


8

Myojin Katou

Illustration by
Sao Mizuno

The Greatest
Demon
Lord
IS REBORN
AS A
TYPICAL
NOBODY

The Goddess's
Awakening



"I'll save you.
You have my
word."

Ireena

A young elven woman
held captive by Alvarto.
She witnesses Ard and
Alvarto's clash and...

Alvarto

The greatest of the Four
Heavenly Kings cursed
with immortality. He
challenges Ard to a battle
for supremacy in the
altered world.

"...I'll stake
it all.
Everything I
ever had."

Ard

The ex-Demon Lord.
Unleashes all of his power
to retake Ireena's soul
from Alvarto.

"Yes, you're
right. I should
bet everything,
too."

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Verda

Olivia

Alvarto

Lizer



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Illustration by **Sao Mizuno**


NEW YORK

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The Greatest Demon Lord Is Reborn as a Typical Nobody, Vol. 8

Myojin Katou

Translation by Noboru Akimoto

Cover art by Sao Mizuno

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SHIJOU SAIKYOU NO DAIMAOU, MURABITO A NI TENSEI SURU Vol. 8

MEGAMI NO KAKUSEI

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CONTENTS

The Greatest Demon Lord Is Reborn as a Typical Nobody

Myojin Katou

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[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[CHAPTER 95 The Ex–Demon Lord and a New Despair](#)

[INTERLUDE The Deathless Monster and a Fleeting Dream I](#)

[CHAPTER 96 The Ex–Demon Lord and a Devil’s Guidance \(Part 1\)](#)

[CHAPTER 97 The Ex–Demon Lord and a Devil’s Guidance \(Part 2\)](#)

[CHAPTER 98 The Ex–Demon Lord and the Path to the Underworld](#)

[INTERLUDE The Deathless Monster and a Fleeting Dream II](#)

[CHAPTER 99 The Ex–Demon Lord and His Journey in the Underworld \(Part 1\)](#)

[CHAPTER 100 The Ex–Demon Lord and His Journey in the Underworld \(Part 2\)](#)

[INTERLUDE The Deathless Monster and a Fleeting Dream III](#)

[CHAPTER 101 The Ex–Demon Lord Breaks His Promise](#)

[CHAPTER 102 Ireena Litz de Olhyde Takes a Stand upon the Dawn-Lit Battlefield](#)

[CHAPTER 103 The Ex–Demon Lord and the R3t%\\$urN OF N0rM4LCy](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

CHAPTER 95

The Ex-Demon Lord and a New Despair

“T’was such a long wait. A long, long wait.”

A destroyed landscape. A gray sky.

As darkness engulfed the world, the enemy in front of me smirked in pleasure.

Alvarto Egzex. Once, he was one of my vassals...and the most powerful member of the Demon Lord’s army.

A person I had previously shared meals with as a comrade later became the worst enemy I’d ever known.

“Finally, all things have come to fruition. It was worth the millennia of waiting.”

Alvarto puffed out his chest proudly in triumph, letting out a sigh of satisfaction.

Honestly, the situation filled me with anguish.

“A lovely sight. A lovely, lovely sight. Do you not agree? My Liege?”

Spears. Long swords. Great swords. Armor. Bows and arrows. Mauls. Shields...

The six hundred and sixty-six pieces of equipment that possessed overwhelming power were known as the Armor of the Demon Lord.

One of my most vital assets was now in the hands of my enemy.

“A frustration without equal, is it not? To have everything you could possibly possess taken from you.”

Alvarto grinned as he turned his gaze in our direction. His eyes moved down to those around my feet. There was...everyone who was of any value to me.

Ginny, Olivia, Sylphy, Verda, Lizer.

The corpses of my friends lay upon the ground.

“ ... ”

Silently, I looked upon them.

Even if the results were exactly as I'd expected, I couldn't help but wonder how it had come to this.

“So, my dear Demon Lord, if you do nothing, the next move will settle it all.”

With those words, the weapons and armor that filled the gray skies flashed. They were all aimed at my body. Their very presence was so overwhelming that it filled the target with the fear of death. Which was why...

...my mind began to play back the events that had led to this moment.



A short time had passed since I'd faced off against Lizer Bellphoenix and the cursed Mephisto Yuu Phegor.

Our first concern was the matter of a certain young girl—Maria.

She was more important to Lizer Bellphoenix than anything or anyone. In a way, she had set off the whole incident.

Maria had no unique powers or anything of the sort. She was exactly as she appeared. And that was why we couldn't have her tagging along on our journey.

“...I'm afraid there's no choice but to have her wait here.”

Unfortunately, the Megatholium, the site of the battle, was now as good as a burned-out wasteland. Leaving a young girl in a place like this was out of the question. That's why I restored everything to its original state using magic, a deed that should have put the issue to rest.

“We'll have Miss Maria wait inside the palace. Is that all right with you?”

The girl herself offered no objection. Lizer, however, looked anxious and began to babble on about the possibility of sneak attacks to take Maria hostage, so we took steps to account for that possibility.

“With this, there's no more cause for objections.”

“...Yes.”

Lizer, or rather, the creepy geezer, gave Maria a lingering look of regret. Although it was clear he still felt uneasy, he understood that any further delay was a waste of time.

“I’ll return soon. Stay safe until then.”

“Okay. I’ll be waiting. Go do your best, Lizer.”

The words of the one he cared so deeply for helped keep Lizer from dawdling. With him in our group, the party now totaled six as we departed from the Megatholium.

Several nights later, I was listening to the crackling fire while we all made camp on the plains.

As relaxing sounds echoed in the quiet evening air, Verda sighed. “Al’s just got this saturnine tendency, y’know?” She was probably referring to the bit of harassment that had occurred several times since we’d left the Megatholium.

Soldiers valued speed above all else. It was best to take care of conflicts as swiftly as possible. Any wasted time allowed for unexpected complications to arise, catch you off guard, and cause all sorts of havoc. For that reason, we’d intended to use teleportation magic to send ourselves directly to the enemy’s home base and put an early end to this matter. Unfortunately...

...the enemy had no intention of humoring us.

The capital of the Asylas Federation was where the opposing supreme commander, Alvarito, made his lair. The region around it had been completely enveloped in anti-magic spells, making teleportation impossible.

“...Is there a chance he’s just trying to buy time?” Lizer asked, rubbing his chin as he sat on a rock.

Verda shook her head in response. “I can’t imagine Al resorting to any plans that would require him to stall.”

I agreed with that assessment. His schemes were almost all focused on vexing me as much as possible.

Changing the world and turning all my classmates into monsters, kidnapping Ireena and keeping her at his side—the common thread that bound these

things together was the intent to make me suffer. And this teleportation blocking, along with the monstrous hordes that had attacked every day... It was all meant to stress me out.

It was working. I was quite irritated. I wanted to save Ireena and return my classmates back to normal as quickly as possible.

Now, now, now, now, now.

I wasn't expressing it overtly, but I felt the impatience bubbling up inside me. Thus, our slow pace was an extremely effective bit of needling on Alvarto's part.

"For now, we can only endure. When the time is ripe, we'll turn the tables on Alvarto and give him a taste of his own medicine. Yes, an excruciatingly irritating bit of trolling."

"Oh? Looks like you've got something in mind." Verda turned her head in interest, and I slowly began to speak as I looked at the faces gathered around the campfire.

My voice seemed to carry particularly well in the night air. The campfire lit the faces of my comrades as they listened intently. That didn't last long, though. When I finished my explanation, their expressions brightened.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That's good! It'd be amazing! Let's go with that!"

"...A fairly effective bit of vengeance, I think."

"I have no objection. However, I admit to a bit of anxiety on the matter."

"You need to stop worrying so much, Lizer! It'll all work out!"

"Quite. Ard is the one who came up with it, after all."

There was real trust in my companions' eyes, and I continued to outline the plan. After straightening my posture, I confidently said, "Let's make sure we thoroughly destroy his schemes."



Hearl-Si-Pearl, the Capital of the Asylas Federation. It was a beautiful city, a veritable treasure of wooden architecture guarded by towering walls. Each year, countless tourists came to gaze upon its buildings.

Though once plagued by constant civil wars, the recent reunification by the current king had brought stability to Asylas, and the domestic political situation had turned for the better.

In the newly reborn Asylas, there was no trace of the despair that had once so thoroughly hung about the region. The capital's residents enjoyed the surprising arrival of peace—at least, for a while.

Changed beyond all recognition by the Strange Cube, Hearl-Si-Pearl was no longer an oasis of tranquility. It was a demonic city where hideous monstrosities wandered the streets. Alvarito Egzex, gazing down upon the ruined city from his castle, smiled as he took in the scene.

“This is now a lair befitting a Demon Lord from fairy tales. Though...perhaps it's a little too overt?”

He stood at the top of a spire, a chuckle in his throat and his long black hair billowing in the wind.

The newly altered world considered him the monster who bore the cursed title of Demon Lord. Yes, he had claimed the same title as the man who had robbed him of everything that mattered.

“If only... If only he had kept his promise to me, I would have never had to adopt this annoying position, and all this hassle could've been avoided. Alas, this is only made bearable by the thought that he must be boiling over with irritation.”

Alvarito made a show of shrugging his shoulders.

It was then that a young woman appeared next to him. She was a pretty little thing who had appeared out of thin air, but something was off about her—an aura of wrongness.

“Hah! It looks good on you, Kalmia, as I knew it would. That attire is indeed fit for a lieutenant of a Demon Lord.”

The girl, Kalmia, replied expressionlessly, “...I meant to mention this a while ago, but your sense in clothing is repulsive.” Her words were dismissive, though even as she gazed down at her attire, her face remained still as stone. “Gothic lolita is a style that was perfected long ago. You've completely ruined the

delicate balance by adding all these gaudy little accessories. Why include this tiara-like hat? The sword-shaped decorations on the skirt make no sense. By heaping on unnecessary decorations, you've also ruined the color balance—"

Alvarto cut her off with a boisterous laugh. "Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Kalmia! You truly are a master at trampling upon my heart! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Kalmia let out a small sigh at Alvarto's reaction and changed the subject. "...We're close, aren't we?"

Alvarto immediately understood what she meant, and he nodded in response. "Yes. My wish is about to be fulfilled. The moment I've anticipated for ages is about to arrive."

With that remark, Alvarto gazed up at the heavens. In sharp contrast to his mood, the skies were gloomy. That just added to the ambiance in its own sort of way.

Alvarto's features twisted with a mad grin as he practically sang out his words. "Today, my tale that has dragged on for so long will finally reach its conclusion. Ahh, it's such a wonderful feeling. So this is what bliss is like."

Kalmia remained silent. She stood at Alvarto's side and simply stared at his face. If he paid any heed to her gaze, he made no sign of it as he exhaled with satisfaction.

"At any rate, our preparations are complete. All we wait for now is for our guests to arrive." Alvarto smiled maliciously as he gazed at the city below.

"Ahh, just thinking about it makes me chuckle. That guy and his companions are suffering through such inconvenience on their way here. And that accumulated stress will reach even greater heights when they arrive in the city. I may very well become the second individual in existence to give the Demon Lord an ulcer! I am so looking forward to it! My limbs tremble with anticipation! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Kalmia let out an exasperated breath as Alvarto cackled next to her. "...Sicko," she murmured.

"Sicko indeed! I've been kept waiting for thousands of years! Of course, my heart has grown odd! Surely I can be forgiven for indulging in one or two

hundred bits of harassment in revenge!”

Alvarto pictured his former liege and current rival in his mind’s eye. The man who had altered his appearance and changed his name to Ard Meteor.

Just the thought of his enemy’s usually calm expression twisting in anger brought Alvarto to the brink of ecstasy. Surely he would fulfill Alvarto’s expectations and more. After all, this city and this castle were filled with countless little gifts of malice that would drive Ard Meteor up the wall.

Diabolical traps, monsters positioned in the nastiest of places, and once the man made his way through all of that, the one thing he wanted would elude his grasp.

“Ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Alvarto gazed up at the sky and spread his arms. Joy was practically radiating from him. Yet something unexpected quickly brought his revelry to an end. There was an object glittering in the sky.

“Hmm?” Alvarto knit his brow in consternated surprise. An enormous ball of light emerged from behind the clouds.

By the time Alvarto realized it was an attack from that man...everything he’d prepared had been reduced to ashes.



“...Phew. That makes me feel a little bit better.”

The sight before me gave me a sense of satisfaction, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

It had been a long and stressful journey, but we had arrived at the objective at last.

Obviously, we were never going to work our way through the city. Having assumed Alvarto had filled the place to the brim with all sorts of unwelcome surprises, I’d elected to simply get rid of it all.

“Ah. Impressively done.”

“Full power really does make a difference. It’s hard to believe you were born in this era.”

“...This brings back memories. It was such a simple thing to destroy an entire city with a single blow.”

Three former members of the Four Heavenly Kings each offered their opinions on my maneuver.

“It’s just too much to even make sense of...,” Ginny said with her mouth agape.

“For someone born in this era, you really are far beyond the norm.” Sylphy chuckled as she offered her praise.

“I guess I went a little overboard. Maybe I was angrier than I thought.”

Hearl-Si-Pearl had been reduced to a smoldering wasteland.

Where there were once tall buildings, there was now only scorched, flat land.

Mentally, I flipped off Alvarto.

Loom.

Suddenly, an enormous presence bore down upon us.

“Hmm. As I expected, he survived unscathed.”

The sheer presence was enough to bring goose bumps to my skin. That proved the man we were after was still alive.

“Ahh, what a shame. I’d forgotten what sort of man you are.” The tension in the air increased in weight as a voice like a petulant child’s offered a comment. “Why must you be such a spoilsport?” Rage began to creep into the speaker’s words.

As if in reply to that shift in tone, an anomaly formed ahead of us. Shadows flooded from under a piled mountain of debris. It spread slowly, staining the air around it.

“Everyone, retreat!”

My command came more as a reflexive response than as a conscious order. Everyone responded by moving backward in unison, as though they had coordinated the timing. Their expressions were tense, and they appeared to be struggling with the cold prickle of fear.

It was clear that we needed to avoid those shadows at all costs.

As though to prove that point, the flowing darkness demonstrated its terrible power.

It slowly spread out in a fan shape, and the moment it touched the pile of rubble...it vanished.

This was more than dismantling, vaporizing, or pulverizing. It was erasure. The flood of shadows had utterly wiped the debris from existence.

“The Flames of Hades...! I see they’re as dangerous as ever...!” Olivia cried as sweat beaded on her brow.



The Flames of Hades was the name of Alvarto's special ability and one of his titles. The skill brought instant death upon anything it touched.

The moment those black flames grazed a target, the victim's soul would be sent immediately to the underworld. Nothing was exempt. Making contact with that burning darkness spelled doom.

The black flames raced toward us...then split in two, surrounding our group and blocking off our retreat.

"Irritating. Ahh. So very irritating!" Alvarto said this with a note of intense irritation and yet with the kind of grace that would put the most beautiful women to shame. The flood of shadows coalesced around him, slowly shrinking. He was like a grim reaper emitting the ebon aura of death. "You have no idea how much effort I put in to all of this. You cannot understand how my hopes grew while I waited," Alvarto lamented with a deep sigh. His eyes narrowed to sharp daggers. "You've ruined it. Ruined, ruined, ruined, ruined. Ahh, such a shame. The only thing I can do at a time like this is dance."

Alvarto spun in circles. Mad, chaotic rings. He stepped around in odd spirals, moving with strange steps. As he did so, he stared upward at the sky and quipped, "Still, that was quite brave of you. There are two things that are of vital importance to you here. To just utterly destroy the area... Quite bold, quite bold."

I dismissed his commentary. "Don't lie. Neither the Strange Cube nor Ireena is here. You're hiding them somewhere else, right?"

Alvarto snorted as he danced, perhaps because I was right.

"Impressive. Sharp as always."

"I understand how your mind works. You probably intended to enjoy a drink as you watched our efforts go to waste. Unfortunately, that won't be happening."

When I smiled tauntingly at Alvarto, his mad dance began to slow.

