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Yu Shimizu

ILLUSTRATION

Asagi Tohsaka

The DEMON SWORD MASTER of Excalibur Academy



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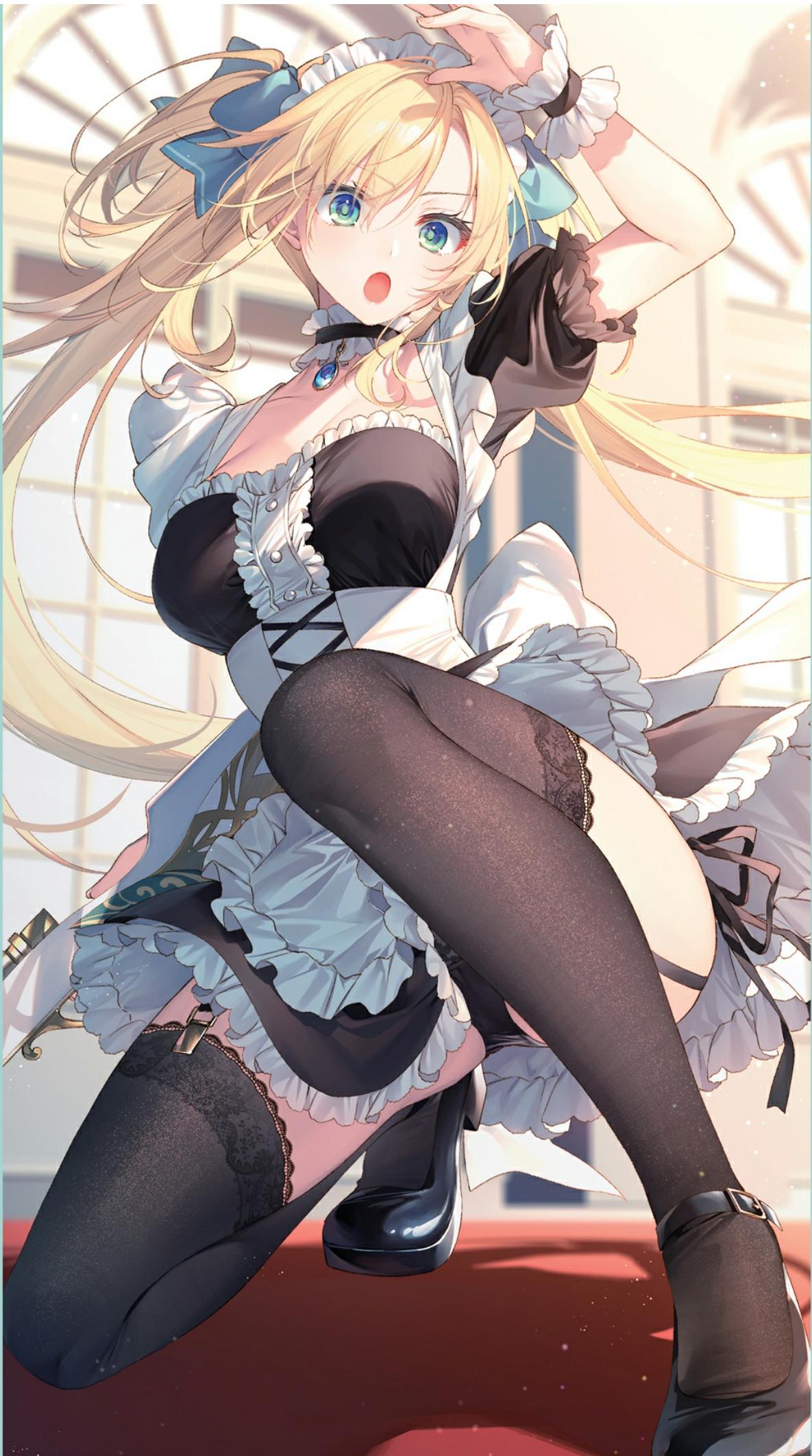
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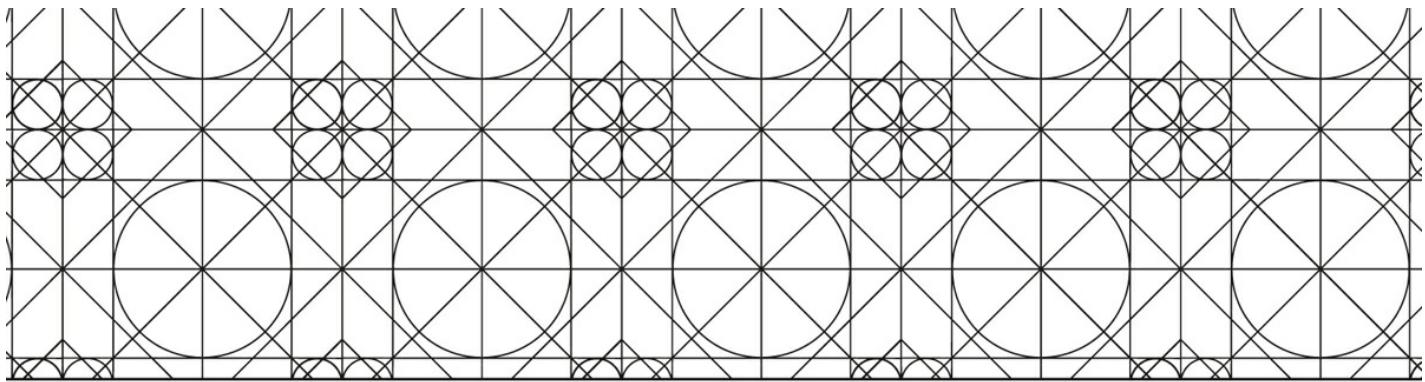
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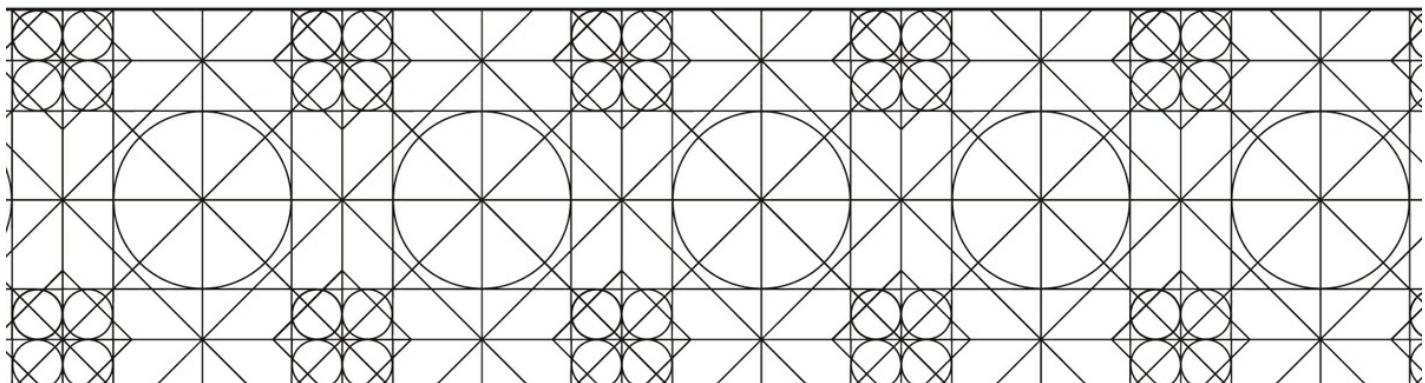


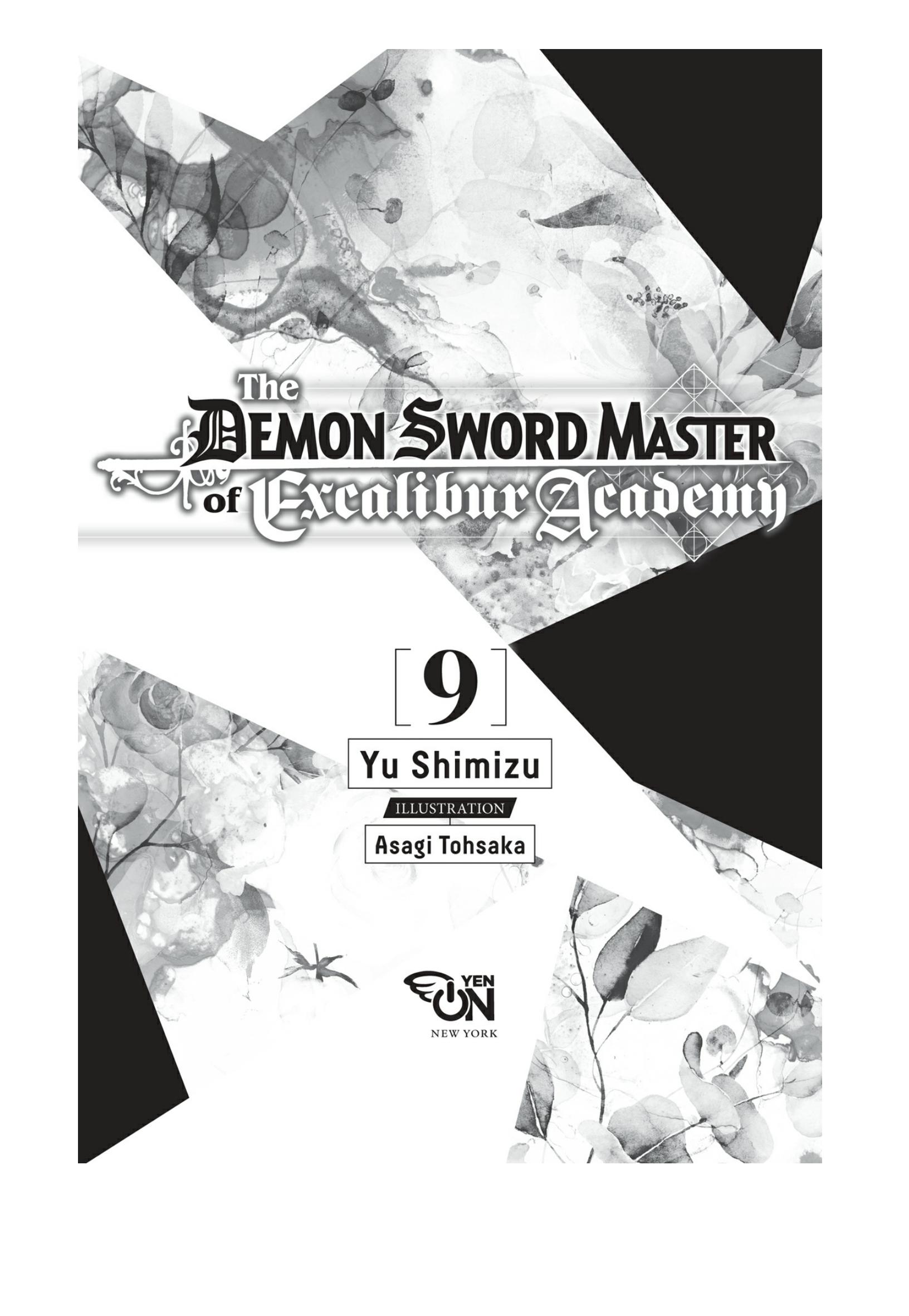


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The **DEMON SWORD MASTER** of Excalibur Academy

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ON
NEW YORK

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CHAPTER 1

THE EVERDARK QUEEN

In the midst of raging winds, Leonis parted his lips while holding Riselia tightly in his arms.

“I’m sorry I kept you waiting, Miss Selia.”

“L-Leo...?” Riselia blinked her ice-blue eyes in disbelief.

Her body wasn’t heavy for him, but the arms of a ten-year-old couldn’t maintain a balanced grip on her.

“...!”

Still, Leonis gritted his teeth and fought to maintain his composure. After making such a dramatic entrance, acting like Riselia was too much for him would tarnish his dignity as a Dark Lord.

“...Is it really you, Leo? The real Leo?” Riselia gently touched Leonis’s cheek with a finger.

“It’s the real me, yes. You can be sure of that,” Leonis said with a strained smile as he peered down.

A destructive storm raged over the Eighth Assault Garden’s plaza. Its buildings had been reduced to ruins, and an unsightly monstrosity roamed about—a large spider-shaped Void.

Hmph, is that the Void lord? I suppose it’s sturdier than the rest...

Despite being hit directly by Leonis’s Di Farga spell, it wasn’t blown to bits. However, it wasn’t entirely unharmed. Half of its legs had been torn off, and its body was partially destroyed. Leonis descended to the ground, still holding Riselia.

“I’m putting you down, Miss Selia.”

“O-okay...” His minion bobbed her head diffidently, and he lay her down on

the rubble.

Leonis noticed that her smooth skin was laced with burns and lacerations.

“...?!”

Riselia was a Vampire Queen, the highest form of undead. Simple wounds would normally heal because of her mana, but Riselia was completely out of usable power. The magic combat form of the True Ancestor’s Dress didn’t produce endless amounts of mana; it optimized all of the wearer’s magical power for battle. Thus, none of her strength was relegated to healing.

“You have tarnished my minion,” Leonis whispered as he turned around.

Anger was seeping ever so slightly from his ten-year-old body... Upon seeing this, the Void Lord froze.

“Wh-who are you?!”

“Ooh. You’re actually capable of speech, you mere monster...,” Leonis sneered, and took the Staff of Sealed Sins out of his shadow. “Then let’s see. Can you feel terror?”

But as soon as he said that...

“Ahhh... Ahhh... Ahhhhh...”

The Void Lord’s remaining legs trembled.

“N-no... It can’t be. That staff, it’s... That’s impossible.”

“You have injured my minion—and for that, you will be slain a thousand times over.”

Leonis raised the Staff of Sealed Sins overhead and produced a giant bright red fireball at its tip. An eighth-order fire spell—the Grand Annihilation Fireball, Al Gu Belzelga.

“How can a mere brat like you wield *his* sorcery?!”

The Void Lord parted its giant jaws and unleashed a crimson blast at Leonis, but the attack was easily swallowed up by the blazing fireball.

Whooooosh!

And so, the ninth apostle, Iris Void Priestess, was wiped off the face of the world.

“Behold the might of a true Dark Lord’s sorcery. Relish this parting gift as the underworld claims you.”

It seemed the Void Lord uttered something before screaming out in its death throes, but Leonis had no reason to listen to anything it said. He batted his uniform trousers, dusting them off, and turned around. And that’s when...

“Leo!”

...something soft squished against his face.

“M-Miss Selia...?!” Leonis squeaked out, his face buried in her cleavage.

Riselia seemed intent on tightly embracing his head.

“Leo, you’re alive... Oh, thank goodness!”

“E-erm, Miss Selia...can’t...breathe...,” Leonis croaked into her chest.

“Ah! Sorry!” She released him hurriedly.

Leonis bowed his head apologetically. “I’m sorry I didn’t make it back in time like I promised.”

“Don’t be. I’m just glad you’re back now.” Riselia shook her head.

“All that said, I don’t quite understand what happened here. What about the Holy Sword Dance Festival?” Leonis asked after clearing his throat.



He'd received Shary's report, but having just returned, he didn't have a full grasp on the situation yet.

"A Void outbreak alarm started halfway through the match. I tried to head back to Camelot with Regina and Princess Chatres, but—" Riselia doubled over.

"Miss Selia?!" Leonis caught her by the shoulders.

She was terribly cold to the touch.

Mana exhaustion.

Riselia must have mistakenly thought the True Ancestor's Dress provided her with an endless reserve of energy and overextended herself using sorcery.

"H-huh...?" Riselia stared at him in an exhausted stupor.

"You have fought hard, and that warrants a reward. Drink all you'd like, my minion." Leonis cradled her back and brought his index finger to her lips.

"M-mm..." Riselia nodded weakly and bit down on Leonis's finger.

She bashfully sucked on Leonis's blood, and he grimaced despite himself at the sweet throb of numbing pain.

"That said, don't drain too much, or I might run out," he whispered with a wry smile as he watched the clouded sky.

Far above was a gaping hole torn into the sky. It was clearly different from the cracks Voids had emerged from thus far. And Leonis clearly saw what lay on the other side of that cleft.

A crimson red sky, the color of blood. Leonis knew it well.

It was the sky of the realm he the Dragon Lord and the Lords of the Seas were sent to when Azra-Ael used the Azure Hold's dimensional travel abilities.

"Do the Voids really originate from that world?" Leonis whispered to himself.

Brrrrrrrrrrrr!

The Eighth Assault Garden's ground shook ever so slightly.

What?

Leonis faced the source of the sound, only to be greeted with the surrealistic

sight of something soaring through the air in the distance and mowing down structures like they were building blocks. He spotted a thirty-meter-tall, giant-class Void—but that wasn’t the source of the destruction. No, the one wreaking havoc was one petite girl, clad in a dark mantle and haphazardly swinging about an Executioner’s Sword.

I see she’s already running amok. Not that I’m surprised...

It was his third minion, Rakshasa Nightmare, the Everdark Queen, an afterlife devil Leonis had sealed one thousand years ago. As a desperate measure against the Void attack, Leonis had ordered Shary to unleash her. But if Rakshasa was left unchecked, she could reduce the Eighth Assault Garden to dust.

“Miss Selia, I’m sorry... If you drink any more of my blood...”

“O-oh, I’m sorry!” Riselia hurriedly released Leonis’s finger from her mouth and pulled away from him. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, if a bit dizzy...” Leonis got to his unsteady feet and pointed at the giant Void rampaging in the distance. “I’m going to stop that thing.”

“All on your own?!”

“Yes. This is beyond a unit of Holy Swordsmen.”

Even if such a group used team tactics to dispatch the massive Void, they’d be helpless against Rakshasa.

“Well, I know you’re strong, Leo, but...” Riselia’s ice-blue eyes wavered for a moment before she ultimately nodded. “All right. Leo, you handle the Void. I’ll link up with Regina.”

“Miss Regina is here, too?”

“Yes,” Riselia replied, looking concerned. “She’s trying to evacuate while helping Princess Chatres, who’s injured.”

While Regina was proficient with artillery and rifles, her Holy Sword was ill equipped for handling group combat. If she were surrounded while carrying an injured person, she’d be helpless.

“Very well. Just don’t do anything dangerous.”

“Okay!”

Riselia got to her feet and gripped the Bloody Sword. The pure white True Ancestor’s Dress scattered into motes of light, restoring her school uniform. After watching Riselia run off, Leonis faced his goal.

The giant-class Void and the Everdark Queen rampaged while more Voids emerged from the tear in the sky.

“My word. I’ll have no choice but to resort to conspicuous means.”

After shrugging indifferently, Leonis produced a skull-shaped Dark Lord mask and donned it.



“Oh, damn it all, why do they keep showing up?!”

Regina shot down wasp-class Voids as she shielded a limp, wounded Chatres.

The Drag Striker was incredibly accurate, but it wasn’t suited for barrage firing. On her own, Regina wasn’t capable of handling the endless swarm of Voids spilling out of the tear in space.

“Mikagami-style swordsmanship—Thunderclap!”

A slash crackling with electricity cut down several wasp-class Voids at once. Sakuya dashed into view, and spheres of plasma popped in the air. With every billow of her white Sakura Orchid garb, the Void swarm shrank.

“Miss Regina, if I miss anyone, shoot them down!”

“You got it!”

Any Voids that evaded Sakuya’s blade were dispatched by Regina’s rifle.

“...Is that Sakuya Sieglinde?” Chatres whispered, sprawled out on the rubble.

Even though she’d been treated with a first aid kit, blood yet seeped into her bandages.

“You actually memorized the names of all the enemy team members, Lady Chatres?” Regina said as she felled an approaching Void.

“Honestly, of all of Excalibur Academy’s team members, she’s the one I was wary of the most. I once saw a Sakura Orchid mercenary group in battle, and

those Holy Swordsmen were each a one-man army on their own.”

“Do you think you’re stronger than her, Lady Chatres?”

“Who knows? There’s always the matter of compatibility when it comes to Holy Swords. But that girl... She’s much stronger than research suggested. Her movements are entirely unlike what I’ve seen.”

“In normal training matches, Sakuya only exhibits about half of her true prowess,” Regina explained with a strained smile. The topic of discussion cleaved through Voids with help from Regina’s covering fire.

“I’ve heard the Sakura Orchid refugees feed on their hatred for the Voids for power, but... Ngh...”

Regina glanced back at Chatres. “You don’t have to force yourself to talk.”

Beads of greasy sweat dripped down the princess’s forehead. Perhaps she spoke to keep her mind off the pain, or maybe...

She’s doing it to keep me from worrying.

Suddenly, the fractures running through the space around the girls widened.

Crack, crack, crack, crack!

“Sakuya, watch out! There’s something coming!”

“?!”

Sakuya hopped back cautiously, cutting down more wasp-class Voids as she did. She kept Raikirimaru raised to protect Regina and Chatres behind her.

“Miss Regina, it’s a big one.”

Crack, crack, crack, crack!

As the breaks in space widened, thick miasma poured from them.

“■■■■■■■■...!”

A gigantic, eight-headed Void emerged, tearing into reality.

“Is that...a hydra class?!” Regina’s green eyes widened in disbelief.



Fwooooosh!

Rakshasa Nightmare's Executioner's Sword sped through the air, annihilating a laminated building, which collapsed upon a gigantic monster that had appeared from a tear in space.

"Just what are these unsightly monsters?"

The Everdark Queen, her visage that of a cherubic girl, peered down with merciless eyes. The world held no shortage of despicable creatures, of course, but the entities emerging from ruptures in reality were unlike anything she'd seen. They elicited such primordial disgust that they seemed a desecration and denial of everything that made up the world. Such beings had never existed in her era, be it within her domain, the Land of Demise, or without.

"■■■■■■■■■■...!"

The giant-class Void howled as it slowly rose again.

"You're quite durable."

Rakshasa's Executioner's Sword was a high-grade magical weapon that inflicted all living things with a curse of death, yet that power didn't seem to affect her foe at all.

"It must be some undead minion of his creation."

After settling upon that conclusion, Rakshasa furrowed her brow in displeasure. This was surely some minion crafted by that despicable Undead King. As the undead were already deceased, they weren't affected by the Everdark Queen's curse of death. These monsters being the Undead King's handiwork explained her aversion to them.

"Leonis. Leonis Death Magnus." Rakshasa uttered the name hatefully as she landed on the rubble.

The arrogant, cowardly Dark Lord who stole her realm. Why had he released her from the seal and unleashed these filthy abominations on her?

Is he testing his minions' powers against me?

The giant-class Void howled and charged Rakshasa, who angrily brandished her sword at it. The blade produced a shock wave of mana that crushed the monster's head like a pomegranate.

“Show yourself, Undead King! You’re watching this and mocking me, are you not?!”

With a flap of her night-colored dress, Rakshasa unleashed a torrent of dark flame that burned down the wasp-class Voids around her. However, the tear in space above grew ever wider, with more and more giant-class Voids emerging from it.

“I see... So you insist on hiding from me, Undead King,” Rakshasa whispered, her eyes burning with fury. “If that’s the case...”

Bwoooooosh!

An intense storm of mana blew from her, crushing the Voids.

“...I need only make sure there are no shadows for you to hide in.”

“—Are you planning to blow away this entire area, Everdark Queen?” a voice called from overhead.

"?!" Rakshasa reflexively spun around. The whirling mana dissipated, clearing away the dust blowing through the air.

“I care little if you want to destroy a human city, but this place is destined to eventually become my domain.”

A figure clad in a dark mantle gazed down at Rakshasa. The tall man wore a skull-shaped mask.

Rakshasa's dark-colored eyes widened. "You!"

The silhouette flourished his cape as he spoke.

“I am the true ruler of this world, the Dark Lord who has risen from times most ancient—Zol Vadis!”



The eight deformed snakelike heads cried out at once.

“A hydra class?!” Regina heard Chatres groan behind her.

Even someone with as much frontline experience as Chatres rarely encountered this type of Void.

Besides, this isn't a Hive on the front lines; this is a city.

Regina held up her Drag Striker while cold sweat gathered on her. She had fought a hydra class once before. Four months ago, during the Stampede in the Seventh Assault Garden, she'd run into a Void of this classification.

Vrrrrrrrr!

The hydra's gigantic form pushed its way through the tear, widening it as it did. Its eight heads had clearly locked on to the girls.

"Tch... Sakuya, do you think we can get away?"

According to Excalibur Academy mission protocol, slaying a hydra-class Void required at least two platoons of trained Holy Swordsmen. The two of them facing an enemy of this caliber was reckless.

"I might be able to escape on my own," Sakuya replied, shaking her head. "But not while carrying the princess."

Regina shrugged with a sardonic smile. "Yeah, figures."

"Regina Mercedes, just leave me behind," Chatres told her.

"Yes, yes. Princess, would you please keep your mouth shut for now?"

"What?!" Chatres exclaimed from behind Regina. She clearly wasn't accustomed to being spoken to like this.

"I told you I'd protect you," Regina whispered, her expression resolute. She took a step forward, her twintails trailing in the wind. "Sakuya, can I count on you to be vanguard?"

"Yes. Leave it to me!"

With Raikirimaru in hand, Sakuya slashed at the hydra. And as she did...

"Holy Sword, Mode Shift—Dragon Slayer!"

...Regina transformed the Drag Striker into its anti-Void annihilation mode, a large artillery cannon.

"I'm going to fire a big one, Sakuya! Dodge it!"

Sakuya hopped away, running along the wall of a nearby building.

“Eat thiiiiiiiiis!”

Booooooom!

A blinding flash erupted and the hydra’s massive body was enveloped in an explosion. A deafening rumble soon followed, shaking the air. Fragments of rubble scattered around. But when the smoke cleared...

“?!”

The hydra-class Void’s silhouette emerged from the dust. A few of the scales on its body were torn off, but it hadn’t taken any damage.

The Dragon Slayer is capable of defeating ogre-class Voids. But all a direct hit could manage against this thing was to blow off a few scales...

