

The Greatest Demon Lord IS REBORN AS A TYPICAL NOBODY

Advent of the
Greatest Demon Lord

10

Final

Myojin Katou

Illustration by
Sao Mizuno



“I won’t falter
anymore.”

“To give our friends
the push they need to
take them to the future...”

“I offer
everything
of myself...”

“As fuel, to
burn dry.”

Ard

The ex-Demon Lord Varvatos, reincarnated three thousand years in the future. He and his friends meet the ultimate Evil God Mephisto in battle.

Rogue

A version of Ard from another world. He fought Ard and his friends when they traveled back in time. He joined the perilous fight to help Ard take on the Evil God.

The Greatest Demon Lord IS REBORN AS A TYPICAL NOBODY

10

Advent of the
Greatest Demon Lord



Lydia

The legendary hero who fought
side by side with the Demon Lord
in ancient times. In a dimension
filled with mystery, she and Ard
have seemingly been reunited...

“Lydia. Marry me.”

“C'mon...I think
it's time to stop
hating yourself.”



“Let’s do this, Ard.”

“Yeah. Let’s win this, Ireena.”

Ireena

Ard’s childhood companion and one and only best friend. A great support to Ard, she has fought alongside him countless times.

The Greatest Demon Lord IS REBORN AS A TYPICAL NOBODY

Advent of the
Greatest Demon Lord

10

Myojin Katou

Illustration by Sao Mizuno



Copyright

The Greatest Demon Lord Is Reborn as a Typical Nobody, Vol. 10

Myojin Katou

Translation by Sarah Moon

Cover art by Sao Mizuno

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

SHIJOU SAIKYOU NO DAIMAOU, MURABITO A NI TENSEI SURU Vol. 10
DAIMAOU KOURIN

©Myojin Katou, Sao Mizuno 2022

First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2024 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com

facebook.com/yenpress

twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: June 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Jordan Blanco Designed by Yen Press Design:
Lilliana Checo Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Katou, Myojin, author. | Mizuno, Sao, illustrator. | Lange, Jessica, translator. | Akimoto, Noboru, translator. | Moon, Sarah, translator.

Title: The greatest demon lord is reborn as a typical nobody / Myojin Katou ; illustration by Sao Mizuno ; v. 1–7 translation by Jessica Lange. v. 8 translation by Noboru Akimoto. v. 9–10 translation by Sarah Moon.

Other titles: Shijou saikyou no daimaou, murabito a ni tensei suru. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2019.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019032131 | ISBN 9781975305680 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975305703 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975312749 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975312763 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975315023 (v. 5 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975316501 (v. 6 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975325398 (v. 6.5 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975334314 (v. 7 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975342005 (v. 8 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975370138 (v. 9 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975370152 (v. 10 ; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Demonology—Fiction. | Reincarnation—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.K3726 Gr 2019 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019032131>

ISBNs: 978-1-97537015-2 (paperback) 978-1-9753-7016-9 (ebook)

E3-20240523-JV-NF-ORI

CONTENTS

The Greatest Demon Lord Is Reborn as a Typical Nobody Myojin Katou
Illustration by Sao Mizuno [Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[INTERLUDE](#) [The True God and the Evil God's Resignation](#)

[CHAPTER 112](#) [Intersection of the Ex-Demon Lord and the Scholar God](#)

[INTERLUDE](#) [Her Journey](#)

[CHAPTER 113](#) [The Ex-Demon Lord and the Scholar God's Lamentations \(Part I\)](#)

[CHAPTER 114](#) [The Ex-Demon Lord and the Scholar God's Lamentations \(Part II\)](#)

[CHAPTER 115](#) [The Ex-Demon Lord and the Next Move](#)

[INTERLUDE](#) [The Bitter Boy Won't Take the Outstretched Hand](#)

[CHAPTER 116](#) [The Ex-Nobody's Plan to Rescue the Current Nobody](#)

[CHAPTER 117](#) [The Ex-Demon Lord and What His Self-Sacrifice Bought](#)

[CHAPTER 118](#) [The Ex-Nobody Renews His Vow](#)

[CHAPTER 119](#) [The Ex-Nobody and the Mayhem Before the Final Battle](#)

[CHAPTER 120](#) [Fight with the Evil God *Pre-Battle*](#)

[CHAPTER 121](#) [Resolutions and Disappearance](#)

[THE FINAL CHAPTER](#) [A Typical Nobody Is Reborn as the Greatest Demon Lord](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

INTERLUDE

The True God and the Evil God's Resignation

The flow of time is slightly upstream.

Alvarto Egzex stood beside Lizer Bellphoenix. By colluding with the former Demon Lord, the pair had transformed the world.

Ard Meteor and his allies floundered in the center of the vortex.

The Evil God Mephisto stood alone, observing.

The monster, once free to go where he pleased and sow chaos in his wake, had been confined to a single mountain range after his defeat during the final battle in the ancient era.

His prison was an eternal dungeon forged by the Demon Lord. Within, Mephisto would taste endless anguish until his very soul collapsed. At least, that's how the story was supposed to go.

“Gee, Lizer, that was awfully lazy of you. Did you think a little magic seal would be enough to finish this? I wouldn’t underestimate my sweetheart’s powers if I were you.”

There wasn’t a hint of displeasure on Mephisto’s face as he sat confined in the stone room. He’d remodeled what should have been a revolting dungeon cell into a cozy living space.

All the spells Varvatos had cast to inflict pain upon the devil had been casually undone by Mephisto because he found them kind of annoying.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ooh, I just *love* the way Sylphy fights! So much funnier than any dumb comedy show! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Mephisto lay on the sofa, munching on snacks while spectating through the giant mirror he had summoned with vista magic. The tableau was reminiscent of a middle-aged woman gleefully indulging in an awards show.

"This episode's just as good as the last one! But...I still can't give it a perfect score."

I could have done better, Mephisto thought.

He sighed melodramatically. "I wanna go outside!"

He was more than capable of resisting the *Torture* spells meant to bind and torment him. However, the means of breaking the *Sealing* spell—the final barrier—still eluded him.

"Ugh, I sure messed up big time. I should've made a contingency plan so I wouldn't be stuck here."

Despite the devil's upset tone, there was a brightness in his voice. And that was because he believed in himself.

Leaving his cell was impossible, a dream that couldn't be granted. However, if he had faith in himself and worked hard, he'd reach his goal someday.

While he mused on that optimistic idea...

"Your wish...shall be granted indirectly."

...a second voice echoed from somewhere in the cell.

The moment he heard it, Mephisto narrowed one eye. "Wow...these plot twists are so extreme."

His words quavered slightly. Mephisto turned his gaze from the giant mirror to the intruder.

The blue-haired boy was dressed in white. He ignored Mephisto's remark, preferring to continue from where he'd left off. "In the near future...Lizer Bellphoenix will come here...to use you...as a last resort..."

"Ohhh. Well, if you say so, then it must be true." Any who knew Mephisto would've recognized that he seemed very out of character in that moment. "So...what do you want with me?"

He was nervous. The Evil God was clearly nervous. The feeling was perfectly understandable. After all, he was in the presence of the *True God*. The one who'd once trapped him in solitude.

"So, why are you here?" he asked, face contorting into a sneer. "I highly doubt you came all this way just to give me a forecast of the distant future."

The boy in white answered the question with utter lifelessness. "To us...you are a special existence... The only one who was able to change a predestined outcome.... That is why...we have decided...to give you...the power of...choice."

"The power of choice?"

The boy nodded lightly. "In the near future, Lizer Bellphoenix...will come here... You will be freed, albeit indirectly... And then, after many twists and turns...it will come...to an end. *The story will end for good.*"

The boy's prophecy brooked no disagreement and left Mephisto in a speechless daze.

The white-clad boy answered the devil's silence by continuing, "After this battle...our kind will observe this world...no longer. We will weave the threads of fate...no more. We will create new creatures...nevermore."

Mephisto remained silent, glaring at the boy. Then he finally said, "Gee... Ironic, isn't it, that I, who spent my life forcing others to make the ultimate choice, would in the very end have to suffer at the hand of another forcing me to do just that? Now *that's* what you'd call a dooming prophecy."

A smile returned to his face. But it was not his usual aloof smile. His smile, abundant with resignation, was the smile of a weakling who had just been crushed by an unavoidable reality.

"Either we shall end the story...or you shall end the story yourself... Give us your answer with your actions."

It would seem that the god had completed his mission. The moment he closed his mouth, he vanished.

Mephisto, alone once more, clenched his fists, stared up at the ceiling, and said, "If *he* lived in the former world...or if it were you, my sweet...neither of you would choose to give up. But I..."

He closed his eyes and retraced his memories back to the end of another world.

To the end of the home where he was born and raised.

“There is no such thing as eternal play. Parents take away the toys eventually. Inevitably, the time will always come...when we must face what we don’t want to do. And that time is now.”

Mephisto made up his mind.

“My love, at least let you and I...”

CHAPTER 112

Intersection of the Ex-Demon Lord and the Scholar God

If a being of absolute power existed in this world...

...he could transcend all creation and control all other beings at will.

If such a being existed...

...could friendship ever be born between such a powerful being and the weak?

Could the bonds that took root between them ever be called genuine?

The curtain rose on the final chapter at this question.

Mephisto Yuu Phegor, my nemesis and eternal enemy. The most powerful and most malicious of the Evil Gods.

He hurled his question at me.

Mephisto had turned all my friends into enemies, and it broke my heart. He hounded and tormented me until the moment his words broke me, and I accepted defeat.

But just before I gave in, a faint burst of light flipped the situation on its head.

“Remember what you told me once? ‘Don’t insult my friends,’ you said. Well, right back at ya. You shouldn’t care what anyone else says or does, as long as the friendship in your heart is genuine. Can you seriously not understand something that simple? You moron!”

Elzard, the Frenzied King of Dragons. Long ago, we were sworn enemies who tried to kill each other, but she’d come to my rescue.

However, she wasn’t my only savior.

“Was this all part of your calculations, too, Ard Meteor?”

Alvarto Egzex. The man of unrivaled might who’d served in the Demon Lord’s

army when he was at his most powerful.

The two of them had evaded Mephisto's *Corruption* spell and joined me, and I vowed to myself that I would take down the Evil God and liberate everyone else. Along the way, we rescued Olivia, who'd been made his puppet...

...and we showed that devil. We proved to him that our bond was genuine. No matter how he tried to corrupt it, the friendship etched in our souls would never be destroyed.

And now...

...I'd just given him a second show of proof.

"Nnh... A.....Ard? Is that...you...?"

Ginny Fin de Salvan. Mephisto's spell had also corrupted her. She was sent to us as an assassin, but things didn't go according to that devil's plan. Her spirit responded to my words and the feelings within them. In the tumult of the battle, she'd regained her sanity.

"Ard...what did I do...to you?!" Ginny's eyes grew wet with tears. She was overwhelmed with intense guilt over her actions.

I rested my hands on her shoulders, and with a smile, I said, "It was all our enemy's doing. Don't blame yourself, Ginny."

"A-Ard..."

I couldn't stand to see my friend cry, especially if it was because of an enemy. Perhaps sensing this, Ginny wiped her tears and nodded.

"Well...that's one hurdle cleared," Olivia muttered, folding her arms. She wore her usual sour expression, but I sensed she was deeply relieved. Her tail peacefully swayed back and forth.

"I need to apologize to you, too, Lady Olivia. I'm so sorry for what I did!"

As Ginny rushed to get the words out, Olivia merely gave her a slight shake of her head.

"Um, Ginny? Girrlie? Where's my apology?" Elzard asked, eyes narrowed in a glare. "You kind of blasted me out of the sky. Feel any remorse for that?"

The grudge really ran deep. I felt the malice oozing from her. However, Ginny only gave Elzard a dubious look, not saying anything.

“Huh? What? Why are you looking at me like that? Want me to gouge those eyes out?”

“Leave it, lizard brain,” Alvarto interjected with a sigh. “From Ginny Salvan’s perspective, you are still an enemy. Nobody would apologize to a foe. After all you’ve done, you’d think that much would be obvious. I suppose that’s the reptilian brain for you.”

“Um, excuse me, but didn’t *you* orchestrate all of that? Disguising myself as Jessica, kidnapping Ireena, and the fight that followed—*you* told me to do all that stuff, didn’t you?”

“Certainly. But *you* were the one who did it. So you completely deserve this. Yet you’re so petty that you would try to put all the blame on me. Unfortunately, even my spelling that out for you won’t make a difference. Once a lizard, always a lizard. Explaining anything to a lizard with no concept of morality is a fool’s errand.”

“HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA! You’re dead.”

Elzard swung at Alvarto, who gracefully moved out of the way.

As the man who resembled me watched the two, he muttered softly “What a harmonious pair...seriously.”

He was Disaster Rogue. Ginny’s face filled with confusion upon seeing the man who was my exact replica. It was an understandable reaction to have, but we didn’t have time to explain it to her at length.



“Ginny, we’re in a hurry. I’ll explain everything to you on the way.”

“A-all right. That should be fine.”

Once she agreed, I called out to Elzard, who was still squabbling with Alvarto. “We’ve got to get moving again. Please return to dragon form.”

“What?! I don’t take orders from yo—!”

“Do you want to become friends with Ireena?” I interrupted.

“—ouuu...”

“Whether you do is entirely at my discretion. Take care not to forget that.”

“—Yeah, I still hate you.”

Although Elzard puffed up her face with anger, she reluctantly complied. A moment later, the beautiful girl had transformed into a dragon. This was Elzard, the Frenzied King of Dragons’ true form, and also an ultra-convenient mode of transport.

“Hey. I know you had a disrespectful thought just now.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dare.” I checked my immediate surroundings as I climbed on Elzard’s back. “Is everybody onboard?”

“You just used the phrase *onboard*, didn’t you? You said ‘onboard’! I knew it! You think I’m nothing more than a—”

“Let’s take off, Elzard! Hop to it.”

“You’ll pay for this later,” Elzard grumbled before spreading her three wings wide and soaring into the sky.

“All right, Ginny, let me bring you up to speed.”

Once we were in the air, I explained everything that had happened to Ginny. She quietly listened until I was finished, then replied, “I can’t believe it... We’re allies...with Elzard.”

Ginny’s eyes betrayed her mistrust, but a bigger part of her wanted to believe me. And I think I knew why.

“He’s...the ultimate persuader. Isn’t that right, Miss Ireena?”

It was Ginny's earnest adoration for her best friend, who wasn't with us at the moment. Ireena had played a big part in creating the bond that we all shared. That made our efforts now all the more critical.

"Let's get her back, Ard."

"Yeah. I promise we will."

After reaffirming our commitment to our friend, Ginny looked at Rogue. "With two Ards in our group, we might as well be invincible."

I'd only told her two things about Rogue. One, that he was me from another world. And two, that he'd come here to save us. Nothing I said was false, although there was a lie by omission.

Rogue had previously been our enemy.

On our summer school trip, we'd been blasted into the past by someone who called themselves a god. It was there that we had faced off against Rogue... He'd lied about his true identity back then, so Ginny and Ireena didn't know the truth.

Had I explained it to her, it would only create needless worry, so I decided to keep it private.

"I am Disaster Rogue, not Ard. Don't call me by that name ever again."

"Eep?!"

He was glaring at her with murder in his eyes. Ginny shrieked and cowered behind me.

"W-well, I suppose if the world changes...so does a person's personality..."

She clearly saw Rogue as someone to be feared, but she was wrong. We were the same person, so I understood his psychology.

He believed he no longer deserved to interact with Ginny as a friend. After failing to protect her in the past, he couldn't bear to act as though he was close with her. To Rogue, this was all a way to correct his mistake, nothing more.

That's why he made no effort to be friends with anyone, including Ginny. He put up walls to distance himself. I knew that, deep down, he wanted to enjoy

this reunion, though.

“You sure are an awkward and self-centered man...,” I told him.

“Yeah...I am. And so are you.”

We exchanged a look and bitter words and tasted each other’s self-loathing.

“You imbeciles,” Olivia said to us. As our surrogate sister, she must have felt conflicted. She looked unsure of what to say to make us feel better.

Without particular interest, Alvarto remarked, “Enough chitchat. This isn’t a field trip.” That quick statement was all it took for him to seize control of the conversation. “We’re headed toward the old capital of Kingsglaive. Our objective—the capture of Verda Al-Hazard. Her powers are essential to our mission. Right, Ard Meteor?”

I nodded. To rescue Ireena and save the world, we needed to defeat Mephisto. However, conventional means weren’t enough to damage him.

Our victory depended on two things. We already had one—the Bangle.

Its full name was the Bangle of Devouring. It was one of the items in the Armor of the Demon Lord that I’d used in the final confrontation against Mephisto in ancient times. When activated, the Bangle sapped away an enemy’s powers and made the wielder stronger in turn.

Simply put, whoever wore the bangle became invincible.

“The bangle alone isn’t enough,” Alvarto noted. “If you and Rogue fuse together, your powers will increase beyond measure. Then you can defeat Mephisto. That’s what you said, right?”

“Yes,” I confirmed. “To do what you just described, we’ll need—”

“We need Lady Verda’s powers?” Ginny concluded. I nodded, and she continued. “I like to think I have a rather firm grasp on spell crafting, but...I have no idea how one would go about fusing two people together. To be honest, I haven’t the faintest clue. So I’m not even certain it’s possible to use Lady Verda’s powers for this.”

I was confident that Verda would find a way. However, that wasn’t the issue.

"Her persona has likely been corrupted... Just like mine only a little while ago." Olivia squeezed the words out bitterly.

"Don't worry. I'll bring her back. Just like I did with you," I declared.

Olivia nodded meekly in reply.

"And how are you going to do that?" Alvarto asked. "Give us your plan."

With a smile, I replied, "I have no plan."

"Um...what?"

"I don't have a plan. Not even part of one."

While everyone else sitting on the dragon stared at me blankly, Elzard laughed powerfully. "Nice! Just the right amount of stupid for me. That's much better than standing around and racking our brains worrying."

Surprisingly, she wasn't the only one who approved.

"Hmph... You sound just as stupid as Lydia, you dumb baby brother."

Smiling, I said, "I can't deny it. I think it's about time we quit relying on our brains too much. That's what she'd do."

That's how I'd managed to rescue Olivia. Had I not held on to that fragment of wisdom, I never would've been able to bring her back.

"You've changed a little, Ard," Ginny said.

"Are you scared now that I'm an idiot?" I asked.

"No. If anything...you've become even more wonderful!" Ginny beamed.

Meanwhile, Alvarto sighed deeply from beside her. "Rogue. What do you think?"

"I'm a failure, and thus unworthy to pass judgment. However, I will say this..." Rogue looked me in the eye. "Ard Meteor, you accomplished what I couldn't. And that means your judgment must be correct."

Alvarto shrugged at the rest of the group. "I'm surrounded by damn fools."

He sounded frustrated, but nothing about his expression suggested he objected. He surely understood. In this fight, the heart mattered more than the

head. We needed to strike Verda wholeheartedly with our feelings and believe in our bonds with her. That was all we could do, and all that we should do.

“If we stupidly hit her with our feelings, Verda’s corruption won’t stand a chance,” I said.

Our hopes and feelings were woven together as one. But in the very next moment— The very object of our mission rejected that belief.

“*Um, you’re wrong. Dead wrong.*”

Verda Al-Hazard’s voice suddenly pounded in my brain. Then the next thing I knew— —beams of light sped toward us from somewhere ahead. And there were more than just a couple.

The blindingly brilliant rays raced at us with tremendous speed.

“Sorry, you missed me!” Elzard swerved hard. Up and down, left and right. She danced through the sky, dodging each hot blast as it came. And while she was able to evade, she couldn’t press forward.

Perhaps with our help, she might have been able to. However...

“Why are we wrong?”

...I was so preoccupied with Verda’s comment that I wasn’t in a place to fight back.

As we sat there, stunned, Verda’s voice came to us again.

“*My persona hasn’t been corrupted. I’m fighting you all because I want to.*”

I’d never once heard Verda speak so firmly. That was proof of her feelings, and why I felt so incredulous.

“So you’ve betrayed us?” The words spilled out of me half-consciously. And Verda’s reply was prompt.

“*That’s right. I’ve decided to be with my master. That makes us enemies now.*”

I didn’t want to believe it. And I wasn’t the only one.

“What the hell are you thinking, Verda Al-Hazard?” Alvarto demanded, voicing how we all felt.

Why had she turned on us? Nobody could make sense of it. Was this just one of Mephisto's tricks to disorient us and laugh from a distance?

The feeble hope that it was proved short-lived.

"Fine... I'll tell you why."

The torrent of light beams abruptly stopped.

"Ard, I'm sure you must have noticed many times since this latest incident began that Master is taking this awfully seriously."

"Yes...I have. It seemed strange that someone who always played around suddenly became so intense."

"Master meant every word he told you. Take, for instance, when he said that this is the farewell game. He means that literally and is acting accordingly. Master intends to close the book on his life. Not a word of that is a lie."

Verda's words left me bewildered. Mephisto was synonymous with chaos. There wasn't a bit of consistency to his actions. He was fickle. That's what made him so difficult to read in a fight.

To think that he might act in earnest, with intent and without lies, was dicey.

Was there calculation to his actions? It was impossible to determine.

"I don't blame you for not understanding. I used to think the way you do, Ard, until I heard a certain piece of news... At first, I believed he was messing around as usual, but when Master revealed the truth...I changed my mind. Master made it clear that he's dead serious now."

At last, Verda revealed the event that had set off this final battle, and her reason for betraying us.

"In the near future, a higher existence known as the Dominator will destroy the world."

Heavy silence followed her words.

It was too much to ask me to understand. And yet...

"Dominator... The word sounds familiar to me," I muttered. Glancing at Rogue, I saw he was also looking at me.

"It's a title given to gods. A faction of them are known as the *Dominators*."

The androgynous face of a child surfaced in my memory. Dominator had orchestrated our time-traveling adventure. Following our victory over Rogue, the child had appeared and said, "*I hope...we don't meet again. However...the next time...we come face-to-face...that would mean the gallery has abandoned you...and the Dominator—the one who records—will...destroy you.*"

"I see..." I whispered. "So that's what they meant. And that's why Mephisto is so serious... His heart's buried under a mountain of despair. That's why..."

"Not even Master can compare to this higher being. If he could, neither Master nor your compatriot there would have come to this world."

The Outer Ones, the beings called Evil Gods in this era, were not from this world.

They had traversed the chasm between dimensions and arrived here. And Mephisto was no different.

Why had they come to our world at all? The truth was dawning on me.

"Their world was destroyed. Master told me of it with terrible sadness.

"In that world, there was someone who could fulfill my heart's needs. Thanks to him, I was never alone. That's why I wanted to protect that world with him. But...we were completely powerless. I don't want to ever experience that again. If the same thing happens here...then I will destroy this world. I love it that much—I don't want anyone else to ruin it.'

"Master said that to me with a smile, yet he looked aggrieved. I saw no trace of his usual playful self anywhere."

"So, he's making good on that promise right now, then," Olivia replied.

Rather than let some other god destroy the world, he would do it himself.

Now I understand...all the pieces are falling into place.

Still, something felt odd. If Mephisto was really that serious, why didn't he settle things right away? Instead, he seemed to be testing us.

I don't understand...

For now, I'll have to let it go. I've got to focus on what's most important.

"Verda, I don't see a connection between what you've told us and your betrayal," I said.

To Mephisto, this battle was the true farewell game. If he won, he would destroy the world, himself included. If he lost, we would make him disappear. Why had Verda turned against us when faced with that reality?

"Ard... I was originally on Master's side. He's very important to me. Even after we parted ways, that never changed."

Sadness trailed from her words. However, it quickly evaporated.

"I think his death is unavoidable. But...the idea of him dying alone makes me just feel sorry for him."

Verda's voice grew hot, burning with passion.

"I joined you all because I knew he'd never die. Everything was nothing but a fun little diversion for him and me. But this time, it's different. It's not a game anymore."

A burning-hot battle cry came hurtling to me from the distance.

"He's going to die. Whether he wins or loses doesn't matter. He will disappear before my very eyes. So, if nothing else, I want to be with him when the end comes. I know what he's like. But..."

"...Master is the only father I've ever had."

Verda's barrage of projectiles returned, as though to declare, "This is where we part ways."

"Ack!" Elzard cried. "Hey, what's the plan, Ard Meteor?!"

This attack was more violent than the last. Elzard did her best to avoid the deadly beams, but she would be struck down if things continued much longer.

I stared at the scene before me, clenching my fists in defeat.

"We'll...retreat for now."

No one objected. We hadn't counted on this development, and it had left us shaken. We needed time to collect ourselves. Elzard must have gathered the

intent behind my decision, because she offered no complaints about my weakhearted decision and did as I said.

She flew away until we were out of Verda's range.

"We should be safe here..." Once Elzard determined the onslaught of light attacks had stopped, she began to descend. We glided over a flat plain, perfect for a landing.

Once we were on the ground, everyone exchanged glances.

"Guess that solves one mystery." Alvarto broke the silence, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "I always wondered how the spell that sealed Mephisto was broken."

I'd frequently asked myself the same question. Mephisto's prison surpassed the level of any individual. It was an ultimate *Sealing* spell; its power derived from all living beings on the planet, and from the stars as well. Not even Mephisto could break free. That he'd established any sort of connection with the outside world was already unbelievable.

And yet the seal had been undone.

"It must be the handiwork of a god," I said.

Mephisto and the god had undoubtedly formed a covenant. The god had set him free on the condition that Mephisto destroy the world.

"So that means...we'll be up against a god soon." Alvarto's tone spoke of an impending defeat. I could hardly refute his resignation. It would be a fight we couldn't win and one we couldn't afford to lose.

"For now...," I began. "Let's forget about this god and the future he's trying to bring about."

Sighing, Alvarto replied "Indeed. As it stands now, we have to deal with Mephisto first if we have hope for anything else."

When no one dissented, I continued, "The news Verda gave us was...well...a little bewildering...but it doesn't change our current objective."

We needed to defeat Mephisto and restore everyone's corrupted personas to normal. Saving the world was impossible otherwise. That much was a foregone

conclusion to all the ancient ones in our group, myself included. However...

"Um, pardon me, but are you sure finding a peaceful reconciliation is impossible?"

...Ginny had lived in an era without Mephisto. We must have seemed too aggressive.

"I mean, are you sure fighting is our only option? If I understand right, Mephisto has given in to despair because of that god's strength."

I nodded. "You're right, Ginny."

"Then what if we just convinced him that—?"

"Not happening," Alvarto angrily snapped. "Even if the impossible happened and we were successful, I'd *never* join forces with that little bastard."

Where Alvarto showed anger, Olivia remained calm. She crossed her arms and spoke evenly and firmly. "As you say, convincing Mephisto that we're right would be a considerable win for us, on the surface. It would resolve this conflict without wasting precious strength, and we'd have the strongest Evil God on our side. I couldn't ask for a more reliable ally in a battle against this Dominator."

Oliva's eyes narrowed to sharp slits. "But Mephisto is insane. There's no telling what he'll do. He'll smile and shake your hand one moment, then three seconds later, he'll kill you with that same grin. When you join forces with a madman like him, you'll get a hundred losses for every victory. You'd be better off with a venomous spider in your stomach."

Rogue and I agreed. Were Mephisto's personality even slightly less warped, winning him to our side would be best. However, at present, an alliance with him was out of the question.

"I agree," Elzard said. "I knew his deal the moment I laid eyes on him. I knew he was crazy, and not the sort molded and warped by trauma like me. He's a born psycho. Nobody can form any kind of normal relationship with that monster."

Elzard was once our enemy. She'd tried to destroy the world as Mephisto was now. However, I understood her motives and even empathized with her. That's

why we were friends now.

Mephisto was too far gone. Nobody could understand him. Nobody could empathize with him.

"Sorry for repeating it, but defeating Mephisto has to be the first step," I said.
"The issue is that we can't without Verda's help."

Ginny lowered her head. "B-but Lady Verda said—"

"Yeah. She betrayed us."

We were all quiet for a while, silenced by the harsh truth. Defeating Mephisto was impossible without Verda, and she'd allied herself with him.

Okay...what in the world are we going to do?

"It seems like...we'll have to think outside the box to win," I muttered, searching my mind for a solution...

...I heaved a long, deep sigh.

INTERLUDE

Her Journey

Had I only been born an ordinary girl to an ordinary family.

