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The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy


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of Excalibur Academy




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Contents

The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy

Chapter 1 The Ebony Angel

Chapter 2 The Dark Lord Conference

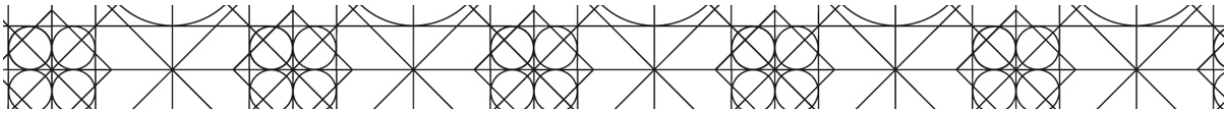
Chapter 3 Homecoming

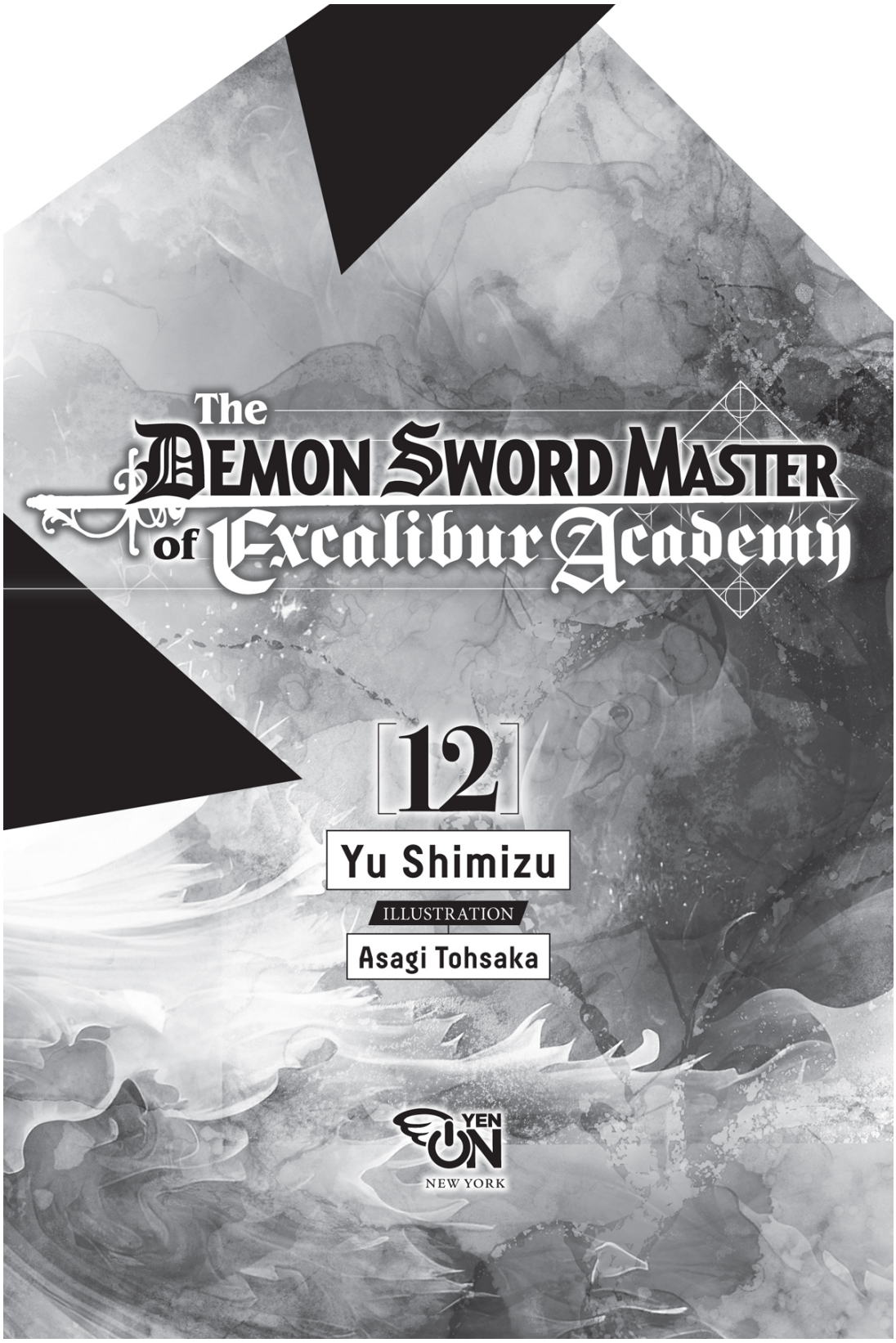
Chapter 4 Elfiné's Will

Chapter 5 The Dark Lord and the Emperor

Chapter 6 Dark Lord Battleship, Set Sail!

Chapter 7 The Demon Sword Queen




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The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy Yu Shimizu

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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Chapter 1 The Ebony Angel

Chapter 2 The Dark Lord Conference

Chapter 3 Homecoming

Chapter 4 Elfiné's Will

Chapter 5 The Dark Lord and the Emperor

Chapter 6 Dark Lord Battleship, Set Sail!

Chapter 7 The Demon Sword Queen

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

CHAPTER 1

THE EBONY ANGEL

Countless cracks formed in space, spreading like a spider's web, and from within the largest crack at its center emerged a girl's beautiful, willowy hand. Her fingertips spread the tear open, her arm emerging as the crack shattered loudly like glass.

And the one to emerge from the Void crack was…

"…Miss Finé?" Riselia asked, her voice tense and ice-blue eyes wide.

Yes, she was dressed in an outfit they'd never seen before, but there was no doubting it—it was Riselia's friend and dependable comrade from the eighteenth platoon.

"Miss Finé… What are you doing here…?" Riselia asked again, still confused.

The Seventh Assault Garden was currently defending against a Stampede, and Riselia had infiltrated a Phillet research facility with the help of Elfiné's sister, Clauvia Phillet. Clauvia had come to her for help with rescuing her abducted little sister. She and her group had stormed the facility in search of Elfiné's whereabouts, and had just reached the central control room where they had hooked up Schwertleite to the control system's core.

And then, the Void tears happened. Elfiné herself had emerged from one, clad in a dark mantle and surrounded by Voids.

"…?!"

Why had she emerged from the crack, just as the Voids had? Why was she looking at Riselia with such vacant eyes, as if she didn't recognize her?

"Miss Finé…"

Something felt terribly wrong—like they were too late, and something irreversible had happened.

“Miss Finé, it’s me! We’re here to save you!” Riselia called out to Elfiné, who remained expressionless. All she did was raise her smooth, slender arm and extend her fingertips.

With loud cracking sounds, six orbs appeared around Elfiné, shimmering in black.

…The Eye of the Witch?!

Riselia could tell, however, that something was different about the orbs. Something felt off. The Holy Sword was charged with a malevolent power. It was… Yes, it was just like…

The six floating spheres opened their eyes at once, revealing blood-red pupils that shifted and glared right at her.

“Lady Selia!” Regina called out in warning.

“…Bloody Blade Storm!”

Riselia reflexively swung down the Bloody Sword, a splatter of blood flying from the blade and forming a wall of sanguine daggers. As soon as she did, the six eyeballs fired off a flash of light. The beam shot through the control device that towered at the center of the room and sliced through the floor.

“…!”

The tower lost its balance and collapsed with a deafening *thud*.

“Leite?!” Riselia called out into the cloud of dust the destruction had kicked up.

Schwertleite, who was plugged into the tower and completely defenseless, became buried within the tower’s rubble.

Still coughing from the dust, Riselia dispelled the blade barrier. “Regina, are you okay?!”

“Lady Selia, behind you!” Regina’s voice called out.

Riselia turned around in alarm and saw flying insectoid Voids emerging from the crack, their mandibles clicking loudly.

“Why, you…!” Riselia cut down the Voids right in front of her and hopped back.

“Get your hands off…Lady Selia!” Regina used her Drag Striker to shoot down Voids that appeared from overhead, the monsters dying in a puff of miasma.

As she swung the Bloody Sword to defend herself, Riselia called into the darkness.

"Miss Finé!"

But of course, no response came. Instead, crimson lights flickered in the dark once more.

"…!"

Riselia hopped horizontally, entirely on intuition, which proved to be lifesaving. In the next moment, all the Voids in the beam's line of fire were evaporated. The beam shot through the floor's ceiling, causing large pieces of rubble to come crashing down.

Oh no…!

It happened the moment Riselia realized it—the floor, with its durability compromised, collapsed beneath their feet.

"Aaaaah!" Riselia heard a familiar scream.

"Regina!"

She channeled mana into her legs and unleashed it at once, propelling herself forward. She reached out to Regina, who was in mid-fall.

I'm not gonna make it in time!

But just before Regina fell, Riselia caught her in the nick of time. She then bounced a few times, her body slamming against the rubble.

"Kch…"

Sharp pain ran through her body; she'd no doubt cracked a few bones. But her Vampire Queen's mana was rapidly beginning to mend her wounds.

"Regina… A-are you…all right…?" Riselia knelt and laid Regina on the ground.

Apart from a few scrapes, Regina seemed unharmed, but the shock of the fall must have caused her to lose consciousness. The Drag Striker slipped from her limp fingers, breaking up into particles of light.

Riselia looked up at the hole they had just fallen from.

"Miss…Finé…"

Wheeling above them like crows searching for carrion were the six ominously glowing red eyes.

Those are definitely from Miss Finé's Eye of the Witch, but…

Elfiné slowly swooped down the hall, a pair of black wings spread

across her back. Her eyes, cold and bereft of all emotion, were fixed on Riselia.

…this isn't a Holy Sword. Yes, it's just like…

Riselia had an inkling as to what this might be, but the conclusion she arrived at was terrible. It meant Elfiné had lost her sanity. She'd seen people being manipulated before when under the influence of Muselle Rhodes's dominating Holy Sword. And she knew narcotics could be used to brainwash people. But right now, Elfiné's condition was neither of those.

…mental erosion, caused by a Demon Sword's power…

Holy Swordsmen who came to possess the power of a Demon Sword all exhibited some degree of mental affliction. Even someone as stout-hearted as Liat Guinness, the captain of the seventh platoon Elfiné was once a part of, couldn't resist the afflictions a Demon Sword dealt to his mind.

Riselia had to accept talking to her in this state might well have been futile.

…This might get a little rough, but I have to temporarily knock her out.

Riselia swiftly got to her feet and held up the Bloody Sword in an attempt to shield Regina. She brought the weapon to her arm. Nicking her skin with the blade, she scattered blood over the rubble. The blood dripping at her feet glowed with mana.

"Aaaah!" Riselia stepped over the rubble and charged forward, materializing the crimson True Ancestor's Dress over her body.

This was the Mode Scarlet Tyrant, which focused on augmenting her physical prowess.

"Bloody Blade Storm!" She swung the Bloody Sword through the air, producing sanguine blades that swooped at Elfiné at an acute angle. Riselia wasn't aiming at Elfiné herself, of course—the attack was aimed at the six orbs encircling her.

But Elfiné opened her hand, prompting the six Eyes to open and unleash beams of energy.

"…!"

The powerful beams knocked down the blood blades weaving through the air. With a flap and a flutter of her crimson dress, Riselia

avoided the beams, kicking against the walls rapidly to ascend above Elfiné.

If I knock out Miss Finé, even for a second, the orbs should disappear…!

Blood converged at her Holy Sword's tip—

"Haaaaaaa!" Riselia swung down her Holy Sword with a battle cry.

However, the blade of raging blood was deflected by a barrier deployed by the dark Eyes.

"…What?!"

This was the Eye of the Witch's auto-guard feature. Even after being corrupted into a Demon Sword, they retained their original abilities.

"Take this…!" Riselia pumped mana through her body, her sword still swung down. Her silver hair shined bright, and the Eyes' barrier shattered, unable to withstand the explosive output of mana.

But Riselia sensed an attack from behind and jumped into the air to dodge. A beam of sizzling heat grazed her shoulder.

"Kuh…" Riselia winced from the burning pain as she looked around.

Four Eye orbs floated about, surrounding her.

The Eye of the Witch's all-range attack…!

The four Eyes hovering around her lit up all at once.

"Bloody Rondo!"

Blades of blood revolved around her, deflecting the beams of light as she raced over the rubble. She wouldn't have been able to avoid their attacks this quickly without the True Ancestor's Dress augmenting her body.

But I can't get closer to her if this keeps up…!

The True Ancestor's Dress rapidly exhausted her mana and blood reserves, and she'd be fully depleted in a matter of minutes.

But as Riselia tried to figure out her next step, the barrage of beams raining down on her suddenly stopped.

"…?!"

Riselia stopped in her tracks and looked up—Elfiné, flying in midair, looked down at Riselia and slowly reached out her arm. Three Eye orbs gathered in front of her, forming a triangle. Blinding

light coalesced in Elfiné's palm.

That's dangerous.

Riselia could tell instinctively. Elfiné was going to blow her up along with the floor she was standing on. She couldn't avoid it, because moving away would expose Regina to the attack.

…I'll have to use my trump card.

Riselia took a red gemstone fragment from her breast pocket—this was the last remaining bit of the shattered Dragon Blood gem. She flicked it with her thumb and swallowed it without a second thought.

She could feel her heart throb hard—a violent current of mana ran through her body.

"The Binary Star of Ruin—Tri-Flare Blaster," Elfiné uttered quietly.

A crimson flash converged at one point in space and began barreling toward Riselia.

"Burn through all, Dragon Blood of Hellfire—Flaming Howl!" But at the same time, Riselia swung her Holy Sword.

The blood dragon's flaming howl collided with the flash in a spectacular blast.

"Miss Finé!" Riselia shouted, mustering all the mana in her body.

The intense current of light began swallowing up the blood dragon enveloped in hellfire—

…The Dragon Blood is being pushed back!

The next moment, a blinding flash of light overwhelmed Riselia's sight.

…

"Uuuh, aaah!"

Riselia had gone unconscious. It was only for a moment, about ten seconds at best. It couldn't have been any more than that. But when she came to, Elfiné's face was right before her eyes, looking at her with a cold, emotionless gaze.





“Miss… F-Finé…,” Riselia attempted to say, but her voice only came out in a croak.

She was being choked out. Her entire body went limp. The True Ancestor’s Dress, which guarded her body, had already dematerialized.

“Wh-why… Agh?!” Riselia groaned.

The slender fingertips dug deeper into her throat. And—

“—lia…dy Seliaaaaa!”

The last thing she thought she heard before her consciousness went out was Regina’s voice.

◆

Imperial standard time, 16:05.

The Seventh Assault Garden’s Central Garden area. The burnt remains of a decaying dragon emanated a repugnant stench.

“Leo…niiiiiiiis…”

“Learn when to give up, Archsage,” Leonis said, stomping on the vines of the Holy Tree wiggling at his feet.

The Divine Dragon of the Six Heroes, Gisark Saint Dragon, once feared as a great hero of the dragonkin and enemy to the Dark Lords’ Armies, had turned into a Void Lord. And now, he was perishing alongside the Archsage that had been resurrected through much the same means as him.

It seems he turned him into an undead, but in this state, he will never be resurrected again.

As he thoroughly stomped on the vines that still writhed with malice, Leonis turned around.

“It seems even you had trouble facing a dragon-slaying hero, Dragon Lord.”

“…O-oh, tone it down, will you? The Divine Dragon’s always been a difficult opponent for me!” Veira, having reverted to her human form, snapped back at him, her crimson hair dancing like a billowing flame.

“Hmph. What are you doing in my city to begin with? I thought

you were pursuing the Devil of the Underworld and the Otherworldly Castle?”

“Azra-Ael gave me the slip, but I was able to reclaim the Almagest. It helped me figure out a lot of things, so I thought I should let you know. But when I came here to do that…” Veira landed on the rubble and glanced at Gisark’s disintegrating body. “I found my old nemesis, the Divine Dragon, running amok.”

“…”

“What’s the meaning of this? I thought only the Undead King could turn one of the Six Heroes into an undead…,” Veira said, her golden eyes fixed on Leonis.

“…True. This would be impossible for anyone but me.”

“That’s right, no one but you would be able to… Wait, did you just admit to it?”

Leonis walked off, ignoring Veira’s confused frown.

“Hey, Leo?!”

He stabbed one large blade into the undead dragon’s front leg. This was one of the swords he had thrown from atop the building during his battle with Gisark.

This could have been dangerously close if this sword didn’t cut through the Divine Dragon’s leg.

Leonis gripped the sword’s hilt and looked up to the cloudy sky. It was then that he spotted a figure on the tower’s rooftop…

“Erm, m-my lord?!”

A girl in a maid’s outfit emerged from the shadow under the rubble.

“Hmm, Shary. You’ve done well this time; your hard work is worthy of my praise.” Leonis turned around and encouraged Shary. If she hadn’t set up a shadow gate inside Gisark’s body, he wouldn’t have won this battle. “You’ve done well to defend the kingdom in my absence. Your distinguished service is deserving of a Special Bone Medal.”

“M-my lord! I’m not worthy!” Shary shook her head in a flustered manner. “I was unable to follow your orders with my own meager powers and had to rely on the Dragon Lord’s help to protect the orphans. If anyone should be honored with a Great Bone Medal, it

should be the Dragon Lord—”

“…I don’t want it,” Veira whispered, her eyes narrowing peevishly.

“…Either way, we can decide the matter of your reward later. Give me your report on what happened in my absence.”

“O-of course—I actually have very important news to report regarding that…”

But before she could go on—

“Oh-hoh. So you’re the so-called Zol Vadis.”

Something crashed into the ground like a meteor with a thundering impact, kicking up a large cloud of dust.

◆

“…What?” Leonis’s eyes widened in disbelief.

A figure emerged out of the dust—a beastman warrior, covered in a golden, glowing aura.

“It can’t be, you’re…?!” Leonise exclaimed despite himself.

“Oh no, oh no…!” Shary gave out a frightened screech and cowered behind Leonis’s back. This was one of the Eight Dark Lords who led the Dark Lords’ Armies. He was the greatest of all warriors, known by many titles: Tyranny Incarnate, the King of Destruction, the Demon Beast Emperor.

“The Lord of Beasts, Gazoth Hell Beast!” Leonis whispered to himself bitterly, wiping away the greasy beads of sweat that rolled down his forehead.

“Hmm, I’ll admit I didn’t expect this, though. So the one assuming Zol Vadis’s name was some human brat.”

The Lord of Beasts easily pulled out one of the swords stabbing into the rubble, and then took off his suit’s top, which was tattered from combat. Perhaps he’d fought something before coming here. He revealed the top half of his muscles, hard as steel, covered in a white tiger beastman’s silver fur. No—steel was far too brittle to compare to how robust his body was.

“But appearances can be deceiving. I saw how ya beat that Divine Dragon. And since it was a close call, I decided to give ya a

little hand."

The Lord of Beasts' sole eye glared obsessively at Leonis.

…This intense, oppressive sensation is definitely him. That's the real Lord of Beasts, no doubt about it! So Leonis thought, exposed to a gaze that would knock most people unconscious.

This wasn't a big surprise, though, given that other Dark Lords and members of the Six Heroes had been resurrected one after another. And the Lord of Beasts in particular boasted of being immortal, albeit in a different way compared to Leonis. From the looks of things, he wasn't corrupted by the Voids like Veira was, nor was he being controlled like Rivaiz was…

"Oh," Veira suddenly said with an intrigued voice. "You're alive too, Gazoth. I heard you picked a fight with the Swordmaster and got yourself destroyed."

"Dragon Lord… And here I thought you'd croaked one thousand years ago," Gazoth turned to look at her and smirked ferociously. "But I guess the chief lizard hibernated underground this whole time, eh?"

"…Excuse you?"

The air trembled, and the temperature around them rose at once.

…This is bad!

The Dragon Lord and Lord of Beasts were in constant conflict, partially because their territories bordered on each other. A battle between these two Dark Lords could last weeks, even months, and inflict significant harm to the surface world.

I remember Roselia often asking me to mediate the two of them…

If a battle between these two Dark Lords were to erupt now, the Seventh Assault Garden would be reduced to ashes.

"What is the meaning of this, Shary?" Leonis asked the girl standing behind him. "Does Gazoth know about Zol Vadis?"

"Y-Yes, my lord!" Shary replied, speaking rapidly as she gave her report. "During your absence the Lord of Beasts made contact with me. He took offense to the fact the beastmen were gathered under your banner…"

"I see… So there's room for negotiations."

In the midst of this explosive situation, Leonis raised his voice. "Wait, Lord of Beasts. Should we not resolve this in a civil manner, through dialogue—"

"Huh?!" Gazoth growled, turned around and swung his sword at Leonis.

"…?!" Leonis hurriedly hopped away, just barely dodging the sword cleaving into the earth with a mighty *thud*.

The ground was cut cleanly in half by a gigantic fissure left in the attack's wake.

"Wh-what are you doing?!"

"Dialogue? Don't say stuff that kills the mood. I need to have ya pay the price for assuming the legendary name of Zol Vadis and poaching my subordinates." Gazoth growled savagely, holding up his katana. "I'll deal with ya later, Dragon Lord, so just be good and wait yer turn."

"I can wait. But are you sure you can even beat this child?"

…Don't taunt him! Leonis glared at Veira.

"Hmph, he beat one of the Six Heroes. He's no ordinary child."

"Wait, you should hear me out first—nhaa?!"

The Lord of Beasts casually swung his blade again, and Leonis just barely caught the attack with his staff's hilt. But the air pressure produced by the slash sent him and the rubble he was standing on flying back.

"Guh…!"

His body was slammed hard against the rubble. Had he not cast a spell to augment his defenses in the last second, his ten-year-old body would have been smashed.

"Kuh…!"

He wobbled to his feet and tried to pick up his staff. But then he realized—the staff he was gripping with both hands was broken cleanly down the middle.

…M-my Staff of Death's Eye!

While it paled in comparison to the Staff of Sealed Sins, it was still a one-of-a-kind, Legend-class magical tool, and a rare curio Leonis especially favored among his many treasures.

"Good block. I'd expect as much of one who assumes the

legendary name of Zol Vadis.” Gazoth charged at him, sword in hand.

“…Damn you. Mel Ziora!” Leonis thrust forward the broken staff’s tip and cast a sixth-order spell, enveloping the Lord of Beasts’ burly form in a fireball.

—But he easily scattered the flames and barreled toward Leonis with all the might of a heavy tank!

“Haaaaaaaa!” He held his sword overhead and swung it down on Leonis—only for the boy’s body to shatter like glass.

“…Mm?”

“—You will pay dearly for breaking my staff, Gazoth.”

Leonis appeared behind Gazoth, emerging from his shadow. The one who was shattered was a skeleton soldier with an illusion spell applied to it.

“Eighth-order spell—Al Gu Belzelga!”

With a thundering blast, a white-hot explosion of heat hit the Lord of Beasts directly in the back. A massive pillar of flames appeared, rising up to the heavens.

“You were careless, Lord of Beasts. To charge at me without enveloping your body in vigor.”

“Hah, I don’t need vigor to handle these kinds of flames,” the Lord of Beasts’ voice came from within the raging flames.

“What?”

“Haaaa!” Gazoth let out a howl toward the sky, and the cursed flames scattered.

…He was able to break my eighth-order spell with just his howl?!

True, Leonis had exhausted much of his mana in his series of battles against the Divine Dragon and the Archsage, but still—he didn’t chant any defensive spells, and unlike Veira, he didn’t have any scales that offered him spell resistance. He had just dispelled high-order sorcery with nothing but his own tempered body.

…He always was one absurd creature. Leonis grit his teeth as he hopped back, trying to create distance from Gazoth.

“C’mon, how often do we get to have a one-on-one? Let’s have fun with this!” Gazoth laughed savagely, his fangs bared.

…I get the feeling he’s not so much indignant at my assuming Zol

Vadis's name as he is just looking for a strong opponent.

After all, the Lord of Beasts was so obsessed with finding a good fight that he challenged Leonis's old master and strongest of the Six Heroes, the Swordmaster Shardark, to one-on-one battle.

But then—

"L-Lord of Beasts, please, stop!"

A shadow whip lashed out, wrapping around Gazoth's right arm, which was gripping his sword.

"Shary?!" Leonis asked.

"I—I can't allow anyone to wreak such havoc, not even you, Lord of Beasts!"

"Don't butt in, maid. You're spoiling my high." Gazoth easily tore off the shadow whip and glared at Shary with his lone eye.

"Eeep…!" His menacing gaze made Shary cower, her knees giving out.

This was the eye of one who single-handedly defeated tens of thousands of troops in battle. And while Leonis was unaffected by it, Shary couldn't withstand its pressure.

"What are you doing to my attendant?!" Leonis slammed his hand against the ground.

Leonis cast the eighth-order spell, Earth Tremor Impact—Graz Garud. Countless rock pillars manifested in midair and propelled themselves at Gazoth Hell Beast. This was a tactical-tier spell, and an impact from even one of these rock pillars was enough to instantly fell an extra-large Void.

"Hah, now we're talkin'…!"

Gazoth swung his sword directly above him, unleashing a radial wave of vigor that crushed the stone pillars and hoisted their fragments in a swirling whirlwind.

"I'm not holding back with this one. Take this attack if you can, you shameless pretender…!"

"N-no, hold back, you fool! You'll sink us along with the entire Central Garden!" Leonis exclaimed in outrage, deploying a force barrier around himself and Shary.

"Haaaaaaaaa, Bestial Destruction Slash!"

Vigor built up in Gazoth's sword, but just as he was about to

unleash it— "Enough, Lord of Beasts."