Regina gritted her teeth in frustration. Her strongest attack, Drag Blast, could penetrate the hydra class’s scales, but charging it took some time, during which she would have to remain fixed in place. That made it ineffective against mobile targets.

One of the Void’s eight heads reared up at Regina and parted its jaws, light gathering in its mouth.

“Hahhhh! Mikagami-style swordsmanship—Thundering Lightning Slash!”

The hydra’s head soared through the air. Sakuya’s white Sakura Orchid garb billowed elegantly and her blade glinted.

Thud!

The severed head struck the ground and bounced before the heat ray in its mouth ruptured, blowing it to bits.

“That’s one head down—”

Having landed on the hydra class’s back, Sakuya lopped off another head. The hydra class howled, thrashing as it bashed its massive body into a building, trying to crush Sakuya. The structure crumbled with a loud tremor, but Sakuya leaped off the Void’s back, driving her sword into the exposed flesh revealed by its broken scales. She then poured her Holy Sword’s electricity into the tip of the sword, producing a pale electrical discharge that ran through the beast.

However, the electricity that fried the wasp-class Voids in the flash of an eye was successful at making the hydra class spasm only momentarily. The hydra spun its remaining heads around, sweeping them at its attacker like they were whips.

Sakuya jumped back, Raikirimaru ever ready. Even a single hit from the hydra class's heads would tear her slender body apart.

"Sakuya!" Regina called out in surprise, alarmed by her friend's reckless fighting style.

She was doing a good job maneuvering around the hydra class, but whenever Sakuya seriously wielded Raikirimaru, Regina's eyes couldn't follow its movements.

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!

The hydra-class Void's six heads attacked her simultaneously, only for Sakuya to dodge by the skin of her teeth. Her footwork lacked its usual gracefulness. And that's when it dawned on Regina.

Is she blind in her left eye?

It felt like Sakuya's reactions were slightly sluggish when it came to attacks from her left.

Did she fight something on the way here?

Communication had been lost with Sakuya halfway through the Holy Sword Dance Festival...

"Sakuya, fall back! I'm firing another one!" Regina called out, raising the Dragon Slayer.

Sakuya made to leap away, but...

Hissssssssssss!

...a severed hydra head instantly regenerated and lunged at Sakuya. It was an attack coming at Sakuya from her left. She wouldn't react in time.

Yet to Regina's surprise, the hydra head was destroyed. A crimson stroke, as pliant as a lash, had ripped through it.

“I’m here, Regina!” announced a familiar voice.

“Lady Selia?!” Regina’s eyes widened in disbelief.

A silver-haired girl hurried over, a Holy Sword with a crimson blade in her grip. She jumped lithely and soared through the air like she had wings. She thrust her blade into the gap in the hydra’s scales and loosed her Holy Sword’s power.

“My blade of blood, dance aflutter—Bloody Petal Dance!”

A spiral of scarlet blades tore through the Void’s insides.

“Grohhhhhh...!”

The hydra howled in agony, thrashing its remaining heads around. Riselia withdrew her Holy Sword and landed beside Sakuya.

“I owe you one, Miss Selia.”

“Sakuya, Regina, let’s rush it!” Riselia glared at the hydra-class Void, her Bloody Sword clenched tight.

“Lady Selia, don’t do anything reckless!” Regina implored her.

“Hyahhhh!” Riselia dashed forward, summoning blades of blood that coiled around the hydra’s necks.

“Grohhhhhh...!”

The hydra writhed, trying to shake the blades off, but...

“I won’t let you do that.”

...Sakuya cut through the hydra’s necks in a streak of lightning.

“Regina, shoot the necks’ cross section!” Riselia shouted as she and Sakuya both jumped away.

“Right! Get blasteeeeeee!” Regina fired the Dragon Slayer.

Boooooom!

An explosion of blinding firepower swallowed the Void’s gigantic form.



“The Dark Lord Zol Vadis?”

The devil in Shary's form looked up at the figure hovering above her, her fair brows furrowing.

"Indeed. I am the Dark Lord who has risen again to govern over this wo—
Whoa!"

Whoosh!

Without any warning, Rakshasa brought her sword down, producing a blade of mana that skimmed past Leonis's side. He heard a building crumble behind him.

"Wh-what's your problem?!" Leonis called out, alarmed behind his skull mask.

If that attack had connected, it would have split his fragile ten-year-old body in half.

"I see. So even after all this time, you rely on petty tricks."

"What?"

Intense mana gathered around Rakshasa. Her dark eyes burned with hatred as she glared up at Leonis with a gaze that seemed to stab into him.

"You think that absurd mask can fool me?!" Her shoulders trembled, and the scattered fragments of rubble around her rose into the air. "As if I would ever forget?! Your voice, your scent, your name!"

Not good! Rua Meires!

Overcome with a grim foreboding, Leonis instantly invoked a nonverbal defensive spell.

"Undead King! Leonis Death Magnus!" Rakshasa howled, and then...

Vrnnnnnnnn!

...a wave of powerful mana expanded in a radial pattern.

"...!"

When the smoke cleared and Leonis opened his eyes, he found that in place of the Eighth Assault Garden's high-rise buildings, there was nothing but a gaping crater.

Nng, I suppose I should not have pushed my luck.

The intense mana washing over Leonis completely stripped away Zol Vadis's illusory mantle, exposing Leonis's ten-year-old body. He couldn't fool the Everdark Queen, Rakshasa Nightmare. She had reigned over the prosperous Land of Demise deep within the Terminus Mountain Range.

An ally to neither the Dark Lords' Armies nor the Luminous Powers, she'd warred with Leonis for the title of Undead King. Eventually, Leonis was able to seize the Land of Demise using his army, but since she was an immortal being, he couldn't fully destroy her. Instead, he elected to seal her soul away.

Rakshasa was a high-ranking devil, making her a powerful combat asset. But since she always sought to claim Leonis's life at every opportunity, there were very limited times he could introduce her to the battlefield. However, now that Leonis had lost many of his subordinates, she was a precious and powerful trump card.

I'm glad I had the foresight to keep her shackled to some extent.

Shrugging, Leonis landed in the ruins of a half-destroyed building.

"Hmph. I thought you'd have settled down after a thousand years' slumber."

"Undead King, you have the gall to present yourself to me as a child?" Rakshasa leveled the tip of her Executioner's Sword at him. "Even back then, you resorted to such means...to toy with my heart!"

With an enraged scream, Rakshasa leaped at him, closing the distance in a single bound.

"...!"

Screeeeech!

Leonis blocked the slash with the Staff of Sealed Sins.

"Wait! What are you doing?!" he asked.

"Kill you! Kill you, kill you, kill you, kill yooooou!"

Her darkness-colored eyes burned with furious fire as she hammered him with her sword repeatedly. Any normal staff would have split in half by now.

The only reason Leonis's held was because Dáinsleif was sealed within it.



This is bad!

Leonis clicked his tongue. Each time he blocked, his strength waned. The Everdark Queen's Executioner's Sword absorbed power.

When Leonis was the Undead King, he had full resistance to this ability, but in the body of a living human, his mana waned with every strike. He did his best to resist, but at this rate, it wouldn't be long until Rakshasa sapped his life force, too.

"Ragze Veirez!" Leonis chanted as he deflected the blade that swung down at him.

Vrooom!

A gravity field formed in the air between the two, propelling Leonis and Rakshasa in opposite directions. Leonis held up his staff and fired a flurry of third-order spells to keep her in check.

"Farga! Farga! Farga!"

Yet as the explosions hammered her...

"You would use such spells against me?!"

...Rakshasa swept her sword horizontally, deflecting a fireball that went on to hit a wasp-class Void, disintegrating it.

Spells of this level will get me nowhere, Leonis thought as he jumped back to put more distance between himself and Rakshasa. For now, I'll have to stall for time!

Crack, crack, crack...!

A fissure formed in the space around Rakshasa.

"■■■■■■■■■...!"

A hydra-class Void erupted from the crack, tearing through space as it did.

"Out of my way!" Rakshasa shouted in annoyance, bringing down her sword and easily cleaving the gigantic Void in half. "Are these your undead minions? You think this will be enough to buy time against me?"

"Hmph. Perhaps you won't be so high and mighty once I've gathered a sufficiently large army," Leonis said with an exaggerated gesture. "Come forth, my minions, and claim the Everdark Queen's head!"

And as if in response to Leonis's voice...

Thud!

...three giant-class Voids descended from the large crack in the sky.

"Try defeating my minions. We can duel after that."

"You underestimate me if you think these weaklings stand a chance!"

Rakshasa began fighting the giant-class Voids under the mistaken impression that they were Leonis's servants. Leonis sneered as he seized upon this opportunity to get away. He'd been fortunate to notice those Voids emerging and timed his performance accordingly.

That said, it's the first time I've seen Voids of that type.

These six-armed giants easily stood over thirty meltes tall.

They do resemble that race of servants of the fallen gods, the Hecatoncheires.

Even Rakshasa would struggle somewhat against those giants. Leonis didn't know how vast the Imperial Capital's forces were, but humans weren't likely to triumph against so many of those Voids.

After gaining enough distance, Leonis stopped in his tracks.

"Forgive me, Shary. I may have to get a bit rough this time." Leonis raised the Staff of Sealed Sins and chanted a high-order attack spell.

"Tactical-class eighth-order sorcery—Vira Zuo!"

Vrnnnnnn!

A sphere of gravity formed in the air, enveloping the nearby Voids and Rakshasa. Buildings collapsed, kicking up a thick cloud of dust. Leonis didn't think this would be enough to incapacitate that devil, but it would earn him a little more time.

Leonis checked his terminal. The useful magical apparatus was capable of accurately measuring time. Shary had unleashed Rakshasa over five minutes

ago.

The time should be right.

An aura of darkness appeared from within the dust cloud hanging in the air.

“Your precious minions have been defeated, Undead King.” Rakshasa rose to her feet slowly, glaring at Leonis with eyes alight with rage.

“Very well. Then let us fight as you so desire!” Leonis held up the Staff of Sealed Sins. “Guard me, my loyal servants!”

Leonis summoned an army of skeletons from the Realm of Shadows.

“Coward. Did you not say this would be a duel?”

“These skeletal warriors are a part of me.”

“Nonsense!” Rakshasa bolted at Leonis with blinding speed, brandishing the Executioner’s Sword.

And as the devil closed in, she batted away skeletons in her path.

“Your head is mine, Undead King!”

The blade of the Executioner’s Sword thrust into Leonis’s neck.

However...

“What?!” Rakshasa’s eyes widened in shock.

A moment before her attack connected, her blade stopped.

“What...is this?”

The Everdark Queen was utterly frozen in place, standing with her weapon held out. For she was no longer Rakshasa Nightmare.

“Your time is up.” Leonis shook his head, stuffing his terminal back into his uniform pocket. “Too bad, Everdark Queen.”

“Wh-what did...you...?!”

“You were already growing sluggish when you slashed at me. I’m sure you were happy to finally be free, but I did take measures to restrain you in case you went out of control.”

The Everdark Queen's freedom was limited. A stage three release lasted eight hundred seconds—roughly thirteen minutes.

"Leonis... Leooooooooonis!" Rakshasa howled in wrath, but her body remained immobile.

Shary, whose body Rakshasa was using, forbade the demon from hurting Leonis.

"Rakshasa, you proved useful this time. May you sleep soundly..."

"Curse you, curse you, curse you a thousand times over, curse youuuuuu!"

Leonis gently touched her head, and the dark-colored mantle melted away, reverting into Shary's maid's uniform.

"Ah, my...lord."

"You did well, Shary. Rest for now." Leonis gently placed Shary on the ground, and her body sank into Leonis's shadow.

"Phew..." Leonis sighed in relief. "Things turned out fine, one way or another."

The tear in space still hung in the sky, but there was no sign of any gigantic Voids appearing. Even so, flying Voids were still emerging.

"I should help clean this up," Leonis whispered, donning Zol Vadis's mask again.



"Lady Selia, the capital's reinforcements should be arriving soon."

"All right. I'll go patrol the area, then." Riselia nodded and jogged down a rubble-covered alley.

"Be careful, Lady Selia!"

After stowing her terminal in a pocket of her uniform, Regina let out a sigh. Communications were recovering, which meant the Void offensive was weakening. She turned and knelt next to Chatres, who was still seated on the rubble. The capital's military units always included at least one Holy Swordsman with healing powers. With a top-class medic, Chatres's wounds could be

mended in no time.

“You’ll be fine, Your Highness.”

“Yes. I’m sorry...Regina Mercedes.”

“Are you all right, Sakuya? I mean, your left eye...”

“Yes...” Sakuya placed a hand over her left eye and shook her head. “It’s nothing serious. Some sand got in it, is all.”

“...That’s good.”

Regina wearily examined her surroundings, Drag Striker still in hand. The remains of the hydra class she and Sakuya had slain lay in the alley’s entrance. It would soon dissolve and vanish into the emptiness whence it had come.

Looking up, Regina saw another sky in the cloudy heavens. A crimson expanse visible beyond the massive tear in space.

It was like a giant red eye peering down at the Eighth Assault Garden.

CHAPTER 2

NETHER VOID

It was 16:00, Imperial Standard Time.

All the survivors from the different schools participating in the Holy Sword Dance Festival had successfully evacuated from the Eighth Assault Garden. Knights escorted them back to their lodgings. The Shangri-la Resort, where the eighteenth platoon was staying, opened its park as an evacuation zone for the capital's civilians. The place was very much packed.

The knights had already cleaned up the smaller Voids rampaging through the streets, and there were no new ones appearing, but the general state was still one of confusion and chaos.

Not that I could fault anyone for feeling this way, Leonis thought, gazing out the window in his room in the Golden Rafter Hotel.

A massive tear in space had appeared over the Eighth Assault Garden. Up until now, the Voids' tears disappeared given time, but this rip lingered.

“Lord Magnus.”

Leonis heard a voice behind him. After turning around, he saw a large black wolf emerge from under the refrigerator.

Leonis couldn't help frowning. “Blackas, why are you coming out of there?”

Blackas Shadow Prince was a curse in animal form, but he never forgot the pride and elegance he carried while he was still a prince. Even if he was emerging from the shadows, coming out from under a refrigerator should have been beneath him...

“My apologies for the rude intrusion, Lord Magnus, but this is an emergency.”

“An emergency?”

“Yes. All of the shadow corridors built around the Seventh Assault Garden

have been cut off."

"...I see," Leonis said after contemplating this news for a moment.

"Do you have any idea what might have caused it?" Blackas inquired, looking confused by Leonis's composure.

"I might." Leonis looked at the tear in the sky. "I can only speculate, but it's probably due to that thing's influence."

"The Void tear."

"Yes. I've been on the other side of that cleft."

"What?!" Blackas's ears twitched.

"Azra-Ael used the Azure Hold to travel between dimensions and was caught in—"

"Azra-Ael? The Devil of the Underworld has revived?" Blackas cut him off.

"So it would appear." Leonis nodded, picked up a glass of juice, and sat down on a sofa. "It'll be a long story, but I want you to listen. Honestly, I need to sort this out for myself, too."

Blackas sat opposite the sofa.

"I joined forces with Veira to defeat the Lord of the Seas, Rivaiz Deep Sea. And soon after we did, he appeared on the battlefield, alongside the Azure Hold."

Leonis recounted the recent events to Blackas.

Azra-Ael appeared in the form of Duke Crystalia, Riselia's father, who was believed to have died on the Third Assault Garden. Using the power of an unknown Holy Sword, he dominated Rivaiz's mind. Later, in the midst of battle, he used the Azure Hold's dimensional travel capabilities, and Leonis was pulled along for the ride.

"...Dimensional travel? The Dragon Lord's flying fortress can manage such a feat?" Blackas asked dubiously.

"Yes, Veira herself was unaware of that power. She said the Azure Hold was discovered by the ancient dragon elders."

"Then it's the same as Azra-Ael's Otherworldly Castle?"

“In all likelihood... Regardless, I was caught in its dimensional travel and sent to another world.”

Leonis took a vigorous sip from his glass.

“It was a land with a bloodred sky. A place where the Voids ran rampant.”

“So those Void monsters are from that world you were flung to?”

“I’m sure of that. In that place, everything from the forests to the oceans was covered and polluted with Void miasma. What’s more, I found *him* there.”

“Him?”

“My teacher,” Leonis whispered in displeasure. “The Swordmaster of the Six Heroes.”

The Void Lord, Shardark Shin Ignis.

“When Shardark appeared in the Seventh Assault Garden, he emerged from a Void crack. His presence in that other world means it’s where the Voids come from.”

“I see.” Blackas gazed over at the tear in the sky.

“I believe the reason this tear lingers is because the Seventh Assault Garden and the capital were dimensionally shifted.”

“So the shadow corridors are disconnected because of the jump to the Void World,” Blackas concluded.

“Probably...” Leonis nodded. “But for some reason, the dimensional shift is incomplete. Had it been fully successful, we wouldn’t be seeing this tear. Instead, the area around the Imperial Capital would be swallowed up into the Void home world.”

Leonis didn’t know if this outcome was irregular or not.

“So if this is the result of an attempted dimensional shift, then why here?”

“I don’t know.”

Gates to other worlds didn’t open by coincidence. Someone must have done this intentionally. But how?

Was it through the power of Azra-Ael and the Azure Hold?

Could the Devil of the Underworld have been involved in this?

“We must investigate this tear further.”

Blackas got to his feet. “I will go inspect it, then.”

“No, you stay here. If this fissure is the aftereffect of a dimensional shift, it could be unstable. You might end up trapped on the other side if the tear closes. I’ll send a Shadow Demon to scout it out instead.”

No sooner had Leonis come to that decision than he heard the beep of a card key outside the room.

“Leo, I’m back.”

“Miss Selia?!” Leonis raised his voice in flustered reply as Blackas dove into the shadows under the sofa.



“Sorry, the report took longer than expected...,” Riselia said as she returned to the room and put her uniform jacket on the coat hanger.

The captains of all squads that had participated in the Holy Sword Dance Festival were called to the knight headquarters in the Central Garden to report what had happened.

“I got you the pudding you like on the way back, though.”

“Oh, thank you.”

Leonis stood from the sofa and started brewing tea for both of them.

“They said the Holy Sword Dance Festival will be postponed until the situation is resolved. The administrative bureau ordered all the units in the capital to head to Excalibur Academy for the time being.”

Riselia took a seat after retrieving cups and utensils from a shelf.

“Well, given the situation, the event being postponed doesn’t come as a surprise.” Leonis nodded as he soaked tea leaves in the pot. “I’m sorry I didn’t make it back in time for the match. I promised.”

“No, don’t be. You’re back safe and sound, and that’s enough for me.”

Riselia reached out and touched Leonis's cheek.

"M-Miss Selia?"

"I was really...really worried about you." Riselia's ice-blue eyes wavered with apparent concern.

"It was only a few days...," Leonis replied.

"Nngh. I—I mean, yes, but I was still worried!" Riselia puffed up her cheeks adorably.

And it was a very eventful few days, at that...

Leonis fought the Lord of the Seas, Rivaiz Deep Sea, and then encountered Azra-Ael before being sent to the Void home world.

Now, how do I tell her about that? Leonis frowned to himself. He was conflicted over how to explain to Riselia that her father, Duke Crystalia, was still alive. Worse yet, he was possessed by the Devil of the Underworld.

"What's wrong, Leo?" Riselia inquired, sensing his hesitation.

Leonis shook his head. "Nothing."

I shouldn't tell her about that now.

He had no proof that her father was truly alive. It was possible the Devil of the Underworld was only possessing her father's body, and that Duke Crystalia's soul was long gone. Giving Riselia false hope would only hurt her.

"I heard you performed well in the Holy Sword Dance Festival." Leonis elected to change the topic.

"H-huh? Oh, erm, yes...I guess we worked hard." Riselia scratched her cheek bashfully. "The Holy Sword Dance Festival was postponed, but it turns out our accomplishments there do reflect on our ranking. We beat the ace of the Military Instruction School and put up a good fight against Princess Chatres. Our standing may rise considerably because of this."

Riselia was usually modest, but this time she seemed quite pleased with the team's performance. Leonis had seen the Eighteenth Platoon's battles via the video archive, and once Riselia took off her shackles, her display was

impressive. It was hard to believe that she'd struggled against Muselle Rhodes only a few months ago.

"It's all thanks to your special training." Leonis nodded in satisfaction. "Come to think of it, what kind of exercises did my body double have you do?"

"Huh?" Riselia visibly tensed at his question. "Hmm. Well, she was much harsher than you were... Like a tough drill sergeant..."

Riselia chuckled dryly, and she gazed vacantly into the distance.

Sh-she's traumatized?! What kind of things did Shary subject her to? Leonis felt oddly anxious.

"B-but I am grateful to her. She made me much stronger!"

"I see. Well, that's good." Leonis cleared his throat. "I admit, I'm surprised. You were able to invoke the sorcery combat form of the True Ancestor's Dress, Mode Queen Minerva."

Its physical combat form was called Mode Scarlet Tyrant, while its sorcery-focused form was referred to as Mode Queen Minerva. The latter required a vast amount of mana and precise control of it. Both forms had positives and negatives, so one couldn't say Queen Minerva was necessarily superior to the Scarlet Tyrant, but Queen Minerva certainly required more latent talent and training.

"The drill serg—I mean, your body double, trained me every day to control my mana. But I didn't know it would help me transform the dress you gave me... Oh, right!" Riselia exclaimed in realization.

"What is it?"

"That spider lady you defeated, Leo... She knew about the dress."

"Huh?" Leonis raised an eyebrow. "A Void knew about the True Ancestor's Dress?"

"Yes. She asked me why I had it..."

"..."

Leonis placed a hand over his jaw and cocked his head.

If she knew about one of my treasures, was that woman possibly a survivor of the Dark Lords' Armies?

Leonis didn't recognize that spiderlike Void Lord. But Nefakess Reizaad had once been a minion of Azra-Ael, and then there was the evil priest called Zemein Vairel, who was a staff officer in the Dark Lords' Armies. Former high-ranking members of the Dark Lords' Armies were skulking about in the shadows of this era, aiding the Voids. Perhaps the spider was one of them.

"Did the Void say anything else, Miss Selia?"

"Hmm..." Riselia looked up at the ceiling, sifting through her memories. "I think she mentioned something about overwriting *the world*...?"

"Overwriting the world?"

What does that mean?

Was it related to the gigantic tear in the sky?

Did that Void cause the dimensional shift? Overwriting...

While Leonis was lost in thought, Riselia called out to him, her expression somewhat anxious.

"Say, Leo... Do you know anything about that Void?"

Leonis pursed his lips for a moment. But after concluding there was no point hiding the truth from Riselia, he changed his mind.

"Yes. I might have known her long ago."

"Was she a minion of yours?"

"I don't think so. If she was my minion, the seal would have reacted to her..."

The Seal of Dominion surfaced on the back of Leonis's hand. When Leonis resurrected Riselia as a Vampire Queen, he was branded with this seal as proof of their contract. Riselia, too, had a Seal of Servitude on her thigh, forming a pair with Leonis's seal. Up until now, Leonis had never used the seal's power to force her to obey him.

"Since she knew about the dress, it's possible she was one of my enemies, or perhaps a subordinate of theirs. I don't know why or how she became a Void,

but..." Leonis looked directly into Riselia's ice-blue eyes. "Don't worry. So long as I'm here, I will always keep you safe."

"?!" Riselia's face went red at once. But then, she clenched her fists on her lap. "N-no."

"Huh?"

"Protecting you is my role. I'm your legal guardian, Leo..." she said, then she suddenly hugged Leonis's head.

"M-Miss Selia?!" Leonis's face flushed as he felt her soft chest press against him. "I—I just let you drink my blood."

"Yeah, but that's not what I need right now. I'm balancing my Leo deficit."

"Wh-what's that?"

"It's built up because I haven't seen you in soooo long..."

Riselia's whisper tickled Leonis's earlobe. Her silvery hair brushed over his cheek. It had been days since he'd last felt his minion's embrace...

Good grief. How incorrigible.

Leonis buried his face in her chest, still bashful.



"Just what's going on here?" wondered an irritated Alexios Ray O'Itriese, younger brother of the emperor. He was in the Central Garden, heart of the Imperial Capital.

His terminal's monitor displayed real-time footage of the Void tear in the skies of the Eighth Assault Garden. In the sixty-four years since the Void invasion began, something like this had never happened.

With a tear that big, we can't rule out the possibility of a superdreadnought-class Void appearing.

If a swarm of such monsters invaded, the powers of humanity and the Holy Swords would not be enough.

And it will take at least ten days for the capital to escape this region of the ocean.

Unlike the Seventh Assault Garden, which was designed to be a mobile fortress meant for launching attacks, Camelot was much larger and slower for it. The Eighth Assault Garden was still under construction and lacked the capability to mobilize, and presently, the Seventh Assault Garden was coupled to the capital to have its mana furnace replaced.

“Edward, it may be too late for us.” Alexios slammed his fist against the table after invoking the name of his departed friend.

But then...

“Do you have a moment, Your Grace?” a woman’s voice called from the other side of the door.

Only one woman could enter Alexios’s room without an official request for an audience.

“It’s you. Good timing, come in.”

The door opened, and a woman in her midtwenties clad in a white coat entered. She had delicate facial features and sleek, pitch-black hair, which looked as if it had been spun from the night sky.

Clavia Phillet. A daughter of the Phillet Company and a high-ranking researcher in the Sixth Assault Garden’s anti-Void research facility. Rumor had it that she was Alexios’s mistress, but of course that wasn’t true. If Alexios had to describe his relationship with Clavia...

...Partners in crime, I’d say, he mused sardonically. Clavia had heard the gossip of them being lovers, but shrugged it off with a hint of amusement.

“Shouldn’t you rest a little, Your Grace?” she asked. Alexios must have appeared exhausted.

“I’m afraid I haven’t the time for that right now. I’m a member of the royal family, after all.” He shrugged with a tired smile. “More importantly, what brings you here? I’m afraid I’m quite busy.”

“I know. I wanted to show you this...” Clavia placed a data analysis terminal on the desk. Given that she’d come all the way here to deliver this, it definitely didn’t contain pictures of her pet cat.

“Do you recognize this?” she asked.

The terminal displayed countless lines of data.

“A mana furnace’s operation ratio?” Alexios said.

He’d studied in the Fourth Assault Garden’s Academia, which granted him some knowledge in the field of magical technology.

“Precisely, Your Grace. These numbers are the operation ratios for the Eighth Assault Garden’s two mana furnaces gathered right before the Holy Sword Dance Festival began.”

The numbers showed that the mana furnaces were hardly functioning, which was to be expected. The Eighth Assault Garden was still halfway through its construction, thus the furnaces’ output was minimal, providing what little energy was required to host the Holy Sword Dance Festival.

“So what of it?”

“Please wait a bit. Thirty minutes after the Holy Sword Dance Festival started...”

Alexios watched the screen, and suddenly, one mana furnace’s output spiked.

“Don’t tell me that...”

“Yes. The furnace’s dimensional shift mechanism activated.”

“...?!”

Alexios swallowed nervously. Very few people knew this, but mana furnace cores used the remnants of what were known as gods in the ancient world, beings gathered from across the continents. This meant that different furnaces carried different powers based on the god used as a core.

The Eighth Assault Garden’s mana furnace used the remnant of a devil capable of dimensional travel, granting the furnace limited dimensional shifting. Of course, the top brass of the empire—the Sage Council—weren’t interested in using this to invade the Void home world. Instead, they hoped to use this power to forcibly close Void tears.

“Did the mana furnace react to the Voids’ presence and go out of control?”

"It's possible, but honestly, I don't know." Clauvia shook her head and shrugged. "I can only assume that, for whatever reason, the mana furnace's dimensional shifting mechanism activated, causing part of the Void world to become exposed to our own. In other words..."

"If we activate the dimensional shifting mechanism again, we might close the tear?"

Clauvia nodded. "Theoretically speaking."

"Very well. I will propose it to the Sage Council." Alexios leaned against his chair's backrest and stared up at the ceiling. "Still, there's no guarantee that reigniting an unstable mana furnace will go well. And it's possible that Voids will invade again when we try."

The capital wouldn't survive an even larger Stampede.

"Whatever our course of action, we need to speed up our plan."

"You're right..."

The D Project was the unofficial undertaking Alexios had inherited from his old friend Duke Crystalia. The plan was to suppress and harness the vast powers of the Dark Lords, who had once plunged the ancient world into terror, then wield those powers against the Voids via magical technology.

That was the outline of the plan, and on secret orders from Alexios, Clauvia's team was combing through ruins around the world, hoping to exhume the Dark Lords.

Two months ago, they'd discovered the Dragon Lord sealed in the tundra. The Dragon Lord awakened, only to be corrupted by Voids and go berserk. As a result, the Dragon Lord was lost to them. Regardless, the event proved that the Dark Lords existed, something even Alexios had half doubted.

"Those that cast this world into chaos. To think that humanity must rely on them to survive..."

If they were to direct their power not at the Voids, but at mankind...

Then I'd be the greatest traitor to my species, Alexios thought sardonically.

"I have a report regarding the Dark Lords, by the way."

“What?”

“About the so-called Dark Lord Zol Vadis.”

“Oh?”

The Dark Lord Zol Vadis was the leader of an anti-imperial activist organization on the Seventh Assault Garden. He’d integrated countless smaller underground cells and was rapidly building up his faction.

The research notes left behind by Duke Crystalia didn’t mention a Dark Lord called Zol Vadis, but the fact that this individual was aware the Dark Lords existed was puzzling.

After all, all mention of the Dark Lords and Six Heroes had been wiped from the history books.

Clauvia operated her terminal. “Look at this...”

The monitor switched to footage of the gigantic Void tear over the Eighth Assault Garden’s central sector, shortly after the Stampede began.

“Was this recorded by the festival’s spectator drones?”

“Yes. The drones near the site of the incident were destroyed when the Voids attacked, but a few stationed farther away managed to record footage.”

The video was quite low quality, likely due to the electrical disturbance caused by the Voids.

“?!”

While the footage played, Alexios swallowed nervously. His eyes were fixed on a figure clad in a skull mask who floated in midair. The figure brandished some kind of staff, eradicating buildings and disintegrating a swarm of Voids.

“What is this...?” Alexios whispered, staring at the monitor with rapt attention.

“According to the reports, that’s the Dark Lord Zol Vadis.”

“Of course.” Alexios nodded excitedly. “I’d heard that man wears a skull mask.”

An incredible thought crossed his mind. What if the person in this footage, Zol

Vadis, really was a Dark Lord battling the Voids?

Could he be an ally?



“Oh, it’s Lady Selia and the kid!”

When Leonis and Riselia entered the meeting room, Regina, who was standing in the kitchenette in her maid’s uniform, turned to face them.

“What are you preparing, Regina?” Riselia asked.

“My special fruit sandwiches!”

There was already one sandwich sitting on the kitchen tray. It looked quite tasty and was full of strawberries, kiwis, peaches, banana slices, and oranges, topped off with fresh whipped cream.

“There’s time until dinner, so I thought these would make for a light snack during the meeting.”

“Thank you.”

Riselia saw that Regina wasn’t the only one to arrive before her and Leonis. Sakuya dozed on a sofa in the corner. She wore an eye mask.

“Sakuya? The meeting’s about to—”

“Heh-heh-heh. Taiyaki aren’t real fish, boy.” Sakuya uttered something strange in her sleep in response.

“What happened to Sakuya?” Riselia frowned and called out to Regina in the kitchen.

“She came over for a snack as soon as she returned to the hotel. And after eating a whole bunch, she zonked out on the sofa...”

“I see. She really overused her Holy Sword’s power fighting the Voids. We should let her rest,” Riselia said, placing a coat over Sakuya.

Leonis glanced at the sleeping girl. *She must have used the mystic eye’s power.*

The mystic eye he gave her had originally belonged to a devil, and its powers weren’t meant to be used by a human. Even Sakuya couldn’t employ it too

much before it taxed her body.

“Lady Selia, kid, what do you want to drink?”

“I’ll have juice...,” Riselia said.

“Coffee.”

“With lots of sugar, right, kid?” Regina nodded as she placed the fruit sandwiches on the meeting room table. Leonis picked one up and bit into it. The soft bread and thick cream mixed with the sweet and moderate sourness of the fruit to form a harmony of flavors.

“It’s been a while since I last had your sweets, Miss Regina. You really are a master at the craft,” Leonis praised her sincerely as he picked up a second sandwich.

Leonis had eaten only military rations for the past few days. And while Rivaiz and Veira were satisfied with them, they hardly compared to Regina’s handiwork.

“A while?” Regina blinked curiously. “Kid, you’ve had my snacks just about every day. And you always took seconds.”

Drat!

Leonis remembered too late that Shary had been acting as his body double.

“Ah, erm, well...,” Leonis stammered.

“Sorry I’m late.” Elfiné opened the door with perfect timing.

“You look tired, Miss Finé,” Riselia remarked.

“The high-ranking knights made some pretty unreasonable demands...,” Elfiné said as she fixed her disheveled collar and sat beside Riselia.

“Well, that’s just how it goes. The information your Eye of the Witch provides is invaluable.”

Regina put a teapot on the table and took a chair across from Leonis.

The first topic was the Void tear.

“Were you able to learn anything?” Riselia asked.

Elfiné shook her head. “The capital’s intelligence bureau sent drones in to investigate, but none of them returned. Once they crossed through the tear, the Artificial Elementals controlling the drones all went haywire.”

“What about your Holy Sword?” Regina asked.

“I sent two Eye of the Witch orbs in to investigate, but they haven’t found anything useful yet. All I know is that the place on the other side of the rift is polluted with very thick Void miasma.”

“Have you seen any Voids in there?”

“Not yet. Probe-type Holy Swordsmen have set up a surveillance network around the tear, so if anything happens, they’ll report right away. But the problem is...” Elfiné’s expression turned severe as she spoke. “Apparently, there’s more than one fissure we have to worry about.”

“Huh? R-really?” Regina questioned, surprised.

“It’s true,” Riselia replied. “The administrative bureau’s report states that at least fourteen tears have been confirmed in the sea around the capital.”

“Seventeen. They’re growing in number...,” Elfiné corrected grimly. “They’re not as large as the one above the Eighth Assault Garden, but they’re still big enough for large-scale Voids to emerge. We’ll be sending in survey units to investigate those tears soon.”

“Survey units...,” Leonis whispered with a mixed expression.

Any normal military unit will be wiped out.

Leonis thought back to the superdreadnought-class aviating Void he saw in the other world. Rivaiz had effortlessly tore it to bits, but that creature did survive one of Leonis’s eighth-order spells. If a Void of that class were to attack, mankind’s current forces would be helpless to stop it.

“It’s a dangerous mission, of course, but the empire’s council and the administrative bureau see this as a golden opportunity to decipher the secrets of the Voids’ territory. We’ve been on the defensive until now, but this might be our chance to go on the offensive.”

“Will we be included as a survey unit?”

"Students are not subject to the order. Not at present, at least."

"Either way, the eighteenth platoon is to report back to Excalibur Academy for the time being. The administrative bureau has handed down the order." Riselia used her terminal to display the directive sent to her. "We're to pack our things tomorrow morning and move out."

"And I was just getting used to the kitchen here. What a shame..." Regina's shoulders dropped in a show of disappointment.



"Ahhh, how splendid. A once-fallen kingdom, revived under the mantle of a grand queen."

The young, white-haired priest spread his arms in a great gesture as he praised the queen sitting on her throne.

He was Nefakess Void Lord—the thirteenth apostle of the goddess.

Standing silently behind him was a blue-haired girl, clad in the white garb of the Sakura Orchid. These two messengers were visiting the Shadow Castle. This was the world beyond the Void cracks—the Nether Void. All the shadows that covered this forested area belonged to the queen.

"I tire of your self-aggrandizing, priest," the queen seated on the throne growled in displeasure.

The Queen of the Realm of Shadows lacked a human form. She was an otherworldly mass of darkness that hovered over the throne. A set of eyes glared from the hovering shadow. This was all that remained of the beauty who'd ruled the Realm of Shadows with tyranny and terror one thousand years ago.

Behind the queen's throne stood two girls clad in maid's uniforms. Both were young, lovely maidens in appearance, but they weren't human. They were a type of demon called shadowfolk, trained under the Septentrion organization to serve as assassins.

"More importantly, I hear that your invasion plan failed." The queen's voice rumbled through the room.

"Indeed, we failed to manifest a complete Void Shift, but the overwriting did

temporarily succeed,” Nefakess replied. “The tear we opened should serve well when our goddess sorties her advance guard.”

“Hmph. Very well. I desire to reclaim the Realm of Shadows, the dominion usurped from me by that despicable black wolf.”

The rage building in the Queen of Shadows made her two maids tremble slightly.

“Incidentally, priest,” the queen added. “Was it a Holy Swordsman who dispatched the ninth Apostle?”

“We do not know who felled Lady Iris,” Nefakess replied, shaking his head. “However, she was still a major commander in the Dark Lords’ Armies. While the humans may have grown significantly stronger with the power of the Holy Swords, I cannot imagine they would be able to defeat her.”

“Then who did it? Was it the elf hero?”

“Arle Kirlesio? It’s hard to say. She does possess one of the Arc Seven, but when I fought her, she seemed to have lost much of her strength.”

“You can never know for certain. She was disciple to the Swordmaster of the Six Heroes.”

“True. I can’t rule out the possibility, but...” Nefakess trailed off and dropped his voice to a whisper. “There is another who troubles me, Your Majesty.”

“Hmm. Speak of them, then,” the queen said, seemingly interested.

“The Dark Lord—Zol Vadis.”

“Zol Vadis?” The queen repeated the name. “The Dark Lord of old, who fell to the Hero of the Holy Sword?”

“That’s right.” Nefakess nodded, his expression not changing one bit. “Someone claiming to be a Dark Lord is hiding in the capital. It could be a pretender who’s usurped the title, of course, but no normal human knows the forgotten name Zol Vadis.”

“Indeed. Fascinating. However, the prophecy of the goddess made no mention of the ancient Dark Lord.”

“Quite true, Your Majesty. But there have already been multiple deviations from the prophecy. The Dragon Lord Veira was exhumed by the humans before the time was right for her revival, and the Undead King was missing from the ruins of Necrozoa. And what’s more, the strongest Dark Lord, Rivaiz Deep Sea, has gone missing as well...”

“If the goddess’s prophecy were flawless, the Void Shift would have been completed, and it wouldn’t be necessary to gather so many Demon Swords to awaken the one sealed in the Spirit Forest.” The Queen of Shadows laughed cynically. “There’s no helping it now, I suppose. I’ve already built a firm bridgehead to that other world. I will gather Demon Swords and go forth to strike down this Zol Vadis of yours.”

“Ohhh. How encouraging.” Nefakess bowed his head reverently.

The Queen of Shadows’ eyes glinted in a mystical light, and an image formed with sorcery appeared in the center of the hall.

“This is my kingdom’s bridgehead.” The image depicted the well-maintained garden of a white building as magnificent and fair as a palace. “The heart of the capital, and the crucible of sacrifices, where Holy Swords gather...”

CHAPTER 3

THE SHADOWS' SCHEME

The next morning, Riselia and her group checked out of the Shangri-la Resort and took the intercity linear rail back to the Seventh Assault Garden. Elfiné was asked by the imperial knights to stay behind in the capital. Meanwhile, Sakuya ended up going to Old Town to visit Raiou's mansion; she parted from the rest of the group at one of the stations along the way.

"Maybe I should stop by Phrenia's before we return to the academy..." Riselia mused aloud.

"That's fine by me, Lady Selia," Regina agreed.

"I don't mind, either," Leonis said.

And so the three of them decided to stop by Phrenia's orphanage. They bought some gifts at a large chain store during the trip.

"Ah, Big Sis Selia!"

"It's Leo!"

The children hurried over excitedly when they noticed the group's arrival.

Riselia hugged the kids gently. "It's been so long. Have you been good?"

"Big Sis Selia, you were so cool!"

"I wish we could show Phrenia how you fought!"

The children surrounded Riselia, cheering. They'd watched the Holy Sword Dance Festival on their terminals.

"W-well, I really fought hard, too." Regina twirled her twintails as she fished for compliments.

"Awww, but you were always in the back, Big Sis Regina."

"And Big Sis Selia fought the enemies face-to-face."

“Yeah, you were cheating.”

“What?!” Regina hung her head, shocked and heartbroken.

The vanguard swordswoman naturally stood out more than the sniper offering covering fire. Leonis sympathized with Regina.

“E-erm, Leo was...really cool, too...,” Tessera said bashfully from her spot at the back of the group.

“...Was I?”

“Y-yeah... You, um...you really...tried!” Tessera nodded encouragingly with her fists clenched.

Shary... She completely slacked off. Leonis had told Shary not to stand out, but judging by Tessera’s reaction, she’d downplayed his strength almost too much. Leonis shrugged and changed the topic.

“By the way, was everything all right over here?”

“Oh, right, did the Void swarm reach as far as the Seventh Assault Garden?” Riselia asked, alarmed.

“Yes, but thankfully this area was spared from the attack,” Phrenia replied. “The stars must have given us their protection.”

Leonis had some idea as to what the real source of that protection was. He’d stationed three of his Shadow Knights to protect this orphanage and ordered them to attack any enemies that might harm the children.

She’d probably never imagine that she was under the protection of a Dark Lord instead of any stars. Leonis smiled sarcastically to himself.

“Lady Selia, the gifts.”

“Oh, right!” Riselia opened the paper bags she’d carried to the entrance. “I brought you all lots of sweets. Be good and share, everyone.”

“Yay!”

“Thank you, Big Sis Selia!”

The children cheered and swarmed over the treats.

“Oh, thank you for your kindness,” Phrenia said.

“No, thank you for always helping me out.” Riselia bowed politely. “We’ve got to be off now, though...”

“Awww, Big Sis Selia, you’re leaving already?”

“We wanted to play with you!”

The children looked disappointed.

“Sorry. I’d love to play, but we need to get back to the academy.” Riselia hung her head remorsefully.

Since she and Regina had fought the Voids, they had a duty to report to the administrative bureau.

“Right...” Riselia suddenly turned to Leonis. “Leo, how about you play with them?”

“Me?!” Leonis was taken aback by the abrupt suggestion.

“Leoooo! Tell us what fighting is like!”

“Play with us!”

The children started yanking on his sleeves.

“M-Miss Selia?! Whoa!”

“Well, aren’t you popular, kid!” Regina teased.

“Thanks, Leo. We’re counting on you!” Riselia said, bringing her hands together apologetically as Leonis was pulled around by the kids.



The heart of the Imperial Capital was a marble building surrounded by a beautiful garden and forest, its exterior like an anachronistic palace that was home for old nobility.

This structure was called Elysion Academy, the capital’s prized Holy Swordsmen training facility.

While its scale was nowhere near that of Excalibur Academy, it was a much more selective institution attended by many promising noble children. In recent

years, the unit led by the Silver-Blooded Sword Princess had performed admirably, winning the Holy Sword Dance Festival two years in a row.

Elysion Academy's female dorm block was entirely off-limits to boys, and if any man was foolish enough to enter, the security knights would beat him before kicking him out. And staring out into the garden from one of the well-guarded dorm room windows was...

“...How utterly dull.”

...the empire's third princess—Chatres Ray O'ltriese.

Her wounds had been treated, thanks to the healing powers of a medical team's Holy Swords, but she still wasn't in any state to use her own. She wanted nothing more than to recover right away and investigate the Void tear... And yet, when she touched her arm, she could still feel the recently mended wound throb painfully.

It was likely because her injury had been exposed to Void miasma.

What was that?

Chatres had been wounded by a Holy Swordsman representative of the Human Church. The woman had sprouted disgusting spiderlike legs and stabbed Chatres with them.

It was like she herself was a Void...

The notion sent a shiver down her spine. A Void masquerading as a human. Was that possible? Or was that Void different somehow? Either way...

Ngh! I was helpless during a crisis. Chatres clenched her teeth, overcome with shame.

Her duty as princess was to protect the people, and she'd failed.

Even though I was granted the power of the strongest Holy Sword, I still needed others to rescue me!

The Excalibur Academy eighteenth platoon had risked their lives to protect her. Riselia Crystalia, Sakuya Sieglinde, and...

...Regina Mercedes.

Although Regina hadn't left much of an impression on Chatres the first time they'd met, the girl now lingered in her memory. She was turning fifteen this year and had lived as a maid of House Crystalia on the Third Assault Garden before enrolling in Excalibur Academy. That was all the information Chatres was able to gather about her before the Holy Sword Dance Festival.

She was on a platoon with Duke Crystalia's daughter, one of Count Phillet's daughters, and a Sakura Orchid swordswoman. Compared to those three, she didn't stand out.

"Fifteen years old... No, it couldn't be. Right?"

Chatres switched on her terminal and called up data on Regina. Clear, green eyes. Golden hair. Those traits weren't too unusual on their own. But coupled with the fact that she had a Holy Sword...

Those with the blood of the third royal family always manifest a Holy Sword...

Chatres was a two-year-old baby when it happened, so she had no recollection of her younger sister. But if she was still alive...

"Hmm, Chatres, do you have a moment...?" a girl's voice called from outside her room.

"Altiria?"

Chatres opened the door to find her younger sister, the fifth imperial princess, Altiria Ray O'Itriese. She was wearing an adorable dress and holding the royal family's spirit, Carbuncle, in her hands.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?" Chatres asked her.

"I came to visit you!" Altiria pouted, puffing up her cheeks.

"But you saw me yesterday."

"That was yesterday!"

"I see..."

Chatres wasn't opposed to spending time with her darling little sister, of course. But...

"I'm fine. My wounds were healed."

"That's good, but you still mustn't overexert yourself. Knowing you, Chatres, I worried you'd volunteer to go hunt down the Voids..."

"Well, for the time being, I intend to stay put and recover," Chatres said, clearly not meaning any of it.

She didn't plan to remain inactive at all. Altiria put a box of sweets on the table and sat down on the sofa.

"Incidentally, Chatres, I was hoping to ask you something while I'm here."

"You want to consult me on something? Go ahead."

"The spirit has been acting quite strange since yesterday."

"You mean Carbuncle?" Chatres asked, looking at the royal house's spirit which sat in Altiria's hands.

"Yes, it's been acting anxious. And it's not just Carbuncle. The spirits in the palace garden and the Artificial Elementals are all behaving oddly. It's like they're frightened of something..." Altiria hugged the spirit in her arms tightly and looked up at Chatres. "Do you sense anything strange, Chatres?"

"...No. My powers as a priestess are quite meager, I'm afraid," Chatres said, frowning.

As one of the three royal families with the right to rule over the Human Integrated Empire, House O'Itriese bore the blood of ancient spirit users. Chatres could hear the voices of spirits, but perhaps as the price for having been granted such a powerful Holy Sword, her power over them was a far cry from Altiria's.

"Given everything that's happened, it's only natural the spirits are agitated."

"I...suppose..." Altiria hung her head and hugged Carbuncle close again.

The rabbit-like Origin Spirit looked up at her in confusion.

"But it having an effect on the Artificial Elementals is a problem," Chatres added.

The Artificial Elementals were used to control the city's core. If multiple systems malfunctioned all at once, the Assault Garden would be paralyzed.

"We should ask Uncle Alexios about the Artificial Elementals. Perhaps he'll be able to come up with a solution."

"Yes, let's."

Their uncle, Alexios, was often looked down upon by his family for not possessing a powerful Holy Sword. However, Chatres acknowledged his talents as a scholar and researcher. She didn't like that he'd taken that Phillet vixen as his lover, though...

Altiria glanced over at the table, where the terminal monitor was still on.

"What's that, Chatres?" she asked, looking at the eighteenth platoon's profile images.

"Oh. Well, I owe these girls my life, so..." Chatres twined a lock of hair around one finger in a show of slight bashfulness. "I'd like to go thank them personally, but that might be difficult."

Chatres visiting Excalibur Academy would undoubtedly draw media attention. As a member of the royal family, she'd have to contact the school and go through formalities, causing trouble later on.

"...Hmm. That might be true," Altiria said pensively. "Then how about you invite the eighteenth platoon over instead?"

"Invite them? Here, to Elysion Academy?"

"Yes. You could prepare tea and sweets and hold a modest get-together for them."

"Hmm. I hadn't considered that."

It felt more proper for Chatres to go and meet them, but Altiria's suggestion would work, too. The only issue was that Chatres had never hosted a tea party before, despite being a noble daughter.

"Altiria, I hear you often host tea parties?"

"Yes, as part of my duties as a princess."

"I see," Chatres mumbled. "It's just...I don't know how to go about it..."

"No need to worry. I will take part in your party, too."

“I—I see. Thank you.”

“It’s the least I could do for you, sister.”

Chatres suddenly remembered something. The eighteenth platoon also had a boy among its ranks.

“Did you come up with this idea to see that boy?” Chatres teased.

“Huh? Erm, well, ah...” Altiria went scarlet and hung her head.

Goodness. So that was her plan.

Chatres shrugged to herself.



My word. My uniform is all wrinkled now.

The underground of the Seventh Assault Garden’s sixth sector—the special demi-human ward. Leonis walked through the underground passage with a sour expression. The kids at the orphanage had tugged on his uniform, and now it was covered in dust. Tessera had asked them to stop halfway through, so he managed to slip away, but...

“Hmm. Yes, the gate is closed,” Leonis said while fixing his collar as he came upon his destination.

Before him was the entrance to the Dark Lord castle he was secretly having built. Leonis came here instead of returning to Excalibur Academy because he’d received a report from Lena of the Demon Wolf Pack.

It stated that the gate connecting the Dark Lord’s castle to the Seventh Assault Garden was closed, cutting off travel and communication.

This is likely due to the influence of the dimensional shift.

The eighth-order spell, Dimensional Portal, was unstable by nature. The dimensional shift taking place had likely unfixed the gate’s position. Leonis traced the remnants of mana hanging over the place and then tapped a spot in the air with the Staff of Sealed Sins. Doing this made a ripple form in the air, which then formed something resembling a pitch-black full-length mirror.

“That should do it.”

Leonis stepped through the restored gate.

“Oh? The decor has significantly improved since my last visit.”

Leonis warped directly to the throne room in the depths of the castle. It felt much like the throne room of Necrozoa’s Death Hold. The stone walls were adorned with eerie carvings, giving the impression that the room was one giant casket. Leonis’s seat was made of bones, which suited his tastes perfectly.

Hanging above the throne was a gigantic ogre skeleton. The flames glowing in its eye sockets seemed to glare at the chamber. Black mist spewed from its gaping mouth.

I’m sure Roselia would like this.

Leonis sat on the throne of bones and leaned the Staff of Sealed Sins against it. It was a bit too large for his ten-year-old body, so he didn’t look very dashing.

It’s not a very comfortable perch. The bones prod my back.

Leonis threw out his legs and snapped his fingers, prompting a skeleton soldier to emerge from the throne’s shadows.

“Send word to my subordinates in the Dark Lords’ Armies. The gate has been restored.”

The skeleton soldier rattled its jaw and left the throne room. Leonis could have just sent a message to Lena’s terminal, but that would tarnish his Dark Lord’s dignity.

That puts an end to this matter, but...

Leonis was in no rush to return to the academy.

...perhaps I should inspect the progress of the castle’s construction.

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind...

“—Lord Magnus.”

...than he heard a low, growling voice in his head. It was a telepathic message from Blackas.

“What’s wrong, Blackas?” Leonis replied telepathically.

“I have a report, but the shadow corridors being unusable make things quite inconvenient,” Blackas grumbled.

“Any luck in restoring them?”

“Yes, that’s what I needed to report...”

“Hmm?”

“The shadow corridors are being encroached upon by a different faction.”