Maybe then, I would've been spared this pain.

Verda Al-Hazard was the greatest magic scholar in all of history. Possessed of a godly intellect, she had served as a military chief of the Demon Lord and as one of the Four Heavenly Kings. Her long, glittering list of achievements and prestige were known worldwide. The people acknowledged her as the greatest among the greats. However...

...she saw her abilities as a curse.

Lawrence Al-Hazard was a man on the Demon Lord Varvatos's Council of Seven. He operated as the brains of the military, conducted research as a magic scholar, and advanced civilization culturally.

He was also Verda's father.

"Doting father" described Lawrence best. Verda's divine talents blossomed under his discipline. And when her unique abilities caught Varvatos's attention, he requested that she become one of the Four Heavenly Kings. So the story went, anyway.

That was a fabrication, however.

The true story was too cruel, so a false one had been recorded in the historical records.

A friend of Lawrence's, a fellow member of the Council of Seven, compiled the fake accounts. He twisted the truth to protect his friend's honor, and the story survived to future generations.

No consideration was given for Verda's feelings.

From a young age, she stood out as unique.

She was born to a famous man and possessed extraordinary powers.

For this, she was locked away and never permitted outside, so that her father's high esteem would be preserved.

At the time, Lawrence was lauded as second to none in magic academia. He was a man of ultimate talent. Not even Varvatos outmatched him in matters of academics. When he boasted of himself, nobody faulted him for it.

Lawrence suffered none who threatened his supremacy, not even his own child.

It happened one fateful morning...

Lawrence stared at the stack of papers strewn about on the floor of his study. The irregular letters on the pages resembled worms. At a glance, he knew his daughter had written them, yet she was only half a year old. Lawrence had suspected that Verda was a rather clever girl.

Then, two years later...

"Hey, Dad, is it okay if I correct this paper?"

...his daughter, who wasn't even three, found an error in what Lawrence considered his magnum opus.

"You impudent child! What the hell do *you* know?!"

He clenched his fists and shouted at her. There were no traces of paternal love in him.

Lawrence had lain with some woman, and a baby had been born. That's all the affair had meant to him. He allowed Verda to stay in his home not because he was her father, but because he worried about what people might say about him.

Verda was not his beloved child, just a stranger. Perhaps that's why he felt so threatened by her. It was only a matter of time until the anger showed.

However, Verda was still too young to pick up on Lawrence's fragility.

"See, your thesis itself is correct, but you messed up a couple of the steps that got you there. Like this part."

If Lawrence had been able to laugh off her comment as child's play, reminding himself that she was only a toddler, he might have kept his anger in check.

Unfortunately...

"That's...impossible."

...he understood. Verda had discovered genuine errors in his greatest work, and in so doing, had demonstrated that her intellect surpassed his.

It broke him. Insanity exploded within Lawrence.

The next thing he knew, Lawrence was beating his daughter. He grabbed the golden locks she'd inherited from him and slammed her, over and over, against the ground.

"You insignificant brat! How dare you mock me?!"

She had committed the ultimate sin—she was the greater mind.

He could never forgive this transgression.

Lawrence Al-Hazard's persona was corrupt.

And when his daughter's head split open and she passed away...

"There—*huff*—now nobody—*huff*—will ever threaten me again."

...he sighed in relief. There wasn't a hint of remorse in him. If anything, he felt accomplished.

"I'm sorry, Dad...I did something wrong, didn't I?"

The daughter he'd just murdered stood in the doorway.

"Y-you...?! H-how...?!"

Lawrence had no idea what was happening.

"I made many clones and put pieces of my soul into them. Even you can do that, can't you, Dad?"

He couldn't.

Cloning was possible. Lawrence understood it perfectly.

Splitting a soul, however, was beyond him.

“Nn—ahh—oh—..... Hrahhhhhhhhh!!!”

The next thing he knew, he was killing her. A second time. A third time. A fourth time. A fifth time. No matter how many died in his hands, another appeared.

By the time he killed his thirtieth daughter, Lawrence changed tactics. If he couldn't eliminate her, then he would conceal her existence.

Maintaining his station was Lawrence's highest priority. So long as no one knew of his daughter's brilliance, he would still stand at the top. Thus, Lawrence locked her away in his home.

At the time, Verda couldn't understand why he treated her that way.

How did this happen?

I just wanted him to love me.

I only wanted my father to accept me.

But every time he sees my face, he beats me.

Every time I see my father, he kills me.

Why does he do this to me?

What did I do wrong? I don't understand.

But there's something I know for certain...

“I hate you! I wish you'd never been born!”

...this man will never love me.

Upon realizing that, I lost the will to live.

I returned the fragments of my soul into one body.

“Die! Die! Die! Die!!!”

Now it will all be over.

He trampled on my stomach. My organs burst. I bled out. I was dying.

If he will never love me...if I can never get him to love me...then there's no use in living.

I accepted my death.

However, he denied me of it.

“Now, that’s a boring way to go. For both of us.”

A new voice had spoken from nowhere, its tones smooth and elegant, like an angel’s song.

This was no angel, though. His was the voice of a devil.

“Ghhk?!”

My father’s body contorted. First his limbs. Then his torso. Then his neck.

He was being slowly punished

“*Agraaff! Ghhf!* N...no... Have mercy...”

As my father stared at me, begging for his life, the other presence spoke, his peaceful words no louder than a whisper.

“I love humans. Whether they’re good or evil is irrelevant. I love them because they make for perfect toys. And that’s why I love you, dear Lawrence. But you see...”

His angelic beauty couldn’t hide his wicked smile.

“You must die for me. Because you make me sick.”

He twisted my father.

The revolting sounds of his flesh, skin, bones, and organs straining filled the room with nauseating anguish. They crumpled to the floor disgracefully.

My father was wrung out like a cloth.

“Da...d...”

It was a traumatizing sight, yet I felt no sadness. I shed no tears.

My heart was stolen that day. I cared more for a devil than for my father’s death.

“Well, hello there, little Verda! I’m Mephisto Yuu Phegor. You can call me *Daddy Mephy* if you’re feeling extra affectionate.”

He looked down at my broken body.

“Geeee...you really are a mystery. I sense special feelings for you. This might be a first for me. Then again, I have no idea whatsoever where they’re coming from.”

His golden eyes betrayed curiosity and insanity. Neither frightened me, though, because his eyes looked just like my own when I stared at the mirror.

Surely, he thought the same thing.

“Would you like a new home, little Verda?”

“A home...? What’s a home?”

“It’s a place where you can relax. I guess you could say it’s a metaphor for a person who makes you feel that way.”

“Are you...gonna be my home?”

“No. I can’t ever be that. But I might be able to give it to you.”

Mephisto reached for me, and there was sadness in his face.

Oh, he carries grief just like I do, I thought.

I took his hand. He stood me up and said, “Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

And we began to walk.

Our route would surely take me on an evil journey, but I didn’t care.

“Oh, by the way, I just turned your mother into a new test subject for my research. Was that wrong of me?”

“Your research... Is it okay if I participate, too?”

The warmth I felt from his touch and gentle gaze filled me with peace, the first I’d known in my life.

That’s why I chose to walk with this man, even if it meant destruction in the future.

Because he was my...



“Oh... Did I fall asleep?” Verda muttered, yawning to shake off the heavy blanket of slumber.

She was in a room inside a lab located in the center of Kingsglaive, the ancient capital. The lab had become a giant fortress through which the capital could be controlled at will. It was the heart of Kingsglaive now.

“I guess doing all this alone is impossible, huh...?”

Manipulating all of Kingsglaive and everything in it was exhausting. It required expending massive amounts of magical and mental energy. The recent battle had left Verda exhausted, and she had fallen unconscious.

“The automatic operation switch is on, but still...”

One wrong move, and there might have been a hole in the defense grid that intruders could exploit. Unwilling to let that happen, Verda had given herself sole functional control.

“Some people think nightmares are a defense reaction to stress. Did you know that?” spoke a familiar voice.

“Master...”

“Hey there, my little apprentice.”

When did we start addressing each other like this?

This man is the only person I ever call my master.

And I am the only person he ever calls his apprentice.

Even now, it brings me some joy.

That's why I don't feel a bit of regret for betraying them.

At least, I didn't think I would.

“Like I said, think of nightmares as a means of diffusing stress. But nightmares can also make your bad feelings seem worse. Must be a kind of shock therapy. My, humans are so amusing.”

Verda sighed quietly at Mephisto's pontificating.

“Are you trying to tell me that I'm stressed out?”

"Um, yeah? Do I have to spell it out for you? You shouldn't ask stupid questions. It's a waste of time, and it makes you dumb."

His tone was oddly challenging. Then again, it was very true to form for Mephisto... Verda sensed something different in the way he spoke this time, though.

"Are you trying to make me angry so I'll abandon you?"

Mephisto fell silent, another rarity for him. Ordinarily, he answered any question promptly, always wearing a devilish grin.

His smile today was cynical, and he scratched his cheek. Verda thought he looked trapped.

"You never change, do you?" she said. "You grow lonely so easily, yet you push others away from you. You look aloof, even when you're happy. You clutch your stomach and laugh, even when you want to cry. You're a walking contradiction. You're so twisted that nobody can stand to be near you."

He was just like she used to be. Mephisto Yuu Phegor's persona was beyond twisted.

He did love, and that's why he wished to know what it would feel like when that love was destroyed. His curiosity would not be denied.

That's why he could only use agitating, hurtful language with others.

"You killed my friends...to drive me away, didn't you, Master?" Verda thought back to the day she left Mephisto's side and followed the Demon Lord. Her decision had been motivated by tragedy.

"My test subjects were my only friends at the time. I loved them. I meant to keep my heart shut to all but you and them. And you killed them."

At that moment, Verda had a revelation. Remaining with Mephisto meant she would lose everything. Had Verda known this the day Mephisto took her in, it wouldn't have bothered her.

But over time, she'd found a reason to live. There were other people she didn't want to see destroyed. That pushed her to leave Mephisto. She couldn't stay with him while there were people she longed to protect.

Perhaps that tragedy had been Mephisto's attempt at consideration.

"What you did that day seemed awfully roundabout for you. You never intervene with anyone unless they interest you. If you only half love somebody, you form an indirect relationship with them. It's only when you love someone fiercely that you destroy their mind and body directly. That one incident was the exception to your usual style, a reflection of your state of mind, I suppose."

Mephisto had no answer for Verda. He held his silence with an anguished smile on his face.

"Please don't treat me like a child. You're the child—and a bitter one, at that. Let your guard down and accept my friendship. I don't care what you say...I'm staying with you until the end. I have to. You're my—"

Before Verda could continue, a deep, earth-splitting rumble from an attack shook the room.

Verda gasped. She knew the ones responsible. Her conversation with Mephisto had given them the necessary opening.

"So...was this part of your plan, too?"

Mephisto shook his head. There was no telling if he was being sincere. It didn't matter.

"We'd better fight back. Our enemies are here."

Our enemies. Verda's heart ached to call them that.

Still, she rose to her feet and steeled herself to prepare a counterattack.

And as he watched Verda march out of the room, Mephisto whispered something quietly.

"Oh, how troublesome...truly."

CHAPTER 113

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Scholar God's Lamentations (Part I)

"I think it's possible to convince Verda to join us," I said, throwing a stone into the lake of silence. "The scale weighing her father against her friends is starting to shake."

"I don't suppose you have any proof?" Alvarto asked after a moment.

Olivia answered before I could. "The *Original*, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah. In the last skirmish, Verda didn't use her *Original* or activate any of her supernatural abilities."

Verda's supernatural gifts were creation and destruction. If she used her *Original*, those abilities in their ultimate form, she could have destroyed us all.

Yet she had refrained. She'd chosen not to follow the obvious route to victory.

Alvarto crossed his arms and bobbed his head in approval. "I think I understand. You believe it's a worthwhile gamble."

Now that Alvarto agreed, Olivia moved the topic to its next point. "So, how do we get to her?"

It was an obvious dilemma. Verda clearly had no intention of talking with us. Since she'd infiltrated Kingsglaive and made it her fortress, we needed to speak face-to-face for our words to have any hope of reaching her. That meant securing a path to breach the capital.

"We're already working on that issue," Alvarto said.

No sooner did he finish saying as much than someone appeared behind him, a beautiful girl in gothic attire.

It was Kalmia. Outwardly, she resembled a human, but she was actually one

of the three Great Holy Swords, and her blade name was Dilga Zervatis. Alvarto had deployed her as a scout. Always thorough, that guy.

“Kalmia—your report.”

“There are no means of entry from the sky or from on land. In one aspect, the land route appeared to be comparatively easier, but I believe it’s a bluff. She’s likely set undetectable traps.”

Alvarto’s gaze went to me. “Ard Meteor, couldn’t you use your supernatural ability to neutralize the traps?”

“I think it’s safe to assume she’s considered that and prepared some countermeasure,” I replied.

“In other words...there is no clear path forward, from the air or the ground,” Alvarto concluded. Everyone groaned dejectedly.

All except for Elzard, that is. “Okay, then, we’ll bust in by air.” She spoke as though issuing an order.

Alvarto cocked an eyebrow. “What’s your rationale?”

“It’s always evidence this, rationale that with you, isn’t it? Who gives a crap?”

“What the hell are you suggesting, alligator brain?” Alvarto massaged his temples as though beset by a headache.

Ignoring it, Elzard said, “Dragons rule the skies. I’m not gonna let it end this way. I won’t let my last move be a retreat.”

“Defending your pride is no justification for endangering the rest of us. A primitive lizard should know when to shut up.”

“No, you shut up, you piece of trash.”

“Piece...of trash?!”

“Or should I call you *useless*—does that make more sense? And it seems the three Great Holy Swords aren’t worth much, either.”

“.....Al, it’s okay if I kill this woman, right?”

“Now’s not the time. Let’s focus on what’s important.” After a heavy sigh, Alvarto looked at me. Presumably, he was saying that I would have to decide.

Everyone else seemed to agree with him.

"Hmm... Elzard, do you have the confidence and commitment to make it work?" I asked.

"I will open the way. Any complaints?"

No one said anything, meaning we had our answer. "Very well. Show me you're worthy of your reputation as the Frenzied King of Dragons."

Elzard nodded confidently, then transformed into a giant white dragon. Everyone climbed on her back.

"Okay, Elzard, time for a little payback."

"Don't make it sound like I lost, Ard Meteor."

Elzard took off. Spreading her three wings wide, the Frenzied King of Dragons soared through the great blue sky.

"We're almost within attack range. Is everybody ready?" I asked. We weren't relying solely on Elzard to get in. We all had to attack together. And I saw that everyone was ready. Their hearts were as one.

"I guess...they really were good allies, after all," Rogue whispered.

The attacks came shortly after—shining orbs and scorching-hot fragments. They flew straight at us.

"Pathetic! You can't down a dragon that easily!"

Elzard charged with a valiant roar. She pushed through the assault, ripping the atmosphere and dodging every projectile. She flew faster by the second.

"Does the word *caution* not exist in your vocabulary, you stupid gecko!"

"Hah! I don't need caution when you guys are with me!"

Her speed was proof of her trust in us. She knew that if she faltered, we'd pick up the slack.

Ginny gasped. "The Frenzied King of Dragons...trusts us..."

I nodded from beside her. "She's put all her faith in us, Ginny. Answering with anything less than our best would be an insult."

“I believe you’re right.” Ginny gripped the red magic spear she’d borrowed.

“Weapons ready. A new attack is incoming.” Olivia’s therianthropic vision saw what we couldn’t. A few seconds later, a wave of strange creatures was closing in.

They weren’t monsters but test animals Verda had modified.

“There’s a ridiculous amount of them, but it won’t be an issue,” Alvarto remarked.

“It certainly won’t, Al.” Reading her partner’s thoughts, Kalmia changed form. The beautiful girl was now a Holy Sword that shone in seven colors.

“We’re going in, Kalmia.”

“Yes, sir.”

Standing on the dragon’s back, Alvarto held his sword high and invoked the ancient chant, “*Vasq helgeqia vol nagan.*” Then he unleashed his giant attack. “*Galva quesar!*”

From his sword came a multicolored surge of destructive energy. It was an ultra-wide-range attack, large enough to cover the entire sky.

The enemy force was nearly eradicated, but hard scales protected their bodies, so a fair number remained.

“Hey, don’t hold back on me, *Adelaide*.”

“It will be hopeless if we exhaust our powers now. Get that through your dense reptilian skull.”

As Elzard and Alvarto bantered, Olivia quietly said, “I’ve got it.”

Despite her cool tone, her heart was on fire. After drawing the Holy Sword hanging at her hip, she kicked off the dragon and flew into the air.

Olivia sped through the sky like a shot.

And then—

“*Slash.*”

The giant enemy nearest to her split in two with one stroke of her sword. She

used its falling corpse as a platform to jump up and do the same to the next one. She repeated this over and over. No matter how tough the enemies were, they might as well have been paper to Olivia's sword.

She slashed, slashed, slashed, and slashed some more.

"It's over."

Once she'd cleaved the final creature in two, she jumped off its corpse and returned to us.

"Olivia vel Vine, your skills remain as keen as they ever were," Alvarto praised her.

"Oh...this was nothing."

Alvarto had made the first attack, and Olivia finished it expertly. Ginny gripped her spear as she beheld the heroism of the Four Heavenly Kings and whispered, "If nothing else, I hope I'm not a burden..."

"Don't beat yourself up... You have your own strengths."

Ginny's eyes went wide at the unexpected words of encouragement from Rogue. I was a little surprised, too, but this was no time to be distracted.

"I doubt this is the end of it," I said.

We'd vanquished the vanguard, but it was undoubtedly just the first wave. Sure enough, the next force arrived before long, twice as big as the last. That said, the enemies were too weak to be much threat to us.

We repeated our tactics from the first skirmish and cleared this second one without any trouble. The same went for the third and fourth.

"That's odd," I said. "These enemies are awfully weak, considering Verda's controlling them."

Rogue considered this for a moment. "I believe she has her hands off the reins."

Judging by the way the enemies moved, he was probably right.

"But why? It doesn't make sense," I replied.

"I don't see the logic, either. Regardless..."

“Yeah, we should take the win.”

Such weak defenses made it easy to punch through and reach Kingsglaive without an issue. However, just as it seemed things were turning in our favor...

“Nngah?!”

...Elzard’s giant body froze. It was as if she’d slammed against an invisible wall.

No, not *as if*. That’s what happened.

Glaring at the invisible wall before us, Rogue and I immediately realized the culprit.

“It’s a barrier.”

“It’s not surprising that she has one in place.”

“Mmmrrrggg! Well, *thanks* for telling me! You double dummies!”

“Had you given it any thought, it would’ve been obvious.”

“Do you have Sylphy-level intelligence, Frenzied King of Dragons?”

“Oh, now you agree on something, you jackasses?!”

During the exchange, I used my supernatural abilities—analysis and control—to examine the barrier. “Hmm... This is an impeccable last line of defense.”

“Guess half-baked tactics won’t breach it,” Rogue said.

While we thought about how to proceed, a hole the color of darkness ripped open in the sky around us...and a flock of monsters flew from it. Idling here would make the situation worse by the minute, compounded further by the fact that we were in the air.

“Everyone, get rid of the pests for us,” I commanded.

“Hah... So it’s our job to buy you time,” Alvarto groused

“That’s right. Rogue, Elzard, and I will destroy the barrier.”

After I’d confirmed everyone’s duties, we got to work.

“Olivia, you’ve got this one,” Alvarto said. “I don’t want to use up any more magic. Ginny Salvan, you and I will cover her. Got it?”

“Y-yes, sir! I promise I won’t let you down!”

“That’s the spirit... Impress me!”

While Alvarto attacked with his Holy Sword and Ginny with her spear, Olivia jumped off Elzard and into the flock of monsters.

Meanwhile, as combat raged, I called to Elzard. “Let’s re-create the past and how our relationship has evolved through our cooperation. In other words—let’s show her a spectacle of incredible feats, Elzard.”

“Of course, Ard Meteor! I welcome any challenge.”

I shot a glance at Rogue. Since he was another version of me, he understood my intent without words. He nodded in the affirmative, and I said, “Initiating Code Sigma. Match me, Disaster Rogue.”

“Initiating complementary technique formulation in ten...”

I was about to perform my greatest feat, *Ultimatum Zero*. It only worked if it came after my *Original* spell. It expended quite a lot of magic.

But now that I had gained the help of a unique existence, another version of myself, we could synchronize and spend only half the strength.

As we got everything ready on our end, Elzard made her preparations.

“Fourme. Evisa. Gwyneth...”

A golden magic circle appeared before her. Immediately after, my black magic circle appeared on top of it.

“Evsim. Lufasa. Urvis. Azura...”

“Magic at sixty percent...seventy...eighty...ninety...”

A memory surfaced in my mind, one of when Elzard kidnapped Ireena, and we hurled our greatest attacks at each other in a fierce battle. This demonstrated how we’d changed.

“Let’s go, Ard Meteor...!”

“I’m ready when you are, Elzard.”

Our breathing harmonized.

“Begone! *Elder Breath!*”

“*Ultimatum Zero*—fire!”

A blue current burst from the golden magic circle, and a red one surged from the black array. In one breath, the two beams of light erupted, binding themselves as they flew. The process fused both forces, red and blue, into one destructive vortex of unprecedented proportion.

The incredible attack struck the invisible barrier.

“With our powers combined, there’s no barrier we can’t break,” Elzard declared.

“Indeed. This is mere tissue paper to us,” I answered.

The invisible barrier shattered after a struggle that lasted only a few seconds. It sparkled like broken glass in the sun and rained down to the ground below.

“Perfect timing...” Olivia had just finished off the final giant pest and jumped off its body back to us.

“Okay, I think it’s safe to say we’ve proved ourselves worthy for the fight ahead,” Alvarto said quietly.

“Hey, *Ava*, got something to say to me?” Elzard needled.

“Do you want me to praise you, you stupid newt?”

“No, idiot, I want you to apologize...idiot.”

“Hmm? For what?”

“You mocked my powers, yet the barrier has been completely destro—”

“Ah, yes, thanks to our backup, you were able to break through. Had you been working alone, you would’ve been blasted out of the sky. Swatted like a mosquito. So you should thank us, you pathetic gecko.”

“Get your will in order, okay? When this is over, I’m killing you.”

I shrugged at their malicious banter. “Brace yourselves, everyone. Alvarto’s right. We proved we can stay in this fight with that last maneuver.” After I broke up the squabble, I turned to Elzard and said, “It’s time to land.”

We made our descent into the ancient capital of Kingsglaive, Verda's fortress. Our destination was directly below, a laboratory thought to be Verda's base of operations.

The dragon's giant body came to rest on the ground with a heavy rumble. Not a moment after we dismounted, someone arrived to welcome us.

"I thought it was you guys." Verda emerged from the lab entrance.

"Oh, what a pleasant surprise," I said. "I assumed you'd stay holed up in your base until the very last minute."

"Why bother...? You were gonna eventually make it to me anyway. It would only waste time. Besides..." Verda trailed off. A hole the color of darkness formed behind her. The words that followed signified her complete rejection of us. "I've been looking for new test subjects. I'd be glad if you guys would volunteer."

Her voice was icy cold, and her eyes seemed to lack color and emotion, giving them an inorganic appearance. I couldn't help but remember when I'd first met her. She'd looked at me with those same eyes.

"You are the sincerest person I've ever met," I said. "You don't know how to lie."

One of Verda's eyebrows twitched, but she otherwise didn't falter.

"I hate you... I hate all obstinate people like you."

Then she charged.

Verda Al-Hazard.

A former Heavenly King.

My friend was lost and confused, wandering her path.

Facing her, I declared, "Sometimes, feelings can only be understood through a clash."

"So let's fight, Verda."

CHAPTER 114

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Scholar God's Lamentations (Part II)

The Four Heavenly Kings were part of an incredibly special rank in my army. All other higher positions were filled by supervisors I appointed. However, the Four Heavenly Kings won their titles by fighting and beating their competition. As a rule, they were apex military officers. It had seemed logical that those who proved themselves greatest in combat were worthy.

That cut down on guesswork. My feelings were completely irrelevant. Talent was the only quality I sought. And that driving principle meant that the members of the Four Heavenly Kings rotated many times...

...until they reached their inevitable peaks.

Aside from Olivia, my final member of the Four Heavenly Kings, all the others turned out to be loose cannons.

Lizer Bellphoenix, a suspicious old general whose entire history was shrouded in mystery.

Alvarto Egzex, a keepsake my former rival entrusted to me.

And Verda Al-Hazard. She was once one of my most formidable enemies. She nearly destroyed half my army.

Standing in her presence now, I felt as though she'd returned to how she'd been in the old days. After so long, Verda bared her fangs at us again.

"Scary Monster, System Full Blast."

A swarm of countless creatures burst from the inky rift around Verda. They were black all over, the same color as all the enemies we'd faced thus far. Their forms were fishlike, and they swam through the air. Each was about the size of a human child, but the collected swarm took the shape of a giant serpent.

“Violent Strike.”

At Verda’s command, the giant snake lunged toward us.

“Let’s see what it can do first.” Alvarto extended his right hand to the sky, manifesting a jet-black flame. The fire darted through the air to form a giant net. The massive serpent smashed against the jet-black snare, but was ultimately trapped and destroyed. That’s what should’ve happened, anyway.

“Ah! It broke through!” Ginny cried.

“Makes sense. We’re fighting a swarm,” Elzard noted. “C’mon, *Alice*, a baby is cleverer than you.”

As Elzard said, we were fighting a collective of small enemies, which allowed them to slip through the holes of Alvarto’s net and continue charging for us.

And the horde was rapidly growing in size.

“I *said*, let’s see what it can do first, lizard brain.” Alvarto was trying to study our opponent. And he did give us some valuable information.

“It looks like they split and multiply when they take damage.”

“Yeah. And to make it more annoying, the power of an attack doesn’t seem to matter. My flames are supposed to burn things to a crisp with just one blast, but when they touched it, they extinguished my flames while duplicating.”

“Yeah, we’re probably dealing with an infinite army here...,” I agreed.

“E-eyes up, everyone! They’re coming at us!” Ginny cried.

“Then dodge ‘em, basic bitch.” There was no worry on Elzard’s face, likely because our enemies’ movements were simple and easily evaded. Indeed, we all jumped out of the way and escaped without issue.

“Still, there’s no guarantee they’ll stay this tame forever,” I remarked.

“Indeed...,” Alvarto agreed. “It looks like that swarm keeps multiplying even if we don’t attack it.”

The jet-black horde swelled bigger with each passing second. As we stared at it, Olivia whispered, “It’s almost like they’re evolving...”

Then, in the very next moment, her prediction came true, and the swarm

attacked us.

“GYAAAAAAA!”

The grotesque swarm howled as one body, then a shining light beam shot from the giant serpent’s mouth.

It was a suicide move. The outer layer forming the serpent’s body ripped apart and turned into flaming fragments.

“Scatter!”

Everyone leaped away at my command and somehow managed to evade the shower of light.

“They self-destructed, attacked, and multiplied,” Ginny observed.

“And the more they multiply...the stronger they get,” I added.

The giant serpent had grown larger still. Seeing this, Rogue broke his silence with a sigh and said, “Alvarto, you and I will deal with this.”

“Good idea,” he replied after a brief pause. “If we all fight it, we’ll just use up our magic. We should handle that thing with as few people as possible.” Turning to me, Alvarto said, “Ard Meteor—this battle hinges on whether or not you can move Verda’s heart. We need to give you an environment where you can speak without interruption for there to be any hope of victory.”

“You’re right...and I’m sure Verda put up this obstacle to prevent me from doing so.”

“In that case...,” Ginny said. “We’ll clear the way for you.”

“Don’t hold us back, basic bitch.”

As I watched my friends banter, I quietly said, “Thank you... I’m counting on you all.”

Sensing the trust in my comment, they nodded firmly.

“Okay, let’s get this party started.”

“Who put *you* in charge, *Alexandra*?”

“Alvarto and I will engage the giant serpent,” Rogue stated. “As soon as you

have an opening, run with all your might, Ard Meteor."

"Ginny, myself, and Elzard will keep your path open," Olivia explained.

"Please, Ard...help Lady Verda," Ginny entreated.

I bobbed my head in the affirmative. With that, our operation began.

"Kalmia, we're using Function Six."

