









Dream of the Evil God





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### The Greatest Demon Lord Is Reborn as a Typical Nobody, Vol. 9

#### Myojin Katou

Translation by Sarah Moon

Cover art by Sao Mizuno

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SHIJOU SAIKYOU NO DAIMAOU, MURABITO A NI TENSEI SURU Vol. 9 JASHIN NO YUME

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## The Ex-Demon Lord and His Stolen Life of Normalcy

Present-day accounts of the Demon Lord Varvatos's life always painted events in elegant splendor. According to the epics, the path walked by the exalted one was ever that of a champion—without a single setback or anguish.

From his first cries as a babe to his last breath, he led an infallible life.

The first time I read that sentence, a cynical laugh escaped my lips.

Everything about it was wrong.

I was not the almighty hero worthy of an epic.

In actuality, I spent my whole life with my back against the wall.

On the surface, I was undefeated. But the truth was that I never had a single victory. When I was the Demon Lord Varvatos, *his* shadow haunted me wherever I went. From my first breath, I was already his target.

That devil's target.

Mephisto Yuu Phegor's target.

As the stories go, the wars for humanity's salvation that spread across the ancient world were ultimately a battle against the Evil Gods, with the Demon Lord and a hero at the center.

However, all of it was actually a game of solitaire played by Mephisto Yuu Phegor.

Clearly, all of us were fools in his eyes. All living beings were puppets, dancing on the palm of his hand. Every decision. Every animosity. Every idea. Every conflict. All were orchestrated by *him*.

Most of the world's negative incidents were his work. The moment we realized this, we found our true purpose: sever the root of all evil and take the

first step toward peace.

We each strove for that purpose. Those of us who were at odds temporarily set aside our differences and forgot our mutual hatred. And those of us who were allies tied our bonds tighter.

Regardless of labels, human and demon, holy and evil, we formed a united front against him.

And we lost.

Then there was nothing left.

To those of us who lived through that era, the phantom known as Mephisto was a nightmare incarnate. And I was not spared that terror.

It's why I'd turned a blind eye. I couldn't face reality.

Knowing that I still couldn't kill him, even after making such tremendous sacrifices, was intolerable.

Knowing *he* still lived was intolerable.

Reality was so inconvenient, so discomforting, that I intentionally forgot it...

Before my eyes, the devil stood.

Taunting me to finally face the music.

A classroom of the Laville National Academy of Magic, a place I knew well, had become a trap pulling me into the worst hell imaginable.

"You bastard... What did you do to them?!"

I couldn't hide my anguish. Were I the sole target of this evil, I could endure it for all eternity. But the evil this monster had wrought made everyone else a target.

Glaring at the devil who stood in front of the lectern, I stealthily shifted my attention to one side. There stood Olivia vel Vine, my big sister at heart. Even with our archnemesis in her sights, her expression was mechanical and smug, as if she didn't have a single worry about the situation.

I glanced around the room. Everyone appeared to be in the same state as Olivia. Ginny, Sylphy, Elrado, Ireena, and all my other classmates, too. They

were like a hive mind of puppets, mechanical and deathly still.

It was as though time had stopped for everyone except for me and Mephisto.

A smile formed on the devil's lips as he weaved the words, "What did I do? To answer your question simply, I used corruption magic. But none of that matters one bit, my dear. The surface-level fact that I turned your friends into dolls is utterly meaningless to me. I want you to see the truth that lies beneath the surface. I want you to know why I did this. I have faith that you, of all people, will understand my true intentions."

His tone was friendly. He wasn't ridiculing me. The way he spoke was how one might address a companion.

Indeed, he didn't perceive me as his enemy. No matter how much I loathed him or how the murder shone in my eyes, Mephisto saw me as his one and only friend.

Nauseated by his incomprehensible thinking, I unconsciously muttered, "How...did it come to this?"

None of what Mephisto said earlier registered in my brain. Frustration and lamentation over the unfathomable reality crowded my mind.

Despite my anguished mental state, Mephisto kept smiling as he answered, "Let me walk you through it step-by-step. Do forgive me, this will take a little while."

Mephisto twirled, his skirt flowing around him as he turned away from me. Then he approached the blackboard, like a teacher about to give a lesson, and said, "Your side sealed me away during the final battles centuries ago. I was unable to take a step outside my prison. The spell seemed to be unbreakable, and I couldn't find a way to breach it and meddle with the outside world. Seriously, it was devastating. I'd never known that emotion before. You gave me an important experience, and I thank you for that."

Mephisto rattled on, the chalk gliding over the blackboard as he spoke. "So, we have the final battle centuries ago, the unbreakable seal, and the inability to meddle with the outside world. Your side believed these rules were absolute. So how were they broken? Let's start our explanation—here."

Mephisto drew an X over The inability to meddle with the outside world. "As you know, I am diligent. I make the impossible possible. I believe that's the joy of living. And that's why I put my all into breaking that seal. Fast-forward about, oh, four hundred years? That's when I was finally able to meddle with the outside world."

Mephisto's tone was casual, but his words were hell to me. He'd been trapped for centuries, unable to move, let alone think clearly from the intense anguish, and yet none of that seemed to have troubled him in the slightest.

A smile formed on his skin-crawlingly beautiful face. "Well, having said that, I was still unable to break the seal. And I owe that to your brilliance, my sweet. You haven't said anything. It's okay, hurl curses at me if you wish. Actually, please do so. I feel lonely, doing all the talking."

No way.

Mephisto sighed. "Aww, you're no fun... Well, anyway, I worked my tail off, and I finally gained the ability to interfere with the outside world. But you see, it didn't thrill me at all. You had to go and reincarnate yourself without a second thought over how I might feel. It's no fun messing with things without you around. Although, I did screw with the world a little now and then. I was terribly bored waiting for you to return."

Mephisto shot me a playful smirk. The innocent boyishness in his unrivaled beauty was truly adorable, on the surface. However, his smile did nothing but make me want to vomit.

"So I killed time for a few centuries. Then you were finally reborn, but I still couldn't break the seal, try as I did. I gave it my best effort, yet nothing seemed to work."

Mephisto shrugged. There was no sign of falsehood in his words, which left me wondering how exactly the seal broke.

Just as this question entered my mind, Mephisto said, "The second reason the seal broke, and the greatest factor of all, if you can believe it...

"...I'm not gonna tell youuuu!"

Mephisto giggled playfully and stuck out his tongue, and I silently clenched

my fists. Finding my reaction comical, the little bastard clutched his stomach and laughed, pointing at me.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You thought I'd tell you? You thought I'd tell you? Tooooo bad! It's a seeeeecret!"

Mephisto cackled, wiping the tears from his eyes and breathing deeply to calm himself. Softly, he added, "If I revealed my secret now, well, it would ruin the fun. I'd be so disappointed if your focus shifted to the seal. I wanna be the center of attention at the start of the game."

His decision not to tell me now likely meant he never would, and I had no hope of forcing an answer from him. And if that was the case...then I'd have to let go of my curiosity about the seal breaking. It wasn't important at this point anyhow.

Mephisto stood before me now. My primary concern should be handling this situation and escaping the struggle to come. That was all that mattered.

"Ohhh. Nice move, honey. Your mastery of priorities was always beautiful." With a satisfied smile, the little bastard hurled a question at me. "Okay, let's get down to business. Have you pinned down the essence of your predicament?"

"...You hurt my friends and turned them into puppets. That's all I care about." I glared at him. The "essence of the predicament" could go to hell.

Mephisto shook his head and replied, "Remember what I told you earlier? It's nothing more than a surface-level fact. Either you haven't realized it, or you're resisting the truth. The latter, I'll wager. Oh well, out of the kindness of my heart, I'll just tell you. The core of it is, this is a refutation of the bonds you and your little friends forged."

He swept his gaze across my classmates. "As you can see, I can control them at will. I can corrupt their personalities and their physical appearances. I can change it all as I please.

"...Would it even be proper to classify such beings as intelligent life-forms like you or me? I don't think so. Beings that change at the whims of their master are no more than machines. That's why I think of everyone besides you as a tool. You alone are a human being like me—that is why you are the sole person I can

have a friendship with. And here's the thing, my darling, you are no different. You can never be friends with anyone besides me. I'm the only one who won't bend to your will. And that's why—"

"I'd rather die than be friends with you."

It was just too unsettling, too sickening, and too infuriating.

My rage burned my fears and frustrations to ash, leaving behind only the desire to eradicate this devil and save my friends.

I didn't care if it was possible or not. I couldn't bear to look at that bastard a moment longer.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! I know I mentioned this before, sweetie, but your right cheek twitches whenever I hit you with a hard truth. Then you lose it. Aah, it's these predictable mannerisms of yours that are so truly—"

I prepared to hurl an Attack spell to shut his damn mouth, but...

"Now, now, calm down. Do you want everyone to die?"

My friends moved in unison.

They rose from their seats and marched toward Mephisto, forming around him like a shield. Among them were Ireena, Ginny, Sylphy, and even Olivia.

"You little bastard!" I gritted my teeth and glared at Mephisto.

He shrugged. "As long as you see them as humans, you'll never beat me. Search your memories of the distant past. Remember the man you once were. The one who had nothing to lose."

The devil spread his arms wide and smirked. It was like he was enticing me. "You were empty—that's why you were ridiculously powerful. But when you gained so many things and established your humanity, you turned weak. Unless you transcend your afflictions, you will never be capable of defeating me."

His words held deep conviction. Mephisto had determined that the very concept of friendship was an illusion, and he demanded that I accept his belief.

I looked at the devil and said, "I was right...you are a pitiful little man, Mephisto Yuu Phegor."

It was subtle, but my quip got to him. His composed smile trembled slightly.

"You and I are made of the same essence. I'll give you that," I said. "On the surface, we're both almighty, but we're hollow. Our strong facades keep everyone from noticing."

The Demon Lord's military forces symbolized this perfectly. Not one of my soldiers loved who I was on the inside. None of them stood beside me. I had followers, not friends. I'd resigned myself to this, and Mephisto surely had as well.

However...

"When I met Lydia, my best friend, my perspective changed. She didn't resign herself to her fate, she kept pushing forward. She was the ideal version of myself."



Lydia surely was one of us. Nobody saw beyond her appearance. Her relationships were mutually exploitative, incapable of anything beyond cold calculation.

Yet she didn't succumb to her fate. She relinquished the burden of loneliness she carried.

"Everyone's empty on the inside at first.

"And it's true—people like us are too great for words, outwardly at least. That's why it's hard to be an even greater person on the inside.

"But you see, when we learn a lot, think a lot, and love a lot,

"When we fill our minds and hearts, in time, our internal greatness and our external greatness will switch places.

"So stop moping around and just be a jackass.

"If you do, I promise things will turn around for you.

"After all, you're my best friend."

My spineless former self had failed to apply Lydia's advice.

But now...

"I've been reborn and met my new best friend... I've learned so much, I've done a lot of thinking, and I've loved so many. I'm sure that people only saw my facade, just like in my past life. But they see me for who I am on the inside now, and they accept me. They call me a friend."

My feelings. My friends' feelings. They couldn't be fabrications.

"You claim that everything I gained made me weaker. Well, you're foolishly mistaken. It's because I gained so much that I—"

"Why don't you put your money where your mouth is?" Mephisto interjected calmly. "Is your claim genuine? Is everything you've gained real or fake? Is the love you share with your friends imagined? Why don't we test that all right now."

The setting around me changed in a flash.

We were in the school quad.

We'd teleported there via magic, but it was surely more than that.

"The field is set. All that remains is to start the game." The smile on the devil's face was deep and pronounced.

It was starting again...this obnoxious game against Mephisto.

I was nervous, scared even. But I wouldn't let him beat me.

Our fates had intertwined in my past life and remained linked for nearly a century. I had the home field advantage, and I knew his moves better than anyone. I would leverage these in my favor and win the battle once a— "Oh yes, I almost forgot. I have a little announcement before we start." Mephisto clapped. And with a smile still on his face, he uttered the last words I expected to hear from him. "This will be my last time playing with you. There will not be another."

"...Sorry, what?"

I couldn't believe the words that came from his mouth.

"I want to play with you for all eternity." That devil had said that on many occasions, and now he was changing his tune?

"One more thing. I'll be playing to win, so get your affairs in order," Mephisto said, completely ignoring my bewilderment. There was a shard of melancholy in his smile.

"All right. Let's get this party started. This will be our farewell game."

### The Ex-Demon Lord and the Final Battle

The sudden admission left me dumbfounded. Mephisto paid that no mind, however. His golden eyes gleamed with a light different from the playful sparkle they'd held before.

"Now, let's go over the rules. They're nothing fancy. Just find my astral bodies I've hidden around campus and destroy them all to win. Doing so will bring me a death from which I can never return.

"However, I've filled the playing field with all sorts of obstacles to stand in your way. I think you can guess what they are.

"If your proclamations are true, then you'll surely win the game. But if it turns out that *I'm* right..." Mephisto trailed off, smirking devilishly.

"I'll keep saying it until you get the message. My bonds with my friends are real."

"Well...I can't wait to see how this ends. Truly." An indistinguishable emotion lived in the devil's voice. Before I could place it, he added, "I'll be in the stands if you need me. I'll be rooting for you, honey."

And with a playful smirk, he disappeared.

An eerie silence settled over the campus.

"...Something feels amiss."

Mephisto had claimed this would be our farewell game, whatever that meant. I couldn't get a read on what sort of truth lurked behind his words. The words farewell game couldn't have been literal. Even if they were, the timing was off. This was too anticlimactic to be our last bout.

I was certain he had some angle, but no amount of pondering led me to an answer. For now, I needed to focus on solving the immediate problem.

First, let's take stock of the playing field. I'm in the vicinity of the secondary school building right now. The school gate is to the south, the main school building is to the east, the field and the Tree of the Sword King are to the west, and the dorms are to the north. On an ordinary day, we'd be in first period right now.

Bathed in sunlight, I muttered, "It doesn't feel like there's been any Jamming..."

Hide-and-seek. That's what the game was, in a nutshell. Detection or concealment magic could be considered against the rules. Such spells would win you the game undetected.

Yet no *Jamming* that would inhibit such magic had been enacted. Perhaps that suggested a trap.

"Well...I can't just stand here all day. I need to make bold moves."

I used detection magic and found that one of Mephisto's astral bodies had been placed by the Tree of the Sword King. If I cast teleportation magic, I could get there instantly. However, there were some obstacles in place to inhibit that.

I made myself invisible with a *Concealment* spell and started walking. I didn't sense anyone around, but after walking for a while, I heard voices. Veering off the path to the Tree of the Sword King, I made my way to the field. The students in the class next door were there. Alvarto, their new teacher, was leading a lesson.

"...You'll all advance when everyone can cast elementary-level spells without chanting. This is both an assignment and an order."

"B-but sir, that's just too hard."

"Oh? Do you have a complaint about my methods?"

"Eep! S-s-s-sorry, sir!"

With a languid frown on his face, Alvarto looked at his cowering students and said, "That's why you fail...because you believe you can't do it. I'm surrounded by cowards." He faced his students as his true self now, having abandoned the mask of insanity he used to wear. It was both a mark of sincerity and a symbol

of his commitment.

During the last conflict, Alvarto had severed the chains of the past that once bound him. He spoke with his actions, demonstrating that he would live the rest of his life with optimism. And as I reflected on his history and his current state...

"Information is meaningless when it can be so easily changed."

...the devil's voice echoed in my brain.

One of the girls looked at me. It was Veronica, the daughter of a duke and one of the friends I'd made during my days at school. The next instant, her eyes shot open...and she screamed softly.

"Eep...!" The voice that squeaked out of her pinched throat teemed with terror.

The moment I heard the cry, I realized what a fool I'd been. No one should have been able to see me beneath my concealment magic. However, that notion had been mistaken.

Mephisto's objective with this game was to break my spirit. Thus, the act of finding his astral bodies and any ingenuity to accomplish that was the height of futility.

No matter what actions you take. No matter your mental state. I will defy everything and shatter your spirit.

That's why he didn't bother inhibiting my concealment magic. He wanted to make that message clear, and now he was rubbing it in my face.

"You monster!" Veronica exclaimed. She saw me...but she didn't see me.

And it wasn't limited to Veronica. The other students and Alvarto followed her lead and stared at me with the same look in their eyes—contempt, disgust, fright, and bloodlust. Their gazes held a mixture of all the worst feelings.

And just like that, I found myself in a nightmare.

"Die," Veronia spat.

Everyone hurled spells at me. Hellfire. Lightning. Wind Blade. Boulder.

A swarm of violent elemental attacks came crashing down. And each was

beyond what its caster should have been capable of.

"I know I was like, 'Waaaah, I can't cast without chantinnnng,' but that was a lie."

"See, I enhanced all these kiddos' powers to the level of warriors of the old world."

"You'd better fight back or you'll die, buddy."

I blocked their lethal attacks with a magic wall, cursing under my breath. There would've been no problem if these people were enemies. Even reborn as a weak nobody, I knew I could hold my own against a platoon of warriors of the old world.

However...

The people charging at me with murder in their eyes weren't enemies. Some were friends, others could be friends someday. Each of them was a precious classmate of mine.

There was no way I could fight back. I couldn't choose to hurt them.

"Remember what you said, sweetie?

"'My bonds with my friends are real'—was it?

"That the relationships you nurtured would never disappear, no matter what happened?

"Well, here's your chance to prove you're right, honey.

"Show me. Show me that friendship can make miracles."

I quipped back at the devil in my mind, *Oh, I'll show you, whether you asked for it or not.* Then I said aloud, "Friends! Stop this madness! I'm not—"

My words were drowned out by more magic and shouts.

"Drop dead!"

"Die, you monster!"

"Go away!"

Their words oozed hate. Disgust colored their gazes. No human being

deserved such treatment. In their eyes, I was surely a hideous phantom right now.

That devil is controlling their minds.

"Oh, no, my dear, you've got it all wrong.

"I'm not controlling them. I corrupted them.

"The concepts are similar, but different.

"The words they're screaming didn't come from me.

"Right now, they all loathe you in earnest. They sincerely hate you.

"Now, then...can you say with confidence that they're the same people you called friends?"

All I could do was grit my teeth in response. Accepting that these weren't the same people I called my friends would affirm that bastard's belief—that all living things were malleable, therefore, anyone might as well not exist.

Thus, the only answer I could give him was that these people were my friends.

"My friends, please listen..."

My words won't reach them.

My feelings won't reach them.

My only recourse was to block their enhanced attacks with my conjured wall.

"Why don't you try cancellation magic? An Original might be just the ticket."

Mephisto twisted the knife.

No matter what spell I tried on them, I couldn't cancel the spell already ensorcelling them. There was a wide chasm in ability between my current incarnation and the Evil God I was up against.

But even if I had my full powers... Even if I were able to restore them with magic...

"Ohhh, nice. I love it when you get smart, my darling.

"And you're absolutely right. This isn't a battle of strength.

"It's a battle of wits.

"Are we the only ones that are real? Is everyone else a lie?

"Can you prove that the concept of bonds exists, that you made them real through the relationships you nurtured?

"That would be nothing short of a miracle.

"If you were to neutralize everyone's attacks without cancellation magic...

"Bringing that about against everyone you know would seal your victory at last.

"Which is why you must understand.

"Up until now, I've gone easy on you. I granted your side an advantage.

"But not this time.

"This time, I have the overwhelming edge, sweetheart."

The attacks intensified.

Everyone's bloodlust started to crack my wall.

There was no better representation of what my heart felt like.

"Nnf!" All I could do was groan, and that infuriated me.

"Begone forever!" With an icy whisper, ebony flames shot at me. The magic had come from Alvarto. Anyone hit by his curse would have the very concept of their existence extinguished. There were no exceptions. Even I would vanish instantly.

Instead of shielding myself, I chose to retreat.

I kicked off the ground and flew into the air. In the split second that followed, the ebony flames swallowed my shield, eradicating it in the blink of an eye.

"Professor Alvarto! Kill that monster at once!"

"He's so repulsive...I can't stand the sight of him!"

Disgust and malice. The students leveled a unified, contemptuous glare at me.

"I'm just getting started, Ard Meteor." Alvarto hurled another attack—a lethal

spell that came from every direction.

I dodged it only by a hair. "Alvarto! Open your eyes!"

"I will not negotiate with an enemy." The bloodlust in his expression was icecold to the core. It chilled my sweat. Such was the intensity of the darkness in his mind.

However, his movements were sloppy.

Alvarto's ebony flame attacks were short and monotonous. They struck me as quite unnatural. If he truly wished to destroy me, he would have used his trump card immediately. Had he still worn the mask of a berserker, I would've understood, but this was different. He'd never drag out the fight like this...

It's hard to believe, but this might mean he's...

"Alvarto, are you actually—?"

But before I could finish my question, the wind died down. I flipped and leaped sideways. A blade cleaved through the air where I'd stood not a blink earlier.

I knew my attacker without seeing them. The sliced wind announced my new challenger's identity.

"Olivia..."

My surrogate big sister pointed her sword at me. Her piercing stare was just as sharp. Her eyes, her expression, they tore my heart to shreds.

"Olivia...don't you recognize me? It's Ard. It's me."

I couldn't maintain the persona of Ard Meteor. I cast it aside and beseeched Olivia as her brother. Surely, she would understand and remember.

Our bond went deeper than—

"If I had to make a guess, if she really cared for you, I doubt you would've felt so alone in your past life."

While those negative words sounded in my brain, Olivia's sword flashed. It was too fast for my eyes to register. Only by good fortune did I manage to dodge. Still, her blade managed to graze my cheek, carving searing pain into it.

Blood flowed freely from the wound.

"Oli...via..."

She offered no response to my bewildered anguish. Her stance was unmistakably hostile.

"This so-called sibling bond of yours is a fallacy."

I knew I ought to refute the devil's taunts, but my body could only retreat.

I had no idea why I was running. I didn't want to know why. Facing the fact that I'd considered resignation was too much.

"Think! There has to be a way out!" I said, trying to calm my wavering heart.

My mind raced along with my legs. The concept of struggling against another didn't exist in Mephisto Yuu Phegor's mind. To him, other beings were nothing more than tools to be manipulated, so everything was one-sided. Since he didn't embrace the concept of fighting, he likely wasn't all that particular about winning.

To preserve that mentality, he undoubtedly had a contingency plan readied. That way, even if conditions were bleak, there would be a clear way out.

"Nope, sorry. There's no Plan B this time."

The voice in my head was cruelly sincere. So sincere that I was left with no other choice.

"Remember what I said? This is the end.

"When I called this our 'farewell game,' I wasn't joking. This isn't one of my usual whims or fancies.

"I intend to fully enjoy myself, of course.

"And this game will end with my victory, darling."

The grimness in his words was genuine. He really did intend to destroy me. As if to drive the point home...

"Augh!"

...a bolt of lightning flew at me from the side. It was a perfect surprise attack.

Had I been in my right mind, I could've dodged it.

Unfortunately, I didn't have a prayer in my current state.

The damage sank into my entire body. My internal organs burned, my extremities went numb, and I collapsed. If only this were physical damage, I could heal it with magic.

I was powerless against psychological damage, though.

"Elrado...please...!"

A boy stood alone in the school courtyard—Elrado Spencer. He was one of my few male friends, and he was glaring at me. His hostile stance and piercing gaze were a dagger in my heart. Unfortunately, he and Mephisto didn't give a damn about my feelings.

"A divine child, huh?

"He was buried in praise all his life.

"Considering the levels of strength found in this era, you could've definitely called him a prodigy.

"But in your eyes, he was nothing more than an average guy.

"That's why the fight between you two was horrendously lopsided in your favor.

"But now, he has the power a divine child deserves.

"So, how about a grudge match?"

At the devil's command, Elrado's puppeteered legs launched him forward. "Giga Flare—"

His right hand shot forward, forming a crimson magic circle. A chill ran down my spine. The next thing I knew, I'd jumped backward.

Giga Flare was a high-level fire magic attack, Elrado's favored one during our last showdown. Back then, his Giga Flare was merely a weak echo of its former glory. But now...

"Your spell is a disgrace to the one who invented it. Let me show you what a true Giga Flare is."

The scene formed to life in my mind.

Elrado's *Giga Flare* back then had been fake, but this was the genuine article. The giant pillars of fire reaching to the heavens were unmistakably formed of a perfect *Giga Flare*.

"I've got more...," Elrado muttered, spreading his arms wide. Countless magic circles materialized around him.

It was a multicast, a feat lost to the modern era, but to this corrupted version of Elrado, it was nothing more than a comically simple party trick.

"Go forth."

He unleashed the spell, a now massive *Mega Flare*. Countless giant orbs of fire sped toward me.

"Elrado...!" I cried as I blocked and dodged the attacks. "Please, Elrado! Remember who you really are!"

My relationship with Elrado was complicated. Our first impressions were downright rotten. I'd dueled him to stop him from bullying Ginny. It had been a completely one-sided fight.

And when I saw the sheer terror in Elrado's eyes that day, I knew in my heart that we could never be friends. I thought his fear of my strength had dashed all chance of that, but I'd misunderstood.

"I don't care how he's changed you! I know you're still in there somewhere! Remember what happened at the Megatholium! Remember how you and the others came to rescue me!"

