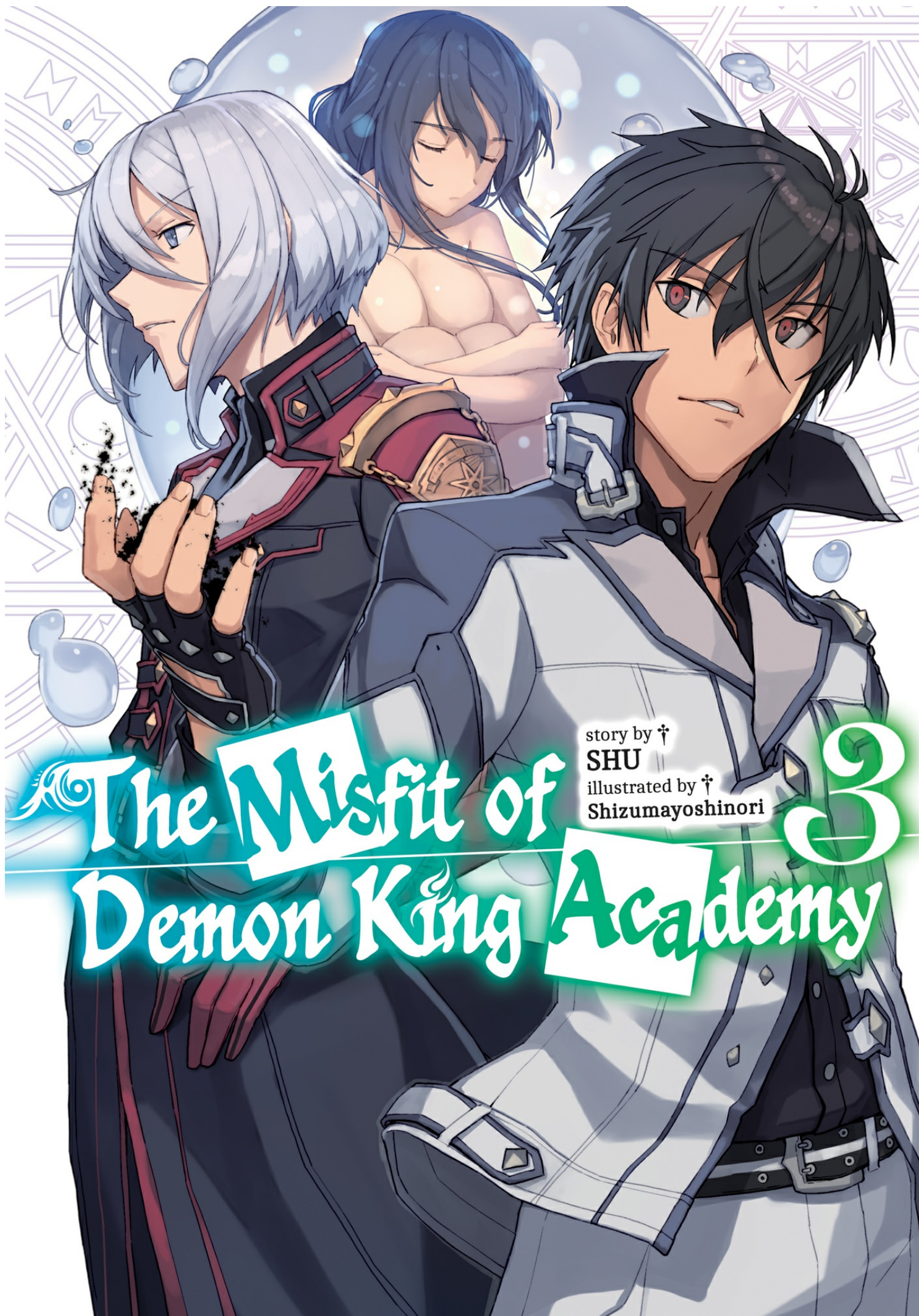


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The Misfit of Demon King Academy

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THE MISFIT OF DEMON KING ACADEMY

Keywords

Hero Academy

An academy in the human capital of Gairadite, dedicated to raising heroes. Doing so in the peaceful Magical Age is said to be for the development of the country.

Royal Capital of Gairadite

The capital of the Human Realm, located at the center of Azesion. The headquarters of the Demon King Subjugation Battalion formed two thousand years ago is located here.

Holy Sword

A type of magic item. Like demon swords, these blades possess their own magic and the ability to choose their owner. Created from the power of gods or spirits, they are immensely effective against demons.

Hero

Exceptionally strong human warriors chosen by holy swords. Hero Kanon was one such example, alongside others two thousand years ago.

Evansmana, the Sword of Three Races

A holy sword forged by human hands, in which a spirit chose to reside and to which the gods gave their blessing. Created for Hero Kanon to destroy the Demon King of Tyranny. A single swing of this blade is said to be able to cut the ties of fate.

Hero Kanon

The legendary hero with seven sources who, two thousand years ago, fought fierce battles with the Demon King. His whereabouts have been unknown since Anos sacrificed himself.



Designed by Suzuki Toru

§ Prologue: The Hero and the Human King

Two thousand years ago.

At the center of Azesion, the human continent, was the royal capital of Gairadite. The chosen one of the Holy Sword, Hero Kanon, resided here, alongside the headquarters of the Gairadite Demon King Subjugation Battalion with which he was affiliated.

As a military city fully equipped for withstanding demon attacks, Gairadite boasted the installation of demon-repelling magic items and circles throughout its locality. The average demon would face annihilation the moment they stepped foot inside, and those who survived would be promptly bombarded with spellfire.

However, there was one demon who dared to traverse the city brazenly.

This was none other than the Demon King of Tyranny, Anos Voldigoad. Completely unaffected as he advanced, he strolled through the powerful barriers as though he were trampling weeds, his gaze fixed on the two men before him.

One of those men was Hero Kanon. The other was Jerga, the king of the royal capital of Gairadite and commander of the Demon King Subjugation Battalion.

Jerga was around sixty years of age, but the vigor and magic he exuded were far greater than those of the average human. He was Kanon's mentor and a former hero himself.

Before Kanon was born, Jerga had fought countless wars against demons in order to protect Azesion. Even now he had retired from the front lines, he continued to deal heavy blows to opposing forces in his command of the Subjugation Battalion.

"I shall go, Kanon," said Jerga solemnly. "Not even the Demon King of Tyranny can evade Teo Triath from point-blank range. He will have to cease his advance. Use that opportunity to pierce us both with the Holy Sword."

“But master...”

“Do not hesitate, Kanon. Be brave. In any case, I haven’t long left in this world. If one old man’s life can pave the way to a peaceful world, consider it a small price to pay.”

A magic circle of holy light appeared at Jerga’s feet. It was the circle for Aske, a greater magic spell said to be usable only by heroes. The spell was capable of uniting the hearts of men, converting their thoughts and emotions into magic. This spell was the only way for humans to stand a chance against the magical superiority of demonkind.

“Sir Jerga... Sir Kanon... We entrust everything to you.”

“Please... Please put an end to the Demon King of Tyranny.”

“More... We must give Sir Jerga more of our hope.”

“Let there be peace in this world.”

“Please protect our future!”

The thoughts of the people began to overflow, filling the city with holy light that gathered around Jerga to aid him. This was the royal capital of Gairadite, the last remaining stronghold of mankind. Here and now, their prayers were more widespread and intense than ever before.

“This is the end, Demon King! Today is the day I shall avenge the lives of all you have taken from us!”

Enveloped in Aske, Jerga charged towards the Demon King of Tyranny. Behind him, Kanon readied the Holy Sword.

Demon King Anos deployed fifty magic gates around himself, from which Jio Graze hailed like a cloudburst. The black suns struck Jerga one after another, whittling his life away by the instant. Even with the power of Aske shielding the former hero, the Demon King’s power was too great.

“This much is nothing compared to the pain my wife and child bore when you slew them!”

The former hero continued to advance, pushing his way through the black flames roaring around him.

“Raaaaaaaaaargh!”

Jerga’s hand closed in on the Demon King of Tyranny. However...

“Guh... Ugh...”

Just as he was about to take one last step, the Demon King’s right arm pierced through Jerga’s abdomen. “Hmm. You fancy yourselves the only victims, king of humans, but you humans killed my mother as she bore me. Rising into being from a corpse was a rather terrible experience, if I do say so myself.”

Jerga laughed, spitting out a mouthful of blood. “You’ll be accompanying me to hell, Demon King of Tyranny.”

In his skewered state, Jerga reached for the Demon King. “*Teo Triath.*”

The thoughts and emotions gathered with Aske exploded into a blast of magic. Holy light engulfed the two of them.

“Now! Do it, Kano—”

Jerga’s words were cut short. His lungs had been crushed. The strength drained from his body.

“You... What did you do to our comrades...?”

Teo Triath had lacked force. The spell should have been strong enough to penetrate the Demon King’s defenses, but the will and hopes of the people were dwindling.

“Oh, nothing much. Just a little intimidation.”

In order to decrease Teo Triath’s strength, Anos had prioritized intimidating the battalion powering the spell, over eliminating Jerga. Humans had trivial resistance to magic, so he could have incapacitated every human in the city if he had wanted to—it would have been just as easy to kill them.

“You shall *never* be forgiven!”

“That’s enough. From what I can see, your source has reached its limit. You’ve fought with impressive longevity for a human, but you shall not revive again after your next death.”

With that, Anos crushed Jerga’s other lung, making Jerga let out a cry.

“Though it seems you don’t have long either way.”

His legs giving out beneath him, Jerga crumpled to the ground.

“Now, Kanon,” said the Demon King, turning to address the Hero, “don’t you think it’s about time for peace?”

Kanon glared at the Demon King without lowering his guard. “Who are you to talk, as the one behind all this chaos?”

“True, it may seem that way from your point of view, but I, too, wish for peace in Dilhade. As long as I can obtain that, I vow to spare Azesion.”

The Hero lifted his sword, pointing it in warning at the Demon King.

“If my proposal interests you, come to Delsgade,” Anos continued. “I have already extended invitations to the Great Spirit and the Goddess of Creation. If you don’t like what you hear, you can join forces with them to defeat me.”

Having completed his errand, the Demon King of Tyranny turned his back on Kanon. A magic circle for Gatom appeared at his feet, and he vanished without a trace.

“Master!” Kanon immediately rushed over to Jerga, casting Enchel to heal him. Fortunately, the wound left by the Demon King was somewhat shallow, so the human king recovered before Kanon’s eyes.

“Sorry for the trouble I’ve caused,” he said.

“Not at all.”

Accepting Kanon’s offered hand, Jerga rose to his feet. His wounds were healed, but his pained grimace remained.

“Master, should I return your source?”

Using the greater magic of the gods, Hero Kanon had acquired seven sources to stand up to the Demon King, which had been gathered by combining portions of sources from multiple people. Amongst them, Jerga had offered the majority of his source.

“That is no longer possible. Even using the Holy Sword, a source that has been severed can never be fully restored.”

“But it should recover it to some extent. Otherwise—”

“Kanon, this was a decision I made knowingly,” Jerga said, expressing his unshakable will. “I placed my faith in you. I believed and still do believe that you shall defeat the Demon King—and I’m not the only one. Everyone who entrusted their source to you shares that belief.”

Jerga continued weakly. “You are our only hope. You shall defeat the Demon King of Tyranny and save this world. You’re our shining sun in this world of darkness. Even if that destiny cannot be achieved today, the day will surely come for your holy sword to fulfill humanity’s greatest wish. I will not cast aside that hope for my own sake.”

Kanon looked down in silence. He contemplated something for several moments before eventually opening his mouth. “What do you think of all this, master?” he mumbled.

“Of what?”

“Of what the Demon King of Tyranny was saying just now.”

“His words hold no credibility. Demons kill humans by nature. Either we destroy them or they destroy us. There is no other way. Coexistence is unattainable.”

Kanon nodded, but there was something dark about his expression.

“You are kind, Kanon. But demons are not creatures that deserve your kindness. They are unholy beings that must be removed from this world. There is no need to feel guilt over killing them. Vanquishing them is their salvation. Have courage. You are the Hero, the one chosen by the Holy Sword.”

“Right,” Kanon replied, his expression bitter.

No sooner had he done so than Jerga staggered to his knees.

“Master?!”

“There’s no need to make a fuss. I’m tired, is all. Must be the age.”

Kanon watched him worriedly. “But—”

“I’m fine. What’s more important right now is for you to return and inform

everyone of the Demon King's escape. Go and ease their fears."

"All right. I'll return right away," Kanon replied hesitantly before sprinting towards the castle. Jerga watched as he left.

"It seems...I really have reached my limit."

With a trembling finger, Jerga drew the magic circle for Gatom. The streets of Gairadite disappeared before his eyes as everything around him turned white.

The next moment, he reappeared in a dimly lit room with several magic circles across the floor, walls, and ceiling. A large bubble of water floated at the center of the room, most likely sustained by the magic circles.

This water was no ordinary water. It was holy water, a shapeless magic item said to have been purified by the gods.

"Demons must be exterminated," Jerga muttered to himself as he stared at the holy bubble. "Even if I must turn this body of mine into magic..."

§ 1. One Peaceful Morning

I felt a delicate hand touch me in the darkness.

“Anos,” a familiar voice murmured. “Breakfast.”

The owner of the voice shook my body gently.

I slowly opened my eyes to see a girl with platinum-blond hair peering down at me. It was Misha. Long strands of her hair tickled the tip of my nose.



A pair of clear-blue eyes blinked twice. "Awake now?"

"Yes."

She smiled. "Good morning."

I got out of bed and drew a magic circle around my feet. "How come you're here so early, Misha?"

The circle activated, changing me from bottom to top out of my pajamas and into my uniform.

"I'm practicing making lunch today."

I see. So mom was teaching her how to make lunch as she went about making mine for the day.

"I also made breakfast."

"Then I'm looking forward to it."

Misha blinked in surprise.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Will you eat it?"

"Breakfast?"

Misha nodded, then pointed at herself. "Will you eat mine?"

"Is there no share for me?"

"Your mother made yours."

Ah, so that's what she meant.

"Then I can eat that."

"Okay," she replied in her usual flat tone. Her expression was neutral as she opened the door, but she somehow seemed disappointed.

"But if you're willing to trade with me, I'd like to eat the food you made."

She stared at me as though to figure out my true intentions. "Are you sure?"

"If you're okay with it."

Misha thought for a moment, then replied, “You like your mother’s cooking.”

“That may be true, but I rarely get to eat yours.”

She glanced down shyly, then looked back up at me, beaming. “You’re kind.”

“I’m capricious.”

Misha shook her head. “Did you know?”

“Know what?”

“How I was feeling.”

“You seemed a little disappointed.”

Misha cast her eyes downwards. “How embarrassing...”

“You’re always watching me closely”—in fact, there was probably no one better at seeing through me—“but my Eyes won’t lose to yours.”

Misha blinked in surprise, then giggled.

“Did I say something funny?”

“Take a guess.”

At what she was laughing at? Hmm.

“You’re...having fun?”

Misha smiled. “Look closer.”

Without confirming or denying my guess, Misha turned around and started off down the stairs. I followed behind her until we reached the living room.

Breakfast was ready on the table, but there were only two portions.

“Where are mom and dad?”

“Working.”

Come to think of it, dad was still lending a hand at the workshop that had helped him forge the adamantine sword. Apparently, after the Demon Sword Tournament, they had developed a newfound respect for him and had asked him to assist them more often, but he didn’t seem overly interested in their proposal.

“Mom too?”

“A customer requested a home visit for an appraisal. They live a ways away.”

So that’s why mom had left earlier than usual.

“She said to let you sleep in a little, since you’d be tired after the tournament.”

I wasn’t particularly tired, but that sounded like something mom would say.

“Shall we eat by ourselves, then?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

Misha and I each took a seat at the dining table, ready for breakfast. It was oddly quiet without my parents bouncing around.

After eating, we washed our dishes with magic and left the house, walking leisurely beside one another as we made our way to the Demon King Academy.

Of course, I could have used Gatom to get us there, but there was plenty of time before class and nothing to gain from rushing. It was the perfect opportunity for a steady stroll while enjoying the morning streetscape.

“Huh?”

As we were walking, we encountered a familiar face. The girl’s blonde hair was tied up in twintails, and she wore the black uniform of the Demon King Academy. It was Sasha. She was glaring at us with suspicion.

“Why are you walking to school with Misha?”

“Because we were together this morning.”

“I can see that much! Don’t brush me off just because you’re too lazy to answer.”

“Lunch,” Misha answered. “Anos’s mother was teaching me.”

“I see. Ah, right. You said you were learning how to cook. You could have told me you were going this morning.”

Sasha seemed displeased at being left out.

“I did.”

“What? When?”

“This morning. Before I left.”

Sasha paused to think for a moment. It seemed she couldn’t recall. “You weren’t there when I woke up, though.”

Misha shook her head. “That was the second time you woke up.”

“No way. Seriously?”

So in other words, she had fallen back asleep.

“Hmm. Not a morning person then, Sasha?”

“No one said that.”

I looked over at Misha, who nodded. “Not her strong suit.”

“I...I just have a little trouble getting out of bed, and I’m too sleepy to remember things!”

That excuse was only proving Misha’s point, wasn’t it?

“Wh-What’s with that triumphant look?”

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of. Being a late riser isn’t a life-ending impediment or anything.”

“Can you stop making it sound so grave?”

Hadn’t I just said it wasn’t anything to be ashamed of?

“Whatever. Let’s go already,” Sasha said, setting off down the street.

Misha hurried to catch up to her. “Are you mad?” she asked.

“Why would I be?”

“Because I went alone.”

“I’m not bothered by that. There’s no way I’d take a detour all the way to Anos’s house in the morning.”

Misha lowered her head in thought. “I won’t go anymore.”

“Why? I just said I’m fine with it. If you want to go, then go.”

Looking troubled, Misha fell silent. I burst into laughter beside her.

“What are you laughing at?!” Sasha snapped.

“That’s a lot of lies first thing in the morning, Sasha. If you wanted to come over, you should have just said so.”

“I... I said I didn’t want to go...” she mumbled, trailing off unintelligibly.

“Are you being stubborn because you know you can’t wake up for it anyway? Don’t worry. Your aversion to mornings is no match for me.”

“Um, what do you plan on doing?” she asked cautiously.

“I’ll wake you up myself.”

“Huh?” Sasha glowed beet red.

“You may specialize in falling back asleep, Sasha, but I’m not as gentle as Misha. You won’t be dozing off with me around,” I declared, smirking as I stared right at her.

“Ah...”

“What do you say?”

Sasha averted her gaze, unable to maintain eye contact. “Fine...” she responded weakly.

Hmm. Was struggling to get up in the morning really that embarrassing?

“Then you can come together next time,” I said to Misha, who nodded happily.

“But...isn’t it strange to have you come over and wake me just so we can go back to your house?” Sasha mumbled to herself.

“Morning,” a crisp voice suddenly called out. We turned to see Lay approaching us.

“Hey. What a coincidence,” I said.

Misha and Sasha also greeted him.

“Do the three of you always walk to school together?”

“No, we just bumped into each other today.”

Lay found a space alongside me. “Incidentally, do you know of any good

demon swords out there?”

“Hmm. Looking for a replacement for Initio?”

“It was broken quite superbly. I’m sure it can be fixed soon enough, but I’ll need to use another one in the meantime.”

It wasn’t as though he could get Sheila to act as his sword every time he needed one. Now, did I have a demon sword in the treasure vault that fit the bill?

“Oh! Good morning, everyone!” a voice called from afar. It was Misa, who was waving as she ran up to us. “It’s unusual to see you all walking to school together.”

“Yeah, we ran into each other by chance,” Lay said.

“Is that so? That must be nice, though—being able to go to school together like this, I mean. I’m always by myself in the mornings, and it gets a little lonely.”

“I didn’t take you for the companionable type.”

“Aha ha... Keep that a secret, okay?”

The two smiled at each other.

With that, we all walked to Delsgade together while enjoying the immeasurable peace.

§ 2. Educational Exchange

Demon King Academy Delsgade.

After walking through the open door of the second lecture hall, we made our way to our respective seats.

“Oh right, Lay. About what you mentioned before...”

Lay leaned back in his chair to look my way.

“Grant me some of your time after school today.”

“Are we going somewhere?”

“Somewhere secret, yes. You can have my demon sword.”

“Oooh. Then I’ll look forward to it.”

At the mention of my sword, some of the students began to whisper—specifically, the girls in the Anos Fan Union.

“Hey, did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“Lord Anos just said he’d take Lay to a secret location after school and give him his demon sword!”

“W-Wait, does that mean...?!”

“Lord Anos’s sword has become a demon sword!”

“A demon sword?! Awaaaah!”

“Sh-Should we inform his mother?”

“It might be a shock for her to hear something like that out of the blue.”

“R-Right, of course, but...”

Hmm. It seemed there was yet another baffling misunderstanding going on. I couldn’t allow them to report that to mom or else things would get out of hand.

“Ellen, Jessica.”

The two girls whose names I’d called flinched and looked my way.

“Yes, Lord Anos!”

“How can we help you?!”

I warned them in a gentle tone. “Keep it a secret from mom.”

“O-Of course.”

“I’ll guard this secret with my life!”

That should do it. Resolving the misunderstanding would take too much effort, but I could at least stop them from spreading the word. After all, what mom didn’t know, mom couldn’t jump to conclusions about.

“Oh my goodness, we were silenced!”

“So it must be true...”

Sasha shot me an exasperated glare from the desk beside mine.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing. I was just wondering if you enjoy digging your own grave.”

I chuckled. “There’s nothing to be concerned about.”

“Don’t come crawling to me when you find yourself in over your head later on.”

“Are you worried for me?”

“Y-You’re not worth worrying about...” Sasha muttered.

Just then, the bell rang, signaling the start of class. But no one entered the room.

“Strange,” Misha commented from the seat on my other side. “Ms. Emilia’s always on time.”

At that, Sasha seemed to remember something. “Hey, wasn’t it Ms. Emilia who attacked your mother on the day of the Demon Sword Tournament?”

“Correct.”

“What happened after that?”

I laughed dryly. “What do you think?”

Sasha drew back, horrified. “Stop it with that Demon King-like laugh...”

I was laughing completely normally, though. Besides, I *was* the Demon King.

“All right everyone, take your seats.”

A long-eared woman entered the classroom. Judging by the familiar black robes, she was a teacher of the academy.

“I believe this is my first time greeting this class. Hello, everyone, I am Meno Historia, homeroom teacher for class one of the third-year students. I’ll be your substitute for the time being.”

The classroom bustled with noise at her greeting.

“Excuse me, miss,” called a girl with her hand raised. “What happened to Ms. Emilia?”

“Ah. I haven’t heard the details either, but it seems she’s resigned from her position at the academy.”

The class instantly burst into chatter.

“Quit?!”

“But isn’t that a bit sudden?”

“Right? Normally a teacher says goodbye if they plan on leaving. Is she sick? Was she injured?”

“Hey, won’t that misfit get more and more arrogant without Ms. Emilia around?”

“Okay, that’s enough. Silence please!” Meno clapped her hands together. “I don’t know what the circumstances are, but she isn’t available for farewells. She left so abruptly, the academy was unable to find a replacement in time. Until one is secured, I shall be taking homeroom.”

“But, Ms. Meno, you just said you’re responsible for the third-year students.”

“How can you teach two classes at once?” cried the first-years, firing question

after question at the patient teacher.

“Ah. Teaching two classes at once won’t be possible, of course, but there really isn’t anyone else available. For the time being, I’ll be taking turns teaching one class while the other has a self-study day. Of course, I’ll be checking up on that class as well. But this should only go on for about a week.”

“So we’ll be getting a new teacher next week?”

“No. I don’t know if it’s any way related to Ms. Emilia, but Delsgade will be participating in an educational exchange next week.”

The students shuffled around in confusion. Apparently, this was the first time they’d heard of such a thing.

“Ms. Meno, what’s an educational exchange?”

“Put simply, an educational exchange is when you visit another academy to learn about things you otherwise wouldn’t at home.”

My peers were no more enlightened.

“Another academy?”

“The Demon King Academy is the best school in Dilhade, so there won’t be anything for us to learn elsewhere. There’s no benefit to an exchange like that, is there?”

Meno answered their questions one by one. “That’s right. That’s why Delsgade has never had an educational exchange with another school before. But this time, we’ll be visiting an academy outside of Dilhade.”

“Outside Dilhade? Where?”

“Azesion. We’ve been discussing for some time now whether such an exchange would be possible. The Hero Academy has finally completed their preparations to accept our offer, which is why this exchange is rather sudden.”

“Azesion, as in *that* Azesion? We’re going to a human academy?”

“What’s a hero? Have you ever met one?”

“Nope, it doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Wasn’t the Hero one of the enemies the Demon King of Tyranny fought

against? Back when demons and humans were at war with each other, demons were led by the Demon King, while humans were led by the Hero.”

“Ah, gotcha. But aren’t humans meant to be weak? This Hero would have had to be strong, right?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Hmm. It seemed there were records of heroes left, but they weren’t well known across Dilhade.

The wall I’d created had cut off all communication with races other than our own. As a result, all fighting had ceased, and war had become a thing of the past. The demons of today did know of the war against humans two thousand years ago, but that was about it. No one knew any of the details.

Still, considering everything that had happened until now, this sudden educational exchange—and the diminishment of the Hero’s significance to demonkind—could be the work of Avos Dilhevia. I’d have to check in with Melheis later.

“You’ve all been slacking off on your studies, haven’t you? Heroes were definitely mentioned in your history class, albeit briefly. I guess it’s time for a recap.”

Meno turned to the blackboard, on which she wrote the words “Asura” and “The Seven Classes.”

“Heroes were said to have developed their own military magic during the Great War, in the form of a spell called Asura. It works in the same way as Gyze, with seven different classes.” Meno looked around the class. “Okay, who remembers all of them?”

No one raised their hand. I looked over at Misha, who piped up in a low voice, “We haven’t learned that yet.”

“Right. Isn’t this a third-year topic?” Sasha hissed.

Hmm. It seemed this teacher was quite forgetful. I decided to raise my hand.

“The Chosen, Wiseman, Mage, Healer, Summoner, Cavalier, and Shaman. Asura is a spell that allocates people to one of these seven classes,” I answered.

Meno looked delighted. “That’s correct! Can you tell me the difference between Asura and Gyze?”

“They’re both military spells, but the greatest difference is with the flow of magic. Gyze splits the King’s magic amongst their subordinates, whereas Asura gathers the subordinates’ magic for the Chosen. Gyze was developed with defense in mind to construct a castle, while Asura was developed to capture that castle.”

For a race inferior to demonkind in every regard, humans’ only hope of victory was to take down the top—to gather the power of many for the Hero to take down the Demon King. Demons were led by force, so the loss of their commander would reduce their troops into a disorderly mob.

“But the true worth of Asura doesn’t end there. By using Aske, the will of a caster’s comrades can be transformed into magic, giving humans enough power to rival demonkind.”

“That’s correct! At least one of you’s kept up with their studies! Aske is mind magic, a type of magic that isn’t taught at the Demon King Academy. In that regard, I believe this exchange will prove worthwhile to Delsgade.”

Admittedly, something about all this did strike me as odd. Why would humans and demons still teach their descendants about the military magic they had developed to defeat one another two thousand years ago?

“That said, Asura and Aske are spells that can only be performed by heroes, so we won’t be learning the magic itself. Instead, the goal will be to study the spell formulae and peer deeper into the abyss. I believe these spells could be someday adapted into something usable by demons, so the goal of this exchange will be to...” Meno trailed off midsentence, a questioning look crossing on her face. “Huh? Come to think of it, I don’t think you’ve been taught Aske yet,” she said to herself, finally realizing her mistake.

“Miss, it’s still too early for first-year students to learn about Asura. We only just did practical classes with Gyze,” a student pointed out.

“Ah!” Meno gasped. “I see, I see. Sorry, I forgot you aren’t third-years!”

As soon as she’d said that, another puzzled look came across her face. She

turned to stare at me. “How come you know about Asura, then?” she asked. “Even the third-year students haven’t been taught about Aske yet.”

“Oh, I’ve just seen a lifetime’s worth of these spells. While I have your attention, I should mention that there’s a flaw in your explanation, Meno.”

I drew a magic circle on the spot, casting a spell. The complex spell formula activated, connecting Meno, Misha, Sasha, and me with a magic link.

“Huh?” Meno was dumbstruck. “No way... This... Isn’t this Asura?”

She must have seen the spell at the Hero Academy to recognize it so quickly.

“You don’t have to be a hero to use it. Demons are just more suited to Gyze.”

Meno was lost for words, her mind unable to keep up with the scene before her. She could only gape with a vacant stare.

§ 3. The Demon King's Self-Study

"Lord Anos is as amazing as ever! Talk about *dreamy*!" came the squeals of the delighted fan union.

"Yep! If our lord teaches us hero magic, we won't even have to go on the exchange!"

"Oh, but if we do go, we'll all be staying in Azesion together. That means we might be able to sleep in the same place, right?"

"What? Y-You mean...you plan on attacking Lord Anos in his sleep?!"

"No way! As if I could do something so embarrassing!"

"Then what?"

"We'll be sleeping under the same roof as him, right? That means we'll all be sleeping together—in other words, we'll all be sleeping in his arms!"

"Those delusions of yours are far more embarrassing than just taking your chances."

Finally recovering her thoughts, Meno looked at the insignia on my uniform. "I see. So you're the misfit. I thought you seemed familiar. You're Anos Voldigoad, the victor of the Demon Sword Tournament."

"That I am."

"So the rumors are true. I couldn't believe my eyes just now."

Despite having heard of it already, Meno was shocked in the face of my strength. Well, I couldn't imagine Emilia telling the other teachers the truth about me. Perhaps Meno hadn't known what to believe. Judging from this reaction, she wasn't as zealous of a Royalist as Emilia either.

"Let's leave the hero magic talk at that," she said, retaking control of the class. "As I said before, you'll all be heading to the Hero Academy in Gairadite next week, along with my third-year class. The owls will deliver a list of the things you need to your homes today, so make sure to look it over and pack

everything you need! It's a little early, but I'm going to be teaching the third-years today, so you'll be studying by yourselves. Don't make too much noise, or you'll disrupt the other classes."

Meno headed for the door, but just before she left the classroom, she seemed to remember something. "Oh, that's right," she said, turning back to us. "While we're over there, we'll likely be holding team exams as a practical class on the use of Asura and Gyze. Although this is a purely educational exchange, our reputation as the best school in Dilhade is at stake. Defeat is unacceptable." Meno winked at us playfully. "That said, the older students will demonstrate the pride of the Demon King Academy for us, so the only thing you need to focus on is not making fools of yourselves. Now get studying!"

Having given her final warning, Meno took her leave.

"Hmm. Self-study, is it?"

Sasha shot a glare in my direction. "You're not planning on slacking off, are you?"

"Of course not. I wouldn't bother coming to class at all if that were the case." I rose to my feet. "You four, come with me."

"Sure," Lay said.

"What are we doing?" Misha asked curiously.

"Since we're to study by ourselves, I may as well teach you all how to use your powers." I extended my hand, which Misha took in her own. Once Sasha, Misa, and Lay had linked their hands with us, I cast Gatom, transporting us all to the enchanted forest.

This was the best place to get down to business. No matter the destruction we wreaked, the magic in the land would regenerate the forest in no time at all.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Sasha muttered skeptically. "Why are we here?"

"You're all going to fight me at once."

She looked at me coldly. "You can't be serious."

"I told you I'd teach you how to use your powers. It'll prepare you for the

upcoming exams.”

“About that... Can’t you take them all on alone?”

“I shan’t deny it.”

Sasha looked mystified.

“I learned something in the Demon Sword Tournament.”

Misha stared at me. “What was it?”

“There’s meaning in giving it your all. Even if the outcome is insignificant, the act of doing your best is priceless. However reachable the goal may be, run towards it with all your might. That is how you create irreplaceable memories.”

“Spare us that motivational crap when your power’s so damn preposterous,” Sasha muttered.

Misa laughed weakly. “It’s normally however *unreachable* the goal may be, right?”

“I get what Anos is trying to say,” Lay remarked.

“I knew you’d understand me.”

He beamed.

“It’s a good thing,” Misha said. “I’ll do my best.”

I looked over at Misa questioningly.

“Of course, I’ll do my best too!” she agreed.

“Sasha?”

“All right, all right. I’ll do it. Happy?”

I chuckled, turned my back on the four of them, and walked away. “I’m glad to have such understanding followers.”

I turned back to Sasha and drew a single magic circle. Her eyes widened at the sight of it.

“Hey, isn’t that...? Don’t tell me...”

“Defend yourself effectively, or you may end up dead.”

A black sun shot towards her, leaving a blazing trail of light. She promptly cast Fless to launch herself upwards, evading the spell at the last moment. The trees behind her were burnt to a crisp. Without pausing for breath, I drew the next magic circle.

“H-Hold on a second! You’re overdoing it! Aren’t we just supposed to be studying?!”

“What kind of study session doesn’t risk one’s life?”

“What are you talking about?! Are you stupid?!”

“Listen up, Sasha. A flame burns the brightest right before it goes out. Similarly, the source releases the most magic when it’s in danger of elimination. This is the sure path to the abyss of magic for those studying it.”

I fired another Jio Graze, which she barely evaded. All that remained of the land behind her was an already spell-scorched wasteland.

“There’s no point in having stronger magic if I’m dead!” she yelled.

“Of course. But the light of a dying flame can overcome the darkness itself.”

In other words...

“Use your power when you’re on the brink of death and save yourself. Then the next time your life is in danger, your power will be even greater.”

It was the lack of danger in this era that had weakened demonkind. Dying without actual death was crucial to increasing one’s power and drawing nearer to the abyss.

I created another magic circle to put my advice into practice.

“Argh! Stop being so reckless!”

“You can do it.”

“There’s no way.”

“You can. Do you trust me, Sasha?”

She stared back at me in silence.

“Use your Magic Eyes of Destruction. They’re the ultimate form of anti-magic.

Recall how you used them to resist Eugo La Raviaz's time magic."

Another Jio Graze shot forth. The flames of the black sun roared towards Sasha, drawing a dazzling trail of light.

"Ugh, you're so... Ah!" Sasha cast a barrier before herself, then tried to take down the incoming fireball. "It'll be all your fault if I die!"

Jio Graze burned through the barrier in an instant, but Sasha's Eyes diminished the black sun's momentum. The fireball grew smaller and smaller as its black flames fizzled away, but she couldn't stop the projectile entirely. Jio Graze crashed straight into Sasha.

"Eeeeeek!"

Sasha was engulfed in obsidian flames and was blasted into the forest.

"Is she all right?" Misa asked worriedly.

"She's alive," Misha replied.

Having been used in desperation, Sasha's Magic Eyes of Destruction had successfully, albeit imperfectly, lessened Jio Graze's impact. The power of the Phoenix Mantle would prevent her death.

"I'd say we should fight back," Lay piped up, "but I still don't have a sword."

"Leave it to me," Misha said. She immediately cast Iris to create a demon sword of ice.

"Thanks." Lay took the sword and propelled himself towards me. "Here I come, Anos!"

"How unfortunate," I said. I caught the sword as it came swinging down and crushed the blade with my grip. The ice shattered into pieces. "Your craftsmanship is lacking, Misha. When creating a rock, don't merely create a rock. Create the atoms that form the rock. Think carefully about the composition of the sword and look deeper into the abyss."

After saying that, I thrust my fist at Lay. He tried to counter it with his bare hands.

"Hah!"

For a moment, it appeared as though he'd succeeded. But I soon forced his hand away with pure physical strength, landing my next punch to his solar plexus.

He was winded.

"Lay, you need to work on how you handle yourself without a weapon. Sword in hand, you may be near undefeatable, but without one, you're full of openings."

"Even so, it feels like you've gotten way stronger since the last time we fought," he muttered.

"Don't expect me to remain anchored in one place forever. If you wish to catch up, you'd better get running."

Lay crumbled over on the spot. A drop of water fell on his cheek.

But the water didn't stop there. Another drop fell, then another. It was raining, and Misa was nowhere to be seen. The enchanted forest was now blanketed in a downpour of Fuska.

"Don't bother showing me the same spell twice—even if it is spirit magic." I stepped forward and pinched a raindrop.

"Eek!" Misa yelped, reverting to her normal form.

"Misa, you don't have much strength to begin with. But the weak have their own ways of fighting. Use your head, and you'll make better use of your spirit magic."

I overpowered her with the sheer force of my magic, knocking her out in an instant.

"Anos."

At the sound of my name, I turned to see the enormous ice castle Misha had crafted.

"One more time," she requested.

"Very well."

I used Iris to create an opposing Demon King Castle, and with a flick of the

wrist, the castle floated up into the sky.

“Try me.”

I pointed forward, and the Demon King Castle shot forth. Misha held out her hand to do the same for her ice castle. The two great castles picked up speed before colliding violently in midfield, sending rocky debris raining down around us. A cloud of dust cloaked the area.

Slowly but surely, the haze of dust cleared, revealing my castle floating lonely in the sky above. The ice castle had been reduced to rubble.

“Not quite.”

I walked towards Misha, who collapsed, unconscious. She must have poured all of her unspent magic into Iris.

“Hmm. That was an admirable effort.”

I drew a magic circle and cast Ei Chael over my fallen comrades, who opened their eyes and slowly got to their feet. Their minds were still dazed, but I lent them a hand by using Gyze to replace the magic they had consumed.

“Now, let us continue. I’ll revive you as many times as necessary until our study session is over.”

§ 4. Siegesta, the Sword of Intent

After a day of intense but productive self-study, Lay and I visited the treasure vault in the dungeon beneath Delsgade.

Lay looked around at the array of demon swords and magic items lining the vault, then turned to me with wide eyes. “Are all of these yours, Anos?”

“They’re trinkets I collected two thousand years ago.”

“Wow... You seem more like the Demon King of Tyranny by the day,” Lay remarked, distracted by the demon swords around him. He seemed far more interested in the swords than in the Demon King from two thousand years ago.

“Pick whichever you like.”

Lay scrutinized the demon swords in turn, picking each of them up to analyze them. Each one was a genuine artifact of the Mythical Age, but it was hard to say if any were as good of a fit as Initio had been.

Initio was a fine blade, but its ability wasn’t actually all that powerful. Although the sword was capable of cutting through spell formulae, it wasn’t able to negate every type of spell without exception—the wielder had to cut each formula by means of their own skill.

For example, if a large number of spells were fired in a single burst, each one had to be sliced apart individually. The complexity of the spell also played a part, like when Misa had managed to cut through the complex formula of Je Grade. The more redundantly complex the spell, the greater the difficulty of negating it, requiring the wielder of the sword to have sharp Eyes and a rich knowledge of the intricacies of spell formulae.

And while Initio was capable of cutting through all types of wards and barriers, the sharpness of the blade itself was mediocre. The sword’s power was highly dependent on the wielder, making it an almighty blade in the hands of the extraordinarily gifted Lay—a blade capable of slicing through the demon swords of his opponents in the Demon Sword Tournament.

For Lay, who struggled at any magic unrelated to swords, Initio's magic-disabling ability was the perfect match.

"Hm?" Lay's gaze faltered on a single demon sword in the corner of the vault. "May I?" he asked.

"Be my guest."

He drew the sword from its sheath. The dazzling silver blade gleamed in his grip. "It's nice," he murmured.

Hmm. So he'd zeroed in on that one. What a curious twist of fate.

"That's Siegsesta, the Sword of Intent—a rather tricky demon sword to handle." I used Iris to create a stone statue for Lay to test the sword against. "Try it out."

Lay nodded and took a step forward, swinging Siegsesta down at lightning speed. "Hah!"

The blade passed straight through the center of the stone statue as if to slice it in two. But the statue was unscathed. There wasn't so much as a scratch on it.

"Wow." Lay chuckled in amusement.

"The magic within Siegsesta allows its blade to transform freely. But that freedom can be temperamental. Single-minded focus is required for the blade to cut anything, or else it's as good as a blunt weapon."

The faintest stray thought would prevent the Sword of Intent from displaying its true worth. Only with the complete focus of one's mind, heart, body, and magic would Siegsesta transform at one's will.

Of course, that was easier said than done. Achieving unwavering concentration was no easy feat—especially on the battlefield, where the slightest lapse in focus could spell death. Preparing oneself for an opponent's attack simply wasn't enough.

"Can you use this sword?" Lay asked me.

"I can," I admitted, "but in my case, I have to force it into submission. To the extent of my knowledge, there has only been one person ever to master it."

“I see. I’d love to face that person someday. Oh, but if their sword is here, you’ve probably defeated them already.”

I chuckled. “No, I was the one who gave him the sword. He said he would reincarnate after me, so he must have returned it before then out of loyalty.”

Two thousand years ago, the Sword of Intent had been the favored sword of Shin, my right-hand man.

“You may be able to master it,” I told Lay.

“What makes you think that?”

“You’re much like him.”

Lay smiled brightly. “You think that person reincarnated as me?”

“I can’t say for sure. What do you think?”

Lay concentrated his mind as he thrust Siegesta forward. “I do sometimes feel like I’ve lived in another era, but I don’t have any memories of it.”

That was to be expected.

“Perhaps you’ll recall something if you master that sword.”

“You think?”

“The Sword of Intent can transform at the will of its wielder, which leads to the feelings of its former owner being contained like memories within it. It wouldn’t be odd for someone with the same source to resonate with such feelings.”

Perhaps Shin had left the Sword of Intent here in anticipation of his reincarnated self obtaining it once again.

“Either way, knowing your past life wouldn’t change anything in the present. There’s no particular need for you to remember anything,” I said.

“Right. But I’d like to go with this sword anyway.”

“You don’t want any of the others?”

“I’ve taken a liking to this one.”

So he was drawn to the trickiest demon sword in the room. He truly

resembled Shin in that regard.

“Then let’s head back.”

We left the treasure vault. Once we’d reached the surface and parted ways, I headed for the union tower of the Anos Fan Union. It was almost time for my meeting with Melheis.

I had just entered the tower and was making my way up the stairs when I heard some familiar voices coming from the second floor.

“If anyone has any opinions on the lyrics for *Lord Anos Cheer Song No. Three*, please speak up.”

“Yes! This time, I think we should put in some words by Lord Anos himself!”

“What kind of words might those be?”

“You know, like when he said, ‘Did you think slicing through a mountain meant that you could slice through my skull?’ during demon sword training.”

“Ooh, that one’s nice. Let’s use it!”

“It’s like a paradox, right? A sword that split a mountain *should* be able to slice through a skull, but that logic doesn’t apply for Lord Anos. The two contradict each other, which is exactly what we’re going for, yes?”

“Precisely! We’ll go with that!”

“Okay, so how can we turn that into lyrics that *scream* Lord Anos?”

The fan union girls pondered deeply. They seemed to be struggling for ideas until one member eventually spoke up.

““Did you think a kiss meant we were dating?””

The other girls shrieked in excitement.

“Oh my! Lord Anos is such a brute! But that’s good—brutes are hot! And Lord Anos would totally say that!”

I certainly would not.

“Well, then how about this? ‘That I sought your heart from a one-night stand?’”

“Eek! Savage! I would just *die* to have him say that to me!”

““Did you think it okay to meet me today and that I wasn’t after only your body?””

“It burns! You’re too direct, Lord Anos! What are you thinking of doing in the middle of the day?!”

“Oh, how about this? ‘Did you think “I love you” meant we’d be married?”

“Nothing makes sense anymore! He’s so mysterious, my head’s going to explode!”

“And for the last line, we can use this: ‘That you were no longer mine because I cast you aside?’”

“Yees, I want to be cast aside! Please, Lord Anos, no more! If you say such things to me, I’ll...I’ll happily be your plaything! You’re so mean...”

Hmm. What exactly was going on here?

“These lines are great. They form a complete story, don’t they?”

“Yep, I think so too. Let’s make *Lord Anos Cheer Song No. Three* a heart-wrenching love song!”

“Wait a minute. A love song isn’t a cheer song, is it? Would we be able to sing this while Lord Anos is fighting?”

“Oh, right.”

“It would be weird, wouldn’t it...?”

“How about we think of it like this? Lord Anos is so strong, the battle is a trivial matter compared to the night of burning love that awaits him. The song can express his innermost desire for the one he seeks!”

Silence fell over the room.

The next moment—

“Y-You’re a genius! It’s like you’ve seen straight into Lord Anos’s heart!”

She had not.

“Hee hee... Who says it can’t be a love song just because it’s a cheer song?”

High-pitched squeals echoed through the building.

Hmm. Perhaps it would be best to pretend I hadn't heard anything. At least they seemed to be enjoying themselves. Besides, Melheis's report was of much greater importance.

And so, I continued my climb of the union tower.

§ 5. The Mystery of the Hero Academy

Waiting for me on the top floor was a white-bearded old man—Melheis Boran of the Seven Demon Elders.

He kneeled before me, his head bowed. “I have awaited your arrival, my liege.”

“How are Gaios and Ydol?”

“The resurrections were successful. As you suspected, their sources and bodies had been taken over two thousand years ago by an assailant.”

They’d experienced the same as Ivis, then. That considered, I had no doubt the remaining Demon Elders were in a similar state.

“Three of the Seven Demon Elders are now on our side,” Ivis said. “We can use our influence to support the Unitarian movement if you so wish, but...”

Avos Dilhevia remained blissfully unaware that Ivis Necron was still alive, which made Melheis, Gaios, and Ydol the only Demon Elders that could move openly as my followers. The three remaining Demon Elders were still on the other side. Politically speaking, the Unitarians and the Royalists were now equally matched. This made it possible to keep those under Avos Dilhevia’s control in check. However...

“You can leave things the way they are. A change of heart from those in charge won’t change the views of demon society. One wrong move could split Dilhade in two.”

Unitarians and hybrids were only keeping quiet because royalty held the majority of the power. If the balance tipped, the Unitarians would put up a greater fight, risking the emergence of extremists like Emilia.

The easy solution would be for me to exert control, but power was no longer all that mattered in this era. How many Royalists would I have to kill to silence them? Even Avos Dilhevia would think twice if I unified demonkind with so much bloodshed, but his escape could one day return to bite me.

Of course, I had no intention of losing, but several thousand years more on top of the two thousand Avos had already spent preparing his schemes would only make those schemes more bothersome. For now, the safest plan of action was to go along with his expectations. If Avos believed things were going his way, he was inevitably bound to reveal himself. I could just bring him down then.

“Understood. Also, I have one question regarding this incident.”

“You must be wondering why your source wasn’t taken over like the other Elders’.”

Melheis nodded seriously. “The other Demon Elders had their sources fused, while I was merely restrained by a demon sword shackle. Could there be a reason for that?”

“Perhaps he thought I’d see through him if he used the same trick twice. That, or he didn’t have enough pawns on hand to fuse.”

“So the culprit may not have many subordinates?”

“If he were to take over your source, he’d want a trusted subordinate in charge of you. He may have countless pawns at hand but not as many confidants.”

If my assessment were correct, only three of his confidants remained—those in control of the three Demon Elders.

“That, or he wants me to believe that there are only three pawns left.”

Avos Dilhevia was no fool. He was extremely cautious, having set up layer upon layer of traps and waited patiently for me to fall into one.

“I, too, have a question for you, Melheis. I heard that you aren’t the leader of the Unitarians.”

Melheis bowed in reverence. “As expected of my liege. To think you knew as much already.”

“Who is it?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know either. Of course, it would be completely natural for a royal to conceal their true identity. Anyone of demon lord status or thereabouts

would be stripped of their power if they were to be discovered, which would be just as unfavorable for the Unitarians.”

This was a valid reason to hide one’s identity—but being able to do so was precisely what made it the perfect position for a fraudulent Demon King to conceal themselves in.

“Are the Unitarians led by the movement’s founder?” I asked.

“My research shows that to be the case. I have tried looking into their identity, but all traces of their magic have been erased, and I was unable to track them down. This is what led me to believe that they were a fellow demon of the Mythical Era.”

Demons lived long lives. Though that length differed depending on lineage and heritage, the average demon life spanned around three hundred years. The Seven Demon Elders I had created possessed longer life spans for the purpose of preserving our species, but other powerful demons of the Mythical Age were capable of extending their life spans using magic. A handful of them were equally capable of reaching two thousand years of age—and those who couldn’t were able to reincarnate if they so wished.

It was possible that one of the demons close to me two thousand years ago had grown tired of the current state of Dilhade, which had led them to establish the Unitarians.

“But if that were the case, my liege, they should have stepped forward upon your resurrection,” Melheis surmised.

A demon from two thousand years ago wouldn’t be able to ignore the reappearance of the Demon King of Tyranny. It was reasonable to assume they would at least emerge to confirm I was real.

“There must be a reason they can’t reveal themselves to me.”

“That seems the most likely answer.”

Based on the events of the Demon Sword Tournament, the masked man that had sneaked inside Azesith could be the leader of the Unitarians. That, or Avos Dilhevia, or one of his followers.

“I have one more question. What do you know about the Gairadite Hero Academy?” I asked.

Melheis’s expression changed. “Why do you ask?”

“We’re to head there on an educational exchange, but the academy became ready to receive us on exceptionally short notice. Something’s off about it all.”

“I cannot say if the Hero Academy is under Avos Dilhevia’s control, but there have been no signs of demon control over Azesion thus far,” Melheis said. “However, I must advise that you remain wary of them. As a former enemy, I have already conducted inquiries involving Gairadite. The human land is peaceful and free of war now, but ten percent of Gairadite’s—no, of *Azesion’s* total tax yields are being funneled into the Hero Academy.”

Ten percent of tax revenue all for a single academy. That was an extraordinary amount of funding.

“Why was the Hero Academy created?” I asked.

“Their official objective is to train future heroes in beneficial subjects, such as swords and magic. Those who graduate from the Hero Academy serve Azesion by contributing to the development of the nation.”

So they were like the demon lords of Dilhade.

“Nevertheless,” Melheis continued, “there’s something abnormal about the place. There’s a selective class there that takes up the majority of the budget within the institution. They call it the ‘Jerga-Kanon,’ but I found no further details no matter how much I investigated.”

Hmm. The Jerga-Kanon, huh? It had no doubt taken its name from the two great Heroes of the Mythical Age, who were probably now considered legends.

“‘Hero’ is a term that once referred to the illustrious warriors of the Great War. Unlike two thousand years ago, when the Demon King governed demonkind, there should be no need for such figures in an era of peace. It would be one thing if their power were being used for the development of the nation, but—”

“So this isn’t a purely educational institution,” I concluded.

Melheis nodded. “From my understanding, the Jerga-Kanon is a class for reincarnated heroes. Whether Avos Dilhevia is related or not, you should exercise caution.”

