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Yu Shimizu

ILLUSTRATION

Asagi Tohsaka



The  
**DEMON SWORD MASTER**  
of *Excalibur Academy*



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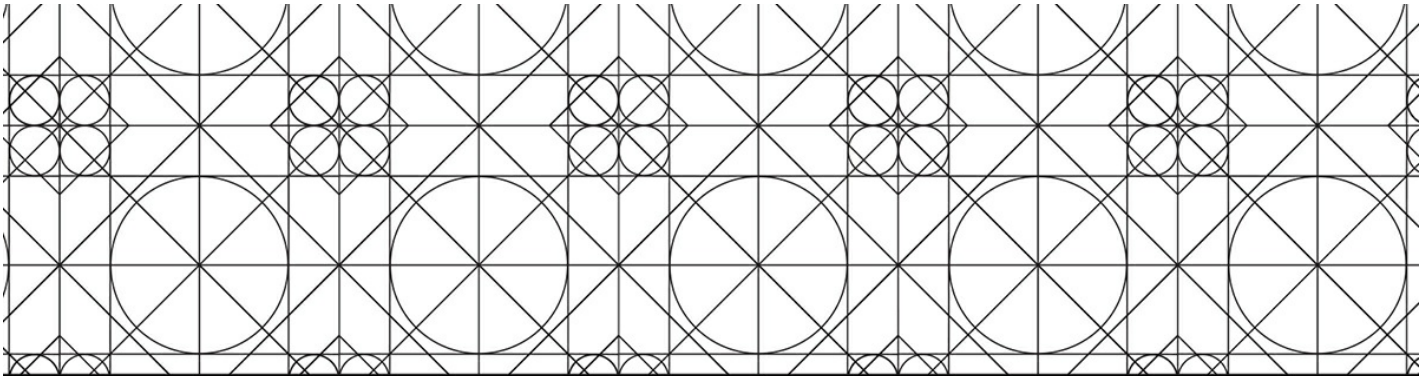
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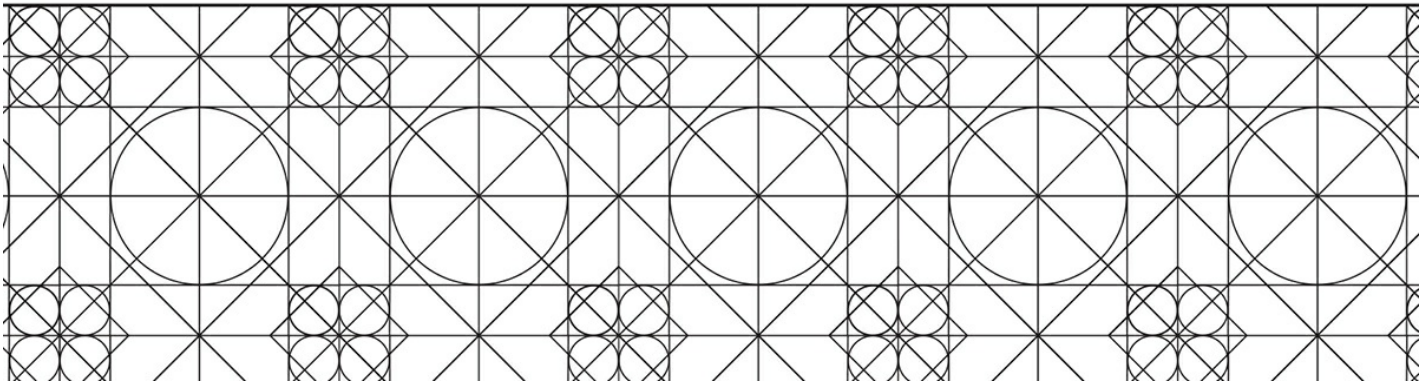


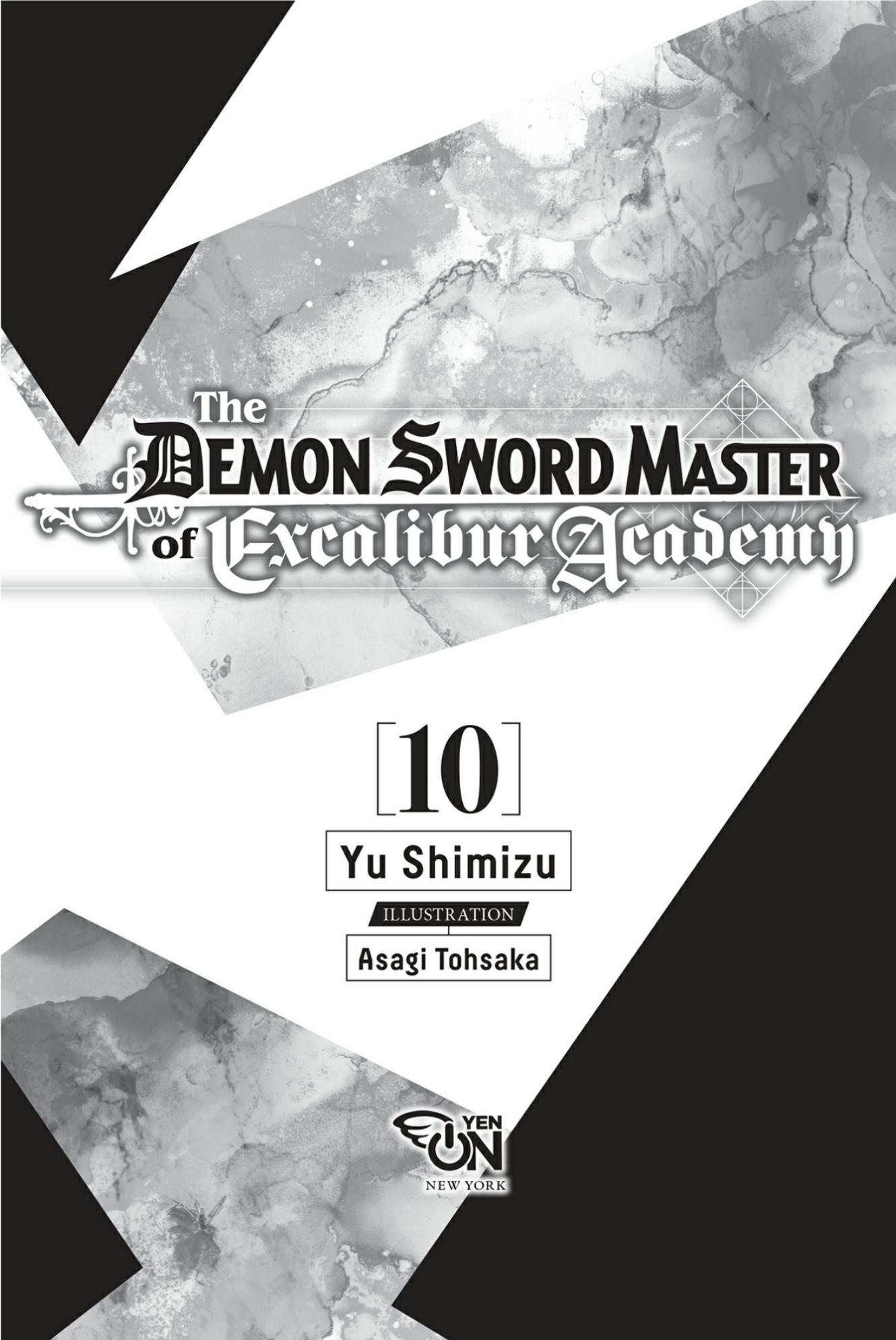


The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy

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NEW YORK

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## CHAPTER 1

### GUIDED BY THAT VOICE

A red sky the color of blood filled his vision. This was the sky of another world, where all Voids were born.

*This body is so fragile. To be rendered motionless by so little,* Leonis lamented bitterly as he lay face up on the soil. The blade of the Demon Sword in his grasp had already lost its luster, its powers and authorities inert. But Leonis hadn't given up yet. Using Dáinsleif took its toll on him, sapping his stamina and mana. He tried to restrain the sword's output to an extent, but controlling the Demon Sword was, in the end, too challenging.

"He's...been destroyed...right?"

Leonis looked around. The area where he'd fought the Spirit King had been rendered into a wasteland. Trees had been swept away and the forest eradicated.

Leonis had felled the resurrected king of Origin Spirits, Elmysteriga Elemental Lord, his old nemesis. All livable land had caved in, and there was no trace of him left.

"Forgive me, proud and lofty Spirit King. I bore you no ill will..."

Once Leonis had drawn the Demon Sword, he'd had no choice but to destroy his foe.

"You forced me into using Dáinsleif. I will pass down your story as one mighty enough to achieve that much."

A shadow fell over Leonis's face.

"Lord Magnus, are you all right?" A black wolf peered down at him with golden eyes.

"I'm fine. It's just the backlash of using the Demon Sword. I can't move."

“I see.”

Blackas bit on the collar of Leonis’s uniform and dragged him to an overturned tree. The great wolf laid his friend up against the trunk.

“...You’re being rough,” Leonis grouched with a sullen look. “Treat me with a bit more care.”

“Pardon.” Blackas bowed his head a little. “I’ll pursue the Queen of Shadows. We cannot let her escape.”

“Yes, you handle that. Capture her alive and bring her before me.”

The Queen of Shadows—Scheherazade Shadow Queen. She had ruled the Realm of Shadows. Blackas and Leonis had joined forces to banish her a thousand years ago. Recently, they’d discovered she had turned Elysion Academy into her base of operations and abducted many Holy Swordsmen, including Regina and Chatres.

She’d taken Blackas captive and even lured Leonis into a trap, only to have the tables turned on her all too easily. Desperate, she’d played her trump card and resurrected the Spirit King, Elmysteriga, only for Leonis to thoroughly foil her scheme.

“We need to get her to reveal her goal. After that, she’s yours to do with as you please.”

“Understood.” Blackas growled viciously and dived into Leonis’s shadow.

The tyrannical wolf wouldn’t let his prey escape. No matter how far she ran, he would chase her to the ends of the earth.

“...The Spirit King,” Leonis mumbled to himself as he sat up and sealed the Demon Sword in its hilt within the staff.

The whole place had been blown away in the battle, but looking around now, Leonis was confident he recognized the surroundings.

“Even with all the miasma filling the place, there’s no mistaking it. This is the Spirit Forest.”

The Spirit Forest, the place where all Origin Spirits were born. A millennium ago, the elven kingdom flourished here, bordering the Rognas Kingdom.

“...”

Leonis looked up at the bloodred sky.

What was the Spirit Forest doing in another dimension, in the Void world?

*And also...*

Leonis's grip on the Staff of Sealed Sins tightened.

*“Ahhh, finally. You've come to carry out your promise, Leonis.”*

When he'd used Dáinsleif, he heard her voice.

Leonis didn't know enough to reach a clear conclusion, but he was able to come up with a theory about this Void world.

*If my theory is correct, this world is—*

“My lord! Are you all right?!” A voice cut off his train of thought.

A maid hopped from his shadow in a flustered panic.

“Ah, my lord!” In her rush, the maid ended up bumping into Leonis's face.

“Guh!” Leonis exclaimed as she hit him.

“M-my apologies! Are you okay?!” Shary said in alarm.

“Y-you nincompoop...,” Leonis grumbled, having nearly been knocked over.

“...Erm. What's a nincompoop?” Shary asked.

“Never mind. Hurry up and get off me.”

“M-my apologies!” Shary hurriedly hopped back, pinched up her skirt's ends, and curtsied. “I-I'm glad you're safe!”

“Hmph. Who do you take me for?” Leonis straightened up and shrugged. “Where's my minion?”

“Your minion is...safe,” Shary replied, sounding displeased and puffing up her cheeks. “She's currently occupied rescuing the ones abducted by the Queen of Shadows. I believe she intended to search for you, but I dissuaded her.”

Leonis nodded. “...I see.”

“You always fret over that minion, my lord,” Shary remarked irritably.

“Why do you look upset about that?”

“I am not upset. I—I just wish you’d worry about me, too...” She trailed off, mumbling.

*If she says so, then I should refocus...*

Leonis needed to link up with the abducted academy students, and the best time to do so was when things were still chaotic. If he tried to join them later, it might make him look suspicious.

“Shary, I can’t move much after using my Demon Sword. We’ll rest here for a time, then rendezvous with Riselia and the others.”

“Yes, understood. I will guard you until you can move, my lord!” Shary declared, clenching her fists.

“That’s unnecessary. I can protect myself even if I can’t move.”

“...In that case, would you like a lullaby? I don’t know too many songs, though.” Shary cleared her throat and let out a clear, sonorous “Ahhh.”

“No need for lullabies. For now, you must take on my appearance and join the others so my absence doesn’t seem conspicuous.”

“Yes, understood.”

Shary bowed politely. Darkness enveloped her, as though in response, and when it moved away, she had become a mirror image of her master.

“Will this do?”

“Yes, that will be fine.”

“Um, I believe the real you is much cuter than I can ever hope to be, but—”

“Hurry up and get going,” Leonis said, exasperated.

“O-okay! I’m off!” Shary quickly sank into Leonis’s shadow.

“Honestly.” Leonis sighed and relaxed his weakened body. “The Void world, huh?”

Assuming his theory about this world held true, the ruins of an important place might exist here.

“...I must confirm it for myself.”



“Lady Selia, I found some here, too!” Regina called over her shoulder.

The light attached to her Holy Sword’s sights illuminated the pitch-black interior of the ruined structure. Elysion Academy uniforms were strewn all over the corridor, the remains of students swallowed up by shadows. Their owners had been abducted and stripped like Regina. Presently, they were being held in the pyramid’s hall.

Regina, Riselia, and a handful of others had regained consciousness and ventured away to recover their lost clothing and communication terminals.

“That’s twenty-seven people’s worth of uniforms. That only leaves eight unaccounted for,” Riselia said, using her terminal to keep tally.

Holy Swordsmen training schools had students’ unit numbers stitched into their uniforms, making it easy to identify who they belonged to. Incidentally, they found Regina’s outfit quite quickly. Hers was the only Excalibur Academy uniform, which made it easy.

“What is this place supposed to be?” Riselia whispered, scanning the hall. “Voids couldn’t have built this place, right?”

“Yeah, I doubt it. I think that elf girl called it a temple,” Regina answered.

“I’d like to inspect it more carefully, but now’s not the time.” The disappointment in Riselia’s voice was obvious.

She was curious about the seemingly ancient structure. However, there were more pressing issues. After all, they were currently on the other side of a Void fissure.

This was the Void world.



An eerie, dense forest surrounded the ruined pyramid. The crimson sky was visible through gaps in the canopy.

“Does anyone here have a healing Holy Sword? We need help with the injured.”

“I can use my Sunlight’s Bell. It’s only an E-rank Holy Sword, though.”

“That’s absolutely fine. Please do what you can to help the wounded.”

“Princess Chatres, we’re back!” Riselia said. She had bundles of uniforms in both arms.

“Thank you. Good work.” The third princess of the imperial royal family, Chatres Ray O’ltrieese, nodded.

“Did you find everyone’s clothes?” Chatres asked.

“There’s still a few sets missing. We’ll have to go back to search more,” Regina replied. Her arms were also carrying heaps of attire.

“Very well. For the time being, leave those you’ve recovered and identified here,” Chatres instructed.

““Understood.”” The two girls from Excalibur Academy nodded and made their way to where the abducted students were gathered.

“Lady Chatres is still speaking formally around you,” Riselia commented quietly.

Regina shook her head, her pigtails twisting and bouncing. “It can’t be helped. Everyone’s looking.”

Chatres had recently learned that Regina was the fourth imperial princess of House O’ltrieese, her younger sister whose existence had been kept a secret. She’d had her doubts when Regina saved her life during the Holy Sword Dance Festival, but those evaporated when an Origin Spirit loyal only to the O’ltrieese bloodline became attached to Regina.

“I’m glad I got to talk to my sister anyway. I always thought she was intimidating, but she’s not so bad.”

Riselia smiled. “I’m happy for you.”

“It’s all thanks to you, Lady Selia. When we got the invitation to the tea party, you were the one who encouraged me to come along.”

“Yes, but look at how things turned out...”

“That’s not your fault.” Regina shook her head. “Did you and the kid get

caught by the shadows?”

“Huh? Oh, er, yes...” Riselia nodded awkwardly.

In truth, she and Leonis hadn’t been snared. They’d jumped into the darkness voluntarily to save Regina.

“Leo and I woke up in the middle of the abduction and fought our way out.”

“What are these shadows anyway? Voids?”

“...I don’t know.”

That much wasn’t a lie. Riselia really didn’t know what they were.

*I know an enemy of Leo’s is behind this, though.*

Leonis had split with Riselia on the way to the Shadow Castle.

“Why did that giant Void disappear into thin air?” Regina said. She gazed in the direction of where a giant monster had been rampaging until a short while ago.

That creature had been a veritable incarnation of the land, like nature itself brought to life. The elf girl who came with Sakuya had called it a great spirit. Armed with that knowledge, Regina and Chatres—who carried the blood of elementalists—had climbed to the top of the ruins and attempted a ritual to calm spirits.

However, the monster hadn’t been destroyed by their efforts.

*Leo must have done it.*

Riselia was certain of it. The moment before the giant creature vanished, she saw an intense flash streak through the sky.

*He must have used that sword.*

He’d done the same to vanquish the Void Lord that attached itself to the Seventh Assault Garden’s mana furnace and the one that appeared on the Third Assault Garden. The weapon carried incredible power, greater than anything humanity’s Holy Swords could manage.

“By the way, where’s the kid? Feels like he should be back by now...,” Regina said, concerned.

“Y-yeah...”

Riselia had told Regina that Leonis went out to scout the surrounding area with his Holy Sword, but if he returned soon, it would seem suspicious.

“I don’t think he went that far...” Riselia was honestly concerned about him. She couldn’t imagine him losing after using that sword, though.

*He’s fine. My instructor went to pick him up.*

Riselia wanted to hurry to Leonis’s side, but Shary had told her, “Stay here and ensure no one notices my master’s absence.”

While Riselia and Regina spoke, they walked among the Elysion Academy students lying on the ground. Most of them had only recently woken up. Many were still weak and couldn’t stand. To Riselia’s surprise, she spotted a familiar face among them.

“Sakuya.”

“Oh, Miss Selia...” The boyish blue-haired girl in Sakura Orchid garb looked up at her friend.

The shadows hadn’t taken Sakuya. She’d slipped through a Void tear that had opened during the Holy Sword Dance Festival and found herself here. While she usually wore a cool-looking eye patch out of a teenage attempt to act edgy, she didn’t have it on now.

“What are you doing, Sakuya?” Riselia asked curiously.

“Oh, I’m trying to help the other students with a traditional Sakura Orchid method of infusing others with *ki*.”

“Oh, right. I’ve heard the Sakura Orchid’s people had special powers like that.”

Sakuya stood behind a weakened student, took a deep breath, and then...

“Tahhh!”

*Pow, pow, pow!*

...she struck the back of the student’s neck with a hand.

“...I-is that how the Sakura Orchid people do it?”

“Yes, it’s a traditional Sakura Orchid chop. It fixes most problems with people and magical apparatuses.”

“I-it does...?” Riselia sounded confused, but Sakuya continued, untroubled.

Astonishingly, the weakened girl struck by the chop...

“Th-thank you. I feel kind of better now.”

...seemed to regain the strength to smile.

“That’s good. But you shouldn’t move around too much yet,” Sakuya cautioned.

Riselia was slightly agape. “It actually works...”

“Is she using Raikirimaru’s powers to transmit weak electric currents or something?” Regina cocked her head.

Riselia put down the stacks of uniforms she was carrying and looked around. “Sakuya, could you come with me? Where’s the elf girl?”

“Oh, she told me she’s no good at dealing with crowds and wandered off.”

“I guess an elf would feel uneasy around lots of humans.”

Elves were known to dislike large gatherings. That’s why they weren’t seen outside the forest in the special demi-human ward on the Seventh Assault Garden.

“I wanted to thank her for sharing the ritual to calm the spirits,” Regina said, disappointed. “Won’t she be in danger on her own?”

“She’s as strong as I am, so I think she’ll be fine.” No sooner had Sakuya finished replying than she threw a glare at a nearby thicket. “Who’s there?!”

Riselia and Regina furrowed their brows at Sakuya’s aggressive question and turned to look. A small figure emerged from the brush.

“Leo!”

“I’ve finished scouting around,” Leonis said, patting away the leaves clinging to his uniform. “There are no Voids nearby.”

“Oh, it was just you, kid.” Sakuya relaxed and shrugged. “Your presence felt

kind of different, for some reason...”

“Oh, thank goodness you’re back, Leo. I was worried.” Riselia ran over and hugged him.

“Wh-what are you doing?!” Leonis cried, flustered when Riselia’s chest swallowed his face.

“...Huh?” Riselia pulled away slightly.

Something *did* feel off. She squatted to look Leonis in the eye.

“You’re not Leo.” She whispered so the others wouldn’t hear.

“...”

“Is that you, teacher?”

“...D-don’t call me teacher,” Leonis muttered indignantly.

“I knew it...,” Riselia said.

This was Shary in disguise.

“...How could you tell?”

“Hmm. It was something about your demeanor, or maybe it was your scent.”

Riselia hadn’t recognized when Leonis had been replaced with a body double during the *Hyperion* seajacking incident, but she could now. Perhaps she’d unconsciously learned the subtleties of his gestures and mannerisms.

“Where’s the real Leo?” Riselia inquired.

“He’s a bit tired, so he’s resting at the moment. You have no reason to be concerned about him,” Shary explained.

“O-okay...”

Despite Shary’s insistence, Riselia couldn’t help but fret.

Regina trotted over. “Are you okay, kid? You’re not frightened, are you?”

“No. I was unconscious when the shadows swallowed us,” Shary fibbed.

“Are you hungry? I could give you some of my snacks.” Sakuya waved her sleeve, and a few colorful bean paste balls rolled out.

“...P-perhaps just one.” Shary was practically drooling at the sight of the sweets already.



“Hmm. Eighteen people have regained consciousness.”

Half an hour had passed since Riselia and Regina returned with uniforms.

Chatres stood in the forest clearing, looking over the students. Elysion Academy’s Holy Swordsmen stood at attention, listening intently to the third princess.

“Currently, we seem to be in a world on the other side of a giant Void crack. This is quite possibly the bastion of our enemy.”

A stir ran through the assembled students as Chatres spoke.

*I can hardly fault them for being frightened,* Riselia thought.

They’d been minding their own business on the Elysion Academy campus when they’d been kidnapped. When they awoke, they’d found themselves in an unfamiliar place. No, calling it something so mundane was a disservice. They would have been better off in some unknown location. They were trapped in the world of the Voids.

“Quiet, please!” Chatres’s dignified voice brought the anxious whispers in the crowd to order. “I don’t know why we were taken, but I have to assume the Voids were responsible. Voids are known to eat people, but I’m sure you’ve all heard stories of them taking unfortunate souls instead.”

Such cases were rare, but they did happen. It’s why Riselia had initially assumed Leonis was a refugee taken by Voids when she found him.

One girl sheepishly raised a hand. “Excuse me, Princess Chatres!”

“Yes?”

“Well, um, did you defeat the Voids that abducted us, Your Highness?”

“I did indeed,” Chatres responded instantly.

She’d undoubtedly prepared to field that question in advance. Replying as she did was wise. It would prevent needless worry among the students. And indeed,

the abductees appeared to relax somewhat.

Chatres Ray O'Itriese was a two-time Holy Sword Dance Festival winner and regarded as the strongest Holy Swordswoman of her time. Everyone recognized and greatly trusted her strength.

"But even so, this is the world of the Voids. The fact remains that we're in a dangerous predicament," Chatres continued. "Our terminals are unusable, and our distress calls are not reaching Camelot. The empire's knights are probably aware that students of Elysion Academy have vanished, but they lack a means of tracking us down."

"Oh no..."

Worry entered the students' expressions again.

"Don't panic. Thankfully, we know of a way back home." Chatres turned around, casting her gaze at Sakuya, who was leaning against a tree. "Unlike us, she wasn't snatched by the Voids. This girl crossed through a giant fissure and emerged in this forest."

Sakuya nodded and pointed past the trees. Beyond the woods was a tear in space that stretched toward the sky.

"That tear is a few dozen kilorels from here. I came here in a two-wheeled vehicle, but trained Holy Swordsmen can easily cover that distance by foot," she said.

"R-really?"

"Then we can go home?"

While they were confused, the students' eyes lit up at the possibility of returning to safety.

