

The Greatest Demon Lord TYPICAL NOBODY

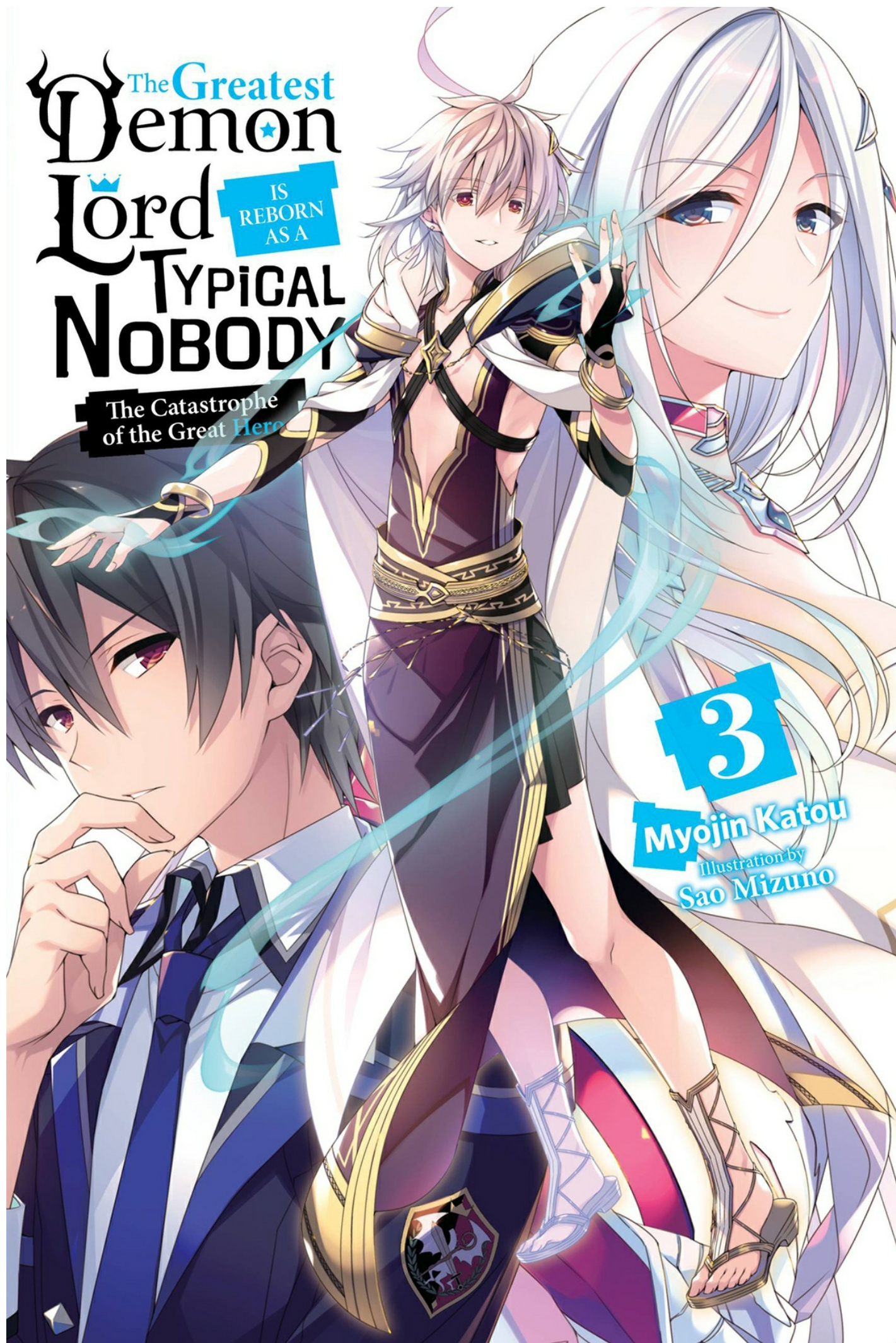
IS
REBORN
AS A

The Catastrophe
of the Great Hero

3

Myōjin Katou

Illustration by
Sao Mizuno





"H-hey!
Where do
you think
you're
touching?!"

"How
about I
show you
to my villa
after this
and we
have some
fun?"

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Demon
Lord
IS REBORN
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of the Great Hero

Ard

The ex-Demon Lord. Sent back to the ancient world upon an encounter with a self-proclaimed "god," he plans to ravage the battlefield to return to the present.

Sweeping my hand out in front of my eyes, I put together a technique in a flash. As it expended my magic, a large magic circle manifested—and with it raged an inky thunderstorm, cracking and flaring with angry lightning bolts.

“Would you like me to show you what real lightning looks like?”



**“Ha-ha!
Up to
no good,
huh?
Count
me in.”**

**Just when
that familiar
voice rang
through the
confines, the
wind kicked
up, violently
whipping
around them.**

Lydia

The great hero who suffered an untimely death and was known as the Champion. When Ard is traversing the past, he runs into her, and—

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ON**
NEW YORK

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The Greatest Demon Lord Is Reborn as a Typical Nobody, Vol. 3

Myojin Katou

Translation by Jessica Lange

Cover art by Sao Mizuno

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SHIJOU SAIKYOU NO DAIMAOU, MURABITO A NI TENSEI SURU Volume 3
DAIEIYUU NO CATASTROPHE

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CHAPTER 38

The Ex-Demon Lord on a Sweet School Trip...with a Twist

Under the cerulean sky, the sun's unfiltered rays illuminated the earth.

Summer was nearing an end in the Laville Empire of Sorcery.

With even spaces between them, a row of carriages proceeded along the main road at a leisurely pace. All around them spread a pastoral scene...and the voices inside the carriage chattered with equivalent euphony.

"Argh! I got the Frenzied King of Dragons card again! Hey, Olivia! I bet you're trying to pull one over on me, aren't you?!"

"Hmph. Don't blame others for your screw-ups, you novice."

"You know, I'm starting to get bored of Old Fiend."

"Should we do something other than a card game? There's still plenty of time before we reach our destination."

My fellow passengers were Olivia, Sylphy, Ginny, and Ireena. The girls were engrossed in a friendly game of cards.

To think Elzard would be the bad draw in a card game. Of course, the Frenzied King of Dragons was *the* notorious bad guy in this era, but this seemed excessive. It made me feel a little bad for my former enemy, even though we hadn't been on good terms.

...Anyway, we were on our way to the destination for our school trip.

This inevitably brought back memories of my former life.

Back when I was called the Demon Lord, I had worn a disguise to blend into society, attempting to sneak into school with some commoners. In those days, I remembered we'd had a class trip, too.

I knew most students associated these school events with making lasting

memories among friends or engaging in some wholesome romantic moments. I had those lofty hopes, too.

...And yet, I ended up spending it completely alone.

It must have been because I tried in every conceivable way to make friends before the trip. In the end, that got me nowhere, and I became the class clown—not the good kind, either.

“Your entire existence is just...aggravating,” decreed Michael, the most popular kid in our class, judging me hard. I must have been real annoying back then.

Because of that, I didn’t have a single good memory of my school trip. Merely the thought was making me...

“U-um? What’s wrong, Ard? You look like you’re about to cry...,” Ireena asked.

“No need to worry. It’s just... The sun can be blinding.”

You know, Michael had basically been our sun. Our class had orbited around him. The school trip then had been no exception.

In comparison...

Let’s not go there.

We shouldn’t be held captive by the past. It was vital that we face the present and live on.

In my past life, I was so lonely that I had chosen death, but now...

“Hey, Ard! I heard there’s gonna be a beach near our inn. Why don’t we go for a dip during our free time? I prepared the *wildest* swimsuit for this very occasion. ♡” Ginny leaned over, flaunting her enormous chest.

“Is. That. So? If that’s the case, I’m going, too! I’ve always wanted Ard to teach me to swim!” Ireena cradled my arm between her breasts, squishing them beside me and glaring at Ginny threateningly. She looked like a puppy refusing to share its master. It was seriously adorable.

“G-guess you guys give me no choice! I’ll come, too!” Sylphy shouted, her pale

cheeks flushed slightly red.

Honestly, letting her tag along was more trouble than it was worth, so I wished she would just stay behind...

"Heh. Swimming, huh?" Olivia turned her gaze to the ceiling as if deliberating on something.

Don't you dare. Seriously, don't come along with us.

...Obviously, things were more spirited compared with my old life. We'd overcome and dealt with a bunch of stuff, but I felt lucky to be here. I hoped these undisturbed days would continue forever.

...I was deep in my thoughts.

"It's fine to let loose, but don't go forgetting this is part of your schoolwo—," Olivia cut herself off midsentence.

Was something wrong? I looked over at her, and I was instantly confused. Her mouth hung open, but she wasn't moving an inch.

"...Lady Olivia? Is something the matter?" I asked, but there was no answer. It was as if she'd been frozen in time. This was totally boggling my mind.

...Wait a second. I suddenly turned my gaze to Sylphy.

And then, my bewilderment turned to vigilance.

"H-hey? Sylphy? *Hellooo?*" Ireena waved her hand in front of Sylphy...but there was no response. As with Olivia, she didn't even bat an eye.

It really was as if time had stopped completely.

"Th-there is something off about the carriage...!" Ginny exclaimed, voice trembling.

I peered outside. Until a second ago, we had been proceeding forward, slowly but surely, but the carriages were apparently frozen in their tracks.

This was a strange situation. My voice became clipped.

"Ireena, Ginny. Be on your guard. This is most likely the demons' attac—" But I didn't even get to finish my sentence before I blacked out—completely out of the blue.

I was standing in pitch darkness a few seconds later.

“Wh-where are we...?!”

“D-don’t worry...! A-as long as we have Ard...!”

But I wasn’t alone. Ireena and Ginny were both right next to me, trembling slightly, probably out of fear. I wanted to try and offer them some words of encouragement.

“Wel...come... Chosen...Ones...”

Through the silence rang out a young-sounding voice. We all shot our gaze in that direction. Standing there was a small child who appeared to be around ten years old.

With shoulder-length hair that was light blue and an elaborate outfit, this figure was hard to miss and young enough to look androgynous.

Based on outer appearances, this being was the exact picture of a sweet, young child. And yet...their true nature had to be something else entirely.

“Could you be a demon?” I asked.

The child didn’t spare me a glance, sleepy eyes gazing out into void.

“Humans always refer to the incomprehensible as...‘demons.’ Following that line of logic, I...might be... But if you witness my true identity...you’ll see that I am not one of them.”

“Then what would *you* call yourself?”

“If I were to describe myself...in your own tongue... I think *a god* would be most appropriate.”

A god. The same expression was plastered on all our faces—one of suspicion.

A god...? Really? ...On any other day, I would have scoffed. But in this situation, that statement wasn’t lacking credibility. That said, I couldn’t just go about blindly taking the child’s words at face value.

“...All right, that’s fair enough. At the very least, you’re not a demon. Let’s leave it at that for now... Well, what do you want from us?” I asked.

Without looking at anyone, the self-proclaimed kid-god answered

nonchalantly.

“There are infinite worlds... The past and future will repeat themselves forever, forking at every possibility... However...when a *singularity* occurs...the story...is different.”

“...Um.”

“It transcends law...and transforms the world... The results bring forth...either chaos or hope.”

“Pardon me.”

“The past...cannot be rewritten... That is the limit... However, a certain singularity...is trying to overturn that...”

“I’m sorry, but could you please explain in simpler terms? Your speech is too poetic—”

“I want you to...eliminate the singularity... And meet the *Demon Lord*... That will shake your world... One of the two will disappear... I pray you are the one to live on...”

“Please listen to what I’m trying to say—”

With my brows knitted, I tried to reason with the self-appointed kid-god, but this being clearly had no interest in listening to anyone.

“Well then... Safe travels...,” the kid-god interrupted, talking over me and waving us off lethargically— In that instant, our vision went black once more.

Moments later, we returned to consciousness, immediately seized by confusion.

“This is...,” I blurted out.

But I wasn’t the only one.

“Wh-what in the world is going on?” exclaimed Ireena.

“I never realized people could get headaches from being tossed into weird situations.”

Ireena and Ginny had broken out in a cold sweat, scanning the area anxiously.

In front of us was a wild terrain in the dark of night. The moonlight illuminated the plains and the huge holes that riddled it...

It was all too familiar to me.

No, it can't be, I rejected, refusing to believe what was in front of me.

"Huh? N-no, wait... *What?*" Ireena rubbed her eyes before looking up at the sky. Her lips quivered.

Ginny and I followed her lead to see what was above us.

I had to accept this situation whether I liked it or not.

Two moons were floating out in the dark canopy of the night.

It was a sight unseen in the modern world—for the two had become one through a certain incident in the olden days.

Why was the impossible now right before my eyes? There could only be one answer.

Somehow or other...

"It appears we're back in ancient times..."

I faced my unbelievable reality, shouting from the bottom of my heart: *How did things turn out this way—?*

CHAPTER 39

The Ex-Demon Lord's Time-Traveling Adventure (Sans School Trip)

Based on the classification systems in the modern era, the olden years began with the attack of the First Ones (known as the Evil Gods in the present day) and ended with their elimination at the hands of the Demon Lord Varvatos. The period afterward was labeled *New Age*, which continued to the present day. Modern historians said the same thing about the ancient past: *It was a rich time in human history that overflowed with codes of honor and virtue.*

There was the attack of the Evil Gods, whose existence was still wrapped in mystery; this had been around the time when humans started to conceptualize and categorize demons.

And with Varvatos the Demon Lord spearheading the creation of magic, the humans started using it.

The heroes of humanity had started to hold down their forts. It was humans against the demons and Evil Gods.

Finding a more momentous time would have been difficult, even if you managed to untangle the rope of human history.

...As one who was born to be a leader in that era, I had mixed feelings over this evaluation.

At any rate, antiquity was a bygone era for all, myself included. All you could do was reminisce.

...At least, that was what I'd thought until a few minutes prior.

I couldn't believe I'd walk on ancient soil again.

...Despair weighed on my heart.

If I was feeling this way, that meant Ireena and Ginny were...

“‘Back in ancient times’...”

“That can’t possibly be...”

I could sense the discomposure and worry on their faces. These emotions stood in their way, barricading them from understanding the reality before us. Even if I walked through the situation with them step-by-step, it would be pointless. Our priority for now was getting out of here.

“If my memory serves me right, we’re in the Makina District of the Vardia Empire, which was once ruled by the Demon Lord. I’m not exactly sure about the time period...but don’t worry. As long as I am here, no danger will befall us,” I claimed boldly, hoping to ease their minds, but the two only nodded nervously.

There wasn’t much to be done about that. I’d let time solve their psychological turmoil. If we had traveled through time, they would adapt whether they liked it or not. We were just built to process information that way.

...Well, it’d be more precise to say it would be a real problem if they *couldn’t* adapt. They’d never survive otherwise. I was talking as though we had all the time in the world, but this was kind of the worst possible situation.

Our current location had to be a famous training ground in the Makina District. If I remembered correctly, its name was the Plain of No Return. This zone was inhabited by very powerful monsters that bore their fangs at outsiders.

Most humans who dared enter ultimately lined the pits of monsters’ stomachs or nourished the earth—hence its nickname. It was the optimal place to raise and train young soldiers...and I should know. I’d used it.

I was the one who had made it a training ground for soldiers.

That was exactly why I knew something else: For modern humans, there could be no greater hell. That included Ireena and Ginny.

“Well then, let me lay out our next steps. First, we escape this region. This is monster territory, and it could pose major problems for us if we stay here. Unlike animals, they’re active whether it is day or night... Meaning we can’t apply general adventuring theories here.”

If dangerous animals inhabited the land—rather than monsters—it would have made the most sense to wait until dawn. The threat of wild animals halved in the morning and afternoon.

However, standard practices would be ineffective here. We had to leave immediately, regardless of the time of day.

“Based on the stars, I’d say we’re facing...true north. Let’s continue going straight for the time being. We should arrive at a town.” I flashed a big smile at the girls, who were all doom and gloom.

It seemed they were hanging on to the hope that this was all a dream, but I knew I shouldn’t bring that up now. I took the reins, moving the conversation forward.

“In any case, we must do something about our attire. After all, we’ll look suspicious in our school uniforms if we run into any locals on the way.”

I cast magic for molecular conversion, manifesting geometric magic circles around us that drew near, passing over our entire bodies. Our clothes transformed to basic leather armor. With this, we’d be perceived as adventurers, unlikely to arouse any suspicion.

And then, we were off.

Invoking common knowledge from my ancient past, I knew it would be best to rush out of this place, traveling faster than the speed of sound... However, there was no chance of that happening with Ireena and Ginny.

Because the world of the past was denser in mana compared with the present generation, both the soldiers and monsters in this land were on an entirely different level. Suppressing even the weakest monsters here would require a whole crew of modern-day knights.

...Will I be able to protect them against this world...in this body? I feared.

Ireena suddenly spoke up. “...Who was that kid?”

“‘A god,’ they said...”

Their expressions looked slightly less tense than before. It was taking some time, but they must have been slowly coming to grips with the situation.

That said, I couldn't help but be puzzled by the self-proclaimed "god" myself.

"I suppose there isn't a point in speculating over the child right now. I mean, I doubt we'll come to the correct answer. But...I think we should at least think about their parting words," Ginny said.

"Umm, yeah... Something about a singularity and the Demon Lord, right?" Ireena asked, and I nodded.

"We do not know what this singularity means. However, the self-proclaimed kid-god requested us to eliminate it. There is no doubt of that. Which means..."

"If we take care of that, we can go back to our own era?" Ginny asked nervously.

I assented. "I think so. Which means our final objective is to get rid of it. However, we do not know anything about this singularity. For now, we must prioritize something else."

"Another objective?" asked Ireena.

"Yes. That 'god' mentioned an encounter with the Demon Lord. An audience with him might move our situation forward."

"A-an audience with the Demon Lord...?!" Ginny's face turned to stone.

I looked at Ireena, who was frozen solid next to her. I guess this was reasonable. To them, Varvatos the Demon Lord existed only in legend, a total myth. And I had just suggested we go meet him. They must have thought I'd gone mad.

...They were actually standing in front of the Demon Lord himself, but that was for another day, another time.

"Meeting him will be our main objective. However—"

How do we make that happen?

It happened just as I was about to bring up the matter.

"RAAAH!" roared a valiant war cry, ringing in our ears.

...It seemed some major annoyances had wasted no time dropping into our laps.

“U-um, that sounded really desperate.” Ginny paled in fear.

“A monster must be attacking someone! We’ve gotta help them out!”
Meanwhile, Ireena practically radiated courage.

When considering the most optimal situation for these girls, it would be best to ditch whoever the victim was.

But that...would betray these girls’ hopes.

And Ard Meteor had to always be their hero.

“...Very well. Let’s go see what’s happening.”

We raced off, cutting through the darkness of the night.

Luckily, the owner of the voice was far away, and we soon caught sight of the situation.

“SH-SHIIT!” shrieked a very young girl.

From her leather armor, I could tell she was an adventurer. Her gallant features were twisted in fatigue and fear, and almost every inch of her pale skin was plastered in fresh blood.

The culprit was a monster, of course. A whole gang of them, actually.

Apparently, we’d somehow come across a pack of monsters. I calmly assessed the situation, but on the other hand...

“Wh-what the heck are those beasts...?!” Ireena blurted out in shock.

Next to her, Ginny was silent as if at a loss for words.

Again, this was within reason. The monsters of our present day were no match for those of the past.

As the girls stood there, I pondered with my hand on my chin. “Hmm. They seem to be none other than a pack of Death Stingers.”

“*What?! Death Stingers? Those things?*”

“Th-they’re nothing like the ones I know...”

In the modern day, Death Stingers were about fifty celti high, resembling a scorpion. They were relatively intimidating, but their movements were

incredibly sluggish, and the only threat came from the poisonous stinger at the end of their tail...

But that was because they'd been downgraded—after all, the saturation of magical essence was at an all-time low. Ancient Death Stingers were enormous and grew beyond five merel. Their weapon of choice still remained a poisonous stinger, but...

“SSSSSSSSSSSH!” hissed one from the group, whipping up its tail and pointing its stinger at the bloodied girl.

In the next moment, it sprayed its deadly poison.

Back in modern times, the Death Stingers would have shot a load of purple liquid...but this attack was practically going to hose her down, blasting toward her like a beam of light. *BZZZZZZZZT!*

“Nrgh!” she grunted, darting away with a speed that transcended sound, managing to dodge the poison.

The stream struck the ground instead...and set off a small-scale explosion moments later.

In most circumstances, ancient poison exploded whenever it collided with something. A fight between the girl and the Death Stingers was starting to unfold...

Both Ireena and Ginny stood stock-still with their mouths slack. The ancient world had raised the bar high. These new standards were incomprehensible.

Well again, that was perfectly fine. There was a girl running at the speed of sound around a bunch of monsters. That alone was absurd for modern people.

To me, however, it looked like nothing more than an average day. I took a step forward with a strange sort of relief, as if I was returning home.

“She’ll be done for at this rate. It may be overstepping my bounds...but I’m going to offer her some assistance.”

Plus, I wanted to see my capabilities in this era. You might say the group of Death Stingers made for perfect practice opponents.

“First, let us conduct a few preliminary tests.”

I chose the mid-level attack spell *Lightning Field*. This was a derivation of *Lightning Blast*, and as the name suggested, it summoned a rain of lightning over a wide area to conquer and annihilate. I unleashed it without an incantation, invoking magic circles in the dark sky over the Death Stingers' heads— Bolts of golden lightning thundered down on the group of monsters. They struck true, each one a direct hit.

For me, however, this single attack was really only a test.

"Hmm. This was unexpected... To think they would be finished off so easily."

The Death Stingers sizzled silently as black smoke rose off them. It was obvious they were all dead.

In the middle of the charred monsters was the girl, who was frantic moments before.

"Y-you got all the Death Stingers in one shot...?!" she yelped.

It was a line that gave me déjà vu. Come to think of it, this situation was uncannily similar to my first interaction with Ireena.

As I savored that memory, I tried calling out to the girl.

Just as I opened my mouth, I could feel an enormous intensity overpower me from behind.

Uh-oh. This feeling. It can't be...

When my mind's eye showed me a certain face, I broke out in a cold sweat. I nervously turned around.

"Heh. You ain't half bad."

Sure enough, standing there in the middle of the night was...one of the Four Heavenly Kings and a sisterly figure to me, Olivia vel Vine.

""L-Lady Olivia?!"" shrieked Ireena, Ginny, and the damsel in distress.

I had guessed she was Olivia's pupil or something. There was no doubt *this* Olivia was suspicious as to why Ireena and Ginny knew her name. She crossed her arms with a frown and glared sharply at the two.

"...Who are you? I don't recognize your face. And why are you two looking at

me like that?”

Her prickly attitude must have been due to Ireena’s and Ginny’s adoring and trusting gazes focused on her. But this Olivia had no way of understanding why—because we knew a different Olivia entirely, the one in the modern day.

Our Olivia always wore a bold, modified teacher’s uniform that allowed a full range of motion, but this one dressed in a dark outfit that kept her light on her feet. Furthermore, this Olivia appeared marginally younger, more aggressive, and inexperienced. Unlike the modern Olivia, her long, silky, black hair was tied up into a ponytail, and even that sharply emphasized her youth.

“U-um, that’s, uh...”

“W-we, ah...”

With complicated expressions, the two began to sweat bullets.

I could totally understand how they felt. To reunite with a loved one, only to realize they were not quite the same person and a total stranger... This would naturally leave anyone confused.

Even I was a little baffled, but I couldn’t show that. I had to act like nothing bothered me and continue being the girls’ emotional cornerstone. Showing uncertainty would be unforgivable.

Besides...remaining calm wasn’t just for their sake; I needed to keep my composure to prepare for what would inevitably come *in the future*.

“My apologies, Lady Olivia. These two envy and aspire to be like you, which is why they feel an excessive familiarity with you. Please, I ask that you forgive them.”

“...Is that right?” Olivia murmured, radiating with a bloodthirsty energy and an intent to fight and kill. The air pulsed between us, and my skin began to tingle, electrified.

“O-oh gosh...?” Ginny was the first to fall back, slamming her butt on the ground.

She was followed by Ireena and the girl, who both slowly made their way down onto the hard earth. Speechless, all three stared at Olivia. It was like a

predator glaring upon its helpless prey. If Olivia had been this way in the modern world, I would have acted the same way. I would have put up a front.

But I was now in the past. Therefore, I had one clear course of action.

“Wow, it’s so obvious why you’re one of the Four Heavenly Kings. It feels as if your energy alone could finish off the enemy.”

“...Aren’t you nervous?”

“Yes, to an extent.”

“You seem pretty confident in your power.”

“No, nothing of the sort. Though, I’ve never been considered ‘ordinary,’” I replied.

Her intent to kill became more overwhelming.

“Argh...”

As I’d expected, it was too much to handle. All three fainted simultaneously, starting with Ginny.

On the other hand, I maintained my cool expression and even gave a bold smile.

My attitude guided Olivia to the conclusion that I’d planned.

“...What’s your name?”

“Ard Meteor.”

“I see. ‘Ard Meteor’ it is then,” she spat, keeping it brief and shooting daggers at me with her eyes. “Join my army.”

The offer made me chuckle inside. I couldn’t believe how things were working out. It was hilariously perfect. I struggled to suppress my grin as I answered: “I humbly accept. From this day forward, my life belongs to His Majesty.” I bowed, and Olivia’s bloodlust abated.

She nodded in return.

“However, Lady Olivia, I have two conditions before entering government service.”

Olivia's homicidal defenses went up again. "...You've got some guts."

"It would seem that way. But I have a hunch you appreciate people like me. Right?"

My superficial politeness didn't bother Olivia in the slightest. In fact, it put her in a good mood.

As if to prove a point, her ears and tail, features characteristic of the Beast People, were flicking back and forth. Her face was grim, but that was fine. When it came to Olivia, smiling was a sign of displeasure. I'd been with my older sister for almost a thousand years. I knew how to get on her good side better than anyone else.

"Fine. Let's hear it."

I believed she'd have no problem accepting my conditions. I had two, and the first was...permission to enlist Ireena and Ginny in the army.

"...They'll die in a heartbeat. You sure about that?"

"I'm certain that will not be the case. I will protect them, after all."

Olivia snorted, prompting me on.

"As for the second condition...I wish to work directly under Master Verda."

"You *what?*" Olivia exclaimed. With her arms crossed, she stared at me as if I were crazy. "Do you understand exactly what you're asking?"

"But of course."

"...You possess battle prowess, but you want to work as a rearguard?"

"I'm not really one for ambition. Besides, I am but an aspiring magic researcher. I wish to devote myself to His Majesty through knowledge instead."

Olivia knit her eyebrows and groaned.

...I know how you feel. I really do.

Even I would doubt the sanity of anyone who said they wanted to work for Verda. However, the irony was that serving under Verda was the best choice in terms of stability. Otherwise, I wouldn't go with Verda even if it killed me.

“...Fine, I don’t see why not. I’ve got the authority, so I’ll put you directly under Verda.”

Her expression was skeptical, but she seemed to accept my proposal.

This really was a lucky break... At this rate, I might be able to squeeze something else out of it.

“By the way, Lady Olivia. If you see me as promising... I happen to have one more request.”

“Piling them on in the last minute, huh? ...Whatever. Go ahead and spit it out.”

She looked irritated, but it meant I was getting a positive reception. At this rate, maybe I could speed this process up...!

I had a firm grip on my hopes and finally said it out loud: “Could you please grant us an audience with His Majesty?”

A moment later—

“For what reason?” she asked, voice leveled. The only problem was that she was grinning, releasing an intimidating air that couldn’t be rivaled.

Internally, I clicked my tongue in irritation at this clear rejection.

Well, I’d figure there was a good chance of this happening. Based on her attire and whatnot, we’d landed in the era when I had only just earned the title of Demon Lord. This period had been nothing but one pain after the other, and Olivia and I had constantly been hypervigilant. That was why even if I revealed my identity and asked for her cooperation, she’d never believe me.

Coming to this conclusion, I answered Olivia’s question.

“I do not have any reason in particular. But...glimpsing upon the countenance of His Majesty would give me no greater happiness and honor. That is all.”

“...If you wanna meet him, you’ve gotta work for it. Earn credibility.”

I knew it. That was my only option.

I’d render my services and make a name for myself acting as Verda’s subordinate and protecting everyone around me. It was the only way I’d be able

to meet the Demon Lord—in other words, myself from this era.

Thinking about everything that would happen from here on out, I let out a tiny sigh.

CHAPTER 40

The Ex-Demon Lord and a Complicated Reunion

After that, I woke up the girls, and we set off with Olivia.

Our journey went without a hitch—leisurely, almost. It must have been because we were with an Olivia in her heyday. Any monster that tried to attack us basically posed no threat.

“What? When did she even kill that monster...?!”

“Wh-what in the world is going on...?!”

Ireena and Ginny couldn’t wrap their heads around it.

Well, Olivia’s go-to maneuver was plain and simple.

Basically, she drew her sword at hyperspeed, produced a whirlwind with her swing, and split her enemy in two. That was it.

However, her moves were much too fast for them, so it looked like the approaching monsters were all dropping on their own. There were times even I lost focus and couldn’t track her attack.

I guess this really was Olivia in her prime.

Well, after our perfectly safe travels, we arrived at our destination: the Frontline City, Aether.

As its name stated, it was a large citadel set on the front lines. Unlike the modern era, war was a daily fact of life here, so the city was protected by a sturdy wall. However...

The wall surrounding the city of Aether was personally made by the master of this region—the unmatched, genius magical researcher, Verda. It was praised as the strongest in the entire nation.

This impenetrable barrier was nothing like the ones in our era.

“Wh-what would you even call this...?”

“I guess we’ve actually traveled back in time...,” added Ginny.

Passing under the gate, the girls conversed in quiet voices as they took in the interior of the city. As if they’d finally come to grips with reality, they both seemed incredibly exhausted.

Before us was a bustle of ancient people going about their daily lives, as well as clusters of older buildings huddled together. The people of the past didn’t look all that different from their modern counterparts. The races were the same. Just like in our world, humans made up the majority of the population. Even in this era, elves, like Ireena, and succubi, like Ginny, were rare.

However, ancient attire was very different. Most modern townspeople wore soft clothing made from synthetic fibers, but the people of the past wore hemp cloth designed to wrap around your entire body. Knowing how modern styles looked, this couldn’t be called fashionable even as a backhanded compliment. Regardless of gender, these highly revealing outfits gave off “uncivilized barbarian” vibes.

Furthermore, the ancient buildings were far removed from their beautiful, precisely calculated counterparts.

“I-it’s like a bunch of blocks piled on top of one another,” Ireena commented.

“How do they make them...?”

As Ireena had said, the buildings were at the height of simplicity: big squares made up of smaller blocks. There were some exceptions, but it was safe to say all commoner houses followed this formula.

The construction method was incredibly basic. First, they used molecular-conversion magic to transform earth into building stones then utilized architectural magic to construct from their imagination. That was it.

In the present, this was considered one of the Lost Skills, but here, it was an exceedingly simple skill that any adult could use.

Under these circumstances, there was no such job as an “architect.”

“...What are you muttering about? Let’s get moving.”

“Ah, r-right!”

“Pardon us, Lady Olivia!”

As Olivia set off at a brisk pace, Ireena and Ginny hurriedly bustled after her.

They cowered before her. Maybe there was a difference between ancient and modern relationships. I found conversations with this Olivia easier to navigate, since I didn’t have to rethink everything that came out of my mouth, but it seemed Ireena and Ginny longed for the kind Olivia, who actually cared for her students.

Well, at any rate...

“Hey, Silver. Put your eyes back in your head. You’ll get pickpocketed if you look like a hillbilly.”

“Y-Yessim!” squeaked Ireena.

“Hey, Pinkie. Don’t look down. Place more trust in your friends.”

“Y-y-y-y-yes!”

In reality, this Olivia wasn’t all that different: kind and helpful, with a soft spot for kids.

Olivia, along with her pupil, brought us to our final destination: the front of Verda’s manor and research laboratory. As expected of a place belonging to one of the nation’s top citizens, it was enormous. A gate loomed at Verda’s residence...but not a single person was stationed there. It should have been locked tight, but instead, it automatically clicked open when we approached. It was both an entrance and exit that seemed to embody Verda’s philosophy that no visitor be turned away.