“What?!” Leonis raised his eyebrows in surprise. *“What do you mean, ‘encroached upon’?”*

“The corridors weren’t simply cut off. The shadow corridor network we built has been swallowed by a greater, more powerful shadow.”

“Another shadow? But who could do that?” Leonis asked, puzzled.

The shadow corridors were a unique mystery known only to those from the Realm of Shadows. Even Leonis, who’d merged with the Realm of Shadows as its ruler, couldn’t wield its power as well as Shary and Blackas.

“That remains unknown,” Blackas replied. *“But I’ve discovered the epicenter of the invasion.”*

“Mmm. And that would be?”

“Elysion Academy, the school at the center of the Imperial Capital. The other shadow corridors spread out like a spiderweb from its premises.”

Elysion Academy?

That was the Holy Swordsman school reserved for the capital’s nobility.

“...Whoever did this, they’ve tried to steal from us. We cannot let this stand,” Blackas said with a snarl.

Blackas and Shary had worked tirelessly to construct the shadow corridors. While Blackas sounded calm, his fur was probably standing on end from indignation.

“Indeed. They’ll pay for laying hands on a Dark Lord’s domain,” Leonis whispered. He snapped his fingers, summoning three Shadow Wraiths. *“I’ll lend you three Shadow Wraiths for assistance. We’ll begin by investigating Elysion*

Academy.”

“Understood. You don’t mind if I destroy the enemy, do you?”

“For now, just investigate. Don’t do anything reckless. If need be, I’ll attend to the matter myself,” Leonis warned his friend.

He couldn’t imagine Blackas being defeated, but they didn’t know how powerful this new enemy was. Thus, Leonis insisted Blackas tread carefully.

“Very well. I will handle it.”



“What a foolish foe we’re up against. To think they would stoke the tyrannical Black Wolf Emperor’s ire.” Leonis pitied this unidentified foe of theirs from his seat on the throne.

When enraged, the black wolf was not as merciful as the Undead King.

“The shadow corridors, eh? Just who could have—”

“My lord, I come bearing an urgent report.”

The shadow at Leonis’s feet rippled and wavered, and the head of a girl in a maid’s uniform popped up.

“Shary?” Leonis regarded the girl with a bit of surprise. “You’re awake?”

“Yes. My body is still in pain, so I cannot participate in battle, but I can see to my duties as a maid.”

She emerged from the shadow and pinched up her skirt in a curtsy. Shary never saw to her maid’s responsibilities, but Leonis was kind enough to leave that unsaid.

“Very well. Are there otherwise no issues with your body right now?”

“For the time being, no. It’s just...”

“What is it?” Leonis asked, concerned.

“Well, hmm. When I undid the seal, Queen Rakshasa’s memories, or rather, her emotions, flowed into me.”

“Rakshasa’s memories?” Leonis asked suspiciously.

It wasn't impossible, given that Shary served as a vessel for that devil.

"My lord..." Shary began reluctantly. "Why does Queen Rakshasa hold such a deep grudge against you?"

"I assume it's because I launched a campaign against her realm and destroyed it." That seemed reason enough to resent him.

"Well, yes, I'm sure that's part of it, but I felt an emotion I'm intimately familiar with..." Shary whispered, her words gradually turning into a bashful mumble.

"What's wrong?" Leonis asked.

"Oh, nothing. Please forget I said that."

"...?"

Leonis was rather confused by this exchange, but he let it be.

"Regardless, you were of great assistance, Shary. I will reward you later."

"You honor me, my lord." Shary pinched up her skirt and bowed her head.

"Good. So you mentioned a report?"

"R-right!" Shary raised her head upon remembering. "P-please, take a look at this."

Shary took out a communication terminal from the shadow at her feet. It was notably larger than the ones provided by the academy.

"What's this?" Leonis asked.

"It's the newest model. I bought it with the money I earned from my part-time job."

"If it's so important, you could have purchased it with funds from the Dark Lords' Armies' treasury..."

"Hmm, er... How do you work this thing again?" Shary fiddled with the device.

Evidently, she was still unaccustomed with magical devices.

"Ah, here, this!" Shary held out the terminal's screen for Leonis to see.

It displayed footage of the Eighth Assault Garden's sky, of the Void tear and

the countless Voids creeping out of it.

“What of it?”

“Here, this, look at this!” Shary pointed at the edge of the screen.

“...?!” The moment Leonis noticed it, he groaned. The footage was rough, but he could make out the image of a masked Dark Lord floating in the sky. “I thought Rakshasa destroyed all the nearby footage drones...”

“One drone was far enough away to survive, it seems,” Shary said, her eyes narrowed peevishly. “The news is making a bit of a fuss about this.”

“W-well, so be it. I had considered informing humanity of Zol Vadis’s existence soon anyhow.”

“I see. Then this part isn’t a problem, then.”

“I-is there more?” Leonis asked, realizing Shary implied there was greater trouble.

“Yes, here, at the end of the news footage.”

Leonis leaned forward to get a better look at the terminal screen, and he read the letters at the end of the video.

“...Is that—?!”

This time, Leonis’s eyes went wide with astonishment. To the humans of this era, the letters were nothing but a strange, meaningless cipher, but Leonis knew their meaning.

“How can this be? This text is from a thousand years ago...”

Ancient text the people of this era should have been unfamiliar with was displayed on the screen. The letters spelled out: *Dark Lord. Requesting. Negotiations.*

“I don’t know. But this is definitely a message from someone.”

“So it would seem.” Leonis put a hand on his jaw pensively.

At face value, the message was an invitation for the Dark Lord Zol Vadis. Was someone hoping to negotiate with him?

“What shall you do, my lord?”

“I can’t very well ignore this,” Leonis muttered.

“This may be forward of me, my lord, but isn’t it possible this is a trap?” Shary’s remark befit her role as Leonis’s bodyguard.

“If it is, so be it. I will simply crush them, traps and all.”

It was perfectly possible this was a ploy, but being too frightened to act went against Leonis’s honor as a Dark Lord.

“Understood. How shall we answer?”

“Hmm...”

He could simply use this news station to send a response directly, but...

“Let’s take this chance to go about this in a manner befitting a Dark Lord.”



The capital’s fourth pier area was the entrance to a large bridge that linked Camelot directly with the continent. The entrance had a defensive facility meant to keep Voids out, as well as an immigration bureau where rescued refugees were accepted.

Standing atop one of this facility’s observation towers...

“What a bothersome process. A thousand years ago, all it took was one slip of paper to enter a capital,” Arle Kirlesio whispered, holding her ponytail with one hand to keep it from flapping in the wind.

She stood, dressed in her shorts, holding the Demon Smiting Sword, Crozax, and a small backpack. Traveling light, as it were. Lena of the Demon Wolf Pack had provided Arle with a fake civilian ID card, but since the city was currently on high alert, unauthorized civilians weren’t allowed to leave the city.

Fortunately, spells that masked one’s presence were the elves’ specialty.

“Ye wind.”

Arle invoked a spirit spell, causing the air around her to shift. The girl vanished in an instant. She glided through the sky with the wind’s protection, her eyes fixed upon a large wood.

A thousand years ago, this place was known as the Spirit Forest, an area where Origin Spirits, high elves, and beastmen lived. It was the domain of the Spirit King, Elmysteriga. But now, the heart of this forest was host to an unnatural power. A Void fissure had manifested there, like a gash across the earth.

The spirits are astir.

Arle's elven intuition, capable of hearing the spirits' voices, told her as much. On the other side of that tear, something gigantic was awakening. If it was a Dark Lord...

...then it's my duty as a hero to smite them!

The elf girl tightened her grip on Crozax and descended to the bridge.

Screeeeeeeeech!

Something moved behind Arle.

“?”

When she turned around...

Thud!

...it collided with her, sending Arle spinning through the air for a moment before she struck the ground hard.

“Owwwww!” Arle got to her feet, rubbing her bruised tailbone.

A girl dismounted the two-wheeled vehicle that had collided with Arle, and she hurried over. “A-are you all right?!”

“Of course I’m not all right! What are you doing?!” Arle cried.

“I’m sorry, you just came out of nowhere...”

Arle realized that the girl was right. She’d been invisible because of her wind spell.

“Well, I suppose I can overlook it... Wait, you’re...Sakuya!”

Arle’s eyes widened upon recognizing the girl. White garb and blue hair... She knew this person. She was a skilled swordfighter, capable of fighting on Arle’s

level, and by some trick of fate, they were both in the same organization ruled by the Dark Lord Zol Vadis.

Sakuya, too, recognized Arle.

“Oh, thank goodness. I was afraid I hit a decent citizen.”

“Tch! Y-you...!” Arle shot Sakuya a hard look.

However, Sakuya was right. Arle wasn’t exactly a decent, legitimate citizen.

Arle eyed Sakuya suspiciously. “What are you even doing here?”

Sakuya turned her gaze to the distance, toward the Spirit Forest. “I want to investigate that Void tear.”

“On your own?”

“Yes. I can’t involve my upperclassmen in my selfish whims.” Bloodlust poured from Sakuya, but only for a moment.

“?!” As a fellow swordswoman, Arle recognized it instantly. She didn’t know why, but it was clear that Sakuya harbored an intense hatred for Voids.

“And what were you doing here?” Sakuya questioned.

“I came to investigate the tear, too,” Arle replied while batting dust from herself.

“On the Dark Lord’s orders?” Sakuya asked.

“Hmm, something to that effect,” Arle replied vaguely. Elaborating would complicate things, so she left it at that.

“What a coincidence. This must be fate. Want me to give you a ride?” Sakuya patted on the back seat of her vehicle.

Arle considered the offer. Her wind spells enabled her to move swifter than any vehicle. However, if she used magic on it, they’d move even faster.

And honestly, going there alone is a bit unnerving.

Arle acknowledged Sakuya’s skill with a sword, and if Voids awaited her on the other side of that fissure, she’d be glad for a dependable ally.

“...I’ll take you up on that offer, then.”

CHAPTER 4

AUDIENCE WITH THE DARK LORD

“Lord Alexios, who do you intend to meet at a place like this?”

“I believe I told you not to ask.”

“Y-yes, m-my apologies. But still...”

“Listen. No matter what happens here, I won’t hold you responsible. You need only do your jobs as guards, that’s all.”

The Seventh Assault Garden’s Area VI—the special demi-human protection ward. Three people were walking through the underground supply passage beneath it. One was the emperor’s younger brother, Alexios, clad in a military uniform. The other two were Holy Swordsmen who served as his trusted bodyguards. All Alexios told his guards was that he would be negotiating with an underground organization.

That a royal intended to converse with the leader of a clandestine organization felt impossible on its own. Who knows how Alexio’s guards might react if they heard they were marching to meet a potential Dark Lord?

I understand their suspicions, of course.

Alexios couldn’t very well beckon a Dark Lord to the palace, and using the Astral Garden ran the risk of the empire’s top brass learning of the exchange. A slight shiver ran through Alexios as he moved through the passage.

Zol Vadis.

Alexios had no doubts about the powers of this so-called Dark Lord. Alexios had used a broadcasting station he had influence over to add a message to the footage of the masked Dark Lord. Using the ancient text Duke Edward had researched, he requested an audience with the Dark Lord. Alexios had assumed that if this Zol Vadis was the genuine article, he’d send a response.

Sure enough, the answer came mere hours later, appearing above the capital. Ashen clouds covered the sky, producing a sudden downpour. Startled by a flash of lightning, Alexios looked out his window, and his eyes beheld a startling sight.

Lightning ran across the hanging clouds, and Alexios instantly realized what this meant. Bolts repeatedly flashed over the same spot, drawing ancient text over the canvas of the clouds.

I accept your call to negotiations.

The lightning then went on to specify the place of the meeting. Evidently, the Dark Lord was capable of manipulating the weather. Zol Vadis clearly had powers that exceeded Alexios's imagination. He felt cold sweat run down his forehead.

Depending on how the talk goes, I might not return alive.

At worst, he could be killed on a whim. But if he managed to win this Dark Lord to his side...

He could become humanity's hope in place of the Holy Swords.

As the group continued through the dim corridor just barely illuminated by mana lamps, something happened. The shadows on the ground suddenly surged up.

"Your Grace, back away!" one of the knights said, activating his Holy Sword.

"Wait." Alexios raised his voice to stop him.

"Insolent lout."

Crack!

A whip lashed out from the darkness, striking the Holy Sword and shattering it.

"What?!"

The shadow slid over the floor like a black dress. A lovely girl dressed in a servant's uniform emerged.

"A-a maid...?" The three exchanged confused looks.

"I am here on my lord's behalf," the girl in the maid's uniform said dispassionately.

"I—I see. We apologize for any disrespect..." Alexios replied, still astonished by the maid's arrival.

"I am here to greet you at the behest of my lord. My apologies, but we cannot welcome your two guards to the audience chamber."

"Wh-what?!" one of the Holy Swordsmen cried. "We cannot consent to this!"

"We're His Grace's royal guards!"

"You are not permitted an audience with my lord. We ask that you vacate the premises..." The girl shrugged indifferently and snapped her fingers.

"Wh-what?! M-my shadow, it's...!"

"My shadow is swallowing me up! Ahhh! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

The pair were consumed by their own shadows.

"Wh-what did you do to them?!" Alexios asked, alarmed.

"Rest assured, I did not kill them," the maid replied carelessly before snapping her fingers again. "Now then, welcome to the Dark Lord's castle."

"What...?" Alexios looked down and realized he was sinking into his shadow. "Ahhhhhhhhhh!"

It felt as though he were drowning in mud... However, he collided with a cold, hard floor a moment later.

Wh-what just happened?

"How long do you intend to keep your eyes closed?" demanded an icy voice from above. "You are in the presence of a Dark Lord."

Alexios opened his eyes slowly.

"Ah..."

He was no longer in the underground passage, but a vast hall. Flickering candlesticks cast an eerie glow. Engravings of strange creatures decorated the walls, and miasma hung about the place.

Wh-where am I...? Was I transported here?!

While surprised, Alexios's sober mind worked to grasp the situation. Did that maid use a Holy Sword ability? Or was it some kind of other power at play?

"Lower your head, human," the maid commanded with a voice that struck terror into Alexios.

"...!"

This girl was no ordinary maid—she was an apex predator who wielded absolute power.

"Raise your head. I allow it," another voice instructed from overhead. The voice echoed eerily through the audience chamber.

"..."

Alexios fearfully raised his head. At the top of the staircase at the end of the chamber was a throne made of bones. A king in a skull mask sat upon it.

The Dark Lord Zol Vadis, Alexios thought, a shudder running through his body.

"I permit you to speak your name, fearless human."

The eyes behind the mask glinted red, and the air in the audience chamber trembled.

Ahhh. I really might die here...

Intense regret gripped Alexios's heart. Yet still, he was prepared.

"It is an honor to meet you in the flesh, Your Majesty the Dark Lord."

Alexios kneeled in a perfect display of aristocratic dignity. His pride demanded he maintain appearances, at the very least.

"I am the younger brother of the emperor of the Human Integrated Empire. My name is Alexios Ray O'Itriese."



From behind his skull mask, Leonis gazed at the man like he was gauging his worth. In truth, he knew him already. When Alexios appeared at the designated meeting spot with his two guards, Shary, who was lying in wait, identified him and sent Leonis simple documents about him.

Leonis had Alexios and his guards walk around for a bit in the tunnels to confuse them and buy time so he could study his guest.

That said, Shary's intelligence consisted of data readily available to the public. Alexios was the younger brother to the current emperor, Alzeus Shida O'Itriese. Since he lacked a powerful Holy Sword, he'd chosen the path of a researcher.

In the empire, royals without the power to fight the Voids were not given any genuine authority.

His pedigree is fine, but the royal family sees him as a nuisance.

Leonis was disappointed to learn of Alexios's identity. A trap would've made for a more interesting turn of events. Using ancient text to reach out to Leonis had made him suspect that the one responsible was a remnant of the Dark Lords' Armies or some other survivor from a thousand years ago.

But it's just a mere human.

Still, this was interesting in its own way. This man knew of the ancient text and the Dark Lords; that much was fact. And his connection to the current emperor meant that he might be privy to government secrets.

"You may stand, Alexios."

"My lord, that's—" Shary spoke up, but Leonis raised a hand to silence her.

"It is fine. We are not equals, of course, but I will pay royalty their due respect."

"Thank you, Your Majesty the Dark Lord." Alexios bowed his head deeply and rose slowly.

He was a slender man with a well-featured face, but he certainly didn't look like the kind to fight with a sword in his hand. However, his green eyes did contain a hint of tragic heroism.

His pedigree means that he is technically Regina's uncle. Leonis noted the color of the man's eyes. *I cannot treat him too cruelly, then.*

Regina had aided Leonis more than a few times, after all.

"Dark Lord, before I speak my business, I would like to present you with

something,” Alexios said.

“Oh? Very well. Show me.” Leonis nodded graciously. Alexios knew his manners.

“This meeting was called on short notice and was kept secret, so I couldn’t prepare much, but please accept this precious token.” Alexios carefully retrieved a small jewel box from his breast pocket.

“Hmm. Shary, bring it over.”

“Yes...”

Shary took the jewel box and climbed up the stairs to deliver it to Leonis.

“Is it a doughnut?” she whispered.

“Somehow, I doubt that....,” he replied quietly. Upon opening the box, Leonis found a silver amulet inside. “What is this?”

“It was excavated while digging through an ancient ruin. Discovering such items in a nearly complete state is quite unusual, so it’s quite a precious part of my personal collection...”

Leonis toyed with the amulet while half listening to Alexios’s prattling explanation.

A protective charm using a second-order spell. I suppose it’s valuable in its own way...

To Leonis, this was nothing short of junk. His treasure vault in the Realm of Shadows held many magical tools with far greater power.

“My Lord, this is tra—,” Shary began.

“Silence, Shary. In this day and age, it carries great value.” Leonis dropped the amulet into the shadow at his feet. “I thank you for your wonderful gesture, Alexios.”

“Yes. I trusted that you would appreciate it.” Alexios bowed his head, looking somewhat pleased with himself.

Leonis cleared his throat behind the Zol Vadis mask.

“All right, let us get down to business. First, there is something I wish to ask

you.”

“Wh-what is it, Your Majesty the Dark Lord?” Alexios asked, his expression tense.

“How did you come to know of the Dark Lords?” Leonis questioned, his eyes glinting through the skull mask. “And where did you learn the ancient text? As far as I know, the knowledge of both has been lost to humanity.”

“If I may be so forward, Your Majesty, I am a researcher who has explored ancient ruins around the world. The amulet I presented you earlier was discovered on one such expedition.”

“I see. Just like Riselia, then.”

“Risel...?” Alexios asked, baffled.

“Never mind, forget it.” Leonis immediately retracted mention of his favorite minion’s name. “So you discovered evidence of the Dark Lords’ existence while investigating ancient structures?”

The legends of the Dark Lords and Six Heroes had been lost to history, but when Leonis visited the ruins of Necrozoa, he did come upon surviving statues and carvings exalting his name. Riselia was able to read them, if only partially, and nearly found out he was a Dark Lord.

“No, I knew of the Dark Lords before that,” Alexios said.

“...What do you mean?” Leonis asked, his eyes glinting again.

“My old friend and former teacher researched the Dark Lords. He was an excellent Holy Swordsman and devoted his life to defending his land from the Voids, but he perished in the process. I inherited some of his research.”

“Hmm.” The name of a certain man surfaced in Leonis’s mind. “Are you referring to Duke Edward Crystalia?”

“H-how did you know?!” Alexios asked, his eyes wide with alarm.

“Fool. I am a Dark Lord. I know and see all!” Leonis snapped at him.

Alexios flinched in fear. “O-of course... I beg your pardon!”

Leonis smirked behind his mask. It was only by coincidence that he knew

Duke Crystalia studied the Dark Lords, but bluffing about it worked in his favor.

“Very well, you are forgiven. I understand now how you know of the ancient Dark Lords. Did you seek me out of mere curiosity, then?”

“O-of course not, Your Majesty the Dark Lord. I come to you on behalf of all humanity to ask for your...for the help of Zol Vadis!”

“Oh?” Leonis laughed, amused. “You think I would wield my mighty powers for mere humans?”

Leonis let his aura of death show ever so slightly.

“?!” Alexios shivered and nearly collapsed to his knees, yet he managed to hold his ground and continue speaking. “H-humanity suffers under an unprecedented threat—Voids. In the sixty-four years since the Void invasion began, we have made countless sacrifices to secure safe havens for ourselves. And now, the power of the Holy Swords alone is not enough to oppose our enemy.” Alexios raised his voice as he spoke, so as to not be overwhelmed by the Dark Lord’s presence.

Hmm. I may be going easy on him, but it is still commendable that he remains on his feet despite my power.

Leonis was impressed with the man. Despite his scrawny frame, he had grit. Leonis continued questioning him, though.

“How familiar are you with the Dark Lords?”

“Th-the Dark Lords are...erm, enemies of humankind that cast the world into ruin and chaos... Or so Edward’s research notes claimed...”

“Correct. And I am one such Dark Lord. What reason would I have to help you humans, then?”

“B-because the Voids are a threat to you, as well!” Alexios declared, shaking off his fear.

Leonis made a pensive gesture. “You humans truly are greedy. In the name of survival, you would seek the powers of the Dark Lords that sought to destroy your world?” Leonis laughed. “First, you beseeched the heroes for help, and now, you cling to the Dark Lords?”

Memories of his time as the Hero of the Holy Sword, Leonis Shealto, crossed his mind. One thousand years ago, Leonis was a member of the Six Heroes and dispatched the Dark Lord Zol Vadis. But after that, he was seen as an obstacle to humanity. Leonis was betrayed and left for dead.

And now, after all that, humankind prostrated before Leonis, in his Dark Lord form, begging for aid.

“Your Majesty, I—”

“Do not let it bother you. It does not concern you.” Leonis shook his head and shrugged.

The time is right...

Alexios’s face was swiftly losing its color; if Leonis continued projecting his aura of death, the man would faint.

“Very well. I will lend you my strength, courageous human.”

Alexios looked up at the throne fearfully. “?! D-do you mean it...Your Majesty?”

“Depending on what you will give up in return, of course,” Leonis added, nodding grandly.

Alexios’s plea hadn’t moved him. The Voids were an obstacle to the restoration of the Dark Lords’ Armies and a threat to the Seventh Assault Garden, which belonged to Leonis. Destroying them was a top priority regardless of this man’s wants. Plus, he needed to dispose of the conspirators behind the Void attacks, too. Naturally, Leonis had no intention of sharing that with Alexios.

At best, I’ll use you like pawns. Leonis cackled, the eyes of his skull mask igniting with crimson fire.

“I-in return...?”

“No need to guard yourself so. I will not devour your soul.” Leonis’s evil laughter echoed through the room.

“?!”

“Hmm, yes... First, I demand information.”

“Information?”

“It has only been a short while since my resurrection. I do not know enough about this world. I’ve looked through many books in this age, but there are things I still do not understand. Surely a member of the royal family would have access to knowledge the common man does not.”

Alexios swallowed nervously. “I-I’ll answer anything I can.”

“Good, then here is my first question. Many seem to accept this era’s magical technology without question. However, it should’ve been impossible for humanity to acquire such advanced marvels in a mere few decades. Especially the Assault Gardens. Someone gave you this technology, correct?”

“...”

“My next question pertains to the Holy Swords. Their power did not exist in my time. The people of the Human Church claim theirs is the power of the planet. What is the truth behind their strength?”

A silence hung over the room. Alexios seemed to harbor some doubts, but eventually...

“Very well, Your Majesty the Dark Lord. I will divulge everything.”

He parted his lips, steeling himself.

CHAPTER 5

THE SECRET OF THE HOLY SWORDS

“Dark Lord, what I am about to tell you is a guarded secret of the Integrated Empire,” Alexios began.

“Yes, I imagine it is.”

“Please keep this secret to yourself—”

“I know.” Leonis glanced at Shary beside him. “This maid is my faithful right hand. She will not speak of this without my express permission.”

Though she may squander her money on sweets regardless of what I tell her.

“Yes, understood.” Alexios lowered his head solemnly.

“Then let us begin with an explanation of this unnatural magical technology.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. The rapid advance of magical technology and the power of the Holy Swords are intrinsically linked. Would you permit me to explain a portion of human history that remains undisclosed to this day?”

Leonis nodded, bidding the man continue. Alexios took a deep breath to calm himself.

“The first essential piece begins seven hundred years ago. The era predating that period is called the Dark History, as we only know vague facts about that era from the ruins we’ve uncovered.”

“Seven hundred years ago...,” Leonis whispered under his mask.

The oldest books Leonis could find in Excalibur Academy’s library only went back two centuries. He couldn’t find any that spoke of times older than that.

“What happened seven hundred years ago?”

“No one knows for certain. However, we can only trace our history back seven hundred years. It’s possible something happened at that time that set the age

that followed in motion. It's like some destructive calamity that defies imagination occurred, wiping away all previous history..."

Whether the ground split or the stars rained down from the heavens, the cataclysm that befell the world after Leonis's sealing destroyed all life, wiping away the legends of the Six Heroes, the Dark Lords, and countless gods.

"Two centuries after that event, the surviving remnants of humanity began to rebuild civilization and lived in city-states. One hundred years later, the Odain Kingdom, which would later form the heart of the Human Integrated Empire, was established from three predecessor kingdoms—Kaimaru, O'Itriese, and Reinbelle."

"The ancestors of the current three royal houses."

"Correct, Your Majesty."

"And the O'Itriese bloodline is, if I recall, capable of communicating with spirits."

"You are well informed. The lineages of the three royal houses are said to be descended from ancient priestesses. I, too, bear this power, yet it seems to be weaker among male descendants, for some reason."

"Yes, that stands to reason. Even in my time, the most powerful spirit users were princess priestesses," Leonis remarked.

Alexios swallowed nervously. Perhaps it only just struck him that he was speaking to someone from a thousand years ago.