"That's right," Chatres declared. "So once we rest for a bit, we'll make for the giant crack. If anyone has objections, speak now."

"..."

Unsurprisingly, no one had any objections. Everyone believed that remaining here was far worse than making the trip.

“What about those who are still unconscious?” one of the students questioned.

“We’ll wait as long as we can, but we can’t afford to delay for long. Does anyone have a Holy Sword that can be used to transport them?”

“I think my Glutton Holy Sword might be able to carry them all,” a student offered.

“All right, then please handle it.” Chatres nodded and looked at each of the gathered Holy Swordsmen. “Everyone, please report your Holy Swords’ powers and ranks. We’ll assemble the most combat-capable students and march in anti-Void formations. Our departure is planned for fourteen hundred hours.”

“Yes, ma’am!” The Elysion Academy students saluted in unison.

“They’re quite organized. I’d like them for my army,” Shary commented, giving her best impression of Leonis.

“Army?” Riselia asked, confused.

“N-nothing, I didn’t say anything...” Shary shook her head and walked toward the bushes.

Riselia raised an eyebrow. “Where are you going?”

“I’m leaving. My job here is done, it seems.”

“W-wait...” Riselia made to go after her.

However, Shary sank into the shadows without looking back.

“T-teacher?” Riselia knelt and knocked on the shadow, but her fingers tapped only on solid earth.

Not a moment later, the shrubs behind her shook.

Leonis emerged, his staff in hand. “What are you doing down there, Miss Selia?”

“Leo?!” Riselia stood and promptly wrapped her arms around Leonis.

“M-Miss Selia, what are you doing?!”

“Yeah, you’re the real Leo,” Riselia whispered happily. She tightened her

embrace and ruffled his hair.

“Th-that hurts...”

“Ah, sorry!” Riselia released Leonis in a flustered hurry.

“It’s not your fault... My muscles are still a little sore.”

“You went and did something reckless again, didn’t you?” Riselia peered into Leonis’s eyes. Her brow furrowed.

“I wouldn’t call it reckless.”

“You were the one who beat that monster, right?”

“Well, yes. I had to exercise a bit of force to accomplish it...” Leonis grimaced as though pained.

“Do you want me to get a compress? Oh, there are a few students who can use healing Holy Swords. Should I ask them for help?” Riselia was all but running off to call for them already.

“No, I’m fine!” Leonis grabbed her sleeve and looked in Chatres’s direction. “Forget that. What’s everyone doing?”

“We’re getting ready to return to the capital.”

Riselia explained that Sakuya and Arle had arrived through a fissure in space that was still present. The group intended to use it to return to their world.

“Really?” Leonis placed a hand over his jaw. “That’s fortunate...”

“Fortunate?” Riselia parroted, confused.

“Yes,” Leonis said. “I think I’ll stay here for a while longer.”



*I’m sorry, Sakuya, but I’m just no good at handling crowds.*

A ponytailed girl moved through the forest, distant human voices at her back. She was Arle Kirlesio, an elven swordswoman known as a Dark Lord—vanquishing hero.

She had no intention of getting along with humans. She’d planned to come here alone.

*Dealing with their questions would only cause trouble.*

Presently, she was a bodyguard for the anti-imperial organization called the Demon Wolf Pack. The group had provided her with a fake registry in the civilian census, but if anyone looked into her too closely, the lie would likely be exposed.

*What happened here?* Arle pondered as she took in the miasma-polluted scenery of the Spirit Forest.

The forest had been torn up by a gigantic earth monster—the Spirit King, Elmysteriga. The grand ruler of the elementals was once an ally to the elves. Why had the deceased Spirit King returned? And why did he take the form of the terrible monsters the humans of this era called Voids?

Arle inspected the wreckage left in the monster’s wake. There was no surviving trace of the Spirit King. She only found felled trees and a massive crater.

“Did the ritual to calm the elementals return him to the Spirit Realm? No, that can’t be.” Arle shook her head, her ponytail swaying.

She glanced back and turned around, gazing at the ruined pyramid. That place was a temple for the spirits. In Arle’s era, it was where elven priestesses conducted rituals to quell the wrath of raging elementals.

*That couldn’t have been enough, though...*

The two girls Arle taught the ritual to did carry the talents of elementalists, but even if they’d summoned the temple’s power, it shouldn’t have been enough to completely subdue a being on the magnitude of the Spirit King. Especially not after it had turned into a Void monster.

*More importantly...*

Arle stopped in her tracks and looked up. A sky as red as blood peeked through the openings in the treetops.

“Why did the Spirit King manifest here?”

This wasn’t the same world. It was the Voids’ domain.

*Just what is this place? The Elder Tree never told me of this.*

Arle's mission was to slay the Goddess of Rebellion, Roselia Ishtar, who was supposed to be reborn after a thousand years.

*That's why I was given Crozax, one of the Arc Seven.*

Arle gripped the hilt of the Demon Smiting Sword. The world had become unrecognizable compared to what she remembered.

*I should investigate this place.*

Thankfully, Arle wasn't completely without hints—the resurrection of the Spirit King and the presence of his temple were clues to build upon.

*If the ruins are here, then this world must be...*

Arle had no definitive proof. That's why she had to go and confirm it for herself.

*Unless I'm wrong, it should be there...*

Arle fixed her gaze in one direction and disappeared into the forest.



"...You want to stay here and check something?" Riselia asked. Her eyes betrayed her incredulity.

Leonis nodded. "Yes."

The two of them were alone, having moved a good distance from the rest of the group. Leonis had also constructed a barrier to keep others away, just in case. No one would disturb them.

"Leo, this is the Void home world. Do you have any idea how dangerous this is —"

"I'll be fine. You know how strong I am."

"Y-yes, but... No, I can't. I won't leave you here." Riselia shook her head firmly.

*I never expected her to go along with it, but she's still being too obstinate.* Leonis shrugged, exasperated at his minion's overprotectiveness.

"I'm going, no matter how much you tell me I can't," he asserted, trying to come across as commanding as possible.

“L-Leo?!” Riselia stiffened as though a shock had run through her. “Are you entering your rebellious phase?”

“N-no!”

“Then why...?”

“I think the person I’m searching for might be here.”

“...Huh?”

Riselia’s ice-blue eyes widened slightly at Leonis’s admission.

“The person you’re looking for? You mean...?”

“Yes. The one who’s...very special to me.”

Leonis had once told Riselia that his goal was to find someone very important to him.

“And that person is here, in the Void world?”

“I don’t know for certain,” Leonis conceded as he met Riselia’s gaze. “But this world might have clues about her.”

“...”

Riselia was speechless for a moment, but she eventually found her words. “All right. I understand.” She shrugged and nodded. “I know you have your reasons, and I understand how stubborn you can be.”

*You’re one to talk*, Leonis thought. He nearly said as much aloud, but he kept quiet.

“However, I have one condition.” Riselia held up an index finger.

“And that would be?”

“I’m coming along,” she stated.

“No. You need to go back with everyone else, Miss Selia.”

“Why?”

“It’s dangerous. I don’t know if I’ll be able to protect you.”

Riselia pouted. “I’ll be the one protecting you, Leo! I’m your guardian.” She

crouched to bring her face close to his.

“...?!” Leonis went red in the face. Riselia was so close that their noses nearly touched.

She gazed straight at Leonis’s face. “Leo...you can hardly move right now, right?”

“W-well...” Leonis struggled to answer.

He couldn’t deny that he’d only just found the strength to walk on his own. He could invoke spells, but moving quickly was a challenge. Judging by past instances when the Demon Sword’s power had enervated him, it would take him two or three days to fully recover.

“You always spend a long time in bed after using that sword. I know you’re strong, but you’ll be in trouble if you run into danger in your current state.”

Hearing the truth hurt. Leonis wasn’t undead anymore. He had the body of a ten-year-old. One poor dodge and a Void’s claws would kill him. Blackas normally guarded him, but he was away pursuing the Queen of Shadows, and the Three Champions of Rognas were guarding Excalibur Academy. Leonis had intended for Shary to guard him.

*However, I’d rather have Shary manage the Dark Lords’ Armies.*

With Leonis—or rather, the Dark Lord Zol Vadis—absent, Shary needed to watch over the Demon Wolf Pack and the others in the newly formed Dark Lords’ Armies. Annexing many of the underground organizations in the capital had recently bolstered the ranks, and with the present chaos, Leonis couldn’t afford to let his new recruits go out of control.

Leonis eyed his minion.

*Compared to the ranks of my old forces, she’s basically like an undead corps commander.*

Thanks to Shary’s training and the Holy Sword Dance Festival, Riselia had grown stronger than Leonis had remembered. She’d learned to fully draw out the power of the True Ancestor’s Dress and was more than capable of keeping the weaker Voids occupied while Leonis chanted spells.

*Maybe I would be more at ease with her by my side.*

The Queen of Shadows had already attacked Elysion Academy. Camelot wasn't safe just because one attack had come and gone. In which case, having Riselia within arm's reach meant she'd be in less danger.

*Besides, it's almost impossible to change her mind when she gets like this.* Leonis sighed internally.

"Very well, then. You may come with me, Miss Selia."

"You can count on me!" Riselia nodded with a smile and patted Leonis on the head.



"No, I can't let just you and the kid stay behind!"

Regina's reaction was predictable enough. She lifted her golden pigtailed up with her hands, holding them like horns.

Evidently, this was how she expressed her chagrin.

"I'm coming along!"

"Y-you can't! It's really dangerous. Besides, you're still fatigued from what happened, right?" Riselia argued.

"I'm fine now! See?" A pouting Regina hopped up and down a couple of times.

This made her skirt flap, and Leonis had to avert his eyes uncomfortably.

"Besides, if it's that dangerous, then that's all the more reason I can't leave you here! Duke Crystalia asked me to look after you, and if I abandon you here, I'd never be able to face His Grace again!"

"B-but..."

"No *buts*. I'm coming!" Regina said firmly, placing her hands on her waist.

It was like a repeat of Riselia's exchange with Leonis earlier.

"Besides..." Regina turned to face Leonis. "This is connected to your memories, right, kid?"

“Yes...” Leonis nodded earnestly. “The things I see in this world are familiar somehow.”

When he was rescued, Leonis pretended he’d lost his memories. Since Riselia was the only one who knew of his search for Roselia, he told Regina this world might hold hints about his past instead.

“I’ll help you, then. You’re one of my precious teammates. ♪” Regina patted Leonis affectionately on the head.

“...Very well. You can come along, too, Miss Regina.”

“L-Leo?” Riselia turned around to face him, flustered.

*“I won’t be able to talk her out of this,”* Leonis communicated to Riselia telepathically.

“...Okay. I understand.”

“Lady Selia!” Regina gave her best friend an appreciative look.

Riselia smiled. “Honestly, having you around will be encouraging...”

“Then surely you have room for one more,” Sakuya interjected. She’d been listening with her arms folded.

“You want to come along, Sakuya?” Riselia asked.

“I willingly came to the Void world to fight. I would’ve remained even if I was the only one left.” Sakuya nodded, as if to say this was all a natural conclusion.

“Then please join us, Miss Sakuya,” Leonis said.

“Thanks. I’ll be counting on you three to watch my back.”

“...Fine.” Riselia shrugged. “I just hope Miss Finé won’t worry about us too much... Let’s get ready to go, then.”

“Wait, Lady Selia.” Regina stopped her. “There’s someone else we’ll need to persuade.”



“You want to stay behind and investigate?”

Chatres Ray O’ltrieze cocked an eyebrow and glared at Riselia sharply.

“Yes,” Riselia replied unflinchingly, enduring the full pressure of speaking to royalty. “While we were brought here against our will, this is a precious chance to gain information on the Voids. As such, Excalibur Academy’s eighteenth platoon intends to stay and learn what we can.”

“The empire’s knights are already organizing a survey unit. This isn’t your responsibility,” Chatres replied sternly, her tone as cold as ice. “I know your actual abilities are higher than your ranking within your school implies. I’m sure you’d be able to handle highly dangerous Hive investigations with ease. But this world is unknown to us. We lack the information to send out teams like yours.”

“But if we wait for the administration bureau’s investigation results, it might be too late.” Riselia refused to back down. “Sitting by and ignoring the signs of a possible Stampede could mean the capital’s destruction.”

“Hmm...”

Riselia’s eyes were so resolute that Chatres went silent for a moment. The princess knew that the Third Assault Garden, Riselia’s home, had been destroyed in a Void attack. And there was no denying that a massive Void fissure yet loomed over Camelot, meaning an invasion could begin at any moment. Riselia could very well be right. They didn’t have the leisure to wait for a detailed report from the administration bureau.

“Please, big sis.” Regina bowed her head.

“You’re going, too, Regina?” Chatres asked.

“Yes,” Regina replied. “I’m Lady Selia’s maid, after all.”

“I see...”

Chatres crossed her arms pensively and eventually let out a sigh.

“I may be the third princess, but I’m still a knight trainee and student. I have no authority to order Excalibur Academy students like yourselves. Do as you will.”

“You have our thanks, Your Highness,” Regina said.

“Big sis, thank you,” Regina added.

“But don’t do anything reckless under any circumstances. Treat this as a

reconnaissance mission, nothing more.” Chatres’s attention focused on Regina, and her tone became concerned. “I would’ve liked to come along with you, but I have a duty to see the other students safely returned to the capital.”

Regina nodded. “I understand. Please be careful.”

“...” Chatres cleared her throat. “I-incidentally, Regina Mercedes.”

“...?”

“Could you, erm...”

“Huh?”

“...call me big sis...one more time?”

“...” Regina’s eyes widened in surprise, and then she whispered into Riselia’s ear, “Lady Selia, what do I do? My big sister’s too cute.”



The eighteenth platoon waited for the Elysion Academy students to recover and watched them leave. While Riselia and the others helped care for the weakened students, Leonis snuck away from the camp and examined the interior of the pyramid ruin.

“As suspected, this really is a temple the high elves built to worship the Spirit King.” Leonis brushed his fingers over the magical text carved into the walls.

If these inscriptions were activated properly, the temple would function, even after all this time.

*So this suppressed the Spirit King’s power...*

During Leonis’s battle with Elmysteriga, an elven magic circle appeared when Regina and Chatres performed a ritual. The two were descendants of elementalists, but it was this place that allowed them to stall the Spirit King’s wrath briefly.

*Arle Kirlesio must have activated the temple.*

The Swordmaster’s apprentice and elven hero, Arle, had come with Sakuya. Leonis didn’t know where she was now but had to wonder why she’d come at all.

*Someone's definitely pulling her strings.*

Leonis had once tried to use mind control sorcery on her and found his spell rebuked. He'd also sensed someone observing him. Curiously, Arle hadn't seemed aware of that.

"Is now a good time, my lord...?"

The shadow at Leonis's feet wavered, and Shary's head emerged from it.

"What is it, Shary?"

"Your minion is one thing, but won't taking all those girls with you just make for a burden?"

"I had no choice but to agree. Refusing would've made me look suspicious." Leonis shrugged. "Besides, they won't hold me back, not when I'm weakened."

Leonis closed and opened his hand to demonstrate.

"My limbs feel heavy like lead. Just standing up is a challenge right now."

"Should I stay to protect you?" Shary asked, concerned.

Leonis shook his head. "No, I need you to command the army in my stead. You're the only one who can masquerade as Zol Vadis. Besides, I need to make sure someone keeps an eye on the emperor's younger brother, Alexios. Ally or not, I don't fully trust him yet."

"Alexios...", Shary said, bringing a finger to her jaw pensively. "Who is that, again?"

"The one who had an audience with me the other day," Leonis said, glaring at her reproachfully.

"Oh. The one who brought all that junk as tribute." Shary brought her fist down on the open palm of her other hand in a show of realization. "My apologies, my lord. I was simply so disinterested in him that I'd forgotten."

"...He is related to the most powerful person among the humans," Leonis said, exasperated. "Inform him about Chatres so as to ensure they regroup."

"Understood." Shary nodded. "What will we demand in exchange for that information?"

“...Hmm, well, perhaps some weapon provisions... Actually, no. We demand no recompense.” Leonis changed his mind.

Since they’d made an alliance of friendship and goodwill, there was no need to demand payment for something this insignificant. It hardly made for a debt, even. The Undead King was a magnanimous Dark Lord, after all.

“I’m counting on you. You’re the only one I can rely on in my absence.”

“Leave it to me, my lord.” Shary bowed her head respectfully and began sinking back into his shadow.

Recalling something, Leonis said, “Wait.”

“What is it, my lord?”

“Take care of these.”

Leonis snapped his fingers, and a group of six girls appeared from his shadow. Each had black hair and wore a uniform similar to Shary’s. Perhaps they were sextuplets, because they were all mirror images of one another. They were all sealed in place by a spell, blindfolded and unmoving.

“My lord, did you pick up more girls from the street without permission again?” Shary asked, looking a bit flabbergasted.

“These were the Queen of Shadows’ assassins.”

“...?! They’re from Septentrion?!”

“Yes. They tried to kill me, but I defeated them.”

Septentrion was an assassin society affiliated with the Realm of Shadows. Shary herself was a former member of the group.

“Do you recognize them?” Leonis asked.

“No...” Shary shook her head and glared at the girls coldly, her dusk-colored eyes glinting dangerously. “To make an attempt on a Dark Lord’s life... You should be sentenced to death.”

“Wait, don’t get carried away. These assassins serve the Queen of Shadows because of a Seal of Servitude spell. They were forced to obey her. I’ve destroyed the marks already.”

Leonis snapped his fingers again, and the mana chains binding the girls disappeared. The six fell to the ground, sound asleep.

“I task you with training these six. Septentrion assassins are bound to be of aid.”

“...Very well. I will do my best to educate them accordingly.”

“Good. I expect favorable results.”

When Shary returned to Leonis’s shadow, she took the girls with her.



Several orbs of light with countless letters and numbers running across them floated in a data analysis room in Camelot’s Central Garden. They were a Holy Sword, the Eye of the Witch, and they belonged to a girl with sleek black hair—Elfiné Phillet.

Despite attending Excalibur Academy, she was temporarily dispatched to the data analysis department to analyze the Void tear that had appeared over the capital. At present, she had three orbs deployed to collect data on the other side of the rift.

*No Voids detected in the areas around the entrance...*

While Elfiné’s spheres gathered data, a map of the world through the fissure slowly took shape. This chart would eventually be used by investigation teams when they were deployed.

*Bzzt, bzzzt...*

Suddenly, static ran through the Eye of the Witch. The Holy Sword’s power was growing unstable from the Void miasma.

At least, it seemed that way initially. There was actually another reason. A Holy Sword’s power was greatly influenced by its user’s mental state.

Elfiné’s fingers stopped tapping on the terminal’s keyboard, and she closed her eyes. She leaned against the chair’s backrest. Her hands trembled slightly. Even with her eyes closed, she saw him.

Her brother.

*I killed him...*

The mastermind of the D Project, Finzel Phillet, had been consumed by the power of his Holy Sword and became a Void. He'd tried to murder Elfiné, his own sister.

*I did what I had to as a Holy Swordswoman.*

Elfiné hadn't seen the moment of his death, for during his final moments, he was swallowed by a Void tear. However, his body had been on the verge of a breakdown. There was no way he survived in that state.

*I thought I was prepared for this...*

Elfiné sighed heavily. She'd taken the life of her brother—of someone who once human. She often played the part of a reliable older sister for the rest of her unit, but she was still only a seventeen-year-old girl.

*I'm weak. And I still have an enemy to exact revenge on.*

The head of the Phillet Copmany—Deinfraude Phillet. The man who took her mother's life. Undoubtedly, he was behind the D Project. Elfiné clenched her trembling hand into a fist.

*I need to become stronger.*

She couldn't defeat that monstrous man yet.

When Elfiné opened her eyes, she saw a message waiting on her terminal.

"From the bureau?" She furrowed her brow as she read. "Elysion Academy students went missing?"

Elfiné couldn't hide her shock as she read through the report from the administration bureau. Roughly three hours ago, forty students had suddenly disappeared from the girls' dorm block of Elysion Academy, the capital's Holy Swordsman training school. All of the academy's security cameras had been damaged, meaning there was no record of the event. The bureau concluded the incident was the result of Void miasma.

*"...Voids in the center of the capital?"*

Elfiné chewed her lip. The Eye of the Witch orbs stationed above the capital

hadn't detected any Voids, but there was that giant fracture in space nearby.

*Anything could happen now.*

There was also the possibility another Void tear had appeared within Elysion Academy itself. Had the students been swallowed and sent to the world on the other side?

The message from the bureau also had an attachment regarding the increased spatial distortion rate detected at the same time as the abductions. Elfiné sent a reply acknowledging the information, but she paused as she remembered something.

*Come to think of it, didn't Princess Chatres invite Selia and the others to a tea party...?*

She checked her terminal, suddenly feeling more worried.

*I knew it...*

She'd remembered correctly. Elfiné hadn't been able to attend because of this data analysis assignment; however, her teammates had gone to Elysion Academy at the same time as the incident.

"Selia...!"

## CHAPTER 2

### THE ROAD TO THE ANCIENT KINGDOM

Chatres's unit set out when the alien world's sun was at its zenith. Regina and Chatres's farewell was surprisingly brief. They both formally wished the other a safe trip and hugged briefly.

"Shouldn't you have said more, Regina?" Riselia asked while her friend watched the Elysion Academy students leave.

"We can't. If we act too close, people might find out the truth," Regina answered with a sardonic smile couldn't mask a hint of loneliness. "Besides, she made me a promise."

"What promise?"

"She told me that, someday, she'll definitely come and welcome me back into the family." Regina turned around. The wind caught her pigtails, sending them dancing. "All right, kid. Let's get going."

"That reminds me. Where are we going, kid?" Sakuya asked.

"We'll head straight north through the forest," Leonis replied.

"And what's there?"

"I don't know..." Leonis shook his head. "It's just a feeling. Something in my memory is calling me there."

Despite the vague answer, Leonis had an explicit destination in mind. However, he had no idea if the place was actually there.

*There's always a chance my intuition is wrong.*

Even if the place wasn't there, that would bring him a step closer to deciphering the truth behind this Void world.

"Well, it's not like we have a better lead to go off," Sakuya remarked casually. "We may as well see how your hunch plays out."

“Let’s head north, then,” Riselia said, stepping forward.

“Ah, wait.” Leonis grabbed Riselia’s sleeve to stop her. “Crossing the forest on foot will be difficult.”

Given his weakened state, a walk would tire him out in no time.

“Oh, you’re right. When I was with Arle, I didn’t have to worry about that,” Sakuya remarked.

“Did she cut a path through the forest?” Leonis asked.

“No, she used some elven power to slip through the forest unimpeded. It was quite wondrous.”

*The elves’ Spirit Sorcery certainly has its uses.*

Sadly, Leonis hadn’t mastered that type of magic. He could easily burn the forest down, but that would undoubtedly expose him as a Dark Lord.

*And that means I can’t summon a skull dragon, either.*

Leonis obviously didn’t wish to reveal his true identity to Sakuya and Regina, but he also thought it best not to act too conspicuous in general until he knew more about this world.

If he drew the attention of gigantic flying Voids, the fighting would be loud and flashy. This was the realm of the Swordmaster of the Six Heroes, who was a truly fierce enemy. Leonis had managed to defeat him during their last encounter, but that had only been with the help of Veira, the Dragon Lord, and Rivaiz, the Lord of the Seas. It had taken three Dark Lords just to match him.

“I could use my Drag Howl to blow the trees away,” Regina proposed.

Riselia was quick to reject that idea. “You shouldn’t. What if there’s a dormant Void Hive hidden nearby?”

“Then the only option is to walk,” Regina said. “Don’t worry, kid. We can take turns carrying you on our shoulders if you get tired.”

“Please don’t bring up embarrassing ideas like that again,” Leonis protested.

“We don’t have enough food or water for a long trip, though.” Riselia lifted her backpack to highlight the issue.

One of the students abducted from Elysion Academy had an infinite storage space Holy Sword and shared military rations with the others. The eighteenth platoon had been given enough for six days.

“I brought some emergency rations, too.” Sakuya retrieved a small flax bag from her sleeve.

“What are those?” Riselia questioned.

“Traditional Sakura Orchid ration balls. One should keep you up and running for two days. They’re very bitter, though, and they dry out the throat when you swallow them.”

Regina sighed with a troubled expression. “I think we should keep those as our last resort.”

“Not to worry,” Leonis said. “I have just the thing for this situation.”

Riselia cocked her head. “What do you mean?”

Leonis tapped the end of the Staff of Sealed Sins on his shadow. This made the darkness at his feet expand, and a big lump of metal emerged from the ground.

“Huh?!”

“...Wh-what’s this?!”

Riselia and Regina were both agape in disbelief. A battle vehicle had emerged from the Realm of Shadows. The anti-Void combat tank was commonly referred to as a Thunderbolt. It was reinforced with solid armor and a high-output reactor motor. A caterpillar track allowed it to drive across all manner of terrain, and a powerful autocannon sat atop its body, allowing it to damage any small, unarmored Voids. The vehicle was also equipped with food and a water tank for long expeditions, as well as a simple water purifier.

“L-Leo...where did you get this thing?” Riselia asked.

“I found it on the Third Assault Garden when we were there, and I stowed it for future use,” the Dark Lord explained quite placidly. “It seemed in working order, so I thought it’d be a waste to leave it there.”

“You stole a military weapon?!”

“Is that forbidden?”

“Yes! Extremely!” Riselia, straitlaced girl that she was, seemed liable to explode. “We have to return it!”

“Now, now, Lady Selia, we can always give it back later, right?” Regina tried to placate her. “Besides, everything on the Third Assault Garden was considered abandoned and lost, right?”

“W-well, yes, but... Hmm...”

The truth of the matter was that Leonis didn’t take this battle vehicle from the Third Assault Garden at all. Shary had used the Demon Wolf Pack to acquire it via illegal routes. Leonis had sent Shary to search the ruined Third Assault Garden for any viable aircraft or ground weapons, but anything that might have still functioned was wrecked during the battle with Tearis.

“Well, we might as well make the best of what we’ve got. But you have to return it when we get back!” Riselia chided, wagging a finger at Leonis.

“I never knew your Holy Sword’s power could hold something this big,” Regina said, marveling.

“E-erm, well, this is basically the most it can handle,” Leonis lied.

“Maybe you’ll be able to carry bigger things once your Holy Sword develops.” Regina sounded excited.

“Holy Swords that can store objects in other dimensions are valuable for supply transport. But in most cases, that’s all they’re good for,” Sakuya pointed out. “Holy Swords capable of multiple functions like yours are very rare.”

“R-really...?” Leonis muttered, hoping the conversation would move away from this subject soon.

“Can you drive vehicles, Leo?” Riselia asked.

“No...” Leonis shook his head awkwardly. “I think I can get it running, but I’m not confident I’ll do it right.”

He’d planned to have a skeleton handle that.

Riselia turned to Regina. “You have a military vehicle license, right?”

“Yes. I got one as part of my maid training. I don’t have much experience with anything this large, but I think I’ll manage.”

“We’re counting on you.”

“Leave it to me, Lady Selia!”



An upside-down fortress floated within endless emptiness. This was the Otherworldly Castle. It was no longer occupied by its original owner, the Devil of the Underworld, but by the goddess’s apostles, now reawakened as Voids.

The apostles were the speakers of their deity’s gospel. Their ranks were made of powerful retainers who had once served as core members of the Dark Lords’ Armies a thousand years ago.

In the halls of this castle, where heaven and earth were flipped, countless eyes flickered across the walls. These were top-class apostles who, while having awakened, were still sealed.

“Our comrade, Iris Void Priestess, successfully enacted the Void Shift. Albeit in an incomplete form.”

“Then the goddess’s prophecy was partially realized. However...”

“Scheherazade, the Queen of Shadows, failed to turn the Spirit King into a Void.”

The voices that intermingled endlessly echoed through the castle.

“What was the cause for its destruction?”

“There were insufficient Demon Swords to sacrifice. The Queen of Shadows failed.”

“The Spirit King was a target for seizure on the same level as the Dark Lords. This is another deviation from the prophecy.”

“The goddess’s prophecy is always correct. Deviations are merely misinterpretations of her words, nothing more.”

“Be that as it may...”

All the eyes swiveled to peer down at a white-haired young man standing in

the center of the chamber.

“...It seems you weren’t able to control the Queen of Shadows, priest.”

“I can say nothing in my defense.” The young man hung his head, a serene smile on his face. Nefakess Reizaad had once served in the Dark Lords’ Armies. Now he was the thirteenth apostle, an agent of the Voids who’d infiltrated human society.

“We entrusted the D Project and the Pseudo-Goddess Creation plan to you. Do not disappoint us.”

“I won’t.”

The beings looking at him through those eyes were much more powerful than Nefakess. Lower-ranked apostles were all pawns for executing the will of the sealed high-ranked ones. The identity of the prophesized first apostle was still completely unknown.

“Fulfill the goddess’s prophecy to the letter. The day of reckoning is near.”

“The Void Shift will come to pass, and the door shall open.”

“In the ancient kingdom where the hero was born, the Void King shall awaken.”

This was one of the three hundred prophecies left behind by the goddess.

The ancient kingdom where the hero was born—the Rognas Kingdom. The great being slumbering there would awaken as a new Void.

However...

“The kingdom’s guardian impedes execution of that foretelling.”

“Indeed. It is a fruit that dangles so tantalizingly close but remains beyond our reach.”

“However, the time is upon us. The artificial goddess shall open the gates to the kingdom.”

“For the will of the goddess. For the world to be reborn in emptiness.”

As their voices echoed, the countless eyes vanished one by one.

“By your will, you grand departed souls,” Nefakess said.

All light died in the chamber, leaving it in darkness.



A simple altar surrounded by white walls stood before the young Nefakess. Beams of multicolored light shone in through the stained glass on the wall. This was the Human Church’s Grand Cathedral in Camelot’s Central Garden. It was one of the gates linking to the Otherworldly Castle in the Void world.

“The goddess’s prophecies.”

Nefakess stood slowly, wearing a crooked smile.

“This world already moves along a future that greatly differs from what she foresaw...”

When he turned, Nefakess saw a man sitting among the pews, an aged fellow with hawklike eyes.

“My apologies for the delay, Count Deinfraude.” Nefakess spread his arms. “Have you come to confess your sins?”

“And who would pardon them if I have? All those gods lost to the passage of time?” the old man answered without meeting the priest’s gaze. “There are no gods left in this world to pardon or punish. That I do not burn as we speak is proof enough.”

“Yes, that might be true.” Nefakess shrugged.

“—I killed my son,” the old man suddenly admitted.

“Finzel Phillet?”

“Yes. He was grievously wounded, but I could have easily used my power to resuscitate him. And I didn’t. I killed him. I killed him and used his soul, rotted by the emptiness, as sustenance.”

The old man spoke emotionlessly, dispassionately.

“It was a terrible sin. But it pales in comparison to other wrongs I have done and what I yet intend to do.”

“Indeed, if you were human, your deed would have been a grievous sin. But

you are an apostle blessed by the goddess.”

“Yes, I am already a monster. The same kind you are.”

The old man rose from his chair and extended his hand to the priest. Particles of light began to gather before his palm, fashioning the contours of a human form.

“Ultimately, Finzel’s work toward the Pseudo-Goddess Creation did bear fruit.”

The contours of a beautiful winged girl became apparent on the luminous shape.

“An Artificial Elemental created from a fragment of the goddess’s soul—this is its complete form.”

“Glorious. I have nothing but respect for the tenacity of humans.”

“We’ve held up our side of the deal, Nefakess.”

“Yes. I know.” Nefakess nodded as he touched the girl-shaped Spirit. “Through the miracles of the goddess, I shall resurrect your wife, Philia Phillet.”



Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.

A gigantic mass of metal raced across the Spirit Forest. The caterpillar treads rolled over the ground while blades engineered with magical technology and set on the front of the vehicle tore through tree roots in its path easily.

The Thunderbolt vehicle was designed to have customizable configurations to handle Voids in urban and wild environments. The blades, which converted energy from its reactor into heat, were a piece of equipment Leonis had attached to the machine.

*I only attached them because I thought they looked intimidating, but they’ve turned out to be quite useful,* Leonis mused with satisfaction from his back seat in the vehicle.

Since they were forcing their way through the trees, the ride was understandably shaky.

“It’s been so long since I got to drive a large battle vehicle. It’s fun. 🎵” Regina hummed to herself while working the controls.

The Thunderbolt’s steering system read the faint mana in the driver’s fingertips and moved accordingly.

*It’s similar to the principles of controlling a golem, but it works regardless of the caster’s proficiency.*

This era’s magical technology never ceased to surprise Leonis. As Alexios had told him a few days ago, this sudden development in magical technology was brought on by the same voice of the planet that granted humanity the power of the Holy Swords.

*The voice of the planet, huh...?*

Leonis’s thoughts began to wander.

*“You’ve come to carry out your promise, Leonis.”*

Her voice didn’t feel like a trick of his mind. He’d heard her once before, when he was caught by the Devil of the Underworld’s dimensional shift.

*“You have come...my dear...child...”*

*“You kept...your promise...”*

That voice had guided him to the goddess altar hidden beneath the ruins of the Ironblood Castle, Gazoth Hell Beast’s stronghold.

*Why did I hear the goddess’s voice from that altar when she was supposed to have reincarnated?*

Leonis looked down at his left arm. The moment he’d touched that crystal altar, Void miasma had flowed from it, coiling around his arm. Ever since, he’d been unable to summon his Holy Sword.

“What’s wrong, Leo?” Riselia peered at his face from the seat next to his.

“Nothing. I’m just a bit groggy from the shaking...”

“Huh? Are you feeling sick?” Riselia rubbed his back.

“I’ll be fine. It’s not too bad.”

“It is shaking pretty hard. Just bear with it until we get out of the woods,” Regina said over her shoulder, hands still gripping the steering stick. Then she used the microphone to speak to Sakuya, who was sitting on the vehicle outside. “How are you doing, Sakuya?”

“No problem.”

Sakuya was seated in the vehicle’s cargo space, serving as a lookout for any Void ambushes that might come from the trees. She occupied herself by cleaning Raikirimaru’s blade.

“Is there even a point to polishing a Holy Sword?” Leonis asked Riselia.

“Hmm, probably not. It’s not like the blade would ever chip.”

“That’s what I thought.”

*Perhaps it’s just a habit.*

“The sun will set soon,” Riselia remarked.

Regina nodded. “Yeah, let’s try to get out of the woods before it dark.”

“Miss Finé must be worried sick about us...,” Riselia whispered. Her eyes drifted to the scenery through the reinforced glass window.

Her concern was understandable. Communication terminals didn’t function in the Void world. Once Chatres and her group made it back safely, they could tell the outside world that Leonis and the others were still on the other side of the Void tear, but that would take at least a day.

*Having Elfiné around would make things considerably easier.* As that thought crossed Leonis’s mind, Riselia turned around to face him with a smile.

“Oh, Leo, if you’re tired, you can rest for a bit.”

“I guess I am a bit sleepy,” Leonis admitted.

It was too early for bed, even for his ten-year-old body, but using Dáinsleif had taken a big toll on him, and he was reaching the limits of his endurance.

“Here you go.” Riselia patted her skirt.

“...?”

“You can use my lap as a pillow. Lie down.”

“N-no, I’m good!”

“Don’t be shy. C’mere.”

“Whoa!”

The vehicle suddenly shook hard, and Riselia used this chance to grab Leonis by the shoulders and pull him close. She placed his head on her legs and patted it.

“You better take this chance and relish Lady Selia’s thighs, kid,” Regina teased.

“Oh, Regina...” Riselia pouted. “Don’t mind her, Leo.”

“E-erm...,” Leonis muttered softly. His heart raced at the feel of her soft skin.

The sensation was so pleasant that he thought he really might fall asleep before long.

*Ugh. This body really is incorrigible...*, Leonis thought to himself, yielding to his exhaustion.

However, just as slumber was about to overtake him...

“Miss Regina, you should speed up,” Sakuya called from her seat in the cargo space.

“What’s wrong?”

“We’ve got enemies coming.”

A loud, rumbling *thud* filled Leonis’s ears, and the battle vehicle’s fuselage shook violently.



*Thuuuuuuuuuuud!*

“Ahh!” Regina exclaimed from the driver’s seat.

Riselia reflexively hugged Leonis, cradling his head.

“Leo, are you all right?!”

“Y-yes...,” Leonis muttered as his minion’s breasts squished against his face,

making his heart race.

“Lady Selia, we’ve got multiple hostiles! How did they get the jump on us?!” Regina inspected the mana scale device on the vehicle’s dashboard.

Glancing out the window, Leonis spotted multiple black shadows moving.

“They look like medium-sized Voids, wyvern-class ones, I think.”

“■■■■■■■■! ”

The swarm of wyvern-class Voids howled, breathing fireballs at the vehicle.

“Hang on tight, everyone!” Regina ordered. “This is gonna be a bumpy ride!”

The Thunderbolt’s reactor growled as the vehicle sped up. The caterpillar treads screeched while the blades cleaved through the forest foliage.

*Thud, thud, thud-thud-thud!*

The vehicle bounced, splashing mud into the air. Riselia held on to Leonis even more tightly.

“M-Miss Selia...”

“We’re completely surrounded,” came Sakuya’s voice from outside.

The girl from the Sakura Orchid stood calmly and resolutely atop the shaking battle vehicle. Raikirimaru’s powers of lightning magnetized her body, keeping her rooted to the metallic tank.

“We can’t just stay on the defensive!”

Regina removed the safety on the vehicle’s guns and pulled the trigger.

*Ratatatatatatatatata!*

The anti-Void autocannon fixed atop the combat vehicle roared, spraying sparks into the air. Unfortunately, the piercing ammo bounced off the Voids’ armorlike scales.

“Tsk... I guess conventional weaponry is useless against medium-sized Voids...”

“Regina, I’ll go out and handle them,” Riselia said.

“All right, Lady Selia!”

The roof of the combat vehicle opened like a convertible. Thick armor wasn't particularly effective in serious anti-Void combat. This feature allowed Holy Swordsmen the means to deploy swiftly.

"Stay behind me, Leo." Riselia stood from her seat. Her shining, argent hair billowed in the breeze.

*This should make for a good chance to see how much my minion has grown.*

Leonis obediently hid under the seat. It wouldn't take much effort to deal with these small-fry enemies, but he wanted to conserve his mana after using Dáinsleif.

"Here they come, Miss Selia!" Sakuya shouted.

The wyvern-class Voids spread their malformed wings and glided through the air toward them.

"Like moths to the flame, as they say!"

*Schwinggg!*

As one of the Voids headed for Sakuya, Raikirimaru cleaved it in two. The bisected monster crashed into the trees past the tank.

"Holy Sword, Activate—Bloody Sword!"

Riselia's Holy Sword shone a menacing crimson in the faint light.

"I'm counting on you, Miss Selia. I'm not that good at handling fliers."

"I'll take care of them!"

Riselia raised the Bloody Sword overhead.

"■■■■■■■■!"

She swung her blade down on one screeching Void swooping in on her.

"Windy Blood!"

Blades of blood laced with mana arced and split into countless scythes. The air trembled and whistled.

*Whoosh, whoosh, whoooooooooosh!*

In a flash, the wyvern-class Voids' wings were cut from their bodies, and the

monsters fell to the ground.

“Projectiles? Miss Selia, I never knew you had techniques like this...,” Sakuya said, her eyes wide with surprise.

“It’s my first time trying it in real battle...” Riselia held up the Bloody Sword again. “Regulating the power is tricky, so I didn’t use it during the Holy Sword Dance Festival.”

The Voids that had been knocked into the ground quickly rose again. Normal living creatures would have been incapacitated after that attack, but Voids were more resilient. They opened their jaws so wide that they seemed liable to tear as the Voids prepared to loose more fireballs.

“Regina, dodge!”

“Lady Selia, could you not make impossible demands?!”

Indeed, evading with the combat vehicle’s limited mobility would be impossible.

*I guess I should lend a hand, if only a little,* Leonis reasoned to himself.

It would be sad to see the Thunderbolt destroyed after all the trouble he’d gone through to get it. Leonis leaned out of the back seat to start chanting a barrier spell. However, he never had the chance.

“By my will and blood, become a thousand blades!” a voice as clear as crystal chanted from somewhere above.

*What?*

Riselia’s silver hair shone faintly with mana and began to float.

“Merg Shar!”

Blood splattered on the soil became thorns, which sprang up and intercepted the burning spheres.

*Kaboom!*

The air shivered as the fireballs ruptured furiously.

*She modified a second-order Realm of Death spell to work with her vampire blood manipulation powers?!*

Leonis's eyes widened in disbelief. His minion was fully awakening to her powers as a Vampire Queen, the strongest type of undead.

"Oh, what now?!" Regina cried out.

*Thud!*

The vehicle came to an abrupt stop, sending Leonis tumbling forward.

"Whoa!" Riselia toppled into the seat, having lost her balance.

"Miss Selia?!" Leonis tried to catch her, only for her to fall over him. "Wh-what just...?"

Leonis turned to look forward, and then he saw it. A four-armed humanoid Void stood blocking the battle vehicle's path. It was easily five or six metres tall, and its toned body appeared sculpted from rock. The giant caught the Thunderbolt's magic technology blades, still red-hot with mana, in its bare hands and lifted the vehicle with ease.

"Wh-what's it doing?!" Riselia exclaimed.

Leonis grimaced. "Don't tell me—"

"Miss Selia, you need to get out of there now!" Sakuya said, using her lightning powers to leap away.

"Are you serious?!" Riselia cried in disbelief.

"■■■■■■■■!"

The giant Void howled and slammed the Thunderbolt into the ground.

"Leo?!"

*Thud!*

Sediment was blasted into the air. The gigantic mass of metal was flung up and then sank into the damp soil.

"Are you two all right...?" Riselia asked, holding Leonis and Regina by their collars.

"Yes, I'm fine...", Leonis replied.

"I thought I was a goner...", Regina muttered wearily.

The mana wings behind Riselia's back vanished.

*Ahhh! The Dark Lords' Armies' tank! It cost so much!* Leonis mourned.

Shary was definitely going to chide him for this.

*Curse you, you despicable worm!*

Leonis let out a slight hint of bloodlust, and the Void, despite being apparently fearless, suddenly froze up.

“Ultimate Blade Technique—Crescent Moon Slash!”

Sakuya emerged from somewhere unseen. Her attack, crackling with lightning, lopped off one of the giant Void's arms.

“Sakuya, watch out!” Riselia warned.

“...?!”

The severed arm bounced on the ground and moved in to attack Sakuya as though possessed of a mind of its own.

“Damn monsters!”

Sakuya leaped back to evade it. As she did, her sword moved again, this time tracing across the giant Void's leg.

“Let's see how well you can dance.”

“■■■■■■■■■!”

While Sakuya brandished Raikirimaru, she skillfully deflected the Voids' many attacks. Electricity popped and sparked, and as Sakuya moved quicker, she began to resemble lightning itself.

“Sakuya...” Riselia readied Bloody Sword and looked behind her. The wingless wyvern-class Voids were charging toward them, slithering like serpents. “Regina, handle that side!”

“You got it!” Regina answered with an indomitable smile. “Holy Sword, Activate—Dragon Slayer!”

Regina's Holy Sword appeared in its cannon form. The muzzle of the weapon glowed with heat.

“Get smooooooked!”

*Booooooom!*

The high-firepower projectile hit the swarm of wyvern-class Voids crawling across the ground, engulfing them in a massive pillar of flame. Leonis judged the attack to have the power of the fourth-order Light terms of Leonis’s era; this attack was equal in power to the fourth-order spell Lightning Burst.

*Boom! Boom! Boom!*

A series of explosions and flashes eradicated the medium-sized Voids. Meanwhile, Riselia and Sakuya engaged the giant Void in combat with their swords.

“Hahhhhh!” Blades of blood converged at the tip of Riselia’s sword, forming a vortex. “Bloody Petal Spiral!”

The whirling razors stabbed at the giant Void’s body, gouging into its armored hide. It wasn’t enough to defeat it, though. This was an especially tough specimen, it seemed. The arms growing out of its back swung down to pummel Riselia.

“No you don’t.” In the blink of an eye, the gigantic limbs were sent flying. Electricity pulsed in the air with Sakuya’s slash. Whirling, her next attack brought the edge of her blade across the Void’s neck.

“It’s over!” Riselia charged forward, her body shining crimson, overflowing with a Vampire Queen’s mana.

“■■■■...■■■■!”

The Void’s final howl was nearly deafening. The Holy Sword sticking from its chest burst, sending scarlet blades raging through the monster’s insides. The Void’s gigantic form was blown to bits.

“Haah, haah, haah...” Riselia fell to her knees, trying to catch her breath.

*This is more than I ever expected.* Leonis smiled to himself, pleased with his minion’s surprising growth.

She’d defeated a giant-class Void without the True Ancestor’s Dress and created a variation on a second-order spell. She’d come far for one who’d only

gained the power of the undead several months prior.

*At her current strength, I can give her that item without any worries.*

Something caught Leonis's attention, and he looked up. A few wyvern-class Voids circled above, waiting for their prey to grow exhausted. Riselia and the others hadn't noticed them yet.

"Filthy hyenas. I suppose I should sweep away the trash..."

Leonis lifted the Staff of Sealed Sins.

"Perish. Death Ine."

He chanted a fourth-order instant death spell. Instantly, the swarm of wyvern-class Voids vanished silently into the emptiness, destroyed.

"Are you all right?" Leonis hurried over to Riselia's side like nothing had happened.

"Yeah, I'm fine. What about you, Leo? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. But more importantly..." Leonis's gaze went to the smashed Thunderbolt. "Is there any chance it can still run?"

The magic technology blades at the front of the vehicle had been crushed, and its armor plating was bent out of shape.

"It should still run. It's an anti-Void military combat vehicle, after all," Regina said, hurrying over.

"Leo, do you have a way to flip it over?" Riselia asked.

He hummed. "I can sink it into my shadow and summon it again."

A gravity spell would do the trick, too, but Leonis preferred not to use more power than needed, given his condition. The Thunderbolt's large fuselage plunged into shadow.

"The sun's about to set. Let's hurry," Sakuya said as she dispelled Raikirimaru.



"Curses. Curses, curses, curses! Damn that monsterrrrrr!"

Black sludge slowly crawled through a shadow corridor that seemed to go on

forever.

“Elmysteriga, the Spirit King! He took so many Demon Swords to reviiiiive!”

The nasty howling voice reverberated against the walls, echoing menacingly.

It belonged to Scheherazade Shadow Queen, Queen of Shadows. She was the one who'd seized control of Elysion Academy and abducted its Holy Swordsmen. But her efforts had been in vain, for the Undead King defeated her and forced her into a shameful retreat. He'd broken through many traps she'd set and defeated the Spirit King, who was said to be powerful enough to match the Dark Lords.

With no option but to run, the Queen of Shadows had put every bit of her remaining power into fleeing from the Undead King.

“This isn't over. If I bide my time, the chance to destroy him will present itself.”

She knew that the Undead King, Leonis Death Magnus, the man who'd usurped control of the Realm of Shadows from her, was masquerading as a child.

Scheherazade didn't know why, but it was valuable information regardless.

*I must report this information to the apostles.*

The future was erring from the goddess's prophecies. One foretold that the Dark Lords would return. The Undead King was supposed to be reborn as a Void in the ruins of Necrozoa. However, he'd been curiously absent from his resting place.

*To think he'd already been revived...*

An eye surfaced on the sludgy mass, burning with intense hatred. Although the Undead King's power had diminished compared to a thousand years ago, he was still far too strong for the Queen of Shadows. Her only option was to escape and seek safety with the goddess's apostles.

“Not even a Dark Lord would dare to chase me into my shadow.”

“True,” answered another voice from somewhere in the corridor. “My trusted friend shouldn't have to dirty his hands with this.”

“What?!”

The dark sludge stopped in its tracks. A black wolf with glinting golden eyes stood farther down the corridor. Blackas Shadow Prince glared down at the sludge.

“You...you foul usurperrrrrrrr!”

The sludge’s eye writhed eerily, and a shadow blade shot from the mass. However, the black wolf parted his jaws and caught the attack.

“Don’t expect the same trick to work more than once.”

“Guh, ahhhh!”

Blackas crushed the shadow blade with his jaw and spat it out. The shards of the broken blade stabbed into the dark sludge, pinning it in place.

“Ahh, ahhhhhhhhhhhh, c-curse yooooou!”

Scheherazade’s clash with Leonis had left her too weak to fight. The Queen of Shadows hurried away, hoping to find safety, but Blackas jumped after her and stomped on her squishy form.

“Stay still. I won’t kill you here. You will be brought before Lord Magnus.”

The sludge shuddered at the mention of the Undead King’s name.

“What was your plan, Scheherazade? What were you trying to achieve by attacking that human city?” Blackas demanded with a low growl.