So the humans were also plotting something. Well, they were inferior when it came to magic, so they had to make up for it somehow—even if that meant they tended to be far more devious than any demon. Some things never changed.

“Human lives are fleeting,” I replied. “If these humans harbor any reason to antagonize demonkind after all these years, it’ll be the fault of those reincarnated heroes and the grudges that haunt them.”

That said, Kanon and I had made peace when I constructed the walls between the realms. I couldn’t imagine him intentionally leaving behind a legacy of resentment. Was someone other than Kanon behind all this?

“I do not know the reason,” Melheis responded. “It isn’t clear whether there even are any reincarnated heroes with memories of two thousand years ago. As my liege stated, their life spans are short. A hero from two thousand years ago would have reincarnated multiple times by now.”

The results of Syrica varied depending on a myriad of circumstances, but in general, the time it took to reincarnate was directly related to one’s power and life span. Humans lived for less time, but reincarnated faster than demons. The two thousand years I had taken to return wasn’t an unusual time span for a demon reincarnation.

“Delsgade has had some interaction with Gairadite and the Hero Academy in recent years, and they’ve never shown any particular hostility towards demonkind.”

This information meant nothing, really. If they really were planning to start a war, they wouldn’t be so blatant about it—especially around Melheis and the other Demon Elders, who represented demonkind.

“Then I’ll investigate the Hero Academy myself,” I said. “I doubt they’ll be expecting the Demon King of Tyranny to be amongst the students visiting their school.”

“Indeed.”

“Continue to keep an eye on the other Demon Elders in Dilhade. Report to me if anything happens. I will return right away.”

“As you wish, my liege.”

I turned my back and left the union tower.

The Jerga-Kanon, huh? Memories or no memories, it sure would be nice to run into Kanon someday.

§ 6. Gairadite Expedition Exam

One week later.

The students of Delsgade had gathered in the second lecture hall, laden with bags upon bags of luggage. There were weapons, magic items, large leather bags of food and clothes, water, and more. My peers had prepared for the long journey ahead of them.

The bell for the beginning of class chimed, and an owl flew in through the window.

“Good morning, everyone,” it said in Meno’s voice. She was using the owl as a medium to speak to us. “Today’s the day we leave for the educational exchange in Azesion. Our destination is the royal capital of Gairadite. As I explained in advance, the Demon King Academy will not be leading you on this expedition. The third-year students are familiar with such excursions already, but I shall explain things once more for our first-years.”

There was probably another owl in the third-year classroom projecting Meno’s voice at the same time.

“At Delsgade, barely any of the expeditions are led by faculty members. As students aiming to become demon lords, you are expected to reach the destination without guidance. Oh, but you are free to assist your fellow students.”

Hmm. So reaching the destination was a part of the class.

“You will encounter many obstacles on the road to Azesion. If you wish to go by sea, you must cross the Elugar Strait, and if you wish to go by land, you may either cross the Deltest Mountains or take a detour through the Tola Forest. You can also choose to fly there, but the magic field in the skies above Azesion is highly unstable, so it won’t be an easy task.”

Not only was this a test of route knowledge, but it was also a test of one’s judgment in selecting the best route for one’s abilities.

“Azesion is unlike Dilhade. You’ll soon experience things you’ve never seen before. The goal of this expedition is for you to learn to handle the unknown and educate yourselves beyond what is taught at the academy.”

This sounded like a rather interesting endeavor compared to our other classes until now. If only I hadn’t visited the Elugar Strait, the Deltest Mountains, and the Tola Forest numerous times already. That said, they might have changed in the two thousand years since my last visits.

“You have ten days. Any student who doesn’t make it within that time to Dormitory Three of the Hero Academy will be disqualified from the educational exchange. Of course, your marks will completely depend on how fast you arrive, so do your best! The third-year students are already accustomed to these expeditions, so any first-years to arrive before them will receive bonus marks.”

Ten days, huh? That wasn’t unreasonable. One could run all the way there at a decent speed and arrive with time to spare.

“Just so you know, I arrived at the Hero Academy in two days. Third-year students should be aiming for that amount of time.”

Two days wasn’t bad for a teacher. Meno was probably a step above Emilia to be teaching the third-year students.

“With that settled, let’s get this exam underway. Ready, set, go!”

At her cue, the majority of the students in the lecture hall took off out of the room. Those remaining began poring over maps, discussing which route to take.

“Say, Anos,” Sasha piped up, eyeing me suspiciously, “it’s been bugging me for a while now, but did you really come empty-handed? Please tell me you packed everything into a storage circle or something.” Sasha wasn’t particularly overburdened with luggage herself—she must have packed everything other than the magic items she needed on hand into a storage circle already.

“I’ve no need for luggage. I used to take day trips to Gairadite all the time.”

After all, witnessing the petty tricks of humanity had often filled me with the urge to crush them.

“Day trips? Why does this stuff still surprise me...?”

“Which way should we go?” Misha asked.

“Wouldn’t it be best to go by air?” Sasha suggested. “The magic field above Azesion can’t be *that* bad—at least compared to the field I had to suffer during self-study with a certain someone.”

Sasha liked to use Fless to move about, so during the self-study day, I’d made it a little harder for her to fly. Thanks to that, she was now able to do so smoothly through even the roughest of magic environments.

“What do you two think?” Misha asked, turning to Lay and Misa.

“Aha ha... I can’t fly, but I think I’ll be able to keep up with Fuska,” Misa replied.

Misa was able to move freely anywhere within the range of Fuska. It was a somewhat inefficient means of travel, but casting the spell in quick succession allowed her to travel at a reasonable speed.

“But if I had to choose, I’d prefer to run there. I’m not that good at using Fless,” she said.

“So it’d be better to go by land,” Sasha concluded. “I can just fly at a lower altitude. That way we can go together.” She spread a map out over the table and traced three routes across it in red. “There are three roads through the Tola Forest. Out of these, the one that passes through the Milenne Desert should make for the fastest route. If there are no major setbacks on the way, we can make it there in a day.”

Meno had told the third-year students to aim for two days, so Sasha was probably feeling competitive. How typical of her.

“If you intended to walk there, that would indeed be the shortest road, but why would you need a map to get to Gairadite in the first place?” I asked.

Sasha looked at me questioningly.

“I said I’ve been there before. Have you forgotten how I get home every day?”

“Ah,” she said, finally understanding.

“Gatom?” Misha asked.

“Can you use it over such a long distance?”

“Putting it as you youngsters would, Gatom is a spell developed for busy demons who have to make long-distance trips many times a day.”

“I get that, but please don’t ever call us ‘youngsters’ ever again,” Sasha snapped.

Hey now, I’d just been trying to explain in a way she would understand.

“At any rate, that’s how it is. It won’t even take one second to arrive, much less a day.” I offered my hand to Sasha, who accepted it with a skeptical look. Then, once everyone had linked hands, I cast Gatom.

One flash of light later, we were standing before a vast lake. Ramparts towered over the water on the far side of it, where they protected the city within.

The royal capital of Gairadite was a fortified city built at the center of this holy lake. The lake, a source of holy water, had the ability to act as a natural magic circle and seal magic. From what I could see, the lake’s holy water-producing abilities were much the same as they had been two thousand years ago, but I had to wonder whether anyone in this era could make any use of it.

“Getting here so easily is kind of a disappointment,” Sasha said, but Lay didn’t seem to hear her.

“I’ve heard that heroes excel in swordplay, so it’d be fun to come face-to-face with one before the exchange.”

Sasha glared at him in exasperation. She was probably questioning how he planned on challenging them to a sword fight before both academies had been officially introduced.

“You’ve really got nothing but swords on the brain.”

Lay beamed cheekily. “Perhaps even as much as you’ve got the Demon King on yours.”

“Wh-What are you saying?!” Sasha blushed, unable to hide her fluster.

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with a student of the Demon King Academy thinking about the Demon King all the time, though. If anything,

you're a model student."

Sasha continued to glare. "I won't forget this, you sword freak..."

How rare to see those two bickering.

We proceeded to the city gate. The soldiers on duty checked our school insignias and let us right through. On our way inside, I heard them mutter something about not expecting anyone to arrive today.

"So where is this Dormitory Three?" I asked.

"It's directly east of the main building, beside the outer wall," Misha replied.

"I see. And where is the Hero Academy?"

"You don't know where it is?" she asked, surprised.

"It didn't exist two thousand years ago."

Misha pointed at a tall building in the distance. "There. That's the Hero Academy Arclanisca. It was on the handout we received."

Hmm. So the Royal Castle of Arclanisca had been turned into the Hero Academy. In such a peaceful world, there was no need for military headquarters, but it would have been a shame for all those magical facilities to go to waste. They must have instead repurposed it as an educational institution. Delsgade had done the same, so there was nothing strange about doing so. If anything, it was the complete lack of anything abnormal about the place that made it all the more suspicious.

"Let's get going already," Sasha said, hurrying us along. "We've arrived so early, we might as well find Ms. Meno."

Misa frowned. "Will she even be about? She might not be expecting anyone to arrive today."

"I guess that's true."

As we continued our chat, we made our way to the dormitory, taking a few detours to sightsee around the city. We eventually arrived at an extravagantly decorated stone building large enough to fit around two hundred rooms. Above the gate was a sign that confirmed we had indeed reached Arclanisca Dormitory

Three.

“There she is,” Misha said, pointing towards the gate. Meno was leaving the building.

“Ah, Meno!” I called out. “We’ve arrived.”

“Huh?” Meno froze for a moment before looking over at us blankly.

“I assume we’ve made a decent record.”

My words seemed to pass over Meno, who failed to acknowledge them. Dazed, she blinked at us for a few more seconds before finally finding her voice.

“W-Wait, what? You’re kidding, right? It hasn’t been a day—it hasn’t even been an *hour*. Just how did you get here so quickly?!” she stammered in disbelief. She had to have seen us at Delsgade through the owl’s Magic Eyes, so she had no reason to suspect us of cheating.

“Since I’ve been here before, I used Gatom.”

“I had heard about your ability to use lost magic, but it’s hard to believe you can connect two spaces so far apart...” Meno stared at me, still dumbfounded. “You’ve proved your magical talent. In my time as a teacher, I’ve seen many magically gifted students referred to as geniuses, but the word ‘genius’ is far too mundane to describe one as skilled as you.” Meno activated her Magic Eyes. “Just what are you, Anos?”

“I’ve answered that multiple times already. If you trust the words of others over your own two Eyes, you’ll never see the truth before you.”

The Demon King of Tyranny.

As the words flashed through her mind, Meno could only fall silent.

§ 7. Promise

The five of us ended up tying for first place on the exam. According to the troubled Meno, the other students were still yet to cross Dilhade's border.

Expedition exams were graded on a comparative scale. As the students who had arrived first, we would each be rewarded one hundred points, while the other students' marks would fall dramatically the later they were. It was an unavoidable situation, but the greatest woe for our teacher would be explaining that to the other students.

We were each shown to our rooms in the dormitory, where we took a short break. The rooms were split by gender, so Lay and I shared a room for two while Misha, Sasha, and Misa bunked together as a trio.

"So we're free for the next ten days?" asked Lay, who had immediately lain back on his bed.

"That's what we were told."

In ten days' time, the students who made it to Gairadite would take part in lessons and exams with the Hero Academy. We could spend our time however we pleased until then.

"Now's as good a time as any to take a look around the city," I said. "And you?"

"That sounds nice and all, but I'm thinking of going to the dining hall," Lay replied.

The school dining hall was open every mealtime for any student to walk in and eat. At this hour, he would still just about make it for breakfast.

"You sure have an impressive appetite," I said, positive that he'd already eaten before arriving at Delsgade that morning.

"I'm interested in the food of Azesion."

"In that case, I'll see you later."

Lay raised an arm to wave me off, so I left the room and headed towards the dormitory exit. There, I bumped into Sasha.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I was thinking of taking a look around town. Want to come?”

“Huh? Um, yeah. Sure.”

With that, we left the dormitory together.

“So, what are Misha and Misa up to?” I asked.

“They’re using Leaks to contact the fan union. Last I saw, they were giving them advice on how to get to Gairadite.”

I see. How considerate of them.

“You could have brought them along as well, right?” she asked.

“Those girls are weak. A proper trial will do them some good. Exceptional marks don’t guarantee exceptional ability.”

Sasha looked at me thoughtfully.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re normally out of your mind, so I’m always surprised you actually consider things like that.”

“What are you saying? I’m always the pinnacle of rationality.”

Sasha looked at me with a deadpan expression. “You nearly killed me multiple times during self-study.”

“You didn’t die even once, which was highly commendable.”

My unexpected comeback left Sasha unable to respond. Then she returned to herself. “D-Did you think you could fool me with compliments?” she snapped, turning away in a huff. “Unfortunately for you, I’m not that easy!”

“What would I need to fool you for? Three times I used magic I thought might kill you, and you lived to tell the tale. It’s truly impressive—as expected of someone with the same Eyes as I.”

Sasha lowered her head in embarrassment, her ears showing a hint of red.

“I... I said you can’t fool me like that. I almost died.”

Hmm. What was she unhappy about? I rarely praised others so openly.

“Sasha, I wasn’t lying to you before when I called your Magic Eyes beautiful.”

“What?” Sasha slowly turned to face me. “Why are you saying this so suddenly?”

“It’s not sudden. I’ve always thought that. Your Eyes are tranquil and free of corruption—I became even more convinced of that after yesterday’s self-study session.”

Magic Eyes were for viewing magic. Continually peering into the abyss increased one’s proficiency at doing so, but eventually, those Eyes would become tainted by something sinister. Tranquil and pure Magic Eyes were proof of strong resistance to magic. After all, a certain strength was required to remain unaffected by exposure to tainted power.

“Wh-Where were your thoughts straying that day? You had other things to focus on!” Sasha exclaimed.

“What else could I think about? My attention was single-handedly dominated by the abyss of your Magic Eyes.”

Sasha’s Magic Eyes of Destruction had improved every time she defended against one of my attacks, and yet, I still couldn’t see the depths of her power. In terms of talent alone, she surpassed even the demons of the Mythical Age.

“Say,” Sasha mumbled shyly, “show me your Eyes.”

Hmm. Did she want to use my Eyes as a reference?

“Like this?” I asked, staring at her with my Magic Eyes of Destruction.

“See, yours look more beautiful than mine.”

“I don’t think so,” I stated firmly, rendering Sasha speechless. “Yours are far more beautiful. I will only say this once, Sasha, so listen well.”

“Um, okay...” Sasha’s gaze was drawn to mine.

“Before now, I thought I wanted your Eyes.”

“Huh?”

“It’s not every day that I say such things.”

Sasha was just that talented. Her Magic Eyes of Destruction had the potential to surpass mine some day. That is, as long as she continued working hard at staring into the abyss of magic.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“H-Hold on a minute,” Sasha said. “I’m thinking.”

That was to be expected—it wasn’t every day that you were told you had the potential to surpass the Demon King of Tyranny, be that in one or any area.

“You mean *that*, right?” she asked evasively. She seemed hesitant to suggest her superiority out loud.

“That’s right,” I declared.

“I can’t believe you’d say such a thing.”

“Is it that implausible?”

Sasha nodded. It was a rather cute gesture coming from her usually confident self. “I haven’t done anything to deserve your saying something like that.”

“Superficial acts are irrelevant. I’m looking into the abyss of your magic—at what sleeps deep, deep within you. The shine of that magnificent light is what caught my eye.”

Sasha was speechless. Her destructive Eyes, which she had previously learned to control, inadvertently appeared in her pupils. Everything around us began to shake.

“Look into my Eyes, Sasha.”

“What?”

“And don’t look away.”

“O-Okay.”

“Closer.”

“How am I meant to—”

“Come closer.”

Sasha approached me as told. Once she was close enough, I used my Magic Eyes of Destruction to suppress the effects of hers.

Hmm. To think I had to be that close to seal her powers completely. Her Eyes truly were something special.

“Do you get it now?”

Sasha nodded in embarrassment. “But didn’t you go on a date with Misha before?”

A date? Did she mean that time we’d gone out together?

“What about it?”

“I thought, you know, you and Misha were...” Sasha mumbled hesitantly. “Didn’t you, um, want Misha’s Eyes as well?”

So that’s what it was. Sasha must have also seen through Misha’s talents.

“Misha’s Eyes are just as sharp. They aren’t by any means inferior to yours.”

Sasha looked up at me nervously. “Which do you prefer?”

“They’re incomparable.”

She must have been wondering whose Eyes were superior, even more so since the sisters were so close to one another. However, the natures of their Eyes were different. Neither was superior to the other.

“You mean you’re undecided?”

Hmm. Perhaps I’d chosen the wrong words.

“I mean I want you both.”

“What?! B-Both of us?” Sasha yelped in surprise.

“Do you disapprove?”

“It’s just strange, isn’t it?”

I chuckled.

“What are you laughing at?! Is it that weird to want to be the best?”

“No, I just found it very typical of you. It’s a good thing though. Aim for the

top, Sasha. You shine your brightest when you're competing with others."

"I see," Sasha mumbled, part relieved, part disappointed. She then seemed to come to a decision. "Um, I'll only say this once..."

I returned her serious expression with one of my own.

"If you want them, my Eyes are yours," she said.

Hmm. It wasn't impossible to take Magic Eyes away from another, but that person's light would surely fade, never to return. Her desire to express such loyalty to me was admirable, but this was not a sacrifice I could accept.

"In that case, let's make a promise instead."

Sasha gave me a puzzled look.

"Someday, a situation beyond my control may occur—a situation in which I cannot protect that which I wish to protect."

"I can't imagine a day like that ever coming..."

"That is only natural. But at the same time, it isn't impossible. Thus, if that day ever comes, Sasha, I want you to do the protecting. Your Eyes have the power to do just that."

Sasha thought for a moment before replying. "If I keep that promise, will you do whatever I ask?"

"Anything you wish."

She grinned happily, then nodded. "It's a promise, okay?"

"Do you need a Zecht?"

She shook her head. "No. I prefer a promise over a contract."

"I see."

Sasha's Eyes of Destruction had faded. I pulled away from her, and she started off cheerfully.

"Where are we going, by the way?" she asked.

"To research what happens in the legends of the heroes."

"I see. How about we start at the academy, then?" she suggested, pointing at

the fork in the path up ahead. “They could have something worth a look.”

“Sure.”

And so, we set off towards the Hero Academy, which towered over all in the distance.

§ 8. Legend of the Hero Academy

After a short walk, we arrived at the academy. Arclanisca was a beautiful and majestic castle that possessed strong magic. Inside, it was probably packed to the rafters with magic circles and ancient artifacts. Even the power I could sense from outside was no different than that of two thousand years ago.

“Come to think of it,” Sasha said, turning to me curiously, “we kind of walked over here on the spur of the moment, but are we even allowed inside? I mean, we might not be able to get in.”

“I don’t know the answer to that, but no place can keep me out,” I said smugly.

Sasha stared at me in annoyance. “Yeah. Could you not go causing trouble before this thing even starts?”

“You needn’t worry.” I marched straight ahead and stood before the Hero Academy’s main gate. There, I gave the gate a light nudge, but it didn’t move.

“It’s locked with Dejit,” Sasha said, inspecting the gate. “We won’t get through without permission.”

It had probably been set up so that only those affiliated with the academy could enter.

“If we force our way inside, it’ll probably set off an alarm somewhere. We should just give up—”

“Open.”

At my order, the magic lock—Dejit—clicked open. The power in my words had compelled it to allow us entry.

“Hmm, that should do it. It seems we’re allowed through after all.”

“You got past Dejit without even a spell... Why do I even bother?” Sasha examined the gate with her Eyes, attempting to figure out how I’d done it.

I pushed the gate open.

“Wait, are we really going in? What’ll you do if we’re caught?”

“Do you know what my specialty is?”

“What?”

“Silencing others.”

Sasha was just about done with me.

“Now, now, don’t make that face. I’m half-joking.”

“Then would you *please* hold back the part of you that’s half-serious? If you start silencing people, we’ll never be allowed in again. I know you want to research these heroes’ legends and all, but that can wait. We’ll be coming back in ten days anyway.”

“Stop with the fuss. You’ll be surprised what one can get away with if they act like they’re meant to be somewhere.”

I lifted my hand to push the gate once more when a voice called out behind us.

“Okay, you two. Not another step.”

Sasha flinched, then glared at me with eyes that practically yelled, “See? What did I tell you?”

I turned around without any particular concern to see a girl in a scarlet uniform. Her black hair reached past her waist, and her expression was soft and easygoing. However, my eyes were particularly drawn to the two mounds threatening to burst from her attire.

Hmm. How notably big. Bigger than any chest I’d seen two thousand years ago.

Was this a product of the human diet and sleep pattern? The humans back then had lived under extremely harsh conditions. With the exception of a select few, they’d had little to eat and rarely had a peaceful night’s sleep.

The humans of this era, however, had access to nutritious meals and restful sleep. Their growth was no longer hindered by their environment. In other words, this was the true biological form of the human being—proof of the

peace that I had sought.

“The Hero Academy is off-limits to outsiders,” the human girl said somewhat lightly.

“Hmm. We weren’t aware of that. We just arrived from Dilhade, you see.”

“Dilhade?” Surprised, the girl looked down at our uniforms. “Oh! Are you students from the Demon King Academy?”

“Indeed.”

“I see, I see. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Eleonore Bianca, a third-year student at the Hero Academy. I’ll be participating in the educational exchange with you guys.”

At that, Sasha looked between Eleonore’s face and chest. Eleonore noticed Sasha’s gaze and lifted a finger, laughing.

“I won’t give ’em to you.”

“Wha—” Sasha sputtered. “I don’t want them! I was just wondering—!”

“Hm? They’re real, you know.” Eleonore tapped her chest proudly.

“I-It’s not as if I were doubting that or anything—” Sasha shrank back awkwardly. The two girls’ chests were so different in scale, she must have doubted whether Eleonore’s was genuine.

I laughed. “Sorry about that, Eleonore. This one tends to get caught up in her own perception of common sense. Whether they’re pint-sized or proportionally preposterous, what does it matter?”

“But they *are* proportionally preposterous...” Sasha muttered under her breath, but Eleonore didn’t seem to hear her.

“I’d have to agree there,” Eleonore said, grinning. She offered me a friendly handshake.

“Anos Voldigoad,” I said, accepting her hand.

“I’m Sasha Necron. We’re first-years from the Demon King Academy.” Sasha also exchanged a handshake with Eleonore.

“So what are you two here for? The educational exchange is still a fair bit

away, isn't it?"

"We were curious about your legends."

"Oooh, you're the studious type. Why don't you come in, then?" Eleonore gestured at the gate.

"I thought outsiders weren't welcome?"

"Sure, when they're by themselves. But it's fine if you're with me."

Without waiting for a response, Eleonore placed a hand against the gate, only to frown and strain her Eyes curiously. She must have noticed I had overpowered Dejit and unlocked it. As she turned back to us, I saw Sasha grimace.

"Tsk ts. I'll keep quiet about this today, but don't go doing it again, okay?" Eleonore warned, scolding us like children.

"Very well. I'll make sure to keep Sasha in check next time."

"What?! Don't try to shift the blame! I tried to stop you!"

I laughed heartily. "It's just a joke. We all need some entertainment once in a while."

"I'm not here for your entertainment!"

"We just met Eleonore, so I wanted to show her my good humor. You understand, right?"

"Understand what? All you've done is show how smoothly evil you are by shifting the blame onto me!"

Amazed, Eleonore watched our brief exchange but soon replaced her surprise with a smile. "That won't do, Anos. You have to be gentle with girls."

"Unfortunately, demons have no such values."

"They sure do!" Sasha interrupted immediately.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't look so clueless. It's true."

"Hmm. But unlike human abilities, those of demons aren't affected by gender.

Why should such a thing matter?”

“I don’t know how it works for humans or why such a rule exists, but good manners are universal!” Sasha snapped.

Hmm. This hadn’t been the case two thousand years ago. Times sure had changed.

“Oh, actually,” Eleonore started, lifting a finger as we passed through the gate, “might I ask if you’ve been reincarnated, Anos?”

“I have,” I replied, following her into the school grounds.

“Whoa. So demons can reincarnate as well, huh?” she replied. It almost sounded as though running into reincarnated people wasn’t a rare occurrence here. The humans I knew weren’t even aware of Syrica, but mom and dad had come from a remote town. Was the spell common knowledge here in Gairadite, or was this knowledge just limited to this academy?

“Is it common to come across reincarnated humans here?”

“Everyone in the Jerga-Kanon has reincarnated,” Eleonore explained, but she then gasped as though she’d made a mistake.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“Ah, I’m not meant to talk to outsiders about the reincarnated. We can seem a little much for regular humans.”

Ah, so that was it. But that couldn’t be the only reason.

“Oh well. It should be fine. We’ll be taking part in an exchange with your school, and you guys have reincarnated students too. I’m sure it’s no problem!” Eleonore clenched her fist as if trying to convince herself.

“No worries. I don’t plan on telling anyone else anyway.”

“Really? Thanks! I’m glad to hear that,” she said, relieved. “Is it the same at the Demon King Academy, then? Do you guys gossip about who’s a reincarnation of who and so on? The popular kids here are reincarnations of the Hero Kanon.”

Popularity? What a human concept.

“The reincarnation of Hero Kanon is here?”

“Yup, four of them. Oh, oops. That was a secret too.”

Sasha tilted her head, puzzled. “Four?”

“Hero Kanon bore seven sources,” I explained. “If each of those sources reincarnated into a different body, there being multiple reincarnations wouldn’t be strange.”

Eleonore nodded. “That’s right. Do they teach that at the Demon King Academy too? Or do you know this because you’ve reincarnated?”

“Oh, this is common knowledge at Delsgade.”

It actually wasn’t, but I’d gone for the simplest answer.

“Ah, right. Continuing on from before, does that make the reincarnation of the Demon King the most popular kid there? You know the one,” Eleonore said, holding up a finger. “The Demon King of Tyranny, Avos Dilhevia?”



Sasha looked at me wordlessly.

Hmm. So even humans were aware of that name. I couldn't say for sure, but it seemed that they weren't the only ones up to something.

§ 9. The Reincarnated

“Ah, s-sorry!” Eleonore bowed her head at us.

“What for?” I asked.

She looked at me, confused. “Huh? I thought the Demon King of Tyranny’s name was too revered to say out loud?”

“Oh, right.”

So that’s what she’d meant. For a school that had never had any contact with demonkind, they sure knew a lot about demons. Had someone on their side researched us? If so, why?

“So, um, that means you don’t like it when other people say it, right?”

“I don’t particularly care.” I looked at Sasha.

“I don’t mind either,” she said, “but it’d be best not to mention it during the exchange. The Royalists can be rather annoying about that kind of thing.”

Eleonore sighed in relief. “Thank goodness you two are so accepting. In class, they told us that we’d be putting our foot in it, but I guess there are all kinds of demons out there after all.”

“Pretty much.”

If the students had been forewarned, she must have quite the lax attitude to let it slip anyway.

“I’m sorry, though. I wasn’t thinking properly.” Although she had been the one who’d made the blunder, Eleonore stuck her tongue out playfully. “Oh, hold on,” she then said, coming to a sudden halt. “Sorry! I went too far. It’s back this way.”

Eleonore turned on her heels, reaching for a door we had already passed. It opened to reveal a circular atrium. A staircase connected the bottom floor to the top, and bookshelves lined the walls of every floor as far as the eye could see.

“This is the magic library, pride of the Hero Academy. Books on magic have been gathered here from all across Azesion. The only legends missing will be those found solely in other nations like Dilhade.” Eleonore walked through the library with familiarity, coming to a stop before a particular shelf. “This is the legend and lore section,” she explained. “Which legend are you interested in?”

“The legend of Kanon.”

“Wow. Who’d have thought Hero Kanon’s famous even in Dilhade?”

We weren’t there to play around, but Eleonore seemed to be enjoying herself.

“Is it because he defeated the Demon King of Tyranny?” she asked.

Sasha’s gaze darkened.

“Ah... S-Sorry, forget I said that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sasha asked, taking a step towards Eleonore. If it had been her old self standing here, she would have taken the whole library hostage with her destructive Eyes. As it was, she contained herself. “Did you say Hero Kanon defeated the Demon King?”

“I’m sorry,” Eleonore said weakly.

“I’m not asking for an apology; I’m asking what you meant. Is there a legend here that Hero Kanon defeated the Demon King of Tyranny?”

Eleonore nodded apologetically.

“Then who made the walls?”

“Um... Walls?”

“Beno levun, the walls that split the world into four.”

“Are you talking about Al lent?”

Sasha looked at her quizzically. “Al lent?”

“After Hero Kanon slew the Demon King of Tyranny, he created a barrier to protect humans, spirits, and gods from demon attack. Wasn’t that how it went?”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.” Sasha shot Eleonore a fierce glare, her voice low with rage.

Hmm. How troubling. I placed a hand on Sasha’s head to pacify her.

“Wha...? Anos, what are you doing? Your hand...”

“Calm down, Sasha. There’s nothing strange about what she said.”

She turned away in a sulk. “But you sacrificed your life for that wall...” she whispered, so that only I could hear.

“I appreciate the thought, but humans have a tendency to rewrite history for their own convenience. If we nitpick every little thing, there’ll be no end to the arguments.”

“As long as you’re okay with it, I guess. Now move your hand already!”

I moved my hand as Sasha had requested, only to hear her gasp. I looked at her questioningly.

“It’s nothing...” she mumbled, ducking her head.

“Sorry,” Eleonore repeated once again.

“Were you told not to talk about that too?” I asked.

She nodded. “How does it go in Dilhade’s history books?”

“The Demon King of Tyranny summoned the Hero, the Great Spirit, and the Goddess of Creation to Delsgade. There, they combined their magic to create the walls between the realms. Unable to withstand such insurmountable power, the Demon King’s vessel was destroyed, and he reincarnated two thousand years later—that is, in this era.”

Eleonore’s mouth had fallen open.

“You don’t have to believe it. After all, you humans have lived your entire lives believing the Hero defeated the Demon King.”

Despite her confusion, Eleonore nodded.

“You mustn’t let them fool you, Eleonore,” a sharp voice snapped not far away.

We turned to see a boy in the same scarlet uniform as Eleonore, staring at an open book on the desk before him. He had blue hair and an ice-cold gaze that pierced us from behind his glasses.

“Demons deceive others by twisting their words to sound legitimate.”

Hmm. Unlike Eleonore, this human clearly harbored hostility towards us. It seemed there were all kinds of students at the Hero Academy as well.

“Anyway,” the boy said, slamming his book closed and standing up to make his way towards us, “why would the Demon King renowned for his tyranny sacrifice his life to create a wall protecting the human race? It makes no logical sense. Your reverence for your founder stupefies your thoughts and prevents you from accepting his defeat. It’s pure foolishness.” The boy stopped and turned to me. “Don’t you agree, O guests from the Demon King Academy?”

“Wholeheartedly, human. But I have a question for an intelligent mind like yours: how did a mere human bear enough power to create a wall that split the world into four, then sustain it for so many years?”

The boy pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “It’s fundamentally impossible. However, the Hero had the power to make the impossible possible. The thoughts and emotions of mankind culminated within the Hero to bring about a miracle. It’s only natural for demons to doubt such unity.”

Laughter bubbled up from my chest. “Bwa ha ha! A miracle? The gall. It seems the blather of today’s humans is no different than that of those of the past. Heed my warning: praying will bring about no miracles in this world.”

“I don’t expect you demons to understand,” the boy said dismissively.

“Be careful, or the gods will fool you.”

The boy furrowed his brow in confusion.

“So, tell me, are you one of the reincarnated?” I asked.

He replied with a cool expression. “I am Ledriano Kanon Azeschen, the Guardian Knight of the Holy Water and student of the selective class Jerga-Kanon. I am rank two at the Hero Academy and the inheritor of Hero Kanon’s first source.”

The inheritor of Hero Kanon's first source, huh?

"Hmm. I can't see it."

Ledriano's expression soured. "What did you say?"

"I said that I don't believe that you are a reincarnation of Kanon. That, or six of his seven sources were letdowns."

In the beginning, Kanon had only possessed one source, just like the rest of us. His other six sources had been pieced together from the offerings of other people. These six sources wouldn't have reincarnated with him, so it wouldn't be strange for them to have been reborn by themselves.

"Take that back."

"Take what back?"

"What you said about me and Hero Kanon. You may not be aware, but inheriting the source of the legendary Hero is our pride. We shall not remain silent at your insults."

"I merely told the truth. I cannot see you as the reincarnation of Kanon. If you're so certain of your own identity, the words of an ignorant demon should be of no consequence, no?"

Ledriano sighed. "I shall say this one more time for your sake," he said, nudging his glasses up with a finger as he glared at me coldly.

But then...

"It's too late, Ledriano," a voice called from the second floor. I looked up to see a red-haired scarlet-uniformed boy sitting on the windowsill, having just come in from outside. "I thought I detected demonic magic, but what's going on here?" The red-haired boy jumped down from the second floor and landed before Ledriano. "First, let me introduce myself. I am Raos Kanon Jilphor, Destruction Knight of the Holy Flame and student of the selective class Jerga-Kanon. I am rank four at the Hero Academy and the inheritor of Hero Kanon's third source." Raos took a step forward. "And you are?"

"Hmm. Another letdown."

"E-Excuse me?" Raos glowered in clear discontent. "What did you just say?"

“You seem to be hard of hearing. I said you don’t seem to be Kanon either.”

“Listen here, unnamed demon,” Raos demanded, “are you aware of whom your master was taken out by?”

“Is that the reason for your arrogance? You’re free to believe whatever version of history you wish, but you should consider first whom you’re speaking to.”

Raos clicked his tongue in irritation. “It’s not too late to turn back. I’m not heartless. Everyone makes mistakes.” His magic surged like a threatening aura. “Accept that the Hero defeated the Demon King of Tyranny and built the walls. Then I shall forgive you.”

I could only scoff.

“Heh,” he spat. “You’re looking down on us, aren’t you?”

“Hmm. You can tell?”

“What?!”

“The Hero defeated the Demon King of Tyranny? You have some nerve speaking with such blind faith about something you weren’t around to witness.”

Raos glared at me. Alas, if looks could kill...

“Fine,” he said. “Have it your way. Let me educate you on how the Hero Kanon defeated the Demon King. Perhaps that’s what it’ll take to convince you.”

“Enough, Raos,” Ledriano warned. “He’s a guest. Don’t make trouble for us by injuring him.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t even draw my holy sword. I just need to teach our guests a little lesson. He can take this brief display of a hero’s power as a greeting.”

“I said stop. We don’t need you thrashing about in a place like this—”

I laughed. “Please, do enlighten me with this so-called power of yours.”

“See? This guy’s ready to go too.”

Ledriano sighed in resignation. “Just be prepared for due punishment.”

With no care for the repercussions, Raos stepped forward, clenching his fists. Glowing flames appeared around them. “Let me show you a little something that’ll blow your mind. Blink and you’ll miss it!”

Raos thrust his fist forward with all his might, releasing a holy flame that shot forth to strike me.

“Hmm. By blink, do you mean”—I closed my eyes for a brief moment. When I opened them next, the holy flame had been extinguished, and Raos was flying backwards, knocking down several shelves of books as he slammed into the wall —“like this?”

“Wha... What...? Gah... What just...?” Raos couldn’t even understand how he had been bested. “What did you do?”

“Oh, I just blinked.”

The wind pressure of my magic-boosted blink had erased the holy flame and torn Raos’s anti-magic to shreds.

“No way! That’s...absurd!”

It seemed Raos was no longer able to move.

“Perhaps you should amend those history books of yours to mention how a descendant of the Hero was defeated by the blink of an eye.”

§ 10. Warning

Enraged by my words, Raos placed a hand on the floor to support himself. But try as he might, his body was so badly beaten that he didn't have the strength to stand up.

"D-Damn it!" Raos glared at me, clenching his teeth.

"That's enough, Raos. You've lost," Ledriano said, moving to block my way. "My apologies for his behavior. For the sake of our academy, would you please spare him some mercy?"

"If you're apologizing for discourtesy, I believe there's more to say."

Ledriano responded without hesitation. "As you say, it is possible that Hero Kanon did not defeat the Demon King of Tyranny. There's no way for us to know the exact events of two thousand years ago."

That was somewhat unexpected.

"You were quick to change your mind."

"Isn't that what you wished for? After such a display of barbaric strength, we have no choice but to obey you."

His decision was rational, but something didn't quite add up. Why would such a hostile person so readily be willing to lay down arms?

"What happened to that pride of yours? Is this all the reincarnation of Hero Kanon amounts to?" I asked.

"No pride is worth more than life. If things can be settled by lowering my head, then I'll do so as much as you wish."

Hmm. His sincerity was questionable.

"Well, whatever. Let's go, Sasha."

"What? You're done already? I thought you'd make a bigger mess."

"There's nothing to gain from mocking someone with no will to fight."

We headed for the door.

“Ah, just a moment,” Ledriano called from behind me. “May I ask for your name?”

“Anos Voldigoad,” I replied, opening the door and exiting the building.

“Hey, hold up!” Eleonore exclaimed, hurrying along after us. “I’ll walk you to the gate,” she said, holding up a finger.

“Isn’t it right over there?”

“Don’t worry about it. We’ve caused trouble for you, so consider it an apology,” she said, seeing us to the front gate.

After we left the grounds, she turned to us to say goodbye. “I’m so sorry about everything. I didn’t think a fight would break out—but you’re really strong, Anos. I was surprised.”

“It’s fine. Hot-blooded types like that exist everywhere, though their tendency to try to solve everything by force can become rather troublesome.”

“Look who’s talking,” Sasha muttered.

“Hmm. What do you mean by that, Sasha?” I asked.

“Nothing. Forget it.”

Seeing our exchange, Eleonore giggled. “You two sure get along well. Are you dating?”

“Wh-What? N-No, don’t be ridiculous!”

“Oooh? Then what are you so flustered about?” Eleonore asked with a grin.

“What are you talking about? I’m not flustered at all!”

Eleonore nodded knowingly.

Sasha glanced at me from the corner of her eye, then ducked her head self-consciously. “What are you looking at?”

Eleonore giggled at Sasha’s shy response, but then her expression turned serious. “Anos, over here,” she said, beckoning me over to her.

“What’s up?” I asked.

When I reached her side, she leaned close to me and said in a whisper, “You should skip the exchange if you can. The Hero Academy hasn’t changed in the two thousand years since it was founded.” She stepped back once she’d finished her warning.

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t want to know any more than that. Bye!” Eleonore grinned, then hurried back to the Hero Academy.

“What did she say?” Sasha asked.

The school hadn’t changed in two thousand years, huh?

“*Open*,” I said, ordering Dejit to let me pass.

“H-Hey, Anos! What are you doing?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t make a commotion this time. Go and spend some time in the city.”

“Huh?!”

Ignoring Sasha’s cries, I used Lynel to hide my body and Najila to hide my magic. I then proceeded back through the gate, making my way around the garden to the outside of the library. When I looked up, I could see the second-floor window that Raos had entered through. I hopped up lightly and went inside.

At that moment, voices reached my ears.

“Sorry to burden you with such a role, Raos.”

“Nah, it was nothing.”

I looked down at the floor below to see Raos enveloped in the light of healing magic.

“But that demon guy sure packed a punch,” he said, standing up as if nothing had happened. “What kind of level is this guy on?”

Ledriano looked thoughtful. “So far, five students from the Demon King Academy have arrived in Gairadite. He must be one of them. He’s probably one of their top students—either a third-year student or one of the Cohort of

Chaos.”

“One of the candidates to become the Demon King of Tyranny’s vessel, was it?”

“If so”—a new voice filled the library. It was another boy, in the same scarlet uniform. This one had blond hair, blue eyes, and a handsome face—“they’ll be no match for us.”

Raos snickered in agreement. “Damn right. We now know what they’re capable of. They’re strong—fearsome, even—but strength isn’t everything in battle. They’ve been fooled into letting their guard down.”

“Fooled by your fine performance, you mean?” Ledriano asked.

Raos nodded smugly.

“I can’t wait for this exchange,” the blond boy said, rubbing his hands together. “I can already picture their faces.”

Hmm. So Raos had pretended to lose to me, to create an advantage in the inter-academy exam. It seemed humans were as crafty as ever. Did what Eleonore had said about the academy really relate to these guys? I had assumed she’d meant the enmity towards demonkind hadn’t eased in two thousand years, but this troop of heroes seemed like nothing more than excited, if not mischievous, students.

“Besides, we’ve got the Holy Mother on our side. Right, Eleonore?” The blond boy turned to the newly returned Eleonore, but she didn’t respond.

“Eleonore?”

“It’s nothing.” Eleonore headed up the staircase.

“As usual, I have no idea what’s going on in her head,” Ledriano muttered. The blond boy smiled wryly.

Eleonore proceeded to the second floor, then walked right up to the window. She stared out of it.

No.

She was staring directly at me. Our eyes met.

Eleonore opened her mouth, moving her lips soundlessly. *Hey now, you shouldn't be here*—or something along those lines. She then grinned and pointed outside before using Fless to fly out the window. I followed closely after her to a tree a short distance from the library.

“I already said you're not allowed inside. And I just gave you a warning.”

So she could see me after all. I lifted Lynel and revealed myself.

“Impressive,” I said, commending her. “There aren't many people who can see through that.”

“Ha ha! Just because I can't see you or your magic, doesn't mean you can hide your source.”

I see. She was right, but a source could normally only be seen because of the magic it emitted. The average Magic Eyes couldn't look directly at it. Hero Kanon, who excelled at source magic, was one of the few people who could.

“If you understand, you'd better leave here. There's nothing to be gained from getting involved with the Hero Academy.”

“Aren't you a student here?”

“I am, but that doesn't mean I'm lying.”

“Do you have proof?”

“None at all.” Eleonore had responded to each of my questions without a moment's hesitation. She was so confident in herself, I couldn't help but laugh. “Ah. You don't believe me, do you?” she said.

“No, I just find you rather amusing. For your sake, I'll withdraw for today.”

“Really? Then could you answer one question for my sake as well?” Eleonore was more brazen than I had expected—I liked that.

“Very well. I'll answer whatever you wish.”

“You have memories of your previous life, don't you?”

“Indeed.”

“Did you know Kanon?”

“That’s two questions.”

“Oops.” Realizing her mistake, Eleonore stuck out her tongue to hide her embarrassment. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“I did know Kanon, in fact,” I admitted, choosing to humor her anyway. “Before reincarnating, I made a promise to him, so I came to find him now I’ve been reborn.”

“Oh?” She looked at me curiously, seemingly wondering why I was so willing to answer.

“That was just a bonus.”

“Then I’ll tell you something too. But it’s a secret between the two of us, okay?” she said, holding one finger up.

“You have my word.”

At that, her carefree expression turned serious. “Hero Kanon no longer exists. At least, the Kanon you’re searching for doesn’t.”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

“Two thousand years ago, he was killed by someone. Whoever bears his source now is no longer the same hero he used to be. You’ll only regret searching for him.”

Just then, someone called for Eleonore. I reflexively used Lynel to hide myself.

“Eleonore! What are you doing over there? Heine’s asking for everyone!”

“Sorry, I’ll be right there!” she replied, making to head back to the library.

“Eleonore,” I called after her. She paused and looked back. “Who killed him?”

Her expression saddened as she took a moment to respond. “A human,” she replied.

§ 11. One-Shell Necklace

As I left the Hero Academy, I spotted Sasha lingering outside the gate.

“Were you waiting for me, Sasha?” I called.

Hearing my voice, Sasha perked up and turned to beam at me, but then, as if she remembered herself, that smile flipped into a scowl. “Don’t give me that! You’re late! Do you know how worried I was?!”

“Worried? What could you possibly be worried about when it comes to me?”

“What...” Sasha paused, thinking. “I... I was worried you’d killed everyone before the exchange even started!”

I scoffed. At least she knew where her priorities should lie.

“The goal of this exchange isn’t just to learn each other’s spell formulae,” she warned, “it’s to establish friendly relations between Dilhade and Azesion. You can’t wreak havoc here like you do in Delsgade.”

“The other side may not intend the same, though.”

Sasha quieted, her spirits dampened. “Yeah... It’s kinda hard to believe they’ll show us any goodwill with that kind of fabricated history.”

I started walking with Sasha following alongside me. “As I was saying earlier, the existence of the tale of Hero Kanon defeating me doesn’t automatically mean humans see demons as their enemies.”

“How come?”

“The almighty and untouchable Demon King brought peace to the world on a mere whim—if the story went like that, humans would never be able to overcome their fears. They’d live their lives cowering at the thought of the reincarnated Demon King destroying the world on yet another whim.”

Sasha nodded. “So they lied to give everyone peace of mind.”

“Doing so was probably for the best. By then, the Demon King of Tyranny was

dead. After all the atrocities I'd committed, no one would have believed I desired peace."

The world of two thousand years ago, spoiled by war, had been rampant with enmity and resentment, to a degree that had disgusted me.

"It's no wonder the Hero's descendants believe those tales and as a result act arrogantly in front of demons. It's quaint, really."

Sasha glared at me. "And who was it that sent a human flying not so long ago because he couldn't stand their 'quaint' arrogance?"

"Oh, he was just too innocent to resist teasing."

"Ah, I see. I hope that teasing didn't give him a lifetime of trauma."

Well, that shouldn't be a concern.

"So are you saying their goal might not be to establish affable relations?" Sasha asked. "Did you learn something just now?"

"I did, but unfortunately it only deepened the mystery."

"It did what?"

Two thousand years ago, Hero Kanon had been killed by a human. His death must have occurred after my own. What had happened, exactly? Why would mankind kill the hero that had fought the Demon King of Tyranny on the people's behalf? Had he been dragged into a power struggle? Or had Avos Dilhevia had a hand in this too? For now, the easiest way to get answers was to ask Eleonore.

"Apparently, that Raos guy was only pretending to be defeated by me," I explained.

"Did they plan to catch us off guard at the exam?"

"That, and they were measuring my power. They were clearly out to pick a fight."

"Huh. How cocky." Sasha's gaze sharpened. She still seemed on edge since the earlier incident—if this continued, I might not even need to lift a finger in the exam myself. "Hey, Anos," she suddenly said, tugging at my sleeve. "Look

over there.”

Her gaze was directed at a white-haired boy with gentle features walking beside a girl with wavy chestnut-colored hair. It was Lay and Misa, walking shoulder to shoulder down the street.

“Looks like they’ve finished advising the fan union,” I said. Just as I was about to call out to them, Sasha grabbed my hand.

“Hey, hold on—”

“What is it?”

“Oh... I just think we shouldn’t interrupt them, is all.”

“What is there to interrupt?”

“Look, we just might be, but we might not be, okay?”

Hmm. That was a strange way of putting things.

Under the weight of my gaze, Sasha finally gave in. “Okay, fine!” she snapped. “Don’t look at me like that. If you *must* know, I think Misa might have a crush on Lay.”

“Oh?”

When had something like that happened? How interesting.

“What about Lay?”

“I have no idea what he’s thinking, but he does talk to Misa a lot. Shouldn’t you know better, since you’re both guys?”

“We’ve never discussed the topic.”

“Right, of course.”

Lay and Misa turned the corner onto the main street.

“Let’s follow them.”

“What?! You can’t! That would be imprudent.”

“If you’re not interested, you don’t have to come.”

I turned the corner after them. The main street was rather packed, but I had

no trouble spotting them with my Magic Eyes. From there, if I focused on my hearing, I could make out their conversation.

“Wow. Isn’t it amazing? There are so many stalls!” Misa breathed, looking from one stand to the next.

“Is there a festival going on?” Lay wondered in response.

The pair were their usual cheerful selves.

“I believe it’s the anniversary of the great Hero Jerga’s birth. It was written on the slip of paper we got before the expedition exam. There’s a whole month of celebrations leading up to the date of his birth.”

“I see.”

Lay and Misa strolled excitedly through the street, browsing stall after stall until Misa came to a stop in front of one of them.

Lay looked at her curiously. “Do you want to give it a try?” he asked.

“Yes! Let’s do this!”

The stall that the two had stopped at featured a shooting game. The goal was to hit a target roughly eight meters away, using the wooden bow provided. There were several targets available, each one corresponding to a different prize, and a total of three arrows, giving the player three chances to win.

The currency here in Azesion was different from that of Dilhade, but we had exchanged some pocket money in advance. Misa used some of it to pay the stall owner and picked up the wooden bow. She stood back, took careful aim, and then missed each of her three shots by a mile. Still, she burst into laughter anyway.

“Aha ha, I guess I’m not so good at this after all,” she said, grinning. “Do you want to try too, Lay?”

“Sure, but I’ve never used a bow before.” Lay paid the stall owner and took the bow from Misa. “Which were you aiming for?”

“Um, that one.” Misa pointed ahead. The prize for her selected target was a shell necklace.

“I wonder if I can hit it.” Lay pulled the bowstring and took aim, but the arrow he released barely grazed the target.

“Aw, that was so close! You almost had it.”

“I’ll get it this time,” Lay replied with a brisk smile.

“Are you sure you should be saying that? It’ll be embarrassing if you miss!”

“Want to bet on it?”

“Okay, then. If you miss, you have to buy me a snack.”

“Deal.”

By the time Lay had finished speaking, the arrow was buried in the middle of the target.

“Wow!” Misa exclaimed. “That was awesome. And it’s a bull’s-eye!”

Hmm. That was his first time with a bow? It seemed his growth was just as rapid when he wasn’t using a sword.

“They’re flirting pretty openly, huh?” Sasha muttered from behind me. Her curiosity had clearly gotten the better of her.

“Aren’t they always like this?”

“No, they’re not. The aura around them is at least three times sweeter than usual,” she said somewhat enviously.

“Congratulations!” said the stall owner. “With skills like yours, you’ll have nothing to worry about even when the deepest darkness comes.”

“The deep what?”

“Oops, my bad. That isn’t a topic for a holy birthday. Which prize would you like?” The stall owner was quick to change the topic and motioned to a display of shell necklaces.

“Do you have a one-shell necklace?” Lay asked.

The stall owner reached into the back of the shelf and selected a necklace threaded with two shells. “Here you are. Give it to your girlfriend.”

“Thanks,” Lay said, accepting it. Misa bowed politely before they both left the

stall.

“Aha ha, we gave him the wrong idea about us. Sorry you had to get lumped together with me.”

“I don’t think that’s something to apologize for.”

“Ah, I...I see...” Misa said, laughing shyly.

“Were you okay with that?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“If you’re in love with Anos, you wouldn’t want to be mistaken for my girlfriend, right?”

