leaders mentioned, then such a body would only exist once in this era.

Instead, Nastion offered the Parasite a fortified mana core.

Just as Orthes had once fused the Thunderstone Lord with Silver Threads to create the Thunder Jewel, Argyrion had also devised a method to enhance Silver Threads.

The result was a synthesis of mana core and Silver Threads. Though this unnamed artifact wouldn’t quite reach the power of a fully ascended false god using an extraordinary mage’s body, it would far surpass any standard mana core.

Satisfied with Nastion’s explanation, the Parasite accepted the synthesized mana core containing the Silver Threads.

“…But there’s a problem.”

Even at that moment, the Cult’s hunters were scouring every corner of Algoth City, relentlessly hunting down the Parasite’s physical hosts. The number of bodies the Parasite had been forced to detonate was already well into the double digits.

If the Parasite attempted to transform now, it would naturally become vulnerable. Although it could use some magic while in its cocoon, and the shell would be tougher than ordinary metal….

“But this is the Divine Cult we’re dealing with. And it’s not the impoverished, diminished Cult of recent times—they’re using incantations as freely as they did in their prime.”

If the shell encasing the Parasite proved harder than steel, the Cult would bring in priests of Polyphron, the god of blacksmiths, to melt it down.

If the Parasite burrowed underground, priests of Kydaria, the earth goddess, would await it there.

And if the Parasite blocked every traceable path?

Then the priests of Phoibos would be called upon. They would deploy the unreasonable power of prophecies and revelations to find the Parasite.

A Cult wielding divine power without constraint was an extremely malicious enemy.

Nastion considered the situation. If he wanted to ensure the Parasite's safe transformation, it would have to leave Algoth City altogether. It needed to be far enough away that, by the time the trackers arrived, the transformation would already be complete.

But even this solution had its problems.

The greatest issue was timing. If they fled far enough to complete the transformation before the pursuers caught up, the distance would also mean a longer return to Algoth City.

While they journeyed back to the city with the false god, Orthes would have already secured the Amimone Tower unopposed.

Spatial magic could almost eliminate travel time, but the Ten Towers posed an obstacle.

Algoth City, the venue for the Tower Lord Selection, was under the supervision of the Ten Towers' overseers. The Divine Cult might be able to conceal traces of divine power with their own dark methods, but any spatial magic would have to bypass not only the overseers but other layers of surveillance as well.

The very structure of the Amimone Tower itself.

The true purpose of a magic tower was to prevent extradimensional incursions. The Amimone Tower's mana core, operating autonomously, would be primed to sound an alarm at the slightest detection of spatial distortion. And any alert from the core would prompt the overseers to request immediate support from the Ten Towers.

Nastion examined the problem in depth.

To obstruct Orthes—and his ally, the Divine Cult—they needed the power of a false god's transformation.

But to achieve the transformation, they had to impede Orthes.

It was an endless loop of contradictions.

An impossible trap.

"…Wait."

The Ten Towers.

Yes.

Who said the Ten Towers were only Argyrion's enemy?

***

An anonymous letter arrived at the administrative office overseeing the Amimone Tower Lord Selection.

The letter exposed suspected traitors using relics secretly.

And right in the middle of the hit list, as expected, was the Hydra Corporation's name.

…But Nastion's plan did not yield the intended results.

***

"What the hell…."

Nastion's shadowed form writhed in frustration. This was a calculated move using the Ten Towers' sensitivity to traitor organizations.

The list he'd drawn up contained a careful balance of truth and deception—enough to prevent the authorities from dismissing it as entirely false. At first, it appeared to work, with a few Tower Lord candidates detained and some of their sponsors scrambling to flee.

However, the primary target, Orthes of the Hydra Corporation, was only subjected to a few perfunctory inquiries before being released. Surely he was the most suspicious one, given his ties to the Divine Cult!

'Did he anticipate this and prepare in advance…?'

But how?

How could Orthes have anticipated and prepared for a plan Nastion had devised and executed on the spur of the moment? Did a new prophet emerge from the Cult of Phoibos?

Something monumental had shifted within the Divine Cult. Nastion feared that a transformative wave had swept through without anyone noticing.

***

The Tower Lord Selection had taken a muddy turn, with suspicions of treason thrown around at both candidates and their sponsors.

But I wasn't worried.

Hydra Corporation had already completed a thorough purity inspection. It had been around the time I'd asked Lampades to find Kynemon. Our company had already undergone an audit.

The only inconvenience was that Carisia, summoned as our representative, had to deal with the nuisance.

Still….

"They tried to pull a fast one, didn't they?"

This "traitor investigation" didn't mean much for Hydra Corporation; we'd been preemptively certified as clean.

The real problem was that the Ten Towers had summoned a significant number of Panoptes agents to act as ideological police for purity inspections.

"We've been careful to use incantations outside the city to avoid the overseers' eyes, but… now Panoptes agents are visible all over the city."

Demus, who had temporarily paused his pursuit of the Parasite, clicked his tongue in irritation. With this political maneuver filling Algoth City with mages, the Divine Cult could no longer act freely.

"They went this far… I didn't expect it."

It was an utterly shameless move. This was the desperate struggle of the weak, yet here Argyrion was resorting to it.

"Quite the precarious situation."

"Do we just lay low and wait for the storm to pass?"

But.

"Precisely because of this situation, there's a method we can use."

After receiving the tip about the traitor organizations, the Ten Towers had urgently deployed Panoptes-affiliated mages near Algoth City.

And who were these mages stationed in Algoth City?

None other than Niobe, sent on a special mission by Salmosia.

Niobe, having witnessed the extradimensional storm, had urgently requested reinforcements from Blasphemia. Though the issue was relatively resolved, these forces had now shifted to search for traces of Argyrion in Algoth City.

In other words, the Panoptes mages scattered throughout the city included Niobe and the Blasphemia operatives.

If Argyrion called the Ten Towers' shadow upon us with this complaint, I'll show them how power collusion looks when it backfires.

Chapter 138: Proxy War (6)

Chapter 138: Proxy War (6)

Nastion felt like rubbing his temples, though technically, his limbs and even his head were more symbolic than functional. While he usually took on a human form, his true essence was that of a shadow—an amorphous entity unconstrained by any physical shape.

He had transcended the conventional human form of two arms, two legs, and a single head long ago.

And yet, he now felt a headache pounding in his nonexistent brain.

"……."

He understood well how the Ten Towers' conduct had steadily degenerated since the Ten Traitors committed their unspeakable sins in the ancient times.

But how could things have come to this?

Every tactic he'd employed, sacrificing various allies in the process, had been aimed at ensnaring the entire Hydra Corporation. Yet how did Hydra alone manage to repeatedly slip away?

'Even if Hydra bribed Panoptes extensively, there's been far too much evidence for them to simply ignore.'

Orthes was undoubtedly associated with the Divine Cult. Otherwise, why would Cult hunters have been dispatched to Algoth City so soon after Orthes clashed with the Mental Parasite?

It was impossible to conduct dealings with a faction as influential as the Divine Cult without leaving some kind of trace. Surely, there had to be remnants of the Cult's presence within Hydra or even on Orthes himself.

According to Argyrion's leadership, Orthes was known for his deviousness, a man skilled in manipulating others with his words, using them to do his dirty work while avoiding it himself. Such cunning individuals usually kept their deepest secrets closely guarded. If Orthes were detained and investigated, they were bound to find something.

Yet despite the flood of incriminating reports, Orthes had emerged unscathed from Panoptes' clutches.

Instead, the Panoptes agents in Algoth City began to hunt for the "subversives" who were "tainting the Tower Lord Selection with false accusations."

The ones pursuing the Parasite had merely shifted from the Divine Cult to Panoptes; the fact that they were being hunted hadn't changed.

Though it was easier to evade Panoptes than the Divine Cult's hunters, there were still many times when they came dangerously close to his hiding spots.

When coincidences become frequent, they become patterns. Nastion began to suspect that Orthes had been discovering his whereabouts and feeding information to Panoptes.

But one question puzzled him.

'When the Divine Cult was tracking the Parasite, they were unaware of my presence. How did they suddenly detect me?'

***

"Hey, senior, could you explain what exactly we're chasing right now?"

Niobe, currently in the midst of anti-flame preparations near Algoth City, was having trouble understanding why she'd been summoned here in the first place.

"Ah, I believe I once mentioned that I'm currently borrowing the face of a friend from Hydra, Orthes."

Niobe nodded. It wasn't exactly a lie; after all, this face wasn't quite the same as my real one in the physical world.

"Actually, it's a bit complicated. While working on a mission, I killed the original owner of this identity. Since it was useful, I decided to assume it myself."

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"So… you're saying you're using Orthes's identity for cover?"

More precisely, I was Orthes's cover, but in the grand scheme, it was close enough. I nodded.

Niobe was technically more senior than Kine, but from my perspective, they were cut from the same cloth. Though Niobe was more seasoned in public service, she didn't have the vast, chaotic experience I did—being hunted by Blasphemia, revered as a prophet by the Divine Cult, and seen as a nemesis by Argyrion.

So crafting a convincing excuse for this rookie was easy.

"Even if a superstitious artifact has some utility, people will use it discreetly if it's helpful. Likewise, I've been using similar unorthodox methods to track Argyrion."

"Wait, so Argyrion caught on to those unorthodox methods and retaliated by trying to ruin the company under your fake identity?"

Niobe tilted her head, looking skeptical. She seemed to think, *If Argyrion had any sense, they wouldn't report a Blasphemia agent to Blasphemia….*

"Well, isn't Argyrion full of traitors from Blasphemia? They probably assumed the betrayal would prompt a deeper investigation from Blasphemia."

Niobe tilted her head again. Damn it. A few months ago, she was still naive, but she'd toughened up working under the Chief Auditor, accumulating more worldly wisdom than I expected.

"Oh, well, I suppose there's no choice. I'll confide in you alone, Niobe."

"Hm?"

***

"Niobe, do you really think Argyrion would join forces with superstitious believers?"

Niobe pondered the question. Given that Argyrion was widely perceived as synonymous with superstition, she would ordinarily answer, "Yes, of course."

But she doubted her senior would ask such an obvious question just for an obvious answer. Niobe deliberated further.

Orthes spoke up to help her piece together the answer.

"There might be some among Argyrion who dabble in such 'superstitions,' those who carry on the ancient traditions of priestly magic. However, it doesn't mean all superstitious believers have formed alliances with Argyrion."

"So… there are superstitious believers who oppose Argyrion?"

"To be precise, it's uncertain if any actively oppose Argyrion."

The puzzle started coming together. Why was a model agent like L13 using such unorthodox methods to track Argyrion?

It could simply be because those methods were effective. But an experienced agent knows how to layer multiple purposes into one plan.

"It doesn't matter whether hostile superstitious believers exist! All that matters is that Argyrion believes they do!"

Realization struck Niobe, who clapped her hands in excitement. Orthes nodded slowly.

“I’ve laid various schemes to make Argyrion think of me as a hostile superstitious believer. Argyrion will now hesitate to merge with other superstitious factions, and this will likely weaken any such factions within Argyrion, perhaps even causing internal fractures.”

It was indeed a brilliant plan. If Argyrion saw L13 as a superstitious believer and Hydra Corporation as a front for them, they might try to exploit Blasphemia against him.

“But… you expected all this, right? Isn’t that why you’ve been operating in Algoth City?”

“Oh, please. How could I have foreseen Argyrion would file a public report?”

Orthes gave a mild smile, which Niobe took as a sign of modesty.

***

In truth, contrary to Nastion’s suspicions, Orthes hadn’t detected his arrival.

Nastion’s unintended pursuit was due to an idea from Carisia.

“They call it a ‘hunting incantation,’ right?”

This incantation had an impressive range, capable of tracking even spiritual entities like the Parasite if a proper catalyst was available. Naturally, Carisia thought to use it to track Argyrion.

However, there was a crucial difference between Argyrion and the Parasite.

After Orthes’s battle with the Parasite, a piece of the Parasite’s host body had been retrieved. Though the Parasite could occupy multiple bodies, it was still a single entity, so even a small sample was enough to track it.

But Argyrion wasn’t a singular entity like the Parasite. Even with a trace of one individual, the incantation could only target that person, not the entire Argyrion faction.

Moreover, Carisia hadn’t yet found any traces of Argyrion in Algoth City. Having learned how the incantation worked from Orthes, she reluctantly took out an item she hoped could serve as a catalyst.

A Silver Thread sample.

Based on the experience that wherever there was a Silver Thread host, there would likely be Argyrion members capable of using them. It was an indirect method of finding Argyrion by searching for Silver Thread hosts.

Unfortunately for Nastion, he carried a synthesized mana core containing Silver Threads meant to house the Parasite.

And so, a peculiar situation unfolded in Algoth City.

The Divine Cult handled intelligence gathering on both the Parasite and Argyrion's positions—Orthes had preemptively explained to Niobe that any traces of divine power within Hydra buildings were due to "unorthodox means"—while Blasphemia carried out the actual tracking.

The two groups, despite being at odds, now followed Orthes's lead in closing in on Argyrion.

Orthes himself remained comfortably behind the scenes, letting others handle the work.

Yet Nastion, feeling the Divine Cult's shadow in Blasphemia's pursuit, was close to panic.

This pursuit speed went beyond "leaking information." It was as if they were actively working off intelligence straight from the Divine Cult.

It felt as if Panoptes was tracking him on behalf of the Divine Cult, which couldn't openly act.

Just who was Orthes? Or what was he?

To wield both the Divine Cult and Panoptes at his command, bending them to his will?

Chapter 139: Turbulence (1)

Chapter 139: Turbulence (1)

"...It can't go on like this."

The Mental Parasite muttered with a grim determination.

"Isn't there any way to call in support from Argyrion?"

"Impossible. The Ten Towers' attention is fully focused on this city. If we try using spatial magic, there's a chance they'll trace it back to us."

Even if the spatial coordinates of Argyrion's base were exposed to the Ten Towers, an immediate raid wasn't likely. Argyrion's headquarters lay deep within the extradimensional realm, where not only coordinates but a multitude of defense spells would need to be breached to reach it safely.

But the Ten Towers were formidable. If their coordinates were discovered, it would take less than a month for them to launch a massive campaign against Argyrion.

Nastion was starting to consider withdrawing, abandoning both Algoth City and the Mental Parasite. There seemed to be no way forward.

A joint pursuit by the Divine Cult and Blasphemia…

Who could have foreseen such an alliance?

Nastion hadn't just stood idly by. Through persistent surveillance and espionage, he'd identified that among the Panoptes agents gathered in the city, only Blasphemia's members were under Orthes's control.

He'd briefly hoped to disrupt the strange cooperation between the Divine Cult and Blasphemia by leveraging the old conflict between Argos and Blasphemia.

But what had caused Amimone Tower to fall vacant in the first place?

It was because Argos, an investigator from the Amimone Tower, was accused of colluding with Argyrion.

Now, Argos held only the authority to oversee the Tower Lord Selection, with no jurisdiction over any subversive elements in the city.

Panoptes had deployed every surveillance device in the city to track Nastion and the Mental Parasite. Even if they evaded the mechanical monitoring, the Divine Cult's incantations remained.

Nastion felt as if the entire city were hostile toward him.

In reality, Algoth City's infrastructure was interconnected with Amimone Tower, whose mana core was under the temporary management of the Selection Committee. And since the Committee was primarily comprised of Blasphemia members under Orthes's influence, the city being hostile to them was more fact than metaphor.

As Nastion retraced the steps that had brought him to this point, the Mental Parasite repeated the phrase, *"It can't go on like this."*

"There's no way to turn this situation around using conventional methods."

The Parasite calmly acknowledged their disadvantage. Even in the one area where it thought it could overwhelm Orthes—through its sheer number of host bodies—it had been outdone.

As long as Orthes could wield Blasphemia and, by extension, Panoptes, the manpower he could summon was virtually limitless.

Outmatched in both numbers and quality, the fight was inevitably unwinnable.

So, they returned to the starting point: how to complete the transformation.

"At this rate, won't the trap Argyrion set up also be useless?"

"Yes. Our collaborators are being captured before the final battle has even begun."

It was already happening. Argyrion had planted a list of agents as a trap, baited to ensnare Hydra Corporation, but Orthes had somehow identified the actual agents and captured only them.

While not every agent was on the list, Orthes managed to detain the others by identifying those in contact with those named.

At this stage, half of Halto's plan was already foiled.

Someone had once said that the adversary was the Philosopher's Stone that crafted traps rather than gold. Nastion couldn't help recalling Argyrion's leaders' furious laments over their past failures.

Perhaps it was time to admit defeat and retreat. Leaving Algoth City to complete the false god transformation back at Argyrion's base and setting the next trap from there might be the wiser choice.

But a maxim about their adversary resurfaced in his mind: *"If you let him slip away even once, you'll never see him again until he chooses to reveal himself."*

A dangerous being like Orthes couldn't be allowed to roam free. At the very least, they needed to wound him deeply enough to halt his activities temporarily.

As Nastion brooded over their predicament, the Parasite proposed an unexpected plan.

“Just once. I only need to approach him undetected by Blasphemia one time. Can it be done?”

“...”

A seemingly absurd, yet perhaps only possible solution.

***

“They’ve disappeared, sir.”

That was Niobe’s response. I had given her sketches of every host body the Mental Parasite might use, but it seemed none of them were showing up in Algoth City anymore.

“Strangely enough, we’re unable to track them.”

That was Demus’s report. I rubbed my temples as I replied.

“Not even with incantations?”

“The gods have no limits, but humans do. What would you need to expand an incantation’s range and precision?”

“A lot of divine power?”

“Exactly. For the incantation to miss its target, it would either have to be very far away, even after the hunting priest has exhausted his divine power, or the target is hiding within the influence of some extraordinarily powerful force.”

“And how powerful would that need to be?”

“Well… if it’s thrown into the extradimensional realm, or if it’s hiding under the shadow of the Ten Commandments in the Ten Towers, perhaps?”

“Heh…”

Demus listed several other situations that could hinder tracking. If the Parasite’s own mana levels dropped significantly, it would naturally become harder to find. There was also the half-joking suggestion that if it was already dead, the incantation would end since the hunt would be considered completed.

But it couldn’t be dead. My life never unfolded so easily.

My neck started feeling tense for no reason.

I had wanted to settle this before they could escape. Though Amimone Tower would soon fall to Kynemon, leaving things as they were made it hard not to worry about future complications.

"Well, I suppose there's nothing we can do. I'll leave the search in your hands until the Tower Lord Selection ends."

As Demus nodded thoughtfully, he suddenly asked.

"What do you plan to do once you've secured Amimone Tower?"

"Hm? This is a gift for Ms. Kynemon, after all. It's not something I'd get involved with."

Demus's expression clouded with doubt. Had I not explained?

Then again, this was a personal matter; it wouldn't be proper for me to disclose too much.

"Who devised the plan to bring down Amimone Tower?"

"I did."

"And who took direct action to bring it down?"

"Since I suggested it, I did."

"…Then why would someone else receive it?"

"As I mentioned, it's a gift," I said, smiling.

***

After the Divine Cult's arrival, Carisia kept her interactions with them to a minimum, following Orthes's advice to maintain some distance.

Thus, the Divine Cult's impression of Carisia was fairly superficial. A talented mage, Hydra's nominal CEO, and a guardian figure to Kine.

The members of the Divine Cult, including Demus, assumed there must be a connection between Orthes's lack of direct control over Hydra and his plan for Kynemon to receive Amimone Tower.

They speculated that since Orthes was a Blasphemia agent, he had placed Kynemon and Carisia as figureheads to avoid drawing undue attention to himself. In other words, the two were merely commanders under the authority of Orthes.

Demus disagreed with this view, but he couldn't overturn the consensus held by the priests of Glaucus, considered the wisest within the Divine Cult.

To Demus, Orthes didn't seem to be someone motivated by ambition. If anything, he resembled an office worker who dealt with the tasks that came his way daily. He kept such observations to himself, though, as they invariably drew derision from both the Saint faction and the Pope faction.

His current reason for slipping away from the Cult's nightly meetings was similar. The priests spent hours debating whether Orthes was plotting something, and Demus had nothing to contribute on the matter.

While wandering the yard of a building rented out entirely by Hydra, he saw two figures approaching from afar.

One of them was familiar—a certain narrow-eyed man with an oddly blurred presence.

The other wasn't familiar, but easily recognizable: long, silver-white hair cascading down his back, a rare sight indeed.

It seemed Orthes had come to meet Carisia, who'd once again been summoned by Blasphemia. Despite Orthes's intervention making the questioning somewhat perfunctory, Carisia's expression revealed a certain fatigue.

As Demus turned to look away, Carisia's golden eyes met his.

In that moment, Demus felt as if an ice-cold spike was driving through his heart, a chilling sensation rising from within. His chest was racked with a fierce, tearing pain.

It was the kind of resignation one feels in the face of unavoidable fate, a surrender felt only at the brink of death.

The divine power within him screamed, writhing in rejection of an utterly incompatible intruder.

He'd felt this sensation only once before.

In the twilight of his younger days, when he still believed he could change the world on his own…

…It was like the despair he had felt when standing before the Ten Commandments.

Chapter 140: Turbulence (2)

Chapter 140: Turbulence (2)

Countless thoughts churned in Demus's mind.

Who—no, what—is Carisia?

To make sense of this, Demus had to dig deep into his own past and confront a memory he'd thought buried.

It went back to when he'd been the head warrior-priest of the War God's Cult. Back then, he'd recklessly attempted to assassinate a Tower Lord after the cult's hideout was discovered, and its previous high priest was killed.

In a rare move, one of the Ten Tower Lords had led the raid personally. The reason for this unprecedented intervention by a figure far above the usual ranks of Blasphemia remained uncertain. Perhaps they were simply terrified of the latent power the Divine Cults still held.

When Demus returned, the sanctuary of the Enyalius War Cult was already in ruins.

Though younger and more hotheaded back then, Demus was still a formidable warrior, as he was now the War God Enyalius's finest fighter.

From the few survivors, Demus gathered that the high priest had stood his ground against the Tower Lord. The critical detail was that they'd managed to hold out, albeit briefly. While the high priest sacrificed his life to buy time, the other members of the Enyalius Cult were able to escape.

The high priest's self-sacrifice had inflicted a serious wound on the Tower Lord, preventing the Ten Towers' forces from immediately pursuing the fleeing cult members.

Demus knew that a wounded lion was dangerous.

But a lion that healed its wounds was even more so, especially if it held a grudge.

This was why Demus had planned the assassination. At that time, he believed it was the only way to ensure the survival of the Enyalius Cult.

And then he had witnessed the power of the Ten Commandments.

"...It was more magic than human."

It wasn't so much that the Tower Lord commanded the Ten Commandments; it felt like the Ten Commandments were controlling the Tower Lord. An ancient magic that should have been lost to history erupted from the Tower Lord's shattered limbs.

He'd been paralyzed by the sight, by the sheer density of mana that defied description. The unimaginable compression of mana shattered every object within its reach.

The Tower Lord, glowing in golden light, appeared less a person than a concentrated blaze in human form. Every step he took vaporized the very space around him into light.

Eventually, the Tower Lord seemed to float above the ground, a translucent, mana-filled zone forming a circle around him as if he were surrounded by an aura.

Demus had felt absolute despair at the sight of that golden being, able to wield boundless mana without limit.

The divine power in his body, and even the natural order of the world, seemed to curse that being. They screamed that such a creature would distort and crush all of creation into despair.

The only reason he'd survived was because of the intervention of the Tower's elders, ancient figures who had dedicated themselves to studying the wisdom of the Ten Commandments through countless Tower Lords' reigns.

They'd arrived to confront the Tower Lord, and Demus remembered snippets of their words.

"Foolishness... to connect with the Ten Commandments with an incomplete body…."

"Has he been consumed by the Dead King's resentment?"

"Where is the intruder?"

Demus closed his eyes.

The sensation he'd felt from Carisia was similar to what he'd felt when he witnessed the Tower Lord in that transformed state.

But how could any human resemble a Tower Lord—or even the Ten Commandments?

He abandoned any attempt to comprehend Carisia's nature. It was beyond him.

Instead, he thought about Orthes's purpose.

Unless his senses were deceiving him, Carisia was surely connected to the Ten Commandments, or at least to the Ten Towers.

A being that would make an appropriate nemesis for the Divine Cult.

But was Orthes truly an enemy of the Divine Cult?

A sudden question arose from the depths of his mind. But Demus was a rational man; if Orthes had intended to destroy the Divine Cult, he'd already had countless opportunities to do so.

The fact that the Divine Cult had managed to reclaim the Temple of Pluto was evidence that Orthes was not their enemy. So, then…

“Why would he take in such a monstrous being?”

Assuming that Orthes’s ultimate objective didn’t conflict with the Divine Cult’s interests, then if Carisia were indeed linked to the Ten Towers...

Then the thought of Kynemon crossed Demus’s mind. Soon, she would take the position of Tower Lord of the Dark Tower, giving her a significant voice in magical society.

If, under the authority of the Dark Tower’s Tower Lord, word spread about “another successor to the Ten Commandments,” what would happen?

It would set off a storm that would shake the magical world, powerful enough to force even the Ten Towers to act.

Demus reflected on Orthes’s role in arranging the “gift of the Dark Tower.” Orthes had planned it, and Orthes had executed it. That was all.

If someone could gift a magic tower according to their will, what of the Ten Towers themselves?

“Could Orthes be planning to use the Ten Towers to dismantle the Ten Towers…?”

It was a terrifying thought, not because the mighty Ten Towers might be deceived, but because someone as powerful as Carisia was following Orthes.

With access to both divine power and magic, Orthes wielded the strengths of both sides.

Demus imagined what might happen if Orthes’s plan bore fruit.

There had been countless instances of challengers facing off against the Ten Towers, but there had never been a full-blown war between the Ten Towers themselves.

If such chaos, an all-encompassing war, were to erupt, could the magical society endure?

“To think he would bring about a war for the sake of the gods!”

Demus inwardly lamented.

That man should’ve served our god, not Phoibos.

Maybe he’d give Orthes a copy of An Introduction to the Art of War by Enyalius as a gesture of goodwill someday.

***

Lately, Demus had been strangely friendly.

Despite our rocky start, we'd managed to get along reasonably well, and now he seemed to feel some kind of strange camaraderie with me.

Since kindness, in moderation, is good for the soul, I accepted the various books Demus handed me without complaint.

Honestly, I had plenty of free time to read them. Ever since the multi-bodied Mental Parasite had gone into hiding, I'd run out of things to do in Algoth City. Using Argyrion's whistleblowing tactic against them, I'd caught and locked up enough Argyrion collaborators to meet my quota of posing as a Blasphemia agent.

Carisia was in a similar position. Even after rooting out all the infiltrators, Argyrion's headquarters showed no signs of exposing itself.

The indirect tracking method we'd tried using Silver Threads returned the same frustrating answer as the hunt for the Mental Parasite: "Target cannot be found. Please check your connection or verify the correct route."

So, with little to do, we spent our days cheering on Kynemon and watching Kine's impressive progress in her incantation studies.

I'd proposed to my boss that maybe we should hand things over to Kynemon and call it a day, but she'd just shake her long, flowing silver hair.

Her response was cautious: we'd withdraw only after the final round of the Selection confirmed Kynemon as Tower Lord. As an employee, I didn't dare contradict the boss.

After several rounds of trials, Kynemon displayed her full potential and was easily selected as a finalist.

Today, at last, the final trial took place.

In this test, each remaining candidate paired up with one trusted mage from their tower to form a two-person team. Each team received a special emblem.

Then, the candidates were all placed within a barrier, with the proclamation that *"the candidate with the most emblems when the barrier is lifted will become the Tower Lord."*

Officially, the test was to assess both a candidate's personal skills and their ability to lead subordinates, but in reality, it was about choosing the best fighter or the person with the widest network.

After all, while the second mage was called a "guardian," they could just as easily be a mercenary. Sponsors could "suddenly" bring in someone expelled from another tower to back their chosen candidate.

Initially, I'd intended to briefly step down from my role as Hydra's chief secretary to support Kynemon directly, but both Carisia and Kynemon objected. Carisia argued that I needed to remain outside, and Kynemon reassured me to trust in her abilities. In the end, her companion was decided to be Kine.

"Why do you seem so uneasy?"

After seeing Kynemon and Kine off, I turned to Carisia.

"Do I look it?"

"Your expression is the same as usual, but your tone is just a little tense."

Honestly, she wasn't wrong. I was just reflecting on her tendency to want me nearby during times of uncertainty.

"It's not something I saw in Phoibos's crystal."

Of course. If she'd had concrete evidence, Carisia would've told me immediately.

"There's something strange in the flow of mana through the city. It's not something that can be managed from within the arena."

"Could it just be residual from the extradimensional contamination? Since the whole land was corrupted, it's likely that some of it seeped in through the city's mana veins. The mana core should purify it on its own, though."

Carisia shook her head, turning her gaze away from the arena's entrance and towards Amimone Tower in the city center.

"That mana core is what feels most ominous."

Chapter 141: Turbulence (3)

Chapter 141: Turbulence (3)

After hearing Carisia describe the mana core as “ominous,” I found myself rubbing my temples.

The mana core was indeed the heart of the tower. No matter how advanced the spells or technology around it, if the core was faulty, then the tower itself was no better than a defective product.

So, the tower that Kynemon’s set to inherit might actually be… a dud?

“When did you notice this?” I asked.

Carisia and I had a way of speaking that allowed us to cut right to the point, understanding each other with minimal context. She frowned slightly before responding, and her answer didn’t match the timeline I’d expected.

“About three days ago?”

An oddly ambiguous timing. I had thought that this uneasy feeling must have started around the time of my showdown with the Mental Parasite, if not when the Divine Cult began their pursuit.

Three days ago would have been after my “middleman” dealings between Blasphemia and the Divine Cult, and even a while after the priests reported that the Parasite’s presence had seemingly vanished.

Thinking logically, it was likely that the Committee made a mistake while setting up the final trial’s barrier, leading to mana contamination in the core.

Or perhaps they’d overdrawn from the city’s mana network to maintain the barrier, weakening the core’s output.

Still, I had a lingering feeling that it was more than that.

Words like “logical thinking” are dangerous if used too freely.

Had Blasphemia in the Golden Desert behaved irrationally? Not at all. They’d plotted to kill Carisia and me with perfect logic, only to be struck down by an extradimensional storm, an anomaly outside reason itself.

Even the Mage King, who split his legacy with precise care before ascending, likely didn’t foresee his disciples hitting him so squarely in the back.

In my view, logical thinking was a luxury reserved for situations that had reached a nice, clean conclusion.

What I needed now was the type of thinking that matched an irrational situation.

“Well then, if it feels that ominous, let’s go check it out.”

“Aren’t the Tower Lord’s quarters sealed until the end of the Selection?” Carisia’s tone carried a hint of something else—did I intend to beat up all the mages guarding the place, blast open the seal, and storm in?

Of course, I had no such intention. Unlike Carisia, who sometimes seemed to exude a readiness to “return as White No Name” and unleash her fighting spirit, I’d always been a fan of fewer battles, not more.

I chuckled. “For Orthes, chief secretary of Hydra Corporation, it might indeed be a locked door.”

Naturally, my approach would be a “conversation.”

“But what about for Blasphemia’s secret inspector, L13?”

I contacted Niobe, the Blasphemia director for Algoth City.

***

As Orthes shouted a bizarre chant—*“Aha-ha-ha! Power! Unlimited power!”*—with an almost gleeful grin, Carisia prepared to slip unnoticed into the Tower Lord’s quarters.

It was one thing for Orthes to enter the quarters under the pretense of inspection as a secret agent, but it was quite another for Carisia, a known sponsor of Tower Lord candidate Kynemon, to accompany him.

A camouflaging spell wrapped Carisia’s body, bending visible light to cloak her perfectly, without even the faintest refraction or distortion.

After receiving my call, Niobe met up with me in a secluded area.

“Even if it’s your request, this is a risky move,” Niobe began hesitantly. Her hesitation was a good sign; by starting her sentence with “even if,” she was implicitly indicating some trust in my words about the mana core’s instability.

“Couldn’t you wait just half a day, senior? By then, the Selection will be over, and we could go in together as sponsors, no questions asked.”

“I’m only suggesting this because it might already be too late. Normally, yes, we’d wait for a straightforward solution, but in emergencies, we need ingenuity.”

Carisia noticed Niobe’s gaze fill with trust, admiration, and something like reverence, a blend of emotions she found slightly distasteful. But as long as it helped things move forward, she tolerated it.

With her fingers supporting her chin, Niobe sank into thought, a gesture that signaled her agreement.

Anyone hesitating in front of Orthes was ultimately bound to be persuaded.

“One hour. Our people won’t question me if it’s for your sake, but I can’t keep all the Panoptes agents distracted from the Tower Lord’s quarters for long.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll be done before then.” Orthes winked.

To Niobe, it was merely a confident gesture, but Carisia saw the intent behind it.

Orthes was ready to open his eyes.

***

“...Huh?”

That was all I could manage as I prepared to enter Amimone Tower discreetly.

The tower had exploded.

Or, more accurately, it appeared destroyed to others, but I could tell that the tower’s fragments weren’t physically shattered.

Space was warping. Objects within the tower—laboratory equipment, artifacts—seemed to float outside, while the tower’s outer walls stretched into the sky, etched like fragments.

It was as if images of the tower’s interior and exterior had been scattered across the sky, like projections on an enormous celestial screen. Soon, these projections began breaking down further: from walls to bricks, from bricks to sand.

The entire space was disassembling. A phrase drifted into my mind: “Assembly is the reverse of disassembly.”

Yet I doubted that the reassembled form would be a “tower.” Perhaps it would be a “monster.”

“Niobe! Get Blasphemia here! Something inside the tower is casting a spell—if we apply mana from the outside, we can at least partially counter it!”

I’d shouted the first effective plan that came to mind. Any magic follows the principle of imposing one’s will on mana. By introducing impurities into the magic, it could fail—or at the very least, be disrupted.

Thus, my command to Niobe was also an indirect request to Carisia, who was hidden right beside me.

Carisia pondered.

“No specific instructions on how to apply mana, right?”

As usual, she liked simple solutions.

Orthes would have called her approach straightforward, maybe even blunt.

“Huh?”

The same exclamation of disbelief escaped me as when I’d first seen the tower explode. Unbeknownst to me, Nastion, lurking in the shadows and watching the metamorphosis, had muttered the same word.

The sky was distorting. Space was bending, similar to the process the Mental Parasite had initiated to merge with the tower and make it part of itself.

But this time, the spatial distortion was certainly not the Parasite’s doing.

Although there was no magical evidence, Nastion could sense it.

Whatever was out there had started to burn Amimone Tower.

The ring-shaped distortion in the sky acted like a convex lens, focusing light into a single point until the brightness grew almost unbearable to look at.

At that critical moment, the concentrated light shifted its focus.

No longer aimed at empty space, it was directed at Amimone Tower.

A beam of light scorched through the skies of Algoth City.

***

I only asked for mana to be applied.

Not for the tower to be incinerated.

Instead of clutching my throbbing head, I focused on observing how the tower responded to this mana input—known to the Ten Towers as “beam attacks.” The disassembly process had slowed considerably, but it hadn’t stopped.

This meant that the mana was still being fed from somewhere. I quickly looked down at the ground. Beneath us lay the city’s mana pipelines, continuously supplying mana to the tower.

The beam had bought us some time, but at this rate, Carisia would exhaust her mana before the tower did.

Off in the distance, I spotted the Blasphemia members Niobe was bringing. Thanks to Carisia's "death beam" disrupting the Parasite's transformation, we had gained some precious moments.

We needed to make the most of this time. What moves were available through Blasphemia, and which would be most effective?

As I refined my question, the answer became clear.

The barrier prepared for the Tower Lord Selection.

If we could erect a high-level barrier around Amimone Tower that completely isolated it, we could sever the connection between the mana pipes and the core. The mana sustaining the Parasite's metamorphosis would naturally be cut off.

That would at least preserve the tower's foundations, allowing me to avoid the embarrassment of telling Kynemon, *"Sorry, the tower kind of vanished on you."*

I shouted to Niobe, "Get everyone over here!"

She nodded vigorously and replied with enthusiasm.

"Everyone, attack Amimone Tower, which has undergone extradimensional mutation!"

Hey…

Chapter 142: Turbulence (4)

Chapter 142: Turbulence (4)

Regardless of Orthes's bewilderment, Niobe's judgment was accurate. The False God, on the verge of being born, was not something that could be thwarted with a half-hearted resolve to preserve the Magic Tower's foundation.

If Orthes himself had taken complete control of the entire Blasphemia unit and dismantled every component of the False God's apotheosis ritual, things might have been different. But he lacked both the time and the means of communication for that.

Orthes swiftly grasped and accepted this reality.

'The Amimone Tower is...'

The end of service.

Orthes squeezed his eyes shut. Damn it. What am I going to tell Kynemon?

'Come to think of it, the original request was to erase this Magic Tower from existence. It's gone just as they wished.'

Orthes wasn't one to be whimsically granting wishes like a monkey's paw, but Carisia's invisible—*her stealth was active and truly made her unseen*—hand had recklessly cast magic onto the tower, bringing things to this point.

With a hollow laugh, Orthes glanced down at the ground, filled with a resigned sorrow over the Amimone Tower.

However, Nastion, observing the metamorphosis of the parasite, thought differently. That man had never cared about the "Amimone Tower" to begin with.

To bring in a strategic weapon the moment signs of metamorphosis appeared, stifling its growth and committing every reserve force to an all-out assault?

'Did he know from the start?'

The idea that arose from the Mind Parasite's last desperate struggle was simple: to transfer its metamorphosing host from a physical vessel to the Magic Core of the Amimone Tower.

The Magic Core housed in the tower was within the Ten Commandments' sphere of influence. As long as its connection to the Commandments was maintained, even the religious devotees wouldn't be able to detect it. Therefore, if they could slip in undetected just once, it could lead to an ambush on Orthes.

Luckily for Nastion, he knew of a discreet route for infiltration.

It was the lingering traces of Sprigo, who had perished in an earlier confrontation with Orthes.

Nastion had discerned that Sprigo had used the Angelification Elixir by observing the scars left throughout the city. The man had likely embedded himself as a silver tree, rooting into the city itself. Using the Silver Thread, he would have absorbed mana from the city's mana pipes as his sustenance.

Though Panoptes had undertaken city repairs, they hadn't had enough time to examine every part of Algoth's underground facilities.

The mana pipes were surrounded by layers of alarm spells. But Sprigo, having taken control of the pipes, had ensured the Silver Thread would not be treated as a 'foreign substance.'

Honoring the spirit of his unfortunate comrade, Nastion merged the Mental Parasite into a Silver Thread-fused Magic Core and let it flow back into the pipes.

The Mind Parasite traveled through the pipes and settled into the Magic Core of the Amimone Tower. Now, waiting only for the right time to metamorphose, it would strike Orthes—who was deeply engrossed in the Tower Lord's Contest—at an opportune moment.

Nastion didn't expect Orthes to die easily, but he thought he could at least deal a deep, hard-to-heal wound that would restrict Orthes's movements.

That was assuming only the False God's ambush was in play. If Nastion himself assisted from the shadows, the outcome could easily escalate from a lasting wound to death.

But then he saw this sight.

The moment the metamorphosis began, Orthes struck immediately. Nastion couldn't help but think of a foreboding possibility.

If Orthes had possessed confidence in hunting down the False God from the very beginning...

The situation Orthes most dreaded would not be the showdown with the False God but rather the Mind Parasite's endless expansion of its reserve terminals as a parasite. Without a priest like Bacchus, who specialized in handling minds, eradicating the parasite would be impossible.

However, if all its mental faculties were concentrated into one metamorphosing entity, then a single death would bring about permanent silence.

A trap had been covered with an even larger trap.

He had to change the situation at any cost.

Orthes's figure came into view, looking down with a sneer of dark amusement. But it wasn't simply at the ground.

It was deep below the surface. He was looking at the mana pipes, the route the Mind Parasite had used to infiltrate.

Was he analyzing the infiltration route to pinpoint the location of the parasite's collaborator, Nastion himself?

If so, it was a mistake. Nastion had long fled after pushing the Silver Thread-fused Magic Core into the pipes.

'…No.'

Over these past few days, the Divine Cult's pursuit of him had noticeably diminished. Initially, he assumed it was due to the divine power drain exceeding the half-god's restoration rate, necessitating some time to recuperate. Or perhaps they were preparing to unleash an even stronger divine power.

Considering the Divine Cult's available respite and the nature of the 'half-god,' they would have stored up sufficient divine power to use a level beyond Saint—perhaps the Holy Spirit.

To trap the False God, obstruct it from overpowering Orthes in a contest of sheer strength, and then to annihilate the last remaining variable, Nastion, with stored divine power.

Despite the urgency of the situation, no pursuers from the Divine Cult had come to confront the False God. He would have to assume they were held in reserve specifically to target him if he wanted to survive.

Nastion's survival instincts accelerated. While it seemed Orthes had taken control of the Blasphemia unit deployed in Algoth, it wasn't as if he controlled all of Panoptes.

After all, chaos wasn't a tactic exclusive to Orthes.

***

A construction site repurposed from redevelopment to demolition, thanks to my employer's usual approach. As dizziness rose up, I looked down momentarily, spotting the chaotic disrepair of the underground infrastructure at a glance.

Signs of corrosion marred the mana pipes. I hadn't thought much of it, attributing it to Sprigo's prior bio-terrorism here.

But now, seeing the parasite's surrealist piece on the Magic Core within the Amimone Tower, I realized what role the neglected mana pipes played in this mess.

Damn those Argyrion bastards. If you damage public facilities, at least fix them before leaving.

Infiltration via mana pipes. Mana pipes connected to the Magic Core. My eyes and formula overlay.

As I calculated my options, a thunderous shout that shook the ground resounded from behind me.

“A cultist――!!”

To the heart of the already chaotic Algoth City, yet another upheaval had arrived. Near the Amimone Tower. Kynemon, his Hydra Corporation sponsors, and their nominal employers, the Divine Cult, resided there.

The source of the shouting lay there.

Beyond my visual range, an image of a mage casting fire and lightning toward the lodgings appeared on my retina.

The mage was unremarkable: average height, wearing robes, wielding a staff with several engraved spell-drive slots—like the standard image of a modern mage.

But my eyes saw more than that. The essence beneath that human disguise—a dark, bubbling, shadow-like figure. Clearly not an ordinary human.

“…I’m going to lose my mind.”

The Mind Parasite had an ally.

***

Nastion couldn’t read Orthes’s expression. His eyes were narrow slits.

But he could detect that Orthes, unusually tense, had turned to face him. It must have been an unforeseen strike even for Orthes.

Orthes had mobilized the Blasphemia forces he controlled to preemptively suppress the False God. It was undoubtedly the correct choice.

But sometimes, precisely because it’s the “correct choice,” one’s defenses are left wide open. Just as he had opposed Halto’s expedition.

Nastion felt a rare swell of satisfaction deep within his heart.

The parasite’s relentless drain on the city’s mana to expedite its metamorphosis had caused even the barrier in the Tower Lord’s Contest arena to collapse. Other Panoptes agents, whom Orthes had sidelined under the pretense of supervising the trials, could now act.

With Panoptes agents mobilizing, the participants also began to take action to punish the Divine Cult. With the trials now invalid, they likely saw the opportunity to earn points by eliminating those defying the Ten Towers' order.

If he couldn't use the False God to eliminate Orthes, he would mount the most efficient attack possible while the False God bought him time.

Nastion knew well that the most 'efficient' assault wasn't aimed at Orthes himself but at his forces.

If Hydra Corporation's collusion with the Divine Cult were exposed under these circumstances, Orthes himself would be deemed an enemy of the Ten Towers.

As Nastion prepared his next spell to escalate the battle, he heard a clear voice, its refined tone utterly mismatched by the harshness of the words:

"That bastard! That damn bastard is pure evil!"

***

Kine had learned magic from Carisia and the Holy Incantations from the Divine Cult priests.

But those two were not her only teachers.

It wasn't intentional, but while staying with Hydra Corporation, the two adults she conversed with most were Carisia and Orthes.

Just as Carisia had unconsciously adopted Orthes's rhetoric, Kine, too, had observed Orthes closely.

The difference was that Kine's observation was deliberate. After the scheme in Elysion, Kine paid close attention to Orthes's every word and action.

And now, finally, with her mentors and old family friends under threat, something new, combining magic, the Holy Incantations, and rhetoric, was beginning to bloom.

Through magic, she eroded people's resistance, twisted their minds' direction through the Holy Incantations, and finally, wielded words to compel them to act.

Magic combined with the Holy Incantations—this skill was something beyond simple sorcery.

Its name was Politike Techne.

A secret that the god of revelry and chaos, Bacchus, would surely find delightful.

Chapter 143: Turbulence (5)

Chapter 143: Turbulence (5)

Kine craved power.

Since the moment she was taken in—half willingly, half forcibly—by Orthes after her family in the Bacchus cult was slaughtered.

After all, wasn't Orthes's very first question to her, "Do you seek power?" For Kine, power was the solution to every problem.

The relentless pursuit by Blasphemia, the annihilation of her Bacchus cult family, and the salvation of her kin who had fallen into vegetative states—if she'd had power, all these problems could have been solved.

Thus, she studied Orthes. This was the man who personally executed the Bacchus cult's traitor, manipulated Argyrion from behind the scenes, and devised schemes to dismantle the Ten Towers. Orthes was precisely what Kine aspired to be.

The more Kine studied Orthes, the more he became an enigma to her. He was less a person and more like an unsolvable puzzle.

If survival was the mark of strength, then Orthes was undoubtedly strong. But the way he demonstrated that strength was profoundly strange.

Orthes's greatest weapon wasn't his body or a blade—it was his tongue.

From the current state of the magical society to the intrigues that caused it, much of it originated from Orthes's verbal maneuvering. From what Kine had learned in her private lessons with Carisia, even the downfall of the elder of the Ten Towers, supposedly Argyrion's doing, was actually a result of Orthes's hidden hand.

Orthes had the power to bring down an elder of the Magic Towers by force. But his cunning words threatened the world itself.

His persuasive power was astonishing. From deceiving Demus in Elysion to the present, Orthes was responsible for orchestrating much of the world's current turmoil.

To wield a deadly weapon like his, Kine sharpened her own skills.

Now, with the Panoptes agents and other participants hurling stones at the unknown assailant, her efforts bore fruit.

Watching this scene, Kynemon had a single thought.

That bastard Orthes is ruining the world.

***

I was elated to see unexpected reinforcements.

‘It was worth taking her in, feeding her well, and giving her a warm place to sleep!’

At a glance, the Mental Parasite’s ally appeared to be struggling to comprehend the abrupt shift in the situation. My task here was simple.

I needed to stop the parasite’s metamorphosis, bring Carisia, and eliminate that figure, who was most likely Argyrion.

I started planning my approach to exploit the mana pipes. Even now, the Mental Parasite was drawing mana from the Magic Core.

If I could sever the connection between the pipes and the Magic Core, it would weaken the parasite and tilt the power struggle in favor of Carisia and the Blasphemia agents.

But that would be an amateur move. Who knew how long it would take to destroy the pipes completely? If I failed to destroy enough of them, our forces could end up depleted of mana.

And besides, that approach would only harm Kynemon’s investments—our “company’s” potential assets.

Creating new value through conflict is the expert’s way, but unfortunately, I’m no investment prodigy. I settled for the middle ground.

Preserve as much value as possible. Maintain the facilities, destroy only the Mental Parasite.

And I had a method. The parasite’s metamorphosis was an incredibly complex magic that would demand a tremendous strain on my eyes to analyze fully.

But full comprehension wasn’t necessary right now. Transforming the ritual entirely was one thing, but my aim now was simply to ruin its meticulously set banquet by overturning it.

I didn’t need to understand it to smash it. The more complex a spell, the more disastrous it becomes with just a single misstep.

Carisia’s blasts left craters all around the Amimone Tower as the Mental Parasite defended itself. Beneath the shattered ground, fragments of the mana pipes were visible.

I pulled out a mana-imprinted drive for the overlay.

Click.

Click.

‘It’s not working?’

This was the first time an overlay had failed me after countless uses. Was the drive defective?

The mana, which should have powered the drive, was drained.

Just a moment ago, this drive was functioning perfectly. When I tried attaching another drive as a test, I saw its mana being siphoned off into the pipes.

Damn it.

The Mental Parasite's mana absorption was too strong. The mana intended to complete the spell was being sucked up before the spell could even be cast.

I didn't expect this overlay to be blocked like this.

I glanced up at the Amimone Tower, still torn to pieces. There was no choice.

Time to become a low-level investor.

I'll also need to deal with the fake news source that gave me bad investment advice.

***

In the midst of his shock, Nastion managed to regain his composure. Though the onslaught of stone-throwing had escalated into a storm of attack spells, it had no effect if they couldn't grasp his true nature.

'What the hell did he do?'

It was clear that the crude insult, "that damn bastard," had somehow served as a magical trigger. Yet Nastion couldn't fathom the structure of the spell.

At best, he deduced that it was some kind of curse that weakened mental resistance. But beyond that, the elements that rattled people's will and led them into specific delusions were beyond his understanding.

'Was this anticipated…?'

It was undoubtedly another of Orthes's ploys. The moment his allies attacked, an orchestrated counter-propaganda led everyone to turn on him.

The scale of Orthes's scheme was now beyond comprehension, as was the extent of his tactical preparations.

"Blasphemia! Change your target! Attack the Magic Core connected to the tower, not the tower itself! Otherwise, this will be a war of attrition without end!"

Finally, a more effective plan of attack was issued. But Nastion couldn't understand why Orthes, who must have anticipated all of this, was only now suggesting this strategy.

'Was it to avoid suspicion?'

The Mental Parasite and the False God had long been enemies of the Divine Cult. There was no record of their ever clashing with the magical society. If Orthes had revealed the effective countermeasures immediately upon their appearance, it would have aroused considerable suspicion later.

Thus, the initial approach was to stymie the metamorphosis with attacks, only initiating the full assault after sufficient time had passed. A truly fearsome opponent.

It wasn't just his knack for devising schemes; it was his ability to maneuver every participant in the fight according to his plan. Even Nastion, who prided himself on his cunning, found all his desperate measures rendered futile by Orthes's machinations.

Nastion spotted Orthes charging towards him. This was dangerous.

Orthes could probably grasp his true nature. One blade from Orthes would be deadlier than any grand magic cast by lesser mages here.

With the False God, who should have held Orthes in place, now immobilized itself, Nastion had no remaining options for counterattacks.

Orthes sprinted along the building's wall and launched himself from its peak. At that moment, two spells collided, erupting in smoke.

The sudden obscured vision masked Orthes's approach, which now came from behind.

Had it not been for Nastion's entire body functioning as a sensory organ, he wouldn't have detected this strike.

Nastion dissolved his corporeal form and escaped into the wall's shadow.

Cheers rang out among the mages shouting, "Evil has been vanquished!" From the shadow on the wall, Nastion fled into the rubble of the building, then into the shadows cast by other buildings, repeatedly shifting his position. And as he landed, he watched Orthes below.

Their eyes met.

Though Nastion had no "eyes" to speak of, he knew it instinctively.

He had used instantaneous evasion without a trace or delay, yet the moment he slipped into the shadows, Orthes located him.

A single thought rose in Nastion's mind—a word foreign to him in centuries since gaining his shadowed body.

Survival.

‘Can I survive this?’

Against this half-god who had turned all of Algoth City into his stage.

Nastion was feverishly calculating. From the shadow of a wall, the shadow of a lamppost, and sometimes from the shadow of a bird.

Wherever he hid, Orthes was closing in, and Nastion consciously suppressed his growing awareness of this fact.

Pressed into extremity, a strange solution presented itself.

The reason spatial magic was so tightly controlled was due to its potential to summon extra-dimensional forces.

But Argyrion had no reason to fear the extra-dimension.

And he already had the massive mana source required for spatial magic.

He had to act before all the mana pipes connecting to the False God were severed.

This unfortunate actor resolved to blow up the stage to escape the director’s trap.

Chapter 144: Turbulence (6)

Chapter 144: Turbulence (6)

Nastion darted between shadows in a desperate flight. The fierce chase led through alleys, the ruins of buildings, and deep underground. Even with his ability to move almost teleportationally between shadows, he couldn't shake Orthes's relentless pursuit.

That thing was a terrifying monster. Orthes might lack the divine powers typical of a demigod, yet he wielded a sovereign's authority over the world around him.

Perhaps, the Divine Cult had succeeded in creating the newest form of god—a god of power, not of natural forces like lightning, oceans, or the depths of the earth, but a god of domination befitting this age of humanity. A god who ruled over Blasphemia and the Divine Cult with an iron grip.

Nastion couldn't afford to die here. He had to survive to inform his allies in Argyrion of the truth behind this aberration.

But he'd reached a dead end. Orthes's blade aimed at the air, striking the dim shadows cast by the mana pipes in the tunnel.

From that shadow, Nastion bubbled up and emerged.

"You really are a monster."

"What on earth are you talking about? I look much more human than you, don't I?"

Nastion's shadowy form rippled, his shape expanding and contracting in sync with his chaotic mental state. The surging shadows pulsated like a heart beating.

"The line between human and monster is drawn by one's inner nature, not appearance…"

Orthes shrugged once, making it impossible to tell if he was speaking earnestly or just stalling for time.

Now, forced into revealing his true form in the tunnels, Nastion's identity remained elusive to Orthes, layered like dozens of overlapping texts. Too many details were layered on top of each other, making it almost impossible to decipher. He could barely pick out a name—Nastion.

'The only way is to provoke a reaction from him.'

"You're with Argyrion, right? Are you folks so short-staffed you had to team up with a Mental Parasite?"

It was a simple deduction; only Argyrion would resort to collaborating with a Mental Parasite.

Nastion, anticipating the tactic, reacted calmly, without heightened emotion.

“And you, you’re a great enemy. What on earth did you do in the Golden Desert?”

“Nothing much. Just struggled to survive.”

Both were aware that the other was merely stalling for time, yet neither could discern the other’s intent. Orthes sought to unravel Nastion’s shadow-based magic to block his escape, while Nastion was calibrating the mana flow in the pipes, awaiting the completion of his spatial spell.

“Survival? You call this survival?”

Even as he spoke, Nastion found the idea absurd. That this bizarre demigod, who was pushing him to the brink of death, was driven by survival?

Then again, the will to survive was the most primal and powerful of desires. Nastion himself was also preparing to play a desperate hand, one he would never consider under ordinary circumstances.

The spell was ready.

Nastion enveloped the mana pipes with his shadowy form just as Orthes’s blade sliced into the edge of his shadow.

***

As the Blasphemia agents severed the connections between the mana pipes and the Magic Core, gradually dismantling whatever had taken over the Amimone Tower, a sense of foreboding gripped them.

This feeling was similar to animals’ instincts for sensing natural disasters like typhoons; just as animals detected danger through their sharpened senses, the mages perceived an extra-dimensional disaster through their sensitivity to mana.

Only Niobe, among the Blasphemia agents, fully understood what was happening.

After all, she had experienced an extra-dimensional event in Algoth City with Orthes just days before.

‘This can’t be happening.’

While it was true that a location tainted by an extra-dimension was more likely to destabilize again, the Magic Core of the Amimone Tower was fortified by a proper Tower’s magic. Unless they were profoundly unlucky—

Niobe realized then that the Amimone Tower was mutating into some monstrous entity, targeting people.

The dimensional wall-stabilizing function provided by the Magic Core had likely ceased to work. As this realization struck her, the Mental Parasite's body—the very space of the Amimone Tower—began to distort.

The fragmented space of the Amimone Tower, while still distinguishable as the "interior and exterior of the tower," began to shimmer and twist, staining into a kaleidoscope of colors.

It was becoming tainted by the extra-dimension.

She looked around urgently for the only person she could rely on in this situation—her mentor.

But her mentor was not there.

***

Carisia, still concealed by her stealth magic, observed Niobe's dismay and improvised efforts, ceasing her barrage of beams.

It was time to reconsider their strategy.

***

The moment he exposed his back, I instinctively stabbed him with the high-frequency blade. The physical attack seemed ineffective, as the blade passed through him without resistance, but that didn't matter.

At the very moment the spell was cast, I grasped a clue to his true nature. Every shadowy fragment of Nastion's body was composed of magical formulas.

Whether he had transformed his human self into a magical construct or was created from the start as an artificial being, I couldn't say.

But as long as he was magic, I was his natural predator.

The spell etched into my mana-engraved drive infiltrated his body. His shadowy form suddenly twisted and contorted.

Discarding the shape of a human, Nastion's body morphed into countless geometric shapes. It shifted from a cube to a dodecahedron, then into a flat triangular shadow, and finally into an infinitely expanding fractal structure.

As the shapes extended toward infinity, each smaller and smaller, they repeated endlessly. My brain began to overload under the strain of processing this boundless pattern.

My vision blurred momentarily. A sudden emergency signal from my brain warned me that the data flow was overwhelming. I quickly shut my eyes.

‘Could it be…?’

Was that endless transformation some sort of defense against my eyes? When I struck him, Nastion’s emotions were unmistakably those of panic and fear. There was no way he’d had the composure to launch a high-level counterattack like that.

Something other than Nastion’s own will had retaliated against my attack. Perhaps it was an automated defense mechanism set up by his creator, or maybe a second personality he himself didn’t know about.

As my vision cleared, I saw Nastion’s human form had returned. But it looked like something had gouged out his entire left arm and part of his left thigh.

“I cannot die here… No, I cannot die without delivering your secrets to Argyrion…!”

Behind him, space had already begun to ripple and distort, spreading rapidly outward.

Metallic, silver threads like spider silk extended into the surrounding space, radiating outward. The web of silvery mana pulled the area in, consuming it.

Nastion hurled himself into that space. My high-frequency blade pierced him through what should have been his heart—or at least the place where a heart would have been.

Then he vanished into the silver abyss.

“Hah, damn it.”

This was bad.

The abyss that had swallowed Nastion now began extending its web towards me. I etched the spatial information of the approaching silver threads into my mind.

The hunter had vanished, and now I was the one being hunted.

Wouldn’t it be nice if alligators or vampires were the worst monsters you’d meet in the sewers?

***

The twisted space now writhed, expelling extra-dimensional mana. Strange transformations emerged from the ground, saturated by the ominous power.

“Ahhhh!”

“Change in soil properties! Strong acid! We need an earth-element mage or someone who can alchemize corrosion-resistant metal!”

The Mental Parasite, observing the chaos below, recalled what felt like a dying message from Nastion.

‘We’ve failed. We completely, utterly misjudged this. We must survive to tell the truth for the greater cause.’

Though Nastion’s intent was clear enough—escaping alone—the parasite felt no betrayal. In reverse circumstances, it would have done the same, and Nastion would have understood. It was a duty only those who served their creators could understand.

The parasite had no hope of survival after its metamorphosis was exposed. It only hoped it had the strength to preserve its creator’s plans.

For some reason, after the spatial magic was cast, the devastating barrage of beams had stopped. Likely, her mana had run dry. The Blasphemia agents, too, had become preoccupied with resisting the extra-dimensional encroachment.

About two-thirds of the mana pipes had been severed, but enough mana remained to attempt the metamorphosis.

The parasite felt an intense joy welling up from within. Buying more time would be good.

But wouldn’t completely annihilating Orthes be even better?

The parasite’s mad laughter echoed like a whirlwind, shaking Algoth City. The fragmented spaces converged around the Magic Core. The metamorphosis advanced to its next stage, having endured repeated interference.

All the fragments coalesced. The parasite felt a rush of omnipotence, realizing it no longer needed to be called a parasite.

And then it saw them—two golden eyes fixed upon it.

Chapter 145: Turbulence (7)

Chapter 145: Turbulence **(7)**

Carisia pondered.

What was the best course of action she could take right now?

She regretted not following Orthes when he vanished, chasing a suspicious figure. A sigh, tinged with regret, slipped from her lips.

Had it been a mistake to remain on the front lines against the parasite to fill the void left by Orthes' disappearance?

Dismissing her optical camouflage, Carisia approached Kine.

“Uh, boss?”

Kine was startled by her sudden appearance, while Kynemon, standing nearby, cast a troubled glance her way. Without any preamble, Carisia stated,

“Withdraw. Everyone.”

“Why...?”

Kine's question was reasonable. The mages she had politically maneuvered into assembling represented nearly all the magicians gathered in Algoth City. To retreat now, despite this formidable force, seemed like a foolish choice.

After all, even with just Blasphemia and Carisia, the parasite was already in a disadvantaged position. If everyone charged in together, they could likely clinch victory in one swift stroke, couldn’t they?

Carisia shook her head calmly.

“You’ll get caught up in it.”

Kynemon was the first to grasp the weight behind her soft-spoken warning. While Kine, still debating the parasite’s strength, faltered, Kynemon recognized that Carisia had something far more overwhelming in store—something he could scarcely comprehend.

“What are you planning to do?”

Kynemon’s voice betrayed no tremor; he had already steeled himself. Whatever measures Orthes’ superior might employ, they were sure to far exceed his imagination.

“Just an ordinary method,” Carisia replied, her tone indifferent. “A byproduct of research one might dabble in if they’ve worked in large-scale construction.”

Leaving those words, Carisia once again donned her optical camouflage. As Kynemon convinced Kine to withdraw with the other magicians, they began to retreat.

***

Niobe, leading the battle against the Amimone Tower mutant, sensed a shift. It wasn't just the parasite's accelerating transformations.

"Where's the firepower?"

Orthes' large-scale offensive magic had ceased. It seemed his artifact had run out of energy.

This turn of events put Blasphemia's forces at a disadvantage in the battle of attrition. Niobe recalled Orthes' prior response during the extra-dimensional storm in Algoth City:

Inform the main Blasphemia force while I cover your escape.

Orthes was nowhere to be seen now, but Niobe knew he would give the same directive in this situation.

"Abandon Amimone Tower! Pull the front line back! I'll hold off the mutant while everyone retreats! Relay the situation to the main force immediately and await further orders!"

The Panoptes operatives outside Blasphemia quickly withdrew. As a commander, Niobe had done her part.

Resigned to her fate, she prepared to meet her end. Activating the implanted mana stone within her body—enhanced through Blasphemia's augmentation—she planned to unleash its full explosive potential.

The blast would be enough to wound the mutant severely, forcing it to focus on regeneration. As she mouthed the detonation code, however—

The mutant's assault ceased.

It hadn't died. Its form distorted space around it as it exhaled extra-dimensional energy like breathing, fixating its gaze on something.

This wasn't a figurative gaze. Spatial distortions rearranged into a massive face-like structure, with two enormous eyes locked on a single point.

Niobe turned her attention toward the direction of the gaze—the same area where magic spells had been firing moments earlier.

She felt a massive surge of magical energy emanating from that location, a pulse so overwhelming it threw her off balance.

"Orthes?"

Clearly, he had recharged his artifact's power.

***

Carisia poured out her mana without restraint. Dispelling all auxiliary magic like her optical camouflage, she concentrated her mana into a single point in the void.

The parasite, halfway through its evolution, couldn't ignore the massive energy that would inevitably be refined into Grand Magic to strike it down.

Carisia herself was gambling with this technique. Her mana reserves were far too vast for any individual to control, and she remained bound by the limits of her own humanity.

Thus, she focused only on gathering mana, refraining from shaping it into a specific spell. Any attempt to form a ritual might backfire catastrophically, potentially vaporizing both herself and everything around Amimone Tower.

If the parasite realized that no spell was being prepared, it might disregard her entirely.

Fortunately, it lacked such discernment—or perhaps Orthes' honed art of deception had effectively set the stage.

「You...」

The parasite couldn't decide what to make of her. Initially, she had seemed like the perfect sacrifice. Then, briefly, she was a creation of its "Creator." Now, with Orthes' deception exposed, the parasite refused to think of her at all.

Yet now, face-to-face with her, questions abounded. The Creator's boundless authority churned within her fragile mortal frame.

Orthes' lies couldn't possibly be true. The Creator would remain distant, observing their struggles with incomprehensible silence from the heavens above.

But *that power…*

It was undeniable. The parasite, now confused, chose the most efficient form of defense: overwhelming offense.

Recognizing the preparation of Grand Magic, it instinctively began constructing an equally devastating spell to counteract and cancel her attack.

Carisia, having spent a long time alongside someone as inscrutable as Orthes, had developed an acute sense for reading even the most cryptic of behaviors.

The parasite's confusion, by contrast, was painfully obvious.

All of its resources were devoted to countering her magic. Carisia, meanwhile, analyzed its ritual and smiled.

She had won.

***

I felt a sudden, bone-deep dread. Not the ordinary kind of unease, but the kind that promised catastrophe if I failed to act.

Yet there was no time to ponder the cause of this foreboding. The silvery spiderweb trailing me was nearly upon my back.

Then—

My ‘eyes’ flared in a panicked warning. The world turned crimson, as if bathed in blood-red text.

Disoriented, I glanced at the letters:

Detonation in 10 seconds.

“Carisia!”

I instinctively called out her name. What the hell have you done?!

***

Since her arrival in Algoth City, Carisia had been engaging in steady destruction. Aware that her actions would draw Panoptes’ attention, she had pressed on, undeterred.

Parallel to her search for Argyrion, she had continuously set the stage for destruction—even when she couldn’t locate her true target by the final day of the Tower Lord Selection.

Her reason? Simple.

To lay the groundwork for a bomb.

While Kaicle and the other directors were preoccupied with crafting the Artificial Commandments, the discarded remnants of reliquaries—drained of divine power but still functional for storing abilities—piled up.

Orthes might have sold them off as antiques. Bertrand, head of the Miners’ Guild, would’ve argued for preserving them as historical artifacts.

Carisia thought differently.

Before weaponizing the Artificial Commandments, wouldn’t a prototype be prudent?

Gathering the drained reliquaries, she began constructing mana bombs.

Initially, there was no plan to plant these bombs in Algoth City. They were meant to be thrown through portals should Argyrion escape via spatial magic.

But her plans shifted upon hearing of the parasite's intentions to seize Amimone Tower's mana core. If it succeeded, this would serve as her trump card.

The timing was fortuitous. As soon as the Tower Lord Selection began, Carisia attacked the other candidates, prompting them to retaliate. The escalating conflicts played to her advantage.

Panoptes, stretched thin policing the chaos, turned a blind eye, rationalizing that "only survivors would be evaluated anyway."

This leniency allowed her to discreetly plant explosives at key locations.

The trigger? A specific wavelength of light transmitted in a coded pattern. High-precision optical sensors, a collaboration between the dwarf Bertrand and Lamphades, completed the mechanism.

Carisia sent the light signal, timing it perfectly while the parasite fixated its detection abilities on her massive mana output.

And then—

There was light.

Chapter 146: Turbulence (8)

Chapter 146: **Turbulence (8)**

Mana bombs, intricately arranged according to the principles of the magic circle, were designed to create a more powerful explosion by using mana conduits as connecting lines. That was why Orthes was horrified upon seeing the mana conduits.

From the moment the mana bombs received their detonation signal, the mana conduits became part of the explosion magic. The infrastructure laid throughout the city was cleverly edited to function as a single massive magic circle.

Orthes was aghast at the sheer madness of the idea, but what could he do?

Keeping an ace hidden until the very last moment. Turning the opponent's moves against them. Carisia had learned all of this from Orthes himself.

Orthes began to wonder if the original White No Name wouldn't be taken aback by Carisia's explosive tendencies too.