“Ha-ha. You already know what I want. You stole my Realm of Shadows from me, and I would make it mine again.”

“That can’t be the only reason.”

Blackas’s fangs dug into the sludge.

“C-curse you... Usurpers... Damn yooooou...!”

The Queen of Shadows thrashed, trying to free herself, but Blackas kept her held in place.

“I’ll ask one more time. What are you and your allies after?”

“Heh-heh-heh... Heh...” Scheherazade’s mocking cackle filled the corridor. “No

one...can escape the goddess's voice..."

"What?"

It wasn't an answer to Blackas's question, but the Queen of Shadows didn't seem interested in offering more. She writhed beneath his foot, muttering as though delirious.

"Not me, not humanity, not you—not even the Undead King can resist the goddess's call. All shall be swallowed up by the emptiness, the gospel of the star... Gospel of the star, star, starstarstar..."

"...?!"

The Queen of Shadows wasn't acting like herself any longer. The eye within the sludge blinked erratically. Her body boiled.

"Scheherazade, you—!"

The sizzling shadow coiled around Blackas's front legs, threatening to swallow the black wolf.

*Boooom!*

Then suddenly, the shadow burst, engulfing all around it.

"The Queen of Shadows chose to end herself?" Blackas could scarcely believe it. Half his body had been destroyed, leaving him with only one front leg.

Blackas's greatest nemesis—Scheherazade Shadow Queen—was gone without a trace.

"She was never one to consider dying with dignity, but..."

Did she fear the Undead King that much?

"The goddess's call..."

Scheherazade's final words still echoed through the corridor.

## CHAPTER 3

### ANOTHER WORLD

The sun had set, and day made way for night.

Having finally emerged from the Spirit Forest, Leonis, Riselia, Regina, and Sakuya found themselves in a wasteland dotted with countless strange rock formations. The battle vehicle, its armor now severely dented, rolled along over the landscape, leaving a large trail of dust in its wake.

“It looks like the daylight hours are about the same as our world,” Riselia muttered from her seat in the back while she tapped on her terminal.

She was compiling combat data from the Voids the group had encountered earlier as well as map info. All of it would be submitted to the administration bureau later.

“Lady Selia, we should take a break over there. Continuing in the dark will be dangerous,” Regina advised.

“You’re right.” Riselia stowed her terminal and glanced out the window. “But there’s too much open space nearby. It’s not very safe for us to camp here.”

“Nowhere’s safe,” Regina replied. “We’re in an unknown world controlled by the Voids.”

Riselia nodded in agreement.

“There’s a large rock nearby.” Leonis pointed to a large stone with a coiling serpent shape.

“It’ll at least make for a good windbreak. Let’s check it out,” Regina said.

They stopped the combat vehicle behind the rock and started setting up camp. They planted a mana lamp into the ground, securing a light source. It would make them stand out, but there was no point in being stealthy with the Voids’ tendency to appear out of thin air.

*I should set up some guards to patrol, just in case.*

While Riselia and the others took care of the tents, Leonis hid behind the rock and summoned three skeleton hounds, which he promptly sent running into the dark. Should they be destroyed, Leonis would know immediately.

“What are you doing over there, boy?” someone asked from behind Leonis.

“...?!” He hurriedly turned around. “Oh, Miss Sakuya. I could ask you the same question.”

Sakuya had a small ceramic bottle in her hands.

“Heh-heh, you mean this? It’s a catalyst for a Sakura Orchid barrier technique.”

“What kind of barrier technique?”

“You use white sand to draw a barrier circle, which wards off evil. Though I don’t know if it works against the Voids.”

*Hmm. That’s different from any barrier I know of,* Leonis thought.

He didn’t sense any mana being transmitted from the sand. Still, Blackas did tell him that the Sakura Orchid people used mysterious powers that differed from traditional sorcery. Maybe they really did draw on some old power, like Regina and Chatres with their lineage as elementalists.

“Sakuyaaa! Quit playing around; come over and help us set up the camp!” Regina called out from the other side of the rick.

“I-I’m not playing around!” Sakuya replied, her voice betraying that she was offended.

“Let’s have dinner.”

When Leonis returned to the vehicle, he saw that Riselia was carrying a box and a jug of water. The group of four sat in a circle around the mana lamp.

“Rations aren’t the tastiest, but we don’t have much of a choice right now.” Regina shrugged as she worked open a tin can.

“I’ve got some spices and cooking ingredients we can use,” Leonis offered.

Regina perked up slightly. “Really, kid?”

“Yes. Give me a second.”

Leonis expanded his shadow slightly and retrieved a large rug from the Realm of Shadows. It was a treasure plundered from some kingdom, made of tanned hydra hide. After spreading it on the ground, he took out salt, pepper, vegetables, meat, pasta, flour, and cooking utensils like pots and pans. The flow of time differed in the Realm of Shadows, so the ingredients were still fresh.

“Your Holy Sword is so convenient, kid,” Regina commented in surprise as she picked up the frying pan.

Leonis shook his head. “It can’t hold that much,” he fibbed.

“Could I go in and look for a bit?” Regina inquired, dipping her leg into his shadow.

“What? N-no!” Leonis hurriedly closed the gate to the Realm of Shadows.

Regina used a portable stove to prepare a simple meal of onion soup, cheese galette, some soft-boiled eggs, and a heated vegetable salad. Each dish was simple, but Regina’s effort made it all taste excellent.

“A warm meal is always better than a cold one.”

“Very true,” Leonis agreed as he dipped some bread into his steaming onion soup.

“Having cookware is a huge help. It’s all thanks to you, kid,” Regina said.

“Maybe I should consider taking some special courses on cooking back at the academy,” Sakuya mused.

“Can you cook, Sakuya?” Leonis inquired. He had a hard time imagining her preparing food, given her personality.

Sakuya tapped her cheek. “Come to think of it, you’ve never tried one of my dishes, have you?”

“Sakuya’s cooking is, uh, unique...? Yeah, unique!” Riselia said.

“Y-yeah, it’s very...stoic.” Regina nodded, wearing something of a troubled expression.

“Uh...” Leonis wasn’t sure how to interpret what they meant.

The group mostly ate in silence. Once Leonis had finished, Regina came over, wiggling her fingers.

“Hey, kid, do you want a massage?”

“N-no, I’m good. My shoulders aren’t stiff...”

“Yeah, yeah. Listen, kids shouldn’t be shy. I understand.”

“What do you understand exac—? Whoa!”

Regina tugged on Leonis’s arm, forcing him to lie facedown on the rug. She then grabbed him by the back of his neck.

“Ah! Nnh!” He let out a squeak that was quite unbecoming of a Dark Lord.

“See? I knew it,” Regina whispered as she rubbed the back of his neck.

“What are you...on about...? Khhh... 🎵”

“I noticed how run-down you are during the fight in the woods. I don’t know what you did to wear yourself out so much, but your muscles looked stiff.”

“...”

It seemed she’d noticed the strain Dáinsleif had put on Leonis. Whenever he drew the Demon Sword, it fully restored his sword abilities from his time as a hero. However, his current form couldn’t handle that much power, leaving him drained.

Regina moved her fingertips meticulously, running them across his neck, shoulders, and back. Tension melted from him. The sensations were irresistible.

“Heh-heh-heh, you’re not getting away from me. Uh-oh, your uniform’s in the way, so take it off, please. 🎵”

“Ah, wait... Miss Regina?!”

Leonis thrashed like a fish on a chopping block. It was no use, though. In no time, Regina had removed his jacket and shirt.

“Don’t worry, Leo. Regina is a certified masseuse,” Riselia assured him.

“Sh-she is?”

“It’s part of my duties as a maid.”

Regina straddled Leonis's waist. Her weight felt just right against his body.

"Okay, now breathe out and relax, kid. 🎵"

Her smooth, slender fingers slid over his bare skin, pressing against the crevices in his shoulder blades.

"Mm... Haaah..."

Leonis found himself letting out odd sounds as his body unwound.

*S-so...undignified...*

Although frustrated, Leonis could only surrender himself to Regina's touch.





“...Oh no. They’re not picking up.” Concern colored Elfiné’s expression as she stared at her terminal screen.

Using the Eye of the Witch, Elfiné accessed the security cameras in Elysion Academy’s vicinity to pin down Riselia, Regina, and Leonis’s last known locations. She didn’t know why Leonis was dressed like a maid, though.

*Probably one of Regina’s pranks.*

Regardless, she hadn’t been able to get in touch with any of them. Elfiné had even checked Excalibur Academy, but the Hræsvelgr dorm was empty.

“Sakuya’s vanished, too...”

Admittedly, Sakuya going off on her own or being hard to reach wasn’t unusual. Elfiné knew there wasn’t much need to worry about her.

“I really should consider the possibility they were taken during that mass disappearance...”

According to the administration bureau’s report, third princess Chatres, who had invited Riselia and the others to a tea party, was among the missing students. Since this was a high-grade confidential incident, that information had been kept from the public. Very few had been informed on the matter.

A large number of Holy Swordsmen had disappeared, including the third princess. Such news was bound to spread worry and disorder through the capital. If the Holy Swordsmen had been abducted by Voids...

*What should we do?* Elfiné bit her lip.

Whatever waited beyond those fissures in space was a complete mystery. Thick miasma thwarted any attempt to send in observation equipment. It seemed like only a matter of time until more massive Voids emerged. And while the bureau had decided that it would deploy an investigation unit, it would be a while before that happened. At this point, all Elfiné could do was use her Holy Sword to search for her friends as best she could.

*If he’s with them, they’re probably fine, right?*

That ten-year-old boy, who’d made sure not to draw too much attention to

himself during the Holy Sword Dance Festival. He'd fooled most other people, but Elfiné knew of his true strength.

*I can count on him to keep those girls safe.*

Elfiné brought her hands together in prayer.



Nights in the Void world were full of silence. There were no animals. Not even a single insect chirrup disturbed the quiet. The only light in this place so utterly devoid of life came from the portable mana lamp.

*It really did make me feel better.*

Seated on the rug, Leonis stretched his arms. He was still weakened, yet his body did feel lighter after Regina's massage. When he was the Undead King, his body would have been entirely unaffected by something like this. Perhaps that explained the humiliating moans from the unexpected pleasure.

"We must be close to the Nessel Territory."

Leonis switched on his terminal and brought up a map of Camelot and the surrounding landmasses from their original world.

*If my hypothesis is correct, it should be past here...*

As he pondered this, he felt someone approach him from behind.

"...Leo, why are you awake?"

It was Riselia. She didn't need to carry a light because of her vampiric vision.

"I couldn't sleep," Leonis replied a whisper.

Sakuya and Regina were resting comfortably in their tents. After dinner, the group had decided on who would sleep where while Riselia would keep watch that night. The other two didn't know it, but Riselia was undead and didn't need any sleep, making her the perfect one to stand guard.

"Kids need to get their rest. You won't grow big otherwise," she scolded as she patted down her skirt and sat beside Leonis.

"I will once I'm tired." Leonis ignited the portable stove and started boiling water in the kettle. "Didn't find anything in the area?"

“No, not so much as a single blade of grass. I did find some weird sand sprinkled around.”

“That’s probably Miss Sakuya’s barrier.”

“Oh, really? Touching it made my fingers feel kind of numb...” Riselia frowned. Evidently, that sand had some level of efficacy at warding off the undead.

“I guess I shouldn’t include that sand in the report, then.” Riselia turned on her terminal and removed mention of the stuff from her account.

In the meantime, Leonis put some cocoa powder into two cups and poured hot water into each.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

Cocoa had recently become Leonis’s preferred drink. It didn’t befit a Dark Lord as well as coffee, but he appreciated its sweetness. Leonis blew on his cup to cool it, and Riselia placed a hand on his head.

“Is it just me, or have you gotten taller?” she said.

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t be able to tell.”

“Maybe you’re having a growth spurt.”

“You think?”

This did beg the question of whether his body was maturing. It had been a few months since Leonis’s reincarnation. Given his biological age, it wouldn’t have been odd if he did get taller.

“But I’m dead, so I guess I won’t be aging anymore.” Riselia’s joke had a bit of grimness to it.

“Erm... Sorry.”

“Ah, no, I didn’t mean to imply that it’s your fault!” Riselia shook her head, flustered. “You saved me, and it’s allowed me to protect the Seventh Assault Garden. Really, Leo, thank you.”

Riselia placed her hands over Leonis’s and smiled. Her undead hands, which

had no mana flowing through them, were cool and pleasant to the touch.

“I’d say you’re definitely maturing, Miss Selia,” Leonis said. “Your performance during the Holy Sword Dance Festival and the way you fought the Voids in the forest demonstrate great improvement. You’ve come far compared to the practice match at Excalibur Academy.”

“R-really...?” Riselia looked both glad and embarrassed.

“Yes. You performed impressively, even without using the True Ancestor’s Dress.” Leonis took out a brooch with a chain attached to it from his pocket. The jewel set into it was a deep crimson. “I think it’s safe to let you have this now.”

“Uh, what is this, Leo?” Riselia’s ice-blue eyes examined the jewel curiously.

“It’s called the Dragon Blood. It’s an amulet without equal. Many heroes have died trying to get it.”

Leonis deposited the jewel in Riselia’s cold hands. The bloodred gem glowed faintly in the dark.

“You really want me to have this?”

“Yes.”

“A-are you sure? It looks so precious...”

“Veira asked me to give it to you.”

“She did?!” Riselia looked surprised.

“She said it’s your reward for beating her at the Shangri-la Resort. I guess she’s taken a liking to you.”

Veira had given Leonis the Dragon Blood on the way to their battle with the Lord of the Seas. It wasn’t often that the cruel, tyrannical Dragon Lord displayed kindness for anyone other than her fellow dragons. Even then, she didn’t hand out things like the Dragon Blood frivolously.

*And it’s no ordinary jewel.*

The Dragon Blood was quite dangerous in the hands of someone unaccustomed to handling mana. Leonis had been careful not to give it to

Riselia until he was certain she was ready.

“You must exercise caution when you use it. Just like the True Ancestor’s Dress, it’s a magical tool that holds a great deal of mana, and that makes it challenging to control.”

“A-all right, I understand. Thank you, Leo.” Riselia nodded tensely.

“Don’t thank me, thank Veira... Huh, what’s wrong, Miss Selia?”

As soon as she had received the Dragon Blood, Riselia started acting strange. Her ice-blue eyes took on a trembling crimson glow.

“Ah, what...? H-huh...?” Riselia muttered, her cheeks flushed and her breath turning labored.

*Mana deficiency?* Leonis thought. He looked down at the amulet in her hand, yet nothing seemed unusual.

“Le...o...”

“...?!”

Riselia looked intoxicated. She fell over Leonis, pinning him against the ground.

“...M-Miss Selia?”

“Leo, I want...your blood...”

Her silver hair spilled over his cheeks. He heard her whisper in his ears.

*Ahhh. I can’t believe I was so careless,* Leonis scolded himself.

Thinking back on it now, Riselia had charged into Scheherazade’s castle, fought the shadow monsters, and then battled with Voids in the forest. Of course she was running low on mana. Touching the Dragon Blood, which held a great deal of magic power, had agitated her vampiric impulses. Riselia hadn’t been able to do anything with Regina and Sakuya, but now...

“...If you don’t want to, just say so. I’ll make do...with your sweat...”

Riselia bashfully ran her tongue over Leonis’s neck.

*She was trying to be considerate.*

Leonis finally understood. Riselia had been worried about him being weakened after using the Demon Sword and couldn't bring herself to ask for blood.

*Good grief. No wonder Shary calls me dense.*

Leonis sighed, lay face up, and angled his neck toward her.

"Don't worry. Take as much as you need."

"R-really...?"

"Go ahead."

Leonis nodded, and Riselia reservedly sank her fangs into him.

"...!"

He really was quite spent, but he wouldn't suffer a Dark Lord's mana capacity to be called into question. He still had enough to share with his minion.

"Mmm... *Sluuurp*... Nha..."

Leonis felt Riselia nibble on his neck. She sucked his blood until he started feeling anemic. Ten minutes or so later...

"I-I'm so sorry, Leo! My head got kind of hazy halfway through."



“I-It’s...fine...,” Leonis replied, lying limply with pallid skin.

Riselia covered her face shamefully in a gesture of regret. However, her silvery locks shone in the dark, brimming with mana.

*Now that she’s replenished this much, she ought to be fine for a while.*

Leonis sluggishly straightened up and fixed his disheveled shirt. He heated up his cooled cocoa and looked at the sky. The heavens of the Void world were dotted with countless sparkling stars.

“My father liked looking at the stars,” Riselia whispered. She’d followed Leonis’s gaze to the sky. “He often used astronomical devices on the Third Assault Garden to examine the celestial bodies.”

“...”

Riselia’s father, Duke Edward Crystalia. Leonis recalled the man’s hawklike eyes. He held the power of one of the Dark Lords who served the Goddess of Rebellion, the Devil of the Underworld, Azra-Ael. However, Leonis didn’t know which personality was in control.

What was that man hoping to achieve by seizing control of the Azure Hold? Either way, it was clear he couldn’t tell Riselia about this.

“It’s strange. This world has stars, just like ours...,” Riselia whispered. Her tone sounded almost nostalgic. The winds of the desolate wasteland toyed with her shining silver hair.

“Miss Selia,” Leonis said with a serious expression, “there’s something important I have to tell you.”

“Huh?” Riselia turned to look at him. “Something important?”

“Yes.” Leonis nodded. “I think this might be the same world we came from.”



“Just as I thought, it exists here, too. It seems my assumption was correct.”

Standing atop walls of stone, the elven hero, Arle Kirlesio, looked down upon the scenery before her. She knew this place quite well, for it was where she’d met her teacher, the Swordmaster of the Six Heroes.

*Time has completely spared this place, and no Voids have touched it, either. Why?*

Countless doubts crossed Arle's mind. She'd cut down a few Voids on the way here; none was a match for a skilled fighter like her. There were surely more of the monsters around. How could this structure have survived for so long?

*What's going on here?*

Suddenly, Arle's keen elf ears picked up on a strange sound, that of rustling metal.

*Voids?!*

Arle spun, readying the Demon Smiting Sword, Crozax. Curiously, she saw no Voids anywhere.

*But I know I heard—*

She never finished that thought.

*"...?!"*

Countless flashes of light showered the walls she stood on with all the intensity of a storm.



"The same world we...came from?" Riselia echoed Leonis's words, her eyes wide in astonishment.

"Yes. Assuming my theory is correct." Leonis nodded and held up his terminal, which displayed a map of the capital's surroundings. "This is Camelot's current position."

"Okay..." Riselia sat next to him and examined the terminal display.

"To the west, there's a large forest." Leonis tapped on the terminal's screen with his finger. "The Void tear appeared in the center of those woods. We didn't enter through there, but Sakuya did."

Riselia bobbed her head in agreement, but she still didn't quite understand.

"I think the western forest and the one surrounding that pyramid are the same place," Leonis explained.

Riselia furrowed her brow. "...Wh-what do you mean? This forest looks nothing like our world."

"I suspect that's because it's been warped by Void miasma. Areas with large Void Hives are severely altered, right?"

"...Yes, that does happen."

Natural environments were known to undergo radical transformations after prolonged exposure to concentrated Void miasma. This well-documented phenomenon was covered in Void research lessons at Excalibur Academy.

"Still, you can't make that assumption just because the scenery happens to match a little...," Riselia said.

"Of course. I'm not basing it on the forest's position alone," Leonis replied. "There's also the pyramid ruin Regina and the others were taken to. There are traces of the same structure at the same spot in our world."

Leonis tapped on a point on the map, calling up detailed text on the location. The map on his terminal had a feature that displayed information on previously explored ancient sites.

"Ah..." Riselia's mouth went slightly agape.

The chart on the screen of their original world showed the Spirit Forest, where the massive tear in space had appeared. On top of that, Leonis's terminal automatically calculated the position of the Void world's pyramid, which perfectly overlapped with the ruins in the Spirit Forest.

"This can't be a coincidence," Leonis asserted.

"..." Riselia settled into a contemplative silence. This proved difficult to accept. Meanwhile, Leonis added the location of the ruins to the map of the regular world. Now he knew it was where the pyramid temple built to worship the Spirit King, Elmysteriga, was located.

*Gazoth's Ironblood Castle also exists here...*

This couldn't simply be some other realm.

It was more like this place was a mirrored image of their original world. But why was this what lay beyond the Void tears? That left Leonis doubting himself,

so he'd examined various locations on the map to confirm his theory.

"There should be some large ruins in the direction we're headed." Leonis switched the chart on his terminal to one of the entire continent. There was a point highlighted on it. "Right here."

"Oh, I know that place. I believe it's where the largest Void hive was discovered," Riselia commented. "The imperial knights went there to investigate the site."

"Long ago, in the distant past...a mighty kingdom stood there."

"Long ago... During your time, Leo?"

"Yes." Leonis nodded. "It was called the Rognas Kingdom."

"Rognas!" Riselia repeated the word with evident surprise.

"Oh, you know of it? Has the name survived through the ages?"

"Um, isn't Rognas the place those skeleton teachers came from?"

"Skeleton teachers?" It took Leonis a moment to realize what Riselia meant. "Oh..."

She was referring to the Three Champions of Rognas.

"Yes, those three were accomplished knights who served the Rognas Kingdom."

Now they served the Undead King... But rather than mention that, Leonis cleared his throat and stayed on topic.

"The capital city of the Rognas Kingdom, Ur-Shukar, should be ahead. If the ruins of that place exist here—"

"That would prove this is our world," Riselia finished.

Leonis nodded. "Yes."

It would mean far more, too. If, like the Spirit King's temple, Ur-Shukar existed here and was mostly intact...

*I'll have to investigate very carefully.*

"..."

Riselia stood slowly, her eyes on the stars all the while. “Our world and the Void world are the same...”

Evidently, she was struggling to accept the idea. Leonis didn’t know what this revelation meant, either. Had Roselia Ishtaris foreseen this future?

Riselia turned to face Leonis. “Do you think you’ll find clues about that special someone of yours?”

“Well...” Leonis shook his head. “I don’t know. But uncovering the truth of this place might bring me closer to learning where she is.”

At present, that was all he could hope for.



*Crack, crack, crack!*

The cerulean sky above the Bloodfang Prairie on the second continent warped and shattered as countless dimensional tears formed in thin air.

*Crack, crack, craaaack!*

The fractures gradually expanded, like a seam widening, until they broke apart with the sharp sound of shattering glass. One part of a massive structure appeared in the broken sky, a chalk-white fortress shaped like a dragon with its wings spread.

This was the Azure Hold.

During the war with the Dark Lords a thousand years ago, it served as Veira Dragon Lord’s stronghold, a flying fortress that flew between many battlefields.

“The Bloodfang Prairie...where the Lord of Beasts met his end.”

A man stood at the bow of the Azure Hold, which was shaped like the head of a dragon. His sharp ice-blue eyes were fixed on the ground far below.

He was the governor of the Third Assault Garden, Duke Edward Ray Crystalia, a man thought to have died defending his city six years ago.

*“The Dark Lords are beginning to awaken all across the land. We must claim them for our own before the apostles do.”* A voice spoke into his mind.

“Yes. I know.”

It was the Dark Lord Azra-Ael, the Devil of the Underworld, he who governed dimensional travel, who spoke to the duke. Edward's soul had forged a contract with him.

Together, they'd claimed the Azure Hold, one of the ancient sites that predated the advent of the gods. Regrettably, they had failed to seize the Dark Lord necessary for their plan to succeed.

They had dominated the leviathan, the greatest life-form and one half of the Lord of the Seas. However, they'd lost Rivaiz, the other half. While they'd baited out the Dragon Lord with the Azure Hold, someone had prevented them from controlling her.

*"The Lord of Rage has fully fused with the Swordmaster, who became an avatar of the Voids. The Undead King's soul, which was supposed to be slumbering in Necrozoo, has been destroyed. The whereabouts of the wandering Dark Lord are still unknown to me, and the Deus Machina lacks a soul, making it impossible for my Holy Sword to dominate it..."*

The voice of Azra-Ael reverberated in Edward's head again. They absolutely had to claim the Lord of Beasts before the Goddess of Void was fully revived and attempted to take over all dimensions...

*Otherwise, humanity, who has awakened to the power of the Holy Swords, will be cast into ruin.*

Looking down at the wasteland, Edward held out his right hand. It had been previously severed by the Lord of the Seas but had already regenerated thanks to time acceleration magic.

*Brrrrrrr...!*

The Azure Hold trembled, and a turret hidden within the base of the flying ruin opened up.