“...This is as far as I’ll take you. You’re on your own from here on out. I have to head back to my own domain and retrain my pupil.” Olivia made it sound like she was coldly abandoning us.

“When you meet,” she added, “show my letter of introduction. I can’t imagine Verda will treat you too badly after that. Remember, show the letter right away. Got it?”

She must have been worrying about us. This was a stern warning. We thanked

my kind sister, and with some hesitance, she nodded and departed with her pupil.

As we watched them leave, Ireena and Ginny redirected their attention back to the gate and murmured.

“...I wonder what Master Verda’s like?”

“According to the heroic ballad, I think this Heavenly King is a diligent craftsman, taking great pride in the art of it, but...I’m sure the real deal will be different...,” Ginny trailed off.

Yeah, you’re right. I guarantee Verda will be beyond your wildest imagination.

In modern times, Verda made a modest impression as a magic prodigy and scholar, and the unseen power fueling the Demon Lord.

In the heroic ballad about the Demon Lord—which was apparently a worldwide bestseller now—Verda was described as “*an elderly researcher of magic who was high-maintenance but had a heart of gold.*”

Verda was a noble researcher who was passionate about his studies, deeply loyal to the Demon Lord, and explored the outer reaches of sorcery in search of world peace.

But that was the posthumous reputation, you see. To those who knew Verda, they might have had some choice words to exchange with the writer of said ballads. Like *Yeah right, dumb-ass.*

“Standing here paralyzed will not get us very far. Let’s enter,” I suggested.

At my words, the girls started to sweat, but they nodded. I was in the same boat. I would have avoided a reunion with Verda if I could help it. Though this was unpleasant, sticking with Verda was our safest bet, unfortunately.

Verda’s forces essentially supported our group from the shadows. Or rather, it was all they were *capable* of doing. The staff was mostly made up of scholars and researchers. They weren’t made for fighting and worked mostly in logistics and medicine. The fatality rate among this army was the lowest. If we’d joined Olivia’s army on the other hand...Ireena and Ginny would have lasted a month, tops.

Plus, Verda was called *“a genius with divine intellect.”* If there was anything we wanted to know...Verda would likely be able to help, especially with that self-proclaimed god.

And so, Verda it was. Even though every cell in my body was cringing—even though I would rather die than serve this genius.

But even though I really, seriously, positively did not want to do this, I had no other choice.

“...Please listen. Imagine the most nonsensical character possible. I’m willing to bet Verda will be even worse than that, but...it is better than doing nothing at all.”

Facing *that* mess with no mental preparation would be tough for a whole slew of reasons. If the girls armed themselves with this knowledge, it could very well be their saving grace. But they didn’t seem to get it. They basically told me what I wanted to hear just to get it over with.

I passed through the gate with Ireena and Ginny, entering the estate. A huge building in the shape of a bowl was smack-dab in the center of the sprawling grounds...with the words *RICE IS LIFE!* written on the top part.

I was already annoyed. I wanted to be anywhere but there. I endured the pain in my stomach and continued forward.

One step. Two steps. Three steps. With each one, I grew increasingly sweatier.

We made it to the front of Verda’s manor-slash-laboratory, and then, it happened.

KA-BOOOOOOOOOM!

Without even a hint of a warning, the strange building before us was blown up into a million pieces.

““What?””

There was no way they could comprehend this. Ireena’s and Ginny’s jaws dropped to the ground, and they blinked in surprise.

...Oh, we’re just getting started. You’re in for a treat if you think this is hell.

That was right. We'd only gotten a glimpse of Verda's hellscape.

I frowned and audibly gulped.

In that moment, a section of the blasted rubble shot up into the air...and a girl covered in soot popped out.

"A smashing success! I outdo myself every time! Another *perfect* experiment!" she boomed, looking up at the heavens and the cloudless sky, which stretched on forever.

One could say she looked like an oddball.

The girl appeared much younger than us. She seemed like a young child, really. A white lab coat was wrapped around her small and dainty body. It looked totally adorable. Her silky, flaxen hair was tied up in pigtails. On the outside, she was the picture-perfect image of a sweet young girl. However...

Ireena timidly approached and called out, "A-are you Master Verda's daughter? Or his granddaughter?"

"Hmm?" The girl narrowed her large eyes, glancing at Ireena while maintaining her skyward pose. "Well, would you look at that. What a cute little guest. What brings you to my abode?"

"Ah, no, well... We have some business with Master Verda... Is he away at the moment?"

"Hmm, what a rare treat. We have guests. Come in. Welcome... Oh wait, I just blew up my house! Whoopsie!" With her arms still in the air, she stuck out her tongue, winked, and bonked herself on the head.

This time, Ginny asked a question. "U-um, are you sure this is all right? Your manor is a complete mess. Won't Master Verda be upse..."

"Hmm? I basically eat this for breakfast. There's nothing to be mad over! You know, this is exactly what gets me worked up! I'm *exploding* with genius! Literally! Just kidding! Geh-heh-heh!"

She held her stomach in laughter as if something was funny enough to warrant it. All the while still facing the sky. Ireena must have been getting tired of waiting for her.

“A-at any rate! If Master Verda is available, we would like you to call him for us!” Ireena snapped.

At this, the girl finally looked away from the sky and turned directly toward Ireena. Then, with a charming tilt of her head, she said, “If you want Verda, I’m right here.”

““...What?”” garbled Ireena and Ginny in unison.

Their expressions practically shouted *What the hell is this kid talking about?*

I get it, I thought. I honestly do. I feel your pain. But you know, this is reality.

Even then, Ireena didn’t seem to understand quite yet.

“Um, actually, I mean the three of us would like you to call Master Verda, sweetie,” she cooed, sweat dripping from her temples.

The girl gave a somewhat offended look and waved her arms about...

She shouted with all her might, “You aren’t listening to me! I. AM. VERDA! I am Verda! I am the beautiful magic prodigy and genius! Do you get it now?!”

Her sullen pout was endearing and suited the age of the loud girl...er, *Verda*.

Ireena, Ginny, and I could only give one response: absolute silence.

...The divine brain. The ultimate intellect. The greatest scholar in history. These were the hyperboles that came to most people’s minds when appraising Verda Al-Hazard. In reality, though she did possess a quick wit, it garnered many polite complaints...

“Ugh, *geez!* How rude! Didn’t your parents ever teach you not to judge people by their appearances?!”

Watching her throw a cute little temper tantrum, no one could ever have guessed that she was a full-fledged Heavenly King.

“Um, but, well...?”

“There’s just no way...”

Ireena and Ginny exchanged looks without even attempting to hide their confusion. That was most people’s reactions upon first meeting Verda. Even fellow ancients felt that way, so the effect was obviously greater on modern

folk who had blindly accepted the idealistic image of her as truth.

Anyway, we'd get nowhere at this rate, so I stepped forward and called out to her—

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Ar—"

"Oh! What do we have here?! You smell like a rarity!" Cutting off my introduction, Verda turned to me, her eyes sparkling with the pure innocence of a child.

I knew what this meant.

As a matter of fact—

"Will you let me dissect you a little bit?!" Verda launched her attack on me like a child trying to collect rare bugs.

There was no incantation. Not even a magic circle.

She summoned a whole army of semitransparent knives around her—

Just as I realized this, they flew into a ferocious orbit.

Any ordinary person would have been taken off guard, causing them to respond too late and be sliced into shreds. However, as I had mentioned before, I knew her well.

I had been positive she'd get a strange sense when we met and try something. That was why my reaction was swift. Before she could release the knives, I cast a defensive spell. It was high-level, of course. It was called *Giga Field*.

Magic circles manifested at all four corners, with myself at the center. A filmy orb enveloped my entire body. A few moments later, the knives crashed into my defensive wall. The semiclear blades shattered like glass, dispersing into the air.

"Oooh! That was super-duper cool! To think anyone could defend against the *Original* technique of the lovely genius scholar!"

She was becoming even more interested in me. Her cheeks were flushed, and she was breathing heavily through her nose...

“Okey-doke! In that case, maybe I’ll go for something wackier next!”

That was when a black hole appeared over Verda’s head. There was no incantation or magic circle this time, either. It was one of the scariest things about her. It was unclear whether she was using magic or not, and her moves were beyond analysis. Using the rune language I had created as a base for human magic, she devised an enigmatic power all her own. Her abilities in battle were unbelievable. On top of that, she was constantly making powerful sorcery weapons...

If she was to fight in battle, the combination of her unknown power with those weapons could make Verda strong enough to kill a god.

And that was why she was selected not as a prominent official in the Council of Seven, but as one of the leading military officers among the Four Heavenly Kings.

“Well, let’s get this experiment started!” The fiery gleam in her eyes edged on madness. She looked like a perverted mad scientist.

My army—the Demon Lord’s army—was full of her kind.

Good grief. I sighed. “I don’t mind participating...but it will cause trouble for my two companions. And this will earn you Lady Olivia’s displeasure. Does that still sound all right?”

“Whazzat? Why would Olivia be mad?”

“We came here with the intention of entering your service. With Lady Olivia’s letter of introduction.”

Verda answered, “Tch. Fine, be that way.” She gave a conceding, meek nod. The black hole floating above her head disappeared. “It’s rare for anyone to wanna work under me. Could it be? Are you big fans of me? Geh-heh-heh! I guess my time’s finally come!” she concluded all on her own.

At this point, it wasn’t necessary to add anything. As Verda laughed with uncontrollable glee, Ireena and Ginny spit out the same thing at the same time.

““What’s *with* this girl...?””

Yeah, I feel you so much that it hurts.

Well, after she regained her composure, Verda returned her smashed manor back to its original state. She practically turned back time. It was clearly something other than magic.

“...I guess this girl really must be Master Verda.”

“I-I’m unsure whether I still can’t believe it or simply don’t wish to...”

Ireena and Ginny were looking at each other and mumbling. Now that I thought about it, they’d been that way since we got here. There wasn’t the slightest hint of their usual arguing. There just was no time for it.

“All righty, come on in! I’m ready to hear all the details!”

“...I already said everything I need to say. Lady Olivia’s—”

“She sent you drifters over to me, right? But you know...” Verda turned her neck to look over her shoulder at us. Her large eyes held a mysteriousness that seemed to read through everything—

“...but that’s not *all*, right?”

In reality, her intelligence must have allowed her to see through the truth.

With a renewed sense of awe for my former subordinate, I obediently followed Verda into the manor with the others.

The interior was exceedingly simple. No strange, frivolous items were to be found anywhere. Walking farther in, we entered a room that seemed to be for receiving guests. The spacious room was set with multiple beds. Verda threw herself down on one of them.

“Go ahead and make yourselves comfy!”

Ireena and Ginny looked at me for guidance. They weren’t sure what to do.

In the modern era, it was expected to sit down across from one another on sofas and talk, but...there were no sofas in this country—or even this era. Instead, you used beds.

“Please lie down. This is part of ancient culture. You learned about this earlier in Lady Olivia’s history class, I assume?”

“Y-yeah, come to think of it, we did.”

“I always thought this was an odd custom. I wonder why this tradition took root?”

The two stretched out on the beds. I personally thought the custom was a result of the ancient people’s weird sense of generosity, but even I couldn’t say for sure. I didn’t particularly care, either.

Like the girls, I spread out on a bed and looked at Verda.

“As you have requested, I shall reveal our true identities,” I started.

Then, I told of the events that had brought us here without sparing any details: that we were from the future, that a self-proclaimed god sent us flying into this era, that we were searching for clues that would send us back to our own lives.

Anybody with even the slightest grip on reality wouldn’t have believed a word of such nonsense.

But the weirdo lounging on the bed before us was eating up our story. After all, she was a mad scientist without an atom of reason in her. Far from unbelieving, her eyes were shining.

“No way! You’re kidding?! Get outta town! *Woowieee!*” Verda hooted, jumping around like some sort of hyperactive fish. “I’ve got myself not the Outer Ones or the Old Gods—but some other higher-dimensional being! To think this is how I’d get proof! Uh-oh, I’m getting pumped!”

Ireena and Ginny were put off by Verda’s violent bouncing. So was I, of course. Why was she my only choice...? I heaved a massive sigh.

Ireena spoke up. “Master Verda, the ‘Old Gods’... What exactly are they?”

Before I could answer, Ginny piped up with a triumphant expression.

“*Old Gods* is the common name for the mysterious beings who ruled a bygone world that goes even further back than ancient times. Lady Olivia said they were annihilated during the invasion of the Evil Gods... How about we pay better attention in class, Miss Ireena?”

Ireena puffed out her cheeks as Ginny smugly made a fool of her. I flashed them both a bittersweet smile at this charming scene.

Verda seemed to have finally chilled out. “Ahhh, I’m pooped,” she moaned before collapsing on her bed and rolling around.

“Well, anyways, I get what’s going on now. I’ll protect you guys if you want. I’ll even help you get back to your own time. But in exchange—”

I expected her to say *Be a part of my experiments* or *Let me dissect you once in a while*. You know, that sort of thing. I opened my mouth to beat her to the punch and say I wouldn’t allow it, but—

Just before I could, there was another explosion, distant and far from the manor, but then came loud, hurried footsteps. They were slowly growing closer... Naturally, Ireena, Ginny, and I immediately leaped off our beds and assumed a vigilant stance.

On the other hand, Verda was still lying on the bed, not a care in the world.

A moment later...

“GRAAAAGH!” someone growled in a cute voice unbecoming for those low tones.

The door was kicked down.

Then came the violent intruder...someone the three of us knew well.

“S-Sylphy...?!” Ireena stammered.

That was right. It was Sylphy Marheaven. Well, the Sylphy from this era.

Her clothes were standard ancient fashion. Her entire body was wrapped in a single layer of cloth that was highly revealing. Her characteristic red hair was a little shorter compared with her modern-day version, as was her height. Her chest was as small as always. No changes there.

Without taking a single glance at us, Sylphy zeroed in on Verda lying on the bed.

“I found you! There’s no escaping now, idiot!”

“Geh-heh-heh. Don’t you know, Sylphy? When you call someone an idiot, you become dumber than their opponent!”

“Wait. R-really?! ”

“Pfft! As if! Wow, you’ll seriously believe anything people tell you! You’re, like, the stupidest person of all time! Geh-heh-heh!”

“Ghhh...!” snarked Sylphy, flushing red as Verda rolled around with laughter.

Ireena looked on at the two with a complicated expression. She must have been shocked to reunite with both Sylphy and Olivia; there was undeniably some heartache over someone who was basically her little sister ignoring her. I pondered over something I could say to ease Ireena’s mind.

In the midst of my contemplation...

“Agh, enough! I wanna beat you to a pulp! But I’ll hold off for now!” shouted Sylphy.

And her next sentence shook me to the core.

“Please get her good, *Sis! Lydia!*”

As soon as her name was called, I could hear the quiet *tip-tap* of footsteps echoing.

And then, a beautiful woman entered the room. And when I saw her...my heart started to pound.

“.....!”

Everything around me faded to white. Ireena. Ginny. Verda. My awareness of all else vanished. In my sight, in my world, only one woman remained.

“Lydia...!”

How often had I wished to meet her again?

And how much agony had I suffered each time?

She was a sight seen only in my memories. But the woman always in my thoughts now stood before me.

And I couldn’t help but be rocked by this reality—



CHAPTER 41

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Legendary Champion

“What...?! Sis? Lydia? Does she mean...?!” blubbered Ireena.

“Th-the Legendary...?!” added Ginny.

Both of them balked, sweating bullets, at the woman in front of the broken door.

The object of their gaze took a single glance at Verda, sighed quietly, and closed her eyes.

She was essentially the crystallized form of beauty. Her long, pointed ears symbolized she was an elf. She was tall for a woman, coming in at around 175 celti. Her taut body and womanly softness were concealed by a thin cloth. Her entire face obeyed the golden ratio, and her long, silver hair was one of her distinctive features.

Her name was Lydia. Lydia Viigensgeight.

The reigning example of one who etched her name into legend as the mightiest of heroes. The first Champion and most exalted of all warriors. And my one and only dear friend after I became known as the Demon Lord.

In that next moment, Lydia suddenly opened her clever, almond eyes wide.

“Damn you, Verda! How many times are you gonna make me tell you that I don’t have enough rearguards?! You little nitwit! You think you’re better than me?! Yeah?! Spit it!” Lydia spewed in her angelic voice. Her long, silver hair swayed as she barged in toward Verda, lifting her and forcing her to stand on her feet.

“Sally twice as many troops! If you don’t, I’m gonna ram my arm right up your asshole and directly to your brain! You hear me?!” Lydia yanked her up by the collar, bringing her real close as she stared menacingly. Just like a town

hoodlum.

Ireena and Ginny stood frozen in shock, unable to process the crudeness that lay beneath her beauty.

“...*That’s* the Legendary Champion?”

“Sh-she’s so different from the depictions in the heroic ballad... She can’t be...”

You see, those depictions of Lydia were bad enough to make you want to berate the author, too. The girls had believed in that false image and just been hit with a dose of reality. Lydia was in no way the paragon of virtue the present world made her out to be. She was beautiful on the outside and a vulgar, greedy delinquent on the inside. As expected of Sylphy’s big sister, she was the world’s greatest...no, *history’s* greatest idiot.

...As soon as I saw this huge jackass, I instinctively felt an urge to cry.

So it was true. I had really returned to the past.

I’d been able to return to a world with Lydia in it.

In a single breath, my unrest had transformed to wonder. On the other hand, Lydia and the others continued their little argument.

“Come on, relax, Lydie. I think the support troops are at an optimal number. My super genius led me to that—”

“Who do you think you’re calling a genius? You’re a bean sprout! Don’t tell me you’ve already forgotten—you said the same thing in that war and then we ended up taking more damage than we anticipated?!”

“More than we anticipated? No, not at all. There’s no way I’d ever miscalculate. And that’s because—I’m ☆ a ☆ geeeniuss! Geh-heh-heh-heh!”

Lifted by her collar with her legs dangling midair, Verda roared with laughter.

Lydia was reaching her wit’s end, rattling Verda’s petite body around as she ranted and raved. Sylphy stood next to them with a proud look on her face.

“You got this, Sis! Oh, you never lose your cool, even when you’re up against some real wacky perverts!” waxed Sylphy, admiration gleaming in her eyes. But

she must have sensed something because she suddenly whipped over to look at Ireena.

“...Hmm? You look like Lydia. Could you be long-lost sisters?” With one hand on her chin, she peered at her.

“N-no, I, um...,” stuttered Ireena. She mustn’t have known how to deal with this Sylphy.

This exchange between the two was terribly precious and kind of fun to watch.

...At any rate, judging from Lydia’s anger, it seemed we had arrived at a point in time before the Battle of Aralia Plains had been settled. By this period, we had already defeated several Outer Ones, and the fight was in full swing. We were protecting our vast nation, rising up as a world superpower, and rushing toward the end of the war with the Outer Ones and demons... That was what I remembered.

At the time, I had left the matter of the war largely up to the Four Heavenly Kings and the Champion army, which was led by Lydia, devoting myself to internal affairs. My band of oddballs—and their human capital city—was pushing us toward a golden age, and I had already intentionally excused myself from their ranks.

It had been a turning point that differentiated the middle and end of the long war.

The Aralia Plains was controlled by the demons and covered a large sprawl of land. There, the demons had erected fortress towns and citadels. Through a joint effort between Lydia’s and Verda’s armies, they subjugated the area, laying down the foundation for us to usurp the continent.

The armies didn’t seem to get along from the outset, but they were a surprisingly good fit for each other. In the end, they had gained control of the Aralia Plains with incredible skill in a little less than two years.

By the way Lydia was yelling, I guessed we were halfway through the war.

“Listen. To. Me. Something bad is coming. My senses are tingling!” Verda screeched.

Lydia was still shooting daggers at her. Even Verda was starting to get tired of resisting her, with her eyes narrowing in exasperation as she sighed.

“Hmmm. Fine. Use those three.” Verda pointed to us to conclude her jaw-dropping statement.

Lydia finally noticed our presence. “What the hell?” she barked, twisting her neck to get an eyeful.

She directed her attention straight...to me.

Her eyes narrowed sharply in an instant. However, she didn’t say anything in particular and shifted her gaze to look to my side. Standing next to me was Ireena.

“...You.” Lydia’s features softened slightly. Could it be she was surprised? At any rate, she clearly held a soft spot for Ireena.

...Wow. Sylphy is right. Ireena and Lydia do look remarkably alike. I thought the same thing when I met Ireena for the first time, but...

Could it be the two were possibly related?

...No, there’s no way. Immediately meeting Lydia’s descendant postreincarnation? That would be too good to be true, I thought, as Lydia’s gaze suddenly shifted to the side...and caught sight of Ginny.

“—gh! Whoa! Whoa, whoa! You’ve gotta be kidding me! What the hell was I thinking?! I’ve been in the same room as this VIP all along!” Lydia buried her face in one of her hands before throwing her head back to look at the heavens. With a long exhale, she lobbed Verda’s tiny body away from her and approached Ginny.

“Um? What?” Lydia’s target was drenched in sweat, turning toward me with eyes that pleaded *D-did I do something?!*

...Nope. Nothing at all, Ginny.

This was...her worst habit.

“Your name, miss?” Lydia looked down at Ginny. Her vulgar language softened to one of utmost propriety. It was a lovely voice that enraptured young and old, male and female. Ginny’s cheeks flushed as she answered: “M-

my name is Ginny. I-it is a great honor to meet you, renowned Champion...”

“Ha-ha-ha. No need to be this formal. *Oh*, I’m not so great. No... I cannot hold a candle to you, a beautiful blossom.”

...Ugh, enough already. It’s been a while since I’ve witnessed this kind of scene. I’d smack this deviant’s head if I could. I’d have to resist here, though. Patience, Ard.

...On the other hand, Ginny had no intel on Lydia’s ulterior motives, and her cheeks deepened in color.

“A-a flower? I’m not...”

“No. You are an alluring woman. Your features are fair. Your figure is stellar. And besides—” Her gaze shifted slightly downward, landing on Ginny’s plush breasts, ripe for the picking.

In an instant, her eyes filled with wickedness.

At last, her true self came to the forefront.

“What do you say, miss? How about I show you to my villa after this and we have some fun?”

“.....What?”

Though Lydia was beating around the bush, the intention in her invitation was clear...

It must have come as a shock, because Ginny’s face flashed with surprise and uncertainty.

On the other hand, this bisexual pervert was piling on the seduction.

“What a reaction... Don’t tell me you don’t have experience with this type of thing. Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me. An inexperienced succubus? You can’t ask for more. Now you’ve really got my attention. Geh-heh-heh,” Lydia chuckled, closing the distance between them as she talked, cornering Ginny physically and psychologically.

Lydia snaked her arm around Ginny’s waist, drawing her close enough to kiss her. From an aesthetic point of view, it would appear that a ravishing beauty

was embracing a lovely young girl... In reality, it was a tableau of a young girl falling into the evil clutches of a lustful mage.

As if her instincts were kicking in, Ginny's expression turned to one of fear.

"Eek! Pl-please, let me...go! H-hey! Where do you think you're touching?!"

"Geh-heh-heh. Nice ass."

Lydia wasn't even trying to hide how disgusting she was anymore. Since they were both women, Lydia felt entitled to feel Ginny up without restraint.

Puzzled, Ireena tilted her head. "Hey, Ard. Why does Lady Lydia like Ginny so much?"

Why, you ask? That's because she's a pervert who loves big-breasted beauties more than anything else in the world.

"Ah... Wait! N-not there...! I'm saving that for Ard...!"

"Hmm? Is there someone special in your life? Geh-heh-heh. That makes it better! Once you sleep with me, I promise my skills will take your little heart! Geh-heh-heh-heh!"

I finally couldn't take this degenerate idiot anymore. I stepped in front of Lydia and forcefully separated her from Ginny.

"Hey?! Whaddaya think you're doing?!" Lydia's face twisted with rage, glaring at me from close range. She really did give off the air of a town delinquent with basically penises for limbs.

Why did I ever consider her a close friend?

"I'm terribly sorry, but we just arrived in this city—and we're exhausted. That's me, Ireena here, and Ginny, who you've fondled in every conceivable way. Therefore, I ask for your mercy. On a number of levels." I spoke with a smile...but I couldn't hope to hide the emotions within me.

Taking note, Lydia narrowed her eyes. She stood directly in front of me and glared.

"Got some nerve, huh? You wanna go, bro?"

"Nothing of the sort. But...if you're saying you wish to challenge me, I will

gladly oblige.”

I had to keep up the act as Ard Meteor. I knew that. But...with her here right in front of me, I couldn’t help myself.

“Hmm... You’re really asking for it...! Let’s take this outside!”

I figured I should up the ante. “Very well. I’ll beat some sense into that terrible disposition of yours.”

Unable to contain ourselves, we headed outside.

We carried on our fistfight for hours. Using magic would cause trouble for those around us, which was why we resorted to a physical match. Even then, my opponent was the Champion in her heyday. Her physical prowess alone was a terror worthy of praise.

On the other hand, my body was now average here in this ancient world. Therefore, it was much easier for her to drive me into a corner compared with when I was the Demon Lord.

Dammit. If I was at my best, too, I wouldn’t be getting beat to a pulp.

For the first time in my life, I wished I could go back to being the Demon Lord.

“Huff... Huff... You aren’t half bad, boy...!”

“Y-you’re not as tough as I thought...!”

“I’m not buying it—not when your face looks like *that*...!”

“And your lovely one has taken on the appearance of a hideous goblin. Serves you right...!”

We were both rolling on the ground and letting the insults fly. I wondered what expressions crossed over Ireena’s and Ginny’s faces. There was no doubt Verda was grinning ear to ear.

...This era seriously sucked. I wanted to get back home already.

I violently hacked out the blood pooling in my mouth.

“Keh! Keh-keh...! Man, you’re funny.” Lydia began to cackle. All previous animosity was gone—leaving behind honest passion. It was manly, almost, if you wanted to call it that.

“Ard, was it?” Lydia started. “Bring the other two with you and come join the support troops.” She got to her feet, looking down at me.

“I’m dying to tell you to join the front lines...but you’ve got your reasons, right? Otherwise, you wouldn’t be coming to work under Verda.”

“...If you already knew that, then don’t say the unreasonable. Joining that battlefield is—”

“I need your help. Don’t make me say any more in front of everyone. It’s embarrassing.” Lydia had a sullen look.

...She really was the worst. Always and forever ruining my plans. I hated that about her.

...I hated it, but if she was depending on me, there wasn’t much I could do.

“...Very well. If you’re going to go that far, I’ll lend you my assistance—”

“If you’re coming, that means Ginny’s tagging along, too, right? Then the ball’s in my court. I’ll do whatever it takes to make her mine... I’ll *do* her in every which way in our free time. Geh-heh-heh. Wow, I can’t wait for this little war!” On her scratched-up face, Lydia had on a somewhat debased smile.

All I could do at that moment...was to slam my fist into my former friend once more.

CHAPTER 42

The Ex-Demon Lord and a Night in the Ancient Realm

Our chance meeting with Lydia sent us to the battlefield.

...This turn of events deviated from the original plan, but I tried to put a positive twist on it: It was an easier way to accomplish more. Either way, we'd rack up achievements and rise through the army's ranks.

Battlefields were full of opportunities to perform great feats. If I could just pull off one, we would be closer to our goal of chancing upon the Demon Lord.

We were placed under the support troops in the back, so it was unlikely we'd encounter much danger... My decision was undeniably a sound one.

Obviously, we weren't exactly sent out to the front lines immediately upon entering the service. Both Lydia's and Verda's armies still had a lot of preparation to do. We'd get moving once those matters were complete.

This worked out in my favor. There was something *I'd* been wanting to prepare, too.

There was one other thing that warranted my gratitude.

Until the armies were ready to mobilize, we'd be staying in Lydia's villa in the city. Ireena and Ginny were all for this. It was more of a bonus for me, but at any rate, luck had come our way. If Lydia hadn't invited us, we'd be stuck under the same roof as Verda.

When this was reported to Verda, her large eyes filled with tears.

"No! Don't gooo! Stay here forever, pleaaaaase!" she whined, catapulting herself into my arms and throwing a childish tantrum.

If this was all there was to her, she would be a cute little kid. Based on appearances alone, she was a cute girl. That was why things went her way whenever she begged.

“Ugh! But I was gonna conduct some secret human experiments while you were sleeping! What about now? It’s the least you can do! Let me cut open your chest just a teeny tiny bit! Just a little! Just the tip!”

Anyone would catapult her into the air and flee by this point. Naturally, I did, too.

I heard Verda sobbing behind me, but my heart felt nothing at all.

...Why were my top ranks filled with the worst kind of people?

After dealing with her fuss, we headed to Lydia’s villa, where we were each given a room of our own. It was big and nothing else; it wasn’t beautiful in any way. Even then, the rooms were spacious and, most importantly, clean. I had no complaints.

I threw myself down on the bed and savored the feeling.

I quietly whispered, “...To think we’d actually meet again.”

To tell the truth, the possibility had crossed my mind when we were first thrown into the past. It had only been there for a brief moment and quickly vanished.

Well... It would be more precise to say I had tried not to think about it.

For me, no existence was more complicated than that of the woman named Lydia.

As my dear friend, I had constantly hoped to see her again—not as the puppet of a soul who obeyed my every order, but the true and vibrant Lydia. This always loomed over me.

But on the other hand, I was the one who had put an end to my dearest friend. The grave truth had made me abandon hope of seeing her again. Because after everything, did I have the right to wish for our reunion?

“...What the heck does that ‘god’ want to do with me? Harass me? In that case, next time, I’ll show no mercy...” I sighed with grief.

A moment later, a knock came at the door.

Was it Ginny? Ireena or Lydia wouldn’t knock before coming in.

And if she was coming here in the middle of the night, that only meant one thing. I fretted over how to turn down her amorous proposal as I answered the door.

When I opened the door, in walked...someone I hadn't expected.

It wasn't even a face I knew. Before me stood a young girl of tender years with distinctive dark skin and white hair. She wore average clothing...but the crest on her stomach told of her bearing.

That peculiar mark was the symbol of a slave.

"It is a great honor to meet you. I am Latima, a servant of Lady Lydia. I shall be the one to attend you. As per Lady Lydia's instruction, I shall accompany you during your stay here. I'm afraid I am most incompetent, but I do hope I may serve you well," Latima spoke simply with practical efficiency and gave a quick bow.

...There was no question Lydia was against slavery, but she understood there were societal advantages to the system, which was why she hadn't been able to crush it altogether. Instead, she had desperately tried at the very least to save those unfairly treated as slaves. Lydia must have rescued this girl and taken her in. There were many people in her army, and they were fanatically loyal to her.

All to say, Latima could be trusted... Probably.

It must have just been my imagination.

As she looked at me, I thought I sensed some sort of danger in her eyes.



After they were shown their respective rooms, Ireena and Ginny accepted Lydia's request and entered the bathhouse attached to the manor. The area was spacious, and Sylphy was already soaking her slim body in the tub.

"Haaaaaah. Yeah, that's the stuff!" She sighed with pleasure as she mumbled like an old geezer.

Ireena couldn't help but smile.

I knew it. Sylphy is Sylphy, after all.

They all had a decent amount of fun in the communal bath, although at the

center of it all...

“Little Miss Ginny! I’ll scrub your back; you scrub mine!”

It was Lydia Viigensgeight.

“Eek! That’s all right!”

“Aw, come on. Don’t be a stranger! Let me massage those bubbly breasts! Geh-heh-heh-heh!”

“Nooooo!” Even the dirtiest of old men would be shocked by Lydia’s behavior as she charged after Ginny. Nothing about her resembled the dignity of the great Champion passed down through legend.

But Ireena thought it was one of the best things about her. If Lydia had been the very picture of the ballads come to life, Ireena would be constantly cowering before her with no room to relax.

“Geh-heh-heh! I gotcha now, my honey!”

“*Eek!* Please! Let me go! Hey! Hey! Please don’t touch my breasts!”

It was unbearable for Ginny, though. Her plump breasts squished like putty in Lydia’s pale hands. Ginny cried out, looking horrifically uncomfortable, but Lydia didn’t care in the least.