He closed his eyes. Not to give up on life. Carisia had created an even more powerful explosion, but it didn't result in a *larger* explosion.

Using the mana conduits to draw the magic circle was an annoying task, but it ensured that the explosive force would not be wasted and instead be focused on a single point. With every ounce of strength in his legs and eyes, Orthes managed to distance himself from the epicenter of the explosion.

The point of concentrated force would be the **Amimone Tower**. Orthes inferred the full design of the magic circle based on the part he had observed. At the center of the hexagram-shaped arrangement of mana bombs was the Amimone Tower.

The destruction caused by the mana bombs would all be concentrated on the Amimone Tower. Orthes wondered if even a trace of the tower's foundations would remain. Just as he began to delve into this question...

A flash.

It was a brightness so intense that any ordinary human optic nerve would be rendered blind instantly. Even with his eyes closed, Orthes' vision turned entirely white.

The reason Orthes had closed his eyes was similar—to protect them from blindness. While his eyes would not be harmed by mere brightness, the magical information crafted meticulously by Carisia was of a nature that assaulted the brain rather than the eyes.

Closing his eyes to block out the flood of information was Orthes' best defense.

***

On the surface, the heat and light concentrated in the tower reached down underground. The materials at the explosion's epicenter evaporated instantly. Substances were broken down below the level of physical existence and transformed into shimmering fragments of light.

The **parasite** was stunned. There had been no incantation.

No, it wasn't even a matter of "no incantation." Mana continued to converge on that location. The spell wasn't even fully prepared yet.

「How――」

"How did I cast magic?"

Carisia sneered. Her smile was a mix of mockery, ridicule, and the euphoria of utterly defeating an opponent.

"Idiot. I activated it three minutes ago."

A firepower capable of distorting space itself erupted into a towering column of light. The spatial disintegration caused by the overwhelming explosion reached its climax, collapsing back in on itself.

The column of light, large enough to sweep away the entire Amimone Tower, was perfectly suited to vaporize the **parasite's physical form**—both corporeal and divine—constructed by reassembling the tower's space.

The violent light erased even the sound of screams. A white radiance so bright it blinded the eyes.

While the searing light obscured everyone's vision, Carisia slipped away unnoticed. There was no need to waste time on the dead. She planned to search for Orthes.

***

"How are you feeling?"

"Dizzy."

The first thing I saw upon opening my eyes was hair whiter than the earlier flash. I responded with a wry smile.

"Boss, were you trying to kill me?"

"Oh, don't worry. I checked beforehand."

"Checked?"

Carisia pulled a crystal of **Phoibos** from her pocket and held it up.

“If you were in danger, it would have shown me a vision. Nothing came up even when I decided to set it off.”

“Hah, damn. You’re bold.”

She hadn’t designed the spell to spare the underground from the blast. No, her reasoning was simpler: if the *instant death detection function* didn’t activate, he wouldn’t die. Knowing how accurate the crystal was, I couldn’t exactly argue.

“Sometimes that thing doesn’t work properly.”

I tried to recall how it was described in the original work. The artifact’s power couldn’t perfectly foresee beings that transcended its limits—essentially, entities akin to gods. In the source material, the Mage King himself had been one such “godlike being,” so it hadn’t been an issue.

“Now that I think about it, didn’t Carisia once face off against me and several elders?”

At least the artifact seemed capable of foreseeing opponents like the Ten Tower Elders, the worst-case scenario one might typically encounter.

“Really? Tell me more about it when we’re back. I need to take notes.”

I felt as though I could hear the length of her report growing. I took Carisia’s outstretched hand and got to my feet.

***

What had once been the **Amimone Tower**…

Nothing remained.

Truly, nothing. The issue wasn’t whether the foundations were intact; even the **mana core** had evaporated. The very heart of the tower was gone.

And it wasn’t as though anything else was left intact. All that remained were minor branches of the Amimone faction.

It was like a patient who had died, leaving only their donated organs. If Kynemon were to rise as the new tower lord, he might be able to reorganize the branches into a new tower.

But with the mana core gone, it would no longer qualify as a legitimate mage tower.

“Boss, by the way, how are you planning to handle this explosion?”

“Blame it on **Argyrion**, of course.”

Argyrion agents had infiltrated the Tower Lord selection process, and their minions nearly seized the position. However, their suicide bombing destroyed the mana core before it could happen.

It was a plausible enough cover story—better than admitting Carisia had blown up the Amimone Tower with a bomb.

If that truth came out, Panoptes wouldn't even matter. The Ten Tower Elders would hunt us down with murderous intent.

"What do you think will happen if we pin this on Argyrion?"

Argyrion had already overstepped the Ten Towers' bounds repeatedly. Adding the complete obliteration of a proper mage tower would be an intolerable provocation. The Ten Towers would likely abandon all pretense of diplomacy.

"A war will break out. The spatial magic used by the Argyrion executive you killed recently, and the space magic this parasite used to connect itself to the extra-dimension—both will become leads for tracking Argyrion's main base."

"Twice. In theory, spatial coordinates can be calculated, but the manpower required would be astronomical. Even with support from the Ten Commandments, it would require the combined efforts of the Ten Towers."

Once the coordinates were verified, the Ten Towers would likely launch a counterattack. Even a personal campaign by a Tower Lord was not out of the question.

I began to recall Argyrion's known—or suspected—actions.

A full-scale declaration of war in **Elysion**. Disruption of magical society through tower infiltration. Assassination of Ten Tower Elders. Betrayal of proper mage towers followed by a "if I can't have it, no one can" mentality that led to the destruction of Amimone Tower.

Plenty to push the Ten Towers' patience to its limits.

Admittedly, about half of these incidents were my doing, but hey, hadn't Argyrion operatives been present at every scene?

At the **Pluton Sanctuary**, for instance, without the angelified Argyrion agents, I wouldn't have fared so well against Talo.

Even if the Amimone Tower Lord wasn't colluding with Argyrion, it was true there had been traitors from Amimone working with them.

And before Carisia obliterated the tower, the parasite had already shattered it.

…Wait. That last one wasn't my fault at all!

I glanced at Carisia. She caught my gaze and smirked faintly.

"Feels like we're nearing the endgame, doesn't it?"

No. That wasn't the emotion behind my look. But as ever, I couldn't help my corporate instincts. My mouth began offering flattering commentary.

“Progress is much faster than expected. If the Tower Lord vacates his position, the final stage of the plan could begin sooner than anticipated.”

According to my predictions, the Mage King’s resurrection was still about three years away. I had expected the fall of White Light to follow only after the war between the Ten Towers and the Mage King began.

If the Ten Towers responded as predicted…

“The era is about to enter a time of turbulence.”

“Yes. Whether we capitalize on the turbulence to launch the final phase or wait a little longer will be a matter for discussion.”

Carisia remembered my prophecy about the Mage King’s return.

If the White Light Tower Lord joined a campaign against Argyrion, and the Ten Commandments of White Light were destroyed in the process, the White Light Magic Tower would certainly fall into ruin.

But could the Ten Towers, after losing one of the Commandments, still stand against the Mage King?

A turbulent era—and a question Carisia and I must answer.

Chapter 147: Interlude (1)

Chapter 147: Interlude (1)

Niobe was barely alive. The massive explosion Carisia had orchestrated had been meticulously concentrated on the space where the **Amimone Tower** once stood.

Still, even though it hadn't hit her directly, she had been within the range of the transcendent heat. Having stayed on the Amimone Tower's frontlines to distract the **parasite**, Niobe hadn't been able to completely escape the blast when the Grand Magic was triggered.

After the battle, it was Orthes who dug Niobe out from the rubble. He had acted on Carisia's advice.

Her words were clear: "She was fighting the parasite until the very end. Check the vicinity of the wreckage." Along with a single instruction:

"Are you alright?"

"Senior…"

Niobe smiled suddenly, a faint grin spreading across her face.

"The artifact... That was something else."

"Oh…"

Niobe seemed to think Carisia's "magic" was nothing more than an ancient artifact Orthes had prepared in advance. Considering she had been the closest witness to Carisia's abilities, there was a chance she might have seen through her identity, but thankfully, that hadn't been the case.

"We got lucky. We overloaded their spatial magic, forcing it to implode. The fact that you got caught up in it was—"

Niobe shook her head, a silent indication that no apology was necessary. Her trust in Orthes seemed deeper than expected. Orthes recalled Carisia's proposal.

Instead of simply keeping the truth from Niobe and using her as a tool, why not groom her into a friendly ally within **Blasphemia** who could eventually serve Hydra Corporation's interests? It was a dangerous gamble.

"Senior, did I live up to my position?"

Orthes nodded. From the days when she was a novice easily fooled by Orthes' initial schemes to now, Niobe had grown remarkably.

That said, her competence also made her a potential threat if she ever turned against them. After deliberating until the last moment, Orthes decided to trust Carisia's judgment.

“Yes, Niobe. You performed splendidly. Your decision to evacuate your unit first and then stay on the frontlines to buy time was exemplary.”

Niobe muttered a quiet “That’s a relief” and smiled bashfully. Seizing the moment, Orthes continued.

“However…”

“Hmm?”

“I’m not sure this organization is worthy of you.”

“Senior?”

Niobe’s face showed clear confusion. Orthes carefully weighed his words. How far could he push without alienating her? How deeply did her trust extend?

“Even within Blasphemia, there’s bound to be ongoing suspicion. Why are so many drawn to **Argyrion**?”

“That’s—”

“It’s something that can’t be explained by mere camaraderie or the pursuit of wealth and power. Having fought Argyrion more than anyone, I’ve come to understand some of the methods they use to persuade other mages.”

This was no lie. Considering the collaboration between **Nastion** and the parasite, it was evident that the Mage King’s influence had reached Argyrion, at least subconsciously.

Their recruitment methods—half-jokingly referred to by Orthes as a "hypnosis app"—were rooted in a truth that could shake the very foundations of a mage’s mind.

The truth about the origin of the Ten Towers.

The first disciples of the Mage King had betrayed him. That betrayal, and the efforts to hide it for millennia, was a festering wound. Argyrion likely used the guise of serving the Mage King to sway others.

“What are you trying to say?”

“My view of Argyrion hasn’t changed. They’re a dangerous group ensnared by the extra-dimension. But our organization…”

“Senior. Any further, and—”

You’ll become a traitor. Niobe’s gaze pleaded for Orthes to stop.

“Our organization may harbor even darker secrets than we imagine.”

Niobe’s mind was a whirl of confusion. Her face reflected a mix of shock and distress. Orthes played his final card in this gamble.

“You’re welcome to report these thoughts to the higher-ups. I won’t do anything to stop you. If you come to a decision, contact Hydra Corporation.”

Orthes handed Niobe over to another Blasphemia operative. She remained lost in deep turmoil.

***

Kynemon reflected bitterly.

“Those Argyrion bastards…”

One more step, and the Amimone Tower would have been his, but it had been obliterated.

Still, the plan wasn’t a complete failure. Kynemon had earned the highest scores during the final selection round. The one who dealt the decisive blow to Argyrion’s infiltrators during the tower lord selection process was **Kine**, officially registered under the Tavning faction.

Under Kine’s leadership, they had defeated **Nastion**—a figure whose name Orthes had provided—securing Kynemon’s reputation and eventually granting him the title of Amimone Tower Lord.

Though now he presided over little more than fragments of the former tower.

“It’s truly unfortunate. Argyrion has caused such devastation,” Orthes said, his voice heavy with regret. Kynemon couldn’t fault Orthes for his grief. He had done everything expected of him.

“Who would’ve guessed? That Argyrion would stoop to wiping out an entire tower. Shortsighted as it is, it’s undeniably an effective show of force.”

“Argyrion! It’s all because of their reckless actions,” Orthes exclaimed, uncharacteristically fervent. Kynemon recalled Lampades’ theory—that Orthes was using Argyrion as a smokescreen for Hydra Corporation.

“So, Argyrion must have realized Orthes’ plans and lashed out first. Things are getting messy.”

Lampades had told him that Orthes intended to use Argyrion to divert the Ten Towers’ attention while plotting to upend the world through Hydra Corporation. The dynamic was simple: Hydra Corporation, hidden behind Argyrion’s facade, versus the Ten Towers.

But after the **Algoth City incident**, Argyrion had officially severed ties with Orthes.

“It’s a three-way battle now…”

Hydra Corporation seemed to hold the upper hand. Despite Argyrion’s public affiliation with the Divine Cult, the cult’s loyalty lay not with Argyrion but with Orthes personally.

Orthes' estrangement from Argyrion meant the cult would naturally side with him. Argyrion's earlier attempt to eliminate the cult's operatives was likely a preemptive strike to weaken Orthes' resources.

"But Kine's retaliation shifted all the blame back onto Argyrion…"

Even though the cult had supported Orthes, the accusations of heresy and fanaticism were redirected entirely to Argyrion. It was a masterful ploy.

Kynemon, having pieced together the situation, nodded at Orthes, who continued to denounce Argyrion.

"No need to dwell on it. You fulfilled my first request, didn't you?"

"My first request? Oh…"

Kynemon had initially sought the Amimone Tower's destruction as his reward. With not even a brick remaining, his wish had been granted far beyond expectation.

"And I'm a tower lord now, in name at least. Two plans half-realized—sounds like a win to me."

Kynemon found himself oddly satisfied with the current state of affairs. It proved that even Orthes' schemes weren't flawless.

Perhaps the world wouldn't end after all.

Orthes' plans might succeed only halfway, burning away the rot without consuming everything. The vast evil he served might unwittingly stop at a tolerable limit.

Kynemon dared to hope.

Though, as a willing accomplice to that evil, he wasn't sure he had the right.

Smiling wryly, Kynemon asked Orthes with a lighter heart, "So, what's next?"

It was obvious to anyone with some insight that Kine, despite her affiliation with Tavning Tower, was more a mercenary than a true member. It wasn't hard to deduce that Hydra Corporation, Tavning's benefactor, had provided her services.

Requests for similar "mercenaries" were already flooding Carisia's way, particularly for those capable of countering Argyrion. Even **Panoptes**, and by extension the Ten Towers, had taken an interest in Kine.

"For now, we'll head back to **Etna City**. A lot has changed, and we have much to prepare."

"Understandable. Losing a trusted tool would demand some adjustments."

Chapter 148: Interlude (2)

Chapter 148: Interlude (2)

Demus had returned to the **Divine Cult** after what had been an exceedingly fruitful mission in his view.

The most significant outcome was the last surviving heir of the **Bacchus Cult**. Despite the burden of being the sole survivor, she was remarkably bold, with a level of skill to match her audacity.

When a mysterious assailant publicly denounced them as heretical fanatics, Demus had felt an immediate foreboding. His instincts warned him that casualties might be unavoidable. It was only natural that sacrifices would be made when priests were isolated in the midst of hostile mages.

But **Kine** defied those natural expectations.

Though it was unclear exactly what she had done, the hostility of the mages shifted in an instant. Even Demus, initially oblivious to the divine power at play, recognized its presence only through the faint aroma of wine lingering in the air—an unmistakable hallmark of the Bacchus Cult.

What she employed was no ordinary trick. It captivated the mages while simultaneously concealing the divine power's wavelength with extraordinary finesse.

Demus thought of the suspicions raised against **Orthes** by both the **Priestess Faction** and the **Papal Faction**: *Isn't he just trying to monopolize the Bacchus Cult under the pretext of protecting its survivor?*

That was, of course, absurd. Upon arriving in **Algoth City**, Demus had taught Kine how to wield sacred incantations himself. Yet her current abilities far surpassed anything a crash course could achieve in mere days.

Orthes had genuinely poured his utmost effort into training the heir of the Bacchus Cult.

Perhaps neither the Priestess Faction nor the Papal Faction is truly working for the Cult's best interests, Demus reflected.

The Pope's plans had already advanced significantly through the excavation of the **Pluton Sanctuary** and the sacred relics within. As a cleric, Demus could fully understand the Priestess' repulsion toward the Pope's creations.

Yet to oppose such a plan now would seem like opposition for the sake of opposition. Even though the sanctuary empowered the cult, divine energy could also be harnessed through the Pope's constructs.

If the Cult had already strayed from its righteous path, why not use every means available? At least until the **Ten Towers**, the Mage King, and the prophets of **Phoibos** were defeated.

As the leader of a war god's cult, that much seemed logical. Be it the Priestess' path or the Pope's, they should use whatever tools they could to fight.

Satisfied with his reasoning, Demus returned to report to the Cult. The destruction of the parasite appeared conclusive.

Unusually, the Pope requested a private audience. Demus gladly accepted.

"So the parasite has been destroyed, you say," the Pope mused in a soft voice, inquiring about the "metamorphosis" the entity had been attempting. While Demus hadn't participated in the final battle, he shared what he could about the vortexes of mana and spatial distortions he had observed.

"I see. So in the end, space itself was distorted."

"To be precise, the metamorphosis was incomplete. It was caught in the explosion before it could finish."

"And the cause of that explosion?"

"According to Orthes, it was a reaction between the parasite's spatial magic and the Hydra Corporation leader's—"

At that moment, a memory struck Demus: the garden encounter, the fear of the Ten Commandments, and the overwhelming power veiled in human guise.

"Are you well, Demus?" The Pope's serene tone snapped him out of his thoughts. After all, Carisia's true identity didn't matter. What mattered was that she was Orthes' ally, and therefore an ally of the Cult.

"Ah, it's nothing. I was just reconsidering the explosion's scale—it seems too vast to be explained merely as magical backlash. Orthes suggested it resulted from spatial magic colliding with itself in a runaway reaction."

"I see. Thank you."

The Pope's gratitude felt cryptic, but before he could leave, Demus spoke without thinking.

"Isn't it time to end this?"

"End what?" the Pope asked with a curious tilt of his head.

"This conflict between you and the Priestess. In my view, both of you have your merits and flaws. It's hard to believe that following only one path is the correct course. Why not take the strengths of both and maximize them?"

The Pope smiled faintly, a fragile expression that seemed to vanish as soon as it appeared.

"If she desires it, I am always willing to end this conflict."

With that, the Pope rose and began to leave. Before Demus could realize it, he was gone, likely having returned to his private quarters.

Even for the Cult's heralds, the Pope's powers remained mysterious.

"If she desires it."

Demus recalled the saying from the cult of **Poliphron, the God of Smiths**: *Strike the iron while it's hot.* Resolving to act, he set out to meet the Priestess.

It was time to put an end to this senseless internal strife.

***

Meanwhile, **Nastion**, who had lost roughly 30% of his mass to Orthes' high-frequency blade, barely managed to utter the words, "The enemy's name is Orthes…" before collapsing upon returning to Argyrion's base.

When he awoke, he instinctively knew he had incurred the wrath and contempt of both **Halto** and the other Argyrion leaders.

Nastion had opposed Halto's precise judgment, labeling it irrational, and had argued against deploying their top-tier forces. The loss of **Sprigo** was solely his responsibility.

Argyrion would not forgive Nastion for failing to respond to their adversary's resurgence and botching the initial countermeasures.

But contrary to his expectations, Nastion wasn't condemned by the other leaders.

Instead of berating him, some patted his shoulder or back. Others murmured, "It's alright," though what exactly was "alright" remained unclear.

The vague reassurances of "Anyone could've done the same" only deepened Nastion's self-loathing.

One phrase, however, was universally agreed upon among the Argyrion executives: "When it comes to *that adversary,* anything is possible."

Nastion, a being who sowed the seeds of division and delusion, now found his thoughts muddled. What truly broke him was Halto's address at the grand assembly.

Before all available executives, Halto proclaimed:

"Behold, comrades! Nastion has failed! Algoth City lies scorched, beyond the reach of our enlightenment."

Nastion was prepared to undergo public self-criticism for his defiance and the unnecessary losses it caused.

"But he has achieved a success greater than his failure! He has accomplished a feat none of us could!"

While Nastion stood dumbfounded, Halto roared with fiery conviction:

“He has learned the adversary’s name!”

Thunderous applause filled the hall. Overwhelmed by handshakes and congratulations, Nastion—though he lacked proper eyes—felt his vision grow dark.

It was just a name. The scene defied all logic and reason.

“Nastion.”

Halto’s voice snapped him back from his reverie.

“One more question. This is vital. Are you certain the heretics were under the Hydra Corporation’s protection?”

“Yes. If they were using the Hunting God’s relic, it would require a recharge period. There must be a priesthood capable of harnessing divine power for sacred incantations.”

“I reviewed the recordings. Why did the mages attack you instead of the exposed heretics?”

“That’s…”

Nastion couldn’t answer definitively. **Kine**, the guard Orthes had stationed by **Kynemon**, had shouted a bizarre incantation, triggering some unknown spell.

The nature of that spell eluded him.

“It appeared to be magic affecting the psyche,” Nastion finally offered.

“I see.”

Halto frowned. Orthes had the backing of a powerful magical corporation and had allied with heretics in secret.

Orthes and Argyrion were now mortal enemies.

“We and the heretics couldn’t possibly be allies without their knowledge.”

“…Do you believe the Divine Cult spread such rumors deliberately?”

“No. Orthes likely orchestrated it, using the cult’s activities to obscure his own. It seems his plan to hide beneath their shadow has failed.”

Halto considered the strange sequence of events surrounding Argyrion: leaked plans, premature exposure, and accusations against unaligned tower lords.

“Most of all…”

Talos. The elder of the **Silver Iron Tower**, slain.

With Orthes as the hidden orchestrator, the pieces finally fit together.

“Nastion.”

“Yes.”

“How close are we to opening the dimensional gate?”

“We intended to gather data from the parasite’s metamorphosis, but my defeat prevented proper collection. Factoring that in, I’d estimate it’s about 76% complete.”

“I see. The remaining 24%…”

Plenty of room for Orthes to overturn the board.

“This time, we’ll be the ones to flip the table.”

For now, they were finally ready to face the **true adversary.**

Chapter 149: Internal Management (1)

Chapter 149: Internal Management (1)

Returning to **Etna City**, Orthes' first stop was to meet with **Lampades**.

"I heard about what happened in **Algoth City**. Sounds like it was quite the battle," Lampades said, maintaining a composed expression while closely observing Orthes' reaction. Through **Kynemon**, who shared a certain camaraderie with Orthes, Lampades had been informed about the events in Algoth.

The revelation that shocked Lampades most was Argyrion's betrayal. To think they had plotted against Orthes and even succeeded in part—it was nothing short of astonishing.

It was also noted that the contaminant entity Argyrion had presumably prepared at the **Amimone Tower** to counter Orthes was utterly annihilated in an instant.

Kynemon had recounted how Orthes abandoned the "Bubble of Erasure" with apparent ease and replaced it with something else. The massive explosion that eliminated the contaminant was undoubtedly a result of this substitute mechanism.

Lampades felt a phantom dryness in his mouth. While Orthes and Carisia were absent, their agents executed orders with machine-like precision. However, one undeniable fact emerged: the efficiency of their operations had multiplied since Lampades provided the **Radar** to them.

From one division, there were reports of terrible screams echoing through the night. In a facility resembling a spider's lair, unknown and likely dreadful experiments were being conducted.

A Hypothesis Formed

Drawing from the facts he knew, Lampades pieced together a hypothesis:

1. **Fact One:** The Radar Lampades had developed significantly increased the efficiency of finding something critical to Orthes' plans.
2. **Fact Two:** Using the enhanced Radar, Orthes' agents had secured an excessive quantity of this resource.
3. **Fact Three:** Orthes had completely neutralized Argyrion's secret weapon at Algoth using some unknown means.
4. **Fact Four:** The agents were unaware of this special method. The only exception might be…

Kaicle.

Lampades had met Kaicle several times, particularly after their first "accidental" encounter in the executive office, where the latter had requested adjustments to the Radar for specific purposes.

When news of the contaminant's emergence and the subsequent explosion reached the **Ether Network**, Hydra Corporation was thrown into disarray. Uncertainty loomed over whether Orthes and Carisia had survived.

Yet Kaicle, unshaken, approached Lampades with requests for further performance enhancements.

From this, Lampades concluded:

The massive explosion Orthes used in Algoth must have relied on a resource traceable via the Radar.

This resource, while rare, had become sufficiently available thanks to the Radar's improvements.

Lampades' mind wandered to old legends: stories of visionaries who executed their own subordinates to safeguard their secrets.

If Orthes decides to silence me to keep his secrets…

Lampades reassured himself with a strategy. While the theory behind the Radar's functioning had reached its developmental limits and could be discarded, its operation depended on **Astraphe**, the central figure driving its performance. Without her, the Radar's capabilities would plummet. Additionally, the regular mages of Lampades Tower, skilled in syncing with Astraphe, were equally vital.

Preparing his case for sparing Astraphe and his Tower's members, Lampades nervously awaited Orthes' words.

"Lampades, what's your opinion on the **Ten Towers**?"

Here it comes, Lampades thought. He had anticipated this since Orthes recruited the apocalyptic-minded Kynemon. Orthes seemed genuinely intent on burning the world down.

"Ah. You mean their power, not their governance?"

"Yes. What do you think of their military strength?"

"…If you're facing one member, it's possible to defeat them. But is there any group capable of taking down all ten towers?"

Orthes nodded slowly at the response.

"I understand you've had extensive conversations with Kynemon."

Lampades stiffened.

"As you've likely surmised, Kynemon and I share some aligned goals. That's why I'm bringing this up, but…"

The next words would determine whether this was a negotiation or a warning. Lampades' tension mounted.

"Isn't it about time for you to return to your Tower?"

"…What?" Lampades blurted, caught off guard. This was far from a demand to hand over everything or a call to join Orthes' cause.

"You see, Kynemon has always had an… ideological intensity, hasn't he?"

"…He has."

"That's why we could work together. But your goals differ from his. It's inevitable that Hydra Corporation and the Ten Towers will clash."

"And when that happens, won't my Tower also be branded an accomplice and eliminated?"

"I've prepared contingencies. If events unfold as expected, the Ten Towers will find themselves too strained to focus resources on eradicating your Tower. They might even overlook your involvement entirely, valuing every mage tower too much to waste their efforts."

The Ten Towers, strapped for resources? Even with the limitless mana reservoirs of the Ten Commandments? Just what is Orthes planning? Lampades wondered, his thoughts racing.

Gathering his resolve, Lampades finally asked, "I have a few questions."

"Go ahead."

"That magic you used in Algoth—wasn't the Radar crucial for acquiring the necessary resources? Are you truly willing to give up that advantage?"

"…Impressive deduction. First, I should clarify that the magic wasn't mine. However, your Radar was indeed pivotal for Hydra Corporation's plans. But," Orthes shrugged, "we've already secured what we need. While we haven't mined every location, we've recorded enough to ensure surplus availability."

The calm certainty in Orthes' response sent chills down Lampades' spine.

Hah. This one's sharp, no doubt about it.

While Lampades believed the Radar was used to create mana bombs, it was actually for producing **Artificial Commandments**. The bombs were merely a byproduct of that process. His conclusions were incomplete, but surprisingly accurate.

"Second question, then: does the 'necessary amount' include what's needed to counter Argyrion?"

"We'll avoid direct confrontation with them as much as possible. The Ten Towers will handle eliminating Argyrion without our intervention."

Lampades considered this. Recruiting him had crossed Orthes' mind initially, but Lampades carried too much baggage. Unless the entirety of Lampades Tower relocated to Etna City, Orthes couldn't protect all of its members. Asking Lampades to abandon his ambitions was unthinkable.

There was also the contingency of **Astraphe** potentially coming into contact with the Mage King. While Orthes understood Kine's mindset after extended interaction, his encounters with Astraphe were too brief to predict her actions.

"A wise strategy. One last question."

"Of course. Ask anything."

"You only pick fights you're sure to win. But can you really be certain of victory against the Ten Towers?"

Lampades had struck a nerve.

"I've noticed something different about you compared to your time as a fixer. Back then, you moved with unshakable confidence. But now…"

"It's partly because the opponent is the Ten Towers. But not only that."

"Not only that?"

"It's hard to explain, but the ultimate adversary we must face might defy my expectations—or render them meaningless entirely. Your Tower, in this sense, serves as an insurance policy."

"To create a safe haven, unrelated to Hydra Corporation, as a fallback?"

Orthes nodded. Lampades found it hard to believe. An adversary beyond Orthes' understanding? Only mythical gods came to mind. The idea of Orthes planning for his defeat was unprecedented.

Yet it was a welcome arrangement. Preserving the Tower's strength and returning home with mutual secrecy intact—there was no reason to refuse.

"One last thing, then. Does your unease have anything to do with Argyrion?"

Orthes smirked wryly. A rare hint of humanity.

"Argyrion? It's close. Let's say… it's about the entity behind them."

After concluding his discussion with Lampades, Orthes turned to Carisia. With the external partnerships handled, it was time to address internal matters.

"No one in the company knows the full extent of our plans, right?"

"Kine and Kynemon are busy rebuilding in Algoth. No one is aware of the plan to create Artificial Commandments or to go to war with the Ten Towers."

Carisia massaged her temples. With the impending clash between the Ten Towers and Argyrion, the timing was perfect to strike **White Light**.

To fully unleash Hydra Corporation's capabilities, the truth would have to be revealed.

"But," she said.

"Yes?"

"Do we even need to reveal the truth to fight the Ten Towers?"

"…What?"

Chapter 150: Internal Management (2)

Chapter 150: Internal Management (2)

Carisia's proposal was straightforward.

"The issue is convincing people why we need to fight the Ten Towers, correct? Then let's give them a cause they can believe in."

When people thought of a conflict with the Ten Towers, **Argyrion** naturally came to mind. I was about to voice the common-sense rebuttal—that our employees didn't aspire to be labeled terrorists—when Carisia interrupted.

"Succession War."

"…Are you serious?"

Carisia's declaration that she intended to claim **White Light** for herself was shocking. She had always harbored boundless hatred for the **Ten Commandments of White Light**, so much so that possessing it had never been on the table.

"Of course, I have no intention of actually keeping White Light," she clarified. "I'm still dead set on destroying it. But think about it."

Couldn't we leverage the pretense of wanting to claim White Light as a righteous cause?

Her tone was soft, almost a whisper, as if weaving a spell.

"It's easier for the executives to believe I want to claim White Light rather than destroy it outright. Once I officially take ownership, I could obliterate it without interference."

And after White Light's destruction was complete, Carisia wouldn't need Hydra Corporation anymore. Even if the remaining nine towers declared her the world's enemy, she could simply vanish.

"The idea of using a succession war to frame the situation is compelling," I conceded. "But there's a problem."

"The Mage King," Carisia replied immediately.

I nodded. Destroying the Ten Commandments before the Mage King's resurrection would undoubtedly complicate his attempts to ascend.

In the original story, the Mage King had sought to reclaim the Ten Commandments' authority for his rebirth. But whether nine remaining towers could defeat the Mage King was another question entirely.

Above all…

I was beginning to doubt whether the story's depiction of the Mage King was accurate. The Mage King in the original novel was an overwhelming yet cunning antagonist—but still the "main character" in his narrative.

There was no mention of century-spanning schemes like the mind-parasite's plan to annihilate the **Divine Cult**.

His actions outside the story… the sheer determination I can only observe here, send chills down my spine.

The parasite was likely meant to serve as a sacrifice for the Mage King's revival, so it wouldn't be surprising if the timeline for his resurrection was delayed now. But how many alternative methods did he still have at his disposal?

When I looked up, Carisia was watching me.

"What are you thinking so deeply about?"

"It's an extension of our conversation. The Mage King."

***

Carisia's mind raced. From the moment Orthes guided her to the **Phoibos Temple**, she had sensed something strange.

Orthes was uncharacteristically focused on the Mage King.

If his assumptions were correct, the parasite—a crucial component for the Mage King's revival—had been destroyed by Carisia's mana bomb. Yet Orthes' wariness remained undiminished.

Even with the early warning system crafted from **Adoosiam's** remnants, his unease lingered. He carried an ironic certainty: without the Ten Commandments united, the Mage King could not be opposed.

If that's the case…

Carisia decided to change her perspective.

"Let's postpone destroying White Light."

"Postpone?" I asked.

"Why not aim to destroy all the Ten Commandments?"

"What?"

Orthes' confusion was evident. Carisia began outlining her new plan, seemingly impromptu but with unmistakable conviction.

“If we take down one tower while preserving the Artificial Commandments, we can theoretically wield the power of two Commandments against the next tower.”

And with each subsequent victory, the balance of power would shift overwhelmingly in their favor.

“With all due respect, boss. Did you get enough sleep last night?”

“I’m saying this because you’re overthinking things too much. Now listen.”

Orthes’ bemused tone couldn’t deter Carisia’s brazen determination.

“Now, imagine we’ve collected all ten Commandments, and the Mage King is resurrected.”

The **Adoosiam alarm** would signal his return.

The first blast—**White Light**.

The second—**Yellow Thunder**.

The third, fourth, and fifth Commandments would follow.

“And after we’ve detonated all ten Commandments, if he’s still alive, we’ll set off the Artificial Commandments. Ta-da!”

Carisia spread her hands and smiled brightly. Orthes couldn’t suppress a small laugh at the absurdity of it all.

What was truly absurd, however, was the logic. Even Orthes couldn’t see how the Mage King could survive eleven consecutive Commandment-level detonations.

“So what you’re proposing, boss, is that we systematically eliminate the Ten Towers to secure ammunition for the Mage King?”

“Exactly. Simple, right?”

“Simple and foolproof—aside from the fact that we’re not even sure we can take down one tower.”

Orthes chuckled, half-expecting Carisia to have some hidden strategy. But to his surprise, she shook her head.

“Figuring out how to achieve this is your job, isn’t it?”

“…What?”

“My original plan was just to destroy White Light. A modest goal, don’t you think?”

Whether toppling the supreme authority of the magical world could be called “modest” was debatable. Under normal circumstances, Orthes would have protested her tendency to assign lofty goals while delegating the details entirely to him.

But today, he felt a strange sense of relief. The absurd plan provided an odd comfort.

“The boss adjusted the company’s objectives to match her employees, so I’ll trust you to make it happen,” Carisia said with a grin.

Orthes’ determination began to burn anew, with an unexpected hint of enjoyment.

“The idea of a succession war is incredibly useful. Let’s start there.”

***

Q: How do you defeat the Mage King?
A: Eleven consecutive Commandment detonations.

It was absurdly simple logic. The Ten Commandments defeated the Mage King once before; surely, eleven would be even more effective!

Carisia’s reckless calculations were usually a headache, but today was different. Focusing on securing the Commandments opened new possibilities.

“The Ten Towers are preparing for a campaign against Argyrion. They’ve been undermining the magical order for years—”

“Most of which was your doing, wasn’t it?”

“That’s not the point. What matters is that the Ten Towers believe it was all Argyrion’s doing.”

Carisia’s pointed truth was gently brushed aside as Orthes continued.

No matter how powerful the Ten Towers were, launching an expedition into **Argyrion’s extra-dimensional stronghold** would strain their resources.

Even with the infinite mana of the Commandments, mages themselves had limits.

“When the Ten Towers’ elders are absent on this campaign, it will disrupt the magical order.”

“And how do you plan to exploit that?”

“Succession wars. With the elders who’ve managed the Commandments gone, it’ll be the perfect opportunity to claim them.”

Up until now, Orthes’ schemes had focused on pitting natural enemies against each other: Argyrion versus the Ten Towers, the Ten Towers versus the Divine Cult, and Blasphemia versus Argos.

But now, it was time to play on a grander scale.

The time had come to deceive the entire magical world.

“How will you determine when the Ten Towers begin their campaign?”

“We’ll use Kine, who was recently scouted by the **Black Dark Tower**. Even as a new recruit, she’ll notice if multiple elders suddenly go missing.”

But relying on a single method could be dangerous.

“Lampades’ Radar can track the massive spatial disturbances caused by extra-dimensional expeditions. Observing these fluctuations will let us pinpoint their departure.”

“We could also siphon intelligence from Blasphemia. If Niobe contacts me as a trusted ally, she might provide insider information.”

“The most optimistic scenario is if the Ten Towers themselves announce their campaign. Given how Argyrion has tarnished their reputation, they might hold a grand send-off to flaunt their power. That would make it easy to time the public’s agitation.”

Ideas flowed endlessly, fueled by Orthes’ newfound clarity. Carisia nodded along.

“And then?”

“Then we incite the other mage towers. With Argyrion’s defeat imminent, we convince them to hold succession wars and claim the Commandments before the elders return.”

The Ten Towers had maintained order through fear and strength, especially in this volatile era where Argyrion’s chaos stood out. Harsh decrees like relic confiscations and immediate executions of suspected Argyrion agents had fostered widespread resentment.

If the Ten Towers’ “strength” was away on a campaign, what then?

“They’ll regret relying solely on power to maintain internal order.”

The classic *three-way stratagem* had grown stale. Why settle for dividing the world into three parts?

Now was the time for the **plan of universal division.**

Chapter 151: Hydra Corporation Assembly (1)

Chapter 151: Hydra Corporation Assembly (1)

I had boldly announced the beginning of the *Plan to Divide the World,* but implementing it immediately was not feasible.

To proceed, the expedition forces of the Ten Towers had to depart first. Provoking the battle-hardened and enraged Ten Towers prematurely would likely turn my carefully laid plans into rubble.

Turning my focus away from the *Plan to Divide the World,* I reviewed my immediate tasks and found nothing requiring my direct involvement. It was an oddly familiar feeling.

For the first time in ages, I decided to inspect the internal workings of Hydra Corporation. Following Carisia's advice, I planned to pitch to the board members not as “we will destroy the White Light,” but as “we will seize the White Light, so prepare to face it.” Even so, there were some truths I needed to explain to the board.

Chief among them was the enmity between Carisia and Argyrion. In hindsight, this entire affair began with their conflict.

“Fortunately, the board is unaware that Argyrion considers us an enemy.”

Likewise, Argyrion did not yet realize Hydra Corporation had turned hostile against them. Not until Nastian returned to them bearing my name.

For now, it was fortunate that Argyrion lacked the resources for external ventures. They were preoccupied preparing for the Ten Towers’ wrath.

“Perhaps I should meet with the board members individually while informing them of the upcoming assembly.”

***

“Director Bertrand is asleep,” yawned Geryon, nonchalantly addressing me as he emerged.

“Hmm? Is Director Bertrand working on something directly?”

“You don’t know? What I’ve heard is that the old man is engrossed in a task ‘personally assigned by the boss.’ Even Arabella is being relentlessly mobilized.”

Carisia’s mysterious directive clicked in my mind. It must be related to some kind of schematic for a magical bomb. Reluctant to disturb Bertrand’s rest, I simply conveyed the assembly schedule and left.

When I visited Cretone, I encountered a similar scene. It was break time at a demolition site, and he lay on his back using a rolled-up cloth as a makeshift pillow—a posture only achievable by someone deeply attuned to such environments.

“Wait a minute. Does Cretone even sweat?”

Under normal circumstances, his heavily modified body wouldn’t require a towel. Then again, dust was inevitable in demolition sites, even if it wasn’t sweat.

After distributing coffee and bread to Cretone’s crew of physically enhanced mages, I reminded him of the meeting schedule.

“And who should I say informed me?”

“Ah, just mention the ‘grinning guy from headquarters.’ I handle all the mundane errands like spreading messages among directors.”

Noiro, Divius, and Meconion were still out conducting Divine Investigation missions, and it was surprising to hear that Meconion had left Etna City. I had pegged him as someone tied to his drug den. Perhaps something had changed.

When Kaicle came to headquarters for a report, I notified him of the meeting. That left only one person to visit: Taros, the half-dragon mutant.

The bronze-scaled Taros regarded me with a peculiar gaze.

“To think you’d come in person….”

“Haha. I’ve been busy outside lately, so I haven’t had the chance to meet with the directors. I thought I’d take this opportunity to inform you all of the assembly.”

“Bertrand’s task… is proceeding smoothly.”

Bertrand’s name surfaced again, hinting that Carisia’s assigned “work” was monumental.

Could it be preparations to weaponize the Artificial Commandments as bombs? Taros, a representative of the mutants exposed to magical waste, was one of the most knowledgeable about the underground mana pipelines of Etna City. Perhaps work was underway on the pipelines connecting the Artificial Commandments on Mount Etna.

I made a mental note to ask Carisia later. For now, I changed the subject. Since I couldn’t ask other directors, I decided to probe Taros’s thoughts on fighting the Ten Towers.

“That’s good to hear. Director Taros, how would you evaluate Hydra Corporation’s standing?”

“I assume… you don’t want me to say ‘I don’t know.’”

Taros appeared deep in thought. I had initially assumed him to be cunning in combat but not particularly wise—an impression based solely on his appearance in the original story. That was clearly my mistake.

“To answer precisely is difficult. But Hydra Corporation has demonstrated the audacity to devise and execute plans to deceive the Ten Towers.”

A sharp response, despite claiming uncertainty. Hydra Corporation was indeed deceiving the Ten Towers.

“And if deception escalates into outright conflict, will we have the means to carry out our plans?”

Taros’s eyes quivered at my question.

“This assembly…?”

“Something along those lines. I wanted to gather the board’s candid thoughts to present to the boss before the meeting.”

After some coaxing, I assured him anonymity in reporting opinions, encouraging him to speak freely.

Ignoring internal unrest before a major operation often leads to catastrophic backlash. I cited examples of corporations collapsing due to unaddressed concerns.

“Like the Ten Towers….”

“They let Argyrion linger and ended up in this mess.”

Deeply pondering, Taros promised to have his response ready before the meeting.

***

The directors didn’t entirely dismiss the idea of a conflict with the Ten Towers. Taros’s reaction leaned more toward resignation than incredulity, as if it were an inevitable outcome.

He also didn’t seem to think victory was impossible, given his hesitance to call the idea absurd. The directors’ confidence might stem from the Artificial Commandments, the Ten Towers’ declining prestige, or rumors that the Etna City explosion was Carisia’s doing.

Whatever the case, morale was higher than I expected. If I unveiled parts of the *Plan to Divide the World* and connected it to the succession war, they might be more motivated.

***

Taros’s hands trembled as he reflected on Orthes’s fearsome aura.

The man had pinpointed “internal unrest” in their conversation, casually mentioning Argyrion and the Ten Towers’ predicament. Taros recalled a recent encrypted message that hinted Argyrion could cure his family’s mutations caused by extra-dimensional contamination.

The message, a whisper of betrayal, had been swiftly deleted, yet Orthes somehow knew.

Unanswered questions plagued Taros.

***

As I organized Hydra Corporation’s files, Arabella approached, her expression weary.

“Hey.”

“Yes?”

“Why didn’t you tell me to clear my schedule for the assembly, like you did for the others?”

“Ah.”

I hesitated before deciding to be honest.

“Director Arabella, where have you been just now?”

“The Strategic Planning Room in the basement.”

“Considering you’ve been eating and sleeping there for days, I figured you wouldn’t be leaving headquarters until the meeting.”

Arabella silently screamed in frustration.

Chapter 152: Hydra Corporation Assembly (2)

Chapter 152: Hydra Corporation Assembly (2)

While Orthes was meeting the directors to prepare for the assembly, Carisia was making her own preparations.

Kaicle, the creator of the Artificial Commandments, likely had some idea of the broader scope of the plans Carisia and Orthes were devising.

Responding promptly to Carisia's summons, Kaicle arrived without delay, aided by modifications he'd made to the Ether Space deployment system installed beneath the Etna Volcano. This allowed him to connect directly to Hydra Corporation's internal systems.

"What can I do for you?" asked the imposing figure, his manner calm and composed. Having reached the culmination of his life's research, he exuded the poise of someone who had achieved their greatest dream.

"You once said the Artificial Commandments were made in pursuit of a 'clue to ascension,' correct?"

"Yes."

"You also posited that the Mage King, who ascended beyond this dimension, is essentially equivalent to the gods."

"Yes."

"Then, if we consider the Mage King a god, his domain would be 'the God of Magic,' wouldn't it?"

Kaicle nodded. It was a profoundly heretical idea. The Ten Towers, which had persecuted the followers of the Old Gods as superstitious fools, would be appalled. Yet Kaicle was unwavering in his conclusions. He had already succeeded, to some degree, in using sacred energy to open pathways to the dimension of ascension and metaphysical infinite power.

This was akin to one of the two key traits of the Artificial Commandments: *inexhaustible mana.* Kaicle, being of an uncompromising nature, would sooner die as a heretic than compromise his beliefs.

"The Mage King... is a god," he affirmed with conviction.

"That is, by the definition of a god as an entity capable of freely accessing the dimension of ascension beyond this world."

Kaicle nodded again, but a question lingered. Until now, Carisia had seemed more focused on the practical applications of his heretical theories than on the theories themselves.

Carisia had given him unprecedented freedom to study the Artificial Commandments, despite the inherent dangers. If his work were leaked, it could spell the end of Etna City

itself. Yet, Kaicle did not believe Carisia would kill him and seize the results for herself—not while Orthes, an even greater enigma, was in the picture.

After the Mage King's advent, mana had become interwoven into every aspect of existence. Yet Orthes, who possessed neither mana nor magic, stood as an anomaly. He was the only known true *null-mage.*

****

"Director Kaicle," Carisia's voice broke through his thoughts.

"Yes."

"I intend to destroy the Ten Towers."

"…I expected as much."

Allowing the heretical implications of the Artificial Commandments meant this was about more than mere ambition to become an eleventh tower. The Ten Towers' ideology firmly rejected even the notion of Artificial Commandments. To them, the idea was both heretical and blasphemous.

From Kaicle's perspective, the Tower's mages were no different from priests worshipping gods. He responded calmly:

"In that case, I assume you're affiliated with the Cult of the Old Gods."

"Ho, I thought you were solely focused on your research."

"I am. But I also worked in the Ten Towers, where political savvy is a necessity for survival."

"Politics? Doesn't the Ten Towers pride itself on being the purest bastion of magical research?"

"The purer one claims to be, the more corrupt they often are. Greasing wheels, currying favor with elders, and shielding your work from rivals—that's the true nature of their purity."

Kaicle recounted how relics he had supplied for the Artificial Commandments had come from various sources, including ones that couldn't be explained by Hydra's Divine Investigation Office or Lamphades' enhanced radar.

Some were relics of the Twelve Old Gods, which Orthes himself had procured and presented as samples.

"I suspected as much. Relics of that magnitude must have been either excavated or received from their original owners. In either case, a connection to the Cult of the Old Gods seemed likely."

"You're correct. Some were excavated; others were acquired from their original owners, such as the Divine Cult. They are invaluable allies when opposing the Ten Towers."

Using the Artificial Commandments and the Cult of the Old Gods to dismantle the Ten Towers was a plan terrifying enough to unnerve most mages into betraying it on the spot. But Kaicle was no ordinary mage.

“What role do the Artificial Commandments play in this plan? Nullifying the existing Commandments?”

“For now, that’s the primary expectation. But there are additional uses I’m still considering.”

Carisia didn’t bother explaining that these uses included the creation of magical bombs. For now, Orthes was the only one privy to that part of the plan.

Kaicle’s remaining organic eye gleamed with determination.

“I simply want to prove my methods for achieving ascension are correct. If you seize the Commandments, the path to ascension will be clearer.”

His voice trembled slightly as he concluded, “I’ve always wondered what would happen when all the Commandments are brought together.”

“You’re betting on Hydra Corporation?”

“I’ve already staked everything.”

Carisia nodded. If her plan succeeded, the Commandments would indeed be gathered in one place—only to be destroyed.

****

“Good. Director Kaicle, now that the Artificial Commandments are essentially complete, I have a new task for you.”

She handed Kaicle a document, not as a hologram or email through Ether Space but as physical paper—a sign that its contents were to leave no trace.

The document explored the differences between extra-dimensional entities and gods. While they were similar in nature, one critical distinction existed in this world: *resistance from the world itself.*

Extra-dimensional beings faced resistance from the *world barrier* or *dimensional wall* whenever they tried to interfere. This resistance, an inherent law of nature, was why dimensional cracks automatically healed. Gods, however, were exempt from this resistance.

Carisia’s hypothesis aimed to artificially replicate this resistance.

“I’m exploring a way to induce the world’s resistance not against extra-dimensional mana but against *mana itself.*”

“….”

She envisioned a spell to destroy magic—a way to restructure the world barrier's rejection mechanisms to target mana universally.

"A fitting name would be…" she mused.

***

Kaicle burned the document to ashes with a flicker of mana. The spell Carisia proposed was horrifying even in concept. If realized, no mage could use magic within the Anti-Magic Field—not even Carisia herself.

But Carisia had Orthes.

A man existing outside the magical laws rewritten by the Mage King, a true null-mage, and perhaps the only one in the world.

"One question, if I may," Kaicle asked cautiously.

Carisia nodded, granting permission.

"What exactly is Orthes?"

It was an enigma Kaicle could not resolve. Within Hydra Corporation, Orthes's true position seemed akin to that of an ambassador mediating with the Divine Cult. But Kaicle knew no priest, no matter how devout, could exist without mana in this age.

Carisia's lips curled into a thin smile as she replied with disarming certainty:

"I have no idea."

Chapter 153: Hydra Corporation Assembly (2)

Chapter 153: Hydra Corporation Assembly (3)

Kaicle expressed doubts about Orthes' true identity, but even Carisia had no further answers to provide. A few months ago, she had speculated on candidates like the Pope or a demigod as possibilities for Orthes' identity.

However.

"You mentioned that the envoy from Argyrion and the mental parasite called Orthes a demigod, didn't you?"

If that was the case, it was unlikely to be true.

It was purely instinct—a decision made without any concrete evidence—but Carisia trusted her intuition. At the very least, Argyrion's judgment about Orthes couldn't be entirely accurate.

"If not a demigod, but something beyond… there's only one possible candidate left."

A god.

Even in this era where the cults of the old gods had waned, the title of "god" still carried immense weight. No—

It was precisely because the names of the gods held such weight that the Ten Towers had worked so diligently to suppress the cults.

The mental parasite hunt led by the Divine Cult at Orthes' request was shocking. The irrational efficiency of their *Holy Incantations* made it seem as if they were achieving results without any detailed process.

Carisia recalled Kaicle's theory that the Mage King could be equated to a god of magic. Could the Ten Towers have not arrived at the same conclusion?

If they had reached that conclusion, then their obsession with establishing a department in Panoptes to hunt down the cults made sense. If the Mage King, walking the earth, could obliterate all cults, then similarly, another god descending to the mortal world might be capable of wiping out magical society itself.

"Huh?"

Orthes' actions, in the end, were strikingly similar. While Orthes hadn't waged open war against the cults like the Mage King, he had been systematically dismantling the order and the structure of magical society maintained by the Ten Towers.

Carisia pondered this deeply before shaking her head.

No matter Orthes' true identity, it was enough that he was beside her now. She had accepted this simple fact long ago.

She called for Orthes with a light heart. It was time to finalize what they would say at the general assembly.

***

"Boss, I have great news. We've recruited someone who will be a tremendous help in the *Plan of World Division*."

Carisia didn't hesitate.

"Ah, is this Niobe, the Blasphemia agent? Recruiting an insider from the Ten Towers would indeed be excellent news."

"Hm? No."

"Then someone from Argos or Eidolons?"

"Haha, Boss. Even I have my limits. Recruiting someone with no connection to those departments would be tough."

"If not a Ten Towers insider, then who?"

"Oh. Remember I mentioned I had three friends back in my fixer days? It's the last one of them."

Carisia still didn't flinch. Instead, she merely worried about Orthes' friendships.

The "friends" Orthes spoke of had unique abilities of their own, but whether they genuinely considered him a friend or viewed him as some high-dimensional being nicknamed "friend" was uncertain.

Carefully choosing her words, Carisia avoided probing Orthes' one-sided camaraderie. There was no need to reveal such a truth unnecessarily.

"You said it's a friend from your fixer days. Are they still a fixer?"

"Oh. Strictly speaking, we met even before I became a fixer. Back then, being a fixer was more like a side hustle for that old man."

"Old man?"

"Yeah, he's quite old. Our relationship is also the longest. Anyway, his main job... hmm, how should I put it..."

"Tax evasion—no, a professional tax-dodging consultant?"

Carisia froze.

***

Sensing the headache to come, Carisia decided to postpone the topic of this "friend" until after the general assembly.

“I’ve already informed those who, by position, had to know the truth. Now, we just need to decide how to present this to the other directors.”

“I’ll craft a convincing lie about seizing the White Light Tower through a succession war as our cover story.”

Orthes nodded. Carisia summoning him this way was her way of entrusting him with the assembly’s announcement. The directors needed to play their roles in the fight against the Ten Towers.

Not just the directors—Geryon, whom Carisia had captured, would also be indispensable in the initial succession battle for the White Light Tower.

“If we announce our intention to destroy the Ten Commandments, it will likely provoke rejection from those entrenched in magical society’s systems. But if we frame it as taking control of the Commandments, the question shifts to ‘Can they do it?’ And with your abilities, Boss, you can answer with ‘Yes, we can.’”

Orthes assured their readiness, and Carisia nodded.

The day of the assembly arrived as scheduled.

***

“First.”

Orthes scanned the room. It was similar yet different from the day Hydra Corporation was first established. One of the eight directors was missing, replaced by Geryon and Kaicle.

In their first meeting, the conference room had been nearly empty, as Orthes and Carisia had just purged the former occupants.

In contrast, today’s conference room was resplendent, thanks to Bertrand’s assistance in refurbishing every piece of equipment.

Savoring the moment, Orthes began his opening address.

“Thank you all for gathering here. It is an honor to share the fruition of Hydra Corporation’s *Artificial Commandments* project with everyone.”

The directors remained silent. It was a monumental announcement, but they knew Orthes wouldn’t have called them merely for ceremonial congratulations.

“President Carisia’s vision for our company was to become the eleventh great tower. Now, with the completion of the Artificial Commandments, this vision is within reach…”

Orthes' smile deepened. The directors sensed that the real discussion was about to begin.

“But.”

“President Carisia has judged that settling for this would be premature.”

Neuro raised a hand. Orthes glanced at Carisia, who granted permission with a nod.

“Are you referring to the Artificial Commandments' perfection or Hydra Corporation's ultimate goal?”

“The latter. The President has been greatly disappointed with the current conduct of the Ten Towers.”

The word "disappointment" rippled through the directors, implying something bold.

“During the Argyrion uprising, the Ten Towers were repeatedly called to prove their worth. But in reality, what did we witness? From the Elysion terror attack to the Algoth City Black Magic Tower's annihilation, the Ten Towers have failed to justify their existence.”

"Justify their existence"—a provocative choice of words. The Ten Towers were not just enforcers but also judicial bodies and military powerhouses of magical society.

In the Argyrion incident, the Ten Towers had consistently failed. The complete annihilation of a Black Magic Tower's mana core alone was an unprecedented failure for the entire institution.

“Thus, the President has decided. The pinnacle of magical society no longer befits the Ten Towers.”

Orthes naturally stepped behind Carisia, who took over.

“The Ten Towers have stagnated for far too long, abiding by the Mage King's will to crown the greatest mage as their leader.”

Carisia's golden eyes gleamed. Of those present, only Kaicle, who knew their true intentions, chuckled at Orthes' careful wordplay.

“Now, Hydra Corporation will claim the pinnacle.”

Orthes and Carisia intended not just to usurp the Ten Towers but to dismantle their system entirely. Yet, if their plan succeeded, Hydra Corporation would inevitably ascend as the new pinnacle.

After Carisia's declaration, Orthes addressed the room once more, scanning the directors.

“We now possess detailed intelligence on the Ten Towers and Argyrion's situation. With this knowledge, we will rally the magical society to topple the Ten Towers. However.”

Pausing briefly, a faint blue glow seemed to flicker beneath Orthes' eyelids.

“Hearing what comes next will be akin to crossing an irreversible boundary. I offer you one last chance—to leave this room, or—”

Thud.

The sound was too loud for a single person collapsing.

It was Taros.

Meconion, sitting beside him, struck his back, asking what he was doing, but Taros remained kneeling.

Slowly, the dragonkin’s mouth opened.

“…There was… a reconciliation proposal from Argyrion.”

"What?"

An entirely unexpected confession. Orthes maintained his composure.

Chapter 154: Hydra Corporation Assembly (4)

Chapter 154: Hydra Corporation Assembly (4)

Taros' confession dragged on for quite some time. Part of this was due to his naturally slow and stilted manner of speaking, but mostly it stemmed from his hesitation over the content of his revelation.

As Orthes endured a pounding headache—caused both by his *Eye* and the unexpected turn of events—he probed deeply into Taros' thoughts. There was no trace of falsehood in his confession.

"I was tempted by their offer… but I have yet to pass on any information."

The sudden disclosure left the conference room in silence.

The directors instinctively understood this wasn't their place to intervene, and Orthes was preoccupied analyzing a cryptic thought from Taros: *"As expected, the Director of Divine Investigations must know everything…!"*

The silence was broken by Carisia.

"As President of Hydra Corporation, let me ask. Why did you hesitate to accept their proposal?"

Taros, gathering his halting voice, began to explain.

The proposal promised the ability to freely manipulate *extra-dimensional mutations*. If true, it could potentially cure the mutations afflicting Taros' kin. While Hydra Corporation's *Artificial Commandments* project could draw upon immense magical power, it didn't extend to offering curative techniques of that nature.

Thus—

"Oh, that's not quite what I mean. If their proposal was so convincing, wouldn't you, as a director, have handed over information—like about the Divine Investigation operations—already? Yet you haven't. What stopped you?"

Carisia's tone conveyed curiosity rather than accusation. Taros, surprised by her unexpected demeanor, answered plainly.

"Fear."

"Fear?"

"Fear that the Director of Divine Investigations… already knows. Or that this is a loyalty test orchestrated by him…"

"Ah, I see. Anything else?"

At this point, Orthes seemed more like an omnipotent dictator from a cautionary tale, capable of monitoring every conversation and movement. Carisia couldn't help but reflect that Orthes' reputation had long since crossed the point of no return.

"Distrust. …Toward Argyrion."

Carisia nodded in agreement. Indeed, Argyrion wasn't exactly known for its reliability. At the same time, she signaled to Orthes.

Orthes nodded back, affirming that Taros' testimony contained no lies.

"Orthes."

While Carisia had crafted the grand framework of their plans, it was Orthes' role to fill in the details. Whether to dispose of Taros or assign him another task was Orthes' decision to make.

"Director Taros."

Orthes fixed his gaze on Taros. The director felt unnerved by Orthes' perpetually narrowed eyes, which betrayed no emotion.

"In that case, let's sell them some information."

"…?"

***

When Orthes first heard of the proposal, he'd been momentarily taken aback. Argyrion's movements were faster and more precise than expected, targeting a vulnerable spot with unsettling accuracy.

Not even a week had passed since Nastion vanished after hearing his name. Yet Argyrion had already singled out the most peripheral member of Hydra's board for their scheme. If not for Taros' exaggerated fear of Orthes, the plan might have been quite effective.

"This must have been Halto's doing."

Nastion, despite being part of Argyrion, was somewhat of an outlier. Argyrion had its roots as a Blasphemia strike team hunting Carisia, yet neither Orthes nor Carisia had ever encountered someone like Nastion among them.

Their first confrontation had been in Algoth City. It was likely Nastion's first direct encounter with Orthes as well.

Halto, on the other hand, retained faint memories of their repeated clashes.

For Argyrion, who referred to Orthes and Carisia as their "adversaries," mimicking the social stratagems Orthes had used against them seemed inevitable. They had already succeeded in sowing discord between the Magic Towers and the Ten Towers.

The chance to counterattack a long-standing thorn in their side with the very tactics they despised must have been tempting.

Yet something about it felt… off.

***

“Argyrion probably didn’t expect Director Taros to truly defect.”

“What do you mean…?”

“Our relationship with Argyrion is one of enmity, to say the least.”

As Orthes began, he noticed skeptical glances. Meconion, who had been fidgeting with his pipe like a smoker in withdrawal, shot him a look that seemed to say, *"Isn’t this grudge between you and the President personally?"*

Orthes dismissed it. *We’re all on Hydra Corporation’s payroll now. What’s the difference?*

“They’ve overestimated my abilities somewhat. Their swiftness in contacting you is commendable, but the scheme itself is too simplistic to be their genuine strategy.”

Argyrion viewed Orthes as a dangerous "adversary," but toppling him through a single director’s betrayal seemed naive.

“And how does this relate to selling them information?”

“What do you think they’ll do if an unexpected defector emerges? They’ll either assume we’ve seen through their plot or attempt to solidify the defector’s loyalty. Either way, they’ll respond, and that response will give us valuable insight.”

Whether Argyrion’s demands or information were truthful or deceptive, any reaction would provide clues for future decisions.

The more sources of intelligence, the better.

“Director Taros, thank you for your candid report. Now, let’s move on to the main topic of this assembly.”

Orthes pressed a button, and a hologram appeared on the table. It was a polished presentation tool designed by Arabella.

“Let me introduce the *Plan of World Division*.”

***

Meanwhile, Nastion confronted Halto.

“Do you truly believe their director will betray them?”

Halto could guess the unspoken meaning behind Nastion's question. Even if a director defected, would it deal any meaningful blow to Orthes? Would it even catch him off guard?

Having pondered these questions countless times, Halto answered succinctly.

"No."

Nastion's shadowy form rippled, likely a sign of his dismay. Halto, noting Nastion's heightened emotional state since his clash with Orthes, elaborated.

"Orthes would have foreseen this. The moment our names and actions were exposed to Hydra Corporation, he would've known we'd strike."

Halto stared at the writhing extra-dimensional barriers and the adversary beyond them—a foe who seemed to treat the world as nothing more than a theatrical play. To Halto, breaking Orthes' carefully prepared script was now a personal mission.

"By now, the director we approached has either been discovered by Orthes or delivered our proposal to him."

"But how…?"

"To Orthes, people's minds are no different from books. Any ruse or deception is meaningless to him. A director serving under him would know this better than anyone."

"Then why make the proposal at all?"

If failure was inevitable, why waste the effort and resources?

"Sometimes, to capture the grandest prize, you must sacrifice a few pawns. A decoy move."

Nastion struggled to grasp this, but his experiences in Algoth City had taught him one thing: of all Argyrion's members, Halto had the sharpest insight into dealing with their "adversary."

As he recalled the horrifying encounter with Orthes, a signal interrupted Nastion's thoughts. It was a message from Argyrion's agents embedded in the outside world.

"…Hydra Corporation Director Taros has agreed to the deal. He'll provide samples of the mutations in exchange for an antidote, and he's willing to share parts of Hydra Corporation's operational data."

"It's a trap."

"You're certain?"

"A pretext to gather intelligence on us. Depending on what we demand, they'll gauge our position."

Nastion's shadow form rippled again. Halto easily discerned his unspoken question this time.

"Oh, wondering how I know this so well? Let me share my secret—just this once."

The shadow drew closer as Halto smirked bitterly, leaning in to whisper.

“Our adversary always manages to bring my worst imaginings to life. Sometimes, they’re even worse.”

Chapter 155: Hydra Corporation Assembly (5)

Chapter 155: Hydra Corporation Assembly (5)

I poured my heart into explaining the *Plan of World Division*. The strategy revolved around staging multiple succession wars triggered by the Argyrion expedition against the Ten Towers.

A surprise declaration of war would occur while the elders and primary forces of the Towers were absent. Other Magic Towers would then drain the Ten Towers' reserves in prolonged skirmishes. At this critical juncture, Hydra Corporation would intervene, leveraging the *Artificial Commandments* to seize control of the Ten Commandments.

I laid out all the details that could be disclosed.

The directors didn't applaud or celebrate after hearing the plan. Considering that their opponent was the Ten Towers, it was only natural for them to deliberate seriously.

***

"…There's an issue," said Neuro, breaking the silence.

"When wolves go hunting, there's always a leader to guide the pack. Is there anyone in the current magical society capable of becoming such a leader to challenge the tiger that is the Ten Towers?"

"You needn't worry. The new Tower Lord of the Amimone Tower is under our sponsorship, after all."

Kynemon and the Amimone Tower were set to serve as the catalyst for the succession wars. More specifically, they weren't intending to truly fight.

Their role was to declare a succession war against the Ten Towers and then prolong a stalemate for days, even weeks.

"A White Magic Tower that lost its mana core. A Ten Tower unable to conclude a succession war against such a weakened target. Soon, the magical society will begin to think—"

"'Is the Ten Towers weaker than we thought?'"

In truth, Kynemon's "endurance strategy" was bolstered by the Divine Cult. The Ten Towers, unable to mobilize their forces quickly due to their main army's absence, would be further frustrated by the Amimone Tower's advantage of using *Holy Incantations* to strengthen their defense.

It was enough to maintain a stalemate.

"The Ten Towers will no longer be seen as a tiger. At best, they'll be regarded as a toothless tiger. Of course, everyone will understand that its dangerous fangs could grow back soon."

"…And because of that, there will be those who try to kill the tiger before its fangs return, seizing wealth and glory for themselves."

I nodded in agreement. Neuro always had a knack for explaining things logically, saving me the trouble of convincing the other directors one by one.

"And with Director Meconion's help, we could empower one of those dreamers."

"Me? Why me?"

Meconion, uninterested in the prestige of the Ten Commandments, was an easy sell. She would agree if I mentioned rare plants or magical techniques useful for her flora, supposedly hidden around the Nokmok Tower.

Her side business—illicit herb sales—required her network of contacts. Specifically:

"Director Meconion, don't you have contacts among mages who were researching your half-dryad physiology?"

"Sure, though most of those connections dried up when you told me to lie low for a while and cut off my dealings with the Ten Towers."

"Reach out to them. Ask if they desire the pinnacle of plant magic—the Nokmok Commandment. Once Kynemon and the Amimone Tower start the first succession war, and a second war begins for the Nokmok Tower, the other succession wars against the Ten Towers will snowball naturally."

If two such sparks weren't enough, I had a third bullet in reserve—though I hoped to avoid using it. The Lampades Tower, reluctant to involve itself in such dangerous schemes, would serve as a fallback option.

"When the Ten Towers' combat capacity is depleted, we'll act. With an insider feeding us intelligence, we'll gauge the perfect moment. And at the decisive juncture—"

"Hydra Corporation will declare its own succession war," murmured Geryon.

As a mage, Geryon must have once dreamed of claiming the great legacy of the Ten Commandments. Now, as a warlord captured by Hydra Corporation, he was paradoxically closer to achieving that dream.

Divius, who had remained silent until now, raised his hand.

"Hey, President and Director, I have just one question. I've lived off the Ten Towers' resources for quite some time, so this is a critical issue to me."

"What is it?"

"The *Plan of World Division* is brilliant—something the cults of the old gods would applaud. But its greatest flaw is its reliance on Argyrion."

This statement caused Cretone to furrow his brows in confusion. Meanwhile, Arabella, sharp as ever, gave a small gasp of realization and turned to me. It was indeed a valid concern.

“If Argyrion isn’t strong enough to fight the Ten Towers’ expeditionary forces and hold them off, there won’t be enough time for the succession wars to unfold. Do we have any assessment of their capabilities?”

“What about the death of Talo, the Warden of Silver Iron?”

“That was one elder. This time, each tower could send two, making twenty elders. Can Argyrion handle twenty?”

“Their headquarters being in the extra-dimension doesn’t help much, does it?”

“Not when it’s a full-scale expedition. The Ten Towers would overcome even dimensional barriers eventually.”

This was a perspective I hadn’t considered. Could Argyrion buy us enough time?

***

“There’s… a way. Not a solution per se, but a method to gain some time,” Geryon unexpectedly offered.

“During my time working with Bertrand, I was roped into all kinds of odd jobs. Being a prisoner, I didn’t mind. But the more I worked, the more I started to pick up a thing or two—particularly about engineering.”