A gigantic blade of ice shot up in front of Gazoth with a whoosh, blocking his path like a wall.

"…?!"

Gazoth and Leonis both looked up.

"I swear. What are you two doing?"

Above them floated a girl with amethyst-colored hair, who looked down at the two Dark Lords with disapproving eyes.

"You… Are you the Lord of the Seas?" Gazoth asked, amazed.

"Indeed. Though I am only at one half right now, with my Leviathan lost to me." The beautiful girl clad in a water mantle gracefully landed. "It's been a long time, Gazoth Hell Beast. So you, too, were resurrected in this era."

"Nngh…" The one-eyed white tiger let out a guttural growl.

It was a considerable departure from how he treated Veira.

"Incidentally, I recall you still owe me a debt from a thousand years ago, Lord of Beasts."

"…Aye."

"So out of deference to me, I ask that both of you lay down your arms," the Lord of the Seas said, her voice soft.

Gazoth thrust the sword into the ground and sat down on the spot.

"Tsk. Fine. Aaagh, and we were just getting to the good part…"

"My apologies. But the Dragon Lord and I have words to exchange with the Undead King."

"…The Undead King?" Gazoth frowned. "The strongest Dark Lord, Leonis Death Magnus, got resurrected, too?!"

"Mm." Rivaiz nodded and looked at Leonis. "This child is the Undead King."

◆

Her heart throbbed, hard, and a surge of mana ran through her body, jolting her awake.

This was one of the Vampire Queen's abilities—Auto Resurrection.

As Riselia lay atop the rubble, her fingers twitched.

…lia… Selia… Lady Selia…!

"Mm…" Riselia opened her eyes to a crack, seeing her maid's face looking down at her. "Regina…?"

"Oh, you're awake, Lady Selia…!" Regina hugged her, her jade eyes full of tears. "You heart wasn't beating, so I was worried you might have…"

"…Yeah, it's fine. My heart isn't beating most of the time anyway."

"I-it isn't?"

Riselia tried to live like a normal person, and so she ended up forgetting, but as an undead, her heart didn't usually beat and her blood was cold. The only reason her heart ever beat was because of the mana circulating through her body, and when she lacked sufficient mana, her body entered a temporary dormant state.

A normal vampire would need to slumber for a few hours in their coffin to recover, but since Riselia's mana recovered unusually fast, she was capable of resurrecting rapidly so long as a stake wasn't driven through her heart.

"Are you all right, then, Lady Selia…?"

"Y-yes…" Riselia grabbed onto Regina's arm, letting her pull her into a sitting position.

She could hear an alarm blaring, and the half-collapsed floor was illuminated by flickering emergency lamps. There were still clouds of dust hanging in the air all around her.

…It looks like I wasn't out for long.

Realizing this, she looked around in a hurry. "Where's Miss Finé?"

"Miss Finé…vanished," Regina said, pursing her lips.

"Vanished?"

"Yes. She went into a Void tear with the other Voids…"

"Huh…?"

Indeed, the insect-like Voids that emerged earlier weren't here, either. But more important still was the fact Elfiné had entered a Void tear. If that was true, it would mean she was already…

Miss Finé, why…? Riselia touched her neck, still bruised where Elfiné's fingers had gripped it, and bit her lip.

Elfiné didn't know Riselia was an undead minion, which meant

she seriously tried to take her life. But then— "Could you explain what happened here?" a voice suddenly spoke.

"…?!" The two girls turned around with a start.

"Wait. It's me."

The space in front of them suddenly distorted, and a woman in a white lab coat appeared.

"…Miss Clauvia."

Clauvia Phillet, a high-ranking research officer and Elfiné's older sister, who had come to Riselia asking for help with her rescue.

"You ran into Finé, didn't you?"

Riselia hung her head and nodded. "Yes, but Miss Finé was…"

She trailed off, unsure of how to explain the change in Elfiné, but then— "…Something's coming!" Regina called out in alarm.

The sound of heavy footsteps, like the sound of metallic clanging, filled the room.

"A mechanical security guardian. Not good," Clauvia whispered, glancing at the corridor lit up by the emergency lights. "We can talk later. If Finé isn't here, we should get out of here posthaste."

"…Yes." Riselia nodded.

Clauvia was definitely right about that. If they got into a fight with the Phillet company's combat machines, it would risk exposing their infiltration and destruction of the facility to the administrative bureau.

"Sakuya, do you read?" Regina turned on her communication terminal.

"Mm…hear you…" Sakuya's voice crackled out of the terminal, unclear and garbled.

The communication lines were being jammed due to the Stampede.

"Are you all right?" Regina sighed with relief.

Sakuya ran into Phillet private soldiers on the way to the central control room.

"Sakuya, we're getting out of here. Link up with us in the first floor at the battle vehicle."

"Mm, rog…that—"

“Let’s go, Lady Selia.”

“Yes…” Riselia took Regina hand and got to her feet.

But then—

“Master.” The clear voice of a girl called out from within the mountain of rubble. “Please dig me out.”

“L-Leite?! W-wait…!”

Riselia hurriedly manifested the Bloody Sword and used it to blow away the rubble.

CHAPTER 2

THE DARK LORD CONFERENCE

The battle vehicle drove through the Seventh Assault Garden's underground tactical transport tunnel. They pushed the vehicle hard, breaking through the forest and busting the research institute's walls, but this vehicle was designed with combat support against Voids in uninhabited regions. While its armor was now covered in scratches, it did nothing to impede its operations.

"…Apparently, the Stampede died down thirty minutes ago," Regina said as she sat in the driver's seat and listened to the communication device. "Multiple Void Lord-class specimens appeared in the Central Garden, but when the massive Void Lord reaction disappeared, all the Voids that poured out of the cracks started vanishing, too."

…Leo must have done something, Riselia concluded.

"What about the Phillet's pursuit unit?"

"I think we're in the clear for now," Regina replied, glancing at the footage from the vehicle's external camera. "I'm not picking up any vehicles following us."

"I've erased all traces of our infiltration and left behind dummy footage. We should be fine," Clauvia said, holding up an index finger.

"You really are Miss Finé's sister…"

"I just used my Holy Sword's power to become invisible. But more importantly, now that we're safe, won't you tell me what happened to Finé?"

"I'm not up to date about that, either." Sakuya nodded.

"…Y-yes, all right."

Riselia nodded and explained the events that transpired in the central control room.

"So Finé was corrupted by a Demon Sword…," Clauvia said after

hearing her story and hung her head in thought.

"Yes, I think given how scary her Holy Sword looked… It must have become a Demon Sword."

She didn't want to believe it, but the senior she respected so much had her mind corrupted by a Demon Sword. When they visited the Capital for the Holy Sword Dance Festival, Elfiné told them a Phillet Company Artificial Elemental was involved with the Demon Sword incidents.

…Did this happen because the Phillet Company found out Miss Finé was looking into the D Project and that got in their way? Or was it because they wanted her as a test subject for her powerful Holy Sword…

Or perhaps it was both. Either way, Riselia couldn't imagine what terrible things Count Deinfraude Phillet did to his daughter after abducting her… Just the thought of it gave her chills.

"So where did Finé disappear to after that?" Clauvia asked.

"Miss Finé vanished into a Void crack," Regina replied from the driver's seat. "Lady Selia was unconscious when it happened, so I'll pick up the story from here."

"Please do." Riselia nodded.

She was also curious at where Elfiné went.

"When I came to, I saw… I saw Miss Finé holding Lady Selia by the throat. When I saw that, everything went red, and I got to my feet, shouting her name…"

Regina's fingers, gripping the steering wheel, trembled slightly.

"After that, Miss Finé turned to look at me, and I saw her eyes. She's usually so kind, but she was looking at me with cold eyes, like she didn't even know me. And then, when Lady Selia crumbled at her feet, Miss Finé let out a scream. She started thrashing like she was in pain, and she was pulling at her pretty hair… I thought she was trying to come to her senses, so I came closer…"

Regina bit her lip, looking ahead to the end of the tunnel. "And then, a Void tear appeared around Miss Finé. The cracks spread like a spider's web, and she got swallowed up by it."

"A Void tear… You're sure that was it?" Clauvia asked.

"Yes, definitely." Regina nodded. "…It might have happened just

around when the Void Lord vanished, and the Stampede in the Seventh Assault Garden ended."

"…I can't say if that's the case," Clauvia said. "Maybe it is."

"So she appeared with the Voids, and vanished with them, too…," Sakuya muttered, looking out the window. "Demon Sword users get corrupted by the power of emptiness and take forms close to the Voids. I don't want to believe it, but Miss Elfiné might have…"

"We don't know that for sure yet." Riselia cut Sakuya off, shaking her head.

"…Mm. You're right. My apologies," Sakuya said.

Riselia clenched her hands. "Even if she is corrupted by a Demon Sword, her will is still in there."

"Yes. I think so, too."

"…You're right." Clauvia nodded, coiling her fingers together tightly over her lap. "Finé's a strong girl. Much stronger than I am."

The battle vehicle emerged from the tactical transport tunnel and came out on a city road on the surface. All the defensive facilities in the area were damaged in some way, indicating fighting must have taken place here. They passed by Excalibur Academy battle vehicles and ambulances.

"Thank you for the lift. I'll get off here." Clauvia raised her hand as they arrived at the linear rail station.

"Will you be all right?" Riselia asked, concerned. "The Phillet soldiers aren't going after you, are they…?"

"I can get away and hide on my own with the power of my Hide and Seek Holy Sword." Clauvia nodded with a smile. "I'll look for Deinfraude's whereabouts. And I'll see if I can find any clues about what happened to Finé from the data I took from the facility. I'll contact you via an encrypted line if I find something."

"Right. Thank you." Riselia nodded and then recalled something. "Oh, and erm, I need to ask you something, Miss Clauvia."

"…?"

They stopped the battle vehicle at the entrance to the shelter module and stepped outside, opening the luggage box located behind the back seat.

"Good morning, master."

Sitting inside it, secured in place by belts, was Schwertleite's upper half.

"Could you get her fixed for us…?"

"…This is a very well-made Magia Droid. What manufacturer is it?"

"I, uh, don't really know which one it is…," Riselia stuttered, unsure as to what to say.

"Hm. I guess you have your reasons. It must be some disposed military weapon…" Clauvia eyed Schwertleite curiously.

"Um…"

"Don't worry, I'm not going to pry. I don't know if I can completely fix it, but I'll attach some military-grade artificial limbs to make sure it can at least move on its own."

"Thank you, that's plenty of help already."

"It's a small price to pay given how much I owe you three."

Clauvia made to close the luggage box's lid when a lonely voice spoke from inside it. "Mama…"

Clauvia cocked an eyebrow, puzzled. "Mama?"

"N-no, uhh, that's not what it said!" Riselia shook her head, flustered, and then opened the lid and whispered into the box. "I'll only be away for a bit, so don't worry. Just be good."

"…Understood, master," Schwertleite replied, her voice a bit sulking, and returned to sleep mode.

"Please take care of her."

"Don't worry, I will."

Clauvia accepted the box, picked it up, and walked into the station. Before long, she vanished into thin air.

"Area II is close, so I'll be getting off here, too," Sakuya said and got out of the vehicle.

"Aw, you're not coming back to the dorm?" Regina asked, peeking out of the driver's seat window.

"No, I'll head back to the estate in Old Town. I haven't seen Raiou in a while now."

"All right. You won't need dinner, then?"

"Yes, I'll spend the night there."

"Just be careful, Sakuya."

"You two, as well."

Sakuya kicked against a building's wall and vanished.

"All right, Lady Selia, let's get back to the Academy."

"Yes, we need to link up with Leo."

Riselia boarded the battle vehicle and checked her communication terminal. She tried to send messages for some time, but Leonis wasn't responding.

"I hope Leo's all right…," Riselia whispered in concern, looking up at the unclouded night sky.

◆

"The powerful Undead King, said to be the strongest among us, reduced to this state…," Gazoth Hell Beast said as he downed the cup of wine in his hand. "What happened to you, Leonis Death Magnus?"

"…A lot, to put it simply," Leonis replied, his expression bitter.

They were in the Dark Lord's Castle's eighth underground level, in the Corpse Chamber, built to accommodate guests of Leonis's. It was a circular room with a domed roof and a large, round table made of bones with space for eight guests in its center. The walls were adorned with the bones of ancient monsters and skulls that had a penchant of cackling every so often in an attempt to startle the guests.

Not that the guests being entertained in this room were ones to be startled by something like that.

"Hm, this is some fine wine. Not that it matches the divine wine served to me by the King of the Depths," Rivaiz said.

"—Yes, I'd like to drink more of this. Keep it coming," Veira said, putting down one empty bottle after another.

"Don't be foolish," Leonis said in complaint as he took out another bottle from the treasure vault in his Realm of Shadows. "This is exquisite wine I claimed after defeating the Ganzal Kingdom one thousand years ago. I'll never get anything like it again, so be sure to relish it."

"Oh, come on, what do you care? It's not like you can drink it, what with your body being what it is."

"Grr…"

Indeed, Leonis's glass was full of grape juice made out of 100% freshly squeezed fruit sold in the Seventh Assault Garden's local supermarket. This brand was his favorite, and Riselia bought it for him all the time.

"Leonis, I prefer meat to wine right now," Gazoth said. "I'm getting a bit peckish after running wild."

"Shary, serve him one of the rock boar steaks stored in the palace's pantry," Leonis instructed.

"Yes, right away!"

Shary, serving as their waitress, hurriedly sank into the Realm of Shadows.

"A rock boar, eh? Good stuff; only my fangs can bite through that thing's skin."

As the Lord of Beasts gave a hearty laugh, Leonis sipped on his juice, taken aback. Shary reported the details of Gazoth Hell Beast's resurrection just earlier. Around the same time Riselia awakened him in the Necrozoa ruins, Gazoth was resurrected in the Blood Fang plains after his battle with the Swordmaster.

After awakening, he had been spending some time attacking nearby Void Hives to while away the time when he ran into a Holy Swordsmen unit exploring a hive. They took him in, thinking he was a beastman refugee, after which he took cover in an underground syndicate in the Capital.

Unlike Leonis, who kept his powers hidden and tried to rebuild the Dark Lords' Armies, Gazoth took his time to experience and enjoy this world a thousand years removed from his own.

Until the Holy Sword Dance Festival brought Leonis to the Capital, and the Dark Lord Zol Vadis tried to recruit the capitals' underground syndicates and organizations—Gazoth's subordinates—to his army. And so an enraged Gazoth stormed the Seventh Assault Garden in search of retribution.

…Good grief. This is quite troublesome.

The beastman unit Leonis gained in the aftermath of the

Hyperion incident made up the crux of his Dark Lords' Armies at present. But Leonis did understand where Gazoth was coming from: A thousand years ago, the beastman tribes were under the command of Gazoth's Grand Beast Army.

But that was a thing of the distant past now, and Leonis wasn't going to give up the core of his new Dark Lords' Armies to the Lord of Beasts.

Still, what to do…?

Making an enemy of another Dark Lord would be a pointless endeavor. Of course, he had no intention of losing to Gazoth, but if the two fought no holds barred, they would end up destroying the Seventh Assault Garden.

…Besides, Roselia always said we Dark Lords shouldn't fight among ourselves.

Still, the Lord of Beasts was one to resolve all negotiations through combat. He was a difficult Dark Lord to handle, in a different sense from the arrogant, tyrannical Dragon Lord.

Well, I suppose I always was the only sensible Dark Lord to begin with… Leonis thought to himself, blind to his own failings.

"—I—I brought the rock boar steak!"

Shary returned, carrying a plate with a piece of rocklike meat on it and placing it on the table. Her voice was trembling—she was incredibly nervous having to be in the same room with so many Dark Lords. As she poured juice into Leonis's goblet, she directed a telepathic message toward him.

"—Excuse me, my lord? Are you sure you should have exposed your identity to him?"

"Yes. It would have been impossible to hide it from him for long anyway."

Veira And Rivaiz already knew about Leonis being in a child's body, so it was only a matter of time until he discovered Zol Vadis's identity.

"Then why did I work so hard to hide it while you were away…?" Shary dropped her shoulders, deflated.

"Incidentally, did you collect it, like I asked you?"

"Yes, it's already in the Realm of Shadows' treasure vault…"

"Good. Well done."

Leonis referred to one of the Arc Seven, the dual swords Lesca Kishar, which was in the possession of Divine Dragon Gisark, who had become a Void Lord.

Veira would definitely claim it if she ended up finding it… Leonis smiled to himself, satisfied with this new item in his collection.

Leonis was extremely fond of curious weapons and enchanted tools.

"By the way, Leo. Isn't it about time we got down to business?" Veira said quietly.

"…What is it?"

Leonis panicked for a moment. Surely she didn't find out about the Arc Seven weapon?

"I mean the undead Divine Dragon. Just to confirm it one more time, can you think of anyone who can turn the Six Heroes into Undead and use them as minions?"

Silence settled over the banquet. Gazoth and Rivaiz put down their eating utensils and awaited Leonis's answer.

"…"

After a moment's silence, Leonis sighed.

"—No one. No one but me." He shrugged.

"Leo, what does that mean…?"

"It means I'm the one who turned Gisark into a zombie dragon."

"…Huh?" Veira looked at Leonis dangerously, taken aback by his absurd answer.

"That comment isn't something we can ignore, even during a banquet of your hosting. What are you on about, Leonis?" Gazoth glared at him with his sole eye, his silver fur standing on end.

"No need to be so bloodthirsty. Let's hear what the Undead King has to say." Rivaiz urged Leonis to continue.

He nodded briefly and parted his lips.

"Another Undead King resurrected in the Void Lord."

"…What?"

"What does that mean?"

"…Mm?"

The three Dark Lords exchanged incredulous expressions.

◆

Leonis explained the events that took place in the Void World to the other three shocked Dark Lords.

"Do you remember when Azra-Ael used the Azure Fort's to move to the other world and dragged us along with it?"

"When we fought the Swordmaster who'd become a monster," Veira supplemented.

"Yes. Back then, I began to speculate that the Void World and this one, where humanity survived, are one and the same…"

The basis for that hypothesis was the existence of the Eisen Fort, an old Dark Lords' Armies stronghold, in the Void World. And true to his theory, Leonis later found the Rognas Kingdom's Capital, Ur-Shukar, in that world as well.

"There was another Undead King who shares my soul sealed in the ruins in Ur-Shukar's underground. After being released from his seal, the other me stole the Goddess's Demon Sword from me and disappeared into a Void tear."

Leonis excluded the part about the Deus Machina Schwertleite having protected the Undead King, since explaining that would complicate things. Instead, he went into more detail into his battle with the other Undead King.

"…I find that story hard to believe," Gazoth said in a growl.

"I don't blame you. When I faced the other me, I had a hard time taking it in myself."

"…No, I ain't saying I don't believe yer story. It's just…" Gazoth spread out his arms. "Is that Undead King the real deal? Or is it someone else imitating the way you used to look? Just like you assumed Zol Vadis's name."

He punctuated that last remark with a touch of sarcasm.

"No." Leonis shook his head. "He's the Undead King. There's no mistaking that. When I fought him, he used twelfth-order sorcery. In terms of his mana reserves, he has more than I do in my current body. And besides…"

Leonis cracked a self-deprecating smile.

"Like I said earlier, no one but the Undead King could turn the Divine Dragon of the Six Heroes into an Undead and control him."

"…I suppose that's true."

"Singing your own praises, in a sense." Veira shrugged.

"But if that's true, why did the Undead King's soul split in two after he used the spell of Reincarnation?" Rivaiz asked.

"—I don't know, either." Leonis shook his head. "If I had to say, when this world was split in two for some reason, my soul was likewise divided and reincarnated into two."

But this, too, was only speculation. He had no idea why or how the world ended up splitting in two.

"Well, that conveniently leads us to our next topic." Veira smiled indomitably. "I actually came here to discuss just that."

"…Right. Did you learn something in your pursuit of Azra-Ael?"

"Well, yes…," Veira said and held up her hand.

A glowing sphere appeared above the table. It was covered in ancient text that revolved rapidly around it. It was about as big as a basketball, and its shape was reminiscent of the Deus Machina's standard form prior to awakening, or Elfiné's Eye of the Witch.

"What's this?" Leonis asked.

"It's the core of the Almagest I took from the Azure Fort."

◆

The Almagest—the Astrological Observation Device. A treasure of the dragons, capable of recording the movements of all the stars in the celestial sphere. Veira chased down the Devil of the Underworld solely to reclaim this artifact.

"Bringing the whole thing would take up too much space, so I took out its core."

"I thought it was a treasure for you dragons. Should you be treating it so crudely?"

"I'm the Dark Lord of the Dragons; I can get away with anything," Veira said, puffing her chest up proudly.

"So? What did you learn from your little toy?" Leonis shrugged.

"—Heh. I'll show you."

Veira ran a hand through her crimson hair and whispered something in dragon tongue. This prompted the sphere of light to revolve much faster, projecting a three-dimensional globe into the air.

"This is…"

"The record of the stars stored within the Almagest."

Numbers appeared on the surface of the projection: Holy Calendar, 447. Veira twirled a fingertip, which made the planet sphere in the center of the projection to zoom in. Leonis was impressed. Veira looked proud of herself, but in truth, this wasn't dragonkin technology. The Azure Fort was, much like the Deus Machina, produced by the magical technology of an ancient, ruined civilization.

"This is our world. One thousand years ago, the Dark Lords led by the Goddess of Rebellion were defeated, and mankind emerged victorious with the help of the Six Heroes blessed by the Luminous Powers—"

Windows opened around the planet, showing off different images.

"But mankind then lost sight of the Six Heroes as well, and the age of legends came to a close."

The numbers of the Holy Calendar progressed, and the footage shown in the windows rapidly changed. After the conclusion of the Dark Lord War, mankind flourished in a momentary time of peace, after which different nations once again began fighting among themselves.

As their civilizations advanced, they exchanged swords and spears for stronger weapons, eventually developing forms of magical technology capable of killing tens of thousands at once. The fires of war spread rapidly, with cross-national wars spreading all over the world. And then—

The counter stopped at the year 714 of the Holy Calendar, and all the footage vanished.

"…Mm?" Leonis turned his eyes to the revolving globe. A black stain suddenly appeared and began spreading from the center of the north pole and all over the planet. Before long, it covered the entire

continent.

"Veira, what is this?" Leonis asked, but she simply whispered to him to keep watching.

The black stain continued spreading, swallowing up continents and even the sea, to the point it nearly overtook the entire planet. And then, just as the world was nearly fully consumed, a small dot of light appeared on the surface of the blackened planet.

"…?"

The point of light spread out at once, pushing back the black stain. Half of the blackened planet was now covered in white light. But then, the three-dimensional model of the planet started crackling…

And the biggest change yet happened.

The star model, still revolving slowly, separated into two.

"…The planet split?"

"That's right. At that point, the world we knew was divided in two." Veira nodded, her eyes fixed on the two star models floating above them.

"So was that black stain Void miasma…?"

"That's probably what it was." Veira shrugged.

"This happened about seven hundred years ago. Of course, the planet wasn't physically split in two. But the two halves' dimensional phases separated, making them overlap over spacetime to, uh…"

"Create another world that stands for another divergent possibility," Rivaiz said, finishing her sentence.

"Y-yeah, what she said!" Veira said and cleared her throat. "So when the worlds were separated, most life-forms like demons and monsters were swallowed up by the Void World. And they ended up becoming those disgusting creatures, the Voids."

Seven hundred years ago…

Leonis recalled something Riselia once told him in the Seventh Assault Garden's museum. At some point, the ancient world's monsters all vanished without warning.

—The Great Divide.

Its cause is yet to be determined, and it is speculated it might have been a giant meteor hitting the planet, some kind of plague

curse, or otherwise the planet's mana going out of control.

And when the Emperor's younger brother, Alexios, told Leonis of the Imperial history, he mentioned some kind of massive cataclysm seven hundred years ago that made it impossible to trace history back to before that period—a cataclysm that wiped all record of the era of Gods, heroes, and Dark Lords at once.

And that was this black stain that appeared in the world's pole, two hundred years after mankind reestablished civilization. If that was the singularity that formed the Voids…then what was that light that appeared suddenly at the center of the continent, pushing back the emptiness's encroachment?

Did that light save the planet from being consumed by the Void miasma?

The Almagest only showed records of the planet. So while they knew what happened seven hundred years ago, it didn't show how or why it happened.

Veira operated the Almagest to display the position of the celestial bodies.

"So with that happening, it only makes sense the stars' position would shift."

And indeed, the stars' positions were different compared to one thousand years ago. Back in Leonis's period, there was an art of astrology that tried to decipher the positions of the stars and their meaning, but now, all its research was of no use.

"Mm, wait…?"

Leonis realized something. No matter where he looked along the star map, he couldn't find that star.

"Veira, where's the Star of Calamity?"

The Star of Calamity—a red star that shined bright in the sky, one that didn't exist a thousand years ago. It was believed to be related to Void activity and the outbreak of Stampedes, and Regina was disinherited from her position as princess for being born under that star.

"What are you talking about? It's over there." Veira pointed at the star map's center.

"What?"

"What the humans call the 'Star of Calamity' is the other world that split off from this one seven hundred years ago. Whenever the Void World overlaps with this one, it becomes visible, like a shadow."

"…I see."

This world and the Void World weren't separated by physical space, but via their spacetime positions. So a situation where they overlapped could occur.

…I imagine the Devil of the Underworld would be more knowledgeable about this.

But in that case, it would mean that the other Undead King sealed in the Rognas kingdom ruins was to Leonis what the Star of Calamity was to this world.

