AN ARCHDEMON'S DILEMMA: HOW TO LOVE YOUR ELF BRIDE
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ILL. COMTA

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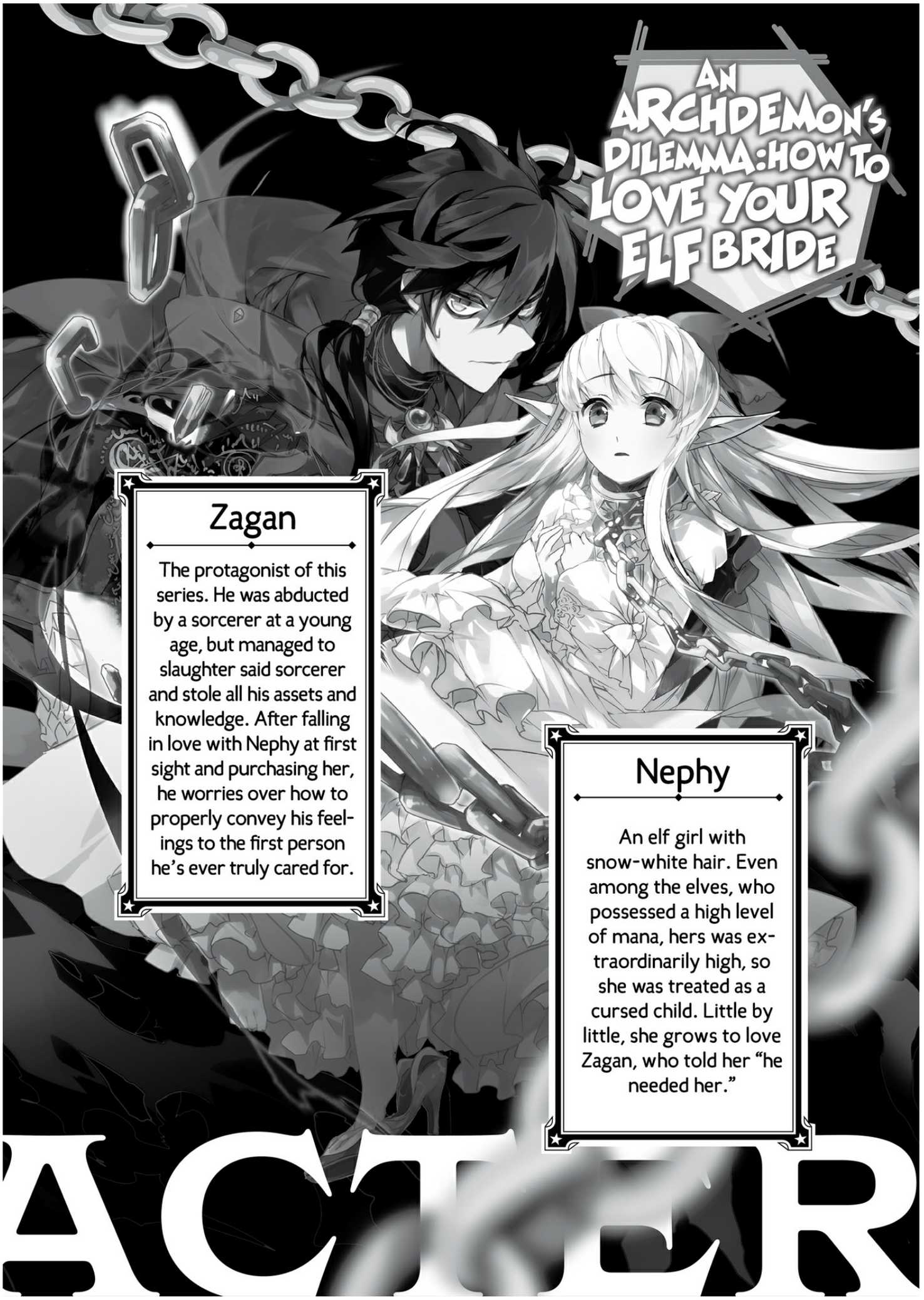
A girl dressed like a wealthy family's maid was looking around with a troubled expression.
"You there, did you drop something?"
The girl looked up at Micca in shock. Perhaps she was nervous, as her expression was very stiff. She looked like a doll.

“He sure said it. Chasty is cute, plain and clear.”
The couple on everyone’s mind is overwhelmed by a teasing mother’s words!

"H-How is it...?"
"V-Very sweet..."
"Um... what kinda show are you putting on for me here?"


AN ARCHDEMON'S DILEMMA: HOW TO LOVE YOUR ELF BRIDE
Zagan
The protagonist of this series. He was abducted by a sorcerer at a young age, but managed to slaughter said sorcerer and stole all his assets and knowledge. After falling in love with Nephy at first sight and purchasing her, he worries over how to properly convey his feelings to the first person he's ever truly cared for.
Nephy
An elf girl with snow-white hair. Even among the elves, who possessed a high level of mana, hers was extraordinarily high, so she was treated as a cursed child. Little by little, she grows to love Zagan, who told her "he needed her."
ACTER

Barbatos
Zagan's undesirable friend. A skilled sorcerer who is one of the leading Archdemon candidates. Is constantly troubled by Chastille's crybaby side, but still can't leave her alone.
Chastille Lillqvist
An Archangel known as the Maiden of the Sacred Sword. She's a master of the blade, but is far too serious and easily tricked. Lately, those around her suspect she's in a much deeper relationship with her guardian sorcerer, Barbatos, than she lets on, but she vehemently denies it.
Asmodeus
The Archdemon known as the Collector.
Possesses immense power even the other Archdemons have to acknowledge as beyond them. She lives for the sake of gathering Spirit Blood.
Kuroka Adelhide
A blind cait sith. She once served in the church's secret assassination sect, Azazel, and excels in swordsmanship. She has finally entered a relationship with Shax. Lately, they've been in their own little world.
Shax
A sorcerer who excels in healing sorcery. He once worked under Shere Khan, but has now inherited the title Tiger King and serves as an Archdemon in Zagan's camp.
Marchosias
Once the Archdemon known as the Eldest.
He's been revived as a Nephilim, and is plotting behind the scenes while gathering many Archdemons to his cause.

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Prologue

“Hey, hey, Big Bro, you work with Lady Chastille, right? Have you met this Barbar guy? What kinda person is he?”

Just as Micca was heading out for work, his younger sister asked him that question. Having just turned sixteen this year, Micca had worked for the church for a good year now. He’d worn his uniform every day to the point where it couldn’t be called new anymore, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that the clothes wore him instead.

Despite being somewhat lanky, he was finally starting to build up some muscle. He had short dark-brown hair and his tired eyes were a reddish brown. He didn’t have any standout features. No one who passed him on the street would remember him. However, his mediocre appearance was contrasted by a far-from-mediocre sword swaying on his back. It bumped into the narrow entranceway every single time he walked through, so a noticeable number of scratches were etched into the doorframe. One day, he would probably have to replace the whole thing.

“I’ve only met Lady Lillqvist once,” Micca said, scratching his head. “She’s a pretty scary person. She scolded me out of nowhere. I’ve got no idea about the sorcerer.”

“Whaaat?! They’re so passionately in love, how can you not know? Oh, right! It was still a secret relationship at the time. Oh well.”

Seeing the sparkles in his little sister’s eyes, Micca could only force a smile. She was describing events from a month ago. Rumors had spread of a romantic relationship between the third-ranked Archangel, Chastille Lillqvist, and the sorcerer Purgatory Barbar—no, Barbatos, if he remembered correctly—who just so happened to be a former Archdemon candidate.

At first, the church had denied it as malicious gossip, but due to an enchanted newspaper spreading through the lands, there was nothing they could do about it anymore. The gossip rag in question was quite the troublesome piece. It

showed Lillqvist and Barbatos meeting in secret, the sorcerer quite literally protecting her from the shadows when she was in danger of being assassinated, them having tea together, picking cups for each other, and other such romantic scenes. It even replayed scenes of them preparing for her birthday.

There was no telling who'd made that newspaper or why, but the contents had spread like wildfire right as it had been released. This had likely been a scrupulously planned scheme. There were even rumors that some Archdemon was responsible, but it made even less sense why an Archdemon would spread such rumors.

Lillqvist was already known as the only woman among the Archangels, and the youngest to have achieved that rank, so she had heavy support from the people. There were even those who wanted to keep this recording of her for prosperity, such was her beauty. There were no signs of her popularity fading. That was exactly why the rumor had entranced the entire continent in a single night.

A lover, huh? I'd like a normal girl. Someone simple and kind like a florist or a maid. She doesn't have to do anything for me. I just want someone who will stay by my side when times get tough.

As a sixteen-year-old boy, Micca naturally had an interest in the opposite sex. He wanted nothing to do with a woman with complicated circumstances like Chastille Lillqvist, but the idea of having a lover was something he thought of often.

However, even if he did meet someone wonderful, he was sure to prioritize his family. That was how Micca's life had been thus far. And so, he tucked away that faint yearning in a corner of his mind.

"Not all sorcerers are bad people, huh?" his sister said, looking up at him. "Have you ever met a good sorcerer?"

"There's no way that exi—"

Micca was about to deny that such a thing could possibly exist, but was left at a loss for words.

"So you have?" his sister asked, her eyes filled with expectation.

“Yeah, um, I’m not sure if he’s a good sorcerer, but I’ve met an Archdemon.”

“Archdemon? That’s the most amazing of sorcerers, right?! What kinda person was he?”

“He, like, got along *really* well with his, um, lover?”

Micca wasn’t quite sure if the man was a good person, but the Archdemon in question also didn’t fit the symbol of evil that the church portrayed him as.

“Amazing! So there really are good sorcerers out there!” his sister exclaimed, smiling and jumping up and down innocently.

I got a pay cut and the higher-ups have been scolding the hell out of me ever since, though...

Half a year ago, two Archdemons had rampaged through the treasury in the church’s headquarters in the Holy City Raziel. Twelve Archangels had been incapable of defeating a single Archdemon. That massive failure had led to Micca and the others having to go back through training from scratch. Not only that, but the one in charge of their training was the ever-mysterious Archangel Stella Diekmeyer.

She really has no idea how to take it easy on us...

Head Archangel Ginias Galahad II, who was even younger than Micca, was practically beaten to a pulp every single day but had the guts to keep hanging in there. Honestly, Micca respected him for it.

And then, after finally being released from that hellish training, this incident had befallen them. The church was managed with the support of the people in the form of donations, so they couldn’t function if they ignored the populace.

What’s more, with that incident as an impetus, it had come to light that there were those among sorcerers who were protecting people, secretly treating the diseased and injured, and sharing food with them as well. The time for the church to reevaluate its relationship with sorcerers was quickly approaching. Even a month after the incident, the town was filled with stories of romance. The wild enthusiasm was in no way limited to Micca’s sister.

“Maybe I should join the Unification Faction...”

Chastille Lillqvist was the leader of the Unification Faction, a group that called for coexistence with sorcerers. The recent incident had strengthened their position greatly. It would be smarter to join them if Micca wanted to continue making a living at the church. This got another delighted look from his sister.

“That’s Lady Chastille’s faction thing, right?! You’re amazing!”

“Yeah,” Micca replied with a smile before waving to her. “It’s about time for your big brother to get back to work.”

“’Kaaay. Do your best, Big Bro!”

“I will, Ayla. Take care of Mom.”

“Leave it to me!”

With that, he finally left. This small brickwork house in the corner of the village was Micca’s home. The village itself was also small. Even at the very center, there was nothing but a few places to eat and one general store that handled goods of every type. If there was anything they were known for, it was that the grass was good, or the milk produced here was delicious. There were fewer than a thousand residents, and they were pretty much all acquaintances. Still, even out in the sticks, travelers passed through this tranquil village every now and then.

Hm? Is that an outsider? How rare.

Just as Micca saw an unfamiliar figure in front of him, a piece of paper hit the traveler in the face.

“Mph?! What’s this...?”

The traveler stood stock-still in bewilderment, then took off his round glasses and wiped them with his sleeve before staring at the paper.

“Uhhh... Seriously, what’s this? What’s going on...?”

The baffled young man was staring at a renowned gossip rag. It had been a month since it was published, but it had been carried here by the wind from somewhere.

Angelic Knights existed to protect the people. Micca was technically a knight, so he called out to the bespectacled traveler.

“Um, are you all right?” Micca asked. “You seem rather pale...”

“Hm?!”

The traveler was so engrossed in reading the paper that he hadn’t noticed Micca. The young man looked startled and placed a hand on his hip.

“Hey, calm down,” Micca said, raising both hands to show he wasn’t an enemy. “I’m just a passing Angelic Knight.”

“H-Huh? Oh, forgive me,” the traveler replied, finally returning to his senses. “I just happened to see something unbelievably inexplicable... Wh-What is this?”

There was still a clear hint of bewilderment in his voice.

“Oh, that?” Micca said. “It’s news from a month ago. One of the Archangels is in a romantic relationship with a sorcerer. Though I’m ashamed to say it.”

“Is this true? Isn’t the church angry about this?”

The traveler looked like he couldn’t believe it. It seemed this was his first time hearing the news. Well, being on a journey could’ve distanced him from what was considered common knowledge now.

No, shouldn’t a traveler know even more about that stuff? Was he somewhere secluded?

The man’s reaction was a bit of a mystery, but Micca wasn’t here to interrogate him or anything.

“Well, it’s become a bit of a problem,” Micca responded, smiling bitterly. “But the public has accepted it, and the person in question is of rather high standing, so it’s gotten pretty complicated...”

There were, of course, voices within the church calling for Chastille Lillqvist to be punished. However, she had far too much support from the people for that. Before the church could make an announcement, protests had been carried out, calling to “recognize Chastille’s love.” The clearly negative attitude toward the church had seen a drastic drop in donations.

The church couldn’t make any careless statements now. Even if they were in the right, it could lead to the balance of power between the church and

sorcerers flipping on its head. What's more, the leader of the church, the pope, hadn't said a single thing about the incident. He hadn't shown himself in public over the last few years, so there were even quiet rumors of his death. His silence now pretty much confirmed those rumors. It was almost the same as a public declaration. If their leader was turning a blind eye to the situation, the church couldn't take any strong measures.

It's almost as if they knew His Holiness the Pope would remain silent.

Not that that was possible, of course. Either way, now that things had gotten this far, the Angelic Knights could no longer act as they had. Drawing their swords immediately upon spotting a sorcerer was out of the question.

"You must be joking," the bespectacled man said, his hands to his head. "This ridiculous situation is being accepted? How unfathomable..."

Maybe, just maybe, this man was a devout believer of the church. The current situation was very hard for such people to accept.

"As a member of the church, I understand how you feel," Micca said with a comforting smile.

"Ohhh... Right. Thank you. Sorry for taking up your time."

The bespectacled man crumpled the gossip rag into a ball and shoved it into his pocket, then staggered away on unsteady feet.

Is he going to be all right...?

The man's back exuded an aura that seemed to say, "Like hell anyone in the world can understand how I feel."

At any rate, Micca had a job to do. With the traveler still on his mind, he walked off.

It was a small village, so it didn't take him long to reach the church, which was a simple wooden building. Even when they held services, the draft was so bad that most participants didn't even listen to the sermons. Knocking on the door, Micca took a quiet breath and raised his voice.

"Twelfth-ranked Archangel Micca Salvarra reporting for duty!"

He then let out an involuntary sigh.

Why is someone like me serving as an Archangel?

Micca wasn't a noble, nor was he from a family of devout believers. His father had served as an Angelic Knight, but he'd been no more than the lowest of the lowest ranks and had died when Micca was six.

He respected his father for fighting for the sake of others, but after his untimely death, Micca had been forced to forgo school and work for a merchant to support his family. Naturally, he'd never wielded a sword, so he sat on the lowest seat among the Archangels.

As for how that'd happened, he'd been chosen by a Sacred Sword last year and suddenly promoted to the ranks of the Archangels. Naturally, he'd refused at first, thinking he couldn't possibly fulfill such an important duty, but he'd had no choice in the matter. A Sacred Sword apparently couldn't be used by anyone else until its wielder died. At least being an Archangel came with significant income.

I want my siblings to attend school.

He had a thirteen-year-old brother, a younger sister, and two other brothers who were even younger. His mother's body had broken down from overwork. She was in poor health, so Micca was the only one who could support the Salvarra family.

He didn't care about achieving great deeds. If he could carry out his duties until his siblings were adults, then that was enough. So long as he was alive, he could support his family.

"Lord Salvarra," the priest said with a smile. These two had been acquainted since Micca was a little boy. "The village is peaceful again today thanks to you being here."

"No, I haven't done anything, really..."

The majority of Archangels were dispatched when there was an incident that required their attention. Even when they weren't in the field, there was no need for them to stay at a specific church. They generally lived in the cities out of convenience, but in order to help his family, Micca had set himself up in this tiny village. He was often absent, but due to a recent incident, he hadn't been

given any real missions as of late. Rather, the church as an organization couldn't make a move. Over the last month, Micca had helped out with chores at this church and had patrolled the village. However, that was all about to change.

"Lord Salvarra, I have a mission for you," the priest said gravely as if passing a death sentence. "I command you to monitor a certain Archdemon."

I get it now. If they've got a useless Archangel, they can just send him to die and hope to get a new one.

These were the hopeless events of a certain day at the end of spring in the sixteenth year of Micca's life.

Chapter I: Doing Something Unfamiliar Generally Leads to Wasted Effort

“Exactly how much of that incident was your doing, Archdemon Zagan?”

Inside Archdemon Palace’s throne room beneath Kianoides, a sorcerer with closed eyes questioned Zagan. It was Earthshaker Vepar, a man with white hair and a slender frame. He was so beautiful that if Zagan hadn’t heard of Vepar’s features beforehand, he would never have assumed Vepar was a man. Vepar was one of the former Archdemon candidates, as well as Asmodeus’s disciple. Despite both being Archdemon candidates at one point, and getting Vepar dragged into last month’s incident in a grand manner, Zagan had never met him before this.

“Ever since that incident, the relations between sorcerers and Angelic Knights have changed greatly,” Vepar continued, awe clear in his voice. “You’ve destroyed the structure of the world, yet you refer to it as no more than ‘that trivial matter.’ The feat was akin to leveling a mountain by throwing a pebble. Honestly, you terrify me.”

There was clear admiration in his voice. Zagan leaned an elbow on his throne and replied boldly...or not. He replied with a sense of fear in his own voice.

“Well, I was the one who ordered it, but Gremory actually executed the plan. I’m terrified of her too.”

“Is that so...?”

A bead of sweat ran down Vepar’s cheek as he nodded, a strange sense of understanding in his heart.

Angelic Knights and sorcerers were enemies who’d been at each other’s throats for as long as anyone could remember. However, the root of those hostilities had been fabricated by Eldest Marchosias’s twisted hands eight hundred years ago. Up until that point, Angelic Knights and sorcerers had worked together to develop the world. The Head Archdemon at the time,

Lisette Dantalian, had brought peace through her great efforts. However, when Marchosias trampled her work into the ground, the two groups had been turned into enemies.

Someone had already gotten revenge against Marchosias for this, but Lisette and Shere Khan's intended peace remained shattered. That was why Zagan and Gremory had formed a plan to foster harmony between Angelic Knights and sorcerers. However, Zagan hadn't expected Gremory to accomplish the task with such astounding success. Though, Gremory had been the one to directly witness Shere Khan's memories, so perhaps she'd been spurred by a sense of duty rather than entirely by her hobby.

The populace's attention was now focused entirely on the romance between an Angelic Knight and a sorcerer, and as a result, the Angelic Knights could no longer hunt sorcerers with reckless abandon. And yet, the sorcerers had also stopped quarreling with the knights as if that were perfectly natural. That was because the sorcerer in the middle of this upheaval was none other than Barbatos. There was no telling how he would butcher any sorcerers who caught his attention. Such was what the average sorcerer believed.

The sorcerers were also vaguely aware that Zagan had instigated the whole affair. After all, Gremory had boldly used his name to spur those reporters into action, and Zagan had approved of it. Sorcerers had nothing to gain from antagonizing Angelic Knights if it meant incurring the wrath of an Archdemon and a former Archdemon candidate. Thus, just as Vepar had said, the way of the world was changing.

Well, I got to celebrate Nephy's birthday in peace thanks to that, so I don't really have anything to complain about.

Zagan was at least grateful for what she'd done, but Gremory still terrified him. Even an Archdemon couldn't rein that granny in.

"I shall apologize for dragging you into such damnable trouble," Zagan said, pulling himself together and facing Vepar once more. "As proof of that, I'll hand over all the information I have on Asmodeus to you. If you wish for anything else, I'll consider it so long as it's within the realm of reason."

"What a lavish offer," Vepar replied, his mouth agape.

“I know how rough it can be to get involved with Gremory...”

“I see...”

She always rambled about love power or whatnot, making a toy out of Zagan. He understood how much of a pain that was more than most. This was the moment a strange sense of comradery was born between two of Gremory’s victims.

Nonetheless, Gremory was essential to his plans. Zagan had used her while being well aware of the risk. Nobody but the granny could’ve achieved such results, even if they also used Barbatos and Chastille, so it was up to her king to deal with the aftermath.

“Is that enough to make up for it?” Zagan asked Vepar, staring right at him. “Then allow me to move on to further negotiations. I have an interest in your attempts at reproducing Sacred Swords.”

Despite being a sorcerer, Vepar had knowledge of Sacred Swords, and he even knew how to make them. This was information Zagan wanted above all else so that he could destroy the Sacred Swords—freeing the seraphs who were sealed within them.

Upon hearing that, Vepar’s brow shot up in shock.

“What? Is it that surprising for an Archdemon to have an interest in Sacred Swords?” Zagan asked.

“Oh, well...it is, in fact, surprising, but it’s been a while since I’ve had someone I can conduct a proper negotiation with,” Vepar responded, wiping the corner of his eye with a sleeve.

“I really do apologize for that idiot and granny,” Zagan said from the bottom of his heart.

Getting involved with Gremory and Barbatos was guaranteed to be a huge pain. It was enough to make the very concept of a negotiation seem futile. Zagan waited for Vepar to calm down before continuing.

“I have one Sacred Sword at my disposal. If necessary, I can provide you with another two...no, another three.”

The first was, of course, Raphael's. The rest were Richard's, Chastille's, and Stella's. They would likely allow their swords to be studied if Zagan asked. Richard and Stella were especially liable to simply handing over their Sacred Swords. It was even possible that Archangels who were part of Chastille's Unification Faction would cooperate given the right conditions.

"That's as much as I can guarantee, but I have others I might be able to get," Zagan added. "So long as you meet my demands, you may use them however you see fit."

He meant allowing Vepar to use them for his own purposes—which was ultimately to fulfill his lifelong goal of defeating Asmodeus. That was the reward Zagan offered.

Not that Foll will like it... But if she doesn't, she simply has to intervene in her own way. She possesses the power and status to do that if she so wishes.

"You continue to show how terrifying an Archdemon you are," Vepar said, taken aback by the extraordinary offer. "You've made your way that far into the church?"

Zagan remained silent and smiled boldly.

Not that I intended to... I just happened to get more Archangels in my family over the last year. Still, I'll use everything at my disposal.

Zagan had already crushed several Archdemons, but he didn't trust too much in his own strength.

"Is an Archdemon of your caliber so fixated on the Sacred Swords because of that monster from the other day?" Vepar asked, probing.

Samyaza, despite being a demon, possessed great intelligence. It was an amalgamation of over ten thousand demons. Zagan hadn't been able to defeat it on his own. There was a way, but it was impractical. Heaven's Phosphor Showers of the Wailing Dead was a sorcery Zagan had created to destroy absolutely everything. It was meant to be used by a group, so it would take him an entire day to weave it on his own. However, demons appeared in unexpected places at unexpected times, so he couldn't use that method. If Nephy hadn't shown up, Zagan would have failed to do anything.

We repelled it, but I doubt it's dead.

There could also be more of its kind. Thus, Zagan had to accumulate power. Marchosias was scheming something too, so he couldn't afford to fall behind now.

"That one, you mean," Zagan said, nodding gravely. "Truly a dreadful demon. I need a means of defeating it or any others of its kind when they next appear. However, I have other reasons for investigating the Sacred Swords."

"And they are?" Vepar asked nervously, gulping.

"I intend to destroy all the Sacred Swords," Zagan declared, a quiet and absolute resolve in his voice.

Vepar gasped. Well, to be precise, Zagan was intent on freeing the seraphs sealed within the Sacred Swords, but that would take a while to explain. Besides, freeing the seraphs would render the Sacred Swords powerless, so it was ultimately the same as destroying the weapons.

"Why would you do that?" Vepar asked, a bead of sweat running down his cheek. "The Sacred Swords shouldn't be much of a threat to an Archdemon of your caliber."

They were somewhat of a threat, but not enough that he had to break them. Zagan found it difficult to answer that question. He had done it because his sister-in-law's lover had asked him and his bride wanted him to. However, saying that now was likely to invite a misunderstanding. So, after pondering over how to best respond to that question, Zagan arrived at an answer.

"Because I promised a friend."

To Zagan, Richard was his sister-in-law's savior and a peerless friend from whom he could learn how lovers were supposed to act. He was almost like Zagan's teacher. Zagan spoke with clear respect for him in his voice. Vepar opened his mouth in shock. No words came out, but upon coming to an understanding, he closed his mouth and flashed Zagan a beautiful smile.

"I see," Vepar replied. "I heard you were a man with a strong sense of duty, but this surpasses my wildest imagination. I would've loved to meet the person that you hold in such high esteem."

“Hm? I’m sure I’ll introduce you two sooner or later.”

“No, I’ll pass on that. It’s not my place to intrude on such things.”

Vepar was speaking as if Zagan were referring to the deceased, but Zagan didn’t give it much thought.

“At any rate, even if you’re keeping quiet for the moment, I figured you were hostile to that ‘self-proclaimed’ Marchosias,” Vepar continued, nodding. “Even if it’s to fulfill a promise to a friend, it’s unexpected that you would so boldly tear apart a source of great power.”

Having been revived as a Nephilim, Marchosias was up to something. He hadn’t directly picked a fight with Zagan yet, but Zagan knew that conflict was inevitable after the incidents with Asmodeus and Eligor. So Zagan was better off devoting all his strength to the confrontation with Marchosias. That Archdemon was called the Eldest. He’d lived a thousand years, all the while ruling the world both publicly and from behind the curtains.

“I’ve played my hand already,” Zagan stated, smiling boldly. “My subordinates are talented, after all.”

“I see. I suppose all the new Archdemons are your subordinates,” Vepar mumbled, coming to an understanding and smiling once more. “Now that I think about it, I haven’t heard anything about one of the new Archdemons yet. Do you mind if I ask about him?”

Zagan didn’t need to ask whom he was referring to.

“You mean Shax. The man doesn’t know how to spread his name, so that’s understandable. However, I believe he is the most terrifying of the new Archdemons.”

Foll was the strongest sorcerer among them. Her power had destroyed the Zombie Dragon Orobas and had forced Asmodeus into a draw. In contrast, Nephy was the natural enemy of all sorcerers. Her celestial mysticism manipulated nature itself, and she was even well-versed enough in sorcery that it wouldn’t bring any shame to her title of Archdemon. She was also in tune with Sacred Swords.

However, despite all that, Shax was the most terrifying among them. Even

though he had a proper grasp of Foll's and Nephy's capabilities, that was what Zagan truly believed.

◇

"Achoo!"

The "terrifying Archdemon" let out a grand sneeze in the middle of the street. The surrounding pedestrians shot annoyed looks at him. Spring was over, and it was the start of the month of Vodi, so the weather was supposed to be warming up, but maybe it was still a little chilly today.

Ever since becoming an Archdemon, he'd stopped hunching and had changed his shabby white gown to a more dignified robe. And yet, he still didn't exude an air of majesty. He was out on a trip too, so he'd grown some stubble, which wasn't helping. The girl walking next to Shax looked up at him with a worried expression on her face.

"Mister Shax, did you catch a cold?"

It was Kuroka Adelhide, the cait sith from the Far East. Her triangular ears poked out from her black hair as it shook about. She also had human ears, and her previously blind eyes were red. Her two tails swayed about in good humor, contrasting her worried tone.

The two of them were far away from Kianoides in the ancient city of Aristocrates. It had apparently once been the capital of a large country, but had declined due to the rise of the church. It was now no more than a backwater with historic ruins as its primary tourist attraction. The townscape was a mix of old stone ruins and far newer wooden buildings. It was an odd mix of cultures, but strangely enough, nothing really seemed out of place. Each section complimented the next, creating an oddly balanced living area.

There were only a thousand or so residents, so it wasn't particularly big. Still, it was a tourist hub, so it received a fair number of visitors. A foreign girl in the midst of such a town was like something out of a fairy tale. This surrealism was accentuated by Kuroka's Eastern garments, which she was wearing due to visiting her home in Liucaon before coming here.

Outfits from Liucaon generally gave the impression of having large,

unmanageable sleeves, but Kuroka was currently wearing a dashing military uniform. It was apparently the Adelhide family's formal outfit. She had a family crest with a decorative cord at her chest and golden epaulets.

This girl was always tugging him along and could be rather childish, but she was actually the world's strongest swordswoman who could defeat not only an Archangel, but even an Archdemon. The staff she held in her hands housed Liucaon's Holy Treasure, Moonless Sky. That, combined with her uniform, gave her a dignity befitting her royal lineage. Shax found himself completely charmed by her.

"Is something the matter?" Kuroka asked.

"Oh, no, nothing. My nose is just a little itchy."

Shax shook his head, hiding the fact that he was so smitten, but Kuroka narrowed her eyes, smiling as if she saw right through him.

"Hrgh!"

And then, for some reason, she headbutted him. Shax groaned from the impact against his ribs, but Kuroka paid him no mind and continued pressing her head against him.

This has been happening a lot lately...

It was said that cats often had a habit of butting their heads against others. Did the same apply to Kuroka? When a cat acted like this, it was often a show of affection. He didn't have to confirm this part with Kuroka after all this time, and Shax was resolved to answer her feelings in kind. He felt awfully sorry for making her wait so long for him to make up his mind, so he couldn't bring himself to criticize such behavior. Still, he wanted her to consider the time and place. The gazes the passersby gave them were painful.

"Kurosuke, it's hard to walk..." Shax said.

"Hee hee hee, sorry. I'm just happy to find out your tastes."

"My tastes?" Shax repeated, cocking his head.

Kuroka spread her arms wide and spun on the spot. Despite all the other pedestrians who were out and about, her hands didn't hit anyone.

“You like these clothes, don’t you?” she asked.

“Well, I don’t hate them.”

“Jeez, can’t you just honestly say they suit me?”

“I’m pretty sure I told you that a ton already...”

No matter how bad Shax was at reading the mood, he at least knew to praise a lady when she dressed up. Or rather, he’d learned to do so from his boss Zagan, who’d scolded him over and over before this trip. That was why he’d told her it suited her when he first saw her in the clothes.

Does that mean I didn’t say enough?

“Girls want to be praised as many times as possible, you know?” Kuroka said, her tails swinging about.

“Oh man... It’s your hometown’s formal dress. How could it not suit you, Kurosuke? You’re so pretty.”

“Hnnngh...!”

He gave her his honest opinion, and Kuroka stiffened up in response, turning bright red in the process. She then started rubbing her cheeks and grinned. Even the human ears peeking out of her hair were red.

“Heh... Heh heh heh... It’s pretty embarrassing when you say that right to my face,” Kuroka said.

“Seriously, what do you want from me...?”

That said, she seemed to have enjoyed Shax’s compliment. She spun on the spot again, then continued walking by his side. Shax couldn’t help but smile. Noticing his gaze, Kuroka’s shoulders jolted.

“Wh-What is it?” she asked. “You’re staring at my face.”

“I’m just relieved to see you so cheerful.”

Shax and Kuroka were currently acting under secret orders from Zagan. However, they had received those orders a month ago. As for what they’d been doing in that time before acting on those orders, the two had visited Kuroka’s hometown in Liucaon. They’d visited the graves of the destroyed Adelhide

family. Liucaon had three royal families that protected its lands: the succubus Hypnoel family, the siren Neptunia family, and the cait sith Adelhide family.

And the Adelhides died because of me.

Archdemon Shere Khan had been the one to kill them, but Shax had been there too as his disciple. He hadn't been able to stop his mentor. He hadn't been able to save anyone. Kuroka had forgiven him, but that didn't mean his sins were gone. It was a crime that Shax had to come to terms with.

However, even if they'd accepted those circumstances, that was only between Shax and Kuroka. Having inherited the name Tiger King, and as Shere Khan's direct disciple, there was no way Shax would be welcomed on the Adelhides' lands.

Naturally, the two remaining kings of Hypnoel and Neptunia had been enraged. Incidentally, Kuroka had also been enraged. Well, Kuroka had just been trying to stand up for Shax, so Shax had gone through dire straits to get them to calm down and talk it out. Despite all that, Kuroka was in a terrific mood.

"I mean, Uncle Hypnoel and Neptunia accepted our relationship in the end," Kuroka said, smiling proudly. "They also understand you intend to join our family."

Shax was intent on looking after Kuroka for the rest of his life, which was practically the same as being married.

"W-Well, take it easy on me, okay?"

In the end, they'd accepted Shax. Of course, being responsible for so many rare species who were constantly targeted by sorcerers, they were always in need of powerful backers. Even if not the best of them, Shax still held the title of Archdemon and could fulfill that role.

"You were so cool and daring at the time," Kuroka said, grinning ear to ear and blushing.

"I mean, compared to old Raphael chasing me around..." Shax replied, smiling bitterly.

It’d all seemed so much more relaxing compared to the sight of the most dreadful butler swinging his Sacred Sword around with lethal intent. At the very least, nobody there had tried to cut off his head upon meeting his eyes, so he’d been able to talk to them openly.

“By the way,” Kuroka said, remembering something as she twirled a finger in her hair. “I know your tastes for clothes now, but what about hair?”

“What do you mean?”

