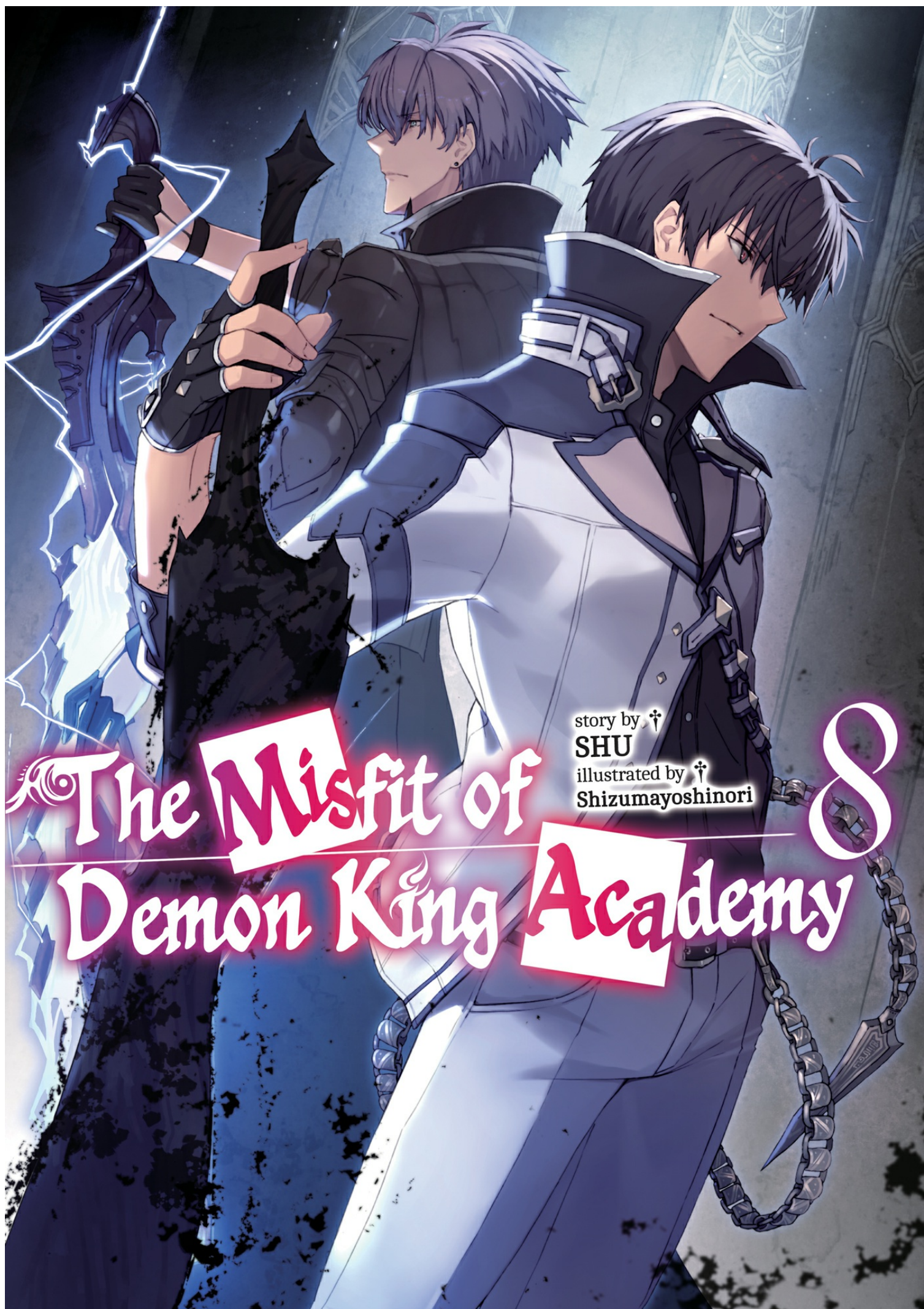


The Misfit of Demon King Academy 8

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THE MISFIT OF DEMON KING ACADEMY

Keywords

The Selected Eight

The title for the people chosen by the gods to undergo the Selection Trial. Each carries their own special Selection pledge jewel that allows their pledged god to descend into their body. As the title implies, there are meant to be eight participants in the Selection Trial.

Sorcerer King

The nickname of a powerful demon on par with the Four Evil Kings during the Mythical Age. The demon governed the land of Mithaze before Anos took over.

Phantom Knights

A combat group belonging to Gadeciola that was previously active aboveground during the Mythical Age. The members have discarded all attachments to the world and wander like ghosts of the dead, dedicating themselves to a single goal.

Azesion

The continent where humans live, separate to the demon nation of Dilhade. It is formed from multiple allied nations, including the royal capital of Gairadite.

Inzuel Empire

Once a powerful nation where humans that excelled in magic gathered, it is now only the nation of ruins and fortresses located to the west of Azesion.

Erial (Stars of Creation)

Stars that Militia, the Goddess of Creation, left behind. Anos's memories are said to be sealed in a total of five of them. It is unclear why Militia had the key to Anos's memories.

Anoss Rod

The name of the clubs that were sold in the city of Zehenburg (on the way to Aharthern). Completely normal wooden sticks that were crafted by ordinary craftsmen, containing no magic and no divine blessing.

MISFIT OF DEMON KING ACADEMY

Character Introduction

DEMON KING ACADEMY



✠ **Anos
Voldigoad**

The reincarnation of the man feared as the composed, fearless, indomitable, and confident Demon King of Tyranny.



✠ **Misha
Necron**

A quiet, reserved classmate and Anos's first friend after his reincarnation.



✠ **Sasha
Necron**

Misha's somewhat pushy but caring older twin sister.



✠ **Lay
Grandsley**

The reincarnation of the hero that formerly fought tooth and nail against the Demon King.



✠ **Misa Reglia**

The half-spirit, half-demon daughter of the Great Spirit Reno and the Demon King's right-hand man, Shin.



✠ **Eleonore
Bianca**

One of Anos's motherly and caring subordinates.



✠ **Zeshia
Bianca**

The youngest of the ten thousand Zeshias born from Eleonore.



✠ **Arcana**

One of the eight gods holding the Selection Trial. Her true identity is the blasphemous god once called the Goddess of Absurdity.



✠ **Shin Reglia**

The strongest demon swordsman, who was long ago hailed as the Demon King's right-hand man.

MISFIT OF DEMON KING ACADEMY

Character Introduction



PHANTOM KNIGHTS



Ceris Voldigoad

The commander of the Phantom Knights who claims to be Anos's father.

HERO ACADEMY



Emilia Ludwell

Anos's former homeroom teacher who has since been dispatched to the Hero Academy.



Ledriano Azeschen

The cool, calm, and polite hero chosen by Bailamente, Sword of Holy Harbor. Excels in defensive magic and holds the title of Guardian Knight of the Holy Water.



Raos Jilphor

The impulsive and wild-mannered hero chosen by Garriford, Sword of Holy Inferno. Excels in offensive magic and holds the title of Destruction Knight of the Holy Flame.



Heine Iorg

The childish and mischievous hero chosen by Zere, Sword of Sacred Land, and Zeleo, Sword of Sacred Earth. Excels in earth-moving magic and holds the title of Creation Knight of the Holy Land.



Eldmed Ditigeon

One of the great demons that ruled during the Mythical Age, also known as the "Conflagration King".



Anos Fan Union

A collective sworn to devote their lives to Anos out of love and insanity.

§ Prologue: Nameless Ghoul

Before the current ruler of demons was born, powerful demons like the Four Evil Kings and Midhaze's Sorcerer King warred for dominance.

Demons flaunted their strength to prove they were worthy of ruling Dilhade, fighting even with their own kin. Many even attempted to invade Azesion to expand their territory. With the flames raging both inside and outside the country, demons were forced to deal with the united humans, gods that lent them their power, and invading spirits all on their own.

What the humans and spirits feared the most was the demons banding together as one. The balance between Azesion's and Dilhade's forces was barely maintained thanks to internal strife. If there emerged a ruler among the demons that could unite them, the tide of battle would be turned instantly.

The Azesion army worked to continuously sow the seeds of doubt for each king that governed an area of Dilhade, plotting to use the Great War to their advantage by having the demons fight each other. While the demons made light of the humans, it was the humans who would ultimately decide the outcome of the war—and they were steadily moving towards success.

Of course, there were demons who noticed their intentions as well. But they neither belonged to a faction, nor followed a master, nor possessed territory, nor had names. They were a group of demons led by Ceris Voldigoad, and they eventually vanished from history.

What did they believe in? For what did they swing their swords? Only those who had seen those nameless, phantomlike knights in person had the faintest memory of them.

"E-Enemy attack! Enemy attack! Number of assailants unknown! Enemies cannot be seen either! The barrier is under magical attack from every direction!"

At the southernmost end of the Midhaze territory was a poisonous swamp

area.

The human soldier who detected the demon attacks sent Leaks to his fellow troops. They sharpened their Magic Eyes to the best of their abilities, but they couldn't see the enemies at all.

“Those damned demons... Just how did they find this place?”

Squad 17 of the Azesion army, led by Hero Graham and supported by the gods, had set up a base in Dilhade. Their location should have been hidden from the demons, yet something invisible had suddenly attacked them out of the blue.

“There's nothing to fear,” Hero Graham said. “They're most likely using Lynel and Najira magic to conceal themselves. Even if they're invisible, they won't be able to do much while casting those spells; we have Linorolos's divine protection on our side. If the demons want to break through our barriers, they will have to reveal themselves first. And I, Hero Graham, have the Divine Protection Sword in my hand. We will not be defeated!”

He stepped forwards while sending his comrades words of encouragement. Lorostalma, the Sword of Divine Protection, shone in his hand. It was a holy sword that had received the blessing of the Barrier God Linorolos. With the barrier magic of a hero, the Sword of Divine Protection, and the Barrier God Linorolos standing by Graham's side, they would be safe. They could survive even if the world ended.

The light of Aske gathered around Hero Graham, solidifying their defenses further.

But just then came a voice, saying, “*Veneziara.*”

A lone demon appeared before Squad 17 of the Azesion army. He had purple hair, green eyes, and wore a long coat. His name was Ceris Voldigoad.

“The demon has revealed himself...”

“His magic wavelength does not match that of the king class demons.”

At those words, the soldiers clearly exhaled in relief.

From the intel they had gathered from their enemies, their forces were

particularly wary of a number of demons, collectively referred to as “king class demons.” Ceris wasn’t among their numbers, so for all intents and purposes he should have been easy to deal with.

Ceris walked straight towards the barrier, quietly moving Gauddigemon, the Sword of a Thousand Bolts, in his right hand. He held it up and pointed it at the spherical magic circle before him.

There was more than one magic circle. The Veneziara he had cast formed nine spherical magic circles of possibility.

“*Veneziara*,” Ceris said again, stabbing the Sword of a Thousand Bolts into one of the circles.

At the same time, nine blades of possibility speared through nine spherical magic circles. Ear-shattering thunder roared, with purple lightning scattering across the entire swamp. The sky rumbled and the ground shook, erasing all life through the release of magic energy alone.

Purple lightning crackled across the ground and drew a giant magic circle surrounding the hero’s barrier. The barrier was strong enough to defend an entire nation from destruction. Ceris raised the real and potential Swords of a Thousand Bolts into the air, so that a total of ten swords released thin purple bolts of lightning up into the sky.

“*Ravia Neold Galvarizen*,” he said.

A giant bolt of purple lightning fell from the sky, and like a pillar, momentarily connected the earth and sky before transforming into an enormous sword.

The Sword of a Thousand Bolts swung down, making a great tearing sound that resounded through the air like the sky was being split apart, and with it, disaster struck. The sky above Dilhade turned purple, and a few seconds later, the entire swamp was blown away. The elites of the Azesion army and their barrier were completely annihilated, leaving only destruction behind.

The only survivor was Hero Graham. Lorostalma had crumbled into burnt and blackened pieces. He had barely managed to survive thanks to the combined forces of the Barrier God, the Sword of Divine Protection, and the power of Aske.

Ceris approached Graham, who was lying face down on the ground. A dozen or so demons wearing a similar coat to his appeared behind him.

Due to the Lynel and Najira that was cast on them, the magic particles surrounding them made their figures blurry.

“If you have that much power... Why...” Graham muttered.

Ceris stood before the hero without speaking. He pointed Gauddigemon at Graham.

“Why haven’t you joined those warring for dominance?” Graham asked.

All of the infamous demons claimed their own territories. As the leader of the squad tasked with gathering intelligence, Graham had investigated all the famous demons of the king class. But he had no information on the man in front of him.

“Who are you people?” Graham asked.

“The dead need no names,” Ceris replied quietly. He lifted the Sword of a Thousand Bolts. “But those on their way to hell can engrave this name in their memory: Isith of the Phantom Knights—”

“Halt.”

Jet-black flames rose from the ground. From within the flames emerged another flame in the shape of a person—a demon. His whole body was ablaze beneath the robe he wore. He was Bomiras Helos, the Sorcerer King of Midhaze.

“You are in Midhaze, a territory under my jurisdiction. Killing for fun will only cause trouble. Wouldn’t you agree?” he said.

Ceris stared at the Sorcerer King Bomiras silently.

“Now, there’s no need to get angry,” Bomiras continued, “I just have two or three questions for that human over there. You shouldn’t mind that much, no?”

In place of an answer, Ceris lowered his sword in agreement.

“Answer me, Hero Graham, or the spies you sneaked into my castle yesterday will lose their lives,” Bomiras said, speaking from his fiery mouth. “The number

of spies in Midhaze Castle and the number of soldiers here don't add up to the number of people who entered Dilhade. Where are the rest?"

He drew the magic circle for Zecht.

"If you answer me honestly, I will spare their lives. You see, I'm a pacifist at heart. All I want is your people out of Midhaze."

What Bomiras said was recorded word for word in the Zecht. Graham's comrades and holy sword were lost, and there were no reinforcements to be expected on enemy land. He had no other choice but to sign it.

"My comrades are near the Tseilon family settlement," he said after signing it.

"I see, I see. The women of the Tseilon family love to behead humans and steal their faces, knowledge, and magic. It's only natural to resent them."

The Tseilon bloodline was a rare headless race of demons. The entire race was female, and their queen was the only one who gave birth.

"I am an understanding king. Your resentment for demons is most reasonable to me. I do not fault you for targeting the Tseilon family, hero," the Sorcerer King said calmly. "This is a good opportunity. How about we discuss things, from demon to human? Come to my castle. Your comrades are there too. During your stay, I will guarantee the lives of the humans in the Tseilon settlement."

Graham considered things for a while. But there was only one choice to save himself and his comrades.

"Very well," he agreed.

At that moment, Ceris silently swung the Sword of a Thousand Bolts. Thunder roared and purple lightning flashed, but the Sorcerer King Bomiras caught the blade with his right hand of fire.

"I already said this place is under my jurisdiction, Isith. Unfortunately, as the Zecht is signed already— Gwaaaaaaaaaah!"

The Sorcerer King's arm of fire was sliced off by the Sword of a Thousand Bolts.

"Ah..."

Ceris proceeded to use Gauddigemon to mercilessly behead the Hero Graham and destroy his head with purple lightning.

“What are you—”

Just as Sorcerer King raised his voice, the Sword of a Thousand Bolts stabbed through him as well. Purple lightning spread across his body of flames, and Ceris swung his sword all the way through. Bomiras’s body scattered, but he was still alive and well.

“Fine, fine. I get it,” Bomiras grumbled. “Either way, that human is dead now. I have nothing to gain from fighting with you.”

The scattered flames flickered but didn’t return to the shape of a demon.

“Good grief, you truly are an indiscriminate walking disaster. You are indeed the most insane among all demons. As expected of the last Voldigoad doomed for destruction. That heart of yours has long perished.”

With that, the Sorcerer King Bomiras departed.

§ 1. Filial Piety Picnic

It was my first break in a long time. After dealing with the aftermath of the falling dome and closing negotiations with the underground world, I was finally able to relax in my room.

That is, until someone knocked on my door.

“Brother?” Arcana said, opening the door and poking her head inside. “Mother and father say it’s almost time to go.”

“Go where?”

Despite being completely out of the loop, I went with Arcana downstairs. Mom waited for us with a large basket under her arm while dad stood beside her with a hamper of newly forged swords on his back.

“Oh, he’s finally here. Let’s go, Anos!” dad declared without any explanation.

“Where are we going, dad?” I asked.

“Isn’t it obvious? Just take a look at this weather!” Dad pointed outside the window. It was a clear sunny day. “It’s the perfect weather for a picnic. You’ve finally got a day off too. We’re going to close the shop and have a fun family day out enjoying nature!”

“Enjoying nature sounds fine, but...” I looked at the large number of swords on his back. Judging from their make, they were all swords my dad had forged himself. “What are the swords for?”

Dad chuckled, as though he had been waiting for that question.

“Why is your father bringing swords to a picnic, you say? Are you that curious, Anos?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well, you see,” dad twirled around and posed with the austere expression of a veteran blacksmith. “It’s about time you learned from watching your father’s back.”

He casually turned his back towards me. Ultimately, it seemed that he didn't have a particular reason at all.

"Sorry about the sudden picnic, Anos. You've been so busy with work, you probably wanted to rest properly, didn't you?" mom said with a worried look.

I couldn't refuse that face.

"A picnic every now and then doesn't sound too bad," I said.

Mom beamed from ear to ear. "Thank goodness! I packed us all delicious lunch boxes, so look forward to it!" she said.

We locked up and left the house.

"Where are we going?" Arcana asked after we had walked for a while.

Dad was the one who answered.

"I found the perfect spot for a picnic the other day," he said proudly. "Maybe you've heard of it before. It's a hill southwest of Midhaze. It has a great view that overlooks the city."

What dad described was the exact place my subordinates from two thousand years ago had claimed as their final resting place. But all the grave markers were gone now, so it was just a hill.

"Shall I use Gatom to teleport us there?" I offered.

"Tsk tsk tsk," dad said, waving his finger. "Listen up, Anos. Walking in the sun with a spring in your step is all part of the picnic experience. Just like this."

He started jumping with both feet, creating quite the spring in his step.

"We're also going to meet up with the others first," mom added. "Ah! There they are."

She waved in the direction of the Midhaze gate. "Misha! Sasha!"

At the sound of mom's voice, Sasha curtsied elegantly and Misha waved back. They were both wearing casual clothes.

"While you were asleep, I went out shopping and ran into Misha and Sasha. So I invited them along!" mom explained.

Misha nodded. "Today is the perfect picnic weather."

"Forget the weather, what's going on there?" Sasha asked, looking over at the suspicious man bouncing with swords on his back—as in, my dad.

"Did you forget, Sasha?" I said.

"Forget what?"

"That's the picnic etiquette for this era."

"No it isn't!" Sasha yelled. "If that was truly the etiquette for this era, there'd be suspicious men bouncing all over the place in this weather!"

I pictured the sight in my mind. "Bwa ha ha. What a funny thing to say."

"I wasn't the one who said it! *You* said it first!" she screeched, marching up to me.

"I was kidding. Even I can tell that it's dad's original etiquette."

Misha tilted her head. "Original etiquette?"

"If it's original, then it's not etiquette," Sasha mumbled, dropping the topic with an exasperated look at my dad.

We proceeded to leave Midhaze and climb the hill to our destination. The sunlight wasn't too bright, and there was a comfortable breeze caressing us as we walked. This was indeed the ideal weather for a picnic.

"Mm, it's such a nice day," Sasha said as she stretched.

Arcana wandered around for a bit before crouching down and staring at some flowers.

"Something rare?" Misha asked, poking her head over Arcana's shoulder from behind.

"This flower doesn't exist underground," Arcana replied. "Plants are hard to grow in the underground to begin with, and there are very few flowers."

Misha gazed at the flowers with Arcana for a while.

"Want to make a flower crown?" she eventually suggested.

"How do you do that?" Arcana asked.

Misha took her hand. “Come here.”

She led her to a patch with more flowers and began to demonstrate how to make a flower crown. Arcana’s hands moved awkwardly, but under Misha’s gentle guidance she slowly formed a flower crown. The smile on Arcana’s face was nothing short of heartwarming.



“For some reason... It feels like Arcana’s nicer to Misha,” Sasha mumbled, watching them in the distance.

“She’s just responding to how you snap at her all the time.”

“I don’t snap at her...all the time...”

She trailed off towards the end of her words. Her mind seemed to spring up examples even as she protested.

“How’s this?” Arcana asked Misha.

“Very good,” Misha replied.

A warm breeze blew over the hill, while two girls sat among a patch of flowers, making flower crowns together. With such a beautiful backdrop, they made quite the tranquil sight.

But I already knew that this peace wouldn’t last for long.

“Huumph!” a rough voice shouted, drawing attention. “Hraaagh!”

Among the grunts was the sound of a sword whistling through the air. Naturally, it came from dad, who had finally begun his demonstration.

“Raaaaaaaaaagh!” he roared, swinging his sword with all his might.

He clearly looked like he wanted someone to strike a conversation with him. If left alone like this, he would eventually tire himself out.

“Oh, this, Anos?” he said, even though I hadn’t said anything yet. “I’m checking each sword one by one to see if they swing well! I’ve always confirmed their quality this way!”

Fine. I suppose I could play along with him as a show of filial piety.

“What difference does it make if you swing it or not?” I asked.

“Why, it’s obvious!”

Dad thought for a while.

“It’s that—you know,” he said, sounding troubled. “Well, yeah... The meaning behind swinging the sword, you say...”

He pondered over the philosophical question for a while.

“I’m still searching for that answer myself,” he concluded.

So he was still in the middle of learning.

“But there’s one thing I can say for sure,” dad added.

“What’s that?”

“When I do this, it feels like I’ve finished a big job.”

Dad lifted an index finger and thrust a fist forwards. *So it’s for his own satisfaction.*

“You know, Anos. There was something I always wanted to do if I had a son.”

He struck a dramatic pose, stabbing his sword into the ground and leaning his weight on it, his back turned towards me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I want us to test swinging the swords I made, and refine their souls together. Then, once we’re done, I’ll say the words—”

Dad continued rambling, lost in his own world.

““You’ve become a man now, son.””

He twirled into another pose.

““F-Father...” he said.

He also took on the role of the son in this scenario.

““There’s nothing else I can teach you. From now on, you walk your own path.””

Dad rapidly changed from one pose to another, playing both roles by himself.

““Ah, I’ve lived a good life.””

Dad fell over.

““F-Father! Father, nooo!””

Why did he suddenly die?

“Well, that was only if my son said he wanted to inherit the blacksmith. Ha ha,” dad laughed, ending his skit. “You’ve become a wonderful Demon King,

and a far better son than I could have imagined.”

He drew his sword, with keen emotion.

“There was nothing for me to teach you from the beginning, and I’m far more proud of you than the son I pictured.”

After joking around until now, dad had a serious look on his face, as though this statement was what he had wanted to say all along.

“Dad,” I said, sending my magic out with a flick of a finger.

One of the swords in his hamper flew through the air towards me.

Dad looked at me in confusion. I smiled.

“Let’s do it. Though the Demon King doesn’t need to do the work of a blacksmith, learning to refine the soul may be useful someday,” I said.

Dad’s eyes widened before he beamed with joy. He was almost moved to tears.

“Hey now, don’t forget these are to be sold. We’re just testing them!” he said.

“Of course.”

I drew the sword from its sheath.

“But, you know,” dad said, walking over to face me, “now that we’re actually doing it, I feel a little shy about it... But it *is* something I always wanted to do if I had a son...”

Dad grinned bashfully as he held his sword ready. Then, he yelled in a loud voice, “Now is the time to release my alter identity!”

“You call that shy?!”

Sasha, who had been watching over our conversation until now, couldn’t help but interrupt at that. Arcana and Misha also looked over out of curiosity, flower crowns on their heads.

“I bear you no malice, but you must die for the sake of peace,” dad said, solemnly.

“He’s got a new background story now?!” Sasha screeched.

She had a point. Wasn't he meant to be a father teaching his son how to refine the soul of a sword?

"So you want to know who I am—you want to know the name of the King of the Oblivion Sword."

Dad made it blatantly clear that he wanted to be asked who he was. He had even given half the answer already. King of the Oblivion Sword was dad's nickname in his teenage fantasies—Gardelahypt, the King of the Oblivion Sword.

Hmm. I suppose this is another chance to be filial. It was the duty of a son to go along with his father.

"Yeah. Who are you?" I asked.

"Hah!"

Dad laughed. This was the moment he had been waiting for to announce his name.

"I am no one worth naming!"

Incomprehensible.

"Now come at me with whatever arrows or magic you have!"

Dad raised his sword.

"*Jio Graze*," I said, holding my hand up at dad.

Of course, I didn't actually activate the spell—I merely sent a few magic particles over.

"Schwish!" dad yelled, pretending to slice through the *Jio Graze*.

"Strong..." Misha mumbled.

Sasha shot her an exasperated look.

"*Egil Grone Angdroa*."

"Shwoosh!"

Dad easily cut through the *Egil Grone Angdroa*, a spell capable of destroying the world.

“That’s just ridiculous. How strong would he be?” Sasha grumbled, unable to overlook that level of make-believe.

“Gilieriam Naviem.”

“Graaagh! I, Gardelahypt, the King of the Oblivion Sword stand before you!”

Dad—who named himself in the end—swung his sword down as I took seven steps forwards, passing him.

“Gah...!” dad cried, falling to his knees in feigned defeat. “Y-You’ve become strong, Anos. There’s nothing left...for me to teach you...”

He fell forwards, collapsing on the hill. Silence fell over the area.

“Um...” Sasha said hesitantly. “Is it over? He said this was something he wanted to do if he had a son, but all he did was play out a teenage fantasy... Is that really all he wanted?”

But Sasha’s words were carried away by a warm breeze cresting over the hill, never to be answered.

§ 2. Arcana's Decision

We sat on the hill, eating the sandwiches mom had made.

The sandwiches appeared normal at a glance, but the bread was awfully soft. The fluffy texture attacked my mouth the moment my teeth sank into it, conveying its deliciousness before I could even taste it. It was mom's homemade bread recipe. There were various fillings like raw ham and cheese, tomato and lettuce, but my favorite was the omelet. The faint scent of butter, with the perfect amount of salt, and the tasty flavor of the fried egg leaped on my tongue, all cushioned by the soft bread.

The clincher to the flavor was the abyss of the omelet—in other words, the sauce. I didn't know what she mixed into the egg before frying it, but it tasted good enough to melt my tongue. I ate omelet sandwich after omelet sandwich to explore that abyss, but I wasn't able to identify the sauce before finishing my share.

"Anos," Misha said.

She held out her omelet sandwich to me.

"Trade for tomato?" she asked.

"No need to worry about me, Misha. The omelet is amazing."

"I *like* tomato."

Since she was that insistent, I had no reason to refuse.

"Then I shall gladly trade," I accepted.

Misha smiled happily. We traded sandwiches, and I resumed my investigation of the omelet's abyss.

"There's something I want to tell you," Arcana said to me after we were mostly done eating. "It's about Gadeciola."

Gadeciola was currently without a king. Overlord Veafare had been handed over to the Jiordal Church for attempting to collapse the dome, and was now

imprisoned in the jail of the Jiorhaze Cathedral. Without Ceris around, the rest of the Phantom Knights had vanished, and the magic barrier around the nation was dispelled.

“Mom, dad, we’re going to discuss something important for a bit,” I said.

We moved a short distance away from my parents. We still had some sandwiches left, so I took the basket along with me.

“The children the Overlord left behind are still in Gadeciola. They do not believe in the gods—some even detest them. In an ideal world, there would be no grudges, but it seems Gadeciola is still necessary to the underground world.”

Like Arcana said, Agatha’s and Jiordal’s teachings wouldn’t be able to save everyone. It would be best to still have a place for those without faith in the gods.

“Since the nation was originally made by me,” Arcana said, “I’m considering returning to Gadeciola as the Goddess of Absurdity.”

“As a draconid?” Misha asked softly.

“No, as a god. I promised to bring the Selection Trial to an end, and I will not break that promise.”

If I had become the victor of the Selection Trial, the orders that Arcana possessed would have become mine, freeing her from the role as the proxy of the gods. That had been her original goal.

“Bringing the Selection Trial to an end doesn’t mean you *can’t* return to being a draconid,” I pointed out.

But Arcana shook her head. “I know I’ve kept you waiting for a long time, but I’ve made my decision.”

She looked straight into my eyes without any hesitation.

“For the very first Selection Trial, Militia, the Goddess of Creation, chose me as her Selected Eight. She knew I had a hatred within me that couldn’t be erased. She knew I couldn’t be saved, and offered me her hand anyway.”

Sasha listened on with a serious expression, while Misha watched over Arcana gently.

“But I didn’t listen to Militia after making our pact. My heart was a prisoner to hatred, and all I wanted was peace. I drifted towards whatever was the easiest option. I believed her to be an enemy and killed her.”

Arcana’s tone was full of regret.

“But her order continued to watch over me. In her last moments, she said this to me: Someday, the Demon King, the one who can incinerate your burning hatred, will come to this land.”

“She meant Anos, right?” Sasha asked.

Arcana nodded.

“Militia believed that he would save me. Maybe that’s why she let me kill her. If the Moon of Creation remained with me, he would wonder if I was the Goddess of Creation and show interest in me. Her order is what led me this far.”

The Moon of Creation was what had drawn Arcana to me. Perhaps that had been Militia’s message for me to save her.

“I think I knew that all along. When I hid my memories and hatred with the Moon of Creation and became the nameless god, I wanted to be someone like Militia. Someone who saved those who couldn’t be saved. That was my idea of what a god should be.”

“Which was why you offered your hand to that helpless man and made him your Selected Eight?” I asked.

“Yes. But I couldn’t save him in the end,” Arcana said regretfully. “I didn’t want him to be sacrificed to the Royal Dragon and become part of a future dragonborn. I thought forcing him into a position of honor would be the greatest pain for him.”

As someone who had gone through the exact same experience, Arcana had made the decision to kill him herself.

“I still don’t know if that was the right choice. But I hope his source makes a natural reincarnation.”

“I actually have a question about that,” Sasha wondered out loud. “Do all sources go through reincarnation like the spell Syrica if they’re not destroyed

outright?”

“The reincarnation magic Syrica merely accelerates the natural rebirth process. All sources reincarnate, they just do so in different shapes, with different powers and without their memories. But perhaps that could be considered a kind of destruction in and of itself” I answered.

“Hmm. If they’re that different, it doesn’t really feel like a reincarnation,” Sasha said.

“Even then, it’s the same source. It’s possible something could still remain,” I replied.

Sasha tilted her head. “Something?”

“No idea.”

There was no way to answer that. No matter the era, it was always a small relief to know those who passed away could live happily in their next life.

“If I were to become a proxy of god, I wanted to be like Militia,” Arcana said. “I hoped to be like her. But my hatred for the people of the underground and their gods kept tormenting me.”

As the Goddess of Absurdity, she held both an immense hatred for the people who betrayed her, and a deep wish to live like the Goddess of Creation, someone that had tried to help her until the very end. Those two emotions had clashed within her.

“In the end, Militia gave me a place with you. She found me my salvation. That’s why I want to protect my role as the proxy of god.”

And so, Arcana had decided thus: She wanted to protect Gadeciola so that those who lost faith in the gods would always have somewhere to go.

“Until Militia returns, I will act as her proxy.”

“What happened to Militia in the end anyway?” Sasha asked.

“Militia tried to reincarnate. The weapon I used to kill her—Gauddigemon, the Sword of a Thousand Bolts—had a spell cast on it that interfered with reincarnation. Apparently, it would make her reincarnate into something else.”

Sasha looked confused. “Apparently?”

“Ceris’s doing?” Misha asked.

“Yes. Ceris’s magic interfered with Militia’s reincarnation. But I don’t think he was able to seal her reincarnation completely. Militia would have been forced to reincarnate into her least desirable form.”

Misha tilted her head. “Like what?”

“I don’t know,” Arcana answered. “That’s just what Ceris told me.”

“Hmm. Would it have been better to leave Ceris alive? We could’ve asked him questions that way,” Sasha mumbled.

“No,” Misha stated firmly.

“Well, what’s done is done. As long as she’s reincarnated, it doesn’t matter what form she’s in,” I said.

“What about the Selection Trial?” Misha asked.

“Of course, it won’t just be left as is,” I answered. “The feelings of the underground people are holding up the dome through the Sky Pillar Sword right now, but the power of destruction may be strengthened by the Selection Trial.”

“The Selection Trial will end if the order of Elrolarielm, the God of Balance within Arcana is destroyed, right?”

Misha nodded at Sasha’s question.

“But the balance of all things will be lost,” she said.

Velevim, the Sky Pillar Sword that supported the dome, was also under the influence of both Militia’s and the God of Balance’s orders too. The logic of the world was formed through a complex blend of different orders.

“In other words, the Selection Trial just has to be destroyed without destroying the God of Balance,” I stated.

“You make it sound easy, but how can that be done? The Selection Trial *is* the order of the God of Balance. Is there a way to choose what to destroy like that?” Sasha asked.

“Militia tried to lead the Selection Trial to its end. If Arcana hadn’t stopped

her, she would have succeeded,” I said.

Sasha made a sound of realization. “Oh!”

“What was Militia trying to do, Arcana?” I asked.

Arcana hung her head in thought for a while.

“She was using Altiertonoa, the Moon of Creation. She said the moon would swallow the God of Balance, and both their orders would fall into a deep sleep,” she eventually said.

So the order of the Goddess of Creation would fall asleep with the order of the God of Balance, huh?

“Elrolarielm said if order was destroyed, the end of the world would become inevitable.”

Militia had tried to destroy the entire order. Did she have a reason to believe the world would be safe even if she did so?

“What else?” I asked.

“I can’t remember anymore. I think that was all.”

Well, there was no way for Arcana to know the answer to everything.

“Then let’s search for Militia’s traces first,” I said. “It’s very likely Ceris may have known what she was trying to do.”

“Going to see Veaf flare?” Misha asked.

“Yeah,” I confirmed. “Golroana’s in Jiordal right now too. The God of Traces has perished, but the Book of Traces may be able to show us some of the past. They should have reached a lull in the reconstruction work by now.”

I threw the rest of my sandwich in my mouth and turned to mom.

“Sorry mom, but we’re going to head underground now.”

“Huh? Now?!” mom exclaimed. “But it’s your break! Did someone call for you?”

“I wasn’t called, no.”

“Then... How about resting for a little bit longer? It’s so rare for you to get

time off..."

Mom's shoulders fell sadly. It hurt a little to see that.

"Don't trouble Anos like that, Izabella. There are a lot of circumstances behind a man's work," dad said, walking over to me.

"Isn't that right?" he whispered with a knowing wink.

"Were you listening?" I asked.

"Yeah, I heard most of it. It'd be best to move fast. We can always have another picnic another day."

Hmm. That settled it.

"But Anos, as your father, I have one concern about what I just heard," dad said, expression dead serious. "That Militia you mentioned is like, you know... It sounded like you uh, *knew* her in your past, right?"

"Yeah."

At that, dad flinched with his whole body, and looked at me while trembling.

"All right. Your father gets it. Don't worry, I'll explain things to your mother. Since she tends to jump to conclusions easily."

It *would* be troublesome if she thought I was going to another divorce trial, but...

"Go, Anos. Sometimes a man has to settle things with his past."

I had my apprehensions about leaving it to dad too. Well, it didn't matter that much.

"I'll leave it to you, dad."

"No worries! Just remember I believe in you! I believe you'll do things right! I'll be here waiting—it's a man's promise!"

Mom watched dad send me off with a confused look.

I returned to Sasha and the others and held out my hand.

"Let's go," I said.

"Are you sure you should leave them like that?" Sasha asked worriedly.

“It’s fine, I’m used to dad saying strange things now.”

“Being used to it doesn’t prevent misunderstandings, you know.”

I ignored Sasha’s muttering and drew the magic circle for Gatom, teleporting us away.

As our vision turned white, I heard mom’s voice.

“Whaaaaaaaaaat?! Arcana isn’t actually Anos’s little sister but his illegitimate child?!”

Father. What exactly did you hear us say?

§ 3. The Wandering Dead

The capital of Jiordal, Jiorhaze.

We descended in front of the cathedral. Since it was impossible to teleport directly to the underground, we had dug through the dome and flown over to Jiordal.

Bishop Mirano greeted us out front. I had sent notice of our business beforehand using Leaks. He led us to the Shrine of Sacred Song and placed a hand against the grand door.

“Pope Golroana, I have brought Demon King Anos,” Mirano said.

The door slowly opened, revealing a man with an androgynous face: Pope Golroana.

“My apologies for interrupting your prayer,” I said.

“Not at all. I heard you wanted to question Veaf flare?”

“And borrow the Book of Traces, if possible.”

“Understood.”

We followed Golroana through the Shrine of Sacred Song. Eventually, a staircase came into view, from which dragon cries could be heard. Golroana walked down those stairs.

“What condition is she in?”

“She’s lost her sanity, I’m afraid. She spends all day cradling Ceris’s head in her arms while muttering to herself. We’ve tried to speak to her, but she doesn’t reply at all.”

“Hmm. It sounds like we won’t be able to ask her about Ceris,” Sasha said with a troubled frown.

“Don’t worry, we can just make her sane again. It’s simple,” I said.

“What, will we take Ceris’s head from her and threaten her with it?” Sasha

asked.

At that, Mirano spoke up. “We’ve tried that too, but she merely screams for it to be returned. She’s too crazed to listen to us—in the state she’s in, we cannot get her to atone for her sins against the dome. It may be possible to consider that she herself was a victim, controlled by Ceris.”

Golroana came to a stop before a particularly sturdy door. “She’s in here.”

He drew a magic circle, and the door slowly opened. We entered the room behind him.

“Huh?” Sasha let out a sound of surprise.

Misha blinked blankly.

Half the room was a jail, but there was only a lump of ash within the cell. There was no sign of Veafare or Ceris’s head anywhere.

“What is this? This can’t be right,” Mirano said in a fluster. He looked around the jail with his Magic Eyes. “The report from this morning was normal! And without the power of the Supreme Dragon, Veafare should have no means of escaping.”

Priests and holy knights were stationed everywhere in the Jiordal Cathedral. A prison break would have been extremely difficult for her to pull off.

“Can the follower who checked on her be trusted?” Arcana asked. It was a reasonable question to ask.

“Everyone here is a genuine Jiordal follower, and only Pope Golroana and myself have the key to this cell. There shouldn’t be anyone who can open it by force either,” Mirano explained.

The cell was protected by multiple magic circles that, together, formed a barrier that shut out the outside world.

“It isn’t impossible for the cell to be broken into. Someone must have come to save her,” I said.

Misha tilted her head. “Who?”

“Right?” Sasha said. “The forbidden soldiers were told she turned their bodies

into hosts for the Supreme Dragon. I honestly don't think she has any allies left..."

I observed the cell with my magic Eyes as well.

"Golroana, are you able to check what happened here by searching the traces?"

"Without the God of Traces, the power of the Book of Traces is limited. The events of the past may be reenactable if the trace to be investigated can be identified."

"That should be easy," I said, pointing at the space between the iron bars. "There's a point here where the space was distorted and returned to normal. It should be safe to assume it's a trace of someone using magic to rescue Veaf flare."

"Got it."

Golroana took the Book of Traces out of a storage circle and opened it while glaring at the spot I pointed at.

"Through the deity, the past is but pages of a tome. O God of Traces, let us trace the past that has been recorded here, and witness your miracle. Book of Traces, Second Movement, *Ziaraph*."

Through the Book of Traces, we could observe what had happened in the jail cell prior to this moment. Inside the jail cell the faint image of Veaf flare coalesced. She muttered quietly to herself, Ceris's head clutched in her arms. Ceris's beheaded body also appeared in the corner, magically preserved to prevent him from rotting.

"He will come... Without a doubt... He will come get me," she muttered, crazed, her mind fixed on a single thought. Indeed, she looked as if she had gone mad.

"Even after falling into such a state, she still yearns for love. What a pitiful woman," a voice said.

Veaf flare turned in our direction. A black mist appeared on the other side of the bars, slowly forming the shape of a demon with six horns, and another

demon wearing an oversized eye patch.

They were Kaihilaam the Cursed King and Aeges the Netherworld King, respectively. Aeges thrust the Crimson Blood Spear Dehiddatem in the direction of the jail cell. The tip of the spear vanished, reappearing before Veafare and stabbing into her.

“Gyah...!”

It left no wound. The alternate dimension swallowed her, still holding Ceris’s head, and the next moment, Veafare was outside of the cell.

“Did you come for me...?” Veafare asked fearfully. “Boldinos is calling for me, isn’t he?”

“Boldinos doesn’t exist anymore,” the Netherworld King said clearly.

“That’s not true. He’ll return for sure. He promised.”

“Not every promise in this world is fulfilled. It would be foolish to wait for someone who won’t return. Forget the dead and live your new life.”

“He said he would see me later,” Veafare insisted. “I’m the only person Boldinos would never lie to.”

The Netherworld King sighed. The sharp look in his single eye seemed to soften a little.

“A world where the living dead must wander is not a world worth living in,” he replied.

Kaihilaam’s black mist covered Veafare, making her vanish. At the same time, the mist began to cover the Cursed King and Netherworld King’s feet.

“Kaihilaam,” Aeges announced, “you are no longer needed from here on.”

Aeges thrust his spear into the cell once again. The tip stabbed into Ceris’s body and burned it into ashes using Gresde.

“The dead shall vanish into the past with the dead.”

But Kaihilaam frowned at the Netherworld King’s words.

“Shut up. I haven’t repaid my debt to you,” he said, marching up to Aeges and pointing a finger in his face. “I said I would chase you to the end of hell to repay

you, and I will do exactly that.”

The Netherworld King closed his mouth for a moment, then sighed.

“Why must I be surrounded by selfish fools wherever I go?”

Black mist covered the two of them. Their figures blurred with static and vanished—the Book of Traces’s effect had ended.

“This is as far as the book can trace,” Golroana said.

Bishop Mirano immediately lowered his head at us.

“M-My sincerest apologies. I thought the security here was flawless, but I didn’t even notice such an invasion.”

“You are not at fault here. No one thought anyone would be willing to save Veaf flare.”

Veaf flare hadn’t had any political value to Jiordal either.

“But I’ve caused the Demon King unneeded trouble...”

“Don’t worry about it. If you *had* noticed the Cursed King and Netherworld King, it would have only resulted in more deaths.”

“Why did the Netherworld King rescue Veaf flare though?” Sasha pondered curiously.

“Who knows? He has his own goals,” I replied.

I held out my hand and erased the barrier around the cell. I then used the spell Dee to unlock it and went inside.

“Golroana, can I ask you to look up another trace while we’re here?” I asked, looking at the ashes at my feet. “These are Ceris’s traces. I want to see what he was doing two thousand years ago.”

“The further in the past it is, the blurrier the target of the trace will be,” Golronana warned. “Ceris may be the only identifiable figure you’ll see, and there’s no telling exactly what moment in time will be traced.”

“That’s fine.”

Golroana nodded and opened the Book of Traces once again.

“Through the deity, the past is but pages of a tome. O God of Traces, let us trace the past that has been recorded here, and witness your miracle. Book of Traces, Second Movement, *Ziaraph*.”

The Book of Traces glowed, its light covering the jail cell in front of us until a different scene started playing, and the past itself was revealed before us.

§ 4. Phantom Knights

Two thousand years ago.

The Sorcerer King Bomiras, a demon with a body of fire, appeared in a swamp-like area in Dilhade.

“As expected of the last Voldigoad doomed for destruction. That heart of yours has long perished.”

With those words, Bomiras departed.

Bomiras’s words didn’t seem to particularly bother Ceris. He turned back to his Phantom Knights.

“We will now head for the Tseilon,” he said.

They started running like the wind. Each member used Lynel and Najira to turn their body and source invisible, making them undetectable to most Magic Eyes.

“Isith,” one man called out. He held a spear in his hand while running at a tremendous speed. In the ancient demon tongue, Isith meant “commander.”

“Are you sure about this?” the man asked.

Ceris shot the man a glance. “About what?”

“The Tseilon family’s settlement is located on the Sorcerer King’s land. We’ll have to go around two or three barriers to get there, one of which we need to break through entirely. Won’t we be too late?”

“I don’t see a problem with taking our time,” Ceris said dismissively.

“Your wife just so happens to be staying in the Tseilon settlement right now,” the man pointed out. “If you explain things to the Sorcerer King, I’m sure he would simply let you through. It’s not too late to ask. I could even do it for you...”

“Jeph.”

Ceris called the man Jeph—the word for “the first” in the ancient tongue.

“We are apparitions of the dead. What is there to think about?”

Jeph closed his mouth and gritted his teeth. But he still spoke.

“Isn’t your child about to be born?” he asked quietly.

The next moment, lightning flashed. Ceris had drawn the Sword of a Thousand Bolts, pointing the tip at Jeph’s face.

“Silence. You know the rules,” Ceris said. “When we wear this coat, we are dead. And the dead have no lingering attachments: no names, no family. If you break this rule, you will be reduced to nothing.”

The man with the spear hung his head.

“But master,” he said quietly. “What is the point of having power if we don’t use it to protect those that need it? We’re not truly dead.”

Ceris mercilessly stabbed Gauddigemon into Jeph’s neck.

“Gah...!”

“Brat. Don’t flap your gums when you don’t know anything.”

Purple lightning surged. Jeph had already died five times in the past, and each time, had been revived through Ingall.

“Your skills have improved, but still you think like a child,” Ceris said. “I have no need for those who cannot act as the dead. Perhaps you should perish here.”

Jeph slowly grabbed Gauddigemon’s blade with his hand.

“If you want to kill me, go ahead,” Jeph said. “But I will say this, master. You are wrong.”

Jeph tightened his grip around the blade. Purple lightning burned his hand, but he continued talking.

“The Sorcerer King Bomiras is a magnanimous king of Dilhade. He dislikes conflict and doesn’t murder demons needlessly. He’s a benevolent king that shows compassion even to humans.”

“Magnanimous? Benevolent?” Those words do not exist in Dilhade, Jeph. For us demons, it’s eat or be eaten—power alone dominates all. Benevolence is a worthless thing, only meant to be discarded.”

The sword was stabbed in further, making blood spew from Jeph’s mouth.

“You are a coward, master. Unable to believe in others, unwilling to expose your own weakness. Some things can only be protected by relying on the strength of others. Right now, you’re leaving your own wife and child to die...”

“So what if I am?”

“What...? It’s your wife and child, is it not?”

“Brat. Think about what Bomiras said one more time, carefully.”

Pierced by the Sword of a Thousand Bolts, Jeph’s face twisted in pain. It seemed he was struggling to comprehend what his master was saying.

“He pointed at me and called me the last Voldigoad doomed for destruction. If you can’t figure out what that means by yourself, then you were raised wrong.”

“I am aware. The Voldigoad bloodline inherits the source of destruction from generation to generation, and thus struggles to naturally procreate,” Jeph said between gasps.

His words were the truth—it was why I had created the Seven Demon Elders using magic, allowing my descendants to be born naturally afterwards.

“It’s a miracle that your wife is pregnant. Giving birth will risk both their lives!” Jeph exclaimed. “That’s why she was in the settlement to beg for the Tseilons’ assistance, no?”

The hand Jeph used to grab Ceris’s hand was drenched in blood, causing a surge of magic power. The blood on the Sword of a Thousand Bolts dulled its power, and slowly, the blade was drawn out of Jeph’s throat.

“At this very moment, your wife is risking her life to give birth to your child. And here you plan to trample all over her kindness! She is more than just the incubator of a dead man’s child!”

Ceris watched Jeph rage with a cold gaze.

“Calm down,” he said.

“No, master, I will have you answer me!” Jeph shot back in refusal. “I am grateful you saved me when I was dying. I willingly became a dead man to repay you. But even as a tool, I pray for my master’s happiness!”

“Jeph.”

With Veneziara, Ceris slashed Jeph’s body apart.

“Gah!”

Unable to endure the attack, Jeph collapsed backwards.

“Did you hear me? I said to calm down. Anger lures death and invites destruction.”

Ceris thrust the Sword of a Thousand Bolts into the heart of the fallen man.

“Just like this.”

Purple lightning crackled across Jeph’s entire body.

“Guh... Guwaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!” Jeph screamed.

“Why don’t you get it, Jeph?” Ceris asked. “We are dead. We cannot feel anger, sadness, happiness, or excitement. We cannot feel anything.”

“Then...why...?”

“Become an apparition, Jeph. Erase those questions of yours.”

Ceris leaned in to whisper in Jeph’s face. “There’s no need to hesitate or ponder. Such things will only hinder you. The dead merely wander, destroying what they wish to destroy. Got it, Jeph?”

“I do not...”

Ceris’s Magic Eyes glowed coldly. “You were abandoned by your parents. I thought you would have lost hope in the world, but it seems I made a mistake in adopting you. You’re unsuited for the role.”

He drew his demon sword from Jeph and straightened himself.

“Don’t think you can leave the group. I was the one who saved you. I will have you die for me.”

Jeph stabbed his spear into the ground and used it as a support to get back to his feet.

As Ceris walked away, Jeph called out to his back. "I have no intention of leaving. Not until I prove you wrong, at least."

Ceris laughed happily. "One day, you will know despair. If you haven't changed your mind by then, I'll ensure you die a worthy death."

They flickered with static and quickly vanished. The scenery of Dilhade around them faded, returning to the jail cell.

Golroana closed the book in his hands. "The Book of Trace's effect has ended."

"Say, that Isith just now was clearly Ceris, wasn't it?" Sasha said.

"So it seems," I agreed. "Not only in appearance but also in magic power. Not many people would have been able to use magic like that two thousand years ago."

Sasha hummed in thought. "But wasn't his personality completely different? His tone of speech too."

Indeed, he hadn't sounded like the Ceris I'd spoken to before.

"I can think of a few possibilities," I said.

"Anos," Misha interrupted, pointing at the Book of Traces. "I saw an order that didn't belong to the God of Traces."

I stared at the book with my Magic Eyes but didn't find anything unusual.

"Is it still there?"

Misha shook her head. "It was only there for a moment. Since you were watching the past, I kept an eye on the book itself."

Oh? That was Misha for you. Her sharp mind had saved us quite some trouble.

"When using the Book of Traces, everyone focuses on what it shows them. A magic must have activated on the book itself in that brief moment," I said.

"What order was it?" Arcana asked.

“I don’t know, but I have a guess,” I replied. “Golroana was imprisoned in the Overlord Castle. Ceris may have altered the Book of Traces to prevent me from digging into his past.”

“So that’s why Ceris’s personality was different just now?” Sasha asked.

“It could simply be a result of the alteration,” I said.

But Golroana tilted his head with a baffled look.

“The Book of Traces shows the past exactly as it was,” he said. “It cannot be altered so easily. Even if it were changed, the order of time would return it to what it was originally.”

“It probably changed it for the single moment the Book of Traces was active—when we were watching the past,” I said.

That’s why there was no change right now. This way, I would be unable to see the past as it truly was.

“It is no easy feat to alter the past while the God of Traces’s order is active,” Golroana said. “It would be the same as forcefully interfering with the person in the past directly. For example, if I were to alter the trace of us speaking today, I would require enough strength to brainwash you.”

Even if Ceris had managed to alter the Book of Traces, if he couldn’t brainwash me into believing it, that altered past would have no effect. Of course, it would take an absurd amount of effort to brainwash me.

“In short, the stronger the figure, the harder their words and actions are to alter,” I surmised. “But what if the one being altered was an ally, or the person making the alterations himself?”

“You mean Ceris altered his past self?” Golroana asked.

“It’s just a possibility. Let’s keep watching for now.”

Golroana nodded. “I shall try.”

He opened the Book of Traces once again, chanting his incantation to reveal the past with a bright flash of light—

§ 5. The Birth of the Demon King

The Edonas Mountains were a mountain range rich with magic soil, where the materials for magic tools could be mined.

A stronghold was built halfway between the base of the mountain and the summit—this fort was the settlement of the Tseilon family. Most demons of Tseilon blood preferred to live in isolation. They had little interaction with other demons, but contrary to their sinister appearance and abilities, many had relatively peaceful personalities.

Ceris and the Phantom Knights concealed themselves with Lynel and Najira and ran up the mountain to the queen's settlement at the summit, evading the various traps on the way.

On their way, they encountered several soldiers on watch—human soldiers. Like Hero Graham had said, the humans had already occupied the mountains. With Lynel and Najira in place, the Phantom Knights cautiously closed in on their enemy.

With a hand gesture, Ceris signaled for Jeph, Edd, and Zeno—the first, second, and third in the ancient tongue—to each move behind a human and slash their throat without a sound. The human soldiers were entirely helpless when caught by surprise, and once cut by source-slaying swords, perished instantly.

“Edd, all clear.”

Edd, the second, reported the elimination through Leaks calmly.

“Zeno, all clear.”

“Jeph, all clear.”

The other two echoed him. With the obstacles removed, they resumed climbing the mountain silently.

The humans on lookout were eliminated one after another without ever noticing their enemy's presence. All the guards were killed in a mere ten

minutes after the Phantom Knights stepped onto the mountain. They broke into the fort and approached the queen's settlement, only to witness a commotion underway.

"Well?! Got anything to say for yourself?!"

A large number of soldiers were gathered in the square of the settlement, standing over a single demon woman with beige-colored hair: Luna. Her abdomen was swollen with child, and whenever a human kicked at her, she covered her belly with a protective arm.

"Please," Luna begged. "Please wait until this child is born. Afterwards, you can do whatever you want with me..."

The humans glared back coldly.

"Say," one man drawled, hatred spilling from his mouth. "Have you ever heard of the settlement called Dahna?"

She shook her head. Immediately, the man lifted his magic-infused foot and kicked her stomach.

"It's the village you demons *burned down!*" he yelled, full of rage. "With my children still inside! I had a son and two daughters. And yet, you want me to wait for *yours* to be born?"

He punched Luna in the face.

"Then give back my children first! Now! Go on! Bring them back!"

Their hatred was as potent as daggers, and each stare pierced her body as such.

"How careless of you, demon child," an eerily odd voice suddenly said.

The one who had spoken was a blonde-haired girl behind the soldiers. She was using Fless to hover in the air like she was sitting in a chair, and the magic power radiating from her was significantly higher than those of the humans around her.

"Every human here has had their children killed by demons," she continued. "Your pleas are just fuel to their fire."

Luna looked up at the blonde-haired girl.

“You’re...not a human,” she said, weary.

“They call me Abernyu, the Goddess of Destruction. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Abernyu said with a smile. “Although you will be dead soon.”

As though her words had been a signal, the soldiers all drew their holy swords. Each blade emitted a divine magic that could easily kill a demon.

“Say, I’ve thought of something fun,” a human soldier said, his expression dark. “Why don’t I just kill the living evil in that belly of yours with my sword, and leave you alive for it.”

Luna, who had been this whole time seeking a moment to flee, at once leaped to her feet and started to run. But the soldiers ran ahead of her and surrounded her.

“We’ll avenge our children this way,” one of the soldiers said. “We’ll give you the same pain you demons gave us, and through this, have justice.”

Here were two parties—a mother desperate to save her unborn child, and a group of soldiers desperate to destroy it. Was this truly justice? So blinded were these humans by their hatred, they could no longer see clearly what they were about to do.

“Isith.”

Unable to bear the sight he was witnessing, Jeph sent a Leaks.

“Isith, your wife... She can still be saved. Will you just stand there and watch?!”

“How odd. Why would they try to kill Luna now, after spending so much effort to keep her alive. It’s as if they know we’re watching,” Ceris said, thoughtful.

“Those fueled by vengeance hold no rhyme or reason!”

“Do you really think so? Someone must have fanned the flames of their revenge.”

Ceris analyzed the situation calmly. He turned his Magic Eyes to the Goddess of Destruction and stared into her abyss.

"I thought I destroyed her..."

"This isn't the time to worry about that! We have to save her! If you won't do it, I will."

Ceris glanced over at the buildings of the settlement.

"Edd, Zeno, hold Jeph back. Luna shall be bait by which we track the enemy's actions. She's my wife—she knows what is expected of her."

"Wha...?!"

The two Phantom Knights swiftly grabbed Jeph.

"Do you have no heart, master?!"

"Everyone else, follow me," Ceris said, ignoring Jeph's outcry. "If they're pretending not to notice us, then we'll search the mansion first. If anyone from the Tseilon family is still alive, release them so they can join the fray."

Ceris walked straight past the square and towards the mansion of the Tseilon family's queen.

He dispelled the magic traps and entered the building. The air reeked of blood, and there was no sign of life. No humans could be found either. But there was one spot saturated with magic, and the Phantom Knights walked towards it carefully. They arrived at where it led—a room—and Ceris quietly opened the door.

The Phantom Knights, all expressionless until this moment, now furrowed their brows. The entire room was filled with headless corpses. Their sources were gone, having long perished. The demons of the Tseilon family had no heads to begin with—they normally used the heads they stole from humans. For their corpses to be headless was to be expected, but there were humans among the bodies too, and they were headless as well.

"It doesn't look like the Tseilon were the ones who did this," Zett, the fourth, observed. "If they were, the humans occupying this area would have cleaned up the corpses."

Ceris looked around the room. Magic circles were crammed across the floor, walls, and ceiling, and a variety of magic tools were scattered around the room.

“It looks like they were eaten from within,” he mumbled, touching the wound of one with his hand. Faint traces of a magic circle were left on the body.

“Were they researching magic here?” Ceris asked aloud.

Ceris proceeded to the back of the room. There, he found the corpse of the queen of the Tseilon. Her corpse was the only one with an intact stomach.

“G-Gyaaaaaaaaahhh!” a voice screamed in the distance.

It was a human scream. At Ceris’s signal, the Phantom Knights left the mansion and turned their Eyes towards the square they had passed earlier. One of the human soldiers was alight with black flames.

“Curse you demons... You evil fiends...!”

The man dispelled the black flames with his anti-magic and leaped towards Luna, reaching her in a single step and stabbing his holy sword straight through her swollen belly. Cracks ran up the blade.

“Wha... Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Magic power overflowed from her belly, snapping the holy sword into pieces. Black flames burned the surrounding humans.

“Anos,” Luna mumbled.

The humans had beaten her black and blue, and thus, *he* had been angered.

“That’s impossible,” a soldier muttered. “This woman shouldn’t have any magic left...”

“It’s the baby,” one of the soldiers said, horrified. “Just now, before the flames appeared, I heard the fetus moving. I saw a magic power that didn’t belong to the woman! The demon in her belly was using magic...”

“What...?”

The humans were speechless. The soldiers who were sent to Dilhade were the elite of the elite—the very top of Azesion—and even they were utterly dumbfounded.

“If that’s true, just how powerful will the child be once it’s grown?”

Among the soldiers a number of them gulped nervously, their eyes glazed in

fear.

“We cannot allow her to give birth,” one declared. “What is in her belly is the pure incarnation of evil itself—it will throw the whole world into war!”

The humans started shouting with renewed vigor.

“For the sake of the world, we will give our lives to stop evil!”

“Go forth and kill her! For the sake of the world! For justice!”

The human soldiers all lunged forwards at once, their blades, blessed with holy power, shining brightly in their hands.

Badump.

The next moment, the fetus shifted, and at once all the humans were entirely engulfed in a wave of jet-black fire.

“What? I can’t erase this fire! That can’t be—the demon-sealing barrier is...?!”

“What is this sinister power?!”

“Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

In no time at all, every human there was reduced to ashes.

“Abernyu... Please destroy the rest,” the last human rasped before burning away.

“Hmm. The Voldigoad bloodline, was it?” Abernyu said, showing no interest in the humans who had just died. “Magic that increases when it nears destruction.”

She gazed upon Luna with her Divine Eyes. As soon as she did, a jet-black flame appeared before her, forming a wall—as if *he* were protecting his mother. But the Goddess of Destruction’s Divine Eyes easily destroyed that wall. More flames appeared in succession, but she destroyed those as well.

“It’s okay, Anos,” Luna mumbled. “It’ll be okay. Save your strength for your birth. I will bring you into this world...”

“I made a pact with the humans, you know,” Abernyu said. “You and your child are going to perish here.”

The moment the black flames cleared, Luna started running towards the Goddess of Destruction. She had saved just enough magic to sustain Anos, and poured the rest of her power into her next spell, chipping away at her source to do so.

Darkness began to spread around her.

“Galian.”

A black veil that blocked all light fell upon them. It was a complete darkness that erased not only sight, scent, and sound, but also the ability to see with Magic Eyes.

“Nice try.”

Even in the darkness, Abernyu’s gaze stayed fixed on Luna.

“Everything in this world will be destroyed equally.”

The moment her Divine Eyes glinted, Luna’s belly was slashed apart by her gaze.

“Ah...”

Luna fell to her knees and collapsed. But even then, she kept her hands on her abdomen to protect her child.

“The rest is up to you...dear...”

Galian’s darkness was cleared by Abernyu’s Divine Eyes. But a black spot remained behind her. Purple shot out of the spot like a lightning bolt, and Gauddigemon stabbed into Abernyu’s heart.

“Veneziara.”

Ceris drew one spherical magic circle, followed by nine spherical magic circles of possibility within Abernyu’s body.

“Veneziara.”

Fierce purple lightning sparked around the Goddess of Destruction’s body. Ceris slammed his strongest destruction magic at her source.

“Ravia Neold Galvarizen.”

A vast number of purple lightning bolts struck her body, erasing her source.

“The god that governs destruction cannot be destroyed. That’s how order works,” Abernyu said.

The bolts of purple lightning swelled and burst from the god’s body like stars, before vanishing without a trace. The purple world faded back to normal, and silence fell upon them.

There was no sign of Abernyu resurrecting—or at the very least, not here or now. As soon as he calmly confirmed that, Ceris made his way over to where Luna lay on the ground.

“Dear...” she mumbled weakly.

Her source had been shredded by the Goddess of Destruction’s Divine Eyes, and there was no hope of healing her. Ceris merely looked at her in silence.

“Don’t you have anything to say?!” Jeph cried, stomping over to him. “At least say *something* to her in her last moments, master! Spare her some mercy as she dies!”

He was trembling with anger, but Ceris looked completely unaffected.

“She knew what she was getting into when she married the dead.”

Jeph glared at Ceris with a look between disappointment and fury.

“It’s fine, Jeph,” Luna said, weakly. “I was happy.”

“But ma’am... This is just so...”

Luna slowly shook her head. “To give birth goes against the Voldigoad bloodline—the source of destruction. Something must die in exchange. This is the fate of every Voldigoad wife.”

Unable to find the right words to say, Jeph could only watch her. She didn’t have long left—a single glance into her abyss made that clear.

“A dying womb...is the best for Anos. This is fine,” she said, smiling despite the tears flowing from her eyes. “Thank you...”

Just who was that gratitude directed to? As her source slowly faded away, she closed her eyes.

“Live, Anos,” Luna said, with the very last of her energy. “Live and become stronger than anyone else. Save your father...”

Luna took her last breath with her hands still cradling her belly. The Phantom Knights watched on as black flames roared from Luna’s body like the first cry of a newborn.

From within Luna’s torn belly, the baby reached out and firmly grabbed his mother’s finger, and thus did he emerge into a world of destruction, having received the great love of a mother.

It was in that moment the Demon King Anos Voldigoad was born.

§ 6. If the World Was at Peace

The Book of Traces's effect ended, and the image of the past faded. But everyone remained silent for a moment longer, their faces heavy with what they had seen.

The events of my birth had been far more gruesome than they had expected.

"No need to feel down about it. This was a common sight two thousand years ago. In fact, the fact I was born alive makes me one of the lucky ones."

My mother's face flashed through my mind.

"It was my first time seeing her, but I should be grateful to her," I said.

"Do you remember what happened?" Misha asked.

"I remember being born from my mother's corpse. It was the worst feeling."

Even now, I could remember how unpleasant it was.

"But I was a newborn back then. I probably protected her instinctively. I don't remember doing it consciously—I don't even remember Ceris being there."

"But the past we just saw could have been altered, right?" Sasha asked.

I nodded in response. "There are several possibilities. For example, the man referred to as Isith might not actually be Ceris. He could have altered the past to make it look like him. It would explain the difference in his tone of speech."

Ceris's usual tone would have alerted Jeph and the others that something was wrong. A different appearance could be overlooked, since the identities of the Phantom Knights were meant to be secret.

"So Ceris took the place of his real father?" Arcana asked.

"It's a reasonable theory, but it still leaves questions," I replied.

Misha tilted her head. "Too obvious?"

"Exactly. If he wanted to hide the past, that would've been the most crude way of doing it. It'd be as good as admitting he wasn't my father to begin with."

Sasha hummed in thought. “Maybe by hiding your true father, he was actually hiding something else?”

“It’s possible,” I agreed.

Was it something to do with my birth? Or was it something else entirely? There was no way of telling.

“Taking the place of a demon from two thousand years ago would require significant power,” I noted. “It’s possible he *is* my father, but has altered the past in another way that affects his tone of speech.”

“What would be the point of that, though?” Arcana wondered.

“Because if I saw the past like that, I’d think my father *wasn’t* Ceris.”

“But why would he want you to think that?” Sasha asked.

“Who knows? It could be another trick of his. Perhaps he could trap me by sending me on a search for a nonexistent father.”

“That sounds plausible too,” Sasha said.

“It’s also possible that what we saw of Ceris was the truth. That’s what he was actually like back then, and he became his current self after losing his heart in the Selection Trial.”

“Without any alterations?” Misha asked.

“Yes. Even if he cannot alter the past to any significant degree due to the amount of power required, he can make us *believe* that the past was altered. In this case, his goal would be to make us doubt what we saw.”

“But there was no guarantee we would look at the past in the first place.”

I nodded at Sasha’s words. “Indeed, it’s unlikely the past was completely unaltered.”

“Let us assume nothing was altered regarding Ceris. Would it be possible for alterations to be made elsewhere?” Arcana asked. “The past was changed in some way—but what exactly has changed?”

It was certainly possible that he wanted to hide something else.

“In what we watched just now, there were two people that I knew of

already,” I stated. “The first is Abernyu. Until today, I had always believed my mother was directly killed by humans. I have no memory of Abernyu’s involvement.”

“She’s the Demon King Castle?” Misha asked.

“Yes, she’s the Abernyu that was turned into the Demon King Castle. But this was my first time seeing her in the form of a blonde-haired girl. In my memory, I’ve only seen her as the Sun of Destruction, or her god form created by its shadow.”

“Hmm... Could we find out what happened by asking the Goddess of Destruction?” Sasha asked.

“We could, but we cannot afford to revive her,” I said. “Doing so would increase destruction across the world.”

“Oh, right. That would be a problem...”

Sasha lowered her head, ashamed of asking something so foolish.

“Who’s the other one?” Misha asked.

“Jeph, the first of the Phantom Knights. Also known as Aeges, the Netherworld King.”

“What?!” Sasha shouted in shock. “Are you *sure*? I mean, the Netherworld King doesn’t seem like a horrible guy, but he’s so coldhearted! And Jeph was the only decent guy we saw just now. Sure, his face was a *little* similar, and we couldn’t see him clearly because of Lynel, but he didn’t have an eye patch either!”

“People change when their positions change. War will drastically change one’s values. If what we saw was the Netherworld King in his youth, then it makes sense to me.”

Sasha hummed in thought again. She seemed to be struggling to connect the current Netherworld King to Jeph.

“For now, since we can’t tell what’s been altered or not, can we watch more of the past?” she asked.

“I would normally agree, but I’m afraid we cannot watch any more today,” I

said.

Golroana nodded. “My apologies. Without the God of Traces around, the Book of Traces has very little power. It can only look back this far a maximum of two times. Its power will recover the more the past increases—that is, the more time passes—so the next time the past can be seen will be in a week’s time.”

“A week is too long to wait... Can we summon Eugo La Raviaz and steal its Scythe of the Timekeeper?” Sasha suggested.

“I tried that some time ago, but they’ve stopped bringing the Scythe of the Timekeeper with them when they appear before me. Probably because I stole it last time,” I said.

The Keepers of Time were meant to protect the order of time. It was only natural for them to do what it took to prevent order from being disrupted.

“Does that mean we have no other way of searching for Militia?”

“Should we find Aeges?”

Sasha and Misha wondered out loud.

“Veafare’s with him too,” I agreed. “At the very least, he should know what part of the past we just saw was altered. But whether he’ll answer us honestly is another matter.”

At any rate, that was the only clue we had, unless...

“Golroana, you know of the secret runes in the stone monument room of Everastanzetta. Do you know which god left them there?” I asked.

“No,” Golroana replied. “I am aware they are called sacred runes, but they are forbidden from being shared outside of the gods, so the God of Traces concealed anything to do with them.”

“In that case, will you come with us to Everastanzetta right now? We may need the Book of Traces again.”

“Very well.”

We left the jail cell—still ringing with the sounds of dragon cries—and drew Gatom magic circles. Bishop Mirano, who was standing to the side to send us

off, suddenly raised his voice in shock.

“Please wait a moment! A Leaks from Sword Emperor Diedrich of Agatha has just arrived,” he said.

In the underground world, dragon cries echoed everywhere, so in order to connect Leaks, magic links had to be joined from area to area using magic tools. The link from Agatha to Jiordal had only been set up recently.

“Connect him,” Golroana said, joining the Leaks link. “Is something the matter?”

Diedrich’s voice echoed through the room.

“My apologies for the sudden message, Pope. We just caught a glimpse of a future with the Phantom Knights in it. We may have discovered their hideout. I will inform the Demon King right after this.”

Naphta’s Divine Eyes could no longer see every possible future, but she could see a vague image of some futures.

“I’m right here,” I said.

“Perfect timing, I’ll explain now then. There’s a place in the underground world called the Gangrand Cliffs—simply put, it’s a giant wall connected to the dome. It seems the Phantom Knights have made a cave and set up a base there.”

“Did you see Aeges or Kaihila there?”

“We couldn’t see that much. Just some figures in familiar-looking full body armor entering a hole in the side of Gangrand.”

With Ceris gone, the Phantom Knights’ motives were no longer clear. But if their location had been identified, then there was no reason to disregard it.

“We’ll investigate that location too. But we’ve got another stop to make first, so wait until we’re done.”

“Sounds like you’re pretty busy already. Sorry to add more to your plate.”

Diedrich cut the conversation there, and we activated our magic circles. Gatom made the world turn white before fading to reveal an immense number

of stone monuments before us. I walked straight to the wall in front of us and touched it. Light glowed, and words appeared on the wall.

““It was an endless night of perpetual nothingness...””

I read the writing out loud for everyone to understand.

Far beneath the ground, a castle of god was born,

To shine a gentle light over the night with no beginning.

Above ground, the sun never rose, and destruction never came.

No life was born—the world came to a stop.

Order or people, which matters more?

You know the answer.

““You know the answer.””

Everyone considered what these words could mean.

“According to Arcana, Militia knew I would come to the underground world. If so, could these words be a message to me?” I asked.

Order or people, which matters more, huh? For sacred runes—meant only for the gods to read—the words were strangely vague. The average god would answer that order is more important. There was no need to write such a thing.

“Golroana, are you able to trace anything? Even the slightest clue would help,” I said.

“There isn’t much power left, but I can try...”

Golroana opened the Book of Traces.

“Through the deity, the past is but pages of a tome. O God of Traces, let us trace the past that has been recorded here, and witness your miracle. Book of Traces, Second Movement, *Ziaraph*.”

Then, a new line appeared below the final row on the wall.

With light.

If this was Militia's message to me, then there was no need to ask what kind of light.

"Arcana."

She nodded and held her hands out.

"Night falls; day passes; the moon rises; the sun sets."

Altiertonoa, the Moon of Creation, rose outside Everastanzetta. Its light penetrated through the building and illuminated the wall. More runes rose to the surface.

Your forgotten past is sealed within Erial, the Stars of Creation.

Should the need arise, for the sake of world peace,

find the five stars of Erial in the ruins of Inzuel, the Western Empire.

Look out for alterations made by Aganzon, God of Frenzy.

But please believe me when I say this:

If the world is at peace, do not seek the past.

For it is already over.

§ 7. Where Memories Lie

“Hmm. There’s no doubt Militia was the one who left this here,” I said.

It was a message relying on the fact that I would have access to the Moon of Creation—that I would save Arcana without a doubt.

“Ah! Look, it’s fading!” Sasha exclaimed, pointing at the wall.

Like she said, the runes were fading before our eyes, and eventually vanished entirely. Arcana tried to shine the Moon of Creation’s light on the wall again, but nothing appeared.

“Did she know we would use the Book of Traces?” Arcana asked. She was referring to the faded words “With light.”

“The runes didn’t disappear due to Militia. This was probably the work of Aganzon—the God of Frenzy mentioned in the message,” I said.

“Were they altered?” Misha asked.

“Most likely it was altered just like the past we saw in the Book of Traces. If so, it explains why Militia went through such a roundabout way of leaving a message,” I concluded.

“Um, does that mean that the God of Frenzy can alter all kinds of things?” Sasha asked, looking at Arcana. She shook her head to say she didn’t know.

Golroana answered instead.

“Aganzon, God of Frenzy, is said to be the god that throws everything into chaos and disarray through alterations. His order makes people consider him a blasphemous god, and although legends of him exist, no one has actually seen him.”

“If he is a blasphemous god, he might have been in Gadeciola at some point, right?” Sasha asked.

“Yes,” Golroana answered. “Or maybe he was the Selection God for Ceris, who was one of the Selected Eight.”

So he obstructed Militia by altering her runes, huh?

“Are you sure Ceris was a Selected Eight?” I asked.

“Most likely. I’ve used the God of Traces’s order to see his traces before, but the past is far too vast. Without a god’s powers, it was impossible to preserve all the memories.”

Golroana must have used the God of Traces’s power to search through a vast amount of the past in order to win the Selection Trial. But there was no way for his mortal body to retain every memory of what he saw. The memories he had retained had probably faded with the death of the God of Traces. That, or they had been erased by someone in a way that made their disappearance seem completely natural.

“Do you know who the final Selected Eight is?” I asked.

“No, I cannot recall...”

So he didn’t know that either. Well, it didn’t matter too much.

“Militia knew of the God of Frenzy’s existence. They may have been enemies. That’s why she left a message using her own order, so that it couldn’t be altered.”

Misha tilted her head at me. “What do you mean?”

“The runes just now didn’t appear under the Moon of Creation’s light, but were newly created from Militia’s order within Arcana. Since there was nothing to actually alter, the God of Frenzy’s order didn’t work,” I replied.

Arcana and Militia possessed the same order, but they were ultimately different people. This message was probably the limit of what Militia could leave behind.

“The Erial were probably split into five Stars of Creation to protect them from being altered by the God of Frenzy too. If Aganzon got his hands on them, there’d be a high chance they would be altered, just like the Book of Traces.”

“It sounds like it’s pretty likely the God of Frenzy was Ceris’s Selection God then,” Sasha said. “He could have altered the Book of Traces while Golroana was imprisoned in the Overlord Castle. Ceris was the one trying to hide Anos’s

past from him, so maybe the God of Frenzy won't go after the Stars of Creation now that his Selected Eight is gone?"

"But we can't discount the idea that the last Selected Eight and Ceris have the same goal. The Phantom Knights originated from Dilhade. The other members may also have grievances with me and Militia."

If Ceris hadn't been acting alone, then the war still wasn't over.

"We don't know why the Netherworld King took Veafare with him either," I added.

"Hmm... We'd better find the Erial quickly then. Where is the Western Empire of Inzuel anyway?" Sasha asked.

Golroana shook his head. "There are many minor nations in the underground world, but I've never heard of one declaring themselves an empire."

"Above ground," Misha said simply.

Sasha's eyes widened. "Inzuel...isn't in Dilhade, is it?"

"It's part of Azesion—as one of their allied nations. It's a country located at the west of the continent, with a history going back three thousand years. The castle and town were built around the ancient ruins that originally existed there. Humans skilled in magic once gathered there, as it was one of the leading nations of Azesion before Gairadite rose to power."

I drew a magic circle and created a three-dimensional map depicting the worlds above and under the ground.

"Arcana, where are the Gangrand Cliffs that Diedrich just mentioned?"

Arcana pointed and a lunar snowdrop fluttered down. The map of the underground world completed itself before our eyes, revealing the Gangrand Cliffs.

"Hmm. So Ceris already knew about the Stars of Creation."

The Gangrand Cliffs and Inzuel Empire glowed with light. They were located directly on top of each other.

"That's...!" Sasha uttered in surprise.

“If they searched every corner of the world for Militia’s magic, they’d eventually find it even if they didn’t know where to look. They’ve had plenty of time, after all.”

“So that means the Erial have already been altered...right?” Sasha asked.

“Not necessarily. Militia knew I would reincarnate two thousand years later. She would have prepared countermeasures to prevent tampering before my return.”

I pointed at the Gangrand Cliffs on the map.

“Militia left the Stars of Creation in the Western Empire of Inzuel. It has to be easier to get there from the surface than from these cliffs. The fact the Phantom Knights set up their base there means they couldn’t reach the Erial in a single trip.”

In which case, there was still hope.

“We’re going to return to the surface. The remnants of the Phantom Knights are also a concern. It’d be best to search both the Gangrand Cliffs and the Inzuel Empire at the same time,” I said, turning to Golroana. “Please pass that on to Diedrich.”

“Understood.”

“Let’s go.”

I drew the magic circle for Gatom and teleported us outside of Everastanzetta. We then started heading upwards with Fless.

“Come to think of it, are you okay with this?” Sasha asked me.

“With what?”

“Militia’s message said not to seek the past if the world is at peace. Ceris is dead, and the past shouldn’t be a problem once we deal with the remaining Phantom Knights, right?”

“Hmm. Do you think the world is at peace, Sasha?”

She paused to think before answering.

“Compared to the world we just saw... I think it is.”

“In that case, we might be able to make it more peaceful.”

“More peaceful? How can it get more peaceful than this?”

“The runes said it’s already over, but they didn’t say *what* was over. How can we know it’s over if we don’t know what it is? If we can find out what the runes are referring to, we may be able to salvage something. If one more person is saved as a result, then the world will take another step towards peace.”

Sasha let out an exasperated sigh but was smiling. Misha giggled beside her.

“How Anos-like,” Misha said, still giggling.

“Peace never ends with you,” Sasha said.

I burst out laughing.

“Two thousand years ago, all I wanted was for the war to end. But once it did, I realized that tragedy still existed everywhere. We went to the underground world, and I wanted to end the war occurring there too.”

Like Sasha said, it was just one war after another, with no end in sight.

“Sorry. Since you are my followers, my greed will probably get you guys in quite a bit of trouble.”

“I just want to be of use to you, big brother,” Arcana said.

Sasha chuckled. “The Demon King’s greed knows no limits.”

“I’ll help as much as I can,” Misha said in support.

We flew past the dome and returned to the surface. I immediately sent a Leaks to my followers and the students of the Demon King Academy.

“Sorry to interrupt everyone on a day off, but I’d like those who are free to gather at Delsgade immediately.”

Once I sent that message, I used Gatom to teleport us to the throne room of the Demon King Castle.

“Melheis,” I called through Leaks.

An old man with a long white beard immediately appeared through Gatom.

“Do you have any information on the Inzuel Empire?”

Melheis looked surprised.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“No, I just so happen to have a matter regarding Inzuel to discuss with you as well, my liege,” Melheis answered in a courteous tone.

I looked at him silently to continue.

“I believe I’ve already told you about the Hero Assembly formed in Gairadite when Azesion transitioned to a parliamentary system.”

The Hero Assembly was a company of people gathered to guide the new Azesion.

“They’ve been visiting the prominent nations of Azesion in order to negotiate the new system, but I’ve just received a report from Igareth that the Hero Assembly has failed to return from Inzuel on time.”

“Did he try Leaks?”

“He couldn’t reach them. He tried to teleport there with Gatom, but it seems that the country is protected by a barrier set up by past heroes.”

A barrier that sealed Leaks and Gatom, huh?

“That has to be Lo Macis, the sealing barrier spell. I didn’t think there were any humans left that were capable of using it,” I said.

“It could be a reincarnated hero. Or perhaps a demon from two thousand years ago reincarnated as a human and learned to use it,” Melheis said in a heavy tone. “While we could enter the Inzuel Empire by force, with the members of the Hero Assembly possibly being held hostage, we can’t afford to move recklessly.”

Indeed, with Lo Macis around the nation, not even my Magic Eyes could see what was going on inside.

“When did the Hero Assembly enter Inzuel?”

“One week ago. The plan was to stay in the ruined town of Etiltheve, so they’re most likely to be found there...”

But there was no way of knowing for sure.

“I was just thinking of visiting Inzuel myself, so this is all rather troublesome. Demons entering the nation could endanger the Hero Assembly.”

“That is correct.”

What terrible timing—so terrible, it was hard to believe it was just a coincidence.

“Our only choice is to Gatom close by, then disguise ourselves and sneak in, right?” Sasha asked.

“They’ll be regularly searching the boundary of Lo Macis for enemies. As long as Gatom doesn’t work, the boundary will be the only point they need to guard,” I pointed out.

Sasha frowned.

“Can we disguise ourselves as people allowed in and out of Inzuel?” Misha suggested.

“Like merchants, you mean?” Sasha asked. “But if they’ve apprehended the Hero Assembly, will they allow anyone to enter at all? They should know that Gairadite and Dilhade will try to sneak in.”

“We’ve received reports that those who tried to enter Inzuel were turned away. The nation has restricted all entry and exit,” Melheis explained.

Sasha racked her brains for another solution. “If only we knew what was happening to the Hero Assembly... But that would be too easy...”

“Hmm. I know what’s happening,” I said.

“Huh?!”

Ignoring Sasha’s dumbfounded look, I drew a magic circle in the air. Limnet reflected a certain someone’s point of view. They were located indoors, in a stone room. The room was dim and dusty—it appeared to be some kind of storeroom.

“Whose view is it?” Arcana wondered out loud.

“The headmaster of the Hero Academy is in the Hero Assembly. She’s a demon named Emilia.”

“Ah!”

Sasha raised her voice while Misha looked thoughtful.

“The Bell of Thoughts?” she asked.

“Thankfully she had it on her. It depends on the magic of the caster, but a magic link can just barely be connected through the Bell of Thoughts even with Lo Macis in place.”

The view slowly shifted. Emilia seemed to be sneaking forwards somewhere. She didn’t appear to have been captured by anyone, but it wasn’t a good situation regardless.

“Can you talk to her?” Misha asked.

“The Bell of Thoughts is a magic tool that the wearer uses to call out to others. While it would be possible under normal circumstances, with Lo Macis in effect, Emilia has to be the one to call out first.”

A sound echoed in Emilia’s point of view, and she whirled around to look at it.

An unfamiliar face stared back at her. It was a man with short, ash-blond hair. He wore a suit of holy armor and was armed with a sword.

Emilia took a wary step back.

“Wait. I am not your enemy,” the man said, holding both hands up in surrender. “My name is Kashim. Two thousand years ago, I was Hero Kashim of the Gairadite Demon King Subjugation Battalion.”

§ 8. Connected Feelings

“Hero Kashim?” Emilia muttered, searching through her memories. “I think I’ve seen that name in a textbook before... You’re Hero Kanon’s senior disciple?”

“That’s right. I reincarnated into a draconid. You’re the headmaster of the Hero Academy in Gairadite, right?” Kashim asked in a serious tone.

Emilia nodded cautiously.

“I have no issue with you being a demon. That era is over,” Kashim said, remaining still with his hands held up. “However, there are some who have yet to adjust to the new era. Such as the man who restrained your comrades, the Hero Assembly, and placed the barrier around this town: Bomiras Helos, the Sorcerer King who once ruled Midhaze.”

Emilia’s brow furrowed, unable to recognize the name. A large part of Dilhade’s history was still missing due to the whole incident with Avos Dilhevia.

“By Sorcerer King, do you mean a demon reincarnated from two thousand years ago?”

“That’s right. He’s a cautious, attentive, and cunning demon. He hid himself after his reincarnation and investigated this era.”

“What grudge would a demon from two thousand years ago have against the Hero Assembly?” Emilia asked.

“The Sorcerer King isn’t a man motivated by revenge. His goal is to negotiate with the Demon King. That’s why he’s trying to obtain the Stars of Creation somewhere in this ruin of a town.”

Emilia cocked her head. “Negotiate with the Demon King?”

“Over the ownership of territory, I assume. The Sorcerer King Bomiras Helos concealed his demon background and became the general of the Inzuel Army. He instigated the ambitious emperor’s actions and controls the country from

the shadows. He's after the throne."

I'd had no point of contact with the Sorcerer King two thousand years ago, but for a demon, his methods were rather straightforward.

"Simply put, if the parliamentary system of Azesion is implemented, royalty will have less power. That is why the Sorcerer King is against it."

"So he wants to be the king of a human nation? Even though he's a demon?"

"He believes that people should be ruled by the worthy. Perhaps his end goal is to rule all of Azesion and take back the Midhaze territory from the Demon King of Tyranny."

Two thousand years ago, both Dilhade and Azesion were ruled by the strong. His desire to regain control of Midhaze wasn't completely incomprehensible.

"That doesn't make it okay to negotiate with this kind of force!" Emilia protested.

"Inzuel had no choice but to use force. If it opposed the Hero Assembly passively, it would just be thrown out of the alliance."

That was logical. The power that belonged to Gairadite would be divided as a result of the parliament. Few would oppose a solution that would end the dictatorship of incompetent rulers.

"However, his way of thinking is unsuitable for this peaceful era. As a hero, I will take down the Sorcerer King. You are trying to save your fellow Hero Assembly members. Consider that we have the same goal."

"I get what you're saying. However, I have no reason to believe you're telling the truth," Emilia said. She cast the magic for Zecht—the contract stated they would collaborate until the Hero Assembly members were saved.

"Your suspicions are only natural. Reassuring, even."

Kashim sighed the Zecht without any hesitation. Emilia looked a little relieved.

"What about your comrades?" she asked.

"I have none. In order to take down the Sorcerer King, we need the power of modern day heroes. We will save your comrades first. If you believe I am worth

trusting after that, please help me defeat the Sorcerer King.”

“I understand.”

“From what I’ve investigated, the Hero Assembly has been split into two groups and imprisoned in separate locations.”

Kashim drew a map using magic of the building they were currently in.

“They’re currently in the Etiltheve Sorcerer Fort jails, located here and here. We’re in the storeroom over here. The Sorcerer King Bomiras isn’t around at this hour. The soldiers take turns guarding and patrolling at regular intervals. If we know their schedule, we can reach the jail without anyone noticing.”

He drew their route with magic.

“This jail has higher security. Those in key positions are probably imprisoned here.”

“Then let’s get the people out of the other jail first,” Emilia said. “The three heroes that accompanied me as my guards should be there. Thanks to them, I was able to get away without being caught. Once we rescue them, we should be able to combine our strength and break into the other jail.”

“Got it.”

Using the clock spell Tel, Kashim accurately watched the time. He approached the door and waited, then cast Naaz on Emilia and himself. With their sources disguised as the source of two mice, they opened the door and ran.

Kashim led them turn after turn down the stone corridors without any hesitation, then hid behind a pillar and stopped. A patrolling soldier passed them by.

Once the guard had passed, the two resumed moving. With the patrol routes and guard positioning Kashim investigated beforehand as their guide, the two moved forwards, sometimes taking the long way, sometimes stopping and waiting, until they eventually reached the jail without anyone’s notice.

Two guards stood before the sturdy steel door.

“I will act as a decoy,” Emilia said.

“Okay.”

She immediately leaped out of the shadows and charged at the two guards.

“What?!”

The soldiers immediately drew their swords to face her, when—

“Gah... Hah...”

The two soldiers fell forwards and collapsed. The moment their attention had turned to Emilia, Kashim had moved behind them and knocked them unconscious.

“Je Neroh.”

Holy fabric wrapped around the soldiers and restrained them, blocking their magic from penetrating the cloth. They took the key from one of the soldiers and stuck it into the keyhole of the jail. One click later, the door unlocked.

Ten members of the Hero Assembly were inside the room. Raos, Heine, and Ledriano of the Hero Academy were there too. Everyone had their hands cuffed with magic cuffs.

“I am Hero Kashim. I’m here to rescue the Hero Assembly,” Kashim said, using Dee to free the humans from their handcuffs.

Everyone looked wary of the unfamiliar man at first, but when they spotted Emilia entering the room, their expressions changed to looks of relief.

“New guards will be here soon. Let’s hurry,” Kashim said.

Those who had been imprisoned in the jail quickly stood up and started moving. It was at that moment that Emilia approached Kashim, grabbing the sword hanging at his waist and pulling it out of its sheath.

Huh?

Through the Bell of Thoughts, Emilia’s confusion reached me. She ran towards one of the fleeing Hero Assembly members and slashed them with the borrowed sword.

“Gah!”

“Emilia, what are you—”

Raos ran over to her, but she thrust the sword straight into his heart.

“Wha...”

Griad swirled through his body, burning away his magic wards and organs.

“Gwah...?!”

Raos collapsed to the floor.

“Headmaster Emilia, what are you doing?!”

“Something like this just cannot be overlooked!”

The members of the Hero Assembly raised their voices in rage. But Emilia didn't reply.

“So you never intended to save them?” Hero Kashim spat. “It's clear why you were the only one still free. In the end, you're just another demon. Just like the Sorcerer King.”

You're wrong.

Once again, the voice in Emilia's heart reached me through the Bell of Thoughts. Neither Kashim nor the Hero Assembly members could hear it.

My body is moving on its own. I can't speak. Why?

“That's right,” Emilia said, as though her voice and body were being controlled. “The goal of the Demon King of Tyranny is to dominate mankind. By forming the Hero Assembly, he could gather all the key players into spot, and erase them in one sweep.”

Emilia cast Griad.

“Kuh! So that Zecht was just a disguise!” Kashim yelled, brushing aside the black flames with anti-magic.

Even though they had exchanged a Zecht to rescue the Hero Assembly together, what Emilia was doing was breaking that contract.

“These people believed in you! Times have changed!” he continued shouting. “Are the Demon King’s orders really more important than the lives of your students?! Are they really worth nothing to you?!”

“Hey...”

A voice interrupted Kashim’s angry rant. It belonged to none other than Raos, on the floor after being stabbed through the chest.

“I don’t know who you are,” Raos got out, “but stop spouting such delusions. She would never do something like—”

This time, Emilia stabbed him in the throat. But he continued anyway.

“That’s not Emilia...”

His voice was so faint that it was only heard by Emilia. She rushed to attack Kashim, but he easily parried her sword and kicked it out of her hand. He then picked up the fallen sword.

“Everyone, the guards will be here soon. Hurry outside while I keep her at bay!” Kashim shouted.

The humans of the Hero Assembly left the jail as directed by Kashim. Heine tried to approach him to say something, but Ledriano held out a hand to stop him. He adjusted his glasses with an index finger and exchanged a look with Heine.

“Is that what you truly believe, Emilia?” Ledriano asked.

No.

The voice in her heart was pleading, but her mouth didn’t move.

“Hmm. I knew it. In the end, you’re just another demon,” Heine said with disgust.

“Please hurry, you two,” Kashim urged. “Unfortunately, we won’t be able to

treat him in time.”

Ledriano and Heine shot Emilia a glare full of intent before leaving the jail.

“Evil demon,” Kashim spat. “You won’t get away with this. After we’ve defeated the Sorcerer King, it’ll be your turn next.”

With those parting words, Kashim closed the door and locked it behind him.

“Raos,” Emilia muttered, then gasped in realization. “My voice!”

Having regained control of her body, she immediately ran up to Raos. Though she cast healing magic at once, his wounds didn’t heal. The power of the sword she used to stab his heart was obstructing his recovery—with every movement, the stigma spread.

“I can’t heal you...”

Raos moved his hand and touched Emilia’s face.

“I knew it... You’re back to normal now...” he muttered.

Emilia bit her lip in an attempt to keep her tears at bay. She then stopped casting healing magic and drew a different magic circle over Raos instead.

Once she was done, she cut her finger and spilled a drop of blood on it.



“Listen carefully, Raos.”

Although he was clearly in pain, Raos stared straight into Emilia’s face.

“I’m going to kill you once.”

The complex healing magic that could heal stigmata was still beyond Emilia’s ability. It was a better idea to kill him once and use Ingall to revive him.

“It may not work,” Emilia admitted.

“That’s fine with me,” Raos mumbled with a gentle expression. “But before you do... Can I say something first?”

“No!”

Emilia poured her magic into the Ingall circle.

“Tch. Then I’ll save it for next time... Don’t mess up...”

“Of course!”

Raos yielded himself to Emilia with complete faith. She mustered all of the magic in her body to complete the magic circle for Ingall. Then, she took a knife out of a storage circle and pressed it against his chest.

“Here goes...”

Emilia’s hands shook with uncertainty. With her current skill, she had about a 30% chance of successfully using Ingall.

Raos grabbed her trembling hands.

“Don’t worry too much... You won’t fail...”

Emilia nodded with a determined look, then brought the knife down with all her might. Raos’s body lurched, then ceased moving.

“Please. I beg of you. Come back to me.”

Emilia activated Ingall with fervent emotion.

I made a mistake once. I cannot fail again.

Never again.

Come back.

Please return my precious student to me.

Please.

“...”

Emilia held her breath. The Ingall magic circle had activated. With how much magic she possessed, there would be no chance of resurrection once three seconds had passed.

However, Raos's eyes remained closed, and there was no sign of his wounds healing. Tears started falling from her eyes.

“Help me... Someone...”

Please. Someone.

“Anosh...”

“Hmm. So you finally called for me. I was waiting, Emilia.”

“Huh?”

Emilia blinked blankly in response to the Leaks in Anosh Polticoal's voice. Thanks to her finally calling Anosh's name and initiating the magic link, I was able to assist in her casting of Ingall. In no time at all, Raos's wounds healed.

“Ugh... Agh...” Raos wheezed, coming back to life.

Ingall had succeeded. Emilia watched in awe as she spoke into the Bell of Thoughts.

“Anosh? How? There is a barrier...”

“Did you think a mere barrier could stop my Leaks from reaching you?”

“Jeez...”

Emilia laughed in relief, half smiling, half crying.

“Haven't I told you to stop speaking like the Demon King?”

The tears spilling down her face changed from sorrow to joy.

§ 9. Infiltration Preparation

Once Raos woke up, he moved stiffly into a sitting position. I continued talking to Emilia through Leaks.

“Leave before the guards arrive. Draw the magic circle for Dee.”

Emilia drew Dee on the door. I sent her my magic power to assist, and the lock opened with a click.

“Let’s go, Raos,” Emilia said. “They’ll be on our heels as soon as they notice we’re missing, so we should get out of here as fast as we can.”

“Yeah.”

Emilia and Raos opened the door and stepped out of the cell. They proceeded carefully down the corridors, avoiding any soldiers.

“There really are a lot of guards around,” Emilia mumbled, observing the area from the shadows.

“Return to the storeroom first.”

“Got it.”

The two started retracing Emilia’s steps, going back the way she’d come. Since Kashim wasn’t there to lead them, they had no choice but to knock out a few of the guards on the way, but they were able to return to the storeroom safely.

“Can you show me the map again?”

“I can only recall what Hero Kashim showed me earlier.”

Emilia recreated the map of Etiltheve Sorcerer Fort. I made a point on the map that glowed with red light.

“Due to the large size of the Lo Macis covering Inzuel, there are inconsistencies in the barrier. The spot I’ve marked is where the barrier is the weakest. It normally wouldn’t be possible to use Gatom, but...”

“Is it possible if there’s a magic link connected to the Bell of Thoughts?”

“Just barely.”

Emilia and Raos glared at the map, planning their route to the marked spot.

“If you can make it there, I can send you reinforcements. The Demon King has been informed already.”

After all, I was talking about myself.

“If it’s this spot, then there hopefully won’t be as much security,” Emilia muttered.

“Then let’s get going already,” Raos said. “Once reinforcements from Dilhade arrive, we’ll find Ledriano and Heine and explain what happened. You were controlled by a magic spell or tool just now, yeah?”

“Yes...”

Emilia frowned with a puzzled look. “But when did I come in contact with compulsion magic? I have absolutely no idea.”

“Hmm. I’ll look into it.”

“Please do.”

Emilia and Raos left the storeroom and set off towards the weak point in the barrier. With her focus directed away from me, our Leaks disconnected.

“I was only watching from partway through, but—”

I looked away from the Limnet and turned to see Lay. He was gathered with Shin, Eldmed, Misa, Eleonore, and Zeshia.

“Did Ms. Emilia sign a Zecht with Kashim?” Lay asked.

“I see. You think it’s Roa Zecht?”

Lay nodded, then explained the spell to the others listening. “Unlike Zecht, Roa Zecht compels whoever signs the contract to move exactly as the contract states.”

“So it was disguised to look like the magic circle for Zecht?” Misha asked.

Sasha had questions too.

“Wouldn’t the contract details have to be disguised too?” she asked. “The

contract was to cooperate until the Hero Assembly was saved. And wasn't it Ms. Emilia who cast the Zecht in the first place?"

"Was it altered?" Misha said.

"Altering a spell without the caster's notice... Ah!" Sasha gasped. "The God of Frenzy?"

"It's certainly a possibility," I said. "He could be the last of the Selected Eight."

At present, we could only see Inzuel through Emilia's Magic Eyes using the Bell of Thoughts. There was currently no way for me to look into the abyss of Aganzon's order or the magic circle of that Zecht.

The same applied to Lay—he hadn't even seen the moment the Zecht was signed. Yet his guess involved Kashim.

"Why do you think it was Kashim's doing?" I asked him.

"That's just the kind of person he is," Lay explained. "He, more than anything else, wants to see the heroes fall."

"How come? Isn't Kashim a hero himself?" Sasha asked curiously.

"He may have the title, but in reality, he wasn't able to become the hero he wanted to be. He wanted the Sword of Three Races to choose him to lead the Gairadite Demon King Subjugation Battalion to victory."

"So he went crazy when he wasn't chosen?" I asked.

Lay nodded.

"Back then, Kashim was better than I was at both swordplay and hero magic. And he worked hard for it. He dearly wanted to defeat the Demon King and end the war. He often spoke of how he would become a true hero by discarding his ego and desires for the sake of the people. And at the time everyone believed he was the worthiest hero alive."

Lay had a sad expression on his face.

"But the Sword of Three Races chose me, and from that day on, Kashim was never the same."

He continued explaining in a heavy tone.

“He actively tried to ruin the reputation of heroes, bad-mouthing anyone weak for even trying to be one. He even sowed seeds of conflict in my battalion during the Great War.”

“A crazy thing to do while in a war against demons,” I said.

Lay grimaced bitterly.

“It was Master Jerga who noticed what Kashim was doing. When cornered, Kashim confessed, then declared he would bring down all the heroes and fled. Master and I pursued him. Everywhere he went he tried to ruin our reputations, just like this time. I thought he perished by master’s hands, though.”

It seemed like Jerga hadn’t destroyed him completely.

“Hold on a minute. If Kashim was the one behind Ms. Emilia’s actions, isn’t he trying to divide the Hero Assembly by making the Demon King of Tyranny look like an enemy?” Sasha asked, holding her head in her hands.

“He probably wanted to make a hero kill a demon that was friendly with humans,” Lay said.

“What does he gain from that, though?” Sasha asked. “In the first place, it doesn’t matter if there aren’t any heroes left. The Great War is over, and we’re not enemies.”

Lay hesitated for a moment, then answered.

“Even if times change, Kashim probably won’t,” Lay explained. “He’s crazy because of me, after all.”

“I don’t think it’s your fault, Lay,” Misa said.

“At the very least,” Lay said, “he wouldn’t have felt so offended if I had been stronger than him.”

“That makes things simple,” I said.

Lay turned to look at me. I made eye contact with him.

“I’ll stop the others from interfering,” I explained. “Go and defeat him, utterly and thoroughly. Once you do, he’ll have nothing left to complain about. Now show that underhanded fool what a true hero is.”

“Thank you,” Lay replied.

Just then, Eleonore held up her index finger and smiled.

“I got here midway, so I don’t really know what’s happening right now. What’s our next move?” she asked.

“Is it...work?” Zeshia said with a sharp look of determination.

“We’re going to head for the Inzuel Empire in the continent of Azesion,” I said. “Militia left behind five magic objects called Erial, the Stars of Creation, in the ruined town of Etiltheve. My missing memories are sealed within them.”

“Wow, so much happened while I wasn’t around!” Eleonore said jokingly.

“However, there will be people who will try to get in our way. We may have to face Hero Kashim, the Sorcerer King Bomiras, and the Phantom Knights, among others. It’s unclear just how many enemies we’ll have to fight.”

“So we just go to Inzuel, grab the Erial, and beat up anyone who gets in our way?” Eleonore asked, summarizing roughly.

“And save the Hero Assembly,” Misha added.

“There’s one more thing,” I said. “Directly below Inzuel, in the underground world, is the Gangrand Cliffs. It seems that the Phantom Knights have a hideout there, and it’s almost certainly related to all this.”

“Do we split into two groups?” Shin suggested.

“Yes. Shin, head to the Gangrand Cliffs with Eldmed. Find out what the Phantom Knights are plotting there.”

“Yes, my liege.”

“I’ll send you the information we’ve gathered so far. Check over it later.”

I sent through Leaks the past we’d seen in the Book of Traces and the message Militia had left.

“Bwa ha ha! Come to think of it, you summoned the students as well,” Eldmed said, drawing a Gatom circle. “It looks like things are about to get interesting again!”

He teleported away, Shin following right behind him.

“Yeah, why *did* you call the academy students here?” Sasha asked with a wary look.

“Hmm,” I said, not quite answering. “It seems like everyone’s gathered in the lecture hall. Let’s discuss the rest there.”

As soon as I said that, I drew a Gatom circle and teleported everyone to Delsgade’s second lecture hall. The students were already seated and waiting—they wouldn’t dare drag their feet to a summons from the Demon King.

“Sorry to interrupt your break. Something troublesome has happened,” I announced.

The room immediately froze over. Then, under the tense air, students started whispering to each other.

“Hey... I have a really bad feeling for some reason...”

“So do I... Feels like dread...”

“It has to be *that*...”

“It’s *definitely* that...”

“Some of you have guessed already, I see. But fret not; it’s not that big of a deal,” I said. “There’s trouble in the Inzuel Empire of Azesion. The Hero Assembly has been captured by the Inzuel army. The culprit is believed to be the Sorcerer King Bomiras, a demon from two thousand years ago. Hero Kashim of the Gairadite Demon King Subjugation Battalion is also an enemy.”

I gave a simple explanation of how Kashim had deceived the Hero Assembly, how we still didn’t know the full motivations of our enemies, and about the Stars of Creation.

“First, you’ll save the Hero Assembly.”

The students’ faces fell.

“Then, you’ll find the culprit behind this incident and either capture or destroy them.”

Their faces fell even further.

“At the same time, you’ll find the Stars of Creation left behind by Militia, the

Goddess of Creation.”

Using Gyze, I linked to everyone and sent them Militia’s magic wavelength.

“If you find a magic object with a similar wavelength to this, retrieve it.”

The students listened to the explanation with grim faces.

“Oh, and I won’t be going with you. Follow Emilia’s orders once you get there. I’ll be expecting good news upon your return.”

Despair spread across the students’ faces.

“Wait, he’s *not* going with us? Seriously? Even with Lay and Lady Sasha, that’s...”

“Sorcerer King Bomiras... If he was a ‘king’ two thousand years ago, doesn’t that make him the same level as Mr. Eldmed?”

“Hero Kashim also sounds like a pain to deal with. What if the Hero Assembly treats us like enemies?”

“We finally returned from underground... Only to face a civil war in Azesion...”

They muttered to each other in the same vein, all trying to process what I had told them.

“Those without confidence may withdraw,” I said, but no one raised their hand. In fact, their faces started twitching even more.

“If we raise our hand, he’ll have us withdraw from living altogether...”

“You never know. What if he tries to say something that’ll make us feel more confident?”

The students gulped, their faces resolved, as though they were ready to face their fears.

“No matter who we’re up against, they can’t be nearly as bad as the Demon King of Tyranny.”

“Ha...ha ha... It’ll be okay. I’ll be okay. I’ve been practicing my magic for the past month for something just like this.”

“Same here. I knew it’d happen sooner or later. Like reviewing for a class in

advance—but this time, in order not to die. Ha ha...”

The majority of the students looked like they were ready to do this. Some of them even sounded well prepared.

“Now, stand by until Emilia reaches the location where she can use Gatom,” I said. “The rest will be handled through Anosh and the Bell of Thoughts. Prepare for infiltration!”

I cast Lynel and Najira, vanishing on the spot.

“Anosh is here too?” one student asked.

“I’m right here,” I called out to him, making him flinch in surprise.

I turned into my six-year-old body using Kursla and appeared before him.

“W-Were you hiding again? Don’t scare me like that...”

“My bad.”

I sat in my seat.

“Are you going to go as Anosh?” Lay asked in a whisper.

“Since Emilia’s there, yes. I might be able to surprise our enemies too.”

After that, Lay cast Naaz to disguise my source and make it unrecognizable from that of the Demon King’s. The students took out their demon swords and magic tools, making preparations for combat.

It wouldn’t be long until Emilia arrived at the meeting point.

§ 10. Old Demon, New Demon

Emilia and Raos were carefully moving through the Sorcerer Fort of Etiltheve. The current area they were in was less heavily guarded, so they were able to make their way to their destination without being detected by any soldiers.

“Looks like the spot is just over there. The barrier *does* seem weaker,” Raos muttered.

He looked out from the shadows at their target. Two soldiers were standing guard outside the room, watching their surroundings carefully.

“Tch. They totally know we escaped,” Raos said. “We won’t be able to catch them off guard, and they confiscated my holy sword earlier...”

From their current location, there was no way of reaching the guards without being seen. In the time it’d take them to defeat the guards, the guards would be able to alert the rest of the army to their location using Leaks.

“The longer we wait, the less the situation will be in our favor. We have to attack head-on,” Emilia said.

“Seriously?”

“They’re nothing compared to dragons.”

Raos chuckled. “Damn right!”

He leaped out of the shadows and charged forwards, flames wrapped around his arms.

“*Cyfio!*”

The soldiers evaded the holy flames at the last second, yelling in a panic, “E-Enemy attack! Escaped members of the Hero Assembly are—”

Before the soldier could use Leaks, Emilia ran over and slashed his throat with a knife.

“Gah...!”

“Y-You!”

The other soldier drew his sword to counterattack, but she burned him using Griad. In no time, the two guards were dead.

Raos kept a lookout for possible reinforcements while Emilia approached the door. She looked inside with her Magic Eyes and strained her ears. She couldn't see through the wall, but she was able to detect magic power.

“There's someone inside—a human, I think,” she said.

“An Inzuel soldier?” Raos asked.

“Their magic is a little weak for that.”

“Is it just the one?”

“Just one person,” Emilia confirmed.

The two exchanged a look.

“Then there's no choice but to go in,” Raos said. “Once we subdue whoever's inside and call for help from Dilhade, we'll have this in the bag.”

“Right. Let's do it.”

Emilia turned the doorknob, but it was locked. She cast Dee and muttered, “Anosh, if you would please...”

I sent her my help and the door unlocked with a click. Emilia and Raos looked at each other and flung the door open, charging straight inside.

“*Destor!*” Raos shouted.

Flames wrapped around him like armor as he leaped right at the person inside the room. He raised his hand to cast barrier magic that would restrain them to the ground—

“Raaah! Wait, huh?”

—and stopped at the last moment. Sitting on the floor inside the room was a long-haired girl, mouth gagged and hands bound with magic cuffs.

“Mmgh! Mmgh!”

The girl looked up at Raos in fear, tears welling in her eyes.

“This...isn’t what I expected. What now, Emilia?”

“There were guards outside, so she was probably captured by the Inzuel army just like the Hero Assembly. Free her.”

Raos crouched down, making the girl flinch back.

“Don’t worry, we’re not your enemies. We’re from the Hero Academy,” he said, untying her mouth gag.

“Th-Thank you very much,” the girl said, once she could speak. “I am Rona Inzuel, First Imperial Princess of Inzuel.”

“First Imperial Princess?” Emilia glanced over at Rona dubiously. “Now that I look again, you do seem familiar. But why is the First Imperial Princess being imprisoned by the army?”

“Ah... That’s because I overheard,” she said, trailing off with a gloomy look.

“Overheard what?” Emilia prompted.

“That my father, Emperor Chappes Inzuel, planned on capturing the Hero Assembly during their visit. I wanted to inform the Gairadite ambassador of this, but...”

She was captured before she could do so.

“My father is being deceived by General Bomiras. I saw it—I saw his body change into flames. He’s a demon! He must have done something to my father.”

“Do you have any proof that Bomiras has deceived the emperor beyond being a demon?” Emilia asked.

Rona looked troubled.

“Nothing specific... But my father was a kind person. He wouldn’t have done this...”

It was only human nature to blame someone else when unexpected disaster fell. Even if she had reason to hate demons, it was natural to suspect anything weird or abnormal as the cause of disaster. But doing so didn’t mean the emperor was the kind man his daughter knew him as.

“Please. Can you take me to my father?” Rona asked. “I’m sure I can convince him.”

“Let’s move somewhere safe first,” Emilia said without answering.

Raos grabbed the cuffs around Rona’s wrists. “This may burn a little, but hang in there.”

Flames rose around the handcuffs, burning through the metal. Rona grimaced in pain for a brief moment, but endured the pain until the cuffs were off.

“Th-Thank you very much...”

She took Emilia’s offered hand and got to her feet.

“It looks like there’s another room connected to this one,” Emilia said, looking at the other door in the room. The barrier was clearly weaker on the other side of the door.

“Do you know what room that is, Princess Rona?” Raos asked.

“No, I rarely ever come to the Sorcerer Fort,” she said apologetically.

“I can’t detect any magic inside, so it may be safe to enter,” Emilia added.

“If no one’s come out after all this commotion, it must be fine,” Raos agreed. With his approval, Emilia approached the door and opened it. What appeared was a normal room empty of people, holding only a single table and chair.

The two sighed in relief.

“Anosh, we’re here,” Emilia said. “Ready whenever.”

“Well done. I’ll send help over right away.”

Through the Bell of Thoughts, I analyzed the magic environment of their location. The barrier here was just weak enough to let me do so.

I cast Gatom, drawing a magic circle in the room. But the moment my vision turned white, the room from Emilia’s perspective transformed. The furnishings disappeared, and in their place appeared magic circles on the floor, walls, and ceiling.

“Tch!”

Raos tried to turn back, but the door vanished before his eyes, turning into a wall.

“What the hell?! The door disappeared!” he shouted.

He thrust his fists forwards to use Cyfio, but the wall was reinforced with magic and remained completely unharmed.

“Emilia, what...”

Raos was about to ask for orders when he fell speechless. In front of him was the magic circle for Gatom I’d drawn—the entrance point for reinforcements from Dilhade. But the circle was covered in a globe of red fire, flames roaring with heat.

“Extinguish it! Or they’ll burn the moment they teleport through!” Emilia shouted.

She drew a magic circle on her palm and created ice.

“Schade!”

“Zagard!”

The ice Emilia released covered the globe of fire, while Raos’s barrier magic formed eight layers around the fire to extinguish it. But their efforts had no effect.

“How pathetic. Neither the demons nor heroes of today can compare to those of two thousand years ago,” a voice said.

Raos and Emilia searched their surroundings, but couldn’t see any sign of the enemy.

“Where are you looking? I’m right here.”

An eerie set of eyes and mouth appeared on the flames surrounding the magic circle.

“Good grief. Moths to a flame, all of you. Did you *really* think I wouldn’t notice this weak spot in the Lo Macis barrier?”

Emilia glared at the demon. “Are you the Sorcerer King Bomiras?”

“Indeed I am, frail demon of today. I am the Sorcerer King—the master of all

magic.”

She clenched her jaw in response but didn’t reply.

“I have a suggestion for you, weak one. Care to hear me out?” Bomiras said, surprisingly humble for his position.

Emilia looked at him warily. “What is it?”

“The inside of my body is another dimension filled with fire. Those who leap here through Gatom will barely survive within the flames. If you become my subordinate, I will spare your life and the lives of all the fools who step foot in my land.”

The heat of Bomiras’s flames made the small room unbearably hot. The temperature alone was enough to exhaust Emilia and Raos.

“I am the subordinate of the Demon King of Tyranny. Are you defying the ruler of Dilhade?” Emilia asked.

“Don’t push your luck, little moth. If you wish to speak to me, use your own words, not your master’s. That is what it means to be a demon.”

The Magic Eyes in the flames emitted a cold bloodlust strong enough to render Emilia silent. She could tell he wouldn’t listen to her without proving her strength first.

“You shouldn’t need to think about it,” Bomiras said. “You have two choices: become my subordinate and survive, or burn to death with your comrades in the flames of the Sorcerer King.”

Instead of replying, Emilia carefully looked around for a chance to get away. Bomiras noticed her actions and cackled, sending sparks of fire scattering around.

“Fool. Do you honestly believe you still have a chance, after falling for such a simple trap? The demons of old would have never teleported here.”

Bomiras’s mouth of fire distorted in a mocking smirk.

“Do you understand? You are *regressed*. If your mind cannot comprehend the difference between us, I will have to teach you firsthand.”

An arm extended from the globe of fire, which Bomiras bent back into the globe.

“Carve the power of a true demon into your Eyes. Every demon who teleports here will be burned to death, one by one.”

His fist closed around something in the flames.

“Here’s the first. Look.”

Bomiras pulled his fiery hand from the globe and slowly opened it. A doll rested on his palm. Its head was flat, and the word “idiot” was written on its face.

“Wha... A fake?!”

The next moment—

“Bruguguguguh! Gubababababaaaah!”

Bomiras’s body of fire burst apart, revealing a demon of around six years of age that had been within him.

“Hmm. The old demons would have never teleported here, you say?”

The scattered flames gathered back into the shape of a person.

“Looks like the Sorcerer King has some outdated ideas. A spell of this level can’t even be considered a trap—it’s just an open invitation to teleport here.”

The flames reformed into a complete person whose red Magic Eyes stared into my abyss.

“Oh? It seems like someone with a spine has arrived. Let’s see how well you fare, then.”

Bomiras drew magic circles on both his arms.

“If you can withstand this spell, I will allow you to name yourself. Witness the Jio Graze of the most sublime caster in Dilhade.”

He joined the magic circles on his arms together. A red Jio Graze emerged from the circle, shooting towards me.

“I don’t feel any particular need to name myself, but if you *really* want to

know, I'll tell you," I said, drawing a magic circle with a grin.

A jet-black Jio Graze shot towards him. Red and black suns struggled for dominance against each other, sending sparks of flames everywhere. A hole opened in the red sun with a deafening roar, and the Jio Graze I cast headed straight for Bomiras.

"Wha...?!"

Bomiras's fiery body was swallowed by the jet-black flames and burned up.

"Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Unable to endure the heat, he scattered into sparks of fire.

"Who *are* you...?" he exclaimed.

"Anosh Polticoal. A demon from *this* era," I replied boldly.

§ 11. The Sorcerer King's Warning

The scattered flames gathered back together, forming the shape of a person. A magic circle was drawn, and Bomiras appeared, wearing a traditional robe.

"You call yourself a new demon?" Bomiras asked, Magic Eyes glinting.

"You sound doubtful," I commented.

"If anything, I'm surprised. I thought I was fairly used to this Magical Age by now, but I suppose something like this isn't impossible. Demons are meant to be strong, after all. It is the frightfully frail current generation that is abnormal."

Had he not realized who I was? Or was he pretending not to realize?

"Anosh Polticoal, strong demon of the modern era. I have a suggestion for you, if you care to listen," Bomiras said.

"I'll hear you out."

"Why don't you become my subordinate?" the Sorcerer King said, deadly serious. "At the end of the day, we must extinguish the sparks that threaten to fall. There are times when fools must be raked over the coals. And above all, this era is in danger. Far more than it was two thousand years ago."

His fiery face broke into a smile.

"If you truly enjoy conflict, I have a better idea," I said.

"Better idea? What could that be?"

"You become the subordinate of the Demon King of Tyranny instead. The demons of today do not favor conflict. The same goes for humans. The Great War has ended, and the world is at peace."

Sparks of fire scattered as Bomiras chuckled.

"Peace? Do you think this era is peaceful? Despite having nearly as much magic as I, it seems you're still a new demon after all. Especially so if the precarious state of this world looks peaceful to you."

His laughter quieted, and he stared at me with a sharp gaze.

“The ruler of the era after my departure, the Demon King of Tyranny, Anos Voldigoad. Do you truly believe he is to be trusted, Anosh?”

That wasn't something I could answer.

“I don't see your point,” I said. “The fact I am standing here should be your answer.”

“A single individual in the world has the power to destroy the gods, the spirits, the demons, and the humans whenever he wants. Can you really call that peace?” Bomiras asked seriously. “The Demon King of Tyranny can end this world at will. Listen carefully, demon of the modern era. True peace cannot be built on such a dangerous foundation.”

Just then, Emilia interrupted.

“The Demon King of Tyranny is far more peaceful than you, who captured the Hero Assembly by force,” she pointed out with a glare.

“You don't get it, demon woman. I dislike conflict, but I am still a demon of old. I have no intention of being some envoy for peace. But there's a line in this world that must not be crossed. As someone who lived through the era of feuding kings, I cannot overlook such a threat.”

The Sorcerer King spoke to Emilia admonishingly.

“Since my reincarnation, I haven't acted once. Not towards Ceris of the Phantom Knights, not towards the Demon King of Tyranny, and not towards the Hero Kanon. I haven't even acted against the draconids of the underground world, whose very existence is pure trouble. With them in existence, one wrong move in this world could lead to instant destruction.”

Sparks swirled around Bomiras's body and rose into the air.

“That is how the balance of the world works. Conflict can only be prevented when there is an area beyond the control of any one individual's desires. But when it comes to the Demon King of Tyranny, he can do whatever he wants to the world without any consideration for that balance.”

“If he doesn't want to do that, then there's nothing to fear,” Emilia said

sharply.

Bomiras refuted her immediately.

“Whether he wants to or not isn’t the problem. The problem is that he *can*. You know how the Hero Assembly is Gairadite’s attempt at replacing their monarchy with a parliament, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Do you recall *why*? It’s because the Gairadite royalty foolishly tried to lead Azesion through dictatorship. But that wasn’t how things were in the beginning; the monarchy decayed after many years. Who can guarantee that won’t happen to the Demon King of Tyranny?”

While Emilia struggled to find her words, the Sorcerer King continued.

“See how simple it is? Greater magic that can destroy everything exists in this world. And the activation of the spell formula all depends on Demon King Anos’s individual will. Can the demons of today not understand how terrifying that is?”

“Hmm. So what will you do about it?” I said.

“There are plenty of options. For example, Dilhade can also adopt a parliament instead of a monarchy under the Demon King of Tyranny. And not just on the surface—a number of superior demons should be selected, and the Demon King’s magic should be split among them. When they each possess a part of the Demon King’s power, they’ll be able to keep each other in check and achieve true peace.”

True peace, huh? Sure sounds convincing.

“It’s also questionable why the Demon King of Tyranny wants to rule Dilhade himself, but reduce Azesion to a parliamentary rule,” Bomiras continued. “Azesion’s power as a nation will be reduced until the new system is fully established.”

Yet such a development was inevitable. When building a new system, it was necessary to continue using the old ways for a time until the new ways could be properly implemented.

“If the Demon King truly desires peace, he must raise a power that can suppress even him. In other words, he should be strengthening the heroes, expanding their army, and giving them the strength to rise against him. What he’s doing with Azesion now is the opposite.”

“Do you realize your means would cause war?” Emilia asked sharply.

Bomiras cackled with sparking laughter. “You’ve got it wrong. I’m saying it was more peaceful *when we were at war*. Currently, there is no way for the army to reach the Demon King, no matter how much they expand. To put it simply, the Demon King’s mere existence is a cry for war.”

“Individuals are different from organizations,” Emilia pointed out.

“Indeed so. The fact that he’s a single person makes it worse. The Demon King has power. Power that he alone possesses, power that is far stronger than anyone else’s. Why would he need so much power if he desires peace? Why is he weakening Azesion while refusing to let go of his own power?”

Bomiras listed his concerns one after another.

“Can you guarantee that someone with the power to destroy the world *won’t* use it?”

He shook his head as though to answer his own question.

“The answer is *no*, demon of today. You shouldn’t be siding with Demon King Anos just for his strength. We must unite to become his deterrence. The world needs to gather as one and form an army that can oppose him. It should be possible if the gods, spirits, demons, and humans all join hands together.”

“You have a point,” I said to the Sorcerer King. “But you lack ideals. Uniting the world as a form of deterrence? You make it sound nice, but all you’re doing is warmongering in the name of peace. Don’t make me laugh.”

“The Demon King is just as contradictory, no? He speaks grandly of peace, but possesses the power to destroy the world.”

“At the same time, your idea of deterrence wouldn’t unite the world either,” I said. “If anything, it would only result in more conflict.”

“And yet it would still be the better option,” Bomiras insisted. “Why can’t you

see that?”

“There’s no point in speaking to you. If you want deterrence, you have one of two options,” I said, searching for his true intentions with my Eyes. “Stop relying on everyone else and become the deterrent yourself. Or butter up the Demon King of Tyranny so he doesn’t feel like destroying the world. By my calculations, the latter is the more peaceful option.”

The Sorcerer King cackled.

“Your suggestion is to humor the Demon King so that he doesn’t throw a tantrum? I suppose I should have expected a demon of this era to see nothing wrong with placing the fate of the entire world on something so vague and uncertain.”

“And your rigid dogma that power subdues power is typical of a demon from two thousand years ago. However, there’s one thing you should learn,” I said, looking at the sneering Sorcerer King. “If you desire peace, believe in love. That is the only path to an ideal world.”

“You think a little strength gives you the right to lecture me? Don’t get ahead of yourself, lowly underling. I am the Sorcerer King Bomiras. I may have less power than you right now, but in my prime, Dilhade wouldn’t have been controlled by the Demon King of Tyranny so easily.”

Indeed, I had never faced Bomiras in combat. But that in itself was rather odd. If he really was so powerful, then why hadn’t I heard of the death of Midhaze’s ruler back then? Perhaps it was related to my missing memories.

“Who got you?”

Bomiras’s fiery face twisted in irritation.

“What?” he snapped.

“You were killed before you got to fight the Demon King of Tyranny. I’m asking who killed you.”

That seemed to touch a nerve, as the flames across Bomiras’s body surged like a wave.

“Watch your mouth. You do not have many options,” he said, spreading his

arms and scattering sparks with a flap of his robe. “Acknowledge my wisdom and power and become a deterrent force for the sake of the world. Or turn tail and run home, and bring the Demon King of Tyranny to me. Choose whichever you prefer.”

Magic circles small and large appeared across his body. He was ready for combat. His magic power became floating sparks that flowed from his entire body.

“Then I shall give you a choice as well.”

I stained both my hands with Vebzud and stared into the abyss of his magic circles.

“Confess how pathetically you died two thousand years ago. Or be tortured into giving me all the details on the Erial.”

I presented Sorcerer King Bomiras with his available options.

“Choose which you’d like to experience first.”

§ 12. The Quintessence of Sorcery

“Hee hee hee,” Bomiras cackled with a sneer. “Not many demons could say such arrogant things to the Sorcerer King two thousand years ago.”

The flames that formed his body blazed in a show of intimidation.

“You may have more magic than the average demon, but you are merely resting on your laurels. However, I, the Sorcerer King Bomiras, am different. I have spent countless years devoting myself to attaining the perfect form—the form of the future. Witness the true power of a demon who has reached the quintessence of sorcery.”

From the various magic circles on Bomiras’s body emerged crimson red suns.

“Stand back. Any reckless action will result in your death,” I warned.

I placed wards over Emilia and Raos and drew a magic circle.

“Behold my sublime Jio Graze,” the Sorcerer King declared, robe fluttering.

Countless Jio Graze of varying sizes flew haphazardly in every direction.

“This is getting old, Bomiras. Did you forget it didn’t work the first time?”

I shot my own Jio Graze straight forwards, burning the approaching red Jio Graze with black flames. The black sun continued moving forwards, heading straight for Bomiras’s body.

“You’re the one with the old tricks, Anosh.”

The robe Bomiras wore glinted darkly, and swallowed the black Jio graze completely when it struck.

“Dedradonado.”

Bomiras’s right hand drew a magic circle and released the Jio Graze I had cast, shooting it right back at me.

“I see.”

I slashed apart the Jio Graze with the Vebzud around my right hand,

extinguishing it with my anti-magic.

“So that robe itself is another dimension, huh?”

I sprinted towards the Sorcerer King, evading the red suns he shot towards me.

“There is no magic that can affect me at my full strength,” he replied.

His fiery right arm swung down. I caught it with my Vebzud-stained fingertips. The moment my jet-black hand sank into his fiery palm, his hand turned into darkness, and swallowed my arm.

“Dedradonado.”

Bomiras’s left hand drew a magic circle, from which emerged jet-black fingers. I turned my head to avoid the hand and clenched my fist, watching the fingers reaching out of the Dedradonado make a fist. So the hand was mine, and wasn’t being controlled.

“I’ve heard of this before—the Darkworld Cloak, no?”

The robe that he wore was a magic space called a darkworld, and was made so that every attack against it would be swallowed by the darkworld. The magic space could be distorted freely with Dedradonado, creating one-way paths as well as various entry and exit points. The Vebzud I thrust straight forwards had passed through that darkworld and exited through the circle he had drawn.

“Knowing what it is won’t help you. All attacks will pass through the darkworld, and will never reach me.”

Bomiras fired his red Jio Graze out of his body again. I extinguished each one with a weakened Jio Graze of my own, then drew another magic circle with my right hand.

“The darkworld itself seems rather spacious, but what about the exit point?”

I activated Iris. The next moment, the ceiling and walls were smashed apart with a rumbling crash.

“Seriously?” Raos muttered in disbelief.

In my right hand, I held up the giant Demon King Castle I had just created.

“Good grief,” Bomiras said. “I can’t have you breaking the fortress.”

The Sorcerer King drew his own magic circle, swallowing the room with Azesith and expanding into a far larger space.

“Bwa ha ha! Is it really the fortress you should be worrying about here?” I asked.

The Demon King Castle smashed through the room noisily as I slammed it down on Bomiras’s head.

“Pathetic.”

The Darkworld Cloak expanded and spread, covering the Demon King Castle and swallowing it easily.

“A typical maneuver from a modern-day demon. Totally without substance,” Bomiras said. “Need I remind you that the magic of the Sorcerer King has no limit.”

He pointed the magic circle in his right hand at me.

“Dedradonado.”

A corner of the giant Demon King Castle emerged from the circle. I immediately used my left hand, covered with the pale Ygg Neas, to push it back.

“Hee hee hee! Nice catch, but that’s as far as you’ll go. You cannot block my magic while in the midst of catching your own,” the Sorcerer King said triumphantly, drawing his biggest magic circle yet. “It’d be a shame to kill a brat like you. Even thousand years ago there weren’t many demons who could last this long in a fight against me. Swear your fealty to me, the Sorcerer King Bomiras, and I will spare your life.”

“You don’t seem to understand the situation, Bomiras. The one cornered is you.”

Magic power surged, and the Demon King Castle grew in size.

“Wha...?!”

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “If you don’t expand Dedradonado again, the exit will stay clogged.”

Bomiras expanded his Dedradonado to twice its size, but in response, the Demon King Castle grew three times bigger.

“Is that your limit? Looks like the entrance was wider than the exit.”

I released my Ygg Neas-covered hand, but the Demon King Castle remained inside Dedradonado. It was so big that it was stuck within the darkworld, unable to move.

“My Demon King Castle can be as big as I want it to be. Size is no issue.”

The Dedradonado circle shattered, the sound of magic bursting echoing throughout the cell. Bomiras’s spell was unable to withstand the Demon King Castle’s infinite growth and the pressure it exerted against the exit point’s finite boundaries. The corner of the castle vanished, returning to the other side of the space.

“Now it’s just the entrance point. Let’s test how wide it can spread.”

In my right hand, over half of the Demon King Castle I had conjured was sticking into the expanded Darkworld Cloak. I made the castle expand even further, and the cloak immediately spread to attack me.

I dashed to avoid it, and in that moment the darkness swallowed the entire castle.

“It was a good attempt, I’ll give you that,” Bomiras admitted. “Two thousand years ago there were some who reached a similar conclusion. Indeed, the Darkworld Cloak, with its infinite space, is weak at its entrance and exit. As you predicted, if the mass exceeds the size of the entrance, the cloak will break.”

“Oh? I commend you for revealing your own weakness.”

“One look into the abyss can easily reveal that, after all. But regardless of its weaknesses or strengths, magic depends on how you use it. And I won’t just stand back as you attack those weaknesses.”

“I see. But unfortunately,” I added, “I’m not targeting that weakness.”

I held up three fingers.

“What’s that for?” Bomiras asked. “If you’re begging for me to wait three seconds, then I suppose I can consider it.”

“Threefold. For every second that passes, the Demon King Castle in your darkworld increases in size by threefold.”

All emotion from Bomiras’s face disappeared as the meaning of my statement reached him.

“So, how big do you think the castle is now?” I asked.

“Threefold in one second? How absurd. The Demon King Castle would be bigger than this entire world in under a minute. Your bluff won’t work on me.”

Yet as soon as he said that, the Darkworld Cloak he wore was torn to shreds.

“What?!”

Pieces of the shredded cape drifted to the floor. The dimensional power was gone.

“Huh? Gwah?!”

I took advantage of his astonishment to sink my Vebzud-soaked fingers into his briefly unprotected body of flame.

“It seems the darkworld was too small for my Demon King Castle after all,” I said.

He narrowly avoided having the vital point of his source struck when I pierced his body, then leaped up to distance himself.

“If you answer all my questions, I can promise to spare you from destruction,” I offered.

The Sorcerer King cackled.

“What makes you think you’re the victor here? Just look around you.”

Swinging the Demon King Castle inside the Azesith cell had smashed it apart, and it was filled with several crimson suns—the Jio Graze he had cast earlier.

“Always be two or three steps ahead of your opponent. This is how war was fought two thousand years ago,” he said.

Flames ran along the red suns, connecting multiple Jio Graze together. Together, they formed a three-dimensional magic circle. More Jio Graze large and small released heat rays that fell upon Bomiras’s body. His fiery body

burned even more fiercely, turning him into a bright sun.

“Are you scared yet, young demon? I can read your mind like a book. Jio Graze is the highest grade of fire magic. There should be nothing higher. If there was, why haven’t you heard of it until now? Well, if you give it a little thought, the answer should be obvious.”

Bomiras spread his arms, scattering sparks of fire everywhere.

“Everyone who has witnessed this spell has perished without exception. Rejoice, for you will be given the honor of joining them!”