Misa blinked expressionlessly for a moment, then waved her hands in a panic. “N-No, that’s a misunderstanding! I respect Lord Anos and admire him, but I would never dare think of him that way. The fan union is just a front to carry out Unitarian activities! Besides—”

Lay’s face broke into an easy grin. “Thank goodness.”

“Uh... Thank goodness for what?”

Lay held out the shell necklace he was carrying. “I want to give you this.”

“What?” Misa stared back at him in surprise.



“It’s a thank you for looking after my mother the other day. Sorry it isn’t much.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I didn’t end up being much help in the end. It was Lord Anos that saved your mother.”

“But you risked your life to save her when you didn’t even know me that well. That’s more than deserving of a thank you.”

“When you put it that way, it’s kind of embarrassing.”

“I feel the same way.” Lay stared into Misa’s eyes.

“But...are you sure I can have this?”

“I won our bet, didn’t I?”

“Ah, that’s right.” Misa’s cheeks flushed faintly.

“Will you accept it?”

Misa nodded, bashfully accepting the necklace from Lay and moving to put it on. “Huh? How do you even undo this? The clasp is different from the ones in Dilhade.”

“Give it here.” Lay took the necklace and opened the clasp with ease. He then slipped his arms around Misa’s neck to hook the necklace in place.

She laughed awkwardly. “Sorry about that. How does it look?”

“It looks good on you.”

Misa ducked her head shyly. “It is pretty. I’ve never seen a necklace made with two strings before. Do you think this style’s popular in Azesion?”

“Maybe.”

Their conversation broke off there. Oblivious to the hustle and bustle of the city, they stared into each other’s eyes as though time had stopped.

Eventually, Lay broke the silence. “Shall we take a look at the other stalls?”

“Sure.”

The two set off once again. The street was packed with even more festival-goers than before, and Misa was struggling to keep up.

“Misa,” Lay said, offering her his hand.

“Oh, um...”

“I’m not very good at using Leaks. This way, we won’t get separated.”

“Ah, right. Of course.”

The two linked hands, smiling, and went back to enjoying the festival.

§ 12. Ominous

Ten days later.

Today was the very first day of the educational exchange. After breakfast, Lay and I returned to our room, where he immediately dived into bed.

“Are you going back to sleep?” I asked.

“There’s still time until it begins.”

Drowsy from a full stomach, Lay was soon fast asleep. His heavy breaths filled the room but were promptly punctuated by a light tapping coming from the window. When I nudged it open, I saw Misha standing outside.

“What’s up?” I asked her.

“There’s a kitty. Meow.”

A familiar-looking black cat came running over at Misha’s call. It hopped up onto her shoulder, then over onto the windowsill. It was the Demon Elder Ivis Necron.

“Is there news from Dilhade?”

Like Melheis, Ivis was under orders to investigate Avos Dilhevia’s movements there. For him to come all the way here, the news must be urgent.

“Three of the Seven Demon Elders have disappeared from Dilhade,” the black cat—Ivis—said.

“Oh? Where did they go?”

“They were seen entering Gairadite, which is where I lost their trail. They’ve yet to leave the city, so they must be hiding somewhere.”

Right before the exchange? The timing of this excursion couldn’t be a coincidence.

“Is the Hero Academy involved?” I inquired.

“I can’t yet say for sure. I’ve also got eyes on the members of the Hero

Academy, but not one has made contact with the Elders.”

If the Hero Academy and Avos Dilhevia truly were scheming together, it was easy to imagine why.

“Keep an eye out for them.”

“As you wish. In addition to that, there’s one more thing I wish to report. This intelligence is not related to Avos Dilhevia, but you may still find it of interest.”

“What is it?”

“Whilst in the city, I happened to overhear of a legend passed down amongst the people of Gairadite. They call it the ‘deepest darkness.’”

Hmm. The owner of the shooting game stall had also mentioned something about that.

“What’s the matter with it?”

“It is an oral legend passed down from long ago. The legend is told as such: ‘The deepest darkness shall descend again, engulfing the continent of Azesion. But fear not. Pray with hope—pray for the legendary Hero. His return shall once more be the light that banishes the darkness.’”

It was a pretty unremarkable legend, all things considered.

“I believe the deepest darkness may refer to the Demon King of Tyranny,” Ivis concluded.

“You mean this legend foretold my return?”

“So it seems. Perhaps they have passed it down in order to target you upon your revival.”

“Hmm. Is there any evidence of this?”

“I looked into it out of curiosity, and found that the graduates of the Hero Academy are the ones spreading the legend throughout Azesion. The deepest darkness is said to bring despair to all of mankind, but the heroes have not explained what that means. They say the details must not be known in order to overcome the darkness.”

For such a vague legend to spread so far, mankind must have great faith in

the heroes. Believing in something so incomprehensible wasn't unlike them.

"In other words, unbeknownst to demonkind, the Hero Academy is conspiring to kill the reincarnated Demon King. And this time, they plan to do so, source and all," I concluded.

Ivis nodded. "If it were a legend directly referring to the Demon King of Tyranny, word would have reached us immediately. They use this legend to hide the identity of their enemy, preventing retaliation from Dilhade."

The world was at peace; communication between the two races had been cut off; and yet these humans had been waiting in feigned naivety for my reincarnation.

"It isn't out of the question," I said. "But something else strikes me as odd—the Hero Academy also believes Avos Dilhevia to be the Demon King of Tyranny."

"Are you sure of that?" Ivis asked.

"There's apparently a gag order on the information, but one of the clumsier students let it slip. I wouldn't say I'm absolutely sure, but it seems to be the truth."

Ivis fell silent. Passing down a legend for two thousand years in anticipation of an opportunity to defeat the Demon King made perfect sense, but getting the name of their nemesis wrong was plain silly. It would mean all of the Hero Academy's efforts would have been for a fight against a fake Demon King.

"Did Avos Dilhevia's schemes become entangled with those of the Hero Academy, resulting in this illogical situation?" Ivis asked.

"We can't know for sure, but if three of the Seven Demon Elders have come to Gairadite, it's a possibility."

Avos Dilhevia, the Hero Academy, and me—three factions in the same city, each with their own agenda. There was no way this exchange would end uneventfully—I'd have to prepare for the unexpected.

"Track down the Demon Elders. I shall investigate the Hero Academy. The exchange just so happens to begin today."

“Yes, my liege.” Ivis leaped down from the window and scurried away.

“Work?” Misha asked, standing on tiptoe with both hands on the windowsill. Only her face peered over the edge.

“Work?” I repeated.

“Were you doing Demon King work?”

So that’s what she meant.

“Something like that. It seems we’ve met a spot of bother.”

“Can I help?”

“If the need arises. What were you doing outside?”

“Going to school,” Misha replied matter-of-factly.

“Isn’t it a little early?”

“It’s the first day.”

How typical of her.

I hopped up and over the windowsill, leaving the room through the window. Misha looked up at me in curiosity.

“Let’s go together,” I said.

She smiled brightly. “Okay.”

The two of us lazily set off for the Hero Academy.

Upon our arrival, I held my hand against the gate to find that the conditions of Dejit had been changed. Unlike before, the gate was now conditioned to automatically allow us entry. We continued through it without a hitch and entered the academy grounds.

“Come to think of it, where are we supposed to go?” I wondered.

“The auditorium,” Misha replied, looking around. “Over there.”

She pointed at a sign that indicated the direction of the auditorium. It had most likely been prepared specially for the arrival of the Demon King Academy students. We followed the sign up a flight of stairs and down a long corridor. At its end was a double door with a plaque that read, “Auditorium.”

The doors opened onto a spacious hall with seats more elevated towards the back, which allowed for a clear view of the blackboard from any seat in the room.

“It’s spacious,” I said.

“The exchange involves lots of people.”

Two whole classes from the Demon King Academy were in attendance. The addition of an equivalent number of heroes would pack this hall to the brim.

“Whoa, it’s Anos. Good morning!”

A girl with long black hair waved at us from the front row. It was Eleonore. She ran up the stairs between the seats and came over to greet us.

“You’re here early. Don’t tell me you’re actually a model student.”

“No, I just felt like coming.”

Misha tilted her head. “Someone you know?” she asked.

“Oh, sorry! I should introduce myself. I’m Eleonore Bianca, a third-year student from the Hero Academy.”

Misha bowed her head. “Misha Necron, a first-year from the Demon King Academy.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Misha. You can call me Eleonore.”

Misha nodded.

“While you’re here, Eleonore, there was something I wanted to ask you regarding Hero Kanon—”

I’d just begun my question when a voice interrupted me from the doorway.

“Oooh. I wonder what it could be. Let me in on the conversation, friend from the Demon King Academy.”

The voice had come from the blond-haired boy I recognized from the library. He was accompanied by Ledriano and Raos.

“Good morning. The name’s Heine Kanon Iorg, Creation Knight of the Holy Land and student of the selective class Jerga-Kanon. I am rank three of the Hero

Academy and the inheritor of Hero Kanon's second source."

Hmm. These guys sure liked their long introductions.

"I heard Raos caused you some trouble. Apologies; he has a bit of a short temper."

"It's nothing to apologize for. I was just playing with him a little."

Raos frowned irritably.

"I'm glad to hear you see it that way," Heine replied. "Oh, that's right. I've been meaning to ask—would you be willing to play with me as well?"

"Oh? What did you have in mind?"

"Today's class is all theory, you see, so the plan is to have a little competition between Delsgade and Arclanisca as recreation. The loser has to answer the question of the winner. How's that sound?"

"Very well," I said in agreement.

"Good." Heine used Zecht. The contract simply stated that the loser would answer the winner's question without lying. "By the way, what I want to know is who the Demon King of Tyranny is," he added. "Of course, you can decide after hearing about the competition—"

I signed the Zecht without batting an eye.

"Oooh. Are you sure you should be signing so easily? This isn't a battle where you can brute-force your way to victory."

"It's no loss to me if you know who the Demon King of Tyranny is. Besides"—I decided to enlighten Heine with one simple truth—"whatever the competition may be, there is no way I shall lose."

§ 13. A Class at the Hero Academy

Heine grinned innocently. “You’ll regret looking down on us, friend,” he said before heading down the stairs to the front row seats.

“Anos.” Eleonore beckoned me over to her. When I approached, she leaned in to whisper into my ear. “Hey, did you forget my warning?”

“That nothing has changed in two thousand years?”

She nodded.

“There’s nothing to worry about. No matter what they’re scheming, humans always end up being the ones learning the lesson, as was also the case two thousand years ago.”

Eleonore looked surprised. “What was your name back then, Anos?”

“My name hasn’t changed.”

“Hasn’t changed... So it was originally Anos Voldigoad?”

I nodded. Eleonore hummed in thought. She didn’t seem to recognize it.

“Humans have completely forgotten my name,” I explained.

Eleonore frowned. “No matter how strong of a demon you are, you should still be careful.”

With that final warning, she turned to walk away.

“Eleonore,” I said. She looked back questioningly. “What was your name back then?”

“I’m the same as you—I’ve always been Eleonore.”

Back then, I had known most of the important figures in Azesion, but that name didn’t ring any bells. Anyone who could look directly at another’s source would have been famous, even in the Mythical Age.

“I doubt we’ve met before, since I don’t recognize your name either,” she said.

This meant that she possessed memories of her past life too, in which case she had probably been born after my death—after Avos Dilhevia had changed the name of the Demon King of Tyranny.

“See you later,” she said, leaving to join up with Heine and the others.

“When did you meet her?” Misha asked curiously.

“We ran into each other on the first day here.”

Misha stared at Eleonore, who had taken a seat in the front row. “She seems sad.”

“Who, Eleonore?”

Misha nodded.

“With an easygoing personality like that?”

“That’s just on the surface.”

I glanced over at Eleonore, but she was just as cheerful as I remembered.

“I might be wrong,” Misha added.

“You mean it’s hard to tell?”

She nodded again. “Forget I said anything.”

“No.”

At the very least, Eleonore definitely knew something about what the Hero Academy was up to. She probably disagreed with it, or else she wouldn’t have gone out of her way to warn me. If that were the case, it wouldn’t be strange for her to be suffering behind such a facade.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Misha blinked several times, then smiled softly. “You’re as kind as ever.”

“I simply have faith in your Eyes.”

Misha shook her head. “I mean to Eleonore.”

“Are you saying I’m sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong?”

“Am I wrong?”

“She merely seems to know what happened during my reincarnation. Perhaps Avos Dilhevia’s involved.”

Misha stared at me patiently.

“If she has been dragged against her will into a trivial plot, I may as well help her out while I’m at it.”

Misha giggled. “How Anos-like.”

Her eyes were locked on me as though she were looking straight through me. What an odd feeling.

“Want to sit down?” she asked.

“Sure.”

The seats in the auditorium were divided into two main sections. According to the signs, those on the right of the blackboard were for the Hero Academy, while those on the left were for the Demon King Academy.

Misha and I headed to the left and sat down near the middle of the block. Before long, the room started to fill as more and more students arrived. Misa entered the hall, then Sasha, then the Royalists, and the fan union girls too, whilst on the other side, all the students from the Hero Academy seemed to be present.

Similar to the black and white uniforms of the Demon King Academy, scarlet and indigo uniforms divided the Hero Academy students. Ledriano, Raos, and Heine all wore scarlet, meaning this was probably the uniform of the Jerga-Kanon. Considering the low number of scarlet uniforms, it was a safe bet to make.

It was almost time for class to begin when a finger tapped me on the back.

“Lord Anos, is there something wrong with Lay?” Misa asked worriedly.

Come to think of it, he still hadn’t shown up.

“Last I saw, he’d gone back to sleep.”

Despite today being our first day of classes, he probably hadn’t woken up in time. What a brazen man.

“Well, it’s just one class. I’m sure he’ll show up eventually.”

“Aha ha... Right.”

Just then, we were interrupted by the chime of the bell. It was a much softer sound than the one at the Demon King Academy. Meno entered the auditorium soon after with a middle-aged man in crimson robes, whose stern expression implied a strict personality. He seemed to be a teacher at the Hero Academy.

“Take your seats,” the man said in a low voice. The students still standing hurried to sit down. “As you all know, today marks the start of the educational exchange. Welcome, students of the Demon King Academy. My name is Diego Kanon Ijeiska. I am the headmaster of the Hero Academy and homeroom teacher for the selective class Jerga-Kanon.”

So the selective class was supervised by the headmaster himself—that was quite the investment. And based on the sound of his name, Diego was also a reincarnation of Kanon. In other words, he was a graduate of this place. Those who studied at the academy went on to teach at the academy, ensuring that the same lessons were passed down through the generations.

But from what I could see, Diego was nothing like the Kanon I knew. He was another reject.

“Allow me to introduce our guests. This is Ms. Meno Historia, an excellent teacher who has taught the third-years of the Demon King Academy for many years. Please be on your best behavior.”

Meno took a step forward. “I’m Meno Historia, and I’ll be in your care during the exchange. It’s a pleasure to meet you all,” she said with a friendly smile.

“Now, as today is the first day, our goal will be to get to know each other. Thus, we’ll begin with a light recreational activity,” Diego explained, using magic to write the words *‘Inter-Academy Competition’* on the blackboard.

“An inter-academy competition may sound daunting, but all it involves is a question and answer exchange between students of each school. You’ll compete for the most correct answers.”

Hmm. So the goal was to sound out the other academy’s intelligence and areas of expertise through questions and answers.

“Let’s start with an example, shall we? First, the Hero Academy will present a question. Rank two, Ledriano.”

At Diego’s call, Ledriano stood up.

“Present a question.”

“Yes, sir.” Ledriano pushed his glasses up to the bridge of his nose. “I shall begin with an elementary question: what is the spell formula and effect of Lyfid, the hero spell?”

The Demon King Academy students stirred.

“Huh? How are we meant to know that?”

“Yeah, we don’t learn this sort of thing.”

“Oh, but maybe the third-year students know.”

Meno clapped her hands to silence the noisy first-years. “All right, everyone, quiet please. Rivest, please rise.”

A third-year student wearing black stood up.

“Sorry to single you out. Do you think you can answer?”

“No, I cannot. But Ms. Meno, isn’t there a fatal flaw with this competition? There’s no way for us to know what a foreign academy teaches its students. If the questions aren’t limited to common knowledge, this activity won’t serve as proper recreation,” Rivest said, presenting his point clearly, in a mild tone.

“I believe this is sufficiently well-known,” Ledriano responded. “Phrasing your own lack of knowledge as a problem with the exercise sounds rather questionable, in my opinion.”

Rivest frowned at Ledriano’s blatant criticism. “In that case, would you know the spell formula and effect of Nedra?” he asked, evidently expecting cluelessness from the opposing team.

But Ledriano smirked. “Yes, I do,” he said, drawing the spell formula on the blackboard as he explained. “Nedra is a spell primarily used to transform animals, with the aim of improving their physical abilities. The results, however, can vary depending on the species of animal and skill of the caster. Some

animals will have their intelligence reduced, while others will gain the ability to understand human language. Animals that have been transformed with Nedra are called mutants. Presently, certain conditions must be met for Nedra to be used in Dilhade.”

Rivest was lost for words.

“How’s that?”

Meno checked the spell formula. “It’s correct,” she mumbled, sounding impressed.

“If your third-year students are incapable of answering such an elementary-level question, it may be best to forgo this exercise. The gap is too large for a fair competition—or should we take on some kind of handicap?” Ledriano asked.

“That’s a good point,” Diego said, humming as though to think of a solution. The mockery in his expression was evident. “I never expected not one of you to know about Lyfid.”

“If I could have a moment, Mr. Diego.” Meno brought Diego over to the corner of the auditorium and began to address him in a hushed tone. The other students probably couldn’t hear her, but my ears could pick up every word. “This isn’t what we agreed on. The purpose of today’s recreation was for students from both academies to identify the areas they’re lacking in, was it not?”

“Of course, that is the intention,” Diego replied. “However, I assumed such knowledge would have been common sense across the board. I hadn’t realized the Demon King Academy was so obtuse. No, I must apologize for failing to foresee this.”

The students of the Hero Academy snickered to themselves. Unlike Meno, Diego hadn’t bothered to suppress his voice at all. It was as though he wanted us to hear.

“Everyone,” Diego continued, turning his back on Meno, “it is disrespectful to laugh. No matter how uneducated they may be, they’re doing the best they can.”

For the briefest moment after he'd spoken, a smirk flickered across his face. His statement was phrased to chide his students, but he was clearly treating us demons with contempt. If he were being mindful of the Demon King Academy, he wouldn't have spoken in such a manner.

"I shall think of a way to meet you at your level," he said.

Meno bit her lip. It must have been frustrating, but there was little she could do when they feigned innocence like this. The students of the Demon King Academy would clearly seem inferior after such an underhanded blow.

When it came to nasty battles like this, humans were a step above demons. Showing contempt without voicing hostility was too intricate of a technique for the foolishly honest demons to imitate. It was somewhat unbearable to watch.

"Lyfid is a spell that blesses weapons, armor, and items, granting them holy power," I said, standing up to answer the previous question. "By using Lyfid, the inherent function of the item can be improved. A sword will cut better; a medicine will work more effectively. When mastered, Lyfid can transform a regular item into a magic item, but doing so would require the power of a hundred sages. That is why it's not often used."

I drew the spell formula for Lyfid on the blackboard.

Upon its completion, Meno beamed at me. "Anos..."

"Well?"

"It is correct," muttered Diego, humming to himself. "The spell formula is right as well. However, it is an exaggeration to say that mastering Lyfid can create magic items. At best, it can grant the item a similar power. There has been no precedent of Lyfid creating such a thing. It seems you've done some basic research, but you still have a long way to go if you're being fooled by such exaggerated information."

The Hero Academy students snickered again.

"For a second there, I thought he was decent, but he's just as stupid as the others."

"There's no way it can create magic items. The spell formula only applies

magic to the object externally.”

“Right? Magic items expel magic from the inside, so it’s fundamentally wrong.”

“Seems like he doesn’t even understand the basic concept of magic.”

As expected. Humans and their fixation on common sense.

“Hmm. If you don’t believe me, then I’ll show you.”

I walked up to the front of the auditorium, pointing on my way at one of the decorative swords hanging from the ceiling. The sword detached itself and floated down before Diego.

Once I’d stepped up onto the platform, I held my hand over the sword and drew the magic circle for Lyfid. Mere moments after, I spun the floating sword around so that the hilt faced Diego.

His eyes widened. “This... This can’t be!” He touched the sword with a trembling hand. The next moment, it began to glow.

The Hero Academy students leaned forward to stare in shock.

“Hey, no way. That holy glow is...”

“Impossible! It’s impossible! How...?!”

“A holy sword! He didn’t just make a regular magic item, he made a *holy sword*!”

“Hold on, that isn’t the problem here. He’s a demon! He shouldn’t even be able to use Lyfid! It’s hero magic!”

Meanwhile, Diego stared in silence at the sword. He was still having a hard time believing what he’d witnessed with his own two eyes.

“Cast aside common sense, Diego, and look deeper into the abyss. If even the headmaster doesn’t know the correct answer, the entire student body will be looked down on.”

§ 14. Confusion Among Heroes

I turned around to head back to my seat, accompanied by the cries of the fan union.

“Awaah! Lord Anos really is the best!”

“I know! He does everything you could ask for, right when you need it the most! I’ll follow him forever!”

“Me too! But that teacher... He’s the headmaster, right? Isn’t he meant to be the most important person in the academy and the homeroom teacher of the selective class? Surely it’s humiliating for him to be outsmarted by a Demon King Academy student when it comes to hero magic.”

“Maybe Lord Anos went a little too far. I feel so sorry for their students right now. They’re not used to being Lord Anos’d.”

“Since when did Lord Anos become a verb?”

“Oh no! I just realized something terrible!”

“I have a bad feeling about this, but I’ll ask anyway: what is it?”

“Well, you know how most boys only use demon swords? That means they swing one way, right?”

“So that’s what that means...”

“Well, what about holy swords?”

“What? That means...Lord Anos swings both ways?!”

The excited fangirls squealed in unison as the students of the Hero Academy looked on. Half of them seemed dumbstruck with incomprehension, while the other half seemed humiliated by their inability to comprehend.

“That was a little surprising,” Ledriano said, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “But now I know. The tremendous knowledge about magic, the overwhelming power, and the skill that defies racial norms—it all adds up.” His

eyes glinted from behind his glasses as he declared his conclusion with conviction. “Anos Voldigoad, you are the reincarnation of the Demon King of Tyranny!”

This time, the Demon King Academy students were the ones snickering.

“Pfft. What is that guy blathering about? One answer and spell demonstration, and he’s completely lost his mind.”

“Yeah, doesn’t he know the difference between black and white uniforms? He needs to get his eyes checked. How embarrassing.”

“Cut it out. This guy’s from the Hero Academy, so he probably just doesn’t know the first thing about the Demon King.”

“Then he shouldn’t act like he does.”

“No matter how amazing Anos seems, there’s nothing noble about his magic. Of course, there’s no way a *human* would know that.”

Ledriano frowned skeptically, as though he found it hard to believe he was wrong. “If Anos isn’t the Demon King of Tyranny, then what is he?” he asked sharply, but the Royalists scoffed at him further.

“Ledriano, was it?” Rivest asked, speaking for the rest of his peers. “You seem to know a little bit about demon magic, but do you know anything about the insignia of our academy?”

“Of course. They’re assigned based on the students’ results in the aptitude assessment. Each insignia is either a polygon or star. The more vertices the shape has, the greater the potential of the student.”

“Either a polygon or star, huh? Then what do you think Anos has?”

Ledriano stared at the insignia on my uniform. It was neither a polygon nor a star. “A cross? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“That is the brand of a misfit, Ledriano,” Rivest explained. “Anos is the first misfit in the history of the Demon King Academy—the furthest existence from the Demon King of Tyranny one can get. The entire population of Dilhade scoffs at the thought of him being the Demon King.”

The other seemingly Royalist third-year students spoke up to agree with him.

“That’s right. In other words, your headmaster wasn’t even a match for our biggest failure!”

“I guess that’s the Hero Academy for you.”

“They got bested by a misfit and then mistook him for the Demon King of Tyranny. What an embarrassment.”

“No one at the academy recognizes Anos as such.”

The Royalists must have been angered by the Hero Academy’s earlier attitude. The moment they’d heard me be declared the Demon King, that rage had become too much for them to bear.

“A mere misfit holds this much power... Then what are the other students like?” Ledriano gulped, suddenly struck by fear.

The relationship between the Royalists and me had been fermenting for the past two months. It was a complex situation that even the Hero Academy would have struggled to investigate beforehand.

“Tch. How do we know these guys aren’t just bluffing?” Raos muttered, but Ledriano shook his head.

“The Demon King of Tyranny is so exalted in Dilhade, demons refuse to utter his name aloud. They wouldn’t insult him even as a joke, so they would never brand him a misfit.”

“So what are you saying? That Mr. Diego really knows less about magic than that misfit?”

“Calm down, Raos. It’s a single incident.”

“How do you expect me to do that?! This isn’t any magic we’re talking about. It’s hero magic!” Raos stood up and turned to me. “Hey, you! Anos Voldigoad. You’re the Demon King of Tyranny, aren’t you?”

“I am indeed.”

“Wha...”

My acknowledgment had been so instantaneous, Raos was left all the more dubious.

“While I’m at it,” I said, “I may as well correct you. The Demon King of Tyranny’s name is Anos Voldigoad. Your history books are incorrect, so make sure to amend them.”

“What did you say?!”

The thought of suspecting the name taught by the Hero Academy had probably never occurred to him. Raos looked bewildered, unsure of what to believe.

The Royalists continued jeering.

“Heh, look at this guy. He’s falling for Anos’s bullshit.”

“That’s what arrogance does to you. They’ve fallen for a misfit’s words.”

“He isn’t even a royal. Only a pureblood descendant of the founder can become the Demon King’s vessel!”

“Hmm,” I said, raising my voice over the hubbub. “Don’t trouble yourselves over their words. They’re unable to accept the fact before them and have resorted to this behavior.”

Raos furrowed his brow. “Tch. What is wrong with you demons? None of you make any sense!” he shouted.

Hmm. A group of equally uninformed people were making judgments based on suppositions, continually averting their eyes from the truth. Well, at least it was amusing to watch.

“Okay, that’s enough!” Meno said, clapping her hands together to intervene. “Quiet down, everyone! Mr. Diego, we can count the earlier inquiry about Nedra as our question, so it’s the Hero Academy’s turn to ask something.”

“R-Right, of course.” Diego cast his gaze searchingly over his students.

“I’m looking forward to the next question,” I said, watching him in amusement. “Surely you’ll also know the answer this time, right?”

Diego’s expression stiffened.

“Watch what you’re saying, Anos,” Meno said, scolding me softly. “Mr. Diego simply made a mistake. Even the headmaster of the Hero Academy can’t know

everything there is to know about hero magic. Isn't that right, Mr. Diego?" Meno flashed him an innocent smile, getting her revenge for his earlier comments. She had a good head on her shoulders.

"*Ahem*. It's about time we moved on. I'd love to continue with this activity, but the next class is scheduled to begin."

It seemed he had chosen to flee instead of risking another slipup.

"Wait, is the Hero Academy running away?"

"Aww, it was just getting exciting."

"If they quit now, it'll count as a draw... Tsk, how cunning. They know they'll lose if they go on like this."

"Their teacher was the one who messed up. No matter how you look at it, it's their loss, right?"

As expected of my compatriots. Their taunts were straight to the point.

"Cease this nonsense. If you're going to make such a fuss over this, you can take the win," Diego said.

Heine raised his hand. "Sir, I'd like to continue a little longer. The pride of the Hero Academy is at stake."

Diego stepped down from the platform and marched briskly over to Heine's seat. "Do *not* make a fool of me in front of demons!" he hissed quietly.

Heine looked taken aback. When Diego turned back, he shrugged in resignation.

"The lesson will now resume," the headmaster declared, back to his usual tone.

Pfft. What was that? His actions were so pathetic, one almost felt sorry for Heine and his peers. Even Emilia had been a better teacher than that.

§ 15. Tension

The air in the auditorium was tense. After the earlier disagreement, the Royalists were resentful of the Hero Academy, while the heroes were irate at their own humiliation. In such a state, could they even pay attention to the lesson?

Diego's low voice spoke over the strained atmosphere. "That brings us to holy swords—swords that have been blessed by the gods. A sword becomes a holy sword when it gains holy power and chooses an owner. In other cases, swords become holy swords when a spirit resides within them."

No sooner had Diego spoken than snickering could be heard from the left side of the auditorium. A bitter look flashed across his face before he cleared his throat loudly.

"Of course, there are exceptions to every rule," he added helplessly. "As I have just explained, holy swords are not easy to create. They are extremely rare, extremely valuable items. Demon swords that can be mass-manufactured may be superior in quantity, but holy swords are superior in quality. The powers that dwell within them are what give them their holy glow."

Holy swords *were* superior in quality—this statement was actually fairly accurate. Demon swords could come in weaker varieties, but all holy swords possessed powerful magic. On top of that, most holy swords were enchanted to seal the magic of demons—this was what made these swords perfect for slaying them. This was one of the reasons humans were capable of resisting demons.

"Eighty-eight holy swords are said to exist in this world. The greatest among them is the legendary Holy Sword wielded by Hero Kanon: Evansmana, the Sword of Three Races. Two thousand years ago, humans forged this sword in which a spirit chose to reside, while the gods gave their blessing. That is how the blade came to be."

Hmm. That sure brought back memories. There was more power packed into that thing than any reasonable sword in existence. After all, it was a sword

crafted to destroy me.

“The Sword of Three Races was lost long ago, but they say that one day, when disaster befalls the world, it shall resurrect with the legendary Hero to bring light to the world once more.”

Lost, huh? Two thousand years ago, only one person in Azesion had been able to draw Evansmana, and that person had been Kanon. With its owner gone, the Holy Sword must have vanished as well. Besides, the Demon King it was meant to destroy had been gone for two thousand years.

That said, its loss was debatable. If humans had truly been waiting for my reincarnation, they would need Evansmana to have any chance of defeating me. It was hard to believe that those spreading the rumor of the resurrecting Hero believed in any of it themselves.

“Speaking of two thousand years ago, an interesting tale from around that time has been passed down to today: the tale of the michens necklace. It is a story about love and reincarnation. Have any of the Demon King Academy students heard of it?”

There was no way for demons of Dilhade to know the folktales of Azesion. Naturally, not one hand was raised, which made Diego smile smugly.

Good grief, how petty could one be? It was too embarrassing to watch.

“As expected. Well, your naivety cannot be helped. Then, if one of the Hero Academy students could kindly inform—”

“Michens necklaces are trinkets that humans gifted their lovers before they departed for war,” I said, making Diego grind his teeth.

Hmm. So I was right. Well, there was no need for humanity to revise a common folktale. Diego had probably assumed I wouldn’t know of something so unrelated to magic, but the tale had come about before my reincarnation. Naturally, I’d heard it before.

“Two thousand years ago, during the early stages of the Great War, very few people would return alive,” Diego explained. “And so, humans, in the hopes of reuniting with their loved ones in their next lives, wore michens necklaces. A pair of lovers would take the shell of a michens shellfish from Gairadite Lake

and split it in half to craft two necklaces. One went to the soldier going to war and the other went to their lover.”

Diego glared at me as he spoke. He seemed hellbent on making fools of us. “Michens shellfish, supposed messengers of the gods, live in the holy water of the lake. People back then believed that a shell split in two would guide the lovers’ wandering sources after death, leading them to reunification.”

From what I’d seen in the past, nothing about the michens shellfish’s power could affect a person’s source. But the war had been tragic and cruel—it wasn’t strange for people to cling to superstitions.

Whenever I had killed a human wearing a michens necklace, I would cast Syrica on them without specifying the conditions. Magic had the potential to be swayed by the heart—if their feelings were true, they had a reasonable chance of meeting their beloved one in their next life, but that was no more than a comforting possibility.

“Thanks to Hero Kanon’s outstanding efforts in the final stages of the Great War, Gairadite began to have hope. Soldiers wearing michens necklaces returned and married their lovers. Since then, the michens necklace has taken on new meaning and has become known as the ‘one-shell’ necklace. The two strings are presented together to one’s lover.”

As peace approached, humans had begun to have hope—phrasing it this way sounded good, but truth be told, they’d been trying to escape reality. Only Gairadite, under the command of the Hero, had been able to defend against demon invasion. The humans of the rest of Azesion had clearly been overwhelmed by the stronger force.

“Thus emerged the tradition of proposing by splitting a presented one-shell necklace in two. This tradition has been passed down to the current day.”

When Diego finished his explanation, a pained look crossed his face. He seemed to be refusing to comment on whether my answer had been correct. Right then, the bell chimed, marking the end of the lesson.

“Thus ends our discussion. The next class will start in ten minutes.”

With that, Diego fled the auditorium.

“Hey,” Heine called, grabbing my attention. “It’s a shame we couldn’t settle our competition, huh?”

I took one look at the confident smirk on his face and replied, “What are you saying? The match was decided. Your teacher accepted defeat, did he not?”

“Tsk. How shrewd of you,” he said, undeterred.

If I had considered the match to be called off, the effect of Zecht would have been voided. Just who was the shrewd one here?

“You wanted to know about Hero Kanon, right?” he asked.

“No.”

Kanon had been killed by a human. I would have loved nothing more than to ask about that, but Eleonore had said it was a secret. This wasn’t the time or place.

The contract of our Zecht was to provide one answer for one question. Any question worded vaguely would be met with a vague answer.

“I’m going to ask a different question,” I declared. “What is the name of the Demon King of Tyranny?”

“Hmm... Are you sure I can say it out loud?”

“Go ahead.”

“It’s Avos Dilhevia,” Heine said.

Due to the Zecht, he couldn’t lie—if he had broken the contract, he would have died on the spot. It seemed he truly didn’t know the truth.

“Why did you want to know?”

“I just wanted to check.”

Heine blinked in confusion, then grinned. “The inter-academy exam is tomorrow, you know? This time, we can face each other in a real battle.”

“Ah, so you want to make another bet.”

“Far from it. I just thought we’d have a fair and square fight.” Smiling innocently, he extended his hand for a handshake.

“That almost sounds like you’re accusing me of not playing by the book,” I said, accepting it with a smirk.

“Of course not. I’m looking forward to it. It’s our turn to give you a surprise.”

Heine turned on his heel and led his gang over to the third-year demons. He seemed to say something to them while seeking more handshakes. Just what was he up to?

Meanwhile, the fan union girls were gathering around Misa’s seat.

“Say, Misa, isn’t that one of those necklaces Lord Anos mentioned just now?”

“Ah, yeah. So it seems,” Misa replied hesitantly.

“Hold on a minute! What was that reaction just now? You’re acting suspicious. Misa, who bought you that necklace?!”

Hmm. How astute of them.

“A-Aha ha... What are you saying? I bought this myself!”

“Oh, really now?”

“If you ‘bought it yourself,’ that means someone else bought it for you, right?”

“Yeah, that has to be it!”

“Don’t tell me... Was it Lord Anos?!”

“Y-You traitor!”

“I said I was the one who bought it! It really was me, I swear!”

“Reeeally?”

“R-Really.”

“Swear on your life?”

“Y-Yes...” Misa replied, faltering under their pressure.

Just then, a voice spoke up behind me.

“Huh? Is first period over already?”

I turned around to see Lay. “It ended just now,” I said.

“Ah, I see. I must have overslept a little.” Lay went to find a seat, seemingly unbothered by his tardiness. “Is this seat free, Misa?”

“Y-Yep, go ahead.”

He was sitting down in the seat beside her when his gaze wandered to her necklace. “You wore it to class, huh? That makes me happy.”

“Ah... Aaah... Aha ha...”

Misa glanced awkwardly at the fan union. The girls were staring sharply back, their gazes brimming with curiosity. Finally, she conceded.

“Yes...” Misa admitted, with a sigh of resignation.

The fan union girls recoiled in shock as they processed the information. The next moment, they rushed away from Misa to discuss amongst themselves.

“Sh-She said yes! She said *yes*!”

“That means Lay was the one who gave it to Misa, right?!”

“Huh? But Lay and Lord Anos are...”

“Does that mean...”

“In other words...”

“She’s *indirect dating* Lord Anos?!”

Their conclusion was as baffling as ever.

§ 16. Inter-Academy Exam

The next day.

The students of Delsgade and Arclanisca had gathered at the holy lake outside the city. Now, the teams were busily checking that their equipment was ready for the exam.

After yesterday's class, the two schools had become extremely hostile to one another. As a result, the atmosphere was tense, and no one was making eye contact. It seemed that everyone was eager to prove what they were made of.

Eventually, the bell chimed, signaling the start of class.

"It's time for the inter-academy exam," Diego announced with an eerie glint in his eye. "As you all already know, this is a practical exam conducted using military magic. The Hero Academy will use Asura, while the Demon King Academy will use Gyze. As these two spells each have their own respective traits, this should make for meaningful training for all of you."

"This feels ominous," Misha mumbled beside me.

"Indeed, these are rather harsh conditions to remain calm in. Two thousand years ago, I saw similar expressions on people's faces."

"It's like being trapped in a prison of hatred."

That was certainly an apt description. However, these humans hadn't until now had any contact with demons. Was this a normal amount of hostility in such circumstances? No matter what had happened yesterday, this level of anger seemed excessive.

"The exam shall take place here, at the holy lake—in other words, the battle shall take place underwater. This is in order to prevent collateral damage to Gairadite. The water's surface acts as a natural magic circle to contain the effects of offensive spells. Please take extra care not to cast spells above the water."

Ordinary humans, whose bodies were fragile, unlike those of demons, resided within the walls of Gairadite. By all means, they had to be protected.

“The holy lake has been transformed into an underwater city for the purpose of this exam. There will be buildings and caves within the water—their use will be the key to victory. Now then, are there any questions?” Diego’s gaze swept over the students.

No one raised their hands.

“Ms. Meno, we shall be sending our selective class. The students of the Jerga-Kanon are the most familiar with military magic and underwater training. I believe it would be best for you to send your third-year students, those who’ve had the most training in military magic and combat. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Meno glanced in my direction.

“Or would you rather send the Cohort of Chaos? You have reincarnated students on your side too, no? You may send whichever you prefer.”

“No, I’ll go with the third-year students.”

A creepy grin flashed across Diego’s face. “Let’s all do our best, then.”

“Indeed.”

With the teachers’ conversation concluded, Meno walked back towards us. “Demon King Academy students, gather up.”

The students huddled around her.

“As you just heard from Mr. Diego, it’s time for the inter-academy exam. The third-year students will be the ones to take part. The first-years don’t have experience with underwater battles, so the only team with any real chance of winning would be Anos’s team.”

That much was a given. There were two members of the Cohort of Chaos—Sasha and Lay—in my team. The remaining first-year students were a disorderly bunch.

“However, there are only five people in your team, Anos. According to the academy’s rules, a team requires at least ten members to participate in this kind of exam.”

Come to think of it, Sasha had mentioned something similar a while back, but she'd been talking about inter-class exams.

"You can borrow the remaining five people from other teams, but your unit would be lacking coordination."

"But doing so would be enough to make up the number. In fact, I could defeat the entire Hero Academy single-handed if I so wished."

Sasha glared at me. "Hey, what happened to teamwork? You'd better leave some fun for me."

"I've been looking for a subject to test this sword on," Lay added.

"Aha ha... I might not be much help, but I'll do my best," Misa said, chuckling, and—

"I'll help," said Misha, staring straight at me.

"Meno," I said, "you're already privy to my strength and that of my followers."

"That's true," Meno admitted, before flashing me a wicked grin. "But just between you and me, I'm rather ticked off as well."

"Oh?"

"The exam might be a piece of cake for you, but I want to show those posh brats what my students are capable of."

Hmm. So that's what it was. Meno certainly wouldn't feel any satisfaction simply watching me sweep the floor with them. She wanted the students she'd taught herself to show them a thing or two.

"I understand how you feel, Meno, but the third-year students don't know a thing about these heroes."

"Are you saying you do?"

"Who do you think I am?"

Unable to answer or argue, Meno fell silent.

"Craftiness is part of human nature. Unlike demons, humans specialize in indirect attacks—just like during class yesterday. Sending my team would be the

wiser move.”

“In that case, how about we do it this way?” Rivest said, piping up with a suggestion. “Since we don’t know what tricks they’ll pull, the third-year students will go first to sound them out.”

Hmm. This behavior was rare for a Royalist.

“I don’t know where they got their information from, but the Hero Academy is awfully well informed about us. We’ll be at a slight disadvantage if we go ahead with the exam like this. That’s why we need to get a feel for their movements first.”

That was indeed standard procedure for warfare. Two thousand years had passed since I’d last fought with humans—if they were still serious about defeating the Demon King of Tyranny once and for all, they may have developed new spells. They probably weren’t stupid enough to reveal such a spell here and now, but their fighting style alone would be different to that of two thousand years ago.

“No matter the circumstances, there’s no way I’d lose.”

“You’re as arrogant as the rumors say. I can see why you’re a misfit.” Rivest sighed, then turned to me with a look of all seriousness. “Anos Voldigoad, I am a Royalist. I cannot forgive you for your blasphemous claims. However,” he said, pausing for effect, “when you created that holy sword yesterday, I was elated.”

“Oh?”

“You’re a disagreeable fellow, but you’re one of us. They are not. Their contempt for the Demon King Academy disrespects the Demon King of Tyranny himself.”

Well, in a way, claiming to be the Demon King of Tyranny *was* a form of respect. No one would claim to be someone inferior.

“Leave the first match to us. If you really are the Demon King of Tyranny, you must be used to sitting back imposingly to watch, no?”

He sure had a way with words.

“Is that what you want? To set the stage for me?”

“Today is a contest between schools. There’s no time to be bickering among ourselves in the face of a common enemy. It’s only natural to choose the path to victory.”

Now that’s what I called thinking like a demon—was this a result of Meno’s teachings?

Two thousand years ago, demons had been far from united. Some, like Shin, had been fiercely loyal, whilst others had detested me. Crises had occurred many a time due to ambushes during internal conflict. However, when it came to war against humans and spirits, they would set aside their strife and band together.

Avos Dilhevia had distorted many things, but demons were still the same at the core.

“The Demon King fought for the weak. I am proud to be his descendant. If I have to become a misfit’s sacrificial pawn to honor our revered founder, then so be it.”

Since a Royalist had gone so far as to say this, I couldn’t disregard their efforts. There was no way Rivest truly felt this way either—he was merely willing to lower himself to me in order to live up to his teacher’s expectations.

“Very well. But learning our opponents’ tricks can come second. It’s time for you to show your prowess as our upperclassmen.”

He grinned boldly. “Of course. That goes without saying.”

The impudence. Well, I supposed that was preferable to sudden obedience.

“All right, then it’s decided!” Meno declared. “Team Rivest, are you all ready?”

Standing in an orderly line, Rivest’s team nodded.

“Like I just said,” she said in a hushed tone, “I’m quite irritated right now. If they have something to say, they should get to the point. Especially that Diego! It’s just one indirect insult after another with him, but I have to sit back and take it.”

The look in Team Rivest’s eyes changed. They were ready to exact revenge for

their respected teacher.

“But enough of that! Let’s win this! Let’s show those humans the true power of the Demon King Academy!”

At Meno’s call, the third-year students let out a roaring war cry.

§ 17. Holy Lake Barrier

“The inter-academy exam between the Hero Academy’s selective class Jerga-Kanon and the third-years of the Demon King Academy shall now commence. May you all fight fairly in the name of your founders,” Diego said, signaling the start of the exam.

The rest of us were to remain on the bank of the lake, watching the underwater proceedings through Limnet. The falcon familiars of the Hero Academy were already gliding through the water, transmitting what they saw with their Magic Eyes.

“I’m sorry, Anos,” Meno said, coming up to me.

“For what?”

“For Rivest’s behavior. His words were pretty harsh.”

“It’s not like the Royalists’ antics only began today.”

Meno gave me an apologetic look. “Rivest is actually a very gentle boy. He just holds a lot of respect for the Demon King of Tyranny, is all, and takes pride in his lineage.” She gazed into Limnet. “Rivest may be the top student among the third-years right now, but he struggled a lot when he first came to the academy. He couldn’t cast Gyze, so he didn’t even qualify to become a team leader.”

“Hmm, how surprising.”

“Right? He didn’t like conflict, so deep down, he probably rejected military and attack magic.”

“That’s certainly uncharacteristic of a demon.”

“Maybe so. Back then, he actually hated the Demon King for all his atrocities. He couldn’t accept himself for inheriting that blood.”

That must have been quite the hardship. Regardless of forebears or bloodline, he was still himself. Well, I supposed it wasn’t easy to think that way in this era.

“So what changed him?” I asked.

With a soft expression, Meno recalled the occasion. “A year ago, I was in charge of teaching the second-year students’ Gyze classes. That was when he confessed to me that he didn’t like to fight and was thinking of quitting the academy.”

Classes at the Demon King Academy were biased towards combat. His feelings were understandable for someone who shied away from it.

“That’s why I told him this: ‘Gyze may be military magic developed for war, but I believe the founder did so to protect demonkind. Otherwise, why would the Demon King of Tyranny, the target of so many enemies, bother to share his power with his followers?’”

Oh? What an interesting take.

“Is that written in the textbooks?”

“If everything were written in textbooks, there’d be no need for teachers.”

Indeed. That was a very reasonable point.

“Wouldn’t you agree, Anos?”

“Hmm. Who knows,” I replied stoically, prompting Misha to glance my way. She smiled as if she saw right through me.

“‘Even if you disagree with war,’ I told him, ‘having the power to protect others is vital,’” Meno said. “‘Perhaps the founder was just like you—perhaps he didn’t want to fight either.’ After that, Rivest turned over a new leaf. He began to revere the founder and accept himself.”

“And then he went too far and became a Royalist.”

Meno smiled. “Maybe just a little. The Demon King of Tyranny became someone special to him, even more so than he is to the average demon.”

So that’s why he disliked me so much for naming myself the Demon King of Tyranny. He probably also felt a lot of respect for the mentor that had set him on the right path. It must have taken quite the resolve to lower himself before me in order to meet that mentor’s expectations.

Meno smiled again. “Just watch. My students are my pride and joy—they’ll definitely win.”

Limnet showed both teams getting ready to make their moves. The Jerga-Kanon had set up their base at a temple within the underwater city, while Team Rivest had stationed themselves near a cave by a rocky mountain. They were all using Koko to breathe underwater, so there was no risk of drowning unless they ran out of magic.

“Preparations are complete, Lord Rivest!” the members of Rivest’s team said confidently. They addressed him politely, out of respect for either his family or abilities. That, or their tone was a result of his rise from struggling student to top of the class.

“Do it.”

“Right away!”

First, Team Rivest constructed a Demon King Castle at the camp, as was standard procedure. The castle was tall and narrow like a tower. An intense water current rushed fiercely around it, creating a barrier that prevented entry. Nearby boulders and wildlife dragged into the current were ripped to shreds.

It seemed the terrain itself boosted the strength of water-based magic. The two Guardians on their team were notably skilled to construct a castle and such a powerful whirlpool using only the magic flowing around them.

“Pretty castle,” Misha murmured as we watched through Limnet.

“They *are* third-years, after all. A castle like that is still too much to ask for from those in our year,” I commented.

Misha cocked her head in confusion.

“Apart from you, I mean.”

Satisfied, she nodded at that.

“First, Shamans will scout the enemy,” Rivest said, instructing his team. “A major difference between Asura and Gyze—aside from the spells assigning a different leader, the Chosen—is the role of the Wiseman as opposed to the Guardian. Instead of building a fixed stronghold like the Demon King Castle, the Wiseman is capable of casting special support.”

At least the third-years had done their research on Asura.

Rivest's team consisted of three Shamans: one in charge of setting up a magic net to locate the enemy, another charged with using their Magic Eyes to detect changes in the magic around them, and the last responsible for controlling the fish in the lake in order to track their enemy's movements. However, the hero they were searching for in particular was the Wiseman.

Asura was a spell that focused on strengthening the Chosen—for example, Mages blessed the Chosen with stronger attack magic, while Healers strengthened the Chosen's healing magic. In exchange, these team members would suffer the demerits.

However, Wisemen were a little different from the other Asura classes: by wielding the magic of the others under Asura's effect, they could cast support magic on the entire team. The presence of a single Wiseman strengthened every other enemy—which made them the highest priority in terms of elimination.

"Lord Rivest," one Shaman said, catching the attention of the demon team's leader, "there's something strange going on. The fish familiars I sent out aren't moving as ordered."

"The magic net was cut off as well."

"The same goes for my Magic Eyes. I can't see their magic."

That meant our third-years couldn't do any scouting at all.

"It's like they're applying anti-magic to block our spells," a Shaman added.

Rivest thought carefully. "Form three squads, each made up of a Cavalier, a Shaman, and a Healer, and head out to scout the area in person. Avoid all unnecessary combat. If you see anything strange, report back immediately using Leaks," he ordered.

"Understood."

A total of nine demons departed the castle. Each squad took a different route towards the underwater city, where the Hero Academy students had set up base. They proceeded without incident for some time, until...

"Look at this lot rushing towards death like moths to a flame."

Raos had appeared at the city entrance.

“Lord Rivest, the Chosen has appeared!” a Shaman exclaimed over Leaks. However, there was no response. “Lord Rivest? Lord Rivest!”

No matter how many times the Shaman called out, they were met with silence. Their Leaks had been forcibly cut.

Raos laughed. “Do you know why you can’t use Leaks?” he taunted, clenching his fists. Holy fire flared up around them, which burned brightly despite being underwater.

“We’ll buy time. Hurry back to the castle!” the Cavalier shouted, reaching for his sword, but he couldn’t draw it. “What...?”

Taking advantage of the moment, Raos closed in on the Cavalier. “Take that!”

“Shoot— Gah!”

Raos slammed his burning fist into the Cavalier’s solar plexus. The body, engulfed in holy flames, bent and collapsed to the ground.

“Tch!” The Healer tried to cast Enchel, but the magic circle disappeared without a trace. “What? Don’t tell me...”

“So you’ve finally noticed. You demons have lost your magic.” Raos took a step forward. The Healer tried to keep his distance, but his feet could only move sluggishly. “But it’s not only your magic you’ve lost—you’ve lost your physical abilities too! Now you’re no better than a frail human!”

The Healer was enveloped in flames, and the Shaman soon followed him.

“Ha. What a disappointment. I don’t even need to draw my sword,” Raos said, before using Leaks. “*Heine, Ledriano, I’m done over here.*”

“I’m done too.”

“I’ve finished up here as well. Now the demons’ Eyes are no more. It’s time to take the fight to their castle.”

Raos left the underwater city and headed for Rivest’s base.

“Strange,” Meno muttered, watching the scene through Limnet. “If the magic field is tainted enough to weaken their magic, the Hero Academy should be

weakened as well. They're using Leaks like normal, though. It would be one thing if there were a great difference in their power, but Raos's Leaks showed less magic than usual."