“Mwa-ha-ha! This resistance! This weight! Big tits are the greatest!”

“Aaaaah! Please stop!”

In the water, Sylphy glared at them.

“...I’ll be nice and big in two or three more years, too, y’know.” She patted her flat chest.

But Ireena knew the sad truth—Sylphy’s luck had run out. Naturally, she didn’t share this kernel of truth. It would have been far too depressing.

After they finished taking a bath, which was energetic with Lydia in the room, Ireena tugged on her standard ancient clothing and returned to her room.

“Mmm... It’s awfully drafty... Maybe it’s a little too revealing?”

Ireena had no qualms about showing skin, but this single strip of cloth

covered only the most vital areas. It was a little embarrassing. Though Ireena wasn't as endowed as Ginny, this outfit left her perfect breasts, plush butt, and taut stomach boldly on display.

It was slightly embarrassing. But on the other hand, it felt good.

"I wonder if being kidnapped by Elzard...made me a naughty girl?"

She wondered what Ard would think of her. When she thought about it, her face flushed red.

".....gh!" She collapsed on the bed and pressed her face into the pillow to cool herself off.

Then, she forced herself to change topics.

"I was really worried at first, but...I might have a good time in this era."

As Ard had said before, this was not a school trip, but a trip across time. No magic would allow them to personally experience the ancient world. When she thought about it that way, this opportunity was invaluable.

"They're different from what I expected...but to think I'd get to meet Lady Verda and Lady Lydia... Though, I'm sure no one in class will believe us."



Her thoughts turned to her own era.

...Thinking about it, ever since she met Ard, her life had been a series of unbelievable surprises, this among them. The most shocking of all was that she had friends. That she was surrounded by people who she could laugh and smile with.

However... It was an environment as brittle as ice. If they knew *the truth*, it would quickly shatter to pieces. Ireena understood that well.

“I’ve made a bunch of friends. But...no matter where I go, my blood is still tainted.”

Her earlier enthusiasm was nowhere to be found. With a heavy sigh, desolation rang through her heart.

Ireena was surrounded by friends and living happily on a surface level. However...she was ultimately different from everyone else.

To begin with, she wasn’t even of this world.

After all, as the former Elzard had said, Ireena was a monster who carried the blood of the Evil Gods. That was why she put on a front as a cheerful girl living happily with everyone around her, but...at her core, she was a lonely, pitiful being who was unlike anyone else.

“...*Haah*. I’m just no good. I always start thinking about things I shouldn’t before I can stop myself.”

The image of Ard filled her mind.

“...I doubt I’ll get any sleep alone tonight.” Ireena hurriedly stood up.

She shared a bed with Ard almost every night not only because she fancied him; being with him calmed her. He understood her loneliness in its entirety and promised to stay by her side. That’s why the human known as Ard Meteor held a special place in her heart.

“...I wonder if he’s already asleep. Even if he is...I’m sure he’ll forgive me.”

Ready to head to his room, she went to open her door.

But before she could, the sliding door opened, and someone stepped inside.

“What?” Ireena yelped quietly, taking in the person before her.

“Hey there, Ireena. Can’t sleep?” Lydia looked at her with a soft gaze, standing with a leather bag in one hand. She sauntered inside and perched on the bed, then pulled out the contents from the bag—distilled spirits. She took a long draw from the bottle. “Whoo-heee!” she belted in an unladylike manner.

As Ireena stared at her transfixed, Lydia said, “I wanted to talk with you alone. This a good time?”

There was an earnestness in Lydia’s clear eyes. It was different from the lewd way she appraised Ginny or the rough stares directed at Ard. They were transparent. There was something about them.

“...Yes.” Ireena nodded.

“Great. Well, come on and sit right next to me. You drink?”

“N-no, not really.”

“I see. Well then. Take this.” From one of the leather bags strapped to her waist, Lydia passed a container to Ireena. It seemed to hold grape juice. Accepting it, Ireena took a seat next to her.

For a while, silence pervaded the room. Lydia had said she wanted to talk, but she wasn’t saying anything at all. And it especially sucked that Lydia had taken on a serious vibe, one that made her truly captivating.

Even Ireena grew red from a glance at Lydia’s profile, though she was a woman herself. This was the only point the rumors got right: The Champion Lydia was incredibly beautiful. And still, she made no effort to speak.

.....! I—I can’t take this silence anymore!

Ireena gathered every last bit of her courage. “U-um! I—I believe you said you wanted to speak with me, correct?!”

Finally, Lydia responded. “...Yeah. Though, it’s a pretty hard thing to ask.”

Her crystalline eyes bored into Ireena, and she naturally gulped.

Wh-what does she want to say?

Ah, but it must not be a big deal.

With Lady Lydia, it's definitely possible. She could pull a prank on me, pretending it's a dire situation or something.

That eased her mind to a degree.

"Hey, Ireena."

But Lydia's question was by no means trivial.

"...You're related to *them*, right?"

This turned Ireena to stone.

By "them," Lydia had to mean the Evil Gods. She couldn't tell why she said it in such a roundabout way...

But none of that mattered now.

The Champion. The great hero. The subjugator of the Evil Gods.

Lydia had come to Ireena's room to talk—about her real identity...about her blood connection to the Evil Gods.

That had any number of meanings. As soon as she arrived at a conclusion...

".....gh!" Ireena leaped from the bed as if repelled and put some distance between them. From what she'd heard, Lydia had severely punished those connected to the Evil Gods. If that was the case...

She'd probably be killed right then and there. The sense of impending danger caused her to drip with sweat. As her stomach ached and her heart raced faster by the second, Ireena glared at Lydia.

Lydia looked apologetic and shook the leather bag. "Sorry for asking you that out of the blue. I've got you all upset. But...I really needed to talk to you, because..."

Her next statement would really blow Ireena away.

"Y'see, it's the first time I've ever met someone *like me*."

Ireena couldn't hold back her surprise. Before she could stop herself, her eyes bugged out of her head, growing wide.

"L-like you...?! " she managed to stutter.

“Yep, that’s right. I’m just like you. My old man is...one of the Evil Gods.”

It was almost impossible to believe. How could the Champion, who was said to despise the Evil Gods more than anyone else in history, be the same as her?

And yet...Ireena couldn’t pick up even the slightest deception in Lydia’s eyes. What she had laid bare was the genuine truth.

And this bloomed a feeling of kinship in Ireena.

“L-Lady Lydia... Did you also have a period in your life when you found it hard to believe in others?”

“Yeah. Those were some tough times.”

Before she knew it, the words came flowing out and wouldn’t stop. Ireena spoke of many things, laughing at times and crying at others.

It was the first time she’d ever felt this way. Her chronic loneliness might disappear. She might be close to forgetting it all for the first time in her life. As someone who was Ireena’s kind, Lydia wiped away the emotions that had been too much for even Ard to heal.

It did not take much time for Lydia to become a dear part of Ireena’s life. That was why...she wished from the bottom of her heart that they never had to say good-bye.

“It’s getting pretty late. Sorry for popping in out of nowhere. It was a lot of fun, though. Thanks, Ireena.” With a grin, Lydia stroked Ireena’s silver hair and stood up.

Stay here, Ireena practically screamed, about to explode with emotion. She yanked on Lydia’s hand.

“U-um! W-won’t you...sleep next to me?!”

Lydia stared at her blankly for a moment before flashing her a gentle smile. “I had plans to sneak into Ginny’s room, but...I can’t say no to that face.”

They got into bed together, and Lydia snapped her fingers.

In that moment, the magic lamp went out, and the room fell into darkness.

“Good night, Ireena.”

“Yes... Good night, Lady Lydia...” Cradled in Lydia’s arms, Ireena closed her eyes.

A body larger than her own. Soft limbs. A sweet, feminine scent...

Ireena naturally thought back to her mother.

Back when she was alive, Ireena had never known loneliness. For the little Ireena, her mother was her whole world... As long as they were together, Ireena had thought from the bottom of her heart that she’d be happy for the rest of her life.

But her mother was gone now. This loss was the source of Ireena’s loneliness...

Though meeting Ard had helped her heal, she still wasn’t completely whole. She was certain this lingering despair would follow her until the day she died.

But now, Ireena had a second mother in Lydia. Her heart swelled with an indescribable joy, as if she were with her mother once more.

But this was why she knew she’d experience unfathomable sorrow.

Why? Because even her second mother would someday leave her.

At some point, they had to return to their own time. But she might be able to endure that...if that was all that was to happen.

Ireena opened her eyes slightly, peeking at Lydia’s sleeping face.

This person will die.

She will face a tragic end.

That was what history had decided.

But even if it was to be her fate...

I... I won’t stand for it...!

What could she possibly do?

Ireena continued to anguish over the destiny that would one day come—

CHAPTER 43

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Ancient Battlefield, Part I

The handful of days in the Frontline City of Aether passed in the blink of an eye, and we finally arrived at the night before the attack.

“Well then, as we discussed... I have special sorcerer’s equipment for the two of you.”

We were in one of the rooms of Lydia’s manor. As I spoke to Ireena and Ginny, I looked at the desk immediately next to me. On the round, wooden desk were two sets of magical items...

One pair of deep-crimson leg armor.

A golden spear.

And azure bracelets.

These were all quickly prepared for them. To be frank, the girls’ battle experience would do them no good here. If they messed up, they’d be no better off than a three-year-old. That was why it was crucial that they have magic armor and equipment to raise their strength in battle.

“Hey, Ard! We put these red ones on our legs, right?! What kind of magic armor is this?!” Ireena asked, eyes sparkling. She seemed to like the designs. It had been worth staying up late to think it through.

Internally pleased at Ireena’s reaction, I began to explain the effects of their fittings.

“This armor not only grants the wearer increased mobility, but it also allows the ability to fly. It does more than helping you run faster on land; this can propel you high in the sky, making it possible to fight in all dimensions. The basic concept is to have the enemy at our mercy using multidimensional maneuverability.”

“Hmm? Flying around sounds lovely!”

“Running at a high speed is a concern for me personally... How fast will I be able to run?” asked Ginny.

“Ah, yes. Well, even at the minimum speed, you’re guaranteed to travel at the speed of sound.”

““Th-the speed of sound?!”” shouted the girls, eyes wide.

Of course, this blew past the standards of the present day, but in this era, traveling at the speed of sound was just a matter of course.

“This is a magically endowed spear used for fighting. There is a mechanism that allows you to cast lightning magic when you pour magic into it. As for its effectiveness... Well, one shot can annihilate about three hundred people.”

““Th-three hundred people in one shot?!””

“Last are these bracelets, which will always detect the vitals of the wearer’s body. If you are fatally wounded, its technique will revive you within an instant.”

““R-revive you in an instant?!””

These two were always in unison at times like these. Just like sisters.

“Th-that’s hard to believe. However...”

“He *is* Ard, after all...”

They looked at me as if they were falling in love all over again, and I felt a streak of bashfulness.

...At any rate, we were ready.

And with that, the following day arrived. It was early morning when we met up with Verda’s army and headed toward our destination.

Marches hadn’t changed at all between past and present. The infantry was on foot, while the officers and cavalry sat atop fine Dragorses.

As the name stated, a Dragorse was a mix between horse and dragon that was categorized as a type of monster. However, they were intelligent and fond of people, making them one of the very few monsters who were able to

cohabitate with humans. With their quick wits, they could walk long distances without faltering, respond to an individual situation, and even cast magic. They were invaluable assets only given to those in the army's top ranks.

Ginny, Ireena, and I were thus marching on foot.

"...I really would call it nonsensical. The ancient world, I mean," Ginny clarified, running beside me and sighing in resignation.

This march was no doubt the cause of her grievances.

As previously mentioned, the march remained constant in past and present. But yet...it was still undeniably different.

In the modern day, it'd take you a few days to get to the battlefield, no matter how close. But here in the ancient world, as long as it wasn't *too* far away, you'd arrive at the battlefield in only a few hours.

That was thanks to the large difference between the speed of the infantry and the speed of the cavalry.

Dragorses had survived to modern day, and they were several times faster than the average horse. However, thanks to the decrease in magical essence, the species's power had largely diminished. The ancient Dragorses, which thrived on dense magical essence, were scores faster than their present-day counterparts.

Furthermore, modern people didn't stand a chance against even basic infantry... Indeed, while no one in existence could run as fast as a Dragorse, their speed was still phenomenal.

Kicking up dust, the troops pushed on at dizzying speed. Anyone would find such a march intense. For someone from the present day, like Ginny, it must have been a maddening scene.

Still...I was sure that participating in this crowd was a curious sensation for her.

Ireena and Ginny were racing by at the speed of sound with the crimson magical leg armor I had given them the night before.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! I'm one with the wind! Ah-ha-ha-ha!" Ireena chuckled.

“How would one describe it...? It feels as if I’m in a dream...,” said Ginny.

Responding in their own unique ways, they continued to kick off the ground.

In any case, the magical equipment gave them the power to adequately fight in this era. They wouldn’t be lagging behind your most average foe, at least. Since these two were honest, hard workers, there was no worry they’d fall under the illusion that the great power they’d received was their own.

Speaking of concerns, Ireena was one of them.

“By the way, Ireena. Did you sleep together with Lady Lydia last night?”

“Yeah! Did you know? Lady Lydia isn’t just manly; she’s really cute, too! She woke up in the middle of the night and—” Ireena raved about Lydia without any more prompting.

I continued to smile superficially.

“And guess what? Lady Lydia—”

“I see.”

“You know, Lady Lydia is surprisingly—”

“How very nice—”

I reacted to her stories, throwing in the occasional interjection. Internally, I was wading through my thick, murky feelings for Lydia.

That moron. She wasn’t making a move on my Ireena, was she? I’d been stealthily placing miniscule magic devices in her room, just for surveillance purposes, so I could come running should anything happen, but she’d casually tossed them away each time...!

Thanks to that, I had no idea what they had talked about together. My anxiety had spiked through the roof last night, and I’d given myself an ulcer. Only a few days after reuniting, and she’d already caused one.

The woman known as Lydia was by all means my natural enemy. A sworn foe I could never reconcile with.

We’d only just run into each other again, and already, Lydia was all Ireena could talk about. Even though she’d always been with me and spoke only of me,

now it was *Lydia this* and *Lydia that*.

It wasn't like I was jealous or anything. I wasn't the slightest bit mad about her taking Irinny away.

My motive was pure. I was simply worried about Ireena.

When will that tit-loving pervert fully try to steal Ireena...?! Depending on when this war ends, I'll have to come up with security devices even she can't detect!

Everything is for Ireena! I have to protect her honor no matter what! As her close friend, obviously!

...Just as my heart decided on this, we arrived at the battlefield.

We were right in the middle of the Aralia Plains. Rough and uneven terrain spread out around us, and we didn't sense any particular threat. In fact, the scenery was tranquil and gave no indication that a bloody battle was about to take place. On top of that, Verda's army was waiting on standby at a location far removed from where the real fighting would occur.

And so, the sense of a brewing battle was further diminished.

But—

"I-it should be starting soon."

"I—I wonder if Lady Lydia will be okay...!"

For these two, who had never experienced a real battle before, it was apparent their response was much different. The battle had not even begun, but Ireena and Ginny were already breaking out in a sweat.

After hostilities opened far off at the front, both stopped sweating altogether.

There was one reason for that.

They could do nothing but stare in shock at the unimaginable scene of warfare before them. When faced with an almost improbable reality, most people grew calm and silent.

"...It seems the weather has suddenly shifted, and a large pillar of light is erupting... Or am I hallucinating?" Ginny questioned, observing the battle across

from them unfold.

“...I guess people in this era can easily come back to life,” commented Ireena, witnessing the mangled, dead bodies brought perfectly back to life with a special-class magic circle.

Incidentally, bringing back the dead wasn't so rare in this era. That is, as long as the spirit was still on this earth. In a battle of generals, the purpose of fighting was to deplete your opponent's morale, so there was a high chance of ordinary soldiers temporarily dying. On the other hand, in this era, it was common sense to quickly send an enemy leader to the otherworld.

That was another difference between our time and this one. In the present day, it was easy for an incompetent leader to survive if the small fry got picked off. It was wretchedly deplorable.

“The relief squad! Call the relief squad!”

“We can't put back together torn-off limbs! Hurry up and die!”

“Ah, leave that body there. Lady Verda wants it, so we've gotta give it a quick autopsy.”

It'd been a while since I mingled with the support troops, and it was as bustling as ever. Scores of staff noisily rushed to and fro, and you could hear angry voices fly from every direction.

In my past life, this had been my daily bread and butter. It made me a bit nostalgic, really—

“RAAAAAAARGH?!” rang out a shrill scream as an explosion struck our ears. It had been right at our doorstep, and Ireena and Ginny trembled with shock.

“Wh-what was that...?!”

“Hmm. It appears to be an enemy attack.”

“A-an enemy attack, you say...?!”

As the two shivered and perspired heavily, I remained calm and looked in the direction of the noise. Smoke swirled toward the sky, and we could still hear screams and destruction.

Ginny's voice trembled. "I—I thought the enemy wouldn't target the support troops...!"

"That's not true. It is an established tactic to crush your opponent's supply train and source of medical care. Our position is safer compared with the front lines, but that doesn't mean there's absolutely no chance of an enemy attack here," I answered calmly in the midst of the commotion.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! I knew it, crushing worms *does* feel great!" boomed a bold and rough voice.

There before us was a broad man with a gang of several other soldiers. His large, muscular body was protected under crimson armor, and he appeared to be an experienced warrior. The subordinates he brought along with him were just as fierce.

"He must be the leader who set this attack into motion." Whispering, I turned to Ireena and Ginny, "Well then, let us be off."

No answer. They must have been overwhelmed by this demon's astonishing power. Well, there was no way around it. According to their knowledge, demons couldn't compare with these.

That said, from my perspective, that demon wasn't terrifying at all. Of course he wasn't.

There was no way anyone given the job of taking out the support troops had any sort of awesome power.

"It's not the same as meeting the Demon Lord...but a win is a win, I guess."

The warring emotion bubbling within me manifested as a smile.

After so long, a fight with a *real* demon stood before me, and I felt a resurgence of exhilaration.

CHAPTER 44

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Ancient Battlefield, Part II

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! I dare you to scream! Cry! Let flow your blood and sinew!” cried out the colossal demon, cackling in pure delight and madness.

With a hand thrust toward the heavens, the beast summoned five magic circles to manifest out of thin air, thundering down lightning bolts from every corner.

A five-layered chant, huh. The demons from this era are on a whole different playing field. That said...

“At this level, I can’t say you’re worth killing,” I mumbled quietly to myself, casting a spell that shot across long distances.

As the lightning threatened to rain down on us, layers of protective walls spread out before our ally army, sparing us as the two attacks collided and disappeared.

“Well, well...!”

The soldiers of our ally army scurried away like scattered baby spiders after they were spared their lives.

“You the one that got in my way, boy?” The large demon and his lackeys looked at me with a glint in their eyes. They housed an intensity that would have knocked any normal civilian onto their butts, but it seemed a bit half-assed to me.

“Indeed.” I flashed them an easy smile, and the large demon snarled back at me.

“Your spells just now looked like a Twelve...but it must have been my imagination.”

“No. Your eyes were not mistaken.”

“...You mean to tell me someone your age can cast twelve layers of magic at once?”

“If you doubt me, I would be happy to try it again.” I spread both arms wide, taunting him.

“C’mon, you lot! Give that brat a bloodbath!” the demon boomed, mobilizing the host of enemies toward me.

There were a lot more of them than there were of me...which must have been why they were looking down on me—because instead of attacking me, they cast spells to strengthen their bodies, pounding toward me with fury and brandishing their specialized swords and spears.

From their expressions, I could read their minds: *I’m gonna torture this brat to death.*

Their thoughts were incredibly sadistic.

“You’re worse than the worst,” I quipped, moving dynamically as I kept smiling.

I would follow their lead: I wouldn’t use attack magic. There was no point with weaklings. I’d cast magic to strengthen myself and fight with my bare hands.

With sharp movements, I stepped forward, deflecting one of the spears with my palm as I drove a backhand blow right into a face. By a hair’s breadth, I deftly dodged a vertical sword swing, thrusting my foot into an abdomen. A bludgeon went to strike my temporal lobe, but my fist smashed it to pieces before it even had a chance. I gave the enemy a lightning roundhouse kick to the side.

A high-speed, close-combat battle requiring split-second decisions.

The one who had risen as victor was...me, Ard Meteor.

“Hmm. It appears my opponents were not adequately prepared.” I looked down at the demons sprawled across the ground and sighed.

“Gweh-heh-heh-heh! Not bad, kid! Guess only old Bulgan here has what it takes to get the job done!” savagely hooted the titanic demon, unleashing his attack spell to manifest ten magic circles.

“Eat this! *Vortex Burst!*” he roared, blasting heat lasers that glittered blue in my direction.

The intense heat of ten magic circles combined into one single, giant ray and rushed forward to end me.

“Not the worst. But certainly not the best,” I appraised, languidly raising a hand to cast a defensive spell. Before me flashed a geometric pattern, subsequently transforming into a semitransparent wall.

The beam crashed into my wall, sending a shock wave rippling across the field. The translucent shield blocked the thick rays, scattering it in all directions. The enemy attack died out without ever accomplishing its goal.

“Hmm...! To think that a kid has already mastered high-level defense magic without the use of an incantation...!” the demon noted, half in shock, half in joy.

I imagined Bulgan’s heart was racing in excitement for an enemy worth hunting.

But, to be honest, I was already over it.

“*Haah*. It’s been such a long time since I fought a demon with a spine; I’d expected something, at least. But it appears those hopes have been dashed.”

“What was that...?! You think you’re better than me, brat?! ”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Damn you...! All you can use is high-level human magic! Don’t get ahead of your—”

“If that’s all you have to say, you’re really not that great,” I commented, cutting Bulgan off to hit him with some cold, hard facts. “This wasn’t a high-level defense spell—but a *low-level* one.”

“Wh-what...?! ” Bulgan’s eyes bulged, and I continued on.

“As you know, the potency of a spell depends on its magic. I just charged a low-level spell with a little extra *umph*—some more magic.” I sighed. My eyes gleamed for the first time. “Our little fight wasn’t any more than child’s play. I don’t want to carry on—it would be a total waste of time. Which is why I’ll end this battle in three moves,” I declared.

I could feel Bulgan flare with bloodlust.

“Don’t screw with me, you little brat!” he boomed, rage shocking the air around us. He brought an extensive number of magic circles before him. “You can regret that pride of yours in the afterlife! *ALL END IVAN!*”

With this, a loud crash of thunder rumbled from a large magic circle, laced with bolts of lightning that raced toward me. The scene was almost beautiful, but... It couldn’t have been more than a middle-rank spell.

“Would you like me to show you what real lightning looks like?”

Sweeping my hand out in front of my eyes, I put together a technique in a flash. As it expended my magic, a large magic circle manifested—and with it raged an inky thunderstorm, cracking and flaring with angry lightning bolts.

It was the mid-level lightning magic, *Hydra Blast*.

Bolts of black lightning snaked forward, colliding with the enemy’s attack. My mass of thunderbolt serpents swallowed his bolts, rushing forth toward Bulgan.

His massive frame was completely swallowed up.

...That was my first move.

After *Hydra Blast* pounded him all over, Bulgan planted his feet on the ground as smoke rose from his body.

“R-ridiculous. I’ll never...!” His entire body was covered in wounds. He had no chance of fighting now.

Plus, that last attack had been the ace up his sleeve. And I’d beaten it easily, which was likely why the demon could no longer hide his agitation.

Bulgan’s heart and mind had been driven into a corner, but he showed no signs of giving up. He glared right beside me.

“Eek?!” shrieked Ginny, who had been watching my battle from the outskirts.

“NRAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!” With a war cry, Bulgan dashed toward her.

As I’d expected, he planned to take Ginny hostage.

She seemed struck by the force of his charge, unable to move a single muscle. Nearby, Ireena couldn’t rush to her aid, either. Neither one was mentally nor

physically prepared to face demons from these ancient times.

“This isn’t over yet! I have more where that came from!” screamed Bulgan, closing the distance between him and Ginny.

Ten steps until impact.

Nine. Eight.

Seven...

And then, there was an odd-sounding *beep*.

Immediately after, a magic circle appeared under Bulgan’s feet, and a silvery-white, shining pillar shot toward the sky. He had no choice but to let it envelop him whole...

“Im...possible... How could I...” His charred body fell silently to the earth.

“This was my second move... Oh dear, I still had another one left.”

Foreseeing this might happen, I had laid a magic trap ahead of time. This had all gone according to plan, but...

I’d overestimated and finished him in one shot. I still needed to work on holding back.

“Phew... Are you all right, Ginny?”

“Y-yesh,” she lisped. She must have been so scared. Ginny’s legs gave out, and she dropped to the ground with a *thud*. Beside her, Ireena let out a sigh of relief.

“You never let me down, Ard! Even a big old demon doesn’t stand a chance against you!” lauded Ireena.

“I’m delighted by your praise.”

Ireena was grinning ear to ear, and I gave her a little bow.

As if realizing the battle was over, everyone else started to offer their own comments, lavishing me with attention.

“I-incredible...!”

“Why’d that monster come for the support troops...?!”

“That spell was seriously something else...!”

As I thought, civilians lacked the knowledge to gauge the differences in our strength. All I did was clean up some weaklings, yet they were now gazing up at me like I was some kind of hero.

It was a trivial matter unworthy of special recognition—

“AAARGH! Where’s my enemy?!” shrieked a young girl who sounded familiar.

When I turned toward the voice, I saw a redhead in the distance. It was Sylphy, breathing hard, dressed entirely in light leather armor and all sliced up. It looked like she’d just come from the battlefield...but that didn’t really matter.

There was something else that concerned me.

“Looks like you guys took care of things before we could get here.”

Lydia was standing beside Sylphy. I thought this was very strange.

As always, she’d entered the battle in regular clothes. There was a single strip of cloth covering her top half, while her pale arms and toned stomach were boldly on display. She wore loose pants and was not equipped with a single metal weapon. Defensive measures were unfathomable to this woman.

She hated how armor weighed down her mobility. That was why she had tossed out any and every form of protection, deciding to attack, attack, and attack. When it came to war, Lydia’s philosophy was that offensive plays were the greatest defense.

...I knew this, which was why this whole thing was so strange.

Why would Lydia leave the front lines just because the support troops were being attacked?

Verda was currently on standby in the city, which meant Lydia was the supreme commander of these combined armies. In normal circumstances, she’d be waiting in the back with the rear guard... But Lydia didn’t operate with any sort of logic. Even though she was the general whose head the enemy was after, she deliberately opted to throw herself into life-or-death situations. With her other comrades by her side, she would run about the battlefield as an independent ally army and upset the tide of battle.

It was this point that made her very similar to Alvarto, our crazed battle monster who was praised as both our strongest and most terrible.

Therefore... If Lydia had sensed danger among her support troops, wouldn't Sylphy be the one to check on us? I would imagine the following transpiring:
Hey, Sylphy! The back's having a hell of a time!

Okay, Lydia, leave it to me!

But the reality was different.

No one wanted to be out fighting on the front lines more than Lydia, yet she was here for some reason. I had to think over this implication more.

"...Hey, Ard. Is this your doing?" She pointed at the charred enemy general on the ground.

"Yes."

"...You didn't kill him, right?"

"I did not. I determined he wasn't worth killing. Besides, even a warrior like him is still a general. I thought we might obtain information from him and chose to intentionally capture him alive."

"Is that right...? In other words, you have enough power to capture this guy alive." Her grin told me she was starting to have fun.

...What's going on? It feels like we're operating on two different wavelengths.

"Um, Lady Lydia. About General Bulgan. In terms of military rank, he's closer to the bottom than the top, right?"

Lydia chuckled—"Heh-heh-heh"—scratching her silver head of hair and looking almost astounded. "Guess again, stupid. That pulp of a guy was the top commander and our main target."

"...Excuse me? The top commander?"

This guy? Their leader?

"Ngggg! You stole my prize! You're pretty cheeky for a newbie!" growled Sylphy in the distance, stamping the ground in frustration.

"You know, Ard's just that amazing! Look at him! That's my friend! Getting

the head honcho on his very first battle and all! No biggie!” Ireena puffed up her chest, looking all smug and snorting in satisfaction.

“Well, anyway, you sure are something.” Lydia patted me on the back in admiration as she let loose a big laugh. “Gah-ha-ha-ha!” It had been so long since we were like this, and I had assumed it would never happen again... It was safe to say I wasn’t unhappy.

But despite my joy, there were questions that lingered between us.

How was Bulgan the supreme commander? I could see his attack on the support troops being one part of some clever scheme.

But to defeat him as I was now... How was that even possible?

If I was in my heyday—when I was Varvatos—this would have been the natural order of things. But right now, I was Ard Meteor, an average nobody with nothing at my disposal but wit.

...Well, I *did* possess knowledge from my days as the Demon Lord and had been exerting myself to be the best without a moment’s rest since early childhood.

But even then, how could I have the power to easily defeat a top commander of this era?

...Something felt off.

That was why I couldn’t let myself be thrilled over the achievements that had fast-tracked me toward my goal—



Not even a day had passed since we left the Frontline City of Aether. It was sometime between noon and dusk. Above the cloudless sky, the shining sun illuminated the ground below, warming the earth.

Meanwhile, having achieved that amazing victory so quickly, Verda and Lydia’s combined troops stationed half their soldiers in a simple fortress before the rest returned to Aether. With the fortress as a relay point, they set out to plan the subjugation of the demon metropolis of Almedio.

The march home was much slower. Many were exhausted from battle, so

they progressed at a gentle pace that the soldiers could handle.

Among them, the one known as Ard Meteor was no less than a supernova who had suddenly appeared among them.

“I’ve never heard of anyone taking out the top leader during their first battle!”

“Ah, it’s nothing, honestly.”

“Thanks for saving us! I promise to repay the favor twofold!”

“Please, think nothing of it.”

Ard was surrounded as a barrage of gratitude and praise rained down on him.

He responded with a troubled smile.

“Heh-heh-heh! My Ard basically eats that for breakfast!” scoffed Ireena.

“*Nghhh!* Pl-please, don’t get ahead of yourself! I’ll always nab more big baddies than you, Ard!”

Ireena puffed out her chest and bragged about Ard to everyone, while Sylphy threw frustrated abuse at him as he was showered in praise.

On the other end of the spectrum, gazing at Ard from the distance was... Ginny, the succubus, grinning proudly.

I knew it. Ard is amazing...!

Like Ireena, Ginny swelled with joy whenever Ard received praise, as if it had been directed toward her.

It was natural. How could she not be happy when watching a loved one who was doing well?

Her heart held nothing but admiration for Ard and pride in their friendship.

“H-hey, you. You’re with that guy, right?” called out a voice beside her. It was a young boy of tender years.

This era sends children off to war, I see. Even though our ages aren’t so different.

Once again reminded of the cruelty of life in the ancient world, Ginny

answered the boy with a smile. “Yes, that is correct. I’m Ard’s friend...and you might also say his first wife. 🎵”

“What? H-his wife...?!” The boy balked, his eyes opening wide; he flashed her a dismayed look.

This did not elude Ginny, who quickly guessed his feelings. And more importantly, she understood that boys were not ones to give up these matters easily.

“I—I can see it. Wife, huh? W-well, let’s forget him for now... I-I’m interested in you!”

He was a straight shooter. Unfortunately, Ginny had no interest in him. She had zero intention of having a relationship with any man except Ard.

She thought it would be best to be up front, when he spoke again.

“I bet you’re awesome like him, right?! I can tell that armor is specially made!”

These words stabbed Ginny’s heart and shut her up.

“The demons almost got you in the end...b-but I’m sure you would have gotten them in a flash, right?! Aw man, I guess I’m just, like, I dunno, super jealous!”

She supposed the boy had been trying to kill her with praise and help her feel better.

Unfortunately, it had the opposite effect.

“...No. I’m not the least bit amazing.” Her voice dipped low, slightly somber. It must have been visible on her face as well.

“Hmm? Um, well... S-sorry.”

He must have sensed that mortal failure awaited him if he continued any longer. He apologized with an embarrassed expression and left as if trying to quickly escape.

