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Prologue

"Master Zagan, I'm so happy."

Nephy smiled, a pure-white dress adorning her body. Her hair was equally white, sparkling like silver under the light. It gave her an air of divine solemnity. She was like a spirit of the moon. The chest of her dress and her elbow-length gloves were embroidered with a crest of a laurel tree using gold thread. Her skirt went all the way to the floor and was adorned with frills and lace. She held a bouquet of pale pink and white flowers in her hand. Atop her head was a silver tiara and a thin transparent veil, hiding her face as if to protect a bride's purity.

Zagan let out a sigh of admiration. He could do nothing but stand there, desperately attempting to suppress the pounding of his heart.

How beautiful...

No matter how hackneyed and overused a word it was, Zagan's mind was incapable of coming up with any other way to describe her. Yes, right here, right now, his beloved was wearing a wedding dress.

Zagan looked down at his own clothes. He was dressed in a white tailcoat. This was the moment of their wedding ceremony.

Aaah, this must be a dream.

Perhaps it was Lilith's doing. He'd brought her along on a vacation, so maybe she was being considerate. It really hadn't been necessary, but still, it wasn't a bad dream.

If he could allow himself to be a little greedy, Zagan would've liked to have seen Nephy in this outfit only after he'd proposed to her. Seeing what came afterward in a dream felt like a waste. In a sense, it would detract from the experience when he eventually got to witness the real thing.

Regardless, she was so beautiful that he couldn't peel his eyes away from her.

"Um, Master Zagan," his adorable bride said, her pointy ears bright red and quivering. "Are you not going to say anything...?"

"Oh! Sorry! You're so beautiful that I lost consciousness!"

"Hyah?!"

His beloved was wearing a wedding dress.

Huh? Isn't this a dream?

The sight was straight out of a dream, but this seemed to be reality.

"Hic... You really are beautiful, Nephy. I have no more regrets now that I've seen you two on your wedding day."

"Hey! Don't go kickin' the bucket on your own!"

"Th-That was just a figure of speech! You already know, don't you? I have no intention of dying and leaving you alone..."

"Haaah? What kinda embarrassing crap are you spoutin'?!"

Maybe this really is a dream.

Now that he took a closer look, Chastille was dressed as the officiant, having an idiotic lover's quarrel with Barbatos. Zagan couldn't distinguish this from dream or reality, but either way, he really wanted those two to choose the right time and place to argue. However, punching Barbatos might splatter blood on Nephy's wedding dress, so Zagan mustered the full force of his willpower and endured the urge.

"Aaaaaaaaagh!"

"Zagan! It's our fault, so please let him go! Barbatos's head is going to pop!"

Chastille screamed as she heard Barbatos's skull creaking. It seemed Zagan had resisted the urge to punch him, only to unconsciously grab him by the face. Well, that didn't really matter. Barbatos's eyes rolled back as Zagan chucked him aside.

How'd it end up like this again...?

It had all started several days...no, about a month ago.

Chapter I: The Better You Know Yourself, the Clearer It Is What You Must Do

"So you're Thunder God Furfur?"

The morning after repelling Lord of Murder Glasya-Labolas in the ancient city of Aristocrates and failing to protect Puppetmaster Forneus, a boy and girl stood before Zagan. The boy trembled. Having been unable to hold back a sigh, Zagan's voice ended up coming across as somewhat overbearing.

The boy was dressed in a simple uniform and had a Sacred Sword on his back. This was practically the first time Zagan was meeting him. The boy wasn't a part of Chastille's faction. The reason he wasn't wearing Anointed Armor was because it'd been pulverized in the recent battle.

The boy had only just turned sixteen. He looked rather weak to be an Archangel, and also very timid. To sum it up, he had very plain features. Zagan wasn't confident he could remember the boy's face the next time they met. Well, considering the fact that he'd been no more than a farmhand only a year ago, that was understandable.

The boy's name was Micca Salvarra. He was Sacred Sword Haniel's wielder. He wasn't the one Zagan was addressing, however. Zagan had spoken to the girl next to him. She had jet-black hair and violet eyes. She wore a headdress and apron, both of which were lavishly adorned with frills. She wore a dress that went all the way down to her ankles and white gloves that covered her elbows. Combined with how little her expression changed, she somewhat reminded Zagan of Nephy back when they'd first met.

Now that I think about it, I haven't seen Nephy in her maid outfit for a while.

Now that Nephy was an Archdemon, she was always in more formal clothes. That was dignified, beautiful, and dazzling in its own way, but he missed her maid outfit.

No, now's not the time for that.

His attempt to make contact with the founder of alchemy, one of the foremost Archdemons, Puppetmaster Forneus, had ended in failure. While Zagan had sent Shax and Kuroka to negotiate with him, Marchosias had sent the Lord of Murder to assassinate him. As a result, Forneus had died. Zagan hadn't lost any of his subordinates, but he hadn't obtained what he'd wanted. That didn't mean he was empty-handed, though.

One thing he'd gained was this girl before him. Furfur lifted the hem of her skirt and curtsied. Zagan could hear something creak like a wooden door being opened.

"Yes. Artificial soul-infused lightning-powered armored puppet, Thunder God Furfur."

This girl was the late Archdemon Forneus's greatest masterpiece, his beloved daughter who'd inherited his Sigil of the Archdemon.

She's necessary to free the seraphs from the Sacred Swords, but first, I need to decide how to handle her.

Forneus had lost his ability to convey his will to others. And so, it was doubtful Furfur had inherited his knowledge. Nevertheless, there was plenty of knowledge to be gained from investigating this puppet's body.

However, Shax and Kuroka wished for this girl to be treated as a person. And as their king, Zagan couldn't handle her harshly. Seated atop his throne, Zagan crossed his legs and addressed her in an overbearing tone.

"Furfur, I present you with two choices," he said, lifting a finger. "First, you can let go of the Sigil of the Archdemon right here and live a quiet life as a normal person. You may even take that brat with you as a companion. So long as I live, I can at least guarantee your safety."

It was questionable whether it was possible for her to live among normal people in the body of a puppet, but Zagan had no obligation to go that far for her. If it didn't work out, she could do as Orias had and seclude herself in a forest or something. Zagan was at least capable of protecting whatever peaceful life Furfur desired.

I still need a Sigil of the Archdemon to give Barbatos, after all.

During the matter with Chastille the other day, Barbatos had been made into quite the plaything. Zagan figured a Sigil would be the least he could do to reward him. The question was whether Barbatos would accept a Sigil from Zagan under such circumstances. Either way, it was better for the peace between Angelic Knights and sorcerers if that man was an Archdemon.

So, what did it mean for Furfur to abandon her Sigil? The boy next to her had to have an idea. Micca tightly pursed his lips. Giving him a sidelong glance, Zagan held up another finger.

"Second, you can inherit Forneus's Sigil and live on as the next Archdemon. I desire Forneus's knowledge. If you cooperate, I'll provide you with an education as a sorcerer. However, you'll have to give up on that brat. You're far too weak a sorcerer to be with an Archangel."

She was a former Archdemon candidate, but still too weak to be an Archdemon now that Marchosias was scheming something. She would get killed and have her Sigil stolen in no time. She needed a patron in order to live on as an Archdemon. That was why Furfur had to make a choice: give up on Forneus's will and live with Micca, or give up on Micca and inherit Forneus's will. Furfur looked straight at Zagan with her glassy eyes and gave him a clear answer.

"I don't like either. I refuse."

"Hmm...?"

Zagan gave her an amused look, whereas Micca went pale and grabbed Furfur's hand.

"F-Furfur! You can't," he whispered. "This person is way stronger than that Glasya-Labolas guy. We have no chance against him."

He had a surprisingly accurate grasp of the situation. And yet, Furfur remained undaunted and looked down at the Sigil on her right hand.

"This Sigil is the last thing my master entrusted me with," she said. "I won't hand it over to anyone. It's precious...necessary. But Micca is equally precious...important. My master chooses...chose, Micca's life over his own. He's just as precious...necessary as my master's will."

The puppet put a hand to her chest, closed her eyes, then raised her head

with determination.

"I want to know," she said. "I want to know why my master died with a smile."

"Laughter is not at all a bad beginning for a friendship, and it is by far the best ending for one."

Those were the great founder of alchemy's last words. Zagan couldn't even begin to guess the meaning behind them.

"To find that answer, I believe I need both the Sigil and Micca."

"Furfur..." Micca muttered.

Zagan planted an elbow on his throne, then burst into uncontrollable laughter.

"So hand over both of them, you mean? The depth of your greed knows no bounds. I see. Well, such avarice certainly can't come from a puppet. How utterly human."

Puppets had no desires. They didn't have wills of their own. Ignoring the boy who was growing paler and paler by the second, Zagan whipped forward a finger and pointed at Furfur.

"Very well. I'll work things out with the Angelic Knights. You shall learn to be an Archdemon."

"H-Huh...?" Micca mumbled, his mouth popping open in shock.

"He's saying you can stay with the little lady," Shax said, plopping a hand on Micca's head. "And she can keep Forneus's Sigil."

Before, Shax had always hunched over and favored an unreliable worn-out doctor's gown, but now his back was straight and he wore a fine robe. He now possessed the dignity of an Archdemon—except for his usual stubble.

Kuroka wasn't here. This was her first time back in town for a month, so she had several people she needed to see and speak to. If Zagan remembered correctly, she was currently on her way to the church.

"Boss, try not to tease them too much," Shax added.

"I'm not," Zagan said. "I don't know them. I'm not so soft that I'll provide protection to complete strangers."

That was why he needed to be sure of it.

"Well, I'm relieved to see they live up to your standards," Shax replied, smiling wryly.

"Hmph. A *puppet* who can't even make a proper choice would've just ended up on the research table."

That said, Shax and Kuroka had appealed to Zagan to protect her. He already knew that she wasn't such a puppet. What made a person was the existence of a will. Anyone without one was no different from a puppet.

Furfur had made her choice. Not only that, but she'd chosen an option that Zagan hadn't presented to her. She wasn't a puppet. That was why he was taking her under his protection. Not choosing and being unable to choose were different matters, after all.

"Um, I don't really get it..." Micca said, disbelief and bewilderment clear in his voice. "What do you mean by 'work things out' with the Angelic Knights?"

Well, considering his profession, it made sense for that to be the first thing on his mind.

"You may wield a Sacred Sword, but nobody will complain if you claim you're keeping an eye on a new Archdemon, right?" Zagan answered indifferently. "You can just give them arbitrary reports on how things are going every now and then. Besides, it works out just fine for me for you two to be an Archangel and an Archdemon. I'm sure the masses will rejoice at having a second source of amusement."

In that sense, Barbatos and Chastille had been extremely useful. Thanks to the full disclosure of their love life, the church's true authorities—the cardinals—were incapable of making any careless statements. If they lost the support of the populace, they would be overthrown in an instant. On the other hand, so long as Angelic Knights served as a deterrent against sorcerers, they would still be necessary even without the cardinals' support. Things could change radically, but the Angelic Knights wouldn't be completely lost.

Micca seemed to realize what Zagan was referring to, so he raised his voice in shock.

"A second source... Don't tell me that really was your doing?!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Zagan replied, boldly feigning ignorance.

I mean, I didn't think Gremory would go so far...

Even now, it scared him a little. He didn't want to hear it mentioned if possible.

"I somewhat understand what you're saying, but how exactly are you going to work things out with the church?" Micca asked, still not fully convinced. "I'm an Archangel, but the lowest-ranking one. My voice doesn't exactly carry a lot of weight..."

"There's no need to worry about that," Zagan said. "The pope is currently absent. Nobody in the church is really in a position to make any decisions. For something of this level, we can have the Unification Faction push things through."

Even if Chastille's voice wasn't enough on its own, there were several other Archangels who would cooperate. If that wasn't enough, Zagan could even rely on Orias, using her position as Oberon. It wasn't that complicated a matter. For now, at least.

Micca weakly fell to his rear, overwhelmed by how much influence Zagan had in the church.

"You've only just lost your master," Zagan said, turning back to Furfur. "I'd like to give you time to settle your feelings, but you're in a dangerous position—even with my protection—so, I'll need you to build up enough strength to call yourself an Archdemon."

"A proper...inevitable? Conclusion. I'll comply."

The battle with Glasya-Labolas must've affected her, but Furfur assented with unexpected ease. The problem was getting her a teacher...

Andrealphus...really doesn't have the time for this right now.

That man had claimed the title of strongest as both a sorcerer and an Angelic Knight. He was the most qualified person to train these two from scratch. However, he'd gone back to Raziel, and things were extremely troublesome over there at the moment.

I never thought Samyaza would end up drifting to Raziel...

Samyaza was an intelligent demon that was an amalgamation of ten thousand entities. It was a monster even Zagan was incapable of defeating in a one-on-one fight. Or perhaps "phenomenon" was a better word to describe it. Even in his heyday, it would probably have been impossible for Andrealphus to defeat it.

For some reason, that same demon had been observed in Raziel. Zagan had figured it was still alive but didn't know what its objective was. Was it recovering from the wounds it'd suffered in the battle against Zagan? For now, it wasn't showing any signs of making a move, at least.

From the very beginning, it was like it was trying to test me.

It would be a poor move to prod it unnecessarily, but Zagan couldn't just ignore it either. That was exactly why he'd asked Andrealphus to keep an eye on it. And so, it wasn't really the time for him to be training youngsters.

He really wanted to retire too...

Even Zagan felt somewhat sorry for him. He decided that if he came across some quality tobacco, he would send some to Andrealphus as thanks.

Orias was another former Archdemon who could do the job, but her two daughters—Nephy and Nephteros—had her undivided attention. Furfur and Micca weren't important enough for Zagan to deprive his mother-in-law of such precious time with her daughters.

In terms of simple skill, Foll and Shax had no shortcomings. They also had people at their beck and call who knew how to use swords. However, they weren't capable of teaching others sorcery at the level of an Archdemon, especially when it was outside of their own specialties.

About the only choice left was for Zagan to teach them personally, but he was already busy looking after quite a few people. He also didn't want to lose any

more time he could be spending with Nephy instead. So then, who could serve as their teacher?

"Hm hm hmm! My liege! Have you forgotten someone?! Leave it to me, and I shall raise them to possess love power that surpasses even Purgatory!"

"You go sit in the corner!"

Having eavesdropped on them from somewhere, the granny nobody had asked for came barging in, her ulterior motives on full display. She was followed by a giant young man with the face of a lion.

"Come now, Miss Gremory," he said, an air of remonstration in his voice. "I'll sit with you, so let's apologize properly. I'm sure you know how delicate a matter this is."

"Be quiet, Kimaris!" Gremory shouted. "Do you think I'm understanding enough of others that I'd just sit still when such love power is before me?!"

"Isn't that exactly why you're being scolded?" Kimaris retorted.

These two had been working separately as of late, but they'd returned together today. Kimaris took a seat next to Gremory, a look of relief on his face as if he'd finally returned home after a long absence.

Zagan folded his arms and continued pondering the matter at hand when suddenly, a knock came at the throne room's door.

"Mister Zagan! I heard you came back!"

"Hang on a minute, Selphy. It looks like he's receiving guests."

"Huh? But Miss Gremory totally just waltzed in."

A carefree voice resonated through the throne room, coming from someone completely incapable of reading the mood. It was the siren Selphy.

Dammit, one after the other. I'm busy trying to find someone to train these two...

There simply weren't that many people out there who could teach both sword and sorcery.

"Selphy, my business can wait. Let's come back later, shall we?"

And upon spotting the boy who'd entered the room with Selphy, one of his problems was immediately resolved.

"Oh, there's one right here," Zagan said.

"Huh? One what?" the boy asked.

It was Zagan's father, the first Head Archdemon, the second Silver-Eyed King Lucia—or at least his Nephilim, Ain. Zagan explained the situation, and Ain agreed to look after them. With that decided, they'd need a place to live. Zagan ended up offering the old castle in the forest he'd previously occupied. Archdemon Palace would've worked too, but Ain had chosen to live a life separate from his previous one. It would be far too awkward for him to bump into Alshiera frequently.

And just as the meeting in the throne room came to an end, Shax added one last thing.

"Boss, before we split up, I've got something to tell you."

"Yeah, I know."

Zagan could already guess what he wanted to discuss.



"Hey, hey, you a newcomer?"

After his audience with Archdemon Zagan, Micca found himself standing inside a kitchen. Furfur had been dragged away by the girl who'd entered the throne room, and Micca had followed them here. Furfur seemed more confused than worried. She threw Micca a glance, a shocked look on her face as she was taken farther into the kitchen.

"Hmm, so your name's Furfur, huh? That's a real cute name. I'm Selphy! Are you a sorcerer? Can you cook? It's A-OK! Even if you can't, Mister Raphael will totally teach you!"

"I will try...no, do my best?"

Micca figured this girl had misunderstood things because of Furfur's clothes, but that didn't seem to be the case. That only made things more confusing. There was also a small girl with green hair in the kitchen who, upon seeing

Furfur, began trembling. Well, Furfur wasn't very expressive, so maybe that had frightened the girl.

And as he remained standing stock-still, a boy who looked to be around the same age as Micca casually struck up a conversation. He had chestnut hair and blue eyes. Judging by his ragged robes, he was probably a sorcerer too.

"Huh? No...? Am I?" Micca said, not quite sure himself.

"I'm Furcas!" the boy said, grinning. "Not a whole lotta people my age around here, so it's nice to have ya!"

"Oh, hello. I'm Micca Salvarra. You can just call me Micca."

"Gotcha. Nice to meet you, Micca."

Micca remained distracted throughout their introductions. His focus was stuck on the old gentleman who seemed to be running the kitchen. He wore what looked like a butler's tailcoat, but there was no mistaking the scars on his face.

"H-Hey, Furcas?" Micca said. "I have a question. Is that...?"

"Mister Raphael? He's an amazing guy! He's the butler and chef here!"

Micca was getting a headache.

Why is Lord Hyurandell working as a butler and chef?

He was the oldest living Archangel and boasted the foremost strength among them. Micca had heard vague rumors about him getting caught up in some kind of internal discord in the church and having to hide under the protection of an Archdemon who was on good terms with the Unification Faction. Still, this situation far surpassed Micca's imagination.

At first, he thought he was hallucinating, but this seemed to be reality. He wanted it all to just be a dream.

"Micca, are you bad at cooking?" Furcas asked, cocking his head. "It's all right. Mister Raphael has a scary face, but he'll teach you properly. Even I can help out now."

"No, I've cooked plenty at home. It's just..."

He'd been away from home for a week now.

I wonder if everyone is okay...

The local priest was watching Micca's house during his absence, but Micca wasn't sure what his position in the church was anymore. Zagan had guaranteed his safety, but it didn't sound like such a simple matter. It was possible he was thought lost in action after the incident the other day, and given his current circumstances, it was even possible he was being considered a traitor. The anxiety was starting to give him a stomachache.

"You know how to cook? That means you know how to peel vegetables, yeah?" Furcas asked, pulling out a chair for him. "I'm pretty bad at it, so lend me a hand."

"Oh, sure."

Furcas handed him a knife and a potato, and Micca began peeling it half-unconsciously. Curious about how Furfur was doing, he glanced her way. She'd been entrusted with making a salad while pasta boiled in a pot.

Looks like things are going fine over there.

For now, nothing seemed dangerous. After confirming that, Micca returned his attention to Furcas.

"Mister Raphael's cooking is super tasty," Furcas said. "You'll cheer up once you have some."

It seemed he was trying to encourage Micca in his own little way.

"Th-Thanks. You're very kind," Micca replied.

"Ha ha, everyone here has gone through hard times," Furcas said. "I've been treated so well by them, so I'm just passing it along."

Well, Furcas looked to be around the same age as Micca, and here he was...working(?) at an Archdemon's castle. He'd had to have gone through hard times.

"Furcas, what brought you here?" Micca asked casually.

Furcas continued peeling the potato in his hands, not quite sure how to

explain his situation.

"To tell you the truth...I don't remember anything about my past," he said.

"Huh? You have no memories?"

"Mhm. I kinda wandered into a ridiculously dangerous place, and when I was on the verge of death, Zagan and Lilith saved me. Oh, Lilith is the redhead over there who's making the soup. She's such a beautiful and cute girl!"

Furcas pointed to a strong-willed girl. She had red hair and golden eyes and looked to be about the same age as Furcas. She wore an apron over rather revealing clothes, but Micca was more focused on her curved horns.

Races with such horns were, in general, very rare. It was miraculous for one to be alive under an Archdemon, or even a sorcerer, but it didn't seem like her life was at risk here.

I wonder if Furcas is in love with her. Micca could guess from the clear passion in Furcas's voice.

"She really is pretty," Micca said. "Is she also a sorcerer?"

"Nope," Furcas said. "Lilith is Liucaon's princess."

"Why is a princess making soup in the kitchen?"

Was she being forced to obey Zagan in exchange for her life?

"Ha ha ha, I asked the same thing when I first came here," Furcas said, smiling nostalgically. "By the way, the one showing the other newcomer the ropes is Miss Selphy. She's another family's princess."

And the one running the kitchen was the most dreadful Archangel.

"What's going on here...?" Micca muttered.

"Oh, and the beautiful woman cooking the meat over there is Miss Nephy. She's Zagan's girl, so be sure not to be rude to her."

"Zagan, as in Archdemon Zagan? So he's in a normal relationship...?"

Now that Micca thought about it, he vaguely remembered a beautiful elf accompanying Zagan during the attack on Raziel's treasury.

"Yup. And the little green-haired lady next to her is Foll," Furcas added. "She's Zagan and Miss Nephy's daughter."

"They're old enough to have a daughter of that age?"

A sorcerer's appearance wasn't exactly a reliable indicator of age, but one way or another, both Zagan and this elf appeared to be as young as they looked.

"Nope," Furcas said, shaking his head. "They're not related by blood. Foll's a dragon and all."

"Dragons exist?"

This was even more of a shock. Micca had been under the impression that dragons only existed in picture books.

"She's also the strongest Archdemon here, aside from Zagan," Furcas added.

"Isn't it weird for a dragon to be an Archdemon?!"

"Miss Nephy became an Archdemon recently too."

"Is becoming an Archdemon that easy?!"

How many Archdemons did Zagan have in his employ to begin with? Tiger King Shax was also one of the new Archdemons. This was all too shocking for Micca. He gasped for breath as Furcas laughed next to him.

"Ha ha ha, you're reacting just as expected."

"Quit using me for entertainment," Micca complained.

"But you've cheered up a bit, yeah?"

Micca was taken aback.

I see. I must've looked really down...

That was why Furcas was half-teasing him to cheer him up.

"Thanks, Furcas."

"I didn't do anything."

That was when Micca noticed something. Nephy and Foll each had a crest on their right hand. He'd seen the same thing on Archdemon Zagan's and Shax's

right hands too. And right in front of him, he saw the same crest on Furcas's right hand...

"Furcas, mind if I ask something...?" Micca said. "That crest on your right hand..."

"Oh, this? It's apparently called a Sigil of the Archdemon."

Micca never imagined this boy would be an Archdemon too. Micca trembled at the thought of having spoken to him so casually.

"I'm pretty sure there are others who should have this instead of me," Furcas said with a troubled look. "But I've had it since before losing my memories, so Zagan told me to hold on to it..."

"Is that so ...?"

Micca was ashamed of himself. Furcas had been so kind to him despite this being their first meeting, yet Micca had gotten frightened of him just because he had a Sigil of the Archdemon. To Furcas, this could be the one and only clue he had about his own past.

Micca glanced at the pile of potatoes that'd been building up next to them. Furcas had been the one to ask for help, but he'd peeled more potatoes than Micca had. He didn't actually need help but had given Micca something to do because Micca had seemed lost. People were capable of clearing their minds of unnecessary thoughts when they had work in front of them, after all.

What a good guy.

Micca suddenly wanted to become friends with him.

"You're amazing, Furcas," Micca said. "Even though I have a Sacred Sword, I'm the weakest among the Archangels, so I have no idea why I'm being treated so well here..."

"Don't say that. I'm definitely the weakest among those who have this Sigil too."

He didn't call himself an Archdemon. That was because he understood the situation better than anyone else. However, there was no timidity in Furcas's voice like there was in Micca's.

"But even so, Zagan and Lilith saved me. They could've snatched the Sigil from me, but instead, they told me to get stronger and are supporting me. I want to pay back the favor they've granted me... You have someone like that too, don't you?"

With that, he shot a glance at Furfur.

He really is amazing.

That was exactly why Micca didn't want to look pathetic in front of Furcas or Furfur.

Micca nodded.

"Yeah... I want to become someone the people who've been so kind to me can be proud of."

The two boys smiled. Still, even after having all this explained to him, Micca had a headache.

"Royalty, Archangel, and Archdemons... Does this kitchen have anyone normal in it?" Micca asked.

"What're you saying? You've got a Sacred Sword too."

Micca had almost forgotten about that. The tranquil and normal life Micca had long dreamed of felt so distant all of a sudden.

"Oh my, there are even more people here than usual."

And just then, yet another girl entered the kitchen. She had blonde hair and golden eyes like the moon. She wore a pitch-black dress and seemed to be just as young as Foll, or maybe a little older.

"That's Miss Alshiera," Furcas said. "She's apparently a vampire."

"There really are no normal people here!" Micca exclaimed.

Still, not having a title like Archangel or Archdemon meant that she was maybe the most normal one there.

"She's a widow who's lived around a thousand years," Furcas added. "She's also Zagan's mom."

"She's the most abnormal one here!" Micca shouted unintentionally, startling

the vampire.

"H-Huh? What is it?" she asked in bewilderment.

"Alshiera. He's new," Foll said.

"Aaah..."

Now she had a look of pity in her eyes. It was like she was saying, "He's about to go through the same things I once did."

Micca thought he already knew that an Archdemon's castle couldn't be normal, but things had far surpassed his imagination.

I give up. What will be will be...

Thus, he stopped thinking about it.



"It seems you've once more taken on all kinds of burdens, Zagan."

Now that Furfur and the others were gone, the only ones left in the throne room were Zagan, Ain, and Shax. The one addressing Zagan was Ain. For now, the matter of Furfur and Micca was sure to work out with Ain's help. Now that Zagan had decided to treat Furfur as a person, he would only prod into the means of freeing the seraphs after she obtained power befitting an Archdemon.

"I never planned to, though," Zagan said, groaning. "It just always ends up like this before I know it."

Ain chuckled.

"Ha ha ha, I don't hate that part of you."

"Hmph..."

Unable to say anything to that, Zagan averted his gaze. He would scoff at anyone else saying it, but coming from this boy, it made him feel embarrassed and awkward.

Zagan cleared his throat, then cut to the chase.

"Well, now that you're here, I suppose I'll need to explain the situation to you."

"That'll help," Ain agreed.

In all likelihood, Shax's business had to do with both Zagan and Ain. He also stood there in silence and nodded.

"I have three problems to handle," Zagan continued. "One you already know about—Marchosias. He's gathered three Archdemons and is trying to start something."

Depending on how things played out, it was possible Naberius would join that side too. Marchosias's objective was still a mystery, but that was exactly why Zagan was trying to contact the other Archdemons and former Archdemon candidates.

Hopefully, I can make it in time...

Archdemons and former Archemon candidates often isolated themselves from worldly matters. This had been made even clearer after failing to protect Forneus. Even Zagan's talented subordinates had a hard time tracking them down. It was inevitable for Marchosias to beat them to the punch.

The only Archdemons Zagan had yet to contact were Phenex and Astaroth. Of the former Archdemon candidates, only their disciples—Gaoler Acheron and Godsight Flauros—remained. Disciples often took after their teachers, but Zagan would've preferred it if they hadn't when it came to being so hard to find.

After confirming Ain was following along, Zagan continued.

"Next, the demons. Alshiera's barrier hasn't been broken, but for some reason, they've been appearing all over the place."

The reason for this remained a mystery, and Zagan was unable to find a means of resolving it.

Asmodeus is handling them on her own, but I can't rely on her forever.

Things were soon going to be beyond her control. No matter how powerful she was, she wouldn't be able to stop them if they appeared all over the continent at the same time.

"And finally, the Sacred Swords," Zagan said. "For a certain reason, I aim to

destroy them...or rather, free the seraphs who are sealed within them."

These were Zagan's three major problems, but Ain held up four fingers and added one more for him.

"Also, the ring you've been keeping in your pocket this whole time, right?"

"Right... What do I do? I have no idea when to hand it over," Zagan said, his tone far graver than before.

Ain smiled at how honestly Zagan admitted this.

"This might not sound very persuasive coming from someone with no experience," Ain said. "But I'm sure the appropriate time will arrive. When it does, you can't be timid about it. Just remember that, and I'm sure you'll be fine."

Getting timid when the time comes is the biggest problem!

Not that Zagan could say that to his father, even if this technically wasn't him. Zagan could only avert his eyes sullenly.

That was when Shax joined the conversation.

"Boss, my gut feeling tells me the three problems you brought up are all connected."

Both Zagan and Ain stared at him in wonder.

"Wh-What?" Shax asked.

"I was just thinking about how talented you are when it comes to these things," Zagan told him.

"You're not gonna get anything from flattering me."

Well, he was acting more like a man toward Kuroka lately. It was about time for him to graduate from being criticized by Zagan all the time.

"It's just as you say," Zagan confirmed. "I doubt these problems are unrelated."

"Hmm... You mean to say Marchosias is involved with the demons' reappearance?" Ain asked.

"I wouldn't go that far," Zagan replied. "However, there are signs he's trying to use the demons for something."

Zagan had come to this conclusion due to the battle with Samyaza the other day.

That thing is an amalgamation of demons.

Its power was tremendous and it had intelligence to match an Archdemon. Zagan couldn't possibly have defeated it alone. That was simply how preposterous a being it was. Marchosias must've learned about it a thousand years ago. And if so, he couldn't have left it alone.

"And how are the Sacred Swords related?" Ain asked, an air of caution in his voice.

"That's exactly what I wanted to ask you about," Zagan responded as he and Shax shifted their attention to Ain. "The weapon once wielded by the second Silver-Eyed King Lucia, Sacred Sword Azazel—why does it share the name of the demons' king?"

"I see..." Ain mumbled, raising a brow. "I wasn't informed of the specifics, but it's apparently because they were both 'originally one and the same.'"

"Weren't the swords created by sacrificing those seraphs?" Shax asked, cocking his head. "Was a demon used instead of a seraph?"

"That's bec—"

Just as Zagan started to explain, he felt a sudden chill. A cold bead of sweat ran down his cheek.

Bloodlust...? Alshiera...? No, this is...

"That's as far as this conversation goes," Zagan said, holding a finger to his lips. "I can't say more at the moment."

"What do you mean?" Shax asked cautiously.

"It annoys me to imitate my mom, but I can't talk about it," Zagan told him with a sigh. "Think of it as a curse that'll infect me if I do."

Zagan had witnessed Azazel "outside" of Alshiera's barrier. That meant Azazel

had also seen him. Now that this was the case, simply by saying the wrong words, Zagan could become a means for Azazel to break through the barrier.

This is such a pain to handle.

However, both Shax and Ain were talented men.

"Understood..." Shax said. "Then for now, let's call it Cat."

"Hmmm..."

Zagan let out a sigh of admiration. By giving it another name, it was possible to avoid detection to a certain extent. Shax really was wise to come up with such an idea on the spot.

It really is best to consult others when you have a problem.

"Why Cat?" Ain remarked curiously.

"Don't ask..." Shax said. He'd probably come up with it on the spot.

This guy really loves cats...

Well, both his teacher and lover were cats, so it was understandable. Once this matter with Marchosias and the demons was resolved, Zagan decided to let this man research cats to his heart's content.