Could his engineering insights really solve this? Even Bertrand raised a skeptical brow.

“While modifying Lampades’ radar system for Divine Investigation purposes, I learned something interesting. It was originally designed to locate safe extra-dimensional zones. The Ten Towers likely have similar observation tools or spells to map spatial coordinates.”

Bertrand, quick to grasp the idea, muttered to himself.

“We could reconfigure Lampades’ radar into a jamming transmitter. Disrupt their spatial magic and delay both their approach to Argyrion and their return from the expedition.”

“Spatial magic is inherently dangerous,” Geryon added. “Even the Ten Towers wouldn’t risk it without ensuring complete safety first. This could buy us significant time.”

I turned to Divius, who was deep in thought before nodding.

“Interfering with teleportation… Lampades’ radar itself is unprecedented, so the Ten Towers wouldn’t anticipate this. We could indeed gain the time we need.”

With Divius, the most knowledgeable about the Ten Towers’ current capabilities, acknowledging its feasibility, the first phase of the *Plan of World Division*—persuasion—was a success.

***

After the meeting, the top floor of Hydra Corporation held only Orthes and Carisia.

“Divius made a sharp observation. Without him, we might have failed due to an oversight,” Carisia noted.

Orthes grinned. Once the plan gained momentum, Hydra Corporation’s *Artificial Commandments* would ensure superiority in any direct confrontation with a single Ten Tower.

“Next is reviewing our allies?”

“Yes. We’ll coordinate with the Divine Cult and await Niobe’s report. However, none of this is urgent. Take a day off.”

Carisia nodded. With some free time, she decided to ask a lingering question.

“Orthes, you don’t have anything pressing to do right now, do you?”

“Ah, no. I was going to review the plan again, but it’s practically finalized.”

“Then explain more about that ‘tax-dodging consultant’ friend of yours.”

Orthes, unbothered, nodded and gestured toward the chair across from him.

“Where should I start? He was the first friend I made.”

“First friend?”

“When I woke up, his face was the first thing I saw. We’ve known each other a long time.”

Orthes described how the "old man" had taught him much.

“The spell-overwriting techniques I use require understanding the original spell. I’ve honed my skill, but it was the old man who taught me the foundational knowledge.”

“A detailed understanding of spell structures and dismantling techniques… Is that why he’s called a ‘tax-dodging consultant’?”

“Precisely. Modern magical systems are built on axioms proven by earlier research, and usage rights are taxed by the Ten Towers.”

The old man would meticulously dismantle spell structures, find obscure loopholes, and argue their uniqueness in court.

“No judge in Panoptes could outwit him. After dodging taxes—or rather, optimizing them—he’d vanish without a trace.”

“And now?”

“He reached out after seeing our sponsorship of Kynemon in the Amimone Tower announcement. His connections are ideal for our plans.”

Carisia couldn’t help but smile. Unlike Orthes’ other so-called "friends," this one had contacted him first.

Maybe, she thought, *this one is a real friend.*

Chapter 156: The Scale (1)

Chapter 156: The Scale (1)

After the fall of the Amimone Tower, a peculiar question lingered in Orthes' mind:

"Why doesn't Aegio's Scale work?"

Among the relics in Orthes' possession, the *Scale of Aegio* was perhaps the most venerable.

After smuggling the scale out of the Amimone Tower—technically posthumously approved, now that Kynemon had taken control of the tower—it seemed logical to expect the spirit of an ancient priest to appear, as had happened with other relics.

But no such event occurred. Whether he slept with the scale at his bedside or placed it above his head, no spirit manifested, neither in dreams nor waking moments.

"A defective product?"

Kaicle, however, confirmed that the scale brimming with immense divine energy was undoubtedly authentic.

Orthes had sought another ancient priest to solve this mystery after an unproductive conversation with the priestess of Estia. While the priest of Phoibos—the one described as knowing the most—had muttered cryptic phrases before vanishing, Orthes placed his hopes on Aegio's priest.

Aegio was the preeminent god among the deities. Even the leader of the Aegio cult held a rank second only to the Pope and stood above all other priests.

If the ancient Divine Cult's schemes to summon Orthes had any central figures, it was highly probable that Aegio's priest played a key role.

Still, with the relic inactive, exploring its secrets wasn't feasible amidst the urgent matters of late. Despite sending both the rebellious elements within the Amimone Tower and the former Tower Lord on a one-way trip to Blasphemia, Orthes had to focus immediately on the Tower Lord succession war.

Even after that, Orthes was busy preparing materials for Hydra Corporation's general assembly. While Arabella handled the research and organization, Orthes still spent significant time editing and drafting scripts. He meticulously prepared answers to likely questions from both internal and external directors.

Though not overwhelming, Orthes' schedule was certainly hectic. It was only natural that the investigation of Aegio's Scale was deferred.

For now, Orthes placed the scale in a corner of his bedroom, intending to study it later when he had more time.

***

And so came today, when the Hydra Corporation assembly had concluded successfully. Satisfied with their progress in initiating their plans, Orthes and Carisia decided to take a rare early night off.

As Orthes lay down, free from the burden of scheming, Carisia barged into his room like she had on a prior holiday and claimed his bed.

Though initially dumbfounded, Orthes—ever her loyal subordinate—yielded the bed to his boss without complaint and resigned himself to the sofa.

In the drowsy haze of sleep, the two shared idle conversation before drifting off.

At last, the necessary weights were placed on the scale.

***

Where is this?

A peculiar sense of buoyancy accompanied by the surreal vagueness unique to dreams enveloped Orthes. Recognizing the situation was straightforward—it was his third time meeting an ancient priest.

It was time for Aegio's priest to appear.

But why only now? Did the scale need some kind of "charging period"?

The hazy landscape of the dream gradually sharpened, revealing an expanse of blue sky. Beneath Orthes' feet lay soft, white clouds.

"Floating on clouds, huh? Quite romantic and eco-friendly of you," he muttered, scanning his surroundings.

There was no sign of the ancient priest. Orthes flopped onto the clouds, deciding to wait. After all, these spirits usually wanted acknowledgment for their deeds before they could rest.

As he lay there, a sudden thunderous rumble echoed—a sound like the roaring of thunder following a lightning strike.

Orthes turned his gaze skyward, puzzled. The clouds remained unmoving, and there was no wind. Yet something felt... off.

"Wait a minute."

What he had mistaken for the sun was growing larger. No—it was coming closer.

As it neared, Orthes could make out its true form: the head of a giant made of lightning, draped in white clouds like a toga.

"I'll ask—"

The giant’s majestic voice reverberated across the heavens, each word resonating like overlapping thunderclaps.

"Gold and treasures to ensure your comfort for life, and a return to your world. What will you choose?"

The question was unexpected. The first option aligned with Orthes’ current goals; the second harkened back to his initial wish upon arriving in this world.

The giant raised its right hand, revealing a massive version of Aegio’s Scale.

On the left side of the scale was a literal mountain of riches, while on the right was a single, unremarkable door.

Despite the vast distance, Orthes could clearly make out the door’s shape—a metal door with a simple lock.

It was the door to his old, cramped apartment.

"Is this some kind of personality test?"

The lightning giant remained silent, its intent clear: it wouldn’t speak until Orthes gave an answer.

"Could you shrink yourself a bit? It’s a pain craning my neck to look at you!"

His attempts at small talk were met with the same unyielding silence, leaving Orthes to ponder his choice.

"I choose... to return."

Though Orthes had achieved much in this world, the prospect of returning to his humble but familiar life outweighed staying in a dangerous realm where a Mage King loomed.

The giant posed more questions—first offering glory, then power.

Each time, the left side of the scale changed to represent the new reward. At one point, a sword representing ultimate strength appeared, prompting Orthes to quip, "Would wielding that let me beat the Mage King?"

The giant didn’t answer, and Orthes again chose to return.

The pattern continued until the giant declared:

"This is your final question—"

As the clouds parted to reveal the final offering, Orthes massaged his temples in irritation.

***

While Orthes deliberated over his answer, Carisia was facing a similar dilemma elsewhere in the dream.

For her, the right side of the scale held not "returning" but the destruction of the White Light Tower.

"Choose—"

Carisia had also reached the giant's final question. Unlike Orthes, however, the giant facing her was holding the scale in its left hand.

This wasn't due to any special significance—it was because Carisia, upon seeing the giant, had immediately fired a full-power magical beam, obliterating its right half.

Normally, the dream's logic would restore the giant, but a mage of Carisia's caliber wreaking havoc in the dream realm was a force even it couldn't fully counter.

Using its now-missing right half as a sacrifice, the lightning giant barely managed to suppress Carisia's magical rampage.

The giant was silently grateful that Orthes hadn't resorted to similar measures; otherwise, the relic itself might have been irreparably damaged.

"Orthes or the White Light Tower's destruction..."

Carisia closed her eyes.

She opened them moments later.

"Orthes."

"Why?"

Her reasoning was simple: it felt like the happier choice. But she didn't share this with the lightning giant.

Instead, she tilted her head and smirked.

"Didn't you say that was your final question?"

The giant hesitated.

"Ask what you wish, then. Are you the creators of Orthes?"

"We are not."

The ancient priest of Aegio silently thanked the heavens for not appearing in human form, as Carisia's golden eyes held an icy intensity reminiscent of the Mage King.

Maintaining its dignity, the giant quickly explained:

"The one you call Orthes still has a choice to make."

Chapter 157: The Scale (2)

Chapter 157: The Scale (2)

Orthes deliberated long and hard over the lightning giant's final question.

The relationships he had built, and the relationships that had shaped him—they were important. But Orthes set aside his personal emotions to focus on the question at hand.

He needed to ask, "Why pose this question at all?"

From what the ancient priest of Phoibos had hinted, the priest seemed to regard Carisia as a living embodiment or personification of the Ten Commandments. In contemporary terms, her role might best align with that of a Tower Lord.

Thus, the Phoibos priest was convinced Orthes was meant to oppose Carisia.

Yet the thunder giant's question seemed unrelated to this line of thought. If the goal was to determine whether Orthes sided with the Mage King, there was no reason to frame the question so indirectly.

The peculiar aspect was that *returning home* had been placed opposite Carisia's destruction on the scale. If Orthes returned without confronting the Mage King, the ancient priests' grand designs would almost certainly fail.

"A counterweight to returning."

The giant's true purpose, Orthes hypothesized, was to identify what might bind him to this world.

With this hypothesis in mind, Orthes considered testing its validity by probing the giant's thoughts. He hoped that the relic's accumulated memories over centuries were simple and orderly enough to analyze.

***

"Do not proceed," the giant finally spoke, reacting for the first time.

"Why not? The priest of Estia said I had the qualifications to act freely," Orthes replied, feigning audacity. If the giant could speak bluntly, so could he.

"The living manifestation of the Ten Commandments is also within the relic's domain. Observing the relic will lead to observing her."

Orthes gleaned the implication: while his *Eye* could handle the influx of knowledge, his mind likely could not endure it.

"Carisia? What made you involve her in this? Have you lost your mind?"

Orthes massaged his temples, exasperated, envisioning Carisia's likely reaction—destroying the relic the moment she awoke.

The thunder giant's silence suggested guilt or at least weariness. Sensing an opening, Orthes pressed further.

"I imagine you summoned me as some countermeasure or assassin to face the Mage King. This whole relic-testing process is probably just your way of ensuring your ultimate weapon is trustworthy."

"Trustworthy? In what sense?"

"Let's call it… 'character screening.' A test to ensure I won't betray you and side with the Mage King. When the priest of Estia read my memories of Earth, it was likely part of this vetting process."

Since his encounter with the ancient priest of Phoibos, Orthes had mulled over the intentions of these spectral priests. Though the Estian priest had claimed ignorance, Orthes resolved to uncover their secrets this time.

"Originally, our meeting would have been more structured," Orthes speculated.

The Phoibos priest had appeared directly in the real world, unlike the other priests, who manifested in dreams. Orthes theorized the difference stemmed from the relics' locations.

"I found Phoibos' relic in the sanctum of its temple. Presumably, the other relics should also have been found in their respective temples. More importantly, I was supposed to wake near a relic that would guide me on my journey."

There was a pause. The giant furrowed its brow—or rather, its lightning face twisted to resemble a furrowed brow.

"What makes you so certain?"

"This is your grand endeavor, isn't it? Surely you wouldn't just throw some random person into the world and say, 'Go kill the Mage King!' You'd at least provide some guidance and indoctrination first."

Orthes shrugged, his tone biting. While he described it as "indoctrination" to be polite, he pointed out it was essentially brainwashing. Their sole objective had been to create a "final weapon" to oppose the Mage King.

"But here's the issue: the place where I woke up was a mess. The Ten Towers likely swept through it during a skirmish. The relic I was meant to encounter first probably went missing, and the remaining relics were either looted or hidden during the war. That's why the relics ended up scattered and displaced."

Only Phoibos' relic had remained intact in its original location, allowing its priest to appear directly. The others, however, had no choice but to manifest in the liminal space of dreams.

"That’s hypothesis number one. Any objections?"

The giant raised the scale instead of answering, signaling that Orthes would have to respond to its question first. But Orthes had no intention of playing along with its riddles.

"I’ve answered enough of your questions. Whatever your plans are, they inevitably hinge on defeating the Mage King. While I acknowledge the necessity of that goal, I won’t indulge in these games any further. Answer mine instead."

Orthes doubted the giant would comply. He wasn’t genuinely seeking an answer, either.

Now that he knew Carisia was present within the relic’s domain, he reasoned he could bypass the issue by observing the scale in her absence. He prepared his *Eye* for a precise observation.

But the giant’s next words caught him off guard.

***

"Is that your answer?"

"What?"

"Both questions have been answered. The scale has rendered its judgment. Now, the weights shall be unified."

A blinding flash of light consumed the dreamscape.

The illusionary world conjured by the relic turned stark white. The two realms where Orthes and Carisia had resided collapsed into a single unified space.

***

"These damn priests… No wonder they’re ghosts now."

Dragging someone into a dream without consent was one thing, but pulling unrelated people into it? That was idiotic.

Carisia waved at Orthes with an expression so cheerful it bordered on innocence. Orthes, well aware that his boss could unleash death beams with that same expression, returned the wave cautiously.

He wasn’t worried about her attacking him; her temper might just obliterate the thunder giant before they could extract any answers. Orthes hoped the giant’s existence could be extended by a minute or two, at least.

"What did you choose?" she asked.

"Hmm? Were you given a choice as well?"

"They kept shoving choices at me, making me pick between two options," Carisia replied.

Her answer shed light on why Aegio's Scale had only activated now. Unlike the first two encounters, which focused solely on Orthes, this one also questioned Carisia.

"Did it take two participants? Because of the symbolism of a scale, or for some other reason? I can't say," Orthes mused.

"I was told to choose between what I wanted most and something else I valued deeply. I hesitated, but before I could decide, the thing declared it had my answer."

"Hesitated, huh…"

Carisia blinked a few times. Orthes tried to read her expression, but for once, it was difficult. He prided himself on his ability to understand her thoughts, but perhaps his skills had dulled during his frequent fieldwork.

***

"The verdict shall be pronounced."

The thunder giant reappeared, parting the clouds. Its right side was faintly translucent—likely a consequence of Carisia's earlier assault.

"You regard each other with equal weight. Thus, the scale's true power shall be revealed."

"Excuse me?"

The golden scale in the giant's hand gleamed before disintegrating into particles of light. The golden dust flowed toward Orthes, merging with him.

As the light settled, the knowledge of how to use the relic's power flowed into Orthes' mind. When he had first acquired the scale, he hadn't fully analyzed it, content to understand its name and surface-level abilities.

The apparent power of Aegio's Scale was the *Authority of Fate*.

One could swear an oath upon the scale, declaring an intent to achieve a goal. In exchange for accepting specific restrictions, the scale would grant heavenly favor, manipulating fate to ensure a critical success at the opportune moment.

However, breaking the imposed restrictions would unleash a backlash that could strip away more than was gained.

…That was merely the *surface* power.

The true power, as revealed by the priest, was an inversion of this principle.

Chapter 158:The Scale (3)

Chapter 158:The Scale (3)

My frustration reached its peak. As expected, the Divine Cult had been incredibly thorough in their preparations.

Even if their so-called "ultimate weapon" failed to defeat the Mage King, they had a backup—a final failsafe for the final scenario.

"I won’t need to use this. The Lamp of Estia is already relegated to being a glorified nightlight."

"My duty ends with revealing the true nature of the Scale. Its use is entirely up to your will," the thunder giant replied.

"Fine, you damn relic babysitter. Since you’re not claiming your task is done, I’ll ask a few questions first."

I glanced at Carisia. I couldn’t help but feel exasperated, speaking my mind without much thought.

Who knew what she might think upon hearing the phrase "sacrificing to claim destiny." This relic, left behind as the Divine Cult’s last resort against the Mage King, held power capable of erasing even the White Light Tower.

"If the price is steep enough, that is."

The cost of defying destiny couldn’t be paid with mere gold and jewels. It required something of equivalent weight to alter the natural order.

The simplest payment would be the life of someone with sufficient power.

"First thing tomorrow, I need to hide this Scale somewhere out of reach."

I couldn’t afford to lose my life, nor could I risk Carisia’s. My death was out of the question for obvious reasons, and while Carisia’s death might shatter the White Light Tower, it would make dealing with the Mage King afterward impossible. Neither outcome was acceptable.

With my mind set on concealing the Scale, I finally spoke up.

***

"You…"

"Are you trying to nitpick something irrelevant again? If it’s not critical, hold your tongue—I need to think of my questions."

The giant’s booming voice ignored my protest.

"You exceed the expectations we envisioned when creating the relic. More precisely, we could not foresee that two beings of such immense ability would arrive together."

Judging by its persistence, it seemed the giant's remarks were important. For now, I decided to hear it out.

"Thus, during the process of pulling you into the Scale's judgment and the unforeseen developments during said judgment…."

Its tone was ominous. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Carisia briefly avert her gaze.

"I was forced to exceed the limits permitted to my soul's imprint within the Scale. I bore the burden meant for the Scale itself. While I will answer your questions to the best of my ability, some gaps in my memory may persist. I ask for your understanding."

"Ah, hell."

***

Carisia had been reveling in a vague, buoyant sense of happiness following the giant's declaration that she and Orthes regarded each other equally. But the follow-up made her break into a cold sweat.

The "unforeseen development" during the judgment was all too obvious.

"Uh… Orthes?"

For the first time since founding Hydra Corporation, Carisia's voice lacked its usual confidence.

Orthes scratched his head, his expression clearly troubled. Before Carisia could say anything further, Orthes cut her off.

"It's fine."

"What?"

"What else can we do? It's not like I pulled us into this bizarre situation. Considering your temper, we should be thankful this place hasn't been blasted to oblivion yet."

Normally, Carisia would retort with something like, *"What's wrong with my temper?"* But this time, she stayed silent.

Her emotions were a mix of relief at Orthes' forgiveness and annoyance at how he seemed to view her personality.

To defuse the tension, Orthes redirected his attention to the giant.

"What's the deal with the novel?"

"…Novel?"

"The story you spread in my world—the prophecy about the Mage King’s return in 2077!"

"You have already identified its nature," the giant replied.

"What does that mean?"

The giant explained slowly. It had transmitted a "prophecy" to another world.

The prophecy was a secret observation by the most gifted members of the Phoibos Cult, who sacrificed their lives and souls to glimpse a vision of the Mage King—his defeat and inevitable return.

"The prophecy flowed into your world in the form of inspiration for a creator. From this, the ‘novel’ you speak of was written."

"And why did reading that novel pull me into this world?"

"To witness is to recognize existence; mere observation carries ritual significance. Among those who read the prophecy, you were the most—"

The giant hesitated, choosing its words carefully.

The space created by the relic was a direct connection between souls. Ideally, it allowed for the purest exchange of ideas, bypassing the need for language.

However, Orthes’ mental defenses were unyielding.

Carisia, being fundamentally opposed to the relic’s nature, was beyond its influence entirely.

The giant struggled to convey its meaning effectively.

The will to rise against the grand design of the Mage King. The ability to conceive plans greater than the grand design—or to tear apart the canvas of destiny itself. The capacity to twist the prophecy’s vision through sheer ingenuity.

There was no word in the giant’s era that encapsulated all of this. But Orthes’ surface consciousness offered a suitable modern term. The giant borrowed it.

"—a natural disruptor."

"What?"

"You are unrivaled in sowing disruption between heaven and earth."

***

"For centuries, you have shattered laws, dismantled order, and proven uncontrollable. Thus, you were destined to veer off the path of our plans."

Carisia could tell Orthes’ blood pressure spiked at the giant’s evaluation. He clearly didn’t take kindly to being labeled a chaos agent.

Deciding to give Orthes a moment, Carisia turned her attention to the giant's words.

"Just because he read the prophecy, he got swept into the Divine Cult's plans…."

To Carisia, it felt no different from a curse. A curse indiscriminately cast upon anyone who glimpsed the prophecy.

Having developed magic with similar principles herself,[1] she understood it well. Other readers of the novel hadn't been pulled into this world because they didn't meet the "threshold."

In the Scale's judgment, Carisia's "wish" placed on the right side of her scale had been the destruction of the White Light Tower.

Now, she could guess what Orthes' "wish" had been.

"Returning home."

If Orthes wished to return after everything was over, Carisia wasn't sure how she would respond.

***

"How can you insult someone you just met like that? I'm polite to everyone just to avoid complaints!"

"Accept it. This is reality, nothing more."

After railing against the giant for some time, Orthes clicked his tongue.

"Fine, your opinion is noted. But for the record, I'm a diligent, orderly person—not a disruptor."

"Embrace your nature."

"Oh, shut up."

Taking a deep breath, Orthes decided to move on to more pressing questions.

"How accurate is the prophecy, anyway? Because so far, it seems pretty off."

"Naturally. This prophecy glimpsed a future that would unfold if *you* did not exist."

"And what about the Mage King? From what I've seen of his personality, it doesn't match the novel at all."

"Has it improved? Or worsened?"

"The Mage King in the novel seemed better, honestly."

The giant fell silent. Betrayal might have worsened his disposition, but there was no clear reason for it to improve.

"Perhaps I cannot say, whether due to my fragmented soul or lack of precedent. What vision of this world did the prophecy convey?"

"Accurate enough. Let me rephrase: under what circumstances does the prophecy fail?"

"Predictions targeting events too distant or entities too powerful tend to lose accuracy. However, the Phoibos Cult painstakingly overcame such limitations."

"Entities too powerful, huh? Was the prophecy flawed simply because its subject was the Mage King—"

A sudden thought struck Orthes. Perhaps the Divine Cult never truly understood what they were up against.

A false god who reshaped the world over millennia. A god of magic.

The Mage King had called himself merely a king, even succumbing to his disciples.

Orthes and Carisia only dared to call him a "god" because of Kaicle’s research.

The hypothesis equating ascendants with deities had led to the creation of the *Artificial Commandments*.

The Divine Cult didn’t know the Mage King’s true nature.

"Can prophecy uncover the will of a god?"

"Divinity lies beyond prophecy’s reach."

Chapter 159:The Scale (4)

Chapter 159:The Scale (4)

“Damn it.”

A reaction that slipped out instinctively, without any forethought.

The "world-building" of the novel — for instance, the detailed structure of the Ten Towers or the pitiful state of the Divine Cult — fit this era perfectly. But when it came to the Mage King himself, something felt off. Maybe this was why.

I could now understand why the Mage King's resurrection had been described so ambiguously. It was because it lay beyond the scope of what could be known through prophecy.

‘No. That’s not the real problem.’

The title of the novel was *The Mage King Who Returned in 2077*. I didn’t remember it perfectly, but I was certain about the "2077" part.

But now, I had to question whether it was even true that the Mage King would return in 2077.

Hadn’t the Mage King already been revived?

Was Hydra Corporation, like the Divine Cult, also scheming to dry up and wither away something over the course of millennia?

One doubt led to another, a chain of questions. Just as I was about to squeeze my eyes shut, I caught a glimpse of Carisia’s white hair.

‘…Alright.’

I took a deep breath. Organized my thoughts. I drew out evidence from my mind to test my hypothesis.

First question.

Is the Mage King alive right now?

No.

The Mage King wouldn't suddenly appear, saying, *"Actually, I never died."* The very existence of the Ten Towers was proof of that, wasn't it?

The golem *Adoosiam* that I excavated from the Temple of Pluton, or the parasitic mental entity that nearly decided to kill itself after sensing the absence of its creator and a few persuasive words from me—these, too, were undeniable evidence.

And since Carisia had blown up that parasitic entity, any progress toward revival through it would have been significantly delayed.

Above all, if the Mage King were alive, he would have already made a move to claim the "Commandments." Just as Argyrion was now mobilized to attack the Ten Towers, but in a more direct, unmistakable manner.

‘Argyrion spoke of truth and righteousness.’

I had a rough idea of what “truth” meant — it likely referred to the murder of the Mage King by the Ten Towers. Similarly, the "righteous cause" they were trying to bring forth was probably none other than the Mage King himself.

‘The Mage King still has no physical body.’

After re-confirming the key premise of this plan, I felt a sense of stability return. I raised my head again to look at the Thunder Giant.

“If one were to attempt to predict a god through prophecy, what kind of result would they get?”

「Cannot. Be. Known.」

“Not even an educated guess? This is important.”

「If divinity were to sense an attempt to perceive it, it would only reveal the image it wished to show, much like how Phoibos bestows prophecies upon his followers.」

I nearly swore aloud. So the history I thought I was reading might actually be ancient pseudo-historical nonsense fabricated by the Mage King?

I was about to vent my frustration when the Thunder Giant spoke again.

「However, if the divinity fails to detect the act of prophecy, or if multiple divinities observe each other and attempt to interfere with one another’s prophecies…」

“And if that happens?”

「The prophecy would manifest as something akin to a 'most likely future,' based on the observer's perspective and the prophet's personal bias.」

What a maddeningly ambiguous condition.

Did the Mage King not know he was being prophesied about? Or was there another force on par with the Mage King that obscured him from view?

I had no way of knowing. The only thing I could rely on was the present.

Another "divinity."

I thought of Carisia as I gazed at her.

White No Name.

She was the only one in the original story to stand against the Mage King and thwart his will.

The origin of White No Name wasn't explained in much detail in the story.

But I knew about Carisia. I knew that she was originally born from *White Light* of the Ten Commandments.

If the Commandments were fragments that carried part of the Mage King's divinity, then Carisia, too, might have inherited some of that divinity.

But whether a fragment like that could interfere with the Mage King was questionable. Even sacred relics imbued with divinity didn't disrupt prophecies—

'Hm?'

"…Do sacred relics not interfere with prophecy?"

「Divinity and divine power are concepts from different dimensions.」

The Thunder Giant added a few more words. He compared it to how mages distinguish between "mana" and "magic power."

Just as mana is transformed to suit the individual form of each wizard, divine power is an interpretation of divine essence tailored to each priest.

Even divine artifacts created directly by gods — like Aegio's Scale, which I possessed — may carry divinity, but they could not interfere with prophecies.

For a divinity to interfere with prophecy, two conditions had to be met:

1. The divinity had to be aware of the act of prophecy.
2. The divinity had to have the will to obstruct the prophecy.

Divine artifacts might hold divinity, but they lacked the will to interfere with prophecies.

This, at least, was hopeful news.

The Commandments were practically divine artifacts that directly inherited the Mage King's divinity. And the Masters of the Ten Towers, who possessed these Commandments, were always the Mage King's enemies — and they had no awareness of prophecies.

While information about the Mage King himself might be beyond the reach of the old priests' abilities, it could at least serve as a reference.

"…Wait. Are you saying that Aegio's Scale and the other relics I've been collecting are classified as divine artifacts?"

「To preserve one's soul over millennia, it is necessary to draw upon the power of divine artifacts.」

There was someone besides me collecting these divine artifacts. The one that an ancient priest of Estia had warned me about.

Judging by how they had free rein to use artifacts excavated from the Temple of Pluton, it was likely someone with high status within the Divine Cult.

Probably the *Pope.*

"What can you accomplish by sacrificing divine artifacts and the souls of ancient priests?"

「—Ah.」

The Thunder Giant let out a strange sound of awe.

「It is the flaw I sought to warn you about. But my soul fragment vanished along with it.」

Damn it.

I clutched my head in frustration.

「I have lingered beyond the time allotted to mortals, and my soul is no longer whole. My time is running out.」

The light from the Thunder Giant's limbs was gradually fading. I could only sigh in resignation.

"You have fulfilled your duty. It seems I won't be using the Scale anytime soon."

After a brief pause, the Thunder Giant, no longer a thunderous presence, replied in the voice of a tired old man.

"...I hope so."

***

Orthes rose from his seat.

'Has Carisia woken up?'

On the surface, she still lay in bed. He turned his gaze from Carisia to the Scale, which was propped up on the desk like an ornament.

He stared at the Scale for a long while, as if having a staring contest.

One had no eyes, and the other had half-closed eyes, so it was hard to tell who won.

Then, Orthes muttered to himself.

“Should I get rid of it…?”

“Don’t.”

Before he knew it, Carisia was standing behind him. Orthes replied, not particularly startled.

“That’s an easy way out. One day, you might find yourself in a situation where you need it to solve everything.”

“Which is why you should preserve it. You’re basically saying that there’s a chance we’ll need it, right?”

Orthes sighed. The idea of using the Scale to defeat the Mage King or, failing that, banish him from this world gave him a bad feeling.

“I won’t use it, so I’ll take it to the boss’s office.”

Carisia nodded.

“Then go back to sleep. It’s still dawn.”

As Carisia returned to bed, Orthes closed his eyes.

A gentle voice broke the silence.

“People wouldn’t even know if your eyes are open or closed, you know?”

She was right.

“Not you, though, Boss.”

Just as she suspected, Orthes was wide awake.

Chapter 160: Receiving a Guest (1)

Chapter 160: Receiving a Guest (1)

Work life is a pain. No matter how exhausted you were the night before, the time to clock in comes all the same.

I glanced at the dawn breaking outside and let out a hollow laugh. We'd been talking, and now it was this late.

"Boss, time to get up. If you want to get ready for work, you'll need to head back to your room."

"Ugh, what a hassle…"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm the boss, aren't I? Bosses are supposed to be able to show up to work a little late."

What a ridiculous excuse. Without Carisia, so many things wouldn't move forward. Even for the Artificial Commandments activation tests, they needed a mage to use the Commandments — and that mage was Carisia.

Rubbing my temples, I checked the time. Based on the schedule and how much time we had to spare…

"You can lie down for another 30 minutes. I'll bring your clothes so you can change right here."

Carisia nodded in response, and I started listing off today's schedule. Most of it was groundwork before the full implementation of the *Plan of World Division*.

"Oh, and my friend is supposed to be arriving today. Should I schedule some time to meet with him during our free period?"

Carisia suddenly sat up. The drowsiness that had lingered on her face moments before was completely gone.

"Let me know as soon as he arrives. I want to meet him personally."

"Fair enough. He's the guy who's provided tax... no, *tax evasion* advice to multiple Magic Towers, so he's got useful connections. I'll inform you as soon as he arrives."

***

Carisia's reason for wanting to meet that "old man," Orthes' so-called friend, wasn't solely for the *Plan of World Division*.

Of course, his skills would be immensely helpful in carrying out the strategy. After all, there was probably no better person to stir up simultaneous succession battles across multiple Magic Towers.

But the biggest reason occupying Carisia's mind was a simple one:

'*A friend? Really?*'

Orthes had claimed he had three friends. But for two of those so-called "friends," it was clear that Orthes was the only one who considered them as such. From their perspective, Orthes was closer to a supernatural calamity than a friend.

So could this third "friend" possibly think of Orthes as a friend too? Carisia was skeptical.

At the same time, she wondered, *If he doesn't think of Orthes as a friend, then what reason could he have for contacting him first?*

For some reason, Orthes never used his “eye” abilities on his acquaintances. Which meant Carisia would have to do it herself.

***

Orthes fiddled with the comms device embedded in his gauntlet.

It had already been 15 minutes since he’d left a message telling his friend to contact him upon arrival. The guy wasn’t the type to die a dog's death somewhere, but still, could something have happened?

Then again, that old man was known for his unpredictability. Even if Orthes went out to search for him, it wasn’t guaranteed he’d find him. More likely, he’d just waste time and tire out his eyes.

As Orthes scratched his head, he noticed a silhouette approaching from afar.

He raised his hand and waved.

"Old man! Over here!"

"Tch! Listen to that mouth on you!"

The old man approached, clicking his tongue. His outfit was flashy. The complete opposite of Orthes’ plain black suit.

The old man wore a red shirt covered in bright, lively patterns — something that would be called an “aloha shirt” back on Earth. He paired it with loose-fitting shorts and sandals that flapped against his heels as he walked.

If not for the long stick slung over his back, he would have looked like one of the leisurely retirees you’d see wandering around Elysion on a weekend.

The only thing that didn’t fit was his face.

His white hair had a slight wave to it and was neatly groomed, giving off a touch of vintage elegance. His face resembled that of a classic actor from the films Orthes had watched back on Earth. But Orthes thought the old man’s fashion sense didn't do his looks justice.

"Hector. Long time no see. Still dressing like that, huh?"

"This is the most comfortable way to dress. You should try wearing something besides a suit once in a while."

Orthes shrugged. Just as this old man was stubborn about his sense of style, Orthes had his own preferences too.

"Let’s head up. I’ll contact the boss and have a room set up for us."

A glint of crystal light flickered in Hector’s eyes — curiosity, amusement, and a hint of surprise.

"So it’s true. You’re actually working under someone?"

"Ugh, seriously. Every person I know says that. I’m a functional member of society, believe it or not."

"Yeah, sure. Functional, but definitely not the kind of person who’d work as a middle manager under someone else."

Following Orthes into the Hydra Corporation building, Hector glanced around.

The number of employees walking the halls was fewer than he’d expected, considering the grand scale of the plan Orthes had described.

"Ah, most of them are out handling other tasks. The ones here have specific jobs that require them to be in this building."

"Is that so… Hmm, I’m impressed."

"About what?"

"That you’re trying to bring down the Ten Towers with a plan like this. Wasn't your focus elsewhere before?"

"You’re not wrong. I did struggle with that. But for now, I’m focusing on this."

Orthes didn’t notice, but for a brief moment, Hector’s expression hardened. A moment later, his face returned to the soft, sly smile of a seasoned old man.

"This is the reception room. Wait here a moment."

Orthes left the room to call Carisia. He wasn’t trying to keep his voice down, so even without focusing, Hector could hear him say, *“Boss.”*

Hector thought to himself.

‘Is this "boss" person using Orthes?’

If so, that would be a shame. From their conversation, he could hear the trust between them. Trust was something Orthes rarely granted others.

If Orthes had set aside his own dreams to devote himself to someone, only for that person to exploit him, Hector would have no choice but to feel profound sorrow.

At the same time, however, he felt relief.

Relief that Orthes wasn’t using his full potential.

If he were, then Hector might have had to face him in a battle to the death *today.*

Click. The door opened.

"She’s on her way. Let’s kill some time until she gets here."

"Huh, for a boss, she sure moves fast. Either she doesn’t have much to do, or she’s good at offloading work onto her subordinates."

"It’s the latter. I’ve never seen anyone more skilled at wringing work out of people."

"Even more than you?"

"Me? Come on."

Hector let out a dry chuckle. It reminded him of Orthes’ early days as a fixer. Back then, Orthes had ruled over his temporary teammates with a grim smile and cold, cutting words.

They’d stormed an abandoned research lab in an extra-dimensional contamination zone in a single night. The moment the mission ended, his team members fled the city, swearing to never cross paths with him again.

"Yeah, yeah. If you say so, then I guess that’s how it is."

Hector shrugged and asked,

"Still using the sword?"

"Yeah. It’s all I know."

"Tch. I taught you better than that. You just refuse to use it properly."

"Cut the crap. That wasn’t swordsmanship. It was anti-mage *disruption tactics.*"

Hector shrugged again. Passing that technique on to Orthes was something he considered both his best and worst decision.

Orthes’ "eye" made all magical formulas meaningless. Hector believed that eye could complete or even surpass his swordsmanship.

But after much internal conflict, he decided to teach him.

Orthes later refined it into a technique called *spell formula overwriting*, which was rooted in Hector's anti-mage swordsmanship.

It was a style that hunted mages by intricately analyzing their spells and collapsing the formula before it could be completed.

***

Carisia entered the reception room.

Contrary to her worries, the conversation between Orthes and Hector seemed friendly.

'They're... actually getting along?'

As she watched them, Carisia wondered.

Why do all of Orthes' friends have to misunderstand something about him?

Chapter 161: Receiving a Guest (2)

Chapter 161: Receiving a Guest (2)

“What on earth are you talking about?”

Carisia's tone was one of utter disbelief. She stared at Hector, her face the perfect mask of incredulity.

Hector noted the naturalness of her reaction. *Not just anyone can fake a response like that... This one’s sharp.*

Orthes' apprentice had a peculiar mix of traits — suspicious in some ways, yet strangely naive in others. With that kind of acting, it wouldn’t have been hard for her to break through Orthes’ seemingly high but loosely constructed walls.

“Are you serious? A boss who doesn’t even know the true nature of their own subordinate... how disappointing.”

Carisia wasn’t just *pretending* to be incredulous — she genuinely was.

She and Orthes had spent all night talking about how to defeat the Mage King. They’d barely slept. *Of all the possible misunderstandings, why this one?!*

“The Mage King, huh? I'd think the direction is a bit different from magic, wouldn't you agree?”

This was a subtle probe. She wanted to gauge how much this secretive old man, Hector, actually knew about Orthes. If he knew the truth about Orthes, he would inevitably bring up the Divine Cult.

‘If he really knew about the connection between Orthes and the ancient Divine Cult, he wouldn’t be making such a ridiculous mistake.’

“The Divine Cult, huh? That ancient, decrepit group? I see, so you’ve got your eye on them as well…”

To Carisia’s surprise, Hector mentioned the Divine Cult without hesitation.

He knows about the connection between Orthes and the Divine Cult, but he still thinks Orthes is a fragment of the Mage King?

But more importantly—

‘He knows about the Divine Cult?’

The Divine Cult wasn’t just one of those "typical cults" dismissed as superstition. It was a shadowy organization, known only to specialized groups like *Blasphemia* within the Ten Towers.

Recently, the Ten Towers had made public statements hinting at the existence of such a “group unlike any other superstition-following cult” in connection to Argyrion's movements. This had spread awareness of them to some extent.

But the way Hector immediately identified the “different direction” as a reference to a *cult*—and not just any cult, but *that* cult—was telling. Only someone with specific knowledge could make that connection.

“I only know about them because of my line of work. No need to be so wary.”

“Line of work? Your roles as a fixer and a ‘tax evasion consultant’ don’t sound like jobs where you’d run into them.”

Hector nodded knowingly.

“Everyone has their secrets. What about you, Boss Carisia? What do *you* think Orthes really is?”

“No point hiding it anymore. I figured he was probably a *Pope* or maybe a *demigod*.”

“A god, huh…”

Hector stroked his beard. Carisia was suddenly struck by how much he resembled Orthes in that moment. Their auras were different, but there was something about their mannerisms that overlapped.

“Well. I’m sure you’ve seen Orthes in battle.”

“More times than I can count.”

“Then you must have seen him use that bizarre technique called *Spell Overwriting*, yes?”

“…Yes.”

Carisia had been with Orthes longer than anyone. She’d seen him fight more times than anyone. It wasn’t just a matter of experience. She and Orthes had survived countless battles together.

Orthes never went out of his way to explain his abilities to her, but he didn’t hide them either. If she asked, he'd answer with a nonchalant, “No, I don't have a dark dragon hidden in my arm, but I *do* have the Eye of Truth,” followed by a calm explanation of his abilities.

“Can anyone else replicate that technique?”

“…That would be…”

Orthes frequently lamented that, since he couldn’t use magic himself, he couldn’t induce *Magical Interference*. But Carisia found *Spell Overwriting* far more bizarre.

It wasn’t unusual to connect the gaps between different spell formulas — anyone could do that.

But doing it haphazardly would only cause the spell to explode, killing the mage in the process.

Yet Orthes not only avoided the explosions but wielded the potential of combined formulas freely.

It was an art so close to impossibility that even Carisia, despite all her experience, wasn't confident she could do it herself.

"Even if a swordsman like me, with all my years of experience, had the skill of a Tower Master, it'd still be impossible. Now tell me, what are the three fundamental elements of magic?"

"Magic Power, Will, and Formulas, right?"

"Will is expressed through formulas. In other words, each formula requires a compatible 'will' to bring it to life. Where on earth would you find a 'will' compatible with the grotesque magical formulas that Orthes produces with *Spell Overwriting*?"

"Hector, you seem to think of Orthes' Overwriting as a form of magic."

"Does he not use another's magic power, impose his will on it, and express it through a formula?"

It was a new perspective. The idea of seizing another's formula and magic power, and then controlling it with one's own will, was undeniably magical in nature.

Carisia's interest was piqued as a mage. But she focused on the conversation.

"Orthes reverse-engineers the form of 'will' necessary to shape the formula, then uses that will to produce the result he wants. I'd call that magic."

Who else but the Mage King could steal the magic of others, manipulate it with his will, and reshape the world?

That was the underlying message of Hector's words.

Carisia shook her head.

"I don't think the will involved in the process is Orthes' own. It's more like he distorts the formula to force the desired result, reflecting the 'impression' originally envisioned by the mage casting the spell."

"Oh? Then how do you explain the *magic power* involved?"

"Magic power? He doesn't have any. If anything, *that* proves Orthes isn't connected to the Mage King."

Hector shook his head.

He pointed out a simple truth known even to children: *Mana exists everywhere.*

“Any living being with will absorbs mana just by breathing, or even just by existing. It’s unavoidable, no matter how small the amount.”

But Orthes was the only exception.

“Think about it. The Mage King inscribed a principle into this world, and yet there’s someone who can so naturally reject that law. It’s like being able to command mana itself, ‘Do not come near me.’”

Carisia recalled the legends of the Mage King. He didn’t need to process mana into magic power — he could wield the world’s mana as his own.

Orthes’ inability to store magic power could be seen as a counterpart to that.

It was natural for mages to control their own magic power. But if Orthes was truly a fragment of the Mage King, it was plausible that he could treat the world's mana as his own.

At that moment, a question flashed in Carisia's mind.

“…But isn’t that incredibly inefficient?”

“Ah. That, my dear, is where the Divine Cult comes into play.”

Hector’s gaze shifted. His eyes, once filled with playful energy, now carried the weight of shadowy knowledge.

“I’m sure you know the Divine Cult was deeply involved in the creation of Orthes’ body.”

“I learned that while working with him. But how did *you* know?”

Hector raised a hand to his face, as if shading his eyes from a blinding light.

It could have been the reflex of an old man trying to block the sun.

Or it could have been the gesture of a sinner seeking to avoid the weight of his own sins.

“Because I’m the one who *discovered* him. Or perhaps 'excavated' would be a more fitting term.”

***

He avoided giving the full context, glossing over the details. He claimed to have detected a massive pulse emanating from an ancient ruin in an extra-dimensional incursion zone.

When he approached, Orthes was there.

“It wasn’t hard to tell it was a ruin of the ancient cults. There were numerous records written in Old Tongue, marked with the word *Theos* — 'god.'”

“‘God,’ huh…”

Carisia recalled her earlier discussion with Hector, where she'd speculated that Orthes might be a demigod.

"Based on everything I saw, I concluded that it was the final sanctuary of the Divine Cult and the research lab for their ultimate secret weapon."

"…The Divine Cult's ultimate weapon…"

Hector nodded.

"Don't you think it resembles the myth of *Typhoeus*?"

Carisia couldn't deny it.

Chapter 162: Receiving a Guest (3)

Chapter 162: Receiving a Guest (3)

The most ridiculous part was how the structure of the misunderstanding kept growing more intricate.

Carisia glanced up at the ceiling. *How did I end up surrounded by people like this?*

'…Well, let's try to think positively!'

At least this old man, Hector, didn't seem to be openly hostile toward Orthes, even though he viewed Orthes' nature as "extremely dangerous."

Out of Orthes' three so-called "friends" — Lampades, Kynemon, and Hector — Hector was arguably the closest to what you'd call a "normal friend."

Still, the fact that the person who sincerely believed Orthes was the reincarnation of a mythical tyrant was the *closest thing to a friend* he had… it was a little sad.

With a deep breath, Carisia firmed up her resolve.

"I have a question."

"What is it?"

"You fear the Mage King, don't you, Hector? At the very least, you're not looking at him with kindness."

The old man closed his eyes and nodded heavily.

"You're right. I fear the Mage King."

"Then why do you maintain a friendship with Orthes?"

"Because I want him *not* to become the Mage King."

"…*Not to become*, you say?"

Hector's words were in the future tense.

He believed that Orthes might someday awaken as the Mage King.

And in that moment of awakening, the only possible "variable" that could change the outcome would be Orthes' memories.

"A person's life is, at its core, the sum of the relationships they build with others. If, at the decisive moment, the memories Orthes has built in this era become a moment of hesitation for him… if that hesitation can delay his inevitable destruction… I would call that a success."

“Delaying destruction. Is that really all you’re aiming for?”

Hector’s brow twitched. Carisia had pointed out the unspoken part of his statement.

“You could have killed Orthes.”

If Hector had truly been the one who discovered Orthes right after he had “activated,” it would have been simple to eliminate him on the spot, before he had a chance to come to his senses.

“…What if I didn’t have certainty at the time?”

Carisia stretched out her hand and pointed at the sword hanging at Hector's waist.

“That’s a rare item in this day and age. You discovered Orthes, you use a sword, and Orthes has used a sword from his fixer days to now. It’s only reasonable to infer some kind of connection between the two of you.”

Even if he hadn’t been sure at first, he could have figured it out over time while teaching Orthes swordsmanship. Considering Hector cited *Spell Overwriting* as a core piece of evidence for his “Orthes is the Mage King” theory, it was clear that he had arrived at that conclusion well after his initial discovery.

“…Did Orthes not tell you about me?”

“He only answers what I ask him directly. I usually wait for him to share his personal matters on his own.”

Hector found that response unexpected. If she were lying to deceive him, she wouldn’t say something so easy to verify. After all, she could just ask Orthes later to confirm.

“...Yes. I taught Orthes how to wield a sword. In that sense, you could say I’m his mentor.”

Carisia stared at him. *A swordsman who fears the Mage King.*

Warriors who wielded aura often held jealousy or envy toward mages, especially in the early days of the Mage Era when warriors had their own influence and authority.

However, unlike holy power, aura was never a direct target of suppression. So while warriors might feel jealousy toward mages, it was rare for them to feel fear.

“And yes, it’s true. I taught him the fundamentals of spell structure analysis, which he later used as the basis for *Spell Overwriting*.”

“Fascinating. So you’re telling me you taught the Mage King a sword technique that denies magic itself?”

“…Orthes’ *eye.* That eye which perceives the essence of all things in a single glance is one of the simplest ways to comprehend the truth of magic. If Orthes chose to use it, he could easily grasp the most profound secrets hidden in the Commandments.”

Hector explained that the intellect that could *comprehend* all magic could also *unravel* all magic.

“The sword I inherited was designed solely to fight magic. It’s been refined over thousands of years for that purpose. When I saw someone who had the potential to not only *perfect* that sword but *surpass* it, I knew.”

Carisia thought of *Talo*, the enemy Orthes had faced at the Temple of Pluton.

According to Orthes, Talo had mistaken him for the descendant of a long-lost knightly house.

The secret organization of fallen knights that had been sharpening their blades against the Ten Towers for centuries. Their hatred of the Mage King. Their quest for a sword that could *shatter magic itself.*

‘So Talo’s suspicion wasn’t entirely baseless after all.’

“Hector.”

“Go ahead.”

“Are you the one leading the knights?”

***

After being *subtly kicked out* of the reception room with the silent message of “go do something else while I conduct this interview,” I realized something.

I really don’t have much to do.

“Can’t start recruiting for the *Plan of World Division* until we’ve laid more groundwork...”

I wandered over to check on Arabella, only to find her half-dead from overwork. I gave her a pep talk, saying, *"Hang in there!"* But she responded so aggressively that I made a hasty retreat.

The task of moving Aegio’s Scale to Carisia’s room had already been handled while I was tidying up her clothes this morning.

Rather than feeling liberated by having no tasks left, I just felt bored.

‘If I don't tackle some work now, I’ll regret it later when I actually want free time.’

Out of sheer boredom, I checked my email to see if any work requests had come in.

A new message.

The sender’s name was a jumbled mess of letters and numbers, like it had been randomly generated. *Spam? A virus, maybe?*

I glanced at the subject line.

“Senior.”

It’s Niobe.

Good. I opened the email, hoping for a positive reply.

And thankfully, my expectations were met.

***

Carisia called Orthes back to the reception room.

The conversation had gone on long enough.

The analysis from an unusual perspective, as well as the insight into the past, had value. Hector’s personal skills and connections would also undoubtedly prove useful.

‘But it’s this persistent misunderstanding that’s the problem.’

What this situation called for was shock therapy.

And the best person to deliver that shock was Orthes himself.

Orthes arrived promptly, as always.

Knock, knock. Two sharp raps at the door.

“Come in.”

Orthes entered with his usual narrow-eyed smile, though his grin was a bit wider than usual. Must have heard some good news.

Hector glanced at Carisia with suspicion. *You said you were going to prove that Orthes isn’t the Mage King, and you bring him here?*

What was her plan?

Was she seriously going to ask Orthes, *“Are you the Mage King?”*

If her plan was to ask such a blunt, direct question, it could backfire horribly. According to Hector’s theory, Orthes wasn’t yet aware of his identity as the Mage King. If she triggered that self-realization, it could lead to disaster.

He was about to voice his concerns when—

“Oh, Boss. How did the interview go?”

“…It was your recommendation, so I don’t have any objections. But Hector here seems to have some doubts about our company. So I told him you’d answer any questions he has.”

“Come on, old man. You should’ve just asked the boss from the start.”

Orthes shrugged, waiting for Carisia's question.

"When is the Mage King supposed to be resurrected?"

It was a shocking question.

But the truly shocking part was Orthes' calm, straightforward reply.

"2077, if I remember correctly. Though it might be sooner. He still seems to be dead, though."

"…What the hell did you just say?"

"Uh. I'm talking about the Mage King's resurrection. Weren't you briefed on all this?"

"I heard you were planning to overthrow the Ten Towers, that's all."

Orthes scratched his head. *Looks like Carisia only gave him the start and end of the story, skipping the whole middle part.*

"Okay, so here's the thing. Ever hear of the Divine Cult?"

"I know about them."

"Then I can skip the explanation about the parasitic mental entity."

"…What?"

"Oh, it's just a monster raised on divine faith that was supposed to be the Mage King's backup body."

Hector felt a headache coming on. Not from his concern over his disciple. But from the sheer *onslaught of information*.

Chapter 163: Receiving a Guest (4)

Chapter 163: Receiving a Guest (4)

Argyrion was in a truly peculiar position. It was unusual enough that they maintained rationality despite being *Eroders*, but their true uniqueness lay in their very existence.

Within this century, no other doomsday cultists had ever rebelled so openly and on such a large scale against the Ten Towers. Yet, despite all that, the Ten Towers still had not managed to wipe them out.

The key point was that they "could not" exterminate them — not that they *chose* not to.

When the news of a Tower Elder being killed reached Hector, he had been genuinely shocked.

With the power he wielded, killing a Tower Elder wouldn't have been difficult for him. However, he hadn't done so — not yet, anyway.

This was because Hector had a "group" to protect.

As an old scholar of history, Hector knew to fear the Ten Towers' overwhelming capacity for retribution. Killing a Tower Elder would be the trigger that woke that war machine.

No matter how shaky the internal balance of the Ten Towers was, that turmoil was a problem confined to their own society.

The moment an outside force intervened, the Ten Towers' collective will would unite to crush it. Just as they had done to the Divine Cult for centuries.

So when Hector heard that *Talo* had been killed, he assumed that the countdown to Argyrion's annihilation had begun. But Argyrion didn't stop there. They swallowed an entire *Regular Magic Tower*, turning it into a forward base for their invasion of magical society.

When that plan failed, Argyrion went further. As if mocking the Ten Towers, they even destroyed part of the foundation stone of *Amimone Tower*. With the collapse of Amimone's magic core, dimensional collapse in the surrounding area accelerated.

It was at this point that a "peculiar" proposal was made to Hector.

Form a connection with Argyrion.

Their roots as *Eroders* made it inevitable that they would have to part ways eventually. But as a means to confront the clear and present threat of the Ten Towers, Argyrion was a valuable asset.

Hector put the proposal on hold. For one thing, the timing was off.

The unprecedented provocation by Argyrion had prompted an equally unprecedented response from the Ten Towers — the formation of an *expeditionary force to invade the extra-dimension*.

Reaching out to Argyrion was difficult under those circumstances, and the fate of Argyrion amid the large-scale Ten Towers offensive was still unknown.

The second reason was more personal.

He'd seen *Orthes* in the surveillance footage collected from *Algoth City* as part of an analysis of Argyrion's capabilities.

Mages of a certain level — especially those qualified to compete for the title of Tower Master — wrapped themselves in artifacts to the point where video footage often ended up distorted with noise.

Skilled mana-video analysts could correct for most of that noise, but there was always a certain point beyond which restoration was impossible.

There were two possible causes for this:

1. The presence of an *extremely powerful artifact* blocking the recording.
2. The presence of *Orthes*.

Even in the distorted footage, Hector had spotted a figure in a black suit wielding a high-frequency blade. He'd immediately contacted Orthes.

His only disciple.

Perhaps his final adversary.

"Argyrion's probably feeling a bit wronged right now. It was me, not them, who had ties to the Divine Cult, but *they're* the ones being accused. Same with the Talo incident — I was the one who moved things around."

Hector listened as his disciple explained that Argyrion had been a *complete decoy all along.*

"Let me get this straight. You're telling me *you* took down Talo?"

"The Argyrion dispatch squad helped too. So, to return the favor, I arranged the scene to make it look like *they* were the ones who defeated him."

"And the destruction of Amimone Tower?"

"That wasn't me."

Hector nodded. *So Argyrion does have that much strength after all,* he thought — until Orthes spoke again.

“It was the boss. She’d been biding her time for ages, and then boom — she blew it up with a bomb.”

Hector slowly turned his gaze toward Carisia.

His image of her had been that of a cold and calculating magician, the type who ruled with an iron grip, commanding even a rogue like Orthes with the authority of an iron-fisted monarch.

“…It was necessary,” Carisia muttered, her eyes avoiding his.

She looked more like a scolded child than a fearsome mage at that moment.

“It’s like I mentioned earlier — that explosion was to get rid of the parasitic entity. Boss had been holding back ever since she started Hydra Corporation, but she eventually snuck off to make it behind my back.”

“…The *boss*? The top decision-maker, the one who doesn’t need anyone’s permission to do as she pleases?”

“Yup. Boss says she’s running a business, and I’m just her secretary, so who am I to stop her? I did try telling her it was dangerous, though.”

At Orthes’ scolding, which was disguised as concern, Carisia lowered her gaze even further. *They seem closer than I thought,* Hector realized.

“So yeah, the mental parasite ended up cooperating with Argyrion, but after that whole mess, it turned out that both the parasite and Argyrion's ideology were just proxies for the Mage King’s schemes.”

“Then one last thing.”

Hector narrowed his eyes.

“About this claim that the Mage King will return in 2077?”

“There was a prophecy from the Divine Cult. The current Divine Cult doesn’t know the full details, but the deadline for that prophecy keeps shifting. It’s not exactly reliable.”

“...Heh.”

Hector chuckled. His disciple had always wielded that eerie, intangible presence and a way of getting straight to the heart of the matter.

Now, however, that same disciple had developed a new method of conversation — the casual delivery of earth-shattering truths, as if he were discussing the weather.

“Argyrion’s stock just plummeted.”

“On paper, they’re still a well-diversified terrorist group, you know. Though I *did* add a bit of seasoning to their image.”

“You’ve become quite the con artist!”

“Haha, I’m still no match for you, old man.”

“No, you’ve surpassed me. Go ahead and leave the mountain.”

“Not sure you can call that mess of an extra-dimensional incursion site a ‘mountain.’ Terrain was all over the place.”

As the two men chatted about meaningless nonsense, Carisia sat quietly, sipping her tea.

Her earlier assessment had been correct. *Hector was closer to a real “friend” than the others.*

As for their bizarre conversation? She ignored it. *No point in paying attention to talk about the flight speed of seagulls or the altitude of extra-dimensional rifts.*

“By the way, Orthes, with all this world-shaking news you’ve been dropping…”

“Hm? None of it’s that shocking, is it?”

“I always knew you’d cause a disaster with that mouth of yours.”

“Thanks for the compliment, old man. I’d prefer to make a living with my mouth than with my sword.”

“...Anyway, I’m serious this time.”

Hector’s tone shifted.

“You mentioned hearing something from Talo about a secret order of knights.”

“Ah, did you tell him about that? His imagination’s pretty wild for a guy who spent his life studying magic. Made it easier to read his moves, though.”

“Actually, that’s me.”

“…What?”

Orthes’ brain short-circuited for a moment.

Hector shrugged.

Carisia, sipping her tea, noted the similarity between Hector’s shrug and Orthes’ mannerisms. *It’s not just a mentor-disciple relationship. It’s like a full transference of identity.*

“The secret order of fallen knights? I’m their leader.”

“Ah, come on, old man. This changes everything.”

Orthes’ tone suddenly grew sharper. Carisia straightened, alert to any shift in tension.

“See, personal negotiations are different from company-to-company deals. You realize I have to recalculate the terms, right?”

Just banter between friends.

Carisia relaxed and sipped her tea again.

“Alright, listen. The order of knights I’m leading? It started with the one knight who failed to kill the Mage King.”

Hector began to recount the tale of a lone knight from a kingdom destroyed by the Mage King’s conquest.

That knight sought to assassinate the Mage King during his moment of triumph — the day of *Ascension*.

But before he could make his move, he found that the Mage King was already dead.

That knight’s final vow?

To kill the Mage King upon his return.

And to bring down the unjust world born from his blood.

Carisia recalled the words of the Thunder Giant.

“A man from another world, chosen to overturn this one.”

Orthes was a vessel of disorder.

Chapter 164: Exposing the Truth (1)

Chapter 164: Exposing the Truth (1)

"Hmm, I had a hunch you had some extraordinary secrets, old man. But I didn't think you'd be *this* high up the chain."

"Do you sense the 'dignity' of a knight?"

Orthes silently raised a finger and pointed at Hector's loud, vividly colored shirt.

"Shouldn't a knight be walking around in armor or something?"

Hector puffed up his chest and declared with pride:

"A suit is the modern man's armor!"

"…That garishly colorful shirt counts as a suit?"

Clap!

Sensing the conversation veering off course, Carisia clapped her hands once to draw attention back to the matter at hand. She'd let the master-disciple banter play out long enough.

"While I do agree with Orthes' point that 'business-to-business deals differ from business-to-personal deals,' I'd like to get to the heart of the matter. Hector, may I ask what exactly you're hoping to achieve by coming here?"

"Simple. The plan to assassinate the Mage King is currently unfeasible. After all, the target doesn't exist yet."

Carisia observed Hector's demeanor. It seemed that Orthes' earlier shocking revelations had forced him to reconsider his theory of *Orthes = the Mage King*.

If he hadn't completely abandoned it, he had at least put it on hold.

"Therefore, our goal is simple. The dissolution of magical society."

Hector's words were direct.

"Orthes' *Plan of World Division* — that precise, elaborate plan — is the most sophisticated path to achieving the goal my comrades and I have long pursued."

He had no hesitation in aligning himself with the strategy. The idea of forming an alliance with Argyrion had already been scrapped once it became clear that Argyrion's reputation was overblown.

"Total cooperation, is it? Now that I think about it, I don't believe I've heard the name of the group you lead, Hector. May I ask what it is?"

“It bears the name of the kingdom from which our founder was knighted. *Ilion.*”

Hector laid bare the nature of Ilion’s activities.

The secret swordsmanship designed to kill the Mage King was only passed down to the leader of each generation. However, fragments of that swordsmanship had been reworked into a system for analyzing magic spells, and that knowledge was shared among all the knights of Ilion.

Just as Hector himself had contributed to tax evasion schemes for various Magic Towers, Ilion’s knights traveled from tower to tower as “tax reduction consultants,” gnawing away at the Ten Towers' financial resources.

Orthes scratched his head.

“Old man, do Ilion's knights have formal job titles like *‘certified accounting knight’* or *‘tax audit knight’* or something?”

“…That has a nice ring to it. I’ll suggest it at the next meeting.”

Hector then shared Ilion’s records of Magic Towers with known grievances against the Ten Towers. These towers would serve as the vanguard for the *Plan of World Division*.

“Our goal, Ilion’s goal, is the same as yours, Hydra Corporation. At least, as far as the *Plan of World Division* is concerned. The rest, we can discuss once the plan is complete.”

Carisia understood what Hector meant by "the rest." It was a polite way of saying, *“We’ll discuss Orthes’ true identity later.”*

But Carisia remained expressionless as she reached out and shook Hector’s hand.

“Oh, speaking of which, I got a message from Niobe,” Orthes suddenly said.

Hearing an unfamiliar name, Hector tilted his head in confusion. Orthes explained with calm indifference.

“She’s a high-ranking member of *Blasphemia* that we happened to recruit.”

Hector's eyes twitched.

“Happened to recruit” a high-ranking agent of Blasphemia? If that were possible, the Ten Towers system would have collapsed 100 years ago.

Still, Hector kept his thoughts to himself. He knew from experience that, with Orthes, it was better to keep your mouth shut and wait. Otherwise, Orthes would somehow end up successfully fooling even himself.

“She says she’s ready to hear the *truth*. We should prepare to consume Blasphemia from within.”

“The *truth*, huh? Are you talking about the so-called ‘hypnosis’ method that had everyone baffled by Argyrion’s insane recruitment abilities?”

“Correct.”

Orthes had put significant thought into uncovering the truth behind Argyrion’s shocking recruitment method.

Rationally speaking, it made no sense for high-ranking mages to abandon their privileged positions in magical society and join a mere terrorist group.

But magic itself was never a rational field of study.

Orthes had assumed that Argyrion's "truth" must be something profoundly shocking, something that could overturn the very framework of a person’s worldview.

“Given that the Mage King is behind Argyrion, such information would be limited to a few key truths.”

Hector nodded and muttered to himself,

“The truth of the *Day of Ascension*…”

The fact that the Ten Tower Masters had killed the Mage King was a truth that threatened the very foundations of the magical world.

The claim that they had inherited the *Commandments* from the Mage King carried the implication that they were legitimate successors of his magical legacy. The Mage King’s Ten Disciples were even referred to as *Apostles*, giving them not only academic but also religious authority.

But what if it became known that those Apostles had murdered their own master?

The legitimacy of the Ten Towers, and the solemn authority that underpinned magical society, would crumble in an instant.

“Argyrion probably recruited mages by claiming that they alone upheld the ‘true cause of the Mage King.’ But the game has changed. Their scheme will now become *our* weapon.”

It would begin with Niobe. By feeding her the truth, the plan was to create a core faction loyal to Hydra Corporation within Blasphemia, and eventually Panoptes.

Panoptes was officially a subordinate organ of the Ten Towers. No matter how high one’s rank was within Panoptes, they could not oppose decisions made by the Ten Tower Elders.

But they *could* manipulate the reporting structure that informed those decisions.

Orthes explained his vision of the future, adding that he would need a private room to meet with Niobe one-on-one.

“Panoptes may have numbers on their side, but ever since it was revealed that Argyrion had spies among Amimone Tower’s investigators, their influence has waned.”

“…And you were the one who exposed them, disguised as a Blasphemia agent.”

“Correct. Which is why now is the perfect time to seize Blasphemia and take control of Panoptes. The Eidolons are a concern, but since they’re even more closed-off than Blasphemia, it’s hard to come up with a practical way to approach them.”

Listening to Carisia and Orthes’ exchange, Hector let out a hollow laugh.

To magical society, *Hydra Corporation* was seen as just another small, insignificant Magic Tower.

Even after Hydra Corporation sponsored the Amimone Tower succession match, its name was overshadowed by the catastrophic collapse of the *Regular Magic Tower’s core*.

Unseen by all, a ticking time bomb was moving through magical society.

And now, Hector himself was a supplier of gunpowder for that bomb.

“If a Blasphemia agent visits Hydra Corporation for no apparent reason, it’ll draw attention. I know a good place to set up the meeting.”

“Oh, has Ilion expanded into real estate brokerage as well? Damn, I should’ve asked for some parting money when I left.”

Hector gave a dry laugh. Carisia didn’t like where this was going.

The idea of Orthes alone in a room with Niobe — a woman who might already have feelings for him — didn’t sit well with her.

But she knew it was necessary.

If Orthes met Niobe in *Hydra Corporation’s* headquarters, it would seem like coercion. But if it happened in a neutral location, it could be framed as a genuine meeting of the minds.

“…Alright, let’s wrap up the business talk. It’s time for the ‘high-ranking individuals’ to have their discussion. Step outside for a bit.”

“Wow, pulling rank now, old man?”

Orthes pouted but glanced at Carisia for confirmation. She nodded, and he gathered the empty teacups and left.

“Looks like you’re finally convinced Orthes isn’t the Mage King,” Carisia remarked.

Hector rubbed his temples.

“Can’t say I’m convinced, but after all that Mage King talk and *no reaction*, what else can I think?”

Chapter 165: Exposing the Truth (2)

Chapter 165: Exposing the Truth (2)

Tock. Tock. Tock.

Niobe tapped her foot anxiously.

As a Blasphemia agent, she had been trained to strictly control her emotions.

Displaying one's emotions was supposed to be a calculated move — a psychological tactic to create a false impression for the negotiation partner. This was a basic skill for Blasphemia agents, who often had to infiltrate anti-establishment secret groups like cults of superstition.

Niobe had climbed the ranks at lightning speed, and as such, she had been especially thorough in reviewing her training to avoid being seen as incompetent. She remembered every lesson, including the nonverbal cues and subverbal communication techniques.

But the nervousness she was displaying now?

This wasn't *calculated*. It was pure, raw emotion.

"Senior…"

The idea that her former senior, someone so thorough in carrying out assignments — even purging former colleagues without hesitation — might *betray* Blasphemia and the Ten Towers? The mere suggestion of it felt surreal.

Her mind tried to reject it.

But doubt lingered. *What if Senior L13 had been recruited by Argyrion?*

No. She cast that doubt aside.

Wasn't he the one who handled the biological disaster that Argyrion unleashed on Algoth City and Amimone Tower?

Niobe took a deep breath and scanned her surroundings.

They were far from Elysion, on the outskirts of magical society. The town had its own local Magic Tower, but it was a plain, unremarkable place with no notable achievements.

The coordinates her senior had sent led to an ordinary cafe. The most "unique" aspect of the place was the abundance of private rooms, catering to those who preferred a quiet space.

Niobe waited in one of those rooms for about 10 minutes.

Click.

With no sound of the door opening, her senior, L13, simply *appeared*.

“Ah, sorry to keep you waiting,” he said as he sat down.

“Senior…”

The two sat in awkward silence. The weight of the matter was too great for either of them to find a comfortable starting point.

In the end, it was her senior who spoke first.

“They found a reliquary in this region, didn’t they?”