"Ah. I finally feel a bit of motivation." The cloud over his beautiful features cleared in an instant, replaced by a mischievous glint. With the ease of a

morning stroll, he immediately closed the distance between us, saying, “So, shall we dance?” A predatory smile spread on his face, and he waved his left arm.

“Tch!”

It was at this moment that we realized our mistake. We’d let our guard down because Alvarito hadn’t displayed much hostility, allowing his black flames to lash out at us.

“—Wind!” I reacted entirely on reflex. With no time to evade, my brain sought an alternative and executed it. My wind magic hurled us backward with a great deal of force.

No sooner had we escaped than the shadowy fire engulfed the spot we’d been standing in only a moment earlier. As we landed, we cautiously looked over at the enemy.

“What a pity. So close, too! Ha-ha-ha.”

Alvarito smiled like a child at play, showing no trace of aggression even as he casually tried to kill us. It was the demeanor of a madman. The years hadn’t changed him; he was still as thoroughly broken as he had been in the past.

“...I suppose there’s no point in holding back.”

There was a reason Alvarito was known as the most powerful of the Four Heavenly Kings. At this rate, it would be tough for me to do what I needed to. Thus, I decided to play my trump card.

“Please leave this to me,” I said to my companions. Then I summoned a particular magic item.

“Oh-ho. I thought it took you a while to get here. Now I understand you took a little detour to get something.” Alvarito narrowed his eyes as he grinned with delight. His gaze and attention were focused on my hands and the gem held within them.

The white-gold treasure in my grip was something I had created in the distant past... And I had recovered it from a dungeon for this very fight.

“I’m going all in from the beginning. Enjoy the show.”

With that, I held the gem to the heavens and activated it.

“Overwhelming power. Manifest before me. And bring me a hallowed victory!”

After I recited a three-line incantation, the white-gold gem shimmered brilliantly, and a giant gate appeared beneath the cloudy sky.

“Ahh! Such beauty! A portal to purgatory itself!” Alvarto shouted with mad glee as he beheld the gothic beauty of the gate. There was no fear in his expression. If anything, he had been waiting for this moment.

It made no difference to me. He could laugh and play around all he wanted.

Alvarto Egzex, I doubt this battle’s end will produce your desired outcome.

“Open! Gate of Annihilation!”

With those two incantations, the portal floating in the heavens loudly began to open. On the other side awaited nothing but a dark abyss. An onyx so dark that it seemed to absorb all the light.

Slowly, objects began to appear.

They were weapons and armor. Of course, they were no ordinary items. All the things that appeared from the gate were overwhelmingly powerful.

In total, there were six hundred sixty-six of them. The collection hovering in the gray skies was my ace in the hole.

The collection was the Armor of the Demon Lord. Each item was an overwhelming weapon on its own. There had only been one time in the past when I’d had to use all six hundred sixty-six of them—my final battle with the Fallen God Mephisto Yuu Phegor.

Alvarto had been present for that, so he understood what he was up against. Yet the greatest of the Four Heavenly Kings continued to laugh. “Ahh, such beauty. Even all the art in this world couldn’t match this sight.” He chuckled. His demeanor suggested he still felt confident of victory, making him appear even more disturbing.

“I never desired more destructive power, but I’ve longed to possess the Armor of the Demon Lord since I first laid eyes upon the collection. The power

is so great that it drew me in. That's the true nature of the Armor of the Demon Lord... Undoubtedly, the pieces are something of a reassuring crutch for you, are they not?" Alvaro continued to laugh. It made me feel as though I had forgotten something critical and obvious.

No, it's not worth worrying about it. I need to just shift to the offensive and buy time.

"To you, those are essentially your lifeline, yes? Any enemy can be dealt with so long as you have that collection of weapons and armor. It's a power you rely on when all else fails. Then...this... Then this...

"...then this must be completely unexpected! Your ultimate weapon now belongs to your enemy!"

Before I could give the order to attack, one of the six hundred and sixty-six pieces, the Javelin of Time Thieving, acted despite my not giving it a command.

The weapon flew from the cloudy heavens toward the ground. It raced at the speed of a lightning bolt, plunging down like a predator. And then...

"—Oh."

True to its name, the spear had the power to manipulate time.

The moment it was thrown, it escaped the laws of this world and moved to an axis where time flowed much quicker. This enabled it to deliver a completely unavoidable attack upon its target.

It wasn't simply that it was moving faster, it operated in a completely different manner from other weapons. No matter how much one strengthened their reflexes and senses, it couldn't be evaded. To the target, it was as though the javelin had suddenly sprouted from their chest.

Which was why I wasn't able to stop it from piercing Ginny's heart.

"G-Ginny!" Sylphy shrieked.

There was no response from Ginny, however. Her eyes stared lifelessly as her body collapsed to the ground.

"Worrying about someone else on the battlefield...? What nonsense."

After a mocking laugh, Alvarto turned his cold gaze upon me.

Sylphy ran toward Ginny as she fell, as a light shone beneath her feet. A moment later, her entire body was consumed with raging flames. It happened so quickly that there was no time to help her.

All that was left of her was a charred corpse. Alvarto grinned at Sylphy's demise.

"When was it? I believe it was during our attempt to kill one of the avatars of the Evil God. I stepped upon Miss Sylphy's traps and got burned to a crisp. Ha-ha. I suppose this is poetic payback. Now—" He turned his eyes toward Olivia, Verda, and Lizer. I wondered what he thought as he faced his old comrades. Whatever it was, Alvarto's look was frigid and unfeeling. "'Tis a problem to be too powerful. It takes all the fun out of fighting."

I couldn't stop his mad acts. By the time I realized what was happening, it was all over.

Olivia's head had burst, Verda had been chopped into pieces, and Lizer had been crushed into a lump of gore.

The scene was the very epitome of despair.

"T'was such a long wait. A long, long wait."

A destroyed landscape. A gray sky.

As darkness engulfed the world, the enemy in front of me flashed a pleased smile.

Alvarto Egzex. Once, he was one of my vassals...and the most powerful member of the Demon Lord's army.

A person I had previously shared meals with as a comrade until he became the worst enemy I'd ever known.

"Finally, all things have come to fruition. It was worth the millennia of waiting."

Alvarto proudly puffed out his chest in triumph, letting out a sigh of satisfaction.

Honestly, the situation filled me with anguish.

“A lovely sight. A lovely, lovely sight. Do you not agree? My Liege?”

Spears. Long swords. Great swords. Armor. Bows and arrows. Mauls. Shields...

The six hundred and sixty-six pieces of equipment that possessed overwhelming power were known as the Armor of the Demon Lord.

One of my most vital assets was now in the hands of my enemy.

“A frustration without equal, is it not? To have everything you could possibly possess taken from you.”

Alvarto grinned as he turned his gaze in our direction. His eyes moved down to those around my feet. There was...everyone who was of any value to me.

Ginny, Olivia, Sylphy, Verda, Lizer.

The corpses of my friends lay upon the ground.

“...”

Silently, I looked upon them.

Even if the results were exactly as I'd expected, I couldn't help but wonder how it had come to this.

“So, my dear Demon Lord, if you do nothing, the next move will settle it all.”

With those words, the weapons and armor that filled the gray skies flashed. They were all aimed at my body. Their very presence was so overwhelming that it filled the target with the fear of death.

Thus, my mind began to play back the events that had led to this moment.

“...Well, this is quite the bother.”

The moment I let out my sigh, the six hundred and sixty-six pieces flew toward me with immense destructive power.

Nothing I did would protect me from this attack.

Thus, I *chose* just to endure the onslaught.

I continued to cast regeneration magic on myself to avoid being eradicated outright.

Not yet. I can't yet. I haven't finished my job. I can't disappear yet. I need to wait until everyone's finished with their—

As my vision filled with incredible displays of power, a shimmering orb was fired into the sky.

That was the signal. The signal that everything was done.

“...Then that's fine.”

My role was complete. All that remained was to endure.

I cut off the regeneration magic. Naturally, that meant my body was going to be destroyed. But that was fine. The outcome had already been settled.

“Ahh, I see. As I thought, you really are no fun,” Alvaro remarked with a tone like he was pouting. The devastating attacks stopped at his comment.

I suddenly fell to the ground. After the impact, I tasted the coolness of the earth. Alvaro peered down at me, his brow furrowed with obvious frustration.

“You never intended to give me a proper fight, did you?”

“Yup. Screw your script.”

As we exchanged words, my body began to fall apart. Starting from my fingertips, my body slowly evaporated into motes of light. The same began to happen to the corpses of my already fallen comrades.

“Standins created with duplication magic. That you managed to keep me from noticing speaks well of your skill.”

Alvaro shrugged his shoulders. He was pretending not to be bothered, but his heart had to be a furious storm. I felt a tinge of satisfaction.

“All of your actions fell well within my expectations. Undoubtedly, you'd spent several thousand years preparing. To wage a conflict that would take all of your effort against me and...to face your own end.”

Alvaro must have gone around the world to each scattered piece of the Armor of the Demon Lord to overwrite its ownership. Yet no matter how much he schemed, I had no intention of cooperating.

“Our goal is simply to save the world. We'll take Ireena and the Strange Cube

back, and return the world to normal. That's the important thing... Defeating you isn't a priority."

And we'd succeeded. Thanks to the quick work of my comrades, I was able to put an end to this incident without breaking my promise.

I basked in the sense of accomplishment from completing a particularly difficult task as I addressed my enemy. "You've lost, Alvarto Egzex."

He let out a small sigh in response, and then he gazed upward. "You're the epitome of a spoilsport. To know what I feel and dismiss it, even though you made my body and soul this way..." Although his words were resentful, there was no actual emotion behind them. "It's much too early to declare victory, my dear Demon Lord. Don't underestimate my resolve, my obsession. I've spent thousands of years preparing. Yes... I have made thorough preparations for my own destruction. Which is why..." A dark shadow fell over Alvarto's features. He then continued calmly, as though he were reading out a ruling. "You must kill me. There's no other option."

Just how true was his statement? There was little time to think on it, as my duplicate form's endurance had run out. My consciousness moved back to my body with a new question lingering in my mind.



My vision went dark for a moment before I awoke in the middle of a field.

"Damn that Alvarto... Just what is he planning...?"

No answers came to mind, meaning it was best not to think about it. For now, I needed to meet with my companions and enjoy our successful rescue of Ireena.

I used my detection magic to determine everyone's location, then activated my teleportation magic. I had already completed analyzing the anti-teleportation spell, and there was nothing left to obstruct me.

I arrived to join the others in an instant. They had taken shelter inside a shadowy forest, and close by was a building that appeared to be a ruin of some sort. That was probably where Ireena and the Strange Cube had been kept.

"A...Ard...", Ginny said softly as she caught sight of me.

That's strange. Why does she seem so gloomy after our victory?

She wasn't the only one. All of my companions looked defeated. Their expressions fanned my anxiety.

"What's wrong, everyone? You succeeded in securing what you came for, yes?"

I turned to look at Olivia, who held Ireena in her arms. The elf's eyes were closed, as though she was in a deep sleep. She was clad in a white frock that looked like a wedding dress, and she cradled the Strange Cube in her hands... There didn't seem to be anything wrong with her at a glance.

All we needed to do was wake Ireena, analyze the cube, and figure out how to activate it. Once that was done, the world would return to normal, and we'd have our lives back. That should've been all there was to it.

Yet, for some reason, everyone wore despair plainly on their faces. Lizer was the one who explained why that was.

"Ard Meteor...calmly listen to me." What he said next was just too much of a shock. "Ireena Olhyde's body...contains no soul."

That meant...

"This girl is already...completely and irreversibly dead."

My mind went numb. The scene before me went white.

"...That. Can't be..."

All I could do was stand there, mouth agape like a fool, utterly numb.

INTERLUDE

The Deathless Monster and a Fleeting Dream I

A pale void stretched as far as the eye could see. That was all that existed in this space. There was nothing else. No objects, no sense of direction, not even gravity existed in this world of nothingness.

It was inside this incomprehensible realm...

...that Ireena found herself when she woke.

The first things she felt were a slight headache and drowsiness.

It took a moment for her to process her surroundings and the strangeness of her circumstances. When it finally clicked in her head, she murmured in confusion, "What...is this place...?"

Nothing about her predicament made sense. Ireena's most recent memories did nothing to explain why she was here.

As best as she could recall, she had been in the capital of the Asylas Federation, fighting an intense battle against the monster Elzard, known as the Frenzied King of Dragons. The fight had been close, but she and the others had somehow secured victory, and then...

"Then...what happened afterward...?"

Ireena's memories of what followed were foggy, and she struggled to visualize them with any clarity. A vague sense of foreboding bored through her chest. The anxiety continued to grow, and she was on the verge of venting it in the form of a complaint when...

"You're inside Al. He absorbed you, and you've become part of him."

...a voice sounded through the white space. It was beautiful, but there was a mechanical quality to its tone, and the moment Ireena heard it, a figure took shape in front of her.

It was a girl. But the moment Ireena saw her, she was gripped with a conviction that this was no ordinary person.

That much was obvious from a single glance. The girl oozed power.

She wore her hair in twin ponytails, and there was a certain artificial grace to the white strands, interrupted only by the red highlights that seemed to pulse with a faint light.

Her appearance was too perfect, reinforcing the impression that someone had created her. What settled that notion was the colorful clothing in the gothic lolita style. The excessive decorations and vivid colors prompted Ireena to blurt out an observation.

“She looks like a doll...”

The moment the words left her mouth, she realized she was uttering nonsense and blushed. Ireena’s statement felt out of place, considering the circumstances. Still, the girl showed no reaction. Instead, she watched Ireena, her face immobile.

“You aren’t wrong,” the girl replied dryly, like she was merely reciting a line.

Ireena shivered in discomfort at the girl’s presence, but decided to see what she could learn.

“Just who are you? What is this place?”

The girl responded to the first question. “I’m Kalmia.”

“...Kalmia?”

The name sounded familiar. Ireena had first heard it during the incident at the Megatholium. Kalmia had been the name of the queen’s agent who had helped Ireena and the others escape the city.

A few months later, they saw Kalmia during their summer vacation. However...

“You look completely different.”

...the Kalmia that Ireena remembered had been beautiful, but soberly dressed. There was no semblance of her in the eccentrically attired beauty who

stood in this pale void.

“Appearance is meaningless. That appearance, this appearance, all of them are temporary guises.”

Ireena wasn't sure what Kalmia was trying to say, but she didn't feel a particular need to press the issue. There were more important matters to discuss.

“What's happened to me?”

“As I stated earlier, you've been absorbed into AI—”

“Back up. Who is this AI? And what do you mean 'absorbed'?”

“—Do I have to spell it out for you? I guess you're not very bright? I don't understand what they see in you. At the very least, you're not worthy of being my owner.”

Ireena felt a surge of irritation as Kalmia let out an exasperated sigh.

“No, the problem is your vague explanation! I'm definitely not stupid!”

“...This is the problem with you girls with excessively large breasts. All of the nutrients go to your boobs, and you end up with nothing between your ears. I pity you. To not even have the intelligence to grasp your own lack of smarts.”

“Excuse me?! Are you trying to pick a fight, you washboard?!”

Perhaps it was her imagination, but Ireena thought she saw a trace of anger tinge Kalmia's sterile expression.

“I am not a washboard. I simply embody modesty and propriety. Such a pity that you can't even recognize that. Yes, you should remain stuck here forever —”

As Kalmia doled out her observations, a new presence suddenly appeared in the emptiness.

Ireena thought she saw a black fog from the corner of her eye. It rapidly spread through the entire space, staining the pure white with black.

“Huh? W-what's going on?”

Ireena could do nothing but glance around in confusion. Nearby, Kalmia

narrowed her eyes and muttered, "...It's started."

A heartbeat later, a new change rippled through the darkened void. An unending fountain of colors erupted and began to fill the place with color. By the time Ireena knew what was happening, she found herself standing in a room made of stone.

It seemed to be some sort of basement. An unsettling room that was dimly lit by a hanging lantern. Kalmia and Ireena were...not the only two who stood there.