"Yes, sir."

"Do whatever you need to get to her... We'll back you up all the way." Alvarto unleashed the power within his Holy Sword. Then the blade, sparkling crimson, glowed brighter. A moment after, the giant serpent's body was bound in chains.

And obviously, they were no ordinary chains. They were built from a function of Dilga Zervatis, the supreme Holy Sword. They completely suppressed the swarm-turned-giant-serpent, impeding its movements.

"Rogue, assist me with a multi-seal. These little bastards keep self-destructing to get stronger."

"I see. Eventually, they'll overpower even your Holy Sword's ability..." Rogue glared at the terrifying swarm of monsters, then complied.

I took the opening they gave me and started running.

To Verda. Straight and true.

"Stay away from me... You're annoying," she spat.

Suddenly, a black rift split open beside me. But that didn't stop me. My gaze was focused straight ahead.

It was proof of trust. No matter what happened, my friends would protect me. And Ginny was the first to leap to my defense.

"I won't let you lay a finger on Ard!"

Red lightning danced along the tip of her crimson spear. Then it shot at the grotesque beings that popped out from the rift.

I continued sprinting, breathing a sigh of relief.

I had twenty seconds remaining.

“I said, stay away!” Verda attacked again, her lips quivering.

This time, a rift opened below my feet. As an obstacle, it was pretty direct. In the blink of an eye, I would fall into the black hole. But before I did...

“You owe me one, Ard Meteor!”

...a gust of wind from Elzard carried me forward and over the hole.

I had ten seconds remaining.

“...C’mom. Just stop it,” Verda croaked. Her shoulders trembled, and her fists were clenched tightly.

A pure white wall appeared before her, blocking me from her. But the very next moment...

“It’s no use shutting us out, Verda Al-Hazard.”

...Olivia sped by me.

Slashslashslashslashslashslashslashslashslashslashslashslashslashslashslashslashslashslashslashslash...

And the white wall crumbled into shards, as did the Holy Sword in Olivia’s hand.

“Ard Meteor...I mean, stupid brother,” Olivia called to me as she passed by. She wasn’t addressing me as a student, but as her baby brother. “You can do it this time—I promise.”

I smiled back at her and said, “Consider it done.”

I answered not as Ard, but as Varvatos.

Olivia was right. Were I the old me, the Demon Lord with a hole where a heart should have been, I wouldn’t be able to touch Verda’s heart.

However, I’d changed after being reborn and making so many friends. I was no longer an empty killing machine. During my days spent with my friends, I felt, I learned...and those experiences had built something sparkling in my chest.

And Verda was one of those friends who helped build my heart. And so I took my final step forward, planted my feet...and stood before her.

“Verda, give up.”

I could no longer wear my Ard Meteor facade. I'd never touch her heart unless I was my true self and expressed my genuine feelings.

When Verda answered me with silence, I continued. "Join us. We need you."

After a few moments, Verda replied, "But you just want to use me to win the battle. Isn't that right?"

"You're wrong. Even if you were a powerless child, I'd still need you. You may have been little more than an enemy I couldn't trust in the past, but now..."

"Nothing's changed. It's all the same as back then," she snapped, as though she weren't listening.

And then something giant rose up from behind Verda. It was a golem, a massive weapon born from a fusion of magic and science. Its iron fortress of a chest opened, welcoming its master inside.

"Nothing is different. Our relationship's the same as it ever was.

"*We're enemies.*" Her eyes conveyed those words better than any words.

Verda sprang backward into the golem. As soon as she landed, its opened chest shut. Immediately after, the golem's eyes shone with an eerie light.

"Our paths are split. They have been for a long time. And if you refuse to understand that...then this is where the journey with your little friends ends."

The iron giant's body released an intense burst of pressure.

And then...

"Die."

...the golem's fists came hurtling down like a bolt of lightning. A direct hit promised terrible damage.

I chose not to dodge and let the blow hit me dead-on. The fists raced down to crush my head, but stopped short.

"Ugh...this hurts a lot more than I thought it would."

The innate strength of the blow still penetrated me, etching pain into my spirit. Had Verda gone through with that attack, I would've been destroyed.

"What's wrong, Verda? Hit me however you like." I raised my arms wide in acceptance.

"What the hell are you thinking?!" she cried.

"I didn't come here to fight you," I answered, my arms still raised. My confident posture made it clear this wasn't a lie. "I came here to talk to you—nothing more. I won't attack with anything but my feelings. How you respond is up to you. I won't fight your decision."

Hopefully, the implication behind my words would reach her. *"I don't care if I die if it means I can bring you back to me... That's just how much I value our friendship."*

After a long pause, Verda asked with noticeable irritation, "Are you stupid?"

A punch came flying toward me. My bones shook fiercely, and my organs burst open. Still, I remained motionless. "I know Mephisto Yuu Phegor is like a father to you. And I can understand why you'd care for him. But...have you ever once considered *his* feelings?"

Verda's answer was another fist, as I'd expected.

I let it hit me without flinching. "Well, to me, he's an abomination. Just picturing him makes my skin crawl. However...the feelings he has for those he loves are genuine. I consider that to be his one virtue."

The fourth attack came. My head split open, sending blood trickling from my forehead. But even as the red entered my eyes, I kept them locked on my opponent. "Has he ever asked you to stay by his side? Yeah...didn't think so. That's because you could never save him. Your presence hurts him. He has a hunger to destroy anything he doesn't want to destroy. That warped desire can never be sated."

Finally, Verda answered me with her voice instead of with the golem's fists.

"Shut up..." And once she did, the dam burst, and it all came rushing out. "I know... You think I don't know that?!" She screamed as if she were spitting out blood. Another attack collided with me. "I know what choosing to be with him means. I know what he thinks. I *always* knew, and that's why I..."

The golem's fists rained down on me. With each attack, my consciousness slipped further away.

Yet I remained resolute.

"If you know...then why don't you consider his feelings? You are wanted...you are needed, Verda Al-Hazard. We need you, Verda, not that devil."

Even harried by deadly strikes, I hurled my intense feelings at Verda.

"Children always leave their parents eventually. You need to consider his feelings and move on to where you're supposed to be. It's an expression of your love for him."

Come back to me. You're welcome here. You will always have a home with us.

I knew my feelings had reached her.

The golem's fist stopped, hovering above me.

"What have...I...?"

Verda began to tremble. Her feelings for Mephisto and us shook her.

She wanted to be with her father during his final moments. She wanted to meet the glittering future with the first friends she'd ever had. Both wishes were earnest, so they broke Verda's heart.

She found her answer beyond the agony.

"Nn...ah... AH...AHHHHH!!!"

Verda screamed, breaking free of her thoughts.

Not even Verda Al-Hazard, the most intelligent person in the world, could've found this conclusion alone.

What purpose did those iron fists serve? Verda didn't know anymore.

I need to make things right...

"That's enough."

He's here.

Just as I pictured him in my mind, Mephisto Yuu Phegor appeared.

Verda's shocked howl rang from inside the golem. An iron fist swung for me again but stopped inches from my face. A moment later, the golem's arm crumbled to gravel by Mephisto's doing.

"Mas...ter?"

Ignoring her bewildered cry, Mephisto raised his right hand at the golem. Verda's iron fortress fell apart, and she fell from the ruined construct's torso.

Her mouth opened in a silent cry. She had to know Mephisto's intention and would surely object.

Mephisto teleported to Verda and spoke before she could. "It was a tough decision. I truly did agonize over it," he said, forcing Verda to keep silent and listen. "I considered killing you myself... After all, no matter how this ends, everyone will disappear. So I thought, *Why drag this out any longer?* That's what I decided...but I'm fickle. I can't help myself."

With a distant smile of resignation on his face, Mephisto added, "I wonder. How long can I go without killing somebody I really want to kill? I'll continue this experiment, this challenge, until the very end. At least, that's how I currently feel."

He placed a curse on his beloved pupil. Dark mist flowed from his hand, straight into Verda's forehead.

And what curse could he have possibly placed on his beloved pupil? Well...

"Ah!"

...Verda struck Mephisto's cheek—clearly not of her own volition.

"No... Why?" she pleaded, her shoulders shaking.

She had struck her surrogate father, someone doomed to be her enemy.

Mephisto gave her no answer but a smile.

"All right, I'm going before I change my mind."

He spoke with all the mundane casualness of discussing the weather. There was no hint of his true feelings for her. His heart was a heavy jumble of emotions.

Mephisto disappeared.

“...Master.”

Verda fell to her knees as tears spilled down her cheeks.

“Consider his feelings, Verda,” I said as I rested my hands on her trembling shoulders. “Don’t reject them.”

Mephisto was an enigma by nature. The more deeply he loved someone, the more he was compelled to destroy them out of curiosity.

And for the first time ever, that madman made the choice not to.

Verda’s feelings had broken through the distortion in Mephisto’s nature.

“Keep going, Verda. Your friends are here for you.”

I called out to her with my voice and heart alike. Unfortunately, there was nothing I could do to stop her sobs.

“I was right about you, Master... You’re a backstabbing coward.”

Verda’s voice melted and vanished.

CHAPTER 115

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Next Move

If she had no place to run, her grief would've lasted for an eternity.

But Verda could go to her friends.

So she rose.

"...Okay. What am I supposed to do now?" Verda asked, wiping her swollen red eyes.

There was no clear intention in her gaze. The currents of emotion carried her.

I wanted her to find her way again, but I knew that was easier said than done. For now, supporting her was more than enough.

"Verda... Would it be possible for you, with your knowledge and supernatural abilities, to fuse me and this man, Disaster Rogue, together?"

Her gaze traveled to Rogue. Ordinarily, she would've been bursting with curiosity over this replica of me.

"Ah... I assume you want to integrate your essences to increase your total power."

A look was all she needed to understand. Verda looked haggard—weakened beyond imagination. Ginny's eyes filled with pity, but she kept quiet, knowing nothing she could do would help.

"If I had to say whether it's possible, it definitely is. Fusing two separate existences together is extremely risky, but it shouldn't be a problem when the two are the same."

Verda turned toward her facility as she spoke calmly. We all followed after. As we walked, I ran through a few potential outcomes in my mind.

I keep coming back to the same worry... What will happen after this is over?

At the start of this battle, I thought everything would be neatly resolved once I passed Mephisto's sick challenges. No unknown truth had been waiting for us.

Unfortunately, the stakes were much higher than I'd first assumed. A higher being sought to bring about the end.

Let's say we defeat Mephisto... What next?

This world would still be in unprecedeted danger. A greater enemy would arrive before too long. This god was likely a thing of nightmares.

We'd need everyone to fight this monster. All except Ard Meteor, anyway.

I can't help but hope it's not too late to change our strategy when I consider what's waiting ahead.

Rogue's voice echoed in my mind while I was lost in thought.

"Unless we can avoid the end that's staring us in the face, there will be no future."

Since we were the same person, he'd read my thoughts and sent his back to me.

"Well, let's say we do avoid the end that's staring us in the face. The next threat will destroy literally everything. What then?"

"You sound like someone carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders..."

"That makes me sound arrogant, but I'm sure you understand what you said is a fact."

"What happened to trusting your friends and leaving the future to them?"

"It's precisely because I love my friends that I feel so driven to save the future."

Rogue and I were the same existence, yet our paths were very different. That's likely why the little distinctions in our opinions stood out.

"Your concern is nonsensical. There's nothing you can do when wandering a maze with no exit." Rogue followed up that particularly sharp jab with a twist of the knife. *"I admit, I do believe a future where only one of us remains is ideal. However..."*

"I know..." I replied. *"Once we've fused together and combined our powers,*

we won't be able to carry out the plan."

"Exactly. We'll lose the privilege of choice. Without a counterproposal, your thoughts are just a waste of time."

Rogue spoke without hesitation. All I felt from him was a steeled resolve.

"The path everyone is on ends only a few steps ahead. We'll add a few more paces, then disappear. Beyond that, our friends will have to make their own way."

I, Ard Meteor, had a strong faith in my friends.

"I know, but I can't help but worry. About their future, about the lives of my friends who rescued me from my solitude."

Rogue probably deemed all my thoughts at this point trivial sentimentality.

"Don't be so weak, Ard Meteor."

Our conversation ended there.

I don't care if I'm being weak...I can't stop myself from worrying. I have to find a way to reach the best possible outcome.

Unfortunately, I never found a clue to the solution, even as the situation continued to unfold.

"It's ready." The devices that would fuse Rogue and me together, two rings, sparkled in Verda's hand. She gave a succinct explanation of how they worked. "You both put one on and press the gemstones together. Send your magic into them, and you're good to go."

Following that quick briefing, she handed us the rings. Rogue put his on immediately, but it took me a moment.

"Just give in already."

He broke into my thoughts again, without pretense this time. Rogue was right. Trusting my friends to see this through was our only choice. I knew that they'd be all right, even after I was gone.

I collected myself and put on my ring...

"Let's do this, Rogue."

"Yeah."

We would fuse.

For the future. For our blocked path. To give everyone another chance...no matter how small.

My fist reached toward his. And sure enough, Rogue and I started to become one— *"Cloverfield."*

There was a third voice.

One like a massive boulder.

Just as it rang out...

...I sensed an attack coming. My brain worked at supersonic speed when faced with the sudden interruption.

In a second that lasted an eternity, I thought long and hard.

"I've found it...the best way out."

Through sheer willpower, I suppressed my body's instinct to react. Instead, I stared this new assailant in the face.

Lizer Bellphoenix. The giant mace in his hand was flying toward me.

Everyone else was frozen in panic at the perfect surprise attack.

I was probably the only one among us who stared into Lizer's eyes with a clear head.

Sure enough, the moment his mace connected with my body, my consciousness fell into the darkness.

INTERLUDE

The Bitter Boy Won't Take the Outstretched Hand

“All right, I think we’ve reached a resting point.”

Mephisto leaned the entirety of his weight against the back of a chair as he sipped his tea in the Laville National Academy of Magic’s cafeteria.

He relaxed with a smile on his lips. To all eyes, he surely seemed quite stately. Yet to Ireena, he was a boy on the verge of tears.

“So...why did you—?”

“Forget it. Shouldn’t you be worried about your friends instead?”

He was right, and she *was* worried for them.

She worried for Ard, who’d been attacked by Lizer, knocked unconscious, and abducted. She fretted for those left behind, too.

Everything she saw in the giant mirror before her made with magic was troubling.

However, none of those were her greatest concern.

“You...don’t make sense to me anymore.”

Her first impression of Mephisto could be summed up with the word *evil*.

He applauded the world’s cruelty, laughed at tragedy, and delighted in chaos.

Mephisto was a devil. There was nothing to understand about him. That’s what she thought.

Yet what he did for Verda was exactly what a father would have done for the daughter he loved.

“Be honest...are you *really* trying to destroy the world?”

Mephisto was a monster of contradictions, but Ireena was starting to glean

the truth buried within him.

"Your kindness is heartwarming, truly...and that's why I hate you." His smile never faltered. As Mephisto went on, his tone noticeably lacked its usual silliness. It had been swapped for traces of warmth. "The beings you call Evil Gods are visitors from another world. And I'm one of them."

"That's right...you were talking about that earlier. You said your world was destroyed by someone who called themselves a god."

"Yup. That's why we fled here, sacrificing many people along the way... My friends were among them."

Friends.

Ireena's eyes opened wide at the word.

"Boy, you sure are an open book... Yes, contrary to what you might think, I had many friends in the other world."

Mephisto gazed sentimentally up at the sky. "My curiosity is insatiable. That's why the more I come to like a person, the more I want to destroy them. If that cycle always produced the same feeling, I'd lose interest. However, I experience something different with each person I crush, so I never tire of it. So I can repeat it for all eternity."

However...

Mephisto smiled softly, imagining someone. "In my old world, there were many people that even I couldn't destroy. And thanks to them, I had a happy life. They wouldn't break, even if I exerted all my power. If anything, I would've been beaten to death. Those were such bright, golden days...which is why everything hurts all the more now."

Mephisto sipped his tea. There was an intense look of resignation in his beautiful eyes.

"Say, Ireena, help me picture something. Let's say I joined your team, and we fought to stop the end of the world. And let's say we succeeded... Now, here's the question: While you and your friends smiled and sang for joy, would there be any room for me in your circle?"

Irenea's reply stuck in her throat. For as kindhearted as she was, Irenea felt visceral repulsion to the devil called Mephisto Yuu Phegor.

"See? You can't accept me, right?"

"Well...you only have yourself to blame for that."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Hello, bed I made! Burning in agony because of the calling I was born to is my punishment. I get it. But you see..."

I feel so bitter.

I feel so lonely.

I feel so disgusted.

By everything in my life.

That's why.

"...That's my motive. That was why I started this fight. I'm tired. Tired of being burned by my own flame. Tired of pretending to accept it. I'm tired of everything. I want to end it. I want to end it in the happiest way for me."

These were Mephisto's true feelings, yet he failed to communicate them completely.

What was he scheming? What sort of ending did he seek?

The answers remained a mystery, but Irenea understood one thing.

This man, Mephisto Yuu Phegor...

I'm not equipped to teach him.

There's no way I can save him.

His loneliness stemmed from his being an absolute existence. However, if that's all it was, he wouldn't need to resign himself to that fate.



Ard Meteor was the perfect example. He was a similar entity, and loneliness had consumed him as well, yet he'd found a wide circle of friends. One's state of mind could create an environment that drew people in—that's what it meant to evolve.

But if his isolation came from a perverted mind...

...there was no repairing it.

Irenea's only recourse with Mephisto was to fight him.

Opposing him was the only way to protect those she loved.

If anybody has a chance at saving this monster...

It had to be someone who could accept the perversion while keeping the evil away, or better yet, smashing it. They'd have to know his pain and stand on a level playing field and fight fiercely.

There was only one person who fit that description...

And just as Irenea visualized him...

“I’ve completed the task you gave me.”

...a harsh voice reached her ears.

She turned around and saw two men.

One was Lizer Bellphoenix, the grizzled old general covered in battle scars. The other...

“Ard...!”

...was her wounded friend.

He didn't answer.

His vacant blue eyes stared into the void.

CHAPTER 116

The Ex-Nobody's Plan to Rescue the Current Nobody

"I have to say...it was an expertly executed surprise attack. The best of its kind," Alvarto muttered irritably. "After Rogue and Ard fused, I meant to bring up the subject of the two conspicuously absent players. You had the same thought, didn't you, Olivia?"

"Indeed. I've been wondering how we'd handle Sylphy Marheaven and Lizer Bellphoenix. But I'd assumed..."

"I know. Our mistake was thinking that we had some room to relax after making it through one crisis."

The enemy had smashed their confidence in the most spectacular way. No one but Lizer Bellphoenix could have managed it.

"Rogue, what's your read on the situation? Do you really think Lizer's under Mephisto's control?" Alvarto asked.

"To be honest...I don't know."

"I guess that means we need to consider the worst-case scenario."

Olivia nodded quietly. "We'll draw up our strategy assuming Lizer has defected." Then she looked at Rogue and posed a question. "Was the goal only to abduct Ard Meteor?"

"This is only a guess, but...Mephisto wants to make him his toy. He'll brainwash Ard completely, then send him out to attack us."

Alvarto sighed. "Ah. Yes, that is the sick sort of game he'd play."

Beside him, Olivia put a hand on her chin. "Yes, but I doubt Ard Meteor will be brainwashed so easily. He'll be able to stall to some extent."

"W-well in that case, we need to rescue him now!" Ginny cried, hurrying to get the words out.

Rogue chose that moment to reveal his strategy to the group. “We will infiltrate the enemy base and recapture Ard Meteor. If we don’t make it on time, I can use my supernatural ability to bring him back to normal. But if Mephisto’s brainwashing is irreversible...we’ll change tactics and go for the bangle.”

The Bangle of Devouring was their one ace in the hole against Mephisto. It was currently on Ard’s right wrist. If he fell under enemy control, the fight would be impossible.

That’s only if he falls under enemy control, though..., Rogue thought. *Among the many possibilities, I can’t tell which one will come true. It’s like I’m grasping in the dark.*

Even so, the goal was clear.

“All right, listen well. This is our first step...”

After Rogue explained everything, most of his allies voiced their approval.

“It’s painfully simplistic...,” Alvarto remarked. “But there’s no guarantee a carefully crafted plan would work, either.”

“Indeed,” Olivia replied. “Lizer will catch wise to any overcomplicated strategy.”

Elzard and Ginny remained silent, but from their eyes and body language, it was clear they were on board.

As for Verda...

She stared at the floor, saying not a word.

She’s in no state to come along.

“Verda, you stay here.” Rogue’s voice was firm but considerate.

She wouldn’t be any help in a fight. If anything, she might hold them back. And Verda knew it, too. She didn’t argue, only nodding in acceptance.

I’d love to help her...but we don’t have the time for that.

Suppressing the sympathy in his heart, Rogue addressed the group. “Let’s go.”

The banality of his words gave them a substantial weight. Everyone nodded

gravely, and with that, the operation commenced.



"You! What did you do to Ard?!" Ireena's angry cry rang through the school garden.

"First pity, now anger. My goodness, Ireena, we've certainly been through the emotional wringer today, haven't we?"

Mephisto's giddy smile had returned. Freed from his moment of sadness earlier, he carried on as though it were any other day.

He was a devil divorced from humanity once again.

"A link between past and present consolidated here and now. The Demon Lord, a hero, and an Evil God—the three main characters of the tale we call ancient history, although one's a descendant. All three have gathered in one place. I just thought we might have a conversation together."

Mephisto's eyes darted from Ard to Lizer and then back. "Lizer, leave. Ard, sit."

And Lizer obediently disappeared while Ard lowered himself into a chair.

The trio sat around the table: an Evil God, the Demon Lord, and the hero's descendant. Ireena had little awe for the gathering.

"Ard! Please! What did he do to you?!"

His blue eyes gazed vacantly, never once reacting to Ireena. It was clear that Ard wasn't his normal self. Mephisto, the cause of this nightmare, leaned back in his chair as he confessed, "I put my darling in a temporary brainwashed state."

"You...brainwashed him?!"

"Yup. See, I didn't want him to play any mind games with me," he explained. "It was necessary to get the pure, unadulterated truth out of him." Mephisto's grin held all the beauty of an angel and all the wickedness of a devil. "You should tell the truth, too. Otherwise, I'll have to *tease* my darling's body."

Faced with the threat to end all threats, all Ireena could do was grind her teeth and glare.

"So glad you understand, dear. Now that all the prep work is done...let's have a little tea party!" Mephisto sipped his tea. "Now, first things first. Ireena, how did you feel when you learned my sweetheart's true identity?"

"Well...at first, I was stunned. But very soon, I realized I didn't care. Ard is Ard. Even if he was the Demon Lord in his former life, that has no bearing on his life now."

"Hmmm... So you never thought you shouldn't be friends with him anymore?"

"Of course not."

"Weren't you scared somebody like you wouldn't be a good match for him?"

"If you'd asked me that question a while ago... I might have considered that possibility, yes."

Ireena thought back to her early days at the academy, when she'd been the target of a crime group called Lars al Ghoul.

"Elzard kidnapped me, then Ard came to my rescue...and when I saw them fight each other, I realized his strength was beyond a normal human's."

Ard had frightened Ireena. That was an undeniable fact. However, that wasn't the whole picture.

"A part of me feared him, but another part realized he was just like me. Neither of us is normal. It's why I can understand his pain."

Ireena was scared of Ard, but her pity for him outweighed that feeling. She knew his powers would repel everyone from him. No matter how many people surrounded him, no matter how friendly he was to them...

"Without an equal to stand at his side, Ard would be alone forever. That realization lit a fire in me. I didn't want him to be alone. I wanted to rescue him. Those feelings extinguished my fear...leaving only determined grit."

She would do whatever it took to stand at his side. Ireena held that feeling with her always. It was her greatest reason for living, and it motivated her actions.

That was truer in the present than ever.

"I can say with absolute conviction that I will stay with Ard. I understand him best... I'm his best friend."

He'd rescued and protected her countless times. Ireena was more to him than a girl who needed to be saved, though.

At times, she rescued and protected him. She no longer stood in his shadow. Ireena knew she stood by Ard as his equal.

"Hmmmmmm." Mephisto narrowed his eyes and propped his elbows on the table. "Well...I've known him longer than you."

He had the tone of a child competing for something. And that something was Ard.

"Isn't that right, my sweet? You and I really have been playmates for quite a long time, haven't we?"

"Yes."

"We have a very unique bond between us. Isn't that right?"

"Yes."

"Now, knowing that, I'd like to ask you a question... Between me and Ireena, which one do—?"

"Ireena."

.....

.....

.....

The abrupt answer turned Mephisto to stone for a moment. Upon regaining his composure, he smiled and asked his question again.

"Between me and Ireena, which—?"

"Ireena."

He was even faster this time.

"...Aww, you're so cute when you play hard to get."

"No, he's just being honest. You made it so he can't lie, remember?" Despite Ireena's remark, she was just as confused. What was happening here? "Seriously, Mephisto...what are you after?"

The Evil God pouted his lips and said, "Not telliiing. I don't like you anymorrre."

Ireena couldn't tell whether he meant it or if he was just messing with her. Why would he entertain such a farce?

"Okay then, honey, what about me? How do you—?"

Ireena watched as Mephisto lobbed Ard a fresh question.

A violent explosion ripped through the air before Ard could answer, though.

"Huh...they're a bit ahead of schedule." Mephisto shrugged, leaving his question unfinished. He rose from his seat and looked at Ireena and Ard. "He's come to play with us—my other honey."



"Please forgive me, my school friends." Rogue wore an anguished expression as he beheld the piles of fallen students. It had been necessary, but he still hated himself for attacking them.

Still, he'd managed to reach his goal.

"You may have come from another world, but you're still my honey, no mistaking it," came a sweet voice.

Mephisto Yuu Phegor appeared in the center of the courtyard. His lustrous black hair fluttered in the wind. He wore a brilliant smile. "Oh my. I didn't think you'd just come to me willingly. Storming in from the front, readying a powerful attack, and reclaiming your friend all in one go—I suppose it's the best option, considering your team's combat potential. But it takes real courage to pull off. You'll be fighting me, after all."

Rogue, Elzard, Ginny, Olivia, and Alvarto would engage Mephisto. Once there was a break in his defenses, one of them would burst through and secure Ard or take the bangle and escape.

Mephisto had already deduced their plan.

"We knew hasty trickery wouldn't work on you. This was the best option."

"In other words, you decided to attack me like fools." Mephisto giggled and spread his arms. "All right, then, I'll play."

And with that, he unleashed a savage attack, creating countless magic circles in the air. One breath later, the brilliantly colored spells hurled giant bursts of energy. Elemental rain pelted Rogue and the others. Fire, water, and lightning poured down on them in a straight line.

"*Mega Wall!*" Rogue shielded everyone from Mephisto's attacks with a *Defensive* spell. And as the torrent of destruction rained down, he muttered, "Too bad...guess the same thing won't work twice."

He was referencing the time when he'd overpowered Mephisto in an attempt to free Olivia from his corruption.

Rogue had only defeated a copy of Mephisto, though. This was the real thing.

"My spell will only hold a few more seconds. But that should be just enough."

Rogue had a second plan, one aside from the straightforward assault. Namely, he had duplicates of his own. That's how he'd defeat Mephisto.

Unfortunately, there was a slight catch to his plan. Rogue issued a command to his allies on standby behind him to resolve it. "Mephisto's magic is endless. You can't wait it out. His attacks will never stop. I'm going to put magic armor on each of you. Once I give the word, attack as you see fit."

It was pointless to hope for any sort of cooperative attack from his team. Their clashing attributes and differences in power made teamwork impossible. All Rogue could hope for was that pairings might emerge in the midst of the onslaught.

"On my mark... Go!"

Just as he'd outlined, Rogue encased everyone in protection magic. As soon as the thin membranes of light surrounded the others, they dashed forward without hesitation.

Alvarto, Elzard, Olivia, and Ginny ran out from Rogue's barrier, dashing into the barrage of elemental attacks. Their armor neutralized the heat, cold, and

electricity.

“Tempest!”

In the blink of an eye, Oliva closed the gap and slashed with terrible intensity. It was an extraordinary display of swordcraft. Were Olivia up against an average opponent, they would've been cut down before ever seeing the flash of her sword. Unfortunately, she was up against an Evil God.

“Whoo! So close!”