“Yeah, that’s the official reason for my assignment here. I checked it out, but it’s nothing special. It probably had power back in the day, but it’s mostly deteriorated now.”

“Ha, I see. That’s fortunate, then.” L13 chuckled.

He tapped the table lightly. “I prepared something just in case. Since you’re a high-ranking officer, you can move more freely than most. But if you don’t have a position like ‘Special Inspector,’ wandering around aimlessly draws suspicion.”

“Prepared something, huh?”

Niobe tilted her head. Was he implying that he’d personally secured a reliquary without handing it over to Blasphemia?

That was no small matter.

While Blasphemia did allow its most loyal and skilled agents to utilize reliquaries, that usage had to be officially sanctioned. Unauthorized possession of a reliquary was an entirely different matter.

“When you’re chasing down Argyrion, you come across plenty of relic fragments. Most of them are hollow shells, barely worth the effort of collecting. So sometimes, I make use of them.”

Silence hung between them for a moment.

“…So what do you want to talk about?”

L13’s smile grew sharper.

But Niobe didn’t see joy in it. It looked more like the face of someone struggling to bring up an uncomfortable topic.

“Let’s start with Algoth City. We worked together there, didn’t we?”

Algoth City. Twice, L13 had lent her his strength.

The first time was against a coalition of Amimone Tower’s traitors and Argyrion’s extra-dimensional infectors. The second was during the battle against the biological disaster Argyrion had sent to destroy everything.

Every single time, she'd watched L13's back.

She never once felt that he had stolen her credit.

Rather, she felt guilty. She'd watched him bear the burden of dangers and hardships that should have been hers.

Niobe lowered her head. She knew it wasn't the proper posture for a conversation. But right now, she couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes.

Even if he spouted nonsense about betrayal, if she looked him in the eye, she feared she might believe him.

"...Then again, with his squinty eyes, can you even see them?"

"I started having doubts after subduing Amimone Tower's Tower Master," L13 said.

"Doubts?"

"Doubts I'd had for a while, but I'd been too busy to confront them. I was constantly preoccupied — fighting old acquaintances takes a lot out of you, after all. I didn't have time to think. But after the Amimone Tower incident, I couldn't look away anymore."

"What kind of doubts?"

"'Why?'"

Niobe's head tilted.

"Why would people like the Amimone Tower's Tower Master — who held high status as Argos investigators — side with Argyrion? That fundamental question."

Motivation.

It was a question of motivation.

"At first, I wanted to bury it. I was too busy to dwell on it. But after Amimone, I realized I'd been ignoring something *big*."

The traitors from Amimone were different.

In other betrayals, the turncoats were often people who'd been pushed to the fringes of magical society. People with grudges.

But the people at the top of the *Regular Magic Towers* had no reason to betray.

They were already at the summit of magical society.

There was nowhere higher for them to go.

"…Except for the Ten Towers," Niobe muttered.

“Exactly,” L13 said.

“So you’re saying they used Argyrion as part of a succession war?”

“No.” L13 shook his head.

“Amimone always prioritizes self-preservation. They wouldn’t risk rebellion just for some higher position. If they did, that wouldn’t be enough to explain it.”

For a brief moment, a blue light flickered beneath his squinted eyes.

Too fast to be certain it had even happened.

“Argyrion cries out for ‘truth’ and ‘righteous cause.’ That caught my attention, so I started digging into the Ten Towers’ history. I found something.”

L13 placed a slip of paper on the table.

It looked like a hastily scribbled memo.

One sentence.

One *short* sentence.

But its weight was enough to shake the foundations of magical society.

The Mage King was murdered.

***

“What… What the hell is this?!”

“Shh.”

L13 placed a finger over his lips, gesturing for silence.

Niobe immediately understood.

This was why he’d brought a *handwritten note* instead of storing the message on a magical device.

This message *must not* be recorded.

Niobe’s breath grew short.

Her heart pounded as she asked, even though she already knew the answer:

“Who…?”

“Who else? The people above Blasphemia. The ones with the strongest artifacts in the world.”

“Do you have evidence?”

“Not yet. But Argyrion might. I only managed to find this small piece of the puzzle. If I’m right, they definitely have something that convinced even high-ranking defectors to believe in them.”

It all made sense.

If word got out that the Mage King had been *murdered*, the entire foundation of the Ten Towers would collapse.

The Ten Tower Masters, heirs of the Ten Disciples, would be seen not as successors, but as *accomplices to murder.*

“...So now what, Senior? You’re gonna join Argyrion or something?”

“Not a chance. They might talk about justice, but they’ve crossed too many lines.”

“Then… are you just gonna keep living as you have? Pretending you don’t know? I… I can’t do that! I believed in the Ten Towers! I believed in them as the guidepost of our society!”

Her lips quivered.

Her hands trembled.

The weight of all her past deeds pressed down on her.

Everything she’d done might have been nothing more than an extension of *that original betrayal*.

“What are you going to do, Senior? How are you going to face this horror?”

She was waiting for his answer.

The answer of a man who had been the *paragon* of Blasphemia.

L13 looked at her and smiled.

“Indeed. The Ten Towers are the guidepost of magical society.”

“...Huh?”

“And if the guidepost is broken, we fix it.”

His eyes narrowed as he uttered a single question.

"How do you feel about revolution, Niobe?"

Chapter 166: Creating the Truth (1)

Chapter 166: Creating the Truth (1)

Revolution.

It was an unfamiliar word, but not an unknown one. Niobe dug into the hazy recesses of her memory.

She had heard it during the early stages of Blasphemia's ideological training, specifically during the lessons on historical perspective. It was a prelude, a part of history that was rarely explored in detail — the era before the Ten Towers were established.

The Mage King had shattered the old order — a palace of corruption erected by the so-called "cultists" who now bore the label of "superstition followers" — and established a new system.

Their power had been bestowed by the heavens, or at least that's how they justified it. Divine right. A heavenly mandate. But as they clung to this absolute authority, it began to rot. Society crumbled from the inside out.

That's when the Mage King appeared.

He rallied the warlords to his cause and stood against the priests who ruled from on high. He promulgated *magic* as a counterforce to the divine powers of "Holy Incantations" and "Divine Spirits," the supernatural tools of the priests.

A cataclysmic upheaval in society, institutions, and the order of the world.

A radical resistance against the entrenched power of the era.

A violent transformation of the old mandate (天命) into something new (革新).

The Ten Towers called it by one name:

Revolution.

"Senior… Do you understand what that word really means?"

Revolution begins with a rejection of the prevailing order — the *paradigm* that defines society itself.

If the Mage King's target had been the priesthood, then...

"Of course I do," Orthes replied with absolute certainty.

It was clear to Niobe what he intended. The revolution he sought would be aimed squarely at the Ten Towers, the ones who monopolized the *Commandments.*

"Niobe. Do you have a dream?"

Dream.

She was silent.

Niobe had always been a simple person. Why had she joined Blasphemia?

Because she was hungry.

Panoptes offered food and shelter to volunteers, and since age wasn't a barrier to learning magic, she had been allowed to enlist. Her magical talent was discovered by chance. She had the sensitivity to detect *reliquaries* and the physical aptitude to endure Blasphemia's cybernetic implants.

Her life shifted from the lowest ranks of the Argos to becoming a full-fledged agent of Blasphemia.

Her "dream" back then had been nothing more than survival — to eat and to live.

Blasphemia relieved her of her hunger but not her fear of death.

So she thought: *"If I do well as an agent, I might be recruited by one of the Ten Towers someday."*

She clung to that dream. It wasn’t unheard of for exceptional field agents to be recruited by a Magic Tower. It was rare, but not impossible.

Others might have refused such an opportunity to remain in Blasphemia and aim for higher positions. But Niobe wasn’t like them.

Her dream was simple.

To escape from the endless cycle of survival.

She wanted to one day live a life where she could think about what it truly meant to live.

She believed that once she joined one of the Ten Towers, she could finally begin to dream.

Perhaps, she thought, she could study magic not as a tool of survival but as an ideal, like the magic of fairy tales and legends.

Blasphemia’s teachings had been cold and pragmatic. Magic was not an ideal but a tool. A weapon. A means of control. The only kind of magic she had ever touched was the kind meant for killing, subjugating, and interrogating.

But the Ten Towers — their magic had to be different.

Or so she believed.

She believed that if she entered the Ten Towers, she would live a life unlike any she’d known before.

But it was an illusion.

Behind the illusion lay the hard, dried stains of blood.

When Orthes asked about her dreams, she couldn't answer.

Her dream had crumbled before it even began.

Perhaps, she thought, her dream had been filthier than reality.

“You seem hesitant. Then I’ll go first,” Orthes said.

Niobe studied his face. As usual, his eyes were unreadable, hidden beneath a squint. His face was calm, and he spoke with his usual mild smile.

“I wanted to change the world.”

“…What?”

“I mean it. This world.”

His words carried the weight of conviction.

“While the threat of the extra-dimension looms over us, the Towers do nothing. Sure, they stabilize the dimensional rifts with mana cores, but after that? They do nothing. I thought it was because they didn’t have the resources. I believed that.”

Orthes shrugged.

He had believed that if the Towers weren’t wasting their strength fighting off cultists and doomsday zealots, they might have the capacity to protect the world better.

“I was wrong. I’ve made quite a contribution tracking down Argyrion. I’ve saved their precious Towers. But did I change anything? Did it improve the system in any way?”

The answer was no.

From the Ten Towers, to the Regular Magic Towers, to the Minor Magic Towers, to individual mages, and finally to the common citizens — the chain of control remained unbroken.

And the lives of the common people, at the bottom of the chain, never changed.

"The magical elite claw their way up the chain, but they don’t break it," Orthes muttered.

“Now we know the truth. The Ten Towers never intended to create a better world. From the very beginning, their only goal was to reach *Ascension*. They’re pilgrims chasing an unreachable dream, obsessed with the idea of rising to heaven.”

“...So what?” Niobe asked.

Her heart was starting to pound.

“What do you want to do about it?”

Orthes leaned forward, his voice calm but firm.

“Change it.”

He placed a slip of paper on the table.

It was a calculation.

It was a detailed estimate of the amount of magic generated by the *Commandments* and the mana required to sustain the current magical world.

Niobe recognized it immediately.

"Everyone knows that. The *Commandments* have infinite mana."

“Everyone knows it, yes. But have they considered what would happen if that *infinite mana* was no longer monopolized? If it was shared with the world, what would happen?”

Orthes' eyes gleamed with certainty.

"With the energy of the Commandments alone, we could transform the entire world into something like Elysion — a purified, extra-dimensional haven. And that's a conservative estimate."

The revelation was staggering.

Her mind reeled at the possibilities.

The vast majority of mana from the Commandments was hoarded by researchers in the Ten Towers. They used it to fuel their pursuit of Ascension.

But what if that limitless energy was set free?

“Let’s release it. No more Ten Towers. No more hoarding.”

“…That’s insane.” Niobe shook her head. “To pull that off, you’d need to seize every Commandment. You know that, right? You’d have to fight the Ten Towers themselves.”

“Correct,” Orthes said. “But there’s only one moment in time when that’s possible.”

He laid it out plainly.

The Ten Towers were about to launch an expedition against Argyrion. The vast majority of their forces would be tied up. It was the one chance to seize the Commandments.

It was the only moment in history when a revolution could succeed.

But still, Niobe had doubts.

Even if they seized the Commandments, what then?

“Do you think the ones holding the Commandments will just give them up?” she asked.

“Not easily. But only those who have truly grown sick of power can give up power.”

Orthes leaned back and sighed.

He admitted that he didn’t have what it took to be the leader of a revolution. He’d be too greedy, he said.

“But if you want my honest opinion, I think I’ve already found someone who could.”

“…Who?”

Orthes locked eyes with her.

Niobe's breath caught in her throat.

“No… No way. Not me!”

“Why not?” Orthes grinned. “You’re one of the rare people who has no desire for power.”

From his coat, he pulled out another document.

It was a *plan to take control of Blasphemia*.

“…This is crazy.”

“You’re perfect, Niobe. You don’t seek power. That makes you the only one I can trust to give it up.”

His voice was steady, calm, and deadly serious.

“Help me, Niobe. Let’s create something new. No upstream, no downstream.”

“…Then what’s left?” she asked.

Orthes smiled.

“A sea.”

Chapter 167: Creating the Truth (2)

Chapter 167: Creating the Truth (2)

A world where all stand equal.

It was a grand ideal.

Niobe thought back on her past. The world that Orthes spoke of... at the very least, it would be a world where she wouldn't have to worry about tomorrow's survival.

After a long moment of deliberation, Niobe shook her head.

"Even so, senior… it's still impossible," she said firmly. "You can't put all the *Commandments* in one person's hands, and at the same time, that person has to be someone who won't desire them. You said it yourself — a mage can't be trusted with the *Commandments.* So I get it, you'll bring in the anti-magic factions as part of the revolutionary leadership. But do you really think the anti-magic radicals will cooperate with a mage's plan?"

Orthes smiled.

"Funny you should mention that," he said. "I actually know someone like that. A certain anti-magic radical who desperately wants to destroy the *Commandments.*"

***

Later

I let out a deep sigh. Finally, the recruitment was complete.

The excuse I used to lure them in was simple but effective: **"the destruction of a *Commandment*."**

The bait was effective because I laid down the groundwork in advance.

Destroying a single *Commandment* was framed as a form of symbolic satisfaction for anti-magic radicals. It was presented as a major victory that would satisfy their deepest desires — the destruction of the core symbol of magical authority.

The reasoning I used in my presentation was split into three main points:

1. The Destruction of a Symbol
Destroying even one of the *Commandments* would represent a colossal blow to the foundations of the Ten Towers' power. After all, the *Commandments* are the source of their might, both practically and symbolically. The anti-magic radicals' desire to destroy magic could be partially realized through this symbolic act.

2. Prevention of the Birth of a New Mage King
The *Commandments* contain the Mage King's knowledge — the foundation of the entire magical system. It's not an exaggeration to say that someone who possesses all Ten

Commandments could, at least theoretically, rival the Mage King in magical theory. Destroying even one *Commandment* would eliminate the possibility of such a successor emerging. It would be a “safeguard” against the rise of a magical dictator.

3. Proof of Revolution’s Integrity
"Revolutions need the support of the masses," I had told them.

"How does blowing up a *Commandment* achieve that?!" they had retorted.

"Simple," I replied with a grin. "It’s a declaration of our principles. By destroying a *Commandment*, we send a message to the world — we will not repeat the sins of the Ten Towers. We will not hoard the *Commandments* for ourselves. We’re different.”

Niobe seemed reluctant but eventually nodded, accepting — however begrudgingly — that there might be some merit to the idea.

“…We’ll discuss that later,” she muttered. “For now, I need to get back to Blasphemia.”

“Of course,” I agreed. “When the revolution reaches its turning point, we’ll discuss it again.”

With that, she would return to Blasphemia.

Her task was clear: recruit personnel, consolidate power, and — under the name of *Salmosia* — take control of the organization.

Under normal circumstances, it would be a long, arduous process. But I had given her a certain... **"secret weapon."**

***

Back at Hydra Corp

Carisia listened intently as I explained the "secret weapon" I had handed to Niobe.

“What's this *secret weapon* you mentioned?” she asked, eyes narrowed.

"Ah, nothing too extravagant," I said, feigning modesty. "It’s just a document that happens to be very effective in Blasphemia's particular environment."

I proceeded to explain.

"Word is, it’s now a public secret among the Ten Towers' higher-ups that Blasphemia’s leadership had some ties to Argyrion."

Carisia frowned. “And?”

“So, I handed Niobe a list. It’s a list of Blasphemia’s senior personnel who had suspicious links to Argyrion, along with a few… **enhanced ‘facts’** sprinkled in.”

“…You made it up, didn’t you?”

"Technically, no. Not all of it."

The signal-spoofing was thanks to *Adoosiam*, the transmission system originally designed by the Mage King himself. Since Argyrion's communications used the same foundational system, it was a simple matter to forge a few *"missed calls"* in the Blasphemia executives' personal logs.

"Basically," I said, "I created several 'missed calls' from Argyrion's private communication network on the personal devices of key Blasphemia executives. Each missed call is going to drive them insane. They'll claim it's nothing but a glitch, but who's going to believe them?"

I glanced at Carisia. She had a strange look on her face.

"Did you… have some kind of grudge against Blasphemia?"

"Grudge? Nah," I said with a shrug. "It's just the most effective strategy I had at my disposal."

But I did think back to those harsh days when Carisia and I had been on the run in the desert.

The infamous *"Golden Desert Operation"* had wiped out most of Blasphemia's top personnel. I assumed their leaders would face some sort of reckoning for the debacle.

But nope.

The operation's commander? **Still at large, hiding in luxury.**

Meanwhile, low-level agents like *Halto* who defected to Argyrion were left to bear the consequences.

So, when the opportunity presented itself to undermine Blasphemia, I seized it. It wasn't out of hatred.

It was simply... **practical.**

With Niobe now poised to rise as a new power center within Blasphemia, it was the perfect time to inject a little chaos.

"They'll be too busy clawing at each other to stop Niobe," I said with a grin.

Carisia stared at me for a moment.

"Orthes," she said.

"Yes, boss?"

"Are you really going to entrust the future of the world to Niobe?"

I nodded without hesitation. Carisia raised a brow, her gaze sharp as ever.

“Niobe won’t be the only one,” I said, leaning forward. “I’ll also entrust it to Kreon, to Lampades, and even to Hector. Each of them will play a role. And of course, *you’ll have a role too.*”

Her eyes narrowed. “And what about you? You sound like you’re planning to walk away from it all.”

“I am,” I replied with a grin.

Carisia blinked, momentarily stunned. Then she snorted.

"Ha. I see it now. You’re planning to destroy society just so you can slack off in peace, aren't you?”

“Exactly,” I said with utmost confidence.

Of course, there was one more reason.

Destroying the Ten Towers while ensuring that Hydra Corp became the only force with access to the *Commandments* would make it infinitely easier to craft weapons of mass destruction. Weapons that could be used in the final battle against the Mage King.

If the Mage King returned, I didn’t want to be the only one fighting him.

We’d need an army.

“I get it,” Carisia muttered.

"Do you?" I asked, tilting my head.

Carisia smiled. It was a sharp, knowing smile.

"If you’re going to play this game of thrones, you’ll need puppets on the board,” she said. “Niobe will spark division within Blasphemia. Kine will do the same within the Ten Towers. Kreon and Lampades will play their roles as well. Hector will be the wild card. And, of course, you’ll have control over them all, directly or indirectly.”

I nodded.

“Then there’s one last thing,” Carisia said, her grin sharper than ever.

“What’s that?”

“**Propaganda.**”

I chuckled. “Once Niobe has Blasphemia under her control, I’ll use them to spread it. After all, what's more efficient than using law enforcement as your mouthpiece?"

Her smile grew wider.

"All we have to do now," she said, "is wait for the Ten Towers to march.”

"And that will happen within a month," I replied.

Soon, the biggest house in the world would be empty.

And I would be inside it.

Chapter 168: The Scheme of World Division (Part 1)

Chapter 168: The Scheme of World Division (1)

There was a little-known fact about *Panoptes*.

The organization, often seen as a singular institution, was actually composed of three distinct branches:

Argos: The largest branch, functioning as a public security force tasked with maintaining general law and order.

Blasphemia: A secretive faction specializing in the suppression of "superstition followers" — a term broadly applied to anti-magic heretics and fringe cults.

Eidolons (εἴδωλον): The most obscure of them all, focused solely on monitoring and managing activities related to the *Extra-Dimension*.

The sheer size of **Argos** meant that, naturally, its influence and power were the greatest within Panoptes. **That was the case... until Orthes got involved.**

Through a series of meticulously orchestrated events — including the *Amimone Tower Incident* — Orthes undermined Argos's reputation while bolstering the prestige of **Blasphemia**.

One of his most effective weapons? A list of suspected **Argyrion collaborators** hidden within Argos. The list had been crafted with care, with the help of Salmosia. It was just authentic-looking enough to force Argos to burn its political capital defending itself against accusations.

In contrast, Blasphemia, with its covert nature and elite personnel, became the most trusted investigative force in Panoptes.

The **real winner** of that power shift wasn't Blasphemia. It was **Orthes**.

With **Niobe** rising as the de facto leader under the banner of Salmosia, and Orthes's trusted agent Niobe consolidating power, Blasphemia fell into Orthes's hands.

Argos had lost its influence, and Blasphemia now served Orthes's will.

But there was one part of Panoptes where Orthes's influence had not yet reached:

Eidolons (εἴδωλον).

Unlike Blasphemia, which was originally a covert subdivision of Panoptes, Eidolons were so secretive that they didn't even engage in internal power struggles. Their only mission was to observe the *Extra-Dimensional Realm* and prevent its influence from spilling into this world.

Unlike Blasphemia, Eidolons did not concern themselves with politics. They didn't move, didn't talk, didn't care.

That is… until today.

Today, the Eidolons were stirred from their long silence.

The reason? **A summons from the Ten Towers.**

The subject of the summons was direct and simple:

“How much power will we need for the campaign?”

The “campaign” referred to was, of course, the planned invasion of **Argyrion's stronghold** in the *Extra-Dimensional Realm*.

The Eidolons’ response was equally simple:

“We will need everything.”

They explained that the threat was too great to risk anything less than full mobilization. The possible presence of a **"fragment of the Mage King"** or a comparable existence was enough to justify complete mobilization.

To ensure the safe return of forces from the *Extra-Dimension*, a special "beacon" would need to be built — a magical signal to guide them home. To accomplish this, high-level mages with the ability to manipulate **dimensional interference magic** were essential.

This type of magic was one of the most difficult to master. Naturally, the only mages of sufficient skill to handle it were **the Tower Masters of the Ten Towers**.

A fierce debate erupted.

The Tower Masters were reluctant to leave their towers. After all, if a master leaves, the odds of being challenged in the **Succession Wars** increase significantly.

In the end, **three towers were excluded from the campaign**:

1. **Yellow Thunder Tower**
    - Its Tower Master had been grievously injured during a clash with a superstition cult. His injuries had only worsened after a failed assassination attempt. He now relied on the **Commandment of Yellow Thunder** to survive. Mobilizing him was impossible.
2. **Nokmok Tower**
    - There was no specific reason for this one. Other towers volunteered to cover its duties, and with no immediate need for Nokmok, it was quietly left behind.
3. **White Light Tower**
    - This one was special. The White Light Tower was given a unique role in the campaign. Its Tower Master was tasked with creating a **"dimensional beacon"** that would guide the expedition back to their world. This was a role

only White Light could fulfill, given its mastery of *all-encompassing light magic*.

Thus, the final decision was made.

7 out of 10 Tower Masters would depart for the Extra-Dimensional campaign.

The Ten Towers believed they had accounted for everything. To prevent *Succession Wars* from erupting in the absence of their masters, they left behind their most powerful subordinates — the **Elders**. These Elders, while not as strong as Tower Masters, could still unleash **Grand Magic** using the infinite mana of the *Commandments*.

On paper, it was a perfect defense plan.

But that “perfect defense” was only valid if the opponent played by the rules.

***

At Hydra Corporation

"Only three Tower Masters will remain behind," I explained.

Kine had delivered the information to me, and I’d cross-checked it with Niobe. It was genuine.

I informed Carisia of the situation, and she nodded, her eyes sharp with anticipation.

We would soon convene a meeting. Participants would include:

- **Hydra's board members**
- **Kaicle**
- **Geryones**
- **Hector**

Even **Crenemon** and **Lampades** might participate via magic projection.

I wasn't ready to loop Lampades into the full scope of the plan just yet. I intended to reveal it to him only during a strategic briefing before the campaign began.

“Seven out of ten Tower Masters will leave,” I concluded. “While they’re gone, we’ll incite mass uprisings, and by the time the expedition returns, **the rulers of the seven towers will have been replaced**.”

Carisia glanced at me.

“And the three Towers staying behind?”

“Nokmok and Yellow Thunder don’t matter,” I replied. “But White Light... it’s the biggest problem of all.”

Carisia frowned.

“The White Light Tower.”

“…Yes.”

It was a problem.

Even the original **Mage King** had delayed confronting White Light until the very end.

This fact spoke volumes.

The White Light Tower was the strongest of the Ten Towers.

“Still,” I added, “White Light’s hands are tied. Most of its Elders are going on the campaign. The Tower Master is being forced to maintain the *beacon spell* to guide the others back. While that beacon is active, their power is limited.”

A rare smile appeared on Carisia’s face.

I could sense it. The intense emotion behind her gaze.

Her origin. Her source of suffering. The White Light Tower.

Carisia had fled the White Light Tower. It had forged her into the person she was today.

Her long journey with me — from our days as fugitives in the desert to our foundation of Hydra Corp — had been one long effort to destroy the White Light.

Her eyes were not filled with fear.

She didn’t fear the coming battle.

She **longed for it.**

“Orthes,” she said quietly. “Is this really the best we can do?”

“It’s everything we can do,” I replied honestly. “Now, all that’s left is to wait for the heavens to decide.”

Carisia tilted her head slightly, then shook it with a faint smile.

“No, Orthes,” she said. “**The heavens belong to them.**”

The White Light Tower was a tower of "heavenly illumination." It was a tower that ruled over sight, clarity, and guidance.

“They’ve held control of the heavens for too long,” Carisia whispered. Her voice was low, but her declaration was absolute.

“It’s time to break the sky.”

Her eyes glowed with resolve.

And for just a moment, I thought back to our company's name.

Hydra.

A monster whose venom was so potent that even immortals begged for death.

For years, Carisia had poisoned the magical world. Slowly, steadily, spreading her venom through every corner of the Ten Towers.

Now it was time to coat the arrowhead with that venom.

It was time to shoot it straight through the heart of the Ten Towers.

“Then, boss,” I said, my grin matching hers.

“Let’s begin.”

Chapter 169: The Scheme of World Division (2)

Chapter 169: The Scheme of World Division (2)

Orthes' visit was abrupt. To Lampades, it was an unexpected ambush. After all, wasn't Lampades and his magic tower repurposed as an insurance policy for a one-in-a-million contingency?

Because of this, Lampades' attitude was cautious. He could already guess, to some extent, what Orthes might bring up.

"Wasn't it originally the plan to leave us as insurance for an unforeseen crisis?"

"Oh. Are you already guessing my intentions before I've even said a word?"

"It's obvious. I can't imagine any reason for you to visit at this moment other than a war with the Ten Towers. Is it a lack of manpower?"

Orthes shook his head. A flicker of doubt rose within Lampades. If it wasn't due to a lack of manpower, then why had Orthes come to drag Lampades' magic tower into the war?

The simplest explanation would be that Orthes was lying. However, Lampades knew Orthes to be above such shallow deceit. Orthes' deception was always far more sophisticated.

"Quite the opposite. It's too much power that's the problem."

Orthes slowly laid out his plan. He intended to launch a succession war while the main forces of the Ten Towers were tied up on the extra-dimensional navigation route to Argyrion's headquarters outside the dimensional barrier.

"Rough estimates indicate that the outcome might not be in our favor. If things go as they are now, there's a possibility that factions beyond our control could win the succession war."

"So, you need a figurehead? Ha, unbelievable. What, you want to get your hands on several of the Commandments in full?"

"Let's not call them a figurehead. Let's call them a 'capable collaborator.' Doesn't that sound better?"

"You're not even bothering to hide it anymore."

"I've always done honest business with my acquaintances, with no need for concealment."

Lampades reviewed Orthes' plan. The timing was ideal for a succession war. Seven of the tower masters were absent, and even the remaining ones were forced to allocate the Commandments' resources toward maintaining the interdimensional lighthouse.

However, there was still a problem.

Lampades and Kynemon had often disagreed on many points, but there was one thing they both agreed upon:

Orthes was an apocalypticist. And not just any apocalypticist—an unprecedentedly radical one.

In that sense, Orthes' current proposal raised many suspicions. Above all, the fact that his plan didn't involve obliterating magical society entirely was highly suspicious.

Lampades did not hide these suspicions and spoke them plainly. From past experience, he knew it was better to ask Orthes directly rather than giving him the chance to distort his answers through evasive wording.

"If it were up to me, I'd prefer to blow the entire Commandments to bits."

Orthes admitted this with a nonchalant attitude, making it abundantly clear that the current plan wasn't his ideal form.

"But, as I've mentioned before… Something beyond the Ten Towers."

Lampades nodded. Something beyond the Ten Towers. It was hard even to imagine such a thing, but Orthes spoke so earnestly that he had no choice but to believe him.

Orthes explained that this entity was the one behind Argyrion. Someone who had likely guided Argyrion, once a mere pawn of Orthes, to rebel against him and grow into an independent force.

Such a figure would indeed be a sufficient threat for even Orthes to fear. It implied that this being not only understood Orthes' power but had also turned it back against him.

At the very least, it meant that in terms of strategizing and uncovering truths, this being had surpassed the Ten Towers.

"That is precisely why we need other mages. This enemy is on a scale that Hydra Corporation alone cannot contend with. Well… though our boss has come up with some creative ways to utilize the Commandments."

Creative ways to utilize the Commandments. Something about that phrase felt ominous.

Lampades inquired about what he stood to gain by joining Orthes' plan, as well as what role he was expected to play.

"For starters, you'll gain access to the Commandments. At least for a few days, you'll be free to use their boundless power to explore the extra-dimension."

Orthes added a pointed clarification: rather than saying you can explore it, it would be more accurate to say you must explore it.

"You'll have to subtly alter the interdimensional lighthouse spells and use your extra-dimensional radar to interfere with the Ten Towers' return as much as possible. Completely

preventing their return would be ideal, but the Ten Towers surely have their own contingency plans. Delaying their return until we can fully control the situation will suffice."

As Lampades listened to Orthes' explanation, he realized something peculiar. Orthes was already operating under the assumption that he would be fighting someone after securing all the Commandments.

It seemed Orthes viewed the struggle with this someone as far more challenging than the fight against the Ten Towers themselves. His calm assumption that Lampades would secure the Yellow Thunder Commandment contrasted starkly with his extreme caution when discussing the post-succession war situation.

"…It's strange. Do you genuinely believe the Commandments will be so easily obtained? Even with most of the tower masters across the stars, the remaining forces are still powerful enough to be called the strongest in magical society."

"We don't underestimate the Ten Towers. That would be madness. But…"

Orthes furrowed his brow. In a rare moment, Lampades realized Orthes was expressing doubt—uncertainty toward the unknown.

"Our boss is convinced that the success or failure of this succession war will hinge on the outcome of the first battle."

It was a deviation from the flow of their conversation. Nevertheless, Lampades nodded. The statement was, in principle, correct. Traditionally, succession wars were framed as battles between one of the Ten Towers and an alliance of magic towers led by a single champion.

Since each of the Ten Towers represented a particular attribute, the challenging magic towers were typically of the same type. Unlike the challengers, the Ten Towers rarely formed alliances with one another.

However, Orthes' scheme sought to dismantle this traditional structure entirely.

At first glance, it appeared that separate magic tower alliances were challenging individual Ten Towers. However, in reality, all of these alliances were secretly controlled by Hydra Corporation, converging into one massive force.

If this fact were discovered, the Ten Towers would undoubtedly abandon tradition. The conflict would escalate into a full-scale battle between the entire Ten Towers and Hydra Corporation's unified front, nullifying the advantage of a surprise succession war.

This was why Orthes and Carisia placed so much importance on the first battle. Lampades could only assume that Hydra Corporation possessed a decisive weapon capable of challenging even the Commandments.

If the first succession war ended in Hydra Corporation's favor, they could deploy this weapon to other battlefields, tipping the balance of power and seizing the remaining Commandments.

With the absence of the top-tier forces capable of fully utilizing the Commandments, such a scenario wasn't impossible.

However, for this ambush to succeed, the Ten Towers could not learn the full scope of Hydra Corporation's plans in advance.

Thus:

"Hydra Corporation plans to challenge the White Light Magic Tower in the succession war. The current leader of the Ten Towers is undoubtedly the master of the White Tower. By eliminating him, we'll paralyze the Ten Towers' information-sharing network and overthrow them."

"…You're planning to start the first succession war against the strongest magic tower?"

"It's the only way to paralyze the Ten Towers. Our boss believes this battle must be concluded within an hour for the plan to succeed."

Defeating the White Light Tower within an hour of declaring the succession war. It was an outrageous statement.

Yet, if successful, it was undoubtedly a strategy that could plunge the Ten Towers into chaos.

"Do you really think it's possible? What, you and your boss storm the White Light Tower yourselves?"

"Haha. Don't joke. How could the two of us possibly annihilate mages empowered by the Commandments?"

"If not that, then it's an impossible proposition. Even using the weapon you deployed in Algoth City wouldn't make conquering the White Light Tower feasible."

Orthes agreed. He also admitted that he didn't yet understand what method Carisia had in mind to ensure victory within an hour. The idea of using a Commandment bomb briefly crossed his mind—but no, that was meant to counter the Mage King.

Still, Orthes faithfully conveyed Carisia's words:

"She said there is a way. Hydra Corporation has been meticulously preparing for that one thing all along."

From Orthes' words, Lampades discerned two conflicting emotions: curiosity about the method, and confidence that if it was Carisia, she would undoubtedly have it ready.

If this was a plan Orthes was willing to bet everything on, the odds of success weren't low.

"Even transporting the forces alone would be impossible within an hour. Do you mean one hour from the moment the battle begins?"

“Give me your answer by the day the Ten Towers deploy their forces. We need to finalize the locations for emitting disruptive signals with your extra-dimensional radar.”

Chapter 170: The Siege of the White Light(1)

Chapter 170: The Siege of the White Light Magic Tower (1)

After much deliberation, Lampades decided to accept Orthes' proposal. He couldn't ignore the warning Kynemon had once shared with him—a seemingly delusional prophecy: if Orthes were to seize control of the Commandments, that would be the moment the world ends.

According to Kynemon's prediction, Orthes would use the succession war to take control of all the Commandments, then form a global-scale magic array using the Ten Towers and their boundless mana to obliterate the world.[1]

The first half of Kynemon's prophecy—successive succession wars and the theft of the Commandments—was already becoming a reality.

And now that the first half had proven true, there was no guarantee that the second half wouldn't follow suit.

…Still, Lampades believed Orthes when he said he needed to fight against "something that would come after the Ten Towers."

However, even if Orthes and Carisia defeated that unknown entity, Lampades couldn't be certain they wouldn't then turn the Commandments' power to destroy the world.

Thus, Lampades decided to join their plan instead. After all, the cornerstone of the large-scale magic array formed through the Ten Towers would undoubtedly be the Commandments.

If Lampades could gain control of the Yellow Thunder Commandment, he could sabotage the magic array assigned to it. Even if Orthes pressed the proverbial doomsday button, the intricately calculated magic array would collapse, preventing the explosion from reaching its peak and diminishing its destructive power.

In this way, the magical civilization Lampades' tower members relied on would partially survive. This was Lampades' strategy to prepare for the future he feared.

Orthes was delighted by Lampades' decision to cooperate and promptly reported the news to Carisia. Upon hearing it, Carisia collapsed into her chair, as if her strength had finally left her.

She had now done everything possible to set the plan in motion.

"We still have the succession war ahead," Orthes murmured softly beside her. Carisia nodded. As soon as the Ten Towers officially deployed their forces, they would declare the succession war—and bring down the White Light Magic Tower.

Carisia tried to sit up straight, but her body wouldn't respond. Now that the long-awaited moment was so close, the mix of tension and exhilaration was throwing her off balance.

Carisia closed her eyes briefly and removed her gauntlet. Clank. The metallic sound echoed faintly. She extended the hand hidden within the black gauntlet toward Orthes.

“Will you hold it?”

Without a word, Orthes shrugged lightly and clasped Carisia’s right hand with both of his. Feeling the warmth, Carisia wiggled her fingers, seeking more of it. As her left hand moved to cover Orthes’ hands, he finally spoke.

“Well. Looks like this long, long contract between you and me is finally coming to an end.”

“…It does, doesn’t it? We started all this just because White Light didn’t sit right with us,” Carisia replied.

Using Orthes’ finger, she traced words onto the back of his hand, asking in a teasing tone if he planned to quit after this fight with White Light.

Orthes shook his head.

“After that, I suppose I’ll have to beg you to let me stick around a little longer. We still have the Mage King to deal with, after all.”

Carisia chuckled faintly.

***

News spread across the magical society: the Ten Towers’ expeditionary force had breached the dimensional barrier. There was widespread hope that this time, the persistent scourge known as Argyrion would finally be eradicated.

But beneath the surface, a quieter, more secretive expectation rippled like waves.

The prophecy of a battle to end the era of the Ten Towers, a fight to usher in a new age, began to take hold.

Those who had even a glimpse of the truth beneath the surface turned their eyes toward Etna City.

For there resided the monster, born to bring down the giants of the Ten Towers.

***

13 minutes and 25 seconds after the Ten Towers officially deployed their forces, Hydra Corporation’s cross-referenced observations confirmed the news of the expeditionary force.

Hydra Corporation immediately declared a succession war.

Their target: the White Light Magic Tower.

The oldest—and strongest—of the Ten Towers.

***

Due to the physical distance between Etna City and the White Light Magic Tower, even the fastest calculations suggested that the succession war would take at least ten days to conclude.

This wasn't counting the time it would take for White Light to intercept Hydra Corporation's forces and utterly crush them, which would likely be so swift that it wasn't worth estimating.

The ten-day period referred instead to the time it would take Hydra Corporation's forces to reach White Light on foot. The magical infrastructure of society—such as magi-powered trains—was all owned by the Ten Towers, meaning Hydra Corporation naturally couldn't use it.

Most of magical society assumed this battle would end in a tedious stalemate. They were more preoccupied with figuring out who, and for what reason, had instigated an attack on the Ten Towers using some remote tower.

At that moment, Carisia made a shocking declaration:

"The White Light succession war will conclude within one hour."

***

One hour.

That was the time White Light would need to dismantle its lighthouse spells and focus the full power of the Commandments on its defense.

If Hydra Corporation failed to bring down White Light within this hour, they would face the tower's full strength, and the plan would unravel entirely.

For this reason, Carisia issued additional instructions:

"If the succession war is not concluded within one hour, we will trigger the artificial Commandments to overload. To ensure this plan runs smoothly, all directors are to hold their ground in Etna City."

It was a declaration to forcibly take the Ten Towers' seat of power by killing White Light's tower master, no matter what it took. At least, that's how the directors understood it.

The only person who knew that "overload" actually meant "detonate" was Orthes.

Even Kaicle misunderstood the term, assuming it referred to cutting off White Light's mana supply via the artificial Commandments. Only Orthes knew the truth: Carisia had created the artificial Commandments with the sole purpose of destroying White Light itself.

"If this fails as well, the entire plan will be scrapped. The successive succession wars and the theft of the Commandments will be deemed a complete failure. From that point on, ensure your own survival."

Her brief declaration left most of the directors bewildered. There were no detailed strategies on how to deploy their forces or how to repel expected attacks.

Cretone raised his hand.

“Boss… How exactly are we supposed to attack the Ten Towers…?”

“The mission has been issued, has it not? Hold your positions in Etna City.”

Divius scratched his helmeted head. As a former member of Blasphemia, he found this strategy incomprehensible.

“Are the two of you planning to attack alone? That’s suicide. The mana around the Ten Towers is completely dominated by the Commandments—it’s nearly impossible to even use magic. And isn’t it common sense, even in ancient warfare, that a siege requires three times the defenders’ numbers? Against the Ten Towers, even ten times wouldn’t be enough.”

As expected. Carisia exchanged a glance with Orthes.

Some individuals who had been privy to fragments of Carisia’s blueprint for attacking White Light quietly left the room to prepare for their roles.

Bertrand.
Kaicle.
Arabella.

“We won’t be conducting a siege,” Carisia announced, continuing as though the directors’ confusion didn’t concern her.

“The siege is White Light’s responsibility.”

It was then that the directors finally realized what had been bothering them.

Orthes, who was always at Carisia’s side, was no longer there.

***

“Miss Kine, is this the right channel?”

“Yes. Just give me a moment….”

Orthes and Kine were now in Elysion, the holy sanctuary of magic.

Elysion was the midpoint where all mana from the Commandments converged, its attributes canceling each other out and transforming into pure mana.

Orthes was here to sabotage that sacred site.

Ordinarily, only individuals subjected to the highest levels of mental screening by Argos’ dimension could serve as guards in Elysion.

However, Argos' influence had waned, and the faction that rose to replace it was led by Orthes' allies.

Thus, it had been absurdly easy for Orthes to infiltrate Elysion under an official identity.

"Well then, shall we begin our 'City Mana Corporation duties'!"

Orthes manipulated the control panel for the mana conduits. Ten main mana conduits connected to Elysion's core power source.

One of those conduits, the one connected to White Light, was shut off.

As the flow of mana to Elysion was blocked, the mana density around White Light began to rise slowly.

At the same time, Orthes sent an email to a randomized address.

Niobe.

The former agents of Blasphemia, who were meant to serve the Ten Towers, had begun moving against them.

The rebellion didn't start with grand fanfare. Once, Auditor-General Salmosia had been summoned to Elysion by the Ten Towers due to Argyrion's presence there.[2] He had entered the Ether Space while retaining his physical form.

Outside the Ten Towers' domain, achieving the Eleusis phenomenon required incredibly complex conditions.

But within their territory, the overwhelming mana of the Commandments made it simple to create an arbitrary virtual space where one could enter with their physical body.

Niobe merely activated the device that concentrated mana to form such an Ether Space.

Of course, the Ether Space would form within White Light's territory.

Chapter 171: The Siege of the White (2)

Chapter 171: The Siege of the White Light Tower (2)

Carisia's life, excluding Orthes, could be summarized as a quest for revenge against the White Light Tower.

Even Hydra Corporation, in the end, was merely a means to enact that vengeance. But the fact that Carisia viewed Hydra Corporation as a tool didn't mean she neglected its management.

After all, her target of revenge was White Light. You might only need an ordinary knife to tear through paper, but to destroy alloyed steel plates, you required a weapon with equivalent destructive power.

From the moment Hydra Corporation was founded, every task given to its members had been designed with the intent of forging them into weapons capable of standing against White Light.

The standard for "standing against" was low. Achieving victory in direct combat with White Light was almost impossible. Carisia didn't expect much.

All she wanted was for Hydra Corporation to hold Etna City until her duel with the White Light Tower Master concluded. That was all Carisia demanded from Hydra Corporation.

For the most critical phase of the plan, only she and Orthes would be necessary.

To the directors, her orders were incomprehensible. "Defend Etna City"? There was no reason for White Light to dispatch an expeditionary force to Etna City. The success or failure of the succession war would ultimately be determined by who reached the Commandments. As such, the battlefield would naturally converge on White Light's territory.

At that moment, the directors felt a faint tremor.

Guuuuuuuung—

A strange sound resonated through Etna City, like the rumbling of an engine starting or the hum of concentrated mana. The faint vibrations grew stronger.

『Do you hear me?』

"Yes."

Orthes' voice came through. Carisia snapped her fingers, and a hologram rose in the center of the meeting room.

Orthes' image appeared over an unfamiliar landscape. The directors quickly realized he was not in Etna City.

Ignoring the confusion on their faces, Orthes continued speaking nonchalantly.

『The mana density around the White Light Tower is increasing. In about ten minutes, it will reach the level required to form an Eleusis space.』

"Kaicle has also begun her work. Have you sent the security codes for the communications line to Director Arabella?"

『I just transmitted the access codes for the Blasphemia line. Please tell those present to brace themselves. I'll join you shortly.』

Beep. The hologram disappeared. Amid the directors' evident confusion, some began to catch on to the hinted strategy.

Taros, who had long been tasked by Bertrand with scouring mana waste disposal sites for anything that could serve as fuel, growled lowly.

"Boss, you don't mean… Etna City itself…?"

Carisia nodded.

"In exactly 9 minutes and 40 seconds, Etna City will move directly above the White Light Tower."

Her golden eyes glinted sharply. For Neuro, the head of the Hunters' Guild, it was a familiar look—the eyes of a predator sinking its fangs into prey it had hunted for years.

***

Kaicle was deep beneath Etna Volcano, making final adjustments to the Ether Space mechanism. Bertrand and Geryones were assisting her.

"Is this even possible?"

Geryones asked, half-excited, half-doubtful. He knew of Eleusis in theory, but…

"The difference in mass between a city and a person is astronomical. And the mana required for that?"

"There's more than enough," Bertrand rumbled in reply.

"The Commandments' excess mana alone can alter the mana composition of entire continents. We've cut off Elysion's supply, redirected their spatial creation technology, and concentrated the mana. Mana capable of moving an entire city's mass? We're not dealing with ordinary mana cores here—we're dealing with the Commandments."

Bertrand glanced at Kaicle. For this operation, the mana from their own artificial Commandments was also being fully deployed.

The mechanism worked by expanding the passageway—originally only large enough for a single person—using the combined power of both the real and artificial Commandments.

Geryones scratched his head with one of his six hands.

“Damn it, I’m more of a field guy. This theory stuff goes right over my head. So, what do you want me to do, old man?”

“Adjust the formula. The mana needs to be evenly distributed across Etna City. In theory, we’ve already optimized the city’s structure through constant redevelopment, but in case of any structural issues, you’ll need to fix them immediately. If a red light flashes on this panel, head out and deal with it.”

The exhaustive redevelopment of both Etna City’s surface and its underground infrastructure had all been leading up to this moment. The city itself served as an enormous magic circle designed to support the expansion of Eleusis.

The modifications to the mana conduits and the excavation of the underground space, conducted using Taros’ mutant subordinates, had all been part of this plan.

“So I’m just grunt labor, huh? What about Cretone, the guy who put so much muscle into tearing up the city?”

“He’s not skilled in magic. He’ll be leading the melee forces in Etna City’s ground defense instead.”

While Bertrand and Geryones busied themselves with adjustments, Kaicle slowly activated the artificial Commandments.

The countless relics they’d fed into it were now acting as a primer, extracting divine energy to power the artificial Commandments.

Residual traces of divinity still lingered in Etna City. Following the echoes of the Ascended’s footsteps that Orthes had revealed, the artificial Commandments pulsed with power.

Lampades’ radar activated. A list of points beyond the dimensional barrier that reacted to the artificial Commandments’ mana appeared.

Kaicle filtered out the false signals—entities from the extra-dimension reacting to the mere release of power—and identified pure, unintentional energy points.

Connection established. The artificial Commandments began to glow with multicolored light. From beyond the sea of stars, the power of gods who had long left this world began to surge forth.

Kaicle sent a message to Arabella.

Arabella, connected to her spider-shaped cybernetic frame, was silently grinding her metaphorical teeth.

Kaicle. Carisia. But above all, Orthes.

“Linking our Ether Space to theirs? Easier said than done!”

In essence, they were hacking the Ten Towers’ systems—a truly insane act. Even with the internal data Orthes had provided from Blasphemia, it was barely feasible.

Without the foundational technology extracted and developed from the brain chips[2] of Torres Tower’s former branch leaders—who had once pursued the goal of hacking the Commandments—this would’ve been impossible.

“So this was Orthes’ plan all along?”

The sheer scale of Orthes’ grand design sent chills down Arabella’s spine. She finally understood why they had exterminated every last member of Torres Tower’s faction and meticulously collected their brain chips.

With a sigh, Arabella extended her web.

The Ether Space beneath Etna Volcano rapidly expanded, growing large enough to encompass the entire city.

At the edge of the expanded Ether Space, Arabella’s web reached out, connecting to the secret Ether Network laid out by the Ten Towers via Panoptes—a network designed to provide access to any location in the world.

The security spells guarding the Ten Towers’ infrastructure opened effortlessly before Blasphemia’s authorization codes.

The Eleusis spaces above the White Light Tower and beneath Etna City were now linked through Panoptes’ network.

At that precise moment, a deafening sound reverberated across the world.

It was like the shattering of glass, the violent rupture of tectonic plates, or the thunderous roar following a storm of lightning—a sound both majestic and bone-chilling.

***

“Well, thank you for this.”

“Don’t mention it. I’ll probably be stuck doing this all day.”

The cheeky response came from Proditor, a priest of Pyrraeus, the Gatekeeper God. He had just used the holy incantation of spatial travel to transport Orthes close to White Light.

It was a precarious location, just outside the reach of the White Light Commandment’s influence.

“Is the plan still on track?”

“Yes. We have about one hour. If we don’t bring down White Light within that time, we lose. If we succeed…”

“Continue the succession wars. If you fail, retreat. Got it. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Haha. I’d love to, but using the holy incantation within the Ten Towers’ territory might be a bit… risky, don’t you think?”

Proditor grinned. Even now, this was pushing the limits of acceptable risk. If the holy incantation were detected within the Commandments’ influence, it would be instantly exposed.

Until Blasphemia’s sabotage fully disrupted the Ten Towers’ internal communication network, using the incantation had to be kept to a minimum.

“Good luck! When we’re less busy, I’ll read your fortune or something!”

With that, Proditor vanished beyond a golden gate. Orthes looked up at the sky.

At that moment, Etna City’s earth and White Light’s sky connected.

A profound roar shook the heavens and the earth.

Crack. The sky fractured.

Like a hazy image seen through a broken window, the silhouette of something immense loomed above the White Light Tower.

Orthes knew what it was.

Etna City had arrived.

The shadow of the city loomed directly over the White Light Tower. Anti-air magic erupted toward it, but none of it struck. What hovered above was merely a shadow, separated by a thin veil of space.

The massive attack spells fueled by the White Light Commandment struck the fractured sky instead, pushing the boundary of the space to its limit.

Finally, the sky shattered.

Fragments of the broken sky rained down like shards of glass, falling onto White Light’s barrier. The fragments acted as reverse-magic devices, disrupting the spells maintaining the barrier.

Beyond the shattered veil, Etna City slowly revealed itself. The polished, dome-shaped underside of the city was clear evidence that this assault had been planned for a long time.

The artificial Commandments’ overflowing mana, combined with semi-permanent generators harnessing volcanic heat, powered ultra-high-output propulsion engines[3].

The city's dome-like underside was densely packed with engine nozzles. The engines' emitted mana and light cascaded down the sky's fractures like liquid. This condensed, liquefied mana fell like rain.

Each droplet of the mana rain acted as a corrosive weapon, neutralizing the White Light Commandment's influence. The barrier enveloping the White Light Tower began to dissolve.

Eventually, the engines' light dimmed. All of their energy was redirected toward forming a shield around Etna City itself.

The significance was simple.

The city was falling.

It was the first reappearance of an extreme-mass weapon on this scale since the Mage King's era.

Etna City descended alongside the broken pieces of the sky. White Light's response was swift. Instead of retaliating, it poured all its mana into rebuilding its defenses.

Empowered by the Commandments, the White Light Tower managed to reconstruct its barrier in the nick of time, preventing the city's direct impact.

But that wasn't the end.

At that moment, the engines mounted on Etna City's upper section ignited. Unlike the propulsion engines below, these were designed solely to accelerate the city's fall.

Carisia adjusted the artificial Commandments' mana supply in real time from the heart of Etna Volcano, pushing Etna City to fall faster.

And so came catastrophe. The White Light Tower's barrier shattered brilliantly. Even so, White Light managed to deflect the city's trajectory just enough to avoid a direct hit to the tower's core.

It was a praiseworthy defense.

But Carisia had anticipated it. Of course White Light would block this attack.

And she was prepared.

The angle of the acceleration engines shifted. The city's descent was no longer vertical—it slashed diagonally.

Etna City pierced into the White Light Tower like a blade. The tower did not collapse, sustained by the Commandments' power.

Now, it was time for the two of them.

Carisia used the overflowing mana from the artificial Commandments and the destabilized space to teleport.

She appeared at the upper levels of the White Light Tower, where Etna City's pointed tip had struck like a ramming spear.

Beyond the shattered walls of White Light, hostility surged forth like a flood.

Carisia smiled savagely. She had been waiting her whole life for this moment.

"White Light—!"

Her long-dreamed declaration echoed.

"The ghost you erased has returned! I will reclaim my name!"

Chapter 172: The Siege of White Light Tower(3)

Chapter 172: The Siege of White Light Tower(3)

In magical society, the fundamental structure of a city was simple and straightforward. First, there was the Magic Tower—a control apparatus for the mana core, which purified extra-dimensional mana. The sphere of influence of the mana core materialized in the form of barriers surrounding the city's borders.

A magic tower and its barriers—these were the most basic components of a city's structure.

The barriers were part of the magic circle linked to the magic tower and also served as the operational boundary for the extra-dimensional purification formula. You could even say they visualized the purification range of the mana core assigned to the tower.

In cities like Etna, which housed multiple magic towers, the extent of the barrier's coverage increased accordingly. The Etna City that Carisia had sent crashing into White Light included the entire city, outer walls and all. Its mass alone was overwhelming compared to an ordinary city.

But even such colossal mass couldn't exceed the sphere of influence of White Light. The area within Etna City's barriers was a result of the combined output of three mana cores, yet a single Ten Commandments far surpassed that combined output.

Thanks to the overwhelming output of the Ten Commandments, the Ten Towers structured their barriers as layered systems. The mana density between each wall was adjusted so that the closer one got to the tower, the purer and denser the mana became.

This served as both an artificially tailored environment for magical experiments and a symbol of social hierarchy—a stark reminder that purer mana was reserved for mages of higher standing.

Because of this structure, one could often predict the outcome of a succession battle based on the breach of the first barrier.

Under most circumstances, the first barrier was manned by the weakest disciples. By measuring how much combat power the challengers expended in their initial fight, the overall flow of the succession battle could be reasonably anticipated.

But this time, the circumstances were far from ordinary. White Light had stationed elders at its first barrier.

The most skilled elders had been dispatched to the Argyrion Expedition, while the remaining elders stood ready to intercept enemies at the barriers. As for the mages who stayed behind at the main tower, their level was below that of the elders.

Except for one—the Tower Lord.

This unusual deployment of forces was a direct result of Hydra Corporation's succession battle.

The magical society at large viewed Hydra Corporation's succession battle as an act of madness. The more rational members of the society speculated that there must be an underlying intent behind Hydra Corporation's actions.

It was simply inconceivable for an ordinary magic tower, not even one of the Ten, to challenge the Ten Towers to a succession battle. There had to be a third party pulling the strings behind the scenes.

However, most analysts hit a wall when they reached the next question: "Who on earth stands to gain from such an absurd move?"

Surprisingly, White Light presented a convincing answer to this question.

"Another of the Ten Towers."

The Lords of the Ten Towers were asymmetric forces in magical society. Officially, the Lord of White Light was the pinnacle of light-attribute magic; unofficially, they were considered the greatest mage of this era, among the most powerful of the Ten Lords.

While the era's greatest mage remained behind, the other Nine Tower Lords had disappeared beyond the extra-dimension. This was White Light's golden opportunity to extend its dominance, increasing its influence over magical society and rising beyond a mere member of the Ten Towers to its leader.

So, other towers had likely devised a plan: they would use the name of a lesser tower, like Hydra Corporation, to declare a succession battle.

White Light had identified the timing of when another tower approached Hydra Corporation—during the relic self-reporting period and the internal investigations of Hydra Corporation. Hydra Corporation, which had failed to unify even Etna City, suddenly gained the resources and influence necessary to involve itself in the tower lord decision battle of Amimone Tower. Such rapid growth was nothing short of extraordinary.

White Light Tower's Strategic Planning Division analyzed this explosive growth as being the result of sponsorship from another of the Ten Towers. It concluded that a tower interested in recruiting Hydra Corporation into its sphere of influence had granted them overwhelming support.

A nameless tower from the outskirts had, in a short time, grown to the point where it could compete for the legacy of a Proper Magic Tower. Such growth was only possible under the shadow of the Ten Towers.

Initially, the Ten Tower supporting Hydra Corporation likely viewed their sponsorship as a simple means of expanding their faction. But when the Argyrion Expedition was announced, the situation changed.

To prevent White Light's expansion, they would use Hydra Corporation as a stopgap measure. Since Hydra Corporation's allegiance to a specific Ten Tower had not yet been confirmed, it was an ideal tool for this purpose.

White Light's Strategic Planning Division deduced that Hydra Corporation's role was "name borrowing". Hydra Corporation would formally declare the succession battle, but the actual attack would be conducted by another Ten Tower.

It was a warning.

Even in the absence of a Tower Lord, the other Ten Towers would not sit idly by and allow White Light's expansionist ambitions. It was an implicit threat to intercept White Light whenever it made any move to physically extend its influence.

White Light's Strategic Planning Division had prepared this analysis the moment Hydra Corporation declared the succession battle. It was an almost instantaneous answer, provided by think tanks linked to Ether Space.

Thus, White Light positioned its elders at the front. Their intent was to adjust their response according to the severity of the warning prepared by the other Ten Towers.

If the warning proved powerful enough, they would acknowledge that it was not yet time to pursue dominance over magical society. However, if no sufficient force remained to stop White Light...

White Light would advance.

Towards ascension.

***

White Light likely perceived the situation this way. The fact that the elders were primarily stationed in the direction of the magic engine train tracks—linked to other Ten Towers—made it almost certain.

But all of these plans were rendered meaningless by Carisia's "It's Etna City! WRYYYYYYYYY!"

While White Light focused all its resources on the falling Etna City, I managed to break through the three barriers and reach the main tower.

At moments like this, I found myself oddly grateful for my magicless constitution. After all, it rendered me immune to the creature-detection spells that were practically plastered all over White Light's domain.

From the main tower, immense mana was pouring out. Not only was it supplied by the Ten Commandments at close range, but thanks to my earlier handiwork, even more mana was now concentrated in this space.

Even with my eyes barely open, I felt dizzy.

I swallowed hard. This was no time to clutch my head in despair. The mages who had been in the tower had already gone to the upper levels to pursue Carisia.

But they weren't the only ones. The mages stationed on White Light's outskirts would also head toward the tower to intercept Carisia.

And I had to stop them from joining forces.

I exhaled. It would be a difficult task, but it was nothing compared to Carisia, who was fighting White Light's Tower Lord alone until I could join her.

Where should I start? Most of the mana within White Light's domain was under the control of the Ten Commandments. While the artificial Ten Commandments' encroachment had begun, its influence wasn't yet sufficient to disrupt the main tower directly connected to Etna City.

Not that it mattered to me. Mana control was only relevant to those who could actually use magic. My own use of magical elements was limited to the magic-engraved drive. Tools like that, which operated on built-in mana, were still functional.

But such basic magic wouldn't be enough to change the tide of battle. Overwriting White Light's defensive spells? Impossible—the scale was far too massive. Adding a few formulae to the magic-engraved drive?

The basic spells of common magic-engraved drives couldn't withstand White Light's mana output. They would shatter before I even finished overwriting them.

If I couldn't rely on magic...

Then there was only one thing left to trust in: divine power.

However, the god I prayed to was not one of the Twelve High Gods.

It was the God of Firepower.

I fiddled with the special relic-enhanced equipment Carisia had entrusted to me.

***

The elders stationed at the third barrier, White Light's outermost wall, managed to maintain their composure despite the catastrophic fall of Etna City.

But even they could not fathom the principle behind such a massive spatial transfer. Moving an entire city would require a mana source on par with the Ten Commandments.

No matter how wary the other Ten Towers were of White Light's dominance, it was unthinkable that they would deploy their own Ten Commandments in such a backwater region.

So how had such an immense mana supply been secured?

The elders' thoughts raced. Suddenly, one of them spoke.

"What if they've burned through all the relics they've confiscated over the years?"

"What? Sure, deploying them all at once could momentarily produce an output comparable to the Ten Commandments, but... are you suggesting Blasphemia betrayed us?"

"Not betrayed. Those behind Hydra Corporation must also be one of the Ten Towers. Blasphemia wouldn't have resisted an order to hand over the relics. They'd simply have obeyed."

"Despicable. As the rightful heirs of magic, we, White Light, are naturally destined to be the first to ascend. And yet they resort to such measures to hinder us?"

The elders concluded that the party responsible for Etna City's spatial transfer must have been one of the Ten Towers. Such a feat was beyond even the Proper Magic Towers, for they lacked the mana to perform such a miracle.

It was a logical judgment that informed their next move.

"In that case, we cannot rule out the possibility of a follow-up attack via the magic engine trains. Half of us elders will head to the main tower as reinforcements."

"Will that be enough?"

"We still have the Tower Lord, don't we?"

A statement of firm confidence. Yet, had they heard Carisia's imminent scream, they might have realized the error in their judgment.

But the elders were not given the chance to correct their mistake.

Their path was blocked by Orthes.

A massive explosion echoed from the main tower.

And then another.

And another.

Chapter 173: The Siege of White Light (4)

Chapter 173: The Siege of White Light Tower(4)

I wasn't someone who believed every problem could be solved with violence.

That was Carisia.

Still, some problems could only be solved with violence. Like preventing anyone from approaching the White Light Tower Tower's main spire, for example.

I pulled out a relic bomb. While it wasn't possible to replicate the explosive force Carisia unleashed when she planted dozens, maybe even hundreds, of relics across Amimone City and detonated them using an array, this bomb alone had enough power to reduce most structures to dust.

But just throwing this bomb at the spire as it was would be pointless.

It wasn't about the mages intercepting it—those chasing Carisia had already gone higher up the tower.

No, the issue was the White Light Tower Tower itself.

The spire, receiving the magical power of the Ten Commandments at its core, was so resilient that only a method as absurd as the Etna City Drop could inflict any meaningful damage.

Even if I used my eyes to disrupt the tower's defensive wards and temporarily weaken its structural integrity, the outcome wouldn't change.

The tower wasn't a physical structure so much as it was a magical construct. Even if I were somehow able to blast the lower section to pieces, the spire wouldn't collapse. As long as the shape of the tower was imprinted into the Ten Commandments, the spire could stand firm without a foundation.

Not only that, it would regenerate, weaving its physical matter back together using raw magical energy.

So my goal wasn't to physically block the passageway.

I opened my eyes.

The boundless flow of power generated by the Ten Commandments struck my mind like a hammer. A flood of information surged over me the moment I looked. It was reminiscent of the fractal chain of data I encountered when peering into Nastion's thoughts.

The difference, however, was that while Nastion's mental defenses were an infinite loop designed to overwhelm my perception, the White Light Tower Tower simply bombarded me with raw data that far exceeded the limits of what my brain could process.

Still, I endured. At this moment, no one else could take on this task but me.

I analyzed the defensive barrier surrounding the White Light Tower Tower. I abandoned any attempt to decipher the secondary and tertiary barriers. Focusing on the warding that connected the first barrier to the main spire would suffice.

I traced the flow of magic. Just as there are strokes in calligraphy, magic circles also follow structured sequences. The defensive spells were incredibly refined, with no wasted elements. It was a marvel of efficiency—proof of thousands of years of refinement.

Its simplicity was its flaw.

Cross-referencing it with the magical systems Carisia had described in the past, I found them almost identical. They hadn't bothered to hide or modify the structure, likely confident that no one could counter it even if they understood it.

I pinpointed the order in which the magic flowed.

I tilted my head upward. From where the main spire of White Light Tower Tower clashed with Etna City, the artificial Ten Commandments and White Light Tower's domain were locked in an invisible struggle, eroding each other's alien powers.

That was it. The White Light Tower Tower's defensive barrier also served as an extra-dimensional cleansing field.

Of course, Etna City's magic tower had a similar cleansing field.

The two wards shared an essential similarity at their core. That shared nature would become the invisible dagger I would drive into White Light Tower.

I looked at the pristine white wall of the tower. It looked climbable.

More than anything, I wanted to scar that flawless white. It was White Light Tower that turned my life in the magical society upside down when I ran off with Carisia, wasn't it?

I pulled out a specially crafted relic and set the detonation timer.

It was time to run.

***

Orthes sprinted up the wall of the spire, tracing a spiral path. The mages who should have intercepted him were either locked in battle with Carisia or trying to repel the force of Etna City that had collided with the spire.

No one noticed the most dangerous chaos unfolding in the midst of this battlefield.

Orthes placed the relic bombs precisely where they needed to be. There wasn't much time left before detonation.

Activating the communicator embedded in his gauntlet, Orthes shouted, trusting that someone—anyone—on the council of directors would hear him.

"Cease fire immediately! Brace for impact!"

There was a sound on the other end of the communicator, but Orthes didn’t have time to decipher it. The detonation was imminent.

In his vision, he saw the glow of magical circuits coursing through Etna City. He also traced the flow of energy within the White Light Tower Tower.

The instant the magic circuits of Etna City collided with those of White Light Tower, the countdown reached zero.

Orthes kicked off the wall with all his might, leaping into the air above the massive fissure where the two forces had clashed.

The mages of White Light Tower, engaged in a siege against Etna City, turned their gaze upward, unable to look away from the intruder who had burst onto the scene. Orthes grinned and hurled the final relic bomb into the heart of the spire.

A flash.

The explosion came before the sound. A deafening roar drowned out all other noises as the relic bombs Orthes had planted detonated in succession.

The flows of magical energy from White Light Tower and Etna City intertwined, creating a new, unstable current. Each subsequent explosion built upon this chaotic interaction.

Orthes had placed the bombs precisely where the flows converged, ensuring that each detonation occurred at the optimal moment to twist the magical currents further.

Though both the artificial Ten Commandments and White Light Tower shared a similar foundational principle, their energies were fundamentally different.

The artificial Ten Commandments were rooted in divine power, while White Light Tower drew its strength from pure magic. A boundary separated these two forces, preventing them from easily mixing.

Carisia’s bombs obliterated that boundary, acting as a catalyst that fused the two energies through violent explosions.

The merging currents formed a single, colossal magical line.

At that exact moment, Orthes stood at the edge of the magical boundary shared by Etna City and White Light Tower. By throwing himself into the spire alongside the final relic bomb, he placed himself at the epicenter of their convergence.

Raising his high-frequency blade, Orthes drove it into the exposed mana conduit of White Light Tower.

Using a technique that overwrote magical formulas, Orthes fused the cleansing fields of the artificial Ten Commandments and White Light Tower into one.

Brilliant auroras erupted, not into the sky, but downward—into the spire of White Light Tower and the floating Etna City.

It was a towering pillar of light, a god-like judgment descending from the heavens. A kaleidoscope of chaotic colors, a blinding conflagration.

The barrier born from this collision was monstrous. A sealing field that annihilated everything it touched, reducing matter to particles smaller than atoms.

White Light Tower was isolated.

***

Orthes knew his mission had succeeded when he saw the mages of White Light Tower collapse, vomiting blood—or at least, he assumed it was blood. His own vision was clouded with red.

Using his monstrous ‘eyes’ to take in the entirety of White Light Tower and Etna City had pushed his body to its limits.

Each blink left a sticky residue on his eyelids—likely blood.

He staggered, struggling to remain standing. Though he had braced himself for the impact, enduring it was no easy feat. He reminded himself that Carisia was still fighting. It wasn’t time to collapse just yet.

He scanned his surroundings one last time.

The mages of White Light Tower, who had been connected to the Ten Commandments for magical support, were now overwhelmed. The alien energy Orthes had forced into their circuits burned through their magical pathways.

The pain must have been excruciating, like having their entire nervous system ripped apart.

Only those with cybernetic brains or extraordinary willpower could have endured it. Among them, of course, was the master of the White Light Tower Tower.

The mages of Etna City, particularly those in leadership positions, had been briefed on the plan. They only connected to the artificial Ten Commandments for magical reinforcement after the sealing field had stabilized.

The sole exception was Carisia. She was the vanguard, tasked with drawing all attention and confronting the tower master head-on.