"Let's return to the topic at hand," Leonis said. "Did humanity's magical technology emerge with the creation of the Odain Kingdom?"

"No, the people of that period still lived in stonework cities and employed mana through a technique called sorcery."

"Hmm. Then your society at the time wasn't much different from my era."

"Shortly after that, countless nations formed on the continent, leading to an age of warfare. The next major change took place two hundred years ago. All across the world, people began hearing the voice of the planet."

"The voice of the planet?" Leonis repeated the words, baffled.

“Strangers appeared in every corner of the world, speaking prophecies and claiming they were chosen by the planet. At first, those who heard the planet’s voice were either worshipped or considered mad and persecuted by their countries. However, people quickly realized that those who heard the voice of the planet were able to manifest a strange, supernatural power.”

“A supernatural power? You mean...”

“Yes. That power was the true identity of what we now refer to as Holy Swords.”

“That differs from the story I’ve heard,” Leonis said, fascinated. “I thought the Holy Swords first manifested sixty-four years ago, when the Voids invaded.”

“That’s true, in a manner of speaking, Your Majesty. The Holy Swords of those who first heard the voice of the planet were trifling in strength compared to what Holy Swordsmen today wield. They didn’t take the form of weapons at all.”

“So, originally, their power wasn’t significant enough to be dubbed Holy Swords.”

Alexios nodded. “Precisely. As the years passed by, the gifted individuals who heard the planet’s voice grew in number. And then, one day, all the gifted ones across the continent heard the same words.”

According to records, that was the day the red Star of Calamity appeared in the sky. The voice echoed in the gifted people’s minds in the form of a prophecy.

“Within the next two centuries, a threat to mankind will appear and destroy the world.”

Leonis’s eyes widened behind his mask. “Are you saying...the advent of the Voids was foretold?”

“...Yes. And at the same, some of the gifted found that a vast amount of unknown knowledge flowed into their minds.”

“Unknown knowledge...”

“That information was the foundational theory that led to the sudden

development of magical technology. Vast wisdom that would normally take us centuries, if not millennia, to accumulate was suddenly bequeathed to humankind..."

And with that knowledge, humanity's magical technology progressed at an explosive rate. While it did, the sages of the old kingdom began the Assault Garden project to prepare for the arrival of the future threat. They produced mana furnaces, causing an industrial revolution that relied on magical technology, and set up defensive installations.

"What's more, upon realizing that the powers of the gifted passed onto offspring, nations formed blood ties between those blessed to cultivate and strengthen their abilities. That was how the Holy Swordsmen you know today came to be."

"And that explains why the nobility produce so many children who manifest Holy Swords..." Leonis nodded.

Many Holy Swordsmen were created because of how their bloodlines were managed during past generations.

"And then, sixty-four years ago, the Void invasion began, and the strength of the Holy Swords awakened." Alexios's voice echoed through the audience chamber. "And you know what followed, Your Majesty. The Voids appeared, and in response, the rate with which people awakened to the power of the Holy Swords increased exponentially. The war with the Voids continued, and now, humankind stands on the brink of extinction..."

Alexios looked at Leonis, seated on his throne, and concluded his story.

"And that is everything I know."

...

After a long silence, Leonis finally replied, "Very well. It seems you told me the truth."

"...?"

Leonis reached into his jet-black robe and took out a shining crystal skull.

"This is an ancient magical apparatus that reacts to lies by laughing. You were

wise to speak honestly. Had you told me a single lie, I would have made you a part of my throne.”

“...?!”

“Your information was very enlightening. You have my gratitude.”

“Thank you.” Alexios fell prostrate, sweating profusely.

The Voids’ true nature, the cataclysm that ravaged the world over seven hundred years ago, and the mystery of the planet’s voice. This man didn’t hold the answers to those questions. Leonis nodded in satisfaction and rose from his throne.

“Alexios, younger brother of the emperor. I believe you and I will make fine allies.”

Alexios raised his head. “So you mean...?!”

“The Voids are a nuisance. I care little for humanity’s continued existence, but depending on the price you are willing to play, the great Dark Lord will lend you his considerable strength.”

“Th-thank you!” Alexios fell prostrate again. “I will give you anything I can provide!”

“Hmm, in that case...” Leonis placed a hand on his chin. “For the time being, I must demand equipment and a war chest for the Dark Lords’ Armies. Also, the yielding of territory.”

“T-territory?”

“Yes. Your cities are marvelous realizations of your magical technology.”

“Y-you’re not asking me to give you an Assault Garden, are you?”

“Worry not. I’m not asking you to hand over Camelot. You have an uninhabited city destroyed by the Voids, do you not?”

“You’re requesting the Eighth Assault Garden?” Alexios asked, flabbergasted.

“The Ninth Assault Garden, which is currently under construction, is also an acceptable choice.”

“I—I can’t... No, that’s an impossible demand, Your Majesty. I lack the

authority to approve that..."

"I was joking." Leonis chuckled. "If I desired those cities, I could simply take them whenever I please."

"...!" Alexios gritted his teeth.

"I have a more reasonable idea. A warship."

"A...warship?"

"Yes, my *Wild Hunt* is a sight to behold, but is very much lacking in utility. I want a vessel that utilizes the newest magical technology."

"A warship... A warship, you say..." Alexios murmured in contemplation, sweating nervously. "If it's just a single boat, I could make arrangements with the military to arrange for it in secret."

"Oh, is that right?" Leonis replied.

I-is he serious? This man possesses more authority than I gave him credit for.

While internally perplexed, Leonis maintained a confidently pleased facade. He'd intended to make outrageous demands and ease into more favorable terms. He'd even considered settling for a year's supply of doughnuts, which would go a long way toward appeasing Shary.

"Can you grant me the *Hyperion*?"

"N-no, I'm afraid that would be impossible to arrange. Please understand, Your Majesty." Alexios shook his head hurriedly. "That ship is the exclusive vessel of the royal family and a symbol of humanity's hope. What's more, it requires the royal family's spirit and Altiria's power to perform at maximum efficiency."

"Hmm, very well. An ordinary warship will do, then." Leonis threw back his black cape. "This concludes our negotiation. Alexios, my ally, I promise you on the name of the Dark Lord Zol Vadis that I will lend you my strength when you need it."

"Y-yes, thank you, Your Majesty the Dark Lord!" Alexios pressed his forehead against the floor.

“Escort him back to the surface, Shary. And be courteous.”



“Phew...”

The moment Shary and Alexios vanished into the darkness, Leonis removed Zol Vadis's mask and exhaled. The Mantle of Illusions came undone and melted into the shadows. Having returned to his ten-year-old form, Leonis dangled his legs off the throne.

“Hmm, that wasn’t bad at all. That’s how a Dark Lord should be...”

Alexios’s terrified reaction to a Dark Lord felt satisfying, whereas Riselia and Regina offering their laps as pillows for him or using him as a hugging pillow seemed like a cruel mistake. Regardless, Leonis now had a cooperator in the royal family, which was a stroke of good fortune. Alexios wasn’t much of a Holy Swordsman, yet he’d proved to be a very capable sort.

The information he provided about the Holy Swords was very enlightening. Unfortunately, the greatest questions yet remained mysteries. What cataclysm had swept over the world seven centuries ago, wiping away all knowledge of Leonis’s era? And what was the voice of the planet that granted humans the power of Holy Swords?

I didn’t hear any voice when I received my Holy Sword...

Leonis didn’t recall Riselia mentioning anything like that when she awakened hers, either. The same went for Elfiné and Sakuya.

A voice.

Recalling something, Leonis looked down at his right hand. When he was thrown to that other world, he heard Roselia Ishtaris, and her words guided him to the ruins of the Ironblood Castle, Gazoth Hell Beast’s stronghold.

When Leonis had touched the goddess altar beneath the ruins, Void miasma flowed out and carved a curse pattern onto his arm. The sigil was nowhere to be seen now, but when he fought Shardark, Leonis couldn’t use his Holy Sword.

“...”

Leonis tensed his right hand and thrust it forward.

"Holy Sword, Excalibur XX—Activate!" he cried, but the Holy Sword didn't manifest.

Why did I hear her voice? What happened down there? Leonis stared at the back of his empty hand as he pondered.

His thoughts were interrupted by a beeping. Leonis checked the terminal in his breast pocket, only to find...

Where are you, Leo?

Call me, K?

Leo?

You didn't get kidnapped, did you?

His overprotective minion had sent him multiple messages.

I best head back as soon as possible.



When Alexios Ray O'ltriese awoke, he found himself in the middle of a forest.

"Th-this is...the special demi-human ward's forest?"

The woods were dim, for the sun was descending. A quick look around revealed his two Holy Swordsmen guards lying on the ground. They were alive but seemed to have been put to sleep.

Alexios shook his head and sat up. His fingers still trembled from terror.

Zol Vadis. He's the genuine article. A real Dark Lord...

An unknown Dark Lord not mentioned in Duke Edward's research. Coming face-to-face with him made it clear that Zol Vadis wasn't someone humanity could hope to harness and control.

Duke Edward. Were our actions truly for the best?

Alexios's efforts were in the name of defeating the Voids, but...he may have signed a pact with an even worse monster.

Unease gathered in Alexios's heart like black smoke.



"Blast it all. Such good-for-nothings..."

The Eighth Assault Garden's harbor block was a port town meant for storing and preserving mineral resources harvested from the ocean floor. A young man clad in a tailored white suit was spouting insults into empty air.

He was Finzel Phillet, son of the noble Phillet Company, the biggest industrial giant in the capital. He came here in search of something. As the stage of the Holy Sword Dance Festival, the Eighth Assault Garden was completely closed and off-limits to anyone but those affiliated with the army. As such, there was no one else nearby.

The abrupt thunderstorm from earlier had died down, and the sun was setting. The gigantic Void fissure remained visible overhead, offering a glimpse at the crimson sky beyond. It hung like a gigantic eye peering down on this world.

How vexing. If it weren't for that disturbance, I would have...

The ninth apostle, Iris Void Priestess, had used the Eighth Assault Garden's mana furnace to trigger the Void Shift. Had it succeeded, the whole region around the capital would have been consumed by the Nether Void.

But something got in the way.

Finzel Phillet groaned bitterly. The Void tear had formed as a by-product of the interrupted process, but the Void Shift wasn't realized. Someone had destroyed Iris Void Priestess, and the Academia unit Finzel had sent to the Holy Sword Dance Festival was wiped out.

“Damn it all! Why?! Why won’t things go according to plan...?!”

Finzel searched for Demon Sword reactions, cursing all the while. The Academia unit deployed to represent the Fourth Assault Garden was supposed to gather and recover Demon Swords. Its objective was to kill the most promising Holy Swordsmen chosen by each of the other schools to participate in the Holy Sword Dance Festival and offer their Demon Swords to the mana furnace.

While the plan had ultimately failed, Finzel still needed to recover the assembled Demon Swords to eliminate them as evidence. In other words, he was here to scavenge and sift through garbage.

“Damn that Sakura Orchid mad dog...,” Finzel spat.

He’d once hired a mercenary group called the Kenki Gathering. They, too, were rabid mutts in their own right, but they didn’t hold a candle to the blue-haired swordswoman from Excalibur Academy.

Sakuya Sieglinde had single-handedly defeated the Academia’s Demon Swordsmen, even after they’d begun to transform into Voids.

Had the plan worked, I would have been welcomed as one of the goddess’s apostles!

The apostles spread the goddess’s gospel and reigned over the Void home world.

Finzel wanted to be acknowledged—by the world and by his great father. When he was twelve, he attained the power of a Holy Sword, but everyone around him was disappointed. His Holy Sword’s abilities were useless in combat. Thus, Finzel came to loathe the world. He despised his brother and youngest sister for being gifted with powerful, useful Holy Swords...

However, he didn’t need a Holy Sword anymore. By becoming an apostle of the goddess, he would surpass even Father.

Finzel gazed up at the Void tear.

“Soon. Very soon, I shall welcome you to this world, goddess...”

Something grazed Finzel’s ear. The object whizzing past him struck the ground, kicking fragments into the air.

“...?”

Finzel spun around and saw a black-haired girl pointing a military pistol at him.

“I won’t miss the next shot, Finzel...,” Elfiné Phillet declared.



Elfiné faced Finzel, the muzzle of her Ray Hawk still pointed at him. Her sleek black hair fluttered in the ocean breeze.

“What are you doing here, Elfiné?” Finzel didn’t seem terribly surprised.

His voice came across as almost casual. It had been years since Elfiné last saw her brother's face up close. She hadn't met him since her admittance to Excalibur Academy, when she left Count Phillet's domain on the Fourth Assault Garden.

"That tear..." Elfiné muttered.

"Hmm?"

"At the army's request, I was using my Holy Sword to observe the Void tear," Elfiné explained coldly.

Two Eye of the Witch orbs floated around her like sentries. "And in the process, I spotted you. What are you doing here?"

"Oh, just looking for something."

"Looking for something? In a place that's off-limits to nonmilitary personnel?" Elfiné questioned, holding up an investigation warrant issued by the Imperial Knights.

"What are you trying to say?" Finzel replied curtly.

"I know you're involved in the D Project, Finzel."

"..."

"It was originally a plan spearheaded by the military to combat the Voids. The goal was to make Holy Swords even more powerful by forcing them to go out of control." Elfiné took a step closer, the Ray Hawk still in her grip. "But the plan failed. There's no controlling the Holy Swords in that state, and some of their wielders exhibited signs of turning into Voids. As a result, the dangerous Demon Sword project was suspended indefinitely, never to see the light of day again. That's how it should have been anyway..."

"...But someone resurrected the project." Finzel's lips curled up into a smirk.

"...!"

"You're talented, Elfiné. I can see why Father tried to groom you to be his successor." He clapped his hands in sarcastic praise.

"Finzel, you..." Elfiné glared at the man. "You used that Sakura Orchid

mercenary group for your experiments, tried to awaken Demon Swords at Excalibur Academy using an Artificial Elemental, and made Academia's students into your test subjects, didn't you?"

Elfiné had no decisive proof about any of those isolated incidents, but she knew that more people would be hurt if she didn't stop her brother. Finzel Phillet received the accusations with a vexed click of the tongue.

"Perhaps I've been a bit careless with my operations. Had things only gone according to plan, the capital would be overrun with Voids by now."

"What are you after, Finzel?!" Elfiné concentrated mana in the Ray Hawk. Liat's face flashed in her mind. Elfiné had once been a member of the seventh platoon under Liat. He'd sought the power to protect others, only for his soul to be corrupted by the power of a Demon Sword...

"Ha-ha. Can you really shoot me?"

"I'm not a very good shot, but the Eye of the Witch supports my aim."

"That's not what I mean. Can you do this to your brother, your own flesh and blood?"

"I can. I won't let you cause any more sacrifices."

A gunshot rang out, and a bullet of compressed mana was propelled from the Ray Hawk, puncturing Finzel's shoulder.

"Nng! Ahhh... Ahhhhhhhh!" Finzel staggered and fell to his knees.

But the next moment, something unbelievable occurred. Black miasma spewed from the wound on his shoulder in place of blood.

"...What?!"

"Ahhhhh! Ahhhhhhhh■■■■■—"

Squelch, squelch, squelch, squelch.

Finzel's body underwent a horrifying transformation. His suit was torn up, and the flesh in his back swelled from the inside out. His limbs grew and writhed in inconsistent sizes, as if each one were a different creature.

"A Demon Sword?! No, this is...a Void?!"

“■■■■■■...!” The oversized monster released an inhuman howl.

Fragments of rubble shot out in a radial pattern, tearing through Elfiné’s uniform.

“...Have you submitted to a Demon Sword’s power, Finzel?!”

Elfiné aimed for Finzel’s head and shot. But the luminous bullet of mana was deflected by his hardened skin. Normal weaponry was ineffective against Voids.

“...?!”

“Elfiné, you’ve always been beautiful. But...” Finzel smirked in Void form.
“Don’t you think this body is much more appealing?”

He brought down his massive arm with a force that far exceeded anything a human was capable of.

Screeeeeeech...!

The gigantic limb was deflected right as it seemed it would collide with Elfiné. The Eye of the Witch deployed a shield around her without being given an order, acting on its auto-guard capabilities.

“What a wonderful Holy Sword. I wish I had one as strong as yours, tooooooo!”
Finzel howled and kicked off the asphalt, charging for his sister.

“Holy Sword, Mode Shift—Vorpal Ray!”

The two Eye of the Witch orbs released a blinding glow, producing a radiance around the pair of spheres.

Screeech!

A beam blew off the Void’s arm and destroyed its head. Elfiné couldn’t hold back. Now that he’d relinquished his humanity and sold his soul to the emptiness, she could spare him no pity.

However...

“You’d never understand. You were blessed by the Holy Swords!”

Intense miasma spewed from Finzel’s wound, and a snakelike head grew out of the remains of his arm. Finzel’s transformed face surfaced on his chest.

Monster! A Demon Sword can really transform someone this much? Elfiné fired the Vorpal Ray again, but Finzel jumped away and climbed up to the rooftop of a warehouse.

Hisssss!

He whipped his snakelike arm like a lash at Elfiné, who reflexively summoned a third orb to deploy a shield. The serpent appendage was deflected and struck the warehouse wall, creating a shower of rubble.

...Oh no!

Their clash kicked up a cloud of dust. Elfiné sprinted through the cloud, blinded and holding her breath. She could only manifest up to eight orbs, but five of them were scanning and guarding the Void tear at the army's request. Recalling them required time, and dismissing a manifested Holy Sword only to activate it again immediately consumed a great deal of stamina.



“Ah-ha-ha! This power the goddess granted me is wonderful!” Finzel laughed maniacally.

Goddess?

Elfiné latched on to her brother’s words. Other students corrupted by Demon Swords had claimed to hear a goddess’s voice. And when Elfiné ran into the Phillet Company Artificial Elemental, Seraphim, the spirit called itself a messenger of the goddess.

Just who is this...goddess?

Was it some code word linked to the D Project or an actual individual’s name?

While the dust settled, Elfiné continued shooting the Vorpal Ray, which cleaved horizontally through the warehouse and caused it to collapse over Finzel.

Crash!

“Haah... Ahahahahahaaaaaaaaaaaaa■■■■■!”

Finzel’s body swelled up unnaturally again, limbs sprouting from random spots. It was like watching a caricature of the process of evolution.

“You can’t go back to being human anymore, can you...?” Elfiné whispered sadly. She bit her lip. “In that case, I can at least put you down before the army’s Holy Swordsmen see you.”

Elfiné thrust out her arm, commanding the three Eye of the Witch orbs to form a triangular force field.

“■■■■■...!”

Finzel’s now monstrous form tore off its arm, hurling it as a projectile weapon.

Hissss!

The arm, thrown at blinding speeds, struck the barrier and instantly evaporated.

“I kept this technique a secret for the Holy Sword Dance Festival...!” Elfiné said.

The three orbs' force field converged on one point, and then...

"Tri-Flare Burst!"

Bwoooooooosh!

An intense explosion that rivaled Regina's Drag Blast in firepower swallowed the Void.

"Did I...do it?" Elfiné whispered, dropping to her knees.

The three Eye of the Witch Orbs broke into particles of light.

If this doesn't defeat him...

Elfiné heard the sound of something cracking.

What?

Elfiné raised her head and strained her eyes, peering into the ashen smoke. Finzel was still standing. He had a gaping hole in his torso, but he was alive.

"God...dess... My goddess!"

"...!"

The Void staggered for her, writhing.

Crack, crack, crack!

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Multiple fractures formed in the air around him, enveloping Finzel.



Am I going to die? To a Holy Sword, of all things? The power I hate most...

Amid his muddled consciousness, Finzel Phillet found himself gazing at the Nether Void's crimson skies.

Crack, crack... Crack...

His body was falling apart, and there was no stopping it. He knew very well the fate that awaited test subjects whose bodies were corrupted by the power of a Demon Sword. He'd seen what his experiments had done to so many Holy Swordsmen.

"Heh-heh-heh...I'm...going to hell..."

"No. Those who gain the power of the Voids only return to emptiness." A voice suddenly cut through his thoughts.

"...? O-ohhh!"

Was the goddess reaching out to him during his final moment?

"It's a pity, Finzel, but your role ends here."

No. It wasn't the goddess. A palmtop-sized fairylike girl appeared above Finzel. It was the Phillet Company's Artificial Elemental, Seraphim, a false goddess, implanted with a fragment of the true, great goddess.

"So you...came to recover my Demon Sword?" Finzel muttered miserably, extending his crumbling arm to the sky.

What irony that the false goddess he'd created came to see him in his last moments.

"Yes," replied a voice quite unlike an Artificial Elemental's. "And what's more, your memories will make for useful combat data."

"...?!"

The speaker was the man Finzel despised more than any other.

"Wh-why...?! Why are...you...?!"

The hands of an old man covered in black miasma grabbed his face like a vise.

"I am an apostle of the goddess."

Finzel could only groan in despair at Deinfraude Phillet's words.

CHAPTER 6

INVITATION

“What’s Leo up to?”

Riselia whined like a cat while lying on the sofa in her room in the Hræsvelgr dorm clad in nothing but a towel. She was fresh out of the shower, and her skin was still flushed and steaming. After reporting to the bureau on all that had happened recently, she’d returned to the dorm, only for a thunderstorm to abruptly strike on the way. The forecast had called for clear weather, thus she’d been unprepared, and her uniform got soaked.

After fixing her dripping silver locks with a hairpin, Riselia threw her bare legs over the sofa’s edge. Her present appearance was much too immodest for a duke’s daughter.

“Lady Selia, you’re acting improper,” Regina chided her as she heated up a teapot. Her uniform had gotten drenched by the downpour, too, but she’d changed into her maid’s outfit. “And you’re being overprotective. The kid’s a full-fledged Holy Swordsman, you know.”

“W-well, yes, but I’m worried. What if someone kidnapped him?” Riselia kicked her legs while staring at her terminal’s screen.

“Ah, Lady Selia, you look like a beached shrimp!” Regina said, promptly taking out her terminal and snapping a photo.

Riselia hugged her pillow anxiously. “I am not a shrimp...”

According to what Phrenia had told her, Leonis left the orphanage shortly before the rain started.

Where did he go?

She was well aware of Leonis’s strength. He wouldn’t get kidnapped, and even if Voids appeared, he’d easily be able to fend for himself.

But...

Leonis had disappeared for the last few days, going somewhere far away. Perhaps Riselia was over-fretting now because she'd worried so much during his earlier absence. She sank her fangs into her pillow grumpily.

...!

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting, Miss Selia."

Upon suddenly remembering that moment, Riselia felt her cheeks flush.

When she was held in his small arms, and his eyes gazed at her...he didn't look like a ten-year-old, and it made her heart race. Riselia's fingers brushed over her cheeks, which felt feverish. Was it because of the shower?

No. It was probably more than that. Her emotional state was unstable, which made it difficult to regulate her mana. Her vampire heart throbbed, brimming with magical power.

"Leo..." Riselia whispered softly.

Suddenly, the dorm's front doorbell rang.



"...Ohhhhhh! Leo, I thought some bad grown-ups kidnapped you! I was so worried!"

"I'm sorry!" Leonis apologized profusely as soon as he returned to the room.

"Did you get caught up in the rain, too, kid? We got totally drenched," Regina said.

Maybe I should refrain from recklessly manipulating the weather in the future. Leonis ruminated upon his hasty actions.

"By the way, kid, what do you want first? Something to eat? A bath? Or maybe...me?" Regina asked impishly, a teasing smile on her lips.

After a moment, Leonis replied...

"I'll have you, Miss Regina."

...with a perfectly innocent smile.

"Huh? E-erm, uh...me?" the maid stammered, her face going red.

As always, Regina couldn't handle it when others teased her back.

"I was joking," Leonis said triumphantly as he went to sit on the bed. "I did work up a bit of a sweat, so a shower would be welcome..."

However, Regina suddenly hopped over, hugging Leonis and placing her chin on his shoulder.

"M-Miss Regina?!"

"You think you can get away with teasing your big sister, kid?" she whispered before blowing into his ear.

She was clearly in counterattack mode.

"U-um...your chest is pressing..."

"Yes, it is. Does that make you embarrassed, kid?"

"N-ngh..."

Squish...squish...

Leonis felt Regina's soft chest press against him through her maid's uniform, and his pulse quickened. How would Alexios react if he saw him now? Leonis's dignity as a Dark Lord would evaporate in an instant.

"I—I give in, all right? I shouldn't have said that."

Regina nodded in satisfaction when Leonis waved the white flag.

"Well, I'll forgive you, but next time you'll know better before you mock a girl like that, right?"

"R-Regina, what are you doing to Leo?!"

Riselia entered after having changed into a tank top. She puffed out her cheeks angrily.

"I'm just getting my fill of the kid, Lady Selia. Want to join in?"

"H-huh? Well, yes, I would..."

"E-erm, Miss Selia...," Leonis muttered uncomfortably.

The three heard a knock on the window.

“?!”

Everyone froze up—this was the second floor of the building. Who could be tapping on their window? The trio looked out the window and quickly spotted a shining gold bird sitting on the sill, tapping its beak on the pane.

“...A bird?” Riselia said, puzzled.

“No, I think this is a spirit,” Regina corrected.

“A spirit? What’s one of those doing here?” Riselia got up to open the window.

The bird fluttered into the room, and after flying around for a moment, it dropped the object it was carrying in its beak onto the table.

“It’s an envelope,” Riselia said.

“People use spirits to deliver letters?” Leonis asked.

“On the front lines, it’s not uncommon to use flying Artificial Elementals to deliver orders and directives,” Regina explained. “They’re useful when the Voids’ EMP jamming disrupts communications.”



She extended a hand to the golden bird, which promptly hopped onto her arm. Regina was clearly accustomed to handling spirits.

“But using a spirit to deliver personal mail is actually pretty unusual...,” Regina commented.

“...This isn’t a directive from the army,” Riselia said after picking up the envelope. “Is it a personal missive?”