His golden eyes likely saw her attacks in slow motion. Mephisto easily danced around Olivia's blade. He jumped behind Olivia and distanced himself from her.

“Die.”

That's when Alvarto's black flames shot at Mephisto from the side. Striking from the flank was the perfect surprise attack. However...

“Hoo-hooey!”

...Mephisto tumbled backward to dodge, giggling and smiling all the while. He didn't escape entirely unscathed, though.

“Oww! Why is my tummy so hot?!”

Clutching his stomach where Alvarto's flames had grazed him, he tumbled around on the ground. He looked like a clown, but there was no telling which of his antics were earnest and which were in jest.

That wouldn't stop Elzard, though.

A golden magic circle appeared in the sky above.

“Disappear!” she roared.

“Sorry, no can dooooooooooo!” Mephisto sang. “Whoo-hoo!” He flipped, raising his legs to the sky. That simple action instantaneously spawned a tornado that swept away Elzard's attack.

It was quite an absurd way to fight, but Ginny remained determined. “Take this!” she cried.

She shot red lightning that arced toward Mephisto at the speed of light. Still, the Evil God proved quicker. He was completely and utterly beyond

comprehension in body and mind.

“Dinnertiiime!”

He opened his mouth wide, swallowing the lightning.

“Oomph?! Ohh, it tingles!”

After he’d actually swallowed the red lightning, Mephisto’s body twitched. It was a terribly silly and wicked sight.

Seizing the opportunity, Rogue snuck up behind Mephisto while he was distracted. “You’re asking for it.”

He stabbed at Mephisto with a conjured sword. The devil would surely dodge, but that wasn’t a problem.

This wasn’t an offensive tactic. It was merely meant to stall.

As long as Mephisto focused on Rogue and the others, the fight was as good as theirs.

While thrusting the blade, Rogue thought, *If this can just buy us thirty seconds...*

Perhaps his mistake was allowing his focus to wander in the middle of combat. Or maybe the battle had simply been lost before it ever began.

“Hmmm...it pains me to say this after I was the one who asked you to play, but...” As the sword plunged for Mephisto, he whispered, “Yeah. This is just too boring.”

The blade stuck into Mephisto’s back.

Rogue gasped in shock. He was sure his enemy would evade. This development was beyond his expectations. As he felt Mephisto’s flesh tear and his bones grate against the metal, Rogue stared wide-eyed.

Seemingly feeling the man’s gaze on him, Mephisto sighed deeply and said, “These are highly realistic copies...but they’re not good enough to fool me.”

He snapped his fingers. Just one little snap.

Everyone but Rogue ruptured and scattered into the air. Their bodies landed in jumbled clumps. A moment after, they transformed into sparkling particles,

evidence that they were magical duplicates.

"It's just no fun fighting fakes. Well...guess I'm not one to talk, am I?" Mephisto stuck out his tongue and giggled.

Wait, did he—?

But before Rogue could finish his thought, his suspicion was confirmed. Mephisto's body turned into particles of light and disappeared.



Rogue's strategy was a simple diversion.

He would go in alone and stall Mephisto. Meanwhile, everyone else would try to save Ard, and failing that, they would reclaim the bangle. That was the entirety of the plan. At least, that's what Rogue told them.

And that was precisely why they all thought the plan had failed.

At first, Alvarto, Elzard, Ginny, and Olivia reached Ard without any trouble. He was at an outdoor cafeteria in one section of the campus garden. When they spotted him and saw Ireena was there, too, they were overjoyed. This was a double win.

They'd rescue Ard and Ireena. Elzard and Alvarto were in exceptionally high spirits. But it all came crashing down.

"Do you think I'm stupid?" came a voice from somewhere unseen. The beautiful tones could only belong to Mephisto.

"I don't *think* you do, but...I don't get the sense you've planned anything besides this. Figuring out my sweetheart's plans is much more difficult."

He cocked his head. His lips curled in an amused smirk. Lizer stood behind him, quietly sizing up his opponents.

"Mephisto! If you hurt them, you'll be sorry!" Ireena jumped from her seat, growling at the devil.

Ard remained quiet, staring into the empty air ceaselessly.

"Ireena, dear, if you've grown to hate me, my heart will break... But I suppose I've got bigger fish to fry right now."

Mephisto's words made it clear that, at this point, he harbored no intention to restrain himself.

Ireena's eyes shot open. "Everyone, run! I'll hold him back!" She cried. "Come to me! Vald-Galgulus!"

She stretched her hand to the heavens, and a sword appeared with a crash of lightning. Vald-Galgulus was one of the Three Holy Swords.

As she held the sparkling silver blade, she screamed. "What are you waiting for?! Run now!"

Nobody heeded her order to flee. If anything, it filled their hearts with the courage to remain.

"You want me to run *away*? You've got some balls to say that to me," Elzard replied.

"Miss Ireena!" Ginny shouted. "You know I would *never* leave you behind!"

Olivia nodded. "Indeed. A mentor would disgrace herself if she abandoned her student with her tail between her legs."

"Everyone here is willing to give their lives for you. And I'm no exception," Alvarto said.

Everyone answered Ireena's compassion with their own. She had asked them to run...

...and they unanimously refused.

"Y-you guys...!"

Her passionate feelings for her friends and the worry that came with it ignited something in Ireena.

Mephisto applauded the demonstration. "Friendship—what a beautiful thing. Oh, I'm truly moved."

Then he sighed, his breath filled with adoration and envy.

Mephisto pointed at the group. "I want to know what my honey is thinking. I want to know what lies ahead. And beating you all is the fastest way to find out."

The devil smiled, making it plain there was no running from him. No one faltered or let cowardice take their soul, though. They were going to get out of this alive. And they would take their beloved friends with them.

Mephisto took a step forward, intent on breaking their spirits. However, he never got the chance, for his reason for living appeared.

To Mephisto, a being who could manipulate anything at will, it was no exaggeration to say that anyone who defied his expectations brought him true joy.

She came down, the perfect picture of the unexpected, to shake the devil's heart.

She descended from the heavens, tracing an arc as she fell and gripping a Holy Sword.

“Dwa-shaaaaaaaaaa!!!”

Sylphy Marheaven arrived on the scene with her signature cry.

“Agh! For real?!”

The exclamation was proof of Mephisto's shock. Stunned and unable to react to the unexpected development, he had his head split open by the Raging Champion's attack.

“Mrrnng!”

Lizer moved not a moment after Sylphy appeared, yet didn't swing his giant mace for her.

Instead, it smashed down upon the devil.

“Whoa! Wha?!”

The blow sent Mephisto's lithe form flying...

...toward where *he* was waiting.

He finished his quiet *Original* chant just in time.

Ard Meteor stood ready to meet Mephisto in his ultimate form.

“Well, what an incredible surprise.”

Ard lunged for Mephisto, blue eyes locked on the monster as he glided toward him. Lizer's attack had left Mephisto vulnerable, and Ard's supernatural ability trapped him easily.

He couldn't move. He couldn't take control and manipulate the one who struck him with a mace. Not even the Evil God could free himself from Ard's powers. However, this was Mephisto...

"Ohhhh, that tee-yee-ingles! But it's not a problem."

Lizer's supernatural ability only managed to keep Mephisto still for a few seconds.

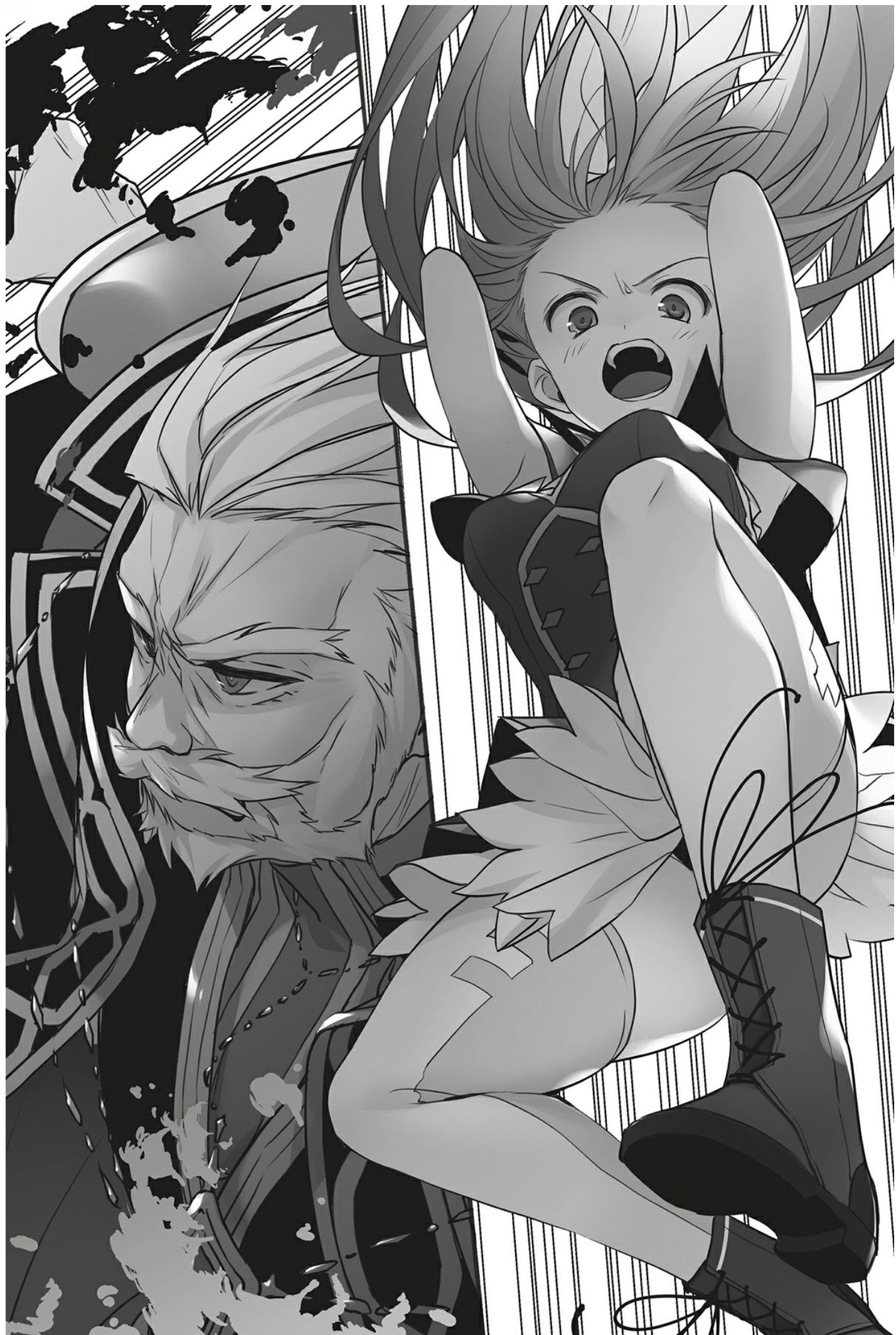
It was an absolute rule that when struck by Lizer, he lost his powers over life and death. Yet Mephisto forced his will to irrational heights and suppressed the effect.

But...

"That's all the time I need!"

...everything worked exactly as Ard envisioned.

He swung his black sword, forcing Mephisto to block. Between the few seconds Lizer won and the few more Ard bought with this maneuver...



...that man would have all the time he needed.

“Ah...now I get it. So that’s your plan.”

Mephisto had figured it out too late. He blocked Ard’s black sword with one arm, and looked up.

Disaster Rogue stood beside Ireena.

“What?!” Ireena cried, completely unable to grasp the situation.

Ginny was just as baffled. The turn of events was so dizzying that she couldn’t keep up.

Those born in ancient times grasped the situation immediately, though, and they reacted promptly.

“With me, lizard brain!”

“Got it, *Alicia*!”

To earn more precious seconds, Alvarto and Elzard cast *Barrier* spells on Ard and Mephisto. Just as their sturdy shields formed around the pair...

“Ginny, we’re leaving.”

“Ah! Uh?!”

...Olivia grabbed Ginny and took off running. *Jamming* spells prevented teleportation. With only their feet to carry them, escaping Mephisto was next to impossible.

That’s why they couldn’t let the opportunity Ard had made for them go to waste.

Lizer and Sylphy followed a few paces behind Olivia, with Alvarto and Elzard close after.

Rogue brought up the rear.

He shot Ard a glance as he scooped the bewildered Ireena into his arms.

There was a conflict in his heart.

Is this really what you want?

Are we just going to accept it?

An ending where a failure like me stays, and he disappears? Is that really a fair ending?

The discord within dulled his judgment. His legs froze.

And as he stood there, stuck, Ard screamed at him, “You bastard! Don’t you dare make the same mistake again!!!”

A shock ran through Rogue, and he returned to himself.

That’s right. The fate of the world comes first...as do my companions and the best friend who means more to me than my life.

Nothing else matters.

Rogue took off with Ireena.

“Ard?!” Ireena shouted, struggling to break free from Rogue’s grip. A quick *Sleeping* spell sapped her consciousness before she could get free, though.

“Protect her this time,” Ard said.

Rogue nodded. “I will...”

With those words, the two Ard Meteors parted ways.

CHAPTER 117

The Ex-Demon Lord and What His Self-Sacrifice Bought

As one of the Four Heavenly Kings, Lizer Bellphoenix was the wisest general in my army. But our relationship was anything but compassionate. It was cold and calculating. We schemed to take advantage of each other.

After all this time, I'm sure our relationship remained fundamentally unchanged.

We weren't friendly enough to be called friends, nor did we understand each other enough to be comrades.

But we had trust. We trusted each other.

And that's what brought us to this moment, where my plan succeeded in the most perfect way, bringing us to the end.

It began a little earlier. The moment Lizer ambushed us.

It was a splendid attack. No one had the chance to react. I hadn't been without options, though.

I'd had ample opportunity to dodge it...but I didn't.

Why?

Because I trusted him. I trusted Lizer Bellphoenix's power and intellect. I trusted him with all my heart. That's how I realized...that he lacked the ability to rob someone of their will and power over life and death twice.

We'd fought against each other as enemies once. During the battle, Lizer had brought out Mephisto as his ace in the hole to defeat me...and had fallen right into his trap. Surely, he'd learned from that mistake.

"You saw right through to my true intention. Well done, Ard Meteor."

When Lizer attacked me and I fell under his control because of his

supernatural ability, I heard Lizer's voice echo in my brain. He spoke even as he traded blows with my astonished friends.

"As you know, my supernatural abilities are control and enhancement. And I can also link myself to another spirit. By connecting my spirit with the person I wish to control, I can communicate telepathically. Of course, nonverbal communication can be done through magic, however..."

"This better avoids detection."

"Exactly. This is Mephisto Yuu Phegor we're dealing with. You can never be too careful. Not even an Evil God will hear us if we communicate using my power."

Lizer teleported away to the Laville National Academy of Magic, taking me with him. I saw two people against the familiar backdrop of my school. One was Mephisto. And the other was— “Ard!”

Irenea.

I wanted to tell my bewildered best friend that I was okay, but I had to remain silent to deceive Mephisto into thinking Lizer's supernatural ability bound me. My plan was already in motion.

“I just thought we might have a conversation together.”

Mephisto's eyes commanded Lizer to leave and for me to sit.

We both obeyed as we continued to communicate telepathically.

“I will leave now, as he commanded. But we can still use my ability to communicate, no matter how far apart we are. We can exchange ideas on what our next move should be. Make sure you don't draw suspicion.”

As Irenea and Mephisto conversed, I decided to inquire where Lizer currently stood.

“So, you've completely freed yourself from Mephisto's control, is that correct?”

“Indeed. I foresaw earlier that this moment would come. So I made myself immune to his Corruption spell.”

“You said you foresaw this? How?”

“In the past, I made a clone of Mephisto as a secret weapon when I went to

attack you. In doing so, I connected with Mephisto through his seal...and discovered something.”

“Ah... You found evidence of a god meddling with him.”

“Ultimately, yes, that’s what happened. Nevertheless, you and your party defeated me. And just as my fight with Alvarto was about to end, I sent my consciousness to Mephisto because I intuited that he would attack immediately.”

Lizer explained that he was supposed to communicate his wariness to us so that we would know we needed to draw up a countermeasure. Unfortunately, Mephisto was just too fast, so there wasn’t any time to prepare.

“The one silver lining was that Maria and I were able to escape. I thought that as long as you all were safe, there was a chance you’d turn the tables... In hindsight, it was a precarious turn of events.”

“There’s no use in worrying over the past.” With a cynical laugh to myself, I moved the conversation forward. *“Okay, I’ve grasped the situation. So...let’s make a plan.”*

First, I explained my plan to Lizer. After listening quietly, he answered, *“Hmm. It’s exactly the same tactic I devised.”*

“So you went the same route, eh?”

If you thought about it rationally, this was the only conceivable resolution. And I had no reservations about going through with it.

“Are you...sure you’re all right with this?” Lizer questioned.

“Gee, Lizer, that doesn’t sound like you at all. I never expected you to take my feelings into consideration.”

“I, too, am confused by my reaction. Perhaps my altercation with you and your friends spurred a change in me.”

Had a bond formed out of our clash?

“To be honest, I didn’t think you were capable of that... Maybe that’s the cause of my loneliness—the tendency to pass judgment.”

The change in Lizer was like a ray of hope for the future. However...I still couldn't envision this man in my group of friends. But only because I wouldn't be around for much longer.

"Listen, Lizer—if you have even the slightest sense of comradery for me...then please, help everyone else."

My friends and the other me would need it.

I was begging Lizer to take care of them.

Lizer answered promptly. *"I promise, I will honor your testament."*

Since the conversation was telepathic, there was no chance of deceit. Our emotions flowed directly into each other's minds.

I was eternally grateful to Lizer. I knew he meant every word.

"All right...let's lock in this plan," I said.

"Indeed. In principle, this should work. However, there's still one issue..."

"Yeah, how are we going to overcome what unfolds in the aftermath?"

"Exactly. When we either rescue your abducted friend or steal the bangle, your compatriots will surely unleash a fierce attack. How do we stop that?"

"At the very least, we'll need to incapacitate Mephisto for a few seconds."

"Indeed. And to achieve that...we shall enlist the help of Sylphy Marheaven."

"She's regained her sanity, too?"

"Correct. She heard Lydia's voice."

"I see. Then we can definitely trust her."

Like Lizer, Sylphy had broken free of the *Corruption* spell only a short while ago. She'd furiously declared she would strike Mephisto first.

"If I hadn't successfully stopped her with my supernatural ability...we'd be doomed right now."

"That little terror...she just had to give us a hard time until the very end." Inwardly, I smiled cynically, but felt relieved nonetheless. With Sylphy back, that meant everyone close to me had escaped Mephisto's control. That was worth

celebrating.

“Sylphy’s rebellion will certainly catch Mephisto by surprise. I predict she may even land an attack on him,” Lizer said.

“And you’ll seize upon that short opening to set our plan in motion.”

“Correct. If I use my supernatural ability, I should be able to get us three seconds at least.”

“Then I’ll give my friends another push.”

“Indeed. That should give them plenty of time to escape.” Then Lizer followed up with a caveat. *“Alvarto, Olivia, and Elzard—we can count on them to make the right decision in the moment. But what of the other you? One wrong move from him could prove fatal for our plan.”*

The moment Lizer asked me this question, Ireena shot a defiant reply at Mephisto: “I can say this with absolute conviction. I will stay with Ard. I understand him best... I’m his best friend.”

The warmth from her feelings was my answer to Lizer.

“That won’t be a problem. He will choose friendship over the hubris of self-sacrifice. Mark my words. He’ll put Ireena first.”

“Then we can assume the other you will not do anything brash.”

The desire to stay behind and fight by my side, to sacrifice himself to defeat Mephisto, would lose out to rationality and compassion for his friends.

With that, all the details of our plan were set.

At last, it was time for the climax.

Everything had gone as I’d envisioned. All my friends escaped...and I faced my nemesis in battle alone.

“As much as I believe outward appearances are meaningless, I like you best this way, in the form of my one true darling.”

I had activated Brave Demon Full Body. As such, I took on the appearance of the Demon Lord Varvatos.

This was my ultimate ace in the hole, but there was a caveat.

My opponent was Mephisto Yuu Phegor. Not even my greatest powers combined matched his.

Thankfully, I had a secret weapon. My powers had been enhanced by Lizer's supernatural ability.

"You've changed, my dear... In ancient times, you never resorted to such things, even when faced with the bitter end."

Mephisto was right. Accepting a power enhancement from Lizer's supernatural ability meant becoming his slave in a way. That's why I never chose that option. I trusted Lizer, but I could never shed the last remnants of my hypervigilance.

But I'd changed.

Now that we'd dueled in earnest and deepened our understanding for each other, I was able to make that choice without fear or hesitation.

"When all of this started, you made it clear that you thought compassion for others was a waste of time, nothing more than a facade. These powers I've gained are the counterargument."

After I was reborn as a typical nobody, I left footprints on the path I walked. My heightened strength was evidence of everything I'd learned on the way. I stood somewhere the lonely Demon Lord could never have reached.

"During the former final battle, I fought purely to dispel my hate. Any concern or animosity for those I fought alongside was irrelevant. I just wanted to make you suffer. That obsession consumed my mind. But this time...it's the opposite."

I readied my black sword without a speck of negative emotion. All that lived inside me now was a bond of pure love for my friends, and it filled my heart to the brim.

"Mephisto Yuu Phegor. I will kill you now, to save the future for my friends."

The devil favored my proclamation with a smile. "Now there's an expression I've never seen on your face before, my love. And it is indeed beautiful...but truly nauseating."

There was no telling where the jealousy in his golden eyes came from. I didn't

care to ask.

With a sharp exhale, I dashed for him. My outrageous strength split the ground, sending giant chunks of earth shooting into the sky. The waves of my steps broke the sound barrier and whipped up the devil's black hair.

"If you wanna roughhouse, I'm game."

Mephisto's hand summoned a pure white sword and charged. Our whirling blades met in a tango punctuated with violent castanets.

"Ha-ha! Good job, my sweet. Your skill exceeds expectations."

Not once had this devil's confidence ever faltered in all our skirmishes.

Until now.

"You're shaking, Mephisto."

It was only for an instant, but there was no mistaking it. He was beginning to fear me.

I've got this. I pressed on, filled with conviction.

The devil's smile never wavered. However, he went from gripping his weapon with one hand to two.

"Wow...you're pretty strong, my love."

"That's right. You aren't a worthy opponent anymore."

I pushed even harder, shoving him away. Mephisto sailed through the air, breaking his stance. I gave chase and...

"*Hahhh!*"

...slashed his delicate torso in two.

Naturally, Mephisto wouldn't go down that easily.

I had slashed all the way through his form, but he was still alive.

"This makes one hundred and twenty-eight times you've cut me now...and this one hurts more than all the others, my sweet."

His severed body reassembled itself. He stretched, reached his hands toward me, and shot out jet-black flames similar to Alvarto's. I quickly dodged them,

letting my momentum carry me into delivering a kick to his abdomen.

“Oof!”

Mephisto went flying with an anguished grunt. I attacked the airborne Mephisto once again. At least, I tried to. Unfortunately, I hesitated at the last moment. A jet-black aura radiating from Mephisto’s entire body stopped me in my tracks.

If I wasn’t careful, I’d die. I knew it. The pressure was almost suffocating.

Upon landing, Mephisto said, “Okay, I admit it. You’ve gotten stronger. Changing from Varvatos to Ard gave you new strength. But it’s given you a new weakness, too.”

Malice dripped into his beautiful smile. “I’ll admit that you’re powerful, but nothing more. I reject the sentiment behind it. I *refuse* to believe that your power comes from the bond with your friends. The idea is a fantasy...and now I’m going to show you I’m right, my darling.”

My schoolmates manifested in a circle around me, starting with Elrado.

“You monster...”

“Die...”

“Go to hell...”

Hatred burned in their eyes. A lust to kill thrummed in their hearts. When this battle first began, seeing them like this had shaken me. I’d barely been able to stand. Now, however...

“After everything I’ve been through...do you honestly think that’ll work?”

My spirit didn’t flinch.

“Such confidence! But how long will it last?”

They were coming for me. My school friends were coming to kill me.

And Elrado Spencer led their advance.

He rushed toward me, his fists balled up with magic heat energy, and screamed, “Die, Snowflake!”

I caught myself smiling as he hurled verbal and magic attacks at me. "Snowflake...that really takes me back, Elrado."

He'd called me the same thing the first time we'd fought, and that memory was surely etched in Elrado's mind. That's why he called me *Snowflake*. Even after Mephisto had corrupted his soul, Elrado's perception of me survived.

And with that knowledge as my shield, I took an offensive posture and said, "Let me show you what a *real* attack looks like."

I dodged my opponent with the slightest of movements, then struck. I pounded Elrado's cheek hard, without hesitation.

"Grahh!" Elrado cried as he flew into the air. The students behind him soon met the same fate. I pummeled them all with reckless abandon, tossing them into the air like twinkling stars.

Stunned by the unexpected sight, Mephisto's jaw dropped as he said, "Sweetie...what the hell are you playing at?"

"Just using a little body language to communicate. Why?"

"But they're your friends... Don't you care about them?"

"What a stupid question. My friends are far more precious than my life. Everybody knows that."

"Um...but you just slugged those precious friends. What are you thinking?"

As I gave the berserk students rushing toward me the gift of my fists, I answered, "Nothing."

"Wheh?!"

"I'm not thinking anything."

"Uhh..."

I snorted at the devil's utterly perplexed expression and said, "You've seen everything leading to this moment, right? You should understand. You should know I've stopped letting myself get in my head."

Whack. Whack. Whack.

I was deforming my classmates' faces, but I didn't care. I imbued my fists with

love and punched them all without question.

“This is what I should’ve done all along. I should have just trusted them. I should have trusted that I was etched into their souls. Their malice and bloodlust is only a mask, so I have no reason to doubt. I don’t even have a need to scream or beg them to return to normal.”

I took a step closer to Mephisto, punching away every school friend who tried to stop me.

“My darling...I don’t understand your reasoning. It’s just too illogical.”

“Yeah, I guess it is. And you probably never will.”

Whether their minds were corrupted or not, they were still my friends. On the surface, it looked like we were fighting...but our souls were connected. All I needed was to cherish that conviction. Everything else could be thrown away. My one task was to walk with my eyes facing forward.

Honestly, I was doing my best to emulate my unrivaled best friend, Lydia.

“I see... I’m fighting the Demon Lord *and* the hero...”

All traces of confidence vanished from the devil’s face. And at that same moment...

“Ar...d...”

...I saw another miracle. Elrado, collapsed on the ground behind Mephisto, struggled to his feet.

“Urrraaahhh!!!”

He leaped at the devil with a roar, pinning his arms behind his back.

“Do it! Kill him! Ard!”

Elrado. Elrado Spencer.

I lived in his heart. Memories of me. Of our friendship.

That’s how he’d broken free of Mephisto’s curse...and given me a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

“Mmff?!”

The devil's beautiful face contorted in fear. Elrado had created the perfect chance. I could do this.

This will work. The final move.

I kicked off the ground with all my might and raced forward.

"Sink into darkness, body and soul! Mephisto Yuu Phegor!"

I killed him. In my heart, I knew it.

He killed me. In Mephisto's heart, he knew it.

"This...can't be happening."

Despair filled his golden eyes. In the next moment, everything would end.

The devil and I would both disappear from this world.

Yet just before we met our end, memories flashed before me like a kaleidoscope.

So much had happened after my reincarnation.

Looking back on my life, I saw that Ard Meteor was never really a typical nobody. I had no regrets, though.

That turbulent life led me to meet so many wonderful people.

May their futures be blessed.

With that final thought, I beheld my nemesis with steeled resolve and— "Just kidding. ☆"

His eyes, once filled with despair, filled with devilish delight.

In that moment, I had an epiphany.

Everything and everyone were in the palm of his hand, dancing like marionettes.

Elrado had never returned to his former self.

He relaxed his muscles, releasing my nemesis. And in that moment, my once-in-a-lifetime opportunity crumbled like a mirage...

This was the worst possible outcome.

“Not quite, sweetie.”

The next thing I knew, I was lying facedown on the ground. I couldn’t lift a finger.

No...I won’t let this be the end.

My plan was perfect... At least I thought it was.

The Bangle of Devouring. The combat buff from Lizer. My entire life.