I'd fallen into a trap set by Lizer, a former subordinate of mine. I'd been in real danger, and my friends had rescued me. And Elrado was among them.

"I thought there was no way you'd come to my aid. Remember what you told me? You said you wanted to be friends! Do you have any idea how wonderful that was to hear?!"

Elrado had helped me realize something. The crushing solitude of my past life was not the result of my overwhelming might. It was because I'd kept my heart locked tight. I'd never earnestly opened up to anyone else.



Had I only tried, made an effort to be understood, talked to and listened to others...

...I could have been friends with anyone.

Being reborn in a new era taught me so many lessons. The one I learned from Elrado was unique.

And that's why...

"Elrado Spencer, please come back to me! Don't let that devil win! You're better than tha—!"

In the middle of my heartfelt plea, I sensed a presence striking from the side. I unconsciously moved to counter. It wasn't a conscious decision. Had I only known, had I seen who it was, I would've stopped myself.

Hurting my best friend was unthinkable, even if it was to defend against a sneak attack.

It just happened too quickly.

That's why I couldn't believe it.

The sight before me was unreal. I didn't want to accept it.

No. Not this. I won't let this...

"I won't let this happen.' I'll bet that's what you're going to say.

"But it is happening, my dear.

"You hurt her with wind magic. You struck her when she sneak-attacked you.

"How wretched you must feel. Just look, you've nearly dismembered her.

"Awww, you poor thing.

"You really are a poor little dear—sweet Ireena."

That devil's voice. That devil's thoughts. They bound me as I tried to escape.

I couldn't look away from the girl splayed on the ground.

"Iree...na?" I called to her, but she didn't budge.

I'd slashed her all over with Wind Blades. Blood ran freely from the wounds.

And as I saw her, on the ground, in a pool of blood...

"Wow, déjà vu! Reminds me of that day.

"It really looks just like that time you murdered my Lydia."

...I had a flashback to the day I killed my best friend.

Did I kill again?

Did I kill my best friend while she was possessed by the devil?

My mind went blank.

I couldn't think anymore.

My body wouldn't run.

Honestly, I lacked the will to move.

Elrado's fire magic came racing for me. I took the entirety of the massive pillar of flame.

The blunt force of the impact ripped through me, filling me with searing agony.

When my senses returned, I was on the ground. My uniform and skin were burnt, and tremendous pain coursed through me.

But I didn't care.

I wasn't able to care.

"I killed...Ireena... I..."

It was a surreal sensation.

A part of me screamed at myself to do something, urging me to stand and deal with this. However, I could only do the opposite.

"No. This can't be... It's impossible..."

I lay there impotently, muttering to myself.

I was a broken shell of a person.

"Awww, you always were a fragile boy, my love.