"I suppose even I can't get everything to go as I'd like."

An elegant voice echoed in the creepily lit room.

The moment Ireena laid eyes upon the source of that voice...

Shudder, shudder, shudder.

...she felt a shiver of terror run up her spine.

Her teeth chattered in fear. Terrifying. Just terrifying. And yet, she felt an odd kinship with the figure.

"What...is...this...?!" Ireena uttered the words without meaning to do so.

"Hmm?" The figure turned his gaze toward her.

"Ah!" Ireena let out a reflexive gasp. The figure gazed intently in her direction.

Beautiful—that was the only word that could describe the man. His long, floor-length black hair shimmered in the dim lighting and seemed to create an aura around him. His large eyes sparkled like stars in the night sky, drawing in the viewer. His facial features still retained a certain childish innocence, making him look almost angelic... Yet at the same time, he carried the unsettling perfection of a devil.

"Hrrrrm."

He tilted his head and rubbed at his chin in thought.

"I thought I sensed a presence, but I guess it's only a fly."

That was odd. Ireena felt there was something off, even as terror gripped her heart. There was no way he could've missed Ireena or Kalmia. So why wasn't he

reacting?”

“We’re in the world of memories. It’s not as though we actually exist here.”

“The world of...? Memories...?”

Ireena still couldn’t quite follow what was happening. Thus, Ireena’s mind tried first to understand the sight before her rather than deduce the exact situation she found herself in.

The scene in this stone room was simply too strange to do otherwise.

An array of tools of unknown purpose hung on the wall. The beautiful and terrifying man stood in the middle of the chamber.

His eyes were fixed on a young child. While still small, the youth had beautiful features that resembled the man’s. Anyone would have assumed they were father and son.

However, if they were, this was no way for a parent to treat their child.

The boy wore dirty, ragged clothes, and he was trapped inside this creepy room. Worst of all, he was chained to the wall.

Day after day, the boy was subjected to gruesome torture.

“—Huh?!”

Ireena realized with a start that her thoughts made no sense. Why did she know the poor youth’s situation with that much clarity? How had she come to understand the situation unfolding before her? It was just as she began to process everything...

...that images began to flood into her mind. They came in a torrent. The hellish days from the boy’s birth to the present scene carved themselves into her head in a matter of seconds.

“Urgh... Ugh...!” It was a miracle that Ireena was able to maintain her composure. “Wha...? What just...happened...?”

“As I noted earlier, you’re currently one with AI. Meaning that his recollections will regularly enter your mind. The fact that you’re in the world of memories is part of that process.”

Ireena slowly began to understand. Something had occurred after the incident at the Megatholium, and she had been absorbed by someone or *something*.

Al was the name of the person or thing. And...Al was likely the child bound to the wall.

“You exist to give me a method of researching myself. What do I need to break myself? What do I require to drive myself mad? I gave you several of my traits...to check aspects of myself that I have missed until now... Regrettably, the results aren’t...very useful.”

The man’s beautiful features were clouded by disappointment. Ireena wasn’t able to contain her befuddlement at his expression and words.

For the sake of his research? That’s why he tortured the boy and chipped away at his life?

“What does that even...? It makes no sense...”

“It’s pointless to attempt to understand Mephisto Yuu Phegor. No one can comprehend his mind... Even those who are his kin.”

Kalmia’s last words came softly enough that Mephisto’s voice overpowered them.

“Given that it took a fair amount of time and effort to make you, it does feel like a waste, but there’s no point in keeping something that serves no purpose. A pity, but I’m afraid I’ll have to get rid of you.” Mephisto had no trace of hostility as he sighed and shrugged. To him, erasing the child was the same as disposing of garbage.

“S-stop!”

Even though she knew it was pointless, Ireena spoke up and tried to stop Mephisto by tackling him. At the exact same moment...

“If thou hast no need for him, perhaps thou might allow me to have him?”

...a woman’s powerful voice posed a question. The speaker held a kind of energy that inspired awe and respect.

The moment after the woman’s words echoed through the room, an energy

field appeared in front of Ireena—and a figure took shape.

“Ahh, it’s you. That’s what I felt earlier,” Mephisto remarked with a smile like he was greeting an old friend. The woman at the end of his gaze was pure crimson.

Crimson hair.

Crimson lips.

Crimson irises.

Crimson nails.

Crimson clothing.

The aura she emitted, her voice, even her very presence itself. All of it was crimson. That was the impression that she left on an observer.

“Well, hello. You’re lovely as always, Luminas wol Croft.”

Ignoring the compliment, the crimson woman Luminas gazed intently at the chained child. Her eyes burned with intense emotion.

“...Yes, he’s lovely.”

A pleased smile formed on Luminas’s face, and she sauntered toward the child, her lengthy hair bobbing side to side.

“Allow me to correct myself. Thou art not giving him to me. This boy is mine. I care not for thy approval.”

“Hah. As self-centered as ever.”

Despite the biting comment, Mephisto’s expression held no hint of displeasure. If anything, he watched the situation with a certain glee, as though he had found a particularly interesting toy.

Meanwhile, Luminas had reached the boy. “Now, allow me to release thee. Thou will live with me from this day on.”

Luminas snapped her fingers, a gentleness softening her primal beauty. In response, the chains binding the boy disintegrated into dust.

Without a sound, without hesitation, the boy immediately pounced on

Luminas, his eyes swirling pools of chaos.

There was no meaning behind the attack. Ireena, who was now linked to him, understood that well. The child was the very manifestation of malice.

He had been exposed to nothing but pain and suffering since he was born. He knew nothing else—no common sense or ethics. All he wanted was to survive. There was no time for intelligence or reason.

Despite enduring agony that would break anyone, he still wanted to live. This was why he'd sought a method to survive, to overcome the pain. And his answer was to pool his malice and hatred.

To bear suffering that was enough to drive him insane, he'd had to fill his heart with the madness of indignance and rage. The boy, whose heart and mind were filled with nothing but murderous fury, had suddenly been freed from his binds.

It was only natural that he would lash out. Raw fury drove him.

But Luminas wol Croft wasn't equipped with the sanity required to panic or hesitate when faced with that sort of madness.

"Oh my. Such a lovely creature thou art, my boy." Her crimson lips curled in a wicked smile.

It happened in an instant. Yes, in the blink of an eye.

Ireena and the boy couldn't grasp what had occurred because of how quickly it came.

Luminas dodged the pouncing boy and broke his arms and legs.

"...!"

Unable to maintain his balance, the freed boy crumpled to the ground. Luminas then picked him up.

"A fine lunge. Make sure thou never forget what drove you to it."

A compassionate smile. A sweet scent. The warmth of her touch. The beating of her heart.

Such curious sensations.

The boy howled in pain over his snapped limbs, and the one responsible was holding him. However, he found himself incapable of mustering any rage. No, the boy felt something else. It was a wholly unfamiliar emotion.

He was melting into some kind of warmth.

“Tell me. Does this child have a name?”

“No. You can call him whatever you like.”

“Truly? Then...” The woman fell silent in thought as she held the slender child.

As he watched her, the boy finally understood. The hellish days of suffering and torture, why he had clung to life, and why he had wanted to survive... It was all so that he could meet this woman.

“...Mmm, all right. Yes. Thy name from this day forward is Alvarto.”

Alvarto Egzex. After naming him, Luminas gently patted his head.

“The first and last man that I once loved. Thou art worthy of that name.”

Luminas leaned in and, without a moment's hesitation, placed a kiss on Alvarto's dirty forehead.

Alvarto's emotions abruptly flooded into Ireena's heart.

It was the love that a child had for his mother.

That was the moment the boy had gained a semblance of normalcy.

The scene Ireena was watching suddenly lost its color.

After a moment, the environment returned to the infinite white space.

“...Alvarto. That's one of the Four Heavenly Kings.”

Everyone in the modern era knew that name. He was the greatest asset of the Demon Lord's army...and an extremely mysterious figure.

His portrayal and his history were fragmentary and contradictory, leaving no consistent image.

While the other members of the Four Heavenly Kings were well-known public figures, Alvarto was considered to have gone missing, furthering the sense of mystery.

He was their enemy.

“...Lord Alvarto is behind this entire mess, isn't he?”

“Yes. He absorbed you, changed the world, and is currently at war with Ard Meteor and the others.”

Ireena didn't yet understand every detail, but she had pieced together the vital information.

Alvarto Egzex, once one of the Four Heavenly Kings, was plotting something, and his scheme involved inciting the recent incident at the Megatholium. Ireena and the others had resolved that problem, but as a result, she had fallen into Alvarto's trap and his grasp.

Undoubtedly, Ard and the others were working hard to free her, even at this very moment.

“...Guess I'm causing them more problems.”

Ireena disliked the idea of being a damsel in distress. That was the reason she'd worked so hard to grow stronger.

Unfortunately, there was little she could do now. Ireena bit her lower lip in frustration. Kalmia, standing next to her, spoke up.

“There is no need to be upset. You can still turn things around. If not, I wouldn't have made contact with you.”

Ireena cast the doll-like young woman a questioning look. “...Whose side are you on? What's your goal?” She had the vague feeling that Kalmia was allied with Alvarto, but if that was the case, her actions seemed out of place. There was no reason for Kalmia to interact with Ireena. “Are you pretending to be on his side while planning to betray him?”

“No. I am always by his side. I'd choose destruction over betraying him,” Kalmia stated firmly, leaving Ireena no reason to doubt her resolve.

“Then why are you talking to me? Just killing time?”

Kalmia shook her head. If that wasn't it, then Ireena was at a complete loss.

“I have a single goal.”

The words she uttered next compounded Ireena's confusion.

"Ireena Olhyde, I want you to save Al."

CHAPTER 96

The Ex-Demon Lord and a Devil's Guidance (Part 1)

To me, rescuing Ireena was of the utmost importance, something that took priority over all else. I believed I had come up with a perfect plan to accomplish that goal and had executed it perfectly.

"No... I can't accept this...!"

The unfortunate reality was too shocking and impossible to believe, so much so that my facade as Ard Meteor slipped.

"Calm down. This isn't like you."

My big sister's chiding snapped me back to myself. Evidently, I had let my aura flow out of me. Ginny had fallen back, cowed at the intensity of it.

"...Sorry. I lost my cool for a moment. You have my sincere apologies, Miss Ginny."

"I-it's all right..." Ginny took my offered hand, stood, and glanced at Olivia. "It's understandable. Miss Ireena is in quite dire straits..."

Olivia held Ireena in her arms. The elf girl looked as though she were only sleeping, her eyes closed. Ginny and I weren't the only ones struggling with the sight. While she maintained a calm face, Olivia was distraught. Verda and Sylphy had their eyes shut and seemed to be deep in thought.

Which meant the one who was calmest at the moment was...

"First, we need to reexamine the situation and determine whether or not it is definitely hopeless. It's important that we discuss this calmly. Everyone should take a moment to calm down."

...Lizer Bellphoenix. Once the chief strategist for my army, he was the greatest of tactical minds.

So long as Maria wasn't involved, this man was capable of calmly analyzing

any predicament.

“We planned to retrieve Ireena Olhyde and the Strange Cube and executed everything according to plan. While we succeeded in our objective, Ireena Olhyde’s soul is gone... Meaning our efforts were a failure. I believe that’s what you’re all thinking at present.” Since no one voiced their disagreement, Lizer continued. “First, we need to assume that it’s not too late to complete our mission. Remember, the primary goal was to take the Strange Cube from our enemy and return the world to its normal state. Ireena’s Olhyde’s survival is not included in—”

“You trying to say that Big Sis’s death isn’t important?!” Sylphy glared at Lizer with an intense aura of hostility.

It was enough to knock out an ordinary man, but Lizer didn’t so much as twitch a brow. “Don’t draw hasty conclusions, Sylphy Marheaven. In fact, I believe that it’s still possible to save Ireena Olhyde.”

Sylphy’s expression changed at the response. “What do you mean? What can we do? If there’s no soul, then...”

“It’s true that resurrection is impossible.” Lizer looked at each of us in turn as he spoke. “Does it not feel strange? Why would Alvarto Egzex do such a thing? Was it to place a great deal of emotional stress on us and enjoy our suffering? No. While he is a prankster, he is not that sort of sadist. So, why did he erase Ireena Olhyde’s soul?”

Lizer was encouraging us to consider Alvarto’s reasoning. This was the sort of situation where I thoroughly appreciated his unerring calm. I felt myself regaining some of my cool.

“If we were facing an opponent who was only concerned with his own interests, then perhaps Miss Ireena’s existence was a threat, and he killed her to eliminate the risk she posed.”

“...But that doesn’t fit Alvarto’s personality.”

“That’s true. Al’s one of those types who enjoys the thrill of combat. It’s why he always provides some way he can lose.”

Such was the sort of man Alvarto was. Ordinarily, the way to prepare for a

fight was to eliminate all factors that might lead to defeat, but that was something Alvarto never did.

He would push ahead as though hoping to fail...and he'd still obtain an overwhelming victory in the end.

Once he'd secured his triumph, he would laugh in wistful disappointment.

"So, if he didn't kill Ireena to remove a possible threat or upset us, the remaining possibility is..." Suddenly, I hit upon an idea. "It may be a bit overly hopeful, but..."

"What is it?"

"Perhaps Ireena's soul still exists in some form."

Lizer crossed his arms and nodded at my remark. "If that's true, then his aim would be to use her as a hostage for negotiations."

Removing a person's soul, storing it somewhere else, and using it as a bargaining chip in negotiations. For someone proficient enough, it wasn't an impossible task.

"...I'm starting to feel like that's the most likely scenario."

Verda nodded and said, "Right? Al's main goal is to fight, yeah? But we're in a situation where we can accomplish our objectives without combat. Which means..."

"He manufactured a situation that gives us no choice but to battle him." Something clicked in my head after Olivia stated her conclusion.

It all made sense. Alvarto had sought to fight me...and the death that awaited him beyond. That was all. If our hypothesis was right...

"Combat with Lord Alvarto will be necessary to reclaim Ireena's soul, then. That raises an issue, however..."

"Yes. At present, we don't stand a chance against him. Given that you've avoided fighting him to this point, that much is clear," Olivia remarked with a furrowed brow. She was right that I'd tried to keep from battling him, but it wasn't because I'd lose. No, I hesitated to kill him over an oath I'd sworn to someone. Unfortunately...there were no other alternatives now.

It was impossible to keep my promise to her. As Alvarto had already noted, none of this would end unless I claimed his life. It was time to resign myself to that fact.

To keep one pledge, I'd have to break another and live with the guilt of doing so.

Still...

"To make progress, we need to figure out the mechanics behind his immortality, the secret to his inability to die. Or else we'll never achieve our desired future."

"The greatest problem is how we get to that secret. That's the long and short of it." Verda crossed her arms and sighed. Evidently, she had some notion of how to go about that task. It was probably the same idea that I was considering.

To explore that possibility, I turned and asked Lizer a question. "Did you liberate him completely?"

"No, I couldn't help but hesitate to do so. Even I wouldn't be able to control him were he fully unleashed. That's why I took part of his soul and summoned it."

"Then..."

"Yes, he's still there."

Sylphy and Ginny were having obvious trouble following our conversation, yet we continued regardless.

"Quite the dangerous choice."

"Still, nothing wagered, nothing gained."

It was undeniably risky. However, we needed to awaken the sleeping giant to find our way out of this mess.

"We have to do whatever we can to break Lord Alvarto's immortality. Right now, we can't even say for certain what powers his ability encompasses, and there's only one individual in the world who knows—the man who created Alvarto."

We needed to meet with the Devil himself—the hated enemy who, in ancient times, had been a constant thorn in our sides.

His name was Mephisto Yuu Phegor.

He was the most powerful and wicked Evil God. Regrettably, there was no alternative but to speak to the creature that we hoped we'd never meet again.

CHAPTER 97

The Ex-Demon Lord and a Devil's Guidance (Part 2)

Why do demons worship the Evil Gods and do their bidding?

Because the Evil Gods were, as their name implied, gods to the demons.

Like how the Old Gods created humanity and had us serve them in the distant past, my interpretation was that the Evil Gods had made the demons to act as their tools in this world.

Alvarto Egzex was one of the demons created by the Evil Gods.

In which case, the man who brought him into being would know the secret to Alvarto's immortality.

The question was...would he simply give us the answer we needed? While I was plagued by doubt, we had no other choice. So we used teleportation magic to go to him.

The Mountains of Madness—that was the moniker for these lands. It was an enormous natural landscape that was formed by a large formation of mountains. The primal beauty of the lands drew people in—and consumed them once they stepped foot inside.

Were it simply a beautiful natural landscape, no one would have called them the Mountains of Madness. A malevolent insanity permeated this place.

For most people, stepping into these lands was the last conscious decision they would make. Almost all of them would lose their minds and end up slaves to hysteria. After that, the only fate that awaited them was a tragic one.

It was by drinking the blood of those unfortunate souls that these mountains maintained their beauty.

“...I'd hoped to never set foot in here again.”

“Didn't expect to come back here for something like this.”

As we stood in the midst of the peaks, Olivia quietly voiced her displeasure, and Verda responded, chuckling. Neither was influenced in the slightest by the insanity that permeated the Mountains of Madness.

They weren't the only ones who remained unaffected. Lizer, Sylphy, and I were similarly fine. Our hearts weren't that fragile. The psychological miasma emanating from the peaks was little more than a light breeze to us.

However, Ginny was struggling to cope.

"Urgh... Mmrrph..."

She let out a groan as she pinched the bridge of her nose with her right hand. I leaned in and said to her in a worried tone, "Miss Ginny, it would probably be best if you waited elsewhere."

"No, I refuse...to be the only one...doing nothing..."

Perhaps the Mountains of Madness were taking their toll on her. Ginny was in a highly emotional state.

"I have my pride...! I don't want to be left behind...! I *can't* be left behind...!"

Ordinarily, she'd never make a scene like this in public. But this tenacity was a thing Ginny had acquired through her emotional growth, a precious accomplishment that, to her, was priceless. It shimmered from within her, and I decided to trust that it would be enough to shield her from the *wrongness* that emanated from these peaks.

"...Then shall we be on our way? To the source of this insanity?" With that, I glanced to the east. The giant ruins that lay at the heart of the mountains. That was where he was waiting. "...Please steel yourself for what's to come." Anything less, and they'd be swallowed by his power.

We were all tense as we stepped into the ruins. It was dark. Without a single light source, the interior was cloaked in heavy shadow.

"This place is depressing. Although that's likely due to more than the absence of light." With a sigh, I created a small luminous sphere with my magic. The ball lit our surroundings, and we began to venture farther in.

As we proceeded, Ginny muttered an observation aloud. "It's extraordinarily

complicated...”

“Right? Without a proper grasp of the layout, I’m pretty sure one hundred people out of one hundred who come in here would end up lost. But it’s a necessary part of the design, so there’s nothing to do about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“This place was built to strengthen the seal on the inhabitant. The corridors are actually built in the shape of a giant magic circle. This structure is a giant containment device.”

Yes, I’d constructed these ruins from scratch solely for that purpose. The array the halls formed was designed to remain for perpetuity, creating an inescapable jail.

Unfortunately, even this wasn’t enough to provide peace of mind. Lizer appeared to be in agreement with me on that. As we walked through the complex series of corridors, he furrowed his brow and spoke.

“A containment system designed with the full might of the Demon Lord Varvatos. That alone should be enough to damn the target to eternal suffering. Yet...the individual kept here is capable enough for me to doubt this place’s security.”

Lizer’s statement was true. The creature imprisoned here would never allow us to rest easy. The fact of the matter was that the devil who lived in these mountains had crafted a situation outside of my expected outcomes. The very fact that this region was known as the Mountains of Madness was unmistakable proof of that fact.

“...The containment magic Var created was supposed to completely contain the target’s power and reduce him to a creature that was as powerless as a baby... And yet...”

“He continues to influence the outside world anyway... If that was intentional, it would simply mean he was extremely powerful, but...” Verda looked unusually tense, and sweat had formed on her forehead.

Yes. If the state of these mountains was deliberate, then all that meant was that he was monstrously powerful. The reality was worse, however. That devil

wasn't consciously doing anything. It wasn't an attempt to expand his malicious power or engage in villainy by punching a hole in the seal.

No, his very existence was enough to corrupt the world. That was what had twisted these mountains into what they were now.

"...People have constantly described me as being overwhelming or supernatural. But compared to *him*, I'm the very epitome of normal."

Yes, that devil was probably the only one worthy of being called supernatural. He fit no definition of natural. And the moment I pictured that monster in my mind...

"Oh, hello there. Welcome to my home."

...a voice rang out in my head.

It was a beautiful sound, and yet at the same time, it was so discordant that it made me feel sick to my stomach. There was no mistaking the source...

"Mephisto Yuu Phegor...!" I shouted out the identity of the speaker, my voice filled with disgust. Evidently, the tone gave the recipient some pleasure.

The next statement that rang in my head was extremely cheerful.

"Well, well. To have more guests after Lizer's visit the other day. Given how much I love company, you have no idea how pleased I am."

There was no deceit in the lively tone. To Mephisto, we were like old friends, and he was overjoyed at seeing us again. He was completely unbothered by our hostility and sent us cheerful, friendly thoughts. He was the very definition of selfishness.

That fact made him as frustrating and irritating as he had always been.

"So, I would ordinarily like to welcome you all in, but...I think I'd like to have a tête-à-tête this time."

No sooner had the statement sounded in our minds than a glittering bouquet of roses appeared in front of me.

"You are the only one permitted to go any farther. If you object, then I'm afraid you'll all have to leave."

I glanced at the others for confirmation.

“...Very well. I’ll head your way. By myself, of course.”

I ignored the bouquet floating in the air and stepped forward.

“Ard...be careful...,” Ginny entreated in a frail voice from behind me.

“It’ll be all right. There’s nothing to worry about. Focus on caring for yourself for now.” I thanked her for her concern and continued down the passage alone.

I walked through the familiar halls of the ruins. With each step, I felt the weight of his presence grow. It was proof I was getting closer to that devil.

“...You know, after the recent incident with Lizer, I was hoping I wouldn’t have to see his face for at least another hundred years, but...I guess things never go the way we want.”

I moved forward with a sigh and stood in front of a giant gate. Once it opened, he would be waiting beyond it. That hated black aura was leaking out from beyond.

“We’ve known each other for so long. There’s no need to knock. Come on in.” He spoke as though he was the master of this home. His attitude made it clear that he didn’t consider himself to be a prisoner in the slightest.

“*Sigh.* You really are an irritating man,” I spat, making my ire plain. Then I reached out to touch the gate. The moment my fingers made contact...it creaked and began to move, opening like the maw of a giant monster.

“Hello there, darling. It’s been a long time. Quite a long time.” He welcomed me with a devilish smile on his angelically beautiful features. My greatest enemy welcomed me in.

When I clocked his demeanor and the state of the room, I let out the deepest, longest sigh of the day. Back when I had first sealed Mephisto here, multiple black swords had been embedded in his body, and then he had been bound in dark restraints, completely robbing him of movement.

That wasn’t all. I had blocked his eyes, nose, mouth, and ears to keep him from speaking, breathing, or anything else. That done, I’d set the black swords to inflict such agony that he would regret ever being born.

Of course, he should've been incapable of employing any magic, supernatural power, or divine abilities. The intent was to leave him struggling here in pain for eternity.

"...I'd expected as much, but this is still irritating to see for myself."

The black swords that were supposed to inflict unending anguish and the restraints that were supposed to keep him in place were nowhere to be found. He looked wholly comfortable, draped in a strange outfit made of white and black fabric. The interior of this room had also changed dramatically.

Originally, it was a plain, unadorned stone chamber. Yet now, there was an alabaster carpet on the floor, and elegant furniture stood atop it. A sparkling chandelier was hanging from the ceiling, illuminating the surroundings. Beautiful wallpaper adorned the sides of the room, and there were even several pieces of art hanging on the walls.

I gritted my teeth as I looked. The decor suggested Mephisto had spent decades, maybe centuries, coordinating the furnishings.

"Don't look so angry, my darling. At first, I intended to keep things as you wanted. I swear. I figured you had earned that reward by outmaneuvering me, so I was planning to suffer in agony here for eternity as you wished. But, well... you know how easily I get bored. After around three hundred years, I started to get tired of my surroundings." He shrugged his shoulders and stuck out his tongue like I'd caught him in the middle of a prank. "I felt guilty for it, but I wanted to stay true to myself. So I removed your restraints, although it pained me deeply. And while I was at it, I figured I might as well pull out the swords, too. They were really getting in the way of my daily chores, after all."

He shouldn't have had any regular activities to begin with...

"After another two centuries or so, I was struck by the desire to see your face again. So I tried to break out, but... Well, you're an impressive one, worthy of being my darling. Try as I did, I couldn't get free. I ended up just sitting here for a long time... To say that I've been bored would be an understatement." He shook his head with an expression of faint exasperation. Still, his golden irises remained bright and sparkling. Irritatingly so. "I didn't complain, however. It was more productive to find a way to enjoy my current circumstances than to

continue lamenting how dull things were. Don't you agree? It's when things are hardest that you need to think positive. That's one of my core philosophies."

Mephisto chuckled rather proudly.

"That's why I decided to enjoy this environment. I thought about the things only I could do and acted on all of them. The results are here before your eyes. I made furniture, I tried painting, writing books... It really was a fulfilling, enjoyable time." He said it all so gratefully, thanking me for the opportunity. There was no sarcasm in his voice. He was perfectly sincere. "The thing is, while living here was very amusing...I can't live alone. You were always on my mind. You, who share such a powerful bond with me."



Mephisto blushed as though he were feeling a bit shy. He squirmed and pressed his index fingers together.

“As you know, I tend to grow lonely easily. I’ve truly missed you. For the last few millennia, I desperately waited until I could meet you again. From your perspective, I suppose it seems you saw me only a few days ago. However, that thing you met was one of my avatars, not the true me. This is the first I’ve seen you myself in thousands of years. Ahh, yes. I don’t feel like I can restrain myself any longer. Can we start with a hug and a kiss—?”

“Quiet. Shut up. Just die.”

Gross. That one word said it all.

Despite my clear rejection, that irritating devil maintained his grin.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha. You don’t need to be so shy. Oh, or are you worried about the fact that you look different now? It’s okay. I don’t care about your appearance. You were indeed more beautiful than any other in the world before your reincarnation, but that wasn’t what I fell in love with. It’s with your very existence—”

“Bite off your tongue and rot,” I stated coldly, keeping my expression level. It seemed that was finally enough to convince him there was no chance of anything happening, and he held up his hands in surrender.

“Hmm. Then I guess I’ll have to satisfy myself with talking to you.” He looked disappointed, but kept his distance and sat down at a table. “Go on and take a seat. Why don’t we chat over tea? I’ve started a little garden recently. I’ve been able to grow some nice tea leaves, so—”

“Our relationship isn’t the type where we chat over drinks.” My heart remained icy through this exchange.

I don’t think I would’ve felt such disdain had we simply been enemies. There were plenty of rivals I settled differences with. I would sooner die than do as much with this devil, however.

“Yeesh. You really are a spoilsport. I guess that’s all right. No matter the attitude you take, it doesn’t change the fact that we share a strong,

unbreakable bond.”

“...Stop your rambling.”

“No, it’s true. I’m the only one you can really be friends with.” Mephisto smiled knowingly at me. Was this his usual babbling, or was he taunting me? Either way, I had no intention of humoring him.

“Let’s get to the point,” I declared while remaining standing, which elicited a chuckle from Mephisto.

“You’re after the secret to Alvarto’s immortality, right, my darling?” The way he spoke suggested he’d anticipated this. “You were caught between two contradictions: his wish to have you kill him and her wish for him to live on. The promises are contradictory, and you couldn’t keep them both. Which is why... you abandoned the problems you needed to solve and reincarnated into the future, right?” He shrugged while he spoke. “This is what happens when you don’t settle your debts... Surely your long life taught you as much. Yet you still ran like a fool... The situation must have felt unbearable.”

Seething hatred boiled within me as I listened to Mephisto describe the situation from the perspective of an unrelated outsider.

Damn you. It was all your doing.

I wanted to scream that at him, but I knew it was a pointless effort. Keeping my cool as best as I could, I replied, “Yes, I was truly foolish. I genuinely regret it... That’s why I’m here now, begging for your help.” It was the truth. If Mephisto wanted, not only would I plead, but I was willing to do whatever else he requested.

To my amazement, however, he made no demands of me.

“It’s fine. I’ll tell you,” he remarked casually. “Alvarto’s immortality stems from a spatial link he possesses with the underworld. Since he himself functions as part of the underworld, no matter what methods you use in this world, you can’t erase his existence. He’s a creature from a different dimension and not any ordinary life-form.”

I replayed Mephisto’s words in my head a few times and broke them down, processing them. “...Meaning, you acquired a specific part of the underworld

and gave that space itself a consciousness?”

“Ah, impressively done, my darling. So quick on the uptake.” Mephisto smiled at me the way a parent would when proud of their child.

It was infuriating, but I had to concede that he possessed amazing power.

For life to exist, there needed to be a vessel made of flesh and self-awareness. The former was created in the womb, while standard theory stated that the soul created the latter, but...

...Alvarto's consciousness wasn't based on a soul. A part of the underworld was what made up his mind. His soul was merely a support mechanism to keep his awareness in the physical world, and there was no lasting damage in destroying it.

“So, unless the portion of the underworld that makes up Alvarto's consciousness is eradicated, he can never die. Put a different way, destroying that makes it possible to kill him.”

“That's pretty much it... So? Any other questions?”

I asked three more questions and obtained all the necessary answers. In the end, I got all the information I'd sought by coming here.

“Seems like you've devised a plan. I suppose that means—”

“Yes, I have no further use for you.”

Without the slightest show of emotion, I turned on my heel and departed. My business here was completed, so there was no reason to delay. I wanted to get back to the others as quickly as possible. Breathing the same air as Mephisto was sickening and only hastened my steps.

“Yeesh, you could at least give me a kiss good-bye,” he said with a slight pout, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of a response. I continued on my way, determined to ignore him.

And just as I was a step away from exiting the room—

“You have a bad habit, you know?” I couldn't help but pause at that. Truthfully, I don't know why. There was something in Mephisto's voice, a pull that made me freeze in my tracks. “You have overwhelming, absolute power. In

battle, your strength is like no other's. But your psyche, at least in your daily life, is extremely fragile. You tend to unconsciously run from problems that you need to face. This is why, no matter how much you may think you've learned your lesson, you keep repeating the same mistakes."

A shiver ran up my spine. Every hair on my body stood on end. I broke out into a cold sweat and couldn't stop the sense of dread running through my nerves. The evil that lingered behind me went on, chilling me to my very soul.

"A devil will always reach out and take the hand of someone who desires aid. Yet the moment you accept assistance from that sort of creature, the end is doomed never to change. No matter how well things might seem to go, the result will be identical. After all, there's no such thing as a devil that doesn't seek payment for their help."

And then...

"Make sure you remember that, and this too, my darling." A heavy meaning filled Mephisto's voice, giving it a disturbing ring of truth.

"You can never escape the past. It will never let you go."

...before I knew it, I was running. The gates shut behind me, and Mephisto's presence grew more distant. Still, I couldn't stop. My legs kept moving, desperately carrying me away from something.

CHAPTER 98

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Path to the Underworld

I ran.

I ran as swiftly as I could through the ruins.

My feet refused to cease, driven by an impulse I couldn't identify. The feeling of the devil at my back slowly began to fade, and, eventually, I came to an unconscious stop.

"...Just what was all that?" I couldn't understand. Why did I flee? "...No point in thinking about it. There are more important things that need my attention right now." After saying as much to convince myself, I took a deep breath and started walking.