I’d used up everything. And now...

“Just swinging your fists madly around won’t bring you a victory, my dear. After all, I haven’t even used a quarter of my power yet.”

As Mephisto assaulted me with the truth, he knelt before me, hunched over, and tousled my hair.

“The fate of the world...the future of your friends...throw all those trivial thoughts away. Only look at me, my darling. For when you do...”

A smile lingered on Mephisto’s lips. But his eyes... His passionate golden eyes beseeched me.

“...then victory will be yours. And at the same time, I will win this farewell game.”

CHAPTER 118

The Ex-Nobody Renews His Vow

I want to know defeat.

I'd held steadfastly to that wish until the end of my life as the Demon Lord. At the time, I lived only to grant the wishes of those I'd lost, and it had filled me with loneliness.

A world without pain, a utopia where everyone always smiled, couldn't exist.

One person's good fortune was another's misfortune. That was a fundamental law of society.

However, I just couldn't resign myself to that truth.

Because I'd promised them.

I'd promised those departed that I'd let their regrets drive me. Ultimately, that brought about my descent into madness.

Heroes rose to stop me, comrades who once fought by my side.

I slaughtered them all.

And as I clashed with each of my former comrades one by one, my soul withered away.

That's why I longed for defeat.

Please...somebody stop me.

Break my body beyond recognition...and take my hand.

Just like Lydia. Please, somebody, guide me to the right path.

My dearest wish was never granted.

From an outsider's perspective, the Demon Lord deserved to be alone.

Yet I believed my isolation wasn't to be written off as something I deserved.

Mephisto Yuu Phegor. That devil stole everything from me.

If not for him, I wouldn't have lost anything.

My most loyal comrades, my beloved best friend—I never would've been separated from any of them.

Each time somebody left me, the devil cackled.

"I'm the only one who will never abandon you, my dear."

The words haunted me without end.

I feared that same motive had fueled this very battle.

As I sneered at Mephisto and he merrily sipped his tea, I realized the truth.

"La-la-la-la."

He hummed, smiling sweetly, like a young maiden in love. His face truly was beautiful, but I found it nauseatingly hideous.

"Care to tell me what's so funny, Mephisto Yuu Phegor?"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, like you don't knowww!"

The devil threw his head back and laughed. I wanted to drive my fist into his face.

I tried to move, desperate to grant the wish that surfaced from the depths of my heart.

Yet I couldn't move. I no longer controlled my body. So I sat there at the table with a devil, forced to chat.

".....This is torture. One-of-a-kind torture."

"Awww, there you go again, baby, playing hard to get. We both know deep down you *love* it."

I wanted to kill him. Or at least be allowed to die. Mephisto wouldn't permit either, though.

He didn't want to kill his enemy or die.

If anything, his was truly an optimistic sort of ambition.

“Ohhh, that’s my honey. You really do understand me.”

“Stop reading my mind...you’re making me sick.”

My angry thoughts traveled to the devil like whispered nothings in a lover’s ear. Mephisto smiled bashfully at my curses. “It really is you. It has to be you. I had hopes for Ireena, but regrettably, she’s just too green. She’s not strong enough yet to withstand my might.”

“.....So that’s why it has to be me?”

“Yup. Because you won’t break. Your mind and your body are indestructible.”

There was a hint of melancholy in Mephisto’s smile. It was a loneliness that only those with overwhelming power understood.

There was a single person capable of comprehending his loneliness and rescuing him from it.

I refused to accept that, though. Even if it was true, I couldn’t bring myself to accept it.

However...I knew for certain that was the key.

To win this battle and to give everyone a future, I needed to make a tough decision.

I needed to embrace a path more difficult than sacrificing my life. We’d be at a stalemate forever, otherwise.

“Aww, looks like you’ve figured it out, my dear.” Mephisto giggled, taking a sip of tea. “You are truly precious, the way you muse over two options. I really do love the way you look when you’re perplexed.”

“...Piss off, you stupid worm.” After snarling a curse, I took a deep breath in and released it slowly. I pictured the faces of my friends.

They’d probably come back to fight. I wondered how they’d react to the ending that would follow. I hoped they wouldn’t be upset with the only future I could give them.

“Y’know,” I began. “I never should’ve been born. Same goes for you.”

“Yeah. I couldn’t agree more.”

Suppressing the urge to vomit over our moment of agreement, I looked up at the sky. "Guess this is the end of the road for me."



His best friend slept in his arms. Disaster Rogue glanced at her peaceful face, his thoughts drifting to the other version of himself.

He and Ard Meteor were the same person. However, there was one significant difference.

One was a man in the middle of a story. The other had reached his story's end.

That caused a great difference in the way they thought.

Thus, Rogue believed that Ard Meteor's choice was a grave error.

"He ordered me to protect you...so I agreed. And yet..."

Now I think it was wrong to listen.

The shared sense that came from being the same person brought tidings of his end.

"So, in the end, we're both failures," he muttered.

"Nn...mm..."

As Ireena started to wake, Rogue froze, as did his comrades.

They were in the middle of a field. The campus-turned-battlefield and the capital city that held it were already far in the distance.

They'd all run nonstop to get there. In silence. Only running.

Surely, that was because they were all in mental turmoil.

Is this really for the best?

Sprinting was all they could do to shake off that thought.

They'd stopped at the first reason they were given.

Ireena Olhyde blinked her eyes open in Rogue's arms.

"A-Ard?!" she cried, looking up at the man carrying her.

When Rogue saw the look of relief wash over her young, pretty face, he wanted to say yes. But instead...

"I am...Disaster Rogue. Not Ard Meteor."

...he told the truth.

The intense guilt and self-loathing wouldn't let him say what he wanted.

I am no longer her best friend. I'm just a failure, nothing more. I failed to protect her, so I'm no longer worthy.

He fed himself these curses as he looked down at Ireena.

She looked around, a wrinkle between her brows, and folded her arms. Ireena clearly wished to say something. She was probably trying to analyze and understand the situation. Upon taking everything in, she paused for a breath and said, "I know what happened. Ard sacrificed himself to save us."

She clenched her fist and gritted her teeth. Elzard was the first to speak to her.

"None of us like the decision, but...it was the only way."

Alvarto and Lizer nodded.

"He tried to preserve his hopes for the future."

"We need to accept it and move on."

Olivia, Ginny, and Sylphy held their silence. They'd all been tempted to reject Ard's choice. However, they'd convinced themselves that accepting his decision was the only recourse.

No matter how the three justified it, they'd abandoned Ard. That fact hadn't changed. And that knowledge rendered them incapable of giving an opinion on the matter. They understood this and so remained silent with anguished expressions.

Ireena didn't comment on the group's opinions. Instead, she watched the sky. "You know...for the first time in my life, I want to punch Ard," she whispered, clenching her fist. "You're just gonna sacrifice yourself for us? Don't give me that crap... Is your trust in us really that shallow?"

Rogue sympathized with Ireena. She was right. Ultimately, Ard didn't trust his friends. He claimed he trusted them, and he acted accordingly to prove it.

However, his love and attachment for his friends convinced him that he needed to protect them all, even if it meant sacrificing his own life.

His selfless spirit was a beautiful thing, superficially. Yet beneath the surface, there lay a hubris that should've been ridiculed.

Deep in his heart, he looked down on others, refusing to rely on anyone.

"Why didn't you ask us to help you fight?"

How dare you carry all the burden yourself? It's like a slap in the face to your friends.

The next thing she knew, Ireena was screaming, releasing her rage that had nowhere to go.

"WAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

Her angry shriek echoed around the group. The long, anguished sound was a manifestation of everything Ireena had been keeping inside.

"Phew...that felt good." Ireena swiftly collected herself once she was done. "Okay, guys, let's go beat up Ard."

She looked at her friends, hands on her hips. A chorus of bewildered faces stared back.

Undoubtedly, they believed that Ard's sacrifice meant that the fight was already over.

Ireena vehemently refused.

"Nobody can make it to their destination if they choose the wrong path. Ard's gonna fail. I wouldn't be surprised if Mephisto's already got the upper hand."

From the perspective of most of the others, Ireena's statement sounded like wishful thinking, an excuse to go back.

However, Rogue knew the truth.

I was right... Ireena sees through Ard Meteor like glass. She understands him fully.

Guess I shouldn't be surprised. They are best friends.

Ard took care never to let his admiration or special feelings for her show, but that didn't change the facts.

Rogue calmly told Ireena the truth. "You're right. He lost to Mephisto moments ago."

All faces tensed at the revelation, but only for a moment.

They quickly realized what they had to do, and accepted it.

"So, we retreated...only to turn around and go back."

"It's a bad look, but oh well."

"We can't defeat Mephisto without Ard Meteor. Thus, we'll need to storm into enemy territory again—that is undeniable. However..." Lizer put a hand on his chin. His eyes went to Rogue. "I really hope you're not suggesting that we lay siege without a plan. You do have one, don't you?"

"Of course," Rogue answered. "I've got measures in place. But...I can't share them."

It was an unscrupulous declaration worthy of outrage. Any sensible person would've refused to risk their life for a secret plan.

However...no one objected. They all trusted Rogue.

They all trusted Ard Meteor.

"I see. Then we need not hesitate," Lizer said.

"Indeed...," Olivia added.

Elzard sighed. "Dammit, I knew that guy was hopeless without us."

"Stop acting like you know him, lizard brain. You two aren't even that close."

"Let's all work together to bring Ard home," Ginny said.

"Great! I've been itching to have a good brawl! Don'cha agree, Sis?!"

Theirs was a battle of almost certain death, yet there wasn't a trace of weakness or despair in them.

As he beheld this group of friends, Rogue muttered, "Well, Ard Meteor...looks

like you made the same mistake I did."

How had he become a failure?

The question had haunted him since he'd lost everything.

Now the answer shone before him as clear as day.

I tried to protect them, up until the bitter end.

All because I looked down on them.

The proof was in what I never managed to say.

Those two words.

"Help me." Had I been capable of saying that, then perhaps...

He and Ard Meteor had been so foolish.

They were so adamant about protecting everyone that they'd made fatal mistakes.

In the end, Rogue was yet another person who approved of Ard's choice.

They all knew that staying with him was the right choice, yet they hadn't.

Ireena would lead the charge to correct that mistake.

This had been the right decision all along.

Ard Meteor. We are both small-minded men who couldn't let go of our intellects.

That's why we need them.

We need a bunch of idiots standing by our side.

Idiots like Lydia.

And major idiots like Ireena.

Rogue looked at Ireena, comparing her to his former best friend. She met his gaze.

"Let's go, Ard!"

She reached out with her right hand.

The sight of this called to mind something from Rogue's past. He swallowed the words on the tip of his tongue and averted his eyes. "I am...not Ard Mete—"

"No, you're Ard. Make no mistake." Ireena cupped Rogue's cheeks in her hands, forcing him to look her in the eye. "You just remembered the day we met, right?"



His eyes went wide. She was dead right.

Smiling softly at Rogue, Ireena said, “You shouldn’t shake with the left one. I didn’t mess it up this time! So praise me!”

As he beheld her cherubic little face, Rogue felt his face soften into a smile. “Seriously...I’ll never be as good as you, Ireena.”

“Well, *duh!* I’m your super-best friend, Ard! I understand you better than anybody!”

Rogue had a thought he hadn’t experienced in a long while. *Ireena is seriously cute.*

Awash in a wave of nostalgia, Rogue had a revelation.

As long as she is here, this world will always be peaceful.

The world will survive, even without the Demon Lord’s powers.

Relief filled Rogue’s heart. His lips parted.

“Let’s go. It’s time to end this.”

CHAPTER 119

The Ex-Nobody and the Mayhem Before the Final Battle

Rogue's proposed strategy was a full-frontal assault.

The group would turn back the way they'd come and charge the capital. They'd keep pushing to the academy and face Mephisto.

It was straightforward and incredibly reckless, yet no one complained. They trusted Disaster Rogue, of course, but no one could think of anything better, either.

They were up against an Evil God, the most powerful of all evils.

There would be no typical confrontation or covert victory. This fight promised to be the strangest in existence.

Such was the strategy entrusted to the group by the former Demon Lords, Ard and Rogue.

"I can see the capital..." Rogue said.

The party's destination awaited just beyond the field.

"The road so far has been quite easy—*too* easy," Lizer remarked.

Alvarto nodded. "Yeah. Mephisto would never let us get to him without a challenge."

As though the devil had been waiting for that comment, his voice suddenly boomed all around them.

"Hey, guys! Thanks for coming back.

"You attack one minute, then retreat the next. Make up your mind!"

"Each time we repeat the dance, it gets less exhilarating—it's no fun.

"So let's make this fight the last one.

“If you fail, there won’t be any do-overs. A final match—fair and square.

“Either I disappear, or your future gets crushed.

“Winner takes all. Sound good?”

The moment they heard his voice, panic surged through them. Mephisto chuckled.

“There’s a proper order for everything. An opening act always precedes the champion match, right?

“So anyway, I’ve prepared a lovely opening act for you crazy kids.

“If you make it through, be sure to pay me a visit.

“I’ll be waiting with my honey by my side.”

No sooner did the one-sided conversation end...

...than monsters spawned before the group.

The creatures filled the route leading back to the academy. Their incredible numbers buried the road completely. Similarly, the sky was dyed black by the sheer number of flying monsters.

However, none of Ard’s friends showed any fear. If anything, their courage burned brighter.

Sylphy snorted. “Hah! This’ll make a perfect warm-up for the final battle!”

“Let’s give them hell, Ginny!”

“Yes, let’s, Miss Ireena!”

The three girls took off. Ireena and Sylphy brandished their Holy Swords, while Ginny readied her crimson spear. They cut through the monsters effortlessly. Simply put, it was a rampage.

As he watched, Rogue said to Elzard, “You okay?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“You want to join those girls...don’t you?”

Elzard didn’t answer. She couldn’t. In truth, she did wish to join them, but she lacked the courage.

Alvarto chuckled at her. “Damn, you sure suck at making friends, you *alligator*.”

“Excuse me?! You’re one to talk, you little—”

“Miss Ireena! Above you!”

Ireena was in danger. A dragon was diving at her from above. Ginny and Sylphy had their hands full with the monsters on the ground. They wouldn’t get to her on time. Ireena was doomed.

Elzard took off.

“Keep your damn hands off her!!!”

She lunged fast enough to break the sound barrier.

Following a flash of light, the tip of her summoned dragon bone blade slashed the small dragon in two.

Elzard grabbed Ireena with one arm to pull her up and out from where the falling corpse would land.

“Um...you okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Elzard.”

“Hmph... Whatever. It’s not like I *wanted* to save you. That little shit just rubbed me the wrong way. Don’t get the wrong idea.” Elzard’s words turned hostile as she lowered Ireena to the ground.

“Hey, are you okay? Your face is awfully red.”

“What?! I’m obviously *not* blushing!”

“Uh, but you look as red as a boiled octopus.”

“Nn—nnnn—ooh, shut up! D-don’t get distracted from the fight!” Elzard fired a thick light beam at the swarm of approaching monsters and screamed, “C’mon, let’s wipe the floor with these weaklings! J-just you...and me!”

“Of course! I’d love to, Elzard!”

“!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” The Frenzied King of Dragons’ face flushed a darker shade. “W-well, okay, if I *have* t-t-t-to! T-twist my a-a-a-a-rm!”

Thus did the curtain open on *Unilateral Annihilation*, the one-woman show starring Elzard.

“...I’ve got to look good for her.”

It was the epitome of crushing violence. On the ground. In the sky. In the space between. Elzard overwhelmed everything with more magic circles than could be counted.

“*Scatter, peons!!!*”

A shower of fire rained down.

The monsters that blotted out the air were incinerated by high-level destructive magic. Creatures burst into blue flame and winked out of existence. It was truly a masterpiece.

Irenea looked very impressed by the display. “Wow, Elzard! That’s *awesome!*”

“!!!!!!! M-mere child’s play! Just wait till you see me at my best—you’ll lose your mind!”

The Frenzied King of Dragons was showboating. Her destruction grew to new heights with each passing moment.

“Oh, wow! I’m so glad you’re on my side now!”

“You...you consider me an ally?”

“Of course I do! One who’s always got my back!”

“.....S-so, do you think of me as a f...f...f-f-f...friend...? Do you—do you think of me as a...friend?”

“Of course I do! We’re fighting side by side, aren’t we?! We’re totally friends.”

“.....Heh-heh.”

The Frenzied King of Dragons’ excitement rocketed through the stratosphere. Her untamed rage spread like wildfire, an embodiment of her uncontrollable elation.

Meanwhile, the Four Heavenly Kings watched from the ground.

“Ugh...she’s kind of upsetting my stomach,” Lizer groaned.

“Indeed...I feel sick,” Alvarto said.

“What he said,” Olivia added.

Despite their discomfort, Elzard fought on heroically. And when the dust cleared, she had leveled the entire army of monsters.

“There! Let’s go, guys! And hurry!”

The Frenzied King of Dragons now led the charge, a sparkling smile on her face.

Although he followed after, Alvarto repeated, “I feel sick...”

Everyone shared the sentiment except for Ireena.

Nonetheless, the way had been cleared by Elzard’s hand. A few skirmishes broke out along the way, but the group made it to the capital without any issues.

“This is odd,” Lizer remarked.

Rogue nodded. “Yeah, that was too easy.”

Olivia also felt nervous. “He’s surely scheming at something...”

They followed the main street, locals attacking them as they went.

“Does he really think this is enough to shake us?” Rogue sighed as he punched one of the dominated citizens from the mob unconscious. It didn’t sit well with him to attack innocent bystanders, but it was hardly anything serious. This was nothing more than a little light harassment.

“Don’t get cocky, Rogue. This is just part of the opening act,” Alvarto chided.

Rogue nodded as he knocked out another citizen. “Right... He’s absolutely going to hit us with a surprise.”

Unfortunately, Rogue could only guess what that surprise might be. He racked his brain as the group pushed through to the center of the capital.

“Just a little farther, and we’ll be at the academy!” Ireena cried.

“I only hope we can get there in one piece...,” Ginny said.

Sylphy laughed. “No problem! No matter what stands in our way, nothing can

stop us!"

"True. After all, you have *me* with you. I'm Ireena's f...f-f-f...friend—Ireena's friend is here! Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh..."

Compared to the upbeat quartet of girls, Rogue and the present former Four Heavenly Kings were ill at ease.

"If he plans to surprise us...it's got to be soon," Alvarto noted.

"Yes...I'd assume so," Lizer replied.

"Or perhaps he wants to lure us into a false sense of security, then catch us once we reach the school," Olivia posited.

Rogue was about to voice his own thoughts but was interrupted. Alvarto's prediction had proved correct.

As they made their way through the city square, a bolt of lightning shot out from the group's blind spot. The straightforward attack abandoned all ornamentation. Still, a hit would prove lethal. That's just how intense the attack was.

Rogue, who noticed it first, shouted "*Mega Wall!*" and erected a magic barrier. The lightning collided with the hemispherical membrane just as it finished forming.

Rogue was an alternate Ard Meteor, but his combat powers exceeded the other's nearly two to one. Yet his extra-powerful barrier still cracked slightly from the lightning bolt's impact.

"Guess I shouldn't be surprised... This is classic Mephisto Yuu Phegor. Truly crafty."

The moment Rogue realized who'd attacked, his expression tensed, as did Ireena's. The confidence and optimism flowing through her only a moment ago evaporated, leaving behind bewilderment on her sweet, innocent face.

For the one who'd attacked them was...

"Daddy?"

...Ireena's father, Weiss Olhyde.

He wasn't alone, either.

"The Heroic Baron and the Great Mages—the gang's all here," Rogue said, grimacing.

Weiss Olhyde was joined by Jack and Carla Meteor, Ard's parents post-reincarnation. The trio had formed a line to block the way.

"Face us, you abominations."

"You'll go no farther."

"Not as long as we're still standing, that is."

The trio was under Mephisto's *Corruption* spell, and their powers had been enhanced. Seeing them in such a state left Ireena stunned. Her mouth fell open, ready to scream. She swallowed the scream down, however.

"Daddy, Uncle Jack, Auntie Carla...I'm so sorry, I mean it."

She had to attack them to rescue Ard and bring this battle to an end. It didn't matter who stood in her way, she needed to keep going.

Ireena's eyes shone with a steely resolve.

"If I'm being honest, I wish I could return to you normal. But...I don't have the time. I hope you understand."

Her only recourse was to knock them out and keep moving. Ireena drew her Holy Sword, Vald-Galgulus.

Weiss's gaze locked onto his daughter. "*Fly, Tempest Blade.*" He attacked without hesitation. His invisible wind blade signaled the start of combat.

Ireena's primal instincts kicked in, helping her dodge the unseen magic attack. Her comrades dispersed in all directions to get to safety.

"I could do this all day!"

"We won't let you counterattack!"

Jack and Carla sent a shower of elemental attacks down on the group. Dodging the assault from his mother and father, Rogue muttered, "Their attacks may look plain...but they hold deadly firepower."

It was truly bothersome. Being powerful mages, they didn't waste any energy when casting offensive spells. The plainness of their attacks was a testament to their polished mastery.

"You are contemporary heroes, nothing more." Alvarto loosed a remotely cast *Attack* spell. A magic circle appeared beneath Weiss, Jack, and Carla and erupted into a pillar of fire. The white-hot flames swallowed the three.

"Hey, Alexandra."

"What, lizard brain?"

"Don't play it cool if you can't deliver. It's kinda pathetic. Hilarious."

The fire enveloping Weiss, Jack, and Carla vanished as soon as Elzard finished mocking Alvarto.

"That won't work on us."

With a daring grin on his face, Jack patted the faint wisps of smoke from his clothes. The other two looked much the same. None of them had taken any damage.

At this, Olivia said, "Well...guess there's no need to use discretion anymore." Despite her cold expression, a vortex of conflicted feelings churned within her. These were her former pupils, after all. "You little punks... Even after graduation, you still give me a headache." Olivia sighed, thinking back on their school days.

Beside her, Lizer calmly remarked, "Killing them should be easy. However, it will come with a price."

There was no mercy in the grizzled old general. Every action he took was logical. It didn't matter that these opponents were family to his friends. He would kill them without reservation if he deemed it necessary. And that's exactly why Lizer hesitated.

"Even if we make it through this ordeal...if we lose the next one, it will have all been for nothing."

Everyone agreed. At present, they had two options. The first was to defeat these enemies. Just as Ireena had declared, they'd march on and topple

everyone in their path... Ideally, that would've been best, but it wasn't realistic.

Knocking their enemies unconscious instead of killing them wasn't viable. However...

"If we kill them, that may impact us negatively during our fight with Mephisto."

...Lizer understood. Rogue and Ireena would be their greatest weapons during the final stand against the devil. If Jack and Carla—his parents—died, Rogue would still maintain a level of emotional stability. Sacrificing someone for a greater good had become commonplace for him. Killing his parents wouldn't shake his heart.

Ireena was different.

"Ireena Olhyde—are you confident you can retain your sanity after killing your father?"

She didn't answer Lizer's question. She was incapable of answering. Sweat trickled down her brow. The look on her face was all the reply anyone needed.

"If we lose one of our two wings, we will surely fail," Lizer said.

"Are you suggesting we talk to them and find a way to restore them?" Alvarto asked.

"That would be best. Unfortunately..."

"We'd use up a lot of magic," Alvarto finished. The enemy had plenty of power to spare, which revealed the devil's intent. "It takes time and energy to free people from the *Corruption* spell, and that will put us in a bad spot when facing Mephisto."

Whatever choice they made would determine their fate, and that's precisely what the devil was after. If they killed the corrupted, Ireena would lose heart, and they would lose. If they restored the corrupted, they'd expend too much power and lose. On the surface, there appeared to be two distinct choices, but they led to the same outcome.

Elzard was fuming. "Seriously, that guy is such a dick!"

Rogue furrowed his brow. "This is usually the way Mephisto fights. He backs

you into a corner and forces you to choose between terrible options. To break through and win, you have to create a third choice.”

Unfortunately, no clear alternative presented itself. What would spare them from overexertion and psychological trauma? Did such a choice even exist?

“It’s cool, guys, I’ve got this.”

A new voice entered the deliberation. Its clear and beautiful tones could only belong to one person.

“Verda?!”

Rogue’s eyes went wide in shock.

Countless black holes opened up everywhere, spawning swarms of indescribable monsters. And the moment they spotted their enemies—the present-day heroes—they rushed to attack.

“Dammit!”

“Wh-what *are* these things?!”

“Goodness, how disgusting!”

Although the creatures were weak, they attacked as a massive swarm. Empowered though they were, the heroes would struggle to handle the onslaught.

While Weiss, Jack, and Carla struggled, a new black hole formed in the air. From it emerged...

“Heya, guys...”

...Verda Al-Hazard. She wore an awkward look.

Her eyes were red and swollen, like she’d been crying until a second ago. She could hardly be in top emotional shape, yet she’d come anyway.

For her friends.

“Go to him. I’ll hold these guys back for you. C’mon.”

Their third option had arrived. Seizing upon it was the only way forward, even though everyone saw the worry in Verda’s eyes.

“Thanks, Verda.” Rogue kicked off the ground, dashing off.

“Sure.”

Olivia nodded at Verda. “See you later...”

“Sure.”

The rest of the party followed suit, each member offering a quick word of gratitude.

“Hey, come back here!”

“You’re supposed to fight us!”

A small explosion kept Jack from trying to stop the group from escaping. It wasn’t life-threatening, but proved just strong enough to keep him where he stood.

Rogue, Ireena, and the others hadn’t used up their strength or suffered any trauma. Verda watched them disappear into the distance.

“Will they be angry? Or...will they be sad?”

They were leaving her. Vanishing.

The sight of their shrinking forms felt like an omen.

Melancholy gathered in Verda’s chest.

“What the hell am I even doing?”



The fight between Verda Al-Hazard and the trio of heroes was a veritable quagmire.

“Dammit...! There’s just no end to the little buggers!”

The infinite army spewing from the black holes had the heroes completely cornered. Verda, meanwhile, slowly grew lost in thought.

Why am I even doing this...?

Why did I even come here...?

What am I even thinking...?

Her feelings had felt plugged up since separating from Mephisto.

She didn't feel like doing anything.

She was about to lose her father, and she wouldn't be able to stop it.

The notion festered in her soul like poison, and pessimistic malaise brought the gears of her brain to a standstill.

However, that's why she was here, even though she shouldn't have been able to act.

It was incomprehensible, even to Verda.

At some point, she'd arrived here and said, "I've got this."

"I don't get it... I don't understand myself... But..."

I don't care.

Before long, something entirely unexpected occurred.

"Urr-YAHHHHHH!!!"

Jack burst through the threshold with a scream. It was berserk magic that enraged the psyche, robbing the caster of the ability to distinguish friend from foe. In exchange, it increased Jack's combat power dramatically.

The magic greatly damaged the mind and body, meaning it could only be used in a single battle. Jack had spent his ace in the hole to smash through the endless army.

"GRAAAAAAAAHHH!!!"

His destructive power overtook the monsters' spawning rate. The majesty of it all was nothing short of astonishing...but even more surprising was the man's ability to retain some sense of self, even in his enraged state.

"This enhancement...didn't come from Master's *Corruption* spell. This man must be suppressing the madness with the mental strength he had pre-corruption."

Ordinarily, Verda would've found that fascinating and conjured up all sorts of experiments to run on Jack. Yet no curiosity sparked her interest.

“Urrr-YAHHHHHH!!!”

Jack was coming at her. While brandishing two swords in a flailing dance, he cut through the swaths of monsters. If Verda didn’t retreat or fight back, she would die.

That’s why she kept still.

“I just don’t care anymore... *Nothing* matters.”

She’d stopped the heroes and fulfilled her duty. Rogue’s party had surely reached Mephisto by now.

Her death wouldn’t burden anyone.

So Verda accepted it.

She accepted the death rushing at her.

This was why she’d come here.

“Gee... What a shitty life.”

The berserker brought his weapons to bear on her.

And during the moment it took to cut her body in half...

...in the blink of an eye...

...time stretched to an eternity.

A kaleidoscope in her brain.

As her life played out in her mind...

...Verda’s heart winced with a unique agony.

I was born to the worst parents ever.

I kept searching for a love that could never be mine.

It all led to a chance encounter with the devil.

And then, though he was a being I should have rejected, I loved him.