Orthes could easily imagine her laughing maniacally, masking her pain as she fought. She wouldn’t show weakness in front of the White Light Tower Tower master.

Using his high-frequency blade as a crutch, Orthes forced himself to stand.

And then, he ran.

This was the final battle between White Light Tower and Carisia.

At the very least, he would be by her side.

Chapter 174: Ten Commandments Frontline (1)

Chapter 174: Ten Commandments Frontline (1)

15 minutes since the declaration of the White Light Tower succession war.

White Light Tower suspected that Hydra Corporation's declaration of the succession war had been instigated by another of the Ten Magic Towers. So did the other Nine Towers. It was the only logical explanation.

Each of the Nine Towers hoped another would step forward to pull the strings behind Hydra Corporation, forming an alliance to check White Light Tower's dominance. A cooperative effort to halt their runaway supremacy.

But no such covert dealings occurred between the Towers. Was each one planning to face White Light Tower alone?

Perhaps. After all, this succession war wasn't about launching an all-out war against White Light Tower. It was merely a warning—an exercise to send a message. There was no need to involve the other Towers.

At least, that's what they thought.

Then came the moment no one expected: one after another, the succession war was declared against all the Magic Towers, catching each Tower off guard. Before any of them could even make sense of the situation, chaos erupted. War had begun.

The first wave of combatants wasn't made up of mages. Nor were they priests. According to Orthes' plan, they were to be held back as a trump card for the war's most pivotal moments.

Instead, the vanguard Orthes unleashed in the "Ten Commandments Revolution" was...

"Haah... Damn brat. Tasking an old man like me with something this insane..."

...knights.

Mages who dared to trespass into the domain of another Magic Tower would find it almost impossible to control their magic. And yet, in order to claim the Ten Commandments, one had to breach the very heart of their enemy's domain. That was why the Towers held an unassailable advantage in succession wars.

But for knights?

Knights didn't use magic. They wielded aura. Though they weren't completely immune to the influence of the Ten Commandments' magical dominance, it didn't impose any fatal penalties on them.

Furthermore, no mage ever anticipated a coordinated assault by knights. That's because knights had long been rendered obsolete by magic. They were relics of a bygone era, their defeat by magic so absolute that they'd become history's losers.

Their legacy, aura techniques, had been reduced to nothing more than combat protocols programmed into the circuits of golems. The once-proud "knightly orders" no longer existed in any recognizable form.

So when seasoned warriors, masters of aura, suddenly threw themselves into close combat, the battlefield descended into pandemonium. The attackers' identity was impossible to discern.

The elders overseeing Yellow Thunder Tower, filling in for their tower lord who could barely stay awake for a few hours each day, were horrified.

Even ether-based long-distance communication through the network wasn't functioning properly. The only means of maintaining remote communication was by manually transmitting electrical signals into the opposing devices—something only their most skilled operators could manage.

"Is this the Black Dark Tower's doing? Have they unearthed some ancient knights' crypt?!"

"Do those look like Death Knights to you? No, they're alive! They've hired mercenaries—agents who clean up dimensional erosion zones, and in bulk!"

"Mercenaries? What kind of organization could possibly hire this many of those thugs? Only another Tower could afford something like this!"

A heated debate broke out among Yellow Thunder's elders. And at some point, one of them recalled a similar situation from the past—a Tower employing mercenaries on a smaller scale.

White Light Tower.

They remembered the clandestine request to hunt down the "White Light Tower Monster," an effort that White Light Tower had contributed significantly to creating. Though the request hadn't been officially issued under White Light Tower's name, the connection was obvious in hindsight.

However, the current scale of this operation was vastly different. Back then, White Light Tower had hired perhaps five mercenaries at most. Now, there were well over a hundred mercenaries assaulting the battlefield.

That said, the Magic Towers historically had no reason to associate with mercenaries. The Towers wielded overwhelming power in their own right, and when additional forces were needed, they could simply mobilize affiliated dark towers under their jurisdiction.

White Light Tower only resorted to hiring mercenaries to avoid exposing its involvement. They could have easily attempted to kill the White Light Tower Monster through more conventional means.

Of course, that mission had ultimately failed.

The details of this incident were only revealed later during the investigation into White Light Tower's involvement in the disappearance of Blasphemia's vice-commander.

Since then, White Light Tower hadn't made any further known attempts to work with mercenaries. After all, the White Light Tower Monster had been dealt with by that time.

But it was a fact that White Light Tower had once established a channel to hire mercenaries. Among the Ten Towers, White Light Tower was the only one to have set up such a line of contact for recruiting mercenaries on this scale.

"So, White Light Tower assumes we're the ones behind this assault? What reason would they have for thinking that? Have they all lost their minds?!"

"No, think carefully. Even if White Light Tower did organize this force, isn't this still strange? The succession war began less than thirty minutes ago. Are you telling me they've mobilized a force of this size in that short time? It's ridiculous!"

Of course it was. But this was the Ten Towers.

The elders of the Towers, who understood their peers' capabilities better than anyone, found their speculation only growing more confused.

And this confusion was exactly what Orthes had planned for.

***

The battle against Yellow Thunder Tower held a unique position in Orthes' strategy. It stood out, even in the backup plans.

The other units in the Ten Commandments Frontline were ordered to retreat immediately if the assault on White Light Tower failed. But not the Lampades unit.

Lampades recalled Orthes' words.

"Under no circumstances can Yellow Thunder Tower be left standing."

"Why?"

"Yellow Thunder is the weakest. Though its lord remains, the elders on the frontlines are only there because the lord is in no condition to act. Remember the 'insurance' plan I mentioned earlier? It's still active."

"You're saying Lampades will become the fallback refuge if things go south?"

Orthes nodded. The only safe haven from White Light Tower's fury after their inevitable retaliation would be another Magic Tower with equivalent authority.

If the fight against White Light Tower ended in failure, Orthes planned to hide Carisia within Lampades Tower.

“The second reason is this: If defeating White Light Tower is the first condition for victory, then subduing Yellow Thunder is the second.”

Orthes pointed to Lampades’ radio interference technology.

“With the Ten Commandments’ power boosting your jamming capabilities, you’ll gain the ability to control the entire Ten Commandments Frontline’s communications. You understand how massive a tactical advantage that is, don’t you?”

Orthes then introduced Lampades to an elderly man who had been waiting nearby.

“…Hector?”

“Oh? You know me?”

“Of course. You’re a legend in our line of work. A man who solved countless requests with just a single blade...”

Lampades glanced at Orthes and immediately made the connection. He understood why they were friends.

“Old man Hector is actually a key figure in an anti-Tower faction. He’s more moderate than Kynemon, the revolutionary, but...”

“What?”

“Oh, never mind that. What’s important is that the fighters Hector leads are all seasoned mercenaries. A band of soldiers suspiciously skilled in aura combat, led by a former mercenary. What do you think Yellow Thunder will make of that?”

Lampades answered hesitantly, wanting to avoid the chaos of this situation altogether.

“They’d assume the mercenaries are exploiting the chaos of the magical society to challenge the Towers’ power structure.”

“That’s the logical conclusion. But since you and I are close...”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing. I just meant that despite not meeting in years, we’re still connected.”

“...Fine. And?”

“And, well, it just so happens that the mercenary you were close with had a history with White Light Tower. That alone gives enough room for the elders to speculate on other scenarios.”

Overwhelmed by the sheer volume of new information, Lampades felt his mind spinning.

“In any case,” Orthes concluded, “this chaos will delay their decision-making. That much is certain.”

Even if it didn't, Orthes added, the sudden attack by a "mercenary" faction would leave them scrambling for answers.

"In this confusion, we have a chance to do something decisive. Lampades, you and Hector have a critical role to play."

Lampades looked toward Hector, who simply grinned mischievously, his strange shirt wrinkling as he adjusted his stance. It was as if he already knew the plan.

"What exactly is this role?"

"Assassination."

"Assassination? Of whom?"

"Who else? The lord of Yellow Thunder Tower."

The enchantware monitoring Lampades' vitals blared a warning as his blood pressure spiked.

"That's—"

"Oh, don't worry. If infiltration is the issue, I've already brought in an expert."

Orthes gestured toward empty air.

A golden door materialized from nothing. As it opened, a young boy stepped through. Orthes turned to Lampades with a calm smile.

"This is Proditor. To put it simply, he's one of the most dangerous among the twelve priests of the old gods."

Lampades closed his eyes.

Chapter 175: Ten Commandments Frontline (2)

Chapter 175: Ten Commandments Frontline (2)

"Even if we're talking about assassination, the target is a lord of the Ten Magic Towers. Do you really think the master of Yellow Thunder Tower would meekly allow themselves to be killed?"

“For all your concerns, let me introduce someone who has actually attempted to assassinate them. Everyone, please welcome Mr. Demus! He works in the same organization as Proditor and holds an identical rank.”

Lampades clutched his head in frustration.

As Lampades struggled to process this madness, Demus pulled Orthes aside to the corner of the room.

“Are you sure about this? If this goes wrong and Lampades snitches on us...”

“Haha. Don’t worry,” Orthes replied with a breezy smile. “Lampades would never do that. He cares far too much for his people.”

Orthes’ tone was casual, but his words were double-edged. He was implying trust, but the underlying message to Lampades was clear: We’re all on this ship together. If it sinks, we all drown.

And Orthes was right. They had sailed too far into dangerous waters to back out now.

Moreover—

“I’m in charge of this ship’s lifeboat.”

Or, more accurately, Lampades was the one building the lifeboat. Securing Yellow Thunder was the only way to create a refuge, a safe haven to escape retaliation from the other Towers if they sought vengeance in the future.

For the sake of his people, Lampades steeled himself. He would put everything he had into this fight.

The greater the risk, the greater the reward. If I’m staking everything, I’ll claim more than everything in return!

With a grim resolve, he made up his mind. Hector, watching from the sidelines, sighed internally.

Ah, Orthes...

You really don’t know how to pick your friends, do you?

As Hector observed his one and only disciple's knack for surrounding himself with questionable individuals, he felt a pang of sorrow. Orthes had a talent for inviting chaos into his life, and Hector's old heart ached at the realization.

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"Let me hear it again. What exactly is the situation with the master of Yellow Thunder Tower?"

"Hmm, well... Our order has been persecuted by the Ten Towers for centuries. But we've had our moments of retaliation, and the current lord of Yellow Thunder was injured during one of those moments, by the previous head of our order—"

Demus explained the situation to Lampades, describing the Yellow Thunder lord's injury and the circumstances surrounding it. After Demus' assassination attempt, the tower lord had ceased all public appearances.

Sensing something suspicious, the Divine Cult had used every internal contact within Argos to uncover the lord's current condition.

"When I attempted the assassination, the lord went berserk. The damage must have been severe, as they're now unable to leave the tower at all. They're said to be conscious for no more than one or two hours a day."

"So... in a weakened, incapacitated state, the tower lord is vulnerable enough to assassinate."

"Exactly. But the real problem lies with the elders. The ones I saw were skilled enough to subdue a rampaging tower lord, even if they needed the advantage of numbers to do so."

As the explanation wrapped up, Orthes gestured to Proditor, who had been casually examining the reception room.

"This is where Proditor's role becomes crucial. In theory, he can open a door to any location in the world."

"Well... that's only if the coordinates are properly secured. Otherwise, it's dangerous," Proditor said with a shrug.

"Lampades' radar technology will handle that part. It's possible we've stumbled upon a dangerous yet effective combination," Orthes said with a sly grin.

Lampades wanted to protest that his radar was designed for extra-dimensional exploration, not for pinpointing specific locations in this world.

But on second thought, it wasn't entirely impossible. If he used the energy output of the Ten Commandments as a basis for calculating coordinates, it just might work. Reluctantly, he swallowed his objections.

"So, Lampades," Orthes continued.

“What now?”

“The problem is that Proditor’s ability relies on divine power. As you know, the Towers are hypersensitive to any use of divine power. The moment it’s detected, they’ll swallow their pride and immediately request reinforcements from the other Towers.”

Demus nodded in agreement. As a priest of the war god, he knew this analysis was spot-on. When it came to the Divine Cult, the Ten Towers—normally riddled with infighting—demonstrated remarkable cooperation.

“That’s why your role is critical, Lampades. The moment the succession war begins, you’ll need to paralyze Yellow Thunder’s information and communication systems.”

“Are you joking?”

“Not at all,” Orthes said with a shrug, wearing an expression that suggested everything was already prepared.

But this time, Lampades refused to agree so easily.

“The succession war takes place within the domain of the Ten Towers. Without significant time or an enormous amount of magic stones, invading their control is almost impossible. Unless you have an artifact on par with the Ten Commandments, large-scale magic of that scale simply isn’t feasible.”

Lampades gestured to Hector, as if to point out that this was precisely why they had brought aura-users as their vanguard.

“You’re correct, Lampades. But who said we need an artifact on par with the Ten Commandments? What if we have an artifact that can use the Ten Commandments themselves?”

“If something like that existed, my tower would have been a dark tower by now!”

“Oh, but you acquired it fairly recently.”

Recently? Dark memories stirred in Lampades’ mind.

The relic Orthes had gifted him, supposedly as a "present." A discovery from the Torres faction.

The last legacy of Manubia Tower, which had dared to challenge Yellow Thunder—and failed.

“The Talisman of Thunder...?”

“Yes, the Talisman of Thunder. I told you it could fully convert mana into magical energy. But, in fact, it has another function.”

Orthes' next words were prefaced by the usual disclaimer: "This is purely theoretical, of course." He explained that this additional functionality was inferred from the relic's origin and that the strategy would have to be adjusted if the hypothesis proved false.

But Lampades, with a sinking feeling, already knew Orthes' hypothesis was correct.

Orthes was that kind of man.

The Talisman of Thunder's hidden function wasn't just converting mana into magical energy—it could also do the reverse. It could convert magical energy back into mana. A flawless, bidirectional transformation with no loss.

This unforeseen function had emerged from the fusion of the artifact's original properties with the Silver Thread Parasite and Keranos, the Thunderbolt Lord. Though an accident, Carisia had modified the relic to safely access this hidden capability when necessary.

Following Carisia's instructions, Orthes activated the release command. A golden orb began to glow, its surface etched with silver patterns.

"Behold, the final legacy of Manubia Tower."

Mana into magical energy. Magical energy back into mana.

The possibilities raced through Lampades' mind. The relic was perfect for the succession war. It could neutralize the Ten Commandments' domination of ambient magical energy by converting it into mana, which their allies could control. A perfect countermeasure against the Ten Commandments' control.

The artifact must have been created by the last lord of Manubia Tower, Keranos, before their ultimate defeat against Yellow Thunder.

Lampades shuddered. Everything—the relic, the strategy—felt like it had been crafted to dismantle the Ten Towers.

But there was one final detail to confirm.

"You said this relic was for Astrafe."

"Yes."

Cold. Lampades took a deep breath, preparing for the worst.

"However, exposing Astrafe to the current situation would be far too dangerous."

Unexpected. Lampades waited for Orthes to elaborate.

"Astrafe, wielding the Talisman of Thunder, would signal the rebirth of Manubia Tower. But that would draw far too much attention."

Astrafe, wielding the relic to its fullest, was Orthes' hidden card for the Mage King. The King's magic was unparalleled, but the Talisman didn't target magic itself—it targeted the

magical energy required to use it. A completely unforeseen artifact, absent from the original history.

They couldn't reveal the Talisman's full potential in the succession war.

Lampades interpreted this as evidence of Orthes' lingering humanity. He had once suspected Orthes and Astrafe of being family, and this preferential treatment only deepened his suspicions.

But in a way, it was comforting. If Orthes was sparing Astrafe, perhaps he truly wasn't planning to "burn the whole world to ash," as he once claimed.

"Too much attention, you say."

"Exactly. If the succession war goes as planned and we topple all the Towers, it won't matter. But if it doesn't, the attention could be problematic."

The Talisman's discovery had been linked to the Torres faction, which was later exposed as a collaborator of Argyrion. If rumors of collusion resurfaced, Lampades Tower's reputation would be on shaky ground, even after ascending to the Ten Towers.

If Orthes intended to use Lampades Tower as a fallback, then avoiding suspicion was paramount.

But Lampades sensed there was more to Orthes' reasoning than simple practicality.

"So, who will use it? Do you already have someone in mind?"

Orthes looked at Lampades with a rare expression of genuine confusion—emotions seldom graced his face.

"…Me?"

"Of course! The assassin needs the assassination tool, don't they?"

Chapter 176: Ten Commandments Frontline (3)

Chapter 176: Ten Commandments Frontline (3)

Thus, Lampades stood upon the soil of Yellow Thunder Tower, gripping the unleashed Talisman of Thunder. He began channeling the endless magical power of the Ten Commandments through the artifact, preparing an unprecedented grand spell.

To those unaware of the tangled schemes involving Hydra Corporation, Orthes, and the forces behind them, Lampades must have appeared as a trailblazer heralding a new era.

What level of mastery must this figure possess to prepare such a colossal spell in the heart of the Ten Towers' domain? A hidden dragon from the wilds of the mercenary world—a figure unnoticed by the magical society until now.

But this spectacle would never spread across the magical world.

First reason:

"The true abilities of the Talisman of Thunder must remain a secret. I trust you understand why."

Orthes simply wouldn't allow it.

Second reason:

"Tower Lord! We've successfully connected to the network as instructed! What are your orders?"

"Good. It's my turn now."

From this moment forward, all magical communications near Yellow Thunder Tower would be rendered useless.

Lampades' spell wasn't meant to disrupt Yellow Thunder Tower's communications.

Rather, it would do the opposite.

The plan was to generate an overwhelming flood of magical transmissions—so many that the sheer volume of signals would completely paralyze the transmission and reception of messages.

While the Ten Commandments had no limits, the mages and enchantware operating under its influence were bound by very human constraints. By flooding their communication devices with noise, Lampades would push them to their breaking point, exceeding their processing capacity.

This was a classic strategy for attacking Ether Space.

But attempting it against the Ten Towers was an entirely different matter.

To successfully infiltrate a Tower's exclusive communication lines and resist the Ten Commandments' dominance with a grand spell required capabilities that no one had ever possessed before.

Only Lampades—who had secured Yellow Thunder's private network address through Blasphemia, accessed the immense power of the Talisman of Thunder, and routed his efforts through Creal's relay—could pull it off.

Additionally, Yellow Thunder Tower's chief administrator of Ether Space was incapacitated, unconscious.

Fast response times were critical in Ether Space defense. With the Tower's immediate reaction effectively neutralized, the attack had a clear opening.

As long as the rigid hierarchy between the Tower Lord and the elders remained intact, this chaos was unavoidable.

Standing amidst the overwhelming disorder he had created, Lampades surveyed the scene. From now on, all communication would have to be conducted through direct, verbal orders.

"Hector!"

The old man, who had been slaughtering artificial constructs on the front lines, leapt backward with ease. None of Yellow Thunder Tower's sentinels could impede his movements.

Hector arrived at what could now be considered the main encampment of Lampades Tower—the command post where the massive radar system had been set up.

"Is it already time?"

Lampades nodded, though he still felt the absurdity of his own actions. Never in his life had he imagined working with priests from an ancient cult.

Now, it was time to bring out a relic that belonged to another era.

The communication device resembled a hollow dish, like a primitive radar. But instead of housing delicate circuits to receive signals, it contained firewood, accelerants, and materials to produce colored smoke.

With a spark of electricity, Lampades ignited the firewood.

Red smoke rose into the sky.

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The priests of the Divine Cult were positioned far enough away that the smoke was invisible to them. It wasn't wise to get too close to the domain of the Ten Towers.

But some signals don't need to be seen to be understood.

Demus shot to his feet, his voice ringing out.

“The signal fire has been lit! Prepare for war!”

What Lampades ignited was a makeshift beacon—far less grand than the signal fires of ancient times, and its smoke was faint by comparison.

Yet it was unmistakably a call to arms. The crimson smoke curling into the sky was a harbinger of battle. Demus, as the chief priest of Enyalius, the God of War, could sense this instinctively.

Among the forms of offerings to a god, the burnt offering was one in which sacrifices were burned to honor the divine. Lighting the beacon was itself a burnt offering, and war—the ultimate sacrifice—was the greatest tribute to Enyalius.

After all, he was the God of War.

As if in response to Demus’ proclamation, Proditor opened a door.

“Revenge is right around the corner, old man. How do you feel?”

Demus turned his hollow eyes toward the boy.

“What good is talking about my feelings before it’s done? Ask me afterward.”

“Cool answer.”

Proditor clapped his hands, and a golden door appeared.

This was the final stage of Orthes’ plan to conquer Yellow Thunder Tower. Hector, Lampades, and Demus were to assassinate the Tower Lord, ending the succession war prematurely.

The condition for victory in a succession war wasn’t the total conquest of a Magic Tower—it was the seizure of the Ten Commandments. Normally, conquering a Tower and seizing its Ten Commandments were inseparable tasks. The Tower Lord, as the Tower’s most powerful defender, had to be defeated for their Ten Commandments to be claimed.

But with Proditor’s holy incantation and the Tower Lord’s unique vulnerabilities, the circumstances changed.

The elders and other defenders of Yellow Thunder didn’t matter. Once the Tower Lord was brought down and the Ten Commandments’ highest authority was transferred, everything else became irrelevant.

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As Proditor’s holy incantation activated, the security system of Yellow Thunder Tower issued an emergency alert. It detected the presence of a heretic.

However, this desperate warning was ignored.

It wasn't that Yellow Thunder Tower underestimated the threat of the heretics.

The Tower's systems simply treated the alert as false.

"Damn it! Another false alarm? Pathetic cowards, resorting to such underhanded tactics! Typical riffraff from outside the Tower!"

Among the flood of signals Lampades unleashed, he had included repeated false alarms for the detection of heretics.

The barrage of fake warnings drowned out the truth, ensuring that this genuine alert was dismissed as just another distraction.

This twist was an improvised addition to Orthes' plan, demonstrating how much Lampades had been influenced by his time with Orthes.

Orthes' revolution targeted three Towers: White Light, Yellow Thunder, and Nokmok.

White Light was the highest priority, for obvious reasons.

Yellow Thunder followed close behind.

And finally, Nokmok.

Nokmok was chosen for a simple reason: while Orthes had no plans to use its Ten Commandments for anything, it was another Tower whose lord had remained in their domain. If the Nokmok lord interfered with the other fronts, the entire operation could unravel.

Thus, Nokmok had to be tied down before the White Light succession war concluded. But unlike the campaigns against White Light and Yellow Thunder, the objective with Nokmok was different.

Whereas White Light and Yellow Thunder required victory, the Nokmok front focused on delay. Orthes aimed to keep the Nokmok lord occupied defending their Tower rather than projecting their power elsewhere. This was less a battle and more a distraction.

For this, Orthes deployed a coalition of plant-aligned Magic Towers, linked through Meconion's network. They were ideal for a war of attrition.

If Yellow Thunder was a blitzkrieg, Nokmok was its polar opposite.

While Lampades, the Divine Cult, and the Knights' Guild threw everything they had into creating a battlefield where magic could be used against Yellow Thunder, the Nokmok campaign adhered strictly to the basics of succession warfare, slowly escalating their control over magical dominance.

Nokmok Tower itself was structured like a tree. The Ten Commandments' magical power flowed through its roots and leaves in a continuous cycle.

The coalition used parasitic plants to gradually disrupt this cycle, weakening the Tower's magical control. But as with all things plant-like, this process was slow and methodical.

The Nokmok lord could not afford to leave their Tower unattended. The attacks were subtle but persistent, creating just enough of a threat to force the lord's focus inward.

This was Orthes' plan.

Among the coalition forces, one branch stood out with its eerie precision. Their shadows moved in perfect unison, as if even their silhouettes marched in formation.

This was the Minte Tower, a small but surprisingly disciplined faction. Its unexpected strength drew admiration—and envy—from other Tower lords in the coalition.

But beneath their feet, their shadows squirmed.

The majority of mages and Magic Towers deployed to Nokmok had been recruited through Meconion's network, carefully curated by Meconion to avoid the riffraff of its usual clientele. Instead, Meconion had selected competent mages with an academic focus on their semi-elemental lineage.

These were second-tier Towers dreaming of first-tier status. Towers hungry enough to take risks, yet too small to match the strength of the Ten.

This made them ideal pawns for Argyrion.

Halto, in particular, made one thing clear as they deployed Argyrion's forces to claim the Ten Commandments:

"If you can't beat them...

...join them."

Chapter 177: Ten Commandments Frontline (4)

Chapter 177: Ten Commandments Frontline (4)

The Nokmok front unfolded in a manner starkly different from Orthes' expectations.

Originally, this front was meant to be a drawn-out, almost peaceful kind of battle—if such a term could ever apply to war.

The attackers would slowly cultivate plants, while the defenders uprooted and overturned those same plants. If the goal was merely to delay, months could be spent just growing siege flora designed to disrupt the circulation system.

But everything changed with Argyrion's intervention.

Argyrion provided angelification drugs to Minte Tower, inheritors of Sprigo’s philosophy.

In unison, Minte's mages stabbed the vials of angelification drugs into their own chests. And then, they charged forward in a frenzy.

Chaos erupted across the frontlines.

This was not a sanctioned maneuver. The plan had always been to win a decisive victory in their patron's first war before engaging in actual combat.

What was this sudden madness?

Even those who suspected traitors planted by the Ten Towers were confused. If this were sabotage, surely the Minte Tower mages would have attacked in the opposite direction.

Betrayal without an enemy charge? What did it even mean?

The rest of the coalition tried to make sense of it. The consensus was simple: Minte Tower must have wanted to stand out. They sought to play a more active role in the battle to secure a favorable position when the spoils were divided.

The more cautious Towers laughed at Minte Tower's foolishness. In war—especially a war against the Ten Towers—the vanguard always suffered the greatest losses.

At the start of a succession war, when the Ten Commandments' control over magical energy was strongest, magic was difficult to use. Minte Tower, they assumed, had run ahead for greater rewards, only to doom themselves to annihilation.

Meanwhile, those who shared Minte’s ambition were gripped by anxiety.

What if Minte Tower gained access to Nokmok’s Ten Commandments before them?

What if Hydra Corporation decided to favor Minte Tower?

Still, even the ambitious were rational. Instead of overtaking Minte, they merely advanced faster, keeping just behind them.

This division fractured the coalition forces into three distinct groups:

At the forefront, Minte Tower, recklessly charging ahead.

Behind them, a few other Towers, hurrying to follow Minte's lead.

The majority, who hung back at the rear, maintaining their cautious approach.

And this division was a fatal mistake.

Upon reaching Nokmok's first barrier, Minte Tower's mages began to shed their human forms.

This was Sprigo's treefication magic, augmented by Argyrion's Silver Blessing.

The angelified mages of Minte Tower, now transcending human limitations, realized they were no longer constrained by the rules of magical energy.

They could manipulate mana itself, bypassing the constraints of magic entirely. The Silver Thread's power converted magical energy into mana and sought new fuel for its growth.

Nokmok Tower's circulation system was resilient, far too robust to attack without preparation.

So the tree-mages of Minte chose their first sacrifices: the coalition mages pursuing them.

The sudden turn of events threw the coalition into disarray.

Unprepared for the betrayal, the coalition mages were ensnared by a flood of silver roots.

The moment even a single root pierced their bodies, it spread rapidly through their veins, invading capillaries and devouring their life force.

The mages became gaunt in an instant, their forms collapsing into thin, silver threads.

Those who remained at a distance couldn't fully understand the horror they were witnessing. But one thing was clear—they needed to run.

And then they noticed it—the unmistakable glint of silver.

"Argyrion!"

How could they be here? Had they evaded the Ten Towers' expeditionary forces and arrived undetected?

Impossible. The expeditionary forces had departed less than a day ago. They couldn't even have reached Argyrion's main camp yet.

As panic rippled through the coalition like a contagion, the heart of the silver forest revealed itself.

The intertwined branches of the silver trees formed a grotesque throne, upon which a man stood proudly.

He declared loudly, his voice booming across the battlefield:

“Hydra Corporation! In accordance with our pact, we have arrived!”

For a moment, all eyes turned to Halto, leader of Argyrion, as disbelief and confusion deepened. None of the coalition had time to check beneath their feet.

That’s when Nastion struck. From the shadows cast by the immobilized coalition forces, Nastion emerged.

In the moments it took for the coalition mages to regain their senses, they realized they couldn’t move. Their bodies felt pinned in place as if nailed down.

Argyrion’s officers acted swiftly, using spatial magic without hesitation. They opened pathways between the silver roots and the coalition forces. Through these gateways, silver tendrils surged, ensnaring dozens more mages.

The sudden influx of “fertilizer” accelerated the growth of Argyrion’s tree-mages.

Halto smiled with satisfaction.

Of course, the chaos was short-lived.

In the grand scheme, the coalition forces had lost less than 20% of their total numbers.

But growing the silver forest wasn’t Halto’s true goal.

The attack was a deliberate provocation—a scheme to frame Hydra Corporation.

Halto had long since concluded that Argyrion’s position as a target of the Ten Towers was entirely due to Orthes’ cunning manipulations.

If you couldn’t defeat Orthes’ schemes, then you joined them.

Thus, Halto had abandoned Argyrion’s main base and thrown his lot in with the Ten Commandments Revolution.

But mere cooperation wasn’t enough. If Halto wanted to turn the tables on Orthes, he needed another plan.

And so, Halto weaponized Orthes’ own tactics against him.

Standing amidst the silver forest, Halto declared what Orthes had once so masterfully spread across the magical world:

“Argyrion operates under the guidance of Hydra Corporation.”

It was a blatant fabrication, designed to sow suspicion among Orthes’ allies and entangle Hydra Corporation in the crossfire of the magical society’s wrath.

The retreating coalition mages would carry this claim in their hearts, their panic ensuring it would spread.

Could Orthes silence them all?

No.

Could he even silence Nokmok?

By declaring Argyrion’s allegiance to Hydra Corporation, Halto ensured that Nokmok would seek aid without hesitation.

And so, Hydra Corporation would join Argyrion as a public enemy of the magical society.

Confident in the success of the first step of his plan, Halto prepared to move again.

Argyrion existed to pave the way for their great cause: creating a gateway through which their master could descend.

The loss of their original base and the repurposing of the gateway as a trap for the Ten Towers’ expeditionary forces had been a setback, but not an insurmountable one.

The infinite power of the Ten Commandments would be enough to shatter the dimensional barrier. The final piece for their master’s arrival was within reach.

“Let’s go, silver apostles!”

“For truth and the cause!”

Argyrion surged forward, a tide of silver trees marching toward Nokmok.

***

Meanwhile, Kore, the Priestess of Pluton, assumed her role as the overseer of the Ten Commandments Revolution.

Unlike the far-seeing priests of Phoibos, Kore lacked a divine incantation for clairvoyance.

Instead, she possessed the ability to hear the voices of the dead. Amplified by Pluton’s grand temple, her power extended across the entirety of the Ten Commandments Frontline.

This massive amplification came at a cost.

The divine authority granted by the temple was meant to be distributed among all of Pluton’s priests within its walls, according to their rank.

But now, Kore bore the burden alone. The overuse of the temple's power drained her life force with every passing moment.

However, the stakes were worth it.

A single revolution awaited them—one that could end all persecution.

Convinced by Demus' passionate argument, both the moderates and the Pope's faction of the Divine Cult had united for this campaign.

Kore had hesitated, fearing Orthes' connection to the Ten Towers. She believed Orthes wasn't just a Tower affiliate but one of its creators.

But Demus reassured her, claiming Orthes had a plan to dismantle the Ten Towers using the Ten Commandments against them.

Despite her doubts, Kore had decided to trust him.

And so, she braced herself for the divine pain of the temple's power, waiting for the decisive moment after White Light's fall.

But then—

Her ears were filled with the terrifying wails of the dying.

***

Atop the White Light Tower, Orthes emerged, having cut through all its defenses in a single stroke.

The space he entered no longer adhered to the laws of reality. Even its dimensions defied comprehension.

The endless night sky stretched infinitely above, though the world outside remained bright with daylight.

Orthes noticed shallow water pooling around his feet, so clear it reflected the stars above. It reminded him of Earth's salt flats, where the heavens seemed to descend and merge with the ground.

A river of starlight—a galactic halo—encircled the space, forming a radiant ring that resembled a solar eclipse.

And at the center of that ring stood a single figure.

Her hair was pure white, her golden eyes holding the very starlight she commanded as her halo.

She resembled Carisia in many ways, but unlike Carisia's black suit, this woman wore a white dress that matched her hair.

This was White Light.

Chapter 178: White Light

Chapter 178: 『White Light』

Carisia moved forward without hesitation. It wasn't a sprint—such haste was inefficient.

Inefficient for killing.

Inside White Light Tower, Carisia unleashed her instant-kill magic, perfected long ago during her battles against Argyrion in Elysion.

Even as a member of the Ten Towers, no mage could claim to know every magic in existence—least of all Carisia's. Her magic was a self-written magic, a spell she had personally invented, completely unknown to the world.

Only two individuals were aware of its existence: the Argyrion members who had died to it, and Orthes.

Thus, Carisia could strike fatally at any mage who laid eyes on her. The activation condition of her spell was simple: perceiving Carisia.

That was why she didn't run.

The mages rushing to stop her marveled at the overwhelming power she radiated. They were astonished that someone could wield such immense magic even within the influence of the Ten Commandments.

And the moment they saw her—they died.

Her spell fried their optic nerves and, beyond that, scorched their brains directly. Within seconds, a dozen mages dropped dead, unable to even react to the spell.

Their response was swift.

Clearly, Carisia hadn't used this magic outside the tower. The main difference between her behavior inside and outside? The presence or absence of allies.

The mages formulated a hypothesis: the spell must indiscriminately attack everyone in its range, friend or foe.

They cautiously fell back, out of its perceived range. Instead of risking direct confrontation, they sent in swarms of drones to analyze her magic.

Mechanical beasts shaped like quadrupeds, along with simplistic cylindrical suicide drones, flooded toward Carisia. White Light's automated forces surged to confront her.

Carisia quickly canceled her spell, but it was too late. Several drones that had visually detected her exploded, their sensory circuits destroyed.

The mages of White Light had deduced the spell's mechanism.

They would no longer rely on visible light to track her. Instead, they would shift to indirect methods like sonic detection.

It was time for a change in strategy.

"Like White Light."

Carisia raised her hand, her magic enveloping the area. The mages tensed, but the spell she cast was a simple, elementary one.

Telekinesis.

The shattered remains of the drones floated into the air, caught in her magical grasp.

Her intent was difficult to decipher. A physical projectile attack? Such a primitive method would never break through White Light's defenses.

Still, the mages couldn't hide their tension.

Since her incursion began, they had failed to launch a proper counterattack—more accurately, a proper magical counterattack.

It was possible to operate pre-enchanted drones and activate the tower's automated defensive spells. But any attempt to directly cast magic at Carisia had failed.

This failure wasn't due to a lack of effort or skill. It was magical interference—an extraordinary ability that disrupted the spells aimed at her.

Every single spell cast by dozens of White Light's mages dissolved into nothingness at the exact moment of activation.

It was a terrifying display of precision and control.

Even though White Light's elders had been deployed outside to protect the outer barriers, the remaining mages within the tower weren't ordinary. Any one of them could easily suppress a mage from outside the Ten Towers.

And yet, dozens of these skilled mages had been rendered useless by Carisia's simple gestures, their spells unraveling before they could take form.

The only effective attacks were those pre-programmed into drones or artifacts. But the artifacts couldn't be used recklessly—they were reserved for moments when they could be guaranteed to strike their target.

***

Inside White Light's Ether Space, the mages communicated via virtual cognition.

Cut off from the elders outside, the senior disciples coordinated their efforts, seeking a way to overcome Carisia's interference.

The conclusion they reached was straightforward:

Simple attacks, like telekinetic projectiles, were the only viable option.

Sophisticated magic would be neutralized before completion. Carisia's interference was akin to a divine technique, exploiting the brief window between a spell's casting and its completion.

But telekinetic attacks were different—too simple to be disrupted. They required minimal preparation and could be executed instantly.

***

The mages, now resolved, began using telekinesis themselves, gathering debris from the surrounding area to prepare a counterattack.

Only a few seconds had passed since Carisia first cast her telekinetic spell.

But Carisia didn't attack them with her gathered debris.

A flash of light.

The lead mage collapsed with a startled gasp, a clean hole pierced through his forehead.

Another flash. Another mage fell.

The method was eerily familiar. These were the results of White Light's own signature laser attacks—the same devastation they had inflicted on countless enemies.

But there was a problem.

The angle of the attack was wrong.

Analysis of the drone footage revealed that the beams hadn't originated from Carisia's position. They had been fired from behind the mages.

Another enemy? A traitor within the tower?

The mages scrambled to activate their Ether Space-linked detection devices to locate the attacker.

And the truth was revealed.

Carisia's telekinetically controlled shards of metal were the source.

Thousands—perhaps tens of thousands—of metallic fragments floated around her, precisely positioned to act as mirrors. She continuously manipulated their positions, using them as reflectors to redirect her beams in real time.

By constantly adjusting the angles of the reflections, she overcame the natural limitation of light traveling in straight lines, making her laser attacks nearly impossible to block.

No matter where they deployed defensive magic, she could instantly alter the trajectory of her beams to strike a vital point.

It was a murder spell at the speed of light, a method that shattered the conventional understanding of laser-based attacks.

Carisia looked toward the summit.

With the elders absent, resistance from the remaining disciples was meaningless.

Still, the tower lord had yet to appear. Was this deliberate provocation? Or were they preparing something to break the barrier isolating the tower from the outside world?

“Whatever the case, I’ll find out when I get there,” Carisia murmured.

The killing light began to dance wildly, tearing through the remaining mages blocking her path.

Carisia advanced, systematically crushing the morale of the mages who dared to stand against her.

She felt the presence of pursuers behind her but paid them no mind. The rear was Orthes’ responsibility, along with the forces of Hydra Corporation.

Her opponent awaited at the summit.

She ascended the final steps—

And came face to face with her.

Carisia recognized the truth immediately.

The tower lord wasn’t merely a symbol of White Light.

She was White Light.

One of the ten disciples of the Mage King, the original master of the light attribute, and the namesake of White Light Tower.

The first betrayer.

She had never been defeated in a succession war, nor had she ever passed on her title. She had achieved immortality.

The Mage King, betrayed by his disciples, left a final curse within the Ten Commandments—a spell to dominate the flesh of the tower lords.

It was this very spell that inspired White Light's immortality. By engraving her soul into the infinite capacity of her Ten Commandments, she transcended the limits of human life.

But immortality wasn't her only goal.

To ascend, both body and soul had to reach perfection.

Her soul, immortal and sublime, was now equal to the Mage King's in spiritual stature.

What remained was the body—she required the divine vessel of the Mage King, one capable of commanding all attributes of magic and mana.

When body and soul both reached the pinnacle, White Light would finally achieve ascension.

Carisia knew this from the memories that had been forced upon her.

Carisia and White Light stood motionless, like mirrored reflections of each other. In their eyes, the other's figure was endlessly repeated, like an infinite hall of mirrors.

The silence stretched, feeling eternal.

It was Carisia who broke it first.

"Do you remember me?"

White Light slowly opened her mouth.

"They haven't moved. I suppose their focus lies elsewhere."

Carisia's eyebrow twitched.

White Light hadn't answered her question. She was speaking to herself, as though Carisia wasn't even there.

It wasn't dialogue—it was monologue, dismissing Carisia's existence entirely.

The Carisia of the past would have already erupted with rage. But not now.

This battle wasn't just about her. Orthes remained.

Carisia smirked coldly.

"Too old to hear me properly, are you? Don't worry—I'll send you off soon enough."

Above her shoulder, light began to gather. A spell of focused light, a condensed beam attack crafted in White Light's own image.

The tower lord spoke as she observed.

"I didn't think Blasphemia would kill you. And it seems they didn't."

Her voice was mechanical, devoid of warmth, and her faint smile was chilling.

“My daughter.”

Carisia’s jaw clenched. No one in this world had the right to call her daughter. It was a deliberate provocation.

“I’ve come to destroy you, White Light.”

“Is that what you desire?”

“Of course.”

“Then do it.”

White Light’s tone mirrored Carisia’s, eerily similar to the way she had just said “of course.”

“If you can.”

Carisia whispered to the rage boiling within her:

This is just the prelude.

The real battle begins the moment Orthes arrives.

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The battle between White Light and Carisia mirrored their initial confrontation.

A clash of reflections.

Each laser bombardment was met with a perfectly angled counter-laser, nullifying the attack.

It was meaningless to speculate who would seize the advantage first—whichever side launched an attack was immediately met with magical interference that absorbed the mana behind it.

Due to their overwhelming skill and the boundless mana provided by the Ten Commandments, their magic was delayed but never outright nullified.

The process repeated endlessly: one side's spell neared completion, the other countered it, and both spells annihilated each other in a burst of mutual destruction.

Under the star-filled celestial sphere, the starlight wielded by the two Archmages illuminated the battlefield below.

"Mana is…"

For now—equal.

This was White Light's domain, the place where the Ten Commandments of White Light were enshrined and where the mage White Light had spent millennia crafting her dominion. The territory itself actively sought to expel the intruder, Carisia.

Carisia had attempted to wrest control of the domain by leveraging her unique physical constitution, but to no avail. She could feel the mana consumption of her spells escalating exponentially.

And yet, the boundless mana provided by her Artificial Commandments ensured that her reserves not only endured the increased consumption but even replenished faster than she could expend them.

If the battle were to stretch on indefinitely, that balance might shift. But for now, they were equals.

Their power was equal, that much was clear.

When their bombardments collided, the resulting annihilation was perfectly symmetrical—neither side giving way.

If their mana and destructive power were the same, only speed would determine the outcome of their duel.

And in this, Carisia held the advantage.

It wasn't because Carisia could complete her spells faster.

This was White Light's domain—its heart. Not even Carisia could hope to surpass White Light here.

But Carisia could discern which attacks she could afford to take.

Around her neck hung a crystal crafted by the priests of Phoibos, granting her limited foresight into the immediate future. It painted a clear vision in her mind: which strikes would kill her, and which would not.

Carisia trusted her body's regenerative abilities, reinforced by mana, to recover from anything short of a fatal wound.

Thus, she diverted resources away from defense and poured them entirely into offense. Sharper. Stronger.

White Light's attacks were swift.

But Carisia's strikes were deadlier.

This reckless strategy fascinated White Light.

Carisia's combat logic was something White Light would never have chosen. It was an audacious, perilous tightrope act—a deadly gamble at the edge of survival.

White Light observed the precision with which Carisia assessed incoming attacks. Every strike that landed on her proved to be non-lethal, a testament to Carisia's ability to distinguish fatal blows from superficial ones.

White Light wasn't surprised that Carisia possessed such a capability.

Even the Blasphemia cultists, such as the Prophet in the Basement, employed similar techniques to glimpse fragments of the future. White Light assumed Carisia had obtained such powers through the cult of the Vanished Gods.

But what did surprise White Light was Carisia's utter lack of hesitation in allowing herself to be wounded.

No matter how precise her foresight, there was always the chance that an attack could outpace her reaction. Such confidence in her predictions was inherently dangerous.

White Light herself possessed the skill to exploit that vulnerability.

The deluge of lasers she now unleashed was designed to probe Carisia's reaction speed, firing with time intervals measured in the fractions of fractions of seconds—0.000…1 intervals, pushing the limits of human and magical perception.

Carisia, too, understood that her foresight defenses were being systematically dismantled.

And yet, she did not falter. She clung to her strategy, as if awaiting a decisive variable that would change the flow of battle.

White Light briefly considered the possibility of reinforcements but dismissed the thought.

Carisia could trust no one in this world.

And in turn, no one in this world would trust her.

White Light's attacks grew more intense.

The starlight bombardment condensed into dozens of beams, aimed to land within infinitesimal time gaps.

Carisia knew she was being tested.

And she also knew that Orthes was approaching.

The clarity of her future visions sharpened with his proximity. The decisive moment drew near.

Three. Two. One.

Boom!

The collision of White Light's mana and the Artificial Commandments created a grinding resonance that tore through their circuits.

Mages connected to the Commandments felt as if their mana circuits were being shredded from the inside out, nerve endings burning with searing pain.

But for Carisia, this was the moment she had been waiting for.

Carisia knew she was inferior to White Light in nearly every way.

Her resources were nothing compared to those of the Ten Towers. Her experience, though unique, paled in comparison to White Light's millennia of existence.

But there was one thing she was certain she surpassed White Light in:

The sheer number of failures and the depths of suffering she had endured.

Her life with Orthes had been a harrowing struggle for survival, filled with agony and loss.

The pain of her bones shattering, the thirst of slowly dying in the Screaming Desert, the regret for what had been lost.

White Light, who had spent centuries ruling from the heavens, could never understand the full weight of such torment.

With a feral grin, more savage than ever, Carisia pushed through the pain.

Her body, overwhelmed by mana and searing agony, began to move.

She suppressed the rampaging mana, forced her spasming muscles to obey her will, and controlled every motion of her body down to the finest detail.

Pain sharpened her focus. Reflexive responses to external stimuli were ignored—her movements were now entirely directed by her mana and mind.

Carisia ran.

White Light fired relentlessly, but her shots were uncharacteristically imprecise. Whether due to the lingering pain from the mana clash or Carisia's unexpected speed, it was impossible to tell.

Carisia didn't care.

Right now, all that mattered was smashing that face.

Her black gauntlet gleamed with golden light.

This was close combat, a style Carisia hadn't used even once since the start of the succession war.

Every decision had been made to lure White Light into exposing a vulnerability.

Carisia's approach, so similar to White Light's, was meant to convince her opponent that she was nothing more than an imitation.

But Carisia's true specialty wasn't bombardment or curses.

Part of her body dissolved into photons, shedding mass and transforming into pure speed.

It was a technique inspired by a whimsical question from Orthes: "Can you kick at the speed of light?"

Much like Sprigo and Talo had fused their bodies with their attributes, Carisia had achieved a similar feat.

Her charge left a streak of white light in its wake, too fast to appear as anything but a single glowing line.

As she reassembled her body mid-flight, her gauntlet collided with the very space in front of White Light's face.

The collision twisted the air, forming a searing white-hot plasma sphere.

White Light reacted in an instant, dismantling the plasma's magical structure and layering protective wards across her body.

But Carisia's gauntlet plunged into the unfinished plasma, triggering a surge of mana that completed the spell.

The black gauntlet, now blazing with radiant power, delivered an uppercut aimed at White Light's face.

The strike connected.

A blinding flash engulfed the area as White Light's face was struck by the full force of an Atomic Arm.

For a moment, Carisia thought she had won—

But pain exploded in her abdomen.

She looked down to see a pristine white shoe embedded in her torso, an elegant, almost aristocratic design that seemed utterly out of place in battle.

The shoe's heel had fired a concentrated laser, carving a perfect hole through her body.

White Light's head, which had been obliterated moments ago, was already restored.

She dropped her staff and raised a fist.

To Carisia's horror, White Light conjured an Atomic Arm of her own—seamless, needing no external devices or equipment to support it.

The punch was direct, elegant, and lethal, aimed straight for Carisia's heart.

Carisia barely managed to block with her right arm.

The resulting explosion knocked her to the ground.

White Light spoke as she watched Carisia struggle.

"They all make the same mistake, assuming ancient mages are weak in close combat."

She smiled faintly.

"I killed the Mage King with these hands."

Carisia could feel her regeneration failing.

White Light's mana lingered in her wounds, preventing them from closing.

Still, she layered defensive wards around herself, buying time.

Not yet.

White Light smiled as she prepared to deliver the final blow.

The stars above and below converged, forming a radiant halo.

The light gathered at her fingertips, a force capable of annihilating any defense.

But before she could strike, a door opened.

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As soon as Orthes stepped through the door, he felt blood trickle from his eyes.

The sheer amount of information was overwhelming. A battle between two Archmages connected to the Commandments. Hundreds, thousands, perhaps an uncountable number of magical energies were being loaded, intercepted, and consuming each other in a ferocious cycle.

He accelerated his thought process. Filtered out the unnecessary. Ignored all trajectories of lethal attacks that wouldn't land.

He witnessed and analyzed the solemn flow conjured by White Light.

Orthes let out a hollow laugh. The condensed and focused energy formed into a ring reminiscent of a solar eclipse. It was a mystical secret of the Mage's Ascension.

It was built on the same principles as connecting to the Divine Domain of the Artificial Commandments. A power drawn from a transcendent providence, far nobler and greater than this world, one that mortal realms could never dare to reach.

But White Light had constructed it not as a faint imitation through the Commandments, but purely with her own magic.

An infinite force. An absolute truth that stood above any law or principle of this world.

No magical defense, no material protection, could hold against it. Even a Holy Incantation user channeling divine authority wouldn't be able to rival it.

Because divinity and divine power were entirely different concepts. Divine power was the imperfect attempt to confine the absolute nature of divinity within the limits of human understanding. Compared to divinity itself, divine power was inherently incomplete.

That spell was magic elevated to the level of divinity.

Perhaps only a Holy Spirit above even the saints could resist it. But the only two candidates capable of wielding the Holy Spirit—Kore, the Priestess, and the Pope—weren't here.

Yet Orthes had his "eyes."

Through ancient priestly dialogues and his own accumulated experiences, Orthes suspected his eyes were connected to something divine.

He wasn't certain, though. No one had ever given him a clear answer to his questions.

But...

If I can't succeed here, we're all dead.

He widened his eyes and gripped his sword. The vast Celestial Sphere above and the starlit water landscape below—both crafted by magic. The formula to embed into this scene was—

Orthes realized that the sharpness of the High-Frequency Blade had amplified severalfold in an instant. Carisia.

The formula embedded within the High-Frequency Blade or the magic engraved device wouldn't be enough to contend with that monumental magic.

Only Carisia's magic—no, only her magic, closer to White Light's realm than anyone else's—could disrupt the intricate mechanics of that spell.

Orthes plunged his blade into the starlit waterscape. An incomprehensible movement. White Light recognized the person behind such an action.

Every step he took was a variable. Every motion was a disruption. He was the Ender of the Mythical Era. The Mage King.

For the first time, White Light felt a strange mix of déjà vu and unfamiliarity toward this unexpected swordsman. She didn't dismiss her intuition. She shifted the target of Infinite Starlight.

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The galaxy came into view.

The magic White Light had prepared to kill Carisia—a spell of absolute lethality—was awe-inspiring in its sheer construction.

Countless formulas and an unimaginable amount of mana had crystallized into a shape that could only be described as a starry expanse. A pure white brilliance, so dazzling it threatened to blind.

I looked at the blade in my hand, forged to challenge the galaxy itself.

Carisia's magic had also taken the form of a star. A single thread of starlight, pitifully faint compared to the galaxy's overwhelming radiance.

But it was enough.

I categorized the magic.

Beneath the galaxy-representing magic of the solar eclipse, there was the magic forming White Light's domain.

The erosion of the Artificial Commandments clashing against White Light's domain. And between those two, countless offensive spells were aimed at each other.

The magic of the solar eclipse was the canvas, and every other spell was my paint.

The single thread of starlight Carisia had handed me soon became a comet, streaking through the galaxy. Its erratic movement disrupted the silent order controlling all the galaxy's stars. Its scale was laughably insignificant, but it created a crack nonetheless.

Following the comet's trail, other streams of light began pouring in. They were the power of the Artificial Commandments, beams prepared by Carisia, and counterattacks from White Light.

The chaos of colors painted over the galaxy. The starlight, which had previously flowed serenely under White Light's control, began producing discordant notes. The darkened domain cast shadows of a black nebula, scattering stardust that refracted the galaxy's light in random directions, distorting its focus.

Thus, across the pristine white Milky Way, vibrant arcs of color began to bloom.

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White Light gathered the most refined, condensed concept of "light" at her fingertips through Infinite Starlight. A single drop of that pure light was enough to bleach all creation into nothingness.

But then it happened. The sound of shattering glass, the tolling of a high tower's bell, the freezing of a winter sea, the roaring boil of the sun.

All these sounds blended into a single tone that filled the space.

At the exact moment when the light extended in a straight line from her fingertips, White Light instinctively realized something was wrong.

The mana concentrated within the domain had caused the trajectory of the light to refract ever so slightly.

This should not have happened. If Infinite Starlight had been perfected, no such phenomenon could occur. A beam that ignored the laws of the lower realm, advancing in an unerring straight line, erasing all in its path—it shouldn't have been deflected by mere mana.

She saw the dark-haired swordsman open his eyes wide. Within those blue eyes spun an immeasurable depth of the unknown, beyond this world's comprehension.

It was an ominous sight. Even if the spell wasn't entirely complete and thus failed to fully project the providence of ascension, anyone struck by that light should have been erased along with the surrounding space.

But the light's advance was blocked. It was Carisia's hastily constructed seven-colored defensive spell.

White Light's mana-detection ability reported that Infinite Starlight had been neutralized. She couldn't believe it. She couldn't dismiss the possibility that her sixth sense, refined through magic, was being deceived by an illusion, so she glanced behind her.

The ring of light connecting heaven and earth was crumbling into fragments.

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Carisia appeared beside Orthes through photonization. It was the result of quickly pulling herself together during the brief moment White Light had launched Infinite Starlight.

“Damn it. That woman fights dirtier than I thought.”

“Is this really the time for comments like that?”

It was a scolding tinged with worry, implying she would’ve been helplessly killed if Carisia hadn’t arrived in time. Carisia grinned at Orthes’s concern and retorted.

“You’re not exactly one to talk.”

She gestured toward the blood streaming from Orthes’s bloodshot eyes. Orthes merely shrugged.

“It’s more manageable than I thought.”

“Keep disrupting her magic. I’ll adjust my attack angles, and I’ll block as much as I can of her lethal spells. You keep attacking.”

“What a reckless plan. A game of chicken, where either White Light or we die first.”

“Well, there are two of us, so she’ll probably go down first, don’t you think?”

Their exchange served as both strategy discussion and a brief respite to recover. Carisia restored her body through mana, while Orthes blinked to readjust his vision.

They moved in a way that covered each other’s blind spots—something they had done often during their desperate days in the Screaming Desert.

A sense of dissonance struck Orthes. An attack that should have followed hadn’t.

He turned to look at White Light, who stood with her back turned to them, and the fragmented ring of light beyond her.

“Boss, I’m going ahead.”

He charged forward.

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For a moment, ripples appeared on White Light’s expressionless face. If her Infinite Starlight had merely been blocked, she might have been able to comprehend it. The mage before her, after all, was her own most ideal creation.

Compared to the millennia White Light had lived, the mage's lifespan was but a speck of dust. Yet, perhaps through sheer talent of her body, she might have blossomed into a mage equal to White Light herself.

But just now, Infinite Starlight wasn't countered by her creation—it was undone by a swordsman. A technique that nullified the spell itself, a feat neither seen nor possible before.

No—

A memory surfaced in White Light's mind, of someone, or perhaps something, that had once resided in the deepest part of her consciousness.

If it was the Mage King, he might have achieved such a feat. No, "might" wasn't enough. He absolutely would have.

Was this swordsman, Orthes, standing in the same realm as the Mage King?

Impossible. The Mage King was a figure who existed once and never again, as he must not.

While White Light was lost in her thoughts, Orthes's blade struck. White Light conceded her mistake, offering her left arm as a sacrifice. With just a few seconds, she could regenerate her body with ease.

"...!"

Her calculation was off. The flesh cleaved by Orthes's blade didn't regenerate. The very structure of her body, crafted from mana and bound by formulas, began collapsing.

White Light recalled a memory of those who once trained in swordsmanship solely to dismantle magic. She had suspected they might have survived into this era, but she never imagined they would side with Hydra Corporation.

"The Demon-Hunting Sword Technique. You must be the Order's leader."

"Who knows? Why don't you try being a bit more creative?"

Carisia noticed White Light's disturbance. Though hidden beneath her stoic face, the very fact that she spoke revealed her composure was shaken.

"Who could possibly exist in this world capable of breaking your magic?" she teased with a mischievous grin.

In truth, by succession, Kine was merely the second to inherit Orthes's swordsmanship.

The one who had spent more time with Orthes than anyone else was none other than Carisia.

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How ridiculous.

As long as the Eidolons' Observation Chamber was functioning properly, the Mage King could never return to this world.

Even Argyrion, who surely operated under the Mage King's shadow, had established their base outside the dimension. They knew full well that returning to the Ten Towers' observation range would render all their schemes meaningless.

“Do you really think the Eidolons are functioning properly?”

Carisia could guess White Light's thoughts. The two shared certain similarities in essence. It was easy to predict the kind of reasoning White Light would follow in this situation.

The same thought process that she herself might have had before meeting Orthes.

“The Eidolons are an organization unrestrained by internal power struggles, solely devoted to observing extra-dimensional phenomena. They’ve held a position within Panoptes free of interference or oversight for centuries. But such isolation also means no one oversees them. No checks, no balances.”

Argos, constantly exposed to public scrutiny, and Blasphemia, embroiled in perpetual internal conflict, had both seen defectors emerge within their ranks. So how could the Eidolons, free from all scrutiny, possibly remain immune to corruption?

The fleeting question caused a subtle ripple in White Light’s mind—a disturbance that Orthes, ever perceptive, immediately detected. He raised his sword again.

A relentless flurry of strikes came from the left. White Light’s left arm was beyond recovery. To regenerate it, she would have to recreate her entire body from scratch.

White Light gathered mana at the tip of the staff clenched in her remaining right hand.

The light enveloping the staff grew larger, taking on the form of a sword. A weightless blade of pure light, the most destructive of its kind, imbued with the essence of annihilation. It swept forward, aiming to obliterate everything in its path.

Carisia was the one to intercept. A concentrated mass of plasma wrapped around her gauntlet met the wave of light, resulting in a violent explosion.

The brightness of the clash made it nearly impossible to keep one’s eyes open. But the three combatants present were beyond such ordinary limitations of vision.

Orthes’s blade aimed for White Light’s head. Meanwhile, Carisia, darting low, targeted White Light’s thigh with her plasma-imbued gauntlet.

White Light raised her right foot and stomped it down. A circular barrier of light expanded outward from her, creating a shockwave that crushed everything in its vicinity. Both Orthes and Carisia were forced to retreat.

For a brief moment, a lull settled. White Light, her gaze sharp and low, murmured softly.

“Meaningless bravado. There is no way to contact the Eidolons from the outside.”

It was a declaration—one that carried the force of certainty. Even if it wasn’t entirely true, her words imposed that truth in this moment. The best way to avoid being ensnared by a verbal trap was to either ignore it entirely or dismiss it outright.

White Light did not retrieve the blade of light she had conjured. Instead, the extremities of her body began to burn white-hot.

She had activated magic akin to Carisia’s photonization, a spell that transformed the caster’s body into light to achieve overwhelming speed. The difference between them was clear.

BOOM!

A flash of light illuminated the night sky. Even Carisia, who could glimpse the future through Phoibos’ Crystal, reacted a moment too late. White Light’s blade of light, moving at impossible speed, was aimed directly at Carisia’s heart.

Speed.

Overwhelming speed in its purest form. White Light’s sudden assault outpaced even Carisia’s photonization. Carisia could almost hear White Light’s unspoken proclamation:

“Every spell you can cast, I can cast as well.”

While Carisia might be unable to wield White Light’s magic, White Light would never be incapable of wielding Carisia’s.

And yet, the blade didn’t pierce Carisia’s chest. Orthes had intervened, twisting the spell’s structure once again.

A mage’s domain, which occupies space itself as their territory, provides overwhelming advantages—control over mana, amplified power, and more. However, this was Orthes they were up against.

If magic was intertwined with space, then by interfering with space, one could also interfere with the outcomes of magic. Orthes’s rewritten formula unraveled the blade of light at its core.

As a result, White Light’s attack devolved into a mere physical strike. Though Carisia was sent flying, her ribs shattering under the force, it was far from lethal.

Her heart and lungs, punctured by fragments of her broken bones, could still regenerate given enough time.

But White Light had no intention of giving her that time. She had realized Orthes's ability to disrupt magic through any means necessary. The solution was simple.

Outpace his interference.

Speed was strength. The faster, the stronger.

The shattered solar eclipse reassembled at White Light's command. Fragments of the ring gathered behind her, forming radiant wings of light.

Each fragment of those wings scattered in all directions. Every shard was a deadly weapon in its own right, and from their tips, beams of light radiated outward, powerful enough to evaporate any barrier they touched.

Orthes knew it was time for a decisive move. Carisia had made her "preparations." Years of fighting together meant Orthes knew exactly how to use her preparations to their fullest potential.

And so...

"Doesn't something feel strange to you?"

For the first time, Orthes addressed White Light directly.

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White Light tried to ignore Orthes's words. He was a harbinger of chaos, an agent of unpredictability whose very presence increased uncertainty. Engaging him in conversation would be meaningless.

But Orthes's tongue was sharper than his blade.

"The Ten Towers Expeditionary Fleet should have been in regular communication with the Eidolons, receiving updates on the situation. And yet, isn't it odd? Not a single signal from their side has come through."

It was the simple truth. After the Ten Towers' fleet set sail, all communications had abruptly ceased. Of course, the expedition was headed for the extra-dimension, where communication often fluctuated due to dimensional storms.

"Do you really believe their claim that communication issues are due to extra-dimensional disasters? Even with the lighthouse formula you constructed using the power of the Commandments, not a single voice signal has come through. Does that seem normal to you?"

Of course, it wasn't normal. Lamphades' extra-dimensional interference jamming was in full effect.

But that was information White Light didn't know. Orthes continued chipping away at her composure as he deflected her relentless magic.

“You said there’s no way to contact the Eidolons from the outside. Ha!”

He let out a derisive laugh, filling it with mockery. At the same time, he interfered with White Light’s domain once more, evoking the image of the first mage to ever control such overwhelming magic.

“There’s no need to contact them. The Eidolons are observing the extra-dimension, aren’t they?”

Orthes raised his empty left hand toward the sky.

“Surely, you know better than anyone who’s waiting beyond that dimensional wall.”

There was no need to infiltrate the Eidolons. They had approached the extra-dimension in search of the Mage King’s will. It was the perfect environment for uncovering ancient truths and dedicating themselves to a greater cause.

It was circumstantial evidence, nothing more. But it was a rational suspicion. White Light’s brow twitched.

“Are you claiming to be the Mage King?”

“Who knows? What do you want me to be?”

Orthes lowered his sword. A gesture of nonchalance.

He raised his left hand, adopting a posture reminiscent of a practiced orator. A stance that instinctively drew attention and compelled belief.

“Does our relationship—Carisia and me—mirror yours and the Mage King’s? Then who am I to you, White Light? Do you truly believe the Mage King you ‘killed’ 2,074 years ago is gone forever?”

“He’s dead. The only remnant of his soul was the lingering thought engraved in the Commandments.”

“Then why were you so terrified of Argyrion’s master? Who did you think was behind them?”

Orthes smiled, closing his eyes. It was both a brief moment to readjust his vision and a calculated dramatic pause.

For maximum effect, he opened his left eye first, leaving the other still closed.

“Look.”

He opened his eyes.

"Can't you see it? The proof of complete ascension that you sought but could never reach?"

A blue light—an unearthly, vividly azure glow—momentarily overwhelmed the starlight meticulously etched by White Light. The brilliance emanating from the stars in the sky and earth was crushed under the weight of a single strand of light shining from a human's eyes.

White Light was the most advanced and profound being in this space. And because of that, she was able to verify the 'truth' Orthes presented. The moment Orthes opened his eyes, she saw the essence of his 'gaze.' The vision of an azure morning star spreading, eroding the celestial sphere filled with countless shining stars.

That was true divinity.

Doubt rippled through White Light's once-unshakable composure. What now appeared before her was what she had once revered above all else in the world, what she had buried with her own hands—resurrected in front of her.

It was at the very moment she tried to reject it.

The communication channel reserved exclusively for the owners of the Commandments—the Tower Lords—activated. A hidden function, designed thousands of years ago to prepare for the eradication of the Mage King, now roared to life.

The Tower Lord of Nokmok screamed into the line, their voice sharp and frantic.

"Argyrion! Argyrion is here! They invoke Hydra Corporation's pact of inheritance and declare succession warfare against us—!"

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White Light's heart sank, heavy and subdued.

"Perhaps not the Mage King himself, but it seems you are one of his vanguards."

Her voice was low and calm, yet sharp enough to cut through the air. Orthes couldn't comprehend White Light's sudden change in demeanor. His intention had only been to throw her off for a second or two, just enough to buy a little time. But this? This was far beyond what he had expected.

"So even the Expeditionary Force's departure was part of the plan."

What is she talking about? Is this some sort of bluff to gauge the truth in my words?

"The blockade of White Light's main tower also makes sense now. It wasn't just to prevent the Elders' support. It was to delay Nokmok's communications as much as possible, wasn't it?"

Nokmok? A message from Nokmok?

Orthes's instincts flared. In this instant, one of the Commandment Frontlines had slipped from his control.

Carisia, now poised and fully regrouped, exchanged a glance with Orthes. A wordless understanding passed between them.

"Do you know what's going on?"

"Not a clue. This is the first I'm hearing of any of it."

From the looks of things, the Tower Lord of Nokmok had managed to send a direct communication through the Commandment network. And its contents were shocking enough to lend credibility to Orthes's bluff—even to White Light herself.

"If it's connected to the Expeditionary Force's departure…"

Only one answer remained: Argyrion. A sense of foreboding crawled up Orthes's spine, but he opened his mouth to speak.

"Betrayal by the Eidolons. The Expeditionary Force's drift. Everything has gone according to plan. By binding the greatest card of the Ten Towers—you—we've secured victory across the entire battlefield."

"Very well, servant of the Mage King. I admit that the Ten Towers were negligent in their vigilance."

Carisia remained on standby, her magic charged and ready. Until they could extract more information about the rapidly changing circumstances outside, it was necessary to hold back on the attack for now.

“To think that Hydra Corporation was backing Argyrion all along…”

White Light’s words were barely audible, but they were enough for Orthes to piece together the situation.

Argyrion… abandoned their stronghold?

The thought was absurd. It was an outrageous gamble, one that would almost certainly leave them vulnerable to being crushed between the succession warfare of the Ten Towers and the returning Expeditionary Force, creating a two-front disaster.

Unless Argyrion was certain they could delay the Expeditionary Force—or had some third party to ensure they drifted—it was an insane risk to take.

Why would Argyrion join forces with the Commandment Revolution in the first place?

Orthes steadied his swirling thoughts and resorted to his habitual method: calculated provocation.

“Hah. Are you so surprised that your creation would join forces with the Mage King’s creation?”

“It’s not entirely incomprehensible, given that it hates me,” White Light replied in a resolute tone. Yet beneath her calm exterior, the embers of an uncharacteristic anger began to smolder.

“But how foolish. Because it is nothing more than discarded dummy data. You, better than anyone, should know how things ended between the Mage King and me.”

Carisia quietly delved into the fragmentary data of White Light stored within herself, revisiting that pivotal moment. The moment White Light had realized the true nature of the Mage King: that his ten disciples were nothing more than tools designed to devour the world.

“No matter how much trust you place in it, no matter how deep your bond with it may seem… as long as it remains the Mage King’s confidant, its fate is already sealed.”

Carisia smiled.

Orthes was not the Mage King’s confidant.

He was hers.

White Light’s eyes narrowed as she caught sight of Carisia’s grin. A faint ripple stirred in her heart. The stars of the celestial sphere quivered. Fragments of the radiant wings floating behind White Light broke away, flying toward her severed left arm.