"You really never grow up.

```
"Where did all that fight you had before go?"
  Not even that devil's words stirred any feeling in me.
  "C'mon, stand up.
  "Hey, I hope you aren't trying to end things here.
  "Stand up and fight me.
  "C'mon.
  "Hello?
  "……
  "...Oh no, did you actually give up?
  "Please.
  "You're pulling my leg, right?
  "Aren't you gonna show me the power of friendship? Didn't you mean to
prove how wrong I am?
  "C'mon.
  "Please, say something.
  "Say something.
  "……"
  ""
  "...Okay. I'll leave you alone."
 His voice was beyond icy.
 It was filled with loss and despair.
 I didn't care, though.
 Mephisto was right, my heart was broken.
 I'd been in such high spirits and convinced myself that I had to win at any
cost.
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However, I didn't have the will to go on anymore.

I can't beat this devil.

Resisting him is pointless.

I don't want to be hurt.

I don't want to hurt anyone.

"I can tell you're terribly devastated right now, honey.

"This isn't how I wanted things to end.

"Because you're my—No.

"There's no point in talking anymore..."

The devil had given up on me. He was all but telling me to go away.

Elrado came charging at me to deliver the final blow.

Still, I didn't move.

After I die, he's going to erase everything and everyone... It wouldn't be so bad if they all vanished peacefully. You might even call it good.

"Farewell, my first and final—" Elrado spoke the devil's words, but never finished.

"No..."

My heart, subjugated by defeat.

My soul, welcoming oblivion.

From deep within the grim resignation came a voice.

"...reak...you..."

It built to a rallying cry.

"Don't you dare let him break you!"

Scorching words. Violent emotions.

I knew that voice.

"Lydia...," I managed through the delirium.

Tremendous energy burst within me. And then it manifested.

The devil tensed. I felt his agitation through Elrado's body.

Lydia stood before me like a shield, but only for an instant.

She vanished like a mirage in a blink.

Someone quickly arrived to replace her, though.

"Ya oughtta be ashamed of yourself, Ard Meteor."

The wind picked up as the newcomer spoke.

I felt like I was floating.

It took a moment for me to realize what had happened.

Mephisto was surely just as stunned as I was. Perhaps that's why he didn't move.

The intruder had appeared out of nowhere.

I was huddled in her arms, feeling the air currents caress my skin.

And as we moved through the deep blue sky, I called her name.

"Elzard...is that you?"

## **CHAPTER 106**

## The Ex-Demon Lord and the Unexpected Ally

Her voice rumbled, splitting the atmosphere.

She pierced through the great blue sky, moving in a straight line.

Flying farther...farther away.

Away from that devil and the academy.

It brought me no comfort, though.

A massive question dominated my thoughts.

"How?" I asked, looking up at her as she flew with me in her arms.

No answer.

Elzard only cursed under her breath.

"How did you...?"

She received my second question with silence.

Her ivory beauty seethed with irritation.

I...I don't understand.

I can't get a read on her at all.

"Did you take me away...so that you could deliver the final blow yourself?"

At my third question, she snorted. "Did the shock of losing your friends rot your brain or somethin'? Nah, scratch that, you were a dumbass to begin with."

I would've been dead already if she'd meant to kill me, that's what she implied. Unfortunately, that only succeeded in confusing me more. We weren't allies by any stretch of the imagination. If anything, we were enemies.

"I thought you hated me. You do hate me, don't you, Elzard?"

Memories came to mind while I stared at her profile. Elzard, the Frenzied King of Dragons, was one of the most powerful opponents we'd faced.

I'd faced her twice in the past. The first time was in the spring of this year. She'd disguised herself as Jessica, a daughter of the nobility, to get close to us and kidnap Ireena.

Our second fight had been only yesterday. She'd joined Alvarto's scheme and gotten clobbered by Ireena for it.

No matter how you looked at it, you couldn't call our relationship a friendly one. If anything, Elzard hated me. Why had she come to my rescue?

An overpowering sense of wrongness and confusion overwrote the despair that had consumed me only a minute ago. Elzard seemingly picked up on my emotional state but was content to say nothing and continue flying.

"This oughtta be far enough," she said, taking an abrupt plunge.

She landed on a deserted field and flung me to the ground. I hit the dirt hard and rolled.

Elzard peered down at me. "Don't misunderstand. I didn't rescue you." Her lips were drawn into a straight line. Her beautiful face betrayed disgust. "Don't flatter yourself, dumbass. I don't care about you anymore."

"... Then why are you doing this?"

Elzard fell silent again, but she wasn't reactionless. She sighed, blushed, looked up at the sky, and scratched her silvery-white hair.

Finally, she answered. "Has your little friend ever broken a promise to you?"

"My...little friend?"

"Y'know...that little friend who's always with you."

"There's lots of people who fit that description. You'll have to be more specific as to who you're—"

"Ireena, you dolt! I'm asking, does that silver-haired airhead keep her promises?! Get a clue, you insensitive moron!"

I didn't know how, but I'd made Elzard angry. Her face was red, and her

shoulders trembled with rage. Her behavior confused me, but I answered her anyway.

"Ireena has never broken a promise—not once. She is the sincerest person I know. She would never fail to keep an oath. That's why everyone loves her."

"......Hmmmmmmmm."

Elzard's reaction was the height of indifference...but her lips were curled in a faint smirk. It was almost as if she were...

"Do you, um, want something from Ireena?" I asked.

"...Huhhh? What's your deal? I'd never want to be friends with a lower lifeform."

"Er, that wasn't what I asked."

Silence.

"Elzard, if I didn't know better, I'd think you were—"

"Don't ask me leading questions, you slimy bastard!!!"

Her face flushed harder, and she hurled lightning at me. I dodged her attacks and asked, "Are you trying to rescue her? Ireena, that is."

"Shut up, you moron! Stop asking questions, blockhead! Drop dead, shit-for-brains!"

Her defensive retorts were answer enough. Elzard had rescued me for Ireena's sake.

"Wow... Never thought I'd see you change so dramatically."

Upon closer inspection, there was something different about Elzard's eyes, a lack of hatred. The anger she expressed for everyone but herself was gone. That must have been Ireena's doing. She'd chased away the darkness in Alvarto's heart and had evidently done the same for Elzard.

"My best friend really is amazing." I smiled as I dodged the torrent of lightning bolts.

Upon hearing this, Elzard stopped her attacks. "Hmph... Sounds like you've finally calmed down a little. That being said—"

She was cut off mid-sentence by another voice.

"Oh, it's so true. No matter what your mental state, reality doesn't change."

The devil's words echoed all around us. Elzard frowned, and I cowered.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

"What a rare treat! I don't usually see you in that position!

"It's thrilling, yet so vexing, my darling." He sighed and seethed. I held my silence.

The budding peacefulness I'd enjoyed with Elzard withered and died. Remembering the reality I'd fled, my psyche crumbled.

"Shit, pull yourself together, Ard Meteor," Elzard spat.

"You can say that again!" the devil said.

"You lack presence, but you do seem to be self-aware.

"Let's seeeee. Elfart, was it?"

His playful quip riled her up instantly. "It's Elzard. Don't ever mess it up again, you little shit."

"Ohhh, okay, I got'cha. El-shart it is. Your wish is my command."

That was probably Mephisto's way of picking a fight. Veins popped on Elzard's forehead, but the devil didn't seem bothered in the slightest.

"Your intrusion was completely outside my calculations.

"I never even considered aid might come from outside the campus.

"It's quite intriguing, truly.

"Cards on the table, I've known about you for some time.

"But only as an unremarkable villain, so I didn't pay much attention.

"You can imagine my surprise when you threw a wrench in my plans."

Mephisto's voice brimmed with vigor, as if the setback at the academy had never happened.

Then he declared that the game would resume.

"Okay, honey, I'm giving you another chance.

"Let's take back what happened at the school.

"We can begin a new farewell game here and now.

"The rules are simple.

"Either you extinguish me, or I snuff you out.

"That's it.

"No curveballs.

"Let's have a simple contest of strength to determine the winner."

His words only brought me despair. In my reincarnated form, I possessed an average level of magic, by old-world standards. The experiences from my past life and my *Original* powers did raise my base level, but not enough.

There was no way that I, a typical nobody, stood a chance against an Evil God.

Mephisto was well aware of my dampened morale, but he ignored it and continued his speech.

"I shall await you at the academy.

"Attack me at your leisure.

"Just remember...I am a creature of chaos.

"So be a dear and don't blame me if your school is in cinders when you arrive."

The brazen threat made my blood boil with rage. However, it wasn't enough to shake my broken heart to action.

"Okay! Let's check our game pieces.

"I'll let you keep that El-emenopee girl.

"I could easily make her mine if I wanted to, but that would give me an unfair advantage.

"The game really is a drag when it's clear who's going to win.

"So I'm going to give you a chance, albeit a small one.

"Then again... There's no guarantee you'll be able to seize it in your current

state."

After making it clear that there was a vast chasm of despair and only a faint glimmer of hope, the devil said, "Well, let's get this game started."

It was a rather subdued start to a battle, but not a moment after, I was beset upon from all sides by intense, murderous beams. It felt like all of creation had become my enemy.

No, it didn't feel like. It was. That was the harsh truth.

"GREEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!"

The scream resembled the squawk of a great mythical bird. Elzard and I stood back-to-back, both our gazes directed overhead.

"How did they get here so fast...?"

"It's like a murder of crows...except these guys are actually murderous."

The sky was not the same blue it was a minute ago. It had turned a greenish-black from the giant flock of wyverns approaching. Their ridiculous numbers completely blacked out the sky. With another mighty roar, a second mass of them flooded the sky.

Meanwhile...

**"**GНҮАННННННННННННН!!!"

...an enormous worm burst its head through the dirt with a terrifying roar that shook the earth.

As the two forces assaulted us from the heavens and earth, their war cries sent shivers of icy terror down our spines. The curtain rose on a ferocious battle.

"GREE-YAAAAAAAAA!!!"

"GRAAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

The giant wyverns and worms roared at each other, then attacked us in tandem. From the sky came slashing talons and a torrent of fireballs. From the earth came the digestive juices dripping from the giant worms' jaws.

A normal person wouldn't last three seconds against this onslaught, yet Elzard

maintained her composure.

"Hah! Don't get cocky, ya little pests!"

A blinding flash burst forth, swallowing everything. It was an agglomeration of destructive light beams. As it expanded in all directions, it wiped every wyvern and worm out of existence. Elzard took no pride in this. She was like an elephant trampling ants as she wiped out the massive army before us. I should've expected as much from a creature who was the stuff of legends.

Meanwhile, I was losing focus.

"Hnnff...!"

I feel heavy. I can't move the way I want.

I know what I'm up against, I know Mephisto enhanced those monsters' powers.

But this battle shouldn't be this difficult.

"Tsk!"

I kicked off the ground and jumped around the giant worm maw headed my way, then I cast a spell in midair. A beam of scorching heat shot out, burning all the enemies to ash.

That was a close call...

My reaction time had slowed by half.

Whether because of my weakened concentration or magic distortions, I couldn't cast as I intended, and my spells were weakened. I was in very bad shape.

"Um...Ardy-boy? Is everything okay? Got an upset stomach?"

Elzard's attempt at a morale boost did nothing for me. My mind was a turbulent sea. I was not in any sort of mental condition to be in a battle.

I simply couldn't manifest the will to fight.

Even if I escaped my current predicament, what would I do when the next one struck? And the one after that? And the one after that?

A future where I won seemed impossible.

In my past life, I'd joined that devil in his sick little games many times. And I never lost once. However, I didn't win any of those battles, either. You could even call them psychological losses.

Mephisto didn't care about results. As long as he had fun, it was as good as a victory. And that was exactly why I'd been able to keep beating him, at least on a superficial level...

But this time, that devil wasn't pulling any punches.

He had me utterly cornered, and he was playing to win.

Try as I did, I couldn't find the impetus to stand and face him.

And what's the use? Even if I did fight him, I'd merely be playing into his hands. And when the dust settled...I might discover I'd hurt my friends again.

Images from the earlier scene looped in my mind. Ireena, wounded and splayed on the ground. She sank into a sea of blood, motionless.

"Never again...," I muttered weakly.

"GHYAHHHHHHHHHH!!!" The giant worms roared behind me.

They were close. By the time I turned around, it was already too late. One worm's open jaw was already inches from my face. I couldn't escape.

I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing myself for the pain.

Then I felt a gust of wind from the side, and I was suddenly floating. When my feet touched the ground, I realized Elzard had come to my rescue.

"No!" I opened my eyes just in time to see the worm catch her, swallowing her slight frame whole. "Elzard! No!"

I have to save her.

The thought consumed me, but before I could move, sparkling beams of light exploded from the giant worm's body. Elzard had attacked from inside the enemy. After a moment's pause, the worm's giant body shattered into pieces.

"You filthy parasite."

Elzard was free and unwounded. Her white skin and hair were soiled with the creature's fluids, and her dress was in tatters, but she wasn't even slightly damaged. If anything, it was the opposite. The giant worm's attack had energized the Frenzied King of Dragons.

"Get lost, shit bugs."

A tremendous rage smoldered in her golden eyes. A second later, a brilliant radiance shot from her, so intense it was all I could see.

The next thing I knew, every poor fool who'd come into contact with the dragon's wrath had been erased.

After reducing the army of monsters to nothing in the blink of an eye, Elzard muttered, "I had to use my full power against peons...what an embarrassment."

She cast me a look. I hung my head, unable to answer her hard gaze. I felt a sting on my cheek, and the next thing I knew, I was flying.

"You're pathetic, Ard Meteor." Elzard looked down at me as I rolled on the ground. "Stop wallowing in self-pity, you dumbass."

With a sigh, she brushed her white hair from her face.

"As you know...I lost to Ireena. The rage was unbearable, let me tell you. The little speech she gave me was all-around unpleasant...especially what she said after the fight was over. That really made me wanna kill her. Do you have any idea what she said to me?"

Elzard waited, but I had no answer for her. With acid in her tone, Elzard answered her own question. "She had the gall to say that she wanted to be friends."

For just a moment, I saw a glimmer of a smile on Elzard's lips. I was sure I wasn't imagining it.

"I thought, Wow, what a stupid bitch. I'm her enemy. I hurt her and her friends. Yet she offered me empathy. She really, really pissed me off...but that's why I decided I could trust her."



Elzard heaved a long, loud sigh. Then she looked right into my eyes and said, "Mephisto Yuu Phegor—I've known of that name for a long time. Neither you nor he were around when I was born, though, so I had no clue what he was like. Had we been born in the same era, I'm sure he would've killed me. The moment I saw Mephisto, that much was clear."

Despite her words, there wasn't a trace of weakness or defeat in Elzard's eyes. Even now, after learning what Mephisto was capable of, she was still ready to fight him.

"How...?" I croaked. "How can you be so—?"

"How can you be so pathetic? Why do you let his words get to you like that? Remember what you told me once? 'Don't insult my friends,' you said. Well, right back at ya. You shouldn't care what anyone else says or does, as long as the bonds in your heart are genuine. Can you seriously not understand something that simple? You moron!"

Emotions burned in her golden eyes. Our relationship couldn't be described as friendly, and that's precisely how I knew she was being sincere. She didn't pull punches or coddle me, and she had no shame. Elzard beat her feelings into me.

"Truth is, I envied you. I was jealous, with all my heart. I was jealous of how you looked together. Of how you acted together. I'm a monster, just like she is. So why was I the only one left out?

"Ard Meteor, you have something I've been searching for all my life... something I was never able to attain.

"Something far prettier, brighter, and more precious than anything.

"I knew it was something I could never defy.

"It was something I should never let anyone else defy.

"Yet you clumsily let your heart break and quit without a fight.

"You're an idiot, the lord of idiots. You're a stupid piece of shit.

"Let me tell ya something, I can still see all your friends in a circle around you. But I guess you can't.

"Seriously, could you be any more pathetic, clumsy, or stupid?"

Elzard's words were cruel. They beat me to the ground. Yet they were oddly inspiring. She was trying to get me on my feet again. Her fiery words burned my broken heart...dyeing it the color of fire. With a budding vitality in my chest, I tossed a question back at Elzard.

"Do you seriously think either of us stands a chance against that devil?"

"Yeah. It's possible...if we team up, that is." She muttered the last part of the sentence shyly, with her eyes turned away from me, but there was confidence in her reply, too. "I can't do it alone. And you can't, either. To be honest, I hate the idea... I hate it with every fiber of my being. But if we work together, we can beat him. I wouldn't have saved your ass if I didn't think so. 'Cause I seriously loathe you."

Elzard fixed me in her gaze and offered me a hand. "I want to transcend. What about you, Ard Meteor? Aren't ya tired of being a whiny bitch? Get over yourself and stand on your feet, ya damn slug."

In my past life, I never would've joined forces with an enemy. When I was the Demon Lord, my foes were foes and that was the end of it.

I used to think something like this was impossible. But now...

"Being reincarnated as a nobody...made me weak. I thought that made it impossible to defeat Mephisto."

However, maybe the opposite was true. Perhaps because I was a typical nobody and not the Demon Lord, I could defy the impossible. Seeing Elzard standing before me made me believe that.

"A best friend of mine once told me that if I feel depressed, I should embrace stupidity. That moping wouldn't turn the tables, so I should turn off my brain, become an idiot, and run forward without thinking... I think I'll listen to that advice and become an idiot."

I'd found something I wanted to believe in—Elzard's words, not Mephisto's. I would believe in her and her feelings. I would believe in all my friends.

And most of all...

"Will you help me, Elzard?"

"Hmph. All I did was help ya get on your feet. The rest is up to you."

We exchanged cynical smirks.

Then we shook hands.

## INTERLUDE

## **The Bitter Boy and the Glowing Girl**

Beneath the bright beams of sunlight, inside a school building, a large chorus of praise echoed off the walls.

"W-wow! This is a potion of legend, made from a lost recipe!"

"You're the best, Mephisto!"

"You are the greatest genius at this school! No, the greatest this country has ever known!"

The compliments resounded through the classroom. Praising him was the just and moral thing for them to do. And thus...

"Don't get cocky, you little—"

"You peon! How dare you insult our Mephisto!"

"You insulted Mephisto?! What a waste of life!"

"Anyone who dares to insult Mephisto deserves to die!"

...they swarmed to slaughter the one dissenting student.

There was no logic to it. They would praise the exalted one and affirm everything he said or did. Such was the meaning of their existence.

Anyone who defied him was disposed of.

Their angry shouts drowned out the wrongdoer's screams. Nobody stopped them from cruelly ripping the heretic apart. If anything, they were praised for it. Nobody in the room felt a single shred of doubt over their actions.

"""Long live Mephisto! Long live Mephisto! Long live Mephisto! Long live Mephisto!"""

As the chorus of adoring voices boomed through the classroom, Mephisto Yuu Phegor reclined on the desk at the front, smiling peacefully. He favored his

adoring classmates with a dazzlingly beautiful smile, looking as elegant as an angel and as terrifying as a devil.

"Worthless, all of you."

Bone-chilling contempt leaked from his peaceful grin. A moment later, every member of the classroom mob burst open, decorating the surroundings in a shower of flesh, bone, organs, and blood.

The boy's inhuman smile didn't falter beneath the crimson rain. "What's so great about all this? I don't understand, honey."

He saw the man in his mind. Varvatos, or Ard Meteor—the only one in this world who could match him. All other living things on this planet were indistinguishable and worthless. He couldn't even tell which were sentient. Ard Meteor alone was a being equal to Mephisto Yuu Phegor.

"Okay. He's probably beaten the first level by now."

Mephisto used vista magic. A mirror appeared before him, displaying a distant scene. Ard Meteor rose from the ground and shook hands with his former enemy. Mephisto sighed with relief at the scene.

"Oh, good. You stood back up for me." A smile formed on his angelically beautiful face—a genuine one. "That's why you're my darling. You are the one person who might be able to teach me what defeat feels like."

Mephisto inhaled and released the breath, then he turned away from the mirror. "All right, then. I planned to share his experiences to deepen my understanding of him, but..."

"I take it you've grown tired of us, Mephisto?" one of the three people that hadn't burst apart asked. It was Ginny Salvan.

"Yes, I have. I mean, you're just so horrendously boring."

One of the three dared defy that statement. "What about us is boring? Please, enlighten us." It was Sylphy Marheaven.

Mephisto answered her question calmly. "You kids aren't sentient. You aren't people." He spoke as though delivering a self-evident truth.

The last of the three, Ireena Olhyde, refused Mephisto. "But we are people.

We're flesh and blood, and we have souls, too."

Mephisto's smile turned to stone. "I see. A being of flesh that houses advanced intelligence should indeed be called a person. But you see, sweet Ireena, that little thought of yours is *common knowledge* among your own kind. As long as you hoist that up as truth, a transcendent being like myself cannot accept it as a *confirmed fact*."

Without even finishing his thought, Mephisto unleashed another volley of spells. *Regenerate, Disassemble, Rearrange.* 

All the fragments of flesh, bone, and organs in the classroom converged—and were rebuilt. It looked like a scene right out of a nightmare. The students, reanimated from mutilated corpses, were the epitome of deformity. All they could do was groan and wander the room like zombies.

"Good. My vision's come to life."

And with a snap of Mephisto's fingers, the mob of zombies fell apart again. Then they were regenerated, disassembled, and rearranged. This time, they looked more normal on the outside, but they were abnormal on the inside.

"Watch where you're lookin'!"

"Huh?! Drop dead, you shit!"

"I'll frickin' kill all of you!"

It was a cruel and gruesome battle royal. Everyone abused, hated, and hurt each other without a second thought.

And as Mephisto watched it all unwind, he said, "Shut up."

With a snap of his fingers, the reanimated students collapsed into a heap of meat. Mephisto bathed in spurting blood until he was coated red. His expression didn't so much as flinch. "I can bend others fully to my will. Their minds and bodies belong to me. I can kill them as I please, revive them as I please, change them as I please, manipulate them as I please. And if all of that is possible, then human relationships essentially don't exist."

He could extinguish anyone he didn't like, or corrupt them. To Mephisto, it was nothing fancy.

"If only there were a limit to the existences I could target, then perhaps I might have embraced a banal common knowledge like you kids and wielded my power for love, justice, and peace. However...I regret to inform you that everyone kneels to my will but him."

That was why.

"Only he can be described as a *person*. Because he's the only one I can't bend to my desires. He subverts my assumptions. But you kids? Sorry, but you don't pass."

Hiding his coldness behind a mechanical smile, Mephisto pointed his right index finger at Sylphy. "Truth be told, you got my hopes up just a little, sweet Sylphy. As Lydia's friend, you were the one being who might have inherited her spirit. I'd hoped that you might surpass my expectations...that you might interact with me like a sentient human being."

Mephisto narrowed his eyes to knife points as he continued. "But you were exactly what I thought, in every way possible. Even now, you're still under my control. In the end, you're nothing more than an inorganic being wearing an organic mask, just like everyone else."

The devil raised his finger, giving form to the negative feelings in his heart as a cruel, violent attack.

"You see, I hate nothing more than having my hopes betrayed."

Mephisto leveled the tip of his finger at Slyphy and drew a magic circle. Her fate was already sealed. In a moment, Sylphy would join the lumps of flesh on the floor. As far as Mephisto was concerned, it was inevitable.

"Please...stop!"

Which was why the unexpected development delighted his soul.

"...Who? Ah yes, that's right, that does make sense. Mmm-hmm."

He opened his eyes wide and stared at Ireena, who stood before Sylphy protectively. She was supposed to be under Mephisto's control. With her perceptions warped, she was an empty shell. She was unable to disobey Mephisto's orders. The words from her mouth should have been his.

However, Ireena took action outside his power. Although it was slight, she had slipped from Mephisto's grasp.

"Anyone...who hurts...my friends...answers...to me!" Her spirit was a raging inferno.

And when Mephisto saw that...

...he blushed and brought his clasped hands to his lips as they twisted into a smile.

"I never once felt any value in bloodlines. As far as I'm concerned, my wife and daughter were my only family. I had no interest in any relatives beyond them...but now that opinion has *drastically* changed."

Intense love burned in Mephisto's eyes, but there wasn't a hint of the fondness an ordinary person would show. A devil's love was always a repulsive thing.

"Oh, sweet Ireena, now I'm very interested in you."

A devil's smile spread wide on his angelic face as he gazed at his kin.

"Let's have a chat with you in your right mind. A nice, long chat..."

## The Ex-Demon Lord and the Frenzied King of Dragons' Secret

As soon as Elzard helped me to my feet, I said, "I want to defeat Mephisto Yuu Phegor by force. I know it sounds impossible, considering he was born in the old world, but...is there some tactic we can exploit?"

Elzard folded her arms and frowned. "If such a tactic existed, we wouldn't have to team up."

"Yeah, figured," I whispered to myself.

In Elzard's eyes, the very act of cooperating with me was already an ironic tactic. And I thought I knew why she chose to do so anyway.

"When you had the final battle against him in the ancient era...you won, didn't you? And according to legend, it was a simple contest of force, just like this time."

Elzard was saying we had a chance if we mimicked history. However, I'd been present for that old fight, and I had to object.

"Sorry, but all we did was seal Mephisto. We didn't defeat him. If anything... we lost."

Haunting memories surged within me. I recalled a time when my side controlled most of the world. The Evil Gods, called the Outer Ones at the time, had been reduced to solely Mephisto. He was the only one remaining, forcing me to make a choice.

"I had to either subdue Mephisto Yuu Phegor, the last of the Evil Gods, or... enter a peace treaty on his terms and postpone the problem. After much agonizing, I made my decision."

I'd selected the latter. There were many reasons, but the largest was...

"You may already know this, but I regarded Lydia the Champion as a dear

friend and a lover. If I confronted Mephisto on the battlefield, somebody was bound to die, and it easily could have been Lydia. It wasn't worth taking that risk to kill Mephisto."

That's why I chose to delay the problem.

Had I been able to voice my feelings honestly, perhaps things would've turned out differently.

"Lydia vehemently opposed my decision. Mephisto was her father, but he also murdered her mother. Avenging her mother was her life's mission. So she confronted me, and..."

"Ah. You made it worse," Elzard breathed quietly.

I nodded. The guilt would stay with me forever. I'd failed to bare my heart to her. I should have said, "I don't want to lose you." Six simple words. Instead...

"I said, 'If you want to die that badly, then suit yourself.' And she called my bluff and mobilized the troops. Ultimately, Lydia's forces suffered tremendous casualties, and Mephisto possessed her. He turned her into his puppet."

She committed horrible atrocities, and that had left me with no choice.

"To preserve Lydia the Champion's good name...I killed her."

My soul had burned with guilt and loss, which in time turned into vengeance... And thus, I'd vowed to put Mephisto down.

"In those days, every living soul despised Mephisto. Most of my own soldiers were obsessed with killing him. That's why there wasn't the slightest backlash at the mass renunciation of the Evil Gods."

Lydia's surviving soldiers had joined us, and we unleashed the entirety of our wrath against the last Evil God.

"All my soldiers were unique individuals, not the sort who were inclined to cooperate. But even they got in line and demonstrated just how coordinated they could be when it came to smiting Mephisto."

Once complete, my army had been the epitome of excellence. What's more, we'd made allies along the way as we rode to battle.

"Even those races who wouldn't be caught dead fighting alongside humans joined to punish Mephisto. Your kin were among them, Elzard."

"Yeah...I know." Elzard's eyes betrayed her conflict. I was mindful of her feelings as I continued.

"The very world itself rejected Mephisto's existence. Every army united against him. All living things joined against that devil, to extinguish him. And I'd assumed that our side was sure to win. There was no way Mephisto could triumph, with everyone else against him. And I know I wasn't the only one who believed this. However..."

We didn't win. Mephisto Yuu Phegor had met us all in battle alone. And in the end...

"Mephisto had never exercised much of his power before that fight, and we learned why the hard way."

Those who survived were left with terrible trauma, and I was no exception.

"Even with the entire world set against him, Mephisto didn't lose his edge. He trampled all of us, like it was child's play..."

My little trick was the only move that had taken him at all by surprise. And Mephisto had welcomed it gleefully.

"I succeeded in sealing him. But since our goal was killing him, we had to consider it a loss. I was only able to lock him away because he let it happen. Had he insisted on getting his way..."

...There'd be no one left alive today.

"So you're saying you've got no plan, just like me?" Elzard said.

I couldn't refute that. There was no way we could win a battle against Mephisto head-on. Even the surface-level victory we'd scored against him in the past only happened because he allowed it on a whim.

If the Mephisto we faced now was his usual flippant, playful self, we might stand a chance. However, he'd declared that he would take the fight seriously for the first time. He'd already demonstrated a willingness to win.

"To be honest, yes, I have no real plan," I admitted.

We were insects trying to topple a dinosaur. To be blunt, our chances were grim.

Still, we wouldn't surrender. We hurled the notion into the stratosphere.

"We've practically lost already. But we do have one card to play."

No speck of hope's light reached us in the deep pit we had to climb out of. Still, we could try, holding on to the faith that each inch got us closer to victory.

I could tell Elzard felt the same.

"Gimme some specifics. What's our move?" she asked.

"We could do something like...retrieve the Armor of the Demon Lord."

Elzard ruminated on my words for a minute, then replied, "The Armor of the Demon Lord... That's the six hundred sixty-six pieces of powerful magic equipment, yeah? I remember you wore many pieces of it the last time we duked it out."

"That's right. One of them is called the Bangle of Devouring. That should be our first target. It was created to be used as a secret weapon against Mephisto. There's no doubt it will be essential."

The Bangle of Devouring did exactly what it sounded like—it devoured powers. By draining the strength out of all living things around the bangle's wielder, the wielder's power increased without limit. Conversely, enemies grew weaker, meaning the tables could be turned on any opponent.

Whoever wore the Bangle of Devouring could become invincible beyond reason. Yet even with such a powerful item, we still wouldn't stand a chance against that devil.

He was beyond unbeatable. That's the sort of freak Mephisto Yuu Phegor was.

Even if we acquired the Bangle of Devouring, we couldn't win. Yet without it, we wouldn't make it to the starting line. It wasn't a requirement to win, it was the entry ticket to play.

"Okay, guess we should go get this Bangle of Devouring thingy, then."

"I'd love to do that...but there's a number of steps we must go through first." "Steps?"

"Yes. That piece of armor is so powerful that it's been sealed heavily to prevent it from falling into wicked hands. That seal requires seven items to break. Without them, the Bangle of Devouring is useless anyway."

The Armor of the Demon Lord was built so that only I could use it fully assembled. But if someone were to tamper with the armor and change that rule, the Bangle of Devouring would become the most terrible piece of weaponry in all of history.

It could turn the weakest person in existence into the mightiest. The world was doomed if the wrong person got ahold of it.

That's why I'd placed an excessive number of locks on the bangle, to prevent such a scenario from coming to pass.

"I suppose that makes sense," Elzard said with a sigh. She was annoyed, but she understood. "So? Where do we find these seven keys?"

The items that released the seal on the bangle were scattered around the world and enchanted with *Concealment* spells. The nearest one was...

"One of them is hidden in your part of the world, Elzard—the Vylamd Mountain Range."

At that, her eyes widened. "Seriously...you really are a pain in the ass," she muttered. "Ya know, going into those mountains is utterly unpleasant. But I guess we have no choice." After cursing under her breath, she raised a hand to activate a *Teleportation* spell.

Unfortunately...

"Tsk... He's got a Jamming spell going."

"Hmm...is he just messing with us, or is he buying time? Regardless, if we can't use *Teleportation* spells, that means we only have one other choice..."

"......What? Stop staring, you creep."

She'd likely hit upon the same tactic I had. That would explain her obvious

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reluctance.

"Elzard."

"There's gotta be another way...I hope."

"Elzard."

"I mean, what's the rush anyway?"

"Elzard."

"Elzard."

"Elzard."
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I smiled, leaning in closer and closer until she threw back her hair and screamed, "Oh, fine! I'll do it! Happy, ya parasite?!"

Evidently, I'd managed to wear her down.

"Well, let's get to it, then!"

With that, Elzard and I took our first step toward a counterattack.



Dragons are recognized as one of the oldest species. They've existed since the dawn of creation. According to some legends, they existed even before the most ancient of times and governed over the world.

Because of their history, dragons possessed huge egos. They were truly a clannish sort. They made forests, caves, and subterranean caverns their domains. They rarely ventured outside their territories, as their dispositions kept them wary of fraternizing with others.

The white dragons who made the Vylamd Mountain Range their home were no exception. Still, compared to others of their kind, they were a bit more cooperative, or perhaps a bit more calculating. As a result, the white dragons of the Vylamd Mountain Range were the only dragons who'd joined us in the final battle against Mephisto. They fought side by side with us, risking their lives.

Grateful for their cooperation, I granted them several privileges after the war, and I also bestowed their beloved treasures upon them. One of those treasures was the item necessary to break the seal on the Bangle of Devouring.

Dragons had an abnormally high attachment to their treasures. They would defend their hoards with their lives. I'd used this quirk of theirs to my advantage and gave them the key item so they would guard it for me.

"Huh... They don't call ya the Demon Lord for nothing. That's a really rotten thing ya did there."

Elzard's thick voice blended with the roar of the air. She was not in human form. She'd become a giant, three-winged dragon. In her true form, she cut through the heavens with a wild magnificence.

"Gee, can ya share some of your deep-seated maliciousness with me? I know they call me the Frenzied King of Dragons, but as violent as I can be, I'm a real softy on the inside."

Elzard sounded tremendously grumpy. She was probably bent out of shape because she had me riding on her back. To a proud dragon like her, there was no greater disgrace.

Holding back a chuckle, I replied, "I'm sorry, but without teleportation magic, flying on you was the only rational—"

"You're *sorry*? So you're saying you're sorry that you have to stoop so low as to ride on *my* back, but you're doing it because you have no choice?"

"You always seem to assume the worst in people, Elzard."

"Hmph. Admit it. You hate this, right? I'm just a big lizard to you. And who'd wanna sit on a bumpy, gross lizard back?"

"...I see you're still upset about our last fight."

We'd entered an alliance of convenience, but we could hardly be called friendly.

"Aaaaagh... First I have to carry a stupid human on my back, then I have to go somewhere I never wanted to return to again! Is this purgatory?"

Her griping gave me pause. "You never wanted to return to the Vylamd Mountain Range?"

"That's right. What of it?"

"I'm just surprised. Isn't that your home?"

Why would somebody want to avoid a place so precious?

There was a sourness in Elzard's voice as she replied, "I never enjoyed being there. I only stayed there because it was the most effective location to heal."

To heal, huh? Hearing that brought memories to the forefront of my mind.

"That's right, I heard about the time you went on a rampage and almost brought the world to its doom. Did it really take you several centuries to recover?" I said.

"Technically, the wounds were from before that."

"What do you mean?"

My question was met with silence. I guessed she didn't want to talk about it, so I didn't force the information out of her. It was a part of her past she didn't want to dredge up. That much was obvious.

Instead, I remarked, "Ah...I can see our destination." The giant mountain peaks pierced the sky. And as I beheld the tallest of them all, I added, "I never thought I'd revisit this place with you, of all people."

That peak was the site of my last battle with Elzard. As I stared at the great mountain, awash in emotion, Elzard groused, "Hmph. Go ahead, gloat. Like I give a damn."

"Oh, no, I didn't mean it like that... Er, Elzard, I think you should make your descent now. Our destination is the range interior, not the peak."

"Tsk! What am I, a taxi?"

Despite her griping, Elzard obliged and landed in the lush greenery below. Then she returned to human form. The fragrance of earth and grass filled the verdant grove.

Frowning, Elzard remarked, "Heh, the power of nature is really somethin'. There's not a trace of what happened that day remaining."

The solemnity of the scenery lent a kind of coldness to her words. In ancient times, the Vylamd Mountain Range was home to the white dragons. Their

insular society forbade visitors. I remembered the violent welcome I'd received here in my past life.

Now, however, there wasn't a single white dragon in sight. I suppose that was to be expected. The white dragons of the Vylamd Mountain Range were extinct.

While bearing witness to the evidence of that fact, I said quietly, "Elzard...I heard you destroyed the white dragons who lived here."

Her silence told me everything.

I didn't know why she'd eradicated her own kind. Admittedly, I was curious... but I could never ask.

After clearing my throat, I said, "They hid their treasures in mazelike dungeons. I think that's where we'll find what we're looking for."

The structure in question was nearby. I used detection magic to calculate our route there, then we set out. Elzard kept quiet the entire way, but I could tell she wasn't calm at all. Occasionally, she loosed an *Attack* spell, felling trees with a beam that ignited them afterward. She was clearly holding on to a lot of stress but wasn't willing to discuss any of it.

I suffered through the gloomy atmosphere all the way to our destination. The white dragons had carved the dungeon into the mountain, so it looked no different from an ordinary cavern. However, the miasma emanating from the mouth of the giant cavern was anything but commonplace.

"I can see why they call it forbidden ground," Elzard remarked.

"Forbidden ground, you say?"

"Yeah, this dungeon is considered sacred. No one is permitted entry. Even I haven't seen inside."

"I think I know what that means..."

"Yup. Something's waiting for us, but I couldn't tell you what."

"It would seem our little adventure is going to get rather intense." Standing before the dragon-made labyrinth, I said, "Elzard, we're going in. Are you okay?"

"...Yeah."

We took our first step into the dungeon together. This place was a treasure trove for the white dragons, and it promised to be a death trap for intruders. We knew they wouldn't pull any punches.

Darkness enshrouded the way ahead. I couldn't see a single pace before us, or even my own feet.

"This darkness...doesn't seem natural," I remarked.

The shadow inside the dungeon was probably magical. No *Lamplight* or *Illumination* spell would help here. Moreover, the darkness in this dungeon seemed to carry a weakening effect on intruders.

"Any ideas on how to break this spell, Elzard?" I asked.

"I already told you, I don't know anything about this place."

There was no reason for her to lie, so I assumed that was the truth.

"I suppose I'll have to rely on my supernatural reputation, then."

Occasionally, humans were born with unexplained abilities. I was one of those people, and my unique abilities boosted my analysis and control. By tapping those talents, I inspected the magic traps in the dungeon and canceled the enfeebling substance in the shadows. That done, I activated light magic to illuminate the way.

"...Overpowered as ever, I see."

"Your words humble me."

"It wasn't a compliment, dumbass."

My shining white orb of magic light illuminated our path. Adding detection magic helped us evade any remaining traps. With that, the dungeon was as good as safe.

However, neutralizing a dungeon's quirks didn't guarantee an easy search. There was one other challenge, perhaps the most terrifying of all.

"Given the place's spaciousness, I had a hunch, but..."

I glared at the thing before my eyes and sighed quietly. A resident was the

biggest thorn in an explorer's side.

The cores of naturally occurring dungeons spawned monsters. These became the guardians who attacked intruders. Compared to wild monsters, dungeon ones were more chaotic, and more powerful.

However, the peskiest of all were the monsters that appeared in man-made labyrinths. A dungeon's master could assign attributes to such creatures as they pleased.

Dungeon cores had their limits, but a dungeon's master could fill the entire place with god-tier monsters if they liked, so long as it kept within what the laws of physics allowed.

That was the biggest threat we'd have to face.

"Somehow, the master linked the core to memories of this place. They can manifest replicas of themselves at will."

Thinking about it, it was obvious. After all, these mountains were home to a sect of dragons, the most advanced living organisms on the planet. They were their own best guardians. That's likely how they saw it.

It certainly explained why there was a giant white dragon sitting in front of us.

"Only the most powerful memories linger in a location. In keeping with that rule... Elzard, the core has reflected a memory of your rampage."

The spawned white dragon was in tatters. Its wings were shredded, its scales ripped. It resembled a dragon zombie. When confronted by the horrific sight, all I could do was frown in silence.

Elzard seemed to have a special connection to the creature, however.

"Long time no see, Falchion."

A smirk formed on her lips, but not the friendly sort. It was horrifying, in fact. It was the kind of smirk a wild beast might show its prey.

"I'm happy to see you. Truly. Just imagine—I get to kill you twice."

What occurred next was perfectly logical. The white dragon, deeming us the enemy, prepared to strike. However, Elzard's *Attack* spell was quicker. The

dragon she called Falchion was then surrounded by a bunch of magic circles.

Pale-blue light beams shot everywhere. There was no way for the dragon to dodge. Our enemy tried to erect a defensive shield.

"Ha-ha-ha! You never learn, do you?"

Just as the walls shot up, the light beams promptly destroyed them. In no time, the white dragon was torn through by countless glowing rays until nothing remained.

"Even in death, you still ruin my day. Damn, you're really somethin'." Elzard's tone was unbelievably cold.

During our exploration, we had several white dragon encounters, and Elzard unceremoniously buried them all. Each attack was truly graceful, though. If she went all out in a frenzied rampage, the dungeon would collapse and bury us alive. And if that destroyed the core, we'd lose our chance at getting the item we came for.

With all that in mind, Elzard destroyed our obstacles with the least amount of force possible. She murdered the echoes of her kin with ruthless serenity. Though her rage burned hot, the air around her was icy-cold. As I watched her calculated yet frenzied rage, I understood how she'd earned her title the Frenzied King of Dragons.

And that concerned me.

"Elzard...let's take a little break here."

She didn't so much as humor me with a glance. In fact, she was busy stepping on the head of a fellow dragon she'd ripped apart with her hands.

"Ha!" she laughed. "What, you think we're friends now? If so, you're sorely mistaken. To me, you're no different than our little dungeon annoyances, so you can stop making that face. Don't look at me like that. You got a death wish, Ard Meteor?"

That was a close call.

I'd forgotten that Elzard's psyche was fragile. I'd gotten my hopes up after her little run-in with Ireena, but at her core, Elzard hadn't changed a bit.

One wrong move now, and I might shatter our alliance beyond repair. Regrettably...I had very little experience communicating with someone like this. I had no idea how to start chipping away at her.

If I were Lydia or Ireena...I could get her to open up for sure.

While I was busy mourning the powerlessness of my own humanity...

"Shit..."

Whether because of the pile of dragon heads at her feet or the fact that they'd lost their original forms, Elzard spat a curse and looked up at the ceiling. "...Did they build this dungeon to taunt me?"

A question came to mind, but I wasn't sure whether to voice it. I knew that remaining silent risked upsetting her, though.

I steadied my nerves and asked, "Those white dragons... Did they recognize you?"

Elzard stared silently up at the ceiling for a while.

Did I make the wrong move? A nervous pang shot through my stomach.

Elzard replied, "Dragons look down on all other races. They accept no others. Their contempt for humans in particular runs deep. You just reproduce like mad. That doesn't make you conquerors, ya damn apes."

A smile formed on her beautiful face. It was either in self-deprecation or in mockery of her own people.

"It's funny, really. Nobody realizes how cruel they are, not even us. We're no different than the apes we looked down on."

After a heavy sigh, she continued down the dungeon passage. I kept a steady pace behind her, and as we walked, Elzard suddenly began to open up.

"Highly intelligent life-forms are always tribal. Dragons are no different. Those who resided in this mountain range formed a community out of necessity, and dragon societies are always hierarchical."

She stopped there. Then, after a lengthy pause, Elzard added, "I was born into what you humans would call a royal family... So it's what I was."

To be special and to be discriminated against because of it. That was the life that Elzard knew, day in and day out.

"I couldn't make a single friend. Don't get any ideas, though. I wasn't sad. Because I had somebody who loved me... Back then, my mother was my sole emotional support. With her in my life, I wanted for nothing else."

Elzard's voice became a hoarse whisper. "I shouldn't have wasted my time looking for friends." However, she recovered only a moment later. "Oh, great. Now Zesphyria's here."

Elzard regarded the appearance of this latest battered white dragon with a stony expression. "I should have never put my faith in you."

She lunged forward with a murderous chill in her eyes. There was emotion buried in her movements. Up until now, she'd slaughtered all her kin in a cold, calculated manner...

Now she was truly enraged.

Smack. Crack. Whack.

Elzard engaged in a one-sided fight against the giant dragon looming over her.

Scales were ripped, flesh was pounded, and bones were severed.

The raw, bare-fisted violence spoke to the state of Elzard's heart more than a thousand words could.

Before long, her enemy was silent and dead.

While looking at the bludgeoned corpse, Elzard spat, "So stupid..."

I didn't know who she was talking about.

She took off again, her body coated with blood. We continued in silence for a while, but eventually a confession spilled from her lips.

"That dragon I just killed? Well...that was the first friend I ever had."

My eyes went wide in shock.

The Frenzied King of Dragons had someone she called a friend?

"Well, we weren't really friends."

"What...do you mean?"

"Ha! I think you can deduce the rest. You lived as royalty, too, once, didn't you?"

"... So that was an insurgent who pretended to be a friend."

I received a quiet nod in response. Elzard's expression remained stoic. I'm certain her feelings were beyond words.

"The fate of being royalty...I know it well," I said.

"Yeah. You said it. I shouldn't have trusted anyone. But—"

"But it was terrible to be so alone."

We were alike. Elzard and I had similar lived experiences.

"I was unusual and isolated...and that was why I clung so desperately to whoever loved me. But if you cling too tight, you become codependent. You can't tell where you end and the other person begins. Then the loneliness worsens."

With Elzard, it was her mother. With me, it was Olivia. We each had a person we depended on desperately. It soothed our loneliness for a while, but as we came to take their existences and feelings for granted, the isolation tormented us constantly.

"It could have been anyone, as long as they loved me just like my mother and freed me from this pain. Really, it could have been anyone."

And that "anyone" was the dragon she'd just slain. Perhaps that's why she'd used brute force this time, instead of magic.

"It was special... My first friendship I ever had was special, ya know...?"

"I understand," I answered. "And it's because it was special."

"Yeah. Because it was special—"

"When you were betrayed, your anger surpassed expression."

Elzard smiled vaguely. Undoubtedly, she wasn't happy to have found someone who comprehended. If anything, it was the opposite.

We understood each other's pain.

Maybe that's why Elzard hated her own kind—she saw herself in them.

"Destroy the royal family and claim one of the empty thrones with the rest of some insurrectionist family. That's why my *friend* got close to me. And when I collapsed in confusion and sorrow, you wanna know what my *friend* said to me? *'Who could ever love an abomination like you?''* 

Elzard surely lost everything that day.

"My failing to drop dead from the poison was that insurrectionist family's greatest failure. I managed to escape and run to my mother. But...I was too late. By the time I got there, she was already gone."

Why had Elzard exterminated her kin? I knew it wasn't what she wanted. The anguish in her voice revealed the truth in her heart.

"I was really annoyed back then. I even tried to commit suicide... But it didn't work. My body is just too sturdy. I couldn't even kill myself... Was it the same for you, Ard Meteor?"

"Yes, I'm not proud of it, but I had the exact same experience."

That's why I'd chosen reincarnation over suicide. Honestly, it had been my only choice. No matter how hard I'd wished for it, I couldn't attain death's salvation. Upon realizing this, I'd decided to give myself a full reset. If I became somebody else, I could live a different life. It had been my wish that this new life might change my despair into hope.

Elzard must have lacked the grit to go through with that.

"I plunged into a deep sleep, praying I'd never wake up. But that didn't work. Of course it didn't. It only healed my injuries. Right after I woke up, I found myself in the middle of a nightmare."

Elzard paused to take a breath before continuing. What occurred after she awoke was evidently more traumatic than slaying her own kind. Her story was fragmented to protect herself from recalling the whole experience.

"See, I had somebody guarding me while I slept, the queen of a fallen kingdom. And this is what she told me: 'I'll give you my soul if you steal my

kingdom back for me.' Then... Well, stuff happened. And I made my second friend. My kin are probably laughing in hell right now. A dragon developing feelings for a human. It was unheard of."

I saw where Elzard's tale was going. Her abnormal relationship broke her heart for a second time.

"Was that the origin of your hatred for the world?" I asked.

Unsurprisingly, she didn't answer. Elzard just resumed walking, silent and stoic.

Memories of my fight with her materialized in my mind. At the time, that fiercely negative aura I'd sensed from her was incomprehensible. But now that I knew the truth, everything made sense.

Two betrayals. Two devastations.

She'd loved them so earnestly, and that made the pain horrific. Elzard's wounds were so deep that burning the entire world to ash wouldn't cure them.

"But in spite of it all, you still..."

Before I could finish my thought, we arrived at the heart of the dungeon. Elzard pushed the great gate with majestic carvings open with one hand. Beyond lay a spacious chamber. A lone woman waited for us there.

Her beautiful, long white hair cascaded to the ground. Her skin, speckled here and there with scales, shone like porcelain. The pure white dress hugging her slight frame was identical to Elzard's, as though their garments were twins. Upon a closer glance, this woman's beauty was also identical to Elzard's.

"This is so vicious that I have to wonder if this dungeon is sentient."

The sorrow on Elzard's face revealed the identity of the woman standing across from us—the final guardian the dungeon core had built from the memories lingering here.

"Never thought this was how we'd meet again, Mom."

Vicious. I couldn't think of a more apt word to describe this situation than the one Elzard had used. The woman she'd loved with all her heart, the one she lost, the one more precious than life itself stood there. I could only guess how

Elzard felt upon seeing this.

"Ah—ah—aah...aaaaah..." A strange moan issued from the guardian's mouth. There was no emotion in her eyes. There were no traces of joy upon seeing her daughter.

That was to be expected. That thing was nothing more than a monster who'd taken the form of Elzard's mother. And I'm sure Elzard knew that.

"Ard Meteor..." Elzard's voice was the manifestation of budding defeat. "I...I can't do it."

Her feeble words echoed in my mind. They were the cracking of a fissure.

Our enemy didn't spare a thought for Elzard's state of mind, though. The guardian existed for the sole purpose of fulfilling its duty.

"Ah—ah—aah...AAAAAAAAH!!!"

Magic circles appeared around the guardian following her shrill, metallic cry. The geometric patterns shimmering with gold were identical to Elzard's. She must have learned all her magic from her mother at an early age.

Even an outsider like me got emotional at the sight. No wonder this was too much for Elzard to bear.

Giant beams of light shot from the magic circles to kill Elzard, yet she didn't budge. She gritted her teeth. She wanted to move, but her heart wasn't with her.

Eventually, her survival instinct kicked in. As I deflected the beams of light, Elzard erected a hemispherical shield, protecting herself from the radiant death surging toward her.

However, the mother of the Frenzied King of Dragons was no pushover.

Elzard's shield was so sturdy that even I couldn't break it easily. Yet our opponent's light beams cut through it like butter and pierced into Elzard.

"Augh!"

With a whimper, Elzard collapsed. The light beams had disintegrated over half of her body. Only her head and part of her torso remained.

She slammed onto the stone floor, spurting bright red blood. This would've been fatal for a normal human, but a dragon's immortality was nothing to underestimate. Her missing body parts regenerated at lightning speed.

On the surface, it was two against one. We should've had the advantage, but reality was different. Elzard had warned me that she was in no condition to fight, and I agreed. At present, she was merely deadweight.

Any advantages to be gained from an ally were moot now. If anything, her being here would distract me.

"Guess this'll have to be a short showdown."

I activated my *Original*. My trump card would end the battle in a single breath. It was the only way. Steeling myself, I took a breath to begin my *Original* chant. But before I could...

"KHEEEEEEEEE!!!"

...an eerie shriek shot out of the guardian's mouth. That would usually signal a second attack, but not this time. It was a scream to stop my attack and avoid the worst-case scenario.

"Is this ...?"

Before my very eyes, a giant magic circle formed on the walls, the floor, and the ceiling. I guessed its purpose on instinct.

"It's a combination of Geass magic and causality manipulation!"

The caster would manipulate a specified area, overwrite the laws of causality, and force those new rules onto an opponent. Very few could cast a high-caliber spell like this. What's more, to be able to manage it in such a short period without a special ritual...

Her magic might have rivaled Mephisto's.

"I'd wondered why Elzard's mother was chosen as the guardian over Elzard herself."

My opponent's spell was already activated. It was too late to panic. As icy sweat ran down my skin, I calmed myself and accepted my fate.

"A guardian manifested from the land's memories always takes the form of the mightiest creature around."

Simply put, Elzard's mother was powerful, far more so than the Frenzied King of Dragons.

"KHEEE-YAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

With a howling shriek, the guardian sprinted forward.

She was fast.

Before I knew it, she was upon me, fists raised.

"Tsk!"

I dodged her, but only barely. As I evaded, I tried speaking the chant.

"Ngh! I thought so..."

The sensation was gone; that special feeling I always experienced before using an *Original* had completely vanished. That was the purpose of that spell. Elzard's mother could seal *Originals*.

And it didn't stop there.

"It's not just my *Original*...it's my powers, too!" I exclaimed, still doing my best to dodge.

The supernatural powers I'd been born with—analysis and control—I'd raised them up to create an ultimate attack that was my *Original*.

But now, I'd been stripped of my right to invoke it. This had to be what a wingless bird felt like.

"I haven't known this sensation in a while! It's so infuriating!"

This wasn't the first time this had happened to me. Twice in my past life, I'd found myself in this predicament. Overcoming those challenges was why I stood here today.

However, my past experiences wouldn't provide me with the hint I needed to escape this. I'd survived those previous challenges because I'd had a powerful ally with me.

The first time, it was Olivia, and it was Lydia during the second. Without them, I would've met my end.

Technically, I did have an ally, but she was very different from the ones I'd had in the past.

Elzard was in the middle of regenerating.

It's too late. She's healing too slowly.

It was surely a reflection of her psyche. She had no will to fight. She'd surrendered to her past, abandoning all hope.

And seeing her like this, I felt...

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"Nn-ga-aaaaaah!!!"
```