I saw him as my true father, knowing it was wrong.

Verda’s days with Mephisto were intense, but genuinely joyous.

They were both outcasts, free from the chains of rationality. As long as he was in her life, she could be happy. She wouldn't reject him, even though she was fated to be harmed by his twisted soul.

Dying because of him wouldn't have bothered me at all.

But he made me leave. He said we'd never see each other again.

And if that's how it has to be, then it's over.

"I have no reason to live."

The blades passed through Verda's head, and she relaxed into the white flash.

Yet before she met her end...

"You really are hopeless, you know?"

...a voice echoed in her mind, kicking her body into action.

Escape.

Escape the blade cutting through your body. Escape the death you desire.

She jumped backward.

"Mmf...!"

Verda didn't know why she moved. The action had been entirely subconscious.

To her surprise, it wasn't a one-time phenomenon, either.

"Gii-YAAAAAH!!!"

She evaded a second, third, and fourth time.

As death came for her, Verda dodged over and over.

Each time she narrowly skirted death, voices roared in her mind.

"Verda... Where the hell did you put my sweet potato?"

Olivia vel Vine, a paragon of stoicism. Seeing her face turn bright red with anger was more fun than Verda could handle.

"That potion of eternal youth you invented. If a child drinks it to stop their growth, could they still be called a child if they reached the chronological age of

an adult? I wish to hear your reasoning on this."

Lizer Bellphoenix, lauded as a general of unparalleled wisdom. The somber ridiculousness he exhibited at times made Verda laugh herself to pieces.

"Bwah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Dang, you're certainly eloquent! I could never—never hold a candle to you! Bwah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-----and now I'll kill you."

Alvarto Egzex. Peeling off his layers of vanity after thoroughly making a fool of him was such a genuine delight.

"I wanted to discuss the theory you presented the other day."

"It was truly intriguing."

"I've decided to hold a lecture demonstration on it. Would you consider providing commentary?"

Varvatos.

He was quite an amusing person. One worthy of observation.

Verda understood why her master considered him an unrivaled friend and stuck to him like glue. He was like an empty vessel. A vacant weapon. Watching someone like him gain one thing and lose another in so doing shook Verda's soul.

Okay, I get it now.

My life...

Verda smiled as she ducked beneath Jack's blades.

The voices roaring through her mind lit a fire in her heart.

My life...

My life was...

It was terrible at times...

But at least...it was anything but dull...

Even a wretch like me knew many wonderful friends...

Friends met in ancient times.

Friends met in the present era.

“Lady Verda! Would you please stop giving Ginny love potions!”

“Why, Miss Ireena, forgive me if I’m misremembering, but didn’t you inquire with Lady Verda about love potions just the other day?”

“W-well, that was...a potion for staying up! Yes! I was going to use it to study for exams!”

Ireena Olhyde and Ginny Salvan.

Amusing girls born in a boring era.

Seriously...what a wide variety of people. We met...we parted ways...

And if I was asked if it was all for nothing...

...I’d have to say no.

They’re still here. Inside me.

My friendship with all of them remains.

Suddenly, she found herself picturing her master’s face.

Behind that cursed smile...was a father’s compassion.

“I don’t want to break you. I want you to be happy, if at all possible.”

That was his hidden message.

Verda accepted it with all her heart.

“I understand now, Master... I know that a world without you will be dreadfully boring. But...”

I think I’ll try living just a bit longer.

Verda shut all the black holes.

The monsters restraining Weiss and Carla vanished.

Verda leaped backward to put distance between herself and Jack.

“For I seek it. I laugh in the face of mayhem.”

And she began the chant for her *Original*.

Her eyes sparkled.

“There is a fine line between wise and foolish. Dancing in the gap between joy and pain, I shall keep blowing the horn.”

Sensing danger, Jack, Carla, and Weiss charged at Verda in a unified assault, yet they never reached her.

As soon as Jack took his first step, he realized he was facing the opposite direction. Carla's and Weiss's spells were flying through the air. They'd transformed into lollipops, marshmallows, and other treats and were scattering every which way.

“In the presence of the Almighty, all creation is—nope, I'm tired of doing things by the book. Starting now, let's let loose and let it fly!”

There was a change in the atmosphere. A rainbow-colored mist surrounded Verda. Strange music began to play.

“I'm smart! I'm freaking powerful! I'm a super bitch who can do anything! In conclusion...”

Verda Al-Hazard screamed the final line of her invocation with a smile on her face.

“I am a god! Twilight Zone!!!”

Rebirth was the best description for the phenomenon.

The surroundings warped into that of another world.

This was no longer the town square of the capital.

Verda had moved the fight to a bizarre wonderland of dreams.



“Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la. ♪ La-la-la-la-la! La-la-la-la-la. ♪”

Her tune was discordant and indescribable. The residents of dreamland danced in a frenzy to the rhythm of the driving beat. There were mice on two legs—or perhaps tanuki. No, maybe they were hippopotamuses. It was all incomprehensible. Merely standing in this realm induced madness.

Verda spread her arms, and sang, “You see, I’ve been interested in you crazy kids for a very long time. You defeated a revived Evil God. Where did those powers even come from? Well, this is a great opportunity to find out—so let’s do it.”

Verda spun like a top. After making a show of how dizzy she was, which was her own fault, she added, “If nobody’s dead when the dust settles, it’s all good, baby! Even if your psyches get smashed to pieces a couple of times and your bodies get mixed up and transformed, we’re golden if you’re back to normal by the end! I’m gonna have a lot of fun! You hear that, Ireena and Var?”

Then, for some reason, she did a bridge cartwheel. As Verda beheld the world upside down, she declared, “Okay, guys. Let’s get your lives back.”

CHAPTER 120

Fight with the Evil God *Pre-Battle*

They're coming.

They're almost here.

Undoubtedly, I wasn't the only one who sensed as much.

"Well...guess our little teatime together is over."

He gulped down the rest of his tea and set down the cup.

A moment later...

...jet-black flames swallowed him.

It was Alvarto's attack.

The jet-black hellfire consumed the body and spirit alike.

Anyone who touched it had their very existence extinguished.

But that only applied to ordinary people.

This was Mephisto Yuu Phegor. Even a critical hit was of no consequence to that devil.

"You always were one for intense greetings."

He was alive and well.

Mephisto was irritatingly unscathed.

That didn't seem to trouble anyone, though.

My friends stared him down.

Ireena, speaking as though she were the group's representative, declared, "We've come to rescue you, Ard."

Her voice was bold, her expression valiant.

A soft smile formed on my face.

What an intense posture. She betrayed no fear or anxiousness. Her heart was host only to unyielding determination and limitless courage.

Ireena nearly seemed the spitting image of Lydia. Actually, she surpassed her.

Although impressed by Ireena, I was unable to say anything to her. My body was under Mephisto's control.

I couldn't thank everyone for coming to rescue me or stop them from going through with this reckless assault.

I was helpless.

"You'll have your turn in the spotlight a bit later, my dear. Have fun spectating in the meantime."

Mephisto stood from his chair and approached my friends. "If I was your average self-assured meathead, I'd probably be delighted to face such a powerful group. But I'm not. If anything, I detest contests of brute strength. They're savage, lack all class, and worst of all...I can't imagine myself losing. Not in this world, at least."

A game with a guaranteed victory was boring. The victory speech was delivered before the fight ever began.

Ireena calmly let the taunting declaration wash over her. "Let me say one thing." She paused to take a breath. "Let's just stop this. All of it."

She stared at Mephisto with no hatred for the devil. Her eyes held mercy for a fellow human.

"Remember what you told me earlier? You said we can't coexist. At the time, I agreed... To be honest, I still think it's probably impossible. But...I'm not the type to give up before trying."

Ireena's compassion was her main charm and virtue. She approached everyone with openness, no matter who they were, and offered a hand.

That quality of hers had rescued me, and the same could be said of Alvarto, Elzard, and the others.

Ireena had the power to pull people back up from the abyss, even those seemingly beyond salvation.

However, her opponent was a devil. He wasn't the sort to take an angel's hand.

"How moving, sweet Ireena. You really are so, so...stupid beyond belief."

Mephisto cackled at the love Ireena offered, and at the hand she held out.

"Either I disappear from this world, or you and your friends do. There are no other outcomes. I won't accept any others."

No matter what Ireena said or how she felt, Mephisto wouldn't budge.

"Okay! Now that all the players are here, shall we get started?"

He reached his right hand to the sky. A dull light shot from his palm, transforming the surroundings.

"First, let's set the perfect stage."

The manifested scenery was flawless, just as he said. A wasteland stretched to the distant horizon in all directions. The sky wasn't a brilliant blue. The sun lost its shine, forever masked behind thick, black clouds.

This was the Ruined Earth.

Here, Mephisto and the other Outer Gods waged war against the Old Gods in an ancient era.

Rogue and I met in battle here as well.

It was the final stage of the war against Mephisto in the old world.

And it was also...where I killed Lydia.

"Can you think of a place more fitting than this? I sure can't! After all, this is where the Demon Lord, the Hero, and the Evil God weaved their entwined destiny, thread by thread."

The Ruined Earth.

The very name seemed to imply that something would meet its end here.

Either the world or the devil.

Faced with the setting of this great battle, Ireena said, “Okay...I’ve changed my mind. I won’t try to save you anymore.”

She tightly gripped her Holy Sword, a blade that once belonged to Lydia, and thrust it toward Mephisto. “I will end you, Mephisto Yuu Phegor. To protect my friends’ future...I need you to disappear.”

Ireena had cast aside her compassion to prepare herself for what needed to be done. Although she had not done so without great pain.

Still, Ireena Olhyde’s gaze was clear and true.

She would protect everyone. She would save them. Her resolute heart was that of a true hero.

Disaster Rogue, the other Demon Lord, stood ready at her side.

As both heroes prepared themselves, the devil looked to each and said, “A contest of brute strength really isn’t my thing...but I’ll make an exception this once.”

He grinned, baring his fangs. It was the first time the devil had shown such excitement for battle. His immense aura came off him in terrible waves.

As he was now, he truly appeared to be an Evil God in every respect.

Mephisto Yuu Phegor, the embodiment of his title, gave one final remark before the battle commenced.

“All right, everyone—let’s end this with a fatal fistfight.”

The curtain rose on the final battle.

Mephisto was quick to seize the first move.

“Be crushed.”

He flicked his index finger, and the ground beneath Ireena, Rogue, and the others folded upward.

With a roaring noise, the earth shot up toward the heavens like giant mountains sprouting from the soil. Then it all came crashing down to crush everyone, as Mephisto had ordered.

He displayed an absurd level of strength right from the start.

Yet none of my friends so much as flinched in the face of this attack.

“Sylphy, with me!”

“Copy that!”

Olivia held the Demon Blade Elminage, and Sylphy gripped Demise-Argis. The two swordmasters filled their cores to capacity with power and leaped.

Their air-splitting jumps catapulted them toward the makeshift mountains, and then...

“*Hahh!*”

“*Drraaah!*”

...their slashes created a powerful vacuum wave, which became a giant blade that pulverized the mountains. Earth and stone crumbled to dust and rained down onto the ground harmlessly.

Upon landing, Olivia and Sylphy immediately sprang forward.

“Mephisto Yuu Phegor!!!”

“We’re here to claim your life!!!”

Olivia vel Vine, master swordmaster. Sylphy Marheaven, the Raging Champion. When these two warriors, whose names were engraved in history, fought side by side, it was enough to make anyone’s blood run cold with fear. Regrettably, they faced an Evil God.

With a calm smile and narrowed eyes, Mephisto said, “I surpassed the greatest swordmaster eons ago. Nothing can shake me.”

Mephisto was not his usual, jovial self.

This was his true nature.

He was a master in all disciplines, meaning everything was worthless to him.

As expected, the abomination summoned a silver sword in each hand. “Let me teach you kids a lesson—the essence of swordcraft.”

Mephisto lunged to meet Olivia and Sylphy’s attack head-on.

The two sides closed in on each other in the blink of an eye.

“*Tempest!*”

“Urryaaa!”

Olivia and Sylphy’s synchronized strike stole the first hits. Both blades slashed into the devil’s flesh.

Mephisto sighed lightly. “*Arrival—to wit, the battle is mine.*”

His two swords danced.

I only saw them disappear. Whatever movements they took after that were impossible to follow with the naked eye.

By the time I realized what had happened, it was too late.

Olivia had been cut diagonally from her shoulder to the opposite side. Sylphy was slashed horizontally across the face.

However...

“Nn—RARRRRR!”

“Shii-YAAAAAHHH!”

...they wouldn’t be brought down by a single attack.

Olivia had thousands of years of experience, and Sylphy’s talents were unparalleled.

That’s what had spared them from fatal wounds.

They moved in for another attack, proud and high-spirited.

Their swords, like Mephisto’s, danced too quickly to track.

Each of their forms was an art, terrifying in its beauty.

However, the devil didn’t flinch.

“Olivia vel Vine, Sylphy Marheaven...” As he dodged their flying thrusts and cuts with the littlest effort possible, he used words to cut them down to size. “You are both *unripe*.”

Demon Blade Elminage and Holy Sword Demise-Argis flew out of their hands, spiraling toward the sky with a sharp sound.

They'd been disarmed, and that could only mean one thing.

"I know I promised to teach you the essence of swordcraft, but I rescind that offer. Instructing infants is worthless. They'll never understand."

Mephisto stood too far above everyone else. Olivia and Sylphy were legendary swordmasters, yet to that devil, they were no better than children.

Surely, they thought he was going to kill them, judging by their pale faces. I saw a different future as a spectator, though. In that version of events, something stopped Mephisto's two swords.

"Cloverfield!"

"Black Mirror Bandersnatch!"

While Olivia and Sylphy awaited their doom, the two men chanted their *Originals* just in the nick of time. Lizer Bellphoenix and Alvarto Egzex joined the battle—Lizer with a giant mace as long as he was tall, and Alvarto with his jet-black Hellfire Sword. They sped forth to meet the devil.

Their timing was, in a word, perfection.

Mephisto was distracted by Olivia and Sylphy. He didn't notice the incoming attacks.

The others undoubtedly believed Lizer's and Alvarto's attacks would connect. It's why they struggled to process the reality that hit them the very next moment.

"Master of the empty fists—conqueror of many battles."

Mephisto loosened his grip on his swords and let them fly. Their projected trajectory through Olivia's and Sylphy's torsos veered into an elegant rotation, and the weapons changed targets.

Lizer's and Alvarto's eyes shot wide. Olivia's and Sylphy's faces tensed with dread again. An instant later, a powerful chain attack struck all four of them.

It was an astoundingly strong flurry of blows, each strike's force strengthened by the last's kinetic force. If this were a harmless contest of strength, I might have burst into applause. That's just how beautiful Mephisto's attack was.

““““Nghh...!““““

Yelping pitifully, Alvarto, Lizer, Olivia, and Sylphy were scattered in all directions. The impacts rippling through their bodies damaged their organs, ripped their flesh, and broke their bones.

All four of them flew through the air and collided with the ground disgracefully. Any ordinary person would've died of those wounds. However, such injuries were still only moderate to ancient warriors. They'd need at least two seconds to recover and prepare to continue fighting, though.

That was more than enough time for Mephisto to extinguish them for good.

“Check.”

An icy intent to kill surged in his gaze. He made it clear to all that this was indeed a fatal battle, as he'd said before.

Once he made his move, Alvarto, Lizer, Olivia, and Sylphy would be no more.

“Over my dead body!” Ginny shrieked, launching lightning from the tip of her crimson spear.

It was a direct hit, but that didn't mean her attack was successful.

The blow was completely ignored.

It didn't even register to Mephisto. Ginny was merely an ant crawling on his shoe.

“My dear, that didn't even count as child's play.”

Just as one of his weapons turned on her, there was a howl from the heavens above.

“Scatter! Elder Breath!”

Elzard's attack shot from the clouds to the earth in a blue pillar. It drilled into the ground, swallowing Mephisto in the blink of an eye.

The tremendous impact from the attack rippled in all directions with an earsplitting roar.

“Dragon magic is truly mighty. The crap demons and humans use can't compare,” Elzard declared. Her triumph was short-lived, though.

The devil cut her confidence in two. “You do indeed have a fair amount of power, as you should, to be called a king of the dragons...but challenging me to a contest of magic is foolish. Even if you are the apex dragon, trying to fight me like this is laughable.”

The energy of the pillar that swallowed Mephisto grew with each passing moment. Yet not even that was enough.

“Let me remind you who is sorcery’s greatest master.”

The devil shot out an attack from inside the raging inferno. The thin beam of light stretching from his fingertips released a force of absurd magnitude, erasing Elzard’s grand attack.

The Frenzied King of Dragons opened her eyes wide, silently mouthing, “This is insane...” The half-human, half-dragon’s wings were struck, and she fell.

Ginny stood below Elzard, and caught her to spare the dragon a direct collision with the ground.

“Are you all right?”

“Don’t misunderstand. I didn’t need you to help me,” Elzard muttered, looking away.

The two had dealt no damage to Mephisto whatsoever...but without their help, Olivia and the others would’ve died. Ireena and Rogue had healed them, and they were ready to continue fighting.

“Back to square one, I guess.”

His excitement over demolishing his four opponents in one fell swoop quashed, Mephisto’s face twitched with anger and impatience. To him, winning this battle should’ve been easier than ripping petals off a flower.

That’s why he never considered trying to prevent this confrontation. He believed it posed no threat to him.

He was an Evil God, a perfect picture of calm.

Eyeing the devil critically, Lizer asked Rogue, “What did you observe during the clash?”

Rogue frowned bitterly. “We’re just one hand short of making my plan work.” Sweat ran down his brow. They were outmatched, even more than it appeared.

This is so infuriating...

My friends are in danger. What the hell am I doing?

I need to break free from this curse and help them.

No sooner did I think as much than...

“Yes, quite right, my sweet. You can’t be of any help if you’re just standing there.”

...his voice throbbed in my brain.

“You understand me better than anyone, which is why you surely know what this battle needs to end.”

He was demanding I choose between two things—exactly that.

“The time will come. You can be sure of it. Unless you make your decision in time...your little friends won’t possibly have a happy ending.”

The devil’s words spread anguish through my heart.

I know...I already know what I’m supposed to do. It’s painfully obvious.

Rogue’s plan confirmed it.

“You know, I wasn’t lying when I said this would be a fatal fistfight. I would’ve preferred you were the star fighter. I wonder if that would change anything. Would you use some sort of trick to outwit me? That part’s unclear. Maybe...we’ll even get an ending nobody asked for.”

His last line was filled with a sense of urgency, threatening me to make a decision.

“Maybe I should go ahead and make at least one of you disappear?”

Mephisto acted as he always did, to steal something else from me.

When he took his first step toward my friends...

...a crack formed in the air beside him.

Something emerged from it with a ringing sound like breaking glass.

It was a giant rice ball.

A giant clump of white rice bigger than a full-grown man ripped through the fissure in space and struck Mephisto.

It was unexpected in a number of ways. The devil blinked in shock. He stood frozen.

Then came the impact.

Mephisto's delicate body sailed through the air in a perfect arc.

Before he could land...

“Whee-hee-heeee! I love saltwater clams!”

...a giant, shirtless, middle-aged man burst from the earth and delivered an uppercut. He sent Mephisto sailing into the sky. Another strange creature appeared while he arced through the sky.

“Monochro-o-o-o-me!”

A giant bird with a cat's face headbutted Mephisto. And as the demon tumbled down...

“All ba-a-a-a-alls are friends of me-e-e-e-e-e-e!”

...a half-fish, half-human kicked Mephisto in the head, returning him to the air before finally collapsing into a trash can.

Then there was a big explosion.

“...What the hell is this?” Elzard muttered.

“It's called absurdist humor, Elzy,” someone answered from the original crack in the air.

Someone with blond twin-tails, a tiny frame, and a youthful face emerged.

Her lips were curled up in a daring smile.

There was no mistaking her.

“Lady Verda?!” Ginny exclaimed, her eyes wide.

Verda Al-Hazard answered by shouting, “The bri-hi-hilliant! Scholar God! Is ☆ back, babyyyyyyyyy!”

Her scream activated her supernatural ability.

The world began to rearrange itself. Previously desolate earth became a flowering garden.

Butterflies danced in the air. Little birds tweeted. All signs of chaos vanished, and the scenery turned properly beautiful. I assumed it was Verda's way of giving her father a parting gift. She wanted his final sight to be beautiful.

Mephisto smiled peacefully at her work of compassion. "Looks like you finally broke through, little pet." He watched as Verda reconnected with her friends.

"Good to see you back," Olivia said.

"Sorry I worried you, Olivia! But I'm okay now!"

Alvarto sighed. "Personally, I preferred you depressed. You weren't as annoying."

"Gya-hya-hya-hya-hya! Oh, stop it. You're happy and you *know* it. Oh, Al, you really are a softy, aren't ya!"

"Now that you have arrived, it's safe to say that our prospects have brightened significantly," Lizer said.

"Yeah, I got'chu, Lizzie! Gotta make up for all that time I held it in and let it all run wild!"

The Four Heavenly Kings were complete again. Ireena looked rather worried, though. She gripped her Holy Sword a little tighter.

Rogue put a calming hand on her shoulder. "Patience. Your turn's still coming. It's just been moved back one step."

"Yeah...you're right. I need to preserve my strength until then."

Ireena took a deep breath and stamped out the flames in her heart. Meanwhile, Rogue issued orders to everyone.

"Four Heavenly Kings—attack as you please."

"Aye, sir."

"So, business as usual, although not quite."

“Yes, it would be worth demonstrating how we’ve changed.”

“Yeah, we’ve all really grown...in more ways than one.”

Rogue nodded in agreement. “Elzard, Ginny, Sylphy—you three take up the rear guard. You’re on defense and guerilla attacks.”

“Pfff. Who died and made you emperor?”

Ginny sighed. “Maybe it wouldn’t hurt you to be a little nicer, Miss Elzard?”

“Yes, be polite, my dear, like me.”

““That means nothing coming from you, Sylphy.”” The other two girls shot back.

“Dwa-wa-wa?!”

Finally, Rogue turned to Irene. “You stay here on standby... Wait until I reach our *little friend*.”

A power enhancement from fusion was the main pillar supporting his strategy. Mephisto stood between me and my friends to keep that from happening. He spread his arms wide.

“Give it your best shot, Four Heavenly Kings.”

That’s when all hell broke loose.

Rogue ran in an arc around Mephisto to avoid him. Unsurprisingly, the devil wasn’t about to let that happen. He followed Rogue with his eyes, ready to strike at any second— “Keep your eyes on me—*locked on me*.”

Lizer’s voice prompted Mephisto to leap to one side. The devil was wary of something, and had been forced to take action.

It was a lone butterfly, although no ordinary one, of course. It had been buffed by Lizer’s supernatural ability. The little thing flew through the combat zone fast as an arrow...but what was even more terrifying was the power it held.

Propagation.

When the butterfly got close enough to Mephisto, it turned into a bird. The little creature’s eyes gleamed verdant and brightly.

"Until a moment ago, there were no beings on this field that could serve as my pawns. But not anymore," Lizer said.

"Yeah, I can just pop out pawns like there's no tomorrow-o-o-o-ow!" Verda sang.

Black holes appeared.

A seemingly infinite number of the rifts formed, and a swarm of monsters poured out as one body.

Lizer struck the closest one to him with his mace, activating his supernatural ability. And when the buffed monster touched another, the effects of the enhancement passed on and on, until the whole swarm of inexhaustible troops had all been empowered.

"Wow...you kids really are the perfect match..." A faint glimmer of anxiousness flashed on Mephisto's face.

Next was the charge.

The swarm of monsters. The butterflies. The birds. The ambiguous creatures, great and small, all rushed at Mephisto. They were a tremendous defense force with the power to stop an Evil God just by touching him. Mephisto countered them head-on.

"Annihilating a powerful opponent with sheer force, what a mundane tactic. I guess it'll help me blow off some steam."

He swiftly cut into the monsters nearest to him, and those in the distance were annihilated with ranged magic attacks.

Half-baked measures weren't enough to stop this devil, but that's why Lizer and Verda's cooperative assault was so impressive. Mephisto wasn't able to move.

"I think we've got about fifteen seconds before my two darlings meet. Okay, what should I do about that...?"

Mephisto, the all-powerful devil, had found himself unable to prevent something from happening. No matter how many of the monsters he killed, there were always more to replace them. While he tried to work out a way to

break through this wall...

“Your brain.”

“We’ll burn it dead before you can use it.”

...Olivia and Alvarto sprang from their hiding spot in the swarm of monsters. They lunged at Mephisto’s back with swords in hand.

“Ah. So this is what it means to hardly have any time to breathe.”

Swords flashed. Olivia and Alvarto worked as two arms of the same body. During Olivia’s brief moment of vulnerability after her attack, Alvarto would slash. Olivia similarly covered Alvarto. They were truly an image of perfect teamwork, moving one after the other in excellent rhythm.

“Well...I didn’t see that coming.”

Earlier, Mephisto had overpowered Sylphy and Olivia with his swords, but now he was forced to remain on defense. I understood why he was surprised. The Four Heavenly Kings had never worked in harmony like this before. Honestly, I was just as astonished by the sight as Mephisto was.

Even during the final battle in ancient times, Olivia, Alvarto, Lizer, and Verda never worked together. The threat of the bitter end hadn’t been enough for them to cooperate. While they were the most powerful Four Heavenly Kings in history, I’d deemed them fundamentally incompatible.

I’d been confident those four would never work together.

“Perhaps you find it surprising, but from where I’m standing, it’s not astonishing in the slightest.”

Rogue’s thoughts echoed in my mind as he ran to me.

“Growth. Transformations. Breakthroughs. Everyone progresses forward with the passage of time. Whether you and I are around or not, everyone will continue onward.”

“Etch this in your soul, Ard Meteor. They no longer need a guardian.”

Rogue was closing in, yet Mephisto was still unable to touch him.

“What about us?”

“Yeah, don’t forget about us!”

Sylphy and Elzard swooped in from the side with impeccable timing. Their arrival kept Mephisto from seizing an opportunity to break free.

“Okay. Interesting. Uh-huh. Now I see.”

It took everything in him just to keep up. Mephisto was completely and utterly backed into a corner. If things continued like this, Rogue’s plan would be a perfect success.

“Thank you for the entertainment. Your powers were quite amusing. You show great potential and growth.” An angelic smile flashed on Mephisto’s beautiful face. “Unless I do something, we’ll be locked in a stalemate forever.”

Despite his lighthearted expression, there was melancholy in his voice.

“I didn’t realize you kids were so capable. I truly am impressed. You’ve grown far beyond my expectations. Thank you, really. I mean it. And that’s why I’ll give you all a little respect.”

Power surged from his body.

“I was running at six percent. Now I’ll go to twenty.”

It was just too much.

The reality was too brutal to express in words.

He’d created a nightmare with an increase from six to twenty.

As promised, Mephisto’s powers increased roughly threefold. The next thing we knew, it was all over.

The battle ended in the blink of an eye.

And that’s why I struggled to comprehend how everyone wound up splayed on the ground. There seemed to be moments of time missing, leaving behind only the terrible results.

The infinite army that once flooded the area had vanished. Only five people remained standing.

Me, Mephisto, Rogue, Ireena...

...and Ginny. However, she was spared simply because Mephisto had no interest in her. He didn't perceive her as a threat. It wouldn't be surprising to learn he'd forgotten she even existed. As though to prove this, he didn't even spare her a glance, preferring to focus on Rogue.

"Now, what move do you think I should go with next?"

He had the eyes of a delighted child. Rogue laughed through his nose and replied, "Try whatever you like. You'll never stop us, Mephisto Yuu Phegor. You've underestimated my friends, and it's sealed your fate."

Mephisto visibly struggled to understand. He cast Rogue a quizzical look. I, however...knew what Rogue intended to do, but I'd yet to accept it.

As though to denounce my lack of faith...

"Please don't underestimate me!"

...red lightning shot at Mephisto. The Evil God showed no indication of injury, yet still Ginny poured it on, refusing to give up.

"Gee...I just don't get your way of thinking, sweetie," Mephisto drawled, refusing to look at Ginny. "Are you trying to annoy me into submission with your incessant buzzing?"

With a snap of Mephisto's fingers, Ginny's crimson spear crumbled to dust.