The fragments melted into her arm, neither entirely wing nor entirely flesh. They fused and transformed, reshaping into a blindingly radiant arm that seemed capable of bleaching the world itself.

The arm, suffused with light, settled back into place on her shoulder. Fundamentally identical to the plasma constructs Carisia conjured, yet superior in every way. Without the need for external tools like gauntlets, White Light could manifest and control this devastating power directly, shaping it into a perfect weapon.

“If you had come here alone, with the resolve to kill me yourself, and if I had been defeated, I would have praised your magic as I accepted my demise. But to align yourself with the Mage King?”

The hatred directed at the Mage King burned intensely in her voice. And that hatred now turned toward Orthes.

Orthes and Carisia exchanged another glance. That radiant arm was pure magic. It was Orthes’s role to deal with it.

“How foolish, you nameless fragment of my dream!”

Orthes braced himself for the attack. White Light surged forward.

But her target wasn’t him.

It was Carisia.

Even as her composure cracked, White Light had turned her emotional turbulence into an opportunity, launching a sudden assault. Orthes was stunned as he realized that even in the split second before striking Carisia, the murderous intent reflected in his "eyes" remained locked onto him.

White Light accelerated with photonization. Though Carisia had faced this magic once before, it was now her turn to counter with the same spell. Her plasma-wreathed gauntlet collided with White Light’s radiant blade.

Every movement of White Light left behind afterimages of luminous trails. Each trail transformed into a blade aimed at Carisia.

A greatsword skimmed the surface of the starlit sea, throwing up sprays of water. Every droplet reflected starlight, each beam twisting into an attack. As the drops exploded outward, they scattered destructive waves of light across the entire ocean of stars.

Carisia stood her ground, countering with sheer force. Her tightly clenched fist continued to gather and discharge plasma, creating explosion after explosion.

A kaleidoscope of shattered light danced around them. In the heart of this beautiful destruction, Orthes intervened.

It was the moment White Light accelerated again, aiming her radiant arm at Carisia's left eye. The arm collided with Orthes's High-Frequency Blade and began to disintegrate.

But its restoration was even faster. White Light gathered the scattered particles of light, reforging them into wings, and reabsorbed an intact wing fragment to recreate the arm. Orthes's interference could only buy time—it couldn't deal a decisive blow.

The fleeting seconds Orthes bought allowed Carisia to retreat beyond White Light's reach. Orthes seamlessly took over the offensive.

Carisia had met White Light strength for strength, skill for skill. Orthes, however, relied solely on skill. He didn't disrupt White Light's magic by breaking it apart but instead grafted incompatible formulas onto it, twisting them into malformed structures.

Light clashed against light, canceling out and scattering. With every swing of Orthes's blade through White Light's domain, another star of the celestial sphere dimmed and disappeared.

But such attacks couldn't end the fight.

Orthes's every strike steadily chipped away at White Light's combat capabilities. Yet her reservoir of power seemed endless. It was like trying to drain an ocean with his hands.

"I can't settle this within an hour… no…"

Perhaps he wouldn't even last that long before he was completely exhausted.

A new variable was needed.

Orthes activated the magic engraving drive: Flowing Water Projectile. A low-grade spell that produced nothing more than a few splashes of water. It was an attack so weak that it didn't even warrant a response from White Light.

But for Carisia, it was a crucial assist. The water droplets shortened the process for her spell.

Just as White Light had used water droplets to scatter and refract destructive beams of light earlier, Carisia now used Orthes's water as lenses to contain her own light. But she didn't fire it immediately.

Instead, she condensed the light further. Using the water droplets as lenses, she focused her light, not for sheer destructive power, but to imbue it with symbolic and magical meaning. With careful telekinesis, she split the light-laden droplets into finer spheres.

The droplets arranged themselves in a circle, surrounding White Light in all directions.

Fire.

A barrage of light erupted, pouring out every ounce of accumulated radiance. White Light's physical and magical senses were overwhelmed, both blinded by the onslaught.

In that brief instant, her ability to detect anything was drastically reduced. Orthes stopped fighting. He neither attacked nor defended.

A crucial piece of the puzzle had been missing from this battle from the very beginning.

He had to find it.

Orthes opened his eyes wide.

***

When I think about it, the prerequisite for our success in the Commandment Revolution wasn't defeating White Light.

It was ending the succession war within an hour.

The victory condition for the succession war wasn't to kill White Light.

It was to usurp the connection rights to the Commandments.

When I first reached White Light's pinnacle, I was too overwhelmed by the sight to ask the fundamental question:

Where is the Commandment 'White Light'?

The boundless mana White Light wielded was proof of the Commandment's existence. Even if her soul was contained within it, as long as we could sever the connection projecting its influence outward, we would claim victory in that instant.

I followed the lines connecting White Light to her magic. Searching for the true weak point that this ancient monster was hiding.

It's not there?!

Her mana was undeniably linked to the entire realm. But that was because this battleground existed within the dimension she had created.

Tracing the flow of mana that controlled her body should have led me to the location of the Commandment housing her soul. Yet the mana flowing from her body extended only into this vast sea of stars.

There was no connection point to the Commandment itself.

Instinctively, I turned to Carisia. The mana flowing around her body shimmered like a heat haze. It was connected to the Artificial Commandment buried beneath Mount Etna.

The connection to her Commandment was so clear. A connection should exist for White Light as well—it had to.

…It had to?

If I could see connections to a source as powerful as a Commandment, then that meant…

I was already seeing the connection to White Light's Commandment.

I looked back at her. The flow of her mana extended endlessly, linking her to this entire dimension.

Infinite. Boundless.

The Commandment of limitless mana.

We were fighting inside White Light's soul.

Chapter 183:『White Light』

Chapter 183:『White Light』

If I wanted to destroy this massive space in one blow…

Do I really have to detonate the Artificial Commandment?

My thoughts accelerated. In the vastly slowed perception of time, I calculated future actions. Whether detonating the Artificial Commandment would collapse White Light was still unverified.

In the prophecy called the Original Script, the final magic of White No Name had shattered the Commandment White Light. It wasn't unreasonable to assume that the explosive power of the Artificial Commandment, which rivaled—or perhaps surpassed—that magic, could destroy White Light.

But let's say the Commandment bomb did defeat White Light. Would the Commandment Frontline move as we intended afterward?

…No, it's impossible!

Argyrion's sudden intrusion had unraveled every calculation.

The Commandments were limitless sources of mana, and that alone made them unpredictable variables. Even for aligned groups like the Divine Cult or Hector's Knights, relinquishing such a power was no small decision. Entrusting Commandments to multiple parties relied on the premise of dividing power to ensure mutual checks and balances.

But what if Argyrion claimed one?

Before confronting White Light, I had heard everything Carisia knew about her.

White Light had said she modeled her spiritual immortality after the Mage King's will engraved in the Commandment. In other words, if Argyrion seized Nokmok, the Commandment, they could connect to the fragmented will of the Mage King.

That fragment would act as a catalyst to summon the Mage King, who resides beyond the extra-dimension.

It was the worst-case scenario. The Artificial Commandment was indispensable—not only as a warhead to confront the incarnated Mage King but also as a key component for spatial displacement to strike Argyrion.

This meant that defeating White Light without detonating the Artificial Commandment was imperative.

How?

What method could dismantle White Light's integrity?

Time ran out before I could find an answer. The lingering light subsided, and White Light rose into the air.

She no longer appeared willing to fight on the ground. Was it an application of photonization?

Whatever my suspicions, my reaction needed to be quick. Since this space was fundamentally White Light herself, all her spells were part of the formulas that composed the dimension. Every time I overrode a spell, she restructured it almost immediately—a testament to her mastery.

But I had Carisia.

My employer unleashed relentless firepower. White Light countered with torrents of starlight, neutralizing the attacks with overwhelming force. I had wondered why she chose flight, knowing I could interfere with her magic.

Now it was clear: by drawing closer to the stars, her magic's potency had increased. It seemed she was willing to take that risk to overpower us.

Damn it. The Artificial Commandment was steadily eroding the domain White Light controlled, but this space remained inherently hers. If I calculated the maximum mana she could draw at any given moment, of course her advantage was higher.

Erosion?

The domains of two Commandments compete to expand their influence. The larger the pool of free mana they secure, the greater their domain grows. When one domain erodes the other, the original spells in that space collapse, converting their stored mana into free mana.

Ultimately, the struggle between two domains boils down to the seizure of free mana. The spells themselves or the mana within them aren't directly exchanged.

But my formula overrides could forcibly link the two Commandments. If White Light's existence itself was inscribed as a formula within the Commandment, then the Artificial Commandment's magic could act as a poison, diluting her essence.

I recalled the attack that had caused White Light the most damage: when I had forcibly connected the purification formulas of the Artificial Commandment to White Light.

"Boss! Did overriding the Commandments work?"

"It was enough to blow her head off once! But I'm not you—I couldn't stop her from regenerating!"

Even when White Light was consumed with murderous intent toward me, she was cold and calculating enough to exploit it and target Carisia instead.

For her to show such a significant vulnerability against Carisia meant the discord between the two Commandments inflicted something far worse than mere pain.

The strategy became clear: attack the formulas that composed White Light herself. Since we couldn't bypass her to connect directly to the Commandment and seize its authority, this was the only path left.

The problem, however, was that the Artificial Commandment was the only force capable of delivering a meaningful blow against White Light, whose existence was fundamentally intertwined with the Commandment.

If I attempted another forced override between the two Commandments, the outcome of the battle against White Light might shift—but Hydra Corporation's overall war efforts could spiral out of control. At this moment, Hydra's forces were likely fighting with the Artificial Commandment's support.

If the shock of the override brought both White Light's forces and Hydra's mages to a standstill, it might work. But if White Light recovered first and severed the Artificial Commandment's link, we would lose.

I needed a method other than the Artificial Commandment. A formula capable of challenging the scale of White Light's existence. Something that could contend with her soul.

And then it hit me.

I let out a dry laugh. The answer had been right in front of me all along.

"Boss. This entire space is the Commandment. As soon as White Light's avatar collapses, seize control of the Commandment."

"Orthes? What are you planning to do?"

White Light had inscribed her soul into the Commandment as a formula.

And I? I was a soul engraved by the Divine Cult, drawn from beyond the extra-dimension.

White Light and I shared the same fundamental nature.

The only thing needed was a spell to bind our two souls together. I had always relied on the magic engraving drive as a medium for formula overrides, but this time, I didn't need it.

I recalled the principle behind Carisia's instant-death magic by sight. Sometimes, the very act of seeing is itself a magical action.

In that case, my gaze could become the formula.

Open your eyes, Orthes.

***

It was a mosaic-like landscape. A lifetime, eerily similar to Carisia's, yet with a different essence, stretched out before me.

Fragments of a human's every moment split into countless shards, filling the space above, below, and all around me. The memories flowed without pause, turning the space into a grotesque monitor where countless channels played simultaneously.

And there I stood, at the center. A man in a black suit, his eyes narrowed to slits.

In one hand, I held a black High-Frequency Blade.

This was me. The form of the outsider who had named himself Orthes.

The mosaic fragments began to coalesce, taking the shape of a person.

It was White Light. Or rather, her form before she had engaged Carisia. Unlike now, her left arm was intact.

"You… you…!"

Just as I perceived White Light's life, she was undoubtedly witnessing mine. The façade of me as the Mage King's confidant had completely crumbled.

"The Divine Cult? That relic of a bygone age is their final desperate act?"

"Yes, that's exactly what this is."

I pointed my blade at her.

"Although, I rather like my other title: Chief Inspector of Hydra Corporation's Divine Investigation Office."

I swung my blade. The dreams shown by the reliquary had taught me how to move within this mental space.

Let's wager our souls and fight, White Light.

***

Orthes stood perfectly still, his eyes wide open.

At the same time, White Light's movements visibly slowed. Her body creaked, as if it were made of rusted tin.

Had Orthes awakened some sort of Medusa-like ability to petrify what he gazed upon? Carisia looked at Orthes, a glimmer of hope in her eyes. Perhaps this fight could finally end.

Thin, blue cracks began to spread from the corners of his eyes.

Carisia's magical intuition grasped the essence of the phenomenon before her. Orthes's physical body was beginning to reflect the vision in his 'eyes,' reducing him to fragments of intangible words, as if he were being unraveled into scattered pieces of meaning.

Carisia neither froze in horror nor wasted time shouting clichéd words like "No!"

Instead, she turned and sprinted toward White Light.

If Orthes was to disappear, White Light had to be destroyed first.

White Light, her body moving in grotesque, jerking motions, was preparing to strike Orthes. Her dissonant movements were the result of her spirit's commands being transmitted at an agonizingly slow pace. As long as her soul remained bound by Orthes, her actions couldn't remain coherent.

But White Light was adapting to the two-front assault.

Carisia herself was the result of a quest to master the duality of spirit and body.

Over thousands of years of magical contemplation, White Light had refined the ability to project her will across both the material and spiritual realms.

***

White Light optimized her movements for efficiency. She issued identical commands to both realms, eliminating the need for dual calculations and reserving resources for focused thought.

She was preparing the ultimate move, a decisive spell that would erase both Orthes and Carisia in one strike.

In her current state, fine motor control and precise mana manipulation were difficult. Naturally, her attacks became straightforward, linear, and devastatingly wide in scope.

Her finishing blow would come from her left arm. The radiant arm (gwangwan, 光腕), woven from fragments of Infinite Starlight, was a weapon of unparalleled destructive power, an enchanted construct that exceeded any conventional tool of war.

White Light compressed her mana into the radiant arm, overloading it to the limit before detonation.

The concept for this attack had originated from Orthes's memories: the Artificial Commandment bomb that Carisia had prepared. Since Infinite Starlight was a magic on the threshold of divinity, this was essentially a compressed version of that bomb.

White Light swung her blade of light.

Carisia charged headlong into the oncoming cascade of radiance.

Meanwhile, Orthes retrieved a formula from his memories and grafted it onto his blade.

Slowly, gradually, the two adversaries fighting White Light advanced—one in the material realm, the other in the spiritual.

Carisia realized that White Light was preparing a spell of tremendous power. The starlight gathering in her left arm grew ever brighter, impossible to ignore.

Orthes, his eyes fully unleashed, read White Light's actions as well. In her current state of unified thought across two realms, even deception through murderous intent was no longer possible.

Finally, the starlight condensed in her radiant arm reached its critical point.

At the moment of impending catastrophe, Orthes and Carisia shared the same thought:

White Light was holding her own against both of them in this two-front war. Even as she reserved her strength to complete a finishing spell.

Victory was impossible if they continued in a linear pattern—soul against soul, body against body.

***

I trust Carisia. If I can destroy White Light's body here, she'll finish the rest.

I trust Orthes. If I can sever White Light's spirit here, he'll handle the rest.

Together, we'll win.

***

Orthes's eyes saw both worlds simultaneously. In the spiritual realm, he fought White Light's soul. In the material realm, he saw Carisia battling her physical form.

Since he had accessed the spiritual realm without closing his eyes, this was, in a way, inevitable.

Orthes observed White Light's mana bomb, the Extinguishing Star spell. Excluding Carisia, no one alive had studied mana bombs more extensively than Orthes.

He had seen the structures of countless explosive spells, to the point of exhaustion.

Orthes's apocalypse grafted itself over the Extinguishing Star formula. The mana, which had reached critical mass, suddenly lost its direction and erupted outward. A blinding, annihilating force tore through space, erasing everything it touched.

The Orthes in the spiritual realm had disrupted the battle in the material realm. When White Light tried to suppress the unleashed mana with the power of her Commandment, Carisia intervened.

Magical interference requires two things:

1. Timing the interference precisely to match the spell's activation.
2. Using a spell from the same category as the one being interfered with.

Carisia rapidly constructed a spell meeting both criteria.

The first was explosion, the concept she had always pursued. Since the Extinguishing Star formula itself had originated from her mana bomb, preparing a corresponding spell was simple.

The second was spirit, an aspect she had directly experienced through Aegio's relic. By reverse-engineering the formula from the moment her mind had synchronized with Orthes, she created a spell that not only interfered with the Extinguishing Star but also disrupted White Light's spirit.

Ultimately, the formula Carisia sought to interfere with was White Light's soul.

From the spiritual realm to the material realm, and back again—from realm to realm, Carisia's attack destabilized the very fabric of White Light's existence.

She clenched her fist one last time, plasma coiling tightly around her gauntlet.

Orthes grasped the magical tremor radiating from Carisia's attack in the spiritual realm. It became the foundation for his final formula override.

A descending blade and a rising gauntlet. The two attacks, one from each realm, converged on White Light's heart. In both worlds, the strikes landed in the exact same place at the exact same time.

The boundary between worlds vanished. Carisia could see Orthes, and Orthes could see Carisia. Across the material and spiritual planes, they delivered a decisive cross-strike that burned through White Light.

Her existence shattered, scattering like an explosion. The mana she had accumulated over countless eons flooded the world, bleaching the once star-filled celestial sphere to pure white.

At last, the radiance collapsed, fragmenting into countless pieces and dissipating.

Orthes dropped the High-Frequency Blade from his hand and looked up at the sky.

It was no longer filled with starlight or an infinite void.

It was a vast, endless blue—the azure sky.

Chapter184:『Commandment Frontline (5)』

Chapter184:『Commandment Frontline (5)』

Orthes lay sprawled on his back, staring up at the sky. Only the endless blue filled his vision. There were no invasive streams of information about the history of objects or their composition, no annoying data like the mana density of the surrounding atmosphere.

For the first time, he saw the world without any sense of pressure.

A shadow fell across his face. Soft, white hair brushed against his cheek, and golden eyes came into view.

“Boss.”

“You’re alive!”

“Seems so,” Orthes replied with a dry laugh. He wasn’t sure if his overworked eyes had finally given out, if they were temporarily offline, or if their function was permanently impaired.

But one thing was certain.

They had defeated White Light.

“Did we… do it?”

Carisia muttered under her breath.

“Don’t jinx it,” Orthes warned.

“Do you believe in silly superstitions like that?”

Carisia shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly and looked around. The peak of White Light’s tower was surrounded by arched pillars, open to the air with no walls between them.

The wind blew freely through the gaps, and faintly, from far below in the city of Etna, came the sounds of ongoing conflict.

Then, suddenly, the tower groaned with a deep rumble.

Carisia immediately snapped into action, channeling mana into her gauntlet. The gauntlet, already damaged from the excessive strain it had endured during the battle, was on the verge of breaking completely, but she somehow managed to force mana into it.

The tower groaned again, louder this time, and an ominous sound echoed—something heavy, something vital, was beginning to fall apart.

A vivid image of the current state of White Light’s tower flashed through Orthes’s mind. Thoughts connected in rapid succession.

As his thoughts accelerated, peripheral information began creeping into his vision again, only for his senses to suddenly reset to normal.

So, my eyes haven't permanently given out.

It seemed they had temporarily shut down to recharge after being pushed too far.

Orthes refocused his thoughts on the tower. The structure had been pierced by the overwhelming mass of Etna City.

The only reason the tower hadn't collapsed outright was due to the constant regeneration efforts powered by the Commandment's mana.

But now, the Grand Mage White Light—the master of the Commandment and the one sustaining the tower—was gone.

Orthes and Carisia had defeated her.

The link between the tower and the Commandment had been severed. Which meant that the flow of mana sustaining the tower…

"Is gone?!"

"What's gone?"

"Boss, connect to White Light's Commandment! That sound—it's the sound of the tower collapsing!"

"Wow. That's kind of awesome! I was disappointed I didn't get to blow it up myself."

Orthes's expression twisted in disbelief, and Carisia stuck her tongue out with a playful smile. "Just kidding," she added.

She turned and looked behind her.

At the center of the arched peak stood a massive artifact—a crystalline orb over ten meters tall. Inside, white light swirled like a storm.

Just moments ago, Carisia had been fighting within that very space. Now that White Light, the mage who had used the Commandment to create that dimension, was gone, the Commandment had reverted to its basic form.

A destructive impulse welled up inside her.

The urge to detonate the Artificial Commandment right now, obliterating the entire tower, the Commandment White Light, and even herself, was overwhelming.

But then Carisia turned her head and saw Orthes, staggering to his feet with difficulty.

She decided to suppress her destructive impulse for now.

Carisia reached out and touched the Commandment.

Slowly, light began to radiate from it. Unlike the overwhelming, blinding radiance White Light had emitted, this light was gentle—like clouds drifting across the sky or freshly fallen snow in winter. It was a calm, comforting glow.

Carisia deliberately restricted the amount of mana she drew from the Commandment. Given that she was also receiving mana from the Artificial Commandment, there was a risk of accumulating more power than she could control.

The moment White Light fell, the mages of White Light's tower must have been thrown into confusion, she thought.

Their link to the Commandment had been severed. And now, it was time to deliver the declaration of complete victory.

***

I silently watched Carisia. My eyes were a defective tool. If I left them open, my head hurt; if I imposed restrictions to ease the strain, the constraints caused yet another headache.

I needed to take in as much of the world as possible while I could still see it clearly.

As Carisia touched the Commandment, the once-unstable tower quickly began to stabilize. At the same time, the sounds of combat from below grew quieter. The mages must have understood the significance of White Light's silence by now.

"Ah—"

Carisia tested her voice, letting out a few meaningless sounds as though testing a microphone. Then, she spoke in a calm, measured tone.

"This is a public announcement. Hydra Corporation has undertaken a merger and acquisition of the Ten Towers' White Light in order to enhance its competitive edge in the rapidly evolving magical society. As of today, at this very moment, the acquisition is complete. The company name will remain Hydra Corporation, and the existing organizational structure will be maintained."

A merger, huh? Not technically inaccurate. I couldn't suppress a wry chuckle.

"With this merger as a stepping stone, Hydra Corporation has secured an unparalleled position in the magical society and promises to introduce innovative methods for operating the Commandment White Light—methods unlike anything you've seen before."

Sure. The Commandment bomb was certainly a revolutionary way to utilize White Light. Carisia's farcical tone was so absurdly effective that it further eroded the morale of White Light's mages. It was as if all the bloodshed and carnage up until now were being reduced to mere "corporate friction" in the course of a merger.

“In addition, all contracts and employment statuses under the former White Light Corporation will be subject to a comprehensive review. Effective immediately, all ongoing tasks undertaken by employees of the former White Light Corporation are hereby suspended. All former employees are instructed to disarm and remain seated. Detailed operational guidelines and personnel restructuring will be provided at a later date.”

A mischievous smile played across her lips.

“Hydra Corporation, which continues its ‘explosive’ growth toward the future, stands at the forefront of magical innovation. We look forward to surprising you with extraordinary rewards in return for your continued interest and support. Until that day, Hydra Corporation will keep growing.”

Damn it. What an unsettling way to end a speech. I trudged over to Carisia.

“Signed, Carisia, CEO of Hydra Corporation.”

Carisia ended her speech and stood still for a moment, gazing up at the sky. Though she hadn’t destroyed White Light outright, she had finally achieved her long-held dream.

Whether it was satisfaction or bittersweetness, the moment clearly carried a unique weight for her.

“How was it?” she asked.

“A bit long. Probably excruciating for the employees to listen to.”

“Really? I thought it was a well-crafted statement for something I made up on the spot.”

“So, Boss…”

I had other questions I wanted to ask after taking down White Light, but now wasn’t the time. The unpredictable variable of Argyrion was still out there.

“Do you think Lamphades succeeded?”

“Well, it’s been about 42 minutes since the succession war was declared. I’d say it’s a fifty-fifty chance at this point.”

“Whether Lamphades managed to secure Yellow Thunder or not will determine how quickly Argyrion’s schemes spread. That, in turn, will dictate our next moves. Damn it. The seal we created by forcibly merging the Artificial Commandment with White Light is impossible to undo quickly.”

Carisia hadn’t delivered her victory speech out of sheer arrogance. If they could move to Nokmok’s frontline immediately, they would have. But the barrier formed by the fusion of the two Commandments was a knot that couldn’t be untangled easily.

It was like tying a thread into a mess in an instant but needing an eternity to unravel it.

Carisia had realized she couldn't head to Nokmok right away, so she had focused on decisively breaking the morale of White Light's forces. Understanding this, I resolved to undo the formula once my eyes recovered.

If only there were a way to contact the outside… I muttered aloud, and Carisia tilted her head curiously.

"Why don't we just check?"

"Huh? The seal blocks all external communication. Sure, Etna City's terrain is still connected to this tower, but only someone like Proditor could navigate that route to reach us."

Carisia tapped the Commandment White Light lightly.

"You said Nokmok's Tower Lord sent a communication here, didn't you? Since the Commandments are linked, it must be possible to bypass the seal and communicate between them. Let's try contacting Lamphades."

Carisia began sifting through the spells embedded in White Light, searching for the formula used for direct communication between Tower Lords.

When she finally spoke, her voice was eerily identical to White Light's. If I weren't me, I might not have been able to tell the difference.

"Yellow Thunder. What's your status?"

Chapter 185:『Commandment Frontline (6)』

Chapter 185:『Commandment Frontline (6)』

The succession war at the Yellow Thunder Tower ended earlier than expected. Orthes had always believed that Hector's Knights were more than capable of conquering a Ten Tower branch whose Tower Lord was absent.

And yet, before they even set out to attack their assigned tower, the Knights had joined forces with the Lamphades Tower to assault Yellow Thunder first.

Many of Yellow Thunder's Elders had been deployed on the Argyrion expedition, and its Tower Lord was in a coma.

Under the combined onslaught of Lamphades Tower and Hector's Knights, Yellow Thunder's forces crumbled, unable to hold the front line.

With no functional leadership in place, proper command became impossible. The Elders could not unify their opinions, and their chosen solution to the collapsing front line was to take to the battlefield themselves.

The result was chaos. Each unit under an Elder effectively became an independent entity, and the complete breakdown of communication only fueled the disarray.

In this confusion, the Divine Cult delivered the killing blow.

Using Lamphades's radar to pinpoint coordinates, Proditor's clergy executed a precision teleportation strike. Assassination teams were sent directly to the comatose Tower Lord of Yellow Thunder.

It wasn't the Tower Lord's consciousness that responded to the attack, but rather the survival-driven auxiliary intelligence embedded within his body. This cold, calculated artificial intelligence controlled the left side of his otherwise paralyzed body by directly channeling electrical currents through his nervous system.

The left side responded faster than the right, where the faint influence of his dormant consciousness still lingered. From the Tower Lord's left hand, destructive lightning surged forth.

Demus charged forward with a wild grin. In his hand was a sacred relic, one of the few that had regained its former power. Its name had long been forgotten, but the blade of its spear had been reforged anew.

Harnessing both divine power and martial aura, Demus was engulfed in a crimson wind that swirled like a storm. His right arm, gripping the spear, pulled back with immense force. His muscles rippled as he twisted his entire body to hurl the weapon.

From his toes to his fingertips, the rotational energy built up in his frame was unleashed in a single, destructive throw. The spear spiraled through the air with devastating power, piercing

through the golden lightning emitted by the Tower Lord. Fragments of thunder scattered in all directions, but Demus pressed on, unfazed. His clenched left fist radiated with the combined force of divine power and martial aura.

The survival program recognized the threat. The incomplete state of the Tower Lord's body wasn't enough to deal with this zealot.

The program attempted to seize control of the Tower Lord's right side as well. It prioritized the survival of the body, even at the cost of the consciousness inhabiting it. Memories, after all, were merely sparks in neural cells—so long as the body lived, they could be restored.

But just as the program prepared to override the Tower Lord's right side, Hector struck.

Hector's target wasn't the Tower Lord himself. With sharp, precise movements, he attacked the invisible tendrils of magic that the survival program was using to seize control.

Just because something is unseen doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Hector's blade, shimmering with martial aura, pierced the heart of the intangible spell.

In an instant, the spell was forced into manifestation—a golden, geometric pattern glowing brightly before shattering into countless fragments.

The Commandment's radiance attempted to reassert itself, sending pulses of power to regain control of the Tower Lord's right side. But every time it tried, Hector's blade cut through the connection. No matter how many times the survival program requested mana, Hector severed its supply lines with precision.

All of this was to buy time for Lamphades to activate the Thunder Talisman at the Tower's core.

The innermost chamber of Yellow Thunder Tower, where the Tower Lord was kept, was filled with an overwhelming concentration of thunderous mana. But the Thunder Talisman began to convert that energy into a more stable form.

The Commandment's infinite mana couldn't be entirely transformed, but it was enough to disrupt the unstable magic the comatose Tower Lord was channeling.

The survival program made a cold, calculated decision. The intruders could not be repelled. Therefore, it needed to ensure that the title of "master of the Commandment" remained tied to Yellow Thunder Tower.

It began charging the Tower Lord's body with a self-destructive spell, using his entire nervous system as a conduit. Golden lightning crackled within the Tower Lord's body, preparing for a catastrophic explosion.

Demus recalled a moment from the past as he watched the glowing figure of the Tower Lord.

"This time, it will be different!"

He prepared to invoke the name of his god, Enyalius, for a finishing blow.

But Hector preferred a "safer" solution over a head-on clash of power.

“Lamphades! Make the conversion quick!”

Martial aura erupted around Hector’s feet. He leapt into the air, his movements more akin to flight. With controlled bursts of aura from his entire body, he adjusted his position mid-air with precision.

Hector’s blade struck true, plunging into the Tower Lord’s heart—the nexus where all the mana was converging.

The explosive torrent of thunderous mana was itself a flood of lightning, but the Thunder Talisman absorbed the energy, subduing the raging currents.

When the mana stored in the Tower Lord’s body was depleted, his form collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut.

Lamphades couldn’t help but notice a resemblance between Hector’s strike and Orthes’s methods.

“Damn it, they’re alike…”

Hector clicked his tongue. Without Orthes’s “eyes,” breaking down the structural formula of spells to cancel magic was the best he could manage.

But he couldn’t achieve the same finesse as Orthes’s formula overrides.

“That brat should’ve taken over as the Sword Duke after me,” Hector muttered.

The title of Sword Duke referred to the leader of the Knights. Since the order had been founded by a knight serving an ancient king who had been slain by the Mage King, they refrained from calling themselves "king" and instead adopted the title of Duke.

Now that Orthes’s supposed connection to the Mage King had been more or less resolved, Hector was ready to pass on his role and retreat into obscurity.

“If this is going to end with the revolution we’ve been aiming for, I might as well start preparing for retirement…”

Lamphades ignored Hector’s grumbling and surveyed their surroundings.

“I’m initiating the succession process.”

As Lamphades reached out to touch the Commandment—

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「Yellow Thunder. What’s your status?」

The voice wasn't emotionless; it was utterly lifeless, like a machine. Lamphades swallowed nervously.

"What's going on? Did something happen to Orthes?"

「I'll ask again. Yellow Thunder. Do you have the capacity to assist Nokmok?"

Lamphades took a deep breath. That couldn't be. Orthes's strategies had proven effective even against the Ten Towers. Whoever was behind this transmission, whatever their intentions, it was surely part of Orthes's plan.

"The former Yellow Thunder Tower has fallen in the succession war. I am Lamphades, the new Tower Lord."

A moment of silence followed. Lamphades waited, a mix of unease and anticipation tightening his chest.

「Ah, that's a relief. It's Carisia.」

The voice shifted instantly—from its cold, mechanical tone to something recognizably human, carrying a trace of warmth.

「Orthes has a question. Did you send a message to Nokmok?"

Lamphades responded calmly.

"Of course. Orthes warned us to be wary of Argyrion, and it seems he was right."

Orthes let out a sigh of relief upon hearing Carisia relay Lamphades's answer. If Lamphades had sent a message to Nokmok, it meant he had successfully secured the Commandment and activated the jamming signals.

With Lamphades's interference in place, the only communication Argyrion could use was the direct Commandment link, which meant their schemes couldn't spread further.

Though the mage coalition dispatched to Nokmok's front was still a potential problem, Hydra Corporation wouldn't immediately become a public enemy.

"Argyrion's presence here, outside the extra-dimension, is an enigma," Lamphades continued. "But to stabilize morale, either you or Carisia will need to confront Argyrion directly."

Hector and Demus had already been dispatched to their respective front lines via Proditor's clergy, while Lamphades and his mages worked to stabilize Yellow Thunder.

"For now, we won't be able to assist Nokmok for at least a few hours."

「They're grateful. Focus on stabilizing Yellow Thunder. Orthes will handle Nokmok," Carisia replied.

Lamphades found himself nodding in admiration. Orthes's ability to manipulate the narrative was extraordinary, enough to make even someone like him feel a pang of fear.

Meanwhile, Argyrion pressed forward relentlessly. Empowered by the Silver Thread, which converted raw mana into magical energy, the battle for Nokmok was unlike any conventional succession war.

Typically, attackers were at a disadvantage in succession wars, as they had to erode the mana-dense atmosphere dominated by the defending Commandment. But Argyrion simply overwhelmed the process by converting vast amounts of mana faster than it could be absorbed.

Fueled by the concentrated efforts of their forces and the knowledge left behind by Sprigo's World Tree research, Argyrion achieved unprecedented results.

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Halto, perched atop a silver wave, watched as mages were consumed one by one. He had no intention of climbing Nokmok's tower floor by floor.

Instead, he headed straight for the peak.

Branches surged like a tidal wave, crashing over Nokmok Tower. The moment Halto set foot toward the summit—

Dozens of spells rained down upon him in an instant.

Despite the Silver Thread's ability to convert mana, these attacks were simple yet highly effective.

What was strange was that the spells' attributes weren't unified. They weren't all nature-based magic. Instead, all ten elemental attributes of the Ten Towers manifested simultaneously.

"Who's there?" Halto demanded.

"We knew you would come, servant of the Fallen Lord."

From the shadows of Nokmok, nameless mages emerged. Even the Tower Lord hadn't known of their presence. They were more magic than human, uninterested in the succession war and endlessly devoted to research.

Among the Elders, they were known as the Ancients—beings who had remained since the founding of the Ten Towers, having outlived countless successions.

In name, they were considered Elders, but in practice, they ignored even the Tower Lords, existing solely as machines of magical inquiry.

“You know the truth and still choose to side with the Ten Towers?” Halto asked.

“We exist for magic, not for some corpse king,” they replied.

Argyrion (1)

Chapter 186: Argyrion (1)

Halto's expression contorted at the words of the ancient elders, those perpetrators of a terrible truth, those who insulted the true cause.

However, Halto soon wore a confident expression.

"Then you should be afraid. Hydra Corporation, who is on the same side as our Argyrion, has headed to White Light. They will be the overture to the end of the magical society."

Bluster to distract the hostility of the old elders. It was an extension of the preceding public opinion warfare.

"How amusing."

"You're so sure. Do you believe in White Light's victory? But what if the head of Hydra Corporation is White Light's bastard? Even White Light himself can't guarantee victory."

White Light's bastard. Argyrion was convinced that the president of Hydra Corporation was White Light's monster simply based on Nastion's report that he had 'white hair'.

This was not a logical deduction. It was an empirical derivation that the only being who could be by the side of the adversary Orthes was another adversary.

"That's exactly why I say it's amusing."

The elders' voices filled the space draped in silver shadows.

"If White Light's bastard is truly White Light's child, then he cannot abandon his desire for magic. The agreement between you was quite surprising, but even if Hydra Corporation obtains White Light, they will not offer it to the dead king."

Halto, feigning a blank expression, glared at the old elders. He had failed to make those unknown entities hostile to Carisia.

"To White Light's child, you are merely pawns to approach a more sublime magic. We will not interfere with who possesses the Ten Commandments as long as magic continues, but the dead king you serve is different."

The old elders seemed to have some understanding of the identity of the 'White Adversary' as well. Old grudges simmered within Halto.

How many casualties had there been because the Ten Towers hadn't told them the true identity of White Light's bastard, and because they hadn't grasped the capabilities of the trickster who was attached to his side?

"So. In the end, everything other than magic is meaningless to you."

"Isn't it obvious? All mages seek ascension, and therefore cultivate magic. What else should we give meaning to other than magic?"

"The truth. The ugly truth you've been hiding—! Under your deception, the magical society is rotting! It's time for the right cause to be re-established!"

Behind him, the executives of Argyrion gathered. There were two reasons why Halto had indulged the old elders' arguments.

The first was to find clues about their identities. The fact that they called White Light so easily and knew the identity of White Light's bastard made it possible to ascertain their identities to some extent.

The second was.

"Truth and—"

Halto's lead, followed by a thunderous response in a unified voice.

"Cause!"

It was a ploy to buy time for the Argyrion executives to gather. Clearly, the individual magical capabilities of Argyrion executives did not reach those of the Ten Towers' elders. If there was anyone capable of defeating an elder in a one-on-one, head-on magical confrontation, it would be Halto or Nastion.

But the story changed if the blessings of silver bestowed upon them were added. The power to convert magic into mana was a counter to magic.

Argyrion was located at the opposite end of the spectrum from mages. The more Argyrion gathered, the more the conversion efficiency increased exponentially. Halto instinctively knew that now was the time to wage a decisive battle for the fate of Argyrion.

"Let's go! It's time to put an end to the ugly history of deceiving everyone with lies!"

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When Carisia and White Light finally met, White Light muttered something incomprehensible to himself.

'They're not moving. They must have other intentions.'

The 'they' White Light was talking about referred to the old ones, the ancient elders. A word that grasped that the ancient elders recognized Carisia as a 'just' challenger, that is, a challenger who conformed to the framework of the magical society in order to obtain White Light.

The 'other place' where the ancient elders had set their sights. It was the settlement with Argyrion, who only moved to destroy the magical society, and furthermore, magic.

In a sense, the ancient elders were closer to the Ten Commandments than even the Tower Lords.

Those who had long abandoned human bodies and existed only as parts to explore magic. Beings who would give up anything if they could absorb even one more piece of knowledge from the Ten Commandments, if they could get even one step closer to ascension.

They resided in the Ether Space constructed on the Ten Commandments network.

If Ether Space proved that a virtual world could sometimes become reality, the ancient elders proved that beings from reality could sometimes be incorporated into a virtual, non-physical world.

And when it was time to come into reality, they either reconstructed their bodies with magic or downloaded their consciousness into Enchantware substrates for descent.

Most of the ancient elders gathered here had fashioned bodies with the magic of the Ten Commandments. In fact, they had been connected to the Ten Commandments for so long that there was no meaningful distinction between their own magic and the magic of the Ten Commandments.

Bodies made of magic should theoretically be vulnerable to Argyrion's magic-mana conversion ability.

And the older the mage, the more they could personally demonstrate how meaningless words like 'theoretically' or 'realistically' were in front of magic.

Halto realized that the ancient elders' bodies did not conform to conventional magical laws, but followed their own providence.

It was similar to how the administrator of Ether Space could freely set the rules inside Ether Space. The elders had made their bodies a different dimension.

Beings who only followed the rules they had set, detached from this world.

Each of the ancient elders' bodies was made up of the formulas he had remembered and acquired. Everything from the condensation of magic to the use of formulas and the projection of will was completed from within the body. Unless one had overwhelming power like Carisia or White Light, it was impossible to respond to their magic with Magical Interference.

As soon as Halto understood that, he tried a different method. Magical Interference was the principle of preventing the completion of magic by stealing magic power before the magic was completed at the right time. It could not interfere with completed magic.

But the power of the Silver Thread could devour magic power even from completed magic. It could not nullify the magic itself, but if it extracted the magic power that would be the driving force of the magical phenomenon, it could greatly reduce its power.

But even stealing magic power from completed magic did not work as he wished.

The providence of the elders, the independence from the rules of the world, was applied to the magic chanted by the ancient elders. From the moment it left their own bodies and materialized as an independent phenomenon of magic, its effectiveness gradually decreased.

Even so, it was clear that the efficiency with which the power of the Silver Thread was working was very low. So, Halto stepped forward before any other Argyrion executive and threw himself into the storm of magic.

Among the Argyrion, Halto was the one who had cultivated the blessing to the most profound level. Dimensional gates that summon Silver Thread Bugs. Halto was able to open and close dimensional gates at will, even on a small scale.

Constantly summoning Silver Thread Bugs to erode Nokmok Tower's mana core and weaken the magic of the ancient elders. Halto was also the only member who could cope with overwhelmingly powerful magic that was impossible to handle.

If he opened a dimensional gate and transferred it to the other side of the extra-dimension, even the most powerful magic would be meaningless.

Halto clicked his tongue. Originally, this ability to open dimensional gates was a hidden card to deal with the Nokmok Tower Lord. If he could somehow push him into the gate, Argyrion could immediately win the succession war.

Even if the Nokmok Tower Lord fell into the dimensional gate, he would not readily accept the extra-dimension. He would forcibly use spatial magic to escape, but as a result, he would drift into a space far away from Nokmok Main Tower. In the meantime, Argyrion could get the Ten Commandments.

The trump card of certain victory was exposed too early. It would be nice if he could take even one of the ancient elders, but there was a high probability that their 'independence' could also cope with the forced transfer of the dimensional gate.

Halto felt a sense of déjà vu from the ancient elders' abilities.

All Argyrion members who followed truth and cause were basically granted the power of magic-mana conversion and the power of erosion, which would be a fatal move in the Ten Towers' succession war. It was a counter to the Ten Towers.

But conversely, the ancient elders had prepared a way to oppose mana conversion and respond to forced extra-dimensional transfer. A move as if they had anticipated the blessing of cause.

Counter against counter. Halto gritted his teeth. It was not strange that they had the ability to oppose Argyrion.

Hadn't they said it themselves? That they were those who denied the great cause. But the problem was that they collided with Argyrion at this time, in this place.

An ominous thought flashed through Halto's mind. Did Orthes know about them, the secret final guardians of the Ten Towers?

If so…!

Chapter 187: Argyrion (2)

Chapter 187: Argyrion (2)

White Light expanded the Otherworld to its limit, integrating himself as part of that Otherworld. He contained all of creation within a single formula.

The ancient elders' direction was the opposite. They shrunk the Otherworld to its limit, equating the Otherworld with themselves. The will they put into magic was extreme reduction. They compressed and unfolded all the magic they had realized into a single body.

Expansion and contraction, but the gist is the same: becoming the master of providence independent of the basic world.

If one were to distinguish the superiority between formulas, White Light could be said to be one level higher in terms of scale, but the ancient elders' formulas were no less sophisticated than White Light's skills.

The combined attacks of the ancient elders, who frolicked in the deepest part of magic, were not something that even Argyrion could dare to approach. With even the fundamental compatibility of mana conversion weakened, Argyrion was in a state of utter crisis.

Argyrion themselves, who were fighting the ancient elders, knew this fact best. But Argyrion trusted Halto, their leader who had constantly opposed the great adversary.

Halto coldly assessed the situation. Now was the decisive battle. If they took even one of the Ten Commandments using any method, it would be their victory. Halto decided to use the last resort.

Eidolon.

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Orthes had already paradoxically asked, 'Do you believe in Eidolon?' in front of White Light. At that time, the arguments Orthes had made were closer to lies to buy even one second of time from White Light.

That was how Orthes himself judged it.

But Orthes' lies touched on a truth he didn't even know. The betrayal of Eidolon.

The head of the Eidolon observers was called the Director of the Observatory.[1] He observed the Otherworld through the gaps in the stars, the dimensional walls, and foretold the future.

At the same time, he also had the role of tracking down the echoes of the Mage King. Those who bore the secret task of Eidolon were shared the first secret of the Ten Towers in their duties, and could only go to the front lines after undergoing thorough ideological education.

In other words, they had already been vaccinated against the most fatal means of making Argyrion participate in their 'cause'. This was the reason why the Ten Towers predicted that no traitors would appear within Eidolon.

However, the Mage King had already been slowly dismantling the group that had absolute authority to the point where traitors could not emerge. The weakening of the Divine Cult through mind-parasites.

The methodology of gradually dismantling the Cult, which was the most solid group before the advent of the Ten Towers, could also be applied as a ticking time bomb to dismantle the Ten Towers again.

Nastion knew that he was a being arranged for that purpose. Originally, he belonged to the category of servants who were under the Mage King's control, like Adoosiam.

The thought injected into the Ten Commandments at the Mage King's last moment was also a smokescreen for the creation of Nastion. At the moment the Mage King's body met its death, he outwardly engraved his thoughts on the Ten Commandments, and at the same time, he briefly wove together the remnants of his two servants, Naberius and Stibon, and re-created them as a new servant.

The thought inherent in the Ten Commandments outwardly appears to be aiming for resurrection by usurping the bodies of the Tower Lords. However, the true role of the thought was to protect the Ten Commandments.

To prevent the truth of the Mage King from being widely spread and to keep those who inherited the Ten Commandments silent. To make the infinite wisdom sleeping within the Ten Commandments even more alluring.

To ensure that the signpost calling for the Mage King from beyond the Otherworld is eternally inherited.

The true duty given to the thought was to fuel the dark greed of mages. The Tower Lords grow their greed for the Ten Commandments, boasting, 'I even overturned the Mage King's thoughts!'

The ancient elders and White Light realized this trap, but they did not care. They thought that if they reached the same level as the Mage King, ascension, such traps would be meaningless.

That arrogant indifference was a mistake. Even if they realized the trap of thought, they did not sense Nastion's clandestine activities.

Nastion was given the role of waiting for the time at the boundary between the Otherworld and the world. That's why Nastion's essence took the form of a shadow.

The shadowy body that rippled like mist obscured the celestial energy observed by Eidolon. Even if it could not cover all the domains of the Otherworld, it could distort the light of the places observed by some of Eidolon.

It was the darkness that seduced the Astronomical Observatory.

This was the reason why Nastion was essentially similar to the mind-parasites of Algoth City, but did not have any terminal bodies. He was not a being who lived by parasitizing the mind, but a being created to bewilder the mind.

Complete domination of others is inefficient. It is enough to occupy a corner of the mind and let out an appropriate amount of suspicion at the necessary moments. The more accurately they observed Nastion and tried to read the celestial energy perfectly, the more those who fell into truth and cause increased.

Showing the truth to the observers of Eidolon, and at the same time, whispering the cause. Showing the sins of the Ten Towers under undeniable reality.

Conversely, the utopia that would be reached when they added their hands to the Mage King's return. The future of this world where a paradise of a different world would descend.

The Dark Nebula, which had been the main object of observation for Eidolon for the past few centuries, was Nastion's first essence, a time bomb installed in the Ten Towers.

And as the Golden Desert Operation failed and Blasphemia's elite agents fell into the Otherworld, Nastion's second essence began to operate.

Just as the world is agitated when the magic of the Otherworld is injected into the world, when something is ejected from the inside of the world to the Otherworld, ripples occur in the Otherworld.

When the size of the ripple exceeds a certain level, Nastion collects them and recreates them as vanguards for the creator's advent.

That was the reason why the former Blasphemia agents, who would have drifted in the Otherworld and been ejected back into their original world, had all become Eroders and joined Argyrion.

In a world where Orthes had not met White No Name, White No Name would have killed most of Blasphemia's agents. Even if he had not killed them, if it had not been for Orthes' scheme, the Golden Desert Operation would not have ended with the unprecedented drift of a large number of people.

The Blasphemia agents thrown into the Otherworld by Orthes' scheme caused a great upheaval enough to awaken Nastion, and Nastion re-created them as the vanguard of cause.

Nastion's first role was to install a trap to destroy the inside of the Ten Towers. The second role was to foster vanguards to defend the creator's advent.

The reason why he did not simply stop at fostering vanguards and divided his essence and attached it in the form of a shadow was because of some errors that could not be erased from the vanguards.

The fear of the 'adversary' that they had not overcome even after receiving the blessing of cause. Nastion, who wanted to transform Argyrion into the most perfect soldiers, could not wash away the irrational obsession with the adversary.

He had dispatched an incarnate to serve as a counselor and correct their unique irrationality, but Nastion himself had changed his mind after experiencing the adversary directly.

He was a being to be feared.

Thanks to having a body and entering this world, Nastion also learned unexpected emotions such as fear, anxiety, and embarrassment - mostly because of Orthes - but there were not only side effects.

He could use his formless body to hide anywhere. How much had he contributed to public opinion manipulation by becoming the nameless crowd that spread rumors?

If he combined the ability to distort space he possessed as a member of the Otherworld and the characteristics of the shadow's body, he could connect the shadows between two specific targets.

The shadows Nastion designated were a pair of Halto and the Director of the Observatory. He could go from Halto's shadow to the Director of the Observatory's shadow, and from the Director of the Observatory's shadow to Halto's shadow. The information that the Tower Lord was not moving even though Taros of Silver Iron Magic Tower had died was also obtained from the Director of the Observatory.

The ability to hide in the shadows of others and have secret conversations was also a link between Argyrion and Eidolon.

The fact that the Director of the Observatory answered that the forces to be deployed to the Ten Towers expeditionary force were 'everything possible' was also a result of Nastion's intervention. A trap prepared to maximize the success rate of the Ten Commandments usurpation plan.

Originally, Eidolon, which should have assisted the Ten Towers' interdimensional navigation, subtly interfered with the expeditionary force's advance. Argyrion responded by turning the dimensional gate being manufactured at the main base into a trap.

The expeditionary force's entry into the Argyrion main base was slowed down, and even if they arrived, the time it would take for them to be swept away by the trap and return would be even longer.

"If we divert Eidolon's capabilities from interfering with the expeditionary force to securing the Ten Commandments at this point, the expeditionary force's return may be accelerated."

A sentence that deleted Nastion's hesitation was added.

"...If we spend more time dealing with those old elders, Orthes might appear at any moment."

After the clash with Orthes, Nastion completely trusted Halto's strategic insight.

Nastion seeped into Halto's shadow and headed towards the Director of the Observatory.

Chapter 188: Improvisation (1)

Chapter 188: Improvisation (1)

Orthes massaged his eyes. After all, the quickest way to undo the sealing barrier was for him to use his 'eyes' to forcibly unravel the formulas that had been grafted onto them one by one.

He didn't know if it would help his eyes recover, but he felt like he had to do something, so he was fiddling with his eyelids.

"Orthes."

It was Carisia's call. Orthes stopped massaging and walked towards Carisia.

"What is it?"

"We have an opinion from the directors."

In theory, Carisia was a being who had obtained both White Light's and the Artificial Commandments' magic power. She could seize and eavesdrop on both White Light's communication channels and Hydra Corporation's communication channels.

However, the gap between 'being able to' and 'realizing it' was not something that could be overcome so easily. Even an ordinary mage would have exploded without finding a stable point between the magic power supply of the two Ten Commandments, but to reach the level where she could freely switch between the two channels in such a short time.

"Ah. Come to think of it, I shared the situation with the directors, right?"

"Yes. They said that a problem had erupted in Nokmok, which was supposed to be a distraction-purpose front... other than the seven fronts we had designated as the main battlefields. I even conveyed the fact that Argyrion was trying to slander us."

In Orthes' plan, the Ten Commandments that Hydra Corporation and their allies would directly interfere with were seven.

First, White Light. This was the most basic of the Heavenly Schism Array. If White Light could not be obtained, the Heavenly Schism Array was destined to fail.

This stage was successful.

Second, Yellow Thunder. This was the Ten Commandments that Lampades had to occupy. The jamming signal amplified by the output of the Yellow Thunder Ten Commandments would paralyze communications on other Ten Commandments fronts.

There were no real priorities in the five fronts after the two most important fronts. To be precise, there was one front that should not be prioritized for seizure, but rather a front where the succession war should be postponed until the very end.

It was Black Dark, which Kine was in charge of.

Kine was going to seize Black Dark using the fusion of Holy Incantation and magic she had realized - which she claimed she realized thanks to Orthes, but Orthes could not accept that assessment - and her Divine Magic political maneuvering.

Of course, Kine could not conquer Black Dark Magic Tower alone. No matter how outstanding her talent was, even if she received magic power support from the Ten Commandments, and even if she mobilized both political maneuvering as Divine Magic and political maneuvering as social skill to create a considerable number of friendly factions in a short period of time.

Even the elders might not be susceptible to Divine Magic political maneuvering. So Orthes gave Kine a very unique mission.

Kine had to engage in political maneuvering in Black Dark Magic Tower.

But it wasn't to conquer Black Dark. It was to attempt to politically maneuver Black Dark to conquer other magic towers.

If White Light and Yellow Thunder collapsed according to stage 1 of Orthes' plan, intense chaos would descend upon the Ten Towers. The news that White Light had collapsed would be a shock and horror, and if Yellow Thunder also fell soon after, the fear would spread uncontrollably.

That was when Kine had to step up.

Even though succession wars were declared in all the other magic towers and they were experiencing 'challenges to authority' according to Orthes' plan, why was it that no one challenged Black Dark Magic Tower?

Even those disrespectful people who were trying to subvert the hierarchy by taking advantage of the chaos in the magic society feared Black Dark!

The Tower Lord of Black Dark was absent, but the power of Black Dark Magic Tower did not come from a single powerful Tower Lord. The near-infinite numbers of the undead legions, including the Spartoi, were the true power of Black Dark.

Precisely because they knew this, those rebellious groups could not dare to approach Black Dark. Only Black Dark could maintain such strict order.

The Tower Lords of the Ten Towers were absent, and the remaining White Light and Yellow Thunder had collapsed. In this chaotic situation, a 'strong leader' was needed to lead the magic society.

And that leader, of course, had to be Black Dark, which was maintaining order.

With this logic, Kine was planning to have Black Dark embark on a war of conquest. The word war of conquest was too blatant, so Orthes' advice was to express it as a 'grand choice for maintaining law and order' when engaging in political maneuvering.

If the political maneuvering worked properly, Orthes would be able to create a more advantageous Ten Commandments front with Black Dark as the vanguard.

Hector's Knights were supposed to face Silver Iron after being dispatched to Yellow Thunder Tower.

This was for practical reasons. The knights' fighting techniques had been entered into the golems' automatic combat devices and sold as products for many years. Silver Iron was the leading corporation at the pinnacle of that golem manufacturing industry.

It was known that the golems of Silver Iron Magic Tower possessed more powerful strength, more elaborate skills, and faster speed than the knights of the old era. But there was one thing they had overlooked.

Golems had been accumulating fighting technique data for a long time, improving the precision of their combat programs. This was because fallen knight families continued to sell their visions to Silver Iron.

But was it purely for wealth and glory that they passed on their visions without hesitation?

Of course, there were also knight families who sold their visions purely for money. However, there were also fighting techniques injected according to the Knights' grand plan to induce the combat patterns of Silver Iron Magic Tower's golems.

In that way, the Knights had been teaching fighting techniques to golems for hundreds of years. In parallel with analyzing all the movements and postures that golems could use, and creating a perfect solution to that fighting technique.

The golems of Silver Iron Magic Tower were evaluated to have completely ended the era of knights, but in the future, they were raised to be defeated by knights.

But the fronts to be assigned to the remaining three were not clear. In the operation plan, Kynemon was supposed to be in charge of Zaton, Niobe was supposed to be in charge of Blue Water, and the Divine Cult was supposed to be in charge of Scarlet Flame, but the plan could change flexibly depending on the troop strength and the state of the front.

The role of those three was the reserve.

Niobe could use Blasphemia's authority to prevent Panoptes's intervention, and the Divine Cult could use Proditor to release high-ranking priests to any front. The information warfare capabilities using Kine could not be ignored either.

The capabilities of the organization that Kynemon possessed were not comparable to Blasphemia and the Divine Cult, but unlike the two, he was highly reliable. The Bubble of

Oblivion that Orthes had returned to him was a move that allowed Kynemon to be operated as a secret weapon to change the tide of the front.

However, this operation plan was meaningless at this point.

Even if Hydra Corporation and the allied forces were combined, the maximum number of fronts that could be involved at one time was seven. Three fronts that could not be interfered with immediately occurred.

Orthes classified the attributes of each of the Ten Towers by collecting the attributes that were 'least suitable for waging attrition warfare'. Freezing Ice, Flying Wind, and Green Wood. These were the three magic towers with the longest average time from the start to the end of the succession war.

For these three fronts, Orthes prepared for 'a ragtag coalition of nobodies' to buy time appropriately. If the coalition led by Hydra Corporation secured seven of the Ten Commandments, the magic power that could be substantially mobilized, including the Artificial Commandments, would be at the level of 8 Ten Commandments.

A level of magic power gap would occur that could not be overturned by any means with the remaining three Ten Commandments. If this stage was reached, it would be Hydra Corporation's practical victory.

"Those goddamn Argyrion bastards. I don't know how they got here."

All plans were twisted when Argyrion appeared in Green Wood. A situation where the prevention of Argyrion appearing in Green Wood had to be prioritized over the victory of other Ten Commandments fronts.

The interference signal that Lampades was sending out from Yellow Thunder Tower had to be temporarily stopped to send a communication, but Argyrion's slander was a problem.

What if Argyrion's slander reached the other Ten Towers through the gap created by the removal of the interference signal?

All the remaining Ten Towers might gather together to prepare for an expedition against Hydra Corporation.

'If Hector old man has secured Silver Iron, it might be worth trying to wage a decisive battle...'

There was still no news from Silver Iron. Orthes took a breath.

'First, I need to listen to what the directors are saying and think.'

"What are the directors saying about the current situation?"

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"They're just saying to turn off the jamming signal from Yellow Thunder Magic Tower."

"Yes? Then the possibility of our side being singled out as the mastermind behind everything and being attacked becomes too high."

Practically, Orthes was the mastermind behind everything. But the generous Carisia did not point that out.

"Argyrion is still fighting in Green Wood, right? It's clear who is an easier enemy, Argyrion who has not secured a Ten Commandments, or Hydra Corporation who has."

"Huh?"

If you think about it, it was a simple story. Argyrion's seizure of Green Wood was a 'currently ongoing' threat, and Hydra Corporation's seizure of White Light was an 'already happened' event.

If Argyrion was left unattended and obtained the Ten Commandments like Hydra Corporation, the Ten Towers would be in a much more disadvantageous position. For the Ten Towers, the priority was to suppress Argyrion before the decisive battle with Hydra Corporation.

"They analyzed that even if a Ten Towers alliance is formed, there is a high probability that they will attack Argyrion first rather than us."

It was a persuasive analysis. One more fact came to Orthes' mind, who closed his eyes for a moment.

Carisia's voice was similar to White Light's.

Chapter 189: Improvisation (2)

Chapter 189: Improvisation (2)

Let's organize the situation again.

I mentally sorted the order of information.

First, the Ten Commandments Front began when we declared the Succession War for White Light.

Then, before the fight between Hydra Corporation and White Light was settled, Lampades, who had been deployed to the Yellow Thunder Front, won. And he fired communication jamming signals amplified by the Yellow Thunder Ten Commandments across the Ten Commandments Front.

Next, Argyrion-sourced false news began to spread on the Green Wood Front.

And only then did we win against White Light.

If we re-establish this.

"...President, how about we pretend that White Light won for about 30 minutes?"

"Pardon?"

"Other than Lampades, no one knows that the fight on the White Light Front has ended with our victory."

Because communication was cut off before our fight was over. Other than Hydra Corporation and Lampades, the only people who know the whereabouts of the White Light Front are the (former) mages of White Light.

However, other mages in White Light Main Tower have already been suppressed because the magic power support from the Ten Commandments has been cut off. There are also White Light elders who are isolated because they could not enter the Main Tower due to the sealing barrier, but they themselves know best that fighting without the support of the Ten Commandments is suicidal.

When the sealing barrier is lifted and Carisia shows the double boosting of magic power from White Light and the Artificial Commandments and shouts 'I am descending', they will give up and surrender, saying it's comfortable.

In a situation where cooperation has been sought from White Light's mages in this way, if we spread false information that the Succession War between Hydra Corporation and White Light has been concluded with White Light's victory. If we disguise Carisia as White Light.

"If the president asks to open a space-time passageway to support the Green Wood Front, they will gladly open the door. As it stands, let's take over Green Wood too!"

Who on Earth said that? The person who counts the votes, not the person who votes, decides everything.

The current situation was the same. It wasn't the person who heard the truth, but the person who reported the truth who could decide everything.

Our employees who heard Argyrion's slander would be able to spread rumors.

But Panoptes was in Niobe's hands, wasn't it? The name White Light was also in our hands.

The moment White Light's victory was announced, Argyrion's slander would lose power in the first place. Because Argyrion had exposed his allies, but the allies had already been defeated by White Light and disappeared.

Then Niobe would mobilize Panoptes to spread the rumor that Argyrion's slander was nothing more than a vile trick to bring chaos to the magical society. At this point, there was no reason for an alliance of other Ten Towers to be conceived against Hydra Corporation.

And if Carisia directly descended on Green Wood and ended the Green Wood Front, even if the Ten Towers Alliance was formed from that point on, it would be a fight worth fighting.

The Artificial Commandments, White Light, Yellow Thunder, Green Wood, and even Silver Iron, which Hector had likely obtained. The Hydra Corporation Alliance, which had eliminated all the Ten Towers where the Tower Lords remained, could receive magic power support from five Ten Commandments.

Carisia connected Lampades with direct communication to the Ten Towers. As soon as the jamming signal was released, the communication had to be delivered step by step.

"Please tell Lampades. First, as soon as communication is released, we must spread the fact that 'Hydra Corporation actually won' to our allies. We need to prevent the fake defeat from leading to a real defeat."

After the preventive education by Lampades, Carisia would spread to the other Ten Towers in the name of White Light that the Succession War had ended with the defeat of the challenger Hydra Corporation. Then she would request to open a space-time passageway because she was going to strike down Argyrion, who had raided Green Wood.

"It will be difficult to use interdimensional teleportation on the scale of Etna City using the Artificial Commandments twice. So this time, let's just go with the two of us, who are the most reliable forces."

Carisia nodded. The long-standing feud with Blasphemia had been expanded to the cause and effect with Argyrion through the battle in the Golden Desert.

Now was the time to liquidate the karma that had continued from the past.

"Both Green Wood and Argyrion would have undergone considerable consumption. Considering the support of the Divine Cult by Proditor, we can suppress both forces at once."

Lampades would not be able to directly attend the front, but he would have to spend busy time continuously controlling the communication of the entire Hydra Corporation alliance.

"All available forces must be sent to Green Wood. Even if we exclude Niobe because she has to control Panoptes."

If Panoptes went beyond the level of public opinion control and said things like 'The magical society is in an unusual state, so I will declare martial law', Niobe could naturally sit in that commander's position.

In a situation where Argos's virtual loss of power and Eidolon's silence continued, Blasphemia was in control of the real power. The Blasphemia Commander was in seclusion, and Salmosia regarded Niobe as her plenipotentiary ambassador.

The current situation where chaos was spreading like wildfire throughout the Ten Towers. If Panoptes was about to make a 'decision to save the country', Niobe was the only card to control it.

'Actually, it would be more advantageous if Panoptes made a decision to save the country.'

The most ideal scenario would be for Niobe to ascend to the position of temporary commander of Panoptes, and to attack other Ten Towers with those forces instead of attacking the Ten Towers occupied by the Hydra Corporation alliance.

But the situation had not yet become so chaotic. The Blasphemia faction that supported Niobe was forcing silence on the entire Panoptes, but....

"Orthes, I have delivered all instructions to Lampades. Let's have them release the communication jamming signal."

I nodded.

***

At the same time as the sudden communication failure was resolved, shocking news struck the magical society.

The Succession War that broke out in succession as the Succession War for White Light was declared. It was the news that the first Succession War had been concluded.

The owner of Yellow Thunder had changed.

The news of the front was endlessly transmitted without being given time to think over the facts.

Compared to the first news, the second news was within the category that could be understood. The story that Hydra Corporation raided White Light's Main Tower by some means, but White Light ultimately won.

Common sense questions arose, such as how Hydra Corporation could have appeared above White Light's sky, and how they could have secured a mage who could face White Light without any base forces, but solving these questions was not important.

This was because common sense was all volatilized in the last third piece of news.

The identity of those who challenged the Green Wood Front was Argyrion.

The rebellious party, who should have been fighting the Ten Towers Expeditionary Force, was mixed in with the magic society and was proudly holding a Succession War?

It was shocking and terrifying news. Argyrion had already threatened the Ten Towers more fiercely than any other doomsdayist so far. What if those people got the Ten Commandments in their hands?

The end might really come.

Moreover, in light of the circumstances, it could not be guaranteed that the others who were currently holding a Succession War were not in the same group as Argyrion!

It was the new Yellow Thunder Magic Tower Lord Lampades's declaration that resolved the great chaos in the magical society.

"Lampades Magic Tower has no connection whatsoever with the heretical group that calls itself Argyrion. To prove this, Lampades Magic Tower will dispatch supporting mages to the Green Wood Front."

It was an unconventional move. It was the same as declaring that the right of the Succession War, which prohibits external intervention other than the parties involved in the Succession War, would be ignored. But Lampades had already heard the justification for this from Orthes.

"The right of the Succession War, which can only be fought by the Ten Towers and the challenger, is immutable, but the right of the Succession War is not guaranteed to anti-magical doomsdayists such as Argyrion, and extra-dimensional invaders. This is because the right of the Succession War is for mages, not for invaders."

The new Yellow Thunder Magic Tower Lord's declaration met an unexpected supporter. The oldest and therefore greatest White Light.

"Like the Yellow Thunder Magic Tower Lord's opinion, an invader is not a mage. Therefore, we declare that we will resolutely attack Argyrion in order to preserve the universal rights of

all mages. Those among the Green Wood Succession parties who are not related to Argyrion should immediately leave the front and preserve their lives."

Then Panoptes's broadcast continued.

'The Ten Towers are focusing all their efforts on subjugating the rebel gang Argyrion, so please rest assured and continue with your business!'

'Mages, rest assured! The magic society is safe!'

***

Halto and Argyrion were also able to hear the suddenly restored communication and the information flowing from it.

Halto could feel the cold malice of the faceless Orthes in all the news from the Ten Commandments Front. Halto could hardly imagine White Light's defeat, nor Orthes's defeat.

Halto's inner self was saying. If Orthes gets involved, the situation always goes to the worst. Halto thought about which victory was more terrible, White Light's or Orthes's.

The future that would follow White Light's descent could be easily predicted. Argyrion would be swept away in an instant, and their great cause would be buried in the soil.

But what if Orthes came?

He couldn't even imagine what would happen. So Halto was sure.

He's coming. Orthes is coming.

The Green Wood Magic Tower Lord, grateful for the support of other Ten Towers, was trying to form a passageway to Eleusis. Halto shouted with a feeling that his intestines were being cut off.

"You must not open that passageway! It's a trap!"

Chapter 190: The Pope's Masterstroke (1)

Chapter 190: The Pope's Masterstroke (1)

Amidst the chaos, several coincidences overlapped.

First, Nastion faithfully carried out Halto's instructions. To summon Eidolon's Director of the Observatory to the Green Wood Front.

This had already been ordered before Orthes came up with the White Light impersonation plan, and had already been done before accepting White Light's reinforcements in Green Wood and opening the passageway.

The betrayal of Eidolon, whom the Ten Towers trusted most among Panoptes, was an unexpected event even for the ancient elders. The betrayal was even more fatal when considering what kind of powers Eidolon could exert.

Eidolon were observers of the Otherworld. Within the magic society, they could be said to be the highest authority on the Otherworld. Projecting the Otherworld specimens they had collected so far, the spatial magic for observation as a force.

Halto's opening and closing of dimensional gates was on the level of power, not magic, but those belonging to Eidolon could reproduce similar results to a limited extent with magic.

Magic to increase the clarity of Otherworld observation was also magic to 'safely approach the Otherworld', and if safety was removed from this, it was the same as pouring in the Otherworld.