“C’mon, like long or short, or tied up or let down. There are all kinds of styles.”

“I’ve never really thought about it,” Shax replied, folding his arms. “I’m pretty sure any hairstyle would suit you.”

That turned out to be the wrong answer. Kuroka puffed out her cheeks and said, “That’s not what I’m asking...”

I don’t know anything about hair, though...

Once more left wracking his brains, Shax brooded over the matter for a while, then came up with an answer.

“I think your usual hairstyle is good, Kurosuke,” he said. “Well, a part of me wants to see you with long hair too, I guess.”

“H-Hmm, is that so? Then maybe I’ll try growing it out a little...” Kuroka mumbled, fiddling with her bangs, looking more pleased than she let on.

That seemed to have been the right answer. Kuroka’s cheeks flushed as she clenched her hands in front of her chest as if firing herself up. Incidentally, her two tails were coiling around Shax’s back the entire time they were walking, but she didn’t seem to realize. Shax was trying to get used to it, but it still made him feel restless.

“Setting aside my tastes, what about you, Kurosuke?” he asked, trying to pull himself back together.

“Me? Umm, what do you mean...?”

“I mean your tastes, obviously. Like an outfit or anything else. What do you want from me? If there’s anything I can do for you, I’ll try my best.”

Kuroka was putting effort into her personal appearance, so Shax had to do something too. Kuroka made a meek expression, then came to a stop. Shax turned to look at her, finding her deep in thought.

“Umm, it’s a bit problematic to be asked like that,” she said. “I think you’re fine as you are...”

“You’re saying the same thing as me.”

“Erk... That’s true! But! But!”

Shax didn’t understand the intricacies of a woman’s heart and was horrible at reading the mood. He’d lived a life of regret, so he hadn’t had any opportunities to feel romantic attraction to anyone. But Kuroka was the same... No, half of her life had been far more gruesome than anything Shax had gone through. In short, Kuroka had no idea what she wanted out of a lover either. She started to get worked up over it when Shax plopped his hand on her head.

“Don’t worry, there’s no need to rush,” he told her. “We both have plenty of time. Let’s just take our time thinking about it.”

“Right...”

If they didn’t know, they could figure it out little by little. Kuroka nodded in satisfaction, then tugged on Shax’s sleeve. He squeezed her hand awkwardly. But, well, just taking her hand like this at all could be seen as progress. Kuroka said nothing and simply squeezed back.

They continued walking for a while in silence when eventually, Kuroka muttered quietly, “Mister Shax.”

“What?”

“If I grow out my hair, there’s something I want you to do. Is that okay with you?”

“Yeah, I’ll do whatever you want,” Shax answered immediately.

He would do anything this girl asked unconditionally. It didn’t matter what it was.

Kuroka smiled shyly, then continued, “The other day, Lady Nephteros and Sir Richard did a certain something. I kind of want to imitate them.”

“Hmm. What did they do?”

“That’s, um...”

Kuroka stumbled over her words, finding it hard to tell him. He patiently waited for her to continue, and before long, Kuroka spoke in the quietest of voices.

“I want you to...kiss my hair.”

“Huh?”

“N-Never mind!” Kuroka yelled, turning red right to her ears and waving her hands in a panic.

The heck have those two been up to? Shax groaned internally. If Kuroka knew about it, that meant they’d done it in public. Shax had believed that Richard, unlike Zagan, was a man of proper discernment, so he found himself astonished by this development.

Anyway, a kiss on the hair... How does that even work?

The first thing that came to mind was a parent kissing a child on the forehead. That could be said to be a kiss to the bangs. Shax could see the sense in it. The hurdle was far lower than a kiss on the lips or cheek...but it was still embarrassing. Unfortunately, this man was hopelessly incapable of reading the mood. He couldn’t even imagine what the act actually entailed, so he replied with a smile and casual ease.

“What, that’s it?”

“Hwuh?”

Kuroka started as if hearing the unthinkable. Shax took a look around him. Unfortunately, there were a lot of people around. He wanted to do whatever Kuroka wished, but doing so in the middle of a populated street lacked common sense.

“Looks like there aren’t many people over there,” he said.

“Huh? What? Wait?”

Shax pulled Kuroka’s hand, then went down an empty alley. He attracted

some gazes due to suddenly changing directions, but nobody paid him any more attention than that.

“Okay, right here should do.”

“Wh-What? Should do? Right n— Hyah?!”

“H-Hey!”

Losing her mind from shock for some reason, Kuroka tripped over an inexplicably placed piece of wood, tumbling backward. Shax tried to support her, but it was so sudden he staggered and his palm thudded against the wall. As a result, he was now hanging over Kuroka.

They were close enough for their noses to touch. Perhaps due to keeping up appearances for their ultimate destination, a sweet scent wafted over from her. Kuroka gripped her staff in front of her, tears blurring her eyes. However, she showed no signs of pushing him away. Shax's eyes were drawn to her trembling pink lips, and he gulped involuntarily.

Crap, I feel like I'm doing something really indecent.

His heart pounded in his chest. He wondered why this girl was so defenseless. He tried touching her cheek. She was startled initially, but then raised her own hand to his face. Thinking about it carefully, she was an adult, and those around them had already accepted their relationship. There was nothing standing in their way except for Shax's cowardice.

Wait, that's not the point here!

This was supposed to be about planting a kiss on her hair.

"Ready, Kuroka?" Shax asked as if preparing his heart for what was to come.

"Y-Yes."

Kuroka closed her eyes tight and raised her head.

The mood kinda makes it seem like we're about to kiss, but that's not what's going on, okay?

He felt like kissing her hair now would actually make her angry, but Shax questioned whether he would be able to maintain his sense of reason if he kissed her on the lips. And so, just as he brought his face closer to her brow, Kuroka suddenly opened her eyes. Her gaze wasn't the adorable one she'd been making, but one with the sharpness of a drawn blade. Her crimson eyes didn't look at Shax, but in the instant before they turned away from him, his heart throbbed greatly.

"Over there, you fiend!"

Kuroka quickly drew a throwing knife from her sleeve and threw it deeper into the alley.

"Wha—?!"

Kuroka also changed her posture, her triangular ears sticking out in front of Shax. He opened his mouth in shock, and as a result...one of her ears went right in as he closed it again.

“Hwah...?”

Kuroka froze. Before long, her face looked red enough to catch fire.

“Myaaah...?”

Her eyes spun about and she sank to her knees.

“Kurosuke?”

Shax supported her in a panic, his eyes fixed in the direction she’d thrown the knife. There was nobody there. The knife was stuck in the wall.

Kurosuke missed...?

No, even taking the situation into consideration, it was doubtful she would miss, which meant someone had dodged it.

“Seems we’ve got some crazy guy following us...”

Considering who Shax was about to meet, that was a perfectly reasonable assumption.

◇

“Fairy Queen Nephelia...”

Nephy muttered the name that had been given to her while sitting inside her room in Archdemon Palace. It felt like too grand a name for a novice. It had belonged to her mother, Titania Nimueh Oberon. Zagan had bestowed it upon Nephy on her birthday. That was when she’d been given the name, but she’d already known it by then.

“And you’re Fairy Queen Nephelia, was it?”

Astrologian Eligor had referred to Nephy by that name before she’d even received it. Nephy had ignored it at the time, not knowing what it had meant, but after looking it up later, she’d discovered that was her mother’s second name. Thanks to that, she’d known the meaning when Zagan had bestowed it upon her. However, Eligor had known beforehand because the Astrologian

could see the future. She didn't make predictions. She saw the inevitable future.

"That's how you'll destroy the world, after all."

That was what Eligor had said when Nephy had turned her back to her to run off. Still, Nephy was sure she hadn't misheard it. That was probably the reason for Eligor's tremendous animosity toward her.

What am I going to do, I wonder...?

Honestly, Nephy thought it was an exaggeration. She'd become an Archdemon mostly out of circumstance. Barbatos or Gremory would've been far more suitable sorcerers. She found it impossible to believe that she would one day destroy the world. Even with celestial mysticism, the people of the world weren't so weak that they'd allow her to destroy them on her own. Plus, before all that, if Nephy ever lost her way to such an extent, Zagan would stop her.

No matter what happened to Zagan, Nephy would always be his ally. This wasn't blind belief, servitude, or worship. It was because she loved him. If she believed he was going down the wrong path, she would stake her life on stopping him. She would do so by any means necessary. And she was sure Zagan felt the same way about her. After all, he was so endlessly kind and strict.

If Nephy did something that threatened to destroy the world, he would definitely scold her and then stop her. He would tell her that that wasn't the Nephy he'd fallen in love with. It was precisely because she was convinced of this that she didn't understand.

What exactly will I do, and why, to bring about the world's destruction?

Perhaps it wasn't literal and was instead a metaphor. However, Eligor's declaration couldn't have been a thoughtless remark, so it was better to assume it was some inevitable future.

Nephy had grown tired of being called "the cursed child who'll destroy the world" by the elves from the hidden village. That had essentially been their way of greeting her. They'd all perished because Nephy had abandoned them, so in that sense, she'd destroyed their world. However, Eligor's words had a different

connotation.

“That probably wasn’t a curse, but advice.”

It’d been a word of caution to prepare her for the time to come. Despite having only talked to her a little, Nephy knew that Eligor was a gentle and kind person at heart. Perhaps that was a comical way of describing an Archdemon, but despite saying the future couldn’t be changed, Eligor prayed it could be. No, she was struggling tooth and nail to try to change it. Eligor hadn’t given up on the future. That was why Nephy felt sympathy for her. She’d been hostile, but that hadn’t been the same as the elves’ repulsive hatred.

Nephy had to make use of Eligor’s advice. She had to prepare. However, that brought her back to her initial question. What exactly was she going to do in the future?

“I’d like to meet her once more and ask...”

And as she continued agonizing over such thoughts, a knock came from the other side of the door.

“Yes, who is it?”

“Nephy, you there?”

The one who peeked inside was her daughter, Foll. She was also an Archdemon now and was ruling over her own territory. She’d been devoting all her energies there as of late, so she hadn’t been back much. Seeing her, Nephy felt her cheeks loosen into a smile.

“Welcome back, Foll,” she said, spreading her arms.

Foll ran over with a pitter-patter and leaped into her chest.

“I’m back, Nephy.”

They said children grew fast, but Nephy felt this was especially true for Foll. It wasn’t certain how much longer she’d be able to pamper the little dragon like this. Nephy returned Foll’s embrace with all the affection she could muster.

“How are things going over there?” Nephy asked. “Has anything been troubling you?”

“You’re such a worrywart, Nephy. I’m fine. Dexia, Shura, and them help out with all the hard stuff.”

“Hee hee, it seems there’s already nothing I can help with.”

“I’m happiest when you’re just the same old Nephy,” Foll said, getting out of Nephy’s arms and sitting on her lap. “What’s for dinner?”

“A herbal meat pie, lamb soup, and mandrake pudding for dessert.”

“Oh! All my favorites!”

“It’s your first time back in a while, after all. Master Zagan is also delighted.”

“Heh heh heh...”

“Oh yes, are Dexia and Aristella doing well?” Nephy asked, stroking Foll’s hair.

Understanding what she meant immediately, Foll nodded seriously.

“I think they’re fine... Nobody is looking for the capital of the oppressed yet, anyway.”

The nephilim twins who served as Foll’s advisors were currently being targeted by Archdemon Glasya-Labolas. It wasn’t clear whether he was aiming for Dexia or Aristella. Perhaps he was after both of them or maybe he didn’t even know which he was after himself. Despite coming to blows once already, he showed no clear signs of attacking again.

I wonder if Lisette is all right.

That girl shared the twins’ face, but seeing how Zagan hadn’t mentioned her, it was unlikely for her to be targeted. Lisette lived in Raziel, where Stella, Ginias, and the others were. Even an Archdemon couldn’t act recklessly there.

“I doubt he’s given up, but I feel like he’s holding back for now,” Foll said.

“One can only hope...”

Those girls had also led a hard life, so Nephy hoped they could live in peace one day.

That man inflicted so many wounds on Master Zagan. It would be best if we never have to fight him...

However, it was actually rather ominous that he backed down quietly. As Nephy pondered the matter, Foll looked up and changed the topic.

“Oh yeah. I met Nephteros on the way back.”

“You did? Is she doing well? She’s been awfully busy as of late.”

“She said Horse Head is stuck in crybaby mode, so it’s a huge pain.”

“Aaah...”

One month had passed since then, and Chastille still hadn’t recovered. Well, it was somewhat inevitable, considering what had happened.

“If Horse Head is used as a plaything for much longer, Nephteros will lose it,” Foll added.

“I don’t believe there’s cause for concern. Master Zagan has achieved his objective.”

Foll cocked her head and asked, “The handyman and Horse Head still haven’t done anything. Is it okay to stop?”

“Master Zagan wanted the Angelic Knights and sorcerers to reconcile. He made a show of their relationship to that end, nothing more.”

Foll didn’t look fully convinced.

“I don’t really get it. Everyone thinks they’re a couple, but they’re still not dating or anything. Is it okay if reality doesn’t match the story?”

Nephy smiled, gently running her finger along Foll’s horn.

“Then say Chastille and Lord Barbatos truly are dating. What do you think they’ll say if you ask them about it?”

Foll sank into thought, groaned for a full ten seconds, then muttered dubiously, “‘W-W-W-W-W-We’re not really dating or nothing...!’ sounds about right.”

She even imitated Barbatos’s tone. Nephy nearly burst into laughter and turned to the side to hide her face.

“Isn’t it the same whether or not they’re actually dating?” she said.

“True...”

The important part was getting everybody to know about them. How they perceived their own relationship didn’t matter. It was common knowledge that they were in love with each other, and yet they refused to admit it. Their relationship wasn’t likely to change even if they started dating, so their own perception was a trivial matter.

Besides, we’ll never get them to admit it without going at least this far...

Still, perhaps it had been somewhat too big a shock for Chastille. Barbatos was sure to do something for her, though, so there was no cause for concern.

“Love is still a total mystery to me,” Foll said, a bewildered look on her face. “I can’t figure it out.”

“Well, you’ll understand one day when you fall in love.”

If that time ever came, Nephy was sure she, Zagan, and Raphael would throw a huge fuss.

“Forget about Horse Head. Are you okay, Nephy?” Foll asked, looking up at her.

“What do you mean?”

“It looks like you’ve been worrying about something lately.”

It seemed children always kept a close eye on their parents.

I can’t go worrying Foll, now can I?

That said, this girl was Nephy’s senior both in terms of being a sorcerer and an Archdemon. Having accepted that fact, perhaps it was best to open up to her.

“Right...” Nephy started. “To tell you the truth, I met a certain Lady Eligor...”

Nephy told Foll about the advice she’d been given.

“You’ll destroy the world?” Foll said, her eyes wide in shock.

“It seems so.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

Foll looked at the floor, deep in thought.

“If there’s anything that can accomplish that, it’s celestial mysticism.”

“Perhaps, but then the same could be said about my mother and Nephteros.”

Even after becoming an Archdemon, Nephy couldn’t match her mother’s power. Now that Nephteros had a stable body, she also possessed power that rivaled Nephy’s. Taking Nephteros’s sorcery into consideration, perhaps she was even a step ahead of Nephy. Nevertheless, Nephy was apparently going to be the one to destroy the world.

Foll shook her head in resignation and asked, “Have you talked to Zagan?”

“No... I wanted to grasp some kind of clue before consulting him. He’s awfully busy right now.”

“Did something happen?”

“A small matter involving the Sacred Swords. He’s currently in a heated discussion with Lord Vepar, a former Archdemon candidate.”

“A former Archdemon candidate?” Foll repeated, knitting her brow.

“Do you know him?”

“Nope. I never really got involved with the other candidates.” Foll paused, then came to a realization. “Oh. I did meet one, though.”

“Were you close?”

Foll shook her head fearfully and responded, “Nope. I only caught a glimpse from afar, but I felt scared.”

“You did?”

Foll shuddered.

“Thunder God Furfur—a strange sorcerer whose identity is a complete mystery.”

Even after obtaining considerable power as an Archdemon, Foll spoke of them with terror in her voice.

◇

“Father... Please answer me. Is the insurance money for dying in the line of duty enough to provide for a family of five?”

Inside Aristocrates’s church, Micca pleaded half in tears. In a corner of the church was a small booth with two chambers just large enough to seat one adult each. In the space opposite Micca, beyond the screen that divided them, sat a gaunt priest who appeared to be in his thirties. This was a small church, so there was no bishop here like there would be in Raziel.

“Lord Salvarra...” the priest said in a clearly troubled tone. “I don’t believe I’m able to answer that. Besides, this is a confessional.”

His sorrowful reaction wasn’t simply because the question was about money. Micca was an Archangel, so as a matter of convenience, he held the title of bishop. Anyone who was asked that by a person of higher status would be left stumped. Nonetheless, this was the only person Micca could cling to, so he continued his pleas.

“Please hear me out, Father. I’ve been dispatched here to observe an Archdemon’s clandestine meeting in town. I wield a Sacred Sword, but I’m the lowest rank there is. Father, do you believe I’ll be able to go back home alive?”

“Aah... Umm, I hear it’s very rare for an Archangel to be as young as you are. It might be difficult for you now, but it’s essential to have more confidence in yourself.”

The priest wouldn’t give him anything but platitudes.

I wanted to at least live long enough for my youngest brothers to go to school... Life was such a cheap thing. If Micca died, Ayla would be forced to leave on an apprenticeship. At that point, his little brothers wouldn’t be able to manage the house and their mother on their own. His family was at a crisis point. *They could at least give me a helper or something...*

“Lord Salvarra,” the priest continued, his voice filled with optimism, “I hear this mission was given to you by Lady Diekmeyer’s recommendation. She may be a peculiar woman, but I hear her skills are assured. That same Lady Diekmeyer has acknowledged you. Please believe in yourself.”

That only plunged Micca further into the depths of despair. *So even Lady*

Diekmeyer has given up on me... She didn't know how to hold back, but she was unexpectedly kind. Despite him showing no progress whatsoever, she'd told Micca, "People have things they're good and bad at, Micca. You can just get better at what you're suited for." Those words had saved him at the time. And yet, in the end, he'd never so much as blocked a sword in training, let alone taken a proper point. It only made sense to conclude he had zero talent for it.

Micca left the confession booth behind, completely dejected. "Sorry, Ayla. Looks like this is the end for your big brother..."

Micca felt like he would cry if he hung his head, so he did the opposite. Sparse clouds floated in the clear blue sky, and a gentle shaft of sunlight poured down on him. Aristocrates had declined since its glory days, but it was a quiet and pleasant town to live in. If he hadn't become an Archangel, Micca would've liked to open a shop or something here to spend the rest of his days.

He continued to observe the town when he noticed a girl came. Her shoulder-length hair was raven black, on top of which she wore a frilly headdress. She was looking around with a troubled expression. She seemed to be searching for something, but the tourists around her paid her no mind.

"Can't really leave her be, can I...?"

There was no helping it now that he'd seen her. Micca weaved his way through the crowd as he ran toward her.

"You there, did you drop something?"

The girl looked up at Micca in shock. Perhaps she was nervous, as her expression was very stiff. She looked like a doll. She was probably around fifteen or sixteen, making her the same age as Micca. Her big round eyes were violet, giving her a somewhat mysterious atmosphere. Micca's mouth flapped open at the sight. She was pretty much dead center in his strike zone. The girl stared up at him, cocking her head. That brought Micca back to his senses.

"Ah, ummm, I'm not anyone suspicious. I'm an Angelic Knight. If something is troubling you, I can be of assistance."

It was obvious at a glance that he was an Angelic Knight, but Micca had a bad habit of introducing himself this way. It was also common for him to follow up

in a panic only to be told, “I’m fine.” It made him feel like he was trying to pick up girls, but Micca tried to keep his tone firm.

“An Angelic Knight?” the girl repeated, looking somewhat relieved.

She had a beautiful voice like a songbird chirping to signal the coming of spring. Even as this entranced him, Micca somehow nodded.

“Mm-hmm. An Angelic Knight.”

The girl fished around in her apron for a bit, then pulled out a piece of paper.

“Obsessed with romance?” she asked.

“No... That’s a bit wrong.”

“Is that so?”

As to be expected, it was the paper on Lillqvist. *She sure is a peculiar girl...*

The girl slumped her shoulders in disappointment for some reason, then put the gossip rag away in her apron again.

“S-So, did something happen?” Micca asked. “You’ve been looking around restlessly for a while now.”

“I’m...investigating? Searching? For my master.”

Micca wasn’t quite sure what the questioning inflection was for.

“Ummm, were you separated?” he asked. “Are you two from around here?”

The girl shook her head. Her black hair swayed about, tickling Micca’s nose with a flowery scent.

“Not from...around here. Separated? Unknown. All of a sudden...vanished.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s what separated means.”

“I see? Vanishing...is separating. Noted.”

“So...is your master somewhere in town?” Micca asked, holding back a smile. “Do you know where you got separated?”

The girl shook her head again. “Destination? Unknown. In town...also unknown.”

“Hmmm. Then do you know why you two came here?”

Once again, the girl shook her head. “Purpose...unknown. Master...not good at talking.”

“Aaah... I see.”

Meaning the way she talked had probably been inherited from her master. At any rate, it meant she hadn’t been told anything.

“That’s a bit of a problem,” Micca said. “Hmmm, what to do? Want to try waiting at the church? If you’re lost, your master might come looking for you there.”

The girl shook her head yet again. “Master said...not to approach the church.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Master...hates? Enemy? Of the church.”

Micca turned pale. *Um, an enemy of the church means a sorcerer, right?* Seeing his reaction, the girl lost confidence in her words and cocked her head. Micca heard a creaking sound as if someone had opened a door.

“Words...correct? Description...fitting?”

Seeing this, Micca thought of another possibility. *Maybe she came from somewhere where they speak a different language?* It was said that there were lands like the northern holy lands and parts of the island nation Liucaon where people spoke other languages. The church had no influence in those lands, so there were times they clashed with the local beliefs. Hate and enemy could describe such a situation. If she’d come here from such a place, her tottering speech was also understandable.

“Yeah,” Micca said, smiling to put her at ease. “It’s mostly getting across to me, so you’re doing fine.”

Micca went back over what she’d said.

Someone coming from afar with a maid in tow must be pretty important, right? That meant it could involve a delicate matter. Just the other day, it had come to light that someone related to Liucaon’s royal family had been secretly made to work as a priest for the church, and that nation was bitterly opposed to

it. This was probably a problem on Liucaon's side of things, but the section she'd been assigned to apparently kept themselves from the public eye or something. What's more, the person in question possessed significant status and skill with a sword. It was said that she was the first person in hundreds of years to gain the title of Sword Saint.

Liucaon clearly had a grasp of the church's failings. That was why relations with powers beyond just sorcerers were teetering on the edge. Honestly, it was questionable whether this master of hers would rely on the church in such a situation.

I'm technically here for work, but... Monitoring an Archdemon was clearly beyond him. If he got close enough to observe one, Micca would just be killed on the spot.

"Okay! I got it. I'll help you look for your master."

Micca was sixteen. It was inevitable for him to choose helping a girl in need over doing a mission where he was sure to die.

It's just a small detour. I'm not running away or anything. If he ran away, it could have an effect on the life insurance money. Abandoning his duty was one thing he couldn't afford to do.

"I don't...have money," the girl said, staring at him in astonishment.

"Can you not treat me like some scammer?"

"I heard kindness has...a toll? Costs money?"

Well, offering to help free of charge did sound rather shady. It seemed this girl's master had at least taught her that.

"It's an Angelic Knight's duty to help people in need," Micca said as gently as possible.

"Is that so? My duty...is to help my master."

The girl puffed out her chest proudly in some strange show of rivalry. That was when Micca came to a realization.

"By help, do you mean your master is in poor health?" he asked.

“Poor...health? Unknown. But when walking...always uses a cane.”

“A cane... So your master is pretty old?”

“Age...unknown.”

Despite this being her master, there sure was a lot she didn’t know. *Well, this master is apparently bad at talking, so I guess that makes sense...*

“So can you tell me what your master looks like?” Micca asked.

Only now did the girl reel back cautiously.

“Why...do you need to know?” she asked.

“Weren’t we going to look for this person?”

“Yes. That’s right?”

Micca was starting to get a headache.

“How am I going to find someone I can’t identify?”

“I see. I didn’t...consider that.”

The girl clapped her hands as if it was a terrific idea. She then sank into silence for a while before opening her mouth to speak with difficulty.

“My master...is a man.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Yes.”

“Um... And?”

The girl blinked in confusion as if asking, “Why isn’t that enough?”

“What’s...the correct answer?” she asked.

“Hmmm. You know, like hair length, age, or height.”

“His hair...shorter than mine.”

“That’s pretty common for men.”

“And...older than me? So he appears.”

“That’s pretty common for a master.”

“Height...taller than me.”

“I see. You’re pretty short.”

A cold sweat ran down Micca's cheek as he tried to maintain a smile. *What do I do? All that tells me is he's a man.* Still, she was doing her best to answer him in her own way. He had no choice but to conduct this search with such meager clues.

"Ummm... Oh, right! If you're not from town, he'll need a place to sleep, right? How about searching the inns?"

"A good idea. A brilliant idea."

After sighing in admiration, the girl nodded repeatedly. The gesture reminded Micca of his sister Ayla, so he couldn't help but smile. First, he had to find where the inns were in this town. It was a tourist spot, so there were plenty. He was sure to find them if he went to crowded locations.

"A maid who was separated from a gentleman? Haven't heard anything about it."

"Is that so? If you hear anything, please pass the information to the church."

Well, there was no way Micca was going to find him so quickly. His first attempt had ended in vain. He bowed to the innkeeper, and the girl mimicked him. After that, they went back to the street and just happened across an old man.

"Whoa there. Careful."

Micca reflexively stepped in front of the girl to stop her, but ended up bumping into the old man in her stead.

"Hmmm...?"

"S-Sorry! Are you hurt?"

Micca lowered his head in a fluster, and the old man relaxed as if taken aback by his behavior. He then took off his hat and smiled gently.

"Non. Excuse my inattentiveness. I must instead ask if you are hurt, my boy, and the little lady over there too."

The old man wore a monocle over his right eye and carried a cane topped

with a decorative dog head. He had a foreign-style sword at his waist and wore a tailcoat. Micca exchanged looks with the girl, then let out a sigh of relief.

“We’re both fine.”

“Superb. Tonight is shaping up to be a splendid night. Getting hurt now would be such a waste.”

“A splendid night...?” Micca repeated. “Is there a festival going on or something?”

“I bid you adieu,” the old man said, putting his hat back on. “My boy, little lady, have a wonderful evening.”

He then left with an air of composure. Micca looked up. The sun was starting to set, but it was still a few hours before evening.

“What a hasty old man, huh?”

“Yes. He was?”

The girl cocked her head again, making it unclear whether or not she understood. Micca had no idea what kind of monster they’d just encountered.

Chapter II: Meeting an Archdemon Is Too Much for Two Beginners at Love

“Haaah... What should I do from now on?”

Chastille was having dinner at home, which was a rare occasion, and let out a deep sigh. She had the day off, so she had her hair let down and was wearing a plain shirt and skirt. Her relationship with Barbatos, the details of their date, and pretty much everything pertaining to their association had been spread across the entire continent a month ago. After a constant series of trivial mistakes at work, Nephteros had finally forced her out of her office to get some proper rest.

Ever since, things had been so awkward that Chastille hadn’t been able to talk to Barbatos. He was in the shadow at her feet even now, so he was at least keeping an eye on her. Chastille ruffled her scarlet hair. Tears filled her equally scarlet eyes, which was pretty much always the case as of late.

The food she’d cooked absentmindedly looked far more atrocious than usual. If Nephy saw the hazardous substance, she was liable to quarantine the kitchen. She’d once told Chastille, “The spirits might die, so please allow me to take over,” in regards to her cooking, subsequently kicking Chastille out of the kitchen. The taste was horrendous, of course, but Chastille couldn’t taste anything in her current state.

As an Archangel, and as the leader of the Unification Faction, she had countless things she had to be doing. And yet, a single love affair had brought it all to a halt.

Get it together, Chastille! Is this all your determination amounts to after taking up the Sacred Sword and chasing your brother’s back?! She slapped her cheeks to fire herself up, but...

“By the way, Chasty, won’t Barbatos be joining us for dinner?”

“Pffft?!”

The words her mother threw from the other side of the table had Chastille spitting out burnt fragments of meat—what was supposed to be a steak. Chastille had inherited her scarlet eyes from her mother. In complete contrast from her daughter, however, Chastille's mother didn't understand the concept of tension. She always wore a carefree smile, and despite being midway through her forties, she sometimes got lost in town chasing butterflies and the like. She looked younger than she was, and it was easy to mistake her mental age as being equal to or below Chastille's.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What're you saying, mom?!"

"Oh dear. Isn't Barbatos the fairy who's always having tea in your room? You don't eat at home often, so you should've brought him along."

Chastille's mother was a very gentle and calm person, and for better or worse, she was ignorant of the world. An Angelic Knight couldn't possibly be in a relationship with a...

"Hang on. Why do you know about that?" Chastille asked.

"Hm? Were you trying to hide it? Oh dear, you must be more careful. Our walls are thin, so you should at least keep your voices down."

"Hwah? I thought the house itself was well constructed."

"It used to be, but the little termites have been eating away at it and it's all worn out now. Any sounds are quite easy to hear."

Chastille covered her face. She hadn't done anything to feel guilty about, but it was extremely embarrassing to have it pointed out to her like that.

"You could've just told me if you heard me..." she complained.

"But you're always chatting away so cheerfully. I didn't want to get in the way..."

From the sound of it, her mother had heard everything from the very beginning.

"I-I didn't do anything indecent."

"It's fine, it's fine. Don't worry about it. Chasty, my dear, you've always been so devoted to work that your mother was worried you had quit being a girl."

“Th-That’s not...”

She tried to deny it, but couldn’t.

W-We’re not dating or anything, but I was so happy he celebrated my birthday with me... Her hands naturally went for her ear, touching the earring he’d given her.

“And don’t you wear those earrings he gave you every day?”

“I-I was told the holes would seal up if I don’t wear them constantly!”

Barbatos had pierced her ears for her on her birthday, but it turned out his way of doing it hadn’t been proper. Afterward, Vepar had dropped by and had properly disinfected them for her. He really was a good person.

Is he really a man...? Chastille had talked to Vepar as if he were another female friend without really thinking about it, but she’d had mixed feelings afterward when she recalled he was a man.

No, I’ll never be that womanly. Be realistic. She shook her head to ward off such unsightly desires, then noticed her mother had said something strange earlier.

“Mom, what do you mean by fairy?” Chastille asked.

“I mean Barbatos? You refused to tell me his name, but I figured it wouldn’t be right to ask. Do you know he helps me every now and then when I drop the plates? That’s why I thought a fairy was suddenly living in the house.”

Her mother laughed. Much like her daughter, she was rather clumsy. She was partially responsible for the house being such a tattered mess. However, her clumsiness was in a different dimension from Chastille’s.

“Ah.”

As if to prove that, she knocked over the pepper mill. Chastille did this pretty often herself... No, just once in a while. However, her mother’s clumsiness didn’t stop there.

“Ah. Ah... Ah?”

The pepper mill fell onto a fork, flipping it into the air above the table. The

fork went on to hit a flower vase and knocked it over. The vase tumbled off the table right over a rat who was darting around the floor. The rat jumped aside in shock, then ran off and slammed into the shelf, knocking down a picture frame. The frame bumped against a decorative sword on the wall, breaking the latch that was holding it up. Chastille and her mother both watched this unfold in a daze as the decorative sword crashed to the ground with a shrill noise, sending other items scattering about.

However, even when they believed it was finally over, they noticed a brass ornament that had been adorning the shelf was now flying through the air. It crashed into the chandelier over the table as if it had been sucked into it, making another unpleasant noise. The chain of events caused by knocking over a pepper mill was almost artistic, coming to an end with the chandelier's destruction.

"Oh dear."

"Whyyyyyy?!"

Chastille screamed as the chandelier fell down on top of them, then the shadow at her feet wriggled.

"Hey... Ain't your mom actually cursed or something?"

The chandelier stopped in midair right before it would have crashed against the table. Barbatos poked his pale face out of the shadow, forgetting the awkward tension that had kept him from talking.

"Don't talk about my mother like she's a bad omen," Chastille whispered back. "But thank you for saving me."

"Look me in the eyes and try saying that first part again."

Chastille kept her eyes averted.

"Anyway, 'Chasty,' was it?" Barbatos added in amusement.

"Ugh, that's, um... She has a tendency to give people weird nicknames."

"It's not weird," her mother cut in petulantly, clearly overhearing their whispering. "It's nice and cute, right, Mister Fairy?"

"Fairy...? You talking to me?"

Now that she was talking to him, Barbatos reluctantly came out of the shadow. Naturally, his hair was unkempt and he was wearing his robe and amulets, clearly showing he was a sorcerer. He didn't have any earrings on.

"Oh my. You're awfully tall, Mister Fairy. So you've finally shown yourself. You're far cooler than the gossip rag made you look."

"Y-Yo..."

Not quite sure how to react, that was all Barbatos managed to say. Chastille's mother had naturally seen the gossip rag. She'd even adorned her room with it. Chastille really would've preferred she hadn't, but she'd gotten her mother to remove the copies from everywhere outside her room, so couldn't push for more.

Chastille's mother pulled out a chair at the table, but it hadn't been used for so long that it was covered in dust. She brushed it off with a hand, scattering dust all over the dining table and coughing in the process.

"Sorry, this is the only chair we have."

"No, don't mind me...please."

"Please...?"

Chastille was baffled by the bizarre phenomenon of Barbatos being respectful.

"Shut it, Chasty."

"Wh-Why do you have to say stuff like that?! I won't forgive you if you call me that outside!"

"What? Ain't it fine? It's a cute nickname."

"C-Cute? I-Is it...?"

"Waaah?! I didn't say that!"

"You just did!"