"Awaken Gazoth Hell Beast, Lord of Beasts," he whispered.

In response...

*Boooooooooom!*

...a beam from the Ragva Cannon tore up the earth. A massive pillar of flame

erupted, burning the sky. Edward's ice-blue eyes widened slightly.

"...This won't destroy the Lord of Beasts, will it?"

*"Don't underestimate a Dark Lord. This isn't nearly enough to destroy one."*

*Boom, boom, boom!*

The bombardment continued. Burning shafts of light dug massive craters into the soil, but there was no sign of anything awakening beneath.

"This is supposed to be where the Lord of Beasts fought and fell against the Swordmaster...", Edward muttered. "But does the Lord of Beasts actually rest somewhere else?"

*"Wait. I sense a great power approaching!"*

"The Lord of Beasts?"

*"No. This is—"*

Before Azra-Ael could answer...

*Boooooooooooooooooooooom!*

...a powerful explosion shook the Azure Hold.



"...?!"

Something massive tore through the thick clouds—

*"Roooooooooooooooooooooooooar!"*

A gigantic red dragon appeared, accompanied by a terrifying howl.

"A dragon?! Veira Dragon Lord!" Edward scrambled to keep standing against the violent shaking.

With her wings spread, the red dragon opened her jaws to reveal rows of terrible fangs. Radiant, burning heat gathered in her maw.

*Booooooooooooooooooom!*

A ray of deadly fire swept across the Azure Hold's plaza, forming burning towers that shot up like geysers. The flames consumed Edward Crystalia. The gigantic red dragon beat her wings, and with a rush of mana, she was

surrounded by fire and changed form.

“That was just a greeting, Dark Lord of the Underworld. Hurry up and reveal yourself...!”

A beautiful girl, her hair a brilliant shade of crimson, appeared from within the conflagration. Her golden eyes glowed menacingly as she glared at the Azure Hold.

“Did you come in pursuit of me, Dragon Lord?”

*Bwooosh!*

Edward Crystalia scattered embers from himself. His white overcoat billowed in the hot wind.

“Hmph. I never did understand your way of thinking. You’re gathering Dark Lords, right? I knew I’d find where Gazoth died.”

Veira Dragon Lord’s crimson hair raged in the wind. Within her hands, she formed a burning sphere, full of infernal, incandescent hellfire, which she hurled at the Azure Hold. Then came another, and a third afterward.

“I’ll burn you to ashes—Drag Raiga!”

*Boom, boom, booooooooooom!*

Veira’s Dragon Tongue Sorcery called forth a storm of destruction.

“The Azure Hold is the rightful bastion of dragons! I will take it back!”

“Fool. These ruins are no stronghold.”

“...?!”

Edward vanished, and a moment later...

*Crack, crack, crack.*

...fissures ran through the air behind Veira.

“Holy Sword, Activate—Wheel of Fortune.”

Edward appeared from within the crack in space, a shining ring on his finger aimed for Veira.

“A Dark Lord won’t fall for the same trick twice!”

Veira instantly summoned countless fireballs, which sped for Edward in a complicated, twisting trajectory.

“Hrahhhhhhhhh!” Veira howled as she kicked against the air and charged for Edward.

The sonic boom her charge produced shook the surroundings, blowing away clouds.

“Drag Fist!”

The Dragon Lord’s fist, enveloped with a destructive aura, slammed into Edward’s face. The duke was sent flying, blasting through the Azure Hold’s walls and tumbling into the courtyard.



“Yes, I see now. It seems I underestimated the most terrifying of Dark Lords.” Edward slowly rose from the rubble. His dominating Holy Sword, the Wheel of Fortune, left him defenseless until it was fully activated. And it would only work against a Dark Lord if they were unfamiliar with its power or otherwise vulnerable, such as right after they had awakened.

“Hmm. You’re pretty sturdy for someone using a human body for a vessel,” Veira snarled, hands resting on her waist.

Edward’s hawklike eyes narrowed contemptuously at the Dragon Lord.

“Holy Sword, Activate—Dimensional Sword.”

A blade awash in rainbow colors appeared from thin air.

“...?!”

Edward took his Holy Sword and, a split second later, appeared only paces from Veira.

“...What?!”

Edward hadn’t moved. Veira and the space around her had been drawn in. The sword slashed at Veira’s neck, sending a few strands of crimson air flying.

“Damn you!” Veira leaped away, hoping to put some distance between herself and her enemy.

“It’s pointless.”

*Whoosh!*

The sword flashed again, and Veira found herself pulled back into Edward’s striking range again.

The Dimensional Sword was Edward Crystalia’s original Holy Sword. Its edge cut through space, eradicating Voids and the tears they emerged from. His fusion with the Devil of the Underworld had pushed the weapon to its absolute limit.

The Holy Sword capable of ripping through dimensions thrust forward with the intent of plunging into the Dragon Lord’s heart, but it never found purchase.

“Sharia Shiez!”

Blades of ice charged with mana plunged down upon Edward, forcing him back.

“...?!”

Edward looked up to find a girl with amethyst hair and clad in raiment made of water.

“It seems you’re having a hard time, Dragon Lord.”

“Hmph. Took you long enough...” Veira combed through her hair with one hand.

“There wasn’t much I could do. I am a sea sprite, and I cannot fly as quickly as dragons.”

“Dark Lords fighting on the same side...?” Edward looked incredulous.

“We simply have a common goal...,” the Lord of the Seas explained, focusing mana into one fingertip. “Devil of the Underworld, you will return my leviathan!”

*Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!*

She cast a ninth-order spell—the Demon Frost Blizzard, Hield Berzed.

A storm of absolute zero blew through the Azure Hold’s ruined plaza.

“Hey, are you trying to kill me with your spell, too?!” Veira hurriedly leaped into the air.

“...!”

Edward’s trump card, the ultimate life-form that was the leviathan, was sealed away in the dimensional interstice...but he couldn’t summon it here.

*“Fall back, Edward. The odds are not in your favor against two Dark Lords.”*

“But the Lord of Beasts is right here.”

*“The Lord of Beasts’ soul is gone.”*

“...What?”

*“Gazoth Hell Beast was the purest warrior of all the Dark Lords. Had Gazoth’s soul been here, a battle between Dark Lords would have been sufficient to*

*awaken it."*

"Then all of this was a wasted effort..." Edward gritted his teeth within the raging blizzard. "Very well."

He nodded and held the Dimensional Sword aloft.

"Dimensional gate, open your seven locks..."

*Crack, crackcrackcrack, craaaack...!*

Numerous fissures ran through the space surrounding the massive Azure Hold.

"Grr, you're not getting away from me, Azra-Ael!"

Veira condensed mana in both her hands and started chanting.

"Do you intend to shoot down the Azure Hold?" Edward asked.

"This castle is the rightful stronghold of the dragons. I'd sooner see it in ruins than leave it in someone else's hands!" Veira unleashed her vast gathered power. "Hear my roar, you fool—Dei Argh Dragray!"

*Boooooooooooooooooom!*

Veira loosed a beam of utter devastation. The Azure Hold was made in the image of a dragon, and the ray shattered its tail section, sending stone tumbling to the wasteland below. However, the majority of the structure remained intact. As it lurched to one side, it vanished into a dimensional tear.

"The Devil of the Underworld escaped. You failed," said Rivaiz.

Veira sneered. "That's not true. I got exactly what I wanted."

"What?"

Veira looked down at the remains of the section of the Azure Hold blown off by her attack.

"I've reclaimed the Almagest, the dragon astronomical device."

## CHAPTER 4

### UR-SHUKAR

Just before dawn, the vehicle was already rolling through the miasma-polluted wilds. While yesterday's battle had greatly damaged most of its armor, the engine reactor functioned without issue.

Leonis, Riselia, Regina, and Sakuya hadn't run into any Voids since last night. Leonis's skeleton hounds had told him where Voids were concentrated, and he advised Regina to avoid those locations.

"Say, kid, are you all right?" Regina glanced over her shoulder from her spot in the cockpit; concern was clear in her eyes.

"Yes, I'm fine. I just feel a bit anemic...," Leonis replied, straightening up in his seat.

"...Sorry, Leo," Riselia whispered.

Leonis shook his head. "Don't worry about it."

Evidently, she'd taken a bit too much of his blood.

"Maybe I should put on some music to lift the mood. Does this vehicle have a karaoke function, kid?"

"I don't think it does. It's for military use, after all."

Admittedly, Shary might have added that sort of feature for all Leonis knew.

"Hmm, really? All right, Lady Selia, why don't you sing something to cheer the kid up?" Regina proposed.

"H-huh? Me? A song? Why?!" Riselia quickly grew alarmed over the idea.

Regina shrugged. "I mean, the scenery's so boring. It's all sand. I'll play a tune on my terminal so you can sing along."

"But..."

“I’d like to hear you sing, Miss Selia,” Leonis added.

“Not you, too, Leo!” Riselia cried, now torn about what to do.

Leonis had never heard her sing, so Regina’s suggestion had stoked his curiosity. *If she has a talent for curse songs, perhaps I could teach her a few*, he mused.

Curse songs were a type of sorcery that didn’t cause as much direct damage but invoked various magical augmentations that affected large areas. If Riselia were ever to command undead in the future, such a power would prove invaluable. However, Leonis couldn’t use curse songs, so he’d need high-ranking banshees or other monsters to instruct her in the craft.

“F-fine. Just a bit, then...”

Ultimately, Riselia accepted, perhaps because she still felt guilty and indebted to Leonis for last night. She cleared her throat.

“My sword, stand bravely, to defend our homeland ♪,” she began in a clear, fair voice. “March on, march on, Crystalia’s brave knights. ♪”

“...”

Her voice was unquestionably charming, but...

“Wh-what kind of song is that?”

“Erm, it’s an anthem for the Crystalia Knights.”

...Leonis hadn’t expected a war song.

“Are you setting up for a joke, Lady Selia?” Regina asked.

“Ugh... You were the one who told me to sing something to lift everyone’s spirits.”

Regina hurriedly corrected herself upon seeing Riselia sulk. “S-sorry. Don’t worry about it, Lady Selia. Just sing whatever you like.”



Meanwhile, the imperial palace was in an uproar.

“You still can’t find her?!”

“We’re working on it now, Your Highness. However, it seems Princess Chatres has—”

“Just focus on getting a grasp on the situation.”

The emperor’s younger brother, Alexios, ended the call with his subordinates and collapsed on his desk, cradling his head.

The cause of the mass Holy Swordsman disappearance from Elysion Academy was still a mystery, but it seemed likely that Voids were responsible in some capacity. Worse yet, Third Princess Chatres Ray O’ltrieise was among those missing.

*Blast it all. What’s happening?!*

Alexios was usually one to keep his temper restrained, yet he slammed his fist against the desk in a show of frustration. More than thirty hours had passed since the incident. Elysion Academy had been closed off, and investigation units inside were issued a gag order. This was a major problem, and it was only a matter of time until news leaked to the general population.

*Chatres’s disappearance alone is bound to get out before long.*

Chatres Ray O’ltrieise was the third princess and the strongest Holy Swordswoman, having acquired tremendous popularity for her performances in recent Holy Sword Dance Festivals. She was very much the light that helped keep hope alive among the populace during troubled times. If she was truly lost...

*Anxiety and discord would reach a fever pitch. It could mean an uprising.*

Alexios sighed, his expression grim. As Chatres’s uncle, he was concerned for his niece’s well-being, of course, but the political ramifications troubled him far more, and that filled him with self-loathing.

Such was the duty of those born to the royal family.

*If only Altiria could remember some detail that might help.*

Their sole clue about this incident came from fourth princess Altiria. She had been in Elysion Academy’s girls’ dorm at the time of the incident. For some reason, she alone had been spared from the abduction. When she awoke,

Alexios visited and questioned her. However, she couldn't recall what happened or how she'd escaped the danger. The shock must have left her memory in disarray.

*I can hardly blame her.*

The most baffling part was the lack of any conceivable way Altiria could have escaped. It was almost as though she'd vanished in a puff of smoke and reappeared in the palace courtyard.

*This whole thing is baffling...*

Whatever the reason, Alexios wouldn't get anywhere sitting on his hands. If those who'd disappeared had been taken through the Void tear, then there was no choice but to deploy a search party to recover them. Were it only that simple. Sending out a group with insufficient information risked even further losses.

*We're at an impasse. There's nothing we can do.*

No, that wasn't quite true. Alexios knew of another option, although he tried to push it to the edge of his mind.

*Perhaps he'd help if I asked...*

The mere idea was enough to make him break into a cold sweat. Alexios hadn't forgotten his terror the last time he stood in that man's presence.

The Dark Lord Zol Vadis. If Alexios asked that monster who surpassed human understanding for help, perhaps...

*...N-no, I can't! I must only turn to him as a last resort!* Alexios shook his head to dismiss the idea from his thoughts.

He couldn't afford to carelessly accrue debts with that terrifying Dark Lord. However...

*"...!"*

Alexios pulled open his desk drawer with a truly agonized expression. Sitting inside it was a terrifying statue of a monster, carved from an unknown kind of bone. When Alexios returned to his office after that terrifying meeting with Zol Vadis and found it sitting atop his desk, he nearly fainted on the spot. The letter

sitting next to it had explained that if he held on to this statue and wished to meet with the Dark Lord, he would.

“I know that I may be driving myself to ruin with this,” Alexios whispered, “but my only choice is to rely on his strength...”

He picked up the statue and held his breath.

“...”

Standing from his seat, he closed his eyes and tried to concentrate.

*Great and ancient Dark Lord, please answer your humble servant's call...*

...

Five minutes passed. Then ten. Alexios slowly opened his eyes...

“He’s not showing up, the bastard!”

He threw the bone statue to the floor and frustratedly kicked it away.

“Haaah... Haaah... Blast it. Damn that horrible Dark Lord.”

No sooner had he said as much than...

“Am I imagining things? I could’ve sworn I heard someone speak foul of the Dark Lord...”

...he heard a voice from behind him. A familiar, charming one.

“...?!”

Alexios spun and saw a maid seated on his sofa, eating a doughnut.

“Ahhhhh!” Alexios let out a tense yelp.

This girl was a servant of Zol Vadis. She looked like an innocuous, pretty girl, but her power was beyond measure. She’d incapacitated the two Holy Swordsmen who had escorted Alexios during his first meeting with Zol Vadis without any trouble.

“E-erm...,” Alexios stammered.

“What’s this?” The maid looked at the statue lying discarded on the floor.

“I, well, I...dropped it, by accident... Ah-ha-ha.”

“...Is that so?” The girl fixed Alexios with an icy glare. “I would advise that you handle it more carefully in the future, then. Because mistreating an item bequeathed to you by the Dark Lord is tantamount to treason.”

“Ha-ha-ha... I’ll keep that...firmly in mind...,” Alexios replied, reflexively falling to his knees.

It wasn’t the sort of pose appropriate for a man who carried the imperial lineage. Yet in the face of absolute power, his body felt compelled to submit.

*I-I’d probably be dead if she saw me kick it!*

“I come bearing a message from the Dark Lord,” the maid declared, still eating.

“Oh?!”

“The third princess Cha...Cha-something-or-another leads the students abducted by the Voids. They are on their way back.”

“?!” Alexios raised his head, regarding the maid in disbelief. “A-are you sure that’s true?!”

“Are you implying that the Dark Lord would lie?”

“No, no, I would never!”

The maid shot Alexios a look before tossing a terminal to him.



“This device contains the princess’s route. Send your forces there to rendezvous with her.”

“ ... ”

All at once, Alexios’s head was a storm of thoughts. The gears of his mind spun at high speed. What was the Dark Lord trying to achieve? He didn’t seem the sort to help another purely out of the kindness of his heart. Was it possible he’d orchestrated this whole incident? Certainly he wouldn’t have done something so roundabout.

*Then what is he...?*

The maid stood from the sofa.

“Y-you have my thanks! I’ll deploy a unit right away.” Alexios bowed his head in a flustered manner. “Um...”

“Yes?”

“What does the Dark Lord demand of me in exchange for this information?”

“Hmm...” The girl cocked her head. “The Dark Lord does not demand anything in particular.”

*What?*

Zol Vadis had requested a battleship during their first audience, yet now he wanted nothing? Did this mean he would come to collect in the future? Perhaps this was his way of saying that this was inconsequential to a Dark Lord of his might.

*Just what are you thinking, Zol Vadis?*

Alexios’s fists trembled as he struggled to fathom the Dark Lord’s intentions.



“So, Holy Sword, answer these emotions of mine. 🎵”

Her choice of song aside, Leonis was taken aback by Riselia’s vocal talents. The invention of magical apparatuses had bolstered humanity’s capacity for music, but she was impressive nonetheless.

*This is remarkable.*

A thousand years ago, Riselia would've been considered a diva. Leonis found himself enchanted by her.

"What do you think of Lady Selia's singing, kid?"

"Honestly, I'm surprised. She's like a professional performer."

Riselia blushed at Leonis's frank praise. "Um... Thanks."

"Back at the Crystalia Estate, Lady Selia went through rigorous vocal training," Regina said.

"Really?" Leonis asked.

"...That was a long time ago," Riselia answered. "I was a kid."

"Oh, how about you sing that one song next? You know, the one we did during last year's Holy Light Festival," Regina suggested.

"Huh?! I can't sing that alone!"

"How about I join you, then?"

Leonis raised an eyebrow. "Last year's Holy Light Festival?"

He had some bitter memories of the Holy Light Festival, since he'd been forced to dress as a girl for it.

"Oh yeah, we set up an eighteenth platoon band and performed onstage. Customers at our café got really excited. It was a lot of fun."

"...A musical group, eh?" The closest thing Leonis was familiar with was his skeleton war band.

"Lady Selia did the main vocals, and I did backup vocals and guitar. Sakuya played bass, and Miss Finé handled the keyboard. Practicing in between training sessions was really hard." Regina looked a bit nostalgic as she recounted last year's events.

"I wrote the lyrics," Sakuya appended from her spot in the cargo hold.

"You can write, Miss Sakuya? I never knew you had the talent for that..."

"That's rude, kid. I like to think up song lyrics to kill time."

"...What kind of lyrics?"

“O Fluffymaru, Fluffymaru. ♪ Wherefore art thou, Fluffymaru? ♪” Sakuya hummed.

“...”

As Leonis listened idly, something occurred to him.

*Perhaps writing a victory song for the Dark Lords’ Armies will boost morale?*

Surely some of the recent recruits in the capital had musical talent.

*And the emperor’s younger brother seems knowledgeable in the arts. Maybe I can ask him for advice.*

While Leonis was busy pondering on the idea, Regina spotted something outside, and she leaned forward to get a better view.

“Mm? What’s that?” she muttered.

“What’s wrong?” Leonis inquired.

“Look at that, over there. It’s not a rock.”

Leonis leaned forward and peered outside at the object ahead. “Isn’t that...?” Regina had noticed a wall clearly different from the scattered stones in the area. Leonis called up the map on his terminal to confirm.

“Leo? Is this...?” Riselia whispered.

Leonis nodded. “Yeah. That’s the place.”

They had arrived at the Rognas Kingdom’s capital city—Ur-Shukar.



It was 10:30 Imperial Standard Time, one hour after the group had discovered the ruins.

*What a surprise. This place...*

Leonis exited the vehicle and approached the remains of the structure. He raised a hand to shield his face as he peered up. Great stone walls surrounding a city stood before him.

There was no mistaking the place. These were the familiar barricades of Ur-Shukar. These same walls had been destroyed many times by attacks launched

by the Dark Lords' Armies. Yet each time they fell, they were rebuilt and improved to be more resilient.

Multiple watch towers had been erected and crewed by gargoyles created by Diruda Ars Magna, the Spellweaver of the Six Heroes. The walls had been blessed by the Holy Woman Tearis Resurrectia and equipped with mana cannons invented by Arakael Degradios to handle airborne threats.

This was humanity's final stronghold, which had withstood countless assaults by the Dark Lords' Armies. The lion crest of the Rognas Kingdom was etched into the main gate.

*This solidifies my theory.*

The Void world really did seem to be some version of the real one.

"Wh-what is this?" Regina muttered in disbelief.

"This is on a whole different scale compared to the ruins in the forest," Sakuya remarked.

As the two took in the incredible structure, Leonis tugged on Riselia's sleeve. "Miss Selia...", he whispered. "Are there no ruins back in our world as complete as this place?"

"I don't think so," she replied. "Investigation teams typically only find rubble and demolished buildings."

*But the Ironblood Castle and the temple in the Spirit Forest were both intact on this side.*

What was the source of this discrepancy?

*The only way to find out is look for myself.*

"For now, let's head inside." Regina approached the massive gate and tried to push it open with both hands. "Mmm! Mmmm! Phew! It's a no go. Feels like it's locked."

She was quite quick to give up, and she wiped the sweat from her forehead.

"Why would you expect it to open that easily?" Leonis muttered, exasperated.

“Hey, kid, did you just make fun of me?” Regina said, grinding her fist against his head.

“That hurts.”

Regina had put hardly any force into her revenge attack, so it didn’t pain Leonis much at all.

“So how do we open it? Do I blast it away with my Drag Howl?” Regina suggested.

“Wait.” Riselia moved to stop her friend. “We’re in the Voids’ territory here. We should watch our step. Let’s look for another way in first... Huh?”

Riselia reached out and touched the gate casually, and it immediately burst into radiant life, glowing with mana.

“Huh, what?!” Riselia pulled away from the gates in surprise.

*Brr... Brrrrr, brrrrrrrrrrrrrr...*

The tightly closed gates slowly ground open from the inside out.

“Did you do something, Lady Selia?” Regina asked curiously.

“No, I just...touched it...”

*Hmm. Leonis scrutinized the gates suspiciously. Did they react to her vampiric mana? That doesn’t seem right.*

As far as Leonis knew, there was no trick like that applied to the gates.

“Well, either way, we’re in luck. Let’s go in.” Sakuya bravely and calmly strode ahead.

“Hey, Sakuya, wait...!”

“It’s dangerous!”

Riselia and Regina hurried after her.

“...”

Only Leonis delayed, remaining at the entrance. This was where he’d made his triumphant return many times when he was one of the Six Heroes, where countless people greeted him as a champion, where he paraded down the

streets on horseback alongside his teacher, Shardark. He still remembered the cheers he heard when he came back after defeating the Dark Lord Zol Vadis.

*Pointless sentimentality.*

The Undead King crossed the threshold, moving as though to stomp on those old memories.



The thousand-year-old capital was as silent and lifeless as the wilderness surrounding it. Leonis walked down the flagstone road beneath the crimson sky.

“That was so strange. Why did the gates open?” Riselia was still confused. “Do you have any ideas, Leo?”

“No, I don’t...”

Despite his answer, he did recall that something similar had happened before.

*The seal on my resting place in Necrozoa was broken, too.*

Undoing that seal wasn’t something a mere human could accomplish. Perhaps the magic had weakened after a thousand years.

“This looks like a human city...,” Sakuya whispered as she examined the surrounding buildings.

“Do you think people like us used to live in the Void world?” Regina offered.

“It’s hard to say. But the Voids certainly couldn’t have built this,” Sakuya replied.

“These don’t look like old ruins to me. It’s like...” Riselia paused for a moment. “Like someone’s been tending to this place, keeping it maintained.”

“...” Leonis felt the same way. He’d expected to see some evidence of weathering on the buildings, yet they all accurately matched what he remembered.

The only difference was the absence of life.

*Did the Voids spare this place?* Leonis thought to himself as he eyed the conspicuously intact structures.

Stone walls wouldn’t have stopped Voids. Seeing Ur-Shukar so unchanged

after all this time served only to highlight how unnatural it was.

“What’s that large building over there?” Riselia pointed down the street.

Sitting on a small hill at the heart of the city was a building Leonis knew very well.

“...It must be where the king lived,” Sakuya said. “Castle Tenki in the Sakura Orchid stood on a spot like that.”

Sakuya was right—this building was a palace.

*Just like everything else, it’s mostly untouched.*

The Ur-Rognasia Palace’s size wasn’t impressive when compared to the Seventh Assault Garden’s laminated high-rises, but a thousand years ago, it stood as humanity’s greatest architectural achievement. Leonis himself didn’t have too many memories of the palace.

The aristocratic world of ostentation and deceit hadn’t suited him. He’d felt more at home in Death Hold, surrounded by undead minions.

*I suppose since the palace has survived, it’s worth checking.*

Leonis’s objective wasn’t in the castle itself. Rather, he wished to consult the Great Arakael Library on the palace grounds. It was a treasury of endless wisdom, a repository that the Archsage of the Six Heroes had filled with knowledge from all over. The library ran deep underground, like a labyrinth.