"So this Cat was something like a god to the seraphs, right?" Shax continued, a little red in the face. "And for some reason, this Cat became a demon...or was somehow turned into one."

"You mean like Nephteros," Zagan observed.

Shax had also been present when Bifrons had restored Azazel's fragment as the Sludge Demon Lord. In other words, he'd witnessed Nephteros being swallowed by it and transformed.

So it's also possible the same thing happened to Az... Cat.

"I see..." Ain said. He hadn't considered that. "So it could absorb more than just demons?"

"Wait, what did you just say?" Zagan asked.

"Hm? About Cat?"

Now that Zagan thought of it, Ain had crossed blades with Azazel a thousand years ago—back when he was Lucia.

Ain put a finger to his head and sank into thought.

"The Cat in my memories was the demons' king, capable of spawning endless demons. It could also absorb them to turn into a giant."

Zagan and Shax were speechless at the dreadful revelation.

A self-propagating king of demons...?

No, the main problem was how that was connected to the current situation.

"Meaning the current outbreak of demons is because of Samyaza?" Zagan said with a groan. "No, the sequence of events is wrong. In that case..."

"The next king is somewhere out there," Ain finished for him.

The room fell silent. None of them were able to deny that possibility.

Don't falter, Zagan. Aren't you a king?

What kind of leader would he be if he fell into despair at the first sign of bad news?

"Then if we find and kill it, we'll clean up this whole matter of demons."

Enticed by his words, Shax and Ain smiled.

"I'm really glad I chose to follow you, boss," Shax said.

"Indeed," Ain agreed. "Marchosias must know this too. That's why he's taking things so slowly."

If something as outrageous as a king of demons existed, Marchosias would try to use it. Crushing it might not put a stop to Marchosias's plans, but it would throw a major wrench into them.

Why has Alshiera kept quiet about this...? Zagan sank into thought without letting it show on his face. A thousand years ago, she'd fought by Lucia's side. She had to know. So then, why hadn't she told Asmodeus? Was this also something she *couldn't* say?

Or maybe she's convinced it has nothing to do with this case?

It seemed it was necessary to question her on the matter.

"So, the immediate issue is the Sacred Swords," Shax muttered.

"You wanna release the seraphs, yeah?" Unexpectedly, it was Ain who answered him. "I'm not entirely devoid of ideas on that front..."

"What?" Zagan replied, confused as he unintentionally rose to his feet.

"The other day, one of your subordinates used it, right? The technique we call Confession..."

"Ah!"

Both Zagan and Shax made a weird noise.

True, that technique must summon the seraph.

He'd witnessed it several times, but had never connected the dots due to the seraphs' armored forms.

"What a blind spot..." Zagan muttered, putting a hand to his head. "Just to be sure, does it release the seraph inside the Sacred Sword?"

"Mm-hmm," Ain nodded. "It's a temporary form created by aura, but it's definitely the seraph."

Meaning there was already a means of temporarily freeing the seraph within a Sacred Sword. All that was left was to find a way to sever its connection to the sword itself.

Furfur's body may be the key to this...

She was a soul within an inorganic body. It was highly likely this was a clue to transferring the seraphs' souls out, seeing as they were also sealed within inorganic objects.

"Both Raphael and Chastille are capable of performing Confession," Zagan said. "Richard may be able to master it too."

This had all started with Richard's Sacred Sword Camael. It would be fastest for him to learn Confession. Stella was another possibility, but she was in Raziel, making it difficult for her to come all the way here. Zagan finally felt the tension in his shoulders relaxing now that a solution was in sight.

"Mind if we get down to my business now?" Shax asked.

"About Kuroka's eyes, I presume?" Zagan said.

Shax nodded.

"Kuroka is that cait sith girl, yes?" Ain said. "The one I accompanied on the trip from Raziel?"

"That's her," Zagan confirmed. "It seems Marchosias called her 'the fourth."

"The fourth...?" Ain muttered as he narrowed his eyes. The words must've resonated with him.

Zagan nodded.

"Liucaon's three royal families are descendants of Lilithiera...of Lucia's daughter."

"Lilith's descendants...?"

In other words, they were descendants of Zagan's twin from a thousand years ago.

I can't even remember her face. It's only fair if she resented me for that.

By the time Zagan had become aware of his surroundings, he'd been fishing through trash in the alleyways. He'd only just recently discovered he had a family. However, none of that mattered to the other party.

"Among them, the Silver-Eyed King's blood is particularly thick in the Adelhides—Kuroka's family."

Lilithiera herself had apparently taken after Alshiera more than Lucia. The Hypnoels had inherited her blood, where this had become even more prominent, leading to the present day's Lilith. However, the Silver-Eyed King's blood was still within all of them...and that power had completely taken the fore in the battle against Glasya-Labolas.

"Kurosuke's eyes are back to their usual color now," Shax said with a groan. "But the power itself isn't gone."

"Meaning she can't control it?" Zagan asked.

"Probably..."

"So you want me to instruct her how to use it," Ain concluded.

"Can you?" Zagan asked.

"I'd love to..." Ain started with a complicated expression. "But Zagan, you can see the flow of mana too, right?"

"Yeah."

Zagan also knew how to use this power.

But I apparently specialize in seeing the circuits behind sorcery.

It was the fundamental power behind his ability to devour sorcery—the power that had elevated him to the seat of an Archdemon. However, his use of it was too specialized. While he could imitate Ain, he was nowhere near as good as reading his opponent's movements.

"Are you capable of explaining how it works to someone else?" Ain asked.

Zagan didn't answer.

"What do you mean?" Shax asked with a confused look.

"Both Zagan and I can see the flow of mana," Ain explained. "However, we don't consciously try to perceive it. From the moment we were born, we could see it as if it were perfectly natural."

It was questionable how much they could teach Kuroka when she'd only just become capable of seeing mana recently.

"You don't need to worry about that," Shax said, unfaltering. "Kurosuke will definitely overcome it. However, I want someone who can lead the way for her, even if just a little."

In truth, Shax wanted to do this himself. That was his only regret. He believed in Kuroka.

He really has become manly...

It wasn't Zagan's place to get in his way.

"I'd like to ask this of you too," Zagan said, lowering his head. "Please, help Kuroka. So long as she can grasp the gist of it, she should be able to make that power her own." "How can I refuse when you ask me like that?" Ain said, laughing. "Be sure to handle *that* properly too, okay?"

"Erk!" Zagan groaned, unable to keep up his vainglorious facade. This was the fourth problem Ain had pointed out to him.

When can I give her this wedding ring?!

Mystic Artisan Naberius had created this ring two short months ago. Despite that, Zagan hadn't been able to find the right time to give it to Nephy. Zagan was already panicking, but there was yet another man in this room who was driving him farther into the corner.

Shax and Kuroka only started going out and they're already farther than we are!

During their one-month break, they'd gone to Kuroka's hometown, greeted her relatives among the other two royal families of Liucaon, and had even gotten their marriage approved. Officially, the one-month trip had been a mission, but it could easily be called a honeymoon. Zagan had hounded Shax about shaping up as a man, but he'd never expected Shax to progress so rapidly.

Well, Kuroka was also aggressive enough to try to make their relationship an established fact...

Once Shax had resolved to accept Kuroka, it was only natural for them to proceed without a hitch.

But what about me? It's been a year since I've met Nephy, and I haven't progressed our relationship at all!

Ignoring Zagan's internal agony, Shax looked up at the ceiling—toward Kianoides—and muttered to himself.

"Kurosuke... She's not gonna be able to drop by the church for a while again, huh...?"

"Well, yeah..."

She was technically affiliated with the church but hadn't been there the last two months. This seemed to bother her, but she had training to do, so it would

be difficult for her to go there for a while.



"Kuroka Adelhide, reporting for duty."

Around that time, Kuroka dropped by the office in Kianoides's church. She was technically a priest here, but ever since the battle with Shere Khan, she'd been in a precarious position, so she hadn't been to the church in over two months.

"Hm? Miss Nephteros? Where's Lady Chastille?" she asked, wide-eyed.

The one seated at the desk was an elf with dark skin and silver hair—Nephy's little sister Nephteros. Due to her position in the church, Kuroka had previously addressed her as Lady Nephteros, but because she addressed Nephteros's big sister as Miss Nephy, Nephteros had asked Kuroka to do the same for her.

They really are sisters in that regard.

Nephteros's personal knight, Richard, was also dressed in uniform with a bundle of documents in his hands. Even while doing office work, he drew quite the picture. That said, the office was supposed to belong to Chastille.

"Welcome back, Kuroka," Nephteros greeted her. "Sorry, we're a little busy right now..."

"Lady Nephteros, we just put on some tea, so how about taking a break?" Richard suggested.

"Jeez... Don't spoil me like that..." Nephteros protested, puffing out her cheeks.

Seeing her pointy ears quiver, Kuroka couldn't help but smile. With her own love life going well, she had more leisure to observe other people's romance.



"Kuroka, why don't you have some tea too?" Rachel asked, holding a cup out to her. "You must be tired from your long journey."

"Thanks, Rachel."

She must have prepared the tea with Richard. Rachel was Chastille's errand girl whose most distinctive feature was her freckles. She got along very well with Kuu—Kuroka's roommate—so the three of them often spoke to each other.

She hides her presence in the strangest way sometimes. I almost think she must be an assassin or something.

Even with Kuroka's sharp senses, it was sometimes difficult to perceive her. Kuroka found it hard to believe she was just a normal civilian.

With Chastille's absence, Kuroka wasn't sure what to do about her report, so she took a seat on the guest sofa and accepted the cup of tea.

"Oh right, Kuroka!" Rachel said cheerfully. "I passed the nun qualification exam!"

"Wow! Congratulations!" Kuroka exclaimed, clapping her hands and smiling as if it had happened to her personally. "You really studied hard. We must celebrate."

"No, no, you're the one we need to throw a celebration for," Rachel said, unable to hold back a smile. "I heard from Kuu, you know? You got yourself a man?"

"Augh... Um, I was going to tell you about it, but...yes. I'm now in a relationship with a man called Shax."

Much like Kuu, love stories were Rachel's favorite food.

"You took an awfully long vacation," Rachel said, a trickle of blood running down from her nose. "Were you actually on a private holiday with him?"

"Hwah? How did you...? Oh."

Officially, it had come to light that Kuroka was a member of Liucaon's three royal families—the last survivor of the Adelhides—and she'd been summoned

to the church headquarters. That was, in fact, true and had taken up the first half of her two-month absence. The second half, however, she'd spent with Shax in Liucaon, meeting the two other royal families. However, only a select few in Zagan's camp were aware of that fact.

By the time Kuroka realized she'd let it slip, Rachel had a second stream of blood coming out of her nose and was leaning forward in excitement.

"So, Kuroka, you were on a two-month date?!" she asked.

"O-One month!" Kuroka corrected. "Things were really serious at first."

"So it really was a date! Huh? But hang on, I heard you went back home 'cause of a bunch of complications with Liucaon..."

It seemed Rachel had been properly informed of that much. Kuroka nodded, and Rachel's eyes shot open.

"Going home with your man for a whole month? Isn't that just a way to get your marriage approved?"

Well, Kuroka was going to tell her eventually.

"Um, well...yes," she confirmed bashfully. "We're...engaged."

"Pow!"

Letting out a cry like a certain homicidal maniac, Rachel toppled backward. Nephteros almost spilled her tea, but Richard held her steady.

"Good grief... Allow me to apologize for my little sister, Miss Kuroka," Richard said, dragging the unconscious Rachel into a corner of the room. Despite their wildly different personalities, these two were actually siblings.

"It's fine. This is the norm," Kuroka told him.

Richard covered his face in shame at the fact that his sister acted this way often enough for Kuroka to be accustomed to it.

That was when Kuroka finally returned her attention to Nephteros. She'd started taking a break and was sipping the tea Richard had prepared to calm herself down.

She really is pretty.

Despite sharing Nephy's face, Nephteros looked beautiful to Kuroka, while Nephy looked cute. They both shared the same calming nature, so why was that? If Kuroka had to say, Nephy was adorable like a chipmunk or a little bird. In contrast, Nephteros had the beauty of a stray cat or wild wolf who couldn't get attached to strangers. Either way, both had a charm that was far beyond Kuroka's foolhardy nature.

Her relationship with Richard is also so mature.

Kuroka was considering growing out her hair because she'd witnessed Richard kissing Nephteros's hair. That was why Kuroka really looked up to her.

"You're amazing, Kuroka."

"Hwuh?"

Kuroka let out a weird noise at the unexpected praise. It seemed Nephteros hadn't meant to say it aloud. She covered her mouth in a hurry. After a short pause, she continued bashfully.

"I mean, you never even knew if the person you loved would answer your feelings, were ignored over and over, and still never gave up... And you're even getting m-married now, right?"

Nephteros's dark skin turned a little red as she twirled a finger through her silver hair.

Oh, she's cute too.

It seemed she was envious of Kuroka for getting engaged to Shax.

"I believe you have plenty of courage," Kuroka said, throwing a quick glance at Richard.

"Only what I've received from Richard..." Nephteros mumbled.

She really talks up her love life.

Kuroka narrowed her eyes and smiled at the discovery. Kuroka enjoyed a good love story, but shook her head for now.

"You're here today because you stood firm in the face of many hardships," she said. "That takes a lot of courage."

Kuroka wasn't aware of all the particulars, but she knew that Nephteros had been in a far harsher situation than her. Nephteros's lifespan as a homunculus had reached its limit, but she'd stood her ground without even knowing if she'd live to see another day. What else could that be but courage?

Nephteros's eyes widened in surprise. The tip of her pointy ears twitched and quivered, and her hands idly twirled the cup she held.

"Thank you..." she said. "I'm happy to hear you say that."

"Augh... Likewise..."

The two girls blushed and hung their heads as if they were at a marriage interview. Kuroka would've liked to keep up the momentum and indulge in sharing love stories, but she had a duty to fulfill, so she cleared her throat and straightened her posture.

"So? What's the situation here?" she asked. "Has Lady Chastille still not...?"

Kuroka had caught wind of the fact that Chastille's passionate love story with a sorcerer had been broadcast around the continent. It had been over a month already. Had she still not recovered?

"It's been long enough for even Chastille to recover," Nephteros said, shaking her head. "They're still strangely conscious of it, though."

"You mean that whole story isn't some kind of threat? It's really...?"

Kuroka knew that Zagan was the source behind the rumors, so she was pretty sure that wasn't the case. Still, with that sorcerer called Gremory around, things were a little more uncertain. She'd made an utter and complete plaything of Kuroka too.

In a way, that Manuela lady is the same...

Kuroka vaguely understood that there was some kind of connection between them. She also had a hunch she was under Manuela's jurisdiction or something. She always made sure to go nowhere near that shop if she was alone, but that avian visited Nephy all the time, so it was impossible to completely avoid her.

"Well, even I can tell that those two have an interest in each other,"
Nephteros said with a sigh. "And yet, they've remained indecisive for so long. I

believe Big Bro just wanted to light a fire under them."

"That's good, then," Kuroka said. "I was ready to put an end to that sorcerer if need be."

Kuroka didn't really like to insult someone else's love interest, but the man Chastille was fond of—the sorcerer named Barbatos—was the worst kind of man. From an outside perspective, she could only see him as a bad man who was taking advantage of an ignorant girl. She couldn't help but worry.

"The sorcerer who recently came to Big Bro said the same thing," Nephteros said, putting down her cup and smiling. "Vepar, I think his name was? He seems to have gone through a lot."

"Vepar... I believe that's the name of a former Archdemon candidate. Could it be the same person?"

He'd been one of the candidates when Zagan had become an Archdemon a year ago. Kuroka had been injured and dropped out of the church's dark side at the time, but she'd had the opportunity to hear the name just by being in the church.

"That's probably him," Nephteros confirmed.

Zagan was currently making an effort to contact all living Archdemons and former Archdemon candidates. Forneus, the man Kuroka and Shax had been sent to negotiate with, had been one such case.

Looks like the other negotiations are going smoothly.

Kuroka had messed up by failing to protect Forneus, but the plan as a whole seemed to be making progress.

"Um, not to put a damper on things, but do be careful," Nephteros muttered awkwardly.

"What do you mean?" Kuroka asked.

"About your condition," Nephteros explained. "You're probably fine, since you have someone to worry about you, but no matter how strong you are, there are times when you're completely helpless, right?"

She was apparently concerned about Kuroka's predisposition for misfortune.

The cait sith were a race who brought good luck, but as a consequence, their daily lives were filled with misfortune. Kuroka was currently going through a tremendous peak in happiness, and, well, that was exactly when bad things tended to happen.

"True. I'll be careful," Kuroka replied, nodding.

"That reminds me," Nephteros added. "Kuroka, there was a message for you from the church. Something about bestowing the title of Sword Saint on you?"

"Oh, that..." Kuroka sighed. Honestly, she wasn't particularly interested. She'd used the church to get revenge on sorcerers, and to push things even further, she'd sworn the rest of her days to her sorcerer lover. How was she supposed to receive any titles or honors from the church in that state?

It could totally be a bother to Uncle Hypnoel and the others too. They might end up staging a weird protest or something.

What was more, the ones trying to bestow that title on her weren't the Angelic Knights, but the church's cardinals. Ever since that incident with Chastille, it seemed disparities had started to show between the Angelic Knights' intentions and the church's intentions. If the church was pushing for this, it meant they were hoping to pull Kuroka to their side. And frankly, she had no interest in getting caught up in their power struggle.

Also, Lord of Murder Glasya-Labolas had been granted that title in the past...and she refused to have the same title as that sorcerer. The church had to know how ominous that title was because of him, which was why it hadn't been bestowed on anyone for so long.

"You look displeased," Nephteros remarked.

"Well, yes."

"Understood. I'll refuse for you."

Kuroka stared at her in confusion. Nephteros had made that decision so naturally.

"Are you sure?" Kuroka asked.

"You don't want it, right?"

"I don't..."

"Then I'll refuse. There's no need for you to force yourself to take something you don't want."

Nephteros was the successor to Lady Oberon—the creator of the church's Anointed Armor. Her voice carried more than enough influence.

Still, Kuroka hadn't expected her to offer that so readily.

"Um, thank you very much," Kuroka said, bowing deeply.

"Stop that. You were helping me even when you couldn't see," Nephteros told her. "At least let me pay you back when I can."

Richard was always by Nephteros's side, but Kuroka also accompanied her rather frequently. This was a very trivial thing, but Nephteros was never going to forget. Kuroka felt both happy and embarrassed, the ears on top of her head folding flat.

"I feel like it's my first time seeing you react that way," Nephteros said, narrowing her eyes and smiling.

"Is that so?"

Now that Kuroka thought about it, she realized she pretty much only reacted like this in front of Shax. Unlike Kuroka, who'd been completely obsessed with Shax, Nephteros was curious about everything around her.

"Oh right, about Chastille," Nephteros said, clapping her hands. "She's currently away from Kianoides on other business."

"Huh? She is?" Kuroka asked.

"Yes. That's why I'm here doing office work until she returns. Richard has been handling the patrols too."

Despite having only just ascended to the ranks of the Archangels, Richard's skills now rivaled Chastille's.

"You've gotten really strong," Kuroka told Richard with a smile.

"I'm still nowhere near as strong as you, though..." Richard replied.

"You don't know that. We haven't had a bout with you using your Sacred

Sword."

Richard coveted more strength. That was why Kuroka had accompanied him several times during his training. Well, due to her prolonged absence, it hadn't been *that* many times.

"Please leave it at that," Nephteros said gently. "I'm well aware of how extraordinary you are, Kuroka."

"That's not really... Oh, what's this business Lady Chastille is attending to?" Kuroka asked.

Even Kuroka could see that leaving Kianoides in the middle of a big scandal was rather dangerous.

"Oh, about that..." Nephteros started, a tone of exasperation in her voice.

She went on to explain things, and Kuroka couldn't help but put a hand to her mouth.

"You mean Lady Chastille is on the counteroffensive?"

They'd been toyed with so thoroughly that it was only right for Chastille and Barbatos to retaliate once or twice.



"You're really doing this, Bato?"

Inside a collapsed canyon cave that hadn't seen anyone step inside it for hundreds of years, there was a gloomy research lab. In the center of this lab, illuminated by the dim lanterns hanging from the ceiling, Marchosias questioned his old friend.

In front of him was a man bound to a bed. The man's features made it impossible to tell whether he was young or old, and he had slit-thin eyes. His hair was tied back and somewhat long for a man, and he was currently topless.

This was an operating table. Not only that, but the surgery they were attempting had an extremely low success rate.

"Faltering at this stage, Marchosias?" the man said with a bitter smile. "You and I are the only ones with the aptitude for this. Besides, you're the boss here.

We can't let you do something so dangerous, so this is the only choice."

It was precisely because he knew this—and in all likelihood, he'd read this far immediately after the battle between Zagan and Shere Khan—that he'd joined Marchosias's side.

"Lady Alshiera told us something," he continued with a satisfied look. "No matter how we were created, we are now living humans."

He paused there, then smiled.

"She has more than enough of a reason to absolutely detest me. And yet, she told me it was okay for me to keep living."

Marchosias felt his expression softening. It was just like that little sister of his to say such a thing.

"That's why I'm not doing this for you," Bato continued. "I'm giving my life for her, so there's no need to fret over me, my good friend."

"You still see me that way?" Marchosias asked, his eyes widening behind his round glasses.

In his thousand years of life, this man was the only one who'd ever referred to him that way.

"Well, you've never had any friends, after all," Bato added teasingly.

"Don't go there..." Marchosias mumbled with an annoyed sigh.

"I don't plan for things to end here," Bato said, smiling. "So please get it done quickly. There isn't much time left."

"I'm in your debt...my good friend."

Several hours later, only one man walked out of the gloomy cave. He leaned against the wall and slid to the ground.

"You better handle the rest, Eligor..."

After a while longer, when the man finally stood up and left, screams continued to echo from the cave.

"Archangel Salvarra has not only joined Lillqvist's faction, but is even siding with Archdemon Zagan. What's more, Archdemon Forneus's successor, Thunder God Furfur, has become Zagan's subordinate. There is no longer any force out there who can challenge him in a direct confrontation."

In a tavern far away from Kianoides, a man spoke with an air of elegance. He wore a felt hat and a stylish jacket with a crimson handkerchief in his breast pocket. Smoke rose from the rolled tobacco between his fingers, and each and every one of his gestures seemed overly theatrical. If not for his unseasonable thick coat, he seemed like the type of man who would easily attract the opposite sex.

Sitting across from him, resting her chin on her hands, was a woman whose eyes were covered by charms. She wore clothing native to Liucaon that laid her cleavage bare and had a beauty spot by her lips. Her bewitching and lascivious figure was harshly contrasted by the metal collar and chain at her neck. Astrologian Eligor puffed at a slender Eastern pipe—a kiseru—and smiled.

"You seem to be in awfully high spirits, Gaoler Acheron," she said.

"Dandy," the man corrected, holding up a finger while keeping a hold of his smoke. "If you're going to append a title to my name, then use Dandy. I don't like the name Gaoler."

Eligor shook her head.

"Oh? Isn't it a wonderful second name? At the very least, I believe Phenex bestowed it on you with plenty of affection."

"That's my point," Acheron replied, snapping his fingers. "As a fellow Archdemon, you must know how foul a personality my teacher has. She gave me that name knowing I would hate it."

Phenex, one of the thirteen Archdemons, was Acheron's teacher.

"Gaoler isn't a name for my sorcery, but for the tool I use," he added, flicking the rim of his felt hat and plunking back into his chair. "What sorcerer wants to be treated as an accessory to the tool he uses?"

"Hee hee, you're unexpectedly pure. I rather like boys like that, you know? Still, there's no changing the fact that Gaoler is a part of your power. It's what

made you an Archdemon candidate, isn't it?"

"A title beyond my means," Acheron said, spreading his arms in an exaggerated manner. "I don't overestimate my own abilities. I was probably the worst of the Archdemon candidates one year ago. They say Valefor and Furfur were inexperienced, but they were still better than I was. It doesn't feel bad to stand shoulder to shoulder with my betters, but that also depends on the situation."

There was much to gain from the prestige of being among the former Archdemon candidates, but it also brought the unnecessary jealousy of others. Over the last year, Acheron had been thoroughly troubled by this demerit. After all, Phenex wasn't the type of sorcerer to protect her disciple, so Acheron didn't have anyone to back him like Valefor and Furfur had. In other words, he'd learned his place in the world. He had, of course, put in plenty of effort so that he wouldn't shame his name. However, after witnessing monsters like Purgatory Barbatos and Enchantress Gremory, he'd been forced to understand that he was incapable of standing in the same arena as them.

If Micca Salvarra was the weakest Archangel, then Acheron was the weakest former Archdemon candidate. And yet, Eligor smiled as she puffed at her pipe.

"Being able to make the most of a tool is a talent of its own," she said. "You may be ashamed of that, but there is nobody in the world who can use it better than you do. Isn't that something to be proud of?"

"Ha ha, you're quite the flatterer."

No man in the world would feel bad about having a fine woman like Eligor praising him. However, Acheron felt a cold sweat run down his back.

She's still an Archdemon. There's no way she's here just to flatter me.

Acheron's defensive instincts were telling him that he would be devoured if he dropped his guard for even the smallest instant. He felt like sweat was about to form on his brow, but he held it back and smiled.

"So? I doubt you called me here for idle gossip," he said. "What does a sorcerer of your caliber need with little old me?"

"Don't be so hasty," Eligor said, cocking her head with a smile. "It's good to be

able to get right to the point, but sometimes it's important to enjoy the process."

Eligor paused, and around the time the smoke from her pipe reached the ceiling, she opened her mouth once more.

"My business with you is regarding why you're in such a good mood. Zagan sent someone to scout you, yes?"

Acheron gulped involuntarily.

It's only been a day, but she already knows?

It'd happened last night. Archdemon Zagan had sent Acheron a messenger. Contrary to his outer mannerisms, Acheron was a very careful man. Having gotten tired of the jealousy of other sorcerers, he'd gone into hiding. To retrain himself from the ground up, he'd cut off all contact with everyone he knew, so he had no idea how anyone had found him. He could only chalk it up to the skill of those who served Archdemon Zagan.

The messenger had invited Acheron to serve Zagan. It'd been a tempting offer, but Acheron wasn't so thoughtless that he would jump at an invitation from a stranger. He'd told the messenger to give him time to find out what kind of man this Archdemon Zagan was. And now Eligor had come to see him.

Zagan is after techniques that affect the soul.

The characteristic of the tool Acheron specialized in meant he'd acquired vast knowledge regarding the soul. That was what Zagan was after. He saw value not in the tool, but in Acheron himself.

Perhaps this was the first time someone had ever acknowledged him. After a brief investigation, Acheron had discovered that the favorable treatment Zagan's subordinates received was famous among sorcerers. And once he'd found that out, Acheron had had no more reason to refuse. And just as he'd resolved to accept the offer, he'd found himself seated across from Eligor.

"How about forgetting Zagan and coming to our side?" Eligor asked, smiling as if to say Zagan's offer was too good to be true. "We'll give you a warm welcome."

Acheron stiffened in his chair.

Looks like the rumors of Zagan and Marchosias being at odds is true.

Unable to endure it anymore, a bead of sweat ran down Acheron's cheek.

"And what exactly can I expect?" he asked, flicking the rim of his hat.

"Let's see... I believe we can accommodate everything you need, but as for what's *most* important to you..." Eligor paused, putting a finger to her lips seductively, then continued in a cheerful voice as if she'd come up with the most wonderful of ideas. "We can guarantee your life. Would that be insufficient?"

Acheron groaned.

"I'm pretty sure I'm never going to be enough of a threat that you have to go out of your way to threaten me."

"Overestimating your own abilities is a poor move, but I don't admire underestimating them either. With your tool, you possess more than enough value. It would be somewhat problematic for that to fall into Zagan's hands."

Like I thought, it's always about Gaoler Acheron.

Acheron took a long drag of his tobacco, causing embers to scatter from its tip, then puffed out a dense cloud of smoke.

Well, I don't even really need to think about it.

His answer had been decided from the very beginning.

"Okay, I'll do as you say," he said with an obedient smile. "I value my life, after all."

He crushed his tobacco against the ashtray...then kicked the table over and stuck out his other arm.

"Swallow her—Falsehood Compass Antikythera!"

The click of a creaking gear resounded in the air. Acheron had a silver disk in his hand. There were countless cog-wheels on its surface. At a glance, it looked completely ornamental, but those who were well-versed in sorcery would be able to see the circuits that made up its structure.

Antikythera was a compass for the concept known as the complex domain, or complex space. Complex numbers existed only within equations. They had no place in reality. Complex space was the domain of equations that didn't physically exist. It wasn't the same as subspace or the valley between dimensions. It was a world that fundamentally didn't exist. If it did, it would be a world where all laws worked differently.

If the real world was a space where all matter was composed of positive numbers, then complex space was the inverse—a world where all matter was composed of negative numbers. Not zero. Negative. It was impossible to surpass the speed of light in the real world, but in complex space, it was impossible to go beneath the speed of light. Objects in complex space didn't exist in the real world, and objects in the real world couldn't exist in complex space. It wasn't clear whether an object would be annihilated or held in stasis, but in the sense that it couldn't be observed, the outcome was the same.

Antikythera was a compass that provided guidance to the coordinates of the complex domain and allowed one to interact with it. However, it required four-dimensional calculations for a physical human to reach the complex domain. A three-dimensional being was incapable of perceiving four-dimensional equations, let alone understanding them. And even if one was capable of stepping into complex space, it would be impossible to maintain one's existence.

It wasn't clear when this tool had been created or who had made it. Perhaps it truly was the creation of a god. Whatever the case, Acheron was the one and only person capable of understanding four-dimensional equations. That was why he was known as Gaoler. That was why he wasn't valued as a sorcerer. And yet, Zagan saw something in the wisdom Acheron possessed—even though it had no worth to any sorcery. He needed *Acheron*.

I'm gonna defeat you and join Zagan!

It was worth risking his life for.

"Ghhh! Libitina!"

Eligor's face stiffened as she unleashed her chain, but it was too late. Her coordinates were already linked to the complex domain, so her entire being had

parted from this world.

I won.

The moment Acheron was convinced of this...

"Huh...?"

...Eligor's figure vanished from those coordinates as if she'd leaped through time. She hadn't been swallowed by the complex domain. After all, Acheron hadn't sealed off the coordinates yet. He then noticed something transparent sticking out of his chest.

"Gaaargh...?"

Blood burst out of his mouth. Only with the red droplets running along its surface did Acheron understand that it was a blade that had impaled him.

"Goodness gracious, what a terrifying power. You truly did catch Astrologian with it."

An old gentleman was standing behind Acheron, a bladeless hilt in his hand. How long had he been there?

"Despite grasping victory with your own hands, death snatched it away from you so unreasonably. Alas, how sweet it is."

The old gentleman pulled out the bladeless sword. Acheron's knees buckled and he died before collapsing to the ground.

"There is nothing more terrifying than one who knows how weak he is. Don't you think so too, Astrologian?"

Sheathing his Hex Katana, the old gentleman looked down at Eligor as she gasped for breath at his feet.

"We really did need two Archdemons to challenge him..."

If the old gentleman hadn't used Night Curtain to stop Acheron's sense of time, Eligor would've been swallowed by the complex domain with no means of escaping. Had the old gentleman tried to use Night Curtain in a direct confrontation in anticipation of Antikythera's activation, the odds would've been fifty-fifty.

Thanks to Eligor acting as a decoy, the old gentleman had been able to catch Acheron off guard. It had only been possible in that one instant. It had only been possible on this day when Acheron had been in a good mood from Zagan's invitation.

