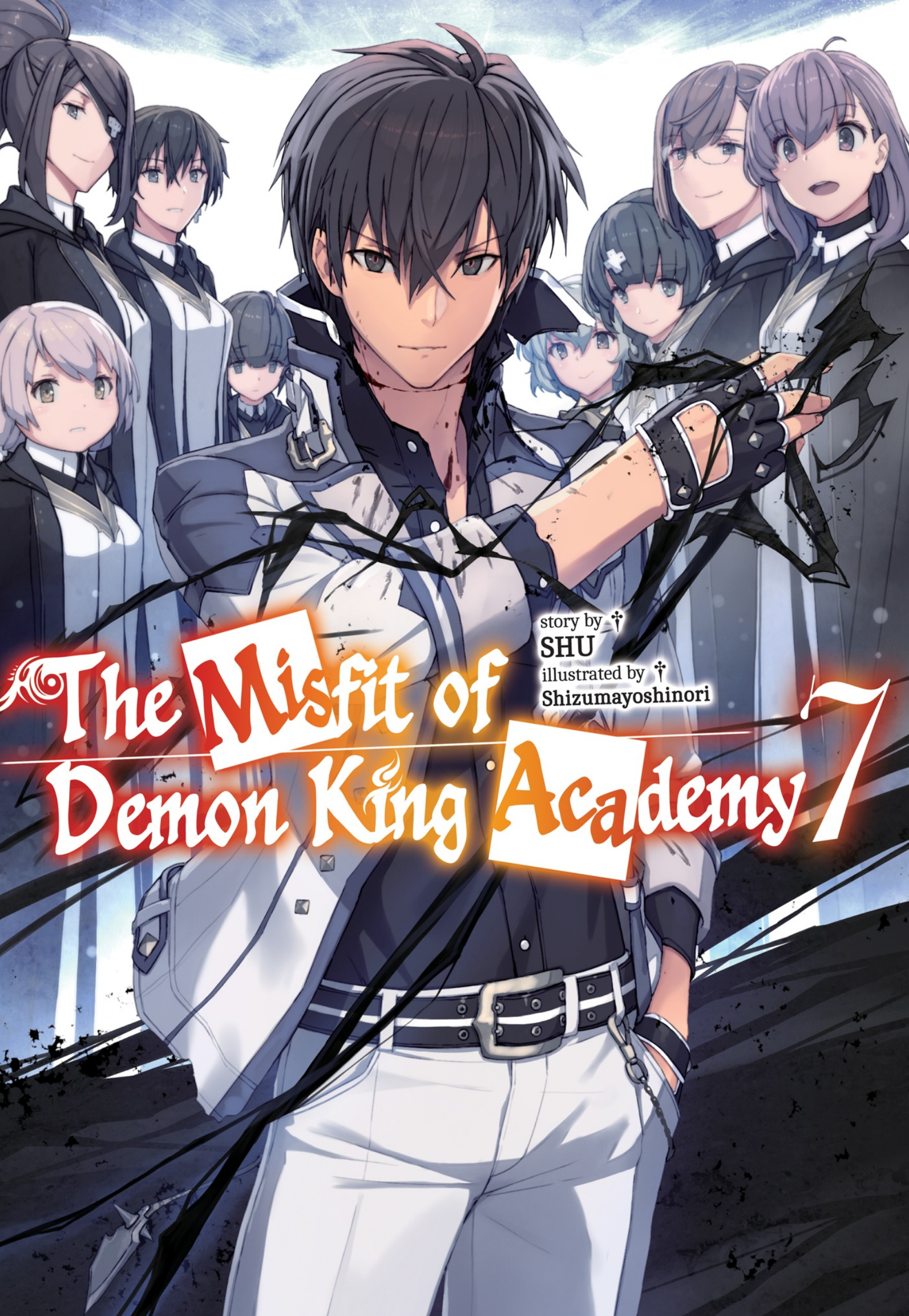
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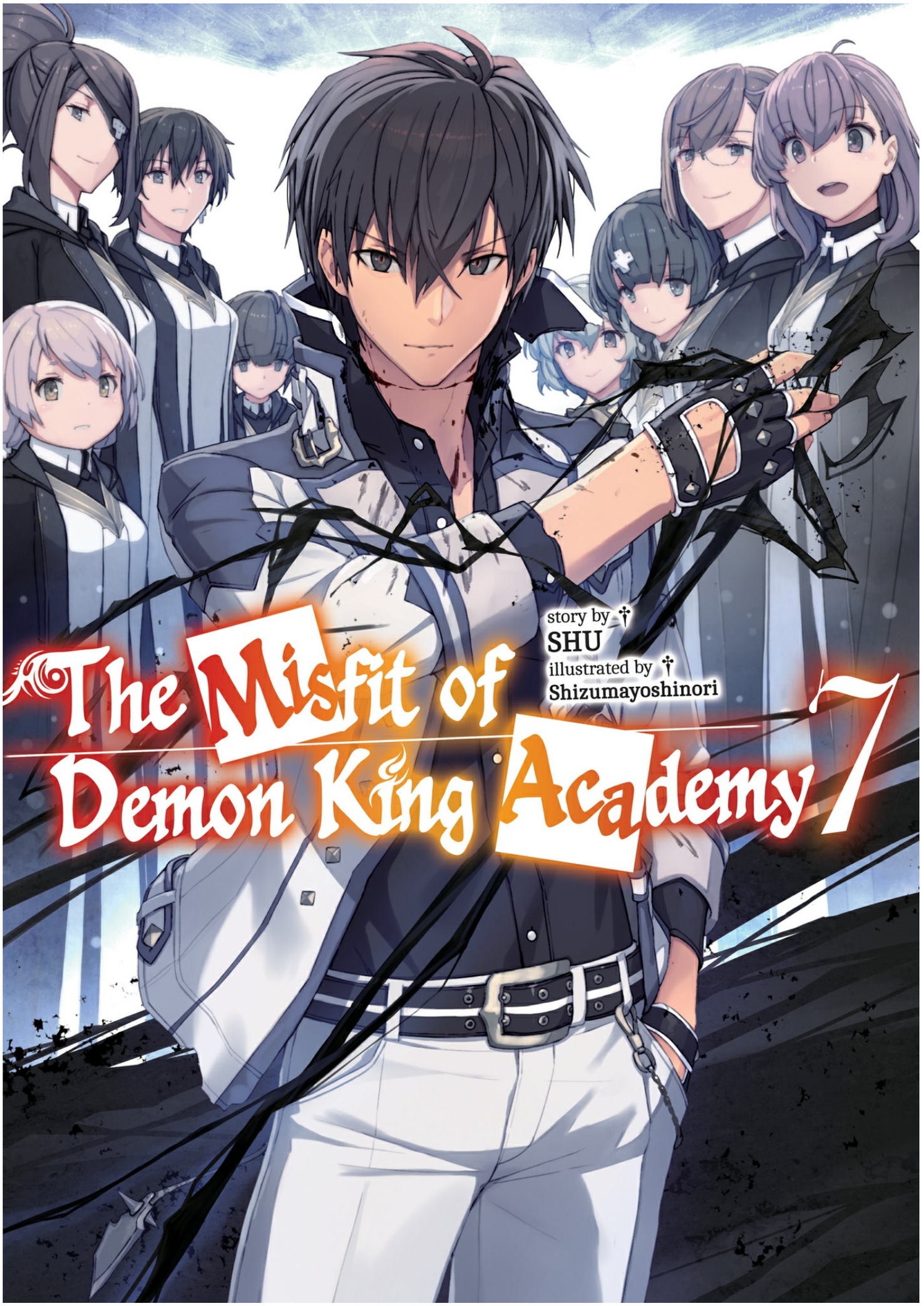
SHU
illustrated by
Shizumayoshinori
The Misfit of Demon King Academy 7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THE MISFIT OF DEMON KING ACADEMY

Keywords

Underground World

An enormous cavern located deep beneath Dilhade and Azesion. It is well governed by the three major nations—Jiordal, Agatha, and Gadeciola—despite their conflicts.

Draconids

Inhabitants of the underground world. They resemble humans and demons, though they are not exactly the same. As the name of their race implies, they are believed to be the descendants of dragons.

The first generation of draconids, born directly from dragons, are known as "dragonborn" and possess far more power than other draconids.

Agatha, Kingdom of the Royal Dragon

One of the three major nations of the underground world. A kingdom of knights ruled by the Sword Emperor-Prophet. Although they worship the same Almighty Radiance as Jiordal, they believe that god resides in each and every person, and this difference in ideology is the cause of their conflict.

Gadeciola, Kingdom of the Supreme Dragon

One of the three major nations of the underground world. A mysterious nation ruled by the Supreme King.

All faith must be discarded upon entering the country, and it is said that those who enter are never allowed outside again.

Phantom Knights

A combat group belonging to Gadeciola formed of fearless demons from the Mythical Age, not draconids. Their activities originally took place aboveground, however...

Velevim, the Sky Pillar Sword

The pillar of order that holds up the thick bedrock that covers the underground world-the dome. Multiples of the same sword exist, and it's said that the loss of any one would lead to the fall of the dome. A vital pillar that supports the underground.

Dragon Core

The special source that becomes the primary source of a dragonborn after a dragon consumes enough sources. This trait causes dragons to actively seek dragon cores, dooming those born as dragon cores to have their lives constantly targeted by dragons.

MISFIT OF DEMON KING ACADEMY

Underground World

Relationship Chart

DILHADE

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.

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

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

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

VISIT-ING

OPPOSING

JIORDAL, KINGDOM OF THE DIVINE DRAGON

RULER

Golroana Delo Jiordal
Pope of the Jiordal Church that worships the god Equis, the Almighty Radiance.

OPPOSING

AGATHA, KINGDOM OF THE ROYAL DRAGON

RULER

Diedrich Kreizen Agatha
The Sword Emperor and Prophet who rules the kingdom of knights.

PRISONER

Ahid Alovo Agartz
Former Cardinal of Jiordal. Currently captured and imprisoned in Agatha.

KNIGHTS OF AGATHA

Nate Anmilion
The powerful commander of the Knights of Agatha.

Sylvia Arbitias
The deputy commander of the Knights of Agatha who was born as a powerful dragonborn.

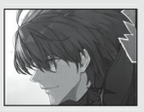
Ricardo Arbitias
A member of the Knights of Agatha, and Sylvia's adoptive father.

OP-POS-ING

GADECIOLA, KINGDOM OF THE SUPREME DRAGON

RULER

Veaflare Wips Gadeciola
The female draconid who rules Gadeciola as its Supreme King.



PHANTOM KNIGHTS

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

Aeges Code
One of the great demons who competed with Anos for power during the Mythical Age. Also known as the Netherworld King.

Kaihilam Jiste
A demon with dual personalities Kaihilam and Jiste. Also known as the Cursed King.

§ Prologue: The First Proxy

A long, long time ago, in the underground world, the first trial was held.

Two people had survived until the end: the Goddess of Creation, and one of the Selected Eight she chose. They stood in the middle of a vast wasteland, where a fierce battle had just concluded. No one else remained on their feet.

A deafening sound rumbled over their heads. The dome was falling—an order of the underground world called a skytremor. Just like how earthquakes occurred in the world aboveground, the sky of the underground world could tremble loudly as well.

The dome slowly sank lower before coming to a stop. The space above the underground world reached half as high as it normally did.

“The judgment has been made,” said a voice. “You have been deemed worthy of the power of the gods, transcendent one chosen by the Goddess of Creation. Become the proxy of the gods and balance the tilted scales.”

A giant glittering set of scales appeared on a hill of the wasteland. Many more scales of various sizes floated in the air around it. They were all tilted to different degrees, but the smaller scales were mostly balanced.

The least balanced of the scales was the giant golden one in the middle. On the left side of the majestic scale was a shield, while on the right, merely the blueprint of a sword, causing the scale to be heavily tilted towards the left.

“Elrolarielm, God of Balance,” the Goddess of Creation called out quietly. “Are you sure that is correct?”

The giant set of scales replied to her. “Order must always be balanced. This is the world you created, the land that values balance.”

“I was wrong.”

“No, order cannot be wrong. There is no right or wrong for us; we merely guide the world to the way it should be.”

“Yet I believe I was wrong. If what you say is true, then whether these feelings of mine are correct or not, something is wrong with me. Your point is illogical, God of Balance,” the Goddess of Creation said. She held out a small hand towards Elrolarielm. “I will stop the Selection Trial and put it to an eternal end.”

“There will be no end. As long as the world exists, order will be maintained. That is the purpose of the Selection Trial.”

“Order that sacrifices lives is not kind.”

“Indeed,” Elrolarielm said. “There is no kindness to order. Lives exist due to order. In the face of order, life and death are trivial. But without balance, the world is fated for ruin.”

The Goddess of Creation closed her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Countless lunar snowdrops fluttered down around them. The Moon of Creation, Altiertonoa, glittered in the sky.

“Your way may save the order, but it will never save the people,” the Goddess of Creation said. “You will fall into a deep sleep along with my order, and this sad trial will finally come to an end.”

Silver light shone upon the golden scales. Altiertonoa descended slowly, engulfing the scales into the moon.

“So foolish,” Elrolarielm said. “You are a fool, Goddess of Creation. You’ve chosen to turn against the order of the world you yourself created”

“You’re right. I was a fool.”

A large mass of magic power left the Goddess of Creation’s body and swallowed both the Moon of Creation and the God of Balance. The scales melted under the power of the moon, their silhouette becoming distorted.

“Without order, the destruction of the world will be inevitable. Lives will be lost, and everything will return to nothingness. Do you intend on remaking it all, Goddess of Creation?” the God of Balance asked.

The Goddess of Creation shook her head slowly. “Even if the scales of order tilt towards ruin, it won’t be destroyed. It just has to last for two thousand years,” she said with conviction.

“Impossible,” Elrolarielm remarked. “Order is not some vague concept. The logic of the gods is absolute. What you speak of is pure speculation.”

The Goddess of Creation nodded. “That’s right. A predetermined tragedy where everything is already decided will only torment the people and hurt the gods. The only salvation is in an unpredictable and uncertain world.”

“Nonsense.”

“I do not wish for anyone else to take the path my little sister took.” The Goddess of Creation walked up the hill. She touched the Moon of Creation that had engulfed the scales, stroking it as though she was comforting her own child. “I’m sorry I couldn’t create kindness in you.”

The Moon of Creation changed shape.

“Farewell.”

The Goddess of Creation’s body began to glow.

Just then, a figure could be seen running up the glowing white hill. The figure held a sword, and as they plunged it straight through the Goddess of Creation’s body, it glinted a deep and vicious purple.

“Guh...”

The Goddess of Creation groaned—her inner glow faded slightly. The sword stabbed through her chest was Gauddigemon, the Sword of a Thousand Bolts. From the blade itself purple lightning flowed, and ate away at her body.

“Transcendent one,” the Goddess of Creation said gently, calling out to the figure who stabbed her. “Who is that you hate? Is it the gods? Is it mankind? Or do you hate the world itself?”

The transcendent one said nothing, only glared at the Goddess’s outstretched hand.

“Erasing me here will not change anything,” the Goddess of Creation continued. “Becoming a proxy of god will not bring you salvation. The powers of the gods will not stop the hatred burning your soul.”

Without batting an eye, the transcendent one pushed the lightning blade further into the Goddess of Creation.

“I extended my hand and chose you because of your hatred... But I was unable to grant you salvation. I was unable to stop you.”

The Goddess of Creation’s body began to turn transparent. Her life was reaching its end.

“However,” she said quietly, as though making her final wish. “One day, at a time that isn’t now, in a place that isn’t here, you will be freed from your hatred.”

A magic circle of light appeared around the Goddess of Creation’s body—the light of reincarnation. To interfere with the magic, the transcendent one channeled purple lightning through the Sword of a Thousand Bolts.

The light of reincarnation flickered.

“You may look down upon me and hurt me all you wish, if it brings you the slightest bit of peace. But remember this.”

Right before her body disintegrated in particles of scattered light, the Goddess of Creation spoke once more. “One day, the Demon King will come, and he will burn your raging hatred into ashes.”

Ignoring the Goddess of Creation’s final words, the transcendent one proceeded, stabbing the Moon of Creation with the Sword of a Thousand Bolts.

Bolts of lightning illuminated the wasteland. The sunken dome slowly started to rise back up, supported by the pillars of order.

Thus, the Selection Trial came to an end, and the underground world’s first proxy of god was born.

§ 1. Demon King Training Suspended

At the Jiorhaze dragon landing site.

All of us gazed up at the dome, now eternalized through the Sword of the Almighty.

“An eternally unchanging barrier,” Sasha murmured. “But we can still cut our way through with Leviangilma, right? Isn’t it a good thing if the draconids have no way of invading the surface anymore?”

“Oh, good point,” Eleonore agreed. “Sounds like there shouldn’t be any problem,” Eleonore agreed.

Just then, the earth overhead trembled. It was a skytremor—the sky was falling down. As the dome approached the ground it rattled loudly.

Misha pointed at the dome. “Anos.”

“Hmm. Some of the dome is falling. Not too large though,” I commented.

“Wait, didn’t the dome just become eternally unchanging?” Sasha asked in a panicked voice.

“The dome isn’t just one slab of rock,” Arcana answered. “The pillars of order merely hold up the pieces in a way that makes it seem so. But every one hundred years, the skytremors disrupt that order. The boulders that rain down as a result are called earthrain. However...”

“It hasn’t been a hundred years, has it?” I asked.

“That’s right.”

At that moment, part of the dome shifted, and a large boulder—positioned right over Jiorhaze—jutted out, threatening to fall at any moment.

Eldmed stared upwards with a look of great interest. “Bwa ha ha! If that falls, this city is done for. An eternalized boulder of that size will crush everything below it.”

“Under normal circumstances, there is leeway between the first skytremors and the first earthrain. The earthrain typically falls seven days after the skytremor,” Arcana explained.

But just as she said that, the skytremor worsened, and the boulder came free from the dome—plummeting straight towards Jiorhaze.

“I-It’s falling!”

“Do we run...?”

Eleonore and Zeshia spoke at the same time.

“Running now would only guarantee Jiorhaze’s destruction.” I held out my hand and Arcana handed me Leviangilma. “*Veneziara*.”

My body started moving in a wave, swaying to and fro. The body of possibilities leaped from the ground and flew towards the falling earthrain.

One flash later, Leviangilma cut through the falling boulders.

Of course, the result was what had occurred. In reality, I never moved from where I stood in Jiorhaze. The falling earthrain was reduced to dust that scattered in the air.

“Looks like things have gotten troublesome,” I said.

Arcana nodded. “The eternal state of the dome has defied the pillars of order.”

Both the skytremor, only meant to occur once a century, and the earthrain, only meant to occur seven days afterwards, had turned against their order and fallen in succession.

“More rain may fall,” Arcana said.

“And if it does, the city won’t survive,” I replied.

Evacuating the city would be difficult without the seven-day grace period.

“This must be because of my sin,” Arcana mumbled, looking downwards. “As the Goddess of Absurdity, this is my fault. I’ve already betrayed you, big brother...”

I patted her head gently. “Making the dome rain down is just a cute prank.

Something this trivial doesn't count as betrayal."

Arcana took a small breath.

"If the Goddess of Absurdity caused this to happen, then there must be a reason for it. Let's figure that out first. Whatever her lies and betrayal involve won't matter once I destroy them."

"Yeah..." she replied quietly, a hint of embarrassment in her voice.

"How's the land aboveground being affected?" I asked.

"On the surface, order is being maintained as normal," Arcana answered. "The blessings of the land haven't changed. Fields can still be tilled, and trees will still bear fruit. But if one tries to dig too deep into the ground, they will be obstructed by eternalized dirt and stone."

So not an immediate cause for concern. But there was no guarantee things would remain that way forever. An abnormality in the skytremors could potentially affect the order aboveground.

"We won't return to the surface then," I concluded. "We'll undo the restrictions on Arcana and return the dome to normal first."

"Are we going to Gadeciola?" Misha asked.

That would indeed be the fastest way to investigate the Goddess of Absurdity.

There was a high chance that Gadeciola's Overlord—and Ceris—knew something about Arcana. While we were there, we could find clues as to what they were plotting, plus retrieve Golroana along the way.

"We'll eventually go to Gadeciola, but our first stop will be Agatha," I said. "We should be able to gain some information from Diedrich's prophecies."

As long as we knew when and where the next earthrain would occur, prevention would be easy. Once the people were safe and we had our information, we could head towards Gadeciola.

"Eldmed, go and inform Bishop Mirano of the earthrain. It should be possible to use magic against the boulders before they fall and gain too much momentum."

“Bwa ha ha! Leave it to me.” Eldmed drew a magic circle and used Gatom.

Mirano would be able to figure out a countermeasure with the Jiordal Church. At worst, they would be able to begin the evacuation process to flee.

“That leaves the students of the Demon King Academy.” I sent a Leaks to the Demon King Castle. “Demon King Anos orders you all to exit the castle within the next ten seconds. Do not be late.”

“Will they make it in ten seconds?” Sasha wondered out loud, right as the door to the castle swung open.

A stampede of footsteps later, panicked students gathered before me. They seemed to be under the impression that I would punish them if they didn’t gather immediately.

“Well done. That was a swift response,” I said to them. “Now, listen to the plan. Though I considered returning to the surface first, the situation has changed. The dome has become eternalized. In short, I’m the only one who can pass through.”

Sensing the seriousness of the situation, the students all listened carefully.

“The songfire you all saw earlier was aimed at Midhaze. The song of the Divine Dragon was part of Jiordal’s fifteen-hundred-year-old spell to eradicate the surface. The magic has been stopped now, but it seems the underground world is much more dangerous than I originally believed.”

The students stirred noisily.

“Eradicate the surface?!”

“That magic earlier was seriously horrifying...”

“I’m more scared of how casually he said he *stopped* the magic...”

They all stared at me in awe and gulped.

“I was planning on resuming Demon King Training lessons, but that won’t be possible anymore. In the worst-case scenario, the underground world will become a battlefield.”

The students trembled in fear.

“Thus, this concludes lessons,” I announced.

The students then sighed in relief.

“Well, I guess there’s a silver lining?”

“I honestly wouldn’t have been surprised if we had all died during Demon King Training...”

“Looks like we’ll be able to go home safe.”

I laughed at their relaxed comments. “Brace yourselves. From here on, all the battles are real.”

“Huh?” the students all said in unison.

“Wouldn’t it be better to send them all back, Lord Anos?” Misa suggested. “It won’t be easy for you to keep an eye on all of them.”

“Don’t be silly. These are future demon lords you’re talking about. They’re not demons that need protection—they’re the demons that protect. They need to experience putting their lives on the line at least once or twice.”

“That may be true, but...” Misa brought her hand to her mouth, deep in thought.

The students all looked towards her and folded their hands in prayer—Jiordal style. It seemed they had actually learned something during this trip.

“Please... Please, Misa...”

“Please convince the Demon King!”

“We’ll do anything you say!”

Their pleading gazes honed in on Misa.

“Even if you look at me like that...” Misa mumbled.

Seeing how troubled she looked, Lay offered his opinion. “War doesn’t wait for you to get stronger first. In a way, they’re quite fortunate—they have us here.”

The students glared at Lay, eyes full of hatred.

“That’s not helping... Damn you, Lay. I mean, Hero Kanon...”

“Are you just going to abandon us for being demons? Are humans the only people you’ll save? Have a heart!”

“We’re your *classmates*! We cheered for you in the Demon Sword Tournament!”

“We’ll spread embarrassing photos of you and Misa throughout the school!”

Lay turned to me and smiled cheerfully. “Look, Anos. It seems they’re raring to go.”

“Hmm. So it seems. I like the looks in their eyes.”

The students fell to their knees.

Well, I couldn’t blame them for wanting to stay safe. But enemies don’t wait for their opponents to be ready. Sometimes, hardship was necessary.

“We will now head for Agatha. The Sword Emperor that leads the nation is a respectable man that should be treated with the utmost courtesy. Thus, you will all prepare a gift for him.”

The students looked at me warily.

“A song and dance.”

§ 2. Knight of Agatha

We flew through the air of the underground world, heading towards Agatha. Those who couldn't fly fast enough rode on dragons of snow created by Arcana. At the speed we were traveling, it wouldn't be long before we arrived.

"Hah!"

"Woo-ooh!"

Standing on the backs of the snow dragons, the male students thrust their fists in and out, over and over again. Female students on other dragons were busy singing along.

"Hah!"

The students thrust their fists out in unison, sweat running down their brows.

"That's not good enough! Put more love into your fists! Punch with gratitude! You're trying to *conquer* the enemy, not just defeat them!"

Ellen, as the lead adviser for the song and dance, was the one yelling. The students had been thrusting their fists in perfect unison for a while now, but she still seemed unhappy with the results.

"I don't get it. What are we meant to do? You've been saying nothing but vague things for a while now!" Ramon whined. The other students looked similarly lost.

"Hmm, how do I explain this..." Ellen said.

"How about you try picturing someone specific in your head?" Jessica suggested.

"Good idea! When you thrust your fist, think of your crush," Nono added.

"All right. Let's try it again from the top!" Ellen nodded in agreement and turned back to the male students. "Listen up, everyone! Picture your crush in your mind. Every thrust of your fist is a thrust towards that person! Got it?"

The male students looked even more confused.

“A crush... Do you normally thrust your fists at a *crush*?”

“I don’t think so... This makes even less sense than before.”

“Right? What if I end up punching them?”

Ellen leaned forward enthusiastically and nodded. “That’s right! That’s exactly right! You can’t use all your strength, or you’ll hurt them. So how should you do it? With tender loving care! Hah!”

She thrust her fist of love out. “Okay, now your turn!”

“Hah!”

Sasha shot their practice a sidelong glance. “Will they really make it in time with such weak posture?”

The class was split into teams for the song and dance lessons, and Team Anos was awaiting their turn.

“It probably would’ve gone smoother if they had more experience,” Lay said.

Sasha turned to him, face sour. “What *kind* of experience...”

Lay grinned without saying anything.

Sasha sighed. “Not everyone is an idiot who flirts all day lo...”

She froze without finishing her sentence. Her gaze was fixed on the cold eyes glaring in their direction.

“All day long, you say? I’d love to hear the details about those experiences, Lay Grandsley.”

Without any warning, Shin had appeared right behind Lay. With his smile frozen on his face, Lay shot Sasha a betrayed look. Sasha looked away like it wasn’t any of her business.

“Experience...in what?” Zeshia asked Misa curiously.

“Aha ha... What indeed...”

“Ah! Misa’s feigning innocence!” Eleonore lifted a finger and poked Misa in the nose.

“Th-That’s not it! It’s just a little early for Zeshia...”

Eleonore giggled. “It’s okay, Zeshia’s a gifted child!”

“That isn’t okay at all...” Sasha pointed out.

“Come on, Zeshia. Think of the person you love and shout!”

Zeshia nodded. She clenched her fists and flew over to me.

“Like this... Hah!”

I caught easily the fist she thrust out. “A good punch. I’m sure the Sword Emperor of Agatha will like it too.”

“Zeshia is good at punching...” She smugly threw out two more punches.

How adorable.

“Want to practice the choreography?” Misha asked Sasha with a tilt of her head.

“Hmm... I don’t mind practicing, but I’d rather be in the woo-ooh group.”

“There’s also the singing group.”

“Absolutely not! Anything but that,” Sasha replied.

Misha blinked. “But you’re good at singing.”

“Oh?” I said. “I didn’t know that. Sing something.”

“Huh?!” Sasha yelped in shock. “You want me to sing those lyrics? *Those lyrics*?! Is that an order?”

“If you don’t want to, it’s fine. I just wanted to hear your singing voice.”

At that, Sasha suddenly blushed and turned away. “Which verse?” she asked quietly.

“You can sing whatever you want.”

“Then...” Sasha came up to me and placed her mouth by my ear. In a whisper, she sang: “Don’t open the door...”

She shot me a little nervous glance. “Don’t open the door...”

Her head turned downwards. Red spread across her cheeks. Her singing voice

was quiet but heartfelt.

“Don’t open...” She tore her gaze off me and forced her voice out in a mumble. “The forbidden door...”

Misha clapped along. “Woo-ooh.”

Hmm. Not bad. Good enough to sing in front of others. She just needs a little more confidence.

“Sasha is good,” Misha said, clapping politely.

“Your woo-ooh wasn’t bad either,” I commented.

Misha smiled bashfully.

“Maybe I should sing too,” Lay said, having flown towards us to get away from Shin.

“It’d be better for all the boys to do the dance. There’s no time to figure out how to harmonize with the choir,” I said.

“In that case, maybe a martial arts dance would be interesting,” Lay replied.

“Oh?” I said. “That’s a good idea.”

If Shin and Lay were performing, even an impromptu dance wouldn’t be a problem. The flashier their moves, the more extravagant the show would be.

“If the student dance works out well, we can give it a try,” I said.

“Big brother,” Arcana called, looking back at us. She had flown to the lead while the rest of us were talking. “There’s a flight of dragons in front of us. They’re attacking a draconid.”

I looked down with my Magic Eyes and saw quite a number of dragons below us. They had surrounded a young man in red knight armor.

“That’s the official uniform of the knights of Agatha,” she added.

Indeed, when I met Diedrich, he was wearing a similar suit of armor.

“That draconid is pretty strong, isn’t he?” Sasha asked.

The young man was fighting off dragon after dragon—slashing at them with his sword, kicking their heads, breathing frost at them, and evading their

attacks. He seemed quite used to dealing with dragons.

“It doesn’t seem like he’s trying to kill them,” Sasha commented. “What’s he planning?”

The young man was clearly trying to avoid dealing a fatal wound on the dragons. With his abilities, it should have been easy for him to break through the encirclement.

“The dragon flights near Agatha are led by an alpha dragon,” Arcana remarked. “He’s probably trying to lure it out.”

As soon as Arcana said that, the ground exploded apart, and out of the chaos, a black dragon with two horns and sleek wings appeared. Its huge body was larger than any other dragon in the group.

“Is that the alpha dragon?” I asked.

“Yes,” Arcana replied.

The young man drew a magic circle around his sword and murmured, “*Prethz Gaguna.”*

A god descended into the sword, and at once the blade both turned red and became larger. The knight swung the now-giant sword at the approaching alpha dragon.

Just then, blood spilled from the corner of the knight’s mouth. He covered his mouth and coughed, hacking up more blood.

Was he previously injured? No—his magic is decreasing too dramatically for that.

“Hmm. He’s going to die at that rate,” I said.

As the strength drained from the young man, his grip on his greatsword weakened considerably. It was as though he had lost control of his body.

Meanwhile, the alpha dragon was almost upon him.

“GROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!”

With a deafening roar, the dragon opened its jaws. Ferocious fangs closed around the knight of Agatha. The head of the alpha dragon crashed into the

ground, sending a cloud of dirt up into the air.

But it failed to swallow the young man; at the last possible moment, I had grabbed his body and rescued him from the mouth of the dragon.

“Can you move?” I asked him.

“Thank you for saving me, but it seems my body won’t listen to me. Please leave me here and run,” the young knight pleaded. “That is an alpha dragon—a fearful variant dragon stronger than any flight...”

The alpha dragon roared over the knight’s words and lunged towards us.

“Now go! I will buy time for you—” The knight’s eyes widened.

I was running straight for the alpha dragon.

“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

The dragon opened its mouth and breathed a jet-black flame. I ran up to its chest to avoid it, then sunk my fingers into its front leg. With a secure grip, I lifted the giant alpha dragon into the air.

The young knight’s eyes widened even further. “Wha... What power...”

I slammed the dragon back into the ground.

“Use this sword, traveler!”

The young man mustered the little strength he had left to lift his greatsword and try to toss it to me. But midway he started coughing blood and fell to his knees. His greatsword slipped out of his hands entirely and flew in another direction.

“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

The dragon’s dark breath struck the sword, sending it flying even farther away.

“Kuh!” The young man pulled another sword out of a storage circle and began to pour magic into it.

“Don’t,” I told the knight. “You’ll die if you use any more magic now.”

“But the scales of the black alpha dragon can only be pierced by a sword with

Gaguna—”

The knight’s jaw dropped midsentence. His shocked gaze was fixed on me and, more specifically, my Vebzud-covered fingertips, fully pierced inside the fallen alpha dragon.

Scales that were said to only be affected by a sword with Gaguna crumbled apart under my hand, allowing my fingers to pass its skin and flesh. I grabbed the dragon’s source and crushed it.

With a final dying scream, the alpha dragon perished.

“What? The black alpha dragon died... In a single hit...?”

The young knight looked at me with pure astonishment.

§ 3. Alpha Dragon Elixir

With the leader of the dragons dead, the remaining dragons scattered like startled spiders.

“Can you stand?” I asked, offering the young knight a hand.

He grabbed my hand and sat up. His complexion looked a little better than before.

“Many thanks, kind sir. I am Ricardo Arbitias, a knight of the Agatha Guards. May I ask for your name?”

“It’s Anos Voldigoad.”

“Sir Anos, the way you defeated the black alpha dragon without the use of divine powers was simply astonishing. Could you possibly be a dragonborn?”

In the underground world, those with abnormal levels of power were assumed to be either gods or dragonborn.

“I’m not a draconid, I’m a demon from aboveground,” I said, pointing at the dome.

“Aboveground...” Ricardo repeated, looking surprised. But he quickly pulled himself together and asked, “Meaning Dilhade?”

Unlike Jiordal, it seemed that Agatha’s people were aware of the world aboveground.

“Yes, that’s where I came from.”

“It was foretold in an Agathan prophecy that heroes who respect the path of chivalry will visit this world from above. It is an honor to meet you, Sir Anos.”

“I don’t know if we’re the ones your prophecy speaks of, but it’s a pleasure to meet such a gallant knight like yourself.”

I exchanged a proper handshake with Ricardo. “If I may ask, why were you trying to lure the alpha dragon out? With your strength, you should have been

able to run before that dragon appeared.”

Ricardo nodded with a grim look. “The truth is, my daughter is sick.”

“Oh?”

“Her treatment requires a rare dragon pearl produced within the body of the alpha dragon. The pearl is a required ingredient for an elixir effective against her illness. That’s why I have been here for quite a while, fighting.” He smiled wryly to himself. “But it seems I was in over my head. If you hadn’t passed by, I would have lost my life.”

“Then you better grab the pearl and make that elixir soon.”

Ricardo looked at me in confusion. “I cannot do that, Sir Anos. You were the one who defeated the alpha dragon. The dragon pearl has immense value. It can be used to craft various magic tools and, if sold, can fetch a steep price. If you are unfamiliar with its uses, I will gladly impart my knowledge as a thank you for saving my life.”

He was willing to give up the material he had risked his life trying to obtain.

What an honorable man.

“There’s no need for that,” I said. “I have no use for it.”

“I cannot act against the path of chivalry. I’m sure you will find a use for it someday.”

The path of chivalry, huh? This man was too honest for his own good.

“In that case, hear me out. I have a certain goal in mind. I will tell you what my goal is, and you can tell me if this dragon pearl can achieve it.”

“Of course,” Ricardo replied. “Please, do speak.”

“I wish to change this brutal world into one where honesty and honor is rewarded. I cannot bear to watch honest people be treated like fools.”

Ricardo gasped—he had caught on to the true meaning of my words.

“So what would be the best way of using the pearl?” I asked.

He bowed his head low with sincerity. “I cannot thank you enough. I will definitely repay you for this.”

Just then, a voice yelled overhead. “Cani! Where are you going?! Stop moving!”

An odd sound could be heard along with Naya’s yells. The alpha dragon’s body shrank until it was the size of a small ball.

“Krrroo!”

The cute chirping sound belonged to Cannibal. At the same time, the shrunken body of the alpha dragon vanished.

“Cani!”

“Krrr?”

At Naya’s call, a tiny dragon appeared where the alpha dragon had been. It licked its lips as though it had just finished a meal.

“Hmm. Did you eat the alpha dragon, Cannibal?” I asked.

“Kree?” Cannibal chirped sweetly.

The peculiar sound just now appeared to have Cannibal’s power embedded in it. Was it a side effect of eating the Divine Dragon?

“C-Cani! Lord Anos is in the middle of a conversation! Don’t interrupt him!” Naya cried, descending to the ground. She grabbed Cannibal and bowed her head. “I’m so sorry for the trouble!”

She quickly returned to where the snow dragon was waiting for her.

“My apologies. That was a student from my academy and her summoned dragon.”

“Not at all... It was your dragon to begin with...” Ricardo mumbled.

Despite his words, he was glum. He was willing to risk his life to defeat this dragon—his daughter’s illness had to be severe.

“I agreed to yield it to you, so I will take responsibility for this. Will you allow me to examine your daughter’s illness?” I asked Ricardo.

“Sure, I wouldn’t mind that, but...”

“This isn’t just lip service. Aboveground, healing magic is quite advanced, and

I myself am experienced in using it. If she can be cured with an elixir, magic may have an effect too."

Ricardo looked grateful for the offer and bowed his head deeply. "I cannot thank you enough. Would you please take a look at her?"

"Where is your daughter now?"

"She's in the capital of Agatha, Agarofione."

"That just so happens to be our destination too. Will you lead the way?"

Ricardo nodded and cast Fless on himself.

"How's your body? We can provide a snow dragon for you to ride," I offered.

"I appreciate the concern, but there won't be an issue."

Ricardo flew up into the air. He indeed appeared to be fine.

I flew up into the air after him and met up with the others.

"I am Ricardo Arbitias, knight of the Guards of Agatha. I thank you for your assistance, heroes from the world above. Thanks to Sir Anos's kindness, I will be traveling with you to Agarofione. It is an honor to make your acquaintance!"

After giving the Demon King Academy students his sincere introduction, Ricardo flew to the front to lead the way. I explained the situation to Sasha and the others as we followed his lead.

Eventually, a city surrounded by swords came into view.

Like a great defensive wall, gigantic swords were stabbed into the ground in a closely packed ring. In the center of the city stood a castle, surrounded by rows of shops and residential buildings. The streets were full of people.

"The dragon landing site is over here," Ricardo said, leading us down slowly.

Once we landed, I turned to the Demon King Academy students. "I have some business to attend to, but this city is safe. Continue your song and dance practice here."

I then looked at Shin. "I'm leaving things to you."

“As you wish, my liege.”

I turned back to Ricardo.

“This way,” he said.

I started walking after him. Misha, Sasha, and Arcana followed us.

“Can we go with you?” Misha asked.

“What about practice?” I replied.

“I’ve already got it down perfectly. The moment I cast aside my dignity, it was a piece of cake,” Sasha said smugly.

“Oh? You conquered your shame rather fast,” I remarked. “You’ve always seemed rather opposed to the Fan Union’s songs. What changed your mind?”

“N-Nothing in particular. I just pulled myself together!”

“I see. Shyness and shame reside in the heart. You must have overcome those emotions with an even stronger heart.”

“You don’t need to analyze me so seriously...” Sasha muttered.

“Am I wrong?”

“Is it because you’ve already done the most embarrassing thing?” Misha asked.

Sasha immediately turned red. “Wh-What are you saying?!”

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Misha responded.

“That’s... W-Well... In that case, you should do it too, Misha!” Sasha spluttered.

Hmm. The conversation seemed completely incoherent. Misha was tilting her head in confusion too.

“Don’t open the door...” Misha started singing.

“Why are you singing at me?!” Sasha exclaimed.

“You told me to do it.”

Sasha pointed at me. “Sing that way! At Anos!”

“Well, as long as you’ve both prepared, I don’t mind,” I said. “Follow me.”

We started walking, Sasha still grumbling under her breath. We left the dragon landing site and proceeded down the streets of Agarofione, observing the townscape as we went.

“Unlike Jiorhaze, I don’t see any churches here,” Sasha commented.

“There are no priests either,” Misha added.

“Agatha is a kingdom of knights ruled by the Sword Emperor,” Arcana explained. “These people pray with their swords. They believe that the salvation of god will only visit those who carve open their own path.”

Ricardo turned back at their conversation. “For a visitor from the world above, you are very knowledgeable.”

“I am a god of the underground world,” Arcana said. “His Selection God.”

“A Selection God,” Ricardo repeated. “I can indeed feel a strong aura coming from you. I welcome you to Agatha from the bottom of my heart, Selection God.”

Ricardo bowed his head deeply and resumed walking. It seemed he wasn’t interested in prying about my status as one of the Selected Eight.

Influenced by Arcana’s earlier statement, Ricardo began to talk about Agatha. “There is an ancient teaching in Agatha: one life, one sword, one wish. Your life is your sword, and you use it to accomplish one wish. There will be a time in our lives where we must fight as if our very lives depend on it. We train our bodies and refine our swords in preparation for that day. By doing so, we hone our lives, and the Almighty Radiance resides in that life. Thus, the people of Agatha are all knights, and we all carry the brilliance of the Almighty Radiance.”

“I see. So you believe the brilliance of life is god.”

“Yes. God is always here with us,” Ricardo said, placing a hand over his heart. “That is why we have nothing to fear. So in fact, we are gods as well, and thus can face anything with our entire body and soul. This is the foundation of Agatha and the most important teaching of all. It is also our pride.”

He smiled warmly. “That being said, Agatha’s dogma directly contradict

Jiordal's ideas of worship, so we are mutually opposed..."

Though the nations of Agatha and Jiordal both believed in god, their respective teachings manifested that belief in entirely different forms.

Compared to the people of Jiordal, who did nothing but pray, I found Agatha's belief that each and every person was god quite refreshing. But it made sense why the two kingdoms didn't get along.

"It's this way," Ricardo said, stopping before a large gate.

The soldier nearby took one look at Ricardo and promptly opened the gate.

"This is the Agarofione Sword Emperor Palace. Agatha's Sword Emperor Diedrich conducts all his official affairs here."

"Oh? I didn't think your daughter would be in the palace," I said.

"My apologies, I should have explained earlier," Ricardo said. We went through the gate and entered the palace. "My daughter is a retainer of King Diedrich. She is a dragonborn of the Royal Dragon, and one of the two Dragon Knights of Agatha."

§ 4. Fatal Illness

Agarofione Sword Emperor Palace.

Ricardo led us to a spacious room on the upper floor, one decorated with a luxurious rug and table, among other furnishings. In a large bed at the center of the room lay a girl, sleeping, bangles encircling her arms. They appeared to be some kind of magic tool.

“Mm...”

The girl stirred at the sound of us entering and slowly turned in our direction. Her long red hair reflected the ambient room light and framed her elegant face. She gazed at us curiously.

“I’ve returned, Sylvia,” Ricardo said, a gentle look in his eyes.

“Welcome back, father. Who are the guests?” she asked. For someone who had just woken up, her tone was remarkably clear. “They’re visitors from the world aboveground. I was unable to obtain the elixir today, but this man said he may be able to heal your illness.” Ricardo gestured at me with a hand. “This is Sir Anos Voldigoad.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said.

In response, Sylvia sat up in bed and bowed her head politely. “Thank you for coming all the way here. I am King Diedrich’s retainer, Dragon Knight Sylvia Arbitias. The pleasure is all mine.”

She offered a handshake, and while I accepted, I observed her with my Magic Eyes.

The flow of her magic was stagnant. As predicted, her illness was rather severe.

“I apologize, my explanation was lacking,” Ricardo said, “My daughter is afflicted with an illness called draconic deficiency, and it involves—”

“Magic leaking out of the body, in the manner of an open hole in a vessel,

eventually leading to death," I answered. "The bangles around her arms are to seal the magic from escaping her source, but they cannot keep it fully contained."

Ricardo looked surprised. "Does the same illness exist aboveground?"

"No, I just examined her now. The illness seems to be caused by an organ unique to dragonborn." I peered into the abyss of her illness. "Hmm. A part of her magic organ is functioning out of control. That appears to be what's causing it."

Ricardo exhaled in astonishment. "What? You analyzed the symptoms and cause of draconic deficiency in mere seconds?"

"If her magic organ is treated, her draconic deficiency will be cured."

"It can be treated?" Sylvia asked hesitantly.

"That won't be a problem."

"B-But Sir Anos, draconic deficiency is an illness that cannot be cured even with the power of the Keeper of Restoration. With the exception of the alpha dragon elixir, nothing magical has any effect," Ricardo said.

"But even the alpha dragon elixir isn't a cure; it only eases the symptoms and prevents the illness from progressing. Am I correct?"

Ricardo nodded shamefully.

"Y-Yes, that is correct. The elixir's effects lasts for a year, so long as the user doesn't perform any major spells. Otherwise, the symptoms will worsen again."

"Then in all likelihood, this alpha dragon elixir is essentially a poison. It paralyzes part of the magic organ that just so happens to coincide with the part that functions out of control, and as a result, it suppresses the symptoms of dragon deficiency."

I drew a magic circle on Sylvia's body. "The reason the Keeper of Restoration cannot cure dragon deficiency is because it perceives nothing wrong with how the magic organ functions. Gods are order—they can restore what's broken, but they will not change what is in accordance with order."

"So it's normal for the magic organ to be out of control?" Sylvia asked, looking

utterly bewildered.

“Perhaps it would be simpler for me to say the magic organ has grown too much. The organ itself is normal, it’s just too powerful for the body to keep up.”

“I see...”

“And one more thing. The source holds the memories of the body, and those memories are unable to be overwritten. The cause of the illness is located there, but the Keeper of Restoration cannot interfere with the source.”

With a faint look of hope, Ricardo asked hesitantly, “What can be done about that?”

“Only the afflicted area needs to be removed. But the pain will be more agonizing than death. Are you prepared for that?”

“Yes,” Sylvia said firmly. “I am a knight. I will endure however much pain is necessary. Please do it.”

“I like your way of thinking,” I replied. “Don’t worry, it will only hurt for a moment.”

I cast Vebzud over my right hand and sunk it into Sylvia’s chest.

“Agh... Ugh...”

I focused my Magic Eyes on the center of the illness and took aim. It was hard to make a general statement when magic was involved, but the affected area was approximately one billionth the size of a heart. The afflicted area I sought to remove was at the very center of the magical organ. If I slipped here, I could potentially remove too much of the source and cause unwanted aftereffects.

I carefully moved my fingertips and split the source into two. Upon excising the afflicted area, I immediately rejoined the two pieces back.

Sylvia screamed at the top of her lungs. “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

She fell unconscious as I removed my hand. I healed the hole in her chest with Ei Chael while Ricardo watched on, expression deeply worried.

“It’s a success,” I said. “The source was wounded in the process, but it will recover normally. She should wake up in a few hours.”

I sent magic into my fingertips to remove Sylvia's bangles. The magic that, before, would have simply seeped out of her without them now safely circulated through her body.

"Ooh! This is... This is...!"

With tears in his eyes, Ricardo bowed his head deeply. "This is a miracle. I cannot thank you enough."

"Raise your head. I was merely making amends for ruining your elixir. There's nothing to thank me for."

At the back of the group, Sasha smiled proudly, while Misha watched me with a warm gaze.

"I cannot accept that," Ricardo insisted. "You have saved my daughter's life, thus you may ask anything of me that you wish. I will repay this favor no matter what it takes—"

Ricardo cut off and suddenly collapsed. I reached out and managed to catch him before he fell.

"Gah! Agh... Kah..." Ricardo was beset by hacking, painful coughs. Blood spilled from his lips.

"Hmm. Come to think of it, you've been looking unwell for a while now," I said.

"A soft bed," Misha said, creating a bed with Iris.

I then laid Ricardo onto the bed. Through eyes glazed with pain, he looked at me. "My apologies for the trouble..."

"I assumed you were injured, but it seems you're afflicted with an illness of your own," I commented. "I may as well heal you too."

"No, there's no need for that. I'm not ill. I'm simply at the end of my lifespan."

"You don't look that old to me."

"Very rarely, some draconids are born with reduced lifespans. We age at an accelerated speed, so despite my appearance, I'm considered quite elderly. My life could end at any moment now and it wouldn't be a surprise."

“Allow me to examine you anyway. I may be able to ease your pain.”

I used my Eyes to scan his body for the cause. At a glance, the only issue I could see was just plain old age.

“You shouldn’t have fought those dragons with this body,” I finally said. “You really are at the end of your lifespan.”

He must have used magic to force himself to move.

“If possible, I’d like you to tell me something, Sir Anos...”

“What do you wish to know?”

“Do you think I will live for one more week?”

“It’s hard to say. Is there something going on?”

“Have you heard of the Royal Dragon before, Sir Anos?”

The dragon Ahid stole, huh?

“The Royal Dragon that consumed sources to give birth to the dragonborn, correct?”

Ricardo nodded. “If I am still alive by next week, I can sacrifice my source to the Royal Dragon. My ailing body can contribute to the new dragonborn and become the sword that will protect Agatha. I can become the foundation that supports this kingdom...”

Even at death’s door, all he wanted was for his nation to prosper. Ricardo was truly the ideal knight.

“What did Diedrich say?” I asked.

Naphta would have been able to see Ricardo’s future, so Diedrich should know how this man would end up.

“The Prophet can see everything, but he does not make prophecies about everything he sees. It has been decided that particularly bad prophecies will not be spoken of.”

“Why not?”

“The people of Agatha believe the prophecies wholeheartedly. If they are

made aware of their death, they accordingly lose the will to live. Conveying bad prophecies can lead to early deaths and miserable lives. The Sword Emperor has said that knowing the future and feeling despair come hand in hand."

He had a fair point. Hearing a good prophecy was fine, but hearing a bad one would permanently change the future for the worse. Diedrich knew that holding his silence would lead to the best possible fate.

"In that case, your ignorance of any prophecies concerning you might have actually saved your life."

Ricardo looked at me in question. "Saved...?"

"Ageworm disease. Two thousand years ago, this disease spread through the world aboveground. At a glance, the victims all appeared to die of old age. But the actual cause of death was the ageworm, a parasite that latches onto defenseless newborns and alters their magic."

Since the parasite's sole target was newborns, people were misled into concluding that only certain people had reduced lifespans.

"Ageworms are shapeless worms of magic. They assimilate to the magic of their host during the host's infancy and become so well integrated that they're undetectable. But it's almost impossible for this magic worm to develop naturally."

"By which you mean...?"

"Someone must have created them with magic."

However, we were never able to confirm this in Dilhade. No caster was ever found.

And since Diedrich hadn't prevented its creation, the ageworm had to predate his pact with Naphta. It was possible that the same person who created the ageworms in Dilhade two thousand years ago was the same person who brought them underground.

Naphta's order meant she could only see the future—she probably wasn't even able to see much of her own past. She might have been able to see me mention ageworm disease at this time and place, but had been unable to take

measures against it. Calling it a reduced lifespan had most likely been their best option.

“At any rate, there is a form of treatment.”

I drew the magic circle for Wazwath over Ricardo, and in no time at all, the ageworm lurking in his body disappeared. The accelerated aging would no longer continue.

“Have I been cured...?”

“Of the disease, yes. I will now reverse your body’s aging to a previous state. I’ll have to briefly read your memories.”

I drew another magic circle and used Liknos.

“My memories? What am I required to do?” Ricardo asked.

“Just answer my questions however you wish. Let’s see. How about Sylvia? She’s a dragonborn, correct? So she isn’t your biological daughter.”

Ricardo nodded. “Dragonborn come from the Royal Dragon, so at birth they are born parentless. Thus, a foster parent is arranged to raise them. Sylvia and I first met eighteen years ago, when I was ordered by the Sword Emperor to raise her as a Dragon Knight.”

Memories of that time flowed into my mind. *Eighteen years should be a good point of origin.* I drew a magic circle over Ricardo’s body and with Rivide, rewound the time of his body.

In short, I made him younger.

“It’s over. Try standing up.”

Ricardo got to his feet as ordered. He moved and stretched his limbs in disbelief.

“It’s like time has rewound,” Ricardo marveled out loud. “No, my body feels even lighter than before.”

“That’s because you’re now able to use the magic the ageworm had been consuming all this time,” I explained. “You have the same lifespan as any other draconid now—you can protect Agatha with your own two hands.”

Ricardo looked at me with deep gratitude. “I can’t thank you enough... You’ve done so much for not only my daughter but for me as well... If there’s *anything* I can do for you in return, please, just say the word.”

He bowed his head low.

“Don’t worry about it. It was nothing.”

I canceled our Liknos, but just before the connection cut off, Ricardo’s inner voice reached me.

With this, I can safely sacrifice myself to the Royal Dragon.

§ 5. Visiting the Dragon Knights

“Come to think of it, is Diedrich available for an audience?” I asked. I made no comment on Ricardo’s inner voice.

“Of course,” Ricardo replied. “However, he’s gone out today to greet some important guests. I believe he should be back before it gets dark. Would you like to wait until then?”

Ricardo would sacrifice himself to the Royal Dragon in one week—there was still time to deal with that. Understanding the culture of this kingdom came first.

“In that case, we will come back to visit tonight. If I could ask one more question: what does the Royal Dragon mean to Agatha?”

“The Royal Dragon is one of the prophecies taught in Agatha. Through the sacrifice of many draconid lives, the Royal Dragon shall give birth to the dragonborn hero who will save the nation.”

“It doesn’t seem so peaceful to offer living sacrifices,” I remarked.

Ricardo nodded in agreement. “It is exactly as you say. But the sacrifices to the Royal Dragon give hope to those with no future. Only those terminally ill or with reduced lifespans—or those that have committed unforgivable crimes—qualify to be sacrificed. We do not indiscriminately sacrifice people to the Royal Dragon.”

“If the dragonborn are considered heroes of this nation, does that also apply to her?” I asked, glancing at Sylvia.

“Yes. The Dragon Knights of Agatha are the unbreakable swords that support this kingdom. When the inevitable doomsday arrives, the Dragon Knights will protect the nation with their indomitable power.”

“Is Diedrich the one who made that prophecy?”

“No, that would be the founding Sword Emperor of Agatha. This specific

prophecy was passed down through the generations and is now considered the standard teaching for us knights of Agatha."

Ricardo slowly walked over to the bed to gaze at his sleeping daughter. "When the time comes for the dragonborn to protect the nation, it is our duty as knights to protect *them.* Only then will there be peace in Agatha."

"What's doomsday?"

"Doomsday is another prophecy that has been passed down through time. It's believed that it doesn't refer to a specific day, but rather everything that threatens Agatha. It's possible that King Diedrich can see the day it will arrive, but there's no way for the rest of us to know."

He clenched his fists and turned to me, his eyes resolute. "However, as a knight of Agatha in these troubling times, we must always be prepared for anything. No matter what hardships befall this nation, we will stand up with one life, one sword, one wish."

His entire body exuded a firm conviction.

"As knights and swords of this kingdom, we will do what is required of us. And that duty includes the dragonborn."

Ricardo softly petted Sylvia's head. "That's why I was rather strict when raising my daughter... She complained so much when she was younger. I don't think she wanted to become a hero."

He suddenly gasped and ducked his head. "Forget what I just said. It was irrelevant."

"Do you regret it?"

Ricardo thought for a moment, then shook his head. "As an honorable knight, it was my duty to raise Sylvia. And if I hadn't, I wouldn't have become her foster parent. I have no regrets in that regard, but..."

He stared at his daughter's face and muttered, "I cannot understand her feelings."

"Nothing will come from dying," I said. "To raise her to be strong wasn't your mistake. Being strict is still a form of love. When you have the chance, you

should talk to her about it.”

“Yes, I should... If I have the chance...”

Ricardo gazed at Sylvia, but in his eyes already there was a remoteness, a vacancy—as though he knew that chance would never come.

“You’ve just recovered. Have some rest.”

“I will. Once again, I cannot thank you enough.”

We turned and left the Sword Emperor Palace, retracing our steps back to the dragon landing site.

“Does it bother you?” Misha asked, peering up at my face.

“A little,” I admitted. “Just before I canceled Liknos, I heard his inner voice say he would sacrifice himself to the Royal Dragon.”

“Huh?!” Sasha cried out, shocked. “But he said that only people with no future are sacrificed to the dragon! He was cured of ageworm disease, so he shouldn’t need to do that anymore, right?”

“There may be some other reason at play, one closed to outsiders. Ricardo said there are two Dragon Knights in Agatha right now. Perhaps there’s a need for a third,” I guessed.

“There might have been a prophecy,” Arcana added.

“Something like if Ricardo sacrifices himself, other draconids will be saved?” guessed Sasha.

“Perhaps. One life, one sword, one wish,” I recited. “He may be trying to sacrifice his life for a purpose. If there’s a future that can be achieved, it could be worth his life.”

Misha tilted her head. “Does the Sword Emperor know?”

“Most likely. But Diedrich did say that prophecies that couldn’t be overturned were meaningless.”

Lose one for the sake of all. Logically, it was sound, but was it really something worth breaking the rules of sacrifice for?

“It’s possible that Diedrich will stop Ricardo from sacrificing himself too,” I

said.

If that happened, then there would be no need for me to intervene.

“From the way you speak of him, it sounds like Agatha’s Sword Emperor is a pretty decent person,” Sasha said, looking doubtful.

After Ahid’s scheme using Azesion royalty and Golroana’s attempt to erase the entire surface, I didn’t blame her for having an unfavorable impression of draconids.

“I’ve met him once before. In my eyes, he was a good king.”

“Hmm. Then I guess that has to be true. I wonder what Ricardo’s circumstances are,” Sasha replied.

“Who knows? We still don’t know any of the essential details. It’d probably be easiest to ask about it directly.”

Diedrich would return to the palace at night. There was no need to rush to conclusions.

“I just thought of something,” Arcana suddenly said. “The Prophet was a big fan of the Demon King’s Choir. They may be his important guests.”

“If he can read the future, then he’d have no problem finding the Fan Union,” Sasha said. “But why didn’t he come to Anos first? Isn’t that kind of rude for the king of a natio— What?”

Misha had pointed to somewhere in the distance. Sasha followed her finger, finding a round, elevated stage—one that hadn’t been there when we passed by earlier.

At once, a familiar tune reached our ears.

“Say... Why do I have a bad feeling about this?” Sasha said.

The grand instrumental was Demon King Hymn No. Six, “Neighbor.” As the hymn unfurled, the students of Demon King Academy stepped onto the stage.

“Hold on. What do they think they’re doing?!” Sasha exclaimed.

There were draconids who had been walking all along the street, and they had stopped to stare and speculate, curious about the mysterious stage.

“Is there an event going on?”

“Who built such an obstruction in the middle of the road...”

“Music... Don’t tell me they’re followers from Jiordal!”

“Do they know where they are right now? This is the capital of Agatha. The palace knights will shut down any propaganda from Jiordal immediately.”

But unfortunately, it seemed they attracted a bit too much attention. The people of Agatha were glaring at the stage unhappily.

Just then, around thirty white dragons approached from the sky, knights in crimson armor riding on their backs.

“Look, here they come now!”

“It’s the Knights of Agatha led by Commander Nate! Take that, Jiordal invaders!”

The white dragons swooped low, the knights on their backs leaping down onto the street. The troop of thirty began walking in line with one another.

“All forces, halt!”

The man at the front with swept-back hair and sharp eyes must have been Commander Nate. He raised a hand, and the knights all came to a halt.

“Such strong magic...”

“What is this feeling? Though I’m nowhere near him, it’s like he’s got a sword right at my throat...”

Misha and Sasha both watched Nate with awe, commenting on his power. If he was commander of the Knights of Agatha, he was probably the other dragonborn—the other Dragon Knight.

“Was an event on the streets authorized today?” Nate asked.

“No, sir! Nothing has been authorized. No request was made at all!” an adjutant-like man replied. “Shall we arrest them immediately?”

“Not yet,” Nate replied. “Hymns are a teaching of Jiordal, and if they truly are from the church, then there’s no telling what they’re up to. We’ll wait for them to make the first move. All troops stand by! Clear your ears and watch carefully!

Don’t miss a single second!”

“Yes, sir!”

The knights stood by and observed the Demon King’s Choir. The girls began to sing, completely unaware of the knights nearby.

“Oh my! I didn’t know such a world existed!”

“In-cum, in-cum, incoming, woo-ooh!”

Nate’s brow twitched.

“Don’t open the door!”

“Woo-ooh!”

The students of the Demon King Academy started performing the choreography to the hymn with perfect coordination.

“Don’t open the door!”

“Woo-ooh!”

Fists of love thrust forward, showing off the result of all their practice.

“Don’t open the forbidden door!”

The wary knights watched on, totally dumbfounded, their senses captivated by the hymn’s song and choreography.

“I can’t feel any magic—seems to be just a regular song and dance,” Nate observed. “It looks like they’re not missionaries of the Jiordal Church, but a troupe of traveling entertainers. In this case, a stern warning will do.”

Nate continued watching for a while, ordering the others to stand by. His command was perfect. The troops never broke formation, and not a single knight moved out of line.

That is, until something unusual happened.

“Who—”

Nate whirled around and glared at his subordinates. “Who uttered that just now?”

However, no one came forward.

“Don’t think you can fool me. One of you went ‘Woo-ooh’ just now. What knight goes ‘Woo-ooh’?! Do you think you can protect the nation like that?!” Nate yelled, his face the picture of pure rage. “If you have any honor as a knight, reveal yourself.”

One man quietly raised his hand—the adjutant that had spoken earlier.

“So it was you, Gordo.”

“M-My apologies, Commander.”

“Why did you do it?”

Adjutant Gordo closed his mouth, hesitating to answer.

“I’m asking why you uttered ‘Woo-ooh’ just now. Answer me.”

“I-I don’t know either. There’s something funny with my body... The more I listen to that song, the more it feels like the melody is trying to burst out of me. I found myself humming out of my control.”

“Imbecile! Why are you uttering such nonsense? Bursting melodies? Have you completely discarded your honor as a knight?”

“No, sir! I’m very sorry!” Adjutant Gordo replied.

Nate clenched his fist. “Close your mouth. I will correct you myself.”

“Yes, sir! Please do!”

The adjutant braced himself for impact—but just then...

“Oh my! I didn’t know such a world existed!”

“In-cum, in-cum, incoming, woo-ooh!”

At the same time the students thrust their fists of love forward, Nate’s own fist flew out.

“Hah!” the Dragon Knight shouted, punching the adjutant’s cheek.

Everyone—Adjutant Gordo, who had been punished; Commander Nate, who had done the punishing; and all the knights watching on—had incredulous looks on their faces.