"There. Now you can't do anything anymore. You never belonged here in the first place." As Mephisto spoke, he raised his palm toward Rogue, who was fast approaching...

"Why, you!"

A magic fireball sped for the devil. However, this attack, like all Ginny's others, had no effect.

That wouldn't stop her, though.

She loosed one spell after another, attempting to stop her enemy cold. Her actions weren't meant to be a diversion.

Ginny was in it for real. She was earnestly trying to defeat Mephisto alone.

Puzzled, the devil pondered her determination. He ultimately shrugged and

sighed deeply. “Constant dripping wears away the stone, so they say. It’s meant to validate the effect of hard work, and is always taken to be a positive. I have a different interpretation, though. Dripping water’s ability to break a stone illustrates the futility of hard work.”

Still refusing to look at Ginny, Mephisto continued languidly, “Sure, given enough time, a trickle of water will split a boulder. But you see, when it comes to things much tougher than stone, it’s hopeless. Steel will take millions—billions of years. Now that’s the epitome of a vain effort.”

He snapped his fingers.

Beams of white light shot from Ginny’s body.

“There. I just severed your magic connection. Now you can’t cast spells anymore.” Mephisto completely depowered Ginny as easily as one would swat a fly. He returned his attention to Rogue.

“I’m not finished yet!!!”

Ginny kicked off the ground, dashing for Mephisto as though to say, *I may not have magic, but I’ve still got two perfectly good fists!*

Her bold charge betrayed no sign of resignation or defeat.

“Y’know...I kinda like stubborn girls, but I’m not in the mood right now.”

Mephisto again.

A blade of wind cut Ginny at the ankles, and she fell to the ground.

“Nng—ah!”

Her anguished cry undoubtedly signaled the end of this. Now Mephisto could completely ignore Ginny.

“I told you not to underestimate me!!!”

This wasn’t the sort of fight that could be won with morale or courage.

However, Ginny refused to yield. She pushed herself forward with her hands and then launched herself with her arms. Ginny sailed toward her target.

“HRAHHHHHHH!!!” she roared with a burning spirit.

Finally, Mephisto looked at her directly.

“I’ll take that attack as an apology...”

Ginny’s fist sank into the devil’s beautiful face.

She’d thrown everything she had into this. All her heart and soul.

Mephisto’s delicate body flew through the air, crashing to the ground after a spin. Ginny had also collapsed, dirty and unable to stand.

“Grit...huff, huff... Ever heard of it? Girls have it, too...huff...you know.”

She wore a mocking smile. The sight of her caused me to narrow my eyes.
“You’ve really grown, Ginny...”

I remembered the day we first met. That groveling girl—that walking liability—was now a warrior in her own right, holding her own against Mephisto.

It was the undeniable truth.

“That’s right. You dismissed her, too, Ard Meteor.”

Rogue stood over me. While looking at Ginny with pride, he said, “If you failed to find hope in her efforts, failed to see her potential, you’d be a failure as her friend.”

“Yeah...you were right all along,” I replied.

I’d believed that disappearing with Mephisto, leaving Rogue behind, was the best strategy. Concern born from love had led me to that decision.

I had to protect everyone. I had to keep everyone safe.

Although born from compassion, it came from a kind of dismissal of my friends as well, as Rogue said.

“If only I’d realized my folly sooner, we could have avoided this pesky detour.”

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Rogue said. “It took me years upon years to realize it.”

My gaze went from Ginny to my other self. “I won’t falter anymore.”

“To give our friends the push they need to take them to the future...”

“I offer everything of myself...”

“As fuel, to burn dry.”

Then I...

Then Rogue...

Pressed our fists together.

And in doing so, we joined our rings.

Two former Demon Lords fused together.

We became sparkling particles, melting and mixing together into a singular existence.

We were no longer a nobody. Our souls rebuilt their vessel.

That's right...I was Ard Meteor no more.

I was the Demon Lord of ancient times—Varvatos.

“Ah, so good to have you back, my darling.” Mephisto rose from the ground. “However, I still can't quite believe it. I'm not sure you've actually returned to your true form. But I know the best way to test that.”

He hurled a punch at Ginny.

“Now, show me your power so I—”

The devil never finished his sentence. Just like Ginny, I threw my fist into Mephisto's face. When I teleported to him, he made no effort to stop me. He simply stood there, smiling.

So I whacked his smug expression into the stratosphere, then walked over to Ginny.

“It was an honor watching you fight him... You were very brave.”

My voice was no longer Ard's. I was an entirely different person now. Ginny looked at me no differently, though.

“Ah... I knew it. Ard...you were always my...”

Her body finally gave out. Ginny lost consciousness, entrusting the rest to her dear friend.

“So...something's been bothering me,” Ireena began to say as she

approached. "What name should I call you by? Personally, I prefer to keep calling you Ard, but if you want me to use your other name, I will."

She wasn't surprised or scared to see me in this form. Ireena accepted me as I was, unconditionally, and I was powerfully grateful.

"Use whichever you like. I'm not Ard Meteor anymore, but...I'm still your friend. That hasn't changed."

Ireena smiled at me, and I did the same to her.

"Gee, you kids sure are chummy."

Ireena and I stood side by side, watching the devil.

"Let's do this, Ard."

I felt my best friend beside me, and my other one, too.

Ireena...and Lydia.

The interlacing of past and present uplifted my spirit.

"Yeah. Let's win this, Ireena."

With burning feelings in my heart...

...I moved toward the final battle that lay ahead.

CHAPTER 121

Resolutions and Disappearance

“To me, this is nothing short of a miracle.”

The devil realized then that he was nearing the end. The words that followed flowed swiftly from Mephisto’s mouth. “I really am fickle. It’s why I obsess over the unexpected—I can’t help myself. You see, my darling...the truth is, I originally planned on a lovers’ suicide with you. If I could lose everything and meet my doom with you, I’d know something like a happy ending. That’s what I believed.”

“But reality betrayed you.”

“Yeah. So many unexpected things happened, so I had to change my objective. The heart of the matter, making you mine, that part hasn’t changed... but the process and the results have deviated severely from my prediction. From my perspective, the current situation far exceeds perfection. So you see, that’s why...”

An angelically beautiful smile spread across the devil’s face. With a voice clear as a bell, he declared, “...I will destroy everything you hold dear. That will bring me the perfect finale that I long for.”

I’d clung to a faint hope that after committing to the hardest decision of my life, Mephisto would obediently follow my intentions. Unfortunately, things didn’t turn out that way.

Still, there was hope.

“It’s time to end this—to pay you back for everything you’ve done to us,” I said passionately.

I sensed the same emotion from Ireena beside me as she shouted, “Fine, destroy us! I’d love to see you try!”

She launched herself forward, breaking free from the layers of frustration holding her back. The sight of her with her Holy Sword Vald-Galgulus reminded me of someone.

“Ohh, sweet Ireena...,” Mephisto whispered. “You really are the spitting image of Lydia.”

He looked at her not with the eyes of an enemy. Mephisto’s eyes held a love for his child...and pity.

Ireena must have interpreted it as scorn. Rage colored her expression. Her aura burned brighter than before as her blade came racing down.

“RAHH!”

It was a sharp, swift attack. But the time it took to reach the devil felt like an eternity. And in this elongated moment, Mephisto spoke.

“Gee, this really takes me back... When *she* attacked me, she let her feelings carry her, too. She didn’t plan. She even forgot to charge her Holy Sword. And that’s why it ended with the opening move.”

He was speaking of Lydia’s final battle. When the war against the Evil Gods neared its end. She’d faced Mephisto alone to avenge her mother. Lydia had been terribly impulsive.

Just like Ireena.

“Y’know, it baffles me why you’d attack without wearing the Soul Annihilation Armor.”

Soul Annihilation Armor was one of Vald-Galgulus’s powers. When summoned and worn, it devoured the user’s sanity in exchange for a tremendous boost in combat strength. Ireena had forgotten to activate it, perhaps because of her heightened state of emotion.

Thanks to that mistake...



“Once you reach a certain level of stupidity—it’s just uncomfortable.”

...Mephisto’s sword was far swifter than Ireena’s. She would surely be dismembered, just like Lydia.

Which was precisely why...

“This time I’m going to save her.”

...I lunged, closing the gap at a speed far beyond what Mephisto expected. His eyes widened a little as he said, “Wow...you’ve surpassed yourself at your greatest, my dear.”

He stopped his fatal attack, bringing his sword back to protect himself. That devil’s reflexes were impeccable.

However...

“That won’t save you.”

...I swung my black sword...slashing through Mephisto, silver sword and all.

His blade shattered like glass, unable to protect him.

Mephisto was cleaved through with a diagonal stroke. As the devil broke into two pieces, I said, “That one’s for Olivia.”

There was a flash, and I cut through Mephisto over and over, exacting revenge for my surrogate sister, who was collapsed on the ground behind me. Mephisto had destroyed her people, and now he would pay.

By the time my black blade’s strokes counted a billion, Mephisto had vanished completely from this world. Not a single cell remained.

“W-wow...! You...you finished him so quickly!” Ireena’s voice was filled with surprise and admiration, her eyes wide as saucers.

“Focus,” I chided. “Our enemy’s no novice. He wouldn’t die from something like that.”

This was Mephisto Yuu Phegor we were talking about, the abomination who made an enemy of everyone in the world, and who forced his will on us.

“He’s only disappeared in the physical. That’s barely bought us a few

moments."

Darkness formed in the distance as though to confirm my remark. The black fog formed into a humanoid shape...

"You surprised me, my darling. I didn't realize how powerful you've become."

The Evil God reformed.

As Ireena beheld the abomination, her eyebrows bunched together. "He's... just like Alvarto."

Alvarto was indeed an immortal of absurd power, but his resurrecting ability was his weakness. If you targeted that function, truly killing him was possible. Not even he could be considered wholly immortal. Ireena likely surmised that something similar would need to be done to win this battle. We needed only to destroy the means of resurrection, take Mephisto's immortality hostage, and defeat him.

This is exactly why she was staring hard at me now, asking me with her eyes how we could defeat him...and I had no concrete plan on how to do it.

"I'll buy some time so you can don the Soul Annihilation Armor. You're far too weak to face him in your current state."

"Right. I just found that out the hard way," she said apologetically.

There was no need for us to say anything more than that. Ireena trusted that I had a plan.

"Come to me once you're ready. As Rogue predicted, *you* are the key to winning, Ireena."

"Okay! I understand!" Ireena replied, a little choked up.

She looked so glad to be needed. Ireena assumed a battle stance and began her chant. And as I watched her from the corner of my eye, our enemy took a leisurely breath and said, "Ordinarily, I'd give you a head start...but you don't need a handicap this time, right?"

He smirked like a little kid about to pull a prank.

Then the next thing I knew, blades the color of darkness appeared, flying at

me from all directions.

I used my supernatural ability to understand their powers fully. Impossible to block. Impossible to offset. Impossible to dodge. The spell was fundamentally an embodiment of cause and effect. When activated, victory was assured.

“You may be a founder and master of sorcery. But you’re not the only one.”

The black blades speeding toward us scattered one after the other.

“Oh...it looks like you leveled up your supernatural ability as well,” Mephisto said.

While he gawked and laughed through his nose, I took off running. As I got closer to him, I summoned a swarm of white blades, meaning to let them fly as I ran...

“You’ve made it onto the same stage as me. A battle of magic will be nothing more than an extreme stalemate.”

I wasn’t the only one who possessed those supernatural abilities of analysis and control. Mephisto’s powers *included* my own. The white blades disappeared without a trace before they ever moved.

We had the same abilities.

One was the first person to spread knowledge of magic in this world.

The other firmly established the concept of magic here.

The final conflict between the two apex founders...

...would inevitably need to be fought by primitive means.

In other words, hand-to-hand combat.

“I’m going to...dial up the heat...a little!”

“Well...I’ll slash you into oblivion!”

Black sword and silver sword clashed, unleashing bursts of scalding energy. The impact came off us like ripples on a lake, drowning out all other sounds.

“Niiice! Okay, cranking it up to forty percent now!”

“Only forty? So arrogant... I’ll make you regret that!”

It was a cutthroat duel. Each flash of a blade was the harbinger of tremendous destruction, transforming the area around us in the blink of an eye. The beautiful scenery created by Verda's magic quickly became a wasteland once again.

"HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA! Ohhh, this is fun! What a world! I didn't know I could play with it like this!"

Euphoria of a new kind showed in Mephisto's every move. Yet it didn't distract him, and because of this, he came to understand the truth behind my strength.

"My love, ever since your upgrade, your *Original* has been in perpetual activation, right?"

I continued to fight, rather than answer. That seemed to strengthen Mephisto's conviction. As our swords met, he said, "An *Original* is ultra-powerful. But in exchange, it drains magic considerably. That's why it's used as a trump card, and I'm no exception. The magic within me may seem unlimited, but it is finite. By comparison, your magic never runs out."

While his words sounded like praise, they were actually an assertion of his superiority.

"Let me put it another way. You've already used your last resort. This is the limit of your power. You have nowhere else to go."

"Yeah...that's right. I've already reached my combat ceiling. Defeating you on my own is certainly impossible."

That gave me no reason to despair, though. Because this fight wasn't like the others. I couldn't trample this enemy all by myself.

So I'd face this supreme foe with my friends, instead.

Armed with that conviction, I replied, "Yes, I've already used my trump card. But...who cares? Mephisto Yuu Phegor, I never intended to fight you alone."

I had an ally with me.

"Mephistooo!!!"

She arrived right on time to vindicate my statement, clad in silvery-white

armor, complete and perfect in both mind and body.

“RAHH!”

A sword streaked for the Evil God.

Mephisto barely blocked Ireena’s attack. “Now I get it. You’re potential personified,” he said. He spoke to her like a god testing a human. “All right, show me. Show me just how powerful the heart of Ireena Olhyde is.”

Mephisto turned up the pressure, yet Ireena only grew more invigorated in turn.

“Face me, Mephisto!”

As Ireena cried out and assumed a battle stance, the devil sped for her. The sharpness, speed, and power of his sword were beyond anything Ireena could hope to counter ordinarily.

“Grrrrf!”

Still, she blocked inescapable death.

What’s more...

“HAH!!!”

...she even managed a counterattack.

“You’re good, little Ireena...” Mephisto lunged, seizing the opening following Ireena’s slash. His blade thrust in a straight line for her throat. The tip of his weapon moved even quicker than it had before. “But I don’t think you can dodge this.”

Ireena gritted her teeth the moment before impact, enduring through sheer spirit.

Mephisto laughed at her vulnerability, but I believed she could still win.

Because she was Ireena Olhyde.

Sure enough, the devil’s blade struck my best friend’s neck—

“Nope! Didn’t work. Sorry.”

She should’ve been run through. That sword should’ve taken her life.

However, it had stopped after just managing to prick one layer of Ireena's skin.

“Okay...my turn now.”

Batting the weapon away, Ireena delivered a ruthless volley of sword thrusts. Her bladework was reckless, and Mephisto undoubtedly believed she'd never hit him. Not only was her skill underdeveloped, but the two were on wildly different levels.

However...the power of imagination suppressed all petty rationale.

That's who Ireena was.

“HIT THE TARGET!!!!!!”

“MMF?!”

Swiftly. Sharply. Powerfully.

With each breakneck swing, the sword felt stronger in Irene's grip.

Finally, her weapon managed to graze Mephisto's cheek.

The devil, utterly shocked by this unexpected development, blinked widely and shot himself backward. Upon landing, he wiped the blood from his face.

“We share the same supernatural ability... I knew that already, but I didn’t think you could wield yours to such an extent.”

Curiosity twinkled in Mephisto's eyes. It was the first time he'd ever regarded Irenea as a proper threat.

He hung his head and muttered, "Aww, this sucks... Now I feel like doing something totally random again... But I can't help it... I'm just too curious for my own good..."

Mephisto lifted his head. He now wore a peaceful smile. "I wonder how much damage your group's potential can really do to me? Ugh, I really, really wanna know. I'm gonna go crazy. I can't hold back. From this point on, I'm going to try to kill you in earnest."

With that declaration, he began a chant.

“One who ascends to the apex, a warrior matched against thousands, the solitary absolute being.”

This was the first time Mephisto had ever used his *Original*.

He truly was serious.

“Irenea!”

“I know!”

The next thing I knew, I was moving.

I have to stop him. I have to stop him. I have to stop him.

I can't let him get any further.

We won't be able to win, no matter what we do.

I couldn't even imagine what Mephisto's greatest weapon would be like, but I understood that everything would end once he finished invoking his *Original*.

This was a critical moment.

If we stopped his chant, created an opening, and followed the plan, we would win.

Anything else would mean Mephisto's victory.

Irenea and I rushed for the Evil God to seize control of this final phase.

Darkness surrounded the devil, perhaps as a harbinger of his *Original*.

Blackness.

All was painted, devoured, extinguished by shadow.

As we rushed in for the attack, the darkness reached out to us with terrifying force.

“Dodge it, Irenea!”

“Obviously!”

I couldn't analyze or control it. Such was the blackness consuming everything around us.

What would happen if we died here? The unknown possibilities were endless. Unable to even skim the surface of understanding, Irenea and I dodged the shadows, kicking off the ground with all our might as we ran.

Meanwhile...

“All of creation, in the palm of my hand.”

...Mephisto's chant continued.

Chasms carved themselves into the ground in answer. The world was loudly announcing its own destruction.

While we beheld the bleak sight, I said, “Ireena! Forgive me, but I'm about to say something very pathetic!”

I bit my lip.

“I don't have a plan to stop this... You're our only hope now, Ireena! Please, find a way to give me an opening!”

It was a first for me. I'd never been this vulnerable with someone before.

I was ashamed of how pathetic I was, and I hated myself for being so weak.

However...

“Ard...” With a big smile as bright as the sun, Ireena replied, “You can count on me!”

The power in her legs increased tenfold, and her steps left deep footprints in the ground.

Bravery and recklessness had been condensed into a run. In other words, she gave up on evasion.

She wouldn't reach Mephisto in time if she tried to dodge the darkness. So she elected to dash in a straight line and take the hits directly.

“Sweet Ireena...you are beyond insane.”

This was so unexpected that Mephisto paused his chant, utterly captivated.

“This stupid darkness! Won't! Work! On! MEEEEEEEEE!!!”

Ireena collided with the shadows head-on and burst through, extinguishing them as she went.

Externally, she was unharmed, but internally, her spirit—her life force—was surely scarred.

Lines of anguish formed on her pure face.

Yet the pain did not stop her. Ireena Olhyde's feet never faltered.

"MEPHISTOOOOO!"

Finally, she reached the devil, and her blade raced to greet him.

"HRAHHHHHHHHHHH!"

She screamed to fight back the agony devouring her.

It was an attack to end it all.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!"

Her form was absurd, worse than an amateur's. It was painful to watch, but overflowing with possibility.

The power of imagination, of determination, welcoming a miracle.

There was no telling what damage even a graze might do.

Mephisto tasted true fear.

"None contain thee, none rival th— Whoa, there!"

Dammit. Just a bit closer, and she would have had him.

Ireena's powers were fast approaching that of an Evil God's.

She'd stopped Mephisto's invocation, that was proof enough.

"Okay...this is crazy... Seriously."

It took everything Mephisto had just to keep from being struck down.

However, that wouldn't last. There were no vulnerabilities for Ireena to exploit.

Slowly, the pace of the clash was shifting, perhaps due to a difference in experience.

If I stayed out of it, the situation would only worsen.

However, I didn't rush to help. I just waited.

I trusted Ireena, fully and completely.

And she proved to me that I made the right call.

“Demise-Argis!”

She summoned a second Holy Sword into her free hand, the one Sylphy had wielded only minutes before. Embodying her surrogate sister’s feelings, Ireena charged like the raging wind.

“HIT HIM, HIT HIM, HIT HIM, HIT HIM! HIIIIIIIIIIIIIT HIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIM!!!”

All she did was increase the number of swords, yet things were shifting back in Ireena’s favor.

Her abilities were starting to surpass Mephisto’s.

“It would seem...that I underestimated you, little Ireena.”

She had amazed the devil countless times now. However, Mephisto smiled.

“You truly are quite a force to be reckoned with. But...you’re still far too young.”

His smug, victorious voice hung in the air.

Darkness stretched beneath Ireena’s feet. The surprise attack hit her directly, flooding her with pain.

It wasn’t a fatal wound. She could still move, but that pause was enough to create a functional reset. The moment Ireena stopped charging, Mephisto retreated and spread his arms wide.

“There are four lines left in my chant. In the time it takes me to recite them, you will not—”

“I know I won’t make it to you in time.” Ireena spoke with such quiet calm that it seemed her fiery passion from a moment earlier had been a lie. “I failed. But that doesn’t matter. I mean, this is exactly what we planned. Everything I did...was meant to distract you.”

A savage grin spread on her face.

“Now, Kalmia!” Ireena cried.

Another presence appeared behind Mephisto, piercing through his chest with her right hand.

“Nn— *GAHH!*”

Mephisto looked over his shoulder as crimson ran from his mouth.

“What a...surprise...that someone so staunchly loyal...would listen to anyone...but Alvarto.”

A manifestation of one of the Three Holy Swords, Dilga Zervatis—Kalmia—had impaled the devil with a spear.

“I have not accepted Ireena Olhyde as my master... I simply deemed it suitable to assist her,” Kalmia answered, casting a cool glance at her enemy. Her words were proof of how incredible my best friend was.

Ireena Olhyde was the first of her kind.

No one in history had ever wielded all Three Holy Swords, and none ever would again. Only Ireena could have accomplished this.

And that achievement granted me the perfect chance.

“Sorry, baby, there’s no golden opportunity here.”

Mephisto’s languid demeanor remained intact, even as he bled.

The reason became clear soon enough.

“This isn’t my true body. It’s a piece of junk made from cloning magic.”

Mephisto disappeared before our eyes.

And then...

“O, great expanse, sink into the ceaseless darkness, and thus, know my lamentations.”

...despair rained down from above.

He’d been up there all along, standing directly beneath the clouds, looking down at us.

And the look in his eyes as he watched us betrayed his thoughts.

“*Okay, one more line, and it’s done.*”

“*So, how are you going to attack my Original?*”

“I can’t wait to see, honey.”

I can’t stop him.

There’s no interrupting him now.

The devil’s lips moved. He would speak the final line and unleash unknown terrors.

But before he could...

“Giga Flare!!!”

...fierce hellfire encased Mephisto.

It was too abrupt.

No one, not me, not Ireena, not even Mephisto, could have foreseen this.

I never would’ve dreamed they’d come.

“Okay! Fire, fire, and fire some more!”

“You don’t need to inflict any damage! Just distract him!”

“We have a debt to pay for all the grief we caused you, son!”

My parents and Ireena’s father were here, and they’d come with my schoolmates.

“I-is that an Evil God...?!”

“My magic isn’t doing shit!”

“Don’t freak out!” Elrado shouted to the sniveling students. “We’re all just links in a chain, got it?! Just pass the baton. That’s all you need to do!”

“This one’s for Daddy!”

“We’ve got this!”

The twin spirits Lumi and Lami had arrived.

“You’ve really gone too far, you selfish little brat!”

“Curse you for making me hurt Ard!”

Veronica and Carmilla, two girls once deceived by Mephisto, joined the fray.

And they were joined by...

“Soooo, I’ve done just about all the distracting I can dooo! I’m rustyyyyyy!”

...Nemesis, the artificial sprite who became our friend after some trouble. Although she hurled magic attacks with the others, she wasn't looking at Mephisto.

“Hurry and go! Masterrrrrrrr!”

The person she called to sprang into action.

Verda must have returned everyone to normal on her way here.

She'd realized what Rogue and I were trying to do and saw a future where we failed.

So she'd devised a secret plan and executed it with impeccable timing.

Mephisto hadn't considered anything like this, and while his thoughts strayed...

...they tied it all together.

“It appears our trickery has succeeded.”

Lizer Bellphoenix was speaking of how he and the others had fooled Mephisto, but also of how he'd fooled Ireena and me. To deceive your foe, you must first deceive your friends. Had we known their intention, Mephisto would have picked up on it. That's why they'd executed this tactic in secret.

“Allow me to make the next move.”

A patch of flowers blooming beneath Lizer's feet danced into the air, soaring high. The petals, controlled and strengthened by Lizer's supernatural ability, were too swift for Mephisto to evade. And in that moment of vulnerability...

...phase two began.

“Allow me to give you a taste of the powers of my storied clan!”

Ginny, who was a mess of wounds only a moment ago, had been healed by

Verda while I wasn't looking. She planted her feet firmly on the ground and glared at Mephisto. A bewitching twinkle shone in her pupils.

Her *Charming Demon Eye* had activated.

Memories of my first days at the academy flooded my brain. Her *Charming Demon Eye* was so ultra-powerful that it had nearly made me her victim in bed one night. To charm a target, to put them under your control, and to manipulate them was a succubus's special power.

And she used her magic now to force Mephisto's mouth shut before he could utter the final line of his chant.

"Die."

Olivia appeared behind the devil, and her Demon Blade flashed, cutting through him. Just as her feet touched the earth...

"*Vel! Stena—Olvidius!*"

"*Vasq helgeqia vol nagan—GALVA QUESARRRR!*"

...Sylphy Marheaven and Alvarto Egzex released great beams of light from their Holy Swords.

"And now the final blow! Eat this! *Elder Breath!*"

Elzard's massive spell sent azure fire surging high into the heavens.

Mephisto was swallowed by the three massive attacks, but survived.

"Ard!" Irene's call told me this was my chance.

Everyone's feelings, all the memories we'd woven together, everything had brought us to this moment.

"...Let's end this."

I jumped into the sky to finally bring down the curtain.

It only took a moment to reach him. I beheld Mephisto as I floated before him. Then I looked down to my friends watching my every move.

"Everyone..."

I looked at my beloved, irreplaceable comrades.

And delivered my final words.

“...thank you.”

I took my battered enemy into my arms.

“This battle is over.....you win again, Mephisto Yuu Phegor.”

I pressed us together in an embrace.

We flew into the rift between the clouds. Once we passed through, Mephisto and I would...

...extinguish our own existences from the world.

Never to be seen by anyone.

Ever again.



“...Ard?”

Ireena’s eyes trembled with apprehension. “You’re okay...right?”

There’s no way Ard would lose.

He’s finishing Mephisto off in the clouds.

He’ll be right back. He’ll come back to me. To his friends.

I’m sure of it. So why...?

Why did she get the dreadful sense in her heart that she’d never see him again?

A moment later, Lizer confirmed her worst fear.

“Ard Meteor...chose to crown the wrong winner.”

Ireena’s eyes went wide.

“...What? He...crowned the wrong winner?”

“Correct. He has disappeared from this world.”

“.....What...are you even saying?”

She couldn’t believe it. Ireena couldn’t accept Lizer’s words.

"I thought...that I was ready to face this possibility...but it's still pretty tough," Verda whispered, all traces of former levity gone. "I just lost two loved ones at the same time."

She went silent, resembling a mourner offering a prayer to the dead.

Olivia hung her head. "Do you think...we made the right choice?"

"No. We made the wrong choice. That much is obvious," Alvarto answered, sneering at the sky. "But...it was the only option we had. There was no perfect, happy ending waiting for us."

"C'mon...this can't be happening," Sylphy said, bewildered.

"Ard Meteor...you were truly...*truly* a pain in the ass. I mean...who just up and leaves right after making friends with someone? No one, you dumbass."

Elzard's words shivered. Tears dampened the corners of her eyes.

Meanwhile, those who'd arrived from the academy had yet to grasp what had transpired.

"Dang, Ard sure is taking his time. What's the holdup?" Elrado wondered, oblivious.

"Well, when he gets baaaack..."

"He's gonna praise me first!"

Lumi and Lami were busy dreaming of a moment that would never come.

"M-maybe if we apologize for what we did when we were mind-controlled?"

"Oh, we could both get on our hands and knees and beg for forgiveness? But...he'd forgive us even if we didn't, I'm sure."

As Carmilla and Veronica gazed at the sky, their hearts yearned for an impossible future.

Meanwhile, the two great mages and the hero...

"I saw it coming... I knew that someday, we'd part ways."

"Me too. But..."

"I didn't think it would happen like this."

They understood, but refused to accept it.

Some were bewildered. Others were incapable of comprehension. A few embraced defeat.

All fell into one of the three categories except for two people.