"He sure did," Chastille's mother butted in. "Chasty is cute, plain and clear."

"He..."

“I...”

“...didn’t go that far!” the two yelled back at her in wonderful unison.

“No, no, you two,” her mother said, somewhat troubled by their behavior. “The neighbors will hear you, so keep it down a little.”

Only just realizing their whole conversation could be heard outside, Chastille and Barbatos covered their faces.

“Maybe we should give Mister Fairy a nickname too?” her mother continued, not a hint of timidity in her voice.

“No, I don’t need one...thanks.”

“Let’s see... I suppose Tosey isn’t quite right. But Barty doesn’t have a good ring to it...”

She wasn’t listening to him at all. Barbatos turned to Chastille bitterly.

Don’t look at me, I can’t do anything about this. Chastille wouldn’t have had such a hard time with her mother to begin with if she was capable of that.

After pondering over it a while longer, Chastille’s mother clapped her hands together as if suddenly remembering something.

“Oh right. That whole thing about being cursed might not actually be wrong.”

Though they were relieved she’d apparently set aside the matter of a nickname for now, Chastille and Barbatos couldn’t believe their ears.

“What do you mean?” Chastille asked.

“Back when I was about your age, your mother broke vases and tumbled to the floor pretty much every day.”

“That’s impressive,” Barbatos quipped without thinking about it.

“But then, before I knew it, the vases started breaking other things too, tying one oopsie into another. I thought it was just my imagination, but looking back on it now, isn’t it a bit weird?”

“I’m not really sure what to make fun of here, but I suppose it’s a bit of a relief that you can at least question that,” Chastille said.

“Hey, that ain’t the point to focus on,” Barbatos said, turning even paler. “Do you really get it? If your mom’s telling the truth, your klutziness is just gonna get worse. I’ve got no idea if it’s genetic or a curse, but at this rate, you’re gonna die without me babysitting you.”

“I’m not such a klutz that I need babysitting!”

“That’s right,” Chastille’s mother agreed. “It’s not babysitting, but an expression of love.”

“Qqabqhbpoqehrbopahfdb?!”

The merciless attack had both Chastille and Barbatos reeling back.

Anyway...a curse? Chastille had witnessed curses befalling both Zagan and Stella. Had something similar happened to the Lillqvist family? If so, had her brother’s early death also been related to it? Chastille considered this with a grave expression when her mother once more clapped her hands together.

“Oh yes. So Barry, will you be joining us for dinner?”

“Barry...? Well, whatever...thanks.”

Barbatos resigned himself and took a seat in the dusty chair. He then picked up a scone—or the black lump that was supposed to be one—and tossed it into his mouth.

“Horrible...” he muttered.

“How rude!” Chastille protested.

“But you still ate it,” Chastille’s mother said, watching them with a bright smile.

“I know someone who’ll beat the crap outta me for wasting food...”

Now that Barbatos was seated, Chastille and her mother continued their dinner too.

“By the way, once you two get married, will you be living here?” Chastille’s mother asked. “Or will you be moving in with Barry?”

“Pffft! Gah! Hak!”

They both choked on their food, incapable of answering her question at all.

Let's not have dinner at home anymore.

The following day, Chastille somehow managed to return to work mode. As a digression, she would later consult Zagan about being cursed and was told, "Don't blame your clumsiness on a curse. It's simply who you are."

◇

"Have you calmed down, Kurosuke?"

Back in Aristocrates, in a corner of a tavern late in the night, Kuroka gulped down her glass of water as Shax called out to her considerately. Shocked by his play-biting her ear, she'd lost all strength in her legs and hadn't been able to move. Getting a piggyback ride at this age—something she felt was becoming pretty common now that she thought about it—was extremely embarrassing. Not that she disliked it, of course. Rather, she'd enjoyed it, but embarrassment couldn't be explained by logic.

"Um, Mister Shax..." Kuroka mumbled in the quietest of voices, covering her face. "Girls are very delicate there, so I'd prefer if you were a little gentler. Um, you know, in bed it'd be okay, but..."

"Can you not make it sound like I did something really indecent?!" Shax screamed in shame.

Well, perhaps Kuroka had phrased it poorly. People looked at Shax dubiously as he raised a fuss in the tavern, but Kuroka didn't have the composure to pay that any mind.

What do I do? Mister Shax is way too assertive!

When had it all begun? Was it since their visit to Liucaon? Or perhaps since his training with Andrealphus? No, it was likely since he'd become an Archdemon. Up until then, he'd treated her like a child and wouldn't turn to look at her at all. Kuroka had been on such a fierce offensive to get him into a relationship, and suddenly he was capable of catching her in his arms...and even pushed back vigorously on the offense. This was what she'd always wanted, but the sudden reversal of positions had her in a panic and she couldn't respond to his feelings.

What a sad state of affairs! And you call yourself an Adelhide samurai?!

However, with Shax petting her head in concern, her heart was pounding and her thoughts couldn't keep up anymore.

"Barkeep, something light to snack on and another water for her."

"Coming right up."

Shax ordered some food, petting Kuroka's head all the while. She lapped at her refilled water little by little to calm herself down. Her pulse managed to slow somewhat when Shax turned a smile to her.

"Wh-What is it, Mister Shax?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking about how cute you are..."

"Cu—?!"

Shax was praising her a strange amount lately. She was happy, but so shaken by it that she couldn't form a response. At this rate, she would capitulate without resistance.

"A-And you're a lot cooler now!"

Kuroka resolutely went on the offense, putting her hands to her cheeks to try to hold back a smile. Faced with her attack, Shax blinked in surprise, then smiled gently.

"Dummy, don't say embarrassing stuff like that."

He scratched his cheek in the slightest display of shyness, then plopped his hand on her head.

Curse his adult composure!

She was well aware this composure had her heart throbbing and her cheeks red.

"You okay, Kurosuke?"

Prostrating herself on the table, Kuroka finally understood the situation she found herself in.

I don't have any means of defense.

Kuroka was the greatest samurai, capable of even laying low an Archdemon.

The secret behind her strength was her ability to see through everything and go entirely on the offensive. This was a power she'd gained precisely because she had once lost her sight. By reading everything from her opponent's breathing, to the way they stepped forward, to the distance between them, she was capable of getting through both swords and sorcery. Thus, the blade she'd taken up to get revenge on sorcerers had been sharpened to a terrifying decree.

Her fighting style was no different when it came to love. To get a decapitating blow in, she tossed away all forms of defense and rushed in, slashing with all her might by taking the shortest and most direct route possible. And now that she'd succeeded in dealing that blow, Kuroka was standing defenselessly within Shax's range. In that case, maybe it was fine for her to just go with the flow and surrender herself to him...

M-My heart and lungs can't keep up!

Faced with a situation where he responded to any of her teasing kind, Kuroka was left with no immunity to his advances.

"I'm not really used to this either," Shax said, gently petting her head as if he saw through her thoughts. "But I'm here for you. Don't work yourself up all on your own."

"M-Mister Shax..."

Was this a man who'd gathered his resolve? With no exaggeration, this might be the coolest Shax had ever looked in her eyes. And just as she was about to lean against his shoulder...

"Someone capable of dodging your attack may be no normal opponent, but with the two of us together, we didn't even lose against the old man, remember?"

Kuroka couldn't understand what Shax was saying for a second.

"Ugh..."

"What's wrong, Kurosuke?"

Figuring it out, she slammed her head against the table, getting a bewildered response from him.

That's right. Some weirdo was keeping an eye on us.

It was because of that incident that Shax had nibbled on her ear. What's more, even though she had thrown it as an improvised attack, that person had dodged her knife. A sorcerer would have needed the power of a former Archdemon candidate to pull that off, whereas an Angelic Knight would have to have been an Archangel. Shax's caution was a matter of course. He was under the impression that she was depressed for letting such an opponent get away and was trying to comfort her.

And my head was just filled with flowery thoughts...!

Now feeling double the shame, Kuroka had to put in significant effort to calm down. She was a former elite of the church. She emptied every last ounce of air in her lungs, then immediately refocused herself.

"Sorry. I'm fine now," she said.

"That so? Your face is still red."

"I'm fine!" Kuroka repeated, reaching out for the food that had arrived. "At the time, given the situation, I couldn't hold back. If the opponent got away anyway, that means they must have significant skill."

"Right. Your knife didn't have any blood on it," Shax replied, placing her knife on the table. There wasn't a single bloodstain on it. "Who do you think it was?"

"Let's see... Considering who we're about to meet, it's not weird for someone to be targeting us."

With that preamble, Kuroka fell silent for a moment.

How can I explain that sensation...?

In that instant, she'd sensed something strange. Thinking it over for a while, she decided to describe it exactly as it was.

"To tell you the truth...I'm not confident we were actually being watched."

"What do you mean?"

"It's like there were no signs of it at all. Maybe it was just my misunderstanding..."

Her voice quickly faded away. She was so pathetically anxious.

“You’re not the type to throw a knife over a misunderstanding,” Shax said, shaking his head. “Someone must’ve been watching us. If you didn’t sense anyone, then what could you have sensed?”

“Um, you know how you were about to k-kiss me?”

“It wasn’t a kiss!”

She’d thought it was going to be one, but it seemed Shax hadn’t intended to kiss her on the lips. Kuroka felt her face growing hotter, but they were having a serious conversation right now.

“I think our observer got a little bewildered by that,” Kuroka continued. “Because they made a sound, and that was when I first realized we were being watched.”

“I see...”

After putting it into words, Kuroka found she had shockingly little confidence in her assertion. Thrown off as she was, she couldn’t help but think she was jumping to conclusions. And yet, Shax appeared to be scrutinizing this information deeply.

“If you couldn’t detect them, is it best to assume they’re a sorcerer...?”

“I wonder... It’s an old story now, but I was never once able to sense my mother’s presence. There are masters like that out there too.”

“Masters who can avoid your detection as you are now? That’s not a human feat.”

“Um, I’m a girl, just so you know...”

She wasn’t sure whether to be angry or happy about what he’d just said. She knew what he was getting at, but it still hurt. About the only Archangel capable of doing so was Raphael. It was impossible even for Stella and Chastille. Even Zagan and the second-generation Silver-Eyed King would have a hard time hiding their presence from her.

“Do you think it’s possible to erase one’s presence using sorcery?” Kuroka asked.

“It’s more likely that someone used sorcery to throw your senses off. It’s not simple, even for a former Archdemon candidate, but not impossible.”

“I see...”

Kuroka had never witnessed it before, but it was technically possible.

Meaning it can even be an Archdemon...

“So maybe they’re both...?” she said.

“Yeah...”

There was a precedence for an Archdemon to wield a Sacred Sword—the strongest man, Andrealphus. It wouldn’t be strange for another Archdemon to possess similar strength.

Like Lord of Murder Glasya-Labolas, for example...

According to Zagan, there was an Archdemon who was formerly an Angelic Knight who held the title of Sword Saint. He was Marchosias’s subordinate. Considering Kuroka and Shax’s objective, it was possible he was here to obstruct them.

“I don’t mean to say we’ve been negligent, but it appears we should focus ourselves even more,” Kuroka said.

“Yeah... But one thing worries me.”

“What’s that?”

Shax peered into his glass for a while.

“Getting shaken by watching a kiss must mean they’re pretty young...or actually, a child, don’t you think?”

Kuroka endured the urge to blush, but then cocked her head. She’d heard Glasya-Labolas was an old man.

“Someone with the capabilities to match an Archdemon and my father...who’s a child?” she said.

“I guess that’s far-fetched...”

“Hmmm... But if it’s a possibility, I don’t think we should ignore it.”

Even if it didn't sound realistic, the world was a place where such things happened. Still, even with their heads put together, they had too few clues to identify the culprit. Kuroka brooded over this as Shax suddenly looked like he thought of something.

"Barkeep, two meads, please."

"Coming right up!"

The barkeep responded as if he were watching over an ordinary young couple. He had no way of knowing the dangerous conversation they were having. Shax was actually one of the Archdemons, and he was using sorcery to prevent anyone from hearing what they were saying. Even if the barkeep heard their voices, they would be no more than part of the background noise around him.

"Mead is a type of liquor, isn't it?" Kuroka asked curiously. "Why did you order some?"

"Didn't I tell you I'd teach you the proper way to drink?" he answered casually.

"I-I'm glad to hear it, but that doesn't mean you have to now..."

Kuroka and Shax had an important mission to attend to. They couldn't just start drinking. And yet, Shax looked surprisingly serious.

"It's precisely because what's coming up is important," he said. "I need you in your best condition. I'm actually relying on you, ya know?"

"Jeez..."

She couldn't refuse when he put it like that.

Do I look that troubled by all this?

An enemy she couldn't detect was a threat, but she didn't mean to feel intimidated by it. As she thought that over, she realized that wasn't quite right.

Oh, I get it. This is making up for before!

She didn't know what he'd tried to do, but him nibbling on her ear had been an accident. Kuroka had been thrown out of sorts because of that, so he was

trying to make up for it. Even at a time like this, Shax was trying to treat their time together dearly. Realizing that, Kuroka decided to let him spoil her.

The barkeep placed glasses in front of Kuroka and Shax with a thud. There was a golden liquid that filled them to the brim. Kuroka picked up a glass.

“So mead has the same color as honey,” she observed in delight.

“Ha ha, most distilled liquors are golden,” Shax said as he clinked his glass against hers. “To a successful mission.”

“Yes. To coming back from this with you safely.”

They shared a toast and Kuroka brought the mead to her lips.

“Hm? It’s...not sweet.”

The distinctive heat of alcohol rushing down her throat was followed by a refreshing fruity sensation. This could technically be classified as sweet, but was different from honey or sugar. The drink left behind a slight sourness in her mouth.

“Well, it doesn’t taste like honey,” Shax said, laughing and twirling the liquid in his glass. “It’s one of mankind’s oldest liquors. After all, it’s easy to start fermenting, since all you’ve gotta do is mix honey and water.”

“Huh? That’s all it takes to make liquor?”

“Yeah. That said, it’ll end up weaker than beer like that, so those handled by shops have some yeast added to strengthen it.”

Kuroka still didn’t understand strong and weak when it came to alcohol, but she knew being weaker was a bad thing.

“Anyway, being easy to make is mead’s selling point,” Shax continued. “Honey is really good for you too. Long ago, it was valued highly as a nutritional supplement. There was also a period where making this stuff was part of bridal training.”

“B-Bridal training...!”

He was mentioning this after their talks about him joining her family, so Kuroka’s face flushed red.

“Ha ha, I’m not telling you to make it yourself,” Shax said. “But you know how they call the first month of being newlyweds a honeymoon? That word is derived from the period the bride and groom used to make mead—so the story goes.”

Shax then scratched his cheek shyly and averted his gaze.

“So, you know...” he started hesitantly. “If I was going to share a proper drink with you, I figured we should start with this.”

“Aaah...”

She was just thinking how smooth this was coming from him. He’d likely prepared this speech beforehand for this occasion. Such consideration made Kuroka happy enough to elicit a sigh. Knowing that he had her in his heart had her grinning without thinking about it. Kuroka covered her cheeks in a fluster, but it was probably too late. Well, there was no point keeping up appearances now, so Kuroka leaned against Shax’s shoulder.

“These stories of liquor are interesting,” she said. “Do you know any others?”

“Y-Yeah.”

It was pleasant how such an approach shook him up.

Mmm... I’m not the only one losing.

As she convinced herself of that fact, Shax started another story.

“Right. Mead’s flavor changes clearly based on the type of honey used.”

“There are different types of honey?”

“Yeah, quite a few, actually. The flavor and scent change depending on what flowers the bees collect nectar from. For example, honey created from apple blossom nectar smells like apples.”

“Apple honey...”

She wanted to try that now. Shax watched her reaction with a smile.

“This one tastes similar to white wine, so it probably comes from grape flowers. Well, the flavor apparently doesn’t always translate directly, though.”

“So white wine tastes like this?”

“It’s just similar. Wine has a lot of variety of its own. I mentioned mead being used as a nutritional supplement, remember? Those naturally use varieties of honey with high nutritional value. There are some that use buckwheat, which are particularly high class.”

“Buckwheat? That’s used to make noodles in Liucaon.”

“Hmm, is it now...? Well, buckwheat honey has a horrible stench, just so you know.”

Kuroka looked bewildered by that fact. She’d never seen it before, but buckwheat was said to produce beautiful white flowers.

“Do buckwheat flowers stink?” she asked.

“Yeah... Kinda like fertilizer. It’s bad enough that it’ll overpower any other scent.”

“Wow...”

She didn’t want to imagine honey that smelled like dung. Kuroka paled at the thought.

“This is a story from way back when,” Shax said, amused by her reaction. “The stuff they sell in stores is different. You can’t drink it as is, so they use a ton of herbs and spices to balance it out. It doesn’t look like this place has much of that stuff in stock, though.”

Watching Shax enjoy telling stories of things Kuroka didn’t know reminded her that he was older, and more mature, than her. She felt her cheeks grow hot as she looked up at his face.

Mead... Will he be pleased if I make some...?

He’d taught her all this, so she wanted to make some kind of memory out of it. And as such thoughts crossed her mind, she emptied her glass. There hadn’t been much in there, so she wasn’t drunk enough to have to cool off.

“It’s about time,” Shax said, pulling out a pocket watch. “We should get going.”

“Right.”

In a complete change from her entranced expression, a grim look dawned on Kuroka's face.

"Puppetmaster Forneus—the founder of alchemy."

The two had come to this town to meet that Archdemon.

◇

"You'll...destroy the world?"

On the terrace of a certain restaurant in Kianoides, Nephy consulted Zagan about the warning she'd received. He doubted his ears. He'd invited her out to eat, seeing that something had been bothering her lately, and this was what she'd opened up about.

"That's ridi..."

He wanted to deny it, but stopped mid sentence.

Hang on, does she mean...?

Nephy turned pale at his reaction.

"Master Zagan, do you have some sort of idea what that could mean?"

"No... It can't be."

Besides, he couldn't tell Nephy about it. He tried evading her question, but Nephy corrected her posture and persisted with determination.

"Master Zagan. Please tell me. I'm prepared."

"Very well..." Zagan said after a moment's hesitation. "Your cuteness might have breached the stage where it can destroy the world."

The air froze.

"Master Zagan!" Nephy yelled, her ears trembling and turning bright red. "I'm being serious!"

"And do you think I treat what you have to say as anything but serious? I'm as serious as can be. You've been rather adorable lately, far more than ever before. I don't know how many times you've stopped my heart. It's highly likely that the shock will cause me to accidentally destroy the world!"

“Hwah?!”

A cup sat on the table between them—a parfait piled high with ice cream and whipped cream. Zagan had created and sold the sorcery apparatus to create ice cream just so Nephy could enjoy it. And so, it was only natural to visit this shop when trying to give her a breather. It definitely didn’t seem like the right place to talk about the fate of the world. Regardless, the other customers were gazing at them delightfully, saying things like, “Oh, just the usual,” and “So that’s Kianoides’s famous attraction.”

If Barbatos or the like were present, they’d probably tell Zagan he was too emotionally unstable, but unfortunately, the only one in the area was a granny, blood spilling from her nose as she mumbled, “What refined love power! It knows no end!” to herself. Nephy couldn’t keep herself from smiling either. She put her hands on her cheeks and averted her eyes.

“Master Zagan... It’s unfair to say such things out in public.”

“Sorry. Forgive me. I couldn’t keep my soaring emotions in check.”

“No, I must apologize as well. After all, I’m the one who insisted you tell me.”

The two then scooped up some ice cream as if to calm themselves down.

“Mmm...”

Nephy broke into a huge smile, placing a hand to her cheek.

Yup! Just being able to see that smile is enough to allow the world to end!

Zagan felt a benevolence welling up inside him that allowed him to forgive anything, even Eligor’s unpleasant prediction.

Nephy then shook her head, suddenly regaining her senses. The way her white hair swayed about made her look like a snow fairy.

“Wait, that’s not the point,” she said. “I believe Lady Eligor gave me advice to help me prepare for the future. What do you think, Master Zagan?”

She looked at Zagan with upturned eyes. She was so lovely that he felt like his spirit would fly away no matter how many times he saw this expression, but Zagan mustered the willpower of an Archdemon and nodded back to her.

“I see. Advice, you say? Things change a little when viewed from that perspective.”

“Yes.”

Nephy pursed her lips tight as she stared at Zagan.

Nephy is so beautiful when she’s acting dignified!

This only reinforced Zagan’s idea that Nephy’s cuteness would drive him mad, ultimately destroying the world, but he’d already brought that theory up.

“If she gave you advice, it means there’s something only you can do about it,” Zagan said.

“Something only I can do...?”

Only one thing came to mind.

“Celestial mysticism,” Nephy and Zagan said in unison.

However, Nephy shook her head.

“My mother is better at celestial mysticism, and even Nephteros...”

“No, you’re the only one who can wield both a Sigil of the Archdemon and celestial mysticism right now.”

“Oh...”

Orias had originally possessed Nephy’s sigil. She’d been the being who’d wielded both the power of celestial mysticism and an Archdemon.

But she sealed her celestial mysticism when she took the name Orias.

One reason for that had been to hide her identity, but Orias was also a great sorcerer who didn’t need to rely on celestial mysticism to begin with.

“Besides, Orias mentioned that in terms of the raw power of celestial mysticism, you far surpass her. Your celestial mysticism should be stronger than hers.”

Now that high elves were extinct, Nephy was probably the most powerful high elf in the world.

“That can’t be...”

Nephy was shocked by this fact, and the one to follow up on that...wasn't Zagan.

"The question is whether to seal or further develop your celestial mysticism, huh?"

The owner of the voice took a hearty bite of Nephy's ice cream.

"Mmm! So sweet. Waitress, I'll have one of the same!"

The one speaking without a hint of timidity was a girl with star crests deep in her eyes. Archdemon Asmodeus was standing at their table, having appeared out of nowhere.

She got this close and I couldn't perceive her...?

Not only that, but she'd done so in Zagan's own domain. Asmodeus pulled up a chair without asking, then took a seat as if it were perfectly natural. Nephy looked at her in wonder.

"What the hell do you want?" Zagan asked.

"Aha, I didn't get to finish eating when I came here with Foll."

"Buy us a new one!" Zagan yelled, slamming his hands on the table and standing up. "How are Nephy and I supposed to feed each other after *you've* touched it?!"

"Can you not treat me like some kind of bacteria? Are you bullying me?" Asmodeus said, her composed smile twitching. "Ummm, you're Zagan, right? You don't seem to match the person in my memories."

Zagan cocked his head at this.

Well, I guess the only time we really talked was when she was Lily.

He questioned how much of her memories of that time still remained, but he couldn't deny the possibility of her misunderstanding something here.

"I don't know what the hell you want, but watch your tone," Zagan said as calmly as possible. "The only reason I'm not killing you for interrupting my date with Nephy is because you are Foll's friend."

Such an offense was grounds for a merciless beating, no matter who it was,

but Zagan showed great benevolence in granting her a warning instead. This was a remarkable act of kindness.

“Oh, I see,” Asmodeus said, sighing deeply in understanding. “I guess Foll isn’t here.”

“Hm? If you’re here to see Foll, then just say so. I can bring her over right away.”

“Aaah, stop, stop. That’s not why I’m here.”

“Hmph! Do you have a reason to be troubled by Foll’s presence?”

It’s almost like she doesn’t want to drag Foll into something.

Zagan didn’t say that part aloud, but Asmodeus clicked her tongue as if he’d let that slip.

“I kinda feel like you’re throwing me off my game,” she said. “Yeah, yeah, I’ll go see Foll and talk things out with her...eventually.”

Even though opposing Archdemons were meeting each other, the only thing they were talking about was Zagan’s daughter. This was inevitable in a sense, since Zagan saw Asmodeus as no more than his daughter’s friend who wasn’t being honest with herself.

“It’s good to see you again, Lily,” Nephy said, moving her chair to better fit three people around a table. “Foll was delighted by the news you sent her.”

“Haaah... You’re just as bad.”

Even though Nephy was being so kind, this pest was grimacing.

“Hmph! I don’t care about that matter at the treasury,” Zagan said. “If that’s what’s stopping you from talking to Foll, then make up with her already. Watching a daughter fret so much isn’t amusing for a parent.”

“I keep telling you that isn’t it,” Asmodeus protested as her parfait arrived. “Can you quit pestering me about that topic? I mean, you were talking about something pretty interesting, weren’t you? I kinda wanted to join in on that conversation. Oh, go ahead and have this, Nephy. Your husband was seething about buying a replacement. I’ll take your half-eaten one in exchange.”

“H-He’s not my husband yet... Oh, thank you.”

Asmodeus swiftly swapped the new parfait with Nephy’s, then scooped out some of the half-eaten one without hesitation.

Damn you! That was meant for us to enjoy feeding each other!

“Oh, please don’t mind me,” Asmodeus said, grinning at Zagan as she noticed his gaze. “C’mon, c’mon, weren’t you in the middle of feeding each other? Feel free to continue.”

She was basically saying, “I’ll watch, so go ahead and do it.”

“It seems you know your place,” Zagan replied with an exaggerated snort. “I’ll forgive your earlier impudence.”

He scooped up a little of the whipped cream and held it in front of Nephy’s face.

“W-We’re doing this now?”

Nephy was so bewildered that she had tears in her eyes and her ears were trembling. She looked so adorable that Zagan nearly reeled back in shock.

Hnnngh! Her shyness is compounding her usual cuteness! What sublime synergy!

Unable to fully suppress his mana, electrical discharges manifested around him, making the nearby customers scatter in all directions. It was somewhat concerning that some of them were gripping binoculars, but he then recalled seeing a sign at the entrance that read, “Please feel free to use these,” for some reason.

Nephy realized that she couldn’t back down anymore. And so, she held down her white hair as it fluttered in the unnatural wind, bringing her face close to the spoon with a look of determination as if she were facing down a storm.

“Nom!”

She chomped down on the spoon with gusto.

“H-How is it...?”

“V-Very sweet...”

The surrounding customers let out sighs of relief and started clapping.

“Um...what kinda show are you putting on for me here?” Asmodeus asked, finding herself at a complete loss for words and unable to understand what was going on.

Zagan felt like he sensed a vampire’s gaze out of nowhere that implied, “I understand that feeling to a painful extent,” but he paid it no mind.

Now that I think of it, we haven’t had any time to do this kind of thing lately.

Shere Khan had finally been dealt with, he’d been busier than ever having to handle the aftermath and because of that idiot Marchosias. Thanks to his subordinates’ efforts, things had finally calmed down. He got a real feeling for how precious time spent basking in happiness with Nephy was. Watching them from afar, a certain granny was moved to tears.

“By putting on a show of it, they take their love power to even greater heights... Haaah, I’ve etched this display into my soul, my liege.”

“I think I picked the wrong people to consult...” Asmodeus muttered, sounding like she wanted to leave. Only then did Zagan remember she was present.

“Oh, right. Did you have some business here? Get on with it.”

“Sorry. Can I get some time to think about it?” Asmodeus mumbled.

He didn’t know what had happened to her, but the typically insensitive girl was hanging her head feebly.

◇

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

The sorcerer spoke with a voice that was neither male nor female, young nor old, shrill nor deep, harsh nor sweet. It was like his voice had no characteristics to it at all, yet was a mix of all of them. He was like a man straight out of an opera. Despite it being the end of spring, he wore an old-fashioned black coat with a scarf tied around his collar. He looked around fifty years old, had slight wrinkles on his face, and his eyes were green. He had wavy black hair split

perfectly even down his brow, highlighted by gray streaks. His chiseled features were topped by small pince-nez glasses on the tip of his nose. He gripped a cane in two hands, both covered in white gloves. One of those gloves had to be hiding a certain Sigil. Shax's Sigil of the Archdemon could sense it.

Puppetmaster Forneus—now that Shere Khan had been defeated and Andrealphus retired, he was the oldest Archdemon. He was seated across from Shax, who had Kuroka standing behind him, her face stiff with tension. Their mission was to get this Archdemon's cooperation, or that of his disciple Furfur.

One of their goals on this trip had, of course, been to visit Kuroka's home in Liucaon, but they hadn't spent an entire month on that. Using Liucaon's intelligence network, they'd searched for this Archdemon's location. They'd located him just a few days ago, and Forneus had appointed Aristocrates as their meeting place. And yet, upon meeting, this was the first thing he had to say.

What does that even mean? Does he want us to make him laugh?

That didn't sound right, even for a demand directed at a fledgling Archdemon. There had to be some other meaning, but Shax felt like it was useless to try to figure it out on his own.

"What do you mean by that?" Shax asked.

"Nowadays, people know the price of everything and the value of nothing," Forneus replied. It was like he was mumbling without moving his lips.

Is this some kinda riddle?

He couldn't read Forneus's intent from his expression either. In fact, the man's gaze wasn't even directed at Shax. It made it unclear whether he was talking to Shax or himself. It was a matter of course for an Archdemon's behavior to deviate from the norm, but it was hard to even hold a conversation here. That was when a certain thought came to mind.

This sorcerer's second name was Puppetmaster. It wouldn't be strange for the man before them to be a puppet. In that case, perhaps this was a test. Shax crossed his legs the other way around and thought things over once again.

"I can't say anything in my defense if you accuse me of ignorance," Shax said.

“It’s an unmistakable fact that I’m still a youth in my twenties.”

He started by affirming Forneus’s words and was met with an unflinching expression and yet another riddle.

“Because you have the most marvelous youth, and youth is the one thing worth having.”

Shax furrowed his brow even deeper.

Nope. I don’t get it at all.

This time, he got a compliment. That didn’t make it clear whether his answer had been correct. Shax was at his wits’ end when Kuroka suddenly made a sound like she realized something.

“Oh.”

“What is it?” Shax asked, looking over his shoulder.

Kuroka sank into thought for a bit, then said, “I don’t feel that.”

For the first time, Forneus’s eyes moved.

“No, you don’t feel it now. Some day, when you are old and wrinkled and ugly, when thought has seared your forehead with its lines, and passion branded your lips with its hideous fires, you will feel it, you will feel it terribly.”

Kuroka nodded in understanding.

“What’s going on, Kurosuke?” Shax whispered.

“He’s speaking lines from an opera,” Kuroka whispered back. “It’s a story called *The Picture of Yarg Nairod.* It’s pretty famous.”

It was apparently a story about the love and hate of a sorcerer who’d obtained immortality. Kuroka’s human ears blushed a little when Shax brought his face closer to whisper to her, but she feigned composure. Despite the situation, she felt a shiver run down her spine due to the pleasant tickling sensation against her ear.

“A-An opera?” Shax whispered after clearing his throat. “Why do you know about that stuff?”

Considering the life Kuroka had lived up until now, she shouldn’t have had the

leisure to appreciate such things. Opera in Liucaon was supposed to be vastly different from that on the continent too.

"Back in my days in the dark side of the church, one of my colleagues recommended a book to kill time when we weren't on missions. It was based on an opera."

Shax nodded in understanding. Operas weren't very common among the general populace, but transcripts of operas were in circulation for the wealthy. Most of the wealthy were literate, so to the church, who were capable of printing books for mass distribution, they were an important source of income. Such books were distributed to churches to confirm their contents too. Shax had never had the time to read any, but during his posting at the church in Kianoides, he'd seen patients reading them. It wasn't strange for the dark side of the church to have some copies too.

Anyway, what's with this roundabout conversation?

Shax pondered the matter and was reminded of what Andrealphus had warned him of prior to this mission.

"Forneus is a weirdo in an altogether different way from Naberius. I can't tell what the guy is saying most of the time. He's apparently afflicted with a troublesome curse."

The longer a sorcerer lived, the more likely they were to get involved with a curse. Even Shere Khan had researched curses before Marchosias had crippled him. Thus, one possibility came to mind.

"I'm guessing...you can't say anything that hasn't been written down by others?"

If his mouth wasn't functional, he could write things down. An Archdemon would naturally be capable of telepathy too. Nonetheless, he chose this method of communication. It was a decent guess.

"We shall all suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly," Forneus said, turning his green eyes to Shax.

It was comical for an Archdemon to speak of heaven and gods, but that was likely an affirmation.

“I see... I wouldn’t mind a dictionary or something for this,” Shax said, completely stumped by this predicament.

“That would be nice,” Kuroka agreed. “I’m not well-versed in opera or anything either...”

“The act of suggesting a book to read is either meaningless or harmful,” Forneus said solemnly.

Kuroka and Shax exchanged looks.

“I kinda get that one,” Shax said. “We don’t need a dictionary or the like...right?”

Forneus neither confirmed it nor denied it. Shax was starting to figure out how to interact with this man. He placed a hand on his knee and straightened his back.

“Let me get right to the point,” he said. “Our boss—Archdemon Zagan—wants your power and wisdom. Can we get your cooperation?”

Forneus placed both hands on top of his cane, pondered over it for a moment, then opened his mouth to speak.

“The only pity was one had to pay so often for a single fault. One had to pay over and over again, indeed. In her dealings with man, destiny never closed her accounts.”

Shax and Kuroka were once more forced into silence. His words couldn’t be literal, but they were still disturbing coming from an Archdemon.

“Ummm, meaning you have a price...?” Shax ventured.

Forneus said nothing for a while, seemingly lost deep in thought.

“All I want now is to look at life,” he eventually answered. “You may come and look at it with me, if you care to.”

Another unintelligible response.

“You...wanna go somewhere?” Shax asked, his face starting to twitch.

Forneus showed no signs of moving.

If going somewhere isn’t the point, then “look” is the keyword here.

What did he want to look at? The bizarre Archdemon remained silent, showing no indication of whether Shax's answer was correct.

Boss, I'm in way over my head on this mission...

Still facing the unmoving and unspeaking Archdemon, Shax and Kuroka were at an utter loss.

◇

Back in Kianoides, at a restaurant where three Archdemons were gathered, a lone girl wore a melancholic look like she was fed up with the world.

"Is this what they call a sense of defeat...? It's like an emptiness I've never felt before is crushing me."

Faced with the depressed girl, Zagan mercilessly delivered another blow.