“Commander, just now...”

“Did you say ‘Hah’ in time with the music?”

Nate’s fierce expression wavered.

“That can’t be... What did I just...?” He held his hands beside him and stood stiffly at attention. “Punish me!”

“Yes, sir!” The adjutant punched Nate in the face. Nate immediately turned to look at the Demon King’s Choir.

“Why?”

His body trembled restlessly. And he wasn’t the only one; all the knights were struggling to stand at attention, their bodies swaying with impatience.

“I am a Dragon Knight, a hero who will protect Agatha from the foretold doomsday. So what is this urge rising within me?! What is that song?! The more I try to control myself, the more my tears threaten to flow!”

Unable to comprehend what was happening, Nate was moved to tears.

“Argh! The bizarre song is cursed! Though I couldn’t detect any magic, the devil himself must have sent this song to crush our morale. Arrest them! Knights like us will never fall for such tricks!”

On Nate’s command, the knights all started marching towards the stage.

“H-Hey, things are looking bad!” Sasha yelped. “If we don’t stop them and apologize, they’ll be in big trouble!”

I held out a hand to stop her from running after them.

“Hmm. I cannot read that man,” I said.

“Read... Which man? And why aren’t you stopping them?!” Sasha cried out.

“Don’t worry about it. Just watch.”

I pointed at the stage. In time with the music, the Demon King’s Choir parted, allowing a man to walk onstage between them. He had long hair and a neatly trimmed beard, and wearing the scarlet red armor of a knight, he carried himself with the weight of someone who had lived for an eternity.

Standing with his legs shoulder-width apart, the man focused his strength to his diaphragm and sang loudly in a deep baritone, “Oh my! I didn’t know such a

world existed!”

“In-cum, in-cum, incoming, woo-ooh!”

The Demon King Academy students and Demon King’s Choir clapped along.

“That’s the Sword Emperor of Agatha—”

The man suddenly thrust his fist out.

“So please don’t enter!”

“Hah!”

He pulled his right fist back while thrusting his left fist out. The punch resounded through the land, along with his deep singing voice.

“So please don’t enter!”

“Hah!”

He crossed his fists over each other and thrust them forward, like a beast sinking its fangs into its prey.

“Don’t enter with that forbidden key!”

“Hah, hah, hah!”

He grinned boldly at the people—and his own Knights of Agatha—watching them.

“—the Prophet, Diedrich Kreizen Agatha!”

“I just can’t get enough of this.” With powerful strides, Diedrich stepped forward, striking a pose full of vigor.

“That’s the... Are you sure? That perv—that guy?!”

Sasha, bewildered, stared at Diedrich’s original choreography. The Magic Eyes of Destruction—that she should have complete control over—were fully apparent in her eyes; she seemed truly shaken by what she was currently witnessing.

“That’s... King Diedrich...” Dragon Knight Nate muttered, eyes wide with shock.

“There’s no mistaking it... It really is him...”

“Is this an event hosted by the Sword Emperor?!”

“He should have told us... That man can be so inconsiderate sometimes...”

“But what’s the meaning of this?”

Upon seeing their liege, the knights removed the swords at their waist—sheaths and all—and bowed to show respect.

“Hear me, people of Agatha!” Diedrich shouted over the performance. “These people have arrived from the world aboveground. Dilhade’s Demon King kept his promise and brought his choir for a performance. I shall say this bluntly—”

He took a large step forward and pointed his thumb at the choir over his shoulder.

“I can’t get enough of this song.”

The Demon King’s Choir’s lyrics—including “Like ruinous hand,” and “Oh, but it’s dirty there!”—echoed throughout Agarofione.

As it did, Diedrich performed his perfect fist thrusts to the rhythm of the song. He was far more skilled than the students of the Demon King Academy. He must have seen this moment in the future and put in a significant amount of practice.

“I see... So that’s how it is...” Nate mumbled. “The meaning of life resides in the heart of the enemy! We *should* fear or be overwhelmed by the song—and by doing so, we should make it our own. That is what the Sword Emperor is

trying to teach us...”

The Dragon Knight’s eyes glinted sharply. “That is what the honor of a knight should be! As expected of Sword Emperor Diedrich, the true Knight of Agatha!”

“U-Um, Commander Nate, I don’t think that’s it...” Adjutant Gordo advised warily.

“Idiot!” Nate snapped. “Do you *doubt* the actions of the Sword Emperor?! Each and every one of his prophecies hold unfathomable layers of meaning! Do you intend to make a fool of our leader with your inability to divine his true intention?!”

“N-No, sir!” Gordo stuttered. “My apologies... I can’t believe I failed to see that...”

Nate raised his voice loudly. “All troops, after me! Sword Emperor Diedrich has revealed the path. He is the true Knight of Agatha, and everything he does connects to the true path of chivalry, the honor of a knight! Now sing and dance! This is where chivalry resides!”

The knights looked helplessly on as their leader charged at the stage with a dead serious expression, talking among themselves about what had just transpired.

“King Diedrich’s mischievousness and Commander Nate’s overly serious personality really are something else... But I guess we can’t let the commander bear all the shame.”

“Ha ha, no doubt. Doesn’t hurt to have this kind of chivalry every now and then.”

“Besides, the song is nothing like Jiordal’s music. A song that isn’t about praying to god, but instead about extending one’s hand to their neighbors in understanding...”

“Yeah, it really moves the heart. I didn’t know a world like this existed. It’s just like our teachings. Instead of taking prophecies at face value, we strive to overcome them one day. The song is just like that.”

“Ha ha ha! In a way, it’s exactly as King Diedrich says. I can’t get enough! From

the lyrics to the choreography, this song is a perfect fit for us knights!”

Coming to a united opinion, the knights improvised choreography on the spot as they basked in the singing of the Demon King’s Choir.

Drawn in by the joyful voices, the crowd of draconids grew larger and larger.

“My people of Agatha,” Diedrich proclaimed, “there will be no standing on ceremony today! Put down your swords, clench your fists, and let yourselves free. Thrust, thrust, and thrust your fists as your heart desires!”

The knights roared, their cries echoing through the skies of Agarofione with all the fierceness of a declaration of war.

§ 6. Reunion with the Sword Emperor

Several encores later, Agatha's Sword Emperor was still belting passionately.

"Oh my! I didn't know such a world existed!"

By this point, both the knights and the common people of Agatha were completely familiar with Demon King Hymn No. Six, "Neighbor," and they were dancing along to the song.

"In-cum, in-cum, incoming, woo-ooh!"

"Sword Emperor!"

"Hiyah!"

The Sword Emperor responded to the calls with a powerful punch. His shout was also impressive.

"Sword Emperor!"

"Hrragh!"

Diedrich walked to the front of the stage and thrust his fist towards the sky. The grin on his face reached from ear to ear.

"I can't get enough of this," he said.

"Sword Emperor! Sword Emperor!"

The people of Agatha chanted Diedrich's title in praise. There was no doubt that their expressions and words came naturally from the heart.

"Like an idol," Misha murmured.

"Yeah, he has quite the charisma," I replied. "The people of Agatha adore their king."

"Are we sure Agatha is a kingdom of knights and not a kingdom of perverts?" Sasha asked. "I mean, look at that over-enthusiastic guy in the front row..."

Sasha's gaze found Nate, the dragonborn, who was swinging his arms in

circles while shouting.

“This! This is the honor of a knight! Long live King Diedrich! Hooray for King Diedrich! Hooray! Ohhh! Diedrich!” Nate fervently yelled.

Sasha held a hand to her head as though to fend off a headache. “Is that really the hero that saves this kingdom from doomsday?”

“Until now, his prophecies have saved many lives and are proof he has protected his people’s happiness. Out of the many possible futures that could have befallen Agatha, he secured the best one,” Arcana explained. “In a way, this place is the ideal nation.”

“An ideal nation... *That*?!” Sasha yelped, pointing at Nate.

Arcana replied quietly. “What he’s doing isn’t a problem, demon child. The king is adored, and so the people follow his footsteps with joy. That is one form of the ideal.”

“I suppose you have a point... But I refuse to accept it.” Sasha looked at the stage with disapproval.

“I’m certainly envious,” I said. “The people here must live far more comfortably than those who live under a certain Demon King, who can only solve things with force.”

Misha blinked a few times. “I’m sure if Diedrich came to Dilhade, he would think the same of you.”

“Really?” I replied.

“Yeah.”

She smiled gently. She seemed to be looking out for me.

“People of Agatha!” Diedrich raised his voice once the song ended. “Allow me to introduce you all once again. These are our guests from beyond the dome, the Demon King’s Choir and the students of the Demon King Academy of Dilhade!”

With a grand gesture, Diedrich raised his arms. The choir and students bowed their heads.

“That said, I really cannot get enough of this song. It stirs my emotions in a way I would never expect.”

A prophet who could see countless futures, unable to expect something? If that was the truth, then it explained why Diedrich liked them so much. After all, he should know practically everything that was to happen.

People were easily fascinated by the unknown. A life where every event, every choice was already known was as good as a life that was already over. Until this moment, Diedrich’s life must have been utterly dull.

“This is a song that surpasses prophecies. In the name of the Sword Emperor of Agatha, I bestow the Demon King’s Choir with the title of Dragon Songstresses!”

Applause broke out in support. Ellen and the other girls looked surprised and bowed in embarrassment.

“Let us party to this dragon song again some time.”

Diedrich turned his back to the people, waved a hand, and descended from the stage.

“Mission accomplished. There was no threat here,” Nate declared in a stern voice, turning back. “The Knights of Agatha will now return to the palace.”

The Dragon Knight pulled himself together, and with a stiff expression, resumed perfect command of his subordinates. He raised a hand and at once all the white dragons returned. Nate and his knights then mounted their dragons and took off for the palace.

“Let’s go,” I said.

We walked over to where Diedrich and the Demon King’s Choir had stepped down from the stage. The area was still noisy, and the street was overflowing with people. When we finally got through the crowd, we found Diedrich watching our approach, as though he had been waiting. He grinned cheerfully.

“Hey, Demon King. My apologies, I only wanted to take a peek at the Demon King Choir’s practice, but my heart got ahead of me and I just couldn’t hold myself back. Thanks for letting me enjoy myself.”

“I’m glad you had a fun time. The song was for you in the first place,” I said.

Diedrich laughed heartily. “Excellent!”

“Did you come out because you knew we’d be visiting Agarofione?” I asked.

“That’s right. I also had some other matters to take care of. The original plan was to greet you when you reached the palace.”

“Seeing the future doesn’t mean you can be everywhere at once. Don’t worry about it.”

At that, Diedrich turned and bowed his head at me. “I thank you from the bottom of my heart for saving my subordinates, Ricardo and Sylvia.”

“It’s fine. I needed to apologize to Ricardo anyway.”

Draconic deficiency and ageworm disease couldn’t be cured just by seeing the future. Using Naphta’s powers to restrict the illness would only slow the symptoms, not cure them, and besides, her powers were probably only effective when she was nearby. The Goddess of the Future couldn’t be used to just treat illnesses.

“As you may know already, Diedrich, I’m here because I have business with Agatha’s Prophet.”

“You want to know about Genedonov, the Goddess of Absurdity, right?”

Diedrich glanced at Arcana. “The dome has been eternalized through Leviangilma, the Sword of the Almighty, and for some reason, cannot be reversed. You’ve come to Agatha to solve that issue.”

“No matter what the reason is, I will eventually reach the answer. So I can assume seeing the future would reveal that reason.”

“That would be correct. However, I cannot tell you right now.”

“Oh?”

I had considered that possibility, but it was still a little surprising to hear.

“In other words, if I knew the reason right now, something bad would happen.”

“Perhaps not for you, but for my own circumstances.”

Would Arcana become involved in Agatha as the Goddess of Absurdity? Or would my future actions affect this kingdom in some way?

"The same applies to your memories," Diedrich continued. "I know you've come all this way, but I cannot give you a prophecy at this moment in time."

"No matter. If you say that a better future can be reached by not knowing, then it must be for the best. It'll happen sooner or later anyway."

"You don't know if it'll be a better future for you."

I burst out laughing. "If I had a better future within reach, I would do anything in my power to grasp it. For Agatha's future, I expect you to do the same."

Diedrich beamed; my answer had satisfied him. "Even knowing the future, your words are refreshing to hear."

I responded with a smile of my own.

"I welcome you to Agatha, Demon King. The Sword Emperor Palace is prepared to host you as guests. Feel free to relax there."

"We'll do just that. But I'm afraid we won't be able to relax for long."

We exchanged a firm handshake.

"Regarding the earthrain, I will tell you when and where they will happen. It will be in Jiordal." Through Leaks, he then conveyed the time, date, location, and intensity of the next incoming earthrain.

"Are you sure?" I said. "Jiordal is your enemy."

"It's fine. We have our religious differences, but that doesn't mean we wish for their extinction."

Using Leaks, I passed the earthrain information on to Eldmed, who remained in Jiorhaze. He would have enough time to convince the church to take action.

Diedrich turned and started walking. When I matched my stride to his, he threw an arm around my shoulder.

"Say, Demon King. We're both busy people. I have a suggestion on how we can get to know each other better quickly."

"Oh? Sounds interesting already."

“Let’s have a drink. I’ll prepare a banquet.”

I smirked and said, “Just so you know, I have a *very* high tolerance.”

Diedrich nodded gravely. “Of course. One can’t serve as the Sword Emperor without being a heavy drinker. My knights are big drinkers too.”

“Great.” I turned to Sasha, who was following behind us. “Sasha, tell everyone we’re about to have drinks with the Knights of Agatha.”

“About to have... As in right now? It’s the middle of the day...”

She shot me an unimpressed look, but I brushed her off easily.

“Did you think that just because it’s the middle of the day, we couldn’t drink?”

§ 7. The Banquet Begins

Agarofione Sword Emperor Palace.

The banquet hall was lined with tables of dragon meat dishes and copious alcohol, a buffet-style feast.

Attending were those from the Demon King Academy, Diedrich, the knights that were his direct subordinates, and the Knights of Agatha.

“Allow me to introduce you,” Diedrich said. “This is the mighty Demon King and his followers who hail from the nation of Dilhade. They are the heroes from the other side of the dome that the prophecy spoke of.”

Dragon Knight Nate made an admiring noise. “Ooh. So these are the people who stopped Jiordal’s Beherom prayer?”

“That’s right. This is Demon King Anos and his Selection God, Arcana. They repelled Gadeciola’s Phantom Knights, beat up the followers of Jiordal, and defeated Pope Golroana’s prayer.”

More surprised voices could be heard.

“The Phantom Knights, as in, the Fiend of Purple Lightning?”

Diedrich nodded solemnly in response. They must be referring to Ceris.

The knights murmured their admiration.

“How valiant...”

“Although it was after her symptoms began to show, not even Deputy Commander Sylvia could handle that devil...”

“And these are my trusted retainers,” Diedrich continued to me. “They’re all heroes who protect Agatha, though currently we’re three short.”

Out of those three, two were probably Ricardo and Sylvia.

“Well, let’s not sweat the details. Let us all drink ’til morning to celebrate our new friendship!” Diedrich raised a cup into the air. “To the heroes from above!”

The knights brought the cups in their right hands to their chest, in the Agatha style salute. “Our swords bless thee!”

They cheered in welcome and downed their brimming cups of alcohol. Perhaps it was because they were draconids, but they all looked completely unaffected by their drink.

“Hmm. It seems you’re all quite the drinkers,” I commented.

I knocked back the cup in my hand as well.

“Mm... This is some strong alcohol. Like forty proof or so?” Eleonore said, gulping down her drink and pouring more.

“Ha ha ha! Did it suit your tongue? It’s called dragonfang wine, and it’s a recipe unique to Agatha. The drink seeps right through your entire body,” Diedrich explained.

Sasha glared at her cup of dragonfang wine. “Seeping through the body doesn’t sound like a good thing...” she muttered.

“Maybe you should avoid drinking,” Lay said.

“Aha ha, right,” Misa said. “You have pretty low tolerance, Sasha.”

“I-I’ll be fine! Isn’t that right, Misha?”

Misha blinked a few times, then tilted her head. “If you only take one lick, maybe?”

Sasha glared at her, an unhappy pout on her face.

“Here, Sasha. There’s fruit juice. Have some of this instead,” Eleonore said, a cup of juice in her hand.

“The same...as Zeshia...” Zeshia mumbled.

“You’re all worrywarts,” Sasha declared. “I’ll be *fine.* I’ve gained a lot of magic since then, and I’ve built a higher poison resistance too. If I can withstand magic poison, there’s no way I’ll get drunk over a little wine.”

Now determined, Sasha raised her head and knocked back the cup of dragonfang wine. As Sasha slammed her now-empty cup of wine back on the table and suddenly broke out into a beatific smile, Misha watched on, clearly

worried.

“Oh my, such beautiful stars tonight,” Sasha commented. “It’s like someone scattered stardust into the river in the sky.”

It was still the middle of the day.

“It took you less than a second to get drunk, Sasha! There are no stars underground!” Eleonore exclaimed.

“Eh. At’sa wiwio ma’er.”

Sasha was completely unintelligible.

“She said that’s a trivial matter,” Misha interpreted, taking small sips of the dragonfang wine herself.

Misa looked impressed. “I’m surprised you could tell.”

“But it isn’t a trivial matter at all, Sasha! You’re in big trouble right now!” Eleonore scolded, swiftly swapping the wine in Sasha’s hand for a cup of juice.

“Ugh,” Sasha groaned. “What do *you* want... Don’t treat me like a child!”

Eleonore pointed her index finger at her. “Acting cute won’t get you anywhere! No means no!”

“‘m not acting cute...”

Wasted after a single cup, Sasha flashed a toothy grin. “It’ll be fine! I’ll destroy the alcohol with these Magic Eyes of Destruction that can destroy everything!”

“Ah! Stop that, Sasha!” But before Eleonore could do anything, Sasha grabbed a bottle of dragonfang wine and fruit juice in each hand.

“I’ll show *you* the power of the Witch of Destruction.”

She tilted the bottle of wine and poured it out into several cups before her. Once the bottle was empty, she filled it with the fruit juice instead.

“See? I just changed wine to juice. I destroyed the alcohol!”

All she had done was swap out the contents of the bottle.

“Well done, well done. Now you can drink that wine you destroyed with your Magic Eyes of Destruction,” Eleonore said.

Having watched the entire scene unfold from the side, Diedrich turned to me. “You’ve got quite the delightful followers, Demon King. I’m envious.”

“It never gets boring with her around,” I agreed. “Although, *your* heroes are rather interesting as well.”

I glanced at the seat beside us. Drinking with a dead serious expression was the Dragon Knight, Nate. The speed at which he switched moods could rival Kaihilam, the Cursed King with two personalities.

“There’s a legend in Agatha that goes like this,” Diedrich said with a hearty laugh. “Once upon a time, a powerful dragon attacked the nation, one so powerful, no sword or magic had any effect on it at all. The Knights of Agatha were backed into a corner. With no hope of winning in a fight, what do you think those knights did?”

“Did they make the dragon drink?” I guessed.

“Ha ha ha! Indeed they did! In an all-or-nothing attempt, they served the dragon wine. And to everyone’s surprise, that dragon loved to drink. The knights planned on finishing it off once it was drunk. Thus, they held a wine war.”

“A wine war with a dragon? Now that would be a sight to see.”

Diedrich burst into more laughter. “Well, I don’t know how much of it is true. But according to the legend, after having a merry time drinking with the dragon, the knights finally understood the enemy they were trying to defeat.”

“A fine story.”

“Isn’t it? Ever since, it’s become custom to hold banquets in Agatha called dragon wine duels.”

Diedrich threw back his cup, emptying it down his throat. I picked up a new bottle of dragonfang wine and refilled it for him.

“In short, it’s an event to drink and compare strong liquor. We pour one another drinks, get into drinking contests, and learn to understand one another.”

I finished downing my wine and accepted a refill from Diedrich.

“You’ve come all this way already. Have a taste of Agatha’s culture before you go. What do you say to a cup together?” Diedrich requested.

“Very well. Let us understand one another to our hearts content,” I said with a smile.

Diedrich raised a hand. Several knights immediately carried over multiple wine casks and placed them in the center of the room, where a small and simple stage had already been set up. Once the knights set down the casks, they returned to their seats.

“Let’s get ready for battle. Select among your followers who will participate in the wine war.”

“Hmm.”

Now, who should I choose?

“For my side, let’s see. Nate Anmilion,” Diedrich declared.

“Yes, sir!” Dragon Knight Nate proceeded to the stage, striding with fortitude.

“This is my most trusted confidant, the commander of the Knights of Agatha,” Diedrich said. “He stands at the top of the kingdom not only in battle but in drinking as well.”

“Oh?” I remarked. “Then I must prepare someone worthy to face him.”

At that, Nate turned to me and lowered his head. “With all due respect, Demon King from above, I, the Dragon Knight Nate, wish to request an opponent myself.”

“I’ll allow it. State your request.”

Nate pointed to Shin. “With his impeccable movements, carefully alert gaze, and shrewd ability to constantly remain in the best position to protect you, he must without a doubt be the greatest guard of Dilhade. On top of that, he’s had seven cups already and looks completely unfazed. As the knight representing Agatha, I wish to challenge him.”

I see. So Shin had caught his eye.

“As one would expect from the hero fated to save Agatha from doomsday,

your Magic Eyes are quite sharp," I replied. "That is my right-hand man, Shin Reglia, hailed as the strongest swordsman of demonkind. He also has a bottomless stomach for liquor."

I looked over at him. "Shin."

"Yes, my liege," Shin replied. He immediately stepped onto the stage, a cold expression showing absolutely zero sign of intoxication.

"Now, let's start with a warm-up match," Diedrich said. "The rules are simple: you will each take turns drinking until one of you either becomes drunk or surrenders. Got it?"

"Understood," Nate replied, face serious. He picked up the cup left on the stage, a particularly large chalice, and filled it with wine from the cask.

"I accept your challenge," Shin said, similarly filling the other remaining chalice.

"I must say this in advance," Nate said to Shin, "but this dragonfang wine in particular is specially made to be three times as strong as regular dragonfang wine. You best be prepared."

"Throwing away your advantage on purpose? The chivalry of the Knights of Agatha is most admirable," Shin replied coldly.

"Do you prefer to drink first?"

"Whichever you wish."

Sparks flew between them as they spoke.

"In that case, I shall go first," Nate decided.

The two clinked their glasses together.

"Hmm. If the wine is three times as strong, it would be 120-proof alcohol. That's quite the powerful drink," I said.

"I thought hundred proof was the limit," Misha, who had come up to me, mumbled curiously.

"Perhaps for the Magical Age, but things were different two thousand years ago," I replied.

The dragonfang wine would have been strong enough to knock the average person out immediately, but Nate gulped it down without hesitation.

Voices of astonishment rose among the other knights.

“Th-That’s Commander Nate for you! The way he drinks is as stunning as always...”

“That’s 120-proof alcohol, isn’t it? Not even a draconid can drink that unscathed.”

“And he’s fast at it. He took less than ten seconds to down that cup...”

Nate placed his empty cup on the table. “Your turn.”

“I see,” Shin said. “You’ve thought of a way to pressure me to not only drink but to drink just as fast as you.”

“What might you mean?” Nate said, solemn. “This is normal for me.”

He had gulped down 120-proof liquor in less than ten seconds. It was clear he was far beyond a regular heavyweight.

“Now go on, show me what a warrior from the world above drinks like,” Nate cajoled, pressuring Shin to drink even further. His remarks caused a stir among the knights.

“The commander sure can be mean,” a knight said. “Anyone would want to back down after seeing that.”

“Just because he’s a fearless fighter from above doesn’t mean he’s a drinker,” another commented.

“The commander is serious to a fault. He probably believes he’s making a fair challenge.”

“But look—his opponent isn’t moving at all.”

“Why would he? Even I wouldn’t be able to compete with the commander.”

“Hey! Mr. Swordsman from above! Don’t force yourself. You can give up anytime. This is just for fun!” one knight called, offering Shin an easy way out.

“I’m sorry, was I too fast?” Shin said.

Nate frowned. “D-Don’t tell me...”

He rushed forward to peer into the cask beside Shin.

“I went for the entire cask,” Shin said.

The wine cask that had been filled to the brim with dragonfang wine was empty. And the knights had an explosive reaction.

“What?! Th-That can’t be!”

“Did you see that just now?! He drank the entire wine cask *instantly*!”

“No! No... I didn’t see it. Never mind drinking, what kind of inhalation power was that? Did he just breathe it all in?!”

“Not even the dragon of legend could drink like that! What a fearsome man he is, Shin Reglia!”

Shin leisurely walked forward and picked up the empty cask. “It’s been a while since I’ve attended a drinking party, you see. So don’t mind me. For every cup you drink, I’ll be downing a cask.”

§ 8. Dragon Wine Duel

“In a wine war of honor, it would be disgraceful for a knight to accept an advantage. A man who cannot drink has no business protecting his homeland!” Nate grabbed the wine cask and held it high in the air. He shouted majestically, as though he was in the midst of a battlefield. “The Dragon Knight Nate Anmilion will push forward!”

He opened the wine cask and turned it over. The wine came rushing out over his body, but not a single drop fell to the floor; every last drop was being absorbed by his body.

“Th-There it is! Commander Nate’s whole-body drinking!” a knight spluttered.

“Outrageous as always...” another murmured.

“But that man managed to make the commander bring out his trump card so fast... He shouldn’t be underestimated either!”

What an odd constitution. Was it because he was a dragonborn? After bathing in the wine, his magic became more powerful. It wasn’t because of some spell—it seemed his internal organs were converting the wine to magic power. That being said, he was getting quite intoxicated in the process.

“I can drink to that.” Shin lifted a second large cask up to his mouth and tilted it. The next time he placed it on the floor, the contents were drained.

“Even though that’s his second cask, he drank it with such speed!” a knight exclaimed.

“If Commander Nate’s forte is strength, then Sir Shin’s must be speed,” another surmised.

“I can’t tell which way this battle will go!”

Shin and Nate stared straight at each other.

“The dragon wine duel is Agatha’s specialty. I am the Dragon Knight bestowed with the prophecy of saving the nation. In the name of the great King Diedrich, I

cannot fall behind!” Nate announced.

“The same applies to this side,” Shin countered. “Whatever the battle may be, the world would perish before the Demon King loses. As his right-hand man, I will not disgrace myself before my liege.”

With casks in hand, Shin and Nate glared at each other fiercely.

“Here I go. Dragon art—”

Nate picked up an additional ten casks to the cask Shin drank, making a total of eleven. With magic, they floated in the air around him, and in that moment, Nate truly resembled a dragon.

“H-He’s using a dragon art already?!”

“A skill that only Dragon Knights of Agatha can use—a hidden art that releases the power of the dragon within him!”

“How many years has it been since the commander last used it? Sir Shin must truly be a worthy opponent...”

The knights gazed at Shin with looks of awe.

Meanwhile, Shin moved his right hand as though he was holding an invisible sword ready. “Imbiber Blade, first hidden art—”

His hand moved in a flash, and casks flew through the air.

“Wh-What’s that?!”

“The casks above Sir Shin’s hand... They’re stacked in the shape of a sword!”

The world was quite harsh two thousand years ago. Tragedy and injustice was rampant. If the rare drinking party was ruined by a lack of entertainment, heads would go flying. Thus, the drinking tricks of that time were on a different level to this peaceful era.

Shin’s Imbiber Blade was originally meant to stack wine bottles in the shape of a sword and allow him to drink it all as he swung it down. He must have improved his skill quite a bit to be able to do it with casks.

“*Drunken Frenzy Flash*!”

Ten wine casks came swinging down like a single sword, crashing into the

floor. The empty casks rolled around with hollow sounds, proving they were all empty.

“Hmph! That’s nothing! *Drun Khard*.”

Eleven casks flipped over, pouring a large amount of wine onto Nate’s head. He used his entire body to drink it up.

They were still evenly matched, but there was no wine left on the stage.

“More. Bring more liquor *now*!” Nate yelled like a drunkard.

“Yes, sir! Right away!”

The knights promptly went running out of the banquet hall for more wine.

“Hmm. Looks like the match is suspended for now,” I said.

Just then, someone threw themselves at my back. I turned and saw Arcana.

“Big brother...” she mumbled, hugging me with all her might, face bright red.

“How rare—a drunk god.”

“Tee hee...” Arcana giggled. “I did what you told me to do...”

She wasn’t speaking like her usual self. It was almost like she was the Arcana that appeared in the dreams.

“What did I tell you?” I asked her.

“That I can’t save anyone if I don’t know weakness. So I intoxicated myself to learn how to save the drunk!”

That indeed sounded like something a drunk would say. Gods were order, and order normally couldn’t become drunk, but she must have worked around that using her creation magic.

“How studious of you. Did you learn anything?”

“Um...” Arcana mumbled, slurring her words together a little. “I want to sleep with you today, big brother...”

She had a firm grasp of what a drunk was; there was not a bit of coherency to the conversation.

“I guess it can’t be helped,” I said.

“Big brother...”

“What’s wrong?”

“Hee hee, big brother!”

She hugged me with a beaming smile.

“I won’t betray you... I’m on your side... I’ll never betray you...”

“Yeah, I know.”

I petted Arcana’s head gently. She truly was dead drunk.

“I have a good idea!” she suddenly said, grinning. “I’ll cast a charm so that you can sleep soundly tonight!”

The moment she said that, she looked uncertain. “Unless...you don’t need it...”

“No, I’d appreciate that.”

Just then, a series of footsteps stomped loudly. Sasha had stepped up onto the stage.

“It’s my turn next, dragon wine duel! I’ll avenge you Shin!” Sasha cried out.

“I haven’t lost yet...” Shin said, but Sasha merely smiled.

“Just because you haven’t lost yet, doesn’t mean I can’t avenge you.”

Shin fell speechless, his eyes narrowing—it was clear that no amount of logic would get through to Sasha right now.

“The Demon King’s Army strives for a perfect victory! Shin will win, and I will avenge him. It’s two birds with one stone! We’ll show these knights exactly how we conquer our enemies!”

She was a flawless example of a drunkard. She made Arcana look practically sober.

“King Diedrich, my name is Sasha Necron, a follower of the Demon King known as the Witch of Destruction. If you don’t mind, may I request my opponent as well?”

“That’s fine with me. Who would you like to request, little witch?” Diedrich

asked.

Sasha pointed a finger straight at her target. “Get up on the stage, Arcana! I’ll drink you to your grave!”

Arcana was an ally.

But she downed the dragonfang wine in front of her and said to me, in all grave seriousness, “The time has come for me to bring her salvation. I am a god of salvation, and I will bring her back from her drunken senses.”

She staggered forward and stepped onto the stage.

Hmm. For a moment there, it looked like she had sobered up, but really the alcohol was just circulating through her more.

Diedrich burst into laughter, chugging more wine. “Ha ha ha! Fantastic! Demon King, your follower and your god both know how to keep a banquet entertaining. This is the highlight of the dragon wine duel—when two drunkards fight for dominance!”

Just then, the knights returned with new casks of wine, lining them up on the stage. Shin and Nate resumed their wine war as Arcana and Sasha drunkenly glared at each other beside them.

“Urgh...” Sasha grumbled.

Arcana stared at her.

“Why are you like that?!” Sasha blurted out.

“What do you mean?” Arcana replied.

“Just because you’re Anos’s little sister doesn’t mean you can sleep with him and give him good-night k-k-kisses!” Sasha stuttered. “That’s unfair! As long as my eyes are magic circles, I won’t allow it! In the first place, a little sister is no more than a little sister! Got it? If I win, you have to hand me that position!”

“Ah, so Sasha was jealous all along,” Eleonore said, sipping her wine.

“Big brother is *my* big brother! If you want to be his little sister, you can become my little sister,” Arcana said to Sasha pointedly.

“There’s no point in becoming *your* little sister! I want to be Anos’s little

sister!”

“If you become my little sister, my big brother will become your big brother.”

“That...sounds good,” Sasha said, pivoting suddenly. “Will that make us indirect siblings?”

“More like direct siblings,” Misha chimed in.

“Direct siblings?!” Sasha’s face turned bright red. “Fine. In that case, if I win, you’ll give me your position of little sister. If I lose, I’ll become your little sister instead.”

“No matter the outcome, demon child,” Arcana replied, “this wine war will be your salvation.”

“Oh, you really think it’ll go that well?” Sasha smirked, looking down on Arcana. “Here we go, then.”

She picked up her cup and filled it with wine. Arcana did the same with hers.

“I have one suggestion,” Arcana said.

“I suppose I can listen to your last words,” Sasha said.

“You should choose what you’ll call him once you become his little sister.”

“Wh-What I’ll call him...” Sasha looked down in embarrassment, blushing. Her voice was merely a whisper as she mumbled, “Then...b-brother dear...”

Sasha rallied herself. “And when I lose, I’ll call you sister dear as well! Otherwise it’s too embarrassing to endure!”

“I could say the same,” Arcana said.

Oddly enough, their drunken conversation meshed well.

“I’ll gain a family member too?” Misha asked, head tilted. She sipped at her wine. If Sasha gained a brother or sister, Misha would technically gain one as well.

“Things will get even more lively,” I said.

“Drink?” Misha held the bottle out towards my empty cup.

“Thanks.”

She poured the wine for me.

“Who will win?”

“Who knows? They’re both on the verge of toppling over. If I had to guess, maybe Arcana?”

“Then I’ll support Sasha.”

I looked at her in faint surprise. She smiled back.

“Are you drunk?”

“You always have fun when making bets.”

I see. She was challenging me because she thought I’d enjoy it. *She isn’t wrong, actually.*

“Very well,” I said. “If you win, I’ll reward you with whatever you wish.”

“Zecht?”

“Sure.”

I drew a magic circle for Zecht and signed it with Misha.

As soon as we did, the two girls on the stage moved.

“With my power as the Witch of Destruction, I’ll destroy all the alcohol!”

At any moment, Sasha was about to lose herself to wine.

“Gods cannot get drunk. This is the path to my victory and your salvation,” Arcana claimed. But she was already intoxicated.

The two fixed their unfocused gazes on each other and gulped down their dragonfang wine. Once the liquid disappeared down their throats, they slammed their wine cups down on the table.

Sasha fell to her knees first. It appeared to be Arcana’s victory—except she was falling forward as well. They both broke their fall at the last moment and rolled onto the floor side by side.

Neither of them showed signs of getting back on their feet.

“Hmm. A tie. What would you like for a reward?” I asked.

Misha tilted her head. “Reward?”

“A tie counts as your win. I’m not about to make a fuss over a bet with my own follower.”

Misha blinked a few times.

“Is there nothing you want?” I said.

“I want time,” she answered immediately, pointing at me.

“You mean my time?”

Misha nodded.

“I don’t mind, but when?”

“Tonight. Come to my room after you put Arcana to sleep.” She smiled softly. “Give me your time until morning, Anos.”

§ 9. The Female Dragon Knight Is against Romance

Eleonore walked over to the stage and examined the two girls on the floor. “Wow, they’re both out cold!”

She held an index finger up and cast Relyme. Sasha and Arcana were absorbed into the bubble and left to sleep.

“All right, now *I* want a turn at a match! Who wants to get drunk off their feet?” Eleonore said, getting on the dragon wine duel stage herself. One knight stepped forward to accept her challenge.

“Zeshia wants to do it too...!” Zeshia clenched her fists and got on the stage with Eleonore. “I will battle with juice... Bring the casks please...!”

The knights then exchanged wary looks among themselves.

“Isn’t it your turn to go? You said you wanted to earlier,” one remarked.

“No, I’d forfeit. Juice isn’t enough to get me drunk, and I can’t compete against such an adorable little girl. Why don’t you go? You like sweet things, no?” another countered.

“Don’t be ridiculous... I only like them as an appetizer for liquor. Sweets and alcohol are the ultimate combo. My limit for juice alone would be one cup at most!”

The Knights of Agatha were hesitant.

Zeshia’s face fell. “Will no one face Zeshia...?”

“Fools!”

While drinking his shower of wine, Nate rounded on his subordinates.

“What kind of knight flees from a challenge?!” he declared. “Whether it’s juice or mud, if it’s for the sake of victory, the Knights of Agatha will drink it! Step forward, Gordo!”

“Y-Yes, sir!” the knight called Gordo replied, stepping onto the stage. Casks of

juice were immediately brought over.

“It’s a battle...!” Zeshia squealed.

“I fear what the commander will say to me if I lose, so as the deputy commander, I will take you on with my all!” Gordo proclaimed.

Gordo and Zeshia commenced their battle by gulping down their cups of juice.

Everyone looks like they’re having fun.

“Are you gonna participate in the dragon wine duel, Lay?” Misa asked, pouring dragonfang wine into Lay’s cup.

“I prefer to savor my wine,” he said with a smile. “Besides, this wine tastes much better.”

“They did say the wine on the stage was 120-proof alcohol. At that point, it’s more poison than wine... Aha ha...”

Misa faltered under Lay’s intense gaze. He quietly shook his head.

“Um... Did I say something wrong?” she asked.

“I actually like strong alcohol a lot. If it were two thousand years ago, anyway.”

“Then...why?”

Lay chuckled, then whispered sweetly in her ear, “The best-tasting wine is the wine you pour for me.”

Caught off guard by his words, Misa looked back at him, her cheeks flushed.

“L-Let me know if you want a refill...”

“Pathetic. A warrior pours his own drink!” a sharp voice rang out in a sudden reprimand.

Lay and Misa turned to see a man and a woman at the entrance of the banquet hall. One was the red-haired Dragon Knight, Sylvia Arbitias. The other was her foster parent we saved at the wasteland, Ricardo Arbitias.

I hadn’t expected Sylvia to be up and about so soon, so this was a rather rapid recovery.

“Oh, Deputy Commander!” someone shouted happily. The knights all ran over to them.

“Deputy Commander Sylvia, Sir Ricardo! How are you both feeling?”

“Perfectly fine. As you might have heard already, Sir Anos healed us,” Sylvia stated clearly.

“Even after seeing you in such health, it’s hard to believe he cured draconic deficiency...”

“Yeah, but that’s why he’s the hero from above that the prophecy spoke of! His magic was even greater than expected.”

The knights’ gazes focused on me as they gossiped.

“However,” Sylvia said, pushing through the knights to approach Lay. She spoke in a quiet volume to avoid reaching my ears. “His subordinates are so pathetic, they sully his achievements.”

She glared at Lay like she loathed the very sight of him. Lay, however, was completely unaffected by her gaze and responded with his usual smile.

“I apologize if I’ve done something to offend you. Let’s not ruin the party.”

“*If* you’ve done something to offend me?!”

Sylvia pointed a finger at Misa and raged even more. “What is that woman?!”

“My beloved person.”

“Your *beloved person*?!”

Sylvia glared at Lay with even more anger, the tips of her red hair trembling in rage.

“You dare utter such shameless words before me?! Do you protect your king and kingdom with such an attitude?!”

While she was raging, a knight approached her from behind and grabbed her arm. “D-Deputy Commander, have you been drinking already? You just recovered!”

“What are you doing?” Sylvia cried out. “Let go of me! I haven’t been drinking! A drink or two or three or four or so doesn’t count as drinking!”

“You’ve had so many you don’t even remember!”

It seemed she was quite drunk already. Though she had joined midway, she was almost as drunk as Sasha.

“Now now, Deputy Commander,” a knight said, conciliatory. “The people from the surface have their own culture. There’s no need to scold them over such minor things.”

“*Such minor things?!*”

Sylvia whirled around on the knight, who shrank back and averted his eyes.

“My apologies, guest from above,” another knight whispered to Lay. “The deputy commander is a little drunk right now. As you might have noticed, she has a rather severe hatred for romance...and couples in love. Her complex stems from her being too strong to land a man herself, so—”

“People are born alone and die alone,” Sylvia declared. “A warrior that constantly dances with death has no need for a spouse! Argh, let go of me! How dare you treat me like a wild beast?! I’ve only just recovered from an illness!”

Sylvia easily shook off the subordinates attempting to subdue her. As one may

expect from a dragonborn, her physical strength was tremendous.

“Simply put, she’s bitter about being single... Sorry for the inconvenience...”

“I’m fine with it,” Lay said with a smile, “But are they okay? Your commander and deputy commander, I mean.”

The knight could only grimace in response.

“Hmph! Anyone this indifferent to provocation can only be a coward, merely infatuated with the *idea* of love. Is it that fun flirting in public?!”

“It’s not just fun, it also makes me happy,” Lay replied.

“Wha... How shameless!” Sylvia clenched her jaw. “Hmph! I doubt you’d be able to hold your liquor with that pathetic attitude anyway. No self-respecting woman would flirt with you—which explains things, considering how little magic she has.”

“Now that’s something I can’t overlook,” Lay said, softly but firmly. “Misa is the loveliest woman in the world.”

“Ugh... Ah...” At Lay’s rebuke, Sylvia was too shaken to respond.

“My name is Lay Grandsley. Dragon Knight Sylvia Arbitias, I challenge you to a dragon wine duel. If I win, I’ll have you take back your insults to Misa.”

Sylvia already had an expression of defeat on her face, but she was unable to back down.

“U-Ugh... I accept your challenge! If I win, you’ll never flirt in front of me ever again! Keep it to yourself! Do it in secret!” she yelled, nodding to encourage herself.

“Unfortunately, there are circumstances behind why we don’t care about what other people think or see. We’re searching for true love.”

“Shut up! Stop defiling my ears and face me! You’ll never whisper sweet nothings again once I’m done with you!”

“I’ll teach you the power of love.”

The two made their way to the dragon wine duel stage.

Sylvia took one glance at the wine and said, “This weak wine isn’t even worth

drinking. Bring out the dragon hunt ones!”

At that, the knights all stiffened.

“B-But that’s...”

“I said *bring it out*!”

“Yes, ma’am! Hey, someone get the wrath wine!”

The knights left and returned with a golden wine cask. Upon opening, the cask revealed a glittering gold wine inside.

“This is wrath wine, originally used for hunting dragons. No matter how big the dragon is,” Sylvia explained, “the moment this touches their skin, they become drunk and lose their minds. Drinking it could cause death, depending on how much is consumed.”

Sylvia filled a wine cup with the wrath wine.

“Those without courage need not step on the stage. This is a true dragon wine duel between knights. If you claim to be more than just a weak warrior infatuated with a woman, prove it here and now!”

“Sure.”

Unaffected by Sylvia’s threats, Lay filled his cup with the wrath wine too.

“We’ll see how long that attitude lasts once you’ve tasted the horror of wrath wine.”

Sylvia clinked her cup against Lay’s to signal the start of their battle.

“I’ll show you my courage as a knight prepared to lay down my life for chivalry!” she declared, then licked the surface of her wrath wine.

Lay looked at her like he didn’t know what to say.

“Is something funny?” Sylvia asked.

“Your courage is rather cute.”

“Laugh if you want to laugh, but don’t underestimate the strength of wrath wine,” she warned. “One lick is the appropriate amount. Two licks will render you incapable of standing. But...”

Sylvia took another lick of the wrath wine. “I’m giving you a slight advantage. You won’t be a match against me under equal circumstances, since I already have some resistance to wrath wine. Just watch.”

She licked at the wine like a cat lapping at milk. Roughly ten licks later, her knees buckled, and she struggled to stay upright.

“Are you okay?”

“Heh. This handicap is nothing against a pathetic man infatuated with the idea of love and romance,” Sylvia said coolly, her legs trembling like a newborn deer.

Lay gave her a concerned look.

“Heh heh,” Sylvia chuckled. “You’ve fallen right into my trap. It’s only logical to assume there’s no way to get drunk off ten licks of wine. But with wrath wine, it’s the truth. By acting drunk, I’ll make you believe I’m weak to alcohol. With your guard down, you’ll drink the wrath wine normally—and once you do, you’ll disgrace yourself in front of your woman! Will you dance naked? Whatever you do, I’m sure it’ll be a sight to see. What about my courage as a knight, you say? Such things are irrelevant to a drinking game! In chivalry, you either drink or get drunk!”

Sylvia grinned smugly.

“Now, let’s continue this battle fair and square, Lay Grandsley.”

Lay opened his mouth with a puzzled look. “Could I ask one thing?”

“What?”

“Your internal monologue is audible right now. Are you sure you’re not drunk already?”

“Internal monologue? What are you on about? You make no sense, Lay Grandsley.”

“You said you were pretending to be weak to alcohol and plotting for me to disgrace myself in front of Misa.”

Sylvia’s jaw dropped. “How did you know that?!”

“You said it yourself.”

“There’s no helping it if you’ve found out. Indeed, as you can see, I am not drunk.”

She promptly stopped trembling and stood straight up—or so she tried. But she couldn’t. Her knees started swaying like they were laughing, toppling her forward.

“Awah!”

She caught herself on the floor with one hand, somehow managing to protect the wine cup in the other. She turned her head and glared at Lay.

“This proves my point. Even someone as experienced as I am in drinking can misjudge their alcohol tolerance and act this shamefully. That is what wrath wine does to you,” Sylvia said in a cool tone. She was trying to retain whatever remaining dignity she had left as a Dragon Knight, but her knees were wobbling and she was barely able to stay standing. “Does a womanizer like you have this kind of resolve?! The willingness to disgrace yourself, the way we do in Agatha?! This is the chivalry of this kingdom!”

All she had left to support her angry yells was her vigor.

“I see. I think I’m starting to understand what a knight of Agatha is.”

That was Lay for you. Unable to bear the sight of her any longer, he chose to offer words of subtle support. A true hero didn’t let their opponent lose face.

However...

“Wasn’t I cool just now?”

There was no way to respond to an audible internal monologue like that.

“Ah!” she gasped. It seemed that this time, she had noticed she was saying her thoughts out loud. “That’s right! This is the horror of wrath wine!”

It was too pitiful to look at anymore. *Put her out of her misery, Lay.*

“Well, I’m afraid you chose a bad opponent. I can’t get drunk no matter how strong the liquor is,” he said.

To prove his point, Lay drank the entire cup of wrath wine in one go. He gulped it down to the last drop as Sylvia watched on in terror.

“Wha... H-Halt, you fool! This isn’t a matter of disgrace anymore. You’ll die if you drink any more!”

Ignoring her warnings, Lay continued drinking.

“H-Hey!” Sylvia tried to stand up and knock the cup from Lay’s hand, but her knees buckled and caused her hand to futilely wave through the air. “Curse you... If only this body would move properly!”

Before long, Lay fell limp, like a puppet with its strings cut. Sylvia looked on in despair at the empty wine cup, now falling from his lifeless hand.

But just before the cup hit the floor, Lay caught it with his foot and kicked it back up, catching it in his right hand. He had drained all the wrath wine from his cup, yet he stood upright without any issue.

“H-H... How...?”

“I have seven sources, you see. By drinking the wine, one source fell dead drunk—you could say I killed off that source on purpose. Then, I switched to a new source and turned sober again.”

“What... But that means...” Sylvia said, trembling from head to toe. “That means you were able to elegantly down that entire cup of wrath wine while having a girlfriend, while I only made a disgrace of myself while being single! Not only do I fail to attract anyone of the opposite sex, I was reduced to nothing more than the supporting role to your center stage in the one place that was my emotional support! Am I just a piece of trash on the street?!”

“There’s no need to put yourself down like that.”

“Stop it, I don’t want to be comforted by someone in a relationship!” Sylvia shouted, bringing her wine glass to her lips with trembling hands.

“I suggest you give up. My sources regenerate with time. No matter how much I drink, I can’t drink all seven of them to death at the same time.”

“Silence! Some battles simply must be fought! Someone with a girlfriend wouldn’t understand my pain!”

She tilted the cup and gulped down the wine. But about halfway through, she froze.

“Guh... Hah... Augh!”

With a final groan of regret, Sylvia fell to the floor.

§ 10. Doomsday Prophecy

“Do you have a moment, Eleonore?” Lay said.

Eleonore paused her own wine war and turned around. “Wow! Drinking girls you just met under the table? How scandalous!”

She cast Relyme and prepared a bed of water for Lay to place the unconscious Sylvia down on. The Relyme bubble then floated off the main stage.

“Relyme is different from regular detoxification magic and removes the alcohol slowly and comfortably,” Eleonore explained to the surrounding knights. “You should let her sleep for a while.”

“We cannot thank you enough.”

The knights bowed their heads at Eleonore gratefully.

“It’s your turn next, Miss Zeshia,” Gordo’s voice said from the stage. He had been drinking juice with Zeshia, but she was currently glaring at her cup like she couldn’t drink any more.

“I suppose you’ve finally reached your limit. Oh, but you were a formidable opponent! It was a good match,” he said to her.

“Zeshia can’t lose... Zeshia is a follower of the Demon King...” She took another sip of her juice. “Did you think I couldn’t drink more...just because I’m full...?”

Despite her words, she appeared to be too full to take a second sip.

Tears of frustration welled in her eyes.

“*Sniff*... Zeshia is... *Sniffle*...”

The next moment, Gordo fell to his knees.

“Gwaaah... I’ve suddenly got a terrible tummy ache!” he said in a monotone voice.

“I-I can’t stand for another second! I-I must forfeit from the contest. I lose!”

“Zeshia...won?”

“Yes, you were very strong, Miss Zeshia. I never imagined I would lose to a child.”

Zeshia smiled happily. “Did you think I couldn’t drink alcohol...just because I’m a child...?”

But we didn’t actually have any alcohol, Gordo objected through his expression. Zeshia curiously looked between him and the Relyme carrying Sylvia—her gaze seemed to question why he wasn’t drunk off his feet too.

“O-Oh no.”

Gordo toppled over.

“Zeshia won! Relyme please!” she said to Eleonore happily.

“Well done. You did great.” Eleonore cast Relyme and threw Gordo inside the bubble, then approached it herself. “Sorry about that. Thank you for playing with Zeshia.”

“It was nothing. Any honorable knight would allow a child all the glory. The commander would scold us otherwise.”

The commander also said earlier that Gordo would be scolded for losing as well, so it seemed a deputy commander was doomed to be scolded either way.

Gordo then started nodding off comfortably within Relyme.

“Please forgive me, Sir Anos,” Ricardo said, bowing his head. “My daughter was terribly rude to your subordinate. That behavior was unacceptable.”

“It’s fine, I was well entertained,” I replied.

“It’s reassuring to hear that, but...”

Ricardo’s expression was still gloomy.

“She seemed to harbor a deep resentment towards love.”

“Yes,” Ricardo confirmed. “Being a dragonborn, my daughter was birthed by a dragon. As her foster parent, I should have taught her what love looked like... But the opposite happened. Because of my shortened lifespan, I chose to pursue the sword instead, dedicating myself to only the path of chivalry.”

A shortened lifespan inevitably meant parting from loved ones early. Ricardo had probably chosen to remain alone—to neglect teaching Sylvia about love—to prevent such grief.

“My daughter actually asked me once if it was because of her that I couldn’t find a partner. I told her I valued the path of knighthood more and found no greater happiness than in raising her, but it seemed she misunderstood that...”

“She concluded that love and romance were trivial things.”

“It is embarrassing to admit it, but yes. I’ve tried to resolve that misunderstanding, but all my attempts so far have failed... As someone who has dedicated all my life to the sword, I struggled to explain to her the wonders of love.”

“You did the best you could. And now that your lifespan is no longer shortened,” I added, “you should be able to find a partner without such worries.”

Ricardo looked conflicted, but nodded. “Yes... But it may be difficult to change the way I live at this point, ha ha ha.”

“Demon King Anos, Ricardo, may I say something a little more serious?” Diedrich interrupted, playing his wine cup down on the table.

“Should I leave?” Misha, who was beside me, asked.

“You’re a trusted follower of the Demon King. I don’t mind if you stay,” Diedrich said, then immediately continued. “You’ve heard about the sacrifices to the Royal Dragon already, I presume.”

Hmm. It seemed he knew what was on my mind.

“The ceremony to sacrifice Ricardo in a week?” I answered.

“That will no longer happen. It’s yet to be announced officially, but another sacrifice has already been found.”

“Who?” Ricardo asked. There was no detectable change in his expression.

“Ahid, the former cardinal of Jiordal who stole the Royal Dragon, was captured. He will be offered to the Royal Dragon as a sacrifice in a week’s time.”

It looked like this was news to Ricardo. He had probably been distracted by his search to obtain the alpha dragon's elixir and was unaware of this development.

"Ricardo, you have conquered ageworm disease. Your lifespan is no longer shortened, thus I am revoking your right to be sacrificed."

"As you wish." Ricardo knelt and bowed his head. "I will dedicate my one life, one sword, one wish to Agatha as a knight of the Agatha Guards from now on."

"I'll be counting on you. Do your best."

"Yes, sir!"

It seemed things had settled peacefully. Ahid's case was unfortunate, but he had brought it all upon himself.

"Say, Demon King. Will you accompany me for a little break?"

Diedrich didn't appear particularly drunk, so he probably had something to discuss alone with me.

"Sure thing."

He started walking out of the banquet hall. I followed him down the corridor until we arrived at extravagant glass doors leading to a large balcony. The city of Agarofione was spread out below us.

Diedrich walked up to the handrail and gazed into the distance.

"Before the sacrifice ceremony can be held, Ahid will be abducted by Gadeciola," Diedrich said. "The culprits will be the Phantom Knights."

"Hmm. A prophecy."

"It will come true no matter what."

How odd.

"If you know what will happen, there should be plenty of ways to prevent it," I pointed out. "This is *your* kingdom."

Diedrich responded with silence. There was a look of rare resignation in his gaze.

“I see. You have no intention of preventing it.”

He nodded quietly. “I need an excuse to enter Gadeciola. They have always refused to communicate with any nation that follows the religions of Agatha *or* Jiordal. The only two ways of entering Gadeciola are to discard your faith in god or force your way in.”

“And as the Sword Emperor of Agatha, you can’t choose either.”

“But I need to meet the Overlord of Gadeciola and discuss something. The same goes for the abducted Golroana.”

“What do you need to discuss?”

Diedrich answered with a dead serious look. “To put it simply, the future of the underground world. Jiordal, Gadeciola, and Agatha each have secret teachings passed down only through their leaders: the scriptures of Jiordal, the prophecies of Agatha, and the forbidden tomes of Gadeciola.”

“I heard the scriptures of Jiordal were only passed down orally.”

“The same goes for Agatha and Gadeciola. That’s why my first goal is to ask the two leaders themselves.”

He had Naphta, a god who could see the future, by his side, yet he didn’t know what those teachings involved. Did that mean the teachings would cease being passed down in the future? In other words...

“Jiordal’s and Gadeciola’s teachings will come to an end?” I guessed.

“That’s what it means.”

The pope and the Overlord were either going to die, or have their memories erased. Whichever it was, the teachings passed down through generations of leaders would come to an end. It was quite a serious situation.

“What will you do if they tell you?”

Diedrich looked away from the city below us and turned to me. “As the Sword Emperor of Agatha, there’s one prophecy I wish to overturn at any cost.”

“Oh? What might that be?”

“Unfortunately, I cannot share it with you. If I do, the prophecy will be even

more likely to come true.”

So my actions will affect the prophecy too.

“That’s fine, then,” I said. “So in the end, what you wish for is to visit Gadeciola and speak with the pope and the Overlord as a king.”

“Right. Invading Gadeciola without a reason would only lead to war. If I have the excuse of retrieving our prisoner, the Overlord will have to come to a compromise somewhere.”

Gadeciola had its own rules. The people of their nation wouldn’t accept a foreign king breaking their rules either. Whether the Overlord wished for it or not, war could break out.

Thus, Diedrich dearly needed an excuse to visit, which was why he would look the other way while the Phantom Knights snatched Ahid.

“And? The fact you wanted to speak alone with me means there’s an even worse prophecy, right?” I asked.

Diedrich nodded quietly. “I will invade Gadeciola with the Knights of Agatha. By speaking to the pope and Overlord, I will get closer to uncovering their secret teachings. But in exchange for accomplishing my goal, something will be sacrificed.”

“What?”

“Ricardo will lose his life. He’ll be sacrificed to the Royal Dragon.”

I see. So that was what he wanted to say.

“Why can’t you save him?” I asked.

“There’s more than one reason for it. The sacrifice to the Royal Dragon is absolutely essential for Agatha. As a loyal knight of the kingdom, Ricardo himself makes the decision to give up his life. I’ve repeated the future a hundred thousand times, and only once have I both achieved my goal *and* saved my follower.”

With a firm look of conviction in his eyes, Diedrich said, “I will most likely stand by and watch as he dies.”

“If there’s a one-in-one-hundred-thousand chance, then all you have to do is grab that one chance,” I argued.

“It’s one in one hundred thousand when *I can see the future*. I have no choice but to rely on unexpected coincidences.”

“Let’s suppose you speak the truth. Is the dragonborn really so important that you must sacrifice Ricardo’s life?”

Diedrich nodded. “Remember the prophecy I said I had to overturn at all costs? The dragonborn is necessary for that. Nate, Sylvia, and I were all born in Agatha to fulfill that duty.”

“I’ll lend you my strength,” I suggested. “I don’t know how powerful a dragonborn is, but I should be able to do the work of ten people.”

Agatha’s Sword Emperor hummed in thought, then shook his head. “I appreciate the offer, but if I could achieve everything by borrowing your strength, we wouldn’t have a problem in the first place. I’m gathering power *because* it’s not enough. Although we’ve chosen to only sacrifice those close to death, we’ve still sacrificed many people until now. We need one more for the dragonborn. Even then, the prophecy can’t be overturned.”

“If a prophet is saying this, then this future must truly be unavoidable,” I said.

Diedrich stared back at me silently, as though to communicate just how well he knew that.

“Did you think I saved him just to be sacrificed?”

“I am grateful for what you did. That is why I’m telling you this now.”

“You said this yourself, Diedrich: a prophecy that cannot be overturned is meaningless. How can someone who can’t grasp a one in one hundred thousand chance fulfill a dream that big?”

“That’s exactly why. In order to achieve a future that doesn’t exist—in order to overthrow a prophecy—I must take the best possible route. I acknowledge your power. No one in Agatha would be a match for you. But even your strength is accounted for within the prophecies.”

Accounted for, huh?

“Doomsday, was it called?” I asked. “The one mentioned in Agatha’s prophecies.”

Diedrich stared at me.

“The dragonborn will become the heroes of Agatha,” I elaborated. “Your desire for another dragonborn implies that doomsday itself is what you wish to change.”

“I will not deny it.”

“What could possibly happen that would be beyond my capabilities?”

“What indeed?” Diedrich repeated, showing no intent of answering me.

“The moment a prophet utters their prophecy, that prophecy becomes easier to overturn. If the future you saw was something bad, you can do everything in your power to prevent it from happening.” I stared back into Diedrich’s face. “The fact you won’t, though, means that you *wish* for it to happen. Both you and Naphta.”

“If you know already, then this should be quick. I have to take the best possible path until the final moment when I can overturn the prophecy. I cannot stray from it in the slightest.”

And that was why he couldn’t tell me.

“Do you really think that?” I asked. “Naphta, the Goddess of the Future, can see countless different futures. A number so vast, no mortal body could process it—or analyze it. It would be impossible to follow every possible future in a single lifetime. So you must be misunderstanding something.”

I directed my next words at Prophet Diedrich. “You assume you can see every future.”

“I only wish I was misunderstanding that.”

“I cannot see the future, but there’s something else I can see.”

Diedrich paused for a moment. “Go on,” he said.

“Think about it carefully. The Divine Eyes you received from Naphta have a blind spot. The same blind spot as Naphta’s Divine Eyes. I will lead you to the

future you failed to see in that blind spot.”

Diedrich contemplated my words in silence. He had probably seen me telling him this already, but had yet to make up his mind about it.

“Bring us to Gadeciola with you,” I offered. “First, I’ll save Ricardo without getting in your way. The prophecy will come after.”

Diedrich turned his gaze back to the city of Agarofione. “I have a condition.”

“Sure.”

His stiff expression relaxed a little at my immediate reply.

Choosing to sacrifice one’s own subordinate after viewing countless futures would have been an agonizing decision for him. Thanks to the prophecies, Agatha was extremely close to being an ideal nation, but Diedrich could only do his best.

In a nation that flourished from having the absolute knowledge given to it by the prophecies, the future sometimes presented a cruel reminder. However, Diedrich never passed on prophecies of despair to his people. He knew that the route to the best future involved keeping his knowledge to himself. If he didn’t, the people would struggle needlessly, even if they were unable to overturn those prophecies of despair.

This man had to bear the weight of all the negative futures on his own. He probably wished for a miracle more than anyone.

“Demon King Anos, I challenge you to overturn a prophecy of Prophet Diedrich. If you win, we can go to Gadeciola together.”

And so, I had to overturn his prophecy.

§ 11. Desired Future

It was polar night, and the underground world was shrouded in darkness.

Arcana was sleeping soundly in the room that had been prepared for us. She had woken up once after the banquet, but since it was already night at that point, she went straight back to bed.

Once the new day arrived, I would take on Diedrich's prophecy. Upon conquering that, I would go to Gadeciola, save Ricardo, and overturn the doomsday prophecy. If I could retrieve Arcana and my memories while I was at it, everything would be perfect.

"Big...brother..."

I glanced over at Arcana, but she appeared to be talking in her sleep. A faint smile appeared on her face when I petted her head.

"Getting drunk wouldn't have been easy for you. Sleep well."

I stood up and left the room. As I walked down a corridor of the Sword Emperor Palace, I heard a commotion behind one of the doors—the door to the banquet hall. I looked through the door to see Shin and Nate still drinking on the stage, surrounded by a mountain of empty wine casks.

"I've never met a man who could keep up with my pace. I'm impressed," Nate said with a serious look.

Shin returned the look calmly. "You're not bad yourself."

"Then let's end the warm-up here and start drinking for real."

"Of course. We shall drink the night away."

They seemed to have reached an understanding through their wine war, as there was a thin smile on both their faces. The other Knights of Agatha backed away in terror.

"E-Everything until now was a warm-up?"

“Monsters...”

“C-Commander!” one knight called. “I-I hate to spoil the mood, but you’ve already drunk all the wine in the castle...”

Nate frowned. “Hmph... We were just getting started...”

“Isn’t there some good wine right there?” Shin asked, gaze landing on the golden cask of wrath wine beside them.