She thought over the situation before continuing. "Team Rivest's magic has been sealed, so there has to be some kind of spell at play, but there's no sign of that spell affecting the Hero Academy students. If it's not a spell directly applied to one's opponent, the range has to be absurdly large." Meno grimaced, clutching her head in her hands.

"Hmm. So you think the Hero Academy's cheating?" I asked.

"I have my suspicions, but there's no proof. If they claim it's because they're superior to us, there's nothing we can do," she said, unhappy with her own conclusion.

"There is proof."

"Huh?"

"They're using holy water that's been mixed into the lake. Holy water is a shapeless magic item. Its power can be called upon to benefit humans and inhibit demons."

The gods had bestowed holy water upon humans for the purpose of sealing demons. Two thousand years ago, very few had been able to harness its power, but it seemed someone had inherited the ability.

Holy water was a highly adaptable item, but this was my first time seeing it used in such a way. They must have devised a clever way of concealing the item's presence.

"Basically, they've drawn a magic circle in the lake using holy water," I explained.

Meno strained her Magic Eyes as she stared into the water. "I can't see a thing. How are you supposed to see water within water anyway?"

It seemed the circle was too well hidden for her to make out.

"Let me show you." I contacted Meno by her Eyes, drawing a magic circle over them. By sending my magic into that circle, I enhanced her vision.

“Wait, this is...!”

“There, now you can identify magic better. You see before you what I see.”

The spell was only possible because of Meno’s highly trained Magic Eyes. Anyone with weak Eyes would risk losing their vision.

“I can’t believe it. I can see magic better than matter...” Meno directed her gaze to the scene shown over Limnet. With her newly honed Eyes, she could no doubt see the circle of holy water sitting within the lake. “That’s a spell formula for a barrier, right? I can’t tell what its effects are, but...”

“It draws out the power of the holy water, enhancing the magic of humans within the barrier, while simultaneously sealing that of demons. Holy water flows from the lake itself, allowing the Hero Academy to supply the circle with endless magic, while demons are kept completely helpless.”

“How could they do such a thing? That’s far more than just a locational advantage. It means there’s an endless source of magic that only the heroes can use!” Meno cried in resentment.

I had known there was a spring of holy water there, but it was harmless in its natural state. Who would have thought these humans would harness its power for a mere exam? Were they so desperate to win, they were willing to leave a trail of grudges? Or had they thought we wouldn’t notice?

“So what’s the plan?” I asked. “This won’t be an even match like this.”

“No, thank you. This is proof enough. I’m going to raise a protest.”

With a furious look on her face, Meno stomped off towards Diego.

§ 18. A Student's Wish

Back at the Demon King Castle, Rivest's subordinates were panicking over the disconnected Leaks.

"None of the squads are replying, Lord Rivest!"

"What shall we do? If we can't reach them, they're either in combat or have already been defeated. We should have sent an assault squad instead of a reconnaissance unit."

"How strange..." Rivest responded thoughtfully. "There's no way they would've been defeated without a chance to use Leaks. They must have been caught in some kind of trap. We'd better take things cautiously, or they'll have us right where they want us." With no knowledge of their enemies' movements, Rivest decided it was best to wait. "It's not ideal, but we're going to hold the castle."

Staying within the castle gave the King—that is, Rivest—a location buff. Sieges were the core of Gyze battles.

"Start stockpiling your magic," he ordered. "The moment they appear, we'll show them what we're made of!"

"Understood!"

As Rivest's team awaited the enemy's arrival, they quietly prepared a greater magic spell. Then, after some time, Raos appeared to the east of the castle.

"Ha! There they are. Let's get this over with," he said, grinning.

"You're so hasty, Raos," Heine chided, standing at the castle's western wall. "At least let us play with them first."

Ledriano appeared to the north. "Don't let your guard down, you two. There's no knowing what tricks they have up their sleeves. Proceed with caution."

"There they are!" one of Rivest's subordinates cried. "There's a Chosen to the north, east, and west!"

“So they split their main force into three. But that makes no difference. Let’s go! Show them the strength of the Demon King Academy!”

“Roger that! Prepare Rio Eirth!”

“Preparing Rio Eirth! Commence magic circle construction!”

A giant magic circle appeared at the castle, forming ten cannons on the perimeter.

“Supplying magic!”

The power supply activated the magic circle, lighting the cannons at their muzzles.

“Ready to fire!”

The cannons took aim at Raos, Heine, and Ledriano.

“All right, here goes,” Rivest muttered, undaunted. Then he gave the order. “Fire Rio Eirth!”

The next moment, the lake was filled with holy light. Magic links between Raos, Heine, and Ledriano formed a triangle. A huge magic circle appeared at its center, emitting light that covered the castle.

“L-Lord Rivest, our magic supply is rapidly decreasing. We cannot maintain Rio Eirth!”

The magic circle within their castle was fading fast. In fact, the whirlpool surrounding the castle had already disappeared.

“My magic’s weakening!” a Guardian called. “At this rate, the castle will...!”

At that, the Demon King Castle snapped cleanly in half. A surge of water flooded the building, rushing straight through the middle.

“Waaaaaah!”

The walls, floor, and ceiling were torn apart by the current, which in turn scattered the team members and devastated the lake. Rivest alone managed to cast Fless and escape the wreckage. Once out, he sent a message to his team.

“Everyone, stay calm and prepare for enemy attack. I’ll help you out right away!”

“Heh. Can you really do that?” Heine asked, appearing behind Rivest. “Say, friend, if you’re the King, does that mean you’ll be a demon lord one day?”

“What about it?”

Heine chuckled. “Take a look over there. Can you see what’s going on?”

Rivest turned in the direction Heine was pointing. There was a light blinking in and out of view. Between the scattered rubble of the destroyed castle, holy fire was being shot at the scattered students.

“I-It’s no good, I can’t maintain my wards at all— Gyaaaaaah!”

“Aaaaaagh!”

Screams of agony echoed through the water. The demon team’s voices were carried to Rivest by their barely functioning Koko.

“Ha! Weak. Demons sure are pathetic!” Raos was the one firing Cyfer continually, burning one student after another. With their anti-magic and healing magic sealed, the students could only spread out helplessly in the water.

Heine burst into laughter. “Ha! How unsightly. Can someone so pathetic really be a future demon lord? You’ll be a laughingstock. What do they even teach you over there? To watch on as your comrades die?”

Rivest glared furiously at Heine, who only laughed harder. The King tried to draw his demon sword from its sheath, but he lacked the magic to even do that.

“Shall I tell you why your magic’s so weak right now?” Heine asked Rivest mockingly. “The holy water in this lake creates a rather special magic field. If you can harness its power correctly, you can use it as a source of magic. If you can’t, however, it becomes a hindrance to the use of your own. Not that you’ll get what I’m saying. It’s just too complicated for you, am I right?”

Heine made a show of controlling the holy water in front of Rivest.

“So that’s it... But you should have stayed quiet about that until the end!”

Having analyzed Heine’s magic, Rivest attempted to copy him. Of course, that was a trap.

“Ah... Gah...!”

Holy water seeped into Rivest’s source. Although holy water enhanced the magic of humans, it acted as a poison to demons. Its holy power tore Rivest apart from the inside out. Blood began to seep from his entire body.

“Aha ha ha! What a failure! I guess that’s too complicated for a Demon King Academy student after all!” Heine exclaimed, cackling, before raising his right arm. “Come to me, my holy sword: Zere, Sword of Sacred Land!”

Light gathered in his palm, materializing into a sword with a dark-green aura. Heine grasped it by the hilt.

“Go on, hurry up and shield yourself! I’ll make sure to go easy on you, but you’ll die if you take a direct hit!”

Heine swung the holy sword down. A tremendous rush of magic split the water in two. The falcon familiar must have been caught in the attack, as the image abruptly cut off.

“Rivest!” Meno screamed on the bank of the lake. She whirled around to Diego with the fiercest scowl I’d ever seen from her. “Evacuate the students immediately! If anything happens, the Hero Academy will be held accountable!”

Diego sighed heavily. “You may say that, but we merely hadn’t expected the Demon King Academy students would be so frail. In the last several hundred years, we haven’t lost one student during exams. Of course, we can send for help immediately, but I’m baffled as to why you wish to hold us accountable for your students’ own failures.”

Meno ground her teeth. There were probably many things she wanted to say to him, but she swallowed her words in favor of saving her students. “Stop flapping your tongue and save them already! What are you thinking?!”

“I’ve sent my familiar to call for someone. This is a rather sudden turn of events, so it may be some time before we receive a response. Please be patient.”

Meno was appalled. Team exams were mock warfare, so injuries were common. As teachers, she and Diego always had to be prepared for the worst. Meno probably hadn’t imagined there to be no emergency measures at all.

Unable to wait any longer, she began running towards the lake.

“Hold up,” I said, grabbing her by the shoulder before she could leap in. “There’s little any demon can do within that barrier.”

“But I can’t wait any longer!”

“Not even five seconds?” I asked.

Her eyes widened.

Accompanied by a large spray of water, the defeated students rose out of the lake and floated over to the bank, where they began to slowly descend.

“You did this, Anos...?” Meno asked.

“Fishing them out is easy when they’re not fighting,” I replied, laying the students down on the bank.

“Ah, Rivest!” Meno ran over to the third-year, who was in worse condition than the others. When she reached his side, she immediately drew the circle for Enchel—but the wound didn’t change at all. “Why...? Why won’t it work...?” Meno tried to pour more magic into the spell, but the blood flowing from Rivest’s body continued pouring out. “Why?! Please work, please!”

“Ms. Meno, it’s no use. He’s been branded with a stigma,” Diego stated callously.

Meno shot him a sharp glare as she continued working the spell. “What do you mean?”

“When one is deeply wounded by holy magic—just like your student there—a stigma develops. At this stage, no healing magic will have any effect. You can only pray he has enough life force to fight through it.”

“Treat him immediately!”

“Did you not listen to a word I said? That’s impossible.”

“This is the Hero Academy’s responsibility! What were you people thinking, using such dangerous magic in an exam?! I’ve protested your use of holy water this entire time!”

“But it isn’t dangerous magic—no Hero Academy student has ever been

branded with a stigma. This is entirely the fault of the Demon Academy students' own weakness. As I explained earlier, holy water is not a magic item as you claim. As far as the academy is concerned, it is no more than a troublesome magic field. Your students were merely unable to adapt to their environment."

"I can prove it's a magic item!"

"Be my guest, but even if it were, we would be unaware of its uses. I'd understand if we had set such a thing up intentionally, but these false accusations are concerning to hear. We should just consider this an unfortunate accident—a lesson to be learned for the future."

His ability to talk in circles was truly commendable.

"I'm happy to dispute the use of holy water at a later time, but shouldn't you be prioritizing your students?"

Meno was unable to respond as Diego walked away. She continued casting healing magic on Rivest, but he showed no sign of recovery. She looked at me pleadingly. "Anos..."

"Come now, what's with that worried look? Stigmas are easy to treat."

"Really?!"

I nodded. Kneeling beside Rivest, I placed my hand where the mark had formed—over the hole that Zere had punctured.

At that moment, Rivest's hand twitched to life and latched on to my arm.

"Sorry, miss..." he said to Meno. "I couldn't meet your expectations..."

Hearing this, Meno looked ready to cry. "No, I'm the one who's sorry. It's my fault, Rivest. I shouldn't have exposed my students to danger over such trivial matters. I've failed as your teacher."

"That's not true..." Rivest murmured with difficulty. "You're the best teacher there ever was...and I wanted to prove that..." He opened his other hand. "Take this..." he said. He was clutching an insignia of the Hero Academy.

"What's that?"

“It’s a magic tool...used to control the holy water... Their power is halved without it...”

Ah, so that’s how they’d concealed the holy water.

“Just before the holy sword pierced me...I redirected all the magic from my wards into my Eyes.”

Rivest had left his own body defenseless in order to find the item controlling the holy water, ultimately risking his life. What commendable determination.

“Misfit,” Rivest said to me, “you’re a disagreeable man...the kind that I detest the most...”

“I can imagine.”

The grip on my arm tightened. “But today, for the first time, I wished...I wished I had your power...no matter the impurity of your bloodline...”

“It’s okay, Rivest!” Meno insisted. “The Hero Academy was cheating. They prepared an underhanded method of defeating us. I’ll bring this to the Seven Demon Elders as an official objection.”

Rivest gritted his teeth, then shook his head, tears spilling from his eyes. “I swallow my pride to ask you this, Anos... Please...”

“Say no more, Rivest.”

I wasn’t cruel enough to make him ask what he so despised to ask. I knew exactly how he felt. We both knew an official objection wouldn’t effectively settle this matter.

“You’ve fulfilled your duty admirably. You’ve shown us the spell formula of the holy water and revealed the existence of the tool controlling it.” With his stigma removed, I got to my feet. “Leave the rest to me. I’ll give them a taste of their own hellish medicine.”

§ 19. Team Anos's Deployment

I calmly made my way over to where the Hero Academy students were gathered. Lay, armed with Siegesta, flanked me on one side, while Sasha, clad in her Phoenix Mantle, accompanied me on my other. Misha walked beside her in silence.

Misa brought along the eight fan union girls, flashing me a look as though to ask if that would pose any issue, but I nodded to welcome them. With them, we were a total of thirteen—enough to qualify for the exam.

“Heine,” I called out. He was sitting on a boulder on the bank of the lake, lazing about with an innocent smile.

“Hey, friend, your upperclassmen were pretty weak. Were they really third-years? Surely demons aren’t *that* weak, right?” he taunted, laughing in an attempt to provoke me.

“They’re as you saw, though the real Hero Kanon would have no need for holy water.”

Heine’s smirk twitched. “What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying you’re nothing more than a cheap imitation. Hero Kanon was merciful to his enemies even in the midst of war. He was in constant conflict with himself. A true hero has both strength and courage—and you lack both.”

“Oh? So you don’t think I’m a hero. You must be an expert,” Heine spat. “What do you even know about humans? You’ve reincarnated, right? You may have met the great Hero before, but we can hear his voice much clearer than you can right now.”

Hmm. That was an interesting thing to say. I’d have to beat the details out of him later.

“Now what? Will you be playing with us next, demon?”

“I don’t know if there’ll be much playing going on. I may just quash that

worthless pride of yours immediately.”

Behind Heine, Ledriano pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, and Raos stood up, cracking his knuckles. All the students of the Jerga-Kanon seemed ready and raring to go.

“I don’t mean to dampen your spirits, but your opponents will not be the Jerga-Kanon,” Diego said, strolling back up to us, “or else they’ll be fighting consecutive battles. I know you demons would like nothing more than to target an enemy on the verge of exhaustion, but we don’t allow such cowardly tactics here. Ah, or is that the kind of shameless education they provide at the Demon King Academy?”

Diego looked me slyly in the eye, then continued. “Unfortunately, this is the Hero Academy. You’ll have to refrain from using such tricks today. I’d prefer to leave your match against the Jerga-Kanon for another day, but I can understand your desire for immediate vindication. Let’s compromise by having you battle our third-years beforehand. How about it?”

I see. So he wanted us to reveal our methods while letting the Jerga-Kanon rest—even though we would be the ones fighting a consecutive battle. Did he plan on rushing us into the next match when we were done? He seemed the type to favor petty tricks like that.

“Have it your way,” I said, conceding. “It makes no difference to me.”

Diego smirked—his scheme had gone to plan. In all likelihood, the holy water barrier could be controlled by anyone. Once the other students had worn us down as much as they could, the Jerga-Kanon would finish us off.

“Then let’s begin immediately. Which base will you take?”

“You can have the underwater city,” I replied curtly, before leaving with my team for the lake.

“Oh, I should probably let you know in advance,” Lay piped up with his usual smile. “I can’t actually use Koko.”

“Wait, what are you going to do? The battle is underwater!” Sasha exclaimed. Indeed, Lay’s confession was unexpected for someone as skilled as he was.

“It’s fine. I’ll just hold my breath.”

Sasha looked at him like he was crazy. “What?”

“Anyone else who can’t use it?” Misha asked, calling for a show of hands. The eight fan union girls awkwardly raised theirs.

“We need them to make the numbers and all, but we can’t just let them die,” Sasha said, pondering the issue. “Can we let them float on the lake?”

“Shall I support them?” Misha suggested.

If Misha used Koko on them, they’d be able to move around underwater.

“But that’s too much of a burden on you, Misha,” Sasha replied in protest.

“There’s no need to think so hard over it.” I cast Koko and entered the lake. Using Fless to glide underwater, I made my way to the caves where our base was.

“Hey, is it really okay to be so reckless?” Sasha asked, following along behind me. I could hear several splashes in the distance—the Hero Academy students had entered the lake. The underwater city was a short swim from the edge, so they could promptly secure their position and set up their barrier.

Once the rest of my team had joined us, Diego contacted us all using Leaks. “Both sides, are you all ready? The inter-academy exam between Demon King Academy first-years and Hero Academy third-years shall now commence. May you all fight fairly in the name of your founders.”

Diego gave the signal.

“We have to do something about that barrier first,” Sasha said, immediately ready to form a strategy. “We’ll be goners with it up.”

“Do we steal their insignias?” Misha asked.

The sisters looked at me.

“The barrier is sustained through the power of the insignias—they control the flow of the lake water, allowing the holy water to be carried wherever they want. That’s how the magic circle is being sustained. Thus, we just need to stop that water flow,” I explained.

“But how do we do that?” Misa asked.

“It’s simple.” I held out my hand and drew a magic circle. The circle expanded before me, emitting a violent surge of magic particles.

“What...?” Sasha, who had seen my magic countless times, couldn’t contain her surprise. “H-Hold on a second; this amount of magic is absurd! You’ve never used anything like this before, not even during self-study!”

“You should have paid more attention in history class, Sasha. Two thousand years ago, the Demon King of Tyranny used a certain spell to scorch Dilhade to its foundations.”

Sasha looked dumbfounded. “Don’t tell me you’ve not fought seriously before now.”

“Of course not. If I don’t suppress myself, I’ll destroy the entire nation. But since this barrier can suppress the power of demons, it should all work out just fine.”

A black sun emerged from the center of the magic circle. In spite of everything, I still had to hold back.

“Brace yourselves, humans. This is the power of a Demon King.”

The black sun filled the entire bottom of the lake. Every droplet of water, holy or otherwise, was vaporized by Jio Graze. The lake floor became as dark as nightfall as it was scorched.

“Hmm. There’s no need to hold your breath any longer, Lay,” I said.

Light eventually cut through the darkness, illuminating the area. Every last drop of the holy lake had dried up, and the third-year heroes lay unconscious in the grounds of the former underwater city.

“Controlling the flow of water is useless when there’s no water left. Even with the holy water spring here, they’ll be unable to draw the circle for their barrier.” With my Magic Eyes, I cast my gaze over at the bank to see Diego trembling where he stood.

“That’s impossible...” he muttered, pale with shock and fear. “The holy lake... The divine water bestowed upon us by the gods...dried up with a single spell...”

He stared out at the parched lake, completely awestruck. Not a single third-year student lying down there could move—they were incapable of continuing the battle. I sent my magic over to them and used it to float them back up to the bank.

“Hmm. The prelude ended with a single spell. It seems the third-year heroes are no big deal either,” I thought, projecting my voice through Leaks to the Jerga-Kanon. Raos, Heine, and Ledriano all stood on the bank, muttering to themselves.

“That bastard... He evaporated the lake, barrier and all, in one fell swoop. Is he a monster? He can’t be a reincarnation of anyone but the Demon King.”

“He’s clearly on a different level than their third-years. Honestly, if he’s the kind of demon our ancestors had to face, I’m shocked humans have survived till today.”

“But the stronger the opponent, the greater the satisfaction when they surrender to us. I’m sure it’ll work out if we can seal him inside a barrier.”

“What are you all muttering about? It’s your turn next. Get down here,” I said.

§ 20. 1,088 Barriers

The heroes on the bank stood up and headed towards the barren lake.

“Hey, children,” Diego called after them, still reeling in shock.

“It’ll be fine, Mr. Diego,” Ledriano replied. “We’ll use our secret weapon.”

“Hold it. You are not to act on your own.”

Raos cracked his knuckles. “You don’t expect us to hang about after they made fools out of us, do you?”

“Just watch,” Heine added. “We’ll teach those demons a lesson.”

Heine jumped down to the lake floor, followed by Ledriano and Raos. The other Jerga-Kanon students in their scarlet uniforms all descended after them.

“Halt! I did not authorize this! You cannot start the match of your own accord!”

“The inter-academy exam between the selective class Jerga-Kanon of the Hero Academy and Team Anos of the Demon King Academy shall now commence,” Meno declared, using Leaks in Diego’s place to announce the start of the match. “May you all fight fairly in the name of your founders.”

“Ms. Meno, I advise you to refrain from acting on your own.”

“Oh? You said yourself that the Jerga-Kanon would be up to fight again after your third-years. Don’t tell me you’re scared of losing.”

“That’s hardly my point. My concern is for the city of Gairadite, whose structure is inherently threatened without the barrier over the lake.”

While Diego was still speaking, I cast a large anti-magic barrier to cover the lake’s former surface.

“There,” I said over Leaks once the barrier was complete. “Now it’s even safer than before.”

Meno nodded. “Since one of our students will be fighting while maintaining

that barrier, we'll be at a disadvantage. Surely you're not thinking of running while you have the upper hand."

Diego glared at her resentfully. "Do as you wish," he spat, before sending a message directly to the Jerga-Kanon. "*Listen up, Ledriano. Know your goal—if you're going to call upon our trump card, make sure you win no matter what. Teach them to never look down on us again. You hear me?*"

"Understood."

Following Ledriano's reply, Diego cut the Leaks.

"Now," I said, casting a new magic circle. With the match underway, there was no need to delay any further.

"I told you to leave some fun for me," Sasha muttered beside me.

"Tell that to them," I said, casting a Jio Graze of the same scale as before. The enormous black sun hurtled towards the dried-up city.

"*De Ijelia.*"

All of a sudden, four vast magic circles appeared to the north, south, east, and west of the city, made of wind, earth, water, and fire, respectively. The four magic circles matured into anti-magic, each amplifying the effects of the others.

Jio Graze's path was blocked by the wall, its power reduced as it progressed. Then the black sun collided with the holy barrier, crackling noisily as it burned. The shock wave of the impact sent a violent wind through the area.

The next moment, a figure leaped into view. A light flashed, and the black sun was split down the middle. Illuminated by a blinding glow, the two halves of the spell disintegrated. The figure that had cut it landed on the ground.

My Eyes locked on to the figure—a young girl with purple hair tied back, a holy sword glinting in her grasp.

"Hmm. Jio Graze *had* been weakened by the barrier, but I'm still impressed that she cut through it so easily," I said.

Come to think of it, I had yet to meet the top-ranking student of the Hero Academy. Assuming they were in the Jerga-Kanon class with the others, could that student be the girl before me?

“Looks like these heroes can still put up a fight.”

Sasha shot me an unimpressed glare. “So what are you going to do? Knock their socks off with an even stronger Jio Graze?”

“I could, but I won’t be able to control the spell at any higher output than this. If I wiped out their sources, we’ll have a disaster on our hands.”

This wasn’t war. There was no need to go so far for a mere exam.

“We’ll take the fight to them.” I took a measured step forward, setting off towards our opponents’ city.

“What about the Demon King Castle?” Misha asked.

“From what I can see, the barrier around the city is small yet powerful. By overlapping four layers of different elements, they have enhanced its magic-sealing potential. As long as they’re threatened by my Jio Graze, they won’t want to leave that barrier.”

Building a castle here and waiting them out would cause nothing more than a stalemate.

“But we’d be at a disadvantage if we built it in there, right?” Sasha asked. “We’d just suffer the same fate as Team Rivest.”

Lay smiled mischievously. “Won’t the barrier disappear if we defeat its casters? No doubt those reincarnations of Kanon are behind this.”

“But they’ll be inside the barrier,” Misa replied, frowning in thought, “so we’d have to fight in there with them anyway, right?”

The fan union girls nodded in agreement.

“I could build the castle inside,” Misha suggested. “The effect of the castle should offset the effect of the barrier.”

If a Demon King Castle were built inside the city, the effects of the barrier could be canceled out. This strategy entirely depended on the ability of the caster, but success could even put us at an advantage.

“But won’t it take some time to build a castle with such a specialized effect? You’d have to use your magic inside the barrier,” Sasha pointed out.

Misha nodded. “I can make it in three minutes.”

“Then let’s go with that,” I said. “For those three minutes, I shall protect Misha and the castle. The rest of you shall wait outside the barrier. Once the castle has been constructed, Sasha and Lay shall enter the barrier and defeat the casters. Misa and the other girls will take care of any stragglers.”

“Got it,” Lay said.

“All right,” Sasha added.

“W-We can’t embarrass ourselves in front of Lord Anos, so we’ll have to watch our timing carefully,” said the fan union’s Ellen, tightly clenching her fist.

“It’s okay, there’s no need to be nervous. You’ll be able to see when the castle’s built,” Misa said in reassurance, but—

“No, no, I mean the timing of our cheer song.”

“Ah... Aha ha, there’s really no need to sing...”

Hmm. I was aware Lay and Sasha would be undaunted no matter the foe, but the fan union’s fortitude surprised me. They sure had some steady nerves.

“If opportunity strikes, sing to your hearts’ content. Break the spirits of your enemies in your own way.”

“R-Right!” the girls cried with enthusiastic nods.

“Then we’ll be off first.”

I held my hand out to Misha, who touched my palm with her fingertips. Then I locked my Magic Eyes on our destination—the city in the distance—and cast Gatom.

Our surroundings turned white for a brief moment, then cleared to reveal an open square. The space was perfectly sufficient to build a Demon King Castle. I could feel the barrier’s effect, but that wouldn’t be a problem.

Misha held her left hand in a prayer-like pose. “*Iris.*”

Ice crystals appeared around the Lotus Ice Ring on her finger, forming a glittering magic circle.

“*Ice castle and town,*” she murmured.

More ice crystals filled the square, freezing the ground and rising into the sky to form a formidable castle crafted from ice. However, its structure was still incomplete. Iris continued its work, increasing the number of ice crystals dancing around the city.

Just then, Heine appeared in the square. “Wow. I can’t believe they can use such large-scale spells while under the effects of De Ijelia,” he called out, in contrast to his cocky demeanor.

“It’s a work in progress at most,” Ledriano said, arriving beside him.

Raos was close behind, a smug grin on his face. “Did they think we’d let them build that eyesore in here?”

Finally, the young girl from earlier stood before me, holding her holy sword ready.



“I’m impressed at how thoroughly you destroyed my Jio Graze, even in its weakened state. Identify yourself,” I said to her.

She didn’t answer.

“Please excuse her,” Ledriano said. “She cannot speak, so I shall introduce her on her behalf. Allow me to present Zeshia Kanon Ijeiska, Returning Knight of the Holy Wind and student of the selective class Jerga-Kanon. She is rank one of the Hero Academy and the inheritor of Hero Kanon’s fourth source.”

Rank one was the fourth reincarnated hero, huh? That meant Eleonore hadn’t included their teacher when she’d mentioned there were four of them. Still, there was something unusual about this girl. I couldn’t see the depths of her source.

“That’s a fine holy sword. What is it called?”

“That there is Enharle, the Holy Sword of Light,” Ledriano replied. “This sword, which rejects all demons and reduces them to naught, will cut down that unfinished castle with a single strike.”

I wanted to find out whether she was the Kanon I knew, but it seemed I had to deal with that holy sword first. Its light was blinding my Eyes.

“Hey, Ledriano, that’s enough chitchat,” Heine said, holding his palm out before him. A magic circle appeared there. “Let’s finish this before that castle is done.”

Ledriano, Raos, and Zeshia drew a copy of the same magic circle.

“De Ijeid.”

Magic circles of earth, water, fire, and wind shot towards the incomplete castle from four directions.

“Hmm. Didn’t you say you were going to teach me a lesson?” I asked, casting anti-magic to intercept De Ijeid.

The next moment, the magic circles shattered, and magic chains, each of a different element, wrapped around my arms and legs.

“Oh? It seems De Ijeid also has the effects of malediction magic.”

Malediction spells were holy curses used by heroes to create unfavorable, sometimes detrimental, situations for all within their areas of effect. De Ijeid specifically was designed to trigger upon the use of anti-magic to block a spell, creating magic chains like those binding me.

“This is the end of that brave front of yours, friend. De Ijeid’s chains have sealed over ninety percent of your magic.” Heine raised his hand into the air. *“Come to me, my holy sword: Zere, Sword of Sacred Land!”*

Light gathered in his palm, materializing to form a holy sword with a deep-green glow.

“Heh. Now’s the time to start begging. ‘Oh, please save me!’ and the like.”

Despite being bound by De Ijeid’s chains, I smirked down at Heine. “Hmm. Very well. If you grovel before me, I shall forgive you.”

“You know what?” Heine’s face twisted with anger. “Jokes like that grind my gears the most of all!”

Heine burst into a dash, closing the gap between us at a rapid speed. Then the Sword of Sacred Land swung down from above, landing a direct hit. Particles of light burst from the force of the holy strike, scattering around in a blinding glow.

“Bwa ha ha! What do you have to say after such a pathetic defeat? Well, it’s not like you can hear me anymore.”

“I’m unsurprised such a fine sword can slice through De Ijeid so easily,” I said as the magic chains fell around me.

“What the hell?!”

The light particles in the area faded, revealing my figure from beneath. Heine’s jaw dropped—I hadn’t taken a single scratch.

“With your enemy within your grasp, you should have considered your method of attack more carefully.”

“Be quiet!” Heine roared. “We’ll just keep going until we cut through you! Ledriano, Raos, Zeshia!”

“We know,” Ledriano replied curtly.

The four heroes once more cast their magic circles of wind, earth, water, and fire, aiming for the Demon King Castle.

“Go on, try to block it!” Heine yelled. “You don’t want your precious castle scratched, do you?”

“Hmm. That’s true.” I cast anti-magic to intercept their spells.

“See? Now I’ll just strike you with an even more powerful— What?!”

Heine fell speechless. My limbs were free of chains. The De Ijeid that should have activated from my anti-magic had this time failed to trigger.

“That can’t be...”

“Did you really think the same attack would work on me twice?” I took a step forward. Heine stumbled back in fear.

“No way... Our spell... The spell we so painstakingly practiced was defeated in no time at all!” Heine cried, falling dramatically to his knees to slam his fists against the ground. Could there be a more embarrassing reaction to being seen through? But he swiftly changed his tune. “Is that what you thought I’d say?”

Heine lifted his head, sneering as he cast a large magic circle on the ground. The other three heroes were also drawing magic circles.

“De Ijenx.”

The ground shifted. Earth rose up to surround me.

“Of course we never expected the same spell to work more than once,” Ledriano said, taking over the explanation. “You may have good enough Eyes to analyze a spell at a glance, but allow me to enlighten you on how many barrier spells we Jerga-Kanon are capable of casting.”

The cage of earth enclosed around me.

“It’s precisely one thousand and eighty-eight.”

“Ha ha ha!” Raos laughed triumphantly. “Not even you can negate another one thousand and eighty-seven barriers!”

At that moment, black lightning sparked from the earth prison.

“Wait, what?!”

The jet-black bolts crackled with volatile ferocity as they spread from the center of the prison.

“Everyone, retrea—!”

As Ledriano raised his voice, lightning enveloped the four heroes, tearing their wards apart. From there, the lightning continued to spread, raging like a violent storm.

“This power... Just what kind of greater spell is he using for it to work under the effect of De Ijelia?!”

“I-It’s no good. Damn it, we’ve cast so many barriers, yet we still can’t suppress him. What is he? How can he be so powerful?!”

“Aaaaaaaaah!”

Swallowed by Jirasd, the origin spell, Heine, Ledriano, Raos, and Zeshia were sent flying.

“You seem to have misunderstood something, so let me be clear.” The cage of earth crumbled back to dust. “Just because the same attack won’t work on me twice doesn’t mean a new attack will work the first time.”

§ 21. Two Holy Swords

The direct hit from Jirasd sent the reincarnated heroes sailing across the square. Their bodies came to a sudden halt when they slammed into several buildings, where they hunched over, unable to move. Their battered forms were charred black from the lightning, so they were clearly in no state to stand, let alone resume. Yet, the next moment, their bodies were shrouded in light—the light of healing magic.

“Hmm. So these four aren’t the ones maintaining De Ijelia after all.”

De Ijelia diminished the strength of demons while enhancing the strength of humans. Healing magic was part of that enhancement. As long as they stayed within the barrier, humans would instantly recover from anything excluding death.

Maintaining a barrier spell like that required a constant stream of magic. If these four had been the ones casting De Ijelia, the barrier would have been broken the moment they had been struck down by Jirasd.

“Is the barrier being cast by another student?” Misha asked.

“So it seems.”

“I’ll try to find them.”

Misha’s ice castle was complete. Countless ice crystals carpeted the ground, trailing like pathways throughout the city. Plants, trees, and buildings made of ice all sprouted from these pathways, forming a crystalline town around the castle.

She pressed her fingertips against the castle wall and strained her Eyes. The effects of the ice castle and surrounding town were similar to a barrier in that they allowed her to see as far as the area they covered. She was trying to use that advantage to track down the De Ijelia caster, but—

“I can’t find them.”

Oh? The caster had to be of exceptional ability to evade Misha's Eyes.

"But I've got it," she added in her uninflected tone. "There's only one student from the Jerga-Kanon missing."

Hmm. As expected of Misha—she had memorized each of their faces. In other words, the missing student had to be the one casting De Ijelia.

"Who is it?"

"Eleonore."

So that was it. Well, Eleonore was capable of looking directly at a person's source, after all. It wouldn't be strange for her to be capable of casting all four elements herself.

"Leave it to me," Misha said.

"Be careful. She's strong."

While Eleonore was ranked lower than Ledriano and the others, that didn't mean her abilities were inferior. I mean, even I was only a misfit.

"I'll do my best."

Misha raised the ring on her left hand and poured her magic into the ice town. The forces of De Ijelia and the Demon King Castle contended, unseen to the untrained eye, to make the superior barrier. It was quite the sight.

"Tch, what a monster," Raos grumbled far from the square, standing up without a scratch. "We'd have died without De Ijelia."

"I'm getting fed up with this," Heine moaned, getting up just like Raos. "Why doesn't the barrier affect this demon? Isn't that sort of unfair?"

Raos groaned. "Ah well. No matter how strong he is, we can just keep getting back up. He'll eventually run out of steam."

"Alas, Anos needn't bother with mooks like you." A blonde-haired girl descended from the sky, landing right before Raos. With Misha's castle completed, the effects of De Ijelia had effectively been neutralized. Sasha raised the hem of her skirt in an elegant curtsy. "I am Sasha Necron, the Witch of Destruction of the Necron family and direct descendant of the Demon Elder Ivis

Necron. You'd do well to remember this name, for I shall now show you true despair!"

"Ha! Bring it." Raos grinned belligerently and raised his fists. "Hey Heine," he said, contacting his peer over an open Leaks, "that girl from the Cohort of Chaos showed up. I'm going to go have a little fun with her, so go on ahead and find Ledriano."

"Fine, but make it quick, or else we'll beat that guy by ourselves."

"I don't think so."

Heine's gaze hardened. There had been no one near him just moments ago—no traces of magic either. And yet, there before him now was a white-haired demon that had appeared out of nowhere.

"You can't win against him," Lay said brightly, blocking Heine's way with the Sword of Intent. "No one can. He won't lose to anyone."

"Oh? A black uniform with a seven-pointed star." Heine smirked in delight. "I know you. You're Lay Grandsley, the Demon Swordmaster of the Cohort of Chaos. I hear you're pretty good with swords."

"Better than you, at least."

Heine's smile froze. "If you're so good"—he lifted his holy sword up out of Lay's reach, where holy magic gathered at its blade—"then try and defend yourself!" He swung the sword down with all his might.

Just then, something flashed in Lay's hand and went shooting towards his opponent.

"Gah... Ack!"

Heine's right arm flew through the air, Zere still clutched in its grip. Not only did Heine have no idea when Lay had approached, but he couldn't even tell when his arm had been severed.

"Skill of that level will make your sword cry. And it's such a good sword too."

"You...! You're just that guy's lackey. How dare you?!"

Heine hopped back up. Due to the effects of De Ijelia, his arm began

regenerating immediately. Still sneering at Lay, he drew three magic circles by his feet.

“I know your weakness, Demon Swordmaster. I’ve heard you’re no good at magic. And let me guess—your Gyze class is Cavalier, right? Your enhanced physical abilities may allow you to move faster than I, but I bet your magic’s useless!”

“That’s right.” Lay beamed, completely unaffected.

“What are you grinning at? How infuriating. Are you an idiot? Do you not understand? You have no way of defending against our barrier magic!”

Water rose from around Heine’s feet. It was holy water. From the second it appeared, he began to absorb its power.

“*Agorus!*”

With a sound like rippling thunder, the ground within a thirty-meter radius of Heine began to tremble. Agorus was a barrier spell that bound the feet of demons while robbing them of their strength.

“Aw, can you no longer move? No matter how good you are with a sword, you’ll get nowhere with that alone.” Heine walked calmly through the raging earthquake, scooping Zere up from the ground. “Let me share one more surprise,” he said, raising his left hand. Holy light gathered in his palm, where a second sword materialized. “*Come forth, my holy sword: Zeleo, Sword of Sacred Earth!*”

Heine held Zere in his right hand while grasping Zeleo in his left.

“Here’s the thing: if I use Zere to cut a wound inflicted by Zeleo, that wound becomes a stigma. Healing magic will have no effect on it. Everyone wounded by my swords ends up screaming for help!” He laughed wickedly. “But there’s no point in them wailing at me. I don’t know how to heal stigmas, so there’s nothing I can do to help them!”

Heine approached Lay carelessly, readying his twin swords. “Go on, admit I’m the better swordsman. If you don’t bow to me, you’ll find yourself in a world of pain.” He looked at Lay with contempt.

“Heine, was it?”

“Yeah, what of it?”

“Your swords really are crying.”

Siegsesta flashed. Heine’s left arm was severed, and Zeleo twirled point-first into the ground.

“A-Ah...ack... It hurts! Damn you... What the hell?!” Heine jumped back in surprise. With the glow of healing magic, his left arm regenerated immediately.

“How did you...?!”

Lay stepped forward through the violent earthquake. “What’s wrong?” he asked coolly.

“How can you move within Agorus?! You’re barely protected by anti-magic!”

“I figured you were moving around freely thanks to your holy magic, so I decided to try it myself.”

Heine’s face contorted.

“This sword, the Sword of Intent, can transform at its wielder’s will. That’s why I willed it to release holy magic. I’m so glad it worked.”

Holy light streamed from the Sword of Intent, blanketing Lay’s entire body. Agorus could restrict a demon’s body and magic, but it had no effect against the same kind of magic. The Sword of Intent eliminated the vibrations of the earthquake before the tremors could reach him.

“Holy magic” was a term gods and humans used for convenience, but it really just referred to the different wavelength of magic they used to produce harm. There was nothing truly preventing a demon or their demon sword from using that wavelength.

“Oh, is that right? Hmph! But you know what? That counterfeit holy sword can’t win against me.”

“Then I’ll just use a real one.”

Lay reached down to pick up the Sword of Sacred Earth. At that, Heine burst out laughing.

“Hey! What are you doing, friend? I mean, I don’t mind either way, but that puny demon body of yours will be eaten away if you use a holy sword, you know? Didn’t you see what happened to your upperclassman when he tried to use holy water? This’ll be even worse—”

Heine’s left arm was severed at Lay’s hand once more, this time by the Sword of Sacred Earth.

“Gyaaaaaaah! Aaaack!” Heine screamed, clutching his wound as he stumbling back. “Why...? How come you...? Tell me how! It shouldn’t be possible!”

Lay pursued the retreating Heine.

“Return to me, my holy sword. Return to your true owner!” Heine cried, stretching out his regenerated arm, but the Sword of Sacred Earth showed no response. The panic on his face heightened. “Wh-Why?!”

“This holy sword seems to like me better.”

“Why won’t it return?! Hey, Zeleo! Are you listening?!” Heine screamed desperately, but Zeleo didn’t budge. Holy swords chose their own owners, and Heine had been deemed unworthy. “No... No, no, no! That has to be a lie! That... That’s a holy sword, and not just any holy sword. I’m the only one in Jerga-Kanon that can wield Zeleo! It’s not something a *demon* can use!”

Heine swung Zere. A blade of magic came hurtling down towards Lay, who slashed it away with a nonchalant flick of Zeleo.

“What?!”

“You don’t seem to get it, so I’ll teach you how this sword works.”

With a short breath, Lay thrust Zeleo into the earth. He flicked up the sword, flinging dirt into the air, as if the ground had been gouged open. Heine was launched back with it.

“Aaaargh!”

Sediment, stones, and trees flew towards Heine, as though they had a mind of their own. They broke through his wards, gashing and scraping his body while knocking Zere right out of his hand.

Heine’s eyes rounded with astonishment. “I never knew Zeleo was so

powerful...”

Lay sheathed the Sword of Intent and picked up Zere from where it had fallen. “You said a cut with Zere over a wound inflicted by Zeleo will form a stigma that can’t be healed, right?”

“What are you saying? There’s no way... No way! Do you know how many years I trained to be able to use two holy swords at once?! There’s no way a demon could— Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Two holy swords gleamed at once. Stigmas formed where Heine’s arms had been severed.

“D-Damn it... Damn youuu!”

Heine cast a magic circle around the area affected by the stigma, attempting to amputate his arm further. However, the stigma spread before his eyes, expanding its effective area.

“Why?! That can’t be right! Zere and Zeleo never had this much power. What did you do to my swords?!”

“These swords have been this powerful all along. You just couldn’t quite handle them.”

“Sh-Shut up! Damn it. This wasn’t how it was meant to go... How could I lose? How could I lose to a demon?!”

Calling on all of his magic, Heine cast Agorus once more. He must have assumed that Lay couldn’t defend against it while the Sword of Intent was sheathed.

Nevertheless, Lay merely stuck both the holy swords into the ground, halting Agorus with ease. “This is how to use them correctly.”

Heine’s body was skewered by forty-four blades.

“Urgh... Gaaah... Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

His high-pitched screams echoed around the area. The blades of Zere and Zeleo had multiplied underground, extending from the earth to pierce Heine. Each individual wound transformed into a stigma. With all healing magic rendered useless, De Ijelia stopped regenerating his body.

“Aah...! Help me... It hurts! Argh, it hurts, it hurts, it *hurts*! Ah... It won't heal... Why... Why do I have to suffer so much? Aaaaaargh!” Unable to endure the depths of his pain, Heine wailed at the top of his lungs. “H-Hey, demon! I'll surrender, so heal me, okay? This is just an exam, so there's no need to leave me like this!”

At Heine's arrogant ranting, Lay smiled benignly. “Unfortunately, I'm not so good at magic, but if you've surrendered, I won't stop you from healing yourself.”

“Dumbass... I already said I can't! Aaargh, it hurts. It hurts so much. Someone help me! Save me!”

“Does it really hurt that much? They don't look like major wounds. I'm sure there are far more agonizing pains in this world.”

“Like what?!”

Lay grinned. “Dunno. I just felt like that would be the case.”

Still smiling, he turned on his heel and left. Heine continued screaming at his back.

“H-Hey, wait. Where are you going?! Help me! S-Save me, damn iiit!”

His screams echoed throughout the city.

§ 22. Dominator of Flames

On a road down from the city square, Sasha and Raos were facing each other.

“Rumor has it, the Witch of Destruction has those Magic Eyes that can destroy anything, right?” Raos asked, coating his fists with holy fire.

Sasha smiled. “So you’ve heard of me before. What about it?”

“It just so happens that I’m the Destruction Knight of the Holy Flame. Breaking things is my forte. Want to try a little contest of strength?”

“Really now? You seem to specialize in fire magic, but can you vaporize a lake?”

Raos clicked his tongue in irritation.

“You can’t even hold a candle to Anos, yet you want to challenge me? What, do you think you’d stand a chance? How pathetic.”

“You demons have a knack for provoking others.”

“Or,” Sasha said sweetly, “you simply have a short temper.”

“Shut your trap!”

Raos cast Cyfer from his fists, but Sasha deflected it with a wave of her hand.

“Ha, not bad,” Raos remarked. “Now let’s see how you fare against half of what I have to offer!” Raos slammed his fists together, deploying a magic circle. “*Cy fio!*”

Holy fire surged in eight directions, swooping down at Sasha. However, with just a glance, she identified its weak point and cast a counterspell to meet the flames. The spell shared the same roots as the eight jets of fire, which allowed it to cut off their magic. Cy fio was extinguished before it ever reached her.

“Just come at me with all you’ve got. You’re not strong enough to put on such airs, so at this rate, you’ll die before you can lift a finger, idiot.”

Raos gritted his teeth. “How did you know...?”

“That you’re weak?”

“Stop messing around, or I’ll kill you! I’m asking how you knew I was using Cyfio to make a barrier!”

Sasha narrowed her eyes. “You truly are stupid if you’re asking your enemy that.”

“What did you say?!”

“You’re talking about Zagard, right?”

Raos paled. “How do you know about that? I’ve never shown you before.”

“Use your brain and figure it out yourself,” Sasha said, heaving a sigh. “Anos taught me everything I know about ancient spells. It was a pain learning to defend against him, but you’re much easier to deal with.”

“Watch your tongue!” he snapped, bursting into a run. He proceeded to charge straight for Sasha. “How’s this for weak?!”

Fire enveloped his body, encasing it in an armor-like shield—he was using Destor. At a glance, the spell looked defensive, but when used to pin down an enemy, it became a demon-sealing barrier. Any demon caught by the barrier would lose the bulk of their power.

But instead of retreating, Sasha stepped forward.

“Ha! Like a moth to the flame!” Raos spread his arms to grab her.

“*Gresde.*”

A black flame appeared in Sasha’s palm. It morphed into a blade and pierced Raos’s stomach.

“Gah! Ugh...”

“I said he taught me everything I know, stupid. In order to use Destor as a barrier, you have to cover your enemy in those flames. That might work in a surprise attack, but I know about it already—I can see your every opening.”

Sasha directed more magic into the flames, scorching his entire body. Unable to endure the heat, Raos leaped back.

“Tch!”

In an attempt to shake off Gresde, Raos sent all his magic into his defenses. He was readying his counterattack when he swiftly froze in his tracks.

“Missing something?” Sasha asked. She held a familiar insignia in her hand—the Hero Academy insignia she had stolen during her approach just now. “I know this lake is a spring of holy water, so evaporating the existing water won’t be enough to remove it completely. You should have just used it from the start instead of acting all high and mighty about it.”

“Shut up!” Raos spat. “Fine. Since you’re so insistent, I’ll show you the full extent of my power!” Using holy flames, Raos drew a magic circle before himself. A fire roared at the center of the circle, brushing the outline of a sword. *“Demonstrate justice, Garriford!”*

At Raos’s words, the rising flames were sucked into the outline. A real sword, gleaming scarlet, appeared in its place.

“How’s that? Out of the eighty-eight holy swords in this world, the Sword of Holy Inferno burns the hottest. Some even say this sword created the sun! That’s one impressive power, isn’t it?”

“Idiot,” Sasha scoffed through a dismissive laugh. “No matter how impressive the power, it’s useless in the hands of a hopeless wielder.”

“Ha! What, are you trembling in fear?”

Sasha sighed. “I’m saying such power is wasted on you. How is that so hard to get?” She waved her hand lightly to fire another Gresde.

“That won’t work anymore!” Flames enveloped Garriford’s blade, overpowering Gresde in an instant. “You’ve been yapping incessantly for a while now, but war isn’t all that complicated. All you need to do is beat your opponents to a pulp!” Cloaking himself in Destor, Raos rushed fiercely forward, swinging Garriford back. “Take this!”

He swung the holy sword down. Sasha leaped out of the way using Fless, but the holy flames spread ferociously, creating a sea of fire that filled the area. A wall of flames rose from the fire to block any chance of escape.

“Look what I have.” Raos waved the Hero Academy insignia. “The fact you bothered to steal this means you don’t want to face the magic barrier, doesn’t

it?” he asked.

Sasha bit her lip in frustration.

“Heh, I knew it. How does it feel to be seen through by an opponent you were looking down on?” Raos gripped the insignia, pouring his magic into it. Holy water gushed from the ground around his feet, sending countless bubbles into the air. “Seal her, Garriford.”

The bubbles of holy water twined around Garriford, then shot out to form a magic circle that surrounded Sasha. The spell was for a powerful magic barrier used to snare demons.

“Well? How does it feel to be trapped in Burdisd? Can you still feel your magic? Can you even move? I didn’t think so!” Raos pointed the tip of Garriford at Sasha. “I’ll break you so thoroughly, you’ll never open that mouth of yours again!”

Aiming at the imprisoned Sasha, he broke into a run—as blood spurted from his mouth, sending him to his knees. Garriford slipped from his grasp and clattered to the ground.

“Hurk... Ack... What? Why?”

“Rather careless of you to assume a magic item would be safe to use after falling into the enemy’s hands, no?”

Raos looked down at his insignia. If he’d have focused his Magic Eyes on looking into its abyss, he would have realized the wavelength of its magic had changed.

“I fused that insignia with Dien,” Sasha said.

Raos tried to get back to his feet, but he seemed unable to muster the strength.

“I’m sure you know already, but Dien is a poison to magic. That poison eats away at the body and source of anyone who hosts it, destroying the magic organs within them. When you used your insignia, Dien contaminated the holy water. Using the contaminated holy water caused you to take in the poison, which is why you’re feeling so weak.”

“I’ve never heard of items being fused with magic...”

“Idiot. Not even demons know the workings of the Necron family’s secret arts. Did you think you humans would know more?”

Raos crawled across the ground, reaching desperately for Garriford.

“Oh? Are you still going to fight?”

“Shut...your trap... Holy water doesn’t lose its effect just because it’s contaminated. After all, Burdisd activated just fine. The spell was only developed in these last hundred years, so neither you nor that reincarnated demon will know anything about it. That means you can’t move either.”

Holy light gathered around Raos’s body. It was healing magic.

“And as long as we’re within De Ijelia, I can regenerate as many times as it takes. Sure, you made a good effort, but in the end, you don’t stand a chance.”

The healing power of De Ijelia negated the damage being caused by Dien, allowing Raos to recover enough to grasp his holy sword. He then used that sword to support himself as he rose to his feet.

“Besides, you won’t be able to break out of that when you can’t even move.”

“Unfortunately for you, all I need is to be able to see it.”

Magic circles lit up in Sasha’s eyes. With a single glance, the pillars of flames and barrier of bubbles shattered like glass and vanished without a trace.

“Do you know why they call me the Witch of Destruction?”

“That can’t be...” Raos could do nothing but gape. “I’ve never heard of the Magic Eyes of Destruction destroying magic itself...”

“Idiot. That’s why I said there are many things in this world you don’t know.”

With one sharp look from Sasha’s Magic Eyes, Raos coughed up even more blood.

“Gah... What the hell?”

“At this distance, I can even destroy the effects of De Ijelia.”

Magic Eyes of Destruction were the ultimate form of anti-magic. There was no

way Magic Eyes capable of resisting Eugo La Raviaz's time magic would be incapable of countering De Ijelia. To top it off, she could prevent him from casting antidote magic simply by watching him.

"Gah...ah... Damn it... Resorting to poison is such a dirty tactic..."

"You're one to talk. Have you forgotten what your classmate did to Rivest?"

As long as Sasha was keeping an eye on him, Raos would wither away under Dien's effects, unable to heal himself.

"I had nothing to do with it. That was all Heine..."

"You must be kidding me. At least know which side you're fighting for when you fight."

"Ack... Shut up! If I didn't do it, I didn't do it! I didn't know anything about it... Urk..." Raos coughed up even more blood and curled up to fight the pain.

"In that case, I'll enlighten you. Surely you still recall—what you did at the magic library, that is." Sasha's glare hardened in her anger. "Did you think you could get away with such insolence before the one and only Demon King?"

"The hell... That's such a trivial thing..."

With a chilling smile, Sasha directed magic into her Eyes. "It warrants death."

De Ijelia's effects further diminished, and black specks broke out across Raos's body. He was being eaten away by Dien.

"Guh... Gargh... You'll regret this! Next time..."

"Next time?" Sasha giggled. "You really are stupid. You think there'll be a next time? Once that poison has flooded your system, you'll never use magic again."

"What...?"

"It's a tough reality, but like your headmaster said, accidents do happen. We both fought each other fair and square, so let's not hold any grudges."

Despair filled Raos's face. "W-Wait..." he called weakly.

Sasha turned her destructive Eyes towards him and smiled. "Sure, I'll wait. I'll wait here and watch as you writhe in pain—until the poison takes its course."

§ 23. The Magic of Love

I called out to the heap of black ash produced by Jirasd's fury. "How long are you going to play dead? I even suppressed my anti-magic to give you a chance. Just attack already."

The black ash began glowing with a dazzling light, then blew away to reveal Ledriano.

"Dear me, I should have expected such a discerning eye. I was hoping to catch you off guard, but you've caught me in the act. It seems I really will have to fight you fairly." Ledriano reached for his glasses and removed them. His power instantly surged. "Just so you know, ranks one and two of the Hero Academy are on another level to rank three and below. If I don't seal myself with a magic item like this, my power becomes so great, it could potentially destroy me."

Ledriano drew a magic circle before himself and concentrated his magic at its center. Just then, though, I sensed a murderous intent welling up behind me.

The Holy Sword of Light came swinging down at my head but was caught mid-flight by my right hand.

"So one of you makes a show of unleashing power while the other launches a surprise attack. What an admirable display of fairness." I yanked Enharle forward, slamming Zeshia into the ground.

She hit the dirt with a thunderous boom, splitting the ground and forming a crater. Yet Zeshia somehow kept hold of the sword—she seemed aware that releasing it would be akin to releasing their chance of victory.

"Hmm. How sturdy."

Again, I raised my right hand and slammed her into the ground, but no matter how many times I swung, the crater only grew bigger while Zeshia remained unharmed.

"It's pointless," Ledriano said. "With the blessing of the holy sword and her own anti-magic, she's shielded by two layers of protection. They won't be so

easily broken!” Ledriano placed a hand against the ground. A small puddle formed beneath his palm. *“Protect and heal, Bailamente, Sword of Holy Harbor.”*

The puddle of water rose into the air, where it morphed into the shape of a sword. The blue holy blade reminiscent of the ocean fit neatly into Ledriano’s palm.

I cast another Jirasd.

“Bestret!”

A magic barrier surrounded Ledriano’s entire body. Jirasd was right on target, but he withstood the blow by using his sword as a shield.

“Rega Indrea!” he cried, layering another barrier around himself. He then placed a holy curse on the barrier—Liad Anzemra, a curse that repelled demonkind. “Defend us, Bailamente, Sword of Holy Harbor! Protect life as you have since ancient times. Show us your power and will!” Ledriano unleashed the holy sword’s power, amplifying the strength of his barriers several tenfold. “Hiyaaaaaaaaah!”

Swinging the Sword of Holy Harbor, he struck down the black lightning around him. Jirasd scattered, and the surrounding buildings were obliterated by the rebounding attack.

“Did you think you could end this with a single spell? Don’t take humans so lightly.” Ledriano broke into a run. With Bailamente braced at the ready, he charged straight for me. “You may think you’ve sealed Enharle, but that also means your right hand is useless!” he shouted.

“Hmm. That’s quite the barrier. In that case, this should be no problem.”

Still clutching the blade of Enharle, I raised it above my head. Ledriano’s eyes widened.

“What...”

“Let’s see who has the better barrier between ranks one and two.” I slammed Enharle down—with Zeshia still attached—to sweep Bailamente aside. With a deafening clap, the two heroes collided and were sent flying in opposite

directions. “Hmm. I see. It seems rank one’s is sturdier.”

At the moment of impact, Zeshia had released Enharle’s hilt. Hitting Ledriano with the power of the Holy Sword of Light would have been more than he could handle.

With this, I could finally see into Zeshia’s source. But the moment I turned my Eyes on her, a blinding light concealed it. Enharle was in her hand once more.

“Oh?”

The blade in my hand had turned into light and faded. Had Zeshia summoned it? Hmm, no. There had definitely been two Enharles before the one I held had disappeared.

“Zeshia, we’re going to use *that*. He’s looking down on us. We have to take our chance before he gets serious. We’re ending this in one go.”

Zeshia nodded. A holy magic circle appeared at their feet. The spell formula was familiar—it was one the Hero of two thousand years ago had relied on every time he fought me.

“Aske, huh?”

It was the greater magic spell that could convert the hopes and wishes of the people into powerful magic.

“You can do it, Jerga-Kanon!” echoed hundreds of disembodied voices.

“The hope of Azesion! The symbol of world peace!”

“Don’t succumb to the outsiders!”

“Show us your unwavering dominance!”

The events of the inter-academy exam seemed to be being broadcasted to the people of Gairadite, as they could be heard cheering from where we fought.

Ledriano looked at me curiously. “Since you seem to recognize this spell, I suppose I should acknowledge your claims of reincarnation. However, your knowledge of the past has caused you to underestimate mankind. There’s one decisive difference between two thousand years ago and now.”

Light flowed from the city to gather around the two heroes. Aske cloaked

their bodies as it had the famous Hero.

“Two thousand years ago, the population of the war-torn Gairadite was a mere one hundred thousand. But with the blessing of peace, mankind expanded beyond the lake—our population is now ten million strong!”

Zeshia and Ledriano glared at me as the light of Aske converged on their swords.

“With the support of the people, we, the Jerga-Kanon, shall never lose! We’ll show you. You’ll witness our unity firsthand. Unlike demons, whose existence amounts to nothing more than the power they possess, human beings are blessed with our hearts. Love is the force that led Hero Kanon to bring peace to the world two thousand years ago—and that love is greater now than ever before.”

With the world at peace, the human population had increased dramatically. Was he trying to suggest their love had increased proportionately with their population?

“Two thousand years ago, humans and demons were evenly matched. But peace has created a crucial difference between us. The power of the Hero who once defeated the Demon King of Tyranny is now a hundred times greater. You demons will never stand a chance against mankind. Face it—you’ve lost.”

I was the one who’d brought about that peace, but there was no convincing this fool.

“This great love of ours was humanity’s key to victory two thousand years ago, and shall be the key to lead us there now!”

If this were the war of two thousand years ago, I would have resolved the issue by eliminating the people of Gairadite first—but that wasn’t an option during this exam. If I did, the Hero Academy would probably accuse me of attacking innocent bystanders. Besides, I had to crush their pride where it hurt the most.

“Love? That’s some nonsense you’re spouting,” I said.

Ledriano snorted. “Are you still struggling to understand? I’m saying you’ve already lost. Demons that lived for two thousand years were driven to

reincarnation by human love. It seems your own rebirth has dulled your mind, so allow us to trigger your memories.”

Zeshia and Ledriano broke into a run. Bailamente came lunging forward at my left side, while Enharle slashed diagonally at my right.

In response, I caught both blades with my fists.

“What are you...?” Ledriano frowned. Of course he would—I had just used Aske.

“What? Did you really think demons were incapable of love?”

Ledriano looked surprised but quickly regained his composure. “Fine,” he said with a snort. “You got me. But that Aske of yours is no more than a street performance. No matter how powerful you are, demons have no hearts. History has proven just as much. You only have envy for what others possess and an excess of anger and indolence—traits that could never be considered love.”

If this ignorance was the result of his education at the Hero Academy, then it was impressive how wholeheartedly he believed in it.

“That won’t allow you to use the true power of Aske. Besides, there are ten million people on our side. With less than a hundred students present from the Demon King Academy, you can surpass us in neither quantity nor quality.”

“Ten million, is it? That’s nothing. I’ll bet we can take that on with eight.” Using Leaks, I called out to the fan union. “Misa, how are things there?”

“All good! We’ve entered the city and are continuing our search for the Jerga-Kanon.”

“Stay where you are for now.”

“Huh? O-Okay then. Sure.”

“Ellen, you can hear me, right?”

“Y-Yes, Lord Anos!”

“Jessica.”

“Yes, my lord!”

“Maia!”

“R-Ready at your call!”

“Nono, Xia, Himca, Catha, Shelia,” I called, to which each girl responded enthusiastically, “you’re all to participate in a cheering contest.”

The girls listened intently.

“There are apparently ten million humans on the opposing side, but I’m sure they’ll be no match for you. I can’t imagine the feelings you girls have for me could be bested by a mere ten million foes.”

Not a sound came from the other side of the Leaks, but the girls’ strong will was conveyed through the faint change in their magic.

“Sing. Give me your love.”

The instant I finished speaking, the Aske around me rose like a raging tornado, connecting heaven and earth by a pillar of light.

§ 24. Lord Anos Cheer Song No. Three

“What is the meaning of life?” Ellen asked.

The fan union girls all answered in unison. “The meaning of life is Lord Anos!”

“Why do we exist in this world?” Ellen asked.

The fan union answered again. “We exist in this world for Lord Anos!”

“Then...what do you say Lord Anos is to us?”

The fan union answered the final question. “Lord Anos is everything and nothing. He is the entire universe!”

Ellen raised her voice a notch louder. “And now Lord Anos has asked us to sing. The almighty Lord Anos awaits our song! Whether faced with ten million or a hundred million foes, it is our duty to not let him down! If our song lacks the heart to reach him, we’ll have no reason left to live!”

“Lord Anos! Lord Anos! Lord Anos!”

“Let’s go, everyone! It’s time for *Lord Anos Cheer Song No. Three: Almighty Demon King!*”

There was a moment of silence as they gathered their wits about them. Then they poured their emotions into their song.

“Oh, oh...”

“You can’t make me serious...”

“I am the almighty Demon King!”

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!”

Bathed in the light of Aske’s judgment, Ledriano and Zeshia’s attack was repelled. Aske then morphed into a beam of light, chasing after them as if in pursuit.

“A whim...no more mysterious!”

The barrier around Ledriano began to crack.

“What the... What is that?! How can my barrier block Jirasd, but not the Aske of some heartless demons?!”

The fan union’s cheer song could be heard all the way from here. Their practiced lungs carried their song at an impressive volume across the city—songstresses of this caliber had been nonexistent two thousand years ago.

“Just a little kindness, then I’m in!”

Aske responded to their song, converting their feelings into magic and gaining momentum.

“This can’t be... Demons have no hearts—they shouldn’t know love!”

“So tell me, what are you misunderstanding?”

Even Zeshia’s holy sword was being suppressed by my Aske, completely unable to cut through it.

“There’s no way we would lose in holy magic... We have ten million people on our side! We’ll show you the true power of Aske!”

Ledriano attempted to draw out the power of his Aske, but the song he faced suddenly increased in emotional intensity. That’s right—the chorus was about to begin.

“Know your place, your ruler is me!”

“Gwaaaaaaaaaah...”

“You’re just a diversion, hardly long-standing! Go on, entertain me!”

“Stop this...! Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Oh, oh... Stop your glowering! How serious can you make me?”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!”

Swallowed by a violent tornado of light, Ledriano’s barrier was torn to shreds.

“I can’t... I can’t lose here... We are the reincarnations of Hero Kanon, bearers of Gairadite’s future and the hopes of our entire nation! We can’t... We *won’t* be defeated by a ridiculous song like this!”

I see. Then I'd been right to encourage them to try out their song.

"Ridiculous song, you say? As I suspected, you truly aren't a reincarnation of Kanon. I doubt you're even an inheritor of one of his sources," I said.

Ledriano clenched his teeth. "I shall not fall for your provocations."

"This is no provocation. It's the truth. That man was more sensitive than anyone else when it came to the heart. He didn't take people for what he saw on the surface—he gleaned their true feelings beneath. That's why he was able to use Aske better than any hero in history."

In an Aske versus Aske battle, no one could best Hero Kanon.

"If you can't see how pure those girls' emotions are, you have no business calling yourself his reincarnation."

"Nothing about a demon's emotions is pure! You're all heartless monsters who only revel in the torture of mankind!"

"What a strange thing to say. If that's what you believe, why invite us on this exchange?"

Ledriano's glare sharpened at my question, but he refused to give me an answer.

"What is your goal?" I asked.

"It's our turn to show you what Aske can do. Feast your eyes on the true power of mankind!"

Ledriano and Zeshia drew a magic circle before them. Holy light gathered at its center, condensing at a single point.

"Hmm. Teo Triath, is it?"

The holy magic gathered by Aske turned into a magic bolt—the strongest single shot of light magic a hero could use.

"This Teo Triath is packed with the emotions of ten million people; it's far stronger than anything from two thousand years ago. Not even a demon from the Mythical Age can withstand this."

"As I said before," I said, drawing a magic circle before me. Holy magic

gathered at the center, mimicking Ledriano and Zeshia's spell, "eight is enough for me."

Tranquil voices held a wordless note, which echoed throughout the area. The next moment, the magic circle before me filled with an enormous amount of magic—even more magic than before.

"What the... What is that?! How can your magic be so much stronger when you still have the same number of supporters?!"

"Can't you tell?" I aimed the Teo Triath at Ledriano. "The second verse is about to begin."

"Oh, oh..."

"You can't make me serious..."

"I am the almighty Demon King!"

Ledriano and Zeshia prepared to fire their spell. They were probably trying to finish me off before my own magic circle was ready.

"Teo Triath!"

A huge cannon fire of light came hurtling towards me. I fired my Teo Triath in return. Light collided with light, painting the world a blinding white. The two spells struggled for domination, but mine was the one being pressured back.

"Heh. Demons stand no chance against humans when it comes to the heart. Your kind don't know the true meaning of love—the true meaning of hope." Ledriano turned to his comrade. "Zeshia, we'll finish this with the next shot. Let's show them just how much stronger the emotions of mankind are!"

Having gathered even greater strength of feeling, their Teo Triath multiplied in force. The sphere of light I had fired was being pressed back, bringing their shot closer and closer to me.

Ledriano funneled more magic into the final push. "With this, it's over!"

But at that moment, the fan union's cheer song reached a crescendo.

"A whim...a night no more mysterious!"

My Teo Triath started to push back the heroes', just barely.

“A gentle caress, then I’m in...”

The light of my projectile grew as it slowly increased in momentum.

“So tell me, what are you misunderstanding?”

The two spells had reached their original point of collision.

“Did you enjoy the touch for which you wished?”

Then, my Teo Triath started pressing their spell towards them.

“It was your fate to be played with...”

“That can’t be... There’s no way we could lose! How can a mere eight demons and their nonexistent hearts win against the love of humanity?!”

No matter how enraged Ledriano was, there was no denying that my Teo Triath had closed in on him.

“Your fate to be discarded and ditched!”

“Grr... There’s no way a ridiculous song like this could evoke greater feeling!”

“Oh, oh... Quit your whining! Try your best to make me serious!”

“Stop looking down on us!”

Ledriano and Zeshia were swallowed by Teo Triath’s light.

“You’ll never tie me down! I’ll make you give in! The almighty Demon King!”

At that moment, the spell exploded.

Like an explosion of the fan union’s love itself, dazzling light flooded my vision. Ledriano and Zeshia were helpless against it and were swallowed and then blown away by the shock wave. The love of the fan union had knocked them off their feet.

Eventually, the blinding light faded. Ledriano shifted his prone body to look up in my direction.

“H-How...?” he croaked, too dazed to understand why he’d lost. “How can a mere eight demons...”

“Both Aske and Teo Triath are spells that unite the emotions. Two thousand years ago, the people of Gairadite put up a united front against the Demon King

of Tyranny and placed their absolute trust in Hero Kanon. They believed more strongly and more sincerely than anything that he would be the one to save the world—to the point that their belief was near reverent.”

Human lives had been threatened. In fact, the situation had been so bad, mankind was on the verge of extinction. Only because of their belief in Hero Kanon had they come together and converted their unrivaled emotions into immense power.

“Now do you understand? Compared to the weight of the hopes Kanon bore, the expectations people have for you are trivial. Your ten million people are a mere raindrop in the vast sea. In a peaceful world, their expectations for mere students amount to nothing—their hearts aren’t even united.”

Without unity, they were unable to draw out Aske’s true power. Against eight girls prepared to risk their lives for their love, these heroes were nothing.

“I won’t say that human love is inferior to demon love. But this is the reality of the love felt for you.”

Unable to accept that reality, yet unable to make a rebuttal, Ledriano let his head fall back. De Ijelia was healing his wounds, but he made no move to stand up. No matter how much one healed their body, one couldn’t mend the wounds of the heart. He seemed shocked by the realization that the love he’d believed in until now had been nothing more than an illusion.

Now, all that remained was—

“Hmm?”

I thought I’d heard something. Was I mistaken? No, that didn’t seem right. It wasn’t Ledriano or Zeshia who’d spoken. Neither had it been a voice from the fan union. It hadn’t come from Leaks either. No, this was a voice heard directly in my heart—in my source—through Aske.

Kill...

No one was speaking out loud.

Kill the demons...

The Aske I had cast was speaking, and it was speaking in a voice I recognized

—a voice from a long distant past.

§ 25. Radiance of Life

“Kill...the demons...?” Ellen murmured slowly.

Jessica echoed her as though in a feverish dream. “Kill...the Demon King...of Tyranny...?”

“Kill...?” the fan union girls muttered deliriously.

Hmm. I listened in on them from a distance, but they seemed to be in quite a bad way. Was it time for me to step in?

“N-No... Everyone, pull yourselves together! This must be an enemy attack—it’s some kind of brainwashing magic!”

“Ah, r-right... What should we do?”

“It’ll be fine. Just keep Lord Anos in your mind. Overwrite this old geezer’s voice with thoughts of Lord Anos!”

“R-Right... Praise be to Lord Anos!”

“Lord Anos was as handsome as ever today...”

“He told us to give him our love... I can never wash my ears again!”

“Oh, this is too much to take!”

“Hang in there, Ellen! You’re the one who told us to keep thinking about Lord Anos!”

“I did, but I just recalled Lord Anos’s lustful voice... It’s driving me crazy!”

“Uh, what about the enemy’s attack?”

“Huh? Oh, it’s totally fine now.”

“As expected of Lord Anos...”

“Yeah, Lord Anos is incredible...”

It seemed their minds were more resilient than I’d anticipated, but I’d be cruel to subject them to any more of this.

I dispelled Aske.

“Anos,” Misha called, “what was that?”

“Hmm. You heard it too?”

She nodded. We were magically linked through Gyze, so her hearing wasn’t out of the ordinary. “It was a mass of hatred.”

That was a fitting way to describe it.

“Did you sense anything from it?” I asked.

“It felt similar,” Misha said quietly, “to the headmaster.”

I see. Heine had also mentioned something about hearing Hero Kanon’s voice earlier. Could he have been referring to this? It seemed the Hero Academy was involved in something no less troublesome than the current schemes at the Demon King Academy.

“Anos Voldigoad...” Ledriano muttered in a dull voice. His eyes retained their hollow impression, but something about them was different—if I were to borrow Misha’s description, he looked to be trapped in a prison of hatred.

Zeshia, who’d also been caught by Teo Triath, dragged herself to her feet, the Holy Sword of Light in her hand releasing more magic than ever before. The intense waves emitted were as fierce as the wrath of a dying star.

“Even if you aren’t the Demon King of Tyranny, your strength is too dangerous to leave be. You, too, shall threaten humanity some day, without a doubt...”

Ledriano appeared to have relinquished his sanity. Zeshia showed no reaction to his words, but continued staring straight at me. Her emotionless eyes reminded me of those of a lifeless puppet.

“Your visit here...was most fortuitous for us...”

Just as Ledriano muttered that, Zeshia leaned into a sprint.

“Anos.”

“No need to worry,” I told Misha, stepping forward to meet Zeshia’s attack. She drew a magic circle over the left side of her chest—or rather, over her source. That spell formula was...

“Get back, Misha!” I cast anti-magic to protect Misha behind me. “Listen to me, Zeshia. That spell won’t result in what you desire.”

Ignoring my warning, Zeshia continued charging forward.

“Finally lost your nerve, Anos Voldigoad?” Ledriano called. “Too bad it’s already over. Witness the willpower of us heroes!”

Zeshia closed in on me. Spells didn’t require a verbal invocation to cast, but Ledriano shouted the spell name as though voicing Zeshia’s pride in her place.

“Gavuel!”

Right in front of me, Zeshia thrust Enharle into her own chest. Her body released the blinding light of her source, commencing its imminent destruction.

Gavuel was a forbidden spell that forcefully released all the magic of one’s source to spark an explosion of light magic. That is, it was a suicidal source explosion that expended not only one’s life, but all their future lives by releasing the magic that would have spanned those generations. The force of the explosion easily exceeded the limits of its caster.

Light blanketed the world. Not a sound existed. The radiance of life, brighter than any white, flooded the holy lake.

“You underestimated our resolution...our bravery...” Ledriano muttered.

The source explosion settled, and the once white world slowly regained its color.

“I advised her against it, but alas.”

At the sound of my voice, shock and despair crossed Ledriano’s face.

“What were you thinking, Ledriano? She died for nothing.”

“Wha...ah...”

His teeth chattered from his trembling. He seemed at a complete loss for words, as a groan was all he could utter.

“Are you safe, Misha?”

She had retreated back to the Demon King Castle at my earlier warning.

“You protected me, so I’m fine.”

I had suppressed the source explosion with both my anti-magic and my Eyes of Destruction. Teleporting out of the way with Gatom had been another option, but Gavuel’s range of destruction was vast. The spell was less powerful the farther away from the epicenter one was, but it was still notably formidable. Lay and Sasha could have defended themselves, but Misa and the fan union would have died.

“H-How...?” Ledriano finally managed to utter.

I looked over at him.

“How can you be unharmed...at the center of a Gavuel explosion...?!” he yelled.

“Did you think discarding your future was enough to defeat me?” I began walking slowly towards him. “You were right about one thing: I underestimated you. I never expected to see Gavuel called upon for a playground squabble.” I took another step forward. “Your resolution is admirable. But even if you exchanged the futures of every one of you, you would fail to match the value of this life of mine.”

As I took yet another step forward, there was a flash as a sword shot towards me. I grabbed it with my right hand and brushed it aside—then paused, mildly astonished.

“Oh?”

This certainly was a surprise. What was the meaning of this?

Standing before me was Zeshia, who should have vanished at Gavuel’s activation. Her source had exploded. Reincarnation was impossible. The holy sword that should have disappeared with her was grasped tightly in her hand.

“Now that is a fascinating sight. Wouldn’t you agree, Ledriano?” I asked, but his trembling had yet to cease. Considering his personality up till now, I had expected a smug explanation. Was there something else going on here?

Zeshia started running. Accelerating rapidly, she reached me in the blink of an eye, drawing the same magic circle over her chest. Enharle was promptly

plunged into her body.

Gavuel's explosion dyed the surroundings white. I suppressed the damage with my Eyes and anti-magic. Zeshia died. Her source was annihilated. And yet — "..."

The annihilated Zeshia appeared out of nowhere, standing before me for the third time.

"Hmm. There's no end to this."

Gavuel was not a spell that could be easily parried. The first order of business was to identify why she kept resurrecting. If she couldn't be destroyed by her own self-destruction, then there was likely nothing that could.

Good grief, this was starting to resemble a real hero battle.

"Can you hear me, Anos?"

A concealed Leaks, hidden from the students of the Hero Academy, reached my ears.

"Come to the temple. Please. I'm the only one who can stop Zeshia."

The Leaks cut out there.

"Eleonore?" Misha asked.

"It could be a trap."

She shook her head. "She wasn't lying."

Eleonore had seemed different from the rest of them, I supposed. And if Misha was the one saying Eleonore was truthful, then it had to be true.

"I'll go," Misha said.

"Then it's in your hands. I'll keep this one suppressed."

This time, Zeshia was trying to stab herself and activate Gavuel at a distance, but I moved swiftly up to her and thrust my right arm into her chest.

"How repetitive. Did you think I'd let this go on forever?"

I drew a magic circle inside her body and used it to cast Rivide. Gavuel was frozen in time, preventing her source from exploding.

“Hmm. This will have to do for now.”

Using origin magic on a spell was a little excessive, but it wouldn't be necessary for long.

“Be careful,” Misha said.

“You too.”

With a nod, Misha cast Gatom.

§ 26. Two Thousand Years of Hatred

Misha teleported to the front of the temple.

She was still connected to me through Gyze, so with my Magic Eyes of Farsight obstructed, I was able to observe the world through her Eyes.

Misha was glancing around curiously, but Eleonore was nowhere to be seen.

“This way,” a weak voice called.

Misha traced the voice’s magic and looked over at the temple. She blinked twice, sensing there was something strange about the place—no magic could be detected within. Eleonore was supposed to be inside, yet there was no trace of her magic.

“Hang on,” Misha said, holding her hand up to the door. It was locked with Dejit.

“Can you open it?”

“Yeah.”

Misha cast her Eyes over Dejit. In order to remove a magical lock, the spell formula had to be analyzed with precision—which was a breeze for her. Misha promptly finished her analysis of Dejit and cast Dee.

The magic on the door slid away effortlessly. Misha placed a hand against the door and pushed, opening it with a rusty creak.

After stepping inside, Misha seemed to become sluggish. She shook her head to wave off the feeling before continuing forward.

Past the rows of pillars within the temple was a large double door. Magic circles covered the walls, floor, and ceiling of the room, and countless bubbles of holy water drifted in the air.

At the center of the room, inside the largest holy water bubble, was Eleonore. Her exposed form glowed with magic, blurring the contours of her body. A number of protective magic circles floated around her in the water.

Eleonore looked up in surprise. “Huh? Misha?”

No doubt she’d been expecting me instead.

“Anos sent me. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, of course.” Eleonore chuckled. “Can you take me to Zeshia?”

“Will you stop her?”

“Yup. I’m the only one who can. Sorry, I can’t move on my own right now.”

Misha cocked her head. “Because you’re using magic right now?”

“Well, technically, I *am* the magic.”

Misha blinked. She didn’t seem to understand what Eleonore meant, but neither did she ask further questions. “I’ll take you there.”

She approached Eleonore and reached for the holy bubble. The water’s surface rippled beneath her fingertips. She probably planned on using Gatom—the magic circle for it appeared at her feet.

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that,” a voice called from the doorway. It was swiftly accompanied by a bolt of light—Teo Triath.

“Ice shield.”

Misha constructed a huge ice barrier using Iris, but the rushed shield lacked strength. It instantly shattered under the force of the light. Misha, however, continued creating shield after shield consecutively, surpassing the destructive power of Teo Triath with the speed of her Iris.

“That’s against the rules,” Misha murmured.

Standing at the entrance of the temple was the headmaster of the Hero Academy, Diego Kanon Ijeiska.

“Hold your tongue, demon. This is Gairadite—I make the rules. Besides, no one will know what happens here.”

Diego cast another Teo Triath. This time, it wasn’t aimed at Misha, but at the back of the temple.

The bolt of holy energy was drawn to the double door. The moment it struck,

a magic circle appeared there and began to emit a brilliant light.

“The time has come to open the sacred door. Release the seal!”

Slowly, the double door creaked open. A vast amount of magic flowed out as a divine light. The light was whiter than white—it was pure, holy radiance that rejected all demonic beings.

“Misha!” Eleonore screamed.

The holy light pierced through Misha’s defenses, stabbing into her body. She fell to her knees in agony.

“Demons are powerless within this sacred sanctuary. You can forget about using Gatom or casting any more barriers. No one is coming to save you.”

“Stop, Mr. Diego! Don’t you dare hurt Misha!”

“Silence, ne’er-do-well,” Diego snapped.

The holy water surrounding Eleonore turned white, rendering her unable to be seen and heard.

“Now...” Diego held out his hand. Light gathered in his palm, taking the form of a sword. It was Enharle, the Holy Sword of Light, the same sword that Zeshia wielded. “Your classmate has been making quite the fool of us.” He stood before Misha, smiling menacingly. “Time to meet your demise, filthy demon.”

Diego held Enharle’s blade against Misha’s cheek. She seemed unable to move, rendered immobile by the light leaking through the door at the back.

“This is the resentment of the humans you killed.”

“I haven’t killed anyone...”

Misha’s words seemed to touch a nerve. Diego’s face twisted in disgust.

She spoke on. “Humans and demons haven’t fought for two thousand years. The world’s at peace now. We’re all alive.”

“Did you think time would heal all wounds, you rat?!”

Diego kicked Misha in the face with all his might. She rolled across the ground, and he slowly followed her, the holy sword clutched in his hand.

“Expecting us to forget after a thousand years living behind a wall... Telling us to pretend nothing happened and live in peace... Just how arrogant can your ancestor be? We won’t forget. We’ll never forget. Not even one thousand or two thousand years shall erase your sins!”

Diego lifted Enharle and thrust it into Misha’s chest. Blood gushed out of the wound, and her magic began to fade.

“This won’t pass...for an accident...” she wheezed.

A death during the earlier exam could have been dismissed as an accident, but a murder by a human not participating in the event—a *teacher*, no less—would be responded to as a major incident.

“So what? The plan was to have one of you demons die anyway. No...” Diego’s smirk gleamed with madness. “You shall be destroyed, source and all, so that you shall never reincarnate again. I’m sure the Demon King Academy will be furious.”

A magic circle appeared at the tip of the sword embedded in Misha’s chest. It was the circle for Teo Triath.

“Filthy demon. If you wish to resent someone, resent your founder, the Demon King of Tyranny.” The light of Aske gathered around Enharle. “*Teo Triath!*”

Diego cast his spell with all his resentment. The light formed into a ball of energy to blow apart Misha’s body—when it was smothered by a black aurora and disappeared, sword and all. The stark black halo then spread to Misha’s body as though to protect her.

“What...?”

“Look familiar?” I asked, grabbing Diego’s shoulder. I had teleported behind him with Gatom. “This is Beno levun, the wall that divided the world two thousand years ago.”

“Demons...should not be able to use magic in this sanctuary...”

“Oh? Would you like to test that theory?”

For a brief moment, silence fell over the room. Then Diego whirled around

and loosed Teo Triath.

“Die, demon!”

Erasing the spell with my Eyes of Destruction, I grabbed him by the face.

“Guh! Aaaagh!”

I tightened my grip, feeling his skull creak beneath my fingers.

“You’re free to pull all the petty tricks you want,” I said. “If you wish to rewrite history so that humans appear superior to demons, be my guest. Gloat to your heart’s content.” I drew a magic circle within Diego’s body. “But answer me this—what were you trying to do just now?”

Diego seized my arm with his hands, attempting to pull me off. I didn’t budge.

“Shut...up...”

“I asked what you were trying to do.” I summoned Beno levun directly inside Diego’s body.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!”

Swallowed by the aurora of darkness, Diego vanished without a trace. Then, cutting my finger with the nail of my thumb, I spilled one drop of blood before me.

Ingall resurrected Diego’s body.

“Wha...” Diego stared at me in shock.

“Who gave you permission to die? Don’t think death will free you from my presence, foolish human.”

§ 27. Source Slayer

Diego leaped back, glaring at me with immeasurable hatred. “Wicked demon... Did you resurrect me to uncover the Hero Academy’s secrets?”

“Hmm. Diego,” I said, having already approached him and embedded my arm into his chest. He choked as blood spurted from his mouth. “Who gave you permission to speak? Know your place.”

Grabbing his heart, I crushed the organ with my fist. I then retracted my right arm, watching as Diego dropped face-first to the floor. Not a muscle in his body twitched.

“I said there’d be no escape through death.”

I revived Diego once again using Ingall. The moment his body was restored, he glared at me.

“Y-You bastar— Garrgh!”

I stepped on his head, pressing it into the ground.

“Curse you, lowly demon...! No matter what you’re plotting, I, a hero, shall never yield!”

“You still consider yourself a hero? Disgusting.” I created a demon sword in my palm and thrust it through his abdomen, into his source.

“Guh...urgh... I-It’s no use... This pain is nothing... I fight for the sake of mankind, for the sake of peace! I shall endure any and all agony you can serve. You demons don’t understand the love and courage of humanity. You’re all filthy scum!”

“How about you focus your Eyes and take a close look at that spell formula?” I suggested.

Diego directed his magic to his gaze, glaring at the magic circle I’d drawn on his body—and gasped. “This is...Nedra...?”

It was the spell Ledriano had explained in class before now, that transformed

animals into mutants.

“Humans are animals too. This spell works well on them.”

“Ha ha ha ha! Fool. A hero blessed by the Sword of Three Races would never fall to demonkind. We cannot become mutants!”

“Hmm. You seem to be mistaken.”

Black fur began to sprout from his wound, spreading over his skin like a coat.

“Urgh... This is... Gah...!” Diego cast a spell over the wound, attempting to use holy magic to control the transformation of his body. But it was no use.

“Nedra harnesses the wicked bestial nature of a person’s source. Those with rational minds are unlikely to turn into mutants, but doing so isn’t impossible. Results vary from person to person. Of course, you already knew that.”

Diego desperately poured his magic into his wound.

“The Sword of Three Races only recognizes those with the purest light in their source,” I said. “Receiving its blessing does not spare you from being turned into a mutant. Being pure enough to spare yourself is what makes the Sword of Three Races accept you. Do you understand?”

Diego’s nails extended like claws as fangs sprouted from his mouth.

“What’s with that appearance, Diego? Are you truly a reincarnation of Hero Kanon?”

“Of course I am... I’m Diego Kanon Ijeiska, bearer of Hero Kanon’s source...and I shall be the one to defeat you demons and save the world!”

“I don’t believe that. Reincarnation changes people. Memories are lost along the way. But deep down, those people are still just the same. You are nothing like Hero Kanon. Your very nature is ugly and distorted.”

“Shut...up...” He shot me a menacing glare. Then all of a sudden, he snapped. “Shut up, shut up, shut up!” he shrieked. “I won’t fall for your trickery, demon! I am a hero! I will destroy you demons and save the world, just like Hero Kanon—Gaaah! This cowardly magic!”

“Who allowed you to speak?” I sent more magic into Nedra.

“Urgh... Gaaaaaah! This can’t be... This can’t... You’ll never turn me into a mutant!”

“When humans devolve into mutants, their high intelligence triggers a result unlike that of any other animal. The human’s greed, malice, and hatred are fostered until those grotesque feelings manifest in their appearance.”

“Silence! I am a hero... A *hero*... Hagh... Hyaaagh... Hyaaaaaaaah!”

Diego’s transformation accelerated, causing the black fur to spread across his entire body. His claws and fangs extended, and thick horns emerged from his skull. The most distinctive change was in his face—his facial features had been crushed into a grotesque mess. His bulging muscles flexed, snapping the demon sword embedded within him.

“This is your true nature, Diego. And it’s as rotten as I expected.”

Diego slowly rose from the floor, turning his ugly face towards me.

“Well? How does it feel to be a mutant?”

“Did you think you could crush me like this?!” he roared in a beastly manner. “Humans are more than their appearance! More than a bloodline! Humans are defined by their heart! You can change my appearance all you want, but my heart will always remain human! Reducing me to a mutant won’t make me any less of a hero!”

“Your heart is nothing like a hero’s.”

“Silence! Curse you... Curse you, you foul, evil creature. Showing you mercy was a mistake. We should have slaughtered the lot of you from the start!” Diego turned his frustrations over to Leaks. “Attention all Jerga-Kanon students. Attack those demons at once!”

“Oh? What are you thinking? My followers aren’t weak enough to fall to a general assault.”

Diego grinned. He then reached out to a nearby holy bubble and cast a magic circle over it. “Filthy demon. You’ll soon glean a taste of true despair—and I’ll be the first to see your regretful face! Ha ha ha ha—BWA HA HA!”

In his state, using holy water was a bold move—the magic itself would still

activate, but his body would be poisoned.

“I see. You’ve planted Gavuel in the sources of all your students.”

“Wha...?!”

The cat was out of the bag. Diego gaped in dismay at how his scheme had been so swiftly seen through.

“That magic circle just now was to activate the spell, and the students charging probably don’t even know it. They’re completely unaware that Gavuel has been planted within them.”

To think this man was so foolish... He truly was beyond salvation.

“Is that what a hero would do, Diego? Sacrifice the lives of their innocent students to kill some demons?”

“You have no right to speak to me that way! You’re one of the demons that stole everything from humanity! This is what a hero would do—this is how Hero Kanon would fight! No student of the Hero Academy would cower at the greatest wish of our founder! Their courage in the face of death is what makes them heroes!” Diego cast Leaks once again. “Latest status!”

“Yes, sir! The Demon Swordmaster has been located!”

“We’ve just spotted the Witch of Destruction.”

“Nine students of the Demon King Academy discovered here. We’re ready to face them with nine of our own!”

Diego’s ugly face distorted further. “Attack! All Jerga-Kanon students, charge! Show them your courage as successors of Hero Kanon— Agh...!”

At that moment, I plunged my right hand through Diego’s torso. “Did you think I’d let you?”

He grinned through a mouthful of blood. “We’re taking our revenge. Die, demon.”

The magic had already activated, and the holy bubble sent its magic into the circle—the circle that would trigger the explosion of the students’ sources. The bodies of the students approaching Lay, Sasha, Misa, and the fan union began

glowing with the light of Gavuel. The explosion would ravage everything in the area, including this temple— If the spell had worked, that is.

“Wh-Why...?” Diego murmured to himself. “Why aren’t they exploding? Why?!”

“It took a bit of effort to set up, but I cast magic over the entire city. Time magic to stop Gavuel, that is.”

That was why I’d been late saving Misha—I couldn’t allow the others to use Gavuel, so I’d had to set up precautions.

“You froze Gavuel in time...?”

“Were you not listening to me earlier? The same attack won’t work on me twice.”

Diego shuddered, overcome with hatred and fury.

“The world is finally at peace,” I said. “I didn’t want to take any more lives, but it seems I’ll have to make an exception for you.”

I withdrew my arm, and Diego staggered back. He was barely clinging to life.

“If you plan to kill me, then kill me! I’ll return as many times as it takes. If I don’t succeed in this life, I’ll return in the next. I’ll never forget this resentment—not until all demons are eradicated from this world!”

“Did you think you’d return after this life, Diego?”

I opened my right hand, sending magic to my palm so that his Magic Eyes could see. A faintly glowing white orb appeared there. If I looked carefully into its abyss, I could see a white magic link as thin as a thread connecting the orb to Diego.

“Do you see? This is your source.”

With my right hand, I drew a magic circle in the air. It was the circle for Vebdoz. As I reached my hand inside the circle, my fingers became stained a deep black.

“Directly affecting one’s source is difficult, but Vebdoz and other such spells make it possible.”

I scratched the white orb with my nails.

“G-Gaaaaaah! Guwaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

His screams were louder than the cries of a dying man.

“Now do you understand? Having your source wounded is an agony worse than death. Condensing every imaginable pain in this world into one would still be incomparable. After all, the deaths of your infinite number of future incarnations are occurring all at once.”

With my fingertip, I applied a light wound to his source.

“Agh, graaaaaagh... Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Tears and saliva dripped down Diego’s face, but he paid them no mind as he screamed like a beast.

“You said this is how Kanon would fight. That sending your students on a suicide mission with Gavuel is how heroes defeat their enemies.”

My finger pierced his source. Diego’s eyes rolled back into his head as he let out a soundless scream.

“Two thousand years ago, Hero Kanon possessed seven sources. Even if many of those sources were destroyed, he could resurrect with only one. It was the ultimate greater spell designed by the gods, and the only person in history to use it was Kanon.”

Diego was barely conscious, but I continued to address him. “Why? Because no one could withstand the pain of having their source annihilated in the circle of life. No one except him. He had his sources destroyed countless times, yet he always stood back up to oppose me.”

“S-Stop... Stop it... Please...”

I flicked my finger down, slicing Diego’s source apart.

“No... G-Gaaagh, gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Do you know why?” I asked, pointing a black finger at Diego’s tattered source.

“Agh... Hah... Urgh... No...No more...”

“That man would rather die himself than sacrifice anyone else, and die he did, over and over again. His sources were slashed apart, burned, crushed, yet he continued to fight for mankind. That is the legend of the man who drove away demons time after time—the legend of a man of true bravery.”

Seeing such unfaltering resolution had made me proud to call him my enemy. He had always been fighting to protect something, never once controlled by his own desires.

And yet, a man like that had been killed—murdered by the hands of the humans he had sacrificed himself for. Murder probably wasn’t enough to prevent his reincarnation, but it may have been enough to kill his kind heart.

“If you claim to be Kanon, endure this and prove yourself. If you succeed, I’ll reincarnate you. Return and kill me in your next life.”

“Enough... Please, stop...” he gasped.

I pierced Diego’s source with my finger.

“Urgaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“What’s wrong, Diego? Aren’t you a hero? Don’t wail like that. Kanon would laugh at you.”

“Please...” Diego whined with the despairing look of a man who’d seen the depths of hell. “Please...forgive me... Kill me... End this...” he pleaded between tortured sobs. All his hatred and resentment had vanished, leaving behind the sole wish to be freed from pain.

“You are not Hero Kanon.”

With Vebdoz in hand, I grabbed Diego’s source and crushed it with all my might. The white orb disintegrated into dust in my grasp, and Diego’s body flopped lifelessly to the floor. There, he lay motionless. He could no longer resurrect himself. His source had been removed from his body and destroyed in its entirety.

“Don’t speak of Hero Kanon when you know nothing about him. Unlike you, he was strong.”

§ 28. What Hides in the Depths

I walked over to Misha.

I had cast Ei Chael on her earlier, but her wounds had yet to heal. The spell should take effect with time, but the De Ijelia over this temple was rather powerful. Even Beno levun was struggling to completely stave off its effects.

“Over there, is it?”

I strained my Eyes at the holy light pouring from the gap in the door. The light was a by-product of powerful magic—if it was strong enough to limit even my own, only one thing could be behind that door.

“Go...” Misha mumbled, sensing that I was distracted by the back of the temple. “I’ll be fine...”

“You mustn’t think like that. Right now, there is no higher priority than you.”

I barricaded the door with Beno levun, but the light was still leaking through. It would be faster to just leave this place in order to treat her, but first...

I glared at the nearby bubble of holy water with my Magic Eyes of Destruction. The bubble burst, revealing Eleonore from within.

“Sorry for the trouble, Anos... Thanks...”

Eleonore tried to take a step forward, but her legs gave out beneath her. I caught her in my arms as she staggered forward.

“Ah...”

“You okay?”

Eleonore nodded. “Th-Thank you.”

She didn’t appear to be injured. It seemed she’d simply been trapped inside.

“H-Hey, don’t stare so much...” Eleonore took a small step back, hiding her body with her arms. The proof of peace too large to be hidden peeked out from between them.

Hmm. She seemed a little too pitiful to leave in this state.

I extended a finger towards her body...

“Huh...? H-Hey...”

...and touched my fingertip to her collarbone.



“Hold still. I don’t recall the details of the Hero Academy uniforms, so I’m asking your body.” I used Iris on Eleonore. A magic circle appeared around her, shortly followed by a replica uniform.

“Wow... Thanks.”

I walked back to Misha and picked her up in my arms.

“Where’s Mr. Diego?”

“Gone. Source and all.”

“What?”

Even the usually carefree Eleonore had a serious look on her face. She looked around with her Magic Eyes and understood that Diego’s source was gone for good.

“You’re amazing, Anos...”

Well, that reaction was unexpected.

“That’s the first thing you say about the death of your teacher?”

Eleonore lowered her gaze. “I knew everything,” she mumbled gloomily. “Mr. Diego planted Gavuel in everyone’s sources...and I knew about it all along. I’m the only one at the Hero Academy who knows the truth about our history. Not the whole truth, but enough of it. But no one would believe me. If I told them Hero Kanon was killed by humans, they’d think I was crazy...”

“What a coincidence.”

Eleonore blinked at me.

“I’ve been experiencing similar hardships with demon history having been rewritten. The truth only falls on deaf ears.”

Hearing that, Eleonore gasped. “The name of the Demon King of Tyranny...” she whispered.

“Is Anos Voldigoad. At some point in the last two thousand years, someone changed it to Avos Dilhevia.”

Eleonore stared at me blankly.

“Is that too hard to believe?”

“No, no. I thought it was strange,” she muttered. “You’re strong—too strong—yet barely any demons recognized your strength. It was like watching some distorted reality, but that distortion was somehow familiar.”

Eleonore was well acquainted with those around her’s rejection of true history.

“You’re the Demon King of Tyranny?”

“That I am.”

“Why are you looking for Hero Kanon?”

“Because I made him a promise—that we’d be friends upon our return.”

“I see... That makes sense. So it wasn’t a lie.”

“There’s a lot I’d like to ask you, but treating Misha comes first. She won’t die if we stay here any longer, but I’m sure she’s in pain.”

Safe in my arms, Misha shook her head quietly. How brave of her.

“Something also has to be done about the Hero Academy students. Unfortunately, Rivide won’t last forever. If left unchecked, their sources will explode.”

“Right. I’ll handle it.”

“Oh?”

Once activated, Gavuel was like lit dynamite. I could forcefully stop the explosion by freezing the time of the fuse, but returning it to a safe state required much greater effort.

“You can do that?”

“Source magic is my specialty,” Eleonore said, holding up her index finger.

“How’s your body?”

“It’s fine. I was just turned into magic for a bit, so I couldn’t walk right away.”

Turned into magic, huh? That was one of the things I was curious to ask about, but it’d have to wait for another time. At any rate, Eleonore’s peers

should be safe in her hands.

“Then you’d better hurry. Rivide will last for a day, but you’ll need all the time you can get to restore the sources of all those students.”

“Gotcha.”

Eleonore hurried for the temple exit, but on her way out, she whirled around.

“Ah! Can we talk after class tomorrow? There’s a favor I’d like to ask of you.”

“Sure, though I don’t know if the Hero Academy will be up for holding classes.”

Their headmaster was gone. The academy had no way of knowing he’d been murdered, but the mutant corpse left behind should be enough to deduce he was dead. Even if they didn’t notice his disappearance, we were without a teacher to lead the inter-academy classes.

“It’ll be fine. Things might get a little busy with Mr. Diego gone, but they’ll be back to normal by tomorrow.”

So they had substitute teachers on hand. Not that classes really mattered.

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Sure. See ya.” Eleonore waved and left the temple.

After watching her go, I used Gatom to transfer Misha and me inside the Castle she’d created. Healing magic was sure to work here—I cast Ei Chael once more to treat her wounds.

“Hmm.”

The wound inflicted by the Holy Sword of Light was deep, but the light coming from the back of the temple proved even more troublesome. It had seeped through the wound to eat directly into Misha’s source. She’d be unable to cast magic or even move in this state.

“I feel a little better...” Misha said, smiling in my arms.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be able to move in no time.”

“I’m not worried.” She looked straight at me. “You’re here.”

“I see.”

“In the temple,” she murmured, “I saw strong magic. Stronger than that of Eugo La Raviaz...”

Had she looked that far into the abyss? That would have eaten away at her even further.

“Was I wrong?”

“No, the Keepers’ powers are middle ranking amongst the gods. Your Eyes didn’t deceive you.”

“What was it?”

“If I’m not mistaken,” I said quietly, “it was Evansmana, the Sword of Three Races.”

The strongest of the eighty-eight holy swords in the world. The legendary sword forged to defeat me.

§ 29. Reappearance

The Hero Academy Arclanisca.

The next day, I opened the door to the auditorium to the sound of voices chatting inside.

“Yeah, the Jerga-Kanon are absent today. Well, Zeshia’s always absent, but you know what I mean.”

“They were beaten up pretty bad by the Demon King Academy. Raos had to be hospitalized because they couldn’t get all the poison out.”

“Heine’s even worse off. They say there are stigmas all over his body, so healing magic isn’t having any effect. They’re using holy water to keep him alive, but he’d almost be better off dead.”

“Was Ledriano injured?”

“Not physically, but the guys that went to check up on him say he’s mentally beat. He’s shut himself in his room and won’t come out.”

“That doesn’t sound good...”

“Yeah. Who would’ve thought demons were such monsters...?”

“Shh! It’s him.”

The students of the Hero Academy all turned around to face me. Those who’d been loitering in my path scrambled out of my way. For some reason, they looked afraid of something.

I walked past them unconcernedly, heading for our allocated seats.

“Looks like a certain someone went a step too far, don’t you think?” Sasha asked.

Beside her, Misha cocked her head.

“Hmm. Are you one to talk?”

Misha nodded emphatically, much to the disapproval of the now pouting

Sasha.

Misa laughed. “You guys were amazing. Before I knew it, the exam was over, and I didn’t get to do anything.”

After Eleonore had left the temple, the Jerga-Kanon had surrendered. She’d most likely ordered them all to do so.

“But I’m glad you’re unhurt,” Lay said, flashing Misa a smile. She blushed shyly.

“Come to think of it”—I took my seat and turned to Lay—“you handled the Sword of Intent well.”

“You think? I feel like I could have drawn out more.”

How typical of him, always aiming higher.

“Did you remember anything by using it?”

“About my past life? No, nothing unusual.”

“Hmm. I expected the holy sword to trigger something by now.”