“Like a love letter?” Regina suggested.

“For whom?”

“Well, you, Lady Selia. Perhaps someone saw your stellar performance during the Holy Sword Dance Festival and fell head over heels for you!”

What? Leonis felt something in his temple bulge. What cheeky fool has the nerve to try laying hands on my minion?

He gathered mana in his hand, intent on incinerating the letter.

“W-wait, this coat of arms. Isn’t that...?” Regina’s eyes widened when she saw the wax seal on the envelope.

“What’s wrong?”

“That’s House O’ltriese’s seal!”

“What?!”



After opening the letter, the three saw the name Chatres Ray O’ltriese signed in elegant cursive.

“Wh-why did Princess Chatres send us a letter?” Riselia panicked with the message in hand.

“Maybe it’s an invitation to a duel?” Regina suggested.

“A duel?!”

“Well, you never settled your fight in the Holy Sword Dance Festival.”

All the color drained from Riselia’s face. “Th-that’s true...”

The Voids had attacked in the middle of the battle, cutting off their match.

“Go on, read it,” Regina urged.

“R-right.” Riselia nodded. “Um. ‘To the respected captain of the eighteenth platoon...’”

The letter was addressed to the entire eighteenth platoon and was written very concisely. First, Chatres offered gratitude for saving her life, and she praised the team’s courage under fire battling the Voids. She wished to invite the platoon to a humble party, a token of her thanks. The princess apologized and explained that while the custom was for her to visit them, doing so would be difficult, given her royal position. Thus she had to request they come to her instead.

“Oh, thank goodness, it wasn’t an invitation to a duel!” Riselia sighed with tremendous relief.

“Princess Chatres is surprisingly sincere,” Regina muttered as she patted the bird’s head.

“It says the party is tomorrow afternoon, and we can come at any time...” Riselia threw a concerned glance at her maid. “What do you think, Regina?”

“...”

Leonis didn’t miss the way Regina’s green eyes wavered for a moment.

“I...I think I’ll pass.” Regina shook her head with a smile full of conflicted emotions. “I promised I wouldn’t meet them, and I don’t want to cause you trouble, Lady Selia.”

Regina Ray O’Itriese was born on a day the Star of Calamity shone in the sky, which led to her being stripped of her status as a princess and sent to spend her life in a Human Church convent. Riselia’s grandfather was the one to object to that decision fifteen years ago.

Instead, Regina was raised to be Riselia’s personal maid, but she was strictly forbidden from disclosing her background as a former princess and from meeting her relatives. Under normal circumstances, she could never see her elder sister. She was only permitted to exchange a few words with Chatres because their participation in the Holy Sword Dance Festival was a special occasion.

“Regina.” Riselia’s tone was kind, but her eyes were earnest. “You risked your life to protect Princess Chatres. And I think you’re the person she wants to thank the most.”

“I just did my duty as a Holy Swordswoman...”

“That’s how any Holy Swordsman should act, but not everyone can live up to that ideal. Look, she mentioned your name first when thanking us.” Riselia handed the letter to Regina. “I’ll respect whatever decision you make, but I don’t want you to make a choice you’ll regret. After all, I can never meet my older sister, mother, or father anymore...”

“Lady Selia...” Regina bit her lip and hugged the letter. “I was happy when she called my name,” she whispered. “She said she memorized all rival team members’ names. That’s the only reason she knew me, but I was happy anyway...”

Regina hung her head, and the bird-shaped spirit looked up at her.

“I can’t reveal my identity, of course, but I do want to meet my sister. And when I think I might never get a chance like this again...”

“Yeah.” Riselia nodded and gently placed a hand on Regina’s shoulder. She then turned to look at Leonis. “You’re coming with us, right, Leo?”

“Me? Well...” Leonis thought it over.

Honestly, he wasn’t enthused about going. If he had time to spend on a dull tea party, he would much rather spend it working toward rebuilding the Dark Lords’ Armies. However...

...Elysion Academy, eh?

Blackas’s report mentioned that school was the epicenter of the strange shadow corridor activity. Since he couldn’t act conspicuously, Leonis had entrusted Blackas with investigating that, but an invitation meant he held a golden opportunity to look into the place in broad daylight without arousing suspicion.

Plus, he couldn’t let Riselia and Regina go unprotected if the place was dangerous.

Leonis shrugged and nodded. “Since the princess decided to invite us, it would only be polite to oblige.”

“That just leaves Sakuya and Miss Finé. I’ll ask Miss Finé about her plans later. I haven’t seen Sakuya in a while, though,” Riselia said.

“Have you tried calling her?” Leonis asked.

Riselia shook her head. “Sakuya usually doesn’t have her terminal on her.”

Regina shrugged. “Well, Sakuya vanishing and coming back on a whim is nothing new. We can let her be.”

“Yeah, that’s Sakuya for you,” Riselia agreed.

“You’re treating her like a cat...,” Leonis said, exasperated.

It was the exact opposite of how overprotective she was with him.

“Oh, wait...” Regina acted like she’d just recalled something.

Riselia raised an eyebrow. “What’s wrong, Regina?”

“It’s just... We were invited to Elysion Academy’s girls’ dormitory. It’s off-limits to men.”

“It is?”

“Yes. It’s a high-class training school reserved for noble ladies, after all...”

“Isn’t my presence in this dormitory already unusual?” Leonis remarked, calmly reminding the girls of a similar issue.

“You’re fine, Leo. You’re a child.”

“Lady Selia, that logic only works here because Excalibur Academy is relatively broad-minded, and the Hræsvelgr dorm sits on the edge of the female housing area. Listen, if you bring the kid to Elysion Academy...”

“Wh-what’ll happen?”

“The girls are going to abduct him and do this and that to him, that’s what!”

“Huh?!”

“What, exactly...?” Leonis asked quietly.

"Th-that's bad! Oh, no. What do we do?" Riselia was panicking.

"Lady Selia..." Regina adopted a serious expression. "I have a good idea."

Leonis had an ominous feeling.



"This is the Spirit Forest, where all spirits and elementals are born."

"This reminds me of the Sacred Tree Forest from my homeland."

The sun was just beginning to set. After crossing the wasteland, Arle and Sakuya had stopped their vehicle at the edge of the woods. Arle walked between the trees ahead of Sakuya, her steps as swift in the forest as they would've been on flat plains. The underbrush and tree branches seemed to twist out of her way, clearing a path for her.

"This is wondrous. I'd heard elves are blessed with supernatural powers, but this..."

"It's a forest striding spell," Arle replied indifferently. "You don't have to be an elf to learn it."

"I hope you'll teach it to me, then."

"I don't mind. If anything, I think your Holy Swords are much more peculiar."

The two chatted as they ventured into the depths of the forest. The gigantic Void tear ran wide. The pair would reach their destination by dawn at their current pace.

"Let's take a break."

Arle stopped in her tracks when they reached the banks of a lake.

"I can keep going," Sakuya insisted.

"A forced march can be dangerous. Besides, my shoes and pants are full of sand. I want to wash off."

"Yes, that's true."

The two took off their clothes and dipped into the lake. Its water was cold, which was welcome because the long trip had left Arle and Sakuya hot.

“Spirits used to gather at this lake,” Arle said while undoing her ponytail. “If one didn’t cleanse themselves in this lake, the spirits would grow displeased with them and make sure they were lost in the forest forever.”

“Spirits, huh? I don’t see any around now,” Sakuya remarked, scanning the area.

“Back when the Spirit King was still alive, there were as many spirits in this forest as animals.”

“The Spirit King? You mean the spirits had their own ruler?”

“Yes. And the elves were allied with the Spirit King.”

“So what happened to the Spirit King?” Sakuya asked.

Arle’s shoulders sank. “He was destroyed by one of the Dark Lords.”





Moonlight shone on the chalk white palace-like campus building of Elysion Academy and its sleeping residents. The shadow of a large black wolf moved soundlessly through the open-air marble corridors.

This is worse than I thought. I didn't think it had consumed all the shadows.

Blackas growled quietly. The students studying in this academy went about their lives undisturbed, unaware that all the shadows here had been replaced. But to this black wolf that walked amid the darkness, this place was like...

...A forest covered in hunting traps.

The hand of invasion extended from the center of this place, spreading all over the capital from every shadow. Given that it had taken only about a dozen hours for this academy to fall into the enemy's grasp, it wouldn't be long before the shadows in Leonis's base on the Seventh Assault Garden, Excalibur Academy, were compromised, too.

I won't let that happen!

Blackas's golden eyes burned with anger. He'd sent the three Shadow Wraiths that Leonis had lent him to invade the darkness here, but they hadn't returned. Whoever controlled this place had likely destroyed them. Shadow Wraiths were relatively high-ranked among the monsters in the Dark Lords' Armies, and three of them had fallen.

Normally, Blackas would've returned to Leonis and reported this the moment he realized what had happened. However, he wanted to gain some information on this unknown enemy before he left.

He leaped over a corridor railing into the courtyard. A fountain stood in the center, spouting water that glittered in the moonlight. Blackas's eyes settled on a shadow wavering within the fountain. Its darkness was so deep that there was no perceivable bottom.

This is a shadow gate.

With a Realm of Shadows of this size, there were undoubtedly other gates in the area. Regardless, Blackas was lucky to have spotted this. Letting out a guttural growl, he plunged into the fountain without a second thought. The only

sound he produced was a faint splashing, which echoed through the courtyard.

Slipping through the shadows, Blackas emerged to find himself in a stone hallway. It was similar to the underground labyrinth of Death Hold. But suddenly, the shadow gate behind Blackas disappeared, leaving only a rock wall.

“?!”

Blackas’s golden eyes shone in the dark. Bit by bit, shadow dripped from the gaps in the walls. The darkness molded itself into humanoid monsters.

Blackas howled. His sharp fangs and claws flashed, biting and tearing into the creatures.

“No good. These aren’t ordinary shadow monsters.” Blackas groaned as he spat out a piece of one.

This nasty miasma was the same sort those unsightly monstrosities, Voids, exuded.

“What does this mean?”

“Ho-ho-ho. What a pleasant show. The prince of the Realm of Shadows, the great noble son, reduced to animal form and forced to chew on ugly monsters.”

“Who’s there?!” Blackas barked angrily at the voice echoing around him.

“Have you forgotten my voice, Blackas Shadow Prince, usurper of the Realm of Shadows? I didn’t think you were still alive. I admit, it’s a pleasant surprise.”

“It can’t be. You...” Blackas let out an angry howl. “So this is all your work, Queen of Shadows—Scheherazade!”

The Queen of Shadows had once ruled over the Realm of Shadows, but her reign of tyranny ended when Blackas rebelled against her with Leonis’s aid. He drove her from her throne and exiled her to an eternal wasteland.

“*Oh-ho-ho-ho. My Realm of Shadows is undying.*”

“Then I will destroy it as many times as it takes.”

“Hmph. Things shall play out differently this time. You should be bound by my curse, and your ally, the Undead King, has been destroyed by the human heroes...”

“?!”

The floor beneath Blackas became a quagmire, which dragged him down. Blackas struggled to free himself, but the shadowy mud only grew heavier.

“Do not bother. This Castle of Shadows is a bound barrier I’ve spent many years constructing. With your current powers, you cannot break free.”

What a blunder. I must at least tell Lord Magnus!

Blackas fought and struggled while gradually drowning in the mire, but his efforts were in vain, and the shadows swallowed him.

CHAPTER 7

ELYSION ACADEMY

“This is...humiliating.”

Leonis grumbled as he looked at the dresser mirror. A lovely girl in a maid’s uniform looked back at him.

Last evening, Regina had come up with a plan to get Leonis into the female dormitory area—dress him as a female maid. Apparently, they couldn’t get an Excalibur Academy girl’s uniform in time, but if they claimed he was Riselia’s personal attendant, nobody would think twice about it.

They’d had a maid’s uniform sitting in the closet that was just Leonis’s size left over from the café the eighteenth platoon held during the Holy Light Festival. Before they brought out the maid’s uniform, Riselia tried to have Leonis wear her old clothes from when she was in elementary school, but that didn’t work out.

“Me, a Dark Lord once feared as the incarnation of death and terror, dressed like this!” Leonis stood in front of the mirror, trembling with anger as he gripped the hem of his skirt.

“M-my lord, I think you look v-very lovely!” a voice squeaked behind him.



“Are you making a mockery of me, Shary?” Leonis turned around and glared at his assassin maid.

“O-of course not!” Shary shook her head, clearly flustered. “But, my lord, while you look like a maid, you’re certainly not conducting yourself like one.”

“What? Am I really so improper?” Leonis furrowed his brow, pinched up his skirt, and twirled in place.

“You’re doing it all wrong, my lord! Allow me to show you how to act like a maid. Like this. Aha. ♪” Shary struck a cute pose. “Come now, my lord, follow my example. Aha. ♪”

“Don’t get carried away. You are testing my patience, Shary.”

The air shook furiously as Leonis released his aura of death.

“M-my apologies, my lord!” Shary bowed and apologized profusely.

“Very well.” Leonis cleared his throat with a sour expression. “I suppose this disguise will be useful for exploring the academy’s premises.”

Shary’s expression turned serious. “I hope Lord Blackas is safe and sound.”

“He’s cautious. I doubt we have much to worry about, but...”

The fact that he hadn’t reported in since last night was concerning. But before Leonis could think about that any longer...

“Leo, it’s time to go.”

...Riselia knocked on the door and came in. Shary swiftly sank into the shadows to hide herself.

“Oh, Leo, you look adorable!”

“Not you too, Miss Selia...,” Leonis groaned.

“Heh-heh-heh, sorry, Leo. You’re cute when you’re dressed like a boy, too.” Riselia smiled and patted him on the head.

“...That doesn’t make it any better,” Leonis replied dispiritedly.



Riselia, Regina, and Leonis took the linear rail to the Imperial Capital. While

each Assault Garden was currently in a state of high alert, the students of Excalibur Academy could move between cities without having to go through any troublesome formalities.

“It’s a shame that Miss Finé couldn’t come,” Regina remarked.

Riselia shook her head. “There really isn’t much to be done... There aren’t enough analysis-type Holy Swords to go around.”

Elfiné was basically forced to help the Imperial Knights today, and there was no telling when she’d return to the Hræsvelgr dorm.

“And I couldn’t get in touch with Sakuya. Where did she go off to...?” Riselia added.

“She’ll probably pop up if there’s an emergency summons,” Regina replied. “Phew...I’m pretty nervous.”

“Don’t worry. Leo and I are here with you.” Riselia patted her dear friend on the shoulder.

They got off the linear rail at the Central Garden station and walked toward Elysion Academy’s grounds. Before long, the three were standing before the campus—a building reminiscent of a chalk white palace, surrounded by artificial greenery.

This is a fairly old architectural style. Is this what they call retro-culture? Leonis thought while minding the skirt of his maid’s uniform.

According to what Alexios had told him, two hundred years ago, the gifted who heard the voice of the planet were granted knowledge that allowed them to rapidly develop civilization via magical technology. There were some differences, but the structure was similar to those Leonis recalled from a thousand years ago.

“Elysion Academy is the second oldest Holy Swordsman training school, built after the Second Assault Garden’s Military Instruction School.” Riselia pointed at the campus building.

“Excalibur Academy is a relatively recent school, right?” Leonis asked.

“Yes. It was built to be a branch of the Military Instruction School when the

Seventh Assault Garden was completed. It's the largest of all the training academies and boasts the most cutting-edge facilities... Wait, Leo, didn't you attend a lecture about the history of the schools?"

"I—I did?"

Leonis had probably skipped out on that lecture. He'd often used skeletons as his body doubles when he avoided classes, but recently, Riselia had learned to identify his replacements. Now he'd been caught red-handed.

As they walked down the trail on the school grounds, Riselia, Regina, and Leonis came upon an iron gate.

"So, hmm, do we just walk in?"

"We have the letter from Princess Chatres..."

While they pondered what to do, the bird spirit that had delivered the letter flew in front of them, scattering particles of light into the air. The spirit fluttered around the three to confirm their identities and, upon seeing Leonis in his maid's uniform, cocked its head in confusion.

"Erm, I'm Miss...ah, Lady Selia's maid," Leonis said with exasperation.

The spirit nodded in understanding, and the gate opened.



The bird led the group to the girls' dorms.

"Oh, are those guests? They're wearing Excalibur Academy uniforms."

"Are those the ones who fought Lady Chatres in the Holy Sword Dance Festival?"

"Ah, it's Lady Riselia!"

"The Crystalia Duchy girl?"

Some noble ladies walking along the road looked at Riselia and whispered to each other. Unlike Chatres, not many of Elysion Academy's students dressed in military uniforms. Instead, they wore stylish urban outfits. Many of the girls spoke in the same prim and proper manner as Fenris Edelritz, owing to the fact that this was a school for the upper class.

"You're really the center of attention, Lady Selia," Regina remarked.

"That's because the reporters wrote all sorts of half truths about me..." Riselia hung her head, embarrassed, and hastened her steps.

Assorted press outlets published all sorts of special features about her, calling her a beautiful contestant who shook up the Holy Sword Dance Festival. Riselia was a pretty girl, and on top of that, she was the daughter of Duke Crystalia, a hero who died a tragic death in the line of duty fighting against the Voids. This made her as appealing a topic as Chatres, the most promising contender in the Holy Sword Dance Festival.

Riselia's popularity had only grown since her surprising performance during the competition. It only made sense that she'd gained the admiration of all the girls her age who aspired to be great Holy Swordswomen.

"A few reporters even took secret photos of our training. It was awful..." Riselia admitted with a sigh.

Secret photos?! Leonis's ears twitched at the term.

He secretly resolved to reduce those reporters to ashes.

"E-erm, Miss Riselia, could we get a picture with you?"

"C-can I get your autograph?! My kid sister is a big fan!"

As Riselia, Regina, and Leonis crossed the courtyard, girls surrounded them.

"Huh?!" Riselia exclaimed, confused. However, she ultimately complied. "F-fine, just, please, line up..."

"Your battle with Lady Chatres during the Holy Sword Dance Festival was amazing!"

"I—I fought her, too..." Regina whispered, sulking, but no one heard her.

All right...

Leonis looked around. Nothing struck him as out of the ordinary about the place, but there was the possibility that some manner of disguise was fooling him.

"Shary, how do these building's shadows look?" He communicated with Shary,

who was hidden in the shadows.

“Nearly all the shadows have been seized by someone. It’s like a labyrinth covered in traps.”

“...I see.”

As a shadow denizen, Shary saw the area differently from Leonis.

“*Is there any sign of Blackas?*” Leonis asked.

“No, Lord Blackas is nowhere to be seen,” Shary replied telepathically. *“He might be hiding somewhere deep within the shadows.”*

“*I should hope he is.*”

The Shadow Wraiths that Leonis had lent to Blackas never returned. Something might have happened to him...

I doubt Blackas was taken by surprise, though...

“*Should I go search for Lord Blackas?*”

“*Hmm.*” Leonis paused for thought. *“Yes. But don’t do anything reckless.”*

“*Understood, my lord...*”

Shary’s presence disappeared from the shadow at Leonis’s feet. He wanted to join the investigation but decided it was best not to do anything to attract enemy attention.

I don’t know who’s behind this, but I will crush them to bits.

Free at last from the swarm of girls, Riselia let out a haggard exhale.

“Th-that was terrible.”

“It looked taxing, Lady Selia,” Regina said with a strained smile.

“Y-yes. But I’m glad for their support.” Riselia pumped her fists.

“I’m happy, too. Everyone’s acknowledging your hard work, Lady Selia.”

Regina had watched Riselia through it all. She knew how much her friend suffered while longing for a Holy Sword. Regina had been the only one there while Riselia trained tirelessly in pursuit of her goal. Seeing students from another school acknowledge Riselia was undoubtedly a touching moment for

Regina. Leonis was also pleased to see his minion praised for her efforts.

Unlike the courtyard, the area behind the girls' dorm was a quiet, serene place. There were no students to be seen, and silence hung over the place. Evidently, these dorms were reserved for the highest achievers at the school.

Just like Excalibur Academy had the Hræsvelgr dorm and the Fafnir dorm, the living quarters here came in different quality grades. The halls were made of polished marble and lined with expensive-looking paintings. A portrait of a serene sea offered a glimpse of the world before the Void invasion.

This isn't much to my taste, though.

The corridors of Death Hold were decorated with paintings of assorted monsters and undead. When they spotted an intruder, the images came to life and sprang out to attack.

The bird spirit leading the way suddenly sped off somewhere.

“...?”

Riselia, Regina, and Leonis stopped in front of a portrait, and a moment later, the sounds of approaching footsteps echoed from the far side of the corridor.

“My apologies for calling you here. Thank you for coming.”

“Princess Chatres.”

Chatres Ray O’ltriese approached with the bird spirit perched on her shoulder.



“Just what...is this?!”

After crossing through the woods, Arle stood stunned in front of the gigantic Void tear. Many trees grew on the other side of the fissure, but they were quite different from those in the Spirit Forest. The malformed things pulsed with eerie life, surrounded by eerie miasma.

“I doubt my forest striding spell will work here,” Arle said.

“It reeks of them...” Sakuya’s eyes glinted as she glared into the depths of the woods. Her hand was already clutching her sword of crackling lightning. “Let’s

go."

"H-hold on, wait..."

Sakuya stepped into the tear in space without a second thought, and Arle hurried after.

...?!

The moment Arle set foot in the forest on the other side, she was overcome by dizziness and nausea. It was the intense vapor the Voids produced.

"Cough, cough... Protection of the Wind!" Somehow, Arle invoked a spell through a coughing fit, forming a barrier around herself.

"Are you all right?" Sakuya asked, grabbing the elf girl by the arm as she swayed on her feet.

"H-how are you fine inside this miasma...?" Arle asked, still choked up.

"I'm used to it," Sakuya whispered curtly. She looked around. "So this is the Void home world..."

Arle also scanned the surroundings. A bloodred sky. Writhing, eerie trees. And...

"What's that?" Sakuya frowned as she peered into the distance.

Arle followed Sakuya's gaze. Past the trees stood the tip of a giant stone pyramid.

Is that what I think it is?! Arle's blue eyes widened in disbelief.

"A structure? Do the Voids have a civilization?" Sakuya wondered, baffled.

Arle shook her head. "No. That pyramid is a temple!"

"A temple?" Sakuya repeated, and Arle nodded in confirmation.

"What is the Spirit King's temple doing in this world?"



Chatres led them to a room awash with sunlight. At the center of the chamber were a sturdily built table and sofas. The fixtures were all fashionable and fancy. Each had clearly been handpicked.

“I would have greeted you at the gate, but if I were spotted meeting you”— Chatres opened the door and ushered her guests in—“it would have caused a commotion. Do pardon me.”

“Think nothing of it, Princess Chatres.” Riselia waved her hand dismissively, clearly humbled by the princess’s words.

Given Chatres’s incredible popularity, it would have drawn unnecessary attention if the two beauties who’d clashed in the Holy Sword Dance Festival were spotted and photographed together.

“Is this your room, Princess?”

“No. Normally the Executive Committee here uses it as a meeting room.” Chatres bowed to Riselia, Regina, and Leonis. “Once again, allow me to thank you. You have my deepest gratitude.”

“Ah, please raise your head, Lady Chatres!”

“We only did what was expected of us as Holy Swordswomen.”

“What was expected of you... Indeed, all who aspire to be worthy Holy Swordswomen harbor such ideals. However, with that swarm of Voids surrounding us, no one would have blamed you for leaving me behind.” Chatres shook her head quietly. “Normally, I would have been the one protecting you all. I am greatly ashamed.”

She bit her lip despondently.

“Lady Chatres...,” Riselia called out to the princess, who lifted her head in response.

“The Holy Sword Dance Festival may have ended unusually, but I would love to fight you and your unit again,” Chatres said.

“Y-yes! We would love nothing more!” Riselia answered enthusiastically.

“Uh, no, I’d decline if I could...,” Regina muttered, cold sweat on her face.

“Anyway, take a seat.” Chatres motioned to the sofas.

“O-of course...” Riselia said.

Regina sat down, looking terribly nervous. Riselia did the same, although her

eyes were focused on the room's corners.

There don't seem to be any traps here...

The bird spirit flew from Chatres's shoulder and landed in Regina's hands.

"Um...Princess Chatres?"

"It seems to like you. Play with it, would you?"

"Er..." Regina stroked the bird's feathers with an uneasy expression.

"Heh-heh. Let me pet it, too." Riselia tried to pat the spirit on the head, yet it looked the other way, rejecting her. "Whaaat?! How come?!" There were tears in Riselia's eyes.

It is regrettable, but spirits keenly sense the presence of the undead.

"By the way..." Chatres turned to face Leonis. "Why are you dressed like a maid? Is that some, uh...personal preference of yours?"

Leonis couldn't overlook that implication.

"Er, no. We thought that a man walking into the girls' dorm might cause a panic..."

"I doubt that would have been an issue. A male student would be refused, of course, but you're ten years old, correct?"

"Huh?"

"Besides, you have an invitation. Even an older student would be granted entry with an invitation."

"Miss Regina? What's the meaning of this?" Leonis glared at the mischievous girl.

"D-don't get the wrong idea, kid! I wasn't trying to trick you into dressing like a girl so we could toy with you!" Regina laughed, looking the other way.

"Y-you'll pay for this with interest later, Miss Regina!"

"Oh, gosh, kid. You've got a scaaary look in your eyes..."

"B-but you do look cute, Leo!" Riselia insisted. It was clearly meant as encouragement.

“You’re her accomplice, Miss Selia!”



Chatres took a few teacups out of a cupboard and placed them on the table. They were made of pretty white porcelain and had golden rims.

Ohhh, now these are impressive pieces of work.

Leonis eyed the cups, fascinated. They were likely antiques from the days when kingdoms still dotted the world.

“Regina, bring out the sweets,” Riselia whispered while the other girl played with the spirit.

“Oh, right. Uh, we brought some snacks, if you’d like to try them,” Regina said, taking out a paper bag from her tote and placing it on the table.