“But the wrath wine is used for hunting dragons... If it’s all consumed, we’ll...!”

“I’ll allow it,” Nate said sharply. “Failing to serve a guest alcohol would bring dishonor on the Knights of Agatha. Dragons can be hunted with swords! Bring all the wrath wine here now!”

“Yes, sir...”

I raised a hand to stop the knights attempting to leave the banquet hall.

The knights paused and gave me a quick bow. “Good evening, Sir Anos!”

“Don’t get more tipsy than that, Shin. Tomorrow will be a busy day.”

“Understood, my liege.” Shin turned back to Nate. “I would have liked to drink with you a little longer, but I’m afraid I will now have to retire for the night.”

“Very well. I enjoyed our wine battle, Shin Reglia. I’m glad the world aboveground has men like you.”

They exchanged an amiable look with each other. It seemed they had deepened their friendship quite a bit.

“We are most grateful, Sir Anos,” a knight said with a bow. He seemed relieved to know they wouldn’t have to go through their stock of wrath wine.

I left the banquet hall and continued down the corridor until I reached a balcony. The night made the surroundings dark, but the city could still be seen below, illuminated by the lights of the houses like a sea of stars.

A girl stood by the railing, gazing at that view. Her platinum blonde hair swayed gently in the wind.

“Misha,” I called.

She slowly turned back to look at me and smiled happily. “Welcome back.”

I walked up to her side.

“Was Arcana okay after that?”

“Yes,” I said. “She’s sound asleep now.”

“That’s good,” she replied, voice uninflected but gentle.

“What were you doing?”

“Sobering up.”

Come to think of it, Misha had drunk quite a bit.

“Detoxifying with magic just doesn’t feel the same, huh?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Want to get going?”

“Not yet.”

It seemed she wanted to stay here until her mind was fully clear.

“Anos,” Misha called. She seemed to have noticed something.

“What’s up?”

“Over there.”

Misha learned over the balcony railing and cast her Magic Eyes downwards.

Between the canopy of tree leaves was Naphta, the Goddess of the Future. She sat on a boulder, eyes closed as she faced the dome in the sky, her back turned to us. She seemed to be deep in thought, but her expression was inscrutable.

“You could’ve shown your face at the banquet, you know,” a deep voice echoed below.

It was Diedrich.

Without turning to face him, Naphta replied, “I do not think so. Gods that cannot get drunk will only ruin the atmosphere.”

Diedrich walked up to her as he listened. “Gods *can* get drunk, though. The

Demon King's Selection God was undeniably intoxicated."

"That nameless god possesses the order of creation. She gained the ability to get drunk after the Misfit awakened emotions within her. As the Prophet, you should already know how much of a miracle that is. It's not something just any god can do."

"I won't deny that."

Diedrich stood beside Naphta, staring in the same direction she was facing.

"Why do you speak to me, Diedrich?" Naphta asked.

"Because you respond to me, of course."

She closed her mouth in thought for a moment, then opened it again. "I made a pact with you. As your Selection God, I will comply with your every wish. There should be no need for words between the Goddess of the Future and the Prophet."

Her voice was uninflected, as though she was merely listing the facts.

"When you summoned me into your body, I showed you every future of the Goddess of the Future Naphta and Prophet Diedrich. You already know what I will say in response to everything you say. I know it too."

"What the future means to you as a god is a little different from what the future means to us mortals," Diedrich replied. "It's not in my nature to skip an action just because I saw the future and know what will happen." He grinned. "Out of the countless prophecies of the future, I chose to converse with you in this one. I know it's a bit like reading from a script for us, but even so, I wanted to turn this moment from a potential future into a moment from the past."

Naphta turned her face towards Agatha's Sword Emperor. "I have a question: why?"

"How long has it been since we made our pact for the Selection Trial? I can still remember the words you said to me the day I first met you," Diedrich said. He had a gentle expression on his face. "'If the future is light, then Naphta's Divine Eyes that can see all will cast a shadow on the hearts of the people. Prophecies aren't hope, but despair. The Prophet must bestow light to the

people while bearing the darkness all by themselves. Do you still wish to make a pact with me?’”

“You gave an affirmative answer to that question. There was no future where you would refuse me.”

“I can understand those first words far better now,” Diedrich said, with a hint of nostalgia. Then, he muttered under his breath bitterly, “Can’t get enough of it.”

“This is what I think,” Naphta said quietly. “This world is filled with order; the lives of the people are filled with impossibilities. But their eyes cannot see the future, so they see hope instead. That hope keeps them alive. In Naphta’s eyes, the people are as good as blind. But there is something that only the blind can see, and that is hope. Something I could never see, even with my eyes closed.”

Diedrich frowned. “That may be true.”

“Half of the Sword Emperors throughout history chose not to make a pact with me. The other half chose to remove the Divine Eyes I bestowed them. Instead of the best possible future, the people wanted a future that had hope.”

Suppose that every year, one hundred citizens die from natural disasters. No matter what countermeasures were employed by looking at the future, the best possible future was still the one in which one hundred people died; if they hadn’t looked at all, that number would have been five hundred. But even so, it was only natural for people to wish for that number to become zero one day...and so they chose to not to look.

Objectively speaking, the former was obviously the better choice, but emotions didn’t always work that way. Ignorance was bliss and all that, after all.

“However, Prophet Diedrich can see hope despite being bestowed with the Divine Eyes of Naphta,” Naphta said in a tranquil voice. “Why is that?”

“I am the king of Agatha. For the sake of the people, it is my duty to see the future. But for the sake of the god that devoted herself to my kingdom, it is my duty to see hope.”

Diedrich looked at Naphta with a gentle expression. “I want to prove it to you, Naphta. That *your* Eyes can see hope as well.”

“Do you believe in the blind spot that the Demon King mentioned, Diedrich?” Naphta asked.

“Who knows? I can’t imagine there being one, but perhaps there is. But if there isn’t one, we’ll just have to make one.”

He smiled at the somewhat cold expression on Naphta’s face.

“You know there’s one thing that makes me different from the Sword Emperors throughout history, Naphta. Something that clouds your Eyes and shows me hope,” Diedrich said.

A hint of confusion crossed Naphta’s face, which made Diedrich burst into loud and hearty laughter.

“Not even you can see what’s clouding your Eyes, Naphta. And I won’t tell you until I’ve overturned the prophecy.”

There was no way for Naphta to see an overturned prophecy. If Diedrich uttered the reason, he would be effectively erasing that future.

“Are you curious?”

After thinking for a while, Naphta opened her eyes. Her tranquil Eyes stared at Diedrich and looked into the future.

“I am curious.”

He nodded in satisfaction.

“Isn’t it nice to have something you don’t know? But as the leader of a nation, I cannot discard the best future for just hope alone. I will look at the best future with your Eyes and hope with my own.”

Naphta stood up and faced Diedrich. She said in a solemn but gentle tone, “I am grateful to you, Sword Emperor Diedrich, the Final Prophet. Thank you for being the last king I will make a pact with. The future with you is the salvation I have been waiting for.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Diedrich reached a hand out at the dome and closed his fist around empty air. “Let’s grasp it together—the future beyond the best possible future: the future

of hope.”

§ 12. Gentle Gaze upon the Abyss

The Goddess of the Future and the Sword Emperor of Agatha spoke for a while before returning inside the castle together.

“Hmm. He’s a strong man. What do you think his wish is?” I asked Misha.

Misha blinked and turned towards me. “Do you want to know?”

“Oh? You know already?”

“Probably. Just a little.”

It wouldn’t be odd for Misha’s Magic Eyes to see into Diedrich’s heart a little.

“But I can’t let you tell me.”

Misha smiled softly. “Naphta will see if I do.”

“And the Goddess of the Future would probably prefer to hear about the future of hope from Diedrich himself.”

From Diedrich and Naphta’s conversation, the Goddess of the Future’s clairvoyance only allowed her to see what could be seen by the naked eye. She was unable to read thoughts or see into hearts.

Could that be a hint of what the future of hope would be found? But even then, the heart alone wasn’t enough to change the future. Action had to be taken, and every action would be visible to Naphta’s Eyes.

“Wanna go?”

“Have you sobered up?”

“I’m fine now,” Misha said, face still faintly flushed.

“Then let’s get going.”

We left the balcony and proceeded down the corridor, eventually stopping before a door.

“This is my room,” Misha said.

“Come to think of it, what’s Sasha up to?”

Misha pointed to the next room down the corridor. “Asleep next door.”

“From how she looked at the banquet, she won’t be up again until morning.”

With a silent nod of agreement, Misha opened the door. I entered after her.

“Well? I’ll give you my time as promised, but what do you want me to do?”

Misha tilted her head. “You don’t know?”

“I’m asking because I don’t know.”

“Really?”

She stared into my eyes. I couldn’t read her at all.

Just as I was thinking that, she giggled and took my hand.

“This way,” she said, leading me to the bed. “Lie down.”

What is she up to now? Well, a promise is a promise. I lay down on the bed face up as she requested.

“Will this do?”

She nodded and brought her face close to mine.

“Show me all of you,” she said.

I see. Out of all things, she wanted me to show her everything. I hadn’t expected that.

So that was her plan.

“Did you get what I meant?” Misha asked worriedly.

“I have a guess. But you don’t need to do that, you know?”

“No,” she said with rare insistence. “It’s my reward. Show me.”

“Very well. You’re the only one odd enough to ask for something like this as a reward.”

I dispelled most of the anti-magic wrapped around my body. Misha climbed onto the bed and knelt beside me. She took my head in her hands and gently rested it in her lap.

Then, she sent magic into her Eyes and stared at every inch of me.

“You’re tired.”

“It’s no big deal. You’re about the only one who would notice.”

I hadn’t had a day of rest since coming to the underground world, after all. I had spent successive nights in the dreamworld using Arcana’s power, battled with the Goddess of the Future, and spilled the blood of the Demon King. Egil Grone Angdroa had also exhausted an immense amount of my energy.

And the clincher was the battle with the God of Traces. The Sword of Three Races was a holy sword forged to destroy me. While Revalschned’s Heaven Splitter wasn’t as strong as Lay’s, it was still enough to wound my source.

On top of that, I had allowed Egil Grone Angdroa to strike me directly. Although it was in order to draw closer to the abyss of power, I had nearly been destroyed doing so. The wounds on my source couldn’t be disregarded so easily.

And that wasn’t even considering my use of Gilieriam Naviem and Delsgade in such a condition. Even I would be tired after that.

“Show me even deeper.”

“Why do you want to see so much?”

“Trust me.”

Misha looked at me, pure sincerity in her eyes. Exposing the state of my body and source would be like exposing myself to danger. Although she was a trusted subordinate, it wasn’t something I could do readily.

“It’s not like I can hide anything from you anyway,” I conceded.

Misha’s Magic Eyes were extremely sharp. She might even be able to see into the abyss of my source without any assistance one day. The more she stared into the abyss, the more that sharpness would be refined.

In which case, showing her my source now would lead to her growth.

“Like this?”

I dispelled the majority of the wards covering the depths of my source,

exposing myself to her. “You should be able to see easily with those Eyes of yours.”

She blinked a few times before lowering her gaze onto my abyss.

“Poor thing...” she mumbled, petting my head gently. “Your source is a mess.”

“It took quite some effort to overcome Egil Grone Angdroa.”

After all, the spell was intended to destroy the world.

“You’re barely holding it together with your magic.”

I should’ve expected she would see that.

“Just until I get used to the new shape of my source. There’s nothing else that can be done for now.”

Misha looked pained. Even though it even wasn’t her own pain.

“Things were always like this two thousand years ago. It was rarer to fight in perfect condition.”

“I can fix it up a little.”

Magic circles appeared in her eyes—her Magic Eyes of Creation. A fake Delsgade had probably formed in the sky overhead.

“Perhaps so, but you should refrain from doing so.”

“Why?”

“Destruction constantly seeps from my source, seeking to destroy the world. Your Magic Eyes of Creation may be able to alter my source into a more desirable state, but the burden on your own source will be greater as a result. You’d be taking on my exhaustion in my place.”

Misha stared at me quietly.

“It’s the Demon King’s exhaustion. Any normal person would die,” I added.

She quietly reached out and touched my cheek. “It’s okay,” she whispered. “Let me bear a little of it.”

There was firm determination in her Eyes. It didn’t seem like there was anything I could say to convince her otherwise.

“Can I touch you deeper?” she asked.

“Do as you wish.”

Misha’s Magic Eyes of Creation peered into my abyss.

The sensation of her fingers stroking my cheeks felt like she was stroking the magic of her gaze deep into my source. In doing so, my exhaustion eased little by little, restoring the shape of my distorted source.

“Arcana was the Goddess of Absurdity,” she mumbled as she healed me, “so what are Sasha and I?”

“I don’t know.”

Ceris had called the Magic Eyes of Omneity the Magic Eyes of Absurdity. Arcana said she had seen their Eyes before. How did those two facts connect? Or was everything a lie?

At this stage, there was no way of knowing.

“But there’s no doubt you’re my irreplaceable friend and follower,” I said. “That will never change, so the past has nothing for you to fear.”

Misha smiled gently, as though those were the words she had been wanting to hear.

“You’re too kind, Anos,” she whispered.

Her magic was draining from her rapidly. Staring directly into the abyss of my source of destruction should have been agonizing in itself, yet she was trying to correct its shape at the same time.

“Leave it at that. I feel much better already.”

I tried to sit up, but Misha held me down with her small hands.

“No. Stop moving,” she said, moving my head back onto her lap with a smile. “This is my reward.”

“Pain is your reward?”

She shook her head from side to side. “I don’t get to help you very often.”

“I admire your loyalty, but I’m not so weak that I need my follower to

shoulder my pain.”

“It doesn’t hurt,” she said quietly, voice whispering in my ear. “Because I get to touch your deepest place.”

Hmm. She’s not making any sense.

“That doesn’t sound like a reason to me.”

After blinking a few times, she replied quietly, “It’s something only I get to do.”

“Well, I suppose I’ve never allowed anyone else to do as they please with my source.”

Even if I wanted to, they’d need to have Misha’s level of Magic Eyes and creation magic.

“You allowed me into your deepest place and showed me everything,” she said with a smile. Noticing my concern for her pain, she put on a more cheerful front. “It’s like I get to have everyone’s Demon King all to myself.”

At least just for now, she added happily.

In the end, Misha petted me gently until morning arrived.

§ 13. Prophecy Trial

The next morning.

Our group from the Demon King Academy was walking with Diedrich along the first floor of the Sword Emperor Palace.

“You seemed to have rested well last night. You’ve got a good look on your face today,” Diedrich said with a toothy grin.

“It was a nice room,” I replied.

“That’s good to hear. Though it probably wasn’t as nice as your follower’s services.”

I smiled in response to his words.

“What does he mean by follower’s services? Did something happen yesterday?” Sasha whispered into Misha’s ear behind us.

Misha giggled. Sasha looked at her curiously.

“Um... What happened?”

Misha tilted her head in thought, then smiled. “It’s a secret.”

Sasha’s eyes widened at the unexpected answer.

“We’re here,” Diedrich interrupted.

He stopped before a door and placed his hand over it. A magic circle appeared, and the door slowly swung open. The inside of the room was outrageously large, illuminated by the light of the underground world entering through the skylight.

At the center of the room was a sword stabbed into the floor, a greatsword with a dragon design, large enough to loom over anyone who would stand before it. On the other side of the sword towards the back of the room was an enormous dragon, with a pure white body and savage eyes.

“This is the pillar room, where Velevim the Sky Pillar Sword resides, alongside

the Royal Dragon. Only a select few in Agatha may enter here."

A quick glance around the room revealed the Knights of Agatha and Naphta were also present. They seemed to have been waiting for us. The knights were in full armor and standing in a row.

I looked at the greatsword at the center. "Is that the Sky Pillar Sword?"

"Indeed it is. I'm sure you know about the pillars of order already—the pillars hold up the dome, and Velevim supports the pillars. We Knights of Agatha have worshiped this blessing from the gods since ancient times."

The underground world being held up by a sword was probably why the worshippers in Agatha became knights and their king the Sword Emperor.

"This single sword holds up the order of all the pillars?" I asked.

"Nah, it doesn't have that much power. Across the underground world are multiple supports assisting the sword in holding the pillars of order."

Diedrich walked before the Sky Pillar Sword and turned around.

"Since it involves Agatha's future, I figured this holy space would be fitting," he said. His solemn gaze rested upon both the knights and Anos's group in turn.

"Listen up, everyone. The Demon King from the surface will now proceed to challenge a prophecy. Using his power, he will attempt to change an unavoidable tragedy and overturn fate. As the Sword Emperor of Agatha, I honor his courage and conviction."

The knights all drew their swords in unison.

"To the valor of the demons!" Diedrich declared grandly.

The knights pointed their swords upwards and brought them to their chest in a salute.

"May the blessing of our swords be with them!" they shouted in response.

Naphta walked forward and stood beside Diedrich. She sent her magic into the Future World Crystal, Kandaquizorte, and opened her eyes. "I, the Goddess of the Future, will now deliver my message. Demon King of the surface, the future you shall challenge is one of one hundred thousand. The trial shall be

held in a restricted world.”

She spoke solemnly, as though passing judgment. “I sentence you to the prophecy trial.”

Kandaquizorte loudly shattered into pieces. Sparkling fragments of crystal flew through the air, increasing in infinite number. The sparkling sandstorm swept across the area, transforming the entire scenery.

The next thing we knew, we were standing in a crystal town with a giant clock tower in the background. We had been swallowed inside Naphta’s restricted world.

Commander Nate and Deputy Commander Sylvia stepped forward.

“This world is an ally to the Knights of Agatha and an enemy to all demons,” Nate explained. “The restricted rules and reason result in a one-in-one-hundred-thousand chance of you demons emerging victorious.”

Nate drew a magic circle and reached inside, taking out two golden casks and placing them on the ground.

“As this is a trial, you may not completely destroy your opponent,” he continued. “The trial will be held like a dragon wine duel. While crossing swords with each other, whoever drinks the other’s wrath wine first will win.”

So the goal was to steal the opponent’s cask while protecting one’s own cask, hmm? Stealing it alone wouldn’t be enough—they had to drink its contents too. Wrath wine was practically poison, so drinking all of it would be no ordinary feat.

“The wine war shall be two-on-two. Deputy Commander Sylvia and I will participate on our side. Choose two people from your side—your decision will be vital to the trial.”

There were two people with no chance of victory on this side, after all.

“I, Naphta, restrict the future,” Naphta announced, her voice coming from overhead. “Demon King of the surface, you may not participate in this trial yourself. Even in this restricted world, your victory cannot be restricted to one in one hundred thousand.”

In short, this was a mock battle to prepare for challenging a true prophecy. Being able to face the real thing would have been helpful for planning countermeasures, but it couldn't be helped.

"Who do you think would be good?" Sasha wondered.

Eleonore held up a finger and said, "I nominate Mr. Shin! He's strong with a sword *and* holding his liquor."

"What about the other person?"

"Someone with good chemistry with Mr. Shin, I guess?" Eleonore suggested.

Sasha made another thoughtful face. "If only Mr. Eldmed was here..."

The Conflagration King was back at Jiordal, teaching the church how to prepare against the earthrain.

"Lay is strong at drinking...and fighting too..." Zeshia said, making Eleonore and Sasha exchange looks.

"Lay..."

"And Mr. Shin..."

They both grimaced.

"They probably have the worst chemistry out of all of us..."

"I can't imagine them cooperating with each other at all..."

Although they had fought against each other before, they had never fought together as a team. It would be one thing if they only had to defeat their opponents in combat, but this was a wine duel that involved protecting and drinking wine. People who worked together previously would be the better choice.

Besides, there was something I wanted to check.

"Lay, Misa, I leave this to you," I said.

Lay smiled cheerfully. "If only it was just a fighting trial."

"Then it wouldn't be much of a trial," I replied.

If there was only a one-in-one-hundred-thousand chance of victory for us,

there had to be limits in this restricted world. For example, the fact they weren't facing Naphta herself. Without being able to fight the Goddess of the Future, it would be difficult to disturb the logic of this restricted world.

The first hidden art of the Sword of Three Races would be able to cut the fate Naphta created and interfere with the restricted world, but that option wasn't available to us. But our goal wasn't just to win.

How could we grasp the victorious future Naphta saw, the one that had a one in one hundred thousand chance of coming true? The answer to that could provide a hint on how to overturn the prophecy itself.

"But will I really be okay?" Misa asked worriedly.

"You're the most familiar with fighting by Lay's side," I told her.

"That may be true, but..."

"You practiced your love magic in Jiordal, no?"

Misa nodded. "But I don't think I can meet your expectations yet..."

"War doesn't wait," I said. "This is the perfect chance for you to try. Challenge yourself alongside the prophecy trial."

"Aha ha... No pressure or anything..." Misa laughed dryly.

"Losing here won't have any major consequences. But the future waiting afterwards won't be in a restricted world; it'll be a true one in a one hundred thousand chance. And we *must* grasp that future."

And the future beyond that would have an even lower chance of happening.

"There's no time to be stumbling here. Overcome this trial."

Misa nodded with a determined look. "I'll do my best."

She lined up beside Lay as the two Dragon Knights approached.

"Allow me to introduce ourselves," Lay said. "I am Lay Grandsley, and this is Misa Reglia. We will be the ones fighting to overturn your king's prophecy."

He held out his hand and with a flash of light summoned Evansmana.

"Warrior from above, I honor your courage," Nate said.

He picked up one of the golden casks and threw it at Lay, who caught it easily. “We win if we drink your casks of wrath wine, and you will win if you drink our casks of wrath wine,” Nate instructed. “In this restricted world, destroying the casks won’t cause the wine to be spilled. You also cannot drink your own wine.”

Lay nodded, placing the cask down behind him.

“Do you have any questions?” Nate asked.

“Just one.” Lay smiled at Sylvia. “How’s your hangover?”

“We are in the middle of a trial. Forget the banquet,” Sylvia said sharply. “I already have. And I’ll never remember it again.”

Seems like she really *doesn’t want to remember it.*

“I, Naphta, declare the start of the prophecy trial.” At the Goddess of the Future’s signal, Lay and Misa both raised their hands.

“I’ll drink their wrath wine. Can you protect ours?” Lay asked Misa.

Misa held her hand up against Lay’s.

“Yes...” Misa replied.

Just then, Sylvia appeared before Misa. “The battle has already started. Why are you flirting?”

As one would expect from a dragonborn, she moved faster than the eye could follow.

“Haaah!” Sylvia cried.

Magic swirled all around them as Sylvia’s fist plunged into Misa’s abdomen. Misa was sent flying into the wall behind her, smashing it into pieces.

“A warrior has no need for love or romance. Devoting yourself to such things only makes you weak,” Sylvia said.

“Oh? But a warrior ignorant of love is no more than a child.”

Sylvia whirled around, wide-eyed. She was sure she had sent Misa flying, yet Misa had instead just reappeared behind her, looking like a completely different person. Her hair was long and dark, like the depths of the ocean, and she wore a midnight black gown with six spirit wings behind her back. And above all else,

her magic power had risen to an entirely different level.

“We won’t even need to use our love magic,” Misa declared.

Her finger dug into Sylvia’s body. The dull impact traveled through Sylvia’s sturdy dragonborn skin, making her frown in pain.

“What...? She suddenly changed appearances...and magic power?!” Sylvia exclaimed.

With one shove of Misa’s finger, Sylvia went flying. This time, she was the one crashing into the wall of a shop behind her, completely collapsing it to rubble.

Misa smiled. “If your reasoning is to be believed, what a pitiful warrior you would be. Weak *and* loveless.”

§ 14. Chivalry vs. Love

Immediately after Sylvia was sent flying, Lay started running.

“Sorry for the surprise attack, but we’re fighting against a one in one hundred thousand chance here,” he said.

Misa drew a magic circle and pointed it towards Nate. Black lightning gathered around her right arm.

“Let’s finish this while it’s still two against one,” Lay said.

With Evansmana held at the ready, Lay closed in on Nate in the blink of an eye. Behind him, the origin magic Jirasd shot forward.

“*Gaddez*,” Nate said.

A giant magic circle appeared behind Nate. The spell then transformed into the shape of a dragon, one like a sacred mountain, its mirage-like image going in and out of focus.

Nate absorbed the dragon of immense power into his body. At once magic particles flowed from and around his body, wrapping him in the vague shape of the dragon and turning into a weapon of light.

Nate grabbed the black lightning with his Gaddez-covered right arm.

“Grah!”

With a fierce roar, Nate slammed the Jirasd into the ground. The impact split the ground apart, demonstrating the physical might of a dragonborn.

“Impressive. But I wasn’t aiming for you, you know?” Misa said smugly.

One thunderclap later, Jirasd rose in a curtain surrounding Nate. The bolt Misa had aimed at Nate directly was actually a decoy for the black lightning to later spread around him in a cage.

Misa reached forward with her pale left hand, closed it around nothing, then yanked it back. Through the power of Ygg Neas, the golden cask beside Nate

was pulled forward, slipping through the cage as it flew towards Lay.

“Sit there quietly for a bit, won’t you?” she said, casting Beno Ievun around the Jirasd cage for good measure.

“Hah!” Lay cried.

Meanwhile, Lay sliced the cask open with a brandish of the Sword of Three Races. He lifted the cask easily with one hand and drank the wrath wine within. But as soon as the golden liquid passed through his throat...

“U-Urgh...”

The strength drained from Lay’s body, causing him to fall to one knee. He was barely able to support himself using Evansmana.

“Lay?!” Misa shouted.

“Four of my sources went out in one mouthful,” Lay mumbled. “It seems like this is another effect of the restricted world. It’s as though we’re headed for the worst possible future where I get drunk off my feet...”

“Indeed so,” Nate’s voice agreed.

His Gaddez transformed into dragon claws that sunk into the cage of Jirasd and Beno Ievun, piercing the barrier. He then grabbed the lightning-covered Beno Ievun and used great force to rip it apart.

“Graaah!” he roared.

Lay looked at the Dragon Knight. He was still on one knee with his sword as his support, but he swiftly grabbed the Sword of Three Races by the source.

“Sword of Three Races, first hidden art—”

The moment Nate slipped out of the magic cage, countless slashes of Evansmana were ready to greet him.

“*Heaven Splitter*!”

Thirty consecutive strikes of the sword were released in the span of a single breath, yet each blow was caught perfectly by Nate’s Gaddez. Lay got to his feet to deal a follow-up blow using the Sword of Three Races.

“Fwuh!”

“Hiyah!”

Dragon claws clashed against the holy sword. In a show of fearsome physical strength, Nate deflected Evansmana upwards, yet Lay suppressed that momentum and swung the blade back down.

But even that second strike from Lay’s ever-improving sword skills was seen through and stopped by Nate.

“Oh? It seems you can see what will happen in the future. Is this another effect of the restricted world?” Misa asked, drawing another Jirasd circle to support Lay.

“That’s right,” a voice replied.

A shadow passed through the corner of Misa’s eye, like a gust of wind—Sylvia.

She was surrounded by her own Gaddez. The particles of magic formed the vague shape of four dragon wings, arming her in a way that greatly increased her speed.

“In that case, you should have looked into the future from the start,” Misa said.

Black lightning stretched through the air, aimed towards Sylvia. With over a hundred bolts flying at her, she had nowhere to run even if she could see the future.

“Dragon art—”

Sylvia drew her sword.

“*Dustderte*.”

Gaddez wrapped around the blade as it released a slash of wind. Like the flap of a dragon’s wings, the strike cut through Misa’s approaching Jirasd and sliced across her torso, fresh blood spraying in its wake. Yet Misa approached Sylvia with a smile.

“*Vebzud*.”

Jet-black fingers closed in on Sylvia, but she twisted her body and evaded the deadly move as though she knew exactly where it was aiming. In the same

movement, she swung her sword at Misa's neck.

Misa stopped the horizontal slash of Sylvia's sword with a Beno Ievun-covered left hand.

"Dragon art—"

Gaddez wrapped around her sword once again, the blade of wind blowing wildly.

"*Dustderte*."

The slash of wind cut at Misa, attempting to tear her apart.

"*Jio Graze*."

The magic circle appeared below Sylvia's feet. It had been drawn in her blind spot just as she was firing her dragon art.

The black sun had been fired at point-blank range, yet Sylvia was still able to evade it as though she knew it was coming. She moved towards where Lay and Nate were fighting.

"*Dustderte*!" she shouted.

At the same time, Nate used Gaddez's claws to send Lay off-balance. The blade of wind precisely sliced into his body.

"Guh!"

One of Lay's sources was destroyed. He quickly backed away to distance himself.

The two dragonborn were strong. On top of that, the restricted world was on their side. While a mere battle wouldn't have been a problem, the rule about drinking wrath wine was proving rather disadvantageous for Lay and Misa.

"It's my turn this time," Sylvia said.

She switched roles with Nate, running to retrieve their cask from Lay. Meanwhile, Nate ran past Lay to where Misa was protecting their own cask.

"*Zola e Dypt*."

Countless chains of hellfire shot at Nate from every direction in an attempt to

restrain his limbs. But he evaded them with the slightest adjustment in his movements and closed in on Misa.

“Dragon art—”

Nate drew the sword at his waist and pointed at Misa.

“*Geddeolver*.”

Gaddez gathered around Nate’s sword, a glimpse of a giant sacred mountain visible as he swung the blade. Misa multicast Beno Ievun and Jirasd to create a wall, then covered her own hands with Vebzud. She probably intended on withstanding one blow before piercing her enemy from a distance too close to evade.

“Too slow.”

Nate’s sword thrust forward. Misa’s eyes widened before she quickly leaped to the side.

A loud crash rumbled. Geddeolver had thrust through Beno Ievun and shattered both the wine cask and the crystal city behind it.

A huge hole was bored into the houses, shops, trees—even the mountains behind them.

“Drink, *Gaddez*.”

The contents of the destroyed wine cask floated in the air. The order of the restricted world was actively ensuring the wine wouldn’t spill no matter what. The magic dragon that surrounded Nate charged face-first into that floating wrath wine and began absorbing it into his body.

Unlike Lay, the more Nate drank, the more his magic power increased. The Gaddez around him swelled larger and larger with each passing moment.

“Allow me to correct myself. You two aren’t weak by any means,” Sylvia said. “But you will never be able to win against us when we’ve devoted our entire lives to the sword. Love is a weakness. You’ll never win against the prophecy without accepting that.”

The wrath wine floating in the air disappeared into Nate’s body. It wouldn’t take long until he drank it all.

“In other words, you’ve lost because of all your flirting!” Sylvia yelled smugly.

Lay grinned. “Do you know what this is?”

He showed her his clenched fist and opened it. A bubble of water rested on his palm.

Sylvia’s expression immediately turned wary.

“Wrath wine... Don’t tell me... When did you—?!”

It was the wrath wine Sylvia and Nate had to drink. When the wine casks broke, some of the liquid inside had splashed towards Lay.

“When I used Heaven Splitter, I cut the wrath wine within our casks,” Lay explained. “In this restricted world, that wrath wine was all but destined to be drunk by you. I severed that fate.”

However, even the Sword of Three Races was only able to affect a few splashed drops of wine from Naphta’s restrictions.

“A holy sword that can interfere with the powers of the Goddess of the Future,” Sylvia murmured. “It must possess the order of the god that governs destiny and fate.”

Sensing the threat, Sylvia held her sword at the ready and glared at Evansmana.

“Naphta would have seen that future, but it seems the Divine Eyes you were given were a flawed copy. Even in this restricted world, you are unable to see every future.”

Lay swung Evansmana down. “Sword of Three Races, first hidden art—”

“It’s pointless.”

Gaddez gathered around Sylvia’s blade. But the spell instantly scattered into mist.

“I won’t let you,” Misa said.

Her Magic Eyes of Destruction were focused on destroying the magic power gathered around the sword. But Sylvia didn’t falter either.

“Unfortunately for you, I can see that future,” Sylvia said.

“Are you sure you’re looking at the right one?” Lay asked.

He threw the Sword of Three Races at Sylvia.

“*Heaven Splitter*!”

“Kuh!”

Under the effect of the Magic Eyes of Destruction, Sylvia desperately gathered her magic to defend against the incoming Evansmana with all her might.

“*Dustderte*!”

Countless blades of wind focused on Evansmana and deflected it. By the time it was deflected, Lay had drawn the Sword of Intent in one hand and grabbed Misa’s hand with the other.

“*Teo Traloth*.”

The Sword of Intent caused the wine cask Lay and Misa were after to blow up. The wrath wine hovered in the air in a single bubble.

“The future you saw was probably correct,” Lay said with a bright grin. “But after what happened earlier, you weren’t sure it would become reality—because Evansmana could sever fate again.”

Sylvia had moved to ensure the fate of the best future for her and Nate wouldn’t be severed. But Heaven Splitter hadn’t activated, and as a result, her actions were a mistake.

“Seems like I fell right for it,” Sylvia muttered, glaring at Lay bitterly.

He moved to touch his lips to the wrath wine floating in the air. But the moment he made contact, his body suddenly staggered and Misa had to hurry to hold him up.

“But that’s as far as you’ll go.”

Sylvia made no attempt to spring at Lay right away—he was unable to drink all the wrath wine either way. Thus, it made more sense to wait for Nate to finish drinking his wrath wine and bring the battle back to a two-on-two.

“Do you really think so?” Lay asked.

“The same trick won’t work twice,” Sylvia replied. “I’ve already seen the future. Another one of your sources just went out from the alcohol. How do you plan on drinking that wrath wine with your remaining source? The moment that wine touches your mouth, you’ll be unable to remain standing.”

Lay smiled brightly. “Do you believe in me, Misa?”

He held the Sword of Intent out to Misa. She accepted it and nodded.

“Of course,” she said.

Lay placed one arm around Misa’s shoulders and one under her knee, picking her up gently. It was a commonplace pose, yet bizarre in a way.

“What?!”

Sylvia was utterly shocked to see that pose here, in the middle of a trial, on a battlefield where swords were being crossed. It was what was known in this Magical Age as the “bridal carry.”

“Did you see this future?” Lay asked Sylvia.

“Indeed, we can’t see every single possible future. Actions that aren’t worth looking at are excluded from our sight.”

Sylvia analyzed Lay’s actions as calmly as she could. “However, the Sword of Three Races has only severed one fate so far. Your words could be nothing more than a bluff!”

She concluded that Lay had picked Misa up in a bridal carry just to confuse her with a future she hadn’t seen.

Lay chuckled. “You really think so? Your flawed Divine Eyes can’t see our one-in-one-hundred-thousand chance of winning, can they?”

“Who knows? So what if we can’t?”

Sylvia glared at Lay’s smile warily.

“This action could lead to our victory.”

“Impossible!” Sylvia spat. “A foolish move like that would never lead to victory! I don’t need to look into the future to know that! I was just about to reconsider my opinion of you for your sword skills and courage in challenging

the prophecy trial, but you're just another fool! What do you plan on doing with your hands sealed?!"

"This, of course," Misa said.

Misa drew a magic circle on Lay. His body immediately began to absorb the wrath wine.

Just like Nate, he was drinking the alcohol with his whole body.

"What? What are you doing?!" Sylvia exclaimed.

"A spell called Derol," Misa replied. "I used your comrade over there as a reference to create a new magic that allows drinking with the entire body."

"Created a new magic...just now?" Sylvia gave the two of them a dubious look. It seemed she was having trouble comprehending. "But drinking with your body will still intoxicate you. Detoxification magic has no effect in this restricted world... My Divine Eyes can only see a future where you're completely intoxicated by the wrath wine!"

Lay had consumed a greater amount of wrath wine than what knocked out four of his sources earlier, yet he was standing perfectly fine.

"How are you still steady on your feet despite the woman in your arms?! You should be intoxicated to the point of unconsciousness already!"

"No matter how much I drink, I won't get drunk on wine," Lay declared, holding Misa tenderly in his arms. "Because I'm already drunk on love. That is what keeps me standing."

"You're wonderful, Lay," Misa said sweetly.

Light flowed from the two of them. A new love magic was being created between them.

"I'm not being steady on my feet *despite* the woman in my arms," Lay said. "I'm standing *because* the love of my life is in my arms."

§ 15. World of Two

Lay stood firmly on his feet, carefully holding Misa in a bridal carry. Under the effect of Derol, the wrath wine spread through the air like a sparkling mist before being absorbed into Lay's body. It was almost like a champagne shower blessing the two of them.

"What..." Sylvia mumbled, voice shaking with rage.

She glared daggers at Lay. "What do you mean by drunk on love?! Quit fooling around! So you *may* be able to endure intoxication using that so-called love magic of yours. But the alcohol is definitely having an impact on your body!"

She pointed her sword at him. "The proof is in how slow you're drinking. If you drank it all at once, you'd be knocked out."

"You don't get it, do you?" Misa chuckled.

Sylvia frowned at her relaxed expression. "What do you mean? What don't I get?"

"It'd be a waste to gulp down the toast to our love so quickly. That'd make us no different from dogs in heat."

"Wh-Wha... Heat?! Are you saying I think like a dog?!"

Sylvia had faltered for a brief moment, but collected herself with a shake of her head and glared at Misa.

"Dragon Knight Sylvia, your sword is beautiful and impressively swift," Lay said. "That's why you should be able to understand this: a fast sword will not always cut the enemy. There are times where slowness is a weapon. The sword of love is the pinnacle of this—the longer you take to love someone, the better."

"Save the sweet talk. I'll admit you have skill—at psychological attacks, that is! But this knight's body will never fall to emotional wounds!" Sylvia yelled, as though she was trying to convince herself.

“Your hands are sealed, and you can’t hold your sword,” she continued. “It’s clear from that woman’s stance that she’s an amateur at the sword. On top of that, carrying her means you’re unable to stand your ground, and your movements will be limited. You cannot fight properly in such a state!”

Bending her knees, Sylvia brought her sword close to her and held it in a ready-to-strike position. She was prepared to attack at any moment.

“I can end things in a second,” Sylvia warned. “Don’t think I’ll wait until you’ve consumed all that wine.”

“Then why don’t you?” Lay pointed out.

Sylvia hesitated to answer.

“If you could finish things in one second, you would have cut us down and retrieved the rest of the wrath wine by now.”

Sylvia remained still, expression grim.

“Your commander has long finished drinking the wrath wine in the cask, yet you’re both just watching us.” Lay glanced in Nate’s direction. Nate’s Magic Eyes were fixed on the two of them, yet he made no attempt to move either.

Lay continued. “In this restricted world, the two of you are blessed by Naphta’s Divine Eyes that can see the future. That vision isn’t perfect, so you cannot see the future where we win. But there should be very little chance of our victory in a situation like this anyway...”

Although Lay had seven sources, it was near impossible for him to drink all the wrath wine in this restricted world. Yet he was continuing to do so even now. Meanwhile, the remaining wine Sylvia and Nate had to drink was still in Misa’s palm.

“Which means this situation itself is a future you didn’t see,” he concluded.

Sylvia sent magic into her Divine Eyes with a frown.

“The more you look with your Divine Eyes,” Lay added, “the less you’ll be able to see.”

Misa smiled sweetly. “Our love is just so bright, Naphta’s Eyes were blinded by our brilliance. Am I wrong?” she asked.

“This is our one-in-one-hundred-thousand future,” Lay declared. “The blind spot of your Divine Eyes. The blade of love that can overturn any prophecy!”

At that moment, Sylvia moved.

“Shut your mouths! Love is weakness!” she shouted. “The only reason we can’t see the future is because you have no chance of victory no matter how hard you try! I won’t accept any other reason!”

Four wings of Gaddez spread at the same time. Sylvia’s speed exceeded anything possible for a mortal, rushing towards them like a divine wind.

“Dragon art—” she muttered.

The blade of wind swung faster than her words.

“*Demesdones*.”

The blade moved in circles like a swirling tornado, swallowing Misa’s and Lay’s bodies. It was a tempest of ultrafast, ultrasharp blades—a dragon art that could erase its enemies without a sound, impossible to evade.

However...

“Too slow,” Misa said.

“Wh-What?!”

Lay and Misa stood there unaffected. They had seen through the Demesdones and evaded it with minimal movement.

“How...” Sylvia looked at the two of them with her Divine Eyes, mystified. “How can you move faster than Demesdones after drinking so much wrath wine—and while carrying someone?! You couldn’t move this fast in any of the futures I saw!”

“Oh, didn’t you know?” Misa laughed boldly. “Time you spend with the one you love—”

“—passes in the blink of an eye,” Lay finished.

“Quit your nonsense!”

Sylvia’s magic surged in fury. She used that as a springboard to use another dragon art.

“*Demesdones*!”

Blades of wind blew like a storm, filling the area and leaving Misa and Lay nowhere to run. But Sylvia’s eyes immediately widened.

The swords that were moving at the fastest possible speed were being completely evaded by Lay’s slow walk forward. The loving couple were all smiles as they walked through the raging storm of Demesdones without a care.

“Too slow... No, too fast?! What is this? What’s happening?!”

Sylvia’s face twisted in confusion, unable to believe what she was seeing.

“A knight should never lose their composure,” Nate said harshly, snapping Sylvia out of her confusion. “Time’s up. Their time is flowing tremendously fast. That’s why their movements are slow, but appear fast to us. They’re both fast and slow right now.”

“There’s no way they can reach the future first in Naphta’s restricted world,” Sylvia replied. “Not even the Keeper of Time, Eugo La Raviaz can control the flow of time here!”

It seemed they had taken another step further into the abyss of love.

“What’s that? I’ve never seen that magic reaction before,” Sasha said.

“The light surrounding them turned pink!” Eleonore cried in surprise. “I’ve never seen a Teo Aske like that!”

“Hmm. That’s something different,” I said. “That spell has far surpassed Teo Aske.”

The light of the love magic surrounding Misa and Lay transformed, creating a pink-colored cosmos flower behind them. But the magic circle for the spell seemed to be shifting oddly—as though it was a representation of their overflowing hearts.

“A spell formula like that can’t be crafted in the mind alone. That magic circle was entrusted to the love between them. In addition to that...” I murmured.

Laughter bubbled from within me.

“Ha ha ha, bwa ha ha! Color me surprised,” I said. “I didn’t think spells could

be developed using *love* instead of the brain. You always exceed my expectations—and common sense. But that's why you're the Hero, Lay."

With Misa still in his arms, Lay came to a stop and said, "Lovul Aske. This spell will create a tiny and modest—but powerful—world of our own."

"Can you keep up with the speed of our love?" Misa asked.

Sylvia gritted her teeth. Behind me, Shin else gritted their teeth even louder.

"Don't look down on me! A weed like that won't stand a chance against my dragon!" Sylvia cried.

The number of her Gaddez wings increased from four to eight. An outrageous amount of magic power flowed from her, dense enough to distort the air.

"*Demesdones*!"

Sylvia became a divine wind that rushed at Misa and Lay. She followed them closely as they moved using Lovul Aske.

"Haaaaaah!"

But each tempest-like strike of her blade was knocked back by the Siegsesta, the Sword of Intent in Misa's hand. Lovul Aske was wrapped around the blade, allowing their love magic to evenly match Sylvia's source-eroding Gaddez.

Her self-sacrificial attacks were converting her life energy into magic, but even that wasn't enough to reach Misa and Lay.

"Why..."

Sylvia yelled as she swung her sword in quick succession. "Why?! How can it be?! How can you cross swords with me with such unstable posture and poor sword stance?!"

"I already told you. Lovul Aske is our world," Lay replied.

"Lay and I are one in heart and body," Misa added. "This sword is the combination of my strength and Lay's skills. It's only natural for two to be stronger than one."

Their love was so great that it distorted reason and disturbed order. Misa's sword slashes should have been unstable from her being carried, but instead

were fast and heavy. In the microcosm of their world, love ruled over all.

And so, there was no reason why a sword held during a bridal carry would be any less stable than a sword held while standing on one's own feet.

That was Lovul Aske—a world of their own.

"Nonsense! There's no way love can be used to fight! I won't stand for something as ridiculous as flirting your way into being stronger!"

"This is how humans on the surface fight," Lay said. "What we lack in power, we make up for with love. You can look down upon us for flirting, but let me make this clear: we're serious about our love."

The pink cosmos world expanded further.

"Someone who makes fun of the love of others will never grasp the future they desire!" Lay exclaimed.

"Shut up! Acknowledging love wouldn't have made us any stronger! I will smash your little fantasy world with this dragon sword!" Sylvia shouted.

Sword slashes danced about the field, each one knocked away by Misa's sword. They crossed swords over a hundred times, sending fireworks of magic scattering with every fierce collision.

The two sides were locked in a fierce duel. Provoked by Lay, Sylvia had used her magic to give herself the advantage in speed. But with each strike of their swords, Lay and Misa's advantage of using two people's power in one body became more apparent. Sylvia was pressed back and fell to her knees.

"Heh..." she smirked boldly. "It's over. Your movements have stopped."

"Well done, Deputy Commander." Nate jumped forward from behind Sylvia.

"Dragon art—"

The mountain-like Gaddez appeared behind him. The magic power of the sacred dragon mountain gathered at the end of his sword.

"*Geddeolver*."

The sword thrust forward with enough force to flatten the crystal city. It slipped past Sylvia with careful precision to reach Misa, whose Lovul Aske sword

was still locked against Sylvia's—

The next moment, cosmos petals scattered.

"Wha... What?!" Nate spluttered.

Every time Geddeolver increased in might, Lovul Aske revolted, bringing Nate and Sylvia into the world of pink cosmos.

"It can't be... This weed of a flower... Aaaaaaaaah!" Sylvia screeched.

"How could you have so much power left?" Nate asked.

The two Dragon Knights had been so focused on attacking with Gaddez, they were unable to defend against the cosmos world blooming out of control.

Lay and Misa looked into each other's eyes and whispered their love.

"*Lovul Triazetta*!"

Once the cosmos completely covered the two knights, a pink explosion occurred. Nate and Sylvia were sent flying.

"W-Waaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

The Gaddez they used at the last moment was swallowed by the explosion and dispersed, leaving them unarmed, whirling in the air. They crashed into the clock tower and fell.

Lovul Triazetta. A spell that took the attacks of the opponent and used it to momentarily heighten the power of Lovul Aske, huh? It seemed to be another use of the order of love.

In other words...

"Didn't you know? The stronger the obstacle..."

"...the hotter love burns."

Misa and Lay brought their faces together and laughed happily. As though they had no care for who was watching them, in a perfectly relaxed manner.

"Here you go, Lay," Misa said. "Drink up."

Most of the wrath wine floating in the air had been consumed by Lay already.

Misa gathered the rest with her fingers and brought them to his lips for him to drink.

“Oh my. What do you think you’re doing?” she chided when he licked her fingertips.

Lay grinned brightly at her. “The alcohol dripping from your fingers was pretty.”

“How naughty.” Misa tapped her fingers against Lay’s lips.

The cosmos space they created with their magic was indeed their own little world.

§ 16. The Future of Hope Is Despair

The first team to finish drinking the wrath wine was Lay and Misa. The rest of the knights all stirred noisily at their victory, talking among themselves.

“The restricted world is practically the heart of the Knights of Agatha...”

“It shouldn’t have been possible for Commander Nate and Deputy Commander Sylvia to be defeated there!”

“Since it was a trial, there was always a chance they would emerge victorious, but...”

“That chance was one in one hundred thousand. Being able to grasp that single strand of hope is...”

“That man named Lay was key to the magic that defeated them. Despite being a swordsman, he held his partner rather than his sword and believed in her to the end. What bravery...what deep love!”

“Would we have been able to do that? Discarding our sword and believing solely in our comrades... It’s definitely not as easy as it looks.”

“After mastering the sword, he let go of it... That man has reached the pinnacle of sword mastery: total detachment to the sword...”

From behind me, a cold voice spoke to cut through the knights’ praise.

“But if that love is genuine,” Shin said, “then their true challenge is when their world is sliced to shreds.”

Sensing the murderous gaze fixed upon him, Lay’s smile turned strained.

“You may test them if the chance arises. Those two can still grow stronger,” I said.

Light glinted in Shin’s Eyes. “As you wish, my liege.”

I stepped forward. “I assume you have no complaints?” I asked Diedrich and Naphta.

Diedrich grinned broadly. “The hero of Azesion truly is something else, isn’t he? It’s no wonder he was able to face the Demon King two thousand years ago. The prophecy trial has been successfully cleared. I commend your efforts.”

The Knights of Agatha straightened themselves and saluted, their swords across their chests.

“As Lay and Misa just demonstrated, a one-in-one-hundred-thousand future is still an obtainable future,” I said. “And so, there is no reason to give up. You should proceed down the path of salvation for all.”

Diedrich’s smile fell, replaced with a serious look.

“There was very little probability of this future happening,” he said curiously. “So why did I have the feeling you would be able to reach this point anyway?”

He slowly walked over to me. “I don’t mind bringing you with me to Gadeciola. But there’s one thing I’d request of you.”

“Oh?”

“Promise me you’ll give up on ending the Selection Trial.”

That was an unexpected proposal.

“Let’s hear the reason,” I replied. “I can’t see you wanting to become a proxy of god yourself.”

“That’s right. It wouldn’t suit me anyway,” Diedrich said with a chuckle. “But there are things that I have to do even if it doesn’t suit me. I have two reasons. The first is power: if I become a proxy of god, I’ll obtain the strength to compete against order. It may be enough power to overturn a prophecy.”

“I don’t think so.”

I immediately shot down Diedrich’s words.

“Gods are order. The proxy will be no different from them,” I explained. “The countless futures that Naphta sees are formed from that order. No matter how much power you gain, a god of order cannot overthrow another god of order.”

Order worked to protect order, and keep it functioning. The way I saw it, becoming the proxy would actually make it *harder* to overturn the prophecy.

“I understand your point. But it’s the future that can best overturn the prophecy.”

“Is that because of the other reason?”

Diedrich nodded firmly.

“There’s only one future that Naphta can’t see to the end,” he said quietly. “Not a blind spot, but a future of darkness—the end of the Selection Trial. Naphta’s Divine Eyes can’t see anything past the beginning of the end.”

“In other words, no prophecy will foresee anything past the end of the Selection Trial.”

“In short, yes.”

“Then the answer is simple. I will put an end to the Selection Trial. If there’s no prophecy where everyone can be saved, then the only hope can be found in the future past the end of the Selection Trial.”

Despite my words, Diedrich’s expression remained grim—it seemed even this current situation was just another one of the futures he had seen.

“The end of the Selection Trial only leads to a future full of despair. As knights, we must protect the trial with our lives. This is the prophecy that has been passed down in Agatha for generations.”

“Who made that prophecy?” I asked.

“The first Sword Emperor. He exchanged a pact with Naphta and left this prophecy to Agatha.”

“That means the Goddess of the Future, with her Divine Eyes, once saw past the end of the Selection Trial. Why can’t she see that future anymore?”

“I will answer that,” Naphta said. “The order of the Goddess of the Future receives its power from the future. The future can only be seen if it exists. It’s a complex order, but to put it simply, it’s easier to see the future the further away it is from the present. The future with the end of the Selection Trial is close to this current point in time. There isn’t enough of the future left past the end of the Selection Trial for my Eyes to see into the darkness.”

Her explanation was solemn. “What this means is that the end of the

Selection Trial is the beginning of the end of this world. The world will vanish and the future will cease to exist, so it will be impossible for me to see the path there."

"I see. When the world ends, the future vanishes with it. It's harder for the Divine Eyes to see events the closer they are to this void."

"Exactly."

The first Sword Emperor of Agatha established the kingdom roughly two thousand years ago, placing the end of the Selection Trial approximately two thousand years into the future. Naphta's Divine Eyes were still able to see the end of the world when it was that far away, but as time progressed closer to that future, she lost that ability.

When the first Sword Emperor realized that, he left a prophecy for Agatha—a warning to never let the Selection Trial end.

"And you can't remember the future you told the first Sword Emperor, right?"

"I am the order of the future," Naphta replied. "I cannot see the past, and instantly forget the present."

"That's how it is, Demon King Anos," Diedrich concluded. "So this is my earnest request to you: won't you please give up on the Selection Trial?"

"Even if the end of the Selection Trial *is* the end of the world, it doesn't change the fact that it's a future Naphta can't see," I pointed out.

Diedrich nodded grimly. "I get what you're saying."

"Did you think there was no hope at the end of the world?"

Diedrich closed his eyes and shook his head. He then sighed heavily.

"That I don't know."

"Hope can only be found in the future you can't see."

"You're not wrong, but the future has already *been* seen: the first Sword Emperor of Agatha looked into the darkness, saw the destruction of the world, and left behind the prophecy to never let the Selection Trial end."

"Are you sure the first Sword Emperor saw the end?" I questioned. "You have

no way of confirming it."

"You're right. But when people cannot see the impossible, they look to hope instead. They will keep moving forward without knowing they're heading to despair."

"There's no need for a prophet on a path that can't be foreseen, Diedrich. I will destroy all the tragedies and despair in this world."

Diedrich looked me in the eye and answered boldly, "True hope can only be found down the best possible path. It would be foolish to charge towards the end of the world in the name of hope."

"Foolish? It's just business as usual for me. Are you and Naphta afraid of the one thing your Divine Eyes can't see?"

"Of course I'm afraid. An entire kingdom rests upon my shoulders. The fate of this world rests on a single prophecy. It is the duty of a king to fear threats and protect his people. I cannot protect my people simply by being brave."

He had a point, but with his mindset, there was no way he would be able to save everyone.

"The prophecy called it the end of the world. What would you do if you charged towards that end, believing it was hope, and only found despair?" Diedrich asked.

"I would overturn that prophecy. Just like how Lay demonstrated moments ago."

"All he did was reach one future out of one hundred thousand," Diedrich noted. "He didn't overturn a prophecy. Nate and Sylvia couldn't see that future with their incomplete Divine Eyes, but Naphta saw it the whole time."

"You said your prophecies accounted for my strength, but do you truly believe that?" I asked in reply. "In that restricted world, what Naphta said was only a theoretical prophecy. Nate and Sylvia were used as theoretical prophets, and Lay and Misa were used as theoretical misfits to break out of that prophecy."

Naphta and Diedrich listened to my words with serious expressions—despite, technically, having heard it all before through their clairvoyance.

“The future that Nate and Sylvia couldn’t see was a future with a one in one hundred thousand chance of occurring. They knew that Misa and Lay could win, but they couldn’t see the path to that result. What if Naphta hadn’t given her prophecy? They would have said that Lay and Misa had no chance of victory.”

Diedrich didn’t argue. He accepted my point so far as correct.

“If Nate and Sylvia were the prophets, Lay and Misa would have indeed overturned their prophecy. In other words, there was a blind spot in Naphta’s incomplete Divine Eyes. If there was someone who could see the future better than Naphta, we could say the same thing is happening here right now.”

What Misa and Lay accomplished wasn’t a matter of difficulty. It was a matter of proving that they could overturn a prophecy.

“That depends on your assumption being correct,” Diedrich said.

“I am the god that governs the order of the future,” Naphta said. “There is no existence that can see the future better than me. These Divine Eyes can see every future—this is the truth.”

“You have no proof that Naphta has a blind spot,” Diedrich added. “Nor proof you can definitely overturn the future. If the Demon King was capable of everything, he wouldn’t have lost his memory.”

“But that *is* the proof, Diedrich.”

I stated what happened as though it was obvious.

“Even I, the Demon King, have lost my memories. So it stands that it is possible for the Goddess of the Future to have a future she can’t see. No one is perfect.”

Diedrich fell silent with a serious expression.

“If only you had Naphta’s Divine Eyes...”

Just as he mumbled that, an explosion went off in the distance. Thunder clamored and rumbled soon after, and the restricted world shook violently. A Leaks immediately followed.

“Enemy raid! Enemy raid! The palace is under attack!”

“So he’s here...” Diedrich said grimly.

Naphta promptly lifted a hand and drew a magic circle. We returned to our original location, the crystal city crumbling into a whirling sandstorm. The restricted world had been lifted.

As the Sword Emperor Palace was rattled by tremors, Diedrich announced, “The assailants are the Phantom Knights of Gadeciola and the Fiend of Purple Lightning.”

§ 17. Magic Wall of the Kingdom

Thunder clapped again as the Sword Emperor Palace continued to shake.

“I have a prophecy to make,” Naphta said. “In one minute and twelve seconds, the Fiend of Purple Lightning will make contact with Ahid in the underground jail. He will create a path using Gavest and leave with him.”

“That works out well. After Ceris has left the palace, the knights and I will pursue him to Gadeciola,” Diedrich said calmly. It seemed that things were going as he planned.

“Prepare for departure,” Nate ordered the knights at the side of the room. Sylvia was by his side, and, just like Nate, looked completely unaffected from their previous fight. Although it had been under the rules of the restricted world, their wounds from the Lovul Triazetta were already healed.

Impressive recovery speed.

If it hadn’t been a drinking battle, they might still be fighting right now.

“Demon King,” Diedrich called. “If you vow to preserve the Selection Trial, we can head to Gadeciola together.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I will not cooperate with you. It’s unfortunate—we both want peace, but will pursue different paths to achieve it. Depending on the future, we may end even up fighting each other.”

“You should know what will happen if you make an enemy of me,” I told him.

Diedrich nodded. “The Knights of Agatha will confront the Demon King in a fair battle and be defeated. This is a prophecy that cannot be overturned. With full knowledge of the outcome, the knights will uphold their honor and fight to the last man standing. We will protect the nation with our swords and open the path to a new future.”

All the knights watched their king without a hint of fear.

“But if possible,” he added, “it would be nice to drink together again someday.”

This was the resolve of a man burdened with the fate of a nation—mere words would not cause him to falter.

“I will show no mercy if you stand in my way, Diedrich,” I said. “The Demon King’s Army will intercept the Knights of Agatha fairly and crush them with all their might.”

If such a moment ever came, we would respond to the knights’ sincerity with our own. *That*, at least, was something I could promise.

“If we both return safely, you should come visit my nation. I’ll show you

around and treat you to some Dilhade wine.”

Diedrich beamed. “That sounds great.”

Could he foresee such a future? I couldn’t tell from his expression alone.

After a moment, another clap of thunder roared. The Sword Emperor Palace lurched once more before the shaking ceased.

Leaks resounded through the room.

“Reporting in! The assailants have abducted Ahid and fled. There were no witnesses to the abduction. The magic used suggests it was the work of the Phantom Knights. They are currently fleeing in the direction of Gadeciola.”

Diedrich looked over at Nate, who nodded and turned to his subordinates.

“The Knights of Agatha will now head out,” Nate announced. “The enemy is the Phantom Knights. Our destination is Gadeciola. Remember: combat is not the goal. Avoid conflict as much as possible!”

“Yes, sir!”

White dragons descended through the skylight with a dragon cry. The knights all climbed onto the dragons and flew away.

“I will materialize the wings of Kandaquizorte,” Naphta said. “May the future bless Prophet Diedrich.”

The Future World Crystal in her hands distorted in shape and transformed into a crystal dragon, which Naphta and Diedrich mounted.

“See you later, Demon King. I pray that you do not follow us,” Diedrich said before taking off.

I turned to my followers. “We’re going to Gadeciola.”

“That was fast! At least think about it for a minute!” Sasha yelped in shock.

“The more I think, the more we’ll fall behind.”

“That may be true, but Diedrich can see the future, and what he’s saying doesn’t sound that wrong. What are you gonna do if what he saw really happens?”

“If I listened to Diedrich’s words, the only future that will happen is one of the futures he saw. None of those futures end in everyone’s happiness. We have no choice but to move.”

Sasha hummed in thought.

“Arcana, prepare a dragon that can carry eight people,” I said.

Arcana held out a hand and summoned lunar snowdrops from her palm.

“Snow falls, turning to wings.”

Lunar snowdrops danced in the air, forming a large snow dragon.

“The Fan Union will ride this. You’re coming with us to Gadeciola,” I said to Ellen.

Despite her surprise, Ellen agreed readily. “Huh?! O-Okay! As you wish!”

The other Fan Union girls all exchanged looks with one another before climbing on the dragon.

“The others can wait here. There shouldn’t be any threats, but proceed with caution.”

The students of the Demon King Academy suddenly paled in fear, a minor uproar sparking from my words.

“Are you serious?”

“What if the knights pick a fight with us...”

“Abandoning us here in a potential enemy kingdom...”

“Won’t we end up like hostages?”

“C-Can you at least leave Mr. Shin with us?”

I addressed their concerns. “Don’t worry, Eldmed will arrive eventually. Besides, there’s someone who can easily take on dragons and draconids among you, no?”

The students collectively gasped in realization.

“That’s right. Anosh is still here.”

“Right, he’d be able to take down a dragon in a single blow.”

“I completely forgot he was here because of his invisibility magic.”

“He’d be able to take down the enemies without them even noticing him!”

The students all exhaled in relief.

“Anosh, you should hide your presence as much as you possibly can. If the others can get through the situation on their own, don’t do anything to help them,” I said to empty space.

Anosh’s silence would make the students believe in themselves. As long as they had hope, things would end up working out.

“Evil...” Sasha muttered under her breath.

“Let’s go.”

We flew up with Fless and left the Sword Emperor Palace through the skylight. For now, we headed in the direction of the Knights of Agatha.

“Is Gadeciola in this direction, Arcana?”

“Not quite. The Phantom Knights are probably taking a detour to lose their pursuers.”

Based on Diedrich’s prophecy, the Phantom Knights would end up in Gadeciola no matter which route they took.

“Then lead us to Gadeciola. I want to enter the country before Diedrich.”

“As you wish.”

Arcana took the lead and altered our course slightly.

“Hm? Can’t we travel part of the way with Gatom?” Eleonore asked.

“There are many dragon nests near Gadeciola,” Arcana explained. “The dragon cry in combination with the anti-magic around the kingdom makes it faster to fly there.”

“It shouldn’t be an issue. We’ll arrive faster than the Knights playing tag with one another,” I added.

Arcana led the way at a speed just fast enough for the snow dragon to keep up with.

But Misha was lagging behind.

“Misha? Are you okay?” Sasha asked worriedly, falling back to fly beside her.

“Yeah...” Misha answered, but she still looked rather pained.

She had overused her Magic Eyes of Creation last night. The lack of magic and fatigue was taking a toll on her body and source.