Ginny sighed as she watched him. *Special? There’s no way I could be any such thing.*

...What would have happened if Ard hadn't been there?

As if reflecting her mental state, the wings on her head drooped. She gave another sigh and looked toward Ard. People were still crowded around him, and Ireena and Sylphy were by his side.

...Her conversation with the boy just now was the reason she wondered if she actually belonged in their little circle.

I know Ard is incredible. And Miss Ireena and Miss Sylphy, too...

But I... I'm different...from everyone...

Ginny was from a rare race of succubi. Her wit and resourcefulness were far from average.

But...those three were something else entirely.

Ard, of course. There was no need to go into further detail.

Ireena gave off some sort of strange aura.

Sylphy was the Raging Champion, whose name was carved into legend.

Compared with that... "Ginny" must have been a tiny existence to them.

Even in their last battle, all she could do was just barely stay out of Ard's way. The boy had said she could have beaten the demon in an instant, but it simply wasn't true. It was thanks to Ard's unconventional strategy that she hadn't become a hostage and the matter had ended without further incident.

...To begin with... It was me. I was the one he'd tried to take hostage... Not Miss Ireena.

The demon must have thought I wouldn't be the least bit frightening, even if I fought back.

Being looked down upon was painfully vexing.

I was the weakest link. The one with the least reason to exist.

And that's why he chose me...!

She pursed her lips and clenched her fists.

...Do I have the right to stay by Ard's side?

...Do I have the right to be friends with Miss Ireena and the others?

Allowing an ordinary person who does nothing but cause trouble for everyone...to stay beside extraordinary people...would be unforgivable, wouldn't it?

She didn't have the chance to complete this thought.

"Ginny! Why the gloomy face?!" called out a flippant voice.

Squish. Ginny's soft boobs were gripped from behind.

"Geh-heh-heh-heh, I knew it. Your boobs really are the best!" someone chuckled, feeling her up.

"Eek?! Pl-please stop, Lady Lydia!"

It was Lydia the Champion—the legend.

"Want me to shoo, huh?" She was surprisingly accepting of Ginny's cry of protest and readily let go. "Well? Made you feel a smidge better, right?"

Standing next to her, Lydia slung her arm across Ginny's shoulders and flashed her a blinding smile. Upon realizing Lydia had been concerned for her, Ginny felt apologetic.

As if reading her mind, Lydia patted her shoulders lightly.

"What're you worried about? Wanna try talking about it? I've got more experience with this kinda stuff, you know? If I had to take a crack at it, Ginny, I'd say you're worried about—"

"Someone special like you cannot understand."

The words came out on reflex. They had hardly left her mouth before she realized her rudeness and fretted.

"I-I'm so sorry...! F-for me to say such a thing to the great Champion...!" Ginny apologized profusely, but Lydia showed no interest. Instead, she looked Ginny straight in the eyes.

"I get it. You're worried about boring shit," Lydia declared.

Boring shit.

With her mental anguish ridiculed, Ginny was on her last nerve. Her pale cheeks flushed with rage, as her features twisted in anger.

Boring?

Yes, I suppose it is for you, the crème de la crème!

What in the world do you know about me...? She wished to shout this but resisted the urge.

“Yeah, you’re right. Can’t say I’m ordinary. That’s why I don’t get your suffering.”

This statement seemed to read her mind, and Ginny widened her eyes as she looked at Lydia.

...Were her eyes always so clear?

Though she normally acted like some dirty old man, her serious expression took on one of a goddess who possessed all the world’s truths.



“You think you’re ordinary. You think you’re different from your friends, someone from a whole other world. But you’ve just categorized yourself that way. That’s why you’re stressing about stupid stuff—like whether you’re allowed to be with them, right?”

Ginny gave her the tiniest of nods. As she did, Lydia sighed loudly.

“You know Olivia, one of the Four Heavenly Kings?”

“Y-yes. Of course.”

“Okay. Do you think she’s special?”

“That...that is obvious, isn’t it? After all, she’s...”

The Legendary Apostle who served the Demon Lord. Was there anything more extraordinary?

But Ginny found Lydia’s confession hard to believe.

“We share a drink together every now and then. One day, she got drunk and told me: *‘I’m not special at all. I just got fed up with being boring.’*”

“What...?! Lady Olivia said that...?!”

“Yeah... Her expression was priceless. But anyway, listen to this.”

Lydia unhooked a leather bag from her waist and chugged its contents before passing it off to Ginny.

“She had no magic talent to speak of. The skills afforded by her race...involve nothing more than temporarily enhancing one’s physical abilities. Because of that, she constantly got in Var’s way and cried in the shadows each time.”

Glancing at the bag that had been passed to her, Ginny listened with rapt attention.

“I bet she suffered back then just as much as you are now. But...she never gave up. She polished her skills, worked on her swordplay...and became one of the Heavenly Kings. Var’s right hand and confidant. She became someone who supports him more than anyone else.”

It couldn’t be a lie. There couldn’t be anyone in this world who could look into Lydia’s eyes right now and reject the truth.

“...If I work tirelessly, can I become like Lady Olivia?”

What if Lady Oliva had become successful because she was resourceful? This idea—and the timid thoughts that accompanied it—made Ginny meek.

“Quit your whining,” sharply warned Lydia upon seeing Ginny in this state. She smacked Ginny’s butt, and a noise rang out as an acute pain settled in Ginny’s bottom.

“Hey, what was that?” murmured those around them, casting glances in their direction. It hurt too much for Ginny to be embarrassed.

“Wh-what was that for...?!” With teary eyes, Ginny glared at Lydia. However, the woman was not in the least bit daunted, spitting her next words out with a sullen look.

“Being special had nothing to do with it. You think there’s a barrier barring you from greatness? That’s a meaningless illusion that displays your weaknesses. Just race forward without thinking about anything too seriously. I’m sure that one day, there will come a time when you look back on who you are now and laugh about your worries.” Lydia broke into a soft smile.

“Quit hesitating and just keep on moving. If you wanna go from being someone who drags your friends down to one they can depend on, that’s all you can do. Worrying won’t ever change who you are now.”

Her words and smile were mysteriously charming, holding a persuasive power to them.

“Yes. You’re right.”

It wasn’t as if her anguish had disappeared outright. She wasn’t sure she could say she’d even overcome it.

But she would bid farewell to her old self, who did nothing but worry.

Ginny looked at the leather bag that Lydia had given her...and downed its contents in one gulp.

It was a distilled liquor. Her throat felt like it was burning.

“This is delicious.”

The burning sensation. The stinging in her butt.

Right now, it all felt good in a way.

“Ha-ha! The fact you can appreciate that baby is proof you’re a fine woman.”
Lydia wrapped her arms around her, and Ginny gave her a smile.

This was the Legendary Champion. She changed the people around her, whether she meant to or not. Led them in the right direction. That must have been what earned her the title.

At any rate...

It felt like Ginny had been reborn—just a little bit.



I didn’t think this latest incident was such a big deal. However, the bigwigs of this era—like me—apparently thought it was worth commending.

Varvatos the Demon Lord had considered it a great accomplishment and wished to summon us personally. He’d want to give us medals and express his appreciation.

This worked in my favor. Everything was moving along much quicker than I expected.

We were going to meet the Demon Lord just as we planned—and it was the morning of our departure to see him.

Our main objective of returning to the present day racing through our minds, we set off in a carriage.

CHAPTER 45

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Past Demon Lord

It was early morning. The dewy mist had not yet dissipated, and we were heading in a carriage to the royal capital of Kingsglave, which was in the heart of the Demon Lord's domain and under his direct control.

"By the way, Sis, about the thing we talked about earlier—about that exercise that'll help me get bigger in all the right places... Will it actually work?" asked Sylphy.

"...Don't I always tell you? 'Those who believe shall be saved.' If they believe in a possibility and work hard, anyone can become anything...even the tiniest can become huge," replied Lydia.

"Sis...! I'll do my best!"

"Right. I'm looking forward to watching you develop."

With smiles, the two stupidly carried on as they sat across from each other. From a picturesque standpoint, the scene looked like a beautiful elder sister encouraging the younger after a setback.

The reality was that a girl with washboard boobs wanted to get a bigger chest and a lustful pervert was pushing her on.

In other words, it wasn't picturesque in the least.

...These two had been supreme commander and adjutant in the last battle, and thus, our great success would be bestowed on them. It just wouldn't make sense according to military logic to leave them behind while we had an audience with the great Lord Varvatos.

And so, we traveled together with Lydia and Sylphy toward our destination.

But ever since we'd gotten in the carriage, the two sitting next to me—Ireena and Ginny—hadn't said a word. They were trembling, and their faces had gone

pale.

My guess was that they were nervous about our upcoming audience with the Demon Lord. Even in ancient times, the Demon Lord—my past self—was a figure of fear and awe. I was considered divine in the modern day, so you could say this reverence was even more heightened then than in the ancient past.

Remember, these two were from that very era.

An audience with the primary god of the world's most powerful religion... I couldn't even imagine the incredible fear and anxiety they must have been going through.

At any rate, our journey came to a stop as we reached the end of the quiet road to our destination.

The royal capital of the Vardia Empire, Kingsglaive.

As mentioned prior, my past self controlled these lands. Thus, any descriptions of the land would be singing my own praises, but...I had to admit it.

Kingsglaive was the most advanced city not only in the nation, but even in the ancient world. I had gone through hoops and hurdles to build and maintain this huge metropolis.

But it had all been worth it. The capital was a constant bustle of remarkable liveliness, and I could proudly declare we had grown into a marvelous city.

We continued down the wide avenues of Kingsglaive and arrived at my castle in the center of the city, where I had taken up residence... Castle Millennion.

It had been a while since I'd seen my own castle... And again, I hope you'll forgive me for the self-praise.

It was outstanding.

In this era, all buildings were constructed with magic. It was a time when anyone could be an architect with the right technique and magical power.

That could have been the reason why almost no one could grasp the *beauty* of architectural construction. Or maybe ancient people just liked doing things without much thought.

In this world, the man called Varvatos must have looked like a real nonconformist.

“Wow...! Th-this must be Castle Millennion...!”

“I-it is magnificent! Fitting for his standing...!”

Ireena and Ginny seemed overwhelmed by my castle’s enchanting majesty.

Heh. Beautiful, gallant, and more than anything—cool as hell. That is my castle.

People in the future would regard Castle Millennion as the first and finest ancient wonder that sparked a universal pursuit for architectural beauty.

And the one who had constructed this castle was...me! From the basic layout to the smallest detail, I had built and devised it all on my own.

Obviously, it was the best castle for me to build and where I could live out my daily life. In terms of functionality, none in history could compare. Castle Millennion wasn’t just about looks.

It had about 103,000 techniques cast on it, as well as the ability to transform into an invincible stronghold in an emergency. I’d crafted all sorts of items since then...but I considered Castle Millennion to be my greatest weapon.

Heading inside my exquisite castle, Lydia entered with us in tow.

“I-its interior is just as amazing.”

“I have never seen a place that could be described as *gorgeously resplendent*...”

Heh-heh. It is, isn’t it?

I had refused to compromise and be satisfied with only the exterior. The design and utility of this castle was flawless inside and out.

...Well, when it came to interior practicality in its earliest stage, it would have been dishonest to call it “good,” even as a backhanded compliment.

“Hmph! This castle is big, but it has nothing else going for it! Sis’s castle is a million times more amazing!”

The one who had pushed me to reach this assessment was an idiot—I mean,

Sylphy.

Back to the time when Castle Millennion had been completed for only a few days.

At the time, I had tried too hard to make a magnificent castle and ended up revealing my immature sensibilities.

In other words, I couldn't help but attempt to show off my creation.

I made a huge event of it and summoned not only my big sister, Olivia, but even those weirdos—Verda and Alvarito—from their distant locations for a big reveal.

...Looking back on it, I was an embarrassment.

Even Verda and Alvarito commented: *“W-well, everyone goes overboard once in a while,”* and *“Hmm, our master has a real eye for design... By the way, may I go home now?”*

And the like.

As someone who knew those guys, I had to say they'd been unbelievably considerate.

At the same time, Lydia and Sylphy had stopped by to see the spectacle.

“Well, what do you think of my castle? Give your honest opinion.”

Internally dying for them to praise me, I fidgeted as I asked them this question. After planting her hands on her hips, Lydia looked upon the majesty of Castle Millennion.

“Hey, this is pretty good. Build one for me next time.”

“Yes, but of course. I don't see why I would not build one for you, my dear friend.”

I never acted that way around her normally, so it low-key creeped her out.

On the other hand, Sylphy was annoyed by the fact that Lydia praised me and was apparently unable to keep herself from speaking up, especially since she had been burning with vehement antagonism toward me since the day we met.

“Th-this castle isn't anything at all!”

“...What was that?”

“Hmph! What about this says that it’s the world’s most impregnable castle?! Don’t make me laugh! It wouldn’t even take me three days to bring this place to the ground!”

I responded to her challenge in a most unadult way. *“Yeah? Well then, Stupid, I mean, Sylphy! Go ahead and try to subjugate this castle in three days! If you do, I’ll give you a single reward of your choosing! But if you fail, be prepared for the consequences! I’ll make you regret insulting my castle!”*

Sylphy’s quest to capture Castle Millennion began directly afterward...or so I’d thought.

In reality, everything remained uneventful, and two days passed by. I’d made multiple preparations for Sylphy’s attack, but... It had been all for nothing.

After the idiot calmed down and reconsidered, she realized taking my castle was impossible. There was no doubt she was spending that time hard at work coming up with an excuse to reduce the punishment I had waiting for her.

That was what I’d thought...but it had been a fatal error.

Sylphy the Stupid caught me wildly off guard, always doing the inconceivable.

...By the third day, I’d already decided to pay her no mind. I enjoyed my nice castle and devoted myself to my kingly duties. I had been in the midst of carrying on with my productive day when something happened.

Beep, rang a strange sound out of nowhere...

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep..., it shrilled.

It can’t be, I thought.

BOOOOOOOOOOOM!

A blazing tornado of light whipped around, and my Castle Millennion...my glorious masterpiece that I had poured my heart and soul into...a piece of work that anyone would want to show off...a work of art that I thought of as my own child...transformed into a mountain of rubble.

For a while, I stood there charred and in shock, but the moment I saw the culprit's face, I cast teleportation magic on reflex. I went right for Sylphy.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I guess it looks like I win!" Sylphy said as she wagged a finger at me and rolled about with raucous laughter. "You were so worried about the outside that you didn't give a second thought about the inside! It doesn't matter how strong you make it! The inside is still going to be weak! If you can't even get that through your head, you're nothing! Pfffffft!"

Sylphy jumped around as she continued to make fun of me.

...While regrettable, I had no room to object. In fact, I was grateful. If an enemy had been the one to discover this instead of Sylphy, there probably would have been major casualties.

She had pointed out my castle's vulnerabilities.

"As promised, Sylphy, I will offer you one reward."

"Hmm, what do I want? I kinda wanna see you bow before me! Or maybe you could apologize while giving me a striptease! Or dance for three days and nights, repeating Great Sylphy, I was so foolish! I am but an incompetent piece of poop who cannot possibly compare! Hyah-ha-ha! Just thinking about it makes me laugh!"

As Sylphy roared loudly and slapped her knee, I gave a bright smile.

"Hmm, yes. Your reward is—A FIST! TAKE THIS, DUMB-ASSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS!"

I violently slammed my clenched knuckles into her head with everything in me.

Had I been grateful? Sure. But this and that were two separate things. I'd given the moron none other than a fistful of hatred for destroying the manifestation of my sweat, tears, and love.

"...What's up, newbie? Is there something on my face?" Sylphy asked in real time.

"...It's nothing."

I couldn't say it. Remembering it had pissed me off, and I wanted to sock her

another good one.

Anyway, guided by Lydia, we moved farther into the castle. Ireena and Ginny were honestly at their wit's end with their nerves.

"A-any minute now...!"

"Y-yes... To think we would have the honor...o-of gazing upon his countenance."

The two were sweating buckets, so I thought I'd try and reach out to them—

But just before I could, a murderous vibe nearly pierced through us.

In an instant, I instinctively cast defense magic—a high-level *Giga Field*. A semitransparent wall covered not only myself, but everyone around me.

Moments later, a red-hot wave crashed against it. A thunderous roar echoed around us, and the shock wave interrupted all conversation.

It seemed like my defense magic had somehow been able to halt my opponent's onslaught. However, my shield was moments from being pulverized...

Our attacker's power was obvious.

"Heh-heh-heh. Not bad, not bad at all, I say. To think you would fend off that blow just now," called out our assailant across from us.

Accompanying the shock wave was a smokescreen of destruction that hid them from our sight.

From that theatrical tone and androgynous voice, I could guess our opponent's identity.

"...I have heard tales of you. However..."

The smoke finally cleared, and the foe came into view. Before the figure was revealed completely, I narrowed my eyes and spoke.

"This is a radical method of welcoming new recruits...Sir Alvarto," I said, and the wind blew between us, sweeping away the veil of smoke.

"The extremity of my actions is a symbol of my deep love and desire for you to accept those feelings. In any case, this is the only method where I can

express my affection... Gazing upon a soldier such as yourself, who is too wonderful for words, I feel the sudden urge to kill you.”

A man stood in the middle of the now clear hallway, speaking mad words. His name was Alvarito—Alvarito Egzex. The man who was the strongest of the Four Heavenly Kings...and a battle fiend who was touched in the head.

He could be described as a *savage beauty*. His slender body was dressed in basic tones of black and gold. One might think of him as a beautiful woman at first glance, and the sweet smile on his red lips dripped with sex appeal. The man was our army’s hidden ace and the thorn in our side.

He continued speaking in his dramatic tone. “But that was unexpected. The more I see, the more I grow enamored. I thought I might contain myself by sampling your abilities, but...it seems I may grow serious.”

The bloodlust emanating from his entire body became palpable.

“Eek...!” As if unable to endure it any longer, Ireena and Ginny fell behind.

“Sheesh... You’re the same as ever,” Lydia mumbled quietly with complete composure.

A second later, she vanished. She had moved with lightning speed. With a swiftness even I couldn’t register, Lydia appeared right before Alvarito.

...No, she hadn’t just approached him. Before I knew it, she had her beloved sword, Vald-Galgulus, gripped in her right hand, its silvery-white tip pushed against the back of Alvarito’s neck.

“If you wanna fight...I’d be happy to take you on.”

It was a bone-chilling voice. But it had the opposite effect on Alvarito—far from being terrified, his desire for battle seemed to grow stronger. He widened his mad smile.

“If the great Champion is my opponent, I have no complaints. But...rather than a familiar flavor, I wish to taste the unknown.”

“...And you think I’d allow that?”

The two glared at each other with smiles on their faces, ready for battle.

We were in a volatile situation. It'd be no surprise if a battle broke out at any second, and the air was tense.

"Why are you two causing a ruckus?" commanded a beautiful voice, cutting through the tension like a gust of wind. Everyone took notice and faced it. This third party had a presence so immense that no one had a choice.

Accompanied by a few muscular soldiers, the figure's name was—

"Well, if it isn't my old buddy, Var."

"Hee-hee. You're looking as lovely as ever, Master."

The old me.

In other words—Varvatos the Demon Lord.

"Th-that's...!"

"Asdfghjkl...!"

When my past self filled her vision, Ireena widened her eyes, and her face turned as red as an apple... Ginny foamed at the mouth before fainting.

The following were a few of the many statements about the Demon Lord's appearance that had been passed down to future generations:

"Bouquets of flowers bloom from the ground he treads."

"His mere presence purifies all impurities in the air."

"Lowlifes immediately vow to change their ways upon seeing his countenance."

"Young or old, male or female, all are enchanted by him."

"None in history can compare with his beauty."

It was passed down in legend that many of those who did look upon the Demon Lord swooned at the sight.

...When it came to the ancient world, the history books were wrong in a lot of ways—except their descriptions of my appearance in that era. Those were actually spot-on.

The past me wore sublime, black clothes that indicated my status as king. This

flashy outfit wouldn't have fit any ordinary person, but...even they seemed plain compared with the fine features of the Demon Lord.



Nothing about his appearance screamed *man*. He was about a head shorter than I was now, with a frame small for a man. His pale face held a trace of childhood. It was so pretty that illusionary flowers could be seen blooming behind his facade. Silky, white hair flowed down to his waist, cascading down like a smooth river.

Beautiful seemed to be the only word that could describe him.

The Demon Lord scowled at Alvarto and opened his peachy lips. "I don't remember summoning you."

"Yes, it is true. I have never, ever been invited by you. This must be why I feel dissatisfied by you, Your Majesty. You've been nothing but cold to me lately and no longer entrust me with the preparation of human resources. Honestly, I have felt absolutely wretched."

"...How many of our resources have you crushed in this way? This is why I intentionally tried to have an audience behind your back. When it comes to this sort of thing, you have as keen a nose as ever."

"I am most delighted by your praise."

"No one's praising you, idiot." With a weariness that came from the bottom of his heart, the Demon King let out a heavy sigh. Since we were the exact same person, I knew his feelings inside and out. In fact, it was almost painful. This battle nut was a serious pain in the ass.

"...Anyway, go home already. If you don't..."

"If I don't...?"

"I'll completely ignore you next time. I won't give a damn. It won't matter what you do. If you're okay with that, then proceed."

Taking this in, Alvarto seemed to be at a complete loss. Despite this, his smile said he was enjoying himself.

"So that's how it is. You know exactly what words to say. Even though you hardly pay me mind now, any more than this...and I may die of loneliness."

"Please, be my guest... So what's your answer?" The Demon Lord narrowed his eyes, and Alvarto raised his hands as if in surrender.

“I understand you. I shall take my leave. Farewell, my beloved master.”

Alvarto dropped this poor attempt at seduction and instantly vanished. He must have used teleportation magic. It wasn't all that uncommon in this era.

“...Well then.”

With the twisted storm—Alvarto—gone, my past self looked over at us.

“Ha-uh?!” When their eyes met, Ireena let out the strangest voice, and her face flushed.

...I'd lived a long time, but it was the very first time I'd ever been jealous of myself.

As I thoroughly took in this odd feeling, I met the gaze of my past self.

“...So you're Ard Meteor?”

“...Indeed, Your Majesty.” I was trying to process these very complex feelings.

With this, I knew our time travel adventure would come to an end.

It was impossible to discuss everything while standing around, so the Demon Lord guided us down the hallway.

“Long time no see, eh?”

“...You're as overly familiar as ever.”

My past self flashed an annoyed look as Lydia slung her arm around his shoulder. This didn't bother her at all, though, and she flashed a smile back.

“You were just starting to miss me, huh. Why, I'm the only friend you've got!”

“...Since when were we friends? You're no more than my guest commander.”

“Here we go again. You've gotta be more honest with yourself.”

Lydia rubbed her fist into his cheek, and my past self gave another irritated glare. Out of jealousy over the scene, Sylphy spat, while Ireena and Ginny silently watched the two with fascination.

On the other hand, I sorrowfully watched what could be considered the final moments of happiness in my past life before me.

But more than sorrow, I was remembering a strong *sense of dread*.

The reason for this was...my robust crew of soldier attendants.

They were all strong, muscular, handsome men, including Rivelg, the knight of roses. They were all staring fixated at Lydia with eyes of consummate murderous intent. As to why...

It was because they were all after my ass as well.

At this point in time, I was so beautiful that women wouldn't even approach me. This was because they couldn't see me as a man. In fact, they couldn't see me as a fellow human. You know. That sort of thing.

Furthermore, every single guy who hoped to scheme a political marriage would take one look at me and forget about proposing any deal. It was if they thought *No way my daughter is good enough* and decided to just give up.

And thus, I lacked any luck with the ladies in my past life. And those guys made sure the space around me was impenetrable.

At the time, I hadn't thought much of it. But now that I knew their true characters, I couldn't help but be concerned by their every move. Meaning I had been absentminded at the simple medal ceremony.

Afterward, the Demon Lord led us to a reception room. Showing us hospitality in the style of this era, we decided to have a pleasant chat first. We each reclined on a bed in the manner of our choosing. My past self lay on his stomach and gave a relieved sigh.

...One of his subordinates (who was a meaty hunk) spoke to him.

"Your Majesty, what may I offer you to drink?"

"Fruit juice mixed with water, please."

"Understood."

The dialogue alone wasn't worthy of much note. However...that meathead had eyes only for my ass. As always, it left my spine tingling.

"Your Majesty. I have brought some light refreshments."

"Great, good work."

Way too close for comfort. Your face is too close. There's no need for you to be

right next to me.

My other subordinates were just as bad.

Get that jealous look off your face. You over there, standing to the right. You tried to touch my ass, didn't you?

But my old self was most at fault.

What the hell is with you? Be tougher on them.

Quit happily drinking water while lying on your stomach.

Stop kickin' your legs back and forth. What are you, some cute girl?

That attitude of his only aroused his subordinates' desire to a fever pitch.

"Y-Your Majesty...! W-would you like a massage?!"

"What?! A massage?!"

"Stay back, servant! No one must touch His Majesty's as...I mean, his person!"

Squabbling broke out among those guys for *those* sorta reasons. From my current self's point of view, it really was a sickening scene.

"Wh-what are you all so upset over?"

But my past self still had no clue and only stared at them blankly.

I could hardly stand to watch. I should tell him the truth in private later... No, I couldn't bear the idea that I would be the only one to suffer. That would piss me off. I would keep silent.

You're gonna share the pain with me.

I could feel these dark sentiments boiling within me. Beside me, Ireena and Ginny were whispering quietly to each other.

"Th-the Demon Lord is completely different from my imagination. He's much, much...prettier."

"What are you saying, Miss Ireena? 'Pretty'? To use a clichéd word to describe the Demon Lord is a crime worthy of certain death."

"Well, how am I supposed to describe him, then?"

“Yes, let’s see... What expression would suit the unparalleled beauty of the Demon Lord? How about *The Demon Lord is truly Demon-esque?*”

“I don’t get the difference...”

The topic of their conversation was forever about the Demon Lord. To me, it was super unpleasant to have another man steal their hearts, particularly Ireena’s.

...Well, to be more precise, by “another man,” I meant myself. Even though we were one and the same.

“...‘Demon Lord’?”

My past self seemed to have picked up on their conversation. A puzzled look colored his beautiful facade.

“You ladies there. What do you mean by ‘Demon Lord’?”

““Huh?””

They apparently hadn’t been expecting him to address them directly. They stood frozen and unable to say a word. I answered in their stead.

“It is just another name for you, Your Majesty. That is how you are referenced in the public sphere. Were you unaware?”

“...I’m the *Demon Lord*, you say?” His confusion deepened.

Weird. Why was he acting this way? From what I could tell, he should have already been established as the Demon Lord by this era. Yet, my past self was acting like this was the first time he’d ever heard of it.

What was going—

“That’s how I’m referred to by the public sphere? ...If that’s true, it’s very strange.”

His clarification shocked me.

“There’s someone else called the *Demon Lord*. Why would people call me by that name?”

CHAPTER 46

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Imminent Truth

The self-proclaimed god had given us two objectives.

Find the singularity to fix history.

And meet the Demon Lord.

We thought accomplishing these two things would allow us to go back to our own time, which was why we had made meeting the Demon Lord our main priority and decided to work under Verda to gather info on the singularity or whatever. As a result, we'd unexpectedly reunited with Lydia and found unexpected success...thus accomplishing our second goal.

Or so I'd thought.

"There's another Demon Lord?" I was trying to piece together what my past self before me had just said.

...To me, the *Demon Lord* was my past self. In other words, Varvatos. I had no memory of anyone else besides me going by that nickname.

"...What's wrong?" asked my past self simply.

"It's nothing. I'm terribly sorry for blurting such nonsense," I replied quickly, eager to end the conversation. My past self seemed to sense something, but that also must have been why he didn't press further.

...It was better that I avoid having to explain this other, unknown Demon Lord as much as possible. From Varvatos's reaction, everyone knew about this "Demon Lord." If it had been news to him, questions about the Demon Lord's identity would have inevitably arisen.

And even if this past self of mine did believe me...it was hard to tell how he'd react. In this era, I was a king first and foremost. I would do anything to protect my nation and my people.

Meaning...it had made me ruthless. How he'd react to someone from the future who came to change history...even I couldn't say. He was liable to see me as a threat, put me under surveillance, or if I was really unlucky, try to assassinate me.

And so...she was the only one I'd ask for details.

And by that, I meant that genius and walking natural disaster.

After that, we finished our chat and returned to the Frontline City of Aether. Ireena and Ginny were silent the entire way. Like me, they were bewildered by the Demon Lord issue.

That was why we headed to Verda's in hopes that she could clear things up. To Lydia and Sylphy, I offered a plausible excuse: *"Lady Verda is our temporary master, and it is our duty to report on the happenings of the palace."* We had taken our leave.

And now, back to the present.

We were in a reception room of Verda's combination manor-and-lab, explaining the situation as she lay on a bed.

"Ah, I knew it," she said blankly.

"What do you mean?"

"Our Demon Lord and the one you call by the same name isn't the same person. When you first said you wanted to meet the '*Demon Lord*,' I was all confused, but now I understand."

"...If you knew, why didn't you say something sooner?"

"I tried? But then, Sylphy came barging in, and I lost my chance. Well, I could have told you a number of times after that...but let's be honest, I didn't really care either way!" Verda rolled around on the bed. It ticked me off...but if I hit her every time she stressed me out, I'd never stop.

I cleared my throat and tried to press Verda for more info on the Demon Lord.

Here was what I managed to glean:

First, the Demon Lord suddenly appeared about three years prior from the

area between the Outer Ones' domain and our own. This figure took control of the land near the nation's borders, without permission. That land was incredibly close to our current location, Aether.

Second, the Demon Lord had the power to produce monsters. Therefore, their military forces were entirely composed of beasts... And even if those troops were killed off, they could be quickly replenished.

Third, the Demon Lord's goal was unclear—with enemies spanning as wide as the Outer Ones and demons...to us. Even all proposals to negotiate were denied. Furthermore, these actions shifted the historical timeline as I knew it... From this situation, the *"singularity"* mentioned by the self-proclaimed god seemed to be pointing toward this "Demon Lord."

Fourth, this foe was keeping a close eye on us. Varvatos had attacked once but failed to fell the Demon Lord. Since then, this mysterious figure had been surveilling us without bringing about any unnecessary conflict.

The Demon Lord held the power of immortality, and we were trying to figure out an explanation for this secret. We were either going find the reason for his immortality...or... Hm. Well, I didn't imagine we'd have to subjugate him as long as we stayed in our lane.

...Among these four points, the biggest factor for us was the fourth one.

"We've misunderstood this 'god.' *Find the singularity to fix history. And meet the Demon Lord.* We had understood these as separate goals, but...it seems they are one and the same," I said.

That was why the "god" had said it that way... As for the condition we had to fulfill to return to our own time...

"We have to conquer the Demon Lord, who is shifting history, and return this world to the way it should be. That is our condition, but..."

"If Lord Varvatos couldn't beat the Demon Lord, how can we...?" Ireena murmured dejectedly with knit eyebrows.

She was right.

If even Varvatos at his height couldn't kill this foe, there was no way I could go

out and do it on my own now. Meaning we'd need backup to topple this Demon Lord.

"...We'll deal with them using the combined forces of the Vardia Empire, His Majesty, and the Four Heavenly Kings. Otherwise, defeating the Demon Lord will be impossible."

As for the Demon Lord's immortality, which Verda had mentioned, I had an idea. Even my past self had already hit upon something: He could eliminate the Demon Lord, if he was willing to shoulder the risks.

Yet, he was leaving the Demon Lord be, which could only mean one thing.

My past self didn't see the Demon Lord as a threat. As always, he considered the elimination of the Outer Ones the top priority.

...It was a good call.

Unlike the Outer Ones, who reigned over us as our mortal enemies, the Demon Lord was no more than a minor threat. In that case, this figure wasn't a target worth taking a risk to crush. It wasn't just that: It'd only be natural for him to think the Demon Lord wasn't even the one he should be suppressing.

If the Demon Lord possessed the power to continually spawn an army, it'd naturally become a war of attrition. Even supposing we did manage to win in the end...the demon army would likely launch an assault on our exhausted forces in an instant. If it came to that, would we have enough power to repel the enemy? No one could say.