Normally, demons couldn’t use holy swords. If one possessed power that far exceeded that of the sword, it was possible to force the sword to submit, but Lay had received the holy sword’s approval the legitimate way.

Two thousand years ago, Shin Reglia, renowned as the strongest swordsman, had possessed similar strength to that of Lay, yet even he might have struggled to accomplish such a task.

He had said he wanted to relearn the sword in a new era. Perhaps that wish of his had come true. Either way, he was one frightening man.

“Did you know Lord Anos in your past life, Lay?” Misa asked.

“Wait, you’ve never mentioned this before,” Sasha said sharply. “No wonder you’re so good with demon swords. Are all the demons from two thousand years ago like you two?”

The pair looked at Lay curiously.

“There’s no saying for sure,” I admitted. “And it’s not like it changes anything.”

“He’s right,” Lay said.

Sensing we had no intention of expanding on the topic, Sasha frowned in displeasure. “Fine, keep your secrets...”

“Aha ha... Well, if Lord Anos doesn’t want to say, we can’t force him,” Misa said somewhat nervously.

Lay chuckled. “I won’t change.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll still be me no matter what memories I recall.”

“Ah. O-Okay...”

“Or were you worried about something else?”

“N-No, that’s not... I’m happy to hear that.” Misa lowered her head in embarrassment.

Sighing, Sasha shot her a sidelong glance. “Enough already. No flirting in the classroom.”

“Ah! No, no, that’s not what...! U-Um... That’s not what we were doing, right?”

Lay grinned silently at Misa, then turned that grin to Sasha. “If you’re jealous, you can try it yourself—with your beloved Demon King.”

“Wha...!” Sasha glanced quickly over at me, then glared sharply at Lay. “Lay! Step out of this classroom, and we’ll settle this once and for all,” she snapped, rising from her seat abruptly.

“But isn’t class about to start?”

“Don’t worry yourself. I’ll finish this in under a minute.”

“Oooh. A match against you sounds interesting.” Lay stood up as well. He was grinning cheerfully, in complete contrast to the glare on Sasha’s face.

“Are you two fighting?” Misha asked, popping up between them.

“It’s not so much of a fight...” Sasha protested.

“...as a casual test of strength,” Lay finished.

“That’s right. After we went through the trouble of making it through that nightmare of a self-study session—or rather, that self-study session from hell—those heroes couldn’t even put up a proper fight. I need a more challenging opponent.”

“If I’m up against you, I could take Siegsesta for a spin.”

“Ah, I was actually wondering about that. How does that sword even work? Weren’t you wielding it with holy magic?”

“To put it simply, it does whatever I want it to.”

“What? At least give a proper explanation.”

Misha giggled. The pair looked at her curiously.

“You two are close,” she said.

Sasha’s eyes widened.

“Looks like your sister’s the sole winner here.”

“Jeez...”

Conflict forgotten, the two returned to their seats.

Just then, the bell rang, marking the start of class. Meno promptly entered the auditorium, followed by another teacher who stepped up to the podium.

Misha’s eyes rounded in shock.

“Yesterday’s inter-academy exam was a heated affair. I’m sure both the Hero Academy and Demon King Academy identified personal areas of improvement. Let us continue to endeavor in friendly competition as we commence today’s classes.”

Diego Kanon Ijeiska, the man whose source had been destroyed, was standing before us.

Misha’s surprise was understandable. This wasn’t a doppelgänger—he possessed the exact same source as the one I had crushed in my hand.

Hero Kanon had possessed seven sources, which explained his continued resurrection. However, Diego had only had the one source to begin with. Could he resurrect himself as long as the other six sources were intact, even though

they inhabited different bodies?

No. There was no way Diego's source had once been Kanon's in the first place. Even if the spell to split a source into seven had been used on Diego, he would be unable to withstand the pain of having any one of his sources destroyed. If he had resurrected in spite of that, the man wouldn't be of the same mind.

"Oh, that's right. Before we begin, there's a matter I must inform you of. Due to fatigue, the Jerga-Kanon will be absent from today's lesson. I will notify you when they're due to return."

"May I ask a question?" I said, raising my hand.

Diego looked at me. "What is it?"

It was definitely the same source, but what was this feeling? Something felt odd.

Ah, that was it. Although this Diego possessed the same source, he had reacted like a completely different person. Despite everything I'd done to him yesterday, he seemed completely unaffected. If this were an act, I would be mildly impressed, but that didn't appear to be the case.

"Eleonore was uninjured during yesterday's exam. Why isn't she here?" I asked.

Diego replied in an instant. "Eleonore is fatigued from using so much healing magic on the Jerga-Kanon. Her condition isn't serious, but she would prove unproductive attending class in such a state. She's resting to be on the safe side."

Indeed, restoring so many sources from the binds of Gavuel was no easy feat. But hadn't we promised to meet after class today? I couldn't imagine her standing me up simply to rest.

"Class will now begin. Today, we shall cover holy magic items. Though the Demon King Academy students may be unfamiliar with the topic..."

Good grief. It seemed the troubles at the Hero Academy were more complex than I'd anticipated.

§ 30. Taboo Magic

“This concludes today’s lesson.”

In the end, Eleonore didn’t show up the entire day. It was probably best to assume something had hindered her. She hadn’t been able to move by herself when she was in the temple, so it was possible that she was in a similar state right now.

Perhaps I’d have to go to her myself.

“Um, Lord Anos? Everyone was talking about going to the festival together. Would you like to come?” Misa called.

“Hmm. I’ve got something to attend to. Have fun without me.”

“Really? Okay.”

“I’ll pass on today as well,” Lay said. “I’m a little sleepy.”

“Did you stay up late?”

“I’m having trouble sleeping on a new pillow.”

“I see...” Misa murmured in disappointment.

Lay walked up to her and leaned in close. “Let’s meet up after I’ve had a nap,” he whispered.

“U-Uh...”

I see. So they wanted to meet up in secret. How heartwarming.

“Or would you rather not?” Lay asked.

“N-No. I mean, sure. L-Let’s do that.”

Behind them, the fan union began whispering amongst themselves.

“Did you hear that? Lay said he’s sleepy...”

“Yeah. He’s sharing a dorm room with Lord Anos, right?”

“Hold up! What are you thinking?!”

“I’m not thinking anything! I’m just wondering if they’ve had any special contact...”

“Don’t call it special contact!”

“Th-Then does that mean Misa has...”

“Misa has a chance at indirect bed-sharing with Lord Anos?!”

Ignoring their chatter, I left the auditorium and used my Eyes to search for Eleonore. However, no matter where I looked, I couldn’t pick up on her magic. Was it being erased? Come to think of it, Misha hadn’t been able to locate Eleonore’s position either.

On the other hand, Diego’s magic was easily traceable. If the Hero Academy was doing something to her, its headmaster was surely involved.

I used Lynel together with Najila—the former to turn invisible and the latter to conceal my magic—then set off after Diego. He was headed for the holy lake, which was still devoid of water.

Using Fless, he flew down to the lake bed. I expected him to head into the temple, but he instead proceeded elsewhere and entered the caves in the opposite direction.

Inside the dimly lit cave was a small spring of holy water. He used Koko and dived into the pool.

I followed after him and was surprised to discover that the inside was far deeper than it had first appeared.

Diego flew through the water using Fless, plunging deeper and deeper. After swimming for some time, the bottom came into view, along with a large door locked with Dejit. Diego, who was permitted to enter, opened the door and went inside.

If I opened the door after him, he would notice me right away. Instead, I waited for a moment or two before unlocking Dejit and following after him.

The door opened onto the interior of a stone building. Magic prevented the spring water from pouring inside.

What were they doing here? I proceeded down the passage, considering the possibilities.

Soon, I came upon a spot where the wall had collapsed—relatively recently, at that. Judging by the lack of repairs, it must have been damaged sometime in the past few days.

The further I went, the more obvious the damage became. The floor, ceiling, and walls were smashed and severed, leaving an abundance of holes everywhere. It was as though a fight had taken place here not so long ago.

Just then, a voice caught my attention.

“How do you still have no clues?!”

It was Diego. His bitter shouts were coming from a door nearby. I took up a position in front of the door and began to listen closely.

“W-We’ve learned that it was a man in a mask...” came the answer.

“I received that report this morning! I’m telling you to give me new information!”

“My apologies...”

“Are you sure this isn’t the work of the Demon King Academy?”

“We were unable to detect the intruder’s magic, so there’s no way of determining whether he was a demon or otherwise...”

A masked man whose magic couldn’t be detected, hm? This sounded awfully familiar.

“The Demon King Academy is unaware of our plans,” the timid voice continued. “There’s no chance of them attacking this facility. Perhaps it’s the work of the Inzuel Empire to the west.”

“They have no reason to do such a thing! We’ve maintained friendly relations with the Inzuel Empire for well over a millennium!”

“Yes, but neither are they foolish enough to place blind faith in Gairadite. What if they’ve planted a spy on the inside? They may have heard rumors of the Holy Mother.”

Diego fell silent. “Her whereabouts are secure, are they not?”

“Affirmative. The masked man put up a fight, but he wasn’t able to locate her.”

At that, Diego seemed to think of something. “Right. Then here’s what we’ll do—we’ll pin the blame for the attack on those demons.”

“Should we capture one of the Demon King Academy students?”

“I’ll leave the means to you. We only need to convince the people that justice is with us. Create justification to invade Dilhade.”

“So we’ll finally...”

“The time has come to achieve our dreams.”

“Got it! Roger that!”

“Also, deal with the spy. Smoke them out and make them talk. Use whatever means necessary.”

“Right away!”

How infantile. Why was he fabricating a reason for war?

The world was finally at peace. What was he so unhappy about? I could kill him right there and then, but I’d destroyed his source just yesterday. If he were only going to resurrect again, it would probably be faster to stop their scheme first.

I hadn’t heard of this “Holy Mother” before, but they seemed important to the Hero Academy. Judging from recent events, it was probably Eleonore.

If the masked man had failed to locate her, there had to be a hidden room somewhere—a room that couldn’t be detected using Magic Eyes, or else he’d have found it already. That meant the room had been hidden without magic, just like the ones in the dungeon beneath Delsgade.

I turned around and headed back to the passageway with the destroyed wall. There, I lifted my foot and stomped. The entire building began to shake with a violent rumble.

“Enemy attack! All squads into position!” a voice cried as soldiers ran out in

swarms. But with the intruder nowhere to be seen, they paused with confused looks on their faces.

“Was it an earthquake?”

“They rarely happen in the holy lake... Is it because the water’s dried up?”

As they stopped to debate amongst themselves, I used my Eyes to check their positions.

Hmm. So there it was.

With my target acquired, I set off towards my destination.

Once the soldiers had settled down and left, I examined a completely ordinary wall. Then I touched my finger to it and pushed. At the pressure, the wall slowly opened—it was a hidden door devoid of magic.

No matter how negligent they were with their information, humans had the tendency to protect their valuables in times of urgency. Checking the positions of the soldiers after an unnatural tremor had run through the building was enough to give me my answer.

Behind the door was another dimly lit passage. I proceeded down it, past the several non-magical traps set up along the way. Eventually, a faint blue light came into view.

The room before me was enormous. Tens of thousands of bubbles of holy water filled the space, each one accommodating a naked girl.

Zeshia Kanon Ijeiska. There was no mistaking it—the bubbles contained the Hero Academy’s rank one. Each body possessed the exact same source.

And at the center of the room, in a significantly larger bubble, was Eleonore. She was floating within the bubble, emitting a magical glow as she had in the temple yesterday, her silhouette blurred by the light. Several magic circles hovered around her as her own magic flowed into the surrounding bubbles.

“Eleonore,” I called, dispelling Lynel.

“Anos...?” she asked. She seemed surprised yet happy to see me. “I’m sorry I couldn’t keep our agreement—I hadn’t expected this to happen.”

“This counts as meeting after class, doesn’t it? I see no problem.”

Eleonore smiled. “I knew you’d come,” she said, holding up her index finger. She looked at me with a soft expression. “This may be sudden, but will you listen to my wish?”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Anos, I’d like you to destroy a source.”

“Hmm. Whose source?”

Her answer was as calm as it was unwavering. “Mine.”

There was no dishonesty or deceit in her smile. Her wish was straight from the heart.

“All my life, I’ve waited for someone to free us from this endless hell. You know, Anos...”

She paused briefly. Then she confessed the truth.

“I’m the result of a taboo spell that humans should never have created.”

§ 31. “Eleonore”

A taboo spell, was it? That explained a lot.

“In other words, you’re magic personified,” I said.

Eleonore’s eyes widened. “I’m amazed. You figured it out with just that?”

“The possibility of turning humans into magic hasn’t escaped me. I’ve even played around with some spell formulae for it.”

“Did it work?” Eleonore asked nervously.

“It was a moment of pure madness. That kind of magic shouldn’t exist.”

“Right. I completely agree,” she murmured, looking down with a sigh of relief. Then she looked back up at me. “But there was one person two thousand years ago crazy enough to do it. Perhaps you’re familiar with him—the commander of the Gairadite Demon King Subjugation Battalion.”

That title sure brought back memories. His power hadn’t been as great as Kanon’s, but his persistence in defeating demons had been second to none.

“Jerga, huh?”

Eleonore nodded. “Commander Jerga harbored the deepest hatred towards demonkind. That hatred remained even after the Demon King of Tyranny’s death. The walls that had divided the world were to disappear someday. The Demon King of Tyranny was to return. Knowing that, he made preparations to continue fighting until the Demon King was completely destroyed. He founded the Hero Academy to pass on his hatred to future generations.”

“A foolish act, no?”

“I think so too. And someone else back then felt the same way.”

“Kanon?”

“Yup. Until the very end, Hero Kanon opposed the founding of the Hero Academy. He insisted that the Demon King of Tyranny wished for peace—that

his position was no different to ours and that he had only fought to protect demons during a time of war. But few believed the Hero's words..."

That was no surprise. I had killed countless people during that war. If the problem could have been solved with words, I never would have had to divide the world in the first place.

"Hero Kanon claimed that the Demon King had given his life to raise the walls. Even I doubted his words. People said that Kanon's kindness drove him to give the reborn Demon King another chance."

So humankind had believed that Kanon had lied about the Demon King as a final act of compassion. Eleonore had come to be after the Demon King's name had been altered, so her suspicions had been far from unreasonable.

"But after meeting you and learning that you were the Demon King of Tyranny, I began to believe Kanon had been telling the truth."

"Why is that?"

Eleonore giggled. "Because you don't seem like the type to kill humans willy-nilly. Like that time with Gavuel. If you hadn't frozen it in time, everyone would have died."

"That was just a coincidence."

"Well, if you insist," she said, wagging her finger. "Back to the story, though. In the end, Commander Jerga gathered many supporters and successfully established the Hero Academy."

"What happened to Kanon?"

"He gave up and left it in the hands of future generations. He hoped that in an era of peace demons wouldn't attack humans and that humans wouldn't be foolish enough to wage war on innocent demons."

That was an extremely naive way of thinking, but one typical of that man. If there was no aggression, there would be no hatred—or at least that's what he had likely wanted to believe.

"But Commander Jerga was aware of that too. Hatred would fade over time. Anger would one day disappear. Simply establishing the Hero Academy and

retelling tales wasn't enough. After those who had fought in the war passed away, humans would forget their resentment."

No amount of magic could extend a human's life by much. In only a few hundred years, humanity's resentment would fade, leaving only history books stooped in fact.

"That was what Commander Jerga feared the most," Eleonore said.

"Is that why he converted his source into Aske?"

Her eyes widened. Then she giggled. "You really are amazing. How did you figure that out?"

"It's simple, really—when I used Aske earlier, I heard an oddly familiar voice."

The voice had been a little different than in person, so I hadn't been able to recall whose it was at first. Now, though, I was pretty sure it had been Jerga's.

"Gods took part in the war back then. Transforming sources into magic is beyond the realm of human capability, but it wouldn't be impossible with the combined power of the gods and holy water."

The formula for Aske I'd used was based on that from two thousand years ago. It was the same spell, yet the result had been different—in other words, the order of the world had been rewritten by the gods.

"It's just as you say. Commander Jerga gave up his life to commit his feelings—his wholehearted desire for revenge—into Aske magic. It was then written into the academy's textbooks that the voice heard when using Aske belongs to Hero Kanon and that one could become a true hero by obeying that voice."

So that's why the Hero Academy students believed they could hear the voice of Kanon.

"The more a person uses Aske, the more hatred it instills in their heart. At the Hero Academy, the atrocities that demons have committed against humans are passed down in detail. This way, the feelings and memories of resentment towards the Demon King of Tyranny would live on until his return."

I knew Jerga had harbored deeper resentment than any other human out there. But when peace had come to pass, his life had been nearing its end. I'd

expected him to spend his final moments surrounded by his loved ones, passing on peacefully.

Perhaps the continued resentment was the result of my naivety. I should have put him out of his misery.

“And Kanon couldn’t stand by and watch something like that.”

Eleonore nodded. “Kanon was extremely opposed to Commander Jerga’s transformation into magic. There were those who agreed with Kanon, although they were the minority. Even so, Commander Jerga feared they would complicate things.”

“So he killed him.”

“Yeah... All kinds of people gathered on Kanon’s side. Many claimed to want their children and grandchildren to live their lives free of such emotions. But in the end, these people turned out to be Jerga’s comrades. They waited for an opportunity to kill Kanon, ensuring he couldn’t revive. Having seven sources means little when you have no means of revival.”

“He was the man even I failed to kill. Mere humans couldn’t have finished him off simply by catching him by surprise.”

“That’s true... From what I’ve been able to find out, Kanon did actually have a means of reviving. But he chose not to. I believe he got sick of mankind.”

That wasn’t implausible. The man who had sacrificed himself fighting for humanity had been betrayed and killed by the very same humans he had offered his life to protect. He could stand before the Demon King time and time again, but being shot in the back by his allies would indeed quash his will to get back up.

“The legendary Hero who endeavored to save mankind no longer exists. Hero Kanon never again appeared in history. There has been no contact with the Hero Academy or any involvement with Aske. Perhaps he truly did choose not to reincarnate and quietly disappeared into nothingness. Even if he didn’t return, he no longer has reason to fight.”

So that was why she’d said the Kanon I knew no longer existed.

“When were you born?” I asked.

A pained look crossed Eleonore’s face. “Commander Jerga’s source was converted into not one, but two spells. One of those spells was Aske. The other was me, Eleonore.”

If he had turned into magic immediately after the war, she should know the true name of the Demon King of Tyranny.

“Did the transformation process take time?”

“The truth is, I’m a failure. Aske must have absorbed all his hatred and resentment, while I was left with none of it. I was meant to take on a personality reminiscent of Commander Jerga and use it to teach at the Hero Academy. That’s why my memory has been erased numerous times—and why I’ve been recreated over and over again.”

It seemed that Jerga’s scheming hadn’t gone exactly to plan.

“After three hundred years, the heroes of the era came to a decision. They deemed me incapable of correct recreation and decided to just use me as magic.” Eleonore glanced at the countless bubbles harboring Zeshia. “Eleonore, mother of sources, a spell that duplicates the source—that’s who I am.”

“So both Zeshia and Diego are clones born by duplicating sources with magic.”

There was no mistake—the two of them definitely had their sources destroyed yet had revived anyway, and it was all because the clones were so identical, they were indistinguishable from one another. Theoretically speaking, they couldn’t be completely identical, but any differences between them were too subtle for my Eyes to pick up.

“The most suitable sources from the heroes of the time were chosen and honed to fit the clones’ needs. Zeshia is a source clone that specializes in fighting, but she can’t feel emotions or speak. Diego is a source clone that specializes in teaching. His high affinity with Aske makes him easily influenced by Commander Jerga’s voice.”

That was what made Zeshia the perfect soldier, and Diego the perfect teacher to instill hatred in new generations of heroes.

“All my life, I’ve watched them fulfill their pointless existences. Yet because I’m magic, I reincarnate immediately once my human body dies. Then I produce more of them—more disposable lives that only exist for meaningless hatred.”

Eleonore stared into my eyes, her smile concealing her grief. “As long as Eleonore exists in this world, no one can be happy. Not Zeshia, Diego, not anyone at the Hero Academy. So please, Anos”—she looked right at me, uttering her dearest wish—“kill me. Eleonore was originally Commander Jerga’s source. If you can destroy it, you’ll be able to erase this magic from existence.”

“I’m certainly able to...but there’s one thing I wish to know first.”

“What’s that?” Her tone was somehow still easygoing.

“Does your wish take your own happiness into account?”

Surprised, Eleonore stared at me. Then she let out a small, barely audible laugh. “You know, Anos...” She lowered her gaze sadly. “I couldn’t protect them. I couldn’t protect a single one of the children I brought into this world. I couldn’t bless a single one with happiness...”

Tears welled in her eyes.

“For years now... For hundreds and hundreds and *hundreds* of years now, I’ve done nothing but kill them...”

A clear droplet trailed down her cheek, vanishing as it dripped onto the holy bubble.

“I’m the result of a spell that serves to breed hatred and unhappiness. But I don’t want to create any more misfortunate children. Besides...” She paused, choked up with sorrow. Then, as though to punish herself, she said, “As someone who has only created sadness, I have no right to be happy...”

“Hmm. I see. Now I understand.”

She stared at me, uncomprehending. Continuing, I spread my arms, gesturing at the countless holy bubbles in the room.

“In short, I just have to bring happiness to every being in this room.”

§ 32. The Sword of Three Races

Eleonore laughed in spite of her tears.

“Thank you. But it’s okay. I’m the result of a spell made to fight against demons. I can’t control when I’m used. If I keep creating clones like this, all the Zeshias I create will be used to invade Dilhade.”

If Asura were to be used on an army of ten thousand Zeshias, the strength of their force would be immeasurable. On top of that, each one would be a ticking human time bomb. They’d be a huge threat to Dilhade.

“You demons don’t have to play along with us and our affairs. End me and protect Dilhade.”

“No. This is a war I left behind two thousand years ago. I cannot involve the people of this peaceful era in a war of the past.”

If I had destroyed Jerga back then, none of this would have happened.

“The same goes for you and Zeshia.”

Even Diego was no more than a prisoner of Aske’s hatred.

“I’d just be settling old debts. The Zeshias that disappeared would no longer revive, but the Zeshias here would live in this peaceful era with you.”

“If you want to settle those debts, Zeshia and I will no longer be needed.”

“What’s done cannot be undone.”

I couldn’t possibly erase innocent lives that had already come to be. Eleonore and Zeshia were already living here and now.

“For the past two thousand years, you’ve suffered because of me.”

Eleonore trembled. After a life of pain and suffering, she wished for nothing more than to disappear. I’d seen enough of such misfortune.

“This was a result of my own error. That is why I shall ensure your next two thousand years are full of happiness.”

The smile slipped from Eleonore's face. The bold front she had been putting on was slowly peeling away.

"It might not make up for everything, but it's the least I can do," I said.

"I'm a human, though. Not even a human—I'm magic..."

"What does that matter?"

Another tear spilled from her eye and trailed down her cheek. I watched on with my Magic Eyes as that tear dissolved into the holy water.

"As long as Aske exists, humans will continue hating demons. That won't end until one side is destroyed."

"Then we destroy Aske."

Overcome with sorrow, Eleonore shook her head. "Hey now..." she mumbled weakly. "Don't go saying such hopeful things...or I'll start dreaming..."

"I'll make it happen. I'll make that dream a reality. You've suffered for two thousand years. I'd say you deserve to have a dream or two fulfilled."

One who had suffered for so long was to have no choice but to die without hope. If that was the law of this world, I would destroy it with my own two hands.

"Good job enduring until today. You've done enough. I'm here now."

"But..." Eleonore stumbled for words, unable to make up her mind. She knew exactly how easily a dream could morph into despair.

Just then, a faint sound reached our ears.

A faint voice—a faint wish.

"S-Sa...ve..."

The sound had come from a holy bubble right beside Eleonore. Inside was a Zeshia clone who appeared to be about ten years old.

"Zeshia...?" Eleonore uttered in shock. The girl who specialized in combat—the girl who shouldn't have been able to speak—had spoken.

"Save...mama..."

Zeshia's words were too much for Eleonore to bear. She broke down into violent sobs, tears flowing endlessly from her eyes.

"I'm s-sorry, Anos... I know what I'm saying is really cowardly, but please..."

Just like before, Eleonore was pleading, but this new prayer was stronger.

"Please... Help all the Zeshia here... Help me... We've had enough of fighting."

"Leave it to me. It might not be right away, but I'll definitely make it happen."

Tears poured down Eleonore's cheeks. "You have to. It's a promise..."

"I swear it."

The only way to free them was to end this two-thousand-year-old hatred. Jerga's source had to be erased from Aske so that the spell could be returned to normal. But unlike Eleonore, Aske was not humanoid magic. Jerga's source had no specific form. It had already become one with the order and reason of the world—a pure concept that existed incessantly.

Reforming order and reason was no mean feat. It would be like changing the laws of gravity. It would require the perpetual effect of the Abolisher of Reason.

"Huh...?" Eleonore murmured suddenly.

We'd both felt a large disturbance of magic. It hadn't occurred inside this building, but outside—and it hadn't been far away.

"I think...it came from the temple..."

I looked around with my Magic Eyes and intercepted the Leaks being sent around the building.

"What's happening?!"

"Enemy attack! It's an enemy attack! Intruders in the temple!"

"Th-That's the Seven Demon Elders! Three of the Seven Demon Elders have appeared! Medoin Garsa, Zoro Angart, and Eldora Zaia have been identified! Requesting immediate reinforcements!"

"Damn it! It really was the work of those demons... But their target wasn't the Holy Mother! It was the Sword of Three Races!"

The Demon Elders, at this point?

“What’s wrong...?”

“Things have taken a rather troublesome turn. I’m going to check it out.”

“B-Be careful.”

“I will.”

Using Gatom, I attempted to teleport inside the temple, but the magic circle broke as soon as it connected. The presence of the Demon Elders seemed to be influencing the Sword of Three Races, as its demon-repelling power was stronger than ever.

I cast Gatom once again to instead shift outside of the temple.

“Gaaaaaah!”

My arrival was marked by several soldiers being blown from the inside. Offering them no more than a sidelong glance, I took a step inside.

The doors at the back of the temple, which before had been closed, were stretched wide open. A divine light covered the area, filling the room with a pure-white glow. Numerous soldiers had collapsed on the floor.

I walked closer to the open doors to find a holy sword impaled in a podium. The sword was emitting a divine radiance and power beyond compare. It was Evansmana, the Sword of Three Races.

Beside the sword were four demons. One had horns, another had bat wings, and the third had three Magic Eyes. At the center was a man with a mask, who was reaching for the holy sword’s hilt.

“G-Give it up! There’s no way a demon can draw the holy sword of Hero Kanon!” yelled one of the soldiers still in the room.

But the masked man gripped Evansmana without pause and drew the holy sword with ease.

“What...?”

The soldiers were so shocked that they momentarily fell into silence.

“The holy sword...was drawn?!”

“There’s no way... It can’t be possible! The sword that none could draw for two thousand years would never accept a demon as its owner! As if that could happen!”

The masked man ignored the trembling soldiers and looked towards the most dangerous opponent in the room.

That, of course, was me.

“Hmm. The average demon would disappear the moment they touched that sword, and yet you were able to draw it,” I said.

Upon closer inspection, the mask of this man was of a slightly different design than the one I’d seen at the Demon Sword Tournament. However, his magic was just as unreadable.

“With Demon Elders in tow, there’s no longer a need for excuses. Name yourself.”

“I am Avos Dilhevia—the Demon King of Tyranny who seeks total destruction.”

The masked man lifted the Sword of Three Races. Evansmana released a dazzling light.

“What are you trying to accomplish under that fake name, Fictional Demon King?”

Six magic circles appeared before me as I cast Jio Graze.

“Fool.”

Avos Dilhevia brought down Evansmana, sending countless bursts of divine light across the area. The six blasts of Jio Graze unleashed were easily shredded, the bursts of light slicing through them and the air towards me.

Dampening the force of his attack with anti-magic and my Eyes of Destruction, I parried his blows and sent them behind me. The pillars in the room were sliced apart without a sound, causing the temple to rumble around us.

Hmm. Not only had this man drawn the Sword of Three Races, but he had somehow used it effectively. Had he forced the holy sword into choosing him?

Or...

“Hear my words, humans. Two thousand years ago, I was the victor.”

Evansmana’s light enveloped Avos Dilhevia and the three surrounding Demon Elders.

“Die, foolish humans. Die, demons who refuse to accept me. I shall remake this world into its righteous form—a world of chaos and disorder for demons!”

When the blinding light faded away, Avos Dilhevia was nowhere to be seen.

§ 33. Declaration of War

Once Avos Dilhevia and the three Demon Elders departed, the Gairadite soldiers scattered frantically to treat their wounded and report the incident.

I left the scene and set off to check on things at the dormitory. On the way, I passed the city of Gairadite, which seemed somewhat noisier than normal, with soldiers busily scurrying about.

When I finally arrived, I found the area in an uproar. Roughly three hundred Gairadite soldiers on high alert had surrounded the Demon Academy students in Dormitory Three.

Separating the soldiers from the students was a barrier of holy water that must have been set there in advance, given the recentness of Avos Dilhevia's appearance. Even if the holy sword hadn't been stolen, they had planned on doing this from the start.

"Why won't you answer me?" came the voice of Meno, who was hounding the soldier who appeared to be in charge. The two were separated by the barrier. "Spit it out! What is the meaning of this?!"

"As long as you behave yourselves, no harm will come to you."

"Stop this at once! You must be out of your minds to confine students here for an educational exchange. This matter will extend beyond Delsgade!"

The soldier stared warily at Meno without offering a response. He was merely a soldier obeying his orders—he wouldn't know any of the details.

"Who ordered this?"

"I cannot answer you." The soldier turned to leave.

"Hey, wait!" Meno reached out, but her hand was blocked by the barrier. It crackled as it burned her fingers.

"Once the students outside have returned, I shall personally ensure they make it inside with you," the soldier said in a serious tone. How strict of them.

“May I pass?” I called out.

The blood drained from the soldier’s face. He immediately spoke over Leaks.

“A...A student of the Demon King Academy has been discovered! I-It’s the prime target, Anos Voldigoad! I repeat, Anos Voldigoad has appeared at Dormitory Three!”

Fearing my presence, all the soldiers fell back behind the barrier.

Hmm. The soldiers in the temple hadn’t seemed to recognize my face, but these guys were different.

“No need to be so cautious. I have no intention of fighting puppets.”

“Stay vigilant! Everyone inside the barrier, ready yourselves. He won’t be able to cross it so easi—”

I stepped through the barrier. Holy magic tried to burn me, but my wards allowed me to enter unharmed.

“What...?”

“He...He crossed the barrier!” the soldiers yelled in astonishment.

“He’s more of a monster than they told us... W-We used so much holy water for the barrier, yet he wasn’t affected at all! How do the higher-ups expect us to suppress this guy?”

“Quit your whining! Possible or not, we have to fulfill our duty!”

I walked straight up to Meno, ignoring the soldiers’ comedy act. They parted like a receding wave, allowing me to reach her.

“Anos...do you know what’s going on?” Meno asked urgently.

“I do, but you may not want to believe it.”

Just then, Rivest stuck his head out of the doorway. “Ms. Meno, come quickly! Headmaster Diego’s speaking on magicast!”

Meno and I exchanged a look. At my nod, we headed inside the dormitory.

Set up in the lobby was a large magicast crystal for people to relax in front of. An image of Diego was playing on the screen. He seemed to be broadcasting

from the Hero Academy's throne room.

“Attention, citizens of Azesion. I am the headmaster of the Hero Academy Arclanisca, Diego Kanon Ijeiska. All magic broadcasts scheduled today have been postponed to bring you this message.”

He paused for effect, then continued in a grave tone. His serious expression resembled that of a warrior marching to his death.

“The deepest darkness has arrived. The holy sword of legend that was secretly enshrined in the Hero Academy—Evansmana, the Sword of Three Races—has been stolen. The culprits include three of the Seven Demon Elders that represent Dilhade, Medoin Garsa, Zoro Angart, and Eldora Zaia, together with the deepest darkness, the one who has returned to this land after two thousand years of biding his time—the Demon King of Tyranny!”

The lobby stirred in protest. The Royalists were at the center of the chatter, criticizing every line of the broadcast.

“Two thousand years ago, our ancestor, the legendary Hero Kanon, stood against these foul demons and won. For centuries, the demons shut on the other side of the wall showed no signs of invading, even once the wall disappeared. I believed they had reflected on their mistakes. That was why I set aside our past enmity and extended a hand of friendship. I invited the students of their academy on an educational exchange to offer them salvation, hoping we could walk hand in hand towards a mutually beneficial future.”

Diego frowned, then clenched his fist and swung it down violently. “But those fiends played us for fools! They took our treasured guardian deity that has protected these lands! You all know what this means—the demons intend to invade Azesion! Why else would they have stolen the sword?”

He raised his voice with the confidence that justice was on their side. “But fear not! With the approval of the King of Gairadite, the Gairadite Demon King Subjugation Battalion that once defeated the Demon King shall be reformed! We shall bring down the hammer of justice on those who dared seize our ancestor's prized sword! Today, I declare war on those vile demons!”

The soldiers gathered in the throne room roared with fervor.

“We all knew of the legend that has been orally passed down the generations: the deepest darkness shall descend again, engulfing the continent of Azesion. But fear not. Pray with hope—pray for our legendary Hero. His return shall once more be the light that banishes the darkness.”

Diego lowered his voice. “I am Diego Kanon Ijeiska, a descendant and reincarnation of the legendary Hero Kanon. Graduates of the Hero Academy have already been summoned back to Gairadite. Tomorrow, preparations to march shall be complete.”

No matter how much magic they used, preparing in so little time would be impossible. They had clearly readied themselves for this in advance, but no one would stop to worry about that. The humans of Gairadite would be too busy prioritizing their own safety.

“Justice is on our side! Victory to the Gairadite Battalion!”

“Huzzah!” the soldiers cheered.

“Judgment shall befall those foolish demons! Heroes will emerge victorious!”

“Huzzah!” the soldiers roared again.

At that, the students of the Demon King Academy began murmuring amongst themselves.

“What are these guys saying? Are they for real? Are we seriously gonna be at war?”

“Have they gone crazy?”

Their reaction was understandable, but a considerable number of students were frightened. If Dilhade really was going to war with Azesion, the students of the academy were now prisoners of the enemy nation.

Just then, someone reached out to me using Leaks.

“Can you hear me?”

It was Misha.

“Yeah. Did you watch the broadcast?”

“Yup. Where are you right now?”

“At the dormitory. It’s surrounded by soldiers, and they’re holding the students inside. You’re better off staying outside, but the soldiers out there will be under orders to capture any Demon Academy students they find. Be careful.”

“I’ll be fine.”

Human soldiers certainly would have no chance of capturing Misha.

“Are the others with you?”

“Sasha is. The rest are elsewhere.”

Come to think of it, they had mentioned something about a festival.

“Edolo is active, so it’s hard to keep a stable Leaks connection. We haven’t been able to contact Lay.”

Lay wasn’t good with magic, and Misa had little of it to begin with. If someone had cast Edolo, it would be difficult to reach either of them using Leaks.

“He should be with Misa. They’ll be fine by themselves. Look for the fan union first.”

At that moment, someone else tried to reach me through Leaks.

“Contact me if anything happens,” I said to Misha.

“Okay.”

Ending the connection to Misha, I answered the new Leaks. It was coming from Dilhade.

“What’s wrong, Melheis?”

“Things have taken a rather troublesome turn.”

A Limnet image was sent through the Leaks connection and was projected before me.

“I am Avos Dilhevia.”

A masked demon was speaking. The Demon Elders Medoin Garsa, Zoro Angart, and Eldora Zaia were kneeling by his side in a show of allegiance.

“What is this?” I asked.

“A transmission being broadcast across Dilhade. Medoin, Zoro, and Eldora have announced the discovery of the reincarnated Demon King of Tyranny.”

If the Seven Demon Elders were the ones making the announcement, the people of Dilhade would have no choice but to believe it.

“My descendants, I have returned,” Avos Dilhevia declared. “Two thousand years ago, I sacrificed myself to divide the world and end the Great War. I believed this to be the best path to peace and spared the humans out of mercy.”

Medoin cast Limnet, projecting the footage that had been broadcast across Azesion moments ago. Diego’s speech spread across Dilhade—along with his declaration of war.

Once the projection ended, the masked man opened his mouth. “Humanity held on to the Sword of Three Races in order to destroy me. In this peaceful era, they developed techniques to kill demons and trained an army under the guise of the Hero Academy. You have all forgotten how to fight. You have all forgotten your hatred for humans. But for the past two thousand years, mankind has not changed.”

He presented the facts in a detached manner, but each carried significant weight.

“I was wrong all those years ago. No matter how many thousands of years pass, human nature will never change. They fear, discriminate against, and kill those different from themselves. There is no saving such foul, abhorrent fools.”

Avos Dilhevia raised his right hand. “The time has come to right the wrongs of two thousand years ago. O mighty warriors, gather by my side. Entrust your lives to me.”

Divine light radiated from the masked man’s raised hand. Evansmana, the Sword of Three Races, appeared there.

“I have obtained their greatest weapon, the sword created to destroy me. You have nothing to fear. Commit yourselves to me, my descendants, and I shall protect every life and fulfill every oath. Join me on the battlefield, and let us annihilate humanity!”

It reeked.

It reeked like the familiar stench of blood. War was upon us.

The final battle I had averted two thousand years ago was about to—

§ 34. Eve of the Final Battle

I teleported to the hidden room of a military facility below the holy lake. Eleonore was still floating in a bubble inside.

“Wow. Welcome back, Anos,” said Eleonore, who greeted me with a lighthearted grin.

“Things have gotten rather messy.”

“I know. Azesion has declared war on Dilhade, right?”

I nodded. “My imposter, Avos Dilhevia, has appeared in Dilhade. He plans on engaging the Subjugation Battalion.”

“I see...”

“Avos Dilhevia is raising an army and heading to the Azesion border.”

“Can he really gather so many troops in such a short time?”

“No. But he’s leading the advance. Even in a peaceful world, demons aren’t cowardly enough to let their founder head to war alone. Demons from across the nation will assemble under his command.”

The Gairadite Demon King Subjugation Battalion had been preparing for quite some time, so their movements were understandably rapid. Heroes from across the nation had joined the army moving towards the Dilhade border.

“I can still help you and Zeshia flee.”

With the Hero Academy’s attention on the Demon King of Tyranny, this was the perfect opportunity.

“War’s about to start, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Then we can’t run away.”

I figured she’d say that. Diego had declared war on Dilhade while accounting for Eleonore’s power to create expandable Zeshias. Without them, the

Subjugation Battalion would be helpless against Dilhade's forces.

"I have to protect them," she said. "I have to protect everyone in the Jerga-Kanon and everyone in Gairadite." Suddenly, she giggled. "Everyone's a little silly sometimes, but they're not bad people. The bad one is me. I can't let them die."

Although she was far from a reincarnation of Jerga, her source had originally belonged to him, and she seemed to believe that was her sin.

"Being a hero is just as burdensome."

Heroes had such an unreasonable duty forced upon them, and yet they had to fight to protect others. Was this how it had been for Kanon two thousand years ago?

"That means you and I are now enemies," Eleonore said with a sad smile. Then, in a softer voice, she added, "I don't believe what you promised me earlier was a lie. That's why I'm going to defeat you. No matter which side wins, there'll be no hard feelings, okay?"

It sounded as though she were trying to offer me an excuse to erase her. If I destroyed her source here and now, the battle would be set. Once both armies were exhausted, the war was unlikely to spread. However— "Neither Dilhade nor Azesion will emerge victorious from this, Eleonore."

"You mean there are no winners in war?"

"No. The victor will be me. I'll stop this pointless war."

The peace I'd dreamed of two thousand years ago had finally come true. People were living with smiles on their faces. Humans and demons no longer had to live in fear of tomorrow. This irreplaceable era wasn't going anywhere.

"Even coming from you, Anos, that's a little—"

"It's no big deal. I'll give Dilhade's army a light knock around, stop Avos Dilhevia, then put out the flames of the Subjugation Battalion."

If I neutralized both armies before the fighting began, I could figure out the rest later—including, of course, how to dash the humans' hatred.

"Some things can only be protected from the Azesion side. But if you're going

to step out onto the battlefield, Eleonore, please remember this: don't kill anyone, be it friend or foe. Protect the things you want to protect with all your might. In return, I will safeguard your happiness."

Eleonore stared straight at me. I met her gaze without fear.

"Got it. I'll believe you. It's a promise."

I returned her smile and drew the circle for Gatom.

"Anos," she called as my vision turned white, "I finally understand why Kanon trusted the Demon King."

"I see," I said.

My body vanished from Eleonore's side and was transported to Dilhade—specifically, to the Anos Fan Union tower within the Demon King Academy Delsgade. Waiting there were Misha, Sasha, Lay, Misa, the eight fan union girls, and Melheis, Ivis, Gaios, and Ydol of the Seven Demon Elders.

"I've spoken to Eleonore."

Everyone nodded with somber expressions. I'd informed them of Eleonore's situation in advance.

"This is the fight I left unfinished two thousand years ago."

The situations with Avos Dilhevia and the Hero Academy were the result of my own oversight.

"None of you are obligated to go along with this."

At my words, the four Demon Elders kneeled before me.

"My liege, the Demon King of Tyranny, Lord Anos Voldigoad," Melheis said, "we of the Seven Demon Elders cannot overlook the insolence of this imposter." The Demon Elders bowed their heads. "Please grant us your orders."

The fan union girls spoke up after them.

"We'll fight too! Although we may not be of much use..."

"We don't want a war..."

"...but we'll do our best!"

I looked over at Misa. She nodded. “Now that Avos Dilhevia’s shown himself,” she said, “mixed-blood demons will be in an even weaker position than before. If he’s a fake Demon King, then this is my fight too.”

“Anyway,” Sasha said next, “isn’t it a bit late for all this? You asked me to become your follower. Don’t tell me you’re gonna let me quit just because Dilhade and Azesion are bickering. Even if you make an enemy of the entire world, I’ll be here fighting beside you.”

Misha nodded in agreement. “You’re always right, Anos.”

“Not necessarily,” I said.

“Even if you’re wrong, you’re the one who gave us life, so we’ll always be on your side.”

Finally, Lay piped up. “We’re friends, after all.”

I chose my words to express my gratitude for their loyalty and friendship. “I have been blessed with great friends and allies.”

In opposition to two nations, we were about to take on their armies. Of course, we had my power, but the other side claimed demons of the Mythical Age and the Sword of Three Races, not to mention that the Hero Academy was sure to have a few tricks up its sleeve. This wasn’t a light decision by any means.

“Melheis, Ivis, Gaios, and Ydol will suppress Demon Elders Medoin, Zoro, and Eldora.”

Dilhade’s army would be the first to fall. I had a general idea of the Hero Academy’s capabilities, but Avos Dilhevia’s power was still an unknown. Since I didn’t know what he was up to, I’d have to take him out before he made his move.

The Seven Demon Elders would be facing each other, but it would be four against three. With Melheis in particular on our side, we had the overwhelming advantage.

“Sasha and Misha will stop the advance of demons gathering from the west. The front is far from the main army at the border, so their line of command will be all over the place. They won’t be expecting an attack from this side of the

border.”

Unleashing Sasha’s Magic Eyes of Destruction across an open plain would restrict the enemy’s magic. Next, Misha could create walls and prisons to prevent the group from advancing.

“Misa and the fan union will stand by at the rear, using Fuska to disturb the battle and gathering any necessary intelligence.”

There was nothing to gain from having them on the front lines, so they were better off supporting the others.

“What about me?” Lay asked.

“You shall stop the troops heading for Azesion from the east. Don’t let them cross the border.”

The advance units of Dilhade’s army were made up of skilled Royalists rushing to join Avos Dilhevia. It would be a tough fight even for Lay, but this man was capable of surpassing his own limits mid-battle.

“I will personally approach the main army behind them.”

Ivis spoke up. “I’ve investigated the area and came across an immense Demon King Castle constructed on Ayan Hill. Avos Dilhevia most likely frequents it.”

“If I cause a scene, he’ll have no choice but to reveal himself,” I said.

If he didn’t, I could simply march into the castle directly. Thanks to how I’d let him roam so freely until now, he had made a rather bold move. Now there was no getting away.

“Here are my orders to you all: do not die. Do not kill. No more lives should be lost in this pointless war.”

There was no telling what might happen on the battlefield. Victory isn’t decided by a measure of power. Until now, I had witnessed the fall of many a mighty demon. In war, one should never go easy on an opponent.

Despite my selfish request, everyone nodded firmly.

“We shall all meet here again. All of us.”

§ 35. Their Feelings

Dawn was about to break. Sunrise would signal the start of war.

I made my way to the staircase to check on everyone. There, I heard the sound of voices. It was coming from the top floor, so I headed up the stairs.

“I took a look around Midhaze today,” Misa was saying.

“How was it?”

Lay was standing beside her, facing the half of the demon sword. They appeared to be alone.

“It was so calm, you wouldn’t think a war was about to start...”

“That’s how it normally is,” Lay said with his usual smile. “Reality hasn’t sunk in yet. They can’t believe war is on the horizon, and they won’t realize it until they’re in the midst of it themselves.”

Misa stared at the fractured sword before her.

“By the time they do realize it, it’ll be too late to do anything,” Lay said quietly, clenching his fists.

“Almost all of the demon lords in Dilhade have rallied with Avos Dilhevia.”

“They probably couldn’t stand the thought of sitting around in their castles while the Demon King of Tyranny leads the charge. That is the demon way of fighting.”

The demon lords who governed the nation always fought their battles in person. This placed them and the safety of their nation directly in the line of fire, but failing to prove themselves would cause them to lose all authority. No one would follow a leader that hid themselves in their castle—that was just how demon society worked. Even in a peaceful world, some things never changed.

“It’ll be okay,” Lay said. “Anos said so too, remember? I won’t kill anyone.”

Misa's eyes rounded. "Um..."

"After all, your father could be among them."

Misa lowered her gaze in shame. "I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice brimming with guilt.

"For what?"

"Because you're about to take on that army all by yourself..."

Lay's brisk laugh dismissed Misa's woes. "You know, I'm about to head off to stop a war, but I don't feel nervous at all."

"R-Really?"

"I think I really was around for the Great War two thousand years ago," he said, his easygoing tone ever the same. "That's why my body—my source—knows that this is no big deal." He turned his smile to Misa. "I will come back to you, for sure."

Misa's gaze was drawn into Lay's eyes. Their bodies slowly drew closer to one another's, and Misa closed her eyes.

Lay reached around Misa's neck, taking her shell necklace into his hand.

"Lay...?"

"Can I take this?"

Misa's cheeks flushed. Splitting a one-shell necklace into two, giving one half to another, was equivalent to a marriage proposal. We'd learned as much from the Hero Academy.

"It'll be my good-luck charm."

Misa nodded slowly. Lay took half of the split necklace and hung it around his neck.

"What was it you said that time?" Lay asked, reminiscing. "'You can't wait for someday. If you can't save someone who's suffering right now, then when that someday comes, you won't be able to place your life on the line.'"

Misa nodded somewhat embarrassedly.

“That was the moment I fell for you. You were just so dazzling.” Lay chuckled. “I once thought I’d be happy to spend every day swinging my sword, but I get swept along by the tide so easily. I’m not kind, and I’m not strong.”

Misa shook her head. “You don’t know yourself, Lay. You’re kinder than anyone I’ve met, and you’re strong. You always treat everyone equally and share your true self.”

“You really think so?”

“I do. That’s why I...” Misa looked down, biting her lip. After a pause, she lifted her head again. “That’s why I fell in love with you.”

Lay’s eyes widened for a brief moment. Then he smiled. “Thank you.”

Hmm. From the looks of things, they were ready. I turned around and headed back down the stairs. That was when I happened across Misha and Sasha, who were walking up them.

“The top floor is currently occupied. If you need something from Misa or Lay, perhaps wait until they’re done.”

Misha shook her head. “I was looking for you.”

“Did something happen?”

“Not really...” Sasha answered, squeezing her own hand tightly. It was trembling.

“What is it, Sasha? Are you shaking?”

“N-No, I’m not...”

“Such a response is only natural before your first battle. I was the same before mine,” I said, descending the stairs. Misha and Sasha followed me.

“Really? Even you?”

“Yes. It’s a shameful story, but I got a little ahead of myself. I was so eager to prove myself, I couldn’t hold back my excitement. My lack of composure caused me to expend more lives than necessary.”

Sasha froze in her tracks. I turned back to see her staring at me with a deadpan expression.

“You know...no one was asking to hear your warrior tales...”

“Hmm?”

“Don’t give me that confused look. Anyway, it was my mistake for consulting the Demon King of Tyranny.”

“What? Are you scared, Sasha? Bwa ha ha!”

“Wh-What are you laughing at? We’re about to go to war!”

“Who wouldn’t laugh in this situation? You have nothing to fear. It’s awfully cautious of you to be timid when you possess so much power.”

Sasha flashed me an exasperated look.

“I trained you for a week. You may not have realized it from only having me as your opponent, but you’ll never fall at the hands of the demons of this era, no matter how outnumbered you are.”

I had thoroughly trained her in drawing out her magic, which had been amplified by Dino Jixes. A single glare of her Magic Eyes of Destruction was enough to take out any average demon.

“Besides, you’re not alone. There’s someone of equal power right beside you.”

Sasha glanced at Misha, who nodded.

“Don’t worry. I won’t let you die,” she said.

Sasha ducked her head in embarrassment. She seemed to think she was the only one seized by fear.

“Give me your hand,” I said.

“Huh? H-Hey...”

I wrapped my hand around Sasha’s trembling one. “Calm down.”

“Yes...”

“Did you think I’d let my followers march helplessly to their deaths?”

“No...”

“If you can’t believe in yourself, believe in me. There’s nothing to fear. You

will not die. Show those idiots who think they can wander into an army so late the power of those who follow me.”

Sasha nodded firmly. “Okay.”

When I released her hand, it had stopped shaking.

“Hmm. Your cheeks seem a little flushed. Is there something else bothering you?”

“Wha— It’s nothing! I’m just excited for battle!”

“Ah, I see. How courageous.”

“I’m... I’m going to wash my face...”

Sasha stomped off downstairs. Misha looked after her kindly before turning her gaze to me.

“Thank you.”

“It may be impossible to fully remain oneself on the battlefield, but don’t let the fear get to you. Even the strongest have died that way.”

And death was to be avoided.

“The same goes for you, Misha.” I took her hand. Her fingertips were trembling slightly.

“You could tell?”

“Of course.”

“Ah...”