Eidolon's magic is added to Halto's power as an axis. The amplified power creates a crack into the Otherworld. Fatal contamination pours into Green Wood.

The ancient elders had each succeeded in elevating themselves into a single world. Their blood and flesh were magic power and formulas.

However, that made them even more vulnerable to Otherworld invasion. The Otherworld pollutes magic power itself, so it acts more powerfully on bodies made of magic than on bodies made of flesh and blood.

Originally, given the ancient elders' level, the magic power of the Otherworld, no matter how much or how concentrated, would be decomposed and disappear the moment it touched them. However, this Otherworld flood was no ordinary one.

This was like the relationship between fire and water. Originally, fire would go out if covered with water. But if the fire is big and fierce enough, and the amount of water isn't.

Rather, a reversal of the relationship occurs where the fire evaporates the water.

The superposition of Eidolon's observation magic. The dimensional wall becomes infinitely thin. As the power Halto received from the cause was added, the magic power of the Otherworld began to overflow. Like the flood that covered heaven and earth in the old era.

The ancient elders were not flustered. It was an attack of the predicted direction from the point where Eidolon appeared on the battlefield and was not an ally of the Ten Towers at the same time.

They avoided direct contact between the body and the Otherworld and moved to repair the crack in the dimension. It was a wise choice, but it also meant that the powerful firepower of the ancient elders who were maintaining the front line was excluded from the battlefield.

Halto and Argyrion did not miss the opportunity. The sharply increased magic power concentration of the Otherworld increased the power of Argyrion, and the path to Green Wood was empty due to the ancient elders who had withdrawn from the front line.

And at this point, Lampades's jamming signal was withdrawn. This was the second coincidence. The Green Wood Tower Lord believed in White Light's support declaration as it was, and formed the Eleusis passageway for White Light despite the space being unbalanced by the Otherworld.

At this point, two passageways had been formed at the summit of Green Wood.

The first is connected to the Otherworld, and the second is connected to White Light.

From this point on, the instability of space had reached the critical point. Extremely powerful mages had gathered in a limited space, and the dimensional wall had collapsed and the Otherworld was flooding in. However, it was still barely below the limit.

There is also a limit to the range of magic power support from the Ten Commandments. When Carisia descended to Green Wood, she had to give up the magic power support from White Light and the Artificial Commandments and enter.

If Carisia had entered while maintaining magic power support, the already torn dimensional wall would not have been able to withstand another massive magic power structure and would have caused a great catastrophe.

However, here, the third coincidence overlapped.

It was the Divine Cult's judgment.

They agreed that this battle was a decisive phase that would move the tide of the entire Ten Commandments Front. So the Divine Cult projected the most powerful hidden card that the Cult had been hiding as much as possible until now.

A secret dagger that only the Pope and Hyacinth shared.

It was the Commander of Blasphemia.

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The Commander of Blasphemia is in seclusion. This was a well-known fact among those in the know. However, it was not known 'why' she was in seclusion.

Even Salmosia, the Auditor General of Blasphemia, did not know the detailed reason. It was only known that she had stopped all external activities at some point after the failure of the Golden Desert Operation.

The Commander of Blasphemia was a person who was suitable for the position of Commander. Appropriate skill and political power, and above all, a sense of responsibility that befits the leader of the group.

She wanted to somehow retrieve the elite agents of Blasphemia who had been deployed and evaporated by her decision.

What the Commander wanted to rely on was the Prophet in the Basement[1]. A future prediction organization created by connecting the brains of the prophets secured by Blasphemia.

The Son of White Light, who was the cause of the Prophet in the Basement's malfunction, had also been excluded. There were deficiencies in the maintenance, but speed was important in order to completely find the agents who had gone missing beyond the Otherworld.

So the Commander used the Prophet in the Basement at maximum output.

She was caught in the Pope's trap.

She wanted to see the future through the Prophet in the Basement, but the Pope and Hyacinth had realized early on that Blasphemia was predicting the future. For some reason, they prepared a trap for the Prophet in the Basement while Blasphemia was suspending future predictions.

The moment she tried to observe the future, the Commander's soul was sealed in a maze of constantly diverging time. It was the result of the Pope's power being added to Hyacinth's Holy Incantation.

A hollow body with a soul peeled off. Originally, it should have ended as a vegetative state, but commands could be entered through the Prophet in the Basement, which was connected to the Commander.

The Pope handled this very delicately. If espionage activities through the Commander of Blasphemia were discovered by the Ten Towers, the Ten Towers would immediately dispose of the Commander.

Therefore, the Pope decided not to use the 'Commander' until the very last moment. Outwardly, it was a seclusion due to the frustration of the failure of the Golden Desert Operation, but in fact, it was the Pope's concealment process to avoid being suspected by others.

And now.

When a battle to determine the fate of the Ten Commandments Front, and furthermore, the fate of the world, was about to take place at the summit of Green Wood.

The Pope finally pulled out the 'Commander' card.

***

Suddenly, the Commander of Blasphemia stopped her seclusion and stood up resolutely. However, the Commander did not want to receive the authority of Panoptes back from Salmosia and Niobe.

What she wanted was a fight. She herself was largely responsible for the birth of Argyrion, so she was determined to put an end to the fight.

What was needed were powerful relics that Blasphemia had confiscated from superstition followers. Forbidden items that were too powerful for an individual to possess and had been sealed.

However, the position of the Commander was the position, and the justification was the justification, so it could not be stopped.

Niobe contacted Orthes at the same time as the Commander's departure. She said that the Commander had participated in the war while equipping all of the highest-grade relics in the Blasphemia Relic Vault.

It was the fourth coincidence that Orthes had no time to confirm this news.

***

Halto shouted with all his heart. All requests for reinforcements were traps.

However, the Green Wood Tower Lord had no time to listen to the enemy's words. Why should he believe the enticement of a crazy invader group like Argyrion?

The tide, which had been overwhelming Argyrion thanks to the activity of the ancient elders, collapsed due to Eidolon's betrayal. In order to correct this terrible situation, the power of the same Ten Towers was needed.

"You disgusting servants of the Otherworld! Taste the power of the Ten Towers!"

Green Wood opened the passageway without hesitation. The sky parted and a staircase of light unfolded.

From the heavens, a mage descends loftily.

The oldest mage. An apostle of magic who has lived since the Mythical Era.

Green Wood rejoiced with the stairs behind him. Halto noted that the silhouette descending from the sky was not one, but two.

"Orthes…."

Even in the dazzling backlight, that terrifying blue light was clear. What agreement had White Light and Orthes reached? No. If White Light was also a mage, there was no way he could tolerate that.

If White Light could not tolerate Orthes, then it was only natural that Orthes could not tolerate White Light. If so, one of the two should have perished.

Then what is the White Light that is coming down now?

An infinitely similar but more vicious monster than White Light comes to mind. Another monster who used to hang out with Orthes.

'The Son of White Light' is…?

Is he imitating White Light?

Halto felt unprecedented fear and at the same time, joy.

In the end, even Orthes himself had to come out to fight directly in this game. In the previous Golden Desert, he gave the guy room to escape, but this time it's different.

No matter what sacrifice it takes, if I just defeat that guy——

It was then. A distortion of space was created that Green Wood had not approved.

Eventually, the distortion concretized into the shape of a golden gate. The golden gate was imbued with divine power, the bizarre powers of the old priests.

The huge gate opened without friction. A sense of heterogeneity that was not of this world.

And beyond the gate was someone who was more than familiar to Halto.

The reason why he, who had opened his eyes to the cause, had been trying to recruit Blasphemia agents, even at the risk of being discovered by other Ten Towers. The person who should have been the standard-bearer of the cause together.

His former master, whom Halto served as a confidant.

Chapter 191: The Pope's Masterstroke (2)

Chapter 191: The Pope's Masterstroke (2)

“Orthes——!!”

Halto's howl emanated from the depths of his soul. The rage and sorrow within his blood-boiling cry vibrated through the summit of Nokmok.

Nastion interpreted it as, "Ah, he's furious to have his enemy right in front of him," while the Tower Lord of Nokmok thought, "Orthes, what's that? Is it a magic incantation?"

Even Carisia and the Ancient Elders couldn't fathom the extent of Halto's emotion at this moment.

Only Orthes sensed that Halto's cry held a deeper, more complicated story. Argyrion was clearly a formidable adversary who threatened Hydra Corporation with bold disruptions. Halto, who spearheaded those disruptions, wouldn't lose his composure to this extent just because of his anger towards Orthes himself.

'Is it a trap?'

Deliberately showing a furious appearance to lure Orthes – a bait operation. It seemed like the most reasonable hypothesis at first glance.

But no. Orthes had never seen the situation surrounding him unfold in a rational manner.

'It seems related to that Reliquary-ridden mage who just appeared…'

Halto's gaze darted back and forth between Orthes and the mage holding the Reliquaries. Orthes felt a subtle satisfaction with his narrow eyes during times like these.

It's difficult to read narrow eyes. When those who normally keep their eyes wide open awkwardly shift their gaze before an ambush, narrow eyes can simply look wherever they want.

Because no one can tell where they're looking anyway.

Orthes decided to trust his intuition and analysis. He opened his mouth.

"Halto. How do you like the alliance I've forged?"

"Since when…! Just when did you start doing something like this!"

Damn it. This was an unexpected question. Orthes naturally questioned back to buy time.

"Haha. Since when?"

A word extracted from Halto's sentence. Adding a meaningful laugh to set the atmosphere. And the last choice to not reveal the truth that he doesn't know.

"Wouldn't it be better to hear it directly from that person?"

He shifts the target of the question.

Halto turned his head blankly toward the Commander. The days when he devoted himself to the cause before loyalty to the Ten Towers. The days he fought together to contribute to the order of the magic society came to mind.

To make the Commander, who dedicated his life to eradicating the priests of the old gods, a Divine lackey, and to display it before him.

The word "insult" was not enough. It was blasphemy. Even though Halto would no longer pledge allegiance to the Ten Towers, the cause of peace for the entire magical society was still in his heart even now as Argyrion.

That's why he has been steadily recruiting Blasphemia agents as Argyrion, isn't it? Not to lead a false peace as slaves of the Ten Towers, but to build true peace together under the cause.

But now, the Commander was not even a henchman of the Ten Towers.

An enemy of Blasphemia and an enemy of Argyrion. Wrapped in the ritual tools of the priests of the old gods, the root of chaos in the magical society, obsessed with superstition.

As far as Halto knew, the Commander of Blasphemia was the most suitable person to serve the cause. To desecrate that pure heart in such a way!

Halto opened a Dimensional Gate. Short-range teleportation to attack Orthes.

And this was the last fragment of collapse.

The space at the summit of Nokmok had already reached its limit.

The shadow passage that Nastion connected to summon Eidolons. The extra-dimensional encroachment that Halto and Argyrion unfolded. Eleusis, which Nokmok had opened as a reinforcement route for White Light.

And the teleportation made of Divine Power from the Divine Cult. With the spatial distortions overlapping, the very small Dimensional Gate that Halto activated in anger broke the final balance.

Space tore apart. Just as a vacuum craves air, the void of space also drew in everything around it to fill itself.

Extra-dimensional energy, magic power, and Divine Power intertwined to fill the gaps in space.

The moment the space shook, Carisia reached out and grabbed Orthes' hand. Orthes did the same.

As the vibrations that crushed and mixed space subsided, Carisia turned to look beside her.

"I didn't expect this…"

Orthes, with a familiar appearance, uttered unfamiliar words. Carisia turned her gaze away from Orthes and looked at the summit of Nokmok.

The newly forged summit of Nokmok was no longer the rooftop of a tower but a vast expanse that could be called a plaza.

Argyrion's Silverwood served as the outer walls, and the black flagstone of the Pluton Temple was laid on the floor. In the center of the plaza was a giant crystal radiating green magic light, Nokmok.

It was the form of an arena centered around The Ten Magical Commandments.

Those who had escaped the shock of the spatial vibration turned their eyes to each other and toward the Commandments.

One proposition flashed through everyone's minds.

'The one who connects to The Ten Magical Commandments first wins!'

The Tower Lord of Nokmok rushed out first. He realized that his access to the Commandments had been greatly weakened.

It was because of the process of space being reconstructed. As the magic power of the Commandments, extra-dimensional energy, and divinity mixed together, the Tower Lord's control over the Commandments, which he should have had entirely on his own, was weakened as it mixed with other attributes of supernatural power.

He had to reconnect to Nokmok and regain authority.

The Ancient Elders followed as if guarding the Tower Lord of Nokmok. The newly forged space was constructed with all the surrounding supernatural powers as materials.

Each of the Ancient Elders, who were high-density magic power and constituted a realm, were the best materials for repairing space. The providence of the world ruthlessly invaded their bodies.

In fact, the reason why the Tower Lord of Nokmok lost authority was also due to the influence of the independence constituting the bodies of the Ancient Elders spreading

throughout the space. The individual powers of the Ancient Elders, which deviated from the existing magical system, melted into the space, infringing on the composition of the magical phenomenon of the connection between the Tower Lord and the Commandments.

The Elders were able to intuitively realize this fact. Even if they lost their entire bodies, it would not mean the Elders' eternal rest, but it would take a considerable amount of time to restore the lost formulas.

At least years.

Before the bodies that were still collapsing completely scattered. The best choice they could make for the magical society was the victory of Nokmok.

Blocking them from heading to The Ten Magical Commandments were Argyrion and Eidolons.

Halto realized that he could not open a Dimensional Gate. It was not that there was a problem with the authority he had been granted. It was just that since this space already contained an extra-dimension, even if he opened a Dimensional Gate, the limit would be a small-scale gate that was fragmented and impossible to use.

The same was true even if amplified through Eidolons' observation magic. Unless this bizarrely twisted space was resolved, the use of spatial magic within it seemed impossible.

If there was any consolation, it was that this penalty would be equally applied to everyone present here. Even the Holy Incantation of the superstition followers would be repelled.

The purification of magic power created by the order of the Ten Towers collided with the chaos of the extra-dimension. Supernatural powers that devoured each other began to dance.

The Commander intervened in the middle.

His movement was unseen. A method that could only be thought of as teleportation.

"How—"

One of Argyrion's agents, who was about to express a question, was beheaded in an instant. It was the result of the scythe he was holding.

With a bitter heart, Halto charged his magic. The moment he aimed at the Commander, the Commander disappeared from Halto's sight.

And what appeared was behind Halto. If it weren't for Nastion, who could use the shadows of all of Argyrion's members as sensory organs, Halto would have been ambushed as well.

When the scythe was blocked, the relic that surrounded the Commander began to transform. It was in the form of a trident. When the Commander slammed the spearhead into the ground, water began to gush forth from it.

Then, the trident changed shape once more. A combination of straight lines bent in various directions. It was a symbolic representation of lightning.

When the Commander threw the lightning-shaped relic, it turned into a flurry of lightning bolts and swept around. It was a divine punishment that indiscriminately burned both Argyrion and the Ten Towers.

Once again, the Commander disappeared. Nastion, who was carefully searching for the whorl of the relic, reported his inference to Halto.

"Don't be shaken! It's not that the enemy's… realm is superior to ours, or that they are closer to the cause and can use teleportation magic or Dimensional Gates! It's just an illusion through the secret art of invisibility!"

With a concise cry, Halto corrected the confusion of Argyrion. At least, he tried to correct it.

***

Carisia and I were not involved in that mess. Carisia was quickly hiding herself with optically camouflaged magic.

Originally, such camouflage would be easily detected in a battle between such powerful mages, but the three-way battle between the Ten Towers and Argyrion, plus that unknown being, is so confusing that no one has time to pay attention to us.

"Do you understand what it is?"

I shook my head.

"Ah. Your eyes still aren't—"

"My eyes have recovered."

The moment Halto witnessed someone’s first ‘movement’ of that overreacting person, the circuits that had been turned off began to be relit as if the world was being written in words again.

I had a similar experience at Kaicle's hideout. When Typhon's fragment met my eyes and was activated.

If I activated the fragment of Typhon at that time, this time, on the contrary, the 'movement' activated my eyes.

'The unknown divinity in my eyes reacted by contacting Typhon's last words. Then does the movement from just now also mean the manifestation of some divinity?'

Chapter 192: The Pope's Masterstroke (3)

Chapter 192: The Pope's Masterstroke (3)

A certain divinity that I hadn't known until now and my 'eyes' resonated, reactivating their function. It was the most reasonable hypothesis to explain the current situation.

However, the problem was *what* kind of divinity it was. As the head of the Divine Investigation Office, I had checked every single one of the diverse Reliquaries collected by the board of directors.

From the Twelve Olympians to the now-forgotten minor deities. Even after reviewing the memories of all the Reliquaries, I had never detected the same kind of Divine Power as just now.

“…One thing is certain, that the very first movement was indeed teleportation. I don’t know which god’s relic he used, though.”

“Is it different from Proditor's Holy Incantation?”

“It’s different. Proditor’s Holy Incantation is based on the principle of forming a travel route connecting two points by manifesting the divinity of the guardian god of travelers, whereas the movement from just now seems to more primitively manipulate the space itself—”

Ah.

Damn it. Now I have a hunch.

I gritted my teeth. I interpret the information seen in my eyes. The Commander of Blasphemia. Beyond the information about the Commander’s history, I reaffirm the power that controls that body.

The Divine Power that bound the Commander's body like the threads that control a puppet. The pain that assails me the moment I try to confirm the name from which the Divine Power originated. If I hadn't trained enough while fighting against White Light, I might have turned my gaze away.

History, a very long history. So long that it felt meaningless to keep looking. I didn't have enough time to dig up even the name, but the fact that it was that old was a clue to its identity.

I could easily guess the origin of the Divine Power dwelling in the Commander's body.

“Primordial God…”

The Twelve Olympians who preside over each phenomenon that exists in this world, such as the sky, the sea, the land, and the underworld.

And even older than those Olympians, the providence before phenomena. The primal deity symbolizing the flow of time and the genesis of space. Primordial God[1].

The Holy Incantation of the Primordial God, which is only mentioned in academic papers or ancient creation myths, was being manifested through the Commander's body. I murmured the title of the only ally I didn't really know in the Ten Magical Commandments Front.

“The Pope, huh….”

“The Pope?”

"It's a process of elimination. When I looked into him with mind-reading, the Divine Power dwelling in that person's body originated from a Primordial God. Who else in the Ten Magical Commandments Front could use the Holy Incantation of the Primordial God right now?"

I stroked my chin. Sensing a hint of unease in that gesture, Carisia opened her mouth.

“Are you worried because you don’t know what the Pope will do?”

“Yes. I've met the other members of the Divine Cult at least once, but I haven't had any contact with the Pope. I have no idea what he will do.”

The Pope was our ally, but in reality, I had never met him.

“Then it’s simple.”

She extended her index finger and pointed towards Nokmok.

"Let's secure The Ten Magical Commandments before the Pope does anything. Since our allies are buying us time, we just have to push through the front lines, right?"

A Carisia-esque boorish solution. But in this situation, it was a brilliant idea.

***

At a time when the battle between White Light and Hydra Corporation had not yet reached a conclusion. Around the time when the battle on the Ten Magical Commandments Front was fully escalated.

Kore urgently summoned the Pope.

“It’s a trap!”

“What do you mean?”

The Pope replied with an unfathomable smile. Kore gasped in terror.

“Everything! Everything is!”

When Argyrion first revealed their identity and attacked on the Nokmok front, they swept through the Mage Alliance, citing 'an agreement with Hydra Corporation'.

Kore heard the screams of those who died at that time. Kore had suspected Orthes of being an assistant to the Mage King.

Led by Demos's persuasion and the grand slogan of The Ten Magical Commandments Revolution, she had temporarily turned a blind eye, but her fear of Orthes was only masked, not gone.

The priestess spewed out the voices of the dead that she had heard to the Pope. Argyrion, those terrifying beings, were not on the other side of the extra-dimension, but in this world, and were also in league with Hydra Corporation.

The Pope’s smile did not fade. He answered gently.

"However, remember. Argyrion are those who uphold the will of the Mage King. They can act as dishonestly as they want. How can you be sure that they are not using a counter-espionage against the Hydra Corporation Alliance?"

Orthes himself was really an assistant to the Mage King, there was no reason to share the prophecy that the Mage King would return in three years, added a reasonable analysis.

“Three years! The time from then was the problem. If the deadline that guy said was a lie, if the advent ritual of the lost mage that Argyrion is preparing right now happens today! This world is over!”

“Kore.”

The Pope's voice was still slow. Kore felt a fear from that composure, which she didn't know what it was, that was different from Orthes'.

“In fact. Whether he is a subordinate of the Mage King, or whether Hydra Corporation is in collusion with Argyrion, everything is meaningless.”

"What?"

Kore asked blankly. The Pope answered slowly, in a voice that seemed to be strangling the listener.

“No. I guess it is meaningful. If Orthes is a subordinate of the Mage King and today is the day of his advent, shouldn't we carry out our plan even faster."

Kore realized that the Pope did not call the Mage King "The Lost Mage". Not mentioning the name directly was out of fear.

The Pope did not seem to fear the Lost Mage. All she felt from him was a glimmer of anticipation.

"You. What the hell…?"

“Blasphemia Vigo has the relics of the Olympians. All nine relics except for the three relics that have escaped our hands will be gathered.”

He didn't give up.

The Pope did not give up his insane plan. Kore wanted to scream this time, but she couldn't.

She had to stop the Pope's bullshit.

"Stop it right now! If you pull troops from The Ten Magical Commandments Front and infiltrate Blasphemia, the front will collapse!"

"That's strange, Kore. Until just now, didn't you say that we should stop cooperating with Hydra Corporation?"

“People are dying! Because of your irresponsible decisions, most of our cult members will die! At least we should prepare an orderly retreat, and if you only pull out your people without notifying Demos's moderates or the priestess faction that have been put into the front lines!”

Haha.

Hahahahahahahaha.

Only the Pope’s laughter was clear in the dark shadows of the Pluton Grand Temple.

“There’s nothing to worry about, Kore. There is no reason to pull people from the front lines.”

"What?"

“We already have spies inside Blasphemia. Though none of them have noticed.”

The Pope’s smile deepened. With that smiling face, he greeted Kore.

“I’ll tell you in advance. Because we won’t see each other anymore. Have a good afternoon, a good evening, and a good night.”

Kore drew up the power of the Pluton Grand Temple. She couldn’t let the Pope leave the Grand Temple.

The internal structure of the Grand Temple began to intertwine like a maze. A bizarre entanglement where going forward leads to the back, and turning to the left leads downward.

But it was meaningless.

Hyacinth was there as a guide in front of the Pope. Making full use of his powers of foresight, he solved Pluton’s maze without any problems.

Kore realized that she had to at least inform the other members of the cult about the Pope’s erratic behavior. It was the moment she cried out a final plea to stop the Pope.

“You have to stop the Pope!”

It was Kore's voice. But Kore hadn't spoken yet. She looked around. Some kind of kaleidoscope-like shape was spreading in Pluton's stone chamber.

Everything in that shape was Kore herself. The materialization of actions that Kore might choose in the future.

Just as Kore had tried to trap the Pope in Pluton's maze, the Pope had trapped Kore in the maze of time.

***

The level of difficulty of hiding while watching the battle between mages is vastly different from maintaining concealment while traversing the middle of a mages’ battlefield.

Mages who have entered battle mode activate their sixth sense of detecting magic power to the highest degree. Within a certain area to promote their own survival, they can even see and feel the flow of the atmosphere.

Approaching The Ten Magical Commandments without being noticed by anyone in a battlefield where such magic detection abilities are overlapping is impossible even for Carisia.

But it was very easy for Orthes. Magic power detection? Even if Orthes, who has no magic power at all, is subjected to magic power detection magic, the result would be worse than inanimate objects.

“…But conversely, I cannot connect to The Ten Magical Commandments because I have no magic power.”

Therefore, Orthes' plan was like this. If he revealed himself when he approached The Ten Magical Commandments, the attention of all the forces would be focused on Orthes himself.

In the meantime, Carisia uses Photonization to reach The Ten Magical Commandments, connect to them, and end this mess.

Photonization requires a huge amount of magic power, and the resulting surge of magic power inevitably attracts attention. An operation that uses Orthes as bait for the safe activation of Photonization.

Carisia considered the possibilities for a few seconds. Is there a faster, more reliable way to access The Ten Magical Commandments than this?

No. She nodded and began preparing to draw up magic power.

***

Halto felt a sense of unease. Extra-dimensional energy and magic power surged as if they would devour each other, and in that gap, the prestige of Divine Power was indiscriminately destroying both sides, burning them both.

In the midst of this chaos. The being who should definitely appear was not visible.

‘Where is he. Where is he?’

The enemy has no face. A proposition widely spread among Argyrion. Unseen, he was hiding somewhere in this battlefield.

A chilling premonition ran down Halto’s spine. If he alone occupied The Ten Magical Commandments while everyone was stuck in battle, he could become the sole victor.

The moment he completed his reasoning, he felt a strange flow of magic power near The Ten Magical Commandments. A deformed formula created by forcibly connecting the magic of both Argyrion and the Ten Towers. Unable to be constructed with proper magic, it caused a huge explosion and swept away the surroundings.

At the center of that flow was Orthes. On the verge of The Ten Magical Commandments.

The moment everyone else rushed towards Orthes, Halto felt a familiar suspicion. Was the enemy of such a nature to expose himself so carelessly?

Where is the other enemy?

Beyond the wave of attack magic towards Orthes, he feels one foreign magic power. Halto immediately rushed towards the place where that magic power was felt.

Nastion responds. The shadow cast under Carisia's feet reached out a demon hand to grab her. Carisia's response was simple. Increase the amount of magic power put into Photonization.

A body that glows white. The shadow melts and disappears in the incandescent light. Halto's speed cannot block Carisia.

Barrages continue to try to stop Carisia, even as attacks. Carisia simply crushed everything with a fast and powerful physical charge. The end of Carisia's gauntlet touches The Ten Magical Commandments.

At that very moment.

Time stopped.

Chapter 193: Reversing Hourglass (1)

Chapter 193: Reversing Hourglass (1)

The Pope slowly stepped forward. With each step he took, the long, trailing hem of his robes rustled.

The robe, pleated like an ancient toga, was a single, unadorned color. However, though the color of the robe was monochrome, it was not monotonous. It was definitely a single color, but each time one looked at it, the color appeared different.

To be more precise, the base color of the robe was indeed white. But the accumulated years deposited on the robe changed every moment. It was sometimes a dazzling white color, as if a craftsman had confidently just finished it, and sometimes it looked decayed to the point of being close to gray, as if it had deteriorated for dozens, perhaps hundreds of years.

Time changes with each step he takes. The Pope's own appearance was the same. Sometimes he looked like a boy, sometimes like an old man.

It was the moment he passed Carisia and reached out to The Ten Magical Commandments.

Kang—!

In the stopped time, a sound that was not the Pope's echoed.

It was Halto.

He refined the torrent of the extra-dimension and held it in both hands as bladed weapons. The extra-dimensional magic power flowing around Halto's body writhed like a snake, heading towards the Pope.

"What is it, you…!"

The Pope gave him a benevolent look.

"I'm sorry, brother. You have been deceived by a false king and your eyes have been blinded."

Halto's eyes widened at the calm blasphemy.

“But rest assured now. Everything will return to peace, to the way it should be.”

The Pope looked down at his own appearance from a third-person perspective, and further at the appearance of the battlefield.

The most dangerous ones. The Ancient Elders, who exist as independent providence and can evade even the influence of time stop, could no longer move.

It was thanks to the consumption of magic power. As the formulas and magic power that maintained their existence were leaked, their incomplete bodies lost some of their independence, and were incorporated into the influence of time stop.

The same was true of the Tower Lord of Nokmok. The Pope only moved after Hyacinth observed the point at which the connection with The Ten Magical Commandments was damaged, so all of this was within his expectations.

What was beyond expectation was Halto, who was moving here now. The Pope could easily see through the principle by which Halto overcame the stop. The Mage King's power imparted to Argyrion and Eidolons.

Something writhing in the shadows. The nebula living in the gap of the extra-dimension gathered all of the Mage King's power in this place and concentrated it on Halto alone. Halto, blessed by the grace of divinity, was therefore able to move even in the stopped spacetime.

But it was a meaningless act. The Pope drew a circle with his scepter. A gentle movement. It was counterclockwise.

As the scepter moved, all of Halto's movements began to go backwards. The flowing water of the extra-dimension, and the trident held in both hands.

The outstretched arm returns to its original place.

"What is it, you…!"

The exact same sentence as the sharp words first thrown at the Pope. Halto tried to attack again, but then stopped.

"What?"

“Don’t believe the one you call the Mage King. Find the peace within yourself. Brother, why are you wasting your time in a futile fight?”

The Pope replaced persuasion with a single smile and moved again. Halto thrust out the trident like lightning. But the moment the spearhead of the trident was about to touch the Pope's spine, it brushed past Halto's hair rather than the Pope's body and soared upwards.

Seogeong. His sideburns were slightly cut off. At the moment Halto stabbed the spear of solidified extra-dimensional magic power at the Pope, the space through which the spear was moving was distorted and connected to the side of his head.

It was a technique that was impossible to understand. Did the Cult of the Vanished Gods have such powerful Holy Incantation? Why haven’t they used it until now?

But Halto did not give up here. He had a duty to realize the cause. Even as Halto pondered how to break that superstition with magic, the Pope's movement did not stop.

It was the moment when the Pope approached Carisia's side. Right before The Ten Magical Commandments.

“Haha, I think it’s our first time meeting in person?”

A voice of an uninvited guest was heard.

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The Pope knew the identity of that uninvited guest well. Orthes, who had been steadily contacting the Divine Cult as a spokesperson for Hydra Corporation. Although his appearance was somewhat unclear, he remembered that voice clearly.

“That’s right, it’s our first time meeting. As you know, I am the Pope. I am in a shamefully undeserved position.”

The Pope responded gently. About ten steps ahead of the Pope. Orthes appeared with a knife pointed at the neck of the stopped Commander.

“Indeed, I had a hunch, but you really were the Pope. I am Orthes, the head of the Divine Investigation Office at Hydra Corporation.”

It was a conversation as if the company's working-level staff were exchanging business cards at their first meeting. The tone was quite peaceful, and the courteous conversation seemed as if it would lead to a handshake at any moment.

Orthes' faint smile was also there. But his eyes were not smiling. Between the slightly opened eyelids. A cool blue light surged.

“May I ask, as a business partner, what you are trying to do now?”

A greasy voice. It was a different kind of composure from the Pope's gentle composure.

“I am trying to correct the world.”

“That’s quite a familiar statement. That person who is trying to ambush you from behind, Pope-teacher, is also claiming the same thing.”

The Pope raised his scepter. And he let go of it in that state. The scepter floating in the air was frozen, neither moving nor falling.

The same was true of Halto's body. However, the extra-dimensional magic power that surrounded Halto outwardly appeared to be stopped, but the ominous light inside constantly flickered, proving that it had not reached complete stop.

“Unlike those poor brothers who follow the will of the false king. We are trying to bring back the correct era, when this world was not contaminated by magic."

"Are you trying to get rid of all the magic power?"

“Ah, similar. But it is a more certain method than that.”

Orthes could feel some kind of obsession and madness in the Pope's soft tone. Get rid of magic power. Get rid of magic.

If it could be achieved, it might be a good method. We wouldn't have to be afraid of when the Mage King will come. But the problem was Carisia.

Carisia was born from magic itself. What would happen to Carisia when the Pope's purpose was achieved?

“What about the people of this world now?”

"People of the age tainted by magic power have already lost their purity. A tainted life is inevitable suffering. I will liberate everyone from suffering.”

“Is it possible. With just one set of The Ten Magical Commandments.”

“Of course it’s possible. Not only The Ten Magical Commandments, but many preparations have been added.”

“Even if I kill the Commander?”

***

It was a complex silence. The Pope was probably calculating how much of his tricks I knew, and Halto was trying to smash something, whether it was the Pope's Holy Incantation or his power.

“If you had no burden in using the power of the Primordial God, the Divine Cult would have been fighting in a better environment than it is now. I think the Commander is playing the role of a kind of living catalyst.”

It was the result of analyzing the Commander. She had Reliquaries densely mounted on her whole body, and the fact that there were many relics was functioning as a special symbol.

A collection of numerous gods, with the Twelve Olympians at the forefront. In other words, a living pantheon. I couldn't interpret all the meanings, but it was clear that the symbolism of the totality of those gods was playing a certain role.

"You know a lot."

“It’s an occupational hazard.”

The Pope's smile. Even in this situation, a smile is creepy.

"Indeed, you are the same being as me."

"Pardon?"

“Artificial Demi-god. The ultimate weapon created by the ancient Divine Cult.”

I could see why the Holy Incantation that the Commander had unleashed had awakened my eyes. Strictly speaking, it was not a Holy Incantation. A Holy Decree, a higher stage than Holy Incantation.

Holy Incantation is manifested with Divine Power, a degraded form of divinity that individual priests accept. However, Holy Decree was a miracle that could only be reached through divinity, not Divine Power.

My eyes could be reactivated because I came into contact with a fragment of divinity itself, not Divine Power. I suppressed my impatience and replied.

“I’ve been accused of being a Demi-god here and there, but I don’t really know exactly what I am either.”

“Hyacinth was very worried about you. He said he couldn’t figure out what you were. Even when he tried to foresee the future, it went wrong at some point. But I guessed it from the moment I heard the story about you.”

The Pope reached out his right hand to me. I stared at the tip of that hand.

“I wondered if you were the same as me,”

***

The Pope extended his hand toward his brother–not a ‘brother’ in the metaphorical sense of the world, but a real brother who shared the same origin of creation.

He was bound to be the only remaining member of his race in this world. If they joined hands, his plan would be achieved much easier and faster.

But Orthes retorted in an unwavering, businesslike tone.

“I have no intention of being on the same family register as you.”

"Is that so. Does the family register have someone else’s name written on it?”

A moment of silence. Orthes shook his head.

“For now, it’s just me alone. Pope-teacher. I don’t know what you’re trying to do, but stop it. Once we take over Nokmok, the Ten Magical Commandments Front will be our victory. The Divine Cult will no longer have to be oppressed.”

“Brother, I’m sorry, but that’s not enough. The positive attitude of overcoming tragedy may also be beautiful, but wouldn’t it be more beautiful if the tragedy itself did not happen in the first place?”

Silence again. The man whose eyes could not be read because his age was constantly changing. The man who could not read the eyes because he only saw the world with narrow eyes faced each other.

The Pope clenched his outstretched hand. Particles of divinity gathered and formed a second scepter. The Pope pointed the scepter. As soon as the light gathered, Orthes stabbed the high-frequency blade aimed at the Commander without hesitation.

Kang!

A strange sound that no one would imagine to be the sound of stabbing a person. The target that the Pope aimed the scepter at was not Orthes.

It was the void.

The space between the Commander and the high-frequency blade froze, becoming a barrier in itself. Orthes’ eyes interfere with the Holy Decree. But at that point, the time stop that had been applied to the Commander was lifted.

The Commander, wielding the scythe, attacked Orthes. Certainly, if Orthes killed the Commander, a serious error might occur in the Pope's plan.

But if Orthes tried to interfere with and kill the stopped Commander with his power, the Pope only had to release the stop. He could buy time until he applied a small carving to the components of The Ten Magical Commandments.

Orthes, who was dealing with the Commander, used several magic engraving drives in a row to cover the formula and cause an explosion. It is never a meaningful attack on the Commander or the Pope.

However, it was suitable for moving through the smoke. It is impossible to surprise the Pope. Because he must be prepared.

Carisia was too close to the Pope. It's fortunate that he didn't come up with the idea of using Carisia to stage a hostage situation.

A variable was needed.

Orthes slashed down with the high-frequency blade. The formula of the high-frequency blade collides with the Holy Decree of time stop.

The freed Halto blinked his eyes.

"You…?!"

Orthes shouted, gritting his teeth.

"It's a temporary alliance!"

Chapter 194: Reversing Hourglass (2)

Chapter 194: Reversing Hourglass (2)

"What kind of crazy talk is that?"

Halto asked back, dumbfounded. He was focusing on Orthes with his naked eyes, and on the Pope with his magic power detection.

"Even in a stopped state, your sixth sense as an Eroder would still be alive, wouldn't it? The Pope, that bastard, is unexpected even for me——"

Orthes didn't finish his sentence. A fierce attack followed from behind him. The Commander's scythe swept past the spot where Orthes had been just moments before.

Being able to discern the cloaked state was entirely thanks to the 'eyes'. Orthes' eyes, apart from his physical vision, indiscriminately collect information within their range of influence.

Responding swiftly to the surprise attack from behind, Orthes could sense the Commander retreating again with stealth. Orthes raised the high-frequency blade. He aims it at the Pope.

"You desire the victory of Argyrion, and I desire the victory of Hydra Corporation. But the Pope's victory is not what either of us wants, is it?"

"Wasn't the Commander's corruption the result of your interference?"

"Does that person look like they are on my side right now?"

Halto let the extra-dimensional magic power flow out like water. A slight splashing sound is heard. The Commander was constantly aiming for Orthes' weaknesses.

The Commander's control is with the Pope, not Orthes. He could roughly guess that from the conversation. Orthes and the Pope were once allies, but not anymore.

"The enemy has met a treacherous villain. A correct ending."

"Are you just going to give up on your cause here?"

“…No.”

Halto created another trident with extra-dimensional magic power. As Halto hated the enemy more than anyone else in this world, he could guess the battle aspect that Orthes had drawn.

"I'll take care of the Commander."

Halto said that and at the same time threw the trident he was holding in his right hand at the Pope. The thrown spear wrapped in extra-dimensional magic power flew like a wave, leading the magic power. The cutting edge of a willful tsunami.

The Pope raised his scepter and blocked the attack. Each water droplet stopped in the air, creating a surreal, picture-like spectacle.

Orthes appeared, breaking through the water droplets that did not fall. He held the trident that Halto threw in his left hand.

The barrier of stopped time is broken. The stopped tsunami rushes in all at once. The Pope removed his hand from The Ten Magical Commandments and held his scepter.

"Why are you making such a futile choice, brother?"

Orthes looked at Halto. The attack on the Pope, which was done at the same time as saying, ‘I’ll take care of the Commander.’ It was an effective trick. Orthes responded to Halto’s intentions, hiding himself under the wave of extra-dimensional magic power and rushing forward.

After the surprise attack on the Pope, Halto was fighting fiercely against the Commander. Both have amorphous weapons, and continuous, twisting attacks that aim for each other's blind spots continue.

"I would like to ask. Hydra Corporation’s victory is not just Hydra Corporation’s victory. It is the victory of the entire alliance. Did you want to win alone now that we've come this far?"

“I don’t want victory. I just want the right era.”

Kang!

A blade flew towards the Pope. But it stops in the air. It was because the Pope stopped the atmosphere.

Orthes analyzed the Pope's time stop. The first is the stop applied to these inanimate objects without will. In words, it was time freezing.

The spacetime solidified by the action of divinity could not be broken with any direct attack, but Orthes had a simple solution.

Formula overwriting. Interfering not with the solidified object itself, but with the Holy Incantation that is the cause of solidifying the object. Even if there were no eyes that could observe divinity like Orthes himself, if his instantaneous output of mana control could be equal to the Pope's, he seemed to be able to break this kind of stop.

The problem was the second stop. The paralysis that had descended on this entire space right now.

This was a stop on a conceptual dimension. Not Holy Incantation, but Holy Decree. The encroachment of time. This forced everyone as a law of the world.

Those who had not reached the dignity of the law that the Pope had unfolded could not resist the stop. Conversely, those who were not stopped could freely interfere with the stopped beings.

Those who were not stopped were those who embodied a higher providence than those who were stopped. It was the same principle that higher dimensions can observe and interfere with lower dimensions, but lower dimensions cannot interfere with higher dimensions.

The reason why the Pope did not directly aim at Orthes with his scepter was in the same context.

The Pope could instinctively recognize the divinity in Orthes' eyes. Even the Pope did not know exactly what kind of divinity it was, but it was clear that the dignity of that power was on par with himself, a Primordial God.

Trying to encroach on time would be meaningless. Therefore, the Pope restricted Orthes' movements by freezing parts of the space around Orthes.

Orthes used the extra-dimensional waves to contaminate the Holy Incantation that formed the freezing. Extra-dimensional magic power permeates each and every atmosphere. The Pope realized that the resources consumed by the freezing were gradually increasing.

A method of eroding long-term combat capabilities. The Pope realized that Orthes was truly familiar with ‘fighting’. There is a reason why Demos admired him.

He lightly tapped his scepter. The end of the scepter was bent, and a black blade that seemed to dye even the dawn black appeared.

It was in the form of a scythe.

Orthes scoffed after seeing the information in his eyes. The Adamas (ἀδάμας) Scythe. A legendary weapon that one of the Primordial Gods used to stab his father in ancient mythology.

It was a recreation of that with Holy Decree.

"Isn't that too much? I'm just a mass-produced product!"

"Well, I can give you as many as you want if we join hands."

A reply in a gentle tone. Originally, it was Orthes' specialty to embarrass the opponent, but not this time. A question naturally popped out because he was so dumbfounded.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes. I don't want to fight my brother."

"You keep saying 'brother, brother', and I say this again and again, but my family, including my parents, are not in this world."

"Ah. I don't have any either."

I'm going crazy. Orthes let out a scoff. The Pope did not laugh. He continued in a serious tone.

“Don’t you get misunderstood a lot? Also, aren’t other people’s memories of you strangely faint?”

“…What?”

“You and I, brother, are not welcome beings in this world. After the Mage King dirtied our world with his providence, beings with divinity came to be rejected. He made the unconsciousness of all things think of us as 'beings that go against providence'.”

The Pope explained calmly. The Mage King had engraved a new law so that the world itself would reject the owners of divinity. Like square snow falling. Treated like phenomena that should never exist in the natural world.

Something fearful and eerie. The enemy of the world.

“Originally, the supernatural power called magic power did not exist in this world. It was only after the Mage King contaminated the essence of mana, the totality or primitive form of supernatural powers, that he could derive the concept of magic power from mana. Magic power itself is a pollutant like radiation.”

Was that what he meant when he said ‘this whole world is contaminated’? Orthes found a clue to the Pope’s enigmatic words and actions. Perhaps taking Orthes’ hesitation for something else, the Pope's smile deepened.

“It seems that you have lived a similar life to mine. Brother.”

“…Then you can’t handle magic power?”

“Hm? What are you talking about?”

The Pope asked back in a sincere voice.

“Divinity is the power that exists above all supernatural powers. The Mage King also has his own divinity, but there is no reason why divinity and magic power should be mutually exclusive, is there?"

Ah, damn it. What the fuck am I?

Orthes' mind became complicated. There is no reason why divinity and magic power should be mutually exclusive, but why can't I interfere with magic power at all?

A sigh escaped on its own. Anyway, now was not the time to worry about his self-identity. Orthes grabbed the high-frequency blade.

Enmity soaked into actions rather than words. The Pope also no longer tried to persuade with words.

He swung the scythe at a speed that was inversely proportional to his leisurely tone. The scythe that tore through the space was about to spring from inside Orthes' skin and sever his heart.

—!

But it didn't happen. The attempt to directly penetrate the inside of Orthes' body returned to nothing as the space's cracks collapsed brilliantly.

"Indeed, it is not possible to interfere inside a being with equal dignity in this way. I have no choice but to stab from the outside."

What the fuck just happened? Orthes was dumbfounded.

Is such a ridiculous attack possible?

It was an attack that could only kill those who were not able to regenerate perfectly even if their internal organs were messed up, like an Eroder like Halto, or those who could replace their body with machines and replace the parts.

The Pope swung the scythe wildly. He was dozens of steps away from Orthes, but the blade of the scythe freely crossed the space without being restricted by distance.

Orthes felt something was strange. The attack was too inefficiently large. He could see the trajectory of the slash that seemed to extend from the ground to the end of the sky. The target is not himself either. Movements that seem to block the Pope's own front. A few attacks aimed at Orthes could be easily defended.

'Even if it's impossible inside the body, it would be much more efficient to teleport the blade as close as possible to the vitals, right?'

It was the moment when Orthes put aside his doubts and ran towards the Pope. Everything visible to the 'eyes' was dyed red. He immediately activates the magic engraving drive. A gust of wind pushed Orthes' body backwards.

At that very moment, the previous hacking began to regenerate as it was. Black lines were drawn, one line, two lines, and then the entire space was covered in black.

The lacerated atmosphere screamed. The countless number of black lines became black walls, then began to return to lines again.

The Pope’s smile could be seen beyond the scattered black lines.

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Tick.

At the end of the black gauntlet, the index finger twitched.

Chapter 195: Reversing Hourglass (3)

Chapter 195: Reversing Hourglass (3)

Orthes could easily interpret the phenomenon from just now.

Reproducing a past event in the present.

The problem was that realizing the principle didn't mean he could succeed in deciphering it. Even if the Pope didn't even need to attack anymore and just repeated recreating past attacks, he could still block Orthes' advance.

'Did I make the wrong decision?'

Instead of stopping the Pope from manipulating The Ten Magical Commandments, maybe he should have taken down the Commander together with Halto. But Orthes considered the possibilities.

'The problem is that the Pope's Holy Decree manipulates time.'

Fighting the Commander is more likely to win than directly confronting the Pope. This was certain. But the Pope had sent the Commander to Orthes without hesitation.

A choice he would never have made if the Commander's death would lead to the failure of the plan. However, the Pope acknowledged that the Commander was the key to the plan.

'Even if she dies, I should assume that he has the ability to return to the time before her death.'

Therefore, Orthes directly attacked the Pope. The attempt was somewhat successful in preventing the Pope from manipulating The Ten Magical Commandments.

However, now that the Pope had entered battle mode, approach itself had become impossible.

Even if he tried to examine it with his 'eyes', the Pope's Holy Decree was not hanging over the 'present'. A form of reviving a Holy Decree that worked in the past. Orthes could not figure out what kind of power it was that made it work in that way.

The Pope slowly began to approach The Ten Magical Commandments. It was while Orthes was analyzing the trajectory of the scythe's slash and assembling a path to block the Pope with minimal physical damage.

Light.

First there was a flash, and the sound followed.

A deafening noise that tore through the stopped time.

If the Pope had created a wall with the scythe's trajectory, there was an extensive bombardment that would have swept away all of that wall.

At that moment, the torrent of light scattered in a circle. The shape was like a swiftly flowing river meeting a rock. The magic power that scattered in all directions proved that the Pope had hastily frozen the space.

Now is the time. Orthes' intuition whispered.

Now that the 'reproduction' of the past was crushed by the Photonic Cannon, and the stop using the scepter was also consumed to block the torrent of light.

Orthes' high-frequency blade was activated. Like when fighting against White Light, the blade of the black sword becomes even sharper.

The scepter aims at Orthes. Orthes smiled.

He witnessed the formula of freezing and overwrote it.

It was not the freezing that blocked his path. The freezing that stopped the waves of light coming to destroy the Pope.

He shatters the transparent barrier of space.

The surging light from the Pope's left engulfed him. From his outstretched left hand to his right hand holding the scepter towards Orthes. The Pope's entire body was buried in the torrent of destruction.

"Ha."

A cold sneer flowed from beyond the fading light. Orthes felt an unbearable chill even though he was sure it was a familiar voice.

Dalkadang. Carisia threw away the gauntlet she was wearing on her right hand. The gauntlet, which would have been black, was burning white with overwhelming heat and light. The shocked Orthes shouted.

"Carisia, your arm!"

"It's okay. I used Photonization to minimize the damage. But I won't be able to use that again because I overloaded it too much."

It was a gauntlet that served Carisia's magic assistance in various fields. A multipurpose device such as magic power distribution and concentration, and the formation of a buffer zone when using Atomic Fist.

Even if the weapon was lost, there would be no dramatic change in Carisia's combat power. The gauntlet on her left arm still remained. However, the fact that she had to invest

additional computing power in magic power distribution would gradually lead to an imbalance of power as the fight dragged on.

If the Pope perished with this one blow, there would be no problem.

Orthes knew of the Pope's survival. It was not the result of analysis with his 'eyes'.

The stopped time did not flow again, and the Commander attacking Halto did not stop.

The Pope appeared in the air.

"I was surpri…sed."

For the first time, the smile disappeared from his face. What appeared instead was doubt.

"Brother. Weren't you using that?"

"If they pay me well, I have to be loyal, right?"

Orthes winked at Carisia. It meant that he would buy time with words, so prepare a surprise attack with the maximum destructive power without blowing up the weapon with a mindless bombardment like before.

"How can you do that?"

"How so. They give me money, a house, and meals, what more do I want?"

There was a moment of silence. The Pope opened his mouth with difficulty.

"That is not a person."

"Pardon?"

"I, brother, we will be able to know. That is not an ordinary person, nor an ordinary person of this age who was inevitably contaminated by the Mage King, but a false creation made from the beginning to imitate the Mage King."

Orthes realized why the Pope didn't even try to take hostages. To him, Carisia was something that he absolutely had to destroy someday, not an object of human sympathy or communication.

The Pope, who thought of himself and Orthes as 'the same' Demi-gods, would have judged that Orthes also shared the same unpleasantness in the existential unit of Carisia.

"Why can you cherish that?"

"Why do you consider that a person?"

"Why do you—"

Blue eyes stared at the Pope. No emotion could be found in Orthes' strange light in his eyes. It was an inorganic gaze that made the word coldness pale in comparison.

"Are you curious."

The Pope nodded with all his sincerity. Orthes also answered honestly.

"I'm curious too."

"?"

It was a moment when the Pope was embarrassed. In an instant, halos of light ripened around the entire Pope. Each and every one of them contained a fatal explosion of starlight.

It was an explosion that flowed like the Milky Way. Even in that, the Pope was intact.

"He stopped the time of his body…?"

Orthes repeated, dumbfounded. Resurrection followed by invincibility? What the hell is a guy armed only with such ridiculous abilities coming out of?

How can he maintain his self-awareness when the time of his body is stopped?

"It is a Holy Incantation that cannot be used easily."

The Pope ended the answer with that short word. He holds the re-formed scepter in both hands. Orthes now realized that the sizes of the two scepters were different. Perhaps the embodiment of the hour and minute hands.

Carisia clicked her tongue. She didn't know the theory, but she could tell instinctively.

The ultimate light that White Light refined and extracted by refining the solar eclipse. If it were Infinite Starlight, even the Pope's immortality could be broken.

She had succeeded in recognizing and entering this stopped time. It was entirely thanks to witnessing White Light's magic in advance. By witnessing the realm of White Light, who was the closest being to the Mage King under the sky, Carisia also began to see something like a vague starting point towards ascension inside her.

The transmission to the ascension area that she had witnessed countless times while supervising the Artificial Commandments, or the soil made up of the wisdom of the Mythical Era that could be sensed while connected to the The Ten Magical Commandments White Light, even if the output was suppressed as much as possible.

A seed called the battle with White Light contained in that soil. The seed sprouted in the extreme situation of time oppression by the Holy Decree.

However, that's all. It was still a long way off to hold in her hands the magic that had reached the realm of ascension that White Light could use.

No matter how much of the Pope it was, it would be impossible to interfere with The Ten Magical Commandments while the time of his body was stopped, that is, in a state of rejecting all interactions. The moment he comes to manipulate The Ten Magical Commandments, he must release the invincible time stop.

Therefore, the only way Carisia could choose was to block the Pope's approach itself with an area-of-effect attack.

The Pope guessed the method as well. He had experienced that huge torrent of light with his body just now, so he could not help but think of battlefield control through an area-of-effect attack.

Silence continued in the confrontation. Only the cacophony of destruction created by Halto and the Commander's struggle blows in.

"Carisia."

"Yes?"

“I’m going to kill the Commander and come back. Please stop the Pope.”

Orthes, who had finished all the calculations, opened his mouth. There were ripple-like ripples on the surrounding face of his blue eyes again, but he didn't care.

Orthes recalled the temple where he met the ancient priest of Phoibos[1]. The temple had three elements prepared.

A pure white altar signifying the heavens where the gods descended, a relic manifesting the existence of the gods, and a priest connecting the gods and people.

The Pope's plan was visible.

The pantheon created through the Commander was an existence corresponding to heaven. The priest was, of course, the Pope himself. The problem was the relic.

Orthes could easily know that the Pope was another being who collected the Reliquaries that the ancient priest of Estia had warned about. The only groups that were obsessed with collecting Reliquaries in this world were the Divine Cult, Blasphemia, and Hydra Corporation.

Niobe, an insider of Blasphemia, did not say a single word about the relics containing the souls of ancient priests. Naturally, the remaining candidate was the Divine Cult.

The Pope was trying to make something by collecting numerous Reliquaries. Orthes once again recalled what Kaicle had said about the progress of the Artificial Commandments.

‘If about 10 Reliquaries like the Phoibos' Crystal are supplied, it can reach just before completion at once ². ’

Of the Reliquaries in which the ancient priest resided, that is, the Reliquaries of the Twelve Olympians, Hydra Corporation owned three.

There were nine remaining Reliquaries. He didn't know how many of them were in the Divine Cult and how many were in Blasphemia, but it was meaningless now.

Because the Commander was under the Pope's control. The Pope could fully obtain up to nine Reliquaries, and could complete a certain Reliquary equivalent to the Artificial Commandments.

Combined with the abuse of his eyes that had exceeded its limits like in the time of White Light, and the obsession that the Pope was still repeating, Orthes could read the identity of that Reliquary.

It was a body to bring down and bind the god.

The starting point was a very simple logic. The heaven that the ascended would reach.

If you can go up, you can come down too.

The Mage King proves that.

Chapter 196: Reversing Hourglass (4)

Chapter 196: Reversing Hourglass (4)

Orthes felt fear at the Pope's idea.

The Mage King who descended in the Mythical Era was clearly a divinity.

At the same time, the power of the Mage King who came down to this world was much weaker than the True Form that existed beyond the realm of ascension. The historical records of the Mage King creating magic power and magic, and thus 'growing', prove this.

In order to cross the dimensional wall and descend into this world, there are inevitably restrictions on ability.

That was why the gods of the Divine Cult did not directly descend to solve everything, but only gave a very small part of their power to the priests, or formed Demi-gods or Avatars to interfere.

The Pope focused on this point. When a god descends inside the world, he cannot come with his full power and form.

Reliquaries are tools to borrow some of the god's power. It can function as shackles to restrict some of the god's existence.

The god that the Commander was trying to bring down was the Primordial God, the archetype of the divinity he possessed. An existence that manipulates the providence of time and space.

There are no more altars of the Primordial God left in this world. Therefore, he gave the meaning of the pantheon to the Commander and bound it with the Pope's Holy Decree. Assuming the existence of the Primordial God among the various gods.

The Commander-Altar also served as an anchor to fix the Pope so that he could act in this world. Under the world order that rejects divinity other than the Mage King, the Pope's movements were restricted, but conversely, in the Pantheon full of Divine Power, his power finally spread its wings and soared.

The Demi-god, the Pope himself, who has fully awakened the blood of the Primordial God in the realm of the altar, acts as a priest. As a natural consequence, the deity that the Pope reveres as a priest becomes the Primordial God.

The three elements of the temple, the altar, the priest, and the Reliquary. By implying the Primordial God in two of them, the remaining one is also naturally connected to the Primordial God.

But the problem was time. The plan to transform the vacant Reliquary through subtle implications and signs to draw out the power of the god and bind it required a very long time.

Even if he accelerated time using his own Holy Decree, even if he used all of the Demi-god's near-eternal lifespan, it would still not be enough time to guarantee the completion of the Reliquary.

God was such a huge existence.

But The Ten Magical Commandments was added here. Ascension, the greatest artifact in history with a window to divinity already formed.

The power of The Ten Magical Commandments is connected to magic of each attribute. If the nature of the power is reversed and changed to allow access to the realm of the Primordial God.

Finally, the power of the Primordial God of time comes under the Pope's control.

As a pure 'force' without freedom or will.

This was probably why the Divine Cult considered the Pope's plan heretical. Because it was an act of degrading a god, who should be worshiped, into a tool.

But what Orthes feared was not the Pope's plan itself.

It was the future that the Pope wanted to achieve with that plan.

There was no future in his plan.

The result that only Hyacinth, who was the Pope's close aide, would have shared. Orthes recalled the prophecy[1] that Hyacinth had demanded from him at their first meeting. Tell him what the greatest calamity that would befall this world was.

It seemed that the Pope had used Hyacinth as his answer sheet of wrong answers.

He observes the future through prophecy, and if his plan fails, he makes a different choice.

In the process of observing the future, Hyacinth would have observed the number of cases where the world and the universe would be destroyed because he could not control the power of the Primordial God, or where all the time in the world would be twisted and destroyed.

Having gone through those wrong answers, the Pope and Hyacinth would have arrived at the correct answer.

The Pope's real plan, which only Kore had vaguely guessed.

The wish that the Pope will achieve with the power of the God of Time.

He wanted to turn the future into the past.

The 2074 years of the Mage Era, in which the Mage King rewrote history.

He reverses all of that and turns it into nothing. He reverses the past that has flowed. He erases the events that have occurred. He erases the story of people.

He turns the Mage Era into nothing, and further turns back time to the point where even the fact that the Mage King came does not exist.

Like time on Earth, time in this world was also linear. It's like an hourglass. The flow of sand falling from top to bottom is constant.

The Pope wanted to turn that hourglass itself upside down. The sand of time converges back to the starting point. In this way, history is restarted. A correct history not contaminated by the Mage King's magic.

The Pope truly believed that.

The Pope's plan to deny the time that this world has experienced, and the records of everyone who has lived in it. Orthes felt fear.

But at the same time, a thought came to mind.

Perhaps.

Perhaps, by agreeing to the Pope's plan, he could reverse even the fact that Orthes himself came to this world.

If all events disappear, the fact that he came to this world will also be erased. The plan he had thought of while looking at the bubbles of erasure was finally realized.

He can go home.

For that one thing, Orthes, who had rummaged through the extra-dimensional contaminated area, felt the temptation to give up everything and lend a hand to the Pope. The only way to be compensated for all those years of falling into a goddamn magic power class society and running away for survival amidst incomprehensible enemies.

But what is on the opposite side of this choice?

If the Pope's plan is realized, the Pope himself would ultimately disappear. For the Pope, who wanted to erase the time itself of the world contaminated by magic, he himself was an existence that should disappear.

Carisia, who was like the crystallization of the pollutant called magic, was an object that had to be annihilated unconditionally.

On one side of the scale is return, and on the other side is Carisia.

The boss's confidant chose.

***

Halto saw the rushing scythe.

It was too close. That scythe had a strange power that cut off even the regeneration caused by the blessing of the extra-dimension. New limbs cannot grow from where the arm was cut off, and the torn organs cannot stick together.

Therefore, Halto responded by destroying the points that had been attacked so far himself. If the wounds on the organs did not stop, he would cut them out and regenerate new organs, and cut the cut surface of the arm once more to restore it to a regenerable state.

But now, the place where the scythe was aimed was not a place where he could withstand being attacked one more time.

The neck. If his neck is cut off, how can he control the body below his head? It might be possible if he uses magic to mess up the wounded place again.

But it would be faster for the Commander to rummage through the crippled limbs than for Halto to chant a spell.

Halto sensed the finale. Not a life-or-death struggle with the enemy, but a final moment being hit by the Commander being controlled by others.

How ironic is this. It was when Halto was about to take his last breath.

Kang-!

With a clear sound, the trajectory of the scythe was deflected. A blue light that filled him with anger and disgust just by looking at it. The strangely faint impression of narrow eyes, this time, were wide open.

"What are you doing. Not fighting?"

"What about the Pope?"

"I found someone to take over my shift."

Halto witnessed the torrential rain of light pouring down to destroy the world in the distance. Again, a familiar anger rises. The magic that he encountered in his faint memory. That was White Light's bastard.

A joint struggle with two enemies. What the hell am I doing right now?

Regardless of whether Halto was experiencing confusion between his self-identity and professional ethics, Orthes urged Halto.

"Does that. Get hurt?"

"That's not 'that'. That is the Commander of Blasphemia, a group of those with will."

"Yes. So. Does she get hurt?"

Halto shook his head. He was the strongest mage among those belonging to Argyrion. It was one of the reasons he was recommended as the leader of Argyrion.

The other reason, of course, was his ability to deal with the 'enemy'. In fact, the contribution of this part was greater.

Strong magical power and the ability to cope with anomalies accumulated while dealing with the enemy. Halto, who possessed both the essence and the masterstroke, was not skilled enough to be helplessly attacked by the Commander.

Rather, if it had been the original Commander, there was a high probability that she would have been disarmed by Halto long ago. With an opponent who can freely use the torrent of the extra-dimension and has virtually unlimited regeneration ability.

But this time, the Commander's immortality was even stronger. No matter what kind of wound she suffers, time returns to before she was attacked. The only strategy Halto could think of was to 'bless' the entire artifact with the magic power of the extra-dimension.

But even the blessing was only chased away by the reversing time.

Orthes calculated the probability of winning. If he overwrites the time reversal formula with his eyes, he can stop the Commander with Halto's extra-dimensional encroachment.

However, in that case, there was a high possibility that he would have to face Halto and the Commander after stopping the Pope's plan.

He made up his mind.

If he can't stop the Pope right now, the world will disappear. Halto and the Commander? Aren't those the ones who couldn't stop Carisia and himself even when they were together in Blasphemia?

Orthes trusted Carisia.

"I'll break the reversal formula. I'll leave the encroachment to you."

Chapter 197: Reversing Hourglass (5)

Chapter 197: Reversing Hourglass (5)

Halto gritted his teeth. Teaming up with the enemy to fight the mage he once respected the most.

However, this was the only way. Halto was relieved that this fight would ultimately 'liberate' the Commander.

'Yes. If she receives the blessing of the extra-dimension, I can save the Commander from the oppression of that evil priest of the old gods.'

If that were to happen, they could serve the cause together.

Orthes had no interest in Halto's inner thoughts. He only thought about how to somehow stop the Pope's madness.

The eyes, which had already exceeded the processing limit of the body and were activated, analyzed the Commander's movements. Stealth and teleportation were meaningless. Unless the Pope himself directly exercised his power to interfere, the Commander could not escape Orthes' gaze.

"Right!"

Orthes, who blocked the Commander's scythe with the high-frequency blade and stabbed her in the abdomen, shouted. At the same time, the Commander's figure disappeared. Halto reflexively scattered the torrent of the extra-dimension. The Commander, who appeared on Halto's right, could not avoid the extra-dimensional magic power.

Orthes moved again. He weaves together the magic power of the extra-dimension and the formula of reversal. As the reversal that was trying to resist the extra-dimensional encroachment collapsed, the extra-dimensional magic power invaded the Reliquaries that the Commander wore.

'Is this the enemy's ability!'

Halto was amazed once again. He was grasping all of the Commander's movements and moving one step ahead. The unpredictable attacks using the Reliquaries were quickly dismantled and deciphered like simple repetitive tasks.

The Commander's attacks gradually dulled. It was because the blessing of the extra-dimension and the Reliquaries were resisting each other by burning each other. Accordingly, the energy in the Commander's eyes flickered.

It was a clear sign that the Commander's soul, which had been torn apart by that evil old priest, was trying to return. Halto shouted.

“Commander! Open your eyes! You are now being dominated by the enemy of the world! Break free from the domination of evil!”

Orthes clicked his tongue. Although the Pope was suddenly doing crazy things, in fact, it was Argyrion who was more suitable for the position of a villain plotting to destroy the world.

'Will she come to her senses by doing that?'

If it was the Commander that Halto wanted, the Commander who was 'loyal to the cause', she might open her eyes. But Orthes did not think that was truly the original Commander. Just as the current Commander was the Pope's puppet, the Commander who was encroached upon by the extra-dimension would also be the Mage King's puppet to some extent.

However, what Orthes did not expect was the result of Orthes himself. Originally, Divine Power and the magic power of the extra-dimension must mutually annihilate each other, and must repeatedly kill each other until only one side remains. However, Orthes forcibly tied the two together through formula overwriting.

Because of this, the two formulas that wanted to control the Commander's body fell into a kind of interference state. The extra-dimension was trying to control the Divine Power, and the Divine Power was trying to control the magic power, so the influence on the Commander herself in the middle was reduced.

The Commander broke a very long silence.

"Halto…? You, why?"

A voice mixed with confusion, but familiar to Halto. Halto shouted powerfully.

“Commander, did you open your eyes! I will soon free you from the oppression of the old priest! Join the cause quickly!”

The Commander's expression was strangely distorted. It was an expression that seemed to be contemptuous, and also worried.

“You…. You have become an Eroder.”

“I’m not an Eroder. I just realized the truth.”

“Ah. It wasn’t just me who had my soul stolen, but you as well!”

Halto was stunned by the Commander's reaction. What was he talking about? The extra-dimensional encroachment that dwells in the Commander should have already shown him the truth. Why?

'What the hell is going on?'

Orthes was confused. Something was happening. In a direction that Halto, and perhaps even the Pope, had not anticipated.

***

The Pope confronted Carisia. He knew the name as knowledge.

However, until now, Carisia was not a person to the Pope, but closer to an object. An object that was a creation of The Ten Magical Commandments.

If Hyacinth's Thousand-League Eyes and Prophecy, which he received from Phoibos, were combined with the Pope's own power to manipulate time, the Pope could look into the past through a specific person.

The one-on-one interview with Demos to observe the allegorical process of False God and the Ascension Route was conducted in this way.

The Pope read Demos' memory of acting in Algoth City. It was reference material for resetting the connection to the ascension area of The Ten Magical Commandments. He strengthens the plan by observing the connection points and operating principles of the False God.

But there was a more detestable being than the False God. The reality of the one whom Demos had feared intensely, the person called 'Boss' that Orthes served.

The Pope could also see the memory of the shock and fear that Demos felt the moment he witnessed Carisia. Even the ensuing Demos' reasoning. Demos judged that Orthes had recruited Carisia as a tool of war against the Ten Towers.

The Pope agreed with that judgment. The most disgusting pollutant that the Mage King had tainted the world with was The Ten Magical Commandments, and Carisia, from the very beginning of her existence, was the crystallization of that malicious tool.

Orthes, who must be an existence of the same kind as himself, could not regard that as anything other than a tool.

He shouldn't.

However, Orthes was clearly trying to prevent the purification of the world for Carisia's sake. He could understand that Carisia was fighting to protect Orthes, but that Orthes was fighting for Carisia.

It was an area that the Pope could not understand at all.

A wide range of magic power bombardment that fundamentally blocked the Pope's approach. The Pope, who stopped at a certain distance, expressed his doubts.

"How can you do that?"

At the starting point of this conversation, Carisia recalled the encounter with White Light. White Light degraded Carisia's existence by not responding to the conversation. The Pope was the opposite. Unlike what he said before, attempting to have a conversation meant that he was treating Carisia as an equal person, even unconsciously.

'He's probably quite confused, considering that he's not the type to easily go back on his words.'

The emotional confusion that bloomed on that face, which had been smiling at Orthes, was quite pleasing to see. She was in need of time to recover her magic power anyway. Carisia organized her formulas and accepted the conversation.

"How can I? What are you talking about?"

Carisia opened her mouth with all her sincerity. She threw away the honorifics that she had been maintaining ever since learning from Orthes.

Against White Light, honorifics were appropriate to ridicule her in reverse. But against that madman who suddenly backstabbed them, mockery and satire didn't seem to work, and there was no reason to be polite, even as a formality.

"Shouldn't you also hate Orthes? You, who are a product of The Ten Magical Commandments, have no choice but to reject the incarnation of divinity."