The guardian's howl broke my thoughts. Her limbs flailed faster than before. Evading was difficult now.

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"Nng!"
```

Her movements were too quick to see. I gritted my teeth and strengthened my body with magic, but before my spell took effect, a terrifying attack connected with my face. The blow could shatter skin, bone, and even the soul.

I felt myself float as the world turned upside down. By the time I realized my senses were scrambled, my body had already slammed against the wall.

"That was...no ordinary...attack!"

Dragons employed a unique magic technique. Elzard's mother had either used that, or she possessed some other ability that altered my perception.

I needed to heal myself—starting with my concussion. I tried magic but found I couldn't work the spell. Luckily for me, my opponent didn't come in for another attack. But only because she'd shifted her target.

```
"El...zard..."
```

The guardian lunged toward the freshly regenerated girl.

"Eep...!" Elzard squeaked softly. She was the spitting image of a frightened child. There was not a trace of the Frenzied King of Dragons' pride left in her. "Mom...!"

From the desperation in her voice, it was clear she was praying for a miracle. Maybe she hoped the guardian would become self-aware and act like her actual mother. Praying for such an impossible development was all Elzard could manage anymore.

Sadly, such a plot twist was never to be.

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"Khee-YAAAAAAAAAH!!!"
```

The guardian threw a punch as she shrieked. Elzard's crouched position would do little to block it. Without a moment's hesitation, the guardian sank her fist into Elzard's stomach.

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"Nga-ahh!"
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Elzard had managed a *Shield* spell on reflex. The guardian's fist didn't pierce through her gut, but it did send her flying against the wall as it had done to me. The impact formed cracks in the stone.

"AAAAH!!!" Evidently determined to finish off the weakened Elzard, the guardian kicked off the ground, flying toward her. It was only an attempt to take down an easy opponent. There was no thought of her child at all.

But that wasn't what Elzard saw.

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"Mom...why ... ?!"
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It was all one-sided.

Elzard simply took every hit.

The dull beating sounds rang out, unrelenting.

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"Ngh-Ngah...!"
```

Elzard crouched, clutched her head, and took the abuse. She looked just like a defenseless little child. I felt sorry for her, but I was also very angry.

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"How can you...do that to her?!"
```

The damage from that last attack was finally starting to dissipate. I didn't know if I'd be able to chant the spell I'd struggled with earlier, but before I healed my wounds...

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"Spear Lightning!"
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...I performed a special Remote-Cast.

A magic circle formed directly beside the guardian, shooting lightning at her. The surprise attack should have hit her, yet it didn't even graze her skin.

With her quick reflexes, the guardian easily dodged my magic. Fortunately...

"That was all part of the plan!"

I launched a barrage of elemental strikes at supersonic speed—over one thousand per second.

Swallowed by the intense pummeling storm of attacks, my opponent fell into defense without a chance to retaliate. However, none of my direct hits caused any significant damage. When you favored speed, your hits were weaker by nature. All my effort was hardly more than a distraction.

Still, that was good enough for me.

I maintained the supersonic volley of magic while hardening my body. Once ready, I flew into the eye of the storm with a battle cry.

This was the perfect self-sacrificial attack. I dived headfirst into the vortex I'd created.

My opponent hadn't anticipated this. She had no time to react as I zoomed toward her. Although I was wounded by my own magic as I flew...

"My apologies, ma'am."

...I pounded my clenched fist into her face. The guardian flew back hard. I let out a sigh as I watched her go.

"Finally, a direct hit...but there's no way it was fatal."

She was just too sturdy. Without my *Original*, I couldn't cut through the guardian's body.

"There's only one way to kill her...," I muttered, dispelling my elemental attacks at last. In their place, I activated a *Sealing* spell right as the guardian landed. Geometric patterns opened around her, and a moment later her body was trapped in a shining orb.

That'll buy us a little time.

I turned my focus from my opponent and back to Elzard.

She was crouched, clutching her head and trembling all over. Even with her unique healing abilities, the wounds in her heart remained.

I took a step toward her and said, "This brings memories of our first fight back. What a terrible look for you, Elzard." I paused a beat, my lips twisting into a mocking smile. "That's how I would've thought back then. But now..."

As she slowly lifted her head, I looked down at her, both literally and figuratively, and I hurled the blunt words at her.

"Raw power's all you've got, you weak-minded little shit. Mentally, you're still an infant. You haven't matured a bit. How can you still be so pathetic after centuries? If I were you, I'd give up on life."

Elzard reacted with a blank stare...then a burning rage. She ground her teeth and glared at me. My mocking smile softened.

I knew it. Instant results.

Elzard and I were cut from the same cloth. That's why I knew better than anyone what she needed to get back on her feet.

"You're a grown woman, and you're attached to your mommy? Frenzied King of Dragons, my ass. More like *Babied King*."

She needed a kick in the butt, not kindness.

She needed contempt, not compassion.

She needed the same sort of words and actions she'd tossed my way to get me going again.

"Mmf...!"

Her anger visibly rose to fuming as she stared at me. My grin deepened at the sight. "There's an emotion everyone holds on to when they face hardship, and I believe it's anger. And working under this belief...Elzard, you still have just enough impetus to push yourself forward."

Realizing the truth in my words, she frowned and said, "I really do despise you."

There was a tangible energy behind the words she spat. I turned to her and answered with my sincere feelings.

"You know, I think I might come to like you."

"Huh?" Elzard's expression all but asked, What the hell're you saying, you creep?

Maintaining my grin, I added, "The future you thought wasn't even slightly possible when we first fought... Well, maybe it has a chance. The belief we both took for granted, that we could never be friends... A bud of courage took root inside me the moment that was refuted, pushing me to keep going."

To me, Elzard used to be nothing but a villain who'd kidnapped Ireena. I never imagined I could ever be friendly with her. But now...

"Elzard. I've been angry with you, but I've never hated you. In fact, I felt we shared a kinship. All along, a part of me always wanted to be friends... But I convinced myself that would never happen, so I never bothered to imagine you in my life."

Things were different now, though. I beseeched her with my gaze as I went on. "I want to build a future with you. But what I want even more than that...is to see what you can build with others, starting with Ireena. That's my earnest wish."

Come on, you don't want to just give up here and now, do you?

As my unspoken words hung in the air, Elzard's lips trembled for a moment. And then...

"Would you laugh at me...if I said I wanted to make a hundred friends?"

"No. If anything, it would make me feel closer to you. I have the same dream, after all."

"My feud with Ireena..."

"Of course. I'll help you patch things up with her."

"...If you break your promise, I'll kill you, okay?"

"Be my guest. I'd never-we would never betray you." I offered the same

treatment she had offered me a little while ago. I extended my hand to her. "I'm not here just to get you back on your feet. I'm here to help you leave the nest and make some friends, too... Is there something you'd like to say to me?" I teased.

Elzard frowned hard at me and answered, "Thanks...is something I'll *never* say to you, *dumbass*."

Then she smiled. Not the warlike grin of earlier, but a purehearted girl's smile.

Then Elzard gripped my hand, all faintheartedness gone with the wind. I could feel the strong will to move forward pumping through her thin, white hand clasped in mine.

"All right, let's win this fight together, Elzard."

"...Just this once, I'll let you take the lead, Ard Meteor."

As we stood side by side, Elzard and I took in the scene before us. The magic orb containing the guardian was starting to crack.

"Nn—gah—AAAAAAAAAH!"

Our imprisoned enemy burst free.

"Elzard, I don't have the power to so much as scratch her right now."

"Yeah, I know. That's where I come in." No sooner had Elzard replied than she summoned a sword. It was longer than she was tall and made of dragon bone. A single touch from the blade would erase one's body, the very concept of it. It could bury an enemy in just one strike. The weapon in Elzard's grip would slice through the guardian's hard skin.

But only if Elzard wished for it, of course. I had no doubts about that, though.

"She's coming."

"Yeah, I know."

We assumed our battle stances, glaring at the enemy.

"Gohh—GAAAAAAH!!!"

We dodged the enormous beam of light. The guardian didn't have the ability to communicate, but her battle instincts were sharp. She knew to avoid melee

combat. She was throwing ranged attacks to keep us away as she ran around.

"Elzard, I'll open a path for you."

"Okay..."

We exchanged glances, communicating silently. It was too much information to relay to an ordinary partner, but this was the Frenzied King of Dragons. One look was more than enough for her to grasp the entirety of my thoughts.

Elzard took a step back, appraising which way I was moving. Formally, it was now a one-on-one fight. The guardian kept a wary eye on Elzard while concentrating attacks on me.

"GREEEEEEEEE!!!"

Her shining rays flew at random. It was a tired old trick, but obnoxiously effective regardless.

"I'm stuck on evasive action..."

The guardian wasn't giving me an opening for even the tiniest counterattack. She was attempting to crush me with sheer force.

Ironically, that turned out to be my biggest asset in getting Elzard closer to her.

"Another seven seconds should do it..."

As I deflected the beams with a shield, my attention shifted to the ceiling. It was held up with giant pillars of stone. All this time, I'd been using reflection magic to aim the guardian's rays to the bottoms of those pillars.

Dungeons could be reinforced with magic, but they weren't indestructible. And in the very next moment, as if to prove my point, one of the pillars crumbled from a light beam and fell. The guardian was standing beneath it.

"MMMFFF?!"

Undoubtedly, the guardian hadn't expected this. Her eyes went wide. And then, out of necessity, her attacks stopped.

"The rest is yours, Elzard."

She instantly burst from her held position behind me. The enemy would

barely give us a moment of stillness, but that was more than enough time for a warrior whose very name was legend.

By the time the guardian smashed the falling pillar away, Elzard was on her.

"Ryaaah!!!"

With a mighty roar, the dragon bone blade danced through the air. There was no escape. Even if the guardian blocked it, that sword would slice through her, shield and all. Trumpets of victory sounded in my head.

Victory is ours. Or so I thought.

"Rrgaaah!" the guardian howled.

She couldn't dodge the blade or block it, so she went with the third choice. She summoned her own dragon bone blade.

"Khee-yah!" The guardian savagely swung the sword. It rushed for Elzard twice as fast.

She proved unable to evade, and the weapon pierced the Frenzied King of Dragons' side.

Everything that had led to this had likely been a feint. The guardian had acted surprised at the crumbling pillar to lower our guards. Her tactic had won her the battle.

Or so she thought.

"This is why you lose."

As I made my declaration, the corpse falling before the guardian split in two and vanished.

"No need to hesitate anymore," a voice boomed from behind the guardian. It was Elzard, dragon bone blade in hand.

"Mmmfff?!"

This time, the guardian's astonishment was genuine. It had taken her this long to notice that her cards were on the table. I'd seen through the guardian's little plan. The falling pillar, Elzard's dashing in to attack—all of it was a farce to expose a certain truth.

While the guardian was distracted, I'd produced a clone of Elzard, hid the real one with concealment magic, and sent her behind our opponent. Then, when the double was destroyed and the guardian thought she'd won, the truth would be revealed.

"You aren't her mother."

If the guardian had been a perfect replica of Elzard's mother, if she were identical in both mind and body, she would have felt something was wrong after felling Elzard's clone. She would have known her own child wouldn't die so easily.

Yet the guardian didn't show a sign of caution. That was the proof we needed. She was nothing but a soulless shell. A mere puppet with a replicated intellect and arsenal.

And now that Elzard knew that, she had no hesitation.

"GREEE-!"

"Too slow."

Before the guardian could turn and swing her blade, Elzard ended the fight. Her blade sank cleanly into the guardian's neck, severing her head.

Perhaps Elzard gave the guardian a painless death out of love for her mother. She couldn't hurt someone who looked like her, even if it was just a hollow copy.

"Excellently done, Elzard." I celebrated her victories, both external and personal, with applause.

"...Hmph." Elzard turned away in a huff. Despite her cold demeanor, her cheeks were faintly pink. "If you hadn't been here, that would've been a harder battle to win," she mumbled quietly and meekly. "So that's why I, um.......don't need to...thank you."

The last bit was barely audible, but I heard her loud and clear. And Elzard knew it. That's why she bit her lip and shyly hung her head.

I smirked at this unexpected side of the Frenzied King of Dragons and said, "You really lack sincerity."

"...Huh?"

"When you thank a person, you're supposed to smile, look into their eyes, and speak loud and clear. Why don't you try applying these three principles and give it another go?"

"...Don't push it, dung beetle. I'd never stoop so low as to thank a human."

"I doubt Ireena would like anyone who isn't sincere."

"Hmmf!"

"To clarify, you may be beautiful, but you've got a hideous personality. Until you fix that, you'll never come close to getting a hundred friends."

"Mmmmf!" Elzard growled, glaring at me. Her gaze was so murderous that an ordinary person would've fainted, but it had no effect on me.

"No death glares to people who annoy you, either. That's when you have to try extra hard to be compassionate and—"

"Shut it, moron! See if I ever listen to you again, jackass!"

As she blushed and screamed at me, I sighed back at her.

Well...we're in the middle of a crisis right now. We'll have to fix Elzard's personality later.

"Okay, now that the guardian is taken care of—"

I was about to finish with, "Let's get that item," but before I could...

"Demise, answer my call."

The short chant echoed from somewhere. Elzard and I both jumped away on reflex.

A moment later, ebony flames burned where we'd stood.

"Well...there's a face I recognize," Elzard spat bitterly. I doubted the person in question heard her.

"I came here to put an end to your little resistance, and to your lives."

Declaring so, his eyes empty, was the man who was once my subordinate and my sworn enemy.

Alvarto Egzex stood in our way.



## The Ex-Demon Lord and the Dark God of Death

Long ago, when I was called the Demon Lord, my army had a special class known as the Four Heavenly Kings. In most armies, the highest-ranking officer was an admiral, but the Four Heavenly Kings outranked admirals.

Just as the name suggested, they were both my subordinates and lords of their own large dominions. Their positions existed to streamline territorial expansion and kingdom governance, so those assigned to them possessed unilateral authority and were given lands that rivaled enemy kingdoms in size.

But with that authority came responsibility. There was a long list of qualities required of the Four Heavenly Kings: battle prowess, intelligence, popularity, and steadfast fealty. The standards to assess their competence for the job were beyond the norm.

In all of history, only fourteen became one of the Four Heavenly Kings. And among them, the final four were the most powerful in all of history: Olivia vel Vine, Lizer Bellphoenix, Verda Al-Hazard, and Alvarto Egzex.

Battle prowess, popularity, intelligence, military excellence. Each of them met the standards perfectly. In some regard, they were equal to me in ability.

On the other hand, aside from Olivia, the final four were all agents of chaos. Lizer kept his past a secret and carried a personal agenda. Verda prioritized her pleasure above all else and practically ignored my orders. And Alvarto kept trying to kill me.

While the last Four Heavenly Kings were the most powerful in history, they were also the most difficult to handle.

Olivia was the only one I had a fair relationship with, as we knew each other's temperaments well and had a long history...but as for the other three, I closed myself off to the possibility of us ever truly seeing eye to eye.

Despite this, after being reincarnated and experiencing the twists and turns of this new life, I've come to regard my former self as an idiot. It's possible to come to an understanding with anyone. Living as Ard Meteor helped me embrace this belief.

I befriended people I thought I never could, understood people I'd assumed were impossible, and held hands with people I believed were my mortal enemies. And Alvarto was one of those people.

After the major incident resulting from Lizer's scheme, he became an academy employee. I can say with confidence that Alvarto had become an irreplaceable piece of my life, although it's uncertain if he'd say the same about me...

At the very least, I had hopes for my relationship with Alvarto in the future.

"Ard Meteor. You must die now."

Perhaps that's why seeing him like this hurt so badly.

Alvarto Egzex had materialized in the middle of the stone room. His eyes were vacant, and the air around him felt odd.

It was sickening to behold. I averted my eyes unconsciously.

I had to restore the friends Mephisto had brainwashed back to normal with words and heart instead of magic. We wouldn't survive this crisis unless I made the impossible feat possible. And while that promised to be a tremendous obstacle, something about Alvarto's presence struck me as odd.

"That's some confidence, pausing in thought when an enemy has appeared."

His aura was like ice. He was bouncing like a spring.

I flew to the side, as if yanked by an invisible string. Elzard copied my action in the opposite direction. And when the two of us flew apart, ebony flames burst to life where we'd been, just like before. The fire lunged after us both.

It was like a tentacled monster, lashing after its prey. Its trajectory was tenacious, like a snake, as it pursued us.

"Dammit!" Elzard spat angrily.

She and Alvarto had worked together once in the past, so they surely knew each other's strengths and weaknesses. The ebony flames attacking us burned anything they touched to a crisp. It was pointless to block them. I finally realized what that meant, and Elzard had worked out the implications long before me.

"There is no place for you in the world I seek." Alvarto hurled magic attacks with the intent to kill.

A golden magic circle materialized in front of his slender frame, firing thick beams of light at him ceaselessly. They were filled with phenomenal energy. Not even high-level defense magic could deflect them.

The Frenzied King of Dragons' attack was imbued with a terrifying level of power, and yet Alvarto remained steadfast and bold, without a shred of fear. He stood like a champion, not taking a single defensive action. Alvarto was consumed by the massive, shining flames and disappeared.

Elzard sighed. "How anticlimac—"

"Don't let your guard down!" I yelled.

Evidently, she wasn't fully aware of the extent of his powers. Though her attack had burned Alvarto's body to a crisp, leaving nothing behind, it was entirely meaningless.

"I'd prefer not to be assessed by a lizard."

The words came as no surprise to me. Alvarto Egzex was immortal—and that wasn't hyperbole. I knew that not even extraordinary tricks could kill him.

"Hmp!" I dodged the attack that shot from behind me. Elzard, who lacked the critical piece of information I possessed, couldn't react to the surprise in time.

"Nn-ahh...!"

She was trapped inside the ebony flames, a force that could end her with mere touch.

"Elzard!!!"

This is what it felt like to have the blood drain from your face.

I opened my eyes wide, assessing the situation.

She's still alive... She didn't die instantly.

The ebony flames wrapped around her like a rope, slowly burning her with an ominous sound. A dragon's regenerative powers were meaningless now. As an inexpressible pain consumed her, all Elzard could do was fall to her knees and grit her teeth.

"In another five minutes, she'll be dead," Alvarto announced calmly, his vacant eyes on me. "If you wish to save your comrade, then kill me. If you use your supernatural ability, it should be possible."

And with that, Alvarto's vicious attack commenced. His ebony flames ignited violently in the chamber. The fire converged on him and formed into a massive serpent, and then it attacked.

Were that all, I'd repel it without issue. Unfortunately, his ebony flames were unpredictable. "Nngh!"

The abrupt way they burst into being, directly on an opponent, made them tricky. Unless you preemptively dodged them, they would target the inside of your body, enveloping it with dark fire and incinerating you instantly.

"Evasive action has become quite your forte, Ard Meteor."

Alvarto stared at me as I jumped all over the place. The ebony flames existed solely to incinerate me from within, gave no forewarning, and exuded no presence. They were the ultimate sneak attack.

I could only dodge them thanks to years of experience on the battlefield—and pure luck.

"You haven't changed a bit. You still lack the decisiveness to make a splitsecond decision."

The chill in his voice brought urgency to my heart, which only made this situation feel stranger.

It's just a hunch, but...even the conjecture I'm making right now might be part of Mephisto's plan.

As I desperately evaded the ebony flames, Alvarto muttered, "Your hesitation shows a lack of conviction... You still don't see reality for what it is."

"Nn—aah—aaaaaaaaah!" Elzard screamed.

"I decreased the limit by one minute. Now you only have three minutes, nineteen seconds remaining."

That was presumably the minimum amount of time I would need to kill Alvarto. Now that the guardian was gone, the ability-jamming barrier had vanished. If I could use my powers of analysis and control, it might be possible for me to kill Alvarto for good.

His existence was linked with the underworld. Unless I attacked the piece of him that resided there, he would regenerate endlessly. Meaning that to kill Alvarto, I had to go to the underworld. That was the established rule.

If I used my supernatural abilities in their ultimate manifestation, my *Original*, then destroying Alvarto by some other means wasn't entirely impossible.

However...

"Even at the eleventh hour, you still hesitate?"

He's reading me. He knows my thoughts.

"In the pursuit of protecting someone, saving someone, there are times when one must sacrifice another. You learned that lesson while living as the Demon Lord."

I had to choose—save one by sacrificing the other.

Every fighter had to make this decision at some point, no matter how powerful they were.

In the past, I always thought that I made the best choices. Sometimes, my decisions were hard, but I told myself that was a ruler's duty. I made the tough calls for those I needed to keep safe, not for myself.

And now I realized that I'd lost everything by following that philosophy. If anything, choosing to save one by sacrificing another had left me with nothing.

Will I make the same mistake again?

I meant to dismiss the question, but...

"Stop stalling. Don't run from the reality you wish was different, Ard Meteor.

If you do...you'll lose it all here."

Alvarto's words disputed my idea. "Sacrifice one to save the other." The words all but forced themselves on me.

"Why...? Why do I have to make that choice?!"

If I kill Alvarto, I can save Elzard. And if I wait any longer, Elzard will die for nothing.

"Kill me. It's the optimal choice."

He's right...there's no other way I can get out of this. If I had all the time in the world, I could draw upon the power of tens of thousands of words to restore Alvarto's heart to normal. But I don't have that luxury.

"You try to be too clever. That's why nothing ever goes your way."

Lydia's voice broke through my consternation.

I remember... That was right after we finished the great war against the Evil Gods.

As we marched back from the battlefield, side by side, I'd said, "I lost just about as many soldiers as expected, yet you lost far fewer than planned... Your army not only exceeds expectations on the battlefield, but you also suffer far fewer casualties. How in the world do you manage that?"

She'd answered, "Don't try to be so clever." Then she'd followed up with "Some problems can't be solved by using your head. Now, I'm not knocking using your brain to produce the best outcomes. It's just...fighters who keep winning through cunning rely on their minds too much. They freeze when faced with a sudden decision."

She looked into my eyes as though she were a wise old master speaking to her apprentice. "You're smart, Var. That's why your brain never shuts up. As a result, most things turn out just as you planned them—no better, no worse."

"If I want to overturn my expectations, then I have to become an idiot...is that what you're trying to tell me?" I'd asked.

Lydia had roughly tussled my hair and said, "Good answer, kid. You really are a smart guy. I'm not telling you to throw away your brain. I don't think you

could, anyway. But see, someday, you'll have to if you want to make any progress. And when that day comes..."

She abruptly dropped her masterly tone and smiled gently, speaking like a mother to her child. "Have faith in your friends. You don't need to be an idiot. Just believe. Believe in their strength, not your brains. Believe in them, until the bitter end."

At the time, I thought such a choice required serious guts. I'd constantly relied on my strength to win, so I was reluctant to accept abandoning that, especially late into a conflict.

Ultimately, that way of thinking stuck with me. That's why I finally realized that I couldn't keep to my old ways anymore. Continuing as I had been wouldn't change anything. I had to reject choosing between two options and go with the third one.

"Lydia...I'm taking a page from your book."

I stopped moving. In other words, I tossed aside my impulse to run away and welcomed the deadly attacks. It was suicide.

"Mmf...?!" Alvarto's eyes opened wide at the impossible development.

Immediately after, the ebony flames encased me. Their power was lethal. Anything the flames touched was eradicated and sent to the underworld. Even I, someone with an infinite soul, was not immune. That's precisely why I did it.

"Have you...lost your mind?" Alvarto watched me surrender myself to the fire in disbelief.

"In a way, I guess I have."

With each passing second, my existence faded. I knew I didn't have much longer. My brain was scolding me for being so foolish.

However, for that very reason, I smiled and said, "I don't wholly trust anyone. My own strength is all I depend on. And now I feel the weight of that bad habit quite keenly. I told Elzard earlier that I would become an idiot, and yet I haven't been able to let go of my intelligence."

But now that I'd realized how foolish I'd been...

"If Lydia were here right now, she'd probably roll her eyes at me. She'd yell at me, telling me it was too late."

My remaining time was fleeting, yet I wasn't worried at all. I was finally on the same mental plane as Lydia.

"Relying solely on my intellect to guide me was all for show in the end. This fight is not a competition of beautiful feats, neither is it a place to show off a superior mind."

It was about heart. The war that devil dragged me into was a battle of spirit, so I needed to be sincere.

"I believe. Until the bitter end, I believe not in my power, but in my friends...
and our hearts."

And if that results in my demise, so be it.

That earnest vow filled my heart, and my sincerity was swiftly answered.

"Urk—ohh—ah-AAAAAAAAAAH!!!" Elzard screamed again, but not out of anguish. She was breaking free.

And thus, the fate of the battle turned in our favor.

"Mnghf?!" Alvarto exclaimed, astonished. "How...did you...?!" While coughing up blood, he looked over his shoulder. There he found the dying Elzard. Her dragon bone blade had pierced Alvarto from behind.

"Don't underestimate dragon magic, you bastard!" She gritted her teeth, clenched her fists, and moved the blade upward. Alvarto's body was split in two from his waist up to his head.

However...

"Dammit...he won't stay dead...!"

Elzard's dragon bone blade had the power to kill immortals, but that ability didn't extend to Alvarto. Cursing under her breath, she kicked off the ground and raced toward me.

"You tryin' to break your promise?" she asked.

"No, I believed you would rescue me."

She scowled but reached out to cast a spell. The next thing I knew, the ebony flames burning my body flew away and disappeared, leaving no traces behind.

"What...is happening...?" Alvarto muttered, already fully regenerated. The confusion warping his beautiful features was genuine. "Was this all part of your calculations, too, Ard Meteor?"

"Hardly. I already told you that I'm an idiot now. I had no idea this would happen." Standing side by side with Elzard, I looked Alvarto dead in the eye and said, "I'm ashamed of how that fight went at school. My fear and the sudden betrayal of my expectations made me lose my way. Well, not anymore. My dear old friend, and..."

"What? Don't stare at me like that. You're creeping me out."

"...my new friend showed me the way. I need to stop relying on my brain and surrender everything to faith. To answer your question from earlier, that's the third option I had."

I paused for a few beats, and then I posed the inquiry that had been lingering in my heart. "You're not actually under Mephisto's spell, are you, Alvarto?"

He frowned in response. Then, after a moment's hesitation, he sighed, and the pressure left his body.

"When did you find out?"

"I've had my suspicions since the fight at the academy."

Two reasons had led me to that hypothesis. The first was that Alvarto saw me as Ard Meteor, not as an unidentified apparition like the rest of my classmates. As for the other...

"Your attacks showed discretion."

Even during the last fight, Alvarto had not fought at full strength. That got me thinking he was still himself.

"You pretended to be under Mephisto's control to fool him and to let me escape. Am I right?" His silence told me I wasn't. "Ideally, I would've recognized your intentions and fled immediately."

"Yeah... But you panicked instead; it almost got you killed." Alvarto's irritated

stare told me everything in his heart.

To answer him, I asked another question. "Did you play along and attack us... to test my determination?"

Alvarto nodded slowly. "Your strength was a large factor in sealing Mephisto in the past. But I didn't know if you were capable of something like that anymore. With a shattered spirit, you were nothing but deadweight. I wanted to put you out of your misery."

He sighed, and I couldn't help but smile. "It looks like I passed your test, then."

"Don't misunderstand," he shot back with a snort. "I just deemed it best not to kill you. That doesn't mean I've accepted your way of thinking."

I shrugged. "Regardless, how about joining m—?"

"Not so fast," Elzard interrupted, glaring at Alvarto. "I still don't trust him. Why weren't you affected by Mephisto's magic? I don't think that guy's ever messed up before."

"Yes... You're right. Mephisto did cast his corruption spell on me. I'd be a terrible thorn in his side if left alone. Unlike you, whom he forgot entirely."

The challenging words ruffled Elzard's feathers, but Alvarto didn't even flinch at the Frenzied King of Dragons.

"I was born from an element of Mephisto. You could say that I'm his clone. My origins surely played a part."

"Ha! You expect me to believe that bogus claim?"

"I don't care whether you believe me or not."

The air froze as the two stared daggers of ice at each other. Then Elzard and Alvarto let the insults fly.

"You were a lot cuter when you wore a clown's mask."

"Oh? Well, maybe you should've maintained your Jessica disguise. Now you stink like a lizard but possess no other presence."

"Didn't you try to kill Ard and Ireena? Damn, you've got some nerve,

pretending to be an ally now."

"Oh dear... Even your intellect is on par with a lizard's. Utterly useless."

"Huh?"

"You don't even realize how your own proclamations come back to bite you. It's imbecilic, really. You've tried to kill Ard and Ireena, too. You've got some nerve pretending to be their ally. Honestly, I don't even know why I bothered coming here. When I kidnapped Ireena, I envisioned you rushing to Ard and throwing a tantrum, yet you did nothing. You ran away to the mountains and shut yourself in to cry your eyes out. It was quite the surprise when you came waltzing out so brazenly. That's reptiles for you—thin-skinned. That's your one claim to—"

Elzard interrupted his next quip with a light beam. It completely disintegrated Alvarto. But of course...

"Be as violent as you please. I was going to toss you aside like a dirty rag after I got my use out of you. That's the unexaggerated truth. You have a right to be vengeful. Then again, a mere newt's strength couldn't possibly harm me."

In the past, Alvarto had assumed the persona of a berserk pervert. He'd been a real pest. However, he'd since abandoned that facade and showed his true colors. Unfortunately, that had only made him even more of a nuisance.

"Heh! Heh-heh! Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Elzard was so furious that she was reduced to maniacal laughter. Veins bulged on her face, and her white hair stood on end.

"Ew. White alligator, your face is cracked. Turn back. You're sickening me."

"Heh! Heh-heh! Mwa-ha-ha. This is...ha-ha...a first. N-nobody's ever made a fool of me this badly before."

Alvarto coolly looked down his nose at Elzard, who was ready to spring at him any second. I sighed at them both and said, "Oh, stomach pains...how I missed thee."

Even as I felt the sharp pangs in my gut that reminded me of moments like this in my past life, I couldn't help but laugh. No matter how it looked on the surface, we'd all made great progress today.

"All right, you two, bury the hatchet. Time is short. We need to get the item as quickly as possible."

"Idiot! Who died and made you leader?"

"Hmm... Finally, something we can agree on. As much as I hate to be on the same side as gecko-brain."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. I think you two should mind your language. I hope you haven't forgotten that I can severely reduce your standings in Ireena's eyes whenever I like."

"Urk...!"

"Y-you dirty cheater!"

"Sticks and stones," I replied with a smirk. Then I patted them both on the shoulders and said, "I'm counting on you both. I mean it."

Thus, the ex-Demon Lord embarked on an invigorating quest with two companions in tow.

## The Bitter Boy Has a Conversation with His Progeny

The Laville Academy of Magic's schoolyard had a giant tree growing in it called the Tree of the Sword King.

This massive plant was said to house the Holy Sword Vald-Galgulus that Lydia the Champion once wielded. However, it was nothing more than a wonder of nature to the untrained eye. When bathed in the daytime sunlight, it sparkled with a bountiful beauty that cleansed the soul, which is why Mephisto chose it as the venue for his teatime.

There was a tiny white table and chairs. The tray atop the table was piled with pastries. Among them was a strawberry tart, Mephisto's favorite.

He held his teacup in his right hand, took a sip of the black tea, and said, "This is nice. Very nice. A cascade of unexpected twists and turns are the spices that give a game its good flavor."

A giant mirror stood before the Tree of the Sword King. In it, Ard Meteor and his two comrades were visible. As Mephisto gazed at them, his lips turned into a contented smile.

But his grin was not one of confidence. Elzard's arrival and Alvarto's magic immunity were factors outside his expectations and the keys to turning the odds out of his favor.

Mephisto was fine with that, however.

"You've given me the most unexpected twist to date, my sweet."

As he gazed at his beloved nemesis, his one true friend, his smile remained content in every way. "Good. Now that things have settled down on his end, let's you and I have a little chat."

Mephisto turned his grin to the girl sitting at the table with him. It was

undeniably Ireena Olhyde, but something was off about her. Her eyelids were drowsy, and it was unclear where she was looking. Her face lacked spirit. She looked like a doll.

"Now, then! There was a truly intriguing moment in their little interactions. Yes, you guessed it, it was little Elzard's mother. The fight with her mother rendered Elzard useless for a minute there. Do you know why?"

Ireena promptly answered. "Because...it looked just like her mom."

"Hmmm, I give that a C-plus. Too bad. If you'd said it was because she didn't notice the outward appearance didn't match what was inside, I'd have given you an A. Oh well, let's set that aside."

Mephisto took another sip of tea. "The guardian did indeed look just like her mother. And the guardian's experience-driven battle prowess was likely also replicated flawlessly. But her memories and personality weren't carried over. Meaning that the guardian was an impostor with little Elzard's mother's appearance and power. Okay, the preamble got a bit lengthy. Now, let's get to the question."

Mephisto leaned forward, bringing his face close to Ireena's. His grin deepened. "Sweet Ireena, at present, your outward appearance and your inner self are united. You are the spitting image of Ireena Olhyde, and the memories engraved in your brain are proof that you are yourself. But you see, sweet Ireena, despite this, even though your appearance and mind are united, you are not yourself. You aren't even a person right now. Do you know why?"

Ireena shook her head. "I don't understand. I'm me. Who else would I be?"

"Ha-ha! Thanks. You answered just as I expected, and of course you did. That's all you're capable of saying right now. I'd hoped you'd override that expectation. I guess that was too much to ask. You only break boundaries for others, not for yourself. That part of you is truly a *carbon copy*."

Mephisto's golden eyes narrowed to slits. While there was a hint of disappointment in his gaze, his lips remained in a smile.

"Why is it that even though your outside and inside are united, you are still not yourself? The answer can be found in your state of being, sweet Ireena. You

aren't normal right now. I've corrupted you. And yet you lack the awareness that you aren't your true self. Your soul isn't a human's. You're a puppet."

Ireena said nothing because Mephisto wouldn't let her. He'd stopped her brain from thinking. She could hear his voice, but she didn't have the power to react. Anyone in that state was nothing more than a toy in Mephisto's eyes.

"Sweet Ireena...you've got potential. That's why I'm ignoring my beloved and focusing on you right now." Mephisto brought his right hand before his face. "Now, let's get to the heart of our chat."

He snapped his fingers, and the puppet became human again. The element needed to complete Ireena had returned to her, a quality that could be called the soul.

It took Ireena a few seconds to grasp the situation once she was aware. And then...

"Mmm!!!"

...her cheeks flashed red, and she jumped backward. By the time her chair fell and hit the ground, she was already in a battle stance, glaring at Mephisto.

"Mephisto Yuu Phegor! Bring everyone back now! Or I'll—"

"You really are a fool. But I love that about you. You're just like my daughter, putting your emotions over the right and wrong of a situation. That dash of stupidity is truly a beautiful thing."

It wasn't sarcasm. Mephisto's words were sincere. There wasn't a trace of sourness in the smile on his beautiful face.

"Anyway, have a seat, Ireena."

The moment he finished his sentence, Ireena dropped her defensive stance and returned to the table.

"Mmm?!" Ireena snapped backward like a rubber band, her eyes open wide as she grunted in shock. She floated in midair, and the next thing she knew, she was seated again.

"Mmm?!"

She was seated again.

"Mmm?!"

She was seated again.

"Mmm?!"

She was seated again.

"They say time is finite. But never fear, sweet Ireena, for there are no pesky limitations between us. So repeat your attempt as much as you'd like—until you feel ready to sit and chat with me, that is."

He regarded her sweetly, like an angel, yet there was a devilish terror behind his expression.

Ireena gritted her teeth in anguish. She hadn't the faintest idea what he was doing to her. All she knew was that this man was Ard Meteor's equal...or perhaps a phantom even greater than he was. No matter how she resisted, she would be seated the next instant as though nothing had occurred.

"What's this? Giving up already?" Mephisto cackled.

"What...do you want to talk about?" Ireena demanded, stifling her anger as best she could.

"Yes, well, my thoughts aren't particularly grand. But if you work hard enough, you just might be able to resolve this matter in my darling's stead."

"What...do you mean?!" Ireena demanded.

Mephisto smiled cloyingly. "You see, Ireena, I don't particularly hate you people, and I don't want to destroy you, either."

"Then why?!"

"Fair point. I didn't tell my darling, but I guess I can tell you. It's more fun if my little game with you has a different flavor than the one with my sweetheart."

And so the devil began his story, recounting everything that had brought him to this moment.

The truth.

"Now, where shall I begin? Where did it all start? Ah, yes. I awoke in the middle of that little fight you and my darling had with Lizer in the Megatholium. At the time, I was really struggling, trying to break the seal my dearest put on me."

The words that followed were beyond anything Ireena could have imagined.

*"* 

After Mephisto finished explaining everything to her, Ireena sat in a daze, her eyes open wide. She'd lost the ability to do anything other than stare silently at Mephisto.

"Well, your reaction is only natural."

The faint glimmer of resignation in Mephisto's eyes as he sipped his tea was likely from the story he'd told.

How had he broken the seal?

Why had he called this battle the "farewell game"?

And why was Mephisto taking a battle seriously for the first time?

The shock of learning the answer was too much for Ireena's psyche. But in time, her brain accepted it.

"If all of that...is true...then you shouldn't be...wasting your time...doing this!"

Ireena trembled with emotion, yet Mephisto remained unbothered. However, there was something like resignation in his gaze.

"It is true, which is exactly why I'm doing this. The future is already determined. Having said that, I can't guarantee that events won't turn in your favor," Mephisto muttered cryptically. He stared head-on at the girl across from him. "When I began this farewell game with my honey, I'd given up on everything. But now, things are a little different. I've begun to think that resisting fate might not be such a bad thing after all... And I owe it all to you, sweet Ireena."

Mephisto's intentions were a mystery. She had no clue as to the reason behind his obsession and his bizarre point of view.

What value did he see in her?

Mephisto saw through her doubts. "It's only natural that I be obsessed. And there's nothing at all unnatural about me thinking of you as special."

The following words that came from Mephisto's mouth sent lightning through Ireena's heart.

"You are the descendent of my daughter—Lydia Viigensgeight."

Ireena felt the weight of a heavy boulder roll onto her shoulders.

"I'm...Lady Lydia's...descendent?"

She couldn't refute the claim.

Memories from her past flooded her mind. She recalled when the boy who called himself a god had sent her to the old world. During the quest with Ard and her friends to get back to the present time...they'd met Lydia.

The time she spent with Lydia had been filled with warmth. Ireena had felt like she was interacting with her mother. At the time, she'd assumed it was due to Lydia's maternal instincts and gentleness. But if somebody had told her that sensation came from a blood connection, she would have believed it. In fact, she would've taken satisfaction in knowing that.

Mephisto was right. Ireena was the descendent of Lydia the Champion. That much was easy for her to accept.



However...

"You are...Lady Lydia's...father...?"

"I am," he answered casually. "Which makes me your ancestor."

Ireena glared at him and bit her lip.

I want to deny it.

I don't want a drop of this evil man's blood polluting my veins.

However, she couldn't refuse his claim.

On the surface, Ireena's family was made of descendants of lower nobles. But in actuality, they were true royalty, pulling the Laville Academy of Magic's strings from behind the curtain.

Ordinarily, Ireena might have lived quietly in the corners of noble society as the descendant of a baron and steered the nation's politics from the shadows. That duality in Ireena's family was precisely because of its bloodline.

An heir of the Evil Gods was the absolute worst origin a person could have in the modern era. If their lineage were made public, it would be dangerous for them to remain in their own nation.

And the realization that the origins of her cursed fate sat across from her right now was infuriating.

"It's all...your fault..."

"True. I am the source of your family's disadvantages. But you see, Ireena, you would have never been born without me."

He was really saying, "Though the misfortunes in your past were because of me, you owe me for the happiness you've attained now."

It stung because it was true.

The loneliness and anxiety that followed Ireena from her early childhood to today...no ordinary person could even imagine the trauma in her broken heart.

On the other hand, she owed the many dear people in her life to her tragic origin. Ard, Ginny, Sylphy...and the countless other friends she made after

them. They all remained her friends, even when they learned the truth about her.

The bond they shared wasn't so flimsy that a gust of wind could strip it away. Ireena loved her friends. She regarded those relationships as her life's best accomplishments.

And yet they were all thanks to Mephisto's existence.

He was the root of all Ireena's worst qualities, but he'd also indirectly helped to shape her best ones.

However...

"If you didn't exist...my friends wouldn't have had to suffer!"

"Yeah, I guess so. Without me, the Old Gods would still govern this world, and everyone would live in peace and harmony. After all, the Outer Ones—ah, they're called 'the Evil Gods' in the modern era, aren't they? Anyway, I brought them all to this world. If I'd never existed, the events that brought us here would never have transpired."

Mephisto's tone was quiet and calm. He didn't sound at all villainous or smug. If anything, it was the opposite.

"Plenty have told me they've wished I was never born. But none of them want that more than me."

A bottomless pit of despair lurked behind Mephisto's golden eyes, startling Ireena. By all historical accounts, Mephisto Yuu Phegor was the very embodiment of an Evil God. His hands touched everything that was wicked, and he felt no remorse. He was the enemy of all creation. And that was how Ireena had defined Mephisto, too. But now...

"A wretch like me was never meant to be happy, to smile, or to be surrounded by friends. I can't be. I know that. But...I still can't give up. Even if it's taboo, I want to be happy, I want to smile among friends. But that wish will never be granted, so I've twisted logic and reason and denied the existence of love and friendship... Ultimately, I'm just bitter. I'm not so grand as to be dubbed an Evil God."

Even though Mephisto knew himself and accepted who he was, he was unable to abandon his anguish. The way he looked...he reminded Ireena of herself.

"When I was little, I held similar beliefs. Nobody loved me, so that meant everyone was my enemy. I convinced myself that love and friendship weren't real."

My heart would have broken otherwise. And it must be the same for Mephisto.

Ireena's image of him as an incomprehensible monster started to fade.

"If I could have just become the monster everyone believed me to be, I might have been content. But...Ireena, I'm sure you understand how impossible that is. After all, you and I are only people. We can't become monsters."

That's why bitterness, rejecting friendship, was his only recourse. But...

"I was able to change when I met Ard Meteor. But you—"

"I couldn't do it. Even after meeting my beloved, I'm still me."

Ireena wondered what was different between them.

She and Mephisto continued to be bitter because they had no friends.

However, that was just a story they told themselves.

There was always somebody out there willing to love them.

And there was always somebody out there whom they could love.

Both Ireena and Mephisto had met another who helped them think that way.

So why?

"Were you betrayed by those close to you?" Ireena asked.

Mephisto hung his head. "No. My wife and daughter never did anything like that."

"Then why...?"

Ireena wasn't pressing him out of curiosity. She truly wished to understand.

Ireena and Mephisto were enemies. She was furious that he'd attacked her

friends. Despite this, Ireena didn't see Mephisto as an evil that needed to be eradicated anymore. After speaking with him, Ireena realized they were alike in ways.

Now Ireena believed that what Mephisto had said at the start of their conversation was true. They could resolve this by talking.

That would only work if they comprehended each other, though.

"Tell me everything. Then I know we'll reach a mutual understanding. We'll be able to join hands. I want to understand you...and if there's a hole in your heart, I want to do what I can to fill it. I'm sure that even you—"

Even you and I could become friends. Ireena truly believed that.

There's no such thing as a person who only harms others. I learned that from Lizer Bellphoenix and Alvarto Egzex. And I'm certain that Elzard will join us, too.

Mephisto seemed to read her thoughts.

"You're the only one, sweet Ireena. The only one who's ever said anything like that to me."

Tears formed in his golden eyes. He didn't seem a devil at all as he wept. He was a poor lost child, pleading for help.

"I thought you might become my fourth after my wife, my daughter, and my darling. I got my hopes up that you might become somebody I could love with all my heart. In truth, you might even surpass that."

His lips quivered as he spoke. There was no artifice to his emotions. His sincerity was unguarded and bare.

"Ireena... I think it might be all right to admit defeat. I want to forfeit my farewell game with my darling and join him. I want that more than anything."