“Are you afraid?”

“I am.”

“What of?”

Misha thought for a moment before answering. “Everything.”

No one is truly without fear of the battlefield. Killing enemies, having allies die before you—all of it is terrifying. Those who could admit their fears without any false bravado were strong.

“I won’t tell you not to fear. Overcome that fear and make it your ally. As long as your calm Eyes are watching over the battlefield, not a soul shall die.”

Misha nodded.

“I’ll protect it,” she said gently. “I’ll protect the peace you protected. That’s why...” Her fingertips stopped trembling. “You go and settle this two-thousand-year-old battle.”

I hadn’t even said anything yet. She was just as observant as usual.

“Right. Leave it to me.”

§ 36. Two-Thousand-Year-Old Vow

The Tola Forest was a vast forest that spanned the border between Dilhade and Azesion.

At the east of that border on the Azesion side, the Gairadite Demon King Subjugation Battalion had taken formation. Among them were ten thousand girls with the same duplicated source—ten thousand copies of Zeshia. Each one was dressed in a full suit of armor and equipped with the Holy Sword of Light in preparation for the attack on Dilhade's army.

Meanwhile, on the west side of the border were the Dilhade army's advance units, the Royalists of Dilhade. Led by the demon lords who governed each of Dilhade's districts, the units were formed of followers from their own armies.

Several enormous Demon King Castles towered over the forest. There was still quite a distance between the two armies, so both sides were engaged in a standoff. But the impasse wouldn't last for long—as soon as one side made the first move, the sparks of their action would spread like wildfire. I couldn't let the two armies make contact.

Lay was hidden on the Dilhade side of the border. The man was not to let the advance unit step one foot over the line.

Farther west of the advance units, on Ayan Hill, was the base camp for Dilhade's army. There were roughly twenty thousand troops stationed there. The Demon Elders opposing us were probably among them.

I glared at the pitch-black Demon King Castle standing on Ayan Hill. "Let's go. The four of you shall move as a group and target only the Demon Elders. Ignore the rabble."

"Yes, my liege."

Melheis and the remaining three Demon Elders followed me as I began my walk towards the enemy.

"Halt! Who goes there?!"

Since we'd come from the direction of Azesion, the demon soldiers readied their swords.

"Wait. Isn't that Lord Melheis...?"

"...Lord Ivis, Lord Gaios, and Lord Ydol as well...?"

"D-Does that mean all seven Demon Elders will be joining the war?"

The soldiers' expressions brightened as they sheathed their swords. How naive. This was a battlefield.

I grabbed the face of the man in front.

"Gah! Wh-What?!"

"How foolish of you to let your guards down at a familiar face. What if they weren't allies, hm?" I covered the man's body in a magic barrier, then lifted him off his feet.

"Wha... R-Release me!"

"Don't mind if I do." I hurled the man at a dense cluster of soldiers.

"Wha... W-Waaaaaah!"

Dilhade's army had been surrounded by a magic barrier, but the man I threw—wrapped in the barrier I'd conjured around him—smashed that barrier like a cannonball, sending two hundred or so demons flying.

"E-Enemy attack?!"

"No way! How did the Azesion army get this far past the border already?"

"It's not the Azesion army! They're demons!"

"What? Who would double-cross the Demon King of Tyranny? Which faction are they from? Are they Unitarians?!"

"A-About that... It's the Demon Elder, Lord Melheis..."

"WHAT?!"

While the soldiers were scurrying around in a panic, I cut through their formation and stood before a man who appeared to be commanding the others.

“Have you all turned traitor?” he asked with a grim look, warily gripping his demon sword. His subordinates were on their guard beside him.

“We have not. We are the army of the true Demon King. Tell this to Avos Dilhevia—the original has arrived.”

“What can a mere five men do? Charge! Crush them!”

“But the Demon Elders...!”

“No true Demon Elder would turn on the Demon King of Tyranny! They must be imposters! Get them!”

My, how troublesome.

“You seem to be misunderstanding something,” I said, “so please, let me enlighten you. Whether there are five of us or just one”—I lifted my foot and brought it down heavily—“I alone am the Demon King army.”

The ground began to rumble, jolting the bodies of the soldiers. The people of this era had never experienced a major earthquake used in warfare. They toppled over, one after another.

“Gaaagh! Wh-What is this?!”

“Argh! Waaaaaaaaaah!”

“Th-The ground is... It’s splitting apart... Awhoa!”

“The sky is safe! Take to the air!”

The soldiers cast Fless to flee into the air, but as their feet left the ground, they immediately decelerated, tumbling out of the air and crashing to the ground.

“I...I can’t fly... Gaaah!”

“The magic field is in shambles... Help!”

“Damn it! What’s going on?!”

I strode forward and addressed the lot of them. “Did you think the sky would be spared from my earthquake?”

With every step I took magic surged into the ground, triggering violent

tremors. Those tremors shook even the air above, sending the magic field in the sky into disarray.

“Watch closely. This is how a Demon King advances.”

I strode towards the Demon King Castle on Ayan Hill. My footsteps were enough to bring every soldier in a several-kilometer radius to their knees, their heads bashing against the earth, as though they were bowing before me.

The army of demons had been defeated in an instant.

Just then, three figures flew out of the Demon King Castle. It was the three Demon Elders on the opposing side.

“Hmm, so they’ve come. Melheis,” I said.

“As you wish, my liege.”

Melheis and the other three elders used Fless to go after the three figures.

Once they were gone, I contacted Misha. “Misha, how are things going there?” I asked.

Her voice came back to me through Leaks. “*Fine.*”

Through the magic link of Gyze, her vision was shared with me.

A vast desert stretched out before her. A band of demons on their way to join the Dilhade army were attempting to cross that desert, but Misha was using Iris to create quicksand that was swallowing them one after another.

They tried to resist with their magic, but there was nowhere to hide on the sandy plain. One glance from Sasha’s Magic Eyes of Destruction was all it took to destroy their spell formulae.

Using one’s Magic Eyes of Destruction consumed a considerable amount of magic. Sasha couldn’t sustain them for long, but she was able to skillfully apply them to a single portion of a magic circle.

Having even a small portion of a spell formula destroyed made it extremely difficult to repair, often resulting in the affected circle being discarded. Experienced casters could repair them, of course, but as suspected, the demons joining the army so late on were all lacking in ability.

Even so, tens of thousands of soldiers had shown up. If they rushed at Misha and Sasha, their sheer number would force the girls to retreat. How long they would hold out depended entirely on their own strength and strategy.

“Sasha,” Misha said, calling for her sister’s attention, “a spell formula’s appeared in the desert. *Iris*.”

“They’re trying to create an object to block my Eyes. I won’t let them!”

Sasha turned in the direction Misha was pointing and destroyed the spell formula. Even with no clear view of its caster, she needed only to glimpse their magic with her Eyes to do so. However, with her Eyes activated, it was difficult to stare into the abyss. She wasn’t that skilled at identifying magic in the first place.

That was where Misha came in, compensating for Sasha’s flaw by covering her blind spots. The demons before them, who had no clear chain of command, lacked a clear comprehension of the battlefield’s situation, meaning most of them were already confused. One after another, they fell into Misha’s Iris-made traps, which prevented them from progressing forward.

“Hmm. That should do.”

I returned to my own vision to find the soldiers I’d taken down trembling on their knees. A few were still standing, but even they were frozen in place.

Had this not been a war, more demons would have stood up to fight, but Dilhade had been peaceful these past two thousand years. This was the first real battle most of these demons had faced, and the sight of their allies dropping like flies before them had them seized by fear—seized by the thought that perhaps the allies who’d fallen so helplessly had been stronger than they were.

Now, their bodies no longer obeyed them. Even the strongest of demons succumbed easily to death when overwhelmed by fear. What I had told Misha was occurring right before me. If Melheis and the others had not already suppressed the enemy Demon Elders, things might have turned out differently.

To demonstrate my presence, I took to the air with Fless, gliding over to land before the castle.

“How long do you intend to hide in there? Face me, Avos Dilhevia.”

I drew a magic circle and poured my magic into it, but the moment a black sun emerged from the circle, the door to the castle creaked open.

I cast my gaze inside.

With that, a divine glow shattered my wards, piercing through my body. There was no doubt that Evansmana, the Sword of Three Races, was within.

“Hmm. An invitation, is it?”

I took an unwavering step towards the entrance of the castle, but at that same moment, a Leaks transmission arrived from Misa.

“Lord Anos!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Contact with Lay has been lost!”

I used my Eyes to confirm her words. “Hmm. Gyze’s link has been severed.”

Just a moment ago, I had been able to share Lay’s vision. Something must have happened to him during my momentary shift in attention. That said, he wasn’t good with magic. A broken connection didn’t mean he’d been defeated.

Then came another transmission.

“Lord Anos, we have captured the remaining three of the Seven Demon Elders.”

It was Melheis. Strange. They’d acted much faster than I’d expected.

“Aren’t their sources meant to be fused with the sources of Avos Dilhevia’s followers?”

“About that... It seems they’ve discarded the bodies and fled.”

They’d fled? Was there a reason for them to discard the bodies now of all times? Without the Demon Elders, they wouldn’t be able to reorganize the floundering troops.

“Lord Anos! The vanguard is approaching the border!” came a voice from the fan union.

“There’s still no sign of Lay!” another added.

“We’ll take care of the border. Please go after Avos Dilhevia, my liege,” Ivis said.

I looked back at the Demon King Castle. I couldn’t imagine Lay being so easily defeated. That man wouldn’t go down without one hell of a fight. The greatest threat on this battlefield was the Sword of Three Races in Avos Dilhevia’s hands—and that sword was definitely inside this castle. He wouldn’t let it out of his sight.

That meant it would be best to trust Lay with the border and have Melheis’s group join him instead. That said...this was strange. Something didn’t quite feel right.

What was the enemy’s goal? Why had the Demon Elders been discarded at this precise moment? Why was Avos Dilhevia deliberately watching in silence as the troops he’d gathered lost their will to fight? Why was the door to the Demon King Castle wide open, informing me of Evansmana’s location? Why...

“Hmm. I see. So that’s how it is.” I drew the magic circle for Gatom. “Melheis, deploy Azesith to isolate the Demon King Castle and the Sword of Three Races. If Avos Dilhevia shows any sign of emerging, you may relinquish your hold, though I doubt he will. This is most likely a decoy.”

My vision faded to white as I teleported to the Azesion side of the border. There were no trees, only a vast clearing before me, as though a hole had opened in the forest. The Gairadite Subjugation Battalion was stationed not far behind.

Now alone, I strained my ears and came upon a familiar voice.

“March on, my brothers. Do not fear the likes of mere humans. Not a single soul shall die under my command. Follow my lead!”

It was Avos Dilhevia. The advance units in the forest responded to his summons with a roar.

As I’d expected, then. With this, all was now clear—his goal, his desires, and even his true identity.

I stood where I was and waited. Eventually, a lone figure appeared. It was the masked Avos Dilhevia.

When he noticed me, he stopped in his tracks, and without saying a word, he stared at me. The next moment, his magic swelled. He rushed at me without warning.

Blocking the hand that swung fiercely at me, I thrust my right fingertips forward. He evaded my maneuver so fast, he appeared to teleport aside—landing a kick that launched me back.

I landed several meters behind my original position. Avos Dilhevia lowered his stance in pursuit.

But before he could end the match in one fell swoop, I called out to him.

“Long time no see, Hero Kanon.”

Avos Dilhevia’s magic jolted in shock.

Even with my own Eyes, I was unable to see the man before me’s source. At first, I’d thought that to be because of the mask. But that assumption was wrong. Source magic was Hero Kanon’s specialty. His command of it surpassed even mine. Even without the mask, he had hidden his identity from me.

“Or perhaps not so long.”

I opened my balled-up fist. One half of a one-shell necklace lay on my palm. I’d snatched it during the man’s earlier charge.

“It seems you’ve already fulfilled our promise, Lay.”

§ 37. Hero of Legend

Silence fell over the forest. We were in the midst of a battlefield, yet the air surrounding me and the man before me were unfailingly quiet and tranquil.

Avos Dilhevia brought his hand to the mask and slowly removed it, revealing a face that was clearly that of Lay Grandsley.

“How did you figure it out?” Lay asked in his usual voice. The mask appeared to be a magic item that altered his tone.

“Lay Grandsley is a reincarnation,” I said. “The reason you couldn’t inherit the Yvesta family’s magic was that Syrica had been used. Besides, your views have always been out of place in this era, and you already seemed to know who I was.”

At first, I’d merely considered the possibility that he had been missing his memories, but now I had no doubt he had reincarnated.

“If you were reincarnated from someone who knew me, the only question left was who. So you hinted that you were my former right-hand man, Shin, in order to hide your identity as Kanon. You should be fairly skilled at magic, but if you were to cast magic in a demon body, your holy power would reveal itself. Shin made for a good cover story in that regard.”

Magic wasn’t one of Shin’s strong suits. By pretending to be him, Lay had been able to hide the magic he knew how to use, and limiting that which he did use to weak, low-level spells allowed him to keep his holy power concealed. Then, with his source magic—the only magic he surpassed me in—he had deceived my Eyes.

“Shortly after we first arrived in Gairadite, you gifted Misa a necklace from the shooting stall. You asked the stall owner specifically for a one-shell necklace. But the one-shell necklace refers to a necklace made with *two* shells—you wouldn’t have said ‘one-shell’ without knowing about its origins.”

That was the moment I’d realized Lay had memories of his past life.

“The clasp of the one-shell necklace isn’t a type found in Dilhade. Misa wasn’t able to figure it out, yet you knew precisely how to work it. However, Shin had no interest in ornaments. He may have been familiar with items of Dilhade, but he wouldn’t have committed a necklace from Azesion to his memory.”

Of course, there had also been the possibility he had just so happened to remember it—after all, I didn’t know everything about Shin—but this would have been unexpected of him.

“After the inter-academy exam, I asked you if you remembered anything from using the Sword of Intent.”

Lay had answered that he hadn’t.

“Shin’s sentiments had been left in that sword. If you possessed his source, you would have synchronized with them, but you didn’t remember anything. That left me wondering—if you had failed to recall anything, how did you know about the one-shell necklace?”

Demons had not interacted with humans for two thousand years. With his mother sick with spiritosis, it was hard to imagine Lay had any reason to travel all the way to Azesion. The story of the one-shell necklace had only been explained in class *after* he had gifted it to Misa. Besides, Lay had overslept and missed the talk entirely.

“In other words, you couldn’t be Shin. You had memories of your past life, yet you were pretending that you didn’t.”

He had once told Misa that he was a liar. That had probably been in reference to this.

“If you weren’t Shin, then who were you? There was no one else I could think of from two thousand years ago who could master both the Sword of Intent and a holy sword. But if Hero Kanon had reincarnated as a demon, it wouldn’t be odd for him to be able to use both.”

That was what had formed my hypothesis that Lay was in fact Hero Kanon.

“But if you were Hero Kanon, why would you hide your identity? With the world at peace, you should have no reason to hide yourself from me.”

And so I hadn't noticed until now.

"But you *did* have a reason. You feared that if you revealed yourself as Hero Kanon, I would have noticed something about you: the fact that you possess only one source."

No matter how skilled at source magic he was, Lay couldn't hide the number of sources he had from me. And Lay definitely had only one.

"If I'd noticed, you would have had no way of preventing me from wondering where your remaining six sources had gone. And, eventually, I would think of the Demon Elders whose sources had been hijacked—the *six* of the seven sources that had been hijacked, which excluded only that of Melheis."

Imagined that way, there hadn't been enough sources to go around for him.

"Six of the Seven Demon Elders had had their sources fused with Avos Dilhevia's followers. Hero Kanon was missing six sources. The numbers fit together perfectly—too perfectly for it to be a coincidence."

Lay listened silently, making no move to try to deny anything, so I continued speaking.

"That's why you couldn't admit you were Hero Kanon. You feared I might suspect you of your identity as Avos Dilhevia."

Of course, not everything had gone as planned, like his mother's spiritosis and what had happened at the Demon Sword Tournament. There was no way Lay would ever choose to put his mother in danger, and Sheila's life had undoubtedly been at risk. So what had happened exactly? I could think of a few possibilities, but this didn't seem the appropriate time to ask.

"I have a general idea of things, but I'd like to hear them from you directly. What happened two thousand years ago, Kanon?" I asked.

Lay smiled with a more mature expression than I'd seen on him before now. "It's exactly as you heard from Eleonore, Anos. Master Jerga and the Gairadite Subjugation Battalion founded the Hero Academy in order to destroy you upon your return. I desperately tried to talk them down, but they wouldn't listen. Just like you said on that day, defeating the Demon King did not bring peace to the world. The war had only just come to an end, yet they were already preparing

to face you in two thousand years' time."

Unless one side was permanently eradicated, the war would never end. Those were the words I'd once said to him.

"For my resistance, I was slain by one of Master Jerga's supporters. I pretended to die before them and revived right away, but it was already too late to stop them. Not without taking their lives..."

Hero Kanon would never point his sword at a human, so that had been out of the question.

"Two thousand years ago, mankind committed a sin. They plotted to destroy the Demon King, who had sacrificed his life to bring peace to the world. I found that to be beyond unreasonable, so I set off to correct their mistake."

"So that was why..."

Lay nodded. "That was why I invented Avos Dilhevia, the phony Demon King who would one day exact revenge on humanity."

"How did you steal my name from demonkind?"

"I talked them into it. And at times, I fought them over it. But in the end, demons proved more understanding than humans. You were adored by everyone, weren't you? For your sake, they chose to believe my words and forget the name Anos Voldigoad."

So my name had been forgotten voluntarily, huh?

"The Sword of Three Races was once forged to destroy you, but it is also capable of severing the ties of fate. I used it to undo your destiny to reincarnate as the Demon King in two thousand years' time."

"Is that what changed the Demon King of Tyranny's name?"

"Only the gods know what happens when destiny is severed, but perhaps everyone's feelings helped my first wager pay off."

Lay's attempt to rewrite my name had been successful. That was why using Rivide on Ivis and the others had produced no results. The Sword of Three Races had snuffed out my destiny as the Demon King of Tyranny and in turn rewritten history.

“Shin Reglia and other members of your inner circle were ultimately unable to forget your name, so many reincarnated or left Dilhade for good. The demons that opposed you before the war also promised to wait quietly until all was resolved.”

So that was why no demons from two thousand years ago had appeared before me. To think a human could win over demonkind to this extent... The man was as impressive as always.

“Eventually, the Hero Academy learned that the Demon King of Tyranny’s name had changed. They believed that Anos Voldigoad had done so in order to evade their plans. Of course, that was exactly what I wanted them to believe.”

Human life spans were much shorter than those of demons. As the generations passed, the name Anos Voldigoad had faded from the Hero Academy, leaving only Avos Dilhevia behind. Such a thing wouldn’t normally occur so easily, but the holy sword severing destiny had probably tipped the circumstances in Lay’s favor.

“After that, I fused my sources with those of the Demon Elders and erased their memories—with their full consent, of course. There was a chance you would notice their fused sources when you interacted with them two thousand years later, and they knew they couldn’t lie to you, so they asked for their memories to be erased.”

So the Seven Demon Elders had voluntarily cooperated in order to protect me from humanity’s schemes.

“With my last remaining source, I repeatedly reincarnated myself until I obtained a body with as much demon blood as possible. This is actually my first incarnation as a pureblood.”

Hero Kanon had reincarnated as a demon of my blood alone. It was a remarkable thought, but even I had reincarnated into a practically human body, so the possibility was there. In Lay’s case, his new body didn’t possess a drop of his former blood, yet he had still inherited all of his former powers. It seemed that it wasn’t for nothing that he wasn’t better at source magic than I.

“And this war is the result of your two-thousand-year-old plan,” I said.

“Human hatred will never disappear, meaning—be it the Demon King of Tyranny or all of mankind—one side has to cease to exist for this war to end. No matter how merciful you are, the embers have to be cleared. But I never want to take your life again...”

Eleonore’s assumption was wrong. Although Kanon had been murdered by a human, he was a more dignified hero than anyone else.

“Which is why you’ve prepared to be defeated by the humans—as the Demon King of Tyranny,” I concluded.

Lay nodded.

“Will they stop there?”

“Aske has instilled into everyone the desire to annihilate demonkind, but the source of that resentment was Master Jerga, who hated the Demon King of Tyranny above all else. That is why I believe that once the Demon King has been destroyed, the effect will disappear for good. He wasn’t that foolish of a man.”

Lay gave me a serious look, reminiscent of the past Hero Kanon.

“While this isn’t the most desirable road to take, I am still a hero. As long as people consider me a hero, I shall atone for the mistakes of mankind; I shall atone for the mistakes of past heroes. Two thousand years ago, you sacrificed your life to bring about this peace. The world has become a wonderful, wonderful place since then. Such a world was unimaginable in the era we lived in, yet I watched it unfold before my very eyes.”

Unlike me, Lay had watched the world change these last two thousand years, alongside each of his reincarnations.

“Demon King Anos,” Lay said finally, as he had two thousand years ago, “humans were ignorant. But I still believe in them. Before my end, I want to show you the beauty of mankind: the peace that you desired.”

“Hero Kanon,” I said, as I had two thousand years ago, “there is no reason for you to go to such lengths. You have fought enough. How many more times will you sacrifice yourself for the sake of human trifles?”

Lay shook his head slowly. “I still remember the promise we made that day.

This is the peace you defended, the peace you created, the peace you desired. It's a shame that things turned out like this, but I ask that you let me fight you as your friend this time."

There was no need to ask what he meant by that.

"You've spent a long and arduous time preparing for this," I said. "You must have had your own fears and doubts. But you overcame all of that for the sake of this moment. I know your two thousand years of effort and emotion won't be swayed by the words of someone brand new to them."

I wouldn't tell him to cease this. Using words would be making light of Lay's determination.

"That means this isn't a one-shell necklace, but a michens necklace," I said.

It was as I'd explained at the Hero Academy: two thousand years ago, in the early stages of the Great War, barely any humans returned from the battlefield alive. Thus, they gifted their lovers a michens necklace, praying to be reborn in the same era and reunited.

The necklace was created by taking the michens shellfish that inhabited the Gairadite Lake and splitting its shell into two. One half was kept while the other was gifted to a lover before heading to war. Michens shellfish lived off the holy water of the lake, so they were said to be messengers of the gods. The people of the time had believed that the separated shell would guide the sources of the lovers back together after death.

Hero Kanon—Lay—had entrusted his unspoken feelings to that necklace when he had parted with his beloved.

"If you want this necklace back, you'll have to take it by force."

"I thought you'd say that."

Lay hooked his mask to his waist, then drew a magic circle where he stood. Divine light flowed from the circle, forming the shape of a sword. He had summoned Evansmana, the Sword of Three Races from the Demon King Castle.

The man knew I couldn't be shifted by words.

"I have to do this—in order to protect you."

The Hero held the Sword of Three Races at the ready.

I spread my arms and stood in his way. We had fought each other more times than I could count, yet it was my first time feeling like this.

“I won’t let you—in order to protect *you*.”

§ 38. Hero versus Demon King

In a single, flawless movement, Lay stepped forward, appearing before me in the blink of an eye.

“Hiyah!”

The Sword of Three Races gleamed. The glow of divine light briefly blinded me, allowing Lay to disappear from view. From my blind spot, I sensed a hostile gaze, and like a falling beam of light, the blade of his holy sword came swinging down.

“There you are.”

I enveloped my left hand in a condensed form of Beno levun. Using that as a shield, I swiftly deflected the sword aimed at me from a blind spot. The roar of the resulting explosion rattled my eardrums as Beno levun was dispersed into the air.

“I’m surprised you saw through that,” Lay said.

“I borrowed your Eyes,” I replied curtly.

By reconnecting Gyze’s link, I was able to share his vision. He had severed the link between us with the Sword of Three Races, but that link had reconnected with ease. With Gyze still active, I could reconnect it over and over again at this distance.

“You don’t have the blessing of Aske right now. You may have a demon body, but you also have no means of winning,” I said.

“I could say the same for you. Two thousand years ago, your source was pierced by this sword. Sure, it was done in order to transfer magic through you, but the Sword of Three Races was originally created to destroy you. Have you really made a full recovery?”

“Why don’t you see for yourself?”

I drew the magic circle for Vebdoz and plunged my right hand through it,

staining my fingertips black. Lay wouldn't take any significant damage without it —my Eyes told me that he now had all seven sources.

"Gia Gleas," I said, drawing a huge magic circle in the sky above us. Huge magic stones appeared in that circle. Glistening with a jet-black sheen, the stones rained down on Lay like falling stars.

"Hah!"

Lay slashed away the magic meteor shower with a swipe of Evansmana. It was quite the feat to cut down stars with a sword, even if that sword was holy—but with this, his fate was sealed.

"Rio Edram."

This time, a vast magic circle covered the grassy clearing, spilling dark water that turned the land into a shallow pond. A plume of water surged up from below Lay's feet, like a fountain rising from the depths.

"Yah!"

Thrusting Evansmana into the black pond, Lay sliced through it with all his might. The surging water and surrounding pond were immediately split into two. An instant later, Lay began running to avoid the hailing Gia Gleas.

"Too slow."

I fired two consecutive blasts of Jio Graze to obstruct Lay's path. The obsidian sun engulfed his body, which had been unable to evade it, as expected.

"Hah!"

The moment he paused to extinguish the flames with the holy sword's blessing and anti-magic, I thrust my right hand through his chest.

"Urgh!"

"That's one."

I crushed the source I grasped with my Vebdoz-afflicted hand. Lay's sources would regenerate as long as one remained, but it wouldn't happen instantly. If I destroyed six of them here and now, he would have no choice but to surrender.

"Give up. Two thousand years ago, you failed to best me even once."

“Indeed, I couldn’t defeat you...”

Before I could destroy another one of his sources, Lay swung Evansmana at my right arm. I swiftly leaped away from him, deflecting his blade with Beno levun in my left hand.

“...No matter how many times we fought. No matter how many times I opposed you.”

Lay charged at me.

“Hmm. Risking your life to rush at me? I won’t hold back then.”

I pierced my Vebdoz-covered hand into Lay’s stomach and crushed a second source. The agonizing pain would leave most unable to stand, but Lay merely swung Evansmana at my shoulder.

“Haaah!”

I knocked aside the attack with the Beno levun around my left hand. The sound of magic clashing with magic reverberated in my ears.

“That’s three.”

With my fist still inside his stomach, I crushed another source. I expected him to flinch at that, but he lunged forward instead—sending my fist through the other side of his body. I couldn’t grab his sources like this.

“Hiyaaaaaah!”

Using Beno levun, I deflected another swing of the holy sword. Evansmana rebounded as the spell over my left hand dispersed. Instantly, the sword shifted in trajectory, harnessing the force of its rebound to swing back down at my shoulder.

He was fast—I could move my left hand in time, but I couldn’t condense Beno levun around it before the sword struck. I glared at Evansmana with my Eyes of Destruction in an attempt to reduce its power.

“Hah!”

Piercing through my Eyes and wards, the Sword of Three Races sank into my shoulder. Fresh blood sprayed into the air as numerous stigmas appeared

around the wound. However...

“Four.”

I drew my right hand from Lay’s stomach and pierced the right side of his chest, crushing another source. Lay didn’t so much as flinch as he pushed Evansmana deeper into my body.

“I know all of your moves,” I said.

Wrapping Beno levun around my left hand, I grabbed the blade digging into my shoulder. Lay used both hands to apply his entire strength to the sword. In the face of such power and magic, the grass across the clearing blew away, and even the trees weren’t left unscathed. But even so, the blade in my hand didn’t budge.

“Did you think a demon body would allow you to win against me in strength?”

Lay cried out as I clenched my right hand, crushing a fifth source.

“Two left. You’re running out of options.”

“I’ve lost to you time and time again...but that was fine. As long as I could keep challenging you, I only needed one miracle to win...”

“Miracles don’t exist.”

No matter how much strength Lay put into his arm, the Sword of Three Races wouldn’t move. At this distance, Evansmana’s magic was completely sealed by Beno levun and my Eyes of Destruction. It wouldn’t remain that way forever, but at the rate things were going, Lay would run out of strength first.

“One left.”

I squeezed, crushing yet another source. Blood dripped from Lay’s mouth.

“Retreat. Even you’re not foolish enough to fight me in such a state.”

Whenever Kanon fought until only one source remained, the man would always retreat. Even if victory hadn’t been possible at present, there had always been hope for the future. As the embodiment of the people’s hope, he’d understood how important it was for him to survive.

“It was my wish to one day bring peace to the world,” Lay said quietly. “That

was why I always ran. No matter how many times I lost, one victory was all it would take to end things. I believed it was the right thing to do.”

Lay’s gaze fixed on me. “But I was just a coward. Right now, there’s someone before me who needs saving. I can’t wait for someday. I want to save him right now. I want to save as many people as possible from their suffering. If I don’t act, when that someday comes, I won’t be able to save anyone!”

Those familiar words were probably what had made him finalize his decision.

“Even if miracles don’t exist, I shall not lose! If I lose here, you’ll have no choice but to kill more humans to put out the flames of their war!”

Sacrifices had to be made to save the many. *That* was the right thing to do, and it was also what I believed in. As the Demon King of Tyranny, I had often had to destroy in order to protect what needed to be protected.

Lay lifted his left hand from Evansmana’s hilt. “But I can’t let you—he who desires peace more than anyone else—do that!”

The space before Lay’s left hand distorted. Siegesta, the Sword of Intent, appeared like a mirage, the ominous purple light it emitted condensing into the demon sword.

“Hraaagh!”

Lay slammed the Sword of Intent against the Sword of Three Races. The two opposing powers of dark and light repelled one another, creating an explosion of light that blasted away most of the trees and plants around us. My body was propelled back with them before I landed a fair distance away.

“Hmm. That’s some awe-worthy power you’ve got there.”

Lay stepped slowly towards me. In his right hand was Evansmana, shining with divine light, and in his left hand was Siegesta, emitting its ominous glow. Black and white light converged and repelled one another, enhancing the power of the swords to a level Lay was barely able to control.

“I never expected you to reach such heights here.”

The Sword of Intent’s true value only manifested when one devoted their entire mind and soul to a particular purpose. The Sword of Three Races only

recognized an owner of pure and peaceful heart. Lay was simultaneously wielding both a demon sword that required a demon heart and a holy sword created to defeat said demons.

At a glance, the two swords seemed to contradict one another. But that wasn't the case in Lay's heart. The life he lived as a hero and the life he lived as a demon coexisted through his very existence. There was no contradiction between the dark and the light. In fact, it probably wasn't that complicated at all.

The coexistence of humans and demons—that was his wish. It was a noble wish that both holy sword and demon sword acknowledged.

“You have reason to live now more than ever,” I said.

I wrapped my arms in Beno levun, then drew the magic circle for Jirasd, the origin spell. Jet-black lightning coiled around the ebony aurora, creating a magical force of both offense and defense.

“Come. I shall free you from the curse of a hero.”

Lay's feet dug into the ground. “Here I go, Anos.”

We charged at one another. Lay's dual blades collided with my magic, creating a shock wave that blasted away our surroundings. Evansmana and Siegesta clashed with Beno levun and Jirasd countless times as we dashed through the forest. Unable to endure the fight of the Demon King of Tyranny and the Hero of Legend, the whole forest shook in a silent scream of protest.

Then, after crossing swords enough times to lose count, Siegesta slashed Jirasd apart. The Sword of Three Races was thrust forward, breaking past both my Magic Eyes of Destruction and Beno levun. Evansmana pierced my chest.

“Why...?” Lay uttered in astonishment. “You could have evaded it. I wasn't even aiming for your source...”

I laughed. Taking Evansmana's attack had been an act of my own choosing. Now the holy sword that had been forged to destroy the Demon King had finally accomplished its purpose.

“Take a look around you,” I said.

Lay cast his gaze around the area. Far in the distance—but close enough for the naked eye to see—was the Gairadite Subjugation Battalion. They had been watching our battle warily since I'd led us over to them during our clashes.

“The risen Hero Kanon has defeated the Demon King of Tyranny. With this, humanity will be freed of their hatred—just as you planned.”

I extended my arm and took Lay's mask, placing it over my own face.

“My fellow demons,” I called out, intercepting the Leaks of the Dilhade army. The effect of the mask altered my voice to that of Avos Dilhevia. Then, using Iris, I duplicated Lay's attire to clothe myself, in turn transforming his clothes into those of the Hero of two thousand years ago. The final image was projected through Limnet to Dilhade's army. They were to witness the final moments of Avos Dilhevia's defeat.

“All troops, retreat to Dilhade. Do not attempt revenge on Azesion until I return to this land once more. Live. Live in anticipation of the day the Demon King...returns...”

Lay had planned on being defeated by the Gairadite battalion and would have prepared to say something similar. Of course, many demons would probably come to confirm my death, but they would mostly likely be Royalists who would follow the order of the Demon King of Tyranny—believing I would one day return.

“The Sword of Three Races was forged with the sole purpose of destroying you... Your source is already...”

Evansmana had indeed pierced my body and was now eating away at my source. A wound like this wasn't something that could be brushed off by pretending to die. If it were that easy, Lay wouldn't have chosen to risk his own life. But both humans and demons had to witness the Demon King of Tyranny's end.

“Ano—”

I pressed my bloodstained fingers to Lay's lips to silence him. “What's wrong, Hero Kanon? You've defeated me. Stand tall.”

Lay glared at me sternly.

The Gairadite battalion was marching towards us. By now, they should have a clear view of the Evansmana-impaled Demon King. Now was the time to display my power—to prove to them that I was the Demon King.

“Foolish humans!” I bellowed at the army before us. It was a ridiculous display, but if something so trivial could bring peace to the world, I would happily play the clown.

Just like this man.

“I am not so easily killed.”

I poured even more of my magic into casting Gia Gleas. An enormous magic circle appeared in the sky above, raining huge magic stones down on the ground below. By stacking Jirasd over that spell, I clad the magic stones in black lightning.

The combined force of the two spells was enough to slaughter tens of thousands of soldiers. Their wards were as good as paper against them.

“You shall all perish along with me.”

Gia Gleas and Jirasd rained down from the skies. The Subjugation Battalion cast multiple layers of barriers, but the darkness of the magic stones swallowed them and continued to fall.

In a thunderous hail, the stones tore holes in the ground, the craters so deep, they extended farther than the eye could see.

Tremors shook the earth as if the whole world were being destroyed. Two, three, four magic stones gouged holes in the ground one after another. They were landing a short distance away from the Subjugation Battalion, but the shock waves were already more than the humans could endure.

Several hundred more stones appeared above their heads, aimed at the battalion below. If the stones came tumbling down, the humans’ deaths were guaranteed.

Lay sensed what I was up to and set off running towards them. “I won’t let you do that, Demon King Avos Dilhevia!” he roared. Once he reached the battalion, he called out to them. “I am Hero Kanon. Lend me your strength—the

strength to finish off that savage Demon King!”

Lay cast Aske and Asura. Divine light enveloped his holy sword as he lifted it into the air, cleaving through their despair like a true hero.

“Is that...Hero Kanon?” someone whispered.

“I can’t tell...” came the voice of another. “But that person bathed in holy light... He’s protecting us. I’m sure of it.”

“Was he fighting with the Demon King of Tyranny? He recovered the holy sword all by himself...”

Humans would always find hope in Kanon. There was just that kind of appeal to him.

“Kanon is here...” came further murmuring.

Those words quickly spread throughout the battalion, who had been gazing up at the magic stones in despair.

“The Hero of Legend has risen to save us!”

“Kanon!”

“Send Hero Kanon every drop of your power!”

“Please, defeat the Demon King!”

“Bring peace to the world for sure this time!”

The thoughts and feelings of the Subjugation Battalion united around Lay. The Sword of Three Races in his grasp began to swell several tenfold in power.

Then came a new voice.

I’ve been condemned for the longest time...

The feelings that Lay couldn’t put into words flowed into my head through Gyze.

Condemned by the duties of a hero. By the obligations of being the chosen

one. I was just a country boy who liked to swing a sword. I didn't want to kill anyone. I didn't want to fight in a war. But someone told me that if I didn't fight, even more people would die.

Being a hero is just an illusion. I'm not strong. I'm not just. I don't have the power to save others. These hands have ended more lives than they've saved. Fooled by words spoken without consideration, toyed with by fate, I wandered the battlefield aimlessly.

I have no courage; all I feel is the fear of letting people die. That fear, that constant, looming presence, was the driving force that moved me onward.

Nevertheless, I had to be the hero. I had to keep playing the hero. I had to live up to people's expectations, even at the cost of my own life. I had to remain the symbol of hope for mankind.

Those without power prayed for me to kill. Those who were weak begged me to die. Perhaps that was inevitable. Humans need hope. I'd prefer to cast aside this life and die with this fate than watch anyone else suffer.

I died and died and died again, reviving over and over to fight for the sake of mankind. Then, one day, a thought crossed my mind: if I was their hope, then what was my hope?

They had their hero, but I didn't have the faintest sliver of hope to latch on to. It really sounded like the plot of a common—a far, far too common—tragedy...

But there was one thing.

Someone who offered me their hand at the end, now and back then. Someone who should have been the enemy. That someone, that hope, was the Demon King of Tyranny—you, Anos.

You were my hero.

§ 39. A Child's Cry on the Battlefield

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Lay swung the Sword of Three Races. Its blade became an endless beam of light that sliced through Gia Gleas and Jirasd. The light dispelled the darkness, vanquishing despair with hope and illuminating my body.

"Splendid..."

My form was enveloped with light. The wound inflicted by the Sword of Three Races was gradually destroying my source. Normally, my source grew more powerful the closer I came to destruction, yet it was completely powerless faced with the holy sword forged to destroy me.

"Lord Demon King!"

The swiftest of Dilhade's forces had arrived. Roughly five hundred demon soldiers were rushing to assist the Demon King of Tyranny, but it was already too late. The light wrapped around me exploded. When the flash finally subsided, there was nothing left of my body.

"Vile humans..." The commander of the advance unit drew his demon sword and raised it into the air. "I am Demon Lord Elio Ludwell—he whom the Demon King of Tyranny entrusted with the governance of Midhaze! The Midhaze army shall now proceed to escort the Demon King to the underworld! Your foolish human lives will become offerings for his journey!"

The Midhaze army glared at the Gairadite battalion. However, before battle could break out between them, Lay raised his holy sword.

"I am Hero Kanon, slayer of Avos Dilhevia," he declared, taking a step towards the advance unit. "The source of the Demon King of Tyranny has been destroyed by Evansmana, the Sword of Three Races! He shall never again return to this land! Proud soldiers of Dilhade, you possess admirable spirits for wishing to follow in your master's footsteps, but have you already forgotten his final words?"

“All troops, retreat to Dilhade. Do not attempt revenge on Azesion until I return to this land once more. Live. Live until the day the Demon King...returns...”

Those were the words the Demon King of Tyranny had delivered over Leaks.

“Whom will you choose to believe? Your leader? Or the holy sword of the Hero?”

With his source pierced by the Sword of Three Races, the Demon King could no longer revive. However, the Demon King of Tyranny had definitely said he would one day return.

Elio gritted his teeth. It was clear from the look in his eyes that he desired revenge, but as a Royalist, he knew his priority was the Demon King. In a choice of whom he trusted more between the Hero’s sword and his master, the answer was obvious.

“All troops...retreat. We shall await the Lord Demon King’s return in Dilhade...”

The Midhaze army turned their backs.

“After them! Don’t let them get away!”

This time, the Gairadite battalion began to advance in pursuit, but Lay stood in their way.

“Peaceful soldiers of Gairadite, Avos Dilhevia is no more. Demonkind will believe the words of the Demon King of Tyranny and return to their nation, awaiting his reincarnation. But the Demon King will never return. Evansmana has destroyed his source.”

No one in Gairadite doubted the power of the legendary holy sword.

“They will continue awaiting his return for all eternity—awaiting a moment that will never come. This is their punishment, a lesson that will be taught forever.” Lay raised his voice. “My comrades, we are the victors! This war is over. As of this moment, peace has come to Azesion once more!”

Holding the Sword of Three Races high in the air, Lay drew a magic circle and summoned the sword’s sheath. At the sight of him sheathing Evansmana,

Gairadite's soldiers sheathed their swords as well.

Demons would never invade Azesion again. Naturally, that meant Azesion wouldn't invade Dilhade either.

"Anos...it's over..." Lay murmured, when—

A blast of light flashed over the heads of the Gairadite battalion. Lay immediately deflected it barehanded. The next moment, a whole barrage of light shot towards Dilhade's army.

Drawing Evansmana from its sheath, Lay cut down the hail of Teo Triath, but the brief delay of unsheathing the sword resulted in one spell slipping past him.

"Gah—!"

The spell targeted the Midhaze unit, striking several of the retreating soldiers. The resulting explosion caused a cloud of dust to rise into the air.

"What the hell?!" the demon soldiers cried. "Those cowards! Attacking us from behind when we're backing off...!"

Anger spread throughout the Dilhade army.

"Do not be fooled!" a familiar voice called. "That demon is not Hero Kanon! Kill the demons—kill them all!"

The one yelling, his voice so full of hatred, was the commander of the Gairadite Demon King Subjugation Battalion, Diego Kanon Ijeiska.

"B-But Commander, the enemy has already lost the will to fight! The Demon King of Tyranny has been defeated. And on the smallest, smallest off-chance that that demon is Kanon, he's showing no hostility towards us. We have no reason to fight—"

"Silence! Demons must be annihilated. Are you disobeying my orders?!"

"Any further action is futile. We can't sacrifice the lives of our men for—"

The severed arm of the deputy commander fell to the ground with a thump.

"Ah... Aaaaaagh!"

"Anyone who defies me shall go down with them! Zeshia squad, advance! Use Gavuel. Obliterate that fake Kanon along with all the demons!"

Their faces hidden beneath their helms, the ten thousand fully armored Zeshias charged. Each drew a magic circle over the left side of their chest in a single synchronized movement.

“All troops, halt! Turning our backs after our comrades were struck down before us would be a disgrace to the great Demon King who sacrificed himself. Show those humans the pride of demonkind!”

At Elio’s order, the Midhaze troops halted their march and turned back to face the Gairadite battalion. Both armies glared at one another, ready to charge at a moment’s notice. But as they stepped forward—

“Wait!” a voice called out.

With a gust of wind, the dust cloud cleared to reveal Eleonore. She had deployed De Ijelia to protect the demon soldiers, the spell formula altered to negate its harmful effects. Teo Triath had failed to strike down anyone.

“They’re all safe! No one died!”

Surprised, Elio stared at her cautiously. Eleonore was no demon, so it was unclear to him why she’d protected his men. He must have been truly bewildered.

“What are you doing, you defect?!” Diego roared, transmitting his words over Leaks. “Not only have you forgotten your hatred for demons, you’ve gone and betrayed your own kind!”

“How? There’s no reason to fight anymore! The Demon King of Tyranny is dead. Dilhade’s army was retreating! This isn’t a fight to protect. It’s a massacre of both enemies and allies! Not even the Demon King you hate so much did that!”

“Silence! How dare you call me worse than a filthy demon?! It’s inconceivable! This is an act of revenge! I am bringing the hammer of justice down on the filthy demons who stole everything from us!”

“They haven’t stolen anything from you! Whose hatred are you talking about? What justice? None of that is yours! Fighting someone else’s war is stupid! You should know that deep down not one of us wants to be at war!”

“I told you to shut your mouth! Don’t assume you have a right to speak when you’re nothing more than magic! *Eleonore!*”

As Diego spoke the name of the spell that bore her, runes appeared across Eleonore’s body. Holy water then began flowing from those runes, encasing her within a magical sphere. The magic that made up Eleonore’s being had been activated, restricting the extent of her movements.

“Just stay in there and watch.” Diego drew Enharle, raising the holy sword above his head. “Fire Teo Triath and charge. Self-destruct once the demons are within range!”

The ten thousand Zeshias stepped forward.

“Please, Zeshia, stop! You can’t do this—I know you don’t want to kill anyone! Don’t do it!”

“I’m afraid they won’t listen to you. You’re all just weapons made to destroy demons.” Diego turned back to his army. “Now charge!”

The ten thousand Zeshias drew their holy swords and marched towards the demon army before them.

Lay used Evansmana to slash apart the oncoming barrage of Teo Triath, then severed the magic circles for Gavuel. But not even the legendary Hero Kanon could cut through so many magic circles at once. He hadn’t killed a single one of the Zeshias charging towards him, but it was clear he couldn’t keep this up for long.

Several of the Zeshias slipped past Lay’s sword and moved right up to him. If their sources exploded at such close range, not even he would escape unscathed.

“Zeshia!” Eleonore screamed.

But the girls lifted Enharle to stab their own chests—and then they all froze at once. It was as though time had stopped. The ten thousand Zeshias stood stock-still, not moving a single inch. The silence lasted for what felt like seconds, or perhaps even less time than that.

Eventually, one girl opened her mouth.

“Save...us...” the child cried, her plea echoing across the battlefield.

§ 40. Ghost of Two Thousand Years Ago

Enharle fell from Zeshia's hand. Thousands of identical Enharles impaled the earth, each releasing a sad glow of light.

"What are you doing, you fools?! Go! Go and slaughter those demons!" Diego commanded.

But the Zeshias didn't move. The girls who should have been mere puppets were crying of their own free will.

"What's wrong with you?! I said go already!" Diego raised his voice higher, but the girls remained unmoving. "Fine. You leave me no choice..."

Diego drew a magic circle—for a spell to force Gavuel to detonate. But the moment he tried to send his magic into it, his hand was sliced off at the wrist.

"Gyaaaaaah! Aaaaaagh!" he wailed, clutching his decapitated hand.

Lay pointed Evansmana at Diego's neck. "I was mistaken," he said. The moment the Zeshias had frozen in place, he had taken the chance to slip through Gairadite's forces.

"What are you talking about...?"

"In this world, some people *are* beyond salvation. People like you." Lay's eyes were fixed on Diego, but somehow, his gaze seemed distant.

"What are you all doing? Get him! Holy sword or not, the enemy stands alone. You have nothing to fear!" Diego yelled furiously at the soldiers around him, but not one of them drew their sword. "Hey! Do you hear me?! I said kill him!"

The soldiers averted their eyes. Only one man among them spoke up.

"We will not point our swords at the legendary Hero Kanon..."

"Fools! What sort of nonsense is this? Have your Eyes rotted out of your heads? That thing is a demon! I am the true Kanon! I am the reincarnation of the legend!"

“You...” the soldier muttered quietly. Then he made up his mind and spoke up. “You weren’t able to draw the Sword of Three Races, were you?”

Diego was speechless. He glared at the soldier, his face glowing red with fury.

“Did you want to try?” Lay asked, thrusting Evansmana into the ground. “The Sword of Three Races chooses its owner for their righteous heart. If *I’m* just a demon and *you’re* a hero, the sword should naturally take your side.”

“Don’t look down on me!” Diego grabbed the hilt of the holy sword, but the moment he began to heave...

“Waaaaaaaaah!”

...the judgment of holy light ran through Diego’s body like a white electric current.

“Why...? Why would you do this, great holy sword? How could you choose a demon?!”

“That is the holy sword’s answer. The Demon King has been defeated. We have no more reason to fight.”

Diego grimaced bitterly.

“Demons are far more compassionate than you are,” muttered the injured deputy commander.

“Wha— You! Whom do you think you’re speaking to?!”

“The war is over. We shall obey the will of our guardian deity and the words of Hero Kanon, and return to Gairadite in triumph!”

The soldiers cheered in solidarity and turned back in the direction of Gairadite.

“Halt, you idiots! I shall not allow this!” Diego roared, but there was no one left to follow his orders. Tens of thousands of soldiers departed like a receding wave, leaving Diego standing alone in their wake.

With a hollow look in his eyes, the headmaster fell to his knees and murmured to himself, “This isn’t over...”

His voice was low and eerie, as though he were crawling from the depths of

hell. He clenched his fists, digging his nails into his palms until they bled.

“The seeds sown two thousand years ago are finally ready to bear fruit...”

Light enveloped Diego’s body as he activated Aske. A voice echoed seemingly from out of nowhere.

Kill...

It was an eerie voice.

Kill the demons.

A repulsive voice.

“Kill...”

A voice laced with detest.

“Unfortunately, I won’t let you.”

Lay swung the Sword of Three Races down on Diego’s head, but the blade was stopped at the last moment. Diego himself had fallen unconscious after using Aske, his body collapsing forward, yet for some reason, the spell’s effect was still active.

“Urk... Agh...” came the groans of people falling.

Lay looked around to see the retreating battalion soldiers collapsing one after another. Each of their bodies was enveloped in the same light.

“What’s going on...?” he wondered.

“Zeshia!” Eleonore shrieked. Like the soldiers, the many copies of Zeshia had also fallen. Aske wrapped around their bodies.

Filthy demons...

The eerie voice echoed across the battlefield. It could be heard by everyone, including Dilhade’s army.

...I am Jerga...

“Jerga?” Lay muttered.

...the conscious magic crafted to destroy all demons.

The light of Aske gathered in the sky above Azesion. Once united, it rained down onto the battlefield below and condensed into the shape of a body.

“Master...”

Lay’s eyes widened in disbelief. The body of magic that had formed before him belonged to the man who had founded the Hero Academy two thousand years ago to destroy the Demon King of Tyranny—the commander of the Gairadite Demon King Subjugation Battalion, Hero Jerga.

“Kanon,” the man said, “I told you two thousand years ago. Demons are not creatures worthy of your kindness. They are corrupted beings that should be removed from existence.”

Jerga’s body appeared to be in an incomplete state, as he made no attempt to move from his position.

“I see that opposing the establishment of the Hero Academy and standing up for the Demon King wasn’t enough. Never would I have imagined you becoming a demon yourself. What a shame. I’m disappointed in you, Kanon.”

Lay looked back at him sorrowfully. “Yes, master...I agree. It’s such a shame you’ve lost yourself to this extent.” He pointed Evansmana at Jerga. “You are a ghost of two thousand years ago. Your source should have disappeared long before now. I shall end things for you here—I shall put your hatred to rest once and for all.”

Jerga released a blast of light, but Lay evaded it easily and thrust his sword forward. Accompanying Lay’s fierce cry, Evansmana’s divine light sliced through Jerga in an instant. However, the dispersed particles of his body gathered back together, returning it to its original form.

“It’s no use, Kanon. The Sword of Three Races was forged to destroy the Demon King of Tyranny. Its immense effect only manifests against demons. Jerga, the magic through which I endure, is made of the same essence as that sword—a holy sword cannot destroy another holy being.”

Lay drew a magic circle with his left hand, summoning the Sword of Intent, but Jerga continued speaking before Lay could make another move.