"I don't know what happened, but you're an unexpectedly boring sorcerer. I thought you had more of a backbone."

"Whose fault do you think this is?!"

"Hm?"

It sounded like she was blaming Zagan, but he had no idea what she was going on about.

"Haaah... Whatever. It's about time anyway."

"Time for what?"

Just as Zagan raised his brow at those ominous words...

Zagan and Nephy looked up in unison. Something like a black stain was spreading across the sunny sky.

"Heaven's Phosphor Single Petal."

Zagan took action quickly and quietly. He snapped his finger casually, firing a black needle into the air and bisecting the stain in the sky. What had tried to crawl out from the void had had enough power to send shivers down an Archdemon's spine, but it had been annihilated without even being given the chance to fully manifest. Some of the other customers might've felt a chill at most, but they'd all decided it had been their imagination and were back to

their meals and conversations.

“M-Master Zagan, what was that?” Nephy asked timidly.

“Probably a demon,” he answered.

“Yup. That was a big scary demon,” Asmodeus agreed, having finally recovered and returned to eating her parfait.

“I don’t like this,” Zagan said, glaring at her. “You damn well knew that thing would appear here, didn’t you?”

“Well, duh! I was here to finish that thing off. Oh, thanks for doing my job for me. You saved me a ton of trouble.”

“Don’t act so shamelessly. You took a seat here to force your job on me.”

If Asmodeus used her sorcery, she would definitely damage the town. Also, no small number of citizens here had witnessed Samyaza the last time. Zagan couldn’t allow the powerless populace to witness demons multiple times. Even if their bodies could take it, their minds wouldn’t, so Zagan had had no choice but to eliminate it quickly.

“That’s a misunderstanding,” Asmodeus protested, her eyes wide as Zagan clicked his tongue. “I wasn’t told where exactly it would appear, and I’m not ignorant enough to go wild in someone else’s domain.”

“Hmmm...”

Zagan honestly admired her response.

She’s amazing. Despite being so utterly shameless, I don’t sense a hint of malice from her.

Someone like Bifrons would be enjoying the other party’s reaction while a vile sense of malice flickered in and out of perception. However, Zagan didn’t sense any of that from this girl, and it wasn’t because she was skilled at hiding her emotions. This villainous sorcerer didn’t believe any of this was her fault at all. It was Zagan’s first time witnessing such audacity. This was why Behemoth and Leviathan called her a serpent filled with hate in their voices.

No, maybe that’s not quite right.

It was like it was so natural to her that she'd resigned herself to her fate. Zagan couldn't determine if she'd always been like that or if it was the result of some kind of change.

"Lily," Nephy said as Zagan continued to ponder the matter. "You just said you weren't told, yes? Do you mean..."

"Yup. Eligor. Her fortune-telling is pretty vague. She should try to run around in my shoes for a bit to see how it feels."

Asmodeus took a huge scoop of ice cream and chomped down on it in indignation. Her face then cramped as if struck by lightning.

"Hnnngh! Ow, ow, ow! What's with this headache...?"

"You fool," Zagan said. "When you eat too much cold food at once, it triggers an excess response from the trigeminal nerve, which in turn causes a headache."

"Waaah...? Even though I'm manipulating my blood flow...?"

"You can't prevent it unless you deal with the sensitive nerves too."

Maybe, just maybe, this is why she got caught by Glasya-Labolas's Gekien.

The Lord of Murder's sorcery brought another's sense of time to a halt. The sharper one's senses were, the easier it was for them to fall for it. He was Kuroka's natural enemy in that regard. That said, this girl was an Archdemon. After explaining the cause to her, she continued chewing while muttering something and weaving her sorcery.

Anyway, seeing how she doesn't know something so basic, she can't have much experience with enjoying a meal.

Her meal with Foll had likely been the first time she'd ever had ice cream. Even if it wasn't, it was questionable if she'd ever been able to relish the taste. Zagan could see some of himself in her, maybe feeling the slightest affinity with this girl.

Asmodeus eventually wiped away her tears, then turned to Zagan once more.

"Anyway, demons are tough enough for Eligor and the like to have problems with them," she said. "Defeating one so handily is pretty impressive. You've

gotta be second in strength only to me.”

“Confidence is a good trait to have,” Zagan said, raising a brow. “If you can’t even believe in yourself, nobody else will trust you. However, hubris is a fatal flaw.”

Because these two were different sides of the same coin, they didn’t get along at all. Zagan should have followed his own advice, but had found himself acting conceited without realizing it. That was why he’d been on the verge of suffering a miserable defeat against the demon Samyaza. Since this was Foll’s friend, Zagan decided to give her a warning.

“Jeez,” Asmodeus said, puffing out her cheeks. “And here I was praising a newbie. You’re not cute at all.”

“Hmph, you’re one to talk.”

Recalling a certain someone who’d told him the same thing before, Zagan averted his eyes.

“Well, I guess you’d probably win in a match?” Asmodeus added.

“You speak as if you’d win outside a proper fight.”

In truth, Zagan hadn’t noticed her presence until she’d spoken to them. There were probably items among Asmodeus’s treasury that Zagan couldn’t devour too. She was more likely to win, but that wasn’t absolute. At best, her odds were six to four.

“Aha, I’m a humble person. I wouldn’t say such a thing. However...” Asmodeus trailed off, shrugging casually before narrowing her violet eyes. “I would’ve been able to kill Samyaza.”

Zagan fell silent at the mention of that name. Samyaza was probably still alive. Zagan hadn’t been able to defeat the demon. He’d somehow managed to repel it with Nephy’s help, but he doubted he’d be able to kill what was an amalgamation of ten thousand demons. It was sure to appear before him again, so he needed the power to be able to win on his own by then. He couldn’t deny that one reason he’d invited Nephy on this date was because he was feeling pressed by that need.

“Why the hell do you know that name?” Zagan eventually asked.

“Well, I picked a fight with it too,” Asmodeus said, her unflinching composure making her strength evident. “But if I killed it, the world itself wouldn’t have been able to withstand the force, so it would’ve been the same in the end.”

Such words were far too arrogant, even for an Archdemon, but Zagan knew she was telling the truth. That was why he looked at her in exasperation.

“You wouldn’t think such words came from an Archdemon,” he told her. “You should be able to control your own sorcery perfectly.”

A first-rate sorcerer would have been able to unleash the fires of hell, burning only their target without singing a single leaf in the area. It was nothing short of negligent for one who stood at the peak of all sorcerers to cause collateral damage.

That said, no such idiot would’ve lasted hundreds of years as an Archdemon.

Asmodeus’s control of sorcery had to be flawless. Regardless, there were the tiniest ripples that could spill out. If Zagan used Heaven’s Phosphor in the same place multiple times, the vegetation would eventually wither, for example. In Asmodeus’s case, those tiny ripples were enough to destroy the world. She knew Zagan wasn’t really criticizing her for this, so she shrugged without showing the slightest bit of shame.

“Aha, no point expecting that much from me,” she said. “I didn’t have any reason to be so kind to this world.”

She might as well destroy the world in the process of defeating her enemy. That was Asmodeus’s way of life, having spent her years only to retrieve her people’s core jewels. Still, Zagan was left puzzled by her statement.

Is she even aware she’s been talking in the past tense?

Perhaps this terrifying girl was in the process of changing. No matter the villain, it was worth giving them one chance to change their ways. Had this girl been given that chance too? This wasn’t the place to ask her that, though.

“Whatever. It’s not *my* place to nitpick your faults,” Zagan told her. He didn’t have to tell her what he was implying. This time, Asmodeus was rendered silent.

“So? I assume you didn’t come here to brag. Get to your damn business already.”

Asmodeus smiled as if she’d been waiting to hear those exact words.

“Zagan, wanna make a deal with me?”

The nastiest Archdemon impudently cut to the chase like a devil whispering in his ear.

◇

“It can’t be... Was that a demon?” a boy muttered to himself, placing his hands on the two swords at his waist.

“What’s up, Ain?” Selphy asked, peering at his face in confusion.

Despite being a siren, she currently walked with two human legs. Two girls and two boys were walking together through Kianoides’s streets. There was Selphy and the boy called Ain, and just a step behind them were Lilith and Furcas innocently walking side by side.

Ain was in the middle of journeying across the continent so that he could learn about the current age. He used Kianoides as his base of operations. He returned every few days, and each time, he met Selphy and her friends. Today, Ain was going through town to replenish his supplies for his journey.

“No, it’s nothing,” he told Selphy, shaking his head as she looked on in concern. “Seems it was just my imagination.”

“That so?”

Selphy cocked her head, and Ain smiled at her.

It vanished before even manifesting. Was that Zagan’s doing?

Despite being spared from having to play a role, Ain felt a sticky sweat in his palms. It hadn’t been an enemy he’d be hopeless against. The heroes one thousand years ago could probably have won in a one-on-one fight against it—even if it would’ve cost them their lives. The problem was that the demon had appeared in the middle of town.

It’s impossible to predict where and when demons will manifest without the

foresight of someone like Ipos.

Ipos was one of Ain's old companions, one of those who were now called the first Archdemons. She'd also been revived as a Nephilim but had been destroyed by Zagan's blow before regaining her sense of self.

Demons could appear suddenly, anywhere, without any warning whatsoever. Sometimes they manifested in empty plains or mountains, and much like in this case, they could also appear in the middle of town. If they began manifesting with some frequency, even Zagan wouldn't be able to keep up with it. In that case, it was highly likely Ain's new friends would be exposed to danger.

"Hmmm..."

"It don't look like nothing," Selphy said, concern evident on her face as she looked at Ain's depressed expression. "Something worrying you? I can at least, like, listen to what's on your mind?"

"I suppose so..." Ain said, making his decision thanks to this kind girl's words. "I'm using this town as the base for my travels, right? Well, I'm starting to think it'd be nice to have a place to settle down. What do you think, Selphy?"

"You're gonna live here?" Selphy said, smiling broadly. "I totally welcome it! We can play every day!"

"I'm pretty sure Ain isn't looking for a place to live so he can play," a voice quipped from behind, unable to take it anymore.

"It might be difficult to play every day, but I suppose it will be easier to try?" Ain said.

"You do know that if you say stuff like that, Selphy will take it seriously and do exactly that, right?" Lilith said.

"Selphy isn't the type of girl to ignore her own work, though," Ain rebutted with a gentle smile.

Lilith looked at him in exasperation and replied, "She might not abandon her work intentionally, but I'm pretty sure she's accidentally forgotten a bunch of times."

"Ha ha... Well, ya know, I write it down so I don't forget," Selphy said. "But

then I lose those notes somewhere and totally end up forgetting anyway.”

Now Ain couldn’t come up with any excuses to support her. Lilith started scolding Selphy for her behavior, and Furcas used this opportunity to whisper into Ain’s ear.

“Hey, Ain. Was that unpleasant sensation just now a demon?”

“You noticed?” Ain whispered back wide-eyed.

“Yeah. I felt a shudder run down my spine... It was the same sensation as the last time I saw them.”

Furcas looked down at the Seraph Hunter at his hip. It had belonged to Alshiera, but she’d entrusted it to him. He only had one bullet left in it. Now that he’d lost his memories as an Archdemon, that one bullet was Furcas’s only means of fighting.

“Ain, are you gonna fight those things?” he asked.

“I don’t know yet. There are plenty of strong people in this town, including Zagan.”

“My bro’s invincible!”

Furcas smiled, his trust in Zagan unconditional. Perhaps Ain’s strength wasn’t needed in this town. However, there were no second chances when it came to demons, so he wanted to be by Selphy and her friends’ side in case anything happened.

Maybe I’ve become a coward.

Ain hadn’t considered himself conceited at the time, but he’d lost to Asura in a duel. He was in an era a thousand years in the future and he didn’t know who he was. This hesitation was reflected in his blade, but Asura was supposed to be in the same position. Despite that, Asura remained unwavering. Ain didn’t possess the powers of the heroes of old as he was now. In other words, owning the body and memories of the strong didn’t equate to strength itself.

Strength of the heart is indispensable.

He’d traveled the continent with no destination in mind to try to find the answer to that dilemma. That was exactly why he wavered now.

I haven't found my answer yet. Can I really stop now?

There was no guarantee his journey would bring him an answer. But if he stopped now, he would never find the answer either. He didn't know what to do. That was when Selphy was released from Lilith's sermon.

"Then Ain, wanna live in Archdemon Palace?" Selphy asked.

"Archdemon Palace..."

Honestly, it was still awkward for him to see Alshiera. She was strong, but he figured it was also awkward for her.

Still, it's not like I have much money on me.

It would be problematic to buy or rent a house and maintain it. In this peaceful age, money was necessary to put food on the table. On his journeys, he'd been getting paid as a bodyguard to scrape by, but he had no job he could do while in town.

The Lucia from a thousand years ago really was supported by so many people.

Those bonds had surely led to his strength.

But depending on my son to finance my life feels really wrong!

Ain was different from the Lucia from a thousand years ago. That was how he saw himself, but that was only his personal opinion. Zagan had the right to see him as a father, and to hate him. So long as Ain existed in this world with Lucia's body and memories, he had to fulfill that role. His past self had been the one to die without leaving anything behind after conceiving that boy, after all.

"Well, no matter where you live, you'll still be Ain," Selphy said with a grin, cutting off his thoughts. "I'll come see you no matter what."

"Selphy... You're so kind."

Those were surely the words Ain wanted to hear the most. He was overcome with emotion.

"But if you're going to live in Kianoides, you should still run the idea by His Highness," Lilith joined in. "This is his domain, and it'd be problematic for him if you choose somewhere weird to live."

“I see... You have a point there.”

Honestly, Ain was extremely opposed to admitting that he had nowhere else to go, but it seemed he couldn’t avoid the conversation entirely.

“Then let’s go see Mister Zagan!” Selphy exclaimed, tugging on Ain’s hand.

“Hang on, Selphy. What about Ain’s shopping?” Lilith asked.

“It’ll be all right,” Ain told her. “I’m not in a hurry.”

And just like that, Ain was dragged to Archdemon Palace. Unfortunately, Zagan was absent, so he ended up spending some exquisitely awkward time with Alshiera instead, who he bumped into by complete coincidence. However, that is a story for another time.

◇

“Zagan, wanna make a deal with me?”

Around that time, Zagan was faced with a choice. It was a rare and suspicious invitation, but his answer couldn’t have been more obvious.

“No.”

“Isn’t it mean to refuse outright?”

“Then let me ask you this: what part of our conversation made you think I’d accept?”

Every word Asmodeus muttered was a pain to listen to, and she was as suspicious as anyone could be. Her behavior had been more than enough for him to never want to get involved with her. He wasn’t punching her simply because she was Foll’s friend. That didn’t make her worth negotiating with, however.

“Why are you such a bully?” Asmodeus asked with eyes wide, hurt by his words. “Didn’t you happily make a deal with my disciple?!”

“Take a look at Vepar and figure out the differences between you two. He fusses over making a proper trade because he’s surrounded by people who are incapable of it, chief among them being you. I doubt I can make any worthwhile deal with you.”

“I’m the one who raised him to be so upright!”

Even as she objected, she had to know this was a case of learning from a bad example. Asmodeus’s eyes wandered off into the distance.

“If you understand, get lost and go see Foll,” Zagan said.

He saw her as no more than a present to improve his daughter’s mood. It was enough of a compromise for him to let her go unharmed. And yet, Asmodeus got impudently cocky.

“Aww, you sure you can be so cheeky?” she asked. “I won’t save you even if you beg for it.”

“If you’re referring to Samyaza, then your help is unnecessary. How could I make Nephy happy if I were incapable of handling it myself?”

“I don’t know where your confidence is coming from, but it seems you’re misunderstanding me here.”

“What are you trying to say...?” Zagan asked, raising his brow at her strange conviction.

“Zagan, don’t you believe a fight is about numbers?”

“I agree there, but what does... Wait, don’t tell me...”

A chill ran down his spine.

“Yup, bingo. At this rate, come summer, the whole continent will be a festival of demons.”

Zagan was aware that demons were manifesting across the land. He also understood they were doing so with accelerating frequency. Even so, it seemed he didn’t have the time to take things easy.

Dammit. Is that why she waited for the demons to appear?

If she’d shown up offering information on demons, Zagan probably would’ve turned her away without listening. However, after Samyaza and several other demons had invaded his domain, Zagan had no choice but to focus on doing something about them.

Now Asmodeus was bringing him a deal, emphasizing that Zagan’s current

methods were doing little more than buying time. Well, it was an Archdemon's way to go for victory no matter the circumstances. Zagan acknowledged that Asmodeus had duped him. Seeing that he was intent on listening to her now, Asmodeus played with her spoon while making a serious expression.

"You're definitely strong. There aren't many Archdemons capable of taking a demon down in one punch. However..." she paused and suddenly thrust her spoon to point at Zagan. "If this happens every day over and over, how long can you keep it up?"

"About seven days at most," Zagan answered quietly.

It wasn't much of a problem if several demons showed up at once. Zagan had long proved that he could take around seven of them simultaneously. The problem was it happening over and over. Even against Shere Khan's Nephilim, fighting for the entire day had exhausted his mana. And that was when he'd used nearly no sorcery and had mowed them down bare-handed. Against demons, who he'd have to use Heaven's Phosphor to defeat, even with the Sigil of the Archdemon's mana, he could last seven days at most. And if any demons like Samyaza appeared, it was questionable if he could even win.

What's more, using Heaven's Phosphor continuously would be a problem. It was the mark of a first-class sorcerer not to affect anything but their target, but that was basically just him blocking the effects from taking place. It did not mean completely isolating the effects of the sorcery from its surroundings. No matter how perfect one's control, each use would see a little leak out each time. And with enough accumulation, it would surely encroach on the land and even Zagan himself.

"That's how it goes," Asmodeus said, nodding at his answer. "If we don't take measures now, even the Archdemons won't be able to handle them."

And they only had a few months at most before that happened. Zagan considered saying, "And what do you care?" but decided that would be in poor taste. If Asmodeus truly didn't care, she could've solved this by turning the entire continent into a gaping hole. The fact that she hadn't meant she would be troubled by the world's destruction.

"Even if we continue handling them haphazardly, the situation will eventually

deteriorate," Asmodeus said, awkwardly averting her eyes from Zagan's scrutinizing gaze. "We need a way of keeping the demons from manifesting on a more fundamental level."

"If such a convenient thing even exists."

It was believed demons had left this world many years ago. The world as it was today had far too little information on them. They were too unknown to handle.

If only I'd captured some in Alshiera's space...

It'd been a rare opportunity to see a swarm of them, but it'd taken Zagan everything in his power just to kill them. At any rate, Zagan now understood what position Asmodeus had found herself in.

Meaning Marchosias plans on using her before killing her.

Asmodeus wasn't the type of sorcerer whose reins could be taken by another. It was impossible to control her, and there was no telling when she would turn traitor. Thus, one valid means of dealing with her would be to use and kill her while she was still an ally. But if Marchosias was the one doing it, there had to be more to it than that.

There's something that comes after her death.

This girl possessed a bomb in the form of the Collector's treasury. That would be one obvious goal, while another would be the carbuncles' core jewels in her possession. Asmodeus had to do something before that happened. And yet, she didn't show the slightest hint of being driven into a corner. On the contrary, she smiled provocatively.

"Apparently, one exists," she said. "A way of stopping the demons, I mean. Well, according to Alshiera, anyway."

"She said that?"

This was the first Zagan had heard of it. He couldn't ignore anything that came from Alshiera.

"But little Alshiera doesn't know what specifically needs to be done either," Asmodeus added, folding her arms and pondering the matter. "All she says is

she can't tell me more."

"I see..."

Alshiera was always like that when it came to matters from a thousand years ago.

Still, if she mentioned a means exists, that *must be involved.*

When it came to Azazel, Alshiera couldn't carelessly say a word. That would be enough to break that barrier, so she couldn't possibly tell anyone.

"In that case, it has to do with a thousand years ago," Zagan said, nodding as he searched for the meaning behind those words. "And seeing how you're bringing this to us, that clue has to do with seraphs?"

Asmodeus had joined the conversation at the mention of celestial mysticism.

"Aha, just as I'd expect of you, Zagan," Asmodeus said, clapping her hands. "Otherwise, you wouldn't be worth making a deal with."

This troublesome girl had come to bargain, but hadn't acknowledged him as a worthy partner until now. She'd probably intended to extract what necessary information she could, then flee without giving anything in return. Well, if she was an honest enough person to make a fair trade, she wouldn't be called the Collector and the nastiest Archdemon. It was natural for a sorcerer to pursue their own interests first and foremost. Zagan had no intention of begrudging her for doing so. And yet, Asmodeus turned a dubious gaze to Nephy.

"Um, why do you look so happy?" she asked, seeing that Nephy's ears were trembling proudly.

"Hwah? Oh, um, when Master Zagan is acknowledged, I can't help but feel happy too..."

"Hmm. I think I understand," Zagan said, empathizing with her greatly. "I'm also happy whenever you receive praise, Nephy."

"Master Zagan, that's embarrassing."

"Um, if you two do this every chance you have, this conversation isn't gonna get anywhere," Asmodeus cut in, silencing Zagan and Nephy completely. She had a point. "W-Well, let's get back on track, shall we?" Asmodeus shook her

head to refocus herself, then presented her cards one at a time. “It seems a huge outbreak of demons happened one thousand years ago. So, the ones who dealt with the situation at the time were what the people back then called seraphs.”

That was the old name for the high elves. It made sense. One theory stated that celestial mysticism was specialized for combat. There could be nothing else to use such tremendous power against aside from demons. In that case, it also explained why it’d been so effective on demons and the Sludge Demon King to date.

“But they were exterminated by the first Silver-Eyed King and Marchosias,” Zagan said. “Doesn’t that mean Marchosias has a clue?”

“I don’t really trust that guy. Even if he knows, do you think he’ll give information to someone he’s about to kill? It’s obvious he’s just gonna spout a plausible lie.”

What more could he expect from the most hated Archdemon? She understood her position very well.

“I might be able to stop the demons...?” Nephy said as all eyes gathered on her.

“Maybe,” Asmodeus said. “So, the curious thing now is Eligor’s fortune. She said you’ll destroy the world, you say?”

Things were starting to take shape.

“That means...I’ll fail?” Nephy asked.

At present, they had no clues whatsoever. It was barking up the wrong tree to ask Nephy to take responsibility, but paradoxically, this proved Nephy was the key to everything.

“There’s one other thing bothering me,” Zagan said.

“What?” Asmodeus asked.

“Samyaza. It told me, ‘I’ve come to verify the potential I entrusted to———through our ancient pledge.’”

Both Asmodeus and Nephy grimaced.

“Sorry, what did you just say?” Asmodeus asked. “I couldn’t really hear you.”

Zagan looked to his side, and Nephy nodded back to him.

Hmmm. It seems they can’t recognize the name Solomon.

Up until Samyaza had mentioned it, he hadn’t been able to recognize it at all. There had been a similar precedent to this during Kuroka’s report as well.

“It’s apparently someone’s name, but a powerful seal...no, a curse is placed over it,” Zagan explained. “Even if you hear it, you can’t remember or perceive it.”

“Can’t remember...? Hmm, impressive, Zagan. That might be it.”

“Meaning?”

“I was going to go through things in order, but let’s get right to it,” Asmodeus said, smiling complacently. “After the seraphs vanished, someone apparently attempted to seal all the demons. That’s what I want to gather more information on.”

This was the first Zagan had heard of it. Asmodeus stuffed her cheeks with a mouthful of ice cream. The fact that it showed no signs of melting despite their long conversation was probably the work of sorcery to maintain its temperature. Zagan was about to imitate her when suddenly, she thrust her empty spoon toward him.

“According to Alshiera, this person who sealed the demons a thousand years ago had their name and existence wiped from the world. Aha, don’t you feel like everything is coming together?”

Zagan couldn’t hide his grimace.

What kind of information network do this teacher and her disciple have? There’s no way Alshiera blabbed about things from a thousand years ago. And yet, she’s here with that information now.

Vepar had also possessed detailed information that Zagan had only just acquired. Perhaps Asmodeus hadn’t bestowed her disciple only with sorcery, but techniques for gathering information too. If so, it had to have been drilled really deep into his mind. Watching Zagan’s reaction, Asmodeus smiled with

conviction.

“Zagan, you know *that* name. You also know about the person who vanished, right? Can you tell me who it was?”

Zagan sighed.

Dammit, I wanted to have control of this conversation.

She’d hit the nail on the head. There was no escaping it at this point.

“The one called the Silver-Eyed King,” Zagan answered in resignation.

“Hm...? Isn’t that your nickname?”

She didn’t seem to know what this implied, but she did know that Alshiera referred to Zagan as such.

“The first Silver-Eyed King,” Zagan elaborated. “I’m apparently the third.”

“Meaning it’s your grandpa or grandma?”

“Seems so.”

Judging by the name, Solomon was a man, but Zagan had nothing else to work with.

“Hmmm...” Asmodeus mumbled, then folded her arms, deep in thought.

“Something bothering you?” Zagan asked.

“No, not really. I just figured I should investigate Liucaon if that’s the case.”

She was apparently at least aware that the Silver-Eyed King was a name in Liucaon’s legends.

Put another way, despite only knowing that much, she came to me with pinpoint precision.

He didn’t know whether this was her instinct at work, but she’d set her eyes on the wielder of celestial mysticism and the Silver-Eyed King who were closest to sealing the demons. She had terrifying insight. It gave a glimpse at her four hundred years of life spent being hated by the entire world. Since they’d come this far, there was no point putting on airs.

“Don’t expect much from Liucaon,” Zagan said, shaking his head quietly. “The

stories there are of the second king."

"How confusing," Asmodeus complained. "But if they have records of the second, maybe they'll have some clues too?"

"If you're that curious, go ask the man himself. I don't know if you can really call him the same person, but he at least has the man's memories."

"Hmm, what luck."

Asmodeus didn't look surprised at all. In fact, it was likely that this was precisely what she wanted.

"I get it now," Zagan said. "Your real purpose for coming to me is the Nephilim."

Asking those who'd been there a thousand years ago was the best way to find out about the past.

"Aha, I came to you because I figured you'd know. You're not gonna tell me you haven't asked those Nephilim under your protection for information, are you?"

However, if that were her goal, she should've gone to Foll. The capital of the oppressed where the Nephilim now lived was her domain, after all. Zagan had an idea as to why she hadn't...or why she couldn't.

Mercurius. It was a weapon Zagan had granted Foll that had the shape of a tuning fork. It'd been part of Marchosias legacy, and something the "current" Marchosias was after. Having failed to retrieve it, if Asmodeus was seen as being close to Foll—as the aloof Collector at that—no matter the fool, they would suspect Foll of being in cahoots with her. That was why she couldn't go see Foll.

If I'm to respect Foll's friendship, I can't make light of that decision.

Zagan crossed his legs, had a spoonful of his parfait, then opened his mouth to speak.

"Very well. I'll hand over what information I have. If I obtain any new information pertaining to demons, I'll share that too."

Asmodeus stared at him, blinking in surprise at his statement.

“You got on board awfully fast,” she said. “Well, I guess that’s good for me.”

“Dissatisfied?”

“Nothing is scarier than something given freely. I’m glad, but also scared of what’s to come.”

“You stuck to your honor,” Zagan said, shaking his head. “I’m simply answering in kind.”

Asmodeus was sure to understand his meaning.

“She sure is loved, huh?” she said, averting her eyes.

“Of course she is. What kind of parent doesn’t love their child?”

Zagan’s unwavering statement finally brought a smile to Asmodeus’s lips.

“Well, if she’s being treated that dearly, then I don’t need to worry,” she said.

Perhaps this was the first time she’d truly smiled before him. Asmodeus finished her parfait, then rose from her seat.

“That said, cutting a deal but getting stuff for free feels bad,” she added. “For the most part, I’ll handle the demons for you.”

That one sentence changed Zagan’s complexion considerably.

“*What* did you just say?”

As he inadvertently charged his words with mana, the table broke under the pressure. Asmodeus narrowed her eyes and charged her own words with mana in return.

“Aha, how unfortunate. I felt like we were actually getting along.”

The clashing storms of mana formed a vortex and distorted space.

The two Archdemons were suddenly ready for war. The surrounding customers scattered to the winds. However, there were still some fools among them who remained seated with their binoculars out, assuming this was “the same as usual.”

“I’m asking you what you just said,” Zagan repeated, glaring right into Asmodeus’s eyes.

His voice was severe, but contained no hostility or hatred. This confused Asmodeus somewhat.

“I’ll handle the demons for you? Does that rub you the wrong way?”

Zagan shot up to his feet, his eyes opening wide.

“I misunderstood you!” he yelled from the bottom of his heart, somehow resisting the urge to grab her hand. “I apologize for my behavior before this. You are a sorcerer worthy of trust. If you need help, then Nephy and I will spare no expense to provide you with assistance.”

Understanding what he meant, Nephy was nodding repeatedly next to him. The way the tips of her pointy ears flushed slightly red was so adorable.

“Umm...”

The complete reversal of treatment had Asmodeus reeling back in bewilderment.

“Thinking back on it, every last one of those bastards I’ve had to deal with always brought me business that got in the way of my time with Nephy.”

But what about this girl? She was gallantly offering to handle the demons who were very likely going to be interrupting Zagan’s precious time with Nephy. He had to preserve such a beneficial girl’s existence. Well, the way he was fully supporting Vepar in his aspirations to defeat Asmodeus while saying such things in the same breath showed he was truly a self-serving sorcerer, but still...

Asmodeus turned to Nephy with a pleading look for elaboration.

“Umm, they’re not bad people, but Master Zagan has indeed been very busy because of them,” Nephy explained. “Things are going to get very difficult for me as well, so we’re delighted to hear you say you’ll help, Lily.”

As one would expect of Nephy, she translated everything Zagan was trying to say. Asmodeus was left holding back a headache.

“Ummm, right. Okay. To each their own, I guess?” she said.

“Indeed! I expect much of you,” Zagan said before sinking into thought. “Oh, right. It seems you got along well with the Nephilim Shura. If you so wish, you may use him however you like.”

“Oh, I’ll pass. I always work solo, so other people just get in the way,” Asmodeus said, then cocked her head with a seductive look. “Besides, that guy seems to harbor feelings for me. I’d feel bad disillusioning him, so it’s better for me not to get involved with him.”

Seeing that he had no chance at all, Zagan felt a little sympathy.

I doubt he’ll be disillusioned, though.

However, forcing the matter wouldn’t bring a positive result. Waiting could bring change. There was a precedent for this in Richard and Nephteros, so it was best to just leave them be for now.

“Hmm, now that I think of it...” Zagan muttered, remembering something at the mention of the Nephilim.

“What?” Asmodeus asked.

“It’s possible Shere Khan knew something about the first Silver-Eyed King.”

“Huh? Kitty did?”

“Kitty...? Oh, you mean Shere Khan.”

Zagan sympathized with him internally.

He really had it rough...

Thinking back on it, Shere Khan had been one of the few people with a respectable personality among the Archdemons. It must’ve been hard for him to be surrounded by such eccentrics.

“Everyone makes a weird face when I use Shere Khan’s nickname,” Asmodeus said, finding this unexpected. “Why is that?”

“I’d rather ask you why you think people wouldn’t be thrown off by it.”

“That’s weird. He actually seemed to like it...”

“I see...”

Well, it was foolish to ask this sorcerer to understand how other people felt.

“Oh, you don’t believe me at all, do you?” Asmodeus said. “I’m telling you it’s true. He said something about being reminded of his teacher or something and was more pleased than he let on.”

“Lisette Dantalian...”

Zagan reacted involuntarily to those words. In all likelihood, he’d been referring to the second-generation Head Archdemon, whose life and ideals had been crushed into dust by Marchosias. Shere Khan had attempted to resurrect her. The result was Lisette, the girl Stella had picked up and taken in as her little sister.

Marchosias might target them too.

He’d shared that information with Stella already, so she was sure to protect Lisette. Nonetheless, with Marchosias as an enemy, there were no guarantees. Asmodeus had to have an interest in that name, but seeing that Zagan wasn’t elaborating, she concluded it had nothing to do with demons and got the conversation back on track.

“So? Why do you think Kitty knew about this Silver-Eyed King guy?”

“He used the same curse.”

“Huh? Seriously?” Asmodeus asked wide-eyed.

“It was incomplete compared to the original, but he cast the same curse on Marchosias. Because of that, several of his facets were erased from the world.”

This included his name Marc and his status in the church as the pope. There could be other things, but that was all Zagan knew personally. Because of that, the church had spent five strange years with their pope absent without even questioning it. That said, unlike Solomon, those who heard his name didn’t forget, and once known, they were capable of recognizing these aspects normally. Whether the curse must be reduced to such an extent to control or whether he’d simply failed to fully replicate it, Shere Khan’s version had a far

weaker effect than the original.

“But didn’t you reduce Kitty’s base to ash?” Asmodeus asked with a groan.

“That I did.”

He’d resorted to Heaven’s Phosphor Showers of the Wailing Dead. Absolutely everything had been reduced to dust, and the entire area had been rendered a wasteland where not even a single strand of grass would grow for centuries. Even if he’d had other bases, Marchosias would’ve destroyed them five years ago, so it would be difficult to find any traces. Asmodeus sank into thought for a bit, then seemed to recall something.

“Oh, didn’t Kitty have a disciple?”

“If you’re referring to Shax, he’s out of town. It’ll be several days before he’s back.”

Shax was currently negotiating with Archdemon Forneus. Zagan didn’t think this was a simple task. Also, Dexia had been treated as a familiar, not a disciple. He’d already confirmed that she hadn’t been given much information.

“Doesn’t seem like we’ll get much of a clue out of him,” Asmodeus said, shrugging.

“Maybe not. I’ll ask when he’s back.”

That was pretty much all the information Zagan had to share. Asmodeus seemed satisfied too, and was back to her usual frivolous smile.

“Then use *that* to contact me,” she said. “I’ll let you know if there are any developments on my end.”

“Got it. Be sure to keep your guard up.”

Asmodeus didn’t trust Marchosias, and he didn’t trust her. He was sure to betray her one day.