Mephisto's eyes gazed at Ireena, overflowing with tears. "For you, I think I could overturn fate."

A ray of hope shone into Ireena's soul. There was no need to fight anymore. This would be the last— "Phew. Crying really is the best way to relieve stress, isn't it? My head's all clear now. Thanks, Ireena."

Just as Ireena thought everything was over, Mephisto made it seem like everything he'd said was a lie.

He began to talk her through what was to come.

"Now, then! Let's review the situation. My sweetheart and his companions are pushing forward, trying to gain enough power to defeat me. If they keep up their good pace, they should arrive here within the next seven days...though I doubt things will go so well for them. After all, the *next trial* is at a crazy-high difficulty level."

When she saw the catlike smirk on Mephisto's face, Ireena grew worried. Mephisto paid this no mind. "Should they stop her attack, the second and third trials are just around the corner. Let's say my darling does clear all the levels and make it to me. By then, he'll never be able to win. Not unless you are so precious to me that I don't want you to die. Too bad. You just might have made this game more difficult for my dearest."

Mephisto nodded to himself as his smile deepened. He seemed shut in his own little world.

"What are you...talking about?" Ireena asked. The words almost came out unconsciously.

Mephisto gave her a puzzled look "Hmm? Why, I was only clarifying the current conditions and voicing my thoughts about what's ahead."

The look in Mephisto's eyes seemed to inquire if he'd said anything odd.

This only deepened Ireena's confusion. "Uh, but you just said... Don't you remember?"

"I think it might be all right to admit defeat. I want to forfeit my farewell game with my darling and join him."

So...why?

"You're still...going through with this...?"

The moment Ireena asked the question, Mephisto's head cocked sharply to one side. After making a show of how bemused he was, he said, "Actually, I've got a question for you. Why did you think this was over?"

"Because...you said you were giving up."

"Hmmm? Oh, but I never announced an end to the game."

Something's off.

Ireena couldn't shake a sensation that something was missing—that they weren't on the same wavelength.

"Was it...all a lie? When you said you wanted to overturn fate."

"No. I meant every word."

"Then...didn't you decide...to put an end to this?"

As she beheld the scorn in his eyes that seemed to ask "What the hell is this girl saying?" Ireena got a faint sense of the truth. Her earlier assessment of Mephisto had been incorrect.

"Oh! Oh, now I get it, Ireena! You were pretending to be stupid so I'd hate you!" The smile returned to Mephisto's lips. "Nice move! You almost fooled me there! Keep it up and maybe I really will! Otherwise, I'll just come to love you more and more and..."

The next words that came out of his mouth planted a seed of certainty inside Ireena.

"...In the end, I'll probably have to destroy you."

Ireena didn't comprehend. How could she?

"Destroy...me?"

"Yup. If things stay on their current trajectory, that's what'll happen."

"But...why ...?"

"Because you pique my curiosity."

His smile was a field of flowers coming into bloom. His face was beautiful, like an angel's, and disgusting, like a devil's.

"Once I have my heart set on knowing something, there's no stopping me. My

heart controls my body, not the other way around. That's why I let my curiosity guide me. I want to see what sorts of emotions come about from my decisions. If there is even the slightest unknown in my conjecture, then I get restless. That was why I carried out that test."

Tears ran down his cheeks. Resenting the past. Grieving the past.

However, Mephisto smiled, even as he cried. He was having fun while grieving.

"My wife was the first person I ever loved. I wanted to know how I'd feel if I killed her, so I did.

"I took my time. I inflicted all the pain on her I could imagine. I made my daughter watch her suffer. Until my wife's personality wore away...until she disappeared completely...

"I didn't stop. I couldn't.

"I wanted to know. I wanted to know. I wanted to know. I wanted to know. I couldn't help myself.

"It hurt, truly.

"My heart felt like it was going to burst.

"My wife loved me until the bitter end.

"Yet I tortured and killed her.

"I felt like I was losing my mind, yet I couldn't.

"After that... After losing my wife, my daughter was my only remaining hope.

"With her, my heart would be sated with love, and I wouldn't need to despair.

"And that's why I began to wonder how it might feel if I hurt her and made her disappear.

"I was curious, so I tried.

"I tortured her, drove her to the brink.

"I nearly burned her body and soul to ash, but I couldn't go through with it.

"Something about cutting that final thread myself was too much.

"That's why I got someone else to do it.

"My daughter met her end by the hand of her best friend.

"And in that moment, I knew it was cruel. I realized that it was truly horrible. For the first time, I wanted to kill the man named Varvatos.

"'How dare you kill my daughter,' I thought. What an absurd notion to embrace.

"So I tried to destroy him and his forces, but it all felt silly, so I quit.

"Killing them all didn't pique my curiosity.

"Then he sealed me for thousands of years.

"The centuries were predictable and dreadfully boring.

"I was hungry for so long. Hungry for something unexpected to give my curiosity the electrifying jolt it needed.

"Now I thought my darling was the one who gave that to me...but I was wrong.

"It was you, Ireena. You gave it to me.

"That's why I have high hopes for you.

"I dream of the moment when you make a new emotion bud inside of me."

Mephisto's words pummeled Ireena carelessly, breaking her heart.

"Who...the hell...are you?"

I'm scared. I'm terrified. As a terror the likes of which she had never known overcame her, Ireena thought, I was a fool for ever thinking we could understand each other. We could never be friends.

There was someone undeserving of love and understanding. He was laughing at her right now.

"Good luck, Ireena! If you maintain the status quo until my precious arrives, you'll win. But if I come to hate you...or love you too much, then I'll destroy you and the world."

For the first time she could remember, Ireena put a label on someone. After

being cursed for her origin, she'd vowed never to treat another soul that way. That changed today, however.

She murmured in terror, "You're a monster!"

I don't want to understand him.

I don't want to take his hand.

There's no way I could ever be friends with a monster like him.

Hatred and contempt stained her words.

Perhaps saddened by seeing the one he loved in such pain, a teardrop formed in Mephisto's eye. It rolled down his cheek until it reached his lips, sinking and vanishing into the evil within.

There was no better way to highlight the devil's true nature.

## The Ex-Demon Lord and the Ultimate Ordeal (Part I)

The Bangle of Devouring was a requirement for defeating Mephisto, not one for a guaranteed victory. So we had no choice but to recover the item.

That being said, using it wasn't a simple matter. Since it was imbued with incredible powers, I'd placed conditions that needed to be met to activate it. Specifically, the seal had to be unlocked.

Ordinarily, the Bangle of Devouring's powers were locked, and the key was a collection of seven gemstones. Following the farewell game with Mephisto in the old days, I scattered the gemstones around the world after I sealed the bangle's abilities. Most of them were in ultra-difficult dungeons. However, one was different from the others.

To ensure the bangle never came into wicked hands, I concealed one gemstone in a place only I could access, another dimension. It was located in a space between worlds, the very same one that Mephisto and the other Evil Gods crossed to reach our world.

Only a small handful of people knew about this liminal dimension. Of them, an even smaller number could create an entrance. Ultimately, there was only one person who stood a chance at returning from that realm alive—the Demon Lord, Varvatos.

However, that information wouldn't help me acquire the gemstone. Honestly, it was incredibly demoralizing. After all, I wasn't Varvatos. I was Ard Meteor. Traveling to another dimension and making it back in one piece was impossible as a nobody. Still, defying rationality was the only way I'd get a chance at striking Mephisto.

Thus, I took Elzard and Alvarto with me to the other dimension, well aware of the risks, and now we were on our way back. The gemstone in question was in my hand. All that remained was to return to the fissure between dimensions and jump through. Unfortunately...

The path to the gemstone had been hell, and the way back promised to be even worse.

Nervousness seized my heart. It was easily among the top five most stressful situations in my life. "We're almost at the entrance!" I cried to my companions. "Jump like your lives depend on it!"

This interdimensional space was a white void. The concepts of up and down didn't exist, and neither did gravity or oxygen. We were floating in nothingness. This forced anyone here to cast oxygen and flight magic constantly. I couldn't imagine a more deadly environment.

To make things worse, that wasn't even the greatest hurdle in trying to get back.

Continuous spells were a piece of cake compared to the little friends following us.

"Agh, damn it all! A king can only take so much humiliation!" Elzard cursed as she darted about fiercely I glanced behind me and spied a swarm of thick jet blackness that nearly blotted out the white void.

They were dimensional parasites, mysterious entities who infested other dimensions.

It felt strange to call them alive. While their bodies didn't differ much from those of ordinary people, their forms were truly challenging to describe. At the very least, they weren't especially pleasing to look at. Their mixture of human and insect qualities made them hideous. They were highly skilled fliers, but aside from that, they were powerless. And they boasted no great intelligence that might pose a threat. However...

"Their numbers are stupid high! Where the hell are they coming from?!" Alvarto shouted angrily.

He hit the nail on the head. Their true strength was in their numbers. A few million or billion wouldn't have been an issue. Unfortunately, their ranks appeared to be infinite. The swarm doubled in size with each passing second.

Their current numbers presumably totaled in the quadrillions.

Even as we fled, they continued to multiply.

"I'm not gonna let these damn bugs get the best of me!"

I had lost count of how many times Elzard had said that. To someone with her ego, running from an enemy she could kill with the flick of a finger was too much.

Yet if we took a stand against them, it wouldn't matter that we were the King of Frenzied Dragons and the Demon Lord. Only eternal stagnation awaited us.

The dimensional parasites respawned more swiftly than we could exterminate them. No matter how hard we tried, it was impossible to eradicate them. However, since they were so weak, they could never kill us, either.

Really, the problem all boiled down to numbers. If we were engulfed in that humungous swarm, we'd be as good as imprisoned by walls we'd never break through.

Magic couldn't exterminate the parasites faster than they respawned. This made dimensional parasites the weakest and the strongest beings in existence. Anyone caught in their ranks wouldn't be able to lift a finger or even kill themselves. They'd have to wait in stillness until they died.

Even the full extent of my powers wouldn't save us from that fate. Once the dimensional parasites spotted you, the only recourse was to flee.

Fortunately, there was a ray of hope.

We were at the rift between dimensions. Once we flew in, we'd be back in our own world. Unfortunately...

"What's the plan now, Ard Meteor? At this rate, we're doomed."

"Yes, the situation is indeed bleak. We won't last another few seconds..."

The dimensional parasites were closing in on us slowly. They'd be on us before we could get out.

"Two seconds. Just two seconds. If we could freeze them for that long..."

I racked my brain desperately while my body grew damp from sweat.

"Guess I'll have to use my last resort," Elzard said abruptly.

The moment I heard her quiet words and realized what she meant, I shouted "Don't—!"

Before I could finish my sentence, Elzard was already on the move. There was only one way to stop our enemy—spending all our power to slaughter the entire swarm.

However, that method came with a price. And Elzard was going to pay it.

The Frenzied King of Dragons was not the sort of being to choose an honorable hero's death, though. She was going to sacrifice the man flying beside her.

Elzard hit Alvarto Egzex's abdomen with her tail, stopping in midair.

Alvarto's eyes shot open. I'd never seen him so mortified.

His shock was understandable. If the dimensional parasites swallowed an immortal like him, he'd be frozen within for eternity.

The mere thought made me go stiff. Even Alvarto looked terrified.

"You little shits!!!"

After that explosive outburst, two things happened in quick succession. The first was a huge blast of ebony flames. The dark fire burst into the white void, filling it in a split second. It barreled toward the swarm of dimensional parasites like a giant wave, yet it still wasn't enough to completely swallow them.

And Alvarto recognized this.

Which led him to scream...

"KALMIAAAA!"

...and to summon.

The sentient sword materialized in Alvarto's hand. Of the three Great Holy Swords, this one stood at the top of them all, the pinnacle of the very concept of blades.

As a person, her name was Kalmia.

As a weapon, it was Dilga Zervatis, the Holy Sword.

"Exhaust all your magic if you must! We're hitting them with everything we've got!!!"

"Understood, Master." As soon as Kalmia, the personality within the sword, answered him...

"Vasq Helgeqia Vol Nagan—(Puny Creatures, Submit To Me Now! Otherwise—)"

By chanting in the ancient language, Alvarto unleashed his great feat.

"GALVA QUESARRR!!!!! (You Shall Return To The Void!)"

The Holy Sword shot a burst of rainbow-colored light, imbued with destruction. It melted into the black flames pursuing the parasites, creating an even stronger *Attack* spell with an ultra-wide range.

It swallowed the quadrillions of parasites, vanquishing them.

I suppose I should've expected as much from the most powerful of the former Four Heavenly Kings. By unleashing the entirety of his powers onto the swarm, he'd done the impossible and bought us another two seconds.

"Spectacularly done. Whoa, there."

Elzard dived for the dimensional rift without looking back. Meanwhile, I had slightly dropped my speed.

"Alvarto!"

I yanked hard on the magic rope secured to his waist.

I'd predicted that move when Elzard's tail snapped a few seconds before. I'd known she intended to sacrifice Alvarto, so the moment Elzard had taken action, I'd created a means of escape.

Drained of his magic, Alvarto was immobilized...but by tugging on the rope attached to his waist, I pulled him from the grasp of the dimensional parasites.

All three of us made it back to our world.

"Ngh!"

The moment we slipped through the rift, gravity yanked our bodies to the earth, covering all three of us in mud.

"Ard Meteor...thank you for that."

"Don't worry about it. I only did what was right."

As we spoke, the dimensional rift slowly closed behind us. Then suddenly, Dilga Zervatis, the Holy Sword in Alvarto's hand, glowed...and took human form.

She was a beautiful girl, clad in a jet-black gothic dress. Anger smoldered in Kalmia's ivory-white face as she marched up to Elzard. She looked down at the dragon, who was unable to stand from fatigue, like Alvarto and me, and said, "Because of you...Al nearly suffered a fate worse than death."

Elzard snorted at Kalmia's enraged face and said, "Two lives saved in exchange for one is a deed worth celebrating."

There wasn't a hint of malice in the reply, but Kalmia shot a death glare at Elzard.

"Don't." Alvarto's command stopped Kalmia just short of her killing Elzard. As she turned to look at him, he spoke calmly and coldly. "That white lizard still has value. Don't kill her until we've used her up."

Alvarto was telling Kalmia that it was okay to kill Elzard once they'd gotten their use out of her.

Well, by the time that happens, we'll have stopped this crisis. Ireena and I will talk them down.

"Didn't ya hear your master? How about ya get lost, bitch?"

"...Steel yourself, Elzard. After we kill Mephisto, you're next." Kalmia vanished, letting her icy words of death hang in the air.

We took a moment to catch our breath, and once we'd recovered a good amount of stamina and magic, I said, "That was truly a perilous fight, but we made it through."

"This gemstone makes seven," Alvarto said. "Which means..."

"We can break the seal on the devouring thingy. Isn't that right, Ard Meteor?"

I nodded at Elzard. "Next, we're going to retrieve the bangle."

"It waits at the capital of the Federal States of Saphiria...right?"

"Yes. It's going to be another long trip, so... Elzard, if you please?"

When she caught my gaze, the dragon glared menacingly and cursed under her breath. But she didn't say no.

We sailed off through the vast sky on the back of a dragon.

"Why do you have to use me like a mount all the time?! You could just use flight magic!" Elzard, now a giant white dragon, grumbled.

Alvarto sighed. Elzard had been like this for over an hour. "Flight magic wears on the senses. If Mephisto's enhanced pawns attack us while we're weakened, it'll be hard to fight back. So riding on your back is our most logical course of action. This is my third time explaining it, right? Do you still not understand? Is your reptilian brain too small to comprehend?"

Elzard said nothing back, but she shook her body. Alvarto and I were secured with magic, though, so we couldn't fall.

"It's like I'm covered in pesky fleas..."

"Um, Elzard, isn't it unfair to include me?" I said.

"Shaddup. In a way, you piss me off most of all, ya parasite."

What kind of logic is that? Once this is over, I'm telling Ireena everything.

"Okay, stop joking around. It's time we take this seriously," Alvarto said from beside me. He left a pause for effect before getting to the matter at hand. "So we get the bangle... Then what?"

Elzard seemed interested in that question. "If I'm being honest, I really wanna just brutally murder that Mephisto guy. He's a menace. Even with that devouring thingy, we can't stop him."

That was just how incredible Mephisto Yuu Phegor's strength was.

"You're right...," I agreed. "I don't think the bangle alone is enough to stop him."

"So what're you gonna do about it?" There was a faint glimmer of hope in

Alvarto's eyes. That meant he didn't have a single plan of his own. And I couldn't blame him. I couldn't think of anything remotely effective, either.

However...

"I do have one suggestion..."

Elzard and Alvarto would undoubtedly grimace the moment they heard my idea. Unless I was careful, our fellowship might fall apart on the spot. So I steeled myself and opened my mouth to tell them— "Ah! Elzard, watch out!"

I sensed an ambush. And I wasn't the only one.

"Thanks, Mr. Obvious!" With a guttural growl, Elzard cast a *Defensive* spell, encasing her body with a giant shielding orb.

Barely a moment later, a torrent of spears slammed into us. There was a ridiculous number of them—too many to count. The flock of spears pierced the sky and lanced toward us. They'd come from the capital city in the distance.

"...Right at the border. I'm surprised we got this far," Alvarto remarked.

"Yes, it was about time he attacked us," I agreed.

The giant city where the spears were coming from was Velkratt, the capital of the Federal States of Saphiria. Mephisto had likely enhanced all of its inhabitants to the level of warriors from the old days.

"This volley of spears in the air...makes me feel sentimental," I said.

"Yeah, it takes me back to the past."

The raging blades surging toward us were fierce, but not enough to faze us.

"Are they mocking me? These sticks are nothing."

I could sympathize with Elzard for being offended. A barrage of spears looked impressive, but it had practically no effect on us. The magic shield quickly deflected them. They broke and fell to the ground.

Our enemy likely knew their attack was meaningless. The action had to serve some other purpose.

"Even the newt is powerful in her own right, and they know it. I doubt they're mocking you."

"Yeah, but you're mocking me, aren't ya? You're dead, pretty boy."

Alvarto sighed. "Regardless, it wouldn't hurt to strengthen our defenses."

Alvarto and I added our own magic to Elzard's shield while measuring where the enemy attacks landed. This amplified our defenses exponentially.

The former Demon Lord, a former Heavenly King, and the Frenzied King of Dragons. Our shield comprised the power of the three mightiest names in the modern era. Not even enemies enhanced by Mephisto stood a chance at breaching— "No, wait a minute."

That's when I suddenly remembered the existence of certain magic equipment. Alvarto was on the same page.

"If I remember correctly, Velkratt has those things."

"Yes, but they're—"

I was about to tell him that those particular pieces of equipment existed for the sole use of their respective owners, and that nobody else could wield them. However, I then realized we'd underestimated Mephisto's meddling.

As if to mock us for thinking it was impossible, a crimson stream shot from Velkratt, a red spear.

"You have to dodge it!" I cried.

However, Elzard hadn't picked up on the danger like we had, and she reacted too slowly. Even though her intent was to evade, her movements made it plain that she was over-relying on the barrier.

"You stupid crocodile..." Alvarto sighed loudly.

A moment later, the unbreakable shield was shattered by the red spear.

"MRROWWW?!" Elzard howled in shock.

That finally scared her into taking proper evasive action, but it was already too late.

The red spear pierced through her three wings in one shot.

"Mmf! What the hell is happening?!"

She fell.

For a dragon who ruled the heavens and earth, it was surely a first.

She never would've imagined anyone could steal her powers of flight and knock her out of the sky.

As we plummeted toward the ground, Alvarto and I exchanged glances.

"I should have known this would happen."

"Yeah. Looks like this will be an even bigger hassle than I thought."

We shared a sigh and prepared for impact.



The Ten Calamities—a set of warriors who served Olivia vel Vine in the past. One of the men, Ignis Wargerior, had been nicknamed Godspear. In the old days, he was a renowned spearman who carried the red Demon Spear Zol Tovalki, from which he got his moniker.

Elzard's pierced wings were the work of that man and his weapon.

The notion that he was waiting for us at our destination raised some doubts, though.

All ten of the Ten Calamities, Ignis included, had died.

The great war between humans and the Outer Ones during the ancient times was a brutal conflict that took the lives of nameless soldiers and great heroes en masse. The esteemed Ten Calamities were no exception.

Their astral bodies were long gone. I'd assumed that no matter how hard one tried, resurrecting them would be impossible...

But we were dealing with Mephisto.

It wasn't hard to imagine him achieving impossible resurrections with the snap of a finger.

Or perhaps he'd altered the magic equipment of the Ten Calamities so that anyone could use it.

The capital city of Saphiria was a massive metropolis that was under Olivia's rule since the ancient times...and it was also a sentimental place where she

spent many long years with subordinates who were more precious than life itself.

The Ten Calamities were like family to Olivia. So she surely wanted to feel their presence, even in death. Olivia kept their weapons close, refusing to let anyone else touch the weapons her Ten Calamities loved so much.

In other words, Velkratt contained *all* the powerful weapons the Ten Calamities used.

Either Mephisto resurrected them or made it so anybody could use their weapons. Regardless...

"Our only choice is to move forward."

I stood with my comrades and glared at the entrance to Velkratt ahead. Saphiria was a multiracial nation with a therianthrope majority. Olivia was an object of worship, and the Black Wolf Order was the national religion.

Because of that, the capital of Velkratt that Olivia founded was regarded as a holy city in modern times. No part of it had been altered in any way, making Velkratt unique for a modern city. It resembled a citadel.

Behind the high walls and the massive gate, the capital was surely in the literal jaws of death.

"Shall we?" I addressed my company.

"I always repay my debts!"

"I don't wish to needlessly exert myself, but you don't always get what you want."

None of us were afraid. We all charged through the gate together.

"Looks like concealment magic works here," I remarked.

"I hate sneaking around. It makes me feel sick. We should just barge in and slaughter them all...," Elzard groused.

"Are you even dumber than Sylphy? We shouldn't resort to violence unless absolutely necessary." Alvarto's opinion was so levelheaded that it was hard to believe he used to be known as a berserk pervert.

"So about our route," I said. "I'm thinking the shortest path possible won't be a problem."

"I agree... Since we're able to use concealment magic, that probably means our enemy doesn't want us to fight by the city entrance or in the streets."

"So they're welcoming us with open arms and telling us not to delay? I'll make them eat that smug confidence." Dragons were said to be the most vengeful when it came to their wings. And Elzard's eyes had been alive with anger since we'd touched the ground.

We continued boldly down the main road of Velkratt.

"The streets look so lovely, I wish we could have visited during peaceful times," I lamented.

"This place is known as one of the world's top tourist destinations. Don'cha think this would be a great place for our school's winter retreat?"

"Make the suggestion, Alvarto. After all, you're on the faculty now."

Even in the lion's den, we weren't bothered. I suppose it was because we were veteran warriors of the old times.

Elzard didn't mix well into our jovial conversation, though. "Come on...we're in enemy territory, guys. Don't get so cozy."

Her face was tense with the vigilance of a warrior. At least, I wish it were. She looked more like a sulking child excluded from a grown-up conversation.

"Don't worry, Elzard, we aren't trying to exclude you."

"Huh?"

"Once this is over, I'm going to request that the headmaster let you join the academy as a special transfer student. That way, you can go on the winter retreat and have fun with us."

"......Don't misunderstand. I don't wanna go on your stupid trip."

"Oh? I guess you're not interested in being in a group with Ireena, then."

".....'Course I ain't interested. Dumbass."

That reaction made her true feelings painfully obvious. She looked away in a

huff, blushing up to her ears.

Casting her a glance, Alvarto said, "Damn...that Ireena Olhyde is quite a lady."

"You said it." I nodded firmly.

Without Ireena, I wouldn't have these two allies walking with me. She'd saved both of them like she had Ard Meteor. Ireena was the force that connected us. And we were putting our lives on the line to save a world with her at the center.

Our passions for her would surely bring us together, but they also might sow discord between us.

I grew uneasy the moment we arrived at the plaza, perhaps because our destination was in sight.

"The Bangle of Devouring is in the castle—that's what you said, right?" Alvarto asked.

I bobbed my head in the affirmative. Our destination was the castle standing in the middle of Velkratt. It had once been Olivia's home. Now it was used to house the president and to conduct government affairs.

"In the old days, after the first farewell game with Mephisto, I left the bangle to the one I trusted most and ordered it be hidden... And the person I trusted the most at the time was—"

"I'd have to guess Olivia, by process of elimination."

Alvarto was right. After Lydia died, my surrogate big sister was the person I had the most faith in. He was right to think she was the only choice. My army had been full of traitors at the time. If I had given the bangle to anyone other than Olivia, we would've met a horrible end.

"I imagine the castle is full of traps."

"Yeah. Knowing Mephisto's personality, it has to be."

"None of his traps will work on us, I'm sure... We really need to worry about any guardians he might've placed."

We knew that we couldn't simply outwit all his traps and make it through to the end. A final opponent would definitely be guarding the Bangle of Devouring. "I imagine it'll be President Zelos," I said.

The man had a similar air and appearance to Olivia. I'd gotten acquainted with Zelos during the Five Powers Summit held in the Megatholium. He was a devout worshipper of Olivia and a master of the sword. However, that was Zelos before his corruption. There was no telling what qualities Zelos had now.

Perhaps all the magic weapons kept by the giant statues of the Ten Calamities erected around the plaza had been corrupted so he could use them.

In other words, I suspected he was the one who'd attacked Elzard.

"I'd love to draw up some countermeasures..."

Before I could set my mind to the task, a giant statue in the center of the plaza came into view. It was a carving of me and Olivia, brother and sister, standing side by side.

The moment I saw it, a strange feeling took root deep in my chest. It had to be an omen.

"Jump to the side!" Alvarto shouted.

My reflexes kicked in before my brain did, and I jumped. All three of us leaped in different directions. Barely a moment later, a sword came crashing down where we'd stood. It cut deep into the statue and then caused it to rupture.

The sword was small, but given its powers, a direct hit would prove lethal, even for us.

That scorching white blade looked familiar to me.

"Demon Blade Gur Vetania...!"

It belonged to Cayell the Explosive, one of the Ten Calamities. The sword that usually hung on his belt had made an entrance. The guardian had attacked sooner than anticipated.

Sensing the intruder's presence, our focus turned to him at once.

"Oh, good. You're here."

For a moment, my mind went blank. There were two enemies...and one was Mephisto Yuu Phegor.

It wasn't his true body but a clone. The aura emanating from him felt weakened. There was only one reason for that, to make it clear that *she* was the star of this round.

"I see...quite diabolical," Alvarto mused, scowling.

"...Looks like you're not a wimpy bitch only skilled with a sword anymore." Elzard narrowed her eyes in a glare at the woman who'd arrived with Mephisto.

Sure enough, the one standing before us was...

"Olivia...!"

Emotion ripped my Ard Meteor facade in two, exposing Varvatos.

"I feel like I just pulled off the prank of the century against my friend, honey dearest," the devil Mephisto boasted eloquently as he grinned like a devious child. "You should have known this sort of thing would happen. You're not stupid. Oh, is that expression not of shock but of flustered resentment because your worst fear has come to pass?"

.....He was dead right.

This wasn't an entirely unexpected development. Aside from Elzard and Alvarto, all my friends were in Mephisto's evil clutches. It wasn't inconceivable that one of them had come to attack at the worst possible time.

I'm not shocked, but I'm still nervous. After all, since Mephisto attacked the school, I—

"You haven't managed to save a single soul. You haven't managed to bring anyone back to your side. My darling, those two chess pieces you hold now only fell into your hands by dumb luck."

I didn't have the mental fortitude to dispute him. Elzard was here because he hadn't thought of her. And Alvarto's nature as a clone of Mephisto provided him with a unique immunity. Both of them skirted Mephisto's corruption by chance...

I hadn't saved a single person.

"You're a sore loser, sweetie. You've always been a pathetic coward. Isn't it about time you show me some heroics, darling?"

He's daring me to steal her back, to accomplish what I failed to back at school.

Mephisto, eyes glittering with anticipation, spoke to Olivia beside him. "Oh, my sweet Big Sis, save meeee! They're making fun of meeee!" He wiggled his hips and pouted.

If Olivia were in her right mind, her sword would have come flying for Mephisto. However, she was under the corruption magic's influence, thus...

"All enemies of my little brother...shall die."

...she falsely believed that Mephisto was her sweet little brother.

Loneliness, sorrow, and anger filled my heart. "Olivia...!"

Unfortunately, my heartfelt cry wouldn't reach her now.

"Time to die."

No sooner did the words register in my mind than I saw her standing before me. She tightly gripped the Demon Blade, my gift to her long ago.

"Die!!!"

Olivia lunged for the kill. Mephisto had enhanced her. The dexterity of her attack far surpassed what she was capable of normally.

However...

"Nngh!"

...I was able to dodge it.

Despite her movements being impossible to follow with the naked eye, I leaped back and escaped the blade. Something about that struck me as odd, but before I pondered it deeply...

"Lightning Blast!"

...a spell shot from Elzard's hand. The attack was perfect in every way. I thought that it would surely hit Olivia, if only to deal moderate damage.

"Zeta Orchis, Come Hither!"

It was a summoning. A pure white shield appeared beside Olivia, transforming the incoming lightning into light and absorbing it.

"That's...Solzein's shield!"

It was one of the Ten Calamities, Solzein the Damned.



So...Olivia can use his magic shield now. This is bad—really bad.

"Watch out!" I called.

"I know!" Well aware of the shield's danger, Alvarto had erected a barrier before my warning.

Even Elzard's primal instincts alerted her to the danger. She'd already had her barrier up. I was the only one who reacted a bit too slowly.

"Tsk...!"

The moment after I cast *Mega Wall* and had half of myself protected, Olivia's shield shot lightning in all directions.

Zeta Orchis, a magical shield with the power to absorb and release. It took in the power contained in all things and returned it tremendously amplified.

As such, Elzard's returned lightning inflicted tremendous damage on the surrounding area. Most of the people in the plaza were wiped out. And the barriers protecting us were on the verge of breaking.

"Guys, get ready for a follow-up—"

But before I could get the word *attack* out, I noticed something odd about Olivia. She was staring off in a direction, not even flinching. It was very unlike her. From her perspective, she had the perfect opportunity to attack us all at once and turn the fight in her favor.

So why had she stopped?

"It can't be..."

When I saw what she was gazing at, hope kindled in my chest.

Still, trying to face her now was a fool's errand. I needed to collect myself for battle first.

"Retreat!!!"

I wasn't even slightly surprised when I saw that Alvarto and Elzard were already poised to withdraw. The moment I barked the command, they both shot out *Flash* spells. I didn't stick around to find out if either was effective, but Olivia made no move to pursue us.

"Let's go."

"Ugh. How annoying."

I followed Alvarto and Elzard as we all put the plaza behind us. Watching my big sister, still as a statue behind us, I spoke a quiet vow.

"I will come back for you! No matter what it takes!"

## The Ex-Demon Lord and the Ultimate Ordeal (Part II)

The events following our escape were rather tumultuous.

Perhaps because of Mephisto, our concealment magic no longer worked on the civilians around us, so we ran straight into an attack.

"Don't kill them!" I said.

Elzard blinked, surprised. "Huh?! C'mon, we can just resurrect them later!"

"No...knowing Mephisto's diabolical nature, he's likely corrupted them so that they can't be restored."

"Dammit, they're just random humans! Who cares if they die?!" Elzard groused.

"I feel the same way," Alvarto said. "But if Ireena finds out what we've done after this is all over..."

That stayed Elzard's hand. She didn't harm a single person.

And that brought us to now.

"We should be safe to talk and catch our breaths here."

In a deserted alley, I prepared a strategy for what we'd do next. Before I had a chance to say anything, however, Alvarto spoke up.

"On the way here, I didn't kill a single soul. I believe we should only make absolutely necessary sacrifices to win. Anything more would upset Ireena after this is over."

After giving that disclaimer, Alvarto proceeded to tell us how he really felt. "I mean that. But I think...that Olivia vel Vine might need to be on that list."

Blood rushed to my head, but I quickly stamped out the fire of rage and shot a glance at Elzard. She noticed I was seeking her opinion. After a moment's

agonized thought, she crossed her arms and spoke.

"If we had to kill her, I doubt Ireena would resent us for it...but I feel like that's the bigger issue."

"Agreed. If we have to sacrifice Olivia," I began, "Ireena will take the blame for it and hate herself for the rest of her life."

Even if that becomes necessary...

"If possible, I want to avoid hurting Ireena, but it might be unavoidable," Alvarto stated. "We might not be able to accomplish our mission unless we kill that therianthrope."

We had to obtain the Bangle of Devouring by any means necessary. We'd come here for it, but Olivia stood in our way.

Evading Olivia and retrieving the bangle was ideal, but Mephisto wouldn't allow that.

"He's given us two choices: Kill Olivia and get the Bangle of Devouring, or give up on it... And the latter would mean forfeiting the fight. I think it's clear that isn't an option," I explained.

In other words, we needed to sacrifice Olivia. I gave the idea a moment's thought, then rejected it.

"I think we should save Olivia and get the bangle."

Elzard frowned, and Alvarto sighed quietly. But I was sure they both trusted me at least a little. Rather than scold me for being idealistic, they waited and gave me a chance to speak.

"Both choices Mephisto has presented will result in a loss for us. We can't claim victory unless we create a third choice."

That was my first reason for rejecting the premise.

"And let's say we do sacrifice Olivia—do you honestly think Mephisto would let us win with no more losses?"

And that was the second. There would definitely be more "necessary" deaths. Playing by Mephisto's rules ensured that more of our comrades would die.

Once we finally made it to Mephisto, he would surely put Ireena on the sacrificial altar in the end.

Even if we defeated that devil, we'd have given up everything to do it.

"And here's my third reason for rejecting both options: I only see us beating Mephisto with our friends' help. Meaning..."

"Sacrificing those friends would defeat the purpose?"

I nodded at Alvarto.

Elzard broke her silence. "Okay, but how do we make that happen?"

She doubted that it was possible. If it was, I wouldn't have suffered such a humiliating defeat back at school.

"What happened back at school...can only be described as a tragic failure. Between the shocking turn of events and the trauma from my past, I lost the ability to think clearly. I lost faith in my friends."

But not anymore.

The resignation I embraced back then is gone.

I know I can return everyone who was corrupted to their normal states.

And that faith had formed into a clear conviction.

"Do you remember when Olivia froze for a moment?" I asked. "She was..."

I explained why I was hopeful. I knew it wasn't enough to convince Alvarto and Elzard entirely. If either of them insisted that had been Mephisto's doing, it would be game over.

Still, I had to try.

"...I want to believe in her and the bond we nurtured together over the years. I'd like to think that not even a god can break that."

In the end, I was just an idealist.

An idealist in every way.

Alvarto and Elzard shrugged their shoulders and sighed.

"So?"

"What's the plan, specifically?"

That proved their trust in me.

My heart warmed with gratitude, I outlined my plan to rescue Olivia and finished it with a determined statement.

"Let's go teach that devil a lesson."



Olivia had the perfect chance to attack, yet she hadn't moved.

From her perspective, inaction should never have been an option. That's what her *little brother* beside her was undoubtedly thinking.

"Hey, Sis, why did you throw away your perfect chance?"

He wasn't scolding her. His voice was filled with an intense curiosity.

Olivia frowned. "...I don't know."

There was nothing else she could say. She'd absorbed Elzard's lightning attack with her comrade's shield. After sending it back, she could have done more...yet she hadn't Somewhere in Olivia's heart, there was a little ripple.

"...Orvan, Riskell, Falco."

Those were the three statues of the Ten Calamities destroyed by the absorbed lightning's re-release. The sight of the debris brought a pang to Olivia's heart.

"Why ...? Why did I ...?"

How ridiculous.

Statues are just objects. No harm comes from breaking them.

Then why...why do I feel a tremor in my chest?

It feels as if...

As if I were forced to do something I didn't wish to... Break something I didn't want to break.

*"……"* 

Olivia took a slow look at the broken statues around her. Then her gaze

dropped to her feet. There, she saw a head, broken from one of the sculptures. Just like those of the Ten Calamities, this facsimile of her little brother had been shattered. The head had rolled to her feet by happenstance.

And the moment Olivia saw it, the tiny ripple in her heart grew into a giant wave.

*"* 

The head by her feet matched that of the man standing next to her. Of course it did. The statue was of *Mephisto, her little brother*. There was no reason for her to feel anything strange about it.

And yet, for an instant, another image of a completely different person was superimposed on top of it.

"My little brother...is not..."

Her head seared with pain. Just like it had the moment the head came off the statue. She'd seen a different face, and for some unknown reason, that had left Olivia unable to move.

"What a deeply intriguing state you're in."

The voice of Olivia's brother didn't reach her ears.

Instead, her keen senses were focusing on a different sound.

"...It's an ambush."

The noise was coming from overhead.

No footsteps, just an attack from the sky. The enemy was likely more comfortable in the air.

But even an attack that was silent to any other species couldn't fool the therianthrope's ears. As soon as she picked up on the moving air, Olivia looked up at the sky, hundreds of *Attack* spells racing through her mind all the while.

"My first order of business—" Her thoughts were cut off entirely the moment she saw her enemy.

As for why...

"Open your eyes, Olivia!"

That voice.

That face.

That body.

They all resembled the image of the man that had superimposed itself on top of her little brother.

"What's wrong with you, Big Sis? Protect me."

That's right. I must protect...my little brother.

Shoving the confusion from her heart, Olivia prepared herself for battle.

As she drew the sword from her belt, it felt strangely heavy.



Original.

It was a miracle of a spell, irreproducible and unattainable to anyone but its creator.

Unlike ordinary magic, it could be attained solely through intense training and tribulation.

Only those born with special abilities were permitted to use one—just like the name suggested, these were *Original* spells.

Their powers were immense. The gap between those who could cast *Originals* and those who couldn't was impossibly wide.

And yet while *Originals* were regarded in the present day as an ultimate feat, in the old world, they were seen a bit differently.

Simply put, they were a nuisance to use.

A chant was necessary to call upon an *Original*, and the reciting caster needed to dedicate their attention solely to the verses.

In the old times, when magic culture was abundant, this was perceived as a big drawback. After all, at the time, the majority of magic was meant to be cast silently. In the time it took to complete one *Original*, an enemy could loose at least ten counterattacks.

Dealing with that while chanting was incredibly difficult, so *Originals* were usually invoked before the start of a battle.

Following on the conventional wisdom of the old days, I was in the air, preparing for a surprise attack on Olivia.

I let gravity carry my body down as I spoke my pre-combat *Original*, *Private Kingdom*, and phase shifted into the third stage of Brave Demon Full Body.

Just as I completed it, I closed in on Olivia, who waited for me on the ground.

"Open your eyes, Olivia!"

When I cried out and raised my black sword, I got a big reaction from her.

It's working. I was right.

I'd moved into Phase III of the phase shift in part so I could be equally matched to Olivia...but it was mostly because there was a secondary action that I had deemed essential.

In this mode, I was no longer Ard Meteor. I had transformed into my former self, Demon Lord Varvatos.

"What's wrong with you, Sis? Protect me," Mephisto said.

"Mmmnnnggg!"

Hearing the devil's voice likely brought tranquility back to Olivia's wavering heart. She drew the sword from her belt and assumed an offensive stance.

Then she lunged.

Our swords clashed, clanging on impact.

"Agh!"

Mephisto was blown into the air by the force of the strike. Undoubtedly, he wanted to convey that he was weakened and powerless.

I wasn't going to fall for any of that.

"We're going in, iguana."

"Hmph. Trip me up, and you're dead, pretty boy."

Before Mephisto landed, the two emerged from hiding and rushed into the

plaza.

Alvarto was surrounded by ebony flames—his *Original* he'd activated precombat.

Elzard brandished her dragon bone blade high, her fighting spirit on full blast.

They closed in on Mephisto...

"""Eat shit."""

...and hit him with the same insult, in perfect harmony.

Alvarto's ebony flame sword.

Elzard's dragon bone blade.

Both came down on the devil mercilessly.

"Whoa, there!" With a forced, melodramatic cry, Mephisto fell face-first onto the ground. "H-hey now, hey now! T-two against one? That's unfair!"

"""Shut up and die."""

Playing the victim wasn't going to work on them.

Weakened or not, Mephisto was still a devil. There was no telling what he might try to pull at the last minute.

That's why I tasked the pair with restraining him until I got Olivia back.

As we locked in close combat and gritted our teeth, I caught a glimpse of anguish on her face. That troubled expression wasn't because I was overpowering her.

At present, I held a slight advantage for the same reason my big sister looked so confused.

"You're trying to come back. Isn't that right, Olivia?"

The moment I hurled those words at her, her sword slackened just a bit...

...then she pushed harder, as though to muscle through the fight. It was a rookie fighter's maneuver.

If Olivia were in her right mind, she would use my strength against me, throw me off my balance, and cut me down.

But instead...

"Ngh!"

Retreat.

She jumped away without a single counterattack, releasing her blade from mine. This wasn't the right time to retreat. There could only be one reason why she did.

She was running from me.

"I knew it...you do remember."

I pressed her again and took a step forward. I was dangerously close to her. Were I in her position, I would've used the powers Mephisto gave me to summon another weapon of the Ten Calamities and attacked me by now...

...yet Olivia did nothing.

All she could do was stare at me, looking anguished.

In time, I closed in, and our swords met again. And as we struggled, I called out to her.

"Say your little brother's name."

"Mmm!"

Behind her sword, I saw the agony on my big sister's face deepen.

Her mind was in chaos.

Two conflicting pieces of information clashed inside Olivia's mind, truth and falsehood.

A genuine bond and a fake one.

These paradoxes were in a brutal war inside her.

"What's wrong, Olivia? Can't you answer me?"

"Nn-ggg...!"

This is working.

I embraced my conviction.

I don't care how much he's corrupted her, he can't sever two souls that have been bonded together.

And I'm gonna prove it to that devil right now.

"Please remember, Olivia. Remember me. Your real little brother."

"Oh-ohhh...!"

Just give her a push. That's all she needs.

If I do, I know she will answer me.

"My...little...brother...is!"

It's coming closer.

Her distant heart is nearing mine again.

Just a bit more, and the curse will be broken.

Olivia's heart will return to normal.

"Cool. This is exactly how I imagined it would go down."

The devil under Alvarto's and Elzard's restraint grimaced, and he spat his words like poison.

"This farewell game has no easy mode. I won't let you clear this level by beating it just like the others."

In the next breath...

"My...little...brother...is..."

...the heart that was so very nearly mine again flew into the distance.

"...Mephisto Yuu Phegor."

Things took a turn for the worse.

Olivia locked swords with me, and an anomaly grew in her right hand. An aura white as clouds burst from it, covering her wrist. It took a circular shape.

It was the bangle.

The moment I saw it, I went numb. "This...can't be!"

The black-and-gold relic was adorned with majestic decorations. Ultra-ancient

text that read *Evil Spirit Annihilation* ran across the line carved on its face. And there were seven holes at evenly spaced intervals.

There was no mistaking it. It was the item I'd made by hand long ago.

The Bangle of Devouring was clasped on Olivia's wrist.

I cursed my foolishness at this development.

I could only blame myself for having the conceit to believe I knew Mephisto Yuu Phegor better than anyone. I'd underestimated his powers.

"Rules and norms exist to be broken. I thought I was very clear, but I guess you didn't get my message."

The devil's words spun in my head.

"What made you think I wouldn't use the sealed bangle? Hmm?"

The mocking tone in his voice filled my heart with despair.

"Have I ever followed any of your rules?"

A moment later, the seven gemstones appeared around the Bangle of Devouring, each sinking into its own hole as though to demonstrate how wrong I'd been.

I thought I'd made it so nobody could steal it.

However, Mephisto had broken my rule and taken the gemstones by force. My trump card that was supposed to defeat the devil was now in my big sister's hands, and she was a puppet of the enemy.

This is it...

"Olivia..."

"I am but a sword, swinging. I exist only to kill my little brother's enemies."

It's over.

There's nothing I can do.

Resignation spread through my body, born of despair over my fate. It was likely in part an effect of the bangle.

The next thing I knew...

"...Ah!"

...a slash cut across my face.

Sharp. Deep.

I collapsed. Standing became impossible.

A single attack had decided the battle.

"Only two more to go...," Olivia muttered as I fell forward.

When my body hit the ground, everything was over.

There were no sounds. No voices.

Alvarto. Elzard. They were cleaved in half at their torsos and perished.

".....Wait, is that *it*?"

The scene was just as horrifying for the devil, it seemed.

It can't be over...

Mephisto went silent for a while, a look of disappointment in his eyes.

"Aww, what a bummer."

All traces of emotion left his face. And then he took out his frustrations on Olivia and decapitated her.

Our eyes met as her head flew through the air. Had there been nothing in her gaze, had I believed it was all in vain, then maybe I would've accepted that this was the end.

But it wasn't.

".....Va...r..."

My big sister... My Olivia...

She was crying.

She'd regained her sense of self at the very end.

And her sadness set my heart ablaze.

I had no means for a counterattack. I couldn't move a finger.

"Game over, my dearest... You truly disappoint me."

No emotion colored Mephisto's beautiful, porcelain face, yet tears poured from his golden eyes.

"I will destroy the world."

An orb the color of darkness appeared above his head. Less than an instant later, all things around it were consumed.

People. Objects. Corpses.

All things vanished, as though they'd never existed in the first place.

And amid this chaos...

"I'll have to punish you, my sweet," the devil said calmly. "I won't kill you. I'll leave you as the only living thing left in the world, erasing all else from existence. You will live eternally in a world whose story has come to an end. The taste of anguish will linger forever in your mouth."

No...

I won't have it.

I won't let it end like this.

"I guess I'll take my leave now," Mephisto murmured, gazing at the orb over his head.

"St...op," I croaked.

"Farewell."

And with a parting word, Mephisto Yuu Phegor, my greatest nemesis, flew inside the jet-black orb and ended his life \_

I had no idea how many months or years had passed since that day...

After everything vanished from the world, I kept a vigilant search for everyone.

I sought a ray of hope that shouldn't exist.

Ginny. Sylphy. Olivia. Elrado. My school friends.

Lizer. Verda. Alvarto. Elzard. All my friends in the world.

And Ireena, my most cherished friend of all.

I hoped that they were alive somewhere out there.

Perhaps they'd survived by some miracle and were gathered in a place I hadn't found yet.

Embracing this delusion, I wandered the earth.

Over and over.

Until now.

After I completed my 97,348,252,854th revolution, my soul finally broke.

I made a fatal mistake. I accepted reality.

Unable to go on, I collapsed on the spot.

Clenching my fists, I cried out.

Tears flowed from my eyes, and I moaned and wailed, but eventually, everything dried up.

And then all that remained was a longing for death.

But I couldn't die.

If I took my own life, I'd be resurrected immediately.

Not even I could do anything to change my body's immortality.

When...? When will all of this end?

That was the only thought remaining in my mind.

Guilt consumed my heart.

I despised my own existence.

I was no longer Ard Meteor, just a failure.

My life as Ard, my life as Varvatos, and my eternal existence now were

meaningless.

I want to disappear.

Please.

Please, somebody.

"Please...give me the salvation...of death."

No sooner did I speak that impossible wish than something emerged from within me—a sparkling fragment. It gradually took human form...

...and she appeared before my eyes.

"Lydi...a."

My former best friend, the one I loved deeper than anyone or anything in this world.

When I saw her, I wept.

"Ohh... Lydia..."

I clung to her...but she didn't respond.

She was nothing more than a mirage, birthed by my lonely subconscious.

Still...

"If I could...I would atone for all the mistakes of my past."

"Please...," I begged. "If you could destroy me..."

It was a ludicrous thought, but that insanity was the epitome of lucidity to me right now.

As if to answer my plea...a new glittering light burst forth

The next thing I knew...

...the light changed dramatically.

A living world formed around me. This was the plaza of Velkratt, capital of the Federal States of Saphiria.

And then...

"I am but a sword, swinging. I exist only to kill my little brother's enemies."

Olivia.

She was supposed to be dead, yet now she raised her weapon.

Has the time line righted itself?

No, it hasn't.

This isn't what happened.

The world never ended in the first place.

I had a vision...of the future to come.

"It wasn't precognition. You saw the future I experienced."

A voice echoed from the void.

The wind surged, and then he was there, like he'd been present from the beginning.

He was standing there.

"Aah, dammit. Everything about this is so familiar."

He was right next to Olivia and me while we were locked in combat.

The complete failure.

The other me.

Disaster Rogue was standing there.



## The Ex-Demon Lord and the Ultimate Ordeal (Part III)

On the first day of our school field trip, a midsummer day I shall never forget, we were on our way to Kingsglaive, the royal capital of the ancient world. By the hand of a being who called themselves a god, Ireena, Ginny, and I were sent to the ancient world. We were tasked with fixing the problem that destroyed that era.

At the time, we all suspected that the Demon Lord Varvatos—the other me—had something to do with it.

But in actuality, while another version of myself orchestrated that ordeal...it wasn't Varvatos. It was the man standing before Olivia and me now, Disaster Rogue.

Everyone present looked stunned.

Olivia, Elzard, Alvarto and I—even Mephisto. All eyes went to that man. He wore a tattered school uniform. His face and stature were perfect matches for mine. There were only two differences, the strands of silver in his hair and the hideous scar on his face.

While gaping at Disaster Rogue, the question came out almost unconsciously. "Why...? What are you doing here?!"

We'd clashed in the ancient world. After accepting defeat, Rogue had returned to his world, the one where everything ended.

So why was he here?

"After you defeated me...I changed the way I confronted the past," Rogue said, tracing the scar that ran along his face with a finger. "Something happened when I went back to my world. I'm not sure whether it was a dream or reality, but Lydia appeared. And this is what she said to me: "You cannot change the past. However, that is no excuse to give up on resisting the present you face

now."

That really did sound like something Lydia would say.

"When we met, you said I just wanted to be saved, and that's why I'd tried to use Lydia. And...you were right. Death was my only path to salvation. I wanted her to make it happen for me. The thought consumed me. But..."