The important thing was that there was a risk—even if it was the smallest one in the entire world. And it was undoubtedly a risk my past self had no interest in taking.

Whether past or present, I was more cautious than anyone and as cowardly as a fawn.

"...Motivating His Majesty to take action will not be easy."

"You've got that right. Var's got a stupidly strong sense of responsibility, after all. He cares about the lives of even our lowest soldiers. Well, he's a nice guy, so I guess I can't hate that about him... It's gonna be real tough getting Var to do

what you want, you know.”

We couldn't help but fall silent at Verda's words. A curtain fell over us for some time... Finally, it was Ginny who broke the silence.

“Why don't we tell the Demon Lord...I mean...His Majesty about our true identities? If we can explain the danger of the Demon Lord that way...”

I stroked my chin as my thoughts churned in my mind.

The risk of having our identities coming to light would always be something we would have to consider. However...we already had no choice. As Ginny had said, aside from running straight out there, there wasn't much else we could do. Nonetheless...

“Let's go with Ginny's suggestion. However...we have not yet gained enough of his trust to carry it out. His Majesty is a cautious person. There is no way he will lend an ear to those who do not have his full confidence.”

“So you mean...we should work even harder to get him to like us?”

“That's correct. After we've distinguished ourselves, it will be necessary to persuade him...but please leave that part to me.”

He was my past self in every sense. I was the one who knew how to convince him. If we could rack up achievements, we might be able to win him over... That was what I hoped anyway.

“The issue is finding an opportunity for these great accomplishments. We have already dried up that well.”

Oh, it would be fantastic if some major enemy could conveniently come knocking, but— Just as I thought it impossible...

“HEY! ARE YOU HERE, ARD?!” boomed a violent voice.

The door came crashing down. Into the room came...Lydia, looking somewhat agitated. She glared at me.

“It's war! We're leaving tomorrow! Fight with me on the front lines!” she barked.

Her tone didn't give me much room to argue. Taking this all in, I flashed her a

smile.

“Understood. While I possess very little when it comes to ability, I’ll face the situation with resolve and conviction.” I gave my consent with zero hesitation. It was amazing how a chance to further our success had just fallen into our laps.

From the way Lydia was acting, the enemy was a well-known fighter. If I could get their head, I could bring it back as a convincing souvenir for my past self.

“So then...who might our opponent be?”

It didn’t matter who it was. I would definitely defeat them. But I thought I might as well know.

“Mevilas. The Curse King, Mevilas.”

At that name, my response was instinctive.

“You said ‘Mevilas’ ...?!”

The Curse King.

And one of the reasons why I’d killed Lydia.

CHAPTER 47

The Ex-Demon Lord on the Front Lines—

Lydia seemed perplexed when she saw my unrest.

“What’s wrong?”

...Everyone there appeared to be thinking the same thing. Not only Lydia, but also Ireena, Ginny, and this era’s Sylphy were staring at me as if I were a strange creature.

Had they sensed my turmoil?

Anyone would question why someone normally composed would suddenly act this way. I took a single quiet breath to calm myself down, then gave my usual smile.

“...As I thought, hearing a name of such renown has worked up my nerves. But I’m fine now. I can’t contain the excitement within me.”

“Hmph! That big bad wolf is gonna be mine!” Sylphy crossed her arms, puffing ragged breaths out of her nose.

Stroking the hair on Sylphy’s confident head, Lydia smiled to confirm she was ready for battle.

“I was thinking something big might be coming this way... Can’t believe the Curse King decided to suddenly pop in. Not that I’m complaining,” Lydia scoffed, looking forward to the fight.

Ireena scurried over to me. “H-hey, Ard... What is this King like?”

“...Just as mages have a classification system of One through Seven, the demons also have a ranking system. The foe in this upcoming battle is of the most elite class... A rank known as Archdemon.”

“A-an Archdemon...?!”

Even in the modern day, those belonging to this rank possessed incredible power, and it was known that they had backed even our parents, the Heroes known as the Great Mages and the Heroic Baron, into a corner. This power was enough to annihilate a vast region.

...But that was in the present day.

In this ancient era, an Archdemon's strength on the battlefield was beyond all words. The Curse King Mevilas was especially powerful, but...

I thought I remembered Lydia's and Verda's troops fighting against Mevilas further ahead in the future. This must have been another effect caused by the irregularity. There was no question this existence was warping history.

I thought about my next steps... Wouldn't this make me the same as the Demon Lord?

I stared at Lydia's face, and my heart was decided. That little god would probably complain, but that wasn't my problem.

Just this one time, I wouldn't let history have its way...!

The enemy forces had already begun their advance, and we began to move quickly.

According to our current strategy, Ireena and Ginny would sit this fight out. If by some chance...well, I would never allow it. But...*if* the timeline I knew did come to pass, Ireena and Ginny would die.

Of course, I would strive to prevent history from repeating itself. But it wasn't as if there was zero risk. Therefore, they would remain in Aether.

"I understand. I don't want to weigh you down, Ard."

"I feel the same way. Please give it your best."

They had appeared to be all right with things, but they must have been dealing with other feelings on the inside: Ireena had been fervently trying to catch up to me, and Ginny had been working to overcome her inferiority complex.

While indirect, I'd essentially told them, *You'll be useless if you come.*

They were smiling on the outside, but I was willing to bet they were unable to clear away the resentment they felt inside.

...However, I had more than just them to think about at the moment.

After all, this matter was connected to the source of my most traumatic memory.

Well then, back to the present.

Together with Lydia and Sylphy, we were quietly advancing through the mountains. The time was somewhere between noon and evening. It was still daylight, but because the mountain forest was dim, it didn't feel that way at all.

In the midst of making our way through the dense foliage, Sylphy let out a lifeless voice.

"Everyone's having it out on the battlefield right about now. But we're stuck here climbing a boring old mountain, thanks to a certain someone..."

"It's tedious, but try to push through. Excitement will come for us eventually, whether we like it or not."

I had been the one to propose this plan. If we went with the original timeline, Lydia and Sylphy would have been running around the battlefield right about then, just like everyone who played a leading role in their army.

Even Lydia hadn't been optimistic about this battle. As proof, she had called all her scattered major players from every area and worked to ensure everything was flawless—all without knowing it would be the greatest cause of their destruction.

"...But Lady Lydia. I'm grateful you would take the words of a novice into consideration."

"Well, yeah, I guess. Honestly, these fancy sneak attacks really aren't my thing...but I had a feeling that we should go with what you said," Lydia admitted, scratching her head as she walked along across the underbrush.

She was dumb, but her intuition was stronger than anyone's. The fact that she took my plan seriously meant I had picked up on something, which was great news. With this, the chances of the worst-case scenario occurring had largely

diminished.

...Historically, when Lydia's and Verda's armies had clashed with the forces of the Curse King, there hadn't been any sneak attacks. On the contrary, it was said to be a battle without tact.

...Mevilas had acted in this way, too, because the Curse King believed the demons were the chosen ones. Mevilas was the quintessential demon supremacist who looked down on humans as worms. There was no need for ingenuity when fighting against worms; using one's full force against such enemies would be ridiculous.

Because of this inflated ego, Lydia and the others had managed to successfully drive Mevilas into a corner...

And valuing life over pride, the Curse King had pulled out a trump card: Mevilas's *Original* technique.

The name *Curse King* came from Mevilas's talent in casting hexes. And there was no greater curse than the one this *Original* technique possessed. This repulsive power spanned for miles...and sent all touched by it instantly into madness. Our armies began to kill each other.

And thus, both armies were destroyed.

On top of losing almost her entire army...Lydia had lost the friends who she had been breaking bread with since they first met. Of the seven principal Champions who served Lydia's forces, five had been lost. Lydia's army was on the verge of extinction.

And on top of that...Lydia herself had been cursed while trying to protect Sylphy.

It must have been thanks to her steely mental fortitude and the blood of the Evil Gods running through her veins that she'd been able to escape the madness and take Mevilas down with her own hands. But from then on...she suffered from the curse's symptoms. She was sometimes struck by intense headaches and confusion. It was an affliction even I couldn't heal.

Because she continued to fight in that condition, Lydia had...!

...If she hadn't been cursed in this battle... If she hadn't lost her dear friends in this fight, then maybe none of that would have ever happened.

I wouldn't have had to kill her.

...I would not waver from this clearly different timeline. I had already seen it from the very moment I was sent to this era: a future where Lydia survived.

I'd do anything to make that happen. No one would get in my way.

"You thought we wouldn't be expecting a sneak attack?! You stupid—"

I would not show even weaklings any mercy.

"*Storm Blade*," I cast, materializing ten magic circles before me. They whipped up gusts, turning into tornadoes that barreled directly toward the enemy.

"ACK?!"

The enemies tried to dodge each one, but to no avail. It was impossible to escape the fast, wide-ranging wind blades as they spread out. They couldn't even cast defense magic against it. Resistance was useless. The enemy was cut to shreds with the surrounding vegetation and sent on a journey to the next life.

Taking out those pipsqueaks in this manner went against my philosophy, but... I didn't care anymore.

I would annihilate anything that got in my way. I would stop Lydia from dying. Nothing else mattered.

"...Well, let's get moving," I said softly. I could feel a murderous impulse and desire for battle lying somewhere within my subconscious.

As if picking up on this, Sylphy slightly shivered, showing some fear. "D-don't get cocky just 'cause you have a few tricks! Beating minnows won't get you any medals!"

She couldn't hide her competitive spirit.

Lydia, on the other hand...

"You're really getting into this."

The words themselves expressed admiration—but Lydia's face was colorless,

expressionless, with her clear eyes locking on to mine.

...I'd always hated those eyes of hers. They seemed to read straight through me. I found them incredibly disconcerting.

Even now...she'd probably picked up on something.

On top of that, she said, "Don't do anything stupid."

And then, she walked ahead as if leading us forward. Staring at her back, I clenched my fist.

...Nothing I'd do was going to be stupid.

Our surprise attack revolved around bringing the conflict to an end while keeping Mevilas's pride intact.

Why had one as conceited as Mevilas ended up going at full power? Because we had driven the Curse King completely into a corner. That was it.

According to actual history, Lydia had gone with her regular tactics and rushed in for a direct assault. This had turned out to be a great success...and been the impetus that caused Mevilas to unleash that *Original*.

To take the commander's head and prevent this, I had proposed a surprise attack. Lydia, Sylphy, and I would strike the enemy camp directly and clean things up all in one go.

The target would, of course, notice our approach. Mevilas would have to lure us to the camp; after all, our foe was brimming with self-confidence. If we riled up the Curse King, I imagined it would turn into a one-on-one fight.

Right now, Mevilas had to be busy with the entertaining prospect of teasing and killing some inferior monkeys—us. We would use that ego and disregard to take his head in an instant. If we could do that, there was a high chance of avoiding a horrific tragedy for Lydia and I.

"...The enemy's main camp has come into view."

As we descended the mountain, I could see our opponent's base tucked in a hilly region that had a slight yet noticeable shift in elevation.

"Fancy for a basic fortress. Mevilas's expensive taste is written all over it."

“For some reason, I really just can’t stand it...!”

Both of them had grown up in poverty, which was why they tended to hate anything needlessly extravagant. I had grown up poor myself, so I could empathize.

“Well then, let’s get started. Based on the enemy’s level of power, concealment magic won’t do us much good. We’ll do a direct invasion before mowing down the enemy...and rip off their top commander’s head. That is all.”

“Got it. Good—nice and easy.”

“I’m raring to go!”

Neither was the least bit scared. They even saw this as a chance to have some fun.

Sufficient morale. Sufficient power.

Everything we needed for victory was right here.

“I’ll have the honor of the first blow,” I declared.

“No, that’s all mine!”

“I won’t hand it over even to you, Sis!”

Our voices ringing out, we rushed down on the enemy. The gate to the fortress was open as if to welcome us. Passing straight through, we entered the heart of enemy territory.

“...This is strange,” I said.

“...Yeah, I figured they’d be throwing flashy attack magic at us as soon as we ran in.”

“...It’s too quiet,” Sylphy observed.

Our high spirits had turned to suspicion. I had imagined that we’d be greeted with a barrage of magic the moment we stepped inside...but nothing was happening at all. On the contrary, I didn’t even sense the slightest counterattack.

“Perhaps they are waiting to ambush us somewhere?” I offered.

“Yeah, maybe. But...I’ve got a bad feeling for some reason.”

In this eerily silent enemy camp, Lydia and I both broke out in a cold sweat.

What was going on? Had I failed to predict something?

...In any case, we’d come this far. All we could do was carry on.

“Let’s make our way to the center.”

Lydia and Sylphy nodded in agreement, and we set out.

...Something is definitely wrong.

For starters, I couldn’t sense a single enemy. It seemed to be completely empty here. It wasn’t deserted. There was no way. Could it be that they had a scheme up their sleeve?

My mind was racing with infinite possibilities, but...none felt like a plausible explanation for what was going on.

As we approached the center of the enemy camp, things grew even more inexplicable.

“This scent...”

“I know this one. I’ve gotten so used to this smell.”

“I feel sick. It smells like rusted steel... This is...”

The scent of blood.

...The empty camp. As we drew nearer to its center, the scent of fresh blood grew stronger. Lydia and I had a bad feeling in the pits of our stomachs as we continued on.

Finally, we reached the center of the camp, a space that must have been used as a gathering point. When we came upon the scene, we couldn’t help but stare in wonder.

The first thing that filled our vision was a blackish red.

Painted across the entire ground was...a number of demon corpses strewn across the land. None had any trace of their original form. They had all suffered a violent end; blood, entrails, and gore were piled up around us like mountains.

And among this all too gruesome scene... A man's head whirled through the air. It was a gentle-looking face with a distinctive handlebar mustache and aristocratic air.

He was our main objective: the Curse King, Mevilas.

Except none of us had been the one to swing the sword down.

And I thought it was safe to guess... The culprit was not an ally.

"You were a step too late," boomed a deep voice that made my stomach roil as it resonated. With the others, I whipped my head toward the man who produced it.

His age, race, looks—everything about him was unknown. He was covered head to toe in pitch-black armor. That ominous silhouette seemed to reveal his true character...

"What are you?" I asked.

The knight in black armor snorted, sneering. "You have some idea, don't you? I'm exactly who I look like. In other words—," the figure spoke in a tone that rang with finality, from the other side of his sharp helmet. "I'm the Demon Lord. A cruel and vicious monster, and the enemy of the world."



This pompous figure made my anxiety shoot through the roof. This man had to be strong. The host of worthy opponents that swam through my memories couldn't compare.

...It'd been a long time since I'd felt this exhilarated. But we couldn't rush in foolishly. As I glared at my watchful opponent, I waited to see what he would do.

"Heh, so you're the Demon Lord, huh? You look pretty damn strong to me," Lydia scoffed.

"Indeed. Even if you fight together, you would not stand a chance."

"Yeah? Your big mouth will get you in trouble. I'm the Champion, and you're the Demon Lord."

"Reality will not go according to the tales. There is no reason your power will have any affect against me, the Demon Lord."

"Hey now... We won't know till we try."

In that next instant, an eagerness to engage in battle seemed to pour out of Lydia's entire body. That drive alone would cause any normal soldier to faint. It was a spirit that was so great, her own ally, Sylphy, could not even quiver.

Even then, the Demon Lord took this in stride, and he did not falter in the slightest.

"Ha-ha! All right, it's been a while! Looks like I'll finally get to go all out!"

With a savage smile, Lydia summoned her beloved sword, Vald-Galgulus. She gripped its hilt tightly in her right hand.

"Arstella. Glisten, O Soul. Fotoblis. Become my Light. Tenneblicke. And Dispel the Darkness."

Shocking the air was an incantation written before time. Lydia's body was enveloped in a dazzling mass of energy...which finally transformed into silvery, shining armor.

It was a serious situation; Lydia had every intention of going at it, full force. She charged up her footsteps, and in that next moment— "You're reckless. I

approve of you personally...but I currently have no intention of facing you.”

“.....The hell?”

Tossing her spirit to the roadside, the Demon Lord turned his back on us. “Tell this to your leader: *I will take the lands that I want. If you wish for them back, claim them by force.*”

“...You bastard! Are you trying to declare war?”

The Demon Lord sneered at Lydia’s question. “I’ve been declaring war since long ago. I’m the Demon Lord. In other words, my *existence* is a declaration of war on all things great and small.”

Why? Why did those words seem self-deprecating?

“Farewell, Champions. And...you, foolish boy.”

For a moment, it felt like he was directing his rage at me. Finally, without trying to start anything, he cast teleportation magic and vanished in the blink of an eye.

Left behind in that ghastly place, we stood in silence for some time.

What was Lydia thinking? What was Sylphy doing?

They must have been trying to process the same thing as me. There was no doubt everyone’s heads were packed with the same three words.

“The Demon Lord...!”

CHAPTER 48

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Other Demon Lord

We took in this critical new development, which propelled the situation forward.

We returned to our own camp immediately after the Demon Lord left. Our allies were still fighting against the demons, but Lydia determined there was no longer any point in continuing and gave orders for the entire army to retreat. Our sudden withdrawal must have confused the demons.

...They had no idea they were in for a bigger treat.

Our movements after we pulled out had been swift. After Lydia explained the situation to her key players during our retreat, she had written a report and hurriedly sent it by horse to the capital. Upon its arrival, Varvatos quickly understood the situation and called together an emergency council.

And now, to the present.

In the heart of the royal capital of Kingsglaive, inside one of the meeting rooms of the residential Castle Millennion, I was one of a number of people around a round table. In a more casual discussion, we would be relaxing on beds and enjoying some refreshments... However, this current topic was of utmost importance and required a more serious approach. Therefore, everyone was gathered around a large, round table as our grand meeting was called to order.

All the vital figures of our nation were in attendance. First, there were our greatest military leaders, the Four Heavenly Kings.

My sister figure, Olivia, was huffy as usual.

The head of the Four Heavenly Kings, the old general Lizer sat there as though he were a thick tree trunk that had weathered many seasons.

In a fit of boredom, the disastrous genius scholar Verda was greedily devouring the snacks that she'd snuck in.

Then, there was the crazed battle beast—the card up our sleeve—Alvarto. Speaking of which...

“Hee-hee... To think we would so reunite this quickly. I cannot help but feel as if it's a sort of romantic fate. What do you say, Ard Meteor?”

He had intentionally sat next to me, whispering in my ear since some time ago. That meant Ireena had lost in the battle to take the seat beside me, and a conflicted look played across her face. As for Ginny, she was utterly terrified by Alvarto's intimidating aura and trembled with tears in the corners of her eyes.

...A number of people were looking at us with skepticism in their own. A man who seemed to be acting as their representative spoke out.

“Are there not people in attendance here who could be considered less than appropriate?”

Nothing about him seemed particularly special, and by all appearances, he was an ordinary man. However, he was one of the top rising stars among the civil officials, and an intellectual who had made his way into the Council of Seven's ranks.

...It'd been a long time since I'd seen his face. I suddenly got a surge of nostalgia, when—

“They are Lady Verda's and Lydia's favorites. The power of Ard Meteor in particular is comparable to even our own. Taking a number of factors into account, it would be unreasonable to declare them improper in this setting,” lazily called out a member of Lydia's army who was chosen to attend.

Like Sylphy, she appeared to be a young girl. However, unlike that other one, her bearing gave off an intellectual impression.

In truth, this bespectacled girl was known as *The Great Sage Champion* and played a key role in Lydia's army. In the timeline I knew, she had met a tragic end in the previous battle, but...thanks to the Demon Lord's meddling with history, she had fortunately managed to survive and be here at this meeting.

In addition, the Champions who should have died were now here together and largely agreeing with the Great Sage Champion's words.

This sent a look of discomfort across the Council of Seven's faces.

"...Why are these imbecilic guests among us in the first place? I cannot begin to understand it."

This fired up Lydia's army, provoking some vital members into a murderous state. However, Lydia flashed the instigator a blank look.

"Yeah. You ain't wrong. Honestly, we shouldn't be here."

Lydia and her army were in a difficult position. She was a part of my army, but our relationship wasn't that of master and servant. Lydia's forces had started out as a rebel army that she had raised herself. My former self had taken her in as a guest.

Yes, not as a subordinate, but as a guest.

It had been an exchange that ensured her equal status as a sworn friend who held the same will. Therefore, as a general rule, she was not required to listen to my orders. Nevertheless, her authority was still equal to or greater than that of the Four Heavenly Kings and the Council of Seven.

More than few people were against this. Furthermore...for the Council of Seven, whose skills for combat were not only concentrated in strategy but also in limited warfare, someone who had laid all their detailed plans to waste—Lydia—took up too much space.

"...If you understand, maybe you wouldn't mind leaving?"

"Nah, I can't really do that, either. You see, when I'm not around, our guy Var gets real lonely and ends up being unable to do anything at all. Right?" She chuckled, putting on a ridiculous act.

Varvatos let out a heavy sigh. "Council of Seven, I can understand your concern. As guests of sorts, they do not have the qualifications to be here among us. However, you must accept that they are our army's secret weapon."

"Th-that's true, but..."

"I understand your difficulty in accepting this. But could you do so for my

sake?" My past self appealed to them in earnest.

But as an objective third party...I could see why I had seemed like the most enchanting person in all the land begging so adorably...!

"I-if that's what His Majesty wants, I—I have no choice but to obey!"

"I-in fact, I wish to apologize for wasting your time!"

Each one of these guys was completely sincere. I used to think my subordinates' submissiveness was out of fear and awe of me, but...it didn't seem that way now.

After all, the Council of Seven was looking at me like a bunch of boys and girls in love.

...At any rate.

"Ah, and incidentally...I believe that Ard Meteor and his companions are fit to attend this meeting. Ard Meteor is just as the Great Sage Champion surmised... and those two girls light up the room."

"Ha-ha! No doubt about that! You know exactly what to say, Var!" With a hearty laugh, Lydia slung her arm around Ginny, who was sitting next to her.

It seemed like everyone had taken those words as a joke, a way of easing tension, but...I saw right through it: He had been more than a little sincere.

By all appearances, my past self is casting a gentle look at the girls to quell their worries... But I can tell that it's not out of kindness or compassion. I've got some ulterior motive going on.

Because I used to lack favor with the ladies.

I remember asking myself why women avoided me, you know. Sure, I want friends who are men, I used to think. But I think I want to be friends with women even more. I can't explain it, but in the friendship hierarchy, it's just cooler to have more friends who aren't the same gender as you...!

Unfortunately for my past self, I won't allow that.

First off, those two are my friends. Even if they revere you, they'll never see you as a friend. Go ahead and be friendless—forever alone.

...What was I even thinking? This was making me straight-up sad.

“Well, let’s get to the heart of the matter. Shall we?” my former self solemnly asked, making the vibe tense once more.

“First, allow me to declare this. With this latest incident, I admit that the Demon Lord is our primary target now. I knew he had been a minor threat on previous occasions, but we hadn’t formally considered him a person of interest until now... However, with this declaration of war, that can no longer be the case.”

“In other words, will our next war be putting a stop to the Demon Lord, Master?” Alvarto eagerly asked with a bold grin.

My past self nodded. “That’s right. He was able to take...the western Aralia Plains from us. With the metropolis of Amadam at its center, it’s a vital area that we’ll need to control the continent as we intend. We must take it back.”

“...So the Demon Lord is now interfering with our military rule,” Olivia barked.

Varvatos assented. “Indeed. That’s why we must strike him down. But...we cannot be too careful or prideful. We will enter this upcoming battle with our army at full capacity and achieve unconditional victory within the day.”

The room started to stir with determination. But the old general Lizer remained calm as he spoke.

“By ‘full capacity,’ do you mean...dropping all of us Heavenly Kings on the same battlefield?”

“That’s not all. This time, I intend to go to battle myself,” declared my past self.

The room wasn’t just stirring anymore—it was straight-up in shambles.

“Ha-ha-ha! Oh, Master! Do my ears deceive me?! I thought I heard you say you’d fight alongside us!”

“You heard correctly, Alvarto. After so long, I’ll take command in this next war. And depending on the situation...I may also participate in battlefield maneuvers.”

At this, Alvarto seemed to be overcome with emotion, trembling next to me.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh! Splendid! Wonderful! With His Majesty at the helm, I, Alvarto Egzex, cannot possibly fight in a dispassionate way!”

I had no idea what was so funny. This lover of war had to have a few screws loose.

“Hah! Can’t remember the last time I stood shoulder to shoulder with you in battle,” scoffed Lydia.

“Nnnnnngh...! Your participation is nothing! I’ll get the Demon Lord—easy!” Sylphy snarled.

“Sending the Four Heavenly Kings out together is a momentous occurrence.”

“...I will do as I am told. I always have and always will.”

The military officers each responded, most of them in favor.

“Pl-please wait!” The Council of Seven raised voices of protest.

“If the Four Heavenly Kings are out on the battlefield, all defenses will crumble here!”

“Indeed! Have you forgotten why we placed them in all four corners?!”

“If we lose our defense, enemy forces will rush down on us—and get us all!”

Varvatos cast a serious look. “Your worries are valid. That’s why I said we would accomplish this within a day. Until now, the Four Heavenly Kings have given us more than enough power to defend against our enemies. I find it somehow doubtful that they will be able to launch a surprise attack within that time.”

The matter was decided. The Council of Seven couldn’t argue if Varvatos had his mind made up. Instead... They presented a new opinion of their own.

“Your Majesty, we recognize that you are invincible. But if I may...there is something I boldly wish to inquire. Are you certain we can kill the Demon Lord? The last time Your Majesty faced him, you missed your chance and returned without slaying him. Normally, when Your Majesty decides on a course of action, you do not once blunder on the battlefield. However, this was the first life that Your Majesty failed to take. Do we have any evidence that this won’t happen again?”

The basic question was asking what he planned to do about the Demon Lord's immortality. At this, my past self let a mischievous smile play across his face, placing his right index finger to his lips.

"It's a secret." He winked playfully.

The old me threw the Council of Seven into disorder.

"Can you not trust me?" Varvatos asked, which finally silenced them, and he looked around.

"For this next battle, I have but one order," he stated, talking through his peach lips.

As expected, it was exactly what I'd been thinking.

"Obliterate the castle that our enemy controls. Do that, and we win. If we can't, we lose. That's the rule of this battle."

It was already sunset by the time the meeting ended.

There was a saying that it was essential for one to get the jump on their enemy. And just as those words stated, it was imperative that we move quickly.

However...since this battle would use the army to its fullest extent, we couldn't exactly move out at the drop of a hat. It would take two days to get everything prepared, so Ireena, Ginny, and I would be staying at Lydia's manor until then.

...Needless to say, Verda came over to me again.

"*Whaaaaaaaaaat?! You're staying at Lydie's house again?! Why won't you stay with me?! You're my subordinate! If I'm your boss, shouldn't you be with me?!*"

And again, by all appearances, Verda was a sweet girl. It was hard to say no to her when she made a face like that... Well, it was hard for most people.

Those who knew her true self would compare those coy glances to the alluring scent of a Venus flytrap.

"...You're going to attack us in our sleep and forcefully use us for your experiments, right?"

"Well? Isn't that *obvious?! she said.*"

Her only redeeming factor was her honesty.

“...That’s exactly why I don’t wish to be with you. To begin with, you haven’t aided us at all in our goal to return home. That has been our entire purpose of working under you. As I do not see any merit of joining forces with you, I now formally announce that we’ll be under Lady Lydia’s care from this moment on.”

“Excuse me?! You’ve got to be kidding! Just when I thought a fun little guinea pig dropped into my laaaap!” Verda turned on the waterworks, crying enough that she could be her own fountain.

...As if hearing the commotion, Alvarto joined in. And then, it turned really ugly.

When we finally wrapped up that rambunctious act, we arrived at Lydia’s residence. We were given our own rooms, at last able to rest our minds and bodies.

“...Well then, if there is anything you need, please do not hesitate to ask,” said Latima, the slave assigned to me, as she withdrew. This tan, white-haired girl had accompanied Lydia and been given the task of taking care of me even in this royal capital.

“Phew... Everything about this era is chaotic...”

Sighing, I flopped onto the bed. Compared with how I spent my time in the modern day, this era had a faster pace. But even then, this momentum was spiraling way too rapidly.

“I never thought we’d have a chance to get back home so quickly... It hasn’t even been half a month.”

I’d initially feared it would take years, but once the can of worms had been cracked open, it didn’t take much for all our plans to go off without a hitch. Considering this, I began to think back on everything that had happened so far: the meeting with the mysterious self-proclaimed god, the school trip that turned into time travel, coming across the past Olivia, reluctantly working under Verda to try and meet the Demon Lord... And reuniting with Lydia.

“...Information overflow, huh.”

Before I knew it, only Lydia occupied my thoughts: her help with the support troops, riding into battle with her at my side.

I had been convinced they were both impossible. But they'd now become my reality...

Maybe we could even continue on after I returned to the present day. Closing my eyes, I lost myself to speculation.

"...The last battle should have changed history. But those destined to die survived, and Lydia hasn't been cursed."

That hadn't been the only source of our tragedy...but we'd crushed an opportunity. I let myself be a little hopeful. If she lived on into the future, a happier time for us might be laying ahead...

Perhaps, but—

"That god told me to fix history. In that case, if we returned home now..."

That was as far as my soliloquy got.

"It'll go as planned."

Cutting through my thoughts was a voice out of the blue. I snapped open my eyes...and saw a man standing in front of the door. His entire body was covered in sinister, dark armor.

I glared at him. "Do you have some business with me? ...Demon Lord."

That's right. It was the Demon Lord.

The target to destroy before returning to our own time. The man widely viewed as a public enemy even in this world.

Why was he here before me?

Refusing to answer my question, he went on. "The history that awaits *them* is not so easy to overturn. At this rate, you might use everything to revise the past...and Lydia will *still* suffer the same fate."

For a moment, that left me stunned, but I quickly regained my composure.

"...Have you come from another era, too?"

The Demon Lord answered my question with stifled laughter. “First of all, quit that boring act. You’re Ard Meteor right now, but...you don’t have to keep up the facade in front of me.”

“...What could you be talking about?”

The Demon Lord sighed. “I am you, and you are me. Are you going to keep your mask on in front of a mirror?”

I had no idea what he was implying, and my expression practically screamed this.

“Geez. I suppose you won’t get it unless I show you,” he scoffed, as if I were a fool. He reached for the spiked helmet covering his head. With a reverberating clang, he slid off his helmet—to reveal his face.

“Wh-what...?!” I managed to utter, gazing at him in disbelief.

“There’s nothing to be surprised about. You were forced to travel to this era. Then...my appearance shouldn’t seem strange at all.” He sneered at me.

His smile spread across a face that was my own—Ard Meteor’s.

CHAPTER 49

The Ex-Demon Lord's Ultimate Agony

Once you lived for a while, there just wasn't much that would catch you off guard. And even if things startled you, you would manage to regain your composure quickly.

In theory.

But...my mind and body had frozen in time, and I'd lost all ability to move.

I was aiming to defeat the Demon Lord.

And he was none other than myself...!

In terms of appearances, we were essentially twins...with some slight differences.

First, his hair. It was streaked white, longer than my own, and disheveled. Then, there was his face: sharp, glinting eyes like those of a wild beast...and a diagonal scar running from his forehead to his chin.

There was only one thing that could explain these differences.

"That's right. There's no doubt we're the same person. But we were born in separate worlds, living out our own lives. In broad sweeps, you could say we're alike. We were both born as Varvatos and reincarnated as Ard Meteor... We gained a lot, only to quickly lose it."



He grinned, his scarred mouth twisting in self-loathing.

“But you haven’t lost anything yet. Unlike me, you have yet to experience failure. I was no good—entirely worthless. Which was why I got rid of the name *Ard Meteor*. I’m a complete failure, going by the name of *Disaster Rogue*. You may call me that, too.” He deepened his jeering smile.

...There was no question he was me. But he was also someone else at the same time. It seemed we had walked down very different paths. I couldn’t help but feel sentimental about that, but I knew that now was not the time to investigate further.

I took off the *Ard Meteor* mask as he’d suggested earlier. “...How’d you wind up in this era?”