“Unfortunately for you, it’s my turn now.”

Bright light gathered at Jerga's left arm, which slowly moved to draw a magic circle. Once the circle was complete, the very same pattern appeared over the chests of the many Zeshias, as though they were all linked together.

"The demons in this forest cannot escape the force of ten thousand exploding sources."

Lay spun around to begin destroying the magic circles. Eleonore was just as defiant.

"I won't let you...!" she cried, using her magic to erase them. But even so, she couldn't reach every single one of the ten thousand Zeshia clones. It may have been possible if they were gathered in one place, but they were currently scattered throughout the forest.

"You know you'll never make it in time. Your efforts are futile," Jerga taunted.

"Oh, I don't know about that."

The voice had come from above. Jerga looked up to see Sasha and Misha floating there. "Ah, followers of the Demon King of Tyranny, I see. But what can *you* do with so little power? Very little indeed. You're nothing compared to the demons of two thousand years ago. Lament your helplessness as you die for your sins."

"Too bad for you, not all demons have become weak," Sasha replied.

A man with a skeleton body slowly appeared behind them. It was Ivis Necron, one of the Seven Demon Elders, who began to address the two sisters.

"My direct descendants, those favored by the Demon King of Tyranny himself, the time has come for you to present the secret art of the Necron clan."

Sasha and Misha exchanged a look, then linked both their hands together.

"There's nothing to fear," Misha said.

"Obviously," Sasha retorted.

"I am you."

"And you are me."

The two girls drew half a magic circle each around their bodies, connecting

them together to form one big circle. Ivis held both his hands over it and layered one more magic circle on top, pouring all of his magic into that final layer.

“Return to your rightful form,” Ivis commanded, at which the two responded in unison.

“Dino Jixes.”

Particles of magic rose from their bodies as their forms melted into one. Long silver hair fluttered with the wind, dancing in the air. A single girl had taken the place of the two.

Dino Jixes was a fusion spell that could split a source into two and then meld the two halves back together, amplifying the source’s power in the process. But the spell used to fuse Misha and Sasha’s sources with those of their past selves had not been completed.

Unlike with source clones, a force of attraction drew the two halves of a split source together. That applied to Sasha and Misha even now, even though their sources were whole. Thus, Dino Jixes could fuse them into a further complete form.

In terms of sheer power, the result would be even greater than that of the two girls alone. After all, no two halves were returning to one; two wholes were merging to form something much greater.

“Disappear—Magic Eyes of Destruction.”

Sasha and Misha’s voices together rang from the mouth of the silver-haired girl. Misha’s Magic Eyes identified the ten thousand Zeshias scattered around the forest, while Sasha destroyed the Gavuel circles as their gaze locked on to them.

“Get down from there, persistent flies.”

Jerga’s right arm began to glow. Then it moved. He fired Teo Triath directly at the silver-haired girl.

“It’s useless—commencing destruction of Teo Triath’s spell formula.”

The blast of light faded into nothing before the Magic Eyes of Destruction, but

Jerga continued unfazed. A large magic circle appeared around his hand, from which a barrage of Teo Triath shot like a hailstorm.

“Did you think more would make a difference? *Forty-six blasts of Teo Triath confirmed. Commencing destruction.*”

Sasha and Misha dismantled the circles for both the incoming Teo Triath barrage and the Zeshia squad’s Gavuel. Every kind of magic imaginable could be reduced to nothing before those silver Eyes.

“You seem to be missing the point, followers of the Demon King. Your Eyes are impressive, but how will you accomplish anything with mere defense? Anti-magic like that will deplete your magic in no time. You’re only delaying the inevitable.”

Even more light gathered around Jerga’s body. His legs, then his entire frame, broke into a brilliant glow. One of the countless bullets of light slipped past the Eyes of the silver-haired girl. She barely managed to put up her wards in time before it struck her.

“That’s all we need to do. *We’re waiting.*”

“Waiting for what?”

“Anos will return to defeat you. *We believe in him.*”

The corners of Jerga’s mouth twitched upwards in a mocking sneer. “Ha! Ha ha ha! With Eyes like that, I thought you’d know better. The Demon King of Tyranny is dead! Evansmana is a holy sword bestowed by the gods to destroy the Demon King. When he was pierced by it, his source vanished with a trace! He’ll never resurrect again!”

“You don’t know that. *Even if we can’t see him, we believe...*”

Blasts of light struck the silver-haired girl again and again. Even so, she continued staring at the ground, destroying more of the Gavuel circles.

“We will protect it—the *peace that Anos wanted to protect...*because he told us to protect it! *We won’t let anyone die...*”

Light gathered around Jerga’s head. His magic-formed body finally solidified, as though becoming a real body.

“Did you think that our Demon King would die just from having his source destroyed?! *Anos wouldn’t die so easily.*”

The girl’s Magic Eyes of Destruction destroyed every spell before them.

“Have you finally lost your minds, you pitiful demons? Oh, but your agony brings me comfort. You shall face even greater despair—just as I faced long ago, except several hundred times worse!”

Four huge magic circles appeared over the Tola Forest. Each was formed of a different element—earth, water, fire, and wind—to combine into De Ijelia. The barrier suppressed the girl’s Eyes of Destruction in an instant, allowing just enough time for Gavuel to complete on one Zeshia’s chest.

“First will be this one. Then in ten seconds, another. I shall blow all of them up one by one until you weep and beg for mercy. Watch as those you wished to protect die helplessly before you.” Jerga clenched his left hand. “*Gavuel.*”

Lay ran. Sasha and Misha strained their Eyes. Eleonore screamed. They wouldn’t make it in time like this—

But Zeshia didn’t explode.

Everyone’s eyes fixed on a single point.

“Impossible...” Jerga muttered. Reflected in his eyes was the Demon King of Tyranny.

“Anos...Voldigoad...”

“Hmm. So you do recognize me.” I stepped slowly forward towards where the Zeshias had fallen. “Good work, Lay, Sasha, Misha, Eleonore. You did well holding the fort.”

I had cast Rivide to stop the time of the Gavuel afflicting every Zeshia.

“How...? How could it be...?”

“You may have turned yourself into magic, Jerga, but it seems your mind is as dull as ever,” I said to the flabbergasted hero. “Don’t try to define me by your logic. Did you really think that destroying my source would be enough to prevent my resurrection?”

§ 41. Where the Hatred Goes

I slowly stepped towards Jerga. A small noise escaped his lips. The sinister sound soon morphed into broken laughter.

“Bwa ha ha... Mwa ha ha ha!” Jerga looked at me with a repulsive expression. “Very well. I shall destroy you with my own hands instead. I could even thank you for reviving me to give me that opportunity, Demon King of Tyranny.”

Even after being reduced to magic, Jerga’s hatred persisted—for two thousand years, it had failed to cease.

“I shall make you regret returning to this world! Die!”

A flurry of particles flew from Jerga’s body as he charged straight towards me.

“Feel the wrath of mankind, Demon King of Tyranny!”

An immense ray of light shone down from the skies above. The light gathered in his hand, forming a sword made of Aske.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“You’re weak for such a loudmouth.” Parrying his sword with Beno levun, I closed the distance between us and pierced my right hand through his chest. “*Vebdoz.*”

With that, I crushed his Aske-formed body with my source-destroying fingertips. Light scattered as his form dispersed into mist, but more light from Azesion fell from the sky, reforming Jerga’s body.

“Hmm. So your source can’t be touched.”

“Then you understand. This body of mine is made up of Jerga magic—a fragment of this world’s order that cannot be destroyed.”

So this wouldn’t be as easy, then. That was no surprise.

“Time is up,” Jerga said, before calling to the people through Aske. His voice echoed in the hearts of everyone affected by the spell. “Hear me, citizens of

Azesion. The deepest darkness has engulfed the continent of Azesion. After two thousand years, the Demon King of Tyranny has returned to this land. But fear not. Pray with hope—pray for our legendary Hero. His return shall once more be the light that banishes the darkness.”

When Diego had said he’d sown the seeds two thousand years ago, he had probably been referring to this very legend—a legend that had been passed down through the ever-increasing human population.

The light of Aske in the sky glowed brighter than the sun itself. Its radiance was being siphoned from all across Azesion.

“Urgh... Aah...!”

“The darkness... Gyaaaaack! G-Go away...”

“Stop... N-Nooo!”

The Gairadite soldiers lying around the forest were writhing in agony. The light rising from their bodies was brighter than ever before.

“Hmm, I see. Jerga is hidden within Aske. Only when Aske collects a vast amount of magic does the man materialize and form a body of his own.”

Even as I was speaking, the light flooding over Jerga made him grow larger.

“But in order to maximize the effectiveness of Aske, the hearts of the people must be united,” I continued. “That is why the Hero Academy spread the legend of the deepest darkness—so that when that darkness arrives again, the people of Azesion will pray together as one.”

The light over Jerga increased in brightness, blurring the outline of his body.

“Jerga, you’re forcefully sucking the hope out of the Azesion people.”

Once all the hope had been drained from them, all that would be left in their hearts was despair. That was the true meaning of the legend of the deepest darkness. The people of Azesion stood on the brink of despair as they listened to the legend, offering the Hero their prayers of hope. Once those prayers had been fully absorbed, the people would be cast back into the depths.

The people would then be left to wander that endless darkness for all eternity. And in doing so, the people of Azesion would have their feelings

forcibly united in a tragic end—all merely to activate Jerga.

“The heart won’t last long in perpetual despair. Do you truly wish to sacrifice your people, who have only known peace until now, in your pursuit to destroy me, king of humans?”

“Are you only realizing this now, Demon King of Tyranny? This is the grudge of mankind. The people are willing to sacrifice themselves in order to destroy you. I shall not let their noble sacrifice go to waste!”

I stared at Jerga coldly as he proclaimed his intentions as if they were those of a noble cause. “Fool.”

“You speak as if that’s someone else’s problem, king of demons. This is the punishment for your sins. You were the one who made us resent you. If you hadn’t killed all those people, this never would have happened! For that sin—that stupidity—you shall rot away in repentance!”

Screams of agony filled the air as the fallen humans had their hope sucked out. The light in the sky grew brighter still, illuminating the entire forest.

Jerga’s body collapsed piece by piece, no longer able to retain its shape. But the divine light continued to grow until it enveloped the entire forest. Soon, that light formed a Jerga-shaped armored giant, a shining holy sword clutched in its hand.

“Hear me, my followers,” the giant said. “Help the wounded escape. This area is soon to be torn apart.”

The great holy sword came swinging down. With Beno levun, my magic wards, and my Magic Eyes of Destruction, I intercepted the blow. The resulting collision was of such tremendous power, it created a shock wave that split the land and flattened the trees.

“Witness the power of justice.”

With his great holy sword still embedded in the ground, Jerga the giant took a step forward. That single step shook the ground, preventing the soldiers from fleeing.

“I’ll make a Demon King Castle underground—ice castle.” The silver-haired girl

used Iris. Some distance away, a sturdy castle of ice rose into shape beneath the earth.

“Allow me to assist,” came the voice of Melheis, who had teleported beside her. He drew a magic circle over the ice castle. “No Demon King Castle will last long against an opponent like that. *Azesith*.”

Thanks to his spell, the underground Demon King Castle was moved to an isolated dimension. Azesith dimensions couldn’t be interfered with from the outside, but an entrance had to be left open for the evacuating soldiers to escape into—and this inevitably became this particular Azesith’s weak point.

With his current power, Jerga would eventually force his way through, so having the ice castle as a second layer of defense was most reassuring.

“Filthy insects. I’ll exterminate every last one of you.”

The Eyes of the armored giant tried to pinpoint the ice castle’s location. Just then, however, a misty rainstorm fell across the area. The mist quickly spread, transforming into a thick, vision-obscuring fog that concealed the magic of both the ice castle and all the demons. It was Misa’s Fuska.

“Is this the protection of the Great Spirit Forest?” Jerga asked in disbelief. “Have the spirits, too, sided with demons?”

“Times have changed, Jerga. There are no enemies left in this era.” I focused my magic on deflecting his holy sword, then swiftly cast Jio Graze to strike at his giant helm. Jerga was momentarily swallowed by the jet-black flames, but those flames were soon extinguished by his anti-magic. Unharméd, he turned to look at me calmly.

“You cannot deceive me. How vile of you to have resorted to enslaving the spirits.” Jerga the armored giant lifted his sword high into the air. A magic circle appeared at the tip of its blade. “Hear me, demons! You shall all atone for the sins of your founder.”

Countless blasts of Teo Triath came raining down from the circle. With Fuska hindering his ability to take aim, Jerga had chosen to fire indiscriminately at everything. Several of those blasts would inevitably find their target.

Just then, magic circles of earth, water, fire, and wind appeared on the

ground, blocking Teo Triath.

“Get out of here, quick!” Eleonore called. She had deployed a magic barrier to protect the retreating Midhaze army. “I’ve adjusted my barrier to block holy magic, but it won’t be able to withstand a Teo Triath like that for long.”

Bewildered by the sight, the commander, Demon Lord Elio, paused. “Brave warrior of mankind,” he said, “why do you help us demons? You did so earlier as well.”

“Our nation may have been the one to declare war,” she answered clearly, “but this isn’t war anymore. We never wanted to fight—we just wanted to protect ourselves. But that armored *thing* wants to kill demons and humans alike.”

Eleonore glared at the giant form that was barely visible beyond the clouds of dust. On the other side of the Midhaze army were the collapsed Gairadite troops.

“The Dilhade army showed their intention to retreat,” she continued, “and the Gairadite Demon King Subjugation Battalion was turning back as well. That should have been the end of this. We have no reason to resent you.”

The silver-haired fusion of Misha and Sasha was using Gatom to teleport the unconscious Zeshias to the Demon King Castle, but even with their combined power, it would take some time to transport all ten thousand of them.

“I shall gather them all in one place with Azesith,” said Melheis. “Then you can teleport all of them at once.” Melheis cast Azesith. Magic gates transported all the Zeshias to a single spot, allowing the silver-haired girl to use Gatom only once to move them.

“Please evacuate to the Demon King Castle set up over there!” the fan union girls called, directing Dilhade’s army to the entrance of the castle.

“What’s wrong, Jerga?” I asked, using Fless to rise into the sky. There, I drew a magic circle that faced him. “Can you really afford to look away?”

“Don’t think you’ll have the upper hand forever!” Jerga swung his holy sword upwards before bringing it down on me, magic circle and all. I evaded the sword at the last moment, but the circle was sliced in half. “My existence cannot be

erased. If you wish to stop me, you'll have to kill everyone in Azesion—but even then, Jerga shall remain. Jerga will never disappear from this world! Feel this despair, Anos Voldigoad, for as long as Jerga exists in this world, demons are destined to die!”

“If you wish to make me despair, do it with your actions instead of words.”

“Silence! Say what you will, you despicable, arrogant demon!”

Hundreds of chains of light flew out of Jerga’s body. The moment I evaded them, a magic barrier activated—a spell designed to trigger when someone came between the chains. As I destroyed the chains with my Magic Eyes of Destruction, the great holy sword came swinging down. I caught the blow with Beno levun.

“The Sword of Three Races was forged to destroy the Demon King! You may have escaped with your life, but its blade piercing your body will have diminished your strength. That wicked source of yours is no longer a threat!”

The giant sword tore through Beno levun, slamming me into the ground. Blood flowed from my body as my source was wounded, but I somehow managed to land on my feet—until the great holy sword came swooping in to pursue me.

“Die!”

The ground split with a thunderous roar, sending a blast of magic into the air. The holy sword created by Jerga had successfully destroyed my source.

“I see.”

Even so, I regenerated in no time at all.

“A source-destroying holy sword—similar to the Sword of Three Races, but lesser in power.”

“What?!”

Jerga could only gape at the sight of me standing there, the demon he’d supposedly destroyed.

“You should have finished me off the first time,” I said. “You know the same attack won’t work on me twice.”

The origin spell, Agronemt. By using Jerga's attack and my source as an origin, my source could be returned to its state before receiving the attack. The spell normally couldn't be used by one whose source had disappeared, but I'd prepared beforehand by using Rivide to send Agronemt into the future.

Using an enemy's attack as an origin required knowing what attack the enemy was about to use, so it could really only be used after an identical attack. I had only been able to resurrect after being destroyed by the Sword of Three Races because Kanon had thrust the same sword through my chest two thousand years ago. That said, I had not yet completely recovered after being slain by the sword that could cut the ties of destiny.

"Zola e Dypt."

In the brief moment that Jerga had believed my source had been gone for good, I'd drawn a new magic circle. Now, twisting black flames burst forth, coiled into chains that restrained his huge body. At the same time, those chains traced their own magic circle. Zola e Dypt could seal an enemy's magic and movements while composing a spell to finish them off.

"Taste the flames of darkness."

The hellfire chains crackled and spat, swallowing Jerga's great body whole. The resulting pitch-dark pillar of fire appeared to connect the earth to the sky.

"Hmm. I suppose that was to be expected."

Divine light spilled from the pillar of fire, growing brighter until the black flames dispersed and the unharmed armored giant emerged from within.

"You were warned. Jerga magic is eternal. Not even your godforsaken sword, the Abolisher of Reason, can remove the concept of Jerga from eternity. Give it up—demons are destined to die!"

"Well, any less and you wouldn't even hold my interest."

"Hold your tongue!"

Still bound by the chains of Zola e Dypt, the giant body raised its great holy sword.

"This is not your castle! We are not at Delsgade! Your trump card cannot be

drawn here!”

Oh? What an odd thing for him to say.

“I’ve never shown you the Abolisher of Reason. Who told you about it?” I inquired. Only those from long ago should know the castle was a three-dimensional magic circle. Even then, all those who had witnessed the sword had perished.

“You have no time to worry about such things!” He swung the blade of his holy sword sideways, dragging the magic chains with it. “Resurrect all you want. I shall not stop exacting justice until your magic fades and you fall into despair!”

Just as the sword was about to crush me, a gust of wind swept across the ground. The great holy sword snapped in half and dropped with a thud to the ground.

“That was easier to cut than I expected for something of that size.”

Lay had appeared before Jerga, Siegesta in hand.

“Have you recovered enough?” I asked.

“Thanks to the time you bought me, I got all six back,” he said.

Without his seven sources, even Lay would have struggled against this monster. That was why I had dragged out the battle and bought him some time.

Hatred overflowed from the armored giant. There was a dark glint in his eye as he spoke. “You fool... You utter fool of a man! To think that you were once considered a legend. How much further must you fall before you’re satisfied, Kanon?!”

While Jerga was yelling angrily, his holy sword regenerated. He drew a magic circle with his left hand, summoning precisely one hundred and eight points of light.

“Who would’ve known a day like this would come.” I took to the air and landed beside Lay.

“If it weren’t for you, I don’t know where I would’ve ended up.”

I raised my fist and held it up at Lay. It was a hand stained by the blood of

thousands upon thousands of humans. Lay clenched his fist and raised it in kind. His hands had taken more demon lives than a person could count. However, at the end of the day, we were just two sides of the same coin. All we wanted was to protect others. There wasn't the faintest hint of resentment between us.

"Let's go, my friend," I said. "Two thousand years of hatred ends here."

Lay nodded. "For the peace of Azesion and Dilhade."

The two of us bumped fists. The next moment, Lay used Gatom to teleport directly behind Jerga.

"Sly nuisances!" Jerga tried to turn around, but I sent more of my magic into Zola e Dypt's chains.

"Did you think I would let you move?"

"You...!"

Countless Teo Triaths flew at me. I stepped past them as I made my way closer.

"Curse you!" He raised the holy sword into the air with enough force to shake the atmosphere, but Lay's Sword of Intent cut the sword cleanly into two.

"I won't let you move either," he replied calmly.

A ghost of two thousand years ago. The hatred of two thousand years ago. To bring this battle to its long overdue end, two legends of the Great War, the Hero and the Demon King of Tyranny, ran through the sky together.



§ 42. May Love Fill the World

“You called it destiny.” I cast Jirasd, sending black lightning crawling across the armored giant’s body. “You say that demons are destined to die as long as Jerga exists in this world.”

“That is the reality. No matter how hard you try, you cannot change the outcome. But if you’d prefer to be strangled slowly by the agony, then be my guest.” Jerga’s body glowed as he dispelled Jirasd. “My hatred has become the order of this world! Humans and heroes shall join hands to eliminate demonkind. That is the rightful form of this world! Resist all you want, but you *shall* atone for your sins!”

The armored giant glowed even brighter, shooting blasts of light from its entire body. Teo Triath struck from all angles, leaving barely any leeway for evasion. I had to use my Magic Eyes of Destruction to move forward through them.

“Then we shall merely sever that fate. Have you forgotten, Jerga? We have the legendary Hero and Evansmana on our side.”

Lay held out his right hand. Divine light gathered there to form the sword.

“Pfft... Bwa ha ha! Is that the best you can do? How many times do I have to tell you the Sword of Three Races was forged to destroy the Demon King of Tyranny?! Its tremendous power only affects demon enemies, and Jerga magic is made of the same holy power as the sword. That weapon is incapable of slaying a true, sacred destiny.”

With the Sword of Three Races clutched tightly in hand, Lay moved towards Jerga.

“Struggle all you want! Once you realize your efforts are futile, you shall learn what true despair feels...like...?”

Evansmana flashed, and Jerga’s arm fell off. The body of magic that should have been immune to the holy demon-slaying sword showed no sign of

regenerating.

“What...is this?”

“Hmm. Don’t tell me you still consider yourself a holy being, Jerga.”

“What did you do...?” The armored giant glared at Lay, his voice trembling with abhorrence. “Tell me what you did, Kanon!”

The severed arm on the ground twitched, then shot like a cannonball towards Lay. Lay, however, sliced it up on the spot, until it had all but vanished into thin air.

“I am a sacred magic, bringing order to destroy demonkind... There’s no way the Sword of Three Races would affect me!”

The giant swung its fist down at Lay, who slipped past it and slashed at its legs. Thrown off-balance, it stumbled forward, catching itself on one knee. In doing so, Jerga’s field of view shifted just enough for him to see it.

“What is that...?”

“You were so focused on looking down on demonkind, you failed to notice what occupied the skies above you.”

Demon Castle Delsgade was floating in the sky, its shadow falling over where I stood. In other words, I was within its area of effect, and this was now my territory.

“You were right about Venuzdonoa’s limitations outside of Delsgade. However, no one said anything about Delsgade being unable to move.”

Demon King Castle Delsgade was capable of producing tremendous amounts of magic, but the magic required to teleport a fixed magic artifact like this would have been unacquirable two thousand years ago. However, origin spells grew more effective the greater and older the existence they borrowed from. By borrowing the power of the Delsgade two thousand years ago, the greater spell of the same name finally had enough power to summon the castle of this era.

That said, casting the spell Delsgade wasn’t easy, even for me. Not only did it drain the majority of my magic, but it also took time to cast. I had cast Zola e

Dypt in order to restrain Jerga's movements, before drawing the formula for Delsgade in a way that would avoid his notice.

"You are no holy being, Jerga. Your deep-rooted delusions have driven you to steal hope from humanity, reducing yourself to a demon-killing incarnation of evil. You shall not meet your end in this world as a hero." I smiled at Jerga. "You shall face the judgment of the holy sword yourself."

Floating before Delsgade in the skies above was a longsword that gleamed with dark light. Venuzdonoa, the Abolisher of Reason, was eroding the order of this place.

"I shall not forgive this, Anos Voldigoad," Jerga said through gritted teeth. "After treading over human pride, after taking the lives of our loved ones, you have come for justice itself! Unforgivable. We shall never forgive you for what you have done!"

Spurred on by hatred, the armored giant rose to its feet that should have been cut off. Its magic body glowed brighter than ever, giving form to countless swords of light. They were all holy swords—and they all shot out at once.

But halfway on their path to me, the swords of light flipped over and tore into the body of the giant instead.

"Graaah!"

"Don't tell me you thought your swords would serve you because they're your own."

"Unforgivable... I will destroy you... Destroy...!"

The outline of the armored giant blurred, growing larger as it scattered more holy swords about the area. A gigantic magic circle appeared over the left side of its chest. It was the formula for Gavuel.

"Hmm. You think I'd let you do that?"

"I know... I know that the Abolisher of Reason has no true value unless held in your hand and...that summoning the Demon Castle here has consumed the majority of your power!" There was a dark glint in the giant's eyes. "Even without killing you, I can utterly destroy everything you wanted to protect! The

greater the sacrifice, the greater your despair shall become! Now you'll finally feel how deep our resentment truly runs!"

Indeed, the Abolisher of Reason wasn't as powerful out of my hands. Also, I was unable to control it perfectly at my current power. Although destroying Jerga once and for all would be child's play, this war would not end unless his hatred was severed at the source.

"If I don't have enough power, I'll simply get it from somewhere else." Using Aske, I connected my heart with the hearts of the eight fan union girls. "Can you hear me?" I called.

"Yes!"

"Number four. Send this pitiful ghost off with a requiem."

"Right away, Lord Anos!"

Their feelings culminated within my body, transforming into a pillar of light. The magic power I'd consumed casting Delsgade was swiftly replenished.

"You... You dare use Aske while Jerga is in effect... Just how long do you intend on mocking mankind with that demon sword of yours?!"

Using Aske poisoned the caster's heart with hatred for demons—even more so with Jerga in effect. He seemed to believe that effect was being blocked by Venuzdonoa; however...

"Demon sword? What are you talking about? Take another look with those Eyes of yours, and you'll see that this Aske is unaffected by the Abolisher of Reason."

"I shan't be fooled! Aske is the resentment of mankind. Be it a thousand or two thousand years later, that hatred shall never fade. We have vowed to destroy demonkind; we have vowed to exact our revenge; and we have passed those feelings down through the generations! There can be no peace in a world with demons. Every human desires to destroy you! These feelings embodied in Aske cannot be endured by a demon!"

The feelings of mankind from across Azesion gathered in the sky above the Tola Forest. They all condensed into swords of light that poured down like a

violent rainstorm.

At a glance, there had to be over a million of those holy swords. They disappeared the moment they crossed the shadow of the castle, but there was no denying the disadvantage with Venuzdonoa out of my hands. One in every ten thousand swords slipped past the castle, descending towards the humans and demons on the ground. However, each one was stopped by my Aske—with the voices that echoed through the forest.

A gentle song drifted between the leaves.

How long will this night extend?

The Demon King—tyrannical, they agreed—fell into a lonely slumber.

A sword was raised to protect those in need.

With bloodstained hands, he stopped lives falling under.

No, he never wanted to fight.

He killed and killed but never saw light.

Now he sleeps, waits for the dawn.

Two thousand years of sleep would surely change the world.

One belief, one dream for us all.

The immense light released from my Aske collided with the holy swords and shattered them all at once, but their fragments continued raining down—right over the writhing battalion members.

“No, you can’t do that!” Eleonore cried, but they were too far away for the immobile girl to protect them.

Just then, Commander Elio of the Midhaze front appeared on the Subjugation Battalion’s side of the battlefield. He had directed his troops to encircle the armored giant.

“All troops, deploy your anti-magic! Stop the projectiles with your wards!”

At their commander’s order, Elio’s subordinates deployed an umbrella of anti-

magic, shielding the injured shoulders against the fragments of holy swords.

“Rescue the wounded and evacuate them to the underground Demon King Castle!”

The Midhaze troops cast Iris, creating large crates to transport the fallen humans. They were then lifted by hand or Fless to move them to the underground shelter. Some of the demons even helped the humans up directly, lending them their shoulders to lean on.

“Brave human warrior,” the commander said, addressing Eleonore over Leaks, “we shall evacuate your troops to our castle. I swear they shall not be harmed and will be returned once this is all over. Do you accept these terms?”

“But if you don’t run quickly, won’t you guys die too?”

The commander looked up at the clouded sky occupied by the armored giant and two small shadows. “Our founder fought for the sake of demonkind. Likewise, the man before us has returned from the dead to continue fighting, even after his source was destroyed. I am not so dull as to fail to realize who he is.” Elio said. He sounded almost proud to be standing on this battlefield. “My name is Elio Ludwell, Demon Lord of Midhaze and descendant of the Demon King of Tyranny, Anos Voldigoad! In the name of my blood and the name of my pride, I will return the mercy you have shown us here!”

The shards of holy swords became a downpour, descending to the ground in a dangerous hail. Elio worked frantically to protect the humans below, lending them his shoulder and directing them to the castle.

“Our founder ordered us not to take lives. Rescue the humans you see before you! No one dies today. No one kills today. Now is the time to demonstrate our loyalty!”

“Yes, sir!”

Gentle voices continued flowing from Aske as though to watch over the demons on their rescue mission.

Love is a stronger power than hate.

He—who entrusted his hopes to the future—believed in reconciliation.

A sword was raised to protect those in need.

In bloodstained hands, he clutched lives, in abjection.

He, defeated by a world not ideal,

Watched sadness grow no matter how hard he wished.

Two thousand years of sentiments would surely change the world.

One belief, one hope that was this.

“How long will you avert your eyes, Jerga? It’s time to face reality. Times have changed. The world has long been at peace. Humans and demons are joining hands to survive. Surely you aren’t so blind as to miss that.”

I leaped into the air, making my way to the floating Delsgade.

“You call this peace? Don’t make me laugh! There will never be any peace! You destroyed it all two thousand years ago! I have nothing left but hatred for your kind! I shall not listen to your empty ideals for a future that could never exist!”

The number of swords in the sky increased tenfold and came hurtling directly at me. Without a glance, I evaded them and continued approaching Delsgade.

“After being deprived of peace, you choose to steal the peace of your descendants. How does that make you any better than me?”

“Silence! Do not lump me together with you! This is revenge—the result of a two-millennia-year-old grudge!”

“If you want revenge, then do it alone. Humans do not resent demons; it’s only you who resents me.” Destroying the falling holy swords, I rose farther into the sky. “Thus, you should deal with all your hatred, rage, and resentment alone until the end. Channel that eternal obsession to curse me.”

As my hand reached for the Abolisher of Reason, a light shone in the sky—a giant holy sword appeared and came racing towards me.

“You won’t have your way!” he cried.

The sword was conceived of Jerga's hatred, the concept of Jerga magic itself. It slammed into me before I could grasp the Abolisher of Reason—but Lay swung Evansmana, slashing the great holy sword apart.

My hand closed around Venuzdonoa's hilt. "Let's end this."

"Yeah."

The two of us turned to face the giant, then swooped down in a rapid descent. Our swords that had once pointed towards each other now pointed in the same direction.

He waited two thousand years to laugh alongside you.

He waited two thousand years for you to join hands.

Daybreak is upon us;

And from his lonely sleep, the Demon King wakes to rejoin the land.

Please, if one wish could be granted,

Show him the sunrise ahead.

Please, oh please, if one wish could be granted,

May love fill this dark world instead.

Jerga fired Teo Triath, but his efforts were in vain before the Abolisher of Reason. The attack vanished into thin air. I swung Venuzdonoa down onto the giant's head, followed by Lay swinging Evansmana down on top.

"Gah..."

The giant's body was fading. The Azesion people continued to supply their power, but Jerga was unable to maintain his physical existence. The very spell that harbored Jerga and his hatred had been severed, and its magic was threatening to disappear.

"You shall be reduced to nothing," I said. "Your pride, your justice, your hatred—all of it will be lost, and you shall perish in vain."

"My hatred...is waning... It's fading...away..." There was a sad tone to Jerga's

voice as he faded, as though he had finally regained something. His feelings spilled from his mouth like blood being coughed up. "I never wanted pride," he mumbled. "I never needed justice. I lost everything... Hatred was the only thing I had left...of my wife...and my child... I shall never forget it...this grudge..."

"Foolish man. Hatred was never the only thing left in you."

The giant's body disappeared, revealing the faint image of Jerga from two thousand years ago.

"That's why Eleonore, who was made from your source, continued wishing for peace no matter how many times she was remade."

Jerga's heart had been split into two: Jerga, the magic that pursued the death of demonkind, and Eleonore, which wished for the peace of their descendants. The two opposing forces were reflections of the conflict in Jerga's heart. He had harbored both the desire to destroy demons and the wish to protect his descendants from such hatred.

"Your wife and child died by my hands. They were formidable opponents, so I remember them clearly."

Using Iris, I crafted a michens necklace around Jerga's disappearing form.

"They were both wearing one of these."

I pointed the Abolisher of Reason at Jerga. "Reincarnate and come after me as many times as you wish. I shall accompany your journey for revenge for the rest of eternity." With that, I thrust the sword through his chest. "If there's anything left of the hatred you clung on to for so long, that is."

Just before his body disappeared, I cast Syrica over his source and sent him to them, just as I had done to his wife and child all those years ago. If he still harbored resentment after reincarnation, he could come for me as many times as he wished. I would recast Syrica as many times as it took for him to finally reunite with his family.

Silence fell. Eventually, the light over the Tola Forest faded. The hope-sucking magic of Jerga vanished, and Aske lost its power.

"Lay."

“Yeah.”

With the Abolisher of Reason and the Sword of Three Races raised, overlapping, towards the sky, we used Aske to reverse what had happened to Azesion. Magic was converted back to hope and returned to the hearts of the despairing people.

A song could be heard—a song that sent hope to the world.

Love is a stronger power than hate.

He—who entrusted his hopes to the future—believed in reconciliation.

A sword was raised to protect those in need.

In bloodstained hands, he clutched lives in abjection.

He, defeated by a world not ideal,

Watched sadness grow no matter how hard he wished.

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Oh please, if one wish could be granted,

Show him the sunrise ahead.

Please, oh please, if one wish could be granted,

May love fill this dark world instead.

§ Epilogue: A Peaceful Fight

Thanks to the effect of reversing Aske, the exhausted soldiers being carried by the Dilhade army had recovered and were now getting slowly back to their feet. Now that they had regained their hope, there should be no further need to worry about them.

Lay and I lowered ourselves to the ground.

“Anos! *Anos...*”

The silver-haired girl came running our way, the two girls’ voices overlapping as she called. Her body glowed, her silhouette blurring before splitting into two. The effect of Dino Jixes had worn off, returning the girls to their original forms. They both jumped at me separately.

“Don’t surprise me like that! I seriously thought you were dead,” Sasha said, clinging to me tightly.

“I was worried,” Misha murmured in agreement, pressing her small body close. Now that the tension of battle was over, the two had tears in their eyes.

“Don’t cry. Did you really think I would die?”

“I’m saying that’s exactly what I thought...”

“I said I was worried...”

I patted their heads to reassure them.

“No sacrifices will be made. Peace can only be achieved by living.”

Beside me, Lay looked my way with a smile. He looked as though he wanted to say something about how reckless I’d been to let the Sword of Three Races destroy my source. He wouldn’t be wrong either. Using Agronemt required one’s utmost concentration—especially when the Sword of Three Races could have destroyed me once and for all. Although the odds *had* been in my favor, there was no denying that my life had been at risk.

Even so, I had faced that risk and won. Before me, demons and humans alike

were helping each other, lending a hand to one another and administering first aid. This was the scene I'd yearned for all these years.

I began walking forward, my feet carrying me through the aftermath of the battle until a man stepped out in front of me. It was the commander of one of the advance units, Elio Ludwell. The Midhaze unit was lined up behind him.

"Demon King," Elio said, kneeling before me. His subordinates followed suit and bowed. "I am Elio Ludwell, the Demon Lord charged with the governance of Midhaze. I am also Emilia's father..." he added in a humble tone. "All of this was a result of my own ignorance. I will accept any punishment you have for me."

Anyone discerning who had witnessed this incident would have realized my identity by now. The summoning of Demon Castle Delsgade, the use of it as a three-dimensional magic circle, and Jerga's hostility towards me were the biggest giveaways. Away from such chaos, perhaps the answer was obvious, but it was surprising to see someone figure it out in the midst of a battlefield. Perhaps he had his suspicions even before coming here.

"Elio."

"Yes!" he replied, still bowed low.

"Raise your head."

Elio looked up at me. There was no fear in his eyes, only strong conviction.

"I commend you for submitting yourself without excuse, but what need is there for punishing those who have already accepted their faults? If you've made a mistake, you can simply work on correcting it from now on."

"With all due respect, my liege, I, a royal, turned my sword on the Demon King of Tyranny. That unforgivable deed requires punishment. Please allow me the chance to atone for this as your subordinate."

"In that case, I shall have your life. Serve me well for the rest of it. That is your punishment."

"Lord Anos..."

"You did well to read my intentions in the midst of a chaotic battle and extend your hand to humanity. I expected nothing less from my descendants. Have

pride in your loyalty and desire for peace.”

“I am unworthy of such words.” Elio lowered his head again, overcome with emotion.

“Midhaze is a pleasant town with little trouble. Continue in your efforts to devote yourself to it.”

“As you wish!”

Leaving the troops behind, I continued walking until I came across a group of girls slumped on the ground in exhaustion.

“Are you tired, Ellen?” I asked, offering her my hand. Dazed eyes looked up at me.

“Ah, n-no. I’m totally fine!”

Despite her words, Ellen merely stared at my hand without moving.

“Is something wrong?”

“Oh! No, it’s just— It almost looked as if you were offering your hand to me, Lord Anos!”

“You may take this hand in yours.”

Overcome with surprise, Ellen fell flat on her back. Then she rolled herself across the ground, away from me. “Wh-What do I do?! Lord Anos’s hand! Lord Anos is offering me his hand! Do I take it with my right hand? Or do I use my left? Aaah, maybe I should use both! But if I do that, I won’t be able to wash both my hands ever again!”

After screaming out loud, Ellen rolled back up to me. “Um, wh-what should I do in this situation? I’ve experienced it many times in my fantasies, but those were all fantasies! They’d never come true in real li— Ah! Could this be a dream?!”

Hmm. It seemed she was still a little excitable from the battle.

“What happened in your dreams?”

“You, uh... You picked me up in your arms and cast healing magic on me.”

“I see.” I floated Ellen up with Fless and then caught her in my arms.

“Eek! It *is* a dream; I *must* be dreaming. Don’t wake up; don’t wake up, Ellen! Go to sleep for eternity!”

“Dreams are lies if they can’t come true.” I cast healing magic to relieve her fatigue. “Ellen, in my time, there was rarely any singing. Songs like the ones the fan union sing were unheard of. They’re silly, nonsensical, and insolent. Such songs would not exist without peace.”

Ellen listened to my words in amazement.

“But the song you sang this time was the best of all. I’ll be looking forward to your next song.”

Tears welled in Ellen’s eyes. “Okay...” she murmured. I put her down on her feet, and she stood by herself. She had already overcome her exhaustion.

“Awaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Right on cue, the other seven fan union girls gathered screaming around Ellen.

“Hold up! That isn’t fair! How come *you* get special treatment, Ellen?!”

“D-Don’t complain to me! I still think I’m dreaming!”

“Brace yourself!”

“That’s right! You know what’s about to happen, don’t you?”

“W-Wait a sec. Calm down, everyone. What’s with that scary look?!”

“That’s what you get for trying to pull a fast one on us! Girls, do it!”

“We’re on it!”

The fan union girls started taking turns in picking Ellen up bridal style, making a fuss about whose turn it was next and “indirect bridal carries.” After some time lifting one girl, they would announce, “I’ll be Lord Anos next!” and “I’ll be Ellen, then!” and all eight of them would swap positions. What an unfathomable sight.

With a sidelong glance at the girls’ bizarre antics, I continued on until I reached a girl in a bubble of holy water.

“Anos!”

“I’ve come to fulfill my promise, Eleonore.”

“Huh?”

I drew the Abolisher of Reason and thrust it into Eleonore’s bubble. Unlike Jerga, whose magic body had been crafted of Aske, Eleonore herself was humanoid magic. Piercing the bubble wouldn’t affect her source. The holy bubble disappeared along with the runes floating around her, allowing her bare feet to touch the ground.

“Whoa, you canceled the spell?”

“With this, you’re now my magic.”

Eleonore looked at me curiously.

“I considered destroying only the Eleonore spell, but doing so would cause you to lose your power. Instead, I took possession of the magic myself, so you won’t be abused anymore. You’re free now.”

“I see... Okay...” She looked down, blinking back her tears.

“That’s not all. It’ll be backbreaking work looking after ten thousand Zeshias. I’ll do something about that too.”

“Is this really happening?” Eleonore murmured, taking a step towards me. But the lingering effect of the earlier magic had left her legs weak, and she stumbled forward.

“This again, hm?” I caught her with my arm; then she hugged me tightly.

“Thank you, Anos. I love you...”

Sasha stared at her closely. “Misha, do you have anything to say?” she asked.

“Good for her.”

“Is that all?”

Misha tilted her head in question. “She’s naked?”

“Whoa, that’s right! I forgot. Anos, could you...?”

“Sure.” I used Iris to make Eleonore a set of the Hero Academy’s uniform.

“Thanks! You saved me,” Eleonore said, before taking a look around us. “But

you guys sure went all out here, huh?”

The ground was littered with craters and flattened trees, and a river had completely dried up. The Tola Forest was practically unrecognizable.

“Oh, that’s no problem. No one died,” I said.

“How do you know?”

“I kept an Eye out just to make sure.”

Eleonore’s eyes widened in surprise. Then she giggled. “You really are amazing, Anos.”

“There were only one or two people. Even so, there were a significant number of injuries.”

At that moment, Melheis caught up to us, lowering himself from the sky. “That won’t be a problem either. You may leave the rest to the Demon Elders.” He knelt before me. “We shall take care of the wounded and the aftermath of this battle. Please go ahead and rest first.”

“Hmm. Very well. Report to me if anything happens.”

“Understood.”

After bowing his head respectfully, Melheis took flight with Fless.

“Lay,” I called, showing him the one-shell necklace I’d taken from him. “Misa is treating the wounded in the Demon King Castle underground.”

“I gave it to her with all my resolution, so this feels kind of anticlimactic,” he said with a sheepish grin.

“Oh? Why don’t you just make it a regular proposal gift instead, then?” Sasha said teasingly.

“Congratulations,” Misha added plainly.

“I’m beat,” he chuckled, falling backwards onto the ground.

“Should the Hero of Legend be rolling on the ground like that?” I asked.

“I used the hell out of Evansmana,” he said, sitting up. “Even I’m tired after all that.”

“Speaking of which, do you still need this?” I tossed him Avos Dilhevia’s mask, which fell near his hand.

“Not anymore.” Lay destroyed it with the Sword of Intent. Avos Dilhevia was no longer needed. With Jerga gone from Aske, humans and demons had no more reason to fight. The world was now at peace.

“Do you have any other masks like that? Maybe one in another shape?” I asked, offering him a hand up.

“Another shape?” he repeated, looking puzzled. “That’s the only mask I have.”

“Is that so?”

The masked man at the Demon Sword Tournament had definitely worn a different mask than Lay wore. Several possibilities came to mind, but none of them were particularly pleasant.

“Anos?”

“Hmm. Well, that doesn’t have to be addressed today. More importantly, there’s one last enemy remaining.”

“One last enemy?” Lay asked, taking my hand.

“I went to war without telling mom.”

Lay grimaced. “You could lie.”

“I won’t run. Today is the day I convince mom that I’m the Demon King.” I pulled on his hand and helped him to his feet. “Fight with me. We’ll show her the strength of the Hero and Demon King.”

“But isn’t your mother a master of using the Abolisher of Reason?” Sasha said teasingly.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if she had seven sources,” Lay added.

“Could she also sever the Demon King’s fate?” Misha asked, tilting her head.

We shared a laugh and left the forest.

The last remaining enemy was waiting for me at home, but there was no need to fear. I had comrades who’d stick by me. Friends I could laugh with. Besides,

this battle wouldn't hurt anyone. It was the kind of battle that represented the peace that we had desired, created, and protected two thousand years ago.

The End.

Afterword

This entire series is the perfect opportunity to write whatever I want, but I wanted to write volume 3's Hero Academy arc no matter what. I can still remember all the excited comments when Hero Kanon finally appeared in the web novel.

With the way the story developed, some readers believed the series had reached its conclusion as of the end of this arc. Back when I'd first been writing it, I'd already had hopes for it being published one day, so I planned the plot with a break point every three volumes. As a result, the last chapter of this book has that sense of finality.

Nevertheless, there's still lots more I want to write about, so the story isn't ending here! You guys may have noticed a few unsolved mysteries, which we'll touch on when Anos's daily life at the academy resumes.

Quite a few readers have told me that the next chapter is their favorite, so please look forward to it! I'll do my best to revise the text into something even more enjoyable.

Come to think of it, during the story, Anos refers to Eleonore's you-know-what as the proof of the peace he had desired. I just want to take this space to clarify that what he desired was peace itself and not the "proof" before him. He wanted peace, and that peace just so happened to manifest itself before him in that particular shape. So please rest assured he was by no means emotionally moved after waiting two thousand years to see *that* proof of peace.

Speaking of symbols of peace, Shizumayoshinori drew an adorable Eleonore. I have no doubt the hero has gained many fans from the lovely illustrations that supplemented my poor descriptions. Thank you so much.

Further thanks goes to Yoshioka, my editor, whose efforts in this volume made it possible for me to rewrite some of the more confusing scenes and add some more fun parts to the story. I feel like it's become a much, much better story than it was when I wrote it alone. I can't thank you enough.

I also have an announcement to make: the manga adaptation of this series that started serialization alongside the release of volume 2 is now available to buy! Manga artist Kayaharuka has drawn a wonderful version of Anos and company, so please check it out if you have the time. You won't regret it!

Finally, to all my readers, I'd like to express my thanks from the bottom of my heart. I put my heart and soul in bringing something interesting to you, so please look forward to more from me in the future.

SHU

8 October 2018



story by †
SHU

illustrated by †
Shizumayoshinori

The Misfit of Demon King Academy

3



Misha Necron

Quiet and reserved classmate of Anos's and his first friend after his reincarnation.

Misa Illorogue

Anos's hardworking classmate who is all smiles despite her white-uniform status.

Lay Grandsley

A transfer student known as the Demon Swordmaster, who has a very easy going personality.



Anos Voldigoad

The reincarnated form of the composed, fearless, indomitable and confident Demon King of Tyranny.

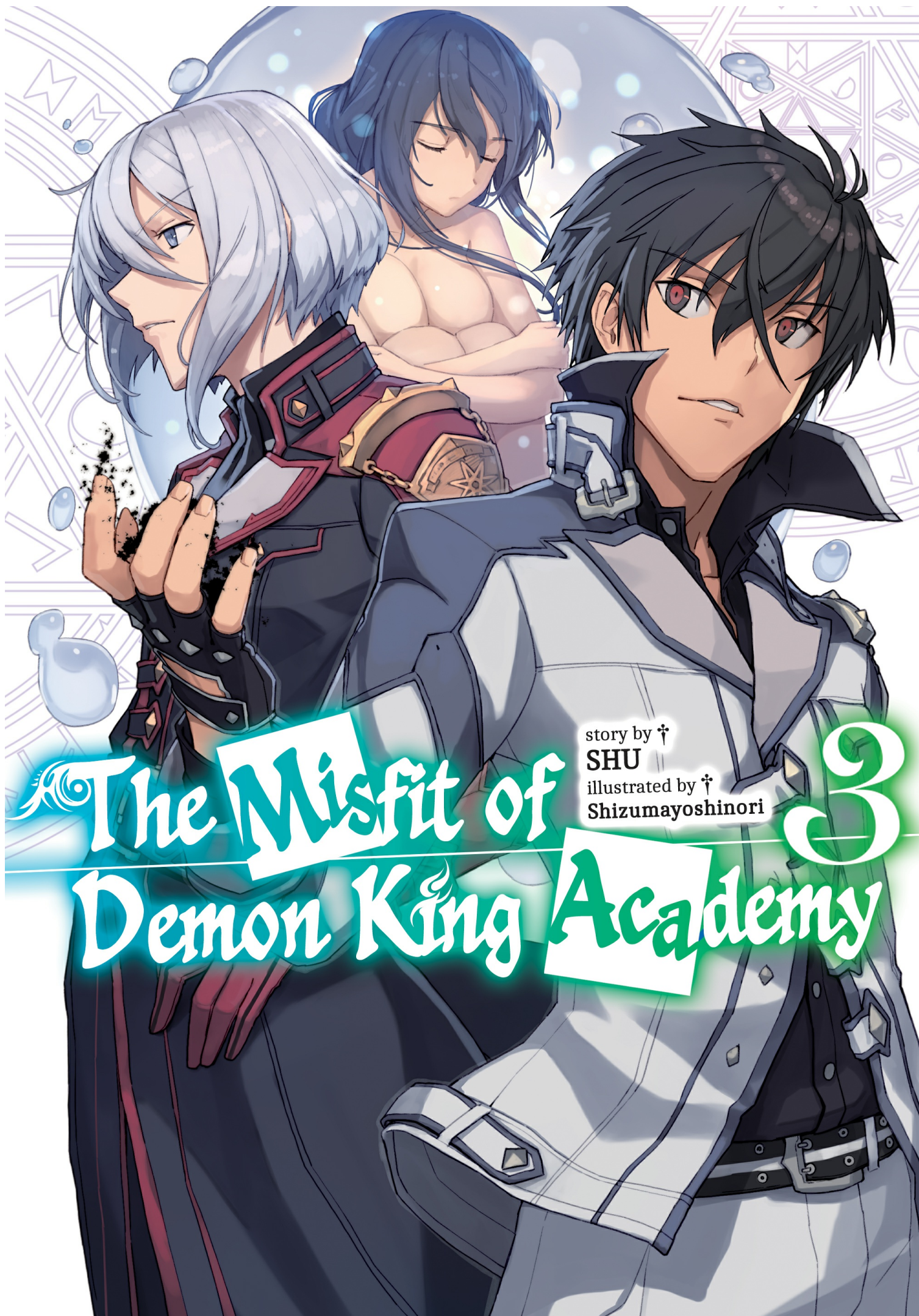
Eleonore Bianca

A motherly third-year student of the Hero Academy who excels at looking after others.

Sasha Necron

Misha's somewhat pushy but caring older twin sister.

“Tsk tsk. I’ll keep quiet about this today, but don’t go doing it again, okay?”



story by †

SHU

illustrated by †

Shizumayoshinori

The Misfit of Demon King Academy

3



Misha Necron

Quiet and reserved classmate of Anos's and his first friend after his reincarnation.

Misa Illorogue

Anos's hardworking classmate who is all smiles despite her white-uniform status.

Lay Grandsley

A transfer student known as the Demon Swordmaster, who has a very easy going personality.



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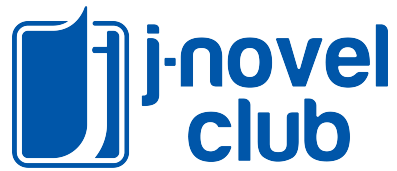
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The Misfit of Demon King Academy: Volume 3

by SHU

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Edited by Stephanie Buck

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