“Oh, much appreciated. I’ll gladly have one.” Chatres opened the paper bag. “Mm! These are cream...cream puffs!”

The third princess’s green eyes narrowed sharply.

“Hmm...one of the special features on the Holy Sword Dance Festival mentioned you like them,” Regina explained.

“Those blasted reporters wrote about that?” Chatres muttered bitterly. “Anyway, I’ve never seen cream puffs like this on sale. Did you make them?”

“Y-yes, I made them myself.”

“Oh my. You make confections?”

“Yes. I’m a maid, after all.”

I know of a certain maid who’s a master at munching on snacks... Leonis mused.

“Altiria likes making treats, as well.”

Chatres poured hot water from the pot into the cups. The fragrance of the tea leaves and the sweet scent of peach wafted into the air.

Regina nodded enthusiastically. “Ah, yes, I’m aware!”

“Y-you are?” Chatres replied, a bit surprised. “Well, she ought to arrive

soon..."

"Huh? Princess Altiria is coming, too?" Regina asked, taken aback.

"Yes. You saved her aboard the *Hyperion*, and she wishes to thank you personally. Especially you, Leonis Magnus."

"I've done nothing that warrants gratitude."

"Hmm, is that so? Well, Altiria seems to believe you saved her."

"She must be under the wrong impression." Leonis acted coy, playing with the hair of his wig.

The princess should have been unconscious...

Had she seen him in flight?

"That said, she is a little late..." Chatres glanced at the wall clock while picking up a teacup.

Leonis stood. "I could go check if she's on her way, if you'd like."

His intent was to act lost and investigate the school.

"No, you're a guest. Please stay and relax. I'll go."

"Ah, it's just, erm...I'd like to use the bathroom..."

"O-oh. Pardon me for not grasping your implication." Chatres's face flushed a little.

"Which way is the boys' dorm?"

"Oh, take a right in the central corridor and you'll get there. I worry you might get lost, though..."

"I'll walk him halfway, then," Riselia suggested.

"Miss Selia?" Leonis looked up at Riselia's face. She seemed to be signaling something to him with her eyes.

"Huh? L-Lady Selia!" Regina protested, flustered.

Her cheeks looked quite stiff, and her mouth was opening and closing like a fish's as she held her teacup.

“L-Lady Selia, I can’t stay alone with her!” Regina pleaded silently.

Riselia winked. *“D-don’t worry! You’ve got this!”*

“Lady Selia, you traitorrrrrrrr...!”

CHAPTER 8

SISTERS

“Why did you come with me, Miss Selia?” Leonis asked as he walked down the hall facing the garden with his minion.

“I gave Regina some time alone with Princess Chatres,” Riselia explained nonchalantly. Then she turned around. “Of course, that’s not the only reason...”

“...?”

“Enough pretending, Leo. What are you trying to do here?”

Leonis stopped in his tracks.

Blast it, she’s sharp. I guess I shouldn’t expect less of my minion, he thought wryly.

There was no point in hiding it any longer.

“Apparently, an enemy of mine is using Elysion Academy as a hideout.”

Riselia lowered her voice to a whisper. “An enemy of yours? Like that woman who knew about the dress...?”

“Frankly, I don’t know yet. My enemies’ goals still elude me. But I do know that this institution is firmly within their grasp. There’s no doubting that.”

Leonis stood on tiptoe and brought his face close to Riselia’s ear. “You should be careful, Miss Selia.”

“I will. If anything happens, I’ll keep you safe, Leo.”

“I’m counting on you. And since we’re discussing this, there’s something I need to ask you right away.”

Riselia nodded excitedly. “Okay! I’ll do anything!”

“I’m sorry, but I need you to act as a decoy for a bit.”

“Huh?”

Suddenly, Leonis pinched up the hems of his skirt and raced away.

“Ah, Leo, wait!” Riselia called out after him.

But then...

“Ah, it’s Lady Riselia!”

“Oh, it really is her!”

“Could you sign this for me?!”

A group of academy students swarmed Riselia immediately. Leonis pitied her a little, but the more she drew the students’ attention, the easier it would be for him to move around.

She might get mad at me later, but I’m ready to accept that punishment.



“E-erm, uhhh, Lady Selia sure is taking a while!”

“Yes. I doubt they got lost, though.”

Regina spoke nervously, but Chatres placed her cup back on its saucer with aplomb.

“...”

Silence hung in the air. Normally, Regina would be teasing Riselia and Leonis, but faced with her older sister, she found herself speechless.

...Ahhh! When will Lady Selia and the kid get back?!

She cried out for them silently, but there was no sign of the two returning. Left with nothing to do, she kept petting the spirit, which had grown oddly attached to her.

“These cream puffs are quite delectable. Did you put strawberries in them?” Chatres asked, placing a hand on her cheek after taking a bite of one of the cream puffs.

“Y-yes. I picked the strawberries from Lady Selia’s garden, and I splurged and got some expensive whipped cream.”

“I see. May I have another?”

"Of course, go ahead. I made plenty."

"I'll help myself, then."

Chatres picked up another cream puff and partook of it elegantly.

Th-this girl...is surprisingly adorable.

Chatres was the strongest Holy Swordswoman student. Yet right now she felt quite different from the so-called Silver-Blooded Sword Princess. Regina had still feared her when facing her during the Holy Sword Dance Festival, though.

Altiria was a cherubic sort, and the first and the second princesses, who were stationed at the Fourth and the Fifth Assault Gardens respectively, were also known for being very kind and nonbelligerent. As such, Regina thought Chatres was unique among the O'Itriese sisters.

Being entrusted with a Holy Sword that's so powerful must be taxing in its own way...

While Regina mused on the notion, she noticed something.

"..."

Chatres's jade eyes were fixed sharply on Regina's face.

"U-um, Princess Chatres?" Regina asked fearfully.

Had she peered into Regina's mind and learned the maid's opinion of her? Regina thought it was possible.

"Regina Mercedes." Chatres stood from the sofa with a stiff expression.

"Y-yes...?" Regina replied with a high-pitched voice as she also got up.

"This spirit is called Nevan." Chatres looked down at the bird resting in Regina's hands.

"Huh? O-okay...," Regina answered, puzzled.

Chatres reached out, and the bird spirit hopped over to perch on her arm.

"This isn't an Artificial Elemental. It's a spirit of the royal family, like Carbuncle."

"?!"

Regina's eyes widened in shock as the tacit meaning of Chatres's remark dawned on her.

"This little one wouldn't grow so attached to just anyone... Only a descendent from House O'Itriese."



"Hello there, cutie maid. What brings you here?"

"This is the boys' dorm area. Did you get lost?"

"E-erm, I..."

Leonis, still dressed in his maid's uniform, found himself being hit on by guys in front of the fountain.

"Want to stop by my room for a rest? I could serve you some tea." One noble boy clad in a school uniform casually placed a hand on Leonis's shoulder.

The nerve. Do you want to be burnt to a crisp?

Leonis's shoulders trembled with anger, and he was about to chant an absolute annihilation spell when...

"You gentlemen over there, what are you doing?" A girl's sharp voice filled the courtyard.

"...?" Leonis turned around.

Standing there was none other than...

"P-Princess Altiria?!"

The two boys hitting on Leonis stood at attention. The one who'd called out to them was a lovely girl carrying the spirit Carbuncle in her arms.

"I-is she your maid, Your Highness?" one of the boys asked fearfully.

Altiria glanced at Leonis and then glared at the two young men reproachfully. "Yes. She is. What were you trying to do to her?"

"W-well, uh... E-excuse us!" The two ran off in the direction of the campus building.

"E-erm, thank you," Leonis muttered, confused.

Altiria smiled. "You're quite welcome, Sir Leonis."

"...?!"

"You can't fool me, even with a disguise," Altiria said, holding up an index finger.

"So you figured me out." Leonis shrugged in resignation.

"Why are you dressed like a maid?"

"Let's just say a few things happened..."

"...Um. You do look quite adorable, though."

"Honestly, that feels like a backhanded compliment..." Leonis replied, mortified.

"What are you doing here, by the way?"

"Ah, I was...on my way back to the tea party when I got lost."

"Oh, I see. It's easy to get lost if you're not used to this place. The girls' dorm area is this way."

Altiria started to escort Leonis back.

Curses. I can't investigate like this.

Slipping away now would seem suspicious. Left with no choice, Leonis followed her.

"What are you doing here, Your Highness?" he asked.

"I was on my way to Chatres's room, but Carbuncle ran off again."

The rabbit-like spirit thrashed and struggled in Altiria's arms.

"And it's not just Carbuncle," Altiria explained. "Since the other day, all the spirits have been acting strangely. It's like something has them frightened..."

"The spirits are frightened...?" Leonis echoed, fascinated. "Maybe it's because of the recent Void attack?"

"Yes, I believe so. It only makes sense that the spirits would be unnerved with that big tear in the sky..." Altiria stopped in her tracks and looked up.

The cleft hovering above the Eighth Assault Garden was clearly visible, even from Elysion Academy's premises. While Altiria was distracted, Carbuncle hopped from her arms.

"Oh, not again..." Altiria chased after the little creature, and that's when Leonis noticed something odd.

The shadows near the trees shifted and writhed unnaturally, attacking the unsuspecting princess from behind.

"Miss Altiria!"



Origin Spirits were also known as Wild Elementals.

They were born in the Spirit Forest, as had been the case since ancient times. They differed from Artificial Elementals, which were products of technology. House O'ltrieise drew on the blood of the elementalists—the spirit users—making them masters of the few remaining Origin Spirits in the world.

Chatres's green eyes gazed directly at Regina. There was no fooling her.

"...When did you figure it out?"

"Nevan's fawning over you made me certain, but I suspected the possibility when I researched your background."

After the Holy Sword Dance Festival came to an abrupt, terrible end, Chatres took great curiosity in the girl who'd saved her life and investigated her past. Nothing about Regina was particularly suspicious, save her unclear origins. However, when Chatres looked into the *Hyperion* incident, she discovered that Regina was the only member of the eighteenth platoon who wasn't listed as having boarded the ship.

"Altiria was held captive by terrorists during the *Hyperion* hijacking, which left the ship without anyone to steer it. Yet someone managed to resonate with Carbuncle in Altiria's place, directing the *Hyperion* away from the Void Reef."

"..."

Regina's boarding wasn't in the ship's registry because she'd come on with help from Elfiné, who'd hacked her terminal. She'd only wanted a glimpse of

her younger sister and never expected to get caught up in such a major event.

“I should have realized it sooner,” Chatres said bitterly. “Back at the training ground, you caught Carbuncle when it ran off. Looking back on it now, that was only possible because you’re a spirit user...”

“E-erm, Lady Chatres...,” Regina began hesitantly. “About my background, could you—”

“I won’t tell a soul.” Chatres bit her lip. “Treating children born under the Star of Calamity as cursed is an old tradition predating the days of the Human Integrated Empire. Even the emperor cannot oppose it. But someday...” Chatres brought her lips to Regina’s ears and dropped her voice to a whisper. “One day, when I inherit the throne, the Imperial Diet and the Elder Council will mean nothing to me. I promise you this, Regina—you will be welcomed back.”

“?!”

Chatres wrapped her arms around Regina in a tight embrace.

“L-Lady Chatres?!” Regina’s eyes widened in confusion, yet she reciprocated her older sister’s embrace. “Uh, I...”

Keeping her emotions in check was difficult. Learning that Chatres knew who she was left her flustered. She’d never expected her older sister, someone so distant and out of reach, to hug her like this.

“Cha—”

Before a bashful Regina could get her words out...

Huh?!

...she felt herself lurch as her legs began to sink into the floor.

“Wh-what?!” Chatres shouted sharply, reflexively moving in to protect Regina.

The shadows would not be denied, however. They swelled like an amorphous blob.

“Are these Voids?!”

“Back away, please! Activate!” Regina manifested the Drag Striker in its rifle

form. One quick shot blew a hole in the growing darkness. The shadows melted back into the floor and vanished.

“It’s dangerous here. Let’s get outside!”

“Right!”

Regina reached for the doorknob but found it wouldn’t turn. Shadows seeped from the edges of the door, holding it in place.

“What is this?!”

“Regina!” Chatres called out behind her.



Whirling around, Regina saw that every shadow in the room was becoming a monster.

“?!”

The creatures lunged at the two sisters.



“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

The tree’s shadow twisted to swallow Altiria.

“Phranis!”

Bwooosh!

Leonis’s flame spell burned the shadow away instantly.

“Are you all right?” Leonis hurried over to Altiria.

“Y-yes... Wh-what just happened?” The princess looked around, scared and confused.

Every patch of darkness in the courtyard writhed and rose, becoming a viscous monster.

The trap has been sprung. Did the enemy realize I came to research them?

Leonis called the Staff of Sealed Sins from the shadow at his feet.

“Princess, please close your eyes. This might frighten you.”

“Huh? Oh, okay!” Altiria obediently squeezed her eyes shut.

Leonis had expected the twelve-year-old girl to panic, yet she remained surprisingly calm.

I guess a royal daughter would possess a stout heart, Leonis thought, impressed.

“Flames of ruin, burn the fools who would oppose me!”

Fifth-order spell—the Tyrant Dragon Flame Roar, Vraz Veira Howl.

A dragon made of flame erupted from the tip of Leonis’s staff, snaking around and burning away the dark monsters with ease. Just as he thought the danger

had passed, Leonis heard screaming from every building around the courtyard. Looking up, he spied shadows dripping from every visible window.

They're attacking all the students in the dorms indiscriminately?

Leonis frowned.

"M-my lord, this is terrible!" Shary's voice echoed in his thoughts.

"Yes, I can tell something is amiss. Report."

"Y-yes! Countless monsters are emerging from the Realm of Shadows built around this academy. They're attacking the students and dragging them into the darkness."

"Hmm. Do you know who the enemy might be or their goal?"

"Not yet. My apologies."

Leonis dusted off his skirt and frowned again.

I have no proof of the culprit, but I do recognize these tactics.

"Shary, go to my minion's side. I doubt monsters this weak would catch her off guard, but—"

"By your will, my lord!"

Altiria still had her eyes closed. Leonis took her by the hand.

"We must return to Miss Chatres's room. Follow me."

"O-okay!"



"Everyone, run!" Riselia shouted at the students.

Countless shadows swarmed the pathway. Riselia swung the Bloody Sword, hacking the creatures into pieces in a flash.

"There's so many of them... Are these Voids?!"

There were no cracks in space, though. What were these things?

Are these the enemies Leo warned me about?

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

“Please, help me!”

Riselia heard screaming behind her. She turned and spotted two girls being pulled into the darkness.

“Hahhhhhh!” Riselia launched a blade of blood that wound like a whip and cut the shadow monsters in half. “Stay calm! Anyone who can fight, summon your Holy Swords!”

“Ah, okay!” one girl replied while Riselia helped her up.

Muffled screaming came from the nearby buildings.

No good, I can’t save everyone on my own! Riselia gritted her teeth. Leo’s got to be okay...right?

Despite how overprotective Riselia could get, she did believe in Leonis’s strength. If Riselia could handle these monsters, he would defeat them handily. She was more concerned for Regina. Chatres was with her, but the princess was injured and couldn’t fight.

The shadows moved for Riselia, undeterred, from the walls and ceiling, forcing her to cleave through them as she ran.

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!

The darkness gathering before her was torn to pieces.

“Huh?”

“My word. It won’t do if you can’t fight your way out of this on your own.”

A maid landed seemingly from nowhere, whips in her hands.

“Ah, drill sergeant—I mean, teacher!”

The maid glared at Riselia coldly. “I am not your teacher.”

“R-right. Thank you very much!”

“You have nothing to thank me for. I was ordered to protect you.” The maid looked the other way peevishly. “I will handle this area. Now go on, shoo.”

“A-all right. Thank you, teacher!”

“I told you I’m not your teacher!”

“Miss Regina?!”

Leonis hurried back into the tea party room with Altiria in tow.

“Di Farga!”

He used a destructive spell to blast the door open and stormed in. The place was empty. A still-steaming teacup sat on the table.

We’re too late...

Regina and Chatres had already been swallowed by the Realm of Shadows.

“Um, where is my sister?” Altiria looked at Leonis anxiously.

“I believe she’s been dragged into the darkness along with the other students,” Leonis replied.

“No!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll save them.” Leonis pulled off his wig. “It’s dangerous here. Your Highness, please allow me to escort you to safety.”

“Huh?”

“Come forth, Soul Collector.”

Leonis summoned a robed, half-transparent monster from his shadow.

“S-Sir Leonis, wh-what is this?!” Altiria asked, alarmed.

“This is a trusted friend of mine. He may look intimidating, but he’s strong and reliable. He can also render himself invisible if need be, so he won’t stand out.”

“A-a friend?” Altiria looked baffled.

Leonis paid her no heed, instead issuing orders to the Soul Collector.

“Take Her Highness back to the palace. Handle her carefully.”

“By your will,” the Soul Collector replied, taking Altiria in his arms.

“Ahhhh!” Altiria let out a frightened cry as the monster hurried off with her.

No sooner had the young princess gone than someone else arrived, as though to take her place.

“Leo!” Riselia called. “Where’s Regina?”

“Miss Regina was taken into the shadows, and Chatres with her, most likely.” Leonis shook his head. “I’m going in to rescue them. What about you, Miss Selia?”

“I’m coming along, of course,” Riselia said without a second thought.

I’d rather not take you with me, honestly.

This Realm of Shadows was uncharted enemy territory. Undoubtedly, countless monsters and traps were lying in wait. However, Riselia would follow no matter what Leonis told her. That courage was what made her worthy of being his, the Undead King’s, minion.

“I’ll be counting on you to guard me, then.”

Riselia nodded readily. “Yes, understood. You’re safe with me, Leo.”

Shary appeared from Leonis’s shadow.

“I come bearing a report, my lo—I mean, master!” She instantly changed her wording upon spotting Riselia.

“Ah, teacher!” Riselia exclaimed, happy to see the assassin maid.

“What happened?” Leonis communicated telepathically to keep Riselia from hearing.

“I found traces of Lord Blackas in the Realm of Shadows. Namely, this.” Shary showed him a jet gemstone ring.

“That ring belongs to the shadow royal family. I can’t imagine him dropping it,” Leonis said.

“Yes. I believe this was a message left by Lord Blackas.”

“In which case, the purpose of his message is clear. The one who created this Realm of Shadows was the former owner of this ring. In other words...”

“The Queen of Shadows—Scheherazade Shadow Queen.” Shary invoked the name.

Leonis nodded curtly. She’d been the ruler of the Realm of Shadows before Blackas destroyed her during his rebellion over a thousand years ago. She was

the one who sent Shary, then an assassin for the organization named Septentrion, to kill Leonis.

To think even she has returned.

That wasn't much of a surprise at this point, though. Constructing a Realms of Shadows and abducting humans in large numbers was Scheherazade's established modus operandi.

"Can you track them down?"

"Yes, since the abductions were quite conspicuous, I should be able to follow them."

"What's wrong, Leo?" Riselia asked, somehow sensing she was being left out of the loop. She appeared a bit jealous.

"Ah, sorry. It looks like we'll be able to track down Miss Regina's whereabouts."

"Leave it to me." Shary bowed her head.

"Let's go, then. To the Realm of Shadows." Leonis removed his maid's outfit, revealing his academy uniform underneath.

You will pay dearly for trying to lay hands on my domain, Scheherazade.

CHAPTER 9

THE CASTLE OF SHADOWS

“U-ugh...”

Regina awoke to find herself in darkness.

What...happened?

Her mind was clouded, but she managed to recall the events that had led to this moment. The writhing shadows had consumed her and Chatres.

What is this place?

Regina looked around, but a sharp pain shot through her arms when she tried to move. They were fixed in place by chains made of darkness.

“Wh-what are these things?!” Regina struggled violently, but the chains wouldn’t yield. “And my uniform’s gone for some reason, too...”

Looking down at herself, Regina realized she was half naked.

“Fine, in that case...Holy Sword—Activate!”

She focused her thoughts on forming the Drag Howl, but...

“Ah, kuh...ahhhhhh!”

Agony shot from her wrists to the rest of her body like an electrical current. The light particles that should have formed the Holy Sword fizzled and dispersed.

I can’t use my Holy Sword!

Manifesting a Holy Sword took a great deal of concentration. One of the first things that Excalibur Academy students learned was how to discipline their minds and maintain concentration even in the presence of Voids.

Regina had undergone that training, yet this pain proved too intense. It nearly knocked her unconscious. She couldn’t use her Holy Sword, and that frustrated

her to no end. Without her Holy Sword, she was just a powerless girl.

Calm down. You need to get a grasp on the situation first.

Regina took deep breaths.

What were those shadows that swallowed the two of them up?

Darkness Voids?

She didn't know Voids could take the form of shadows, but encounters with unknown Void specimens weren't unheard of. And the monstrous things were known to abduct humans on rare occasions. Regina tried not to think about what befell those poor people. She shook her head to banish the idea.

Lady Selia...



“Over here. Jump to the ceiling next!”

Shary led them through the shadow corridors. The Realm of Shadows that Scheherazade had created took the form of a stonework castle, the same one Leonis and Blackas laid waste to long ago. In a Realm of Shadows, directions could shift at any moment. What was a wall one moment could become a ceiling in the next, and if an explorer didn't keep track, they could run into dead ends. Any normal person who got lost here would likely never find the way out.



However, Shary was able to navigate this overlapping, complex labyrinth easily. She had a poor sense of direction in the physical world and often got lost on Excalibur Academy's grounds, but she was able to find her way through this place thanks to a sixth sense unique to those born in the shadows.

I'd very much like to use a tenth-order destructive spell to annihilate this castle altogether..., Leonis thought, annoyed.

Unfortunately, such a hasty action would completely alter the shadows, likely eradicating the path leading to where Regina and the other hostages were being held.

"Ahhhh!" Riselia exclaimed as she ran across the wall. Her body was sinking into the darkness.

"Miss Selia!" Leonis quickly took her arm and pulled her free. "Be careful. You might never find your way out if you get lost here."

"A-all right..." Riselia nodded, her face very red.

"What's wrong?"

"N-nothing. Never mind. We have to hurry and find Regina!"

Shary, who led the group, abruptly stopped in her tracks.

"Please stop, you two."

She was glaring ahead at something different from everything else they'd encountered in the castle. A tear in space spanned the width of the stone hall ahead.

"A Void crack?!" Riselia exclaimed.

I see. So that's what's going on here, Leonis noted to himself.

This explained why the shadow corridors in Elysion Academy had been built in such a short time. The queen's stronghold was in the Void home world on the other side of the tear, and the dimensional shift that took place during the Holy Sword Dance Festival allowed her to instantly seize control of the shadows here.

"The students appear to have been taken through this fissure," Shary

explained.

“Let’s go,” Leonis said.

Riselia nodded, and the three of them crossed through.



Blackas awakened within the pitch darkness of the Realm of Shadows.

I can’t believe I was taken by surprise.

Blackas growled, but he was powerless to move. Countless shadow chains held him in place, and each fetter held curses meticulously applied to it by the queen. Blackas’s physical strength would not be able to tear them apart.

I bring shame to Lord Magnus like this...

Undoubtedly, it wouldn’t take long for Leonis to notice that something had happened. Upon realizing the Shadow Wraiths he’d left under Blackas’s command never returned, he would investigate Elysion Academy and discover it had become a haunt for demons.

That was the trap Scheherazade had set to catch her hated enemy.

Blackas didn’t know if Scheherazade was aware of Leonis’s existence, but she probably suspected Blackas had allies. She was using him as bait to draw out whoever might help him.

No. Scheherazade is not the issue here.

Now that Leonis had been reduced to a child, his power was a far cry from what it was during his reign as the Undead King. Still, Scheherazade would be no match for him.

She has a trump card up her sleeve, though...

The Spirit King, Elmysteriga Elemental Lord. The mighty ruler of the spirits harbored strength comparable to that of an apostle of the Luminous Powers. Supposedly, he’d fallen when the Undead King’s forces besieged the Spirit Forest.

Now Scheherazade was trying to resurrect the Spirit King as a Void, and to that end, she’d gathered Holy Swordsmen from Elysion Academy as sacrifices.

She wants to use Demon Swords...

Blackas had to relay this information to Leonis.

“Grrr... Raahhhhhhhhhhh!” he howled, struggling to free himself from the chains.

As he fought against his bindings, a figure appeared silently in his prison.

“...?!”

A familiar girl clad in white garb emerged from the darkness. No, it wasn't Sakuya Sieglinde. This one had the same facial features, to the point where she looked like Sakuya's twin, but her hair was longer. What's more...

Her scent is the same as Riselia Crystalia's?

It was the presence of those who did not belong in the world of the living—that of the undead. The girl approached Blackas and brought her katana down.

Clank!

The shadow chains holding Blackas in place were severed with a clear sound.

“Wh-what?” Blackas barked, his golden eyes going wide in disbelief.

Just who was this girl? For what purpose did she free him? The culprit offered nothing, vanishing into the dark as easily as she'd come, white garb trailing after her.



Leonis felt a sudden dizziness come over him as soon as he plunged into the Void tear. He, Riselia, and Shary emerged in a corridor decorated with a red carpet.

“Are you all right, Miss Selia?” Leonis asked, catching her as she staggered.

“Y-yes...I'm fine. Thanks, Leo.”

It feels like we've been transported across quite a long distance.

Using the shadow corridors allowed one to ignore real-world distances while moving around. The Realm of Shadows stronghold taking over Elysion Academy must have been far from the Imperial Capital.

Shary closed her eyes and placed a hand on the wall.

“This Realm of Shadows is in the darkness of a...forest, I believe. A very large one, at that.”

“The biggest woodland near the capital is the Boundless Forest,” Riselia said.

The Boundless Forest. That was the Spirit Forest in my time.

Leonis consulted his mental map. The Spirit Forest was a woodland area near the Rognas Kingdom, where spirits and demi-human races resided. In the thousand years since, the wood had grown and overtaken the remains of the Rognas Kingdom.