Some other feeling had taken root in him after speaking with Lydia. Rogue put that new emotion into words. "I want to see that future I couldn't bring about last time. I want to see my friends smile just once more. That's why..."

His eyes went to Olivia, and then he shot a malicious glare at Mephisto. "...I came back to save everyone. In other words...I've come here to destroy you, Mephisto Yuu Phegor."

Tremendous fighting spirit burst from Rogue. In the blink of an eye, he was standing before Mephisto.

I had no idea how he managed it. Either he'd moved at a speed invisible to the naked eye or he'd cast a spell too quickly for me to register. In either case...

...Rogue had grown far more powerful since my last encounter with him.

"I worried that all the maddening loneliness I felt over the eons might make me come to think fondly of a bastard like you."

Rogue struck Mephisto before the devil could respond. Mephisto flew into the air, arcing through the sky before landing on the ground. As he watched Mephisto writhe on the stone road, Rogue said, "Honestly, it's a relief that I still hate you."

His stoic tone terrified me.

He's powerful. Too powerful.

Elzard and Alvarto were probably thinking the same thing. They watched him, awestruck.

"You..."

"Are you really Ard Meteor?"

He kept his gaze fixed upon Mephisto but answered them. "No. I abandoned

that name long ago." His voice was calm yet filled with conviction, "Now I am Disaster Rogue."

He'd used the same name when I met him in the ancient world, but it carried a different meaning now. There was a clear glimmer of trust in Rogue's eyes.

Olivia broke her deadlock with me and charged at Rogue. "Die!!!"

To her corrupted brain, he was merely another hated enemy who threatened her little brother.

This is bad.

I don't care how powerful Rogue is... No, actually, his power is exactly what makes this so dangerous.

"I imagine the Bangle of Devouring will work well on him." Mephisto grinned.

He's right. That bangle sucks all the power from living things in its vicinity, making it the wielder's own. As such, it doesn't matter how powerful the enemy is, the bangle will turn the tables. Surely, Rogue knows about that.

And yet he didn't seem troubled. He welcomed Olivia's approach.

"Haaah!!!"

Rogue didn't flinch in the face of Olivia's attack, but not because he couldn't move. He *chose* not to.

Olivia's blade struck his shoulder. Then it stopped.

Everyone was dumbstruck. Rogue just sighed and said, "Why are you so shocked? Do you honestly think I didn't have a trick up my sleeve?"

That's right. He's another version of me from a desolate future. Knowing what he knows, there's no way he showed up empty-handed.

"I neutralized the bangle's powers with a *Jamming* spell. It's nothing more than a piece of jewelry now."

The claim felt suspect to me, and Mephisto shared that sentiment.

"Wait a minute. Didn't you ensure that no one, not even you, would know how to use it?"

"Yeah," Rogue answered. "After I finished making the Bangle of Devouring, I erased all memories relating to its forging. It seemed the optimal solution after considering all possibilities."

"And you cast an unlockable spell on the bangle, too, right?"

"I did."

"So despite knowing nothing about how it's used, you could still cast a Jamming spell on it?"

"Is there a problem?"

Rogue's calm tone made me dizzy. *Jamming* only worked if the user knew the technique behind the targeted magic object or the spell itself. The more complicated the creation, the more challenging it was to jam it.

It'd be a challenge to think of anything more complex than the Bangle of Devouring. Even if Rogue knew how to use it, the *Jamming* spell would've been impossibly difficult to pull off. How had he done it?

"It's not an incredible feat, really. Anyone can do it, given enough time," Rogue explained calmly, despite his claim being absurd. "Spells boil down to one element, an arrangement of magic words. *Jamming* spells are no different. Which means you need only try every possible combination to find the right one."

This is crazy.

Is this guy really me?

Am I really capable of that sort of thing?

I stared at him blankly. "All the combinations of magic words... The total's practically infinite..."

"Yeah, I know."

"Let's say you did try out each combination, you still wouldn't know which one was correct..."

"That's why I memorized every possible arrangement. The moment I arrived in this world, I cast all the ones I thought it might be. There were about six

sextillion."

...This is impossible.

I was speechless, and it seemed everyone else was no different. Even Mephisto had fallen silent. Rogue was the only one of us who kept his cool. "Oh, it took a stupid amount of time. Plus, I needed to learn the spell to travel to this world and strengthen myself to make the trip. And when you include the effort required for deducing the bangle *Jamming* spell, I think it took... 6,845,268,703,948,929,756,258,235,697,752 years."

Is this guy really me? Like, really?

He makes unbelievable claims like he's discussing the weather.

Rogue's attention went to Mephisto, "You should be happy. This time, you will get that despair of the unexpected that you've been craving."

All for this.

He spent an eternity's worth of time in hell working on this.

Any ordinary person subjected to such torture would have lost their dedication long ago.

Mephisto's cheeks flushed, and he smiled like a young maiden in love as he squealed, "Beautiful! You really are the best, my sweetheart!"

He was overjoyed.

He was enamored.

He was enthralled.

Awash in Rogue's ultimate bloodlust, the devil beamed. This sudden change of plans had him radiating vigor.

"Well, this changes everything. Now we can—"

He likely meant to say "Now we can play to our hearts' content."

But before he could...

"I will never so much as humor the request of a bastard like you."

...a black stake pounded through Mephisto's body, immediately after Rogue's

quip. Its sharp point plunged into the ground, pinning the devil.

Mephisto's eyes shot wide, and Rogue growled, "Now you're going to get Olivia back for me."

Imposing one's will on Mephisto should've been impossible, yet Rogue had managed it somehow.

"Gee...I wasn't expecting *this*." There was joy in the devil's eyes. "I can't use my powers or connect with my true body at the academy. Heh-heh... I think this might be the first time in my life I've ever tasted such powerlessness."

The cheer in his beautiful features cut a stark contrast with his mortal peril. The glitter of Mephisto's smile made it clear that his words were genuine, though.

"The rest of this is up to you," Rogue said.

With that, Olivia was blasted away from Rogue by a gust of wind. This was his way of telling me he'd laid out all the pieces for me.

Olivia landed and quickly reassumed a battle stance, targeting me this time.

"Show me, Ard Meteor," Rogue called. "Show me the future I envisioned. The ending I couldn't attain."

His voice and expression made his feelings clear. He was no longer Ard Meteor.

"Ard. It's your job to go to build the future that I couldn't."

I accepted the will of this failure-turned-survivor to heart. "Come with me. Let's overcome the impossible together."

My message was meant for Rogue and Olivia both.

"Hmph!!!"

After a sharp exhale, I charged in. Olivia prepared to meet my attack, her expression warped with anguish. I closed the gap between us in an instant, and my black sword locked with hers.

The Bangle of Devouring really has been neutralized...

I didn't feel my powers draining. That I could hold my own in a fight against

her was proof of that. While we stared at each other from across our blades, I entreated her, "Remember, Olivia. Remember our relationship. Our bond. Our precious memories together."

I gripped the hilt of my sword harder, and she pushed back in return. Realizing she would lose a contest of strength, Olivia weakened her grip, broke away, and went for my side.

She's trying to make this a contest of skill. Well, bring it on. That's exactly what I was waiting for. A thousand words won't move her.

"Two hearts communicate much more through the sword."

Olivia herself had told me as much long ago. I threw my entire being into my blade, the vessel of our conversation.



Olivia vel Vine had reached the upper limit of confusion.

She knew her duty. There was no cause to hesitate.

And yet...

"Ngh...!"

Her body felt heavy.

Her arm gripping her sword felt heavy.

Her heart felt heavy.

"Die!" she cried.

Olivia knew she was acting strangely. Her way of fighting wasn't effective at all.

Ordinarily, she would've relied entirely on her blade. Yet somehow, she could wield a weapon of the Ten Calamities, thanks to her little brother's powers.

The magnificent abilities of her deceased brethren were available to her, and she ought to use them to save her beloved little brother.

What was stopping her?

Why did she resist the idea?

Olivia didn't understand.

While she was lost in confusion...

...the enemy answered for her. "It's not that you can't. It's that deep in your heart, you know that you shouldn't. You loved your comrades as if they were your kin, and using their powers would be a mistake. Your true consciousness is surely screaming that to you."

The enemy lunged at her. It was a wild movement, which made it easy to judge.

If she dodged it faintly, then used the momentum to slash back at him, his head would fly.

Olivia could already picture it. Clearly, it was the best option.

And yet...

...before she could get her limbs to move, she felt a pang in her heart, a sensation that dulled her reaction. Ultimately, she was unable to cut down her enemy.

"Tsk!"

Parrying her opponent's blade away from hers, Olivia jumped backward. At seeing her retreat, Olivia's enemy said, "When I was little, you taught me how to swordfight."

Then he vanished.

"When you trained me in offensive slashes, you called me weak and kicked my butt whenever I fell back—just like this."

A pain shot through Olivia's bottom, and she lost her balance.

He's going to kill me.

She knew this was the end. Yet, to her surprise, the enemy didn't follow through.

He forfeited his golden opportunity, choosing to stare at her instead.

Are you mocking me?

Ordinarily, Olivia would have screamed the words, but she couldn't. Not to this opponent. Not to this foe.

"Nnn...!"

She couldn't manage a single word.

"I guess today's my lucky day. Consider this payback for my childhood."

With a little laugh, Olivia's enemy lunged at her. She took a defensive stance, but her opponent vanished again.

"Your flank defenses are weak."

This time, the kick hit her side, breaking her stance. And just as before, the enemy didn't follow up with a fatal blow.

The pattern repeated over and over.

"You telegraph your moves. Your solar plexus is wide open," he scolded, punching Olivia below the chest. "Don't obsess over your upper body. Your legs are sitting ducks now." A foot struck her shin. "This is boring." His fist slammed into her face.

"You bastard!"

Olivia was fuming. Anger burned and boiled inside her. However, that feeling did little to stop her opponent.

This almost feels like...like the infantile irritation I knew as a little kid, when I was beating up my annoying little brother.

Why do I feel this childish emotion...for an enemy?

"Are you mad? Listen, Olivia. You were much more ruthless with me when I was a boy. You'd bash my head any chance you got. What did I ever do to you?"

Olivia's enemy shot her a cold look, and something snapped in her mind.

"I was just trying to beat some sense into you, you snot-nosed idiot!"

For an instant, everything stopped.

What...did I just say?

Why did I say that?

And why did I use words that were clearly not meant for an enemy?

That's the thing a person says...when scolding a younger brother.

"Just beating some sense into me, huh? Couldn't you have been a little gentler? See, that's why men never approach you. If you don't fix your rotten personality, you'll be an old spinster."

Olivia flushed with rage, and her feet moved almost on their own. "I'll have you know, I had *droves* of men flocking to me!!!"

These words, too, flew out almost unbidden. Suddenly, Olivia's sword attacks were clean and beautiful, without a hint of hesitation.

"Male vassals and servants don't count, Olivia."

"Well, sorry I don't meet your standards!"

Now she was screaming. As her enemy jumped around to evade, she let it all out.

"I had *hordes* of suitors, starting with the Ten Calamities! I just turned them down so I wouldn't hurt *your* feelings! I'm *not* destined to be an old spinster!!!"

"...Uh-huh, okay. Got it. Sorry for ruining your life, I guess."

"How dare you pity meeeeeee!!!!"

She was furious. She hated him. And yet...she couldn't muster the desire to kill him.

"And by the way! Are you really one to talk?! I never saw a single lady on your arm!"

"Um, excuse me? There were several."

With every stroke of her weapon...

"Then tell me their names!!! I want names!"

"Freya, Listel, Athena..."

"The first and second ones are sorry excuses for women! And as for the third, she was just a product of your pathetic, hopeless romantic fantasy—"

"You take that back!!! Athena was real!!!"

With every word exchanged...

She was changing.

Olivia's true self flowed back into her.

Memories returned.

And then...

"You big idiot!"

"You ignorant moron!"

...they punched each other in the cheek and flew backward.

The enemy soared toward his comrades and Olivia hit the ground by Mephisto.

"Gee, that fight looks pretty brutal, Big Sis."

That voice.

The sound of it in her brain...

"Ungh...!"

...hurt.

Olivia's head felt like it was splitting open.

"Gg-ahh!"

Everything began to fade.

A version of herself was changing. Recollections surfaced from a place buried deep.

And at the end of it all, Olivia vel Vine...



Olivia hung her head.

She was utterly spent and beyond exhaustion.

The devil grinned at her. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

Rogue crossed his arms and heaved an annoyed sigh. "To think you freed a part of her in such a short period ..."

Unfortunately, Mephisto had put Olivia back under his control already. With a vile smile still on his face, he crooned, "Now, let's try that one more time for me, okay?"

His tone all but bragged that he'd corrupted Olivia again.

"You annoying little monster...!" I shouted.

"What's your move, Ard Meteor?" Elzard asked. "Want us to join in?"

Elzard and Alvarto hadn't fully grasped the situation yet.

Rogue and I had an idea, though.

"Come on, Big Sis, make it quick."

Alvarto and Elzard braced themselves for combat. In contrast, Rogue and I stayed perfectly still and kept our gazes locked on our big sister.

"Call my name...one more time," Olivia said.

Mephisto didn't seem to find the plea especially suspect.

"Big Si—"

Before the devil could get the words out, Olivia's head snapped up.

"My real little brother never called me that."

She whirled around and swiped her demon blade across Mephisto's neck. It was an unexpected shock to Elzard and Alvarto, and to Mephisto, whose head had been sent flying.

I was the only exception—we were the only exception.

"That's my Olivia. My Dear Sister."

With smiles on our faces, we welcomed her return.

"Wow... Today truly is a wonderful day. All these unexpected surprises, just for me...," Mephisto said cheerily, even as his head rolled on the ground.

Even in defeat—or perhaps because of it—the little bastard was overjoyed.

Rogue and I stood shoulder to shoulder, eyeing our enemy.

"It's safe to assume we've won your little game, right?"

"We returned someone you corrupted to normal, without using magic. We achieved the impossible using the power of our bond. We proved it to you."

That was it. That was where all of this began.

"Remember what you said back at the academy?" I asked. "You claimed that there were no genuine living beings but you and me in this world."

Mephisto could alter anyone else as he liked; thus, he didn't consider them to be alive.

And if everything around him was lifeless, then he was alone in the universe. And he claimed the same was true of me.

His assertion was that love and friendship could only be achieved between transcendent beings because we were unable to corrupt or control each other. That's why we could create a loving friendship together. I'd been unable to refute this since that first attack at the academy.

I'd wanted to show Mephisto that my bonds with my friends were genuine, but I'd failed. I'd been unable to restore my friends and accepted the fate that came from that.

But then Elzard rescued me, and Alvarto joined us. And now my convictions are strong.

"I was right, my bonds with all my friends are real."

Olivia, back to her true self at last, was the proof. No amount of complaining on Mephisto's part would change that.

"We win, Mephisto Yuu Phegor," I declared.

Hearing this, the devil said, "No, no, no. This is only one instance. It could've been a fluke." He sounded flippant and dismissive. "I mean, I never said this was a competition... I didn't, right? Yeah, even if I did say that, I don't remember. So anyway, the farewell game is back on!"

Mephisto cackled like a petulant child. I'd expected this response, so it didn't bother me at all. But Mephisto's existence still disgusted me.

Rogue and I exchanged glances.

"Fine. We'll see you back at school."

"I'm sure you'll leave all sorts of traps for us along the way."

"But that's no problem for us in the slightest. We'll ride this winning streak and crush you until there's nothing left."

And as a rehearsal for that moment, Rogue and I both raised a foot.

"Ha-ha-ha! Well, as a masochist, that actually makes me quite—"

But before the devil could finish, Rogue and I crushed his head under our boots.

### **INTERLUDE**

# **The Bitter Boy Does Not Understand His Apprentice's Feelings**

We'd retrieved the Bangle of Devouring, added Olivia to our party, and another completely unforeseen existence joined our group, too.

After Mephisto's annihilation, Oliva looked back and forth between me and Rogue, a perplexed frown on her face.

It was easy enough to understand why. Despite being corrupted, Olivia felt guilty for turning her blade against me, and she was suspicious of Rogue.

Explaining everything would take a long time, which was presumably why Olivia didn't ask.

Rogue turned to her and said, "I'll explain my story later...escaping comes first."

Everyone nodded. We were in enemy territory. This was no time to stop and chat freely.

And so we departed Velkratt in a hurry. Once beyond the city's border, Rogue explained briefly who he was. Anyone from the modern era would've had a tough time accepting his story, but those from the old era...

"Ah, that makes sense."

"Hey, you helped us out. That's good enough for me."

"Yes, the fight made your skills clear. And anything besides that is of no interest to me."

Alvarto, Elzard, and Olivia accepted Rogue quite readily.

Immediately after, Olivia's eyes darkened a little. She opened her mouth to speak.

"I don't need an apology," I said, cutting in. "You're back to being yourself.

You don't need to atone for anything."

"Oh...okay." The therianthrope's ears perked up, and her tail wagged. Relief plain in her expression, she added, "Well...that aside, I intend to make you atone for all the horrible things you said to me during our fight, so watch your back."

I sighed, laughing cynically. "Every bit as ruthless as you ever were." Then I looked at my other self and said, "You're joining me, when the time comes."

"Huh? Are you an idiot? What have I done wrong?"

"I'm you and you're me. In other words, you're responsible for half the things I do."

"Wow, I didn't realize I was so obtuse." Rogue shrugged and frowned. I thought I saw sadness in his features, perhaps owing to what was to come. "Sorry, but when this is over, I'll be annihilated."

"Annihilated...?" I echoed.

"Yeah. I can't go back to the world I came from," Rogue explained stoically. "I will be erased from this world by fusing with you, Ard Meteor."

"Fusing? What...do you mean?"

"Before I can answer that, there's something I have to tell you," Rogue said. "Traveling to another time or world always negatively impacts the world you come from. World-to-world travel consequences are particularly dire. A short stay isn't so problematic, but if I remain too long...the place I come from and this realm will join together and trigger anomalies the likes of which are beyond imagination."

How does he know all of this?

Rogue must have sensed the question on my mind. "I found out about this before coming here. The being calling himself a god appeared before me again. He told me all of this and then said, 'Once you carry out your task, your future will cease to exist. Will you still go through with it?'"

I'm sure Rogue accepted without hesitation.

The man who once thought more about saving himself had chosen to forfeit

his life for everyone else's. I understood his desire. He was another version of me, after all. And that's why I had to push back.

"No...there has to be a way." My mind raced, searching for an answer. "What about the Outer Ones...aren't they visitors from another world? Why haven't they caused negative anomalies? I've never seen any."

"Mephisto's supernatural ability took care of that. His wish bent the rules of this world to his will."

Rogue stared hard at me. His gaze told me to give up.

"My annihilation is an absolute requirement for Mephisto's destruction. It cannot be avoided."

Determined, I tried to argue, but Rogue shut me down. "In my reality, I spent eternity working on the *Jamming* spell for the Bangle of Devouring and thinking up ways to defeat Mephisto. And as I explained during the fight, it took so long that I almost lost my mind. Yet I still couldn't find a strategy I was wholly confident in."

"Clone or not, you easily bested Mephisto," Alvarto reasoned. "If you harnessed the powers of the bangle..."

"I could try using it in a fight, but it won't be enough," Rogue answered.

I had to agree. Mephisto was an Evil God in every sense of the word. A Demon Lord or a Champion couldn't hold a candle to him. Even a Demon Lord who lost his Champion and went all out was no match for him.

"Defeating the devil with brute force is as good as impossible. If there were some way of making that possible...it would be very outside the norm."

Whether a full-frontal assault using the Bangle of Devouring or a sneak attack, both were insufficient to kill an Evil God.

"Fusion, huh?" I muttered.

Rogue had mentioned that earlier, and now he finally elaborated.

"At the moment, it's nothing more than a theory...but if like entities from different worlds were to unify, their combined energies may multiply." Then Rogue added a caveat. "Ordinarily, this is the sort of thing you'd want to test

first, but there was no way to do that in my world. The entity that would have made such a thing possible was gone in my dimension."

At that, a girl's name popped into my head.

"You're talking about Verda."

"Yeah. We need her power to make this theory a reality."

Verda's supernatural abilities were destruction and creation. Put differently, they were disassembly, synthesis, and reassembly.

So without Verda, Roque's plan won't work.

"Okay, so are we going to find this Verda person next?" Elzard asked.

Rogue nodded.

Then for now, his annihilation is postponed. Verda's our immediate concern. We need to get her back.

I'm sure it'll be even more difficult than I can imagine.

Olivia rested a hand on my shoulder. "If anyone can do it, you can," she declared.

"Agreed. You've already done the unthinkable and wrested one person from Mephisto's control," Alvarto said.

"Okay, that's nice, but where do we find this Verda person? If it's far away, you'll just have to fly there yourself. If ya think I'm gonna fly with all of you on my back, you can forget it," Elzard snapped.

As long as I have them...as long as I have my friends...

...anything is possible.

With a faint smile on my face, I gestured to the east, toward Verda. "Let's go, everyone."

To get one step closer to victory.

To get everyone back.

To build the future we all wish for.

I flung myself, body and soul, into a new and greater challenge, with my



On a street corner in the ancient capital of Kingsglaive, a giant metropolis that retained the rich atmosphere of the old world, stood a certain woman's lab. The exterior design had a quirky design that truly befitted her, yet the interior was surprisingly sparse.

And in one room of that lab, a pair was engrossed in a spirited board game, surrounded by countless glass vials filled with liquid.

One of them leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms, then bent forward and moved a chess piece. And as he took one of his opponent's, Mephisto Yuu Phegor said, "My honey never ceases to amaze me."

His right eye reflected a distant locale. It was the fight in Velkratt, Saphiria's capital. The former Demon Lord accomplished a succession of expectation-breaking feats. Overjoyed by the wonderful sight, Mephisto grinned with obvious exhilaration.

"I never, never would have thought that my sweetheart from another world would show up! That was definitely something I didn't consider. Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!"

The devil took great joy in his defeat. As his opponent moved her chess piece, she looked Mephisto up and down. "Don't praise him. You are the one who never ceases to amaze me, Master." An inorganic voice issued from between her lips.

Verda Al-Hazard wore her short, curly golden hair in two ponytails, and a bulky white lab coat covered her small frame. She was a pretty girl with a prominent youthful appearance. By all visual accounts, she was Verda. However, there was none of her usual impudence behind the facade.

"Can you really say that this unexpected turn of events was entirely his doing?" Her hands moved her chess piece with a mechanical stiffness.

Mephisto took his turn in response and said, "Are you suggesting that my supernatural abilities merely brought out his heroics?"

"I think it's entirely plausible. I mean, you didn't try to win this time. Even

more so than usual."

Mephisto Yuu Phegor's supernatural ability allowed him to corrupt reality.

He could impose his desires on the whole world if he wished to. At first glance, such a power was unstoppable...

"The only way for you to fail is if you bring it on yourself. Your deepest desire has always been your own loss and destruction. For all your posturing over this being a farewell game that you're playing to win, I think that desire has only grown stronger. Isn't that right, Master?"

Verda moved another piece on the board, and Mephisto grinned sardonically before responding, "I can't refute that, but I can't confirm it, either. Not even I know the answer, you see."

He picked up a chess piece, played with it a little, and then sighed. "By the way, my dear apprentice...how much longer are you going to *keep up the act*?"

Verda sighed deeply. "Aw, shucks. You got me." She stuck her tongue out and smirked. Immediately, the innocent doll-like persona melted away, replaced with Verda's usual smugness. "I thought I could keep it up a bit longer. But man, you're sharp! Didn't think you'd catch on to it that fast."

Mephisto peered at his apprentice as she cackled. "I don't think it's right to say I caught on. It's more like you intentionally left clues for me."

Verda had noticed that Mephisto had corrupted her persona, and she'd righted it by herself. Not even the devil had expected that from her.

She'd managed to conceal the truth all this time.

"You could have struck me by surprise at just the right moment and saved your friends. I can't fathom why you'd waste such a plan."

The excitement in Mephisto's eyes made it clear that he found this amusing, though.

Verda shrugged. "Hey, Master...do you seriously mean that?"

Mephisto gave her a curious tilt of the head and folded his arms, as if to show her he had no idea what she meant.

"Haaaaaaaaah." After a long sigh, Verda stared up at the ceiling and said, "Well, whether you meant it or not, you're still as wicked as you've always been."

Her lips were curled in her usual smile. However, her eyes were as dark as could be.

"Guess what I'm saying is, I've been on your side from the very beginning, Dad."



#### **AFTERWORD**

Hello, everyone. I am terribly sorry I made you wait so long. 'Tis I, your light novelist who hurt his elbow while practicing his floor exercises, Myojin Katou.

Our series has reached the ninth volume. When I started this series, I didn't think it would get this long. It wouldn't have happened without all of your support. And *Greatest Demon Lord* will reach its conclusion in the next book.

Lastly, some acknowledgments.

I'd like to thank Sao Mizuno-sama again for the beautiful illustrations. Mephisto was perfect.

I'd like to thank my editor for always going above and beyond to polish my writing.

I'd like to thank everyone who had a hand in making this book.

And most of all, I'd like to express my ultimate gratitude to all the readers.

Bye for now.

I hope you stick around until the very end.

Myojin Katou

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