“Oh, I know! Can another person fit on this dragon?” Ellen suggested.

Jessica nodded. “That’s right! Misha should be able to fit if we all huddle together! She’s tiny anyway!”

“All right everyone, bunch up! Huddle, huddle!”

The Fan Union girls all huddled in a single group. Sasha sighed at the sight of them.

“How are you all squeezing yourselves in?” she asked. “You could fit three more people in that space.”

“I appreciate the thought, but there’ll be no need for that,” I said. “I’ll take her along.”

I moved to the back of the group and took Misha’s hand, bringing her back with me to the front.

“I’m sorry...” Misha mumbled.

“Don’t be. My body’s amazingly light thanks to you. This much is nothing.”

“That’s great...” she said with a faint smile.

“What do you think Gadeciola’s goal is?” Lay suddenly wondered out loud. He had been deep in thought while we were flying. “I get why they’d want to abduct Jiordal’s pope. But what does Gadeciola want to do with Ahid?”

“Maybe they wanted to steal the Royal Dragon’s sacrifice?” Misha suggested.

“Does that mean they *don’t* want Agatha to gain a new dragonborn?” Sasha asked.

“Dragonborn are strong,” Misha said.

“Right,” Sasha agreed. “If Agatha had more Sylvias or Nates, they’d be an

incredibly tough enemy.”

We continued our air travel with such conversation.

Dragon cries echoed through the approaching area, covering our vision with a thick black fog, which was probably the anti-magic that was preventing Gatom from being used. We proceeded through the dark fog until a giant wall of magic came into view.

Arcana pointed at it. “That’s the border of Gadeciola. A magic wall that prevents both people and gods from passing through.”

Sasha’s eyes widened. “But that’s...”

“Beno Ievun?” Misha asked.

A black aurora-like veil marked the border of the kingdom and was, without a doubt, the Beno Ievun that was highly effective against the gods.

“Gadeciola’s magic wall once covered the dome,” I explained. “For a long time, that was what separated the underground world from the surface.”

“That’s the wall you made two thousand years ago, right?” Lay asked me.

“Hmm. It should be. They must have maintained it by filling it with their own magic. This Beno Ievun still has faint traces of my magic in it.”

Though it seemed to have changed quite a bit.

“Did the wall that covered the dome turn into Gadeciola’s border at some point?” I asked Arcana.

“Yes,” she answered. “A thousand years after it first appeared, the wall covering the dome became the wall surrounding Gadeciola.”

The Phantom Knights were former demons of Dilhade. If Melheis had been able to store a portion of Beno Ievun, it wouldn’t be out of the question for my self-proclaimed father to use his magic on Beno Ievun after the original spell faded, and alter it for his own use.

“Can you force our way in?” Misa asked.

“That’s one option, but there’s no need to begin by being so forceful,” I said. “How does one normally enter?”

Arcana cast her gaze downwards. A tower stood before the wall that surrounded the kingdom.

“The magic tower oversees everything to do with the border,” Arcana explained. “It’s said that entry to Gadeciola is granted once you abandon your belief in the gods and vow to obey Gadeciola’s laws.”

“What kind of laws?” Sasha asked.

“I don’t know. People have gone inside before, but no one has ever come out,” Arcana replied.

“Mm... I’d rather not go there...” Eleonore said.

Zeshia clenched her fists with determination. “Zeshia would rather not go too!”

From what I could remember, Gadeciola was an isolationist nation that rarely interacted beyond its borders.

“We won’t know until we try,” I said. “Don’t worry. At worst, we can always leave by force.”

With that, I descended towards the magic tower with Misha in tow. Everyone else followed behind us.

“We don’t believe in any particular god, so it’s fine for us... But what about Arcana?” Misa asked.

“Oh, that’s right. Arcana *is* a god!” Eleonore said.

Misha tilted her head. “She’s a blasphemous god, so it might be okay?”

“I am the Goddess of Absurdity, but I have no memory of being so. Will it be okay even if I’ve discarded that name?” Arcana asked.

“No need to worry,” I assured her.

Sasha shot me a look of suspicion. “What do you mean by that? What are you going to do? We don’t know what goes on inside that tower, right? They might not accept Arcana as the Goddess of Absurdity...”

“You know what they say.”

I smiled at the confused look on Sasha’s face.

“We can just talk it out.”

“Coming from you, it’s never just ‘talk’!” Sasha yelled.

We landed on the roof of the tower and entered through its door.

§ 18. The Forbidden Soldiers of the Overlord’s Army

The magic tower was dark, gloomy, and damp, with an unpleasant smell hanging in the air.

“Hmm, it smells weird in here. Kinda damp too,” Eleonore remarked.

“Needs...cleaning...” Zeshia muttered.

Eleonore and Zeshia spoke to each other while following me. We went down the staircase until a light came into view.

“Oh?” I said. “It seems there are some peculiar inhabitants here.”

They were still a distance away, but I could see some armed soldiers at the bottom of the staircase. Armed with spears, all the soldiers sported dragon horns, claws, and a tail. They were also all seemingly women.

“Looks like they’re part dragon,” I remarked.

“The forbidden soldiers of the Overlord’s Army,” Arcana said. “Soldiers who guard the border. It’s rumored they were granted the power to fight gods through Gadeciola’s forbidden tomes, which requires them to awaken to their original draconid powers.”

“And that’s why they look half dragon, huh?”

“Yes. But that’s just what is said in Jiordal and Agatha.”

Once we reached the bottom of the stairs, we found ourselves before a large restricted magic circle. A barrier surrounded the circle and was additionally guarded with a number of forbidden soldiers.

When I walked forward, two of the soldiers crossed their spears to obstruct my path.

“Halt. What business do you have with Gadeciola?” one of the soldiers asked.

“I’m here to meet the Overlord,” I replied.

“Lord Veaflare only grants audience to the people of Gadeciola. Discard your

faith in god and vow to obey the laws of Gadeciola to be inspected for entry into our nation," the forbidden soldier said, his tone businesslike and impersonal.

"Behind us is the magic circle that serves as the only point of entry to Galadenaga, capital of Gadeciola," the other soldier explained. "But note that while there is a way in, there is no magic circle out. Once you enter the kingdom, you will never leave again—unless you become a forbidden soldier, that is."

"That brings me to a question I have. How should one expect to live after entering the country?" I asked.

"Visit the Overlord Castle within three days of entering the country. There you will receive an explanation of life in Gadeciola. The Overlord, Lord Veaflare, will grant you with a plan for your future."

"What happens if I accidentally forget to go?"

The forbidden soldier clicked her tongue in irritation. "Don't ask ridiculous questions if you value your life."

"I was just curious. Feel free to inspect us for entry."

The soldier glared at me unhappily. "Step forward."

I looked over my shoulder at the others.

"She said we can pass through," I said.

My party approached. The soldier's frown remained as she inspected everyone with her Magic Eyes. When Arcana passed, the forbidden soldier said nothing.

When the Fan Union at the rear finally stepped onto the magic circle, Sasha exhaled in relief beside me.

"So what do we have to do for the inspection?" I asked.

"The inspection has already begun," the forbidden soldier replied.

Part of the fixed magic circle we stood on fragmented, switching to a state that was unable to use Gatom.

“You, come this way.” A forbidden soldier grabbed Arcana’s hand and led her away, while the other said, “The rest of you, open your storage circles. Take out any pledge jewels.”

“Hmm. Why?” I said.

“Gadeciola worships blasphemous gods. Lord Veaflare will decide what happens to the pledge jewels and gods.”

So they needed to take Arcana away separately for that. Did they know she was the Goddess of Absurdity? This nation was remote and private—it was possible they had yet to know about both Arcana and myself.

Overcoming this situation would be easy, but I also wanted to know how this country treated gods.

“I’m the only one with a pledge jewel. Inspect it if you wish,” I said.

I opened my storage magic circle along with the others. The forbidden soldier stared into them with her Eyes. Since they had no need for the pledge jewel they received at the church in Jiordal, I was the only one with a ring.

While the forbidden soldier was examining the storage circles, I sent everyone a Leaks.

“We’re going to split into two groups. Arcana will let them lead her away and work to discover what their goal is. Find out if they’re after the Goddess of Absurdity, Arcana, or if they’re just treating you as any other god. If it’s the former, we may learn more about Genedonov.”

“As you say, big brother,” Arcana replied.

“But how will you know if they’re after the Goddess of Absurdity?” Sasha asked.

“We’ll prepare one more god,” I replied. *“If they lead the other god elsewhere, we’ll know they want something from the Goddess of Absurdity.”*

“Mr. Eldmed could’ve made a Keeper if he was here,” Sasha said, *“but how do we get another god?”*

“We’ll have Lay play the role.”

Lay smiled brightly as he answered, *“Got it.”*

The forbidden soldier moved in front of me. “Inspection of the storage circles is over. Hand over your pledge jewel.”

I closed my storage circle and handed the forbidden soldier my ring. Of course, it wasn’t the real ring, but an elaborate fake made with Iris. The real ring was a Selection Ring, after all. It was hidden with Lynel and Najira.

“All right. Now—”

The forbidden soldier’s eyes landed on Lay.

“You’re a god too, aren’t you?”

Lay had used Naaz to disguise his source. It was quite an unreasonable request to make on short notice, but Lay’s source magic was able to fool the average Magic Eyes.

“Come this way.”

The soldiers took Lay to the same place as Arcana. Everything was going to plan—and Lay naturally glanced back with a smile.

“Do you need anything else?” I asked.

“That’s all for the inspection. You may use the fixed magic circle to teleport in. As I explained before, you must go to the Overlord Castle within the next three days. There you will be given an explanation of the nation and a plan for your future... Wait.”

Just as the soldier was about to return the spell circle back to normal, another forbidden soldier came running over. They whispered something in her ear as other soldiers began to surround us.

“Wait there,” the soldier ordered. “There’s something else to inspect.”

“You just said the inspection was over. What else is there?”

“I don’t answer to you. Stay quiet.”

Hmm. Negotiating with her won’t be possible.

“Doesn’t it seem rather suspicious?” Sasha whispered quietly.

“It’s more than just suspicious. We might be in big trouble,” Eleonore replied.

“Rest assured, we haven’t done anything wrong,” I said to them. “They’ll let us through if we stay calm and confident.”

“Zeshia is good...at being calm and confident...” Zeshia puffed out her chest and walked over to the forbidden soldier, demanding to be let through with a glare. But the soldier brushed her off with a wave of her hand, and she came back with a dejected slump in her shoulders.

“It was no good...” Zeshia mumbled.

“Aww, that’s not true. You did your best, and you were so close!” Eleonore held up a finger and looked at me. “Right, Anos?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “If you were just a little more confident, the Overlord would’ve happily handed you their own head on a platter.”

“They weren’t talking about things on a Demon King scale...” Sasha muttered tiredly.

Just then, a magic circle some distance away from us glowed, and five soldiers appeared from the circle. They were the knights that wore the draconic armor we had seen at the ruins of Ligarondrol—Gadeciola’s Phantom Knights.

“What did you want confirmed?” one of the Phantom Knights asked.

A forbidden soldier approached him and said, “The people over there wish to enter the country. One looks like Anos Voldigoad, the man Ceris said not to allow in. Please confirm his identity.”

“Got it.”

The five Phantom Knights approached us.

“Looks like we’ll have to fight...” Misa said.

“I don’t want to aggravate things yet,” I said. “Let’s try talking first.”

She looked at me in surprise. “I don’t mind either way, but what will you do?”

“I’ll show them my sincerity.”

The Phantom Knights reached us as we were speaking. They stared into my abyss with their Magic Eyes.

“There’s no mistaking it,” a Phantom Knight said.

A magic barrier and ward were immediately created around us.

“Be careful! This man is Anos Voldigoad!” another Phantom Knight announced.

“You’ve got the wrong person,” I said confidently.

At my side, Sasha gave me an incredulous look.

“Don’t be ridiculous. There’s no way we’d mistaken your source, Demon King Ano—?!”

The five Phantom Knights all touched their necks. Nedneliaz collars had slipped through the barrier and snapped around them.

“That’s impossible... When did he...?”

Because I had cast Lynel and Najira on the collars, only the wearers were aware they were there.

“Demon King Anos, was it?” I said. “I’ve heard of him before too. A brutal tyrant who committed all kinds of atrocities. Everyone who defied him went through a hell worse than death itself. Do you really think a man like that would be in *this* remote place?”

The Phantom Knights gulped at my menacing words. If they really were demons from two thousand years ago, they should be very familiar with the rumors about me. But only by facing me in person and feeling the threat of my magic on their sources directly would they realize those rumors were no exaggeration.

“Take another close look at my source. Are you sure I’m the same person?”

“Uh... Ah...”

“Um...”

No matter what they answered, only hell awaited them. The magic power of the Phantom Knights trembled in fear.

“Whatever you just imagined must not be so bad, for you to hesitate like this.”

After one beat of silence, they called out to the forbidden soldier watching from afar.

“This man is not Anos Voldigoad!”

“Are you certain?” the forbidden soldier asked.

“Yes, you have the wrong person. Let him through...”

After answering her question, the Phantom Knights dispelled the barrier and ward and backed away as though they were fleeing.

“Oh, one more thing,” I said, causing the knights to pause in their retreat. “Pets should always be collared, don’t you think? That way, they’ll behave themselves, even if the owner looks away.”

The knights gulped nervously once again. Another way to understand my words: there’s no telling what I’d do if they told even a single person about me.

“S-Stop speaking such nonsense!” the Phantom Knights said before teleporting away.

“You may go. But refrain from making such chatter in front of us in the future.” The forbidden soldier gave that brief warning before restoring the magic circle and returning to her original position.

I looked over at Sasha and smiled.

“See? My sincerity got through to them.”

“What would you have done if they weren’t demons...” she muttered exasperatedly.

“I’d just have a deeper discussion with them.”

Sending magic into the restricted magic circle, I activated Gatom. My vision turned white for a brief moment, then cleared to the sight of people walking on the streets. We were in a city. The street was lined with many shops and thriving businesses in every building.

“Galadenaga?” Misha asked, tilting her head.

“So it seems.”

“It was easier to get in than I thought. I guess it’s only the Phantom Knights

who have any information on us," Misa said.

Sasha looked worried. "They took Arcana and Lay away, though. Will they be okay?"

I checked my link to Arcana and Lay's vision with my Magic Eyes. "They haven't made a move yet. They're still waiting at the tower."

"Then shall we go and save Golroana and Ahid first? Though I'd really rather not..."

"That will be important too, but we still have time before Diedrich arrives. The problem right now is how Ricardo will most likely die if things go as prophesied. His survival depends on things going against Diedrich's expectations."

"Um... I get what you mean, but how do we do that if Diedrich can see the future?" Sasha asked in confusion.

"That's why the Demon King's Choir is here."

"You mean..."

"First, we'll spread the song of the surface throughout Gadeciola."

"Are you stupid?!" Sasha snapped sharply.

"He said it himself—the Demon King's Choir shakes his emotions in unexpected ways. It may not be enough to overturn the prophecy, but their song should be able to shake the future at least a little."

"Will that lead to Naphta's blind spot?" Misha asked.

"Possibly," I said. "It's worth a try either way. If we can't find Naphta's blind spot, we'll just have to reach the one in one hundred thousand future ourselves."

Sasha looked like she was fighting a fierce headache. "So... You mean..."

"We'll shake the emotions of Gadeciola's people with the Choir's hymns. At best, that will start the chain reaction to saving Ricardo's life."

"I don't get it at all... How is Ricardo's life related to a song?"

"Fret not, things will work out." I turned to the Fan Union girls, who had been listening until now in a daze. "Can you do it?"

“U-Um... I don’t know if we can do something that extravagant...”

“You just have to sing like normal. Shake the hearts of the people here.”

The girls all exchanged looks with one another before nodding.

“W-We’ll do our best! Right guys?”

“Yup! That’s about all that we can do anyway!”

“We’ll give it our all!”

Eleonore raised her hand. “But there’s nothing we can do to make them listen to their song, is there? Jiordal had the Sojourner’s Psalm, and Agatha had the Sword Emperor’s support, but what will we do here?”

“I’ve already considered that,” I replied. “It’s the perfect weather for it too.”

She looked at me in confusion.

“The theme this time will be miracles,” I explained. “For the nation that doesn’t believe in the gods, we’ll offer them salvation.”

§ 19. Song of Miracles

We were walking through Galadenaga, the capital of Gadeciola. There were no churches like Jiordal, or knights like Agatha. The forbidden soldiers couldn't be seen on the streets either. I cast my Magic Eyes everywhere, so I could observe how the people here lived.

"Hmm. Gadeciola's meant to be one of the three big kingdoms of the underground, right? Isn't it kind of small?" Eleonore wondered out loud.

"Right? I guess people assumed the entire area covered by Beno Ievun was inhabited, since that's all they can see from outside," Sasha said, pointing at the barrier along the country border.

"The capital seems pretty big, but are there other cities besides this? I don't think they could fit another city within the barrier."

Misha nodded. "I think this is the only city."

"I guess there aren't many people who believe in blasphemous gods here in the underground world." Sasha looked around the city with a curious expression.

It was near impossible to survive in the underground without relying on the gods. Only those under strenuous circumstances would come here and live like this.

"But it's not like the kingdom was founded yesterday," I said. "They may not receive many immigrants, but no one can leave either. The population should still increase."

At a glance, there were more people walking the streets here than in Agatha or Jiordal.

"It doesn't seem like they lack land either," I continued. "If left to nature, the number of cities *should* increase."

Misha tilted her head. "Is the Beno Ievun stopping them from expanding?"

“Who knows? They have Ceris, the Netherworld King Aeges, and the Cursed King Kaihilam on their side. The Overworld governing the kingdom should also have a considerable amount of magic. They could be maintaining this scale on purpose.”

After all, expanding the territory would make Beno Ievun more difficult to maintain.

“I understand why they may not wish to expand recklessly,” Shin said with a menacing glare at our surroundings, “but why are the forbidden soldiers and Phantom Knights the only ones permitted to leave Gadeciola? Beno Ievun is effective against the gods, but it’s not like there are enemies waiting to attack the moment they step out of the barrier.”

“And with the forbidden soldiers and Phantom Knights around, they have plenty of forces to keep other nations in check,” Misa added.

Eleonore made a sound of realization. “Oh, that’s right! The people of Agatha didn’t seem like the type to attack for no reason. So the people here should feel free to leave and walk about.”

“So why aren’t they allowed out?” Sasha asked, puzzled.

“I know...!” Zeshia announced smugly.

“That’s amazing, Zeshia! You’re a genius!”

Eleonore immediately showered her with praise, but Zeshia glared at her unhappily.

“I still haven’t said anything... Don’t do that...”

Eleonore giggled at Zeshia’s disapproving face. “You’re too clever, Zeshia. Okay, so what did the Overlord want to do?”

“To keep everyone confined...”

“Why though?” Sasha mumbled childishly, unable to keep herself from arguing.

“So that everyone stays nearby...!”

“The Overlord isn’t that lonely,” Sasha protested.

Zeshia clenched her fists and turned to Sasha. “Zeshia gets lonely... So the Overlord gets lonely too...!”

“I-I guess that could be true...”

“I have...one more idea...” Zeshia said, leaning in close to Sasha.

“What?”

“This land...is amazing...”

“Um... What’s amazing about it?”

“It’s just amazing...!”

Zeshia made her point with pure insistence.

“I-I see... So what if it’s amazing?”

“It’s amazing...so everyone has to stay here...!”

“I don’t get it at all...” Sasha muttered with a sigh.

“There are other strange things about this kingdom,” I said.

Sasha looked at me in question. “Really?”

“There are no stores selling food,” Misha answered.

We had been walking around the city for a while, and the townscape itself looked no different from Jiordal or Agatha. The stores were well stocked with daily necessities and other products. But for some reason, none of them were selling food or groceries.

“Does everyone grow their own food?” Eleonore asked, lifting an index finger.

“The underground environment would make farming difficult. Even if this city grew its own food, they’d have to source more from outside the country. It really doesn’t make sense for the citizens to be prohibited from leaving,” I said.

A growing population on limited space would probably have an easier time obtaining food from the outside. Were they possibly using magic to make ends meet?

“If they can’t expand their area, then it doesn’t make sense for them to confine their citizens and increase the population. The more the population

grows, the more cramped this city would get."

A kingdom that never interacted beyond its borders was less likely to receive immigrants in the first place. Allowing people to come and go as they please would draw more visitors, which would make the population increase.

Eleonore pointed her finger at me. "Oh, then maybe it's this: visiting other kingdoms would mean believing in the gods, so that's why they can't leave this place!"

"Wow! Genius!" Zeshia agreed enthusiastically.

"Hey, you're making fun of me! Is this revenge for earlier?"

The two started chasing each other playfully.

"Leaving the kingdom isn't a problem as long as they return," I said. "Perhaps they have reason to believe the citizens won't return of their own will once they leave."

"Doesn't that mean Gadeciola's actually a terrible place to live in?" Sasha said with a frown.

"Hopefully that isn't the case," I replied. "There may be circumstances beyond what we can speculate."

"Huh? Hey, what's that hole over there?" Ellen suddenly called out.

There was a large crater at the center of the city with a deep hole in its center.

"Wow! That's a big hole."

"I can't see the bottom!"

"Let me see! Let me see!"

Nono, Jessica, and the other girls ran over excitedly and tried to look into the hole.

"Exactly as prophesied," I said.

"Earthrain?" Misha asked.

"Yeah. This must have fallen just yesterday."

Diedrich had told me all the times and places the earthrain would fall. Although Beno Ievun covered the sky here, the falling boulders were eternalized through the power of the Sword of the Almighty.

“We’re going to use this.”

Sasha looked at me doubtfully. “This, as in...the earthrain?”

Just as I nodded, a voice called out from behind us.

“Hey, you lot!”

We turned to see some people dressed in robes—citizens of Gadeciola.

“You don’t seem like you’re from around here,” said a man, probably the leader of the group. “This place is off-limits. If you’ve just entered the country, you should head straight for the Overlord Castle.”

“Perfect timing. Are you the ones tasked with investigating the earthrain?” I replied.

The man frowned with suspicion. “So what if we are?”

“You’re troubled by how the barrier in the sky suddenly stopped blocking the earthrain, right? We can help you with that.”

The robed man’s eyes widened in surprise. “Do you know what’s going on?”

“Genedonov, the Goddess of Absurdity, is behind it,” I explained. “She turned both the dome and the earthrain into eternalized objects that can never be destroyed. And it won’t be long until more earthrain falls upon this city.”

“What proof do you have of that—”

A loud rumble from overhead drowned out the rest of the man’s sentence—a skytremor. I stared through Beno Ievun with my Magic Eyes to see more of the dome crumbing as it shook.

Part of the dome came loose, with large boulders emerging from the surface —thirteen in total.

“This earthrain will be a heavy one,” I warned.

“F-Forecast the earthrain location and send out an evacuation notice immediately! The god-repelling magic wall should be able to hold on for a little

while! Everyone needs to be moved to a safe location immediately!” the man yelled.

But one of the boulders was protruding further out of the dome’s surface with every passing moment.

“It’s no good! We won’t make it in time!” someone else from the robed man’s group said.

“Tell everyone to run!” he replied. “Get as far away from the earthrain as you can!”

Ignoring the panicking citizens of Gadeciola, I quietly raised my hand. Ellen and the other girls noticed my signal and drew a magic circle. Synial activated. The instrumental that started playing was Demon King Hymn No. Six, “Neighbor.”

“H-Hey, what are you guys doing?!” the man shouted. “This isn’t the time for that! Come this way, we have to get out of here!”

“If we run, your city will be destroyed. Don’t worry, these girls will sing the earthrain away,” I said.

“What are you saying—”

A deafening rumble echoed from the sky as a giant earthrain fell towards the ground. I immediately took out Leviangilma, the Sword of the Almighty, and used Veneziara into the sky.

With my Magic Eyes, I could see the earthrain accelerating to an unstoppable speed before crashing into the Beno Ievun. The thunderous crash of the earthrain digging into the Beno Ievun rattled our ears. Though the collision had slowed its momentum slightly, the bottom half of the boulder had already pierced through the barrier.

At that point, it was only a matter of time before it fell through. However...

“Oh my! I didn’t know such a world existed!”

“In-cum, in-cum, incoming, woo-ooh!”

The moment the girls started singing, the earthrain vanished without a trace.

The men exclaimed in shock.

“What?!”

“Huh...”

“The earthrain...disappeared?”

I had used Veneziara to slice the eternalized boulder with the possibilities of Leviangilma, dispersing it into nothing.

The men held their breaths as they watched on.

“Wh-What was that just now?”

“It’s as you saw and heard. Their song erased the earthrain.”

They looked at the Demon King’s Choir in disbelief.

“That can’t be...”

“The earthrain that so easily passed through the god-repelling magic wall...”

“Erased by a mere song... How can such a thing be possible?!”

“It *shouldn’t* be possible... It shouldn’t, but...”

“The moment they sang that song, the earthrain *did* disappear...”

Leviangilma was a sword that never left its sheath. They hadn’t seen me draw it at all.

The people of Gadeciola stood there in a daze.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“Huh?”

I gestured at the sky to the men. “Look. The earthrain isn’t over yet. It won’t be long until more boulders fall. Their song alone isn’t enough to stop all of them. Gather the people of Gadeciola here and sing with them!”

“But we aren’t familiar with the song...”

“All you have to say is ‘*in-cum, in-cum, incoming, woo-ooh*.’ We will handle the rest.”

The men thought for a moment.

“If that’s all they need, then I guess...”

“Y-Yeah. It sounds like we could...”

The robed men looked at one another.

“But is it okay to believe him?”

“This isn’t the time to be saying that! We have to block the earthrain first! We want to protect the city just like them!”

“I suppose... That’s right...”

They came to an agreement and nodded.

“Let’s gather more people!”

“I’m Dias, Dias Alondo,” the leader of the robed men said to me. “Please teach us that song! We will cooperate with you to defend against the earthrain!”

Dias offered his hand to me. I shook it and said, “It’s Anos Voldigoad. Nice to meet you.”

The dome trembled fiercely and showed more signs of impending earthrain. The Demon King’s Choir raised their voices and began singing, “Don’t open the door!”

The people of Gadeciola gathered in the area, one after another. The robed men earnestly explained how the song would erase the earthrain. Eventually, voices practicing the in-cum line could be heard throughout the crowd, gradually increasing in volume.

After Jiordal and Agatha, this place would be next to open the forbidden door.

§ 20. Gadeciola’s Hatred

“We’re moving, big brother.”

A voice called out to me as I listened to the Demon King Choir’s hymn resounding through Galadenaga.

I switched my vision to Arcana’s Magic Eyes. She was still inside the magic tower with Lay, and they were both surrounded by forbidden soldiers. There was something dark about the look in their eyes. I couldn’t read subtle emotions as well as Misha, but I could easily tell they were looking at Arcana with hatred.

“What god are you?” one of the forbidden soldiers asked in a businesslike manner. She seemed to be holding back her emotions.

“I am the nameless god, Arcana.”

The woman who questioned her looked irritated by that answer. “Are you mocking me?”

“I am not lying, dragon child. Gods can discard their names. If you wish to know my former name, I can tell you: the blasphemous god Genedonov, Goddess of Absurdity.”

“Lies.” The soldier’s voice turned low with anger. “Insolent god. Did you think we would fall to our knees and worship you if you mentioned the Goddess of Absurdity? Outsiders like to claim that Gadeciola worships blasphemous gods, but none of you know the full details. To us, blasphemous gods are no different from any other god.”

“What do you mean?” Arcana asked.

“If you’re the real Goddess of Absurdity, you should know this already. It was Genedonov, god of lies and betrayal, who taught Gadeciola that neither gods nor blasphemous gods will ever bring the people salvation!”

The forbidden soldier spat her words out sharply. “Do not believe in the gods

—that is our inverse faith in you. That is the pain that was carved into each and every one of us. We citizens of Gadeciola will stand above the gods and dominate them."

"I understand that is what you were taught, dragon child. But it's true that I was once the Goddess of Absurdity, and that now, I have discarded that name. I am not trying to fool you," Arcana said calmly. "Gods exist in many shapes. It is both true *and* false that gods do not bring people salvation. Even so, I vow to you this: my body is formed from the order that brings salvation to others."

The woman pointed her spear at Arcana's face.

"If gods can bring salvation, then why *don't* they?" the woman shouted furiously. "I prayed. I begged the gods and sacrificed *everything*! But even when I gave up all I had, my child wasn't saved. Why was my child cursed with a shortened lifespan? Why couldn't the so-called gods save a single life?!"

Arcana looked back at the woman sadly. It was clear to any witness that she was still imprisoned by her past tragedy. She had prayed to the gods and wished for a miracle, but that wish hadn't been granted. It was a common occurrence both aboveground and below.

"Was it too much to ask for a regular lifespan?! After everything the priest had the gall to tell me I wasn't devout enough, that my prayers were lacking. As if that were possible!"

The hands clenched around the spear were trembling with rage.

"Jiordal's teachings and Agatha's teachings were both lies. The gods do not save anyone. No amount of prayer, no matter of sacrifice changes that. So why didn't they just say that the gods don't exist from the start?!"

Because the underground world was such a deeply religious place, it was not uncommon for anyone betrayed by the gods to fall into an intense rage.

"It isn't a lie that we bring salvation, dragon child," Arcana said. "But we are not omniscient, and we are not omnipotent. There are lives and hearts we will fail to save. Your tragedy was not due to your prayers lacking—it was because the gods' powers were lacking."

The forbidden soldier gritted her teeth and clenched her spear even more

tightly.

“Shut up...” she muttered with deep hatred. “Shut your mouth!”

Finally, the forbidden soldier lost control of her emotions and thrust her spear forward. But instead of piercing Arcana, the end of the spear was sliced off—by Evansmana, the Sword of Three Races.

“I know you wanted to save your child,” Lay said, “But if you’ve realized that gods aren’t such special beings, you should understand that they’re not so different from you.”

“Silence. It’s too late for you gods to be saying that. After so much preaching about how the Almighty Radiance governs every order of god, the moment things get inconvenient for you, you claim to be the same as us?”

“Neither of us claim to be the Almighty Radiance. I don’t know what your circumstances were, but we can’t be blamed for things we weren’t a part of.”

The forbidden soldier glared at Lay. To her, it sounded like they were just making excuses. “All you gods are the same. You only care about order and reason. You’ve never given a second thought to our feelings!”

It was true that this world was overflowing with such gods. Irritatingly so.

“I won’t deny that many gods lack a heart,” he conceded. “But that doesn’t mean it’s right to assume all gods are the same. After all, in this underground world, your nation is the only one who refuses to believe the gods, while others still rely on them to survive.”

“You just keep prattling on...!”

The soldier drew a new spear from a magic circle and thrust it at Lay. He easily cut it to pieces on the spot.

The treatment of gods in Gadeciola was decided only by the Overlord Veaflare. What this forbidden soldier was doing now was solely out of her own personal grudge. Yet none of the other forbidden soldiers were stopping her. They were all watching Lay and Arcana with the same eyes.

It seemed they were all of a similar mindset.

“This damn god speaks like he’s a human. Name yourself! What god are you?”

Lay answered with a bright smile. “Laygrandz, God of Courage.”

“God of Courage?”

The name didn’t seem to ring a bell—as it shouldn’t. Lay had just made up that name on the spot.

“What you’re lacking is the courage to accept your own mistakes,” Lay said. “No one can deny your sadness and hatred. But not every god has treated you badly. Even if you eradicate all gods, your child won’t come back to life.”

The forbidden soldier directly refuted Lay’s admonishment. “You gods only say what best suits you! The existence of gods is plague upon us all. The order of flames burns people, the order of blades cuts people. The order of life *killed my child*! And now you’re using your order of courage to trample all over my pride and my revenge?!”

“You refuse to see anything other than the bad. Fire prevents hypothermia—food must be cut to be prepared. And to move forward, one must have courage.”

“We won’t be fooled by the words of gods anymore. The world can survive without order. We can live without the gods! That’s why Gadeciola and the Overlord exist!”

The soldier sent magic into her spear. Flames appeared around the tip of the blade.

“We forbidden soldiers of Gadeciola have all been betrayed by the gods. Some by the Keeper of Restoration, some by the God of Gospel, and others by the God of Brilliance. When our lives were ruined, we made a vow—a vow for revenge. We will destroy the gods and, with our own hands, obtain true order and true peace!”

The flames spread, blocking Lay’s path as the spear stabbed towards his heart.

“Hyah!”

One brandish of the Sword of Three Races later, the flames were erased and the spear was deflected back.

“I understand your hatred,” Lay said. He pointed Evansmana at the soldier’s throat and looked her in the eye. “But destroying the gods won’t bring world peace.”

“What...?”

“Will your revenge really end there?” he questioned. “Will a personal grudge directed at an entire race really end with the destruction of the gods?”

The soldier returned Lay’s calm gaze with a glare of hatred.

“A warped sense of revenge will only bring warped results. As long as you stew in your bottomless hatred, you’ll continue making new enemies out of nothing. Your battle won’t end until you’ve destroyed everything.”

“What would you know?!”

Lay shrugged at her outburst of rage. “I know exactly how you feel, which is why I’m trying to correct your mistakes. I recall all of it. That hatred, that resentment... You currently stand at a crossroads, faced with a decision: is it revenge that you want, or is it peace?”

Footsteps sounded.

More forbidden soldiers surrounded Lay and Arcana, pointing both their spears and hatred at them.

“Are you sure about this? If the Overlord is meant to decide what happens to gods, won’t you be punished for doing this?”

“Damn talkative god,” the soldier replied. “That isn’t something for you to worry about. Do it!”

At her command the other soldiers stabbed their spears into the floor. Purple flames ran across the ground, creating a magic circle beneath their feet.

“*Nuizinias*.”

Sparks flew from the magic circle. Arcana’s features twisted as she fell to her knees.

“A barrier that seals divine powers...” she murmured.

“That’s right. You gods cannot move freely within Nuizinias! This is our crystal

of wisdom, developed to destroy the order of the gods!” The forbidden soldier with Evansmana pointed in her face leaped to the side and reached for her fallen spear, but—

“Gah!”

Before she could grab her spear, Lay tackled her to the ground.

“What...?”

From her position on the floor, she took stock of her surroundings. The spears of her comrades that once formed the Nuizinias were sliced to pieces, while the soldiers themselves were on their knees with pained, baffled expressions.

“U-Unbelievable... What just happened?”

“He’s within Nuizinias... So why...”

With the spears broken, the magic circle of Nuizinias disappeared and released Arcana from its restrictions.

“Get it now? Even if you seal the gods, you can’t seal the order of courage. Courage cannot be restrained by any kind of chain.”

Arcana frowned slightly. Lay’s words were just a means to avoid letting on that he wasn’t a god, and a part of her wanted to reveal that he wasn’t one.

“With courage, you can cut the ties of hatred that restrain you. That is the order of this world,” Lay—as the God of Courage—said to the kneeling soldiers. “That’s why, if you truly want peace, you should fight with courage, not hatred.”

§ 21. Imprisoned God

“You gods really love to get on our nerves...”

The forbidden soldier mustered her magic and struggled to stand on her feet. The other soldiers around her did the same. They drew new spears and leaned on them as they stood up, glaring with their eyes filled with pure hatred for the gods.

“We ran out of courage long ago,” she said, slowly standing upright. “Because you gods stole it all. The order of this world drove our loved ones into a corner, crushed their hearts, and killed them for no reason. I would have been willing to leap into the flames of hell to save my child! It’s the gods who murder without batting an eye and call it the natural order!”

Spurred on by her words, magic started overflowing from the other soldiers.

“Some gods will show you hell, but other gods will save you. How convenient it is for this world to work like that when the gods themselves made it so! Why wasn’t the world created to allow gods to save people in the first place?!”

Lay listened to the soldier’s words without responding.

“We’re sick of listening to the excuses of the gods and the preaching of their followers!”

Their resolution was clear—they were willing to die if it meant they could take them down with them. The soldiers charged forward, fully driven by their raging emotions.

“Halt!” a new voice called out, causing the women to freeze in place.

Two new soldiers appeared, this time in deep green armor—more members of the Phantom Knights. Judging by the lack of Nedneliaz around their necks, they were different from the demons I dealt with earlier.

The forbidden soldiers made way for the men as they walked forward.

“Have you forgotten our wish? Sacrificing some insignificant gods here is

meaningless.”

Sudden guilt flashed the forbidden soldiers’ faces.

“You were all chosen to be forbidden soldiers because of your hatred,” a Phantom Knight said. “But don’t think the Overlord will forgive you every time you step out of line.”

The forbidden soldiers returned to their original posts with looks of displeasure.

“Step over there,” the Phantom Knight said to Lay and Arcana. The two obediently stepped on the magic circle he gestured at.

“Where are you taking us?” Lay asked.

“The Overlord Castle.”

The Phantom Knight activated the magic circle and all teleported away from the tower.

They arrived at what looked like a jail cell. Purple flames surrounded them from floor to ceiling, and there was a Nuizinias magic circle activated on the floor.

It was a cage to trap gods. Arcana grimaced.

“It’s not working,” the Phantom Knight remarked, observing Lay with his Magic Eyes. He was unable to see through Lay’s Naaz, but he could tell the Nuizinias wasn’t having an effect on him.

“I’m the God of Courage. There is nothing that can restrain courage in this world. That’s how my order works,” Lay said with a bright smile.

The knight frowned in suspicion.

“We were told that Overlord Veaflare decides what will happen to us,” Lay continued. “If that’s true, we’re happy to wait here. There’s something we came to find out anyway.”

“Are you really a god?” The Phantom Knight’s gaze focused on the holy sword in Lay’s possession. “That’s Evansmana, the Sword of Three Races. Hero Kanon used it aboveground two thousand years ago.”

The Phantom Knights were demons from two thousand years ago, so it was only natural for them to know of it.

“You’re well-informed,” Lay replied. “That’s right. I, the God of Courage Laygrandz, gave him this holy sword and blessed him. After he died, it returned to my hands.”

His lies were as bold and outrageous as ever—to be expected of the man who for so long pretended to be the Demon King of Tyranny.

“Come.”

The Phantom Knight ordered Lay to move. He brought him to the corner of the room, away from Arcana.

“I’m going to check whether you’re really a god. If you are, Lord Veaflare will decide your future. If not, your life will end here,” he said, reaching for Lay’s neck.

At that moment, the Phantom Knight’s hand turned jet-black. His magic suddenly increased dramatically.

“Dodge. The Supreme Dragon is lurking within that demon child,” Arcana called out.

“Don’t worry. The Supreme Dragon will just taste your blood and determine whether you are a god or not. A god won’t be destroyed by a mere bite—but anything else will.”

The Phantom Knight’s hand shifted from black to purple. His nails extended as he thrust his hand at Lay’s throat.

Even if Lay wanted to dodge, his back was to the wall. And there would be no way for him to hide his identity if the Supreme Dragon sank its teeth in him.

He took a breath and paused.

“Hah!”

Evansmana flashed, and the Phantom Knight’s arm fell to the floor. The head of the Supreme Dragon emerged from the wound, baring its fangs.

“So you really aren’t a god,” the Phantom Knight said.

“I just don’t want to be harmed by your assumptions,” Lay replied.

“What a ridiculous thing to say. Resisting only makes you *more* suspicious!”

The dragon lurking within the Phantom Knight’s flesh crawled out of his body and lunged at Lay. Lay used the Sword of Three Races to split the dragon into two with a single swing. But the Supreme Dragon merely distorted its shape and transformed into two dragon heads instead.

“Attention, all troops.”

The Phantom Knight sent out a Leaks as more Supreme Dragons crawled out of his wound. Lay ran to stop him.

“Sword of Three Races, first hidden art—”

Light gathered around Evansmana and slashed at the dragon heads and Phantom Knight countless times over.

“*Heaven Splitter*!”

The Phantom Knight was cut into pieces instantly. However, each piece of him transformed into more dragons, forming a total of thirty Supreme Dragons.

“Two gods of Anos Voldigoad, Misfit of the Eight Selected Ones, have been captured.”

The Leaks resounded despite Lay’s efforts. Which of the thirty dragons was the main body? Or were they all considered the main body? Lay’s gaze darted between them in hesitation.

“One is—”

“*Not a god*” was most likely what the message was about to say, when thirty crimson spears emerged out of nowhere and pierced all the Supreme Dragons at once.

“Gah... Y-You...”

The Supreme Dragon spoke, attention shifting to the other Phantom Knight in the room.

The other Phantom Knight held a crimson lance with no spearhead in his hand, the weapon thrust forward. It was Dehiddatem, the Crimson Blood Spear.

“*Dimension Drive*.”

Holes were bored into the thirty Supreme Dragons. The bodies of the dragons were then sucked into those holes before vanishing from existence.

“Attention, all troops. Two gods have been captured. One soldier was injured, but the situation has been resolved.”

The man sent a new Leaks out before drawing a magic circle on himself. The full body armor disappeared, revealing his face. A large eye patch concealed one eye.

“The Demon King’s ways are as overbearing as ever. Going along with him is recklessness, not courage,” said Netherworld King Aeges of the Four Evil Kings.

He had been defeated by Eldmed before, but it seemed he had resurrected after that.

“Why are you helping us?” Lay asked, sheathing the Sword of Three Races.

“We merely have the same objective,” Aeges corrected. “It would be one thing if *you* were captured, but I cannot allow that man to use the Goddess of Absurdity as he wishes.”

“‘That man,’ as in Ceris?”

“I will give you one warning,” Aeges said without answering Lay. “The Supreme Dragon consumes gods and order. It is a shadow of Galvadorion, the Gluttony God, who chose Overlord Veaflare as one of the Eight Selected.”

Arcana slowly walked towards Aeges from within the Nuizinias. “Are you saying the Supreme Dragon is a god, demon child?”

“It was formerly a god, to be precise. It’s just a crazed dragon that eats other gods now.”

“How did it turn that way?” Lay asked.

“It was the work of the Overlord. After going mad with love, Overlord Veaflare detested the gods, order, and everyone who believed in them. They then sought to find a means to destroy the order of the world. That man—Ceris Voldigoad—was the one who planted the idea of twisting Galvadorion’s order and turning it into a god-eating dragon.”

So a god had been altered of its order and was transformed into an entirely new existence. That would have required quite the powerful magic.

“The Supreme Dragon consumes gods and people, turning their sources into its own. It is a colony of countless sources. The more it eats, the more that number increases. Every last one needs to be destroyed to stop it from multiplying.”

Which was why Aeges had sent them all to another dimension, it seemed.

“Its order has been distorted due to the sources of other gods it has consumed. The dragons just now weren’t a threat because they were yet to consume any gods, but the dragons that consumed the God of Traces and the God of Gospel have tremendous power. They’re detestable creatures that use the powers of the gods to consume more gods.”

“Is the dragon-like appearance and god-sealing power of the forbidden soldiers due to the Supreme Dragon that’s essentially leeching off of them?” Lay asked.

“The forbidden soldiers are actually the ones that are better off; it’s most citizens of Gadeciola who have a Supreme Dragon leeching off them. They are all puppets of the Overlord.”

“What is the Overlord’s objective?”

“It’s a well-known fact that Veaflare wants revenge—to ruin the gods and all of their followers who have oppressed her loved ones.”

Lay sighed quietly. “Doesn’t sound like the thoughts of someone sane.”

“It’s foolish, but she’s just a pitiful woman. Her revenge is cute compared to the man who incited her,” Aeges said. He stored Dehiddatem inside a storage circle and turned on his heel. “The Phantom Knights are still skirmishing with the Knights of Agatha, but Ahid has already been moved to a cell on the floor below. If you wish to retrieve him, now would be the time while their security is still scattered.”

“Why did you join the Phantom Knights?”

“I have something to do. A debt from two thousand years ago that I have to

repay. Tell the Demon King this—for once, *stay out of my way*."

With that, Aeges started walking away. But he paused just before leaving the cell.

"Hero Kanon," he said without turning back. "Your fellow disciple is still alive."

Lay gazed at him in shock. "Kashim is alive...?"

"He reincarnated into a draconid. He's in this castle right now, and his senses are quite delicate. He should notice you soon."

Leaving those words, Aeges departed. Lay looked gravely serious for a brief moment, but quickly shook his head and turned to Arcana.

"Let's go. It would've been nice to know what the Overlord wanted to do with you, but saving Ahid takes precedence."

"Snow falls, illuminating earth."

Lunar snowdrops danced around Arcana, its light weakening the effect of Nuizinias.

She looked at Lay calmly. "You should do what you must."

Lay smiled apologetically. "Now isn't the time for me to dwell on the past. Kashim would just run from me anyway."

Arcana slowly shook her head. "I don't know your circumstances, but as Hero Kanon, you're currently suffering. I wish to be the order that brings salvation. If your salvation is to go after him, then you should go. I will do something about Ahid."

Lay looked downwards and thought for a long moment.

"Thank you," he eventually said.

After leaving the jail cell, Lay and Arcana parted ways.

§ 22. The Overlord’s Goal

In Gadeciola’s capital of Galadenaga, earthrain was falling. Eternalized boulders easily pierced through the Beno Ievun, the god-repelling magic wall, and rained down upon the city.

“Oh, but it’s dirty there!”

“Hah!”

The Demon King’s Choir sang Demon King Hymn No. Six, “Neighbor” alongside the people of Gadeciola. They all performed the fist-thrusting choreography together.

“The place no one knows...”

“Hah!”

With each thrust of their fists, the falling rain of boulders was crushed and dispersed.

“It’s dirty there!”

“Hah!”

They had desperately learned the song and choreography while under the falling earthrain. Unlike the people of Jiordal, they were unfamiliar with singing, and unlike the people of Agatha, their bodies were untrained. Their singing was poor and their movements were lacking as a result, but by contrast their hearts were earnest about protecting their neighbors.

“So please don’t come through the door!”

“So please don’t enter, no no!”

“Hah!”

Another earthrain in the sky crumbled. Of course, I was the one using Leviangilma to cut apart the boulders to the tune of the song, but the people of Gadeciola didn’t know that. To them, it appeared as though the power of the

song alone was responsible for destroying the boulders.

“He’ll teach you everything the scriptures missed! Everything!”

“Hah hah hah! Hah hah hah!”

They sang and thrust their fists out. They were so focused on protecting Galadenaga with their voices and bodies, they didn’t bother to question why a mere song and dance could block the earthrain in the first place.

“In-cum, in-cum, incoming, woo-ooh!”

“Oh my! I didn’t know such a world existed!”

“Hah! Hah! Haaaaaaaaah!”

With the last earthrain deflected, the rumbling sound overhead gradually died down.

Several seconds later, there was silence. The skytremor was over. The instrumental to “Neighbor” continued playing as Dias and the other robed men of Gadeciola gazed up at the dome while panting.

Eventually, they realized the skytremor had ceased.

“Did it work...?”

“It looks like it... Though I have no idea what magic that was...”

“Well... It was a good song...”

Dias chuckled at the last comment. “I thought the same. The lyrics about opening the forbidden door reminded me of us citizens of Gadeciola.”

The man he spoke to smiled broadly.

“Yeah, it really struck a chord in me,” he said. “No matter how forbidden or dirty the idea is, we’ll push forward with faith in ourselves. That’s what we’ve done until now.”

“It’s nice how they’re talking about something that isn’t just scripture too,” Dias added. “It’s like they’re saying that those teachings aren’t everything in this world.”

“Don’t forget the ending. *Oh my! I didn’t know such a world existed!* The lyrics

convey the joy of reaching our nation, a paradise where all gods have been eradicated. It's masterful."

"Speaking of lyrics, what's a Demon King?"

"That has to be referring to our hearts. Instead of believing in the gods, we have to love our neighbors. Depicting the heart as the king of demons—the one who opposes the gods—is a work of genius!"

"Say, the thought just came to me, but...Gadeciola still doesn't have a national anthem yet, right?"

The rest of the robed men fell silent at those words, thinking carefully.

"But there's no knowing what Lord Veaflare will say..."

"What if we practiced it to perform in front of her? She may like it," Dias suggested.

"Great idea!"

"Agreed!"

Voices of agreement rose, one after another.

The people of Gadeciola were more willing to take in the lyrics of "Neighbor" now that the song had repelled the earthrain. But that was possible because the girls had the power to move people with their singing—just like they did in Jiordal and Agatha.

"Hey, Mr. Anos!" Dias ran up to me. "We'd like to turn this song into the national anthem of Gadeciola. Could you teach it to us in more detail?"

Hmm. Perhaps the girls were a bit too good. I didn't expect them to want to turn the hymn into their national anthem, but that didn't sound like a bad idea.

"Of course. It'd be our pleasure."

I looked over at Ellen and the others.

"You heard him. Please spend some time teaching them how to sing the whole song."

The Fan Union girls nodded.

“Yes, Lord Anos!”

“Can you start right away?” Dias asked the girls. “Where should we begin?”

Dias hurried over to the girls. In order to block the earthrain, the people of Gadeciola had formed a circle around us to sing.

I glanced over at some children standing in the front row of people and noticed they were sitting down in exhaustion.

“Are you tired from dancing to an unfamiliar song?” I called out to them.

They shook their heads.

“We’re hungry...” one child mumbled weakly.

Dias turned back to face them and said, “I’m sorry. It’ll be a little longer until Lord Veaflare is available for mealtime.”

The children curled up on the spot. “Okay...”

“How is food distributed in this kingdom?” I asked. “From the looks of things, there are no stores selling any groceries.”

“Gadeciola works on a rationing system. Lord Veaflare distributes meals herself. It may seem inconvenient, but it’s far preferable than how the other nations do things—fighting one another in the name of god over food.”

I see. So that’s how it is.

“Were you born in this kingdom, Dias?” I asked.

“No, I entered the country a few years ago. I originally came from Jiorhaze, in Jiordal.”

Jiorhaze was a prosperous city. It was hard to imagine it being low on food. Had his memories been altered? Was it an effect of the Supreme Dragon attached to him? Since they weren’t allowed outside of the country, they had no means of gaining information.

“Children cannot endure hunger. It would be nice if we could feed them until they’re full, but the world is low on food right now. But even when it isn’t, we split all our food equally, like family.”

Dias patted the children’s heads.

Not only were they kept inside with Beno Ievun but they were drained of all motive to leave the country as well. Their king sure was a nasty one.

“I-It’s the Overlord!” a voice cried from the circle surrounding us.

“Lord Veaflare...”

“Lord Veaflare has arrived!”

The crowd of people parted into two with beaming smiles. Their gazes were all fixed on the woman slowly walking forward. She wore armor over a dazzling dress and sported the same dragon horns and tail that the forbidden soldiers had. Her long hair resembled the mane of a dragon too.

“Is it mealtime, Lord Veaflare?”

“We’ve been waiting!”

“Thank you for coming to feed the family again today.”

Veaflare held up a hand to signal for silence. She continued walking past the people of Gadeciola calling out to her until she came to a stop before me.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Misfit Anos Voldigoad,” she said. “I am Veaflare Wips Gadeciola, the Overlord of Gadeciola. I was chosen by a Selection God and hold the title of Predator.”

I suppose after making such a commotion in the city, I should have expected her to make an appearance.

“I’d like to speak to you alone. Do you have some time?” she asked.

Alone, huh? What could she want?

“I don’t mind, but shouldn’t you hold a mealtime first? Since I was the one who disrupted things, I’m happy to wait until afterwards.”

The citizens all looked at Veaflare. The children, in particular, looked especially hungry.

“Unfortunately, the food is yet to arrive,” Veaflare said. “Today’s mealtime will be later than usual.”

The children’s faces fell, but the adults around them hurried to hide them from view.

“Oh?”

“I’d rather speak to you first.” Veaflare smiled and held out her hand. “Shall we go?”

It seemed she wanted me to take her hand. Sasha glared at her warily, but I wrapped an arm around her head and dragged her a short distance away.

“W-Wait, what are you doing, Anos?! This isn’t the time to be messing around!”

“Stop being so menacing,” I told her. “The other side has gone out of their way to greet us. It’d be rude to refuse their request to talk.”

Sasha hung her head. “That may be true, but you don’t know what she’s plotting.”

“Do you think I can’t handle anything plotted against me?”

“I don’t...”

“Then it shouldn’t be a problem. You help out with the song practice. And cooking too.”

“Cooking...?” Sasha looked into my eyes and gulped in realization.

“Shin, take charge of this place,” I said. “Give orders as you see fit.”

“Yes, my liege,” he answered shortly.

I turned back to Veaflare. “Before we go, I brought a gift with me.”

I drew a giant magic circle.

“Oh really? What is it?” Veaflare asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing much.”

The circle glowed as I poured magic into it, and a large pile of food appeared on the circle. A mountain of fresh meat, fish, vegetables, and fruit were stacked on top of one another.

The children raised their voices excitedly.

“Whoa!”

“Hey, look at that! It’s food! I’ve never seen so much of it before!”

The spell I had used was Roze. It wasn’t very efficient to convert magic power into food, and the spell circle for it was excessively complex too. There was rarely a need to learn or use the spell nowadays, but two thousand years ago, there had been times when it had been impossible to obtain food otherwise.

“Mr. Anos... Is this...?”

“Eat all you wish. If you run out, I’ll give you more,” I said before walking over to Veaflare. “You don’t mind, right?”

“Of course, it’s not a problem. Be grateful, everyone.”

The people of Gadeciola brightened at her words, as if, without her permission, they wouldn’t have even tried to eat.

“Is something the matter?” she asked.

“No.”

I accepted the hand she offered anew. She drew a Gatom circle, and the world promptly turned white.

We teleported to a spacious room. The floor and walls were completely black, and at the top of the high ceiling was a skylight.

But what was most notable was the large greatsword stuck into the floor at the very center of the room. The dragon design that decorated the blade was

very familiar—I had seen it not too long ago.

“This is the pillar room of the Overlord Castle, and that is the Sky Pillar Sword Velevim.”

“The same as the one in Agatha’s palace?”

Diedrich had mentioned there were multiple such swords in the underground world.

“Is it so odd for there to be one in Gadeciola?”

“Who knows? I’m not too familiar with the underground. Is there a reason it’s here?”

“It’s not a big deal. It’s just that this country was once called Agatha, so it still remains here today.”

Overlord Veaflare gazed up at the Sky Pillar Sword absentmindedly.

“Gadeciola’s Phantom Knights are fighting the Knights of Agatha at the border right now,” she said.

“I figured.”

“They have quite the vigor,” she remarked. “But not even the Knights of Agatha led by the Sword Emperor and the Goddess of the Future can stand up to your father.”

Perhaps so. Ceris Voldigoad’s strength was on another level entirely.

“But Diedrich can see the future,” I added. “If there’s the slightest chance of victory, he will be sure to break through and grasp it.”

She lowered her gaze back to me.

“For the sake of this country, I wish to turn that chance to zero.”

For the sake of this country? I found that reason hard to believe.

“I know what you want. Why don’t we form an alliance, Anos?” she asked sweetly. “It doesn’t have to be a comprehensive one either.”

Overlord Veaflare elegantly held out her hand, hatred lurking in her eyes.

“I’d just like to unite for one common goal: the end of the Selection Trial.”

§ 23. Hatred and Lies

I glanced at the hand Overlord Veaflare held out to me.

“Are you sure? Our objectives may only align in this one way,” I said.

“The same goes for everyone here.”

“Oh?”

“Gadeciola is the kingdom of freedom and the kingdom of family. Ideologies, races, and opinions of all kinds are accepted here. We all learn to get along by eating at the same table together. Because we’re family,” she declared firmly, sounding like she absolutely believed what she said without any doubt. “The only thing we believe here is that this world doesn’t need gods.”

A kingdom made of people who didn’t believe in the gods. A land formerly part of Agatha, with immigrants from Jiordal, and Phantom Knights that were originally demons from aboveground. By making an enemy of the gods, they created the foundation for people of different mindsets to be united as one.

“Gadeciola has hostile relations with Agatha. While we aren’t working together, I will most likely choose to side with Agatha. Do you still want to form an alliance?” I confirmed.

“That’s fine for now,” Veaflare replied. “It’d be a different matter if you harmed the people of Gadeciola, but you still haven’t done anything of the sort. We don’t persecute dangerous ideologies here. You have the freedom to think whatever you want.”

“Hmm. How generous of you.”

That leniency was probably what allowed the forbidden soldiers to attack Lay and Arcana too.

“You never know—you might change your mind while you’re in Gadeciola,” Veaflare said, chucking. There was a dark emotion hidden behind her smile.

“Were you the one who ordered Ceris to go to the ruins of Ligarondrol?” I

asked.

“Yes, I was. It was to stop Beherom.”

“The disappearance of the surface shouldn’t have an effect on Gadeciola.”

“If the dome disappears through Beherom, a rain of blessings will fall upon us. That rain would be created by god, no?” she said with a crazed expression. Her mouth twisted in the wicked smirk of an Overlord. “I’d rather die than have that happiness forced upon me.”

“That’s quite some hatred you have for the gods.”

“Aha! *Hatred*? Don’t be silly! Hee hee, aha ha, aha ha ha!”

After cackling with laughter, she quietly stared at me with a dark look in her eyes.

“I detest the gods. I detest order. I will erase every last one of them from this world. That is the reason why Gadeciola exists. That is the reason why I became the Overlord,” she muttered bitterly. “Say, do you want to hear a story? It’s a funny story about something that once happened in this underground world.”

“I’m willing to hear it.”

Veaflare turned her back on me and started walking.

“Once upon a time, a draconid girl was born in the kingdom of Agatha. Her name was Sophia. She was a normal girl who honored the sword and devoted herself to training, just like all the other people of Agatha. The only tragic thing about her life was that her lifespan was shorter than usual.”

“A shortened lifespan?”

“That’s right,” Veaflare answered in a light tone.

A shortened lifespan... In other words, she was afflicted by ageworm disease.

“She resented her circumstances as much as anyone would. But there was nothing that could be done about it. One life, one sword, one wish—even if god resided in her body, there was no way for her to alter her fated lifespan. Following the prophecy of Agatha, Sophia decided to become a sacrifice for the Royal Dragon.”

With quiet footsteps, Veaflare walked towards the Sky Pillar Sword.

“That was something to be very proud of. Her life had no future, but she could become the foundation for a sword that would protect the kingdom from doomsday. She had been granted the highest possible for a knight. She had no regrets.”

She touched the giant greatsword stuck in the floor.

“Until she met *him*, that is.”

Veaflare stared at the Sky Pillar Sword Velevim. Her face was reflected in the blade.

“At the time the Selection Trial was underway. By chance, Sophia met one of the Selected Eight that visited Agatha. Boldinos was the first Overlord that defeated Genedonov, the Goddess of Absurdity.”

There was a hint of softness in her voice.

“When Overlord Boldinos found out that Sophia was a knight set for sacrifice, he took her hand and brought her to his own kingdom. Sophia was confused, but at the same time, she was relieved; deep down, she was afraid of being sacrificed to the Royal Dragon. Boldinos probably realized that and told her that she could stay in Gadeciola forever.”

She slowly clenched her fist.

“Sophia was naturally drawn to Boldinos—eventually, she fell in love with him. It was her first and only love, a once-in-a-lifetime romance. But that lifetime of hers was almost over. So she confessed her feelings to Boldinos and set off for Agatha. She wanted to return to her homeland and die as a knight.”

Upon the surface of Velevim’s blade, Veaflare’s reflection smiled peacefully.

“Boldinos stopped her. He said she could be saved. Even if her short lifespan couldn’t be cured, with Syrica, she could be reincarnated. But if she was eaten by the Royal Dragon, her source would belong to the dragonborn instead. Boldinos promised to meet Sophia again. He promised to love her again. Believing those words, she chose to reincarnate.”

Veaflare bit her lip and looked down.

“But even though Sophia reincarnated, the two never met again.”

“Why is that?”

“Boldinos won the Selection Trial. His goal was the god that only appeared before the victor, the God of Balance Elrolarielm. He wanted to destroy that god and put an end to the ritual of the gods—the Selection Trial.”

The God of Balance, huh? I was unfamiliar with that one.

“I thought the Selection Trial didn’t have an order that governed it,” I said. “That’s why the people of the underground believe in the Almighty Radiance, no?”

“No one knows about it, because it’s only written in Gadeciola forbidden tomes. Oh, but I suppose the Sword Emperor of Agatha and the Goddess of the Future would know too, wouldn’t they?” Veaflare asked, expecting no answer. “I can’t say for sure if the pope knows, since I don’t know what’s in Jiordal’s scriptures either.”

The closer the end of the Selection Trial was, so approached the end of the world. As long as Agatha’s prophecy remained unfulfilled, Diedrich and Naphta wouldn’t reveal that to anyone. And even if it was in Jiordal’s scriptures, there was no reason for the pope to reveal it either.

“At any rate,” Veaflare continued, “Boldinos challenged the God of Balance. But he failed. And in his defeat became a proxy of god.”

“The forbidden tomes of Gadeciola aren’t actual books, but knowledge passed down through word of mouth, no? If the first Overlord became the proxy, who did you hear it from?”

Veaflare turned around and looked straight at me.

“Of course, from the man himself.”

She reached her hand out and raised a Selection pledge jewel into the air. The spell drawn on the inside was for Liteld. Particles of magic gathered around the jewel, and a robed man in armor appeared.

He gazed into space with vacant eyes.

“Gods need no emotion. Boldinos became an agent of god and lost his heart

in the process. He is now merely an existence that maintains order. He chose Sophia as a Selected Eight after her reincarnation and told her everything."

"So...phia..." Boldinos groaned weakly. "Eliminate...the gods..."

"Yes, I know. It won't be long now," Veaflare replied. She stared at Boldinos, eyes sad.

"This is what happens when you defy the gods. Witness the remains of what was once the first Overlord, Boldinos. Isn't it hilarious? There was no way for Sophia and Boldinos to love each other anymore after they reunited, because Boldinos no longer had a heart to love with."

Her smile vanished suddenly, and magic began to flow throughout her body. In her eyes now burned a bottomless anger.

"Of course, there's no way I'd accept that... Ever..."

She clenched her fists so hard she pierced skin, blood dripping from her hands.