Soon after, I was reunited with my companions, and the moment they welcomed me back, I felt my knees buckle. My anxiety and disgust had turned to relief. The faltering was my body's reaction to the sudden shift in my mental state.

"...What is it, Ard Meteor? Did something happen?" Olivia, my big sister figure, inquired with a look of concern. I forced myself to smile as I responded.

"Oh, it's nothing. I just finally felt free of that monster when I saw your faces." Even if I once bore the title of Demon Lord and the fearful respect that came with it, dealing with an Evil God was still exhausting. However, I couldn't just let myself bask in my relief. I shared what I'd learned from Mephisto with my friends. "Getting into too much detail will make it sound absurd, so forgive me for summarizing my findings." With that disclaimer out of the way, I explained. "Lord Alvarto has a true self and a separate body, and unless the former is destroyed, he won't die. Basically, if we can kill his true self..."

"Even the unkillable monster will kick the bucket," Olivia finished.

Nodding, I responded, "The issue is where Lord Alvarto's true self is located.

That's the key. It's in the underworld."

"Ahh. I see, I see. So, I've lost out to him yet again." Verda made a frustrated face and groaned. "He's always a step ahead of me. I've spent the last few millennia researching the underworld, but... Even I, a goddess-level scholar, haven't been able to unlock its secrets."

Making part of the underworld self-aware and then connecting it to a vessel in the material world... Creating an artificial life-form using that technique was a feat that required a deep comprehension of the underworld.

Mephisto had that deep understanding. Meanwhile, it seemed that Verda had yet to grasp even the fundamentals.

"You're all making this so complicated! I mean, the long and short of it is we just have to go to the underworld and blow Alvarto away, right?! Let's get going, then!" Sylphy's assertion was a good encapsulation of her personality. She discarded the small details in favor of taking action. There was no trace of skepticism or doubt in her mind.

By contrast, Ginny, as an ordinary person, found the entire discussion bordering on the ludicrous. "G-go to the underworld...? Just how do you do that? I mean, you're not suggesting we die, right?" It looked like she had a headache. I'm pretty sure the miasma in the ruins wasn't the only cause.

"True. The underworld is generally understood to be where the dead end up. However—"

"It's possible for the living to go there. I visit the place from time to time."

"Is it really somewhere you can just stop by for a stroll?"

"Yup. Easy peasy... However, that's only if it's a region I can construct an entrance to," Verda answered casually.

"The underworld is extraordinarily large. The areas that Lady Verda and I know about are only a small part of a nearly infinite space. As a metaphor, we basically have a single grain of sand from a great desert. There's no knowing the dangers that await us until we arrive. I can confidently state that we won't be afforded the slightest bit of safety," I added. Of course, I was sure that everyone here was already aware of that fact.

“We’ve gotten a touch off topic. Let’s return to the subject at hand, getting to the underworld. If you construct a gate that connects the material world to the underworld, it’s possible to enter it as a living being. There are no specific complications, either. If I wanted to, I could do it immediately. However...”

“As Ardy said, the underworld is stupidly large. Which is why, even if Ardy or I took a gate to the underworld, getting to our actual destination would be...”

“There’d be no way to know how long it’d take. What’s more, we wouldn’t know our relative position. It should go without saying, but there’s no such thing as a map of the place. Meaning that we also wouldn’t know which way to go... That means we would waste time wandering for the better part of eternity.”

Blindly traveling to the underworld would make it impossible to reach our goal. Thus, there was a specific process that we needed to follow.

“There’s a gate that connects to our target in a dungeon. Let’s start by going there.”



Among the many notable places in this world, few were as old or as dangerous as where we were headed.

The Gates of Purgatory. That was the name of the place we teleported to. A name that had been used since far into the ancient past. It was a desolate landscape, and nothing lived there—not even a single blade of grass. Further, the ordinary laws of physics didn’t apply in this place, and strange phenomena constantly beset it.

What had turned this place into this nightmarish landscape? The cause was still unknown, and academics considered it a mystery that would forever remain unsolved.

Strange occurrences constantly popped up here in the Gates of Purgatory, but one, in particular, was considered more incomprehensible than others.

It was known as the Infinite Flames, or the Rage of the Gods—and we now had a front-row seat to it.

“Ahhh, it’s always a lovely sight to see!”

To a scholar like Verda, this sort of supernatural anomaly must have seemed a great research opportunity.

However, it was an overwhelming sight that struck an ordinary person like Ginny dumb with its sheer scale. Even to those of us from the distant past like Olivia, Lizer, Sylphy, and I, it was a sight that inspired the faintest prickle of fear.

“...Ordinarily, this is something I’d hesitate to approach,” Olivia remarked, voicing what we were all feeling. This otherworldly wonder that burned at the center of the Gates of Purgatory was aptly named.

As the name suggested, the Infinite Flames burned without end. They stretched far into the horizon and gave off such intense heat that they seemingly threatened to devour the heavens. It looked like a miniature sun. While the Gates of Purgatory were typically engulfed in darkness, the Infinite Flames made it as bright as midday.

“I—I don’t mean to doubt you, Ard, but...a-are you sure this is safe?” Ginny’s anxiety was understandable. We were about to head straight into the middle of this bizarre supernatural phenomenon.

“It’s true that the fire is perilous. If we enter without any protection, we’ll be burned to a crisp. However, I can guarantee that we’re safe for now.”

A powerful magical wall currently shielded us, blocking every bit of the fierce heat radiating from the raging inferno. The only thing left to do was hope the spell worked as we calculated.

“You need to steel yourself for anything, Ginny.”

“...You said you were willing to risk your life to follow us. Was that a lie?”

Sylphy’s encouragement and Olivia’s challenge must have resonated with Ginny, for she nodded with intense resolve glittering in her eyes.

“Then let us be on our way.” The moment I kicked off the ground, the others also jumped high into the air and leaped into the blaze. Although the tongues of flame licked at us, they did no harm.

We kept falling and falling.

While most people were unaware of this, the Infinite Flames weren’t fueled

by the ground beneath them. They came from a massive pit. More precisely...

...the source was actually Flare Breath spewed by a great serpent that lived deep below.

“Almost there, I think.”

While it was impossible to make a visual confirmation because we were surrounded on all sides by swirling crimson, we must have been close to the serpent’s mouth.

It went without saying that this was no ordinary snake. Technically, it wasn’t even a living creature.

After a little longer, we managed to get inside the serpent.

The brilliant fire that filled our vision abruptly changed, and I felt a hard surface beneath my feet. We now faced a stone dungeon. The amount of miasma that permeated the area was far greater than that of any ordinary dungeon, however, and that stood to reason. It was connected to a place where no living creature ought to tread—the underworld.

“So far, so good, it seems.”

“...The problem is what comes next.”

“If I recall my master’s lessons, this dungeon is divided into hundreds of layers, and it gets more dangerous the deeper you go. And, of course, our goal, the gate to the underworld, is at the very bottommost layer.”

Everyone looked tense. Undoubtedly, they imagined just how dangerous and difficult the path to the lowest floor would be... But I broke the tension with a casual remark.

“Not a problem. I’ve made a few preparations.” I aimed my right palm at my feet. A moment later, a magic circle appeared before my hand and released a giant luminous ray. The beam carved a large vertical shaft through the dungeon and eventually reached the deepest layer. “Shall we, then?” I pointed to the newly created passage and looked up at my companions.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Sometimes I feel like you’ve got nothing but brute force in that brain of yours!”

“...You truly do seem to ignore any rules with your power.”

“But this means we can avoid a troublesome dungeon crawl!”

“Indeed. Time is money. It’s a good solution.”

Verda laughed with exasperation, while Olivia looked on with a stony expression. Sylphy and Lizer were rejoicing at how efficient this was. Ginny could only gape in astonishment.

I decided to leap in first and left my companions to their reactions. I descended swiftly through the dungeon’s tiers. The scenery flashed by at an almost dizzying rate.

Downward, farther downward. And at the end...

...we encountered a room shrouded in abyssal darkness. The shadows flitted around like a sea of chaos. This was the space that linked the material world with the realm of the dead, and it was the only entrance that connected to Alvarto’s region of the underworld.

Darkness surrounded my companions and me as if to swallow us. No light awaited us beyond. There was only pitch-black.

Now the real work began. This was where things got complicated. Up until now, I could keep us safe. That wouldn’t be the case from this point onward.

The first and the greatest hurdle to entering the underworld was quickly approaching: the Soul Ripper.

“Everyone! Be strong!” I shouted as I felt myself floating in the darkness. I couldn’t see anyone around me. But that didn’t mean we were separated. That notion would be our only weapon against what awaited. “We’re not alone! We’re all bearing the same pain! If you feel yourself reaching your limit, think of the faces of your comrades—”

It began as I was in mid-sentence, and it came without mercy. A particularly deep shadow appeared within the thick darkness. Although it was the same color as the rest of this space, I could clearly see the ebon beyond the dim ripple, and I thrashed as it reached its tendrils toward me.

A moment later—it arrived.

It reached out with a predatory arc while I was immobilized. There was no use in resisting. This was a concept, a law of nature, something that couldn't be conquered by mere mortals, an unchanging and absolute rule.

The underworld always tried to bar the living from gaining entry, which was why there was a mechanism to keep intruders locked in this border zone.

That was the Soul Ripper.

In this transitional place between the material world and the underworld, the living had their souls torn from their bodies. Of course, if this was permitted to happen, everything was over. Once a soul was sent to the underworld, resurrection was impossible. We had to survive this trial intact.

Unfortunately...

"Guh... Urgh."

...it was excruciating. I had hoped never to suffer through this again. Yes, this was the second time I'd endured this pain. Once, Verda had sent me on a research mission to the underworld.

The place was the ultimate destination for all who died and was thus inviolable to the living. I'd hoped that unlocking its secrets would allow me to bring back the companions I'd lost.

Some had been destroyed, soul and all, but many had just been sent to the underworld, so I assumed they still existed in some fashion. I hoped that, with enough study, I'd see them again.

The first obstacle I'd faced during my initial journey to the underworld had been the Soul Ripper. After surviving, I'd forged a gate that linked the material world to the underworld, bypassing the Soul Ripper. I then spent a long time buried in research, but all it taught me was despair.

After intense pain and an enormous amount of time, the answer that awaited me was a simple and cruel one. Things lost could never be recovered.

Although, if it wasn't yet gone... If it was still there...

...I could recover it.

"Ireena...!"

My best friend. The person who meant more to me than my life. I would overcome any challenge for her and all of my precious classmates. Surely, I wasn't the only one who felt that way. In particular, Olivia, Sylphy, and Ginny were probably approaching this with a comparable strength of will.

But even so...

"Ugh... Agh...!"

"Guh...!"

"Urgh...!"

...I heard the voices of pain. The moans of agony that were filled with anguish came to me. This wasn't good. I had cast spells that increased tolerance to pain on everyone, but even then, it seemed the suffering was difficult to bear.

"H-help...!" Ginny, in particular, was in trouble. Her cry betrayed how close she was to breaking.

But what can I do...?!

There was no going back. Once here, the only outcomes were to fall victim to the Soul Ripper and die, or to overcome it and set foot into the underworld. I wanted to help, yet there was nothing I could do.

"Miss Ginny...! Please endure it...! It's not much longer...!" I struggled to so much as give her encouragement.

"Urr-urgh..."

I heard only a soft groan in reply. I needed to do something. But what could I do to save her? The mounting anxiety left me vulnerable, and the anguish from the Soul Ripper intensified. If things continued, even I was unlikely to make it. The worst possible outcome flashed in my mind.

It was at that moment...

"Geez. You're so helpless."

...a voice rang out in my head.

Soon after, I felt something tugging on me, and...

...when I came to, the scene in front of me had changed.

The abyssal darkness flooding my eyes was gone, as was the lethargy that left my limbs feeling like lead.

Now we were in a desert after dusk. That was the best way I could describe the sight.

The land was formed by countless grains of sand. A full moon hung above. The air was chillingly cold. Slivers of argent light and groups of traveling souls confirmed our location.

"...It seems we've arrived," a familiar voice said behind me. It was Olivia. Everyone else was lined up next to her.

"T-that was really hard, that it was..."

"Well, I guess that's true if it's your first time. It's actually kind of addictive once you get used to it."

"I'm going to decline to experience that a second time."

Sylphy, Verda, Lizer, and...

"I—I... Am I still alive...?"

...Ginny.

She was the one who was slumped onto her knees, and she looked quite pale, but that didn't change the fact that she was alive.

"Ohhh, thank goodness... Thank the gods..." I let out a deep exhale of relief.

"Welcome, everyone. I, Alvarto Egzex, greet you from the bottom of my heart."

Once again, a voice sounded in my head.

"First, let me say, well done. It really was quite the feat to arrive. Particularly you, Ginny Fin de Salvan. I found your efforts and tenacity truly moving. At first, I honestly considered you a weakling not fit to be present, but allow me to correct that misconception. You are indeed worthy of being my enemy."

The voice sounded amused, happy, and yet...somehow hollow, with a touch of ennui. Despite the fact that his enemies were beginning to turn the tables on him, there was no trace of panic or fear in his voice as he continued to speak.

“Now that you’ve made it this far, the rest is simple. Turn your eyes to the west.”

We all did as instructed. The desert stretched as far as we could see. There were the white sands, the dark sky, and an ash-gray moon that floated above... but that wasn’t all.

In the distance, there was a crimson rift hanging in the air

“That is the place you need to make your way to. If you wish to face me, then head west,” he explained in a calm, level tone. *“Of course, your journey will not be a peaceful one. I won’t allow that. I shall make you suffer through things that exceed everything you’ve endured up until now.”* It was then that the mechanical voice adopted a note of joy. *“For example—this.”*

A shudder ran up my spine. A moment later, I felt a presence under my feet.

I jumped reflexively and observed what had emerged as I landed. A single arm stretched out from under the sand. The next moment...

...the sound of sand being displaced echoed from all around. The dunes shifted, the sand flowing off them as figures began climbing out of the desert.

It was an army of dead warriors. They held a variety of weapons in their hands, but none of them wore any armor. They were garbed only in red outfits that appeared vaguely like military uniforms.

“This army... Are they...?”

They looked familiar. The thing that immediately came to mind was Alvarto’s ancient forces, the Mad Blood-Oath Unit. That, and the armies of Luminas wol Croft, the Outer One he had once served. The crimson warriors who had been the greatest force of their time. Their ranks were now lined up against us.

“Now, shall we begin? This is the final battle. The one that will end me.”

There was a certain hopeful note in the voice as it trailed off. Seconds later...

...an assault.

The warriors who surrounded us struck as one.

“All right, then! Demise-Argis!” Sylphy reacted the quickest to the sudden

commencement of hostilities. She summoned her Holy Sword to her hand and fearlessly charged the enemy. “Rahhhhhhhhhh!” She slashed, cut, and diced her way through their ranks. The intensity of her attack was worthy of her title as the Raging Champion.

“I can’t stand around, either...!” Ginny was the next to move. Having been born in the modern age, she didn’t have the strength to fight an ancient army. But it seemed she understood that fact, which was why she immediately conjured a magic item, a crimson spear. It was a piece of handcrafted equipment that I’d given her a while ago. Even a modern-born fighter like Ginny could hold her own against ancient warriors with its power. “I’m not going to be a burden!” With an intense shout, she activated her weapon’s power. Red lightning arced across the field and vaporized scores of enemies with a single blast. Ginny looked every bit the part of a powerful war maiden.

“...Her youth means her skill leaves much to be desired.” With a sigh, Olivia vanished. She moved faster than the eye could follow. When had she drawn her sword? When had she attacked? Many of our opponents fell to her blade before they could so much as acknowledge her presence.

“Hahh. Lately, I seem to be getting caught up in violent incidents rather often. I’m not really the violent type, you know.” Verda exuded no fighting spirit, yet her power was immense. “Dimension Monster, come to me!” Without a moment’s warning, countless black holes opened in the sky. And from them peered a monster that defied description.