Flames roared as Bomiras transformed into a fiery sphere—he had turned *himself* into a Jio Graze. His flames were hot enough to distort the very air, and it was in his form that the sun called Bomiras fell towards me.

“Witness the quintessence of sorcery—*Aviasten Ziara*,” he said.

I drew a hundred magic circles and shot Jio Graze in random directions. Each one of the jet-black suns that flew at Bomiras was burned away by his flaming *Aviasten Ziara* body, vanishing into nothingness.

“Hee hee hee! Your trembling has affected your aim, Anosh Polticoal,” Bomiras taunted, charging straight at me.

I thrust my right arm out with *Vebzud* activated. Crimson flames glittered as they wrapped around me, burning my black fingertips. The *Vebzud* magic was burned away.

“Give up. In this form I am invincible. No magic can oppose me.”

“Hmm. How about this?”

The black suns I fired drew a circle, and their heat rays gathered around my right hand.

“Hee hee hee! Is that the best you’ve got?” Bomiras taunted. “I’ll admit your construction of the spell formula was skillful, but I suggest you look deeper into the abyss. *Aviasten Ziara* can only be used with this body of fire. A flesh body simply cannot withstand the flames!”

“You’re the one who should look closer into the abyss.”

I sent more magic into my fingers, summoning the power of the jet-black sun.

“Aviasten Ziara.”

Roaring flames pierced through Bomiras’s body of fire, burning it black.

“Wha... What is this?!”

The condensed power of Aviasten Ziara in my right arm bored into Bomiras’s spherical form, causing his body to combust in the glittering black flames.

“I-It can’t be!” he screeched. “This is... This is impossible! Gaaaaaaaahhh!”

And thus, Bomiras’s body went up in the black flames of Aviasten Ziara, crumbling into ashes before my eyes.

“It seems there truly is a spell higher than Jio Graze. You’ve got quite the trump card there, Sorcerer King Bomiras.”

I yanked my arm out of his body and he returned to his humanoid form, falling to his knees.

“There’s no way... How? How could *you* use Aviasten Ziara...with a flesh body...” he muttered, hanging his head in complete bewilderment.

“Oh, I just improved a flaw in the spell formula. I removed the condition requiring a body of fire, and increased the base power of the spell. In exchange, the spell became an origin magic.”

The shining crimson aura around Bomiras’s body vanished. His Aviasten Ziara had burned out from the black flames around my hand.

“Improved?” Improved the quintessence of sorcery that I spent thousands of years on...that I spent multiple reincarnations on...in only a single glance?”

“The Magical Age is built upon the efforts of past demons,” I replied. “Be it the Sorcerer King or the Demon King of Tyranny, the legacy of our ancestors—their studies, their efforts, and their countless deaths—have built the path that leads us further towards the abyss.”

The flames around Bomiras continued to burn, setting his source alight. The fire of Aviasten Ziara would only be extinguished when its target was completely scorched to nothing.

“This is the path taken by the Demon King Academy—by the demons of today.”

§ 13. Commencing Action

The body of the Sorcerer King Bomiras burned to ash and crumbled away. The fire only increased after half his body had burned, and soon, the flames of Aviasten Ziara would reach his source.

“At this rate Bomiras, you’ll perish.” I thrust a Zecht circle before him. “Sign it. And choose: the identity of the one who killed you two thousand years ago, or what you know about the Stars of Creation. If you give up either of these things, I’ll reduce the flames by half,” I said.

He’d have to speak of both in order to extinguish the flames entirely. Yet Bomiras, on the verge of perishing, cackled, sparks scattering from his mouth.

“You want to know who killed me that much? Is that an order from the Demon King?”

“Perhaps.”

“The Demon King of Tyranny is more pathetic than I thought, if he has failed to retain his memories through reincarnation.”

“Not as pathetic as you, at least,” Raos muttered, watching Bomiras sign the Zecht.

“Tell this to the Demon King: Two thousand years ago, the one who forced me to reincarnate was Ceris Voldigoad. And the one who dispatched him—was *you*.”

What a mysterious thing to say. But with the Zecht in place, he didn’t seem to be lying.

“Are you saying the Phantom Knights are the subordinates of the Demon King?” I asked.

“Did you think the Demon King was a saint? They’ve always had the same goal,” Bomiras snapped, tone harsh. “The nameless Phantom Knights wander in the shadows like the dead, silently removing those who oppose the Demon

King. Not even the Demon King's most trusted retainers know the truth. This is the dark side to how Demon King Anos rose to rule Dilhade in such a short time."

I had no recollection of this, but it didn't seem like this was a lie either.

"His hands are far too stained for him to speak of peace. Don't you think so too, young demon?"

"Hmm. Are you trying to make me suspect the Demon King?" I asked, erasing half the Aviasten Ziara flames as promised.

"I only wish to make clear that the man would not hesitate to bury his own comrades. Is a king like that truly worth trusting?"

"He makes allies for the sake of peace, and for the sake of peace, he'll eliminate them. What's the problem with that?"

Bomiras's fiery face twisted. He probably hadn't expected a pacifist demon of the modern era to think like that.

"He would have less right to speak of peace if he was biased towards his subordinates," I said.

"As the descendant of a bloodline that only knows how to destroy, he is the least deserving of what he seeks. Demon King Anos is an abominable existence, even among the Voldigoads. A detestable child born through destruction, one that is more disaster than demon."

Although weakened, the Aviasten Ziara was enough to burn through the Sorcerer King's body, making his face crumble into pieces.

"Have the world-destroyer know this: No matter what ideals you preach, you cannot escape the truth."

Bomiras then burned away without attempting to answer the other question.

"If he truly seeks peace, he will eventually realize he has no choice but to destroy himself," he said, as he completely turned to ash. Those were his final words.

Azesith was dispelled, and we were returned to the original room we had been in.

“I-Is he dead...?” Emilia asked fearfully.

“He’s perished. You can move now.”

I released my wards and Emilia walked over to me, glancing at Bomiras’s ashes.

“A demon from two thousand years ago was destroyed this easily,” Emilia murmured. “Anosh, you really are a genius.”

“It was only because he showed me the spell to burn him himself. Without it, I would have struggled against that fiery body of his.”

It was no wonder he was called the Sorcerer King. Perhaps he would have fought more carefully if he’d known I was the Demon King of Tyranny. But no—even then, the battle had ended far too soon.

He had definitely perished, but there was no guarantee he was the real Sorcerer King to begin with. Attacking an enemy without measuring their strength first was far too reckless, especially for someone who had, until now, not taken any action.

It’d be best to assume that this wasn’t over.

“The way is clear. Come,” I said through Leaks.

Magic circles started appearing one after another, followed by the Demon King Academy students teleporting over. Lay, Misha, Arcana, and the others were among them.

“Ms. Emilia,” Lay said, walking over to Emilia and Raos. “Anos has ordered us to assist the Hero Assembly. We have three main goals. The first is to rescue the Hero Assembly, and the second is to suppress the Inzuel army and find who was behind this incident.”

“Was the Sorcerer King that Anosh just removed not the culprit?” Emilia asked.

“We think he was one of them, but there may be more involved,” Lay explained. “Like the emperor of Inzuel, for example.”

Emilia nodded with a serious expression. “What’s the third goal?”

“Militia, the Goddess of Creation, left Stars of Creation called Erial in this ruin town. Anos’s lost memories are sealed inside them. Our goal is to locate all five of them—the Inzuel army is either searching as well, or has already found them.”

Emilia thought for a moment.

“Rona, the First Princess of Inzuel, may know something. She’s waiting in the room over there.”

The wall where the door had been was still unchanged. Lay summoned Evansmana, the Sword of Three Races, and used it to slash at the wall, cutting a rectangular opening that fell back with a crash. We looked through the opening to see a shocked Rona staring back.

“Don’t worry, Princess Rona. We’ve succeeded in calling for reinforcements,” Emilia said gently, passing through the opening.

Just then, particles of magic overflowed from the room she had just been in. Emilia and the other Demon King Academy students searched the area with their Magic Eyes.

“Lo Macis just grew stronger,” Misha mumbled.

Sensing something troublesome had happened, Sasha’s gaze sharpened.

“Does that mean...” Sasha started to say, trailing off.

“We can’t use Gatom here anymore,” Misha confirmed.

“So there’s no way back?!”

We couldn’t call for more reinforcements. It was a two-layered trap designed to isolate those who teleported in.

“Looks like the enemies still have more up their sleeve,” I remarked.

As far as I knew, the enemies we had to face other than Bomiras were the Inzuel army and Hero Kashim. But it wouldn’t be strange for there to be other demons from two thousand years ago lurking around.

“Well, we’ll just solve everything ourselves. What about the Erial?” I asked, looking over at Emilia.

She turned to First Princess Rona.

“Has Emperor Chappes ever mentioned anything about magic artifacts called the Stars of Creation, or Erial?” Emilia asked the princess. “Or has he held any searches in the ruins recently?”

Rona thought for a moment before replying.

“I think I saw soldiers entering the oldest ruins of Burjeena. There were far too many to be conducting a regular investigation, so I noted how odd it was...”

That sounded suspicious.

“Where are these ruins located?” I asked.

“The ruins in Etiltheve get older the deeper you go. They’re accessible through forty-seven shafts set up across town. Shaft seven is the one that connects to the oldest ruins,” Rona answered.

“But there are five Stars of Creation in total, right? Would they all be in the oldest ruins?” Sasha asked.

Misha blinked in agreement. “There’d be no point in making five.”

“It’d be best to assume the others are elsewhere,” I said.

“I’m sorry, I can’t think of anything else,” Rona said apologetically.

Well, at least we had one clue now.

“Let’s split into two groups,” I said.

“Misa and I will pursue Kashim with Ms. Emilia. We’ll rescue the Hero Assembly and suppress the Inzuel army, including Emperor Chappes,” Lay said.

I told the other students to follow Emilia as well. Inzuel’s army was made of human soldiers, so they should have no issue handling them.

“So the rest of us will search for the remaining Stars of Creation, right?” Sasha said.

The group assigned to searching for the Erial would be her, Misha, Eleonore, Zeshia, Arcana, and myself.

“Rona, where’s the seventh shaft located?” I asked.

“Language!” Emilia scolded from beside me, but I brushed her off and drew the map of Etiltheve in front of Rona. The map of the town was publicly available, but the numbers of the shafts weren’t marked.

“It’s this one.”

She pointed at the furthest shaft from the Sorcerer Fort. I marked it with magic.

“Emilia, the Demon King says he’s giving you the right to command the Demon King Academy students. Use their strength to break out of this dilemma.”

“I know,” Emilia replied. “You watch out for yourself, Anosh. Don’t get arrogant like the Demon King, or you may end up tripping over your own feet. And watch your attitude. I think you’re getting a little too conceited, and that won’t bode well for you in Azesion. I don’t mind if you talk to me like this, but watch yourself in front of others. Got it?”

Ever since Emilia had started working at the Hero Academy, she’d been lecturing me about all types of things. But oddly enough, I didn’t mind it.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said.

Emilia’s eyes widened as though she hadn’t expected that reply.

“That’s a promise, you got that?” she said, smiling happily.

I ignored her and opened the door to the corridor. There were no soldiers in sight. Even though there was a spell in place to automatically enhance Lo Macis, after making such a commotion, someone should have noticed us by now. Were they waiting in ambush, hoping to increase their chance of victory?

Well, that just made it easier for us to move.

“Hopefully this is the last loose thread from two thousand years ago,” Lay said, walking up to me.

“For both of us,” I agreed.

We bid each other farewell and split up.

§ 14. The Gangrand Cliffs

I switched perspectives by looking through Shin's Magic Eyes. He was at the Gangrand Cliffs in the underground world. The cliffs were a mass of rock that reached from the dome to the ground, far too large to be seen in its entirety. Eldmed and Shin descended to the ground and peered up at the towering cliffs.

"Bwa ha ha. How utterly mysterious! Even though the dome was eternalized and fell on doomsday, this entire cliff was unaffected!" Eldmed exclaimed.

The dome had been on the brink of crushing the underground world. Even if Gadeciola were the highest point in the underground world, over half the Gangrand Cliffs should have been crushed by how far it fell.

"There must be no dome directly above it," Shin concluded.

"I see, I see. In short, the Gangrand Cliffs are pieces of the dome that've already fallen."

So portions of the dome had fallen as earthrain, piled up, and formed the Gangrand Cliffs. If the area above was hollow, then there would have been nothing to fall from the dome on doomsday.

"Part of the ruin town of Etiltheve may be located here. Along with the objects my liege seeks," Shin said, looking up at the cave in the middle of the cliffs. It was the entrance Diedrich had seen in his vision of the future.

"Who knows what lurks within? Bwa ha ha, how exciting! Memories of the Demon King, left behind by the Goddess of Creation. Just what could be hidden in them? And more importantly..."

Eldmed spun his cane and tapped it against the ground.

"What could have caused Demon King Anos, the man known for committing all acts of tyranny, to lose his memory?! Who could be behind it? In what way could they have stolen the *Demon King's* memories?!"

Shin ignored the Conflagration King's dramatic rambling and used Fless to fly

up to the cave entrance.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha! If they stand in that man’s way, they must be an enemy, no? It smells, oh yes, something smells here! It reeks of *danger*!”

Eldmed flew after Shin, cackling with delight.

“It reeks of an enemy of the Demon King,” he said, landing at the cave with Shin.

A quick glance with his Magic Eyes revealed that the cave extended deep into the cliff.



“These footprints are still new,” Shin commented, looking at the earth at their feet. His Eyes could detect the magic left behind in the footprints.

“The Phantom Knights, most likely,” Eldmed guessed.

The two marched into the cave without any hesitation. There were no lights, and the inside was completely dark. The Phantom Knights were potentially hiding somewhere, but Shin and Eldmed walked along, searching without a care.

“How much do you know about the Phantom Knights, Conflagration King?”

“The Phantom Knights of two thousand years ago?”

“Yes.”

Eldmed tapped his cane on the ground as he walked, searching for clues.

“I didn’t know they were called the Phantom Knights, but I knew there were rumors of a nameless group of knights,” he answered. “They were responsible for eliminating several powerful demons, yet never left evidence. I also knew the Demon King had subordinates that never revealed their names.”

“Are you saying they were the same group?”

“I’m just speaking of rumors and possibilities. But even if I knew anything, don’t you think Ceris would have made a Zecht to prevent me from speaking freely about it?”

Zecht contracts continued past the caster’s destruction. Eldmed’s words, therefore, had to be taken with a grain of salt.

The two continued through the cave for a while, eventually reaching a fork in the path.

“Just wondering out loud for a bit, but humor me, right-hand man of the Demon King. Do you prefer to search silently, or loudly?” Eldmed asked.

“If this is the enemy’s base, then it’s too late for any secrecy. They would already be aware of our presence.”

Eldmed smirked, then spun his cane in his hand. Particles of magic shot into the air like confetti, filling the cave with sparkling light. Eldmed let go of his

cane and it began to spin by itself in the air, making an obnoxious sound, like a great rattle shaking.

The Conflagration King then held his hands out in front of him and made a stretching motion. The spinning cane multiplied into five.

“Heyhey Doh Hey!”

Eldmed clapped his hands. The spinning, sparkling, rattling canes multiplied into ten.

“A magic organism? I remember seeing this two thousand years ago. So it was your doing,” Shin muttered, glancing at the Conflagration King.

“This Heyhey Doh Hey excels in search and investigation. It gathers information as well as it gathers attention! But unfortunately, that information cannot be retrieved until it physically returns to my hand.”

It seemed like a terribly inefficient magic for investigation purposes, since it required searching with neither discretion nor shame.

“However, it can double itself with a clap,” Eldmed added.

He clapped his hands again, and the rotating canes increased to twenty, scattering more sparkling confetti everywhere.

“Go,” he ordered.

The Heyhey Doh Hey split into two equal groups and went spinning down each path, rattling loudly all the while. Eldmed himself randomly chose to go down the right path, clapping his hands together every now and then as he walked. Shin walked beside him. Their surroundings were illuminated by the flashing lights of the spinning canes, and the rattling was bordering on deafening.

“Bwa ha ha! They’ve taken out fifty already. The Phantom Knights sure are skilled.”

Eldmed grabbed one of the Heyhey Doh Hey that returned and drew a map. The map showed a section of the internal structure of the Gangrand Cliffs, and there were several red dots marked on it.

“These dots are where the broken canes were taken out. That should be

where the enemy is. If they haven't moved already, anyway," Eldmed said.

"There's no sign of them moving towards us," Shin noted.

"They must be setting up a trap. A plot to erase the right-hand man of the Demon King and the Conflagration King in one sweep."

If the enemies had decided to avoid direct combat, then the Netherworld King and the Cursed King were most likely absent.

The Conflagration King grabbed another Heyhey Doh Hey that returned.

"Bwa ha ha. Good news!" he said. "A strange room was discovered. There's a barrier preventing the Heyhey Doh Hey from searching it, and the scent of magic is powerful. There could be an Erial there—or it could be a trap."

"It doesn't matter. If it's a trap, we'll clean it up by cutting it apart," Shin said simply.

"Very well, very well. That's what makes you Shin Reglia, right-hand man of the Demon King. Things wouldn't be interesting otherwise!"

Eldmed gave Shin a round of applause. The sound of Heyhey Doh Hey multiplying could be heard in the distance.

"Follow me," he said.

He used Fless to glide along the cave, Shin running beside him like the wind. Eventually, they reached a large vertical cavern. When they looked up, the cavern appeared to extend endlessly—as though it led to the surface. Without any hesitation, Eldmed flew up the vertical hollow, while Shin ran against the wall and leaped his way up.

There were several tunnels along the wall of the cavern, and the Conflagration King entered one of them. The narrow tunnel eventually led to a wider space.

"Here."

A barrier was placed across the entrance, obscuring the cave's interior. Eldmed grabbed the Heyhey Doh Hey that had been spinning there and poked the barrier. The cane immediately burned to ash.

“Watch out,” Shin warned.

At the same time, he drew the Sword of Severance. He took one step forwards, and brought down the sword that emitted a chillingly cold radiance. The barrier shattered apart easily.

“Let’s go,” he said.

They walked forwards. Several canes of Heyhey Doh Hey rattled noisily ahead of them, illuminating the space. Their sparkling light revealed an enormous number of pillars, to which countless corpses were pinned.

“They’re all gods,” Shin pointed out.

The gods were bound like specimens on display.

“Mostly of keeper class, it seems,” Eldmed added, walking up to one corpse and staring at it with his Eyes. He used his cane to lift the cloth covering the corpse, revealing a strange wound on its abdomen. It was scarred in the shape of a magic circle.

“What’s that?” Shin asked.

“Bwa ha ha. It’s the work of the mad, that’s what. They’ve cut open the belly of a god in order to modify it. I don’t know what spell this is, exactly, but it may be related to what happened two thousand years ago—to the countless corpses Ceris Voldigoad discovered at the Tseilon settlement.”

The headless corpses that had filled the Tseilon manor had also had their bellies sliced open.

“So someone has been conducting magical research this whole time. Back then the corpses were human and demon, but the experimental material here are gods. Ha ha ha ha! Just which daredevil dared to commit such taboos for their research? My heart leaps just imagining it!”

Beaming from ear to ear in delight, Eldmed pointed his cane at the back of the room.

“Show yourself, demon,” he said sharply.

Shin was already looking in the same direction.

“I, the Conflagration King, will test if you have the right to be the Demon King’s enemy!”

The end of his cane lit up brightly, shining light on the figure that stood where he was pointing. A low chuckle echoed.

The Conflagration King looked gleeful as he pictured the unseen enemy of the Demon King in his mind.

“Well, well.”

A demon in flamboyant robes and a large hat stepped before the two of them. His body was made of a gel-like substance, and his face was smooth and featureless. He seemed awfully familiar, and it was because he was the man who had once sunk in the magic shallows of Aharthern, the Great Spirit Forest—the Scarlet Stele King of the Four Evil Kings, Grysilis Derro.

“I expected the Demon King’s subordinates to come, but I wasn’t expecting *you*,” he said smugly, gel-like face shifting like a bubble of liquid. Arrogant confidence oozed out of his entire body. “But it’s all the same time. The Demon King himself could have shown, and it’d make no difference in my current state.”

Eldmed’s cold Eyes glared at the man.

“What a letdown,” the Conflagration King muttered, drooping in utter disappointment.

§ 15. Clown Magic

“You haven’t changed, Conflagration King,” Grysilis said, gel-like face distorting smugly.

Eldmed let out a loud and drawn-out sigh. He turned his back to Grysilis and faced Shin.

“What a sly and appalling trap this was, letting me down like this! Oh, if this was a play, the scriptwriter would be quite the big shot!” he lamented.

The Scarlet Stele King’s face collapsed, his Magic Eyes glaring with anger.

“I’m saying that your imprudent habit of looking down on me hasn’t changed at all!” he shouted, magic flowing through his entire body, causing the ancient runes written on every surface of the room to glow a pale blue.

“Ji Noavus.”

It was the spell that had defeated him in Aharthern. Fangs made of black lightning roared with a thunderclap and attacked Eldmed, sinking into his shoulder.

“How does the ancient rune magic developed by the Demon King taste? Replicating his magic is but child’s play for me now.”

Crackling black lightning spread everywhere as it pierced the Conflagration King’s body. But Eldmed looked unaffected by the attack.

“Ji Noavus is a very efficient spell, you see. Once it bites into an enemy, it won’t let go until they’re destroyed. I struggled quite a bit to get out of it myself,” Grysilis said in a delighted tone. “I know you obtained the Heavenly Father’s power, Conflagration King. Now show it to me. I will prove that in my current state, even the gods are no match for me.”

He spread his arms and sent magic power into his stone steles. Ji Noavus ripped apart Eldmed’s anti-magic and tore into his flesh.

“Heh heh heh. Something the matter? If you don’t hurry up, your source will

be consumed.”

Eldmed took his top hat into his hands. “You say that, but imprudence is just the beginning of *your* problems, Scarlet Steele King.”

The Conflagration King used magic to throw his hat into the air, where it hovered while spinning. Hourglasses of Conflagration fell out of the hat and around Grysilis, forming the curse of death.

“A curse that doesn’t activate until the sand finishes falling might as well be useless.”

Just as Grysilis’s gel-like face distorted, a comical *poof* could be heard, and smoke covered the Conflagration King like a party trick. From above a dove flew out of the smoke, while from the ground, a duck waddled out.

“Pon Polopo, huh? Your magic lineup really hasn’t changed at all.”

Unperturbed, Grysilis swung his arm, making Ji Noavus latch onto the waddling duck.

“A walking duck and a flying dove. Of course, one would naturally assume you took the shape of the faster dove. But knowing your impudence, the correct answer is the duck.”

The duck was torn apart by the crackling black lightning, making it vanish in a cloud of smoke with another *poof*.

“In the end, your magic is nothing more than an empty bluff. It shouldn’t even be called magic. It stands no chance against mine, for I have progressed far closer to the abyss.”

The moment Grysilis said that, another dove and duck appeared from the smoke, flying and waddling respectively.

“No matter how many times you try, the result will be the same.”

Ji Noavus sank its fangs into the duck. The flying dove vanished, and another cloud of smoke rose where the duck had been. Once again, a dove and duck appeared from the cloud through the Pon Polopo magic.

“I saw this spell two thousand years ago, Conflagration King. I know you’re trying to make me give up by portraying my attacks as pointless. You’re using

your low-level concealment magic to pretend to be unharmed when you're actually taking damage—a typical bluff coming from you.”

Grysilis continuously attacked the ducks, forcing Pon Polopo to be cast again and again.

“If you can buy enough time, the sand in the Hourglasses of Conflagration can finish falling—that’s what you want me to believe. But unfortunately for you, while you’re transformed via Pon Polopo, you can’t use any magic items. You’re trying to catch me off guard by making me believe I need to deal with your curse at the same time, but such tricks won’t work on me.”

A light glinted in Grysilis’s Magic Eyes as his gel-like face distorted.

“My Eyes can see through you. That clumsy spell formula is proof you’re bluffing through and through,” Grysilis said with a laugh, before turning to lay his Eyes on Shin. “Are you content to just watch on, Shin Reglia? The two of you may still be able to defeat me if the Conflagration King summons his divine body and you both come at me at once, you know?”

“I’ll pass. If you think the Conflagration King is merely defending himself, then you aren’t long for this world,” Shin replied.

Grysilis’s face warped with displeasure.

“I am fully aware of how he works. He has tricked me before. He deceives you by making what doesn’t exist seem like it does. I may have been fooled once, but such tactics cannot be called magic. Magic brings what doesn’t exist into reality!”

At his roar, the black fangs sank into another duck. But this time, the duck vanished without any smoke.

“Have you given up and changed to the dove? That just means you’re reaching your limit,” the Scarlet Steele King said triumphantly, sending the Ji Noavus after the dove instead.

Fangs of black lightning tore the bird apart, turning it into particles of magic that soon faded away. The Conflagration King was nowhere to be seen.

“I see... So there’s a trick behind the trick. During the first cast of Pon Polopo,

the dove didn't vanish even when I disposed of the duck."

Grysilis turned his gaze up to the ceiling. "That dove wasn't a decoy, but your real body."

A single dove rested at the end of his gaze.

"Fighting you head-on is laughably simple. You haven't developed any fearsome spells, and you haven't mastered the demon sword or any other magic tool either. At most, you're somewhat good at borrowing the strengths of the subordinates you raised. You may be crafty and cunning, but you're nothing more than a clown that sings praises for the Demon King."

A Ji Noavus appeared on each of Grysilis's arms.

"You are an utter *disgrace* to the Four Evil Kings!"

Four black fangs of lightning roared like thunder and swallowed the dove by the ceiling, ripping it to shreds. But the Conflagration King still didn't show himself. The dove merely turned into particles and disappeared.

"What...?"

Bewildered, the Scarlet Stele King scanned his surroundings with his Magic Eyes. There were no doves or ducks to be seen—and no Eldmed either.

"I see, I see," the Scarlet Stele King muttered, shooting Shin a sharp look. "The Spirit of Hiding, Gennul, was it? You were pretending not to get involved, but you were hiding the Conflagration King the entire time, Shin Reglia."

Shin silently stared back at Grysilis without moving, the Sword of Severance held loosely at his side.

"Well, that makes no difference to me," Grysilis said. "I'll just eliminate you first."

The Scarlet Stele King spread his arms, preparing Ji Noavus.

"Your Eyes can only see magic power and spell formulas," Shin noted quietly.

Grysilis scoffed.

"That's all I *need* to see. In order to reach the abyss of magic, I cannot afford to turn my Magic Eyes towards anything else."

“You should have shut yourself in your workshop,” Shin advised, “and stayed off the battlefield.”

“Losing your nerve, right-hand man of the Demon—”

Grysilis cut off abruptly, moving his mouth open and shut without a sound. He fell to his knees, then to his hands.

“What?! What is this?!”

The Scarlet Steele King whirled around to look at the Hourglasses of Conflagration. The sand in them had fallen: The curse was activating.

“That’s impossible... The Hourglasses of Conflagration can’t be used from another dimension. Did I misunderstand the spell formula?”

“Bwa ha ha! If you understand that much, you should be able to figure out the answer yourself,” Eldmed’s voice echoed.

It came from the first cloud of smoke created by Pon Polopo. A sudden wind blew the smoke away, revealing the Conflagration King standing there, spinning his cane in his hands. He set his cane down with a tap.

“What...? When did you... Since when... No, what spell did you use? Gatom? Impossible! Lynel and Najira? No, I would have seen that. Gennul is out of the question. You must have developed a new magic to fool my Eyes in the past two thousand years—”

“He was there from the beginning,” Shin said simply.

“From the...beginning...?”

Grysilis looked at them blankly.

“Bwa ha ha! You kept firing your Ji Noavus in random directions. You thought I was a duck, or a dove!”

The truth finally dawned upon Grysilis, and his expression warped with humiliation. He had caught Eldmed with the very first Ji Noavus he cast, yet had also been the one to release him from it.

Eldmed had purposefully exposed both the curse’s condition of falling sand and Pon Polopo’s limitation preventing the use of items, luring his enemy into

taking countermeasures. All that had been to lure his enemy further by falsely reassuring them of their supposed advantage.

“If I am a clown as you say,” Eldmed said, “then you’re my best audience. Time and time again, you fall for my every trick.”

§ 16. Closest to the Abyss of Magic

The corner of Eldmed's mouth lifted as he stared down at Grysilis. He had spotted an abnormality.

"Wondering why I'm still alive even though the sand in the Hourglasses of Conflagration have fallen?" Grysilis asked.

The Scarlet Stele King drew a magic circle on the ground. A black aurora appeared around him, forming a magic barrier.

It was *Beno levun*. Eldmed looked at the spell curiously.

"Did you think it was impossible for a source like mine to use a spell of the Demon King's, that costs so much magic to use?"

Grysilis slowly got to his feet. The *Beno levun* had completely shut out the curse of the hourglasses.

"Like I said earlier, your magic is no more than an empty bluff. With how close I've come to the abyss of magic, I cannot be killed by such party tricks."

Magic power filled Grysilis's body of gel, changing it into a toxic ash-green color. Eldmed stared into his abyss with his Magic Eyes, then burst into cackling laughter.

"Oh, how fortunate! There really *is* hope in the darkness! Did you see that, right-hand man of the Demon King? That utterly mediocre Grysilis, peerless in his stunted source size, *cast Beno levun!*" Eldmed exclaimed with excitement.

In contrast to Eldmed's ecstatic delight, Shin remained calm.

"His magic has increased significantly since he was in Aharthern," Shin remarked.

"Yes, that's exactly right! But his source was fully completed over two thousand years ago. There was absolutely no room for growth anywhere. But look at him now! That magic! Just what did you do?"

Grysilis's gel face warped smugly. "You want to know?"

“Bwa ha ha, what good would it be asking you, Scarlet Stele King? We’d just end up listening to you brag about research you stole from someone else, no?”

Grysilis glared, irritated by Eldmed’s cheap taunts.

“Oh no, Grysilis, no no, I’m not trying to mock you. I just know there’s no guarantee you’ll tell the truth even if I choose to listen,” Eldmed added, irritating him even more. “Of course, I could be swayed into believing you if you signed a contract to tell the truth for a day—”

The Conflagration King held up a Zecht.

“—but I know that’s a hard ask. No matter how much I tease you with bluffs, you don’t have the strength to fight a direct magic battle to the end. After all, no matter how many of his spells you use, you could never be the Demon King of Tyranny, the man who can brute force his way through any disadvantageous contract!”

Just as he was about to put away the Zecht, the Scarlet Stele King shot his magic over and signed it.

“Don’t look down on me. Unlike you, I have no need for lies,” he said confidently.

Eldmed grinned with satisfaction. “Then let’s hear it. Scarlet Stele King, how did you obtain that source?”

“You saw the corpses of gods left in this room,” Grysilis said, beginning his explanation triumphantly. “This was Ceris Voldigoad’s research. That man was trying to step into the abyss of the reincarnation magic Syrica. In addition to inheriting one’s strength in rebirth, he wanted to heighten the magic of the source and evolve it. All those corpses were the wombs used for that research.”

Wombs for rebirth, huh? The corpses in the Tseilon settlement two thousand years ago had probably been for the same purpose. Did Ceris obtain his research there? Or was that part of the past altered too?

“*Gijerica*—an evolved version of the spell Syrica that encourages evolution by using the source of the womb. I doubt you’ll understand even if I explain it, but it’s a source magic that triggers the sudden mutation of the source by either inheriting the womb’s power or interfering with it.”

Grysilis eagerly explained the results of his magic research.

“However, the Gijerica magic Ceris was researching was incomplete. It was possible to use humans and demons as the womb, but the use of gods as the womb still required investigation. He came to me and asked me to complete that research.”

Grysilis would have pounced on the Gijerica research the moment he learned of it. He had always wanted to overcome the issue of his weak source, so the offer would have been a godsend for him. Of course, Ceris would have known that too.

Until now, the Scarlet Stele King had been unfit for combat, but he possessed a vast amount of magic research-related knowledge. He had no aptitude for creativity, but was disciplined. If the foundations for the right research were there, he would be able to make use of it well.

“Thus, I finally completed Gijerica, the spell that reaches the depths of the abyss of magic,” Grysilis concluded, his gel-like body shifting in shape, scattering magic particles everywhere—particles that contained the order of a god. “Do you get it now? I searched for a womb worthy of becoming my source, and once I found it, I modified the god’s womb and reincarnated through it. I am now the closest existence to the abyss of magic, a being with both demon magic and divine order. *That* is what makes me the Scarlet Stele—no, allow me to update that title.”

Grysilis raised his voice loudly.

“I have surpassed the Demon King of Tyranny as the closest being to the abyss of magic. I am Grysilis Derro, the King of the Abyss!”

He held his hand at Shin and Eldmed and drew a magic circle.

“As mere subordinates of the Demon King, you stand no chance against me,” he said.

Light started radiating from his body.

“Order magic, *Jiosselom*.”

A blinding beam of light fired from his fingertips. It approached Shin at the

speed of light, but he stepped aside and let it hit Eldmed instead.

“Oof!” Eldmed grunted happily.

“Do you get it? I can even use the God of Brilliance Jiosselia’s order as my own magic. In other words, I can do things like this.”

Grysilis drew a magic circle over his entire body excitedly.

“Order magic, *Jioroia!*”

The next moment, he moved—at the speed of light.

“Heh heh heh, did you see that? I moved at the *speed of light*. Of course, it’s not as if such cheap magic is the pinnacle of my ability. I’m merely setting the table for the ultimate magic I am about to unveil.”

Grysilis moved around—yet again, at the speed of light—while emitting Jiosselom from his body, carving runes of light around the room.

“This is different to the magic of the Demon King, magic that can only destroy. This magic can remake the order of the world. All magic power and every spell becomes my servant and obeys me. Its name is Empelum Dydeya, and it is the closest order magic to the abyss!”

The magic circle he drew with Jiosselom began to activate. The minuscule amounts of magic in the air gathered around the Scarlet Stele King.

“Behold. This is the moment all magic—every spell—comes to serve me. Eventually, it will spread to your sources, and you will bow your heads in subservience too. You will swear absolute fealty to Grysilis Derro, the King of the Abyss, and not the Demon King—Gwooogh!”

Grysilis, who had been moving around at the speed of light, proceeded to suddenly trip and go flying at the speed of light. Shin had kicked his feet out from under him, causing him to crash into the wall. The moment the Scarlet Stele King tried to get up, Shin pinned him to the wall with the Sword of Severance.

“Gugyaaah!”

“Was there anything else you wanted to ask?” Shin asked, turning to face Eldmed, the struggling Scarlet Stele King easily held in place. As if sensing Shin’s

anger, the Conflagration King shrugged, yielding the floor to Shin.

“Grysilis Derro.” Shin glared at the Scarlet Steele King coldly. “For your false claims and other irreverent statements against my liege, I sentence you to a thousand deaths.”

One flash later—a flash that, arguably, was faster than the speed of light—Shin slashed Grysilis’s source. He instantly revived with Agronemt.

“Nurgh...” he groaned as he revived, but Shin immediately slashed again.

Grysilis resurrected once again.

“Gaaah...”

With his source split into seven parts, as long as each part wasn’t destroyed at the same time, he could resurrect with Agronemt over and over again.

But Shin continued swinging his demon sword without a care. His speed far exceeded the speed of light, and was increasing with every passing moment. He went from one thousand swings in one breath to two thousand in the next, and had now exceeded five thousand. His magic had been reduced to nothing.

“Sword of Severance, fourth hidden art—”

In the blink of an eye, the blade of severance swung ten thousand times.

“—*Certain Death.*”

“Guwabababababababaaah!”

Shin slashed apart Grysilis’s source, surpassing the resurrection speed of Agronemt, causing the particles to disperse on the spot. But the next moment, he looked to the side with a frown.

A giant stone eye had appeared there, and it was radiating divine magic power. It was a Magic Eye, and it glared straight at Shin. Even without looking into its abyss, it was clear it was a god.

“*Guala Nateh Forteos,*” Grysilis’s voice echoed.

His gel-like body emerged from within the stone eye. A Selection pledge jewel ring glinted on his finger. Grysilis had saved himself at the last possible moment by summoning a god.

“Bwa ha ha. So you were the last Selected Eight all along, Scarlet Steele King.”

The Scarlet Steele King beamed smugly at Eldmed’s comment. “If the Demon King was selected, then it’s only natural that I would be too. I am the Pursuer, the Selected Eight of Janeldefok, the God of Magic Sight.”

§ 17. The One Selected by Three

A demon sword glinted. By the time the Scarlet Stele King finished speaking, Shin had already closed the distance between them. He swung the Sword of Severance, down on the giant stone eye of the God of Magic Sight.

“Sword of Severance, second hidden art—*Decapitation*.”

A shrill metallic noise screeched loudly. Deltoros, the Sword of Severance, was capable of severing all things. However, its hidden art had been blocked by the majestic sword that suddenly appeared before Janeldefok.

It was a demon sword with a beautiful tempered pattern on the blade, and it exuded a mysterious aura that brought silence over the vicinity. The blade pattern wavered with a glint, and a vast amount of magic—the order of a god—started flowing from the sword.

“Heh heh heh. Unlike the Demon King, I was chosen by more than one god,” Grysilis declared proudly. A second Selection pledge jewel ring had appeared on his finger at some point. “Haleziend, the God of Demonic Blade.”

At Grysilis’s words, a glowing hand appeared around the majestic demon sword. The glow spread from the hand, forming the shape of a puppet made of light. The puppet held the sword in its hand with a flawless stance.

“Haleziend is the god of swordsmanship that governs all demon swords. He wields in his hands the Ruinflow Sword Altocorasta. Your one thousand dull swords don’t stand a chance against the true magic sword,” Grysilis said with a sneer.

“Is that so?” Shin replied flatly.

He used the Sword of Severance to directly block the Ruinflow Sword. Immediately after, the puppet of light’s weapon was swept away, and Deltoros flashed at its neck. However, the sword came to a stop as though it was caught on something, and Haleziend slashed at Shin’s neck instead.

Fresh blood splattered, but Shin was able to pull himself back at the last

moment and avoid a fatal wound. He used his Magic Eyes to glare at the barrier that had stopped the Sword of Severance.

“Heh heh heh. Like I said earlier, *unlike the Demon King*, there was more than one god who chose me.”

A third Selection pledge jewel had appeared on Grysilis’s finger.

“Linorolos, the Barrier God.”

The Barrier God’s order had obstructed Shin’s sword. An invisible cloth of divine power wrapped around Deltoros. The other end of the cloth was wrapped around a woman wearing no other clothes.

“Do it, Linorolos, Haleziend. Show the best swordsman of Dilhade what the blade of a god is like,” Grysilis commanded.

The pledge jewel shined, and the Barrier God’s body transformed into invisible cloth. The cloth shot in every direction like scattering spiders, trapping Shin and the God of Demonic Blade within a barrier.

“Linorolos’s barrier cloth cannot be broken from inside or outside,” Grysilis said, face distorting in shape as he explained. “Allies are given protection that can withstand the end of the world, and enemies are cursed to have all their movements sealed.”

As Grysilis spoke, Shin used the second hidden art of Deltoros to cut through the barrier cloth wrapped around the demon sword. He closed in on the Haleziend and swung his sword down. In the span of a single breath, the Sword of Severance and Ruinflow Sword clashed numerous times, sending countless sparks flying.

“It seems you aren’t called the god of swordsmanship for nothing,” Shin said.

Although his consecutive slashes were accelerating with every passing moment, the god that governed swordsmanship had no trouble keeping up. Haleziend, God of Demonic Blade, took the form of a glowing puppet with no voice or facial expression, yet it spoke eloquently through its sword.

“Sword of Severance, fourth hidden art—”

Shin’s blade of severance flashed ten thousand times in an instant.

“—Certain Death.”

Haleziend used its natural strength to repel each blow of Certain Death. But it was only able to do so due to Linorolos’s barrier cloth preventing Shin from moving faster. They exchanged blows, slashing at each other’s bodies, but the barrier kept the God of Demonic Blade unwounded as Shin gradually acquired more and more injuries.

As the hidden art came to an end, Haleziend’s body swayed. A faint trickling sound could be heard from the Ruinflow Sword in the puppet’s hand as a thin puddle of reflective water suddenly appeared between Shin and the god.

Shin was reflected on the surface of the water, and the trickling sound could be heard once again. A small ripple spread across the water, like a droplet had fallen, rising where the tip of the Sword of Severance was. The next moment, the Ruinflow Sword Altocorasta pierced through the surface of the water. Shin repelled it with Deltoros, but the thrust made by the God of Demonic Blade struck the spot on his sword where the ripple had ended perfectly.

A shattering sound rang out. The Sword of Severance in Shin’s hand cracked like thin ice, falling apart into minuscule fragments. Its source had been slashed apart too, making it impossible to regenerate over time using magic. The demon sword had perished.

“The hidden art of the Ruinflow Sword... I see...” Shin muttered.

He deployed a magic circle, and the God Slasher Gneodoros appeared from within. A trickle could be heard as another puddle appeared before him. The ripple rose on the storage circle, and the Ruinflow Sword slashed it apart.

At the same time, Shin’s hand was also slashed. Although blood was flowing from the wound, he could still move. He leaped to the side and glared at Altocorasta. For a blow that had destroyed Deltoros, that blow was awfully weak. The hidden art probably focused all its strength on the single spot where the ripple rose.

“Heh heh heh. Looks like that side has been settled,” a happy voice declared. “It’s clear who has the better swordsman between the Demon King and myself.”

The Scarlet Stele King looked down upon them from where he stood on the stone eye of Janeldefok.

“Bwa ha ha! Don’t jump to conclusions, Grysilis,” Eldmed said. “You tend to get so absorbed in your insignificant amount of power that you fail to see your opponent. That’s why you always lose.”

Eldmed’s hair turned gold, and his Magic Eyes started glowing a burning red. Magic particles gathered at his back, taking the shape of wings of light. Golden flames rose from the palm of his hand, creating the Divine Sword Roduier.

“Go,” he said.

Roduier shot towards Shin, but froze midair when it touched Linorolos’s barrier.

“You’re too late. Empelum Dydeya is almost complete,” the Scarlet Stele King said. He held his hand out and Roduier flipped over, pointing its blade at Eldmed. “Not even the magic or swords of the gods can defy Empelum Dydeya.”

“I see, I see! As expected of the God of Divine Sight. Constructing a spell formula as complex as this wouldn’t be possible without borrowing Janeldefok’s Magic Eyes.”

Grysilis’s gel face distorted in discontent at Eldmed’s words.

“Even if you could comprehend it in your head, your Eyes are still unable to see through the spell formula,” Eldmed added.

“Denial is unsightly. No one will come to save you. You have been defeated. Once Empelum Dydeya is complete, you will be my dog. You will never speak in anything other than barks ever again.”

He used his servility magic to send Roduier flying. The Conflagration King evaded it at the last moment, but the sword flipped over and pierced through his chest from behind.

“Until then, I’ll play with you all you want.”

With the sword stabbed through his chest, Eldmed laughed. “Is it still not complete?”

“What does it matter to you?” the Scarlet Stele King snapped.

“Oh, I was just thinking to myself. Your magic isn’t suited for practical use. With a spell of this scale, you need to draw the magic circle on the walls, and it takes you quite a long time to do so. Furthermore, your circle has no failsafe. If the slightest portion of the circle is broken, wouldn’t the activation of Empelum Dydeya be halted?”

“Still unwilling to admit defeat? If you think you can stop it, just try.”

Eldmed burst into hearty laughter. “Where are you looking? I already have.”

Grysilis look bewildered, then narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

“Now, now, go on!” Eldmed taunted. “Use those Magic Eyes you’re so proud of to gaze upon my body!”

Indeed, something was odd. Eldmed’s body had been firmly stabbed by Roduier, yet not a single drop of blood flowed from the wound.

“Eldmedran.”

As if starting a show, Eldmed dramatically raised his hands and pulled out the Divine Sword out of his body. Not a drop of blood could be seen anywhere.

“Allow me to explain the rules of the game!” Eldmed announced with exaggerated movements, pointing at Grysilis with his cane. “I will ask you questions. You have ten seconds to give each answer. Your attacks will only work on me if you answer. In advance of your answer, I will predict what your answer will be by writing it on this card.”

The Conflagration King took out a black card from his top hat.

“If I predict your answer word-for-word, your attack will reflect back upon you. There are a total of three questions. If I cannot predict at least one answer correctly, I will die as a penalty.”

Eldmed flicked the card in his hand, hiding it from view for a brief moment. When it reappeared, it had multiplied into three.

“I, the Conflagration King Eldmed, declare this through the order of the Heavenly Father,” he said with a gleeful grin. “The games of the gods are absolute.”

The Conflagration King’s game magic was designed to make fun of others. But

by using the order of the powerful Heavenly Father, he could make his spell an actuality.

“What worthless magic,” Grysilis replied. “You’ll *guess* my answer, you say? The Zecht may stop me from lying, but that doesn’t mean you’ll be able to predict what exactly I’ll end up saying. To die after three mistakes suggests your magic must be awfully flawed.”

“Let’s get started right away! Here’s the first question, Grysilis,” Eldmed said, ignoring Grysilis’s words completely. “Give the full name of the almighty demon you admire and envy more than anything, who constantly drives you to be better.”

Grysilis fell speechless and glared at Eldmed.

“If no such person exists, you may answer that as well. Of course, my prediction must be exact, down to the word. For example, ‘it’s Anos Voldigoad’ and ‘Anos Voldigoad, I’d say’ are considered different answers. It’ll be quite hard even for me, the Conflagration King!”

Eldmed chuckled deep in his throat as he used his magic power to write on the first black card.

“To tell you the truth, I’ve already asked the Goddess of the Future and her Prophet for what you’d answer. It’s gotten much harder for those two to make prophecies nowadays, but your reply in this situation is 99% decided—”

Grysilis lost his composure for a brief moment, causing his magic to shake.

“—is what I’d *like* to say, but I’d be lying! How unfortunate! Now there’s three seconds remaining. If you run out of time, you’ll have to take the penalty!”

“The answer is...”

Magic started to flow from Grysilis’s body.

“I have no intention of going along with your worthless games!”

Grysilis activated Empelum Dydeya and sent it towards Eldmedran. If he gained control of the Conflagration King’s game magic, the game itself would be rendered invalid. He must have realized such a move was viable in the time between his answer and when Eldmed had to guess his answer. The magic

circles in the room glowed as the Empelum Dydeya interfered with Eldmedran's magic circle.

"Heh heh heh," Grysilis cackled. "How unfortunate. I've said this many times now, but your magic is no more than an empty bluff. There's no need for my magic to go along with your games."

Grysilis's magic entered the Eldmedran, forcing it into subservience through Empelum Dydeya. Grysilis's gel-like face distorted in a triumphant sneer.

But as soon as he did so, Empelum Dydeya froze. The magic runes written around the room rapidly faded away.

"Wha... Why?" the Scarlet Stele King muttered in a daze. "The spell should have been perfect! Why? Why didn't it activate?! Just where did I go wrong? My theory and spell formula should be flawless..."

"Are you *still* going on about that?"

Eldmed walked forwards and grabbed the Heyhey Doh Hey cane spinning by the wall. Its light disappeared, and the magic runes it had been projecting onto the wall vanished with it.

"It was overwritten?!" Grysilis exclaimed, aghast. "No... That can't be possible. I have the Eyes of the God of Magic Sight! I would never overlook something so simple!"

"It's exactly because you have those Eyes that you didn't notice. From the moment the Demon King's name was mentioned, your arrogance blinded you. And the reason is obvious!"

Eldmed tapped his cane on the ground and raised his voice dramatically.

"For you yearn for, envy, covet, and harbor the darkest desires for the awe-inspiring Demon King."

He pointed his cane at the Scarlet Stele King.

"Of course you do. It's inevitable. It's the most natural thing in this world! No one can stand before the Demon King and be content. From the moment I uttered my question, this was the last thing you wanted to admit. If you had you would have won the game easily. You would have defeated the

Conflagration King with ease! Ah, but there would have been just one catch, Scarlet Stele King.”

The Conflagration King grinned.

“You’d be admitting defeat to the Demon King from the bottom of your heart.”

He took out the three black cards and shuffled them in his hands, increasing them and decreasing them playfully.

“That was the one thing you didn’t want to do. You were so distracted by just the idea of him, your mind so consumed with thoughts of the Demon King, that for a brief moment you took your Eyes away from the spell formula. I used that moment to overwrite the magic runes. Unwilling to acknowledge the Demon King yet unable to lie, there was only one possible answer you could give.”

Eldmed flipped the card over. The words written on it said “No response.”

“‘No response.’ You may have thought you preserved your pride by refusing to answer, but by failing to just say Anos Voldigoad, you’ve proved that you envy and extol the Demon King more than anyone else.”

“What... Such nonsense...”

The Conflagration King waved his cane, restoring the magic circle on the wall.

“Your attack will be reflected back to you.”

The Empelum Dydeya directed at Eldmedran rebounded back to the Scarlet Stele King. In other words, Grysilis was made subservient to Eldmed.

“Say, Grysilis. How long is Empelum Dydeya effective for?” Eldmed asked.

Grysilis’s face paled, distorting chaotically.

“H-Haleziend! Linorolos! Kill him in the next minute!” he yelled.

But when he turned to look at his gods, he fell silent. There was a thin puddle of water between Shin and the God of Demonic Blade. Ripples rose over the right side of Shin’s chest before the Ruinflow Sword flashed. In response, Shin walked forwards unarmed and grabbed the hilt of the sword—as though he knew how the god would swing.

“The ripples on the water’s surface are ripples of destruction,” Shin said, sending his magic into Altocorasta through the hilt.

Haleziend tried to move back, but Shin easily snatched the demon sword from the puppet. He moved fluidly, like water itself.

“You are a sword god that has been wandering in search of a master. I will accept that soul of yours,” Shin said, using his honed magic power to force the Ruinflow Sword Altocorasta under his control.

Once he gained control over the demon sword, he swung it with all his strength to prove it. At that moment, the glowing puppet—Haleziend, the God of Demonic Blade—lost its light and collapsed lifelessly on the spot. The light flowed out of the puppet and returned to Altocorasta as though it was being absorbed. The magic being emitted from the demon sword rose dramatically.

“What? That’s impossible... What are you doing, Haleziend?!” Grysilis yelled. “You are a god that made a pact with *me*! How dare you surrender to a mere subordinate of the Demon King?!”

“Pact or no, no demon sword would serve a master that cannot even use a sword,” Shin said, ignoring Grysilis’s bewildered expression. “Especially the order of demon swords. It’s only natural for it to choose who it considers worthy.”

So the main body of the God of Demonic Blade wasn’t the glowing puppet, but the Ruinflow Sword itself. Shin had noticed that by communicating through his own sword. Haleziend couldn’t speak out loud, so Grysilis had failed to realize what the god was seeking the entire time.

“A-Argh! This worthless piece of junk! I didn’t need you in the first place! Linorolos, Janeldefok, kill every one of them!”

“You seem to think the right-hand man of the Demon King would be inferior to a mere god,” Shin said.

A reflective puddle appeared before him, with the faint sound of trickling water. Two ripples quietly spread, which he slashed with the demon sword in his hands. The transparent cloth Linorolos was transformed into was torn to shreds, and Janeldefok shattered mid-charge like it was made of thin ice. In a

flash, two gods were destroyed by the Ruinflow Sword, Altocorasta.

“Wha...”

Shin walked up to Grysilis and pointed Altocorasta at his face.

“Ten thousand deaths isn’t enough for you,” he said.

Another puddle appeared between them. Grysilis’s gel-like body trembled in fear.

“Bwa ha ha! You can stop scaring him now, Shin Reglia.”

Shin turned to look at the smirking Conflagration King.

“His time is up,” Eldmed added.

“Urgh!”

Grysilis fell to his knees, clutching his head in great pain.

“Gah... Aah... Ugh...”

Empelum Dydeya activated, tying Grysilis to Eldmed with chains of servitude. He was no longer able to oppose Eldmed.

“You’re the dog, Grysilis,” Eldmed said.

The Scarlet Stele King’s gel body transformed before their eyes, turning to a four-legged shape with a tail. A perfect example of a dog.

“What’s your reply?”

Grysilis barked and wagged his tail.

§ 18. Accomplice

After leaving the Sorcerer Fort, we headed south of the Etiltheve ruin town.

“I’m sure you were watching us the whole time, but I’ll report anyway. It seems the Scarlet Steele King hasn’t been informed of anything besides the Gijerica magic,” Eldmed’s voice said through Leaks.

After subduing Grysilis, the Conflagration King had interrogated him.

“Hmm. Nothing unexpected, then. Ceris was using him to act on his behalf,” I said.

“But there is one thing of interest! Gijerica is a truly fascinating spell. Look at how much more powerful even someone like Grysilis became because of it! Can you imagine what kind of enemy Ceris Voldigoad was plotting to create using it?! Just the thought fills me with— Ugh!”

He groaned in pain before continuing as though nothing had happened.

“Or perhaps, just perhaps! An enemy of the Demon King has been born already!”

That would be supremely annoying. A monster roaming around with no master would only cause trouble.

“Veaf flare said she made the Gluttony God Galvadorion reincarnate in her belly and turned it into the Supreme Dragon,” I recalled.

“Ah, hold on, I’ll check with him right now. Unfortunately, he only speaks in barks and yaps, so questioning him on anything takes a lot of work. Maybe I should return his ability to speak?” the Conflagration King muttered to himself.

He searched Grysilis’s memories directly, then explained what he saw.

“I see, I see... As you suspected, it was Gijerica. Veaf flare’s stomach was modified to allow her to give birth to the Supreme Dragon. The special traits applied during reincarnation vary depending on the combination of mother and child.”

In Veaf flare’s case, that trait was what had allowed the Gluttony God to be reborn as the Supreme Dragon. However...

“That can’t be all.”

“Indeed, indeed. The Netherworld King Aeges and the Cursed King Kaihilar abducted Veaf flare. Let me guess what you’re thinking, Demon King: Her womb will be used to give birth to something. The Gluttony God’s reincarnation as the Supreme Dragon was a side effect of the modifications made to her womb!”

Eldmed raised his voice in excitement, as if filled with anticipation for an enemy yet to come.

“It reeks, yes, it reeks of danger! Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Capture Veaf flare first. She should be in the Gangrand Cliffs. Search for her alongside the Erial.”

“Capture her first... Right, of course...” Eldmed grumbled unhappily.

In contrast, Shin’s reply was short and simple.

“Understood. And the remnants of the Phantom Knights?”

“I’ll leave that to you.”

“Yes, my liege.”

The Leaks cut off. A black mist appeared between the people walking before us.

“Halt,” I said, calling for Misha and the others to come to a stop. The black mist turned into a demon with six horns.

“It’s Kaihilar,” Sasha muttered, stiffening.

“Wait!” the demon cried.

The people around us turned to stare, wondering at the commotion. The demon slowly walked up to us.

“I wish to speak to the Demon King. Can you please bring me to him?”

“Jiste?” Misha murmured.

Indeed, their current source belonged to Jiste. Her personality was currently

in charge of Kaihilar's body.

"I'm begging you, please save Kaihilar. I won't tell any lies. I can sign a Zecht swearing it. I'll even tell you where the Erial are! So please, just hear me out first," she pleaded in an earnest voice.

Misha stared at her, then tugged at my sleeve.

"Grief and sadness," she said quietly, reading Jiste's emotions. "She's about to lose someone precious to her..."

Well, if it was Jiste at the forefront, then there was no need to be that cautious.

"Come with me," I said, leading everyone to an empty alley.

Jiste followed without complaint.

"What happened to Kaihilar?" I asked, casting Zecht at the same time. The contract would force Jiste to tell the truth.

"He's asleep right now. But I don't know when he'll wake up."

Jiste signed without any hesitation.

"Um... Where's the Demon King?" she asked.

"It's me."

I used Kurst and returned to my sixteen-year-old form. Jiste looked at me with surprise.

"So what does Kaihilar need saving from?" I asked.

"Oh, right. You know about how the Netherworld King was once one of the nameless knights of Dillade, right?"

I nodded, gesturing for her to continue.

"I heard the Netherworld King say something about how the dead must be buried in the dark and forgotten. He cannot accept that the nameless knights are still wandering around in this era like the living dead."

"Meaning Ceris Voldigoad is still alive?" I asked.

"I don't know. I asked if he meant Ceris Voldigoad, but he said no. He

wouldn't tell me any details, so I don't know who he was talking about exactly. But the Netherworld King has been searching for that person for the past two thousand years. He was even willing to help Ceris to find them."

In order to bury the dead, he was willing to work with someone he was at odds with. *Hmm.*

"I think he even went to Aharthern to find that person," Jiste continued.

"And he finally found them in the underground world?" I guessed.

"I think so," she confirmed.

If the Netherworld King was looking for a missing member of the Phantom Knights, then Ceris Voldigoad was most definitely involved somehow.

"Kaihilam said the Netherworld King would lose..."

"To that missing knight?"

Jiste nodded. Aeges was no average demon himself. He would never challenge someone stronger than him unprepared. Yet the Cursed King had declared without a doubt that he would lose...

"The Netherworld King is prepared to sacrifice his own life. Kaihilam said that when it happens, he will step in."

"You mean Kaihilam intends to sacrifice himself in the Netherworld King's stead?"

"Yes."

Such a thing wouldn't be out of the question; with Kaihilam's curse magic, he could draw the enemy's attacks to himself.

"Kaihilam said he owed the Netherworld King a favor. One he is willing to give his life to return," Jiste said.

"I never knew the two were so close," I said.

Jiste gave a small smile, a faint warmth underlying her expression.

"Kaihilam can be spoiled, dishonest, and inconsiderate of others. But even though he has his faults, he's a very righteous person."

A debt worth dying for, huh? Interesting.

“In short, you want me to find that person before the Netherworld King and Cursed King do, and remove them from the picture?” I summarized.

Jiste nodded.

“If anyone can do it, it’s you,” she said.

“Why doesn’t that Netherworld King ask you himself, brother?” Arcana asked. “Ceris and the Phantom Knights are trying to prevent world peace. He should be on the same side as you.”

“Hmm, that’s a good point,” Sasha agreed. She tilted her head in thought. “The Netherworld King always cooperated with us when our goals aligned, so why isn’t he borrowing Anos’s help this time?”

“The Netherworld King said that for this, the Demon King would be the very last person he would ask for help,” Jiste added.

“Does that mean anyone *besides* Anos is okay?” Eleonore asked.

“Does that mean...a rivalry...?” Zeshia echoed. She wanted to join the conversation despite not quite understanding what was going on.

“He said it was his duty to fulfill. Be it two thousand years ago or now, the path of the Demon King should never cross the path of the dead.”

What a frustrating way to say things, though it might have been said entirely to throw Jiste off his trail.

“I know Kaihilam will be quite angry with me if I tell you this, but I’m worried. At this rate, both of them will die,” she said with an anxious look.

“Don’t worry, I’ll save both of them.”

“Really?”

I nodded. Jiste smiled.

“Thank you, Demon King! Sorry for always causing you trouble.”

“How will we find them?” Misha asked—“them” referring to the Phantom Knight the Netherworld was searching for.

“There should be clues about the Phantom Knights two thousand years ago,” I said. “They watched my birth, and there’s Bomiras’s words to consider too. At the very least, they used to be related to me in some way. If I can remember what, then we may be able to reach who we’re looking for.”

“So ultimately, we just continue what we were doing and look for the Erial first?” Sasha asked in confirmation.

“Yes.”

I turned to look at Jiste.

“The Stars of Creation are buried across the ruins. It’s taking time to dig them out. The Cursed King and Netherworld King were ordered to protect them,” she said.

“By whom?”

“The Sorcerer King. Bomiras is working with Ceris. The Phantom Knights are upholding that collaboration even with Ceris gone.”

Was the Netherworld King commanding the knights now? If they were, their cooperation with Bomiras would serve to defeat the person he was after.

“But the Anos beat up the Sorcerer King,” Eleonore said, holding up her index finger.

Zeshia nodded triumphantly. “The Erial are ours!”

But Jiste shook her head.

“I highly doubt the Sorcerer King truly perished. He possesses clones of his body of fire. When one body perishes, his source is transferred to another—you have to destroy every clone to kill him completely.”

“Transferring the source... Is that still the same person afterwards?” Sasha wondered.

“Hmm. If it’s the same personality and same magic, then I don’t see why not,” I said.

As I suspected, he had measures in place to prevent his death. It was no wonder he had been called the Sorcerer King two thousand years ago.

“Where are the Erial located?” I asked.

“The one Kaihilam was ordered to protect is in shaft twelve of Etiltheve. I believe the security there is weakest right now.”

Kaihilam wasn't around, after all.

“Aeges is in shaft thirty. And I've heard there's another one buried in the ruin mural located in the furthest depths of the castle.”

The First Princess Rona had said there was one in shaft seven. Kaihilam was protecting one in shaft twelve. Aeges was doing the same in shaft thirty. There was another in the mural located in Etiltheve's castle depths. If there was another in the Gangrand Cliffs where Shin and Eldmed were, that made a total of five.

“Lay and the others are close to the castle. We'll go after the other ones first,” I said.

I drew a map of the town using magic, and Jiste marked the locations of the shafts.

“Eleonore, Zeshia, and Arcana will head to shaft twelve,” I said. “Misha and Sasha will head to shaft seven.”

Everyone nodded and moved into action.

“Let's do our best, Arcana!” Eleonore shouted.

“I'll try.”

“We'll get...the Erial...first...!” Zeshia said.

Eleonore, Arcana, and Zeshia left in high spirits.

“Be careful,” Misha said to me.

“Our destination is the only one without a confirmed Star of Creation, right?” Sasha asked Misha as they both started running towards shaft seven.

“Jiste, you will come with me,” I said, leisurely walking forwards. “We're going to Aeges.”

§ 19. Inherited Curse

Jiste and I made our way towards ruin shaft thirty, currently guarded by Aeges.

I observed the city as we walked through it, but nothing seemed particularly out of the ordinary. The city held the same kind of peace that was characteristic of this era. Not a hint of uncertainty about the potential upcoming war could be felt.

The citizens were unaware that the Inzuel army had captured the Hero Assembly and was attempting to rebel against Gairadite. Nobody wished for war in peacetime. But if Etiltheve was about to become a battlefield, then it was the king's duty to convey that to the people. If the citizens themselves were ignorant of what was happening, there was no way this war could be in their name.

"Jiste, do you know anything about the debt Kaihilaam owes?"

"I think it has something to do with Kaihilaam's teacher, Master Norr Dorfmond. Have you heard of him?" Jiste asked.

"The head of the Dorfmond family, who all excelled at curse magic?" I replied. "He was also known as the Magic Sage. I met him once before, but he had cast so many curses on his body at that point that he was already close to death."

Perhaps that was why the demons of the Dorfmond bloodline were relatively quiet during the Great War. They avoided both demons and humans and focused solely on staring into the abyss of their magic. Scholarly demons like them were rare, but they did exist.

"Kaihilaam is a descendant of Dorfmond," Jiste explained. "He was an odd one among his bloodline. He insisted on making the Dorfmond name famous throughout Dilhade, so Master Norr disowned him. Kaihilaam was cursed so that he could never name himself as a Dorfmond again, and completely devoted himself to the war."

That was how he became Kaihilaam Jiste, tirelessly fighting in the war and drawing renown to himself such that he became known as the Cursed King of the Four Evil Kings. Although it was unclear at what point Jiste's personality had appeared.

"You reincarnated after the Great War, right?" Jiste asked, continuing. "One day, curses suddenly flooded the Dorfmond castle and wiped out the rest of the bloodline. The approaching end of Master Norr's lifespan caused all the curses he had been suppressing in his source to escape."

Norr Dorfmond had been casting curses on himself for the sake of his magic research. His source was inherited from past generations, and had been packed with curses from the moment of his birth. He'd possessed a strong resistance to curses, but it seemed he lost his control over them just before he perished.

"Master Norr knew that the end of his lifespan would cause his curses to trouble the people of Dilhade. He told his disciples that if worse came to worst, they were to kill him by cursing him. He asked them to inherit the curses he had spent his lifetime staring into the abyss of."

And such was the last wish of the sage who had spent his life pursuing the abyss.

"But even though Master Norr had many disciples, no one at the castle was capable of receiving his curse. The curses gnawing away at Master Norr were stronger than expected, and in an instant all of Dorfmond castle was overrun by curses. The disciples had no choice but to flee."

They couldn't be blamed for that. Norr Dorfmond had spent his entire life building upon his curses. Whatever he had planned couldn't be stopped with half-hearted resolution.

"Kaihilaam knew that and tried to return to the Dorfmond castle. But he wasn't sure if he could fulfill Master Norr's will after being disowned. Only someone of the official Dorfmond name and magic could stop him."

"But the official disciples didn't stand a chance against the curses. That must have vexed Kaihilaam quite a bit," I said.

Jiste nodded.

“Kaihilam visited the disciples and encouraged them to fulfill his will,” Jiste continued. “But they all feared Master Norr’s curses and refused to approach the castle. The eldest of the disciples said this to Kaihilam: None of this would have happened if you hadn’t desired fame.”

She looked down sadly.

“Kaihilam merely wanted the world to acknowledge Master Norr’s magic. He has the heart of a child. He couldn’t understand why his teacher lived such a quiet life. All he wanted was for others to know how amazing his teacher was.”

How very demon-like of him to become an Evil King just for that.

“Kaihilam never said it out loud, but he deeply regretted his choices. He could only watch the Dorfmond castle from afar as the curses spread. That was when the Netherworld King paid him a visit.”