“The exact same way as you. That self-proclaimed god suddenly appeared, I went along with the story...and the next minute, I was in this era. After that, I became the Demon Lord, as you know... It’s ironic. To achieve my own goals, I had to once again take on the name that I loathed more than death itself.” He gave a heavy sigh and shook his head.

I knew where he was coming from. I could empathize so much it almost hurt. However, none of that mattered now.

There was only one thing that had my attention.

“You just said you have your own goals, right? ...What the hell are you planning? What do you hope to gain by being the Demon Lord?”

At my question, my other self...Disaster Rogue hung his head. “I want to save Lydia. I want to atone for my sin. That’s all.”

...His answer wasn’t the least bit surprising. In fact, it made perfect sense. He looked into my eyes, which were keen and understanding.

“You feel the same way, right? Aren’t you thinking about how you want to save Lydia?”

“...Of course. We’re on the same page for that alone.”

“In that case, join forces with me. We are united in our goal. There’s no need to fight.”

He did have a point. But a number of questions were brewing inside me, preventing me from accepting his offer of reconciliation.

“Let me ask two things. First, have you told the Varvatos of this era about this?”

“No. I hate myself more than anything else. Especially...in this era.” Disaster Rogue balled his fist, looking angry. “It was our own stupidity that made us lose Lydia...that made us kill her. The onus of her death is on us. Right?”

“...Yes. You’re right.”

“That’s why I especially hate who I was in this era. I’d rather die than cooperate with him. Instead, I...was thinking about killing my past self.”

I could understand these feelings, too, but that deviated from our real objective.

“If you hate me, why are you inviting me to join up with you?”

“...You’re just different enough. We share the same sin, and I imagine we feel the same way. That’s why I thought we might join forces. And above all...I understand myself more than anyone else. You get what I’m trying to say, right?”

I gave the smallest of nods. Our strengths were comparable. In short...we had no chance of winning against the Varvatos of this era. Disaster Rogue had already revealed his immortality in their very first battle, meaning Varvatos had a thorough understanding of him—and Disaster Rogue would be driven to a corner.

But what would happen if we joined forces? ...We might become equal to our self of this era.

This speculation made sense.

But I had a question of my own. “I have no clue why you’re doing this in the first place. Why act like you want to fight Varvatos? If you want to save Lydia, making an enemy of him is the worst thing you can do... I’m guessing it’s not just because you hate him?”

“Of course. Even if I was the most disgusted with him, I wouldn’t unleash my

supreme wrath upon him.”

“Then why...”

“The answer to this question is related to my answer to the first. I have my reasons and cannot cooperate with that past self under any circumstances. Maybe it would be more accurate to say...that I am destined to fight him.”

I said nothing and urged him on with my eyes. He understood my meaning and quietly answered.

“That god must have mentioned some sort of assignment... I’m guessing it was about subjugating me. Like you, I also received an assignment. That was—”

And this was his answer: “To *destroy the world*. To work toward that purpose. As long as I continued doing that, this era would cease... That was the task the self-proclaimed god—that *being*—assigned me.”

I was at a loss for words, but I’d heard enough.

On the other hand, my other self, Disaster Rogue, went on loquaciously.

“That was why I took up the name of *Demon Lord*. In truth, I can’t say I took it up *again* when this was the first time I’d ever used the title. In any case, I’ve been working to destroy the world. It’s a necessary means to achieve my goals. I have not doubted myself or wavered since the very beginning.”

“...To fulfill your objective? Isn’t your goal to save Lydia? How is destroying the world in any way related?”

I struggled to get the words out, and Rogue smiled. It was a dark smile full of self-hate.

“I said it before. My aim is to save Lydia...and atone for my sins.”

“...If you’re trying to atone, I can’t tell what you could possibly be thinking. Won’t destroying the world make your sins even greater?”

He dropped his shoulders, and he looked clearly despondent.

Why was he acting this way? He knit his brows together—and in the next instant, he was right in front of me. It was as if he’d moved at lightning speed. He quickly drew near to me—yanking me by the collar and glaring into my eyes.

“Do you remember Lydia’s death?”

“...Of course. I could never forget.”

“Then how can you not understand my feelings? You’re me, aren’t you?”

His expression was mixed with intense frustration. I still didn’t understand and could only remain silent. He, on the other hand, had much to say.

“The curse that wreaked havoc on her mind. All our lost friends. All the things that ate away at her... And that fated day, with the final Outer One, our greatest enemy. Lydia had immediately suggested we quickly try and finish it off, but I didn’t do that.”

“Yeah...defeating it would have been risky. Plus...I would have had to prepare myself to lose Lydia.”

I’d been unable to even stand the thought. At the time, I was at the depths of my loneliness... Lydia was my only reason for living. My only constant friend. That was why...more than anything, more than anyone, I wanted to save Lydia.

“And we stubbornly kept telling her no. Why was that?”

“...Because Lydia was precious to us. We didn’t want her to die. If that was the risk to shoulder, we thought we could leave the Outer One alone.”

“In that case...!” The rage in Rogue’s eyes burned, flaring like fire. “Why didn’t we... Why didn’t we tell her what was on our minds?! If we had just told her! None of this would have happened! Am I wrong?!”

His outburst of anger left me speechless.

...It was what I’d been trying so hard all this time not to think about. My gravest sin.

“It’s all my fault! Lydia running off to fight in enemy territory all alone! Her falling in battle and ending up being hated by the world! Everything was my fault! If I had told her back then about my feelings, none of this would have happened! I wouldn’t have had to kill her because she turned into a monster!” he roared.

This ferocious tone. These weighty sins to bear. How I wished they belonged to someone else.

But this was my past self in its entirety: my own words and my own sin.

“How long had I lived in grief? How much had I suffered? ...I couldn’t bear the guilt anymore. That’s why I killed myself. And yet...the world refused to let me sleep. It denied me the chance to run away...” he trailed off, letting go of my collar as if trying to thrust me away. Clutching his white streaks of hair in both hands, he recollected with agonizing sorrow.

“I was reborn as Ard Meteor with my memories intact...and it was just as terrible as before. I continued to lose everything I’d gained—because I was a failure. It was Lydia all over again. I realized that someone like me will always rack up sins. That’s why...I wanted to end it all already. I wanted to atone for what I’d done and end everything. Then, it happened. I met that man who claimed he was a god.”

I could really only lend him an ear by this point.

“‘*You can go to the past,*’ he had said, and I flew off without hesitation. I thought I could make up for what I’d done. I thought I could save Lydia, then... let her kill me as the world’s enemy. Everyone will see me as a revolting monster, and I can be defeated by the friend who had once turned into a monster because of my own failure. I would atone for my own sins. By following the fate Lydia had once suffered...I will finally come to a close.”

As he concluded his speech, Rogue held out his right hand to me.

“If you feel the sins of that time, if you want to save Lydia and repent, then join me in committing the final sin. Kill monsters and humans. Kill, kill, and keep on killing, until the very end.”

“Dying at the hands of the dear friend who we’ll save...”

Nothing could be more tragic. It would be a fitting end for me. It hadn’t been long ago that I had reunited with Sylphy and my crimes once again. However, that had felt more like an illusion. I hadn’t had to face what I’d done. But with my other self right here in front of me, I finally realized something.

“I...”

In that moment, Ireena and Ginny crossed my mind. My choice would make them despondent. But even then... I went to take the hand of the self facing me.

However, just before I could, something happened.

Don't do anything stupid.

Lydia's words from earlier crossed my mind. In that moment, I was uncertain—tense with an inexplicable anxiety, despite the fact that he was my own self. I didn't know why I couldn't grab his hand.

...I wasn't sure if he had sensed something inside me.

"I'll give you time," he told me. "Three days from now, I'll be waiting at noon on the Ruined Earth of the Aralia Plains." And then, he went to cast transportation magic.

"Don't forget. Our sins can never be forgiven."

These parting words weighed heavily on me.

I could do nothing but stare at the empty space for a long, long time—

CHAPTER 50

The Ex-Demon Lord in Search of an Answer

Finally, dawn rose on a completely sleepless night...and a knock came at my door.

“...Pardon me.”

It was Latima. As soon as her quiet voice reached my ears, she entered the room.

“You are already awake this morning, too.”

If this was an ordinary day, I would have said *Sorry to make you come all this way for nothing*, with a dry chuckle. But I had no energy for banter at the moment.

Even then, Latima didn't seem particularly concerned about my welfare.

“Breakfast is served. Please make your way to the dining hall,” Latima informed me with indifference—a business transaction.

I simply answered with a nod and got up, following her request and trailing behind her.

“Latima.”

Why did I call out? I had no idea, even now. Before I could stop myself, I'd asked her a question.

“Say there came a time when your life and Lady Lydia's life were to be placed on a set of scales, compared for their worth. What would you—”

“What a foolish question,” she snapped in a sharp, flat tone. “I would do *anything* for Lady Lydia.”

It was a stalwart, grand declaration.

...Then what made me so hesitant?

I was no closer to the answer as we reached the dining hall. There, everyone was sitting around a large table.

“Hooooly smokes! Your food is seriously the best, Latima!”

“...You flatter me, Lady Lydia.”

“Gimme seconds!”

“Sheesh, you eat so much, Sylphy,” replied Ginny.

“Hee-hee, I *am* a growing girl!”

“...Yeah?”

“Hey, Ginny! If you’ve got something to say, say it to my face!”

“It’s nothing. I pray you grow! ...Especially in the chest area.”

It was a boisterous breakfast scene.

Ireena and Ginny had already gotten familiar with the Sylphy in this era and developed a relationship with her, just as they had in modern day.

In the midst of this...I didn’t say a word and ate in silence.

...I couldn’t taste anything. It was as if my taste buds had lost all their senses. It must have had to do with last night.

“Why didn’t we... Why didn’t we tell her what was on our minds?! If we had just told her! None of this would have happened! Am I wrong?!”

“Join me in committing the final sin.”

If I did that, then Lydia would be saved. And...my sins would be wiped clean. There was no other atonement.

...Then why was I hesitating?

Was it because I’d be killing innocent people instead of demons?

Or maybe...I didn’t feel as guilty about it as Rogue to allow myself to be killed by Lydia.

...That must have been it.

One of my earlier conversations with Ginny crossed my mind. It had been

right after the school festival.

“...Ard, could you be the Demon Lord?”

I had immediately replied, “No.” Even though I didn’t mean to snap at her, my tone had been hard, and even I didn’t know why I’d been so emotional about it...but once I met Rogue, I understood.

I had wanted an escape. I’d wanted to escape the Demon Lord...from my past self. To forget my wrongs and live another life as Ard Meteor. Unlike Varvatos, Ard’s days would be filled with nothing but good times.

That was why.

...Ugh, god. I was revolting. Was I really this selfish? Did I think I could kill my own, dear friend and still expect to be saved? It was damn presumptuous of me. Despicable, really.

...Was it that egotism that was making me unsure?

The more I thought about it, the more I hated myself.

“Hey, Ard. You got some time today?”

“What?”

“Hang out with me today. I bet you’re free, right?”

I shot Lydia a bewildered look.

...Those clear eyes bore right through me. They seemed to see anything and everything, giving me complex feelings impossible to express.

“...I understand.”

It wasn’t as if I could refuse.

...After breakfast, Lydia quickly grabbed my hand, dragging me out to town.

The Frontline City of Aether couldn’t compare with the activity of the royal capital of Kingsglave. By no exaggeration, it was the city that flourished the most in the ancient world. And there I was, walking with Lydia in the middle of it...

“Ohh! You, over there! Would you like to spend a passionate evening with me

tonight?!” And the lust beast Lydia was making a show of seducing all sorts of women.

“Hey, Ard! You give it a try, too! You can’t be a full-fledged soldier if you suck as a pickup artist!”

I was forced to flirt...

“Why’re you getting all the love?! You gotta be kidding me!”

...And then she got unreasonably violent. *You gotta be kidding me.*

...Remind me: Why was I good friends with this person again?

“Shit! If it’s gonna be like that, let’s have an eating contest!” barked this big woman-child.

“N-next up... C-c’mon, let’s race... *Burp,*” suggested this person I didn’t even get along with.

“Argh, geez! Lose at least once, dammit! You’re no fun at all!”

“...Could you please stop hitting me each time you lose?” I replied to this dumb-ass with a terrible personality.

Why did I like her so much?

...She was really starting to piss me off, so I hit her back.

“Urgh?! D-damn you...! Serving a knuckle sandwich to a lady’s face is the worst!”

“A lady? Where could she be? All I see before me is a savage monkey.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You’re dead meat!”

Our pointless bantering devolved into a fistfight where we ignored everything around us, paying no heed to the commotion that we were creating.

She was infuriating.

There was no one as incompatible with me as her.

There was no one as opposite to me as her.

And more than anything...there was no one who was as *outspoken* with me as her.

“Take that!”

As if my useless thoughts had backfired on me, I failed to dodge a fist that I would have normally swerved... A direct hit made contact with my face, and I sprawled out right there in the middle of the main street.

“All right! I win!” With a look of pride, the idiot puffed out her comically large chest. I hated that shining face.

...I absolutely detested her.

“Looks like I’m the big winner here!”

“...What are you talking about? Did you not have more losses than wins?”

“Can it! The winner in a fight takes all! I decided that just now!”

“...You know, I think you’re a moron.”

I’d accidentally let my true self slip out, but I didn’t care anymore. She saw through everything anyway.

She knew my normal “Ard Meteor” personality was all an act.

And she knew I was in agony.

...It ticked me off, so I went for a foot sweep.

“Whoa?!”

It was a beautiful move. Lydia smacked her face right into the paved road. Served her right.

“Y-you little shit! You play dirty!”

“It’s your fault for falling for it.”

Part two of our fight then broke out...

“*Huff, huff*, that’s...my win. Now I’m the total victor.”

“What the hell...are you saying, you doofus...? That one...didn’t count...”

We were both beaten to hell and back as we threw abuse at each other. I wondered what other people had to be thinking.

...I was willing to bet they thought we looked like a huge pair of ding-dongs.

What the heck am I doing? I thought as I immediately started to laugh.

“Heh, hee-hee-hee...”

Apparently, the ass beside me had the same idea. “Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha...”

After we laughed for some time, Lydia let out a big sigh.

“So? Is that weird mood of yours all gone?” She looked straight at me.

...I knew it. So she’d seen through me after all.

“You may be a moron, but you certainly have sharp intuition.”

“Shut it... So feelin’ better?”

I shook my head. “...If you had to sacrifice yourself...to regain the things and people most precious to you, what would you do?”

It was an innocent question—random, almost. No one could possibly know how I was truly feeling.

However...Lydia gave a disgusted look that you might give a disappointing problem child.

“You can use flight magic, right?”

“...What about it?”

“Come with me. There’s something I wanna show you.”

As she said this, I began to float...and soared into the sickeningly blue sky.

We flew through the sky for a few hours until the bright, blue sky took on a tinge of orange.

Following behind Lydia, I contemplated in midair.

If she had nodded in affirmation to my question, it might have somewhat dispelled my confusion... I could have stiffened my resolve to bring the name of *Demon Lord* to life in its truest sense: to lose everything, but save Lydia... And finally die by her hand.

I probably could have then agreed to this future. But she hadn’t done that.

Why? I started to mull things over.

“Everyone’s always going around calling me Hero and Champion, but I’m really not that great. You know... It must just mean I’m a boring waste of space,” Lydia said, murmuring into the setting sun.

Before I could ask the true meaning behind those words...

“...We’re here,” she announced and immediately began to drop down. I followed suit...and settled on the ground.

The only things around us were ruins. They must have once functioned as a magnificent fortress. Now, the many buildings showed not a trace of their former glory, and not a soul was to be found.

“This is...”

“One of my greatest crimes.” Lydia gave a pained look. Right after, a swirl of black mist suddenly surrounded us...

They were all shaped like skulls.

“...Are these cries of the deceased—Ghosts?”

All who died had wishes and dreams that they sent into the universe before they perished. If those feelings were especially strong, they would remain in that place forever as a mass of thought. The final deluge of will from the dead. Those were Ghosts.

And these posthumously manifested the sentiments of their final moments.

“Lydiaaaaaaaaaa...!”

“Devil, she is...!”

“Give me back my child...!”

“Go to hell...!”

They all detested her. They wanted her dead.

The ghosts swirled around her with a cursed energy. But they were formless masses of thought. They could do nothing against living flesh and blood.

But...the heart was a different story.

Lydia had adopted an anguished look. “It’s rough. You know you have to face

it, but you want to run away, against your better judgment.”

She seemed on the verge of tears... I called out unthinkingly.

“What in the world is...?”

“I told you. This is my sin, my crime. It used to be a city where only demons lived...one we attacked long ago. In terms of military strategy, it was a key location. We had to take control of this one,” Lydia continued on gravely. “Taking their castle and forces down was simple. But...occupying it was difficult. Far from listening to the civilians, we attacked them at night...”

With a quivering voice, she concluded, “We killed them all. Women, children, it didn’t matter. Not a single one was left alive... If we hadn’t, we would have lost our friends. Which was why we decided to take the ‘best’ course of action.”

At last, tears welled in Lydia’s eyes. Her expression was one of regret and intense self-hatred...

It was the first time I’d seen her like this. Well, it was the first time I’d ever *heard* of this.

...I couldn’t bear to watch this any longer.

As I thought this, I tried to send her a proverbial lifeboat to give her an out.

“You said they were all demons, right? Then—”

“Then it couldn’t be helped? Then it’s not a sin to kill them? ...I can’t bring myself to believe it, even when I try,” Lydia rejected outright—denying the very thing that would absolve her.

“What is the difference between people and demons? We see demons as monsters, unfailingly believing them to be no different than repulsive fiends... Long ago, I thought so, too. But I realized I was wrong. People and demons share the same roots.”

With that as a preface, Lydia managed to say, “I’m just a murderer. I’ve realized that and continue to dirty my hands... We’re the ones who should be called *monsters*.”



I wanted to argue with that conclusion somehow.

You're not a monster.

It was all for justice. There was no other way.

You're not guilty of anything.

Worrying won't get you anywhere.

...However, all those words got stuck in my throat and never made it out.

Lydia didn't want anyone to console or forgive her. After all, she...had already come to a single conclusion.

"I've already decided how I'm going to die. Fight and fight and fight to the bitter end. If I can make it so people have no one to fear... If I can create a world where everyone, people and demons, can live together in harmony...then I think I'll try and die in the most cruel and pathetic way."

That's the only way I can forgive myself. That was what Lydia was saying.

Those eyes were crystal clear, devoid of any hesitation...as if they'd completely forced out any objection or opposition...

From what I could see, those eyes were terribly cruel.

I could only stand there silently. Lydia let out a relieved sigh and smiled.

"I'm not worth anyone changing their beliefs to accommodate me or sacrificing themselves to save me... It doesn't matter how I go; there's no need for anyone to stress about it."

That's not true.

Even though I wanted to argue, I couldn't. I'd realized that anything I said would be futile. When Lydia got like this, she wouldn't bend for anyone. Her guilt, self-loathing, and sense of purpose...had cemented her belief system.

"...What about our feelings? If you were to die...!" I could only argue with her like a child throwing a tantrum.

Lydia stroked my head as she admonished me. "It's what I have to do. I've got to atone for my sins. If I can't do that...then I can't die with pride. The virtues in

your life are important, but not as much as the way you die...”

She looked straight into my eyes. It really felt as though they were all-seeing. In fact...she must have picked up on everything.

And even then, Lydia continued to speak.

“Don’t try to change the way I die.”

Her smile held a hint of sadness. The eyes gazing at me seemed apologetic.

But... I could clearly see that she knew her beliefs wouldn’t change.

...Lydia. If that’s your wish, then I...!

Under the darkening sky, as the cursed proof of Lydia’s sin swirled around us, I gripped my fists tightly.

And I quietly reflected on the answer I’d discovered.

CHAPTER 51

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Final Ancient Battle

When soldiers got ready for battle, they were accosted by a whole host of feelings: worry, fear, anger, joy, exhilaration...

However, here, there were two people who felt none of those things.

In the royal capital of Kingsglaive, at the Champion Lydia's mansion, Ireena and Ginny were sitting on beds in one of the rooms, radiating disappointment.

Amber ornaments were in their hair. They were Lydia's tokens of thanks for letting her steal away Ard back then. In terms of beauty and craftsmanship, the ancient world was far inferior to the modern one, but they were lovely, and the two time travelers did like them. But there was one thing that bothered them.

"Um, you know, I kinda feel like we're being left behind," Ireena lamented, fiddling with the ornament, letting out a small sigh that said she was a touch resentful about how things were developing.

Feeling the same way, Ginny nodded in agreement. "Indeed. Ever since coming here, it has been as if we are completely invisible."

"...I get it. But that doesn't mean I wanna accept it."

Ireena intentionally didn't say *We're nothing but a burden to Ard*.

She wouldn't say this cold and hard fact—in fact, she *couldn't*.

"...I really want to be Ard's equal. I've been working so hard. But I guess this is reality."

Life doesn't often go as planned, even when you have natural talent, Ireena's father used to tell her.

She ruminated on this now more than ever, and she couldn't help but feel low. On the other hand...Ginny was busy overcoming her dark mood.

“But we can’t give up, right?”

“...Of course not.”

“I see. If you gave up, then my plans for Ard’s harem of ten thousand ladies should progress smoothly!”

“Ten thousand... Since when did you increase it?”

“Is there a problem?”

“...Well, I guess the number doesn’t matter. I’ll never allow a harem either way.” Ireena glared at Ginny, though she looked sullen.

Ginny warded off this intense stare, looking cool as a cucumber as the wings on top of her head twitched.

“*Haah*... You’re calm about all this. I thought you’d be the most worried about being left behind.”

“...It would be a lie to say that I’m not. However...” Running her fingers over the ornament in her peach hair, Ginny squinted as if remembering the past. “We promised Lady Lydia. *Just race forward without thinking about anything too seriously.* That’s why I’m done with being depressed. If we have time for that...we should run where we want to go. It’s more constructive, don’t you think?”

“...You’re right. That’s exactly it.”

Ginny smiled, her doubts clearing as Ireena gave one in return.

“Well, let’s get racing! Let’s do the best we can until Ard gets back!” She suddenly wanted to be as active as possible. As if thinking the same thing, Ginny agreed with Ireena’s proposal. The two would head to the courtyard to hone their magic, but just as they were about to get up...

“Pardon me.”

A girl barreled into the room without knocking. It was Lydia’s subordinate and the former slave charged with Ard’s care...Latima.

As the tan girl with white hair stared at them with a mechanical expression...

“I have important news,” she said austerely—



The western Aralia Plains. In that corner was a wide region of hills with a slight yet noticeable shift in elevation...

It was the main stage for the current battle.

Marching in the ancient world was unbelievably fast compared with modern times. They had left in the early morning, and it hadn't even taken them half a day before they arrived. The time was just past noon...but there was no hint of a brilliant, blue sky. One reason for that was because it was a cloudy day. However, the primary one was...the group of Wyverns soaring in the sky.

Whatever his methods, the Demon Lord had subdued a stream of monsters and amassed his army. The number of Wyverns capable of aerial warfare was already too many to process.

Obviously, as they covered the sky with their bodies, they weren't just announcing their presence. Lording over the battle progressing below, they unleashed balls of fire. It was an air raid of Wyverns.

If any modern people were to witness it, they'd surely think it was the end of the world. However...for ancient soldiers, it wasn't anything to get too worked up over.

Why would that be?

It was because Lizer Bellphoenix was among them.

He was both one of the Four Heavenly Kings and a veteran general known as the Invincible Defense. Especially skilled in both defense magic and revival magic, he and his forces were currently acting as safeguards.

They were on top of a slightly elevated hill in the back of the battlefield. As they looked down on its progression, Lizer and his army were at work as always, casting remote defense magic.

As fireballs rained down, Lizer continued to protect each soldier with his defensive magic, rending the Wyverns entirely powerless. Their accuracy and focus were fearsome, and their limitless magic was even more terrible. There were around ten thousand soldiers in Lizer's army and over eighty thousand soldiers fighting on the battlefield. Modern people could never imagine

continuously defending and healing over eight times your own number—with impeccable timing and over long distances.

They were of myth—in every sense of the word.

“...There’s a sight worth seeing,” Lizer said in his deep voice as he performed his duties. Those shrewd, glinting eyes had caught sight of...an iron giant coming to help reap the fruits of war.

It was huge. It was heroic. It was—unbelievably strong. It was so large that you had to crane your neck to take it all in, and it was almost too much to handle. And one more thing: It was cool as shit.

It was all the wild fantasies of a young child and more. It was a mystical masterpiece and magical weapon created by the walking natural disaster, the genius magical scholar Verda.

Its name was *Golem*.

Its silhouette—big, fat, rough—was capable of handling a force of ten thousand horsemen. Every part of it was a lethal weapon, and it kicked aside hordes of monsters simply by moving. The group of Lizardmen racing across the earth was nothing to it. It struck the enormous dragons that came to face it with a deadly and destructive beam of light. It was a super soldier that flaunted its tremendous power as it conspicuously stood out in the middle of the battlefield.

And there inside the cockpit...

“GEH-HEH-HEH-HEH! I AM A GOOOOD!” shrieked Verda Al-Hazard.

With the new devices recently put in place, she could see every corner of the battlefield from the driver’s seat in 360 degrees. It was fully equipped with heating and an air conditioner, a variety of snacks, a massage chair, and anything else you could possibly ask for. However, with these comforts and incredible efficiencies, the magical input required of its passenger was a major hurdle... At present, the only one who could fully control the Golem was Verda.

“GO GET ’EM! EXPLODING PUUUNCH! NOW FOR THE FINAL BLOW! BRAINSTORM HURRICANE!”

She killed the hordes of enemy monsters like a child at play. Just as it looked like no one could tell how far the iron giant would go...

“BEEP! BEEP! HIT BY ENEMY FIRE! HIT BY ENEMY FIRE!” A warning alarm echoed through the cockpit.

...This magical soldier had a few faults. Its large size gave it limited mobility and...made it difficult to deal with small, fast enemies.

“Ummm... Shoot! A pack of Gold Werewolves, huh? I hate dealing with those things.” Verda wasn’t particularly flustered as she looked at the enemies darting about around her.

Gold Werewolves. It was a general term for the flaxen variety of Wolf People. Even their nails were made of sturdy iron and steel that could cut through you like butter. They were currently darting about the giant frame with a lordly air and mangling the armor plating. Verda was still not especially fazed by this. It was indeed sturdy, but...

The truth was that *she* was on the battlefield. This was the biggest factor.

“You should fight speed with speed, after all. In that case...I’m counting on you.” Verda gave a small smile.

The very next moment, the beasts running in circles around the giant all met their end as they were torn apart.

What could have possibly happened? Naturally, any modern person wouldn’t have a clue, but even among ancients, there were few who could give an answer.

But for a Heavenly King, this was a common occurrence not worth much concern.

“Welp, no surprise there,” Verda murmured at the sight before her...a group darting to the next location, having finished their job.

“Awesome as always, Olivia!” Verda cheered.

That group let off a somewhat odd aura. It was dark—a total and complete blackness that left room for nothing else. They were dressed for the highest amount of maneuverability in attire that seemed fortified by darkness itself,

and their mouths were hidden by jet-black cloths. The name of this extensively shadowy group was...the Demon Slayers.

The group's members were almost entirely Beast People who were taught by its leader. They raced by like a dark wind, cutting down passing monsters with incredible speed. At the head was one of the Four Heavenly Kings: the Greatest Demon Slayer, Olivia vel Vine.

She was dressed the same as everyone else, but the intimidating energy coming off her entire body was unlike any other. She carried the Demon Blade Elminage. The name was a very ancient one that meant *to cut down*. The length of its blade easily surpassed her own height, but it was so thin that it seemed it would snap upon striking anything with any decent amount of force. It was a specialized weapon representative of Olivia herself. Forged by her "little brother," Varvatos, the Demon Blade could slice the whole of creation in two. Add in Olivia's swordplay and unique skills as one of the Beast People, which allowed her to increase her mobility without consuming her magic, and she transformed into a chaotic and divine energy.

"...Cherry Blossom Formation," she ordered, quietly and subdued, and the group quickly moved out.

They scattered in all directions at once and cut down the monsters like a ripple. Once they reached a certain range, they returned to the side of their leader, Olivia, and resumed darting about. Their teamwork and coordination were the best in the entire army. The way they all united to take down prey was just like a pack of wolves.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! *Gooo!*" There was a certain someone who was the exact opposite of Olivia's forces.

With a big smile, this person launched attack magic right next to them. A thick, purple flash shot straight through and turned scores of monsters to ashes.

"Bah-ha-ha! You're gonna be on the losing end of this next bet!"

"Aww, shit! I almost had it!"

Playful, childish laughter seemed out of place on this hellish battlefield. Look toward it, and you'd find—

“Guess there’s no helping it! Time for my punishment!”

One soldier left the rest of their companions and dove alone into a horde of monsters.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Nice, it’s the human explosion!” Shrieking loudly, the soldier exploded from the inside out with magic.

An intense heat spread and enveloped a stream of monsters. At this, the self-detonating soldier’s friends held their stomachs in laughter.

“...I suppose this is what they mean by *birds of a feather flock together*. Damn lunatics.”

How does a battlefield come about?

Some will say it’s because of tragedy. Some will say it’s because of fear and agony.

In either case, there was no doubt most of the words that come to mind are negative.

But *they* didn’t see battle with such a pessimistic outlook.

For Alvarito Egzex and his forces, the battlefield and war were...the greatest playgrounds one could ask for.

“All righty, next is the decapitation game!”

“What? No way, I’m up against you? You’re totally gonna win.”

Amid the angry bellows, sounds of destruction, and miserable scene around them, they were the only ones smiling and laughing.

No battle formation. No strategy. No cooperation.

The goal...was just to have fun.

Once again, Alvarito’s soldiers scattered as they pleased, fought as they pleased, and...died as they pleased.

As everyone howled with raucous laughter, Alvarito Egzex continued watching them from midair.

“Ah, my brethren. I’m pleased you are enjoying yourselves. However... I

cannot help but feel a pang of jealousy. I did not think I could be so bored.”

Even he’d only recently gone all out. This action far outrivaled a force of ten thousand. But...at a certain point, he’d immediately halted his movements and flew into midair as if abandoning the fight. There was only one reason for this.

He’d had enough. He was sick and tired of fighting monsters.

“As I thought, the likes of beasts and monsters do not excite me. Battling is the ultimate form of communication; it requires love from both sides. But these monstrous foes are incapable of it... Ah, I guess this makes it masturbatory.” Lamenting in a dramatic tone, he looked up at the sky of Wyverns and screamed:

“But one of the creeds that I live by is to make the uninteresting interesting! Which is why I will take this terribly boring turn of events and transform it into something amusing!”

His androgynous face broke into a mad smile, and he spread his arms wide.

“We Who Are Born in Confusion.

“Live in Resentment.

“And at Last Embrace Nothingness.”

Geometric patterns flashed off and on—and each time, it brought one chant closer to completion.

“Our Life Has No Meaning.

“If Pure Idleness Is to Be Our End,

“Then I at Least...”

As soon as the incantation got to this point...all on the battlefield, human and monster alike, looked up at the sky.

In that moment, their militance dissipated, and a strange sense of unity spread across friend and foe. Everyone’s intent became one.

Someone has to stop that monster.

If he wasn’t thwarted immediately, something awful was bound to happen.

However, the most powerful, most insane soldier, Alvarto, took no notice of their sense of impending doom and continued—

“Hell’s Gate, Open.”

From the distance, someone had cut off his incantation, and in the next instant, Alvarto was cornered from all sides by black spots.

“Heh-heh-heh! Now that’s not half bad!” His crazed laugh deepened as he stopped his chant, bounding away from the place.

Seconds later, the black spots formed a powerful suction, vacuuming up the Wyverns flying through the sky. If he had been a second late in making his escape, Alvarto would have suffered the same fate.

“Heh-heh-heh...! Your love language is just so extreme, Master,” Alvarto murmured lovingly, eyes darting around before they finally came to rest, gazing into the distance.

“...Tch. He dodged it.”

In the back, far from the battlefield, Varvatos clicked his tongue as he sat on a simple chair in the middle of their main camp. Anger soured his face, and it was obvious he was in a bad mood.