"—That's all we know," Veira said, and snapped her fingers. The star map vanished into thin air. "The events of seven hundred years ago. Was it worth reclaiming the Almagest for this?"

"Yes. Thank you for sharing this insightful information." Leonis nodded sincerely.

Just finding out what happened to the world after the Dark Lords were destroyed was worthwhile information.

"Well, if that's settled, I'll be going." Veira nodded, satisfied, and rose from her seat.

"You're going after Azra-Ael?"

"Well, I'd like to, but…" Veira turned around and shrugged. "For now, I think I'll take my time and relax in this city."

"Wh-what?!" Leonis asked, his expression tensing up.

"I don't like to admit it, but the injuries from my battle with the Divine Dragon will take some time to heal," Veira said, revolving her shoulder, and then looked over at Rivaiz. "But hanging out alone would be boring, so do you want to come with me, Lord of the Seas?"

"Hm. I will admit I'm a bit curious about this era's magic technology."

"Wait, don't just do as you please in my Kingdom!"

"If it's your Kingdom, Leo, then it's mine to do with as I please."

"What kind of logic is that?!"

"Dragon logic," Veira replied nonchalantly and left the Corpse

Chamber.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure she doesn't cause too much havoc," Rivaiz said.

"Guh!" Leonis made to get up, but gave up and sank back into his chair. There was no point in trying to stop the tyrannical Dragon Lord.

"Shary, keep an eye on Veira and Rivaiz," Leonis ordered.

"Eeeh?!" Shary squealed. "I—I can't stop those two!"

"I know that. Just keep watch over them."

"A-all right…" Shary nodded reluctantly and sank into the shadows.

"…My word." Leonis sighed and looked up to the ceiling. But then —

"All right, Leonis, it's about time we talked, you and I," said the Lord of Beasts, having finished eating the rock boar.

"…Yes, you're right," Leonis said, and finished the juice in his goblet.

"I'll overlook you poaching minions from the Grand Beast Army. You didn't know I had resurrected, after all. But things are different now."

The Lord of Beasts opened his one eye wide, and the air in the room trembled.

"I want all the beastmen under your command."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," Leonis said quietly.

"…Mm?"

"I'm still the Undead King. I can't just hand over my subordinates. My dignity won't allow it."

"Heh, so that's your answer then, Undead King?" Gazoth let out a pleased growl. "Then let's follow the old traditions and resolve this in a duel between two Dark Lords."

"A duel. I could take you up on that offer, but are you sure you want to go that way?"

"What?"

"It'll end up tarnishing your name, Lord of Beasts." Leonis shrugged in self-derision. "As you can see, my body is that of a frail child right now. My mana is a third of my original capacity, and even

Shary has me beat in terms of pure physical ability.”

“…Nngh.”

“Moreover, my other self stole my favored staff. You could beat me now, when I can’t use my true power, but it would besmirch your reputation.”

“…Grr. That’s not…,” the Lord of Beasts growled, his expression bitter.

Out of everyone in the Dark Lords’ Armies, Gazoth Hell Beast was the purest warrior—so much so that he challenged the Swordmaster of the Six Heroes to single combat while knowing he couldn’t possibly win. Fighting a weakened, unprepared opponent was beneath him, and an affront to his dignity.

…Albeit, I think I can beat him even in my current state.

“So what are you suggesting? You’re not going to ask me to wait until you regain your full power, are you?”

“No, there’s no need to wait that long,” Leonis shook his head and got to his feet. “Let’s go somewhere else. I’ll prepare a proper place for a duel between Dark Lords.”

◆

—In the depths of black darkness.

It felt like she was in the embrace of cold ice… Just what was she doing there?

…Even though I have a home to go back to.

An old dorm, reminiscent of a haunted mansion. Her favorite cat plush. The warm soup she’d have for dinner. The living room where she would spend time with everyone.

Yes, she had a place to call her own. The place the people she cares about were waiting. But…

I can’t remember, can’t remember, can’t remember, can’t remember— Can’t remember the faces of the members of the ■■■■■ *platoon…*

Why…?

The last thing she saw was her face. Her beautiful silver hair. Her

serious, resolute, clear ice-blue eyes. Her kind junior who reached out to her for help when she was in the deepest dark. And she could see it—someone's slender fingers tightly wringing her neck.

Stop, stop, stop… Stopstopstopstopstop— Why are you doing that? Why are you doing these awful things—

…No.

This hand. It's my hand.

It's me… I'm the one choking R■■■a…

"Aaah… Aah, aaaaaaah…!"

Her agonized scream filled the darkness.

CHAPTER 3

HOMECOMING

"Ha-ha-ha, I'll admit, that was a pleasant duel, Leonis."

"Hmph, I feel the same way, Lord of Beasts. My blood hasn't rushed like this in a thousand years."

"Ya didn't even have any blood coursing through your veins a thousand years ago!"

"…I-it was a figure of speech." Leonis said, clad in his uniform, as he took off the goggles he was wearing.

The virtual forest field around them vanished, revealing a room with white walls in its place. They were in a combat simulation room in Excalibur Academy. This place could access a portion of the Astral Garden, allowing students to experience virtual combat training. It not only recreated the powers of registered Holy Swords, it was also capable of simulating over two hundred types of terrain fields, including urban areas, wastelands, and forests.

Normally, this was a cutting-edge device used for anti-Void combat training, but many students used it as a playing ground. Leonis himself became quite hooked on it for a time after Elfiné introduced it to him. Of course, even in a virtual space, Leonis couldn't reveal his Dark Lord powers, so Elfiné one-sidedly pummeled him in their training match.

Either way, by using this device, they were able to fight to their hearts' content with no holds barred without damaging the Seventh Assault Garden.

"This is an interesting gizmo, though. I like it," Gazoth said, looking at the goggles curiously.

"Mm, mankind's technology has advanced so much it surprises even a sorcerer such as myself." Leonis shrugged and displayed the score of their match on his terminal. "Our scores are basically tied."

"Well, that's the result I'd expect from two Dark Lords going all out. No complaints there." Gazoth nodded magnanimously.

In the earlier parts of the match, Leonis had the advantage owing to his familiarity, but the Lord of Beasts' supernatural reaction speeds allowed him to gain momentum, and he won back all his points in the latter half of the game. If their match lasted longer, Leonis would have surely lost.

…It's a good thing Gazoth is a Dark Lord who stands by his word. Leonis thought to himself in relief.

Veira would have demanded a rematch and blasted the area with her fiery breath when denied.

"Then, as decided, I'll hand over half of the Demon Wolf Pack to you."

"Yeah, but I get to pick who."

"Very well." Leonis nodded.

Gazoth preferred to have the Red Lion clan and Ashen Bear clan, beastmen from clans that had great combat prowess. And while it may have looked like handing over the stronger beastmen was a concession on Leonis's behalf, Leonis preferred beastmen of the Shadow Wolf clan, which were more geared toward stealth and gathering intelligence.

…Losing subordinates is a painful blow, but it's a reasonable price to pay for making peace with Gazoth.

Gazoth Hell Beast was a seasoned warrior that always fought on the front lines of the Dark Lord war. He could make for a reliable ally when the time came to fight the other resurrected Undead King.

"Well, it's about time I went back to my base. Can't leave it vacant for too long." Gazoth raised his hulking figure from the seat.

He was currently running an underground syndicate of beastmen in the capital, it seemed. He opened the door and made to leave the training facility, but then— "Oh. That reminds me…" Gazoth turned to look at Leonis. "While you were fighting the Divine Dragon, I ran into this suspicious guy. He looked human. Aaah, what was his name again? Used to work under the Devil of the Underworld."

"…Nefakess Reizaad?" Leonis asked sharply.

"Yeah, that's the name. He used these sneaky methods to

challenge me to battle. Who is he anyway? Surely he didn't join your side after resurrecting, did he?"

"I don't know what he's scheming, either." Leonis shook his head. "But I do know he's been going around trying to resurrect the slumbering Six Heroes and Dark Lords."

It wasn't limited to just Nefakess Reizaad, either. Leonis's former officer, the Mad Alchemist Zemein, was involved too, as was the exiled Queen of Shadows, Scheherazade, who had crashed the Holy Sword Dance Festival and created the massive crack in the sky above the capital.

"It must have been him who awakened my other self in the Rognas Kingdom ruins."

"Oh. So that was him." Gazoth growled. "I shouldn't have played around and killed him after all."

"Well, if nothing else, I'm keeping a careful watch over his actions. He's not very powerful on his own, but his scheming is proving problematic."

"Yeah, next time I see him, I'll crush him—no questions asked." The Lord of Beasts gave an invincible smirk and waved at Leonis with his back turned.

After leaving the training facility, Leonis took out his terminal and turned it on. As soon as he did, it started ringing, and the voice of his minion girl came out of the speaker.

"Oh, Leo, good. I was worried because you weren't picking up the phone."

"I'm sorry, communications must have been unstable because of the Stampede…"

"Where are you now?"

"Hm, Excalibur Academy's training area."

"Oh, really? We're on our way back right now. Let's meet up in front of the auditorium."

"All right."

◆

"—Leo!"

"Kid, we're over here!"

Ten minutes later, Leonis spotted Riselia and Regina waving at him from the auditorium's entrance. Regina jumped, her twintailed hair hopping.

"Did I keep you waiting?" He hurried over, and Riselia wrapped her arms around him.

"Oh, Leo, I was so worried."

Leonis felt himself flush over as her soft bosom enveloped his face. Thin strands of her silver hair brushed ticklishly over his cheeks.

"M-Miss Selia, I can't breathe…"

"O-oh, sorry…"

Riselia hurriedly let go, but then kneeled and whispered into his ear.

"Thank you, Leo. You saved everyone."

"No, I wasn't…" Leonis awkwardly averted his gaze from her ice-blue eyes.

…He wasn't doing this to save the humans. All he did was try to protect his kingdom.

…I'm not a hero, after all. He rejected the idea, recalling a bitter memory from long, long ago.

"…This reminds me, what did you do with the Thunderbolt?" He turned to look at Regina.

"I parked it in a parking lot in the Central Garden. It'd be trouble if I brought it to the Academy."

"Yes, thank you for that." Leonis was grateful for her quick thinking.

He had gotten the Thunderbolt through illegal dealings, and it was an unregistered military vehicle. What's more, he had modified it to suit his tastes. So if the Academy's Administrative Bureau were to catch wind of it, it would cause him many problems.

He could send Shary later to collect it from the parking lot.

—But then he remembered something important. Indeed, something much more important than the Thunderbolt.

"—Hm, what did you do with the Magia Droid you found in the

ruins?”

The last time he saw the Deus Machina’s wreckage, she was connected to the Thunderbolt.

“I’m having Leite fixed. Apparently, she can get new limbs.”

“I see. So you did meet up with Miss Elfiné.”

Leonis was planning to have Elfiné fix her to begin with. Her Eye of the Witch would have been able to repair the Deus Machina’s damaged memory, too. However…

“…”

Riselia and Regina exchanged silent looks.

“Wh-what’s wrong…?” Leonis frowned, taken aback by their grim change in attitude.

“…Leo, Miss Finé—” Riselia placed her hands on Leonis’s shoulder and began explaining.

…

“So Miss Elfiné has a Demon Sword…,” Leonis whispered, holding back a groan.

He had just heard the story of how Elfiné appeared before them with a swarm of Voids in a Phillet research facility and used a Demon Sword’s powers, before disappearing along with the Voids.

…Was she corrupted by her Demon Sword?

As far as Leonis knew, anyone who wielded a Demon Sword’s power, without exception, had their mind corrupted by it. Like Muselle Rhodes, who attacked Riselia once, and Liat Guinness, the captain of Elfiné’s former unit, the seventh platoon.

“…Yes. If nothing else, she doesn’t seem to remember us.” Riselia shook her head weakly.

“I see…”

“I couldn’t save her…,” Riselia said, her voice trembling as she held onto Leonis’s shoulders.

“Miss Selia…”

“…Don’t worry, Lady Selia. Miss Finé won’t lose to this.”

“…Yeah. You’re right.” Riselia nodded and bit her lip.

“First we need to look for clues and figure out where she went.”

“Right…”

So Elfiné was abducted by her family… Leonis thought to himself.

This meant they weren't without any clues at all. When he ran into Nefakess in the Rognas Kingdom ruins, he was accompanied by Seraphim, an Artificial Elemental, which took control of the Machina Soldiers and the Deus Machina. Seraphim was created by the Phillet company, which meant the priest was somehow backed by the Phillets.

…So if I capture him, I should be able to learn Elfiné's whereabouts…

◆

Passing through the moving walkway set up in the Academy grounds, the trio returned to the residential area. Leonis's residence, the Hræsvelgr dorm, was at the back of the residential area, so it took some time to get there. On the way back, the three of them ran into other returning Academy student units and greeted them with high fives.

"That reminds me, where's Miss Sakuya?" Leonis asked.

"Oh, she went back to her mansion in Old Town," Riselia said, turning to look at him.

"So she went back to visit her family."

She must have gone to visit her legal guardian, Raiou. Since Sakuya knew his true identity, he wanted to consult her about setting up an espionage unit that used the mysterious Sakura Orchid techniques. This way, he could compensate for yielding half of the Demon Wolf Pack to Gazoth.

…If I just started scouting members without speaking to her, I imagine she'd get mad at me.

Sakuya was, despite how she acted most of the time, the Sakura Orchid's princess, so talking to her before doing anything was probably appropriate.

"Ah, our humble, beloved abode is coming into view, Lady Selia!" Regina pointed at the mansion style building built atop a hill. "But is it just me, or does it look even more abandoned?"

"R-right…," Riselia said, her face screwed up nervously.

The walls of the Hræsvelgr dorm were covered in the vines of some strange plant Shary had planted, and a swarm of creepy bats were hanging from the roof's eaves.

"…But it still feels like home."

"True. I think the last time I slept in my bed was the day before Princess Chatres invited us over to the tea party. And that was, uh, how many days ago…?" Regina started counting the days on her fingers.

They were caught up in the Queen of Shadows Scheherazade's plan in Elysion Academy, were swallowed by a Void tear where they fought the Spirit King, and ran into the other Leonis, who was unsealed in the old Rognas Kingdom ruins.

In terms of total time, the entire sequence of events only took eighty hours, but it did feel long enough for them to miss home.

"I wanna take a shower, already…," Regina said, pinching the hem of her shirt with a finger and flapping it to cool herself.

"Regina, that's improper," Riselia chided her.

With that exchange, they arrived at the dorm's front door.

"—Oh, you've returned, Lord Leonis!"

Leonis stopped in his tracks, hearing a telepathic message. He spotted a cackling skull hiding in the thicket. It was the Archmage and leader of the Three Champions of Rognas, Nefisgal. He'd been guarding the dorm ever since the Holy Light Festival, where he was stationed as a decoration in the yard as part of its setup as a haunted café.

"Yes. You've done well to guard this place in my absence, Nefisgal," Leonis replied via telepathy.

Excalibur Academy was also attacked by the Voids during the Stampede, but the Three Champions of Rognas bravely protected the dorm. Incidentally, Amilas and Dorug were set in the back of the building.

"—That said, Lord Leonis, I have a report for you."

"Mm? Speak it."

"You see, about an hour ago, intruders entered the dorm…"

"Intruders?!" Leonis frowned. *"Well, why didn't you drive them away?"*

"Uh, you see…"

The skull rattled inside the thicket. It almost seemed like Nefisgal, a seasoned veteran in his own right, was scared of something.

"Who could it be…?"

"What's wrong, Leo?" Riselia asked as she unlocked the front door, turning to look at him quizzically.

"O-oh, nothing!"

"C'mon, kid, get in."

At Regina's urging, Leonis walked away from the thicket. They opened the door, and the moment he stepped inside, Leonis sensed something was wrong.

…Someone's here.

He cautiously stepped out in front of his minion. But then—

"Oh, you're finally back, Leo."

A girl reclining on the living room sofa looked up at him, her crimson hair coming into view.

"You were late, so we helped ourselves in and made ourselves at home," a girl with amethyst-colored hair then said, holding up a can of beer.

"What are you two doing here?!" Leonis called out irately.

◆

Veira the Dragon Lord and the Lord of the Seas, Rivaiz. Two of the most feared Dark Lords prophesized to bring destruction…were now lazily lounging on the sofa after a bath, dressed in nothing but their undergarments and a blouse over their limbs.

"Th-that's my shirt…," Riselia muttered, stupefied.



"Yes, I borrowed it. It's much more pleasant to the touch than clothes were back in my day," Veira said unapologetically, sipping on her can of beer.

…So these two were the intruders! Leonis realized, bringing a hand to his temples wearily.

Even the Three Champions of Rognas would be powerless against a pair of Dark Lords. He swiftly drew on Veira, who was lying on the sofa, and whispered, "What are you doing? I thought you were going to sightsee around the human city!"

"Remember the place you took me to last time? Well, I went there, and the buildings were all buried."

Indeed, even with the Stampede concluded, the Seventh Assault Garden was still in first combat alert form, meaning all the shopping malls and leisure facilities were closed.

"Still, why here?!"

"I mean, this is where your minion lives, right?"

"Right."

"And what's yours is mine. So your minion belongs to me, too, and I can do as I please with her."

"What kind of logic is that?!"

"Dragon logic," Veira replied with an invincible smile and stacked her empty beer can on another one set on the table.

"Hm, excuse me, my lord…" Shary's apologetic voice reached Leonis's mind. "I couldn't stop the Dragon Lord…"

"Yes, I couldn't expect you to…" Leonis sighed.

I suppose it's better than them running amok in the city center, he thought.

"H-hmm…" Regina, standing at the entrance, spoke out diffidently. "You're a friend of the kid, correct?"

She spoke to Veira, whom she was already acquainted with from the one time she teamed up with Riselia to have a water shooting match on a rooftop pool with Veira.

"A friend? Hmm, I suppose…," Veira said with a chuckle and a shrug.

"And this person over here…" Regina turned her eyes to Rivaiz, who was hugging her knees on a couch.

"…Are you referring to me, human? I am…yes—Leonis's long-lost sister."

"Huuuh?! You're the kid's big sister?!" Regina exclaimed, her eyes wide with shock.

"H-hey, what are you thinking?!" Leonis glared at Rivaiz.

"…I see. I didn't know he had such a pretty sister."

"Yes. When I heard my younger brother was living all alone, I had to come check on him," Rivaiz said, nonchalantly hugging Leonis's head to her body.

…Damn you, Lord of the Seas! You put her under a mental interference spell.

No ordinary human could resist a Dark Lord's mental interference.

"Oh, then we should give you a proper welcome! If you'll just give me time to get take a shower, I'll make us a modest feast."

"My apologies for the trouble," Rivaiz said as Regina headed back to her room.

But then, Rivaiz turned to look at Riselia, and…

"…?"

…cocked her head, baffled.

"It's strange. My spell is not working on this girl."

"E-erm…" Riselia looked at Rivaiz's eyes, as blue as the water's surface, with confusion.

"This girl is Leo's minion," Veira explained, holding up an index finger. "One of the highest class: a Vampire Queen. She has resistance to mental spells."

"An undead minion, then. I see." Rivaiz nodded, satisfied with the explanation. "I am an old acquaintance of Leonis's. For reasons I cannot elaborate on, I am staying on this island for now."

"…I—I understand," Riselia said, swallowing nervously.

She must have sensed on an instinctual level that Rivaiz was a being on an equal level with Veira. But of course, she couldn't imagine these two girls lounging in her living room were, in fact, the Dark Lords her father Edward was researching.

But then—

"U-um, Veira…!" Riselia turned to look at Veira, her voice high-strung, and then straightened out her back and bowed. "Thank you

very much for the Dragon Blood. It saved me."

"Hmm. So you used my Dragon Blood." Veira eyed Riselia with interest.

"What?" Rivaiz's eyes widened ever so slightly. "You granted her Dragon Blood?"

"Yes, just a little bit."

"I hear the only one known to have successfully used a Dragon Lord's blood was the Ancestor Vampire Count Dracul. To think she could use your blood, of all people…," the Lord of the Seas mused, her amethyst eyes alight with interest.

At that point, Riselia drew on Veira. "Um, Veira, I have a request!"

Whatever she was thinking, she was kneeling on the floor in front of the sofa, her fists against the floor.

"Miss Selia, what are you…?" Leonis was taken aback by his minion's sudden behavior.

"Leo's minion is asking me for a favor? Interesting." Veira smiled slightly. "Fine, I'll hear you out, if nothing else. Go on, ask."

"Y-yes. Hm, could you teach me how to use the Dragon Blood better?!"

Riselia looked right into Veira's eyes, her breath held. There was a brief moment of silence…

"Hmm." Veira's smile widened. "I see you haven't lost yourself to the power."

"…I have someone I need to save. A friend. But the way I am now, I won't be able to bring her back. So…"

"Heh. Fine." Veira got to her feet, throwing back her long, crimson hair. "I have time on my hands anyway. I'll give you some special training."

"Th-thank you!"

"Fair warning, though. My training can be harsh."

"…Harsh suits me just fine," Riselia said, swallowing nervously.

"Miss Selia, are you sure you want this?"

"…Yes. I want to get stronger so I can save Miss Finé."

Seeing the resolve in Riselia's eyes, Leonis went quiet.

I'd have told Veira not to lay hands on my minion, but…

If this is what Riselia wanted for herself, it wasn't his place to tell

her otherwise.

"You've got some training grounds, right? Show me the way." Veira got off the sofa and gestured for Riselia to follow.

"Y-yes, Teacher!"

Seeing the two of them make for the front door, Rivaiz whispered, "Hmm. This girl must be something special if the Dragon Lord took a liking to her."

"I—I thought I was her teacher…?" Shary whispered in the shadows, sulking.

◆

The Seventh Assault Garden's Area II, Old Town.

"Princess Sakuya, prepare yourself!"

"Prepare yourself, aaaah!"

"Too easy…!"

With a swipe of her hand, Riselia sent the two shadows pouncing at her tumbling down to the mansion's lawn.

"Kuh, spectacular work, Princess Sakuya…"

"Your skills have grown once more."

The two girls lying on the ground whispered in satisfaction, for some reason.

Eika and Kuroyuki were spies working for Murakumo, the Sakura Orchid intelligence unit. It was habit by now for the two of them to launch an attack on Sakuya, so as to help train their liege.

"Your presence was too easy to detect," Sakuya said with a strained smile as she helped the two to their feet.

Recently, she had become able to easily shrug off attacks like theirs.

…I feel bad for Eika and Kuroyuki, but they're not a challenge for me anymore.

Sakuya needed a sparring partner who was a match for her. The elf fencer she met recently, Arle, could certainly put up a good fight, but she vanished in the Void World, pursuing some sort of mission.

…Would Miss Selia be good enough?

It did seem like she'd gotten stronger recently.

Maybe I should ask her for a match sometime …

So Sakuya thought to herself as she approached the mansion's front door.

"Come to think of it, it's been quite some time since you came to visit, Princess Sakuya," Eika said, following close behind her.

"Yes, I'm sorry I was absent for so long. I was out on something of a journey," Sakuya replied.

"A journey?"

'For training."

She couldn't openly tell them she was in the Void World, or that just a few hours ago, she was running amok in a Phillet company facility. If Raiou were to find out about it, she'd spend the next three hours getting an earful of another of his bothersome sermons.

But Eika might already know…

She went to Old Town's bathhouse to clean herself up before coming here, but even if she did wash off the scent of blood, hiding the emotional turmoil that comes from cutting people down was difficult.

…No. That wasn't human, Sakuya whispered, mostly to convince herself.

In the Phillet facility, she ran into a private militia, its soldiers clad in protective suits and visors. When she cut off their masks, she exposed their faces, only to find one was the face of someone she knew—Uzan, strongest member and leader of the Kenki Gathering, a Sakura Orchid mercenary group.

To take revenge on the Void Lord who destroyed their homeland, Uzan took on a Demon Sword and became corrupted by its power.

And the Kenki Gathering were backed by Finzel Phillet.

And the dozen or so Uzans she faced in the facility were all merged with Demon Swords.

They were likely created through homunculus technology…

This meant they were soulless weapons, somehow implanted with the power of a Demon Sword.

…They'll pay for this.

Sakuya found herself clenching her fists. Those were simply

human-faced weapons, without a shred of memories or personality. And yet, the sensation of cutting down a person—and one wearing the face of a compatriot, at that—was still vivid in all its unpleasantness.

Whoever made those things will pay dearly with their lives…

But a voice cut into that thought.

"You're giving off an awful lot of bloodlust, Princess," The voice of an old man spoke to her from behind the sliding door facing the garden.

"…Raiou."

Sakuya stopped, and Eika moved in to open the sliding door. Sitting in the center of the room was an old man, his hair grizzled and white.

"I am glad to see you return to us safe and sound, Princess."

"Yes. I'm sorry if I caused you concern."

After Sakuya entered the room, Eika silently closed the sliding door and disappeared into the shadows.

"Having you go missing is something we're very much used to by now, Princess," Raiou opened one eye and looked at Sakuya's face fixedly.

"Hmm. It hasn't been very long, but you've changed so much."

"Is that right? Well, I'm still growing every day," Sakuya said, holding her chest by way of illustration.

"No, I'm afraid in that area, you've grown very little."

"H-how rude!" Sakuya puffed up her cheeks grumpily.

Raiou slowly opened both eyes and spoke.

"—You cut someone down. Didn't you, Princess Sakuya?"

"…Yes." Sakuya nodded curtly. "I guess I can't fool you, Grandpa."

"So that's the source of the bloodlust I sensed earlier…," Raiou murmured as Sakuya sat across from him.

"What I cut down was a man-shaped monster. And yet, the fact it looked so human shook me to the core."

"A man-shaped monster… Was it one of those monsters possessed by Demon Swords?"

"Yes. And it looked like Uzan."

"…What…do you mean?" Raiou's eyes widened.

“Homunculi. Phillet Company magical technology.”

“The Phillet Company…”

“Yes. And those things weren’t anywhere near as strong as Uzan,” Sakuya appended.

This was her way of paying respect to the real Uzan.

“Grandpa…I intend to fight the Phillets.”

“Princess Sakuya…”

“They used the Kenki Gathering and devoured them down to their very soul. And they also abducted a senior I hold dear.”

Sakuya brought her fist to the tatami mat.

“—Lend me your strength, Grandpa.”

And then, she bowed her head deeply at Raiou.

“…Please raise your head, Princess Sakuya.” Raiou parted his lips quietly. “Murakumo is a group in service to the royal family. All that is ours is yours, Princess. And while our numbers are not great, we will help you as your vassals.”

“Thank you, Grandpa.” Sakuya nodded, raised her head, and then moved closer to the old man. “Also, there’s something I need to ask you.”

“Hmm. What is it, Princess?”

“—Is my sister, Setsura, truly dead?” Sakuya asked in a whisper.

“…What do you mean by that?”

“I met Setsura.”

Raiou’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Princess Sakuya, that is…”

“I know. My sister was slain in the Sakura Orchid by that Void Lord in the form of a swordsman. But…”

“…If you, of all people, say you’ve met her, then I find it hard to believe you would mistake her for anyone else,” Raiou said, picking his words carefully. “However, hm, is there any chance it’s another one of those homunculi you mentioned…?”

“No. I don’t think that’s the case. It was definitely Setsura.” Sakuya shook her head.

It was no puppet made to look like her. That girl’s personality was definitely that of her sister. And more importantly, Sakuya knew it was her because she had locked blades with her twice.

“The Mikagami style’s ultimate blade techniques are only usable

by the priestesses of the royal house. Only by me and my sister.”

Raiou grumbled, his expression very mixed. “I have heard the ancient Oni arts have a forbidden, heretical spell to raise corpses from the dead.”

“A heretical spell to raise the dead…”

“It’s a lost art. Shall I have Murakumo look into it?”

“Yes. Please.” Sakuya nodded.

But as she did, something occurred to her.

A spell to raise the dead… If such a thing exists…

The face of a boy whom she suspected was familiar with such a thing crossed her mind.

CHAPTER 4

ELFINÉ'S WILL

After Riselia left with Veira to train, Leonis took a brief shower and returned to the first floor living room. It was just around sunset.

"Come, Leonis. This is quite fascinating."

As soon as he came down the stairs, he heard someone calling out to him. The Lord of the Seas was loitering on the sofa and gazing at a tablet terminal with great interest. There was a printed-out picture of Princess Altiria pasted to the back of the terminal, so it was likely Regina's.

"The humans have integrated the power of Spirits into this magical device."

"Yes, indeed," Leonis said, switching on the living room light. "They have the means of using magical technology to artificially create Spirits and Elementals."

"Mm. The sorcerers of yore were able to perform such things, but the fact that even those with no talent in sorcery can use this device with ease is what truly surprises me."

Rivaiz tapped on the tablet and a movie started playing—a panic horror film about a gigantic shark attacking a city.

"The lobster girl has good taste," she said.

"…Lobster girl?" Leonis frowned.

Oh, she means Regina…

He realized what she meant. Regina's twintailed hair did look like a lobster's whiskers. An appetizing scent wafted up from the kitchen, prompting a grumble of complaint from Leonis's stomach.

…I swear, this human body is so incorrigible!

Leaving the Lord of the Seas to her shark film, Leonis made his way to the kitchen, where he found Regina, clad in her maid uniform, making dinner. Her kitchen knife hit the cutting board with

a clear, consistent rhythm. She hummed to herself, her blond twintails swaying.

"Miss Regina."

"Oh hi, kid—" Regina turned to face him, a tomato in hand.

"What are you making?"

"A paella and onion soup au gratin."

"I see…"

The scent that reached the living room did smell of marine food.

"Actually, you came at just the right time. Can you taste it for me?"

"You don't mind?"

"I bet you're hungry, kid. Your big sister can see right through you."

"…Well, I am."

Since she could see right through him, he decided to take her up on that offer. Leonis walked by Regina and stepped up to the kitchen counter. Sitting in the bowl were white fish and clams cut into chunks. These marine products were raised in the Seventh Assault Garden's aquaculture plant, and were quite expensive products.





“You really splurged today, Miss Regina.”

“Of course. We’re hosting your big sister today, after all.”

“…”

Leonis felt a bit mixed about that statement. Regina scooped up a bit of the onion soup onto a platter.

“Here you go, try it. ♪”

“Thank you.”

He blew on the steaming soup to cool it down and tasted it, only to exclaim in surprise. The sweetness of the onion was matched by just the right degree of salt. Dipping some warm bread in this soup would surely be delicious.

“It’s great.”

“Good, I’m glad you like it.” Regina smiled and gently pat Leonis on the head.

“…Miss Regina?” Leonis looked up at her, confused.

“I’m glad your friends came here. We honestly had more ingredients than I knew what to do with,” she whispered in a lonely tone, her gaze fixed on something in the distance.

“…”

She was no doubt thinking of the girl who should have returned to the dorm with them.

“Onion soup au gratin is Miss Finé’s favorite dish, you know?” Regina said softly.

Silence hung over the kitchen, disturbed only by the gentle clinking of the pot.

“Back when Lady Selia had just scouted her to our platoon, Miss Finé didn’t care much for what she ate, and mostly lived off military rations. She said it didn’t matter and she just needed energy to keep going.”

“…”

At the time, she was emotionally hurt by the seventh platoon’s fall to the point where she lost her Holy Sword’s power. She lost her feelings of joy and sorrow, living like a machine.

“So Lady Selia and I tried all sorts of things, but it was like her body just rejected our cooking. Miss Finé kept apologizing about it.”

Regina filled the platter with soup again and tasted it herself.

"But then, one day, our platoon of misfits won its first training match. Back then, Sakuya wasn't with us yet, so looking back on it, it was probably a fluke. But we made a feast to celebrate, and Miss Finé decided to at least have some soup out of respect for the occasion. She had a bit of onion soup au gratin, and…"

Regina wiped her eyes with her uniform's sleeve.

"…it was the first time she smiled and said she likes my cooking."

And since then, she started eating their cooking, and in spending her days with the eighteenth platoon, she gradually regained her emotions.

"…Oh, drat. It must be because I was cutting onions…" Regina wiped her tear-filled eyes with a finger.

Leonis took out a handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to her.

"Heh-heh. You're such a gentleman, kid. ♪" Regina took the handkerchief and used it to wipe her tears away. And then, she gripped it tight. "…Miss Finé's coming back, right, kid?"

"Yes. She will." Leonis nodded.

"Then, when she does, let's do a huge party here in the dorm."

◆

…It was well after sundown when Riselia and Veira returned to the dorm.

"Oh, something smells good!" Veira said at the front door, her golden eyes aglow.

Riselia, by contrast, was completely exhausted. She dragged her body to the living room and toppled onto the sofa.

"Welcome back, Miss Selia… Ah, are you okay?!" Leonis hurried over to her.

"Nngh, Leo…" Riselia sluggishly sat up in a daze and instantly started nibbling on his earlobe.

"Whoa, Miss Selia?!" he exclaimed."Uh, i-it hurts…"

"Oh, s-sorry!" She pulled her lips away from him in a hurry.

"What's gotten into you, Miss Selia? You're never this indecent!"

Leonis rebuked her, rubbing his aching earlobe.

"…W-well, excuse me for being indecent!" Riselia dropped her shoulders bashfully.

Veira then entered the room. "She has severe mana deficiency. Let her suck on you."

"…What have you done to her, Veira?" Leonis asked in complaint as he lifted up Riselia.

"I just helped her train. She's got promising potential, this girl."

"Th-thank you, dragon!" Riselia suddenly got to her feet and spoke sharply, her back perfectly straight.

"D-dragon?" Leonis frowned.

"I can see why you made her your minion—she has very high latent mana potential. But she doesn't have the mental prowess to fully utilize the Dragon Blood. If this is enough to leave her all tuckered out, my blood will suck up all her mana at once, and she'll be reduced to ashes."

"Dragon!" Riselia saluted, her expression as serious as can be.

"Hm, Miss Selia, why do you keep saying that?"

"My teacher told me if I'm going to embody the soul of the ancient dragons and master the secret arts of the Final Dragon Attack, I must append all my sentences with the word *dragon*… Dragon!"

"…Veira, don't put stupid ideas in my minion's head!" Leonis raised his voice.

Veira smirked impishly and stuck out her tongue. "I mean, she takes everything so seriously. I couldn't help but tease her."

"Huh? Tease me? Huh?!" Riselia said in confusion, her ice-blue eyes wide.

"…Miss Selia, I know you're a serious person, but you don't have to take everything at face value." Leonis sighed.

For how kind and earnest his minion was, she had a way of being surprisingly ditzy…which was admittedly a charm point.

"—Leonis."

A voice called down to him from the second-floor landing. Looking up, he spotted the Lord of the Seas clad in a towel after a bath.

"What is it?"

"I was toying with the water Spirits, and it ended up breaking the shower in my room."

"…!" Leonis grasped his head in frustration.

But then—

"Everyone, dinner's ready! ♪" Regina's cheerful voice reached them from the kitchen.

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The living room table was covered with Regina's home cooking.

A paella made from fish bred in the aquaculture plant, warm vegetable salad, a chicken mini-steak, sweet potatoes roasted in butter, onion soup au gratin, and slightly charred molten cheese on fragrant bread.

"Your home cooking really is the best, Regina!" Riselia said, smiling blissfully.

Even though Regina did try to put multiple spins on it to make it more palatable, all they had to eat in the Void World was bland military rations. So a good meal back at the dorm, and especially after a hard workout, added to her appreciation of this meal.

"And this soup, it was Miss Finé's favorite," Riselia whispered as she reached for the onion soup.

"Yes. I was hoping the scent would lure back Miss Finé."

"…Yes. You're right." Riselia closed her eyes and sipped on the soup.

"This meat is just delicious!"

"I've never had this paella dish before, but it's quite delectable."

Regina's cooking seemed to go over well with Veira and Rivaiz, too. The thought of the Lord of the Seas eating seafood seemed odd at first glance, but her other half, the Leviathan, was the strongest life-form that ate many a large fish. And the merman race, which occupied the depths a thousand years ago, did offer the Lord of the Seas an assortment of seafoods as offering.

…The Lord of the Beasts fed on the meat of animals, too. Leonis

noted as he tried the paella.

The fish stock's flavor blended in well with the fragrant saffron rice, making it quite delicious.

"I like you, Lobster Girl. Allow me to reward you in some way."

"Really? Then I'd like the kid's hand in marriage."

"Mm. Very well." Rivaiz consented casually.

"What are you saying, Miss Regina?" Leonis asked, taken aback.

"That's right. Who said you get to call the shots? Leo's mine, after all," Veira interjected.

"I—I'm Leo's guardian!" Riselia puffed her cheeks grumpily.

…Goodness.

Leonis sighed and reached for the chicken steak, but then he felt someone tug on his pants hem from the bottom of the table.

Looking down, he saw Shary's hand reach out from within his shadow.

"My lord, I'd like to try some, too." Her voice echoed in his head.

"…Very well. Wait a moment." Leonis replied telepathically and slipped a platter of paella into his shadow.

"If it isn't too forward of me, my lord, I'd like to try the chicken too, please."

"…You have no modesty or restraint. Sneaking it away without getting spotted is difficult, you know?"

Leonis frowned, but out of respect for Shary's hard work in handling the Lord of Beasts alone, he sunk platters of salad and chicken into the shadow.

"Oh, I don't want the lentils, my lord."

"No. Being picky with your food is bad for your nutrition."

"…Mm, fine."

Shary reluctantly accepted the platters and sank back into the shadow.

"You really finished your plate quick, Leo," Riselia said.

"Hm? Yes, Miss Regina's cooking is delicious."

"You need to eat your veggies for a balanced diet. I'll put some on your plate."

"No, I don't need more veggies…"

But then, a ringing on the front door's bell cut into their

exchange.

"…Who could it be at this time of day?" Regina frowned.

"Regina, you stay here and eat. I'll go get it." Riselia got up and walked over to the front door.

Leonis took this chance to sink the plate full of vegetables into his shadow. Riselia returned from the front door carrying two large boxes.

"Heave-ho…" She placed them on the living room floor and let out a breath of effort.

"What's this, Lady Selia?" Regina asked.

"…I don't know? Someone from the Academy's delivery service said these are packages addressed to us."

"I never ordered anything that big… Oh, maybe Sakuya did? She was looking for mortar on a shopping site the other day."

"Why was she looking for mortar…?"

"She said she really wanted to eat mochi cakes, or something… Anyway, let's open it."

"R-right…"

Riselia brought a cutter and opened up the box. And what she found inside was…

"—Good morning, master."

"Fwhaaa?! Leite?!"

The Deus Machina, hugging her knees with both hands.

"…Y-you surprised me…," Riselia said, holding a hand over her heart. It seemed the surprise made her heart, which typically doesn't beat, race for a moment. "Miss Clauvia must have sent you."

"She didn't need to have her delivered by mail…," Regina whispered and took out a sheet of paper with technical specs written on it. "Lady Selia, it says she's equipped with the newest model of artificial limbs. She also added some new attachable features. Uh, her right hand is loaded with a heat blade. She also has an anti-Void mini-machine gun, a missile pad, a burner and a mixer, a brush, and even a vacuum cleaner!"





Apparently, all these exchangeable features were in the other box.

"This is really convenient!" Regina said enthusiastically.

"Y-yeah…?" Riselia asked, confused.

"What's this? This looks like fun." Veira peeked in from behind them. "…Who's this girl? Some kind of doll?"

"—Yes. It's this era's type of Magia Droid," Leonis said.

Revealing she was the Deus Machina would make things tricky, so Leonis lied. Thankfully, none of the other Dark Lords ever saw Schwertleite in this form.

"Hmm. Magia Droid technology really has advanced," Veira mused.

She lost interest and returned her attention to the dishes on the table. Rivaiz was still focused solely on Regina's paella.

"Are you hungry, Leite? You can join us for dinner," Riselia said as she pulled the Deus Machina out of the box and helped her take off the vinyl cover placed on her.

"Then please replenish my mana." Schwertleite said, pointing at the mana socket on the wall.

◆

…Drip.

A water droplet fell from the ceiling, hitting Leonis's forehead.

"…My word. Things have become rowdy."

It was after the lively dinner with the Dark Lords. Leonis retired to the bathroom, where he dipped in the bath, heaving a sigh.

It's been a few days since he last took a proper bath. He sank his face into the water that had a bath salt applied to it and blew some bubbles.

—There was much to think about.

The other resurrected Undead King. And Elfiné, who emerged from the Void tear…

Unlike Riselia, Elfiné was not Leonis's minion. She was just a human girl, and Leonis had no obligation in particular to save her.

"…"

Leonis looked up at the ceiling, closed his eyes and thought in silence. After a dozen or so seconds of contemplation…

…Right. Her Holy Sword's ability will be useful for the Dark Lords' Armies.

That was his conclusion.

The Eye of the Witch's probing powers could be used to detect Roselia's reincarnated body. He could recruit her into the Dark Lords' Armies after saving her.

…Hmm, yes. Elfiné will eventually work under me. And so as a Dark Lord, I must punish those who take away that which is mine with the utmost severity…

He nodded to himself, satisfied with that reasoning.

And also…

The Phillet Company that spearheaded the D-Project seemed to be backing the former Dark Lords' Armies officers who were trying to resurrect the Six Heroes and Dark Lords. Pursuing Elfiné would no doubt lead Leonis to them.

And—

To the other Undead King, who stole the Demon Sword from me…

He clenched his fist within the tub, casting his glance outside the bathroom's small window. The formation in the night sky seemed completely different from how it looked one thousand years ago.

Another world, that split from this one seven hundred years ago and was now separated from it by space-time. The ominous, red, glowing Star of Calamity was nowhere to be seen now. The way Veira explained it, that red star was but a shadow that appeared when the two worlds' phases approached and began to overlap.

…Which explains why it seems to come and go.

But then, the words Roselia told him one thousand years ago came to mind.

—In a thousand years' time, when the stars fall from the heavens, one who is human but harbors the soul of the Goddess

shall appear.

The stars in the havens—could it have meant the Star of Calamity? If so… Would that star falling mean the time when the Void World overlapped with this one?

"…"

Leonis dropped his gaze to his left arm. When he touched the Goddess's Altar, the miasma emanating from it placed a seal on his left arm, barring him from using his Holy Sword.

During the discussion in the Dark Lord's Castle, Leonis intentionally kept something unsaid…because he unconsciously didn't want to think about it.

But he heard her voice in the Void World.

—Aah. You've finally come to fulfill your promise, Leonis.

When he defeated the Spirit King who had become a Void Lord, he did, in fact and in certainty, hear her voice.

If her soul was incarnated into the Void World…

If Roselia Ishtaris had already been corrupted by the power of emptiness…

How am I going to…?

Promise me. If, in the distant future, I turn into something else,
I want you to use this Demon Sword to kill me.

An old promise from the past, sealed within his memories. Did she know the world would be encroached upon by the power of emptiness and split in two?

And maybe she knew the Undead King's soul would be parted in two, as well…

Roselia ordered the Deus Machina to protect the Rognas Kingdom ruins. The Deus Machina was an ultra-ancient Magia Weapon. And despite being in the Void World, both Schwertleite and the Machina Soldiers that were her subordinates were unaffected by the emptiness's corrupting presence. This was likely because they were not originally life-forms, so they couldn't become Voids. And thanks

to this, they were able to defend the Undead King's seal.

Ironically enough, it wasn't the Voids but an Artificial Elemental produced by the humans that usurped control of the Deus Machina and undid the seal.

Would repairing the Deus Machina's memories help me learn anything about Roselia?

Leonis splashed hot water over his face.

…I'm getting a bit dizzy.

His frail child's body irritated him. When he had his undead body, he could spend days in thought without needing to pause for self-care.

But just as he got to his feet, deciding to leave the bath, he saw a figure move on the other side of the bathroom's half-transparent door.

"…?!"

He slipped in the bath out of surprise, and then—

"Leo, I'm coming in!"

The door opened, and Riselia came in, covered in only a towel.





"M-Miss Selia?!" Leonis exclaimed and hurriedly looked away.

Riselia sat on the chair while looking mostly unperturbed and turned the shower's faucet. Hot steam rose from the water, obstructing his sight.

"It's been days since I got a real bath…," Riselia said as she doused her hair and applied shampoo.

Ten years old is already plenty old enough for a boy, but she didn't seem to mind…which honestly was nothing new.

"And it's been a long time since I took a bath with you, too," she added, facing Leonis with a smile.

"I—I'll, uh, I'm actually just about to get out…," Leonis said.

"…Oh. Really," Riselia whispered, disappointed.

This made Leonis realize.

Oh, she needs blood…

Veira's training made her deplete much of her mana. On a normal day, she'd drink some of his blood before bedtime, but after today, she probably needed to replenish her mana reserves early.

…Leaving my minion unsatisfied would be a blemish to my dignity as Dark Lord.

Leonis, who was already on his feet, sank back into the tub. "Actually, I think I'll warm myself up here for a while longer…"

"Y-yeah?" Riselia said as she washed her hair, her voice perking up a bit.

"By the way, what about Veira and Rivaiz?"

"They're playing a board game with Regina right now. We still have the empty storeroom we used in the Holy Light Festival, so they can sleep there."

"Th-they're spending the night here…?" Leonis screwed up his face in displeasure.

"Yes, all the Central Garden's hotels are serving as reception centers for the injured right now, so they can't stay there…"

"…I see." Leonis sighed.

Unlike Leonis, whose child body got sleepy at around 21:00, the other two Dark Lords didn't require sleep.

I imagine they're probably doing it out of interest…

But having four of the Dark Lords that nearly brought the world

to ruin at one time resting at the same dorm was unheard of. On the other hand, having them stay here for days could be trouble, so he'd probably do well to set up guest rooms for them in the Dark Lord's Castle.

"Pardon me…" Riselia slipped into the tub, having finished her shower.

Her silver locks clung to her bare skin, making for a very alluring sight. She sat with her back to Leonis, the water overflowing from the bath washing over the bathroom floor.

"…"

"…Leo, can I?"

She wrapped her arms around Leonis's body, pressing against his back.

"Go ahead." He nodded calmly, so as to not let her notice his bashfulness at this situation. He cocked his head, so as to bare his neck and make it easier for her to suck on his blood.

"Mm… Nha…" Riselia tightly hugged Leonis body and sank her teeth into his neck.

"…!"

The slight pain followed by a sweet throbbing made him groan out softly.

"Mwha… Mmm…!"

"M-Miss Selia, my ear tickles…!" Leonis fidgeted within the hot water.

The water wavered and splashed. The amount of blood she sucked had been increasing recently, likely due to her power as a vampire minion rising. And while seeing his minion grow stronger was something to be glad about…

This…might be dangerous…

Leonis's mana capacity was essentially bottomless, but the same didn't hold true for his blood reserves. He was still a ten-year-old child. If Riselia kept growing in power like this, eventually she'd suck him dry.

"Heh-heh, Leo, I know you like it when I nibble on your ear," Riselia whispered with a smile and blew into his ear.

"…?!"

…My minion is teasing me!

And his Dark Lord's dignity wouldn't allow it.

"N-no, I don't!" Leonis said, trying his hardest to keep his voice from becoming high-pitched like a girl's.

…The bath water was also just getting cold.

"Are you feeling better now, Miss Selia?"

"Y-yeah… Thanks, Leo."

Her vampiric impulse finally came under control. The shame at what she just did settled in, and her cheeks were rosy.

"I-I'm sorry. Did it hurt?"

"No, it didn't. I'm just a bit woozy…":

"A-are you OK?" Riselia held Leonis, who had become dizzy, in her arms.

"…"

His heart raced a bit, feeling the softness on the back of his head. His gaze locked with her ice-blue eyes, reflecting the water's surface, as they wavered with emotion. He could clearly guess what was on her mind.

"…You're thinking about Miss Finé, aren't you?"

"Yeah…" Riselia nodded. "It was on my mind the whole time during dinner. Is Miss Finé hungry right now, is she getting enough sleep, is she cold… Is she lonely."

Putting her thoughts out in the open, she gripped Leonis's hand tight.

"Miss Selia…"

She was full of regret at failing to save Elfiné, and her inability to help her now was haunting her all the more. Leonis felt the same turmoil a thousand years ago, when he failed to save Roselia…

Leonis went quiet, looking for the right words. Words of comfort alone would achieve little, so instead he simply held her hand tight.

"I hope we can find some kind of clue…"

"Miss Clauvia said she's tracing Miss Finé's activity in the Astral Garden to discover her whereabouts, but…"

"…"

It wasn't likely she'd find anything. Nefakess Reizaad and the other former Dark Lords' Armies Void Lords were behind the D-

Project.

I know her sister is very talented, but a human's investigation can only go so far…

But then, Leonis realized something felt off.

"The Astral Garden?"

"Yeah, Miss Finé would infiltrate the Phillet Company's Astral Garden to look for information about the D-Project. So maybe there was some kind of clue there…"

"Didn't Miss Finé always have a cat Artificial Elemental whenever she dived into the Astral Garden?"

"…Uh, yeah. Cait Sith."

"Yes, that's the one."

It was an original Artificial Elemental created personally by Elfiné. When Leonis infiltrated the Phillet Company casino, she had him bring that black cat along.

"Where's Cait Sith right now?"

"Huh?"

"If he was in her terminal when she was captured…"

"You think she might have sent it away with some kind of clue?!" Riselia asked, her eyes wide.

Leonis nodded.

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"Leite! Wake up, Leite!"

The two of them hurried back down to the living room, and woke up Schwertleite, who was leaning against the wall, asleep. The horns on her head flickered, and Schwertleite opened her eyes.

"Mama…?"

"Mama?" Leonis cocked an eyebrow.

Riselia leaned in front of Schwertleite and said with an earnest expression. "Leite, I need a favor."

"…?"

"Can you connect to that facility's control system one more time?"

Schwertleite's horns flickered in response. "—Target facility's

system is already compromised. I am capable of seizing control of the entire facility forty-two seconds after connecting to the network," she said expressionlessly.

"It looks like she can connect through the Astral Garden."

"Can she connect using an Academy terminal?"

"You need authorization to use one, and there'll be proof of us using it. I think Miss Finé had a terminal she used specifically to connect to the Astral Garden. Let's use that."

—Elfiné's room was getting dusty. Ever since the massive Void tear appeared around the capital, the military's top brass had her hard at work, and she hadn't been in the dorm since. It'd been a long time since Leonis entered this room for the last time, too. On his first day in Excalibur Academy, he came here to have his data registered.

There was a great number of terminals there, connected by cables. It seemed Elfiné was collecting them.

"She really is obsessed with terminals."

"I doubt she's just collecting them for fun…"

They entered the room and approached a table with multiple monitors set on it. This was a large analysis device Elfiné customized for her purposes.

"Can you connect to this?" Riselia asked anxiously.

"Affirmative."

Schwertleite's azure hair glowed faintly—she likely was trying to connect with the terminal.

"Miss Selia, what I said about Cait Sith was just speculation… You shouldn't get your hopes up based on just a possibility. It's possible it's already been captured, too."

"Yes, I know. But if there's even a slight chance…"

"—Coupling complete." Schwertleite's voice spoke out of the speakers.

"Wow, Schwertleite…"

"She *did* easily fuse with the battle vehicle."

Self-destructing took away most of her original combat prowess, but her control over magical apparatuses still stood as testament of her position as a Dark Lord.

“Commencing takeover of target facility. Firewall system fully disabled.”

“Leite, I want you to look for a cat inside the network.” Riselia said.

“A cat?”

“Yes. A cat. Meow.”

“Meow?”

“Meow.”

“…Miss Selia, what are you doing?” Leonis glared at Riselia, who made her cutest imitation of a cat’s cry.

“…Hmm, I mean, an Artificial Elemental in the form of a cat.”

“Order acknowledged. However, there is a great number of Artificial Elementals in the network, so identifying it may be difficult.”

“Hmm. And it might be hiding so the Phillet Company’s Artificial Elementals don’t spot it, too…” Riselia paused for thought and then raised her head, making up her mind. “Leo, let’s go into the Astral Garden and look for the kitty, too.”

“Are you sure?”

“We might get spotted, but if there are any clues about Miss Finé, I don’t think Cait Sith will show itself unless we’re there.”

“Well, that might be true…,” Leonis said, agreeing with her.

They looked around Elfiné’s rooms and found headsets for connecting into the Astral Garden.

“They’re not intended for children, so they might be a bit too heavy for you…”

Leonis sat on the bed, and Riselia put the headset on him. Indeed, it did make his neck ache. Having to remain upright like this for long would be difficult.

“You can rest your head on my lap.”

Riselia grabbed Leonis’s shoulders and placed his head on her lap like a pillow.

“M-Miss Selia?!” he exclaimed in a flustered manner, but Riselia held him in that position. Through the headset, he could feel her soft thighs, and it made his heart skip a beat.

“Let’s go, Leo,” Riselia said, switching on the headset.

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Everything went black for a moment, and then, an endless grid manifested around him—the Astral Garden's space.

I just can't get used to this feeling…

Frowning, he looked down at his body, finding he was now a fluffy raccoon. This was the avatar he typically used in Excalibur Academy's training sessions. Regina set it for him on the day of his first session, and it's been left unchanged since.

"Leo, you're so cute. ♪"

Leonis turned around upon hearing that voice and saw Riselia sitting on a floating cube around him. Her avatar was a beautiful, four-winged fairy.

"So this is the Phillet's garden…" Leonis got up and looked around.

This virtual world was made up of a grid and occupied with thousands upon tens of thousands of floating cubes. Each cube was a block of condensed data.

"Looking for Miss Finé's cat here will be difficult."

The longer they took, the more likely the risk of them being discovered became.

"There are security Artificial Elementals patrolling about. Remain vigilant." Schwertleite's voice echoed in their heads.

"All right. Let's go, Leo."

Riselia pulled Leonis's arm and flew off.

After a while…

"Kitty? Come out!" Riselia called out in a whisper, flying between the cubes. In terms of time, it felt like thirty minutes or so had passed.

"Kitty?" Riselia called out, clapping her hands.

"It's not a real cat, Miss Selia…," Leonis whispered, but then—"Master, hostiles detected," Schwertleite warned them.

A few cubes burst, turning into bird-shaped Artificial Elementals.

"Fwhaa?!"

The flock of birds attacked Riselia's transparent wings. The torn

off wings turned into particles of light and vanished.

"Miss Selia!" Leonis hopped over to a cube and extended his racoon paw. "I'll reduce you to ash. Third-order spell, Vras Raiga!"

But the spell didn't activate.

…Of course it doesn't work; this is virtual space!

The screeching birds pecked at his fluffy head and tail.

C-curses…!

Leonis swung his arms about, batting away the birds.

"What are you doing, Leo?! Let's run!" Riselia picked up Leonis's body and flew off.

B-blast it all! A Dark Lord turning his back on an enemy…!

But he was powerless in this virtual space, and Riselia likewise couldn't use her Holy Sword. On the other hand, even if their avatars were destroyed here, it would cause them no harm whatsoever, but their remains could be used to trace the intruders' whereabouts back to Excalibur Academy.

"I will assist, Master," said Schwertleite's voice.

Orbs of light appeared in the space around them, producing a spherical flash of light that destroyed the bird Artificial Elementals.

"Wow, Leite!" Riselia said in amazement.

But then, a blaring alarm filled the garden. The cubes burst, producing more bird Artificial Elementals.

"It looks like that raised the alarm level…"

"Maybe we should retreat for now?"

"…Yes, I think so." Leonis nodded, hopping atop the cubes.

The sound of the birds' screeching grew louder and louder. But just then, Leonis faintly heard it.

Meow…

"…?!"

Riselia and Leonis exchanged a look.

"Leite, are there any reactions of Artificial Elementals nearby that aren't these birds?"

"—Identified. Preparing a shortcut."

An orb of light floating in the air fired a flash, tearing diagonally through a wall in the grid and leaving behind a red tear.

"Master, leave this to me. Jump inside."

“All right. Leo—”

“I-is this really safe? Whoa!”

Riselia picked up Leonis and jumped into the tear. Crossing into it, they found themselves in a dark space: a silent void that didn’t exist between the grid’s walls and cubes.

“An air pocket that’s completely detached from the Phillet Company’s Garden…” Riselia flapped her fairy wings, their scales glowing.

And there, within the darkness, they spotted a black cat floating in the void.

“…That’s Miss Finé’s Cait Sith!” Riselia exclaimed.

There was no mistaking it—it was the Artificial Elemental that served as Elfiné’s partner.

“Maybe sounding the alarm was the right answer after all.”

“Yes, I guess the credit goes to Leite on this one.”

Riselia bent over in front of the black cat and stroked it under the neck.

“Does it have any clues about Miss Finé?”

“Yes, let’s see… Ah!” Riselia raised her voice, noticing something.

There was a small dial key hanging from the cat’s collar.

“Does it need a password?”

“Looks like it.”

This was likely a precaution set in place in case Cait Sith was captured by the Phillet Company.

“What could it be? Maybe her birthday… No, that would be too easy.”

But if it wasn’t her birthday, it must have been something her comrades would handily recognize.

“…1024,” Riselia whispered.

“Eh?”

“That’s the date Miss Finé joined the eighteenth platoon.”

Riselia adjusted the collar’s lock to the numbers of the password, and the next moment—Cait Sith broke into particles of light and disappeared.

“…?!”

And then, the particles of light reassembled… taking on the form

of a familiar girl.

"Miss Finé?!"

◆

Standing before them was Elfiné in her uniform.

"…You found it, Selia." Elfiné smiled with her usual gesture and took Riselia's hand.

"Miss Finé…"

"I believed in the unlikely possibility you'd find this and released this little one to the research facility's Garden. But you really found it. Did Clauvia send you?"

"Hm, this Avatar… Is it really you?" Riselia asked.

The avatar shaped like Elfiné slowly shook its head. "No. This is just Cait Sith's mimicry ability, done by tracing the real Elfiné Phillet's personality. I can only answer simple queries, but I'm not really her."

"…R-really?" Riselia asked quizzically.

"It must be like the bone dolls I use to take my place when I ditch classes," Leonis appended.

"I see… So the real Miss Finé…"

"The real me has probably been taken to the Fourth Assault Garden by now."

"…The Fourth?" Riselia frowned.

"Yes. The Phillet's main stronghold, where Count Deinfraude governs…"

"But why would they take you there…?"

Elfiné answered Riselia's question by producing a bright light in her fingertip.

"What's this…?"

"This light is my last remaining memory. Before my will completely went blank, I believed you would come here, and left it here…"

Elfiné pointed the light at Riselia, flicking it toward her so it entered her chest.

"This is the entirety of the Phillet's D-Project I looked into.

Creating Demon Swords, and research into Artificial Elementals. Demon Swordsmen soldiers using Homunculus technology. All of these were technologies given to Count Deinfraude by the Void apostles."

"…The Voids are giving mankind technology?! Wh-what do you mean?"

"The Voids aren't all unsightly monsters without an intellect. Some of the Void Lords wield knowledge that far outmatches anything humans are capable of. They're called apostles. They mingle with human society, or join forces with traitors to mankind, like Deinfraude, and are plotting to have this world be consumed by the Void World…"

"There are humans working together with the Voids?!" Riselia's ice-blue eyes widened in shock.

"—I know it's hard to believe, Selia, but it's true."

"…"

Void Lords with advanced intellect. Leonis had an idea of who it could be referring to. The Dark Lord Armies' former officers, like Nefakess, who plotted to resurrect the Dark Lords.

…So they call themselves apostles, Leonis noted to himself.

If that name was to be taken at face value, then they worked in service of a greater power.

And the Dark Lords' Armies only ever worshipped one person…

As Leonis pondered this, Elfiné carried on.

"Count Deinfraude and the Void apostles are trying to push the D-Project to its final phase. I don't know what he's trying to use me for, but I'm sure he's planning something terrible in the Fourth Assault Garden."

She took Riselia's hands and smiled.

"Selia, listen. There's one last thing I have to tell you. I wish I could have told you this in person, but if nothing else, I'll do it while looking like me…"

"Miss Finé…?"

"My life… The life I always thought was my own had been set up by my father since the day I was born. But the days you gave me in the eighteenth platoon were a time that was all my own—something

no one can take away from me."

Elfiné's body began to turn to particles of light, starting with her fingertips.

"But I'm disappearing now. I'm losing myself. My mind is being eaten away by the Demon Sword's power with the emptiness consuming it. So please…"

She parted her fading lips.

"If I end up becoming a Void, I want you to _____ me."

"…?!"

"I don't want to become a Void, an enemy of mankind…"

"…Miss Finé!" Riselia teared up and hugged Elfiné's avatar.

But the older girl simply regarded her with a mournful smile…and shattered into particles of light.

"Miss…Finé…"

The black cat appeared at Riselia's feet.

"Miss Selia…," Leonis called out to her, as she embraced the empty space Elfiné occupied.

Riselia bit her lips tight.

"Deinfraude… Void apostles… Fourth Assault Garden." She repeated the words, picking up the black cat Elfiné left behind.

◆

…I swear. Not a single moment to rest.

It was midnight. He whispered this to himself as he sat in the chair in his office in Palace Illuminous. The Emperor's younger brother, Alexios Ray O'ltriese. His fair features were marred with traces of fatigue after several days of hard work.

A massive Void invasion, enacted by multiple Void Lords.

Despite not having been graced with a powerful Holy Sword, his data analysis abilities were highly regarded and he was forced to take command regardless of his will. The Stampede was halted with the Void Lords' destruction, but the damages the capital endured were great, and even now, he was swamped with work dealing with the aftermath.

Alexios slumped into his chair tiredly…only for his eyes to settle on an ominous-looking statue. A small statuette of a Dark Lord, fashioned from bones. A few of his subordinates were taken aback by the distasteful decoration in his office, but he kept it there anyway, mostly out of fear that terrifying maid might kill him if he threw it away.

…It was probably him that stopped the Stampede, he thought bitterly, holding on to the statue.

The footage of the combat that took place in the Central Garden included a gigantic Void Lord fighting a massive dragon. And in the sea, there were strange reports of a sea monster Void Lord suddenly being swallowed up by a vortex. The crew of the *Hyperion* reported seeing an otherworldly beautiful, fairy-like girl on the deck of the ship at the same time.

And one of the witnesses was his own niece, Princess Altiria.

Upon hearing the report, he came to a conclusion right away: The Dark Lord Zol Vadis was the one who did this.

…I am thankful mankind was saved, of course.

But still, Alexios's stomach churned with concern. If the Dark Lord kept running wild like that, even Alexios, with his skilled intelligence organization, couldn't hide his existence for long. If the Dark Lord was exposed to the world, and the people learned he sided with such a force, even if it was mankind's sake, it would be the end of his career and station.

Duke Edward, are you sure your plan will save mankind…? He resentfully complained to his friend, who came up with the Dark Lord Project.

But sadly, that friend passed away six years ago.

But then the communication terminal on his desk rang out loudly. It was an emergency military line.

"…What's wrong?" Alexios picked up, once again taking up the appearance of a commander.

"Your Highness, we just got an emergency signal from the Fourth Assault Garden, asking for aid!"

"The Fourth Assault Garden…?"

◆

"Hm. It seems it's still too soon for a complete assimilation."

The voice of the young priest, clad in the Human Church's garb, echoed through the silent space. It was Duke Phillet's main estate in the Fourth Assault Garden. Seated on a chair at the end of the room was a black-haired girl, her eyes blank.

Like the Queen of Demon Swords, seated on the throne of emptiness.

She was a Phillet Company homunculus, who had a Trapezohedron—a fragment of the Goddess—implanted within her.

"Deinfraude finally delivered on his word. A fake though you may be, you still function as a sufficient vessel for the Goddess."

The priest brushed a hand through the girl's sleek black hair, but she didn't respond in any way.

"I feel a sense of affinity for you, you know. Or perhaps aversion, since you're so similar to me." Nefakess carried on, not minding her silence. "You see, just like you, I was born an artificial human meant to serve as a vessel. My former master—a great magus known as one of the Six Heroes—sought eternal life. So he made many containers like me, for him to store his soul…"

His voice didn't reach the blank-eyed girl. He knew that. He was merely speaking to himself, never intending for anyone to hear him.

But then—

"You're quite talkative when it comes to dolls, Lord Nefakess…"

An old man clad in a military uniform appeared silently. The governor of the Fourth Assault Garden, Count Deinfraude Phillet. A traitor to mankind and main backer and leader of the D-Project. He already cast aside his humanity, evolving into an apostle of the Goddess and the Void.

"The furnace is prepared."

"Yes, all that remains is to feed it the necessary sacrifice."

The name of that furnace was the Fourth Assault Garden—Brocéliande. With a furnace fed with Demon Swords, it would burn down the final stronghold of mankind—pushing the Demon Sword

Project to its final stage, the Void Shift that will fuse the two worlds together, to completion.

And in that crucible, his daughter will use the power of the gathered Demon Swords to transform into the Goddess.

"With this, my wish will finally be granted… At long last…"

"Yes. Very soon, Count Deinfraude." Nefakess smiled, looking up at something far away. "When the stars fall from the heavens, one who is human but harbors the soul of the Goddess shall appear…"

He chanted the Goddess's prophecy like gospel.

◆

—Imperial standard time, 23:05.

It began in the Fourth Assault Garden's Holy Sword training school, the Academia. A group of Holy Swordsmen who had awakened to Demon Swords occupied and took over the Academia. And, using Seraphim's power, they forcibly turned the students' Holy Swords into Demon Swords. They warped the defenders of mankind, the Holy Swordsmen, into Voids and unleashed them upon the city.

The Fourth Assault Garden's central control bureau instantly issued an aide request to the nearby Fifth Assault Garden and Capital, and began evacuating the civilians.

—Imperial standard time, 01:05.

The mana furnace and 68 percent of the Artificial Elementals used to run the city were seized, and strongholds that resisted the Voids' attacks fell. The mana furnace was momentarily shut off, and then restarted. The city changed course toward a reef area of the ocean.

Attempts were made to track the Fourth Assault Garden, but the Void Reefs hampered communications, and its signal was lost.

Eight hours later, the Fourth Assault Garden emerged…having transformed into a Void Hive.

CHAPTER 5

THE DARK LORD AND THE EMPEROR

"The stars have aligned. It's time to awaken, Riselia."

…She heard a voice. The voice of a girl, as clear as quartz.

"…?"

Spanning endlessly before her eyes was a wasteland. A wasteland littered with countless weapons. Not simply swords and spears, but all manner of strange weapons, the likes of which she had never seen before.

Riselia could tell right away these weren't ordinary weapons.

"Are these all…Holy Swords?" Riselia whispered, looking around.

It was like this wasteland was a graveyard for Holy Swords.

"Yes, these are Holy Sword Prototypes, created by the wills of humans resonating with my soul."

"…?!"

Atop a hill where weapons were piled up was a girl. A beautiful girl with dark-colored hair, crucified atop a pike.

"…Miss Finé?!" Riselia called out at first.

But she was wrong. This inhumanely beautiful girl who carried a transcendental air, was someone she did recognize. Yes, she had seen her when she touched the crystal in the ruins in the Void World…

The one who reached out to Leo when he was down…

The girl smiled at Riselia serenely, still crucified.

"Wait, I'll save you!"

Barefoot, Riselia raced up the weapon-littered hill. But for some reason, no matter how much she tried, she couldn't reach the top.

"Awaken, Riselia. Before the other me awakens…"

Riselia tripped and fell prone on the ground. And at that moment, the sword made up of countless Holy Swords collapsed.

"Wait… Who… Who are you…?"

Riselia reached out to the girl as everything descended into darkness.

◆

"…Wake up… Lady Selia, wake up."

"Mm…" Riselia opened her eyes, feeling someone gently shake her shoulders. "Oh, Regina. Good morning…"

Riselia rubbed her eyes sleepily, finding Regina was standing there in her maid uniform,.

"You're the heir of House Crystalia. You shouldn't be sleeping at a place like this." Regina placed her hand on her waist in a huffy pose.

"Mm…?"

Riselia looked down at herself with a start. She was resting on the desk, still clad in her uniform. Looking at herself in the mirror, she saw a triangular impression on her cheek from resting against the desk's corner.

"Breakfast's ready, so get up, please."

Regina pulled open the curtain, filling the room with morning sunlight.

"I-it's bright… Close the curtain, I'm gonna get reduced to ashes…"

"Why are you talking like you're some kind of vampire?" Regina frowned. "Just get ready and come for breakfast. I'll go wake up the kid."

"…Mm, all right."

Regina left the room, and Riselia stretched in her seat. She had slept in a very bad posture, but being undead, her body felt no pain anymore. The terminal resting in front of her had entered sleep mode automatically.

I guess I fell asleep after that…

Late last night, after recovering Elfiné's Cait Sith, Riselia looked up information on the Fourth Assault Garden in her room's terminal. But halfway through, she'd been overcome with drowsiness and

fallen asleep. An undead being can forgo sleep if they so wish it, but for some reason, her mana reserves had suddenly become low, and she had fallen asleep on the spot.

That's weird. Leo did give me his blood…

She pondered on it for a second before concluding things like that probably just happened every now and then, and switched on the terminal. The same information she'd been looking up last night was still displayed on it.

The Fourth Assault Garden. The Phillet Foundation's headquarters, governed by Duke Deinfraude Phillet. Its role within the Human Integrated Empire was that of an industrial city that sailed different areas of the sea and gathered resources.

Its Holy Sword–rearing school, the Academia, didn't make many striking accomplishments in the Holy Sword Dance Festival of recent years, but many of their students had manifested very powerful support Holy Swords.

Duke Deinfraude had moved Elfiné to the Fourth Assault Garden in order to use her for his plan involving the Demon Swords. At least, that was Elfiné's own speculation, but for now, this was the only clue they had as to her whereabouts.

Right now, the Fourth Assault Garden is in the waters near the Second Continent…

The deployment and formation of the Assault Garden was planned carefully by the Wiseman Council, and according to the schedule, the Fourth Assault Garden would only approach the capital in four months' time.

We can't wait that long… Riselia bit her thumbnail bitterly.

Handing over the information Elfiné had about the D-Project to the administrative bureau was too risky. She didn't know if they could be trusted, and to begin with, at least part of the military was involved with the D-Project. This was why Elfiné was so meticulously cautious as she gathered information.

And what's more, exposing the information publicly didn't mean Elfiné's well-being would be any safer. If anything, Deinfraude might decide to get rid of her.

…So what do I do?

Riselia turned off the terminal, lost in thought.

"Kid, if you don't wake up, I have methods I can resort to! Royal Hip Attaaaack!"

"Mgha?!"

Only to hear Leonis squeal from the adjacent room.

◆

"…That wasn't nice of you, Miss Regina." Leonis glared at Regina reproachfully as he took a seat at the living room table.

"It's your fault for not waking up. And I'll have you know my butt still hurts from doing that," Regina said, rubbing her fist on Leonis's head.

The fragrance of bread baking in the oven and freshly ground coffee beans hung in the air.

"That said, it's pretty unusual for the two of you to oversleep."

"I stayed up late last night, looking into something…"

"Listen to this, kid. Lady Selia fell asleep on her desk!"

"…Huh?" Leonis furrowed his brow dubiously.

Riselia wasn't a low-ranking vampire. Severe mana shortage could make her go unconscious, but she wouldn't fall asleep on her own from sleep deprivation.

"…Are you feeling sick or something?" he whispered.

"No. This never happened to me before, but…" Riselia cocked her head, confused. "I did have a strange dream this morning."

"What kind?"

"Hm, I was in a wasteland, and I saw this really pretty girl… H-huh?" Riselia brought a finger to her temple, confused. "…I forgot. And it was such a striking dream, too."

"…Hm."

"By the way, Lady Selia, what were you up investigating all night?" Regina asked as she placed plates of omelet rice on the table.

"Right. It's important, Regina, so take a seat."

"…All right." Regina nodded, picking up on the serious

atmosphere.

Riselia told Regina about their infiltration of the Phillet Garden and how they discovered Elfiné's Cait Sith.

"…You threw yourself into danger again, Lady Selia." Regina sighed with a shrug.

"But what we found was worth the risk," Riselia said, taking out her terminal and showing a black cat sleeping soundly inside it.

"So Miss Finé is in the Fourth Assault Garden?"

"Yes. Or, well, it's not certain, but it's highly likely," Riselia lowered her voice to a hush and nodded.

"Then we can't storm in like we did with the research facility."

"Yes, it won't be that easy. First, we'll need to figure out a way to travel to the Fourth Assault Garden."

"They won't give us permission to use a tactical aircraft for anything but an extermination mission."

"We should discuss this with Miss Clauvia for now."

"That's a start." Regina nodded.

But their conversation was cut off by two voices.

"Hmm. Quite the fragrant smell."

"Oh, this looks good."

The two Dark Lord appeared from the hallway, dressed in sleeping gowns.

"Oh, good morning," Regina got to her feet and made to the kitchen. "I'll get your breakfast ready."

"Morning, Leo—"

The Dragon Lord and Lord of the Seas sat across from Leonis, making themselves very much at home.

"…Won't you two go back to your sea and mountain already?!" Leonis chided them in a hushed voice.

"Oh, you really want us to go back?" Veira asked confidently.

"…What are you getting at?"

"I mean, your minion asked me to train her." Veira glanced over at Riselia.

"—Y-yes, please!" Riselia bowed her head.

"See? Unlike you, Leo, she's sincere."

"…Guh."

The boastful look on Veira's face was incredibly insufferable, but if this was what his minion wanted, Leonis wasn't in any position to say anything. The Undead King took pride in not being an intolerant tyrant.

"We get to training after breakfast, so you better brace yourself."

"Thank you, Teacher!"

"Oh. I was hoping to finally go sightseeing today, though…," The Lord of the Seas whispered with a hint of disappointment.

"Oh, would you like me to show you around?" Regina suggested as she poured some tea.

"Oh, you'd do that, Lobster Girl? Much appreciated."

"You can count on me. I know all the hot spots in town better than anyone!" Regina said with a thumbs-up.

It seemed the cold, unapproachable Lord of the Seas had developed a liking to Regina.

And so after breakfast, Riselia and Veira went to the training grounds, and Regina and Rivaiz went to the shopping area and leisure facilities. Left all alone in the dorm, Leonis slowly rose from his chair.

"—I should make my move, too."

He reached into his pocket, took out the skull mask, and sank into his shadow.

◆

Riselia and Veira arrived at the Excalibur Academy training grounds. There weren't other students around, since they reserved the place for their use ahead of time. Riselia did some stretching and then faced Veira.

"—I'm asking one more time," Veira said, her hands on her waist. "Do you really want to get stronger?"

"Y-yes… Ah, dragon!"

"You can stop with that now."

Veira shrugged, and bit on her thumb with her sharp canines. Blood dripped to the ground, evaporating and leaving a puff of

smoke.

"This time, we're not playing around. If you're not ready for this, I recommend stopping here."

"…!"

Riselia shuddered. Veira's overwhelming presence made her freeze up.

…This is Veira when she's serious!

The rigorous training she put Riselia through yesterday really was just playing around. The blood spreading through the ground sizzled like magma, catching fire.

"The Dragon Blood contains the strongest flames. If you can't control them, they'll burn through your body. And even an immortal vampire won't get away unscathed from being burned by a dragon's flames."

Veira's golden yes glared straight at Riselia.

"I'll be honest—I like you quite a bit. So I'd rather not kill you here if I can help it."

The flames flared up violently, taking the form of a dragon. The surrounding air's temperature instantly spiked, and Riselia felt her skin prickle from the heat…

"So I'm asking you again: Do you really want to get stronger?"

"—Yes," Riselia said without a second thought. "There's someone I have to save. And this time, I'll do it…"

"—Good. In that case, there's no need to talk this over anymore." Veira smiled. "Let's get started, then…"

The next moment, the dragon formed by the crimson flames swooped down on Riselia.

"Holy Sword, Activate!"

Riselia manifested the Bloody Sword, and at the same time, deployed the True Ancestor's Dress in Queen Minerva form.

"…Kuh, haaaaaa!"

The Holy Sword created countless sanguine blades that clashed with the Dragon Blood. The two streams of solid blood danced and raced upward in a spiral shape.

…No…good… Veira's blood is too strong! Riselia grit her teeth, gripping her Holy Sword tightly. The way the battle was going, the

overwhelming surge of power would completely deplete her mana.

"If you're strong enough to control the Dragon Lord's blood, show me you can do it!" Riselia heard Veira call out on the other side of the raging flames. "And if you can't, that's just as far as you go. Vampires who went out of control and became consumed by blood are common enough!"

"Kuh… ugh… Aah, aaaaaaah!"

Riselia's silver hair glowed bight, brimming with mana.

…I want power. Power to…save Miss Finé…!

The raging Dragon Blood let out a roar that shook the heavens.

◆

Using the Shadow Corridors, Leonis appeared in the Dark Lord's Castle, in the great underground cavern connected to the Seventh Assault Garden through a gate. Donning his skull mask, he took on the mantle of the Dark Lord Zol Vadis.

"Shary."

"Yes, by your side—"

Shary silently appeared from the shadow.

"How goes the list?"

"I have it right here." Shary presented him with a scroll reverently.

"Mm." Leonis spread it out.

"Like you specified, I excluded only those skilled at information gathering."

This was the list for the Demon Wolf Pack members they would relinquish to Gazoth, the Lord of Beasts. Skimming over the list, Leonis nodded.

"Yes, very well. Gazoth should be satisfied with this."

"Understood. I will make the arrangements, then."

"Yes. But wait."

Leonis stopped her before she left.

"Yes?"

"Summon Alexios here."

"Alexios? U-um…"

"…The Emperor's younger brother."

"Oh! That human, yes! Understood."

Shary replied at once and sank into the shadow.

◆

Several minutes later…

"I have brought him, my lord."

Shary once again emerged from the shadow with Alexios bound by her shadow whips and cast him down at the foot of the stairs to Leonis's throne. His expression was pale and screwed up in terror.

"Shary, remember he is royalty. Handle him with more care."

"Yes, if that is your order, my lord."

She undid the shadow whip's hold on him.

"Wh-what… is this? D-Dark Lord?!"

"—Prostrate yourself. You're in the presence of the Dark Lord." Shary shot an icy glare at the Emperor's younger brother, who was stumbling on the floor.

"M-my apologies, Great One!" Alexios scrambled to his feet and gave a vassal's bow before the throne.

"It's fine. Raise your head, Alexios," said Leonis.

"—Yes." Alexios raised his head ever so slightly.

His expression looked incredibly fatigued. Leonis could easily imagine he was busy with handling the Stampede and got no sleep at all…which did make him feel a bit bad about calling him on such short notice.

"My apologies for calling you, Alexios," he said out of respect.

"N-no, Great One, not at all…" Alexios hung his head in fear. "Allow me to thank you on behalf of mankind for your assistance in annihilating the Voids this time!"

"Mm…"

He already knew it was Leonis who beat the Divine Dragon who had become a Void Lord.

"—No need for thanks," Leonis said magnanimously. "All I did was

dispose of the vermin that dared invade my kingdom. But I do think I may have been too conspicuous this time. There's a chance I exposed my existence to your Empire."

"…I-it is as you say, Great One. My intelligence unit alone will be hard pressed to hide your existence," Alexios replied, breaking into a cold sweat.

Even though Blackas kept the Central Garden's surroundings sealed off, the battle was incredibly flashy. Even if no one saw Leonis himself, there was no hiding the fact that something incredibly powerful defeated the Void Lord.

"Well, no matter. I was thinking the time was right anyway." Leonis sneered under his skull mask.

"…Right for what?" Alexios raised his face to look at Leonis, only for a whip to lash right in front of him.

"Who are you to ask questions of the Dark Lord?! Insolent fool!" Shary chided him.

"M-my apologies!" Alexios prostrated himself again.

"—But that aside, Alexios." Leonis cleared his throat. "You were not called here to be reprimanded. I come to you seeking information."

"A-ask anything of me, Great One."

"Mm. I wish to ask you about the Fourth Assault Garden—"

"…What?!" Alexios raised his voice in disbelief as soon as Leonis said that. "Y-you already know…? You truly are all-knowing, Great One!"

…Know about what? Leonis was puzzled under his mask.

Leonis was only hoping to learn about the Fourth Assault Garden because Elfiné may have been taken there, and also to learn about Count Deinfraude Phillet. It seemed, however, that Alexios was thinking about something else.

"I actually only learned about it a few hours ago. The Empire's top brass is in a state of confusion over the situation."

"…Hmm. I'd imagine so."

Leonis nodded gravely, despite not having the first idea what Alexios was talking about. But sincerely asking for an explanation would damage his Dark Lord's dignity and could have a negative

effect on his authority over Alexios in the future.

"So the situation in the Fourth Assault Garden really is as such, then."

"Yes, my people are working their hardest to analyze information, but at the moment, we have no grasp on the situation there."

"…I see. I thought as much," Leonis said, his grasp on the situation even more meager than Alexios's.

"My lord, if I may humbly ask…"

"Wh-what?"

"Just what is happening in the Fourth Assault Garden?"

…How would I know?!

Leonis exclaimed to himself, but outwardly said, "Before I answer that, I must know how much of the situation you understand so far. Speak."

"Ah, I, erm…"

"The Dark Lord asked you a question. Hurry up and answer," Shary chided again.

"Yes!" Alexios spoke up, intimidated. "E-early morning today, we got a distress signal from the Fourth Assault Garden."

"…Yes, indeed," Leonis said, internally surprised.

"The army instantly answered the call, but communications shut down immediately after that, and the Fourth Assault Garden vanished into a Void Reef. The Fifth Assault Garden is deployed in the nearby sea, but it failed to track it. The Fourth Garden's whereabouts are unknown at present."

Alexios shook his head.

"I see. That's all you know, then."

"Huh…"

Leonis swiftly pieced the information he gave him with what he already knew.

It's like Elfiné feared…

This was no coincidence. She had said she was about to be used as a key part of some horrible plan. The Fourth Assault Garden going out of control must have been part of the Phillets' plan, and the Void apostles were working behind them.

And perhaps the Fourth Assault Garden is their stronghold.

He assumed the Voids made their base in the Void World, but…

The Queen of the Realm of Shadows had tried to turn Elysion Academy into her frontline base. So it stood to reason the Voids may have attempted to establish a base in the human world, too.

In which case, this works out well…

So far, the apostles kept giving him the slip, like bothersome flies. But if this as their stronghold, he could go on the offensive and defeat them in one fell swoop.

"It is likely the Fourth Assault Garden fell into my enemies' hands."

"…Y-your enemies, Great One?! You don't mean the Voids, do you?"

"Those are merely a passing calamity. My enemies are the ones manipulating them."

"Someone manipulating the Voids…?" Alexios cocked his head, confused.

Leonis rose from his throne. "Shary, prepare for combat. Open the Realm of Shadows' treasure vault."

"Yes, my lord!" Shary saluted and sank into the shadows.

"For battle…? Great One, what are you…?"

"I told you, didn't I? The time is right for me to show myself in the open." Leonis smirked under his skull mask.

◆

Riselia lay face up on the ground, gasping, her eyes fixed on the cloudy sky. The True Ancestor's Dress vanished, and she was once again in her uniform. The Bloody Sword shattered just as it defeated the burning, crimson blood dragon.

"…Did I…fail…?"

The dragon vanished. Did that mean she failed?

"Remember what I told you? If you fail to take control of it, the dragon will devour you." Veira's golden eyes peered down at her. "But you survived."

"Veira… Does that mean…?"

Veira smiled, still looking down at her. “Impressive work. The Dragon Blood acknowledged you as its user.”

“…?!” Riselia’s eyes widened. “R-really…?”

“Yes. You can feel it, can’t you? The great power of the dragons coursing through your body,” Veira said, poking Riselia’s chest with an index finger.

“Ah…”

Her heart throbbed hard, brimming with energy. A great surge of mana was rampaging within her.

“But you’ll need more training before you can utilize it. So prepare yourself.”

“Th-thank you, Veira!”

Riselia tried to get up, but her body was terribly limp.

“Don’t push it. You’re having a hard time controlling your mana as it is.”

“Y-yes…”

But then—

“Dragon Lord.”

Shary emerged from the shadow stretching behind Riselia.

“Oh, Leo’s maid. What is it?”

“My lord sent me on an errand, Dragon Lord. He wishes to ask you for something.”

“Leo, asking something from me?”

◆

Imperial standard time, 13:00—Camelot.

The first and largest sailing tactical city constructed by mankind sixty-four years ago. At its Central Garden was the Grand Cathedral, the council hall where an important, several-day long meeting to decide mankind’s fate was being held.

…I doubt I’ll get any time to sleep.

From his throne atop the highest platform in the room was the current Emperor, who oversaw the Wiseman Council.

The Emperor—Alzeus Shida O’ltriese. The one chosen by the

Senate's election from among the three royal houses to serve as mankind's reigning sovereign.

He was currently forty-three years of age, and he would continue to sit upon this throne until he either lost his Holy Sword's power or was dismissed by the Senate. Thankfully, the power struggles and political assassinations that existed in the Human Integrated Empire's history were now a thing of the past. With the threat of the Voids leaving mankind on the brink of destruction, no one had time to waste on such foolish acts.

And while the title of Emperor was quite grand, the role was mostly a nominal, symbolic one, with Alzeus himself not having much authority to speak of.

…I'd change places with Alexios, if I could. So thought the Emperor.

In the Senate Hall beneath him, the representatives of each city were in the midst of fervent debate.

"Aren't communications with the Fourth Assault Garden restored yet?!"

"We've confirmed their request for aid already. We should dispatch elite units right away."

"But the capital has taken severe damages from the earlier Stampede, too."

"You're not suggesting we abandon our comrades in the Fourth Assault Garden, are you?"

"I didn't say that, but there's still a chance another Stampede might occur."

"The Human Church's stance is that we should put our faith in the strength of the Holy Swords…"

"With all due respect, Cardinal, right now we're discussing *realistic* solutions!"

This discussion was focused on the Fourth Assault Garden, which was approaching the capital.

—Fourteen hours ago, after the Fourth Assault Garden's distress signal arrived, it disappeared into a Void Reef. And eight hours later, one of the capital's unmanned drones returned footage of the Fourth Assault Garden's new, transformed state.

The great industrial city had become a massive Hive enveloped in Void miasma. What had happened to the Academia—with its many Holy Swordsmen and its hundreds of thousands of civilians—was still unknown.

"—If we do nothing, it'll be a repeat of the Third Assault Garden," someone said, stunning all the senators into silence and pained expressions.

The tragedy that took place in Crystalia six years ago was still fresh in everyone's memories.

"Do we know where Governor Deinfraude is?" asked one of the senators.

"No, we're currently searching for him," replied a member of the city guard.

The governor of the Fourth Assault Garden, Deinfraude Phillet, arrived at the capital a few weeks ago to watch the Holy Sword Dance Festival. But now, just as this emergency was upon them, he was missing.

"Forget the governor. For now, we must discuss the situation at hand."

"True. If the Fourth Assault Garden remains on its route, it'll cross the Capital's first defensive line in twenty-one hours."

The Senate Hall went quiet.

—Indeed, the Fourth Assault Garden was charging right at the capital at a speed so high it could very well make its mana furnace go haywire.

A *gigantic Void Hive* was charging at the capital. This wasn't a situation any of them could have anticipated.

"Twenty-one hours… We won't be able to avoid it in time—" One of the senators shook his head.

Since the capital was the largest Assault Garden, its movement speed was the lowest. And to make things worse, it was docked with the Seventh Assault Garden, which was having its Mana Furnace exchanged, and the Eighth Assault Garden was under construction, so it naturally couldn't move.

"The battleship *Endymion* should arrive in two hours."

"Ooh…"

This was the sole bit of good news they heard in this situation. The *Hyperion*'s sister vessel, *Endymion*, had been dispatched from the Second Assault Garden as reinforcements to respond to the Stampede that began thirty-two hours ago. Of course, a sole battleship wouldn't do much in this situation, but right now, every little bit of hope was welcome.

"—We have no choice but to intercept it." Alzeus spoke up.

All the senators turned their eyes to the Emperor.

"Abandoning the Fourth Assault Garden is not an option. The Integrated Human Empire is tasked with guiding mankind to its future. If we leave innocent civilians to their deaths, all mankind will turn their backs on us."

"Ooh…"

The Senate Hall filled with voices of admiration. Everyone knew this would be the conclusion they had to reach to begin with.

Alzeus rose from his seat. "The power of the Holy Swords given to us by the planet will keep us safe!"

"Ooh, oooooh!"

The Senate Hall filled with exclamations of resolve. Some of the senators were seasoned Holy Swordsmen, among those given Holy Swords and fought in the Void invasion sixty-four years ago. Had the powers of their Holy Swords not faded with old age, they would have been all but resolved to set out and fight personally, even now.

"Y-you're right! We must save the people!"

"Our Holy Swords did stop the Stampede, after all!"

But just as voices of fervor and excitement filled the hall—

"—You think you were the ones who stopped the Stampede? Truly?"

A sneering voice echoed through the room.

The Senate Hall went quiet at once, like everyone was doused with cold water.

"…Who just spoke?" Alzeus asked silently.

The dozen or so senators exchanged confused gazes.

"Fools, who do you think truly defeated that Void Lord?"

A shadow clad in a black mantle appeared in the middle of the Senate Hall. The shadow wore a skull mask and let off a chilling

sense of presence.

"…Wh-who are you?!"

One of the senators raised his voice in anger. In response, the shadow answered with a flap of his mantle and introduced himself.

"My name is Zol Vadis! A Dark Lord risen from the deepest reaches of the abyss!"

◆

"…Did you just say Dark Lord?" The man sitting on the throne looked down on Leonis.

This was the Human Integrated Empire's current Emperor—Alzeus Shida O'ltriese.

Being looked down upon by a human king is infuriating…

Leonis tapped his staff against the floor and floated up, looking down on the throne from midair. The Senate Hall erupted into whispers.

"H-how did he do that?!"

"Don't panic. His Holy Sword probably has the power to levitate."

"What's the royal guard doing?! Protect the sacred Wiseman Council!"

At one of the senator's calls, knights with manifested Holy Swords charged into the hall and began attacking Leonis, who floated in midair. A sword of light, a flaming bow and arrow, a frozen spear—countless Holy Swords were flung at Leonis.

"—Fools."

Leonis flapped his cape, producing a spherical forcefield barrier that blocked all the Holy Swords' attacks.

"I-impossible!"

"The royal guard are all S-Rank Holy Swordsmen!"

The Senate entered a state of panic. One person alone remained composed, however. The Emperor remained in his throne, looking straight at Leonis.

…Oh. He's quite the character, it seems. Leonis smiled under his mask.

For a human, his younger brother Alexios proved to have a great deal of courage, but looking at the Emperor now, it was clear why he was made king. Moreover, this man was Regina's father, so he felt a certain degree of indebtedness to him.

I should treat him with some due respect…

Leonis gave a dignified bow in midair.

"Pardon my sudden visit, Emperor of Mankind. Normally, I'd have greeted you with a formal ambassador, but I believe we haven't the luxury of time right now."

Alzeus looked at Leonis silently for a moment, and then held up a hand, halting the royal guard.

"A wise decision," said Leonis.

"—You called yourself a Dark Lord?" Alzeus parted his lips. "A Dark Lord is an enemy of mankind, poised to destroy the world. Am I correct in understanding that?"

"Heh, yes, indeed. You may take it as such, King of the Humans." Leonis shrugged.

The legends of the Dark Lords were all but gone in this era, but the concept alone remained in their collective memory.

"In that case, he who calls himself Dark Lord, earlier you asked who we think defeated the Void Lord. What was the meaning of that?"

"It means exactly what it sounds like. You're all too frail and weak, so I did away with that vile Void monster in your stead."

Leonis's remark made the Senate Hall fill with angered shouts.

"Impossible!"

"What is he saying?!"

"You would insult the power of the Holy Swords?"

Leonis charged his voice with mana. "Silence."

This made the outraged senators freeze up, reducing them to dolls who could only flap their mouths open and closed, their voices muted.

"Indeed. I am a generous, patient Dark Lord. Knowing your limited imaginations would be hard-pressed to blindly believe me, I thought I would perform a demonstration. A demonic demonstration, if you will."

"A demonstration?"

"Yes. Observe."

Leonis pointed outside the hall's window.

"Wh-what's that?"

"A gigantic Void?!"

"I-it can't be. Is that the monster that appeared in the Central Garden?!"

With a mighty *bwoosh*, a gigantic red dragon appeared in the skies, enveloped in crimson flames. It circled the Grand Cathedral, its wings spread. The sheer air pressure produced by its wing flaps uprooted trees in the garden and shattered the glass window panes.

"I would like for you to see for yourselves. This is one of my servants, who destroyed the Void Lord that appeared in the Central Garden—Super Violence Dragon."

"Th-that's…your servant? That monster?!"

"Impossible, it can't be…"

"You think I'm lying? With but a single order, I can order it to turn this entire area into a sea of flames."

Leonis snapped his fingers, and the red dragon circling above them roared and parted its jaws. With a deafening blast, it unleashed a beam of heat that evaporated a ruined building in a single moment.

The senators were stunned into silence once more.

"Are you more inclined to take me at my word now?" Leonis sneered coldly.

The whole room went quiet. Emperor Alzeus stared out of the window in utter disbelief.

Keh-heh-heh. I was right to ask Veira for this… Leonis chuckled to himself, satisfied with his plan having its intended effect.

He could have simply shown the power of his spells, but Veira was sighted fighting the Divine Dragon, and moreover, the size and roar of the dragon struck instinctual fear into the humans' hearts. And thankfully, Veira was very much on board.

"If you don't believe me, I can offer another demonic demonstration."

"W-wait, Dark Lord… No, uh, Great One…" Alzeus shook his head

violently. “What is it you seek? Is it…dominion over mankind?”

His jade eyes, so similar to Regina’s, looked right at him. Even when gripped by fear, he retained his Emperor’s mettle.

“No. Not for the time being, at least.” Leonis smiled and shook his head. “I have come here to strike a deal with you.”

“…What kind of deal?”

“Your enemies are the monsters you call Voids. They keep emerging and attacking, making them a nuisance for me, as well. So I suggest we join forces temporarily so we may destroy those foul beings.”

“…You want to fight alongside the Human Integrated Empire?”

“Yes, I suppose you could see it as that…,” Leonis replied.

“W-we can’t believe him!”

“Th-that’s right! How are we supposed to take some Dark Lord seriously?!”

“We have the Holy Swords given to us by the planet!”

The senators responded with outrage. But Alzeus calmly raised a hand, urging them to settle down.

“Ye who calls himself Dark Lord. What would you demand in return for fighting alongside us?”

“My recompense, then. Hmm. Yes, I would ask…for a ship.”

“…A ship?”

“Yes. I demand the Royal Family’s private ship, the *Hyperion*.”

“What?!” Alzeus was aghast by the request.

“The *Hyperion* is the symbol of the Empire’s—of mankind’s hope. To demand that…!”

“This is nonsense. Handing it over is unthinkable!”

“The *Hyperion* is the Holy Swordsmen’s pride!”

Once again, the senators began shouting.

“I do not mind either way.” Leonis sneered again. “One ship and the fate of all mankind. I suggest you carefully consider which is more valuable.”

“…Dark Lord.” Alzeus finally spoke. “Give us a moment to consider. We need time to discuss the matter.”

“…Very well. I am a patient Dark Lord, after all.”

Leonis nodded magnanimously and held up three fingers.

"—Three hours. I won't wait longer than that. And, well… It's not as if you have the leisure of time, either."

◆

—After that, the senate began a fervent debate.

The senators who insisted saving the Fourth Assault Garden was their top priority argued with the Human Church who insisted only the Holy Swords should fight the Voids. Some theorized the Dark Lord who appeared before them may have been a Void Lord himself, but the footage of the red dragon he summoned fighting the gigantic Void Lord that attacked the Central Garden seemed to disprove that.

But above all else, the debate was meaningless. Because if he was their enemy, then mankind was already backed against the wall.

And so three hours later, the senate concluded that intercepting the Fourth Assault Garden with the Empire's current forces was impossible.

Thus, they decided to join forces with the Dark Lord Zol Vadis.

CHAPTER 6

DARK LORD BATTLESHIP, SET SAIL!

"Keh-heh-heh… What a sight!"

Overlooking the dock from atop a high-rise tower, Leonis laughed with glee. His skull mask's eyes glinted crimson, and his dark mantle flapped in the wind.

Fourteen battleships with the *Hyperion* as their flagship. A great fleet organized for the Fourth Assault Garden recapture operation. And…

"Hm. So that's my ship."

Looking down at the naval port, he saw a large battleship docked in one of the wharfs. It was the *Hyperion*'s sister ship, *Endymion*, deployed from the Second Assault Garden to answer the Capital's call for reinforcements.

Zol Vadis demanded the *Hyperion* as his price for his assistance, but since it required an Origin Spirit to operate, Alexios suggested he instead accept its sibling vessel, as it would be easier to operate.

Its specs are inferior to the Hyperion*, but that's acceptable.*

Leonis always had wanted a cool battleship of his own, so he was giddy enough as it was.

Only a few members of the top brass were aware mankind had struck a deal with the Dark Lord Zol Vadis, or that Leonis would be boarding the *Endymion*. This was likely a wise decision—if news got out they had bargained with a Dark Lord, it could cause unrest and distrust within the army.

…But that said, I didn't expect them to charge in with their main stronghold, Leonis thought, his eyes glaring at the horizon.

The Fourth Assault Garden's changed state was no doubt the handiwork of the Void apostles. But for what purpose…?

Leonis looked up to the tear in the sky above them.

…The Voids can't freely rip tears into space.

If they could create Void tears whenever and wherever they pleased, they'd have launched a surprise attack from the Void World and defeated mankind a long time ago.

And we know the Voids that appear in this world end up being sent back to the Void World after a certain period of time. To maintain their presence in this world, the Voids have to create Hives and hibernate in crystals. In all likelihood, they can only invade this world when the two worlds' phases intersect…

And for Void Lords to invade this world, they would likely need bigger Void tears. If Leonis's hypothesis was correct, the Fourth Assault Garden was a massive bridgehead for the Void apostles to invade this world.

—And using that foothold, they probably plan to have the Undead King destroy the capital.

Leonis then smiled invincibly.

…He sent the Divine Dragon of the Six Heroes here to test our army's power.

And with him defeated, the Dark Lord himself will lead the army. After all, this was Leonis's key strategy when engaging enemies in war.

…I can read your tactics like a book. Just you wait, I'll pry what's mine back from your bony hands yet.

"My lord…" Shary emerged from the shadow at his feet. "Lord Blackas has a report. He finished setting the Shadow Corridors within the vessel."

"Mm. Understood."

"…Hm, are you sure?" Shary asked reservedly.

"About what?"

"The Dark Lords' Armies are not yet restored. Was revealing yourself to the humans now truly…"

"Oh, you mean that." Leonis nodded. "So be it. I was thinking the time was right for me to make my public appearance anyway."

The Undead King likely already sensed Leonis's presence. So he wouldn't send any more forces in advance, and would instead move in to invade his kingdom with a large group. And trying to hide his

identity while fighting the Undead King would be too difficult, even for him.

What's more, according to Alexios's report, it was already becoming near-impossible to hide that some major power was involved in the recent battles.

"We may have been a touch too flashy in my previous battles."

If it was just Leonis, he'd have been able to somehow hide his existence using barriers. But with so many witnessing Veira rampaging through the skies of the Central Garden and Rivaiz dispatching a Void Lord in the sea with powerful sorcery, things had reached a point where tricks and explanations no longer worked.

And finally, Leonis was able to use his other identity—to show himself to mankind as the Dark Lord of horror and destruction, Zol Vadis—while, on the other hand, living as a ten-year-old boy studying at Excalibur Academy.

By bringing Zol Vadis out to the spotlight, he'd draw everyone's attention, allowing his other, more mundane identity to move in the shadows.

"So that was why you did it. Truly brilliant, my lord!" Shray said, impressed.

"Keh-heh-heh. My days sneaking and hiding in the shadows are at an end. It's time mankind saw the true might of the Dark Lord!"

"All hail my lord!" Shary said, scattering some handmade confetti she produced from who-knows-where.

"Now then. It's time I make my way there."

Leonis flapped his mantle and changed back into his Academy uniform.

◆

—At Excalibur Academy in the Hræsvelgr Dorm.

"Lady Selia, I'm all ready on this side."

"All right, I'll be right there."

The door to Riselia's room opened, and Regina came in, carrying a knapsack. Riselia was just in the middle of stuffing her own

knapsack for expedition missions, too.

"I can't believe what happened to the Fourth Assault Garden…," Riselia whispered as she checked on her terminal.

Excalibur Academy's administrative bureau sent the eighteenth platoon an emergency summons one hour ago. It detailed how the Fourth Assault Garden, which was deployed in the second continent's waters, sent a distress call before its signal was lost. A dozen or so hours later, it emerged from the reef area, having turned into a massive Void Hive, and began making way toward the capital. In response, the capital's Senate decided to deploy a fleet at the first defensive line to destroy the Hive. Excalibur Academy decided to urge all its platoons to volunteer for the mission.

The mission their platoon was given was to help clean up Void presence within the Fourth Assault Garden, as well as search and rescue any survivors. Sakuya and Leonis were already contacted and were to link up with them in the military dock when they boarded the fleet.

"This happened right after Miss Finé was kidnapped. This can't be a coincidence."

"Yes…" Riselia nodded.

Count Deinfraude abducted Miss Finé for some horrible plan…

It seemed quite self-evident that the Phillets had a hand in this situation.

"There's no mistaking it. Miss Finé is in the Fourth Assault Garden." Riselia got up with her knapsack in hand. "Let's go, Regina!"

"Yes, Lady Selia!"

"…Mama."

But then, they heard a voice from behind them.

"Where are you going?"

They turned around, finding Schwertleite sitting in the corner of the room, her head cocked curiously.

"We need to go out for a bit. Watch the fort while we're gone, OK?"

"Unacceptable order." Schwertleite shook her head.

"Huh?"

"Defending the master is the directive given to me by master."

"What directive…?" Riselia asked, confused.

"Why don't we bring her along, Lady Selia? This girl is pretty useful, after all," Regina whispered.

"Well, yes, but…" Riselia brought a hand to her jaw.

This inexplicable Magia Doll was, indeed, quite versatile and useful, and was a major help when they had raided the Phillet facility… But when it came to bringing her along for an official mission, Riselia had no idea how to explain her presence.

She could insist she was an anti-Void weapon, but she had never reported Schwertleite to the bureau, and bringing along an unregistered Magia Doll could bring upon unwelcome questioning.

"Listen, Leite, I have to keep you a secret."

"—That is not an issue. I am capable of operating in stealth mode."

"Huh?"

Schwertleite's horns flickered and began outputting mana particles. Schwertleite's contours then warped and distorted, and she became invisible.

"You can do that?!"

"All I did was use mana conversion to restructure the optical information around me," she said, her head alone appearing in thin air.

"We should be fine with this," Regina said, patting away at Schwertleite's invisible body.

"I-I guess? All right; you can come along."

◆

Fourteen hours remained until the Fourth Assault Garden arrived at the first defensive line. Excalibur Academy's elite units gathered in the Capital's military harbor. Each platoon was to gather there and board the battleship *Hyperion*.

"Princess Altiria will be joining the battle, too," Riselia whispered as she looked up at the large vessel.

“Without the Spirit she uses, Carbuncle, the ship can’t show off its top-of-the-line specs, after all,” Regina whispered back.

The last time they snuck onto the *Hyperion* was roughly six months ago. They were attacked by armed terrorists at the time, making for a scary experience.

“Oh, Riselia Crystalia!”

Someone called out Riselia’s name from behind. The two turned around, spotting Fenris Edelritz from the Executive Committee approach.

“Fenris. You volunteered to join, too?”

“Hah, but of course.” Fenris threw her hair. “If you volunteer, how can I, your eternal rival, not do the same? I-I most certainly didn’t do it out of concern for you.” She then looked away, her cheeks flushed. “Which reminds me, where have you been for the last day or so?”

“Oh, I was, uh…outside the city on a mission.”

“Don’t lie to me. The eighteenth platoon wasn’t ordered to go on any such mission.”

“W-well…”

They were given a gag order about the events at Elysion Academy, and she surely couldn’t tell Fenris they were investigating the Void World.

“Not that I was concerned for you or anything of the sort, but as a member of the Executive Committee, I can’t approve you acting without permission.”

“Right, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“L-like I said, I was not concerned for you!”

“Captain Fenris, what are you doing? Everyone’s here!” a member of the eleventh platoon called her over.

“I’ll be right there. I will be off, then. A good day to you—ow!”

Fenris made to turn in place dramatically and saunter off, but then let out a cute yelp and held her forehead.

“Wh-what is this? It’s like I bumped into a pane of transparent glass…” Fenris walked off, looking baffled.

“Lady Fenris is always so hot and cold when it comes to you,” Regina shrugged.

As Fenris walked away, they noticed Leonis approach.

"Oh. Leo!"

"Over here, kid!"

"—I'm sorry, was I late?" Leonis walked over to them, and then… "Huh. Is there something there?"

He squinted, staring into thin air.

"Master, my stealth mode has been spotted."

"Whoa!"

Space contorted for a moment, and Schwertleite's head appeared, everything under her neck still invisible.

"L-Leite, having just your head visible is a little creepy…"

"You brought Schwertleite along…"

"Yes, if the Fourth Assault Garden is out of control, there's a chance the city's defense systems have been fully taken over. So I thought bringing her along might be a good idea."

"Yes, you might be right…"

"…By the way, Leo," Riselia asked. "Where did Veira go?"

Veira vanished from the training ground and she hadn't seen her since. Rivaiz, who had been out on a date with Regina in town, disappeared somewhere when Regina was distracted with playing a dance game.

"I don't know. Those two go wherever their whims take them." Leonis shrugged.

"I just wish I could have thanked her…"

Honestly, Leonis wished he could have asked for their help, too.

But that would probably be asking for too much… He shook his head internally.

He couldn't impose on them any longer, and the two of them had their own problems and business to attend to.

"Oh, Sakuya's here… Wait, what's that?" Regina pointed ahead, frowning in confusion.

Sakuya approached on the back of a large black dog, who came over with leisurely steps.

"Oh hello, you three. I'm sorry I'm late."

"…Why are you riding Fluffymaru, Sakuya?" Riselia asked, bewildered.

"Oh, I ran into him on the way here. I gave him some specialty millet dumplings and he let me ride on his back. He's much faster than a vehicle." Sakuya hopped off the dog's black and scratched him behind his ears.

Fluffymaru narrowed his golden eyes pleasantly.

"Mm? What's wrong, kid?" Regina said, noticing the mixed expression on Leonis's face.

"Nothing," he replied.

"So we're all here now. LET'S GET ON BOARD."

Riselia turned to the *Hyperion*'s boarding gate.

"What about Fluffymaru, Miss Selia?"

"Don't bring him on board."

◆

The eighteenth platoon were allotted a cabin on the *Hyperion*'s second floor.

…Blast it all, Blackas. She completely has you domesticated. Leonis sighed, sitting on his bunk bed.

Riselia and Regina were called to the tactical headquarters by their commanding officer, Diglassê. Schwertleite was likely with them.

Leonis glanced out the window, where he got a view of the majestic *Endymion*—a ship that was now his.

It really is nice, though. Having my own battleship…

He smiled despite himself. Leonis had ships in the past—a fleet of haunted vessels, in fact, with the skeletal ship the *Wild Hunt* as its mothership. But the subordinate he ordered to serve as the *Wild Hunt*'s captain, the Bone General Derlich Death Lord, got carried away and encroached into the Lord of the Seas' domain. This incurred Rivaiz Deep Seas' wrath, who subsequently sunk the entire fleet.

…Well, that was all over one thousand years ago. I don't begrudge her for it.

Leonis used his terminal's camera to snap photographs of the

Endymion, when suddenly— "What are you up to, your Dark Lordliness?"

"…?!"

Leonis turned around with a fright. The air-lock door opened, and Sakuya walked into the cabin.

"M-Miss Sakuya… Why did you call me…?" He hushed his voice, looking around.

"Oh, it's fine. It's just you and me, and no one's listening in."

Sakuya slipped out of her shoes and sat on a bunk bed.

"That's not the problem here…"

"Heh-heh, the two of us sharing a secret like this is kind of exciting, isn't it? Your Dark Lordliness." Sakuya smiled and poked Leonis on the cheek.

The other day, Sakuya easily discovered Leonis's identity as a Dark Lord.

"What do you think would happen if the seniors found out that you, cute boy that you are, are actually a Dark Lord?"

"…Wh-what are your terms, Miss Sakuya?" Leonis puffed up his cheeks in a pout and asked defiantly.

…She was extorting a Dark Lord.

"I'm glad you catch on quick, boy… But actually, I need to consult the Dark Lord." Sakuya stopped poking his cheek, her expression turning serious.

"…About what?"

"Boy, do you know anything about moving dead bodies, or what people call the undead?"

Leonis fell quiet for a moment and then said curtly, "I'm fairly familiar with it."

Not only was he familiar with it, as the Undead King, he was second to none when it came to knowledge of the undead.

…Well, no. Now there's someone who's my match.

As that thought crossed Leonis's mind, Sakuya edged closer to him on the bed.

"…So you do know about that. I thought so."

"I'm familiar with it, nothing more. What about the undead?" Leonis asked back cautiously.

Did she realize that Riselia was an undead? But no, what Sakuya said next caught Leonis by surprise.

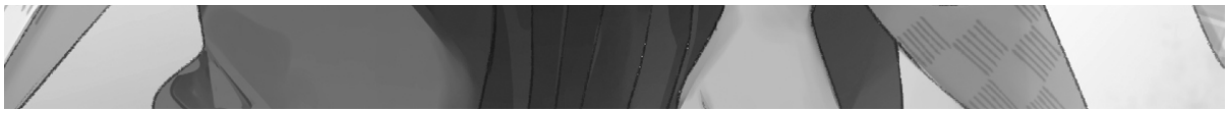
"The thing is, I think my older sister may have been raised from the dead."

"Your sister? You mean the one from the ruins…?" Leonis trailed off, and Sakuya nodded.

A blue-haired girl had tried to assassinate Sakuya in Old Town's sealing area. Since she worked alongside Nefakess, Leonis assumed she must have been another Void apostle. Indeed, Leonis didn't sense a living presence from her.

…I think I can say with certainty she was a high-ranking undead minion.





Sakuya bit her lips and looked down at her hands.

"If my sister really was raised from the dead, is there a way to… kill her?" Sakuya asked quietly, her expression much more tense than usual.

"There are a few ways of killing an undead," Leonis replied earnestly, out of respect for her attitude. "First, the undead are all fundamentally weak to fire. If you burn a body to ashes, it won't be able to be resurrected. They're also susceptible to holy attacks… But achieving that can be difficult."

Holy spells weren't passed down to this era, after all.

"Besides that, there are different ways to dispose of different types of undead. Some can be destroyed by being smashed to pieces, others burn away in the sun. But there are also some truly unthinkably powerful types that can keep rising from the dead even after you burn them down to ashes or purify them with holy light."

The Undead King was one such example.

"…All right. Then," Sakuya whispered sternly and raised her head, "i-is it… possible to save someone who became undead?"

…So that was your real question.

Leonis shook his head slowly. "Once someone's become undead, they can never go back to what they once were."

"…Never ever?"

"Never ever."

The power of sorcery was capable of raising the dead, but making someone who became undead revert to being alive was a miracle even the Holy Woman of the Six Heroes wasn't capable of.

"…If a Dark Lord is saying that for certain, it must be true." Sakuya gripped the sheets on the bed tightly. Her head was hung, making her expression invisible over her forelocks. "All right. I've made my peace, then."

She raised her head, rose from the bed, and slipped her shoes back on.

"Thank you for answering my questions. I'm sorry I took up your time."

"Ah, Miss Sakuya…," Leonis called out to her. "Actually, there's something I wanted to ask you, too."

"…What? If it's the color of my panties, it's pink."

"O-oh, is that right… Wait, no!" Leonis shouted, red in the face.

Seeing Sakuya return to her usual attitude was a relief, though. He cleared his throat.

"Miss Sakuya, you use a Demon Sword's power, don't you?"

Sakuya stopped where she stood and turned to look at him.

"…So you noticed. I guess we both hold each other by our secrets."

"I saw you use it when we entered the Dark Lord's Castle. At the time, I thought it was like when Miss Regina Mode Shifts her Holy Sword."

"I see. So now that you know my secret, what do you intend to do, boy?" Sakuya's eyes fixed on Leonis sharply. "…A-are you going to go about it the Dark Lord's way and investigate my body directly?"

"…Wh-what do you think being a Dark Lord means?!"

"Is that not what it means? I mean, you're at that age, boy…"

"Or are you not attracted to my body at all? That's a bit insulting in its own way…" was what the displeased look she gave him seemed to express.

"No. What I wanted to ask is if you're using a Demon Sword, isn't your mind being corrupted by it like other Demon Swords users…?"

"Oh, I understand. Because of Miss Finé."

"—Yes."

If Sakuya had some way of staving off the corrupting effects of her Demon Sword, it may have been possible to do the same with Elfiné's current state.

"I'm sorry, but…" Sakuya shook her head. "Using the Demon Sword corrupts me with the power of emptiness just the same. I'm no exception. It's just that my Demon Sword, Yamichidori, is a little different. It's not a Holy Sword that was corrupted into a Demon Sword, but one that was originally a Demon Sword, converted into a Holy Sword. So if I use it as little as possible, I can minimize its corrupting effects."

"…I think I understand."

"Honestly, I don't understand much about Yamichidori myself…" Sakuya shrugged. "But either way, if we're going to save Miss Finé,

every second counts. Once her Demon Sword fully consumes her, there'll be no going back for her."

Saying this, Sakuya left the room.

◆

Imperial Standard Time, 19:00.

After a simple dinner, the eighteenth platoon's members gathered at a tactical meeting room.

"—I will now relay each platoon's role in this mission."

The eighteenth platoon's instructor, Diglassê Alto, spoke up. Gathered in the room were the eleventh, eighteenth, and twenty-second platoon members. Riselia and the others all looked up at the instructor tensely.

"At present, the Fourth Assault Garden has lost all its city functions. This makes the primary objectives of this mission—namely, the rescue of civilians evacuated into shelters and seizing control of the city's mana furnace—exceedingly difficult."

The screen set on the wall displayed a map of the Fourth Assault Garden.

"As such, our first objective is to retake the control towers located in the Central Garden and restore the city's functions."

Six control towers were highlighted on the map. The three platoons under Diglassê were tasked with taking over three of them. Taking control of them would restore part of the city's functions, opening the bulkheads in the underground tunnels connecting each area of the city. This would make evacuating the citizens go more smoothly.

"—However, bringing technical officers to the frontlines would be difficult, so instead each platoon will be given an Artificial Elemental with an emergency recovery program and a manual on how to use it. If you follow the manual, you'll be able to restore the city functions to a minimal level."

Diglassê gave each platoon captain a case with an information terminal inside it.

"After completing your initial objective, you're to report in and then link up with Princess Chatres Ray O'ltriese's unit and help them seize control of the mana furnace. But if you discover any survivors, you're to help them and hand them over to the rescue team."

Regina's eyes widened a bit upon hearing Chatres's name. The Third Princess, renowned for having the strongest Holy Sword in existence, would be fighting directly on the frontlines.

Diglassê swung her teacher's pointer, and the image on the screen changed again. This time it displayed a large mass of crystals located under high-rise buildings. Seeing this made Riselia and the other members of the platoon tense up.

"As you can see, there are Void Hives set up all over the city. They will very likely hatch when we land. It's also highly likely there are Hives set around and in the control towers that are your first objectives. If a Void that's S-rank or above emerges, or you deem the situation too difficult to handle on a platoon level, ask surrounding units for help.

"—That concludes the briefing. May your Holy Swords light your way."

◆

"—Erm, Miss Selia?"

On their way back to their cabin from the tactical headquarters, as they passed by an outdoors passage that offered a view of the raging sea, Leonis stopped Riselia.

"Yes, Leo?" She turned to look at him, holding down her argent hair as the sea breeze swept through it.

"I need to talk to you about something." Leonis looked around to check no one was around and spoke with a hushed voice. "I won't be participating in the Fourth Assault Garden recapture operation. I'll be leaving this ship."

"Huh…?" Riselia exclaimed in surprise.

Leonis grabbed the railing and looked out far into sea.

"There's a powerful presence behind this situation. One mankind

can't hope to match."

"You mean what Miss Finé said…?"

"…Yes. It was Deinfraude Phillet who abducted Miss Elfiné, but the ones who backed and empowered him were the rulers of the Voids."

—Nefakess and the other Void Lords calling themselves apostles. As well as the Undead King Nefakess resurrected.

"I'm going to draw them out into the open and crush them."

"Leo…" Riselia looked straight at Leonis, her breath held.

"So I may be occupied with that for a while."

"…Am I a burden to you, Leo? Am I dragging you down?"

"Not at all." Leonis shook his head. "I'm counting on you to save Miss Elfiné. I feel that, the way you are now, I can leave that important task in your hands. Besides, I'm only good at dealing death on my enemies, so if anyone's the right person to save Miss Elfiné, it'd be you. That's why she addressed that message to you."

He turned to face Riselia.

"—That's why I'm leaving this in your hands. You have to be the one to save her."

Riselia's eyes widened slightly with surprise.

"…Right. I understand. I'll handle this." She tapped her fist against her chest, smiling. "You be careful, too, Leo."

"I will, I'll be done before you—Whoa!"

Riselia suddenly pulled Leonis to a hug.

"M-Miss Selia…?"

"I know you're really strong, Leo. But you need to understand… I'm worried about you."

"I know…"

Staying atop the swaying ship, Leonis left his body in her arms for a few moments. When Riselia finally let go of him, she patted him gently on the head.

"When you come back, tell me more about yourself," she said.

"…I will." Leonis nodded.

…The time may be right for that, too, he thought to himself.

He saw Riselia off as she returned to her cabin and then turned to face the deck. Far in the distance, through the dark of night, he

could see the large contours of the *Endymion* riding the waves.

"—Shary."

"Yes, my lord."

Shary appeared from his shadow, kneeling.

"Look after Riselia for me."

"—As you wish, my lord."

Leonis sank into the shadows cast by the ship's lamp. At the same time, Shary's form contorted, and she took on Leonis's appearance.

◆

Leonis appeared in the *Endymion*'s bridge and settled into the commander's seat.

"Lord Magnus," Blackas greeted him, seated on the operator's seat.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting, Blackas. So what's your impression of my ship?"

"It's a splendid vessel worthy of being called yours, Lord Magnus."

"Fully agreed. Shary doesn't seem to understand its charm, but your tastes seem to match mine." Leonis settled into his chair and crossed his arms, satisfied. "I do think its decorations are plain, however. Maybe we should put a carved skull on the bow?"

"No, that would be—"

"Why a skull? It's so lame. Put on a dragon's carving instead."

"…What?"

Leonis turned around, finding that Veira and Rivaiz had just walked into the bridge.

"Hmm. This ship isn't too bad, but it's no match for my Leviathan," Rivaiz mused.

"Don't compare it to the largest, strongest sea creature…," Leonis whispered bitterly.

"So. Will the Undead King actually show up?" Veira asked.

"Yes. Absolutely," Leonis answered with an indomitable smile. "Now that we've been pushed back so much, this is our chance to

charge in and crush them."

"I'll make them pay in blood for trying to take advantage of me. Dragons always repay their debts." Embers rose from Veira's crimson hair.

The apostles had once tried to transform her into a Void Lord, and she still held that grudge.

"If they keep targeting Dark Lords like us, our only option is to crush them. I don't know where Azra-Ael went, but we'll attend to him later," Rivaiz the Lord of the Seas said arrogantly.

They were going to war with the Undead King, but never before have the forces siding with Leonis been this mighty.

"Why didn't you invite the Lord of Beasts to come along? I'm sure a combat fanatic like him wouldn't think twice about joining us."

"Long ago, he was cursed by the Sea God. He can't stand the ocean because of it."

"Yes, I do remember saving him when he was drowning in the sea once…"

"Oh, so that's what you meant by him owing you a debt. Interesting."

Veira smiled viciously. In truth, back during Leonis's hero days, he had a curse placed on him by the Sea God, too, that prevented him from swimming. But he knew better than to speak of it while Veira was in earshot.

Honestly, though, the Lord of Beasts being cursed helps me in this situation.

With the giant Void crack still lingering above the Seventh Assault Garden and the capital, there was no guarantee another Stampede wouldn't break out, and it wasn't out of the question that the Undead King might send two armies concurrently. And while he left the Three Champions of Rognas and the Septentrion maids behind to defend Excalibur Academy and the orphanage, he wasn't confident everywhere else was as well-defended.

…But with the Lord of Beasts staying behind, we'll be able to defend against any large-scale attacks.

Leonis then chuckled to himself. "The Dark Lords gathering to fight together like this feels like a recreation of the Dark Lord War."

“But this time, we’re not fighting the Six Heroes, but the Undead King.”

Leonis used a Mystic Eye of Far Sight to peer into the distance—the Void City, the Fourth Assault Garden, was fast approaching.

CHAPTER 7

THE DEMON SWORD QUEEN

Imperial standard time, 08:30.

The flagship *Hyperion* deployed twenty-four high speed tactical cruisers carrying elite Holy Swordsmen units. Under covering fire from the fleet, the cruisers were able to stage an offensive landing in the Fourth Assault Garden's third military dock area.

Under the command of Princess Chatres, each unit began fighting the Voids and successfully retook the dock, forming a bridgehead in the city.

Seven Holy Swordsmen died in the fight, with forty-two injured.

After successfully taking the dock, the units spread out, each heading to their designated objectives.

◆

"…Here they come, Lady Selia!"

"Right, Regina. Cover me!"

Riselia sprinted ahead and slashed through the giant charging at her. The ogre-class Void toppled to the ground, falling on its back with a large *thud.* Sakuya instantly moved in and cut through its neck. It died, producing a suffocating cloud of Void miasma that filled the air.

They were in one of the towers controlling the Fourth Assault Garden's city functions. There was a large Void Hive built around the tower, its crystals cracking and rupturing as several more ogre-class Voids crawled out of them.

With the Bloody Sword prepped in one hand, Riselia sprinted toward another nearby Void. Countless blood blades flashed through the air, cutting into the Void's body.

"…They just keep coming!" Regina shouted as she used her Drag Howl to blast both the Voids and their Hive.

But sadly, this large Hive, integrated into the city, was difficult to destroy. It was then they heard a loud explosion—far in the distance, a large pillar of light burst out, tearing into the sky.

"Is that Princess Chatres's Holy Sword, the Ragna Nova?!"

"It's as impressive as ever…"

Seeing the strongest Holy Sword in action on the battlefield, the two of them were taken aback by its might.

"Miss Selia, shouldn't we use that?" Leonis, who was running a short distance behind them, pointed down the street.

"Huh?'

Riselia looked in that direction and saw a large battle vehicle buried in the rubble. It was an anti-Void combat model, a blaster vehicle. One of the Fourth Assault Garden defensive units must have left it behind when they retreated.

"Military vehicles have a biometric lock, and it might be wrecked, too…," Regina said.

"I think we'll be good on that front—Leite, can we use this?"

"Yes, master." Schwertleite nodded and hurried over to the vehicle. She opened its hatch and began taking it over from the inside. A few seconds later, the biometric lock was undone, and the vehicle's turret swerved noisily. The mana cannon fired, blasting the Void Hive.

"Whoa, look at that firepower! It's a match for my Dragon Slayer blast!" Regina exclaimed.

It was certainly much stronger than a blaster vehicle normally was.

"…Even if it was mostly grounded, this truly is impressive. I can see why the Deus Machina is on the same level as my lord," Leonis whispered to no one in particular.

"Let's follow it and break through!" Riselia said.

The blaster vehicle, controlled by Schwertleite, charged forward as its turret continued firing.

"I—I'm not going to let this thing outshine me!" Regina boarded the turret and, shouldering the Drag Howl, fired blasts of her own.

◆

"—How fortuitous. We have sacrifices charging in, just waiting to be claimed."

Fourth Assault Garden—the Central Garden's eighth underground level. Sitting in front of the screen monitoring the mana furnace, Nefakess snickered maliciously.

"This will save us the trouble of having to gather more Demon Swords."

He turned around, his eyes settling on a black-haired girl clad in a pitch-black dress. The Demon Sword Queen who Deinfraude had produced.

Elfiné the Void Queen.

The girl did not respond at all, however. Her eyes were full of empty darkness. Nefakess nodded, satisfied, and issued an order.

"—Now, go forth, ye vessel of the Demon Swords. Devour as much as you please."

The girl's fingers traced the air, producing a Void tear.

"I am the Vessel of the Demon Swords. I beckon the offerings to the power of Nothingness…," Elfiné spoke, her voice emotionless.

And then, the ebony angel vanished into the Void tear.

◆

The Drag Howl fired thrice, producing three deafening blasts that tore a hole through a solid bulwark.

"I did it, Lady Selia!" Regina said from atop the blaster vehicle's turret, holding her fingers up in a *V* sign.

"Eighteenth platoon, just arrived at the control tower. We'll be entering it now."

"…Ro…ger. Stay…igilant…," Fenris's voice crackled from the radio.

Riselia reported to the eleventh platoon, which was en route to another control tower, and prepared to go inside.

"Let's take control of the place fast, before the Void Crystals start hatching. Charge!"

Riselia and Sakuya moved ahead of the other two as vanguards, charging in through the tower's gate. At the same time, the blaster vehicle Regina and Leonis were riding followed suit, its engine howling as it careened ahead.

There was another large Void Hive formed within the premises of the control tower. The crystals erupted, with medium-sized insect Voids crawling out of them in large numbers.

"Insect-types—this kind has extremely high regenerative powers!" Riselia said, slashing ahead with the Bloody Sword.

The crimson blade flashed, producing a whirlwind of blood that cut into the approaching Voids.

"Mikagami style, Ultimate Blade Technique—Thunderclap!"

Sakuya put up a good fight, too. Blue lightning sparked through the air, and a moment later, the remains of the Voids scattered on the ground.

"We'll follow you, Lady Selia!"

As the two attacked with their swords on the frontline, Regina and Schwertleite backed them up with covering fire.

"—There's more of them coming from behind," Leonis said, perched atop the blaster vehicle.

"…?!"

Regina turned around and saw several large serpentine Voids, their bodies covered with carapaces, approach the vehicle while kicking up rubble in their wake. On top of that, the ground around them tore open, and many Voids shaped like human hands crawled out from the under the rubble.

"Hand-roper-class Voids?! They can be tricky…!"

The countless hands reached out to grab the vehicle's fuselage.

"If we don't do something, we'll be caught between these Voids and the ones inside the control tower!" Regina said as she blasted the hand-roper-classes creeping toward them.

"—That sounds bad."

It didn't matter how many of them they defeated, because so long as the Void Hive remained, more would emerge. And destroying a Hive this large in a short period of time would be difficult.

Chatres's Holy Sword might have been to destroy it one blow,

but…

She touched the terminal on her ear.

"—Lady Selia, leave this place to us."

"Regina?" Having just cut down a Void, Riselia turned to face her.

"We'll set up a barricade to keep the Voids outside out. Use that time to seize control of the tower."

"But Regina—"

"We can buy you fifteen minutes. Leite, please."

"—Understood. I shall serve as the master's shield."

The blaster vehicle drifted, stopping in front of the entrance as a makeshift barricade.

"Hurry, while we have time…!"

"…All right. We'll be counting on you, but don't do anything reckless," Riselia said.

"You have my gratitude, Miss Regina. I'll give you my castella later, as thanks."

"Really? I'll be holding you up to that, Sakuya…!"

Riselia and Sakuya raced through the gate and entered the control tower's interior.

"All right, let's give them hell. Holy Sword, Mode Shift—Dragon Storm!"

Regina deployed her sword's multi-barrel artillery form atop the blaster vehicle. It was a base-defense mode, optimized for large-scale suppressing fire.

"Get smooooooooked!"

The barrels opened fire, sweeping through the approaching Voids.

"Impressive," Leonis said.

"Heh-heh, isn't it, though? Well, kid, did you get a better impression of how good I am… Wait, what's that?!" Regina looked up in alarm.

Crack, crack, crack…!

Something large was emerging, tearing through the cloudy sky.

"Isn't that…?!" Leonis's eyes widened with shock.

It was a ship. A pirate ship made of bones, enveloped in Void miasma.

"A Void ship?! I've never heard of that!" Regina whispered in

shock as she watched it cast a massive shadow over the ground.

"…That's my lord's ship, the *Wild Hunt*!"

"Kid?" Regina looked at Leonis, dubious at his whisper.

"Ah, kid, what…?"

"You two take care of this place. I'll be off—"

Saying this, Leonis faded into the shadows.

◆

Standing atop the *Endymion*'s deck, Leonis glared at the sky. There was no visible change in the cloudy sky yet. At the dock area's waters, the capital's fleet began shooting covering fire. But the *Endymion* remained still. Like a predator crouched in the bushes, it awaited the right time.

"Leo, are you worried about your minion?" Veira asked him with a light tone.

"Why should I have to worry? She's *my* minion."

"…Hmm. If you say so." Veira twirled a hair on her fingertip. "Well, it wouldn't do for her to die too easily after I gave her my blood."

"Heh, so it's you who's worried about her."

"Huh? Wh-what are you, stupid?" Veira said, a puff of flame billowing from her hair.

Leonis easily put it out.

"—Here he comes," he whispered.

"…Hmm. So he finally shows himself." Veira smiled boldly.

At that moment—

Crack!

A Void tear streaked through the sky above the Fourth Assault Garden.

Crack, crack, crack, crack, crack…!

The cracks spread like a spiderweb over the sky, producing a massive tear that looked like an eye looking down at the sea. It was almost the same in size as the tear that appeared over the capital. The air trembled—the ocean quaked. The *Endymion*'s deck shook

violently, tilting diagonally.

Leonis folded his arms, fixing his Mystic Eye at what loomed beyond the tear. He could see the Void World's bloodred sky, and past it, a massive, overbearing upside-down castle that floated in the air.

"Is that… No, it can't be. The Otherworldly Castle?!"

"What?" Veira raised her voice belligerently.

The Otherworldly Castle—the Devil of the Underworld's mobile fortress, capable of traveling between dimensions.

"…So the apostles have been using that as their base of operations."

"What does this mean? Is Azra-Ael their leader?"

"No. I think the Devil of the Underworld makes for a different faction," Leonis shook his head. "Without its original master, the Otherworldly Castle isn't capable of travelling the dimensions anymore, so its became anchored in the interstice between this world and the Void World. So that's what this about…"

"…Well? What did you understand?"

"They did something to the Fourth Assault Garden, turning it into an anchor that would connect the Otherworldly Castle to this world."

In the past, Leonis read books from other worlds to pass the time. Through these books, he learned about something called the Interdimensional Existence Conservation Theory. With the Fourth Assault Garden and the Otherworldly Castle having had their phases aligned, they became like two sides of the same coin. So if the Fourth Assault Garden moved in this world, the Otherworldly Castle, which was anchored to it, would appear in the same coordinates.

Nefakess Reizaad did *used to be Azra-Ael's lieutenant…*

So it stood to reason he would be knowledgeable about other dimensions.

The sea raged, and heavy thunder rumbled. Swarms of countless Voids appeared from the Void tear.

"They're aiming to destroy the humans' fleet."

Leonis smirked, picking up the Staff of Death's Eye. Its hilt, previously broken by Gazoth, was now pasted together with tape. The tip of the staff shined with mana.

"Dark Lord Battleship *Endymion*—surface!"

◆

A girl in a maid's uniform landed atop the flying ghost ship's decaying mast. Her dusk-colored eyes coldly observed the Void skeleton soldiers.

"The *Wild Hunt*—you were resurrected by the Undead King."

The skeleton soldiers surrounded with miasma instantly turned to look at Shary. It seemed they registered her silent bloodlust as a threat. They let out an eerie cry of malice and charged at the mast.

"Now that you have been reduced to these revolting forms, you're not worthy to be my lord's servants!"

Saying this, Shary took off her maid's uniform, revealing the outfit she wore during her days in the Assassination group Septentrion, the Killer Garment.





“I was taken off guard on the party the other day, but today, I come in full dress,” she said coldly, brandishing a lethal Refisca dagger in each hand.

She didn’t like this outfit, since it reminded her of the cold, empty days of her life before Leonis granted her a heart of her own.

But even so, donning the Killer Garment stood for her resolve in fighting this war.

“One of the Septentrion’s Killer Dolls—Shary Corvette Shadow Assassin.” She quietly stated her name. “I shall offer up your remains as tribute to my lord.”

The next moment, the heads of three skeleton soldiers went flying at once.

◆

As they anticipated, the control tower’s interior was also populated by a Void Hive. Riselia and Sakuya raced down the hall, cutting down the hatching Voids.

“Haaaa! Bloody Spiral!”

“Mikagami style, Ultimate Blade Technique—Lightning Flurry!”

The Holy Swords’ blades flashed through the dark, cutting through centipede-shaped Voids, their flesh and filthy miasma scattering in the air. The Voids formed within the facility were relatively non-threatening ones. But with so many of them hatching at once, they posed a menace just by their sheer numbers.

“The control room should be just ahead!” Riselia shouted as she cut down a centipede Void.

The elevator naturally wasn’t working, so Riselia charged her leg with mana, kicked open the emergency door, and raced down the stairs leading underground.

“—This is taking too long. Let’s take a shortcut.”

Sakuya hopped atop the railing and jumped over it, plummeting down. With her legs enveloped with lightning, she ran vertically along the wall.

“Sakuya, wait…!” Riselia hopped after her.

Spreading her mana wings, she swooped down the shaft. Landing gently on the ground, she dismissed the wings and looked around.

"This should be the control room."

It was a circular, spacious room. The only source of light were emergency lights set all over the room, but Riselia was able to see the place clearly with her vampire's eyesight. Thankfully, a Hive hadn't formed this deep underground yet.

"Let's hurry. Regina and the others can only hold them back for so long—"

But then, Riselia suddenly wheeled in place, sensing something.

…?!

A figure moved within the dark…and it wasn't a human figure. Its form was humanoid, but…

"A Void?!" Riselia shouted, holding up the Bloody Sword.

The figure approached, revealing itself to the dim light.

"—No, Miss Selia," Sakuya whispered beside her.

The thing—the monster—was donning the uniform of the Academia, the Fourth Assault Garden Holy Swordsmen school. But its entire body was swollen, and one of its arms was especially enlarged and warped into the shape of a blade.

A Holy Swordsman—or rather, what had once been a Holy Swordsman.

"A Demon Sword user…" Riselia swallowed.

At that moment—

■■■■■■■■■■…!

The monster bellowed and swung the blade merged with its arm down on a startled Riselia, cleaving through a mana supply pipe crawling along the wall. Sparks sprayed into the air, and the two hopped left and right respectively to avoid the blow.

"…This must be a test subject for the D-Project. Did the Phillets station them to guard key positions?"

"Who's to say. Maybe they've just been let loose to prowl around…"

Sakuya ran along the wall, swiftly closing distance with the figure. Raikirimaru's power was its authority of acceleration, allowing it to speed up whenever it cut an opponent. At this point, Sakuya had

long since achieved her maximal speed.

"Haaaaaaa! Thundering Lightning Slash!"

The blade flashed, crackling with lightning as it cut through the arm morphed into a Demon Sword. She then used the momentum to drive her sword into the Demon Sword user's heart—

"Sakuya!" Riselia shouted.

The severed arm instantly regenerated and extended to slash Sakuya's throat. She ducked at the last second, avoiding the slash, but the Demon Sword user thrust his knee forward, delivering a powerful kick.

"…Ugh!"

Sakuya got knocked back, hit the ground with a *thud*, and was sent rolling back. The Demon Sword's blade then swung down at her like a whip.

"No!"

Riselia swept the Bloody Sword up, deflecting the Demon Sword. She then kicked against the ground to accelerate and lunged at the Demon Sword user. Thrusting forward, her sword travelled like a flash, skewering the Demon Sword user's throat.

Ah…

But at the last second, she froze up. The Academia's uniform—the mark of a Holy Swordsman sworn to defend mankind.

■■■■■■■■■■…!

A howl filled the room—and the Demon Sword user's human face parted in two, manifesting a gigantic mouth lined with countless teeth. They made to chomp down and crush Riselia's throat, but then—

A slash swept through the air horizontally.

The monster's head rolled off its shoulders and hit the floor. Void miasma spewed out of the cross section of its severed neck.

"Sakuya…"

"—What was that, Miss Selia?" Sakuya asked, Raikirimaru's blade thrust into the Void's torso. "It might look human, but once someone's been corrupted this much, they're effectively a Void. They'll never go back to normal."

"…Yes, I know. I'm sorry." Riselia hung her head, biting her lip.

She knew that, and yet, the moment she saw the Academia uniform, its image overlapped with another in Riselia's mind—the image of *her*, taken over by a Demon Sword.

Riselia shook her head slowly and got to her feet. But then, suddenly, a small orb of light emerged from the Demon Sword user.

"…Huh?"

A malevolent, crimson Eye opened in the orb, and it began absorbing the Demon Sword's particles, which were fading into the air.

"…It's eating the Demon Sword?" Sakuya's voice echoed in the dark.

Overwhelmed by a grim premonition, Riselia turned around on the spot. Another orb appeared—

"Sakuya!"

Riselia jumped, pushing Sakuya's body down to the floor. A sweeping flash grazed Sakuya's back, destroying the floor nearby.

"Sakuya, are you okay?!"

"Ugh… Kuh… A-aaaah…"

Riselia held up her Holy Sword, guarding Sakuya, and turned her eyes to the presence that emerged there.

A Void tear formed in the center of the control room. The tear was pushed open from the inside, and a girl in a pitch-black dress emerged. Accompanied by four Eye of the Witch orbs, she looked at the pair with blank, emotionless eyes.

"Miss Finé…," Riselia whispered in shock, still gripping her Holy Sword.

She thought she was prepared for this, but she still believed somewhere deep down Elfiné was resisting the Demon Sword's power and would regain her soul as a Holy Swordswoman.

"—Miss Finé, it's me. Riselia from the eighteenth platoon!" Riselia called out to her desperately.

Elfiné, however, didn't react to her voice at all. Her blank eyes reflected nothing at all. The Eye of the Witch orb that had absorbed the Demon Sword returned to her. When she touched the orb, her body underwent a change.

"…Aaah… Aaah, aaaaaah!"

She let out a loud cry of pain, hugging her shoulders with both hands and trembling. For a second, her sleek, black hair shined red like fire, and Void miasma brewed around her.

"—Miss Finé!"

Riselia reflexively understood what she just did—she had consumed the Demon Sword. Devoured another's Demon Sword, taking it into her body. Riselia could tell this wasn't something Elfiné could do and get away with unscathed.

"Oh, no—Miss Finé!"

Riselia didn't know what to do, but she did know she couldn't stand by and let this pass. She broke out into a run, charging at Elfiné, who was writhing in pain. But two Eye of the Witch orbs appeared, standing in her way, and unleashed flashes of light.

"…Haaaaa!"

She kicked against the ground and sprung forward. Dodging the flashes, she slashed at one of the orbs. A loud screech—sparks scattered into the air. Her blade was stopped by a barrier. Riselia got the impression the orb's blood-red Eye was sneering at her.

…The orbs have a will of their own?

Riselia heard whooshing around her—three more orbs surrounded her.

◆

…I keep shooting them, but it's like their numbers are endless! Regina cursed under her breath, situated atop the blaster vehicle guarding the entrance.

The Hive built along the streets produced different types of Voids that rushed them nonstop. The small, fly-like Voids were especially tricky. They were hard to pinpoint, and once they formed a swarm, it was too late to handle them. It felt like they were gradually tightening the noose around them.

Regina glanced at the time display on her terminal. It had been over fifteen minutes since Riselia and Sakuya went inside.

It should be time by now…

She wasn't counting on reinforcements from other units, but if she retreated now, the Voids would swarm the control tower.

…I guess we're really backed against the wall here. Regina smiled bitterly to herself as she blasted the swarm of Voids. *If I can just buy time for Lady Selia to escape…*

But then, she noticed a shadow cast down on her from overhead.

"…Mm?" She looked up, furrowing her brow.

At that moment, a gigantic ghost ship crashed down from the sky, hitting the Void swarm dead center with an ear-splitting rumble. Countless Voids were crushed along with their Hive.

"Wh-what?!"

As Regina cried out in confusion, Leonis appeared behind her.

"…That was messy. I didn't think the *Wild Hunt* itself would turn into a Void."

"You did this, kid…?"

"…Well, more or less," Leonis answered indifferently and looked up at the sky as a bolt of lightning streaked across it.

"Good luck, my lord."

◆

The four Eye of the Witch orbs deployed around Riselia at once.

"…?!"

As the orbs revolved around her, leaving crimson, dizzying trails of light, Riselia dodged their attack at the last second. Beams of heat melted the floor, blowing a hole into the center of the control room. If a beam were to hit Riselia directly, it would deal lethal damage, even with her immortal vampire's body.

Kicking against the main shaft in the center of the room, Riselia sprung away, desperate to get away from the orbs. But the four Eyes gave chase with all the vicious tenacity of trained blood hounds. Her barrier of blood blades, which protected her autonomously, couldn't keep up with their attacks.

And blood blades can't block this anyway…!

She circulated mana within her body, summoning the True

Ancestor's Dress. The hems of her white dress flapping, she dodged the crimson beams of heat with acrobatic movements. This was the Queen Minerva mode, optimized for magic combat. In terms of physical combat, it was inferior to the Scarlet Tyrant form, but by boosting her mana, she was able to resist the number of magic attacks she unleashed—enough to match the ones fired at her.

Brandishing the Bloody Sword, Riselia chanted a spell.

"Come forth, demon wolves of shadow—Grava Raijan!"

This was a second-order spell Leonis taught her. Three umbral wolves emerged from Riselia's shadow and lunged at the orbs. But before they could make contact, the Eye of the Witch orbs' crimson beams shot through the umbral wolves, instantly destroying them. Which was what Riselia expected—she had summoned them only as decoys to distract the orbs and draw their attacks.

…I was right. Even if her Demon Sword has a will of its own, it doesn't have an intellect.

Riselia sped up her steps, closing in on one of the orbs and swinging her sword on it.

"Haaaaaaaa—Bloody Storm!"

The orb was cut through, and broke into particles of light.

Miss Finé would ignore any decoys and go straight for me.

Elfiné was the brains and tactical expert of the eighteenth platoon. And without her direct control, the Eye of the Witch Orbs were effectively nothing but automatic turrets that attacked whatever entered their range.

So if I whittle them down one by one, I can handle this!

Dodging the flurry of beams, Riselia closed in on a second orb and cut it down.

"Miss Finé, I'll save you!"

Elfiné was still groaning in agony from absorbing the Demon Sword. Two more orbs appeared in the air, as if to reject Riselia.

—Miss Finé has a total of eight orbs.

With the two Riselia already destroyed included, she had summoned all eight already. Back in the mock match, she couldn't summon more than four orbs at once. The orbs had high data analysis ability, but that put a massive strain on Elfiné's mind.

The six orbs lit up at once, preparing for an all-range attack. Riselia chanted a Shadow Step spell, and hopped from shadow to shadow. This was a Shadow Striding spell Shary had taught her. She continuously summoned more umbral wolves to serve as decoys and gradually closed the distance with Elfiné.

But then, as the Void miasma surrounded Elfiné, a change occurred.

…Eh?

A pair of dark wings spread from Elfiné's back, and she began floating into the air…and, looking down on Riselia, she slowly extended a hand. The six orbs began rapidly encircling Elfiné, guarding her.

"Miss…Finé…" Riselia stopped in her tracks and bit her lips.

She hasn't snapped out of it…

Letters and numbers raced across the surface of the orbs, and then—

"Ray of Vorpal!"

A barrage of crimson beams rained down on her. Riselia hopped away in an attempt to evade, but suddenly, the True Ancestor's Dress burned, and blood splattered from her body.

"Kuh, aaah…!"

Letting out a scream, she waited for her body to heal.

The way they're moving is completely different now!

This was the Eye of the Witch's original power—its fearsome ability to predict future actions using its rapid computations. It was incredibly close to future sight, and even after becoming a Demon Sword, it had retained this power.

The orbs continued rotating around Elfiné, raining fire on Riselia and torturing her.

…I can't dodge this!

But then, at that very moment—

"Miss Selia, jump! In the two o'clock direction—" She heard a voice speak to her through her earring communication terminal.

"Sakuya?!"

"Hurry!"

Riselia did so out of reflex, throwing her body in the direction Sakuya indicated. The next moment, the spot she occupied just a second ago was bombarded with a shower of blasts. Had Riselia jumped anywhere but this spot, she'd have been blasted into ashes.

She turned around with a start—standing there was Sakuya, gripping her injured shoulder. Her left eye was glinting gold.

"Sakuya, your eye…?"

"Miss Selia, please don't ask questions and just move the way I tell you." Sakuya said earnestly through the terminal. **"My eye can surpass Miss Finé's calculations."**

She spoke with confidence and conviction.

"…A-all right."

And hearing this, Riselia gulped nervously and nodded.

Is that the power of Sakuya's Holy Sword? Or is this…?

But that didn't matter now. The fact of the matter was that Sakuya's instructions did save her from the Eyes' attack. So she decided to put her faith in Sakuya.

"They're coming. Four o'clock direction, take a backstep!"

"…!"

Riselia jumped, following Sakuya's concise instructions. The beam just barely skimmed in front of her, evaporating the concrete wall.

"Eight o'clock direction, jump."

"There's two of them from behind, an ambush."

"Stop, they're coming from above."

She followed the instructions mechanically, just barely dodging each attack.

"Four o'clock direction, swing your sword—"

"Haaaaaaaaaa!"

Turning in place, Riselia drew the Bloody Sword, slashing through an Eye of the Witch orb and causing it to break into particles of light. Three orbs appeared in front of Elfiné as she floated in the air, forming a triangle.

"She's going to fire a powerful attack. Get away—" Sakuya's voice tensed up.

"—That's OK," Riselia replied and stood her ground.

Holding up the Bloody Sword in one hand, she slid her fingertip along the blade. This was what she was waiting for: The moment Elfiné would lift Eye of the Witch's auto-guard, an opening would present itself.

Light gathered at the heart of the triangle, and it unleashed a powerful beam: Elfiné's Tri-Flare Burst. But at the same time, the blood running down the Bloody Sword's blade caught fire.

"Burn everything away, infernal dragon blood—Flaming Howl!"

The burning blood took the shape of a scarlet dragon, and swallowed up the slash.

"Aaagh… Guh, aaaah…!"

Riselia was overtaken by sudden vertigo, as if all the mana in her body was instantly sucked out. Her glowing argent hair danced and whipped violently, fanned up by the flames. Had the Queen Minerva form not been supporting her, she would have exhausted all her mana at once.



"Haaaaaaaaaaaa!" Riselia shouted.

The dragon roared, echoing her, destroying the Tri-Flare Burst and the Eye of the Witch orbs altogether. Elfiné's ebony wings disappeared, and she plummeted to the ground.

"Miss Finé!"

Riselia rushed toward her, the Bloody Sword still gripped in her hand. The last message Elfiné's avatar had left—*kill me*—echoed in her thoughts.

Don't be stupid, Miss Finé! You know I can't do that!

Racing over the rubble, Riselia wiped her tears. She'd take her back, by force if need be! She didn't know how to make Elfiné regain her senses now that she'd been consumed by her Demon Sword, and maybe there wasn't a way of doing it.

And yet—

"—Don't worry. She isn't beyond saving yet."

She heard a voice in her head.

…Huh?

This wasn't Sakuya's voice. It was someone else's, the voice of a girl she heard somewhere. But where…?

"I'll lend you my aid. That's a part of me, after all."

An aura of light appeared around Elfiné's body as she plummeted —and then, a black crystal that leaked Void miasma floated out of her heart. Riselia instantly intuited this was what had warped her Holy Sword into a Demon Sword.

"Miss Finé! Wake up!"

With all her might, Riselia drove the Bloody Sword into Elfiné's bosom. The Holy Sword's glowing blade—

—pierced through the black crystal, shattering it to bits.

◆

The *Endymion* surfaced over the sea, spraying water that cascaded with a loud roar. Its massive, metallic hull soared upward, as if it was being reeled up toward the sky.

"Quite the sight, isn't it, Blackas?"

Leonis stood upon the ship's deck, looking down at the view of the Fourth Assault Garden. The reason the *Endymion* was capable of soaring through the sky was thanks to Levitating Crystals stored in the Realm of Shadows' treasure vault, spoils of war Leonis claimed when he destroyed the Heavenly Islands. On their own, all the crystals did was make things around them float in accordance to the mana they absorbed, but by setting them all over the ship and supplying them with the massive amount of energy produced by the miniature mana furnace that propelled the ship, they were able to make the entire vessel fly.

"Lord Magnus, the enemy has spotted us."

"Took the fools long enough."

A large army of Voids emerged from the tear above the Fourth Assault Garden. They numbered in the hundreds, if not thousands.

"Hmph. That's their idea of an advance force, then," Veira sneered in amusement.

"They want to gauge our power first, it seems," Rivaiz nodded.

"Turn starboard, one o'clock direction!"

Leonis swung his Staff of Death's Eye like a conductor's baton. The *Endymion*'s hull sluggishly turned, steered by the pirate skeletons Leonis summoned.

"—Good. Let's give the apostles a taste of my power." Leonis thrust his staff at the large force of Voids blotting out the sky. "Tenth-order tactical destructive spell—Zemexis Jyura!"

Countless spell circles formed, each of them summoning a burning meteorite. The meteorites rained down on the Voids like hail, homing in on them persistently and wiping them out. With nothing left to attack, the meteorites crashed down into the sea, producing massive pillars of water.

"Hmph. That'll teach you, small fry…"

Leonis was in a great mood—it wasn't often he was allowed to go all out and fire such large-scale spells without a care in the world.

"Leonis, the human fleet ended up getting caught in the attack and capsizing," Rivaiz pointed out.

"…Oh. I guess I went too far." Leonis cleared his throat.

"There's more of them coming. Want to have a contest over who

kills more of them, Leo?" Veira proposed with a smirk.

"A score attack, hm? Interesting." Leonis held up his staff. "Tenth-order annihilation spell—Arzam!"

"Hear my roar—Dei Argh Dragray!"

Their attacks fired off as slashes, scorching the sky with fire. The air crackled and the *Endymion*'s deck shook violently. Thousands of Voids were destroyed in the flash of an eye.

"Heh-heh, I win ♪," Veira said victoriously.

"No, I clearly destroyed more of them," Leonis insisted.

"Stop bickering over trivial matters, you two," Rivaiz said dryly.

"—Now then. From here on out, we go to war as Dark Lords." Leonis swung down his staff and gave the order. "Dark Lord Battleship *Endymion*, full speed ahead. Our objective—the Otherworldly Castle!"

AFTERWORD

Hello everyone, this is Yu Shimizu. Thank you for your patience, volume 12 of Excalibur Academy is out for your reading pleasure.

Thanks to your continued support, we've reached as far as 12 volumes. While Miss Elfiné is in some big trouble, Veira and Rivaiz make themselves at home in the dorm and Leonis reveals himself to the world at large. It was quite an eventful volume to write. And a late arrival heroine may be coming soon?

Some thanks.

To Asagi Tohsaka, who, as always, provided beautiful illustrations. Thank you so very much for this volume. The pit babe designs for the second cover especially were a sight for sore eyes.

To Asuka Keigen, for releasing high quality chapters of the manga every month. Thank you so much! Volume 6 of the manga came out parallel to this, so do check it out!

And my biggest gratitude has to go to the readers! The cast for the anime has already been announced, and the production is going smoothly, so do look forward to it.

See you again in volume 13!

???: "Heh-heh. It's almost time for me to reveal myself as the true heroine, Leonis."

Riselia: "…Who?"

Yu Shimizu, February 2023

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