It possessed an ugly head that vaguely resembled a sea serpent’s. It opened its jaws and spewed forth a shining beam. The vast army could do nothing in response and was simply vaporized under its assault.

“...She’s no longer a scholar but a walking natural disaster.” Lizer made no particular effort to fight and instead switched to standing next to me. “It would appear we have the advantage for the moment, but... How do you see the situation?”

This man was currently trying to ascertain the situation on the battlefield. I, too, was thinking along the same lines.

“...It does seem that, on the surface, we’ve got the advantage. However...”

The reality was that we weren't in an especially great position. I activated magic to confirm whether or not my suspicion was accurate. It was a salvo attack that combined roughly two thousand different elemental spells. An enormous set of magic circles appeared either below or above the enemies. In the blink of an eye, the entire army was eradicated

"W-wow...!"

"You always take the limelight."

"You know, if you can do that, you should've started with that!"

Ginny's, Sylphy's, and Verda's expressions were somewhat relaxed at the situation. It seemed they believed the battle was over now that the enemy force had been wiped out. Lizer, Olivia, and I were still on guard, though.

"Don't relax. It's not over yet," Olivia scolded sharply, perhaps warned by the uniquely sharp senses of a therianthrope. No sooner had she made her statement than the dunes beneath our feet began to shift again.

"Oh boy. I figured this might be the case, but, c'mon, gimme a break," Verda murmured with exasperation. As I followed her gaze, I spotted what I'd been expecting. The crimson warriors were rising from the dunes again.

Their numbers totaled the same force we'd just wiped out... No, there were slightly more. Either way, this situation pointed to a single truth.

"As expected, this army will spawn from the dunes endlessly."

"Indeed. Perhaps that's to be expected in the underworld."

Yes, we weren't standing in the material world. We were in the underworld, the afterlife. It was the final destination for every person of every age. There were practically infinite souls here...and these troops would likely continue spawning until those souls were exhausted.

"No way am I dealing with an immortal army!" Sylphy cried.

"W-what do we do...?!" Ginny exclaimed.

Olivia and Verda remained quiet, as though pondering something. Meanwhile, Lizer and I had a clear, specific solution to our current situation.

“Ard Meteor. How would you handle this situation?”

“A silly question. There’s only one answer.”

“Indeed. So we are of the same mind.”

As we exchanged nods, Sylphy shouted at us in irritation. “If you have some brilliant plan, now’s the time to tell us! They’re still coming!”

In sharp contrast to her panic, Lizer and I replied very calmly.

“The best response to this situation...”

“The optimal recourse is...”

““Retreat!””

With that, Lizer and I took off running. We dashed without the slightest hint of guilt or shame, proudly plodding through the sand. After turning our backs on the enemy, we scurried away at full speed. Sylphy, Ginny, Olivia, and Verda all stared at us for a moment.

“Wai—! Hold on! Wait for uuuuuussss!” Sylphy shouted before taking off. Seeing her flee, Ginny and the others gave chase.

“Running away from the enemy is embarrassing, it is!”

“Embarrassing is fine. The only important thing in battle is to win. No one cares how good you look doing it.”

“I completely agree.”

“Grrrrr! You were enemies until a few days ago, and now you’re totally on the same page?!”

Sylphy looked upset, but the other three girls had accepted my and Lizer’s reasoning.

“T-true. There’s no need to actually fight them.”

“...Our goal is, in the end, defeating Alvarito Egzex. In which case...”

“We can ignore bothersome opponents and keep going! Quite logical! But...”

“It’s meaningless if they catch us!”

Obviously, the army forces wouldn’t just sit there twiddling their thumbs as

we engaged in our banter. They pursued, kicking up an enormous dust storm in their wake.

“Oh, dang it! I really hate this kind of fighting! It truly annoys me, it does!”

The unbeatable soldiers were all quite swift. At this rate, it was only a matter of time before they caught up. However, that was only assuming that we didn’t do anything to slow them. Naturally, we were going to take measures to impede the rapidly approaching enemies. And even as she was kicking up a hysterical fuss, Sylphy understood that fact better than anyone.

Hence...

...there was a *beep* from behind, and then...

BOOOOOOOOOOOM!

...with an enormous clamor, searing heat scorched our backs. This was definitely her doing. Yes, Sylphy Marheaven’s specialty was trap magic.

“...It was nothing but trouble at the academy, but now it’s quite useful.”

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Sylphy the Runner returns!”

“Don’t call me that, stupid Verda!” Even as she puffed out her cheeks in protest, Sylphy continued to scatter traps in her wake.

The continuous noise of destruction sounded from behind. The dead army was blasted around, and their pace slowed. And, of course, that meant the enemy’s presence was starting to drop off into the distance.

“No one can do a fighting retreat better than you, Miss Sylphy!”

“I don’t find that to be much of a compliment! I don’t! Not at all! It totally isn’t! Not in the slightest!”

Her shouts overlapped with the explosions. As her title, the Raging Champion, implied, Sylphy’s fighting style was an aggressive one that focused on pushing forward at all costs, and her tactical dictionary lacked any terms for retreat. However, that was only when we were talking about her as an individual combatant. When viewed as a commander, Sylphy Marheaven was, in fact, exceptionally skilled with rearguard actions.

That was undoubtedly because of the Champion Army. Lydia regularly ignored orders and treated brilliant tacticians like dirt, so the group was often on the receiving end of beatings from intelligent enemies. As a result, they lost several battles in a row multiple times. In turn, this made the Champion Army grow to be extremely capable at fighting retreating battles.

Sylphy, in particular, always served as the rearguard while fleeing. After stealing techniques from other commanders, she had grown into being the most skilled commander in the world at flee-fighting, a genuine professional.

“Experience really is important, isn’t it? I mean, with enough of it, even a dummy like her picks up a few tricks.”

“Indeed. I’ve never seen anyone else who could position trap magic so expertly. Despite her stupidity, she’s quite skilled in this art alone.”

“I’ve never considered you more dependable than right now. You truly are good at this... Though you’re still a fool in other ways.”

“Are you all trying to piss me off?!”

“Hah! An idiot savant, I suppose! I didn’t expect you to be able to deal with them so well. Alas, I must change my view of you, Sylphy Marheaven. You are not a mere fool. You are a truly remarkable idiot!”

“Alvarto, why are you joining in?! Oh, for...! This is why I hate you Four Heavenly Kings! This! You all keep mocking me!”

Yeah, this was how the Four Heavenly Kings and Sylphy had been, even back in ancient times. It brought back memories. However, this was no time for nostalgia. As though to prove that point, a powerful presence approached from the side.

“Grraaaaaaaaaaaaah!” An enormous shout pierced the air, and an intense presence sped toward us.

Before we could catch sight of the approaching person, a blade flashed in the night.

“Tch!” Olivia had been closest to the enemy. Her action was probably reflexive rather than conscious. Still, there was no hesitation behind her slash,

and any ordinary opponent would have been split cleanly in half by her blade. This was evidently no typical foe, however.

The adversary twisted like an invertebrate creature and dodged Olivia's strike. Yet rather than counterattack, it stepped in farther and aimed for a different target—Ginny, who hadn't reacted quickly enough to this new combatant. It was understandable why the enemy chose to pick her off first.

"REEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!" With a mad cry, the enemy lashed out with a deadly blow.

A pair of strangely shaped curved swords drew a symmetrical arc in the air as they reached for Ginny. She had just noticed the attack and had no chance of reacting.

I needed to protect her. Before I could, though...

"Leave it to me."

...I heard Lizer speak to me.

The twin swords met Lizer's two-handed mace, and their clash released a blast of air.

"Waargh?!"

The attacker made no effort to push back against Lizer and instead stepped backward with a shout. It was here that we finally had the time to stop and get a visual confirmation on this assailant. He was dressed in crimson, like the others. His wild, long hair was streaked with gray, while his expression and the wrinkles etched into his face denoted fearsome experience.

The arms that held the curved blades were relaxed, and he smirked without a trace of tension. Altogether, he seemed a perfectly developed warrior. Despite his unassuming appearance, the aura radiating from him was immense.

"...This person looks familiar."

At Olivia's murmur, I nodded. I, too, recognized his face. If I recall, his name had been Lucius.

He was a close vassal of Luminas wol Croft, an Evil God, and he was also one of the generals of her army who formed the mighty duo called the Twin Jewels.

“He’s revived his old companions to send at us, then?”

“...No. This isn’t a revival, but a re-creation.”

Lucius had perished several thousand years ago in battle, meaning that his soul had already been lost within the underworld. Hence, the figure in front of us was simply a doll meant to resemble him.

“Ahh, it’s a good day to die...,” he mused as he looked upon us with drowsy eyes. The phrase, like his appearance, was familiar. However, it was only an imitation—a copy without any intention behind it, behaving as it was programmed to do. Knowing that, I couldn’t help but feel pity.

This Lucius doll wasn’t created to be used as a killing machine. It had been forged out of loneliness. Yes...like how I’d once crafted a false Lydia.

Alvarto, too, had re-created the past and used it to console himself... And then he undoubtedly had despaired at the hole that remained in his heart afterward.

“...I see. I need to take responsibility for that.” I thought of what Alvarto felt and tasted the sharp tang of sentimentality. Lizer raised his voice to snap me out of that daze.

“Don’t waste time on unnecessary distractions. Think only about how to deal with the situation in front of you.” With that, he stepped forward and stood in a position some distance away from the rest of us. He continued to speak as he faced off against Lucius. “There’s an army at our heels. Even if we were to try holding them back, there’s one who can still disrupt us. Focus on the masses, and we’ll be undone by the individual, yet if we concentrate on the lone assailant, we’ll be crushed by the horde... Ard Meteor, what is the best solution in this situation?”

The moment he posed that question, I understood what he had decided. There was only one thing to do in response.

“Giga Wall!”

I activated a magical barrier. It was a giant wall suited to defending an entire city. Not only was it immense enough to bar the army’s way, it separated Lizer from the rest of us.

“W-what are you...?!”

The only one who let out a cry of surprise was Ginny. Everyone else understood what I had chosen to do, although their faces made it clear they were conflicted. Lizer nodded approvingly.

“Well done. This is the correct answer.”

The enemy force was enormous, and even my *Giga Wall* wouldn't last long. What's more, there was now an extremely skilled agent there to block any efforts to escape. If we'd continued as we were, it would only have been a matter of time until the dead soldiers overtook us. So how were we to avoid that fate and reach our objective?

“Lord Lizer, I'll leave this in your hands. Please hold them off until we can enter that rift.”

Lizer Bellphoenix was remaining behind to buy us time. To an unaffiliated observer, it must have appeared a cruel choice, like we were forfeiting him to get ahead. I had no intention of sacrificing anyone, though. Because...

“With your powers, the enemy's numbers will likely work in your favor.”

...of Lizer's extraordinary ability, which he had mastered into an *Original* spell. Any opponent that touched his mace was forced to obey him, and the weapon also massively boosted their strength. But that wasn't all. Those who had fallen under Lizer's spell could also then bind others to his will. With this technique, the enemy's numbers would become a liability...

Still, there were risks involved. Would Lizer's power even work on the dead denizens of the underworld? There were additional concerns, too, which was why it was risky to stay behind with him. So he had to fight alone.

“Now go. I will take care of this. There is no place for you here,” Lizer stated calmly. I felt the strength of his determination as he turned his back to us. This wasn't the resolve of a man who was resigned to death. It was the will of a man who had hope, who was going to do whatever he needed to do to fight through this situation and survive. Saying anything to a warrior in that state would be rude, and I wasn't the only one who thought so.

“Let's hurry along.”

“Yes, indeed.”

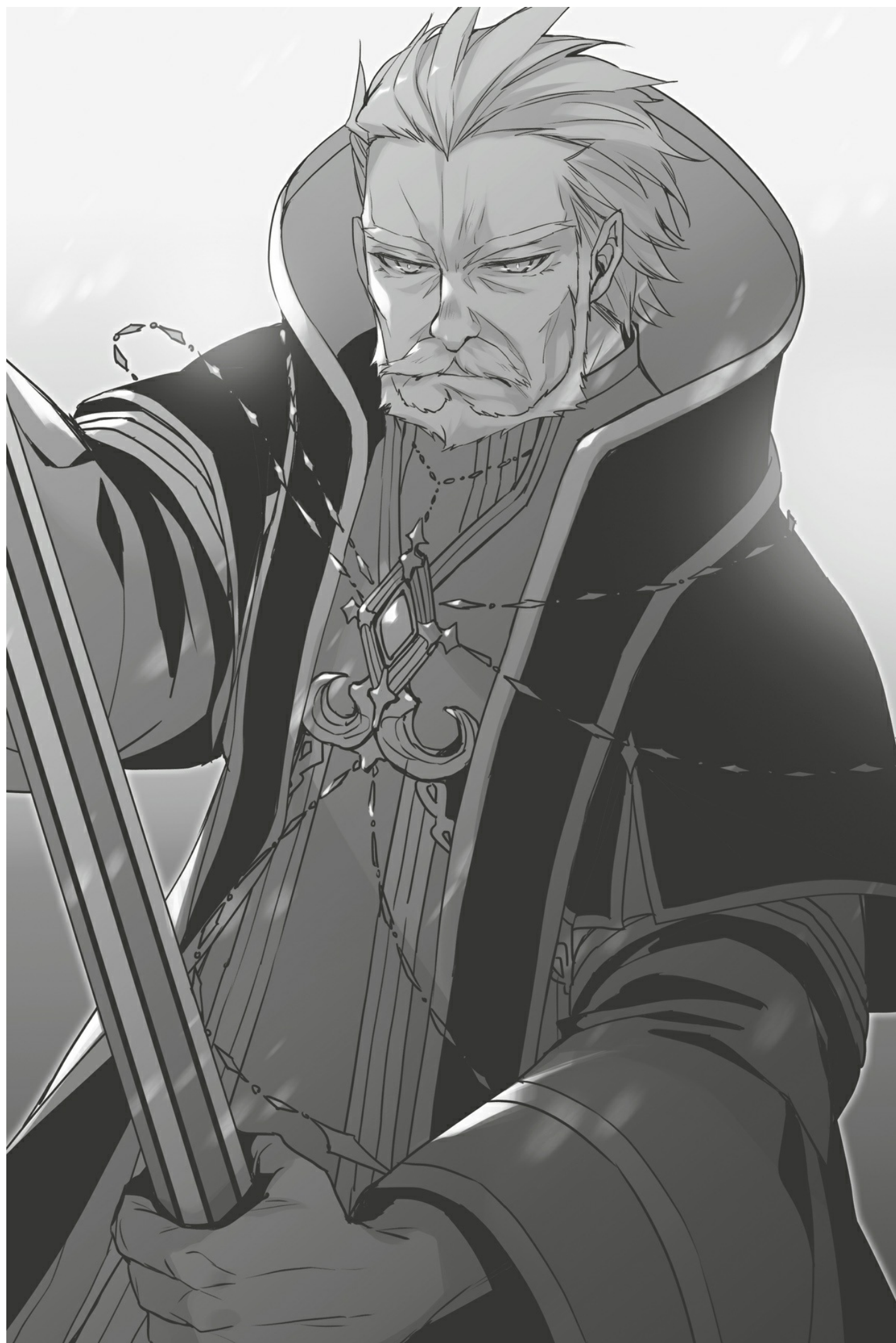
“...Quite.”

“Run! Run!”

Everyone hurried off toward the rift.

For our objective. To save Ireena, to save the world.

Even as we heard the intense sounds of battle behind us.



INTERLUDE

The Deathless Monster and a Fleeting Dream II

He's close.

As she floated in the pure white space, Ireena was abruptly struck by the sense that someone was coming.

"It's Ard...! Ard's getting nearer...!"

"Affirmative. They have currently broken through the first area. They're steadily closing in on us," replied Kalmia coolly as she floated in the void. There was no sense of urgency in her tone. Nor was there any change to her expressionless features.

Ireena furrowed her brow at the unnatural calm. "Hey. We're enemies, right?"

"Affirmative."

"Then Ard and the others coming this way is bad news for you, isn't it?"