There was only one reason for that: one idiot, pervert, and madman. Alvarto had just tried to play a dangerous hand without any consideration for the consequences.

“That damn clown. I knew he would go berserk. This is why I hate bringing him to battle...! Ugh, I can’t take it. My stomach is seriously starting to hurt...!”

Between his languid brow formed a deep crease, and his leg continued to bounce. But Varvatos’s beauty made even that look picturesque.

One of the king’s close aides, Rivelg, the knight of roses, smiled wryly.

“Your Majesty, if we did not have Lord Alvarto’s troops, it would be difficult to maintain the war front.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Judging by strength alone, they’re the best in our arsenal... Damn. Why did the heavens bless perverts with great power...?” He heaved out a sigh. “Rivelg, how’s the battle looking?”

“Right. We’re currently struggling.”

“In other words, we’re playing out our worst-case scenario.”

No answer came. That was all he needed.

“The number of monsters itself isn’t the issue. The problem is...that their stream of beasts doesn’t seem to ever end. Could they actually have an infinite army?”

New monsters cropped back up to replace their fallen companions. Varvatos couldn’t figure out for the life of him if it was some sort of spell.

“I know I said this would be over within the day, but I worry about that.”

“...It would be nice if the castle had some sort of secret door,” his attendant noted.

Varvatos smiled in a dark way. “Even if there was, we wouldn’t be able to find it. It is a secret, after all.”

In any case, the situation wasn’t looking good. If this continued on forever, they would never get any closer to the enemy castle. If there was anyone who could bust through them, it would be a certain someone...

“TAKE THAAAAAAT!”

Just as the silhouette of a certain woman flashed across his mind’s eye, the person he’d been thinking of belted out a war cry that echoed far across from the distant battlefield.

“H-her voice is as loud as ever,” Varvatos’s attendant commented.

“...Hmph,” Varvatos snorted, resting his chin on his hand, looking absolutely annoyed.

But that wasn’t the case on the inside.

I’m counting on you, Lydia, the handsome king thought, thinking about his friend’s bravery and gallant stance as he smiled to himself.

The troops led by the Champion Lydia looked disorganized at first glance. They had no discipline or order and moved around like complete amateurs. However, that was all due to the advanced tactics of the genius strategist, the

Great Sage Champion.

The central raid team—consisting of Captain Lydia and Vice-Captain Sylphy—put on a furious display. A single swing of Lydia’s Holy Sword Vald-Galgulus cut untold enemies in two. Undaunted, Sylphy used both magic and swordplay to mow down one enemy after another.

In the midst of these efforts, Sylphy shouted sulkily, “Agh, enough! I’m exhausted! It’d at least be a little easier if he was here!”

This unspecified “he” was not with them—the boy known as *Ard Meteor*.

...It wasn’t as if the Sylphy of this era had spent much time with him. And unlike her modern self, she didn’t have any special feelings for him, either. Even then, Sylphy recognized his power. However, that was why she was upset he wasn’t around.

“I can’t believe! He would! Run off midmarch! Oh, don’t tell me! He lost his nerve!” she shouted between swings.

She’d wanted to fight alongside him and compete for the spoils of war. His whole disappearance made her irrationally irritated somehow.

Lydia flashed her a wry smile. “Well, I’m sure he had something to do... More importantly...” A shrewd look crossed her face. “...Don’t go doing anything weird,” she muttered cryptically, in a way that only she could understand. She looked to the east and once again spoke incomprehensibly.

“I knew it would come to this.”



On the western side of the Aralia Plains, the Ruined Earth. The name described the land’s condition and peculiar characteristics, of course, but it was also rooted in history.

Long ago, in a time before time, the region had served as the stage of a momentous battle.

On one side of the fight was the enigmatic existence that controlled the world, the Old Gods.

They were up against the deeply mysterious beings from beyond: those who

were transcendental, the Outer Ones.

The clash between the two mighty powers impacted the land under them. There was no explanation on what had caused this phenomenon, but a weak curse continued to drift through the area. Any ordinary creature who stepped inside perished.

For someone like me, who had high magical resistance, it wasn't anything special, but...the Ruined Earth seemed to reject every living thing—as if it had a grudge against the world. Therefore, the only sight to be seen here was destruction.

In other words...it was a forlorn wasteland that stretched out into the horizon.

And here in this image of true bleakness...I reunited with my other self: Disaster Rogue.

He was covered entirely by his usual dark armor, and I couldn't read his expression. Maybe he was thinking of the battle going on far away and feeling uneasy. Or maybe he was going over a scheme in his mind and laughing to himself.

At any rate, we both had one thing to do.

“...Do you have an answer for me?” His voice made my guts rumble.

I took a deep breath. “I—”

I started to say the answer he had been waiting days for, the conclusion I had come to.

I spoke it clearly into the world.

“I'm not going to save Lydia.”

CHAPTER 52

The Ex-Demon Lord Versus the Current Demon Lord

A curtain of silence fell over us. A stinging nervousness crept across my skin. That was because the man in front of me...my other self, Disaster Rogue, was becoming increasingly hostile.

“...Why have you come to that conclusion?”

From the other side of his spiky helmet, I could feel his combativeness radiating toward me. He made it sound as if refusal wasn't an option, and I balled my hand into a fist.

“Because she doesn't want me to save her. I...know what she wants. She wants to bear the burden of Champion and...clear her own sins through death. That's what Lydia told me.”

“...And you wish to grant that. Is your heart actually set on it?”

I didn't reply. I could only glare at him in silence.

Under the noiseless, cloudy sky, Rogue talked to me, calm.

“...All right. In that case, let's begin our *ridiculous charade*.”

In that next moment, I felt the curtain of conflict rise between us, and I bound to the side on reflex.

From the place where I was moments ago, a pillar of light shot into the sky, piercing through the stratosphere. If I had taken a direct hit from that beam, I would have probably been in real trouble.

“Just testing the waters, huh?” I muttered to myself, returning the favor—calling seven magic circles to manifest over Rogue's head. A crash of thunder rang out a few seconds later.

It was an isolated Seven Cast.

To modern mages, it would seem like an incredible, superhuman feat, but...

To my opponent, it was nothing to panic over. He was me, after all.

A stream of earth-shattering lightning bolts crashed down from the sky. If he had been any ordinary person, it would have all been over in one hit.

“...Child’s play,” he scoffed.

I hadn’t accomplished anything. He’d taken the brunt of my attack without even taking a single step. The lightning struck his entire body, but...his black armor obstructed and eradicated it all.

“...That’s some nice magic armor you got.”

“Hmph. Your praise rings hollow.”

He went for a counterattack as soon as he replied. Magic circles appeared around me and released a raging hellfire. I jumped and evaded. As soon as I went to make my escape, another magic circle was waiting for me in midair, floating right before me and roaring with a golden torrent.

Again, modern-day creatures would have obviously been donezo, but even if I were an ordinary ancient person, the battle would have been nearing its end, too.

But it had no effect on me.

“...What a boring trick.” I thrust out one hand, magically constructing a defensive wall that rendered his attack completely useless.

Even after I landed, Rogue went after me with a whole range of spells, remaining rooted in place. In the face of my enemy’s onslaught, I focused on dodging and defending against what was around me. I’d occasionally launch a counterattack, but the armor absorbed everything, so it accomplished nothing at all.

“What about this?” I murmured. I wanted to test him; just as I nullified his attack with another barrier between us...

I discharged a spell that I’d been building up for some time.

A ring of magic circles formed around Rogue, a membrane spreading out from

a peculiar shape.

And the moment the elliptical formation completely covered him, he fell to one knee.

“Ngh... Agh...!” Rogue cried out in anguish.

An outsider would not understand, wondering if something was happening inside the membrane. There was no doubt that he hadn’t been expecting it, either.

That was because it was a spell that I’d made up right there on the spot.

By applying barrier magic in a practical form, I could force pressure down on whoever was trapped inside. The average person would be compressed within moments, but unsurprisingly, this enemy wasn’t so easy to get rid of.

“NNNGH...!”

That said, the armor was beginning to crack all over. The first to break apart was the helmet. His scarred face met the air, and anguished sweat poured off him, scattering in all directions from the pressure.

He wouldn’t be easy to crush, but it was only a matter of time.

If he didn’t manage to hit back, it’d all be over in about another twenty seconds.

...I realized I was asking for the impossible.

“That was...an admirable...effort...!”

The next moment, my improvised magic suddenly vanished into thin air. Not that I was surprised.

“...Hmm, you analyzed its construction, huh,” I murmured under my breath, as Rogue broke through the barrier and heaved.

Analysis. Magic was my specialty. If it was constructed with the rune language, it took me three seconds tops. If it was made with something other than runes, it took me about ten seconds to get the whole picture, with some exceptions.

And...this would be the way that I’d construct a spell to cancel it out. With

this, it was theoretically possible for me to nullify any magic and ability. My *Original* technique was a result of analyzing other abilities.

...And this guy had all that. He was me, after all.

In that case...

“This battle will never end, I see.”

Because how could I overpower him? It was a seemingly insurmountable problem. I’d been in a host of situations up until now and come up with canned responses for battles, but...how the heck was I supposed to fight myself? I hadn’t felt like I could clear this particular subject and intentionally decided to leave it be. It was apparently time to pay up.

Well then, what to do? I wondered.

“Hmph. As I thought, we shouldn’t be enemies. I may be singing my own praises, but...there is no more fearsome foe to be found than you.”

His armor vanished, as if he thought it was in the way, and switched to standard ancient wear.

...Before I knew it, my militancy no longer occupied my brain. He was acting as if everything was all over, and I couldn’t help but feel bewildered.

Rogue curled his lips into a small smile. “You thought I couldn’t even see this coming? Then you’ve wildly underestimated me. You’ll get a chance to really understand who you are, Ard Meteor. You haven’t been able to accurately judge yourself.”

I didn’t understand what he meant... At this point in time, I had absolutely no clue what he was getting at.

“Did you never question why I called out to you on the same day that Varvatos announced his strategy? ...The bottom line is, the point of this war is to draw you in as an ally. I’m willing to bet I’ll lose the war itself. But I have no attachment to this land that I stole. If I just have you as a pawn, I don’t care about anything else.”

As soon as I heard these words, I could imagine his scheme...

“You don’t mean that you...!” I choked, this uncanny feeling coming to life.

Smiling deeply as if assured of victory, he cast a certain spell. It was a magic technique that allowed long-distance projection—an enormous mirror appeared above our heads...

“Now, let me just give you a little push in the right direction.”

With that, the mirror reflected the progress of the far-off battle.

There was a dim room, which must have been underground, and a large red jewel, glowing ominously as it floated in midair. And nearby it...were two girls on crucifixes.

And I saw the heart-wrenching figures of Ireena and Ginny.

CHAPTER 53

The Ex-Demon Lord's Ensnared Friends

A short while before all this transpired...

"I have important news," Latima claimed, to which Ireena and Ginny looked at each other, perplexed.

"Important..."

"...News?"

"Yes. The both of you will soon set out on an attack. I will guide you. Please follow me."

Why? They didn't even have time to ask this simple question before Latima left the room. They didn't know what was going on.

"I suppose that means we can lend a helping hand?" Ginny mused.

Ireena didn't respond, looking at the magic gear made by Ard that was lying in the corner of the room.

After they donned all their equipment, they left the mansion. Latima, now dressed in a light battle-outfit, was already waiting for them.

"I'll explain the situation while we're on our way."

Latima wasn't letting them get a word in, but this wasn't the time to be complaining. After she finished, she darted off before them as they went through the center of the royal capital, past the gate, and outside the city walls. They continued down the main road.

Latima's speed was extraordinary. It would have even left sound in the dust. If Ireena and Ginny hadn't had anything to assist them, there was no way they could have kept up with her. But they now had Ard's equipment... Meaning they were able to follow Latima with the help of their dark, shining leg-armor.

I'm really not used to this feeling...

The scenery flew past them. They both hadn't yet caught up with the reality that her legs could move this fast. As they admired the overwhelming power that the armor's mobility enhancements afforded them, the pair was overcome with a sudden burst of displeasure—an indescribable mix of indebtedness and frustration.

This isn't fair.

This is just something that Ard gave for us to cheat...

Any power this gives me is meaningless.

I've gotta stand by Ard with my own two feet...!

Ireena grew despondent. It wasn't like her, but since coming to this era, she'd lost her usual cheeriness.

"...Well then, Miss Latima. Won't you please tell us what is going on?" Ginny asking, racing next to her.

Ireena involuntarily gasped, coming to her senses. Ginny was right. They were in an emergency situation. This was no time to feel down.

Finally, Latima answered a question: "This is a strategy devised by Master Ard himself."

"A strategy?"

"Yes. Master Ard saw the truth behind the immortality of the Demon Lord... and explained his plan to me first. He instructed me to bring you along at the appropriate time to the castle the Demon Lord currently occupies."

...There was something off about this statement.

Ard had seen through the enemy's secret, which wasn't particularly odd. It was obvious that he would. But why would he have Latima relate this scheme instead of telling them himself?

"It was crucial that this strategy remain secret. If he had spoken with you two ahead of time, Master Ard thought traitors on the inside would take notice... If you had known earlier that you were to be responsible for this important task,

would you have been able to continue behaving as normal?”

Well, they had no confidence about that—neither Ireena nor Ginny. He couldn't allow their odd actions and behavior to alert the enemy. That was why Ard had told Latima about the plan first.

...It was a plausible explanation, but for some reason, they just couldn't shake off their doubts.

“I understand how you're feeling,” Latima consoled. “But...let's try to move past it for now. Our destination is right before us. We do not have time.”

Ireena finally took notice of her surroundings—the scene had changed.

The tranquil main road had become a thick, verdant forest.

“...You're right. All right then, let's hear the details of the plan,” Ireena said.

With the supersonic twists and turns in their plans, Ireena and Ginny didn't have much choice. Beside them, Latima spoke with detached disinterest.

“First, about the Demon Lord's immortality. Master Ard has surmised he is using a secret technique that separates the body and soul.”

“Something that separates the soul?”

“Yes. This is one of the secret ceremonial techniques that incorporates a special-class magic circle. You separate your astral spirit from your own body and contain it in a proper host. Then, the person becomes immortal.”

It was a preposterous story, but they had no choice but to accept it.

“There are two disadvantages to this secret technique. First, the host, which holds the astral spirit, and the spell caster must remain within a set distance from each other. If they are too far apart, the spirit will return to its true host, and the person will no longer be immortal. In short, for the Demon Lord to take over this domain with his own hands, he had to bring his astral body with him. That is what Master Ard believes.”

“...To the castle?” Ireena clarified.

Latima nodded. “Yes. Come to think of it, His Majesty did say so himself. We will win if we take that castle.”

Ard and Varvatos must have come to the same conclusion. In that case, everything seemed more credible... And yet, the question lingered in the air...

Why would the host be brought to a place as obvious as the inside of the castle?

But there had to be some subtleties that novices like themselves couldn't understand.

Ireena tried to force herself to accept this as the truth.

"So I'm guessing the second disadvantage is that the person is in big trouble if the host is eliminated, right?"

"Yes. If the host is destroyed, the person will lose their immortality."

"...And we were the ones chosen to do it."

"That's correct. Master Ard discovered a secret path into the castle, and we will use it to sneak inside—"

"Why us? For a big job like this...", Ireena managed to say, whimpering—and very suspicious.

They had been entrusted with an important task. It was no exaggeration to say that it would play a huge role in turning the tide of the war.

Why would he leave this to us?

He should've chosen someone who would have a higher chance of success...

With each new thought, Ireena's expression grew darker and darker.

"This is not like you, Miss Ireena. I thought you would be rather overjoyed," Ginny observed. "To think that you would back down at a critical moment. If Ard found out, I'm sure he would be disappointed. Hee-hee, I'd already flushed out a few ideas to meddle with your relationship, but it seems it'll capsize without my help, Miss Ireena—"

"Don't be stupid!" Ireena shouted, angry.

Her face was hot. Blood was rushing to her head, and she could tell her cheeks were flushed.

Ginny answered this with a smile to challenge her.

“Yes, that’s it. That suits you best, Miss Ireena. I know you’re the type who hates to lose and rushes forward stupidly. It’s not in your character to get down in the dumps. You ought to yell *Ard gave me a big job! Hooray! Time for a celebration!* in your happy-go-lucky way.”

Ireena had a feeling that Ginny was mocking her, but it actually made her feel better. Ginny set fire to her natural competitiveness and blew those dark feelings away.

“Heh! Yeah, you’re right! Exactly! This isn’t who I am!”

She’d do it. She’d already torched any shreds of doubt in the back of her mind. Shouldn’t she be earnestly rushing in headfirst?

It was Ginny who had helped her feel this way... Not that Ireena would ever openly thank her.

“Have you come to an agreement? ...To put it simply, we were chosen to carry out this plan because it would be a surprise to all other parties. We are all outsiders for a reason. Ignored and excluded. The enemy sees us the same way, and—”

Latima had been continuing her explanation, when a rush of wind filled their ears. By the time they realized it was a wind spell, it was already too late.

“Ngh...!”

It targeted the one leading their group, Latima. The wind slashed at her ankles, causing her to keel over. Blood pumped out of the deep wounds, plastering her tan skin.

“Latima?! Are you—”

“Please go without me! I’ll keep the enemy at bay! If you run straight forward from here, there will be a hidden passage to the castle!”

This was the first time Latima showed signs of desperation. Ireena and Ginny were at a loss for words.

“Stop idling around! Go! Quickly!” she shouted, pelting them with her commands.

“Don’t you die!”

“Please join us soon!”

It hurt to leave Latima behind...but for this important task, failure was not an option. Ireena and Ginny understood this and were left with no choice but to move forward.

Their hearts were practically ripped out as sounds of destruction reached them from behind, but they chose to keep running, all the while praying for Latima’s safety, racing forward as fast as their legs would take them.

“Is this the secret passage...?”

By all accounts, it looked like a cave. The gaping, dark hole was ominous...and they couldn’t help but feel danger coming off it.

“Hmm? What’s this? Could you possibly be frightened, Miss Ireena?”

When this partner of hers put it that way, Ireena couldn’t afford to let fear hold her back.

“Hmph!” she huffed, sticking out her chest, and continued forward into the cave.

Magic served as their light source. A bright orb floated in front of them and lit up the inside of the hole. They slowly inched their way forward, occasionally tripping on the rough path... It had to be a natural cave, but as they progressed farther, they started to get the sense that it was artificially constructed.

Before they knew it, they were walking on a cobbled path.

“Are we beneath the castle?”

“It does appear that way.”

In other words, they were in the middle of enemy territory.

“We better stay on our toes.”

“Yes...!”

With nervous expressions, the two tightly gripped their weapons: Ireena’s red spear, and Ginny’s blue rapier. Both were Ard’s magical creations that amplified the girls’ movement abilities. While they’d been informed of their effects, neither had actually used their weapon before. There was a tinge of anxiety

regarding whether they could become shields of protection or arms to fight with.

...It'll be okay. Ard made this. It'll definitely be okay, Ireena told herself, cautiously surveilling her surroundings as they progressed.

Even though she roared internally with fear and anxiety, everything about her appeared calm.

After walking through what they assumed was the space underneath the castle, they came to an open space, where a few pillars occupied the area— Naturally, the center caught their attention.

“Th-that’s...” Ireena pointed to the large levitating jewel before them. Pulsating crimson, it flickered continuously with a strange light and lit up the space around them.

There was no mistake. That was it. Their goal. The host.

“All right...! Let’s do it, Ginny!”

“Right!

Both readied their weapons and aimed to destroy the target with their given powers— Just before they could—

“...Stop,” called out a voice that was familiar in every way except its tone.

In the next moment, magic circles spanned beneath their feet. With no time to be surprised, the situation took a sudden turn; they scrambled to escape, but it was too late.

The cast magic was meant to bind them; liquid steel coiled around them and fixed them in place. They were pitiful prisoners hung on a cross.

“Ngh...! Th...is...!” Ireena struggled to use magic to enhance her mobility...but nothing happened.

“Wh-why...?!” she cried out.

The voice responded, “This binding spell has an effect that seals magic. Anyone caught in it can’t use any spells.”

It was the magic of the girl whose voice they had listened to only shortly

before.

“Wh-why...?!” Ireena stuttered.

In that moment, they heard the soft taps of footsteps, and the person in question appeared before them: a tan girl with expressionless features.

“What’s the meaning of this...?! Latima!”



CHAPTER 54

The Ex-Demon Lord and His Friends in Jeopardy

The spell created projections over long distances, and it mirrored my jeopardized friends. In this desperate situation, I could only stand there stock-still.

Meanwhile, my other self who had caused all this, Disaster Rogue, was up to something.

“This lineup is so nostalgic. I never thought I’d see them again... To think it’d be like this...” His scarred face housed grief, but that was only for a moment.

His face as he turned back to me revealed only the calm composure of a victor.

“I’ll humor you with a boring excuse. If you value the hostages’ lives, come into my army.”

“...If I refuse, what will happen to those two?”

“Nothing. I said this before. This is nothing more than a charade. And...I said I’d give you a push in the right direction. We are in that very situation... I don’t need to say any more for you to understand, right? We are the same person, after all.”

He was exactly right.

Even though Rogue took Ireena and Ginny hostage...he had no intention of harming them. He had feelings for them, too. His attachment to them...went far beyond any goal. He would never do anything to them, even if it meant deviating from his objective.

That was why it was all a farce, just as he said.

Disaster Rogue was trying to give me *an excuse*: My precious friends were in trouble, which was why I had no choice but to obey.

...What a sweet ring this excuse had.

Rogue must have imagined this would happen—that I would talk with Lydia, find out her wish, and respect it above my own atonement.

...I honestly wanted to do no such thing. There was no doubt Rogue had seen through my hesitation.

As a matter of fact...

“I could read your thoughts. And...Lydia’s feelings, too, in a way. I realized that she wished for a cruel end. I was sure her death would be with neither chagrin nor regret. It’d be a satisfying end. But...” Rogue looked heartbroken, fists tightening.

“What about my feelings? I killed my best friend with my own hands. I was the cause. To bear the weight of that sin forever... Isn’t it just too cruel? And besides...who would ever want to grant Lydia’s wish of a cruel death in the first place? No one. Isn’t it natural to wish for her happiness?” he asked, speaking from his heart...and mine.

“I want her to live, even if it means going against her will. As long as she’s alive...she might have a change of heart. And even if she doesn’t...I want to give her a happy life and a peaceful end. I know this might be my ego talking.”

I couldn’t let him say any more. I couldn’t let myself hear any more. At this rate, my resolve would waver. I’d change my mind. I understood this...and stood in place.

“To save Lydia and change the future...I’ll take countless lives. I’ll be the biggest sinner in history. I’ll drive the world to the verge of ruin. If that’s all I have to do to save her, it’s a small cost to pay. What value do the lives of the nameless masses have? ...I don’t feel anything for them. They were the reason why I’d first taken a stand. I’d clenched my fist in the name of saving the whole of humanity. But...what did the masses do to me? What did they give me? The despicable name of *Demon Lord*. They feared me as a monster...and ensnared me in loneliness.”

The words poured out of my other self. His eyes held hatred.

“Lydia’s fate, and the future of humanity. There’s no need to place them on a

scale or compare them... I imagine you agree with me, deep in your heart. There is no need to hesitate. Join me... And if this isn't enough for you to make up your mind, I'll give you another excuse."

Rogue turned his gaze to the mirror.

"As I said before, I have no intention of harming the girls. But I'm only speaking for *myself*. Once Varvatos advances on the castle, I can't guarantee how they will fare."

It was undeniably a threat.

Why had the host holding our astral spirit been put in such an obvious part of the castle? And why had Ireena and Ginny been intentionally led to this vital location? The reason...must have been for this.

"Right now, the outcome of this battle is fifty-fifty, I'd say. But eventually, one will tip the scales in their favor. I have no doubts that Varvatos will be the one to reign superior. When that happens, the next battle will be in the castle walls... Soldiers will surge into the palace. Obviously, they won't spare consideration for anything else. After all, their goal is to destroy the host holding our astral spirit. There's been a chance they'd demolish the castle since the very beginning."

If that happened, the girls in the castle would...!

"Let me say it once more, very simply. If you don't want to lose your friends, join me."

My heart begged me to yield to this sweet temptation. But just before I could give my final answer— There was a change in the situation.



"Why...?! Why are you...?!" shouted Ireena as her delicate features contorted in rage. Her voice was directed at the girl staring calmly before them...Latima.

"...I have only one reason for my conduct: Lady Lydia. I will do anything for her. After all, she is my everything. If it will make her happy...I will gladly dive into the depths of hell."

Her glance tingled their spines—cold and freezing over Ireena's hot

emotions...which sizzled out and turned into confusion.

“For Lady Lydia? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You have no need to know. After all, you are nothing more than tools—means to bring the pawn, Ard Meteor here. Just shut up and serve your purpose.”

Her expression was as blank as ever...but inside, it was clear she was looking down on them. Latima didn’t even see them as enemies worth fighting.

...It was frustrating—incredibly annoying. But expressing their irritation wouldn’t change anything. They could struggle and fight all they wanted, but it wouldn’t change the fact that they had gotten in Ard’s way—instead of helping him. As Latima said, they didn’t know the truth of anything. They could only sit there and be a bother.

No, that’s not true... If I could bring out that power from before...

Ireena recalled something from not too long ago—memories of the school festival, when they’d fought Sylphy, who had been brainwashed. Considering their difference in strength, it should have been no contest. But strangely enough, she’d slowly filled with power...and nearly achieved an unexpected victory. If she could unleash it again, she could break this deadlock.

Ireena wished with all her might—for that power once more...

But nothing happened... All she was doing was wasting time.

Why...?! Why won’t it respond to my call?!

Ireena grew angry with herself—and yet, the power still refused to come...

...Is this all I have? Just as her heart was about to be crushed with resignation...

“Ah. I see. Miss Ireena. I’d always thought chosen people like you were perfect in every way, but it appears that’s not the case. For average people like myself, you leave plenty of opportunities that I can use to my advantage. Thank you for teaching me that.”

Ireena looked directly next to her. Even though Ginny was bound, she somehow had the proud smile of a victor.

“...What are you saying?” Latima asked with a confused look.

However, Ginny ignored her and fixed her eyes only on Ireena.

“Your sensitive psyche is your weakness, Miss Ireena. When faced with the unimaginable, you’re quick to give up, which must be rooted in your impossibly high confidence. Somewhere inside, you’re holding on to your pride. *I can do anything. I’d never get into a pinch.* But when you *are* in a pinch, your brain freezes. You just completely give up. And yet,” Ginny said before stopping, letting her mouth twist into a confident smirk. Even though she was weak, Ginny had one advantage over Ireena.

“I’m not special. That’s why failure is always on my mind—unlike you. Plus, I have no confidence. Which is why, Miss Ireena, I’m not terribly shaken in a pinch. And so, it’s only natural...that this will allow me to break through this situation,” Ginny claimed, though Latima and Ireena looked skeptical.

What is she saying? How could she possibly get out of this? Latima thought.

“What can a mage who can’t use magic possibly—”

“Yes, that’s true. I cannot use magic. But...I wonder about *abnormal magic*?”

Latima continued to flash her confounded looks...but Ireena gasped.

Normal spells used magic techniques, which were constructed with an incantation to cast a flow of magical energy. If that energy was sealed, casting anything became impossible. But...what if there was a way to cast magic that didn’t require a chant?

Many would answer that no such thing existed.

But Ireena and Ginny knew better. Ard Meteor’s friends and pupils had come to an understanding.

“Script Magic...! That’s it, right, Ginny?!”

“Hee-hee, correct.” Ginny chuckled, wiggling her bound fingers and wagging them through the air.

The next moment, a mysterious pattern appeared before her, and—something exploded.

“What *was* that...?!” Staring in awe, Latima broke into a cold sweat.

There was no way for her to know. After all, it was likely a magic technique only Ireena, Ginny, and Ard knew about.

Script Magic. It was the skill that Ard had taught Ginny to give her confidence back when she was being bullied.

By writing cursive runes into empty space, one could construct a simple spell. General magic needed magical energy as a power source, but scripts were cast by combusting the mana in thin air. In other words, it was a technique that didn't require a shred of magical energy.

In the modern day, mana levels had become scant, rendering scripts virtually powerless...but in this current era, where mana levels were at their height, it was a completely different story.

Ginny had used a *Short Flare Bomb*, which broke her chains with a powerful explosion. The leather armor that Ard had given her absorbed the heat that washed over her.

Ireena followed suit. The metallic magic binding got a taste of her explosive blast, and she broke out with flair. Taking cues from Ginny, who had escaped one step ahead of her, Ireena readied her own weapon.

“...Geez, you sure know how to get on my last nerve.”

“I'll take that as a compliment, Miss Ireena. I mean, you didn't think you could do anything, sulking around like that. ♪”

“Hmph! I absolutely loathe you! I hate, hate, hate you! But...that was pretty good. You're the worst and best partner of all time.”

The two stood shoulder to shoulder and stared down the enemy—Latima.

As she took in this new development, the girl hung her head.

“*Haah...*” Latima let out a weak voice before lifting her head to reveal a slight sneer.

“I admit that this turn was unexpected. It's no problem, though.”

What could she mean by that?

Before they had a chance to ask, Latima muttered indifferently, “Everything you’ve done will all be for nothing.”

Then, an instant later, a horde of monsters materialized, cramming inside the open space.

There was no doubt it was summoning magic...but since there was no magic circle, it had to have employed some other sort of technique.

Either way...Ireena and Ginny were back at square one. They had once again fallen into danger.

“I’ve called over one hundred monsters. You wouldn’t stand a chance, even if you were at your peak. Obediently allowing yourself to be bound will be a less painful experience.”

This situation was worthy of despair.

“Hah! And what’s your point?!” Ireena shouted with power.

That was because she didn’t want to show any more weaknesses to her partner—Ginny.

“A hundred monsters, or two hundred! They won’t have anything on me! Bring it!”

“Well, yes, I suppose you have a point. Once we clean up the opening act, you’re next, Miss Latima. Prepare yourself.”

Both had their morale. They planned to do something about this awful mess. They believed they could with all their hearts. The two were of the same mind.

Ireena and Ginny. They normally didn’t get along at all. Their relationship was like oil and water...but at that moment, they wholeheartedly believed, *As long as she has my back, there’s no danger we can’t face.*

“...I see. In that case, there is only one action I must take.” A ruthless cruelty seeped onto Latima’s face. The curtain was about to rise on an overwhelmingly disadvantageous battle— “Ha-ha! Up to no good, huh? Count me in.”

Just when that familiar voice rang through the confines, the wind kicked up, violently whipping around them. It beat against Ireena’s, Ginny’s, and Latima’s skin and sent their hair billowing around their faces. The devastating gust...had

been kicked up by an intruder.

By the time they realized this, most of the monsters had already been cut down. She could not be seen except for a second—the very last second, when she swung her weapon through the air.

“Hey, come on, is that all you got? Call someone with a little bit more bite.” Resting her beloved sword on her shoulder, she gave a victorious hoot.

With more than enough confidence to spare, her brave facade suited her more than anyone else.

Her name was...

“L-Lady Lydia...?!”

“Hey. Relax, guys. You got me here now.”

A steady stance. A swaggering self-confidence. An aura like no other.

They were in the presence of a gale that was the Legendary Champion—

CHAPTER 55

The Ex-Demon Lord's Decision, the Champion's Choice...and a Demon Lord's Sorrow

A head of silvery-white hair.

A build that was a bit taller than average for a woman.

A beautiful face unlike any other.

Those were the markers that represented the Champion Lydia.

"Wh-why is Lady Lydia here...?!" Her eyes wide, Ireena murmured this question as if to herself.

Lydia smirked and looked over at her. "It was the hair ornaments that I gave you. They've got homing spells. That was why I was able to track your location."

"I—I see...! I can't believe you had this much foresight, Lady Lydia...!"

"...What?"

"What?"

Silence. It was quiet for a little while.

Ginny widened her eyes. "It couldn't possibly be that...these accidentally became key to our rescue, right? You didn't give this to us to...*stalk* us, right?"