Strange...

This Realm of Shadows was supposed to be on the other side of the Void tear.

What's such a large forest doing in the Void home world?

Shary removed her hand from the wall and opened her eyes slowly. “The traces of the shadow monsters end abruptly.”

“What do you mean?” Leonis asked.

“The abducted people aren’t in this Realm of Shadows. They’ve been taken somewhere outside it.”

“Then they’re somewhere in the forest?”

“In all likelihood.” Shary nodded then sank into the stone wall. “This way. This facade is a fake, so be careful...”

“O-okay...” Riselia followed Shary, with Leonis heading in after her. Suddenly, the ground beneath his feet collapsed under his weight.

Hmph. About time. Leonis sneered at how predictable it was.

Scheherazade had been waiting for an opportunity to separate him from his allies. Escaping the shadow marsh trap would have been easy, but Leonis allowed himself to sink. He would have to rely on Riselia and Shary to rescue Regina and the others.



“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

As soon as they passed through the wall, Riselia and Shary plummeted. Riselia screamed as a sense of weightlessness suddenly overtook her body.

“Calm yourself. Run along the wall like this.” Shary pinched up her skirt and vertically scaled the surface.

“H-how are you doing that?!”

“It’s my experience as a maid,” Shary said as she elegantly climbed down the wall to the ground.

Riselia, by contrast, dropped the entire way and landed hard, collapsing. Were she a normal human, it would have been quite perilous.

“Owie...” Riselia stood, rubbing her ankles and looking around. “Wait, where’s Leo?!”

“It seems we got separated...”

“H-huh?! Isn’t that really bad? Oh, my terminal!” Riselia hurriedly took out her communication terminal.

“Don’t bother.” Shary regarded Riselia with exasperation. “That magical apparatus won’t work in the Realm of Shadows.”

“How can you be so calm?!”

“Because I believe in my master,” Shary replied. “Worrying for him is only natural for a vassal, but he will be fine. The one who set this trap is no match for him.”

“...R-really?”

“Yes. So I will follow the orders he gave me...”

No sooner had she finished speaking than Shary drew a dagger from her skirt and thrust it into the wall behind her.

“Grrrrrraaaaah!”

A shadow monster emerged from the wall, dead.

“It seems the welcoming party is upon us,” Shary quipped before conjuring three daggers in each hand.

“Bloody Sword—Activate!” Riselia instantly manifested her Holy Sword and summoned the True Ancestor’s Dress. The beast-like shadow monsters began slithering from the walls to surround the pair.

“I could easily handle weaklings like this on my own...,” Shary said as she stood back-to-back with Riselia. “But circumstances prevent me from exhibiting my full strength right now.”

“What do you mean?”

“If I were to go all out now, a slumbering being within me could awaken and cause a great deal of trouble.”

“E-erm...”

“As such, I must rely on you, Riselia Crystalia,” Shary whispered curtly. She chewed on a doughnut she’d produced seemingly from nowhere.

Riselia nodded happily and held up the Bloody Sword. “Y-yes. Understood, teacher!”



After sinking through sludge-like darkness for a while, Leonis finally dropped into a vast chamber. The flickering flames of candlesticks cast an eerie glow on the floor.



“Oh-ho-ho-ho. Welcome to my castle, Undead King.”

Leonis slowly looked up at the source of the booming voice. Deep within the blackness was a muddy, coiled mass of shadow seated upon a throne at the room’s far end.

“You’ve taken on quite the lovely form, Queen,” Leonis greeted her sarcastically, holding up the Staff of Sealed Sins.

Scheherazade Shadow Queen, the sovereign of the Realm of Shadows. Her massive power had allowed her to rule for centuries until she was driven from her throne by Blackas Shadow Prince and his ally, the Undead King. The queen’s original, butterfly-like beauty had not survived the centuries. Perhaps the unsightly monster on the throne was a representation of her true nature.

“You’ve become careless, Undead King. To think you would fall into my trap so easily. The many other snares I set for you were a wasted effort, it seems.”

“My apologies for that. Getting through all of those would have been a waste of my time...”

“Hmph. Impudent taunting.”

“Let me ask you one thing, Queen...” Leonis tapped the Staff of Sealed Sins against the floor. “How can you tell I am the Undead King?”

“Who else but you would have that despicable black wolf and the Septentrion traitor at his beck and call? I heard the Six Heroes destroyed you down to your very soul, but it seems you’ve found a way to return.”

Leonis shrugged. “Hmm...I guess you haven’t gotten over your history with those two.”

“Oh-ho-ho-ho. Complacent, are you not? Do you not see I have your life in the palm of my hand?”

“What do you mean?”

“How amusing. You haven’t even realized it yet. I suppose these thousand years have weakened you, Undead King. This throne room is the deepest section of my Realm of Shadows. Here, my mana is increased, and yours is diminished... Yes, I believe you should be at a fifth of your power.”

“...What?!” Leonis’s eyes widened.

“I’m afraid it’s too late for regret. You will return the Realm of Shadows you stole from me.”

The amorphous mass of shadows seated on the throne glowed with mana. At that moment, the shadows in the area turned into countless spikes that skewered Leonis’s body.

“Ho-ho-ho, you’re so weak, so fragile, Undead King! Scream, that I might delight in your suffering!”

Crack...

A sound like metal cracking rang out.

“...What?”

Crack, crack, crack...

“I suppose that’s enough acting. You’re blind to the true difference in our strengths, Scheherazade.”

Shatter!

Walls of mana formed around Leonis, pushing back the spikes and effortlessly breaking them to pieces.

“I-it cannot be! My shadow barrier should be dampening your power!”

“Mm? Oh, that. You’ve made a fatal mistake, Queen,” Leonis sneered as he approached the throne.

Indeed, entering this place had weakened his mana to a fourth, if not a fifth, of its original level.

“Why would a reduction in strength ever pose a problem?”

“Y-you think your bluffing will work on me, Magnus?!”

This time, she produced ten times the number of spikes as before and shot them at Leonis.

“Goodness, what a forgetful fool. Fifth-order spell—Zoa Regis.” Leonis gingerly lifted his staff and summoned a vortex of magical power that instantly

sucked up the spikes. “My thanks for the fine shadows. Once I refine them, they’ll make fine weapons for the Dark Lords’ Armies.”

“I-impossible... M-my greatest, mightiest sorcery... That...cannot be...”

“That was your strongest spell? Well, that’s just tragic...”

“K-kill him... Kill this monsterrrrrrrrrrr!”

Leonis sensed several people behind him. Six Septentrion assassins, each wearing a maid’s outfit, attacked him at once.

Hmph. Hiding in the dark, were they?

Leonis prepared to release his death aura, but then...

“Graohhhhhhhh!”

...a shadow sprung from his feet with a howl. The assassins, taken by surprise, were all blown back.

“My apologies for the delay, Lord Magnus,” said a large black wolf.

“Hmph. You’ve gotten careless, Blackas. I didn’t expect you to get captured.”

“I have no excuses...”

“Y-you?! Blackas?! How?! I fixed you in place with cursed shackles...!” the Queen of Shadows cried out in hysterical outrage atop her throne.

Leonis tapped his staff against the ground and pulled the assassins into his own Realm of Shadows.

No need to kill them. Leonis smiled bitterly at his own merciful tendencies.

Although the Undead King had always been magnanimous, he wasn’t originally so forgiving. Perhaps his human body was softening his heart, or maybe it was his good-natured minion.

“What, is this it? Is this all the hospitality you have to offer?” Leonis leveled his staff at the queen.

The mass of swirling shadows slid from her throne.

“Ah, ahhhh... It...cannot be... This cannot be real. It must be a nightmaaaaaare!”

She tried to escape by sinking into the cracks in the floor.

Leonis panicked for the first time in this encounter. “H-hey, wait!”

He hadn’t imagined a proud ruler would be such a trifling opponent. On reflex, he hurled a fireball at the throne, but Scheherazade had already fled.

“She must have prepared a shadow corridor beneath her chair so she could escape,” Blackas remarked. “It seems she’s gotten more cautious since the last time we defeated her.”

“How bothersome...,” Leonis grumbled.

Catching her would be difficult if she kept running around this Realm of Shadows.

Once Regina and the others are safe, I’ll wipe this whole place out of existence. Leonis smirked as he reached a very reckless solution.

“We have trouble, Lord Magnus...,” Blackas said with a growl.

“Yes, it is quite vexing.”

“That’s not what I mean. Scheherazade is trying to revive the Spirit King.”

“...What?”



“Hyahhhh! Bloody Petal Spiral!”

Riselia’s crimson blade tore through the shadow monsters. Her white dress billowed in the dark, illuminating passages with its mana glow. Her dress’s Scarlet Tyrant form was well suited for charging through these enemies, but she would have preferred the Queen Minerva form against a constant, nonstop onslaught of foes for its longer sustainability.

With her shining argent hair dancing, Riselia appeared a veritable sword princess, dancing elegantly among her blood blades.

The assassin maid sprinting behind her swiftly dispatched any monsters that slipped by.

“Teacher, how much longer is this going to last?!” Riselia shouted as she cut down two shadow creatures.

“We’re almost there. And stop calling me ‘teacher’—I am Shary.”

“Ah, y-you’ve finally told me your name!” Riselia said happily.

“Don’t misunderstand. I haven’t acknowledged your worth. I merely do not wish to be called a teacher.” Shary looked away in a huff while skewering a couple of the monsters.

“Well, you can just call me Selia, then. Whoa!” Shary grabbed Riselia by the collar and jumped away.

“Here we are. Let’s escape the Realm of Shadows...”

The two of them leaped for the ceiling. A powerful sense of vertigo overtook Riselia. It felt as though heaven and earth were swapping places. When she opened her eyes, she found herself in an eerie forest.

Riselia looked around. “Where are we?”

A suffocating cloud of miasma hung over the place, and the sky was colored crimson.

“This must be a forest in the Void home world,” Shary said, finally releasing Riselia’s collar.

“Where’s Regina?”

“This is where the shadows’ trail ends. She should be nearby.”

“H-heyyy...what’s that?” Riselia had noticed something behind Shary and pointed at it.

The assassin maid turned and saw a large stone pyramid.

“Hmm....I don’t know.” Shary tilted her head, baffled.

Before they had time to think about it, they felt something approach through the trees.

“?!” Riselia readied her Holy Sword.

“It’s dangerous. We should investigate the area more...”

“My homeland has a saying in times like these. It goes, ‘nothing ventured, nothing gained.’”

Upon recognizing a familiar voice, a surprised Riselia called, “S-Sakuya?!”

Shary sank into Riselia’s shadow.

“Wh-what are you doing?” Riselia asked.

“Shhhh. We can’t let the elf hero discover me.”

“Hero?”

The two girls appeared from within the thicket before Shary could reply.

“Mm?” Sakuya regarded Riselia with confusion. “What are you doing here, Miss Selia?”

“I should be asking you that!” Riselia exclaimed, just as baffled.



“The Spirit King?” Leonis asked as he rode Blackas in pursue of Scheherazade.

“Yes. She is trying to revive the Spirit King who slumbers in this land,” Blackas explained.

She’d abducted Elysion Academy Holy Swordsmen and schemed to use the power of their Demon Swords to resurrect the Spirit King as a Void Lord.

“But I completely destroyed Elmysteriga...”

“There are ways those who have been cut down may rise again.”

“True enough...”

The Archsage Arakael Degradios; the Holy Woman Tearis Resurrectria; Veira Dragon Lord; Azra-Ael, the Devil of the Underworld... Even Leonis was evidence of that rule. He’d been reborn after a millennium. The Spirit King rising from the dead wasn’t so impossible to believe.

Altiria did mention something was causing the spirits to act strangely.

Did the spirits sense Elmysteriga’s impending revival?

That foolish woman. Why would she try to resurrect the Spirit King?

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

The Realm of Shadows quaked as cracks ran through every surface.

“What’s happening?!”

“This is bad! This Realm of Shadows is falling apart!”

Blackas leaped into the wall.



“Gahhhh! That despicable, despicable Undead Kinggggggg!”

Scheherazade crept out of the shadow corridors, having been driven from her home. She was in a secret place located beneath the Spirit King’s temple. There was no direct access, meaning no one could follow her via normal means.

“The apostles’ plan doesn’t matter anymore. I will crush those usurpers!”

A black crystal stood at the end of the room, a shrine to the goddess, Roselia Ishtar, a fragment of her shattered being. If Scheherazade activated this temple, the power of the Voids would overflow and breathe false life into the Spirit King.

“Letting all the Demon Swords I collected go to waste is regrettable, but...”

Scheherazade lacked a sufficient stockpile to ensure the Spirit King’s full revival. She’d worked to gather Holy Swords from Elysion Academy, yet now her labor was in vain.

“And it’s all the wolf and the Undead King’s fauuuuult!” the queen howled furiously as she poured mana into the crystal.

“Elmysteriga, ancient king of the elementals, kill them aaaaaaaaaaaaaall!”



“Holy...Sword... Acti...vate!”

Burning pain ran through Regina’s body. After suffering this terrible agony so many times over, she finally managed to summon her Holy Sword. The Drag Striker’s muzzle spewed fire and destroyed the shadowy bindings holding her in place.

“Haah, haahhh. Ngh...” Regina doubled over where she stood, groaning in pain. “Nng...I don’t have time...to just sit here...”

Regina straightened up with her Holy Sword in hand, still wobbling. She

looked around for her communication terminal, but it was nowhere to be found. Neither was her academy uniform.

Where am I, anyway?

The tip of her Drag Striker had a flashlight for firing in the dark, and Regina used it to illuminate her surroundings. That's when she spotted them—multiple figures bound by shackles as she was. None of them had their uniforms on, but they were definitely Elysion Academy students.

"A-are you all right?!" Regina called out, yet none of them responded. They didn't seem conscious. She walked around, using her Holy Sword to light the way. Regina found Chatres bound up nearby.

"Lady Chatres!"

She shot off the chains with her Holy Sword, and Chatres fell forward. Regina caught her.

"Lady Chatres... Are you all right, Lady Chatres?!" Regina called, holding her sister by the shoulders.

"Ahhh..." Chatres opened her eyes. "R-Regina..."

"Oh, thank goodness." Regina sighed with relief.

"Where...are we?" Chatres breathed.

Regina shook her head. "I don't know. Those shadows dragged us away, and the next thing I knew, we were here. It looks like the other students are trapped with us. We have to save them."

"I....see... Nng..." Chatres struggled to her feet, grimacing all the while. "We just need to shatter those bindings, right?"

"Yes. That's right."

"Holy Sword, Ragna Shadow—Activate!" Chatres manifested her Holy Sword.

"Should you be using your Holy Sword in this state?"

"I can manage severing the chains."

Whoosh!

Chatres swung the Ragna Shadow, and its blade split into countless fragments, which darted about, cleaving through the bindings. The trapped students all dropped to the floor.

“Wasn’t that a little rough?”

Chatres shrugged. "This is an emergency; we have no choice."

The air trembled. The ground beneath them quaked and lurched, and bits of stone fell from the ceiling.

“Wh-what’s happening?!” Regina looked alarmed.

“This place is dangerous. It could cave in.”

“We have to get everyone out of here...” Regina cast her Holy Sword’s light around. Curiously, there was no visible exit.

“In that case... Mode Shift—Dragon Slayer!” Regina changed her Holy Sword to its cannon form. “I’ll just blow a hole open!”

Boooooom!

“Don’t be too reckless. Well, it worked, I suppose. Let’s get the others out.”

“Yeah. We need to hurry.”

Even freed from the shadow shackles, most of the students weren't regaining consciousness. Some were just barely awake and too confused to grasp the situation.

“Helping everyone escape will take us a while...,” Regina muttered.

And that's when...

“I heard an explosion, over here!”

...she heard a familiar voice from beyond the ruined stone wall.

“Huh? L-Lady Selia?!”

As though in reply, the girl Regina respected and adored more than anyone else jumped in and landed nearby.

“Regina, are you there?”

"Yes! I'm over here, Lady Selia!" Regina hopped, her twintails bouncing.

"Regina! Thank goodness you're safe!" Riselia hurried over and embraced her friend.

"I'm glad you're okay, too, Lady Selia... Wait, what are you doing here?"

"We dove into the shadows and followed you here. Leo came with me, but..."

"I see... Ah, Sakuya's here, too?!" Regina noticed Sakuya and the elf girl following behind Riselia. "Why are you here?!"

"I accidentally had a fateful encounter with Miss Selia earlier," Sakuya replied nonchalantly.

"We can catch up later. Are the other students all right?"

"Y-yes. They're all weakened, but alive..."

"Okay. Let's pick everyone up and get out of here."

"Yes, agreed." Chatres nodded, but just as she did...

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrn!

...the ground shook again, so intensely this time that the girls couldn't stay on their feet.

"Whoa! Wh-what's happening?!"

"Is..." Riselia turned around to look at the broken wall with eyes wide. "Is the forest moving?!"



Beneath the bloodred sky, the forest enveloped in Void miasma stirred.

"■■■■■■■■■■■■!"

A gigantic maw opened in the earth, and the howl of a Void cursed and condemned all that lived.

Elmysteriga Elemental Lord, the one known in ancient times as the Spirit King, had fought the dreaded Undead King several times and ultimately merged with the Spirit Forest.

Standing on the peak of the trapezoidal pyramid, the Spirit King's temple...

“Scheherazade, you ignorant fool,” Leonis muttered from atop Blackas. “How dare you debase one of the precious few I acknowledged as a worthy opponent!”

The Spirit King rose, his body like a giant turtle’s. His rocky skin flaked off, decaying the ground on contact. Each step he took kicked up a cloud of pitch-black miasma.

Why did the Spirit King revive here in the Void home world? What was this temple doing here? Many questions swirled in Leonis’s mind, but he didn’t have the time to answer them now.

“Elmysteriga the Spirit King, I carry no grudges against you, but...” Leonis looked down to the foot of the pyramid. Riselia and the others were helping the captured Elysion Academy students evacuate. “I must protect my subjects. Let’s go!”

“Yes!” Blackas answered Leonis’s call and raced down the side of the pyramid. He kicked off the wall to dive into the miasma-laden forest. After landing on the ground, the shadowy black wolf raced through the eerie woods like a loosed arrow. While clinging to Blackas’s back, Leonis chanted a spell.

“Eighth-order gravity spell—Vira Zuo!”

A gravity wave capable of instantly crushing a dragon consumed the walking earth monster. Elmysteriga’s rocklike skin broke off, raining upon the forest like a shower of decay. That wasn’t enough to defeat the Spirit King, though. Leonis did it only to pull the creature’s attention away from the temple, where Riselia and the others were.

“■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■!” Elmysteriga howled in anger, parting its crocodile-like jaw. Crimson light gathered in its mouth, becoming a ray of smoldering heat that it fired at Leonis.

“The Spirit King would risk burning the forest?!”

Leonis raised the Staff of Sealed Sins and conjured a mana barrier. It deflected the heat ray, splitting it into multiple beams, which scattered around and produced pillars of fire wherever they struck. Blackas sprinted through the flames undisturbed. Leonis gripped the hilt of the Staff of Sealed Sins tightly.

Within it lay the strongest Demon Sword, the weapon granted to him by the goddess—Dáinsleif. Leonis's opponent wasn't a Dark Lord, and this was a fight to protect his kingdom's people. Leonis could draw the sword. However...

...If I do, I'll have to settle this with a single blow.

Having faced Elmysteriga multiple times in the past, Leonis knew that this walking incarnation of earth would regenerate in no time unless he struck properly. He had to destroy the core of the Spirit King.

"I'm going to strike him down at close range. Let's move in, Blackas!"

"Understood!"

Blackas jumped onto the gigantic Spirit King, climbing up his legs.



Wh-what is that...?!

The Spirit King ran amok, burning the trees. Riselia stared in disbelief at the surreal display.

"That is the great Spirit King...or what's become of him," said the elf girl, Arle.

"The Spirit King?"

"Yes. In the distant past, the Spirit King was worshipped in this temple. But now it's become something else."

"A Void Lord," Sakuya said. "If that thing were to invade through the Void tear, the capital would become like my homeland."

Everyone froze up and exchanged anxious looks... None of them considered the possibility of defeating that thing. Not Chatres, wielder of the strongest Holy Sword, or Sakuya, with her intense hatred of the Voids. It was clear this creature was beyond the scope of what humans could hope to oppose. Everyone present knew that instinctively.

"We need to inform the capital as soon as possible and evacuate." Riselia only barely got the words out, and soon after, she spotted something.

A small speck moved along the top of the great Void Lord. It was so small that only the enhanced eyesight of a Vampire Queen could spot it.

Leo?!

Indeed, it was Leonis. He was riding some kind of black animal sprinting atop the hulking earth beast.

Leo, why?!

Despite all of Riselia's bewilderment, she knew what he was doing. He was diverting the monster's attention from Riselia and the others. And he might just have the power to defeat this Void Lord.

Leo wants to use that sword again.

She knew the ten-year-old boy's true strength. He'd used that sword's power to cut down the Void Lord that attacked the Seventh Assault Garden and to blow away the one that appeared on the Third Assault Garden, too.

But that sword...

Riselia could tell that it wasn't a power he could use with impunity. As powerful as Leonis was, he needed Riselia to guard him when using that weapon.

Yes, he needs time to use that sword.

And from afar, it looked like it took all he had to avoid the Void Lord's intense onslaught.

Can we manage to buy him the time he needs? Regina's Drag Blast might work...right?

"Ah!" When Riselia looked at Regina, she remembered something. The elf girl called this monster the Spirit King.

"You said that thing is a spirit, right?" Riselia asked Arle.

"...? Yes, it is."

"Th-then, can't a spirit user's power calm its wrath?"

"What?!" Regina's eyes went wide. "I—I can't! Sure, it's a spirit, but look at that thing!"

"You bear the blood of the elementalists?" Arle asked with evident suspicion.

“W-well, yes, technically...”

“I thought the lineage of the elementalists died out ages ago. In that case, it could be worth a try. If we use the Spirit King’s temple...”

“Really?”

“The chances are slim, but it’s better than doing nothing. With luck, we’ll be able to stall long enough for everyone to escape. I’ll help you with my elf sorcery, too.”

“Regina, let’s go.” Chatres grabbed Regina’s hand.

“Princess Chatres?”

“Together, we’ll calm that raging spirit.” Chatres stared into Regina’s eyes. “I may not hold a candle to Altiria’s talents, but I have the royal blood of the spirit users running through my veins. I will be able to help.”

“B-but I’m not of the royal family, so I—”

“Regina, from what I have seen, your latent abilities as a spirit user could exceed even Altiria’s. You wouldn’t have been able to resonate with Carbuncle and steer the *Hyperion* otherwise...” Chatres pursed her lips tightly. “Regina, please. I want to protect Elysion’s students.”

“All right.” Regina nodded silently. “Let’s do this, Chatres.”



Boom, boom, boooooooooom!

Leonis loosed destructive spells in rapid succession while riding Blackas. His hand gripped his staff’s handle, but he couldn’t draw the sword yet. He could only afford to wield Dáinsleif when he knew he could destroy the enemy’s core with one blow. Suffocating miasma burned Leonis’s lungs from within.

Nnng, this is dangerous...

For all his vast power, Leonis still had the body of a boy.

Eighth-order spell—Al Gu Belzelga!”

Boooooooooom!

The spell produced a massive pillar of hellfire, but the area it blew away

instantly started regenerating.

“Lord Magnus, we must retreat for a moment. At this rate, your body...,” Blackas implored him.

“Ngh. We have no choice!”

Just as Leonis was about to heed his trusted friend’s advice...

Brrr... Brrr, brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

...the Spirit King suddenly stopped in its tracks.

What? Leonis looked back in surprise. In the distance, he spied two girls praying at the top of the Spirit King’s temple.

Regina and Chatres, two of the O’Itriese sisters.

The two were kneeling, and an elven magic circle glowed around them.

Are they...trying to appease Elmysteriga...?

The Spirit King stopped for only a moment.

“■■■■■■■■■■■■...!”

The Void Lord’s howl rent the air.

However, Leonis required only that brief pause. He alighted from Blackas and, with a vicious smile, drew the Demon Sword.

Thou Art the Sword to Save the World, Gifted by the Heavens.

Thou Art the Sword to Ruin the World, Made to Rebel Against the Heavens.

A Holy Sword, Sanctified by the Gods.

A Demon Sword, Blessed by the Goddess.

Thy name is—the Demonic Sword, Dáinsleif!

Dáinsleif’s blade cleaved through the Spirit King’s core.

Bwoooooooooooooosh!

A blinding white flash spilled out of the core. Leonis, now standing in midair, released his weapon.

May you rest in peace this time, Elmysteriga, the Spirit King...

Leonis plunged toward the ground as he watched the Void Lord's gigantic frame crumble. The red sky of this other world filled his vision. And just before he let his eyes flutter shut...

...he heard her voice.

"Ahhh, finally. You've come to carry out your promise, Leonis."



AFTERWORD

Thank you for your patience! This is Yu Shimizu, and I bring you Volume 9 of *The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy*.

The Void Shift plot still looms after the Holy Sword Dance Festival. While the Void home world starts encroaching on his own, Leonis finds his Realm of Shadows compromised. Together with a new ally (?) on his side, Leonis must crush an evil plot. And to that end, he must...dress up as a pretty maid?!

That's the outline of Volume 9. Quite a lot happened this time! And there's more to come as the secrets of the world and the goddess come to light. Please look forward to it!

Time for some thanks. To Asagi Tohsaka, thank you for the gorgeous illustrations. The images of Regina as a princess and as a pinup maid are absolutely lovely. To Asuka Keigen, who's working on the manga version, thank you for releasing such high-quality chapters every month! And the biggest thank-you goes to the readers. It's only thanks to you all that *The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy* has come this far. With production of the anime well underway, there's so much to look forward to.

Until next time!

—Yu Shimizu, January 2022

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