Why was she so unaffected? Kalmia shook her head from side to side. "Negative. The current situation is within expected parameters and is not a situation considered to be a risk. I have already accounted for them to approach and clash with Al. I would only feel danger..."

As she spoke, Kalmia slowly turned her head and focused her eyes on Ireena's face. The gaze from the doll-like beauty was enough to make Ireena feel uncomfortable. She opened her mouth to change the subject and conceal that she was blushing.

"Wh-what?! Do you have something against my face?"

Kalmia softly shook her head. Her long white hair and its red highlights waved along with her motions. She then spent several long moments peering at Ireena.

“I would only feel danger if you elected not to save Al.”

Ireena felt a vigorous stir of anxiety and fear as Kalmia shifted her gaze downward. It was clear that Kalmia loved Alvarto deeply. Which was why...

“I don’t know how to put this. But you have a tendency not to show your true feelings, don’t you?”

...Kalmia probably truly wanted Ireena to save Alvarto. However, that wasn’t enough to clear up the doubt that lingered in Ireena’s mind.

“I mean... Why is it me anyway?”

“That’s—”

Just as Kalmia was putting her explanation into words, the pure white space began to morph again. Colors invaded the blank realm and rapidly began to spread. It was as though an invisible brush were drawing upon a blank canvas. By the time she realized what was happening, Ireena was already there.

A stone room. It seemed it was a continuation of the previous memory.

It was immediately after Luminas, one of the Evil Gods and the beautiful woman in crimson, had taken Alvarto for her own. It seemed that Ireena and Kalmia were going to follow his memories after that moment. Perhaps it was because this was the second time, but Ireena was able to watch the scene take shape more calmly.

“...I won’t take any requests from thee to return him.” Luminas’s crimson gaze moved from Alvarto to a different figure—Mephisto Yuu Phegor. A small smile played on his beautiful but unholy features.

“That’s fine. That won’t ever happen. This boy is yours from now until eternity. Not just his body...but his heart as well.” A malicious glint shimmered in his golden eyes. It was unsettling. It was the sort of gaze that inspired hatred from its mere presence. It seemed young Alvarto felt the same emotions welling up.

“Go, be happy. Not that you can understand me. After all, I never taught you how to speak.”

Yes, Alvarto had lacked the concept of language and couldn’t comprehend

what anyone was saying. Yet he managed to deduce a speaker's intent, regardless. The smiling Mephisto was angelically beautiful, and his voice came as an alluring purr. However, Alvarto found all of that only sent a shiver of disgust up his spine.

To Alvarto, Mephisto had always been a repugnant presence. Just the sight of him whipped up feelings of hatred, the dark emotions swirling in his chest. There was a need to destroy him. But something happened before Alvarto could act upon that impulse.

"Shall we depart?"

Luminas's delicate, pale fingers gently reached for Alvarto's hands. The long, slender digits closed around his little palm. It was warm. He had never felt such heat before. The hands that had touched him had always been cold. They had inflicted nothing but pain. Luminas's contact was comforting.

The urge to kill the devil dissipated, and the scenery around Alvarto rapidly changed from a dimly lit and sterile stone prison to the glimmering spires of a great city. The boy now stood next to Luminas in a street crowded with people.

"Welcome to my capital, Gladsheim."

The words of welcome didn't register in the boy's ears. That was understandable. Alvarto's world since birth had been that stone prison. Suddenly, the world had exploded in size in front of his very eyes.

Everything he saw was new. The air itself was a novel experience. Even if he had known all the languages in the world, he would've been at a loss to describe how he felt.

Alvarto stared wide-eyed, overwhelmed by the sight. And he wasn't the only one who reacted that way. Like him, Ireena looked around in surprise.

"H-hey, Kalmia. This city... An Evil God rules it, right?"

"Affirmative."

She couldn't believe it. To Ireena, who was born in the modern age, the image of places ruled by the Evil Gods had ever been that of a hellish dystopia. A land where demons whipped their human slaves while the streets were littered with

bodies of the innocent.

The view before her was a complete contradiction to that preconception.

“Everyone’s just living a normal life...”

The expressions of the pedestrians. The faces of the merchants running their stalls. They were all happy and energetic, without a trace of pain or suffering. Ireena would have understood that if they were all demons, yet the majority of those she saw were humans, elves, dwarves, halflings, and orcs. All the peoples of the world were living as equals.

“...It’s completely different from what I was taught.”

History lectures had always described scenes that were the exact opposite of this. Evil Gods and demons were the sworn enemies of humanity. Everyone had believed as much. However, the reality...

“The creatures you describe as Evil Gods... At the time, they were known as Outer Ones. Each had their own individual personalities. It was true that many of them hated humanity and oppressed them. But some loved humanity and were loved in return... Luminas was one of the most notable of the latter.” Kalmia seemed faintly proud of that fact. “Everyone adored her. Humanity, demons, it didn’t matter.”

It was impossible to believe. But...

“Ahh, Lady Luminas! Such perfect timing! I had just taken my loaves out of the oven. Please take one!”

“Hah. My thanks. But I would appreciate it if thou could provide one to this child as well.”

“Of course!”

The baker wasn’t handing over the goods because he was intimidated. Rather, he had gone out of his way to approach Luminas and offer his goods to her of his own free will. That was something one only did if they respected the person...and he wasn’t alone.

“Greetings, Lady Luminas. You are as beautiful today as always.”

“Is the child with you...yours?!”

“W-who is the father?!”

“Well, let’s just say it’s someone you all know.”

So long as she was on the street, people from all walks of life, rich and poor, noble and common, approached to speak with her.

“Oh, Lady Luminas!”

“Come play with us!”

“Ah, I’m glad to see you’re all so energetic.”

It wasn’t just the adults, either. The children readily approached her, too. The innocent smile she flashed the kids was that of a goddess, hardly the sort of thing expected from an Evil God.

“How do I put this...? She seems like a really...great woman.”

“Luminas is indeed deserving of being considered such. There have been few rulers in history as beloved as she... She was a worthy person to be my wielder.”

Kalmia’s last sentence was drowned out by the energetic voices of the city’s people, but Ireena paid it no heed as she watched the scenes in the city.

“Err. Ah. Mmph.” Alvarto randomly made noises at the scene unfolding in front of him and at the warmth of the gazes of the people around him. What was this feeling? He didn’t know, but he didn’t dislike it. It was...comforting.

“Heh, I’m glad to see that thou approve of my city. From this day on, this is thy home. Forget thy past and allow this land to nourish and raise thee.” Luminas gently patted Alvarto’s head with an expression of motherly affection. Her compassion melted away the ice that had gripped Alvarto’s heart, and he was about to smile for the first time in his life, when...

“Shraaaaaaaah!”

...a terrifying hiss sounded in the middle of the street. The noise was completely at odds with the bright, pleasant day. The next moment, something attacked from overhead.

“Ah, careful.” Luminas picked up Alvarto’s small body and jumped to the side. Immediately after, blade strikes rained down on where the two had been

standing a second earlier.

A pair of curved swords drew flowing arcs in the air. They plunged with such force that they would have easily sliced apart the body of even an Evil God.

“Ahh. Agh. Graah...!” To the young Alvarto, the situation appeared to be tense. The man with the gray speckles in his hair was dangerous. The sharp gaze he leveled at Luminas was filled with a feral, predatory hostility. Alvarto was driven by a need to do something. “Wagh!” He let out a shout at the sudden shiver he felt from behind.

Not an instant later, a giant mass approached Luminas’s head, whipping through the air. A war hammer. Though it had been swung without mercy, it never found its mark.

“Hah!” Luminas gave an amused chuckle as she stepped straight to the side. The war hammer cut through empty air, but there was no way to stop its momentum, and its heavy head struck the ground. As giant clumps of stone scattered into the air, Luminas spoke calmly to Alvarto. “Listen to me. Thou must not move a muscle.”

The boy didn’t understand the words. However, he still understood what she was communicating. Then...

“Shall we play?”

...Luminas’s divinely beautiful features suddenly took on the intensity of a rampaging killer. She fought totally unarmed. Relying solely on her own body, Luminas stepped in toward the nearest opponent.

Could the giant man who had swung his massive war hammer keep up? Luminas moved so swiftly that those who were watching had to wonder.

She was quick as lightning.

Luminas closed the distance in an instant and loosed an unavoidable blow. No one, not Alvarto, nor Ireena, could tell where the woman had struck or how. All they knew was that the giant man was tossed high into the air.

“Ha-ha! Stupidly strong, as always!” remarked the older man with the curved blades, laughing. He also raced forward with supernatural speed. After a

moment, he and Luminas were fighting face-to-face.

“Your back’s exposed.”

“That is my line, Lucius.”

What had just happened?

The man called Lucius had been about to land a blow on Luminas’s unguarded spine. Yet somehow, it was now Luminas who was behind Lucius, and the tables had wholly turned before anyone could understand the situation.

“Heh. Damn.”

Like his cohort, Lucius was cast skyward. The big man had already landed, and he pursed his thick lips into a line.

“Nraah!”

He closed the distance and attacked with a horizontal swing. It was an impressive-looking maneuver, but this, too, caught only empty air. Then, as though in a repeat performance, his impressive physique was sent soaring like a piece of paper in the wind.

This situation continued for a while.

Land.

Charge.

Dodge.

Blast off.

The two opponents would reach the ground, step in, attack and miss, then get tossed up into the air again. Onlookers displayed no fear. Instead...

“Whoo-hoo! Go Lady Luminas!”

“You can do it, Lord Lucius!”

“Hey, Mister Garp! I’ll pay for drinks tonight if you can land a blow!”

...they offered cheers, like this was an impromptu street performance.

Alvarto’s mind couldn’t keep up with the bizarre display, and Ireena was much the same.

“...What is this?”

“Nothing to worry about. It’s just business as usual,” Kalmia replied with a faint note of exasperation.

“Hrmph. Guess I should try something a little underhanded every once in a while!” Lucius, with his blade-like gaze, locked on to Alvarto. The moment the boy understood what was happening, it was too late.

“Sorry, boy! You’re going to—”

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

As Lucius closed in, Alvarto unleashed his special ability. Black flames erupted from the child’s body.

“Whoa?!” Evidently caught by surprise, Lucius immediately jumped backward, and his eyes widened. “...So, it looks like he’s not just some ratty brat.” His instincts must have tipped him off to the danger, and he eyed Alvarto warily. Still, a smile remained on his lips. That expression reminded Alvarto of that devil...and it infuriated him.

“*Rah...raaagh...!*” Alvarto was going to erase him. His eyes filled with heated malice.

“Heh-heh. Good look for a little brat. It just makes this all the more entertaining.” Lucius’s expression glittered with a thirst for battle. The air became tense.

“Alas. I believe it’s time to call it a day.” Before the fight could commence, Luminas intervened. “It’s over, Alvarto. This is just a bit of play and not an actual battle to the death.” The gentle voice had come from right next to him. Luminas had somehow appeared beside Alvarto and reached out her hand for him, even as he was engulfed by dark fire.

For the first time in his life, Alvarto feared loss. That feeling quelled his anger and the flames that were the manifestation of that hatred.

“Yes, good boy.” Luminas’s pale hand gently patted the child’s head. The intensity from her earlier smile had disappeared, leaving only warmth and kindness.

Lucius watched the pair and shrugged his shoulders. “What’s the deal, boss? You take an interest in children?” There was no hostility there, despite the faint note of annoyance.

“B-beautiful.” Garp, the large man who was standing at a bit of a distance, had a gentle voice and expression.

The two attackers who had appeared out of nowhere now seemed quite personable. Ireena tilted her head quizzically at their sudden change in demeanor.

“...Who are these guys? Weren’t they enemies?”

Kalmia evidently took this as a question aimed at her, and she answered, “Lucius and Garp? They are Luminas’s vassals, and they were the greatest warriors in her army.”

“So that means...they’re not enemies, right? Why did they attack?”

“They’re just saying hi.”

“Huh?”

“To them, that’s a greeting.”

“...I don’t quite get what you’re saying.”

From Ireena’s perspective, it looked like those two were actually trying to kill their mistress. They clearly had a strange sensibility that was beyond her, though.

“You know, little man, you’re pretty—”

“*Hissssss!*” As Lucius approached with a smile, Alvarto hissed like a cat trying to intimidate an opponent. How could this man act so kind after trying to stab him? That strange demeanor reminded Alvarto of that devil. “*Hissssss! Hissssss!*”

“Hah. Seems thou art rather disliked by him, Lucius.”

“Heh. It’s nothing new. Animals and brats don’t seem to care for me,” Lucius answered with a dry laugh, scratching at his gray-streaked hair.

Luminas introduced the two to Alvarto, but the boy, who couldn’t understand

the words, still regarded the pair as enemies to be wary of.

Perhaps recognizing this, Luminas raised her hands in apparent resignation. “Well, the three of you can improve your relations later.” With that, she pulled Alvarto to herself. “We shall be heading to the palace... What about you two?”

“Honestly, I’d like to rest my bones after the fighting.”

“B-but there’s a need to train.”

“We found some issues that must be dealt with. And I can’t sleep easy unless they’ve been addressed.”

“Hah. Diligent as always.”

The trio exchanged another two or three sentences before going their separate ways. Luminas led Alvarto toward the center of the city with a sure-footed stride. Their destination was a solidly constructed great palace. The closer they came to the towering palace, the fewer ordinary people could be seen milling about. Instead, palace servants scurried here and there. At a glance, they looked well educated, and their attire appeared to be more expensive than the clothes of the common residents of the city, marking them as high-class individuals. However...

“Ah, Lady Luminas. I bid you good day... DIE!” cried the first one.

“Ah, so you’ve returned. Then let us deal with the work that’s piled up... RAAAGH!” shouted the second.

“YAAAHHHH!” The third was no different. They were all this way.

“...What’s up with these people?”

“This is what passes for normal here. Don’t pay it any mind.”

Initially, Ireena had thought this city to be a utopia, but she now had to revise her opinion. It was a strange, eccentric place filled with battle-obsessed weirdos.

“...Ahm. Urr.” Alvarto must have also found the relationship Luminas had with her subordinates odd, for he tilted his head in confusion.

He felt that the actions the people around the city were exhibiting to Luminas

were no different from what the devil had done to him in his stone room. So why did he feel no disgust?

It was beyond reason.

“Thou wilt eventually understand, I promise.” Luminas gently smiled as she deduced what Alvarto was thinking. They continued walking, Luminas defeating her servants until they came to a particular room. Based on the furniture, it was an office. The large chamber was filled with books and stacks of paper. The desk, in particular, was a wreck, with parchment sheets that were probably vitally important documents piled so high that they nearly touched the ceiling.

Amid the clutter stood a girl with her arms crossed.

It was Kalmia. She looked exactly the same as the Kalmia who had stood next to Ireena. But her face, instead of wearing the mechanical expression of the girl Ireena knew, was more animated.

“...This is the last, last straw. I’m tired of this. I wish you’d stop with your wanderlust.”

Luminas let out a dry laugh as she faced the furious young woman. “Ha-ha-ha. These looming piles of papers art thou’s way of showing thy intentions, hmm? And yet, this... This is perhaps going too far. I had never in my wildest dreams imagined you would leave all of the work I assigned thee undone. Even I find this sight dizzying.”

“It’s your fault for entrusting me with all this. Who do you think I am, exactly?”

“Well, that goes without saying. Thou art the greatest friend that I shall have the pleasure of knowing in my entire life. Which is why I find myself completely dependent upon thee.” Luminas wore a great smile as she replied, and Kalmia could only sigh.

“...That’s one of the things I really hate about you.” Despite Kalmia’s troubled expression, Luminas’s attitude didn’t falter. Perhaps admitting defeat, Kalmia exhaled dejectedly again. “How can you be so self-centered? I can’t understand it.”

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. You flatter me.”

“...Die in a fire.”

Luminas brushed aside the insult with a chuckle and changed the subject. “Allow me to introduce him to you.” Alvarto had been watching the exchange quietly, but now Luminas pulled his delicate body to her and spoke. “This boy is Alvarto Egzex. From this day forward, thou shall serve him.”