Had they let this chance slip by, Acheron would've ended up under Zagan's umbrella, and they would no longer have been able to lay a hand on him. They'd had no choice but to wait for this careful man to come out of hiding of his own volition.

Acheron hadn't had any value as a sorcerer, but he'd been terrifying enough that Archdemons hadn't been able to defeat him without putting their lives on the line.

"I'm perfectly satisfied so long as I get to kill, but is this really all right?" the old gentleman asked with a shrug. "The other day was Puppetmaster, and now Gaoler. Are we not lacking in meaningful resources for the decisive battle?"

"Marchosias made the call... We just have to keep quiet and do as he says."

"Is that so?"

The old gentleman readjusted his top hat and turned on his heels. Without paying any attention to this, Eligor took the silver disk from the pitiful corpse's

"With this, we're finally ready. We can nip Asmodeus in the bud."

""

hand.

The old gentleman remained silent and vanished quietly.

Chapter II: Victory Goes to He Who Makes the First Move, but That Doesn't Always Work

"The lineup of Archdemons sure has changed a lot in just one year," Vepar muttered nostalgically as he tipped back his wine glass.

He was small in stature, his silver hair was tied with a black ribbon, and his eyes were tightly shut. However, despite appearances, he was a man.

A month had passed since Archdemon Zagan had taken the new Archdemon Furfur under his protection. There had been no major movements as far as they could tell. At most, the demons were manifesting with rapidly increasing frequency. Thanks to this period of relative calm, the sorcerers in Zagan's camp were capable of focusing their energies on the assignments given to them.

Inside Archdemon Palace, in a room used as a lounge, Vepar was accompanied by Gremory and Kimaris. One year ago, they had all been Archdemon candidates. Vepar had entered the room intent on getting some tea, only to find these two already inside.

And so, with these former Archdemon candidates gathered in one place, the first topic on their lips was the new generation of Archdemons.

"Indeed. Lady Nephy, Lady Foll, and now even Lady Furfur have risen to the rank of Archdemon."

"Please include Sir Shax's name too, Miss Gremory."

Kimaris could already imagine what the granny was going to say next. He forced a smile while Vepar plugged his ears, hoping not to get involved in this.

"The world is truly going through a golden age of love power! A paradise made specifically for me has arrived!"

"So long as you're enjoying yourself," Kimaris said, taking a sip of his tea.

"I'd rather you consider the feelings of those who get dragged into all this..." Vepar muttered.

"But it being a golden age isn't necessarily a joke, is it now?" Gremory said.

"There is no precedence for close to ten Archdemon candidates to all be worthy of the title of Archdemon."

In truth, of those who'd become Archdemons over the last year, Zagan, Foll, and Furfur had been candidates beforehand. The three in this room now weren't lacking compared to them. If anything, it was simply a matter of chance. Only fate had kept them from becoming Archdemons already. Also, of those who weren't there, Gaoler Acheron, Godsight Flauros, and Purgatory Barbatos weren't overshadowed by the others in any way. In that sense, it truly was a golden age.

If not for Barbatos's obsession with Zagan, he would surely have become one already.

In Vepar's opinion, the power Barbatos had shown during the battle with Eligor was well within the realm of the Archdemons. And as he reminisced about the friend he didn't really want to get along with, Gremory turned a teasing gaze his way.

"Vepar, if not for your obsession with Asmodeus, it wouldn't be strange for you to be an Archdemon already, don't you think?" she said, turning his own thoughts against him.

"Zagan hands out power very generously, after all..." Vepar said.

Not only had his new king provided Sacred Swords as research material, but he'd even granted Vepar free access to his wisdom. Thanks to that, Vepar had acquired the means with which to oppose Asmodeus.

Even then, I can't defeat that annoying woman.

He needed more power. The other Archdemons didn't matter to him.

"So? How goes your research?" Gremory asked, leaning forward in interest. "Extracting love power...ahem, the seraphs from the Sacred Swords, was it?"

"A part of me feels like I shouldn't tell you...but I suppose it's going smoothly."

Vepar was the leading researcher in the field of Sacred Swords. He also had

the full support of the most powerful living Archangel, Raphael. How could he not get results?

"You can say a means of simply releasing the seraphs has already been practically established. The Archangels themselves had an answer for that, after all. My job is to refine a vessel to affix them to...and the prototype is pretty much complete."

"Hmm. Impressive," Gremory muttered.

"But there are several problems," Vepar added, holding up a finger. "First, the technique to release a seraph, Confession, is completely reliant on the wielder's skill. Currently, six have reached this level. That is only half of the Archangels."

"Six?" Kimaris said, finding this unexpected. "Meaning he has reached that level too?"

Vepar nodded with a look of pity.

"For better or worse, there are several masters of the blade here. Getting worked to the bone by them day after day will force one to obtain mastery one way or another."

"Aaah..."

Kimaris smiled as he figured it out. Lately, the newcomers had been getting guidance from the second Silver-Eyed King Ain, the butler Raphael, his daughter Kuroka, and whenever she felt like it, Orias as Lady Oberon. There was no choice but to get strong in that environment. Remaining weak would simply have led to death, after all.

"And the second reason?" Gremory asked, leaning forward in excitement.

"Even if we transfer a seraph into another vessel, the link to the Sacred Sword remains," Vepar explained. "If the vessel breaks, they'll return straight to the Sacred Sword. This will be difficult to resolve unless the Sacred Swords can be completely annihilated."

"But the Sacred Swords still function even after being pulverized to dust, right?" Gremory said.

Vepar nodded bitterly.

"They were built by sacrificing the seraphs. Their function as prisons is annoyingly thorough. We will probably need some outrageous power like being able to cut the threads of cause and effect. Gremory, can your Hex Scythe Thanatos do something about this?"

Gremory looked at the large scythe resting on her shoulder.

"Hmm, that's not really what it does," she said. "We might be able to do something to modify its function, but it'll be useless as it is now."

"Thought so..."

Vepar was only checking to be sure, so he quietly nodded.

"But how did you create a vessel?" Kimaris asked. "Miss Furfur is still in training. I heard she isn't available to help with your research."

"Oh, I was wondering that too," Gremory said. "The soul is a terribly delicate and unstable thing, after all. With nothing but a simple container, the soul won't attach to it and will end up extinguishing itself instead."

The soul was still an unknown quantity. One reason for this was because it was impossible to contain a soul on its own. Creating a vessel capable of this meant creating something identical to the soul itself.

Even forcing a soul into another body would lead to its extinction. It was possible to dominate a body using sorcery, but that decayed over the years. The reason a homunculus was able to change bodies was because the new bodies were identical to the soul's original vessel.

Resentment Andras had been the leading researcher in this field, but even he'd required his own blood relatives to successfully take over a body. He'd used blood as a medium to synchronize the flesh and soul. Zagan's archives contained several of his grimoires, which had been truly useful in this research.

It seems karma really followed that sorcerer everywhere...

He'd been Barbatos's teacher and ancestor, and had been purged twice—once by Alshiera and again by her son Zagan.

"Furfur's very existence was the hint I needed," Vepar said with a casual smile. "Or rather, I doubt I would've been able to solve this without studying

her."

"What do you mean?" Gremory asked.

Both Gremory and Kimaris gave him puzzled looks. By putting a living soul inside an inorganic vessel, the mind would be unable to bear it and destroy itself. And yet, Furfur functioned normally.

"Her soul is special," Vepar said.

Forneus's last and greatest masterpiece was the artificial soul. He'd made Furfur's vessel inorganic to prove he'd created a soul, but that wasn't the only reason.

"They say Furfur shed tears," Vepar continued. "That is absolutely impossible for a porcelain doll. If there is one thing that can make that possible, it's that her vessel itself is changing."

Gremory and Kimaris were both sorcerers who were capable of understanding the meaning of those words. They gulped in unison.

Upon first meeting Micca, Furfur had apparently been ignorant of the world and hadn't been able to speak properly. It had been as if her artificial soul was in a pure and innocent state.

However, by experiencing things with Micca, she'd learned emotions and had grieved over his death. Her vessel had responded to the growth of her soul. She was quite literally a living puppet.

"That vessel was made exclusively for the soul known as Furfur," Vepar said. "One day, she may very well become indistinguishable from a human."

It was because Forneus had confirmed the possibility that he'd left the world.

"What an incarnation of love power!" Gremory exclaimed, so deeply moved that she fell into a solemn prayer. "I know not the words to express such feelings."

"Well, I suppose that's all you need to get excited..." Vepar muttered in exasperation.

"I see you're getting used to it too," Kimaris said, smiling helplessly.

"Not that I want to."

"More and more, we're reminded of how terrible a blow it was to lose Lord Forneus," Gremory said, her voice full of regret as she hung her head.

Both Vepar and Kimaris shared a moment of silence.

"And Acheron too..." Vepar added.

One month ago, one of the sorcerers Zagan had been trying to contact, Gaoler Acheron, had been found dead.

Was it because Zagan contacted him? Or was it something else?

Despite there being other customers at the tavern he'd passed away in, nobody knew when he'd been killed even though the table he'd been seated at had been flipped over. That was enough to identify the culprit as Glasya-Labolas.

"Kimaris, this is serious!"

Just then, the door to the lounge swung open without so much as a knock.

"What is it?" Kimaris asked.

Zagan was taking a day off. He'd given orders not to receive any guests, but for situations where it couldn't be avoided, Kimaris had been appointed as his representative.

"A raider... No, a guest."

The sorcerer who came to report the situation was panicking. This was understandable. Upon turning to the one standing next to the sorcerer, Vepar understood immediately.

"You're...!"

An unexpected guest had arrived at Zagan's base.



"Finally found you, Golden Lord Phenex."

A man with bindings all over his face was speaking in an exhausted voice. Next to him was a girl whose entire body was restricted by her clothes. She was also

worn out and was starting to doze off while leaning against him.

The man's name was Behemoth. He had a lanky build and swarthy skin. His age was a complete mystery. He wore more of an overcoat than a robe, which looked awfully hot in this season. Due to the leather bindings, his facial features weren't visible except for the red eyes peeking through their gaps.

The girl's name was Leviathan. She had fins for ears and the same blue hair and eyes as another certain carefree siren. Her binding clothes prevented her from using her arms, but they were open at her legs, allowing her to walk. The decorative ropes hanging from her sleeves were rather distinctive.

These two were cursed so that when one took human form, the other turned into a hideous monster. It could be called a curse tied to marital vows. They'd wandered the world for five hundred years trying to find a way to dispel it.

If not for Zagan, that would still be the case today.

Their curse hadn't been dispelled or anything, but Zagan had managed to seal it. And thanks to his great deed, these two had reunited at long last. That was precisely why Behemoth and Leviathan had agreed to work for him until the day their curse was truly dispelled.

It'd been two months since they'd received a new order from Zagan. The two of them had been searching for a certain sorcerer. Others had been dispatched to all corners of the continent with similar orders, but Behemoth and Leviathan were probably the last to succeed. Behemoth had heard news that Shax had contacted Forneus and had then returned to Kianoides an entire month ago.

That wasn't very surprising. The sorcerer Behemoth and Leviathan were responsible for finding was the trickiest of the bunch. Their quarry had the strangest figure. Her most standout feature was the odd mask she wore. It had a bizarre shape that seemed to be modeled after a bird's beak, and its surface was covered in countless rivets. The eyes of the mask were covered with frosted glass lenses. She wore a robe made of bird feathers, and due to her hunching over, her physique remained a mystery.

Peeking through her robes were brass-gauntleted hands. Her shin guards and the strange mask were also made of dull brass. If not for the faded color, she would probably live up to her name—Golden Lord Phenex. She was one of the

thirteen Archdemons; the oldest right next to Forneus and the creator of a multitude of abominable sorceries.

"Hmm. I thought I heard a familiar voice," she said, shaking her head. "So it's you two."

Her voice was extremely unpleasant, like that of a crushed bird. Unable to stand it, Leviathan rubbed her head against Behemoth's chest, probably in an attempt to block one ear, so he helped her cover the other one with his hand. Phenex's crimson eyes seemed to open wide in shock behind her glass lenses.

"Seeing as you're both out at the same time...have you actually dispelled *that* curse?"

Her reaction was only natural for one who knew of Behemoth and Leviathan's circumstances.

"Well, it hasn't been dispelled, but our wish has been granted for now," Behemoth replied, shrugging in acceptance. "More importantly, what's with your voice? Is it 'cause of that mask?"

"Isn't it wonderful?" Phenex said, spreading her arms wide in a grandiose display. "It has been six hundred...no, seven hundred years now? It was in vogue when Orias unleashed that epidemic... Oh, I mean the old Orias."

The one who currently called herself Orias was the high elf who'd slain the previous Archdemon Orias. Phenex was speaking of the original.

"That fucking bastard's fashion?" Behemoth said, shaking his head with a disconcerted look. "No wonder it looks so awful. I'm surprised you can keep your cool with such a piece of shit on your head."

"Behemoth. That's too far."

Even though Leviathan chided him, she had a cold and disdainful look in her eyes too. That only stood to reason.

That's the name of the asshole who cursed us. I don't ever wanna hear him mentioned again.

Shere Khan had apparently been the one to order it, but Archdemon Orias had been responsible for actually casting the curse. Phenex shrugged, taking no

offense to their evident disgust.

"Does it look that bad?" she asked. "It stinks like hell. I've vomited three times already. Honestly, it's rough."

"Then take the damn thing off!"

Maybe that was why her voice sounded so horrible.

"My consciousness is hazy and I can feel my brain functions deteriorating," Phenex said, swaying from side to side as if hallucinating. "What an unknown experience. If this keeps going on, I feel like I'll no longer be able to think of anything and maybe even die. Don't you think it's worth verifying?"

"You still haven't fixed your habit of self-harm...?"

Despite being an Archdemon, this sorcerer had worrying habits. She constantly inflicted harm on herself. Any normal person would've died from this, so Behemoth couldn't help but call her out on it.

Still, she's served as an Archdemon to this day. What a monster...

Zagan's subordinates were all talented, but the only ones capable of negotiating with this monster were Behemoth and Leviathan.

"So tell me, what do you want?" Phenex asked, finally standing up straight. "You even came all the way out here to see me."

They were at an ancient volcano at the northern tip of the continent—Mount Kulio. Its eruptions were mentioned several times in ancient legends, but right now, it was no more than an extinct volcano. Naturally, nobody came here nowadays. Even at full speed in a carriage, it was two days away from the nearest village.

That was all supposed to be the case, but Behemoth gulped as he looked down at the bubbling sea of lava.

"I heard Mount Kulio erupted," he said. "I figured you might be involved and dropped by, and here you are... The hell are you up to this time?"

"A volcano is the most powerful natural phenomenon on the planet," Phenex answered listlessly. "I was sure reviving a dead volcano would come at an extraordinary cost, so I tried it out and...well, you can guess the result."

The grand enterprise of reviving a dead volcano was more mysticism than sorcery. Sorcery couldn't manifest convenient coincidences that could be categorized as miracles. To accomplish something beyond one's means, a suitable cost had to be paid. In most cases, the price was the caster's life.

However, Phenex seemed to have lost nothing and was perfectly fine. Much like how Puppetmaster Forneus was the founder of alchemy, Golden Lord Phenex was the founder of countless sacrificial sorceries. The man Barbatos had once teamed up with—Face Peeler—was of her pedigree.

Still, looking down at the scorching heat beneath her feet, Phenex's voice was filled with disappointment. Even after successfully pulling off the ridiculous feat of reviving a volcano using sorcery, this outcome was nothing but a failure to this terrifying sorcerer.

Behemoth wasn't here to ask her how she accomplished this feat, however. He steeled himself and cut to the chase.

"Your disciple Acheron was killed. Seems like Glasya-Labolas did it."

"...I see." There was an air of lament to her jarring voice. She then spread her arms wide in an exaggerated gesture. "You two are so very kind. Did you come all the way to this remote region just to inform me?"

Immediately after failing an experiment, she'd been given news of her disciple's death. That had to hurt, even for a sorcerer. She looked absolutely despondent. Still, that wasn't why Behemoth was there.

"I just figured I shouldn't keep it to myself," he said, scratching his head. "We're here 'cause there's a man we want you to meet."

"Archdemon Zagan?" Phenex brought up the name without needing an explanation. "He's been causing quite the ruckus while I estranged myself from worldly matters. I heard the rumors. He really killed Shere Khan?"

"Yeah."

"Heh heh heh..." Phenex laughed inappropriately as if to say this was truly worthless. "He was the weakest Archdemon. It's a shame to all Archdemons to be broken by a human."

Behemoth and Leviathan were dumbfounded, not quite sure what they were witnessing.

I heard Acheron was a strangely theatrical sorcerer... I guess he took after her in the worst ways.

After laughing to herself, Phenex suddenly slumped over.

"I see... So he's really dead. How unfortunate. I thought he was the type to refuse to die."

"Even you mourn the death of others..." Behemoth said.

This sorcerer hadn't even made such a clear show of emotion over her own disciple's death, yet here she was lamenting the loss of Shere Khan's life.

"He was a good friend, after all," Phenex said, her voice sorrowful. She then whipped back her robe and laughed strangely. "So then, what's this about meeting Zagan? He's been quite mischievous lately. I hear he was not only involved in Shere Khan's death, but Bifrons's, the second Orias's, and Andrealphus's. Not to mention Furcas's disappearance."

After counting all this on her fingers, Phenex turned to Behemoth with a look of disbelief.

"Um, isn't that a lot? What's with him? Is he a jinx? No way. I don't want to get involved..."

"Well, the boss is just merciless toward his enemies."



After acting frightened for a bit, Phenex slumped over languidly again.

"And now I'm the next target?" she said. "How worthless. It's such a pain to have to educate some little boy."

Even after knowing of Zagan's achievements, Phenex was able to make that declaration. However, she immediately thought it over and shook her head.

"Oh, wait, let me rephrase that. Is he conceited because he managed to defeat the likes of Shere Khan and Andrealphus? What an insolent newcomer."

"Why exactly did you have to rephrase it...?"

"Huh? Hang on," Phenex said, turning back to Behemoth with a confused look. "He beat Andrealphus? How can you even beat that guy?"

"You're the one who brought it up. Why are you acting surprised now?"

"I mean, I'm not all that surprised he's dead. I figured he'd probably kick the bucket in some worthless way. But, how do I put it...? I can't picture him losing in a fight."

Sword God Andrealphus had been in possession of a Sigil of the Archdemon and Sacred Sword Zachariel. He could even stop time. He had, in fact, been the strongest in the world. Even now that he'd let go of the Sigil and Sacred Sword, it was hard to imagine anyone capable of beating him.

Also, I'm pretty sure he's technically alive.

"Well, whatever," Phenex said, immediately losing interest. "Andrealphus was definitely strong, but that's all. He fell far, far, far too short of my dream."

Her voice was tainted in despair, as if she'd once had the smallest glimpse of hope.

"Also, can that loud-mouthed Glasya-Labolas die already? He even killed my disciple? Not only is he conceited, but he's full of hot air. I really hate him. Lord of Murder my ass!"

"…"

Behemoth and Leviathan were once more dumbfounded.

She's really lost her temper...

Phenex had to be somewhat shaken from losing her disciple. It was also clear that whatever she was planning here hadn't gone well. This sorcerer had a grand ambition that she'd been working toward for even longer than Behemoth and Leviathan had been trying to dispel their curse. He did sympathize with her a little in this regard, but it didn't change the fact that she was a pain to deal with. Still, even if he complained to her about it, it would only make it worse, so he decided to bring up a topic that would probably interest her.

"Oh, speaking of Glasya-Labolas, he was apparently killed recently."

"Huh? Seriously? That's great. What're you planning, pleasing me so much? How about this? You want the Sigil of the Archdemon?"

"You're that happy about it...?" Behemoth mumbled, reeling back at her sheer delight. "I'm only guessing, but he's probably still alive, just so you know."

Acheron had died after Kuroka and Shax had defeated Glasya-Labolas. It was weird for the Lord of Murder to still be alive after being killed, but that was simply how Archdemons were. It depended on the means of death, but they were the type to calmly recover from having their heart gouged out or their head crushed.

Marchosias apparently took the corpse and all. He wouldn't have done it unless he needed it.

"Then he can be killed again," Phenex replied, nodding in satisfaction. "That's great. Mhm. Wonderful. I'll do it next. You don't mind if I beat him up, right?"

"…"

Regardless of whether she was in a good or bad mood, she was a pain to deal with. Behemoth was at the point where he didn't even want to open his mouth anymore. Seeing this, Leviathan peeked out from behind him.

"Phenex, if you're not going to listen, we're leaving," she said.

"Oh? Lady Levia, it seemed like you had no intention of talking to me."

Levia nodded with a serious expression and responded, "I mean, your voice is too hard on the ears. I don't want to talk with you."

"I have a heart too, you know?"

And just as Phenex was brought to the verge of tears...

"Hm?!"

The three of them turned to the mouth of the volcano in unison. Something crawled out from deep within the belching red sea. It didn't have anything resembling a head or limbs, but it was definitely moving around with a will.

"What is that...?" Behemoth muttered.

It was like a burned sphere of mud that was surging upward.

That's no creature... Is it a demon?

This wasn't his first time seeing one, but he hadn't seen a demon with this shape before. It wasn't clear what defined them. It wasn't even a matter of being utterly alien to humanity. They didn't look like they were alive. It wasn't clear how they physically maintained their shape. Despite all this, it was directing enough bloodlust and mana toward the group of sorcerers to choke on. There was a clear will behind that act.

Despite his confusion, Behemoth took Levia in his arms and jumped away from the mouth of the volcano.

"Oh? Is this your first time seeing one?" Phenex muttered without a hint of tension in her voice. "It's a demon. Now that I think of it, they've been popping up a lot lately. I wonder if they have something like a breeding season. How very interesting."

"Now's not the time for that!"

Behemoth was sure he could defeat a single demon himself. However, the one before him had absorbed lava from the volcano. It radiated a heat that could burn the skin just by being in its presence. He didn't feel like he could even approach it. And yet, Phenex shook her head in astonishment.

"Don't panic," she said. "Demons are made so that they can never defy the Archdemons. To be precise, they can't defy the Sigils we possess. None exist that are unaffected by the Sigil."

"Uhhh..."

Why does this Archdemon have to tempt fate like that?

"You there, demon," Phenex said, holding up her right hand. "By the Sigil of the Archdemon, Phenex commands you. It's too hot, so get lo— Huh?"

Her words were interrupted by a dull thud and a small shock wave. Phenex looked down at her body in wonderment.

The volcanic demon had launched a small rock, piercing the Archdemon's body.



"Hey...Lily? Why are the only men who approach me ones who run away and abandon me?"

"Who knows? Maybe you simply don't have an eye for men."

On the opposite side of the continent, in a city at the southern edge, a pitiful woman grumbled about her luck, while another girl looked at her in astonishment. The latter had silver hair glimmering faintly under the moonlight and violet eyes with the symbol of a star within them. She wore a silver pendant dangling over her chest and had beautiful features with a somewhat childish air to them. If she simply refrained from speaking, anyone would be charmed by her appearance.

This girl, who only looked fifteen or sixteen, was Asmodeus...and she was generally acknowledged as the most dreadful Archdemon. Several minutes ago, houses had surrounded the area, but now they were all twisted, bent, smashed, and in pieces. Whenever she used her sorcery, it always ended up like this. The riffraff could only curse their bad luck for getting dragged into it.

"I'd rather question how a reporter manages to bump into so many demons in such a short period. Are you sure you aren't suffering from some nasty curse?"

Asmodeus had been ordered to eliminate demons wherever they appeared by Marchosias. She'd just finished cleaning one up here. She was capable of predicting where the demons were going to manifest because of Archdemon Eligor's prophecies. In the current age, only Eligor could direct Asmodeus straight to the demons. And yet, Asmodeus often found this pitiful reporter—Rebecca—at her destinations.

"Maybe I am cursed," Rebecca said, smiling vacantly. "You save me every time, but for some mysterious reason, all the money I have on hand keeps vanishing."

"Aha, you should learn to manage your funds better. They say money comes and goes, but you can't make a living like that."

"Who do you think it's all going to?"

Every time Asmodeus saved her, she hustled Rebecca for everything she had. It was only right for Rebecca to complain about it, but Asmodeus saw it as accepting her just reward, so she simply stared back in confusion. Seeing this, Rebecca finally fell to the floor and started flailing wildly.

"Gaaaaaah! I want a man to pamper and protect me! Can't someone just look after me for the rest of my life?!"

"I mean, your partners have the right to choose, don't they?" Asmodeus said, quite reasonably.

Rebecca glared back at her in tears.

"Haaaaaah! How nice for you! You probably have the pick of the litter!"

"Well, I won't deny I'm popular, given my good looks," Asmodeus replied, scooping up her beautiful silver hair and smiling.

"Gyaaah?!" Rebecca screamed and went limp, but immediately stood up and took out her pen and notebook. "Haaah... Whatever. Seeing as you're such a winner, can you tell me some of your love stories?"

"Huh? Why do I have to talk about such things with someone I'm not even close to?"

"Hm? So I can afford to eat, obviously. Why do I have to explain this to *you*?" "S-Sorry..."

Was this her will to survive? Her eyes were heavy and gloomy, and a vein bulged on her forehead. Seeing this serious look from the reporter, Asmodeus unintentionally apologized. This was probably the first individual who'd ever forced an apology out of this Archdemon. Perhaps that was to be expected of a woman who'd survived despite encountering demons on multiple occasions.

Well, after taking all of her money multiple times now, even Asmodeus was starting to feel faint pangs of guilt. She didn't mind going along with this, but soon cocked her head.

"Are love stories worth money?" she asked.

"What're you saying? Love stories are obviously worth more than anything else right now. Don't you know? Archangel Chastille and former Archdemon candidate Barbatos's passionate love has been the top news for two entire months."

Asmodeus used the newspaper as a medium to exchange information, so she'd seen it too. Archdemon Zagan had already pulled his hands from this case, but once the fire had been lit, this particular topic wasn't going to cool down anytime soon. Those two were liable to create some kind of uproar every day even when viewed from afar, so they were an endless source of material. That was how the world was abuzz over this even two months after the initial incident.

"Hmm... People sure have strange tastes," Asmodeus said, forcing a smile. "I'd like to see it for myself now."

She wasn't particularly interested. She'd actually been present during the scandal itself, but for better or worse, she hadn't even been cognizant of it.

People all tend to have the same face. I'm surprised anyone can feel anything special for someone in particular.

Asmodeus's people had gone extinct four hundred years ago, all because a carbuncle's core jewel was worth so much money. To her, all other people were malicious enemies or part of the riffraff. It didn't matter if they were sorcerers, part of the church, or civilians—all of them coveted Spirit Blood. Thus, even though there were rare exceptions, she couldn't see what there was to gain by recognizing individuals.

Paying no mind to any of Asmodeus's internal thoughts, Rebecca passionately continued speaking.

"Well, the whole world is clamoring over the Barbatos/Chastille thing, but my breadwinner is Lily! I'm sure your love stories will take me to the top!"

Oh yeah, Foll also likes this kinda thing.

Asmodeus was reminded of the little dragon who'd asked about her love life. She still remembered that day clearly. And just like back then, she knit her brows with a tilt of her head.

"So you say, but I've never had those kinds of feelings for anyone in particular."

Rebecca's eyes turned to saucers and her mouth popped open.

"Huh? You mean you've never gone out with anyone or been in love?"

"Aren't all sorcerers like that?"

"Th-Then what about your first love...?"

"I'm telling you I have no idea what love is..."

Asmodeus could only shrug, feeling sorry that she'd betrayed Rebecca's expectations. She could at least understand that love stories would make this gossip reporter some money, but Rebecca had chosen the wrong person to ask. And yet, the reporter's eyes sparkled.

"Oh. Oh my. Oh dear... What a tasty... I mean, interesting story!"

"Why did you rephrase it?"

Rebecca pulled two chairs out of the nearby wreckage and licked the tip of her pen.

"Tell me more. Has anyone ever tried to court you?" she asked, staring with enough intensity that it was impossible to refuse her.

"Haaah... I suppose..." Asmodeus said, taking a seat reluctantly.

"Then has anyone ever left a strong impression on you?"

"Umm... Oh, I guess it was about two or three months ago? Well, I met someone like a relative who left an impression."

She didn't know if it was love, but she did see him favorably. He'd looked after her in the capital of the oppressed and had told her he'd run away with her if the time came. Asmodeus at least had enough of a heart to understand what he'd meant.

Shura is a good person...

Even if he'd been under the impression that Asmodeus had lost her memories, he'd been so kind to her. She was at least grateful for that, so she gave those details to Rebecca.

"Haaah! Why didn't you run away with him?!" she asked, full of interest.

"I mean, where would I run away to? Besides, even if he came with me, I'd have probably used him as a sacrificial pawn or straight up abandoned him..."

As a fellow carbuncle, he probably wouldn't die. However, even if Asmodeus didn't cause his death, someone would eventually kill him. After all, he was a carbuncle. That was why he was better off staying under Foll's protection.

I probably want him to survive...

Unlike Asmodeus, who couldn't take back what she'd done, there was a carbuncle out there who could live with thoughts of the future in mind. This was a small form of salvation to her. However, she didn't believe this was the emotion known as love.

"What kind of feeling is this 'love' to begin with?" Asmodeus asked with an air of bewilderment.

"Hnnngh! You get a lot of points for asking that so honestly! That's a whole ninety love points!"

"What kinda points are those?"

"It's a concept called love power. A witch I recently became acquainted with taught me about it. However, unless I give it a numerical quantity, readers won't understand."

"Right..."

Rebecca's pen ran across her notepad intensely before she looked up at Asmodeus with bloodshot eyes.

"Anyway, love is about wanting to be with someone and wanting them to always be by your side!"

The first person to come to mind was the little dragon.

Well, Foll is a good girl.

However, even Asmodeus knew this was friendship. She rested her chin on her hands and cocked her head.

"How is that different from friendship?" she asked.

"Plus eighty love points! You really are amazing, Lily. How do you not know about love at your age? You're like the quintessential natural airhead."

Well, maybe it was strange to not know about love for four hundred years. This was probably something to be ashamed of.

"So? How many points is a perfect score?"

"A hundred, obviously."

"We've already gone past that, though..."

"That's simply how much potential you have! Oh, unlike friendship, you think that person is the only one, like there can be no replacement. You have strong enough feelings that you'd be willing to die for their sake."

When she put it like that, a face did come to mind.

"Hmmm, would that apply to a disciple?"

Rather than dying for his sake, she was okay with him killing her.

One day, when his power can reach me, I'm fine with going down quietly for him.

Disciples were meant to surpass their teachers. What was more, Vepar had more than enough of a reason to resent Asmodeus to the point of killing her. That was why he was the one person she was okay with being killed by. In all likelihood, that would be the most peaceful death there was for her. Even now, he was adorably rebellious.

"A disciple?" Rebecca asked, her eyes wide in shock. "Lily, you're old enough to have a disciple?"

"Well, I've actually been a sorcerer for a pretty long time. But a disciple is a disciple. It's not like I wanna take turns feeding each other dessert with him or embrace him or anything."

"Oh my! Oh dear! So you do know about it! That's what going out is all about!"

"No, that's 'cause I was forced to watch something like that to the point of getting heartburn..." Asmodeus said with a disconcerted look.

She was talking about Zagan and Nephy. That conversation had gone into exchanging information on demons, but before that, it'd been an eternal show of sickeningly sweet interactions between the two. Asmodeus didn't want to see anything like that for a good while.

Rebecca nodded in understanding.

"So you're the type who wants a quiet relationship. Then do you know anyone that you feel at peace with or want to nestle up against?"

"Oooh, in that case, I might have someone in mind."

After going through that heartburn, she'd somehow ended up having tea with that old butler.

I think he said his name was Raphael? He's the one who returned sis's core jewel to me. I feel like we're strangely connected in a way.

"He made some really delicious tea for me... I'd like to try having some again."

Thinking back on it, Asmodeus found herself breaking into a natural smile. Seeing this reaction, Rebecca's eyes shot open.

"Plus two hundred love points! You're way off the scale! Way to go, Lily!"

"Should I be taking that as an insult? Also, he's a total grandpa, just so you know."

"And what's wrong with that?" Rebecca asked curiously. "You're not as young as you look, right? You even have a disciple."

"Mrgh..."

Asmodeus couldn't find a retort for that. In terms of age, she'd lived for around eight times as long as Raphael had. One's physical age was a trivial matter to a sorcerer. For an instant, she gave it some serious thought, but then she shook her head in denial.

"No, he has a child, so isn't that kind of thing impossible?"

"The more forbidden a love, the more passionately it burns. Who is he?"

"I'm not stupid enough to tell you his name."

If she did, it was clear as day Rebecca would make playthings of them in the paper. Even Asmodeus didn't want to be such a bother to him.

"I'm not asking you to tell me his name," Rebecca said, hanging in there. "What about his features or personality and stuff like that?"

"His personality...? Well, I suppose he's a good person, but his awkwardness stands out a lot. He's a gentleman, just so you know."

"Hmmm, that kinda praise is rare coming from you. What else? What else?"

"How long are we going to talk about this?"

Asmodeus was starting to get bored, but it didn't seem like she was going to be freed unless she answered Rebecca's questions. And so, she reluctantly recalled Raphael's features.

"Well, if forced to describe him, I'd say he's a glum grandpa," she said. "He's also very strong."

That was when a sudden thought came to mind.

Oh, I thought he reminded me of someone. He's just like my teacher.

Asmodeus hadn't been able to use sorcery when she'd escaped the attack on the carbuncle village. Someone had taught her the basics. Her teacher had been an Archdemon candidate at the time. She hadn't been with him for very long, and he was neither a good person nor a gentleman, but he'd given her so much and had left a lot behind for her. She owed him a lot. Raphael somewhat resembled this teacher of hers.

Especially in how they're difficult to understand...

And as Asmodeus basked in such nostalgia, the reporter's pen came to a stop.

"Lily, from the way you're talking, are you referring to an Angelic Knight?"

Asmodeus put a hand to her mouth. She'd said too much.

This girl is unexpectedly sharp.

Asmodeus stood at the peak of all sorcerers, so it was very rare for her to describe other sorcerers as strong or weak. They were all beneath her, after all. So, for Asmodeus to speak of someone as being strong, she had to be referring to someone who specialized in another field—like Angelic Knights or high elves.

Still, this was a notion that was unique to Asmodeus. Someone wouldn't be able to reach this conclusion unless they understood her well. And yet, Rebecca had seen through her so casually. Maybe she was actually an astonishingly good reporter. It was far too late to gloss things over, but Asmodeus put on a fake smile and cocked her head.

"Aha, for a little frail maiden, all men appear strong."

"Lily, do you know what persuasive power means?"

"I'm aware of the dictionary definition," Asmodeus answered shamelessly.

Unexpectedly, Rebecca backed down quietly. It seemed she already had enough material for her paper. The end was finally in sight. Asmodeus loosened her shoulders and stretched as Rebecca somewhat belatedly took a look at the devastation around them.

"Oh yeah, you called it a demon, right? That thing you fought, I mean. Aren't there way too many of them lately?"

"Hmmm, well, I guess there have been a lot."

Asmodeus's tone was indifferent, but she narrowed her eyes sharply.

It's the opposite. There should be way more.

Considering their propagation rate a month ago, there was less than half the number Asmodeus had assumed she'd have to deal with. It was nice that she had less work to do, but the mystery of this phenomenon was eerie. From what Zagan had told her, he hypothesized that a specimen similar to Samyaza existed that was creating all the demons.

Maybe someone is eliminating them?

Perhaps Asmodeus wasn't the only one going around killing demons. However, to fight demons day after day, one would need power that rivaled hers. Even among the Archdemons, few could boast of that.

Pretty much the only ones who can are Zagan and Phenex...

But Zagan hadn't told her anything like that, and Phenex would never bother with something so troublesome. If any demons manifested before her, she would at least handle it, though. So then, what exactly was going on?

What was more, Marchosias wasn't really taking the task of dealing with the demons particularly seriously. Maybe he'd known it would end up like this. Or maybe he needed a vast number of demons to himself. It seemed he was plotting something using that Nephilim called Bato.

It's about time for me to cut ties with him.

If Marchosias was handling the demons, it meant he no longer saw any value in Asmodeus. She also only had one or two more core jewels to collect. Now it was a matter of who would outsmart the other. Both were nasty Archdemons. There was no way their alliance would be broken peacefully.

"I forgot I have some urgent business to attend to," Asmodeus said, rising to her feet. "I need to get going."

"Oh? Did something happen?"

"Hmmm, I was just thinking of how I'd like to enjoy at least one more lifeline." Leaving the bewildered reporter behind, Asmodeus vanished into thin air.



The stone launched by the lava demon pierced the Archdemon's body. The molten projectile went on to set the Golden Lord on fire.

"Huh? Wha...? Ow...? Hot...? OOOOOOOW!"

Phenex screamed and tumbled to the ground.

She looks more okay with this than I thought...

Honestly, it didn't seem like she needed Behemoth's help at all.

"D-Damn you!" Phenex screamed in indignation, tears behind her glass lenses. "You dumbass! How dare you?! Who do you think you're shooting?!"

Still in a fit of rage, she calmly rose to her feet.

"If you're gonna do it, shoot to kill! What's the point of just inflicting pain?!"

"That's the problem here...?" Levia mumbled in exasperation from Behemoth's arms.

There was no way any of these words were getting through to the demon, though. Instead, the sphere of lava stretched out like a rope and moved to wrap itself around Phenex's body.

"Not a hint of remorse, you lower life-form?" Phenex spat out. "Whatever, just die."

Phenex swung her brass-gauntleted arm to the side in a grand gesture. Immediately following that, a golden light enveloped the lava demon.

A golden blaze...

Phenex wasn't known as the Golden Lord due to her appearance. Her second name came from the flames she wielded. The enormous body of lava gave in to the radiance, and by the time Behemoth opened his eyes, the demon was nowhere in sight. Only a golden fire swaying in the wind stood where it'd been.

She managed to evaporate lava...

She hadn't even given it time to scream. What was even more surprising was that Behemoth didn't feel the slightest gust of heat from it despite her fire being capable of such a feat. This was despite the fact that the mouth of the volcano was still annoyingly hot.

"How worthless. What a truly worthless being. Apologize to me for the rest of eternity in the next world."

Behemoth and Leviathan looked at the cursing Archdemon as if they were witnessing a truly sad sight.

Why does she have to act like a small-time punk when she's so strong?

In terms of pure skill, she was likely among the strongest Archdemons, but because of her lousy personality, it was rare for anyone to revere her.

After ranting and raving until she was satisfied, Phenex finally turned back to

Behemoth.

"Forgive me. What a worthless obstruction... So? What were we discussing again?"

Faced with an Archdemon who'd handled a demon as if it were a baby, Levia got straight to the point.

"Zagan wants to know your plans. It'll be troublesome if you join Marchosias."

"Marchosias? Oh, now that you mention it, I did get some kind of invitation letter. I thought it was fake. It's real? How stupid. He finally died, so why did he come back to life?" Phenex mumbled in genuine astonishment, then cocked her head. "You want me to decide whether I'm siding with Marchosias or Zagan, then? Unfortunately, I don't have any intention of supporting either of them. Besides, my sorcery is in poor taste. Won't Zagan refuse my help?"

Behemoth shook his head.

"It's our personal opinion that we want you to meet Zagan."

"Hmm...?"

Zagan hated sacrificial sorcery. There was no way he would want Phenex among his subordinates. However, Behemoth and Levia believed that Zagan should meet this sorcerer.

Backing up Behemoth, Levia added, "Zagan might be able to—"

The Golden Lord gulped behind her mask. It was as if she was looking at a dream she'd gotten so tired of being disappointed by, yet couldn't forget about.

"Do you truly think I'll believe that after all these years...?" she said. "How many hundreds, how many thousands of times do you think my hopes have been betrayed?"

"If you don't like it, then that's all we have to say," Behemoth told her. "We're leaving."

And right before doing so, Levia added one last thing.

"The one who reunited Behemoth and me again...was Zagan."

"Gh...!"

Phenex ground her teeth hard enough that it was easy to tell through her mask. She then paced on the spot restlessly three times before turning to Levia.

"I'm not killing you two because I consider us friends," she said. "Your circumstances are very similar to mine, after all."

Behemoth and Levia had met many people over the last five hundred years—from sorcerers, to Angelic Knights, and naturally, regular humans. Among all of them, the one who understood them the most—aside from Alshiera—was Phenex. They'd even cooperated with each other before in hopes of accomplishing their dreams. In all likelihood, she saw them in the same light as they saw her. That was why they were negotiating with her when Zagan hadn't asked for it.

"Even if you're lying, I'll never kill you two," Phenex said, an air of nostalgia in her voice. "It'll piss me off, though."

She spoke calmly as if interacting with the closest of friends, but in the next instant, her voice was chillingly cold.

"However, if you betray me, I'll kill Zagan."

She was talking about the man who'd defeated several Archdemons in headon confrontations, and whose power could even reach Asmodeus. And yet, her words didn't come from overestimating her own abilities. That was what it meant to be an Archdemon, after all. Having power didn't matter. Once they said they would do something, they would pull it off.

Levia nodded, her complexion unchanging in the face of Phenex's wrath.

"Do as you like. That boy will surely meet your expectations."

"Haaah..." the Golden Lord sighed, plopping down on a boulder. "But I'm so sick of having expectations... I'll bear a grudge for this."

"Don't worry," Levia told her. "It won't end up like that."

Even as Phenex grumbled, she immediately began packing her bags. She then turned back as if suddenly remembering something.

"So? What do you want me to do?" she asked. "You didn't tell me this and expect nothing in return, right?"

Behemoth and Levia exchanged looks, then began whispering to each other.

"Huh? What do we do? Did we have anything to ask her?"

"Not really. But Zagan is always short on hands. Won't he be pleased if we bring her back?"

"But won't Zagan totally hate her?"

"Maybe... What do we do?"

"Did you two really not think this through at all?" Phenex cut in, utterly astonished by their behavior.

"Well, you know, it's simple," Behemoth said, flashing a smile. "When a friend is in need, you wanna lend a hand, yeah?"

"Hmph... You sure do look happy now," Phenex said. "How much longer do I have to wait for your wedding, you ass?"

Behemoth definitely saw his old friend smiling behind that mask. However, that peace was shattered by a sudden voice.

"Aha, then how about listening to my request instead?"

Appearing out of nowhere, a girl with stars in her eyes looked down on them from atop a boulder. Behemoth and Levia clearly grimaced upon hearing the annoyingly familiar voice. The same seemed to go for Phenex.

"Ugh! Asmodeus!"

"Why're you acting like a pest just showed up?" Asmodeus asked.

"Isn't that pretty much what you are?" Behemoth said, openly wary of her.

The last time they'd met, she'd looked like a normal little girl, but now she was back to the miser she'd always been. That said, she was used to this kind of reaction. Asmodeus sighed and brushed back her silver hair.

"Seriously, you're all as charming as ever," she said. "How about you take after me and act a little friendlier?"

"How many times do you think we've been tricked by that friendliness of yours?" Behemoth retorted.

"Whaaat? If that's all it takes to trick you, then I don't think you're cut out to be a sorcerer," Asmodeus said, laughing in an irritating manner.

"So? What do you want?" Levia asked, taking a step forward.

"Oh, I don't want anything from you two. I have business with Phenex," Asmodeus said as she turned to the other Archdemon, put her hands together, and cocked her head coquettishly. "Hey Phenex, wanna make a deeeal with me?"

In response to the devil's invitation, the Golden Lord stared back intensely with her red eyes.

"Huh? No way. It's just gonna be something really mean, right? Just like last time!"

It turned out this miser had gotten into disputes with Phenex too.

It's almost impressive how many enemies she's made across the world...

However, it was also true she had enough strength to casually survive despite that fact. Plus, Behemoth and Levia had spent two months searching for Phenex before finally finding her, yet Asmodeus had enough power to find her in an instant.

"Last time? What exactly are you referring to?" Asmodeus asked curiously. "Too many things come to mind..."

She really was the worst, but Phenex was caught on a different detail.

"Hey, have you mellowed out a little?" she asked. "I never thought you'd remember the things you've done."

"How rude. What do you take me for?" Asmodeus complained.

"The worst of sorcerers on par with Glasya-Labolas."

""

As to be expected, she didn't like being grouped with the Lord of Murder. Asmodeus groaned and put a hand to her brow.

"Unfortunately, I just received a different request," Phenex said, shrugging. "I don't plan on going along with whatever you have to say."

"A request? You don't even have to do anything. Aren't you free?" Asmodeus insisted.

"You're the type to totally ruin someone's birthday party when you weren't even invited, aren't you?"

"Can you not treat me like I'm a loner who can't read the room?!"

Even among Archdemons, Phenex could boast of having the sharpest tongue. In an unusual display, Asmodeus was getting worked up over being so accurately called out. After letting out a loud sigh, she raised her voice in a fluster.

"I'm not asking for anything that troublesome. I'm just wondering whether you wanna help each other out when we're in trouble," Asmodeus said, shrugging with a shameless smile, then narrowed her eyes sharply. "You know Forneus was killed, yes? You've got a mark on you too, Phenex."

""

Asmodeus wasn't one to start a negotiation without having any cards to play. As part of Marchosias's group, her words couldn't be ignored. Phenex threw a glance at Behemoth to check the veracity of her words.

Well, she can only go along with it now...

Not giving someone a choice in the matter was Asmodeus's way. Grumbling about it would be a waste of time, so Behemoth nodded.

"Hmph! Let's hear it," Phenex said. "Well, I'm betting it's something I can't back down from after hearing it, anyway."

"Aha, that's Phenex for you," Asmodeus replied. "You understand very well. To tell you the truth..."

She went on to explain the details, and just like that, Behemoth and Levia had once more gotten caught up in something troublesome.

"You've come up with yet another bothersome idea..." Phenex said. "But wait, are you sure it's fine for you to reveal all that to me? Marchosias shows no mercy to traitors."

"Aha, that goes both ways," Asmodeus said with a smile. "Besides,

Marchosias is currently on his way to see Zagan, so I doubt he has the time to worry about little old me."

"Oh my, this self-proclaimed Marchosias is rather childish," Phenex said, an air of pity in her voice. "I feel sorry for Zagan."

"What do you mean?" Levia asked.

"It's the way punks do things," Behemoth explained. "Going directly to see the enemy boss is a way of saying, 'I'm ready to kill you now.' You can call it a declaration of war. Doing so completely ruins the boss's reputation."

"Just by going to see him?"

"Yeah, by doing this, Zagan will be dragged into Marchosias's pace. It's an unpleasant hand to play."

By going to the enemy base on his own, the enemy was ensuring nobody would lay a hand on him. Pride would prevent the boss from doing so. What was more, having the enemy come only to say their piece before leaving was an unbearable humiliation. It would be a complete loss of face if it happened in front of the boss's subordinates, after all.

This is just between punks, though.

Zagan was a villain, but also a king. He was no punk.

"Well, I wonder about that..." Asmodeus said. "There's no telling what Zagan will do. Marchosias might actually be the one who has no choice in the matter, you know?"

"Aaah..."

Both Behemoth and Levia knew what she was getting at and held their tongues.

"Hm...? What do you mean?" Phenex asked, cocking her head curiously.



In Archdemon Palace's throne room, Zagan would normally be seated on his throne while subordinates ran in and out to deliver reports and come to him for advice. Now, the place was dominated by a chilling silence.

Two people faced each other. One was the king of Archdemon Palace, Zagan. His expression remained resolute, but had a hint of tension to it. He'd descended from his throne, and was instead seated at a table to place himself as an equal to the one sitting across from him.

"Ha ha ha..."

"Heh heh heh..."

Unable to stand the silence, they both let out strange laughs. The one seated before the king...wasn't Marchosias. It was Nephy. She was wearing a beautiful white robe. This was something she'd received from her mother and teacher Orias. Zagan knew that she only wore it on special occasions, so in other words, this was her way of dressing up.

To think she put such effort into her clothes just for a tea party!

The thought that Nephy was treating this moment so dearly had Zagan fraught with emotions. Yes, today was Zagan and Nephy's first private day off in a while.

Just as they'd finished dealing with all the aftermath from the battle with Shere Khan, Marchosias had started plotting something uncalled for, two sorcerers Zagan had tried to get in touch with—Forneus and Acheron—had been killed, and he'd ended up swamped in office work too.

Having finally cleaned up all that work, Zagan had matched his schedule with Nephy's and the two had taken an entire day off. He'd even ordered Raphael not to accept any guests—any guests.

No matter what happens today, I'm definitely resting!

In his current mental state, Zagan had decided to ignore everything else. He would even go as far as ignoring Marchosias if he personally led an attack on the castle.

Zagan cleared his throat, then stared directly into Nephy's eyes.

"Um, you know... You're very beautiful today. Your clothes, um...look really good on you."

Nephy's pointy ears turned red right to their tips and quivered.

"Augh... M-Master Zagan, you're also splendidly dressed... Um, you did your hair too, yes?"

"Hnnngh. I-Is that so? Richard taught me a little about minding my appearance."

Zagan had tried paying attention to more than just his clothes this time by using some hair products. He hadn't expected her to notice at a glance. It had him flustered.

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"I-It suits you very well," Nephy said.

"Y-Your fluffy hairstyle today is also very adorable."

"Augh..."
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That conversation was all it took for the two of them to no longer be able to look each other in the face. They both awkwardly reached for their teacups.

Hgggh! It's been too long since we've been alone! I don't know what to say!

There should have been a mountain of things he wanted to do and talk about, but he found himself unable to say the words. And as he agonized over what to do, Nephy smiled.

"It feels like it has been a really long time," she said. "Um, that you've shown yourself being so troubled, I mean."

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"Hrm. I'm always dead serious when it comes to you."

"Hyah... Um... I'm aware of that..."

"I-I see..."

"Yes..."
```

They once more lowered their eyes to the table, completely red to the face. Nearly an entire hour had passed since they came to the throne room, but they'd been repeating this loop the entire time.

This is one of my precious few days off! What the hell am I doing?!

And while Zagan remained disappointed by his own ineptitude, Nephy raised her head as if she'd steeled her resolve.

""

"Hwuh?"

Of all things, Nephy moved her chair next to Zagan and sat back down.

"Um, I'm too embarrassed to look at your face," she said. "So..."

That was apparently her reason for moving.

How can she be so cute?!

It felt like his heart could freeze at any moment, but Zagan still managed to place a hand on Nephy's shoulder and pulled her into a light embrace.

"M-Mmm... Very well. You're also far too beautiful to look—"

He couldn't finish that sentence. Nephy had shifted herself to plop her head on Zagan's chest.

"Ha wa wa wa wa..."

"Awa wa wa wa..."

Both of them were in a complete fluster. Nephy's pointy ears slapped violently against Zagan's neck, but he didn't have the composure to pay that any attention. He'd meant to just nestle up against her lightly, but now they were absolutely glued together.

Hnnngh! I didn't mean to do anything this bold!

Well, they had, in fact, shared even deeper embraces before, but never shoulder to shoulder like this. Zagan let go of Nephy in a panic.

"S-Sorry! I put too much strength into it!"

"N-No! That's not..."



Nephy also backed off in confusion, but was making a disappointed face. She then thought of something and leaned against him once more.

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"Hyah... Uhhh, hm?"
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She was probably trying to lean against him, but Zagan was so shaken he'd bent backward, causing Nephy to miss completely and fall into his lap.

""

Both of them covered their faces in embarrassment.

Well, maybe this is nice in its own way...

Zagan's heart was still pounding like a hammer, but he'd managed to calm down enough to look at Nephy's face.

Nephy then finally lowered her hands and muttered in the quietest of voices.

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"Master Zagan..."

"M-Mmm... What is it...?"

"I tried my best."

"I can see that."

"No... Not that."
```

With her hands down to her mouth now, Nephy went red from her cheeks all the way to the tip of her ears.

"I tried my best with my studies as an Archdemon and with my training in celestial mysticism, all so that I can be a sorcerer I can take pride in when standing by your side, so..."

She paused and shot a fleeting glance his way with her azure eyes.

"Can you tell me I'm a good girl?"

"Hnnngh!"

Zagan arched backward from the significant blow to his heart.

She's been holding back this whole time even though she wanted to be pampered?!

Nephy had probably wanted to avoid acting spoiled until her training was over. Put another way, the thought of being pampered after it was over had supported her this whole time. Zagan was capable of reading all this from Nephy's suddenly "aggressive" behavior.

"N-Never mind!"

After saying it aloud, she'd come back to her senses. Nephy covered her face once more. However, Zagan was a man, so there was no way he could refuse such a modest plea. He gathered his resolve and reached for Nephy's fluffy looking hair.

It's so soft, yet so silky. This feels so pleasant...

He had no idea who was being rewarded anymore. Zagan gently and slowly brushed Nephy's head as if wrapping her in his palm.

"You really stuck to it. Splendidly done, Nephy."

"Augh..."

Nephy sounded drained, but her pointy ears quivered in delight. This time, Zagan had gotten it right without messing up.

Nephy finally lowered her hands to her chest, then squinted in satisfaction as she shuddered in pleasure.

It's been a while since I've seen Nephy so happy!

Even though he was fine with spoiling her all day, Zagan couldn't withstand the pounding in his heart over seeing how defenseless she looked. His eyes were drawn to her flushed cheeks. And as he continued petting her head, Nephy's eyes suddenly opened.

"F-Forgive me, Master Zagan. I'm the only one being pampered here."

"Th-That's not true. If anything, I'll be sad if you don't let me do this!"

"Augh..."

Nephy got up from Zagan's lap, then turned to look him right in the eyes.

"Now it's your turn," she said. "Is there anything you want me to do?"

"Th-That I want you to do...?"

He'd just said he'd be sad if she didn't let him pamper her. He couldn't possibly say no to that.

But how much will she allow?

Would it be fine to have her pet his head like he had for her? But they hadn't really been on any dates for over a month. He felt like asking for something bolder. In all likelihood, Nephy would go with pretty much anything he said. However, that didn't mean he could just make an unreasonable request.

Uhhh... Would it be shameless to ask for a k-kiss?

No, they'd already kissed several times. It wasn't out of the question, but he was under the impression that the mood was important.

No, a kiss can also be done on the cheek. How about that?

Wouldn't this be the righteous path to asking for a reward? At the very least, he'd seen lovers in town down the same thing every now and then.

"Th-Then Nephy!" Zagan shouted, his eyes shooting open.

"Y-Yes?"

"Um...I have a request."

He wanted a reward, but he felt like it was really wrong to say it aloud.

Gaaah! You call yourself a man, Zagan?!

He fired himself up, but maybe this wasn't a problem that could be solved through willpower alone.

"...I see."

And as he continued agonizing over the matter, Nephy nodded in understanding. She then closed her eyes and brought her face closer to Zagan's.

Huh? Is she really going to kiss my cheek?

Nephy's ability to guess his intentions had far surpassed Zagan's imagination. His expectations only grew greater, and the next instant, his eyes turned to saucers. Nephy pressed her own cheek against Zagan's.

Silence.

What's happening here...?

Zagan froze, and Nephy's face turned red all the way to her brow. Her pointy ears shuddered in agitation, tickling Zagan's ear.

"Ummm, why are you rubbing your cheek against me...?" he asked.

"B-Because...I thought you were looking at my cheek..."

Zagan felt his face go hot. She'd totally seen him.

"D-Did I get it wrong...?" Nephy asked.

"...No, not at all."

Surely, this was serenity.

Nephy's cheek is just a little cool to the touch, and also smooth as silk...

He couldn't describe how he felt. This had his heart pounding, but also brought him an equal level of peace of mind. He rubbed his cheek back against hers, tickling Nephy and getting a cute sound out of her. He felt so relieved to hear that.

"To tell you the truth, I was thinking I had to do something special like take you on a date," Zagan said. "However, maybe it's more than enough just to have you by my side."

"The same goes for me..." she replied with a natural smile. "I was thinking of ways to surprise you but couldn't come up with anything."

As a result, she'd rubbed her cheek against him. Zagan once more embraced Nephy's shoulder gently.

"Going out is nice, but I'd like to stay like this for a while longer," he said.

"I agree."

Just then, a knock came at the throne room's door. The method of the knocking told Zagan it was Raphael.

"My liege. A guest."

"I see. Behead them," Zagan replied, still maintaining his gentle smile.

He'd decided he was taking no guests today. Raphael knew that too, but still insisted.

"It's a guest you're better off seeing..."

Well, Raphael wouldn't have defied Zagan's order otherwise. Still, Zagan had decided to enjoy his day off with Nephy today, so he definitely wasn't going to put up with anything bothersome.

"Then make them sit on their heels."

At those words, he heard a cold anger swell up on the other side of the door. He didn't know who it was, but it was a reasonable reaction to being made fun of like this. However, for better or worse, Raphael was the mediator between them.

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"So he commands. Sit on your heels and wait."

"Are you screwing with me?"

"Sit."

"Are you listening?"

"Sit."

"...Fine."
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Zagan heard some kind of argument going on, but it gradually died down. He knew his guest had yielded. This was why dealing with people who didn't know proper manners was a pain.

"Um, Master Zagan," Nephy whispered with a suspenseful look on her face. "Isn't it fine to at least hear them out?"

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"Mrgh... You're too kind, Nephy."
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He still didn't want to put up with this, but having this guest sit on their heels forever would also leave Zagan restless.

Oh well. I'll just see them then drive them away immediately.

Zagan reluctantly rose to his feet.

"Seriously...it's my day off today. What idiot is here to see me?"

He grumbled as he opened the door, and Raphael pointed at the pitiable visitor.

"This idiot right here..." he said.

Zagan directed his gaze to the somewhat familiar face. It was a young man wearing round glasses who was sitting on his heels foolishly, tears of humiliation in the corners of his eyes. This was the man known as Marc and Marchosias.



"What the hell are you doing?" Zagan asked with a look of exasperation on his face.

"You're the one who told me to do this!" he complained in a grief-stricken voice.

This resurrected Zagan's memories as a waif.

Oh yeah, despite acting like a leader all the time, Stella always tugged his strings.

Zagan paid no mind to the fact that he'd done the exact same thing.

He was squaring off against his arch-enemy, and this was the state of things. With this sight before him, his anger faded. Zagan sighed and pointed to the throne room with his chin.

"Well...how 'bout some tea?" he offered.

"I'm seriously considering leaving."

Even as he grumbled a complaint, Zagan's old friend entered the throne room.



"So? What do you want?"

After adding a chair to the table they'd been relaxing at, Zagan and Nephy sat across from the young man who called himself Marchosias. He wore a worn-out shirt and crooked round glasses. With no logic to back it up, Zagan felt that this was the man who'd acted like an older brother to him ten years ago in the back alleys.

Raphael poured tea for the three of them. Zagan stole a glance at the young man's face—objectively speaking, he was staring fiercely—to see that he looked startled and trembled as Raphael poured his tea.

As the former pope, he should know Raphael. What's with this behavior?

In a sense, Raphael used to be his former subordinate. Raphael had a frightening face and was hard to understand, but he was fundamentally a gentleman. This man had to know this. Noticing Zagan's gaze, he shrugged

awkwardly.

"I've always felt like he's seen through everything I am," he explained. "I'm a little bad at handling him."

Well, Raphael's ability to remain unperturbed by anything could be interpreted that way.

"Hmm? He's an attentive and talented man," Zagan said. "I won't deny he has a good eye for details, though."

"When you've got your hands in multiple shady matters, it's hard to warm up to him."

The young man took a sip of his tea as Raphael bowed and left the throne room. Then, he let the tension out of his shoulders.

"Now, about why I'm here. I just wanted to see your face while I could."

At that, he turned to look at Zagan, his expression the same as it had been ten years ago.

"You've grown. You're already taller than I am, huh?"

"Hmph! I'm surprised you can say that after monitoring me all these years."

Zagan had always lived in the vicinity of Kianoides. In other words, he'd always been inside Marchosias's territory. How could this man not know about his growth?

"It sounds better if you say I was watching over you," the young man replied, shrugging. "Besides, I don't know how you've changed in the year since I died."

Marchosias had truly died one year ago. That was why the Sigil of the Archdemon he'd owned was now etched on Zagan's right hand.

"And you haven't changed at all," Zagan scoffed, shifting his focus to his hand.

In terms of appearance, he appeared about five years older than the boy Zagan had known. This placed him in his twenties or so, but his behavior and outfit were exactly as they had been.

"You're right..." the young man responded, pushing up his glasses with a finger. "Nothing has changed in a thousand years. Nothing at all..."

Feeling himself drawn to the regret in his voice, Zagan shook his head.

"Did you ruin our day off just to talk of old times, Marchosias?"

The young man—Marchosias—opened his mouth, paused, then laughed in self-derision.

"I suppose not. Shall we cut to the ...?"

In the middle of speaking, Marchosias gave him a bewildered look.

"M-Master Zagan, you don't need to pay me any attention..."

"But you put in so much effort for today. We can't just let it end."

"I'm more than happy enough that you're angry on my behalf."

"Nephy..."

Zagan took Nephy's hand beneath the table as they whispered to each other. She surely hadn't been expecting that. Her pointy ears quivered in astonishment before she timidly squeezed back. The two of them remained facing forward, but their eyes were fixed on each other.

"Hee hee..."

"Heh heh heh..."

Holding hands right in front of the enemy was somewhat thrilling.

"Are you looking to enter a relationship...?" Marchosias asked curiously.

"How rude. We've been in a relationship for a year," Zagan responded with all the majesty of an Archdemon.

"That sense of distance is strange for a couple who's spent an entire year together," he retorted in exasperation.

Zagan glared at him.

"Then let's hear about the relationships you've been in."

"Huh?"

Marchosias was clearly shaken. Just maybe, this was a topic he didn't really want to touch upon. If so, Zagan naturally had to press him for an answer.

"You're talking big, like you know better," Zagan said. "I'm sure you must've had a relationship or two in the last thousand years."

Just then, Zagan sensed someone pricking up their ears with great intensity outside the room.

Oh yeah, Gremory is here today...

Zagan noticed because he was used to it, but Marchosias didn't seem to be on guard. Well, the throne room had a barrier that soundproofed it. With the door closed, it was completely isolated from the outside, so there was no way anyone could hear what was going on in it.

And yet, it doesn't work on Gremory for some reason.

Whenever it involved love power, that granny casually surpassed the impossible. He really wanted her to cut it out.

Also, while it was difficult for Barbatos to directly infiltrate the room, he could open a hole big enough for him to listen through. The shadow at Zagan's feet wriggled slightly. Barbatos was surely aware of Marchosias's visit. Zagan's bad friend was so far beyond the norm as a sorcerer. He really should've already become an Archdemon.

Showing no signs of noticing that others were listening, Marchosias averted his eyes.

"Wh-What does my love life have to do with you?"

"Hmm...?"

Zagan could sense someone squawking, "Do whatever you must to get him to talk, my liege!" outside the door, but decided to ignore her. Even if he didn't get it out of Marchosias now, if the granny got serious, there was no hiding the truth from her.

He then noticed that Marchosias was stealing obvious glances at Nephy.

"Allow me to warn you," Zagan said, pulling her into a hug by the shoulder. "Nephy is my bride. If you look at her lustfully, I'll rip your eyes out right through your glasses."

"Hwah?!"

Nephy turned red to the tip of her ears, while Marchosias was struck dumb by the baseless accusation.

"Y-You've got it wrong," he protested. "Do you think I'm the type of brute to lay a hand on my little brother's lover?"

"Try to recall everything you've done to date," Zagan retorted. "Sure, you gave me bread, but it was far more common for you to snatch the bread I found myself."

"Ugh... Th-That was because...!"

Marchosias was stumped, unable to come up with a rebuttal. Thinking back on it now, Marchosias had never needed to live in the alleys. He'd genuinely been there to tease and play around with Zagan. Well, at first, Stella had served as a mediator to help him get revenge, but Zagan wasn't going to forget about that humiliation and despair.

Feeling somewhat sorry for him, Nephy smiled gently and cut in, "Umm, Lord Marchosias, yes?"

"Y-Yeah, that's right."

"I hear you saved me when my village was attacked. Thank you very much for that. If I died there, I would never have met Master Zagan."

The hidden village Nephy used to live in was now scorched earth. Zagan had been the one to ultimately destroy it, but its residents had been attacked and annihilated by the late Archdemon Bifrons. Marchosias had stolen Nephy from them and had taken her captive.

Even now, Nephy wore a boorish collar around her neck. Its functionality was long gone, but it had been meant to seal the mana of any who wore it. If she hadn't been protected by it, Bifrons would've caught her no matter where she'd escaped to.

"That's true," Zagan said. "For that, I suppose I should show some gratitude. You have my thanks."

Watching both of them lower their heads deeply, Marchosias's glasses slipped down in disbelief. He then pushed them back up with a bitter smile. As

expected, his eyes were fixed on Nephy.

"You really haven't changed," he said.

"Huh...?"

"It seems the barrier here is still functional," he continued, taking a look around the room.

The barrier in the throne room had been constructed during Marchosias's reign. Naturally, Zagan had put it back up upon inheriting the place, so Marchosias could tell it was functional at a glance.

"What I say next remains between us," he said, growing serious. "If you won't respect that, this ends here."

Zagan folded his arms in consideration.

Ah, Foll just used the Sigil of the Archdemon outside the room.

Zagan had formed a path of mana with Foll, so even while in the throne room, he could tell when she was using sorcery. Right now, her mana had suddenly flared up.

What Zagan specialized in the most wasn't devouring sorcery or his array of forbidden spells like Heaven's Scale. No, his forte was reinforcing his own body. Naturally, he'd bestowed this gift freely on his beloved daughter. During the battle with Shere Khan, she'd shattered Zombie Dragon Orobas's claws in a head-on clash. Combining that with aging her body, she'd made it her own.

In that state, Foll might be able to eavesdrop through the barrier too.

A daughter's growth was something to celebrate and be proud of. It was also an established fact that the granny outside the door could ignore the effects of the barrier. To add to that, the shadow at his feet was squirming. Shifting his focus to the chandelier above, Zagan also saw a bat hanging upside down in Marchosias's blind spot.

"Very well!" Zagan declared, making his decision. "Nephy and I promise never to speak of this to anyone."

He definitely wasn't lying. He and Nephy would never let this information slip.

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"Nephy, are you fine with that?"
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"Yes, Master Zagan."

With no way of knowing that this isolated room was full of holes, Marchosias nodded.

"Zagan, as a sorcerer, you know that what we call the soul transmigrates, yes?"

"I do."

To this day, there was still a lot about the soul that remained unknown, but its existence had been proved. There were even techniques to bind the soul with sorcery and transfer it to another vessel. When a person died, their soul would return to the samsara or sea of life or whatever it was, be cleansed, and be reborn. That was apparently how the system worked.

"Nephelia, you are likely the reincarnation of a certain lady," Marchosias said. "Your appearance and powers are far too similar to hers."

Nephy gulped and put a hand to her heart.

"She saved me, but I never managed to repay her," he continued. "I could only watch as she became a sacrifice. That's why I repaid the debt to satisfy my own ego. You don't need to thank me."

The expression "a certain lady" had Zagan knitting his brow. There was only one person he could think of who could be referred to that way, but...how was Nephy a reincarnation of her?

Can an individual soul be split among two or three people...?

If not, nothing made sense. But if Zagan's guess was right, pressing for an answer would simply complicate matters, so he couldn't ask for more information.

"I don't really understand this talk of reincarnation," Nephy said, squeezing her skirt tightly. "But if I were the person you speak of, I'm sure I would tell you not to worry about it."

"...Thank you."

A tear ran down Marchosias's cheek as if a thousand-year-old burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

"So?" Zagan said. "Say Nephy is in fact a reincarnation of who you speak of—what do you want with her?"

"I just...want her to be happy enough for her sake too. That is my wish."

He surely wasn't lying. That was why he hadn't tried to do anything after securing her.

"I don't get it," Zagan said, not fully satisfied with his explanation. "With the power you possess, you should've been able to prevent Bifrons's attack entirely. You also should've been able to handle the battle that killed you better. But you didn't."

About a year and a half ago, Marchosias had fought an army of demons and had died from the wounds he'd suffered there. It was the battle that had killed Wise Dragon Orobas too. The fighting had to have been beyond any description. However, did this man truly not possess a means of surviving it?

Zagan highly doubted that. That was how much Marchosias's ideology didn't seem to fit. Why had he accepted his death in that one instance? It was as if it had been a ritual to sacrifice himself.

Or maybe he needed a new body?

Considering his discord with Shere Khan, Marchosias should've been able to guess that Shere Khan would resurrect him as a puppet. With Eligor's prophecies, this probably hadn't even been a prediction, but an extremely likely future.

It was possible he'd done all this to replace his body that'd deteriorated over a thousand years. Zagan couldn't help but think that everything to date had played out exactly as Marchosias had planned it. That was why he couldn't afford to let down his guard for even an instant.

However, Marchosias gave Zagan a self-deprecating look.

"Haaah... You overestimate me," he replied. "I don't know how others see me, but I'm completely ordinary. I wasn't able to pick up anything, yet I survived all these years. That's all I am."

Sorcerers couldn't help but feel awe and fear at the name Eldest Marchosias. That was simply how great he'd been. However, the man who'd supposedly had everything go the way he'd wanted had instead lived a life of constant defeat.

Oh, I get it now. That's what's going on...

Zagan finally figured it out.

That's why sorcery is a power anyone can acquire by studying.

Marchosias's thousand years of life was the very history of sorcery itself. Sorcery was something anyone could use precisely because it was a power created by the powerless. That was why the sorcerer known as the Eldest had to be someone far crueler and more feared than any other, since those with talent immediately surpassed those without when it came to sorcery.

"I don't get it," Zagan declared coldly to this incarnation of self-sacrifice.

"What do you mean?"

"A man with such a personality destroyed the world Lisette Dantalian created?"

About eight hundred years ago, sorcerers and Angelic Knights had worked together and the world had been peaceful. The one who'd crushed that world and had created today's antagonism between the two groups was none other than Marchosias.

Even now, he's after Lisette's Nephilim.

Zagan didn't know whether his target was Dexia, Aristella, or Lisette. Well, in all likelihood, it was Aristella. That girl had once assimilated with Azazel, so her very existence was perilous.

"I needed power," Marchosias said, all emotion vanishing from his face. There was no hesitation in his voice. "Back in that age, Dantalian's power was necessary to heal the tattered world. However, her talent exceeded my expectations. Just think about it, humanity would forget how to fight in a harmonious world."

"That's why you killed her?"

Marchosias smiled, his expression a mix of despair and jealousy.

"It went well, didn't it?" he said. "Nowadays, the Archdemons are far mightier than I ever could be, and those wielding Sacred Swords are easily using Confession, something a rare few were able to do a thousand years ago."

Zagan had fought Bifrons, Orias, Andrealphus, Shere Khan, and Glasya-Labolas. He hadn't directly exchanged blows with Asmodeus, but this could also be applied to her. They had all been terrifying opponents who were capable of individually destroying the world.

It was precisely because they had to fight those monsters that the Archangels had been forced to hone their skills and had reached the heights of being able to unleash the seraphs within the Sacred Swords. It was true, none of this power could've existed in a peaceful world.

"Don't misunderstand me," Zagan said with a bored sigh. "Dantalian's fate was Shere Khan's to avenge. I have no thoughts on the matter."

Zagan's great friend had settled that score with his own hands. It would be the pinnacle of foolishness for Zagan to raise any objection over how it'd turned out. That wasn't why he was bringing this up.

"What I find annoying is that I can't see where this is all leading to," he said.

If power was a necessity, Marchosias shouldn't have died. Several Archdemons had vanished over the last thousand years and had been succeeded by others. Some of them were Zagan's fault, but still, these new Archdemons needed a significant amount of time to reach the same heights as their predecessors.

Power that had been cultivated to the point of being able to destroy the world had been lost one after the other. This had happened over and over for hundreds of years. It seemed like everything had been perfectly manipulated, but in truth, it'd all been haphazard. It was unreasonable to place any trust in that kind of plan.

Marchosias pushed up his glasses and leaned back into his chair.

"Don't worry. We're almost there. Just a little longer and everything will be in place."

"And you want me to cooperate?"

Marchosias didn't answer. Instead, he flicked his cup and muttered, "You say you can't see where this is all leading to. I was thinking it's about time to explain that to you, however..." He trailed off there, looking up at the chandelier. "There's no point in only telling the people in this room, right?"

Zagan smiled bitterly.

Well, it was pretty obvious.

Pointing out the most powerful person in the room was a declaration of his intent. Well, the reason Alshiera had been spotted wasn't due to a lack of ability, but because Marchosias was able to predict his sibling's behavior.

"But it isn't something that can be explained over and over," Marchosias said. "I'm sure you know that too."

"Thought so..."

Zagan understood his meaning.

"I'm calling a gathering of Archdemons. I want you to be there," Marchosias declared before continuing in a bold manner. "There are a lot of new faces since my absence. Wouldn't it be better for me to meet them at least once?"

"I'm surprised you can say that so shamelessly..." Zagan muttered. "So? Where are we meeting?"

"The Oblivion Wastelands, Kaslytilio. It's where my final battle was one year ago."

That was the site of Wise Dragon Orobas's defeat and the final grave for multiple Archangels. And now, Marchosias wanted the Archdemons to gather there.

"Be seeing you," Marchosias said, setting down his cup and standing up. "That's all I had to say."

As he opened the door, however, he was left speechless.

"Yahoooooooo! A trip! I must report this to Comrade Manuela! This is gonna be fun!"

A granny was hopping around in joy on the other side. Marchosias turned around and checked the state of the throne room's barrier. It was naturally functioning as intended.

"Huh? How...? What's with her?"

Even if he'd seen through Alshiera's presence, and maybe even Barbatos's, he hadn't been aware of Gremory at all. There was even a hint of fear in his voice. And as if to kick him while he was down, the residents of the castle all peeked out one after the other from behind Gremory. Foll had already undone her transformation too and was back to being a little girl.

"Miss Gremory, it was a secret conversation, so revealing the contents in front of us is a bit much..."

"It's all right. Only Zagan and Nephy promised not to speak of it. It has nothing to do with us."

"That's true. They all agreed to it, so it isn't a problem."

"B-But little lady, he's really glaring at us..."

"Our lady said it's all right, so it's all right."

"Another business trip? I wonder if it'll line up with Kurosuke's schedule..."

"Yay! A trip! You think we'll get brought along too, Ain?"

"Selphy, it's a meeting of sorcerers, so that's pretty unlikely."

"Huh? Does that mean I'm going too, Lilith?"

"Don't ask me... Oh well, shall I go with you?"

"Wh-What do I do? I guess you'll have to go too, Furfur?"

"Presumably...probably? I believe that will be the case."

"You lot, dinner is ready. Continue this conversation at the table."

This had spread not only to Gremory, but pretty much every single one of Zagan's close subordinates.

"Ummm...I'm leaving, okay?"

Marchosias threw a glance toward his actual sister, but she awkwardly

averted her gaze and flew off. So who was it who'd taken the wind out of the other's sails due to this meeting of generals?

Zagan watched his old friend's back as he walked off pitifully.



"That asshole Zagan is finally making a move."

Inside a certain church, a man muttered to himself with a gloomy smile. It was none other than Barbatos. Hearing him, Chastille also smiled...or rather, let out tears of relief.

"Finally! I never thought he'd stay holed up for an entire month."

A quick month had passed since Chastille and Barbatos had arrived in this town. It'd originally been for a mission for the church, but right before leaving, a certain sorcerer had brought Chastille an offer.

Not that Nephy is really at fault, but Zagan sure did use the heck out of us...

She couldn't possibly forget. Zagan had broadcast all the details of her birthday date with Barbatos to the entire continent. Not that it had been a date. She'd only gone to eat with him. Anyway, because of that, Chastille had practically lost her place at the church. Well, she hadn't actually lost anything, but she found herself in a weird position.

At any rate, Chastille and Barbatos weren't such upstanding people that they could meekly accept having to suffer through such an experience. They would leap at the chance to get revenge.

"Quit whining, crybaby!" Barbatos shouted, biting down his humiliation. "We promised to get those guys back this time, remember?!"

"W-We promised... Mm-hmm, that's right. We promised."

She didn't quite get it. She'd made promises before, but it felt like one made with Barbatos had a special meaning to it. Influenced by her expression, Barbatos blushed a little.

"Qu-Quit getting all shy! It's making me, ya know...embarrassed too."

"Do that outside...or just go and die already."

The one complaining to them, utterly fed up with watching this spectacle every day over the last month, was Hartonen. He was Sacred Sword Uriel's wielder, the eighth-ranking Archangel. His long black hair hid half his face, but in uniform, he had a rather handsome figure. He lamented getting dragged into this in his mid thirties. Hartonen was the oldest of the active Archangels after Kaltainen. He was a very taciturn man and Chastille had never really spoken to him before, but this town was under his jurisdiction.

"F-Forgive us, Lord Hartonen," she replied. "We didn't mean to stay this long..."

It really had taken a while.

Just in case, she was supposed to take care of things, but...

Chastille and Barbatos felt goosebumps at how terrifying the sorcerer who'd brought them this deal was. If she said they would come, then it was a predetermined future. However, even if the outcome was known, the timing for it hadn't been clear.

Hartonen wasn't a member of the Unification Faction. He didn't really like the idea of Chastille hanging around here with a sorcerer—especially when there were scandalous rumors going around about them. Nonetheless, he'd had to cooperate with her mission, so he couldn't have just ignored them.

Hartonen let out a gloomy sigh and shook his head as he said, "If you're going to mess with Archdemon Zagan, I'll put up with it for a bit."

He'd also gotten the short end of the stick during Archdemon Zagan's attack on Raziel's treasury. On this one point, he agreed with Chastille and Barbatos. Well, "a bit" had turned into a whole month, so he really was a patient man.

"Come, Zagan!" Chastille yelled, her eyes shooting open as she stabbed her Sacred Sword into the ground. "Don't think you can just tease us forever!"

"Damn straight!" Barbatos shouted. "We know all your behavioral patterns! Hya ha ha ha!"

Looking at their enthusiastic display, Hartonen turned his vacant eyes to the window.

"Maybe this won't work" he mumbled as if he felt truly fed up with everything in the world.	

Chapter III: Losing Your Memories Is Like Losing a Part of Yourself

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

A wail of grief resounded through Archdemon Palace's lounge.

"Why?! Why, my liege?! Why didn't you take me with you?!"

"This is exactly why, Miss Gremory..."

Gremory flailed wildly on the floor as Kimaris sighed in exasperation. Zagan and the others had left for the assembly of Archdemons. It was his first gathering since becoming one. He, Nephy, Foll, and Shax were all participating. He was also bringing the two Archdemons under his protection, Furcas and Furfur.

That said, Zagan had work to do, and everyone was accompanied by their partners. Foll had Dexia and Aristella; Shax had Kuroka; Furcas was not only accompanied by Lilith, but even Selphy and Ain; and Furfur had Micca. It was a rather large group of thirteen people, which was already pushing it, so Gremory had been ordered to remain behind to watch the house. Her teacher Orias had been left here to keep an eye on her too. This made it very difficult for her to escape.

Incidentally, Vepar couldn't be bothered to keep her company and had holed up in his research lab. Raphael had stayed behind in Archdemon Palace as well so that Vepar's research could proceed without a hitch.

"I have to say, I'm surprised you stayed behind," Kimaris said, turning to the other person in the lounge.

The one drinking tea in a corner, pretending not to see Gremory, was the little vampire, Alshiera.

"If I went with them, those children would surely be conscious of me..." she said with a bitter smile. "They may not say it aloud, though."

That king was one to stick to protecting his public image no matter who was present, but that didn't mean he slighted others—especially his relatives.

"Our liege doesn't worry about such things," Kimaris told her with a smile. "If you were there, I'm sure he would make sure you enjoyed yourself."

"Tee hee, perhaps, but I can't burden him forever."

Kimaris had once entrusted his back to Alshiera in battle, so he understood her awkward manner of showing kindness.

"Besides, now is the perfect time to scheme," she followed up, narrowing her eyes.

Now that Zagan was heeding the call, Marchosias's focus had to be fixed on him. It was convenient for Alshiera to make a move in the shadows.

"I wish you good fortune," Kimaris said.

"Those words are more than the undead deserve."

Around that time, Gremory seemed to finally recover. Tears were still pouring out of her eyes, but she raised her head, refusing to yield.

"I'm not done yet! Don't think my only comrades are Manuela and Lady Rachel!" she exclaimed as she shot to her feet and thrust a finger toward the future. "I'm never giving up! Even if you keep me away, all love power makes its way back to me! Ha ha ha ha ha!"

Gremory cackled as if she were an Archdemon herself. Kimaris couldn't help but feel anxious.

When she gets like this, there really is no telling what she'll do...

Now was not the time to be fussing over the means. Zagan was never going to be outdone by a foe when he had subordinates to protect, but he couldn't control Gremory. Kimaris was worried about his great king's fate.



"Hmm, so this is Opheos? Not a bad view."

Marchosias had chosen the Oblivion Wasteland Kaslytilio as the meeting point. This was a vast wasteland that expanded over the southwest of the

continent. It had mostly turned into a desert, had no rivers, produced no crops, and was home to nearly no animals, let alone people.

It was about half a month's ride from Kianoides by carriage. Barbatos could probably manage it, but Zagan had no means of teleporting to such an empty and distant land, so this had turned into a relaxing family trip.

They were currently at the southern tip of Lake Suflaghida in the small island town of Opheos. It was a strange place where the entire island had been turned into one big castle. It had once been a peninsula. When the tide was low during a dry season, there was a land bridge leading to it that could be crossed on foot.

Strictly speaking, the castle was a church. During the incident where Archdemon Dantalian was killed, the church had taken what few forces it had to transform this island into a stronghold in a desperate attempt to resist the sorcerers. After that, it was no longer clear whether it was a stronghold or church as the citizens continued adding more buildings to it, turning the entire island into a castle.

This was an important place for the church, but it held almost no value to sorcerers. However, it was also one of the continent's prime sightseeing spots. In other words, it was a perfect location for a date.

Zagan turned to his subordinates.

"From here on out, we'll be moving by carriage."

They'd traveled here from Kianoides by boat, but the next leg of the journey would be on land.

"This will be a long trip. We're staying here overnight, so you're free to do whatever you want until we leave in the morning! All of you, spend your time as you will without being late!"

"Yaaay!" Selphy cheered, throwing both arms in the air. "Free time! Lilith, where do you wanna explore?"

"Hm-hmm. We obviously need to start with the tower. It'll be crowded come evening, so let's head there first."

"That's amazing, Lilith! It's your first time here, but you've already looked

everything up!"

"See you, Zagan. I'll watch over them, so you take it easy too."

With that, the "regular civilian" group of Selphy, Lilith, Furcas, and Ain left in a cheerful mood. Shax and Kuroka then began whispering to each other.

"This whole island is a church. Have you been here before, Kurosuke?"

"Yes. There are even hidden passageways for assassins to utilize. Want to take a look?"

"S-Sure... Okay then, boss, we're gonna go sightseeing too."

Zagan raised a hand as he watched Shax leave arm in arm with Kuroka. Next was Furfur and Micca.

"This is an inn...castle? What kind of place is it?"

"Ummm, it used to be something like a fortress. Furfur, is there anything you want to take a look at?"

"Then what about the hidden passageways Kuroka mentioned?"

"Huh? Uhhh, I wonder if they'll let us in..."

The two of them also picked a destination, their backs looking somewhat tired. Lastly, Foll looked up at Zagan.

"Zagan, I'm also gonna go play."

"Be careful not to get lost."

"Mmm. Let's go, Dexia, Aristella."

"Oh, little lady, it's dangerous to run like that!"

"Excuse us, Lord Archdemon."

Foll ran off with a pitter-patter as Dexia chased her in a panic. Aristella gave Zagan a quick bow, then followed them. Now, only Zagan and Nephy were left behind. Unexpectedly, all the Archdemons had split up. Well, they'd come here with their own partners, so that only made sense.

"N-Nephy, is there anywhere you want to visit?" Zagan asked, timidly taking her hand.

Ugh! It's a precious opportunity for a vacation date, but I didn't look into this enough!

He wanted to escort Nephy around, but he'd been so busy preparing the boat, inns, and carriages that he hadn't had the time to look things up.

Nephy also appeared to be flustered. She manifested a scrap of paper from midair. This was sorcery that stored objects in subspace, which was actually rather complicated. To do so without any chant whatsoever showed her growth as a sorcerer. As for what she'd pulled out using such advanced sorcery, it was a map of Opheos.

"Y-Yes! Ummm...wh-where should we start?"

There was a lot to see in Opheos, but luckily, as it was a tourist attraction, it had plenty of guides. Gremory had prepared some for everyone without even being asked to, so of course she'd wept tears of blood when Zagan had told her she wasn't going.

Zagan peered down at the guide in Nephy's hands.

"Hmm, seems like there's a rose garden," he said.

Roses weren't used much as catalysts for sorcery, but they were pretty to look at, so they were fairly common in Kianoides too. It seemed the garden was a major selling point here and visiting it was heavily recommended. It was also near the harbor—where they were right now.

"Roses..." Nephy muttered. "Now that I think about it, I've never really looked at one properly."

"What? Is that so?" Zagan said, sounding somewhat bewildered by that.

"Yes. I've seen them lined up at the florist in Kianoides, but I never had any intention of buying any, so I thought it would be rude to stare... The hidden village wasn't the right climate to grow roses either, so I never saw them there."

To add to that, Archdemon Palace was underground, so flowers didn't grow there. The old castle had a flower bed, but it'd been used to grow catalysts. Foll had even used it to grow mandrakes.

Oh yeah, Nephy never really arranges the flowers in the vases either...

Flowers had been used as decorations ever since Raphael's arrival at the castle, but Zagan had never seen Nephy setting them up.

Mysticism's power came from nature. Nephy could hear nature's voice, so maybe she didn't enjoy plucking flowers. Sensing something from Zagan's expression, Nephy waved her hands about in a fluster.

"I'm not against plucking flowers or anything," she said. "I played with flowers when I was little. I also talked to the flowers that grew in the cellar. I don't know what they were called, though. I simply didn't know of the custom of decorating using flower vases."

Now that she mentioned it, back when Nephy had been transformed into a little girl, she'd also played with flowers.

Zagan raised his voice in admiration.

"Hmm. I knew you could hear nature's voice, but I never thought it was clear enough for you to have a conversation with flowers."

Nephy suddenly blushed and replied, "No, um...rather than converse...it's more like I was just talking to them. I didn't have anyone else to speak to."

"Oh, that's what you meant."

I kinda wish I could've seen her talking to flowers...

It might've been adorable enough for him to faint. Zagan understood now, but also found it regrettable.

"You're not going to laugh?" Nephy asked curiously.

"Why would I laugh at you? Spending a long time on your own can get to your head. Back when I was alone in the castle, I shouted for no reason and talked to the broken skulls on the ground."

Barbatos had even been rendered speechless upon witnessing it. So, Zagan could easily declare that he would never laugh at Nephy over something like that. That said, Zagan was at his wits' end for an entirely different reason.

What have I done? I've never given Nephy flowers...

Zagan's ultimate goal was to grant Nephy a "normal" happy life. Richard had

recently taught him that women enjoyed getting flowers as presents. And yet, he'd been so focused on the wedding ring that he'd never considered sending her flowers. Seeing Zagan tormented by regret, Nephy looked at him curiously.

"Master Zagan, have you ever appreciated roses?"

"I've eaten them when I was on an empty stomach before."

The passing tourists did a double take, whereas Nephy clapped her hands in understanding.

"I get it," she said. "Flowers smell nice, so you just want to put them in your mouth. I chewed on dandelions when I wasn't given food too."

"Oh, dandelions. They look tasty, but are actually bitter."

"Yes, but not bad enough to eat, so I couldn't help myself... I also liked licking the nectar from lilies."

Zagan tried to imagine the sight of Nephy earnestly sticking out her tongue at a lily petal and lost his composure.

Huh? No way. I wanna see it.

He was spurred by an impulse to use Memorandum—sorcery that projected and stored an image from memory—to place this image as a centerpiece in his treasury, but decided to focus on his conversation with Nephy for now.

"Nectar?" he asked.

"If you tear a flower's stamen right before it blooms, there's enough nectar inside to drink. They grew in the village's flowerbed, so I sneaked out to pluck some come summer."

"I see. I've only ever put whole flowers into my mouth. You were much smarter about it."

Another passerby was rendered speechless by their conversation, but these two paid them no mind.

"Then shall we go look at the rose garden?" Zagan suggested, taking Nephy's hand.

"Yes. I'm looking forward to it."

"Here's hoping they're tasty."

"You're not allowed to eat them..." Nephy said with a bewildered look.

"I'm joking."

Nephy blinked in confusion at the weird joke, then laughed a little.

They continued walking for a while longer and quickly found the rose garden. As they entered, an unpleasant figure appeared before them.

"Yo! You're looking awfully chipper, Zagan."

A familiar and gloomy sorcerer was leaning against the wall as if to block their path.

"A lot's happened between us, but it's about time to sett— Oooh?!"

Zagan didn't hesitate to swing his fist. His strike created a hole in the wall big enough for someone to walk through and shook the entire castle. However, Barbatos's head remained firmly on his shoulders. He'd thrown himself to the ground to get out of the way.

Hrm? He dodged? He's gotten better again...

It'd just been a punch, but Zagan had intended it to kill. Barbatos would've just barely managed to survive before, but now he hadn't even gotten grazed. His growth was truly worthy of praise.

"Why'd you suddenly try to punch me?!" Barbatos roared while in tears.

"Do I need a reason to?"

"You might not know this, but punching people without a reason makes you a savage."

Zagan cocked his head as his bad friend brushed off his clothes and stood back up.

"Seriously... I'm here 'cause I've got business with you," he said. "It's gotta do with that woman too."

"What?"

Barbatos had also eavesdropped on the private(?) conversation with

Marchosias. If this had something to do with Nephy, Zagan couldn't ignore it. Barbatos threw back his mantle and pointed down a dark corridor. The rose garden stretched out behind him, making the sight rather unusual.

"What do we do?" Zagan asked, exchanging looks with Nephy.

In truth, he wanted to ignore Barbatos completely and enjoy the rose garden, but he couldn't do that right now.

I'm worried about Eligor's prophecy too.

He couldn't overlook something that might be related to that. Still, he was in the middle of a date right now, so he wanted Nephy's opinion on the matter.

"Lord Barbatos isn't one to say such things without a reason," she responded with a serious look. "Why don't we tag along?"

The Barbatos in Nephy's head seemed to have far too much good sense, but slandering him would only ruin the mood, so he went along with her.

"Very well. Lead the way, Barbatos."

"Yeah, yeah."

On a sidenote, he properly fixed the broken wall with sorcery.



"Whoa! We're so high! Amazing! Oh, look over there Lilith! Isn't that Kianoides?"

"There's no way you can see it from here. That's Suflaghida's port."

"Is it? You sure know a lot."

After climbing the church's tower, Furcas was in a terrific mood.

"Come on, it's dangerous to lean forward," Lilith said, tugging on his clothes uneasily.

Opheos's central tower was the tallest building on the island. There was a large bell right behind Lilith, so there was really only enough space for one person to walk around. Typically, civilians weren't allowed this high. Normal tourists could only come up to a floor far lower than this one.

However, Zagan had many supporters within the church. Going through Nephteros—Chastille was out on business and couldn't help—he'd had the way opened. This trip's main goal was to join the gathering of Archdemons, but he'd gone out of his way to make arrangements for some sightseeing. It gave a glimpse at how serious their king was about having everyone enjoy this vacation.

"Yahoo! Oooh! Amazing! My voice comes right back!"

"I suppose we get mountain echoes here. Selphy, be careful not to fall."

Incidentally, right behind Lilith was her energetic childhood friend. Selphy could also use a safety rope or something, but Ain was holding her hand for her. After reaching the top of the stairs, Furcas and Selphy had gone in opposite directions, so they'd split up the group this way to handle things.

Aren't those two a little too close...?

Looking at her childhood friend, Lilith felt a little gloomy for some reason. However, she also felt a certain sense of security knowing that Ain would do something if Selphy seemed about to fall.

"Mountain echoes?" Furcas said, overhearing their conversation. "I wanna try it too."

"Hey, wait your turn," Lilith told him. "Selphy isn't done yet. There isn't enough space for everyone to stand there."

"I see. You really do have a good eye for details, Lilith."

"Jeez..."

Lilith couldn't get angry even if she wanted to when faced with his usual carefree smile. Placing her elbow on the railing, she looked out over the lake. The wind was strong, so she had to hold down her crimson hair.

The lake was so large that it extended to the horizon. There was no salt in the water, but watching the gentle ripples reminded Lilith of her home in Liucaon. She wondered what the princess of the succubi was doing in a place like this. Once in a while, she came to her senses and thought of such things.

His Highness and the head butler are kind, so I don't feel unwelcome or

anything.

However, Lilith was the first princess of the Hypnoels. One day, she would inherit the throne and serve to protect Liucaon.

Is it really okay for me to be playing around out here?

If she hadn't gotten involved with Zagan, she would probably have never been able to experience such things. Even with Selphy and Kuroka gone, she would've been strict on herself and others to better fulfill her duty as a member of royalty. She wouldn't have used being no more than a fifteen-year-old girl as an excuse. As part of the royal family, she had to fulfill her duty.

That's why I thought I would never get to spend time like a normal girl...

But under Zagan, everyone was treated like a normal person. The king even treated her as the representative of all normal people. This was despite Lilith being the next Queen Hypnoel. Still, a certain thought came to mind.

I don't hate this.

She had a feeling these would be priceless memories in the future. And as she continued thinking about such things, she noticed Furcas was staring at her.

"Wh-What is it?" she asked.

"Oh, I was just thinking about how pretty you are," he answered with a carefree smile. "I really do love you, Lilith. No matter what you think of me, my feelings won't change."

"Th-There you go again, saying such embarrassing things..."

Lilith knew her face was getting hot. She understood he felt genuine affection for her. It'd been a little too long now to say they'd just met. She understood this, but couldn't help but wonder.

If your memories come back, will you still say that?

The one he was truly in love with was Alshiera. Lilith didn't think he saw her as a substitute or anything, of course. She knew he had eyes for her. But he was an Archdemon. Much like her king, he was a terrifying sorcerer.

That Lily girl apparently regained her memories right away.