“Aha ha, that’s a parent for you,” Asmodeus said, looking somewhat astonished. “Well, I’m famous for not knowing when to give up, ya know?”

Leaving that mysterious statement behind, Asmodeus vanished into thin air with a laugh.

“You sure you didn’t need to talk with her?” Zagan said to the seat behind him.

Foll and her attendants, the twins Dexia and Aristella, were seated there.

“Mmm... I know Lily is worried about me, so it’s fine,” Foll said, twirling her spoon in a parfait glass.

“Foll...”

The moment Asmodeus appeared, Foll had hidden herself in the back.

Well, I bet she was avoiding the topic of Foll because she knew.

Their relationship was so awkward, but this was the type of friendship they shared.

“Thanks for tagging along, Dexia, Aristella,” Foll said. “This was a relief.”

“Little lady, please refrain from any more of this,” Dexia said, exhaustion clear on her face. “You’ll shorten my lifespan.”

To Dexia, it was questionable whether Asmodeus and Lily were in fact the same person. She’d probably felt extremely uncomfortable when things had hit a critical juncture.

But she stayed put to protect Foll and her little sister, so she’s worthy of my trust.

Zagan decided to grant her a special reward one day.

“But sis, you look relieved too,” Aristella said.

“That’s not true...”

Setting aside their empty glass, Foll’s group vanished too.

Chapter III: Age Comes with Its Own Sense of Pride

“Black Mantle...is a little too simple. Faceless...isn’t quite right. Hmm, how about No Face?”

In the Holy City Raziel, the most prosperous town on the continent, existed slums and back alleys. Come nighttime, no upstanding citizen would approach such haunts, even by accident. In one such alley, an out-of-place, well-dressed girl muttered to herself in a carefree manner. She was Lisette Diekmeyer. As the second adopted daughter of the former Archangel Michael Diekmeyer—who was considered missing—she was current Archangel Stella Diekmeyer’s little sister. Her formal dress was the uniform of the Angelic Knights’ academy, but here she was sitting down in a back alley without worrying about getting it dirty.

“What are you talking about...?”

The human-shaped darkness next to the girl swayed about. Its voice was somewhat like that of a man’s. Lisette had encountered this strange creature a month ago. He wasn’t human. It wasn’t even clear if he was alive like a monster or beast. In all likelihood, Angelic Knights would try to subjugate him, but Lisette had been sheltering him without telling anyone. Whenever school ended, she would spend a while hanging around him like this.

I’d actually like to ask sis for advice about this... But if Stella decided to strike him down, Lisette would have no way of stopping her. Even ignorant as she was, Lisette knew this darkness was something dangerous. If Stella instead decided to shelter him, she would end up taking responsibility if someone found out. That was why she didn’t talk to Stella about him. *She’s probably gonna find out on her own, though...* Stella was likely trying to ascertain what exactly he was.

“Oh, you finally talked,” Lisette said, smiling as if her little prank had worked. “I’m talking about your name. Which do you like? You never answer me when I talk to you. It’s inconvenient if you don’t at least have a name.”

The darkness remained nonplussed by her behavior.

“I wonder what else would work,” Lisette continued in delight. “You’re always sitting around an alley, so maybe Kitty?”

“Samyaza...”

The darkness could probably see that there was no telling what name would be assigned to him if Lisette was left at large, so he finally spoke.

“Samyaza... Is that your name?”

“Yes.”

“Hee hee. Samyaza, huh? That’s a wonderful name.”

Honestly, Lisette had started to question whether this was an illusion only she could see. She was genuinely happy he responded to her.

“You should stop bringing bread here,” Samyaza said. “Random children simply snatch it away.”

“Aaah, so you really haven’t been eating. Do you not need to eat? Oh, don’t worry about the bread being snatched. I kinda figured that was the case.”

Samyaza turned what looked like a dubious expression toward her. The contour of his head was somewhat like a face, but the only feature on it was a geometrical design of circles and straight lines. He was finally talking to her, but it was questionable whether his voice was even coming from there. It was hard to read anything in this darkness’s behavior, but she could tell he sighed.

“If you noticed, why bring bread here?” Samyaza asked. “It’s meaningless.”

“It’s not meaningless,” Lisette said. “I was the same as those kids once, so I’m sharing my portion. A single piece of bread can be the difference between life or death. So long as they live, the day might come when they find good fortune. The child who snatched the bread has grabbed one piece of that fortune.”

With that, Lisette tore off a portion of her own bread and threw it into her mouth.

Is there a human inside there? I feel like a lot of his behavior is very humanish. As she continued observing him, the darkness—Samyaza—muttered in

confusion.

“I cannot understand.”

“Guess not,” Lisette said, smiling without taking offense. “It’s just what I believe. Those who’ve been granted fortune should pass it on to someone else.”

By all rights, Lisette should’ve died on that Alshiere Imera several months back. But then she’d met Stella and Zagan, had watched that man’s final moment, had been helped by so many people, and had been given so much. That was why she was here now. Even before all that, during her days of competing with ruffians to scrounge for scraps of food in the back alleys, there’d been those who’d helped her—people who’d pretended not to notice coins, bread, or fruits they’d dropped.

Perhaps all they’d tried to achieve was to inflate their egos by showing pity to those who were more unfortunate than them. It had been a coincidence that she’d been the one to pick them up, and at the time, she’d never even thanked any of them. Nevertheless, those small turns of fortunes had kept her alive.

That was why Lisette did the same thing now in this back alley—all to pass on the good fortune she’d been granted to another.

“By cannot understand, I meant getting involved with me,” Samyaza said, shaking his head. “If you’re looking for a pity party, go do it among humans.”

“A pity party...? Well, I suppose it looks that way to you.” Lisette chewed down the last piece of her bread and returned a smile. “Somehow or other, you looked like you wanted help.”

When they first met, he’d sounded so sad. Samyaza raised his featureless face. The intimidation he exuded vanished and it felt like his mouth popped open.

“When you find someone like that in the alleys, it makes you want to give them a hand,” Lisette said, not a trace of doubt in her voice. “As siblings of the streets, you see?”

Someone had done the same for Lisette, after all.

“Ha ha... To think the day would come when I would be considered someone’s sibling,” Samyaza said, planting a hand on his face.

“Ah, you laughed. You really are like a human.”

Samyaza sank into silence like the darkness he was yet again, but this didn’t seem to come from irritation. Lisette felt like he was being shy.

Oh, is he embarrassed? That’s kinda cute. For some reason, she felt like something similar had happened long, long ago. Not that she had any memories from before five years ago.

Lisette stood up and patted the dirt off her skirt. It wasn’t enough to get rid of all of it, so she discreetly used sorcery to accomplish the task.

“It’s about time for me to get going. I’ll come again tomorrow, okay, Samyaza?”

As always Samyaza remained silent, but she could tell he wasn’t ignoring her. So, Lisette left with lighter steps than usual.

“Well? Are you not doing anything today?” Samyaza muttered in the now empty alley.

As if in response to this, a figure plummeted from the sky.

“As long as you’re not doing anything weird to my cute little sister, I’m fine with it.”

It was Stella Diekmeyer, the woman who was currently serving as Lisette’s guardian. Lisette had no way of knowing that, during all her meetings with Samyaza, Stella had been watching with murderous eyes. Today, she showed no signs of hostility.

“Anyway... Mm, I get it. Siblings of the streets, huh?” Stella said with a curious smile. “That means Lisette accepted you.”

“What a strange girl.”

Stella nodded in delight. “As the big sister, I’ve got to meet the expectations of her selfish whims.”

In short, this was an offer of compromise.

“It seems humans possess the concept of being beholden to a debt of lodgings and a meal,” Samyaza muttered quietly.

Even such a modest debt was something that should never be forgotten.

“I’ll remain here in this filthy alley a while longer,” he continued. “The inhuman are my jurisdiction.”

Stella blinked in confusion at his words, then burst into laughter.

“Ha ha ha ha! Beholden to a debt? You’ve gotta be an old man.”

Faced with such noisy laughter, Samyaza remained nonplussed as always.

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“Your master is nowhere to be found...”

Despite wandering all over town looking for the maid’s master, there were far too few clues to find. And without finding anything, the sky had darkened. Micca looked up at the crescent moon hanging overhead.

He recalled the melon he’d received to celebrate his inauguration as an Archangel. He’d split it with his mother and five siblings. It had been more delicious than anything they’d ever eaten. His little brothers had even attempted to eat the skin. The moon in the sky now looked exactly like that skin.

Oh no. My life is flashing before my eyes. Someone give me hope for the future.

“Fatigue...exhaustion?” the girl asked considerately as Micca stared up at the moon with hollow eyes.

“Ah, no, I’m fine.”

“Apologies... Forgive me. Sorry...for having you help me.”

Micca shook his head in a fluster. “I’m only looking for your master because I want to, and it can be considered my job too. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“Is that...so?”

Micca’s depression came from the despair of having to return to his original

job once he found the girl's master. If anything, he was being saved by helping her. That was when a pathetic grumbling came from his stomach. *Oh yeah, I haven't even had lunch.*

The girl didn't look tired at all. He wondered whether she'd had lunch. Either way, it was about time for her to get hungry too. So Micca boldly made a suggestion.

"U-Um! Are you hungry? We haven't found your master yet, but how about a short break?"

"Rest. A meal. You mean?" She cocked her head curiously, and upon coming to some kind of understanding, she nodded. "Perception...realization? Insufficient. Yes, let's rest."

Micca was depressed by her reaction. It felt like she was saying, "Sorry for not noticing."

It makes it seem like she's being considerate of me instead of the other way around! Still, she was so kind to show concern for someone who hadn't been of any use despite offering to help. Micca then recalled something she'd said earlier.

"Y-You know, when you said sorry earlier, there's a better word you should use."

"Earlier?"

"Remember? When you told me sorry for having me help you."

"Yes. I said that."

"At times like those, I believe saying thank you will make both sides happier. That's only if it isn't a bother to you, of course."

The girl nodded in understanding. "Thank...you?"

There was a strange inflection to it yet again, but Micca smiled.

Now that I think of it, I still haven't heard her name. But how was he supposed to ask now? Micca hadn't even introduced himself either. That made it even harder to ask. Why hadn't he given his name when he announced himself as an Angelic Knight? As he agonized over this, he took a look around him and

groaned.

“Oh no... All the restaurants are full.”

Micca didn’t own a watch, but it seemed it was dinnertime. There were far too few restaurants for how many people were outside. Every place looked jam packed. Despite being the one to suggest a break, Micca couldn’t find anywhere to go.

Should I just bring her back to the church? The girl’s master didn’t seem to think highly of the church, but they could at least get some rest there. And just as he was about to retrace his steps, a certain shop that didn’t have a line of people outside caught his eye.

“L-Looks like we can get in over there?”

“It seems so.”

If nobody was lined up at this hour, it surely meant the food there wasn’t good. Still, they had to at least serve water. Having spent the whole day walking around, that would be enough to rest his body.

Micca approached the restaurant. It looked like an unexpectedly normal tavern. It was pretty well situated on the street, and there was no filth that would make people hesitate to enter. The interior was relatively large and the scent of food from farther within stirred the appetite.

Micca went through the door, wondering why nobody was coming here, and immediately found out.

“Excuse me. Do you have space for t—”

Micca gulped down his words.

“Mister Shax. This is just a suggestion. How about we abduct this person and take him back?”

“Calm down, Kurosuke. We’ll get to go home that way, but won’t everything be over if we do?”

“But really it is entirely your fault. That book you sent me so fascinated me that I forgot how the time was going.”

“This is hopeless! It’s like everything he says is encrypted and we don’t have any means of solving it! It’s questionable if we’re even seeing eye to eye!”

“I understand how you feel, but he’s trying to declare his intentions in his own way! Let’s give it some thought!”

Seated around a table were a tabaxi girl carrying a staff who looked like she was at the limits of her patience, a man who was trying to calm her down with an exhausted look, and an old man with a gloomy face. A vortex of bloodlust and mana swirled around them. Even those who weren’t Angelic Knights or sorcerers would be able to see how dangerous this place was. However, Micca Hadn’t gulped because of the carnage before him. It was because he knew who one of those taking part in the carnage was.

Tiger King Shax! He was one of the new Archdemons. Micca’s mission was to observe his clandestine meeting. Micca’s first impression was that he was a man of gentle manners. He looked like a normal guy who had a lot to worry about. However, Micca knew that Archdemons were more than met the eye.

He’d once witnessed Archdemon Zagan, who’d acted like a gentleman on a honeymoon while crushing several Archangels at once. All of them had possessed far more power than Micca, but it hadn’t even been a fight. All Micca had managed was to pitifully beg the man who was called the strongest Archangel, Michael Diekmeyer, for help—who hadn’t even listened. Even if he accounted for Zagan being one of the more powerful Archdemons, it was clear the Tiger King before Micca now was far beyond his means.

And is this who he’s having a clandestine meeting with? Micca turned his attention to the old man seated across from the Archdemon. It was strange for an Archdemon to be having a meeting in a commonplace tavern, but that was what the situation implied.

“L-Looks like this place is no good!” Micca yelled, turning on his heels without hesitation. “Let’s look elsewh—”

“Master!”

“Huh...?”

The girl ran past Micca, right to Archdemon Shax...no, to the old gentleman

across from him. She took the old man's hand and spoke with an expressionless face.

"Master, vanishing...getting lost? Not good. Searching...seeking? Was very difficult. You caused...a lot of trouble."

Her phrasing was as awkward as always as she rattled on to the old man, who gave her an affectionate look and patted her head.

"I am so glad I have found you," he said.

"Master...I was the one searching."

"Hm? And who are you?" the Tiger King asked, raising a brow at her sudden appearance.

If I run away now, I can still get away. Micca didn't have much of a presence to begin with. The Archdemon likely hadn't perceived him even as Micca stood in his field of vision. The door was still open. If he just turned around and took one step, he would be able to escape from this nightmarish space. It would mean abandoning the girl he knew nothing about, but he'd only just met her and didn't even know her name. He felt sorry for her, but there was no reason to risk his life over this. There wasn't supposed to be.

"Hurry! Run away!"

Micca interposed himself between the Tiger King and the girl. He bravely spread his arms to protect her, but his legs trembled pathetically. As for the girl, she cocked her head and blinked in confusion, unable to understand what was going on.

"Run! Quickly!"

Micca yelled again, but the girl showed no signs of moving. She probably figured she couldn't leave her master's side after finally finding him.

"Now hang on a sec," the Tiger King said, addressing Micca. "Are you misunderstanding something here...?" He paused, his eyes fixed on the large sword on Micca's back. "Hmm, a Sacred Sword, huh?"

The Tiger King smiled like a hunter.

Oh, I'm about to die.

An Archangel had barged into an Archdemon's clandestine meeting. The Archdemon had no reason to let him live. As if to prove this, the tabaxi girl who'd been next to Shax had suddenly vanished.

Huh? Where'd she go? Micca was about to raise his voice, but suddenly heard a metallic clink behind him. It was coming from the ornaments on a staff. Immediately following that, chills ran through his body as if an icicle had been pressed against his rear.

Aah, so this is what real bloodlust feels like. He felt an intense spirit that would never allow him to escape. He hadn't wet himself simply because he was trembling so badly that he couldn't. The girl was like a grim reaper behind him, her scythe at the ready.

"I see..." she whispered. "So you're the support from the church?"

With tears pitifully welling in his eyes, Micca raised both his trembling hands in a minimal show that he had no intention of resisting. Even in this situation, he wanted to go back home alive. He knew he would be criticized as a failure of an Archangel for this, but he didn't want to die. With no path of retreat left to him, Micca stood stock-still as the Tiger King slowly rose to his feet.

"I heard about you. You're pretty talented, huh?"

Micca had never known how cruel it was to have his life toyed with. Calling the lowest-ranking Archangel talented had to be sarcasm, but that wasn't why Micca turned pale.

Our intel leaked? They'd realized the church was watching them from the very beginning. Maybe that was only natural for an Archdemon. Micca had been thoughtless not to consider it. Shax wrapped an arm around Micca's shoulder like a close friend. His gentle touch was terrifying.

"So, what's your name? C'mon, take a seat."

He absolutely didn't want to. The moment he sat down, he was guaranteed to die. He should've brushed aside the man's hand and run away, but the path to the door looked unreachable as if it were beyond a precipitous cliff. The tabaxi girl slid a chair out for him and Micca was seated at the table without being given any other options.

"So how much have you already heard? Oh, let's start with introductions. I'm Shax, the second Tiger King. This here is Kuroka Adelhide. She's Liucaon's strongest samurai."

They already made a nightmarish pair, but Shax plunged Micca even further into the depths of hell with his next works.

"So, the one sitting across from us is Puppetmaster Forneus. He is today's oldest Archdemon."

It turned out the Tiger King had come out personally to meet another Archdemon. The fact that he was courteously explaining all this was irrefutable proof that they had no intention of letting Micca leave here alive.

Shax and the tabaxi named Kuroka took a seat to either side of Micca. Their focus then turned to the maid.

"Sorry for taking up your time. Can I ask about you too?" Shax said, and his next words were yet another shock for Micca. "Seeing as you're calling him Master, would that make you Thunder God Furfur?"

Micca vaguely recalled this was the name of a former Archdemon candidate—sorcerers who had to be treated with nearly as much caution as the Archdemons themselves. However, his mind couldn't keep up with the fact that the lovely maid before his eyes was one such sorcerer. He turned his eyes to her, wondering if it was some kind of joke, and she lifted the hems of her white apron and curtsied.

"Yes. Furfur. My name. The one given to me."

Was this what it was like to have despair forced in front of his eyes?

What the hell have I been walking around with...?

Micca turned deathly pale, and ignoring him, the two seated by his sides

looked to her with hope in their eyes.

“Th-Then can you decipher what this person says?!”

Micca didn’t understand the tabaxi’s words. She was pointing at Archdemon Forneus. The maid—Furfur—glanced at her master, then shook her head vigorously.

“Speaking...talking? Master is bad at it. Difficult. Unintelligible. I find it hard to understand.”

“Thought so...”

Kuroka and Shax sprawled onto the table as if sick of everything in the world, their earlier solemnity vanishing into thin air. Furfur stood stock-still without making the slightest movement, while Forneus acted like this had nothing to do with him and tipped back his glass of whiskey.

“Mister Shax, I have a terrific idea,” Kuroka whispered. “How about we return with just his head and right hand? Zagan should at least be able to read his memories given that much.”

“Kurosuke, I get how you feel, but cut that out. That’d make us hit men.”

“Have you already forgotten? That’s my original profession.”

“I’m saying you don’t gotta do that stuff anymore. If there’s any killing to be done, I’ll do it.”

“Jeez... It’s unfair to say things like that...”

What kind of show was he being made to watch here? Micca felt more confusion than fear now.

“Aah, sorry ’bout that,” Shax said, noticing his bewilderment. “We’re here to negotiate with this guy, but we’re at a complete loss since we can’t communicate with him.”

“Hm?”

“Honestly, having even one more person here to share in our suffering is pretty nice.”

“Hmmm?”

Micca was even more perplexed now. Unable to stand it anymore, he raised his voice.

“U-Um, I don’t really...understand the situation or anything...”

Hearing this, Shax and Kuroka exchanged looks.

“I guess not. Let’s start from the beginning,” Kuroka said. “The church is aware we’re having a meeting in this town, but they can’t pretend not to see two Archdemon coming in contact, so an Archangel was dispatched to join in. That’s you.”

“Huh...? I mean, why do you have insider information on the church to begin with?” Micca asked.

“Oh, I’m technically from the church,” Kuroka answered.

A tabaxi from Liucaon in the church? Where have I heard this before...?

“Aaah! The international problem!” he shouted unintentionally.

“I’m an international problem now...? Sorry,” the tabaxi girl said quietly.

Sh-She’s...unexpectedly not that frightening...?

“Well, how do I put this?” Shax said with a tired look. “I’m sure you’re confused, but we’re part of Archdemon Zagan’s clique. We’re something like your Unification Faction. I assure you you’ll live, so don’t worry ’bout it.”

“Huh...?”

Micca never thought such words would come from an Archdemon. He doubted his ears.

“I’m...not going to die?” he asked.

“Did you come here thinking you’ll die? I don’t know your circumstances, but treat yourself better. The church doesn’t want any Archangels who’ve faced an Archdemon before dying in vain either.”

“B-But...I have no talent. I’m the lowest ranked too... I’m unneeded...”

He felt relief that he wasn’t going to die. Unable to bear it anymore, Micca sobbed convulsively. Shax and Kuroka exchanged looks again.

“Don’t say that stupid crap,” Shax told him. “There’s nobody in the world who should just die.”

“That’s right,” Kuroka agreed. “Miss Stella said she was sending over someone with promise. That’s you, right? Have more confidence in yourself.”

The Archdemon was encouraging him with shocking kindness.

“Wh-Why are you being so kind to me?” Micca asked.

“I mean...we can at least talk with you.”

Shax and Kuroka awkwardly averted their eyes. They must’ve had their own hardships. And then, before he knew it, the maid—Furfur—was standing in front of Micca.

“Thank you...for looking for my master and finding him. Was that...right?” she said, bowing to him quickly. She then looked into his eyes with concern. “I’m happy...to have received help. Next time...shall I help you?”

Just maybe, the world was far kinder than Micca believed. He finally wiped away his tears, and just as he was about to smile...

“Pow! What a magnificent gathering of guests we have this evening!”

Someone who should never have existed within a gentle world stood before him.

◇

“I’m beat...”

Come nighttime, after finishing her meeting with Zagan, Asmodeus was still in Kianoides. Her reason was simple. She was just too tired to go anywhere else.

Don’t they get exhausted being all over each other like that? It was somewhat charming to see them be so innocent, but witnessing it up close had given her a stomachache. If she didn’t walk it off, she was liable to get food poisoning.

Fortunately, Zagan had cleaned up the demon she was supposed to have handled herself. She had some time to waste in town. Her one concern had been bumping into Foll, but that little girl was one of the Archdemons. She had to be aware that there was a reason they couldn’t meet. Even if they did bump

into each other by coincidence, Foll would be able to walk by without saying a word. As Asmodeus continued walking with no particular destination in mind, she gazed at the townscape.

“It sure is peaceful here.”

Even when Zagan had charged his words with mana, the majority of the customers had only backed away a little and had continued observing them with amusement in their eyes. They seemed so used to it.

Now that I think about it, I feel like I haven’t observed humanity for a really long time. For the most part, humans had either been Asmodeus’s targets or part of the riffraff that she’d trampled down without a second thought. She’d recently captured a weird reporter, but it was questionable whether she’d recognized the poor girl as a person.

Here and now, she saw the riffraff walking around her as people. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d thought that way. Had it been decades, or even centuries? And as she continued her aimless walk in a daze, she came across a familiar face.

“Ah...”

“Hrm...?”

It was an old gentleman wearing a tailcoat. He had what looked like an artificial arm made out of boorish armor. Even though it was late enough at night for dinner to be over, he had a huge bouquet of flowers in his hand.

Ummm, what’s his name again? She remembered he was Archdemon Palace’s butler, but now that she thought about it, she might not have heard his name. Still, there was a reason she recognized him as an individual instead of part of the riffraff.

He’s the one who gave me sis’s core jewel... He was one of those she was supposed to make an example of for laying his hands on Spirit Blood. However, he’d also given Asmodeus her sister’s core jewel. Besides, this man had accepted being made an example of. It was questionable whether killing him would serve any purpose.

And if not for him, Foll or I would be dead. When she thought of it like that,

maybe she owed him in a way. In other words, Asmodeus had no idea how to interact with him. And as she remained incapable of finding something to say, the butler spoke up first.

“Hmph. I see I’m in the way.”

He quickly started walking past her as if he’d seen something he shouldn’t have.

“No, no, no, hang on a sec,” Asmodeus said, calling him to a stop. “Why’re you acting like you just saw a weirdo? Isn’t that a little rude?”

The butler turned an unexpected look to her.

“I suppose you have a point,” he said, nodding in recollection. “I promised to give you my head. Very well. It’s an old head, but take it.”

“Can you stop treating me like a homicidal maniac?”

She couldn’t stand the thought of being lumped together with the Lord of Murder. Well, she had in fact been referred to as the most abominable Archdemon alongside him and the recently deceased Faceless King, but that was a different matter. It felt unpleasant to have it said to her face.

“Hm? I thought you were here to collect,” the butler said, raising a brow.

“Well, you know, that’s kinda on hold for now...”

He cocked his head. These words were unbecoming of the Collector.

“I mean, don’t you think it’s weird to throw away your life so easily?” Asmodeus asked, flaring up indignantly. “Aren’t you pretty strong? How about putting a little more effort into living?”

If Behemoth or Levia heard this, they would be yelling that she was one to talk, but Asmodeus retained her composure. This man was Zagan’s prized wielder of a Sacred Sword. Asmodeus had crossed swords with him a single time, and that had been enough for her to believe that he was among the strongest of all the active Archangels. It was strange for such a man to so easily offer his head to another.

And yet, the butler only smiled listlessly back at her. Not that Asmodeus really cared...but to everyone around them, it looked like an old man was smiling

ferociously as he threatened an impudent little girl, bringing the passersby to a stop.

“The effort to live...” the butler said, ignoring their gazes. “I’ve lost too much to struggle for life at this age. I can’t say it interests me.”

Asmodeus found herself nodding along. “I can sympathize with that a little...”

By the time she’d obtained power, Asmodeus had already been alone. All the other carbuncles had died long before and she’d had nothing left to protect. All she’d been capable of was to retrieve her people’s core jewels that’d been treated as commodities. Even though her sister had died so that she could live, there’d been no purpose to Asmodeus’s life. Now, she felt like she finally understood the meaning behind those words.

Aah, I get it. The “happiness” sis and Foll spoke of refers to the future.

It was true. This was something she didn’t possess. After retrieving all the core jewels, she was sure to die in obscurity without getting involved with anyone else. If she couldn’t do that, she would destroy absolutely everything including herself. Asmodeus was a bomb. A bomb had no future.

“Besides,” the butler said as Asmodeus hung her head, “at this age, there isn’t much left that I want or have to do. If I can become a source of encouragement for the young ones, then dying doesn’t sound so bad.”

“The young ones? I’ve lived several times your age.”

“How laughable,” the butler said, snorting as he transferred the bouquet to his armored hand. “I’m sure that’s the case, but while you cursed sorcerers may live long lives, that is no more than living in a frozen bubble. You’re different from me. Inside, I don’t see much of a difference between us.”

Even though Asmodeus had tried to be friendly with him, that brief comment irritated her greatly.

“Wh-Whaaaaaat?! How impudent! Do you think I won’t kill you?!”

“I’m the one who told you to take my head...”

Despite what she was saying, he was probably right. Asmodeus raised her voice without any dignity. Seeing her reaction, the butler plopped a hand on her

head as if he saw right through her.

“If you don’t like being called a young one, then let the hands of time move again. If you don’t, you’ll eventually wither away within your frozen bubble.”

The worst and nastiest Archdemon had nothing she could say in return.

What’s with this guy? He really pisses me off.

Her eyes then shifted to the flowers he was carrying so delicately.

“You have an awfully cute hobby for an old man,” she said, snatching the bouquet.

The butler had remarkable power, but there was nobody in the world who could stop the Collector from stealing from them.

“You’re lacking in sense, though,” she continued. “There’s nothing cheerful about white and green.”

Asmodeus twirled on the spot, scattering petals all around her as she laughed scornfully.

“They’re grave flowers, after all,” the butler said quietly. “I can’t use cheerful colors.”

Asmodeus came to a complete stop, then lowered her head deeply.

“Ummm... Sorry about that.”

She used sorcery to return the scattered petals to where they belonged and held the bouquet out to the butler.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s simply the sentimentality of an old man.”

In spite of his words, there was clear affection in the way he looked at the flowers—and clear sadness.

“Ummm... Sorry for offending you,” Asmodeus said. “Was it someone close to you?”

The butler shook his head. “No, I only crossed paths with her once. I didn’t even know about her death anniversary until recently.”

Despite such a brief meeting, it must’ve been someone irreplaceable to him.

A death anniversary... I don't even remember when sis died anymore.

Asmodeus was shocked. Forget her death anniversary, she didn't even remember what her sister's voice sounded like or how she laughed. She fought for the sake of recovering her sister's dignity and that of all of her people. That was supposed to be the case, but she couldn't remember their faces or when they'd died. She just barely remembered her sister's face only because of the portrait in her pendant.

I see. So this is what it means to wither away in my frozen bubble. The butler's words were annoyingly on point. Well, it was a suitable end for the Collector who'd committed every evil act there was.

"Sorry for bothering you," she said, brushing back her silver hair and turning on her heels.

She wasn't going to get in the way of someone's grief. And just as she was about to leave, the butler called out to her again.

"Do you have time to spare right now?"

"What?"

"If you do, then come with me."

Even though she was about to get out of his way, the butler invited her for a nighttime walk.

◇

"So? What is this place?"

The butler had taken Asmodeus to a castle in the middle of the forest. Judging by the countless barriers around it, she didn't need to ask whether this was a sorcerer's dwelling. It appeared to be uninhabited, however.

"My liege's castle," the butler replied, opening the door and walking inside. "It isn't currently being used, but it's precious to him. Even now, I keep it clean."

"Hmph. So is your friend sleeping here too?"

The only place he would visit with that bouquet was a grave. And yet, the butler calmly shook his head.

“No? It has nothing to do with that.”

“Then why did you bring me here?” Asmodeus asked in exasperation. He’d even asked her to use sorcery to get there, since it would’ve taken a while by carriage. “I’ll get angry if you say you want help cleaning up.”

“What manner of idiocy are you spouting? Do you think I’m ill-prepared to entertain my liege and Foll’s guest?”

“Oh, sorry. It just didn’t look that way.”

Honestly, the place was very well maintained. Despite being an old castle, there wasn’t any trash on the ground. The rooms beyond the main hall were surely all equally clean too.

“You looked rather worn out,” the butler said, shrugging. “At least have some tea.”

Asmodeus reflexively reached for her face.

Was it that easy to tell?

She was, in fact, extremely exhausted, but she didn’t think someone she’d only met once before would be able to see through her. Perhaps this butler was simply that observant when it came to people.

The butler proceeded farther into the castle. The kitchen was likely that way. Left behind on her own, Asmodeus wandered around the castle idly. It was a small castle—consisting of around twenty rooms at most. It was modestly furnished and everything was well maintained.

Did Foll live here too?

If so, Asmodeus wanted to take a peek at her room. This castle wasn’t used anymore. It was possible none of her personal belongings remained. Still, that didn’t really matter. Asmodeus was spurred on by insatiable curiosity.

Feeling somewhat mischievous, Asmodeus opened every door she found. If the butler got angry, she could just shut them again. It could be done with a snap of the finger, after all. The castle really had been vacated. The rooms had nothing but empty shelves and test tubes and such. There was nothing interesting in them.

And as she continued throwing doors open, she found a room that looked somewhat lived in. She took a sniff at the air and detected the faint scent of hair products.

“Would this be the butler’s room?”

The bed had sheets over it, and the table had a pen and what looked like a journal with a strange foreign mask leaning against it.

A fox mask?

It looked pretty old, so it stirred the Collector’s heart, but she somehow managed to restrain her urge to shove it in her pocket and simply put it on instead.

“I suppose this design is from Liucaon? Eligor would probably like it, but it doesn’t really suit me. Still, it’s well-made and seems rather valuable.”

After muttering to herself, she opened the window. She looked up at the sky where a pale crescent moon hung overhead like a blade. There were no city lights out here and nothing to block the surprisingly clear starry sky. Asmodeus nudged the mask a little to the side and hopped up to sit on the window frame.

“It’s so beautiful...” she muttered to nobody in particular.

How long had it been since such a thought had crossed her mind while she looked at the moon? Maybe she hadn’t even felt this way when her sister had still been around.

Does this mean the hands of time have moved a little...?

Was she able to think this way because of that troublesome and stubborn little girl? As she continued gazing at the sky, Asmodeus smelled the faint scent of tea and detected an approaching presence.

“So this is where you were.”

The butler had made some tea. As he peeked into the room, Asmodeus smiled at him and pointed at the moon.

“The moon is beautiful, isn’t it, Mister Butler?”

For some reason, his eyes shot open as if he were looking at something

unbelievable.

“Hm...? What?” Asmodeus asked.

She had no intention of claiming to be a lady after all these years, but the Collector hadn’t thrown away her appreciation of beauty. It was somewhat vexing to be looked at like that. Sensing this, the butler shook his head.

“It’s nothing. I was simply told something similar before.”

With that, he placed the tea set on a nearby table and poured two cups. Asmodeus didn’t know anything about tea, but the scent was pleasant. It was like it alleviated the burden on her heart. The butler said nothing, took a seat on the bed, and sipped his tea.

Silence followed.

Uhhh...what’s with this situation?

How had she found herself having tea with an old man whose name she didn’t even know? It was baffling, but unexpectedly, she didn’t find it uncomfortable. Asmodeus’s life was always hectic, as was her personality. Having someone silent there by her side was surprisingly pleasant. It made her want to try quietly gazing at the moon while savoring some tea.

Zagan and them were awfully noisy, after all.

Blind to her own shortcomings, Asmodeus smiled before a sudden thought came to mind.

“Oh yeah, Mister Butler?”

“What?”

“Were you the one who tended to sis’s...to the Spirit Blood in Archdemon Palace?”

“Indeed, I was.”

So she had to kill him. That was the case, but the next words out of Asmodeus’s mouth were...

“It looks like it was treated with care... Thanks.”

The core jewels Asmodeus had collected were all stored in a small coffin within her treasury. Her sister’s core jewel had been in extraordinary condition.

The others had been processed in some way to be used as ornamentation and the like, so normally, she had to restore them to their original state. And yet, her sister's had been exactly as it had been in life. Asmodeus hadn't had to do anything to it and had simply stowed it in the coffin.

"It was my liege's property, so I simply handled it as such. I do not need your gratitude."