"O-o-o-of course not, silly! No way that I would d-d-d-d-do something like that! I'm the Champion...! Obviously, I was hit with a premonition that something bad was gonna happen to you guys. Duh!"

And away went that heroic facade. Ireena and Ginny both sighed—and their worries seemed to melt away. Let's just say the Champion made them feel secure, and leave it at that.

...There was someone else opposite to these two.

“L-Lady Lydia...! Why are you...?!”

Latima was trembling from head to toe, but it didn't seem to be with fear. She didn't seem to dread the oncoming punishment for betraying Lydia... There was an unrest that she would lose something. The look on her face made that obvious.

“...Latima,” Lydia called out to the tan girl. There was no anger in her eyes over her subordinate's betrayal.

Instead...it overflowed with motherly affection.

“Give it up.”

That was it—the shortest of phrases.

Neither Ireena nor Ginny could figure out their meaning. However, it seemed to be enough for Latima to understand everything.

“No...! Even if it's you, Lady Lydia...! *Epecially because* it's you...! I will not listen to you!” Tears welled in Latima's eyes. “If it's for you, Lady Lydia, this entire world can all just perish!” More manifested monsters surrounded Latima, gathering around her as if to protect her.

It was an intimidating scene, but Lydia spoke unflinchingly. “...Yeah. I figured you'd *both* get like that. But...” With a somewhat sad expression, she made her declaration. “I'm not backing down, either.”

It was quiet, but forceful.

Everything was resolved in the blink of an eye. With a roaring gale, all the monsters were felled, and even their summoner, Latima, lost her footing.

It was impossible for Ireena's or Ginny's eyes to register what had happened.

This was the power of a Champion.

The pair was filled with respect and awe. And then, before their eyes, Lydia caught Latima's slender body as she fell.

“...You idiot,” Lydia said softly with the tiniest smile on her lips. Her eyes filled with sorrow.

And that was all Lydia could offer to her traitorous subordinate.

“Lady Lydia... I...”

All strength left Latima’s body as if she had breathed her last. Laying her body gently on the floor, Lydia sighed, gazing upon the object floating in the center of the room.

The enormous red jewel. She slowly approached it as it pulsed with a strange light.

“...Honestly. Bastards, every one of you.”

With the red jewel that contained the Demon Lord’s astral spirit right in front of her, Lydia let out another sigh.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t happy. But...it’s fine if that’s my fate. I’ll take it on, whatever it is. I am the Champion, after all. *Pfft.*” She chuckled gently.

Why? To Ireena, her smile seemed unbelievably sad.

Then...Lydia continued on. She seemed to be scolding someone who wasn’t there.

“To protect everyone’s hopes and dreams. To fight to create a world for them to live and laugh in. That’s the purpose of a Champion. But I can never be one of you. My ideals may be lofty, but it doesn’t change the fact that I’m a sinner.”

The only expression on Lydia’s face was pure resolve.

“To make these dreams come true, there must be sacrifices and spilled blood. We’ve even got to kill those who cry out that they don’t wanna die... Then, we shoulder that crime and take on that responsibility, until the day we go to hell... I think that’s the duty of a Champion.”

She lifted the Holy Sword Vald-Galgulus off her shoulder and readied it.

“Before I was *your* friend...I was a Champion. That’s why I’ll live as a Champion and die as one. No one will change my mind.”

And finally, she spat out, “Quit living your life in the past...you big ding-dong!”

With no hesitation left, Lydia swung the Holy Sword with all her strength. The blade of Vald-Galgulus sliced through its target...which splintered into a million pieces.

With this, the Demon Lord was no longer immortal.

With this, the Demon Lord would likely be suppressed.

Surely, many lives would now be saved. Ard, Ireena, and Ginny could return to their own era and enjoy their daily lives again.

And yet... To Ireena, it was a trade that seemed to come at the cost of Lydia's life. Her eyes welled up with tears—



“Why...?! Why...?! WHY?!”

The screams rippled through the air like a shock wave, and the mirror formed by magic shattered, scattering shards in all directions.

“Lydia...!” Rogue screamed, trembling. I called out to my other self and shared his grief.

“It’s over. Your plan—”

“It’s not over!” Rogue snapped as he glared at me. “All she did was steal my immortality! It means nothing more than doing the ceremony again and getting it back! I’ll go ahead and say I lost this war! But I already considered all that! That’s why this isn’t over! You need to join me! Then this matter—”

“But don’t you already know my answer?” I cut him off, letting my words slice through him. “My other self. Do you actually wish to save Lydia?”

“...What was that?” The contemptuous eyes glaring at me flashed with rage. However, I wasn’t able to stop myself. It didn’t matter what happened as long as I could say what I had been thinking for a long, long time.

“Are you sure you...don’t simply want to run away? You killed Lydia. You’ve backed yourself into a corner. Don’t you wish to escape from that guilt? You say you want to save her, but actually...” I knew my statement would cut through me, too. It would cause excruciating pain. But...this wasn’t something that I could ignore any longer.

“Don’t you just want to save yourself—to forgive yourself and die an easy death? Aren’t you only using Lydia to achieve that goal? ...In the end, both of us are completely selfish...and think of only ourselves.”

That was right.

I didn't want to admit it, but that was the truth. I had been egotistical; I had only stood up for the sake of humanity...because I wanted someone to love me. The only impetus was the twisted emotions of a boy who had grown up unloved. It was because I was aware of this...

...that this time. Just this once.

"For the first time in your life, won't you do something for someone else's sake? ...To defend Lydia's wish, we—"

"SHUT UUUP!" he bellowed, loud enough to burst my eardrums.

Rogue grit his teeth, snarling and staring at me with death in his eyes.

"Ah, you're right! I want to forgive myself! I want to be saved! That's the honest truth! But! I won't let you dismiss my feelings for Lydia!"

The next instant, his entire body began to quiver with an intent to kill—unlike no other.

"I'm done with this...! I'm never joining forces with you! I'm gonna consign a hated old enemy to oblivion!"

He was like a small child with his ranting and raving. Pointing out his own faults to make him self-aware had sent him into a flying rage. His pathetic toddler act...was really hard to watch. And the fact that he was me made it that much worse.

To be like him, like my other self, the existence standing before me... I would never allow it.

Then—as we glared at each other, we strangely began to make the exact same moves at the exact same time.

All roads lead to despair.

That is the way of life for a pitiful man.

It was our greatest magic and the ace up our sleeves. We both began the incantation for our *Original* technique.

In complete solitude is he.

For there are those who follow his lead

But none to rule together with him.

As we continued, a whole string of geometric patterns flashed around us...

There is not one who understands.

All are eager to leave his side.

In the center of our glaring contest, I saw this battlefield, where our wills clashed, become distorted.

Cast away by his one and only friend,

He sinks into a sea of madness and isolation.

This battle would only end with one of our deaths. I knew that more than ever, and I reflected on my own intentions again.

Rest without peace.

Drown in anguish and despair.

...I would win. I'd definitely win. I was sure of it.

I grit my teeth.

That which guides this tale.

And I chanted the final verse.

Private Kingdom—the story of a lonely king.

In an instant, she appeared before me and beside him.

Lydia. It was a part of her soul that had taken on the form of bygone days. In that next moment, she transformed into a huge sword for each of us—black blades with the red line carved like a blood vessel...but Rogue's was damaged. Cracks ran down it as if to reflect his way of life.

We both gripped our weapons.

"...Hah!"

With equal spirit, we rushed straight forward. Our strength bore deep troughs into the ground, causing giant clods of earth to fly skyward.

Before they poured back down on us, our first match began.

“Argh!”

“Tch!”

We drew our dark swords, breathing sharply, aiming each blow for the vitals. Each swing was a fatal one. We didn’t use magic.

Well, it would be more accurate to say that we couldn’t use magic.

Our *Original* technique had the power to analyze and control. We deconstructed our enemy’s magic, then took ownership of it. Because of that... any and all magic would be nullified before it was cast, or it would turn back on the caster. Since we both had the same power, our only real battle could be a sword fight dependent on physical skill.

That said, this was no ordinary battle.

“Ngh!”

“Ggh!”

Each time we exchanged blows, the air rumbled from the sheer impact of our blades, and fissures broke through the earth.

We were both known as the Demon Lord. Even if our fight was a physical one, it dealt grave damage to the world.

...This could be anyone’s battle. In that case...

“Lydia. Phase II, Ready.”

UNDERSTOOD.

SWITCHING TO STAGE II OF FULL-BODY TRANSFORMATION.

ACTIVATING BRAVE DEMON.

As she responded, a dark aura settled over my entire body.

...It seemed my enemy had arrived at the same conclusion. Just as I completed my own transformation, he had switched to Stage II.

Pure-white hair. An outfit as black as night. He looked exactly like me. Well, except Rogue’s armor had as sustained as many cuts as his sword and looked

worse for wear.

“Now I’ll...!”

“Take this!”

The previous fight couldn’t even compare. The ringing of our blades echoed loud enough to burst eardrums, and a giant hole gaped in the land we stood on. With supersonic dynamism and approaching the speed of light, we raced across the ground, carving battle scars across the whole of the Ruined Earth.

...We were still evenly matched. This battle would never be resolved through the mastery of our shared skills. The decisive factor in this battle had to be... preparedness.

Which of us had the stronger mental fortitude? How strong was our will in battle? That would decide the victor.

“Aaaagh!”

“Ngh...!”

The equilibrium finally began to break down. The one who fell as the inferior one was—me.

“Gah...!”

Slowly, the tip of his sword had started making contact with my body. At last, he landed a swipe at my cheek, sending a spritz of blood through the air.

As the fresh cut settled on my face, I shouted, “Why did you take your own life?! I know I wouldn’t have! You couldn’t stand the loneliness! Am I wrong?!”

His intensity heightened. On the other hand...I gradually grew more sluggish.

There could only be one reason.

“How dare you?!” he shouted. “How dare you talk to me about escaping?!”

It came down to our hearts—and the difference between them.

He continued. “Was that all Lydia meant to you? Was that why you killed her? So that you could go ahead and be this selfish in another world? Your loneliness was greater than the guilt of murdering Lydia! You were cursed with reaping what you sow, which is why you sought solace in the next life and reincarnated

yourself! Your ego is enough to make me sick!”

I had no argument. After all, he was absolutely right.

“How did you end up serving only yourself?! I don’t get it at all! Did you honestly forget Lydia’s last words?!”

“How could I...ever forget?!”

Our blades met, and we locked swords. As we glared at each other from beyond our weapons, I recalled the past.

...We had been in the final stages of a long war. After repeated sorrows, our goal was just before our eyes: the destruction of the Outer Ones to place human sovereignty back in our own hands.

Honestly, one could have already said it’d been fulfilled by that point. We had taken back control over most of the world...and only one of *them* remained. I was already satisfied.

Well, for certain reasons, you could say I was tired and fed up.

I had lost many friends and fallen into solitude... In the end, Lydia was the only one left. She was my only salvation. When I faced my own circumstances, I’d grown tired...and wanted to avoid fighting. I didn’t want to risk losing Lydia.

The last Outer One was their leader, a being of extraordinary power. If we were to try and defeat it, we had to be prepared to lose about half our army—which would include me and Lydia.

Assuming the worst outcome, I had come to this conclusion: *“There is no need to fight anymore. I will meet their demands, recognize their domain as an independent territory, and allow the remaining demons to form their own nation. Furthermore...we will agree to a cease-fire and form a pact of nonaggression.”*

I was certain that with this, our long war would finally come to an end.

...Lydia had been quick to jump on me about this.

“Quit messing around! If we leave them alone, they’ll just do the same thing again! That’s why we have to prevent it! Now! We should be striking back!”

At the time, the curse was affecting Lydia's body, and she had developed a serious thirst for battle. Anyone who knew her from before would realize she'd never say such a thing...and her new disposition had been another source of my irritation.

"Say all you want, but my mind will not change. Accept it."

Our differences in policy would create a deep fissure between us...if only I had realized it back then. I understood now, but at the time, I had no idea that Lydia was like air to me. Her existence around me was natural, but I couldn't exist without her.

Even though I needed her to live, I couldn't fully understand the blessing that I had. That was why...

"Why don't you get how I feel?! Don't we share the same goal?!" she had asked me.

And then, I had responded to her in the worst possible way.

"How many times?! How many times have I mourned?! How many times have I cursed myself?! If only I had answered Lydia honestly back then! If only I had just told her, I don't want to lose you! None of this would have ever happened!" Rogue exploded, talking from my heart.

Back then, I had selfishly wondered why she couldn't understand my feelings. And I chose not to tell her my true feelings.

"If you want to fight, go ahead. I'm done with you."

That was what I'd said. Those were my last sentences to her when she was still human. Our final exchange had ended in a fight.

"I'll never accept an end like that! I'll save Lydia! And when I finally do, I'll have her sentence me! I'll apologize for my foolishness and pitch straight into hell! Then...Lydia can live happily with Varvatos!"

The fact that he would choose not himself, but a completely alien version of himself in this world...showed me the depth of his self-condemnation—and of his feelings for Lydia. If there was a difference in our mental fortitude, that was it.

All I had was loathing—for myself and those cut from the same cloth. That was all that was fueling me in this fight against my other self.

But he fought with that and his unyielding thoughts for Lydia.

...Meanwhile, I was still hesitating. Was it the correct choice, allowing Lydia to die? That was what hindered me.

After all, wasn't it natural? Even if that was what she wished...I wanted her to be happy.

"Ggh...!"

My hesitation had put me at a disadvantage.

"Ngrah...?!"

And it had brought us to a conclusion.

Of all things, I tripped on the uneven ground and lost my balance. That opening was only for an instant—but it was more than enough to take a life.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!" Rogue came at me with a warrior's yell. The tip of his readied sword aimed right for my chest... In a matter of moments, it would pierce my heart.

...Strangely enough, I had no regrets. In fact, I even felt this was how it should be.

Ireena and Ginny would be sad, but... Rogue was still me. I imagined nothing bad would happen to them. I didn't know if Rogue would achieve his wish after I died...but if he did save Lydia, I'd be glad for it.

My death would come—

It happened just before I fully accepted the brunt of his attack.

"Ack...?!"

The blade halted on the verge of piercing my chest; the dark blade trembled as if trying not move.

What was this? What was going on?

"Gah...!" Rogue looked unnerved; hesitation ran across his scarred features.

“This...! It can’t be...!” When he said that, I opened my eyes.

Was this an illusion?

I saw a form of Lydia standing behind Rogue, pinning his arms back to keep him from moving.

Protect my wish, she seemed to plead with her eyes as she gazed at me. At least, that was what I’d gathered.

“Lydia...! If that’s what you want...!” I grit my teeth and, as emotions welled up inside me...released my sword with all my might.

“Gah?!”

Slicing down from the shoulder, it was an attack meant to cut my target in two. Before it could, he managed to somehow leap backward. But it was moments too late; my blade had gouged his chest.

“Argh...! Stop, Lydia...! Even at a time like this...! You’re going to get in my way...?!”

It was clear to anyone what had caused this role reversal. Up until now, the battle had been one-on-one, but...now, it was two-on-one.

Lydia’s wish must have been dulling his movements. Coupled with the severe wound I gave him, the advantage would turn in my favor in an instant.

“As if I’d lose...! As if I’d accept defeat...! I’ve already vowed...that I would never fail again...! I...I...!”

But Rogue still fought in earnest. The weighty burden of his regret and self-loathing gave him strength—but they didn’t change anything.

“U-ugh...”

Finally, Rogue fell to one knee. My other self was covered entirely in wounds, blood plastered across his dark outfit and staining the ground. I silently stood, ready to take his life and end all this.

“...It’s over, Disaster Rogue. My other self.”

“Do you...really think...it’s fine...for things to stay this way...?” His breath ragged and shoulders heaving, Rogue looked at me. There was fear in his eyes.

But it wasn't fear of death.

It was fear of failure.

And then, he begged for his life.

"Remember...your days together with Lydia... Weren't they...so precious to you...?"

I understood his feelings—empathizing as these feelings were my own.

This man was me. Never one to beg for his life. He'd rather suffer eternal torture. Though his pride distorted him, he had clung desperately to life.

It was all because of Lydia.

...This side to myself made me cry. I couldn't stop the tears from falling.



“This is the only thing...that...I can’t fail... I didn’t understand...my feelings for Lydia...until after I lost her... That’s why I... I wanted to save her... I... I...

“I was in love with her...!”

When I heard those words, my entire body convulsed. My grip on the sword loosened slightly.

“Aah...! AAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!” I let out a mighty cry, letting go of all hesitation.

Under the cloudy sky, I pierced Rogue’s heart in a single breath.

CHAPTER 56

The Ex-Demon Lord's Return to the Present

I could feel that disgusting resistance of cutting through flesh.

This sensation traveled through my hand as the blade pierced Rogue's chest—it was one that told me I had taken a life.

But I was familiar with this feeling. I didn't think much of it...simply staring at myself in front of me.

"Blegh...!" He vomited blood, which streamed from his mouth, and his entire body convulsed. Rogue glared at me.

"You've...committed another sin...! Don't forget...! With this, you've...killed Lydia...with your own hands...once more!"

Saying nothing, I looked at the dying man and grit my teeth.

He was right. I knew I had cemented the future, but I did it anyway: I had sealed Lydia's death with my own hand.

...Because that was her wish.

"Cough." He hacked up pools of blood. At this rate, Rogue's life...

Just as I began this thought—

His body began to dimly shine, before finally beginning to break into particles and disappear.

What's going on...?!

"Ah, it looks like...they want to end this world..." Rogue murmured in understanding as he continued to vanish.

"What do you mean...?!"

"Think about it...for yourself... All...I can say is..."

After a beat, Rogue smiled a little. It was in no way a gentle one. It was one of hatred for me, demonstrating a mad sense of purpose. It was chilling, brimming with repulsive intention.

“It’s not over...! If they expect me...to be the Demon Lord...I’ll boldly play the part...! If I can...seek atonement and find Lydia happiness, then...!” His words faded as if he was the only person who could fully understand them.

At last, Rogue acted like he had suddenly remembered something. The madness in his features eased a little.

“...Don’t let Ireena and Ginny die. Those two are my last hope. You may be my greatest enemy, but...on that point alone, I pray for your success.”

And with these words, he completely disappeared... I was now the only one there.

A number of points concerned me. However, I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I told myself it was all over.

I...noticed the tears in my eyes and looked up at the sky. Before I knew it, the clouds had cleared, and a blue sky spread out before me. At that moment, I loathed that color from the bottom of my heart. As a single tear spilled down my cheek, I spoke to no one in particular.

“Is this really all right...?”



It was a sudden development. It happened shortly after Lydia destroyed the host that held the Demon Lord’s astral spirit.

With no advance warning, Ireena and Ginny began to dimly glow—and, starting with their feet, began to slowly disappear.

“What...?!”

“Th-this is...?!”

Inside, both of them thought the same exact thing.

First, Ard had won.

Second...they were returning to the present.

They looked at each other with soft smiles that were mixed with joy and relief.

Right next to them...

"...You're *going back home*, huh? Well, I guess that's best for you guys."

They widened their eyes at Lydia's statement.

"Huh? L-Lady Lydia, could mean you..."

"Did you know we were from the future?!"

As the two gazed in wonder, Lydia had a wry smile on.

"Well, in a way. I may be an idiot, but I've got sharp intuition. Even this made my imagination run wild... Man, to think I was right. You really got me good." Even Lydia had been a bit shocked. The smile on her beautiful face was indescribable.

After that, Lydia scratched her cheek in a slightly hesitant gesture.

"Hey, can I ask you just one thing? ...How's the future? Is it peaceful? Is it a world where everyone is happy?"

In that moment, the two were at a loss for words. If they were to answer her question honestly...the answer would be no. What she wished for was more than just the smiles of people. She must have wished for a world where people and demons coexisted, holding each other's hands as kin.

However...reality was much crueler. In the future, demons would be more discriminated against than ever, making coexistence impossible, and they themselves would look down on humanity as monkeys. Both groups would keep on fighting until the other was annihilated.

But...it was unfathomable for them to give this terrible an answer.

"The future...is even more wonderful than you can ever imagine, Lady Lydia!"

"Yeah, that's right! We all have fun, and everyone lives happily! I'd say it's a world full of smiles!"

They both lied. It was all they could do. They couldn't possibly tell her the truth.

Lydia smiled, pleased.

“I see... Which means *our* sacrifice wasn’t in vain.”

She didn’t say *everyone’s* sacrifice—or even *my friends’*. She had said “our.”

In other words, it meant...she had sensed her own fate.

“Lady Lydia... Lady Lydia, um...”

“Yeah. I die, too, right? In a terrible way, I bet.” She said it so casually that Ireena and Ginny gazed in wonder.

“It’s fine that way. I said it before, right? I don’t want a cushy death... It’s not anything you two should be worrying about,” she spoke to them kindly. She must have picked up on their anguish.

They had been very confused when they first met this person. She was nothing like the legend. Ireena’s initial impression had been disappointment. Ginny had felt the same way. They didn’t think they could possibly come to like this lascivious monster.

But...as they spent more time with her, they realized that she was cute, and they’d begun to feel this way more and more.

At the same time, they revered her as one of the heroes who had carved her name into legend... Before they knew it, they had both come to respect and adore her.

All to say, they didn’t want her to die. They didn’t want her to suffer a cruel end.

But...what could they possibly do? Lydia’s death was shrouded in mystery. If they didn’t even know the truth, what measures could they take? Besides...even if there was something they could do, Lydia would be against it. She was unmoving in her convictions. They understood that, which was why they wanted to burn Lydia’s image into their mind’s eyes.

I won’t forget this person. That was the only thing they could do.

“...Looks like we’re running out of time. Aww, that’s too bad. I didn’t even get to kiss you, Ginny... And Ireena, I wanted to help you get more practice. Well, not much we can do about that.” Scratching her head, Lydia looked

disappointed as she sighed. “Honestly, I would have liked to give you something with more substance...but I guess I can’t do that. Words it is.”

Lydia first turned her clear eyes to Ireena.

“I bet you’ll experience suffering in your lifetime...but when that happens, relax and look around you. You’ll see what’s most important. And I can say this for certain: You aren’t alone. Don’t forget that, even if it’s the last thing you do.”

“...Right!” Her eyes filled with tears and reluctant to say good-bye, Ireena nodded. Lydia gave her a hug, then turned to Ginny.

“It looks like you peeled back some of your layers during your time here. Even your expression looks a little different from before. You’re really grown, Ginny.”

“It’s all thanks to you, Lady Lydia...! Had you not encouraged me...!”

“I didn’t do much. In the end, it was through your own power... Listen, Ginny. Don’t forget what happened here. A barrier is nothing more than something you decide yourself. If things get painful, get stupid—more than anyone else, you should rush right in. If you do, you’ll go farther than anyone. Nothing is impossible.”

“Yes!” Ginny nodded with tears in her eyes, giving Lydia one last hug.



“Do you think you could pass on a final message for me? I’ve got something I need to tell that guy...Ard.”

There was no reason to deny her.

The two nodded, and Lydia began to speak. They burned each and every word into their memories...and finally, the time came. Ireena and Ginny were disintegrating into particles. Lydia had on a big smile that seemed to bloom until the very end.

“So long, guys. Take care on your way home. Live long without catching a cold. Don’t be picky about your food. And... Ha-ha, what am I—your mother?” She left them these parting words, chuckling innocently.

That was the last Ireena and Ginny saw of her.

They prayed—that at least in this world...even for just her alone...

That she could wear the same tranquil smile as she was now.

They wished for that with all their hearts.



When I came to, everything was over in a flash. It went a little something like this: After our whirlwind time travel, we returned to the place where we started. In other words, a black space.

As darkness stretched out as far as the eye could see, I reunited with Ireena and Ginny.

“AAAH! AAARD! I MISSED YOUUU!”

A lot must have transpired while I was gone. Ireena’s tears streamed down like waterfalls as she came flying into my arms.

“Hey! That’s unfair, Miss Ireena! At least leave me somewhere to hug him... Oh, enough already! Get off him, you single-celled organism!”

“Shut up, dum-dum! Right now, Ard is mine! Go hug that ‘god’ over there or whatever!” Rubbing her cheek against my chest, Ireena pointed sharply.

Standing there was the genderless kid-god, looking at Ginny with the most apathetic expression possible.

“If...you’d like...” Slowly, the god opened both arms wide.

“I’m fine, thank you! I only really want to hug Ard!” she quipped.

“Ah...I see...” Without the slightest bit of concern, the child-god toyed with their hair. “This incident was...completely irregular. It was no less tragic...than usual. For you who put forth this effort...I cannot help but feel...a well of emotions.”

“You certainly don’t look it.”

“With this...the curtain will draw...on our program. But...your stage is not entirely...over. In your own world...I want you...to carry out your roles once more.”

With that, Ireena and Ginny suddenly disappeared.

“...I take that to mean you have sent those two back to our original world?” I asked.

“Yes.” The kid-god gave a small nod, and I asked a new question.

“May I ask why I’ve been left behind?”

“I entrusted you...with a cruel role. On that point...I am very sorry... However, it gave us the chance to talk...for a little longer. If there is something you wish to ask...anything...please do.” The kid-god looked straight at me with another one of those indifferent expressions.

I hounded them with questions. “What are you? From what Disaster Rogue told me, I know that you’re in a group. Verda called you a ‘*higher dimensional being*’ but I don’t know any details. Who are you all, and what are you planning? Also...are you a friend or a foe? That is what I wish for you to answer.”

The kid-god didn’t so much as flinch, answering plainly.

“There is...no name for us...anywhere. If you wish to call us...a ‘higher dimensional being,’ as Verda said...then that is...fine. You may call us...any other name... As for our identity and aim...that...I cannot currently...reveal. To begin with...coming in contact with our cast itself...is already a violation. This time was a unique exception.”

This was why the kid-god could never get to the point.

“So the bottom line is that you have no intention of answering my questions?”

“I suppose...that might be true. However...I wish for you...to believe this alone. At the very least...I am your ally. No matter what happens...even if the gallery tires of watching you...only I will always be your ally. After all, I am...your
◇δ○φs■χ.....I’m forbidden from saying more...which I think...is a little cruel,”
the kid-god mumbled with narrowed eyes.

It didn’t seem like I’d be finding out anything about this being after all, or at least, not here. Didn’t this “god” say I could ask anything? This was getting on my nerves.

That said, childishly stamping my feet wasn’t going to get me anywhere. If this was the way it had to be, I had only one other thought in mind.

“I pray with my dearest heart that we never meet again, Mister God.” I dripped with sarcasm. However, they didn’t act fazed in the slightest and simply nodded.

After that...my turn finally came, it seemed. My consciousness grew dimmer and dimmer. Would I finally return home? I’d have to get through the school trip exhausted.

“Sheesh,” I muttered to myself.

“I am...the same as you. I hope...we don’t meet again. However...the next time...we come face-to-face...”

At the very end, the kid-god said something.

“...that would mean the gallery has abandoned you...and the Dominator—the one who records—will...destroy you.”

...The “god” left me with a few disconcerting words before disappearing. I’d wanted to say something back...but before I could, my consciousness became completely dark.

.....

.....

...I could hear a voice. A familiar one.

“Hey. Hey, Ard Meteor. Wake up, we’re here.”

It was my big sister, Olivia. I could feel my body shake, and I came to.

I slowly opened my eyes...and saw I was inside of a carriage. I slowly began to realize I was back in the real world.

No... What if this was all some sort of silly dream?

Just as I thought this... I suddenly looked right next to me and found that untrue.

“Wakey-wakey! Come on! *Wake up!* Geez, you guys sleep like the dead!” Sylphy was trying to shake Ireena and Ginny awake. They still wore the shining hair ornaments that Lydia had given them.

And there was one more thing.

“Miss Sylphy. May I ask you an impolite question?”

“What?! Can’t you see I’m busy—”

“Are you still continuing your breast-enhancement exercises?”

“Excuse me? Obviously! ...Wait, how did you know about that?!”

It was an insignificant amount. Microscopic, really.

But Sylphy’s chest...seemed just the slightest bit bigger.

“Wh-what?! Quit staring at me, pervert! B-but if you’re saying you wanna see that bad...I can make a special exception...”

“Ah, no. That’s quite all right. I’ve already received confirmation. I’m perfectly satisfied. I’ve never had any interest in your chest. Please be at ease.”

“Excuse *you*?!” Sylphy looked shocked.

...For some reason, I felt like I’d come home.

Finally, Ireena and Ginny came to their senses.

“Let’s get a move on. Hurry up and get out. Everyone else is waiting for us.” Olivia urged us off. We did as she ordered and disembarked from the carriage—to the same place we had only just walked around in.

We stepped into the former royal capital and ancient city...Kingsglave.

"I didn't think we'd be 'coming back' here, too..." I muttered under my breath so no one could hear me.

"Wow, this takes me back! This place hasn't changed one bit! I wonder if my henchman Johnny's shop is still around!"

"Hey, don't run off on your own. Stay together as a group."

Sylphy was frolicking around, and Olivia was scolding her, moving slowly away from us.

"Well then, shall we be going?" I called out to Ireena and Ginny.

They nodded cheerfully...but then suddenly seemed to remember something.

"Oh, that's right. When we parted, Lydia told us to relay a message," said Ireena.

"...A message, huh?"

"Yeah. Um—"

Ireena began to speak. With their outer appearances resembling each other, it was as though Lydia was speaking to me directly. I held back my tears, but it wasn't easy.

"Thanks for everything."

"I guess I should say you should forget about me, but..."

"I'm sorry. I can't do it. If you did, I would be inconsolable."

"So don't forget about me..."

"But don't go living in the past, either. Live your life with your eyes looking ahead."

"Because no matter what happens, no matter what comes your way..."

"We'll always be best friends."

.....

.....Geez, that idiot. How much longer was she planning to stir my heart?

“Heeeeeeey! What’re you guys doing?! You’re gonna get left behind!” screamed Sylphy.

“Okey-doke! We’ll be right there, so wait up!” Ireena called back.

“Our Sylphy is overly cheerful, huh?” Ginny noted.

Ireena and Ginny smiled dryly and went to walk alongside Sylphy and Olivia. As for me... I wanted to reflect on Lydia’s message.

“‘Live your life with your eyes looking ahead,’ huh? That’s so like her.” I broke into a smile.

“You’ve...committed another sin...! Don’t forget...! With this, you’ve...killed Lydia...with your own hands...once more!”

But Disaster Rogue’s curse ran through my mind.

...Yeah, that’s right. I’ve committed another crime.

I’d killed Lydia twice now. It wasn’t anything that could be forgiven. Even if she was ready to make amends, I would never forgive myself.

“Heeeeeeey! Arrrrrrrrrd!”

“We’re leaving!”

But I would continue to live.

I would keep on living in this era, together with my friends—

AFTERWORD

To those coming from the second volume, it's nice to see you again.

To all new readers, it's nice to meet you. I'm Myojin Katou.

Let's get started. Do you like video games?

When I was in junior high, I'd buy a game a week. I fell into the routine of trying real-time attacks and immediately losing interest. But once I entered high school, I grew out of gaming for a variety of reasons. This continued into adulthood, though I've recently rediscovered my love for games.

Speaking of games, there is a problem that I cannot overcome.

That's right: gamer rage.

It's not like I'm an angry person, but when I get wrapped up in a game, it can get ugly... When I was a little kid playing a game about a plumber on a certain console for gamers, I would throw a tantrum when it got too hard. I rammed my little noggin into the screen, and I broke my expensive Game Boy, which obviously landed me a long scolding from my parents... That was one incident.

There are just some habits that you never grow out of. It seems I haven't been able to fix my gamer rage at all. Take this recent incident: Things weren't going as I liked, and it frustrated me, so I ended up throwing down the controller. Because of that, I hurt my fingers. The controller was fine, though. I kind of felt like I'd lost on a number of levels.

...It's time for my words of gratitude.

To my editor: I know that I cause you problems every day, but I ask you not to abandon me.

To my illustrator, Sao Mizuno: Thank you for your high-quality illustrations, even though all you had to work on were really abstract ideas. Professionals are incredible.

Finally, to all my readers holding this book in your hand, you have my eternal gratitude. I pray we'll meet again in Volume 4. Until next time, I'm signing off.

Myojin Katou

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