Jiste smiled thinly.

“‘A castle that spreads curses is nothing but a nuisance, so help me destroy it,’ he said.”

It was a very typical thing for the Netherworld King to do.

“Of course, Kaihilam didn’t agree immediately. The two signed a Zecht and dueled. If the Netherworld King won, Kaihilam would assist in cursing the Dorfmond castle to its destruction. If Kaihilam won, the Netherworld King would become his subordinate.”

“And the Netherworld King won,” I guessed.

“Yes. Thus, Kaihilam reluctantly went with him to the Dorfmond castle. Truthfully, he was happy he now had a reason to go. Being disowned as a disciple, he couldn’t stop the curse. But since he lost the duel, he had no other choice.”

He must have been waiting for someone to give him the push he needed.

“After sending all the curses flowing from the castle to another dimension with his spears, the Netherworld King told Kaihilam to do something about the strongest curse, which was emitting from Master Norr’s corpse. Kaihilam transferred the curse to his own source, then destroyed the source with his

own curse. As soon as he did that, the final curse activated: Master Norr's voice whispered to him. 'Well done, my disciple. My magic will curse you for the rest of your life,' it said."

As a teacher that had pursued the abyss of curse magic, there was no higher praise he could give a disciple.

"I see. With the Netherworld King's spears, it would have been easy to send all the curses to another dimension," I said.

Jiste nodded with a smile.

"That's right. The Netherworld King could have buried the cursed castle of Dorfmond all by himself. Yet he went out of his way to ask for Kaihila's assistance. When Kaihila realized that, he asked the Netherworld King why he did such a favor for him."

"What was the reply?"

"He said he just felt like it," Jiste said with a gentle look.

The usual Netherworld King, then.

"But after that, the Netherworld King said Master Norr had wished to meet Kaihila on his deathbed, and showed him the cursed runes he stored in Dehiddatem," Jiste added. "They spelled 'Kaihila Dorfmond.'"

Norr Dorfmond knew exactly which of his disciples would be able to stop him. In his very last moments, he forgave Kaihila, and wished for him to inherit his curse.

"It turns out that the Netherworld King had gone to the Dorfmond castle by himself at first. When he saw the runes that appeared with the curses from the castle, he turned back."

So that was why he invited Kaihila. It seemed Aeges didn't want to admit he did it for the Cursed King either.

"Even though he inherited the curse, Kaihila was still in low spirits. The Netherworld King said to him in response: 'An immature disciple would never understand the thoughts of a teacher who survived the warring era.'"

"And that was the debt?" I asked.

“I can’t think of anything else. Master Norr was very important to Kaihila. I’m sure the Netherworld King is dealing with someone just as precious to him right now. Something he has to do no matter what.”

And that involved burying the dead. Was his goal just to kill them, or was there something beyond that?

Just then, a Leaks arrived from Arcana and Eleonore.

“Brother.”

“We found something that looks like an Erial.”

I promptly switched my vision to Arcana’s perspective.

She was in the ruin shaft, at what seemed to be an underground temple. Stone arches lined the path. A gate was immediately beyond them, with more gates placed at even intervals for quite a long distance. At the very end of all the gates was an old mural.

The mural was of the night sky. It wasn’t drawn on the wall—the mural was the night sky itself. There was one blue star twinkling in the center, surrounded by many blinking stars around it. The stars formed a divine barrier that protected the blue star.

“Hmm, I think the blue one is the Star of Creation. How are we meant to dig it out, though?” Eleonore asked, looking at the fixed magic circle near the mural.

It had been drawn relatively recently. The spell formula of the magic circle was formed to prevent the mural’s barrier from being destroyed or dispelled. From what I could see of the formula with my Eyes, if the barrier was broken by force, the Erial would fly off somewhere. The barrier would need to be dispelled slowly, over time.

“You should be able to dispel the barrier with Militia’s order.”

“If I remove the barrier with Altiertonoa, the Sorcerer King might know,” Arcana pointed out.

“That’s fine.”

“Okay then.”

Arcana held her hands up.

“Night falls; day passes; the moon rises; the sun sets.”

In the ruin town of Etiltheve, the order of the gods moved. The sun slowly set, changing day to night. Darkness enshrouded the world as the Moon of Creation rose into the sky, shining its blinding moonlight into the ruin shaft. Then, a Moon of Creation appeared in the night sky of the mural. The mural released a gentle glow, causing the scattered light of the stars to fade, leaving behind a single blue star.

Arcana reached out and the blue star leaped out of the mural, landing in her palm.

“There are memories sealed within,” she said.

“Look inside.”

Arcana nodded.

“Memories of the stars blink; light of the past reaches the surface.”

As she peered into the Erial, a scene from the past was reflected in her Magic Eyes.

§ 20. A World of Betrayal and Injustice

Two thousand years or more ago.

At the foot of Goanel Mountain in Dilhade, tents were set up around a burning campfire. The tents housed a group of cloaked demons—the Phantom Knights. They could have used their magic to prepare more comfortable lodgings, but they purposefully refrained so as to better conceal themselves. As long as no magic was used, they could avoid the notice of most people with powerful Eyes.

Just then, one cloaked man walked up to them. He was the one they called Isith—their commander, Ceris Voldigoad.

“What’s the situation?” he asked.

The Phantom Knights continued leisurely setting up their camp, paying Ceris no particular regard. It almost was like there was no sense of leadership among them.

“There’s been no sign of Aeges Code, the Netherworld King who governs the Goanel territory,” Edd said as he placed a pot on the campfire and fanned the flames. “His subordinates are quite skilled. The town is well governed and guarded. But there was one thing that seemed odd.”

“What thing?”

Zeno was the one to answer Ceris.

“There’s someone who knows the way of the dead. That’s probably why they’ve been able to elude us,” he said.

The Phantom Knights had infiltrated the Goanel territory to investigate Aeges, the Netherworld King who governed the territory. But they had yet to discover a thing about him. Everything they had found so far had been fake information the Netherworld King had deliberately planted beforehand, the man himself vanishing like a mirage.

“Someone among us has broken a taboo,” Zett said. “A traitor who failed to play dead.”

Ceris looked around at the Phantom Knights with a cold expression. Then, the grass nearby parted with a rustle, and another knight appeared.

“You’re late, Jeph,” Edd said.

But Jeph just looked at him quizzically.

“I removed Jeph from the investigation this time,” Ceris explained. “Since he seems incapable of working properly.”

Jeph turned to Ceris.

“What do you mean? What investigation?” he asked, walking up to Ceris.

“The investigation of Netherworld King Ages, ruler of the Goanel territory. Rumored to be the best spear user in Dilhade.”

Jeph looked at him with a serious expression.

“You’re well acquainted, no?” Ceris said.

“I am.”

“The Netherworld King left his subordinates in command of his land and rarely shows himself. He’s eluded Edd and the others this entire time, and seems to know our methods through and through. It seems there’s someone among us who doesn’t know how to act like the dead.”

Jeph listened without any change in expression.

“Any ideas, Jeph?” Ceris said, his voice chilly and intimidating.

He glared at Jeph with his Magic Eyes as though he could see through him, but Jeph’s reply was simple.

“No,” he answered.

“You went straight to town after we reached Goanel. What did you do there?”

When there was no reply, Ceris continued questioning him. “Are you looking for where the kid vanished?”

At that, Jeph's composure finally broke.

"You know where Anos went?! Isith, don't tell me you did something to him!"

"Jeph."

Ceris grabbed Jeph by the throat with Vebzud cast on his fingertips.

"Urgh!"

"How many times do I have to say it? When will you understand? You are *dead*. Do not involve yourself with the child. Did you meet him behind my back?" Ceris said coldly, squeezing Jeph's neck.

"You abandoned your own child in a foreign territory! He was lucky enough to get picked up by the Goanel army, but he'll die without any support!"

"If he dies, he dies."

Jeph grabbed Ceris's arm.

"So if he's powerless, your own son means nothing to you?!" Jeph shouted.

"Powerless? You've been so carried away by your emotions, you haven't even looked into the abyss. Fool. That kid has far more power than you."

Ceris released Jeph's throat and turned to walk away. Jeph watched him, confused, until Ceris spoke again.

"Follow me."

He hid himself with Lynel and Najira and started walking. Jeph copied him and followed behind him. They climbed the Goanel Mountain in silence. Eventually, thunder started rumbling, and burning red lava came into view.

The mountain they were on was also known as the Thundering Volcano. The smoke created by the volcanic eruptions was packed with magic power, creating thunderclouds that covered the entire mountain region with red lightning. These clouds could form a natural barrier that disturbed the surrounding magic field, making it difficult to use magic on the summit, and even obstructed the vision of Magic Eyes.

The two kept walking until they reached the mouth of the volcano. Lava boiled at the center of the crater, which was overflowing with magic energy.

“How far are we going, Isith?” Jeph asked.

The moment he said that, lava burst upwards like a fountain, sending a dilahemil—a magic whale monster that could be found swimming in lava—shooting into the air.

“Got you,” a young voice said.

A young child leaped out of the lava after the whale, using magic gathered in his hand to pierce the dilahemil’s body. He then cast Griad, and was able to completely burn the insides of a monster that made its home in scorching hot lava.

He was Anos Voldigoad, and he looked to be around six years old.

“This is...” Jeph murmured in surprise, eyes widening.

“He may be young, but he’s clever enough to understand the situation he was placed in. He realized you were watching him, hid his powers, and came here to sharpen his fangs in secret.”

Two thousand years ago, the weak could be attacked and killed at any moment. It was unjust, but the best way of surviving in this era was to be strong and smart. Even the Phantom Knights, strong warriors all, had to hide themselves to avoid being hunted. Anos had realized that even at his young age. That was why he was here at the Thundering Volcano, where the magic field prevented others from seeing his power.

“The kid is slowly gaining control over the source of destruction he was born with,” Ceris said, looking at Anos. “It’s actually quite frightening. In just a few years, we won’t be able to hide and watch him like this.”

The next moment, Ceris’s gaze harshened. Anos had turned in their direction. His Magic Eyes were clearly fixed on the two nameless knights—even though they were using Lynel and Najira.

“Who’s there?” Anos asked.

Both Jeph and Ceris looked clearly surprised by his words. The Phantom Knights specialized in hiding themselves and concealing their magic above anything else. Even the strongest demons of two thousand years ago needed to

be alert and well prepared to detect them. Yet this young child had found them.

He had already reached the stage Ceris once thought would take several years for him to reach. His talent was beyond normal.

“Jeph,” Ceris muttered quietly. “I’m sure of it now. That kid has the potential to become king. He will be the one to rule Dilhade...”

Despite his words, Ceris’s expression was dark—as though that wasn’t a good thing.

“You stay there. He can’t tell how many of us are here yet,” he said to Jeph.

He then headed down to where Anos was, dispelling Lynel and Najira and revealing himself on the way.

“Identify yourself,” Anos called out in his young voice, staring at him.

“I am but a wandering ghost of the dead. I have no need for a name.”

“What do you want from me?”

Ceris stopped several meters away from Anos and faced him.

“I’m going to educate you, kid,” he said.

“Don’t need it.”

Anos immediately refused, but Ceris continued to speak.

“The magic you saw through just now was Lynel and Najira. Whether you like it or not, you’re going to learn these two spells right now. You must hide your magic. This nation is crawling with demons who seek a source like yours.”

“Are you one of them, ghost?”

Instead of responding, Ceris cast Gijel. Anos’s body was swiftly restrained by chains.

“Shut up and listen. With Eyes like yours, you should know you can’t win against me.”

The fire of Griad burned along the magic chains. Anos used his hands to rip away the chains of Gijel.

“I refuse,” he said.

Anos ran towards Ceris and thrust his fingers at him. Ceris grabbed his black-stained fingers and crushed them in his hand, causing fresh blood to splatter.

“I said to listen.”

“And I said *no*.”

Anos thrust his other hand out, but Ceris grabbed that with his Vebzud as well, crushing his other fingers. No matter how strong Anos was, he was still a child with no combat experience—this should be enough for him to surrender. But Anos continued to fearlessly glare at Ceris.

“Do you want to know about your parents, kid?” Ceris said instead.

Anos faltered, showing the faintest hint of interest.

“About your mother and father,” Ceris added.

“Do you know them?”

“It’s one of the reasons you’re being targeted by the dead.”

“Tell me.”

“Once you’ve become the ruler of Dilhade, I will.”

They glared at each other without moving for a long moment, but eventually, Anos lowered his hands. He cast healing magic on his wound as he looked at Ceris.

“Tell me one thing, ghost,” Anos said.

Ceris stared at Anos’s face.

“Are you the one who is always watching me?”

“It is far too easy to lie with words,” Ceris said coldly. “Don’t believe anything other than what you see with your own Magic Eyes. Look into the abyss and see that this world is ruled by betrayal and injustice.”

He gazed at Anos with a detached expression, continuing to hide the fact he not only knew Anos’s mother and father, but that he *was* Anos’s father.

§ 21. Gatekeeper of the Past

I walked alongside Jiste while keeping my Magic Eyes on the image produced by the Star of Creation. After passing through the narrow streets of Etiltheve, we reached the quiet area where the temple ruins were. Solemn pillars lined the ruins, which were surrounded by a circle of stones imbued with ancient magic power. A number of the pillars were chipped or collapsed, and there was no roof overhead—whether it was originally like that or the structure had eroded over time was unclear. At the center of the ruins was a deep hole extending into the ground.

Just off the edge of the hole was a spiral staircase that descended into the hole itself. It was clear that this was ruin shaft thirty, where Ages was located. Jiste and I walked down the stone stairs as Leaks echoed in my head.

“Hmm, is that the end of the memory in the Star?” Eleonore said.

“I’m not sure. Let me check,” Arcana replied.

“Anosh was there!” Zeshia added excitedly.

“Yup, he was!” Eleonore agreed. *“Ceris was there too, but just like last time, his speech and personality seemed completely different.”*

“Was it...altered?” Zeshia asked worriedly.

“Hmm, who knows? He was rude, but he still seemed willing to teach Anos magic.”

Arcana nodded.

“When the Star of Creation projected the memory, I saw the order of a god besides the Goddess of Creation. The same one as in the Book of Traces. It may be the God of Frenzy,” she said.

“Then it was altered after all?” Eleonore asked.

“It wouldn’t be easy to do such a thing,” I said. “Militia’s barrier was still active. If the Star of Creation could be altered even with the barrier intact, it

would have been stolen already.”

“Maybe it was made to look like it was altered?” Arcana suggested.

“That makes the most sense. Even without touching the contents of the Erial, it should be possible to make it look like another order is moving as the memory plays.”

“Then...it wasn’t altered...!” Zeshia said excitedly.

“But Ceris is involved, so we can’t say that for sure. Let’s just say the past was altered. He could have done this on purpose, to make the alteration look like the real past instead.”

“This is too hard for Zeshia...!” Zeshia complained.

In all likelihood, the memory hadn’t actually been altered. However, there was always a chance I was wrong. It seemed that mere flash of uncertainty was that man’s true parting gift.

“There’s no need to rush to conclusions,” I said. “We can decide once we’ve checked the other Stars of Creation.”

“I’m going to search for any other traces of alteration,” Arcana suggested.

“I leave it to you.”

“Come to think of it, there’s something I forgot to mention, Demon King,” Jiste said from behind me. “The Netherworld King is one of the Selected Eight—the Seeker. He was chosen by Afrasiata, the Water Burial God. I’ve seen him with a Selection pledge jewel before.”

“That’s odd,” I replied.

Jiste paused for a moment, having expected a different response.

“How so?” she asked.

“As the name implies, there are eight people in the Selected Eight. Ahid, Gazel, Golroana, Diedrich, Veaf flare, Ceris, and myself make seven already.”

“So wouldn’t the Netherworld King be the last one?”

“Moments ago, Shin found Grysilis in the underground world. He is also one of the Eight—selected by Janeldefok, God of Magic Sight.”

There was no doubt the Selected Eight I had met until now were legitimate. Ceris was the only one who hadn't shown his Selection pledge jewel, but if he had been lying, then who had made the pact with the God of Frenzy?

Of course, it was possible to borrow the power of a god without a Selection pact—it was exactly what people did in the Great War two thousand years ago. There was also the possibility that the God of Frenzy was moving according to his own order, just like the Heavenly Father had done before.

But it just didn't make sense. Was there any reason for Ceris to lie about being one of the Selected Eight? Besides, Golroana said he had used the God of Traces's power to confirm Ceris's status, even though he couldn't remember it clearly. There was something off here. It felt as if a fundamental truth had just been rewritten.

"What could this mean?" Jiste asked.

"No clue. We'll just have to check everything one by one until we discover the answer."

After walking for some time, we eventually came across a tunnel connected to the spiral staircase. Jiste looked down the path and nodded at me. I strained my Eyes and saw powerful magic flowing out ahead of us—a warning.

"Looks like he's noticed us," I said.

I started down the path unhurriedly. The tunnel eventually led to an open area. Murals covered the walls, reaching all the way up to the high ceiling. A wide stone staircase in the center led up to the temple ruins. Standing halfway up the staircase was a demon with a large eye patch, holding his spear at the ready—Aeges, the Netherworld King.

He glared at Jiste with his single eye.

"Meddlesome woman. You bring the Demon King here while Kaihilam sleeps."

"Please hear me out, Netherworld King!" Jiste pleaded. "I don't know your exact circumstances, but you don't need to do this! The Demon King can do something about the person you want to erase so much!"

"It is the duty of the dead to bury the dead. The living have no business here,"

he said, shooting me a sharp look. “You are too naive to step past this point.”

“Aeges.” I walked straight towards the stone staircase. “Why did you abduct Veaf flare?”

“Don’t ask the obvious. I need her for my goal.”

“Your goal to erase a ghost of the dead?”

“I have no obligation to answer,” he said dismissively.

“Who is the ghost?”

“It’s none of your business. This is my problem. Go home and worry about the peace of Dilhade. When the time comes, I will return the Hero Assembly to Gairadite.”

“None of my business?” I repeated, coming to a stop at the foot of the staircase. I looked up at Aeges. “Then why are you protecting the Stars of Creation?”

“You should stop expecting answers to all your questions.”

“Is it to defeat your ghost?” I asked, ignoring his dismissal. “You can become merciless for the sake of your goals, sure. But you were different before. From what I saw in the Book of Traces and Star of Creation, you were a compassionate person, if somewhat easily swayed by your emotions. For a demon of that harsh era, your kindness set you apart from the rest.”

Aeges kept glaring at me, silent.

“Something changed you two thousand years ago. And that something is related to me,” I continued. “The Stars of Creation have sealed memories of a past involving you, me, and that ghost you’re after. Am I wrong?”

Aeges still didn’t answer.

“You are protecting the Erial to prevent me from knowing about it. It could just be to fulfill your goal, but I believe you’re doing it for your own beliefs.”

He was willing to cooperate with anyone his goals aligned with. The Netherworld King made neither enemies nor allies—he merely did what it took to uphold his values.

“You’re free to imagine what you wish,” Aeges finally said. “But beware, Demon King Anos. If you try to pass me with the naive assumption that I am your ally, you will perish by my spear.”

On the stone staircase, Aeges held up the Crimson Blood Spear Dehiddatem. It seemed there was no more room for negotiation.

“Do you really think your spear can stop me?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter whether I can or cannot. Focus only on the absolutes, Demon King, and you will find yourself skewered on the spear I have spent my entire life refining.”

The Netherworld King looked directly at me, his heart sharpened like a blade. His fierce will was gathered both in the spear in his hand, and on me, his current target standing below him. He felt neither afraid nor hesitant. Indeed, he held no regard for his own life, instead honing his entire being into a single spear—as though he was a ghost of the dead merely fulfilling his duty.

This was the realm the Netherworld King had achieved through many years of training. His spear would surely be something to behold.

“I commend you for standing before me with such optimism. Since it seems it’s slipped your mind, I’m happy to remind you as many times as it takes—”

I released magic from my entire body while piercing Aeges with my gaze.

“—of who you lost to two thousand years ago.”

§ 22. The Crimson Spear of Dimensions

Silence fell over the underground ruins, brought forth by Aeges's sharpened focus. His magic power naturally faded to nothingness in an instant.

"Crimson Blood Spear, fourth hidden art—"

Aeges's single eye glinted as he prepared his hidden art openly.

"—*Blood World Gate*."

He thrust Dehiddatem forwards, and the tip of the spear vanished. The next moment, cuts ran along Aeges's entire body, sending an immense amount of blood spraying everywhere. Aeges had cut himself with his own spear. The blood flowing freely from him writhed like a living being, changing shape and forming a giant gate before him.

The gate of blood quietly swung open. The Netherworld King stood behind it, holding his spear forwards.

"The Star of Creation you're looking for is behind this gate, in the temple at the top of the staircase. If you wish to retrieve your memory, step through the gate."

The Netherworld King looked at me calmly. I was nowhere near the range of his spear, and he had yet to make the first move, so it seemed that the Blood World Gate only had an effect on those who tried to pass through the barrier.

"Is that so? Then I'll do just that," I replied.

I made my way up the stone staircase. There was only one way forwards, but Aeges showed no sign of moving his spear. I approached the Blood World Gate and stepped forwards without any hesitation. My foot came down within the gate.

Then, I was back on the bottom step.

"Only the dead may pass through the Blood World Gate," Aeges said.

"I see, so space and time is distorted inside that gate."

I drew a magic circle to cast Jio Graze. The jet-black sun vanished as soon as it entered the Blood World Gate, landing on the bottom stone step the next moment. I shot it a sidelong glance and made my way back up to the gate, coming to a stop before it.

“Ignoring my anti-magic to cross dimensions? That’s quite an impressive hidden art you’ve got there. But everything has a price, and yours is that your dimension-crossing spear cannot reach out of this gate either.”

Blood was still flowing from Aeges’s body as he held his spear up. At this rate, if we continued glaring at each other without doing anything, he would bleed out and die. His hidden art was so powerful that it risked his own life.

“What are you trying so hard to protect?” I asked.

“I said to stop asking the obvious. The only thing the dead protect in this world are the regrets they left behind.”

I took one step into the gate. The space in the Blood World Gate distorted, but I glared at it with my Magic Eyes of Destruction. I took a second step forwards.

“Did you think you could stop my advance just by distorting space and time?” I said.

“Naturally—”

A crimson flash sped at me faster than the eye could follow.

“—I would never!”

The Crimson Blood Spear Dehiddatem shot straight at my face. I wrapped Beno levun around my right hand and caught it. The tip of the spear turned to liquid, and crimson blood clung to the Beno levun.

“Crimson Blood Spear, fifth hidden art—*Blood Gate Spear.*”

The Beno levun around my right hand was sent flying far away. Before I could deploy a new barrier, Dehiddatem returned to its solid state and pierced through my right arm.

“Leave,” Aeges said.

The tip turned into crimson blood and stuck to my hand, pulling me towards a faraway dimension.

“Blood Gate Spear.”

I immediately used my left hand to cut off my right arm. My right arm—drenched in the blood of the Blood Gate Spear—was swallowed by the other dimension and vanished. I took my third step forwards, closing in on Aeges.

“Vebzud.”

Before he could withdraw his spear, I shoved my black-stained fingers into the Netherworld King’s abdomen.

“Crimson Blood Spear, sixth hidden art,” the Netherworld King said without faltering, blood spilling from his mouth. *“Fang From Blood.”*

Pierced by my fingers, the Netherworld King’s blood itself turned into a spear and attacked me. I wrapped Beno levun around myself, but as soon as I did, the Blood Gate Spear turned to liquid and stuck to the barrier. My body warped alongside Beno levun. A tremendous magic force was trying to send everything surrounding me into a faraway dimension—but just before it could, I placed my foot on the floor and stepped out of the Blood World Gate.

“Hmm. As I thought,” I muttered.

Fang From Blood had no effect, and my body didn’t move to another dimension. All the hidden arts he had used just now were only effective within the Blood World Gate. And there was a limit to its range—if I climbed all the way to the top of the stairs, it would no longer have any effect.

The limited space was exactly what made it so powerful. Within that space, it could send almost anything flying into another dimension.

“If you wish to pass through the gate, you’d better wait there until all my blood has finished flowing,” the Netherworld King said, staring at me with his single eye.

The blood currently flowing out of him at a profuse rate was made of his magic power.

“You, the Netherworld King, have decided to throw away your life for the sake

of simply buying time. What are you waiting for?" I asked.

Aeges returned my glare without batting an eye. Perhaps he wasn't waiting for anything—after all, the battle was moot if I chose not to enter the Blood World Gate at all. He could have been luring me forwards by making me believe there was a reason for him to buy so much time. The gamble was like treading on thin ice.

The Netherworld King's pride probably played a part as well. He knew he couldn't reach me without risk. If all I wanted to do was win, I only had to stand here and stare at him until he bled out. But it was in the nature of the Demon King to not only win but also oppress everything in his way.

"It does seem appropriate to call you a ghost of the dead. No one living would fight like this," I said, casting Ei Chael to heal myself.

My right arm appeared and reattached to my body.

"But even then, you are no match for me."

I took an unhurried step forwards.

"I have no time to spare for the dead."

My steps brought me inside the Blood World Gate once again.

"The result will be the same no matter how many times you try," Aeges warned.

Crimson flashes shot towards me. He thrust his spear straight at the left side of my chest, but I ducked under it and closed the distance between us in a single leap.

"All I have to do is move you without touching your spear or your blood," I said, drawing a magic circle with my right hand. "*Baloica*."

A pitch-black, sinister gate appeared behind Aeges. It was a spell I had made by imitating the Blood World Gate.

"Your efforts are futile. Impressive as your dimension magic may be, you're still trailing behind me!" Aeges shouted.

Baloica activated and attempted to send Aeges into a faraway dimension, but

smoke rose from the Blood World Gate to prevent it from doing so. The magic of the two gates clashed with each other, making time and space distort as they fought for dominance.

“Hmph!” Ages shoved me away to create distance, then swung his spear in the blink of an eye. *“Blood Gate Spear.”*

I caught the crimson speartip with Beno levun, but blood stuck to the barrier yet again.

“You cannot escape my spear,” he declared.

“Not bad,” I replied.

This time, Beno levun wasn’t sent to another dimension. Just like how Ages had blocked Baloica, this time, Baloica was the one opposing Blood World Gate, barely distorting the space back to normal.

“You wish to compete with me in dimension magic? You truly are the Demon King!”

Dehiddatem turned into another flash, thrusting at my head, throat, and abdomen at practically the same moment. I tilted my head to evade the top two strikes, then grabbed the spear aimed at my abdomen with my Vebzud-covered hand. The spear I grabbed melted into blood, slipping from my fingers.

At that moment, I cast Schade to freeze the blood all the way up to Ages’s hand.

“Got you,” I said. But when I tried to lift the frozen spear, Ages grabbed on with both hands and stood his ground.

“You’re strong physically, I’ll admit,” I said. *“But...”*

I scattered black particles of magic with my right hand and exerted more of my own strength, lifting Ages’s body into the air. Then, I slammed him and his spear down behind me, switching positions with him in the process. The stone staircase smashed apart, but he was able to cut himself away from his frozen spear at the last moment with a blade of blood, allowing him to land safely.

But now, I was on a higher step than him. Ages rushed up the stairs to prevent me from reaching the top. The Blood World Gate probably had no

effect up there.

However...

“Gah... Hah...”

Instead of climbing the stairs, I stabbed my Vebzud-covered hand through his heart as he charged.

“I said you were no match for me.”

“Ha. This was my goal from the start!” he spat, blood spurting from his mouth.

My Vebzud-covered hand tore apart his source, but in doing so, the crimson blood of the Netherworld King burst forth from him. All the blood in his body, and all the blood in his source—enough to extinguish his life. And that blood created another Blood World Gate behind me.

“Crimson Blood Spear, seventh hidden art—”

The two gates slammed shut. The blood the Netherworld King had spilled gathered between the two gates, creating a puddle. No, it was more like a pool of blood.

“Blood Pool Burial.”

My body slowly sank into the pool. I lost sensation in my feet—they had already been sent to another dimension.

“Rot away in the dimensional depths,” Ages said, raising his arm up. The blood spray in the air formed a Dehiddatem in his hand, which he thrust into the pool with all his might. Blood sprayed everywhere, and my body disappeared into another dimension.

Ages gripped his spear for support as he panted for breath. The two Blood World Gates dispersed into crimson mist.

“Demon King,” Jiste murmured, having witnessed the entire battle.

“Don’t worry about him. I sent him to the dimensional depths, so by the time he returns, everything will be over,” Ages said, his body completely battered. But there was a glint of determination in his eye, as though there was yet

another task left for him to attend to.

“Hmm. Then it seems I got back a little early,” I said.

Aeges looked up in horror to see me standing on the top step.

“Wha—?! What did you *do*?!” he shouted, rushing up the stairs. Having used so much of his blood to fuel his magic, he had barely any strength left. With me standing closer to the Star of Creation, he was unable to block my way with another Blood World Gate.

“I must admit, even I couldn’t block a hidden art of that level. So I stimulated it instead with Baloica. I gave the spell a push and accelerated its distortion of time and space,” I explained, easily avoiding the Dehiddatem thrust at me and grabbing Aeges by the throat.

“Guh...”

Aeges continued his attempt to thrust his spear, but I tied him up with the chains of Zola e Dypt, restraining his body fully with the chains of fire.

“The distortion made one full lap around and by doing so, returned to normal. The remaining shift in time and space sent me here, to the top of the staircase, instead.”

The flames of Zola e Dypt drew a magic circle for a greater spell.

“Now, Aeges. Jiste is worried you’ll be killed by this ghost of yours—or rather, that Kaihilaam will sacrifice himself on your behalf.”

The Netherworld King glared at me, watching for an opportunity to turn the situation, unable to give up even now.

“But there’s a simple way for me to prevent that from happening, right here and now,” I said. “Do you know what that is?”

The flames of hellfire wrapped around him pulled at his limbs, but he was too exhausted to do anything about it.

“What are you going to do?” he muttered.

I smirked.

“I’m going to kill you first.”

§ 23. A Cursed Friendship

“Behelius.”

Behind Aeges—still restrained by Zola e Dypt—darkness swirled until the shape of a coffin was formed.

“When the lid on this coffin closes, the darkness within will bring continuous death for all eternity. The only release from this endlessly painful death is to open the lid,” I said.

The coffin of darkness formed around the Netherworld King. The lid was yet to close.

“Behelius maintains its strength through the magic of the corpse within the coffin. The lid can only be opened by the caster, and nothing external can end the pain.”

I drew a cross over Behelius. Particles of darkness followed the movement of my hand and covered the coffin.

“Its original use was for torture, but it’s an extremely safe place to keep dying.”

Inside the coffin of darkness, death repeated for eternity. In short, the corpse was in a constantly fresh state and at no risk of truly perishing. Powerful magic barriers and wards prevented external destruction, so the torture couldn’t be ended prematurely. Defenses powered by death were quite firm, which was why it could be used to actually protect people of importance in an emergency. In exchange, they just had to die over and over until the danger passed.

“If you don’t like it, you can team up with me to defeat the ghost,” I said.

“Irony how the Demon King of Tyranny is more naive than anyone. You will not be able to defeat them.”

Of course, Aeges wasn’t the type of man to surrender like this.

“Burial.”

At my order, the cross of darkness spread and covered the coffin. The darkness swiftly became a lid, sealing Aeges inside. A low rumble echoed as Behelius smashed through the staircase to lower itself into the ground, like a coffin would be lowered during a burial. But the coffin froze before it hit the ground, black sludge oozing from its edges.

It was no normal sludge—it had magic to it. And that magic didn't belong to Aeges.

"Open," I ordered, and a small window appeared in the Behelius.

Inside the coffin wasn't Aeges, but a six-horned demon—the Cursed King, Kaihila.

"You've done it now, Demon King."

Kaihila was dead, but his curse was still active, transmitting his voice.

"You've killed me, Demon King."

You've killed me, Demon King. You've killed me. Me. Demon King. You've killed me.

Eerie voices of resentment echoed repeatedly, layering upon each other. Cursed magic power flowed from his corpse and source.

"Giagi Gigior Gigiga."

The sinister, sludge-like curse swallowed the coffin of darkness and spilled onto the surroundings, rushing at me like a surging wave. I leaped up and out of the way.

"Hmm. You just had to wake up at the worst time," I said.

I glanced over at where Jiste had been standing before and saw a black mist. One crimson flash later, the Netherworld King emerged from the mist. Kaihila had cast magic to swap his position with Aeges just before Behelius was sealed.

"A foolish thing to do," I remarked.

Aeges ran up the staircase with his spear in hand—he was probably trying to

save Kaihila from the Behelius coffin. But the cursed sludge formed a wall on the staircase, separating me from the Netherworld King and stopping him from moving closer.

Run away. Run away. Run away. Run away. Get away from here. Run away. Flee. Go. Get out of here. Run away. Run away. Run away. Go!

Cursed words persistently and forcefully stained the Netherworld King's head. It broke through his magic wards and compelled him to come to a stop.

Forget about me and leave! Leave me behind and go! Forget about me! Forget about me! Forget about me! Forget about me!

Run, Aeges! Aeges! Aeges! Aeges! Aeges! Aeges! Aeges! Aeges!

"Get out of here, Aeges!"

But the Netherworld King shook off the curse of compulsion.

"Stop your wailing. This is my fight. It makes no sense for you to die here," he said. He used Dehiddatem to slash through the cursed sludge and send it off into another dimension.

"If you want to reach Kaihila, I'll give you a hand," I said.

From the other side of the wall, I drew a hundred magic circles for Jio Graze and fired them at the sludge. The curses burned up in the flames of the black sun.

I will repay my debt. The debt. My debt—to you!

I will return it. I will return it. I will return it. I will return it. I will return it. I will return it. I will return it. I will return it!!!

"If you're referring to Norr Dorfmond, my goals just so happened to be aligned with yours. There's no need to feel indebted by something so trivial."

“Silence.”

Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up!

An eerie *gigigi, gigi, gigigigi* noise could be heard as the curse moved like a tsunami towards Aeges. The Crimson Blood Spear tried to send it to another dimension, but the sludge moved with unstoppable momentum and endless mass, forcing him back.

“Mrgh...”

Aeges used his spear as support and glared at the curse.

Can you see this, Netherworld King? This. This is my master. The master of my magic.

Norr. Norr Dorfmond.

This is the curse inherited from Norr Dorfmond. The curse of death that gnaws away the source!

The room was teeming with the cursed sludge. The substance spread the curse of death onto the walls, ceiling, ground, and ruins, changing them into the same sludge. If I hadn't used my Magic Eyes of Destruction and anti-magic, I would have been changed into sludge as well.

You have one too. You have one too. You do. You do. You do. You do. You do. You do. You do. You do. You do. You do!

Netherworld King, you have one too. Aeges, you have one too. Aeges. Netherworld King. You! You! You...!

“You have inherited something as well!”

Blended with the curse, Kaihila's intense emotions were given voice. Cursed

sludge formed into solid clumps that rained down towards me. I burned them away with Jio Graze, then connected the black suns around me with flames to form a three-dimensional magic circle. The heat rays of the Jio Graze floating in the air gathered at my right hand.

Go. This is a curse. I'm casting it on you.

It's a curse. You can't escape. I won't let you. My curse. Unforgivable.

This is the soul of Dorfmond that I inherited. I will see it through.

Go!

"Aviasten Ziara," I said.

My right hand released a black glimmer as it burned. With a light flick of my wrist, the cursed sludge caught fire and burned fiercely.

My source may perish, but this curse is everlasting. Go.

Unforgivable! Unforgivable! Unforgivable! Step over my corpse and suffer my curse!

Go. Go to your goal. Take this curse and go.

Don't stop. Never look back. If you stop, I won't forgive you!

"Go, my friend!"

Kaihilam's curse of perpetual death grew more powerful with every passing moment.

Aviasten Ziara tried to burn away the curse, but the coffin—now submerged in a pool of sludge—continued to release even more sludge, filling the room with the stuff. Little by little, the cursed sludge formed a castle. At this rate, the curse would eventually consume its own source, making it impossible to resurrect.

It continued speaking in layered voices.

Go!

Go! Go! Go! Ages!

“Forget about me and fulfill your goal, Ages!”

*Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go!
Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go!*

Surpass this corpse of mine. This is my curse to you.

An unavoidable curse between you and me!

Go, Ages!

“What a nagging, meddlesome man,” the Netherworld King muttered, clenching his hand around his spear. “I have received your curse.”

He turned on his heel and ran from the room. The overflowing sludge wall burned under Aviasten Ziara as I closed in on Ages in a single leap.

“Guala Nateh Forteos.”

A Selection pledge ring appeared on Ages’s right hand. An androgynous warrior made of water manifested before me. I thrust my right hand covered in Aviasten Ziara out towards it, but it knocked my hand away with their spear of water. It was the Water Burial God, Afrasiata.

I won’t let you run. I won’t let you run, Demon King. I won’t let you! I won’t let you!

Suffer my curse, Demon King!

You can’t run. You can’t run. You can’t run. You can’t run. You can’t run. You can’t run. You can’t run. You can’t run. You can’t run!

A flood of cursed sludge rushed towards me from behind. When I turned to

burn it away with Aviasten Ziara, the Water Burial God thrust its spear forwards. The water freely changed form, shooting at my face one moment before suddenly changing paths to stab at my feet. The impact sprayed water up, covering my view with both water and magic.

Aeges created a dimensional rift and leaped inside. It would be easy to chase after him right now, but...

“Hmm.”

I glanced at the Giagi Gigior Gigiga that was turning everything into sludge, then at the mural past the top step of the stairs.

“I can’t just leave this alone, can I?” I said, turning to look at Kaihilaam trapped in the coffin. “Be grateful to the Cursed King, Aeges.”

The rift he’d created closed, and the Netherworld King’s Selection God Afrasiata teleported away, seemingly summoned by him. The cursed sludge had fulfilled its duty, yet it was still attacking me from every direction.

Kaihilaam was already dead—the curse was merely obeying his resentment from when the spell was activated. Once there was nobody left here in the shaft, the sludge would move to the surface and spread through everyone above ground.

First, I had to find the sunken coffin. I wrapped myself in the minimum amount of anti-magic and allowed myself to be swallowed by the sludge. The curse carried my body downwards, getting stronger the deeper I went. It tried to gnaw away at my source, and successfully broke through my wards. I allowed the sludge to touch me—if I blocked it, I wouldn’t be able to reach my destination.

“Go on, curse my source.”

I offered my source instead of my body, and the cursed sludge entered it. A nauseating pain attacked me, and the voices now shouting in my ear were enough to drive any man insane. My body continued sinking as it suffered the pain Kaihilaam would have felt as he died several times over. I endured the pain and voices until the coffin containing the Cursed King finally came into view.

“*Aviasten Ziara.*”

Glimmering black flames gathered in my hand and burned away the curses. I stared at the sludge with my Magic Eyes of Destruction and destroyed it, clearing a path to the Behelius. I leaped down to where the coffin was before the sludge could move back, then touched the lid.

“Open,” I ordered.

With a single drop of blood, the lid shifted and dispersed as magic particles.

“Ingall.”

I resurrected Kaihila and halted the spread of his curse. At the same time, I drew one more magic circle.

“Penerisc.”

I dispelled the magic of the curses remaining in Kaihila’s body and destroyed the magic circle. The sludge approached me from behind to try to curse my body once again. I ignored it and focused my magic on the coffin. The voices were gradually receding, and the sludge slowly dispersing into the wind. Penerisc took several minutes to complete, but once it did, the sludge was completely gone.

“Now...”

Kaihila was unconscious. Although I had resurrected him, he was still in an exhausted state. He’d be out for a while. It was also too late to chase after Aeges now. I looked up at where the ruins were and realized the coffin had sunk fairly far into the ground.

I leaped out of the hole bored into the ground by the coffin and landed back on the staircase. There, I turned and headed to the back of the temple, where I found a mural of a night sky. Stars were scattered across the sky to form a barrier, and there was a blue star glittering at the center. It looked just like the one Eleonore and the others found in the shaft.

“Arcana, I’ve found an Erial,” I said through Leaks.

“Got it.”

As soon as she responded, the silver rays of the Moon of Creation shone through the walls and down upon the mural. Altiertonoa appeared in the night

sky depicted on the wall. Illuminated by its gentle light, the stars scattered across the sky faded one by one, leaving one blue star behind. I reached up and the Star of Creation fell out of the mural and onto my palm.

“Memories of the stars blink; light of the past reaches the surface.”

Once Arcana spoke, her magic became moonlight that shone down on the Erial. The Star of Creation started reflecting my past.

§ 24. The Name of the Dead

Two thousand years ago.

The throne room of Midhaze Castle.

Two demons—the Sorcerer King Bomiras and Ceris Voldigoad—faced each other in battle. Their fight had already reached the final stages, and inside the throne room the powerful magic barriers and wards were battered and alight with crimson fire. A loud rumble erupted, and a pillar scorched by flames crashed into the floor between them, rubble and dust scattering in all directions.

In the single moment their vision was obscured, Ceris began running. He closed in on the Sorcerer King in an instant and thrust forwards Gauddigemon, Sword of a Thousand Bolts. The blade was entangled in Bomiras's robe until it was completely covered. The Darkworld Cloak, being connected to an alternate dimension, swallowed the sword and sent it into another world, and at that Ceris reflexively released his weapon.

"I've got you now," the Sorcerer King Bomiras said, stepping back and turning into sparks of fire. *"Aviasten Ziara."*

The Jio Graze deployed around them formed a three-dimensional magic circle. Its heat rays gathered on Bomiras's body, turning him into a shining crimson sun. He moved in a straight line towards Ceris—but that was what Ceris had been hoping for.

Ceris thrust his right hand into his spherical magic circle and clenched his fist. His hand crushed the circle, and crackling sparks of condensed purple lightning spread everywhere. The sparks drew ten more magic circles, and more purple lightning spread from them. Magic circle connected to magic circle, forming one giant circle.

"Ravia Gieg Gaverizd."

The spell fired from the connected purple lightning, covering Bomiras's Jio

Grazes and Aviasten Ziara. The world turned purple. Light strong enough to blind Magic Eyes flashed, and thunder rumbled fiercely. Every last flame was torn apart and vanquished by that lightning of destruction. Under this onslaught, the castle shook heavily.

Eventually, the lightning quietened, leaving only black ashes behind. Ceris picked up the Darkworld Cloak fallen on the floor and from the folds of the cloak he withdrew the Sword of a Thousand Bolts.

“You’ve left your back open!” shouted the voice of the Sorcerer King, who had just been reduced to ashes.

A crimson flame appeared behind the throne and rushed at Ceris. The destruction of Bomiras’s body had triggered the transfer of his source to another flame body.

“I’m taking you down with me, Isith,” Bomiras declared.

After the flames swallowed Ceris, the Sorcerer King drew a magic circle—the circle for Gavuel. A self-destruction spell that sacrificed the potential future of one’s source to defeat the enemy.

“For I can resurrect no matter how many times I perish,” Bomiras added smugly.

“Jeph,” said Ceris.

Light flashed.

“Urgh!”

A demon spear extended forwards and pierced Bomiras’s source. Holding the spear was the first of the Phantom Knights, Jeph. The spear shortened in length, pulling Bomiras’s body towards Jeph.

“Using your subordinates as your substitute? How typical of you.”

“All your clones have been dealt with,” Ceris said.

Bomiras’s face of flames weakened in horror. He checked on his clones, but there was no response from the other end of his magic links.

The Sorcerer King Bomiras normally hid another clone of himself within his

territory Midhaze. If one of his bodies perished, his source would transfer to a clone and take over that body. At a glance, the Sorcerer King would appear immortal. But the Phantom Knights had destroyed his stock of clones.

“Did you think I would yield to a feeble threat like that?” he said.

“We’ve found your true body too,” Jeph said, drawing a magic storage circle.

The item he withdrew from it was an old candlestick. This candle was Bomiras’s true body. He was asleep within it, hiding his form and magic. This left him powerless, but at the same time, his lack of magic power made him nearly impossible to detect. His true body had been hidden in a safe place while he transferred his source from clone to clone.

“How...”

“The Sorcerer King is well-known for never leaving Midhaze. Some assume this is due to his pacifism, but the truth is he’s too scared to leave his feeble true body behind,” Ceris said.

Ceris had guessed that Bomiras’s true body was hidden somewhere in Midhaze, somewhere no one could stumble across by accident. With that in mind, there were only a limited number of places it could be.

“Bloodthirsty ghosts... So you noticed my secret,” Bomiras muttered.

He had one clone left. His true body was asleep and would be no trouble to destroy.

“Answer before you perish,” Ceris said, walking up to Bomiras’s clone.

“Where did you move him?”

“Move who?”

Ceris glared at Bomiras silently. The Sorcerer King faltered under his bloodlust.

“You know who I’m talking about—the one in the Tseilon settlement.”

“I have no idea what you mean. Are you sure you have the right person?”

Ceris drew a Zecht circle. “If you speak, I won’t destroy your true body here.”

The Sorcerer King thought for a long while before speaking.

"I advise you to stay away from him," he said.

Ceris ignored him. "The location, or death. Choose one."

"The Demon King of Tyranny, Anos, was it?" Bomiras suddenly said. "The youngster you wandering disasters decided to join hands with."

Ceris merely stared at him.

"I finally reached a conclusion. He's of the Voldigoad bloodline, isn't he?"

Ceris didn't answer. Bomiras continued anyway.

"You kept him hidden this entire time. He has the power to unite and rule demonkind. You hid his existence from me until he grew so I would stay ignorant of him."

Despite the predicament he was in, Bomiras spoke.

"Just what are you scheming? With the Demon King's power, the rowdy lords of Dilhade may finally work towards a better nation. Doesn't that sound desirable to you? Without war, there would be no need for the nameless dead."

Ceris stared at the Sorcerer King coldly without taking in his words.

"But the Demon King is of Voldigoad blood. If raised carelessly, he will eventually end up a ghost just like you. You want to nip the prospect of peace in the bud before it blooms by eliminating me, don't you?"

"Are you done prattling?"

Lightning sparked from the Sword of a Thousand Bolts as Ceris thrust it forwards.

"Choose."

Bomiras sighed in resignation and signed the Zecht. "He's at the Thundering Volcano in the Goanel territory."

"Kill him, Jeph," Ceris said.

Bomiras's expression turned grim. Ceris was the only one who had signed the Zecht, so Jeph was indeed capable of killing him here. But Jeph hesitated to land the final blow.

“What are you doing?” Ceris asked. “Finish him off, Jeph.”

Jeph glanced at the Sorcerer King, ashamed, then looked down.

“Does he really need to perish?” he mumbled.

“What?”

“Like he said, the Demon King could bring a new era. If he can end the war between demonkind, why should we kill him?”

“If that’s all you want to say, think about the answer *after* you’ve killed the sorcerer.”

“But master, don’t you wish for a new era as well?”

“*Kill him.*”

Bomiras cackled.

“Give up, Jeph. Some people will never change. These are those in our world who *prefer* our current era. Those who despise peace and rejoice at destruction—like those of the Voldigoad bloodline.”

Bomiras’s hand of flames reached out and grabbed the candle.

“There’s no need to be obligated to a man like this, Jeph. No, *Netherworld King Ages.*”

The moment he was called the Netherworld King, Jeph lost his composure. He looked over at his mentor.

“You wish to live differently to him and change this era, no? Then it’s time for you to go your own way. No matter where he goes, this man will always be a crazed ghost,” Bomiras said.

The fire of Bomiras’s body spread to the candle. The flames burned fiercely, and the overflowing magic turned into sparks of fire.

“See you, Isith. Your era will soon come to an end—Gah!”

As Bomiras attempted to flee, the Sword of Thousand Bolts was stabbed into his body, which was summarily destroyed by Ceris’s purple lightning. By changing bodies, he was no longer under the protection of the Zecht.

“Die.”

One flash later, the candle was cut in half and reduced to ashes by purple lightning. Bomiras’s true body died, but was not destroyed.

“Curse you,” Bomiras murmured. “I won’t forget this...”

Purple lightning wrapped around Bomiras, preventing him from healing himself with Ingall. He instead used Syrica to reincarnate.

The battle was over. But Jeph had been unable to do as he was ordered.

Ceris looked at Jeph, who averted his gaze awkwardly. The two stood there in silence for some time. Eventually, Jeph opened his mouth in resignation.

“What Bomiras said...was the truth,” he said, and by doing so admitted that he was the Netherworld King.

“I knew already.”

Jeph looked at him in surprise. Ceris continued coldly.

“I had told you to die for me. But fools who fail to play dead are useless.” He stored his sword in a storage circle and turned around. “Go. Live with your new name instead.”

He walked away, leaving Jeph alone in the room.

§ 25. The Failed Hero

The door of a gloomy room opened, allowing light to stream inside. An ash-blond-haired man—Hero Kashim—entered the room, carefully looking around. The room was an armory, storing various magic artifacts, swords, spears, bows, and even holy swords.

“All clear. Come retrieve your weapons, everyone,” Kashim said.

On his instruction, the members of the Hero Assembly entered the armory. They seemed to have retrieved those trapped at the other jail already. The chairman of the Hero Assembly, Lloyd Egriess, was among them.

Other than Emilia and Raos, every member of the Hero Assembly was gathered. They retrieved all the weapons and items that had previously been confiscated.

“Come to me, my holy swords,” Heine called.

Zeleo, Sword of Sacred Earth, and Zere, Sword of Sacred Land, flew over and landed in his hands. He then glanced at Garriford, Sword of Holy Inferno, that was right beside him. Heine casually picked it up and stored it in a magic circle.

“Did you find Bailamente, Ledriano?” he asked, walking over to Ledriano and staring at the back of the armory, where a falcon was perched on a lamp mounted to the wall. Heine turned back to Ledriano, who nodded silently.

“We should dispose of that to be safe,” Kashim said, drawing the sword at his waist.

“No need,” Ledriano said, adjusting his glasses with an index finger. The falcon took off from the lamp and landed on his arm. “This familiar is mine.”

“I see.”

Kashim moved further inside the armory and slashed apart the wall, creating a hole that led outside. He kicked away the rubble, and the sky came into view, with more pieces of the wall falling down to the ground below.

“Hurry, someone will notice us soon,” he said, urging the Hero Assembly to go faster.

Chairman Lloyd was first to use Fless to rise into the air and leave the Sorcerer Fort. The other important members followed after him one by one, until only Kashim, Ledriano, and Heine were left.

“Go on, you two next.”

Heine flew off first, followed by Ledriano. Kashim left one moment later, casting Iris to repair the wall behind him to its normal state. They left the Sorcerer Fort grounds and landed, opting to run on foot to avoid unnecessary attention. After moving through the Etiltheve ruin town for some time, they stopped in an empty square.

“Everyone, hear me out,” Kashim said clearly. “As most of you here witnessed, Emilia Ludwell, Headmaster of the Hero Academy, has become a traitor to Azesion.”

The Hero Assembly’s faces all turned grim. Heine and Ledriano were the only ones listening calmly.

“I won’t call all demons evil, but she is a direct subordinate of Anos Voldigoad, Demon King of Tyranny, who placed her in the position of the Hero Academy Headmaster. Her betrayal was clearly at the order of the Demon King.”

Everyone stirred with discomposure. The Hero Assembly Chairman spoke over the noise to calm them.

“I cannot imagine Headmaster Emilia doing such a thing. She has given her utmost effort to Azesion ever since she was appointed. Her reputation at the academy is outstanding, and she is well loved by the students. Are you sure this is correct?” the chairman asked.

“Your bewilderment is most understandable,” Kashim replied. “But you must remember that demons are experts at betrayal, which means they are experts at gaining others’ trust as well. They have all kinds of tricks and techniques to do just that. Unfortunately, that applies to Headmaster Emilia too...”

Kashim looked at them with a pained expression.

“Everything shall be clear once we find the Sorcerer King. He’s probably working together with the Demon King. We won’t be able to return to Gairadite without defeating the Sorcerer King.”

He pleaded to the Hero Assembly with a resolute attitude.

“Heroes of today, please lend me your strength. I, Hero Kashim, seek to put an end to the demons of two thousand years ago who have failed to keep up with the changing times. And I need your help to do that.”

The members of the Hero Assembly looked confused.

“We appreciate you for rescuing us, but we cannot trust you completely,” Chairman Lloyd said. “I apologize for the rudeness, but...”

He drew a Zecht magic circle that forbade lies and that obligated Kashim to promise to fully cooperate with the Hero Assembly until they returned to Gairadite. If he broke the contract, he would be restrained with magic.

“Of course, your suspicion is most reasonable,” Kashim agreed, signing immediately. “Everything I said just now is the complete truth. As a hero, I vow to fight for justice. Hero Kashim will be an ally of justice as long as he breathes.”

If those words had been a lie, Kashim would have been restrained with magic through the contract. Since nothing seemed to be happening to him, the members of the Hero Assembly exhaled in relief.

But at the same time, they looked conflicted. They were probably thinking of Emilia.

“Well?”

Lloyd looked hesitant. Then, Ledriano walked up to him and whispered in his ear.

“It’s hard to believe, but we have no other choice,” Lloyd eventually said. “At the very least, we can cooperate until this Sorcerer King is defeated and we’ve escaped this place.”

“I am most grateful. But there’s one thing I’d like to address before that.”

Kashim drew a Zecht circle.

“There is a traitor among us, one who has joined up with the Demon King.”

The Hero Assembly stirred more, speaking among themselves.

“No way...”

“The headmaster is the only demon, and even her betrayal seems questionable. For there to be another spy for the Demon King in our group seems highly unlikely...”

“The Hero Assembly was formed of everyone who stood up for Azesion. There would be nothing to gain from betraying everyone here.”

They exchanged looks of disbelief with each other, seeds of doubt planted in their hearts.

“It’s fine if I’m wrong. But just to be sure—as a way to reassure everyone here—please sign this Zecht. If you are not a traitor, it is harmless,” Kashim said, showing them the contract. If the person who signed the Zecht was a traitor, they would confess who they were working for and what they had been tasked to do.

“Let’s see,” Kashim said. “Ledriano, was it? Why don’t you sign it first?”

Ledriano glared at the magic circle through his glasses, wary of Kashim’s actions. What Emilia had done in the jail was unbelievable to him too, but he could imagine a scenario in which, while trying to save them, she had encountered Kashim on the way and made him sign a Zecht to prove he was trustworthy, just like he was doing now. In which case, it was only natural to assume there was something to his Zecht.

Even though he had no idea what kind of magic it could be, he had experienced firsthand how the common sense of two thousand years ago surpassed his own imagination. But no matter how much Ledriano strained his Magic Eyes, he couldn’t find the problem with Kashim’s Zecht.

“What’s wrong? Is there a reason you can’t sign?” Kashim asked, looking at Ledriano with suspicion. The Hero Assembly members around him gave him a similar look.

“Of course not,” Heine said first, before Ledriano had a chance. “We’re simply

annoyed that just because you're from the past you're acting like our leader."

"Right, my apologies for that. But I just want to get this confirmation over with. Will you two cooperate by signing?"

"Sure. But you'll sign too, right?"

Kashim narrowed his eyes at Heine. "I think I've already proved I'm on your side."

"Then why should it matter to you? It's just in case, you know? You're a hero from two thousand years ago, so it wouldn't be strange if you could use magic that deceives our Magic Eyes," Heine said, leading him on.

"In that case, sure."

"Then let's go at the same time. Ready, go."

The two signed the Zecht at the same moment. The Hero Assembly members watched on with bated breaths.

Then, Heine opened his mouth.

"Aww, this is why I hate people with sharp senses. It's true; I'm the Demon King's spy. I was trying to round up the Hero Assembly so he could take control of the humans," he said, drawing his two holy swords from a magic circle—as though he was being controlled by an invisible magic.

"Wh-What?! A student of the Hero Academy serving as the Demon King's spy?" Lloyd said with a shocked look. Since there was no reaction from Kashim, who had signed at the same time, it made Heine look even more likely to be a spy of the Demon King.

Kashim stepped in front of Lloyd as though to protect him.

"Stand back. I'll deal with him."

"What a nuisance," Heine said. "Those who defy the Demon King of Tyranny must die, Hero Kashim."

Heine took one step forwards when blood suddenly burst from his entire body. He fell to his knees, then crashed to the ground.

Kashim hadn't drawn his sword. In fact, he looked just as confused as

everyone else.

“Dumbass,” Heine mumbled.

Bailamente, Sword of Holy Harbor, was pointed at Kashim’s neck.

“With this, the true traitor is evident,” Ledriano said.

“What, are you a spy of the Demon King too?” Kashim asked.

“Still don’t get it? The reason Heine collapsed is because of *my* Zecht.”

Kashim inhaled in surprise.

“We figured there was some kind of trick to your Zecht—something even Emilia couldn’t see through, which meant we would have even less chance of seeing it. That’s why Heine signed a Zecht with me that would cause his magic to run wild and knock himself out if he lost control of his body.”

Ledriano drew a magic circle and revealed the Zecht that had been signed to Kashim and the Hero Assembly members.

“It wasn’t me,” Kashim said firmly. “The Sorcerer King must have set a trap on my Zecht to make me look like the traitor.”

“Either way could be possible. But just to be sure, we will restrain you. If you are a true hero, you wouldn’t mind obeying us, right?”

Kashim paused. “Very well.”

“Restrain him,” Ledriano said to the rest of the assembly. “Hero Kanon will be here soon.”

The next moment, the metallic clash of sword against sword could be heard. Bailamente went flying through the air—Kashim had drawn his sword and smacked it away faster than the eye could see.

“I would have spared you if you had just stayed silent,” Kashim said, and stabbed Ledriano through the chest.

“Urgh...!”

Blood flowed as a stigma appeared over the wound. But despite the pain, Ledriano grabbed onto Kashim’s arm.

“Everyone, run! Quickly!” he yelled.

The Hero Assembly members immediately started running.

“Not a bad performance. Sacrificing yourself to save others, just like a hero of justice would, right?”

Kashim pushed his sword deeper, boring into Ledriano’s chest.

“Gaaah...!”

A large stigma appeared over the wound, causing agonizing pain. But Ledriano refused to release his hold, hoping to buy time for his comrades to escape.

“Do you know what this ostentatious act of yours is commonly called?” Kashim said, shaking his hand free and yanking his sword back. He then slashed Ledriano all over, covering him in stigmata and blood. “Dying in vain.”

Ledriano collapsed to the ground, all his strength gone.

“Your courage will not be rewarded. After all, it’s just a sad little farce,” Kashim said, drawing three magic circles with the tip of his sword.

They were the circles for Cyfio—but the holy flames in this incarnation were far more powerful than the ones Raos usually used. The blasts of fire were aimed at the backs of the fleeing Hero Assembly members, causing huge explosions upon impact.

In no time at all, the room became a sea of fire.

“You couldn’t protect them, failed heroes,” he said.

“Fortunately, they don’t need your approval, Kashim,” a new voice interrupted.

Kashim looked in the direction of the voice. Cyfio’s flames were extinguished, revealing the Hero Assembly being protected by a black aurora. Not a single person was dead.

Lay and Misa stood before them, with Misa in her true form.

“They’re far better heroes than you ever were,” Lay said, looking at his former fellow disciples on the ground. “Their courage and bond saw through your scheme, protecting everyone here.”

§ 26. The One Who Wasn't Chosen

Lay's piercing gaze was fixed on Kashim, who ignored him in favor of glaring at the circling falcon in the sky.

"So the falcon was yours," Kashim muttered.

Kashim had said he wanted to defeat the Sorcerer King. Putting the truth of that statement aside, his next stop after the Hero Assembly was rescued would be the armory where their weapons were stored. Lay had predicted that and sneaked his falcon there ahead of them. Since they were in enemy territory, it was safer to do that than wait there himself.

As Lay had hoped, the Hero Assembly escaped the fort safely. After that, he checked where they were headed through his familiar and followed them.

"Why are you so fixed on seeing heroes fail?" he asked Kashim seriously.

"Fail? That's a funny thing to say," Kashim said, equally serious. "You know the reason perfectly well. Flashy glory, honor with no substance. Idols fabricated by mankind. That is what a hero is. All I want is to expose that truth."

"I admit there may be some parts that are exaggerated or fabricated. But that is all done to protect people and give them courage. Two thousand years ago, the people suffering at the hands of demons needed a hero—even if that hero was a lie or a fairy tale," Lay objected flatly. "They needed to believe that someone heroic would bring peace. Lives were saved with that hope."

"A lie is a lie. There's no point in saving lives by going about it the wrong way," Kashim said dismissively. "They should have died instead. It is more moral to die with the truth than live on a lie. Humans should be ashamed of needing to cling to deceit in order to live."

Lay looked at Kashim with a mix of anger and sadness. "Life has more value than that. It's not wrong to want to save people no matter what the method."

"Anyone who feels no guilt over living like that has no right to be a human. Such pampering makes humans no difference from cattle. We humans have to

live strongly, strictly, and *correctly*.”

“Would you say the same thing if you had been chosen by the Sword of Three Races?” Lay asked.

“You misunderstand. It wasn’t the Sword of Three Races that didn’t choose me. *I* was the one who didn’t choose the Sword of Three Races,” Kashim declared proudly. “Both the heroes and the Sword of Three Races are wrong.”

“What are we wrong about?”

“Everything I just said. You promote an ostentatious evil that nauseates me. I will conquer both the heroes and the Sword of Three Races, and defeat the malicious forces that have depraved mankind with their lies. With the justice of Kashim, a mere man, not a hero.”

Lay glanced over at Heine and Ledriano on the ground.

“Even if heroes are wrong, it doesn’t mean your methods are right,” he said. “Tricking people, playing with their hearts, twisting their words, hurting them—are you satisfied by that? You speak highly of justice, but you’re telling lies too.”

“I am merely making necessary adjustments. Heroes have distorted this world. I am returning the glorified title of ‘hero’ back to its original state. Heroes live their lives acting a lie, so I live the same life of lies while thrusting death in their faces.”

“What kind of ‘adjustment’ hurts innocent people?” Lay snapped angrily. “Is it really something worth hurting others for? The lies are harmless.”

“But there was a sin committed. By the Sword of Three Races, and you,” Kashim said immediately. “The karma of the ancestors must be repaid by the descendants. That is the result of your reckless violence. I am merely returning what has gone mad back to normal. Heroes were never meant to be worshipped. There is nothing more pitiful to watch than people yearning for heroes, fawning over and respecting their flashy show.”

With a serious expression and unwavering tone, he declared loudly.

“You can try to blame others, Kanon, but your sin is right here before you, in those modern era heroes who lie there defeated. If you want to condemn me

for your crimes to feel better about yourself, go ahead. But if you are a true hero, you cannot avert your eyes to the truth.”

Kashim sounded certain that justice was on his side.

“And you call that harmless? Those are the convenient words of someone who wants to erase their own sins, Kanon.”

“The war is over, Kashim,” Lay said. “It’s meaningless now to be chosen by the Sword of Three Races. And even if you weren’t chosen, you had the ability to save many lives as a hero. That’s why...”

“Don’t make me repeat myself,” Kashim interrupted in a sharp tone. “I was the one who rejected it! I saw through the facade of that holy sword!”

He raised his hand, and humans with flaming arrows appeared around them. They weren’t soldiers—judging from their weak magic and their outfits, they were innocent civilians from the town being controlled through Roa Zecht.

“I will expose the truth, Kanon. The truth of your lie—of how the Sword of Three Races chose *wrong*.”

The fire arrows all shot at Lay at once. More civilians appeared, drawing swords and charging at him.

“Are you trying to make him fail as a hero by hurting innocent humans?” Misa asked, blocking the fire arrows with a magic barrier.

She cast black chains to tie up the dozens of humans that had charged in a suicidal attack, followed by the humans firing arrows of fire, restraining them without harm. But in that single opening, Kashim made his escape, vanishing from sight.

“He’s quick to flee,” Misa muttered, drawing the magic circle for Ei Chael to heal Heine’s and Ledriano’s stigmata.

“Heine! Ledriano!” Emilia cried, running over with a horrified expression. The members of the Hero Assembly and students of the Demon King Academy were behind her.

“They’ll be fine,” Misa said.

Emilia exhaled in relief, then turned to Lay.

“What happened to Hero Kashim?” she asked sharply.

“He got away. But we can still catch up.”

Misa giggled and pointed at the sky. “A familiar is following him.”

“Let’s split up from here. We’ll chase after Kashim. Ms. Emilia, please handle Emperor Chappes,” Lay said.

“Got it.”

With their wounds fully healed, Ledriano and Heine came to. They stared at Emilia and the others in a daze. Emilia offered them a hand and helped them up.

“Ledriano, Heine. Move to a safe place with the Hero Assembly and protect them with Raos. You’ll get the details from him. I will go with the Demon King Academy students to meet Emperor Chappes.”

“Understood,” Ledriano answered.

Heine reached into his storage circle and took out Garriford, the Sword of Holy Inferno, offering it to Raos. “Here, I picked it up for you.”

“Thanks.”

Emilia turned around, and the Demon King Academy students who were watching from a distance gathered around her. The First Imperial Princess, Rona, was with them.

“Can you lead us to the palace, Princess Rona?” Emilia asked. “Using the shortest route possible. We’ll handle all the soldiers on the way. But it may still be dangerous...”

“That’s fine. I will convince my father.”

Emilia nodded. She didn’t think it would go that well, but there was no knowing until they tried.

“Let’s go,” she said, preparing to head to the palace with Rona. “Lay, Misa. I know I don’t need to worry about the two of you, but please don’t do anything reckless.”

Lay nodded with a smile. “Okay.”

“You take care too, Ms. Emilia. The enemy may not be all human,” Misa added.

“Yes, I am aware,” Emilia replied with a serious look.

Lay and Misa used Fless to rise into the sky. They would draw attention to themselves by flying, but if they took their time, Kashim would get away. They flew in the direction of the familiar following Kashim.

“Where’s he headed?” Lay asked.

“He entered the shaft at the center of the ruin city. Shaft forty-one,” Misa replied.

“It’s probably a trap.”

“No doubt.”

It wasn’t hard to imagine there was something waiting in that shaft.

“Misa, I have a favor to ask,” Lay said.

“I won’t get involved,” Misa answered, predicting Lay’s request. “I will watch over you until you settle this. Give that idiotic man blinded by jealousy a taste of reality.”

Lay smiled sadly. Thanks to their fast flying speed, the ruin city shaft soon came into view. The two headed straight in and descended downwards.

“Whenever I think of Kashim, I can’t help but wonder what would have happened to me if Kashim had been the one chosen by the Sword of Three Races instead,” he said quietly.

“Oh? You think about things like that?”

The shaft got narrower the further they descended. The two drew close to each other and held hands.

“I just don’t know what caused him to change. I want to understand. Maybe I was just lucky this entire time.”

“You want to know what you would’ve done if you weren’t chosen by the Sword of Three Races two thousand years ago? Why, the answer is obvious.”

Lay looked at her, eyes rounded in surprise. Misa chuckled.

“You would still fight the Demon King, and you would still fall in love with me,” she declared, as though stating the obvious.

§ 27. The Demon King Academy's Growth

Inside the Etiltheve Imperial Palace.

While Lay and Misa were pursuing Kashim down a ruin shaft, Emilia and the Demon King Academy students were following Princess Rona to Emperor Chappes's location.

"That's odd," Emilia mumbled warily as she moved. Her gaze darted about the place, surveying their surroundings.

"Um, is something the matter?" Naya, a girl with a tiny dragon named Cannibal on her shoulder, asked.

"There were no guards at the entrance, and no soldiers on patrol. It's abnormal for things to be this quiet."

Naya looked frightened by Emilia's answer. "Are we in a trap?" she asked nervously.

"Most likely. They may be waiting to ambush us somewhere."

The straight corridor they were making their way down eventually came to a turn. Emilia and the others paused and proceeded around the corner carefully. The moment they did so, a huge metal cage came falling down out of nowhere, aiming to capture them all.

"Destroy it! *Gresde!*" Emilia ordered.

The students released their magic into the air. Their Gresdes were focused on quantity over quality, and the collective strength of their magic was able to melt the metal cage into shapeless liquid before it hit the ground. A number of stray Gresde shots opened holes in the ceiling.

"We've got you now, demons!" a human voice shouted.

Water started pouring in from the holes in the ceiling. It was no ordinary water either—it was holy water, the weakness of demonkind.

"Retreat now!" Emilia quickly ordered.

However, the holy water wasn't only raining down from above, but rushing towards them from both ends of the corridor. A large number of soldiers were also approaching them on rafts on the water.

"Foolish demons who dare to defy Emperor Chappes!" one of the soldiers cried. "This will be your grave!"

"We'll make you regret coming here!" another jeered. "This is what you get for looking down on us!"

Using the magic power of the holy water, the humans cast earth, water, fire, and wind magic to shut the Demon King Academy students inside a barrier.

"It's De Ijelia!" Emilia shouted. "The power of demonkind is halved inside this barrier! Protect yourselves from their attacks and take out the wind circle first!"

"Don't even think of it! Fire!"

The human soldiers all fired Cyfer at once. Although their magic was weak, the spells formed a barrage that rained on them fiercely. Emilia stood at the front and deployed anti-magic wards to protect everyone. Holy fireballs struck one after another, shaking her with the impact.

"I'll buy you time to break the De Ijelia circles— Huh?"

The Gresde cast by the Demon King Academy engulfed the Cyfer flames with a roar, then spread to light the soldiers on fire too.

"Gwaaaaaaaaah!"

"Gyaaaaaaaaah!"

Over a hundred soldiers were swallowed by the flames. Their rattling death cries echoed down the corridor, painting a picture from hell.

"O-Our magic wards don't stand a chance against them! They're too strong!"

"What?! That's impossible, we're inside De Ijelia right now! Their magic should be half as strong as normal!"

"Weren't the reinforcements meant to be students from the Demon King Academy?! We were told there were no demons from two thousand years ago among them! How could mere students have this much power?!"

“There’s definitely students, but...!”

Human soldiers helplessly burned to death one after another, trampling each other like ants underfoot.

“Is the Demon King Academy made of monsters? What kind of education are they receiving there?!”

“Ha! *We’re* the monsters? Don’t make me laugh!” Ramon sneered, wrapping his hands with Griad flames. “First year class two is swarming with true monsters. We’re failures compared to them. You’re just too weak!”

Black flames swept the soldiers aside. They fell where they stood while screaming.

“Ms. Emilia! They sent these pawns to waste our time! We’ve gotta deal with them before the real scary enemies arrive! Give us your orders!”

“Oh... Are you Ramon’s twin brother?” Emilia asked.

“Why would you think that?!” Ramon shouted. “I’m Ramon, the real Ramon! Just because you went to the Hero Academy doesn’t mean you can forget about us. I’ve never had a twin!”

Emilia stared at Ramon’s face without speaking, as though she was wondering when he became so strong.

“Just give us your orders already!” Ramon said. “Or do you have any better ideas?”

“No... Everyone, prioritize destroying the magic circles. Eliminate any enemies that get in the way if feasible!” she ordered.

The Fan Union girls grabbed their spears and charged forwards.

“Let’s go, girls!”

“I’ve trained nothing but my specialty thrust!”

“We’ll send you to heaven!”

“Imitation Vebzud!” they said together.

With movements unrecognizable to their former selves the girls speared through the sword-wielding soldiers.

“Gyaaah!”

“Urgh...”

“W-Waaagh!”

Soldiers were knocked down in a flurry as the students destroyed the De Ijelia circle, freeing themselves from the barrier. In less than a minute, every last soldier was tied up with Gijel chains.

It was an overwhelming victory, but no one let their guards down. In fact, the students looked even more suspicious of their sweeping win, talking among themselves with skepticism.

“Don’t let your guards down! It can’t be this easy!”

“Yeah, last time we fell through the sky and had boulders rain down on us...”

“I really thought the world was going to end when the lightning turned everything purple back then. This can’t be it—what’s coming next?”

After surviving through so many life-and-death situations, the students had the faces of full-fledged warriors. They had earned a passing mark for this battle.

“A-At any rate, I’m glad that was an easy fight,” Naya said with a relieved look.

“An...easy fight?” Emilia looked at Naya, who had been the worst student in the class when she was their teacher, doubtfully.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I have to stay focused, don’t I? This is real combat, which is much more dangerous than Demon King Training.”

“Demon King Training,” Emilia repeated quietly, watching Naya scan the area. “Just what is that Demon King teaching?”

“Ms. Emilia?” Naya asked.

“Never mind. Let’s hurry.”

They started down the corridor once more. There was no sign of any more troops in the vicinity, but whether that was because they had exhausted all their forces or had sent them to another trap elsewhere was unclear.

Eventually, a large double door along the corridor came into view.

“Is this the place, Princess Rona?”

“The back of the palace is connected to the ruins,” Rona explained. “All the buildings in Etiltheve were constructed while keeping the existing ruins intact. The emperor is in another place.”

“I see. So this door is unrelated,” Emilia said, moving past.

“Oh! Wait a minute, Ms. Emilia,” Ellen said. She had noticed something.

“Is something the matter?” Emilia asked, a little awkwardly.

Considering their past, that was only natural. She had once tried to kill the Fan Union, injuring them severely. But even if that was on her mind, they were currently in enemy territory. Emilia feigned composure as she looked over at Ellen.

“There should be a Star of Creation in the mural at the back of these ruins! Anosh said it through Leaks.”

Meanwhile, Ellen spoke to Emilia as though she had completely forgotten the past.

“The memories of the Demon King, right? Very well. We’ll collect it on our way,” Emilia said.

Emilia touched the door and it creaked open, as though its hinges had been rusted by time. Through the door was a large courtyard, with the sky visible overhead. The ruins of a staircase and many pillars could be seen.

“Let’s go,” Emilia said, leading the Demon King Academy students carefully into the ruins. She scanned the area with her Magic Eyes, but there were no signs of any people or traps.

“Fishy, fishy. How very fishy,” a voice suddenly said.

Emilia turned to look at Naya in surprise.

“I-It wasn’t me! It was this.”

Naya drew a magic circle and took out a cane. There was a skull at the handle end, and the jaw rattled as it spoke.

“Fishy, fishy. How very fishy.”

Emilia narrowed her eyes. “What is it?”

“The Staff of Knowledge I received from Mr. Eldmed. It contains his knowledge and wisdom, and answers me when I have any questions. Though sometimes it speaks even when I don’t have questions, like just now...”

“It just starts talking without prompting?” Emilia asked with a baffled look.

“Just like the Conflagration King. The voice even sounds the same.”

“Fishy, fishy. How very fishy.”

“But there’s normally a reason it starts speaking,” Naya added. She sent her magic into the cane. “What’s so fishy, Mr. Cane?”

“Bwa ha ha. It’s a dragon. There’s a dragon. A big one.”

“A dragon?”

Naya tilted her head and looked at the small dragon on her shoulder. Cannibal chirped in response, and Naya gasped.

“E-Everyone, stop!” she shouted.

The students of the Demon King Academy froze in their tracks.

“What’s wrong, Naya?” Nono asked.

“I think there’s a dragon in the ground in front of us.”

One student immediately slapped Ramon on the shoulder. “You’re up, Ramon.”

“Hah?! Why me?!” Ramon shouted.

Another student slapped his other shoulder. “Go on. It’s your specialty, isn’t it?”

Everyone’s gazes gathered on him, and he reluctantly stepped forwards by himself.

“If I die, you have to revive me! Within three seconds! Got it?!”

He stomped loudly as he ran across the ground, which split with a rumble behind him, revealing an enormous dragon. It was a variant dragon covered in

blue scales and skin.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Ramon dove at the last moment, barely managing to avoid the dragon as it burst out of the ground.

“Ms. Emilia, use De Jerias!”

“I know!”

Emilia immediately drew a circle that created magic threads to restrain the blue variant dragon. It roared as it was entangled by the De Jerias. Sound echoed through the threads, reducing the dragon’s power.

However, the blue dragon was no ordinary dragon. The moment the spell made contact with the dragon, the De Jerias threads began to freeze over. If all the threads froze, they would be unable to produce sound, and the barrier would be weakened. It was only a matter of time before the dragon broke free.

“The spell won’t last long,” Emilia said. “I hope there’s enough time to retrieve the Erial.”

“It’ll be fine,” Naya said. “Cani, you can eat this one.”

The tiny dragon chirped, and an odd rustling sound could be heard. Using the power it had gained by consuming the divine dragon of sound, Cannibal shrunk the blue dragon’s body before their eyes. In no time at all, the huge variant dragon was small enough to hold in one hand.

“Huh?”

Ignoring Emilia’s confusion, Cannibal swallowed the blue dragon in a single snap. It then burped a cold blue breath in satisfaction.

“Oh, Cani can eat just about any kind of dragon. This one was pretty much the perfect size for a meal,” Naya explained.

Emilia looked dumbfounded. “I...see...”

Despite having no clue what she had just witnessed, Emilia pulled herself together and moved on. She climbed up the staircase to find a huge mural painted across the wall at the back, depicting the night sky.

“Huh? There’s nothing here?” Ellen commented.

Jessica looked over her shoulder and agreed. “Yeah, but there are traces of magic left...”

While the faint remnants of Militia’s magic could be detected, the mural was nothing more than a painting. There was no magic in the night sky, no scattered stars forming a barrier, and no Star of Creation.

Someone had already retrieved it.

§ 28. The Stolen Star

After leaving shaft thirty where Aeges had been, I stood on the roof of a watchtower in Etiltheve and looked over the city.

“Anos.”

Just then, a Leaks arrived from Misha.

“We’ve reached the bottom of the shaft.”

“This should be the oldest ruins of Burjeena,” Sasha said.

“Did you find the Erial?”

“There’s a mural, but...” Misha trailed off.

I switched to Misha’s perspective to see they were in a temple made of ancient magic stone. There was a mural of a night sky before her, but there was no magic to it—the Star of Creation had already been removed.

Sasha looked up at the mural. “The First Princess said she saw a lot of soldiers enter, so maybe they dug it out?”

“Hmm. The Erial in the imperial palace was already extracted,” I said through Leaks. *“That means at least two have fallen into their hands.”*

“Hmm. If they didn’t want you to retrieve these memories, wouldn’t they have destroyed them long ago?” Sasha asked.

“I still don’t know the answer to that.”

It was Ceris who wanted to prevent me from regaining my memories. But it was hard to imagine he would be satisfied by simply destroying the Erial. There was no guarantee they were in his hands either—if it was the Sorcerer King who had obtained them, then he might bring them to me for negotiation.

“If they’ve dug the Erial out, it would be safer leaving it in the hands of someone strong rather than hiding it somewhere. Most likely with Hero Kashim or the Sorcerer King Bomiras,” I said.

“Lay’s probably dealing with Kashim, so how do we find Bomiras?”

“In the past shown by the Erial, his body was split into a true body and several clones. He normally lives in a clone with a copy of his source while his true body is hidden somewhere safe. Since the true body has no magic, it’s essentially undetectable.”

No matter how many clones we destroyed, there would be no end until the true body was found.

“It should be somewhere in this city though.”

“Hmm. It’ll be tough finding something that has no magic,” Sasha said, turning around. “But there’s no point in staying here anymore. Let’s go. We can think of a way to look for Bomiras’s true body on the way.”

Sasha made to leave the ruins when she suddenly came to a stop. Misha was still staring at the mural without moving.

“What’s wrong, Misha?” Sasha asked.

“There’s something there.” Misha came close to the mural and leaned in, glaring at it with her Magic Eyes. “Behind here,” she said.

“Really? I can’t sense any magic at all.”

Sasha tilted her head in confusion but stared at the wall just like her sister. I couldn’t detect anything there either.

“That makes it all the more plausible of a hiding place, since he’s gone out of his way to erase his true body’s magic. One wouldn’t think he’d hide it somewhere so obvious.”

Misha turned around and held out her hands. Sasha nodded and joined them with hers, connecting two halves of a magic circle before drawing another one on top.

“Dino Jixes.”

With a glow of light, the two became the silver-haired girl, Aisha.

“Here goes! *Invisible ice.*”

Aisha’s Magic Eyes of Omneity changed the large temple into ice. Not only the

mural but also every wall, ceiling, pillar, floor, and stones buried underground turned into completely transparent ice. There was only one thing that hadn't changed, buried moderately deep into the ground behind the wall—a candlestick.

"Is that...the Sorcerer King's true body?"

The old-fashioned candlestick was exactly as we saw in the past.

Aisha glared in the direction of the candle and transformed a part of the ice.

"Come here," she said in Misha's voice.

Water started pouring from the mural, carrying the candle along the current. Even though the candle was submerged, the flame showed no sign of going out. Eventually, the candle leaped out of the wall and into Aisha's hands.

"That was simple. The Sorcerer King can't do anything in this state, right? What should we do?"

"Two thousand years ago, the Phantom Knights located Bomiras's true body and killed him before he could use his full strength. I doubt he'd allow the same thing to happen again," I said.

"Oh... That's a good point. That means something will happen if we try to kill him like this, right?" Sasha's voice asked.

"Assuming the Sorcerer King isn't a fool, yes," I answered.

"Shall I change it into ice?" she said in Misha's voice.

The candle was arranged to wake the true body's source up upon contact with a clone.

If Aisha used the Magic Eyes of Omneity to transform the candle into another object, the source would be sealed and rendered helpless. Any countermeasures against its destruction wouldn't be activated either.

"Let's go with that. Give it a try."

Aisha nodded and looked down at the candle in her hands. *"Hopefully this will do it. Ice crystal."*

The candle easily transformed into ice without activating any traps.

“It’s gone,” Misha’s voice said.

The source in the candle had vanished. It had teleported somewhere the moment the candle transformed into ice.

“I see. The true body was set to teleport as soon as it detected anything abnormal.”

The result would have been the same whether we tried to destroy it or seal it.

“But I saw it for a brief second. *It went that way,*” Aisha said, turning to point at a wall.

I checked the direction with the map in my head and saw that it was headed towards shaft forty-one—the shaft Misa and Lay had entered after Hero Kashim.

“I’ll head over,” I said, returning to my own vision.

I glared at shaft forty-one from where I was perched at the top of the watchtower. There were no obstacles in the way—it was a straight line from here. I put strength into my legs and leaped. The top of the watchtower collapsed, and I dove towards the shaft like a meteor.

“You two check that the candle hasn’t moved elsewhere. If we eliminate every teleport point, he’ll have nowhere to run,” I said to Aisha.

“Got it. I’ve seen it once before, so it’ll be easy,” Aisha replied.

The Sorcerer King’s candle was most likely to teleport somewhere he could reach. That way, if anything happened to the candle of his true body, he could move the flame of his source to another candle. If this were true, in all likelihood the candle was currently somewhere in his territory. If the teleportation activated just before his source perished, it would be too risky leaving it somewhere unfamiliar.

In the past, Ceris said the Sorcerer King never left Midhaze because he was afraid of leaving his true body behind. It was unlikely his careful and cowardly personality had changed much since then. Besides, the candle itself had barely any magic. It had used the magic overflowing from the Etiltheve ruins to activate its teleportation spell and not its own magic.

As I descended through the shaft, I switched my view to Misa's Magic Eyes.

"There's nowhere else to run, Kashim," said Lay.

Two men were facing each other—one was Lay, and the other Kashim. They were in a temple that resembled those found in the other shafts—or rather, what *had* been a temple. The surrounding ruins had been destroyed almost beyond recognition, as though a fierce battle had already taken place. From the look of the fight, Kashim was cornered with nowhere to run.

"Let's settle this once and for all," Lay said, looking straight at Kashim. "I was weaker than you back then. That's why you thought I wasn't worthy of being the hero to fight the Demon King, no? Maybe that's why you felt everything was for show. Maybe that's why it felt unjust to you."

Lay's gaze was full of conviction.

"But that's no longer the case," he said firmly.

"What isn't?" Kashim asked.

"I am stronger than you now. The Sword of Three Races wasn't looking at the present, but the future. And I'll prove it."

"An interesting claim. There are two of you, and one of me. And although inferior, that girl has the power of the Demon King. Yet you want to prove you're stronger than I?" Kashim said with a disgusted look. "You heroes always use such despicable tricks!"

"I won't lift a hand," Misa said with a smile. "I'm just here to watch over things."

She used Fless to distance herself from the two.

"I will win against you," Lay declared. "I won't just defeat you—I'll break your sword and your spirit. This fight would have no meaning if it wasn't a one-on-one duel."

Lay summoned the Sword of Three Races and stabbed it into the ground. He then held his hand over his chest. Six faint orbs of light appeared, and he left them hovering beside the sword. He had removed six of his seven sources from his body.

“I won’t use Evansmana, and I’ll only have one source. I’m a demon now, but since you’ve also become a draconid, the conditions should be about even.”

“Fine,” Kashim said, finally agreeing to stop fleeing. He shot Lay a wary look. “If you’re serious, then come at me. Though I doubt that immature blade of yours will reach me.”

“We’ll see about that.”

With a smile on his face, Lay started walking towards Kashim. The distance between the two shortened, until they were steps away from being within sword range of each other.

Suddenly, the ground split apart, and like a geyser bursting crimson flames erupted upwards. The raging flames wrapped around Lay, burning through his magic wards.

“The despicable hero has fallen into the trap he deserves,” Kashim crowed. “Without the protection of the Sword of Three Races, you would have died long ago. *This* is proper adjustment!”

Kashim immediately drew his sword and ran forwards to deal a follow-up attack. Lay opened a storage circle to draw Siegesta, the Sword of Intent. However, the flames shifted, as though they had a will of their own, and burned the spell formula for the storage circle before he could grab his sword.

Lay stared into the abyss of the crimson flames, his gaze hardening. The flames were actually the Sorcerer King Bomiras, and his magic was more powerful than that of a clone.

“Hee hee hee! Did you lower your guard thinking it was one-on-one, Hero Kanon?” Bomiras taunted. “You cannot break free of my body. Burn under my crimson flames as my comrade ends you with his sword—
Gawoooooooooooooh!”

The crimson flames were pierced by a black Vebzud-stained hand that grabbed him and tore him away from Lay. Misa hadn’t moved—I had flown in from afar and swiped the Sorcerer King’s body of flames.

“I was just looking for this guy, so I’ll be taking him with me. Fight to your heart’s content, Lay,” I said.

Kashim shot me an infuriated glance as I left. “Some hero you are, Kanon, bringing the Demon King to a one-on-one duel.”

He charged at Lay, who was still unarmed, and thrust his sword at him. But the next moment, Kashim’s sword went flying through the air.

“What?!” Kashim shouted.

The Sword of Intent—drawn in the blink of an eye—was now pointed at Kashim’s throat.

“Do you admit defeat?” Lay said.

After one beat, Kashim lowered his head. “Fine... I can’t win against you.”

In a flash, Kashim grabbed the Sword of Intent, holy cloth appearing to wrap around his hand and extending to bind itself around Siegesta’s blade.

“What, did you think I’d say that for real?” Kashim said with a snort. “It’s a trap. Don’t tell me you couldn’t tell I was going easy on you.”

With Je Neroh keeping Siegesta restrained, Kashim aimed a kick at Lay. Lay let go of the Sword of Intent to swiftly evade Kashim’s feet.

“Don’t let go of your sword so easily.”

Kashim yanked Je Neroh back to grab at Siegesta. His goal was probably to steal the weapon. But the holy cloth had already fallen into tatters, floating to the ground; Siegesta had sliced it into pieces.

“Wha...”

Lay snatched the Sword of Intent as it fell and at once slashed at Kashim’s body.

“Urgh!”

“Are you still going easy on me?” Lay said, moving forwards as Kashim retreated to deal a follow-up attack. Kashim’s brow twitched. “You should start fighting seriously instead of trying to trap me. If you think I’m still the same as I once was, there won’t be a next time for you.”

§ 29. An Adjustment of Justice

“No next time? Do you think a single scratch makes you better than me?” Kashim said, healing his wound with Ent.

“Couldn’t you hear me?” Lay replied immediately.

Kashim glared at him. “Don’t be so full of yourself. You’ve never won against me before, be it by sword or magic. Never in the past, and never in the future.”

He held up his right hand. A familiar ring glinted on his index finger—the Selection pledge jewel ring.

“Is that real?” Lay asked.

His confusion was only natural—the eight members of the Selected Eight were already accounted for.

“See for yourself. *Guala Nateh Forteos*.”

Magic gathered in the pledge jewel, building a three-dimensional magic circle within it. Divine light radiated from the ring, shaking the temple ruins. A majestic gate appeared out of nowhere, which then grew limbs and an eerie face. The gate was slightly open, leaking divine magic power from within.

“I am the Eight selected by Katnamira, God of the Heavenly Gate. Kashim the Calibrator.”

The ring was real. *Guala Nateh Forteos* and the god summoned were also real. But that was what made it even more bewildering.

There were *nine* members of the Selected Eight. If Ceris was included, then ten.

“Here goes. Witness as I adjust your expired notions of justice!”

Kashim started running, completely unarmed. The Heavenly Gate of Katnamira before him opened its doors with a creak. Divine light flooded out from the gate, blinding Lay’s Magic Eyes.

A townscape could be seen on the other side of the gate—the city of Gairadite. Kashim proceeded to dive through Katnamira's gate.

"It's too bad, Kanon. You didn't make it in time. Inzuel is covered in Lo Macis, and you cannot use Gatom. My goal was to lure you here," he said, declaring his victory from within the gate. "While I go after the Hero Academy Arclanisca."

The Katnamira gate started to close.

"You better hurry after me. For as much fake salvation as you've spread as a hero, I will distribute equal amounts of despair. Gairadite will take its proper form. And you shall see—"

The gate slammed shut.

"—how wrong the Sword of Three Races was for choosing you," his voice said through the door.

A few seconds later. Katnamira's gate opened once again, revealing Kashim inside.

"Now, my plan can finally—What?"

He blinked at Lay in shock.

"I said I wouldn't lift a hand, but I didn't say I would stand back and watch if you tried to flee," Misa said from where she stood a little ways away from Lay and Kashim. She had a magic circle deployed, casting a dome-shaped barrier of darkness over the area. "You may be able to use Katnamira's gate within Lo Macis to teleport away, but you cannot use it within my Demera."

It was the barrier magic Avos Dilhevia had once cast over the entirety of Midhaze, only with its range shrunk to cover the God of Heavenly Gate and prevent its teleportation effect. Kashim had opened the door expecting to arrive in Gairadite, but the magic had failed to activate, leaving him where he started.

"You cannot run, Kashim," Lay said, walking towards him without lowering his guard. "I will defeat you beyond doubt and free you from that absurd curse of yours."

"Run? Me, from you?"

“Not from me, but from reality. You’ve been running this entire time, closing your eyes, covering your ears. When you yourself know best that what you’re doing is hopeless,” Lay said, stopping one step out of sword range.

“I have *never* fled. I’m still fighting to this day. I have fought all this time to correct the erroneous justice enacted by you heroes.”

“Then fight me directly. Or are you too scared to accept it?” Lay said, pointing the Sword of Intent at Kashim. “That you can no longer win against me.”

“That’s quite the conceit coming from a man saved by his holy sword and seven sources. How well you embody the vanity of heroes.”

Kashim extended his hand and gathered magic in his palm. Blinding light formed the vague shape of a sword.

“Come, Sword of Holy Resonance, Exneisis,” he said.

His call materialized a holy sword twice the length of a regular sword. Kashim raised Exneisis into the sky and sent magic into his Selection ring.

“Guala Nateh Forteos.”

Divine light descended into the tip of the holy sword. A new god had manifested in the blade, emitting a tremendous amount of magic power.

“Prethz: Ausravia.”

The Sword of Holy Resonance released a radiant light. The god named Ausravia had descended into the holy sword and enhanced it.

“And that’s not all,” Kashim continued, magic running wild. *“Azept: Katnamira.”*

The gate of Katnamira flew open and moved towards Kashim’s body. He stepped through it and the Heavenly Gate disappeared, the god possessing his body.

“Allow me to teach you...”

He flicked Exneisis’s long blade through the air freely before resting it on his shoulder.

“...what defeat tastes like.”

Lay smiled sadly. “I know all too well what defeat tastes like. I’ve lost more times than I can count.”

He pointed the Sword of Intent at Kashim, watching his movements carefully.

“True defeat is to perish,” Kashim disagreed. “It’s cowardly to remain living after defeat. You should have died an honorable death and passed the Sword of Three Races onto its next owner.”

“If I could’ve saved people that way,” Lay said, “if honor was what it took to save someone, I would have done that.”

Meanwhile, Lay stepped within sword range of Kashim. In response, Kashim took a step back, swinging the Holy Sword of Resonance at the same time. The long blade was able to reach Lay from outside of his range.

“Hiyah...!”

Siegsesta flashed, knocking the long blade away. Lay continued moving forwards as Kashim kept retreating.

Kashim held his left hand out in front of him and drew a magic circle.

“Teo Triath.”

A blast of light was fired, and Lay had to get down quickly to dodge it. The pillar behind him was blasted straight through, and the wall behind it easily crumbled into pieces. The blast carried enough force to bore a seemingly endless hole into the wall.

“Exneisis is a holy sword that intensifies emotions. Though it can heighten the effect of Aske, it can only do so equivalent to the contribution of a single emotion,” Kashim explained.

In other words, Exneisis alone couldn’t be used to cast Aske or Teo Triath. Yet Kashim was able to fire another blast of Teo Triath, which Lay then deflected with the Sword of Intent. An explosion could be heard as another wall was destroyed.

“Is it the effect of the other god you summoned into the sword?” Lay asked as he swiftly ran forwards.

Kashim continued retreating while sweeping Exneisis sideways. Lay blocked

the blow with Siegesta, but was unable to redirect the force, locking their swords together.

“The Duplication God Ausravia can duplicate the emotions of the holy sword, layering it back upon the blade,” Kashim said, evenly matched in power with Lay. “Unlike your incomplete Aske that relies on others—”

The emotions in Kashim’s sword increased through Ausravia’s order, surrounding Kashim in a blinding light. His physical strength was enhanced with his Aske, allowing him to push Lay’s Siegesta back.

“—my Aske has no weakness!”

Lay had no Aske activated, while Kashim was using an Aske blessed by the power of god. The balance in power tilted, and Lay’s feet dug into the ground, forcing his knee to bend.

“Hah!”

Instead of pushing back against Kashim’s strength directly, Lay directed the longsword to the side and stepped forwards. He skillfully sealed the longsword while bringing Kashim within range of his own blade.

“That, too, was a trap,” Kashim said. He drew so close to Lay that Lay was unable to swing his sword either—but despite the improper stance, the Sword of Intent moved anyway. Kashim saw through that movement and sealed Lay’s arm without difficulty.

“No matter how many times you try, you cannot defeat me. Not in swordplay or in magic,” he said.

Their bodies both moved forwards, passing by each other. Kashim elbowed Lay from behind and used his momentum to move behind him. The move opened up distance between the two fighters, still with their backs to each other—and with enough distance for Kashim to use his sword again.

“You’re wide open.”

He spun around and used his centrifugal force to slash at Lay using Exneisis. Lay had lost his balance and still had his back to Kashim.

“Hyah!”

The sound of metal clashing against metal screeched. Lay had blocked the longsword directed at his back using Siegesta.

“What?!”

Lay had used the force from when he was elbowed by Kashim to rotate himself, step up close to Kashim, and thrust his sword straight through Kashim’s chest.

“Urf!”

Blood poured along Siegesta, dripping onto the floor.

“Indeed, the sword you have now is much better than mine once was,” Lay said, smiling coldly as Kashim cast Ingall. “But to the right-hand man of the Demon King, this is still child’s play.”

§ 30. Sword of Affection

Kashim clenched his jaw and glared at Lay.

“Don’t assume you’ve seen all my power in just a single blow, Kanon,” he said.

“It’s because we crossed swords, Kashim, that I understand you well,” Lay replied, making Kashim frown harder. He dismissed Lay’s words with a laugh.

“No matter how much you train your Magic Eyes and stare into the abyss, a battle cannot be decided from appearances alone. The power to overcome regardless of magic or sword ability—*that* is the meaning of courage.”

“Do you think courage is enough to overturn any battlefield?” Lay asked, his sword still pierced through Kashim’s chest. As long as his blade was there, Kashim was forced to continuously cast Ingall to stay alive. “Do you think that standing up for your comrades is enough to overcome any unfavorable situation?”

“It’s deplorable that after all this time you, a so-called hero, feel the need to question such things.”

“Our enemies also fought for the sake of someone else,” Lay pointed out. “We’re not the only ones who fight with courage. I cannot imagine you wielding a sword of loyalty and winning against someone like the Demon King when you can’t even see that.”

Kashim’s brow twitched, but Lay continued.

“You don’t know anything,” he said, “because you fled from the battlefield.”

“It is you who knows nothing, Kanon!” Kashim shot back. “You lost this duel the moment you decided to face me one-on-one!”

Kashim swept Exneisis sideways, but Lay grabbed his arm to stop the long blade.

“Exneisis is useless at this distance,” Lay said.

“If I were my past self, perhaps.”

Magic particles rose from Kashim's body. The order of a god was overflowing from him.

"Amuth."

From behind Lay, a long blade was thrust towards him. He twisted his head to evade it, but two more swords appeared, aimed at Lay's feet and torso. Lay pulled his sword out of Kashim and leaped to the side to avoid them. When he glanced behind himself, he saw three small gates floating in the air, an Exneisis extended out of each of them. It was the effect of the God of Heavenly Gate's magic, Amuth.

"So you used the Duplication God on that Holy Sword to launch an attack using Amuth," Lay said.

"This is no normal dimension magic."

A magic circle was drawn between Kashim and Lay, and another Amuth gate appeared.

"Hraaah!"

The moment Exneisis was thrust through the heavenly gate, light wrapped around it and accelerated it like it was being carried on a swift wind.

"Fwah!"

Lay used the Sword of Intent to repel it. Magic and magic collided, scattering fierce sparks everywhere.

"Amuth."

Three heavenly gates appeared in Lay's blind spot, and more Exneisis extended from within them. He leaped out of the way, but three more Amuth appeared, stabbing into the ground after him. Lay rolled to evade them, landing on his feet. Kashim aimed his left hand at the Amuth, Aske gathered in his palm.

"Amuth Teo Triath."

The moment the light blast passed through Amuth, the room was filled with thick laser beams targeted at Lay as he continued to evade the longswords.

Kashim's repeated use of the Amuth, and his use of it with Aske specifically,

seemed to reveal that it was a magic amplification gate that strengthened the spell that passed through it; the Amuth Teo Triath he had just cast was several times thicker than a regular Teo Triath.

“Sword of Intent, second hidden art,” Lay said, holding Siegsesta with undivided attention. The blade was now capable of slicing even light.

“Bisector of All.”

Siegsesta swung down on the blinding light as though it was parting the sea.

“All your strength is borrowed from others. You are a fake hero made up by humans,” Kashim said, creating countless Amuth gates to form a dome around Lay. “Without the Sword of Three Races, you would be unable to cut the threads of fate. Without your seven sources, you would have perished long ago. Without using your comrades in your Aske, you wouldn’t even be able to cast your magic.”

“Yet without the God of the Heavenly Gate and the Duplication Gate, you wouldn’t be able to fight at all,” Lay pointed out with a smile. “But it wouldn’t be right for me to say that. You’re adjusting for my past of borrowing other people’s strength by borrowing the strength of the gods, right? This is the only way for things to be fair to you, no?”

“So you’ve finally taken a defiant stance. You’ve fallen so far, it’s pathetic, Kanon.”

“But you know, I’d rather you go a step further.”

Kashim’s temple twitched. “What?”

“I’d rather you adjusted things so that you can’t come up with any excuses later. I don’t want to hear anything about how it wasn’t fair afterwards.”

Anger flickered in Kashim’s eyes.

“Are you looking down on me?” he snarled.

“I’m starting to understand your ways,” Lay corrected. “I see that no matter how many times I win, you won’t accept it. You won’t even consider it. And it’s all because you were never standing on the battlefield in the first place. You are a coward that criticizes others from a safe distance.”

Kashim's brows furrowed in irritation.

"So I'd rather you use whatever you need to give yourself an advantage," Lay continued. "The better for me to show you that no matter how far you tilt things in your favor, I will slash everything to pieces."

With a calm demeanor, he observed the increasing number of Amuth and readied the Sword of Intent.

"You've been the loser ever since you avoided fighting the Demon King," he said.

"We may not be allies, but to see you be so critical of your elders is deplorable of you, Kanon. Have you forgotten we share the same master?"

Kashim sighed heavily.

"There's something I learned during the tragic Great War two thousand years ago, Kashim," Lay said.

At that moment, Kashim filled the Sword of Holy Resonance with magic power. The duplicated blade appeared from the countless Amuth gates around Lay. A wall of blades was thrust towards him in an instant—there was nowhere to run.

"And what I learned is this: In this world, there are some people that need to be brought low, truly low, before they will understand."

In the span of a single breath, Lay slashed apart all the Exneisis that were thrust forwards. The copies of the Sword of Holy Resonance were deflected, snapped, or utterly shattered, falling to the ground.

"*Teo Triath*," Kashim said, holding his left hand out.

But no light emitted from his hand—the *Teo Triath* was fired from the Amuth around Lay instead. Blasts of light rained down on Lay like a heavy downpour. Lay slashed through the light using *Bisector of All* as he ran straight at Kashim. Stray blasts of *Teo Triath* created dust clouds as they struck the ground, obscuring his vision.

"The blades are no longer visible. Let's see if you can pull off the same move now."

Exneisis appeared from the Amuth once again. This time, the countless blades aimed away from Lay, stabbing into the ground just barely out of the range of his sword in an attempt to limit Lay's movements and prevent him from getting any closer to Kashim.

Another one hundred Amuth opened, firing blasts of light. In the narrow space he was trapped in, Lay slashed them all apart. Not a single blast struck him.

"Battles are about knowing how an opponent will move before they do. You cannot win against me by evading on the fly," Kashim said.

He swung Exneisis down over his head, Aske wrapped around the blade. In front of him, far above the longsword in his hands, three new Amuth were being formed.

"Amuth Teo Torgatron!"

When Exneisis was brought down, the blade extended up to the first Amuth gate, accelerating its momentum. That momentum increased even more when the attack hit the second Amuth, Aske swelling in size. By the third gate, the slashing attack was no more than a blinding ray of light.

Every other Amuth surrounding Lay exploded in the shock wave of the slash. The ground of the ruins was carved open by the Amuth Teo Torgatron, but Lay was able to evade it at the last moment. The shock wave also blew away the Exneisis that had sealed Lay's movements, but he was able to avoid those calmly.

"That won't be enough to hit me," Lay said.

*"I said to read the opponent *before* they move."*

Just then, Amuth gates started falling from overhead, landing between Lay and Kashim.

A total of nine gates opened between them. Kashim discarded his holy sword and held up a small, blue star.

"This is the Erial that was in the palace. Let's see if you can protect it."

Kashim threw the Star of Creation at Lay. The Erial passed through the nine

Amuth gates in a gentle curve.

“Amuth Teo Triath!”

A blast of light chased after the Erial, expanding several times in size each time it passed through a gate. If Lay tried to use Bisector of All on the light, the Erial’s magic would also be at risk of being sliced in half. The past stored inside the star would be lost.

Lay, fully aware of what was at risk, chose not to use his sword and instead caught the flying star in his hand, his body swallowed by a flood of light not a moment later. The ninth Amuth gate crumbled under the strength of the light as it passed through the gate, hit Lay, and opened a hole in the wall behind him.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m only doing what you asked of me,” Kashim said, turning around triumphantly. “Yet even if I hadn’t gone this far my victory was all but assured.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Lay said.

“What?”

Kashim stopped walking and looked back. The flood of light gradually faded, revealing Lay, still standing, with light wrapped around him. Teo Aske had created a barrier, protecting him from Kashim’s Amuth Teo Triath.

“Still relying on the same trick, I see,” Kashim said, swinging the Aske-covered Exneisis with all his might.

In contrast, Lay met his blade with the Sword of Intent fully wrapped in Teo Aske. Demon sword and holy sword clashed, locking the two in a struggle of physical strength.

“I’m disappointed, Kanon. You truly cannot do anything on your own.”

“I see that makes you happy.”

Kashim, who had been chatting away fluently until then, fell silent at those words.

“You were looking for a reason to be disappointed, weren’t you?” Lay continued.

“Are you that desperate to look down upon others?” Kashim shot back. “No matter what you say, the fact you used Teo Aske is an unshakable truth. Or will you claim that borrowing emotions doesn’t count?”

Kashim wrapped the light of Aske around himself and pushed back against Lay’s sword.

“I just want to understand you,” Lay said.

“*Understand?* Such a thing is impossible with your relentless haughtiness. From the moment you borrowed that woman’s help, your words and deeds became as good as dead. You will never know the despair I felt seeing a hero with such a shallow heart!”

He sent Lay and his demon sword flying, then thrust his long holy sword in pursuit. Lay used Siegesta to prevent Exneisis from reaching his heart.

“Oh, how many times I’ve wished you were a hero. A *true* hero. If only you were a man I could believe in!”

Blade clashed with blade, but Lay easily slashed away the long holy sword.

“I get how you feel,” he said.

The holy sword snapped and the tip spun through the air before stabbing into the ground. Kashim clenched his jaw angrily.

“Forcing my surrender with your sword won’t allow you to understand me. There’s no need to fight further when the answer is clear: There is a fundamental lack in you, something that neither sword nor magic can fix.”

Kashim discarded his broken holy sword and gathered magic in his right hand. A new duplicated Sword of Holy Resonance appeared in his hand.

“You, who cannot understand the feelings of others, are unworthy of being a hero!”

“Hyah!”

Kashim swung Exneisis down, but it was soon sent flying through the air once again. After disarming him, Lay pointed his demon sword at him.

“Do you think the duty of a hero is to merely defeat enemies?” Kashim asked.

“Will it satisfy you, to cut me down here without understanding how I feel? If all you want to do is trample on others, you will be no different to the evil Demon King!”

“I understand now,” was all Lay said.

Kashim sighed in disappointment. “There’s no need to be so far in denial.”

“You should take a closer look at the abyss of my Teo Aske.”

“That won’t change anything.”

But Kashim went along anyway with Lay’s suggestion, and looked at the aforementioned abyss while he duplicated another Exneisis behind himself. He was clearly waiting for a chance to turn the tides.

“These emotions...”

However, Kashim’s expression changed.

“They don’t belong to that woman?”

“That’s right.”

Misa’s emotions weren’t being used in Lay’s Teo Aske. Kashim cast his gaze around.

“Then where are they coming from?” he asked.

“If you are a hero, then you should know what kind of love magic this is, Kashim. This Teo Aske is from *your* love—from the twisted affection you have for me, which I now, finally and sincerely, understand.”

Kashim looked at Lay in disbelief.

“*Riol Aske.*”

The light of Teo Aske transformed into a white kale flower, blowing petals everywhere.

“Though you devoted yourself to being a hero, the Sword of Three Races did not choose you. The people who praised you until that point now turned their backs on you, hurting you deeply. You began to believe the lie that no one needed you anymore, since being a hero was your pride and meant everything to you.”

“Like I said already, it wasn’t the Sword of Three Races that didn’t choose me. / was the one who didn’t choose the Sword of Three Races!” Kashim yelled. “I have no need for something so unjust, no matter how much power it gives!”

He grabbed the duplicated Exneisis and swung it sideways. Lay blocked it with the Sword of Intent, petals from the kale flower dancing around him.

“That was the beginning of your mistakes,” Lay said. “You could only soothe yourself by believing you were the one who didn’t choose the Sword of Three Races.”

“Such groundless accusations. And you call yourself a hero?”

Lay’s Sword of Intent stopped Kashim’s attacks as though he could read his heart.

“You can lie all you want, but I can feel your heart through your sword. This is what the Sword of Intent is capable of,” he said.

Lay had learned how to communicate as a result of his many battles with Shin. Now, he was diving even deeper into the abyss of the Sword of Intent. In his current state, he could pick up even the faintest emotions of his opponent through his sword—including what true sentiments those emotions might have been trying to hide.

“You twisted your sense of justice by convincing yourself that you were the one who didn’t choose, not the Sword of Three Races. You told yourself you were correct, and the heroes and Sword of Three Races were wrong. You wanted to defeat the Demon King without the holy sword to prove that idea. But you had no chance of defeating Anos, so you tried to bring down other heroes and stand on top of them.”

“Utter nonsense! Have you finally lost your mind, Kanon?!”

With a heavy screech, the Sword of Intent collided with the Sword of Holy Resonance.

“You pretended not to notice the truth,” Lay continued. “Because if you had, you wouldn’t have been able to maintain the peace in your heart. That’s why you looked away from your own actions, reducing yourself to a monster obsessed with bringing down the heroes. It satisfied you to do so, if only for a

while, and in doing so you failed to notice you were bringing yourself down as well.”

“Enough of your delusions! I cannot bear to watch you repeat your crazed nonsense like a broken record. This ends now!”

He continued making attack after attack, which Lay shot down one after another. With each strike of their swords, another kale flower bloomed.

“You’ll never accept it. I know how it feels,” Lay said, affectionately. “But there’s nothing you can do about this kale flower reflecting your heart. Kashim, if I didn’t understand you, this Riol Aske wouldn’t have formed.”

“You’ll never understand! You, who receive help whenever you want it, will never know these feelings of mine. Hearing you say that with such assurance disappoints me more than anything!”

Sword collided with sword, and kale flowers—flowers of understanding—burst into a shower of petals.

“You should be disappointed in yourself before you’re disappointed in me. Pretend all you want that you know the real truth, but deep in your heart you recognize how worthless you’ve become,” Lay said.

Something like fear flashed across Kashim’s face as he glanced at the scattered petals. He immediately looked away from them and glared at Lay with a look full of hatred.

“You’ve noticed that you’re a fool no one accepts. That’s why you try to act disappointed in others first, so that you won’t be disappointed in yourself.”

The sound of clashing swords continued to ring out. Petals flew everywhere, in a far greater mass than before.

“Shut up, Kanon. I will not listen to you!”

“I told you I will defeat you completely. Your twisted heart will surrender to my sword of affection. There will be nowhere for you to run, physically or mentally.”

Lay changed tactics, swinging his sword offensively. Kashim moved backwards while deflecting him, but there was another faint grimace on his face. A large

number of flower petals were flying through the air.

“You are no calibrator. None of that matters. You failed to reach what you so aspired to be, so you tried to drag your aspirations down to your level for your own peace of mind. But even then, you knew—no matter how much you drag others down, you yourself have never changed.”

Lay’s Sword of Intent slipped past Kashim’s longsword and pierced his shoulder. The blood that burst from the wound also transformed into kale flowers.

“You’re a mediocre human with no potential, far from what you wished to be.”

“I said *I don’t want to hear it!*”

Kashim swung Exneisis with all his strength. The Sword of Intent blocked it easily, sending more petals dancing.

“Quit your nonsense!” Kashim screeched.

Lay caught Kashim’s blade. More kale flowers burst from the impact, burying their feet in petals.

“What would you know?!” Kashim yelled, accusing.

Lay said nothing. Fierce swings of the holy sword continued to attack him relentlessly.

“You don’t know me!”

As he swung his sword, Kashim created three Amuth gates overhead. He skillfully used his sword to methodically back Lay into a corner. After exchanging three blows, Lay was standing where Kashim wanted. No—it would be more accurate to say Lay had moved there on his own.

With an earth-rattling tremor, the three Amuth lined up between Lay and Kashim for Amuth Teo Torgatron. Once the slash swung down and passed through the gates of god, it would gain a tremendous amount of force.

“With this...”

Kashim lifted the holy sword high over his head.

“...it’s ov—”

Just as he was about to bring his blade down, white petals fluttered down, obstructing his vision. He glanced in the direction the flowers were flying and paled. His feet were buried in a field of kale flowers—a sea of flower petals that had emerged from the depths of his desperate, delusional heart.

Less than a second had actually passed from him noticing these flowers. But to him, it felt like an eternity. Exneisis slipped out of Kashim’s fingers, sinking into the sea of petals without a sound.

“Stop...it...”

Until now, all he had done was run. All he had done was look away.

“Stop already...”

For so long he had clung to an ideal, a delusion that allowed him to look away from reality while allowing him to still carry his twisted love. But he couldn’t run anymore. No matter how much he ran, his sins were lined up before him as kale flowers. There was nowhere he could look that wasn’t covered in those petals of understanding.

“Don’t pity me...”

Kashim fell to his hands and knees.

“Stop it already!” he yelled as though surrendering. “I... I wanted to be chosen!”

He spoke as though he was remembering two thousand years ago. And once he started, he couldn’t stop, all the emotions he had stuffed down flowing forth like water from a burst dam.

“The sword should have chosen *me*! If I had the Sword of Three Races, I could have fought the Demon King too! The honor, the commendation, the peace in this era—all of it should have been mine!”

Lay stood before Kashim as he knelt on the ground.

“It was you who wasn’t chosen, Kashim,” he said. “You weren’t chosen. They were never your things to begin with.”

Kashim closed his mouth and looked at the kale flowers with an empty gaze.

“Stop... Stop it...” Kashim gasped. “I admit defeat... So...”

He grabbed a handful of kale flowers and crushed them.

“So get rid of these flowers!”

Among these flowers, practically buried in them—and in the pity they represented—Kashim trembled like a frightened child. He had lost the will to fight.

It had been his final stronghold: the thought that Hero Kanon, as a true hero, couldn't understand the envy and jealousy of the weak. What little pride remained in him he had protected by believing that a hero who couldn't understand the feelings of the common, unchosen folk wasn't worthy of being a hero.

More than anything else, it was the flowers that brought his defeat.

§ 31. The True Worth of the Sorcerer King

“Murgh!”

The Sorcerer King Bomiras groaned, scattering flames everywhere. He was trying to shake my hold on him as we descended down the shaft. There was no fixed shape to his body of flames, but I had a grasp on his entire source, so his flames were forced to follow wherever I went.

“Hmm. Looks like you have more magic than before. You must be the true body,” I said.

“Before?” Bomiras asked.

For some reason, that candle had magically teleported to him.

“I see. So that’s how it is,” he mumbled in a disgusted tone. “I thought it was weird, but I get it now, Anos Voldigoad, Demon King of Tyranny.”

His Magic Eyes glared at me sharply.

“So you sneaked into Etiltheve alongside your subordinates. Were you Anosh, the modern demon that I fought?”

“Bwa ha ha. So you finally noticed. Rather dull for someone called the Sorcerer King, don’t you think?”

Bomiras’s body of flames transformed, increasing its magic. The intensity of his flames increased, spreading to surround me.

“Oh?”

“Don’t think I’m the same as my clone. Copied sources are far inferior in magic. If I had used my true strength, Ceris Voldigoad wouldn’t have killed me.”

The flames around me swelled further, spreading to turn the ruin shaft into a sea of fire.

“Etiltheve is my territory, just like Midhaze was in the past. As long as I am here,” Bomiras continued, “I will not be defeated.”

Fixed magic circles appeared everywhere, releasing more sparks of fire. Those sparks started forming a barrier that enhanced Bomiras's power.

"Sleep eternally within my body, Demon King of Tyranny. *Bolg Vergum*."

As soon as he activated his magic, my vision was stained crimson. Flames swayed as the space around us distorted. Out of nowhere, the ground appeared beneath me. I landed in the center and several pillars of fire rose around me.

The Sorcerer King's full form appeared in front of me.

"Hee hee hee! This will be your grave. You cannot win against me *inside* the body of the Sorcerer King," he said.

"That's some confidence."

I started running towards Bomiras.

"How careless, Demon King."

As soon as he said that, the pillars of fire shot heat rays at Bomiras's body. His body transformed into glittering flames—an enormous amount of magic power had gathered in his fire.

"There's no need for any tricks inside Bolg Vergum. Witness the sublime magic of the Sorcerer King—the true Aviasten Ziara."

The glittering crimson flames formed a fireball and charged towards me.

"Without a body of flames, you can never cast this pinnacle of sorcery!"

"*Veneziara*."

Countless possible Jio Graze appeared, drawing a magic circle of possibilities. Invisible heat rays beamed down on my hand, covering it in glittering, jet-black flames.

"*Aviasten Ziara*," I said.

"What?!"

I pierced the crimson fireball with my black hand, burning it away.

"I don't need a body of flames, because a single possibility is enough."

I grabbed the source within Bomiras and scorched it.

“Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

With a dying scream, Bomiras’s source was reduced to ashes.

“That was too easy for the true body,” I noted out loud.

I looked around to see cackling sparks of fire forming Bomiras’s destroyed body once more. And it wasn’t just one body—the creepy cackling voice echoed as over thirty copies of Bomiras appeared all around me.

“Hmm. I was pretty sure that it wasn’t fake...”

I observed the Bomiras bodies around me with my Magic Eyes. His source was definitely in each of them.

“Concealment magic isn’t exclusive to the Phantom Knights, you know. The true worth of Bolg Vergum is its ability to create heat haze mirages that can even deceive *you*,” he said with a loud laugh. “One of the bodies here is the true me. Now, will your Magic Eyes be able to tell which one it is?”

It was true that the thirty-odd Bomiras surrounding me all looked like they had a real source. Even when I strained my eyes, I couldn’t see a difference in them. If this was really concealment magic, it was quite impressive.

“Your chance for victory is gone. Even Ceris Voldigoad feared Bolg Vergum, and killed my true body before I woke up. You can only struggle against this crimson heat haze until you run out of energy and burn to death.”

Hmm. There was no guarantee Bomiras wouldn’t just teleport elsewhere if I cleared up every clone here. If I was to defeat him properly, I’d have to do as the Phantom Knights once did and crush his escape preparations first.

Which meant...

“Anos.”

A Leaks arrived from Lay. I thought Bolg Vergum had swallowed me, but it seemed our magic links were still connected.

“What’s wrong?” I said.

“Hee hee hee! Is this really the time to be answering Leaks?”

His multiple bodies started drawing magic circles directed at me.

“Face the wrath of my crimson Jio Grazes!”

Bomiras fired enormous Jio Grazes that left a crimson trail as they soared towards me. I destroyed some with my Magic Eyes of Destruction and cast Benolevun to deflect the rest. In the same breath, I moved up close to one of the Bomiras and slammed my Aviasten Ziara into him.

“Are you busy right now?” Lay asked.

“No, not particularly.”

Bomiras transformed into crumbling ash and vanished like a mirage. Another fake. Just like earlier, I had no way of detecting the difference.

“What’s up?” I asked Lay.

“I’ve settled things with Kashim. He had the Erial from the palace. I was thinking of looking at the past now, but maybe it’d be better to wait until later.”

“No, now is fine. Can you show me?”

“Aren’t you in the middle of fighting Bomiras?”

“I’ve seen his limits. It’s fine if I multitask.”

More large flames rose from the pillars of fire. The Bomiras clones around me all looked infuriated.

“You may be the ruler of Dilhade, but don’t get ahead of yourself, *whelp*,” he said, scattering sparks in a show of intimidation. “I have lived for an eternity longer than you. You will regret looking down on me.”

“If all you care about is the years you’ve lived, kneel here and pledge your loyalty,” I said, pointing at the ground. “I’ll reward you with the long life you’re so proud of.”

Sparks of fire crackled as the Bomiras clones glared at me. Each one had a slightly different expression, but their fury was evident. The clones not only created their own magic power but they also had their own emotions. They weren’t pure imitations of the true body.

I just couldn’t believe they were mere mirages. Which meant there was only one answer.

“I’ll give you a taste of hell, Demon King of Tyranny,” Bomiras spat.

Heat rays from the fire pillars fired at the thirty-odd Bomiras clones, transforming them into balls of glittering fire.

“There’s no way for you to escape from this many Aviasten Ziara.”

With a deafening roar, the flames of Aviasten Ziara charged at me from every direction. I cast my own Aviasten Ziara on both my hands and leisurely readied myself for combat.

“Arcana, activate Lay’s Star of Creation,” I called out.

Her reply was immediate.

“Memories of the stars blink; light of the past reaches the surface.”

The Moon of Creation shone down on Lay’s location.

“Now, what of the past will I see next?” I wondered.

Through Lay’s eyes, the Star of Creation radiated with a blinding glow. I waved off Bomiras’s approach with one Aviasten Ziara-covered hand while watching the memory play.

§ 32. The Seventeenth Visit

Two thousand years ago.

With Bomiras gone, powerful demons swarmed to take over Midhaze. The land was vast and fertile, rich with magic energy and untapped resources, and the climate and magic environment were peaceful and pleasant to live in. On top of that, Bomiras had left his fortune behind. All of this made the area extremely alluring to demons.

Famous demons from across the land gathered their troops and headed to Midhaze. The residents of the city trembled in fear of the war that would soon be upon them. With so many demons about to collide, a battle of unprecedented scale was about to begin.

Those who could flee had long fled already—anyone who was left was resigned to their fate. But that tragic fate never befell them; Demon King Anos swiftly arrived in Midhaze and built the ultimate symbol of terror, the Demon Castle Delsgade.

Thus, all the advancing armies of these enterprising demons were intercepted and wiped out completely. The entire situation was suppressed in under a day. Not a single enemy was able to step foot on the land of Midhaze.

The Demon King Army led by Anos proved to everyone that it was unparalleled in Dilhade. The terror its name instilled resounded across the nation even more strongly than before.

The day the war ended, Anos was standing in the throne room, unmoving. Perhaps he was offering a silent prayer for those who had fallen in the line of fire.

After some time, the Demon King broke his silence.

“Shin.”

The Demon King’s right-hand man knelt behind him.

“Many lost their lives on the way here. More than just a few perished for all this, and were unable to reincarnate,” Anos said.

All he had done was live. People were drawn to him for sticking to his own path, and he accepted them all as his followers without discrimination. He defeated the demons he didn't like, repelled the humans that attacked him, and kept doing as he wished. But as he gained more people to protect, Anos became colder and crueler. Before he knew it, across Dilhade he was feared as the Demon King of Tyranny.

He believed that was for the best. If his bad name spread, fewer people would oppose him, making it easier for him to protect his followers. Yet opposition was still quite fierce and varied; there were demons who refused the emergence of a young king, humans who plotted to remove Dilhade from the control of the Demon King, spirits who cooperated with the humans, and gods who wanted to erase Anos for disturbing order.

“The Goddess of Destruction has fallen. The Sun of Destruction will never shine in the sky again. As Abernyu wished, the order of destruction is gone,” Anos said.

Shin remained kneeling as he listened to his master speak.

“By gaining control of Midhaze, over half of Dilhade is now mine. I thought this would satisfy me.”

He hadn't gained all of this because he wanted to. Some offered him their territory in order to gain his protection, while other territories he had stolen after their rulers had enraged him. Anos had become king because he was unable to abandon them all. In the feuding lands of Dilhade, owning over half the land was the equivalent of ruling the nation. Now, everyone feared and respected him as the Demon King Anos.

“But I've changed my mind. First, I'll bring down the Four Evil Kings. Then I'll force the remaining demons in power to surrender, and unite Dilhade under my control.”

“As you wish, my liege,” Shin replied, head bowed. “I will be your right hand, your sword that cuts down everything that stands in your way.”

Anos turned back to look at him.

“Once I’ve united Dilhade, I will seek an audience with the Goddess of Creation Militia, the Great Spirit Reno, and Hero Kanon.”

It was a surprising proposal, but Shin listened silently, expression unchanging.

“I wish to end the Great War,” Anos declared.

The road ahead of him was still long. But it was at this moment that Anos decided to start down the path of peace.

“But for now, nothing will change. The war has gone on for so long, it’s impossible to say when it will end.”

“Nothing is impossible for you, my liege.”

Anos chuckled at the utmost faith Shin had in him.

“Step outside for a bit, Shin. Don’t let anyone else in.”

“Understood,” Shin replied, departing with Gatom.

After watching him leave, Anos turned to look into empty space.

“I’m alone now. You can enter.”

The space before him distorted faintly. The man who teleported in was invisible from Lynel and had his magic hidden with Najira—Ceris.

“So you brought down the Goddess of Destruction and changed her into a castle,” Ceris said without warning. “You brat, just what did you say to the Goddess of Creation?”

“Skipping the pleasantries again, I see. You haven’t changed for as long as I’ve known you,” Anos said.

His Magic Eyes were clearly looking at the man hidden with Lynel and Najira.

“It seems the Sorcerer King Bomiras has been defeated. Was that your doing?”

“I am not obligated to answer,” Ceris said curtly.

“This is the seventeenth time you’ve appeared before me, ghost of the dead.”

“What does that matter?”

“Nothing, I’m just starting to catch on to your identity—and why you reduced yourself to a ghost. I had no idea the first time I met you, but now I can read you, just a little.”

Ceris stared back into Anos’s eyes silently.

“The world will change,” Anos said.

After glaring for a few more seconds, Ceris replied.

“It will not change. It hasn’t changed until now, and it never will. That is why ghosts are born—we will continue wandering across Dilhade until the end of time.”

“Then I will destroy you,” Anos said in warning. “I will erase the ghosts and change this ravaged world. So that fools are never born again.”

He pointed at Ceris’s face.

“I will put an end to you.”

“Do you really think a brat like you is capable of such a feat?”

“Thinking it’s a feat means you merely lack power. The world hasn’t changed until now, you said? Of course it hasn’t. Until now, the world didn’t have *me* in it.”

A world with him in it was different to a world without. Anos made that near-arrogant declaration and glared back at Ceris. Sparks flew between them for a long, long time. To an onlooker, it would have seemed like time was frozen.

“Voldigoad,” Ceris suddenly muttered.

Anos’s gaze eased, and he looked at him in question.

“You are a descendant of the Voldigoad line. Your mother was Luna Voldigoad.”

The Demon King chuckled with an incredulous look.

“I haven’t taken control of Dilhade yet,” he said.

“I only revealed half.”

The Demon King Anos had taken control of half of Dilhade. Thus, Ceris had

revealed one of his two parents.

“Once you become the ruler of Dilhade, I’ll tell you the other half,” Ceris said, then drew the magic circle for Gatom.

“What happened to your business here?” Anos asked.

“I came to warn a fool, but he was far more foolish than I expected. It was too late for any warning to be effective.”

He teleported away. Anos followed the trace of his magic with his Eyes to see he was moving towards the enchanted forest behind Delsgade.

He watched from afar as a Gatom circle appeared, followed by Ceris. He looked around at the Phantom Knights that had been waiting for him.

Edd, Zeno, and Zett were present. They remained seated on the tree roots.

“What did the Demon King say?” Edd asked.

“That he would destroy the ghosts and change the world.”

They all laughed at Ceris’s answer.

“I’d like to see him try,” Zeno said.

“The dead will always be dead. Nothing will change that,” Zett agreed.

“Is it just the three of you left?”

They nodded.

“Let’s go. This is our largest prey yet. Be it demon or human, we will seek blood to the bitter end. Let’s teach that naive brat the true ways of this world.”

The three Phantom Knights slowly got to their feet. With Ceris in the lead, they left the enchanted forest.

§ 33. Negotiating With the Sorcerer King

The surroundings melted away as the past stored in the Erial faded from my vision.

Seventeen. That was how many times Ceris and I met two thousand years ago. Far too little to consider him a father.

The man hadn't felt the need to reveal his own name or relationship to his own son. To him, had I been merely a tool in fulfilling his own goals? If so, what had been the purpose of his visits? I had said I would destroy him and the other ghosts. Ceris seemed to have come to some kind of understanding from those words, and so had I.

Had I drawn close to the abyss of his heart during one of those seventeen visits? There might have been a hidden meaning to our exchange. Two thousand years ago, the world was a dangerous place. Someone could have sneaked into the Delsgade throne room and eavesdropped on our conversation. No matter how well I trained my Magic Eyes, I couldn't keep a perfect watch on everything.

There were Eyes and ears constantly probing into the internal affairs of their enemies, and in experiencing the Erial I had been one of them. What I had just witnessed was the kind of conversation with unspoken words that couldn't be uttered lightly.

But I didn't get it—what had I noticed about Ceris back then?

“Now...”

I looked around at the pillars of fire that lined Bomiras's body inside the Bolg Vergum.

The thirty Bomiras clones that had appeared like a mirage had been destroyed while I was watching the past, leaving nothing but some black ashes. There was only one left—the Bomiras impaled on my right hand with Aviasten Ziara.

“The clones were quite elaborate, Bomiras. You called them heat haze mirages, I believe? Yet they had nothing to do with concealment magic. They were your clones that you had transferred your source to.”

I pushed the glittering black flames into his body of fire, closing my fist around his source and burning his body.

“Urk... Gah!”

His face of flames distorted in agony as he panted for breath.

“D-Did you know from the beginning?” he asked. “Did Ceris Voldigoad tell you my secret?”

“Know from the beginning? What are you on about, Bomiras? I said I could multitask.”

Parts of Bomiras’s body crumbled into black ashes. The pillars of fire vanished, and the space distorted, returning us to the ruin shaft we were in before. Reduced to a spark of fire, Bomiras attempted to flee upwards, but was unable to proceed past the Beno levun I had set up.

“Ngaaah!” Bomiras cried. “It can’t be. This can’t be! You were barely paying attention to me, the Sorcerer King Bomiras, and yet...!”

Sparks of fire gathered in one spot, forming a body of flames. I leaped up to him before he could draw a magic circle, grabbing his face with my hand of Aviasten Ziara.

“You can only transfer your source to one clone at a time. If your body is awake, your clones cannot move. By convincing your enemies that you possess such a limitation, you can hide the existence of your multiple clones when you swallow them with Bolg Vergum, allowing you to fight with an advantage.”

His clones were both his defense and his lifeline. It was unlikely for someone as meticulous as Bomiras to throw them into battle so carelessly, especially considering the fact that his magic power limited how many he could make.

Therefore, if I destroyed all of them at once, he would have nothing left to protect his true body. Bolg Vergum was a gamble that banked on finishing the battle in a single blow.

“Ugh... Gwah...”

Aviasten Ziara burned up Bomiras’s true body, turning it to ash. His face of flames glared at me with a look of pure hatred.

“Did you think that looking at the past would prevent me from seeing you?” I asked.

“Curse the Voldigoad lineage,” he muttered, “I should have known you were that ghost’s descendant...”

Even though he was turning into ashes, Bomiras’s flames grew in intensity. Like a candle burning its brightest before going out, his flame glowed brighter to conquer its destruction, extending the magic of his source beyond his limits.

“You claim to seek peace when you possess enough power to squash me, the Sorcerer King, like an insignificant insect? Could you be any more shameless?!”

Bomiras drew magic circles of various sizes inside his body, scattering Jio Graze around.

“You yourself are the seed of war. The existence of someone with the power to destroy the world *and then some* is the greatest obstacle for those who wish for peace!”

The scattered Jio Graze formed a magic circle that allowed him to cast Aviasten Ziara. Bomiras turned into crimson flames and escaped from my grip, landing on his feet a distance away. I followed him and landed as well.

“I understand what you’re saying, but crying about it won’t change anything. If you have any better ideas, let’s hear them.”

“I cannot imagine you listening, but...”

The Sorcerer King reached into a magic circle inside his body and withdrew a small vial. The liquid inside was black and shaped like a mountain—the shape was magically maintained.

“Take this,” Bomiras said, throwing the vial at me.

I looked at it and sensed a similar magic to the Darkworld Cloak.

“It is called the Watershed of Sorcery. I have spent a long, long time

researching this item. If you drink it, the magic overflowing from your source will split like a watershed and flow away. Part of it will remain within you as usual, and part of it will flow into the Darkworld.”

“To split my magic and weaken me, huh?” I said.

“If you truly wish for peace, then you have no need for that much power. As I’ve said many times now, a world without the Demon King of Tyranny is a world closer to peace,” Bomiras said.

I stared at the Watershed of Sorcery in my hand.

“Why isn’t it a Zecht?”

“Hee hee hee!” Bomiras cackled. “A Zecht can be broken if you’re prepared to be destroyed. And with your strength, you could overcome even that destruction.”

He had a point.

“So you want me to drink this if I desire peace?”

“But you won’t. You seek peace, but refuse to relinquish your power. Yet in a peaceful world, that power is unnecessary. Therein lies the paradox.”

Bomiras pointed at my face with a finger of flames.

“If you didn’t exist, I wouldn’t have to resort to using such force. Although it seems no one else has noticed this. Your paradox is what reveals your true intentions—peace is just an excuse for you to exert your power over others.”

Bomiras’s mouth twisted, convinced he had seen through my mind.

“Is it fun picking on the weak, Demon King of Tyranny? Suppressing others under a false banner of peace must feel so gratifying. You’re addicted to that feeling. And I can prove that now.”

“Oh?”

Bomiras used the magic Limnet. Emilia and the First Princess Rona could be seen moving through the imperial palace.

“To the rest of the world, *she* was born as the daughter of Emperor Chappes,” Bomiras said. “But she is my clone.”

Hmm. That made sense.

“I see. So Rona’s words about convincing the emperor were a complete lie,” I said.

“Indeed so. Chappes was thrown into jail long ago. Inzuel is fully under my control.”

Bomiras probably masqueraded as the emperor whenever the need arose. If that was true, defeating the Sorcerer King would resolve everything.

“Rona is leading them to the graveyard. Your subordinates are all skilled, so we had to move carefully, but Kashim split them up well. There’s no demons from two thousand years ago with Rona right now, are there?”

Since Lay and Misa had gone after Kashim, the only ones left with Emilia were the students of class two.

“And since Rona is a clone of my true body, I can send my source there freely. Do you know what this means?”

“That you can transfer yourself to Rona and massacre my subordinates at any moment.”

Bomiras crackled triumphantly, scattering sparks everywhere.

“You cannot teleport within this barrier, so it’ll take at least a few seconds for you to run over there. With that much time, I can easily send them all to their graves.”

“Do you think I’d let you?”

“Of course, you may be capable of destroying me before I transfer to my clone. But there’s no way I’d be unprepared for that, no?”

I stared into his source with my Magic Eyes to see him drawing a magic circle.

“When my source perishes, the final magic of the Sorcerer King will activate,” he explained. “As my end approaches, my source becomes more powerful, and will transfer to my clones in that state. Rona will have even more strength than even the true body.”

And so was the method by which the Sorcerer King overcame destruction. Put

another way: Though the Sorcerer King's body perished, a stronger fake would be transferred to a clone, and in doing so, become the true body and live on as the Sorcerer King. Perhaps that was how he had grown stronger until now, and what I was currently fighting was one of many such fakes.

In order to destroy him for good, all of his clones had to be erased first.

"You can destroy me, but you'll just be sacrificing your subordinates if you do. If peace is truly what you seek, then you will drink this Watershed of Sorcery."

Bomiras drew a Zecht circle.

"I will also promise not to lay a hand on your subordinates."

If my power weakened, Bomiras would be able to flee from here. If what he wanted was a way to deter the Demon King of Tyranny, his goal would be fulfilled. However...

"Try it," I said.

"What?"

"If you think your clone can kill my subordinates, just try it."

"Hee hee hee! I knew it. I *knew* you were this kind of man. You'd refuse to relinquish your power even if it meant watching your subordinates die. Your bloodline compels you to seek bloodshed above all. Are you sure? How would your subordinates feel if they heard what you just said? All your lies until now will be for naught. Why don't we call it a draw for now?" the Sorcerer King offered in negotiation.

"You're mistaken," I said.

Bomiras's flames twisted in confusion.

"I'm saying your clone can't kill my subordinates."

I sent more power to the Aviasten Ziara in my right hand. The Sorcerer King glared at my hand with the utmost wariness.

Using his blind spot, I drew a magic circle. Chains of fire shot across the ground.

"Wuh?!"

Distracted by my right hand, the Sorcerer King failed to stop Zola e Dypt from wrapping around his body.

“You will regret this, Demon King. The frail demons of this era won’t last more than a few seconds in my flames. Surely you can understand such simple logic.”

“I’m not sure about that. All I know is that when Rona is defeated, you won’t have anywhere else to run.”

I slowly walked forwards and glared at the restrained Sorcerer King.

“Before I explain why I don’t relinquish my power, there’s something I have to tell you first,” I said.

I would kill him the instant he tried to transfer to his clone. Even if he succeeded at the transfer, he would be no more than a fake with the same thoughts. It wouldn’t be the same as reviving or reincarnating. Knowing him, he would prefer to continue living as is, so it was unlikely he would move from where he was.

“Don’t underestimate the magic of this era’s demons, Sorcerer King,” I said. “The students of the Demon King Academy are better than you think.”

§ 34. The Demon King Academy vs The Sorcerer King

I switched to Emilia's perspective to see a large gate in front of her eyes.

"This is where my father, Emperor Chappes, conducts his official duties. He normally works from here, and during emergencies, the room also serves as the command center," First Princess Rona explained from behind Emilia.

The palace was built and prepared to be sturdier than anywhere else. It made most sense for the enemy command to be located there—if Emperor Chappes had still been in charge, that is.

"They may have abandoned this place already," Emilia said.

They hadn't seen any soldiers since the first attack.

"Let's go."

She placed a hand against the door, but it appeared to be locked.

"I think I should be able to open it," Rona said, touching the magic circle on the door.

She sent her magic power into the circle, and it made an unlocking sound. The door slowly opened.

Perhaps it was because it was built around the ruins, but the emperor's office was oddly spacious. There were old stone statues and pedestals placed around the room, as well as a stone sword and shield, clearly symbolizing something. Another door was at the back of the room.

"It's larger than I thought," Emilia said. "Be careful, everyone."

The group scanned their surroundings as they walked forwards, focusing their Magic Eyes on the stone statues. There were faint traces of magic left in them, but they didn't appear to be activating any spell.

"Is Emperor Chappes in the back?" Emilia asked.

“I think so,” Rona replied.

After a short exchange, they resumed walking.

They were so far into enemy territory, yet there were no signs of any guards—which only made Emilia and the Demon King Academy students more nervous. Before long, they had reached the middle of the room. Ellen took a step forwards, and a section of the floor sank in with a clunk.

“Ah!” Ellen cried out.

“What’s wrong, Ellen?” Emilia asked.

“Sorry! I stepped on something! Watch out—”

A tremor rumbled through the palace loud enough to drown out Ellen’s voice, shaking the room fiercely. At a glance, the old stone statues, pedestals, and the stone sword and shield were vanishing one by one. But they were actually falling—the floor to the emperor’s office was crumbling apart and falling into the earth.

Ellen looked into the large hole that opened near them and shouted.

“It’s hollow below here! Like Lord Anos!” she shouted.

“You mean you can’t see the bottom?!” one of the students yelled back.

“Huh?! Stop using weird metaphors at a time like this!” another said in complaint.

“Everyone, fly up!” Emilia shouted. “*Fless!*”

Emilia tried to rise into the air, but she was unable to take off and lost her balance.

“What’s going on?!”

From what I could see through her Magic Eyes, the magic field had become turbulent and heavily disturbed, preventing the use of Fless. Not even the demons of two thousand years ago could fly here. Anyone who tried would send their bodies flying in another direction than what they intended, causing them to collide with the walls and each other.

“Prepare yourselves for the fall! If you try to fly, you’ll risk breaking

formation!” Emilia said.

The rest of the floor finally fell away, leaving Emilia and the students in the air. Like Ellen had said, the space below the floor was hollow, and reached so deep, the bottom couldn’t be seen—perhaps it had once been a mine shaft itself.

Emilia and the students prepared their magic wards and barriers for the impact of landing, and the trap awaiting them below.

“Princess Rona! Give me your hand!” Emilia shouted, somehow managing to cast a weak Fless to move herself.

But Rona gazed vacantly into thin air, making no attempt to grab Emilia’s hand.

“Princess Rona? Are you okay?” Emilia asked.

Emilia slowly moved through the air towards Rona.

“Run away.”

The mouth of the skull on the falling Staff of Knowledge rattled as it spoke.

“Run away and don’t look back.”

When Naya heard its voice, she gasped.

“Ms. Emilia, stop! Cani, I’m counting on you!” she called out.

Crimson flames spread before the falling students’ eyes. Just before Emilia was engulfed in the flames, Cannibal flew through the turbulent magic field with ease, snapped its jaws around her clothes, and tugged her back.

“What? Ah...!”

Just before she was burned by the fierce flames, Emilia was saved by Cannibal. But her face was frozen in a look of pure shock. Rona’s body had flipped inside out and changed into a body of flames. Even the students who came prepared for battle gasped in horror, exclaiming various reactions.

“Are you serious?”

“I knew it wouldn’t be easy, but of all people...”

“Why did it have to be the Sorcerer King?!”

Rona, now the clone of the Sorcerer King Bomiras, scattered sparks everywhere as he cackled.

“Pathetic demons, incapable of using Fless in this level of disorder.”

Bomiras drew magic circles of various sizes across his body. Crimson suns of Jio Graze threatened to fire at the students. Their magic wards wouldn’t be able to protect them from such a barrage.

“Bwa ha ha! It’s a pinch! Yes, a crisis!” the Staff of Knowledge cried gleefully. *“It’s a matter of life or death, Bookworm! Find a way to juggle this turbulent magic field, your breath attacks, and the connecting shafts of these underground ruins all at once to escape. If you do, you’ll be granted the privilege of living for a little longer!”*

“Don’t underestimate trash like this? Ha! The Demon King may have power, but he has no sense for it in others,” Bomiras said, Magic Eyes glinting. “It’s a waste to use this on you, but consider it a parting gift for the afterlife—the most sublime Jio Graze you’ll ever see.”

A crimson sun appeared from the turret of magic circles and shot towards Emilia and the students.

“Cancel it out with all your strength!” Emilia ordered, casting Griad with the students.

Their fire magic focused on the same point and synergized to form a large fireball. But Bomiras’s Jio Graze easily swallowed it. Despair flashed across Emilia’s face.

“Cani! Use your breath to flip the magic field over!” Naya shouted.

With a chirping cry, Cannibal opened its jaw wide. Its screeching cry pierced through the air, causing Bomiras to stagger for a brief moment.

The disorder of the magic field was so strong that even Bomiras struggled to control his Fless. The breath and rampaging magic field caused his Jio Graze to turn in its path and blow a hole in the wall of the ruin shaft. The wall caught fire, and the hole in the wall led to another bottomless cavity—a neighboring ruin

shaft.

“Everyone, head through there! Cani, push them!”

Cannibal chirped, and used another breath to push the students through the hole. Their bodies were lacerated by the sound waves, but now wasn't the time to be bothered by that. Emilia and the students all used their swords, spears, and feet to push themselves towards the hole and into the other shaft.

“Come back, Cani!” Naya called.

Cannibal flapped its wings and soared smoothly through the turbulent air. But the Sorcerer King appeared directly above it.

“Impudent dragon. Die.”

“Kreeeeeee!”

The Jio Graze that Bomiras released swallowed Cannibal and pushed it down the shaft.

“Cani!” Naya screamed.

“No! Naya, don't go!”

Emilia grabbed Naya's hand and stopped her from returning to the Sorcerer King.

“Let go of me! I have to save Cani!” Naya shouted.

Just then, a weak growl could be heard in the distance. A breath appeared in front of Naya and swept her back into the shaft.

“Ah!”

It was clearly trying to protect its master. Emilia grabbed Naya's hands firmly in hers and looked at her solemnly.

“Let's go. If we don't run, that tiny dragon's actions will be for nothing.”

“Okay...”

Emilia and Naya ran as fast as they could past the magic field. Once they were able to use Fless, they flew down the complex underground ruins to get away from Bomiras.

As the Staff of Knowledge had mentioned earlier, the underground ruins were made of a series of deep shafts connected by narrow tunnels. Ten or so minutes of running later, they had moved to the ninth shaft past their original location.

“Is everyone here?” Emilia asked, checking on the students.

Everyone was exhausted, and some wounded, but they were all there and alive.

“It might be better to get back up to the surface. Naya, does that Staff of Knowledge know anything?”

Naya sent her magic into the cane. “Please share your wisdom, Mr. Cane.”

“Of course, it’s impossible! The Sorcerer King is well aware that you wish to flee to the surface. You should assume he has his Eyes constantly watching the exits. If you try to step outside, you will be found immediately—don’t think you can slip past him. He isn’t called the Sorcerer King for nothing!”

A heavy silence followed those words.

“I guess we have no choice but to wait for help,” one of the students eventually said.

“Anosh, Lay, or Lady Sasha should come save us when they notice, right?” another asked.

“But can we keep running from him until then?”

“If he sets this shaft on fire, it’ll be over for us.”

The Staff of Knowledge opened its mouth again.

“Correct, that is correct! Full marks! Since you avoided his first trap, his next plan will be to smoke you out. While you’re standing around here, your escape routes are being closed off one by one. Your only options will be to burn to death, or face the Sorcerer King at the exit. Nothing else!”

“I’ve never received worse full marks before...”

Silence fell over the students once again. Emilia was also quietly pondering to herself, unable to come up with any good ideas for their next steps. Their opponent was a demon from two thousand years ago—the situation seemed

helpless.

With every passing moment, the Sorcerer King's flames were spreading through the ruins, preparing to exterminate all of them.

"Um," Naya said, breaking the silence. "What if we win?"

Everyone looked at her with faces of shock.

"Win? Do you mean against *Bomiras*, Naya?" Jessica asked.

"He's an ancient fire demon over a thousand years old, you know?" Nono said worriedly.

"But if we run, we can't save Cani," Naya protested with tears in her eyes. "I know Cani's still alive! He's waiting for me to save him!"

"I know how you must feel, but our opponent isn't someone we can just ambush and overpower," Emilia said.

Naya furiously rubbed her tears away and held up her pledge jewel ring with a look of determination.

"I'll use summoning magic. I'm not very good at it yet, but I have to try!" she said. "Besides, I think Lord Anos is telling us to defeat the Sorcerer King."

"What makes you think that?" Emilia asked.

"Just look at this situation. It's impossible for us to be truly cornered like this—because it's impossible for Bomiras's plan to outsmart Lord Anos. Wouldn't you agree?"

Looks of realization fell across the other students' faces.

"Now that you mention it... Yeah, it's impossible."

"Right. So what? He wants us to take him on? That Sorcerer King?"

"Ugh. His demands are always so unreasonable. It's a demon from two thousand years ago! Two thousand years! And a major one too!"

"But it means we can do it, right? We just have to figure out how."

Just then Ellen raised her hand.

"I think Naya's right! Anosh said the same. He said the demons of the Magical

Age stand on top of the foundations built by the ancient demons!” she said brightly, unfazed by the skeptical looks of the other students. “Whether it’s the Sorcerer King or the Demon King of Tyranny doing the research, the work of our predecessors will allow us to reach further into the abyss.”

“I mean, Anosh’s case is a bit special,” one of the students said. “He’s a genius.”

“No, Anosh was probably the first to notice what Lord Anos was thinking!” Ellen pointed out.

Naya looked at Ellen questioningly. “What *was* Lord Anos thinking?”

“He doesn’t want us to lose to the demons of two thousand years ago forever. We have to surpass them! That’s what Lord Anos wants of us.”

“Why would he want that?” Jessica asked.

“That I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?!”

“I mean, he must have some deeper reason! A deeper reason that none of us would ever be able to imagine.”

Jessica shot Ellen an unimpressed look.

“A-Anyway!” Ellen continued. “What matters is that Lord Anos is placing his hopes in us. That’s why he taught our classes in person.”

Nono looked down in thought. “That might be true...”

“That’s why we’ll meet his expectations! Don’t worry!” Ellen said. “If Lord Anos isn’t saying anything, then he must believe we can do it ourselves. We can win this for sure!”

All the students considered her words carefully.

“You all have a point, but I cannot allow you to march into battle without any chance of winning,” Emilia said. “So let’s strategize first. You’ve all grown far more than I expected. We may be able to come up with a way to overcome this situation if we combine our strengths.”

Ellen’s optimistic ideals helped relax Emilia’s mind, allowing her to think more

positively. Their victory didn't seem as hopeless as it had before.

"Please tell me the full range of your skills," Emilia said.

The students nodded, and then began explaining the spells and abilities they had learned to Emilia.

§ 35. The Demon King Academy's Secret Strategy

In a shaft in Etiltheve.

Stone pedestals and stone tablets were lined up in dense rows. A large mountain of rubble was piled in a corner. Swords, harps, hats, shoes, and other objects made of stone were displayed on top of the pedestals, but most were broken beyond recognition. The solemn stone carvings were tombstones; this place was an ancient cemetery, built far more than thousand years ago.

The Fan Union girls glanced around at the tombstones and squared their shoulders. The area was vast—they had come here in search of the widest space in the shaft.

“It smells like smoke,” Jessica commented.

The smell of something burning had wafted over from afar.

“The Sorcerer King probably released his fire somewhere, like Naya’s Staff of Knowledge said,” a Fan Union girl replied.

“Right...”

The ruins below the imperial palace were a network of shafts connected by narrow tunnels. As a whole, they spanned quite a large area, and there were plenty of places within which one could hide themselves. With so many students of the Demon King Academy to chase around, the Sorcerer King had probably decided it was easier to burn entire areas with Jio Graze instead. As time passed, more black smoke filled the shafts.

The path to the surface was already a sea of fire. In order for the students of the Demon King Academy to survive this encounter, they had no choice but to defeat the Sorcerer King Bomiras. The Fan Union girls positioned themselves with their backs to each other and watched their surroundings warily. A red flame flickered at the top of the shaft.

With a deafening sound, a crimson red sun burned far above their heads. A laughing body of flames appeared in a shower of scattering sparks.

“So you were all hiding in the cemetery. What a fitting place to die.”

The Sorcerer King descended to the ground, flames flickering. His Magic Eyes glinted at the girls who faced him with their spears held out.

“Where did the others run off too, hmm?” he asked.

Only the eight girls of the Fan Union were present. There was no sign of any other student in the vast cemetery.

“Where do you think?”

“Maybe they’ve reached the surface by now!”

“Are you sure you shouldn’t be looking for them?”

The girls all said their taunting remarks one after the other. But Bomiras remained composed.

“Even if the world flipped upside down, you will never be able to flee from me,” he said. “Long ago, it was well-known among demonkind that to step into my territory would mean to either surrender to me, or perish.”

Bomiras pointed his fingers of fire at the girls.

“Tell me where the others are. I will wait ten seconds. The first to speak will have their life spared.”

He looked at Ellen. Having lived during the Great War of two thousand years ago, Bomiras was a battle-worn veteran. A bone-chilling bloodlust could be seen in his Eyes.

“Well?” he said.

“I refuse!” Ellen answered immediately, easily shrugging off his bloodlust.

“Oh? So you believe your comrades won’t betray you. But trust is a fragile thing that crumbles easily before the Sorcerer King.”

Bomiras looked at Jessica searchingly, an unspoken threat of death in his gaze. Tension spread from his body of flames, engulfing the area in a heavy air.

“I refuse too!”

Her response was also instant. The threat of death was nothing to girls who

lacked common sense.

“We’ll see how long that show of courage will last.”

The Sorcerer King next looked at Nono.

“What about you?” he asked as though he was applying pressure from above. It was all up to him whether she lived or died—Bomiras understood that well. There was no doubt he was in control of this situation.

The Sorcerer King stood before them with the same aura of the conqueror who’d ruled Midhaze and that, two millennia ago, instilled pure fear straight into the hearts of countless demons.

“Me four!” Nono shouted.

“You mean ‘three’! ‘Me three’! Don’t skip a number!” Jessica chided.

“Why don’t we all say it together, since we’re all refusing anyway?” Ellen suggested.

“Because he insists on asking us one by one!” Jessica replied.

“Right,” Ellen said, considering. “We might as well buy some more time while we’re at it.”

“I refuse eight-o!” one of the Fan Union girls shouted.

“What does ‘eight-o’ even mean?!”

Bomiras sighed, clearly annoyed. The Fan Union wasn’t taking him seriously, and it was a source of real anger for him.

“Enough of this. You are standing at a cliff’s edge. Your lives are at risk, yet you show no awareness at all. The epitome of carelessness.”

Bomiras closed his eyes and sighed while shaking his head, spraying sparks of fire with his breath. “If it were two thousand years ago, you would already be dead—”

“We refuse Vebzud!”

The Fan Union girls suddenly turned on him and charged with their spears out.

“Guwoooogh!”

Eight spears stabbed into Bomiras’s mouth.

“If it were two thousand years ago, you’d already be dead, no?” one of the Fan Union girls said.

“That’s right! If that was Lord Anos’s real Vebzud, you would’ve been killed,” added another.

“The demons of two thousand years ago lower their guard as soon as they mess around. They’re not used to the vibe of modern demons, are they?”

The next moment, eight burning arms sprouted from Bomiras’s body of flames and grabbed the spears, snapping them in half.

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” the girls screamed.

At the same time, fire attacked the girls. The girls were sent flying back and fell to the ground, their bodies burning.

“Despite everything, I am a compassionate person,” Bomiras said. “Thus, I will ask you one more time: Where did the others go? If you do not speak, you will face the agony of burning alive as I slowly kill you. Well?”

“Don’t look down on us...”

One of the eight girls fallen before Bomiras struggled to their feet. It was Ellen.

“We won’t be defeated so easily!” she yelled with a sharp glare.

While the other seven girls were unable to stand, they raised their heads, the intent to fight still strong in their eyes.

“Here we go, girls!”

“Yup!”

The girls drew a magic circle and placed their hands in the center. Their next weapons appeared before them. As any demon of two thousand years ago would do, Bomiras immediately stared into the abyss of the weapons with his Magic Eyes. But even though he had sworn not to lower his guard a second time, he couldn’t hide his disdain at what he saw.

After all, to him, they were mere sticks. Plain wooden batons that were sold in any old city of Dilhade—the anoss rod.

“Hee hee hee! Hee ha ha ha hah!”

Disdain soon changed to fury, which spilled from his mouth as dark laughter.

“Insolent to the core. No one has ever dared to disrespect the Sorcerer King to this extent before.”

They were not demon swords, magic artifacts, or even bladed weapons. This was probably the first time in Bomiras’s life that he was being challenged with such items, and so it was expected that he would view such a challenge as a gesture of disrespect.

“Enough. I was going to do this *after* your capture, but you are the Demon King’s Choir—students who have received the Demon King of Tyranny’s favor. If I were to destroy each of you one by one, the Demon King may be inclined to negotiate.”

Bomiras’s body swelled to double its size, scattering flames everywhere.

“By the time I’m done with half of you, he may feel like listening to me.”

His gaze landed on Ellen, the only one standing up.

“I will begin with you.”

Bomiras’s hand of fire burned fiercely, swelling to three times its size. Ignoring the wooden stick in Ellen’s hand, he swung his arm with the intention of scorching everything he could touch.

“I will not drag Lord Anos down!” Ellen shouted, thrusting her anoss rod at the flames.

At that moment, a furious pillar of fire rose.



“Burn in these crimson flames! You will dearly regret ever insulting the Sorcerer King—”

The Sorcerer King paused in the middle of his triumphant speech. A black stain had appeared in the pillar of crimson fire, rotting the flames.

“What?” he muttered.

The pillar of flames decayed away completely, revealing Ellen standing with her anoss rod still raised. There wasn't a single burn on her, and her rod was covered in a glowing black substance.

“How? A stick like that can be snapped like a twig—”

Bomiras's fiery hand grabbed the anoss rod with great strength.

“Snapped like a twig? Absolutely not!” Ellen shouted.

“Absolutely not!” the girls all yelled in unison.

Bomiras placed a stupendous amount of physical strength into snapping the weapon, but the black light spread to his hand instead, causing it to immediately begin rotting away.

“That's... That's *impossible*! How can you inflict a wound on my body with such pathetic magic power?!”

Bomiras made the instantaneous decision to release the anoss rod and step back. He then stared at the abyss of the girls with his Magic Eyes.

“This is...the Aske of the heroes?”

“Did you think we couldn't use love magic just because we're demons?” Ellen said.

Ellen wrapped the anoss rod with sticky black light and charged forwards.

“Imitation Vebzud!”

“Nuwaaargh!”

Fearing a direct hit, Bomiras created a cavity in his body of flames to evade her and swung his right hand. But Ellen's anoss rod struck his flamed hand and decayed the fire.

“You... You think you’re so clever...when you’re just worthless trash!”

Bomiras flew up with Fless, out of range of the anoss rod.

“But this is the end.”

A large magic circle appeared before the Sorcerer King. It was aimed at the eight girls.

“Die! *Jio Graze.*”

A humongous red sun flew out of the circle and straight at Ellen.

“Everyone... There aren’t enough emotions!” Ellen shouted. “Think of the anoss rod as Lord Anos...and give me more!”

During the Edonica training, the Fan Union girls had taught themselves Gard Aske, and they had continued to study this magic even after they left the underground world. The wellspring of their feelings was a loyalty that bordered on insanity. When the target of Gard Aske was Demon King Anos, their loyalty and the magic were directed towards the same person, bringing out the spell’s fullest potential.

However, things were different when the Gard Aske was focused on Ellen. It was terribly inefficient to use her as the target of the spell when the real target of their loyalty was Demon King Anos. But the girls had overcome that with a surprising approach—and that was the anoss rod.

With Ellen holding the anoss stick—a name quite similar to that of Demon King *Anos*—they were able to direct their loyalty through Ellen and the stick like it was a symbol of worship. With this method, they were able to overcome the most basic tenets of common sense: Emotions conveyed indirectly were weaker than when conveyed directly to the object of feeling.

Indeed, it was an unheard-of feat. What was most surprising was that they were able to treat the stick as a substitute for Demon King Anos just because it had a similar-sounding name. That took an extraordinary imagination—something the demons of two thousand years ago didn’t have.

“With our indirect Gard Aske...” Ellen said, raising the anoss rod over her head.

The other seven girls copied her actions, pointing their sticks at the incoming Jio Graze.

“Take this! Imitation Jio Graaaze!” they all shouted.

Sticky black light formed a sun that collided with the red Jio Graze. Sparks of fire and decayed rust violently scattered everywhere. Jio Graze and Gard Aske were practically equal—no, the Fan Union was slightly winning.

“We can do it! We can do this! Even we can stand against the Sorcerer King!” Ellen shouted.

“Just like this...”

“One more push...”

As their emotions increased, the red Jio Graze decayed and rotted apart.

“You...” Bomiras muttered. “You arrogant brats...”

From far above in the shaft, red rays of heat focused on Bomiras. The fire cut off their escape route and spread countless Jio Grazes of various sizes through the air. They formed a magic circle that poured heated magic power into Bomiras.

The sun of Gard Aske completely rotted away the first Jio Graze and continued moving towards Bomiras.

At that moment—

“*Aviasten Ziara.*”

The Sorcerer King’s body turned a shining scarlet red. The sticky light of Gard Aske burned away the moment it touched him.

“With this, it’s over. I may have underestimated you *slightly*, but in atonement for that blunder—”

The Sorcerer King’s body turned into a sunlike sphere.

“—I’ll turn you to ashes so fast there won’t be enough time for you to even feel the pain.”

With a deafening rumble, the pile of rubble at the corner of the room blew up. Bomiras looked over, body returning to normal at the distracting disruption.

A giant stone hand had appeared at the foot of the rubble mountain. More rubble moved loudly, flying away from the pile. A Demon King Castle made with Iris emerged, growing limbs and standing on its own feet.

The Demon King Castle swayed and took a loud, clunking step forwards.

“Here we go, Bomiras,” Emilia’s voice called.

This was the giant soldier the Demon King Academy students had created with Gyze.

§ 36. All-Out War

The giant soldier walked with loud and heavy steps. Bomiras glared into the abyss of the moving Demon King Castle.

“That is no impromptu castle. How did you hide the magic power behind such an Iris?” Bomiras asked.

Although it had been buried in the rubble, there was no way Bomiras’s Magic Eyes would have missed such a spell being cast—especially if Emilia and the students had been pouring their magic into the Demon King Castle the entire time.

“How did we hide? That should be obvious! We’ve been fighting monster after monster all this time. Of course we’d focus our magic training on running away!” one student shouted without any shame.

“Through Lord Anos’s Edonica training, I learned my specialty is Lynel magic. I trained for eight full hours after school!” another student said.

“And I practiced Najira for eight hours. Ever since we returned from the underground, my daily schedule has been Najira training in the morning, Najira training at lunch, and Najira training at night.”

“We can’t turn invisible or completely erase our magic like Anosh, but we figured we could work something out by hiding beneath magic stone rubble.”

“After all, we don’t have much magic to begin with! We aren’t that much different from magic stone!”

“Wah hah hah!”

The two students laughed like they didn’t have a care in the world.

Najira was more effective when cast by people with weaker magic. The students had used that to their advantage and slowly constructed a Demon King Castle without the Sorcerer King’s notice. By burying themselves in the magic stone rubble, they’d made their presence even less noticeable.

Although it had been weak, Bomiras hadn't expected them to be able to use Najira at all. He had placed too much confidence in his Magic Eyes and overlooked the students entirely.

"And just what do you plan for this moving scrap heap to accomplish? Have you forgotten? I am Sorcerer King Bomiras, the man who ruled Midhaze two thousand years ago," Bomiras said, drawing a magic circle to cast Jio Graze. The red sun soared like a meteor, trailing fire as it moved towards the giant soldier.

"Deploy magic barriers!" Emilia ordered.

The students quickly started casting magic, calling out the steps of their work as they did.

"Roger that! Deploying first layer."

"Deployment complete."

A huge graphite board appeared before the giant soldier.

"Deploying second layer."

Behind it, countless hexagonal pillars made of graphite appeared, packed together without any gaps. It looked just like a beehive.

"Deploying third layer."

"Deployment complete."

Another huge board appeared behind that, sealing the hive.

"Deploying vacuum layer."

"Deployment complete."

An anti-magic vacuum was deployed in the hive between the graphite boards.

"Caniam Tolte!"

Thanks to the division of the spell formula, the students were able to cast everything nearly instantly. The result was a casting speed that rivaled that of the demons of two thousand years ago. The spell they had cast was the multilayered magic barrier, Caniam Tolte.

The burning red sun struck the graphite barrier. However, the Jio Graze the

Sorcerer King boasted as sublime was unable to burn the Caniam Tolte and stopped in its tracks.

The multilayered magic barrier excelled in repelling fire and was highly adept at withstanding strong impacts. In other words, it was a shield that specialized in defending against the Sorcerer King. But merely blocking the Jio Graze wasn't enough—the Caniam Tolte was slowly being pushed back.

“Shift!” Emilia ordered.

The Caniam Tolte shifted diagonally. The red sun moved along the surface of the barrier. By doing so its trajectory was minutely adjusted, enough so that it ultimately struck the wall behind the giant soldier. A loud explosion resulted.

“Insolence upon insolence...”

The Sorcerer King floating in the air glared down at the Fan Union girls. While some of the students had been constructing the barrier, three of them had run over to heal the Fan Union girls.

“Hey, he's noticed us,” one of them said.

“Go, Ramon,” said another.

The two of them slapped Ramon on the shoulder, forcing him to run.

“Hah hah! The Sorcerer King Bomiras is more pathetic than I thought!” he yelled. “He's so scared of the Demon King Castle that he didn't even notice we weren't inside anymore!”

“Hee hee hee. Fool. I won't fall for such cheap taunts.”

In terms of strength, the Fan Union girls were a higher priority for him to deal with. The military magic Gyze raised the magic of a group. If the Fan Union girls were able to relocate inside the Demon King Castle, Bomiras would have to fight a much stronger enemy. He ignored Ramon and drew a magic circle directed at the girls.

“Do you see this collar?” Ramon called out, undeterred by Bomiras's dismissal. “I'm the personal dog of the Demon King. The dog! How does it feel to be outsmarted by a mongrel? Here, Sorcerer King, come fetch!”

Ramon skillfully stuck out his butt and slapped it as he ran. The look on

Bomiras's face changed—warped, as though his wrath had finally been incurred.

“Perish, trash.”

He altered his Jio Graze to aim for Ramon instead.

“I’m counting on you, Nedneli!” Ramon exclaimed.

Ramon used Zecht—the contract was with himself, and promised he would return to the resistance as a royalist if he couldn’t evade this attack. The Nedneliaz around his neck started emitting magic to drag him into the dreamworld.

Nedneliaz had been placed on Ramon back when he was a member of the resistance. If he strayed from his reform as a royalist, the collar would show him a dream to correct his way. If he didn’t choose the right path, he wouldn’t wake up from the dream. The Zecht he had just used would make Nedneliaz show him the same situation he was facing right now—Bomiras casting Jio Graze.

If he didn’t choose the right path to evade the Jio Graze in his dream, Ramon would never return to reality. The dream would repeat over and over again in a single moment. In that moment in the dreamworld, Ramon died countless times—and woke up.

“Graaaaaah!”

He was barely able to evade the Jio Graze. The probability of doing so was probably a fraction of a percent, one chance out of several hundred likelihoods of failure. But after practicing the situation in his dreams until he got it perfect, Ramon was able to grasp that one-in-several-hundred chance.

“What? How could a piece of trash...!”

Bomiras continued firing Jio Graze, but Ramon avoided them all while screaming.

“You... Why can’t I hit you?!”

“Hah hah haaah! Can’t catch me!”

Bomiras flew into a rage and fired Jio Grazes large and small everywhere. There was nowhere for Ramon to run.

“Caniam Tolve!”

A magic barrier was formed, blocking the Jio Grazes from reaching Ramon. He had just enough time to slip inside the Demon King Castle before he was killed.

“No, no!” Ellen’s voice echoed, chiding.

The Fan Union girls had been healed while Ramon was playing the decoy, and were now riding on the giant soldier’s shoulders.

“You can’t defeat the Demon King Colossus Anogade like that!” one of the girls said, in a scolding tone.

“This is the military magic of the Demon King Academy. It’s all our strength combined together!”

“We’ll show you that we can not only take it but also dish it out!”

The girls opened the nearby door and entered the Demon King Colossus Anogade.

“Gard Aske!” the Fan Union girls called out as one.

Sticky black light appeared before the Colossus, transforming into a single spear.

“Here goes!” Emilia yelled, and the Demon King Colossus grabbed the Gard Aske spear.

The giant then took an earthshaking step towards Bomiras.

“Ms. Emilia, the call is ‘Imitation Vebzud’!” Ellen said to her.

“Shouldn’t I be unrelated to your Gard Aske?” Emilia asked hesitantly.

“Yes, but it’s important to have our hearts as one!” Jessica said.

“Feelings are important for Gard Aske,” Nono said, nodding.

“I don’t get it, but fine! I just need to say the words, right?!” Emilia snapped.

The spear of Gard Aske was thrust forwards with all their might.

“I-Imitation...” Emilia said.

“Vebzud!”

The giant black spear roared through the air. Bomiras evaded it at the last moment, then drew more magic circles of varying sizes around his fiery body.

“The impudent military magic developed by the Demon King of Tyranny is useless. No matter how many ants you gather together, you cannot reach the heights of the Sorcerer King.”

Countless Jio Graze fired in every direction. The students inside the giant soldier yelled to deploy the barrier layers.

“Caniam Tolte!”

The magic barrier that appeared before Anogade successfully warded off the Jio Grazes.

“That won’t work on us!” the students called out.

“Fools. Did you think that using the same trick on *me* would work so many times?” Bomiras replied.

The Jio Grazes fired everywhere, curved around and returned to Bomiras. Each one struck his body one after another.

“Graze Avnel.”

As each red sun struck the Sorcerer King, his body swallowed them and expanded. It was as though the Jio Grazes were causing his fires to spread, growing Bomiras to a larger size than the giant soldier.

“Hee hee hee! Truly, only a modern demon would lord over an opponent with such a frail advantage as size.”

“You...!” Emilia yelled.

The gigantic Bomiras held down the Demon King Colossus Anogade’s arm, preventing it from swinging its spear. With his other hand, Bomiras attacked. The Demon King Academy cast Caniam Tolte to defend against him.

“Aviasten Ziara.”

But heat rays rained down on them from above, giving Bomiras’s huge body of fire a crimson shine. His right arm burned through Caniam Tolte and grabbed the giant soldier’s shoulder. Red flames roared, scorching Anogade. The

Guardian students inside desperately worked on repairing the burnt areas of the castle, while the Mages focused on extinguishing the fire. But the flames kept spreading, and eventually the outer wall of the giant soldier burned away.

“Hee hee hee!” Bomiras cackled. “This is the end.”

“Now, Ms. Emilia!”

“I know.”

At Emilia’s call, the Demon King Colossus Anogade—body wrapped in the sticky black light of Gard Aske—charged at Bomiras.

“Take this!”

Anogade’s arms burned and fell away with a loud thunk. But Emilia continued making the soldier charge without a care. Gard Aske’s sticky light collided with Bomiras’s Aviasten Ziara, resulting in an explosion of magic power like a firework.

“Everyone, give it your all!” Emilia shouted.

“Raaaaaaaaaagh!”

Anogade proceeded to push Bomiras back with the last of its strength, embedding him into the wall with a crash. The wall melted from Bomiras’s fiery body in no time at all.

“Is that all you’ve got? Your do-or-die attack was unable to even harm me. That Gard Aske cannot last for long. The moment your magic runs out will be your end.”

Indeed, as Bomiras said, Gard Aske was weakening already. The black light of Gard Aske was slowly beginning to be swallowed by glittering crimson flames.

“Naya, it’s up to you now!” Ellen shouted.

Bomiras’s face of flames twisted with a look of suspicion. Naya then appeared at the head of the Demon King Colossus.

“*You’ll either win, or lose, or lose, or lose. Which will it be, Bookworm?*” the Staff of Knowledge said, skull rattling as it cackled.

“I want to save Cani,” Naya replied, raising her pledge jewel ring. “*Liteld.*”

Divine light filled the area as four keepers appeared: the abnormally long-haired girl with two staves, Nutra Do Hiana, the Keeper of Restoration; the winged centaur woman, Reize Na Ile, the Keeper of Sky; the large man with a greatsword on his back, Zeo La Opt, the Keeper of Protection; and a black shadow with an assortment of bladed weapons, Atro Ze Sistava, the Keeper of Death.

“The summoning magic of the underground draconids, of all things?” the Sorcerer King said with a mocking laugh. “But it seems you cannot control them. It’s clear just by looking at them that they have no intention of obeying you. Even if they did, four keepers are no threat to me. If that was your hidden ace, then you’ve underestimated the Sorcerer King yet again.”

Bomiras extended the hand imbued with his Aviasten Ziara at the Demon King Colossus to deal with it first. Gard Aske immediately attempted to hold him back, but the black light was burned away by the fire, and Anogade’s belly caught alight.

“You have lost. I will now send you to the afterworld one by one, until the Demon King responds to my negotiations.”

The Demon King Colossus fell to its knees, the outer wall crumbling apart. If Bomiras hadn’t wanted to use the students as leverage for negotiations, they would have all been destroyed by now.

“I’ll save you Cani... Just wait...” Naya muttered. “I’ll save everyone! I can do it!”

“Then place your life on the line, Bookworm.”

Naya folded her right hand over her left in prayer. *“Azept: Nutra Do Hiana!”*

The Keeper of Restoration turned into light and possessed Naya.

Bomiras cackled. “Hee hee hee! You may be able to use Azept, but how will that help you? You’ll die before you can regenerate.”

“Azept: Zeo La Opt!” Naya shouted.

The Sorcerer King fell speechless for a moment.

“What?” he eventually said, fiery face dumbfounded. He couldn’t

comprehend what was happening at all. “What did you just say? Calling two gods to descend at once is imposs—”

“Azept: Reize Na Ile!”

Bomiras was even more shocked.

*“Three possessions at once? No... What are you *doing*? To call a god to possess you is to offer your source as a vessel for them to pour into. Even keepers have a divine order, you couldn’t possibly fit three—”*

“Azept: Atro Ze Sistava!”

“Nwaaah?! F-Four...at once?!”

The Staff of Knowledge rattled at Bomiras’s shock.

“Bwa ha ha! That’s right! You’re exactly right!” the staff exclaimed. “The average person may only be possessed by one god at a time, and even then, that is considered an admirable talent. However! Bookworm Naya is no average vessel! Her source is... Bwa ha ha!”

The skull rattled with glee.

“Empty, empty, completely empty!”

Naya started running and leaped into the air.

“Unfathomable. Are you a demon from two thousand years ago?!” Bomiras shouted.

“I...am a weak, useless, and insignificant demon of this era,” Naya replied, evading Bomiras’s Aviasten Ziara easily, as though she were walking through air. “But I have friends I want to protect!”

She charged straight at Bomiras.

“Fool!” he yelled, growing extra arms of fire from his torso to grab at her. “You have four gods in you, and you still don’t know how to fight— Huh?!”

As if someone had placed their hand on his skull and pushed, Bomiras lowered his head.

“Wh-What? My body— How?!”

Flattened by an extraordinary power, Bomiras's knees folded until his fiery head grinded against the ground.

"What is this magic... This order?" he muttered, confused. "None of the keepers who possessed you should have this power. Especially enough to overwhelm me... Gwooh... Wh-What is this?"

"Bwa ha ha! Sorcerer King, you said it yourself. Calling a god to possess you is like filling the vessel of the source with water. So what happens when you pour different liquids into the same vessel? The answer is..."

Bomiras was flattened even further, the unknown force making his body fold up and shrink in size.

"...this!" the skull rattled gleefully.

"It can't be... This is *impossible*! I am the Sorcerer King Bomiras... I am the king who ruled all of Midhaze two thousand years ago!"

Naya stood on top of Bomiras, now only the size of a pebble. His expression was stained by humiliation and despair.

"You are a demon of this era...a *failure* at that...yet..."

"I will save everyone..." Naya murmured. Yet she stared at Bomiras with vacant eyes; she had reached her limit. With the last of her strength fully depleted, she staggered and fell forwards with a crash.

The Sorcerer King observed her unmoving body for a moment, and then relaxed.

"Hee hee hee... That's right. I am the Sorcerer King, and I will finish you off...now?"

A shadow fell over the Sorcerer King. Bomiras slowly turned his head, the movement rickety and fragmented like that of a rusted magic doll. Above him, casting its shadow, was Cannibal, beaten and burned. But to the current Bomiras, the dragon was a giant. Cannibal opened its jaws.

"Wa— Wait! Gwuh!"

Cannibal swallowed the Sorcerer King in a single bite, burping a red flame shortly afterwards. With its burns instantly healed, it turned to Naya, chirped,

and licked her cheek.

Naya slowly opened her eyes.

“Cani... Thank goodness...you’re safe...” she murmured.

She lifted a shaky hand and touched Cannibal.

“Couldn’t you have eaten him a little sooner?”

Cannibal chirped.

§ 37. The Path for the Demon King Academy

“Impossible... My clone...”

A dazed murmur echoed through the ruin shaft.

“How could the Sorcerer King Bomiras be defeated by these modern weaklings?!”

Restrained by Zola e Dypt, Bomiras’s face of flames twisted. His expression was a mix of anger, humiliation, and shock—a fitting look of submission.

“Like you said, the power I hold is unsuitable in peacetime,” I said, clenching my right hand several times around the particles of magic in my palm. “A deterrent is needed. That is why I attend the Demon King Academy.”

I turned my Magic Eyes to Bomiras, who flinched. It was no exaggeration to say his life was now in my hands.

“They’ve grown enough to destroy one of your clones. Lay, Misa, Misha, Sasha, Arcana, Eleonore, and Zeshia have all started to match me in their individual fields of expertise.”

There was no need for any lone individual to be an equal match for the Demon King. But by joining their distinct strengths, my companions needed to be able to come close to my power—whether they liked it or not.

“That is the goal of the Demon King Academy—to be capable of deterring the Demon King of Tyranny.”

Bomiras held his tongue in thought for a few seconds.

“That sounds like an excuse,” he eventually said. “In the end, they’re all *your* followers. This is just another excuse for you not to relinquish your power while bolstering your own forces.”

“An excuse, huh?”

I glanced lightly at him with my Magic Eyes of Destruction, and the flames of his body were gradually extinguished.

“Urgh... Guh...”

“Very well. You have a point.”

I opened the Watershed of Sorcery and brought it to my mouth, tilting the contents of the vial down my throat. Once finished, I tossed the now empty vial to the floor, the vessel rolling with a clatter.

“Satisfied?” I asked, dispelling Zola e Dypt and undoing Bomiras’s restraints. I held out a hand at him. “We should have no reason to fight now that I’ve relinquished my power. We may have our own opinions on how this peaceful era should work, but we can come to a compromise on such things without violence.”

Bomiras stared at me in confusion, then looked relieved.

“Finally... I’ve been relieved of my burden...” he mumbled with a faint smile on his face. He chuckled, sparks beginning to scatter everywhere. “I can finally discard the burdensome title of a pacifist.”

Bomiras glared at me and sneered. “*Fool.*”

He then immediately launched into a rant, as if finally given permission to vent all of his suppressed frustrations.

“Fool! You great moronic *fool!* You’ve been deceived!”

Fire gathered around his hands, and a ring appeared—a Selection pledge jewel.

“I am the Monarch Bomiras, the Selected Eight of the God of Conquest, Gehedovich! The Watershed of Sorcery you drank was actually the melted form of the God of Conquest,” he said, laughing triumphantly.

So that was the true reason he wouldn’t agree to Zecht.

“Ghedovich will conquer your source and offer it to me, the monarch. What would normally be impossible with my natural strength is now rendered a simple act by the magic power flowing into the Darkworld through the Watershed of Sorcery. And with that magic, I am able to conquer your source,” he explained enthusiastically.

As though in response to his words, something inside my source pulsed

unnaturally.

“I see. You borrowed the God of Conquest’s power to create a magic strong enough to steal my source,” I remarked. “Such a thing couldn’t have been developed overnight.”

Bomiras grinned.

“There’s nothing to hide anymore. Consider this my parting gift to you,” he said gleefully as he looked down on me. “I’ve waited a long time for the opportunity to obtain a source of the Voldigoad bloodline. For over two thousand years, long before you were born.”

“So your first goal was Ceris?” I asked.

“Hee hee hee! Correct. I approached him pretending to be a pacifist, all the while waiting vigilantly for my chance to strike. Unfortunately, he saw through me, but that fool Aegeus fell for it just like you. And thanks to that, I survived to this day.”

He must have been talking about that scene from the past, back when Aegeus was still called Jeph. Back then Jeph and Ceris had tried to finish off the Sorcerer King, but because he believed the Sorcerer King’s pleas, Jeph had failed to deliver the final blow.

There was probably more to what happened there, but there was no helping it. The Sorcerer King constantly played the part of a warm and compassionate ruler, and was just genuine enough that those around him believed him no different from any other mild-mannered ruler.

It wasn’t enough two thousand years to survive simply by being strong. Being too obstinate and stubborn in one’s values back then only brought you closer to destruction. And so, in that era, everyone was like an actor in a tragedy, playing their role in order to survive. The Sorcerer King was no exception.

“And? Now that you have my source, what will you do?”

“You should know already. Your power is extremely dangerous in the hands of others, but in my hands it’s a different matter. With the power of the Demon King of Tyranny—the power to destroy gods and rule all demons—I will become the monarch of this world.”

He spread his arms and raised his voice.

“I will be the Demon King of Tyranny!”

“And what about deterrence?” I asked.

“Hee hee hee! *Still* don’t get it? Such a thing will only get in my way. Everything that could defy me I will destroy in advance. Cunning schemes, buttering up potential foes—none of those things will be necessary.”

Bomiras raised his voice once more, reaching the peak of his arrogance.

“I will dominate this world to my heart’s content! Demons, humans, spirits, draconids, and even the gods will be at my fingertips. Everything will go *exactly as I wish*. I’ve never felt so elated! *This* is true peace! A truly peaceful world is one that exists for *me*!”

He reached towards my chest with his hand of flames. He drew a magic circle and stuck his hand inside of it.

“Now, you should be at your limit, Demon King of Tyranny. No—*Anos*. Now I shall receive the sublime source that was born with destruction.”

Using the magic power of the Watershed of Sorcery and the order of the God of Conquest, the Sorcerer King grabbed my source and drew a magic circle on it. He then yanked his arm back, a leer plastered on his face.

It was at that point that I was unable to hide my disappointment any longer.

“It’s people like you that make it impossible for me to relinquish my power,” I said.

“Gwu— Gaaaaaaaah!”

The hand Bomiras pulled back rotted and fell off his arm in quick order.

“Watershed of Sorcery? God of Conquest?” I repeated back to him. “Did you really think such toys could dominate my source?”

The flames of Bomiras’s face distorted in confusion.

“It can’t be...” he muttered in shock. “That cannot be possible... Even your father was wary of me. The magic I designed to steal the Voldigoad source should have been perfect...!”

“And you thought perfection was enough to avoid failure?”

I took a slow step towards Bomiras, and at once he backed away, trembling.

“I cannot discard this power so easily,” I said. “If I hide it somewhere, ruffians like you will go after it. And so, as long as I’m alive, this power won’t be going anywhere. In fact...”

I gently grabbed his face.

“Even if I perish, there’s no guarantee this power will actually go away.”

Just like how Kaihilaam’s source carried curses and Aeges’s source carried his power to control blood, my source contained destruction. The closer I approached destruction, the greater that power increased. So what would happen if I actually perished? The magic could swell infinitely and remain afterwards, beyond even my existence. That was the feeling I had about it, anyway.

“Vebzud.”

The hand I had grasped around Bomiras’s head turned black.

“Hee... Hee hee hee! Looks like this time it’s my loss. Kill me then,” he said, putting on a brave front in spite of his fear. As though he would have a next chance.

“Why do you think I spent so much time playing with you, Bomiras?” I asked.

The flames of his face frowned in suspicion.

“Misha, Sasha—tell him.”

At that moment, the Leaks reached us.

“We’ve found all the candles of the Sorcerer King.”

“I changed them all to ice crystals.”

Sasha’s and Misha’s voices could be heard one after another, causing the Sorcerer King’s face to fall in disbelief.

“They couldn’t have found all of them in such a short time...”

“Want to bet on it? If they found all of them, it’s my victory. If they’ve missed

even a single candle, it's yours. Of course, the bet will be on your life."

Bomiras stared back silently, true despair writ large on his face.

"Don't make that face. It's as good as admitting they've found them all," I said. I clenched my hand slightly, and my Vebzud-stained fingers sank just a bit into his fiery face.

"W-Wait! I get it. I'll tell you about what Ceris Voldigoad did two thousand years ago. That's what you want to know, right?" he asked, pleading. "I'll tell you everything. So please, spare me..."

Bomiras drew a Zecht contract. It was an agreement to let him go if he told me everything about the Ceris Voldigoad of two thousand years ago.

"All right. If you speak, I'll spare you," I said, signing his Zecht.

"Ceris Voldigoad—"

I crushed his face and his source in my fist, erasing him without leaving any traces.

"If you *can* speak, that is."

Since there wasn't much Bomiras could actually tell me, signing the Zecht meant nothing to me. And even after all this, he had limited his confession to the Ceris Voldigoad *of two thousand years ago*.

Up until the very end, he had tried to bet against me. The path he chose meant he would rather risk his life and perish than submit.

"Moving on."

I drew a magic circle over where Bomiras had disappeared. By connecting it to the storage circle he'd left behind, I was able to retrieve the Star of Creation. This was probably the one from the shaft Misha and Sasha had gone to.

"Arcana, there's another Erial to activate."

"Got it."

Arcana's voice replied, followed by another Leaks.

"My liege, I've found another Star of Creation."

It was from Shin. As predicted, there had been another one hidden in the Gangrand Cliffs.

“Make that two, Arcana.”

“Memories of the stars blink; light of the past reaches the surface.”

The Erial started projecting the past into my Eyes.

§ 38. The Truth of Two Thousand Years Ago

Two thousand years ago.

The Thundering Volcano of Goanel Mountain.

Dark clouds crackling with lightning hovered over the volcano where the Phantom Knights—Ceris leading them—were gathered. Before them was the mouth of the volcano, its magic-filled magma noisily bubbling away.

“Here it is,” Ceris said.

Ceris drew a magic circle and reached into it. He withdrew Gauddigemon, Sword of a Thousand Bolts, and lifted it into the air. Lightning crackled and gathered around the blade before he swung it down at the volcano mouth. Purple lightning struck the magma, over and over again, as accompanying thunder clapped fiercely. Red fountains of magma shot upwards where they were struck by the lightning bolts and evaporated. In no time at all, the volcano mouth was drained.

The inside of the mouth reached quite deep. When the Phantom Knights looked within, they found a fixed magic circle at the bottom. With the volcano drained Ceris and his men leaped into the volcano mouth and landed on the fixed magic circle. Once activated with magic, their bodies sank smoothly into the ground.

Beneath the mouth of the volcano was hollow space—a dark cavity with no lighting whatsoever. Soon a nasty scent reached their noses. It was the scent of blood, as unpleasant as it normally was when they encountered it. The Phantom Knights proceeded through the cave while glancing about the darkness. Eventually, a light came into view.

The source of the light was glowing moss growing on the walls of the cave. When the knights strained their Magic Eyes, they discovered rows of corpses also lining the walls. They were corpses of the four races—humans, demons, spirits, and gods. Almost every single one had evidence of their bellies having

burst open. It was practically the same scene as that at the Tseilon settlement, except these corpses still had their heads attached. Someone must have been researching magic.

“Show yourself,” Ceris called into the cave.

Footsteps echoed from the other side of the darkness. A man with a spear appeared.

“Jeph,” Edd mumbled.

Ceris took one look at him and furrowed his brow. “What are you doing?”

“What is this place?” Jeph asked.

Ceris glared at Jeph sharply. “I’m the one asking the questions. You are no longer a ghost of the dead. What are you doing here?”

“Despite everything, I owe you for taking me in,” Jeph said, staring straight back at Ceris. “I wish to understand you. That, and I cannot abandon you. Both things I am sure of. Even if it means living as a ghost against my will...”

“You’d choose to walk the path against your beliefs?”

The sharp question left Jeph silent for a moment.

“That...I don’t know...”

“And yet you still dare to appear before us so brazenly? Brat. You lack resolve.”

Ignoring Jeph, Ceris looked around the cave. He was probably searching for traces of the person who had conducted the magic research.

“Isith—” Jeph tried to press more, but Edd tapped him on the shoulder.

“I didn’t think you’d come back,” he said. He then began to search the cave as well.

Jeph watched him for a bit, then pulled himself together and joined the Phantom Knights in their work.

“Is this *his* research lab?” Jeph asked.

“Probably,” Zeno answered.

“What kind of magic was he researching?”

“Syrica. It’s the trick to how he survived after perishing.”

“How so?”

Zeno shook his head as though to say he didn’t know and looked at Ceris. Ceris kept his gaze glued to the fixed magic circle in the cave as he replied.

“When I beheaded him, I cast a decapitation curse with my purple lightning. That should have been enough to destroy him, but there are some people on whom the curse doesn’t work.”

Jeph thought for a moment.

“Like demons without heads?” he asked.

“That’s right,” Ceris confirmed. “And among them, the Tseilon family appear to have heads at first glance, but are actually unaffected by the curse. This is because their heads are borrowed from others and can be replaced.”

“But he isn’t even a demon, much less one of the Tseilon bloodline,” Jeph pointed out.

“He must have reincarnated with reincarnation magic using a specific womb.”

Ceris glared at the magic circle drawn on the bellies of the corpses.

“Syrica magic is ambiguous in regards to the reincarnated body,” Ceris explained. “By evolving the spell and using a womb, he was able to be reborn as the existence he wanted. It seems the spell was incomplete though, as he had to attack the Tseilon settlement and use the women’s wombs to be reborn as a Tseilon demon—”

A grim look flashed across Ceris’s face.

“No, he took in the Tseilon blood and gained the ability to be headless, but he was born as a different species. A monster that cannot be called a demon.”

That was why Ceris had been unable to activate his curse of decapitation when he beheaded him.

“He most likely activated the reincarnation magic as I was activating my decapitation curse. His source vanished from the spot and teleported to the

womb he prepared in advance. If one was ignorant of his ways, it would have looked as if he had been destroyed.”

The spell had most certainly been Gijerica; compared to a regular Syrica, its rebirth process was much faster.

“That’s... I’ve never even heard of any demons able to cast that spell. For a human to reach that abyss is...”

“Don’t underestimate him. He is no mere human. He’s using the blood of the Tseilon while wearing the skin of a human. All to hide the source hidden behind everything.”

Just then, the sound of slow clapping could be heard—as though from deep within the darkness of the cave, someone was applauding Ceris’s deductive reasoning.

“As expected of Ceris Voldigoad, leader of Dilhade’s nameless knights,” a good-natured voice said.

The voice was accompanied by the sound of approaching footsteps. In the Mythical Age, most people silenced their footsteps. Those who didn’t were still cautious and prepared at all times for battle. But these footsteps were far too light for the battlefield.

The approaching figure came from the same direction as Ceris and the Phantom Knights had. It was the human who had once infiltrated Dilhade—the leader of Squad 17 of the Azesion army, Hero Graham.

“What a wonderful deduction.”

Ceris stared into the abyss of the man who had appeared.

“What are you?” he asked sharply.

“For now, Hero Graham.”

Ceris glared at Graham harshly.

“I’m not asking for the name of your head. Identify yourself, monster.”

Graham chuckled. “I’m afraid I’ve forgotten my old name. You can just call me Graham. Besides, I was actually a human once. I was born to a noble family of

sages, you see, so I was a bit better at magic than the average person. But at some point, I noticed I was a little different to others in another way.”

He spoke with Ceris as if engaging in idle chatter. But there was something eerie about his face—something crazed—as though he had a screw loose.

“That’s right—other people could perish, but I could not. Why? I searched and searched for an answer, but I still haven’t found one,” Graham said, unperturbed by Ceris’s gaze. “But recently, I found someone just like me. Ah, but because of that, I had to do something bad to you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Have you forgotten? I mean this.”

Graham snapped his fingers, and a magic circle appeared on a crystal in the cave. The footage reflected there was of the Tseilon settlement.

“It’s the baby.”

What Graham was showing were the moments just before the Demon King was born.

“Just now, before the flames appeared, I heard the fetus moving. I saw a magic power that didn’t belong to the woman! The demon in her belly was using magic...”

“What...?”

“If that’s true, just how powerful will the child be once it’s grown?”

The eyes of the soldiers present were glazed in fear.

“We cannot allow her to give birth. What is in her belly is the pure incarnation of evil itself—it will throw the whole war into war!”

“For the sake of the world, we will give our lives to stop evil!”

“Go forth and kill her! For the sake of the world! For justice!”

The human soldiers all rushed at once, brandishing the holy blades in their hands.

But the next moment—the fetus shifted. They were engulfed in jet-black fire.

“What? I can’t erase this fire! That can’t be—the demon-sealing barrier is...?!”

“What is this sinister power?!”

“Gwaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

In no time at all, all the humans present were reduced to ash.

“Wonderful,” a man said in a lighthearted voice. *“The bloodline of Voldigoad, the power of destruction. It’s almost like the rules of this world don’t apply.”*

It wasn’t the Goddess of Destruction in the form of a little girl there—it was Graham.

“Looks like his magic power increased when he sensed the womb nearing destruction.”

His Magic Eyes were fixed on Luna. But black flames appeared before her, forming a wall between them—as though *he* was protecting his mother.

“It’s okay, Anos,” Luna mumbled. *“It’ll be okay. Save your strength for your birth. I will bring you into this world...”*

“How beautiful. The love of a mother, protecting her child. You’d give birth to him even if it cost your life, wouldn’t you?” Graham said. *“Once the womb perishes, he gains life. He will be born carrying the destiny of destruction.”*

The moment the black flames vanished, Luna ran towards Graham. He smiled and bowed like he was at a curtain call for a play.

“Thank you.”

Darkness spread through the surroundings.

“Galian.”

A darkness that blocked all light appeared between them.

“How troubling. I can’t see anything like this,” Graham said.

A fatal squelch could be heard. Graham’s hand had slashed open Luna’s belly.

“Ah...”

Luna fell to her knees and collapsed, keeping her hand over her abdomen protectively.

“The rest is up to you...dear...”

In the next moment, purple lightning shot from the darkness. Gauddigemon pierced through Graham’s heart, with purple lightning rampaged wildly throughout his body. Ceris aimed his strongest destruction magic at Graham’s source.

“Ravia Neold Galvarizen.”

His source was erased under the endless bolts of lightning.

“Well then. See you later,” Graham said cheerily, as though he was heading home after a day out and not currently impaled by a sword, and consequently perished without a trace.

No, he had probably used Gijerica to reincarnate just before he was destroyed. But Ceris ignored that and slowly turned towards Luna on the ground.

That was when the footage stopped.

“By the way,” Graham said cheerfully. “Do you remember her final words after this?”

Ceris didn’t answer him. He merely stared at Graham without moving.

“‘I was happy.’ Touching, don’t you think? Should I skip to that moment?”

Purple lightning flashed, shattering the crystal showing the footage.

“I don’t care,” Ceris said coldly, holding the Sword of a Thousand Bolts ready. “You are a worthy opponent for a ghost of the dead. You said you cannot be destroyed. Let’s test if that’s true.”

“I know, Ceris Voldigoad. You aren’t truly a ghost.”

Graham smiled as though he could see through Ceris’s heart.

“You pretend to be dead, suppressing your heart and dedicating yourself to a lonely fight no one else understands, supported only by the few comrades you have. Beautiful, isn’t it?”

He drew a magic circle using both his hands.

“If I get rid of all that too, will you show me your true face?”

§ 39. The Fight of the Nameless Knights

Graham retrieved a set of spear-like weapons from magic circles positioned on either side of him.

“Divine Scythe of Disorder, Bephengzdogma.”

Graham joined the two handles together and made one long weapon. He spun it and slashed apart the magic circles, revealing a large scythe with tremendous magic power.

“Be careful,” Ceris warned the others, readying his Sword of a Thousand Bolts. “It has divine power.”

Graham pasted a friendly smile on his face.

“He’s right, you should be careful—”

He held his scythe sideways and looked at the Phantom Knights.

“—or it’ll be over in a second.”

He swung Bephengzdogma at Jeph in what was essentially a flash of death. Imminent silence approached, the blade rushing forwards without sound or light. It was a blow that even Jeph, the Netherworld King of the Four Evil Kings, couldn’t react to in time. But Ceris was able to stop it with his Sword of a Thousand Bolts.

“I should have expected as much,” Graham remarked. “You’re the first to ever stop the Divine Scythe of Disorder. However...”

Blood sprayed everywhere, soaking Ceris. Zeno, who had been nowhere near the trajectory of the scythe, had been decapitated. His head hit the ground with a thunk, and rolled.

“This divine scythe is the power of the God of Frenzy, Aganzon. The order of frenzy can send fate itself into a frenzied rampage. This is a scythe of disorder. Once Bephengzdogma is swung, no one knows what kind of fate awaits y—”

In the middle of his words, Graham coughed up blood. With their existences

completely erased using Lynel and Najira, Edd and Zett had sneaked up on him and attacked in a pincer move from both the front and behind. Source-slaying demon swords were embedded in Graham's chest and abdomen.

"You talk too much," Edd said.

"Now die," Zett echoed.

The two dug their demon swords into Graham's source. Graham swung Bephengzdogma down in counterattack, but Edd evaded it easily. The next moment, it was Graham's head that went flying as he was beheaded.

Edd and Zett watched the head's movement warily.

"I said it could send fate itself into a rampage, no?" said Graham's head, from where it was still rolling on the ground. "This time, the Divine Scythe of Disorder missed. That's why my head went flying instead."

Just then, more blood sprayed as Zett's head went rolling. This was the power of Bephengzdogma—fate was completely out of control, making it impossible to predict anything. It was truly a scythe of disorder.

As Graham had said, even he didn't know what would happen when he swung the divine scythe. There was no way, then, for the Phantom Knights to know either.

"Now..."

Graham's headless body moved, grabbing the demon sword Edd stabbed into him roughly. He squeezed it and snapped the weapon with his bare hands. When he swung the Divine Scythe of Disorder down again, cuts appeared all across Edd's body. The disorder affected even the wounds itself, making healing magic ineffective. Edd fell to his knees.

"Hmph!"

In the opening after the scythe was brought down, Jeph thrust his demon spear forwards. The tip extended and branched into ten ends, piercing Graham's body.

"Gah...!"

"Raaagh!"

Jeph's demon spear continued to extend until it pinned Graham's body to the wall of the cave. His arms were stabbed into the wall, sealing the Divine Scythe of Disorder.

"Good grief," Graham muttered, moving his pinned arm anyway. Blood poured out as flesh was torn, but he continued to lift the scythe without a care for how the movement was carving off a piece of his own arm.