"Haaah... You sure have a lousy mouth."

Even as she sighed in astonishment, Asmodeus remained seated on the window frame. She once more savored her tea and the view of the moon quietly. This time, the butler broke the silence.

"About that mask..."

Only when he mentioned it did Asmodeus recall she was still wearing the fox mask.

"Oh, this? You have pretty good taste. It's valuable, so you should be careful with it."

Asmodeus had nearly taken it without knowing, so she removed it in a panic and held it out to him.

"You may take that instead of my life," he said, shaking his head. "It's too good for me."

"Hm...? You sure? It looks like you've really been cherishing it."

"I don't mind."

She wasn't really satisfied with that explanation, but she had no reason to refuse.

"Well, if you're offering it to me, I'll take it."

She said the words, ready to accept it haughtily, but then the butler added one more thing.

"I intended to give it to my daughter one day."

"That makes it really hard to accept!"

Don't tell me it's his departed wife's memento or something.

The sorcerer known as Asmodeus was exactly the type to mercilessly plunder mementos and engagement gifts, but that was only when it involved Spirit Blood. She didn't just steal everything in sight...most of the time.

"It's something like a lucky charm," the butler said, realizing he hadn't said enough. "It's protected me more than enough. My daughter has someone else to protect her now too, so just take it."

"Haaah... Is that so?" Asmodeus sighed and retracted her hand.

Everyone I meet keeps saying the same things...

First Alshiera, then Zagan, and now this butler—everyone acted like they were concerned about Asmodeus's way of life. It was ridiculous to be worried about the nastiest Archdemon. Maybe the shadow of death was hanging over her or something.

"Well...I'll be careful," she said, putting the mask back on and facing the butler.

She looked down at her cup. There was only one sip left. Before finishing, she had one more question to ask.

"Oh yeah, may I have your name?"

In a somewhat unusual turn for the girl who didn't see others as people, she figured it was at least fine to remember this butler's name. He didn't answer immediately for some reason. Instead, he opened his mouth, but wasn't saying anything.

"Hm...? What's the problem?" Asmodeus asked. "Well, if you don't want to tell me, that's fine too."

In truth, many didn't want to give Asmodeus their name, not knowing what she'd do to them once she knew. The butler's reaction was reasonable.

"Something is wrong with me tonight," the butler said, shaking his head. "It's nothing. Forget about it. I'm Raphael... What do I call you?"

Despite his question, he already knew both of Asmodeus's names.

"Call me whatever you want," Asmodeus said, shrugging. "Asmodeus...or Lily."

She tried to act like it didn't matter to her, but her voice tapered off at the end.

When I put it like that, it makes it sound like I want *him to call me Lily...*

Why had she even given him the choice to begin with?

I was supposed to have left Lily's name behind at sis's grave...

As her people's lone survivor, she'd committed every atrocity there was to retrieve their core jewels. That was why she'd buried the name Lily with her sister's body.

"Then Lily," the butler said with a smile.

"What...?"

"Get along with Foll. She's my friend's orphaned daughter."

Now it made sense. She'd been under the impression this old man was even more supportive of Foll than Zagan. This was the reason behind his behavior.

"Yeah, yeah," Asmodeus said, returning his smile. "I'll get along with her. If I feel like it, that is."

Something the old butler had mentioned then weighed on her mind.

"One more thing," Asmodeus said. "What kinda girl is your daughter?"

"Her name is Kuroka... She's a cait sith."

Asmodeus's eyes widened in surprise.

"As always, those around Zagan are families made up of every race, huh?"

Pretending she didn't realize how envious this made her, Asmodeus drank her last sip of tea.

"As thanks for the mask, I'll protect that girl should something happen to her," she said. "If I feel like it, that is."

Without waiting for a reply, Asmodeus vanished. Perhaps she was embarrassed about saying something that didn't suit her. Left all alone now, the butler slowly swirled the tea in his cup.

"The moon is beautiful, isn't it...?"

With a certain someone on his mind, those words were carried by the wind and vanished into the distance without reaching anyone.

◇

“Pow! What a magnificent gathering of guests we have this evening!” Glasya-Labolas shouted in ecstasy. “Aaah, what a distinguished lineup!” he continued as if dancing and singing. “The oldest Archdemon, Puppetmaster Forneus; Sword God Andrealphus’s successor, the second Tiger King; Liucaon’s greatest samurai, Kuroka Adelhide; one of the former Archdemon candidates, Thunder God Furfur; and though occupying the lowest seat, a wielder of a Sacred Sword, Micca Salvarra.”

Each one on their own would be a formidable opponent, enough to make his heart dance. So how much would his blood pump from taking them all on at once? Just maybe, this was Glasya-Labolas’s final destination. After intoxicating himself with every kind of murder for six hundred years, how much ecstasy would his own death bring him?

“Alas! Death is impartial to all, and comes upon us unfairly.”

Faced with his shouts of exultation, everyone reacted immediately. The cait sith girl drew her sword. The Tiger King stepped forward to protect Forneus. The maid and the Angelic Knight stiffened at the sudden development. Forneus opened his mouth to invoke sorcery. But they were all too late.

“Night Curtain.”

The world stopped. The gallant samurai had stepped into range in a single stride, her drawn sword cutting through a thin layer of skin before stopping completely. Tiger King had been about to invoke some kind of sorcery to protect her but was standing stock-still without accomplishing anything. Puppetmaster had opened his mouth, but hadn’t uttered a single word. The maid hadn’t even tried to do anything. The young Archangel hadn’t even drawn his sword. They all possessed the potential to defeat Glasya-Labolas, but they’d all frozen defenselessly, unable to even wield their might.

Beyond the counter, the barkeep was pouring beer into a tankard, unmoving as he kept the faucet turned. The golden liquid filled the cup heartily with frothing bubbles, but even as it overflowed, the barkeep didn't register that it was spilling onto his pants and on the floor. Night Curtain was sorcery that halted all living beings' sense of time.

The truly terrifying part about this sorcery was that there was no time limit. Time would remain frozen for eternity unless Glasya-Labolas broke the spell himself, or his target broke it through sheer willpower. Given three days, his target would die of starvation. Still, someone could break out of it if they had the mind to do so.

During the bout the other day against Archdemon Zagan, this sorcery had maintained its effect for no longer than half a second. That was why Andrealphus was known as Sword God and not Glasya-Labolas. Those here weren't that far behind Zagan either. It was best to assume they would only be stopped for one or two seconds, or even less.

Unfortunately for them, an instant was all Glasya-Labolas needed to kill someone. It was because of Zagan's tremendous defenses against sorcery and his near foresight in battle that he'd laid Glasya-Labolas low. If Zagan had lacked either ability, he would've lost his head.

"Death in a borderline exchange with the strong is truly beautiful. It fills my organs with the greatest sense of accomplishment and pleasure. However, stealing the lives of the strong unjustly is yet another sweet fruit accented by blasphemy and corruption."

Glasya-Labolas loved every life he plucked. The five lives here were some of the finest goods of his past six hundred years. He wondered which to start with. How about the samurai who'd closed in with divine speed? No, the terrified Angelic Knight was hard to pass up. How would the young man who took Tiger King's name taste? What kind of dying face would the expressionless Thunder God bewitch him with? Or perhaps it was only proper manners to start with his actual target. The choice he had to make had him writhing in agony, but he decided to set his sights on his target—Puppetmaster Forneus.

However, Glasya-Labolas didn't take a step forward. Instead, a bead of sweat

ran down his cheek.

What fragrant bloodlust!

It was as if he were dancing on thin ice. One step could lead to his own demise. What convinced him of this was right before his eyes. Such was to be expected of Archdemons and those who possessed power just beneath them. They'd taken some kind of measures against his Night Curtain. An evil smile twisted the old madman's face.

Then by all means, I accept this challenge!

How could he back down when faced with such a passionate reception? He was about to step forward, but someone else moved before he could.

"All who intend harm on my master are considered enemies."

"Ooh!"

Of all things, the maid lunged forward within the confines of Night Curtain.

She broke it in an instant... No, it never even worked on her, did it?

That was simply how fast her reaction was. Perhaps equipped with some manner of bracers, blades protruded from both of her arms. Though she wasn't quite as skilled as the samurai, it was impossible to avoid such a blow.

Thunder God Furfur's eyes shot open. That stood to reason. Despite closing in on Glasya-Labolas, her blades had come to a stop as if obstructed by an invisible wall. A single cane stood in between her blades. Seeing exactly where the two slashes were intersecting, he'd stopped them with the tip of his cane.

"How wonderful, Thunder God! My lady, to have such fine swordsmanship at such a young age! You have potential!"

As the former Sword Saint, his expectations soared to see such skill with a sword in a sorcerer. However, she was far too inexperienced to cross blades with Glasya-Labolas. Just as he was about to inform her of that, Thunder God whispered.

"Lightning."

Electricity discharged from her body with a crackle.

“Mrgh!”

At the same time, she began pushing back his cane with unbelievable strength given her slender frame. Glasya-Labolas’s heels slid on the wooden floor as he was slowly forced backward.

“What titanic strength. Are you trying to overcome the difference in skill with power?!”

It was inevitable for Furfur to use sorcery focused on lightning, given her second name. However, the Lightning Glasya-Labolas knew used space as a medium to discharge a bolt of electricity. This was one of the sorceries Zagan favored too. Depending on the caster’s skill, it could exert power comparable to a natural disaster.

It wasn’t supposed to grant such tremendous strength. Regardless, Glasya-Labolas wasn’t such an easy opponent that he could be defeated by brute strength. As the blades pushed toward his neck, he suddenly pulled back his cane.

“Ah.”

Having put all her strength behind her push, Thunder God pitched forward and struck empty air. The neck she’d been aiming for had already slipped past her blades.

“Flaming Devil’s Blade.”

Glasya-Labolas’s cane was a medium that amplified his mana. By pouring his mana into it, he transformed it into a cursed sword that could tear through any and all matter. In an instant, the dog-headed cane became a large sword with a sinister edge to it, mercilessly flashing toward the girl’s torso.

“That’s one dow—”

“Howl! Haniel!”

The air screamed as the blade that was supposed to tear through her waist vanished, returning to a simple wooden stick.

“Guh!”

Even without the edge, this was still an Archdemon’s strike. Thunder God flew

back and slammed against the wall, breaking it as her figure vanished through the other side.

What curious feedback.

It was as if he'd struck armor. Was she wearing something beneath that frilly apron? Whatever the case, she wasn't dead.

Still, she must be incapacitated.

She wasn't going to be standing anytime soon. Glasya-Labolas turned to look at who'd butted in. The young Archangel had his sword drawn. Glasya-Labolas's sorcery had been undone the moment before hitting its target. The Sacred Sword's power wasn't quite evident, but it was clad in an ashen shine.

"Whoa, what's going on?" the barkeep said from the counter.

Hmm, Night Curtain was dispelled.

He hadn't seen it happen, but this was likely the purification power of the Sacred Sword. Glasya-Labolas leaped backward to put some distance between them.

"I suppose I was never going to get through so easily," he said in honest admiration. "How wonderful."

"Looks like you're not letting us take you down so easily either," the Tiger King responded with a shrug. "It would've been over had you only taken a step closer."

Hearing those words, Glasya-Labolas now understood that the intense bloodlust he'd sensed within Night Curtain had come from this man. However, the one he was most cautious of was the young Archangel who was likely the weakest of the group.

He really is the one I must keep an eye on.

It wasn't clear whether the boy was aware of it or not, but he was likely Glasya-Labolas's natural enemy. He could be called a genius. If he survived here and spent a few years gaining experience, he could become the one to kill this mad Archdemon.

Aaah, what fascinating talent.

That was why he couldn’t resist the temptation to pluck that life here and now. And as he observed the boy, he heard the sound of tumbling debris.

“Oh my...”

He turned to see Thunder God standing up despite the clean blow to her torso. She wasn’t unharmed, of course. Her lovely maid uniform was torn here and there, and one of her blades was broken. What he saw beneath her torn clothing wasn’t human skin.

“A puppet...?”

Who had muttered those words? What spread out from the bone-shattering blow wasn’t a blue bruise, but minute cracks. Her torso also revealed clear joints.

“Hmmm...?”

Glasya-Labolas cocked his head.

She moved within my Night Curtain and even used sorcery...

He didn’t know what exactly she was, but sorcery required one to possess mana. In short, only a living being was capable of it.

“My lady, excuse the abrupt question,” Glasya-Labolas said. “Are you a living being? Or are you a mere object? Which is it?”

This was an extremely important question—more important than anything else, in fact. After all, objects couldn’t die. They only broke. Unlike Naberius, Glasya-Labolas was incapable of loving such rubbish. He stared at her, waiting for an answer.

“Question...incomprehensible,” Furfur said, cocking her head curiously. “I exist for my master’s sake. I exist to protect my master.”

“Hmmm...”

What is life? What does it mean to live? It is will. Because they possess a will, people manifest explosive emotions in the moment of death. So...

“Wonderful!”

This was what Glasya-Labolas loved—someone worth killing. And just as he placed his hand on his Hex Katana to continue, he heard something hit the floor behind him.

“Kuroka!”

The Tiger King yelled, tension clear in his voice for the very first time. Keeping the terrifying Archdemons in the corner of his vision, Glasya-Labolas turned to the sound, seeing the cait sith girl lying on the ground.

“Hm...?”

He hadn’t laid a hand on her. He hadn’t had a chance to. Nobody else had shown any signs of attacking her either. And just as he got his thoughts moving, Puppetmaster Forneus made his move. His mouth popped open.

“Begone, Glasya-Labolas.”

“Mmmrgh?!”

An intense pressure crushed down on Glasya-Labolas’s body.

What is this?

It was neither wind nor any form of impact. It was as if some kind of tremendous power spot were trying to engulf him. Unable to remain in place, Glasya-Labolas jumped back all the way out of the tavern. He’d been late to react, but he had no reason to sit still and take it.

“Hmph!”

He drew his Hex Katana and slashed. The power spot coiling around him dispersed in an instant.

“Oh dear, that was my first time witnessing you use your *words*, Lord Forneus,” he said, shuddering with pleasure. “Aaah, how wonderful! To think I would have my target before me and be incapable of killing a single soul!”

What kind of deaths would they paint the world with? What kind of death would they grant him? The simple thought had him trembling with excitement. They were the greatest of targets.

“Oh my, that won’t do,” Glasya-Labolas said, shaking his head to restrain himself. “The night has only just begun. Let us take our time and savor this.”

The nightmarish Archdemon left behind that ominous whisper, then vanished into the dead of the night.

◇

“Ugh...”

Kuroka had a horrible headache. It felt as if someone were sticking a finger into her eyeball and stirring it around. The world in front of her was distorted and she wasn’t capable of focusing. Was she seated right now? Was she lying on the ground? At the very least, she knew she wasn’t standing. Still, the back of her head was strangely warm. It felt like something soft was supporting her.

“You awake, Kurosuke?”

She heard a familiar voice overhead.

“How’re you feeling?”

“I feel horrible enough that last week’s hangover could be considered me being in perfect condition.”

She was referring to their time in Liucaon. Even though she’d gone on a hot spring trip with Shax like it was their honeymoon, she’d lost her senses on the first day and had been bedridden for two whole days. Having told her he’d teach her how to drink, Shax had laughed it off, claiming that experiencing such things was part of the learning process. She felt like he’d been making fun of her, so she held a bit of a grudge over it.

“Can you tell who I am?” the voice asked, tension clear in his voice.

“Huh...? You’re Mister Shax, right?”

She couldn’t focus her eyes, but she wouldn’t mistake his voice for anyone else’s. The voice above her sounded relieved.

“Can you see?” he asked.

“It’s still...all a haze. I can’t really see.”

Even though he was right in front of her, she couldn’t make out his face. Shax remained silent for a moment, then squeezed out his words as if to put Kuroka at ease.

“Got it. Get some rest.”

“Right...”

Shax covered Kuroka’s eyes with a hand. Even though this made things pitch-black, it really brought her peace of mind.

He’s so kind...

She thought about this a lot, especially recently. She really felt how much he cared for her. It made her want to depend on him forever.

What had happened here? Had she gotten injured? She was finally capable of considering her own situation when a sudden realization came to mind.

Hm? Am I maybe lying on Mister Shax’s lap...?

Considering where his voice was coming from, that was very likely the case.

Huh? Why?!

Bewilderment filled Kuroka's head. He'd done stuff like give her piggyback rides and pet her head, but she'd never gotten to use his lap as a pillow. A man's thighs looked solid, but were surprisingly soft. Despite this, they still had a firmness that supported her and brought her peace of mind. It was also warm, and above all else, Shax's scent was prominent.

If anything, she felt like he was even closer to him than when he hugged her. It was so pleasant that Kuroka nearly gave in to her drowsiness when she suddenly remembered something.

Oh right. That old man called Glasya-Labolas or something appeared...

Zagan had told her he was the Archdemon they had to be wariest of. Naturally, Kuroka had charged right in to protect everyone. By buying time with a single slash, she knew Shax could definitely do something about him. However, she didn't have any memories beyond that point.

"Did I get struck down?" Kuroka asked.

"Not really..."

Kuroka grimaced at the vague answer. Shax wasn't foolish enough to hide the truth at times like these. If she lost, he would tell her so. They would then discuss how to handle things in the future.

"Glasya-Labolas attacked us," Shax said grimly. "You charged at him right away, but he stopped you with his sorcery—Night Curtain."

"Did *that* break through it?"

"No, Furfur and the Archangel boy fought back before that."

Furfur was the maid girl. Forneus had brought her to this town as an attendant. Kuroka didn't know the Angelic Knight's name.

"The boy's Sacred Sword apparently manipulates sound. That's what broke Night Curtain, but it was a bad call."

"What do you mean?"

He'd broken an Archdemon's sorcery. Wasn't that worthy of praise?

“Glasya-Labolas’s Night Curtain interferes with the brain, creating a void in your consciousness. Seeing how the boy blocked it, the spell might use sound as a medium to do so. But the fact that he broke Night Curtain forcefully with another ‘sound’ was the main problem.”

“Oh, I see.”

Kuroka understood what Shax was getting at.

“You mean it gouged open my old wound...”

“That’s the gist of it,” Shax said with a groan.

Kuroka had once lost her vision. This had happened because she hadn’t been able to fully block a curse—the Entangling Gaze. It had burned her optic nerves and had even damaged her brain. After a series of twists and turns, Nephy had restored her vision, but the scars remained.

“Sorry, Mister Shax. I dragged us all down...”

Their opponent was a former Angelic Knight who once possessed the title of Sword Saint. Kuroka was meant to fight at the very forefront against such an opponent, but had lost right away.

“You did exactly as I told you to,” Shax said. “It’s my fault.”

“It’s not your fault. We both failed to predict this... You always try to shoulder all the burdens and blame.”

He’d spent the last five years tormented by regret for burning down Kuroka’s home. She didn’t want to see him like that anymore.

“Mister Shax, I’m all right now.”

After talking a little while, she’d recovered somewhat. He’d probably been casting sorcery on her. He helped her sit up. Her hazy vision was starting to clear up a little. They were still in the tavern. The shop had apparently spread out a blanket on the ground for them. Right next to her, Forneus was treating the maid girl. A little farther away, the young Angelic Knight was cradling his knees. He didn’t appear to have much combat experience. Facing an Archdemon must’ve been a serious shock.

Kuroka returned her gaze to Forneus and Furfur, then unintentionally raised

her voice.

“Huh? A puppet...?”

There was no human skin beneath Furfur’s torn clothes. She’d apparently crossed blades with Glasya-Labolas. Cracks ran all over her torso as if she could shatter at any moment. Her arm was broken and was missing everything from the wrist down. The inside cross section was empty, showing no muscles or bone. Instead, a single string stretched out from within, attached to her dangling severed hand.

A ball-jointed puppet...?

The continent treated such puppets as a work of art. In her time with the dark side of the church, Kuroka had seen one of her targets’ collection. She was shocked to see an expression coming from such a puppet, even if only a faint one. Noticing Kuroka’s voice, Furfur bobbed her head in a quick bow. Her unliving body creaked slightly.

“Shall I name...identify, myself?”

With that, she then spoke in a monotonous voice.

“Artificial soul-infused lightning-powered armored puppet—Thunder God Furfur, is my designation.”

“A puppet...” Shax said, raising a brow at the string of confusing words. “Wait, you said lightning? Are you powered by sorcery?”

“Yes. My main driving force is lightning created by sorcery.”

Kuroka was shocked to hear such technology existed.

“Wait, hang on a sec,” Shax said, his expression even more puzzled than Kuroka’s. “Sorcery powers you, but I’m pretty sure I saw you using that sorcery yourself.”

“Humans make...their own meals. I also...make my own meals. Is that strange?”

“It’s not strange in that sense, but still...”

Shax was at a loss for words, but Kuroka somehow understood what he was

getting at.

Simple objects can't use sorcery.

Some chimeras and ghosts were capable of sorcery. If the original ingredients could use sorcery, there were cases where this was inherited. However, golems were incapable of using any whatsoever. Sorcery propelled their movements, but they weren't living beings. Furfur had called herself a puppet, so conceptually, she was the same as a golem.

"There is something fatal about a portrait," Forneus said to answer their questions. "It has a life of its own."

Kuroka and Shax exchanged looks.

"Ummm, you mean...she's alive?" Kuroka asked.

Forneus didn't answer, but didn't deny their claim either.

Structurally, she doesn't look like anything more than a puppet, though...

And as Kuroka continued to ponder over the matter, Shax gasped in sudden realization.

"Soul-infused," he said, repeating Furfur's words. "Does that mean you succeeded in creating a soul?"

Kuroka cocked her head.

"Without making a living being like a homunculus, isn't it impossible to artificially create a soul?"

Why a homunculus could gain a sense of self—to gain a soul—was unknown. After creating tens or even hundreds of them, on rare occasions, it simply happened. A soul was proof of possessing an ego. Even if one lost all their memories and their body was transformed into something else, it was a record of who they were.

"Alchemy has successfully created life through homunculi, but the creation of a soul hasn't been established," Shax said, nodding back at her. "There isn't even an established method of observing the soul."

"Huh? But ghosts are perfectly visible."

Some weak ghosts were invisible, but those who could cause harm to others generally weren't. Their bodies didn't have substance, but they could be defeated with sorcery or a blessed weapon. Kuroka had even heard of some being captured.

"Ghosts are energy forms without substance," Shax said, shaking his head. "The church apparently calls that energy 'aura.' However, it's unclear whether ghosts actually possess a will, and if they do, whether it truly is the same as the will of the person who died."

"Wouldn't that mean nobody knows if ghosts possess souls?"

"That's the gist of it."

That had to be an unpleasant thought for a sorcerer.

"The one thing we do know is that what we define as a soul weighs about twenty-one grams," Shax said, groaning. "No matter how minuscule, it possesses mass. The technique of transplanting a homunculus's soul apparently involves a spell to bind that mass and swap it out."

In other words, they were making use of something they didn't really understand. Kuroka was getting a headache for an entirely different reason from her injury now.

"So he touched upon a genuine taboo. I'm surprised he's fine after that."

The creation of a soul was the work of gods. Such work could twist the way of the world itself, placing it far beyond the reach of even Archdemons.

"No, I don't think he is," Shax said, shaking his head.

He stared right at Forneus. One beat later, Kuroka understood what he meant.

That's why Puppetmaster Forneus had his ability to convey his will to others stolen from him.

The creation of a soul. The true meaning behind that was the creation of life from nothing—to take a step into the territory of gods. That was why he'd gotten cursed. His current state was proof above all else that he'd succeeded in that most taboo of tasks.

Perhaps that was the origin of his second name too. It was said that a homunculus's soul came from its ingredients' soul. To dispute such suspicions, all ingredients had to be inorganic. Having set the foundation for today's alchemy, Forneus must have spent centuries tackling this thesis.

Thunder God Furfur was the culmination of Puppetmaster Forneus's work. Kuroka gulped at the terrifying and abominable labor that he'd undertaken to reach this point. Before she knew it, her mouth was completely dry from the tension in the room.

"But this could be a stroke of luck," Shax said, pulling Kuroka toward him by the shoulder. "That means he possesses the exact power Zagan craves."

"True..."

Archdemon Zagan was planning to destroy the Sacred Swords. To be precise, he was trying to free the seraphs who'd been sealed within them for a thousand years. To do that, he needed some manner of technique that could interact with the soul.

"Meaning that power is a hindrance to Marchosias?" Kuroka asked, recalling Glasya-Labolas's attack.

"Probably," Shax agreed. "He could also just be after the Sigil of the Archdemon, though."

About a month ago, Marchosias had tried to solicit Barbatos—who was currently shaking up the world with his "forbidden love"—by offering him an Archdemon's seat. He might have meant to kill Forneus and have Barbatos take his place.

"Forneus," Shax said, renewing his determination. "Let me ask you once more. My lord, Archdemon Zagan, wants your wisdom and power. Will you come with us?"

"I shall come with you," Forneus replied solemnly. "I see I have missed my train. That makes no matter. I can go tomorrow. But don't ask me to read anything tonight."

Hearing another mysterious answer left Kuroka and Shax dumbfounded.

Is he saying yes or no?

As the two made bitter expressions, Furfur peeked at her master's face.

"Master, assent? Likely, probably, an affirmation."

"Oh, is that so?" Kuroka asked.

"But seems tired? So I believe he's emphasizing."

Well, he'd had to deal with Glasya-Labolas's attack and Furfur's repairs, so it was probably hard for him to move right away.

"Guess our course of action is set," Shax said, shrugging.

"Right."

They had to protect Forneus and Furfur and bring them back to Zagan. That was a matter of utmost priority.

"What'll you do?" Shax said, turning to the young Angelic Knight.

He probably hadn't thought anyone would address him, so he jolted and began trembling.

"I-I'll..."

He'd only just become an Archangel. Perhaps it was too harsh to ask him to stand and face an Archdemon after having just fought one.

Furfur stood up, her body creaking as she did. Her repairs were apparently done. Even her torn clothes were back to normal. She walked over to the boy, stooped over, and took his hand.

"I received...had your help. I'm probably grateful...happy. So this time...it's my turn to help you."

Kuroka couldn't see her as anything but human. She was sure this wasn't because of her hazy vision either.

"You're..."

The boy finally raised his head, turning his teary eyes to Furfur. And just as he opened his mouth to say something back to her...

"Ladies and gentlemen! Let us begin the second act—Dark Metropolis."

A loud and sinister declaration struck the ancient city of Aristocrates.

Chapter IV: Men Become Stupidly Reckless in Front of the Girls They Love

“Nephy, come here for a minute.”

Inside Archdemon Palace, Zagan knocked on the door to Nephy’s room.

“What is it that you need at this hour?”

It was late at night, so Nephy was in the middle of getting ready for bed. She had a towel over her shoulder and was wearing her nightgown. Water dripped from her white hair, leaving a stain on the towel.

Hnnngh! Nephy is not only cute right after having a bath, but erotic?!

Now that he thought about it, even when she came out at this hour, Nephy would at least dry her hair first. It was a fresh and rare sight for her hair to still be wet after taking a bath. The surprise attack had his heart pounding and he could no longer look her in the eyes, but this was an emergency. Thus, he made full use of his sorcery to regain his composure.

“Contact with Shax was cut off,” he said. “Something happened.”

He was being vague, but they’d reported in on time to inform Zagan of Glasya-Labolas’s attack, and nothing since.

An old wound... Kuroka’s misfortune is terrifying.

The cait sith were a race who summoned good luck, but the recoil from that brought misfortune to their everyday lives. She was different from Chastille in that sense. Kuroka’s unluckiness was basically fate. No matter how much she braced herself, it showed up when least expected.

This time around, it had manifested in a horrible manner. At this point, he had to consider the worst. That was exactly why he’d made sure they kept in contact with him every half an hour, even this late at night. However, something had happened to prevent them from doing so.

“And it was Kuroka’s long-awaited honeymoon...” Nephy said, putting a hand sadly to her heart.

“It was a honeymoon?”

“Huh?”

“Hm?”

Silence followed.

Zagan quickly realized he’d only had a dim understanding of the situation.

He was accepted by her father and went on a trip to her hometown... That does sound like a honeymoon!

Something about that bothered him. They were clearly all over each other more than he and Nephy were. Zagan was lagging behind. Well, he’d also gone on something like a honeymoon or a premarital vacation with Nephy, but that had only been for three days and two nights. He’d never taken her on a monthlong trip.

What negligence! I still haven’t given her the wedding ring either!

He couldn’t refute being called an imbecile over this.

“Nephy!”

“Y-Yes?!”

He grabbed Nephy’s hand and spoke with all the majesty of an Archdemon.

“Once I return, let’s go on a vacation for at least a month!”

Zagan was acting as if he were marching off toward his death.

“Master Zagan, have you forgotten your promise to Lily?” Nephy said, smiling wryly. “I do believe a monthlong vacation will be difficult to take.”

“Ugh...!”

Seeing Zagan feel vexation from the innermost depths of his heart, Nephy placed a hand on each of his cheeks, then rubbed her brow against his with a smile.

Whaaaaaaaaat?!

He felt euphoria from the surprise attack, his brain unable to keep up with the situation.

“There’s no need to rush, Master Zagan. Let’s take our time and go on a vacation once things settle down, all right? With just the two of us, that is.”

The tips of her pointy ears turned slightly red. Zagan felt like her shy smile brought him immense joy.

“You’re always consoling me, Nephy.”

“That’s not true... I’m usually the one receiving encouragement from you.”

“I’m off to get rid of the nuisances immediately,” Zagan said, looking straight into her eyes.

“P-Please take it easy on them.”

Zagan wasn’t simply acting in high spirits.

A man who’s incapable of protecting his subjects doesn’t deserve to be called a king.

In Gremory’s case—even though the granny had turned things around splendidly—it was precisely because he’d failed to protect her that Kimaris had faced him as an enemy. He couldn’t allow such a thing to happen again. And so, Zagan had to handle this personally.

“Either way, I need Shax to put in more work for me,” Zagan said. “This saves me the trouble of calling him back.”

“Yes. Have a safe trip, Master Zagan.”

Zagan waved back his mantle and left Nephy’s room. Once she could no longer see him, Nephy finally covered her face and sank to the ground.

“Hwaaah...”

She was feeling delayed embarrassment over what she’d done. She needed quite a bit of time before she could stand up again.

And with no way of knowing that, Zagan groaned to himself.

“I...can’t teleport to Aristocrates?”

The magic circle Shax was supposed to have prepared for teleportation wasn't activating.

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"What exactly is a curse?"

Inside one of Archdemon Palace's guest rooms, Alshiera muttered grimly.

"Huh? What're you suddenly on about?"

She was unable to hide a grimace as Asura lounged with his head on her lap as if he owned the place. Well, it was her fault for sitting down on the bed. He'd taken up this position without giving her a chance to refuse and had then started throwing cherries into his mouth.

"Asura," Alshiera said, sighing. "Have you heard of curses?"

"Ain't that what people call the seraphs' hexes now?"

Alshiera nodded and replied, "That is one answer, yes. It was likely a necessary step for Marchosias to obliterate the seraphs."

"Ha ha. He's always had a horrible personality."

"I agree wholeheartedly."

"So? What about them?" Asura asked curiously.

"What you speak of is also called mysticism. It is a miraculous power that is called forth with simple prayer. Can you really call that a curse?"

"Marchosias made it that way, yeah? There somethin' wrong with that?"

Alshiera chose her words carefully before continuing.

"Then why was Solomon cursed?"

The first Silver-Eyed King had been wiped from existence without a trace. If mysticism was a curse, Nephy would be able to do the same thing just by praying.

Mysticism borrows power from nature, nothing more. That's the only way I can see it. Even celestial mysticism isn't supposed to possess such preposterous power.

In other words, even if mysticism and curses were similar, they weren't necessarily the same. And yet, many terrifying curses existed in this world.

Solomon had been erased from existence. Leviathan and Behemoth would transform into monsters when day turned to night and vice versa. Zagan had swapped ages with Foll. The King's Silver Eye had turned not only Stella's personality, but even her body into those of her brother. Even Forneus had been deprived of his ability to convey his will to others. There were too many to enumerate, but they all shared one thing in common.

"Humanity calls all abnormal events that are beyond their understanding curses, but why do such things even happen in our world?"

Asura was finally starting to understand what Alshiera was getting at.

"I get it..." he said, his eyes widening. "They didn't exist in our age, huh?"

The phenomena created by curses were all over the place, but they all seemed to be connected by their roots.

"Also, why did Marchosias call mysticism a curse?" Alshiera continued. "He's a twisted man, but not the type to be misinformed."

"Hmmm, maybe 'cause mysticism is beyond the reach of man too?" Asura mused casually.

Alshiera was speechless.

Mysticism is a means of twisting the laws of the world...? If that's why Marchosias lumped mysticism and curses together, then...are they fragments of the nightmare...?

The thousand-year-old undead was horrified by her conclusion.

"Hey, Ashy," Asura said just as she was wrapping up her thoughts.

"What is— Hom?"

The moment she opened her mouth to speak, he tossed a cherry into it. The stem poked out between her lips, making her look rather silly.

"You're gonna get wrinkles if you keep furrowin' your brow like that."

What was this man up to when she was being so serious? She wanted to

complain, but wasn't able to until she was done eating the cherry in her mouth.

The pit is in the way. I can't even swallow it.

Even if she wanted to throw it out, Asura's head was on her lap and it prevented her from standing up. As she remained at a loss, Asura plucked the stem that was still poking out between her lips, then chucked it into his mouth.

"Ha ha, you're so uselessly dexterous, Ashy. The stem and pit were still attached. Oh yeah, you can tie a knot with your tongue, right?"

She hadn't done so consciously, but that was how Alshiera had eaten cherries in the past.

"Is it true people who can do that are good kiss— Gwah?!"

Alshiera gave him a chilling glare and pinched his nose.

"Can you even imagine the undead growing old?" she said indignantly.

"That's the spirit," Asura said with a satisfied smile. "You've gotta loosen up. You were makin' that face you make when you're tryin' to do everythin' on your own."