"There's no need for order in this world. I will destroy all the gods, all their order, and retrieve his heart. Everything divine shall meet its end."

"There's no guarantee that destroying the gods will bring back that man's heart," I said.

"I will take any chance I can get. I don't care if the world ends in the process."

If Boldinos lost his heart by becoming a proxy, he should regain it once there was no longer any need for the proxy's order.

"I understand the circumstances now," I said. "I will be ending the Selection Trial either way, so if that is truly your goal, I don't mind working with you. What do you intend on doing first?"

"Out of consideration for you, I will spare Diedrich and Agatha."

"How generous," I remarked.

"But the Goddess of the Future will perish. She stands as the largest obstacle to ending the Selection Trial."

That made sense. Agatha's prophecy deemed the end of the Selection Trial

something to be avoided. As long as he had Naphta, Diedrich would easily be able to avoid such an outcome.

“I won’t ask you to kill her. It’ll be enough if you just stay out of our way,” Veaflare continued, “No matter how far into the future she looks, the Phantom Knights will destroy her.”

With Ceris, Aeges, and Kaihilam working together, that sounded possible. As long as they could eliminate every future where she survives, anyway.

“Do you have any reason to show mercy to the Goddess of the Future?” she asked.

“No, I suppose I don’t.”

Veaflare smirked in response.

“But I do have one question,” I said. “What is the name of the god the proxy turned into?”

“It’s still Boldinos,” Veaflare answered. “A god is different from a proxy of god, so his name didn’t change. It’s not like his name describes his order.”

“Shall I heal him for you?”

Veaflare looked at me warily. “Can you do such a thing?”

“I can’t say if I’ll be able to return him from proxy to human, but gods have hearts too. Even the Heavenly Father Nosgalia, in his final moments, was afraid.”

I strolled forward and placed a hand over Boldinos’s chest. Veaflare looked on, visibly worried.

“*Vebzud*.”

Jet-black fingers pierced into his chest and gouged out his source. The moment Veaflare’s eyes widened, I burned his source using Jio Graze, leaving nothing but ashes.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

It all happened so suddenly; Veaflare appeared so shocked she seemed unable to speak.

“You’re oddly calm for someone whose beloved one just perished, Overlord Veaflare,” I commented. “In these situations, it’s more natural to act upset.”

Confusion flashed across the Overlord’s face. It definitely wasn’t a look caused by the loss of Boldinos.

“But I suppose that’s to be expected, hmm? He may look like a god, but he doesn’t possess any order. You’ve just tweaked his source to resemble a god’s. A true proxy of god wouldn’t be destroyed so easily.”

Netherworld King Aeges had said that the Selection God who chose Veaflare was the Gluttony God Galvadorion. Such a thing directly contradicted Veaflare’s explanation. It stood to reason, then, that one of them was lying.

“The farce is over, Veaflare. Ending the Selection Trial for the sake of a beloved one? For someone from the underground, you’re oddly familiar with how to beg for compassion from me. Whose idea was it?”

I searched her heart with my Magic Eyes as I raised my black-stained fingers.

“Did they also tell you what happens when I expose lies?”

§ 24. A Twisted Heart

“Aha!” Veaflare laughed madly. “That’s odd. What gave me away? Apart from Boldinos, men are supposed to be much more gullible.”

“You can pretend to be a villainess all you want, but I would suggest you cease the theatrics here,” I advised. “I have a friend who put on a superb performance as the Demon King all the way up until my reincarnation. You’ll need to have at least that much talent before you can deceive a man.”

She glared back at me with loathing.

“It’s true that I tried to deceive you,” she said. “That man just now was indeed a fake. But the tale of Boldinos was not a lie.”

“Oh? So there’s a real Boldinos out there.”

“Yes. I had no intention of telling you, but I have no choice if you won’t be deceived. He’s the commander of my Phantom Knights.”

Veaflare sounded like an excited little girl as she spoke.

“Your father, Ceris Voldigoad, is the first Overlord, Boldinos.”

So this time, Ceris was the first Overlord? Well, it wasn’t completely out of the question.

“That’s even less believable than before,” I said. “Are you saying that the man who challenged the God of Balance became a proxy when he was defeated?”

“That’s right. You spoke to him, right? Didn’t anything seem odd?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t know. I’ve lost all my memories of him. He did seem to have a few screws loose, though.”

“Yes, he’s broken right now. When Boldinos became a proxy of god, he forgot his love for his homeland and his affection for his people.”

So the proxies of god lost their hearts. The man did seem to be missing something vital, but at the same time, it still all sounded like a convenient

excuse.

“But he hasn’t forgotten everything. There’s a tiny part of him left that still feels for me.” Veaflare murmured with the faintest hint of hope. “He keeps whispering to me, over and over again, in a voice devoid of emotion—that he loves me. Aha!”

She laughed again, a sound crackling with indiscernible emotion. Grief, insanity, and a seemingly endless hate mixed and clashed on her face.

“Do you have any idea how it feels? How helpless, how *futile*?” she asked with a dark look. “I cannot forgive them. I will *never* forgive them. Not the gods that turned that kind man into what he is now, or the Selection Trial that changed him.”

“So you’ll destroy them to get him back?”

“Yes, I will. If I can fulfill his dearest wish, even if he doesn’t return to his former self, his heart should remember me.”

That sounded implausible. But without knowing what he was like before he changed, I couldn’t say anything for certain.

“Does that make your Selection God Ceris?”

“That was a lie. My Selection God is the Gluttony God Galvadorion. Though the god no longer exists.”

This time, she answered honestly. *What a confusing woman.*

“Why did you lie?”

“Boldinos wanted to keep it a secret. He told me not to make contact with you. He said you were a disobedient son of terrifying power.”

“What did you want to do by meeting me?”

“Aha! What did I *want to do*? That’s a funny thing to ask.”

Veaflare chuckled to herself.

“You really are Boldinos’s son, Anos,” she said sweetly.

“Am I? That’s just what he claims.”

“There’s no mistaking it. Boldinos told me himself.”

“That man is full of lies. Nothing he says is worth believing.”

“No. He may be a liar, but he would never lie to *me*. That’s why there’s no doubt you’re his child,” Veaflare said while chuckling happily. “As living proof of the woman he once loved, you infuriate me so much that I want you gone. But since that woman no longer exists, I forgive you. You’ll be my son instead. And isn’t it only natural to want to see you at least once?”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Her expression seemed to imply she couldn’t see a problem with her reasoning.

“I fail to understand it,” I said. “Meeting me could affect the future of Gadeciola. Why would the ruler of a country move solely out of self-interest without even informing their subordinates?”

“But I’m only meeting my son. There shouldn’t be a problem, no?”

It didn’t sound like a proper reason, but that meant I was getting closer to the truth.

“Oh, but there is one thing,” she said with a sweet giggle. “Now that I’ve met you, I’ve changed my mind. I’m sure Boldinos will rejoice if we come to get along. He may even regain his heart. Don’t you agree, Anos?”

That was another wild assumption to make.

“Let’s defeat Naphta together after all. That should make him even happier.”

“I thought Ceris was one shady man, but you’re just as bad. Have you ever considered what I would think of meeting the self-proclaimed spouse of a supposed father I already have doubts over?”

“Happiness, right?”

All this time, she spoke as if there were nothing questionable about her motivations—as if she truly spoke from a place of goodwill.

“You sound utterly insane,” I remarked.

“What a rebellious boy,” Veaflare tutted. “But that’s exactly how he described you. Don’t worry. As your mother, I’ll be sure to discipline you properly.”

Overlord Veaflare held out her hand. “Come, my beloved child.”

A purple wing emerged from the ashes of the fake Boldinos, followed by the body of a Supreme Dragon.

“There’s no need to worry, Anos. As your mother, I will help you reconcile with Boldinos. Just give yourself over to this dragon. That way, the three of us can live together happily ever after,” Veaflare said with an almost intoxicated expression.

“I have to ask: are you crazy?”

“I could ask you the same, you know? Boldinos is lost without a heart right now. Family can bicker on a daily basis, but when push comes to shove, we need to have one another’s backs.”

“If we really *are* family, that is.”

“I proved it to you just now, didn’t I? There’s no room for doubt.”

“And that’s why you want to attach that parasite to me and force a reconciliation?” I surmised. “Ha ha ha. Bwa ha ha! I see. Quite the family bond you’re imagining.”

Veaflare glared at me, offended. “Isn’t it only natural to scold one’s rebellious child?”

She held her hand out at me.

“Go on, my beloved Supreme Dragon. Nest inside him.”

The dragon growled and leaped towards me, baring its fierce fangs. I dodged it easily and tore it to pieces with my black-stained fingertips.

“Aha! There’s no use resisting. You tried it before, remember? No matter how much you cut it, it will only increase in number.”

The sliced up pieces of dragon flesh twisted and transformed into eight dragon heads. Each one bared their fangs at me.

“*Jirasd*.”

Black lightning wrapped around my right hand. The lightning grew, bursting in every direction with an accompanying rumble of thunder. All eight dragons were turned to ash.

“Such disobedience. Listen to your mother and be a good boy, understand? Like I said, there’s no use resisting,” Veaflare insisted with a smile.

From each pile of ash emerged a dozen dragons, making a total of roughly one hundred Supreme Dragons.

“Do you get it now? Go on, my children. Do it—”

Veaflare fell silent mid order. The hundred-odd dragons were all being attacked by fangs of black lightning.

“What is that?”

“*Ji Noavus*.”

It was the ancient magic spell Grysilis, once used by the Scarlet Stele King. The target of my earlier Jirasd wasn’t the Supreme Dragons, but the floor and walls. I had used the black lightning to draw a large magic circle for the spell, which created lightning fangs that would never detach from the dragons, no matter how many times their sources were divided.

The hundred-odd Supreme Dragons were torn to pieces and dissolved to ash. Countless more dragons emerged from those ashes, but Ji Noavus continued to eat away at them.

“The Supreme Dragon’s source is a colony that splits when cut or burned, but they can’t divide forever. If they’re sliced finely enough, they’ll perish.”

Before our eyes, the Supreme Dragons increased and were immediately torn apart.

Veaflare paled.

“That can’t be... My Supreme Dragons... No! My precious children! What are you all doing?! You should be able to shrug off a spell like that! Quickly!” she yelled desperately.

But the dragons merely screamed as they multiplied and subsequently perished. With every passing moment, they were diced more and more finely.

“Looks like you’re growing senile, barking out such impossible demands. I can’t possibly consent to you being my mother when you’re like this, but I’ll be nice. First things first: to be worthy of being the mother of the Demon King, you’ll need some reeducation.”

Under the rumbling and crashing thunder, the numerous Supreme Dragons were reduced to nothing.

“The old must make way for the new, Veaflare.”

§ 25. Nested in the Source

Ashes of the Supreme Dragons rained on the floor. Their sources had been divided so finely that they were no longer capable of resurrection.

“Oh... My poor children...” Veaflare cried. She reached out her hands and tried to catch the falling ashes, then turned to glare at me.

“Do you know what you just did, Anos?”

“I just gave your badly trained dragon a little head pat.”

Veaflare slowly shook her head. “You destroyed your own little brother.”

She was completely off her rocker.

“You’re making no sense,” I said.

“The Supreme Dragons are my babies. My *children*,” she explained. “Boldinos was the one who taught me a spell that allowed me to swallow the Gluttony God Galvadorion and have it reincarnate within my stomach. That is how the children of this kingdom—the dragons capable of consuming gods—were born.”

Veaflare gently stroked her own stomach. Most likely, there were more Supreme Dragons inside her.

“That’s why, Anos,” she scolded me in an overly sweet tone, “as the big brother, you shouldn’t be bullying your younger brothers.”

“As far as I’m aware, the only sibling I have is a little sister,” I replied. “Not some monstrous little brothers who aren’t even capable of reason.”

“Don’t judge them by appearances. They’re *not* monsters. You met them yourself, didn’t you? You sang together with the people of Gadeciola. They’re all my children—all of them my precious Supreme Dragons.”

I hadn’t expected her to admit that herself.

“What are you trying to do by attaching parasites to the people of

Gadeciola?”

“Well, if I do so, they become my children. My children with Boldinos, that is. I told you already: this is the kingdom of freedom, and the kingdom of family,” Veaflare answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Kingdom of freedom? Don’t make me laugh. It’s just like Golroana; you can turn your people into puppets any time you wish.”

“But isn’t it natural for a child to listen to their parents?” she refuted. “Besides, as long as they don’t defy me, they’re free.”

“For the sake of the argument, let’s say that’s true. Why do you keep them caged within Beno Ievun, then?”

Veaflare looked dead serious as she said, “The outside world is dangerous. It’s full of evil gods and the bad people who believe in them. I keep them inside Beno Ievun to protect them from it all.”

“Why do you limit the food that can be easily obtained outside the walls?” I pressed further. “Why have you altered their memories just to create a rationing system?”

“Families are meant to eat at the same dinner table. By sharing food in spite of poverty, we learn to support one another as we live. That’s how things have always been in Gadeciola. Boldinos is like the father, and the citizens are the children.”

She recounted her memories happily.

“This kingdom hasn’t changed since Boldinos created it. And I will do anything to keep protecting it. Memory is a trivial thing. After all, everyone’s happy, aren’t they?”

“I shouldn’t need to point out the obvious,” I responded. “This nation might have been created by those who opposed the gods, but hearts can change. There are people who were born here as blank slates. Not every citizen might feel the same way as you.”

From the way Veaflare was looking my way with a somewhat distant air, it seemed she had no intention of listening to my words.

“Even a child that doesn’t believe in the gods will grow out of their parents’ protection. What happens to the people who no longer need this nation?” I asked.

“This is the paradise Boldinos created. If anyone disrespects the beliefs he sacrificed himself for, Gadeciola won’t forgive them. No longer need this nation, you say?” Veaflare smirked wickedly again. “Aha! What a joke.”

“When the first Overlord created this country, his ideals weren’t wrong. After all, people who didn’t believe in the gods really did gather here. The borders really did close because of how dangerous the outside was. Food was rationed because it was in short supply. Am I wrong? The circumstances of a nation constantly change. The hearts of the people living there change too.”

I thrust my words into Veaflare’s face.

“Are you aware of how much time has passed? If Boldinos’s heart doesn’t change, the people will eventually leave.”

“No,” Veaflare said. “No matter how long it takes, I will wait for him to regain his heart. We will remain unchanged as long as he is unchanged. Because this is *his* nation.”

“Veaflare.” The rage I couldn’t suppress spilled out in my voice. “This is not his nation. The nation belongs to the people.”

“It’s the same thing. This country belongs to our family,” she said.

“Fool,” I spat. Her ideology was repulsive.

“A country that can be entered, but never exited. People who live their whole lives without knowing the outside world. Citizens with parasitic dragons and altered memories, able to completely lose their free will at any moment. A leader focused on one man instead of a whole nation of people, *starving them*, deceiving them with stories of false dangers while doing nothing to prepare for the very real danger coming their way.”

And that was just what I had observed in less than a day. The thought of that disastrous spectacle being only the tip of the iceberg had me incandescent with rage.

“There is no freedom here, no family,” I declared. “The kingdom is a cage—an involuntary prison created by a pitiful woman who continues to wait for a man who will never return.”

I drew a magic circle and drew Leviangilma.

“Gadeciola ends today. No, it already ended long ago.”

I held the sheathed sword at the ready.

“I will eliminate its remains.”

Veaflare sighed tiredly. “You’re his son. Why can’t you try to understand his sadness a little more?”

She drew a magic circle on the floor. Pope Golroana appeared from the circle with wings of the Supreme Dragon growing out of his back. The parasite robbed him of his agency; his eyes were vacant, and he made no attempt to speak.

“Within him is the Supreme Dragon that has consumed the most gods,” Veaflare said. “Having gained the power of the God of Traces and God of Gospel, its source is stronger than any other god and can multiply almost infinitely.”

“So what?”

“I will now plant this child within your source. Once it’s nested there, we’ll become true parent and child. You’ll soon understand just how wonderful this kingdom is.”

“In other words, you want to alter my memories too.”

Veaflare laughed unabashedly.

“I know you’re strong. You’re Boldinos’s child, after all. But you don’t stand a chance against the child of Boldinos and I—the Supreme Dragon. You only destroyed a tiny portion of the dragon. Do you know how many dragons there are in this country? If you keep up this rebellious act, all of them will become your enemy.”

“Besides,” she continued. “You came here to save the pope and cardinal, right?”

“In passing, yes.”

“Then you should understand, right? The Supreme Dragon is deeply attached to Golroana’s source right now. If I try to detach it by force, his source will perish.”

I see. So he was a hostage.

“I can just tear the dragon away from his source faster than it can be destroyed,” I said.

“That’s why Ahid isn’t here. Even if you manage to do that, his source will die instead.”

“Will you, though? You abducted him because you had business with him, didn’t you?”

“By abducting him, we were able to draw Diedrich and the Goddess of the Future to us. His job is done already.”

So she was fine with him dying at any point, huh? If Ahid was killed, there would be no sacrifice for the Royal Dragon. The future where Ricardo sacrificed himself would become more likely.

“Are you listening, Anos? Put the Supreme Dragon into your source yourself. If you do, the dragon nested in Golroana’s source will move to yours. He’ll be released.” Veaflare smiled triumphantly. “Or are you worried that even you won’t be able to take in the Supreme Dragon’s source?”

“Bwa ha ha. A weak taunt, but very well.” I sheathed the Sword of the Almighty and stored it in a magic circle, then stood there without guarding myself. “I’ll take you up on your offer, but you’ll regret ever suggesting it. As soon as it attaches itself to my source, it’ll be destroyed. You’ll be killing your precious child with your own hands.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that,” she replied.

She smiled, as though everything was going exactly as she wanted.

“Nest in him, my lovely child. Turn your older brother into my true son.”

The Overlord gave the Supreme Dragon her order. The infected Golroana took a step forward and thrust an arm out at me. That arm turned into a purple

dragon, whose giant head sank its fangs into my chest.

Fresh blood spurted out as the Supreme Dragon left Golroana's body and entered mine through the hole it created.

"Persistent, aren't you? It should hurt quite a bit," Veaflare said.

"Nothing more than a tickle."

"Aha! We'll see how long that arrogance lasts."

The Supreme Dragon's entire body settled within my source. The moment it did, the dragon began writhing in agony. Golroana frowned slightly.

"What are you panicking for? I warned you. Anything that enters my body, my source, marches straight towards their own demise, soaked in the blood of the Demon King as they writhe to death."

"Yes, I am aware your source of destruction is special. Any regular Supreme Dragon would perish before attaching itself to you. But this child is special," Veaflare said.

Golroana silently turned the back of his right hand up, showing the shining Selection pledge jewel.

"I, Overlord Veaflare, command the Parasite God Enneteroton to use its order and nest in Misfit Anos."

At her command, the divine order inside my source began to overflow. It repelled the blood of the Demon King, traveling deeper and deeper into my depths to corrode me. Slowly but steadily, the Supreme Dragon began to fill me.

"See? It's exactly like I said. My child is now nesting in your source."

"I see. You attached this so-called Parasite God to your Supreme Dragon beforehand."

"That's right, Anos. Your mistake was in assuming that this nation so against blasphemous gods wouldn't use other gods. To us, gods are to be used."

Veaflare laughed smugly.

Horns of the Supreme Dragon emerged from my head, as though to stake its

claim over my body.

“Oh dear, whatever is the matter?” Veaflare taunted. “You were being so arrogant before, but the dragon’s almost completely attached to you now. How pathetic!”

Blood of the Demon King flowed into my source, but the Supreme Dragon resisted its corrosion like it had completely adapted to it.

“Aha! There’s no use struggling, you know? Once Enneteroton has entered that far, it will attach itself according to its order. The only way to stop it is to destroy the source.”

She raised her pledge jewel ring.

“*Your* source, that is! And you can’t do that, can you?”

Veaflare sent a final rush of magic into the jewel as though to impart the finishing blow. The Parasite God Enneteroton and the Supreme Dragon attached to my source began to reconstruct my body, forming a dragon tail and wings.

“Aha! Hee hee, aha ha ha! I did it! Boldinos will praise me for sure now.”

Veaflare looked upon me with a completely satisfied expression. She walked up to me, beaming. “Now Anos, my darling child. It is time for you to acknowledge your mother. Lick my feet.”

“Hmm. By licking your feet...”

I held the palm of my hand down at her feet. She was still smiling with delight.

“...do you mean like this?”

The next moment, a magic circle appeared in my palm and a Supreme Dragon’s head lunged out, latching onto Veaflare’s foot.

“Eek! Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

My horns, wings, and tail all drew back into my body. Instead, a giant Supreme Dragon emerged from the magic circle. It closed its jaws around the lower half of Veaflare’s body and shook its head from side to side.

“Wh-What are you doing?! Let go of me!”

Veaflare opened her mouth and released a purple breath. High-temperature flames burned the Supreme Dragon, releasing her from its fangs. Dragon wings emerged from her back as she took into the sky.

“Hah... Hah... Why...? I’m sure it was attached to you...”

“Did Boldinos never tell you this, Veaflare? There are countless parasites in the world aboveground, but they never attach themselves to demons.”

It was evident from her expression that she was unaware of this.

“Do you know why?” I asked.

Instead of answering, Veaflare focused on healing her wounds.

“The moment the parasite attaches to a demon, the immune system of the demon will control the parasite instead. When the demon has a strong enough immune system and plentiful enough magic power, they can control even dragons and gods.”

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

The Supreme Dragon roared and bared its fangs at Veaflare. She flew through the air, barely dodging the dragon head’s vicious attack as it charged multiple times.

“Stop it! Stop it, my precious child! Do you know what you’re doing? I am your *mother*! I gave birth to you from my own womb! You dare defy me?!”

“Don’t look down on demons too much, Veaflare. Once it attached to me, it became a part of me.”

Veaflare glared at me angrily.

“Stop this, Anos! Don’t you care about what happens to Golroana?”

“Oh? Do you think you’re in a position to say that?”

“Only half of the Supreme Dragon is attached to you! The other half is still with Golroana!”

As though to prove her words, horns and wings grew from Pope Golroana’s body.

“I’ll just tear away the remaining half.”

“There’s no point in making threats. Like I said before, doing that will ruin Golroana’s source...”

Veaflare fell speechless and stuttered for words. “H-How...?”

Her shocked gaze was fixed on the pope. Although she hadn’t given any order, dragon heads were emerging from his right arm one after another. Each one bared their fangs at her before flapping their wings and charging.

“Wha— Kyaah! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The Supreme Dragons tore apart Veaflare’s wings, making her fall and crash into the ground. Two more dragons lunged after her to attack. She put up a magic barrier to prevent their fangs and claws from reaching her.

“H-How can it be?! That’s impossible... Impossible! The remaining Supreme Dragon on Golroana never even touched you!”

“What are you saying? The Supreme Dragon’s source is a colony, is it not? The dragons have a single source, formed of multiple sources. That means the source of the dragon attached to me is connected to the sources of the other dragons. My immune system followed that connection from the parasite.”

Veaflare turned pale in realization.

“As you can imagine, the immune system of the Demon King is ferocious. It won’t stop until it corrodes the entire colony.”

“That... That can’t be possible... *It can’t be*! Even Golroana’s Supreme Dragon... Are you saying you can control split sources of the Supreme Dragon?!”

“For now, yes.”

“For now...?”

She healed her wings with magic and distanced herself from the two dragons once again.

“Every citizen of this nation is infected with a Supreme Dragon. Each one was originally part of one colony, no?”

Her silence was as good as affirmation.

“If you don’t destroy my immune system soon, all your people will be under *my* control.”

Despair filled Veaflare’s face. She gritted her teeth, eyes teary, and uttered a spell at the two incoming dragons.

“*Belmus*.”

The Supreme Dragons froze on the spot and crashed to the floor loudly. Their sources had been consumed by their own sources. It was probably a self-destruction spell she had prepared in case she ever lost control of her dragons.

Veaflare cradled the dragon in her hands and cried.

“My beloved children...”

“Does it hurt that much to kill a part of the colony yourself, Veaflare?”

She glared at me angrily.

“How could you, Anos?! I will never forgive you for harming the children between Boldinos and myself! You won’t be getting away with just regular punishment!”

I shot the dramatic, tantrum-throwing Overlord an unimpressed look.

“This is my last question to you, Veaflare. Do you have any intention of showing the people an ounce of compassion?”

Veaflare glared angrily at me without answering the question.

“Got it. Listen up, Veaflare. For this rotted kingdom nested by a parasite of a woman, there is only one cure...”

The Sword of the Almighty appeared in my hand. As soon as it did, the tip of Veneziara instantly stabbed into her chest.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

I watched her scream in agony with cold Eyes, then proceeded to pin her to the wall using the blade.

“The death of the Overlord.”

§ 26. A Ceremony to Shake the Heavens

Overlord Veaflare struggled to reach for Leviangilma's blade. She grabbed onto the invisible blade and tried to draw it, but blood merely flowed from her hand instead.

"What... What are you doing?" she asked me, sweating from the pain.

"What do you mean what?"

"The hostage...isn't only Golroana... If you kill me, Ahid's life won't be guaranteed..."

"I don't need to kill you to save the nation. I just need the death of the king."

"If you make another move, I'll kill Ahid!"

"Choose. If you kill Ahid, I will torture and kill you. If you promise to save him, I will kill you painlessly."

I pushed Leviangilma's blade into her.

"Guh! Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"What's wrong? Weren't you going to kill Ahid?"

Veaflare panted, hands shaking as she said, "Do you doubt my sincerity?"

"If you were going to kill him, you would've done so by now."

The blade sank further into Veaflare's source, making her face twist with agony. She endured the pain while yelling, "You'll regret this!"

Trembling, Veaflare raised her right hand and drew a magic circle. But the moment she tried to send magic into the circle, she looked confused. She strengthened her Magic Eyes and searched the castle with her gaze.

"What are you looking at? The hostage you're after is already here."

Lunar snowdrops fluttered down beside me. One blinding flash of light later, two figures appeared. One was Arcana, and the other was Ahid. Ahid was lying on the floor.

“I’ve rescued Ahid Alovo Agartz as ordered,” Arcana reported. “He’s unconscious right now.”

“Well done,” I replied.

After looking at Ahid and Arcana, Veaflare’s gaze returned to me.

“While you were absorbed in playing with me, Arcana broke out of her cell. The Phantom Knights are busy handling the Knights of Agatha outside. Your security was full of holes,” I said, leaning my face close to hers. My cold gaze traveled across her trembling face. “Now, killing a hostage defeats the purpose of a hostage. Since you were so determined to kill him, you must have another trump card prepared in case you needed to beg for your life, no?”

Veaflare flinched in terror.

“Talk. Or would you rather I cast a curse for you to be forever separated from Boldinos? I could also change you into something so ugly, he’ll never want to look at you again.”

Veaflare’s eyes widened. She quickly shook her head, protesting quietly under her breath over and over again.

“I could even make it so that whenever you look at Boldinos, you only see the person you detest the most in the world.”

Despair flashed across her eyes.

“Choose.”

Her mouth opened and closed, but no voice came out.

“Hmm. Can’t decide? I can always curse you with all three.”

Those words seemed to be most effective; the moment I drew the magic circle to cast a curse, Veaflare spoke up.

“I-I’ll talk! I’ll talk, so don’t...!”

“You better consider your words wisely, then. The next time you utter any nonsense, your tragic love will come to a swift end.”

“I-I’ll tell you how to end the Selection Trial! If you wish to end it, you must

not win! That's exactly what the gods want; as the victor, you will be forced to obey order!" Veaflare rambled without pause, terrified.

I must not become the victor of the Selection Trial, huh?

"The order that governs the Selection Trial is the God of Balance, Elrolarielm. But the god only appears before whoever wins the trial. Doesn't that mean one must win the trial in order to defeat it?" I asked.

Veaflare was still trembling as she answered. "That is the truth. But the victor of the Selection Trial becomes unable to escape the God of Balance's order. By conforming to the ceremony of the Selection Trial, you are preparing yourself to accept the power of that god."

In other words, winning the Selection Trial required one to accept receiving an unavoidable curse.

"Is that why the first Overlord who tried to defeat the God of Balance had no choice but to be turned into a proxy of god?"

"Yes. Even with Boldinos's power, once he won the Selection Trial, he was unable to defy the God of Balance."

An immeasurable man like Ceris, unable to lift a finger against a god. Honestly, from what I had seen of him until now, I couldn't imagine him losing to the gods. Was the binding power of the Selection Trial really that strong?

"Is it possible to yield the victory to someone else and defeat it when it appears?"

"Elrolarielm only appears before the victor of the Selection Trial and their Selection God. Anyone else present will be unable to see or touch the God of Balance."

So that was why no one knew the name of the god that governed the Selection Trial.

"So how can one end the trial?"

"There is one way of meeting Elrolarielm in the middle of the Selection Trial. The God of Balance's order may not be visible, but it exists in this underground world."

Odd.

"So this god, that apparently only appears before the victor of the Selection Trial, is just out and about somewhere?" I asked.

"What I explained earlier was the God of Balance when its order is stable. However, that order is currently distorted."

That wasn't totally improbable. The Goddess of Destruction Abernyu was currently the Demon Castle Delsgade, after all.

"What happened?"

"In the first Selection Trial that occurred in the underground world, the draconid who became the very first proxy of god disturbed Elrolarielm's order. The Selection God of that draconid was Militia, the Goddess of Creation. She tried to use her power to seal the God of Balance."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Arcana, head low, seemingly lost in thought.

"I see. The Selected Eight and regular gods cannot stand up against the God of Balance, but the god who created the world was able to do something."

"But she failed. Just as she was about to seal the God of Balance and end the Selection Trial, the draconid she chose betrayed her. Militia died there."

Not destruction, but death.

"What happened after her death?" I asked.

"I don't know. She might have reincarnated, or someone might have interrupted the process. All I know is that the draconid who betrayed her destroyed Elrolarielm afterwards," Veaflare answered.

The God of Balance was already destroyed, yet the Selection Trial continued.

"I see. Militia died in the middle of the sealing process, so the order of the God of Balance began to move once again. The victor of the Selection Trial was turned into a proxy of god and shouldn't have been able to destroy the God of Balance, yet managed to do so anyway. So what happened afterwards?"

I recalled the objective of the Selection Trial.

"The original purpose of a proxy of god was to maintain lost order. The first

proxy of god is maintaining the God of Balance's order," I said, answering myself. Considering everything Veaflare had said up until this point, there was only one conclusion. "The Selection Trial continues because the first proxy still exists somewhere in the underground world. Thus, if someone wins the Selection Trial, that person will fulfill the role of the God of Balance."

Veaflare nodded firmly. "That's right. That's why if you meet the first proxy of god before the Selection Trial is over, you will be able to lead the trial to its end."

"Where is this proxy?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't have gone through all this trouble. We've been searching this entire time, but we only have a few clues. The first proxy of god detested this world."

The entire world? A bit of a stretch.

"Why?" I asked.

"Everyone was against them. They were constantly persecuted. From the moment they were born, the draconid was treated as an abomination in Agatha. A divine prophecy foretold that the draconid's persecution would lead the people to salvation, so no matter where they went in the underground world, they were abused. And eventually, all they could feel was hate."

What a cruel prophecy. Even if it was to keep the number of draconids sacrificed to a minimum, sacrificing even one innocent draconid made no sense to me.

"In the end, that draconid became a sacrifice for the Royal Dragon. The draconid's source was consumed, and their life ended without any salvation. But that hatred remained in the womb of the Royal Dragon. The resulting dragonborn carried a violent hatred in their heart."

Veaflare took a breath, then continued.

"Agatha worshiped the dragonborn. But there was a bottomless rage within them. A lifetime of senseless persecution remained within them. Eventually, when that dragonborn was chosen as one of the Selected Eight, they vowed to get revenge on the people and gods of the underground world. They wanted to

destroy the Selection Trial. I've already explained how that ended."

"In other words, the first proxy of god never fulfilled their goal."

"That's right... That draconid, who only moved out of anger, was in the end unable to grasp anything."

In an attempt to get revenge on the gods and the people, the draconid ended up a proxy against their will.

"How do you know about the first proxy of god?"

"This was all recorded within Gadeciola's forbidden tomes. Everything was left by the first Overlord, Boldinos."

Ceris being the one who archived the forbidden tomes seems quite suspicious to me.

Hmm. How should I process this?

"Does the forbidden tomes say to end the Selection Trial?" I asked.

"That's right. Agatha's prophecies seem to say the opposite, but there's something else Diedrich hasn't informed you of."

Veaflare smiled as though she had recovered from a hopeless situation.

"The skytremors are caused by the Selection Trials. The pillars of order will eventually fail, and the underground world will be crushed by the dome. This is the doomsday foretold by Agatha."

§ 27. The Prophesized Gathering of Kings

“Why... Why is the God of Balance trying to end the underground world?” Arcana mumbled slowly.

“You should know already. Gods are the order of this world, and the purpose of the Selection Trial is to maintain that order. It is a ceremony to restore the imbalance of order,” Veaflare said.

She turned to me with a wicked grin. “Two thousand years ago, a certain Demon King ruined the balance of the world. He stole the order of destruction from Abernyu, the Goddess of Destruction. As a result, everything in the world became estranged from destruction, and the balance of order collapsed.”

“So you’re saying the current Selection Trial is to restore that balance,” I said.

“That’s right. But the Goddess of Destruction is no longer the only problem. Ever since you stole the Goddess of Destruction, things that should have perished failed to perish. The world has moved forward in this distorted shape. All kinds of orders have warped accordingly. The Selection Trial is an attempt to balance out the accounts. That’s why the Selected Eight and their gods fight one another.”

With the way the Selection Trial worked, conflict was inevitable to victory. If two of the Selected Eight were to fight, their kingdoms would end up getting involved. The stronger the Selected Eight were, the more people would perish in the cross fire.

“I don’t know when the Selection Trial started, but are you saying fighting wasn’t a rule in whatever was previously held in the underground world?” I asked.

“Most likely, yes. All we know for sure is that this is how the current underground world works,” she answered.

Before I felled the Goddess of Destruction, order was rarely ever disturbed. If that was the case, there would be no need to regularly hold the Selection Trial.

It probably only happened once in a thousand years, if not ten thousand or more.

“At any rate, according to Boldinos, the order you distorted will never return to the way it was before. The Goddess of Destruction hasn’t perished, she’s merely changed forms into the Demon Castle Delsgade. The order of destruction cannot be revived.”

The Overlord continued in a reproachful tone. “In short, because of the Demon King, the underground world has always been destined to be destroyed. After continuously repeating the Selection Trial to maintain the order of destruction, at the very end, doomsday will arrive. The underground world will perish, and the lives that have been spared up until this point will be balanced out.”

So everyone alive in the underground world as a result of Abernyu’s disappearance will die, huh??

“Hmm. I suppose I understand the God of Balance’s circumstances now. But I won’t let things go their way.”

“Of course. You will lead the Selection Trial to its end. Find the first proxy of god and destroy the order of Elrolarielm. That way, the underground world will be saved.”

Veaflare touched the blade of possibilities with her hand.

“Say, will you draw this sword for me?” she said with a thin smile. “Our goals are the same. Boldinos’s aim is to save the underground world. But since he’s lost his heart, I wish to carry on his will in his place. Call me a foolish woman all you want, but if this underground world perishes, the children of this kingdom will die too.”

“Are you saying you’re too busy to attempt to stop the doomsday yourself?”

“No. I just want to wait here for Boldinos’s wish to come true so he can come home. To me, there’s nothing more important than that,” Veaflare stated firmly. “But even then, I still have more value alive than dead. Saving the underground world from ruin should come before killing the Overlord, no?”

It seemed there was still something she wasn’t telling me.

“You’ve already improved at begging for your life,” I noted.

“Even if you side with Agatha, they will never overturn their prophecy. The dome will fall on doomsday, and the underground world will perish. Is that what you want?” she said spitefully, voice filled with all the force of her hatred for the gods.

Just then, a loud clunk echoed through the room, and I turned to see the door opening.

“Ha! Everything you say always seems so convenient for you, Veaflare.”

Two people walked through the door: Agatha’s Sword Emperor Diedrich and Naphta the Goddess of the Future.

“How...?” Veaflare stared at them in disbelief. “You should be fighting with the Phantom Knights... Where’s Boldinos...?”

“He’s playing tag with the Knights of Agatha. Thankfully, he fell right for our decoy. We would’ve been at a disadvantage if we had to fight directly,” Diedrich said with a grin. “So we fought with a prophecy.”

It sounded like he had used his future sight to confuse the Phantom Knights and shake them off his trail. When it came to information warfare, even Ceris had a hard time taking on Diedrich.

“But that aside...”

Diedrich casually walked up to where Veaflare and I were standing.

“It’s true that the Selection Trials are causing the skytremors. The dome will eventually collapse completely,” he said, backing up Veaflare’s earlier words. “But the end of the Selection Trial will not bring the underground world salvation. If the trial ends, not only will the underground world perish but so will the rest of the world.”

“I thought Naphta couldn’t see the end of the Selection Trial?” Veaflare pointed out.

“Being unable to see it means there’s no future there to be seen. And you don’t have to be able to see the future to think about it: the Selection Trial is Elrolarielm’s power, and it exists to restore balance to disturbed order.”

Diedrich spoke in a low but powerful voice.

“What would happen if you destroy the God of Balance to end the Selection Trial? Every order in the world would become unbalanced. The dome falling will be the last thing on our minds.”

Logically speaking, he had a point. If the god in charge of balancing order vanished, there was no telling what abnormal phenomena would befall the world.

“Gadeciola was once part of Agatha. Could what is contained within Gadeciola’s forbidden tomes be a part of what the first Sword Emperor of Agatha saw in his prophecy?” I said.

“What do you mean by that?” Veaflare asked, feigning ignorance.

“Hmm. I see. I thought this woman was crazy for imprisoning her people within this country, but it seems that isn’t entirely the case,” I said.

Diedrich nodded patiently. “At the end of the Selection Trial, when the world is ruined, there is one place mentioned in Agatha’s prophecy that escapes unharmed. That place is here—Gadeciola. You people are trying to destroy this world, the gods, and the followers of the gods so that you can live here once the Selection Trial is over, aren’t you?”

“That’s just your own assumption, no? Or did Naphta see that future?” Veaflare said.

“Unfortunately, Gadeciola’s forbidden tomes aren’t completely visible to us. And there is no future where you speak of them yourself. That is why I am here—to overturn that prophecy.”

If I combined what Diedrich was saying with everything I knew up until now, it gave me a general idea of what was going on.

“Agatha’s prophecies, Gadeciola’s forbidden tomes, and Jiordal’s scriptures all refer to the end of the underground world, don’t they?” I said.

I cast Ei Chael over Pope Golroana and healed his wounds.

“I know you’ve been awake since the Supreme Dragon was removed from you,” I said.

Golroana sat up slowly. He looked between Diedrich, Veaflare, and myself.

“Jiordal tried to erase the dome using Beherom because you knew it would eventually fall. Am I wrong, Golroana?” I asked.

The pope quietly folded his hands in a prayer to the gods.

“Perhaps so,” he said quietly. “But our scriptures do not contain a detailed description of the legends. All we know is that the dome is a barrier that separates the surface from the underground, and while blessings rain on the surface, destruction rains below. The past popes all prayed to erase this inequality.”

That rain probably referred to the earthrain.

“Well, this is perfect,” I said to the three kings. “Agatha’s Sword Emperor Diedrich, Gadeciola’s Overlord Veaflare, and Jiordal’s Pope Golroana. The kings of the three major kingdoms of the underground are all gathered here.”

Veaflare and Golroana stiffened. Diedrich listened with a serious expression.

“The Sword Emperor of Agatha wants to continue the Selection Trial and overturn the prophecy. The Overlord of Gadeciola wants to end the Selection Trial and destroy the gods of other nations. And the pope of Jiordal wants to erase the dome and everything above it for an equal world. This is why, until today, you’ve been fighting.”

The Overlord, the Sword Emperor, and the pope all stood at equal intervals from one another in a triangular standoff, exchanging wary looks.

“Are you telling us to have a showdown?” Veaflare asked, glaring at Deidrich.

The pope had lost his gods, and the Supreme Dragon had been crucified to the wall. The only one who could fight properly in this situation would be the Sword Emperor.

“No. This is the perfect time to *talk*,” I said.

The unexpected answer made Veaflare frown with disgust.

I started to explain. “If the Selection Trial continues, the dome will fall. If the Selection Trial ends, the world will end with it. This underground world is destined to end either way, but if the three of you join forces with me, we can

create an ending we *all* find acceptable.”

Veaflare looked doubtful, while Golroana continued to pray.

“If we combine our information—scriptures, prophecies, and tomes—we may be able to find a solution. But that requires discussion.”

I finished speaking and waited for a while, but none of the three opened their mouths.

“Diedrich,” I said to the Sword Emperor. “You speak first.”

“About that... If I speak first, there will be no future where they speak...” Diedrich mumbled hesitantly.

“You came here to overturn the prophecy, no?”

Diedrich stared straight back at me.

“Show me your fighting spirit,” I told him. “I know you’ve been enemies for a long time, so just being honest may not get you the answer you want. But if you’re too scared to show your sincerity in the first place, no one can answer you at all.”

With a grim expression, Diedrich clenched his fists. Beside him, Naphta quietly awaited her master’s decision. The two could see bad futures, but every future led to the same doomsday. If Diedrich wanted to overturn the prophecy, at some point, he would have to look at things with his own eyes. He had to leap towards the future, one that wasn’t just a route that Naphta’s Divine Eyes decided was best. The question was whether that moment was right now or not.

“According to Agatha’s prophecies,” he eventually said in a deep voice, “when the three kings gather in Gadeciola’s castle and the Sword Emperor speaks of a prophecy he cannot see, the first proxy of god will reveal themself.”

Diedrich had made his decision. And at the exact same time...

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!” Ahid screamed in agony.

Multiple dragon heads burst out of his body, eating through his flesh. They immediately latched on to Arcana—who had been nearby—and sank their fangs into her shoulder.

§ 28. Past Mistakes beyond Salvation

Arcana's brow furrowed slightly as she released lunar snowdrops from her palm. The petals formed Locoronotto, the Sword of Divine Snow, which she used to behead the Supreme Dragon biting at her.

"Ah! Aaah! Raaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

There were three heads left biting into Arcana. She swung Locoronotto down.

"M-My deity, Arcana, please have mercy!" Ahid yelled.

Arcana froze mid motion. It seemed Ahid's mind wasn't completely under the control of the Supreme Dragon.

"The head of this Supreme Dragon is my source itself. If you cut it, I will perish... O my deity, god of salvation! Dear Arcana, please grant me your compassion... I have turned over a new leaf and now walk the road to salvation. Please, please spare my life!"

The fangs of the dragon sunk into Arcana's body in an attempt to consume her order, while Ahid prostrated himself on the floor before her, begging for his life.

"This is the last salvation I will grant you, Oracle Ahid."

"Oh! Thank you for your sublime words, my deity."

Arcana transformed the Sword of Divine Snow back into lunar snowdrops. She then created snow in the area around Ahid in order to freeze him—when Ahid suddenly grinned wickedly.

"Do it, Supreme Dragon!"

The Supreme Dragon biting into Arcana expanded in size and opened its mouth to swallow her whole.

"You really are beyond help," I muttered, casting Ji Noavus.

Black lightning formed fangs that sank into the Supreme Dragon, tearing its

source to shreds. One, then two of the heads were eliminated. But the moment Ji Noavus struck the third head, purple lightning appeared.

The purple lightning overflowed from the dragon's body at a tremendous rate, erasing Ji Noavus in no time at all.

The Supreme Dragon then proceeded to swallow Arcana. My Magic Eyes detected two familiar magic powers.

"He he he... Mwa ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

Ahid stood up smoothly, as though he was never injured, and let out a smug cackle.

"I've done it!" Ahid proclaimed. "I've retrieved my deity! Now finish consuming her, Supreme Dragon! Turn her order into my own power!"

The dragon crawled out of Ahid's back, but remained connected to him through its tail. Its entire body was crackling with fierce purple lightning—it was evident whose magic that belonged to.

"Ceris made a deal with you when he brought you out of Agatha, didn't he?" I said.

The giant Supreme Dragon spread its wings and lifted into the air, its tail extending so that it remained connected to Ahid.

"Yes, he did, Misfit. Gadeciola and I have *always* been on friendly terms."

Ahid looked over at Veaflare, who was smiling sadistically.

"Children cannot defy their parents," she said. "Everything you've done has all been exactly as Boldinos planned."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Oh, didn't you notice? The long-fought war in the underground world has come to an end. The God of Balance's order has just been swallowed by the Supreme Dragon."

The Overlord Castle shook with the sound of rumbling earth. The cause of the shaking was the skytremor—it was disturbing the air so much that the vibrations traveled all the way to the castle.

“With this, the Selection Trial has come to an end! Oh, it’s finally over! Boldinos’s dream will come true, and his heart will return!”

I looked up at the dome through the skylight in the ceiling and saw it crumbling apart, like a falling tower of blocks. Veaflare was also watching the falling pieces, totally enraptured.

“So Arcana was the first proxy of god that possessed Elrolarielm’s order?” I asked, looking at the Supreme Dragon that had just swallowed Arcana. “By looking at just her order, it wouldn’t be wrong to call her the Goddess of Creation. When Militia reincarnated, her order had to be maintained by the first proxy of god. Lost order is unable to remain in its complete form, which is why the Moon of Creation lost its original shine.”

As the first proxy of god who had to maintain order, Arcana became known as Genedonov, the Goddess of Absurdity. She was also able to become a Selection God because of the orders she possessed.

“Yes,” Veaflare confirmed. “The Goddess of Absurdity discarded her name and memories, fooling herself into believing she was a nameless god. She followed her own hatred, deceiving everyone around her in order to fulfill her goal.”

Veaflare laughed with glee.

“But Boldinos was one step ahead of her. Her wish would end before she could regain her memories, and the Selection Trial with it. Everything aside from Gadeciola will be destroyed, and Boldinos will regain his heart!”

“Hee hee hee! Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Do you see now, Misfit? It’s your defeat, and my victory! Your god has been stolen from you, and now you can do nothing but watch as your nation is destroyed!” Ahid’s vulgar laughter echoed loudly.

“Ah, I feel so good right now!” Ahid said. “The foolish man who believed himself invincible has to face his own defeat! If only you had killed me back then, all of this could have been prevented! What an utter fool!”

“On top of being beyond help, it seems your eyes are as blind as ever, Ahid,” I replied.

“Ha ha! This sore loser refuses to admit def— Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The tail of the Supreme Dragon was severed from Ahid.

“I could dispose of you myself,” I said, “but there’s someone more worthy of deciding your fate.”

“Wh-Wha... There’s no use doing this, I’ll return to normal in no time—”

The severed Supreme Dragon transformed into the Sword of Divine Snow, Locoronotto.

“What...is this...?” Ahid mumbled, astounded.

Without any resistance, Ahid’s anti-magic was totally bypassed to transform the Supreme Dragon.

“The Magic Eyes...of Absurdity? It can’t be...”

“You can deal with him yourself, Arcana,” I said. “Whether it’s salvation or punishment, the decision is yours.”

A single lunar snowdrop fluttered down, and Arcana appeared. The magic circles in her eyes were the same as the ones in Aisha’s Magic Eyes of Omneity.

“How...?” Veaflare said fearfully. “Boldinos said the Goddess of Absurdity wouldn’t be able to use Abernyu’s power without her memories... The order of the Goddess of Creation alone shouldn’t be enough to activate the Magic Eyes of Absurdity...”

Arcana’s Eyes turned towards Veaflare.

“Did you remember...Goddess of Absurdity...” she mumbled.

“You were deceived,” Arcana said, drawing the Sword of Divine Snow from the floor. “I am Genedonov, the god of lies and betrayal. I am the Goddess of Absurdity who *lied*. I said I’d cooperate with Ceris. I agreed to lose my memories until the victor of the Selection Trial was decided, and you and Ceris used that to betray me. But I never believed in you from the start. In order to fulfill this shameful wish of mine, I deceived everyone.”

She turned back to me and said sadly, “Big brother... I regained my name.”

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

Arcana slowly shook her head. “I’ve lied until now for this moment. There’s no time to tell you the truth. I want you to give me a command—so that I won’t betray you too...”

Urgency swirled about within Arcana’s chest, as if the emotions and memories of before were clashing the emotion she was feeling now.

Arcana sent me her magic power, and my Selection pledge ring appeared on my finger, glowing with light.

“I will obey my pact with you,” she said.

“Hmm. In that case, I’ve already given my command,” I said. “You once chose Ahid as your Selected Eight. Deal with him yourself. Grant this helpless man your salvation—or your punishment.”

A magic circle appeared over the jewel as though a pact had been made, then vanished.

Arcana watched me with wide eyes. She looked like she wanted to ask me why, but she didn’t say anything.

“We’ve already exchanged our pact. I trust you. That hasn’t changed, even now,” I said.

I would never doubt her kindness—that was what I had vowed to her at the very beginning. There was no need for a second pact.

“I’ll do as you say, big brother...”

Arcana walked over to Ahid and stopped before him. Her sword was pointed at his throat.

“O-Ohhh... My deity... My god, Arcana...” Ahid said with a nervous smile. “I-I repent for my actions. It was the Supreme Dragon! The Supreme Dragon was nested in my source, forcing me to obey whatever Gadeciola’s leader wanted! I-I didn’t *actually* want to do any of this...”

Tears welled in his eyes as he groveled in front of Arcana. Even for him, it was pretty convincing.

“Raise your head, Ahid. I have found a way to save your helpless self.”

“O-Oh, how generous of you! I will gladly do anything to walk the path of atonement.”

“Well said.”

The Sword of Divine Snow, Locoronotto, pierced through Ahid’s chest.

“Urgaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! M-My deity... What are you...”

“You will freeze and become a sacrifice to the Royal Dragon. At the eventual birth of the next dragonborn, you will become the hero that saves Agatha. You will be reborn into a kind being.”

“I-I am not worthy of becoming a hero!” Ahid spluttered. “Even after reincarnating, a rotten person like me would never be worthy of the role!”

“So you lied when you said you’d do anything to atone?”

“I-It wasn’t a lie... But I won’t be saved that way! I wish to atone for my sins in a way befitting someone as insignificant as me!”

In short, he didn’t want to die.

“If you truly worship me and repent for your sins,” Arcana said, “Locoronotto will return to its original Supreme Dragon form.”

“I repent! I worship you! From the bottom of my heart!” Ahid screamed. His wound began to freeze, the ice slowly spreading across his body.

“Words aren’t enough. Your worship is meaningless if you don’t truly believe it.”

The lower half of Ahid’s body was completely frozen, and the ice on his upper body had already reached his neck.

“I-I get it! I’ll vow on it! I worship you, and this is the proof!”

Ahid used Zecht and immediately signed it. The contract declared his belief in Arcana as a god and vowed his life as payment if he were to ever betray it.

“I accept your devotion, Ahid.”

Just as he sighed in relief, a crack spread from where Locoronotto was embedded within him. That crack quickly spread across his body.

“Wha... Why?! At this rate... I’ll die...”

He looked around the room, desperately thinking of a solution.

“G-Goddess of the Future! Sword Emperor of Agatha!” he shouted. “Y-You two will be troubled by my death! Isn’t that right?!”

By the time he was done yelling, Naphta had already transformed Kandaquizorte, the Future World Crystal, into a spear.

“I, Naphta, object to your actions, Genedonov. If Ahid perishes, Ricardo will become the sacrifice for the Royal Dragon. Please hand him over in a frozen state.”

The spear of Kandaquizorte pointed at Arcana.

“Do not interrupt my god’s salvation, Naphta,” I said. “Ricardo may be saved that way, but Arcana has decided to show that helpless man mercy.”

“Kandaquizorte will sentence her to death by impalement.”

“You better open those Divine Eyes of yours first,” I warned. “There is no future where that spear will reach her.”

Just as Naphta was about to send magic into the Future World Crystal, Diedrich held out a hand to stop her.

“This is fine,” he said.

Naphta changed Kandaquizorte back to its crystal form. “I shall obey the Prophet.”

“No... That can’t be!”

With nowhere left to turn, Ahid started yelling hysterically. “P-Please wait, my deity! What is the meaning of this?!”

“You will receive salvation through destruction. Your source will be shattered into pieces and your soul will naturally return to the cycle of life. Being reborn that way is your only path to salvation, no matter what shape you take on after rebirth,” Arcana replied.

“Th-That isn’t what you said before!” Ahid protested. “It’s not salvation if I’m not myself! *I* vowed to worship you! You said the Supreme Dragon would return

to normal if I did! You can’t go back on your word like this! What kind of god lies like that?!”

Arcana looked at Ahid sadly. “Oracle Ahid, isn’t this what you’ve done to others this entire time?”

Despair spread across Ahid’s face.

“I merely returned your sin back to you. With this sword, I will carve your just deserts on your soul. As an existence guided by lies and betrayal like me, this path of atonement is the only form of salvation for you.”

“S-Stop... Have mercy, my god! Please! I will turn over a new leaf this time! This time for sure, I—”

Lunar snowdrops fell upon his body. With each petal, a quiet chill spread. The presence of death hung in the air.

“Noooooooooooooooooo! I don’t want to die yet! I don’t want to die! Help! Someone help, save me—”

Ahid’s face froze over.

“Save...me...”

Thus, he turned into a silent ice statue.

“What kind of god isn’t able to save everyone and anyone? What kind of god isn’t able to create a god where everyone is happy?” Arcana mused.

With a pitying look at the man who was beyond salvation, Arcana mumbled words of self-scorning.

“I am not a god, but a mere proxy of one... And I’m sorry I wasn’t able to give you proper salvation.”

Cracks ran along Ahid’s statue before he shattered to pieces.

§ 29. The Beginning of the End

The dome writhed, as though it was alive, making an eerie, thundering rumble as it did.

The sky above the underground world was still crumbling before our eyes, ready to fall at any moment. The pillars of order were barely maintaining the balance required to support the dome.

“I, Naphta, have a declaration to make.”

The Goddess of the Future spoke up like she was declaring a judgment.

“The future has taken its first step towards the end of the Selection Trial. A portion of the order of Elrolarielm that the first proxy of god possessed has been consumed by the Supreme Dragon. The weakened order has caused the balance maintaining the underground world to collapse.”

Diedrich continued after her. “If left alone, the dome will fall upon the underground world and destroy us. Eternalized through the power of the Sword of the Almighty, the falling sky can no longer be stopped by anyone—not even if the people and gods of the underground all united as one.”

This was what Diedrich had feared—the darkness Naphta couldn’t see. But the Sword Emperor was beaming boldly.

“This is the beginning of the end,” he said. “This is one of the futures that Naphta couldn’t see with her Eyes, one of the futures without a prophecy. The Sword Emperor Diedrich chose to see hope in this darkness.”

This was his choice. To trust his own eyes and heart instead of Naphta’s Divine Eyes.

“Pope Golroana, Overlord Veaflare.”

Diedrich looked at the praying pope and the dazed woman, calling out to both.

“Now is the time to discuss the future of the underground world. As the

Demon King said, Agatha's prophecies, Jiordal's scriptures, and Gadeciola's forbidden tomes were all passed down to avoid the end of our world. If we combine what each of us know, we may be able to escape from this situation."

He released the fist he had tightly clenched and looked at them with a relaxed expression.

"Come. Let us put an end to this. Jiordal's prayers, Gadeciola's hatred, and Agatha's pride can all be respected at the same time. No one's values have to be denied," the Sword Emperor said to the pope and Overlord. "I swear on Agatha's pride that I will acknowledge both Jiordal's faithful search for salvation and the wounds that Gadeciola harbors that fuels their hatred. Our teachings may contradict one another, but that doesn't mean we have to destroy each other over it."

"Are you telling us we must accept the blasphemous idea of god existing within ourselves?" Golroana asked.

"You can at least accept that there's a kingdom of knights out there who believe such a thing. It's not like I'm asking you to think the same way," Diedrich said.

After listening to his reply, Veaflare spoke next. "The gods stole Boldinos's heart. I will never forgive the gods, and neither will the Gadeciola people. Our hatred will not disappear until everything is destroyed and Boldinos returns home."

"I'm not telling you to forgive the gods," Diedrich replied. "It's true that your people were oppressed. But what will happen if you keep fighting like this? When doomsday arrives and crushes us all under the dome, you will still face the same future as us."

If Elrolarielm's order wasn't completely erased, then the dome could still fall without crumbling to pieces. The Overlord had been aiming for the total collapse of the dome and the destruction of the world. But now that Arcana had regained her memories, the situation was different from what she had imagined. The prophecy stating Gadeciola would escape unharmed was no longer reliable.

"We can bicker with each other and insist on our own teachings. But taking up

arms will only result in hurting each other. The swords we swing are merely hurting ourselves. And that's not what we want to do."

The two kings were silent towards Diedrich's words.

"Why don't we vow to never violate each other's teachings or beliefs?" he suggested.

He held his head high with pride, the scars of past wars carved into his heart.

"It's been a long war. There were many conflicts between us. But let's end the bloodshed *here*. If we need to fight, let's do it with words instead of swords. One day, we may be able to attain true peace that way."

He stated his views peacefully, but his powerful words were that of a true leader.

"It's about time we came to a compromise with each other," he continued. "We may end up bickering and arguing to the end, but our distant descendants may look back on us one day and laugh, thinking all our conflict silly."

He spoke with hope.

"That's the future I envision."

Silence fell upon the room. Golroana and Veaflare both stared at Diedrich without saying anything, contemplating his words.

Just then, a slow clap echoed once, then twice.

"How wonderful. Of course the Sword Emperor Diedrich of Agatha would have such a beautiful view of the future."

The voice came from a purple-haired, green-eyed man in a cloak that had appeared in the open doorway.

"You really were born to be king."

It was the commander of Gadeciola's Phantom Knights, Ceris Voldigoad.

"Boldinos! I'm sorry... I'm so sorry, I—!"

Ceris held a palm out towards the crucified Veaflare and drew the magic circle for Fless. The spell pulled her off the wall and flew her towards him. My blade of possibilities had been pierced deep into her body—the movement would

have destroyed her source if I hadn't canceled my own magic at the last moment and released her.

Veaflare fell to the ground beside Ceris and clung to him. "Oh, Boldinos! You saved me!"

If I hadn't released my blade, the Overlord would have perished. Had Ceris assumed that I wouldn't allow that to happen, or did he simply not care either way?

"But you know," Boldinos said, taking a quiet step forward without a second glance at Veaflare. "Draconids, demons, and humans are *all* troublesome beings. We can't survive on idealistic words alone. Some people will always rejoice at the sight of others drowning in their own blood, of pandemonium echoing all around them. There's just no saving them."

He spoke with a friendly smile. "If you accept faith and hatred, you have to accept that there are people who are just rotten to the core too."

Diedrich shot Ceris an exasperated glare. As the Prophet who had witnessed countless futures, he already knew there was no point in discussing things with this man.

"You're just playing with words now," Diedrich said.

"Yup," Ceris confirmed, "just like you."

Ceris raised his right hand and purple lightning extended from it, forming a demon sword with a jagged edge that resembled a lightning bolt. When I stared into its abyss, I could see the demon sword was inscribed with the name Gauddigemon, Sword of a Thousand Bolts.

"You didn't know I would come here. After all, Naphta's Divine Eyes cannot see past the beginning of the end"—Ceris braced the Sword of a Thousand Bolts on his left shoulder and swung it down—"where there is nothing but darkness."

Gauddigemon's blade extended as purple lightning, sweeping sideways like a wave of destruction. Lightning thundered as the blade slashed apart the wall of the pillar room.

However, everyone in the room was unharmed. Naphta and Diedrich had

avoided it with their restrictions. Arcana had blocked the blow with Locoronotto, and I had used Leviangilma to protect the pope and myself.

"Nice reactions, everyone," Ceris said in praise. "The Sword of a Thousand Bolts causes heavy lightning to surge through the wound, burning everything to a crisp. You all defended yourselves successfully—with one exception."

The loud crackle of lightning could be heard coming from the Sky Pillar Sword Velevim.

Diedrich gasped. "Don't tell me... You..."

"That's right, I've been waiting for this moment all along. Now that the God of Balance's order has weakened, breaking even a single one of the pillars supporting the dome will usher in doomsday *immediately*."

Purple lightning burst from the Sky Pillar Sword, causing the giant greatsword to shake violently and crumble like the wall of the pillar room. At the same time, a loud rumble thundered through the skies as the dome began to fall.

At this rate, the dome would completely fall in less than an hour. Another support needed to be prepared immediately, but how was that meant to be done? Not to mention the fact Ceris still had to be dealt with first.

"Demon King."

A Leaks from Diedrich reached me.

"Can you handle Ceris and the Overlord?" he asked.

"Do you have a means of propping up the dome?"

"That I do. But I need you to drive Ceris out of here. Can you do it?"

I grinned fearlessly and started running. "Easily."

With Leviangilma still sheathed as I ran, I sent a Leaks to Arcana.

"Keep an eye on the Overlord. I destroyed the Supreme Dragon that consumed all those gods, but she may have something else up her sleeve."

"I will do as you say."

Arcana held out a hand and sent lunar snowdrops rushing at the Overlord. "Snow piles up, obstructing the way."

The lunar snowdrops formed a barrier of snow enclosing the Overlord. Veaflare tried to summon the Supreme Dragons within her body, but Arcana immediately transformed them into snow with the Magic Eyes of Absurdity.

Her Eyes then fixed on the Overlord herself. Countless dragons flowed out of Veaflare's body to form a shield. Each one was promptly transformed to snow, but as the progenitor of the Supreme Dragons, she appeared to have an endless number within her.

But Arcana would keep her too occupied to do much of anything else.

"Trying to drive me away from here?" Ceris said, stepping towards me without a second glance at Veaflare. He swung the Sword of a Thousand Bolts down, but I easily blocked it with Leviangilma's sheath.

"Hmm. Intercept our Leaks, did you?" I asked.

"Oh, I'd never. It's written right on your faces."

Purple lightning sparked from his sword, followed by an explosion. I dampened its force with my Magic Eyes of Destruction and bent low to let the blast pass. Ceris drew a magic circle in front of me and thrust his left hand at my face.

"*Gavest*," Ceris said.

Purple lightning crackled, but the spell didn't activate. The blade of possibilities had cut through the spherical magic circle before it could.

"*Veneziara*," I said.

Ceris easily avoided the two blades.

"Even if I can't see the blade of possibilities, I can tell where the blade will come from by looking at your stance and spell circle," he said.

He avoided the next brandish of Leviangilma just as easily, then stepped within striking range of me, swinging the Sword of a Thousand Bolts down. But as soon as he did so, he was thrown upwards as though he had been struck.

"Guh...!"

"Leviangilma isn't the only thing that can use Veneziara," I said.

I slammed a fist of possibilities into Ceris's jaw as he stooped low to avoid the incoming blade. His body was knocked up towards the ceiling, and I leaped up after him.

"Now, choose the possibility you prefer more: blade or fist."

I activated Veneziara and approached him with the choice between my hand and my sword. He was still caught off-balance, so whichever option he chose to defend himself against would result in the other striking him.

"Heh."

Ceris laughed, then cast a spell—the spell Veneziara. His body shifted between two possibilities, erasing the possibility of both my hand and my sword.

"Did you think I couldn't defend myself?" he asked.

But as soon as he said that, my Vebzud-stained fingers pierced through his chest.

His face twisted. "Guh?!"

"I said to choose a possibility, but I didn't say there wouldn't be an actual attack as well."

I used the hand I had still in his chest to lift up his body, then took off into the sky.

§ 30. From outside the Battle of Wits

Ceris and I passed through the skylight in the ceiling and arrived near the dome.

The surface of the dome undulated like the waves of a stormy ocean, the deafening sound of cracking rock shaking the air.

“Perish,” I said.

My hand was about to crush Ceris’s source when suddenly, scarlet lightning began to flow out of it.

“Hmm. Impressive defense.”

The lightning current ran up my Vebzud-covered right hand, raging in an attempt to tear me apart. I withdrew my fingers from his chest at the last moment and shook off the lightning, my hand now slightly charred.

“Have you forgotten this too?” Ceris asked. “The Vermilion Thunderbolt. Compared to your Demon King blood, this lightning blood is far more violent. And it only harms its targeted prey.”

Ceris drew a spherical magic circle in front of himself.

“Unlike the Demon King blood that could ruin the world if used recklessly, this blood is very convenient,” he said.

“I see. So your so-called Vermilion Thunderbolt doesn’t even have the power to destroy the world.”

“Want to see for yourself?”

Ceris readied the Sword of a Thousand Bolts in his right hand while aiming his magic with his left.

“Let’s see if you have the right to call yourself my father,” I replied.

I readied the sheathed Leviangilma in my hands while glaring at the spherical magic circle with my Magic Eyes of Destruction. We charged at each other in

midair using Fless and cast the same spell at the same time.

"*Veneziara*."

Magic circle crossed with sword for the briefest moment, spell formula and sword stance shifting faintly. Ceris was required to read my next move from the constantly changing possibilities of the future. If his Eyes misread my strike, he would promptly be cut down.

Immediately after, a fatal strike was drawn out of the multiple possibilities of my blade.

Out of all the possibilities, Ceris chose to use the freely adjustable length of the Sword of a Thousand Bolts to aim for the moment when I drew Leviangilma. Gauddigemon sent bolts of purple lightning up Leviangilma's sheath, repelling my Veneziara. Possibilities canceled out possibilities, erasing the chance of Leviangilma being unsheathed.

"Looks like I was the one who read you correctly this time. You can't swing your sword at this distance while it's in its sheath," Ceris said.

His left hand was right in front of my face.

"Gavest or Gauddigemon—block the one you think will hurt more," Ceris said.

Clearly, he was trying to get payback for before. Gavest and the Sword of a Thousand Bolts were both posed to fire at the same time. If I erased the magic with my Magic Eyes of Destruction, I wouldn't be able to dodge backwards and draw Leviangilma before his sword reached me. I needed to use Vebzud in order to gain more distance, but the Vermilion Thunderbolt was in my way. There was no distance for me to swing Leviangilma, so I would have to take one attack no matter what I did.

"Time's up," Ceris said, firing Gavest and Gauddigemon at the same time.

"Did you think I couldn't draw my sword at such a close distance?"

The spherical magic circle was sliced apart, and the Sword of a Thousand Bolts was split in two. Ceris's smile didn't falter, but his gaze became harsher.

"Huh... Was that the Veneziara you used earlier, perhaps?" he asked.

"Well spotted. I cast Veneziara on the Veneziara you deflected earlier."

Ceris had used the possibilities of the Sword of a Thousand Bolts to repel me and seal Leviangilma. But to think of this another way, in contrast to the reality in which I was right beside him, there was a possibility that I had been repelled and moved a short distance away. That possibility normally would have disappeared, but I had used Veneziara on it to turn it into reality.

This was how I had caught Ceris—who fully believed Leviangilma couldn't be drawn—off guard, allowing me to slash the spherical magic circle and Sword of a Thousand Bolts at the same time.

"Good grief. Casting Veneziara on Veneziara? I'm speechless, but I suppose I should have expected that much from my son."

He aimed a kick at me to distance himself from Leviangilma. I blocked the kick with an arm, which he used to spring himself backwards.

"Speechless?" I remarked. "You look completely unaffected."

With a hand turned pale-blue through Ygg Neas, I grabbed his foot and yanked it. At the same time, I used Veneziara and swung my sword. Leviangilma's fatal blade was just about to strike Ceris in the head—and purple lightning exploded.

Gauddigemon, the Sword of a Thousand Bolts, caught Leviangilma with its blade. The blade that should have been broken in two was fully intact.

"You thought I didn't have any way of blocking Leviangilma head-on, right?"

Mauve-colored Eyes lowered the power of Leviangilma, allowing Ceris to deflect the blade. At the same time, fingers reached for my face. There was no spherical magic circle formed—he had used Veneziara to create the possibility of a magic circle there.

"*Gavest*."

Purple lightning expanded and shot through me like beams of light. The currents attempted to burn my source, but promptly turned black. Gavest crumbled apart and rotted away.

"Did you think lightning couldn't be corrupted?" I asked.

My Vebzud-stained fingers bore a hole in Ceris's abdomen. Red lightning

flowed like blood, while real, fresh blood went flying.

I pulled my arm back and shook off the Vermilion Thunderbolt wrapped around it.

“Wow. Nice one,” Ceris said with a relaxed expression, gauging the distance between us. “Though I had relocated my source, you were able to aim for the exact same spot where you wounded my source before. Your Eyes and magic are something else.”

“I’ll dig even deeper next time,” I said. “If I cast Egil Grone Angdroa in the furthest depths of your source, the Vermilion Thunderbolt will act as a barrier to the outside. The world won’t be at risk of destruction.”

“That’s a flaw of yours, you know? You may be powerful, but you lack control. You’re incapable of giving it your all. But I can focus my destruction magic on a single point. Do you know what that means?”

Ceris smiled calmly. “I can cast all kinds of magic—magic that could destroy the entire world—onto your source and body alone.”

“Oh? It almost sounds like you’re stronger than me.”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

I burst into laughter. “Fascinating. If you’ve really got a spell like that, let’s see it. Be it true or not, the moment you cast it will be the moment of your defeat.”

Ceris chuckled. “I won’t underestimate you. The moment I show you even greater magic, you’ll learn it for yourself. That’s why I’ll only show my true power when I’m sure I can destroy you for good.”

What a clever thing to say. Is it the truth or a bluff? Either way, it seemed he wanted me to be wary of a potential ace up his sleeve. He was making good use of the fact I had no memories of him.

“Besides, there’s no need to use my true power against you right now.”

Ceris held the Sword of a Thousand Bolts ready by his left shoulder as he made another spherical magic circle. “The dome is about to fall. You have no idea how Diedrich and Naphta intend on stopping that. But you’ve got a faint idea.”

He paused, then continued.

“The Sky Pillar Sword Velevim, the doomsday prophecy, the sacrifice to the Royal Dragon, the heroes of Agatha said to become both the swords and foundation of the kingdom. Once you think about it, it’s pretty clear that they’re all connected to one another.”

He spoke at length with a friendly smile.

“The pillars of order supporting the underground are the remains of the dragonborn of Agatha. They—quite literally—turn into the swords protecting the kingdom. Diedrich will fulfill his promise to you and hold up the dome by sacrificing the source of the dragonborn and his own source. He will become a pillar of this underground world.”

Ceris glanced downwards. Far below us, the Knights of Agatha were riding their dragons towards the Overlord Castle.

“Wonderful knights, aren’t they? Sacrificing themselves to save the world. No one could possibly stop such mighty and proud knights from their duty. Not even the Demon King of Tyranny.”

Ceris had cut the Sky Pillar Sword because he knew Diedrich and his men would take its place. By doing this, he could take out the Knights of Agatha in a single move.

“I see,” I said. “There’s really no telling what you’ll do if I look away from you. But I don’t have time to be dealing with you now either.”

Ceris stared at me calmly without replying.

“However...”

I landed on the top of the Overlord Castle and held up a hand. A Leaks had reached me just moments ago.

“...unfortunately for you, I’m not alone,” I said.

Far off in the distance, an object was flying directly at us. No, it wasn’t an object—it was a person. His cackling laughter grew louder and louder the closer he approached.

“Bwa ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha! BWA HA HA! Charge, charge, chaaarge!”

The Conflagration King Eldmed rushed forward with twenty copies of the Divine Sword Roduier around him. He must have asked Naya to help manifest the divine body of the Heavenly Father already.

“What about it?” Ceris said, drawing a magic circle to create a shield of purple fire. It was the spell Nuizinias, which could seal the power of gods. Eldmed and the Roduiers charged straight into its net, allowing Ceris’s Gavest to strike him directly.

“Gwaaah!” Eldmed cried.

Suddenly, over a hundred of Gadeciola’s forbidden soldiers appeared in the air, flapping their dragon wings. They all wielded spears while simultaneously casting Nuizinias to weaken Eldmed’s magic power.

“I’ve already accounted for all your followers in my calculations,” Ceris said. “How many did you summon here? Feel free to call all of them over; I’ll take them all on at once.”

“Who knows? There’s someone here who likes to strike out on his own quite frequently.” I looked over at the man entangled in Nuizinias’s net. “So how many is it, Eldmed?”

The Conflagration King gasped for breath as blood spilled from his mouth.

“Bwa ha ha. It may not be enough—”

A light flashed in the distance.

“—but I’d say roughly five thousand or so!”

Ceris whirled around to see a huge purifying fire burning behind him. “Songfire? Must be the Jiordal Church.”

He promptly dodged the songfire rushing at him from afar. Eldmed used that opening to escape from Nuizinias and grapple him from behind.

“Exactly! Although this still may not be enough for you, Ceris Voldigoad!” Eldmed shouted.

“How did you seduce them all?” Ceris asked. “I’m shocked you got the church to move, considering they have a pope that couldn’t realize a fifteen-hundred-yearslong prayer.”

Songfire rose from the ground once again, swallowing Eldmed and Ceris together. The forbidden soldiers were spread out through the air, but roughly a tenth of them were struck in the cross fire.

“Bwa ha ha!” Eldmed cackled. “*Seduce*? I’d never do something so scandalous! I merely told them with the dignity of the Heavenly Father that Anos Voldigoad, the man they suspected to be the Almighty Radiance, had gone to retrieve their abducted pope.”

A second and third pillar of songfire was aimed at them, forcing Eldmed and Ceris higher and higher into the air.

“Who do you think will withstand these flames of purification for longer?” Eldmed wondered. “My divine body, or your demonic one?”

A fourth and fifth pillar of songfire swallowed them, pushing them up to where the dome was undulating with tremors.

“Oh my, are you sure about this? If we make contact with the dome, you won’t get away unharmed either,” Ceris said.

“That’s what makes it more interesting!” Eldmed exclaimed. “If you are a true enemy of the Demon King, you will survive this no matter what! If you wish to stand before him, you must first step over the corpse of the Conflagration King!”

Thrust upwards by the songfire, Eldmed and Ceris crashed into the eternalized dome.

“Bwa ha ha! It’s do-or-die! Surrender is not an option!”

§ 31. Dreaming of an Uncertain Future

Pillar room, Overlord Castle.

Arcana's Magic Eyes of Absurdity had transformed the Supreme Dragon, burying Veaflare in a barrier of snow. It was only a matter of time before she would be completely sealed.

Through Arcana's vision, I could see Pope Golroana praying while the Sword Emperor Diedrich glared at the dome. Naphta stood silently beside him.

Diedrich lowered his gaze and looked at the Sky Pillar Sword Velevim.

"Say, Demon King..." Diedrich muttered. He seemed to know I could hear him. "I always believed that hope would be at the end of the best possible future."

He spoke quietly while walking towards Velevim.

"I believed there was a path where everyone could survive. Even if that path didn't exist right now, I wanted to pave the way for that future."

Diedrich walked slowly but firmly, as though, with each step forward, he was recalling the total sum of his life.

"Though using Naphta's Divine Eyes over and over, this is the best route towards that future. But in order to overturn the prophecy, I have to go after the hope I see with my own eyes someday."

The fact he was saying this at all was probably proof he knew the end was close.

"There *should* have been hope here. But maybe I was wrong to think there could be hope in this impossible darkness."

Diedrich came to a stop before the broken Sky Pillar Sword.

"Doomsday is upon us. The pillars of order have snapped, and the dome is falling. If we Knights of Agatha support the dome here, all we'd be doing is extending the problem. Our descendants will be sacrificed to this land, but it will still fall one day."

He clenched his fists and gritted his teeth, clearly enraged by his own helplessness.

“This should have been the end. The dragonborn of this generation were to be the final sacrifices. I didn’t want to leave this cruel fate—this unjust destiny—to the descendants of Agatha. We wanted to end things here, with our own hands.”

Diedrich’s face was full of regret.

“But we couldn’t. I can only say it’s a shame...”

He slammed his fist into the Sky Pillar Sword heavily. Fragments of the sword rolled across the floor noisily.

“Sorry, Demon King. All this was brought about by my failure to choose the best possible future. Perhaps you would have been able to change things if *you* were in my place,” Diedrich said, chagrin seeping through his face. “I chose the wrong path. I was not worthy of being the Sword Emperor of Agatha.”

He clenched his jaw and stared straight forward, as though he had shaken off the past.

“I will right my wrongs. I pray that after I’m gone, you will overturn my prophecy.”

With a resolute look, Diedrich called out to the god that had selected him.

“Thank you for accompanying me until now, Naphta. Without a single complaint, you watched over an ignorant man’s reckless attempt to overturn the prophecy of the Goddess of the Future. I couldn’t be more grateful.”

The Goddess of the Future listened to him without reply.

“This is my final wish,” Diedrich said, taking a deep breath. He held back his grief and spoke as a dauntless king. “Take care of Agatha.”

Unable to look at Naphta in the eye, he averted his gaze awkwardly. “Sorry, I ended up just like all the other Sword Emperors. Another foolish prophet that couldn’t bear the weight of the prophecies and instead, dreamed of an impossible future of hope.”

“No,” the Goddess of the Future said. Her tone gently denied his words. “I,

Naphta, have a declaration to make. You are the true prophet. You looked towards the best possible future until the very end. You are the only one to look at the same future as me with your naked eyes."

Diedrich slowly turned around. Naphta's Divine Eyes were open.

"This isn't an impossible darkness. This is the best future my Eyes could see. A future I never showed you," she said.

Diedrich held his breath. His eyes were wide in surprise.

"There's a blind spot to the Divine Eyes..." Diedrich mumbled fearfully.

Naphta nodded. "The Demon King was right. There was a blind spot to the Divine Eyes I bestowed you."

"Right," Diedrich said, unable to hide his surprise as he processed her words. "That's right... The Demon King did say that."

He recalled what was said on the balcony of the Sword Emperor Palace.

"If the Prophet says the prophecy out loud, that prophecy becomes easier to overturn," Diedrich said, slowly piecing things together. "If a future looks bad, you just have to act so that it doesn't become reality..."

Why hadn't Naphta shown him this future? The answer was easy to imagine.

"If there's a future you want to happen no matter what," Diedrich continued, "you can't say that prophecy out loud. That applies to both you and me..."

If there was a prophecy Naphta didn't want overturned under any circumstances, then she couldn't tell the Prophet about it. It was the same as Diedrich did for the people of Agatha when he refrained from telling them of any bad futures. Diedrich's trust in Naphta was why he hadn't noticed this blind spot until now.

"Like the Demon King said, this blind spot is what led us here," Naphta said. "Now, you'll be able to reach the future that my Divine Eyes couldn't see."

"Does that mean...the blind spot isn't only in my Eyes, but your Eyes too?" Diedrich asked.

Naphta nodded firmly. "The Goddess of the Future's order is to govern the

future. My existence itself maintains the order of the future. Thus, my Divine Eyes have a blind spot as well. The present which I cannot see will not appear as a future to my past self."

She spoke in a solemn voice.

"In other words, a future where I don't exist is different from a future where I do. And such a future cannot be reflected in my Eyes."

Naphta's order was a factor that decided the future. If she disappeared, so would this dire future.

"Please close these Eyes of mine for eternity," Naphta said. "I will become the pillar of the underground world in your place."

"With the dome in that state, the more pillars we have, the better... But..." Diedrich hesitated.

"Only the dragonborn can turn into the Sky Pillar Sword Velevim," Naphta replied. "All I can do is bear the burden of the future in place of my Selected Eight. By doing so, the future where you become a pillar should change."

In other words, either Diedrich or Naphta had to become a pillar of order.

"Look."

Naphta used Limnet on the Sky Pillar Sword, revealing an image of the Knights of Agatha approaching the Overlord Castle. They were deadly serious as they flew forward on their dragons.

"Commander, Phantom Knights approaching ahead!" Adjutant Gordo yelled.

"Ignore them! Continue the charge!" Nate replied.

"Can we break through so many Phantom Knights?"

"We don't have time. The dome is about to fall at any moment! Our Sword Emperor is waiting in that castle! We have to get there as fast as we can!"

Deputy Commander Sylvia yelled after Nate, "Today is the doomsday foretold in Agatha's prophecies! If we don't reach the castle, the underground world is over!"

"One life, one sword, one wish," Sylvia's father, Ricardo, said. "Today is the

day to overturn that prophecy. We must believe in the Sword Emperor! Our king has prepared a stage worthy of sacrificing our knights' honor for—do not fear death!"

Nate nodded in agreement.

"Well said, Ricardo. That's what makes us the Knights of Agatha!" he said, raising his voice as he directed his white dragon to lead the charge. "Take your swords in hand and believe in the god within you. The challenge we are about to embark on will be difficult. Grasp the future of hope with your pride and valor!"

The knights all raised their voices together.

"Yes, sir!"

"Chaaarge!"

The Knights of Agatha roared fiercely as they routed the enemy before them and advanced towards the Overlord Castle.

Naphta walked up to the Sword Emperor who was watching the sight from the pillar room and stood beside him.

"They will reach this castle no matter what. And they will sacrifice their lives to become the pillars supporting the dome," she said.

Diedrich looked at Naphta's face.

"I share the same fate as them," Naphta said. "In my final moments, I wish to be a knight that serves Agatha, not a god that tells the future to the Prophet. Out of the tens of millions of futures I saw, this is the future I wished for."

Naphta stared into her master's face. "I wished to turn this future into the past."

"I see," Diedrich said with a low voice.

"You are a true king, Diedrich. Even without a prophecy, your noble eyes looked forward and reached this future. One life, one sword, one wish. There is no doubt that a god resides in your sword."

Naphta went on to explain why Diedrich had to live, not sacrifice himself.

“In a chaotic future, one in which the Goddess of the Future no longer exists, only Sword Emperor Diedrich can lead the people of Agatha,” she said with a gentle smile. “Maybe. Surely.”

Those last few words were the first time in her entire life the all-knowing god spoke without being entirely certain of what she was saying. It seemed as if this uncertain future was what the Goddess of the Future *wanted* to see.

“The prophecy may not be overturned. But Diedrich, overcome those deaths and keep moving forward down the path of a king.”

Diedrich responded to her words with a definite nod.

“I, Naphta, have a request,” Naphta said, transforming Kandaquizorte into a sword. She took the altered Future World Crystal in her hands. “My master, Diedrich, please live on and see the future that failed to reach these Eyes.”

He stared at her and nodded again.

“My knight, Naphta,” he said, like a proud king responding to his subordinate’s wish. “You have done well. Thank you for supporting this inadequate king until now. You should be proud of your loyalty and devotion.”

Naphta held the Kandaquizorte sword to her chest in a knight’s salute.

“This is my final prophecy. When the Knights of Agatha pass through the Overlord Castle’s gates, the heroes of Agatha will transform into swords and become the foundation to support this underground world for eternity.”

The Kandaquizorte sword in Naphta’s hand shattered, covering the area with fragments of its crystal. The crystals swallowed the entirety of the Overlord Castle, spreading even to the outside.

“I sentence you to the court of a sublime world.”

The order of the Goddess of the Future covered the majority of the Beno Ievun that surrounded Gadeciola.

§ 32. Entrusted Emotions

The Knights of Agatha soared at a low altitude. In front of them, black suns rained down like a hailstorm. The Phantom Knights were all casting Jio Graze at once, forcing Nate to use Gaddez at the front.

His magic power transformed into a huge dragon that resembled a sacred mountain, blocking the countless Jio Graze falling upon them. But the concentrated fire from demons over two thousand years old was too much for even a dragonborn to withstand. Nate's Gaddez was rapidly burning away, but none of his subordinates made any panicked move to leave his cover. They all trusted their commander to lead them forward no matter what obstacles stood in their way.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Nate approached the Phantom Knights with a thunderous cry, with no intention of letting their magic strike his subordinates behind him.

"Dragon art—"

He took a thrusting stance on the back of the dragon he was riding and focused Gaddez to the tip of his sword.

"*Geddeolver*!"

It was like a sacred mountain of a dragon had been thrust forward. A single mighty thrust of Nate's sword blew away dozens of the Phantom Knights before them.

"All troops, charge!" Nate ordered.

The Knights of Agatha roared.

"The commander has created an opening. Rout the enemies!" Adjutant Gordo shouted.

The white dragons the knights were flying on lined up with Nate and broke through Gadeciola's defenses as a single unit.

“*Dustderte*!”

Sylvia’s blade of wind blew violently, cutting down Phantom Knights one after another. The demons weren’t weak enough to be defeated without a fight, but they were unable to stop the charge made with such deadly determination. The Knights of Agatha broke through the scattered formation of the enemies before them. The Overlord Castle in Galadenaga came into view.

Now in front of the Phantom Knights, however, was a sky and ground filled with soldiers. They were all forbidden soldiers of Gadeciola, with dragon wings and horns growing from their bodies and spears wielded in their claws. There were roughly two hundred in total, which was over six times the total number of knights.

“Prepare the dragon cannon!”

“Right away!”

All the Knights of Agatha sent their magic down the reins of the dragon they were riding. The white dragons opened their jaws and breathed out red flames.

“Fire!”

The scorching flames of the white dragon swallowed the defending forbidden soldiers, burning them whole.

“The right flank of the enemy is less guarded! Continue charging!” Nate ordered.

The Knights of Agatha flew in perfect formation to the right side of the forbidden soldiers and advanced through the hole in their defenses.

Immediately as they did so, a black wall towered over them. Not a stone wall, but a wall of countless Supreme Dragons. The burned forbidden soldiers had turned to ash, and each particle of ash had turned into a Supreme Dragon.

Their numbers were easily in the thousands—possibly hundreds of thousands. The Supreme Dragons nested in Gadeciola obstructed their way like a cover of despair.

“Do not falter! There’s no need to eliminate them! As long as we reach the Overlord Castle, victory will be ours!”

As though to take revenge for earlier, the dragons covering the sky and ground opened their mouths and released a drool-like breath of purple fire.

The flames raged noisily, burning the Gaddez Nate and Sylvia had cast. Although the dragonborn were powerful, the Gaddez shield melted swiftly under the pure quantity of the dragon breath, enveloping them in the flames.

“Curse you! No knight shall fall before they’ve fulfilled their duty!” Nate yelled, releasing all his magic power to dispel the breath. He turned his gaze onto one section of the Gadeciola army.

Darkness appeared there. It was a group of Supreme Dragon reinforcements, ready to sweep away the Knights of Agatha with their next breath.

If they continued forward like this, death was inevitable. They had no choice but to pause in their tracks. Just then—

“Heroes of Agatha, you have nothing to fear.”

The voice of their kingdom’s god echoed through the air. At the same time, countless shining fragments appeared in the air—as though the world was being repainted.

“I have materialized a restricted future in the land of Gadeciola.”

The countless crystal fragments formed a sword before Nate. It was Naphta’s sword, Kandaquizorte. There was one sword in front of every Knight of Agatha.

“If there is even one future where you won’t be burned, the flames will not reach you.”

Crystal fragments covered the knights’ armor, containing the protection of the Goddess of the Future.

“If there is even one future where you can cut, your blade will be unavoidable. If there is even a single chance of your victory, you will not lose.”

Crystal fragments entered the knights’ eyes, transforming into copies of Naphta’s Divine Eyes. The power of the restricted world reached into reality, blessing all of the Knights of Agatha.

“In this sublime world, war is restricted. A victorious future is already guaranteed for us Knights of Agatha. This is my miracle to you all for fighting on

the same battlefield as me until now.”

Their god’s voice resounded through the wasteland.

“I, Naphta, the Goddess of the Future, will make a prophecy. Victory will be yours.”

Immediately after, all the Supreme Dragons released their purple breath at the Knights of Agatha. Dragonfire fierce enough to cover the entire wasteland burned everything to a crisp in no time at all.

However, the white dragons the knights were flying on were unharmed. The future had been restricted so that they wouldn’t be burned—it was almost like the flames were actively avoiding them.

Just as the Supreme Dragons were taken by surprise, a ferocious roar could be heard in the distance.

“GROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!”

Tearing through Beno Ievun and arriving from afar was a giant variant dragon—the Royal Dragon. The Supreme Dragons charged at the giant dragon and attempted to release their breaths at it, but the fire was restricted to avoid Agatha’s Royal Dragon. When the Royal Dragon opened its mouth to breath white flames in return, the Supreme Dragons before it were defeated instantly.

The futures restricted in the sublime world interfered with the Supreme Dragon’s power and obstructed its propagation. The Royal Dragon immediately charged through the opening in the enemy formation and landed by the Overlord Castle.

The Knights of Agatha were well aware of what that meant.

“Commander,” Ricardo said, “it seems like I’ll be able to accompany you.”

Another dragonborn to support the dome was about to be born here—by sacrificing a life to the Royal Dragon.

“It’s a harsh responsibility for a new dragonborn...” Nate muttered.

Just then, Adjutant Gordo spoke up.

“The next dragonborn will have a dragon core—my older brother, Metis. If he

was a true knight, he'll fulfill his duty without a problem."

Ricardo nodded and turned to Sylvia next.

"Father..." she said quietly.

"I won't let you die alone. Let us fulfill our duty together."

"Yes."

Nate then turned his Magic Eyes to the Overlord Castle in the distance and held the sword of Kandaquizorte up high.

"Attention, all troops! The Knights of Agatha will now march to their death. A one-way road with no retreat. No one will return alive."

He declared his words with resolution, shaking off the fear of death.

"We stand here out of our own will! We chose the path of the knight ourselves! The honor we have striven towards is right in front of us!"

The knights only looked forward, staring fiercely at their final destination before them.

"Let us laugh and run towards that honor together."

Nate's dragon took the lead, the rest of the Knights of Agatha taking off after him one by one. The knights avoided, parried, and repelled the relentless attacks of the Supreme Dragons. Restricted by the sublime world, the knights cut and burned the enemy dragons in their way, creating an opening.

"Chaaaaaaaaaaaarge!"

Breaking through the enemy formation, they accelerated to their future. After entering the city of Galadenaga, they flew low to hide themselves from the Supreme Dragon's breath. The knights weaved in and out of the buildings until the Overlord Castle came into view.

"Your thoughts and beliefs are truly wonderful," a voice called out of nowhere. "But I cannot allow you to go any further."

A Beno Ievun was cast in the direction the knights were marching, obstructing their way. Misa stood within the barrier.

"Dragon art—"

Gaddez focused on the tip of Nate's sword.

"*Geddeolver*!"

Against the Dragon Knight's whole-bodied thrust, Misa held out her right hand and poured a tremendous amount of magic into Beno Ievun to block it. The impact sent particles of magic sparking fiercely, causing the buildings surrounding them to collapse.

"What are you thinking, subordinate of the Demon King?" Nate demanded. "If we don't go, that dome will fall upon us. Our goals should be one and the same!"

"Our goal may be the same, but our paths are different," Misa replied. "And our Demon King is quite arrogant; he's ordered us not to allow any sacrifices."

Nate's sword faintly pressed into the Beno Ievun. Misa frowned.

"Besides, if I don't stop you here, there's someone who will lose himself with grief," she added.

More Knights of Agatha caught up to Nate and thrust their blades into Misa's Beno Ievun. The black aurora layered ten times over was rapidly reduced to less than half its size.

Finally, Sylvia flew over on her dragon and aimed a Gaddez sword at Misa. Beno Ievun was blown away, leaving two remaining layers.

"Enough already! Move!" she yelled at Misa.

"No, I will not," Misa replied.

"If the underground world could be saved without sacrifice, King Diedrich wouldn't have suffered such heartache until now!" Sylvia shouted. "That dome can only be supported by the pillars of order. Even the powers of every draconid in the underground combined cannot hold it up!"

"Our Demon King is here."

"If the Demon King could do such a thing, we would have been told so in a prophecy long ago! Now *move*!"

Beno Ievun was torn apart with another strike, leaving one remaining layer.

Even then, Misa made no attempt to move. Crystal fragments gathered around the knights, forming spears of Kandaquizorte. They took the spears in hand and held them ready to throw.

“Please,” Sylvia said, now pleading. “Get out of the way. It’s too late for us to back out now...”

“Do what you need without complaining. We will take you on at your full power and win regardless,” Misa said.

Sylvia looked at Misa sadly. “Attack!”

Thirty-three spears of Kandaquizorte were released in Misa’s direction. The spears were restricted, passing easily through the Beno Ievun. It would have been simple for Misa to dodge, but the moment she did, the magic she was sending into Beno Ievun would weaken. She chose not to move.

The spears of Kandaquizorte pierced into her body, one after another.

“S-Stop being ridiculous!” Sylvia stuttered. “Doing this in the sublime world will only delay things by a few hours at most! You cannot stop us! You should know that already!”

“I cannot allow you to pass,” Misa said, blood flowing from her body. She remained standing despite the spears pierced through her, continuing to pour magic into the barrier. “We’re serious. We know the dome is falling. So what? Neither the Demon King nor Lay have given up. So doing something like this...”

At Nate’s signal, Gaddez wrapped around the Knights of Agatha.

“If you are willing to throw away your lives to save the underground world,” Misa continued, “we are willing to risk our lives to save you all...”

At that moment, the Knights of Agatha were like a single, humongous, dragon. The dragon crashed into the final Beno Ievun, blowing it apart. The charging troops didn’t lose momentum there either—the powerful Gaddez crashed into Misa, sending her flying. But all she did was laugh.

“All I needed to do was buy a few seconds of time... He will handle the rest...”

Her body soared through the air and slammed into the ground.

Sylvia glanced at Misa for a brief moment and shook her head. “Fool...”

She turned back to the front as they arrived at the gates of the Overlord Castle. The knights leaped down from their dragons with the same momentum as their charge. The white dragons took to the skies to prevent the Supreme Dragons from getting in the way of the knights.

“We will march in,” Nate ordered.

He took one step forward. With a heavy thunk, the front gate of the Overlord Castle slowly opened.

The knights raised their swords warily. A single man came walking out.

“Yesterday’s banquet was really fun,” he said in a quiet voice. “We were all drinking. We were all happy. It was a harmonious time, and you all appeared to be enjoying every moment.”

It was Lay. He had the Sword of Three Races held in his right hand.

“It was a very familiar sight,” he said softly. “A very saddening sight.”

Sylvia and Nate moved to charge towards Lay, but a single look from him had them faltering in place.

“Two thousand years ago, we were the same,” Lay continued. “The Gairadite soldiers had no idea when they’d die in the war against demons, so they treated every day like their last banquet. Always drinking and making a racket.”

His voice was almost trembling as he stepped through the gate.

“Enjoying themselves with their all...like they knew the end was right around the corner,” he murmured.

Sylvia opened her mouth in response. “That’s right. That is the prophecy the Knights of Agatha received.”

“Is that why you hate love so much?” Lay asked. “Because you knew that one day, you’d have to leave your loved ones behind?”

“It’s too late to stop us,” Sylvia replied. “We will protect our motherland. We will die here and become the foundation for the underground world. This is the pride that has been passed down from our ancestors—our pride as Knights of Agatha.”

“I understand how you feel; I was once just like you. I wanted to protect my friends and save the entire world. I believed everything would work out if I just died like a hero,” Lay said quietly. “But I was wrong. There’s nothing in this world that requires death to be saved. A battle shouldn’t be for something so hopeless and miserable. The friend I was trying to protect taught me that.”

He stared straight at Sylvia and spoke to her from his heart. “He was the true hero.”

“Please move, Lay,” Sylvia pleaded. “There’s no time left—just look at the dome! It’ll fall at any moment now. Our king is waiting for us in the castle. Come on... We’re comrades who’ve drank together. We’re fighting for the same peace, aren’t we?”

Sylvia held her sword at the ready. To her, there was obviously no time to be talking. She was prepared to use force, just like they had with Misa.

“Let us through,” Sylvia said, one more time. “For the sake of protecting Agatha and the rest of the underground.”

Lay probably understood her emotions painfully well. He knew that she wouldn’t be stopped with words alone.

He braced his holy sword and turned to the Knights of Agatha, firm in his resolve.

“I won’t let you. For the sake of protecting you all.”

§ 33. The Future the Knights See, the Past the Hero Sees

The broken Sky Pillar Sword reflected the image of Lay fighting the Knights of Agatha to those in the pillar room.

Diedrich, the Sword Emperor of Agatha, was the first to speak.

“This will become a struggle to the death. The enemy that stands before us is the most formidable enemy we’ll ever have. We must overcome this obstacle. Naphta,” he said, turning to the Goddess of the Future. “Demonstrate the path of the knight first. There’ll be no turning back once you become the Sky Pillar Sword. Our comrades will rise and repel the Demon King’s subordinates, and they will pass through that gate no matter what.”

“I agree,” Naphtha replied. “The sublime world will remain here even after my body is sacrificed. It will eventually swallow the Sky Pillar Sword and pass restricted judgment for the rest of eternity so that the dome is supported—as the order that only looks towards that future.”

Naphta looked at Diedrich, who nodded in return. Gatzdetz particles of magic appeared behind him. The dragon-shaped light transformed into a sword as more light surrounded his body.

“I, Naphta, accept responsibility for your future.”

Kandaquizorte appeared in her hand as a sword, which she then pointed at Diedrich.

By stabbing him, his future would become hers. And she did just that, sinking her sword into her king without any hesitation. The crystal sword pierced through his abdomen, but no blood flowed.

“Farewell, Naphta,” Diedrich said.

Naphta shook her head. “I will always be by your side. I will support your kingdom—your underground world—for all eternity.”

Diedrich's Gaddez glowed with a blinding light. That light traveled through Kandaquizorte and slowly transferred to Naphta. Her silhouette blurred from the light and transformed into a massive sword. The Kandaquizorte sword was withdrawn, and the sound of the earth cracking above weakened for a brief moment before rumbling louder than ever.

The light surrounding the Goddess of the Future faded, revealing her still there, completely unchanged.

"What happened?" Diedrich asked.

"The order of the Goddess of the Future...has been stopped," Naphta mumbled.

"You were close, Diedrich."

The two looked up at the ceiling, eyes widening at the sight of me leaping down from the skylight. I landed on the floor and gazed at Naphta with my mauve-colored Magic Eyes.

"Just as I expected from the Goddess of the Future. Your powers, especially in a sublime world, are great—great enough that it would be quite the effort to destroy it completely. But disturbing the order just a little is enough to prevent you from sacrificing yourself; as long as you're within my sight, you won't be able to use your power."

Even now, Naphta was attempting to use her power to shoulder Diedrich's future, but with each attempt I used my Eyes to eliminate her order.

"Demon King." Diedrich took a step towards me.

"It seems you've chosen the wrong path," he said. He didn't bother to ask why I was standing in his way at this point. My goal was more than clear. "I said something to you before we left Agatha."

Just like how I knew that he wouldn't agree with me, he knew that questioning me again wouldn't change my mind either. And so, there was only one action to take.

"Agatha will confront the Demon King proudly and be defeated. This prophecy will not change," he said, clenching his fist. His firm resolution seeped

out of him.

“That’s why we’ll fight to the last soldier,” Diedrich continued. “Our swords are meant to protect our kingdom. Now is the time to cut open our path to the future!”

“I also said something to you at that time,” I said, holding Leviangilma ready to face the fervent Sword Emperor. “If you get in my way, I won’t show you an ounce of mercy. The Demon King’s Army is prepared to face Agatha’s Sword Emperor. We will use all our strength to crush any that stand before us.”

While the Sword Emperor and the Goddess of the Future were facing me in the pillar room, the Knights of Agatha were glaring at Lay before the Overlord Castle gate. Neither they nor we could afford to lose. The longer these confrontations took, the more the dome crumbled, threatening to fall on us. We had to settle things in one go.

Naphta and Diedrich watched me with their Divine Eyes to prevent me from getting the jump on them. They must have believed they could win, no matter how small the chance; Naphta did not try again to destroy herself before me.

Piercing rumbles roared from the skytremors above. Neither Naphta nor Diedrich moved. They merely stared at me calmly, ready to move at a moment's notice. The first to break the silence were the Knights of Agatha reflected in the Sky Pillar Sword.

"All troops, charge!"

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

At Nate's order, all the knights besides Sylvia, Nate, Ricardo, and Gordo ran towards Lay. The gate to the Overlord Castle was open. Lay didn't have time to close it, so he had to stop them all by himself—which meant, actually, that there was no need for them to really defeat Lay.

If the twenty charging knights could stop Lay's movements for even one moment, the remaining four could slip through the gate into the castle. Once they were inside, things would go as Naphta prophesied: Sylvia and Nate would become a Sky Pillar Sword, and Ricardo would sacrifice himself to the Royal Dragon.

In this place covered by the sublime world, Lay had no means of stopping them by himself. The copies of Naphta's Divine Eyes could foresee that, and the Knights of Agatha leaped at the hero like an avalanche of swords. Three of the Kandaquizorte swords stabbed into Lay's body, sending fresh blood spraying.

The enemy had been subdued. Seeing that future, Nate and others took the first step towards the gate and promptly came to a stop.

"Gwah!"

“Wha... Gaaah!”

The twenty knights that leaped at Lay had been knocked down by his holy sword. Three of them were defeated on the spot and were unable to stand.

“Such gentle yet rapid movements,” Sylvia mumbled, eyes widening at how Lay’s sword had moved just now. “That can’t be... How can you use that move by yourself?!”

She immediately whirled around. Misa was still unconscious on the ground, having taken thirty Kandaquizorte spears to her body and thus returned to her transient form.

It was impossible for her to change to her true form in her current state. Her wounds were severe, and the sublime world made healing magic ineffective, putting her in the worst possible situation she could be in.

She was in such a pitiful state that Sylvia couldn’t bear to look at her. Grief took hold of her face for just a moment before she shook her head to dispel it.

“I will lead the way! Follow me!” Sylvia yelled, running towards Lay. Gaddez formed eight dragon wings behind her, accelerating her body with every flap.

“Dragon art—”

While the knights were attacking in waves, Sylvia ran past with the force of a rampaging divine wind.

“*Demesdones*!”

The storm blade split into layers and attempted to dig into Lay’s body. Looking into the future with her copy of the Divine Eyes, Sylvia’s sword slashed at his torso, shoulder, and chest.

But none of the strikes were enough to be a finishing blow. Lay evaded them by stepping into the blind spot of the Eyes at the last second. The next moment, he used a whirlwind of blows to knock back the blade aimed at his heart while simultaneously cutting down the waves of knights and pushing them back.

“Are you sure about this?” Sylvia asked.

They exchanged heavy blows of their swords.

“I’m asking if you’re sure about this!” Sylvia repeated, yelling. “If you leave Misa in the sublime world like that, she’ll die!”

Lay silently looked at her with a gentle gaze.

“I... I was jealous of you two. You were both so bright in my eyes,” she mumbled, admitting her thoughts.

With every sentence her sword moved faster, reflecting her increasingly emotional state.

“Yes, I was filled with hateful yearning! Because you had something I’d never have... That’s why...!”

Sylvia’s blade ripped apart Lay’s thigh. She bit down on her lip.

“That’s why you should go save her... That’s what you should do for a loved one, no?” she pleaded, sword never stopping as it fiercely clashed with Lay’s gentle blade again and again.

“What do you have to gain from fighting us?!” she shouted. “We didn’t come here to tear apart your love! We’re here to *protect* it!”

Sylvia’s sword slashed across at Lay’s torso, sending more blood flying. But Lay stepped forward without faltering.

“Haaah!” Lay cried.

Towards the end of the Demesdones, the Sword of Three Races thrust towards Sylvia’s left shoulder. With no means of avoiding it, she gritted her teeth.

Nate’s sword deflected the blow with a heavy metallic sound. But Lay’s physical strength pushed him into moving back as well.

“Hmph.” Sylvia avoided the follow-up attack from the Sword of Three Races at the last moment and turned her Divine Eyes onto Lay. Another three knights had been defeated.

“I’ve failed once before,” Lay said gently, “Sword of Three Races braced despite the blood soaking his body. “Two thousand years ago, I couldn’t stop my comrades from losing control.”

Light gathered behind him. Powerful magic blinked in response to his emotions, forming a magic circle.

“I didn’t have power back then—the power to do what I thought was right. I didn’t have the ability to show them another way.”

He was rebelling against order. Lay took half a step out of the frame of the sublime world, unable to be completely restricted.

“That’s why *she* bought me the time I needed. Time to atone. By risking her life.”

The seconds Misa bought by delaying the Knights of Agatha allowed Lay to arrive in time and stand before them.

“Misa would never ask me to save her,” Lay continued. “She would tell me to fight, and she would fight alongside me. That is our love.”

A cosmos flower larger than the gate itself appeared behind Lay.

Misa was unconscious, teetering on the edge of death. But even though they were apart, their hearts were always connected—and stronger than ever before. They sank into the abyss of love and thus arrived at a higher state.

The true power of Lovul Aske bloomed.

“One day, you and your comrades will find love too. A heartwarming peace that leaves you the envy of others will one day be yours.”

“Such nonsense,” Sylvia uttered.

“It *will* happen,” he said, pointing the Sword of Three Races forward. “I won’t let you die here. I’ll stop every one of your proud swords and protect your future.”

§ 34. Unkilling Sword

A fierce battle was unfolding. Having accepted their inevitable death and destruction, the knights charged towards the hero standing before them with Kandaquizorte swords in their hands. There wasn't much time before the dome would fall.

"Do not fear! The opponent may be a subordinate of the Demon King—a monster with the power of an army, capable of repelling our swords even in the sublime world—but the Knights of Agatha that look towards the future cannot be defeated!" Commander Nate shouted, raising the morale of his subordinates. "Our mighty Sword Emperor is fighting within the Overlord Castle right this moment! We will defeat this formidable hero and demonstrate our pride and honor to our king!"

The knights resumed their waves of attacks. Lay could move lightning fast with Lovul Aske, but the knights could see the future with their Divine Eyes. Naphta had said that combat was restricted in the sublime world, which meant the future was especially visible to them in combat. Although their Divine Eyes were copies of the real thing, they could cover for one another's blind spots through their numbers.

Lay took on Nate, Sylvia, and the rest of the knights all at once, but it was unavoidable that he accumulated more wounds: cuts tore apart his shoulder, upper back, right arm, and left leg.

His sources were destroyed, slashed apart by the restricted Kandaquizorte swords over and over again until there was only one left.

"Dragon art—"

Sylvia wrapped Gaddez around her sword in preparation for a follow-up attack. Lay responded by stopping the magic flowing out of his source, all while evading the other knights' attacks.

"Sword of Three Races, first hidden art—"

“*Demesdones*!”

“*Heaven Splitter*!”

Lay’s and Sylvia’s blades collided multiple times in an instant. The blade of wind that could see the future was both lethal and destined to strike its target. After crossing blades several times, Sylvia felt the tip of her blade touch Lay’s heart and became sure of her victory. Sadness filled her eyes.

But the Sword of Three Races shot out from the blind spot of the knights’ Divine Eyes and repelled the Kandaquizorte in Sylvia’s hand. Evansmana had cut its fate.

“It’s over, Lay Grandsley,” Nate said.

He leaped forward, having calmly waited for an opening in Heaven Splitter. Even if his Divine Eyes failed to show him the right future, it was too late for him to falter. Lay prepared to use another Heaven Splitter to fend Nate off when two blades pierced him from both sides.

“Guh!”

Gordo and Ricardo were the ones who had pierced him. They had expected their predictions to go wrong and had charged forward in the face of death.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!”

Gordo took an extra step forward and threw himself onto Evansmana’s blade, effectively sealing Lay’s sword.

“Commander! Finish it!”

Nate was already right under Lay’s nose, Gaddez concentrated around his sword. If he released a dragon art like that, Gordo would turn into Lay’s shield. But if Nate had gone around Gordo, the active Lovul Aske would allow Lay to evade without difficulty. Both Gordo and Nate were prepared for the worst.

“Dragon art—”

The tip of Nate’s sword pointed at Gordo and Lay.

“*—Geddeolver*!”

The crushing charge of a sacred dragon thrust forward. But seconds before it

pierced Gordo's back, Lay let go of Evansmana and threw Gordo's body aside. Nate's sword barely missed Gordo and stabbed into Lay's unguarded heart.

A loud boom could be heard as magic crashed into magic. Half of the cosmos flower behind Lay's back scattered away.

Dust flew into the air as the gate of the Overlord Castle collapsed. Lay only had one source left, yet he was still on his feet. Even after a Geddeolver powerful enough to destroy the sublime world's city had passed through him, even with blood pouring out of his entire body, he remained standing.

"Why won't you fall?!" Nate cried.

Nate yanked his sword from Lay's abdomen and held it high overhead. Lay caught the swinging blade with his bare hand. His palm split open on the blade and more blood poured out.

"If I fall, you'll die," Lay said, pushing back against Nate's sword. "That's why I cannot afford to fall!"

The cosmos behind him glowed brightly in response to his emotions. Lovul Aske and the order of love transcended his physical body, keeping him upright by force. It wasn't as though his wounds were healed or his crushed source had regenerated. As soon as the magic ended, he would crumble down. And yet...

"As long as my heart hasn't given up, I will never fall," Lay said.

He drew a magic circle and withdrew Siegsesta, the Sword of Intent, with his left hand. Lovul Aske gathered around the blade as he swung it down at Nate.

"Hah!"

Nate released his sword and leaped aside. Lay grabbed the Kandaquizorte sword left behind and threw it at the knights headed towards him. The sword pierced one knight through the leg, making him fall to the ground.

When Nate held out a hand, a crystal fragment drifting through the sublime world formed another sword in his palm. Sylvia similarly created a new Kandaquizorte sword and held it at the ready.

"We must acknowledge him," Nate said. The defeated knights were using their swords to support themselves as they struggled back up. "He let go of his

holy sword in order to protect Gordo. We're putting our lives on the line to confront him, yet, he's fighting to keep us alive. I had once thought he was a naive man blinded by his ideals, but his sword has far more honor than I expected."

Sylvia nodded faintly. "And he isn't fighting alone."

"That's right."

Nate moved forward to face Lay once again.

"It has been wonderful fighting you, Lay Grandsley, hero of Azesion, and Misa Reglia, his loved one. Your emotions are truly genuine. There is no hesitation in your belief you can overturn this prophecy and save us!"

He praised Lay openly.

"To be able to cross swords with a righteous hero on our final battlefield has been an unexpected honor of the highest degree!"

Lay shot him a sharp look. "I won't let it be your final battle."

Nate chuckled. "Your people are strong. If it were a battle to the death, we would have lost. But that is why we won't lose, Lay Grandsley."

He squeezed the magic from his source with great fervor. The Gaddez surrounding his body swelled to a tremendous size.

"We will cut down your love with our pride and pass through that gate!" Nate yelled, raising the morale of his knights. "All troops, prepare yourselves! We will place everything on this one blow! The least we can do to repay our comrades in arms who have shown us such gratuitous mercy is to surpass their noble beliefs with our own! Show them that the Knights of Agatha will not stop until their dying breath!"

Nate took the lead while Sylvia was positioned in the center of the formation. They all began running at once.

"Charge!" Nate yelled.

Spirits high, the magic overflowing from the Knights of Agatha surrounded them. Nate's Gaddez swelled, forming a dragon that loomed over the troops like a sacred mountain.

“Gooooooooo!” Sylvia yelled, her Gaddez forming eight wings on the sacred mountain of a dragon. The wings flapped and accelerated the knights’ charge to an incredible speed. Just like when they broke through Misa’s Beno Ievun, this perfect formation was probably their final trump card: a military dragon art that evolved an army into a single dragon running through the battle.

“*Agatha Gliagment*!”

The Knights of Agatha roared as they ran as one giant dragon—one enormous sword. It would be impossible to parry or block the magic of an entire army concentrated into a single thrust. Evasion would be the correct course of action, but Lay didn’t do that. Against the approaching knights moving as one like a divine wind, he leisurely held up his sword, though in his world, time moved to a different flow.

The knights wouldn’t be stopped until their lives were burned up. But Lay had no intention of taking their lives, and he sent that will into his sword.

“I won’t let you through,” he said.

Lay grasped the Sword of Intent and erased the magic being released from his source. But that still wasn’t enough.

As he prepared the hidden art with an empty source, the light of Lovul Aske gathered around Siegsesta. A hidden art that required the removal of magic in the source and a spell that required magic to activate couldn’t be released at the same time.

But it was relevant to note that his love magic was formed from *emotions*.

“*Lovul Triazetta*.”

Lay wrapped the counter spell—one that became stronger relative to the opponent’s strength—around Siegsesta. The Sword of Intent released a deep red glow.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!”

“Sword of Intent, first hidden art—”

The cosmos flower behind him scattered. The tip of the Agatha Gliagment by the Knights of Agatha stabbed into the left side of Lay’s chest, releasing even

more blood.

"*Incorporeal Slash*."

But at the same time, countless cosmos petals fluttered through the air. The petals engulfed the knights and blinded their Divine Eyes for a brief moment.

And in that brief moment, the Sword of Intent moved like a flash of light. Its glow slashed apart the mighty Agatha Gliagment.

"Wha..."

The knights that should have been unstoppable froze in their tracks.

"It's not over yet... Huh?" Nate said, suddenly falling to his knees. "Why? I can still fight! We must get inside!"

Sylvia tried to stand using her sword as a support, but her body was also uncooperative. The other knights similarly fell on the spot.

"Why?! I can still move! You didn't actually cut me... Move!" Sylvia shrieked.

"Incorporeal Slash is an unkilling sword that cuts through enemies without actually cutting them," Lay said, sheathing the Sword of Intent. "Those who are cut feel no pain and suffer no wounds, but take the equivalent damage. Lovul Triazetta would have slashed you all apart and destroyed your sources, so you won't be able to stand until the effect of the Incorporeal Slash wears off."

The Incorporeal Slash wouldn't have been enough to halt the knights' advance alone. By wrapping Lovul Aske—which *did* have the power to destroy them—around the hidden art, Lay was able to dominate the Knights of Agatha without killing them.

He had stolen their lives without taking them. Not even Shin would be able to replicate the use of that hidden art and magic in tandem.

For the man who couldn't cut down his frenzied comrades two thousand years ago, who had needed to overcome the deep regret from his failure, this was the pinnacle of what he had learned.

"Damn...it..." Sylvia muttered, collapsing to the ground.

She lay face up and stared at the falling dome with gritted teeth. Her regret

took form in a single teardrop running down her cheek.

“It’ll be okay,” Lay said. Sylvia turned slightly to look at him.

“The dome won’t fall. I guarantee it. We won’t let it happen.” Lay looked up at the undulating sky as he spoke.

“The Demon King of Tyranny won’t let it happen.”

§ 35. Death Struggle in the Sublime World

Without waiting for the battle outside to conclude, the Sword Emperor Diedrich broke out into a run.

“Raaagh!”

Dark gray phosphorescence gathered around the fist Diedrich lifted up. The Nojiaz wrapped around his fist swung down at my body, creating an incredible blast of wind. I wrapped a black aurora around my left hand and caught his fist directly. Magic and magic collided as fist and palm made contact. Cracks ran along the floor and split open with a dull sound.

“Hmm. It can even consume Beno Ievun, huh?” I remarked.

Diedrich’s Noijiaz ate the Beno Ievun, weakening the magic barrier. I maintained the barrier by continually casting the spell.

“Don’t think you can use up all my magic power.”

I dyed my right hand with Vebzud and thrust it at Diedrich. He tried to grab it with his Nojiaz-enveloped left hand, but my arm suddenly accelerated. His Divine Eyes would have been able to see the future, but there was nothing he could do about our difference in speed. My black fingertips sank into his stomach.

“I, Naphta, restrict the future.”

A strong resistance met my hand—my fingers only sank into his stomach up to the first knuckle. Diedrich’s left hand that should have missed me had instead grabbed my right hand. This was the restricted future Naphta had caused.

“I’ve caught you now, Demon King!” Diedrich shouted.

Magic particles swirled fiercely behind Diedrich, forming the shape of dragon wings that resembled sharp swords. It was Gaddez magic. The swordlike wings surrounded me and released Nojiaz.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!”

Diedrich recklessly grabbed me around the right wrist and pushed me back with all his might. My fingers slipped out of his stomach as he thrust his right hand forward. I braced my legs and the floor sank, creating a crater in the stone.

The combined use of Gaddez and Noijiaz ate away at Vebzud, Beno Ievun, my anti-magic, and my Magic Eyes all at once, weakening their effectiveness.

“I, Naphta, sentence you to death by decapitation.”

Naphta suddenly appeared behind me, like she had moved there in advance, and swung the sword of Kandaquizorte horizontally, slicing at my neck. At the same time, the blade turned black and crumbled apart, corroded by the blood of the Demon King that spurted from the wound.

Just before the sword entirely rotted away, Naphta spoke again.

“I, Naphta, restrict the future.”

Without crumbling apart, the sword finished its sweep and beheaded me. Only attacks above a certain level would cause the blood of the Demon King to damage the world. When accumulated, its corrosive power could surpass the regenerative ability of the world and slowly cause its destruction. But weak attacks barely had an effect—they couldn’t even hurt my own body or source.

Using the Divine Eyes that could see the future, Diedrich and Naphta had restricted the future to behead me in a way that just barely prevented the flow of the Demon King’s blood.

“Impressive,” I said calmly, flying through the air and now speaking through my decapitated head. “You knew you couldn’t reach me with strength alone, yet you tried it anyway. However...”

I hovered midair using Fless and glared at Naphta using the Magic Eyes of Destruction.

“With this, it’s two-on-two.”

My body, which was still grappling with Diedrich, shoved him back. He resisted by sending magic into his arms and swinging them, but my Vebzud-covered foot embedded itself in his abdomen first.

“Mrgh!”

Expression twisting in pain, Diedrich frowned at how my headless body was still moving around. Although he had foreseen it, he still couldn’t believe his eyes.

“Good grief... Your body is absurd...”

“I, Naphta, sentence you to death by dismemberment.”

Naphta moved towards my body as though she was accelerating into the future, swinging Kandaquizorte vigorously.

“Your opponent is *me*,” I said, glaring at the Goddess of the Future and drawing a magic circle with my gaze. Beno Ievun formed a cage around her to weaken her order, then sent out a bolt of black lightning.

“*Jirasd.*”

Black lightning shot out from my eyes and pierced through her.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!” Diedrich yelled, grabbing my foot and throwing my body through the air. He then charged at me at full speed, using his gray light particles to eat away at Jirasd while throwing out a Gaddez-wrapped punch at my face.

“Not good enough,” I said.

My hair extended and wrapped around his fist, allowing me to evade him. “*Vebzud*.”

My black hair turned darker from the Vebzud staining it. Countless strands of my hair writhed, as if they had gained sentience, and shot into Diedrich’s body like a wave of needles.

“Gaaah!”

“Did you think I couldn’t hit you just because I didn’t have a body?”

Diedrich flinched for a brief moment, allowing my thrown body to turn in the air using Fless and fly down, swinging the Sword of the Almighty from overhead.

“*Veneziara*.”

The blade of possibilities swung down in an attempt to sever Diedrich. A small

amount of blood sprayed from his head, but he was mostly unharmed.

“Ha ha,” Diedrich laughed. “I just can’t get enough of this!”

My body caught the heavy fist Diedrich thrust out, and I was forced back a few meters.

“Hmm. I guess Veneziara isn’t the most effective,” I said.

My body grabbed my floating head and jammed the two parts together from where they had been severed. My long hair fell, returning to its normal length. My healing magic wasn’t the most effective in this sublime world, so my head wasn’t connected perfectly, but it would do.

Naphta stood in front of Diedrich as though to protect him. She had cut her way out of the Beno Ievun cage using Kandaquizorte, then restricted my use of Veneziara. The possibility of drawing the blade of Leviangilma was sealed by the god that governed the future, so I couldn’t use it to its full extent.

“You should already know why I’m safe despite Naphta’s Divine Eyes being open,” Diedrich said, holding his fists up. “It’s to realize the one in ten thousand chance of my victory.”

“What, did you really think you had a one in ten thousand chance against me?”

Diedrich took a deep breath, calming himself while preparing his magic within his body.

“If you were to go all out against me, no,” he answered. “But unlike the restricted world, the sublime world is adjoined to this world. You cannot use Egil Grone Angdroa or Gilieriam Naviem.”

If I did, the world would come to an end before the dome had a chance to fall. They were going to make me fight without my full strength, just like how they did when they beheaded me.

“Sorry, but Naphta and I will be using all our power,” Diedrich said. He clenched his fist and sent his magic into his Selection pledge jewel. “*Azept: Naphta*.”

Naphta held the Kandaquizorte sword upright in front of her chest in a salute.

Her divine body glowed with blinding light before shattering like a crystal, leaving only the sword behind. The fragments of glittering crystal gathered around Diedrich, increasing his magic power dramatically.

“Are you sure you should be so idle, Demon King?” he asked while casting Azept. “This isn’t a match, but a war. I am fighting to seal you. Thus, you should be trying to defeat me before I bring out all my strength.”

Indeed, it would be easier to win if I didn’t let him finish casting Azept.

“Go ahead. Show me what you have,” I said instead.

Diedrich laughed heartily.

I was neither acting on a whim nor underestimating him. I had a purpose—and he knew what my purpose was already.

He was using every future for the sake of victory.

“As you wish!”

The Gaddez that formed the sword-winged dragon behind him turned a golden yellow. At the same time, the Kandaquizorte sword Naphta left behind transformed into a thick greatsword resembling a dragon.

Diedrich reached out and grabbed the greatsword.

“With this, the one-in-ten-thousand future has become one in a thousand,” he declared boldly, swinging the greatsword of Kandaquizorte down overhead.

“The Prophet, Diedrich Kreizen Agatha, declares that in one minute and eleven seconds, the Demon King Anos Voldigoad will be slashed apart by the Future World Greatsword and be defeated.”

Diedrich uttered his prophecy with resolution. Even the act of announcing the prophecy was made for the purpose of bringing that future closer.

“Allow me to enlighten you of something, Diedrich,” I said, holding Leviangilma, the Sword of the Almighty, at the ready. “The one in ten thousand future and one in one thousand future are both the same. Your single victorious future is, in truth, the blind spot you’ve been searching for.”

§ 36. One Victorious Future

Diedrich took a firm step forward, the Gatzdetz wrapped around his body giving off a gold glimmer. The Sword Emperor suddenly appeared before me and swung Kandaquizorte, the Future World Greatsword, over his head and straight down at me. He leaped into the future without hesitation.

“Graaaaaaaaah!” he shouted.

In response, I used Veneziara with the sheathed Leviangilma to intercept him with a blade of possibilities.

“I, Naphta, restrict the future.”

The Goddess of the Future’s voice came out of the Gaddez and erased the possibility of Leviangilma being drawn. But even though Naphta could restrict the future, she couldn’t control my every move. Once I decided to take a step and walk forward, that would no longer be the future, but the present and the past. Her power as the Goddess of the Future could no longer impact those actions.

However, using Veneziara on Leviangilma was nothing more than a possibility. The blade had to remain sheathed or its power would erase my past, present, and future self. No matter how powerful it was, a mere possibility couldn’t best the powers of the Goddess of the Future. She could just continue restricting the future to make it one where I didn’t draw the blade.

The Future World Greatsword came swinging down and struck Leviangilma, sheathed and surrounded by Beno Ievun.

“That won’t go well for you!” Diedrich shouted.

Kandaquizorte and Leviangilma screeched as they clashed with each other. But the next moment, the greatsword passed my blade and slashed my torso. My source was cut, and blood went flying as sharp pain bloomed from my chest.

The future had been restricted to allow Kandaquizorte to slip past my

defenses and cut me deep enough that just prevented the blood of the Demon King from activating.

I glared at Diedrich with mauve-colored eyes, preparing to use Leviangilma's blade of possibilities once again.

"I, Naphta, restrict the future."

"The weapon of the Goddess of Absurdity is useless before the Goddess of the Future!" Diedrich cried.

Diedrich boldly swung at my feet with his greatsword. The future was restricted so it would hit me no matter what, so instead of trying to dodge, I lifted just my right foot up.

"Raaaaaaaaaaah!"

Diedrich's mighty blow ripped through my left leg. But before it could sever the limb entirely, I stomped down on the blade with my right foot.

"Tch..."

If it was in the middle of cutting me, the sword couldn't pass through me. The future was restricted so that the sword had to be in my leg at this exact moment.

"There's a reason why the Prophet voices his prophecies," I said. "The Goddess of the Future cannot restrict everything against me, so you want to make me believe Leviangilma is useless."

Diedrich tried to lift the greatsword with all his might, but in a contest of pure physical strength, restricting the future had no effect. The Future World Greatsword sank into the floor from my weight.

The constant need for him to restrict Leviangilma's possibilities restricted, in turn, the options he had to interfere with the future.

"You may think you've stolen my future," I said, "but all you've done is seal your own."

I held my palm out and drew a magic circle. The spell turned into a hundred circles all pointed at Diedrich.

“*Jio Graze*.”

A hundred jet-black suns shot towards the Sword Emperor of Agatha. Gaddez turned into a shield while Nojiaz began to consume the cannon fire.

“There’s a limit to everything.”

I drew Jirasd circles on the floor and walls, just like I did against Veaflare earlier.

“*Ji Noavus*.”

Black fangs of lightning closed around Diedrich’s Gaddez. Phosphorescent light blinked as Nojiaz attempted to consume the lightning. The two spells ate at each other, but the more Nojiaz absorbed the black lightning, the more it swelled endlessly, until Diedrich was surrounded by the fangs.

Staring into the abyss with my Magic Eyes, I sank my Vebzud-covered fingers into an opening of the Nojiaz.

“Guh!” Diedrich grunted.

Although I had pierced Diedrich’s chest, I couldn’t grasp his source. The future had been restricted to prevent it.

“This is a battle of futures,” I said. “The moment you fail to restrict the future the way you want will be the moment you lose.”

Flames shot through their air and formed a magic circle.

“*Zola e Dypt*.”

Black flames turned into chains binding Diedrich’s body.

“Dragon art—”

The swordlike wings of the golden dragon behind him combined to form one large greatsword. That Gaddez sword stacked on top of the Future World Greatsword.

“*Dublomentl*”

Diedrich swung the augmented Future World Greatsword buried in the floor, sending particles of magic scattering everywhere. I lifted my leg and evaded the swing, Zola e Dypt torn to pieces by the shock waves the sword made.

The swing hit the walls of the pillar room instead, slicing it in two from skylight to floor and completely destroying the castle with a loud rumble.

“Hmm. Even the blood of the Demon King would struggle to defend against an attack like that,” I said.

I aimed Leviangilma’s blade of possibilities at the opening made by Diedrich’s sword swing. The moment his sword’s future was restricted, I promptly stabbed the sheath of my sword into him.

“Gruh!”

Despite me being right in his face, Diedrich recklessly still swung his greatsword. I caught the blade with Beno Ievun around my right hand, but since its future was restricted to always hit, the sword sliced into me still, cutting into my right arm to the bone and eliciting a sharp pain in my source.

“Now try and block this one more time,” I said.

Magic circles appeared in the air around Diedrich, one after another. There were a total of six hundred and sixty-six circles, all of them firing Jio Graze at once. On top of that, burning chains of hellfire extended from the black suns and wrapped around Diedrich’s body.

“*Vebzud.*”

Leviangilma’s sheath turned black and pierced into Diedrich’s source.

“Gah!”

Diedrich’s face twisted in pain, blood spilling from his mouth. The end of my sword was met with clear resistance—his source had been harmed despite the restricted future.

“I can see your limit, Diedrich.”

Jio Graze struck him, one after another, each causing a violent explosion. Diedrich used Gatzdetz to endure the bombardment while his gray phosphorescence set out to consume the magic. At the same time, the future was restricted to allow him to shake off the chains by brute force.

“With this, it’s a one in one hundred future! There’s ten seconds left to the prophecy, Demon King!” he shouted, aiming a kick at my stomach while still

slicing at me.

I blocked the blow with Leviangilma's sheath, but my body was blown back, creating a small distance between us. There was now the perfect distance to swing the Future World Greatsword.

The raining Jio Graze struck the ground and exploded as though passing right through Diedrich.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaah!"

If I evaded the sword hurtling down towards me, the floor would cave in. I stepped forward and stomped on his blade instead, using my Vebzud-covered sheath to stab Diedrich in the chest simultaneously.

"Agh!"

"It's over."

With Leviangilma in my left hand and Vebzud cast on my right, I wrapped Ji Noavus around him.

"That's right!" Diedrich said. "It's been one minute and ten seconds, as the prophecy said!"

I thrust my right hand out as his Gaddez gathered around his greatsword. Then, as though in coordination, the Jio Grazes remaining in our surroundings struck Diedrich's body directly.

The Vebzud sheath embedded in his body had definitely reached his source.

"*Dublomen*t..."

Diedrich raised his sword overhead and swung down. His attack was perfectly timed against my strike, and it released with enough force to slice through the blood of the Demon King.

Exactly one minute and eleven seconds had passed since he made his prophecy. For his next attack, he had discarded all defense and instead poured the full power of the Goddess of the Future. The carefully aimed strike was restricted to create a shock wave that allowed the blade to slice through anything with ease.

However, at the very last moment, I was able to dodge it.

"...*Aloia!*" Diedrich shouted.

One minute and twelve seconds had passed. The sword froze midswing, as though it had been deflected. But in the next instant, the restricted Future World Greatsword reached the future before me, swinging down to the ground far faster than I could move.

Diedrich's trump card, Dublooment Aloia, made direct contact.

"By making a prophecy for one minute and eleven seconds, you control the focus of my attention," I concluded. "This tactic prioritizes the second right after the prophecy ends, when my guard is lowered."

"That's right," Diedrich replied. "You can pretend to be as tough as you want, but these Divine Eyes can see your exhaustion!"

Diedrich brandished the Future World Greatsword sideways as a finishing blow.

I casually caught it with my left hand.

"Pretend to be tough? What are you on about?" I said.

I crushed the blade in my hand.

"Prophecies given by the Prophet always have meaning. Did you think that just because I can't see the future, I couldn't predict what you would do?"

My source was torn by the earlier blow, bringing me closer to destruction—but I had allowed myself to be cut on purpose. The closer a source was to destruction, the brighter it would shine in resistance. My magic rose dramatically as a result, and I swiftly cast Vebzud and Ji Noavus over my right hand before sinking it into Diedrich's abdomen.

"Guaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!" Diedrich howled, the feeling of his source being simultaneously gouged out of his body and struck by black fangs of lightning utterly excruciating.

My attack was one that couldn't be completely restricted. Just as he was about to fall to his knees, however, a spear of Kandaquizorte shot at me from behind and pierced me clear through the chest.

“Agh...!”

Blood stained my chest.

“This...was my true aim... Demon King...” Diedrich muttered, gasping for breath.

He released his sword and raised a trembling fist, gathering magic around it.

“The closer you get to destruction,” Diedrich continued, “the more powerful your source will grow to overcome it. But at that moment, your magic becomes so powerful, your existence itself is enough to destroy this world...”

Amid its approaching destruction, my distorted source was further corrupted when impaled by Kandaquizorte and its restrictions.

“It is near impossible to control that destruction. Of course, the almighty Demon King can make anything happen, but what if the powers of the Goddess of the Future restrict that from happening?” Diedrich asked.

Diedrich had given up restricting any of the Jio Graze, Zola e Dypt, Vebzud, and Ji Noavus attacking him in favor of using the Goddess of the Future’s order to throw my source into disarray.

“In order to stop yourself from harming this world,” Diedrich concluded, “you will turn that overflowing power of destruction onto yourself.”

He knew the truth of my destructive source: I constantly, constantly suppressed its power.

An immense number of black particles, masses of unrealized, uncast pure magic, overflowed from my out-of-control source. They glowed, a dark black that promised to swallow the whole world in darkness.

The black particles rose to the ceiling and covered the entire room. As Diedrich predicted, at once I tried to force down the power and shut it within me as much as I could.

“Kuh,” I grunted.

My source, now on a rampage, began to lead me to my own destruction.

“If you were willing to harm this world in order to win this battle, we would

have had no chance of victory. *This* is the only victorious future Naphta and I saw with our Divine Eyes," Diedrich said, wrapping Nojiaz around his fist.

The magic-consuming spell would bring my source one step closer to destruction.

"Sleep for a bit, Demon King. Once the world is saved, it'll be your turn."

Dull-colored phosphorescence glimmered as Diedrich raised his Nojiaz. I was too focused on stopping my source from running out of control to counterattack. The destructive magic within me threatening to burst out of control was far stronger than Diedrich's fists or Kandaquizorte's spear.

The only one who could defeat the Demon King is himself—and so Diedrich planned for me to eventually have to attack myself instead of him.

Now that they had come this far, Diedrich and Naphta's victory was all but guaranteed. This was most certainly the future the Sword Emperor had seen and aimed for.

The one-in-ten-thousand victory was already in his hands. Diedrich swung his augmented fist with all the conviction of his impending victory.

I reached out and grabbed the hilt of Leviangilma that was still stabbed within him.

"*Veneziara*."

The moment I cast that spell, the future was restricted so that my sword would remain within its blade. But that was the moment I had been waiting for.

One beat later, I drew Leviangilma from its sheath. The silver blade flashed, but I wasn't erased by the power of the Sword of the Almighty. I then used the blade to slash at Diedrich's Divine Eyes.

"Aaagh!"

Fresh blood splattered. Diedrich lost the light in his eyes. The Goddess of the Future had been possessing his body, and so her Divine Eyes had now lost sight of the future. The spear of Kandaquizorte inside me turned black and crumbled away. Losing sight of the future meant the future could no longer be controlled.

"Ah, I see now," he mumbled in a low voice, stumbling to his feet. "If the

future is restricted so that the sword remains sheathed, then using Veneziara allows you to draw the sword without drawing it...”

With Veneziara forcing the blade to remain within its sheath, Leviangilma’s ability to erase the source of whoever drew the blade wouldn’t be activated.

“But... Why...?” Diedrich asked. “Why couldn’t Naphta’s Divine Eyes see this future?”

If they had known that this was going to happen, they would have been able to stop restricting the future the moment I tried to draw the blade. That way, Veneziara would lose its effect, and I would be erased.

“Wasn’t Naphta’s blind spot the future where she didn’t exist...?” Diedrich asked.

“Look carefully into Naphta’s abyss with your Magic Eyes,” I said. “The present which Naphta cannot see, will not appear as the future to the Naphta of the past.”

I repeated what Naphta herself had said earlier.

“The future we’ve reached is one where a part of Naphta doesn’t exist—her Divine Eyes. In other words, this is the blind spot to the Naphta of the past.”

It was terribly simple logic: once the Divine Eyes were destroyed, the future containing their destruction would be hidden—even from the past. But since Diedrich and Naphta relied on the Divine Eyes to see the future and trusted that what they saw *would* be the future, they failed to ever consider such a notion.

“I see...”

Diedrich collapsed backwards, fragments of crystal flowing out of his body. Naphta returned to her original form, and the light returned to Diedrich’s eyes. Naphta’s wounded Eyes remained closed.

“So choosing the best path was meaningless from the start,” Diedrich said. “There was no chance of victory to begin with.”

The sky rumbled ominously. I looked up to see the sky half as high as it used to be.

The next moment, the dome’s fall accelerated with an explosive tremor.

§ 37. Pillar of Sky and Earth

“There’s no time left,” Diedrich said, body heavily injured. Naphta was at his side, lending him her shoulder.

“I don’t know what you plan on doing, but use my life,” Diedrich said. “If I become the Sky Pillar Sword, I should be able to buy you some time.”

“No thanks,” I replied. “Losers should stay quiet and obey the victors.”

I gazed through Lay’s Magic Eyes and saw the Knights of Agatha lying on the ground.

“Your subordinates will all return alive,” I said. “There’s no need to sacrifice any lives over just the dome falling.”

“It’s your victory, but you’ve taken too much time,” Diedrich refuted. “That dome is *destined* to fall, no matter what! Only the pillars of order can hold it up. You may be the Demon King, but not even you can create pillars of order in such a short time.”

“That’s true,” I said, peering into the abyss of the Sky Pillar Sword Velevim. “This is more like Militia’s order.”

The creation of the Sky Pillar Swords was based on the order of the Goddess of Creation. The underground world was fated for destruction through the Selection Trial, and Milita’s power alone wasn’t enough to prevent it. That was why the dragonborn were required as sacrifices. Supporting a dome destined for destruction was no easy feat.

“Breaking things is my specialty,” I said, “not making them. Not like the Goddess of Creation’s magic.”

The sky rumbled eerily. I looked up to see the dome was almost right upon us.

“Arcana,” I called. She turned to look at me.

A barrier of snow had piled up around Veaflare, trapping her within.

“I turned all the Supreme Dragons inside her into snow,” she said.

The Overlord glared at Arcana angrily. “It’s pointless. Sealing me won’t do anything for you! My children and Boldinos will definitely come save me!”

“Save the dreams for when you sleep,” Arcana said dismissively. She then made her way over to me.

“As a proxy, you should possess the order of the Goddess of Creation. Can you make a Sky Pillar Sword? I asked.”

“Militia only made the order for Velevim’s creation—she couldn’t make the pillars herself. And my power is weaker than Militia’s.”

“What if you joined forces with someone as skilled at creation magic as you?”

Arcana thought for a moment. “I may be able to make an artificial pillar.”

“I’ve called Aisha here. She should be arriving now.”

I could see songfire shining in the sky above. Aisha was probably in combat with Ceris—f he came here he’d only make trouble. I had to do something about him now.

“Anos,” Misha said to me through Leaks. *“We’re almost at the pillar room. The Netherworld King and Cursed King are in our way.”*

I looked through Misha’s vision. Misha’s group were located above the Overlord Castle, on the rooftop past the skylight.

Shin, Aisha, Eleonore, and Zeshia stood before the Netherworld King Aeges and Cursed King Kaihilam. The two Evil Kings stood in their way, glares on their faces.

“Why are you stopping us? You’re demons too! Don’t you care about what will happen to Dilhade if that thing falls?!” Sasha demanded.

In reply, the two silently readied their demon bow and demon spear.

“It seems they have no intention of listening. *Do we force our way past?*”

Shin stepped out in front of Aisha. He whispered to her in a quiet voice, “Save your magic. I will create an opening for you.”

Eleonore, Aisha, and Zeshia all nodded. Shin drew a magic circle and unsheathed Gilionojes, the Pillage Blade, and Deltoros, the Sword of Severance.

He then started walking straight across the roof towards the two demons.

The gazes of the two Evil Kings followed him warily.

“You two are in an odd stance,” Shin remarked. “It almost looks like you’re unguarded.”

“Then test us, right hand of the Demon King. This is the correct stance,” Aeges said.

The tip of Dehiddatem, the Crimson Blood Spear, vanished from his hand and reappeared before Shin’s eyes. At the same time, an arrow was fired from the Demon Bow Netroauvus. The spear and arrow pierced through Shin—or rather, his afterimage, as he had moved right in front of Aeges and Kaihilam.

“What a simple attack,” Shin commented.

Kaihilam blocked the Pillage Blade with his demon bow, and Aeges stepped in to stop the Sword of Severance’s blow.

“Here goes! *Fly.*”

While Shin was suppressing the two demons, Aisha, Eleonore, and Zeshia flew past them with Fless. The three immediately descended through the skylight and into the castle.

“Anos! *We’re here,*” Sasha and Misha said. Eleonore and Zeshia made peace signs with their fingers.

“We made it just in time!” Eleonore said, while Zeshia added, “We did our best...”

The group landed beside the broken Velevim.

“What do we have to do?” Sasha asked.

“The Magic Eyes of Absurdity are said to be capable of altering orders,” I said. It was something Arcana had once mentioned. “It’s just like how the Moon of Creation was turned from a crescent moon to a half-moon. We can restore the broken Sky Pillar Sword as much as possible using Aisha’s Magic Eyes of Omneity and Arcana’s Magic Eyes of Absurdity.”

“Will it be possible?” Arcana wondered.

“We have no choice but to try! It’s about to fall!” Sasha replied.

Aisha looked up at the sky. The dome was right above us.

“Eleonore will create a pseudo source to become the material for the Sky Pillar Sword. It won’t be as good as the dragonborn, but it should serve as a substitute,” I said.

“Got it!” Eleonore replied.

“Zeshia will participate in the Asura to pass more magic to Eleonore,” I continued.

“Understood...!”

I drew the magic circle for Gyze and set my subordinates to receive the creation magic benefit of the Guardian class, sharing my magic with them.

“Here goes!” Eleonore said, drawing a magic circle.

Runes floated in the air around her, forming a bubble of holy water. She used Aske to increase her magic, then cast the spell Eleonore at Velevim. The pseudo source glowed faintly as it wrapped around the broken Sky Pillar Sword.

“I will synchronize with you, Aisha,” Arcana said.

The two nodded at each other.

“Here goes—*Magic Eyes of Omneity*.”

A magic circle appeared in Aisha’s eyes, which changed the Sky Pillar Sword and pseudo source into light. When she blinked, the two blended together.

“Order perishes, turning to creation. I am the blasphemous god that defies the heavens.” The Magic Eyes of Absurdity appeared in Arcana’s eyes, boosting the light of Aisha’s magic. Little by little, that light took the shape of a large greatsword with a dragon-like design.

The dome’s fall decelerated by a slight amount.

“Hmm. Not as good as the real thing,” I said, “but it’ll serve as a prop in the meantime.”

The artificial Sky Pillar Sword was created on the spot, but just as it was about to finish forming, an ominous creaking sound could be heard. A crack ran down

the blade.

“Aisha,” Arcana called out worriedly.

Her control over her Magic Eyes of Omneity was slipping.

“I’m fine. *I’m sorry*...”

I was supplying their magic, so that wasn’t the problem. The reason their control was failing was because Misha had spent so much of last night healing me.

The effect of shouldering my exhaustion was still weighing on Misha’s source. At this rate, the Magic Eyes of Omneity would destroy the artificial Sky Pillar Sword.

“Aha! Aha ha ha! I didn’t even need to wait to be saved!” Veaflare cackled. “See, I told you it was pointless. This is Boldinos’s plan—there was no hope for you from the beginning. My beloved is stronger and smarter than anyone. That dome is sure to fall here.”

“If the dome falls you’ll die too!” Eleonore snapped.

But Veaflare merely smiled. “No. I won’t die, and neither will my family. Because Boldinos will save us! Only outsiders will perish!”

Aisha grimaced in pain as she focused her Eyes on the Sky Pillar Sword.

“Perish? Not happening. *We won’t lose,*” Sasha and Misha said. “Did you think we couldn’t support a single ceiling...*when it is our very homeland we wish to protect?*”

“Oh, is that so?” Veaflare replied. “I’ll call your bluff, then—”

Purple fire ran through the pillar room. The fire drew a magic circle, covering us and the Sky Pillar Sword we were in the middle of creating. The fire was the spell to seal divine powers, Nuizinias. Right after the fire’s appearance came a rush of forbidden soldiers falling from the skylight.

“Come! Come to me, my precious children!” Veaflare called. “Slaughter them and make the dome fall! Kill at the gods!”

“Foolish woman,” I said.

I fired Jirasd and shot the forbidden soldiers. At the same time, black lightning drew a magic circle. The lightning fangs of Ji Noavus latched on to the Supreme Dragons crawling out of the falling soldiers' bodies.

"Aha! Can you really fight while creating a Velevim with your weakened followers?" Veaflare said. "I still have plenty of children on my side!"

More forbidden soldiers leaped into the pillar room in succession, but each was met with a Jirasd and Ji Noavus. However, the brief formation of the Nuizinias circle was enough to reduce Arcana's power and disturb the order creating the Sky Pillar Sword.

The dome rumbled noisily as a larger crack went through the sword.

"See? It's over!" Veaflare shouted.

"I told you already," Aisha muttered in Sasha's voice. She clenched her jaw as she sent more magic into her Eyes.

Eleonore created the strongest pseudo source she could and directed it towards the cracked blade. "Let's do this, Aisha!"

"There's no way our kingdom would perish to something as trivial as this! *We'll definitely protect everyone.*"

Light enveloped the Sky Pillar Sword. The crack in the blade rapidly repaired itself through the power of the Magic Eyes of Omneity and Absurdity. There was an exploding flash of light, filling the entire pillar room with bright white light.

That light slowly faded, eventually disappearing to reveal a large greatsword with a dragon design on it. The pillars of order, Velevim, were being regenerated.

A loud clunk shook the air. I looked up to see the dome had ceased its fall. In fact, it was slowly rising back up into the sky.

Aisha looked content with her work, while Eleonore and Zeshia grinned brightly.

Just then came the sound of a thunderous snap: the sound of a sword breaking.

“Aha!” Veaflare laughed.

The completed Sky Pillar Sword had been unable to withstand the weight and force of the dome and folded easily. Half of the broken blade crashed to the floor.

“Aisha?!” Eleonore yelled.

Aisha was surrounded by light as she fell to her knees, separating into Misha and Sasha once again. They knelt on the floor, panting for breath as though they had used up all their strength. Misha’s exhaustion was particularly noticeable.

“Aha ha ha! I *knew* it was pointless,” Veaflare cried. “There’s no stopping the dome once it’s fallen this far. If the real Sky Pillar Sword couldn’t hold it up, there’s no way a fake one can!”

The sky rumbled louder than ever. The dome shot downwards, like the attempt to stop its fall had actually given it a boost. It crashed into the roof of the Overlord Castle—the tallest building in Gadeciola.

The end was right before us.

“Farewell, vile gods. Farewell, foolish believers. You will all be crushed while we watch on unharmed!” Veaflare cheered.

Time passed slowly. In the pillar room, Golroana was praying while Diedrich hung his head, fists clenched in shame.

Veaflare closed her eyes, basking in her victory with pure delight on her face.

Silence fell upon the castle. Indeed, it was terribly silent. There was no sound, not even the sound that should have come with the dome destroying the underground world.

Veaflare slowly opened her eyes. “Huh?”

She was stunned, unable to comprehend what had just happened. But the more she processed the situation, the more that expression changed to horror.

“That’s...impossible,” she muttered.

Golroana was so shocked by the sight that forgot to keep praying. Even

Diedrich was speechless, letting out a single, mindless grunt.

The dome had not yet fallen. It was actually frozen in place at a higher position than before, held in place by a pillar of pure black magic. That pillar stretched from the dome to the Overlord Castle—to exactly where I stood.

I held my hand straight up, supporting the dome by constantly releasing a vast amount of magic.

“What are you all so shocked for?” I asked. “If the prop snaps, then you have no choice but to hold it up with your own hands.”

To those left speechless with shock, I had no choice but to explain the obvious.

“Did you think that just because the dome could possibly destroy the world that I couldn’t hold it up?”

§ 38. Thus, Hearts Begin to Gather

I straightened my arm and in response, the dome rose with a rumble. It was back to being about half its usual height.

“Why didn’t you do that from the beginning?!” Sasha yelled. She glanced between me and the pillar, fully exasperated.

“I’m merely lifting it up by brute force,” I replied. “Unlike the Sky Pillar Swords, this option is rather rough on the dome.”

The tremors from lifting up the dome would travel through to the surface. I had wanted to keep the damages to a minimum, but now I had no other choice.

“Not even the Demon King of Tyranny will be able to hold up the dome for eternity,” Diedrich said. He managed to pick his battered body up with Naphta’s help. “A pillar needs to be prepared right away, once that can replace the artificial Sky Pillar Sword your subordinates made.”

“That was just a prototype,” I said. “We now know it’s possible to make a Sky Pillar Sword with creation magic.”

“Are you saying you have a plan better than that, Demon King?” Diedrich asked, a resolved look coming over his face.

“Would you offer to become the pillar if I didn’t?”

Diedrich stared straight at me without answering.

“Of course, I have a plan,” I continued. “A lot of them, right in this underground world.”

Diedrich looked doubtful.

“Each and every resident of the underground world will support the sky—by combining their hearts,” I said.

I drew a giant magic circle over the rising black pillar. Black light flowed from the circle and spread across the underground world. I had also cast Leaks with maximum output—our conversation here would be audible everywhere.

“In other words, everyone in the underground will join hearts to use love magic,” I explained. “That is how this doomsday can be averted, and the prophecy overturned. This is the path of hope past Naphta’s blind spot.”

Diedrich fell silent in thought.

“I showed you in Agatha. Misa and Lay overturned the theoretical prophecy in your restricted world with love magic. We just have to recreate that on a larger scale. Back then, you claimed Naphta could see every future, but I have just proved that there’s a blind spot to her Eyes.”

Even though she was still around, we were currently in a future that wasn’t

reflected in Naphta's Divine Eyes.

"Diedrich, what was it that shook your heart despite your knowledge of the future?"

"That song," he murmured.

"Indeed. The song of the Demon King's Choir—their overflowing love—is what shook your heart *and* the future. Gods are order and know nothing about love and kindness. That's why the Eyes of the Goddess of the Future weren't able to see clearly."

The Demon King's Choir's Gard Aske had been effective against the God of Gospel too.

"Love and kindness are the weaknesses of the gods. Thus, every order in this world can be overthrown with love and kindness," I said, looking up at the sky. "The same goes for that dome. Let your love for the underground world hold up the sky falling from order."

"Everyone in the underground...joining forces," Diedrich said, deep in thought. He glanced at Golroana and Veaflare. All this time up until they had fought—they didn't know how to work together.

"If you don't think it's possible, sacrifice yourself and turn into a Sky Pillar Sword," I suggested to the Sword Emperor of Agatha currently frozen in indecision. "If it's what you believe from the bottom of your heart, I won't stop you anymore. The sky cannot be supported this way if your heart doesn't fully believe in it."

The table had been set. But in the end, it was the people of the underground world who had to choose their future.

"If you think the best path is to choose a definite future, then sacrifice yourself on your pride as a knight. However..."

Despite everything, I had a feeling I knew what this man—the man who had been fighting prophecies until now—would choose. There were some things I could be sure of even without a prophecy.

"However, if you can still see the light of hope after being led around by the

nose from all those prophecies, reach for that sky."

Diedrich exchanged a look with Naphta. She clenched her fist and turned to me—with a look of determination.

"Sword Emperor of Agatha, do you vow to never give up?" I asked.

"That I do! There's something I want to say after overturning the prophecy!" Diedrich shouted, his raw voice determined and filled with emotions for the whole underground world to hear.

"Then I shall give you hope," I declared. "With your hearts as one, pray to support the dome with your love for the underground world. I, Demon King Anos Voldigoad, will unite those hearts and turn them into a new pillar of this world."

Diedrich linked hands with Naphta, squeezing her palm. She squeezed back in understanding. They then reached up to the sky, just like me, and the light of Teo Aske flowed from their body.

Love magic was normally used between two people, but this one was to be held between the entire underground world. It should be easy—all they had to do was love the world.

"Can you hear me, people of Agatha, and people of the underground world?" Diedrich said. His words traveled through my Leaks and echoed across the land. "My name is Diedrich Kreizen Agatha, Sword Emperor of Agatha and Prophet selected by the Goddess of the Future. As you can see, the underground world is currently facing a crisis of unprecedented proportions. If that undulating dome falls, the world will perish. This is the event the prophecies of Agatha refer to as doomsday."

His low voice reached out to the people.

"But there is hope. The hero from aboveground, Demon King Anos, can convert our emotions to power. Agatha, Jiordal, Gadeciola, and the other minor countries of this land have, up until now, always been in conflict. Blood has been shed, and wars have been fought. We've all hurt one another. But I am not asking for forgiveness."

His words came from the bottom of his heart.

“Right now, I humble myself to ask you all this: *please* lend us your strength. Not to help out an enemy, but to protect a friend, lover, a family member—to protect your loved ones. Raise your hands and let us support the sky together!”

Diedrich then shouted with his entire soul. “May this be the beginning of the final battle!”

The light of Teo Aske flowed through the underground world as though in response to his voice. The first place to shine brightly was the front gate of the Overlord Castle.

“Glory to King Diedrich!” Nate said.

“May our honor—” Sylvia said.

“—and our hopes—”

“—become the hands that support this world.”

Gordo and Ricardo finished. Although they were all lying on the ground, they raised their battered arms that shone with all their hope.

“Lay, I want to do it too,” Misa muttered weakly.

Lay nodded as he supported her. “It’ll go well for sure.”

The two reached their arms up towards the dome, hands overlapping with each other. The light of Teo Aske stretched up to the sky, connecting to the black pillar of magic currently supporting the dome.

Far in the distance, five thousand draconids stood in the wastelands of Gadeciola. They were the Jiordal Church, and they had ceased the casting of the phonetic magic circles used for songfire. Whether that was because Eldmed had ceased giving them orders or because they were distracted by the falling dome was unclear, but they were currently praying desperately at the miracle of the black pillar holding up the dome.

“O Equis, the Almighty Radiance... Please bring salvation to your devout followers...”

“People of Jiordal,” I said through Leaks.

Bishop Mirano raised his head.

“Stop praying. No matter how much you pray, the gods won’t save you. The dome is falling *because* of the gods. They insist that destruction is order, that you’re all destined to perish. Will you obey their words and die without a fight? Will you martyr yourself in your devotion?”

I continued to question the church followers praying on their knees. “Do you want to protect the underground? Do you want to protect your comrades? Your loved ones?”

There was no doubt their hearts all wished for the same thing.

“You will be your own saviors. Cease praying and support the sky. Hold your arms up. I will turn your wishes, your love, your prayers from the bottom of your heart into a miracle.”

One bishop stood up as though he had been convinced.

“Bishop Mirano?” one of the church members asked.

“Stand up and support the dome,” Bishop Mirano replied.

Mirano reached for the sky. The moment he did, the light of Teo Aske surrounded him.

“O-Ooh!” a church member said.

“What is that?” another asked.

“Perhaps this is what that man from the other side of the sky came here for,” Bishop Mirano said. “By personifying Equis, the Almighty Radiance, himself, to come teach us that the gods we believed in until now were wrong.”

“Our teachings until now...were wrong?” a follower said.

Mirano turned to the confused followers. “The world is about to end. Those who wish to believe in the silent and unresponsive Almighty Radiance can continue to do so.”

He looked over at the black pillar stretching out of the center of the Overlord Castle.

“In the middle of that castle—in the land that worships blasphemous gods—having made the Sword Emperor concede to him, that man is holding up the

sky. A miracle is happening before our eyes, and you still wish to cling to an idol?!" Bishop Mirano shouted.

More light flowed from Mirano's body.

"It's *him*. He's the one we've been waiting for all this time. Our faith until today has all been a trial to meet *him*! Thus, our false teachings were all a part of the true lesson we are to learn. Now stand—our faith has continued until today for this moment! This realization, one unrecorded in all our scriptures, is our final teaching and prayer!"

In response to those words, the Eight Song Sages got to their feet. They reached their arms out to the sky, and one after another, more followers stood up after them. An enormous mass of Teo Aske headed to where I was in the Overlord Castle.

Meanwhile, a shorter distance away from the castle, in the capital Galadenaga, the people of Gadeciola were gathered in the square and staring up at the sky.

"Mr. Dias!" Ellen shouted.

She ran up to him with the rest of the Demon King's Choir. It seemed they had been searching for him.

"Y-Yes? Can I help you?" Dias replied.

"You heard what was said just now, right? Call back everyone who evacuated, we have to hold up the dome together! Will you help us?"

"But... That voice just now was Agatha's Sword Emperor... Agatha's words are god's words... We cannot..."

"At this rate, we'll all be crushed! This isn't the time for all that!"

Dias hung his head and muttered, "I agree with you, but this is Gadeciola. There's nothing I can do to help."

"Then let's sing!" Ellen said, refusing to back down. "Just like how we sang to erase the earthrain, we can sing to support the dome. It's the same as what we did just now, so it won't be a problem, right? Instead of thrusting your fists out, you just have to hold your arms up!"

Ellen and the other girls looked at Dias hopefully.

“It’s strange,” Dias said with a faint smile. “When you tell us to sing, it feels like we can do it.”

The girls all beamed, speaking one after the other.

“We’ll prepare to sing right away!”

“Anyone can join in the middle, just call as many people as you can over!”

“We’ll definitely hold it up!”

“Otherwise we’ll all get indirectly squashed with Lord Anos!”

“That doesn’t sound too bad though!”

“What are you saying? Lord Anos cannot fail! Do you really think a pillar made by him will fall partway?!”

The Fan Union girls looked at one another with grave expressions fitting for the potentially world-ending situation they were about to face.

“That would be impossible!” they all agreed together.

The Demon King’s Choir took their positions in the square and cast their magic circle. Synial linked with Gyze and connected to the pillar room of the Overlord Castle. From there, music echoed throughout the underground world.

§ 39. A Song to Lift the Sky

The prelude to the Demon King Hymn No. Six, “Neighbor,” echoed through the sky of the underground world.

“I didn’t think that practice would end up being this helpful,” Sasha muttered, hands held up to support the dome from the pillar room.

Despite being utterly exhausted, Misha held her hands up with determination. “We’ll hold it up by singing together.”

“Yup yup, we’re going to sing ourselves hoarse today!” Eleonore chirped.

“Zeshia will do her best too...!”

Eleonore and Zeshia held their hands up too.

“I, Naphta, will sing. In hope that these Divine Eyes that cannot see anything will see hope instead.”

“You’ll be able to see it. After all, this is a song by everyone in Agatha, Jiordal, and Gadeciola,” Diedrich said, reaching for the dome with even more strength.

The prelude to “Neighbor” built up to a climax, then approached its end. The music cut off for a brief moment, covering the world in silence.

The song to change the fate of the world was just about to start.

“Oh my! I didn’t know such a world existed!”

“In-cum, in-cum, incoming, woo-ooh!”

This version of the chorus was enough to shake the entire world. Their singing voices were converted to love magic, and blinding light gathered from across the underground into the pillar room.

“Don’t open the door!”

“Woo-ooh!”

Their hearts were gathered as one and shot into the sky. The hands of the people thrust upwards with their shouts in time with the song. In response to

that love and emotion, the dome rose with a thundering rumble.

“Don’t open the door!”

“Woo-ooh!”

The dome shifted up with another rumble, reaching for its original position in the sky.

The song—the love of every person—was what was supporting this world.

“Don’t open the forbidden door!”

“Woo-ooh!”

At the front gate of the Overlord Castle, Lay, Misa, and the Knights of Agatha all sang earnestly, holding up the dome. The sky rumbled noisily with each “woo-ooh.”

“Tell me, gods!”

“Woo-ooh!”

In Gadeciola’s wasteland, five thousand followers were led through the song and choreography by the Eight Song Sages standing at the top of a gently sloping hill. The Jiordal Church were well-versed with singing to form phonetic magic circles that could release songfire.

“What is this? What is this? The ding-dong!”

“Woo-ooh!”

Their singing ability was unrivaled. The Eight Song Sages led the church members in an intense but graceful choreography that allowed them to hold up the sky with both hands.

“Go on. Start with a knock!”

“No, gentle taps are no good!”

“Woo-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh!”

“In-cum, in-cum, incoming, woo-ooh!”

Their emotions swelled greater and greater, making the dome rumble and the sky rise further with every thrust of their arms. Their emotions traveled through

Leaks and reached the skies above the distant Jiordal.

The people who heard “Neighbor” during the last Sojourner’s Psalm were returning to the city of Jiorhaze themselves. They held their arms up as though to support the sky and let their song echo throughout the kingdom, all of them believing in a miracle.

“I am a neighbor, just a mere neighbor!”

The same applied to the proud knights of Agatha.

“It should have been peaceful all by myself.”

Diedrich had dubbed the Demon King’s Choir the Dragon Songstresses. But even without that title, their king was currently belting the song passionately in sake of overturning the prophecy.

“But it was extending before I knew it!”

“Like a ruinous hand.”

“Woo-ooh!”

One life, one sword, one wish. With their pride as knights on the line, they would sing until they were hoarse. Of course, the visiting Demon King Academy students were singing along with them.

“Your ding-dong!”

“It’s the Demon King!”

“Woo-ooh!”

From the moment they heard their Demon King’s voice, they raised their hands and sang as though they had been possessed.

In Agatha, Jiordal, and Gadeciola, draconids of different faiths all sang the same song and gathered their emotions as one, all to protect the underground world and hold up the sky.

“He’ll teach you everything the scriptures missed!”

“Woo-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh!”

“In-cum, in-cum, incoming, woo-ooh!”

“Oh my! I didn’t know such a world existed!”

The three major kingdoms of the underground were joining forces for the same goal. It was just like the lyrics of “Neighbor”—this was a world that no one knew could have existed. Each resident of the world raised their hands high into the air.

More and more of the people’s emotions were converted into magic, supporting the sky of the underground world while traveling to me in the Overlord Castle. The emotions that arrived then became pure white light that wrapped around the pillar of black magic.

The black pillar transformed into a black-and-white pillar, lifting the falling dome to its original height. But still...

“Say, Anos,” Sasha said. “What are you going to do after this? We’ve lifted it, but we can’t just keep singing forever, right?”

“Don’t panic, I’ve got an idea—but we don’t have enough emotions yet.”

“This isn’t enough? What more can we do?” Sasha asked.

“The followers of Jiordal?” Misha guessed. I nodded.

“There are still many followers praying instead of reaching for the sky,” I said, looking over at Pope Golroana, still kneeling in the corner of the pillar room. “Like that man.”

If the pope spoke up, the remaining followers of Jiordal would support the sky in the same manner of Agatha’s knights.

“Golroana,” I called out, before immediately being cut off by a different voice.

“How beautiful. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine the three feuding kingdoms of the underground uniting like this.”

From the corner of my eye, I could see Veaflare laughing happily. But the voice that had just spoken was Ceris’s, and he was slowly descending from the sky.

He arrived faster than I expected he would. But the Conflagration King wouldn’t have gone down so easily.

“He’s dead, in case you’re wondering,” Ceris said. “It won’t be possible to revive him.”

“If you’re going to lie, make it more believable,” I shot back. “I’d wager you used Nuizinias to make the Conflagration King’s magic undetectable from here.”

Ceris continued seamlessly. “How did you know? He’s dealing with the Phantom Knights and the forbidden soldiers currently. He lost his backup songfire when they switched to supporting the dome, after all.”

His nonchalant expression implied that he had probably lied without even thinking.

“That aside, this is magnificent,” Ceris said. He landed in the pillar room and looked at me with a smile. “An unprecedented threat to the underground world has united the hearts of former enemies. The more they’re cornered, the more people will cast aside their ill will and deepen their bonds with one another. The heart shines so beautifully the closer it is to its end.”

He held up two fingers and pointed them at Pope Golroana’s kneeling form.

“So, what do you think it would take to make an even more beautiful world?”

Purple lightning crackled along his fingers, while a spherical magic circle started forming beside him.

“The answer is to break it even more. That way, we’ll get even closer to the world everyone desires.”

Gavest shot out. At that moment, Golroana had a look of acceptance on his face. Fierce purple lightning headed straight for the pope—and burst.

“Guh!”

The pope raised his head. In his devout eyes there existed a faint look of surprise. Standing before him was Diedrich, protecting Golroana while using Nojiaz to consume the purple lightning.

“Your body is already at its limit, Diedrich,” Ceris said. “Anos beat you up pretty thoroughly. Do you know what will happen if you consume Gavest with such a ragged source?”

“Can’t say I do,” Diedrich gritted out.

Purple lightning suddenly expanded, piercing through Nojiaz and Diedrich's body.

"Uuurgh!"

Burned by Gavest, Diedrich tipped forward.

"The reliable Demon King can't move right now. If he did, the dome would fall and crush all of us. But you'd probably survive. I won't die either. Perhaps he'd be able to protect a few of his followers too."

Ceris shot me a shady smile. "But the people of the underground will die. No one wants to see such a tragic ending."

He turned back to Golroana and Diedrich.

"Hmm. Is it really the time for you to be fooling around right now?" I asked. "If you want to kill me, now is your best chance."

"You don't get it, do you? No matter how rebellious you may be, you're still my son. No parent would get truly mad at their child's silly pranks. The same goes for me," he said casually. It was hard to tell how serious he was.

"Besides, I wouldn't underestimate you," Ceris continued. "Even stuck in place holding up the dome, you may still be able to fight."

Ceris took his Sword of a Thousand Bolts in his hand and started walking.

"But that power isn't suited for protecting others," he continued, slowly approaching Golroana and Diedrich. "You cannot save them while supporting the sky."

"You really think so?" I asked.

Lunar snowdrops fluttered down before Ceris and transformed into Arcana. She created Locoronotto, the Sword of Divine Snow in her hand.

"If it isn't the Goddess of Absurdity," Ceris said, chuckling.

He let go of the Sword of a Thousand Bolts. Purple lightning wrapped around the blade before thunder rumbled, and soon after, a bolt of lightning fell at Arcana's feet. The Sword of a Thousand Bolts had been stabbed into the ground right in front of her.

She looked at him in question.

“With this, everything has gone according to your plan, no?” Ceris asked her. “In the very end, you will betray me and the Demon King. That’s why you’ve been deceiving everyone all this time.”

Arcana’s expression remained unchanged as Ceris continued.

“The Selected Eight are all in the underground world. If the dome falls now, only the Demon King and I will survive. I am one of the Selected Eight, the one bestowed with the title of Fool. When I die, the victor of the Selection Trial will be decided.”

He spoke with a friendly smile.

“Fulfill your true objective, Arcana.”

§ 40. The Traitorous Girl's End

After one glance at the sword at her feet, Arcana looked back at Ceris.

"You should remember everything now," Ceris said. "You killed your Selection God—Militia, the Goddess of Creation—with the very demon sword in front of you."

Arcana swallowed her breath, her usually placid eyes full of emotion.

"It sure brings back memories. You haven't changed; your anger is as beautiful as the first time I met you," he continued, as though lost in a reverie of the past. "You should tell them all about it. Tell them the reason you came this far. The reason you're called Genedonov, Goddess of Absurdity. No need to hide how you feel anymore—they can no longer stand in your way."

Ceris smiled. Arcana gripped the Sword of Divine Snow and watched him warily.

"But if it's too hard for you, I'll do the honors," he offered lightly. The falling dome and the impending destruction of the world appeared to be the last thing on his mind.

Arcana glared at him coldly.

"I was born as a draconid in Agatha," she said, her calm voice echoing throughout the pillar room.

"I had a dragon core, something extremely rare in the underground. Because of it, dragons constantly sought me out to use my core for the dragonborn they would turn into. Anywhere I lived would eventually fall victim to a dragon attack. The Sword Emperor of the time wanted to exile me from Agatha as a cursed child."

Amid the sound of the shaking sky, Arcana's voice was oddly clear.

"He said if someone agreed to take me in, I wouldn't be exiled. But I was an orphan. So I went around town knocking on doors, begging for someone to save

me. *Believing* that someone would save me. I was cold, hungry, and miserable. I cried while walking. But not a single door opened for me."

Arcana gritted her teeth.

"No one would open their door for me. Agatha's prophecy declared me a cursed child—I was not to be saved."

Instead of tears, anger welled in her eyes.

"I was exiled from Agatha. I wandered the wasteland constantly pursued by dragons. There was nothing to eat. There was no one to come save me. I thought I would starve to death. I thought I would freeze to death. I thought I would be eaten by dragons. I would've been much happier if I was."

It was practically the same as the dream she showed me. There were just two differences: she wasn't in Dilhade, and I wasn't beside her.

"Agatha's prophecies and my magic were what barely kept me alive. The Sword Emperor felt guilty about exiling me and chose the future where I was least likely to die. After everything he put me through, he didn't have the courage to release me from the agony of life. He forced me to suffer because he feared to bear that sin."

Sometimes, death was salvation. Without it, one starving girl was forced to wander the wastelands alone.

"After some time, an envoy from Agatha found me. They asked me to become a sacrifice to the Royal Dragon. They said if I agreed, I would become an honorable Dragon Knight. I could live in Agatha without being targeted by dragons."

What spilled from her now were dark emotions she had never shown before.

"The first Sword Emperor feared seeing too far into the future. He feared that one day, he would see his own death, so he limited his sight to only the near future. Because of that, he failed to realize I had a dragon core. He thought I was being hunted for no reason."

So the first Sword Emperor didn't yet know that the cores of the dragonborn were made of dragon cores. Perhaps he only discovered the meaning of the

dragon cores when he saw into that specific future.

“He thought he had finally found a way to save me after ordering my exile. He offered me residence in town and promised to grant me the highest title of honor. He thought I would agree immediately.”

“But your answer was no. Why was that?” Ceris asked, smirking at the first Sword Emperor’s actions.

“It was too late,” Arcana said, rage seeping into her words. “What was the point of honor? No one opened their door for me when I needed them to. Not a single person. What use did I have for honor from such cruel people? If that was what they thought honor was, I’d trample on it myself.”

Distinct hatred could be seen in Arcana’s Magic Eyes of Absurdity. Her heart was filled with pure fury, to the point she was almost unrecognizable.

“You had those eyes the first time we met,” Ceris chuckled, then turned to me. “Back then, I was hired by the Jiordal Church to abduct Arcana and bring her to the pope, who offered her a deal. If she took Jiordal’s side during the Selection Trial, they would welcome her to their kingdom.”

In other words, they wanted her to be a double agent for them in Agatha.

“You agreed to it,” Ceris continued, turning back to Arcana. “You signed the Zecht and became the sacrifice to the Royal Dragon you detested so much. After you became a dragonborn, you made a pact to support Jiordal. Why was that?”

After a brief moment of hesitation, Arcana answered him.

“I wanted to belong somewhere. I wanted to live normally. I was sick of wandering the wastelands and the forests, being chased by dragons, and living by myself. I thought someone finally extended their hand to save me... But I was mistaken.”

Arcana bit her lip, then continued.

“As a former resident of Agatha that had been chosen to be the sacrifice of the Royal Dragon, the followers of Jiordal wouldn’t accept me. They called me a heathen, persecuting and discriminating against me. They said a heathen’s

salvation was to be treated as a heathen. I have never followed Agatha's teachings of my own will. But the followers of Jiordal didn't care about that."

"That's right. That's why the pope made a suggestion," Ceris said with a grin. "If she threw herself into the Bonfire of Judgment, she would be seen as a holy existence and would be accepted by the followers. Arcana did as she was told. She endured the intolerable agony of being burned alive, thinking she would finally be able to live as a normal Jiordal resident."

Arcana glared at Ceris as though she could physically hurl her anger at him.

"It was all a lie," she said. "In the end they said it didn't matter what I did; my past wouldn't be erased. The pope said there was nothing he could do about the hearts of the people. I had been deceived. The pope's goal was to strengthen my source in the Bonfire of Judgment, sacrifice me to the Royal Dragon, then use the dragonborn to win the Selection Trial. I just wanted a place to belong, and I was unable to defy the Zecht."

"I signed a Zecht too, you see," Ceris chimed in. "So I had no choice but to throw Arcana into the mouth of the Royal Dragon—while pretending to be a knight of Agatha."

And that was how Arcana had been reborn into a dragonborn.

"I was full of hatred," she said. "There was no way I couldn't be. Anger and hatred filled my head, like I was cursed. I couldn't forgive anything or anyone—not Agatha nor Jiordal. But back then, they were the only two kingdoms in the underground world. There was nowhere else to run."

"The entire underground world was her enemy. Nothing was left for her but revenge. A tragedy, isn't it?" he said, sounding utterly unaffected.

"I was selected by Militia, the Goddess of Creation, and won the Selection Trial," Arcana said, continuing. "Militia said she chose me because I was beyond salvation. I didn't understand what she meant. The only thing connecting me to her was our pact."

"It wasn't all bad," Ceris said. "But not long after, a man from Agatha named Boldinos reached out to Arcana. He found her situation unbearable and wanted to make up for what he did."

Ceris pointed at the Sword of a Thousand Bolts.

“He lent Arcana this demon sword, the weapon capable of slaying the gods. Because Militia, the Goddess of Creation, was secretly trying to lead the Selection Trial to its end. While it was for the sake of the underground world and draconids living within it, to Arcana, it was an unforgivable betrayal.”

“Boldinos said this to me,” Arcana said, recalling her past anger. “That if I wanted to forget my hatred, I had no choice but to become a proxy of god. Gods have no hearts. I could forget my emotions and peacefully live while saving others. That this was the final salvation left for me. By discarding my heart, I would become something that couldn’t feel, not even hatred. And Militia was trying to steal that from me.”

“It made sense, right? But sadly, Boldinos was deceiving her,” Ceris said.

Boldinos was deceiving her. That phrasing was a little odd. Why was he referring to himself in the third person?

Arcana continued. “I killed Militia. After that, I would have become a proxy of god just by waiting. But I just couldn’t accept it. Winning the Selection Trial was my salvation, but without that Selection Trial, I wouldn’t have been consumed by hatred in the first place.”

Arcana spoke in a detached manner.

“I killed half of the God of Balance. I wanted to steal what I could of its order. I wanted to make the Selection Trial that Agatha and Jiordal were so obsessed with my own. That was the final petty revenge I achieved before becoming a god.”

She looked down at the floor with a dark look in her eyes. The result was obvious just by looking at her—she wasn’t able to become the type of god she desired.

“I became a proxy of god. A substitute for a heartless god. My joy, sorrow, and pleasure all disappeared. But I still couldn’t forgive.”

Deep resentment flowed from her Magic Eyes of Absurdity.

“My disgust and anger were the only things that didn’t disappear. I only had

hatred left. I only had pain left. I wished to become an existence who wouldn't hate anyone, but before I knew it, I was a proxy of god that only hated others."

So that was the lie Boldinos had told Arcana.

"I couldn't stop myself. The heart I had to stop myself had disappeared, and hatred was the only thing keeping me moving. After becoming a proxy and bringing back victory, I first betrayed Jiordal, then Agatha. I made Gadeciola to fight the gods. But I was too foolish to realize I was being tricked by Boldinos."

"Because Boldinos said he never thought her hatred wouldn't disappear," Ceris added in a lighthearted tone.

"When I finally realized Boldinos was an enemy, I betrayed Gadeciola. After making an enemy out of everyone, in the end, Boldinos slew me," Arcana said bitterly, like she was spitting out her hatred. "I am the Goddess of Absurdity who betrayed everyone. That is a fact. But the people of the underground betrayed me *first*. They deceived me and persecuted me in the name of god."

Time after time, she faced injustice, causing her hatred to expand endlessly.

"Some time after Arcana reincarnated, she came to find me," Ceris said. "She said she wanted to join forces. Her eyes were so clear, so focused. It was the look of someone who wanted to defy fate. She must have really wanted to betray me."

Ceris looked somewhat happy as he said that.

"We exchanged information and parted ways. Using the Moon of Creation Arcana sealed her memories and hatred and placed various restraints on herself to lead her to her goal. You may be wondering why she didn't just erase her hatred in the first place, but that was just a temporary, superficial fix. Her actions were constantly being supported by a foundation of hatred."

He placed emphasis on his words.

"Those dark emotions are why Arcana stands here right now."

Then, he spread his arms in a welcoming gesture.

"Do you really think her wish is to bring salvation to people?"

His question was directed to everyone present, but especially me.

“After being betrayed, oppressed, and abused, that duty was *forced* onto Arcana. She didn’t actually want to become the proxy of the gods she hated. She sought only two things.”

Ceris held up two fingers.

“The first is for revenge on Jiordal, Agatha, and Gadeciola for betraying her.”

He folded one finger and continued.

“The second is to stop working for the gods and quit being a proxy.”

He folded the second finger and lowered his arm.

“When the Selected Eight wins the Selection Trial, their Selection God’s order will become theirs through the order of the God of Balance Elrolarielm. Through this, the proxy gains the power of a god, while the lost order is maintained.”

In other words, all the divine powers the Selection God consumed up until that point would become the proxy’s instead.

“That is all to say that if you win the Selection Trial, Anos, every order Arcana possesses will be yours. Her role as a proxy will come to an end, and she will return to being a draconid.”

If the dome fell, Jiordal, Agatha, and Gadeciola would all be cleanly wiped out. Arcana’s revenge would end there.

“You and Arcana vowed to end the Selection Trial, but that was just a trivial promise. You were being fooled from the start, Anos,” Ceris said with a friendly smile. “The proof is in how her memories have returned, but she hasn’t changed Leviangilma back into the Abolisher of Reason. Because as long as the dome is eternalized, the underground world is doomed to perish.”

He turned to look at Arcana.

“Why did Arcana kill Ahid when she wished for salvation? Because she hated him. She couldn’t suppress that hatred. He was the spitting image of the Jiordal followers who betrayed her.”

Arcana and Ceris glared at each other.

“What is your goal?” she asked.

“Aren’t you going to draw the sword?” Ceris asked in reply.

Arcana thought for a moment.

“I won’t let anyone betray me anymore,” she finally said. “If you truly mean to help me with my objective, walk over here without your anti-magic. I will end everything at the same time.”

“That does sound like a good way to prevent any obstructions,” Ceris said, conceding.

Arcana glanced at Golroana, who was still praying at the back of the room.

“There is no reason for me to protect the teachings and descendants of the pope that betrayed and persecuted me,” Arcana said. “If he dies, there won’t be enough hands to stop the dome from falling.”

“In that case, I’ll do as you say.”

Ceris leisurely started walking forward, stopping on the other side of the Sword of a Thousand Bolts before Arcana.

“I won’t stop you from killing Golroana. But in that time, I will kill you,” Ceris said.

“That’s fine with me.”

Ceris drew the Sword of a Thousand Bolts. Purple lightning ran along the blade. An enormous amount of magic gathered around the tip as he pointed it at Golroana.

“Stop right there! I won’t... I won’t let you do that!” Sasha shouted, glaring at Ceris with her Magic Eyes of Destruction. At the same time, Zeshia, Eleonore, and Misha all moved at once—but Gavest shot out from Ceris and struck them.

While they were able to get their anti-magic up in time to withstand the spell, the Sword of a Thousand Bolts slashed across their chests and sent them flying in an explosion of purple lightning.

“K-Kyaaaaaaaaah!” Sasha screamed.

“You don’t have much magic left, remember? Don’t push yourself,” Ceris said. He turned to point his demon sword at Golroana. “Oh, how fleeting the world

is. The trust between people crumbles so easily.”

Gauddigemon thrust forward mercilessly. Purple lightning flashed, and soon after, red blood was spilled.

“Huh?” came from Ceris’s lips, unbidden.

On the other end of the Sword of a Thousand Bolts was not Golroana’s corpse, but Arcana’s palm, stopping the purple lightning in its tracks. Locoronotto, the Sword of Divine Snow, was in her hand, and was pierced through Ceris’s stomach.

She had called him to come closer to her to ensure she could stop him.

“Everything is as you said. Not a word of it was a lie,” Arcana said.

While freezing the Sword of a Thousand Bolts with lunar snowdrops, Arcana’s Magic Eyes of Absurdity glared at Ceris’s body.

“I am full of hatred. I will never be able to forgive them,” Arcana said. “I’ve never felt any joy over becoming a proxy. I didn’t want to save anyone...”

Back when she was Ahid’s Selection God, she asked me something.

Why do mortals want to become gods so much, she had said.

“I didn’t want to become a proxy. Why should I give other people the salvation I never received? Why do I have to save the descendants of the people who didn’t save me? Why do I have to maintain order for people I hate so much?”

There’s nothing good about being a god, she had said.

“Why? Why? Why? The god that should have the answers...was myself.”

Even without her memories, those had been her genuine feelings.

“Everyone betrayed me. Everyone. Jiordal, Agatha, and Gadeciola. That’s why I betrayed everyone who betrayed me. That goes for you too. I won’t let you have your way.”

With the hand still skewered by Ceris’s demon sword, Arcana grasped the surging purple lightning coming off the blade and froze her entire arm.

“But...”

From her eyes still steeped in hatred, a teardrop spilled down her face.

“Even now, the Demon King believes in me.”

Ceris pointed his fingers at Arcana. The moment purple lightning shot out, the Magic Eyes of Absurdity transformed his spherical magic circle into lunar snowdrops. His feet began to freeze over.

“From the moment I spoke of my betrayal, he, my big brother...*he* didn’t betray me.”

§ 41. Checkmate

Arcana's Magic Eyes of Absurdity pierced through Ceris. His body started freezing from his feet up to his upper body. Since Arcana couldn't change him into snow through his strong anti-magic wards, she was changing his anti-magic itself into ice.

"You mean it was the Demon King's trust that saved you from your hatred?" Ceris asked, forcing his frozen right hand to move with a dull creaking sound. He pulled the Sword of a Thousand Bolts out of Arcana's hand. "How beautiful."

Arcana had the Sword of Divine Snow held ready to defend against his counterattack, but contrary to her expectations, he flipped his sword and stabbed himself in the chest. Vermilion Thunderbolt—his blood of lightning—flowed out of him, repelling Arcana and the ice freezing him.

As she retreated, she used her Magic Eyes of Absurdity to change the lightning into lunar snowdrops.

She stood before the praying Golroana and kneeling Diedrich.

"Run," Arcana said.

But the pope answered calmly. "Where do you expect me to run? The fall of the dome is the end of the underground world. For the sake of my kingdom, I must keep praying that it does not fall."

He opened his eyes and quietly chanted something. A phonetic magic circle activated, the impact sending Diedrich and Arcana flying—as though to move them out of the way of Ceris's approach.

"I am the pope," he continued. "I will devote myself to Jiordal's teachings until the end. However, there is no need for you to end your life over this prayer, Sword Emperor of Agatha."

While praying, he directed the rest of his magic at Ceris.

"Oh?" Ceris smiled curiously, forming a spherical magic sphere in front of

himself.

“Arcana,” Golroana said.

A small songfire rose before him—a songfire far too small to stand a chance against Ceris. Golroana was more than aware of this.

“You were once the Genedonov, Goddess of Absurdity, god of lies and betrayal,” he said. “But that is no longer true. We were so caught up in the past that we believed that you would always remain a blasphemous god and never change.”

Ceris pointed two fingers at the pope.

“I knew of our sins,” the pope continued, “of what the past pope did to turn you into the Goddess of Absurdity. But I believed what’s past was past, that our ancestors had atoned already with their deaths, and that your refusal to forgive them was because you were a blasphemous god.”

The pope hung his head in repentance.

“However, thanks to the faith of the only man who believed in you until the end, you are no longer a blasphemous god,” he said, a mixed look of regret and disbelief on his face. “O god, it was *our* lack of faith that turned you into a blasphemous god. Please accept the atonement of these foolish followers who failed to believe in you.”

Blazing songfire attacked Ceris, but his anti-magic wards easily erased the flames.

“*Gavest*.”

Purple lightning flashed. Just before it struck, Arcana’s Magic Eyes of Absurdity changed the spherical magic circle into snow. Ceris’s Sword of a Thousand Bolts extended in a blade of purple lightning and slashed horizontally. Arcana’s Sword of Divine Snow clashed against the blade, creating a fierce collision of purple lightning and lunar snowdrops.

“Dragon child,” Arcana said, “if you wish to atone for your sins, do not die. Instead of praying to the gods, take the hand of the draconid beside you. I have changed. You can too—”

Blood spilled from her mouth, stopping her words. The Sword of a Thousand Bolts, Gauddigemon, was stabbed into her abdomen.

However, without faltering, she froze the sword alongside herself with lunar snowdrops.

“Lord Anos!”

In the middle of that fierce battle, a Leaks from Ellen reached me.

“Please use Gard Aske! We can hold up the dome for a short while,” she said.

Love magic would probably be effective, but...

“You won’t be able to support it if your feelings are half-hearted,” I warned her.

“We want to send our new song to the people of the underground.”

As soon as she said that, a commotion broke out on the other end of the Leaks from the other fan union members.

“Ah! By new song, do you mean the one we just came up with? Wouldn’t No. Four be better?”

“It’ll be fine! We’re always improvising anyway.”

“That’s right, it’s more important to sing what your heart wants you to sing, Ellen!”

“I believe in us. Please, Jessica.”

One pause later, a determined voice could be heard.

“Jeez... Fine, then. Guess we have no choice!”

A performance made up on the spot, was it? They were truly subordinates of the Demon King.

“Show me what you’ve got. I believe in you all too,” I said.

“Yes, Lord Anos!”

In addition to the love magic currently being used, I activated Gard Aske to convert the Demon King’s Choir’s love into magic for the pillar.

Purple lightning exploded with a crackling bang. The ice Arcana had created

was blown away. She stumbled and grabbed Gauddigemon with her bare hand to prevent the blade from slipping out, but Ceris used that moment to draw another spherical magic circle and thrust his hand within it.

Purple lightning filled the room, crackling through the air.

“Just a little more, yup. If just a few more people of the underground gathered their emotions together, that dome would be completely supported,” Ceris said, condensing the magic circle in his palm. “However...”

Purple lightning gathered around his left hand densely, concentrating an overwhelming amount of destructive power.

“Did you ever consider the possibility that they might love their homeland less if it meant they would be destroyed for it?” he said, lifting that hand into the air.

Purple lightning drew ten more magic circles, each one crackling as they connected to form one huge magic circle.

“Ravia Gieg Gaverizd.”

The connected magic circle of purple lightning blew apart the walls of the pillar room and rose into the sky. It stuck itself to the dome far in the distance and shook it with strikes of rumbling purple lightning. The sky was stained purple, and a light brighter than the midday sun could ever be in the underground world illuminated the sky. Thunder roared. The eerie noise of the dome burning from the destructive lightning was fit for something that could end the entire world.

While the dome maintained its shape due to its status as an eternal existence, the pillars of order holding it up burned to ash. Pieces of individual rock began to fall.

“Even if you can hold up the dome,” Ceris reasoned, “you can’t stop the earthrain from falling everywhere.”

The dome dislodged, and what appeared to be countless stalactites emerged beneath it. An immense amount of earthrain was threatening to fall at any moment—and across a vast area.

“Underneath that is Agatha. When the earthrain falls, tens of thousands of citizens will perish. Now let’s hold an experiment!” Ceris exclaimed. “Will they still have love for their homeland and support the dome once it kills them?”

“You bastard...!” Diedrich cursed.

Although he was nearly completely out of magic, Diedrich leaped at Ceris. But Ceris landed a backhanded blow to his face, sending him flying.

“You don’t get it. It’s too late to stop me,” he said, looking through the hole he made in the wall to the sky above Agatha. “It’s already checkmate.”

His tone was lighthearted, like he was talking about a casual game of chess. He pointed his fingers at Diedrich, then paused and tilted his head.