If that manifestation of the Archsage’s greed and obsession remained intact, perhaps it held some clues about what had happened to the world during Leonis’s slumber.

“Look! Over there!” Riselia called out. She pointed to a circular plaza where several roads intersected. Its flagstones were crushed and flipped, and the surrounding buildings showed signs of heavy damage. “What happened here? Why is this the only place that’s wrecked?”

As the group approached the plaza, its members found the place littered with rubble from the nearby buildings. Small craters dotted the ground.

“There was a battle here,” Regina concluded.

“Yeah. A recent one, judging by the marks.” Sakuya’s sharp gaze swept over the surroundings.

Regina cocked her head. “How can you tell?”

“There isn’t any dust gathering on the rubble...”

“So Voids did this?”

“I don’t know. We’ll need to look around some more.”

Sakuya abruptly stopped and knelt. Narrowing her eyes, she picked up a piece of white cloth lying on the ground.

“What’s that?” Leonis asked.

“A ribbon. It’s Arle’s.”

“Arle’s here?!” Riselia exclaimed, her eyes round with surprise.

*I suppose that makes sense. She would come here.*

Arle knew the pyramid in the Spirit Forest was a temple devoted to the Spirit King. She must have concluded the same thing about this world that Leonis had.

To Arle, the Rognas Kingdom was the land her teacher, the Swordmaster of the Six Heroes, served. She’d visited Ur-Shukar several times during her time as a hero.

*And her elven sorcery likely allowed her to cross that forest much faster than the combat vehicle.*

Leonis looked around cautiously. He found no evidence of enemy presence, but something had undoubtedly happened here.

“Was she attacked by Voids?” Riselia wondered aloud.

“It’d be strange if that’s what happened. I mean, if Voids appeared here, why is the damage isolated to this one area?” Regina answered, puzzled.

Suddenly, Riselia cradled her head and crouched low to the ground. “...U-ugh...!”

Regina hurried to her friend’s side, clearly alarmed. “Wh-what’s wrong, Lady Selia?!”

*Curses! I can't believe I was so careless.* Leonis cursed himself for his

foolishness.

That teleportation circle had clearly spirited Riselia away somewhere.

*Calm down. There's still time.*

Tightening his grip on his staff, Leonis tried to go over what he knew. From what he'd seen, the spell array hadn't been complex, so it couldn't have taken Riselia far. As worried as Leonis was, he still possessed a sorcerer's intellect and carefully judged the situation.

His eyes went to the crest on his left hand. Riselia's soul was bound to his by the seal. He could use that to pursue her.

"Lady Selia. Lady Seliaaaa!" Regina shouted, looking for her friend.

"Miss Regina!" Leonis grabbed her by the arm.

"...?!" She turned to look at him, alarmed.

"Don't worry. I promise I'll find Miss Selia and bring her back."

"Kid..."

"Something's attacked us. We need to focus on that for now."

"..."

Leonis's explanation helped Regina to calm down. She took a deep breath and nodded.

*What attacked us, though?*

Leonis tried to peer through the cloud of dust.

*Was it a Void? There's none of the usual signs of their presence, though.*

"This is strange. If there were Voids around, I should've been able to sniff them out." The voice and accompanying sound of footsteps on the rubble prompted Leonis to turn. He saw Sakuya with Raikirimaru in hand. Amber light shone from her left eye.

The mystic eye of time—its power allowed Sakuya to alter her perception of time, enabling her to evade attacks with ease.

*She's already mastering the power of that artifact as though it were her own.*

*Terrifying.*

Leonis swung the Staff of Sealed Sins lightly, creating an intense gust of wind that blew away the cloud of debris surrounding them.

“What?!” Leonis exclaimed, mouth agape.

Countless shadows of varying sizes surrounded the plaza.

Sakuya tensed. “What are those things?”

“What the heck?!” Regina shouted.

*It can't be!*

A glance made it clear there were dozens of hostiles assembled. They filled the plaza and beyond, forming a tight circle around Leonis, Regina, and Sakuya. Each stood at least two metres tall and was covered in metal that shone brightly. Most of them resembled spiders, and their bodies were covered in countless eyelike organs that shone an artificial blue.

“Void Simulators?” Regina whispered. She didn't sound confident.

Indeed, they were the magical apparatuses that behaved like Voids and were used for training at Excalibur Academy. Indeed, for a human of this era, a Void Simulator would be the first image to come to mind when looking at these things. Leonis, however, knew what these strange things really were.

*Why are there Machina Soldiers here?!*

Machina Soldiers were relics of the super-ancient civilization that predated the arrival of the Luminous Powers. They were lifeless murder weapons that lacked will and fed on the planet's mana to strengthen themselves.

*That explains why I couldn't sense their approach.*

But why was a swarm of Machina Soldiers running amok in Ur-Shukar? The Machina Soldiers formed an army under the command of the Deus Machina, one of the Eight Dark Lords. They should have ceased all function when the Deus Machina was destroyed.

*Skriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!*

The gathered Machina Soldiers all simultaneously let out an earsplitting

screech. Their armored carapaces glinted as they raised their tail-like engines.

“Here they come!” Sakuya leaped away, having seen the future a few seconds early thanks to the mystic eye of time.

“Rua Meires!”

Leonis deployed a dome-shaped barrier around himself and the others. Not a moment later, a bombardment from mana cannons rained down.

*Boom, boom, boom, boom, boooooom!*

“Miss Regina, keep your head down and stay next to me!”

“Kid? A-all right, understood... Whoa!”

The thundering blasts forced Regina to plug her ears in a hurry.

*So many of them certainly makes this annoying.*

Machina Soldiers were soulless creations. Leonis’s sorcery was focused on the Realm of Death, which would have little effect on these enemies. What’s more, Machina Soldiers possessed high magic resistance, second only to dragons. They would deflect all but the most powerful spells.

*I’d have preferred to save my mana, but the situation won’t allow for that.*

While keeping his barrier up, Leonis thrust the Staff of Sealed Sins into the ground.

“Blow with violent rage, storm of black ruin!” Leonis began to invoke an eighth-order large-range destructive spell.

Shards of dark crystal appeared in the sky overhead.

“Avis Zol!”

The former Dark Lord Zol Vadis had created this spell, and Leonis had later improved upon it. The crystals struck the metallic carapaces of the Machina Soldiers, tearing through them with an intermittent staccato. The mechanical foes looked like their very existences were being wiped away. While Leonis worked his spell, a brilliant streak of lightning cleaved through a large swathe of the swarm.

Sakuya.

“Hyahhhhhhhh!”

Raikirimaru ripped through the air, cutting off many Machina Soldiers’ legs in a single motion. Sakuya moved like a blur, faster than the eye could follow. The mystic eye of time’s predictive powers and Raikirimaru’s acceleration ability allowed her to weave through enemy attacks, avoiding their blasts by the thinnest margin.

However...

“...?!”

...as Sakuya pressed her attack, new spell circles appeared around her. The fresh teleportation arrays produced new Machina Soldiers.

“More of them!” Sakuya whirled, using the momentum to slash at the fresh enemies, but they deflected her blade. These were a different type of Machina Soldier, a variant focused on melee combat rather than artillery shots.

Leonis scowled. *Someone appears to be deploying Machina Soldiers with intent.*

The first force had likely been sent out all at once. Machina Soldiers had no will to act on their own, so someone else was undoubtedly controlling them.

“Miss Sakuya, get out of there!” Leonis warned her.

Sakuya enveloped her body in lightning and sprinted up the wall of a building to break away.

“Vira Zuo!” Leonis chanted an eighth-order gravity spell. Space warped around the new wave of Machina Soldiers, crushing them like tin cans.

*Our enemy’s reinforcements look to be endless. We should get out of the city for now.*

Leonis was still short on mana after using the Demon Sword, and since they still had to rescue Riselia, he couldn’t risk wasting mana on this fight.

“Kid, what’s that?!” Regina pointed ahead.

The Machina Soldiers that appeared from the spell circles gathered and stacked on one another. The prismatic metal that formed their carapaces

melted, fusing the individual machines together into one in a manner that felt organic. Before long, they had become a gigantic sphere.

*Oh no!*

The massive orb released a blinding flash, blowing everything away.

## CHAPTER 5

### THAT WHICH SLUMBERS IN THE KINGDOM

*"Ngh... Cough, cough..."*

Darkness greeted Leonis's eyes when he opened them, but he knew there was dust everywhere.

*I can't believe I let them take me by surprise...*

Machina Soldiers operated indefinitely by absorbing mana in the air. They were effectively small-scale mana furnaces, and several had reacted at once to self-detonate. The intensity of that blast had demolished the entire area.

Leonis had kept his Rua Meires barrier up, but it hadn't prevented the ground from caving in. He would've been terribly injured by the fall if his shadow hadn't automatically protected him.

*If I'm underground, then where?*

Leonis looked around. Ur-Shukar had a sewer system, but it wasn't anything sprawling. After climbing a heap of rubble, Leonis peered up from where he'd fallen. Roughly ten metres separated him from the surface. Thin strands of light came through the shaft, faintly illuminating the surroundings. Debris from destroyed buildings had tumbled into the crater, blocking the way out.

Suddenly remembering he hadn't been alone, Leonis looked around again.

"Miss Regina!" His shout echoed through the underground space, yet there was no answer. "Miss Regina, where are you?! Miss Regina!"

Leonis lit up the tip of the Staff of Sealed Sins. Through the dust cloud hanging over the surroundings, he spotted the familiar color of Regina's uniform.

"Miss Regina!" Leonis hurried to her, stumbling over the wreckage. "A-are you all right?"

Regina lay limp, her limbs spread out.

“Miss Regina...”

A trail of blood ran from a cut on her forehead.

“Ah... Kid...?” Her eyes opened slightly when Leonis knelt beside her. She forced a weak smile. “I’m glad you’re...safe...”

Regina reached out to touch his cheek and then lost consciousness.

“...!”

Leonis was about to lift her but stopped and reconsidered. Moving her needlessly when she had a head injury was dangerous. The Undead King couldn’t cast any healing spells. His pact with death magic prevented it.

*I should have a first aid kit from the academy.*

Leonis retrieved a standard-issue medical kit from his shadow. He’d learned to use it during one of Excalibur Academy’s training sessions.

*I should at least stop the bleeding.*

While he busied himself applying a bandage to Regina’s head, fighting to keep his fingers from trembling, a familiar voice called from behind.

“Is that you over there, kid?”

“Miss Sakuya.” Leonis looked over his shoulder at her.

She approached with Raikirimaru in hand, the shattered stone crunching under her feet. “That took me by surprise,” she said. “I didn’t expect them to self-destruct...”

“You’re not hurt, are you?” Leonis asked her.

“No, I’m fine.”

The mystic eye of time had allowed Sakuya to foresee what would happen a few seconds in advance, and she likely used Raikirimaru’s acceleration to escape the blast radius.

“Is Miss Regina unconscious?” Sakuya inquired.

Leonis nodded. “She probably has a concussion from the fall.”

“Mind if I take a look?”

Sakuya knelt next to Regina and placed a hand over her chest, which rose and fell in shallow breaths.

Leonis narrowed his eyes. "What are you doing?"

"It's just a little prayer."

Sakuya's hand glowed faintly.

"What's that light?" Leonis asked suspiciously.

It wasn't mana.

"It's a power that was passed down in the Sakura Orchid. I was a priestess there, after all."

"So what you said about that barrier yesterday was true?"

"Mm-hmm. Did you not believe me? The people of the Sakura Orchid are descendants of the Oni Clan, which used such mysterious powers."

"Descendants of the oni...?"

"Yes. Long ago, the oni ruled over the Sakura Orchid's lands, creating a country with humans. Their descendants became the Sakura Orchid's people, or so the legends go."

*Oni are a subspecies of ogres, if I recall...*

Dizolf Zoa, the Lord of Rage, had ruled over the ogres.

*He did employ some mysterious powers that weren't based on sorcery...*

Sakuya gently placed a hand over Regina's forehead.

"She'll wake up in due time. I think she'll be okay. Holy Swordsmen possess strong constitutions."

"Thank you, Miss Sakuya." Leonis sighed in relief and sat down. Sakuya joined him, leaning against a rubble heap.

"Don't mention it. You'd have saved her even if I wasn't here," Sakuya said.

"...?" Leonis regarded her warily. "All I did was put on a bandage."

Sakuya shook her head. "That's not what I meant. I thought maybe you'd also give Miss Regina a mystic eye, since you're the Dark Lord Zol Vadis." Her eyes

suddenly narrowed to piercing slits.



“Leo? Regina! Sakuya!”

Riselia’s voice traveled into the dark. A mysterious light had suddenly enveloped her, and she’d found herself here.

“What is this place...?” Riselia examined her surroundings.

Her vampiric vision allowed her to see without light. Unfortunately, she saw nothing that might help her figure out where she was. Why had she been brought here? While she searched for clues...

*Shine.*

...a blinding light appeared before her.

“...Wh-what?!”

The surprise made her stumble over backward. A luminous sphere appeared out of thin air. It was two metres in diameter and shone a faint white. Unknown letters ran across its surface.

*Wait, isn’t this...?*

Riselia had seen a sphere like this before.

*It looks just like Miss Finé’s Eye of the Witch...*

The orb floated down, stopping before Riselia. The strange characters on it revolved at high speed.

“...?!”

Riselia reflexively raised her arms to shield herself. She had the feeling a giant eye was peering through her. Eventually, the many letters on the sphere vanished, and the orb floated up above her head.

**“Master status, confirmed.”**

“It can speak?!”

Riselia almost fell over again in shock. She looked around in a flustered hurry but found no one there... That left little room for doubt. The reverberating mechanical voice came from the orb of light.

“Wh-who are you?” she asked timidly.

More lines of letters appeared on the sphere.

**“I am the guardian of the kingdom—Schwertleite.”**

“A guardian?” Riselia was surprised by the fact that it answered her at all.

*What’s it protecting?* she wondered.

Still wary, Riselia dared to ask, “Were you the one who brought me here?”

**“Affirmative,”** the artificial voice replied.

“Um... Why?”

**“Because you are the one I have been waiting for. The one qualified to undo the seal.”**

“The one? Qualified?” Riselia parroted back at the sphere. “What are you talking about...?”

The orb of light began to slowly sail away into the dark.

“W-wait!”

Riselia hurried to her feet and pursued the sphere. It wasn’t moving too fast; a brisk pace was all Riselia needed to keep up.

“Was I the only one you took? What about Leo and the others?”

**“The intruders to the kingdom have been eliminated.”**

“Eliminated?” Riselia came to a stop. “No, don’t tell me that everyone...” Hot anger built in her. Mana illuminated her argent hair. “What do you mean?! What did you do to Leo and my friends?!”

Riselia caught up to the orb and slammed her fists on either side of it. However, her attack was confronted by sturdy metal that resisted her vampiric strength.

“Why won’t you say anything?! Hey!”

The orb became completely unresponsive. After striking it a few more times, Riselia’s fury cooled.

*Th-they’re fine. Leo’s there to protect them.*

Sakuya and Regina were surely safe with him. That notion alone was a poor

comfort, though. After all, Leonis was still exhausted from using the sword.

*And I took a lot of his blood last night.*

Suddenly, the orb came to a stop.

“Whoa!” Riselia was forced to halt so quickly that she almost pitched forward.  
“Wh-what...?”

*Vrrrrrrrrn!*

A strange sound emanated from the sphere, seemingly resonating with something. A moment later...

“Wh-whaaa—?!”

...the ground beneath Riselia vanished, and she plummeted into inky darkness.



“Oh. Now, this is curious...”

So whispered the white-haired priest seated upon Ur-Shukar’s outer walls. His gaze was fixed upon the plaza, which now lay in ruins.

“There’s signs of a battle there.” Curiosity colored Nefakess’s voice.

The long-abandoned city was protected by a powerful guardian that kept Voids away. Its presence had kept the apostles out as well.

“Is the guardian fighting the Voids?” asked a girl clad in white who stood behind Nefakess.

“Who’s to say? I don’t feel any Voids nearby.” Nefakess examined the remains of the battle with a faint smile on his lips.

He leaped from the wall lightly, landing within the city. The girl in white followed after silently, her brilliant blue hair trailing in the wind. However, the moment they landed, countless spell circles appeared, surrounding them. Machina Soldiers emerged from within, metallic carapaces shining.

“The Deus Machina’s scouts have come out to greet us, it seems.”

“Stay back, Lord Nefakess.” The blue-haired girl drew her katana and stepped forward.

“That won’t be necessary, Setsura.” Nefakess favored the Machina Soldiers with a grin. “Come forth, false goddess, born of human obsession!”

*Crack, crack, crack, crack.*

Fissures ran through the air above the priest, and a beautiful winged girl ripped her way through space, emerging from the fractures.

Seraphim.

She was the complete form of the Artificial Elemental housing a shard of the goddess’s soul as her core. Before, she was a creature the size of a fairy small enough to sit on one’s palm, yet now she looked closer to the angels who’d served the Luminous Powers a millennium ago.

“Heh-heh-heh. You adorable children.” Seraphim looked upon the Machina Soldiers with a pure cherubic smile.

“Now, Seraphim. Let them hear your music,” Nefakess ordered.



Seraphim nodded. “As you say.”

She spread her arms and began to sing. The words were of a mysterious language humans couldn’t hope to hear. The Machina Soldiers’ blue eyes flickered out, and their bodies crumbled where they stood. Seraphim’s advanced human magical technology overwrote the relics of the ancient civilization from the inside out. It didn’t take long for all the Machina Soldiers to fall, at which point Seraphim stopped singing.

“And that’s that.”

And then the Machina Soldiers’ blue eyes flickered back on.

“Splendid.” Nefakess clapped in praise. “Since they lack souls, even the Devil of the Underworld couldn’t control the Deus Machina’s troops. But you brought them under your thrall with ease.”

He continued walking down the street, still applauding her. The Machina Soldiers formed a neat line behind him, following his march.

“Now let’s go and take that which is sealed in this kingdom—”



“What?!” Leonis froze in the face of Sakuya’s declaration. “Wh-what are you talking about? What’s a Dark Lord?” By the time he found his words, a cold sweat was running down his brow.

“...”

An awkward silence followed.

Eventually, Sakuya sighed and shrugged. “I really don’t think there’s any point to playing coy anymore.”

“No, I’m just, uh, not sure what you’re talking about...”

“Listen, kid...” Sakuya leveled an irked glare at Leonis, who was acting incredibly suspiciously. “It was easy to figure out after seeing your powers up close.”

“Ugh...” Leonis couldn’t stop himself from groaning.



*Curses... I really overdid it this time!!*

Fighting the Machina Soldiers had forced him to loose eighth-order spells in rapid succession. Trying to claim those powerful attacks were all the result of his Holy Sword's power would've been a stretch.

"Honestly, I had my suspicions you were that Dark Lord before."

"...!"

"So is there anything you'd like to tell me?" Sakuya approached Leonis, who was doing his best to keep silent, and started poking his cheek. "Well, kid?"

*Poke, poke. Poke.*

"Kuh..." There was no point in hiding it anymore. Leonis exhaled with clear exasperation.

"You've seen right through me, despite my best efforts to disguise myself."

"I can't say you did a very good job of that," Sakuya shot back mercilessly.

"Huh? But I was certain—"

"I admit it was probably easier to figure out because we're in the same platoon. I had my suspicions judging by how Zol Vadis presented himself and how you seem to punch way above your weight class now and then."

Sakuya held up an index finger as she continued.

"You acted strangely during the Holy Sword Dance Festival, but I think what clinched it was when you pulled a combat vehicle from your shadow. That was probably overdoing it. You didn't pick that thing up on the Third Assault Garden. You bought it through the capital's black market, didn't you?"

Leonis sighed irritably.

*Blast it all, Shary; they all saw right through you!*

During the Holy Sword Dance Festival, Shary had taken Leonis's place. Apparently, both Riselia and Sakuya had noticed something was off.

*I suppose it was only a matter of time before they found out.*

At this point, there was little reason to deny the truth. Leonis cleared his

throat.

“...And what are you going to do now that you know?” He directed a sharp look at the girl, meeting her gaze.

Depending on Sakuya’s response, he might be forced to erase her memories.

Sakuya paused to consider.

“Nothing, I guess.”

“Nothing?”

“I don’t intend to report you to Excalibur Academy, and I won’t tell the others, either,” Sakuya explained, shrugging.

“But why...?” Leonis asked.

“So long as I get revenge on the Void that destroyed my homeland, nothing else matters, really. I don’t stay at Excalibur Academy because I want to defend humanity or anything. It just makes it easier to hunt Voids.”

Sakuya stretched as she went on.

“Besides, I’m the one who accepted a Dark Lord’s help for power. I willingly accepted the power of this mystic eye...”

Her left eye shone a faint amber.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re a Dark Lord, kid,” Sakuya said with a smile. “That doesn’t change our relationship. I’m still a member of Excalibur Academy’s eighteenth platoon and a swordswoman in service of a Dark Lord.”

At this, Leonis quietly replied, “...I see. Sakuya Sieglinde, that makes you my accomplice and coconspirator.” He flashed an evil smile.

“Hmm. Is that your true nature, kid?” Sakuya asked with a hint of amazement, her eyebrows rising.

“W-well, I wouldn’t call it my true nature...” Leonis flushed, feeling embarrassed all of a sudden.

Occasionally, it felt like his mind was second to his young body. Recently, he’d started to lose sight of which side was his true self.

*Acting this way really doesn't work without my Dark Lord facade!*

As Leonis hung his head, Sakuya brought her lips to his ear. "Don't worry. Dark Lord or not, you're still a cute boy."

"...?!"

The sensation of Sakuya's breath against Leonis's earlobe made his pulse quicken. Sakuya flashed an impish smile and pulled back.

"Does Miss Selia know the truth about you?"

Leonis shook his head. "I haven't told her about Zol Vadis."

Riselia was serious to a fault. If she found out he was the leader of an anti-imperial underground organization, she'd probably pass out on the spot.

"Heh-heh-heh. Oh yeah? I guess that makes it our little secret, then."

"...We can leave it at that, I suppose."

"A private relationship is kind of thrilling, isn't it?" Sakuya stood with Raikirimaru in hand. "Okay, let's go save Miss Selia."

"Right." Leonis wore a serious expression as he nodded in agreement and got to his feet.

"Do you have any idea where she was taken?" Sakuya asked.

"I do. I don't think it could've been very far."

The seal informed him that his minion was still nearby.

"Is that one of your Dark Lord powers?"

Leonis's expression faltered a bit. "Er, yes, I suppose so..."

He preferred to keep the fact that Riselia was his undead minion secret, for his sake and hers. Sakuya cast a look at Regina, still unconscious.

"What do we do about Miss Regina? We can't leave her here."

She had a point. There was no telling when more Machina Soldiers might show up.

"I don't think we have many options. I'll have to put her to sleep inside my shadow." Leonis snapped his fingers, and Regina's shadow coiled around her.

With her body now bound up like she was in a cocoon, she slowly sank into Leonis's shadow. "Okay... Let's go."

Sakuya smirked. "Allow me to accompany you, my lord."

"..."

"What?"

"...P-please stop calling me that."

Leoni's embarrassed request caused Sakuya's grin to bloom into a smile.



Riselia couldn't tell for how long she'd fallen. After what felt like an eternity, her descent finally came to a stop. Riselia's body bobbed in midair for a second before landing safely on the ground.

"Wh-what now?"

She looked around, confused. Unlike the chamber with the sphere from earlier, there was some light here, albeit faint. It came from strange glowing patterns etched into the stone walls. The surroundings struck Riselia as oddly familiar.

*I feel like I've seen this place before. After a few steps, she remembered. This is just like the ruins where I found Leo...*

She felt something sail over her head, and she looked up in alarm. It was the orb of light.

"Whoa! D-don't surprise me like that!" she cried. The orb ignored her, however, floating down the passage. Riselia reluctantly followed. "What is this place? It feels different from where we were..."

**"This is the Dark Lord's mausoleum."**

"...The Dark Lord?" Riselia repeated the words with her brow furrowed.

**"The one I consider my master has ordered me to guard the slumbering Dark Lord."**

The light orb glided to a stop before a gigantic set of doors at the end of the corridor. Luminous letters appeared on the sphere's surface, running across it rapidly. Only a second later, the doors opened with a heavy rumble.

“...?!”

A massive crystal waited on the other side of the door. It was pure black, so lustrous that it seemed to emit a pitch-colored light.