“Well. Me, Orthes?”

Carisia naturally smiled. It was the ferocious smile she had given White Light.

“It’s this world that I hate.”

If Orthes had seen it, it was an expression that he would have been shocked by, saying "White No Name's personality is coming out." Carisia reflected on her past.

The Eleusis phenomenon that connects reality and the virtual world suggested another possibility. The possibility that something virtual can be refined to the limit and realized.

White Light decided to use it.

A simulation of the virtual world using The Ten Magical Commandments. By creating countless virtual worlds with different environments, he attempted to create a 'perfect body' in the midst of that infinite repetition.

The existence corresponding to the 'protagonist' of the virtual world was created using White Light's own factors. Because it was a creation that would ultimately become White Light's body.

He would reach the ultimate magic by imbuing his soul into the final product that appeared at the end of the simulation.

No matter how much of White Light it was, it was a plan that could only fail repeatedly. There were countless variables to test. But White Light's obsession was so great that it reached infinity, and the magic power of The Ten Magical Commandments was inexhaustible despite the endless repetitions.

White Light endlessly repeated the creation and deletion of virtual worlds. He deletes everything except the final result, the protagonist, of one world.

Even if it was data selected in that way, it was discarded if better data was produced in another world. The goal of perfection was in a distant place, so the number of discarded worlds and data was so large that it could not be counted even if astronomical numbers were mobilized.

In one of the worlds that was deleted in that way, the 'protagonist' was tested for survival from the moment of birth. A general setting to utilize the phenomenon of extreme situations awakening magic abilities. The mother was tortured in various ways, and the fetus tried to save the mother with its excellent magical potential.

However, what the fetus could not withstand was the mother's self-denial. The mother, thinking that the pain would continue forever because the fetus was saving her, tried to kill the fetus.

In this way, the fetus gave up on survival. White Light deleted the fetus, which had died due to the mother, and that world without emotion.

It was a child who died without being called a name even once.

And all the virtual deaths and tragedies converged. The purest hatred from the worlds being discarded gathered together and solidified into something that could never be erased.

White Light regarded this as a bug. Since he could not delete it from the virtual world, White Light 'banished' the bug to reality.

This was the first case of realization. Instead of being immediately discarded, it was transported to a secret laboratory on the border of the extra-dimension for use as a sample for research and analysis.

And the bug opened its eyes.

Containing as much hatred as the death experienced by the discarded world. Carrying the anger of a fake world destroyed by the real world.

Chapter 198: Human Bomb (1)

Chapter 198: Human Bomb (1)

Halto and the Commander were glaring at each other, putting aside their weapons. It was so close to looking like a lovers' quarrel between two people whose feelings had gone awry, rather than a sharp debate between rivals risking their lives.

Thanks to that, Orthes was able to buy himself some time to rest and recover his eyes. He had strained his eyes without regard for the consequences because he had been a little heated after hearing the Pope's crazy plan. He blinks a few times.

'Since this entire space is already full of formulas, I won't be able to fully recover even if I close my eyes for a moment….'

He had to prevent the performance of his eyes from being factory reset, just like after dealing with White Light.

Orthes listened to Halto and the Commander's argument.

"Why don't you understand! That person who was chased out of the extra-dimension will come! To return this rotten world to its proper form!"

“There are countless existences in the extra-dimension. Don’t you think that one of them deceived you in the name of the greatest mage?”

"No. This is the truth! The Ten Towers destroyed the Mage King's ascension and chased him out of the world! Even our enemy, that Orthes, would agree to this!"

Orthes, who was suddenly hit with an arrow, turned his head towards the Commander. The Commander rolled the word enemy around in his mouth a few times. It seemed that the name in his memory was somewhat faint as he had regained consciousness after a very long time.

And suddenly, anger filled her eyes.

“Enemy…! Was it you who ruined the Golden Desert Operation and caused dozens of our agents to go missing during the operation!”

“That’s how things turned out. But right now, aren't I stopping you, who is being controlled by the Pope, along with Halto-ssi?"

“Are you also an Eroder?”

“No way. I have occasionally stuck my head towards the extra-dimension, but that doesn’t mean I want to become an Eroder."

Orthes drew a line, saying that the reason why he was cooperating with Halto now was to stop the crazy things that the Pope, who had controlled you, was doing.

“It is meaningless for you to be angry at me now. The greatest threat to the magical society in this place right now is none other than you and the Pope.”

The Commander bit her lip. It was a correct point. A brief moment of freedom gained while the magic power and Divine Power of the extra-dimension were fighting each other. However, it was clear that there would be no freedom for the Commander herself, regardless of who won between the two powers.

The extra-dimension and the Pope were both elements that drove the world to destruction. The Commander closed her eyes.

"Halto."

"Commander."

"Kill me."

"What?"

It wasn't that Halto didn't understand the true meaning of that short sentence. The Commander ordered Halto to kill her.

The magic power of the extra-dimension from the Commander's left half and the Divine Power from her right half were invading the nervous system like a plague, binding her. She could think, reason, and speak, but any movement beyond a certain level would be controlled by others.

The best thing the Commander could do was to suppress both the extra-dimension and Divine Power together so that neither of them would completely occupy her body.

“I don’t want to participate in that goddamn superstition follower’s plan, and I don’t want to present my death to that grinning mad enemy. I didn’t know that my only friend would become an idiot who fell into the extra-dimension, but even so, the best cause of death I can choose now is you.”

What the hell is she talking about right now? Halto's gaze wavered. The reason why Argyrion had been trying to recruit Blasphemia steadily. The fact that Argyrion's system was familiar and persuasion was easy because they were originally the same organization was also true.

But the true purpose that penetrated all the rational reasons that Halto calculated was the Commander. To realize the truth and live a new life together under the cause.

But now, the Commander was saying that he would rather die than accept the cause.

"Why?"

Why doesn't she accept the truth?

No. Halto had been with the Commander for a really long time. From the bottom of the magical society to the top of Blasphemia. He and the Commander were cut off after the Golden Desert Operation.

A target who has shared most of his life. Reading the emotions of such a person was as easy and natural as breathing. Halto could intuitively know that the Commander had accepted the truth of the Ten Towers' betrayal.

Nevertheless, she rejects the 'cause'.

The Commander slowly opened her mouth with sunken eyes.

"Because it's not for the magical society."

“Are you also a lackey born from the Ten Towers’ power after all? Think again, Commander. The Ten Towers have already collapsed. The cause is slowly approaching us. Their petty power is meaningless!"

"It's not power, Halto. Have you ever thought about how many people the Mage King who will come will kill? Have you ever counted the number of people who will drown together as you collapse the entire Ten Towers, the society that will collapse with them? The people who will die in the war with those who reject the extra-dimension?”

“It is a necessary sacrifice!”

“…My Halto was buried in the Golden Desert.”

The two people's argument lengthened. Orthes became somewhat impatient and glanced behind him. As long as he had eyes, he was not bound by his field of vision. It was an expression of his desire to physically confirm Carisia's safety as well.

Fortunately, the fight on that side was also in a state of lull. But there was no knowing when the Pope would move again. It was a problem if the fight between the Pope and Carisia was resumed, but it was an even bigger problem if the Pope paid attention to the Commander.

Right now, the magic power of the extra-dimension and Divine Power were in a state of equilibrium. But what if the Pope realizes the abnormality of the Holy Incantation and gives the Commander the Holy Incantation again?

He would have to start this whole thing all over again. Orthes felt his patience gradually running out.

'If I had brought the Artificial Commandments, I would have blown them up…'

Unfortunately, the Artificial Commandments were now embedded in White Light's main tower, including the city of Etna. Attempts to bring them back again were useless in this place where time had stopped.

"So. Commander. It seems that your confidant has decided to serve the cause rather than you, but shall I fulfill your wish?"

Halto distorted his expression with anger and glared at Orthes. How dare he interfere with the sacred process of persuading her to join the cause.

The Commander looked at Orthes with a bitter smile. If she could have committed suicide, she would have tried it a long time ago. But neither the extra-dimension nor Divine Power would allow her death.

“Let me ask you one thing, what are you going to do with this world.”

“What am I going to do? I'm not the decision maker. I'm the subordinate of the person who is dealing with the Pope for us over there. She doesn't really have any desires for the world. She has White Light in her hands, so she'll probably prepare for retirement."

The Commander let out a sigh. The oldest magic tower was destroyed by the enemy.

And that the enemy was drawing the most moderate future among those gathered in this place.

“To think I would entrust my neck to the enemy.”

“Alkife!”

Halto let out a roar. He spoke the Commander's real name, which he had not called for a very long time. Why doesn't she understand him, the cause?

Orthes pondered. It was right to kill the Commander here.

He didn't know that Halto's extra-dimensional encroachment would be so half-hearted that her ego would awaken. It would have been better if she had been reborn as an extra-dimensional Eroder in an instant without an ego.

It seemed difficult to break the exquisite balance between Divine Power and the extra-dimension in an instant. It was not easy to interpret the structure of the connection of the two forces that repeatedly multiply each other by using each other as fuel.

Even if he tried to force Halto to encroach on her and forcibly create an Eroder, time would be dragged out because the Commander refused the extra-dimension. If the Pope were to realize the Commander's change due to the time consumed in that way, it was clear that things would become even more twisted, even if it didn't lead to a catastrophe.

'Is the problem Halto?'

Halto was obsessed with the Commander. It was obvious that if Orthes tried to kill the Commander, he would immediately respond.

'Huh? Wait a minute.'

Come to think of it, it didn't really matter if the Pope realized the Commander's current state.

To be precise, the margin of time until the Pope realized the Commander's incomplete liberation and tried to give her the Holy Incantation again. It was enough to deal with the Commander within that.

And Orthes had the most certain means to deal with the Commander.

“Don’t interfere, enemy! This is a problem between me and Alkife!”

“Since you say so. I won’t interfere.”

Orthes raised both hands and took a step or two back. Halto opened his mouth to persuade the Commander. He tries hard to ignore the disappointment and contempt that flashed across her eyes.

At that very moment, the enemy's cry was heard from behind.

“Carisia!”

The name of another enemy. Wasn't she confronting the Pope?

He had known for a long time that the sounds of fighting coming from the rear had stopped. But sometimes silence is more brutal than gunfire. In an extremely tense state, an acute confrontation where blades of vigilance were set towards each other. In such a situation, what was the reason to call out a name?

So that Halto himself can fully focus on Alkife, is Orthes trying to help Carisia and stop the Pope?

Absolutely not. Orthes was not an existence who would think that way.

Halto turned his head with an unknown chill.

At the tip of Carisia's hand, the light of destruction was ripening.

It was an aim targeting both Halto and the Commander.

Chapter 199: Human Bomb (2)

Chapter 199: Human Bomb (2)

Orthes thought.

'The melodrama is over!'

It wasn't that he didn't feel sorry for the two people's story, but if he were to find the reason why their lives became so twisted, wasn't it because they chased Orthes and Carisia to death (in the literal sense)?

If he could blow up Halto along with the Commander, Argyrion would be dismantled and the Pope's plan would be stopped, so how rational this plan is!

He had also obtained permission from the Commander herself, who was about to die. After confirming that Halto had become insane from worshiping the extra-dimension, the Commander, who had entered a state of resignation, was expressing with all her body the will that it was better to die than to live like this.

Therefore, he called Carisia. Because his direct attack would naturally be blocked by Halto, he called Carisia to deal with the Commander in one go with firepower that Halto could not even respond to.

Carisia finished her judgment as soon as she heard Orthes calling her. She knew Orthes' personality. If it was something she could do, she would silently move forward and achieve the best results.

Conversely, she is also quick to grasp 'things that she cannot do'. Usually, Orthes just throws her anywhere and she brings back the results, saying, "Hey Boss, why are you making me do this?", but Orthes also has personal limitations.

For example, using magic without a magic engraving drive. Or accepting magic power into his body. It was not uncommon for things that Orthes could never do, no matter how hard he worked, forever.

It was a very pleasing part for Carisia. Carisia was not a complete being on her own either, so it meant that they could fill each other's shortcomings.

Orthes, with whom she had shared the most time since she woke up in this world. She could intuitively grasp what meaning was contained in that short call just now.

1. Orthes needed her to do something.

2. Orthes was in the middle of fighting the Commander.

3. One thing that Carisia clearly had a comparative advantage over Orthes in terms of combat was large-scale firepower.

Orthes needed firepower. Very big and beautiful firepower.

Light condensed at Carisia's fingertips. It was the light that Orthes called 'Death Beam' and feared.

A ray containing 'the radiance of death' in its literal meaning was fired.

***

I shouted Carisia's name loudly and ran towards the Pope. While Carisia eliminates the Commander, I must block the Pope.

The Pope, surprised by the sudden change of opponent, seemed to be bewildered because he had not anticipated either my intrusion or Carisia's firing.

"Brother. Truly…!"

“Yes, it will truly be like this. I want to live!"

“What meaning is there in living in this broken world!”

The Pope's words were surprisingly similar to Halto's. The hatred of the two people, who were completely opposite to each other, was so similar.

"Please think about the people who are trying to live in that broken world!"

The Pope swung his scythe again. A slash across the space. The prelude to attack regeneration. It seems difficult to use the previous attack because he left the place where he was fighting me in order to deal with Carisia.

He doesn't make the same mistake as before. Instead of dodging the attack from afar as before, he approaches as close as possible.

The Pope's scythe and the high-frequency blade collided. Not beyond space. In front of the Pope, sparks fly.

The Pope takes a step back, and I take a step forward and stab the blade. At the same time as my blade is aimed at the Pope, Carisia's light is aimed at the Commander.

The Pope cried out.

“Are you going to make others live in hell! Child of White Light!”

I replied to the Pope on behalf of the busy Carisia.

“Yes. I'm trying to make them 'live'. Not to let them die like you. It's somewhat ironic that the means is murder, though."

A straight line cutting through the darkness extended from Carisia's fingertips. It started like that. In the next moment, the line increased in size and became a surface. A terrifying radiance illuminated the chaotic space.

The world is all white, a white night. Physical vision becomes meaningless. I move my sword in the blinding darkness.

The Pope does not rely solely on vision to fight. His power is too great for that.

But at the same time, he is not used to fighting without sight.

I'm the same. If I were to pick one human being who is the most dependent on sight in this world, it would be me.

But what is different about me from the Pope is that even in a situation where physical vision is sealed, I can see everything.

I can see the Pope extending the net of Divine Power. He is trying to grasp my movements with the whorl of Divine Power instead of sight. But it's a mistake. He can interfere with formulas that have a shape.

The net of Divine Power shrinks from the place where I extended my sword. The Pope, realizing that his move has returned to being useless, attempts to retreat. At the same time, the scythe's trajectory surrounded the Pope. Since he cannot know where the attack will be launched from, he attempts to defend by attacking in all directions.

But my victory condition is not the Pope's fatal wound. It is to buy time until he can no longer reverse the Commander's death.

The more the Pope retreats, the more certain our victory becomes.

The torrent of light that Carisia poured out stopped.

We won.

But my 'eyes' pushed in a ruthless reality. There was a moving figure beyond the fading light. Alive, and moving?

The Commander wanted to die. Did the Pope succeed in using the Holy Incantation again even while I was chasing him, and regained control of her body?

The information perceived by the eyes is expanded. One body.

Countless souls.

***

Halto, as soon as he sensed the approaching torrent of light, covered the Commander with his body. It was an action that even he could not understand, perhaps even the extra-dimension that dominated his body could not understand.

Commander Alkife was surprised by the unexpected action. Was it an action created by the last piece of Halto she knew?

She took one last look at Halto's appearance and closed her eyes.

'What a final moment.'

'… ….'

'Even so, I'm glad you were by my side.'

Halto's body and will melted away in the light. The amount of light that can be clearly seen even beyond the eyelids. The Commander intuitively knew that she would be the next to disappear.

But the intuition was wrong. Halto's remnants, which had not yet been destroyed, wriggled.

At the moment when Halto's ego was infinitely weakened and decomposed into magic power, the connection point of the extra-dimension that had been dormant inside him burst out.

Nastion. The final arrangement prepared by the most virtuous follower of the cause.

Already, the blessing of the former Argyrion had been concentrated on Halto's body. The lump of extra-dimensional magic power condensed under the human shell poured out, piercing the framework of the body.

The will of all those of Argyrion, those who were blessed by the extra-dimension, was melted down there. A turbid collection of those who dream of the cause. The turbidity of the ego melted into the connection point of the extra-dimension that had been binding the Commander's left half.

Halto's body, which remained without ego and will, became a living dimensional fissure that emitted the magic power of the extra-dimension from every single somatic cell. The magic power of the extra-dimension, which was sprayed without limit, blocked the torrent of light.

The union of Argyrion. But because too many egos were melted down, there was no focus on any one person's will. The main objective shared by the suspension of wills is only one. The realization of the cause.

The extra-dimensional will, which broke the state of equilibrium with Divine Power in one go based on the overwhelming amount of magic power, moved the Commander. Forward. Forward.

Towards The Ten Magical Commandments.

Orthes witnessed it.

The terrible mixture of egos swirling under the Commander's body. A mental mosaic that only repeats the cause.

The Holy Incantation that the Pope had built was only left as a very weak role as a medium for using the Reliquaries.

The shocked Pope aimed his scepter. However, the suspension of Argyrion that filled the Commander was not a single number. It is not an existence that can be stopped by conceptually stopping one thing.

But still, even the totality of Argyrion could not surpass the Pope's power.

The Pope held a scepter in one hand and a scythe in the other. He was thinking of physically excising Argyrion and giving her the Holy Incantation again.

Another plan was wriggling in Orthes' head as he watched the scene. The Commander's disposal had failed. Then he must seek another way to seize victory.

The Pope and the totality of Argyrion are aiming for The Ten Magical Commandments. The Hydra Corporation Alliance has already secured a large number of The Ten Magical Commandments. One or so can be gone.

'But how?'

Now that the use of the Artificial Commandments is impossible. Will Orthes or Carisia have something that can destroy The Ten Magical Commandments?

Orthes winked at Carisia. Carisia shook her head. Infinite Starlight was still an unknown area. Again, Orthes looks at the totality of Argyrion.

A mixture of souls, a lump of extra-dimensional magic power, compressed without limit inside the outer shell of Divine Power.

Huh? Orthes tilted his head.

'Magic power filled inside the outer shell called Reliquary?'

I've seen this a lot before.

Chapter 200: Human Bomb (3)

Chapter 200: Human Bomb (3)

The prototype of The Ten Magical Commandments bomb that Carisia had made from the husk of the Reliquary from which she had extracted Divine Power to create the Artificial Commandments.

Its components were exactly the same.

Carisia and my eyes met. Carisia, who came closer, asked.

"Judging from your expression, it seems like you have another good idea!"

The view of the 'eyes' looked down on my expression. Although I had thrown out somewhat emotional words while fighting the Pope, the smile that had been carved beyond a simple habit to almost a post-natural instinct did not falter.

"Yeah. Just like usual."

"Then you didn't think of anything?"

I shook my head. If I hadn't thought of something, I would have just asked them to somehow maintain the status quo by bombing both of them from the sky with artillery fire.

Carisia smiled.

"See? What's the plan?"

"The Commander's current structure is very unstable."

I speak mixing the results observed with my eyes and the inferences. The extra-dimensional magic power that continues to be emitted. The Reliquary that surrounds it. A detailed comparison with the essentially similar Reliquary bomb.

“Such a structure is easily collapsed by even a small crack. What if we could induce not just a simple collapse, but a more… violent reaction?”

Carisia's eyes sparkled.

“An explosion!”

"That's what it's called."

“So you finally realized how awesome explosions are!”

It is confusing whether it is playfulness deliberately shown to reassure me, or sincerity. Emotions of such high density that it is difficult to know even with the eyes.

However, in the next moment, Carisia's emotions, which had been as excited as a child, calmly subsided.

“But Orthes. The reason why I could perfectly detonate the Reliquary bomb at my will was because I made it. If I could detonate others simply because the structure is similar, I would have developed human bomb magic a long time ago."

She speaks terrifying words with a calm face. I swallowed once.

"Of course, I know that too. But Carisia. In the fight against White Light, I realized a way to edit the form of the soul made up of formulas.”

The totality of Argyrion encroaching on the Commander's body was also a formula that acted on the realm of the soul, like White Light. It is much more unstable and smaller in scale than White Light, though.

Rather, that makes it easier for me to control.

“Are you saying you’re going to sculpt the internal form by overwriting the formula? In the form of a magic power bomb."

As expected, she understands quickly. When I nodded, Carisia murmured.

"A soul bomb. You're actually one step ahead of me…."

"What are you saying."

I grab the high-frequency blade again. Today's schedule was particularly harsh on the sword. If Carisia hadn't given it magic power reinforcement like enchantware from the time I fought White Light, it would have broken down and been scrapped long ago.

"Boss should take care of the Pope. In the meantime, I'll prepare to blow up the Commander. Once the preparation is complete, we'll switch opponents again—”

“I lure the Commander close to The Ten Magical Commandments and blow them up. The plan is to blow up The Ten Magical Commandments, or at least destroy only the Commander. Okay. Once we finish this, let's really take a break."

***

The Pope, who was trying to seal the Commander's movements with the power of time, faced an unexpected change.

The torrent of destruction that he had experienced so many times.

He sighed deeply and raised his scepter.

“I thought you wouldn’t interfere with the battle between me and the Divine Integrated Circuit."

Carisia still couldn't guess what thoughts were going through the Pope's eyes. In fact, even now he was watching countless lines of time that were stretching out and going berserk beyond his control.

“That is an advance guard calling for the Mage King. Whether our fight is settled in what way, wasn’t it agreed that you do not want to hand over this world to the Mage King, a major premise?"

“Yeah, that’s right.”

Carisia freely admitted.

"But I have no intention of handing it over to you either."

“Are you going to destroy the Divine Integrated Circuit using my brother?”

"No way. I'm in a position to be swayed by Orthes."

Perhaps she had a funny thought, a low laugh leaked from Carisia's lips.

“Just. To fuck both of you over. Both the Mage King and you.”

***

The moment I faced the Commander, a very violent reaction occurred. The totality of Argyrion, which had been taking a fairly rational defensive posture against the Pope until just now, suddenly turned to a fierce offensive.

No. What did I do?

If anyone should be angry, it's me, right? How much suffering have I gone through running away from those guys?

How many Argyrion branches have I blown away, and how many underground ruins have I sunk?

While arguing that the difficulty of the survival struggle was more intense for me than for you, I faced the scythe.

The ability to edit soul formulas that I realized in the fight against White Light is unleashed.

The totality of Argyrion is full of anger. I cannot drag them into my realm because there is no such thing as a vast spiritual world like White Light, but as much as I have gotten closer to their souls, I can hear whispering voices.

『——■■ □□□□□■■ □□■□■ ▌ ▌▌ ▌■■ !!』

Anger that cannot even be grouped into words, anger of different directions from different people. I dismissed Argyrion's anger with a single laugh.

I guide their hatred. I weave emotions together to make them even stronger. I classify and combine enmities with similar colors and create a new pattern.

Among the mixture of emotions, there was one soul that stood out.

A soul that was quietly motionless as if it had given up on everything. Is it the Commander herself?

Perhaps feeling my interference, the Commander's soul pulsed. The Commander is the only one who maintains reason inside the Commander. If she interferes with my bomb-making, there was a high possibility that things would become irreversibly twisted.

「Is it the enemy.」

The voice of the soul was heard. Deep fatigue, resignation and regret.

「A body that has been reduced to a puppet of the Mage King and the Pope. How ridiculous. Am I just a tool to my lifelong enemy and to the source of my loyalty? That the only one who can grant my request in the end is the enemy.」

A request? From the Commander to me?

「Kill me for sure. Like Halto's ruined end. Perfectly and without flaws.」

It was a request closer to an order. A person who had been left in a de facto vegetative state by the Pope for the past few years, and now had regained the freedom of her mind but had her freedom of body taken away. The last order from the person who had her confidant, who was like her other half, taken away by the Mage King.

The relationship between Halto and the Commander seemed similar to the relationship between me and Carisia. I said the only farewell I could give her.

"I'll do my best."

The Commander's magic power controlled the flow of the soul. The nameless angers were no longer amorphous lumps of ego, but were concretized into a single formula with proper flow and order.

“Carisia!”

***

It was a call at a moment that the Pope had not anticipated. Orthes had only wielded his sword a few times, and even so, had not inflicted any wounds on the Divine Integrated Circuit formed by borrowing the Commander's body.

The magic power of the extra-dimension that was boiling up was also more stable than before. If the foundation of the Divine Integrated Circuit was not destroyed, neither Orthes nor Carisia could kill it.

The moment the Pope judged the situation that way, Carisia had already used Photonization to finish approaching Orthes. Her magic power detection ability pierced through the Commander's body.

And judged. This is complete.

As a bomb.

At that moment, Orthes witnessed a beaming smile that he had never seen before blooming on Carisia's lips. It was a frenzy that even felt pure.

Carisia vaporized part of the Commander's body with Atomic Fist. The Pope realized that Carisia's strike had not ended up killing the Commander.

If it had been when Halto had encroached on and weakened the Divine Power, it would have been different, but after the magic power of the extra-dimension had already filled the gap in the Holy Incantation that had been crushed in that way and completed a solid fusion in its own way. Even if the entire body was vaporized, it would appear by reversing time.

The same was true of the current temporary damage. Whether it be extra-dimensional energy or Divine Power. It will soon be regenerated in some way.

However, Carisia did not inflict additional attacks. After sticking her left arm into the Commander's heart and activating something, she threw off her gauntlet and shot the Commander towards Nokmok.

It was a moment when even the Pope did not understand what Carisia and Orthes were trying to do. Give the advance guard of the Mage King the opportunity to get his hands on that legacy?

Were the two of them truly consumed by madness?

The Pope left everything behind and ran towards Nokmok. That must not touch Nokmok. Absolutely not.

And it was the moment when he rapidly approached Nokmok. Something began to happen in the Commander's body, which had been thrown with such great momentum that it was approaching Nokmok in a straight line without properly drawing a parabola.

Carisia's left-hand gauntlet, which was stuck in her heart. It flickered with an ominous red color.

The countless diverging timelines converge to one point. The Pope's specialty was not prophecy, so he could not specifically observe what kind of future each of those timelines was drawing. However, he could intuitively sense the general trend.

An explosion.

A very fierce explosion.

The scattered futures melt together under the radiance of the explosion.

"No…!"

Orthes replied to that bewildered cry.

"Yes."

Chapter 201: 2077

Chapter 201: 2077

Carisia recalled what had happened just before. Orthes himself didn't seem to notice, but he had called her by her name, "Carisia."

It had been a long time since he had given her the name at their very first meeting. Considering that he had been acting all prickly afterwards and had settled on stiff titles like employer or boss like now, you could say that he had finally returned to the starting point.

Why had Orthes made such a 'mistake'? Carisia seemed to know the feeling.

It was a kind of liberation. This long, long fight. The struggle that started from her own determination to destroy White Light and eventually led to a struggle with the entire Ten Towers for Orthes' goals had finally reached its end.

The Argyrion's plot to revive the Mage King. The Pope, who suddenly appeared and was desperately trying to turn the history up to now into nothing.

A final move to completely end everything. The last sprint towards the long-awaited moment. It couldn't be helped if the tightly held mind was slightly disturbed.

Carisia herself knew that feeling. At the summit of White Light. When she had brought down White Light's night sky and greeted the clear sky. Hadn't she spoken much lighter than usual in front of the lightness of finally getting rid of the burden containing the weight of her entire life?

Now, what Orthes was most wary of. The resurrection of the Mage King from mythology was also perfectly blocked.

The advance guards who had been supporting the Mage King's will as the totality of Argyrion were incinerated in the explosion and would disappear from this world.

There may be something that the Mage King had arranged, like a mind parasite, but that was all she had to slowly deal with.

It was the moment when Carisia was drawing a future with Orthes in her mind.

Finally, the magic power of the extra-dimension filled inside the Reliquary began to expand. It was different from the expansion to create a crack in the dimensional wall and bring in the extra-dimension. It was to be detonated with a fuse lit.

As the magic power boiled, it engraved surreal patterns throughout the space where the Commander was located. Colors that could not be definitively described shone, and space began to be deleted from the places where the light touched.

The crack reaches its limit. The Commander broke out of that space as it was, and a sphere of magic power appeared. In the midst of the great disaster caused by the annihilation of Divine Power and the extra-dimension.

Even the outer skin of The Ten Magical Commandments could not withstand that power. The explosion that used the power of the Mage King as a sacrifice deciphered the Mage King's legacy.

Eventually, The Ten Magical Commandments began to emit a scream-like sound and spew out the knowledge of the Mythical Era, infinite magic power. Not something with a shape, but a shape like a concept. Memories latent within the liquefied magic power that The Ten Magical Commandments spews out.

The annihilation of the Commander bomb burned even more fiercely, using the magic power overflowing from The Ten Magical Commandments as fuel.

Carisia felt joy, and Orthes felt shock. Coincidentally, if the two people's thoughts were changed into sentences, they would be completely identical.

'The Ten Magical Commandments is being destroyed!'

Right now, even Carisia would not be able to reproduce it. It was an interference that was possible because Argyrion and The Ten Magical Commandments possessed the same power of the Mage King. But if the result has already been observed once, she may be able to reach it again someday.

The Ten Magical Commandments collapsed for the first time since the declaration of the Mage Era. Not a change of the one occupying the tower, but the collapse of The Ten Magical Commandments itself. An unprecedented feat and an outrageous act that shakes the foundations of the magical society.

In the midst of that great collapse.

The Pope was there.

The moment she witnessed that, Carisia felt an unknown chill. Even for the Pope, it would be impossible to interfere with magic that had already begun to explode like that.

Unless it was before Carisia had reached the realm of breaking the Pope's time oppression. It was impossible for the Pope to stop all the magic that the current Carisia was casting.

It should have been.

The Pope sang a song. It was a kind of hymn. Golden cracks began to spread from his neck. It was the prelude to the Divine Power rupture that Orthes had shown while facing White Light.

“For the time you have spoken of, our fight will cease!”

Time stopped. It was different from time freezing or time oppression. Something more powerful that binds even those who have escaped time oppression. Carisia could think, but she couldn't move. The Holy Decree that the Pope was paying by burning his own divinity, his soul. It had reached the realm of Infinite Starlight.

Even the flowing waves of magic power solidified in the air. The explosion was roundly ripe as it was, trapped without being able to unleash its power.

“They prepared a large pile of wood for nine days, and on the morning of the tenth day, shedding many tears, they laid the corpse on top of the woodpile and set fire to it. The prince spoke, saying, who will twist my fate and guide my soul to the underground, but the scales of fate pushed him to the underground.”

Orthes took a step forward. A pressure greater than time oppression. Orthes was somehow destroying the judgment of time being applied around him and walking towards the Pope.

"Who is there to reverse the judgment of the scales? What can change the strict judgment of the great Aegio?”

However, the Pope's song did not end at 'stop'. He unfolded the Holy Decree of reversal that he had been constantly pursuing. It was not enough to reverse the entire world, but it was enough to reverse this space.

To turn back time to before the Commander exploded, hold the Commander and The Ten Magical Commandments in his hands, and amplify the reversal. It was the last gamble that the Pope attempted by burning his soul.

“To erase the fate that has risen to the scales. What awaits at the end of the world. Only time flowing from the beginning to the end of all things will do that.”

“Are you really going to destroy the world—!!”

Orthes shouted. Even that shout was rewound.

"!!-kkaniipgakseang killshimangmyeol reulgyese jeongjin"

The Commander's figure was restored to the point where the cracks had occurred, and the broken Ten Magical Commandments was also returning to its original form. Fragments of The Ten Magical Commandments that collapsed. The Pope skillfully used this. The only one who can interfere with the reversing time moves.

The Pope absorbed the Commander and the collection of Reliquaries inside the recovering Ten Magical Commandments. The 'Reliquary' is enshrined in the 'Altar'.

Even to the Demi-god, he twisted the connection point of The Ten Magical Commandments with a concentration that had reached the realm of self-discipline. He explores the realm of the Primordial God with himself as a catalyst.

The last struggle to return the world's history to the right path. As the brother said, if he makes a mistake even for a moment somewhere, this world will collapse.

He cannot even dare to speak of what form of destruction it will be. It may be a destruction that is coldly cooled down, or a destruction where only the same moment is repeated forever and a tangible end cannot come.

But the Pope thought that all of that was better than the survival of this evil world. He had to destroy the traces of the Mage King.

It was the moment when The Ten Magical Commandments and the Commander, and the Commander and the Pope were connected. A sensation of meshing with the dimensional wall itself, *cheolkeok*. The world vibrated. The Pope's smile finally disappeared.

The Holy Decree bestowed for the right world. The fate of the world itself, wrapped in the dimensional wall, is slowly rewinding.

The time that had flowed for 2074 years clears its traces. The moons with the names of magic attributes flow in the reverse direction, and the wheel of time moves towards 2073.

At that very time, someone resisted. The formula overwriting that Orthes could activate for the last time. Somehow capturing something connected to the Commander entangled inside The Ten Magical Commandments, and awakening the Commander's will.

The Commander's ego, which had been swept away and annihilated in the explosion magic, had been revived by the Pope's reversal. Even so, she could do nothing but scream. Orthes gave her the last chance.

The Commander's will resisted. She struggled, thinking that anyone other than the Pope's god was fine.

He heard it.

No. It's not you.

The voice. The moment she heard that voice, the Commander sensed it. The reason why the egos of Argyrion, who would have been revived like her, did not respond.

It was because their cause was bowing its head closer than ever before.

This place was already the audience chamber of Argyrion.

The Pope had designed the pantheon to be able to contain 'any god'. That was why he was able to contain the Primordial God, who had not left any traces in this world.

However, 'he' was also a divinity. If any god can come to the pantheon, then 'he' can also come.

That was what had to be rejected at all costs. The Commander knew what that mage had been doing until now outside of the world. The Argyrion's mashed up totality of egos did not hide their memories.

The Commander, who had been entangled in the dough of the ego, knew the atrocities that Argyrion had committed by borrowing the power of the extra-dimension. What Eunsa was born with as a sacrifice, how he had corrupted Eidolons, and the number of humans that Nastion had secretly offered as sacrifices as well.

The Pope could also feel the approach of divinity. A Reliquary that should not have an ego had an ego and summoned a god. A god that must never come. A god whose existence must be erased from this world.

The Pope and the Commander resisted with one heart. The cause that ruined the era. The cause that turned her lover into a madman. It was an existence that neither of them could accept.

Their resistance was effective.

No.

Their resistance was □□□ffective.
Their resistance was ineffective.

The wheel moves. In the opposite direction to the one the Pope had desired.

The time hanging at the end of 2073 returned to its original place again. But it didn't stop. To bring in the concept for his own coming.

2074.

2075.

2076.

2077.

The Mage King has returned.

The Demon King has returned.

Chapter 202: Descent (1)

Chapter 202: Descent (1)

No one other than the Pope clearly understood what had just happened.

Even Orthes was the same. He felt the reversing time, and also noticed that the wheel was turning in reverse again.

The opposite of reversal. Time flowing in the right direction. But time did not stop at the starting point, but ran towards the future. At that moment, Orthes turned his head towards Carisia.

It was because he thought that time might accelerate to the end of the universe and everything would meet an equal end.

However, the maddening waltz of time came to an end at some point. The acceleration of time stopped. When the acceleration stopped, Orthes felt a chill.

He looks around. The Ancient Elders, those who were stopped by the Pope's time oppression, were still the same. There were no traces of time having passed.

Even though three years had passed, nothing seemed to have changed. It was as if everything in the world had evaded the effects of acceleration.

To be more precise. It should be expressed that all the effects of time acceleration were concentrated on one point.

Inside The Ten Magical Commandments Nokmok.

Orthes turned his head towards Nokmok.

He couldn't see anything.

The flow of time flowing towards Nokmok, and the Pope's Holy Decree wrapped around it. The Pope's anger and bewilderment were visible as they were.

But when he looked at Nokmok, no information came in except for the shape seen in his physical vision.

The 'eyes' declared the time.

It is 2077.

Even though all objects outside The Ten Magical Commandments Nokmok had escaped from the flow of time acceleration that had taken place for three years. The time of this world was brought forward by 3 years.

The moment he understood the meaning, Orthes swung his sword like a seizure.

He had to do something. He couldn't see anything, but he had to somehow interfere with the formulas that were swirling inside that Nokmok.

All attempts to connect the formulas returned to nothing. Approaching a formula that was invisible to the eyes. He failed to find the place where the formulas would connect and collapsed.

"Boss."

Orthes' voice sank. Even he didn't know what to say right now.

'Escape? Fight?'

What should he choose?

What can he do?

The Divine Power rupture inflicted on the Pope was spreading from the vocal cords that had shouted the holy song to his entire body.

Even in the midst of that, the Pope did not stop pouring out the power of reversal. However, he had already been deprived of the altar and the Reliquary, two of the three elements of the temple.

The Pope thought that there was no priest to replace him in this place. However, the totality of Argyrion, which had encroached on the Commander's body, were the priests who worshiped the Mage King.

In this way, a temple was built to fully serve the Mage King. No matter how desperately the Pope struggled, he would not be able to reverse the determined fate.

While the two people who were born with divinity in their bodies at the time of creation were bewildered, the human Carisia, Carisia who had experienced countless deaths, finished her judgment.

If they can't win, they die.

Then they should take the first strike first.

She met eyes with Orthes, who had called her, once again. She gathers magic power in her two hands, which had now become bare.

It is not a continuous attack in the form of artillery fire. She cannot break through The Ten Magical Commandments with that level. Carisia compressed the magic power to be used for artillery fire into one point.

A sphere of light floated in her hand. Like a pitcher throwing a fastball, she throws away the sphere of light.

The sphere emitted a flash and scattered into pieces.

It was in the air that didn't even touch The Ten Magical Commandments. The maximum firepower that could be prepared in a short time returned to nothing, but Carisia instead laughed fiercely.

It was an encouraging result. The point that The Ten Magical Commandments took a 'defense', which had not reacted to Orthes' overwriting or the Pope's time reversal.

The attack is somewhat effective.

But it was already too late. Nokmok, and also Argyrion and the Commander inside it, the Pope, and the collection of Reliquaries.

It began to scatter into pieces. It was different from 'melting'. The essence that made up the existence was clarified and poured out.

Nokmok. Magic power. Wisdom. Records of ancient magic.

Argyrion. Ego. Dough. Nastion. Halto.

Reliquary Collection. Mythical Era. Priest. Soul. Oblivion.

It was a scene that was very familiar to Orthes. Because it was the appearance of things he saw with his 'eyes'.

But what was shocking was that this time, it was visible even in his physical vision.

A scene where the components of things are replaced with thin letters. There is no sense of reality. Carisia murmured blankly.

"You were looking at things like that?"

He nods. But the moment comes when that becomes visible to other people's eyes. Orthes realized the meaning of 'visible' at that moment.

Whatever the Mage King is doing now, he can stop it.

He runs out again. He identifies the risk factors. The phenomenon itself that is happening right now. And the Pope. But the Pope was bewildered. There was no reason or will to stop Orthes' sprint.

Orthes stuck the blade into the scene where Nokmok was disassembled and meaning was extracted. To graft Carisia's enchantware and those components together.

It was the moment when Orthes stabbed the blade towards the radius of meaning extraction.

The high-frequency blade began to disassemble into letters.

High-Frequency Blade. Cutting. Enchantware. 3 years 2 months 17 hours after production.

Even in the midst of bewilderment, Orthes did not stop the formula overwriting. The letters pouring out as the high-frequency blade was disassembled were superimposed on the components extracted from Nokmok.

Hidaig Magangbeophwa's Jjakgigi Records

The meaning is messed up and ruined. He was able to inflict minimal sabotage.

But it was the next moment.

Enchantware. Production
Records of Ancient Magic

The arrangement of words returned to its original state. Not only that. The extracted words gathered together and began to form the shape of a person.

Letters such as Nokmok, Mythical Era, and magic power gathered. Orthes intuitively knew that it was a meaning element expressing the 'Mage King'.

It's not enough.

The Mage King declared. It was not a language. The pure will itself spread throughout the space.

Orthes retreated, holding the high-frequency blade that had been cut in half. He still watched the Mage King, who was넋 was넋 and made a human silhouette with letters, grabbed the Pope's neck.

He doesn't know what the Mage King is repeating that is not enough, but it was clear that he wanted to use everything in this place as a material to make up himself.

The Pope was an existence that must never be handed over. Even now, the Mage King had long since surpassed the limit line of the 'eyes', but what if he gets to use the Holy Decree of time on top of that?

There would be no way to fix it.

“Damn it. Boss! Let’s retreat! I don’t think there’s an answer unless we use that method!”

That method.

The Ten Magical Commandments bomb. It was a plain statement of fact, not a joke or anything. Carisia had proven that she could damage The Ten Magical Commandments by blowing up the Commander.

The Mage King was clearly something that surpassed The Ten Magical Commandments. But the only hope that he might be able to reach it right now was the Ten Magical Commandments bomb.

Even if the completion of the Commander-Pantheon was secondary, the total amount of power concentrated as a pantheon was far below The Ten Magical Commandments. But wasn't the unexpected firepower created by the explosion enough to destroy The Ten Magical Commandments?

The joke-like plan to attack the Mage King by blowing up The Ten Magical Commandments emerged as the only hope.

The Mage King took a step. When that foot made of letters stepped on the ground, even the ground slowly began to be converted into letters. The Mage King slowly walked and headed somewhere. Orthes' eyes followed that trajectory.

The Ancient Elders who are stopped by time oppression.

"Pope!"

Orthes shouted at the Pope. Focus came into his eyes.

“Release the time oppression right now! Right now!”

"What are you talking about!"

Urgency was embedded in the Pope's voice. Emotion is finally projected into the language.

“Are you thinking of releasing that to outside the world!”

"Do you think you can stop the Mage King! Even if time is stopped, it's meaningless to the Mage King! Look over there!"

The ground was left torn apart with its essence encroached along the trajectory that the Mage King had moved. The dimensional wall of the ground trampled under his feet had collapsed.

The place where the footprints were imprinted was connected to the extra-dimension as it was. A disaster where the existence itself, every single movement, causes the extra-dimensional collapse.

“Wouldn’t he be able to collapse this space in an instant if he wanted to? The reason why that is moving slowly is because there are ‘immovable’ prey scattered everywhere! We have to make the Ancient Elders run away!”

The Pope gritted his teeth. He had to help his enemies, whom he had fought all his life, to survive in the face of a greater disaster.

But there was no other choice.

The opponent was the Mage King.

The Pope recovered the Divine Power. The wheel of time regained its speed. The Ancient Elders, even though their integrity had been damaged and their flesh had stopped, were at a level where their spirits could see the stopped world.

They recognized all the events from the Pope's struggles to the Mage King's return. They shouted adding their boiling hostility, some fear, and reverence.

"Deposed ruler, have you returned!"

The Mage King did not answer. He just took another step.

Chapter 203: Descent (2)

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The Mage King reached out. The closest Ancient Elder disintegrated into letters, then turned into white bone powder that clung to the Mage King's flesh.

Slowly, a texture was layered onto the framework of letters.

The Ancient Elders made a swift decision. They knew they couldn't face the Mage King with their damaged integrity.

They were about to abandon their bodies and prepare to retreat.

But the Mage King had left his mark. Something rose from the extra-dimensional rift. The earth cracked open, vomiting out a massive form.

"Good heavens..."

Orthes, who was the first to recognize its identity, lamented.

It was an extra-dimensional expeditionary force's dimensional exploration ship. Had it been left in the extra-dimension for the accelerated three years, becoming a second Argyrion? Would it become the commander of the army the Mage King would raise again?

However, Orthes' worries ended up being unfounded. The extra-dimensional expeditionary force was in confusion, saying things like, 'We definitely followed the correct route, so why are we back in the original world?'

It was a trap prepared by Argyrion. By changing the purpose of the dimensional gate originally created for the Mage King's descent, they had constructed a repeating spacetime that would make the expeditionary force approaching their base wander eternally.

Originally, Eidolons would have recognized that they were trapped in a cyclical space and escaped quickly, but the entire Eidolon was now participating in the Mage King's cause.

The expeditionary force had repeated its endless voyage before falling into the rift created by the Mage King and returning to the original world.

Orthes could express the scene in a single word.

Lunchbox.

A lunchbox that Argyrion had packed for the Mage King.

"Wait, this is—"

Since there were as many dimensional exploration ships as there were dispatched Tower Masters, there were a total of seven ships. They resembled submarines rather than

spaceships. An unnamed magician who came out onto the deck and was examining the surroundings observed the Mage King.

He was still approaching with a leisurely gait.

"Humanoid extra-dimensional Infector observed! Attac—"

He disappeared before he could finish his sentence. The white bone powder on the lettered skeleton increased slightly.

Orthes himself never thought he would say these words to the magicians of the Ten Towers.

"Run—!!"

The only people in this place who could exchange blows with the Mage King were Orthes himself, Carisia, and the Pope.

If the Ancient Elders restored their integrity, things would be different, but right now, they too could not stand against the Mage King.

The dispatched Ten Tower Masters? He didn't know. If they were connected to the Commandments, they could definitely participate in the fight, but in the current situation...

Without the Commandments' buff, would there be anyone who could match the Mage King in pure skill?

The answer was 'yes'.

Seven Tower Masters stepped forward. They seemed to have sensed the Mage King's identity. Perhaps the Ancient Elders had transmitted information through the communications that were restored when they returned from the extra-dimension to the original world.

The Tower Masters positioned themselves at different points and constructed a magic circle. They formed a siege centered on the Mage King.

Surprisingly, Nokmok's Tower Master was newly included. He had succeeded in surviving even through the chaos of the Commander and Pope, and even the Mage King's descent.

Strangely, he grew out of thin air. A seed sprouted, a bud appeared, and flowers bloomed, then the shell of the fruit tore open and Nokmok's Tower Master landed.

So, there were eight.

The magic circle was modified. The shape was two overlapping squares with the Tower Masters as vertices. On the outermost edge was a circle with all eight people on one line. Countless geometric patterns were drawn inside.

Suddenly, the Mage King's steps stopped. The magical power emitted by the eight Tower Masters simultaneously was projected towards the Mage King, binding him.

Following this, Hydra Corporation's reinforcements also arrived. They had received an urgent report that the final battle that would determine the direction of the Ten Commandments Revolution would be fought on the Nokmok front.

Among them, Hector arrived particularly quickly. Orthes could guess the reason for his early arrival.

'Did Hector also escape the Pope's time suppression? He was steadily heading to Nokmok even while time was stopped?'

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Hector, who had climbed the outer wall of Nokmok Magic Tower and arrived at the top, sensed that an unprecedentedly dense magical power was concentrated at the summit. He had expected something unusual to happen since then.

Even for Hector, a seasoned old man who had lived for many years, the scene before him was shocking. Eight Tower Masters were facing a single being.

Even so, they could not overwhelm the enemy, and barely managing to achieve parity was the limit.

The problem was that it was questionable whether the enemy was even using his full power. The mysterious being made of letters, with a subtle white color swirling around his toes, stood there leisurely as if enjoying a gentle breeze.

Hector headed towards Orthes, who was on the outer edge of the top of the magic tower.

Orthes was with Carisia, and a man in antiquated attire that seemed to be from the Mythical Era.

"What is going on?"

He asked back like a prisoner who knew that today was his execution day. As far as he knew, there was only one enemy that even if the Tower Masters of the Ten Towers exerted all their strength to confront, they could not defeat.

Orthes glared at the Pope. The cracks that had spread from his neck were slowly but surely spreading throughout the Pope's body. But he should still be able to fight.

He wanted to condemn the Pope's actions right now, but he didn't want to waste time arguing over responsibility.

"...It's the Mage King. Due to a combination of unexpected situations on the Nokmok front, he has descended."

Hector let out a short 'ah' sound. It sounded like a lament for the arrived great disaster, or perhaps an exclamation of admiration for finally facing the Knight Order's fated enemy.

The Pope was about to say something. Orthes could see that he would spout stories about how his mistakes had caused this situation and criticisms of the ugly world structure.

He snapped at the Pope before he could open his mouth.

"Pope. I'm saying this kindly because it looks like you don't have much time left, but stop talking shit and cooperate."

"...I understand. Brother."

And Orthes turned his head towards Carisia, who had been silently watching the situation since the expeditionary force's descent. She was focused on the magic being unfolded by the eight Tower Masters.

"What kind of magic is it?"

Even if Orthes used his own eyes, it wouldn't be impossible to figure out the elements or properties that make up the magic, but interpreting magic that has been advanced to that level would put too much strain on his eyes.

Now that he had to prepare for a battle with the Mage King, it was more reasonable to wait for Carisia's explanation, who specialized in magic analysis.

"...The Ten Towers didn't completely rule out the possibility of the Mage King returning. That's an anti-Mage King technique. It's theoretically the same as Elysion. By neutralizing all attributes, it creates an attribute-less zone that cannot be interfered with by any attribute's magic."

It was a magic with similar ideas to the anti-magic field that Carisia had conceived. Carisia had intended to repel all magic power, but the difference was that they had erased the attributes they could handle. The attribute-less magic power gathered by erasing the attributes became a chain that sealed the Mage King.

"But the problem is that there is a lack of magic power and personnel. If the Mage King has appeared, it means that the Ten Towers are already in a crisis situation, so it wasn't designed as a magic that could only be used when all ten Tower Masters are gathered. But it's certain that the more experts in the Ten Commandments' attributes gather, the more the burden is reduced."

"Boss. Are you saying you're going to help the Tower Masters...?"

"The Mage King is weakest right now."

Carisia asserted. The Mage King destroys the structure of the world and devours its constituent elements simply by existing. To put it another way, it means that he gets stronger every moment.

The Mage King at this moment was the weakest.

"Huh, that's how things turn out."

Carisia, who had agreed to the idea of retreating to get the Ten Commandments bomb, had suddenly stopped moving. He wondered if it was to grasp the rapidly changing situation, but she was calculating the risks and returns. Orthes clicked his tongue.

"Boss and me. Old Man Hector. The Pope and eight Tower Masters. ...Certainly, we can't gather any more power than this."

The Tower Masters' magic was holding the Mage King in place, but it wasn't inflicting any fatal blows beyond that. Orthes inferred the reason from Carisia's explanation that the magic was 'exclusively for the Mage King'.

That's because it wasn't a technique designed to fight and win against the Mage King from the beginning. The dimensional walls and world order repel extra-dimensional beings.

The Ten Tower Masters were convinced that if the Mage King descended again, his essence would originate from the extra-dimension, in other words, from the realm of Transcendence.

That magic was for buying time until the Mage King collided with the world's providence and naturally faded away.

'As Carisia pointed out, the problem is ultimately the amount of magic power.'

If even one of the Tower Masters was connected to the Ten Commandments, it would be different, but there was no one connected to the Ten Commandments in this place right now.

"I'll contact Lampades. I'll have them reactivate Blasphemia's Eleusis construction device and move the location of Etna City to Nokmok."

"It's also good to detonate it in case of emergency."

"What?" "Huh?"

Hector and the Pope simultaneously retorted upon hearing Carisia's answer. Orthes hurriedly stepped forward to try to clear up the misunderstanding.

"Ah. It's not that Etna City is a bomb, but that the bomb that will blow away the Ten Commandments is stored in Etna City. If all means fail, we'll have to throw it at the Mage King."

Chapter 204: Descent (3)

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Hector laughed, dumbfounded.

"Right! The Ten Commandments, they're things that can be broken if you try to break them. Since it's come to this, starting with Nokmok... Huh?"

Nokmok was gone.

"Ah, that's because the Mage King descended through Nokmok, sir. We tried to destroy it too, but the Mage King jumped out faster than we could destroy it, and things turned out this way."

The fierce struggle within the stopped time was summarized in an instant. Hector held his head.

"You're saying the Mage King has already swallowed one of the Ten Commandments? Then we should consider his magic power to be virtually infinite."

Hector drew his sword. Unlike the high-frequency blade Orthes carried, it wasn't a minimalist design close to a plank with no decoration.

It was the very image of an ordinary sword used by knights in the old days. Orthes clicked his tongue.

"Wow, you're still using that? It's lasted a long time."

"The sword is a bit sturdy."

Orthes gestured toward Carisia. A question of what to do now.

"The analysis of the Tower Masters' technique is roughly complete. It's similar to the magic I was designing, so it ended early. I'll join them and buy more time until Etna City arrives."

The real showdown with the Mage King would be fought while connected to the Artificial Commandments. Carisia only explained her own course of action.

It meant that she was entrusting the remaining tasks, including directing Hector and the Pope, to Orthes himself. Her habit of overworking people hadn't changed.

"Hector!"

"Got it."

"Let's go together. It seems like the time has come to stab the Mage King."

Hector laughed in vain. After meeting Orthes, he had always thought that he might cross swords with that friend for the rest of his life, but he had never imagined a future where he would fight the Mage King with Orthes.

But it was a much more appealing future than his fantasies.

"Right. The time has come to fulfill the purpose of the Knight Order's founding."

Then Orthes looked at the Pope. The divine rupture that had occurred due to Orthes overusing his eyes had subsided faster than expected. This was partly because Orthes was used to overworking his body, and partly because the cause of the overload was entirely his own.

If he closed his eyes and rested without seeing anything, there would be no more elements causing the overload, so he could attempt natural healing. But the Pope's divine rupture was different.

Until the point when he forcibly used the Holy Decree to occupy the Ten Commandments, he should still have been able to attempt natural healing.

However, the Mage King had invaded and plundered his Holy Decree technique. The Pope had to bear all the aftereffects of changing the subject of the technique and completely reversing the direction from the reverse of time to the progression.

Even with Orthes' eyes, he couldn't accurately measure his remaining life.

"Pope. How much time do you have left?"

"...I don't know. I think I have about an hour left."

"Is it okay if you die?"

A calm confirmation followed. The Pope nodded with a look that was hard to tell whether it was resignation or responsibility.

"Just as life with the Mage King's descent is meaningless, so death to eliminate him would be valuable."

Ha, a sigh escaped from Orthes' mouth. How easy would it have been if they had just said, 'Let's divide the Ten Towers?' 'Okay.' from the beginning.

"All attributes of magic are dismantled in the space inside that magic circle. It means that the magicians' attacks are virtually useless. But abilities other than magic are a different story. Your Holy Decree is needed."

Waiting for ten thousand years with the Mage King bound like this was not the right response. The Tower Masters' magic power might reach its limit at any time. Moreover, the Mage King had absorbed one of the Ten Commandments whole. There was even a

possibility that the amount of magic power recovery was higher than the consumption by the dimensional barrier.

Therefore, Orthes decided that he and Hector would attack the Mage King to directly reduce his existence time.

The Pope was an insurance policy. A rescue measure in case the two attackers were in danger due to the Mage King's counterattack, or a safety device in case the Mage King broke the attribute destruction seal technique with some mysterious trick.

"I will follow my brother's choice."

***

Carisia approached the Tower Masters. She was clearly nervous. The Ancient Elders had transmitted enough information through the Tower Master-only line while retreating.

The white-haired magician over there was the genuine monster who had defeated that ancient White Light. The 'Bastard of White Light' that Blasphemia had been tracking all along.

Only the White Light, who had already been killed by Carisia's hands, would know the exact identity, but he was a being who was both powerful enough to kill the White Light directly and harbored hatred for the magical society. If Carisia attacked any of the eight Tower Masters now, the Mage King would be released.

Then the world would be over as it was.

It was also not easy to mobilize the expeditionary force to strike Carisia. All the magicians in this place were supplying their magic power to the Ten Tower Masters.

The magic power they already possessed was exhausted, and they were enduring with the magic power of the entire expeditionary force and the desperate will of each Tower Master. There was not even a shred of leeway to open their mouths.

Carisia slowly walked into them. It was the point where the two squares in the magic circle constructed by the eight Tower Masters overlapped.

Slowly, she injected magic power.

The Tower Masters' burden was reduced. Their gazes turned to Carisia in bewilderment or shock.

Carisia coordinated the distribution of magic power at the vertex of the magic circle and added the attribute of light to repair the attribute destruction technique. Now the colorless magic power binding the Mage King had become visible to the eye.

It was originally transparent magic power, but its density was so high that visible light was refracted, making it look like glass.

"Let's go, old man!"

Orthes ran to the center where the Mage King was bound with Hector. The Pope gave them acceleration and returned the magic power consumed by Carisia with the technique of reversal.

'Damn it. All he did with this good ability was commit suicide by dragging the whole world in.'

If the Pope hadn't tried to reverse time, saying he would return the world to its proper form, they would be living happily ever after by now.

Orthes swallowed his complaints and swung his sword. It had been broken by the Mage King and reduced to half its original length, but Carisia had repaired it with magic of the steel attribute.

The bound Mage King did not seem to be able to use the power of literalization, at least not right now. The fact that the colorless magic power surrounding him had not disappeared was proof of that.

Hector and Orthes, the two men's blades turned towards the Mage King.

The Mage King offered no resistance. The sword penetrated the Mage King's body of letters with surprising ease.

And when Orthes' blade came out of the Mage King, his body was already beginning to reattach.

The same was true for where Hector had cut.

'Ordinary physical attacks don't work?'

He had expected it. Orthes immediately interfered with the letters that made up the Mage King's body. An operation to dilute the meaning by mixing the letters together.

Ah.

The Mage King made a sound.

There you are.

The moment Orthes interfered with the letters that made up the Mage King's body, the Mage King began to move. The mixed array had returned to its original state.

Kaga Gaga Gaga Gang!

The intangible chains that had been binding him were broken in an instant. The Mage King had already separated the attribute-less magic power that had lost all attributes by being mutually canceled, and returned it to its original state.

It was absurd. To return the magic power that had already been consumed by magic and lost its properties to its original form. It was no different from a magically achieved reversal of entropy.

The separated attribute magic powers gathered together with the same attributes and floated around the Mage King.

The materialized magic orbs revolved around the Mage King. A formation like a solar system centered on the Mage King. Then the Mage King raised the tip of his finger.

At that moment, the Pope's Holy Decree exploded. The nine magic orbs returned to magic power, and from there, they regressed further to chains. It was a trick that was possible because it interfered with the 'phenomenon' that the Mage King had created with magic, not the Mage King himself.

The Pope shouted with a stern face.

"He was waiting for you, brother! You must not let him find you!"

The Mage King repeated the magic power reversal he had performed without any warning. The exclusive technique that nine great magicians, including Carisia, had meticulously coordinated was scattered like a sandcastle.

"What the hell..."

A murmur of unknown origin echoed.

Where are you? I know what you want.

The Mage King's voice was directly conveyed to the will of the sentient beings in the surrounding space. Hector realized something from the Mage King's words.

Under the obvious fact that the Mage King was looking for Orthes, there was one more hidden.

'He didn't recognize Orthes even when he was right in front of him.'

No. It was more than that. Hadn't the Mage King been attacked by Orthes? Even after the first attack, the Mage King did not recognize Orthes' existence. The Mage King sensed Orthes on the second attack.

It was when he had interfered with the Mage King's body structure using technique overwriting.

He recognized his existence only after receiving an attack in a way that only Orthes could do. That's...

'The Mage King's senses can't detect Orthes?'

Chapter 205: Emergency Board Meeting (1)

Chapter 205: Emergency Board Meeting (1)

'He can't directly recognize Orthes. Therefore, he uses an indirect method of waiting for a special attack that only Orthes can use….'

Hector recalled Orthes' unique constitution. A void where magic power itself doesn't exist.

The current Mage King didn't look like he would have vision or hearing. If the Mage King's cognitive ability was based solely on 'magic power.'

Orthes was the only Other that acted as an unknown to the Mage King.

The problem was that the Mage King knew about that 'unknown' by some means and was trying to secure it.

The situation now was like that. He pretended to be caught in the Tower Masters' trap, and as soon as he grasped Orthes' existence, he restarted. Hector was reminded of a tropical carnivorous plant. The moment an insect brushed against its sensory organs, it would close its mouth and swallow it up.

The Mage King was waiting to deal with Orthes alone.

'Why Orthes of all people?'

That was the question in Hector's mind. Even if he couldn't sense magic power, he could still harm Orthes by using wide-area attack magic, but the Mage King hadn't even attempted an attack against Orthes.

He had only reached out, saying to come closer and that he would fulfill his desires.

Hector couldn't finish his reasoning. The Mage King's power swept around again. The Mage King broke the bondage once again, making the Pope's Holy Decree futile.

Orthes, who had analyzed the process of the Tower Masters' anti-Mage King binding magic being broken, couldn't help but laugh in vain. The Mage King hadn't used any advanced techniques to destroy the attribute-less fetters.

Rather, it was extremely simple. He had simply projected the infinite magic power emitted from the Ten Commandments Nokmok he was equipped with.

In fact, in a way, it was a technique that no one else could imitate. Even if the magic power flowing out from the Ten Commandments was infinite, the magician's maximum discharge of magic power couldn't be infinite either. Humans had a limit to the amount of magic power they could discharge at any given moment.

The Mage King was not bound by such common sense.

"We have no choice. Let's retreat!"

Orthes finished his judgment. They would be annihilated if they stayed like this. The difference in output was too extreme. At the very least, if all the Tower Masters, or even just Carisia, had the support of the Ten Commandments, it would be a fight they could barely manage.

First, Carisia listened to Orthes' analysis of the battle situation and began to retreat without hesitation. Then, the Tower Masters and the personnel of the former Ten Towers prepared to escape from the top of Nokmok. A hasty boarding of the dimensional exploration ship ensued.

"I sent a message to Etna City. I told them to change the coordinates of the teleport to Elysion."

"Then, Boss, how will we escape?"

The Pope opened his mouth with difficulty. The divine rupture had accelerated further due to the Holy Decree that had collapsed due to the Mage King's attack, and his voice was gradually losing strength.

"Proditor is, soon coming…."

It was as the Pope said. A golden door popped out in front of their eyes.

Proditor, who jumped out of the door, was shocked as soon as he saw the Mage King collapsing the world with slow steps.

"What is that—!!"

"The explanation is later, let's retreat for now!"

Orthes covered Proditor's gaping mouth and jumped into the door. He was holding Carisia's hand.

Orthes, Carisia, Proditor, the Pope.

And Hector. He kept the Mage King, who was devouring the very space that made up the world, in his eyes until the very end.

"What are you doing, old man! Get in here now!"

At the same time as Hector jumped in, the golden door hurriedly closed.

The Mage King began to move again. Towards the place where the Ten Commandments could be felt. Slowly, but surely.

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The Ten Commandments Front was chaos itself. The front line, which had moved precisely according to Orthes' plan, had pushed the Ten Towers even more fiercely after White Light's fall.

Lampades overturned Yellow Thunder, and Hector's knights destroyed the Silver Iron Magic Tower.

An emergency situation occurred with the Commander's emergency dispatch, but Niobe succeeded in contacting Black Dark's Kine and the Blasphemia group, and seized Black Dark in a coup.

The Divine Cult targeted the elemental Ten Towers widely spread in nature, such as Red Flame or Blue Water.

Among the cult's gods, there were many who bestowed the power to handle such pure elements. By using the Holy Decree to control the fire of the blacksmith god Polyphron or the Holy Decree to control the water of the sea god Pontomedon, they could attack the tower with the attribute that was the nemesis of the Ten Towers without regard for the magic power suppression of the Ten Commandments.

Ultimately, five places on the Ten Commandments Front were finalized as belonging to the Hydra Corporation alliance.

White Light, Yellow Thunder, Silver Iron, Black Dark, and Blue Water. The moment the Divine Cult tried to take advantage of the momentum to attack Red Flame, a tragic report was delivered from Nokmok.

Along with the dimensional exploration ship that had escaped from that place.

It was when the former Tower Masters were preparing for a battle to reclaim the Ten Commandments, and the tension was rising.

Suddenly, Yellow Thunder Magic Tower's broadcast echoed throughout the Ten Commandments Front.

"The current Yellow Thunder Tower Master Lampades, together with White Light Tower Master Carisia, Silver Iron Tower Master Hector, Blue Water Tower Master Knemon, and Black Dark Tower Master Niobe, jointly announce."

The magicians of the Ten Towers who had been dispatched to the extra-dimensional expeditionary force held their breath. What on earth had happened while they were away from this world?

"Come to Elysion to jointly confront the extra-dimensional being that has now descended on this world. That is all."

The Tower Masters, who now had to be called former, continued communication in confusion. They gathered information from the Ancient Elders, the only surviving former Nokmok Tower Master among the Tower Masters who had remained while they had set out for the extra-dimension.

"Who is this Lampades that he, not the monster of White Light, is issuing such a statement as the representative!?"

"...I heard about it in intelligence about Argyrion. There is a certain being they call the Adversary, a very dangerous ideologue with great intelligence. Perhaps the identity of the Adversary is this Lampades who has suddenly emerged."

"It is said that he was active in a magic tower under his own name before succeeding Yellow Thunder. How daring and blasphemous a provocation. A person who threatens social order was so confidently active!"

In fact, Lampades was simply reading aloud the statement hastily delivered by Orthes. However, thanks to this, the name Lampades echoed throughout the Ether Network, and it was no different from fulfilling his dream of leaving his name in the magical society.

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"I estimated the Mage King's path using Lampades' extra-dimensional radar."

Extra-dimensional collapse occurs wherever the Mage King heads. Therefore, the Mage King's whereabouts can be known by sensing the extra-dimensional encroachment rate near Nokmok.

Orthes calmly continued the briefing in front of the gathered personnel.

"My prediction that the Mage King would go to one of the two Ten Towers closest to Nokmok on the left and right, Bipung and Silver Iron, was accurate. The place the Mage King chose was Bipung. Accordingly, the hypothesis proposed by outside director Hector has become more persuasive."

Hector's hypothesis that 'the current Mage King can only sense the world through magic power.' As soon as Orthes heard this, he replied, 'Then he'll go to Bipung.'

This was because those who occupied the Silver Iron Magic Tower were Hector's knights. The Silver Iron Magic Tower had the Ten Commandments Silver Iron plus the knights, while the Bipung Magic Tower had the Ten Commandments Bipung plus the remaining Bipung magicians. Looking at the total amount of magic power, Bipung had more.

Originally, from the perspective of the infinite realm, the amount of magic power possessed by an individual human magician was so meaningless that it wouldn't even be a calculation error, but Orthes believed that the Mage King would sense even extremely slight differences.

And the hypothesis was proven.

"Accordingly, we have learned the place the Mage King will head to. The Mage King will eat up the Ten Commandments one by one, and if that happens, there is no hope for this world."

Lampades hesitated and raised his hand.

"Yes, outside director Lampades. Please speak."

"...Um, wasn't the one who descended on this world an 'extra-dimensional being'? The one who encroached on Argyrion?"

Orthes nodded.

"Didn't you say it was the Mage King just now?"

Lampades looked at Orthes with almost panic-stricken eyes. From Carisia's point of view, it was a scene that looked much friendlier than his usual fearful attitude towards Orthes.

In fact, it wasn't just the outside directors who were lost for words at Orthes' nonchalant declaration, but also the inside directors.

From their reaction, Orthes realized one thing. The magicians' reaction when the enemy was announced as 'Mage King.'

'The most effective response in this situation is…'

"The extra-dimensional being that has descended claims to be the Mage King when he encroached on Argyrion. Therefore, instead of a vague name like an extra-dimensional being, we are simply calling him the Mage King, which is what he called himself."

It wasn't a lie. It was natural for the Mage King to claim to be the Mage King.