A quiet melody could be heard. “Neighbor” had come to an end, and a new gentle tune was flowing through my Leaks instead.

Singing voices soon followed. Soft voices.

When we’re the last two people in the world,

Answer me one thing before we kill each other:

Tell me how to bury you when you’re dead,

So I can send you to your god without fail.

When I die, return my bones to the sky,

So I can be sent back to my god too.

After making that oath, we crossed divine blades.

But the truth was that I knew already.

That our reason to fight had just disappeared.

Can our swinging swords no longer be stopped?

My god won’t save you.

This prayer is for the god you believed in.

Please, please save this devout man.

The song had a definite effect on a certain person's heart. One draconid stood, spurred into movement by an intense urge.

"Hear..."

Hesitation flashed across that draconid's face. But he found courage in the song playing and shook off his fear, yelling in a loud voice, "Hear me, people of Jiordal!"

It was Pope Golroana. The hands that he had once always pressed together in prayer were now unfolded and held straight upwards—to hold up the dome.

"I am Pope Golroana Delo Jiordal. Cease your prayers, hold your hands high, and use your emotions to support the dome!"

The light of love magic gathered around the pope's body.

"Earthrain is falling upon Agatha right this moment," the pope continued. "The Almighty Radiance Equis told us to be compassionate to our neighbors. This prayer will be directed to the people of Agatha, who are facing a disaster. Let us follow their teachings' prayers, so that their god will save them. In the name of our god, we will offer them our greatest compassion."

With a piercingly loud tremor, earthrain fell down upon Agatha with great force. It was a rain of eternalized boulders capable of piercing through everything—capable of destroying even sources. And it was falling mercilessly upon the defenseless people of Agatha holding up the dome.

Devastating earthrain fell upon the city, smashing through the castle, clocktower, and watchtowers. But just as the rocks were to reach the civilian homes and shops where the people were praying...

Pure white light enveloped each individual boulder—the light of Teo Aske. Golroana's words had prompted the people of Jiordal to send their hopes to Agatha, and in doing so, have their prayers converted into love magic that could lift up the earthrain. The rocks slowly rose back into the sky and became one

with the dome again.

“Ah, how touching. But you’re too late.”

Ceris pushed the Sword of a Thousand Bolts deeper into Arcana’s abdomen. Blood flowed out of her as purple lightning scorched her hand. The next moment, Gauddigemon was drawn out of her abdomen and pointed at her face. Arcana was too weakened to avoid the next swing.

“I said it was checkmate.”

Gauddigemon slashed across Arcana’s Magic Eyes of Absurdity.

“No matter how much emotion and magic you gather, there is no order that can support the sky,” Ceris said. “I know your goal is to use the Magic Eyes of Absurdity to create a Sky Pillar Sword, Anos. You created the fake one earlier to test if it was possible.”

He turned this way. “Can you heal the wounds on those Eyes before the dome falls? With *your* power. Power that only destroys.”

“There’s no need to heal them,” Arcana said.

She turned into mist and vanished through the power of the titi. Her real body had been hidden away in an alternate dimension by Gennul, the Wolf of Hiding.

“It’s too bad, Ceris,” Shin said, appearing behind him from within the wafting mist.

“‘What?! The Netherworld King and Cursed King should have stopped you’”—Shin swung the Pillage Blade and Sword of Severance down at the same time—“is what you were expecting me to say, right?” Ceris asked.

Purple lightning overflowed from the spherical magic circle and covered Ceris’s left arm. The lightning formed the shape of a battleaxe. Galvedul intercepted the Sword of Severance, and Gauddigemon crossed swords with the Pillage Blade.

“I expected the two of them to let Shin Reglia through,” Ceris said. “They want to protect their homeland, after all.”

The Sword of Severance burned up and Galvedul was snapped in half. Ceris cast another spherical magic circle of purple lightning.

“Bwa ha ha! Then you must have expected this as well, Ceris Voldigoad!” a voice called out.

Countless copies of the Divine Sword Roduier rained down from the sky, stabbing into Ceris’s body. Falling at the same time and landing in the pillar room was Eldmed.

“Of course,” Ceris said, “it was about time you showed up.”

Gavest shot forward to counter Eldmed. In the same moment, Shin grabbed one of the Roduier and stabbed Ceris through the left arm. Vermilion Thunderbolts ran down the blade of the sword and tangled around Shin.

“Did you think you could win if it was two against one?” Ceris asked.

“Just one is enough. Unfortunately, I don’t have the time to play with you,” I said.

The dome was being held up by the Demon King’s Choir through Gard Aske. I was now able to move freely and approach Ceris.

Shin closed in on him from the front, Eldmed from the top, and me from behind. Ceris shoved his hand into a spherical magic circle and clenched his fist.

His hand was instantly severed and sent flying through the air.

“Sword of Severance, second hidden art—*Decapitation*,” Shin said.

The scorched blade of the Sword of Severance crumbled even further. Eldmed knocked away the Sword of a Thousand Bolts when it swung up, and I used Leviangilma’s blade of possibilities to swing at Ceris’s legs.

His body tilted forward, throwing him towards the ground. I aimed Leviangilma at his source from behind. Vermilion-colored lightning sparked furiously in an attempt to swallow the Sword of the Almighty.

“Surviving one strike of Leviangilma is impressive,” I commented.

“Destruction is a foreign concept to me,” Ceris replied. “You could even call it an aspiration of mine.”

A cold smirk crossed my face. “Then I shall grant it to you.”

I stomped my right foot down on his head as he struggled to get back up.

“Hold him still,” I instructed the others.

Shin slashed his foot with the Pillage Blade, and Eldmed pinned his arms to the floor with Roduier.

“Two thousand years ago, there were plenty of demons that couldn’t be destroyed. I had to develop a spell to execute them. Of course, it took a bone-breaking effort just to capture them, but...” I trailed off.

With my foot on Ceris’s head, I drew a magic circle.

“*Gigginuvenuenz*.”

A black restraint covered his neck. Appearing around it was a jet-black guillotine, the blade hanging high above.

“I’ll allow you one last word,” I granted Ceris. “If you wish to beg for your life, choose carefully.”

“Militia was the one who stole your memories,” Ceris said immediately.

The blade of the guillotine glinted coldly. I moved my fingers in a downward motion.

Ceris continued. “Don’t you want to know what happened after she reincar—”

“Execute.”

The guillotine blade fell with a clank, taking Ceris’s head off.

§ 42. Always, Even So

Ceris's head went flying with a spray of blood, landing and rolling on the ground some distance away. The Gigginuvenuenz guillotine turned into black particles and quietly faded away.

"He he... Aha ha! What you're doing is useless!" Veaflare cried.

Arcana was exhausted enough for the snow covering Veaflare to partially melt away, weakening the barrier around her.

"Boldinos can't die even if you behead him. That's what happened to you too, no?" the Overlord said smugly, shooting me a cold glare.

"There is no saving anyone beheaded by Gigginuvenuenz," I explained. "The guillotine blade plants the seed of destruction deep within the source through the ritual of decapitation."

"Nonsense. Boldinos wouldn't die from a silly spell like that. Just look."

Veaflare gazed at Ceris's corpse with a look of pure confidence. But neither his body nor head made any sign of movement. No matter how deep into the abyss she looked, his source was dead.

"Boldinos...?" she called.

There was no response.

"You're lying... *Answer me*, Boldinos," Veaflare said once again.

Of course, the only reply was silence.

"But I... I've been waiting all this time...for you to return..."

She tried to go up to Ceris, but the barrier prevented her from moving forward.

"I've been waiting for so long... Boldinos! *Answer me, Boldinos!* You're just pretending to be dead, aren't you?! Stand up and beat them back!"

Tears spilled from Veaflare's eyes.

“Please... Please Boldinos, say something!”

She screamed with grief.

“ANSWER ME!”

The words she screamed at the top of her lungs echoed into the sky. There was no reply. Not a single word. And that was exactly what signified Ceris’s death.

“Noooooooooooooooo!”

A rush of magic was released from Veaflare’s body with her screams. She slammed her arms against the lunar snowdrop barrier with all of her energy. Magic collided with magic and crackled fiercely, tearing her arms open. She continued beating the barrier, ignoring the pain, and eventually broke through.

Veaflare ran up to Ceris’s head and knelt beside it. She reached out with trembling, bleeding hands, tears streaming down her cheeks, and embraced the head in her arms.

“I won’t forgive you,” she muttered, glaring at me with a tearful look of pure hatred. “Listen, my precious children! There’s no need to hold up the dome... Look for the demon girls singing near you and kill them! Kill them *right now*!”

She drew a magic circle and gave her order to the Supreme Dragons lurking within the bodies of the singing citizens of Gadeciola.

“This world can perish... A world without Boldinos in it is meaningless!” she yelled, crazed with love. “Listen, everyone! You must avenge your father! Crush all the people who killed Boldinos!”

She tightened her embrace of Ceris’s head. “Now, do it! Quickly! Quickly!”

But after yelling that, a look of disbelief appeared on her face instead.

“Why...?” she muttered blankly.

There must have been no response from the Supreme Dragon.

“Unfortunately, Veaflare,” I said, walking over to her. The Overlord clutched Ceris’s head tightly, as though to protect him.

“My immunity has spread across all the Supreme Dragons,” I explained. “I was

prioritizing the dragons among the civilians, but my control has now spread to the forbidden soldiers too."

"No way," Veaflare refuted. "You're lying... I killed it before the immunity could spread!"

"But before you killed that dragon, my immunity had already spread to other dragons."

I pointed a finger at her, and a black thread wrapped around her neck. The thread transformed into a sinister-looking collar.

"Wh-What is this—"

"*Nedneliaz*."

Imprisoned in a dream, Veaflare stopped moving. Despite that, she continued holding Ceris's head tightly.

"The Netherworld King was right," I said. "You are just a truly pitiful woman. The kings of the underground world can decide what to do with you."

I turned my back to Veaflare and returned to the Sky Pillar Sword. Diedrich, Naphta, and Golroana were there with Misha and the others. Arcana also came over to me.

"It seems the day the kings and people of the underground align with one another is still far away. I talked big, but what actually happened was far from ideal," I said.

Diedrich burst into hearty laughter. "Perhaps your ideals are a little too unrealistic, Demon King."

"We may be able to make it happen one day. If we keep continuing down this path you've guided us to," Golroana said quietly beside him.

We exchanged looks and nodded.

"Now for the finishing touches," I said.

I raised my hands to hold up the sky. Arcana, Golroana, and Diedrich followed my movements. When I listened carefully, I could hear the voices of the Demon King's Choir in the far distance.

When your god I hated becomes a sinner,

Let me make an oath in the name of my god.

I will lower my sword on the execution stand.

Your god's teachings that I cannot forgive,

I will protect with my life,

And send to you in answer to your prayers.

We are bitter rivals by merely one god's name.

The crystals of emotion from the people of Agatha, Jiordal, and Gadeciola gathered in the pillar room. Flooded by those emotions of love for the underground world, I grabbed the love magic that covered the world with my right hand.

"*La Sencia*."

My jet-black love and the pure white love of the world formed a black-and-white pillar to support the falling sky. In its current state, even if the dome were to revert from its eternalized state, it would no longer crumble apart.

"Arcana," I said, handing her Leviangilma.

She took the sword with both hands, bending her knees as though in a prayer. Lunar snowdrops glowed around her.

"Moon rises and sword falls, awaiting the next trial."

Leviangilma, the Sword of the Almighty, glimmered. Its silver light illuminated the area before splitting into Venuzdonoa and Altiertonoa, the Moon of Creation. A half-moon appeared up by the dome.

"Turn the pillar of La Sencia into a Sky Pillar Sword," I told her.

Arcana nodded and stared at the pillar with her Magic Eyes of Absurdity. The black-and-white light gradually changed into the shape of a sword.

“Guh...”

With a pained grunt, blood started streaming from Arcana’s eyes. Even after borrowing the power of the titi and Gennul, she hadn’t been able to evade Ceris’s attack completely. Her knees folded, and she fell to the ground.

“I’m...okay...”

She lifted her head to continue staring at the black-and-white pillar with her Magic Eyes of Absurdity.

Two hands suddenly appeared before her. Golroana and Diedrich were both offering her a hand up.

“I can return Altiertonoa to its past form with the Book of Traces. If the Moon of Creation regains its original glow, the burden on you should be lighter,” Golroana said, taking a white book out of a magic circle. “The God of Traces no longer exists, so it may not be perfect, though.”

“Don’t worry, Kandaquizorte can restrict that,” Diedrich added. “Although Naphta can’t use her Divine Eyes either, so we’re kind of in the same boat.”

Their two gazes were fixed straight on Arcana. It was Golroana who first opened his mouth awkwardly.

“I will not repent or beg for forgiveness,” he said. “There is no denying that Jiordal has been against you this entire time...”

“We may never be able to compensate for Agatha’s past decisions,” Diedrich said. “I can only atone as its current king...”

Arcana glared at the two of them—the descendants of both Jiordal and Agatha, who betrayed her and tossed her into the depths of hell—with blood-ridden eyes.

“I...”

For a brief moment, she glanced at me. I knew how she felt.

“I still cannot forgive. Neither Agatha, nor Jiordal, nor your teachings,” she said, gently taking their hands. “But I will heal you. The Magic Eyes of Absurdity should be able to return some of the power to Naphta’s Divine Eyes.”

But the truth was, I knew all along.

All I did was hate, I need nothing more than that.

Can our swinging swords no longer be stopped?

My god won't save you.

This prayer is for the god you believed in.

May your hateful teachings continue always, even so.

Arcana turned her Eyes to Naphta. The wounded Divine Eyes were recreated and healed to an extent.

"Diedrich, I leave Kandaquizorte to you," Naphta said.

"Of course," Diedrich replied.

Naphta looked into the future with her wounded Divine Eyes, while Diedrich held the sword of Kandaquizorte up against the Book of Traces in Golroana's hand. The future became restricted.

"Book of Traces, First Movement, *Zegnel*."

The Book of Traces opened, and Golroana chanted the hymn. Everything was restricted by Kandaquizorte, and light started flowing from Arcana. The Moon of Creation in the sky turned into a full moon, and the black-and-white pillar shined silver. She stared at it with her Magic Eyes of Absurdity. The La Sencia pillar that gently supported the sky turned even more gentle, like an order.

The faint tremors of the sky came to a complete stop. La Sencia's pillar was recreated by the Moon of Creation and Magic Eyes of Absurdity, transforming into a black-and-white Sky Pillar Sword.

As of this moment, a new pillar was created in the underground.

The three feuding nations of Agatha, Jiordal, and Gadeciola; Diedrich, who lived with pride in his heart; Golroana, who devoted everything to prayer; and Arcana, who, from her past, held hate for everything.

The emotions of the underground kingdoms weaved together as they joined

hands, and the symbol of their bond could be heard as the song unfurling in the air: the song that announced the beginning of a new world.

When your god I hated becomes a sinner,

Let me make an oath in the name of my god.

I will lower my sword on the execution stand.

Your god's teachings that I cannot forgive,

I will protect with my life,

And send to you in answer to your prayers.

We are bitter rivals by merely one god's name.

But the truth was, I knew all along.

All I did was hate, I need nothing more than that.

Can our swinging swords no longer be stopped?

My god won't save you.

This prayer is for the god you believed in.

May your hateful teachings continue always, even so.

§ 43. A Peaceful Religious War

One month later, in the throne room of the Demon Castle Delsgade.

"I've brought Sir Diedrich and the Dragon Knights of Agatha here, Lord Anos!" Demon Lord Elio, governor of the area of Midhaze, announced.

As promised to the Sword Emperor, today was the day for the Knights of Agatha to visit Dilhade for a banquet.

Intense earthquakes rattled the surface when the dome was falling upon the underground world, but thanks to Arcana turning the land into an eternal state, the ground suffered no cracks or damage despite all the terrible shaking. The past month had been spent on disaster relief and restoration, and above all, preparation for the new relations with the kingdoms of the underground world.

From now on, the people of the underground world would be able to access the surface. Their visits would need to regulated under an established system, and since I was preoccupied by preexisting commitments, Elio volunteered to visit the underground and lead Diedrich to Dilhade in my place.

Diedrich was a king of one of the three major underground nations—a guest of honor of the banquet. In order to show every courtesy, Elio, as a high-ranking demon lord, served as their guide.

"Well done, Elio. You've been a great help," I said.

"It was my pleasure, my liege!" Elio replied, bowing once before excusing himself.

Diedrich and Naphta entered the room as he left.

"This is quite the lavish banquet you've prepared, Demon King," Diedrich said. "Inviting not only the Sword Emperor Palace but the entire civilian population of Agatha was bold of you indeed. I must extend my gratitude."

I stood up from the throne and walked over to the two of them. "There's no need for that. I merely wanted the people of the underground to see the

surface.”

It was natural to fear the unknown, and that fear had the potential to fester and develop into war one day. No matter how wise a king was, it was the emotions of his people that moved the nation. Thus, we had to begin this new era by getting to know one another. That was why I invited not only Diedrich but the people of Agatha too.

“Everyone’s been led to the banquet hall first. The music and wine is all ready,” I said.

“That’s great to hear.”

I turned to Naphta, whose Divine Eyes were closed.

“How are your wounds?” I asked.

“About that...” Diedrich said hesitantly.

“I, Naphta, shall answer,” Naphta interrupted. “I am able to see a little bit of the future now. However, I am still unable to bestow the order of Divine Eyes upon the Prophet I have exchanged a pact with.”

It seemed she wasn’t fully recovered yet.

She had been slashed with Leviangilma’s blade, so that wasn’t a surprise. While she had been briefly treated with the Magic Eyes of Absurdity, she had forced herself to look into the future right after, which could also be causing her slow recovery.

“Is there anything that can be done?” Diedrich asked sincerely.

“Arcana,” I called.

Lunar snowdrops fluttered through the air and formed the shape of a girl.

“Can you heal the Goddess of the Future’s eyes?” I asked her.

“I can try,” Arcana replied.

Arcana stood before Naphta and created more lunar snowdrops from her palm. The petals fell upon Naphta’s eyelids, which slowly lifted open. Arcana’s Magic Eyes of Absurdity glinted.

“The Magic Eyes that disobey order will heal order. I am the blasphemous god

that defies the heavens.”

Magic power flowed from the Magic Eyes of Absurdity, basking Naphta’s Divine Eyes in light. After ten seconds of gazing like that, Arcana broke eye contact.

“How is it?” Diedrich asked.

Naphta turned her Eyes to him and slowly shook her head.

“It seems like the wound isn’t on the Divine Eyes itself,” I said. “Misha and Sasha can help out too. Adding the power of the Magic Eyes of Omneity may work.”

“No,” Naphta replied. “I may already know the reason.”

“The reason your Eyes won’t heal?”

Naphta nodded. “I, Naphta, have a hypothesis. The light’s failure to return to these Eyes is a miracle in itself—as salvation for the Goddess of the Future.”

Arcana looked thoughtful. “What do you mean?”

“If the Goddess of the Future’s Divine Eyes lose sight of the future, that means the future is constantly changing,” Naphta explained. “All clearly defined, fixed futures have disappeared, making my order one worthy of a future of hope.”

Hmm. That was certainly a possibility.

“You could just be failing to see properly,” I pointed out.

“I, Naphta, have a theory. What is currently reflected in these Eyes is not an impossible darkness,” she replied, staring straight at me. Her eyes had lost sight of the future, but her gaze felt more powerful than before.

“I see. You have an idea of what changed with your body.”

Naphta smiled faintly. “I’m sure of it.”

It was a good smile. As long as she herself wasn’t bothered by it, then I wouldn’t say anything further either.

“In that case, please look forward to the banquet today. With no way to see the future, you’ll be able to enjoy yourself to the fullest.”

I started walking. Diedrich walked alongside me, while Naphta and Arcana followed us.

“Allow me to show you to the banquet hall,” I said. “The other guest of honor is already having the time of his life.”

“Do you mean Golroana?” he asked. Diedrich’s tone was a little sharper than usual.

“Something the matter?” I replied.

“Everything, apparently,” he said with a sigh. “Agatha and Jiordal might have opened themselves to discussion now, but that stubborn man keeps trying to pick a fight. The most recent demand was for half of Agatha’s hunting grounds.”

While dragons could be summoned in the underground world, there was a limit to their magic power and pledge jewels. It was more effective to go hunting for dragons that bred in the wastelands.

“In return, he offered to teach us how to cast phonetic magic circles. But clearly that’s just an excuse to spread his hymns and increase the number of Jiordal’s followers. He’s not thinking logically at all.”

“Surely he doesn’t expect such unreasonable requests to be accepted,” I commented.

“That’s why I’m at my wits’ end,” Diedrich said, agreeing. “He insisted that prophecies be prohibited from the negotiation process between our kingdoms. Then, he demanded the return of the pledge jewels Agatha took from Jiordal. After forbidding the use of our prophecies, he brings up something from over a thousand years ago that the God of Traces previously looked up!”

Diedrich sighed heavily in annoyance.

It was no wonder he wanted Naphta’s Eyes to recover.

“Good grief. The moment he knows we won’t swing swords anymore, he brings out all the shameless demands,” Diedrich said.

“Bwa ha ha!” I laughed in spite of myself. “Sounds like a fun time, Diedrich.”

The Sword Emperor was taken aback for a brief instant, then burst into hearty laughter.

“That’s right,” he said, after his laughter died down. “Peace comes with its own headaches.”

At any rate, it sounded like he far preferred his current task to crossing swords.

We made our way towards the banquet hall. Jiordal, Agatha, and Gadeciola’s people had all been invited. The banquet was spread across the entirety of Delsgade, but the main venue was here.

“Shall I tell you the secret to smooth negotiations with Golroana?” I offered Diedrich.

“If such a thing exists, I’d love to hear it.”

I chuckled and opened the double doors. “It’s wine.”

“Don’t open the door!”

“Woo-ooh!”

“Don’t open the door!”

“Woo-ooh!”

“Don’t open the forbidden door!”

At the stage at the center of the hall, the Demon King’s Choir were performing Demon King Hymn No. Six, “Neighbor.”

“Oh, Ellen! Your song heals my body!”

At the very front row of the audience, someone was hyping up the girls by waving two bottles of wine lit with holy songfire.

“Wh-What is that...?” Diedrich mumbled in awe.

The hands that were once clutched in constant prayer for the kingdom now clutched a bottle in each hand. Pope Golroana Delo Jiordal waved the wine that was ignited with songfire in circles over his head.

“Indeed, Ellen said it to me personally,” the pope said, as if speaking to himself. “‘Do your best restoring Jiordal,’ she said! In other words, the best day of my life is coming. Book of Devotion, First Movement, *Wohwoh*.”

“Who...is that...?” Diedrich asked.

Diedrich furrowed his brows and squinted at the speaking figure. But no matter how many times he rubbed his eyes, Pope Golroana’s appearance did not change.

“The pope has never drunk before, having previously only used his time to pray. This is what the recoil of a lifetime’s worth of suppression looks like.”

“He’s like another Sylvia,” Diedrich exclaimed. “I’m shocked...”

The reason for Golroana becoming a follower of the Demon King’s Choir could be explained in one phrase: the new Sky Pillar Sword. Velevim’s power to support the dome came from the people’s love for the world, which meant, if the people ever forgot about doomsday or how it was prevented, they ran the risk of potentially breaking the pillar due to their own neglect.

Thus, the fact the sky was being held up by everyone on an individual level had to be passed down from generation to generation, and the three major kingdoms decided to use the song of the Demon King’s Choir to do this. For the past month, the Demon King’s Choir had traveled around to each kingdom to teach them the song that would remind them not to forget their new responsibility.

Of course, the song itself couldn’t be declared a product of Agatha or Jiordal without offending the other nation, so it became a legend of the Demon King, who ended the war of the underground world. If the proper foundations for the legend were made now, they should be able to establish a stable peace that would continue far into the future.

But as a side effect of that tour, the Demon King’s Choir popularity boomed in the underground world, prompting the birth of many hidden followers—or rather, fanatics.

“If you invite him to one of Agatha’s famous drinking parties, your negotiations may end up going smoothly,” I suggested.

Diedrich smiled wryly. “No doubt about that. But first, there’s something I have to clear up here and now.”

“Hmm?” I queried.

When the song came to an end, Diedrich marched up to Golroana.

“Oh, Ellen!” the pope exclaimed as Diedrich approached. “From the moment I first laid eyes upon you, this heart of mine has been throbbing with overflowing faith. That throbbing has only grown louder and louder over time! I will forever be thankful for this opportunity to visit the land of your birth.”

“Hah... So all it took to cease your praying was a girl from the Demon King’s Choir. Quite the fervent show of passion coming from you, Golroana,” Diedrich called out.

Golroana whirled around. “Why, if it isn’t the Sword Emperor. I was wondering who was blathering on just now. Me, cease praying? It seems you haven’t changed your foolish way of thinking.”

The pope shook his bottles burning with songfire in time to the rhythm, as though they were maracas.

“In this holy land, *this* is how one prays.”

Diedrich watched Golroana shake his wine bottles with an utterly unimpressed look.

“Well, whatever. I’m here to talk to you about something else.”

He gulped down the wine he had grabbed on his way over.

“It’s true that Ellen is the leader of the Demon King’s Choir. But the way Jessica responds to all her unreasonable requests with complete acceptance and devotion is exactly in the manner of the righteous path of Agatha’s knights. In short, *Jessica* is the ideal maiden,” the Sword Emperor of Agatha declared loudly. “And I won’t accept anything else!”

“How fitting of the barbaric beliefs of Agatha,” Golroana scoffed. “Jessica’s wonderful motherly figure can indeed be compared to a holy mother. But she only shines due to Ellen’s innocent and free-spirited ways. Above all, it is the gap between her adorable and compassionate sides that has captured the hearts of Jiordal’s followers and brought us salvation. In other words, *Ellen* is the supreme maiden.”

“Am I correct to assume that this means Ellen is Jiordal’s bias?” Diedrich

concluded.

“You are free to assume that, yes,” the pope said in confirmation.

Sparks flew as the two glared at each other. But at that moment, a third person appeared.

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” another voice called out.

Jiordal’s Bishop Mirano had walked up to the two of them. There were several more priests from the church behind him.

“We also agree with King Diedrich that Jessica is the best,” Bishop Mirano said.

“Wha...”

Golroana looked like he had just witnessed a follower break a commandment.

“What did you just say? You people...support Jessica...?” Golroana said in disbelief.

The priests nodded weakly at the pope’s question.

“How could this be? Agreeing with *Agatha’s* way of thinking,” the pop murmured.

“No, that isn’t necessarily true,” said yet another new voice to the conversation.

“Who are you?” Golroana asked.

The newcomers to the conversation were the Dragon Knight Nate, his subordinate Ricardo, and ten other Knights of Agatha.

“Ellen is our bias. As the leader, she may not always outshine others in pure strength, but in *heart*, is completely unrivaled in her ability to motivate the people around her. That is the true honor of a knight,” Nate declared boldly.

“Commander Nate is right. I might have tried to discard this life once before, but I am now thinking of devoting the rest of it to her song,” Ricardo said, making a knight’s salute. He essentially declared to remain single for the rest of his life.

“H-Hmph,” Diedrich mustered a somewhat weak scoff of dismissal.

This time, it was Diedrich who looked like he had been shamed by his knights.

“Nate... Ricardo...you really don’t bias Jessica?” he asked weakly.

“King Diedrich, as your loyal retainer, I must advise you to choose Ellen as the official bias of Agatha,” Nate said resolutely.

As Diedrich’s subordinate, it was Nate’s solemn duty to advise his king when he believed him to straying off the right path, even if it could result in his own punishment. It was no wonder he was a knight chosen by Diedrich.

“Bishop Mirano, you should reconsider your opinion too,” Golroana prompted his subordinate and colleague. “Jiordal’s bias is Ellen.”

“No, *both* of you should reconsider,” a new voice said, prompting the others to turn their heads. The Eight Song Sages had appeared, accompanied by dozens of other Jiordal citizens.

“*Maia* is the bias of the Eight Song Sages and sixty-four other followers here,” one of the Eight Song Sages announced. “At a glance, she may seem as plain as any other village girl, but she always does her best on such a big stage. This behavior is truly in the spirit of a god.”

Bishop Mirano and Pope Golroana both faltered at the appearance of such a large group of people, but the pope soon pulled himself together.

“I understand how you feel,” Golroana said. “Jessica and Maia are both lovely. However, I am the pope, and if I declare Jiordal’s bias to be Ellen, then that is what Jiordal’s teachings shall be. Opposing this decision may result in excommunication from the church.”

Golroana was so drunk that in the face of opposition, he defaulted to the most ironfisted option.

But the Eight Song Sages were just as drunk.

“Fine!” the sage spat. “From this moment on, we will split from the church and form the Maia Sect of the Jiordal Church!”

Bishop Mirano echoed their dauntless sentiment with his own. “In that case, we will form the Jessica Sect of the Jiordal Church.”

“How foolish,” the pope scoffed in reply. “The Ellen Sect of the Jiordal Church

will be the religious mainstream led by the pope. Denominations such as yours will fail to gain any followers."

The Eight Song Sages were unaffected by his words.

"If you believe that, then it shouldn't be a problem to discard us, no?" one of the sages said.

Bishop Mirano agreed. "Indeed, that shouldn't be of any inconvenience to the teachings of god."

Golroana glared at the two forces against him. "No matter what anyone says, the Jiordal Church will support Ellen. I will not allow any denominations."

Whether the Jiordal Church truly split into the Ellen Sect, Jessica Sect, and Maia Sect as a result of the banquet was—well, it remained to be seen.

§ 44. A Proud Knight’s Love

An endless debate on who was the best girl of the Demon King’s Choir was unfolding in the banquet hall.

“Ugh, both father and Commander Nate are an utter embarrassment,” Sylvia ranted. “I can’t believe they’re infatuated with some choir girls. Doomsday only just passed! Have they no shame?!”

She shot the raving men a cold look and returned to her drink. She was drunk, but not nearly as bad as last time. “Men really are worthless!”

“Then what kind of person would be your ideal crush?” Lay asked casually, drinking his wine beside her.

“C-C-Cr— Cru— Cwuk—”

Zeshia came up to them with a happy grin. “Cluck cluck... Cock-a-doodle-doo?”

“Who are you calling a chicken?!”

Zeshia’s shoulders drooped sadly. “No chicken...?” she asked.

“Uh, no, that’s not... L-Look, I’m the chicken! Cluck cluck, cuh-cuh-cluck!” Sylvia clucked desperately.

“It’s...a chicken knight...!” Zeshia exclaimed.

“A chicken knight...”

Zeshia’s eyes sparkled with anticipation. Sylvia sighed in resignation.

“Th-That’s right, I’m the chicken knight! Chicken sword art, dance of the cockerel’s crest! I’ll cut down every man in love!” she said, waving a hand to aim a karate chop at Lay. “Cock-a-doodle-doo!”

Zeshia’s face brightened. She imitated her with a karate chop to Lay’s leg.

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!” Zeshia warbled.

Lay accepted both attacks with a wry smile.

“The chicken knight Zeshia...will now depart on an adventure!” Zeshia said gleefully before running off to find her next target.

“So?” Lay asked.

“So what?!” Sylvia snapped. “I’m not gonna use the chicken sword art anymore! It’s too embarrassing!”

“I’m asking about your ideal crush.”

“My c-c-cr—cru—crush...!”

“Is it another chicken sword art?”

“No! My crush?! I’d never reveal something so disgraceful!”

Sylvia turned bright red and buried her face in her wine cup.

“It’s normal to have a type, you know? It doesn’t hurt to have one. Share it with us!” Misa said cheerfully, drawing closer to her.

“But... I’m a knight... I have to uphold my honor,” Sylvia protested.

“That’s irrelevant now, isn’t it? The Knights of Agatha are no longer required to become the Sky Pillar Sword. Besides, you said you were interested before, right?”

“That’s... Well, I suppose,” Sylvia replied, trailing off.

Misa leaned in further with a giggle. “You can share it with me. I won’t tell anyone else.”

“R-Really? That better be true,” Sylvia said.

“Yes, I promise,” Misa replied.

“My type...would be...”

Sylvia hesitantly lowered her gaze and picked up her wine cup. She gulped it down before finding the courage to continue.

“A man who doesn’t lose himself to love,” she said in answer, “who almost appears to have no interest in romance, who’s honorable and strong. That would be my ideal.”

Although she was only trying to tell Misa, Sylvia’s drunken answer was loud

enough for others to hear.

“That *does* sound like something you would say,” Misa said, contemplating Sylvia’s answer. “But wouldn’t it be kind of troublesome to fall in love with someone with no interest in romance?”

“Really? Well, it’s not like that person exists in the first place,” Sylvia replied. She took another gulp of her wine with a weary smile. “Even Commander Nate and my father ended up like that the moment the weight was lifted from their shoulders. My ideal prince only exists in my dreams.”

“Excuse me, Lord Anos!” a demon girl in a gown suddenly called out to me.

The purpose of tonight’s banquet was for the people of the underground to mingle with the people aboveground, so many attendees had been invited from across Dilhade.

“Thank you for inviting me today,” the demon girl continued. “I don’t suppose you remember me at all? I’m Demon Lord Boros’s little sister, Liza.”

Demon Lord Boros governed the border district of Helzed. That name indeed rang a bell.

“The girl with the rare disease, right?”

“Yes!” Liza said, beaming joyfully.

Demon Lord Boros had been one of the many demons I had an audience with after the Demon King Reordination Ceremony. His little sister had been afflicted by a rare disease that couldn’t be healed through medical magic, and I had cured her.

“I’ve made a full recovery now, so I wanted to thank you for saving my life. That, and...”

Liza came up closer towards me.

“I always thought you were a lovely gentleman...”

“I see.”

“That’s why, um... I’ll be staying at the Stardust Spring tonight.”

The Stardust Spring was a luxury inn for high-class visitors to Midhaze.

Regular folk were unable to book rooms there.

“And this...is the key to the room...”

Liza took my hand and placed the key in my palm. She blushed bright red.

“I-I know it isn’t my place to be saying this...and I don’t want to cause trouble for you... B-But if you’re interested, just for tonight...”

“There’s no need to finish that sentence. I won’t embarrass my guests like that,” I said.

She giggled and bowed.

“I-I’ll be waiting,” she mumbled shyly before running off.

“Elio.”

I called out to the Demon Lord of Midhaze beside me.

“You know who Demon Lord Boros’s little sister Liza is, yes?” I asked him.

“Yes, my liege.”

“It appears her accommodations were unsatisfactory. She’s returned the key to her room. The Stardust Spring may look extravagant, but its anti-magic wards are on the weaker side. She must be too worried to sleep soundly. Relocate her to a guest room in Delsgade and assign her some security guards.”

“Understood.”

I passed the key to him, and he left.

There were three people who had been watching the entire exchange unfold: Lay, Misa, and Sylvia.

“This must be love,” Sylvia murmured.

“Huh?!” Misa whirled around to look at Sylvia in shock.

“That bold attitude with absolutely no interest in romance,” Sylvia continued. “*That’s* my ideal... I never expected to find him in a place like this... Love really comes when you least expect it...”

“U-Um... Are you drunk?” Misa asked.

Sylvia grabbed Misa by the shoulders. “Tell me!”

“T-Tell you what?” Misa stammered in reply.

“What do I have to do?! What do I have to do...with this love...?”

Misa looked to Lay for help.

“You saw what Anos is like just now,” he said. “You’ll have to spell it out for him.”

“Got it. I’ll be right back,” Sylvia said.

“Huh?! R-Right now?!” Misa said. “Wouldn’t it be better to go through all the steps first...”

“There’s no better time than the present! What good would petty tricks do for an amateur at romance like me anyway? Victory favors the bold, there’s nowhere to go but forward!” Sylvia exclaimed.

“So you’re gonna treat it like a battle...”

Sylvia marched straight past Misa’s strained smile and approached me with confidence.

“King Anos.”

She looked straight at me, then faltered and lowered her gaze slightly.

“Um...”

She clenched her trembling fist and looked back up with determination.

“I’ve fallen in love with you. Please be my lover!”

“Bwa ha ha. An amusing thing to say,” I replied.

“Is that a no?”

“If you’re being serious, come back when you’re sober. It would be an insult to your love for me to accept your drunken words.”

I turned around and walked away to the sound of Sylvia swooning and falling to the floor behind me.

“A-Are you okay?” Misa asked.

She ran up to Sylvia with Lay out of concern.

“U-Uuh,” was all Sylvia could get out.

“Um, it’ll be okay,” Misa said hesitantly. “I don’t think Lord Anos takes drunk people at their word, so you don’t need to feel bad...”

“H-He’s so hot,” Sylvia murmured.

“What?”

“He shot me down without batting an eye. Such a cold and curt attitude! My heart is in pain, and yet... It hurts so good. Is this— Is this love?!” Sylvia asked, bowled over by new emotions.

Lay and Misa exchanged a look.

“U-Um... I’m not sure about that,” Misa said.

“Oh, he’s so hot!” said another voice.

A similar comment to Sylvia’s could be heard nearby. I looked over to see mom, who for some reason, was staring at me while overcome with emotion.

“Just look at how attractive my little Anos is now! Who taught you that rejection line?! Oh, you’ve grown so much in the short time I took my eyes off you. Get over here!” Mom came right up to me and elbowed me in the side. If I recalled correctly, mom didn’t drink—meaning she was completely sober right now.

“Just look at how much bigger you’ve grown since the last time I saw you!” she exclaimed. “You’ve got the actual face of a seven-month-old now.”

What kind of face was that?

“Oh, that’s right. I’ve been meaning to ask the two of you something,” she continued, her arm reaching out behind her to snag Arcana and drag her over.

So that’s where Arcana had been this whole time.

“How did the divorce trial go?” mom asked with a serious look.

Come to think of it, we still hadn’t corrected her.

“Mom, the Selection Trial isn’t a divorce trial,” I said.

“Huh? But... You picked up Arcana, right? In order to save her from a bad

man.”

“That is correct, human child, but you’ve got the wrong idea,” Arcana replied. “I do not have a spouse. I did not go through a divorce trial either. There’s no need for concern.”

“Is that so?” mom said.

Hmm. It was rare to see her convinced so easily. Arcana and I exchanged a look of relief.

“Everything has been resolved. Big brother saved me.”

“Big...brother...?” mom repeated.

Seeing mom’s reaction, Arcana realized right away that she had made a mistake.

“I said the wrong thing just now,” Arcana said quickly. “Don’t mind me.”

“It’s fine, we can tell mom that,” I said, turning to clarify mom’s confusion. “Arcana is my little sister. But that doesn’t mean she’s your daughter—”

“Whaaaaaaaaat?!” mom shrieked in surprise. “Anos—Anos, did you want to be a big brother all this time?!”

“That’s not what I’m say—”

“It’s okay! I get it, Anos!” mom said, cutting me off. “It’s not like you wanted a little sister or anything, right? Don’t worry, mom gets you. I always wanted a little sister too, I was lonely as well!”

It seemed I had touched a nerve.

“But Arcana has her own family, yes?” mom asked.

“Not anymore,” Arcana corrected. “Everyone’s dead. It’s just me now.”

Mom looked at Arcana sadly. It happened a long time ago, so Arcana had her usual expression on her face. But mom smiled at her gently and hugged her anyway.

“Do you like Anos, Arcana?” mom asked.

“I think I like him...?” Arcana replied.

“Then would you like to become our child?”

“Can I?” Arcana asked hesitantly.

“It won’t be easy to become family right away,” mom said. “There’ll be paperwork to fill, emotions to sort out, and all kinds of other hurdles to get past. But why don’t we start with living together first?”

“Will that cause you any trouble?”

Mom shook her head. “It’ll be fine, we’re already living together anyway. If Anos says you’re his little sister, everything will work out. Besides, I have always wanted a daughter.”

“Really?”

“Yup. So let’s try things out first, what do you say?”

Arcana thought for a moment, then said, “I want to try.”

“Okay. Oh, but I can’t decide this all by myself,” mom said, glancing around the room.

“What are you saying, Izabella? Of course, you have my wholehearted approval!” said a voice.

Dad appeared out of nowhere. He must have been listening all along, as he immediately spread his arms in a welcoming pose. He was trying to convey his magnanimity.

“You know, Anos, the truth is, I’ve always wanted a daughter as well!” dad revealed. “There are a lot of things I’d want to do if I had a daughter! I’d welcome a daughter as cute as Arcana with open arms!”

“You better watch out, Arcana!” a tipsy Eleonore called out as she passed by. “Anos’s dad has the look of a criminal in his eyes!”

“The eyes of a criminal...spotted...! Cock-a-doodle-doo!”

The chicken knight Zeshia landed a karate chop at dad’s torso before running after Eleonore. An awkward silence lingered in their aftermath.

“N-No, you’ve got the wrong idea, Arcana!” dad tried to explain desperately. “Calm down, let’s discuss things calmly. You’ve got it all wrong. I don’t want to

do anything inappropriate, I just want to dress her in cute clothes and play house together— Wait, no, that's not what I mean!"

With every word he was digging a bigger and bigger hole for himself.

"Oh, that's right! That's right, that's right!" he said, as though he had just come up with a great idea. He then put on a high-pitched, coaxing voice. "Arcana, I saw some really delicious-looking cakes over there. Why don't we go try some together? You can call me dad too! Or is it a little too early for that? Oh, but if anything, I'd prefer you call me papa... I've always wanted to be called that! Ha ha!"

He started pushing Arcana to leave with him, as though he was kidnapping a child with the lure of food.

"Okay! I'm going to go play with Arcana too, so there's nothing to worry about. Talk to you later, Anos!" mom said, following Arcana and dad with a smile.

"Ah, I finally found you, Anos!"

Just then, Sasha stumbled face-first into my body.

"Urk... What are you doing?" she whined.

"I'm not doing anything."

Misha walked up to both of us and took Sasha's hand.

"Sasha is drunk," she said.

"This doesn't count as being drunk," Sasha said, disagreeing. "I've learned since the banquet in Agatha."

Misha blinked twice and tilted her head in confusion.

"I thought you passed out right away in Agatha?" I asked.

Misha nodded. Sasha reached out and pinched Misha's cheeks with both hands.

"Disobedient children will have their faces squished!" Sasha said.

"You're already squishing it..." Misha objected.

“Forgive her, Sasha,” I said. “Misha’s just worried about you.”

“Urgh,” Sasha grumbled. “Why are you taking Misha’s side, Anos? Is this favoritism?”

“What are you saying? There’s no way I’d show favoriti—”

“Hah!”

Sasha grabbed my cheeks and grinned wickedly. “Ha ha! Anos has a weird face now too!”

I slowly reached my hands out and touched Sasha’s cheeks in return.

“Huh...?” I said, confused.

“This was a popular game two thousand years ago,” Sasha explained. “The goal was to see who could make the funnier face on the other person, and I’ve never lost.”

I smirked and pinched her cheeks lightly. “Are you ready? I’ll make you the biggest clown in Dilhade with your face alone.”

“N-No! I don’t wanna,” Sasha whined. “I’m not a clown!”

“Bwa ha ha. Misha allowed you to squish her face. Now it’s your turn.”

Sasha desperately tried to shake her head, but she couldn’t move her face when it was sandwiched between my fingers. She started kicking her feet in a tantrum.

“Help me, Misha,” Sasha pleaded. “Anos is gonna make my face look weird!”

“What are you stating the obvious for? Misha, do you have any requests?” I asked.

Misha blinked. “Requests?”

“A goblin, an ogre, a slime? I have quite the repertoire.”

After thinking for a moment, she had a reply. “Make her cute.”

“Hmm... Cute. Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

How typical of her. I stared at Sasha, who looked at me with teary eyes and

whined.

“A-Are you saying it’s impossible for me to be cute?” Sasha asked.

“No, it’s actually quite easy,” I said, releasing her face from my hands. “There. That should fulfill your request.”

Sasha paused to process my words, then brightened gleefully.

“Feel free to stare all you want!” she said, grinning at me from ear to ear.

Then, like the drunk she was, she suddenly changed topics.

“Watch this, Anos. The secret art of the Necron family.”

She beckoned Misha closer to her and pressed their hands together. Then, she folded the upper half of her body over, making Misha bend with her.

“*Tun Nel*,” she said with a broad smile.

Misha looked at me without any expression.

“Sasha is drunk,” she repeated.

So it seemed.

“Shall I sober her up a little?” Misha asked.

“I can still drink!” Sasha said. “Drink with me, Anos.”

“Then let’s drink this outside.” I created a wine bottle using Iris and handed it to Sasha.

“Oh, it’s Demon King wine!” Sasha cooed.

She happily clutched the Demon King wine—more commonly known as water—to her chest. I started walking, and she followed me with tottering footsteps. Misha led her by the hand to ensure she didn’t trip.

“Demon King wine tastes so good when I’m drunk,” Sasha said. “It slides right down the throat—I could drink it forever! I wonder why?”

“Why indeed?” I replied, leaving the banquet hall behind us.

§ Epilogue: Vow of Matrimony

Accompanied by Misha and Sasha, I made my way to the inner courtyard of Delsgade. Under the light of the moon, the garden glowed dimly.

Sasha immediately attempted to pour herself the Demon King wine, but her hands were trembling too much to hold the bottle steady. Misha poured the water for her, which she gulped down eagerly.

The night breeze was comfortable. It shouldn't take long for her to sober up here.

"Huh? It's Diedrich and Naphta. What are they doing?" Sasha asked, leaning over a nearby hedge. On the other end of her gaze was Diedrich and Naphta, who were silently staring up at the sky.

"I'll go and give them some Demon King wine!" she said enthusiastically.

Misha grabbed her hand and stopped her from walking off.

"What's wrong?" Sasha asked.

"Give it to them later," Misha said.

"Really? Hmm, okay then."

Sasha resumed drinking the Demon King wine by herself.

"I, Naphta, find it strange," the quiet voice of the Goddess of the Future said. "There shouldn't have been a future where you and I look up at the sky from the world aboveground, Diedrich."

"Though it frustrates me that I wasn't the one that brought you to this future, I suppose I can't ask for too much now," the Sword Emperor said, smiling gently. "Since Agatha's prophecy was overturned, and we're both alive."

One beat later, Naphta responded. "The Demon King might have been the one who overturned the prophecy, but I believe it was your persistence in looking towards hope that prompted him to help."

The Sword Emperor chuckled shyly. “When you say something like that it feels like I’ve been saved all over again.”

“I have a question for you, Diedrich.” Naphta turned towards him. “Why were you able to look towards hope?” she asked.

“Well, let’s see...”

With an awkward look, Diedrich brought a hand to his head. His answer came out in a low, ineloquent grumble.

“Can we continue this conversation another time?”

“Why?”

“Because it wouldn’t look good. After everything I said to the Demon King, I ended up relying on him to resolve everything. There’s nothing I can say about it now.”

Naphta looked down in thought. Then, she looked up again.

“But that was the hope I was seeking. It was my salvation.” The soft smile on Naphta’s face captivated Diedrich’s gaze. “We have arrived in a future neither of us expected. My prophecy was wrong, and you failed to overturn yours. But in the future that neither of us could see, you and I are together. I, Naphta, find that something to be very happy about.”

Diedrich smiled wryly. “My failure was the hope you desired?”

“That was no failure to me,” Naphta said. “There was only an option of which path to take. That’s why you, Diedrich, have given me the greatest thing I could have asked for.”

“That makes me sound a lot better than I deserve.”

Diedrich looked up at the moon. The faint light that had never reached the underground world illuminated the broad smile on his face—as though he was thoroughly reflecting upon his joy.

“Well, either way. If my actions somehow resulted in this fortuitous coincidence, then it was worth all the struggle until now.”

Naphta nodded quietly.

Silence fell upon them. The two exchanged a look without saying anything.

“I’ve been watching the entire time, you know,” Diedrich said after some time had passed. “From the moment you first opened your Divine Eyes, my heart was captured. I’ve seen countless futures since receiving your Eyes, but I’ve been watching *you* the entire time too. You, the lonely god fighting in search of a future of hope.”

Diedrich stared straight into Naphta’s Eyes. In front of her calm expression, he smiled broadly in embarrassment.

“In short, no matter what I saw, I’ve only ever had eyes for you,” he declared boldly. “My eyes are as blind as ever. Even if the Divine Eyes showed me countless futures of death and despair, I couldn’t see any of it. No matter how impossible that may sound.”

Naphta’s face softened, as though she was holding those words gently in her heart.

“I fell in love with you,” Diedrich said. “And these eyes were so blinded by love that they never saw despair.”

“Diedrich,” Naphta called out, calm and solemn. “Your words have convinced me.”

Diedrich tilted his head. “Convinced?”

“The reason these Divine Eyes have ceased to reflect the future is the same as the reason for your blindness.”

She grinned at him brightly. “I, Naphta, have fallen in love—with you, Diedrich. That is why these Eyes are clouded.”

Diedrich blinked in surprise.

“But I must apologize for something first,” she continued.

A look of uncertainty crossed his face. “What for...?”

“The Eyes of the Goddess of the Future are absolutely essential to Agatha—and to you, as the Sword Emperor. Eyes that have fallen in love are of no use to a king who must rule his kingdom.”

“Oh... Is that all?” Diedrich exhaled in relief.

Naphta shot him a questioning look. “Is it that trivial of a matter?”

“Indeed so. The more important matter at hand right now is—am I dreaming?”

He drew closer to Naphta, beaming from ear to ear.

“I, Naphta, have a question to ask. By dreaming, do you mean this situation is like a dream to you?”

“Of course.”

Diedrich grabbed her in a hug. “This is the future I wanted. I’ve dreamed of this future for a long, long time.”

Naphta placed her hand on top of the arms holding her in a tight embrace, face softening with happiness.

“What is there to apologize for?” Diedrich asked. “Naphta, you said it yourself. If your Eyes have lost sight of the future, that means the future is constantly changing. Just like with doomsday, the future of darkness has disappeared and is now replaced with hope.”

By falling in love, Naphta obtained the emotions of love and kindness. As the Goddess of the Future, those emotions must have affected her order. That was most likely what Diedrich was thinking, anyway.

“Your Eyes haven’t stopped seeing the future, the future is just overflowing with hope now,” Diedrich. “Its open-ended shape is constantly changing at a speed faster than your Divine Eyes can see.”

“Do you believe that will lead to a better future too?”

“Your love has overflowed into the future. That couldn’t possibly be a bad thing.”

Naphta nodded, relieved.

“Naphta,” Diedrich said. His tone was hearty, as he usually was, and more notably, loving. “Will you continue to stay by my side, as Agatha’s queen?”

She nodded. “I, Naphta, request a pledge.”

“I will pledge whatever you wish.”

From within Diedrich’s embrace, Naphta reached out a hand and touched his eyelids.

“I, Naphta, wish to walk the path you walk and see the things you see. I wish to share my Divine Eyes with your physical eyes. By doing so you will be able to see a tiny bit of the future, and I will be able to see the past.”

As the Goddess of the Future, Naphta was unable to recall the past. If she had Diedrich’s physical eyes, she would be able to maintain those memories.

“That sounds great,” Diedrich replied.

Naphta curled her hand around his neck. Diedrich pulled her even closer to him, quietly closing the distance between them.

“Do you vow to share your future with me, and my future with yourself?” Naphta asked.

“I do. I will walk this path to the future with you until the end.”

“An unbreakable oath has formed between draconid and god. In the name of the Goddess of the Future, I sentence you to a vow of matrimony.”

Blue light radiated from Naphta’s right Eye, and Diedrich’s right eye glowed crimson in response. They shifted their heads so their right eyes could touch.

Then, Diedrich and Naphta slowly drew apart. Diedrich’s right eye glowed blue, while Naphta’s eye had been replaced with Diedrich’s physical one. They had swapped eyes.

Diedrich looked into the future with his Eye and said, “You were right about how the future can barely be seen... But instead, I can see hope.”

“I can see it too. A future of hope.”

The Sword Emperor leaned forward to peer into Naphta’s Eye.

“Now that we’re seeing the same thing, there’s one thing I’d like to confirm,” he said.

Naphta blinked blankly for a brief moment, then nodded. Their faces drew closer once again, gazes blending at the close proximity. They then proceeded

to kiss quietly, the stars in the sky twinkling as though to bless them.

“I’m so happy for them,” the drunk girl beside me said with a dreamy look. “Diedrich and Naphta have tied the knot. What a happy ending! Right, Misha?”

Misha nodded. “A happily ever after.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Sasha said in realization. She stumbled over to me. “You should do that with me too, Anos.”

“Do what?” I said.

“*That*,” Sasha replied. “I sentence you to a vow of matrimony. Hah!”

She reached for my eyes with her right hand.

“This drunkard,” I sighed, sending power to my eyes to reflect her finger.

“Oww,” Sasha groaned. “Ugh, Anos is a meanie. My finger got jammed!”

“That’s what you get for sticking your finger in my eyes,” I said.

Misha rubbed Sasha’s sore index finger for her.

“But now that I think about it, we’ve already made the vow,” Sasha said, pointing at her Magic Eyes. “Just look at my Eyes.”

She was speaking nonsense again.

“It’s the opposite way around. You’re *my* descendant,” I said.

“Ugh... Misha, Anos is being mean to me. I gave him my Eyes, but he’s claiming he had them from the beginning.”

Sasha clung to Misha and whined. Misha patted her head and turned to me.

“Be nice to her,” Misha said.

Very well.

“Fine,” I said. “Sasha, I’m most grateful to be using your Eyes.”

“Watching Diedrich and Naphta reminded me of something,” Sasha said. She wasn’t listening to me at all.

“Anos once kissed me in the past!” Sasha declared.

That was also the other way around, but there was no use arguing with her

right now.

“That brings back memories,” I said.

“It was two thousand years ago,” Sasha said. She hadn’t even been born back then.

She hadn’t been born back then.

No... Wait. Aisha wasn’t the Goddess of Absurdity, so it was still possible that Sasha and Misha knew me two thousand years ago. That, or— “Say, Anos. I’ve suddenly realized something,” Sasha said. “I think.”

“What?”

“I feel sick.”

She was just drunk.

“Shall I detoxify you?” I offered.

“No! I’m not drunk.”

What did she consider drunk, then?

“I’ll bring you somewhere you can lie down. Can you walk?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” she said, immediately tripping over her own feet and slamming face-first into the ground. “Ugh... The ground avoided my foot...”

“It can’t be helped then,” I said.

I used Fless to lift her body up and held her in a bridal carry.

“This should do.”

I started walking. Misha followed beside me, silent.

“Say, Anos,” Sasha said.

“What now?” I replied.

“What indeed?”

How was I meant to know?

“Hey, Misha? Do you remember the thing—the thing I thought about asking Anos?”

Misha blinked blankly a few times, then thought to herself. But it seemed nothing came to her mind.

“Did you tell me?” she asked.

“I did not,” Sasha answered.

There was no way she could have known.

“But maybe you’d know anyway,” Sasha continued.

Unreasonable.

“What was it? Can you remember?” Sasha asked.

“I can’t,” Misha said.

“Try harder,” Sasha said, pushing.

“I’m trying...”

I walked back into Delsgade and down the corridor while listening to their idle chatter. The sounds of people enjoying the banquet could be heard across the castle.

The people of Agatha, Jiordal, Gadeciola, and of course, Dilhade, were all sharing the same space and enjoying themselves. It had been quite a busy few weeks, but hearing all these laughing voices made it all worth it.

“Oh, that’s right. Say, Anos,” Sasha said, as though she had just recalled something else.

“What?”

“Is the world at peace now?”

I smiled faintly.

“More than two thousand years ago, at least.”

The End

Afterword

Volume 7 was the Agatha Prophecy arc, a tale of a god with future sight, her partner, the prophet, and the knights that serve that partner.

The power of future sight sounds extremely convenient, but in my opinion, using such a power comes with many drawbacks.

Being able to see the future means you'll be able to see unavoidable misfortunes. Living in fear of that future would prevent you from enjoying the present.

At the same time, being able to see the future means you won't be able to enjoy anything good that happens, since you'll know it'll happen in advance.

When it comes to sports and games, winning a match is generally something to find enjoyable. But can you really enjoy that from the bottom of your heart if you know what the outcome will be? The value of being the best athlete is in how difficult it is to get there. Matches with visible outcomes would be as boring as a professional team playing against preschoolers.

Future sight is like preestablished harmony; knowing what happens when and who says what would be like playing a game you've cleared once already. In my opinion, it would make the world feel like an artificial product made by someone else.

There may be times when you think something would have gone better if you knew the future, but if you could see everything, perfection would be the norm and success would have no value. All that would be left is despair with no hope. That sounds rather terrible to me.

What would someone seek if they could see every future? I tried to answer that through Diedrich, the prophet who appears in this volume. I hope you enjoyed his way of life and the conclusion it brought.

The wonderful illustrations in this volume were once again drawn by Shizumayoshinori. Misha's lap pillow scene was a fan favorite before, and I'm

delighted to see it illustrated.

As always, Editor Yoshioka has also been a great help this time. Thank you for all your assistance despite your busy schedule.

Finally, I'd like to thank all the readers of this series from the bottom of my heart. Next volume, one of the great mysteries regarding Anos will be revealed. I'll do my best revising the text, so please look forward to it!

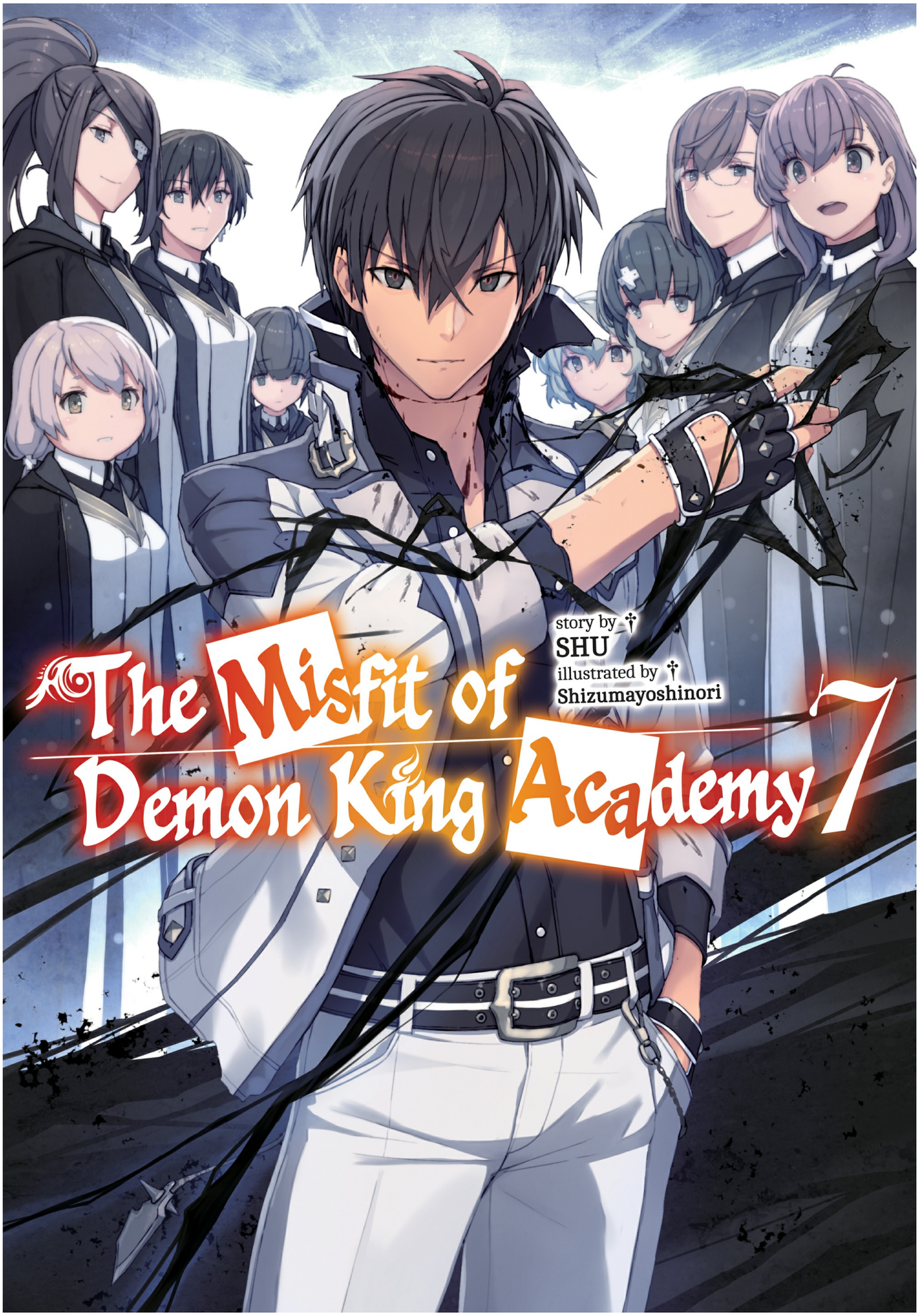
SHU

11 May 2020

story by
SHU
illustrated by
Shizumayoshinori
The Misfit of Demon King Academy
7

Eleonore Bianca
One of Anos's motherly and caring subordinates.
"Just because you're Anos's little sister doesn't mean you can sleep with him and give him good-night k-k-kisses!"
"If you want to be his little sister, you can become my little sister."
Arcana
One of the eight gods holding the Selection Trial. Her true identity is the blasphemous god once called the Goddess of Absurdity.
Zeshia Bianca
The youngest of the ten thousand Zeshias born from Eleonore.
Sasha Necron
Misha's somewhat pushy but caring older twin sister.

"Do as you wish."
"Can I touch you deeper?"
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.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Eleonore Bianca
One of Anos's motherly and caring subordinates.
"Just because you're Anos's little sister doesn't mean you can sleep with him and give him good-night k-k-kisses!"
"If you want to be his little sister, you can become my little sister."
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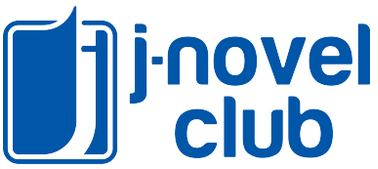

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The Misfit of Demon King Academy: Volume 7

by SHU

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Edited by Dan-Tran Cong-Huyen

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