Ireena and Ginny were the only exceptions.

“No.....he’s coming back.”

“Yes, I’m sure of it.”

They stood side by side, looked at each other, and nodded firmly, their hearts firm with conviction.

“I don’t care who says I’m wrong,” Ireena said.

“There’s no use trying to make any sense of it,” Ginny agreed.

“Ard will never...”

“My Ard will never...”

The pair gazed up into the heavens.

...He’ll never leave me all alone.

He’ll always be there. Always.



We were in the space between worlds. In the past, the Outer Ones traversed this place to reach my world.

And yet, this was no mere passage. Hidden in this white, expansive void, lurked a unique danger. The moment someone was seized by it, this void became their eternal prison.

I’d used unique magic to bring us here...

...to spend eternity here, with my archnemesis.

“This is my second time here and...yeah, it’s boring. Literally hell.”

Mephisto delighted in the tragedies and comedies of human intelligence. That was his reason for existing. No such fun existed here.

This dimension had nothing.

Even gravity and all other elements of physics were absent.

All one could do here was float and wait forever. To Mephisto, there was no worse place. Yet he made no attempts to escape.

And there was only one reason why.

"My dearest wish has finally come true, my love. Now, I can have you—all of you—to myself. The thought of it makes this feel like heaven."

Indeed, his every action had been in service of the goal to spend eternity with me.

Naturally...I didn't want to let him have that.

That's why I initially hoped to end this battle by taking his life. Unfortunately, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't think of a way to make it happen. If I tried to kill him, he might destroy all of existence on a whim.

That made my choice clear. I had to sacrifice myself. Giving Mephisto what he wanted meant my friends would survive, at the very least.

Mephisto sighed. "Y'know...this still isn't perfect. You aren't even looking at me. Your heart and gaze are locked on your friends."

His eyes narrowed to slits, and there was a faint anger in his tone.

"Your friends were amazing people, I mean it. And that's why I'm so upset. They've grabbed your heart, and they won't let go. As long as they're still out there, you'll never completely be mine. And you know...I kinda hate you for that."

"Why won't you look at me?"

"You're all I have."

His emotions were like a little child's, the sort who bullied their crush for attention. Realizing that everything he'd done was fueled by such an immature motive astounded me.

It made me angry.

But at the same time...I pitied him.

"You haven't forgotten what Ireena said before the battle, have you?" I asked.

Mephisto shook his head. "Nope. She said she wasn't gonna save me. So what?"

"Wrong. She said she *gave up* on saving you. She never said she didn't want to. She entrusted that hope to me."

"Oh, wow... She really is an angel," Mephisto replied. He paused for a moment, then said, "You're not going to tell me I ought to praise and worship her, are you?"

Glaring into his eyes, I answered, "Unlike Ireena, I have no mercy in my heart for you, Mephisto Yuu Phegor. You are pitiful. I can pity parts of you. But that's not enough—nowhere near enough for me to forgive everything you've done. I will never, *never* save you."

Mephisto laughed off my statement. "You know by now that I'm a truly self-centered person. No matter what you think, bringing us here is all the salvation I need. Besides...once we've spent an eternity together, I suspect your soul might break a little for me."

The devil smiled. Then the unique element that made this place an endless prison manifested.

Dimensional parasites. No words could describe their surreal appearance. They weren't here to attack, for they didn't know how. Instead, these creatures appeared whenever anyone entered this place, and they multiplied endlessly. That was their sole purpose.

There was no end to them. Once they surrounded you, they would keep respawning forever until you were dead. The speed at which they multiplied was akin to the expansion of the universe. If you were caught, there was no escape.

Not for me.

Not for Mephisto.

Neither of us would ever leave.

"Even if millions...billions of years pass...even if my heart is frozen, I can

promise you with utter confidence that I will never take your hand."

Mephisto giggled. "Are you sure? Waiting to find out will be entertaining, if nothing else."

My field of vision went dark.

I have no regrets...

I had accepted my fate.

My friends still lived in my heart. An eternity with the most wicked being in existence wouldn't break me, so long as I knew that much.

I'd never be with them again, but I saw their smiles when I closed my eyes.

That was enough.

"Oh, stop being a hero, you big lonely baby."

A sight I dared not believe appeared before my eyes.

Mephisto surely felt the same way about it. His eyes were wide at this sudden turn of events.

"Um, excuse me... I gave my darling two choices: save his friends by abandoning them, or die with them."

A third choice had emerged...

...manifesting from my body with a ray of light.

The glittering light, illuminating the sea of jet-black, soon took human shape.

She stood between Mephisto and me.

We called her name in unison.

""Lydia...!""

I'd never mistake her.

My best friend, the one I thought I'd lost forever, was here before my very eyes.

Radiance surrounded her as she looked at me. "Hey there. Long time no see, Var."

Her sunny smile, that expression that lived only in my memory, shone upon me.

“Then again, it hasn’t exactly been a long time for me, you know. After all, I’ve been inside you all this time.”

.....!

Oh...now I understand.

I know where this phenomenon came from.

“Fusing with Rogue...restored your spirit! That’s what brought you back to reality!”

After I’d killed Lydia, I pitifully searched for traces of her existence. Doing so transferred her spirit into me the moment before she vanished from existence. Had I been able to save her spirit in its complete form, I could have preserved Lydia’s persona inside me. But when I slew her, it left her spirit in poor shape.

Fusing with Rogue had restored it.

“You took too damn long, ya jackass.”

“Oof!”

She punched me in the gut. I was too bewildered to fight back.

“Nn—grrr! Y-you little bitch...! Is that any way to greet me after all these years?! C’mon, take something seriously for once!”

“You freeze up when you get in your head. Only a swift whack can fix you.”

“Am I a broken *toy*?! You really are so...so...”

My words failed me.

Tears were rolling down my face.

I didn’t want to cry, but I couldn’t stop.

I didn’t want her to see me looking so pathetic...

“BWAH-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA! You always were such a crybaby!”

“Sh-shut up! I’m not, I mean, there’s something in my eye! That’s all!”

“Something in your eye? Could you *be* more cliché?!”

Lydia clutched her belly and cackled, looking every bit the way she had in life.

Mephisto and I knew just by looking at her what she was here to do.

“I see...so this is how you’ll take your revenge on me.”

The devil tried to stop it, but his *Attack* spell passed right through her.

That’s when Lydia finally looked at Mephisto. “Just sit back like a little bitch and watch. Like I had to, when you killed my mom.”

When her gaze returned to me, I said, “If you’re back...if you’re really here to stay, then—”

Her fist interrupted me. I could’ve dodged if I wanted to, but I happily chose not to.

My cheek was hot where she hit it, but it wasn’t an unpleasant sensation.

Somehow, that blow was filled with the love of a mother scolding her child.

“C’mon, Var. Deep down, you know what you’re supposed to do. That’s why you didn’t dodge my punch.” She unclenched her fist and patted my head. “I thought getting blasted to the past and going through all that shit finally helped you get over me?”

“I thought it did. But now that I’m seeing you again...well, look at me.”

I couldn’t stop the surge of love I felt for her. I didn’t want to stop it.

“Lydia...I couldn’t save you. I failed because of my own stupidity.”

“Forget about it. Remember what I told you? I don’t hold any grudges against you. C’mon... I think it’s time to stop hating yourself,” Lydia said, her hand still gently caressing my hair.

I looked her straight in the eye. “Lydia.”

“Yeah, what?”

“Marry me.”

“.....Huh?”

Her hand froze on my head. She opened her eyes wide and tensed.

“.....What...did you just say?”

“I said marry me.”

“Oh no. That fight must’ve given you brain damage—”

“It didn’t. I mean it. I love you, Lydia.”

Had I only been able to bare my soul in the past, I never would’ve lost her. At least I could tell her now. I guess that was part of growing up.

And because I was able to be honest with her, I realized I cared dearly for all my friends just as much as I did for Lydia. They’d made me into the man I was.

“Hah! You fickle flirt.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“I’ve always been loyal. I only had a kid with one person.”

“.....Yeah, about that. This is kind of a gross question, but who’s the other parent? A man? A woman? I understand why you kept it a secret all this time. If some old devil found out about your kid, terrible things would happen. But there’s no need to hide it anymore. Who the hell was the fathe—?”

“You.”

“.....Huh?”

This time, I was the one who froze. Mephisto did the same. That prompted the Evil God to finally break his silence.

“Whoa, whoa. Hang on, I can’t let that slide. I’ve watched my darling twenty-four seven, so I should know. You kids would never do *that*.”

“Could you not be so gross? Just die already,” I spat. Then I faced Lydia again. “Never mind him. Who did you have a child with?”

“Um, I already said it was *you*. Don’t make me say it again. It’s awkward.”

“I.....don’t remember doing that.”

“I don’t remember it, either,” Mephisto added.

“Of course you don’t remember. We didn’t make the kid by doing *the deed*.”

“.....You don’t mean—?”

"Yeah, a homunculus. I asked Verda to make it."

A homunculus was a human manufactured from two or more people's genetic codes and spirits. In ancient times, people reproduced through sexual intercourse and sorcery, that much was common knowledge.

".....So in other words, if I'm hearing you right, we're already..."

"Yeah, we're basically married, I guess."

Lydia scratched her cheek. It was red, but not from the scratching.

"I thought that when I was no longer around...you'd be left all alone. So I made one for you. That way, you'd have hope. And I left a hint to let'cha know about it, but you never freakin' noticed, so you got all depressed. Then there was the reincarnation, and well, you found her eventually, so I guess it all worked out."

Irenea.

Irenea Olhyde.

She was my hope all along.

I always thought of her as a daughter, and it turned out she was truly my own flesh and blood all along.

An indescribable feeling flooded my heart.

Meanwhile...

"Okay...catching up has been lovely, but I've had enough chitchat." Lydia took a deep breath. Then she raised her right arm and pointed at the infinitely spawning dimensional parasites.

A beam of light shot from Lydia's finger, pushing the parasites aside and creating a hole to another dimension.

"Get out there, Var. Take care of your world. Take care of your friends. And...

"...Take care of your family."

As the words left her mouth, my body was sucked through the hole of light.

"Darling...!" Mephisto cried.



"Easy, buddy, you're not going anywhere. You're staying in here. With me."

A circle of light bound Mephisto, inhibiting his movement. It was a phenomenon that couldn't be explained simply by the fact that Rogue and I had fused. Some other secret surely remained hidden.

However, I couldn't care less about that right now.

"Lydia! I promise I'll come back for you!" I screamed.

Just before the hole swallowed me...

My feelings...

My greatest wish...

"I promise I'll take you back to our world! So please, please spend the rest of your life with me!"

Lydia smirked and answered, "But coming back for me means setting this guy free. You okay with that?"

"You think I care?! I'll just get powerful enough to beat him to oblivion!"

For you, I could move planets.

Lydia's eyes went wide, surprised by my uncharacteristically careless words. "Man...you've changed, Var. Wait, no, you've grown. That's what I meant."

Her peaceful smile faded into the distance.

With every second we drifted farther from each other, my love for her deepened.

So I screamed once more, hurling any notions of resignation far into the distance.

"I *will* bring you back! I promise! *I promise!!!*"

Lydia was so small now that I couldn't see her face.

Even though my eyes couldn't see her. Even though my ears couldn't hear her voice.

I saw her.

I saw Lydia's crimson cheeks.

And I heard her.

I heard her voice, choked with joy.

".....Come back for me as soon as you can, okay?"

To that I spoke a solemn vow, knowing my voice would never reach her as I fell into the hole of light.

"Someday... Someday I will take your hand!"

Even if I had to defy the laws of nature.

Even if it happened in a future that should never be.

I'd break all the rules...for one more chance.

One more chance to smile with her.

And to have any hope of seeing that come to pass, I had to return to my friends.

Until that day arrived...

THE FINAL CHAPTER

A Typical Nobody Is Reborn as the Greatest Demon Lord

It felt like time was spinning in reverse.

The desolate earth swelled into a rapid metamorphosis, returning to what it had once been, the Laville National Academy of Magic. Everyone sighed with relief at the familiar sight.

“Well...it would seem we needn’t worry about the results being overturned,” Olivia said.

“Yeah, Mephisto has been completely eliminated from this world,” Alvarto replied. “The return of this place is proof enough of that.”

“Still, we can hardly call this a victory,” Lizer mused.

The three exchanged conflicted glances. Their mission was a success...but the loss they’d suffered was all too great. It wasn’t exactly a time for celebration.

“I agree, it’s not the ideal outcome...but we can’t let ourselves get depressed,” Verda said. “Our fight isn’t over yet.”

The Four Heavenly Kings nodded. Ireena added, “Lady Verda is right. There’s another fight coming someday, but...let’s rest for a while first.”

Sylphy sighed. “I completely second that. I am absolutely wiped out.”

“Yes...this was truly an exhausting ordeal,” Ginny agreed.

Everyone else felt the same. They needed rest. Thinking and planning could wait.

“The sun is still high up in the sky...but I’d love to get back to the dorms and flop into my bed.” Ireena groaned.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Ginny said.

“Well, I wanna *eat* something,” Sylphy whined. “My belly’s growling so hard,

I'm scared it's gonna kill me."

Ireena and Ginny giggled at the sounds coming from their friend's stomach. They were finally beginning to realize that peace had returned. And although Ard wasn't with them, he'd return someday.

Yet no sooner did they think as much...

"Sorry to disappoint...but I have no intention...of permitting a touching reunion..."

...than a voice from the heavens denied them. Worse yet, Ireena and Ginny recognized it.

"You can't be serious..." Ireena followed everyone's gazes to the blue expanse overhead. She smirked cynically upon catching sight of the speaker, a blue-haired boy dressed in white. There was no mistaking it. He was the being who called himself a god.

"As a rule, our kind...cannot interfere directly with the world beneath us... That is why, while we pass through unforeseen processes at times...we can never change...preordained outcomes."

A ripple formed in the air, signaling the start of something.

Olivia recalled the events that had led to this moment. "So it's just as I feared... He wasn't lying to us."

Deep in their hearts, each of them had doubted Mephisto's claim. They'd hoped that maybe the end of the world would never come. Perhaps Mephisto had lied, secretly laughing at their reactions all the while.

Yet now a threat far greater than an Evil God had arrived to dash their hopes.

"Now.....may the Great End begin..."



The god had said his kind could not directly interfere with the world. And he was probably telling the truth. So the action the self-described god had performed was not an apocalypse by his own doing.

Instead, he summoned a behemoth, a gigantic beast to bring about the end.

On that day, the Laville National Academy of Magic was half-destroyed.

When the monster suddenly appeared in the capital, its people put up the best resistance they could muster.

However, the outcome was just too devastating.

After the apocalyptic beast began its rampage, Verda transported it to another location. A second war began in a deserted grassland. It was a loss beyond recognition.

The fight could hardly be called a proper war in the first place. The behemoth simply invaded, ignoring all attacks. It unleashed a tornado of destruction on everything around it, toppling twenty-five villages and cities.

Others like it appeared all over the world. In villages. In cities. In nations. They eradicated everything.

There was no mercy, no delight or pride.

They destroyed.

Nothing more.

A month passed.

Ireena Olhyde stood before a mass grave in a corner of the capital. She spoke to one of the headstones in particular.

“Remember how I told you that the continent of Sartois was in danger? Well... it fell yesterday. A new breed of behemoth appeared and wiped it out in one attack. That’s what Lady Olivia said. Lady Verda was there, too, and...now she’s missing.”

There had been so much devastation in such a short amount of time.

Everyone kept dying. Even Ireena’s closest friends weren’t spared.

“With each passing day, I lose someone new... I’ve lost track of how many times I wished I could just wake up from this nightmare.”

She never did, though. This was a nightmare that would only end if she made it through the night.

“Tell me, Ard...you believed in us, didn’t you? You trusted that we could

protect the world, even after you were gone.”

But...

Her eyes grew damp. “I’m ashamed to say it, but, without you, Ard...we just can’t!”

Her tears nearly fell.

All her unspoken fears almost spilled out.

However, Ireena held it together at the last moment.

If she broke now, it would all truly be over.

No matter what despair lay before her, she could never break.

Her best friend entrusted this world to her.

Ireena was determined to protect it.

“Two days ago...a new behemoth appeared near the capital. Lady Olivia tried to destroy it...but she lost the fight. She lost her left arm...she lost...consciousness.”

The behemoths were relentless.

They were traveling north, destroying every village and city along the way...

By tomorrow, one would arrive at the capital.

The threat loomed over Ireena, staring her in the face.

“I can’t escape, and I shouldn’t try to. I have to be where you can’t, Ard. I need to protect everyone...while you’re gone. So I...I enlisted to fight.”

Ireena’s friends had done the same—Ginny, Sylphy, Elzard—the girls would march forward tomorrow, side by side. Ireena knew already what would happen. She had no optimism and no pride. The past month had taken all fragile traces of those emotions from her.

Her habit of saying, “It’ll all work out somehow” was gone, never to cross her lips again.

However...there was no pessimism in Ireena’s heart.

Only courage.

"I won't lose, I promise you, Ard. I'll do you proud until you come back."

There was a fighting spirit in her eyes. Yet in her heart lurked understandable fear. Ireena refused to let it show, however.

The day after her promise before her best friend's grave, everything would unfold as foreseen.

The next morning, in the expansive field before the capital, the mustered forces met the behemoths in battle.

It was an army of tens of thousands, with a collection of first-class mages in the center, and support mages as well.

The legendary hero and the two Great Mages who'd killed a revived Evil God ten years before led the charge. Their participation greatly boosted the soldiers' morale, filling them with hope...

Which made the despair all the worse.

The behemoth they faced was like a giant mountain with limbs...or like the scribbled drawing of a child. Its triangular body was massive, reaching all the way to the sky. And supporting it were three threadlike legs. It didn't look like a living being. They weren't even sure it was.

Still, the heroes did not falter.

"All units, *fire!!!*"

Jack unleashed a fireball. And on his signal, everyone in the army commenced the attack. The power of tens of thousands of *Attack* spells was certainly imposing.

"Ya big blockhead—you think size matters?!"

"This is for Olivia!"

Tremendous attacks from Elzard, the Frenzied King of Dragons, and Sylphy, the Raging Champion, transformed the wave of destruction from the army into a strike to be truly feared.

However...

"Ahhhhhhh."

...the behemoth emitted a soprano tone, and all attacks were erased by the infinite beams of light shooting from the triangular beast. The shots even stopped Elzard's and Sylphy's famed spells.

Half the army was annihilated in an instant. Anyone directly hit by the light beams sweeping the earth was unceremoniously eradicated. And the casualties from the impact wave created by the attack were nearly as bad. Some soldiers were crushed to pieces; others lost limbs or passed out.

Luckily, Ireena survived, as did Ginny beside her.

Sylphy and Elzard were standing in the light beams' trajectories, but a *Defensive* spell shielded them from the attack, and they escaped with minor wounds.

Unfortunately...

"Dad! Uncle Jack! Auntie Carla!"

...the state of the three heroes was unknown. All Ireena could do was pray for their safety.

The behemoth would not even grant them that mercy, though.

It attacked again.

A second attack. A third. A fourth.

It mercilessly unleashed the same beams with the strength to wipe out half an army. To behold the massive beast was to understand it existed for one purpose.

Extermination.

The erasure of all creation.

No creature would escape.

These behemoths were a pure manifestation of an intense intent to kill that swept life off the surface of the planet.

Ireena and her friends were no exception.

"Elzard!"

“I don’t care...what happens to me! As long as...you live!”

Elzard had shielded Irenea and suffered heavily for it. Her dragon healing ability could only do so much. The behemoth’s attack had exhausted it.

“Huff...! Huff...! Miss...Irenea!” Ginny collapsed to the ground. A drive to fight yet burned in her eyes, but her wounds were too great. She couldn’t stand.

“I could...do this all day!” Sylphy gasped out valiantly. She had been spared the worst, but her Holy Sword, her precious other half bequeathed to her by Lydia, was half gone.

“Elzard... Ginny... Sylphy...”

Her wounded friends.

All the lives lost.

In the face of it all...

“I won’t...let you defeat me!”

Irenea glared at the behemoth, gripping her Holy Sword Vald-Galgulus tightly. That was all she managed, though. For the moment before she tried to attack, another barrage of light beams rained down.

It was only thanks to Elzard’s protection that Sylphy and Irenea survived, but even that did not spare them entirely. The impact from the beam flung them across the plain.

“Nnf—augh!”

Irenea couldn’t move.

Her limbs felt bound.

She couldn’t pull herself up.

“I won’t...let you...defeat me...!”

She stared hatefully at the behemoth, even immobilized on her back.

“I won’t...let you...kill me...!”

The luminous rays came for her as though to mock her determination.

Although faced with such immense despair, Irenea, Elzard, Sylphy, and Ginny

still refused to give up.

They all shared the same feeling.

They pictured him in their minds.

Ard.

Ard Meteor.

This was his moment.

There was no way he wouldn't come to save them.

Were the behemoth sentient, it undoubtedly would've laughed at them. It would've ridiculed them for entertaining a fantasy at the brink of demise.

However.

Because their fantasy was so simplistic.

So impossible.

It needed to become reality.

That's what Ard Meteor existed for.

Less than a second before Ireena and her friends lost their lives to the light beams...

...a sparkling golden wall protected them.

The behemoth's attacks had destroyed every substance, every concept, but it wasn't enough.

Not even the one who named himself God and brought forth the end of the world could match him.

That's when the girls saw the rift forming in the sky, and the human figure emerging from it.

He transformed into beauty incarnate.

"Sheesh. A big brawl the moment I get back? I've got the worst luck."

The voice that traveled between his lips was more beautiful still.

It was difficult to determine who he was on sight alone.

He'd seemingly transformed into someone else.

But in an instant, Ireena knew him.

Ginny sensed him.

Elzard grasped him.

And Sylphy...

"Uh, Var?! What's Var doing here?"

...was the only one of them unchanged.

"Wait, you mean to tell me you didn't notice all this time? You can't be serious."

"Huh? Notice what?"

Meanwhile, another pair of people were bewildered in a different way.



As he looked down at them from the heavens, the man...

He...

I...

I called to my friends in the distance.

“Hello. Your humble Ard Meteor has returned.”

There was no answer.

Sylphy remained dazed and silent.

Elzard smiled with relief.

Irenea and Ginny watched with tears streaming down their faces.

...Had I only been able to return sooner, I wouldn’t have made them cry.

However, I was hesitant to take full responsibility.

After all, this wasn’t the fault of my ineptitude.

Lydia’s stupidity had screwed things up.

That place between dimensions was like a corridor that connected worlds to each other. It led to infinite places. And thus, the unthinkable had occurred.

“How... *How* could you send me to the wrong world? After such a solemn scene!”

Lydia, that ultra jackass, had sent me to the wrong place.

“Aaaggghhh...just thinking about it pisses me off,” I muttered to the sky. “That idiot... Next time I see her, I’m kicking her ass.”

Suddenly...

“Laaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.”

...the thing next to me emitted some sort of noise.

Irenea’s face turned white, and she screamed, “A-Ard!”

She was telling me to be careful. But from my perspective...

“La—”

“Shut up.”

...it was an insect.

Its very existence.

The noise it made.

Just a whining bug. Nothing more.

So I crushed it like one using gravity manipulation.

I multiplied the load-bearing points on the creature’s body by millions, crushing its mountainlike form to the size of a pea.

Then I landed before Ireena and the others and...

“AAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRRRDDDDDDDD!!!”

...Ireena jumped into my arms. And I was sure Ginny wanted to do the same, yet she didn’t.

“Oh, your legs. Allow me.”

After I healed her, I restored Elzard and Sylphy as well.

“Whoa... Wait just a minute...,” Elzard said.

Sylphy frowned. “A-Ard, I know you’re capable of miracles, but...”

“Is something the matter? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Elzard proceeded to explain that the thing I’d defeated was what they called a behemoth and that the wounds it inflicted were incurable by magic or any other means.

“So...how?” Elzard asked.

“I suppose the properties of the energy I used are different.”

“The energy—properties?”

“Yeah. I didn’t use magic. I used psychic—it’s a feat from a different world.”

“A f-feat from a different world?!”

That’s right. When I got tossed there, I didn’t spend the whole time just desperately trying to find my way back. I got caught up in all sorts of annoying

trouble, too. Along the way, I acquired many new feats and abilities.

As a result, I was incomparably more powerful than my former self...though it did come with a setback. Ginny voiced a question related to it.

“S-so, um...Ard? Why do you...look like that?”

“Ugh... Let me explain. I wanted to reunite with you all as Ard Meteor. Maybe it’s because I’ve become too powerful, but my disguise magic doesn’t work very well anymore. I can take another form but always turn back in just a few seconds.”

My existence had likely become far too firmly defined. Twisting my appearance through disguise magic barely worked anymore. From now on, I had to look like Varvatos.

“Do you...dislike me this way?” I asked.

“Oh, no! In fact, I love it!” Ginny screeched, blood spurting from her nose.

Sylphy cast a judgmental look at me. “When we get back to the capital... you’re gonna do a lot of explaining.”

Evidently, I was in a fair amount of trouble.

Before I had a chance to reply...

“Laaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

...the behemoth I thought I’d destroyed restored itself. For some reason, there were now six of them.

However, nobody looked even slightly concerned.

“Ard.”

“Ardy.”

“Ard Meteor.”

“Y’know...I think I’ll just call you *Ard* now.”

Trust.

Seeing it in their eyes and hearing it in their voices meant there was only one thing to say.

“Rest at ease, everyone. That goes for everyone in the world, not just you guys.”

I wanted them to remember me as a symbol of peace, not just my friends, but everyone who survived.

And even those thought to be lost.

“I don’t care what rules exist here—I can ignore them all now. Even death.”

In the blink of an eye, all those who fell victim to the behemoths came back to life.

“Huh?! A-am I...?”

“I was d-dead...right? I know I was.”

I smirked at the sea of confused faces before me.

“All right. Time to take out the trash.” I flew up into the sky...and as Ireena and the others looked on, I announced, “I am now an existence beyond the Demon Lord. Call me the Greatest Demon Lord.”

Then I issued a challenge to the behemoths that would destroy the world. “Face me. I’m waiting. I’ll crush you until there’s nothing left.”

I wouldn’t let this world end. *Never.*

I’d protect it.

This was my loved ones’ home.

One day, my beloved Lydia and I would share our days here.

“Come on. Give me your best shot.”

I hurled myself into a new battle...

...with a smile.

AFTERWORD

Greetings from a very-relieved-that-the-anime-was-broadcast-without-a-hitch-and-is-consequently-burnt-out Myojin Katou.

I'm starting to believe that a writer's second work is quite special to them on a personal level. If your debut work is a success, or if you're satisfied with the way it turned out, your next creation feels like your second child.

However, if you aren't satisfied with your debut work, then your second one becomes your last chance to crawl out of the pit and make it as a writer.

And since I was the latter, this series was literally my messiah.

It's seen my first manga adaptation and my first anime adaptation.

When my pipe dream became reality, I was more emotional than I'd ever been in my life. I remember thinking, *Thank God I was born.*

I doubt I'll ever know a series this important to me for as long as I live.

And this special series has come to an end with Volume 10.

If I had to express the feeling, I'd say it's like being at your graduation ceremony. It's the loneliness of beating your wings and flying off, even though you don't want to leave, and the sadness of parting with people you don't want to say good-bye to.

And...I really did feel that way at my graduation. I didn't want to have the cliché "Good riddance, shitheads!" sentiment about it.

We're getting off topic, though.

All graduations lead to new things. And I have already started work on my new series while finishing this one.

A writer's third work is like a crossroads. Will the author's second story become the graduating thesis of their career? Or can they keep going? I intend to work as hard as the new kid who tries to look cool on their first day of high

school or college.

Lastly, I want to express my gratitude.

Thank you to Sao Mizuno-sama for providing such wonderful illustrations all these years. Thousands of words would never be enough to thank you. I'm so genuinely grateful for everything you've done.

Thank you to my first editor, who worked with me on Volumes 1 through 6. This series wouldn't have been as strong without your guidance. Thank you.

And thank you to my second editor, who's worked with me from Volume 7 to the end. Sorry for being so high-maintenance, and I hope we get to work together again in the future.

Lastly...my eternal gratitude goes to all of you who read this to completion.

It is with hope in my heart that we meet again someday as I set down my pen.

Myojin Katou

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink