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The
Demon Sword Master
of Excalibur Academy


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Contents

The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy

Prologue

Chapter 1 The Undead King

Chapter 2 A Demon Sword Usurped

Chapter 3 Gazoth Hell Beast

Chapter 4 The Phillet Scheme

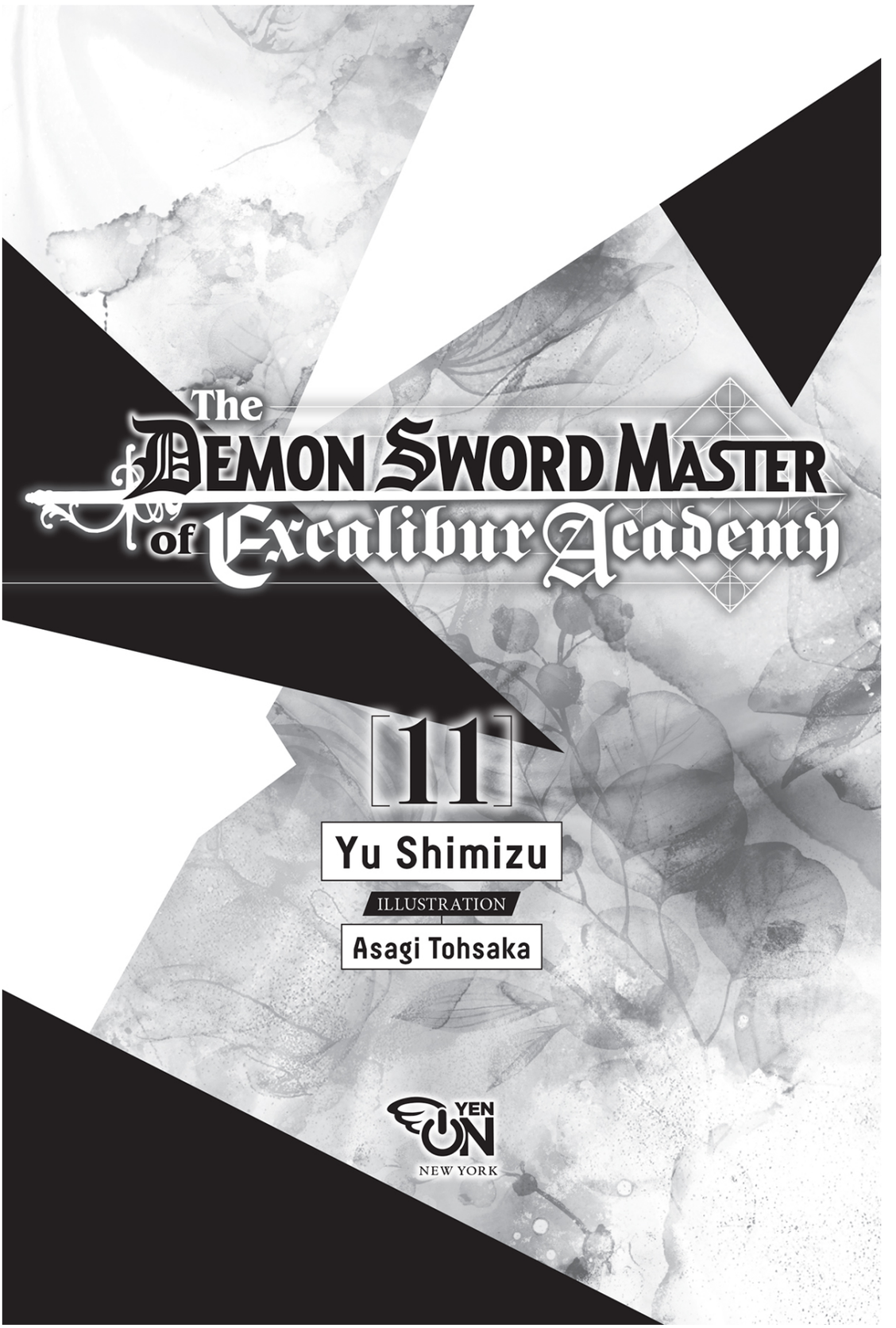
Chapter 5 The Dark Lord Encroachment

Chapter 6 Invasion

Chapter 7 The Dark Lords Assemble

Chapter 8 The Fallen Divine Dragon

Epilogue


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Contents

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright

Prologue
Chapter 1 The Undead King
Chapter 2 A Demon Sword Usurped
Chapter 3 Gazoth Hell Beast
Chapter 4 The Phillet Scheme
Chapter 5 The Dark Lord Encroachment
Chapter 6 Invasion
Chapter 7 The Dark Lords Assemble
Chapter 8 The Fallen Divine Dragon
Epilogue

Afterword
Yen Newsletter

PROLOGUE

The old Ragnas Kingdom's capital, Ur-Shukar. Deep within a sealed off sector of its ruins was a mausoleum where a Dark Lord slumbered. And standing before the black crystal enshrined in the depths of that mausoleum was a sneering, white-haired young priest.

"So it was you who rested here—Undead King, Leonis Death Magnus."

He kneeled reverently on one knee, holding up a fragment of the goddess as it gave off an umbral glow. The Trapezohedron levitated and quickly vanished, melting into the crystal.

"What a joyous day this is. I now have two Dark Lords under my control."

He already had the guardian of Ur-Shukar, the Deus Machina Schwertleite, under his thrall using the power of an Artificial Elemental. And now, he was trying to awaken the Undead King, said to be the strongest of Dark Lords.

When Zemein previously visited Necrozoa, the remains of Leonis Death Magnus were nowhere to be found. Nefakess did not expect to find him hidden in Necrozoa's ruins…

Spreading out his arms, the priest manifested countless weapons of the void out of thin air. Sacrifices, tributes to the Dark Lord. Holy Swords that had inverted into Demon Swords.

"You're using that many after all the trouble I went through to gather them?" A girl in the form of a glowing angel pouted at him in displeasure.

Seraphim—the Artificial Elemental that Deinfraude Phillet created for the D Project.

"Now is not the time to be reserved. The goddess's prophecy is on the cusp of fruition, as we are about to seize the Undead King, lauded as the mightiest of Dark Lords," Nefakess said, moving his fingertips in subtle, gentle movements.

The countless Dark Swords were absorbed into the crystal the Dark Lord slumbered in. They had failed to resurrect the Dragon

Lord Veira, and the Lord of the Seas Rivaiz was snatched away by the Devil of the Underworld. The Lord of Rage was absorbed by the Swordmaster, making it beyond reach.

But with this, the goddess's prophecy could finally be fulfilled—so the Void world could swallow up the real world…

Crack, crack, crack—

Minute fissures ran through the ebony crystal.

"Ooh…!" The priest's face contorted in jubilation.

But then—a thick miasma of death erupted from the shattered crystal.

"…?!"

Ooh, ooooh… Oooooh…!

A horrifying howl that felt like it billowed up from the depths of the earth echoed.

"Something feels wrong, I think—aaaah!" Seraphim's shout was cut off halfway through.

The rush of miasma contacted the Artificial Elemental, breaking it down to particles of light.

"…!"

Nefakess reflexively chanted a shield spell to defend himself, but then a skeletal hand burst out of the cloud of miasma, grabbing him by the throat.

"M-my…lord…!"

The fingers tightened around his throat before he could even scream.

Why—why is this…?!

…His plan was falling apart. As his consciousness faded, he asked himself—was his interpretation of the goddess's prophecy wrong? Or perhaps…

Was I wrong to assume I could control a being of this caliber?

Gasping for air, Nefakess crumbled to the mausoleum's floor. And on the brink of death, he saw the hideous visage of the Undead King, his body impaled by countless Demon Swords…

CHAPTER 1

THE UNDEAD KING

“With the name of my master, Roselia Ishtaris, I undo my seal.”

An artificial voice echoed through the colorless wasteland of the Realm of Shadows. The sphere of light cracked open, and from within emerged a Valkyrie with metallic wings, her hair the color of the azure sky.

“Wh… What…?!”

One of the Dark Lords who governed the world a thousand years ago—the Deus Machina, Schwertleite Terminate.

So that’s the Deus Machina’s awakened form…?

Leonis watched her with wide eyes, standing atop a hill lousy with undead. Even he, one of her fellow Dark Lords, never saw the Deus Machina assume this form before. He did hear that she had taken this form once, when she fought Divine Dragon Gisark, the Divine Dragon of the Six Heroes…

But I didn’t think she’d look like this.

…He recalled asking Roselia about this at one point.

“—Just who is the Deus Machina?”

Despite boasting power to match the other Dark Lords, Schwertleite lacked the ambition the Dragon Lord or the Lord of Rage boasted, nor did she conduct herself with the same reckless abandon as the Lord of the Seas or the Lord of Beasts. She never attended any of the Dark Lords’ Armies meetings, and the only Dark Lord she was at all similar to was the Devil of the Underworld—and even in that, it was in terms of how peculiar and unlike the others she was.

“The Deus Machina came from a distant star… It’s the weapon of an ancient people.”

“…The Deus Machina is a weapon?”

“Yes. An ancient weapon, predating the time when the divine races arrived at this planet. It is the last of seven Valkyries that fought at the edge of space in the war against the ■■■■. The last,

and the strongest unit…”

“…?”

“Oh, pay what I just said no mind. It’s an old story from a distant, distant world…,” Roselia whispered, looking up at the sun rising over the altar.

“…I don’t quite understand. You call it a weapon, but does it have a will of its own?”

“Even I can’t tell if she has a will of her own. But…”

A day may come eventually when she recalls her mission…

At the time, I just accepted her words at face value.

But looking at her awakened form now, he did sense that her presence seemed somehow foreign to this world.

…I suppose the reason I can’t feel her power is because of her nature as a weapon.

Levitating in midair, the Deus Machina looked down upon the undead Leonis had summoned.

“Enemy force acknowledged. Commencing elimination of threat,” Schwertleite said with an artificial voice, holding up one of the light blades in her hand.

The colorless Realm of Shadows was enveloped in a flash of light.

“Leo…!”

“…Miss Selia, get down!” Leonis shouted, deploying a spell shield to protect Riselia behind him.

Schwertleite effortlessly swung down the light blade.

Brrrrrrrrrrr!

A large, luminous slash gouged into the Realm of Shadows, leveling an entire hill. Thousands of his undead troops went flying and plummeted into the fissures in the ground.

…Impossible! She defeated a fourth of my army with just one attack!

Her weapon’s attributes were very similar to the Holy Sword Chatres used in the Holy Sword Dance Festival, the Ragna Nova. Except, of course, for the fact its strength was orders of magnitude greater.

The Deus Machina’s orb form was only its self-defense mode. But this was the true power of one marked as a Dark Lord.

Maybe dragging her into the Realm of Shadows was a bad play, after all…

Within the Realm of Shadows, Leonis was able to summon his undead armies without needing to consume any mana, making this his trump card at this moment when his mana was greatly depleted. But this also made for a demerit. Any undead destroyed within the Realm of Shadows have their souls destroyed, as they normally would when not bound to such a place.

In the past, replenishing those lost forces wouldn't be that difficult, but producing new undead in the modern era wasn't easy. If the battle ended up becoming one of attrition, he'd end up taking serious losses.

"Leo…" Riselia got to her feet behind him, the Bloody Sword in hand.

The raging wind blew violently through her argent locks.

"Are you all right, Miss Selia?"

"Yes. Thank you for protecting me." Riselia stepped forward, standing beside Leonis, and looked up at Schwertleite. The Deus Machina's body seemed to be outputting some kind of heat, because there was a haze surrounding her.

"Who is this girl…?"

"The true form of that orb of light, it seems."

"…So we, um… We woke her up."

"So it would seem…" Leonis smiled sarcastically.

"Leo." Riselia gripped his hand. "Let's run at the count of three."

"No… I'd like to run if I could, but…"

The Goddess Boundary Field Schwertleite deployed earlier was still outside the Realm of Shadows, cutting the area off from the outside world. The boundary field was a unique spell Roselia developed for occasions when Dark Lords fought one another, making it impossible to leave until the duel was decided.

"…So we can't run?"

"I'm afraid not." Leonis nodded apologetically. "I'm sorry."

Normally, anyone who isn't one of the Dark Lords participating in the duel would be able to enter and leave the bounded field freely, but in Riselia's case, she was Leonis's minion, making her part of a Dark Lord's arsenal.

"Miss Selia, I need you to get as far away from the battle as possible. Once one of us loses, the barrier should be lifted."

"Leo—" Riselia tightened her grip on Leonis's fingers. "I'll fight

with you. I'm your minion after all."

"No. You've seen her power…"

"Right. And if you were your normal self, you'd beat her without breaking a sweat."

"…"

"So I'll be your decoy." Riselia said, then let go of his hand and charged forward.

"Miss Selia!"

"Don't worry. I don't think she can attack me."

"Well…"

She was right. It did look like the light orb was intentionally trying to avoid attacking Riselia.

"I don't know why, but she kept calling me master. So—"

But then, the shadow at his feet warped, taking the form of a Black Wolf. "Lord Magnus. The time for talk is over, it seems."

"…!"

A bright flash shined over the ground. Schwertleite's light blade once again concentrated a vast amount of mana.

"Very well, Miss Selia. I leave you to guard my back." Leonis gripped the Staff of Sealed Sins and tapped it against the ground. "However, if it becomes dangerous, I want you to flee at once. I'll use the Seal of Servitude to order you to do so if need be."

"A-all right!"

Leonis hopped onto Blackas's back, held the staff overhead, and exclaimed: "Undead armies, all forces, charge!"

◆

"Mikagami style, Ultimate Blade Technique—Demon Wind Maelstrom!"

"Mikagami style, Ultimate Blade Technique—Savage Lightning Slash!"

Cling….!

Countless slashes glinted in the darkness. Two fencers faced off, their hair the same color, their facial features mirroring each other—the movements of their blades, too, reflected like clear water.

It was the secret fencing style passed down in the Sakura

Orchid royal house for generations, long before Holy Swords manifested in this world.

Our skill with the blade is equal. But the difference in our physical abilities is too great…

Sakuya perceived the slashes her opponent unleashed with gusts of demonic wind and dodged them at the last second. Her left eye shined amber, throbbing painfully.

It was the Mystic Eye of Time, granted to her by the Dark Lord. It allowed her to peer at possible futures that could transpire mere seconds in advance. Without the power of this Mystic Eye, she would not have been able to perceive the storm-like slashes her sister unleashed.

"…!"

She could predict the wind blade piercing her heart, severing her head, carving up her flesh. Peering at the branching possibilities of the future, Sakuya made split-second decisions allowing her to grasp the outcomes where she avoided death.

And as their skirmish continued, she was able to create a momentary opening to slash at her opponent.

"Mikagami style, Ultimate Blade Technique—Lightning Flash!"

Raikirimaru swung through the air—however.

"Mikagami style, Ultimate Blade Technique—Wind God!"

Setsura's blade, embroiled in demonic wind, caught and deflected Sakuya's blade.

"…Setsura…!"

The Holy Swords locked blades, spraying sparks into the air. Standing close enough to hear each other's breathing, Sakuya looked right into her older sister's eyes. Crimson, demonic eyes that glinted ominously in the dark…

There were so many questions that she wanted to—that she *needed* to ask.

Why was her sister, who died nine years ago, still alive? Why did she summon a Void Lord to the Seventh Assault Garden?

But words would no longer reach her. This duel of swords, fought with all her might, was her only way of asking her anything anymore.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Breathing out loudly, Sakuya braced her feet against the ground and strode forward, unleashing a lightning-fast flurry of

slashes. The floor she stomped on crackled with lightning. The source of Raikirimaru's power was one of electromagnetic acceleration. As she raced along the surface, and with every slash she unleashed, her blade grew faster and sharper.

…She was being anxious and impatient. She could tell. But if she didn't press the attack here, her defeat would be all but promised. Using the Mystic Eye rapidly strained her stamina and mind. Processing the endlessly branching possibilities of the future was driving her brain to its limits.

I can only last another minute before I can't take it anymore…

A flurry of slashes rained down on Setsura, but her older sister's blade deflected every single one. Sakuya couldn't use her trump card, the power of her Demon Sword, Yamichidori. That was a power reserved for cutting down the Voids. It boasted overwhelming power, but its speed was inferior to Raikirimaru's, and against a superior fencer, that difference was fatally large.

"Is this the extent of your sword skill…?"

"…Kuh!"

Their white Sakura Orchid garbs flapped in the wind. As Sakuya was on the verge of reaching her limit, Setsura didn't seem the slightest bit fatigued. It was like fighting the wind itself.

"Mikagami style, Ultimate Blade Technique—Thundering Lightning Slash!"

With the flash of a blade, Sakuya slashed with all her might. Her blade, enveloped in lightning, severed Setsura's arm—only for her sister's visage to disperse like fog.

"…A wind afterimage… Her Holy Sword's power!"

The wind billowed, and the white-clad fencer revealed herself within the dark.

"…!"

"Is that all you're capable of…?"

Howling, demonic wind converged in a whirl around Setsura's Holy Sword, held aloft.

"Mikagami style, Ultimate Blade Technique—Cursed Maelstrom Slash."

Setsura delivered her slashes like a raging storm. Sakuya's uniform became tattered as countless blades of wind tore into it.

"Kuh… Uuu…!"

She predicted the trajectory of the blade with her Mystic Eye,

barely avoiding the sword bearing down on her. However—

“Kah… Ngh!”

She felt a sharp kick sink into her gut.

“Guh…!”

Slammed against the corridor’s wall, Sakuya tumbled down to the floor.

“Haa, aah, aaaah…” She hurriedly got to her feet and tried to recover her stance.

“Stop me if you can—Sakuya.” Setsura gripped her wind-controlling katana, holding it aloft.

The swirling wind kicked up her hair, making her blue locks dance like billowing flames. It was like the images of a raging god passed down in the Sakura Orchid.

…!

Her Mystic Eye’s field of vision was full of countless possible deaths.

I can’t see one where I survive…

And so Sakuya decided to steel herself and gripped Raikirimaru’s hilt. She sealed the power of her Mystic Eye and looked upon her sister with her own two eyes.

And then—

“Haaaaaaaaaaa!”

She plunged into the brewing storm of swords of her own will.

◆

The ground quaked. The disorderly army of undead that Leonis summoned marched through the wasteland of the Realm of Shadows.

Skeleton generals, shadow demons, soul generals, elder liches, death clouds, evil elementals, hell lords, greater shadows, skull colossi, a skull dragon—

The ranks of the undead rolled on like a wave, with Leonis racing on the back of a black wolf above them.

“Grant my minions the blessings of darkness—seventh-order spell, Suray Gira!” Leonis chanted and held up the Staff of Sealed Sins overhead. A moon made of mana that empowered the undead shined malevolently over his unliving army. At the same

time, the Deus Machina standing on the surface spread her metallic wings. An intense mana glow emanated from the tips of her metallic, sword-shaped wings.

"…Here she comes, Blackas."

"Yes—"

"Ragva Leite!" The Deus Machina—Schwertleite silently said.

Bwoosh, bwoosh, bwoooosh!

Her deployed wings unleashed spears of light that rained down on the ground. They formed pillars of light that rose up to the heavens, vaporizing the undead soldiers.

"…My precious Reaper knights…!" Leonis grit his teeth bitterly.

But the undead army's march continued. Skeleton soldiers rose from the burned soil, filling the wasteland.

"Grand armies of the undead, follow me!" Leonis, still seated on Blackas's back, swung the Staff of Sealed Sins like a baton.

The undead marching over the ground instantly fell apart, reassembled, and formed a gigantic hand that was large enough to reach the sky. Death Festa—the unique spell of the Undead King, Leonis Death Magnus. The soil full of bones swelled up and surged, manifesting hell within the Realm of Shadows.

"L-Leo… Whaa?!"

Leonis heard a scream far behind him. Riselia was swallowed up by the waves of bones, which were jostling her every which way.

"Don't worry, they won't hurt you!" Leonis told her.

"I—I find that a little hard to believe…!"

"Just follow me, Miss Selia!"

Blackas kicked against the waves of skeleton soldiers, racing upward. He raced up the bone arm extending toward Schwertleite. Standing in midair, Schwertleite swung her blade down diagonally, and a blinding light flashed. It split the gigantic bone hand in half, making it sink to the ground in a rumble.

"Blackas, jump away!" Leonis shouted.

Blackas howled and hopped away from the bone arm falling apart, landing on another arm that formed. The countless bodies reformed themselves, creating a third arm, then a fourth, a fifth, a sixth—

Surging and undulating, the arms reached out for Schwertleite, who was floating in midair.

“Ragva Leite.”

The Deus Machina’s wings once again generated a mana glow.

“I’m not letting you do that! Vira Zuo!” Leonis fired an eighth-order gravity spell, amplified by the power of his staff. The gravity field the spell produced distorted the space around the Deus Machina, making its Ragva Leite spell veer slightly off course. “Fall, Deus Machina!”

Leonis swung his staff again. The massive skeletal arms burst from the ground, extending like whips, before bearing down on her.

Schwertleite vanished from sight—using the mana billowing from her wings like a jet, she propelled herself perpendicularly. Spinning in midair, she avoided the heavy attack launched at her, and used her light blade to crush the bony fists.

“Fool, you’re a bird in a cage!”

Leonis held his staff aloft, blocking the Deus Machina’s path with barrier walls that gradually cornered her. Schwertleite swung her light blade in an attempt to cut through the walls—

“I’m not letting you run. Attack at once!” Leonis gave the order.

The undead formed a wall of bones, while the undead artillery unit chanted spells in perfect unison. They unleashed a barrage of the third-order spell, Farga. Over two thousand instances of this powerful, explosive spell were launched at once. And as they did…

“Take this. Tenth-order spell—Arzam!” Leonis loaded as much mana she could into his strongest explosive spell.

Booooom!

Destructive waves of heat raged within the gigantic skeletal birdcage.

“Keh-heh-heh… Even a Dark Lord couldn’t get away from this unscathed… What?!” Leonis’s evil smile froze over.

The Deus Machina floated within the raging flames, unaffected. A shining, spherical force field manifested around her wings.

“An anti-magic field… A barrier that fully negates sorcery.” Leonis grit his teeth. “So she’s completely immune to spells.”

As a magical weapon, Schwertleite was the worst possible match for Leonis, who fought using sorcery. In that regard, she was even more troublesome than Veira was.

Schwertleite swung his light blade. The massive blade swept through the sky, cutting down the walls of bone that boxed in the Deus Machina.

"…Damn it. My magical artillery unit!"

"Lord Magnus, here she comes…!"

"…?!"

Something streaked through the sky in a diagonal trajectory—Schwertleite was charging right at Leonis, her light blade shining.

"…Great Death Wall!" Leonis chanted.

The bones at his feet swirled up, reforming to create a wall before Leonis. Schwertleite, however, paid it no heed, and continued her charge at Leonis.

"What?!"

The Deus Machina effortlessly shattered the barrier of bones and swung her blade down—but then.

"Haaaaaaaaaa!"

Countless blades of blood attacked Schwertleite.

"Leo!"

"Miss Selia?!"

Turning around, he saw Riselia, a pair of mana wings at her back, kicking against the wall of bones to race toward him. And in that momentary pause, Blackas slipped into the shadows and emerged at her side.

"Leo, are you all right?!"

"You saved me, Miss Selia," Leonis said, running parallel to Riselia and looking up.

Schwertleite looked down on Riselia without moving.

She really won't attack Riselia…

Leonis pulled a few swords out of thin air. "If spells won't work, how about this?"

These were anti-Dark-Lord weapons forged from fragments of one of the Arc Seven, the Evil-Rending Sword, Zolgstar Mezekis. The swords floated in midair and began spinning rapidly, and then bolted toward Schwertleite, who swung her light blade, deflecting them.

"Not yet!"

Sitting atop Blackas's back, Leonis swung his staff—the deflected Arc Seven swords spung in midair and once again went flying toward their target. And this time, they hit their mark.

Boom, boom, boooom!

Zolgstar Mezekis penetrated the anti-magic shield, exploding one after another. The swords were charged with Leonis's explosive spells.

I wouldn't assume that's enough to defeat her…

But surely even she wouldn't get away from this unscathed. But then—

"Unidentified weapon detected." An artificial voice emerged from the flames.

"What?!"

Blowing away the flames, Schwertleite emerged, looking mostly unharmed. She held up her light blade, forming countless orbs of light around her.

"Commencing analysis."

Unknown sorcery text started revolving around the orbs.

…What? This looks just like—

This was very similar to something else Leonis knew—Elfiné's Holy Sword, the Eye of the Witch.

"Analysis complete—commencing duplication."

Schwertleite spread out her arms, and in the next moment, the light orbs changed their shapes into swords. The dark gray sky was full of countless Zolgstar Mezekis blades.

"She duplicated an Arc Seven!? That can't be possible!"

Schwertleite swung down her hand, firing the Arc Seven copies at Leonis.

"…?!"

Trtrtrtrtrtrtrtrtr—

The blades, loaded with the power to smite Dark Lords, gouged through the wall of bones with all the intensity of a storm.

"Ooooh!" Blackas roared, throwing himself in the swords' path.

The many blades tore into his body, and he tumbled down to the ground.

"Blackas!" Leonis reached out for him, but the swords kept rushing toward him.

"…Leo!" Riselia pulled Leonis into her arms at the last second.

"Miss Seli—"

"Hang on tight, I'm not very good at flying yet!"

With Leonis in her arms, Riselia nose-dived in a tailspin,

skimming over the ground as she flew past. The raining swords stabbed into the skeleton soldiers before exploding. Schwertleite didn't press the attack—she really was avoiding launching any direct attacks on Riselia.

Riselia touched down, scattering a force of skeleton soldiers, the impact of her landing sending the crushed bones of the skeletons flying in all directions.

"Ow… Leo, are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fi…"

But before he could finish saying "fine," Schwertleite, who descended to the ground, swung down her light blade.

"…I'm not letting you do that!" Riselia reflexively drew her Holy Sword—which made Schwertleite pause, holding her light blade overhead without moving.

Her cold, glowing eyes were wide open, peering at Riselia.

"…"

But after that pause…

"…Master." Schwertleite's lips moved, speaking with an artificial voice. "My…thousand-year-old mission…"

"Wh-what?" Noticing she was acting strange, Riselia looked at her, confused.

"Miss Selia, get away from her…" Leonis tugged on her sleeve, urging her to move back.

But then…

Crack, crack, crack…!

A fissure streaked through the gray sky.

"…What?"

Noticing something was wrong, Leonis looked up. And at that exact moment—

Riiii…!

The skies of the Realm of Shadows *tore open.*

…How can this be happening?! This is my Realm of Shadows! Leonis was aghast.

And then…

Whoosh, whoosh, whooooooosh!

…countless flashes of light rained down, aiming at Schwertleite below them.

◆

The blades of demonic wind peppered Sakuya's body. But in the midst of the raging storm, Sakuya sprung forward, drawing on Setsura. Her sister's crimson eyes widened ever so slightly.

"Haaaaa!"

She would never reach her older sister if she didn't put her life on the line.

"Mikagami style, Ultimate Blade Technique—Lightning Flash!"

Slipping through countless possible branching deaths, the tip of Sakuya's blade gouged into Setsura's chest…!

"…Huh?!" That exclamation of surprise came from Sakuya's lips. "Setsura…?"

She whispered in shock, her blade thrust into her older sister's chest. She was aiming to sever her dominant hand—she was resolved to do that much. But it almost seemed like Setsura *let* Sakuya stab her…

"U-uuu…" A breath of anguish escaped Setsura's pink lips. Her demonic red irises turned an indigo blue—the same color as Sakuya's. And then…she wrapped her arms around Sakuya's neck, like she was hugging her. This pushed Raikirimaru's blade deeper into her heart.

"Saku…ya…"

"Setsura…?"

The name left Setsura's lips, her voice no longer as cold as it was before. It was the kind voice Sakuya knew her sister had.

"The seal…on my heart… Before the vampiric power… resurrects me…" Setsura drew closer to her Sakuya's body, whispering into her ear. "Listen to me, Sakuya."

"…?"

"Very soon, the reckoning of emptiness will descend on your world."

"You mean the Voids that destroyed the Sakura Orchid…?" Sakuya spoke, still gripping her katana's handle. "What are you talking about, Setsura…?"

"…That swordsman wasn't the one…who destroyed the Sakura Orchid…"

"…Eh?"

“…He was simply called over…as a result…”

Setsura’s hold on Sakuya tightened.

“The one who destroyed the Sakura Orchid nine years ago was…”

But then, burning pain ran through Sakuya’s neck.

“…Ah!”

Setsura bit into Sakuya’s neck, thrusting her fangs into it. The blood running down her neck stained her uniform in crimson. The burning pain soon turned to sweet throbbing, and Sakuya felt her body go limp. Raikirimaru slipped from her grip, vanishing into particles of light, and Sakuya crumbled to the floor.

“Setsu…ra…?”

Sakuya looked up, seeing her sister glaring down at her with crimson eyes. The wound Raikirimaru inflicted to her chest was rapidly healing. Setsura turned her back to Sakuya with a flap of her white garb.

“Setsura… Wait…”

Through a foggy mind and fading consciousness, Sakuya desperately reached out for her sister.



◆

The countless flashes of light shot through Schwertleite… silencing the Deus Machina.

"…What?!"

Leonis's eyes went wide with surprise at this unexpected development. This was within his Realm of Shadows, and moreover, within the Goddess Boundary Field Schwertleite deployed. The only ones who could stop a duel between Dark Lords were…

The goddess, or another Dark Lord…

Leonis looked up to the gray sky, and saw a figure floating up in the shattered firmament. The figure of…

"I'm…possible…"

What Leonis saw rendered him speechless. What stood there was a grotesque monster.

Yes, grotesque. A dead corpse of a monster, clad in a mantle of darkness. And Leonis knew this monster—he knew it more intimately than anyone else.

One of the eight Dark Lords who sowed terror and destruction in the world. The ruler of the undead that embodied death and despair.

The Undead King—Leonis Death Magnus.

…What is this?! What's going on here?!

Gripping his staff tightly, Leonis glared up at the figure floating overhead. There was no mistaking it: This was the visage of the Undead King from a thousand years ago. The form Leonis was originally meant to assume…

Is this some sort of doppelganger taking on my form?

This was the general conclusion for Leonis to make—the real Undead King was right here, after all.

There are plenty of ways to imitate another's form. But…

This phantom was able to cross the Goddess Boundary Field and destroy the Realm of Shadows' barrier. Would someone merely assuming a Dark Lord's name be capable of that…?

And this aura…

This malformed corpse was surrounded by an air of absolute

power, and it was able to beat the Deus Machina into submission, although it was a surprise attack.

"Leo, what is that…?" He heard Riselia gulp.

She, too, could instinctively sense the suffocating aura of death this Undead King was emanating. And it wasn't just her—the undead armies swarming on the surface became completely still, like they'd returned to being lifeless bones.

"…I don't know." Leonis shook his head.

He couldn't tell her this was him.

"I know that thing…," Riselia muttered.

"Huh?" Leonis turned to face her despite the situation.

But then—

Ooh… Ooooh…

A heavy voice, sounding like it rose up from the belly of the earth, filled the wasteland.

"…?!"

The corpse with the form of the Undead King produced a crimson ball of flame over its bony finger.

Is that…?!

The fireball grew in size in a matter of seconds before it was flung down at Leonis.

"Al Gu Belzelga!" Leonis reflexively chanted an eighth-order spell, shortening its incantation.

Booooooooom!

The two fireballs clashed in midair, forming an intense blast of flames that instantly evaporated the undead. The shock waves of the blast sent Leonis flying. His body slammed against the ground, and he rolled a few times.

"Leo!"

Riselia hurried over and stood right in front of him to serve as a shield.

…It overpowered my spell!

The monster chanted the same eighth-order spell he did: the Grand Annihilation Fireball, Al Gu Belzelga. But despite him lacking the Staff of Sealed Sins' boost, the power of that monster's spell was clearly higher.

"…"

The Undead King slowly descended, landing on the Realm of Shadows' soil. Leonis got to his feet and glared at the dead

monster.

"…Who are you?"

Even he had to marvel at how silly this question felt when directed at someone looking just like him. But the monster said nothing, death miasma billowing out of its dark mantle.

"Answer me! Mel Ziora!"

He fired a sixth-order spell from his staff's tip, its flames hitting and enveloping the dead monster. Of course, Leonis wasn't expecting this spell to do much.

"Miss Selia, get away!"

But the dead monster dispersed the flames effortlessly with a flap of its dark mantle.

…It didn't so much as stagger him.

Ooh… Oooooh…!

The undead monster held up a skeletal arm, summoning a death miasma that hung over the area, making the inert undead littering the soil rise up.

He's dominating my undead army?!

"Ah… Kuh, ugh…"

"Miss Selia?!" Leonis turned around in alarm.

Riselia was kneeling on the ground, gripping her head with an agonized expression.

"Something's…in my head…"

He's trying to usurp control over Riselia?!

She may have been a Vampire Queen, the highest rank of all his minions, but she was undead just the same. If she continued basking in the Undead King's miasma, she'd lose her sense of reasoning. Was it possible he came here for Riselia instead of Leonis?

I won't let you have my minion, you fool…!

Leonis concentrated mana into the Seal of Servitude—the contract seal he'd never used ever since he bound Riselia's soul to him as his minion. The seal etched onto the back of his hand shined with mana.

"…L-Leo…"

"I'm sorry. It might hurt, but bear with it."

Saying this, Leonis faced the Undead King.

"Skull colossus!" Leonis tapped his staff on the ground, and a skeletal giant rose from the earth. "Crush him!"

Oooooooh!

The skull colossus swung its fist down on the Undead King, who stood there like he was intent on taking the hit…only for the skull colossus to shatter into pieces in the next moment.

“Perfect physical defense, I see. How will you size up to this, then…?!”

Leonis produced an ominously glowing silver chain from thin air. This was another of the Arc Seven created by the gods. A chain capable of shackling even the Dragon Lord—The Vile Dragon Fetter, Ragva Zol.

The chain shot forth, binding the Undead King’s body. The Arc Seven were seven weapons forged by the gods to destroy the Dark Lords. If he really was a Dark Lord, it should have been effective against him. Leonis instantly followed it up by firing a spell amplified by the Staff of Sealed Sins.

“Tenth-order spell—Meld Gaiez!”

Boooom!

A pillar of fire rose up. In that state, the monster shouldn’t have been able to chant any defensive magic. However—

Whoosh!

A chain came flying out of the hellfire.

“…What?!”

The Ragva Zol instantly coiled around Leonis’s Staff of Sealed Sins.

Oh no…!

The chain tugged violently, slamming Leonis’s body against the ground. With another tug of the chain, the Staff of Sealed Sins went flying, only for the Undead King to catch it.

“G-give it back…!” Leonis got to his feet and prepared to chant a spell.

But the Undead King tapped the staff against the ground.

Brrrrrrrrrr…!

The jewel inlaid into the staff shined, and it unleashed waves of intense mana in a spherical shape.

Crack, crack, crack…!

Cracks formed in the firmament above the Realm of Shadows.

Is he trying to destroy this realm altogether?!

If he caused this much destruction, even this monster wouldn’t get away unscathed, but if this truly was the Undead King, this

wouldn't be enough to destroy him. Leonis, by comparison, had the body of a ten-year-old. He could defend himself with sorcery, but he wasn't certain he'd withstand this damage even with that.

Clicking his tongue, Leonis shielded Riselia, who was still kneeling on the ground.

"Twelfth-order… Apocalypse spell…" The undead monster finally uttered words.

But then—

Vroom…!

A blade of light gouged through the Undead King's chest.

"…?!"

The shining light blade instantly scattered the dead miasma.

"Schwertleite…!" Leonis's eyes widened in disbelief.

The Deus Machina was damaged all over, sparks spluttering from her entire body—but she was on her feet.

"Target designated…as enemy of…the master…!"

But if this really was the Undead King, even getting stabbed through his heart wouldn't be enough to kill him.

The Undead King let out a howl, unleashing a shock wave of mana that flung Schwertleite away from him. The Deus Machina's arm bent over in unnatural directions and eventually flew off her body. The Undead King fired the Ragva Zol he stole from Leonis at her—this was a Dark Lord–slaying weapon, and its effect applied to the Deus Machina just the same, even if she was a weapon.

As the chain wrapped around her, the Undead King unleashed black lightning that traveled through the weapon.

However, a hiss filled the air—Schwertleite jettisoned all her weapons. As her weapons came loose, so did the chains, and Schwertleite followed up by unleashing jets of mana from her wings. She charged at the Undead King, who responded by firing a shadow blade that severed Schwertleite's leg.

But she didn't stop. The Deus Machina's entire body lit up with a mana glow.

"Don't tell me you're…!" Leonis gulped.

That glow was the light of a mana furnace reaching critical levels.

"—The master's enemy will be…eliminated…!"

And the following moment, an intense flash filled the Realm of

Shadows.

◆

“So this is the Almagest, the device that records the movements of the stars.”

“That’s right. An ancient artifact we dragons defended for eons…” Veira nodded, looking up at the ruins of the Azure Fort that had crashed to the ground.

The part of the ruin she destroyed and detached was thrust into the soil of the battleground where the Lord of Beasts’ remains were said to slumber like a gigantic grave marker.

“The fact Azra-Ael got away is a bit frustrating, though…” Veira kicked a piece of rubble, crushing it to bits.

“If we investigate this, we may learn what his objectives are,” said the sea sprite standing next to her, Rivaiz Deep Sea, with a shrug.

“I hope so…”

The Dragon Lord and the Lord of the Seas. These two Dark Lords who once brought terror to the world were now working together with their goals aligned. Both were pursuing Azra-Ael: Veira to reclaim her stolen stronghold, the Azure Fort, and Rivaiz joined her to regain her other side, the Leviathan.



The Devil of the Underworld was a slippery figure, but Leonis suggested that if he sought to place the other Dark Lords under his thrall, lying in ambush in a place where a Dark Lord was buried would be a good way of catching him. And indeed, Azra-Ael appeared here, along with the Azure Fort.

After a spectacular battle between Dark Lords, he once again vanished beyond the dimensions, and though Veira was only able to destroy part of the fort's tail section, she was able to get the Almagest, as she planned.

"I can't see an entrance to it. Is it buried in the ground?"

"An entrance is wherever we want it to be. Aaah!"

Bang!

Veira punched into a part of the wreckage, digging a hole in one of the walls.

"How barbaric. I thought the device within was a treasure to you dragons?"

"This much isn't enough to damage it."

"…Hmm. Is that the issue here?" Rivaiz frowned.

Veira slipped through the hole in the wall and entered the ruins. After walking for a short time down a tilted corridor, she found herself in an open space with an altar in it.

"There it is."

At the center of the room was a large pillar that connected the ceiling and the ground. It was a large device with mana crystals embedded in it.

"This is the divine tool that records the movements of the stars and reads into the future—the Almagest."

Veira approached the pillar and ran a hand over it longingly.

"Can you activate it, Dragon Lord?"

"I don't know. I'll figure something out."

"…Don't tell me you don't know how to activate this thing."

"I mean, I wouldn't know. Managing the Almagest was the Elder Dragon's role." Veira shrugged. "But still, ancient devices like this typically…" She emanated mana through her fingertips touching the Almagest. "…tend to start working when you give them a lot of mana."

"A rough method. I marvel that it does, in fact, work." Rivaiz said, her voice somewhere between disbelief and wonder.

Whoosh…

A celestial globe reflecting the night sky was projected onto the entirety of the room.

“The positioning of the stars really has changed,” Veira whispered as she looked up at the projection of the starry sky.

The Almagest recorded all the movements of the stars, and if they traced the records back, they’d be able to investigate what happened to the world after the war between the Dark Lords and mankind came to a close.

About the Voids, the unknown life-forms that didn’t exist a thousand years ago, and the strange star mankind called the Star of Calamity.

CHAPTER 2

A DEMON SWORD USURPED

The Seventh Assault Garden's Area VI, the Special demi-human ward's fourth underground level. The Dark Lords' Armies have bought off all the warehouses present, using it as their secret base.

"So…," said a beastman warrior clad in a tailored suit. "Where is this so-called Zol Vadis?"

"E-erm, well, you see…," the maid girl stammered, breaking into a cold sweat.

Sitting there was a saber-toothed tiger beastman, his fur the color of steel. He had one eye, burning a bright blue. He was seated on a transport box for materials with all the haughtiness of a Dark Lord.

The beastman didn't know Shary, but she knew him very well. This was, after all, one of the eight Dark Lords who had brought horror and annihilation to the ancient world—the Lord of Beasts, Gazoth Hell Beast.

Wh-why is the Lord of Beasts here?! Shary's head was full of panicked thoughts as she kneeled before this Dark Lord.

—It all happened thirty minutes ago.

This Dark Lord appeared suddenly in a café in the Central Garden, where Shary and the Septentrion sisters were working and demanded she bring him to the Dark Lord Zol Vadis.

And so still none the wiser as to what was going on, Shary took him to a place where they wouldn't be seen.

Why was the Lord of Beasts, said to have perished a thousand years ago, in this place and era?

No, I suppose the Dragon Lord was resurrected as well, so it's not that strange that the Lord of Beasts returned…

But either way, the problem was that the Lord of Beasts was seeking to meet the Dark Lord Zol Vadis…and clearly not for peaceful purposes. All the Dark Lords but Shary's master were

always bloodthirsty and combative.

He's probably looking for him to learn why he's placed the beastmen races under his control.

But her master, Leonis, was currently away, and since he left his kingdom's management in Shary's hands, handling this situation fell to her.

…Incidentally, the Septentrion sisters suggested assassinating him, but Shary rejected the idea instantly. They would fail and die trying. The only way she had was possibly unleashing Rakshasa, who was sealed in her body. The Everdark Queen could possibly put up a fight against the Lord of Beasts, but a battle between those two juggernauts would no doubt leave the Seventh Assault Garden, Leonis's kingdom, in ruins. It was, at best, a last resort.

…I doubt even Queen Rakshasa would be able to beat the Lord of Beasts at the height of his power, though.

"I'm not asking a second time," Gazoth Hell Beast growled. "Where's Zol Vadis?"

"…!" An overpowering sensation washed over Shary.

A normal human would have had their soul knocked out of their body from sheer terror. But as an aide of the Undead King, she was able to withstand it.

…I cannot let him find out my lord isn't here!

If he found out the Dark Lord wasn't present, the Lord of Beasts would try to steal away the Demon Wolf by force.

"My honorable master, Zol Vadis, is currently in the Dark Lord's Castle."

"And where's that?"

"Yes, it's his other castle, located away from the Seventh Assault Garden."

"Aye, take me there, then."

"Lord of Beasts, may I ask you a question first?" Shary looked up, working up the courage. "What do you intend to do when you meet Zol Vadis?"

"Stupid question. I'm gonna beat him to a bloody pulp."

I knew iiiiit! Shary screamed internally.

"I-is there no place for…dialogue and discussion…?"

"Hmph, with a scoundrel who has the arrogance to assume the name of Zol Vadis? No point in talking to them. It's probably some

remnant of the Dark Lords' Armies from a thousand years ago taking his name…"

…He was sharp. Probably his beastly intuition.

"No, my master is the true Dark Lord, Zol Vadis," Shary said bravely.

"I don't care either way. Bring me to him."

"…I cannot." Shary shook her head.

The Lord of Beasts looked down on her with sharp eyes. "Will butchering ya here make the Dark Lord come over?"

"…?!" Shary gulped.

I have devoted my existence to my lord. I'm not afraid to die for him.

She brought her hands together and squeezed her eyes shut.

"…Hmph." The Lord of Beasts shrugged, like he'd lost interest in her. "Fine then. I'd rather not resort to this…" The Lord of Beasts crushed the metal box he was sitting on with one hand. "But I'll just tear his territories apart one by one until he shows up."

"What?!" Shary was stunned.

The Lord of Beasts was serious, that much she could tell.

The Seventh Assault Garden is my lord's kingdom…

And Leonis left the kingdom in her care. She had to protect it, no matter what.

"V-very well, Lord of Beasts!" Shary pursed her lips and reverently bowed her head. "…I will show you to the Dark Lord's Castle, where my master resides."

Shary made her pained decision. Still, she couldn't let him destroy the Seventh Assault Garden, and so she had to at least stall for time until Leonis returned. She would use multiple teleportation gates to make detours to the Dark Lord's Castle and gather as much information as possible on Gazoth Hell Beast.

…But really, my lord, please hurry back!

◆

"Ugh…"

When Leonis opened his eyes, he saw a bloodred sky spanning as far as he could see. The colors of Leonis's Realm of Shadows

were gone—this was the sky of the Void world.

"What…happened…?" He sat up and whispered in a daze.

"Lord Magnus—" He heard someone behind him.

Turning around, a black shadow wolf emerged from the wreckage.

"Blackas, you're still alive…," Leonis said, relieved his sworn friend was unharmed.

"Yes. It did consume much of my power, though…"

"I understand, don't exert yourself." Leonis shook his head and got to his feet. The area was covered in rubble and a large amount of Machina Soldiers. The underground part of the ruins had a large hole at its roof, which had been shot through.

So Schwertleite self-destructed…

The sheer power of the explosion tore through the Realm of Shadows' boundary barrier, and the shock waves of that vast energy must have blasted through the ruins. The most Leonis could do was set up a barrier to protect him and Riselia—

"Right, Riselia!" He raised his voice in alarm.

"The minion girl is sleeping over there." Blackas tugged on Leonis's sleeve with his teeth, urging him to turn around.

Riselia was lying atop the rubble like she was asleep. She was in her uniform, her True Ancestor's Dress gone.

"She's only unconscious. She must have depleted her mana."

"…Right." Leonis gripped Riselia's hand, relieved.

"Schwertleite called Riselia 'master,' but…"

But still, would she go as far as self-destruct for her…?

Leonis looked at the aftermath of the explosion around him. It was an intense blast, to be sure… But given its intensity, the damage didn't seem to travel too far. This was, after all, an explosion paid for with the price of a Dark Lord's life. Even if breaking through the Realm of Shadows' boundary barrier dampened its power, it should have been able to reduce the entirety of the area surrounding the Ur-Shukar's ruins into scorched earth.

It's like the energy of the explosion was unleashed so it would climb to the sky…

Did Schwertleite do it to spare Riselia from damage? But more importantly still…

That Undead King…

The monstrous cadaver that appeared from the empty sky. Its form was the very image of the Undead King from a thousand years ago, the same form Leonis was supposed to incarnate into… And it wasn't just his appearance—that Undead King matched Leonis's might at his peak and wielded powerful spells of the highest order.

"Blackas…," Leonis turned to the black wolf. "What do you think that was?"

"…Mm." Blackas gestured like he had paused for thought before carefully speaking. "In my eyes, it looked like you, Lord Magnus."

"…So you think so, too."

"And it wasn't just how he looked. He had the same presence and aura I recall you having."

"If you say so, then there's no doubting it…"

Leonis looked around.

I don't feel him anymore now…

It seemed even he didn't expect Schwertleite to self-destruct. It was hard to believe he'd have time to cast a defensive spell.

I imagine even he wouldn't be able to shrug off that explosion at point-blank range… Mm?

But then, Leonis's eyes widened in alarm as he recalled something important. With all the surprising developments coming such quick succession, Leonis nearly forgot, but—

"…The staff."

"Mm?

"Where's the Staff of Sealed Sins? He took it from me!" He looked around in a panic.

But the staff was nowhere to be seen. What if the Staff of Sealed Sins itself was caught up in the blast and shattered to bits? It was a mythology-class sorcery tool, making it precious, but if it ended up getting destroyed in the explosion, Leonis could do nothing about that.

However, the Demon Sword within the staff was another story. A Demon Sword granted to him by the goddess wouldn't break, no matter what happened.

"Mm. I shall go look for it." Blackas made to leap into a gap in the rubble.

"No, Blackas, wait." Leonis stopped him. "I'll look for the

Demon Sword. You go look for the priest."

The former staff officer of the Dark Lords' Armies, Nefakess Reizaad. He must have been involved in some way with the Undead King's appearance.

"Very well. I'm sure he's gone already, but I should be able to pursue his shadow."

"Yes, thank you."

Blackas nodded and disappeared into the shadows.

◆

A crimson flame that could burn away the sky consumed the Sakura Orchid capital. The Star of Calamity burned red in the heavens, and glared down at her.

A figure blacker than the darkest pitch marched through the city. A faceless figure which, on that fateful day, gave Sakuya her Demon Sword. A figure who was like an amalgam of darkness.

I am future, or perhaps past. Or perhaps karma. Void. Destiny—

The dark amalgam spoke words, its voice like song, like a curse.

Whose…memory is this…?

It's not mine, it's…her memory…

When she woke up, Sakuya found herself lying on a cold, stone floor. It was the underground corridor where she had dueled her sister.

"Nn…" As she got up, Sakuya winced from pain that washed all over her body.

"You shouldn't move yet," a familiar voice above her said. "I did apply some basic healing, but still. I swear, why do you need to be so reckless?"

"…Arle?" Sakuya craned her neck, looking up.

An elf girl looked down at her, seeming fed up. Arle Kirlesio. She vanished earlier in the woods and went her separate way. She did find her ribbon lying around in the ruins' underground section.

"So you did find your way here."

"I should be saying that." Arle shrugged. "I was sure you

returned to the humans' city by now."

"…I appreciate the healing. Thank you."

"Well, I did owe you one."

Sakuya slowly sat up, leaning her back against a wall.

"Did you find anyone else except for me here?"

"Your friends? No, I haven't seen them."

"…I see."

She was asking about Setsura, though… But either way, it seemed she disappeared before Arle showed up.

…She didn't finish me off. Why?

Sakuya touched her neck, and felt the marks at the spot where the sharp fangs bit into her.

"…"

She had taunted Sakuya, telling her to stop her if she could. However…

To me, it sounded like you weren't challenging me. You were asking me to stop you, Setsura… Sakuya whispered in her heart, looking down the corridor where her sister disappeared.

"I heard a loud explosion while you were unconscious," Arle said.

"An explosion? What happened?"

"I don't know. I could go and check, but…"

"I'll come along." Sakuya got to her feet, still wincing from the pain.

"You shouldn't overexert yourself when you're injured."

"I'm fine. And I think that explosion…," Sakuya trailed off, swallowing her words.

…has to do with a Dark Lord I know.

◆

"…My Demon Sword is gone!" Leonis shouted at the sky.

The skeletons he called to help comb through the area all turned to face him. He couldn't find the Demon Sword, not even a fragment of the Staff of Sealed Sins, and to begin with, he couldn't sense the sword's presence.

If the Deus Machina's explosion didn't destroy it… It must still be in the hands of that thing that looks like me.

“He shouldn’t have had time to cast a teleportation spell…”

But he certainly had enough power to probably do whatever he pleased. If he really was the Undead King—

Does this count as singing one’s praises…? Leonis whispered to himself ironically and looked up to the sky.

The Demon Sword Dáinsleif was more than just a powerful weapon. It was given to him personally by Roselia Ishtaris, stood as proof of their bond, and was meant to serve as his guide to her reincarnated body.

For now, I should go to the surface. I won’t find anything down here.

Leonis returned the skeletons to his shadow and returned to Riselia’s side. She was still asleep, but then, he heard someone approach him from behind.

“I thought I’d find you here, boy.”

“Miss Sakuya…”

He turned around and saw Sakuya step over the rubble and walk over to him, accompanied by another familiar girl. Arle Kirlesio.

…She came here too, come to think of it.

“Is Miss Selia okay?” Sakuya asked.

“She’s all right; she’s only asleep,” Leonis nodded.

Sakuya looked relieved.

“You look awful. What happened?” Arle asked.

“Well, a bunch of those magical machines blew up all at once. When I came over, the whole area was blown away.” Leonis lied.

“…So the Machina Soldiers self-destructed. I see.”

She bought the lie, since she already knew what the Machina Soldiers were. Sakuya, on the other hand, eyed him suspiciously. Getting carried away and showing her too much of his Dark Lord powers made her figure out his secret.

“Nngh, aah…”

They heard a soft groaning.

“Miss Selia, are you up?” Leonis asked.

“Leo… And Sakuya, too…” Riselia rubbed her eyes sleepily.

“Don’t push yourself too hard.” Leonis supported her body.

“For now, let’s rise to the surface. This place could cave in on us.” Arle suggested.

“…True.” Leonis nodded.

◆

"…Why aren't Selia and the others back?" Elfiné finished reading the report and got to her feet.

Two hours ago, the intelligence bureau received a report that the Elysion Academy students who all had vanished were discovered on the other side of the Void tear. Elfiné hurried over to the capital's information bureau to confirm the situation, only to find Riselia and the others' names weren't on the list.

"We don't know the details…," said an employee of the Anti-Void Intelligence Bureau. "But Princess Chatres told us that Excalibur Academy's eighteenth platoon stayed behind on the other side of the Void tear to investigate."

"…An investigation? Just them, alone?"

"Yes, apparently. Princess Chatres implored them to return, but, erm… Since the eighteenth platoon is an Excalibur Academy unit…"

"They're under a different chain of command, and even the princess couldn't force them…" Elfiné massaged her temples, a mixed expression on her face.

…I can see Riselia deciding to stay behind.

Riselia did have an exaggerated sense of responsibility. She'd have insisted on bringing back at least some information on a Hive if it would benefit mankind. She always voluntarily investigated Void Hives, which was only natural, given how she had lost her old home country during a Void Stampede. If there was some sign, some omen that would help detect a Stampede ahead of time, they may have been able to prevent the Third Assault Garden's destruction.

That regret lingered in Riselia's heart to this day.

"There was probably no stopping her…" Elfiné sighed.

For the time being, just finding out she was all right was enough.

I mean, she should be all right… He's there to protect her.

Leonis, who was with Riselia, wasn't the ten-year-old boy he pretended to be. He seemed to be trying to hide his power, but Elfiné knew he was capable of more than he let on. He could fool cameras, but not the Eye of the Witch.

“This information is confidential—”

“Yes, I know.”

The general public hadn’t been informed of the mass disappearance yet. If news came out that the third princess Chatres and a group of Holy Swordsmen students went missing while the people were already anxious over the massive tear that had appeared in the sky, they would go into a panic.

The only ones who were kept up-to-date on the situation were the Imperial Knights’ top brass and those affiliated with the Anti-Void Intelligence Bureau, which Elfiné was a part of.

“Let me know if you learn anything new about the eighteenth platoon,” Elfiné said, before she left the bureau’s building.

She called for an unmanned vehicle at Central Garden station so she could return to the hotel and begin working on a report about what lay on the other side of the tear. Elfiné was part of Excalibur Academy, but ever since the tear had appeared, all students with Holy Swords who had probing abilities were temporarily transferred to working with the Imperial Knights.

It looks like the knights really are thinking of sending in knights to investigate the tear…

She could volunteer to join the unit and sneak into the tear that way. Users of probe Holy Swords were always in high demand.

…I’d rather bring Sakuya with me, if I’m going to go in there, Elfiné thought to herself as she checked the mail in her tablet terminal.

Having Sakuya with her would be encouraging, but Sakuya had been missing and out of touch for a few days now. Elfiné didn’t remember seeing her in Elysion Academy on the day of the incident, so she was probably wandering around somewhere like she always did, but…

As she waited for the vehicle to arrive, Elfiné decided to try solve a puzzle to pass the time, but then—

“Elfiné Phillet.”

“Huh?” Elfiné looked up.

Men wearing visor-type terminals surrounded her without her noticing.

"…!"

There was no one else around, and while this wasn't a packed station at the best of times, having absolutely no passersby in the area was still unusual.

…I was careless.

Using a Holy Sword inside the city was strictly forbidden unless one had approval, but if she had the Eye of the Witch activated, she'd have been able to detect that she was being followed. And if she were Sakuya, she'd have no doubt spotted these people, too. But Elfiné, having grown accustomed—and even reliant—on the Eye of the Witch's probing powers, had her senses dulled when it wasn't active.

"Count Deinfraude sent us to bring you to him," the man standing opposite her said with an emotionless voice.

Phillet Company private militia… Elfiné surmised.

They handled jobs for that man, namely ones that had to be kept away from the public eye. Some of their most elite members were Holy Swordsmen.

"I've cut ties with him."

"He says he wishes to speak to you about Master Finzel."

"…"

Finzel Phillet. Her older brother, and the mastermind behind the D Project. His whereabouts were considered unknown… But she had seen him become a Void monster, only to get swallowed up by a Void crack.

…I had a feeling this time would come sooner or later.

But it was faster than expected, and she certainly didn't anticipate Deinfraude resorting to force in the middle of the city. Did he know the circumstances behind Finzel's death…?

"—We ask that you come with us peacefully."

"I'm sorry, but I have to refuse." Elfiné took a step back. "Tell him I said that if he's that eager to see his daughter, he should come to me with his own two feet."

"…It seems we have no choice. We were told not to resort to violence, but…"

"Eye of the Witch, Activate!"

Elfiné tried to manifest her Holy Sword, but right as she did, an unpleasant sound blared out.

…Is this a Void EMP?

The half-materialized Holy Sword broke apart into particles of light, and she fell to her knees. “This is a Holy Sword jamming system that put a Void’s roar into practical use. It’s still in development, but it’s proven effective against Holy Swords that require extreme focus,” the man in the visor explained indifferently.

Manifesting a Holy Sword requires great mental acuity. One of the first things taught in the Academy was how to build up one’s mental fortitude. Trained Holy Swordsmen needed to be able to activate their Holy Swords even under the stress of combat with the Voids, and in Elfiné’s case, the Eye of the Witch required extreme concentration to control, meaning there were times she wasn’t able to properly activate it.

“Why did you develop a Holy Sword jamming system…?”

This was a system developed against the Holy Swordsmen, not the Voids that were mankind’s enemies. Why would the Phillet make such a thing…?

The Phillet private militia surrounded Elfiné.

“Tie her up. Carefully.”

◆

“Well, Dragon Lord? What does this mean?”

“…”

Veira remained silent as she looked up at the celestial globe projected onto the ruins’ ceiling. Having activated the Azure Fort’s Almagest, she was able to see the changing of the celestial bodies over the last thousand years, but what she saw defied belief.

“…About eight hundred years ago, the world God divided in two.”

Into this world, and the world on the other side of the Void tear. It wasn’t that the Gods, Dark Lords, and countless monsters were all wiped from history… They were corrupted by the emptiness and flung to the other world.

How did this happen?

Who brought this upon the world?

“…Rivaiz, we should go back to Leo’s place for now.”

“To the Undead King’s place?”

“Yes. We’ll need his wisdom for this.” Veira nodded and turned on her heels. “Because the Almagest predicts that the two worlds will go back to being one soon.”

CHAPTER 3

GAZOTH HELL BEAST

"…What in the world happened here?" Leonis whispered in aghast shock as he emerged to the surface.

The Rognas Kingdom's castle, Ur-Rognasia Palace, was split in two like someone had cleaved through it. The wreckage of inactive Machina Soldiers was scattered about the road.

"I saw what happened," Arle said. "A large orb of light appeared under the palace and burned through the city with a beam of light."

The ball of light must have been the Deus Machina's initial form. It likely recognized Nefakess as an intruder and risen to the surface to intercept him. But the priest had a trump card prepared to handle the Deus Machina and used an Artificial Elemental the humans made to take control of her core, forcing the Machina Soldiers to fight among themselves.

"They're not going to start moving again, are they?" Riselia asked, gingerly eyeing a flipped over Machina Soldier.

"You don't need to worry about that, I think," Leonis said, tapping on the burnt armor of the machine.

Machina Soldiers were purely machines, and without their commander unit, the Deus Machina Schwertleite, they were completely inert.

"Let's get out of the city for now. There could be cave-ins anywhere here."

"Agreed."

By the time they reached Ur-Shukar's gates, the sun was already starting to set.

The formation of the stars is different, but the sun sets at the same rate…, Leonis pondered as he looked up at the twilit sky.

Which reminded him—did Veira successfully retake the Azure Fort from the Devil of the Underworld? She had wanted to use the Almagest contained within to inspect the position of the stars

in the past, in an attempt to figure out how it changed over the last thousand years…

“Found it, it’s over there.” Riselia pointed at a rock formation in the wasteland.

Parked there was the battle vehicle they had rode earlier, the Thunderbolt.

“The sun’s about to set, so let’s set up camp here until dawn,” Riselia suggested.

“Good idea.” Sakuya nodded.

“Leo, is Regina still asleep?”

“Oh, yes,” Leonis reached for the shadow at his feet, which rippled, after which Regina floated out of it.

“You can hide people in your shadow?” Arle asked, curious. “Holy Swords really do have useful powers.”

“Y-yes…” Leonis nodded vaguely.

“Regina…” Riselia kneeled next to her, peering at Regina’s face with concern.

“Is she all right?” Sakuya asked.

“Yes, she’s just asleep.”

When one of the Machina Soldiers self-destructed during battle in the ruins, he ended up knocking out Regina. Sakuya was able to use some strange power to give her first aid that healed her wounds.

“It’s time to wake up now,” Leonis said, snapping his fingers.

“Nn…” Regina rubbed her eyes groggily and stretched. “Ah, Lady Selia. Good morning.”

“…Oh, Regina, thank goodness you’re safe!” As Regina sat up, Riselia hugged her tightly.

“L-Lady Selia?! Ah, wait, am I outside the ruins?!” Regina looked around, alarmed and confused.

“We’ll catch you up later. For now, we need to set up camp.”

“C-camp? Oh, you can leave cooking to me!” Regina said, her pigtails bouncing.

“No overexerting yourself, Regina. You can rest if you want.”

“No, Lady Selia. I got a lot of sleep, so I’m raring to go!” Regina hopped to her feet and energetically rotated one of her arms.

“Y-yeah? Well, if you say so…”

But as the two had this exchange, the elf girl turned around.

“…Arle? Where are you going?” Sakuya asked.

“It doesn’t matter where I go. This is where we part ways,” Arle replied curtly.

“Aren’t you going back to the Seventh Assault Garden?”

“Yes, I have a mission to complete. I must investigate this world further.”

“…I see.”

“Erm, won’t you at least stay to have dinner with us…?” Riselia suggested, which did make Arle halt for a moment.

“…I’m sorry, but I don’t intend to get along with humans.”

She waved goodbye and made to walk away.

“Wait.” Sakuya rummaged in her sleeve, took out a small sack, and tossed it over to Arle. “Take this.”

“Wh-what?” Arle turned around and caught the sack.

“It’s a Sakura Orchid traditional dumpling. Eat it as a snack.”

“…Th-thank you.” Arle pocketed the dumpling and walked off into the wasteland.

Leonis had a feeling he knew where she was headed.

…She’s going to look for the Swordmaster, who vanished into the Void tear.

Like Leonis himself, the elven hero was a personal pupil and protégé of Shardark. Her search, however, would likely yield nothing. The man who was once the strongest hero had completely succumbed to the emptiness and became a Void.

No point in stopping her, though…

Leonis couldn’t tell if Arle did this of her own choosing, given that someone seemed to be guiding her actions. He was curious as to who put suggestions into her head… Whoever they were, they were skilled enough to fight off Leonis’s attempt to control Arle’s mind with sorcery once. Leonis had since relented, as there was no telling what might happen if he provoked the suggestion placed on her.

…I’ll just let her do as she pleases right now, Leonis whispered to himself as he watched her leave.

◆

“I was resurrected in this world about ten days ago.” The Lord of Beasts bit on a piece of meat attached to a bone that was about as

large as his arm, chewed, and swallowed.

They were in the banquet hall at the bottom floor of the Dark Lord's Castle. Littered over a table she had prepared were dishes and foods delivered from assorted eateries in the Seventh Assault Garden.

"…Pardon, Lord of Beasts, you said about ten days ago, but do you remember exactly how many days it's been?"

"Huh? Why would I remember that kind of detail?" Gazoth turned around, a piece of meat in his hand, and glared at Shary.

"…M-my apologies, Great One!" Shary said, swallowing the urge to say people would normally remember that.

…I mustn't displease the Lord of Beasts.

Shary had a mission—she needed to stall for time and gather information until Leonis returned.

Unlike the Dragon Lord, I believe he'll be calm so long as I keep him fed…

But really, the beastman's stomach seemed to be bottomless.

My lord's military budget is getting smaller and smaller…

The table already had several hundred empty plates piled on it. What's more, the Lord of Beasts turned out to have an epicurean streak and didn't touch any simple dishes whose only redeeming quality was their mass. After gulping down high-class wine, the Lord of Beasts answered, becoming talkative.

"When the Eisen Fort fell a thousand years ago, I led my forces, the Grand Beast Army, on many battles, until I fought the Swordmaster of the Six Heroes on the Blood Fang Plains."

"You mean Shardark Shin Ignis, said to be the strongest of the six."

"Aye, him." The Lord of Beasts nodded boastfully. "I've fought the Swordmaster a few times before, but that bastard gets stronger each time I face him. I managed to chomp off one of his arms, and at the same moment, he gouged my three hearts."

"You have three hearts, Great One?"

"Aye. That way, if one gets destroyed, I can still regenerate. But if all three of them get done in at once, even I'd end up croaking."

"I see. So crushing all three of your hearts at once would kill you… Allow me to jot that down…," Shary whispered, secretly writing down this unexpected weakness he revealed.

…This could help my lord.

Shary tried to get information on the Lord of Beasts out of desperation, but it turned out he answered her questions both frankly and easily enough. Shary hadn't interacted much with Dark Lords beside Leonis, but they didn't strike her as this rough and careless.

I suppose the Dragon Lord was rough in her own way…

Come to think of it, Dark Lords were all apex predators, the strongest life-forms in this world. They likely didn't feel the need to hide their power from those weaker than them. Perhaps Dark Lords who conducted themselves carefully like Leonis were in the minority.

"I was beaten by the Swordmaster and collapsed to the ground." The Lord of Beasts growled. "My flesh was destroyed to the point where I should have been beyond the point of resurrection or becoming an undead. Or so I thought."

The Lord of Beasts continued.

"But I was resurrected. When I came to, I was lying in a forest that grew where the Blood Fang plains were a thousand years ago…"

When the Lord of Beasts awakened, he wandered the land for a time in search of the enemy, believing the Dark Lord war was still ongoing. And when tears appeared in space and he began killing the unknown monsters that emerged, he was discovered by a unit from the capital on a mission to wipe out a Hive and was taken in as a refugee.



“After that, well, I looked into the humans’ culture, enjoying what I could. May as well make the best of my resurrection, ya know?”

The Lord of Beasts picked up a plate of food and shoveled its contents entirely into his mouth. It was terrible table manners, but he somehow made it look appropriate and natural.

“Sadly, though, I didn’t run into anyone that roused my warrior spirit. Humans use this power called Holy Swords now, but no one’s a match for me. Those monsters, Voids, I just don’t like ’em. Got no souls in ’em.”

“What about rebuilding the Dark Lords’ Armies…?”

“Don’t care for it.” The Lord of Beasts growled, baring his fangs. “Well, to be honest, I considered it at first. Thought maybe I’d lead the beastmen to take over the humans’ cities. But that doesn’t really matter anymore. I don’t know what the other Dark Lords are plannin’, but I’m not exactly itching to take revenge for losing or anything. And to begin with, I only sided with the Goddess of Rebellion because the Luminous Powers ticked me off. They thought the world was their show to run. But…”

Rambling, the Lord of Beasts stabbed the fork into the table.

“…?!”

“Then I heard someone assuming a Dark Lord’s name, and putting my minions to work like they’re his to use. And that’s a different person. I can’t let that slide. He needs to pay.”

Gazoth growled, his metal-gray fur standing on end. His one eye glared right at Shary, making her freeze up with instinctive fear.

“So what’s the truth about him?”

“M-my master really is the Dark Lord Zol Vadis.”

Even as the air trembled with the intense aura Dark Lords give off, Shary spoke stoutly. Her loyalty won out over the Lord of Beasts’ aura of terror.

“Hah. That right? Well, fine by me. Now I’m all the more looking forward to seeing him.” Gazoth threw away a bone he was holding and got to his feet.

“Hm, what about the food…?” Shary asked.

“I’m full.”

The Lord of Beasts walked away and toward the banquet hall’s doors.

“P-please, wait here a while longer, Great One…!” Shary hurried after him.

“Waiting here won’t make Zol Vadis show up anyway, will it?”

“I, uh…,” Shary stammered and grabbed the hems of her skirt. “P-please just…wait a few more days!”

“Aye, I’ll wait, all right,” the Lord of Beasts said, smirking savagely. “I’ll wait as long as it takes until he shows up. But just sitting here and waitin’ is boring. I’ll be taking back the beastman tribes under this Dark Lord.”

“Huh?! No, please wait, you can’t do that! It’s…a problem for us!”

“Then hurry up and bring him before me!”

Bang!

Gazoth shook off Shary’s attempts to stop him and smashed the large doors to the banquet hall, shattering them.

“Aah…”

The Demon Wolf Pack formed the core of the Dark Lords’ Armies at present, but they only swore fealty to Zol Vadis because they were cowed by his power. But if met with their original master, the Lord of Beasts Gazoth, they would yield in the face of his charisma.

…My lord, please hurry back!

Shary gripped her head, left all alone in a banquet hall full of empty plates.

◆

A small campfire illuminated the darkness, lit by Leonis’s spell.

“Mmhmhmm. ♪”

Regina hummed to herself as she prepared a meal, using the battle vehicle’s cargo space as a cooking surface. The ingredients and utensils were all given to her by Leonis, who had pulled them out of his Realm of Shadows. The sound of the bubbling pot could be heard, and the slightly piquant aroma of spices hung in the air.

She couldn’t cook anything too complicated in these conditions, of course, but her efforts did make the rather bland rations into something one could mistake for food from a

restaurant.

Sakuya, seated atop the vehicle's roof, was whetting Raikirimaru's blade. A Holy Sword's blade didn't require that kind of maintenance, but she was doing it out of habit, it seemed.

A sword…

Whispering this to himself, Leonis looked down at his palm. The Demon Sword that should have been there was nowhere to be found. It wasn't as if he carried it on him at all times, but the fact he couldn't beckon it to him at all made him anxious.

…My word. I'm not a child, frightened without his safety blanket.

He had earlier summoned shadow demons to search the ruins, but he doubted they'd find the sword.

That Undead King must have taken it away…

He clenched his fist, when—

"…eo. Leo?"

He jolted, feeling a tap on his shoulder. Riselia was peering at his face, concerned.

"Oh, pardon. I was just thinking about something…"

"Are you okay? You're making a scary face…" Riselia smiled softly and sat next to Leonis. "Here, some hot cocoa."

"Thank you."

He wrapped his palms around the mug, lapping at the hot cocoa with the tip of his tongue. The sweetness permeated through his fatigued body.

"Leo, you saved me back there. Thank you."

"You escaped on your own, though, Miss Selia," Leonis said, his eyes narrowed peevishly.

When Riselia was teleported away, he went to save her, only for them to reunite at the ruins' underground area. When he found her, she had already escaped the Machina Soldiers on her own and learned how to use the Dragon Blood.

"W-well, yes, but if you didn't show up when you did—" Riselia bit her lips as she gazed into the flames of the campfire. "Leo, what was that…?"

She whispered those last few words. It was clear what she was referring to—the Undead King. Leonis paused for thought before shaking his head.

"…I don't know."

Leonis had a few ideas as to what its identity might have been,

but it was only speculation, and he also couldn't tell her that monster was what he was supposed to look like.

"…I see. Erm, Leo, listen," Riselia said and then went silent for a moment, gathering her courage. "I think I saw something just like it once."

"…Eh?" Leonis frowned. "You…have?"

…She did blurt out something to that effect at one point.

"…Yeah. When the orb of light took me to the bottom of the ruins…" Riselia looked straight at Leonis's eyes. "And when I was there, I had a dream about you…"

"About me?"

Riselia nodded. "And in that dream, you were that thing."

◆

The glow of the campfire cast over the minion girl's beautiful features. In the distance, the sounds of Regina's cooking could be heard. Riselia traced back her memories, making head gestures as she told of what she saw.

When Schwertleite abducted Riselia, she took her to a mausoleum at the bottom of the ruins. Schwertleite called it a Dark Lord's resting place and claimed she was its guardian.

"She guarded the mausoleum?"

"Yes. That's what she said."

"And what did you see in the ruins?"

"A black crystal." Riselia said. "She called it the casket of a slumbering Dark Lord."

"…"

When Riselia faced the casket, it let out a blinding glow, and a surge of images began flooding her mind. An orphaned boy picked up by a knight before eventually becoming a hero who saved the world.

The boy who defeated the Dark Lord was celebrated by the people of the kingdom, only to then be betrayed by the same people who praised him. He was left for dead, bleeding in the muck…

But then she saw a beautiful girl resurrect the boy, followed by armies of undead overrunning the land, led by a terrifying

monster. And that terrifying monster…

"…Looked exactly like that dead monster we saw," said Leonis.

"Y-yeah…" Riselia nodded.

"I see."

Leonis's mind churned with thoughts. Riselia's dream was almost certainly a depiction of his past memories. And if the Undead King they saw was sealed in that crystal…

It must mean he really is another me.

If nothing else, it clearly wasn't just someone impersonating his appearance.

It's becoming quite clear this Void world is some sort of mirror image of our original world.

The fact the Rognas Kingdom ruins, the Spirit Forest, and the altar to the Spirit King were all in the same spots they'd have occupied in the old world served as clear evidence of that. So if these two worlds had matching ruins…did Leonis also have a mirror image that matched him?

Leonis was lost in thought, then…

"Leo…" A pair of ice blue eyes looked at him fixedly.

It was his turn to answer her questions. Was what she saw really his memories?

…I don't think I can lie my way out of this.

He could refuse to answer, of course, and Riselia would relent if he did, but this would damage his minion's trust in him.

Leonis cleared his throat and spoke up. "I was once called a hero that saved a kingdom."

"…A hero?" Riselia's eyes widened. "Like the ones you hear about in fairy tales?"

"Yes. A hero of justice that defeated a Dark Lord." Leonis nodded.

Riselia smiled. "So you really are a good boy, then."

"N-no." Leonis shook his head, discouraged. "That's just what people called me. Although, I did defeat a Dark Lord a long time ago… And that dead monster was the Dark Lord I defeated."

"…That was a Dark Lord?!"

"Yes, an evil Dark Lord called Zol Vadis. I defeated him once, but apparently, he was resurrected in this world."

Once again, Leonis pinned all the blame on the ancient Dark Lord.

“So that was the Dark Lord Father spoke of…,” Riselia whispered, a mixed expression on her face.

—Someday, a Dark Lord will come and save the world from the Voids.

This was a story her father, Duke Crystalia, told his daughter for some reason.

“B-but why was that crystal in your memories, Leo?”

“…I don’t know.” Leonis shook his head.

…And he wasn’t lying about that. He really didn’t know. If the one sealed in that crystal was the other Leonis from the other world, why did it react to Riselia? Would it have reacted just the same if someone other than her was there?

“Maybe that crystal was some kind of recording device that projected the events of this kingdom.”

“A recording device. Hmm… I think I understand.” Riselia nodded, but still looked like she wasn’t fully convinced.

Leonis told her he didn’t know for sure, and peered into the crackling fire.

…What in the world is happening?

Why did the Deus Machina abduct Riselia and hand her over to the Undead King? Why was Schwertleite protecting the Undead King to begin with?

He could mull over questions as much as he wished, but Schwertleite had already blown herself to bits and couldn’t answer even if she had been inclined to talk.

…Either way, I’ll need to inspect the mausoleum the crystal was in later, Leonis thought to himself, looking at the flickering flames.

“Hm, Leo…” Riselia’s fingers touched on his hand.

“Miss Selia?”

Looking up, he spotted his minion’s face peering right into his. Her ice-blue eyes wavered, a red aura lingering over her irises. “I, erm…” Her fingertips gently scratched on the back of his hand.

Her vampiric impulses… She can’t help it.

No matter how firm her will was, racial instincts weren’t within her control. She used the True Ancestor’s Dress, which rapidly consumed mana, for a prolonged period of time and used blood manipulation to control the Dragon Blood, too. The recoil from everything she did naturally resulted in a thirst for blood.

“Can’t you, hm, hold it in for a bit…?”

“No…” Riselia gripped his hand and whispered into his ear. “C-can’t we…?”

“I-it’s a bad idea. What if Miss Regina sees us…?”

“Th-then how about we…hide behind that rock over there…?”

“Huh? Whoa—”

She pulled on Leonis’s sleeve, pulling him behind a rock.

“She won’t see us here.”

“A-are you sure…?”

“Yeah, we’ll be fine.”

He felt her lips brush against his neck.

“M-Miss Selia?!”

“Be quiet. Regina might find us.” Riselia smiled impishly, placing an index finger on her lips.

“Listen, we can’t just—nn. ♪”

Bite!

She started nibbling on his neck, which made him squeal like a girl.

“Mm, kid, is something wrong?” He heard Regina call out.

“N-nothing’s…aaah, wrong…!”

Bite, nibble!

Leonis couldn’t help but moan between his words as Riselia continued gently chewing on his earlobe.

“Heh-heh. Good on you for staying quiet. ♪”

“…!”

She was clearly enjoying cutting it close and almost getting caught.

“Y-you’re being improper. Where’s your usual, responsible self, Miss Selia—” Leonis whispered at her scoldingly.

Riselia blushed a little and frowned. “You made me like this, you know?”

“Well, yes, but still…”

It was him who had turned her into a vampire, making him responsible.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be done before anyone finds us. ♪”

She pushed him against the rock, still nibbling on his ear. Leonis had no choice but to let her suck on him as she desired…



CHAPTER 4

THE PHILLET SCHEME

After eating the meal Regina made them, Leonis said he was going to get some fresh air and returned to explore Ur-Shukar's underground area. The mausoleum Riselia mentioned was at the bottom of the Great Arakael Library. But all he found there were fragments of black crystal littering the floor, and no clues relating to the Undead King.

This crystal is identical to the casket I rested in, though…

Leonis picked up a shard of crystal and dropped it in his shadow. The Undead King did seem to have been sealed here.

"You're pale in the face, Lord Magnus," Blackas said, appearing from the wavering shadows.

"Yes, I shared my blood with my minion…" Leonis shrugged and sat down next to Blackas. "Did you find any sign of the priest?"

Blackas growled in response, throwing his gaze into the mausoleum's darkness. "His traces disappeared here."

"Here?"

"Yes. His shadow was destroyed here. That much is for certain."

"Hmm…" Leonis carefully scanned over the ground. "So he was destroyed by the Undead King after awakening it…?"

A pathetic way to die, then.

"So it was you, after all?"

"Undoubtedly."

He wasn't sure earlier, but hearing what Riselia said confirmed it. That Undead King was the body Leonis was meant to incarnate into.

"So your soul was split into two as you reincarnated, then."

"Yes. It probably has to do with the world being split."

After Leonis was sealed in slumber, the world was divided in two. He still didn't have the first idea what might have caused

such a cataclysm to occur, though.

“Maybe some record of what happened remains in the Great Arakael Library,” Blackas suggested.

“Yes, and we did come here to investigate the library, after all.”

He couldn’t check all the tomes stored in the library, but he could throw them into the Realm of Shadows and read them later at his leisure.

Leonis and Blackas left the mausoleum and began searching through the vast underground library. Every time they discovered a tome teeming with mana, they threw it into the shadows, and plundered every magic item stored there.

Their search eventually led them to a gigantic hangar full of dozens of inactive Machina Soldiers.

“What a spectacle,” Leonis murmured, despite himself.

The partially destroyed half-circular space was completely full of Machina Soldiers inside of transparent tubes.

“Can these things move?” Blackas asked.

“They’d probably activate if provided mana, yes.” Leonis tapped on a tube with a knuckle. “There’s no controlling them, though.”

“So they cannot be added to the Dark Lords’ Armies…”

Leonis paused for thought. “No, let’s take them back with us. They are built with mana furnaces, albeit small ones, and those are hard to come by. Besides, if we used the humans’ magical technology, we may be able to have them serve us yet.”

“Very well. Let us do so, then.”

Blackas growled, and the Machina Soldiers were swallowed up into the Realm of Shadows. But as the shadows receded, something glinted from within the rubble.

“…What’s that?”

Was there still an active Machina Soldier? Leonis frowned and approached the light, and…

“…Wait!”

Buried into the rubble was the head of a girl—or rather, the upper half of a girl’s body. “Schwertleite?!”

Leonis hurried over, using a gravity spell to knock away the rubble. The light glinting in the dark went out—it was a horn-like part of her body, glowing and flickering.

“Is she still active?”

“…No.” Leonis touched on the cheek of the Deus Machina, who lay with her eyes closed. “Her mana furnace has completely halted. This is nothing but wreckage.”

Leonis retracted his hand and shook his head. The light she gave off earlier must have been from some residual mana still in her systems.

“If she were a corpse, I could have used her as an undead, but the Realm of Death’s sorcery won’t work on soulless magical apparatuses.”

This was also true of holy magic. Even the resurrection sorcery of Tearis, the Holy Woman of the Six Heroes, wouldn’t be able to repair her.

“…A pity. I had many questions for her.”

What was she—what was the Deus Machina guarding here? Why did she abduct Riselia and call her ”master”?

—Hold on. If she’s a Magical Apparatus, it’s possible…

Realizing something, Leonis picked up the Deus Machina’s discarded upper half. She was made of some material he was unfamiliar with, and was lighter than expected.

“Are you taking it back as spoils of war?” Blackas asked dubiously.

“No. I might just be able to reactivate her.”

◆

“No,” Regina scolded Leonis, leaning in on him. “Put it back where you found it.”

“I—I can’t keep it?” Leonis looked up at Regina, carrying the Deus Machina’s upper half.

“…Mmgh. Don’t gave me those puppy dog eyes! The Hræsvelgr dorm rooms are already full of everyone’s junk.”

“Come now, Regina, I’ll put it in my room,” Riselia stepped in to mediate.

“Huh?” Regina screwed up her face in confusion. “You want this mannequin in your room, Lady Selia? It’s way too creepy! What if its eyes light up at night, or if it comes to life when I clean?”

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem…”

“Besides, what even is this thing? It looks really weird!”

“I guess you’re right about that…”

…He couldn’t very well tell her it was the remains of a Dark Lord.

“Regina, this might be precious evidence that will help us understand the Void world,” Riselia said earnestly. “We should take it back as a sample, along with one of those armored magical apparatuses.”

Regina sighed and shrugged in resignation. “Fine. Do what you want.”

With this, they had approval from their stern dorm manager.

“Besides, if the base technology is similar to ours, we might be able to fix it and learn something about it in the process,” Leonis appended.

Schwertleite was taken over and controlled by an Artificial Elemental created by the humans, which implied human technology might be capable of repairing her, too. But that begged the question: Why did mankind’s magic technology have so much in common with an ancient weapon?

“Do you think you could fix it, Miss Regina?”

“Well, I did take an elective on using magical apparatuses at the academy, but I’m not an expert.”

“Maybe Miss Finé will know how to fix it.”

“Yes, let’s have her take a look at it when we get back to the Academy.”

“Are you done?” Sakuya called out to them from the battle vehicle’s roof. “Because we shouldn’t stay here for too long. Something unfriendly might pass by.”

“Yes, let’s return to the capital.”

“…”

Leonis cast his gaze to Ur-Shukar’s ruins. He wanted to track down the Undead King who stole his Demon Sword… But he couldn’t have Riselia and the group leave him here and go back on their own. And he was also worried about Shary, who he’d left behind in the Seventh Assault Garden.

Either way, I think I’ll run into him again before long.

He keenly had that impression.

And as much as I’m loath to do so, I’ll leave the Demon Sword in his hands until then…

Whispering this, Leonis clenched his fist.

◆

Thirty minutes later, Leonis boarded the battle vehicle and pushed the Deus Machina's wreckage at his feet.

"…It's not going to move, is it?" Riselia asked.

"I don't think so, no." Leonis nodded.

He wasn't a big expert on ancient weapons, but with its mana furnace so thoroughly damaged, he doubted anything would go awry.

"Let's get back to Excalibur Academy, then!" Regina activated the battle vehicle, which rolled away.

Through the front view mirror, Leonis could see the Rognas Kingdom ruins drift away. Riselia gently poked him on the cheek.

"…Miss Selia?"

"You must be tired."

"Well, yes…" Leonis nodded. "You did suck away quite a bit."

"…!" Riselia's cheeks went very red. "I-I'm sorry. I kind of got carried away, so I don't really remember…"

"I don't mind, but just be more careful."

"Y-yes…" Riselia dropped her head, deflated.

But then she hugged Leonis's head.

"…?"

"Take your time and rest, Leo."

And all of a sudden, sleepiness overcame him.

"…?"

Looking up, he saw Riselia place a finger over her lips and blink impishly.

…A sleeping charm?

It was very basic sorcery. Anyone with any experience in sorcery wouldn't fall victim to such a spell, but he really was exhausted, and he'd been careless around her, too. He could have broken the spell with ease, but…the way her fingers brushed through his hair was too pleasant.

…Oh, very well.

Leonis decided to submit to sweet slumber.

◆

Elfiné was six years old when that man killed her mother.

It was in an unofficial military experiment for synchronizing the human brain with Artificial Elementals. In later years, Elfiné would use the Eye of the Witch to sneak into the Astral Garden and try to steal material about the military at the time, only to find all traces of the experiment were purged.

But the one who spearheaded the experiment was clear.

The governor of the Fourth Assault Garden—Count Deinfraude Phillet. Leader of the Phillet Foundation, and Elfiné's father.

She had never thought of that man as a father, because he had always treated her, his daughter, as nothing but a guinea pig. To ensure she awakened to a powerful Holy Sword, from infancy he put her through an educational regimen that was more akin to abuse and forced her to take dozens of different drugs every day. He forced her to see her siblings as rivals and enemies.

Her older sister was wise to get out of that race sooner rather than later.

It was at the age of ten that Elfiné slipped away from his influence. Having awakened her Holy Sword's power, she left the Fourth Assault Garden and entered Excalibur Academy. But even so, she hadn't forgotten about that man for a single day. The man who had killed her beloved mother, sacrificing her for an experiment…

And even now, he stood at the peak of the Foundation, leading the D Project. The terrible plan to taint the Holy Swords given by the planet with the power of emptiness, and turning even its wielder into Void monsters.

…I have to stop him. Elfiné reached out, like she was groping through deep darkness. *I have to stop…that man…*

It was for this reason she returned to the capital.

◆

"…Mm."

As her consciousness turned hazy, Elfiné opened her eyes. Everything was covered in impenetrable darkness, however.

…Is this the Astral Garden?

So she initially thought, before she realized her body's sense of presence made it clear this was the real world, rather than a virtual space.

Her arms hurt. She was bound and restrained on some kind of table.

…Talk about bad taste Elfiné whispered to herself, and held the image of her Holy Sword in her mind.

"Eye of the Witch—Activate."

But the moment she spoke the words to activate her Holy Sword—

"…!"

Pain rocked her body like an electrical current.

…Not surprising, but still.

The table she was strapped to was a device for restraining Holy Swordsmen. It used direct pain, rather than jamming, to prevent the activation of a Holy Sword. A primitive but effective method.

My thinking's weaker, too…

Some drug was likely injected into her while she was unconscious. She bit her lip, trying to rouse her sense of pain, which jogged her memory.

Right. Phillet private militiamen kidnapped me at the station…

She knew where the Phillet Foundation facilities were by heart, but there were six sites just in the capital. She squinted, trying to focus her sight and pick up on some clue. And there, in the darkness, some three meltes away, was something even blacker than the darkness hanging over the place. A triangular structure.

…A pyramid?

It seemed out of place in a laboratory. Was it some kind of experimental equipment? But as she tried to get a better look at it…

"It's an altar."

A presence suddenly appeared in the room.

She heard the dry scraping of shoes against the floor, and then a small mana light flickered to life.

"…?!"

Elfiné's eyes widened in shock. It's been years since she heard

his voice and saw his face, but she never forgot them.

It was the man who killed her mother.

“Deinfraude Phillet…” Elfiné spoke his name, her voice shaking.

But he didn’t seem to acknowledge the way she glared at him. He simply held the light up to the pyramid.

“This is an altar made to allow one to hear the voice of the goddess. Twenty-eight years ago, a Phillet expedition party ran into it while investigating ruins in the old Veriad continent, and brought it to us.”

“…”

What was this man talking about…?

“The goddess’s oracle granted us knowledge that was essential in developing Artificial Elementals and technology that was key for the Assault Garden project. It was this that allowed House Phillet to thrive.”

“…Have you gone insane, Father?” Elfiné said with all the cynicism she could muster.

For all she knew, he really may have gone insane. But one thing he said did linger in her mind.

Goddess…

This was a word she encountered as she investigated the D Project. Those corrupted by the power of the Demon Sword all testified to hearing a goddess’s voice. She was convinced this “goddess” was some kind of subconscious mental suggestion planted in their minds by Seraphim, an Artificial Elemental developed for training Holy Swordsmen.

But what this man just said made it sound like the goddess was something else altogether.

“This is where everything started,” the old man said, turning his eyes to Elfiné. “It has been three…no, four years since you absconded, my daughter.”

“…You have no right to call yourself my father.”

“You’re free to think whatever you’d like, but you are still a potential successor to the Phillet name, and nothing will change that. Even now, the power and authority to become my successor is granted to you.”

“True. I will kill you and rise to the top of the Phillet Foundation.”

But she didn't want to do it to grow House Phillet or the Phillet Foundation, but rather, to expose their darkness and put an end to it all…

"You really are more promising than Finzel ever was." Deinfraude whispered, and the mana lamp approached her.

"…What is this about? Why abduct me like this, against my will…?"

How she wished she could kill this man where he stood with her glare.

"You are my tool. I simply recalled you back to my side now that I need you."

"…!"

Had it not been for the restraints holding her in place, she'd have slapped him across the face. She bit her lip to regain her cool—she couldn't afford to play to this man's tune.

"So you spearheaded the D Project, Deinfraude." She revealed her trump card. "I have the evidence. During the *Hyperion* incident, the terrorists used a Phillet Artificial Elemental to take over the ship. And there was the case where Voids were shipped into the Seventh Assault Garden's pier…"

"You really are brilliant."

"So you admit it?"

"Yes. I was involved in all of it."

Was he just acting defiant? But why would he, when he already had her bound in place? In which case…

"If I don't make it back, a report on the D Project will be released to the public."

This wasn't a bluff. She had configured Cait Sith, her Artificial Elemental, to do that.

But I was going to wait until I had more proof, to make it more decisive and put it to more effective use.

There were many unknown factors when it came to the D Project. Originally, it was a military project to reinforce the power of Holy Swords. But at one point, the project was suspended indefinitely, before it was picked up again by House Phillet.

"What is the D Project?" Elfiné asked, not expecting an answer.

However—

"A ritual to offer up Demon Swords as sacrifices to the

goddess," Deinfraude replied.

"…Goddess? Sacrifices?"

"Tainting Holy Swords granted by the planet to turn them into Demon Swords, and then using them as a catalyst to beckon the Goddess of Emptiness from the Void world on the other side of the tear."

"What are you talking ab—" Elfiné started, only to pause when she saw it.

A malevolent, mad light glinting in the old man's sunken eyes. His eyes glowed with fanatical faith.

"Finzel was involved in the D Project too, wasn't he…?"

"Indeed. Foolish though he was, his research was splendid," the man said with a voice bereft of emotion.

"So you only saw him as a tool, too…"

Elfiné felt some modicum of pity for her older brother. If he hadn't been this man's son, perhaps he wouldn't have turned out broken like he did…

"Finzel…"

Maybe confessing that Finzel died by her hand would shake this man. But before she could put that thought in the action—

"—I devoured Finzel."

The words that left the man's mouth made Elfiné freeze up. "Wh-what…?"

"I used him for sustenance before he fully became a Void."

"…"

This time, she was truly and completely aghast. Shivers she couldn't explain ran through every inch and fiber of body.

…What did he just say? Don't tell me he's…

Also a Void, just like Finzel was?

"He was a foolish son. A failure. But you, you're different."

"…Hearing that from you doesn't make me happy in the slightest."

"No, you ought to rejoice." Deinfraude shook his head. "You were created to become the goddess's vessel, after all."

"…Eh?" Confusion overtook Elfiné's features.

Created?

The word made her draw pause.

"The goddess's oracle granted us the technology of the homunculus."

“…Homunculus?”

“We wished to implement the technology for military use, but the plan failed. Homunculi were not granted the power of a Holy Sword by the planet…”

“…”

“The plan was placed on hold. But I saw the potential the technology held, and continued the research into it. By crossing the genes of powerful Holy Swordsmen into homunculi, I created hundreds of failed experiments until, at long last…”

He touched Elfiné’s cheek.

“I created the sole homunculus capable of using the power of a Holy Sword.”

“…Y-you don’t…mean…” Elfiné’s expression froze over.

“And as powerful a Holy Sword as I’d wished—no, even more than I expected.”

“…You’re lying, that… That can’t be…”

Elfiné shook her head atop the restraint table, but the old man continued.

“You are Phillet’s greatest masterpiece, made in a research facility. Whether the Holy Sword you would manifest would truly be strong was a gamble, but it turned out to be a stunning success.”

Deinfraude took something out of his pocket. A black, triangular fragment that didn’t reflect the light.

“…What… What are you thinking…?”

“I shall fill this soulless vessel with the soul of the goddess.”

The black fragment melted into Elfiné’s heart.

“Good. With this—my ambition is fulfilled.”

“…Kuh, nngh…!”

As blackness washed over her thoughts…

Selia… Regina… Saku…ya…

She called her friends’ names.

Le…o…

CHAPTER 5

THE DARK LORD ENCROACHMENT

Leo… Leonis…

Her slender fingers gently caressed his cheek.

In the Goddess Temple located in the interstice of time, she heard the sounds of the Dark Lord returning victoriously from battle. Her dark eyes looked down upon him. His head resting atop her lap, he reached out to her. At that point, his hand still had flesh, as this was before he fully became undead. It was only through repeated deaths in combat that his body became that of an undead monster.

“Roselia, I… I lost it. The precious memento you gave me…”

“…I see. That’s no good.”

She smiled, her sleek, black locks falling over his cheeks.

“Yeah…”

“But it’s strange…,” she said.

“Eh?”

“After all, your sword is right here, is it not?”

Her fingertips clasped Leonis’s outstretched hand—

◆

“—eo… Leo?”

“Hm…” Leonis awakened, hearing a lovely voice whisper into his ear.

“Oh, Miss Selia… Good morning,”

“Morning,” Riselia smiled at him and patted down his messy air.

The battle vehicle was on the move, rattling. Raising his head from Riselia’s lap, Leonis rubbed his eyes sleepily. It was dark on the other side of the windshield.

“Sorry I woke you up…”

“It’s all right. Did something happen?”

“Sakuya said it smells of Voids, so we should be careful.”

Leonis looked up to the ceiling. Sakuya was seated on the battle vehicle’s top, acting as lookout. The Thunderbolt was equipped with a mana radar meant for detecting Voids, but Sakuya’s intuition was more reliable than that.

“…I see. We should exercise caution, then,” Leonis said, and made to take the Staff of Sealed Sins out of the shadows.

But…

“…”

“…Leo?” Riselia looked at him, concerned.

“It’s…nothing.” Leonis shook his head wearily.

She placed a hand on his head. “Were you dreaming?”

“…? Yes. Did I say something in my sleep?”

“Yes, you, erm… You called my name.”

“Your name…?” Leonis asked, puzzled.

He saw Roselia in his dream, not Riselia. But then, the realization dawned on him.

Oh, she must have mistaken Roselia’s name for her own…

Indeed, their names did sound similar. But that said, why did he have that dream?

The unease of not having the Demon Sword in arm’s reach must have affected me subconsciously…

“Hm, Lady Selia, not to get in the way of you making out with the kid—” Regina used the intercom to speak to them from the driver’s seat.

“I—I am not making out with him…!” Riselia pouted, her cheeks rosy.

“Yes, if you say so… But be careful, here they come!”

“…?!”

The battle vehicle suddenly sped up.

“Whoa!”

The vehicle jerked, sending Leonis plummeting into Riselia’s bosom.

“A-are you all right, Miss Selia?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Are you hurt, Leo?” Riselia asked, hugging Leonis tightly. “Regina, what happened?”

“Look out the window!” Regina replied.

“…?” Riselia turned her eyes out the window.

A flock of gigantic, bird-like monsters soared through the sky, pursuing the vehicle.

"…Large-type Voids?!"

"Database search complete… Looks like they're unknown specimens."

Sakuya's intuition was spot on, it seemed.

The battle vehicle jerked hard.

"…Leo, hang on tight!"

With his face pressed against a pair of sizeable breasts, Leonis's heart rate skyrocketed.

…My minion has impressive cushioning functionality… Such inappropriately idle thoughts crossed his mind.

Screeeeeeech…!

The swarm of flying Voids swooped down on them from the dark sky.

"Fall already, you pests!" Regina shouted.

The Thunderbolt's 35mm autocannon spewed fire, but conventional weaponry was mostly ineffective against Voids.

"…They're trying to ram us!"

Leonis sighed and cast his eyes out the window. He nonverbally casted a fifth-order instant death spell. And so, moments before the flying Voids rammed into the battle vehicle, their heads fell limp and they all crashed to the ground with a loud thud that kicked up a spectacular cloud of dust.

"H-huh?! What just happened?" Regina exclaimed.

"…Leo?" Riselia caught on.

"I'll be scolded if the Thunderbolt gets damaged." Leonis shrugged.

…He could keenly imagine the Dark Lords' Armies treasurer's angry expression.

"Hey there, boy." An upside-down face looked at him through the window.

"Whoa!" Leonis fell back in shock. "Don't scare me like that, Miss Sakuya!"

"Hmm, so you're vulnerable to this, are you? I'll keep that in mind." Sakuya smiled, clinging to the window. "What we just saw was only their advance force. There's more of them on the way."

"…Eh?" Riselia asked in surprise, only for Regina to chime in a moment later.

“More flying Voids coming in from four o’clock! There’s several of them!”

Leonis focused his sight out the window. More shadows than he could count were soaring toward them on the backdrop of the black sky. They were smaller than the earlier ones, but there were more of them.

“I’ll shoot them down,” Regina said. “Lady Selia, could you take the steering wheel?”

“I’ve never driven a large battle vehicle before…”

“Don’t worry about it. Just keep driving at top speed.”

“…All right.” Riselia nodded nervously. “Leo, you watch the fort, okay?”

“Don’t treat me like a child.” Leonis said, offended.

“Heh-heh, sorry.” Riselia patted him on the head and opened the hatch to the driver’s seat.

Leonis turned his eyes to the Void outside.

…Helping them too much might be a bad idea.

He also had exhausted much of his mana in the last few days, so he wanted to focus on recovering it however possible.

And this could be a golden chance to watch my minions’ growth…

But just as he decided to settle into his seat…

Bang!

He tripped over something on the floor and bumped his head on the ceiling’s corner.

“…!”

“L-Leo, is everything okay back there?! I just heard something!” Riselia shouted from the driver’s seat.

“I—I’m fine…!” Leonis replied, cradling his forehead.

…Wh-what errant obstacle has the audacity of damaging the Undead King…?!

He angrily looked down to the thing he tripped over, only to spot…

“…”

The upper half of the Deus Machina, lying tugged under the seat.

“…My word.” Leonis sighed and picked up its head so as to push it back into its place.

But then…

“Mana detected… Survival mode… Reboot…”

The Deus Machina’s head, still in his hands, opened its eyes.

◆

“The group’s coming right at us.” Regina climbed the ladder from the driver’s seat and peeked her head out the battle vehicle’s roof.

The wind full of sand whipped back her pigtails.

“I’m counting on you, Miss Regina. I’m no good with fighting flying enemies,” Sakuya said, pulling Regina up with one hand, her other gripping Raikirimaru.

“You can count on me.”

Regina licked her lips and locked her legs on a fixture brace on the roof. This was a standard system set up on Thunderbolt units to support long-range Holy Swordsmen.

“Holy Sword, Activate—Drag Slayer!”

A large cannon manifested on Regina’s shoulder. This was her Holy Sword, the Drag Howl’s anti-large-enemy annihilation form.

“Get smooooked!”

Boooom!

She unleashed a flare of fire that shot down a pterosaur-formed Void.

“Impressive. You shot down such a large Void with one shot…”

“Heh-heh, are you surprised, Sakuya? My Holy Sword powered up recently!” Regina said, puffing up proudly.

All the live combat experience she gained over the last few months greatly increased the Drag Howl’s power. So much so that in its top firepower mode, the Drag Blast could possibly deal damage even to a colossal Void, although she would need time to charge the attack.

“They’re coming from below, too.”

“…Below?”

Regina turned around.

Brrrr…!

With the sound of a rumble, a cloud of sediment burst in the air.

“Wh-what?!”

■■■■■■■■■■■…!

A gigantic snake appeared out of thin air and let out a deafening shriek.

“…Is that some kind of worm-type?!”

It was a type of large Void that’d only been sighted in Stampedes, and what’s more, it wasn’t registered in the database. It stood in their way, blocking their forward path with a body as long as a high-rise building.

“Regina, what do we do?!” Riselia called out in confusion from the driver’s seat.

“Lady Selia, don’t step on the brakes. Just keep going right toward it!”

“Eeeh?!”

“The moment you stop, it’ll just swallow us!”

“A-all right!”

The Thunderbolt sped up further.

“Sakuya, can you handle it?”

“I’ll make *sashimi* out of it. I’ll be counting on your covering fire…!”

Sakuya vigorously hopped off the battle vehicle’s roof, Raikirimaru in hand.

◆

“…!”

Leonis dropped the Deus Machina’s top half to the floor in surprise. It landed with a dull thud.

Lying face up, the Deus Machina’s glass-like eyes met his.

“…”

“…”

“…Deus Machina, Schwertleite Terminate.” Leonis gingerly spoke the Dark Lord’s name.

“Affirmative,” she replied.

The horn-like devices attached to her head flickered with a mana glow.

“Did you repair yourself?”

“Affirmative. Thought functionality has been restored,” the girl replied, coldly and expressionlessly.

Looking down at the remains of the Deus Machina at his feet,

Leonis regained his cool.

…Hmm. I suppose the Artificial Elemental's control over it has been lifted.

Or perhaps it was already lifted by the time the Undead King attacked…

…Either way, she's harmless in this condition.

Leonis kneeled down, picked up the Deus Machina's wreckage, placed it on a seat, and then asked, "Schwertleite, do you recognize me?"

"…Negative. There is no recollection of you," she shook her head.

…So her memory's gone.

He got that impression from their exchange thus far. Even if she didn't recognize Leonis as a fellow Dark Lord due to his current form, they did have an intense battle in the ruins. Surely she would have remembered that.

"Who are you?"

"I am Schwertleite Terminate. Guardian of…■■…Star…lamity—" The Deus Machina suddenly fell quiet.

"What's wrong?"

"Damage detected to…self-awareness region… Attempting to repair… Failed."

"Hmm. So self-destructing really did damage your memories…" Leonis nodded. "Next question, then. What were you guarding in those ruins?"

"…Unknown. Relevant memory area damaged."

"So you don't remember anything…" Leonis sighed in disappointment.

It didn't seem like there was any point in asking her about the Voids or this world.

…No, wait. In a way, this is a fortuitous turn of events. Leonis reconsidered.

If her memories were gone, that meant he had a golden chance to use this powerful weapon for his ends.

Leonis held up his index finger to the Deus Machina's face.

"Hear me, Deus Machina. I am, in fact, your master."

"…" Her eyes widened for a moment.

One of the horns on her head flickered.

"Incorrect. You are not my master," she retorted with an

artificial voice.

Leonis grumbled loudly. Things didn't go that easily, it seemed.

"So your master would be the Goddess of Rebellion, then?"

"Affirmative. My only master is Roselia Ishtaris."

"…Hmm. So that memory is still intact."

Perhaps it was because her memory of her master was at the very basis of her identity.

What to do, then…? Leonis pondered, bringing a hand to his chin.

Given mankind's advanced technology, they could possibly repair her damaged memories… Or they could connect the Deus Machina's thought circuits to the Astral Garden, and dive directly into her memory banks in hopes of finding useful information.

…I'll need to rely on Elfiné for that.

But then, the vehicle jolted hard, like something had flung it up.

"Whoa!"

The back of Schwertleite's head bumped against the wall.

"…Minor damage…to memory area…"

"…What?!" Leonis hurriedly picked up her body.

Is she more sensitive to impacts now?!

"Leo, I just heard something, are you all right?!"

"I-I'm fine!"

"It's going to get a little shaky, so hang on tight!"

"U-understood!"

Leonis shouted back to the driver's seat, but then—

"Master?" Schwertleite spoke up.

"…What?"

"Is my master over there?" Schwertleite turned her eyes to the partition hatch.

"By master, do you mean Riselia?"

"Affirmative," Schwertleite's horn lit up in agreement.

"Why is Riselia your master?" Leonis asked her.

He needed to hear why she had called Riselia her master after claiming just moments ago her sole master was Roselia, and why she had abducted her in the Rognas Kingdom ruins. And to top it all off, it looked like she had attacked the Undead King, despite being severely damaged, to protect Riselia.

"A part of the master's existence resides in her."

“…What?” Leonis’s eyes widened in disbelief, and he grabbed Schwertleite’s shoulders. “Deus Machina, what do you mean?!”

She couldn’t be saying Riselia was…the incarnated body for the Goddess of Rebellion’s soul, was she…?

No, that can’t be true. Such a coincidence can’t possibly—

When he first met Riselia, she just happened to be exploring a ruin, and besides, if she was Roselia’s incarnation…

…The Demon Sword Roselia gave me would have reacted to her in some way.

But so far, the sword never showed any reaction toward her.

“You said a part of Roselia resides in her. What did you mean by that?”

“I merely detected the master’s soul. That is all.”

“…”

Leonis grit his teeth silently. It seemed her memories had holes in the most crucial spots…

“Take me to the master’s side.” Schwertleite craned her head toward the driver’s seat.

Leonis paused for thought…

“…Very well.”

And picked up Schwertleite’s top half.

She won’t hurt her, that much is for certain.

And seeing Riselia might jog her memory. Leonis opened the hatch for the driver’s seat and walked through it, the Deus Machina in his arms.

◆

“Erm, Miss Selia…”

“Leo? I’m sorry, I have my hands full right now!” Riselia answered, her eyes fixed forward and her hands on the steering wheel.

The road ahead of them was covered in a cloud of dust, making for poor visibility.

“What’s happening?” Leonis asked.

“Large Voids just— Eh?”

Schwertleite placed a hand on Riselia’s shoulder. “Master.”

“Fhaaa?!” Riselia screeched in surprise and unintentionally

stomped on the brakes.

"…?!"

The rapid braking shook the Thunderbolt, making Schwertleite's body hit the vehicle's meter board hard.

"—Damage to memory area."

"M-Miss Selia, be careful!"

"E-eeeeh?!" Riselia hit the accelerator again and turned around to look. "O-oh. She's awake."

"Yes, but she lost her memory…"

"So she doesn't remember kidnapping me or attacking us?"

"So it seems. But she does say you're her master—"

"Lady Selia, no good, they're catching up to us!" Regina shouted from the roof.

"Leo, I'm sorry, but now's not the time!" Riselia gripped the steering wheel again.

Brrrrrrr!

The ground rumbled, shaking the Thunderbolt.

"Wh-what's happening?"

"Large Voids. Sakuya's trying to stall them, but…"

Leonis squinted, looking through the dust-filled window. He could make out Sakuya, running on top of and attacking a gigantic worm standing dozens of meters tall. But she was having a hard time of it, as her blade couldn't penetrate its armored skin. And if that thing were to attack the Thunderbolt, it would certainly reduce it to scrap.

…I guess I have to help.

But just as Leonis decided to chant a spell—

"Is that your enemy, master?" Schwertleite asked.

"Y-yes…" Riselia nodded, confused.

"…What, are you saying you're going to fight that thing?" Leonis asked.

"Affirmative," Schwertleite answered expressionlessly.

"No, you can't fight in the state you're in." Leonis shook his head.

Schwertleite rested her hand on the vehicle's meter board.

"Please connect me to this magical apparatus."

"…What?"

"The fundamental technology for this magical apparatus is the same as the one used for this body. Connectivity between us

should be possible.”

What Schwertleite was saying came across as impossible.

An anti-Void weapon built by mankind sharing its basic technology with the Deus Machina produced by an ancient civilization…?

The Emperor’s younger brother, Alexios, did say mankind based its advanced technology on knowledge granted by the stars. Perhaps the civilization that created Schwertleite went through the same development.

“Wait, don’t do anything without permission—”

“Connection complete. Synchronization complete. Control over unit established.”

The horn on Schwertleite’s head lit up with mana.

“…?!”

“H-huh?!” Riselia called out in surprise. “The steering wheel’s moving on its own!”

Indeed, the steering wheel started swerving like it had a life of its own, and the vehicle was accelerating.

“Whoa…” Leonis lost balance from the sudden spike in speed and tumbled under the seat. “What are you doing?!”

“L-Lady Selia, what happened all of a sudden?!” Regina called out from the roof, confused.

“These armaments are feeble,” Schwertleite remarked. “Doesn’t this unit have a Light Particle Blaster?”

“No, it doesn’t!” Leonis snapped at her as he turned over on the floor.

“No choice, then. I will have to convert some of my compressed mana furnace’s energy.”

“What?”

The Thunderbolt’s connection port glowed with mana, and the following moment—

“—Ragva Leite!”

The Thunderbolt’s sole weapon, the 35mm autocannon, let out a blinding flash.

Bwooooooosh!

A spear of light fired out of the cannon, boring into the Void’s skull and rupturing its head. At the same time, the 35mm autocannon’s barrel exploded with heat.

“Lady Selia, what was that?! Something like the Drag Blast just

—” Regina called out from outside.

“…”

Leonis and Riselia stared in blank amazement. On the other hand…

“Target eliminated.”

The Deus Machina connected to the Thunderbolt spoke with a mechanical, emotionless voice.

◆

The Otherworldly Castle was a looming structure in the interstice between the real world and the Void world. Lying upon the altar was the half-destroyed body of the Undead King.

“…I must say I’m surprised. I didn’t expect such life… No, such *death* force.” Nefakess Reizaad breathed out in wonder, kneeling beside the altar. “Still, that was a close call. I never expected the Deus Machina to self-destruct…”

Had Nefakess not dragged away the Undead King into the interstice when he had, even the Undead King would have perished.

“I am proud to have been of assistance to you, *my lord*.”

Nefakess then dropped his eyes to his right hand, his fair features contorting in displeasure. Etched onto his hand was a seal of servitude. The moment he had carelessly touched the seal crystal, he incurred the Dark Lord’s wrath and was killed on the spot.

But in the face of this Dark Lord, death was not the end.

The Undead King had resurrected him as his undead minion. Maybe it was on a whim, or perhaps he saw him as a useful pawn… What the Undead King was thinking was beyond Nefakess’s understanding.

“The Great Dark Lord Leonis Death Magnus. You have only just awakened from your slumber, so you should take your time and gather your strength.” Nefakess kneeled, hanging his head in a show of fealty.

The Undead King’s half-destroyed skeletal body was already in the process of repairing itself, but he wouldn’t be able to act for a while.

“It seems the Void Shift project, the encroaching into the real world, will be delayed…”

Originally, the plan had been to use mankind’s creation, Seraphim, to take control of the eighth Dark Lord, the Deus Machina Schwertleite.

“But so be it. The goddess’s prophecy has partially been accomplished.”

But then—

“I see you finally gained control of the Undead King.”

A figure appeared from a tear in space—a fencer with the head of a dragon, clad in scale armor, carrying a double-bladed sword in one hand. One of the Six Heroes—the Divine Dragon of the Six Heroes, Divine Dragon Gisark. One of the Six Heroes who had fought the Dark Lords’ Armies alongside the Swordmaster Shardark.

“Ah, Lord Gisark…” Nefakess got to his feet and turned to face him. “You come bearing good tidings with regards to the Swordmaster, I hope?”

“Sadly not. He’s too far gone,” Gisark whispered bitterly. “He’s like the will to destroy the goddess made form. He’s far too much for us to handle.”

“Are you suggesting we give up on the Lord of Rage he consumed, then?”

“Our plan does not require all the Dark Lords,” said the Divine Dragon, placing a hand on the Undead King’s altar. “Can you lot control the Undead King?”

“The only thing that can truly control the Dark Lords is the will of the goddess.”

“Spoken like a true Priest of the Void…,” Gisark whispered ironically.

And saying this, the Divine Dragon placed a hand on the forehead of the body lying on the altar.

But at that moment—

Oooh… Oooh, ooooooooh…!

The skull’s eyeballs suddenly lit up with a crimson glow.

“What?!” Gisark exclaimed in alarm.

The next moment, a sword manifested in the Undead King’s hand, and was thrust forward, piercing the Divine Dragon through the heart.

“Kah, aaah…!” The Divine Dragon’s blood splattered over the altar, painting it red. “Curse…you…!”

Gisark reached for his double-bladed sword—one of the Arc Seven, the Dark Lord–slaying weapons produced by the Gods—Lesca Kishar. But before he could draw it, the sword gouging his heart shined with a malevolent glow.

“It can’t be… That’s…the Demon Sword…?!” Gisark’s eyes widened.

And then, with a burst of dark light, the Divine Dragon’s body was torn to pieces.

“Oooh…!” Nefakess huffed out in amazement. “You have beaten the strongest of the apostles with such ease…!”

The king of the dead lying atop the altar slowly got up, his shining sword in hand. His bony fingertips, covered in miasma, touched on the Divine Dragon’s detached head.

But then—

“Lord Nefakess, what is the meaning of this…?”

A tear appeared in mid-air.

“The Divine Dragon of the Six Heroes was the strongest of us apostles…”

“Our goddess did not prophesize the Divine Dragon’s death…”

Malformed Void monsters appeared from the Void tear.

The tenth apostle—the Demon Ocean King, Neredigoth Void Destroyer.

The seventh apostle—the Monster Duke, Bolzaaza Void Lord.

The fourth apostle—the Underworld Knight, Steizer Void Knight.

They were the strongest of the apostles, raised from the dead by the Void goddess’s call. Former generals of the Dark Lords’ Armies, each of whom boasted great might.

“Undead King, you are but the goddess’s hand—”

“Indeed. Dark Lord though you may be, the prophecy must not be ignored—”

The three apostles surrounded the Undead King.

“…What are you thinking?”

“We shall seal it…once more…”

“This may be the Undead King, but if he’s not fully awakened, even we can complete the ritual.”

The three apostles began moving their fingers, attempting to

bind him with a barrier spell. However…

Oooh… Ooooh, ooooooooooh!

The Undead King raised his fingers, which were covered in death miasma.

“…What?!”

“O-ooooh!”

“It cannot be… Is he so… Aaaah…!”

Cries of agony filled the dimensional interstice. The death miasma instantly snuffed out the apostles’ lives, causing their flesh to decay.

“Such—Such power…” Nefakess shuddered, faced with the bodies of one of the Six Heroes and the apostles.

So this is the power of the master of death and greatest of the Dark Lords, the Undead King…!

But a crazed smile played over his lips. The Undead King already had contained the Goddess’s soul and inherited her will.

The fingers of the king of the dead touched on the decaying remains of the apostles and charged them with mana.

“You shall become my servants, and lead my armies…”

The light burning in his eye sockets glinted a brilliant red.

CHAPTER 6

INVASION

Imperial Standard Time 14:00 hours—at the Eighth Assault Garden.

“Captain, um…”

It was just when an elite unit of hand-picked Holy Swordsmen moved to investigate the tear that appeared near the capital. One of them, who had his scanner Holy Sword deployed, pointed to the sky suspiciously.

“What’s wrong?” The captain asked.

“I’m not sure, maybe I just imagined it…”

“What? Tell me, no matter what you think it is.”

The captain, a seasoned knight who had much experience attacking Void Hives, knew not to doubt the intuition of Holy Swordsmen with scanner type Swords.

“Y-yes, well, you see… That tear…,” he whispered, looking up. “I think I just saw it…expand a little.”

“What?”

Crack… Crack…!

The sound of shards of glass rubbing against each other filled the area. Everyone else heard it clearly.

“…Report this to the intelligence bureau at once. Tell them we noticed a change in the tear above the capital.”

“Yes…”

But just as the knight nodded—

Crack, crack, crack…!

Countless cracks appeared around them.

◆

Morning dawned over the Void world, and the sky once again became red as blood. The battle vehicle, fused with the Deus

Machina, drove through the wasteland, kicking up a cloud of dust. They ran into Voids a few times along the way, but they were all small groups Regina and Sakuya were capable of handling on their own.

For the time being, Schwertleite's upper half was attached to the driver's seat with industrial tape.

"Hmm… Are you okay, Leite? You're not tired?" Riselia asked in concern, resting a hand on Schwertleite's shoulder.

…Leonis marveled at his minion. She just shortened a Dark Lord's name into a nickname…

"I am fine, master. This is only consuming a negligible amount of mana."

"…That's good. But don't overexert yourself."

"Ah, Lady Selia, the tear is coming into view!" Regina called out, holding on to the ceiling's railing.

"At this speed, we should return to the Seventh Assault Garden in a few hours," Riselia said, checking the vehicle's telescopic camera.

She sounded a bit more encouraged than earlier. Being in the world on the other side of the Void tear was making her anxious.

"I'd love to take a shower once we get back to the dorm."

"I'm gonna go to Le Parfait and have their all-you-can-eat fruit-cakes. ♪"

"I think I'll go visit the mansion over at Old Town. I'm sure Raiou and the others are worried about me."

"Query." Schwertleite's horn flickered rapidly. "What is a fruit-cake?"

"It's a dessert, a cake that uses seasonal fruit. It's tasty."

"Fascinating, master."

"…Aren't you a machine?" Leonis asked in a whisper.

Maybe she had a feature that allowed her to convert food into mana?

Either way, Schwertleite seemed very attached to Riselia, who seemed to like her in return and gladly interacted with the Deus Machina.

This is a Dark Lord, after all…

Not that Leonis was one to talk, because he was a Dark Lord, too, and Riselia fussed over and spoiled him.

"Once we get back to the Academy, we'll have them give you

prosthetic limbs. And we'll need to get you clothes… For now, I'll let you wear my old uniform. I think it'll suit you."

"Matching outfits with master." Schwertleite remained expressionless, but her horn flickered with what looked like glee.

As he looked over the two bonding with mixed feelings, Leonis contemplated the situation. He came up with a theory as to why Schwertleite treated Riselia as her master.

…It's because of the black crystal fragment Nefakess planted in Riselia's heart back then.

It was the same kind of fragment Zemein had when he tried to awaken the Undead King in Necrozoa, and seemed to be made from the same material as the black pyramid in the bottom of the Eisen Fort. It clearly had some relation to Roselia.

Leonis had destroyed the fragment laid in Riselia's heart, but maybe some traces of its influence still lingered in her body.

I suppose that will be cleared up once we repair her memories.

But then, the battle vehicle's communication terminal let out a shrill alarm.

"…Wh-what's the matter?"

"Is this…" Riselia's eyes widened in surprise. "Is this a distress call from the Seventh Assault Garden?!"

◆

Imperial Standard Time 14:10—Seventh Assault Garden, Excalibur Academy.

"All sectors are to shift to first combat form. Evacuate the civilians into shelters."

As the high-pitched alarm blared nonstop, the instructors shouted orders in the tactical meeting room.

"The scale of this attack is unlike last time."

Diglassê Alto glared at the central large monitor. The tear appeared during the Holy Sword Dance Festival, and spawned several large Voids, but it didn't cause a Stampede.

"We never expected a Stampede to start so soon."

"The most concerning part is that the Voids' actions seem organized," said a young man with a visor over his face. It was Oberth Baldanders, who was there representing the student body.

“It’s like they’re obeying a leader.”

“A Void Lord with superior commanding abilities?”

“It’s possible. Some Void specimens have been observed to have high intelligence.”

“And looking at the movements of their group, it seems they have multiple commanders.”

“—Hurry up and detect the Void Lord.”

The commander of the bureau nodded. As the officers continued their meeting, Oberth turned to the girl standing at his back.

“Fenris, have we found Miss Elfiné’s whereabouts?”

“We still can’t get in touch with her. We can’t contact anyone from the eighteenth platoon, for that matter…” Fenris shook her head.

“A pity. I was hoping we could rely on her Eye of the Witch to identify the Void Lord…”

At this point, the eighteenth platoon was considered a top-class platoon in the academy, but their whereabouts were unknown at the moment. It could be they were busy fighting the Voids in the city, but…

“Hurry up and get ahold of Miss Elfiné. We need her power.”

◆

Imperial Standard Time, 14:30—Camelot, Imperial Knight Order Headquarters.

“Large Void attack detected on Float VI—”

“The unit on Float II seems to have been wiped out!”

“Seventh platoon, no good, they’re breaking through our ranks—”

Reports from many units reached Alexios, the Emperor’s younger brother.

“Send reinforcements to Float IV, make sure they hang on. Abandon Float II at once and fall back to second defensive line to intercept the enemy. Seventh platoon, come on, seventh platoon…!” Alexios gave orders to each unit as he rapidly walked down the hall.

The situation was terrible. The Imperial Knights were putting

up a good fight, but the enemies were simply too many.

…This isn't just a Stampede. This is like what happened sixty-four years ago…

This was the worst attack possibly since the invasion, when mankind's habitable territory was reduced to less than 7% of its size.

And commanding a military operation isn't in my nature…

Alexios was a research officer, valued for his data analysis abilities, and was only used as a commander in headquarters during emergencies. This was mostly because his Holy Sword was useless for combat against the Voids, and yet…

If I make the wrong call, Holy Swordsmen on the front could end up dying…

But as he made way to the headquarters, his stomach aching from stress, he heard a familiar voice.

"All units from Elysion, follow my orders. Assuming you want to survive."

Turning his gaze, his eyes settled on a beautiful blond girl clad in a knight's military uniform. Chatres Ray O'ltriese. Third Princess of the O'ltriese royal family, and Alexios's niece.

After being caught up in the Elysion Academy disappearance, she was secured by a search party on the other side of the Void tear and returned to the capital.

She turned in Alexios's direction, her eyes meeting his.

"…Oh, it's you, Uncle."

Chatres rustled her kempt brow. Alexios cracked a sardonic smile—he was used to his niece's attitude.

"I'm glad you're fine. I was worried."

"My apologies for causing you trouble."

"No, you did well to return. By the way…"

Alexios paused, looking around the gathered Elysion students. They were all involved in the disappearance, just like Chatres was.

"Were you ordered to sortie as well?"

"Yes, just a short while ago."

"…I see."

They had only just returned to safety this morning, after having to march through the night, meaning they were likely exhausted, both physically and emotionally. The performance of

Holy Swords was greatly affected by one's mental state, so ordering students to fight in this condition would normally be unthinkable.

…But the situation is simply that harsh.

Chatres was famous for her Holy Sword's power, and had plenty of live combat experience against the Voids. And, most importantly of all, she had that which Alexios lacked—overwhelming charisma. Just having her on the battlefield would embolden those around her.

"The fact we returned in time to handle this situation was the guidance of the planet."

"Yes, indeed."

Alexios wished her good luck in battle, to which Chatres bobbed her head in a short bow. He envied the girl, for the great Holy Sword she possessed, along with the strength and fortitude needed to fight. He could only hope she would defend the people in battle, much like his sworn friend, the late Duke Edward, had.

…I must do what I can.

Alexios reached into his coat's inner pocket. Sitting inside it was the eerie statue the Dark Lord had given him. He was told that if he were to focus on that statue in his time of need, he would be able to communicate with the Dark Lord, but he hadn't responded yet.

"…!"

He gripped the statue hard. Just recalling his audience with Zol Vadis made him shudder in terror all over again.

Relying on that Dark Lord's power would be dangerous, but…

This Stampede put mankind's continued existence in danger.

…Please save us, Dark Lord.

Gripping the terrifying statue in his hand, Alexios prayed to mankind's enemy for salvation.

◆

"…Aaah, why does all this trouble happen when my lord is away?!" Shary gripped her head.

She was in the Dark Lord's castle underground study. Leonis's domain, the Seventh Assault Garden, was being overrun by a

large army of Void monsters. Shary didn't know how much she could expect from mankind's military, but it was clear that against an army that large, they would fall within the day.

"For now, we must defend our key positions with all the forces of the Dark Lords' Armies!"

Said key positions were armories, warehouses, and facilities controlled by the Dark Lords' Armies; the school Leonis attended, Excalibur Academy; the Hræsvelgr dorm; and Phrenia's orphanage.

Of those places, the skilled Three Champions of Rognas were stationed in Excalibur Academy, so they wouldn't need any reinforcements.

Shary hastily scribbled a letter and threw it into the shadow corridors. The beasts living in the shadows would carry the letters to each group leader in the army. At the same time, she gave the Septentrion sisters orders to support each unit.

"…This should do for the time being." Shary wiped the sweat from her brow.

Leonis had left her in full command of his army during his absence. This was a heavy responsibility.

…I will protect my lord's domain. She clenched her fist resolutely in the empty office.,

"…ry… Lady Shary…"

But just then, the Undead King statue sitting on the table started trembling. It was the voice of Lena, the Dark Elf commanding the Demon Wolf Pack.

"What is it?"

"May I have a word with you about the beastman guest general?"

Shary's expression stiffened nervously. Hearing that gave her a bad feeling.

"…Is there a problem with Lord Gazoth?"

"Yes, you see…" Lena trailed off hesitantly. "He threw a violent tantrum and then left the castle with the Demon Wolf Pack. They were armed."

"…"

Shary was aghast. Just as she'd feared, the Demon Wolf Pack was made up of mostly beastmen that were drawn to the Lord of Beasts Gazoth's charisma, and they easily became his

subordinates. He likely decided to take the beastmen with him to defeat the Voids.

"…That's very troubling."

…Having the Lord of Beasts fight the Voids attacking Leonis's kingdom was actually a stroke of luck, but Gazoth was destruction incarnate, and if he fought seriously…

We should probably be prepared for an area or two to be destroyed beyond repair… Shary thought to herself, feeling a migraine coming on.

"Lady Shary, maybe we should try to stop them…?"

"There's no point in trying to stop him. Let's just leave Lord Gazoth to his devices." Shary shook her head weakly. "Lena, I leave the place in your hands."

Shary got to her feet.

"Lady Shary, where are you going?"

"I'll take to the battlefield, too." Shary replied and sank into the shadows with a huff.

◆

"—This is a special signal that's only used during Stampedes."

According to Riselia, this distress signal was issued to all surrounding Assault Gardens in the ocean area.

"So there's a Stampede in the Seventh Assault Garden and the capital…?"

"…It seems probable." Riselia nodded, biting her lip. "But it's not likely the other Assault Gardens will be able to send aid in time."

The only Assault Garden near the capital right now was the Sixth. The Sixth Assault Garden's primary role was to serve as an anti-Void research facility, and its garrison was small.

Riselia looked terribly concerned. And Leonis couldn't fault her, since she'd seen her homeland destroyed by a Stampede once before.

"…Any chance we can go any faster, Leite?"

"It is possible. However, should we go faster, the fuselage will be at a risk of falling apart."

"Then please go as fast as you can without that happening."

“Understood, master.”

The Thunderbolt suddenly sped up.

“Wh-whoa?! Wh-what’s going on?!” Leonis heard Regina squeal from outside.

The battle vehicle’s speed rose, as it kicked up a cloud of dust in its wake.

…Still, even at this speed, it’s unlikely we’ll make it in time, Leonis thought, his eyes fixed on the tear looming ahead in the horizon.

—If a Stampede really broke out, it was questionable if mankind’s forces alone could handle it. And the forces of the Dark Lords’ Armies currently in the capital were made up of Shary, the Three Champions of Rognas, the Septentrion Assassins freed by the Queen of Shadows’ control, and other low- and medium-class undead. They could handle weak Voids, but…

…I can’t see them beating a Void Lord.

Unleashing Rakshasa Nightmare, who was sealed in Shary’s body, was a final measure, and at worst, she could prove even more dangerous than a Void Lord.

“…”

After a moment’s thought, Leonis raised his head and tugged on Riselia’s sleeve.

“Miss Selia, I’ll return to the Seventh Assault Garden ahead of everyone else.”

“…Eh?” Riselia’s eyes widened in surprise.

“I’ll defeat the Void Lord and stop the Stampede.”

“But Leo…”

Riselia looked at Leonis with concern.

“…”

She bit her lip. The distress call alarm continued to blare. If they did nothing, the Seventh Assault Garden and the capital could be overrun by the Stampede, resulting in many deaths.

Just like what happened at the Third Assault Garden six years ago.

“…All right.” Riselia placed her hands on Leonis’s shoulders. “Please. Protect everyone.”

She was anxious to let him go alone… But at the same time, she did trust him.

“Yes, let me handle it.”

As Leonis nodded, Riselia wrapped her arms around his back and hugged him tightly.

“Do you need to suck some blood?” he asked teasingly.

“…N-no, I’m good. I got plenty last night.” Riselia went red in the face.

Leonis opened the door and looked at the shadow under the vehicle. A shadow wolf emerged from the shadow of the caterpillar tread.

“Get on, Lord Magnus.”

Having split from his shadow, Blackas ran parallel to the vehicle.

“You’re quick to act, old friend…”

Leonis smiled wryly and hopped on Blackas’s back.

“Leo, be careful…!”

Riselia called out, and Leonis nodded back wordlessly.

◆

Imperial Standard Time, 14:35. Seventh Assault Garden Area VI, the special demi-human ward. The beastman warriors gathered in the vast biotope’s forest. There was a total of thirty-eight of them, all armed, their eyes glinting savagely.

“Ancient warrior people, let your instincts guide you and do battle!”

The Lord of Beasts, Gazoth Hell Beast, let out a loud roar, to which the beastman warriors all howled in response, their battle cries shaking the trees of the forest.

This was the Lord of Beasts’s unique ability, Beast Howl. The sound of his roar, charged with mana, awakened ancient bloodlust in his minions, rousing their latent instincts. This made their already robust bodies bulk up, turning each of them into fearsome warriors.

This was the power of the Great Demon Beast Corps, which terrorized the world a millennia ago as the vanguards of the Dark Lords’ Armies.

“Ooh, and worthy prey just so happened to come by.”

Gazoth looked up, his fangs bared. All of a sudden, a swarm of Voids appeared in the sky, likely drawn to the surge of mana

filling the woods.

“Intrepid creatures, eh? Or maybe they just know no fear.”

His steel-like fur stood on end, glowing silver. A gale of wind brewed in his outspread hands.

“Nnngh… Lord of Beasts Rumbling Fist!”

Brrrrr!

The Area VI Float trembled. The shot of compressed, swirling air single-handedly blew away a few hundred Voids. The beastmen warriors stared in blank amazement. However—

“Tsk. Weaklings.”

Just as the Lord of Beasts clicked his tongue—

■■■■■■■■■■■■…!

A massive winged shadow streaked through the sky.

“…? Is that a dragon?” Gazoth smirked, his golden eyes glinting.

He could tell from its aura—this creature was on another level.

“I might actually have fun with that one…” He turned to look at the beastmen. “I’ll go after that thing. You guys let loose around here.”

He kicked against the ground, producing a powerful thud as he leaped away. Covering hundreds of meltes in a single bound, he landed on a rooftop.

“Now then…” He looked around for the dragon monster. “Huh?”

But instead, he spotted a human figure standing atop the rooftop’s fenced edge. A white-haired young man dressed in a priest’s garb.

“Well, if it isn’t the Lord of Beasts himself. Fancy running into you at a place like this…”

“…The hell are you?”

As Gazoth glared at him with his lone eye, the young man bowed his head courteously.

“An apostle of the goddess, Nefakess Void Lord.”

“I know that name. You’re one of Azra-Ael’s people.”

“Yes, I did serve him a thousand years ago.”

“Hmm…” Gazoth cocked an eyebrow. “Everyone’s rising from the dead around here, aren’t they? What, are you looking to join my side now?”

“Not at all. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

“…The opposite?”

“You will become ours, Lord of Beasts,” Nefakess said, and snapped his fingers.

Tree roots appeared out of thin air and tightened around Gazoth’s limbs.

“…What kind of trick is this?”

“This would be the Archsage of the Six Heroes, Arakael Degradios…”

“…What?”

“I was able to retrieve part of the hero’s soul, after he fused with the Holy Tree. Mankind’s cutting-edge technology was able to revive him.”

“…!”

The roots holding Gazoth in place glowed with pale mana.

“I’ll be using you for an experiment for a new weapon of ours, Lord of Beasts.”

“Hah. You’re one funny man.” Gazoth smiled indomitably, baring his large fangs. “But if I were in your shoes, I wouldn’t underestimate a Dark Lord.”

◆

“…Tessera.”

“Don’t worry. Leo will come save us…”

As their orphanage was surrounded by Voids, Tessera did her best to keep the children’s spirits up. The monsters attacked while Phrenia, the owner of the orphanage, was out shopping. Children who didn’t evacuate in time were hiding inside the building, cowering under their blankets.

Tessera was only eight years old and just as scared as anyone else. But she wasn’t allowed to cry.

I’m the oldest one here…

Getting to her feet, she peeked out the window. The stone statue set at the gate was reduced to pieces. That statue had been there for as long as Tessera could remember, but when the monsters the grown-ups call Voids showed up, it suddenly came to life and started moving, fighting to defend the children.

But now, the statue was shattered to bits.

“…?!” Tessera let out a screech despite herself.

A large, snakelike creature appeared on the orphanage’s front lawn. Its eyes swerved, meeting her gaze.

“Aah…”

The monster’s large tongue slipped out, licking its lips. It slowly crept closer, opening its jaws.

“…L-Leo and his friends are going to beat you!” Tessera said firmly, despite the tremble in her voice.

But then—

“Child though you may be, I applaud your faith in my lord.”

Whoosh!

“…Eh?”

A whistling—the sound of the wind being cut—could be heard, and the serpent monster’s head went flying.

Whoosh, whoosh!

The head was then cut into three in mid-air, then into six, and fell to the ground.

“…Wh-what?” Tessera froze up in shock.

◆

“I made it in time, thankfully.”

Shary stood atop the orphanage’s rooftop and looked down on the courtyard. The snake’s severed, chopped-up head let out disgusting miasma as it vanished into thin air.

This place is dear to my lord.

She landed in the courtyard and gathered the gargoyle’s remains. With some glue, it could be restored to its rightful shape.

“What is the meaning of this? What is a shadow dweller assassin doing here?”

“…?!” Shary wheeled around, noticing a terrible presence surface behind her.

Crack, crack, crack…!

Countless cracks formed in the air, only to fully shatter—and from within it, a monster that looked like a giant frog emerged.

“…?!”

It was covered in a sleek film of mucus and let off a stench of

decay. An air of death hung over it, spreading through the courtyard.

…An undead? Shary narrowed her eyes and swung her shadow whip.

"…Who are you?" she asked, lashing at the ground in intimidation.

If this figure could tell on sight that Shary was a shadow dweller, then they must be some demon from one thousand years ago.

"If you do not know my name, then I shall introduce myself…" The monster smiled in amusement, drops of saliva thick with decay dripping from its lips. "I am known as the Monster Duke, Ishrag Bolzaaza."

"…The Monster Duke?!"

Shary had heard that name before—he was a general under one of the Dark Lords, Dizolf Zoa, the Lord of Rage. If this was actually Bolzaaza, then he was a high-ranking officer of the Dark Lords' Armies who far outranked Shary.

However…

Just like the Six Heroes, he was made into a minion of the Voids.

Shary tightened her grip on her whip's handle. Whenever the Voids launched a large-scale attack, they were led by a commanding specimen called a Void Lord.

So if I defeat the Monster Duke, this invasion might be stopped?

Even if the invasion itself didn't end right here, defeating the commander would allow the situation to swing in mankind's favor. Shary threw a glance at the orphanage behind her and shouted at the girl looking out the window.

"…Child, remain quiet and hide!"

"Y-yes!" The girl squeaked back and retreated into the window.

"The Monster Duke Bolzaaza…" Shary faced the frog-shaped monster and bowed respectfully. "This is my master's domain. I ask that you leave."

"Oh. For a maid, you have nerve…" Bolzaaza cackled and extended his prolonged tongue.

"…?!"

With the sound of a crack, he swung down his tongue.

Whooosh!

Shary hopped away, landing on the gate's iron railing. She

swung her whip, slashing at Bolzaaza's head. However…

"Mm? That did nothing." Bolzaaza calmly raised his head and glared at Shary.

"…!"

He swung his tongue again, tearing down the fence. As she jumped away, Shary flung shadow daggers in midair. The seven daggers gouged into Bolzaaza's flabby stomach, sinking into his skin. Bits of decaying flesh splattered into the air, unleashing a rotting stench.

"Did that achieve anything?"

His rotten flesh bubbled up disgustingly, regenerating before long.

"…You're undead, after all," Shary whispered to herself, fixing her grip on her whip.

The Monster Duke wasn't undead when he had been in the Lord of Rage's service. Someone must have resurrected him as an Undead…

"Yes, indeed." Bolzaaza approached her, his rotund form jiggling with each step. "I have transcended death, becoming an undead minion at the hand of the mighty Undead King, Leonis Death Magnus."

"What…did you just say?" Shary raised her eyebrows, confused. "Perhaps I misheard you. I thought you just said the Undead King raised you…"

"Ho-ho, so you do know the names of the Dark Lords from a thousand years ago, shadow dweller." Bolzaaza regarded her with a sticky smirk. "It was at the hand of that great one, the Undead King, that I was granted the power of undeath."

"You're lying…" Shary's dusk-colored eyes glared at Bolzaaza. "It couldn't have been my lord…the Undead King!"

"What?" Bolzaaza's golden eyes widened.

"Assuming my lord's name is a sin I cannot overlook!"

Shary bolted ahead.

"Haaaaaaaaaa!"

With all the might she could muster, she lashed the shadow whip at him repeatedly. Anyone who assumed her precious master's name, whoever they may be, had to be punished.

"It doesn't work, it'll never work!" Bolzaaza laughed, even as the whip cut into his flesh.

"…!"

Whoever it was that had assumed her master's name, controlled the power of death. And the fact remained that the Monster Duke was indeed undead, with all the benefits that came of it.

…This is tricky.

Shary was an assassin, and her methods were to hide in the shadows and slay her targets with one blow to the vitals. This made her an exceptionally poor choice against the undead, who could regenerate even if all their vitals were destroyed.

Lord Blackas could crush such an opponent with overwhelming strength, though…

Shary discarded her shadow whip and swooped into Bolzaaza's flank. "In that case, I'll just slice you up until you stay dead."

She took two shadow daggers out of the sleeve of her maid's uniform.

"Septentrion Assassination Technique—Phantasmal Shadow Blade!"

The shadow daggers danced through the air, carving into Bolzaaza's corpulent flesh.

"Ku-ha-ha-ha! Didn't I already tell you it's pointless?!"

Bolzaaza extended his elongated tongue, sweeping it and mowing down trees. The trees crumbled to the ground with a thud, and a crack ran through the ground. However, Shary was nowhere to be seen. She traveled through Bolzaaza's shadow, instantly emerging behind him.

"Haaaa!"

With shadow blades in both hands, she stabbed at his blind spot. But the next moment, eyeballs appeared in Bolzaaza's back.

"…What?!"

And it wasn't just eyeballs. Arms bubbled from his back, grabbing onto Shary's petite figure.

"Kuh, nngh…!"

"You put up an amusing fight, shadow dweller!"

Saying this, he slammed her with full force into the ground.

"Kah, haa…!"

Shary got to her feet and prepared to plunge into the shadows, but Bolzaaza spewed out intense flames that extinguished all the

surrounding shadows, cutting off her avenue of escape. He then swung his tongue down like a whip.

“Gah…!”

Shary’s body bounced against the ground.

“Come on, where’s all that outrage and pluck from earlier?!” Bolzaaza laughed, continually lashing down on her with his tongue.

…He’s…too strong…!

Even after being reduced to a Void, he was still a general under the Lord of Rage and was a major officer of the Dark Lords’ Armies that greatly outranked her. And now that he was undead, his power was even greater.

Bolzaaza coiled his long, extended tongue around Shary’s body.

“I won’t swallow you whole. I’ll take my time tasting and dissolving you.”

“My…lord…” Shary whispered.

But then—

Bwooosh!

Something came falling from the sky, shooting through the Monster Duke’s head. Shary was thrown to the ground, rolling in the soil for a moment.

“…Huh?” She looked up in shock, her eyes settling on crimson hair flowing in the wind.

Standing there was a girl, her hands on her waist and her golden eyes fixed on Shary.

“You there, Maid.”

“H-huh…?”

“Where’s Leo?” Veira Dragon Lord asked Shary, her voice casual and unconcerned.

CHAPTER 7

THE DARK LORDS ASSEMBLE

Imperial Standard Time, 15:00.

Voids formed like sea monsters swarmed in the horizon. A Void Reef, a gigantic Void Hive, was slowly drawing in on the capital.

“The estimated time of its arrival is 15:10 hours. If that thing reaches us, Float VI and Float III are projected to take fatal damage,” said a royal guard knight, standing atop the deck of the *Hyperion* battleship.

“How goes the civilians’ evacuation?” The Empire’s fourth princess asked him, her eyes fixed on the horizon.

“The civilians are currently being directed to the shelters, however…”

“The shelters will be meaningless if those Voids arrive…,” she whispered, hugging Carbuncle the Elemental in her arms.

“Princess Altiria…”

“We must stop it, no matter what.”

“…Yes, Your Highness.”

The royal guard serving the princess hardened their features in grim resolve. The fact the princess, still twelve years of age, had to stand on the front lines, was a source of endless shame for them. And had she, with her royal blood, not been here, the ship would not have been able to exhibit its full power.

The Anti-Void Battleship *Hyperion*, and twenty-four combat vessels. This was the extent of the force that guarded the capital’s surrounding waters. Its sister vessel, the *Endymion*, was currently deployed far away in the Second Assault Garden, and it would take twenty-seven hours to come to their aid, even if it traveled at top speed.

“This battle will determine the capital’s survival,” Altiria said, her voice travelling loudly across the deck. “May the blessings of the Planet and our Holy Swords be with us!”

The fleet opened fire on the approaching Void swarm at once. Conventional weaponry had no effect on Voids, but this was done solely to buy time for the capital's knights to set up their defenses.

However…

A massive tentacle rose out of the water with a loud splash and slammed down on one of the accompanying ships, breaking it in two.

"Your Highness, get back!" One of the royal knights manifested his Holy Sword and guarded Altiria.

The water's surface surged up, and a gigantic sea monster with countless writhing tentacles surfaced.

…I am…the Demon Ocean King, Neredigoth…

A cracked, eerie voice echoed from the waves.

"…A Void Lord?!" Altiria swallowed nervously.

The creature rose up from the depths, as large as a mountain range. It was a sight that invoked utter despair.

"Aah… Aaaah…"

May the seas of emptiness…consume you…

The tentacles extended to the sky, then swung down at the ships scattered across the waters.

"…!"

Altiria brought her hands together and closed her eyes in prayer. An image came to mind—the one she saw that day, through her hazy consciousness, of a boy…

Slash!

The sound of something bursting filled the water.

"…Eh?"

Altiria opened her eyes in amazement and looked up. The sea monster's tentacles were all cut into pieces.

"Wh-what…?"

She turned to look at the royal guard, hoping to grasp the situation. The cut-up tentacles fell into the ocean, producing countless pillars of spraying seawater.

"The Demon Ocean King? You give yourself lofty titles when you're a weakling whose only virtue lies in his size."

Farther down the *Hyperion*'s deck appeared a figure—a girl with beautiful, amethyst-colored hair, dressed in a transparent, liquid-like raiment.

Did she just do that…?

Altiria swallowed the lump in her throat and called out to the girl facing away from her.

“Wh-who are you…?”

“I am the true ruler of the seas…,” said the girl expressionlessly, her eyes fixed on the Voids swarming in the horizon.

“Huh…?”

“And I do owe Leonis a debt of gratitude.”

The girl slowly extended a hand, and her transparent raiment glowed.

Brrr…!

A massive whirlpool appeared in the water and began swallowing up the sea monsters one by one.

◆

“Leo’s not here?”

“Yes, Dragon Lord. My lord is away at present,” Shary said, her eyes on Veira, who was looking down at her from atop the rubble.

Aaah, another troublesome person joined the mix…, she thought to herself.

“Cheeky little…” The Dragon Lord let off an intimidating aura, making Shary flinch away. “I didn’t mean you. It’s cheeky of Leo to be away when I came to all the trouble of dropping by to visit…” She pouted in displeasure and brushed a hand through her crimson hair. “But fine, I understand. When will he be coming back?”

“I-I’m afraid I don’t know that, either…” Shary shook her head gingerly.

But then—

“Guh… Curse yooooou!” A cry of hatred erupted from the rubble Veira was standing on.

The Void Lord got up, pushing the rubble away.

“Dragon Lord?!” Shary called out in alarm.

“Y-you will pay! I, the Monster Duke Bolzaaza, shall show you my true form—”

“Oh, shut up.”

Thud!

Veira, who had jumped up into the air, landed on the Void Lord's head. Shary could hear his flesh being crushed by her kick, and the Monster Duke was squished without time to unveil his true form.

"Hmph, he was surprisingly durable. What was he, undead?" Veira asked, cocking a brow in disgust. She snapped her fingers, and the massive lump of Bolzaaza's flesh was enveloped in crimson flames. "That should do it. Well, if Leo isn't around, I have no business here."

"E-erm, Lord Veira!" Shary called out in a hurry.

"What?" Veira glared at her, making Shary back away.

"W-would you please use your power to help defend this city, until my lord returns?"

Veira placed her hands on her hips and looked down at Shary. "A human kingdom means less than nothing to me."

Shary predicted she would say that, of course. "You're absolutely right, Dragon Lord. I was not expecting you to do this without recompense." Nodding, Shary rummaged through her sleeve. "I offer you this this as tribute."

"…?" Veira eyed the maid's offering with dubious eyes.

"These are sticky donuts, a limited-time product," Shary explained.

"…This is a treat?"

"Try it, please."

"Hmm…" Veira took the donut and nibbled on it. She chewed on it animatedly in a cute manner that didn't fit her intimidating appearance as the Lord of Dragons. "…It's pretty good. ♪" Veira licked her fingers and then shrugged. "Still, this isn't enough to earn the Dragon Lord's assistance."

Shary nodded in understanding. "The forces of mankind cannot reach your or my lord's ankles, Dragon Lord. But they have created many things, like these donuts, that I am certain will be to your liking. Letting these unpure monsters reduce these things to ashes surely will not benefit you, Dragon Lord."

Veira paused for thought. "You have a point." She nodded and then smiled. "Oh, fine. Leo will owe me one for this, so that's worth it."



“I, erm…” Shary stammered, faltering. Indeed, this would mean Leonis would owe the Dragon Lord a debt for her help.

…Did I overstep my boundaries in making these decisions during his absence?

But then Shary shook her head in denial. Her role was to protect her lord’s kingdom, regardless of the cost.

My only choice is to rely on the Dragon Lord’s strength…

Shary gripped the hems of her skirt and bowed deeply.

“Please, lend me your help, Dragon Lord!”

“Fine. I, Veira Dragon Lord, will help you just this once.” Veira threw back her crimson hair. “B-but just to make it clear, I’m not doing this to help Leo. Do not get the wrong idea,” she said, thrusting her finger at Shary.

“Of course, I understand.”

“Hmph. In that case, I’ll go run wild… Hm?” Veira paused, looking up to the sky in surprise.

Shary followed her gaze, and far in the distance, flying over the city center…was a massive shadow.

“Isn’t that…?”

It was a dragon, its wings spread—not a normal dragon, but one with most of its flesh decayed and much of its bones exposed.

“A dragon zombie…?”

The undead form of a dragon.

“…No, but how…? Why is he…?”

◆

“Lady Selia, we’re almost through the tear!”

“Yes, hold on tight—”

The battle vehicle’s engine roared as it sped through the wasteland, then flew through the tear in space. For a moment, Riselia felt her field of vision contort. She held on to the back of Schwertleite’s seat and peered out the windshield.

“Look. It’s the sea…!”

Far off in the horizon, they could see the Seventh Assault Garden and the capital.

…We made it back. We’re home!

Riselia picked up a pair of binoculars and peered through

them. There was a massive Void tear in the skies above Camelot, and a black shadow was trying to emerge from it, swirling like a leaden cloud.

“There really is a Stampede going on…”

Swarms of Voids filled the sky. The event of six years ago flashed in Riselia’s mind—of the last time she saw her father, Edward Crystalia. Of the days she spent in the shelter trembling, with Regina hugging her shoulders.

But then, a sound pulled her out of her thoughts.

“—ghteenth…toon… come in. Eighteenth pla…come in…”

It came from her earring-type terminal.

Communications are back online?! Right, because we crossed the tear…!

They automatically entered the Seventh Assault Garden’s communication range.

“This is Excalibur Academy’s eighteenth platoon. Platoon leader, Riselia Crystalia speaking—” Riselia touched on the earring, trying to respond. But sadly…

“Come in…teenth platoon…!”

“We’re being jammed!”

The Voids must have been causing EMP barrages.

“Sakuya, is there any way you can use telepathy?” Riselia asked Sakuya, who was on the roof, on the off chance it was possible.

“No, I can’t.”

“…Right.”

The Sakura Orchid people were thought to have all manner of mysterious powers, so she was hoping this wasn’t entirely impossible.

“Master, I will attempt to improve communications.”

“Huh…?” Riselia turned to look at Schwertleite in surprise. Her clear, glass-like hair was glowing faintly.

“P-pretty…” Riselia could only stare, enchanted.

“…lia…Riselia! Goodness, answer me already!” The voice suddenly became clearer.

“…Fenris?!”

“Riselia Crystalia, what in the world are you doing?!”

Riselia could hear Fenris Edelritz’s shrill voice in her era.

“I-I’m sorry!”

“Where are you right now?”

“In the wasteland near the Seventh Assault Garden. I’ll, uh, I’ll send your our coordinates.”

Operating her terminal, she transmitted the battle vehicle’s current position.

“You must have been outside the city on a mission. Are you up to date on the situation right now?”

“A Stampede, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. We’re being attacked from both sea and sky, with multiple Void Lords assaulting us. And they seem to be acting in an organized manner, like human military units.”

“Multiple Void Lords…” Riselia gulped.

“We’re overwhelmed with all the data coming in right now. We’re in dire need of Miss Elfiné’s Holy Sword.”

“Miss Finé’s Holy Sword…?”

“Yes. I assume she’s with the rest of your platoon?”

“No, she isn’t…”

She was working in Excalibur Academy, also known as the capital’s anti-Void information bureau.

“She’s not with us. Are you saying you can’t get in touch with her?”

“What?” Fenris replied in surprise. **“We haven’t been able to contact her for a while now. We were sure she was working with you…”**

“…”

Riselia got a bad feeling. She held the utmost respect for Elfiné, and knew she wasn’t one to flee from the battlefield. Something must have happened to her. Maybe she was attacked by the Voids when she was all on her own, or perhaps…

“We’ll search for her as soon as we return to the Seventh Assault Garden,” Riselia said.

“Yes, we ask that you make it your top priority. We’ll open Gate 2 in Area VII for you.”

“Understood, thank you.” Riselia nodded and turned off the transmission and looked down at the communication terminal.

“Miss Finé…”

Her message history was full of messages Elfiné had sent them over the last few days, all of which arrived at once when they returned to the Assault Garden’s transmission range. She checked each message one by one.

…She was worried sick about us.

But then, her finger paused over the terminal. The last message was at 19:00, Imperial Standard Time.

"If it's yesterday, this must mean it was before the Stampede began…"

So she went missing regardless of the Voids…?

But then her terminal rang out again. It was a call from Elfiné.

"Miss Finé…?"

"—Oh, you finally picked up. I guess miracles do happen…"

As Riselia picked up the call, the voice on the other side responded nervously. This wasn't Elfiné's voice.

"Who is this…?"

"There's no time, I can't answer any questions now." The voice on the other side cut her off. **"Come to the Seventh Assault Garden's agricultural development block's Plant 04. Right now."**

"Eh, wait—"

But before Riselia could ask anything else, the call suddenly cut off.

"The agricultural development block's Plant 04…."

This was the location of a Phillet laboratory.

◆

The gigantic shadow swooped over the Central Garden's high-rise buildings, its wings spread. This dragon, its scales golden, glared down at the ground as its body leaked disgusting miasma. Its rotting flesh slid off its bones, falling down to the ground in steaming piles. Between its exposed bones was it heart, beating red and glowing.

■■■■■■*…!*

It let out a cursed howl that shook the air. Its intellect was all but gone.

"You have fallen far, Divine Dragon. Divine Dragon Gisark," said the Dragon Lord, standing atop the turret of an anti-Void antiaircraft gun with her hair blowing in the wind.

Looking at the Divine Dragon's changed form, she frowned in displeasure. She, too, was once corrupted by the Voids and turned into a rampaging dragon with her intellect lost. She could only

vaguely remember how it happened, but she did know Leonis cleared away the Voids' influence on her.

"A dragon always repays its debts. I'll protect your kingdom for you…" Veira smiled invincibly.

And debts aside, the Divine Dragon Gisark was her mortal enemy, one she had a long-standing history with. Gisark was a hero drawing on both the blood of both mankind and dragonkin, borne of a golden dragon and a human woman. Despite his draconic roots, he sided with the armies of men and opposed the dragonkin, and fought Veira to the death in the Demon Dragon Mountain Range.

"I have a debt to repay you, too…!"

Kicking against the turret, Veira propelled herself up to the sky, and stuck out her index finger toward the giant dragon floating in the sky.

"Let's get this started. Drag Rei!"

A red flash fired from Veira's finger, hitting the golden dragon head-on with a rumbling blast. Intense flames shot up, producing a heat daze. However…

■■■■■■*…!*

The golden dragon blew away the flames with a flap of its wings.

It blocked my spell? No, that's not it…

Veira glared viciously at Gisark, who continued to fly in circles overhead like nothing had happened. Its burnt, decaying flesh was bubbling and regenerating rapidly.

"This isn't just Void miasma. He's undead, too." Veira grit her teeth.

…That thing was a dragon no longer. It was just a dragon's carcass being puppeteered through necromancy—a dragon zombie.

…The Six Heroes' Divine Dragon became undead?

It was a little hard to believe. Necromancers were normally only able to raise corpses of monsters that were weaker or equal to them in power. And in this case, this was one of the Six Heroes, meaning even a master of the Realm of Death would fail to resurrect a being of this level of power. The only one who it possibly could be was Leonis Death Magnus, who raised devils and dragons as undead minions.

And I can't see Leo turning him into his minion…

If that was the case, Gisark wouldn't be attacking this city, Leo's kingdom. The only one capable of raising the dead on a level matching the Undead King was the Holy Woman of the Six Heroes, Tearis Resurrectia, but even then, her power didn't produce undead.

"But it doesn't matter. Undead or not…" Veira kicked against the air, speeding up as she rapidly drew on the Divine Dragon. "My flames will reduce you to ashes!"

She raised both hands overhead, producing a gigantic fireball.

"Crimson Divine Dragon Wave!"

A dragon-shaped flame burst from her conjoined hands, moving in a spiral pattern and pursuing the Divine Dragon. Wherever the flames passed, buildings melted away and began collapsing.

The flame dragon crunched its jaws on the Divine Dragon's windpipe, burning through its rotten flesh.

"Good! Consume it!"

Veira swooped down midflight, sinking her heel into the Divine Dragon's head with all her strength. With a mighty wallop, the Divine Dragon crashed into the Central Garden, knocking down buildings in its way.

The maid did ask her to abstain from destroying buildings where possible, but…

Sorry, the situation doesn't allow for that!

But this is just Leo's kingdom, after all, not hers. With that excuse, Veira pressed the offensive.

"Haaaaaaaa! Dragon Lord Palm Strike!"

Veira sunk her fist, charged with mana, into the fallen Divine Dragon's head. The mana exploded loudly, forming a circular shock wave that blew away the surrounding buildings. But just as Veira was about to unleash a Drag Rei spell at close range—

■■■■■■…!

The Divine Dragon's charred body rapidly regenerated, its flesh swelling up so as to swallow up Veira.

"…You think you can take me into your being?!"

Veira was being slowly dragged into Gisark's massive form…. But then, its rotten flesh burst at once. Like an egg hatching, a massive red dragon tore its way out of its rotting flesh. This was

Veira Dragon Lord's true draconic form. The red dragon slashed and crunched through the decaying meat, spitting it to the ground in disgust. It then spread its wings and soared up, spraying its fiery breath on its undead opponent as it tried to regenerate.

Hellfire spread through the Central Garden's main street. Veira swung down her claws, charged with mana, onto the burning mass of decayed flesh—

…?!

But the blow was stopped by thick tree roots erupting out of Gisark's back.

…What?!

Gisark just used sorcery…?!

But this couldn't be the case—the sorcery dragons used was called dragon tongue, and it didn't include any spells like this. The tree roots matured with explosive speed, binding Veira's legs, piercing through her dragon roots and gouging into her flesh. Roaring in anger, Veira blew fire on the roots, burning them down.

However, the roots continued to grow and regenerate at startling speed, and this time wrapped all around Veira's large form.

…The way it's regenerating so fast! Is this the Holy Tree?!

The tree that once existed at the heart of the world, governing over life. Why was that tree sprouting out of the Holy Dragon's stomach…?

Veira breathed fire again, burning through the Holy Tree's roots. As they continued to regenerate, she cleared them away and made to fly off… But then Gisark raised his head and bit into her throat!

…?!

The Divine Dragon's maw overflowed with death miasma as it bit into her. The red dragon's burning scales were washed over with black, her flesh dying. The Divine Dragon pulled the red dragon down, knocking her into the ground.

■■■■■■…!

Gisark's claws tore into Veira's wings, spraying blood in the process. A roar that felt like someone's scream echoed through the air. And then, the maw broiling with death miasma tore

through Veira's windpipe—

"Al Gu Belzelga!"

A blast of crimson flame blew off Gisark's upper jaw.

…?!

A small shadow descended upon the crumbling wreckage of the buildings.

"Fool, you dare ransack the Dark Lord Zol Vadis's domain?!"

A boy clad in the former Dark Lord's mantle removed his mask and smiled indomitably.



◆

Imperial Standard Time, 15:10. In the Seventh Assault Garden's agricultural development block. The eighteenth platoon's battle vehicle crossed through the gate Fenris had opened for them and drove through an underground personnel route to reach the designated spot. This area was on the outer rim of the Assault Garden and hadn't become embroiled in the fighting yet.

"…Hmm. Are you sure this isn't some kind of trap, Lady Selia?" Regina asked as she climbed down from the vehicle's roof.

Riselia had the same misgivings, but—

"This is our only lead about where Miss Finé is."

But also, the voice that called them had been familiar. She honestly didn't know much about whoever it was—Miss Finé herself didn't trust them, either. But even through the phone call, Riselia could feel that person was speaking with sincere emotion.

The three disembarked the battle vehicle, manifested their Holy Swords, and looked around cautiously. Since the entire area was given an evacuation order, the place was deserted. This massive harvesting factory, the cutting edge of magical technology, stood still and lifeless.

"There's no one around…"

"I don't feel any Voids, either," Sakuya whispered.

But then they felt someone behind them.

"You made it."

"…?!"

The trio turned around, Sakuya holding up Raikirimaru. The scenery warped before their eyes, and the figure of a woman in a white coat emerged from the shadows.

"Miss Clauvia…" Riselia stopped Sakuya and spoke to the woman.

Clauvia Phillet—a senior officer from the Anti-Void Research Laboratory, and Elfiné's older sister.

"Where did you come from?" Sakuya demanded, her hand still on Raikirimaru's grip and her eyes glinting dangerously. "I didn't even sense your presence…"

"That would be the power of my Holy Sword, Sneak Ring. You

could throw me in the middle of a swarm of Voids and I could mask my presence. A power worthy of a coward like me." She smiled in self-derision and turned her eyes to Riselia. "I haven't seen you since the Holy Light Festival, young Lady Crystalia."

"…Yes."

Riselia met Clauvia some two months ago, when she showed them the dragon trapped in the ice block in the Sixth Assault Garden's museum. Soon after that, the situation went out of control…

"Miss Clauvia, why do you have Miss Finé's terminal…?"

"Oh, her copy terminal. I borrowed it during the Holy Light Festival." Clauvia shrugged, looking unapologetic. "Finé's an amicable enough girl, but she doesn't have many friends. I thought you'd be the only ones I could count on."

"For what? What happened to Miss Finé?" Regina asked, her expression grave.

"Finé was abducted."

"…What?"

"Taken by Phillet's private militia." Clauvia bit her lip. "I was careless. I didn't think they'd act in broad daylight—"

"W-wait!" Riselia drew on Clauvia. "Why would they take Miss Finé…?!"

"She became too involved in the Phillets' dark side. I have the Emperor's younger brother to back me, but she tried to fight that man all on her own…"

"…What man?"

"Count Deinfraude Phillet," Clauvia spat out the name bitterly.

"…"

The trio exchanged looks.

Elfiné had told them about the Phillet Foundation and its involvement in the D Project when they lodged together before the Holy Sword Dance Festival.

"Looks like Finé told you about at least some of it already."

"Yes…"

"Honestly, I don't know why that man decided to act now. But it's clear he's planning something awful, using this Stampede as a cover."

Saying this, Clauvia straightened out her back and bowed her head to the three girls.

“Please. Save my sister.”

“Miss Clauvi—”

“Part of the army might be in Deinfraude’s pocket. They can’t be relied on. You’re the only ones I can count on right now—”

“W-we understand!” Riselia nodded and clasped Clauvia’s hand. “We’ll save Miss Finé. You can count on us.”

Regina and Sakuya nodded in agreement.

“…Thank you.” Clauvia bowed her head again.

“So do you know where she’s being held?” Sakuya asked.

Clauvia pointed at the tower standing at the center of the agricultural block.

“The Phillet’s seventh research facility. I analyzed surveillance camera footage from all over the city, and the car that took Finé definitely went there.”

“So you don’t know exactly where they’re keeping her.”

“No.” Clauvia shook her head. “The Astral Garden’s protection is strong there, and I couldn’t hack into the facility’s internal cameras.”

“Sneaking in isn’t an option, then.”

“Yes. I could use my Holy Sword to mask my presence, but that wouldn’t help me take her out of there. There’s Phillet’s private militia guarding the place, too.”

“—Some of them might be Holy Swordsmen, too,” Sakuya whispered.

Riselia nodded. “In that case, Miss Clauvia, we’ll have you hide yourself with your Holy Sword’s power and look for where Miss Finé is held. We’ll serve as decoys while you do that, and once you know where she is, you can regroup with us and we’ll go to her rescue. Are you all right with that?”

“Yes, I’m on board with that plan,” Clauvia said.

“No objections on my side, either,” Sakuya said.

“It’s a plan, then,” Regina aimed the Drag Striker’s muzzle at the Phillet tower. “We can’t waste a second. Let’s go save Miss Finé!”

CHAPTER 8

THE FALLEN DIVINE DRAGON

…What in the blasted hells is Veira doing here? Leonis suspiciously regarded the red dragon from atop the building.

He thought she was away, pursuing the Devil of the Underworld and the Azure Fort.

“…Leo, where were you during all this?!” Leonis heard Veira’s voice ring in his head telepathically.

“I went back to the Rognas Kingdom. But forget that, what is this monster…?” He turned his eyes to the undead dragon that was regenerating even as they spoke.

“This is Gisark, the Divine Dragon of the Six Heroes. Or what’s left of him, anyway.”

“…What?”

Leonis looked at the dead dragon creeping across the earth. Some of its rotting flesh was still covered in golden scales that did look like Gisark’s.

“This is an intense aura of death. He’s undead,” said the black wolf standing behind him.

“Blackas, do you have any idea who might be able to turn such a hero into an undead minion?”

“…Yes. I know only one that would be capable of such a feat.”

“Yes, I think so, too.” Leonis glared at the seal mark glowing on the Divine Dragon’s forehead. This was the mark the Undead King, Leonis Death Magnus, branded his minions with.

…So he sent him as a vanguard. Interesting.

Leonis landed on the ground and chanted a spell.

“All death is mine to wield. Sixth-order spell—Vraz Ochur!”

A skull appeared around Gisark and crept into its body. This was a spell that forcibly usurped control over an undead creature. However…

■■■■■■!

Gisark raised his large body and fired off a ray of heat that

swept through the air, cutting down buildings that collapsed with a rumble.

…He resisted the spell. Not an unexpected outcome, Leonis whispered to himself as he strode through the shadows atop Blackas's back.

He wasn't under the impression he'd succeed at usurping control over Gisark, but this did serve as proof that it was him who had transformed him into an undead.

I can't inflict too much damage on my kingdom.

This area was evacuated of its civilians, but it was only a matter of time until Excalibur Academy would send a unit to dispatch the Void Lord. Fighting one of the Six Heroes while defending them would be difficult.

"Blackas, can we drag him into the Realm of Shadows?"

"My apologies, Lord Magnus, but the Realm of Shadows is unusable after the Deus Machina self-destructed inside it. Even if you were to drag him in, it would likely collapse from the inside out."

"Blast…," Leonis grumbled and contemplated other options.

Gisark reared his head and blew another ray of heat at them. Blackas hopped into the rubble's shadow and emerged out of another.

"Another idea, then. Would it be possible to use the shadow corridors to transfer anyone trying to enter this battlefield to another area?"

"Transferring anyone who tries to enter… It's possible, but it will be a difficult task." Blackas snorted. "And it won't work against anyone airborne."

"That's good enough. Please do it."

"Understood. However, I won't be able to guard you, Lord Magnus—"

"That's fine. There's another dragon here, and though she makes for a fearsome opponent, she's the most reliable ally when she's on my side."

With a roar, Veira's red dragon form bit into the Divine Dragon's neck. Her fangs crunched on his windpipe, spewing hellfire directly at him.

Divine Dragon Gisark's body shined like a burning furnace.

Leonis hopped off Blackas's back.

“Good luck, Lord Magnus—”

“Yeah. I’m counting on you.”

Blackas crept into the shadows.

“Veira, keep him pinned down…!”

“…Who do you think you are to boss me around?!”

Leonis spread his arms and began chanting.

Doing it without a staff doesn’t feel right…

Reconsidering, he reached into his shadow and pulled out the Staff of Death’s Eye. It was a special staff with a Reaper’s eye sitting on its tip. This was a Legend Class item, a considerable step down from the Staff of Sealed Sins, but it was still the second-strongest item in Leonis’s possession. Given Leonis’s overwhelming power, the amplified effect it had on its spells was negligible, but at the moment, he needed it mostly to stay in form.

“Earth, become a raging spear and run my foe through…!”

Leonis’s field of expertise were spells from the Realm of Death, but those were ineffective against an undead opponent.

“Tactical class eighth-order spell—Graz Garud!”

Countless stone pillars surged up from the ground, stabbing through the undead dragon’s body.

■■■■■■*…!*

With a roar, Gisark flapped his wings, shaking his large body to shatter the stone pillars and fly off. However—

“You’re not getting away!”

Leonis used an eighth-order gravity spell, Vira Zuo, forming a gravity sphere over Gisark’s head that slammed the dragon into the ground.

“Hey, are you trying to hit me with those spells, too?!”

“Not my problem, just get out of the way!”

“I’ll get even with you later, Leo!”

Veira stomped on the ground, kicking off into the air. Spreading her wings, she blew fire on Gisark once more.

“Darkness, burst forth!”

Leonis swung his staff, chanting a tenth-order destruction spell. But the moment he unleashed the spell, the ground beneath them surged up.

“What?!”

Countless tree roots burst from the ground, interrupting the spell and forcing him to hop away. The roots continued extending

through the air, pursuing Leonis.

Is this some kind of elf sorcery that controls tree roots? No. I know this…!

Seeing the tree roots grow with rapid, startling speed, Leonis's eyes widened. At the end of the roots was the face of an old man, contorted in agony—a face Leonis recognized.

"How are you still here…?!"

It was the face of the Archsage of the Six Heroes—Arakael Degradios.

◆

"It's time for a raid!"

Regina fired her Drag Howl, blasting through the entranceway shutters. With its caterpillar track howling, the battle vehicle barreled into the tower. Alarms blared and sprinklers went off, dousing the halls in water. All of the research staff had already evacuated the building and gone to the shelters.

"Let's head to the central control room first." Riselia stepped down from the battle vehicle and confirmed the map Clauvia had sent her. If they looked over the building's history, they could perhaps make a guess at where Elfiné was being kept.

But as she tried to do so, she heard the roaring of an engine approaching from down the hall.

"Here they come," Sakuya said with a smirk, Raikirimaru in hand.

"Regina, get behind me!" Riselia held up the Bloody Sword, and just as she did, a loud rattling filled their ears.

Machine gun fire peppered them without warning. Combat machines operated by mana and loaded with machine guns on every part that could carry them drew on the group. These were Anti-Void unmanned drones—Void Simulators loaded with Phillet Artificial Elementals made for combat.

Riselia deployed blades of blood around herself, using them to deflect and cut down the bullets in midair. Sakuya was already nowhere to be seen—she parkoured around the surrounding pillars and raced across the ceiling, only to land and cut down three combat machines at once. Other machines reacted to her

actions and turned their muzzles to fire on her, but—

“Too slow, you buckets of bolts.”

Raikirimaru’s blade flashed—and the combat machines were cut in half. And at the same time—

“Haaa! Bloody Petal Dance!”

Riselia slashed at a machine, deflecting the hail of bullets all the while. Stabbing the tip of her blade into its vital engine parts, she unleashed the Bloody Sword’s power—blades of blood sprouted out of its metallic frame like a flower blooming all at once, crushing the machine from the inside out.

She pulled out her sword and wheeled around, preparing to swing her blade down on the last remaining machine, but—

“…Eh?”

The machine crumbled to the ground on its own, like it had suddenly run out of power.

“—Enemy control, usurped,” a voice spoke up behind her.

Schwertleite was seated upright in the battle vehicle’s driver’s seat.

“…Erm. Did you do that?”

“Affirmative, master.” Schwertleite nodded, and the combat machine got back up on its legs and swerved around.

“…W-wow!” Riselia said, positively impressed.

But come to think of it, she had commanded thousands of magical apparatuses in the ruins, so doing this was probably effortless for her.

“Is there any chance you can seize control of this tower’s core?” Riselia asked.

“It could be possible, if I were to connect to one of the core’s devices…”

“I think we should totally bring her along,” Regina said firmly, to which Schwertleite nodded.

“Hmm, well…” Riselia brought her hand to her jaw in thought, and then looked at Schwertleite. “But what if an Artificial Elemental takes you over, like one did last time?”

“The possibility of an Artificial Elemental controlling my ego should not be a concern.” She shook her head expressionlessly. “My current self is detached from my original self, and I’m in a completely independent state. I’m greatly limited compared to my normal abilities, but in exchange, I cannot be influenced by

outside sources.”

“…Really?” Riselia couldn’t quite understand the logic behind it, but apparently there was nothing to fear. “All right, then. We’ll take you along.”

With Regina’s help, Riselia removed Schwertleite from the driver’s seat and used a rope they had stored inside the car to fasten her body to Riselia’s back. She was surprisingly light, and with her Vampire Queen’s strength, Riselia could likely fight even in this condition.

“Erm… Is this comfortable for you?”

“No problems detected, Mama.”

“M-Mama?!”

“I misspoke. I meant master.”

“I’m only fifteen, you know…” Riselia pouted.

“We should hurry, Miss Selia, more of them are coming.” Sakuya strode ahead, Raikirimaru drawn in her hands.

◆



“Le…o…niiiiis…!”

As the faced tree emerged from the ground, crushing the soil, it raised its voice in a baneful groan.

…But how?! I know I completely destroyed him! Leonis growled, his eyes wide in disbelief.

Six months ago, the Archsage of the Six Heroes tried to merge with the Seventh Assault Garden’s mana furnace, but Leonis slew him using the Demon Sword Dáinsleif, reducing him to nothing.

…But no. His body’s roots had spread out all over the Seventh Assault Garden’s underground. If Arakael was able to avoid destruction, and someone was there to recover him after he regenerated—

That priest clad in a white garb came to mind—the Dark Lord Azra-Ael’s aide, Nefakess Reizaad. It was him that resurrected the Holy Woman Tearis in the Third Assault Garden, and the one who resurrected the other Undead King in the Ur-Shukar ruins.

So if he resurrected Arakael in some way…

He likely fused him with the Divine Dragon Gisark.

“Leoooo…niiiiiiis…!”

Countless faces appeared in the tree’s barky surface and let out a loud laughter.

“…Phranis!”

Leonis instantly chanted a third-order fire spell to burn away the tree roots. But as soon as they burned into ashes, the tree began instantly regrowing. The Holy Tree’s vitality was still intact.

“How unsightly…,” Leonis whispered in annoyance.

Mixing the power of undeath with the Holy Tree’s life force… Its very existence was an affront to Leonis’s sense of aesthetics.

It seems this other me and I have radically different tastes!

Holding up his staff, Leonis chanted another flame spell, but then he heard chanting from within the burning flames.

Tearing Hallow.

Countless rings of light appeared in thin air and began rushing toward Leonis.

“Zof Meires!” Leonis used a dark element spell to offset the light rings.

He can still use holy magic..!

But even so, Leonis couldn't sense the intellect the Archsage once had, even after becoming a Void. His cries of hatred and malice toward Leonis only felt like an echo of what he once was. He was but the remains of the Archsage…

…Disgusting. Utterly disgusting.

He chanted explosions spells one by one, blowing away the tree roots. "This time, I'll completely destroy you, so you can never regenerate again."

Arakael deployed a holy magic barrier—but, unbothered by it, Leonis continued firing spells that burst against the barrier, shattering it and blowing up the faces that surfaced on the bark in a flurry of flames.

"…This is for showing me something so offensive."

Stepping over the blown-off roots, Leonis rushed at his original opponent, Gisark.

Le…o…niiiiiiiiiiis!

Arakael's soul was blown to pieces, but the remains of his body were still full of residual hatred toward him.

"…?!"

Roots burst through the ground, coiling around Leonis's legs to hold him in place.

"You impudent…!" Leonis whispered in annoyance.

He cut through the roots with a blade of flame, but then—

■■■■■■*…!*

Gisark pushed away Veira, who was trying to pin him down, and roared. A flash of heat formed in his open jaw—

Oh no…! Leonis's eyes widened in alarm. But then—

"My looooord!"

Someone kicked Leonis out of the way.

◆

"Beast Lord Explosive Claw!"

The Lord of Beasts' claws shined with blue fire as he tore through the Holy Tree's roots. A pained voice rose from the roots as Gazoth Hell Beast stomped over them. The ashes of the Archsage scattered in the wind and blew away.

“It…can’t be…,” The garbed priest stammered, his fair features contorted in alarm. “The Archsage’s cells…!”

“Come on, this was your ace in the hole?” Gazoth regarded him with a savage, toothy sneer. “You think you could size up to a Dark Lord with this faulty toy?”

The wrath the Lord of Beasts was emanating made Nefakess stumble back.

“This ain’t the Archsage. It’s an insult to call this part of the Six Heroes. It’s just an empty shell.”

Gazoth rushed Nefakess in the blink of an eye and grabbed him by the throat.

“But what were you thinking, making a toy like that? What’s your plan, eh…?”

“Ngh, haa..!” Nefakess scrambled under his grip, but the Lord of Beasts’ hand wouldn’t budge.

“Whoa, I almost killed you there, didn’t I? Guess I gotta hold you real gentle, don’t I?”

“It seems I…have…misjudged…the might of the…Dark Lords…”

“Huh?”

“Followers of the goddess, enemies of the world, the tyrannical rulers. You Dark Lords cannot be dominated by…those subjected to the natural order…!”

Held in midair, Nefakess smirked in self-derision.

Crack…

A fissure ran across Nefakess’s body.

“The emptiness…beckons…”

“What?”

Crack, crack, crack…!

Small, narrow cracks extended from the priest’s face, down his neck, and gradually all over his body.

“…You!” Gazoth instantly tightened his grip on his neck…

But Nefakess’s body faded away, swallowed into a tear in space.

“He got away…” Gazoth clicked his tongue and looked about the rooftop.

All over the city, human warriors were fighting countless Void monsters. And at the city center…a single boy was fighting a gigantic zombie dragon.

“Ooh. Looks like something fun’s going on over there…”

◆

“Continue straight down this passage.”

“All right!”

In the midst of blaring alarms, Riselia sprinted ahead, following Schwertleite’s navigation. More and more security combat machines were rolling over to them, but most of them fell under Schwertleite’s control and became inert, with Riselia and Sakuya easily sweeping up any that didn’t.

“I’m feeling kind of useless here, Lady Selia…,” Regina complained, holding her Drag Striker.

“Uh… Oh, here’s your time to shine. Blow through that!” Riselia pointed at a bulkhead partition wall blocking their path.

“You got it. Mode Shift—Drag Howl!”

Regina changed her Holy Sword from its rifle form to its cannon form, but just as she was about to fire…the bulkhead opened on its own.

“—Door unlocked,” Schwertleite said with her emotionless voice.

“Wow! Good work, Leite!”

“Heeey, that was my moment!” Regina pouted, once again denied her time in the limelight.

Past the bulkhead partition was the door to a large elevator.

“Taking the elevator to the twelfth floor should be our fastest route to the central control room.”

“It doesn’t look like it’s working, though…”

“Please wait a moment. I will undo the password protection on this elevator.”

Schwertleite reached out and touched the elevator’s panel. But as she did, Sakuya rapidly turned to face the wall behind them.

“—They’re coming.”

“Eh?” Riselia frowned.

The next moment, the wall was blown to bits with a loud rumble.

“What?!”

A human with his arms turned into two massive blades emerged from the hole in the wall, followed by five figures with the same physique emerging from the cloud of dust. All of them

were wearing protector suits with combat configurations and had visors on their faces.

“These don’t look like your average guards to me.” Sakuya said, looking at them with severe eyes.

All five of them had malevolent-looking blades sprouting out of their arms—and those blades couldn’t possibly be Holy Swords.

“Demon Sword users.”

“…?!” Riselia and Regina gulped.

“Miss Riselia, would you let me handle this?”

“Sakuya, what are you saying? I can fight, too,” Riselia said, the Bloody Sword held on guard.

Sakuya shook her head, however. “I can handle them on my own. Right now, we need to hurry and save Miss Elfiné.”

“Sakuya…”

They could hear the sound of the elevator doors opening behind them.

“Hurry. These people are dangerous enough to keep monsters like these as their pets. Go, before it’s too late,” Sakuya said.

Riselia bit her lips. “…Fine. I know you can handle this, Sakuya.”

“Just don’t do anything dangerous,” Regina said, and the two hurried for the elevator.

The Demon Swordsmen let out an inhuman howl and made a beeline for the elevator—only for a swift flash to streak through the air—Raikirimaru’s blade slashed through their protector suits, cutting into their flesh.

“—Too slow. You’re like flies sitting in place.”

Sakuya brushed up her hair, revealing a glowing, amber-colored left eye. As the Demon Sword user collapsed, his visors split in half and fell to the floor.

“…?!”

Sakuya’s expression froze upon seeing the face exposed under the visor. This was a man she knew.

“Uzan, how…?!”

This was the leader of the Kenki Gathering—a Sakura Orchid warrior group that became Finzel Phillet’s private troops for the sake of taking revenge on the Void Lord that destroyed their homeland. But they all became involved with the power of the

Demon Swords and lost their lives in the process. Or so she thought.

"Don't tell me…"

Undoing her Mystic Eye's power, Sakuya bolted forward. A flash of lightning and the glint of a sword streaked through the air, and the other Demon Sword users' visors all snapped in half and fell to the ground.

"…I see. So that's what's going on."

All of them had the same face under the visors.

"Phillet company homunculi. They're *producing* humans that adapted to using Demon Swords!"

Sakuya stood stock-still without realizing it, and sensed more presences approach. Eight more figures, clad in protector suits and with the same physique.

"This is disgusting. Absolutely repulsive…," Sakuya whispered coldly, fixing her grip on Raikirimaru. "I was right to let them go ahead."

Ominous miasma began coiling around Raikirimaru, lending its blade a dark glow.

"My seniors are all too kind. They'd hesitate before breaking an opponent that looks human."

◆

"Nngh…" Leonis crawled out from under the rubble.

"My lord, you're safe!"

"What kind of maid drop-kicks her master?!" Leonis scolded Shary, still coughing.

"M-my apologies, my lord! But it was an emergency…"

Leonis raised his head, and saw that Gisark's flash of heat had burned through the entire area. Had Shary not kicked him into the shadow in the last second, he would have been blown to bits.

"…Hmm. True. My apologies, Shary, you saved me." Leonis got to his feet and glared at the Divine Dragon.

Gisark's flesh was dripping and falling apart like sludge. He no longer even looked like a dragon anymore.

…That's because you planted the Holy Tree in undead flesh. Fools.

If left alone and given time, Gisark would probably fall apart and die on his own before long, but Leonis wasn't sure the Seventh Assault Garden would last until that happened.

Either way, its abnormal regenerative powers are a problem…

Defeating the Divine Dragon would require him to completely destroy its entire existence with one strike. Nothing short of a full power, tenth-order destruction spell could defeat someone in the class of one of the Six Heroes. If he joined forces with Veira and managed to chant an eleventh-order spell despite his child's body, he could possibly defeat the Divine Dragon with the Archsage fused together.

Losing Dáinsleif really puts me at a disadvantage… Leonis dropped his eyes to his left arm.

Leonis had awakened to his own Holy Sword, the Excalibur XX. But that power was now sealed by the goddess's curse.

■■■■■■…!

Gisark raised his head, a glowing heat once again forming in his jaw.

"Leo, we need to finish this soon or we'll be in trouble!" Veira, who was soaring in the sky above him, spoke into his mind.

"…Yes, I know."

Arakael extended his tendril-like roots at Leonis.

"—My lord!" Shary picked up Leonis's body.

She leaped away from the shadow corridors a split second before it was cut into pieces, and began racing perpendicularly up a wrecked building's wall.

"…And what kind of maid carries her master in her arms?!"

"My apologies! But right now, you are a mere ten-year-old boy…"

"Gah, put me down…!" Leonis thrashed for a moment but then paused, realizing something. "Shary…I need to ask you for something."

"What is it, my lord?!" Shary replied in a flustered manner, still weaving and turning to evade Arakael's roots.

Leonis swung his staff, unleashing a flurry of flames that burned away the roots. Shary touched down on the rubble-covered earth and put down Leonis.

"Shary, can you connect the shadow corridors to the inside of this monster?"

“Huh?! My lord, I can’t, not without a Shadow Gate set inside its body—”

“I’ll see to that.”

“W-well, if the gate is set, it would be possible… Wait, *you’re* going to do it?!” Shary looked at him in surprise.

But there was no time to argue about it.

“I’m counting on you…!” Leonis said and bolted toward Gisark.

“Ah, my lord!” Shary called after him.

He chanted a gravity control spell and floated up into the air.

“Veira, keep him pinned down. I only need you to do it for a moment,” he told the crimson dragon circling overhead.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to order me around?! Who do you think you are…?”

But despite her complaints, Veira swooped down, diving at the Divine Dragon.

■■■■■■*…!*

Gisark unleashed a beam of sizzling light at the sky, but Veira parted her jaws and began chanting in dragon tongue.

“Dei Argh Dragray!”

The two blasts collided in midair, producing a deafening, blinding explosion.

“…!”

Leonis produced a barrier, blocking the billowing flames and pieces of rubble that went flying with all the intensity of a barrage of bullets, and proceeded to bolt toward the Divine Dragon.

“Leo…niiiiiiiiiiiiis…!”

The roots of the Holy Tree surfaced, the face of the old man appearing on them, and rushed toward the boy.

“—You think you can stop a Dark Lord, Archsage?” Leonis summoned his copies of the Evil Rending Sword, Zolgstar Mezekis, from his vault. “My swords, *danse macabre* alongside the fallen—Vaas Rest!”

The swords were possessed by undead souls and began moving independently, slashing and cutting down the approaching tendrils. Leonis continued his advance—Gisark’s massive form was right before his eyes. The servitude seal etched into his forehead glowed bright.

Can you feel my presence now, Undead King?!

Leonis smirked victoriously, and plunged into the Divine Dragon's gigantic maw. He thrust his staff into his rotting flesh and pierced the shadows.

"Now, Shary!" Leonis shouted.

As soon as he did, the shadow of his staff's tip was connected through a shadow corridor to the main Realm of Shadows.

"—Unleash!"

The moment Leonis said the word, the shadows within the Divine Dragon's mouth produced a large number of magical apparatuses. This was the wreckage of the Machina Soldiers that filled Ur-Shukar. They couldn't move without their commanding unit, Schwertleite, to lead them, but they were still machines containing small mana furnaces. And the furnaces were still intact and operational in many of these machines.

"Break…!"

Leonis flooded one of the inert machines with as much mana as he could, and instantly plunged into the shadow corridor. The overloaded Mana Furnace became critical and exploded. The explosion went on to trigger the other nearby furnaces, inducing a chain reaction.

With an ear-splitting roar and a blinding flash, the furnaces all exploded. The destructive blast blew up the Divine Dragon from the inside out.

I'd have hoped to use these powerful mana furnaces to power my army's forces…

"Le…o…niiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiis!"

Was that Arakael's agonized last cry, or Gisark roaring in his death throes? From within the rising flames, the Divine Dragon used the last of its power to swing his claws down on Leonis.

…*Blast?!* Leonis's eyes widened in shock.

But before the claw could descend on him, some kind of blade whizzed through the air and chopped off the Divine Dragon's arm.

What?!

Leonis turned to look, and for a moment, he saw a figure standing there.

…*Who's that?*

"My lord!" Shary shouted, forcing Leonis's attention back to the Divine Dragon.

As Gisark crumbled to the ground, glowing mana swirled inside his mouth…

“—Undead King. Next time, come fight me personally instead of sending your minions to do your dirty work.” Leonis held up his hand to the roaring Divine Dragon. “Perish—Meld Gaiez!”

Leonis’s tenth-order spell hit the undead Divine Dragon—which, this time, fell silent for good.

EPILOGUE

“Are you sure Sakuya will be all right on her own, Lady Selia?”

“…She’s strong. Probably stronger than we know.”

The elevator traveled up to the twelfth floor where the central control room Riselia and Regina were seeking was located.

“It should be past here—”

With Schwertleite guiding them from behind Riselia’s back, the two walked through the narrow hallway.

“…So this is the central control room?”

Past the bulkhead door, they found a large, spacious room with a cylinder-like device in its center.

“Connect me to that device.”

“All right.”

Riselia put down Schwertleite, and plugged her into the device.

“Commencing system link—” Schwertleite said, and her horn started flickering.

It seemed that even for her, taking control of a facility of this size would take some time. As they waited, Riselia pondered.

“It’s strange…”

“What?”

“Why aren’t there any combat machines in the central control room?”

“Probably so the machines don’t damage the equipment here?” Regina answered.

“Even so, there weren’t any stationed outside the bulkhead.”

There were no Demon Sword users, either. It all felt a bit unnatural. The central control room was completely silent, save for the humming of the machinery.

But then…

Crack…

Riselia could barely make out a familiar sound.

Crack, crack, crack, crack…!

“Lady Selia, look!” Regina shouted.

Tears in space formed all around them, and eerie, human-

shaped Voids emerged from within them one after another.

"…Regina, get behind me!" Riselia swung the Bloody Sword, cutting down the Voids.

But more and more Voids came out of the tear in space, faster than she could cut them down.

"—Why are Voids coming out all of a sudden?!"

Even taking the Stampede into account, their appearance and movements felt far too deliberate and organized.

Is there a Void Lord nearby…?

With the creaking of breaking glass, a large crack shaped like a spider web appeared, forming an exceptionally big tear in space.

"…Huh?"

Riselia's ice-blue eyes widened. She froze in place. Because the figure that emerged from that large Void tear was—



AFTERWORD

Thank you for your patience, good readers. Yu Shimizu here to deliver Volume 11 of *The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy*!

The visage of Leonis, in his form of the Undead King, appears and disturbs the battle with the Deus Machina Schwertleite. Meanwhile, Shary has to handle the sudden appearance of the newly resurrected Lord of Beasts, Gazoth.

The other Undead King is finally here. I've been looking forward to when I would finally introduce him to the story!

Why was the Undead King sealed in the Void world while Leonis was reincarnated in his ten-year-old body? How is the goddess related to it all? These questions that lie at the heart of the story will soon be answered, so I suggest you buckle up, because you're in for a fun ride!

Some thanks.

To Asagi Tohsaka, who provided wonderful illustrations despite her incredibly tight schedule. Thank you so much! The cover art with the three Dark Lord ladies is gorgeous. The special edition pinups with Shary in a wedding dress and Schwertleite in the Excalibur Academy uniform were perfect as well!

To Asuka Keigen, the artist for the manga version. Thank you for all your work! You present scenes that were hard to grasp in the original in clear detail, and as I write the stories, I often look to your art as a reference. I'm always giddy with excitement when I get to check each volume's manuscript!

To the editors and proofreaders who work with me, you were a huge help this time.

And the biggest thanks has to go to you, the readers who keep up with my series. Look forward for what's to come.

By the time this book is published, the teaser site with information on the anime adaptation should be out. There will be

things that are sure to impress you, dear readers, so do check it out.

See you in Volume 12, then!

Whatever will become of our dear Miss Elfiné…?

—Yu Shimizu, October 2022.

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