“It’s...” Riselia recognized this crystal. “It’s the same as the one Leo was sleeping in...”

She beheld the sight with eyes wide. This crystal was much larger than the one she’d found, and she couldn’t see what it contained.

**“Since the day the world was torn in two, I have protected this place as its guardian.”**

“...What are you talking about? What is this thing?”

“This is the casket of a slumbering Dark Lord,” the orb’s emotionless, inhuman voice explained. “Only one who has inherited the goddess’s soul may awaken him.”

“Goddess?”

Just as Riselia mouthed the word in confusion, the crystal suddenly erupted with light.

“...?!”

The radiance seemed to fill Riselia’s mind with a torrent of images.

*What...is this...?!*

And then...her consciousness sank into the dark.

## CHAPTER 6

### RESONANCE

Heavy rain beat down the cold back alley. A boy in rags sat on the ground, shoveling crumbs of muddy bread into his mouth in feeble mechanical motions. His eyes were absent of light, which was why it took Riselia a moment to realize she knew him.

*Leo?*

Driven by an urge to wrap her arms around him, Riselia sprinted for him, only to realize her legs wouldn't move. In fact, she didn't have a body at all. She was an inactive part of the scenery.

*Is this a dream?*

It felt much too real, and her consciousness was perfectly lucid and awake.

A young man in knight's clothing strode into the alley and stopped before the boy. The golden-haired young man knelt before the boy and took his hand.

A sense of vertigo overcame Riselia, and the scene went dark. The next thing she saw was a devastated wasteland. Dark clouds brewed overhead. The boy she'd seen a moment ago was now covered in blood, desperately swinging his sword as he fought monsters that vaguely resembled Voids.

Again, the world was plunged into shadow. When it returned, Riselia saw the boy riding a white horse down a city street. People were gathered on the sides of the road, cheering for the boy. However, he didn't look happy about the adulation.

*I get the feeling Leo looked happier when he was with us...*

And then...

*Huh?*

...it was raining again. The boy had collapsed into rust-colored mud. Several

stab wounds decorated his body.

*Leo!*

Riselia screamed, but her voice produced no sound. She couldn't even hurry over and embrace him.

*Leo... Why, Leo...?!*

She knew this wasn't real, but even so, why did he have to be put through this?

As the boy lay on the ground, bleeding to death, a girl appeared before him. She had sleek black hair and a beauty that struck Riselia as transcendent—superhuman. She offered a hand and spoke.

“Tell me, boy. Do you think this world is just?”

Everything went black once more. The next scene to take shape was of an army of undead. Skeletal warriors filled the grasslands, charging for human forces. The one leading the undead was a wicked monstrosity wielding a staff. The fires of war spread from those plains across the entire continent, threatening to consume all.

Amid the sounds of battle, Riselia's consciousness sputtered like a candle and was extinguished.



The heavy, rhythmic sounds of footsteps beating against the ground filled the air. Machina Soldiers marched through the streets of Ur-Shukar.

“Pathetic. The Deus Machina's troops impeded us for so long, yet look at them now,” Nefakess remarked with an air of pity as he marched alongside the Machina Soldiers.

Seraphim flew above him, her wings spread as she hummed a beautiful tune.

More and more Machina Soldiers appeared from teleportation circles to engage the intruders, but they were confronted by their own. Eventually, all that survived the battle came under Seraphim's thrall.

Machina Soldiers lacked souls. The Voids couldn't corrupt them. That made them the ideal troops to guard these ruins. However, at their cores, they were

magical apparatuses that relied on mana for power. Ironically, humanity had created Artificial Elementals, which were capable of controlling magical apparatuses.

And so a shard of the goddess's soul had been fused with the product of humankind's advanced magical technology. This was the fruit of one man's obsession—Deinfraude Phillet. Seraphim was the outcome, an Artificial Elemental that could take control of the Machina Soldiers from the Deus Machina.

The Machina Soldiers meant to guard the ruins now marched forward like a surging wave, destroying the buildings in their path. Their target was Ur-Rognasia Palace, located atop the hill. The apostles desperately sought the prize that waited far below the structure.

*I wonder, could Gazoth Hell Beast, the Lord of Beasts, be sealed there?*

Even a high-ranking apostle like Nefakess didn't know who slumbered here. For all their power, the apostles lacked a complete interpretation of the goddess's prophecies.

"Lord Nefakess." The blue-haired girl suddenly stopped in her tracks, as though she'd noticed something.

Nefakess looked over his shoulder at her. "What is it, Setsura?"

"I sense the living."

"Hmm. It must be whoever the Machina Soldiers did battle with." Nefakess considered this, although only briefly. "I'd be ill at ease if we ignored that threat. Go dispose of them."

"As you wish." A surge of wind surrounded Setsura, and she vanished.

A sneer worked its way onto Nefakess's face. "We can't permit anyone to interrupt us now. No matter what."



"...?! " Riselia's eyes shot open.

The terrible vision of war was gone. She was back in the chamber with the giant crystal.

“What was...that?” Riselia breathed heavily and raised a hand to her throbbing head.

*Why did I see Leo?*

And who was that beautiful girl? Was that dream merely a delirious hallucination? The crystal’s glow had faded. Riselia only saw her reflection in the smooth darkness.

The light orb hovering overhead announced, **“Dark Lord awakening failed. Cause unknown. Restarting resonance with qualified individual—”**

“Dark Lord? Awakening? What are you talking about?” Riselia narrowed her eyes at the odd sphere.

*Ripple, ripple, ripple, ripple...*

Rather than answer, the orb trembled oddly.

“Wh-what’s wrong?”

**“Enemy...intruders... Inter...cept...”**

The artificial voice broke and crackled with static.

**“Master must be...temporarily protected...”**

“Wh-whoa?!” Riselia’s body floated into the air like she’d suddenly become weightless. A barrier of light formed around her, trapping her inside.

“What are you doing?! Let me out now!” Riselia demanded, but although she beat against the barrier with all her strength, it wouldn’t yield.

The hovering sphere ignored Riselia’s shouting and vanished.

“Didn’t you say I was your master or whatever?!” she shouted into the lonely dark.

No amount of complaining would free her, though.

“Fine... In that case...,” Riselia whispered. Summoning her courage, she called, “Holy Sword, Activate—Bloody Sword!”

Riselia manifested her Holy Sword.

“Hyaaaaaaah!”

Her slash traced across her prison, yet it was deflected easily with the crisp sound of a pebble against glass.

“Ugh... Why, you...!”



“Farga! Farga! Farga!”

*Boom, boom, boom!*

Leonis launched fourth-order spells in succession, blasting the swarming Machina Soldiers and sending them flying.

“Tch, there’s too many of them! Farga!”

His latest spell destroyed one of the Machina Soldiers, but that only made room for more to appear from teleportation circles.

“Hey, kid.”

“What is it, Miss Sakuya?” Leonis turned to look at her after she tugged on his sleeve.

“Aren’t you kind of going overboard now that I know the truth?” Sakuya looked a bit put off by the piles of Machina Soldiers littering the ground.

“Uh, you think so?” Leonis couldn’t deny that it was liberating to wield his power openly.

*I’m still not in peak condition, though.*

Since he needed to conserve his mana, the strength of his spells was greatly diminished. His magical power was far from exhausted, but given that he’d need to dispatch whoever had abducted Riselia, he couldn’t afford to use spells indiscriminately.

“What is this place anyway? It’s like a maze,” Sakuya muttered as she scanned her eyes across the dark underground passage.

Leonis, however, already knew where they were.

*This must be part of the Great Arakael Library.*

The Great Arakael Library sat beneath the palace, but the Archsage of the Six Heroes had surely been unsatisfied with that alone and had expanded and

changed the structure of the place. The maze that was his library likely extended under the city proper.

“We should hurry.” Leonis looked down at the seal on his left hand. Its reactions were growing faint. That could suggest Riselia was locked somewhere that blocked mana or perhaps something worse.

Before he could mull on that for long, a terrible howling caught his attention.

“Kid!” Sakuya reflexively grabbed Leonis by the collar and used her acceleration power. Less than a blink later, the spot where Leonis had stood was crushed by something.

“You saved me, Miss Sakuya,” Leonis said, still held by his collar. His shadow’s automatic protection might not have reacted in time against such a quick attack.

“...”

Sakuya glared into the darkness, Raikirimaru held at the ready. A ghostly sort of girl stood in the gloom. Like Sakuya, she also had blue hair and wore Sakura Orchid traditional attire. Her face was a close match for Sakuya’s as well.

*That girl...*

Leonis recognized her. She’d killed Zemein back in Necrozoa.

*What could this mean? Why is she here?*

Sakuya released Leonis and took a silent step forward.

“Kid. Leave her to me, okay?”

“But, Miss Sakuya—”

“I need to talk to her.”

“...”

Sakuya gripped her Holy Sword tightly.

*She must have some history with that girl.*

Undoubtedly, this wouldn’t be an exchange of words. Sometimes, one could only speak to another by locking swords.

“I understand,” Leonis replied. “Be careful.”

“Yeah. I’m counting on you to save Miss Selia.”

Leonis hurried into the dark while Sakuya saw him off with a nod and a smile.



“What exactly is happening here?”

Scaling the ruins of a crumbling belfry, Arle took in the sight of the city. By relying on the natural stealth of elves, she’d concealed herself from the patrolling Machina Soldiers. A vanguard of the constructs was assembled on the ground below. The nightmarish sight reminded her of the battles from a thousand years ago.

*I thought the Machina Soldiers ceased to function alongside the Dark Lord Schwertleite.*

But that wasn’t the only surprise. The one leading these Machina Soldiers, walking like a king protected by an honor guard, was a white-haired priest.

“Nefakess? Why is he here?”

This man had ordered Voids to attack her on the Third Assault Garden. Why were the Machina Soldiers, servants of the Deus Machina, obeying him?

Arle watched as the force of Machina Soldiers marched toward Ur-Rognasia Palace.

“I have a very bad feeling about this...”



“Hyaaaaah! Bloody Petal Spiral!”

Blades of blood converged at the tip of Riselia’s sword, then exploded with a mighty thrust.

*Krngggggggggggg!*

The crimson blade bore into the barrier, which flickered violently under the stress, but ultimately, this attempt to escape failed like the others. Riselia’s attack dispersed.

“Haaah, haaah, haaah... Even that...didn’t work...?” Riselia glared at the

spherical shield holding her in place.

She was already wearing the True Ancestor's Dress. It was in its Scarlet Tyrant mode, which converted her vast Vampire Queen's mana reserves into physical prowess. But since it consumed mana rapidly, she couldn't wear it for long.

*"I have to get back...to Leo!"*

Riselia slammed her fists against the barrier in frustration. The fact that nothing worked served to make her more desperate.

*"You're wasting a lot of mana. If you continue like this, an eternity won't be enough time to break free."*

A voice spoke directly to her mind.

"Huh?" Riselia looked around.

It wasn't that light orb, Schwertleite. However, she recognized the voice.

*"Focus your mana on a single point,"* the voice carried on. *"You're not dealing with a moving enemy here. It's just a wall, so there's no need to strengthen yourself."*

Riselia gasped slightly. The voice was right. Instead of empowering herself, she might shatter the barrier if she focused her mana on a single point.

"I-it's not as easy as you're making it sound. What am I supposed to do?" Riselia asked the voice in her head.

Riselia instinctively understood the principle behind focusing her vast pool of magical power into a point, but employing that much control in practice was difficult. She was still a novice at being a Vampire Queen, after all.

*"You've got the likes of me lending you aid, so just do as you're told."*

"Huh?! E-erm, okay...," Riselia responded earnestly, still unsure who was speaking to her.

Riselia was confused, but following instructions promised to be simple enough.

*"First, close your eyes and take a deep breath..."*

Riselia did as instructed, shutting her eyes and taking a long inhale.

*“Imagine all the mana in your body converging in your sword and hold that image.”*

*L-like this?*

She imagined all her power gathering in the Bloody Sword in her right hand. It was only a thought, however, and it didn't help her control her mana.

*“Good work. Now think of yourself as the strongest dragon in the world.”*

*D-dragon?* The word made Riselia suspicious. *What is this voice getting at?*

Dragons were creatures from the distant past and spoken of only in fairytales.

*I can't imagine what being a dragon is like!*

*“Oh, fine. It's like this!”*

As Riselia froze from confusion, a vivid image flowed into her mind—a dragon with crimson scales like raging flames. The sight of the creature seemed to set Riselia's blood ablaze.

*A dragon... Yes, I am a dragon!*

Riselia repeated the words in her mind like a mantra. She felt the mana circulating through her body collect in her sword.

*“Good. You really do have potential. Now hold up your sword...”*

Riselia obediently readied her weapon, its blade glowing from all the mana stored within.

*“And now invoke the words—Final Dragon Attack!”*

*“Huhhh?!”*

Riselia's shock almost made her lose all the mana she'd channeled.

*“What are you doing?! I'll say it one more time. Final Dragon Attack!”*

*“F-Final Dragon Attataaaaaaack!”* Riselia shouted, more out of desperation than true conviction, and thrust her sword at the barrier.

Its tip gouged into the luminous wall of her prison and...

*Shatter!*

...smashed through it easily.

“I—I did it!” Riselia cheered, still confused. “I, um... Thank you...”

As she touched down on the ground, she thanked the voice that had given her advice. However, she received no answer. Only she and the black crystal were there.

*What was that voice?*

Riselia was still baffled and unsure of what to make of what had happened, but she was free now.

“I have to hurry and get back to Leo!”

She sprinted to the entrance of the mausoleum, but before she left, she turned around to look back a final time at the pitch-black crystal.

All those scenes that had flowed into her mind didn’t feel like a dream. Still, Riselia couldn’t delay, so she ran off, although with some reluctance.



“Third-order spell—Vras Raiga!”

A bolt of dark lightning streaked through the air, drilling through the swarm of incoming Machina Soldiers.

“Haaah, haaah, haaah... Where do these things keep coming from?!” Leonis pushed himself to keep running through the underground maze, even as he gasped for air.

He still had the frail body of a ten-year-old, and his short legs meant his stride was shallow. Worse yet, he was still recovering from the effects of using the Demon Sword.

“Haaah, haaah... Curse this...weak form...” Leonis rested a hand against the wall to catch his breath.

No sooner had he done so than more teleportation spell circles flickered to life around him, summoning more Machina Soldiers.

“Begone, you bothersome vermin—Gira Berton!”

Using a fourth-order gravity spell, Leonis crushed the armored Machina

Soldiers under their own weight.

*Kuh! I was known as the greatest of Dark Lords, and now my mana is nearly depleted!*

He had enough to handle these foot soldiers, but his power was reaching its limit. It was a blow to his dignity as a Dark Lord, even if it was the result of using the Demon Sword.

Normally, he would've relied on his minion to guard and escort him, but he needed to rescue her.

*Blast! Where is she?!*

Leonis slammed his fist against the wall in frustration, when suddenly, the seal on the back of his left hand throbbed in pain.

"...?!" Leonis's eyes widened. This was a different reaction compared to before. "Has the situation changed?"

Perhaps Riselia had awakened after being unconscious, or maybe she'd managed to free herself. Leonis couldn't tell.

"Hmm. It seems she's on a lower level..."

He did vaguely sense her location, though. And with that information, there was no need for Leonis to waste his time running around the Archsage's labyrinth.

"Gouge the earth, hammer of fury—Ru Galde!"

*Boom!*

A fissure ran under Leonis's feet, which expanded and made the stone floor cave in. Leonis floated in the air for a moment before descending down the newly formed shaft. After a short drop, his feet touched solid ground again.

He illuminated the area with his staff's light. This wasn't a corridor but instead a spacious room. The walls were covered in books from top to bottom.

*Arakael's collected tomes promise to be fascinating, but I'll have to leave them for later.*

A teleportation spell circle appeared in the room in apparent response to

Leonis's presence.

"Tch. More of them...?" Leonis clicked his tongue and held up the Staff of Sealed Sins toward the circle. "Wait. What?"

Leonis frowned in confusion. The thing that emerged from the array wasn't like other Machina Soldiers. It was a gigantic snakelike construct that stood two metres tall. Its slithering against the floor produced a low rumble.

"Oh, so there are more than just weaklings among your ranks. Farga!"

Leonis instantly blasted it with a spell. The explosion shook the chamber, and hot air raced past. However...

"What?"

...before the spell connected with the serpent Machina Soldier, a barrier had formed around it.

"It must be some kind of specialized anti-magic type. How bothersome..."

This was the kind of opponent Leonis was least equipped to handle.

*Sixth-order spells or higher should be able to pierce its shield, but...*

Leonis's body felt sluggish. He was nearly drained of mana. The Machina Soldier let out a howl and moved in to ram Leonis with its hulking body.

*I've got no choice!*

Leonis prepared to fire a nonverbal sixth-order spell, but before he could...

*"Groooooowl!"*

...a black wolf sprang from the dark and pounced on the Machina Soldier's neck.

"Blackas!"

The Machina Soldier's large body collapsed, knocking down bookshelves in the process. Countless tomes spilled in a paper landslide, kicking up centuries-old dust. Blackas howled, clenching his jaws on the Machina Soldier's neck joint and tearing it off.

"Forgive me, Lord Magnus." Blackas faced Leonis and hung his head. "The

Queen of Shadows terminated herself, and I failed to take her captive.”

“I see... Don’t worry. You’ve done well. Thank you.” Leonis shook his head and patted the black wolf’s smooth fur. “The Deus Machina’s troops are proving tricky for me. My mana is almost depleted.”

“I’m surprised you have any left after using the Demon Sword.” Blackas stomped on the defeated Machina Soldier’s head and looked down on it. “What is the meaning of this? Why are there Machina Soldiers in this place?”

“I don’t know. We can talk about that later.” Leonis sat atop Blackas’s back. “Someone took my minion captive. We must rescue her.”

“Understood.” Blackas nodded and sped off in the direction Leonis indicated.



“Mikagami-style swordsmanship—Thunderflash Flurry!”

Sakuya’s katana cut through the air, scattering blue lightning in its wake. Within the darkness of the underground passage, her Holy Sword’s blade clashed with her opponent’s.

“Setsura!” Sakuya gritted her teeth, glaring at the person holding the sword locked with hers.

Her blue hair billowed, kicked up by the sorcerous wind she produced. Her eyes were a malevolent, ominous crimson. Her skin was as pale as the dead’s, but her features were otherwise a mirror image of Sakuya’s.

The Sakura Orchid had met disaster nine years ago. Had Setsura survived, she would’ve been twenty-two now. However, this girl looked not a day older than how Sakuya remembered her on that fateful day.

“Setsura, why?!”

Sakuya wasn’t asking one question in particular. Too many came to mind for her to voice them all. Why was her sister alive after being killed nine years ago? Why had she unleashed Raijinki from his seal in the Seventh Assault Garden’s mana furnace, beckoning the Void Lord that had destroyed the Sakura Orchid? And why was she here now?

Ultimately, Sakuya swallowed her questions. Asking now was meaningless. If

she allowed herself to be distracted, she'd surely die. She would converse with Setsura by crossing blades.

“Hyaaaaah!”

Sakuya stepped forward, unleashing a slash charged with electricity.

*Bzzzzt!*

A sphere of plasma ruptured, leaving a singed scent that tickled the nostrils. The two katanas flickered, and the sleeves of each girl's Sakura Orchid robes flapped violently in the wind.

*She's reading my moves!*

Both sisters were trained in the Sakura Orchid's Mikagami style, specifically the powerful sword techniques passed down in the royal family.

*It feels like Setsura still has the edge over me in terms of swordfighting skill...*

When they last fought on the Seventh Assault Garden, Sakuya had been helpless against her sister. Setsura had outmatched her in technique and also demonstrated superhuman capability.

Perhaps she wasn't human anymore.

“...!”

Sakuya broke their latest clash and leaped away. With her eyes fixed on her sister, Sakuya slowly edged forward, gauging the distance between them. Her left hand throbbed painfully. She'd overused the mystic eye of time's powers while fighting on the surface. She got the feeling using it needlessly would result in her burning her nerves.

*—But Setsura isn't someone I can beat without this eye!*

Her clear-blue eye shone crimson.

“A mystic eye...,” Setsura said. “Where did you get that power?”

“All questions are asked and answered with sword strokes, Setsura,” Sakuya said curtly. “That's the way of the Sakura Orchid swordswoman, isn't it?”

“—True.” Setsura held her Holy Sword overhead. “Mikagami style, ultimate sword technique—Demon Wind Maelstrom!”

A small tornado brewed around Setsura's blade, forming an intense swirl. Pieces of rubble kicked up by the wind flew about, one of them nicking Sakuya's cheek. This was the power of Setsura's Holy Sword, the ability to command the wind.

But before she could swing her sword down...

"Mikagami Style, ultimate sword technique—Savage Lightning Slash!"

...Sakuya lunged forward, moving through accelerated time.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE DEUS MACHINA

A force of hundreds of Machina Soldiers marched on the square before Ur-Rognasia Palace. A priest of the Goddess of Void acted as the false leader of this march, followed closely by an angel.

“The kingdom that escaped the invasion of the Voids for so long finally falls today.”

As he stood before the gate to the palace, Nefakess calmly held up a hand. What followed was a blinding flash and a deafening, thunderous roar. The Machina Soldiers meant to guard this kingdom charged the gates.

“How amusing,” Nefakess said with a thin smile.

*Whoosh...*

Suddenly, an orb of light appeared in the air above.

“Oh. You’ve finally decided to show yourself.” Nefakess spread his arms, greeting the orb. “How nice to meet you, eighth Dark Lord that serves the goddess—Schwertleite Terminate, the Deus Machina.”

**“Staff officer of the Dark Lords’ Armies under Azra-Ael—Nefakess Reizaad,”** the orb replied with its artificial voice. **“You are not recognized as a worthy master.”**

Letters ran across the sphere’s surface. This was super-ancient code, created by a civilization that existed ages before the development of sorcery.

**“Therefore, you shall be destroyed. Ragva Leite!”**

A beam of light shot out of the orb, sweeping across the earth.

*Boooom!*

Pillars of fire erupted, forming a massive curtain of flame that cut across the plaza. Any Machina Soldiers in its path were instantly vaporized.

“Heh-heh-heh... Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Splendid.” The priest cackled, his shape warped by the heat haze formed by the intense flames. He had not budged from where he stood and was even applauding.

“Your power is spectacular, Schwertleite. I’d expect nothing less from one of the Dark Lords.”

**“Inexplicable...phenomena...”**

Orphic letters ran across Schwertleite’s surface. Nefakess stepped forward slowly, still clapping.

**“Must be...eliminated...Ragva Leite.”**

*Boom!*

Schwertleite fired another beam of hellfire, which tore through the ground and eradicated a great many Machina Soldiers. Nefakess continued advancing toward the palace unbothered, however. The force of the explosion blew back his hair, but that was all.

“Trying the same thing over and over won’t change anything, mighty Dark Lord.” Nefakess shook his head in a show of disappointment. “You will never do me harm.”

**“Ragva Leite.”**

The light orb fired a third beam of destructive fire.

“I told you it was pointless.”

The powerful ray was dispersed effortlessly.

**“Inexplicable... Why...?”**

“Heh-heh-heh. It took me a bit to figure out the trick... But once I did, I seized control,” said Seraphim, who floated beside Nefakess while wearing a lovely smile.

“Shall I enlighten you?” Nefakess grinned and shrugged. “You might be the Deus Machina, the god of destruction created by an ancient civilization, but your sorcery circuits and core are fundamentally no different from the Machina Soldiers. And this treasure of humanity’s research, this Artificial Elemental, can dominate those circuits. Seraphim here has a fragment of the goddess’s soul, a

Trapezohedron, incorporated into her.”

Nefakess produced a small black stone from a crack in reality. “The Goddess of Rebellion was the Deus Machina’s sole master, and Seraphim has her soul integrated into her core, which is why you cannot attack her. And since Seraphim is guarding me, her protection naturally extends to me.”

The glowing letters that ran across the orb of light were being overwritten by another kind of text—code used for controlling magical apparatuses developed by the Phillet Company.

“Schwertleite, the Deus Machina. You never had a soul to begin with. You serve as a tool for the goddess. But I will find a new use for you. You shall become my greatest weapon.”

Nefakess waved a hand through the air, and the Deus Machina floated up above the palace.

“For your first task, show me the way to the Dark Lord slumbering in this kingdom...”

*Boom!*

A blinding flash of light destroyed Ur-Rognasia Palace.



*Just hold on a little longer, Leo!*

Riselia kicked her way vertically up the walls. Her crimson dress fluttered in the dark, and her silver locks left particles of mana in the air. Her instincts as an undead minion guided her, telling her where to go. The seal branding her body throbbed hotly.