"Haaah... That's none of your concern."

In spite of her words, she did feel a little relaxed now.

"Well, I don't believe it's right to leave everything to others, even if that is simply how things progressed."

"You mean the demons?" Asura asked. "What's that gotta do with curses?"

Alshiera paused for a moment before answering.

"Solomon was cursed for sealing the demons."

"Seriously?" Asura asked in shock.

"Yes. I wasn't there to witness it, though."

That said, Alshiera had gotten caught up in things and didn't know what exactly he'd done or how he'd sealed the demons. Asura played with the cherry stem in his mouth as he raised his voice quizzically.

"I heard Solomon was cursed 'cause he chopped up Azazel."

“Oh, who told you that?”

“Batou. I wonder what he’s up to now.”

Alshiera narrowed her eyes.

“Solomon didn’t do it.”

“Then what’s—”

Alshiera placed a finger to her lips to silence him.

“We can’t speak of this any further,” she said in a bloodcurdling voice.

Asura grimaced at the sudden warning.

“Well, whatever,” he said, wanting to change the topic. “Anyway, if you’ve got a clue, can’tcha just pass it on to that Asmodeus girl?”

“About that...”

Alshiera found it hard to deal with her.

She never listens to others, and she’s also Foll’s friend.

That little girl picked people up without a care for their circumstances. And Alshiera couldn’t flat-out ignore such people either.

“Haaah...” Asura sighed, looking truly exasperated. “You haven’t changed at all when it comes to this stuff. You keep toughin’ it out and you’re gonna start cryin’.”

He was right, but she didn’t like having it pointed out to her. Alshiera’s cheeks spasmed as she somehow managed to return a smile.

“In that case, I was simply traumatized by your inability to listen to others,” she said.

“Ha ha, you’re one to talk. You say that now, but you always followed me around.”

Now that he’d stepped on a second land mine, Alshiera flashed him a refreshing smile.

“Oh yes, you mentioned something earlier, didn’t you? About being able to tie a cherry stem into a knot in your mouth making you a good kisser.”

“Hm? Yeah, I did.”

“Want to test it?”

“Huh...?”

Without waiting for a reply, Alshiera planted a kiss on his lips.

“Hmmm?!”

Not only that, but she forced her tongue in, twisted it around, and played with him to her heart’s content. After focusing entirely on that for a while, she pulled back and wiped her lips with a handkerchief.

“Your impressions?” she asked.

“A-Amazing...”

“If you’ve learned your lesson, then refrain from being so impertinent.”

“Y-Yes ma’am...”

With Asura curling up shyly, Alshiera was finally free to stand up and dispose of the cherry pit.

“I never knew Ashy was so lewd...” Asura whispered to himself.

In the end, the one on the receiving end had been unable to escape his fate.

◇

“We’ve been separated...” Kuroka groaned in annoyance. She’d been inside a tavern, but was now on her own on an unfamiliar path in the middle of the night. The wooden town built around ancient ruins had vanished, replaced with a well-organized stone townscape. Stone paving without the slightest gaps covered the ground. Glass lanterns powered by sorcery lined both sides of the path. It was somewhat similar to the Holy City Raziel, but the buildings were bizarrely uniform. Because of that, there was a strange sense of oppression in the air.

“Then ladies and gentlemen, let us begin the second act.”

Following that declaration, the ancient city of Aristocrates had transformed into somewhere else entirely.

Sorcery that can remake an entire city...? No, a barrier?

What had happened to everyone else? There hadn’t been many people inside the tavern, but there’d been a fair number of pedestrians out on the street. She couldn’t see them anywhere. But even without seeing them...

That’s weird. I can still sense them.

Even though she sensed respiration and pulses around her, nobody was there. If Kuroka didn’t still have her eyesight, she wouldn’t have been able to tell up from down, let alone left from right.

Were we teleported? No, I definitely saw the town physically shatter.

Getting dragged into subspace by Barbatos wouldn’t feel like this. So then, what was going on? Unfortunately, Kuroka didn’t have the time to slowly ponder her situation. Shax had treated her, but the aftereffects of Night Curtain were still deeply rooted. She was only able to stand up with support from her staff. She wasn’t going to complain about it, but she was in no state to fight an Archdemon. Pain throbbed deep behind her eyeballs.

Oh no... My eyes...

She could still see, but there was clearly something wrong with her field of vision. She saw something like afterimages superimposed on each other. Some

looked like human figures, while others were meaningless spirals. Also, something like a glowing pale light ran along the buildings. If an enemy was hiding here, she wouldn't be able to spot them. It was like her right and left eyes were seeing different images, making her feel sick enough to vomit.

"I have to find the others..."

She doubted she was the only one trapped like this. The others had to be somewhere inside this town as well. And just as she took a step forward, she suddenly looked at the wall she had her hand against. She felt like she saw a haze in the shape of a person there.

It's holding a sword...?

She couldn't sense its presence or any bloodlust. It was quite clear nothing was there. But when it seemed to swing its sword at her, Kuroka's body moved on its own.

"Ugh!"

She rolled to the ground as a sharp hiss of wind passed through where Kuroka's neck had been a moment ago.

That's no wind. It's a blade!

She immediately pushed herself up with her staff as an old gentleman's torso sprang out of the wall.

"Hmm, so you managed to dodge that?" he said. "That's this age's greatest samurai for you."

Glasya-Labolas came out of the wall as he sang her praises. He had a bladeless sword in hand—which had to be the Hex Katana.

"How do you like this city? Is it not beautiful?" he asked, taking a deep breath as if savoring the air. "Seraphs once ruled these lands. This is an imitation of their city."

"Seraphs...?"

Kuroka knew this was a name for high elves like Nephy, but nobody knew what kind of lives they'd led a thousand years ago.

“Is this your barrier?” Kuroka asked, keeping a careful eye on her surroundings.

“Indeed it is. Dark Metropolis, City of Swords—everything here is under my control.”

Kuroka shuddered.

“Then the reason I didn’t sense anything...”

“Oui. That is a feature of the City of Swords. No matter the master, it’s impossible to evade an invisible blade that cannot be sensed.”

Kuroka saw Glasya-Labolas right in front of her, but couldn’t sense anything from him. Even as he spoke, it was questionable whether he was truly there. She couldn’t evade attacks like that indefinitely.

If he goes after Mister Shax or the others...

It would be impossible for them to escape.

“That’s supposed to be the case, anyway, my lady,” Glasya-Labolas said, shrugging with a troubled look on his face. “You dodged after confirming the attack by sight, didn’t you?”

Kuroka didn’t answer. Or rather, she couldn’t answer.

Is he talking about that haze...?

She’d just happened to see something. She doubted she could repeat the feat. And yet, Glasya-Labolas nodded to himself in understanding.

“Those eyes of yours... I see, so those are the *fourth’s* eyes.”

“What are you talking about?”

She took a peek at the shortsword she’d half drawn. It reflected her face, but instead of her usual red eyes, she had silver ones like Zagan.

Silver...? What’s going on? My eyes are different...

Was this a side effect of her old wound being gouged open? No, thinking back on it, Shax had seemed rather worried about her eyes. She’d been under the impression he was worried about a bad reaction to his treatment, but perhaps this was the reason.

Glasya-Labolas stroked his mustache in contemplation, then smiled as if he'd come up with a most wonderful idea.

"Pow! My heart hasn't danced like this since my game with the Faceless King!"

Faceless King Bifrons—Kuroka had once been used like a tool in their schemes, so the name brought back abominable memories. It was said that Bifrons and Glasya-Labolas had once experimented using an entire town like their toy. The dark side of the church didn't have the full details of the event, but stories spoke of how repulsive it had been.

"I was planning to start with you, my lady, but I've changed my mind," the Lord of Murder continued in delight. He came out of the wall completely and bowed respectfully. "How about playing a little game with me?"

"A game...?"

Kuroka withstood the urge to roar at him for suggesting such nonsense.

I need to drag out this conversation...

As she was now, Kuroka couldn't dodge his next strike, so she had to buy as much time as possible to recover her stamina.

"Oui," Glasya-Labolas said, joy evident in his expression. It wasn't clear whether he saw through Kuroka's stalling or not. "I shall kill all the others one by one."

"Wha—?!"

Blood drained from Kuroka's face at his ghastly suggestion.

"My lady, you will try to stop me. If I kill them, I win. If you stop me, you win. Rather simple, no?"

"Quit screwing around!"

Enraged, Kuroka threw a knife his way, but it went right through Glasya-Labolas and stuck into the wall.

He hasn't actually stepped out of the wall...

The hazy figure of a person Kuroka had first seen seemed to be inside the wall

as it had been before.

“So you really do see it?” he said. And leaving that whisper behind, the haze started vanishing. “Come now, it’s time to raise the curtains on this fun contest.”

“Stop! Glasya-Labolas!”

She threw a second knife, but it bounced off the wall in vain.

How pathetic!

As Kuroka was now, she no longer even had the strength to get her knife to stick into the wall.

◇

“Labolas, you bastard. You’ve gone as far as using Dark Metropolis?” a young man wearing round glasses muttered to himself. The area was extremely dark, an ominous rumbling resonating in the background.

I thought Forneus didn’t have any strength left to fight...

And as he was now, he was incapable of asking others for help. That meant Zagan or the like had predicted this and had sent someone to protect him.

“No, that’s impossible...”

Without a traitor in the young man’s ranks or a prophet in theirs, it was impossible to read his movements to such a degree. Asmodeus was the most likely to betray him, but he hadn’t given her more information than necessary. He’d already confirmed that all prophets aside from Eligor, including Ipos’s Nephilim, were dead. Thus, Zagan had no reason to seek out Forneus. Or at least, that was supposed to be the case.

However, Lucia’s Nephilim was apparently in league with Zagan too. Two Silver-Eyed Kings could make the impossible possible.

“What’s the matter, Marchosias?” the man standing next to him asked. This man’s eyes were abnormally thin. He looked both young and old at the same time.

“It seems Labolas is having difficulties,” the young man answered, shaking his

head. “He’s gone as far as using a taboo.”

There was clear disgust in his voice.

“That has an ominous ring to it,” the other man replied, his expression turning grim. “What manner of sorcery is it?”

“One called Dark Metropolis. It creates a space that suits him perfectly.”

The other man cocked his head and asked, “Is that something like what sorcerers call their domain? It’s a bit of an exaggeration to label such a thing taboo.”

A sorcerer’s domain amplified the caster’s defenses and mana while weakening any intruders within the area. Any sorcerer who possessed territory naturally wielded such power. This young man wouldn’t be making such a fuss over Lord of Murder Glasya-Labolas’s Dark Metropolis if it was something so commonplace, however.

“To put it simply, it’s a barrier that turns Labolas into an entire town,” the young man explained. “Within it, he is invulnerable, can appear anywhere, and those trapped inside are weakened considerably.”

The barrier’s construction required the Sigil of the Archdemon at full throttle. However, the reason Dark Metropolis was considered taboo was because of how abominable the process of its creation was.

“Dark Metropolis requires a tremendous amount of mana and mass. Weaklings are absorbed by the process of its creation and become part of Dark Metropolis itself.”

This was the most repulsive of experiments that had been conducted by the Lord of Murder and Faceless King, requiring the sacrifice of an entire town. Here, Glasya-Labolas had put it into practical use.

“How pitiful,” the other man said. “But he’ll definitely be able to take down his target that way. I don’t see the problem.”

“That’s not like you... If he’s gone as far as using it, that means he’s been cornered to the point that he *has* to use it.”

It was foolish to be sure of his victory.

Forneus shouldn't have that much life left in him, but that makes him all the more unpredictable.

The young man looked up beyond the darkness. There was an enormous hunk of metal there. Rumbling ominously, it looked like armor. It was larger than Raziel's grand cathedral. If only there was someone to wear it.

"Batou, take care of things here," the young man said, turning on his heels. "I'm going to Labolas."

"Oh? How kind of you. Are you going to save him?"

"It's impossible to discipline Asmodeus without Labolas."

"Discipline, you say?" the other man repeated incredulously.

"There's no need to take her life. Training her so she does what we say is the definition of disciplining her, isn't it?"

"I sympathize with her a little..." the other man replied shamelessly, then opened his slit-thin eyes. "Well, that's only if we capture her, though."

His grave voice sounded like he was ready to die. He then smiled without a hint of malice in his expression.

"Despite coming up with such dreadful ideas, you're soft to the point of overprotectiveness when it comes to those close to you. You and Zagan are very alike."

"Hmph. How pitiful for Zagan."

The young man wasn't bothered by being compared to Zagan. Instead, he pushed up his round glasses and smiled with satisfaction.

"Well, I'll take care of things here," the other man said. "What do you plan on doing about how things are outside?"

Sorcerers and Angelic Knight had to be in conflict. That was how this world had been set up, but an incident had brought it all crashing down. All of the young man's solemnity vanished as he drooped his shoulders despondently.

"I have no idea... What do you think we should do?"

"Don't ask me..."

The slit-eyed man had never seen him at such a loss, not even a thousand years ago.

“W-Well, I’m pretty sure we have no choice but to leave it be,” he said, slapping the young man’s shoulder. “Either way, the plan has already reached this stage. Isn’t it actually more convenient this way?”

“I hope so...”

The young man left, and in a complete change from his earlier attitude, he looked utterly depressed.

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“I’m done, Forneus... Not that I’ve really resolved anything.”

In another part of Dark Metropolis, Shax had gotten thrown into this mysterious space alongside Forneus. There were clear and sticky bloodstains on the ground. Neither had been cut by Glasya-Labolas. Forneus had vomited the blood.

“Is that wound from using your ‘words’ against Glasya-Labolas? Oh, never mind, you don’t have to answer me.”

“Begone, Glasya-Labolas.”

Those words Forneus had spoken hadn’t come from a book and had repelled Glasya-Labolas’s first attack. Kuroka had fallen too, so if the fight had continued, someone might’ve died.

Is that the power of the Sigil of the Archdemon?

Having treated Forneus, Shax had seen it. Forneus’s seal wasn’t located on his right hand, but inside his mouth. Was it located there as a means of attack? Or did its power finally grant him the ability to communicate in fragments?

Shax had a ton of questions, but Forneus had no way of answering them. He shook his head and focused his thoughts on the present. Forneus’s power was astonishing, but the price he paid for it was steep. Having attempted to treat the wound, Shax was at a complete loss. Forneus’s throat had been physically crushed as if an enormous hand had squeezed it.

He repaired Furfur in that state?

He'd likely given himself emergency treatment, but the wound had been far beyond such measures. And yet, he'd acted like nothing was out of the ordinary. It was like his willpower had given out once Furfur had vanished from his side.

"Seems that little lady is pretty important to you."

Forneus didn't answer, but his silence spoke volumes. Even after having his wound treated, his expression remained grim.

"Don't worry. I also got separated from my partner. Besides, having you in my debt would be a huge boon, so I'll definitely find Furfur. Same goes for that Micca kid."

Even as he said those words, Shax's head was filled with thoughts of Kuroka.

Please be safe, Kurosuke...

Normally, he would believe in her even when she was facing an Archdemon, but she was far from being in perfect condition due to her old wound reopening.

Also, there's her silver eyes to consider...

Liucaon's three royal families were the Silver-Eyed King's descendants. That bloodline was particularly thick within the Adelhides. It was unclear whether being a four-ears triggered some kind of atavism or if it was particular to that girl in particular. Her blood was awakening not only to the powers of a cait sith, but even the Silver-Eyed King's.

I saw it back during the fight against Andrealphus too.

She'd crossed blades with that Archdemon—even if he was being manipulated—without taking a single step back. During that exchange, her eyes hadn't been red, but silver. Those known as the Silver-Eyed King—including Zagan—were apparently capable of perceiving the flow of mana. Zagan's ability to devour sorcery was based on this. That said, Zagan was probably the only person capable of reconstructing magic circles with such precision.

Kuroka's silver eyes probably didn't possess such power. What's more, it could just be a side effect of her old wound. That was why he hadn't told her,

and had decided to wait and see how things played out. Zagan had also agreed, so only a select few people knew about it.

Man, it's a scary thought...

The Silver-Eyed Kings had thrown themselves into battles that involved the fate of the world and had probably all lost their lives in the process. Zagan was also getting into fights where he could easily die at any moment. Shax was frightened of Kuroka being forced to join such battles. That was why he'd tried to get stronger so that he could protect her, even if only a little.

I swore to protect her. I vowed to do so right in front of the Adelhide grave. And yet, I'm failing grandly already.

If he lost Kuroka, Shax was sure to lose all purpose in his life. He was being supported by Kuroka's very existence. It was the one thing barely keeping him alive. That was exactly why he had to protect her.

First, I need to calm down.

With that thought in mind, he took a deep breath. These were the exact situations he had to remain calm in to be able to save those he could. Shax tried touching his face.

"It doesn't seem to be an illusion. That said, we weren't teleported either...meaning the town was remade?"

If so, it was a terrifying display of power. Was this the strength of a true Archdemon? Shax's telepathic sorcery wasn't working anymore either. It was likely being obstructed by this barrier. He couldn't contact Kuroka, let alone Zagan all the way back in Archdemon palace.

"Hah!"

Shax tried gathering his mana and punching the ground. The stone pavement shattered, but that was it. Even that was restored in short order.

I can use sorcery, but it's remarkably weaker.

Even if there was no comparing his strength to Zagan's, any sorcerer was capable of creating a large crater in the ground with a punch. Shax had put in far more strength than what this pitiful display suggested. It seemed he was at

around a tenth of his usual power. It was questionable whether he would be able to dent the walls here.

“Seems like it’s useless to try to break it from the inside...”

It was impossible to break out of this barrier without the abnormal power of the likes of Zagan or Asmodeus.

Even if Kurosuke has the power of the Silver-Eyed Kings, it’ll still be impossible.

Zagan’s silver eyes were indispensable to his ability to devour sorcery, but they were no more than one component of the whole. His eyes simply granted him the ability to foresee the entire layout of a circuit during its construction. The truly important factor was the superhuman speed and precision with which he made calculations in his brain. Kuroka wasn’t a sorcerer, so she couldn’t even begin to replicate the feat.

Sorcerers are basically at his mercy in here.

That said, an Angelic Knight couldn’t beat the former Sword Saint either. Glasya-Labolas was king here.

Put another way, if we’re close, we might be able to use telepathy.

It was still unreliable, but better than nothing. After going over all the facts at hand, Shax groaned.

“The coordinates I prepared were also destroyed...”

Shax and Kuroka had come here to make contact with an Archdemon. There’d been no telling what could happen, so they’d prepared a magic circle for teleportation.

The boss is awfully overprotective.

Shax was an Archdemon’s subject. He was more than ready to take on a dangerous mission, but Zagan was so generous in providing insurance that it was hard to believe he was an Archdemon. If anything happened, Zagan was sure to come flying over before any reinforcements. This wasn’t a sign of distrust, however, which was why nobody ever thought of leaving his service after joining up.

The magic circle had been set inside the inn in Aristocrates, but given the

state of things, it was likely gone now.

Barbatos can teleport without needing coordinates like that, but he's a monster.

Even now, Shax believed his Sigil should've gone to Barbatos. However, the flow of events had brought it to Shax instead, so he had a responsibility to fulfill. To protect Kuroka...no, to be able to stand by her side, he had to get stronger. Shax shook off his stray thoughts and got back to the problem in front of him.

The closest coordinates we prepared are pretty far from town.

Their regular communications had been cut off, so Zagan was sure to take action. However, it was still going to take him some time to get here. Was it possible for everyone to survive that long?

No, I can't be pessimistic. I have to fight. I have to defeat him. After that, I'll take Kuroka and go home.

Just as he motivated himself and stood up...something whistled right past his eyes.

Huh...? Something in the wall...

Identifying it by instinct, Shax screamed.

"Get away from the wall, Forneus!"

Shax kicked Forneus away on the spur of the moment and jumped away from the wall.

"Hmmm? To think I'd be evaded twice."

Glasya-Labolas came out of the wall where Shax had just been. Shax broke into a cold sweat.

If I didn't stand up by coincidence, I would've lost my head.

Even without Kuroka's expert senses, he could tell Glasya-Labolas was undetectable. The old man had his cane tucked under his arm and started clapping.

"I'm starting to lose confidence after having my blade dodged twice within

this City of Swords.”

In contrast to what he was saying, he was in terrific spirits. In fact, he looked positively ecstatic.

I didn’t dodge it. Kurosuke protected me.

Kuroka herself was very unlucky, but cait siths were fairies who brought good luck. He was often protected by strange coincidences whenever she was around. It was as if Kuroka were yielding all of her good fortune to him.

“You seem awfully happy about that,” Shax said, keeping up his guard.

“Forgive me. It’s my first time feeling such a tingling on my skin in the five hundred years since I’ve become an Archdemon. I suppose the last time was when I was on active duty.”

“Active duty...? Oh, about you being a former Sword Saint?”

“Oui. It’s been so long that I’ve forgotten I’m a swordsman. I can’t help but feel excitement when fighting strong opponents.”

What this man truly loved was murder. It didn’t matter whether his opponent was weak or strong. What was most important to his excitement was the act of killing itself.

“Sorry, I can’t sympathize with you there,” Shax said, smiling bitterly. “I’m a weak coward. I’m dying to turn tail and run, but I can’t do that, so I’m stuck here fighting.”

“Non. That is a lie,” Glasya-Labolas said, smiling as if he found this endlessly endearing. “A true coward wouldn’t fight in this situation. Look, you even have a sacrifice right behind you that you can abandon.”

Shax shrugged, then raised his fists.

“You know what they say about cornered rats,” he said. “You’ve gotta be careful when you drive a coward to the end of his rope.”

“Oui. There is nothing more terrifying than a man like you.”

The Lord of Murder bowed respectfully, then drew his invisible sword.

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“Master...lost again? Location unknown.”

Micca didn’t know what to say as he watched the girl droop her shoulders. After all, he’d believed she was just a lost girl, but she was actually an outrageous former Archdemon candidate—and not even human at that. When she cocked her head, he could hear some kind of creaking. He’d heard the sound several times while in her company, but he’d assumed it to be part of the hustle and bustle of town. She must’ve been the one making them this entire time.

I’m scared...

Just one year ago, Micca had been no more than a regular civilian who’d earned small change by carrying boxes. If he hadn’t been chosen by a Sacred Sword, he would probably still be doing that to support his family.

He wasn’t suited to swinging a sword around and there was no way he could fight an Archdemon. And yet, he found himself trapped in this inexplicable space. It was an unfamiliar city. Micca trembled at the thought when something warm suddenly enveloped him.

“Huh...?”

His brain couldn’t immediately process that the girl was hugging him. Her chest was hard. Beneath her soft clothing was a body made of something akin to porcelain. No matter how elaborate her design was, it emphasized the fact that she was a puppet. And yet...

She’s so warm...

Where did that warmth come from? She wasn’t breathing and he couldn’t sense a pulse from her. Despite all that, she emitted warmth. Even though she had the body of a puppet, he felt like she was alive.

For some reason, that fact brought tears to his eyes. He must’ve been so little the last time someone hugged him like this—back when his father was still alive. She was a puppet, but this warmth reminded him of his mother. Micca wrapped his arms around her back and cried without a care for appearances.

“Have you calmed down?” she asked after a while, stroking Micca’s head.

Why is she being so kind to me?

“Why are you trying to help me?” Micca asked somewhat belatedly, trying to hide his tears.

She was supposed to be protecting that Archdemon called Forneus. And yet, the moment Glasya-Labolas had activated this barrier, she’d grabbed Micca’s hand instead.

“I received your help,” she said, cocking her head curiously. “So this time...I’m helping you.”

Those were the same words she’d said earlier. Micca was ashamed of himself.

She hasn’t changed at all.

She hadn’t lied about anything. From the moment he’d found her lost in town, she’d remained exactly the same. Micca had gotten frightened of her due to his own selfish preconceptions.

“Sorry...” he said. “Even though you’re just trying to help me...”

“You haven’t done anything wrong.”

She showed no signs of being offended. Micca wiped away his tears and finally raised his head.

“U-Um, I’m called Micca. Can you tell me your name?”

“Yes. I’m Furfur.”

“Furfur...” Micca smiled. “It’s a cute name.”

“Is it?”

The girl—Furfur—looked perplexed. Her violet eyes wandered aimlessly. That gesture was exactly that of a cute girl. However, Micca also detected anxiety within it.

“I-I’m fine now,” he told her. “You want to go save your master, right?”

Furfur shook her head and replied, “Even if I go...I can’t protect him. I was defeated...completely. In this space, my power...has declined even further. I’ll just be...in the way. Master...will be forced to act recklessly.”

After Furfur's defeat, her master had done something. That had been enough to get Glasya-Labolas to withdraw temporarily, but it seemed to have placed a burden on Forneus's body. If Furfur went to help him now, the same thing would happen. That was why she was sitting still right here.

I'm so lame...

She was so desperate to do something, yet was being so kind to Micca and trying to protect him. In response, Micca had only felt fear toward her and hadn't even seen her as being alive.

Is there anything I can do?

Now that he thought about it, nobody had asked him to fight. On the contrary, he'd been offered protection.

But those people have to have their hands full just trying to protect themselves.

He didn't know anything about sorcery, but he at least understood they were all sealed within an abnormal space. He couldn't just sit back and allow others to protect him.

"People have things they're good and bad at, Micca. You can just get better at what you're suited for."

That was what Stella Diekmeyer had told him. He had no talent for swordsmanship, but he decided to believe in her words. It wasn't like he could accomplish much either way. He shot a glance at the Sacred Sword on his back. Even if he swung it around, he wasn't going to so much as scratch that terrifying Archdemon. Just watching the short exchange he'd had with Furfur had been enough for Micca to see that the Archdemon was on an entirely different level.

Besides, because I did something without being asked, I ended up hurting that tabaxi girl.

The power of purification within Micca's Sacred Sword manifested as sound. Sound was invisible to the naked eye and it was impossible to focus it on a single target. He could give it directionality, but that only strengthened and weakened its effects on those around him. At the very least, everyone would still be affected. That was why Kuroka had taken a stray hit.

“Oh.”

After thinking it over, Micca realized something.

Just maybe...there’s something I can do too.

“Say, Furfur. I don’t know much about sorcery, but if we beat up that Glasya-Labolas guy, will we be able to break out of here?”

“It is very likely.”

Her answer gave him a surge of confidence.

“Furfur, can you lend me a hand?”

“What for?” she asked, cocking her head again.

“The two of us are gonna beat up the bad guy,” he answered, somehow managing a smile.

It was best to be careful when cornering a coward. Archdemon Shax had been the one to speak those words, but nobody had realized that the true coward was now baring his fangs.

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“I’m not holding anything back against you—Void.”

Shax started with his trump card right off the bat. All color vanished from the world. The old gentleman stopped moving, an insane smile plastered on his face, and even all sound stopped transmitting. This was acceleration to the point where it seemed like time had stopped. It was the exact opposite of Night Curtain, which stopped another’s senses.

I can probably only do this for an instant.

Within the City of Swords, this only bought Shax the time to throw a single punch. However, an Archdemon’s punch was enough to deliver certain death. Shax shattered the stone pavement with his step and charged straight for Glasya-Labolas. He reeled back his fist and wove the Archdemon’s Fist, sorcery that imitated Zagan’s punch. He put all his weight behind a blow that was faster than lightning.

Got ’em.

Sure enough, Shax's punch pierced the old man's face unerringly.

"What?!"

However, Shax raised his voice in bewilderment. Even weakened, the strike had been strong enough to atomize a human skull. And yet, he hadn't felt anything as his fist went through Glasya-Labolas's head.

Time began moving again. Color returned to the world. The shattered pavement caved in with a thundering boom. Shax somehow kept himself from tumbling over after putting all his weight into a missed punch.

Glasya-Labolas was standing right there, but wasn't actually there.

"An illusion?!"

"Indeed."

Shax heard the voice from behind him, but couldn't sense anything there.

"Void—the secret art of the one and only Sword God Andrealphus. So you really have inherited it. If you hadn't, it wouldn't even have been a fight against such a great man."

He predicted this.

Shax felt something cold run down his back. Glasya-Labolas had known this would happen and already had a countermeasure in place.

"Guh!"

"Too slow."

Shax spun to face Glasya-Labolas, but an invisible blade passed through him. He felt no pain, but experienced the sensation of something running into his body from his shoulder to his waist.

"Huh...?"

By the time he raised a stupefied voice, blood burst from his chest like a fountain.

"That's one down."

Shax saw it as he collapsed to the ground. Glasya-Labolas wasn't there.

Instead, only a bladeless hilt floated in the air.

No, that slash wasn't so soft that it could come from a sword being manipulated by telekinesis.

Even though he couldn't see the man, Glasya-Labolas was definitely gripping the sword. As Shax's consciousness faded, he pawed at the air with his remaining hand. He wasn't going to accomplish anything with this gesture. It was a futile show of resistance. However, that futile act split the spraying curtain of blood into five sections.

"Hm?!"

The bladeless sword took to the air to block.

"Gaaaaaaaaargh!"

And this time, Glasya-Labolas screamed in agony. The old man's right arm tumbled to the ground with a wet thud. Next to it, Glasya-Labolas fell to his knees. It seemed the damage had unveiled his presence.

"Hah... Guess I hit you this time," Shax said, smiling feebly.

"Ugh... To think I would be cut down within the City of Swords!"

Glasya-Labolas looked up at the sky. There were hundreds of threads stretched overhead, thin enough to only be visible because of the sprays of blood that had colored them. They were impossible to perceive without touching them.

"Don't tell me..." Glasya-Labolas said, his eyes shooting open. "These are Shere Khan's Puppet Threads?"

"He was...my teacher and all..." Shax answered between rasping breaths.

I hate the power Shere Khan gave me.

It had been used to destroy the Adelhide village, after all. That was why Shax had avoided ever using it.

But that's not gonna fly now.

"So, I'm gonna have you get strong enough to beat me on your own."

That was the trial Andrealphus had imposed on Shax upon his ascendance to

the seat of an Archdemon—to defeat Andrealphus in three days. Up until the trial had started, Shax had optimistically been under the impression it had been an exaggerated declaration to light a fire under him. Andrealphus hadn't been exaggerated whatsoever, however. Shax had had multiple brushes with death. Andrealphus had seriously tried to kill him. That was when a choice had loomed over Shax. Continue spouting pretty words and die, or greedily grasp for life even if it meant committing more sins.

All I've ever done is avert my eyes from my sins.

He hadn't had the courage to face his own powers—the proof of his sins. He'd needed the determination to do so. He'd needed the resolve to survive even if he had to commit more evil acts.

Shax had been bestowed the status of an Archdemon, but he believed it to be beyond him. It would be negligent if he didn't put up more of a desperate struggle than any other. He wasn't alone anymore. His own failures would lead directly to burdening Kuroka. That was why Shax had decided to accept his repulsive power. And in this hopeless situation, it had led to a retaliatory strike against Glasya-Labolas.

"Kuroka's not so weak...that she'll lose to someone missing his dominant arm."

Trading his life for the Lord of Murder's dominant arm wasn't a bad trade. However, Glasya-Labolas rose to his feet emotionlessly and swung his right stump, regenerating his arm instantly.

"It is impossible to kill me within this City of Swords," he said. "No matter what wound I suffer, it is restored in an instant."

Despair colored Shax's features.

"No...way..."

As Shax's consciousness faded, Glasya-Labolas ruthlessly swung his sword. Leaving behind a clear metallic ring as it left its scabbard, the Hex Katana flashed through the air...but didn't strike Shax's body.

"Exactly how long do you plan to keep up that farce?" Glasya-Labolas asked.

“Aw, man... I put a lotta effort into this. Can’t you at least get full of yourself and slip up?”

Shax, who was supposed to have been bisected, jumped to his feet like nothing had happened.

“Non. I already told you that men like you are terrifying.”

He paused, taking a closer look at Shax’s body.

“What mechanism makes such regeneration possible within this City of Swords?”

Glasya-Labolas’s strike had been lethal. Within this barrier, where all sorcery was weakened, such a wound couldn’t be healed. Shax pulled down his collar and exposed the scar. A cut remained there, stitched together by countless threads.

“Unbelievable. You stitched every last cell and nerve together using Puppet Threads in an instant?!”

“I’ve always been a doctor first and foremost.”

He’d gotten the hint for this trick from Zagan’s Heaven’s Scale Prayer’s Shell. He used Puppet Threads to rearrange his biology back into its original state. What was required for such a feat was precision, not mana.

But I’m just being held together. I haven’t recovered or anything.

Normally, his body would regenerate, but the healing portion of his sorcery was clearly weakened. In other words, he was still alive, but the pain remained.

“All right, then,” he said, sweat running down his brow. “You’re gonna keep playing with me here. I can’t let you fight Kuroka as she is right now.”

Hundreds of threads stretched from Shax’s fingers. These had been set up all over the area to protect Shax and Forneus from the very beginning. This was the reason Glasya-Labolas hadn’t been able to approach during the attack in the tavern.

No matter where he attacks from, if he touches a single thread, I should’ve been able to locate him.

Before even needing to consider that, touching a thread was enough to lop off a limb with ease. Nevertheless, Glasya-Labolas had suddenly appeared behind Shax without touching a single thread.

"I thought this City of Swords was some kinda barrier at first," Shax said, taking all that into consideration. "Looks like I was wrong. We've been swallowed into your belly."

The City of Swords was the Lord of Murder himself. This entire ancient town had become a part of Glasya-Labolas. That was why it was impossible to sense his presence. Everything from the ground beneath their feet, to the building around them, and even the sky itself was Glasya-Labolas.

"Ready, then? Let's roll."

Shax swung his arm. The threads attached to his fingers served as countless blades.

What I need isn't mana, but precision.

Each thread was a thousand times thinner than a silk strand and possessed the sturdiness of a boulder. Entangling a target was all it took to bisect it.

"Ugh!"