"Well done, Jeph," Edd said, standing before Graham with his broken sword.

An immense amount of magic power was gathered at the tip of the broken blade. The energy of all his future lives was collected there, glowing with the light of pure life.

For a brief moment, Edd's gaze flickered to Ceris.

"Isith, was I a ghost of the dead?" he asked plainly.

"Edd!" Jeph yelled.

But his voice didn't reach Edd.

"You go first. We'll talk the night away in hell, Edd," said Ceris.

Edd smiled contentedly. Then, he stabbed the broken demon sword into Graham.

"Gavuel."

The light of the explosion cast the entire cave in white before blowing it apart entirely, gouging out half of the barrier that was the Thundering Volcano with it. The source explosion magic was far more powerful than the average spell. Death would have been inevitable at the epicenter.

However...

"Sacrificing life to take out the enemy. A fighting style fitting for the dead."

The light faded to reveal a headless figure standing there—alive. Graham was holding Edd's head in his hands. He had beheaded him just before Gavuel had activated, weakening its power.

But even then, he had still been at the epicenter of the Gavuel explosion. He had been directly hit by the blow at point-blank distance, yet here he was

standing without issue.

“But that was probably his way of protecting you,” Graham remarked. “Sacrifice the minority, save the majority. You Phantom Knights have always followed that belief.”

“Perish, monster,” Ceris muttered.

Edd’s Gavuel had created an opportunity for Ceris to form the spherical magic circle of possibilities in front of him. His self-destruction magic had torn apart Graham’s magic wards and—most importantly—sent Bephengzdogma flying out of his hands.

Edd had never intended on finishing Graham off with Gavuel. It was just the opening move to the Phantom Knights’ strategy: He had given his life to create a chance for Ceris.

“Veneziara.”

Ceris stabbed the spherical magic circle with the Sword of a Thousand Bolts. At the same time, nine blades of possibility pierced nine other spherical magic circles. Purple lightning filled the area, portended by deafening thunder. The sky roared, the earth shook, and the remaining barrier of the Thundering Volcano was instantly swallowed by purple lightning.

“That’s right. You can’t afford to show any weakness. Not for a single moment,” Graham said casually, watching Ceris’s greater magic. “If you don’t keep your wits about you, if you don’t remain heartless in Dilhade, others will prey on you.”

The purple lightning attack spread across the ground, carving a magic circle into the crater created by Gavuel.

“There can be no justice through the sword,” Graham proclaimed. “The Eyes and ears of strong demons are everywhere, constantly on the lookout. You never know when someone is watching or listening. Erasing one evil only begets more evils that will eventually erase you. It is only by becoming a bloodthirsty ghost that you can protect your bloodline from danger.”

Ceris formed a barrier to protect the nation from destruction, and slowly adjusted his grip on the Sword of a Thousand Bolts.

“But you couldn’t protect your loved ones in the end,” Graham continued. “Saving them would only reveal them as your weakness. They would immediately become the target of other bloodlines. And so the Phantom Knights acted as crazed ghosts, not even speaking to each other, defeating evil demons and humans alike with their *swords of justice*.”

Graham took a step forwards.

“But Ceris Voldigoad—”

He vanished and appeared before Jeph. Before Jeph could swing his spear, Graham’s fingers pierced the left side of his chest. His hand closed around Jeph’s source, whose body flinched in response.

“—there was one time you failed to hide your heart.”

“Gah... Ah...”

Jeph struggled against Graham, but was pinned easily.

“Even when he ceased to be one of the dead you were unable to erase him.”

“So what?” Ceris asked coldly, staring at Graham.

He showed no concern for Jeph, as though the only thing he cared about was thrusting his sword into Graham.

“It *means* you were unable to abandon him—the foolish disciple that failed to notice your intentions until the very end,” Graham said, giving Ceris a pitying look. “Am I wrong? You and your people claimed to be nameless knights, wandering like the dead. But why do you call yourselves *knights*? Simple—because it implies that what you do is in the name of justice. Comparing the meaning of this word to your actions makes it easy to see what your goal is.”

His spell was already prepared, but Ceris made no move to swing his demon sword of purple lightning. He merely glared at Graham, who was using Jeph as a shield.

“Only those who realize the goal can become a nameless knight of the dead. Even if you cannot save everyone, you strive to make this nation better in whatever ways you can. You’ve destroyed, destroyed, and destroyed until now.”

Graham continued speaking with a mocking smile.

“You discarded yourselves. You fought for the sake of a future in which others stopped doing evil, swinging your nameless swords no matter how wrong it actually was. For the sake of the future, you abandoned the present.”

Graham moved forwards while carrying Jeph.

“The only exception to the Phantom Knights is the child you adopted—Jeph. He stayed in your company without knowing anything. You were so focused on acting as the dead that you couldn’t tell him the truth. You hoped he would realize it himself. And it was guilt that made you falter, and fail to kill him.”

He flashed him a carefree smile.

“Not a bad guess, right?”

“Jeph,” Ceris said, ignoring Graham. “I told you once that if you didn’t change your mind, I’d ensure you died a worthy death.”

Despite the agony of having his source grabbed, Jeph managed to find his voice.

“D-Do it... Isith...” he said, as though he had finally realized the truth. “As of this moment... I have become a ghost of the dead!”

Every event until now—all of his master’s crazed actions—finally made sense to him.

“Apologies...can be saved for when we meet in hell...”

“Well said.”

With a single step, Ceris thrust forwards the Sword of a Thousand Bolts. Purple lightning surged everywhere as the blade extended, piercing straight through Jeph’s right eye. Blood poured from his source, and magic power exploded into a sinister vortex. Jeph’s source was about to demonstrate its true worth—within was a magic that could control dimensions.

“What...?” Jeph muttered.

“You see now? He’s incapable of abandoning you.”

Ceris’s attack hadn’t been the destruction magic of Ravia Neold Galvarizen, so

Graham was able to hold up a hand and summon the Divine Scythe of Disorder back to his grasp.

“Now, what will be cut next?” Graham asked.

He swung the scythe with all his might. Ceris’s left arm was sliced off, falling to the ground.

“Isith!” Jeph yelled.

For the first time, Ceris looked at him with a gentle expression.

“Jeph,” Ceris said. “Times are changing. The dead are not needed in a peaceful world. But you can still live on as a king.”

In response to Gauddigemon’s magic power forcing Jeph’s source closer towards destruction, his power awakened. Blood overflowed from his body, coiling in the air to form an orb that wrapped around him.

“The era may be changing, but nothing will be different,” Graham said, swinging Bephengzdogma once more. This time, his own left hand was sliced off. “Missed, huh?”

He swung the Divine Scythe of Disorder a third time, and Ceris’s right leg was cut off.

“The first ghost, Jeph, has perished,” Ceris said. “Farewell, Aeges. My disobedient, beloved disciple.”

“Isi—”

Jeph’s words were swallowed by time and space, disappearing with his raging orb of blood.

“Live on,” said Ceris.

“Such a beautiful bond between a master and his disciple,” Graham remarked.

With his right leg gone, Ceris had fallen to his knees. Graham stood before him and raised Bephengzdogma. The Divine Scythe of Disorder swung at the same moment the purple lightning of the Sword of a Thousand Bolts struck the heavens. Ceris thrust his blade into Graham’s stomach.

“You’ve made one mistake, Ceris Voldigoad...”

“The dead have no need for names. Carve this name into your head as you perish. I am the commander of the Phantom Knights, Isith.”

The greater magic that activated with his words was Ravia Neold Galvarizen. A massive bolt of purple lightning fell towards the Sword of a Thousand Bolts. His aim wasn’t Graham’s source, but his body. Before his eyes, flesh turned to ash and crumbled away.

“Trying to prevent me from using the Divine Scythe of Disorder first?” Graham asked.

The next moment, the falling bolt of purple lightning was slashed apart, the roaring thunder silenced at once: The Divine Scythe of Disorder had severed the possibilities of the Sword of a Thousand Bolts.

“How lucky. You should have aimed directly for my source,” Ceris said, sending all his magic into Gauddigemon. “*Veneziara*.”

“As long as you refuse to give up on Jeph, that doesn’t change the fact that I’ve won,” Graham said.

Graham’s blade directly touched Ceris’s neck, cleaving straight through—and his own head came off as well.

Ceris tried to use Ingall as his head soared through the air, but was unable to cast any magic. With his nearly disintegrated hands, Graham grabbed Ceris’s head as it soared midair.

“Finally... I’ve *finally* obtained it. You were a tough one. It was a real pain to destroy you without harming your head.”

Graham connected Ceris’s severed head to his headless body. Magic particles covered his neck, closing the wound and connecting the flesh.

“With this, I have become Ceris Voldigoad.”

Magic power filled his body and purple lightning shot everywhere. Graham’s crumbling body gradually healed with every passing moment.

He tilted his new head from side to side, checking its flexibility and range of motion. He then held his hand out and drew a spherical magic circle with purple

lightning, but his control was slightly unstable.

“Hmm. Does it take some time to set in? If this continues I’ll be noticed soon enough.”

Graham picked up the Sword of a Thousand Bolts on the ground, retrieved the three heads of the Phantom Knights, and drew a Gatom circle.

“Now, what shall I play with until then?” he said, then teleported away.

All that was left at the scene was the headless corpse of Ceris Voldigoad. Night had fallen at some point, though it seemed that just minutes ago the sun had been high in the sky.

In the sky was one moon as normal, but now another mystical moon was floating beside it—Altiertonoa. Its silver moonlight shone down into the volcano crater as glittering lunar snowdrops.

The petals transformed into a little girl with long hair that reached down to her ankles. She had a silver glow to her eyes, and wore a pure white dress. She was the Goddess of Creation, Militia.

She held her hand over Ceris’s corpse, and lunar snowdrops fluttered down around him. With the power of creation, silver light restored Ceris’s missing head, healing his entire body simultaneously. Ceris weakly opened his eyes.

“The Goddess of Creation... What do you want?” he asked from where he lay on the ground. Even though his head had returned, he no longer had the strength to stand.

“You are about to perish,” Militia said in a quiet voice. “The source left in your body is only your consciousness. He took everything else with him. Once your consciousness perishes, you will vanish.”

Ceris was silent.

“All you’ve done until now was for the sake of a peaceful world. For that, I would like to grant your final wish,” Militia said. “What do you desire?”

“To die as a true ghost of the dead. Erase my existence,” Ceris answered immediately. “Erase me from this world—from Anos’s memories.”

Militia stared straight into Ceris’s eyes. “Why?”

“He’s clever. He’s probably halfway to realizing who I am. He may act composed, but if he hears of my death, he’ll definitely try to find out how it happened.”

“He’d want to know you’re dead.”

Ceris shook his head slowly.

“Times are changing. He’s already decided to stop this endless war. He’s trying to end the cycle of hatred, unite the demons, and join hands with the humans. But it was humans who killed his mother—and now me as well.”

His tone was full of self-deprecation.

“He’s nothing like me. He’s strong and kind. I can’t give him a reason to hate when what he wants is peace. I cannot be a reason for him to walk down the path of revenge when he knows how foolish that would be.”

He paused for a moment, then continued.

“All he needs to do is face forwards and keep moving. He should strive only for a peaceful world without any hatred holding him back.”

The silver light surrounding Ceris weakened as his body began to disappear; his source had reached its end.

“The Demon King doesn’t need regrets. He doesn’t need to know anything. He never had a father. This nameless ghost of the dead will vanish without ever being named.”

“What about that man?” Militia asked, referring to Hero Graham.

“He will be no enemy to Anos. Anos can destroy him without knowing anything.”

Militia nodded.

“I shall grant your wish,” she said.

The Moon of Creation cast its light, reverting the Thundering Volcano back to its previously untouched state. Militia then drew a Gatom circle for Ceris and herself. Their surroundings shifted, and they found themselves on the hill that overlooked Midhaze.

“His castle is visible from here.”

“That’s nice...” Ceris muttered, magic power on the verge of disappearing.

A gentle breeze blew. The Goddess of Creation’s hair swayed in the wind.

“Anything you’d like to say?” she asked kindly.

Ceris didn’t reply.

“No one is listening. You can speak your own words, for the last time.”

He clenched his jaw, then opened his mouth.

“I wasn’t a good father,” he muttered, as though physically needing to suppress the emotions that rose with his words. “I used my sword for the next generation, and murdered in cold blood to protect others. These bloodstained hands of mine have no right to hold him.”

A lifetime of living as a nameless ghost flashed before his eyes.

“I had given up on this violent world. Maybe if I had his strength, his ability to dominate everything before him, and above all, his strong desire for peace, things could have been different for me. But I chose the wrong path.”

Ceris grabbed a handful of the sand gathered on the hill. The grains slipped through his fading body, falling back to the ground.

“Did all those lives lost really bring us closer to peace? Did all those murders truly make the world a better place? So many times I gave up without really trying. In the act of being like the undead, perhaps all I did was become a truly bloodthirsty ghost.”

He clenched his fists as tears welled in his eyes.

“I did nothing but watch as his mother died. I killed her. I took her from him. There will never be a man as foolish as I.”

He had clenched his fists so tightly that his nails broke skin, blood spilling from his palms to the ground.

“A fool hiding from being a father, unable to call him by his name, always strict, never loving...”

His body shook. Light rose into the air as his soul slowly ascended to the

heavens.

“I couldn’t do anything for him as a father, but...I wanted to see what kind of peaceful world he would make,” Ceris said, uttering his wish sadly. Regret seeped through his words.

He punched the ground with his clenched fist.

“But that won’t happen,” he said, hitting the ground once more, weakly. “It’s fine. It just means that I was wrong, and he was right. And since he’s not like me, he won’t fail as I did.”

Militia shook her head. “He calls himself the Demon King of Tyranny in order to protect those important to him. Just like how you took on the role of the dead.”

Ceris’s eyes widened.

“Father and son are very similar,” she said.

“We’re not.”

“You haven’t failed. He’ll follow in your footsteps. The world will become peaceful. All the days you spent fighting,” she said, “are connected to the peace he’ll create. He will connect them.”

Ceris exhaled quietly.

“I wish...”

The white light covering him burst apart, and his body changed into particles of magic.

“I wish that I could have held him in a peaceful world.”

Ceris’s source was completely destroyed, leaving nothing behind.

§ 40. The Name of the Ghost

The glow of the Star of Creation faded. Like an illusion, the days long past vanished from view, and the ruin shaft came back into focus.

“For it is already over, huh?”

The words I muttered were from the message Militia had carved into the wall of Everastanzetta. What was over? Was it truly over? When I first read those words, all I wanted to do was understand their meaning.

My father, Ceris Voldigoad, had perished on that hill. Graham had taken everything from him, leaving only his consciousness in his source. Did that mean Ceris Voldigoad’s source was still in the head he’d stolen?

No, that wasn’t possible. If it was, Graham would have split into two sources when his head was separated from his body. But that hadn’t happened. The Tseilon bloodline was probably capable of connecting the stolen head with their own body, replicating the source in a way that allowed them to gain full control of the newly combined body. The head was a mere catalyst for the spell to activate that power.

In the first place, a source split into two couldn’t exist on its own for long. That’s why the source with only my father’s consciousness had perished on that hill. But had it truly been destroyed? What if the weak source had merely flown off somewhere?

“No...”

I clutched my head in my hands, sinking my Vebzud-stained nails in my scalp. A sharp pain radiated from my nails, blood flowing from the broken skin. No matter where that faint source flew, it would have vanished shortly afterwards. There was no point in losing myself to sentiment. Militia had said it herself: It was all over.

What I had seen were merely the facts of what happened. I shouldn’t be thinking of the past, but the present. I needed to keep that in mind. The man I

had met in the underground was the human pretending to be Ceris Voldigoad—Graham.

Even that was a stolen name, but who he truly was didn't matter. What mattered was that Graham stole my father's head and the blood of the Tseilon to pretend to be Ceris Voldigoad of the Phantom Knights.

But I had destroyed that fake Ceris Voldigoad with Gigginuvenuenz—by *beheading* him.

"Anos," Lay called through Leaks.

I tried to calm myself as much as I could before answering.

"What's wrong?"

"Kashim's saying he wants to be left alone for a while."

Left alone, huh? Considering how much he had humiliated himself, I supposed that was understandable...or was it?

"I'm thinking of agreeing, but watching him in secret. He may be up to something."

That made sense. However...

"Kanon," I said.

Lay's magic power trembled in surprise.

"Can you let me handle it from here? There's something I have to ask him. It's urgent."

Lay paused.

"Then I'll leave it to you."

I floated up the shaft with Fless. Kashim was moving away from Lay. I guessed where he would go and moved ahead of the route, ending up in a side cave far from the temple ruins.

I hid myself with Lynel and Najira, and before long, Kashim arrived. He turned around to check that Lay and Misa hadn't followed him, then took a holy sword out of a magic circle.

“Kanon... I...” he muttered.

Then, with a look of determination, he stabbed the holy sword into his chest. A stigma appeared as the blade went through his heart. The magic circle for Syrica was drawn within his body.

“How contemptible. It’s no wonder the Sword of Three Races didn’t choose you.”

Kashim looked shocked. “What...?”

I destroyed his Syrica magic with my Magic Eyes of Destruction, then canceled my spells and revealed myself. I pulled out the holy sword in his chest and threw it to the ground.

“The Demon King of Tyranny...”

I healed Kashim’s wounds with Ei Chael. He stumbled back, picking up his holy sword and gulping nervously.

“If you don’t use Syrica in front of Lay, he will never know if you have reincarnated or not,” I said. “To him, it would seem like you died unnaturally after losing to him in battle. You want to leave your mark in his heart, don’t you?”

“No,” Kashim said. “I just want to start over. I just want to get rid of who I am as Kashim and live like a proper hero in the next life.”

I pointed a finger right at his face, and he looked at me in confusion.

“It’s just as I suspected,” I said. “You’re hiding something. You knew if I caught you that you’d be unable to hide it. That’s why you tried to reincarnate without memories.”

Kashim trembled faintly as a sadistic smile gradually crept over his face.

“Think carefully. Is what you’re trying to hide truly worth your petty jealousy?” I asked, staring at Kashim coldly. “Answer me.”

“Y-You’ve got it wrong. I really just want to do things over again. That’s all.”

Disappointing. I stared at him, silently and without expression.

“Then allow me to grant you that wish,” I said instead, drawing a magic circle.

My magic power turned into black threads that wrapped around his neck. “Sink into a hell you can never return from.”

The scenery before Kashim’s eyes suddenly transformed. Different landscapes passed before us at a dizzying speed before throwing us right into the middle of war.

“Is this...Gairadite?” Kashim asked, eyes wide and darting about in fear.

We were surrounded by the Gairadite of two thousand years ago. The shrill, fierce clash of sword against sword rang in the air, while magic-fueled explosions went off throughout the field among screams and shouts of agony. It was a warzone.

“Kashim! I’ve got your back. You take down the Demon King!”

Kashim turned around and looked even more shocked. Standing there was his master, Jerga. He fought against demons, swinging his holy sword while casting magic spellfire at the same time.

“Master Jerga...”

“We’re counting on you, Kashim. You can do it. You’re the hero the Sword of Three Races chose to defeat the Demon King.”

“I’m...the hero?”

Kashim looked down at the holy sword in his hand. It was the Sword of Three Races, Evansmana.

“What...is this?” Kashim asked.

“Is this your first time traveling into the past?” I asked.

Kashim looked dumbfounded.

“The past... That can’t be. Are you saying this is Gairadite two thousand years ago? But this isn’t right...”

“Did you think it’d be impossible for me? Fool.”

I shot him a piercing look, scaring him into stepping back.

“I altered the past so that the Sword of Three Races chose *you*.”

“Wh-What are you trying to gain by doing this, Demon King?!” Kashim shouted.

“I merely granted your wish. If Hero Kashim was the correct choice, things would have been more convenient for me as well.”

Kashim glared at me grimly.

“If you can prove yourself to be equal or superior to Kanon, this past will become reality. Save more lives than Kanon did. Do it, and the Magical Age will remember you as the hero who brought peace to the world.”

Kashim’s dazed expression gradually changed. He adjusted his grip on his holy sword with a look of strong determination.

“Now go. Your greatest wish has been granted—you’ve been chosen by Evansmana. If you can defeat me, you’ll become a true hero.”

“A true hero... I will become a true hero...”

Kashim’s eyes sparkled more than ever before as he began running.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The Sword of Three Races was thrust forwards. Darkness flowed towards it from every direction, trapping it in a sheath.

“What?!”

“Jilma.”

Forced into the black sheath, Evansmana lost its power. Jilma was a spell I’d developed to deal with the Sword of Three Races. The sword eventually evolved to be resistant to the magic, but the spell was still effective the first time I used it.

“At the battle of Gairadite, I used Jilma to stop Hero Kanon from using the Sword of Three Races. Kanon used up six of his sources in the fight, but he still couldn’t flee from Gairadite, the final fortress of mankind.”

I stained my hands with Vebzud.

“Hah... Haaah!”

Kashim slammed the Jilma-covered sword against me, but naturally, I didn’t

even flinch.

“I should be used to peace by now, but being the Demon King of two thousand years ago is still doable for me,” I said, sinking my fingers into Kashim’s abdomen. “Be careful. I may end up destroying you like this.”

I sunk my black-stained fingers in further, crushing his heart.

“Urgh! Aaagh!”

Kashim used Ingall.

“Now show me what you’ve got, Hero Kashim. Use your hero’s courage to overcome this predicament.”

“S-Stop...”

I grabbed Kashim’s source and squeezed it.

“Uuurph!”

“Even without a sword and shield, Kanon was able to repel the Demon King Anos Voldigoad,” I said.

I drew a magic circle directly on the source within his body.

“Demonstrate your courage. Show me the wonder of humanity.”

“Kuh...!”

Using Syrica, Kashim reincarnated just before he perished. I watched his source disappear with much disappointment.

“Nedneliaz.”

The Gairadite scenery faded, and we returned to our original location. Time had barely passed, and nothing had changed—apart from the ominous collar around his neck.

Kashim snapped back to his senses and glanced around at our surroundings.

“Have we returned from the past?” he asked.

“What you saw just now was a dream created by that collar,” I answered, pointing at the Nedneliaz collar. “But it was indeed a recreation of the past. Kanon had been in the exact same position.”

I unhurriedly walked over to him.

“What do you think he did back then?”

Kashim trembled in fear, intimidated by my words. He tried to think of an answer, but it seemed like nothing was coming to mind.

“When I grabbed his source with Vebzud, he used the source magic he specialized in to pierce his own source,” I said.

“But if he did that...he would...”

“Perish, yes. That was Kanon’s goal. The closer a source gets to destruction the brighter it glows. Just before he faded, he used that increased magic power to use Gavuel.”

Kashim’s body trembled from the realization, his face stuck in a look of disbelief.

“Hero Kanon’s self-sacrificial Gavuel was too much for me to handle. If executed, it would have resulted in an enormous number of my subordinates’ deaths. It took all my might to suppress the spell and cancel its activation. I had no choice but to retreat after.”

Kashim looked at me in a dazed silence.

“Get it now?” I asked, glaring back from point-blank range. “*That* is what a hero is. Having fought against him so many times, I know the strength of his heart better than anyone else. Kanon taught me how miraculous humanity could be. Without him, this peace wouldn’t exist.”

Unable to hold back the anger rising within me, I glared at Kashim. The world possessed countless fools. But I also knew that not *everyone* was a fool.

“Jealousy?” I scoffed. “What pebble feels jealous of the sun? Know your place.”

Black particles overflowed from my body, scaring Kashim into falling on his backside. I leaned down to look right into his face.

“This is the last time I’ll say this. And since I’m unfortunately a little annoyed right now, even I don’t know what I’m willing to do to find out the truth.”

The flowing particles I emitted alone were enough to send tremors through the shaft—and the entirety of Etiltheve.

“Speak,” I said.

Kashim parted his trembling lips. “Th-The Erial I took wasn’t from the mural in the palace...”

Hmm. As I thought. According to Militia’s message, there were five stars, but now I knew that wasn’t right. Most of the past had been revealed—including Graham’s existence, and how dangerous he was to Dilhade. However, none of the Stars of Creation had anything about Abernyu’s past. I still couldn’t remember anything about her.

Suppose Militia had taken my memories at the request of my father and replaced them with her created memories. It most likely would have happened while I was pouring all my magic into creating the wall that separated the world. And while I was doing so, she took my memories of Abernyu too. But why? The answer was unclear, but there was a high chance those memories were sealed in the Erial, making it reasonable to assume there were other stars still out there.

Militia’s message had been left by the order within Arcana using the Moon of Creation. But Graham had obtained the power of the God of Frenzy two thousand years ago, so there would have been an opportunity for him to meet Arcana *after* she became a proxy. He might have altered the message Militia left behind at that time—for example, by changing a number from six to five.

“The place where you fought Lay was terribly dilapidated. You hid the mural there, didn’t you? Is that where you got your Erial?”

Kashim nodded.

“Who has the last star?” I asked.

“The Netherworld King... Aeges.”

“Your Roa Zecht shows a different contract through the power of Aganzon, doesn’t it?”

He nodded again.

“But the God of Frenzy isn’t here now. You didn’t use it in the fight with Lay either—it can’t be your Selection God. Whose is it?”

“C-Ceris Voldigoad...”

“Hmm. Got it.”

I turned my back on him.

“You can deal with the rest, Lay,” I said to Lay, who had appeared at the scene, and descended down a nearby shaft. Once I reached the very bottom, I used Deyas to split open the earth and dive deeper.

Where would Aeges go with the Star of Creation?

Although I had beheaded Graham with Gigginuvenuenz, he should still be alive. His body was the same as those of the headless Tseilon bloodline. Decapitation had no effect on demons that had no heads to begin with. Using Gijerica, he had reincarnated while making it look like he had perished.

When a source perished, it vanished into nothing, making resurrection impossible. The phenomenon of reincarnation also involved the source vanishing, so on the surface, it looked no different. There was no other way to determine what had happened to a source other than knowing the events leading up to its vanishing. As long as the magic circle was hidden from my view, it wasn’t impossible to deceive me. Having the God of Frenzy, who could alter reality, on his side no doubt helped as well.

There was no doubt Aeges’s goal was to get revenge for his master. Where was Graham right now, and what was he up to?

It was most likely his doing that the Selected Eight had increased in number. Up until the day the dome fell there had definitely been only eight. The increase in numbers had to have happened afterwards.

There was only one method by which this occurred—Aganzon, the God of Frenzy, had disturbed the God of Balance’s order and changed it. Since I was with Arcana, he had no means of reaching the proxy for the God of Balance, so he had gone after the remaining half of Elrolarielm’s order. The God of Balance was said to only appear before the victor of the Selection Trial, but it seemed that wasn’t the case anymore.

Did it have anything to do with Militia's actions to stop the Selection Trial? I didn't know the answer, but if the God of Balance existed somewhere in the underground, then there was only one place I could think of.

I continued digging through the earth until I reached the underground world—and the divine-looking castle of Everastanzetta, Institute of the Gods. The God of Balance's order had to affect the Holy Seat Hall where the names of the Selected Eight were recorded. In other words, it was where the God of Balance would always have to be.

He would be there.

Graham, the man who stole my father's head.

§ 41. Blades From That Day Are...

The sound of my footsteps echoed about the corridor as I made my way through Everastanzetta to the Holy Seat Hall. Upon opening the hall doors, I saw a circular room with seats set at even intervals from each other, with a blinding light shining down upon them like a veil. At the center of the hall with his back to me was a demon with a large eye patch—the Netherworld King Aeges. He had long realized I was here, but his single eye was fixed on a point before him.

“Hey,” a lighthearted voice said.

At the top of the staircase leading to a wide mezzanine floor, a magic circle for Gatom appeared. A single man teleported there—Graham, the man with Ceris Voldigoad’s head.

“Looks like the cast is all here,” he said, raising a hand.

The light shining down on the seats suddenly changed direction and illuminated the wall behind Graham, where the Overlord Veaf flare was pinned to a large cross. Her eyes were open, but her gaze was vacant and haggard. An outrageous amount of magic power could be detected from the abyss of her abdomen—she had been impregnated through Gijerica. The magic of the fetus was so strong that it was gnawing away at the womb itself.

“I was hoping to play father and son with you for a little longer, but alas,” Graham said with the same friendly smile he’d had until now. The terribly ugly, repulsive smile. “Pfft. That look on your face—looks like you’ve seen the past already.”

He pointed at me and laughed.

“You know, Anos. For two thousand years, from the day you were born—no. From the moment you were in your mother’s womb—no, no, from long, long before then...”

He narrowed his eyes.

“I have been waiting for you.”

Those words were awfully shallow for someone seemingly obsessed with me.

“There’s so much we have to discuss, but I have a prior matter to deal with,” he said, taking a slow step down the stairs. “I’ve exchanged a Zecht with him.”

He pointed at Aeges while looking at me. “Right?”

“You still talk as much as you did two thousand years ago. Stop speaking such nonsense with that face,” Aeges replied.

Graham stopped walking, and while wearing the face of Aeges’s master gave him a look.

“Does this face upset you? Sorry about that. But Anos is also bothered by it, and you don’t want to be misunderstood forever either, right?”

“I don’t care what anyone thinks. I am already dead—”

Aeges lowered his stance and held the Crimson Blood Spear in both hands. The tip of Dehiddatem was pointed straight at Graham.

“—and all that is left is for me to see this spear of faith through to the end.”

But Graham paid no heed to the Netherworld King and continued speaking to me over his shoulder.

“I’m sure you’ve realized why the Netherworld King is cooperating with me by now, yes? He wants to destroy me. His master, Ceris Voldigoad, fought for the sake of peace in Dilhade without ever revealing who he was or what his intentions were,” he said without pause.

Meanwhile, Aeges glared at him, refining his magic power within his body as he did so.

“That was the case two thousand years ago. So naturally, no one in Dilhade now even knows who he is. He passed on without leaving a trace in history, just like the ghost he wanted to be. I suppose it looked like I was disrespecting the legacy of such a noble knight?” Graham said lightly, almost as though he was unrelated to the matter. “I doubt Aeges could forgive me for using his master’s face and power to trample over everything he fought for.”

Every word he uttered sounded like a provocation. But the Netherworld King kept his composure despite the mockingly lighthearted tone. Graham grinned.

“I found myself liking that more than I expected. So I decided I wouldn’t kill him. I kept running without responding to his challenges. He was never able to catch a hold of me.”

It was extremely difficult to kill someone who had no intention of fighting. The possibility of destroying someone was only created when they tried to destroy you in turn. Such a thing was even more true when facing an opponent far stronger than oneself. If the target fled without a trace, there was nothing that could be done.

“While he was desperately searching for me, I sent a messenger with a proposal. If he joined my Phantom Knights and followed three of my orders, I would accept his duel. Of course, it would be a duel to the death.”

Unable to locate Graham himself, Aeges had accepted that deal.

“So he retrieved Veafare and that head on your order,” I said.

“I’m sure it was an agonizing decision for him.” Graham chuckled, as though it had been most amusing to watch. “After all, bringing the head back would mean I could continue to live as Ceris Voldigoad. But if he didn’t bring it back, he would lose his only lead on my location.”

While he must have been conflicted, the Netherworld King had ultimately prioritized Graham’s destruction. Even if it meant desecrating the dead, it would have been what his master would have wanted.

“The final order you gave Aeges was to protect the Erial and fight me, then bring the sixth Erial to you. Right?” I asked.

“Indeed so.”

With that plan, if I continued to believe there were only five stars to retrieve, I would have never realized there were other hidden memories. Did that mean what he truly wanted to hide was in the sixth star? Was that why he tried to hide his identity?

“Here’s what you asked for. Take it,” Aeges said.

He drew a storage circle and thrust Dehiddatem inside. The glowing blue star balanced on the tip of the spear before it was flung towards Graham, who caught the star easily.

“Unfortunately, Anos found out about the sixth star, but it isn’t your fault. I’ll overlook it this time,” Graham said, throwing the Erial into his own storage circle. He then drew the Sword of a Thousand Bolts out of the circle and wrapped his body in purple lightning. “As promised, I’ll fight you.”

Aeges’s demon spear glinted, and the next moment, a slash landed at my feet. He had drawn a line with blood.

“Do not cross that line, Demon King. You may have the right to kill him too,” Aeges said sharply. His determination was unshakable. “But this is my unfinished battle—the Phantom Knights’ unfinished battle—from two thousand years ago.”

He pointed his spear tip at Graham without looking back at me.

“We’re just two ghosts from the past wandering in the present,” Aeges said. “The living need not lift a hand. Eventually, we will disappear, and to the past we shall return.”

On that day all those years ago, Ceris had led the Phantom Knights against Graham and lost. But if Aeges hadn’t been there, Ceris might have been able to destroy Graham, and thus Aeges had lived for over two thousand years haunted by regret.

His comrades had been sacrificed and his master had chosen to save him, leaving him the lone survivor in this peaceful era. But the moment Ceris Voldigoad chose to save him, Aeges had discarded all naivety and become a true ghost. He had then devoted himself to walking the path of his master—all in order to defeat Graham.

“Very well,” I said. “For your sake, I will turn the other way for a few minutes. Finish settling your past in that time.”

“Much obliged.”

The Netherworld King’s eye glowed as the magic power he had refined started overflowing from his body.

“Done speaking?” Graham asked.

When Aeges responded with silence, Graham narrowed his eyes. “Then let’s begin.”

At that signal, Aeges moved. Dehiddatem glinted with a flash of light and thrust towards Graham. The tip traveled through time and space to reappear before Graham to bore a hole into his heart. But purple lightning struck, and the demon spear missed Graham’s body.

“The Crimson Blood Spear has unlimited range,” Graham said, leaping close and bringing down the Sword of a Thousand Bolts. “But the tip always extends straight from the body. It’s easy to avoid by looking at you.”

A deafening sound screeched as magic clashed with magic, sending sparks flying. Aeges was blocking Gauddigemon’s blow with his demon spear.

“Wouldn’t it be better to get some outside help?” Graham taunted.

“Destroying you is my duty. I will not allow anyone else to do it.”

The blood flowing from the spear stopped the surge of purple lightning before the Netherworld King knocked away the sword. More purple lightning stretched down the blade in a follow-up attack, but Aeges twisted his head and evaded it, then used his demon spear to pass through dimensions and attack Graham. The tip brushed past his cheek, and a single drop of blood dripped from the wound.

“What you want to do isn’t necessarily what you *can* do.”

Purple lightning ran along Graham’s left hand as he drew a spherical magic circle.

“Hmph!”

The Crimson Blood Spear immediately pierced that purple lightning and dragged it into another dimension. The first hidden art, Dimension Drive, removed the magic circle from existence. The next moment—

“*Veneziara.*”

Graham had constructed Ceris Voldigoad’s specialty magic, the spherical magic circle of possibilities. At the same time, he closed in on Aeges and brought his sword down against Dehiddatem.

“Gavest.”

Purple lightning traveled from the magic circle, along the sword, and pierced through the demon spear to flow into the Netherworld King’s body.

“Have you forgotten?” Graham taunted. “I was the one who single-handedly annihilated Ceris Voldigoad’s Phantom Knights.”

Fierce purple lightning burned Aeges, scorching him all the way to his source. He gritted his teeth and stood his ground, forcing Graham back with his physical strength.

“Hmmmph!”

As soon as some distance was created between them, Aeges thrust his spear straight forwards. The spear crossed dimensions, but Graham was able to see its path with his Magic Eyes and twisted his body to evade it. But the spear transformed into liquid and made a sharp turn, the tip moving in the direction Graham had evaded. He bent his upper body back to let the spear pass him, but the body of the spear became a water current, swirling like a vortex on the ground of the Holy Seat Hall.

It wasn’t just the power of the Crimson Blood Spear. It was the order of the Water Burial God, Afrasiata. A god had already descended into Aeges’s body. The crimson water current sealed Graham’s escape routes as the tip of the spear stabbed at the water near his feet. A fountain of blood rose, obstructing his Magic Eyes. In the brief second Graham lost sight of Aeges, Dehiddatem returned to its original form and shot forwards.

The blow aimed at the throat was evaded at the last moment. But the spear made another sharp turn, knocking the Sword of a Thousand Bolts from Graham’s hand. The fountain of blood died down, allowing the two to exchange looks once again.

“It’s rash of you to think they’ve been destroyed. Our blades from that day are still here,” Aeges said.

§ 42. Funeral Procession

The Sword of a Thousand Bolts soared out of Graham's hand and clattered to the ground. Though he was now unarmed, Graham was unshaken, a bold grin across his face.

"Are you sure about that? Even if they were here, their blades were snapped long ago," he said.

"And we would still cut you with those broken blades," Aeges replied.

His hand moved like a blur, thrusting his demon spear forwards faster than the naked eye could follow. Then the sound of clashing metal rang out, and the spear came to a halt.

I focused my Magic Eyes on the magic power to see a faint figure. Even Aeges had to stare hard to keep sight of what was hidden behind the Lynel and Najira. The Crimson Blood Spear had been stopped by a cloaked ghost wielding a source-slaying demon sword—a Phantom Knight that Aeges knew very well.

"Edd..."

A sword flashed in a brandishing gesture, and Aeges quickly drew back. But he misjudged the reach of the concealed demon sword and was slashed across the torso, up to his shoulder. Two more faint ghosts appeared to the Netherworld King's eye.

"Zett... Zeno..." Aeges murmured.

Their figures were barely visible through Lynel and Najira, but the former Phantom Knights were standing in front of Graham as though to protect him.

"See? Your blades are *broken*. They don't even remember why they fight," Graham said.

"Stealing their heads and making look-alikes won't help you," Aeges replied.

Zett, Zeno, and Edd attacked Aeges together, but he dealt with them all with his Crimson Blood Spear.

“You merely used Gijerica to create demons with the same Tseilon blood as yours,” Aeges said. “You stole Edd’s head and powers to recreate vanished Phantom Knights.”

The three launched a fierce attack with Edd facing Aegis head-on, Zett at his back, and Zeno at his side.

“They have long perished. I am the only heir to their blades.”

Three heavy clashes later, three demon swords were sent flying.

“We were knights with no names. Faithless, empty blades will never reach me.”

A fountain of blood rose at Aeges’s feet to completely conceal him. Edd strained his Eyes, but Aeges was completely enveloped by Afrasiata’s order, making it impossible to see through the blood.

“Crimson Blood Spear, first hidden art—”

The red spear drew a circle.

“Water Burial Execution.”

From the fountain of blood rose a blade that neatly sliced off the heads of all three Phantom Knights. More blood from the fountain formed three more Dehiddatem that fell towards the knights and pinned their bodies to the ground.

“Depart,” Aeges said.

Crimson blood flowed from the pierced Phantom Knights, forming a puddle at their feet that swallowed their bodies like quicksand. No matter how much they writhed and struggled, the Crimson Blood Spears pinning them in place prevented their escape. The Water Burial God’s order in the blood drowned them, destroying their bodies. Aeges then turned his single eye towards the three heads that had flown through the air and fallen to the ground. His magic activated, wrapping blood around the heads in a bubble and lifting them up to hover at eye level.

“Edd, Zeno, Zett,” Aeges said, calling out to his former comrades. “You have waited a long time.”

His demon spear flashed three times. All three heads were pierced through, and melted out of existence.

“Did you learn nothing from two thousand years ago? That kind of sentiment will be your downfall, Jeph.”

Aeges turned to look in the direction of the voice. Graham slowly held up his right hand, in which he had gathered the power of absolute destruction, condensed purple lightning scattering everywhere from his palm. In the time it had taken Aeges to deal with the Phantom Knights, he had drawn ten magic circles. The purple lightning connected them to form one enormous greater magic circle.

“If you hadn’t decided to bury your comrades first, you might have been able to block this.”

Graham held his fingers out at the Netherworld King.

“Ravia Gieg Gaverizd.”

The connected magic circles of purple lightning roared, shooting through Aeges and surrounding him within a barrier made of lightning. The barrier of Ravia Gieg Gaverizd prevented teleportation from within, and left no room to evade the purple lightning. Even the dimension-traveling Crimson Blood Spear was unable to penetrate this barrier.

Aeges immediately realized he was unable to evade and held Dehiddatem in front of himself like a shield. Purple lightning flowed into the space, baring its fierce fangs and staining the entire Holy Seat Hall with blinding purple light. Thunder roared fiercely and eerily, marking the arrival of the lightning of destruction. Raining down towards him was a bolt that looked as if it could end the entire world in one strike.

Echoing through the Holy Seat Hall was the sound of wards being torn apart. The divine order in Aeges’s body rapidly faded. As soon as it did, a wall of water surrounded him on four sides. A figure appeared within the walls—Afrasiata, the Water Burial God that had possessed Aeges.

“Water burial shield.”

The figure flipped upside-down within the walls. The newly erected barrier

was capable of cutting off the lightning of destruction, but the Water Burial God's magic was weakening with every moment. To protect the pact it had made with Aeges, the god had created a powerful shield by sentencing itself to a water burial. But the shield could not last for long.

"Nugaaah!"

More water flowed from within the walls, filling the entire space inside Ravia Gieg Gaverizd with water. Aeges ran through the water as purple lightning bore a hole in his shield and began to destroy it. By the time he took his third step, the purple lightning had evaporated the water and mercilessly struck the defenseless Netherworld King. But still he continued moving forwards.

As he was bathed in purple lightning and covered in burns, blood flowed freely from his body. The blood was spilling from the Netherworld King's source—the spring of his magic power.

"Did you know? Most people call that a futile effort," Graham said.

Thunder rumbled louder than ever before, and an immense number of purple lightning bolts struck Aeges from every direction. The floor blew out, the blast sending rubble flying, and more blood flowed. Everastanzetta itself shook, now on the verge of collapse as the greater magic continuously struck Aeges.

"I will end this, Graham...!"

Aeges weaved through the purple lightning and thrust Dehiddatem forwards.

"Will you, now?"

The tip of his spear came to a stop just short of Graham's neck.

"That was close," Graham remarked.

The thunder stopped, and Ravia Gieg Gaverizd came to an end. Aeges was just one step away from Graham, blood pouring out of his body, and with no sign of the Water Burial God's order on him.

"The Water Burial God died to protect you," Graham said. "Yet your spear *still* cannot reach me. You Phantom Knights have never been able to stop me, and never will."

"Shut your mouth," Aeges said. "It is my duty to take you down with me, no

matter what...”

Aeges’s body was battered, but his single eye glinted with determination.

“Blood World Gate.”

His flowing blood rose upwards, forming four large Blood World Gates surrounding Graham and himself.

“Crimson Blood Spear, seventh hidden art—”

The four Blood World Gates simultaneously shut, creating an enclosed space. In an instant blood had pooled up to their waists.

“—Blood Pool Burial.”

Graham’s body sank into the pool.

“Did you think I wasn’t watching your fight with Anos?” Graham said.

He drew four magic circles and cast Baloica. The four gates that appeared gave him the power to transcend dimensions—but Aeges immediately took the last step forwards and thrust Dehiddatem into Graham’s chest.

“Gah...!” Graham sputtered.

The blood of the demon spear attached itself to his source, stitching it in place.

“This is the true Blood Pool Burial,” Aeges said.

Unlike the Crimson Blood Spear’s ability to stitch itself to a source, the pool created by the Blood World Gate was designed to send whoever sank into it to another faraway dimension. Invoking these opposing abilities simultaneously tore Graham’s source apart, annihilating it completely. Even if he tried to use Baloica and loop back to his original position like I had, his source would already be ripped to shreds. There was no way he would remain unharmed from that.

It was clear now that Aeges had never intended to destroy me during our confrontation. And because he knew Graham was watching his every move, he chose to hide certain abilities and not fight me at full strength. He had saved his power while facing the Demon King of Tyranny—all for the sake of this moment.

“We are unneeded in this era,” Ages said.

Graham’s spear-pierced body sank into the pool of blood.

“With this, the last ghosts will wander no more. This age of deranged peace is over.”

The Netherworld King gazed at Graham’s head—the face of Ceris Voldigoad—as though to send him off.

“Master... It has been so long...”

A teardrop of blood fell from the battered Netherworld King’s single eye, trailing down his cheek.

“You have been waiting all this time.”

The red teardrop fell, creating a ripple on the surface of the pool. And as if on cue, Graham’s body completely vanished.

“Please, rest in peace now.”

§ 43. The Beloved Disciple Follows in His Master's Footsteps

A grief-filled silence descended upon the Holy Seat Hall.

Then, as though to break that silence, a loud splash could be heard. Graham's arm rose out of the pool of blood and grabbed Dehiddatem.

"Struggle all you want. Your effort is futile," Aeges said.

Surrounded by the four Blood World Gates, Graham's source was pierced and submerged further within the Blood Pool Burial. He had fallen so far into the spell that escape was now impossible.

"You regretted the mistake you made that day," Graham's voice said through Leaks, reaching across dimensions. "You were ashamed of being too immature to perceive your master's true intentions. That regret was so great that you turned your back on your master's dying wish to live as the Netherworld King Aeges. You changed into the same ghost that he was."

Graham grabbed the handle of the spear, struggling to stay afloat. But it was only a matter of time before he sank completely.

"Is that all the nonsense you have to say?" Aeges asked.

"Don't you get it? Why did he never tell you to become a ghost? When you realized his feelings at the final moment, you should have earned the right to do that."

A nearby groan overlapped with Graham's words. It came from Veafare. From her womb an audible *thump* could be heard, relentless and repeating; an outrageous amount of magic was about to awaken from within her.

"Boldinos..." she mumbled deliriously, stroking her belly with her delicate fingers. "Just wait... Our baby is almost here..."

"I don't know what kind of monster you're trying to give birth to, but you won't live to see it happen," the Netherworld King said without batting an eye.

“Are you sure?” Graham asked. *“You won’t be able to stop the birth if you wait for me to be destroyed first. The fetus will soon be born. The time to abort it is now.”*

“Trivial. It can be buried after its birth.”

That was most logical—whatever it was, a newborn baby could be dealt with easily.

“But is that something you’re capable of doing?”

Graham sank back into the pool of blood, his hold on the spear weakening. Meanwhile, the source Veaf flare was about to give birth to was gradually growing stronger, releasing an intense magic power.

But the Netherworld King continued staring at the pool of blood containing Graham calmly, spear at hand to deal with whatever move Graham tried to make next. Helplessly, Graham’s hand on the spear handle slowly slipped away until it had released it completely.

His arm sank into the pool of blood. It definitely looked like his source vanished.

The next moment, Aeges created another Dehiddatem from the pool of blood and thrust it towards Veaf flare.

“Uuh... Gah!”

The Crimson Blood Spear crossed dimensions and pierced through Veaf flare’s stomach.

“S-Stop... Stop it... This child is...!”

“Crimson Blood Spear, first hidden art—”

Aeges’s spear bored a hole through the child Veaf flare was carrying.

“—Dimension Drive.”

The source that was about to be born was swallowed by the dimensional rift and sent far, far away. The veil of light over the Holy Seat Hall faded, and the chairs placed in the room dispersed into particles of magic power.

“No matter what monster is born, no fetus can survive outside of the womb,”

Aeges said.

“N-No...” Veafare mumbled, eyes widening in horror. “Not our child...”

She shook her head furiously, her composure already starting to crumble.

“Noooooooooooo!” she screamed.

At the same moment, Graham’s hand reached out of the pool again and grabbed Aeges’s foot. The Netherworld King frowned—for some reason, the source that should have perished was still there. Graham’s face emerged from the pool, and he grinned.

“See? You just couldn’t abandon her.”

Realizing something was wrong at once, Aeges pulled Dehiddatem back. The tip of the spear was completely missing.

“Gwah...!”

The Netherworld King stabbed the other Crimson Blood Spear into Graham’s chest once again, refusing to let him crawl up. He poured his magic into his spear and used all his strength to push him back into the ends of the other dimension. From his source crackling blood lightning overflowed, the Vermilion Thunderbolt burning his body to travel along the Crimson Blood Spear. Despite the pain Aeges kept hold of his spear as he thrust it straight downwards.

“Get lost. *Sink*,” he said.

“It’s too late,” Graham replied. Purple lightning flashed, and Dehiddatem was sliced into two. Gauddigemon, the Sword of a Thousand Bolts, was in Graham’s hand.

“Guh!”

Graham immediately stabbed Gauddigemon into Aeges’s foot and escaped from the pool, splashing blood everywhere. He then slashed the four Blood World Gates with the purple lightning from his sword, electricity traveling through the gates, damaging them enough that they cracked and eventually exploded, erasing the pool of blood.

“You should’ve checked that I had truly perished first,” Graham said.

“Destroying the child after its birth was the right move, just as you said. But

even though you knew that was the correct choice, you still couldn't do it."

Graham raised his hand, and the cross Veaf flare was pinned to came off the wall and fell from the middle floor. It stabbed into the ground heavily in the space between Graham and the Netherworld King. The stakes in Veaf flare's hands and feet fell out, allowing her to fall away from the cross.

"I'm sorry... Boldinos... I..." she said, turning to Graham with a look of grief.

"Don't worry about it," he said to her.

Veaf flare smiled in relief.

"It went exactly as I planned. I had him bring you here to be his weakness. Thank you."

"As long as I was of use to you..."

Veaf flare tried to stand up, but was far too weak to do so and fell down instantly. She tried to push herself back up with her hands, but her body was totally unresponsive. When she tried to use her magic, she found herself unable to control it.

"Why...?" Veaf flare exclaimed.

Graham didn't even spare her a second look as he addressed the Netherworld King.

"You should know already, Jeph. It's too late to save her. Her body has served as the womb for Gijerica multiple times, and her source is now damaged beyond help. She wouldn't have survived the birth. And without a fetus inside her, she doesn't have long to live."

The Overlord looked at Graham in confusion. "Huh...?"

Graham had his usual good-natured smile on his face. Veaf flare struggled to her feet and tottered over to him.

"Crimson Blood Spear, first hidden art—"

Aeges thrust his spear forwards.

"—*Dimension Drive*."

Veaf flare stiffened at the sight of the approaching demon spear—but

Graham's Sword of a Thousand Bolts easily deflected it away from her.

"Th-Thank you..."

"You're welcome."

Yet fresh blood poured out of Veafare's body; Graham had stabbed her himself.

For a few moments, Veafare stared at him in total incomprehension as to what had just occurred.

"Boldinos... What are you...?"

"You will die, Veafare. You may even perish forever. Either way, this is farewell."

"No..."

She looked at him with an expression of utter disbelief.

"You're lying... Boldinos wouldn't do that to me..."

"You're right."

Despite the demon sword embedded in her chest, Veafare brightened at those words.

"Then..."

"Because I'm not Boldinos."

The Overlord looked dumbfounded, unable to process his words.

"Boldinos? What are you saying..."

"The first Overlord, Boldinos, was one of my pawns. He was almost as easy to deceive as you. He did everything I asked him to do, and at the very end, I killed him. I pretended to be him and lied to you by saying I was reborn as a proxy."

"Pretended...?"

"It was more convenient to have you believe I was Boldinos. Your body was optimal for using Gijerica."

Veafare stared at him with rounded eyes.

“You were so in love with being in love,” Graham explained, “that you never truly looked at who I was. You were so focused on resuming things with Boldinos as if nothing had happened, but Boldinos hadn’t changed to begin with—he was a different person entirely. You failed to notice that. If you were truly in love with him, shouldn’t you have noticed such a drastic change?”

“But... That’s...”

“Impossible to notice?” Graham asked. “If that’s what you think, then your love is trifling, Veaf flare.”

“That’s quite the accusation coming from the one who deceived her,” Ages snapped, pointing his demon spear at Graham. The Dimension Drive he had tried to use just now had actually been an attempt to save her.

“Don’t say that,” Graham replied. “I just wanted to see true love with my own eyes. What’s wrong with that? It was all fake anyway, so it’s not like she really lost anything.”

“You’re wrong... You’re wrong you’re wrong you’re wrong!” Veaf flare screamed, blood spilling from her mouth.

“What am I wrong about?” Graham asked.

“Boldinos and I made a promise... We promised we’d be together in our next lives...”

“And you broke that promise by falling in love with another man. Just moments ago, you were pregnant with *my* child.”

“You’re wrong!”

Veaf flare gathered the last of her magic in her right hand.

“You only have yourself to blame.” Graham pushed the Sword of a Thousand deeper into Veaf flare’s body.

“Ah...!”

The magic drained from her body.

“Give Boldinos back...” she groaned weakly, tears streaming down her face.

The demon sword was pulled out of Veaf flare. Graham kicked her body

towards Aegeus.

“You can tell her now,” he said. Zecht magic flickered for a brief moment as the Netherworld King pulled her in his arms.

“Was... Was I in love?” Veafare murmured, tears in her eyes. “Did I really betray Boldinos...?”

“Even if you have the right emotions, you can still make mistakes,” Aegeus said. “Only the truly heartless would fail to understand that.”

The Netherworld King drew a magic circle on Veafare’s body—the circle for Syrica.

“I reincarnated Boldinos as well. You can go find him and see for yourself.”

Veafare’s body transformed into floating particles of light. But in the brief moment the Netherworld King watched her depart with a soft gaze, a blade of purple lightning stabbed through his heart.

“Gah...”

“You felt guilty. The Zecht you made with me prevented you from telling her the truth,” Graham whispered, leaning his weight on the Sword of a Thousand Bolts. “Despite knowing she was doomed, you still hoped that she would be spared from birthing more children she didn’t truly want.”

“Gurrrgh...”

Graham dug into Aegeus’s source further, and casually continued to speak.

“You and he really are the same. The beloved disciple of Ceris Voldigoad, the man who, at the very last moment, couldn’t bring himself to be heartless. His final words were for you to not go down the same path he did, but you couldn’t even grant his final wish.”

“Graham... You...”

Aegeus’s hand touched Graham’s face. Gauddigemon’s purple lightning discharged in his source, jolting his body. His strength left him, and his hand fell, leaving a trail of his blood on Graham’s cheek.

“You are a failure,” Graham said. “You’re just a ghost that couldn’t survive

living in a peaceful era.”

Graham swung Gauddigemon through Aeges’s body, annihilating him. Bloodred particles rose into the air and eventually disappeared. Graham then turned to me with an indifferent look.

“Hey. Sorry for the wait.”

I stared back at him without saying anything, and heavy silence ensued.

“No worries. It wasn’t that long,” I said eventually. I stepped across the red line Aeges had drawn and walked towards him. “I have one question. Was the thing in Veafare’s belly Elrolarielm?”

“Yes and no. I used Gijerica magic and the God of Frenzy to alter the God of Balance and rewrite its order and the rules of the Selection Trial. Basically, I was trying to create Equis, the Almighty Radiance.”

“For what purpose?”

“Curiosity. Don’t you want to know what’s in the abyss of the world too?”

“Ridiculous,” I scoffed, stopping in my tracks. “What a worthless reason to trample all over someone’s feelings.”

“Oh? Are you *mad*? How rare. That makes me happy.”

“Mad?” From deep within my gut a dark chuckle bubbled forth. This was probably the most laughable moment of my life.

“Ha ha ha. Bwa ha ha!” I cackled. “What are you *saying*, Graham? Me, angry?”

I snapped my fingers. Aeges appeared in the spot where I had been standing earlier. I had used Agronemt to regenerate his source.

“My father, Ceris Voldigoad, stole my memories,” I said plainly. “All he left me was this message: Throw away hatred and, for the sake of peace, move forwards.”

I had to protect that. No matter what happened, I couldn’t be blinded by revenge.

Which was why...

“Mad? Graham, I’m so happy I almost can’t stand it. You have my thanks,

honestly, because you see, I know now that you are a man that must be destroyed.”

I slowly held my right hand up before me, gathering magic power in my palm. With peace in my heart, I smiled.

I smiled my usual, unforced smile. But a strange emotion was rising within me that changed my face against my will.

“And as a way of thanks...”

Am I smiling naturally right now?

“I’ll show you how ill-suited revenge is to this peaceful world.”



§ 44. A Wretched World

Graham and I stood facing each other in the Holy Seat Hall of Everastanzetta, the Institute of the Gods. Our respective magic powers occupied half of the round room each, black and purple particles clashing for dominion and creating violent sparks with each collision. The resulting shock waves shook Everastanzetta vigorously, as though the underground world itself was about to explode.

“I’ve been waiting so long for this,” Graham said, drawing a spherical magic circle with purple lightning and resting the Sword of a Thousand Bolts against his shoulder. “Finally we can come to an understanding.”

Purple lightning wrapped around the sword, extending the length of the blade dramatically. Graham swung the modified sword once, horizontally.

“Now, let us discuss everything *in depth*,” he said.

Purple lightning flashed. I wrapped Beno levun around my left hand and cast Jirasd on top of it, using the aurora of darkness covered in black lightning to block the incoming slash of purple lightning. Cracks ran along the wall behind me, emitting an eerie sparking sound before exploding violently. The wall crumbled to pieces.

“If you wanted to talk, you should have stood before me from the beginning,” I said. A hundred magic circles deployed in front of me, jet-black suns from each one. “*Without* hiding behind my father’s name and face.”

I fired all the Jio Graze at once. The black suns left a trail of black light as they flew towards Graham.

“But if I had shown myself to you fully in the beginning, as you say, would you be as interested in me as you are now?” Graham asked in reply.

Graham waved his left hand and spread a wall of Gavest, countering my Jio Graze. The ruined wall and floor crumbled and rose into the air like a sandstorm, obstructing my vision. He came charging out of the dust cloud, body

low in a crouch.

“Your mother was destroyed,” he said.

I turned sideways to avoid the Sword of a Thousand Bolts that came swinging down.

“Your father was destroyed.”

I saw through the horizontal sweep of the blade and took half a step back, the blade missing my nose by mere millimeters.

“His head was stolen and his dignity was besmirched—and that is why you cannot help but bare yourself to me.”

A lightning-wrapped thrust shot forwards as a follow-up attack. I layered Beno levun and Jirasd once again, catching the blade with my left hand. The clash of purple and black lightning echoed through the room.

“You cannot help but reveal your emotions. All that ugly resentment.”

“Do you want to be hated that much?” I asked.

We moved at the same time, pointing our fingers at each other’s bodies.

“*Jirasd*,” I said.

“*Gavest*,” said Graham.

The resounding crash thundered, shaking the Holy Seat Hall. Black and purple lightning bolts blended with each other, smashing through the ceiling and creating a rain of rubble. Our respective bolts burned the other, but they were only superficial wounds.

“What’s so different between us?” Graham asked. “I seek hatred and ugliness, while you seek love and kindness. Are we not the same?”

“It’s a bit late to be talking in metaphors.”

I stepped within range of Graham’s sword and stained both my hands with Vebzud to disable the Sword of a Thousand Bolts. I jabbed my fingers forwards from left and right, forcing Graham to discard his sword and stain his hands with Vebzud in response. He used his hands to keep mine in check, while I did the same to him. As a result, we ended up grappling. The shock waves of our

fierce jostling created cracks in what was left of the floor.

“I like love and kindness too,” Graham continued. “So fragile and frail. They tend to attract such wonderful despair. They make an ideal breeding ground for hatred and ugliness.”

“If you think you’re making a favorable impression, that head of yours must truly be rotten.”

Graham’s knee buckled. I was using my Vebzud-stained hands to suppress him with my physical strength. The magic particles that rose widened the cracks in the floor.

“Love and kindness are frail, and so they must be protected. The very fact that they are fragile is what makes them precious,” I said, twisting his hands as far as I could. Graham completely fell to both knees. “But a twisted fool wouldn’t understand that.”

“So it seems.”

Despite falling to his knees and having both arms pushed back, Graham maintained his unbothered expression.

“But consider the idea that love and kindness just so happen to be valued here.”

His Magic Eyes stared into mine as he spoke.

“Somewhere far away, there could be a world where hatred and ugliness are considered beautiful instead.”

I crushed Graham’s hands in my fists and shoved him into the floor. I thrust my Vebzud-covered hand into his neck, the force of it making his feet sink into the cracked ground below. Graham continued to speak even as blood poured from his mouth.

“What would you think of a world like that, Anos?”

I tried to cut off his head, but he managed to grab my arms with his crushed hands.

“An ugly, deteriorated world bloated with fools. A world so bad that nothing from two thousand years ago could compare. Wouldn’t that world appear

distorted to you? Wouldn't you destroy everything in your way as you searched for the love and kindness you're used to?"

"Is that what you're doing in this world?" I asked.

He smiled thinly.

"*This* world seems distorted to me. The peace you seek to create—the love and kindness you wish to center this world in—repulses me."

Purple lightning crackled. He raised his right hand into the air, clutching a spherical magic circle of possibilities created by Veneziara.

"It almost feels like this is a fake world created just to deceive me."

The power of overwhelming destruction caught my Eyes. Condensed purple lightning gathered in Graham's hand, flashing wildly.

"Is it my eyes that are distorted? Or is it the world that has gone crazy?"

Magic circles of purple lightning formed around me.

"Which do you think it is?" he asked, as though he was purely curious.

"You don't have the look of someone who doubts themselves," I said.

"Really?"

"I don't think it matters either way. You won't stop hurting others regardless of whether this world is crazy or not because at the end of the day you don't care for them."

With my hand still in his neck, I picked him up and thrust my other hand into his torso.

"Urgh... Gah!"

I dug through his torso into his source and crimson lightning started flowing out like blood, wrapping around my arm.

"I have no intention of debating any of this with you. You trampled over the dignity of my mother and father. You bring chaos to this world and toy with the hearts of others. I want peace, and you're *in the way*."

The corners of Graham's mouth lifted in satisfaction.

“Thus, I will destroy you,” I said.

“Just try it.”

There were a total of ten magic circles drawn with purple lightning, and they were joined to form one large magic circle.

“The world is my shield against you,” I replied. “My destruction magic will always be faster.”

The connected magic circles of purple lightning roared. Destructive bolts surged from every direction to defeat me. There were more than I could see with my Magic Eyes of Destruction, and they had enough force to burn through even Beno levun.

“Ravia Gieg Gaverizd,” Graham said.

World-destroying purple lightning descended in hopes of vanquishing me once and for all. So there was only one action for me to take.

“Vebzud.”

Without blocking the purple lightning of destruction, I sent my magic into my fingers and dug deeper at Graham’s source.

“Jirasd.”

I wrapped more black lightning around my already black fingers and turned them into a sharp blade. As I burned from being struck by purple lightning, I thrust that blade into Graham’s source. The Vermilion Thunderbolt rushed out in resistance, attempting to prevent the lightning-clad Vebzud from invading.

“Aviasten Ziara.”

At the last moment, the heat rays from the Jio Graze I fired earlier gathered on the Aviasten Ziara in my right hand. Crimson and purple lightning raged wildly while Vebzud, Jirasd, and Aviasten Ziara all focused on a single point in my hand, which closed in on the abyss of his source.

Deeper and deeper I pushed my fingers, shoving aside the Vermilion Thunderbolt until I reached the furthest depths.

“Perish,” I said.

“Will I?” Graham asked.

The next instant, I drew a layered magic circle on Graham’s source. The circle extended out of his body like a cannon.

“Egil Grone Angdroa.”

In the storm of purple lightning, an apocalyptic fire was released.

§ 45. Nihility

Black particles of magic drew a seven-layered spiral around Graham's body, forming jet-black flames that wound around him with a roar.

All of a sudden, the Vermilion Thunderbolt started overflowing from Graham's body in immense numbers. Black sparks of fire were sparsely scattered among the red light. A world-ending Egil Grone Angdroa had been fired into the depths of his source, but his stubborn source and the Vermilion Thunderbolt in his body prevented the apocalyptic flames from destroying the world.

Despite that, the few black sparks flying about were able to fall down on the purple lightning of Ravia Gieg Gaverizd that was attacking me. The magic circle of the purple lightning immediately caught aflame and burned to ashes.

Everything in my field of view was drenched in the light of bloodred lightning. The Vermilion Thunderbolt spilled in every direction, squeezing the last of Graham's magic from his source and destroying the walls, floor, and ceiling of the Holy Seat Hall. Rubble rained down, and the red lightning eventually faded, having no more power to draw from.

At the same time, the apocalyptic flames quietly extinguished. Graham's body was limp around my hand. His source was destroyed—there was no magic left to be detected.

"See?" Graham croaked. His body, now an empty shell, moved to firmly grab my arms. "I cannot be destroyed. Don't you see how similar we are?"

He shouldn't have been able to move at all. He had taken a direct hit from an Egil Grone Angdroa that was powerful enough to destroy the world, but his source was still intact. No, it was completely powerless and hollow now, but it should have perished and faded away entirely.

"Nuelien."

Graham's body faded, eventually vanishing entirely. But there was no trace of

magic in him. No matter how much I strained my Eyes, I couldn't see any power.

I immediately made a large leap to the side.

"Hmm."

I could no longer feel the fingertips of the hand I had plunged into his stomach. It seemed I had leaped away a tad too late, and whatever it was had shaved a millimeter or so off the ends of my fingers. Vebzud, Jirasd, and Aviasten Ziara had been concentrated at the tips of those exact fingers, yet he was able to erase them without any resistance.

Graham's source had vanished during his battle with Aeges. When he regenerated afterwards, he was able to destroy the Crimson Blood Spear easily. If I hadn't witnessed that firsthand, I could have been missing an entire arm instead.

I stared at the spot where he had been with my Magic Eyes. His source was gone, and his body was gone too. But there was no doubt he was still there.

"The existence of nothing, huh?"

What actively existed in his place was "nothing"—there was no other way of describing it.