She could feel it. He was calling for her.

Eventually, Riselia reached a hall that branched in several directions. The place was like a maze.

*He must be this way...*

Using her Holy Sword’s glowing blade for light, Riselia let her intuition guide her through the maze. Her body, bolstered by mana, sped down the passages. Before long, she spotted a blue light shining at the end of the corridor.

*Is that Leo's staff?*

She quickly realized that was wrong. More blue lights rapidly flickered to life.

“What?!”

Riselia stopped in her tracks and readied her Bloody Sword to attack. Looking around, she realized she was in a spacious, dome-shaped chamber. It was even larger and more expansive than the underground mausoleum from earlier, and the whole place was filled with flickering blue lights—countless eyes of spiderlike monsters covered in prismatic, metallic carapaces.

“Are these Voids?!”

Riselia got the feeling that wasn't the case. The miasma that accompanied Voids was absent. The creatures felt closer to Void Simulators. The unidentified mechanical enemies all raised their tails at once.

*“Move!”* a voice shouted in her head.

Riselia jolted and jumped away.

*Boom!*

The machines fired scorching blasts that burned the spot where Riselia had been standing.

“...?!”

Having narrowly escaped, Riselia produced wings of mana and kicked off the wall to glide away. She swung the Bloody Sword down from midair.

“Windy Blood!”

A scythe-shaped blade of blood crashed down upon the metallic spiders. Riselia wasted no time charging into their broken formation.

“Don't get in my way!”

Her Holy Sword ripped through the constructs.

*“These are Machina Soldiers—sorcerous weapons used by the Deus Machina.”*

“...Sorcerous weapons?” Riselia asked the voice speaking to her mind as she brandished the Bloody Sword. “You mean these things aren't alive?”

*“Yes, except... Something’s off. They look like they’re running amok.”*

“They do? Hold on, who are you?!” Riselia kicked a Machina Soldier away. For all her efforts, the enemy’s numbers weren’t decreasing. In fact, it looked like they were swarming faster than she could whittle their numbers down.

*Where do they keep coming from?!*

She looked around the hall and spotted parts of a wall crumbling away and turning into spiders, which hopped off and climbed down.

“You can’t be serious!”

Only now did she realize all of this chamber’s “walls” were made up of those mechanical spiders.

*I guess I fell into their nest.*

Blasts came for Riselia from every direction and angle, forcing her to dive behind destroyed Machina Soldiers for cover. Were it not for the True Ancestor’s Dress bolstering her defenses, she likely would’ve been killed.

*If this continues, I’ll run out of mana...*

Her gaze went to a nearby corridor, but she was already surrounded.

*“Force your way through.”*

“I can’t! Not when there’s this many of them!” Riselia shot back at the voice’s reckless command.

More spiders came to life and climbed off the walls than she could destroy.

*“True. As you are now, you’ll run out of mana halfway through.”*

The Machina Soldiers surrounding her all charged their blasts at the same time.

*“Move!”*

Riselia tried to create a mana barrier on reflex, but she couldn’t make it in time.

*“Fine, I’ll lend you my strength.”*

Blood gushed from Riselia’s chest. The red gemstone broach—the Dragon

Blood from Leonis—shattered.

Blinding crimson filled the area.

“What?” Riselia whispered, her ice-blue eyes wide with disbelief.

The splattered blood billowed around her like a storm. Radiance exploded into flame, and a thundering rumble shook the hall. However, Riselia didn’t have a single burn on her body. Instead, her silver hair shone, dancing in the raging wind.

A dragon took shape from the fire to shield Riselia.

“A dragon made of blood...?” Riselia whispered in disbelief.

*“Not just any dragon,” the voice corrected her. “The blood of the Dragon Lord.”*

At last, Riselia remembered who the voice belonged to. “Wait, is that you, Veira?!”

*“No. I’m a vestige of the Dragon Lord’s will, lingering within her blood. You can think of me as a double of hers.”*

Riselia wasn’t certain what that meant, but apparently, this wasn’t Veira herself.

*“You’re still an amateur, so I’ll lend you my strength just this once.”* The blood dragon raised its head with pride, even in the face of swarming Machina Soldiers. *“Now put the blood of the strongest of all dragons to good use!”*

“I will!” Riselia held up the Bloody Sword and slashed at her enemies. “Hyaaaah!”

The blood dragon roared in answer and began devouring the Machina Soldiers with all the intensity of raging hellfire.



“Lord Magnus.”

“I know. She’s close.”

Leonis rode the black wolf through the Archsage’s labyrinth of knowledge. He heard the sounds of combat nearby, and the seal indicated his minion wasn’t

far.

Leonis fired explosive offensive spells while Blackas's jaws crushed the Machina Soldiers' heads.

"Blackas, she's past that wall!"

"Understood."

Blackas leaped and dived into his own shadow cast against the wall. The moment he and Leonis emerged on the other side...

"Hyaaaaah!"

*Whoosh!*

...a crimson blade missed them by a hair.

"Whoa?!" Leonis exclaimed.

"Huh?! Leo?!" Riselia stood before him with a dumbfounded look.

"M-Miss Selia, are you all right?" Leonis sighed, relieved that she was unharmed and that he hadn't been cut in half.



“Leo, I’m so sorry! You just popped out of nowhere...!”

“No, I should apologize. I’m sorry it took me so long.” Leonis hopped off Blackas’s back. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine...”

Riselia sank to the floor, overcome with relief after seeing Leonis. The True Ancestor’s Dress broke into light particles and vanished, and her academy uniform returned. Leonis looked around cautiously. He and Blackas had emerged into a dome-shaped structure. Dozens upon dozens of broken Machina Soldiers decorated the floor.

*This has to be a Machina Soldier storage room. Looks like she fought hard...*

“Uh, Leo...” Riselia’s attention had gone to the black wolf sitting beside Leonis. “Isn’t that the dog Sakuya’s been looking after?”

Blackas let out a low growl.

“Don’t worry about it for the time being.”

“Um...” Riselia cocked her head a little and then glanced around. “Where are Regina and Sakuya?”

“They’re both okay, but Miss Regina got hurt, so I hid her in my shadow.”

“Huh? I-is that safe?!”

“Don’t worry, she’s resting comfortably.”

“That’s good.”

“Miss Sakuya, though...” Leonis paused for thought. “We split up on the way here. I trust she’ll be fine, though.”

Riselia was devoted to her friends, and telling her the truth would just make her rush to Sakuya’s aid. Leonis had the feeling Sakuya wished to face that blue-haired woman alone.

“What about you, Miss Selia? Are you hurt?” Leonis questioned.

Who had snatched her away, and why?

“O-oh, right! This orb of light came out and started calling me its master...”

Riselia hurriedly recounted the odd events that had transpired after the teleportation circle took her away. The story left Leonis overcome with shock.

*It can't be. Schwertleite?!*

Schwertleite Terminate, the Deus Machina, was one of the eight Dark Lords who'd served the goddess. Schwertleite had commanded the soulless Machina Soldiers as a collective, and its force had consumed entire cities. Schwertleite lacked military strongholds like Necrozoa or the Azure Hold and never attended any of the Dark Lords' high councils. Leonis had seen the Deus Machina's central unit only once, when Roselia summoned it. It had resembled what Riselia described, a two-meter-circumference sphere of light.

*If I recall, Gisark, the Divine Dragon of the Six Heroes, destroyed the Deus Machina.*

Of course, there were several instances of Dark Lords returning after supposed deaths. The Dragon Lord, the Lord of the Seas, and even Leonis himself were such examples. But the most baffling part was that Schwertleite decided to abduct Riselia and called her its master.

*As far as I know, Roselia was the Deus Machina's sole master...*

Leonis eyed the broken Machina Soldiers on the floor and asked, "What was this guardian trying to protect?"

"Erm, well..." Riselia trailed off.

"...?" Leonis eyed her dubiously, confused by her reaction.

"It took me to a place with a large crystal..."

"A crystal?"

"Yeah. And then I..." Riselia took a moment to gather her courage. "I had a dream about yo—"

"Lord Magnus, something's coming!" Blackas warned, cutting Riselia off.

The next moment...

*Crash!*

...the hall's ceiling caved in, and rubble rained down.

“Wh-what?!” Leonis looked around for the source of the attack while Riselia hugged his head to shield him.

Only seconds after the dust settled, a figure descended from the newly formed opening.

“My oh my. I wondered who could’ve beaten me here. To think it was you...” A calm voice filled the chamber. It belonged to a young white-haired priest wearing robes from the Human Church.

“Nefakess Reizaad.” Leonis spoke the man’s name with evident displeasure.

What was a former staff officer of the Dark Lords’ Armies doing in Ur-Shukar? And why was Schwertleite obeying his orders? The shining orb hovered behind some kind of angel. It was like...

*A commander in the Dark Lords’ Armies is conducting himself like the Luminous Powers did.*

“Were you among the sacrifices gathered by the Queen of Shadows?” Nefakess questioned contemptuously from above. “No, I doubt this could be such a ludicrous coincidence. Hmm. Perhaps you’re the Devil of the Underworld’s pawns?”

*He dares call me Azra-Ael’s servant?!*

Although angered by the remark, Leonis still noticed that Nefakess had implied he was at odds with Azra-Ael.

“I suppose it’s of little consequence. If you are his pawns, you’re of little value. I’ll admit I’m a little curious about that vampire girl, though.”

Nefakess shot a hungry look at Riselia, who shuddered under his gaze and hugged her shoulders in disgust.

*I see. That man wishes for a painful death. Daring to fix his filthy eyes on my minion deserves nothing less!*

Leonis stood before Riselia to shield her from Nefakess’s gaze and glared at the man.

“Sadly, I haven’t the time to toy with you right now. I must hurry along.”

“...What?” Leonis hardly had a moment to be surprised before the orb floating beside Nefakess fired a destructive ray down into the chamber. A deafening roar sounded as the attack blasted through the floor.

“Schwertleite, the Deus Machina, I entrust you with cleaning up the trash. Come, Seraphim.” Nefakess laughed loudly as he floated down into the dark, with the angel following close after.

“Stop!” Leonis held up the Staff of Sealed Sins, preparing to chant.

*Whoosh!*

The orb swooped down, standing in his way.

**“Master’s order acknowledged. Eliminating intruders—”**

Glowing letters rapidly streamed across the Deus Machina’s body.

*He really did seize control of it.* Leonis bemoaned his poor luck.

That angel, Seraphim, was an Artificial Elemental with the power to take over machines. Still, no matter how developed humanity’s technology became, taking over a Dark Lord couldn’t have been easy.

Spell circles appeared all over the hall, and Machina Soldiers emerged from them.

“Leo...” Riselia held up her Holy Sword and stood beside him.

Leonis felt cold sweat run down his forehead. He was up against a Dark Lord, someone who’d stood as his equal when he was at his apex. This was a being greater than the Spirit King, and Leonis had needed Dáinsleif to defeat him. Leonis had conserved his mana in preparation for a fight, but this was too much.

*I didn’t think I’d be up against a Dark Lord.*

Leonis fought using spells, and the Deus Machina possessed high spell resistance. It was the worst possible matchup. Worse yet, he couldn’t use Dáinsleif against a fellow Dark Lord. Even if the pact didn’t bind the weapon, the Demon Sword would drain the little mana Leonis had left the moment he drew it.

*And my Holy Sword is still sealed.* Leonis looked down on his left hand and

shook his head.

If Shary were here, he could have taken the risk and released Rakshasa Nightmare.

*The odds look grim.*

Retreat seemed the only viable option. Unlike his fellow Dark Lords, the Undead King never saw foolhardy recklessness as something to be proud of. When faced with battles he couldn't win, he knew that falling back was best. That intellect made Leonis Death Magnus the strongest of the Dark Lords.

He had to run. For his own sake, yes, but more so for Riselia's.

"Miss Selia...," he began, intending to tell her to run.

However, he couldn't finish the sentence.

**"Deploying Absolute Field,"** the Deus Machina stated lifelessly.

"...?!"

Black waves emanated from the orb, covering the entire hall.

*This is the goddess's barrier!* Leonis gritted his teeth in frustration.

Leonis had employed this field on the Sixth Assault Garden, when the Dragon Lord went berserk. It was a unique spell developed by the goddess for when two Dark Lords had to duel. When this field was invoked, the dueling Dark Lords were not allowed to leave it unless the battle was decided or both agreed to cease fighting.

*Does this mean Schwertleite acknowledges me as a fellow Dark Lord?*

Leonis looked like a child, but perhaps the Deus Machina detected his soul. He wished he could let Riselia escape, but since she was his minion, she was also recognized as part of a Dark Lord's power and trapped in the barrier.

The situation was turning more dismal by the second.

*At this point, my only option is to fight.*

Leonis stepped forward with the Staff of Sealed Sins in hand.

"I have to drag it into the kingdom, Blackas. You don't mind, do you?"

“No. We have no choice.” Blackas nodded. “Do you really think you can manage it? You’ll probably only get one chance to strike.”

“You’re right. I’ll have to wait for an opening...” Leonis mounted Blackas. “Miss Selia, I’m counting on you to clear away the foot soldiers!”

“Okay!” Riselia charged ahead, brandishing the Bloody Sword. Her stroke sent a surge of blood across the floor. “Blood of the great dragons, become my blade! Dragon Blood!”

A blade of blood shone with ominous crimson light and took the form of a dragon.

*“Graaaaaaaah!”*

The blood dragon howled and charged the Machina Soldiers.

*She’s mastered the Dragon Blood already?!* Leonis looked on in disbelief as Blackas ran parallel to the blood dragon.

High-ranking vampires were capable of manipulating the blood of different monsters, but the only one capable of controlling that of dragons was a True Ancestor called the Drakuel, the Duke of Dragon Blood. What’s more, manipulating the blood of the Dragon Lord was unheard of. Riselia’s potential alone couldn’t explain this.

*Veira must have really taken a liking to her...*

“Hyaaaah!” Riselia kicked off the ground, racing forward.

She donned the True Ancestor’s Dress in Scarlet Tyrant mode and cut through the Machina Soldiers. The glint of her strike flashed through the air, and several of the spider constructs collapsed.

Meanwhile, Leonis raced ahead atop Blackas’s back, weaving between the blades of blood. While holding on to the black fur, he started chanting a spell. Normal magic wouldn’t work on a Dark Lord, and this was the Deus Machina, with its high spell resistance. Third-order sorcery wouldn’t so much as scratch it.

Blackas leaped into the air, and Leonis swung the Staff of Sealed Sins down on the orb.

“Eighth-order spell—Al Gu Belzelga!”

*Boom!*

An intense blast swallowed the Deus Machina and its soldiers. A pillar of fire shot up from the ground, but the Deus Machina hadn't been caught in it.

"Lord Magnus, up there!" Blackas shouted.

The orb sped over Leonis's head.

"Tsk!"

**"Erase—Ragva Leite."**

A destructive beam of light swept through the hall, eradicating everything in its path, the Machina Soldiers included.

"Blackas!"

The great wolf dived into the shadows at the last second, evading the attack. He emerged a moment later, sprinting vertically up the wall. Schwertleite's attack would have normally been enough to destroy the floor, but the goddess's barrier kept the place intact.

"Leo!" Riselia jumped into the air and spread her mana wings.

She leaped from wall to wall, hopping above the Deus Machina.

*Clanggg!*

She swung her Holy Sword down on the Deus Machina, but it deployed a mana barrier that shielded it from the blade. However, Riselia didn't give up the attack and continued unleashing mana.

"Drag Fang!"

The tip of her blade became the blood dragon's head, which closed its jaws on the Deus Machina. With the sphere trapped, Riselia slammed it down on the ground with a heavy *thud*. A plume of dust shot up like a mushroom.

Not a moment later, countless flashes erupted, shooting through and destroying the blood dragon's head. Riselia managed to keep from being hit, though. The Deus Machina floated back up, beckoning many smaller orbs around it. It really was like Elfiné's Eye of the Witch.

The luminous orbs shone in concert and fired beams aimed at Riselia.

“Miss Selia!” Leonis called to warn her.

Riselia twisted in mid-leap, narrowly evading the incoming deadly attacks.

*What?*

Leonis couldn’t help but feel like something was off as he watched from atop Blackas. It was almost like the Deus Machina had missed intentionally.

*It did call her its master.*

Perhaps that designation hadn’t been overwritten. That would explain it. The Deus Machina’s volleys seemed much too weak and merciful for a Dark Lord. Compared to this, Veira had been more fearsome after she’d been roused from her slumber.

Schwertleite wasn’t exhibiting its full power as a Dark Lord. And if so, then Leonis needed to seize upon the opportunity.

“Gouge and destroy! Evil-Rending Sword—Zolgstar Mezekis!”

Leonis raised his hand, summoning seven blades from thin air. They were weak imitations forged from fragments of one of the Arc Seven. Yet while they were inferior copies, they still retained their ability to smite and destroy Dark Lords.

Leonis swung his hand down, unleashing the Dark Lord–slaying blades on the Deus Machina. They pierced and destroyed the surrounding smaller orbs of light, and then...

“Break!”

*Booooooom!*

...all the Zolgstar Mezekis blades ruptured simultaneously. They’d been inlaid with an Al Gu Belzelga spell ahead of time.

*I’d prepared them for a possible battle with Shardark, though. Such a waste.*

The blast occupied the Deus Machina long enough for Riselia to move in again.

“Hyaaaah!”

The blood dragon around her blade absorbed the flickering flames produced

by Leonis's spell, creating a burning vortex.

"Burn in the hellfire of dragon's blood—Flaming Howl!" Riselia thrust down her Holy Sword, empowered by the flaming dragon.

*Bwoosh!*

The raging incandescent blaze swallowed up the Deus Machina.

**"Master's soul, confirmed—denied—confirmed—denied—"**

The Deus Machina froze in midair. The glowing symbols running across its surface flickered back and forth in apparent confusion.

"Now! We have to take it down!"

Leonis landed on the ground and held up the Staff of Sealed Sins. Multiple shadows in the chamber spread like ink blots on paper. Leonis hadn't been simply running around on Blackas throughout the fight. He'd been preparing a gate to the Realm of Shadows.

"Open, doors to my kingdom!"

All the shadows across the chamber merged into one and consumed the entire room. The Machina Soldiers were submerged in darkness, as was the inert Deus Machina.



It was a place devoid of color. All that was visible was a desolate wasteland of black and gray. The Queen of Shadows, the former ruler of this place, had cast a curse on the land that still lingered, stripping it of hue.

Leonis stood upon a hill that overlooked the wasteland.

"Leo, what is this place?" Riselia asked from beside him. Her eyes anxiously scanned the scenery.

"There's no cause for worry. This is the Realm of Shadows. I summoned this place," Leonis explained as he walked to the edge of the slope. Below, an orb of light hovered in place. The Deus Machina had been pulled into the Realm of Shadows, along with the entire Absolute Field.

"I welcome you to my kingdom, Dark Lord Schwertleite," Leonis declared grandly, spreading his arms.

With these words, the desolate soil swelled, and countless bones emerged from the sand. Tens, hundreds, thousands—an army of skeleton warriors rose up, weapons glowing with magic.

And it didn't stop there. Skeleton generals, shadow demons, soul collectors, elder liches, death clouds, evil elementals, hell lords, greater shadows, a skull colossus, and a skull dragon. A vast army of undead appeared on this land.

*Heh-heh-heh. What say you, Deus Machina? This is my trump card.*

Summoning the undead required mana, but if Leonis pulled his opponent into the Realm of Shadows, where his undead legion slumbered, he could beckon his troops without any.

Still, dragging a Dark Lord into the Realm of Shadows came at a significant risk. Undead could be resummoned later, but any destroyed within this kingdom would have their souls released and become ordinary jumbles of bones. Facing a Dark Lord here could mean a crippling loss. However, Leonis's mana was nearly spent. This was his only chance at victory.

“Strike my enemy down with all your might, my legion!”

The undead came to life one by one and rushed the Deus Machina with overwhelming numbers.

In response, the Deus Machina floated up into the air.

**“Target...designated as...maximum threat...”**

“...?”

Countless letters and numbers swirled around the orb of light.

**“In the name of my master, Roselia Ishtar, the seal shall be undone.”**

As soon as Schwertleite invoked these words, the orb of light shattered.

“What?!”

A beautiful warrior princess with azure hair emerged from within, a mana blade in her hands.

The eighth Dark Lord had awakened, with steel wings spread and cold, lifeless eyes. She regarded the Undead King atop the hill with a frigid gaze.



“Ah, so that’s what you meant, my goddess...”

On the lowest level of the Great Arakael Library, Nefakess Reizaad gazed at the pitch-black crystal and cackled with delight. He’d finally discovered whom the goddess had sealed under the protection of the Deus Machina.

Nefakess reverently offered up the fragment of the goddess in his hands and bowed his head to the crystal.

“So this is where you’ve been hiding, Leonis Death Magnus—the Undead King.”



## EPILOGUE

Le Parfait was a confectionary café in the Seventh Assault Garden's Central Garden. As a popular spot for students, it was understandably packed today.

"Table three ordered a Mont Blanc and tea, and table six asked for a coffee refill."

"Understood, Lady Shary."

"Call me Miss Shary while we're here."

"Understood, La—Miss Shary."

The girl gave an expressionless nod, and Shary sighed. Three girls with identical features in maid uniforms were working at Le Parfait. They were Septentrion assassins whom Leonis had entrusted to Shary. There were actually six girls in all, and Shary had broken them into two groups to take shifts on alternating days. Although skilled assassins, they needed proper training to blend into this era's society.

"We were short on hands, so having three new cuties to work here is a big help."

The café's owner seemed pleased with the situation, but the Septentrion assassins were having difficulty adapting to the work.

*My lord... Shary glanced out the window as she poured a cup of tea. Are you safe...?*

It may have been presumptuous of her to fret over the strongest of Dark Lords, but she was still anxious.

*I hope that vampire minion isn't causing him trouble...*

While Shary was lost in thought, one of the Septentrion maids called to her.

"Lady...er, Miss Shary."

“Yes?”

“That person over there told me to bring them every cake in the store.”

“Haaah... Understood.” Shary sighed. “I’ll handle it.”

This was undoubtedly a request from a bad-tempered customer looking to bother a new employee. Upon finding the person in question, Shary blinked in surprise.

*It’s a beastman.*

The well-built white-tiger beastman wore sunglasses. Beastmen were an unusual sight in the Seventh Assault Garden, especially outside their designated special ward. There were already several platters of cake piled up on his table.

“Excuse me, sir,” Shary said politely.

The white-tiger man looked from his plates.

“Oh, it’s you. You’re the right-hand woman of the Dark Lord Zol Vadis, who’s been gathering beastman factions, right?”

“Huh?” Shary froze up.

“...Can’t say I appreciate that, ya know? Assuming a Dark Lord’s name is pretty disrespectful.” The white-tiger beastman took off his sunglasses and glared at Shary.

“...?!”

The intense immediate pressure emanating from his gaze sent Shary staggering back. She recognized this beastman’s face.

“L-L-L-Lord of Beasts?!”

Shary’s exclamation echoed through the café.

## AFTERWORD

Hello, this is Yu Shimizu. Volume 10 of *The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy* is out for your reading pleasure.

After crushing the Queen of Shadows' conspiracy and defeating the Spirit King, Leonis makes his way to the Rognas Kingdom to ascertain the truth about the Void world. What will he find there?

The series has now entered the double digits. With new Dark Lords popping up like characters in *Smash Bros.* announcements, the fighting will definitely pick up steam, so please look forward to it!

Now, for some thanks.

To Asagi Tohsaka, thank you so much for this volume's wonderful illustrations. I'm especially grateful for the color image of the eighteenth platoon girls performing onstage during the Holy Light Festival. When I got the rough draft for it, I danced with joy over how lovely it was. And the design of that one Dark Lord who shows up at the end is fantastic, too!

To the author of the manga adaptation, Asuka Keigen, I look forward to getting the storyboards every month. The third volume's depiction of the Third Assault Garden arc is so cool, stylish, and cute (not to mention pervy every so often). Thank you for working on it!

The manga's fifth volume should be out this month, so please give it a look!

Thank you to my editors, proofreaders, and designers! And the biggest thanks goes to the dear readers who picked up this book!

The anime's production is well underway. I've been attending the production meetings, and I'm simply overwhelmed by the staff's passion. I can already promise it'll be a wonderful show, so I hope you look forward to it!

Let's meet again in Volume 11! What will the future hold for Arle after all she's been through?



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