The old man's body was torn to shreds, but he regenerated in an instant. What stood before Shax was a tiny fragment that existed only to swing a sword. The other day, Zagan had fought a demon called Samyaza. Its body had been made up of ten thousand demons, so no matter how much Zagan pummeled those small fragments, he hadn't been able to deal a real blow to Samyaza itself. The same applied here. So long as the entire City of Swords remained, it was impossible to deal a blow to Glasya-Labolas.

Naturally, an invisible counterattack came from the Hex Katana. Glasya-Labolas vanished into the ground, and before Shax knew it, he'd appeared behind him and slashed at his waist. On the return stroke, Glasya-Labolas took his right arm, then finished with a merciless cut from his shoulder to his groin. All three slashes had seemed simultaneous to Shax's senses.

Ha ha, how the hell am I supposed to dodge that?

Kuroka was a master, but Shax was just a doctor—even if his body was strengthened. He didn't possess the instincts or the reflexes necessary to dodge an invisible sword.

"Looks like I can at least divert one in three."

Shax should've been carved three times, but he only had two wounds—one across his waist and one on his right arm. One of the Puppet Threads he'd deployed defensively had slightly diverted a single slash. This was a big revelation. If he continued crossing blades with Glasya-Labolas—who could regenerate infinitely—Shax would eventually lose from attrition.

But I just have to buy time.

Given enough time, Zagan was sure to get here and shatter the City of Swords. Being able to block one in three attacks meant a third of the hundreds of blows it would take to strike him down wouldn't land.

Shax stitched up his two wounds as Glasya-Labolas's eyes shot open.

"Oooh... How magnificent!" he exclaimed in joy.

"I'm pretty confident when it comes to a contest of endurance."

Shax had lived his life like a corpse. He'd always been looking for a place to die, but had failed to pass away. So, at the very least, he'd tried being a doctor so that he could be of use to someone.

But I can't do that anymore.

At first, he'd believed it would be fine so long as Kuroka was happy. His life had finally been given a purpose: to support that girl. And yet, before he knew it, a desire had taken root within him. Kuroka was the last survivor of one of the three royal families. She had to wed someone one day and leave behind a descendant.

Yeah right. Like hell I'm gonna hand over such a fine woman to anyone else!

She was Shax's. She was his most precious treasure. He wouldn't let anyone have her, and wouldn't allow anyone to hurt her. No matter what happened, he refused to let her go. This man, who was responsible for her current condition, was particularly unforgivable. Once he admitted this, Shax found a mysteriously

endless well of strength and willpower within him.

“As I am now, I’m not gonna go down even if you cut me into minced meat.”

“I take great pride in being able to fight you here.”

Shax found himself smiling at Glasya-Labolas’s reaction.

Seems he’s a lot easier to rile up than he lets on.

The more Glasya-Labolas got engrossed in this fight, the easier it became to buy more time. This was, of course, predicated on the assumption that Zagan was coming to help, but there was no need to question that.

Shax drove in his Puppet Threads, tearing apart the Lord of Murder’s original body or clone or whatever it was. The invisible counterattacks cut Shax up in kind or were diverted by yet more threads.

“Oh? Guess I’m getting used to this.”

He’d gone from diverting one in three slashes to sometimes diverting two in three.

The thing holding that Hex Katana has to be his core.

It was like an embodiment of Glasya-Labolas’s consciousness. It was too special to be a simple fragment. If the City of Swords was Glasya-Labolas himself, he could just crush whoever was inside it. And yet, this Archdemon had gone as far as making a human-shaped fragment of himself to swing a sword. This obsession could be part of the Lord of Murder’s insanity, but it could have been one of the barrier’s limits. In other words, only this fragment was capable of “murder” within it. This far-too-convenient space could only be explained if such limitations existed.

The problem is that there’s still no way of defeating the guy...

But that would be resolved by destroying the barrier itself. In the end, drawing Glasya-Labolas’s attention was the best way of handling this.

“What a truly terrifying man,” Glasya-Labolas said. “It seems I cannot kill you right here and now.”

“You sure are flattering me.”

“I’m simply stating the truth. Inside this City of Swords, you are the only one I cannot get to back down. Why, you’ve even dragged me into a head-on confrontation that I’m forced to back away from.”

“What...?”

Shax couldn’t have imagined that such words would ever come from the Lord of Murder when his prey was right there before him.

“I’ll be prioritizing my job instead, then,” Glasya-Labolas said, suddenly withdrawing his sword and backing away.

“Crap!”

The Lord of Murder’s blade plunged into Forneus’s chest.

“Forneus!”

Shax swung his Puppet Threads, but Glasya-Labolas sank into the ground with Forneus in tow.

Dammit! He’s getting away!

Shax hadn’t believed Glasya-Labolas would keep him company until the time limit, but he also hadn’t expected Glasya-Labolas to so easily refocus his priorities.

“Hrk!”

Shax tried to give chase, but fell flat onto his face.

It’s no good. I can’t move...

How many times had he been cut? The number might have reached triple digits. No matter how superhumanly quick he’d been at sewing the wounds shut, there was no way his patchwork body would move as he desired.

“Sorry... The rest is up to you.”

A single thread stretched out from Shax’s finger. It was almost as if it were chasing Forneus.

◇

“Over there, you fiend!”

Right after arriving in Aristocrates, Shax had pulled Kuroka into a dark alley for some reason. That was when she'd sensed someone watching them. She'd been unable to catch them with her throwing knife, but she knew she hadn't been mistaken. Kuroka pondered over this as she wandered the City of Swords with the support of her staff.

If that wasn't Glasya-Labolas...

If it was *him*, then it could be their trump card within this barrier.

"Found it! Mister Shax's thread!"

A single thread was pinned to the stone pavement, stretching off into the distance. This was a signpost Shax had left for her. It was shimmering slightly so that Kuroka could see it.

He's fighting somewhere over there.

About half an hour had passed since Glasya-Labolas had declared the start of his game. In such a disadvantageous environment, it wouldn't have been strange for everyone to be dead already given that much time.

No. Mister Shax is still hanging in there.

This thread was born of Shax's mana. If he died, the supply of mana would be severed and it would vanish. The fact that it was still here was proof that he was still alive and fighting.

"Mister Shax, please, take me to your side!"

Kuroka grabbed the thread, wrapped it around her hand, and squeezed tight. Sensing her will, the thread retracted at frightening speed, carrying Kuroka away with it. The stone buildings flew by like the wind and Kuroka could see a pale haze concentrated in one point.

It was as if two human figures were buried beneath the ground. One was so fleeting it could vanish at any moment, while the other was swelling in ominous excitement. There was no need to confirm which of the two was her target.

"Glasya-Labolas!"

Kuroka drew her short sword and stabbed it into the ground.

“Gyaaaaaargh!”

She plunged her blade right into his back. Glasya-Labolas screamed and flew out of the ground. He was carrying a bloody Forneus. Forneus was pale and suffering from a horrible wound, but Kuroka could “see” that he was still alive.

As I am now, I don’t have the strength to cross blades with him.

Kuroka brandished her other shortsword and lunged for Glasya-Labolas’s neck.

“I’ll wrench off your head here and now!”

This was a vicious approach one would never expect from Liucaon’s proud samurai. Regardless, Kuroka put all her remaining strength behind that single strike.

“Ooh! Hak! Gah! D-Damn yooouuu!”

His precious Hex Katana was stuck in Forneus’s body.

“Hnnngh!”

Glasya-Labolas struggled to pull it free, but Forneus was grasping the invisible blade with his bare hands.

“Let go! Let go!”

Glasya-Labolas used his free hand to grab Kuroka and rammed the back of his skull into her face. Blood dribbled from Kuroka’s mouth and nose as her consciousness faded. Nonetheless, the strength behind her blow didn’t falter for even a second.

I can kill him!

Just one more push and she would sever his spine. And just as she was sure of her victory...

“The Flaming Devil’s Blade.”

The old gentleman pulled a cane from his breast pocket and countless blades took shape around it. They swayed like a flickering flame, forming a sword without substance. The blow came down like pouring rain—assaulting even Glasya-Labolas in the process.

Oh no...!

Even in her current state, it wasn't particularly difficult for Kuroka to evade this strike, but the same didn't apply to everyone else present.

"Forneus!"

The Archdemon was also in the flickering sword's path. Since he was using his own body to pin the Hex Katana in place, he had no means of evading it. And since Kuroka had a shortsword in each hand, she couldn't reach out for him. However, just as the strike was about to hit...

"Butterfly."

Rainbow butterflies coiled around Kuroka's body. No, that wasn't quite right. Her body had turned into butterflies and was splitting apart. The butterflies slipped past Flaming Devil's Blade and plunged into Glasya-Labolas's back.

"You'll be returning...my master."

Suddenly, a voice resounded from seemingly nowhere. Kuroka shifted her focus to see that the maid had suddenly appeared and was charging in at their shared enemy. Kuroka hadn't sensed her at all. The maid used her bladed arms to cut off Glasya-Labolas's right hand.

"Miss Furfur?"

"Lightning Flash."

Furfur's body emitted lightning for an instant. She caught the dying Forneus, then swung her bladed arm. She was so fast that even Kuroka's eyes couldn't keep up with her.

Her speed even rivals Lady Chastille's.

It appeared to be some kind of acceleration sorcery. Her blade flashed through the air like light, intercepting the Devil Blade's Flames completely.

"Amazing!"

Glasya-Labolas raised his voice in excitement. Furfur leaped backward, but she must've put everything she had behind her slashes, as she failed to land properly and tumbled to the ground with Forneus in her arms.

At least Forneus is safe now.

However, Kuroka's shortswords were slipping from her hands. Because she used Butterfly, her grip had weakened for a moment. Unable to withstand it, she was shaken off of Glasya-Labolas's back.

"Agh!"

She struck the ground and yelped pathetically. However, that wasn't the main problem at hand.

My swords!

She hadn't been able to pull the shortswords out of Glasya-Labolas's back and neck. She could only use Butterfly when she was wielding Moonless Sky. In contrast, Glasya-Labolas had lost his Hex Katana, but still had his cane—sorcerous blades once more enshrouding it.

Here he comes.

Kuroka tried to stand up, but couldn't get any strength into her limbs. And just as she resolved herself for death, Glasya-Labolas's chest burst open with a dull splash.

"Huh...?"

The monocle fell from his face. He had no idea what just happened. A glowing ashen sword was protruding from his chest.

"Howl, Haniel!"

With a comical boom, Glasya-Labolas's torso was sent flying. Two shortswords fell to the ground with a clang. Standing above them was the young Archangel. Scattered fragments of meat splashed to the ground as the remaining lower half of the mad Archdemon fell to its knees. As if to announce the end of the battle, something shattered in the air. It was the sound of the City of Swords breaking. Cracks ran across the stone buildings, pavement, and even the ominous night, and it all began crumbling in an instant.

"I did it! I beat him!"

The boy smiled and turned to Furfur. She also broke out into a smile and nodded to him. Even Forneus let out a sigh of relief. Among them, only Kuroka

saw that this still wasn't over.

"He's not done! Get away from here!"

"Huh?"

The boy turned around with a dazed expression on his face. Countless flickering blades were closing in on him. Blood spurted into the air and what had once been a boy was scattered all over the place.

"Aaaaaaaaah!"

Kuroka screamed. Furfur froze as if she had no idea what had just happened. Glasya-Labolas—who was supposed to have blown up—was once more standing before them. Blood flowed from his neck and he was gasping for breath, but the wounds he'd suffered at the boy's hands were now gone.

"Just as I thought, the boy was the most terrifying one here," the old gentleman said as he bowed, his eyes full of respect. "Sacred Sword Haniel manipulates sound. Its true value comes from being able to sever all sound. Not even I was capable of perceiving your presence until you hit me."

This was the reason Kuroka hadn't been able to sense him either. The ability to sever all sound made it impossible to detect his presence. Kuroka had once lost her sight, so she knew this very well. People perceived their surroundings by sound far more than by sight. Even people who had an excellent sense of smell were nowhere close to matching an animal in that respect. The sense of touch only worked when in contact with something. That was why there was no detecting someone approaching out of sight who was completely silent. The young Archangel's talent with a sword might have been lacking, but he'd pulled this off. Sadly, however, the first to see through this and be on guard against it had been none other than Glasya-Labolas.

That's why he was already prepared for it!

He'd likely anticipated the moment the boy would strike and had swapped places with an illusion of himself.

"Now then, can you return my Hex Katana?"

"Ugh!"

Glasya-Labolas held up his hand and the Hex Katana pulled itself out of Forneus's body. He then turned to the diced remains of the boy.

"You died in vain, but it was a wonderful strike."

"He didn't..." Kuroka groaned. "He didn't die in vain."

She picked up Moonless Sky and rose to her feet. Her knees trembled and she couldn't put any strength behind her grip. Nonetheless, she stood up.

"If he didn't come, I would've died."

She was only capable of wielding her swords now because the boy had joined the fray. Kuroka removed her hair bands and used them to fasten her swords to her hand. She took a quiet breath and exhaled until her lungs were empty. She stopped trembling. She could swing her swords now.

The last two left standing, the two Sword Saints, faced each other within the crumbling city of seraphs, each wielding two swords.

"I am the representative of the Adelhide samurai, Kuroka Adelhide. Prepare yourself."

"I, Lord of Murder Glasya-Labolas, accept your challenge."

The two swordmasters kicked off the ground at the same time. Glasya-Labolas had the advantage in terms of reach. Only he knew the length of the invisible blade or if the blade even had a fixed length to begin with.

Glasya-Labolas swung the Hex Katana in his right hand. Kuroka caught the invisible blade with the shortsword in her left.

“Sword Hunter!”

At the same time, she brought the sword in her right down on top of it.

“Mrgh!”

She failed to break the sword, but the impact sent a shock up Glasya-Labolas’s arm, stopping him for an instant. Using that opening, Kuroka stepped in, but she still wasn’t in range to strike him.

Glasya-Labolas swung the cane in his left hand. Sorcery was already enveloping it, closing in on her neck.

“Too slow!”

Kuroka bent at the knees, lowering herself almost entirely to the ground to dodge it. She then sprang up to close the distance. She moved so fast that she left an afterimage. She was finally in range to take Glasya-Labolas’s head.

“Splendid. But that’s as far as you go. Night Curtain.”

Kuroka froze mid stride. She could no longer perceive the world. As the only one permitted to move within this crumbling cityscape, Glasya-Labolas brandished his sword for the final blow.

“Farewell, my strong and beautiful lady.”

His ruthless strike severed Kuroka’s head from her body.

“Yes, farewell, you repulsive murderer.”

Rainbow butterflies coiled around Kuroka’s neck.

“What...?”

Glasya-Labolas’s eyes shot open as Kuroka’s shortsword went for his neck. Leaving behind the clanging of the ornamentation on her hilt, the old man’s

head flew off.

“I knew you would go for my head.”

That was why she’d had Butterfly prepared. Under a rain of blood, the Lord of Murder’s body finally collapsed.

“How truly wonderful.”

Before hitting the ground, his head seemed to hum those words. Thus, the curtain fell over this long, long nightmare.

Epilogue

Death is beautiful. Life shines in its last moments precisely because it has an end. No matter how benevolent a saint, how vile a villain, or how mediocre a peasant, it doesn't matter. Death comes equally to all and is a blessing worthy of love. Delivering it with one's own hands is a happiness above all others.

He'd seen all kinds of death in his six hundred years of life. It had been the best of times. The Archdemons were all beings of supreme and terrifying power, but none were as fulfilled in life as he and Naberius.

Though he hadn't been chosen by a Sacred Sword, he'd been given the title of Sword Saint. Protecting the weak—protecting life—had been his purpose. He hadn't been blessed with any children, but had had a loving wife and had enjoyed a happy and modest family.

She'd been the first life he'd plucked outside of a mission.

Thinking back on it now, the reason had been so pointless—nothing more than a factional dispute within the church. Depending on the circumstances, the title of Sword Saint could be such an unpleasant thing. She'd joined the opposing faction and had been in the perfect position to assassinate the Sword Saint. Nonetheless, he'd believed in her and had tried to talk her out of it, but had ended up killing her during the struggle.

The woman had cursed him in her dying breaths. She'd been so different from the woman he loved. In her last moments...

Oh, how repulsive. How beautiful.

She'd spent decades keeping up a beautiful exterior, but when her repulsive nature was exposed, she'd shined like never before. He'd wanted to see more and more death. That was when he'd been summoned by the church's pope—Marc, or to be specific, Marchosias.

His life since then had been truly fulfilling. He'd reaped hundreds, even thousands of lives, savoring those last moments more than any other ever had.

His final battle had been particularly enjoyable.

Tiger King Shax. The majority of his time in the City of Swords had been spent getting stalled by that man. If Shax had lost heart for even an instant, he probably could've defeated Kuroka before the City of Swords was broken.

Puppetmaster Forneus. The founder of alchemy and the oldest living Archdemon had repelled him so easily in the first bout. Had he defeated even a single opponent back then, things wouldn't have ended this way.

Thunder God Furfur. As for her...it was such a pity. He so wanted to kill her. Despite having a nonhuman body, her soul was more human than any other. It was precisely because she didn't possess human senses that Night Curtain hadn't worked on her at all.

Archangel Micca Salvarra. In contrast to his utter lack of confidence, he'd been a truly terrifying coward. In those final moments, it had been his power that had permitted Furfur's intrusion into the battle. That was precisely why his last moments had been so sweet.

And finally, the one who'd defeated Glasya-Labolas despite her faltering condition, the fourth Silver-Eyed King, Kuroka Adelhide. Her silver eyes and Moonless Sky were the only blades that could've killed him within the City of Swords. And in truth, he had been taken down by her hands.

His one regret was that he'd failed to accomplish his mission. Well, dying with regret was yet another delicacy. And just as he yielded himself to a pleasant death...

"I didn't permit you to kick the bucket. You still have a part to play in all this."

He opened his eyes to see a young man in glasses looking down at him. It seemed he'd failed to die.

"How uncouth... Death is the greatest moment granted to all living beings."

"Sorry, but I can't let you die."

The young man wiped his mouth, smearing it red. Combined with his pale face, it was clear he'd vomited blood.

"Did you rewind me?"

“Is there any other way to revive the dead?”

His head was back where it belonged. The stab wounds to his spine and back were completely gone. His Hex Katana was back in its sheath at his waist.

“I failed my mission,” Glasya-Labolas said, cracking his neck. “Am I truly worth shaving away your life?”

“You’ll prove that to me from this point onward... Besides, we did gain something from this. We’ve confirmed the fourth can be used.”

The young man coughed, his voice hoarse, then added one more thing.

“What’s more, we finished Forneus. It wasn’t a failure.”

Glasya-Labolas shrugged.

“Well, I get to continue enjoying murder, so I can’t ask for more.”

Archdemon Glasya-Labolas lived for pleasure. He wasn’t going to repent from simply having died. In fact, the thought of a rematch against such wonderful enemies had his heart aflutter.

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“An Archangel...”

Once the hustle and bustle had returned to Aristocrates, Zagan looked down at the boy on the ground. Upon reaching the city, Zagan hadn’t hesitated to destroy Glasya-Labolas’s Dark Metropolis. He’d barely made it in time. Kuroka and Shax were in tatters. Shax currently had Kuroka resting with her head on his lap while he treated her. Seeing that, Zagan had believed he’d made it in time, but...

“Micca...was...is broken...”

Holding the boy’s corpse tight in her arms, a girl muttered with a blank look on her face. Zagan’s subordinates were alive, but he’d failed to save someone. Shax had tried to revive him, so there wasn’t a single wound left on his body. He’d likely tried to restart his heart too. However, even Shax was unable to bring the dead back to life. In medical terms, even if the heart started beating again, the brain was still dead.

If I bring Nephy over right away... No, it'll be useless.

Life had completely left his body. Not even mysticism could bring him back. Still, those gathered there hadn't given up yet.

"Shax, what happened?" Zagan asked.

"Right..."

Shax went on to bitterly explain what had transpired.

"Sorry, but you'll be returning him to me."

Immediately after they settled things with Glasya-Labolas, a man appeared out of thin air. Kuroka tried to cut him down, but she no longer had the strength to fight. Dodging her with ease, the man took Glasya-Labolas's corpse away, leaving behind one last comment.

"I'll teach you something nice. That brat can still be saved. Isn't that right, Forneus?"

Then, he vanished.

Zagan turned to Forneus. He was also injured, but had received emergency treatment from Shax, so he wasn't in danger of dying.

"So you're Forneus?" Zagan asked. "Is it true that you can revive him?"

"Boss, it's useless," Shax cut in. "He's unable to convey his will to others. He's been cursed that way."

"What...?"

That made it impossible to get the means out of him. Forneus's expression was unreadable, so it wasn't clear how he took these events, but he seemed to understand what Zagan was saying.

Zagan sank into thought. An Angelic Knight had died. He wasn't Zagan's subordinate or even an acquaintance—though they had technically met in Raziel's treasury. Still, Zagan had no obligation to go out of his way to save him. Even if it was hard to come to an understanding, he couldn't ask for more than

securing Forneus.

But it looks like Kuroka wants to save him...

It was a king's duty to meet the expectations of a subject who'd worked so hard for him. The problem was finding out how it could be done. And just then...

"Micca... I still haven't...thanked you. Not for looking for Master...not for inviting me to eat...not for anything..."

A tear ran down the girl's face. Kuroka and Shax looked shocked by the sight.

"A puppet...is crying?"

That was when Zagan noticed it too.

This woman is a puppet?

Her body was that of a puppet, but mana flowed through her like any other living being.

Seeing her tears, Forneus rose to his feet. He then plopped a hand on her head and touched the boy's body.

"Turn back the hands of time, Micca Salvarra."

Zagan could sense the abnormal power behind his words.

What is that? It's almost like celestial mysticism.

As if to confirm Zagan's suspicions, the boy's body twitched. Blood returned to his face and he opened his eyes slightly.

"Micca!"

"Huh... Wah?!"

Realizing the girl was embracing him, the boy jolted upright.

"Seriously...?" Shax muttered in disbelief.

However, Zagan and Kuroka weren't focused on the boy.

"Mister Forneus!"

In exchange for breathing life into the boy, Forneus's body began crumbling away.

"Master!"

The girl raised her voice in grief, but Forneus merely smiled at her calmly and touched her cheek.

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

Zagan didn't understand the meaning behind those words, but it seemed it had gotten through to the girl. She pursed her lips tightly, then nodded. Seeing that, the great founder of alchemy turned to dust...and all he left behind was the Sigil of the Archdemon etched on the back of the girl's hand.

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 17.

The world is shaken by last volume's impactful conclusion. As that goes on, Zagan commands Shax and Kuroka to go on a honeymoon...or rather, to meet Archdemon Forneus. The weakest Archangel, Micca, is forced to get involved in things and has a fateful meeting with a girl. The one to appear before all of them is the most detestable Archdemon in the world. Will the newly formed couple get out of it alive?

Yup. That's the general gist of this story, which puts Shax and Kuroka at center stage. These two characters spin their wheels in a fluster all on their own, so they're very fun to write. But now that I think about it, despite being the only source of lewd incidents in this series, not much of that happened this time around. The ear nibbling was enough for me, I guess.

Also, I've never mentioned this before, but I love writing about nameless background characters and the protagonist's friends doing their best to fill a minor role. (Now that I think about it, Shax used to be that kind of character...)

Anyway, that being the case, I've always wanted to write about the three new Archangels that were introduced in volume 9. In this volume, I've finally gotten the chance to do one. I'm hoping to get to the other two soon.

Oh yeah, I'm the kind of author who doesn't stick strictly to the planned plot. That was particularly a problem in this volume. First, there was an unexpected connection between two characters. I won't specify what exactly, but I didn't plan for them to meet. The mood between Barbatos and Chastille has gotten good without me really noticing it, and that's been throwing me off, but these two meeting really had me wondering why I did it and whether to leave that part in or cut it. Those who know what scene I'm talking about, please grin to your heart's content.

And one more thing: Forneus. When I was plotting things out, he wasn't such

a troublesome old man, so why did things end up like that when I got around to introducing him...? His words are quotes from Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* Up until I decided that, I'm ashamed to say I was a huge bother to the editing department.

Oh yeah, and Chastille's mom. Her character was technically created a while ago, but there aren't that many scenes in Chastille's house, so she hasn't had the chance to appear. I had her ready to go, but never thought she'd be unveiled in one of the color illustrations right off the bat.

And one last thing. The anime version is progressing well. Please look forward to more news about it!

I guess that's about everything regarding this volume. Let's go over how things are with me now. I mentioned it briefly last time, but I bought a cat! It's a super cute black cat. It's kind of mischievous and has been breaking stuff, but Futaba, the manga artist for the spinoff, taught me about sofa covers and cat fences.

The cat's been growing a lot lately, so the pranks are getting less frequent, but now it's taken to climbing on my lap while I work, which honestly grants me the will to keep going.

Also, the cat jumps on my back, but its claws really hurt. Ever since the first time, it properly retracts its claws whenever doing so, so it's really smart, but still... Oh, and it's taken to my children too, so the house has become even livelier.

Now then, allow me to offer my thanks to everyone involved.

To A, my chief editor, whom I must really apologize to for being such a bother. To the illustrator, COMTA, who provided the best possible illustrations for Shax's and Kuroka's cool new outfits. To the manga artist, Hako Itagaki, who also does the storyboards for the spinoff. To the spinoff manga artist, Momo Futaba. To the editors for both manga. To everyone involved in the cover design, proofreading, publicity, and such. To my children, who got me chocolate and liquor for Father's Day. And to you, my dear readers, who are reading the book at this very moment.

Thank you very much!

June 2023: On a Night during Rainy Season When It Isn’t Raining At All

Fuminori Teshima

Bonus Short Stories

Piety and Sibling Affection Are Apparently at Odds

“Jeez, you should at least offer Lady Nephteros some tea, brother. You’re so tactless...”

“Don’t be unreasonable. I just got here... Still, I suppose I can make some tea. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m already done making it. I mean, mine tastes better, anyway.”

“You little...”

In the church’s office, Nephteros was working hard at her duties—for a number of reasons, Chastille had been forced to take a break—so in an unusual turn of events, Richard and the nun who served as an errand girl, Rachel, were arguing with each other. Seeing that Nephteros was clearly bewildered, Richard bowed to her elegantly.

“Forgive the unsightly display,” he said.

“I-It’s fine. More importantly...” Nephteros trailed off as she shook her head, her silver hair swaying behind her. “You’re siblings?”

“Huh?” Richard and Rachel uttered in unison, then exchanged looks.

“Now that I think about it, I might never have mentioned it,” Richard said. “Yes. Rachel here is my sister.”

“You see her every day and you never told her? I can’t believe you...” Rachel said. “Lady Nephteros, please forgive my foolish brother.”

“It’s not really my fault. Even when we meet at work, you never come up as part of the conversation,” Richard retorted. “If you’re going to put it like that, you’ve never mentioned our relationship either, right?”

“Do you think I’d resort to idle chatter in the middle of adhering to my faith?” Rachel replied.

Nephteros shook her head in exasperation, then timidly asked, “Umm, do the two of you maybe not get along?”

“Huh? No, that isn’t really the case,” Richard told her.

“I think we’re pretty normal?” Rachel added.

Their little interaction right now was far from indicating that they were on bad terms.

“Do siblings often fight?” Nephteros asked curiously.

“I wouldn’t say we were fighting...” Richard said, his response reinforced by Rachel’s nods.

“That wasn’t a fight?” Nephteros asked, even more bewildered now.

“I was just giving my brother a warning,” Rachel said.

“She has no reason to warn me, but that’s about right...” Richard added.

“Is that so...?”

Well, she hadn’t gotten to the most important point yet, but this conversation was quite noteworthy for Nephteros.

“Um, do you mind if I ask you something?” she continued. “What are siblings supposed to be like...? Um, you know I have someone who’s like an older sister to me, right?”

Nephteros had very few acquaintances with siblings. The only ones she could think of were Dexia and Aristella, who were over at Zagan’s place. Unfortunately, she didn’t have much to do with them.

“Lady Nephteros, are things not going well with your sister?” Rachel asked, finding this unexpected.

“That’s not the case, but, um, it hasn’t even been a year since we met,” Nephteros said. “I’m not exactly sure how to interact with her sometimes...”

In fact, they’d been enemies at first. Or maybe it was more accurate to say that Nephteros had unilaterally made her an enemy. And yet, she’d interacted with Nephteros as if that hadn’t been the case at all. They’d at least talked things out and had come to an understanding, but that didn’t mean Nephteros

knew how to act around her.

“Nephelia is very kind,” Nephteros continued. “She treats me like a little sister and often invites me to go shopping and such. However, I have no idea how to respond to her kindness.”

Richard smiled gently and took Nephteros’s hand into his own before replying, “You should just act according to your feelings. I’m sure Lady Nephelia will respond in kind. That is what it means to be siblings.”

“Is that so...?”

His words and the warmth of his hands brought her relief. Nephteros’s expression softened, and for some reason, Rachel staggered. This kind of spasm was a regular occurrence, but Rachel’s expression seemed to imply she was agonizing over some kind of internal discord.

“Gah... Is it truly all right to show faith in this...?”

“What’s wrong, Rachel?” Nephteros asked.

“D-Don’t worry about it!” Rachel shouted. “My mind is just rejecting the idea that a relative is mixed in among an object of faith!”

“I...see?”

Nephteros had no idea what she was saying, but she decided to leave it at that all the same. Rachel eventually settled down, took a small breath, and faced the two once more.

“Phew... Brother, that’s not what Lady Nephteros is asking,” she said.

“Hm? What do you mean?” Richard asked.

“Lady Nephteros, how do you refer to your older sister?”

“Um, Nephelia...? By her name,” Nephteros answered.

“Then how about calling her ‘sis’ every now and then?” Rachel suggested. “I’m sure she’ll be delighted.”

She had a point. Nephteros often called Zagan “big bro,” but never referred to Nephelia in such a manner.

“Ah...! W-Will she?” Nephteros asked.

“Yes. My brother here gets depressed if I don’t refer to him as such,” Rachel added, puffing her chest out in pride.

“Uhhh, no I don’t,” Richard said with a sour face.

This was an expression he would normally never show to Nephteros. It was such a fresh sight.

“Thank you, Rachel,” Nephteros said with a smile. “I’ll try it next time I see her... And here, a handkerchief.”

“I’m glad to be of assistance.”

In contrast to Rachel’s dignified tone, a line of blood ran down from her nose. Nephteros then stared up at Richard.

“Hm...? Is something the matter?” he asked.

“Richard, you’re rather different when you speak to Rachel.”

She felt like this was the first time she’d seen him be so frank.

So Richard can be like that sometimes too.

In front of Nephteros, he was always a perfect gentleman, but every now and then, he sometimes acted like...a normal person? Or like any youngster on the city streets? Nephteros couldn’t really find the right words for it.

“I can make a distinction between public and private matters,” Richard said with his usual gentlemanly smile.

Nephteros didn’t mean to criticize his answer, but she found herself puffing out her cheeks.

“And which am I...?” she asked teasingly without thinking about it.

“Erk...”

Unable to bear it, Richard covered his face. However, being able to read the room in these situations was part of what made him Richard. He eventually lowered his hands, gathered his resolve, and brought his face closer to Nephteros’s ear.

“I already consider you family, Nephteros.”

“Augh...”

Nephteros knew that her face was red all the way to the tips of her ears. Richard found this embarrassing too and immediately tried to back off in a fluster, but Nephteros clung to him tightly and pressed her head against his chest.

“Thank you...” she said. “That makes me so happy, Richard.”

“Likewise...”

Rachel had collapsed in a pool of blood at their feet, but in a final display of willpower, she’d done so without making a single sound.

An Encounter at the Church

“Uhhh, oh yeah, I have something to do!”

After bumping into someone at the church’s headquarters, Lisette didn’t hesitate to turn on her heels.

“Wait a minute, Lisette.”

Called to a stop before she could run away, Lisette reluctantly turned to face the boy.

“What?” she asked bitterly.

“Have you been getting involved in something bad lately?” he asked.

Lisette had, in fact, stuck her nose into something shady.

“I-I’m not doing anything that would bother my sister,” she answered hesitantly with a stiff expression.

Ginias let out a slight sigh and continued, “Hmm. I suppose it doesn’t matter if you don’t want to tell me.”

With that, he unclasped the Sacred Sword from his back.

“Um, hang on...?”

Lisette was currently involved with something that wasn’t particularly praiseworthy from the church’s perspective. Just maybe...or with all certainty,

he was somebody they'd try to eliminate. Still, she didn't believe this warranted drawing a weapon on her. Lisette was completely bewildered by his behavior.

"Be sure not to move," Ginias said coldly.

He then swung his sword without hesitation.

"Eep... Huh?"

Ginias had slashed behind Lisette—where there was nothing to cut. She felt like she saw a black haze vanishing.

"Uhhh...? What did you cut?" she asked.

"I don't know. I sensed something like a curse. 'Something' without any substance."

It seemed he'd saved her from being possessed.

"Ummm...thank you. But why save me? I've been avoiding you."

"Hm? Do I need a reason to save someone?" Ginias asked as he sheathed his sword, a confused look on his face as if he'd never even questioned the matter.

What're you acting cool for?

Lisette found herself putting a hand to her chest, when suddenly, despite being indoors, a wind blew by her legs. Even though it was just for an instant, it was enough to reveal the silk hidden beneath her short skirt. She panicked and hastily pressed her skirt back down, but...

"D-Did you see...?"

"I-I-I-I-I didn't see anything!" Ginias roared, shaking his head vigorously, his face bright right. "S-Sorry."

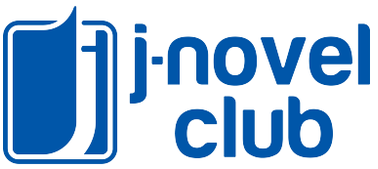
"Wh-Whatever. Not like there's anything worth looking at..."

"No, that's not true."

"Huh?"

"Hm?"

Such were the events on a certain day at the end of spring.



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An Archdemon’s Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride: Volume 17

by Fuminori Teshima

Translated by Hikoki Edited by DxS

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