"I'm surprised you noticed," Graham said. His voice seemed to be coming out of nowhere and everywhere at once. "Indeed, just like how your source is one of destruction, mine is one of nihility. The closer I approach destruction, the more of that power is brought out, and the more I return to my original state of nothingness."

Graham's body was faintly visible again. After being reduced to nothingness through Egil Grone Angdroa, he had regained his original power. But by regaining his original power, he could no longer actually be nothing, and so returned to his earlier state.

Eventually, Nuelien's nihility faded, and Graham stood there in his usual form.

"Generally, it would be strange for 'nothing' to be 'something.' But your existence is quite similar, isn't it?" he asked, flapping his tongue uselessly. "You were born with destruction."

“So?” I replied calmly, gaze fixed on him.

Graham drew a magic circle with his hands.

“Personally, I’ve always believed myself to be beyond the bounds of reason in this world. Just like you, the gods have targeted me before—the God of Frenzy, Aganzon, was one of them.”

Light gathered at his fingertips, and the Selection pledge jewel appeared.

“Guala Nateh Forteos.”

A magic circle constructed itself within the pledge jewel. Divine white light mixed with ominous black light, drawing letters that distorted in the air. A young boy in patchwork clothes appeared in the center of the runes, holding a single quill in his hand.

“But now,” Graham said, “he is my slave.”

Aganzon used his quill to draw a magic circle. Light encircled him, and his patchwork clothes were torn apart as the God of Frenzy turned into countless letters—runes that contained magic. The runes arranged themselves in an orderly fashion, forming magic circles to Graham’s left and right. The handle of a sinister scythe appeared from within each circle.

“Bephengzdogma, the Divine Scythe of Disorder,” he said, grabbing both handles and connecting them with a spin that sliced the air.

“So you transformed Aganzon into a weapon,” I said.

“That’s another similarity between us,” Graham replied. “I did this just like how you turned the Goddess of Destruction into the Demon Castle Delsgade. Don’t you see? We keep doing the same things.”

Unlike how I had stolen the order of destruction, however, it seemed Aganzon’s order was still intact.

“You also exist outside the bounds of this world’s reason. It’s why the gods call you a misfit,” he continued.

“So what?”

Graham grinned gleefully. It was like he had finally found someone to talk to

for the first time in his life.

“Where do you think we came from?” Graham asked.

“I have no intention of discussing philosophy with you.”

I glared at the Divine Scythe of Disorder with my mauve Magic Eyes.

“But I’m not talking philosophy,” Graham replied. “I’m speaking about the world. About order and magic. We are outside the bounds of reason. They do not apply to us. Why do you think we’ve been removed from the framework of this world’s order?”

He used Ceris Voldigoad’s power to glare back at me with the same mauve Eyes.

“Isn’t it odd to you too?”

Graham swung Bephengzdogma. The chaotic power of the God of Frenzy in the blade activated, his own body being slashed and blood immediately seeping from the wound.

“Oh, it looks like I missed.”

“What dull things to think about,” I said, running to close the distance to him once again. When I thrust my Vebzud-stained fingers forwards, he blocked them with the blade of his scythe.

“Really? But have you thought about this?” he continued anyway. “The fact we’re outside the bounds of reason proves that there is a boundary to this world in the first place. It suggests that there may be higher orders past this boundary, and that, for some reason, our sources transcend these limitations.”

I wrapped Jirasd around my right hand and grabbed the Divine Scythe of Disorder, but it didn’t budge in the slightest.

“Maybe that’s why I have a slightly different heart than other people’s. This world is a fake sandbox someone else made. Nothing matters here, and so I seek hatred and ugliness without hesitation,” he said, tone entirely too lighthearted for what he was saying.

“Enough of your delusions.” I cast Aviasten Ziara over the other spells and crushed the scythe’s blade in my hand. “I don’t know about sandboxes and

other worlds and I don't care. This is what I know: Your heart isn't rotten because of anything like that—it's because you yourself are rotten."

"That might be true too," Graham conceded. "But I know for sure that you're the same as I am."

The crushed fragments of his blade scattered through the air, reflecting glittering light. The moment they fell to the floor, cuts ran along my entire body, with blood gushing out of every wound.

"What, did you think that crushing the blade would prevent it from cutting you?" Graham spun the scythe once, and the blade repaired itself. He then held the scythe behind my neck. "You know, I feel that we could reach an understanding if only you let a little more hatred and ugliness gather in that pretty heart of yours."

"Impossible," I replied.

"Really now?"

I drew a magic circle before me, and at once the Divine Scythe of Disorder moved, chopping my head off my shoulders.

"Did you think getting beheaded wouldn't kill you?" he said, grabbing my rolling head with a smile. The Divine Scythe of Disorder had killed my body. I tried to draw my magic circle, but my magic just didn't activate. "Or did you think you could still use Ingall once you became just a source?"

He stared into the Eyes of my head.

"Everything before the Divine Scythe of Disorder is chaos. Things that should happen do not happen. Things that shouldn't happen *do* happen," he said, as though he was stating the obvious—as though he was answering a question I hadn't asked. "I know, I know. You won't perish from this. The closer you get to destruction, the brighter that source of yours glows. Just like how I return from nothing, destruction is merely another thing you shall overcome."

He spun the scythe, then released it.

"That's why I won't destroy you."

The Divine Scythe of Disorder returned to the God of Frenzy in patchwork

clothes.

“Instead, I’ll make you reincarnate with Gijerica. In the chaotic order of Aganzon’s womb, you will become a fetus that can never be born.”

He drew the magic circle for Gijerica over my head. The same magic circle appeared on Aganzon’s belly, having been embedded there in advance. My body crumbled into black particles of light that rose into the air. The head in his hand also turned into black light.

“For the rest of eternity, all you can do is watch as I remake your beloved world into one of hatred and ugliness,” he said, face entirely sincere. “Even if it takes ten thousand years or more, we *will* come to an understanding, Anos.”

Once the black light completely disappeared, Gijerica activated. At the same time, a shadow fell over Graham’s face. A shadow large enough to cover everything in the area.

He looked up through the hole in the ceiling that had been created during our fierce battle. But what should have been a clear view of the dome of the underground world was nowhere to be seen; an enormous castle floating above Everastanzetta was blocking the way.

“Delsgade...”

Just as he muttered that, something shot towards Everastanzetta from the castle. It pierced through layers of floors and ceilings until it reached the Holy Seat Floor nestled at the very bottom of Everastanzetta.

“Ah...” muttered Aganzon.

Stabbed through the God of Frenzy was a longsword that glowed with darkness—the Abolisher of Reason, Venuzdonoa. The shadow the sword cast on the floor transformed in shape from a blade to a person. That shadow then extended from the ground, gaining a physical form that grabbed the Abolisher of Reason.

“Did you think I would be reborn just because you reincarnated me?” I asked.

The shadow inverted, revealing me, perfectly unharmed. The Abolisher of Reason had destroyed Gijerica and the chaos of the Divine Scythe of Disorder.

“Aaah...” Aganzon groaned faintly, turning to look at me with his Divine Eyes. The next moment, the Abolisher of Reason flashed, and his divine body dispersed.

“You said that we’re similar. That I am like you, Graham, and that was why we’d be able to understand each other,” I said, glaring at Graham as I held Venuzdonoa at the ready.

“Have you finally come around?” he said.

“Unfortunately, there’s a decisive difference between us. A difference too significant to ignore, and that makes it impossible for us to be the same.”

“You mean your love and kindness?”

I scoffed.

“You cannot destroy me. Your use of Gijerica is proof of that,” I pointed out.

“Perhaps so, but...”

Graham drew magic circles with both hands. The handles of the scythe appeared to his left and right, which he connected to form the spinning Divine Scythe of Disorder that should have been destroyed by the Abolisher of Reason.

“You cannot destroy me either. We *are* similar, Anos.”

“No,” I said, taking one step towards him. “I *will* destroy you.”

§ 46. Beyond the Bounds of Reason

I stepped straight into Graham's range.

"Nice. Let's test that out," he said lightly. "That way, you'll have to take another step closer to me. You might even be able to understand me better."

Graham held the Divine Scythe of Disorder horizontally. I faced him with the Abolisher of Reason held loosely at my side.

"Nothing you say will ever make any sense," I said.

Graham moved, his scythe slicing sideways but immediately being intercepted by the longsword of darkness. Blade clashed with blade, and the Divine Scythe of Disorder shattered. At the same time, blood of the Demon King flowed out of my source. The fragments of the scythe flying through the air still possessed a disorder that gnawed at my source, creating countless wounds.

"Did you believe the Abolisher of Reason could affect disorder?" Graham asked, twirling the scythe. The shattered blade became whole again, as though reality itself had been altered.

The next moment, his source was slashed open, and the Vermilion Thunderbolt spread through the surroundings.

"Did *you* think that your scythe could alter the Abolisher of Reason?" I replied in kind, taking another step forwards despite the scythe's power still digging into my source.

Venuzdonoa and Bephengzdogma flashed at the same time. I blocked the handle of the scythe with my left arm, while Graham grabbed the blade of my longsword with his left hand. We both glared at each other with mauve Magic Eyes, sealing any divine powers between us.

"Why don't you summon Arcana?" Graham suggested.

"There's no guarantee she can come."

Guala Nateh Forteos was capable of teleporting between the underground

world and the surface, so it could *probably* cross the barrier around us—but with the disorder of Graham’s scythe in play, there was no telling if that would be the case.

“How long will you be able to suppress the Divine Scythe of Disorder with those Eyes?” Graham asked.

“That—”

The floor between our feet split into two, as though it had been cut by a thick blade.

“—is what I would say right back at you,” I replied.

The Abolisher of Reason sliced off Graham’s fingers.

“Don’t act so arrogant over borrowed Eyes.”

The blade of Venuzdonoa dug into the shoulder of his dominant arm, the one holding the scythe. His constantly relaxed expression finally frowned in pain.

“It all depends on how you use it—even if it’s borrowed,” he replied, placing his fingerless left hand against my abdomen. “*Galvedul.*”

Purple lightning spilled from a spherical magic circle, twisting around Graham’s left arm and forming a giant axe suited for both offense and defense. With this new weapon he immediately stabbed me in the stomach, burning my body with purple lightning.

“*Veneziara.*”

“Not good enough,” I said.

Ignoring the axe through my stomach, I swung Venuzdonoa down and severed his right arm at the shoulder. It flew through the air without releasing its hold on the Divine Scythe of Disorder. Graham retreated, but I shot forwards and grabbed his clothes with my left hand.

“You cannot get away.”

“*Gavest.*”

I broke through the wall of purple lightning before me with Venuzdonoa and proceeded to stab him in the heart and source. The sword slashed through the

Vermilion Thunderbolt, ending his life.

“Did you think nihility would prevent your destruction?” I responded.

His source, drawn to nothingness, was unable to perish. But logic had no meaning before the Abolisher of Reason. There was no doubt his source *had* perished. He wasn’t still alive like he had been earlier.

“And do *you* believe that destruction is forever?”

The voice that spoke came from behind me. There was nobody to be seen, but the Divine Scythe of Disorder was floating in the air as though someone was holding it. It wasn’t the same as the nothingness from before. It was the spell he had used after Galvedul—

“Veneziara, huh?” I muttered.

At that moment, Graham had used Veneziara to create multiple possibilities of himself. Thus, even though I had successfully stabbed his heart and source, Graham had been able to maintain himself through the possible version of him that had *not* been destroyed.

“That’s right.”

Before I could erase his Veneziara form with my Magic Eyes of Destruction, the silencing blade of the scythe flashed. The floor and walls of the room were sliced apart, and cuts were sliced across my body. The moment my Eyes destroyed the multiple layers of Veneziara, the body skewered on the Abolisher of Reason split horizontally across the middle.

“The Abolisher of Reason, Venuzdonoa—a sword that possesses the power of Abernyu, the Goddess of Destruction. Yet even with that absurd power, it’s impossible for you to permanently destroy my nihility,” Graham said.

His upper body had escaped from Venuzdonoa’s blade and was gradually fading back into nothingness. There was nothing to be detected—no magic at all—but he was definitely still there.

“Under the order of this world, destruction is the reduction of something to nothing. Yet before the Abolisher of Reason, which can destroy anything and everything, logic itself unravels. Thus, the effect of your blade only works up

until the target is destroyed, no?” his voice echoed from the surrounding nothingness. “But the nothing left after perishing—the nothingness that is not bound by reason—*that* is the true form of my source.”

In other words, the Abolisher of Reason had definitely destroyed his nihility. But destroying his nihility and thus creating nothing in its place allowed him to escape the conditions set by the Abolisher of Reason and trigger his source into reviving him all over again.

“If you keep using the power of Venuzdonoa, I will keep perishing. But is that demon sword capable of maintaining its shape forever? Especially since this isn’t your Demon King Castle.”

He had a point. Venuzdonoa had a time limit—it couldn’t keep destroying the order of nihility for eternity. No magic could stop order from returning to its original form forever. When the sword was sheathed, reason would return, the normal order of things would resume, and the nothingness left behind would form Graham once again.

“Hmm. I’ve got the general picture now. When the Divine Scythe of Disorder slashes empty space, the blade of chaos swings. There’s no telling what will happen, but one thing is for sure.”

His Veneziara self had slashed his physical body and source apart, releasing them from the Abolisher of Reason. If that hadn’t happened, he would still be in a precarious situation right now. There was no way it had happened by chance, which meant...

“Whatever happens is actually convenient to you,” I inferred.

“Really? I’ve been cut by it before,” he replied.

“You just wanted to convince others it was too unpredictable to be used in more crucial moments,” I said.

The sound of his laughter could be heard.

“*Nuelien.*”

The lower half of his separated body completely disappeared, leaving nothing behind. A nothing that couldn’t be seen, heard, or felt, but definitely existed.

“Tch.”

The nihility of Nuelien dug into my side, opening a hole from which blood poured.

“Let’s assume you destroyed me,” his voice said from nowhere. The Divine Scythe of Disorder was pointed at my throat. “Even then, I will not perish.”

The nihility of Nuelien vanished, and an unharmed Graham stood behind me.

“You’re so similar to me, and I’m so similar to you. Have you never asked yourself why you’re so different from others?” he asked.

The scythe’s blade lightly dug into my neck, causing a thin line of blood to drip. The scythe that supposedly cut at random when it swung through air could apparently also be used to behead a target directly.

“No one can follow your path. You’re surrounded by followers, but you’re all alone,” Graham continued. “The lone Demon King, plagued by emptiness.”

The moment I moved even a little, the blade would take off my head.

“You’re so ridiculously powerful that you can destroy reason itself. I’m the only person in this world that could understand what that’s like.”

I sighed quietly and shot him a pitying look. “Are you that lonely, Graham?”

“Will you destroy me and end my loneliness? How kind of you,” he said lightly. “But you’re wrong. I would never bother to do something as impossible as destroying what cannot be destroyed, not when I can behead you and control you that way.”

“Using Gijerica?” I said.

“You won’t be able to stop me the same way twice.”

Was that a bluff, or did he actually have another trick up his sleeve besides Gijerica? Well, either way, it didn’t matter much.

“If you want my head so much, you can have it,” I said, turning on the spot.

“Well, if you’re offering—”

The blade of Bephengzdogma moved swiftly and silently. Using the centrifugal force from my spin, I swung Venuzdonoa up from below to meet the blade,

causing the blade of the scythe to rotate around my neck without cutting it.

“—I’ll help myself,” Graham replied.

Fresh blood sprayed as the scythe dug into the fingers of my right hand. Venuzdonoa was sent flying away.

“Take it.” With the momentum of my spin, I grabbed his head with my left hand that had Vebzud, Jirasd, and Aviasten Ziara layered on it. I then slammed him to the ground.

“Gigginuvenuenz.”

I stepped on his head. Particles of magic gathered around his neck, forming a black restraint. A black guillotine appeared around it.

“Looks like in the end, you chose wrong as well,” Graham said.

I moved my fingers in a downwards gesture. “Execute.”

The blade of the guillotine fell, cutting off his head—the head of Ceris Voldigoad. As Ceris’s head rolled across the ground, Graham freed himself and held the Divine Scythe of Disorder at the ready.

“You were in too much of a rush to free your father,” Graham said. “I suppose that’s *one* difference between us.”

I leaped in the direction of the Abolisher of Reason.

“Divine Scythe of Disorder, first hidden art—”

Graham held the divine scythe overhead.

“—Rampaging Wheel.”

He threw Bephengzdogma like a throwing knife. It spun like a wheel past me, striking Venuzdonoa and slicing it over and over again. Each time the Divine Scythe of Disorder collided with the longsword of darkness, the blade of the sword became more and more battered and chipped away. Eventually, with a dull snap, the Abolisher of Reason broke entirely.

“See? Your sentimentality will lead to your defea—”

From his chest blood ran freely. While Graham’s scythe passed me by to destroy the Abolisher of Reason, I’d run towards him so I could stab him in the

chest with the very same sword he had discarded earlier—Gauddigemon, the Sword of a Thousand Bolts.

“How does it feel to *lose* to sentimentality, Graham?” I asked.

I released purple lightning from my fingertips, drawing a spherical magic circle and multiplying it by nine using Veneziaara. The moment Ceris Voldigoad’s head had been separated from him, ownership of the Sword of a Thousand Bolts had transferred to me. Even with my magic power, it had been impossible for me to take the sword from him when he was in possession of Ceris Voldigoad’s power. Thus, I had beheaded him first.

“*Veneziaara.*”

I thrust Gauddigemon into the spherical magic circle. At the same time, nine blades of possibility stabbed into the nine other circles. Deafening thunder boomed as the Holy Seat Hall filled with enough purple lightning to break everything that hadn’t already crumbled to dust. The sky roared, the earth shook, and the release of the spell alone was enough to blow away the surrounding rubble. Crackling purple lightning spread across the ground, forming a barrier around the area. I used all my strength to lift Graham’s body, still impaled by the Sword of a Thousand Bolts.

I held the real Gauddigemon and the nine Gauddigemon of possibilities up into the air. Bolts of purple lightning as thin as a thread shot from the ends of the blades. They weren’t aimed at his source. I had already seen the result of destroying nihility from the Erial.

My father must have known this as well.

That is why this time, father—

“*Ravia Neold Galvarizen.*”

An enormous bolt of purple lightning fell from the dome, aimed at the ten swords, becoming a pillar connecting the earth to the sky. Like a gigantic sword, the lightning of destruction fell, sending a roar of earth-rending sound far into the distance. In no time at all, most of Everastanzetta was reduced to rubble. The world was stained purple by fierce lightning, and within seconds, Graham’s body was reduced to ashes.

When I strained my Eyes, I could see his source before me. An orb of faint light that was yet to become nihility. I glared at it with my Magic Eyes of Destruction and prevented him from using Ingall. Then, I covered my fingers in Vebzud and grabbed his source.

“Once I lose my body, my source will approach nothingness. This is just a repeat of before,” a voice echoed through Leaks.

“If you hadn’t taken Jeph hostage, my father would have defeated you,” I said.

“He had not the means to destroy me.”

“No. He would have been able to lead your source to destruction as it neared nihility.”

His laugh echoed in my ears.

“Really now. How so?”

Blood poured from my chest. With the hand holding Graham’s source, I pierced my own chest with Vebzud.

“This is the answer.”

Graham’s source was superimposed over mine as I sent it to the depths of my source.

“Oh, I see. So that’s how it is. Smart thinking... Indeed, he might have been capable of this,” Graham said, realizing what I was implying. *“If he took the source of nihility into his own body, Nuelien would reduce the source to nothing. The Voldigoad source of destruction would then continuously destroy my nihility—he was trying to end things for both of us back then.”*

He continued speaking as though he had seen through everything.

“Do you plan to follow in your father’s footsteps, Anos, and destroy yourself for the sake of the world? How beautiful. Though I suppose all this could just be an empty threat. Nonetheless...”

The Divine Scythe of Disorder floated into the air. When I strained my Eyes, I could see the Veneziara of Graham holding it.

“Did you believe I wouldn’t be able to use Veneziara without Ceris Voldigoad’s head?” Graham asked. He had cast the spell just before his body was reduced to ashes. “Right now, the destruction in your source and the nihilism in mine are struggling for dominance. Mine brings yours closer to nothingness, while yours brings mine closer to destruction. We will perish and return to nothingness for eternity, just like you wanted.”

The alternate, potential Graham walked forwards with the scythe in his arms.

“Now, what would happen if we added a power that disrupted your destruction?” he said, holding Bephengzdogma horizontally. “It’s such a shame, you know. We truly are so similar. But if there was a reason for your defeat, it would be the fact you were born after me.”

The blade of silence cut through empty air with disorder.

“Now, it’s time for your first taste of defeat. I will heal your loneliness, Anos,” Graham said with a triumphant smile. He gazed at me with his Magic Eyes of possibilities, imagining the balance in my source between destruction and nihilism tilting in his favor.

But the next moment—

Nothing happened. Not a single thing. Not even the wind moved.

“Oh?” he said.

I took a quiet step forwards.

“Are you sure you want to approach me in such a state?” Graham asked. “I may have missed earlier, but I won’t this time—”

Graham’s face suddenly fell in shock. “What...?”

His feet—the feet of his body constructed through Veneziara—took a single step back.

“What...did you do?”

“Ask your body. It was made through possibilities, and now it has acquired the possibility of fear.”

“Fear?” he repeated, in disbelief. “*Me*, fear *you*? When we are each other’s

mirror image?”

He swung the Divine Scythe of Disorder in a large arc.

“Don’t be silly, Anos.”

The silencing blade flashed again, but nothing happened.

“Why...”

“Still don’t get it?” I said. “When the Divine Scythe of Disorder swings through the air, something convenient to you happens.”

I stabbed the Sword of a Thousand Bolts into the ground and held my hand over it. A shadow slowly extended in the shape of a sword, and I grabbed it with my hand.

“Nothing happened, in fact—because that is the outcome that is most convenient to you right now,” I said.

The shadow sword materialized into the Abolisher of Reason, Venuzdonoa. The broken blade was regenerated.

“In other words, no matter what happens, it’s already too late.”

“What do you mean—”

For every step I took towards him, he took one step back.

“Why...”

The more I moved forwards, the more frightened he looked as he backed away.

“Why is my body...retreating...” Graham muttered.

“You said that our sources were struggling for dominance between destruction and nihilism. That for eternity we would be trapped in a cycle of destruction and nothingness,” I said with a sadistic grin. “Perhaps you should use those Eyes of possibilities of yours to take a closer look into the abyss.”

I drew a magic circle on the wound in my chest, dispelling all my wards and exposing my source, into which Graham stared into the abyss with his Magic Eyes.

He was silent. At a simple loss for words.

“Get it now?” I asked. “You will be the one to perish, Graham.”

His Eyes of possibilities had probably witnessed the utter decimation of his nihility inside my source.

“Why,” he said, completely baffled. “That can’t be. How...? What about Nuelien?”

“I can indeed feel a speck of nihility in me, but it’s so small it’s practically meaningless. My source will simply destroy it.”

“That... That’s *impossible*, Anos,” he said, slicing the Divine Scythe of Disorder through the air. “You and I are so *similar*.”

The blade of silence slashed through the air with disorder over and over again.

“In each other we have found the cure to our loneliness. In this mad world you and I are only normal beings alive.”

Order was disrupted and altered countless times with each swing of the scythe. But no matter how many times he swung it, no matter how many times he cut through the air—nothing happened before me.

“You and I are the *same*—” he shouted, in a voice colored with despair.

I swung the Abolisher of Reason. “Indeed, we may, at one point, have been quite similar.”

The Graham of possibilities leaped aside to avoid the blade, but his arms and legs were summarily sliced off. He fell to the ground face-first, scythe clattering noisily before returning to the form of the God of Frenzy, Aganzon.

“That is, if the entirety of your source had amounted to anything more than just a fraction of mine.”

“Ah...”

Aganzon was skewered by the Abolisher of Reason and removed from existence.

“Anos!” Graham shouted. “You— Guh...!”

I stepped on his back, hard.

“Your source was immediately overpowered within mine. All that’s left of you is this body you made of mere possibilities,” I explained, staring into his Eyes that were wide with despair.

“You had this much power inside you,” he muttered. “You were suppressing this much destruction the entire time we were fighting...”

“Not quite. To me, the bigger threat has always been restraining my own destructive capabilities. In comparison, your nihilism just wasn’t as much of an issue. While the amount of power I can safely release in this fragile world is enough to compete with you, my total power is on another level entirely.”

His full power was, quite literally, to use all the magic power in his source. In contrast, the full power I could use was the mere dregs of my magic that were not currently engaged in restraining my power from destroying the entire world. The power that I could put out wasn’t that different in strength to Graham’s, but the power I possessed inside was overwhelmingly different.

“While you were fighting me, I was fighting myself,” I said.

“You... You weren’t even looking at me...”

“There’s no need to be so discouraged. I was definitely looking at you. You were right about the world being a shield against me. I can’t even swat a fly without taking the greatest care not to destroy it entirely.”

I grinned madly and continued.

“Your nihilism may need to be destroyed billions of times in order to completely disappear, but something like that is trivial for the depths of my source. It will happen just on contact alone.”

“Wh...”

I could hear him swallow his breath. The man who had been so talkative until now had finally fallen silent. After a long pause, he mumbled under his breath.

“The Demon King of Tyranny, huh...”

His Veneziara body began to fade.

“Ah... You...” he said in a trembling voice. “You are far beyond what I could ever be...”

Deep within my source, nihility was smothered by destruction.

“The true lonely monster was you... Anos...”

The layers of reinforced Veneziara turned into particles of light that rose into the sky. I returned the Abolisher of Reason to its shadow form and looked up, watching the particles rise. Soon after I turned my gaze to the Sword of a Thousand Bolts.

It felt like I could see a glimpse of my parents’ faces there, in the reflection cast by the blade, just as I had seen them in the Stars of Creation.

“You will never get the chance,” I mumbled vacantly as I stared at the memento of my father. The nihility nestled deep in my source would continue to be tortured by destruction until the day it truly returned to nothingness.

“All you are destined to receive is the loneliness you so despised.”

§ 47. The Demon King's Face

The source of destruction was beating wildly, forcing my heart to tremble with intense, heavy throbs. Taking in Graham's source of nihilism meant the source could fully demonstrate its true worth. Not even nothingness could escape destruction.

Though the depths of my source contained a destruction that far outmatched Graham's, his nihilism was powerful enough to withstand Egil Grone Angdroa. And that power was now rampaging within my source, fighting against a destruction that could devastate the world several times over in order to reduce everything to nothing. If Graham's source of nihilism ever escaped from me, the world would be fatally wounded.

Perhaps this is what it truly means to be at war with yourself.

This whole thing would have gone a lot smoother if I had just been a little bit stronger than him. I might not have even had to destroy him in the first place.

Perhaps I could have used Gijerica to turn him into a harmless being that couldn't return to nothingness. The world wouldn't have been exposed to such danger that way. In the end there might have even been other, easier ways of winning than what I had done.

But my heart had refused. I hadn't wanted to grant him anything. I wanted Graham to experience the despair of realizing that he and I were not at all the same, and to die alone with that void torn into his heart.

"Anos!" a voice behind me shouted.

Two girls had arrived at the Holy Seat Hall—Misha and Sasha. At once they started to run towards me.

"Stop there," I said, without looking back.

The two paused in confusion.

"Are you still fighting?" Sasha asked warily.

“No. It’s been settled.”

“Then why...?” she asked, visibly worried. Misha had the same look on her face.

“I may have lost my cool a little,” I answered. “I talked a big game about wanting peace too. I’m just too ashamed to face you now.”

Sasha struggled to respond for a moment.

“Um... Then we’ll wait here until you calm down,” she said, even turning her back to me out of consideration. But Misha continued walking towards me without a care.

“Misha? What are you doing? He told us to stay away,” Sasha said, flustered, grabbing her sister’s hand.

“It’s okay,” Misha replied plainly. “Anos is the same as always.”

She slipped out of Sasha’s hand and came up to me.

“He still has the same kind face,” she said.

“You can’t even see me,” I said.

“Mm.” She nodded gently, as if to say she didn’t even need to look, and never would; it wasn’t a matter of having good Eyes or not.

“If that’s a lie, you have to take responsibility,” I said, and slowly turned to face Misha.

She smiled. “See? Kind. Just like always.”

“Really?”

She nodded.

“Jeez! You made it sound like you looked like the Great Demon King or something. Don’t scare me like that,” Sasha whined, sounding somewhat relieved.

“Sorry for worrying you,” I said, placing a hand on Sasha’s head.

“I-I didn’t say I was worried... I said don’t scare me!”

“Sorry.”

Sasha looked down.

"I didn't say I *wasn't* worried either..." she mumbled quietly.

I turned and drew a magic circle where Graham had disappeared, connecting to his storage circle. I forced it open and took out a glowing blue star—an Erial.

"This one also has memories from two thousand years ago, right?" Sasha asked.

"Most likely," I replied.

"The first five Erials were all about your father, so I wonder what's in this one?"

"It could be hope, or it could be despair."

Since Militia had called it already over, whatever was stored in this Erial couldn't be good.

"I guess there's only one way to find out," Sasha said. "I'm so curious..."

Misha blinked twice and looked up at me. It felt like her Magic Eyes were seeing right through me.

"Should we save it for later?" she asked.

"Oh!" Sasha said in realization.

"Etiltheve is still a concern," Misha explained.

"Then let's check on them first," I said. "We still have to sort that out."

I looked over at the entrance, but the Netherworld King was no longer there. He had probably left after watching over my victory. And so Sasha, Misha, and I flew up with Fless and left Everastanzetta.

As we flew up towards the dome, the castle below us glowed faintly and slowly began to repair itself. We entered the hole in the dome I had originally come through and returned to Etiltheve.

"Misha," I said.

She turned to me with a blank look on her face.

"You don't have to worry about me. I'll be fine."

She thought for a moment before replying. "It's better to wait until you've organized your thoughts."

She must have been referring to my father.

"There's no telling what will happen while I wait," I replied.

Misha shook her head. "Things are peaceful at the moment."

I held my tongue at that. Perhaps she had a point after all. "True."

"Yup."

"In that case," I said, "in a truly peaceful manner, let's take things as they come."

I looked over at Sasha after saying that, but for some reason, she looked rather glum.

"Wh-What?" she asked.

"What do you mean, what? What's going on?"

"I just," she mumbled sadly, "I know I'm not as considerate as Misha... I can't tell what you're thinking at all. I don't know anything about you."

Hmm. That was what she was upset over? How silly.

"I'm leaving this with you, Sasha."

I tossed the Star of Creation to her. She was startled, but caught it and gave me a look of confusion.

"Even if I organize my thoughts, as Misha suggests, that doesn't mean I know *when* it will be best to see this. Give it back to me when *you* think the time is right."

"Me?" Sasha asked. "Um... So I just give it back when I think you've calmed down?"

"I'm counting on you," I replied.

Sasha beamed happily.

"Got it!"

We were still flying upwards when we came across Eleonore and Zeshia in the

middle of the shaft. They waved at us excitedly.

“The army of the Demon King is victorious!” Eleonore cheered.

“The enemy has been destroyed...thanks to Zeshia!” Zeshia said, mimicking her.

Sasha shot them an exasperated look. “How carefree...”

“Anos worked especially hard this time,” Eleonore said. For some reason, she clung to me from behind and hugged me so my head was cradled by her chest. “You did well.”

To think the day would come that my back would be used by a subordinate like this... Yet another bountiful, full-bodied symbol of peace.

“How hard did Zeshia work this time...?” Zeshia asked expectantly.

Eleonore held up her index finger. “Of course, you worked the hardest.”

Zeshia copied her movement with sparkling eyes, holding her finger high over her head.

“The hardest...!”

A lunar snowdrop suddenly fell from above. It released a bright silver light before transforming into Arcana.

“Big brother,” she said, flying up to me. “The Selection Trial seems to have ended.”

“Has the God of Balance perished?” I asked.

“I think so,” she replied.

Elrolarielm’s source had been in the middle of reincarnating within Veafare’s womb. When Ages had stabbed her with his spear, the God of Balance had been separated from the womb and sent to the ends of another dimension. With the god destroyed, the order that was the Selection Trial must have ended.

“It may have ended, but that doesn’t mean nothing else will happen,” I pointed out. Both Gijerica and the God of Frenzy had changed the original Selection Trial quite a bit, so it wasn’t unreasonable to think there might be

some surprises still to come. “Keep an eye on things for a while.”

“Got it,” Arcana said.

Just then, the magic that had been covering Etiltheve felt like it faded.

“Lo Macis just disappeared,” Misha said.

And we had not heard a single dragon cry upon leaving the underground world.

“Let’s meet up with Emilia and the others,” I said, casting Gatom.

The world turned white, and in the next moment, we were at the ancient graveyard inside a ruin shaft. The Demon King Academy students had defeated Bomiras’s clone and were resting there, completely exhausted from their fight.

I let Lay and the others know that Bomiras was defeated and that the fight in Etiltheve had been settled, and everyone looked relieved. When I looked around, I spotted Emilia a short distance away from the group. She was restlessly glancing at the Fan Union girls, opening and closing her mouth as though she couldn’t decide what to say.

But she eventually found her courage and marched towards them.

“Oh! That’s right, Ms. Emilia!”

Ellen suddenly whirled around, startling Emilia.

“Y-Yes?!” Emilia exclaimed.

“Huh? Is something the matter?” Ellen asked.

“N-No, nothing,” Emilia said, dejected, all her courage leaving her. “Did you want something?” She gestured for Ellen to speak.

“So the thing is, we’re going to Gairadite in the near future,” Ellen said.

“For official duties!” Nono added.

“Official duties? Oh, as the Demon King’s Choir?” Emilia asked.

“Yes,” Ellen confirmed. “And we were hoping we could visit your house while we were there. To hang out!”

The rest of the Fan Union girls gathered around Emilia excitedly, all chiming

in.

“Yup! Preferably to sleep over!”

“Will you have room for all eight of us?”

“We can squeeze together no problem!”

“A headmaster should have a pretty big house, right?”

The girls’ chatter brought a big smile to Emilia’s face, but suddenly her smile dropped, replaced by a look of guilt. Her face fell.

“Um... Everyone,” she said, voice solemn.

“Yes?” Ellen said.

“I’m sorry.” Emilia bowed her head low. “I’ve done such unforgivable things. I was terribly prejudiced. I’m so sorry about that...”

Tension suddenly filled the air. Ellen and the girls were silent. Emilia bit her lip, unable to do anything but keep her head down.

“Ms. Emilia.”

At Ellen’s voice, Emilia looked up again. With everyone else’s encouragement, Ellen took a step forwards with a serious expression.

“What were we talking about?” she asked.

“Huh?!” Emilia exclaimed.

“E-Allen! Idiot! She’s talking about that— You know, *that!*” Nono scolded.

“Oh, right! You mean the time we were working on Lord Anos’s photo collection in class and you confiscated it?!” Ellen said.

“That was definitely your fault, Ellen!” said another one of the girls. “She’s probably talking about the posters of Lord Anos’s quotes in the corridors! The ones that she tore down!”

“No, that was totally Jessica’s fault!” pointed out another girl. “She means the time she demolished the statue of Lord Anos in the union tower!”

“Those didn’t even look like him, so honestly we can’t blame her for that! She definitely meant the time we answered with ‘Lord Anos’ for the answers in

history class and she marked them incorrect!”

The girls exchanged a look with each other.

“Yes, that has to be it!”

They all turned to face Emilia at once. She looked utterly bewildered.

“H-Huh? Was that not it? Then um...what did you mean?” Ellen asked.

“I was talking about the time during the Demon Sword Tournament...when I tried to kill you all,” she said.

The girls gasped in reply.

“Ah! When Lord Anos remembered our names!”

“It was all thanks to Ms. Emilia!”

“Yup! You gave us the push we needed, even though it made Lord Anos turn on you.”

“Back then, it really felt like you were looking out for us!”

Emilia was at a loss for words. “That’s not how I recall it...”

“Isn’t it?” Jessica asked.

“I mean, don’t you hate me for it?” Emilia asked.

“Hate? No!” said Jessica. “We’re grateful!”

“Without that, we’d never be able to sing this many songs about Lord Anos,” Nono said.

“It’s true! It’s all thanks to you, Ms. Emilia. Thank you very much.”

And with that the girls all bowed politely.

“N-Not at all...” Emilia mumbled, shaken by the unexpected reply.

“So will we be able to stay over at your place when we go to Gairadite?” one of the girls chimed in.

“If you’d like that, then I’d be happy to have you over...” Emilia replied.

“Yay!”

The girls raised their voices, rejoicing. Emilia looked confused the entire time.

"Are you really not bothered by it?" she asked Ellen one more time.

"Hmm," Ellen said in thought. "There was a lot that happened back then, true. But I think it's all in the past now. We suffered because we were hybrids, but because you were royalty, you had a lot of troubles too. One person can't take all the blame."

"I still think I was the one in the wrong," Emilia said.

"Then you're forgiven," Ellen replied.

"How can you say that so easily? I almost killed you all."

"But if you were truly evil, you wouldn't be trying so hard to apologize to us right now."

Emilia's eyes widened. Ellen grinned brightly at her.

"Did you really we wouldn't forgive you for something you *almost* did?" she asked.

"Kyaaaaaah! No fair, Ellen! We wanted to say that!"

The rest of the girls rushed up to Emilia and took turns repeating Ellen's line to her, and after being given so many assurances of forgiveness that even a saint would get fed up, Emilia laughed out of pure joy.

"Jeez," she said. "Why are you all like this..."

"Don't you know, Ms. Emilia? Love is stronger than hatred!" Ellen said.

Lay approached me from behind and stood beside me.

"How lively," he remarked.

"Indeed," I said.

We watched Emilia and the Fan Union girls in silence for a long while.

"What about your parents?" I eventually asked. There was no need to state in which era.

"They're dead."

He didn't clarify if they had been killed or by whom.

"Sorry," I said.

He shook his head slowly.

“They merely fought and died,” he said. “Just like your father.”

I knew how much meaning those words carried.

“Thank you.”

For some reason, the Fan Union girls were now teaching Emilia how to imitate the Demon King. Led on by Ellen’s high-handed ways, Emilia gave a reluctant performance while looking terribly embarrassed. But she seemed to be having fun.

Lay and I continued watching the peaceful scene in front of us unfold.

Even without a word between us, I understood how he felt.

§ Epilogue: The Demon King's Father

The next day.

Early in the morning, I visited the hill to the southwest of Midhaze. Once I reached the part of the hill that offered the best view over the city, I stabbed the Sword of a Thousand Bolts into the ground. I was the current owner of the sword—short of Shin or Lay, no one would be able to draw it out ever again.

“Graham will continue to be destroyed in the depths of this source,” I said to the sword, the only memento of my father. “He will go through endless destruction until his nihility truly becomes nothing.”

Right now his nihility was still deep in my source, facing constant and repeated annihilation.

“Even if I were to perish someday, his nihility would not escape. Father. The Voldigoad source I inherited from you—the source that mother gave her life to bring into this world—will seal that fool in the abyss of hell.”

Eternity didn't exist in this world; even nothingness itself would perish one day. But if I was wrong, and Graham's source really could live as nothing forever, then that would mean my destruction would be similarly eternal. In the end, with his nihility deep in the abyss of my source, there was nothing left for him but to face endless destruction.

“Emperor Chappes was found in an underground cell in Etiltheve,” I continued saying to my late father. “Bomiras kept him alive thinking he might still be of use. And though it hasn't been formally decided, the Inzuel Empire will be joining the Hero Assembly too. Thanks to those who desire peace, Azesion will now move towards a better future.”

With this, the world had taken another step towards lasting peace.

“Midhaze is at peace.”

The Sword of a Thousand Bolts was stabbed into the hill, and from this grave marker, my father could see the entirety of Midhaze.

“The city is so full of smiles that I doubt you’d even recognize it now.”

We had finally reached a point where there was no need to fear war. At the end of the destruction my father had perpetuated, at the end of his agonizing battle, were everyone’s smiles.

“This was built on the foundation of countless corpses.”

Those who lived in this era would never be able to imagine such a thing. But that was how it should be.

“I will never forget again.”

I looked back on the past the Erial had shown me.

“The noble knights who fought for the future without leaving their names in history,” I said. “The valiant ones who, despite being shunned by those they sought to protect and tossed about endlessly by the tides of war, never strayed from their beliefs.”

Perhaps I had only come this far by following the paths they had laid with their lives.

“I will inherit your will for peace.”

So that tragedy would never be repeated.

“The ghosts of the dead have been destroyed.”

They were the words I had said on my father’s seventeenth visit—that I would erase the ghosts and change this ravaged world. In other words, I had vowed to create a world where the Phantom Knights were no longer needed.

Back then I had already had a feeling as to who he really was. And I had probably wanted to see my father’s true face, all the pretense stripped away. I had believed I could do it—that there was nothing out of reach for me. But as a result, my words had pushed my father to his final resolution.

“Did he visit me that time to take strength from me? So he could defeat Graham?”

If so—if I had said something different at that time—could there have been a future where he and I were both standing here, overlooking the city together?

But such thoughts were pointless. It could have just as likely resulted in something else.

Either way, it had been two thousand years since those events, and everything was over. There was no need to doubt, or waver over what had occurred. It wouldn't come up as long as I kept facing forwards.

“Dearest father—with all my heart, I thank you.”

I closed my eyes and offered a silent prayer. *May you rest in peace*—for some reason, those words were stuck in my throat, unable to come out. Perhaps there was a part of me reluctant to move on from this, that wanted this moment to continue as long as possible.

A warm morning wind brushed my cheek. In the tranquil silence, I let all my gratitude for my father pour out of me and overflow endlessly.

Out of nowhere, I suddenly recalled Misha's words. There was no need to rush. There was no harm in letting myself, in this moment, be immersed in my own sentimentality. That was the peaceful way of doing things. My father would have preferred it too, I thought.

I listened to the faint sound of the wind while thinking of the few memories I had seen of my father in the Stars of Creation. The wind carried with it sounds of peace from afar: the soft breath of peaceful sleep, the light tap of skipping footsteps. Joyous, wild laughter. Everything the nameless knights had wished for.

As well as—

“Humph!” a deep voice yelled dramatically. “Hyaaaah!”

A sword cut through the air with great force.

“Gwuhaaaaaah!”

Unable to ignore the loud, insistent voice, I finally looked over. Dad was swinging his sword while pointedly glancing over at me.

“What are you doing so early in the morning?” I asked.

“Oh, Anos! You were there?” Dad said. He stuck his sword in the ground and posed pompously. “What a coincidence.”

Clearly, he was aware I had been here all along.

“This is actually my daily routine. Every morning I come here and swing my sword, in order to refine the souls of the swords I forged!”

He drew his sword and swung it again.

“This is the first I’ve heard of your routine,” I said. “When did you begin?”

“The truth is—”

The sword sliced through the wind audibly.

“—I started today!”

That’s not a daily routine.

“How about we do our usual, huh?” he suggested.

“Our usual?” I repeated.

I walked over to dad.

“Where we refine the hearts of the swords together,” he explained.

Hmm. So he wanted to act out his teenage fantasies again. But I’d only humored him once before, so I wasn’t sure why he was calling it our usual.

“Here.”

Dad forced a sword into my hand. He then skipped over to the basket of swords he had left on the hill.

“Ah... Hmm. Well...”

It seemed he wanted to say something.

“Y-You know, Anos, ever since you came back, you’ve been a little...” he said while rummaging through the basket.

“A little what?”

“Oh, how should I put this? Um, a little down.”

I could feel my own expression turn serious.

“Do I look that way?” I asked.

“Ah, I mean, hopefully I’m just imagining things! But I’m not, and you say it’s

fine, then it's fine. Every man has a wall or two he has to overcome by himself."

Dad chose his sword and turned to face me.

"I'm not proud of it, but I once had so many walls I was practically buried by them."

I tried to imagine dad being surrounded by walls and stuck in place. Indeed, it wasn't something to be proud of.

"What did you do about those walls?" I asked.

Dad gave me a helpless grin. "I'm still buried in them."

So he hasn't overcome them yet.

"That's just how life is, though," he continued. "But you're smarter than I am, so I'm sure that even if you were buried, you'd find a way to break those walls."

"Yeah."

Dad laughed.

"Dad. Did you wake up early just to tell me that?" I asked.

"I told you, it's just a coincidence."

Good grief. Dad's urge to show off was always so troubling. It was troubling, but...I felt a little brighter than I did before.

"Thank you."

"Wh-What for? I only said the obvious! There's nothing to thank me for!"

Despite his words, dad looked extremely pleased.

"Now then."

"Right."

I was about to suggest we go home, when dad cut in first.

"Let's go for a round!"

"Really?"

"Of course."

He looks serious. Hmm. Since he had come all this way and was so concerned

for me, it wouldn't hurt to humor him this time.

"I'm going to give it my all," I said.

Of course, I wouldn't actually do that.

"Bring it."

Dad grinned. We positioned ourselves facing each other and readied our swords.

"I have no personal vendetta against you, but for the sake of peace, you must die!" he cried.

He raised the sword in his right hand, and with his left, grabbed the Sword of a Thousand Bolts currently stabbed into the hill.

"I have more than one sword at my disposal!" he yelled while yanking at the demon sword. Naturally, it didn't budge at all. If I hadn't been the owner of the sword, he would have been struck by purple lightning and burned to ashes instantly.

"Ngh... Ngaaaaaaaah!"

Dad threw aside his own sword and grabbed Gauddigemon with both hands.

"Hah... It won't come out..."

That was a given.

"...is what you thought, wasn't it?" he asked. "Alas, this is actually how you hold this sword!"

He held the handle of the sword and posed dramatically around it.

"So you wish to know who I am, huh? Are you that desperate to know the name of the king of the Sword of Oblivion?!"

Dad continued acting forcibly. As always, it was clear he wanted me to ask for his name.

Good grief, there's no helping it.

"Who are you?" I asked.

I slowly walked over to him as I spoke.

“Heh.”

Dad smirked as though he had been waiting for those words. What, was he going to say it wasn't worth naming himself again?

No, wait. That face—it was far too smug. He definitely was going to try to outwit me somehow. Was he going to deviate from his usual pattern? He had started with the same words just to change direction midway, preventing me from predicting his script. However, I was already used to my dad's teenage delusions. No matter how many patterns he had, nothing he could say would shake me.

“The dead have no need for names!” he cried.

For a brief instant, his voice overlapped with my father's from two thousand years ago. The words weren't particularly unique, so it was most likely a coincidence. I took another step forwards, troubled as usual by dad's fantasy role-play.

“But you can remember this name as you perish.”

Time felt like it was flowing awfully slow.

“I am the Isith of the Phantom Knights—”

It couldn't be...

I froze, unable to do anything but listen to him intently. Now that I thought about it, I never heard the continuation to those words in the Stars of Creation.

“—Gardelahypt, King of the Oblivion Sword!”

With dad's words, the Sword of a Thousand Bolts suddenly slipped out of the ground—as if returning to the hands of its master.

“Hraaaaaagh!”

He swung the sword with all his might from a large distance away. I continued walking forwards without a care, and so Gauddigemon struck me directly in the head.

“Waaah! Ah... A-Anos?!” dad yelped in a panic. “S-Sorry! I misjudged the distance! But you're not bleeding at all... You're a tough one, huh...”

Graham had said he had passed on—that my father, Ceris Voldigoad, was gone forever. Those who had their heads stolen by the Tseilon bloodline died rather than perished. Their power was stolen until they couldn't use Ingall or Syrica, and then the source remaining in their head was released. That source was reunited with the faint consciousness that was separated from their body and then ascended to heaven, dying forever. There was no revival or rebirth involved, making the death closer to true destruction. That's what it meant to pass on.

Even so, Arcana had once said sources went through the cycle of death and rebirth, changing shapes, changing powers, losing memories.

My father was still here, beside me, as he had always been.

"A-Anos? Are you okay? Does it hurt?"

A single tear rolled down my cheek.

"I was remembering my father," I said.

Dad listened to me, face entirely serious, teenage fantasies far from his mind.

"My father two thousand years ago, Ceris Voldigoad, was a strict but deeply loving man. For the sake of peace, for the sake of my future, he drenched himself in blood and lived a life of pure carnage. In his final moments, he looked back on his life and lamented it."

Dad nodded and listened to my sudden story without interrupting.

"He said he regretted being a strict, unloving, and foolish father."

It was hard to imagine his regret.

"I didn't want to hear him say such a thing. His actions spoke to me far more than any words could have," I said, voice shaking. "He was my pride."

I clenched my fists.

"He died without seeing peace. I find that more pitiful than anything."

Dad placed his hand on my head. He threw his other arm around my shoulders, hugging me tightly.

"Your father was a wonderful person, wasn't he?" he said, looking far more

mature than he normally did. “You know, as your dad, I don’t think your father spent his last moments lamenting his life.”

I questioned him with a look, and he continued.

“You’re here with me now, so I think I know how he felt. I’m sure in my last moments, I wouldn’t be thinking about myself.”

“Then what...?”

“I’d be thinking of you, of course. Your father was lamenting the fact you’d no longer be able to receive his love. He was worried that without him, you wouldn’t be at peace with the world.”

Dad’s words pierced me, hitting deep in my chest more easily than any blade could.

“You really think so?” I asked.

“Probably,” he said, then hurriedly corrected himself. “No, I mean definitely! Absolutely! That’s why from here it’s all up to you.”

He was being unusually serious here.

“I have to live in a way he won’t lament over,” I said.

“That’s right! Besides, I can do all the things your father couldn’t do. We can talk about nonsense, talk about life, and talk about our fantasies,” dad jested, in an attempt to cheer me up. “That way, your father will have a little more peace of mind in heaven.”

“Pfft...” I couldn’t hold my laughter back. “Bwa ha ha!”

“Was it that funny? If you laugh that much, I’ll end up with another wall in my life that I just won’t be able to overcome.”

“Enough nonsense, dad. I said my father lived a life of *carnage*. Do you really think he would want to do the same things as someone buried by walls?”

Dad leaned in as though he was about to whisper a secret. “I know. I’m sure your father would have been buried in the walls of life *with* a look of carnage.”

“Bwa ha ha!”

What a ridiculous topic. Could there be anything more nonsensical than this?

If that father who lived more strictly than anyone could become someone like dad, then there'd be nothing more peaceful in this world.

"Mom should be done with breakfast soon," I said.

"Oh, that's right. I'm sure we'll be having mushroom gratin today."

"Why's that?"

"Because you were feeling down earlier, of course."

So mom saw through me too. There was no beating her.

"All right, let's go home!"

Dad started walking down the hill with his arm still around me.

"Like this?"

"What's wrong with doing it this way every now and then? I've always wanted to walk side by side with my son!"

Good grief. What a helpless father.

"As long as it's only every now and then," I said.

Dad laughed, then looked at the Sword of a Thousand Bolts in his hand.

"Come to think of it, what should I do with this sword? I shouldn't bring it with me, right?"

"It's a memento of my father. I'd like you to keep it, dad."

"You sure? Isn't it important to you?"

"That's what my father would want too."

"I see, I see..." Dad mumbled, smiling happily. "I'll hold on to it, then."

He ruffled my hair with the hand he had thrown around my shoulder. The movements were a little rough, but I could feel the tenderness behind them.

"You've gotten bigger, Anos," he said, as though he actually *was* my father from two thousand years ago. But it was probably just what he felt like saying in the moment.

"But not as big as you yet," I said.

“Ha ha! That’s true!”

Dad laughed happily from the bottom of his heart. Side by side, we unhurriedly made our way down the hill without using any magic—believing this peaceful, silly, and dear time together would continue forever.

While listening to our laughter, I suddenly thought of the small Goddess of Creation. She had said this world wasn’t kind.

The next time I saw her, I had to tell her this: *The world you created is brimming with kindness.*



Afterword

There were several scenes in this volume 8 that I've been dying to write, so I'm glad I was finally able to write them.

The five Stars of Creation were meant to fill the blanks in Anos's memories. I recall struggling quite a lot over this method of conveying information and how to reveal the mystery of it.

Emilia also makes a long-awaited reappearance in this volume. After her growth with the students of the Hero Academy, I wanted to give her a turn with the students of the Demon King Academy, especially as she hadn't had proper contact with the Fan Union since her incident with them. I've always wanted to write how she settled things with them and how they responded, so I'm glad I was able to do that in volume 8.

I know the readers are most interested in what happens to Anos and the other main characters, but I believe every character in this story is living as the main character of their own life, so I wanted to put the spotlight on Emilia and the Demon King Academy students a little.

How do ordinary people like them live while Anos and the gang are fighting grand battles and solving huge mysteries? I believed that writing their development and changes would give the story more depth and make it more interesting. But I couldn't neglect the main characters in the process, so the word count grew higher and higher... As you might have noticed from the size of the books, since each volume has been thicker than the last.

While web novels aren't hindered by word counts, it's a bit of a different matter for published light novels. I was very worried that the thickness would be intimidating for readers to pick up, and regretted not making things a little more succinct.

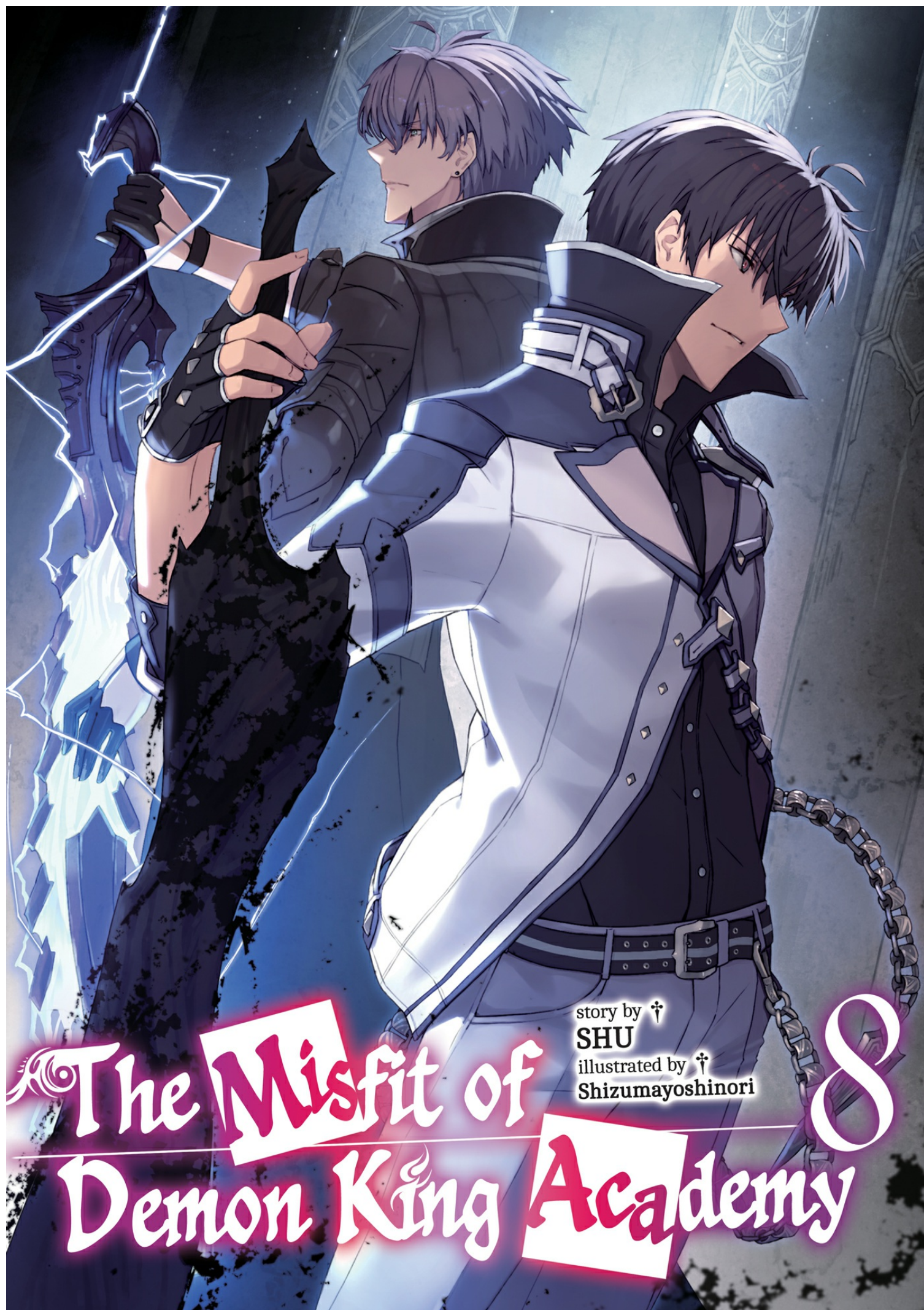
And so, I'm very grateful to Editor Yoshioka for releasing these thick volumes as-is. They may or may not get thicker, but I'll be counting on you again.

I'd also like to give a big thank-you to the illustrator, Shizumayoshinori. The cover illustration of Anos and Ceris is wonderful. Those who have finished reading volume 8 should go back and look at it again—you may just see it in another light. Thank you so much for drawing it.

Finally, to the readers, I thank you all from the bottom of my heart. I'll do my best to bring you another fun volume, so please look forward to it.

SHU

5 August 2020



story by †
SHU
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Shizumayoshinori

The Misfit of Demon King Academy 8





Ceris Voldigoad

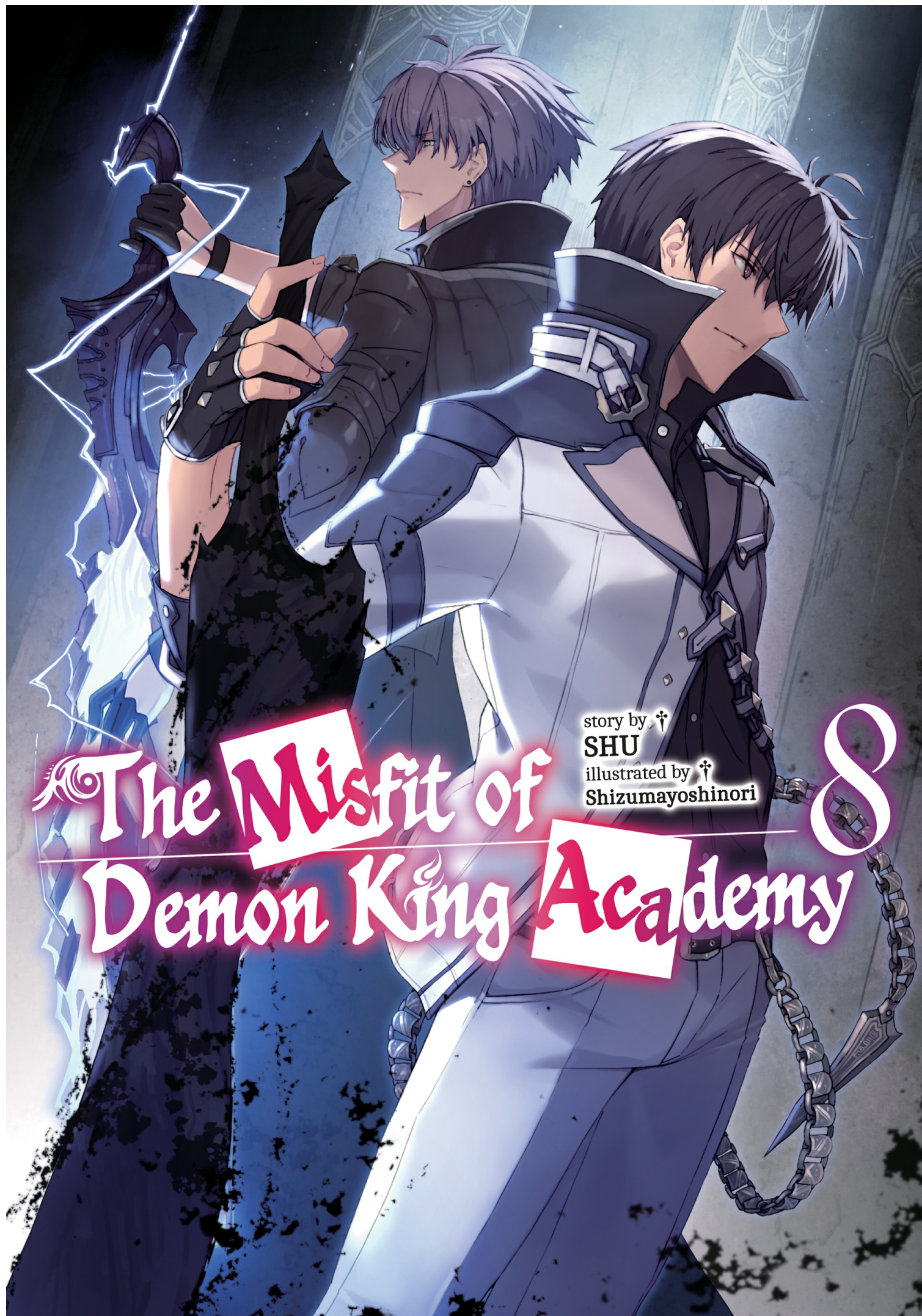
The commander of the Phantom Knights who claims to be Anos's father.

"No," I said, taking one step towards him.
"I will destroy you."

"You cannot destroy me either.
We are similar, Anos."

Anos Voldigoad

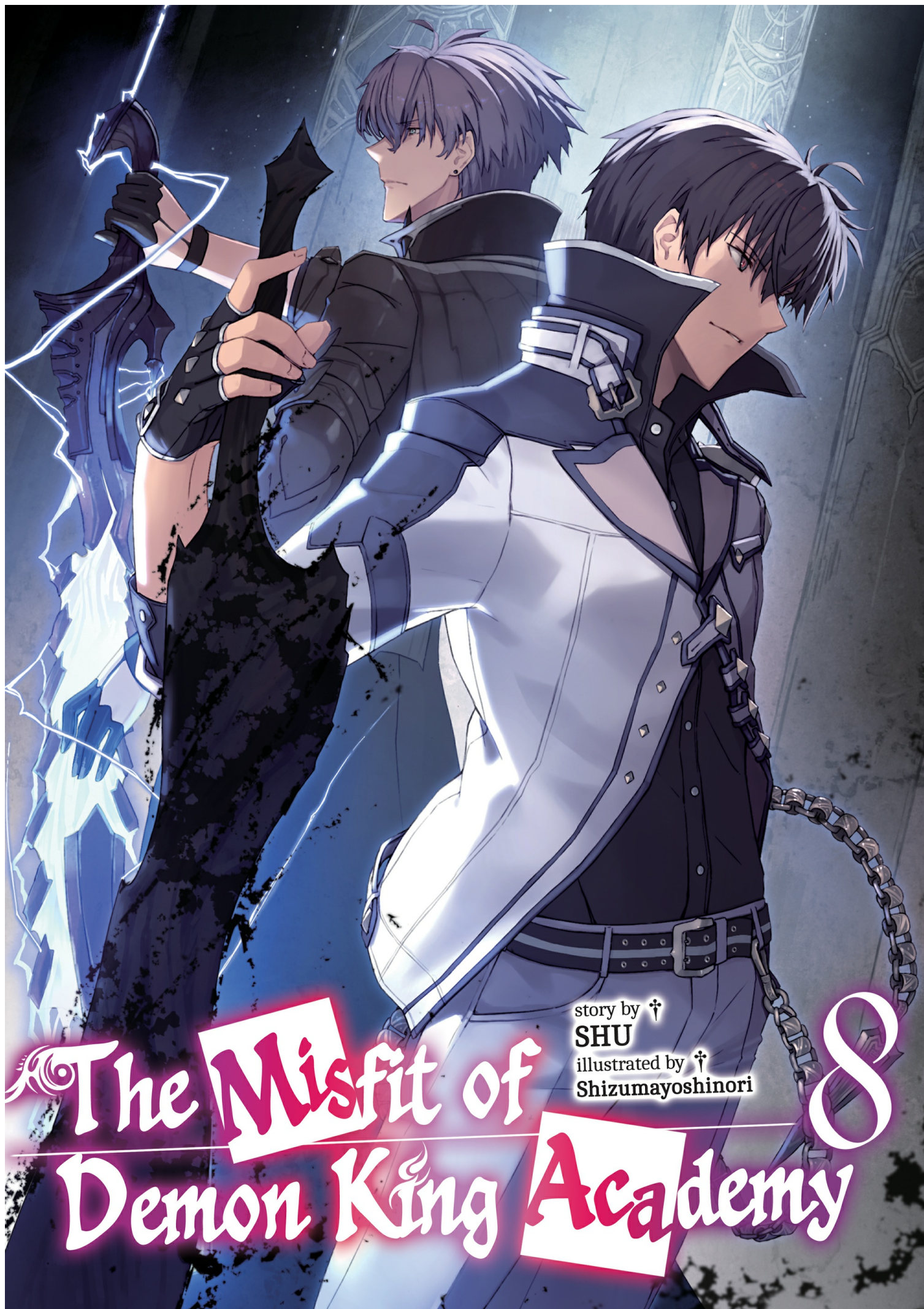
The reincarnation of the man feared as the composed, fearless, indomitable, and confident Demon King of Tyranny.



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story by †
SHU

illustrated by †
Shizumayoshinori



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"Y-You've become strong, Anos. There's nothing left... for me to teach you..."

Gusta

The impetuous but considerate father of Anos's reincarnated form.



Ceris Voldigoad

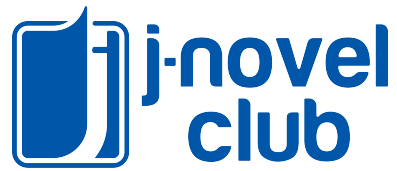
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The Misfit of Demon King Academy: Volume 8

by SHU

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