Lilith's mind drifted to the sorcerer with amnesia she'd crossed paths with that one time. Right after regaining her memories, Lily had vanished despite getting along with Foll so well.

That was why Lilith was scared. If she accepted Furcas's feelings, she would become frightened of him vanishing. No, she was already frightened, which was why she couldn't answer his feelings. It was so cowardly. In the end, she was just running away.

Lilith shook her head as if to fool herself and said, "Furcas, now's not the time to be saying such things. Do you understand? You have to go meet a bunch of people like His Highness as an Archdemon, remember?"

"Ha ha, I know," Furcas replied as he took her hand as if he didn't have a care in the world. "You know what?"

Even though I'm so worried...

She couldn't say those words. Furcas's hand was trembling slightly in hers.

"I understand," he continued. "I don't have power like Zagan and Shax do. A part of me wonders if this gathering is actually to take this Sigil of the Archdemon away from me."

Lilith was the one who hadn't given it enough thought.

It's obviously terrifying not to have any memories...

She grasped Furcas's trembling hand tightly.

"Dummy... Then just run away," she told him. "Nobody would blame you."

Furcas shook his head and responded, "I won't run away. I mean, if you were in my position, would you run?"

"[…"

"I want to be someone I can be proud of when I stand next to you and Zagan. That's why I won't run away."

Lilith gulped.



"That's why I'm going. So that when you come back, I can say with pride that I'm your childhood friend."

Those were the words she'd once said too. That was why she understood him to a painful extent.

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"Hey...Furcas?"
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"If your memories return...even if your memories return, will you remain as you are?"

Faced with her pleading voice, Furcas displayed a rare troubled expression.

"There's no way I will," he answered.

"Right..." Lilith mumbled, hanging her head.

"But I'm pretty sure my feelings for you are the one thing that won't change," he added with his usual smile.

"Dummy..."

She was surprised that he could make such a bold claim with nothing to base it on. However, those baseless words brought her relief to an astonishing extent.

I get it. I don't have the courage to believe in Furcas.

Surely, Chastille had that courage. That noble Angelic Knight understood Lilith better than anyone. She hadn't run away from her own love. She'd faced it directly. It pained Lilith's heart that it'd become a scandal that shook the entire continent, but Lilith respected her. Lilith wanted courage like Chastille's. Raising her head with that resolve in her heart...she suddenly sensed a certain gaze.

"Hwah? Selphy?"

Before she knew it, Selphy was right next to her and staring at her.

"Wh-What's up?" Lilith asked, bewildered by how silent her childhood friend was being.

"It seems you were having a serious conversation," Ain said with a sigh. "She

[&]quot;What is it?"

was waiting to talk with you."

Lilith was shocked that Selphy, of all people, had read the mood properly. She then tugged on Lilith's arm and pouted.

"Even I know you came along because Furcas has it rough," she said.

And then, as if to say she'd yielded enough by this point, she hugged Lilith tightly.



What do I do? I have no idea where we are anymore.

Micca had gone around to take a look at the island with Furfur, but was already pale to the face. That was because this island had been built as a stronghold, turned into a church, and built up as a town. The roads were like a maze. Walking down one path immediately led into ramparts and walls, so despite having a guidebook, Micca had gotten lost immediately.

"Are we...have we gotten lost?" Furfur asked, cocking her head and making a creaking noise.

Well, they were walking together, so there was no hiding that.

"S-Sorry! I don't know where we are..."

"It's all right. I don't know either," Furfur replied, trying to cheer him up.

Micca felt like falling to his knees.

That only makes things worse...

That said, he was taking the lead here. He had to take responsibility.

"Uhhh, right!" he said. "At times like these, it's best to return to where we started. Wanna try heading back to the harbor?"

"Yes. Understood."

Furfur has gotten a lot better at speaking.

One month had passed since they'd come under Archdemon Zagan's protection. Micca had been putting his efforts into sword training and peeling vegetables in the kitchen, whereas Furfur had been earnestly acquiring

knowledge as a sorcerer. They hadn't had many opportunities to speak with each other, but Micca felt a real sense of growth from her over the last month.

As he retraced his steps, he took a look at Furfur's profile.

I died once...

He hadn't really come to grips with that. His consciousness had cut off, and when he'd opened his eyes again, they'd told him he'd died. He'd likely been killed so fast that he hadn't even realized it. This frightened him, but not because he feared death itself. However, someone had given their life in his stead. It was none other than Furfur's master, Forneus.

I wonder what Furfur thinks about that.

In a sense, she should have resented him for causing Forneus's death, but...

"My master chooses, chose, Micca's life over his own. He's just as precious, and necessary, as my master."

That was what Furfur had said to Archdemon Zagan, so it would be an insult not to believe in her. That was why Micca didn't think she resented him. But what had Micca been able to do for her over this last month? He felt so worthless, pathetic, and anxious.

"F-Furfur!" Micca said, gathering his resolve.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Umm...how've you been lately?"

Micca doubted this was the right way to get a conversation started with a girl. He agonized over his choice, but Furfur nodded like it was nothing.

"Everyone is treating me very well," she said. "They're also making my lessons very easy for me."

Apparently, sorcery was all about an accumulation of knowledge, so Furfur was being made to read dozens of grimoires every single day.

"Also, according to Ain, I don't need to signal my moves at all," she added, rubbing her elbow over her long glove.

"Signal your moves...?"

"Yes. I do not need to brandish a sword to swing it. Kuroka said it is similar to drawing a sheathed sword. I've been...am trying very hard to practice it."

To put it simply, brandishing a sword was necessary to put weight behind the blow. Without any weight, a sword couldn't cut anything. It would lack the speed and sharpness to do so.

Kuroka totally did it without any of that, though.

A master could apparently unleash the greatest speeds by simply pulling back a sword. She'd demonstrated this by balancing a coin on the edge of her blade —which was already quite the acrobatic feat—and bisecting it only by pulling on her sword.

"It was a pretty popular parlor trick in the dark side of the church."

It was terrifying how she'd said that with a smile.

"Umm, meaning you can swing a sword at top speed right away," Micca said, recalling that act.

"Yes. Accelerating using Lightning. I apparently don't need to be a slave to human muscle structure."

Meaning she could unleash a slash at top speed without any warning. They were both practicing the art of the blade, but Micca figured he couldn't beat her.

No, I can't be so weakhearted!

Forneus had given his life for Micca's, so he had to become strong enough to protect Furfur.

"Also, I've been chatting with Foll lately," Furfur added as Micca agonized over his ineptitude.

"By Foll, you mean the princess?"

Micca wasn't sure if that was her actual title, but she was Zagan's daughter.

"Yes. Foll is...a dragon? She's far too strong a being. I was ready for the end."

"Wh-What?!" Micca exclaimed, doubting his ears at how violent the conversation had gotten.

"It's hard to feel...alive? When face-to-face with a dragon, I can't be fixed if broken. I was ready for that."

Foll didn't look like anything more than a little girl to Micca's eyes, but she was apparently mighty enough a being for Furfur to resolve herself for death before her.

Well, I guess she's a dragon and an Archdemon...

"But I did my best to talk to her," Furfur proclaimed proudly, clapping her hands in front of her chest. "Foll started talking to me little by little too."

Seeing how Furfur had gotten so chatty nowadays, Micca's heart felt light.

"You're really amazing, Furfur."

"Yes. I tried my best."

Micca couldn't help but smile.

"You're talking an awful lot today," he said.

"Yes. I've always wanted to speak to you, Micca."

He felt his face flush at that.

Augh... Is that really something you say straight to my face?

Micca knew his heart was pounding before her endlessly innocent gaze. Was it safe to assume he was in love with this girl?

"But it's a little unexpected," Micca muttered, trying to hide his embarrassment. "I didn't think you'd find anything scary."

"Scary...?" she repeated as her feet came to a stop.

"Furfur?"

"Scared. Fear. I've felt it," she mumbled, putting a hand to her heart. "When you died, when my master died, I felt it."

"Oh..."

Only a month had passed since she'd lost her master. There was no way she'd already come to terms with it. She'd simply been too busy to give it any thought.

"Micca, why did my master smile...?"

"I want to know. I want to know why my master died with a smile."

That was what Furfur had told Archdemon Zagan when he'd forced her to make a choice. She surely hadn't found the answer yet.

"I've heard that when humans smile, it is due to emotions like joy, delight, fun, and happiness," Furfur said. Micca had never seen her make such an expression. "My master knew he was dying, so why did he smile?"

Micca had been dead at the time, so there was no way he knew. Still, he had to answer her. He stared at the ground before speaking bit by bit.

"Back then...I don't know how he smiled...but..." he trailed off, looking into Furfur's eyes with conviction. "I think Forneus smiled because he wanted you to be happy."

"For my...happiness?"

"I have a lot of little siblings. I did my best as an Archangel because I wanted them to smile. I wanted them to be healthy and happy."

He hadn't accomplished anything and had been the lowest-ranking Archangel, but even so, Micca had put in significant effort.

"I'm sure Forneus felt the same way."

Micca knew almost nothing about Forneus. He hadn't had any real chance to speak with the man—and it'd been impossible to conserve with him to begin with—but he'd seen how dearly Forneus had treated Furfur. That was the best answer he could come up with. However, upon hearing that, a tear drew a line down Furfur's cheek.

"Happiness... I don't get it. I want...wanted my master to be alive," she said, then dived into Micca's chest. "But...I don't want you to vanish either. I wanted both of you here..."

Not knowing what to say, Micca could only return her embrace and let her cry like a child.

A while later, Micca and Furfur took a seat on a bridge's railing. He couldn't just stand there hugging a crying girl in the middle of the street, so he'd moved

over until Furfur could calm down.

She was done crying but hadn't settled her feelings yet. She showed no signs of wanting to say anything.

Maybe these emotions have only just started budding within her.

It was possible she only knew of "fear" and "sadness" after what had happened to Micca and Forneus. If so, Micca had to support her. However, even if she was a puppet and a sorcerer, she was still a girl. Micca had no idea how to talk to girls, so he just sat there, his eyes wandering aimlessly. That was when a certain shop on the side of the road came into sight.

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"Furfur, can you wait here for a minute?"
"Yes."
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Micca rushed into the store, but he wasn't familiar with this kind of place. He wandered about in confusion, not sure what to pick. He stared at the lines of goods for a while, then chose one.

I feel like this color suits Furfur.

Using that as the deciding factor, he immediately paid for it and returned to the bridge.

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"Furfur, here!"

"Yes?"

She accepted the small package from him.

"Um, it's a present. Mind opening it...?"

"I'll do that, then."
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She pulled out a small disc-shaped tin. It was a fancy-looking container. Furfur opened it, revealing what looked like red paint.

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"What is this?" she asked.

"Ummm, it's...lipstick."
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Micca's hometown was in the middle of the boonies, so the women there pretty much never wore lipstick. Nonetheless, growing girls really looked up to

the trends in the big city, so makeup and perfume were common topics among them. They had a particular interest in lipstick.

At least that was what Micca had heard from his male friend. That friend had told Micca to "go buy some lipstick in Raziel," so he could seduce one of the village girls. At the time, Micca's wallet hadn't been in a good enough state to afford it, so he'd ignored his friend's request. Now, he could somehow manage it.

I don't know of anything else girls might like...

Furfur's eyes shot open in wonder. She seemed satisfied with the present. Before long, she looked up at him and cocked her head.

"How do you use this?" she asked.

"Huh? You spread it on your lips... Umm, you don't know about it?"

"I don't."

With that, she closed her eyes and brought her face closer to his.

"Huh? Wuh? Umm?"

"I don't know how to use it. Please do it for me."

Is it okay for me to do this...?

He felt tremendous internal conflict for a moment, but Micca had been the one to buy it. Steeling himself, he scooped some lipstick with his pinky.

I think the village girls did it like this...

Using that finger, he touched Furfur's lips.

Huh? They're so soft...

Her hands were stiff like porcelain, but her lips were soft just like a human's. That said, he couldn't just remain frozen here, so he traced his finger along her lips, leaving a bright red hue behind on them.

"K-Kinda like this... How does it look?" Micca asked.

Unfortunately, he didn't have a mirror, so he drew his sword and used its surface instead.

"I...don't know this feeling," Furfur said.

"Ummm...you look pretty."

He wasn't confident whether he'd put it on her correctly. Still, hearing his compliment, Furfur definitely smiled.

"I feel like...I understand happiness...just a little now."

"R-Really?"

"Yes. If that was my master's wish, then I'll do my best."

Returning a clumsy smile of his own, Micca sat down next to her again.

Even if you only proceed little by little, I'll be here by your side.

It seemed he wouldn't be returning home for a while longer.



"It looks like Miss Furfur and Micca are all right."

Kuroka and Shax were watching the innocent sight from afar. They were the ones who'd brought these two to Zagan. Naturally, they hadn't just dropped off the youngsters and said goodbye. They'd been keeping an eye on them secretly over the past month.

We ended up messing up sometimes too, though.

Kuroka had tried showing Micca a means of cutting things without swinging a sword, walking around without making a noise, and how to cut a blade clean in two, but Micca had drawn away from her because of it. Had it been wrong to try to surprise him in the middle of training? Well, Kuroka had to have Ain help her with her training too, so she ended up accompanying them a fair bit.

"Finally got that weight off your mind?" Shax asked her.

"Jeez, weren't you worried too?"

"Being worried and being curious are two different things. I wasn't all that worried. I knew from the start the boy was very chivalrous."

Well, Micca had flown to Furfur's defense even knowing that Shax and Forneus were Archdemons. He was pretty chivalrous.

Kuroka turned to look up at Shax.

"Hm? What is it?" he asked.

"I don't think you lose in terms of chivalry."

"Can you stop turning up the heat out of the blue...?" Shax complained, covering his face.

Still, he wasn't particularly worried about them because there was something else he had to worry about instead. Kuroka nuzzled her head against his chest.

"Wh-What is it now?" he asked.

"I was just thinking I caused you a lot of anxiety..."

"You did well, Kurosuke," he said, petting her head. "Lord Forneus's case was nobody's fault. We all did our best, but were simply outdone."

"I know..."

So Shax said, but had Kuroka been able to make better use of her "eyes," she might've been able to protect Micca.

Silver eyes...

It'd happened against both Glasya-Labolas and Andrealphus. Kuroka had been able to see the flow of mana. Reading that flow made it possible to predict her opponent's movements, so mastering it would strengthen her considerably. However, she couldn't focus on her silver eyes intentionally.

Much like transforming into a black cat, she couldn't control it. Also, while using it made her unrivaled—well, enough to fight Ain to a draw—it also exhausted her to the point where she couldn't stand up afterward. According to Shax, it was because she'd acquired the ability rather than been born with it. It was a very heavy burden on her brain. Her old wound also played a factor.

However, Kuroka knew that being depressed about it also made Shax feel down as if it was happening to him. Raphael, Shax, and Zagan had thoroughly remonstrated with her about her thoughts of punishment and atonement since she'd left the dark side. That was why she had a clear understanding of how to act around them now. She was doing her best to get better on that front.

"Let's take it nice and easy," Shax said as if reading all her inner thoughts. That simple phrase was all it took to put her at ease.

"I understand there's no point rushing things..." Kuroka mumbled.

"You don't sound convinced," Shax said, cocking his head. "If you've got a problem, I'll hear you out."

Kuroka touched her face, wondering if she was truly that easy to read.

"I'm not really complaining or anything..." she said, shaking her head. "I'm just not happy with the way it's worked so far."

"Oh... Well, I get you there."

There was a boy who joined Ain's training once in a while. He was called Asura and was Alshiera's old friend. He'd once accompanied them on the trip back from Raziel and had talked to Kuroka a few times about facets of Liucaon's lady that she'd never even known. It seemed Alshiera was giving him secret missions, so he spent a lot of time running around outside the castle. That mother and son really were hard taskmasters.

It also means he has enough skill to meet Lady Alshiera's expectations.

He could even defeat Ain in a one-on-one fight, so he couldn't possibly be weak. He wasn't a bad person in any way, but Kuroka found it extremely hard to deal with him.

Upon finding out about her circumstances, he'd told her, "You can just do somethin' 'bout that through sheer willpower!" He'd wanted her to just push through it with guts or something. Not only that, but it had actually worked. What had all that accumulation of training she'd gone through been for? It all felt so futile.

"You managed to push through with sheer willpower because of all your efforts to date," Shax said as if reading her mind. "Kurosuke, you managed it 'cause you have enough skill to meet his reckless expectations. You can be proud of that."

"Jeez..."

When he put it like that, she couldn't even sulk about it anymore. She rubbed

her cheek against Shax's hand in retaliation, and though his fingers stiffened, he wrapped his palm around her cheek and stroked it gently.

Even though he was wearing a glove, his touch felt so soft. He'd recently quit smoking, but the faint scent of tobacco had seeped into his hands. A little of the aroma of the mead they'd had the other night was also still there.

I'd like to do what comes next already, though.

However, she knew he was proceeding carefully so that he didn't mix up the order of things. That was why it was inevitable for her to ramp up such displays of physical contact to divert her attention from her frustrations.

"B-By the way," Shax muttered, apparently reaching his limit, "do you have any interest in makeup?"

He was asking because Micca had bought Furfur some lipstick.

"Hmm, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't interested at all, but..." Kuroka mumbled, thinking it over a little.

"But?"

She only noticed she'd put it the wrong way after speaking. Shax was sure to ask more about it if she fumbled over her words like this.

"Umm, do I really have to tell you?" she asked.

"As long as you don't mind me asking."

Kuroka knew her cheeks were already turning red, but she rubbed her head against Shax's chest once more as if to hide that.

"I mean...putting makeup on means I won't be able to touch you like this anymore."

Makeup was delicate. She'd learned how to use it during her time in the dark side of the church. The slightest rub against her cheek would be enough to remove it and stain whatever it touched. She would no longer be able to nuzzle against him or get head pats.

Shax stared back in blank amazement, then strained a smile.

"Yeah, that is a problem," he said.

"Jeez, please don't laugh."

Unable to stand it any longer, Kuroka covered her face with both hands. Her two tails ignored her will and slapped against Shax's back.

"Well, I was thinking of buying you some makeup too," Shax said, scratching his cheek. "But I guess maybe I shouldn't, huh?"

"Why? I'll gladly accept."

"You just said you couldn't put it on."

"This and that are different matters. What girl would refuse a gift of makeup from the man she loves?"

Unable to endure her straightforward answer, Shax arched backward.

"After buying some lipstick, want to try what Miss Furfur and Micca did?" Kuroka asked, tugging on his arm toward the store.

"Mind taking it a little easier on me...?"

"Not happening."

Kuroka was the type to go straight for the jugular. She didn't know how to take things easy, even when it came to love. In the end, lipstick had been too high a hurdle and they'd settled with blush.



"So pretty. What flower is this?"

"I think it's a lily."

"There are so many colors. How cute."

Foll was honestly impressed by Dexia's explanation. There were countless gardens in Opheos. The rose garden was the centerpiece, but there were all kinds of flowers being grown all over the place. Lilies and lavenders apparently bloomed during this season. Not too long ago, a strange flower called a tulip had been in season.

"So you like flowers too, little lady?" Dexia asked, finding this somewhat unexpected.

"Mmm... Flowers are pretty. I like them. Back when Nephteros played with me, she taught me how to make a garland."

It had been about a year ago now. Those had been the early days when Foll had just met Nephteros. For some reason, Nephteros had ended up getting confined in the hidden elven village along with them. If Foll remembered right, it had something to do with Barbatos dragging her along.

The handyman doesn't make sense sometimes.

She understood now that his behavior tended toward the eccentric when it involved Chastille, but he still did things that got him punched by Zagan all the time. He was actually pretty smart, so why did he always make such foolish decisions?

"Little lady, by Nephteros, do you mean Lady Nephy's little sister?" Aristella asked.

"Mhm. She should've just come with us."

This trip was restricted to Archdemons and their partners, so they hadn't been able to bring her along.

I think Nephy invited her, though.

Well, there was no way this trip was going to end peacefully. Nephteros had finally obtained a peaceful life with Richard, so it was a good thing they didn't have to drag her into this mess.

Aristella clenched the hem of her skirt and hung her head. She seemed to be troubled by something, but also looked scared. It was rare for her to act like this in front of Foll.

"Is something bothering you?" Foll asked.

Aristella started, then raised her head. "No...it's just, when I look at her, my chest starts to hurt for some reason."

Foll had a feeling she knew why. Aristella had likely been consumed by Azazel due to Nephteros. That said, Nephteros didn't have any memories of doing so, and neither did Aristella. There was no way of confirming it, but that was simply how it seemed.

"Are you scared of her?" Foll asked.

"I wonder... I think...I'm scared, but I also feel like she's not entirely a stranger."

Fol wasn't sure what to say.

Because she's a Nephilim? Because of Azazel?

Nephteros's current body was that of a Nephilim, just like the twins. What was more, it was a Bifrons-made model and was highly specialized with a far higher degree of completion than any other Nephilim. Upon moving into that vessel, Nephteros was supposed to have completely escaped Azazel.

At any rate, this seemed to be what was bothering Aristella. Foll pondered over how to respond.

"Hm... I don't get it. If it bothers you, I can look into it."

And after thinking it over, Foll honestly admitted she didn't know.

Acting like I know more than I do will definitely lead to bad things happening.

Aristella stared back in wonder for a little, then shook her head.

"No, it's more than enough just for you to offer, little lady."

Feeling a little more at ease, Aristella gave Foll a modest smile.

"It's okay, Aristella," Dexia cut in, squeezing her hand firmly. "I'm here for you."

"Mmm... Thanks, sis."

Aristella had changed from the little sister Dexia knew, but even so, Aristella had returned to her. Foll couldn't even imagine what was going through Dexia's mind. Even if she wanted to help somehow, Foll had no idea what she could do.

Sorcery that heals damage to the soul doesn't exist.

Due to his extensive search for a means of destroying the Sacred Swords, Zagan had undertaken research of the soul. These two topics were inexorably linked, after all.

What he'd discovered was that both Aristella and Furcas possibly had

damaged souls. If that was the case, the same being had also been responsible for the damage. Her circumstances differed, but Lily had temporarily lost her memories due to damage to her core jewel. A carbuncle's core jewel was a crystallization of their soul, so this backed the theory.

However, a certain thought came to mind.

Zagan's Heaven's Scale Prayer's Shell might be able to do it...

In Lily's case, healing her body hadn't restored her memories. That was what it'd seemed like, anyway. Nonetheless, Lily had regained her memories as Asmodeus. If Heaven's Scale could repair the soul, then the day could come when Aristella's memories were restored too.

"Aha, I found some naughty children," a sudden voice said. "Weren't you taught how dangerous it is for kids to play on their own?"

A girl with stars in her eyes stood with the lily garden to her back.

"Lily!"

Foll raised her in delight upon seeing the girl who'd been avoiding her all this time. She tried to keep up that momentum and run over to her, but Lily flung back her robe in a grand gesture as if to reject her. She used her other hand to put a finger to her lips, then glanced up at the sky for an instant. It was such a trivial gesture that it could be missed with a blink, but Foll definitely saw it.

What was that? Some kind of signal, maybe?

Foll considered why Lily was stopping her. Putting a finger to her lips meant to keep quiet. It would be natural to assume that her quick glance upward meant someone was watching her.

Even though it's dangerous to talk since someone is watching, she has something to tell me...

That meant Lily didn't have the leisure to pass things through the usual gossip rag anymore.

"Asmodeus!" Dexia shouted.

"Both of you, behind me," Foll said, holding her back. "There's no telling what Asmodeus came here to say."

"Huh...?"

Dexia knit her brow at the unnatural turn of phrase, but understood the order. She pulled on Aristella's hand and got behind Foll.

I can't get my intentions across as skillfully as Lily can.

Nonetheless, Foll tried to tell her she understood, prompting Lily's lips to relax in relief. Lily then linked her hands behind her back and started her act.

"There's just a *teensy* something I'd like to ask you. The butler who had my sister's core jewel...Raphael, was it?"

Foll's eyes widened at the unexpected mention of Raphael's name.

"What about him?"

"Well, it's the same old same old, ya know? All who've touched Spirit Blood have to go through hell. It's only fair. And it turns out, of all things, that man has a cute daughter! What kinda girl is she?"

Foll calmly narrowed her eyes.

Meaning...Kuroka is in danger?

Kuroka had Shax with her, but Asmodeus was an Archdemon feared by all sorcerers. There was no telling what she would do. She somehow understood what Lily meant, but telling her plainly would be unnatural.

"Do you really think I'll answer you?" Foll asked, doing her best to sound wary.

Lily gave her a mean smile and replied, "Are you dissatisfied that I'm letting your two attendants live?"

"Oooh, I get it."

She had a point. Foll could survive in a fight against Archdemon Asmodeus, but it would be very difficult for her to protect the twins.

Hmm. That's not all. Does she mean I need to protect Dexia and Aristella too?

Foll would definitely shift her focus to protecting these girls if told that. It seemed that was why Lily had chosen to word it that way. At any rate, Foll had no choice but to comply when threatened like this. Plus, she was deeply moved

that she'd been guided so well.

"Little lady, there's no need to listen to the likes of her," Dexia said, biting her lip. "I'll show I can at least protect Aristella and myself."

"You're so smart, Dexia," Foll told her. "Good girl."

"Is now really the time for that?!"

Thanks to her tactful thinking, the atmosphere was nice and strained. Foll held up her arm to protect her lovable attendant, then started creating the Black Dragon in her hand before pausing with a groan.

Bringing Marbas out might be a bit much.

She no longer had any options. Bringing out Marbas was no more than a show that she was protecting her attendants. Foll lowered her arm in resignation.

"Got it... I'll tell you about Kuroka," she said. "Just don't touch these two."

"Little lady!"

Foll gave a brief description of Kuroka's features. Lily would be able to immediately find a cait sith with two tails and four ears.

"But Kuroka has Shax with her. Don't think you can do anything to her easily."

After Foll added the fact that Kuroka had someone to protect her, Lily once more put a finger to her lips and cocked her head.

"Aha, he's one of the newbies, right? Well, I guess he's strong enough to be an Archdemon, but it's probably pointless."

"What do you mean?"

Lily spun on the spot, lily petals fluttering in the air around her.

"Now that Andrealphus is gone," she said, "there are three candidates for strongest Archdemon. I guess you can say they're the top three. Measuring strength in a squabble is pretty nonsense to sorcerers, though."

The fact that she could call a conflict between Archdemons a mere "squabble" showed that she was one of these three.

"First is me," she declared boldly to confirm that, brushing back her silver hair

and holding up a finger. "Well, that one's obvious."

Despite her arrogance, she was telling the indisputable truth.

"Next is Zagan," she added, holding up a second finger. "Despite only becoming an Archdemon a year ago, he already beat up a few of the other Archdemons. I doubt anyone here will object to this one."

Lastly, she held up a third finger.

"So, the other is Phenex. She's one of the biggest oddballs among the Archdemons, but in a simple fight, she might even be beyond me."

That last fact was surprising, but the name itself also confused Foll.

"Not Marchosias?" she asked.

"Marchosias is a scary Archdemon, but he isn't strong in a fight or anything," Lily replied, then smiled as if opening up about a fun prank. "Phenex is apparently going to go on a rampage soon. This island will vanish."

Foll's eyes shot open in shock.

"So, if you don't want to die, you should hurry and run away," Lily added as she was about to vanish.

"Wait! Lily!" Foll called out without thinking.

"...What is it?"

Lily stopped for her. There was a lot Foll wanted to say, like wanting to play together and travel together. However, she didn't want Lily to take more risks than she already had to bring them this warning.

And so, Foll gave her a small wave and mouthed the words "See you later."

"Hmph..."

Lily huffed in discontent, then wrapped herself in a black robe and vanished. And as she did, she definitely waved back.



Once she was completely gone, Dexia let out a huge sigh.

"She really is an enemy now," she said.

"Dexia, the watcher is gone," Foll told her. "You don't need to act anymore."

"Act...?"

"Sis, Lily came here to warn us of the danger," Aristella said as her big sister stood there with her mouth agape. "She's not hostile towards us."

"Wh-What?"

It seemed Aristella had figured it out, but Dexia had really been under the impression that Lily had betrayed them. This was likely the difference between Aristella not knowing Lily, and Dexia knowing Asmodeus.

"B-But you even brought out the Black Dragon in frustration," Dexia stammered.

"Did it look that way?"

That was a happy miscalculation.

Even if it didn't go exactly as I wanted, maybe I didn't mess up.

"It's okay," Foll said, petting Dexia's head. "You're fine that way. You saved me."

"Ummm...did I?"

"Mm-hmm. Thinking carefully while talking was fun, but hard. It would've been suspicious if not for you. Well done."

It was hard to say whether Foll and Lily's friendship had been properly kept under wraps.

But I think we hid the fact that Lily is trying to protect Kuroka.

After all, Asmodeus's fixation on Spirit Blood was well known among the other Archdemons. They would never expect her to protect a relative of someone who'd once touched any. It wasn't clear whether Dexia understood any of this, of course. She made a weird look as she continued letting Foll pet her.



"I've been waiting, Zagan!"

They were at the cathedral at the center of the island. It was an impressive building even compared to any other church, enough to be the pillar of this tourist destination. An enormous silver cross stood as tall as a person, and behind it was an extravagant stained-glass window depicting a saint.

Standing before a lectern were two Angelic Knights. One was Chastille. She had her Sacred Sword thrust into the ground and was striking a daunting pose. She seemed more belligerent than usual, but was wearing the formal attire of a bishop, so she wasn't here to fight or anything. She was probably just excited. She was wearing both the butterfly hair accessory and green earrings she'd been gifted by Barbatos. She appeared to be rather fond of them.

Standing next to her was a man with long bangs. He was wearing Anointed Armor, so it was easy to tell he was an Angelic Knight. Still, he looked pretty grouchy. His face was vaguely familiar, so Zagan searched his memories and recalled seeing him in Raziel's treasury. He didn't remember his name, but he was the Archangel who'd fought Chastille.

The man looked annoyed, but his hostility seemed to be directed at Chastille rather than Zagan. Perhaps there was some lingering antagonism from their previous fight. Upon noticing Zagan's gaze, Chastille gestured toward the man.

"Oh, let me introduce you first," she said. "This is Lord Yuri Hartonen. He's the Archangel responsible for safeguarding Opheos."

This was one of the continent's premier strategic positions. It was more than enough of a reason to station a Sacred Sword wielder here. That meant he had to possess considerable ability.

Yuri Hartonen. The eighth-ranked Archangel and Sacred Sword Uriel's wielder.

Zagan had memorized the names of all those in possession of Sacred Swords. The man looked like he had some skill, but he was only ranked slightly above the brand-new Archangels. Zagan didn't know what faction he belonged to, but at the very least, he didn't seem to be part of Chastille's Unification Faction.

"Hmph, I'd like to say it's been since the incident at the treasury," the man

said, "but it seems you don't even remember my damn face."

"Not entirely true," Zagan said. "You're the man who crossed blades with Chastille, right? If you wish to pick things up from there, I don't mind going along with it."

"I'd be lying if I said it doesn't bother me," he said with a sigh. "Still, I know my place."

"Hmmm."

He was quite the rational man. If he was the type to flare up and charge into battle, Zagan would've shut him up with a slight brush to the side, but he was apparently capable of proper conversation.

"Allow me to apologize," Zagan said, bowing at the waist. "I've enjoyed my time in your territory. If any of my subordinates forget their manners, feel free to rebuke them."

Zagan and his subordinates were having a pleasant time sightseeing in Opheos. This man was responsible for managing this island so that anyone could enjoy it. It wouldn't be like this if he was despotic or sloppy about his job.

And so, it was only right for Zagan to pay him respect. Hartonen likely never expected an Archdemon to lower his head like this. His eyes widened a little, but he soon returned a quiet nod.

"I have no need to interject so long as there isn't any trouble," he said. "So far, nothing has happened."

The church's standpoint had been somewhat inconsistent since the uproar with Chastille, but the Angelic Knights were slowly establishing their own place in the world. This man was one such example.

"Hey, crybaby, is it really okay to stick that through the floor?" Barbatos suddenly pointed out in exasperation.

The cathedral's floor was made of wood, so putting a Sacred Sword down like that would clearly make a hole in it.

"Aaaaaah! Wh-What do I do?! F-Forgive me, Lord Hartonen!"

"How often must you make that same blunder?" Hartonen grumbled.

It seemed this was the reason he was so worked up. He looked irritated enough to draw his Sacred Sword at any moment, showing that this clearly wasn't the first time.

"Gah! Just pull it the hell out already," Barbatos said. "Erk, even wood is hard to fix after getting cut by a Sacred Sword? What a pain in the ass."

Sorcery didn't work well when a Sacred Sword's aura was at play. Chastille peeked down anxiously while Barbatos was having a hard time with it.

"Can you fix it...?" she asked.

"I-I-I-I-I can! So get away! You're too close!"

"Why? But back home, you never get angry over this."

"This ain't your home!"

"Oh, right... Umm, sorry. I forgot to make the distinction."

Zagan honestly sympathized with Hartonen now. Watching these two idiots was irritating enough for Zagan to break his own throne. Hartonen had likely been subjected to this for a while now.

"Did you drag me here to brag about your love life?" Zagan asked, raising a hand to interject. "Well, we've done it before too, so I won't outright refuse, but we're in the middle of a date here. Mind if we get back to it already?"

"This ain't got nothing to do with love!"

Zagan had tried being very understanding, but Barbatos shouted at him for some reason.

"Chastille, Lord Barbatos, it has been a long time," Nephy said. "I'm glad to see you've safely started a relationship."

"W-W-W-W-We're not in a relationship yet!" Chastille shouted.

"Uhhh..."

Nephy was naturally bewildered by that response. That said, they'd been cornered by that gossip rag being spread all over the place. There had to have been some kind of development. The two seemed somewhat closer to each other than before, at least.

Setting that aside, Zagan would've preferred if they could keep such displays to themselves.

"So? What do you want?" he asked, irritation clear on his face. "If it's something stupid like that time at the elven village, I'm going to choke the life out of you."

He wanted to believe that Chastille wouldn't get tricked by something like that again.

"Y-You've got it all wrong," Chastille said, returning to her senses and hurrying to her feet. "There's something I'd like to show Nephy."

"Nephy? Not me?"

"Yup, Nephy," another voice said as if it was perfectly natural.

"Why the hell are you even here?" Zagan asked, putting himself on maximum guard.

With a hand to her waist, standing atop the lectern as if to provoke divine punishment, was none other than Manuela. Her green wings flapped, spreading feathers around her. Hartonen's face twitched neurotically, his fingers wriggling as the limit of his patience was tested.



"Obviously, to help you get changed," Manuela replied. "Oh, Mister Zagan, you go get changed over there. I've got a helper, so if you don't understand anything, just ask."

Nothing was going to get through to her, so Zagan scowled at Chastille.

"Hey, what the hell is this? Why would you call her of all people? If you're getting in the way of my date, I'll show no mercy, not even to you."

"I'm telling you that you've got it wrong," Chastille protested. "Um, the outfit I want to show Nephy takes a lot of work to get into, so Gremory suggested borrowing her abilities."

"We're leaving, Nephy! Nothing good will come out of staying here!"

Zagan didn't hesitate to pull on Nephy's hand and march out upon hearing the first mention of Gremory's name.

"P-Please wait a moment, Master Zagan," Nephy said. "Miss Gremory may have been the one to suggest this, but Manuela isn't *that* bad of a person."

"Hear me, Nephy. Gremory and Manuela are one of a kind."

"That...certainly might be the case, but Manuela is the type to do her work properly...in the end."

The "in the end" part was the problem, but Nephy was far too kind and always listened to this monster.

"Relax, Mister Zagan," Manuela cut in, brushing back her short hair and smiling in an utterly untrustworthy fashion. "I'm here today at the request of the church. I'm not gonna play around (that much)."

"Do you think I didn't hear you whisper that last part?"

Zagan was as wary as could be, but if Manuela did something uncalled for, she could get marked as an enemy by the church, so he didn't think she would necessarily act like usual. He directed a glance at Hartonen, who had his hands over his abdomen like he had a stomachache. Seeing that he wasn't kicking her out, it was, in fact, an official request from the church. Zagan was a little worried, but sighed upon concluding that he had no other choice.

"Very well..." Zagan conceded. "I don't intend to smear mud over your reputation. Just don't do anything unnecessary."

"You really think that little of me?"

"Do you really need to ask?"

Manuela cocked her head like she didn't understand his apprehensions. Anyway, Zagan just wanted to get this over with already and return to his date, so he reluctantly followed her instructions.

"Seems you've had it rough," he said as he walked past Hartonen, sympathy clear in his voice.

"You too..."

It felt like he could actually get along with this Archangel.

"Oh, Mister Zagan. You're really here."

"I thought it'd be you."

Waiting for him in the room was none other than the vulpin Kuu. Perhaps because today's job was for the church, she was dressed like a nun. It was entirely possible it was because of Manuela's hobby instead, however.

She's been completely poisoned by Manuela...

And yet, she was capable of hiding her presence completely, so he couldn't make light of her.

"So? What am I doing here?" he asked.

Manuela had said something about changing, so he knew it had to do with clothes. Still, she'd been hamming it up for some reason and hadn't gone into the specifics.

An outfit at the church... Is she planning to dress me up like an Angelic Knight or bishop or something?

Zagan knew that the church was losing support. They might have been planning to do some publicity by using an Archdemon. Not that Zagan believed this would have any effect, but Gremory had a record of pulling it off with Chastille, so it was necessary for him to account for the impossible.

But if Gremory is involved...

Chastille would never think of something so crafty, but that granny could use her to that end. Zagan remained on guard as Kuu brought him a change of clothes—a pure white tailcoat.

"Here, please change into this, Mister Zagan."

"What is this? Are you making me some kind of waiter?"

It was similar to the clothes Raphael usually wore as a butler, but the color was different. Nothing suited a sorcerer less than white clothes, so was this meant to match Nephy?

"Now, now, I'm sure you'll be shocked," Kuu said with a smile, forcing the clothes into his hands.

"I'm already shocked by the fact that you two are here."

If both Gremory and Manuela were involved, he had to be on maximum alert. He especially had to do anything in his power to protect Nephy. She was far too kind and had far too little sense of danger when it involved those monsters.

After Zagan finished putting on the clothes with such thoughts in mind, Kuu nodded in satisfaction.

"Oooh, it really does suit you!" she said. "You have a nice face, so you should try dressing up more."

"...I'll consider it."

Kuu was likely just going along with this because Manuela seemed to be having fun. She did appear to know something, but she clearly wasn't going to tell Zagan anything.

Zagan continued absentmindedly nodding along with what she said as he imbued the tailcoat with the bare minimum of sorcery.

I need to at least be able to use Eastern and Western Sky and Shadow Sever at a moment's notice.

That was what he needed to run away.

Upon returning to the cathedral, Nephy was already waiting for him.

"Master Zagan. I'm so happy."

While wearing a pure white dress, Nephy smiled.

Chapter IV: Even a Hero May Seek Salvation

"So? Are you really doing this?" Behemoth asked, standing atop Opheos's walls.

Phenex was doing stretches in front of him, her armor clanking noisily. Armor restricted the joints' movements, so he questioned whether those stretches served any actual purpose, but at least she seemed to be enjoying herself.

"Hmph, I'm saying I'll see this new Archdemon's strength for myself," Phenex replied, turning her strange mask toward him. "Nothing speaks more than experience, right? If Zagan truly possesses as much power as you two say, then it's best to test it out first. So? What kind of sorcery does he use? I vaguely recall Bifrons saying something about him absorbing sorcery."

"What makes you think I'll reveal my boss's tricks...?"

Behemoth owed Zagan immensely, so he would never betray him. And yet, Levia answered in his stead like it was no big deal.

"Zagan uses sorcery to devour his opponent's sorcery. Only Kimaris's physical reinforcement sorcery has managed to work against it."

"Um, Levia...?" Behemoth mumbled, giving her a reproachful look.

"Not even death can cure stupidity," Levia said, shaking her head. "It's better for her to lose so thoroughly that she can't complain about it later."

"Hey, whose side are you on?" Phenex cut in, tears in her eyes. "Are you actually just bullying me?"

"But I'm helping..." Levia protested weakly.

"That's weird. That's not what helping sounds like in my book."

Well, this was the bothersome kind of sorcerer she was, so maybe it was true she had to taste defeat firsthand. Phenex wailed for a while longer, but soon smiled behind her mask.

"Still, it's good news that reinforcement works," she said. "That's what I

specialize in too."

"Also, Zagan uses sorceries called Heaven's Scale and Heaven's Phosphor," Levia added. "This is what cemented his position as an Archdemon. Both are based on his power to absorb sorcery. One is a shield that strengthens itself infinitely. The other is a fire that burns life itself. They each have many forms, so do be careful."

These were all very difficult for ordinary sorcerers to handle. At the very least, Behemoth couldn't think of any way of overcoming them.

Phenex nodded and asked, "Is that the sorcery you want to show me?"

"Yes," Levia acknowledged. "First, you need to demonstrate enough power for him to use them."

"Hmph! Don't blame me if death comes first."

"Yours?"

"Are you joking? If I could die that easily, I wouldn't have it so hard."

It wasn't clear what exactly she took offense to, but Phenex was angry. Still, Levia didn't care at all and continued her explanation.

"Oh, one more thing. Zagan can seal the Sigil of the Archdemon."

"Whaaa...? He's stupidly anti-sorcery. Does he have a grudge against sorcerers or something?"

"Who knows?" Levia said with a cock of her head.

"I heard it all started when he became an Archdemon," Behemoth explained.

"All the other Archdemons had such lousy personalities that he wanted to kill them."

"Hmm...? I can sympathize with that. There are no decent Archdemons,"

Phenex muttered as if it had nothing to do with her. She then twisted her mask toward Behemoth. "Huh? Was I maybe there for that?"

In short, she was one of the reasons Zagan was trying to kill the Archdemons.

"We just teased him a little about being a pygmy! Is that really something to slaughter everyone over?! He's got way too short a fuse!"

Phenex stamped her feet in indignation, then stopped caring again immediately and straightened her posture.

"Where were we again? Sealing the Sigil of the Archdemon, yes? Well, I never use the thing, so I guess that doesn't really matter."

Phenex's specialty was sacrificial sorcery, so the Sigil of the Archdemon couldn't be applied to it. She finished her warm-up by stretching both arms behind her back, then slammed her gauntleted fists together.

"Phew, it's been a while since I've exercised. Time to see what Zagan's got."

Keeping the Golden Lord in the corner of his eye, Behemoth gazed toward the cathedral where his boss likely was at the moment.

Don't you dare lose to this idiot, Zagan.

Phenex acted like a small-time punk most of the time, but Behemoth knew she was mighty enough to rival Asmodeus.



"Master Zagan, I'm so happy."

Nephy smiled, a pure-white dress adorning her body. Her hair was equally white, sparkling like silver under the light. It gave her an air of divine solemnity. She was like a spirit of the moon. The chest of her dress and her elbow-length gloves were embroidered with a crest of a laurel tree using gold thread. Her skirt went all the way to the floor and was adorned with frills and lace. She held a bouquet of pale pink and white flowers in her hand. Atop her head was a silver tiara and a thin transparent veil, hiding her face as if to protect a bride's purity.

Zagan let out a sigh of admiration. He could do nothing but stand there, desperately attempting to suppress the pounding of his heart.

How beautiful...

No matter how hackneyed and overused a word it was, Zagan's mind was incapable of coming up with any other way to describe her. Yes, right here, right now, his beloved was wearing a wedding dress.

Zagan looked down at his own clothes. He was dressed in a white tailcoat. He

felt like Kuu had helped him get into it just moments ago, but his memory was foggy. In short, this had to be the moment of their wedding ceremony.

Aaah, this must be a dream.

Perhaps this was Lilith's doing. He'd brought her along on a vacation, so maybe she was being considerate. It really hadn't been necessary, but still, it wasn't a bad dream.

If he could allow himself to be a little greedy, Zagan would've liked to see Nephy in this outfit only after he proposed to her. Seeing what came afterward in a dream felt like a waste. In a sense, it would detract from the experience when he eventually got to witness the real thing.

Regardless, she was so beautiful that he couldn't peel his eyes away from her.

"Um, Master Zagan," his adorable bride said, her pointy ears bright red and quivering. "Are you not going to say anything...?"

"Oh! Sorry! You're so beautiful that I lost consciousness!"

"Hyah?!"

His beloved was wearing a wedding dress.

Huh? Isn't this a dream?

The sight was straight out of a dream, but this seemed to be reality.

"Hic... You really are beautiful, Nephy. I have no more regrets now that I've seen you two on your wedding day."

"Hey! Don't go kickin' the bucket on your own!"

"Th-That was just a figure of speech! You already know, don't you? I have no intention of dying and leaving you alone..."

"Haaah? What kinda embarrassing crap are you spoutin'?!"

Maybe this really is a dream.

Now that he took a closer look, around Chastille was dressed as the officiant, having an idiotic lover's quarrel with Barbatos. Zagan couldn't distinguish this from dream or reality, but either way, he really wanted these two to choose the right time and place to argue. However, punching Barbatos might splatter blood

on Nephy's wedding dress, so Zagan mustered the full force of his sense of reason and endured the urge.

"Aaaaaaaagh!"

"Zagan! It's our fault, so please let him go! Barbatos's head is going to pop!"

Chastille screamed as she heard Barbatos's skull creaking. It seemed Zagan had resisted the urge to punch him, only to unconsciously grab him by the face. Well, that didn't really matter. Barbatos's eyes rolled back as Zagan chucked him aside.

I-Is this maybe the perfect time to give her the wedding ring?

Hadn't Ain told him the appropriate time would surely arrive? Well, now it finally had. Zagan stood before Nephy.

"Aaah, um, you're so beautiful... I can't even think of any other words to describe this sight."

"M-Master Zagan, you also look most gallant and wonderful."

Both of them broke into a smile. Zagan then timidly reached out with both hands.

"M-May I see your face too?" he asked.

"Y-Yes."

He parted her veil to the sides. Her lips were highlighted by a deep crimson, and her cheeks had blush on them too. Manuela must have done her makeup. She even had ring-shaped accessories on her pointy ears. This was the first time Zagan saw her like this. There was a difference here from her usual adorableness, dignity, and beauty.

"I don't know if this is the right thing to say," he told her, "but I've fallen in love with you all over again."

"I-I feel the same way."

Unable to endure it any longer, Nephy moved to cover her face. However, she then remembered she was wearing makeup, so she started panicking with her hands halfway to her face. This adorable behavior was properly Nephy.

"To tell you the truth, there's something I've been wanting to give you for a while now," Zagan said, taking her hand.

"S-Something you want to give me...?"

"Yeah."

And just as he was about to take the small box out of his pocket...

"Ha ha ha ha! I've finally found you, Archdemon Zagan!"

The ceiling's stained-glass window shattered and a jarring voice resounded through the building with irritating clarity. A cathedral was built with acoustics in mind for a pipe organ and such, so the voice was as noisy as could be. Zagan stopped the rain of glass with sorcery, then flashed a refreshing smile.

"Nephy."

"Yes?"

"I have someone to kill. Wait for me."

"...Yes. Um, do try to be gentle."

After being disturbed at that exact moment, he had no reason to show mercy.



"And who the hell are you?"

Descending into the cathedral was an oddball covered head to toe in glittering golden armor. Their face was concealed by a mask that seemed to be modeled after a bird's beak, and it too was golden. Zagan knew at a glance that he didn't want to get involved with this person.

He took a look around just in case. Chastille was next to Kuu and Hartonen was hurrying to Manuela's side. They lived up to their positions as Angelic Knights. Zagan had stopped the falling glass, but it would've been fatal for the civilians if he hadn't. The knight had moved immediately to protect them. On that note, Barbatos's shadow had spread out to guard Chastille, but Zagan couldn't care less about that.

Zagan questioned the glitzy oddball instead of immediately lunging in with a punch. That was because he sensed the presence of a Sigil of the Archdemon.

The only Archdemons I don't know are Phenex and Astaroth.

Well, strictly speaking, Zagan had met them when he'd inherited his Sigil, but the majority had been wearing hoods, so he didn't know their features.

Starving Bone Lord Astaroth was said to be undead. In that case, this was Golden Lord Phenex. There was really no mistaking it based on the shiny armor.

He couldn't get an accurate grasp of her stature due to her hunched back, but she seemed to be a head shorter than Zagan.

The founder of sacrificial sorcery... I don't see any mediums, though.

Well, an Archdemon could easily stow away one or two sacrifices in subspace.

"Ha ha ha, how cold, my colleague," the glitzy oddball replied, laughing up toward the sky in an exaggerated manner. "Aren't you the one who contacted me? I'm Golden Lord Phenex."

Behemoth and Levia, who he'd sent to contact Phenex, were nowhere in sight. Their last periodic contact had gone perfectly fine, so they were likely all right. However, Zagan hadn't heard anything about them bringing this idiot to meet him.

The way she talks kind of reminds me of that idiot Bifrons. It's pissing me off...

Bifrons had been a genius at annoying others and had gotten in Zagan's way at every opportunity. They'd finally died the other day, and now a similar idiot had popped up. It wasn't an appealing development.

"I heard you had no intention of cooperating," Zagan said, unable to hide his disgust. "Did you change your mind?"

"I did change my mind, but you're not the one I'm cooperating with," Phenex said, spreading her arms theatrically. "I'm siding with Marchosias."

"That's a lie."

"...Not even a moment's hesitation? Why don't you believe me?"

"Marchosias was the one who summoned me. Even if it were a trap, all of his subordinates would attack at once. There's no point challenging me directly when he has Glasya-Labolas on his side either. He doesn't underestimate me

that much."

Phenex fell silent for a bit, unsure how to react.

"I didn't think you'd talk like an upstanding person. Aren't Archdemons the type to go red to the face and charge when someone picks a fight with them?"

"That kind of savage is incapable of making the woman he loves happy."

Having finally come to his senses, Barbatos was giving him a "You really think you have the right to say that?" look. Zagan decided to punch him later. Well, Nephy had told him to be gentle beforehand, so he wasn't really in the mood to resort to immediate violence, but he had no reason to explain himself.

"Don't worry, my business is nothing serious," Phenex said. "My friends assess you very highly, so I thought I'd come to test your mettle."

"Is that so? Then leave."

"Are you the shy type...? You don't normally tell someone to leave when they're being so cordial, you know?"

"Do you really think I'd be nice to someone who's dragging trouble my way?"

"I don't know who you are, but can you leave it at that?" Chastille asked, finally calming down somewhat. "We're in the middle of a sacred ceremony."

"Huh? We weren't just gettin' them dressed up? I mean, these two still ain't married?" Barbatos grumbled, completely blind to his own shortcomings.

Zagan decided to add another punch later. Phenex turned to the two of them, her eyes wavering behind the lenses of her mask.

Is Phenex connected to Chastille in some way...?

It looked like Phenex's eyes were fixed on Chastille specifically. However, that only lasted for a moment.

"Can we get the outsiders to shut up?" she said, waving a hand. "You know what you're in for if you anger me."

In contrast to Phenex's attitude, there wasn't a hint of dignity in anything she did.

Something has her shaken...

However, there was one man here who couldn't remain silent when looked down on like this.

"There have been far too many idiots visiting lately..."

It was Hartonen. Unlike Chastille, he was wearing his Anointed Armor and was ready for battle. He lowered his stance and closed the distance to Phenex in a single breath, then swept his Sacred Sword up from below.

"How bold, though I can't say I admire someone who would bring a blade to such a friendly conversation."

The Sacred Sword was stopped by a brass gauntlet. Phenex grabbed the blade, then threw a punch at Hartonen with her free hand.

"Dodge it, Hartonen!" Chastille screamed in vain as the golden fist went straight for his cranium.

"Protect me, Uriel!"

Phenex's fist stopped right before making contact, obstructed by a transparent amber wall.

Is he so strangely low-ranked because his power is specialized in defense?

If his sword wasn't meant for defeating enemies, then that made a lot of sense.

"Hmm. So you can stop an Archdemon's fist? Not bad."

Phenex laughed and released the Sacred Sword, forming another fist and striking again.

"Guh!"

This time, the amber barrier shattered.

"I thought you knew your place."

Zagan held up a hand, stopping the fist that was destined for Hartonen's face. Their clash had only lasted an instant, but that was more than enough time for Zagan to casually stride over and hold out an arm.

Not a bad punch. Enough to break a Sacred Sword's barrier, at least.

Zagan's hand was even numb. Hartonen's sword likely used an earth or mineral attribute to concentrate enough aura into a physical form. Shattering that with a fist would be difficult even for Stella.

"This is the place I was charged with protecting," Hartonen declared, deadly serious in contrast to Zagan's sarcastic remark. "And here are citizens I'm meant to protect. So, I'll fight. Whether my strength is sufficient is a trivial matter."

This man was capable of smarter choices. At the very least, he'd seen that it wouldn't be worth it to confront Zagan and had avoided battle. However, when he had someone to protect, he was the first to step forward. He had conviction worthy of an Archangel. It truly would be a waste to let him die.

"You have admirable spirit," Zagan said, smiling. "But this one has business with me. I'll be handling this match."



Without waiting for a reply from Hartonen, Zagan tossed Phenex by the fist he had in his grasp.

"Oooh, what brute strength."

Phenex twisted in the air calmly and skillfully landed on her feet. She then slammed her gauntleted fists together.

"This is what you take pride in too, right?" she said. "How about we have a fistfight?"

"Hmm? Well, I'll go along with your whims."

It had, in fact, been an impressive punch, but it was still not quite enough to challenge Zagan.

"Shyah!"

Phenex charged straight at him without any trickery. With a sharp exhalation, she lunged with a punch. Zagan caught it with his left hand. The impact created a visible shock wave.

"Did I get you?!" Phenex cried shamelessly.

"Do you even need to ask?" Zagan answered, somewhat confused. "Hmm,

I've heard you're the founder of sacrificial sorcery, but this isn't the punch of a sorcerer who's just dabbling in physical conflict."

Even in terms of technique, Phenex was pretty close to Stella's level. Zagan could win, but he couldn't afford to be careless. He showed genuine respect, but she sounded disgruntled.

"I've never referred to my sorcery that way."

It seemed the name sacrificial sorcery didn't sit right with her. Still, that didn't matter right now. Zagan squeezed Phenex's fist. Unable to withstand the pressure, her gauntlet burst open.

The advantage of having a small stature is speed.

If Phenex confused him with quick movements, it would be possible to hound him in a protracted battle. However, she'd ignored that advantage and had charged in. Now that he had her fist in his grasp, it was impossible to evade. Zagan calmly clenched his right hand, then mercilessly punched her bird mask.

"Hgh!"

Phenex tried to defend, imitating Zagan's feat of catching the blow, but his fist went right through, breaking her arm on the way.

"Gah?!"

"Not bad, but it seems you weren't blessed with a sufficient physique."

In a hand-to-hand fight, a difference in physique was directly linked to a clear advantage. Phenex's punch was powerful enough to take pride in, but Zagan was too large for it to work against him.

Phenex tumbled backward, and Zagan followed up with a roundhouse kick, rotating her back upright where he delivered a second kick right to the head. He'd timed it perfectly, but something unexpected happened. With a dull snap, Phenex's head flew right off.

"Ah."

The head and body flew off in separate directions, knocking over the cathedral's benches.

Oops... I didn't mean to decapitate her.

Well, he had meant to kill Phenex and hand over her Sigil to Barbatos, but he hadn't expected her to die so easily. He started to feel guilty as if he'd killed someone completely unrelated to all this by accident.

Everyone else was taken aback by what had happened as well.

"Zagan... I didn't think you'd really go that far..."

"Hah... Don't be so damn naive. This ain't the first time he's killed a sorcerer."

Chastille sounded grief-stricken, and while Barbatos chided her, he also looked put off by what happened and averted his eyes. Elsewhere, Kuu vomited and Manuela stroked her back gently, pale to the face. Only Nephy stared at the decapitated body. A bead of cold sweat ran down Zagan's cheek, thinking she was going to criticize him for his actions.

"Enough of this worthless act," Zagan said, crossing his arms and snorting to hide his discomposure. "I know you're not dead."

I mean, she's still an Archdemon. That can't be enough to kill her...probably.

He had no confidence in that statement, but as if to answer him, the two halves of Phenex's body suddenly burst into flames.

"Golden...fire?"

That was the only way of describing it. It didn't burn the wooden benches or floor around it, but merely wrapped around Phenex's body. The flames seemed to be in the shape of wings.

What is that? It isn't sorcery.

Before long, Phenex's lower body slowly rose. Her head seemed to have burned out, leaving only the mask on the ground. In all likelihood, Nephy had been the quickest to notice. Nobody else had kept their eyes on Phenex's decapitated head.

"Good grief. You don't know what it means to hold back."

Her voice was no longer jarring, but clear like that of a songbird. Phenex stood up, golden hair the same color as the flames spilling over her shoulders. Her

eyes were a deep scarlet and her lips were bright red like a ripe fruit. If not for the deep shadows under her eyes that rivaled Barbatos, she would be very charming.



"A little girl...?" Chastille muttered in a daze.

She looked fourteen or fifteen at most. Phenex slowly returned Chastille's gaze. Strangely enough, their eyes were the exact same color.

"I've heard stories about an immortal bird who revives in a blaze of golden flames...but I never thought it would be an Archdemon."

Phenex turned back to Zagan as he spoke. She slowly raised her arm and pointed at the mask on the floor.

"Zagan, this is a little hard to say in the middle of a fight, but could you pick up that mask for me?"

"Hm...? Well, I suppose I don't mind."

It seemed she'd actually lost her head. Perhaps still rattled by the impact, she wasn't moving from where she stood. At any rate, there were many sorcerers who didn't like to expose their faces in public. Zagan snapped his finger, making the mask jump off the ground and settle in Phenex's hand.

"Do you have a reason you don't want others to see your face?" he asked, not quite sure how to react.

"No, this just happens to be the perfect shape for the situation."

Even as she spoke, she grew paler, then shoved her head into the mask.

"Blaaaaaargh!"

And vomited.

Once more, silence hung over the room.

What the hell's wrong with her...?

A short while later, when Phenex had nothing left to expel, she raised her head.

"S-Sor— Hrrrk! This thing...really stinks. Blaaargh! So moving all of a sudden really... Hrrrgh!"

"I get it already, so stop talking... We'll wait."

Even Zagan felt sorry for her now. It seemed her mask was the only receptacle

for her to vomit in that she could think of at the moment.

"Are you all right...? Please go ahead and use this."

Unable to stand watching for much longer, Nephy ran over, rubbed her back, and held out a handkerchief. She truly was such a kind soul to do that in this situation.

"Ugh... Thanks. I'll wash it before giving it back."

"No, um, don't worry about it..."

After putting on a shameful display unbefitting of an Archdemon, Phenex stood straight once more. She still had tears in her eyes, but she'd calmed down enough to talk again. This situation was the worst, but Zagan still wanted to praise her for thanking Nephy.

After Nephy backed away, Phenex spread her arms theatrically as if nothing had happened.

"As you can see, I'm immortal!" she proclaimed.

"You don't look it."

"My sorcery is primarily used by offering up myself."

Zagan was honestly in awe at her guts for continuing the conversation normally. Still, he couldn't ignore what she'd just said.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Exactly as I said. How to explain...? Have you ever seen a hero?"

She was likely referring to the Nephilim Shere Khan had revived, so Zagan nodded.

"What do you think makes a hero a hero?" she continued.

"Mental fortitude. They don't hesitate to put their lives on the line for their beliefs."

At the very least, that was what the heroes Zagan had seen were like.

"I suppose I'll give you a passing grade," Phenex said with a tired smile. "That's not technically correct, however." "What are you trying to say?"

"What makes a hero a hero is the act of performing miracles like they're no big deal."

Zagan knew what she was getting at.

By all rights, Asura shouldn't have the strength to beat Ain.

Zagan had mixed feelings about the man being in a relationship with his mother, but Asura had defeated Ain, who was supposed to possess far greater skill than him. Zagan had believed this was due to Ain's hesitation, but that certainly wasn't enough to fully explain it.

"If you dissect all these miracles," Phenex continued, "one consistency is 'wielding more power than one should possess.' Enough for a boy with no talent whatsoever to be able to defeat a seraph, and a high seraph at that, by simply being given a weapon."

Zagan didn't know who she was talking about, but she used the seraphs' actual name. Also, by the way she spoke, it sounded like she'd seen it for herself. He had a feeling he knew how her immortality worked.

Excluding Marchosias, Forneus was supposed to be the oldest Archdemon.

Forneus had lived for seven hundred years, but seraphs had existed a thousand years ago. There was no way a sorcerer younger than him could have witnessed one. If that wasn't an inconsistency, then the only possible explanation was that the soul of a firebird was continuously reborn in the flesh of an entirely new body, meaning the Phenex here was another entity who'd just been born.

In short, no matter how many times I hit her, it all gets canceled out the moment she resurrects.

How was he supposed to kill someone like that? If Heaven's Phosphor wasn't enough, the only way was to seal her away. However, Phenex continued speaking as if that was impossible too.

"Such vast power can't be wielded without paying an appropriate price. By paying that price, these heroes obtain great might."

Zagan couldn't even begin to guess what that price was.

"The answer is life," Phenex answered for him. "By burning away their own lives, they create miracles."

After saying that, she stared at Zagan.

"Mental fortitude is one aspect of it, as you said. That's definitely the trigger that allows them to burn away their lives, after all. You can also call it guts or spirit or whatever else you like."

Phenex paused and put a hand to her chest.

"The true name of my sorcery is hero sorcery. I recreate the power of a hero in the form of sorcery."

She then shook her head in lament.

"And yet, those who've learned this sorcery don't pay the price themselves. No, instead they choose to inflict pain on others. That's why it was given the name sacrificial sorcery. How unpleasant."

Zagan gulped and asked, "If that's true, you can gain power by endlessly paying the price with your immortal body, can't you? Can anything truly be that convenient?"

For some reason, Phenex slumped her shoulders.

"I thought so too, you know? This power is gained by paying with your own life, so even if I'm immortal, burning away my life should eventually kill me."

She then smiled, complete darkness in her eyes.

"But that didn't happen. Even when I die, I come right back. There is no end."

Zagan couldn't guess what manner of despair this brought her. However, he had a feeling he knew what she wanted from him.

"Boss..."

A man and woman were suddenly standing at the door. It was Behemoth and Levia.

"Boss, I apologize for bringing her to you without asking, but please...can you save her?"

Zagan didn't turn to look at him.

It's rude to turn away from an opponent I should wield my full might against.

Instead, he lowered his stance and manifested Heaven's Scale Eastern and Western Sky.

"You don't even need to ask," he said. "What kind of king fails to meet the expectations of such loyal retainers?"

"Thank you..."

With their backs to Behemoth as he gave his thanks, the two Archdemons clashed once more.



"I'm not wearing that mask anymore. I could hardly breathe with it on, so don't think it'll go the same as before."

She really had made light of Zagan to challenge him to a fight with a handicap. Well, Zagan had also restricted himself only to reinforcement sorcery, so he couldn't really complain.

Regardless, he'd decided to bring his full might to bear. Zagan struck with Eastern Sky. He used martial arts and put his entire weight behind the initial blow. Phenex met the attack with a punch of her own, her hand wreathed in golden flames. The two golden fists slammed against each other.

"Hrrrm!"

"Guh!"

As a result, both fists were knocked back.

She repelled Eastern Sky?

Taking a closer look, Zagan noticed that his invincible shield was even cracked. It repaired itself in an instant, but that still meant that Phenex's punch had surpassed Heaven's Scale's strength in a single instant.

"Ha ha, surprised?" Phenex asked, laughing. "I call it Glorious Death. This sorcery unleashes explosive power by burning away my life force. It quite literally burns like lighting fire on blasting powder, so anyone but me would be

consumed in an instant if they try to use it."

To balance it out, Phenex's fist became a crumpled mess. She was an immortal Archdemon, though, so her crushed fist was repaired in a flash of golden fire.

That single clash between Archdemons had been enough to shatter every last stained-glass window in the cathedral.

"Let's take this elsewhere," Zagan said, clicking his tongue.

If they fought here, the cathedral...or even the entire island would be destroyed. And he still hadn't given Nephy the ring, so he couldn't allow that.

"True, it is a little too cramped and stuffy in here," Phenex said.

The next instant, golden hair spread before Zagan's eyes. She'd slipped in right beneath him during his moment of brief distraction. The hair was flowing horizontally. He could tell she was twisting her upper body.

It's a kick!

Sensing that by instinct, Zagan held up Western Sky to block and was immediately sent flying through the air with a thunderous boom. A beat later, he realized she'd hit him with a vertical kick from below. Or perhaps it was more of a spinning roundhouse kick.

I couldn't devour it in time.

Western Sky's armor was broken. Glorious Death was sorcery, so by all rights, he should've been able to devour it. It'd been too fast, though. It was the same as in his fight against Kimaris...or maybe even similar to Andrealphus's Void.

Phenex's Glorious Death was no more than the trigger. By the time it activated, she was already burning away her life, so it was too late to stop the sorcery at that point. To add to that, Phenex's martial arts were impressive.

"Behemoth! Levia! Fix the damage!"

Still, his defenses had made it in time. Zagan was unharmed as he yelled orders to his subordinates. They'd brought this pain in the ass to him, so they couldn't complain about putting in some extra work.

Flying through the air from the kick, Zagan broke through the cathedral's ceiling. There was a tower at the top of the building, so he kicked off of it to get even higher into the sky.

"Hyah?! Was that His Highness?!"

He felt like he heard Lilith screaming and turned to look. It seemed she was in the middle of sightseeing from the tower. She and Selphy were in each other's arms, jolting in shock. Phenex followed the same path as him, kicking off the tower, and nearly causing the two to fall over. Ain and Furcas saved them.

Sorry, I'll apologize later.

So Zagan's mind drifted, but he didn't actually have much time to consider such things.

"It was a mistake not to prepare Heaven's Phosphor..."

Zagan didn't even have his robe on. He was wearing a tailcoat, which was pretty much the same as being unarmed. He'd woven Eastern and Western Sky into it, which had allowed him to deploy them immediately, but any other sorcery would require significant effort. In short, he had to weave everything from scratch against an opponent who could tap into a hero's power indefinitely.

Phenex caught up with him in the air. A golden light spread out under the setting sun's red sky. They were golden flames in the shape of wings. Phenex flapped through the air with fiery pinions.

That's not sorcery. Is it a racial power?

"There are no obstructions up here," Phenex said, casually floating in place. "But wait, is this not disadvantageous for you?"

Martial arts relied on having one's feet firmly planted on the ground, so having no foothold reduced any technique to being superficial at most. Even Zagan took advantage of this when his opponents fought with swords or fists.

However, they were high in the sky, which meant there was nothing to stand on. Creating a magic circle as a platform in the air was, of course, elementary sorcery, but it was impossible to use any techniques properly on such a fragile foothold.

"Don't worry about it," Zagan replied calmly as he fell from the sky. "More importantly, you should be careful. Touching those seems to erase your flames."

Sparkling dots akin to snow surrounded Zagan.

"Heaven's Scale Snowfield."

The hundreds of floating lights were each miniaturized versions of Heaven's Scale. Stepping on them firmly, Zagan stood midair. In contrast, Phenex's wings were riddled with holes upon coming in contact with them.

"Hmmm...!"

With her golden wings corroding, Phenex raised her voice in expectation and exaltation. Seeing her like this, Zagan was reminded of another opponent.

Her power is similar to Samyaza in some ways...

She was immortal and possessed tremendous strength. That made her a formidable enemy on par with that terrifying demon. Zagan needed power to be able to defeat Samyaza. He needed an even stronger form of Heaven's Scale and Heaven's Phosphor.

However, Zagan could only cast three of them at once. In Asmodeus's terms, this was humanity's limit. He could manipulate more if he relied on the Sigil of the Archdemon, but it was foolish to build a strategy based on borrowed power.

It was fine to keep that in mind as an option, but assuming it was always available would definitely lead to failure. That was not the way of a king. So then, how was he supposed to surpass his limit? It was none other than Asmodeus who'd provided him with a hint.

To use her Hades, she scattered Blackest Black as a catalyst.

This was similar to Foll's Starfall. By casting one sorcery as a source for the other, it was possible to construct something far more powerful in an instant. Snowfield was ideal for this role.

"Hmm, it's unexpectedly stable," Phenex said, lowering herself on top of

Snowfield as well.

"If you like it that much, you may borrow it. There's no telling how long it will stick around, though."

Their conditions were even now. The two Archdemons closed in on each other and recommenced their scuffle.

"Hmph! It's over!" Phenex shouted as if delivering a winning blow, yet unleashed no more than a perfectly normal punch. However, this was a punch using Glorious Death—the punch of a hero. Even Heaven's Scale would shatter under its weight. Zagan kept his hand open and used the back of his wrist to divert the blow.

"What?!"

Phenex's tiny body twirled in the air. Unable to stop her momentum, she spun on the spot and exposed her back defenselessly. Zagan threw a punch with Eastern Sky, but she managed to predict it. She twisted her body and struck back with a roundhouse kick, breaking both Eastern Sky and her own leg in the process.

The strength behind her strikes is pretty much irrational.

She really was similar to Samyaza. That was exactly why it was worth fighting her.

Golden flames enveloped Phenex's broken leg and regenerated it. Absorbing the fire, Eastern Sky also repaired itself.

Zagan threw another punch with Eastern Sky, and Phenex repelled it with a punch of her own. As they repeated this cycle of breaking each other's fists and regenerating over and over, Zagan could sense he was losing the advantage.

Eastern and Western Sky are losing...

Despite showing their true worth in a battle of mana attrition, an enemy who revived when killed was about as bad a match for him as could be. He was only capable of stealing a bit of Phenex's power each time, whereas she resurrected perfectly every time she used Glorious Death. Thus, he had no way of winning. Zagan understood he was at a disadvantage but still smiled.

"I see. So you really couldn't breathe earlier!" he exclaimed. "Your arts are impressive."

"You're not bad either," Phenex responded with a smile of her own. "Unfortunately for you, I've never lost a brawl!"

I feel like people who say that are exactly the type to lose all the time. Is that just my imagination?

However, in contrast to her acting like a small-time punk, her martial arts did, in fact, rival Zagan's. There was something dazzling about that.

"A hero's power and such refined arts... Are you in some way related to *that* lot?" Zagan asked after stopping Phenex's fist for the umpteenth time.

"...The grigori, you mean?"

Yes, Phenex's fighting style closely resembled Stella's, or perhaps even Asura's. To add to that, she'd seemed strangely conscious of Chastille back in the cathedral. Plus, all three of them had the same scarlet hair and eyes.

"Long ago, I went along with the seraphs' cajolery," Phenex muttered listlessly. "I offered them a part of my body. I'm told the grigori were created as a result... It seems their hair dulled a little and turned scarlet, though."

The seraphs back then truly had been a worthless lot.

Meaning they're an artificial race created using the power of a firebird.

Maybe that was exactly why the Sacred Swords had chosen them. It wasn't clear whether this was out of affection or atonement, though.

"In the end, they broke their promise," Phenex continued vacantly. "I thought I burned all the prototypes and seraphs to ashes, but they've survived to this age. I feel a little guilty about it."

That was why she was so conscious of Chastille.

"There's nothing for you to worry about," Zagan said, shrugging. "They're living bold lives. They're not so thin-skinned that they'd complain about what happened to their ancestors ages ago."

"Ha ha, what's this? Are you comforting me? You're unexpectedly kind."

Even as she smiled, Phenex grappled with Eastern and Western Sky.

"How about getting serious already? Fooling around like this isn't so bad every now and then, but I'm starting to get bored."

She then crushed both instances of Heaven's Scale.

Tch, that's their limit!

After being destroyed so many times, Eastern and Western Sky had already become husks consisting of nothing more than outer plating.

"This Heaven's Scale is sorcery that absorbs mana from the outside to strengthen itself, right? It's bad against me. It's just been getting more and more fragile this whole time."

Phenex's flames were no more than the leftovers from reviving herself. Even if Zagan could repair the surface damage to Heaven's Scale, that wasn't enough to strengthen it. Now that Zagan lost both his shields, Phenex clenched both hands overhead and hammered them down on him.

"Did you think I didn't notice?" she asked. "You've been preparing something, right? Show me."

She was correct. He hadn't created Snowfield just to use as a foothold. It was the catalyst he needed for his next sorcery.

Knocked off Snowfield and falling from the sky, Zagan looked straight up at Phenex.

"I wasn't holding back," he said. "It was just hard to get in the right position."

He hadn't gotten into a fistfight just to fool around.

It's pretty hard to do this without damaging Opheos below us.

Now that Phenex had knocked him down, he was finally in the right position to attack.

There are three problems to solve before I can defeat Samyaza.

First, he needed to be able to manifest enough destructive force to obliterate it through its practically infinite regenerative powers. This he already had an answer for. He could simply throw everything he had at it, including Showers of

the Wailing Dead. The only issue was how to optimize this.

The second problem was finding a way to weave sorcery in the middle of such an intense battle. This he'd also resolved and had put into practice just now with Snowfield.

Lastly, he required a means of breaking its sword and armor. This was unexpectedly what had him stumped. By modifying the hardness of its skin, Samyaza could form both a weapon and armor, so simply hitting it with sorcery wasn't enough. He needed something he could charge his martial arts with that had enough power to break through it.

Using Sonne—the gift he'd gotten from Nephy—he was at least capable of breaking the sword. However, he'd only managed to barely break through the armor by combining that with Void to stop time.

More importantly, slamming Nephy's precious gift against something so hard was liable to scratch it, and he didn't want that, so he refused to use it unless he absolutely had to. That was why he needed some other way of achieving his goal.

Fivefold Grand Flower is incompatible with martial arts.

The five simultaneous blades of Heaven's Phosphor were the strongest among all of Zagan's cards. However, it had been developed with the Sludge Demon Lord that had assimilated Nephteros as the target in mind.

It was capable of obliterating enormous enemies who could regenerate, but he hadn't developed it on the premise of facing a foe who could match him in terms of martial arts or swordsmanship. Against an opponent like Azazel, who he'd faced some time ago, it didn't work at all.

Heaven's Phosphor's strength dwelled in killing anything it touched, but even that was insufficient against those with regenerative powers like Samyaza. He needed the power to obliterate an enemy in an instant upon hitting it. He was going to check whether he had the answer to that now.

Zagan held both arms straight up, his hand opened instead of held in fists. The Snowfield spreading around him burned black and turned into Heaven's Phosphor. Taking those in, he instantly created a giant blade that was several

times his height.

"Heaven's Phosphor Sword."

It was a blade made of a convergence of Heaven's Phosphor so dense that it possessed mass. This was Zagan's answer. Looking at it, Phenex smiled as if charmed by the black fire. However, that only lasted a moment.

"Then I'll answer with an ultimate art of my own! Firebird!"

Phenex's body burst into flames and took the shape of an enormous golden bird before coming down like a meteor, her holding out a leg in a divekick. This resembled Nephy's Comet, but the power that burned life itself as its fuel surpassed even her Hex Wings.

Can I cut this?

Simply striking Phenex wouldn't be enough to stop her. This diving attack was unlikely to grind to a halt even if she was pulverized. However, Zagan had never hypothesized facing an attack that was akin to a falling meteor.

That was exactly why Zagan smiled daringly.

What kind of Archdemon would I be if I couldn't smile arrogantly in the face of adversity?!

And so, the giant black blade clashed with the golden firebird.



Had she been birthed by another being? Or had she been created? She didn't even know. Either way, she'd been born as a living creature. Even after searching the entire world, she never found another being like herself.

Surprisingly, when other beings died, it was over for them. They never returned. How fragile and uncertain their existences were. At first, she pitied them for it. However, with the passage of time, that turned into a deep longing.

Precisely because of their limited lives, they were frantic in their search for fulfillment. Naturally, many died on the path toward their goals. If anything, only a scant few achieved their life's desire. And yet, they were all so beautiful.

She wanted to live like them, but it never worked out for her.

She tried to desperately achieve a goal, but she resurrected when she died, while those who worked toward that goal with her all died right away.

Liucaon's legends spoke of great firebirds. They were apparently divine beasts —a male and female pair.

However, she was one of a kind. She found out how helplessly alone she was.

Seraphs, who were considered to have long lives, still died after a few hundred years. Even dragons could only live for about ten thousand.

So what about the future? How long did she have to live in a world where nobody knew her?

She was scared.

There was no end for her.

Even if civilization was destroyed, even if all life was extinguished, even if the planet itself died, she would keep existing.

The thought drove her mad.

She sought out and accepted all forms of death.

She learned sorcery to find her salvation, but no sorcery or sorcerer could save her.

The dragon she'd known for her entire life also finally died.

That was when two of her few friends visited her.

Much like her, they were cursed and could do nothing about it. And yet, someone had saved them.

"Zagan might be able to kill you."

That was what they told her.

How many times had she dreamed of this, failed, and had been betrayed? Regardless, she wanted to meet the person who'd saved these two. She feared being disappointed again, but once more held the faintest hope in her heart.

"Heaven's Phosphor Sword."

The immortal firebird, Creare el Phenex, dived straight for the light that was

far too ominous to be called hope.

As a small digress, she'd learned something by touching upon so many forms of death. She'd seen for herself that those who died early shared a certain style of speech and conduct. Looking back at her life right before the decisive moment was one part of the ritual to imitate them.



"It'd be problematic if you two died here."

The instant before the collision, two holes, one black and one white, expanded between them.

"What-"

"-Erk?!"

One looked like a pure white moon, while the other was a distorted black hole where eyes marked by stars peered out at them.

Asmodeus?!

For some reason, the one who'd forced her way between Zagan and Phenex was none other than the abominable starry-eyed Archdemon.

Manifesting between them, Asmodeus held an arm out toward the sky.

"White Night of Hades."

The white moon was Asmodeus's sorcery. Ignoring the fact that he was plummeting to the ground, Zagan's body floated. No, that wasn't quite accurate. He was kept still. Even the wind, light, and gravity around him had ceased to exist. Asmodeus had created a frozen space.

The one struck by this the hardest was Phenex. Her golden flames were torn away in an instant, exposing her body. However, Zagan had been in the middle of pouring all his might into intercepting her. Even in this frozen space, his giant blade maintained its momentum.

The black sword closed in as if to bisect both Asmodeus and Phenex at the same time. However, Asmodeus already had sorcery ready to face it.

"Morning Moon of Hades."

A sinister shape that was the color of nothingness formed in her hand. Oddly enough, it was the same kind of sorcery Zagan was using. Hers was from an entirely different school of sorcery, but he could still tell it possessed power enough to rival his blade.

The black swords collided. There was no sound. In spite of this, the impact was intense enough to shake this frozen space.

And of the two blades, Zagan's shattered.

"Erk, my Morning Moon..."

However, Asmodeus's sword was also split in two.

A draw?

Zagan's blade had won in terms of sharpness, while Asmodeus's had won in terms of raw power.

Asmodeus's sword vanished quietly. And it wasn't just the sword, either, of course. Even the white moon cracked and crumbled away.

Now that space was no longer frozen, Zagan, Asmodeus, and Phenex all started plummeting to the ground.

I suppose Asmodeus truly should be feared...

Even if it had been an ambush, she'd stopped both Zagan and Phenex while they'd been pouring all their might into finishing blows. Not only that, but everyone was unharmed. That showed she was not only versed in sorcery, but swordsmanship and martial arts as well. Even Andrealphus in his heyday couldn't have pulled this off so perfectly. Zagan had no choice but to recognize her terrifying talents.

"I see there's still room for improvement," he muttered with a sigh, folding his arms. "There's no point if it loses to you."

"Oh, come on, there's no need to be so disappointed," Asmodeus said, smiling as if it was no big deal. "Forget scraping away at White Night, I didn't think Morning Moon would break."

She was technically praising Zagan, but the composure she had as she held down her fluttering hair and skirt pissed him off. As for Phenex, she had a dazed look on her face as if something had utterly shocked her, and was falling to the ground head-first. She showed no signs of preparing herself for a landing, but she was probably going to be fine even if she died.

Zagan and Asmodeus landed softly on the cathedral's roof, and just as expected, Phenex crashed in a splatter of blood.

"Ew..." Asmodeus muttered at the ghastly display.

Not a moment later, a golden flame enveloped Phenex's body and revived her. She stood back up, her brass armor clanging noisily as it fell off. With a drip-drop, a red puddle formed at her feet. Bright red blood ran down her exposed skin.

It seemed that even though Asmodeus had stopped it, Heaven's Phosphor Sword had grazed Phenex. An open cut ran down her chest.

"The wound...isn't vanishing?"

Phenex muttered in bewilderment—or perhaps intoxication. She then ran a hand over her wound to check it. Looking at her blood-soaked palm, the founder of hero sorcery was utterly shocked.

"Phenex...?" Asmodeus muttered.

Clear tears spilled from Phenex's scarlet eyes. Zagan was startled by the unexpected reaction as Phenex then approached him unsteadily.

"I offer you my everything."

Clasping her bloodstained hands in front of her chest as if in prayer, she kneeled before him.

"You are my death."



Epilogue

Before Zagan knew it, the sun had set completely and a pale moon hung in the sky. With the moonlight pouring down on the cathedral, Nephy awaited his arrival.

"Welcome back, Master...Zagan?"

Nephy's smile suddenly froze.

"Aaah, um...I'm back. Hey, let go already."

Phenex had remained clinging to his arm ever since things had been settled. He couldn't do much about it, so he'd dragged her all the way back. However, having lost her armor, she was now completely nude. Seeing how she was an Archdemon, he would've preferred for her to at least repair her own armor. Naturally, a vein bulged on Nephy's brow at the sight.

"Excuse me? Would you mind getting away from Master Zagan?"

"Eep!"

Despite not being addressed, Chastille yelped and hid behind the lectern. A cold bead of sweat also ran down Hartonen's surly face as he backed away. Manuela and Kuu had apparently grown tired of waiting and were having some tea, but they also started in their seats.

However, Barbatos was nowhere to be found. Noticing Zagan's gaze, Chastille spoke up.

"Oh, um...Barbatos said he had something to do and went off somewhere..."

Zagan couldn't hold back a sigh.

So he really did see it...

Due to Asmodeus's ambush, Zagan had unwittingly exposed a weakness. There was an instant when he couldn't devour sorcery. Asmodeus had used sorcery to force her way into the fight, yet Zagan hadn't devoured it. When he poured all his might into his sorcery, he simply couldn't do it.

Asmodeus must've noticed it a while ago.

That was why she'd been able to so calmly pick that instant to join the fray. However, she wasn't a true specialist in spatial manipulation sorcery. Barbatos was, however, so he could likely pull it off far better than she could.

If Zagan fought Marchosias and his subordinates, such a moment was sure to come. He now had to pay constant attention to his back. Barbatos had become Archdemon Zagan's most frightening foe.

Ignoring Zagan's internal anguish, Phenex responded to Nephy.

"I refuse. He's the one and only man capable of granting my wish. I won't let go even if you tear off my limbs. Aaah, if you'll be satisfied by killing me, then go ahead. I'm used to it."

"I won't kill you, but Master Zagan is mine. Do you understand how rude it is to cling to him without permission?"

Nephy's words were charged with mana, shattering the cathedral's stainedglass windows once more. Behemoth and Levia got back to gallantly fixing them.

"Hmm. If you're his woman, then I'll yield on that point," she said, still clinging to Zagan's arm. "I don't mind being number two, three, or even a mistress."

"There will be no number two, three, nor any mistresses, though..." Nephy said with a chilling smile.

Amazing. It's my first time seeing Nephy acting so possessive!

Zagan was so moved by the sight that it made him feel happy.

Understanding that she wasn't going to get anywhere like this, Phenex turned to look up at Zagan.

"Ugh, and what do you think? You get it, don't you? I can devote myself to you endlessly. My body, heart, life, they're all yours to do with as you please. That includes being your partner at night too, of course. My body is always like brand-new, so you'll definitely be satisfied."

"I don't need any of that," Zagan said. "The only woman I love is Nephy."

"Getting rejected so directly is harsh... I even feel somewhat defeated."

Judging by her reaction, she wasn't actually in love or anything.

"Then what about being a little sister or daughter?" Phenex suggested.

"Those roles are filled too."

He couldn't love this oddball like he did Foll, and he still hadn't figured out how to act around Lilith when it came to having a little sister.

"I don't mind being a mother or grandmother, then," Phenex said, still hanging in there.

"Those are even more unnecessary."

His mother Alshiera was more than he could handle on her own, and there was already a dangerous granny around who he couldn't control.

"How stubborn," Phenex pouted. "In that case, I don't even care if you make me your pet!"

"A pet...?"

Her words had long since lost any hint of an Archdemon's pride. Zagan found his gaze wandering to a certain individual.

"Why are you looking at me...? Are you trying to make me angry?"

He doubted this girl had forgotten Foll bringing her over to see him. She complained with a similar chilling smile to Nephy's, but Zagan decided to ignore her.

"Enough of this unsightly display," he said, forcefully shaking Phenex off his arm. "There's no need for concern. I've never once abandoned a subordinate."

"A subordinate?" Phenex repeated, blinking in confusion with a look of disbelief on her face. "I just have to be your servant? Is it all right for an Archdemon to be so unselfish? Weren't you far greedier the last time we met?"

"Haaah... Behemoth," Zagan called out, sighing. "Drag her away somewhere for a bit. I can't talk to Nephy like this."

"Roger that. Come on, it's fine already, so follow me, okay?"

"Let me go, Behemoth!" Phenex wailed. "I'm not leaving his side until he kills me properly... Uh, what's with you?"

"Hmmm, a girl shouldn't be going around looking like this. Why don't you have a dress-up session with your big sister here?"

Behemoth...or rather, Manuela, grabbed Phenex by the scruff of the neck and finally got her away from Zagan. Seeing this, he let out a sigh of relief.

"Ummm, sorry," he told Nephy. "It wasn't supposed to go this way..."

"It's fine... I know it isn't your fault."

Despite saying this, her cheeks were puffed out and her pointy ears were drooping. She was clearly offended, but the way she pouted was so cute that Zagan found himself smiling. She then wrapped herself around Zagan's arm tightly for some reason.

"Wh-What's wrong?" he asked.

"Um... I don't like that she was touching you, so..."

In other words, she wanted to overwrite what'd been done. Nonetheless, Nephy's mood showed no signs of improving.

Well, that only makes sense.

Even though Chastille had gone out of her way to prepare this wedding dress for her, it'd all been ruined. Zagan discreetly took a deep breath.

"Nephy, I'm sorry for making you anxious."

"I wasn't really..."

She had to be self-aware. In an unusual display, Nephy mumbled unintelligibly. Zagan made a genuine effort to act natural as he stood before her.

"So, I have a terrific idea to keep you from feeling anxious ever again. Will you hear me out?"

"A terrific idea...?"

Nephy cocked her head as Zagan lowered himself to a knee. He then took her hand and pulled a small box out from his breast pocket. He opened it with a

pop, revealing the ring inside.

"Nephy. Become mine. I too will become yours."

Beneath the pale moonlight, Zagan finally managed to say those words. Nephy put a hand to her mouth, unable to say anything as her ears trembled violently. She remained shaken for a full minute, then finally smiled.

"Yes! With pleasure!"

Modest clapping resounded through the lightless cathedral. Chastille was bawling her eyes out and Manuela stroked her head gently. Phenex was still clamoring about something, having been turned into a dress-up doll, but everyone present gave them their blessings.

The next day, newspapers about the Archdemon's proposal spread through the continent like wildfire. Barbatos's sudden disappearance—something Zagan had been genuinely wary of—had apparently been for this purpose. He'd even gone as far as conspiring with Gremory and a gossip reporter and had used Memorandum, so there was no stopping it. Also, due to serving as the stage for the Archdemon's wedding, the church's reputation had recovered significantly.

After having had her birthday date broadcast to the entire continent, this was Chastille's meager revenge.



Afterword

It's been a long time, everyone. I'm Fuminori Teshima, and I have come to deliver *An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride Volume 18*.

Zagan and Marchosias finally meet in this volume, but the cover is way more important than that! Nephy is so beautiful in her wedding dress, don't you agree?! Also, you may have noticed this already, but there's a lot going on this time around, so to avoid this book getting too thick, we split it into a first and second half. It'll continue in the next volume. Marchosias probably has more to him than being teased all the time.

Also, the anime! It's finally airing this April. Have you all watched the PV already? It came out pretty good with everyone talking and moving about like that! Please enjoy the show too!

Now then, to my chief editor A, COMTA, Hako Itagaki, Momo Futaba, everyone else involved in this work, and to you, my dear readers, who are reading the book at this very moment, thank you very much!

February 2024: On a Rainy Day as Hot as Summer Fuminori Teshima

Bonus Short Stories

Watch Your Back on a Moonless Night!

"What's with the people of this castle...?" Marchosias groaned, a look of pure exhaustion on his face. Archdemon Palace had once been his castle, but due to the egos of its new residents, everything felt so beyond him. He'd come here with the intent of entering enemy territory to mend an old friendship, but he just spent the whole time being toyed with.

"Huh? Aren't you Marc?"

As he walked its halls completely dispirited, a voice called to him. He raised his head to see a familiar face.

"Asura?"

"It really is you! Long time no see! You were revived too?" Asura asked, slapping him on the shoulder. "Ha ha, oh man, it's been a thousand years, but that gloomy face of yours is the same as ever. I bet you're tryin' to carry your burdens all on your own again. You been eatin' properly? If somethin's botherin' you, make sure to talk to someone about it, 'kay?"

Only this boy smiled at him with the same expression he had a thousand years ago.

He can't read the room, but he's a good guy...

Marchosias was moved to tears, feeling like he was experiencing human warmth for the first time in centuries.

"Oh, right! There's somethin' I've gotta tell you..." Asura said. "It might not be all that fun for you, though."

"Why are you acting so distant? Aren't we friends?"

It was strange for this boy to hesitate to say anything. Marchosias urged him on with a smile.

"I'm dating Ashy now!"

Marchosias's smile convulsed with a twitch.

C-Calm down. You've always known this guy was in love with your sister, right?

Besides, Marchosias had been the one to leave her alone for a thousand years. He didn't have the right to criticize her for filling the hole in her heart with an old friend, even if it was wrong.

"Oh man, it was a lotta work, ya get me? I ran all over the place tryin' to seduce her. Luckily, things finally worked out when I got Silver to help me catch her."

A vein bulged on Marchosias's brow, but the innocent boy just kept talking.

"But y'know, Ashy was the one to make the first move and kiss me. I got thrown off 'cause I feel like the guy should be doin' that stuff, but she was bright red too. It's super cute how she must've mustered her courage to do that."

In truth, she'd done it as punishment, but for better or worse, this boy didn't see that at all.

"Ha ha, you've got a total sister complex, so I figured you'd hate this. Guess a thousand years finally got you to grow up! I'm glad you're acceptin' this."

Marchosias brought his hand down hard onto the boy's shoulder, then used his other hand to push up his round glasses as he smiled at him like an affectionate father.

"Next time we meet, I'll kill you."

"Why?!"

When it rained, it poured. With that, Eldest Marchosias finally left Archdemon Palace, holding back his tears all the while.

Even an Unwanted but Inevitable Friendship Can't Be Abandoned

"Ha ha ha! So this is Archdemon Zagan's castle!"

Watching their friend make a ridiculous clamor, Behemoth and Levia averted their eyes.

"Come on... You're being a nuisance," Levia said. "Keep your voice down, okay?"

"Stop talking to me like I'm some undisciplined brat. I have feelings too."

"But talking to an idiot is exhausting..."

"Levia, even if you're my friend, there are things you should and shouldn't say."

"This is a town called Opheos," Behemoth said to their noisy bird-masked friend. "Our boss's base is in Kianoides. This ain't it."

The sorcerer turned back to him with a befuddled look behind her mask.

"Huh? Then why'd you bring me here?"

"Zagan is going to make a short stop here, so we came to link up with him. How many times have I told you this already?"

"Meaning he's not here yet?"

"He'll arrive tomorrow. You can at least keep quiet and wait for one day, right?"

"No way."

Ignoring his bird-brained friend's tantrum, Behemoth turned to Levia with a smile.

"Seeing as we're here, how about we do some sightseeing until Zagan's group arrives?"

"Okay."

"I'm sorry, I was wrong, so can you stop ignoring me?"

And so, with their friend who'd finally calmed down, Behemoth and Levia took a walk around this fortress-like town. Living up to its reputation as a tourist location, there were many shops selling souvenirs and food. Levia was instantly

attracted to a place that sold ice cream.

"They sell ice cream here too?" Behemoth commented. "Not too long ago, this stuff was a luxury item."

"It's a good thing that something so delicious has spread around the world," Levia said. "Zagan did well."

"What is that? Is it food?" the bird-brain asked, leaning forward in excitement.

"Huh? You've never had any?" Behemoth asked curiously.

"Finding pleasure from food is just so futile."

"I get where you're coming from, but it ain't so bad to have some nice food every now and then."

"Hmm... If you two insist, I don't mind trying some... Huh?"

She couldn't eat while wearing her mask. The bird-brain started taking it off, but then froze.

"Hm... I'll pass after all."

"Don't tell me... You can't remove that mask?"

As Behemoth pointed that out, tears formed behind his friend's lenses.

"...Help me."

He was starting to get a headache.

"Ow! Ow! Ow! You'll yank my head off!"

"Gah! Why're you wearing this crap, anyway?! It's so damn tough!"

"Behemoth, hang in there," Levia cheered from the sidelines.

The mask was strangely tenacious. Even with the strength of a sorcerer, Behemoth couldn't rip it off.

"I'm still an Archdemon, remember?" his friend said. "An Archdemon's equipment isn't going to break so easily."

"Can we just give up?"

"Don't give up, Behemoth. Of the many ways to die, starvation is extremely harsh. Now that I think about it, I haven't had any real meals over the last three days. I'm pretty much at my limit."

"How stupid are you?"

In the end, they hadn't been able to remove the mask even after hours of trying and had settled on sticking a straw through one of the air holes for her to suck the ice cream up like a drink.

"Oooh! This is unexpectedly good. It's like a frozen drink. It has quite a novel texture to it. In the sense of using ice to chill a drink, how about calling it a frappé?"

"Like I care."

The shop owner who witnessed the extreme nuisance in front of his shop had used this as a reference to later set an explosive sales record, but that is a story for another time.



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An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride: Volume 18

by Fuminori Teshima

Translated by Hikoki Edited by DxS

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