“...What?!” Kalmia let out a freezing aura of simmering fury. It was the sort of presence capable of cowing lesser minds. Luminas displayed no sign of being bothered, however, and turned her attention to Alvarto.

“Given that thou cannot understand words, it may be a waste, but...her name is Kalmia. She is my one and only friend, the best and the last—”

“I have no intention of accepting anyone but you as my wielder,” Kalmia interjected after suddenly appearing directly before Luminas.

“I’m not like my sisters. I’m not easy like Vald, nor do I define myself as a tool like Demise. Of my own free will, I chose to serve you and you alone as Kalmia. I won’t forgive any disrespect for that, not even from you.”

She glared at her mistress with bloodshot eyes.

The intensity of Kalmia’s anger and the expression twisting her features did nothing to change Luminas’s attitude.

“Ha-ha. Despite thy insistence that thou art tired of me, thine love for me is unmatched.” Luminas smiled fondly as she stroked Kalmia’s white hair.

It did little to placate Kalmia’s anger. Her eyes, if anything, took on even greater fury. “If you try to cajole your way out of this again, I’m done with you.” Her aura made it plain that she meant every word. Kalmia didn’t so much as blink as she continued to look up at her mistress. “I don’t understand your intention. Why did you bring back this child?” Kalmia locked onto Alvarto as the cause of her anger and vexation. “Why bring such a child, who could be anybody, to come between us? I don’t understand it in the slightest. I demand an explanation that makes sense.”

Luminas let out a tired exhalation at the interrogation and peered up at the ceiling. She then spent a few moments in silence before finally saying, “In all honesty, I don’t know myself. It was the first time I ever felt this emotion... I

wanted to leave something for the world after I am gone. I never thought such a time would come.” The smile left Luminas’s beautiful face, and she faced Kalmia looking grave. “Allow me to state it once more. Thy master from this day forward is Alvarto Egzex. I have high hopes for this boy. Undoubtedly, thou shalt consider him a worthy master in time.”

Kalmia made no sign of listening to Luminas. Her jewel-like eyes glittered with displeasure, narrowed as they were at her mistress. Luminas regarded her friend with a troubled expression and sighed. Her voice was weak, frail even.

“It’s long past time that thee understood. My existence is not eternal. Unlike thee.”

Kalmia’s eyes immediately turned sad. “...I hate you. I really do hate you.” Her lips trembled as she choked the words out. Then she shoved Luminas out of the way and darted from the room.

“Oh goodness. My apologies, Alvarto. That wasn’t a pleasant thing to witness.”

“Urrm. Ah...?”

Both the boy and Ireena were puzzled. Without a grasp on Kalmia and Luminas’s relationship, there was no way to understand the feelings at play.

“You know, it’s...,” Ireena began.

“I don’t need your words. Your job is to simply witness.” The present Kalmia evidently required no sympathy.

“All right. Unfortunately, the introduction didn’t go as planned, but... Well, let us see how things develop. For now, I shall focus on completing this mountain of paperwork. It means I must neglect thee for a while. I hope thou will forgive me.” Luminas lightly patted Alvarto’s black hair, then sat down at her desk.

Time passed leisurely as she worked.

“Phew. Alas, it is too much to finish in a day.” Leaning back against her chair, Luminas let out a groan while stretching.

“Sigh. Enough is enough. Such work can wait until the morrow. The Luminas of today has worked hard enough. No matter what anyone says, I’ll not work

another minute. I shall leave the rest to the Luminas of tomorrow. Good luck to thee,” Luminas muttered to herself before directing her gaze at Alvarto.

“I believe supper and a bath should be ready about now. I’m truly looking forward to seeing thine reactions to new experiences.”

Alvarto’s innocent reactions utterly fulfilled Luminas’s expectations and more.

“Pfffaaaaawww?!” Unable to bear the overwhelming assault on his taste buds by the delicious soup, Alvarto sprayed out the first spoonful.

“Mraaaahhhhhhhh...?” The comfort from his first bath thoroughly loosened Alvarto’s facial muscles.

The happy time that was filled with novelty and joy for both Alvarto and Luminas passed quickly. And with that, it was now time for bed. However...

“Err? Mrr?”

“This is a bed. It is thy place of rest... I suppose that makes no sense to thee.” Luminas struggled to get her message across with gestures. Meanwhile, Alvarto jumped up and down on the bed, using its bounciness as a toy.

“...Mrrm.”

After several minutes, Luminas’s efforts were finally rewarded when Alvarto curled up atop the sheets and began to breathe in slow, steady breaths.

“Oh dear. Child-rearing is more tiring than I had thought.” In spite of her exhausted statement, Luminas’s face was lit with a happy smile. “I should like to sleep with thee, but... No doubt it would be suffocating for thee for me to be too close. And...I should like to avoid thou getting too attached to thine mother and having trouble leaving me.” As she affectionately peered at the sleeping Alvarto’s face, Luminas wore a wistful expression. “—After all, I am not the one thou should walk beside.”

Her words never reached his ears, however, as his fuzzy awareness was pulled into the world of dreams.

How much later was it when a *swoosh* of fabric being shoved aside broke the silence, and Alvarto felt a sharp light pierce his eyelids.

“Urrph. Ah...,” he groaned, furrowing his brow even as he kept his eyes

closed. He then tried to escape from the irritating light by covering his head with a blanket.

“Not allowed.” A firm hand snatched the blanket away from him before a sharp sting hit his right cheek. “Wake up. Now.” Next came a sting to his left cheek.

Alvarto interpreted the smacks as attacks and swiftly opened his eyes and jumped up. “*Grrr...!*” He stood upon the bed, letting out a feral growl as he glared down at his assailant.

“That’s how you respond when I go to the trouble of waking you? So irritating,” the attacker remarked coldly, without a trace of emotion in her features. There was no mistaking that it was Kalmia. She regarded Alvarto with a chilling gaze before going on. “As much as I don’t wish to be, I have been assigned as your trainer for a while. Luminas won’t listen to my complaints, and even if I’m to kick you out of here, the least I can do is make sure you’re better than a pitiful wild ape. So, I’ll raise you until you’re able to communicate normally with other people.”

Both her gaze and words demanded that the boy be grateful for her generosity. Alvarto found it unbearable.

“Graaaah!”

“I’ve said nothing to get snarled at.”

“Grrrrrrrrr!”

“First, get off the bed. Being looked down on by you is extremely irritating.”

“Graah!”

“...Damned monkey boy.”

Kalmia clucked her tongue in irritation before her faintly drooping eyes sharpened into those of a killer. The tension in the room mounted, and a fight quickly felt inevitable.

“Ah-ha-ha. Dear Kalmia, so typical of thee to behave this way.” A thoroughly amused voice broke the thick hostility. The pair immediately turned their attention to the speaker.

Luminas, the beauty who was cloaked from head to toe in crimson, even in the early morning, sat cross-legged in a chair, chuckling.

“Mrah! Rrr!”

Alvarto leaped off the bed, rushing over to her and burying his face in her bountiful bosom.

“Yes, yes. Such a spoiled little child. It seems he quite likes me.”

“...What? Why do you look so smug? That’s nothing to be proud of,” Kalmia said irritably as Luminas lightly carded her fingers through Alvarto’s hair as he embraced her.

“Oh, nothing. I simply thought that despite thy claim to be the greatest of divine tools, thou seem to have little understanding of how to treat children.”

“...Ehh?!”

“’Tis nothing to be bothered about. After all, it is quite different from thy assigned role. Even thou hast things thy can do and can’t—”

“Don’t underestimate me, you bitch. There’s nothing in this world I can’t do.” Evidently, Luminas thoroughly understood how to motivate Kalmia. Although she appeared a complex sort, Kalmia was actually rather simple—

“You were mentally insulting me just now, weren’t you?” snapped the present-day Kalmia.

“O-of course not! Ha-ha-ha-ha!” Ireena sweated bullets as she felt a piercing gaze fall upon her.

At any rate, this was when Alvarto’s and Kalmia’s interactions had started, but...

“Today you’ll be taking a language quiz. Take the letters you’ve learned and make some words.”

“S-t-u-p-i-d g-i-r-l.”

“Well done. Your reward is my fist.”

...there was just something about these two that...

“Highly intelligent life-forms eat while taking care to follow table manners.

The three basics are: one—silence, two—motions, three—posture. Obviously, gnawing on meat like a beast is completely out of the—”

“Graaaaah!”

“Have you no ability to learn, you monkey?”

...made them extremely incompatible. Still, Kalmia never abandoned her role as teacher, and Alvarito never rejected her lessons.

Luminas was the giant presence that kept the conflicting personalities together. Kalmia couldn't ignore her requests, and Alvarito wanted to enjoy his time with Luminas more. The two of them fought constantly, and neither attempted to compromise for the sake of the other. They were like water and oil, but their relationship stayed intact for some reason.

Four years passed in the blink of an eye.

It was early morning. The sunlight illuminated the land, and the birds began to chirp. Like every other day, Kalmia barged into Alvarito's room unannounced. She stalked forward almost menacingly, and she made no attempt to consider the boy who was fast asleep in his bed. When Kalmia reached the windows, she went out of her way to noisily open the curtains.

“Get up. Now.” She bombarded the happily sleeping Alvarito with bright sunlight and cold, sharp words.

“Mrrph...,” groaned the boy, face scrunched. “...Can't you wake me up in a nicer way?”

Some of the first sounds out of his mouth today were human words. Over the last four years, he had made tremendous progress. Having learned proper language and mastered the manners and common sense required in daily life, Alvarito was no longer some savage beast. He was now able to comprehend a person's words as well as the emotions and mindset behind them. However, that was precisely why...

“Why are you so categorically incapable of showing any appreciation? The least you could say is, ‘Thank you for rousing me every morning.’ That should be your first statement each day, and yet all you do is spit complaints. Curs are more grateful than you.”

“When did I ever ask anyone to come rouse me? You choose to do this. Demanding appreciation is, well, kind of obnoxious.”

“I don’t understand how you can say such things. Without me, you would end up sleeping past noon. Given that you are worse than a monkey because you can’t even wake up on your own, you should most certainly show gratitude for the fact that—”

“Yaaaaawn. I wonder what’s for breakfast... I’m really looking forward to it.” Alvaro turned away from Kalmia, completely ignoring her.

She in turn looked at him contemptuously, as though she were staring at a piece of garbage, and clicked her tongue in irritation.

Alvaro’s language comprehension had caused their relationship to settle into a cold war that was far below freezing.

“...That’s enough. Hurry and get dressed. Luminas is waiting.”

“What?! Why didn’t you say so?!”

Alvaro leaped from the bed and hurriedly began taking off his pajamas.

“To have no sense of shame when stripping in front of someone of the opposite sex. You really are a monkey.”

“Opposite sex? Who are you talking about? Oh, wait, you can’t possibly be referring to yourself, right? Because if you are, you’re a brilliant comedian!”

Trading barbs was as natural to the two of them as drawing breath. While on the surface they looked like they had an awful, hostile rapport...Ireena’s eyes saw the truth.

“You really are close, aren’t you?” she said.

“...How did you draw that conclusion from watching this exchange? Incomprehensible.” Kalmia looked thoroughly displeased as she watched memories of the past. Ireena saw through her, however. She knew that Kalmia felt something else.

“Being able to say things to each other without restraint is valuable and rare. I mean, you look like enemies on the surface, but the truth is—”

“Quiet. You should just shut up and watch.”

At Kalmia’s complete refusal to acknowledge the facts, Irenea could do nothing but shrug. Even as they exchanged quips, the memories continued to play out in front of them. After changing from his loose-fitting pajamas to a properly fitted set of elegant clothing, Alvarto left the room with Kalmia at his side.

They proceeded along the hallway toward the dining room. The servants they ran into along the way all reacted the same: respectful awe for important people and joy at seeing great beauty. The latter was primarily directed at Alvarto. While Kalmia had the artificial beauty of a sculpted doll, she was a familiar sight to the servants. By contrast, Alvarto’s grace had been refined and sharpened as he grew older and seemed to have no limit.

He would eventually become so captivating that the sort of princesses that people went to war over would pale in comparison.

Alvarto’s charm drew in all observers, regardless of age or gender, but...

“Hahh. I really hate those gazes.”

...the boy himself intensely disliked his own appearance.

Each time he peered into a mirror, he was reminded that he resembled that devil more than he had yesterday.

Alvarto was essentially a duplicate, a shadow of Mephisto. In a sense, they were more closely related than father and child. Thus, it was unsurprising that Alvarto would grow to look like Mephisto as he matured.

“If you don’t like it, you should change it. The power of magic should make that possible.”

“...The fact that you’re saying it despite knowing why I don’t shows just how twisted your personality is.”

As Kalmia noted, Alvarto was capable of changing his facial structure if he so wished. He had a reason for abstaining, though...

“Ahh, you’ve finally arrived. Good morning, Alvarto. Thou art as beautiful as always.”



...it was because she complimented him. In the large dining room, Luminas sat behind a long table. The crimson woman had yet to touch any of the opulent dishes that were set out on the table.

“...My apologies for keeping you waiting, Lady Luminas.”

“Hah. No need to mind it. ’Tis an everyday occurrence.”

As they exchanged pleasantries, Alvarto moved to sit down.

“Today, the special seat rights are mine.”

However, Kalmia hastily shoved him aside and sat down in the chair he was going for.

The seat in question was the one directly across from Luminas. To Alvarto and Kalmia, it was a special spot that let them gaze directly at their beloved.

Having lost the chair to Kalmia, Alvarto glared daggers at her. “...I’m going to make you pay during combat training. You better be prepared.”

“There is nothing to fear from a general who is nothing but talk. Ah, today’s breakfast is quite delicious.”

The pair looked close to a physical altercation, yet Luminas chuckled with amusement as she watched.

“The two of you truly are close, aren’t you?”

““Pardon?!””

“Ah-ha-ha. See? Perfectly in unison.” Luminas smiled widely as she brought food to her lips.

Although Alvarto couldn’t explain why, he couldn’t bring himself to argue with her. If the boy ended up doing so and upsetting her, he would undoubtedly live in slumped depression for the rest of his life.

That was just how important Luminas had become to Alvarto. He had learned language, cleaned up his appearance, and endured frustration all for her sake. Luminas’s praise and her smile were the things that made life worthwhile. He would do anything if it made her happy.

Alvarto’s dedication to that feeling was unwavering, hence—

“Ahh, that reminds me. Dear Alvarto, ’tis about time for thee to participate in thy first battle.”

“Yes, with pleasure,” he answered without hesitation. Luminas casting her ward into danger as though she were sending him on a little shopping errand was strange on its own, but Alvarto, who showed not the slightest hesitation in agreeing to it, was also tinged with a certain madness.

“Hrrrm. I admire thy ability to answer so readily... Yet doth thee understand what thou art agreeing to do? I am not dispatching thee on a fun little jaunt.”

“I know. A place where people clash with the entirety of their strength and will and seek to take their opponent’s life... A war zone. That’s where I’m to go, yes?”

“Indeed. That is true. Dost thou feel no fear?”

“No. Not in the slightest.” Most people facing their first battle tended to react strongly—excessive excitement, obvious anxiety, embarrassing denial. None of those reactions applied to Alvarto, however. “I’ve been waiting for the opportunity to get results on the battlefield and make you happy. Why should I fear fighting? I feel nothing but joy at the prospect. I eagerly anticipate displaying the many skills you’ve taught me,” Alvarto stated eloquently, without the slightest hint of worry.

Luminas grinned affectionately, as a mother might have before a good son. “Mmm. It seems my eyes did not deceive me. Thou hast the talent to be a warrior.”

“You honor me beyond measure.”

Her praise only inspired him further. The wol Croft army led by Luminas was known as the most powerful and peerless force in the world. Even against the rebel armies of humanity, which had made a recent comeback, Luminas’s forces rarely took a loss. While the crimson woman was a great governor, she was an intense, savage warrior at heart. Thus, her greatest praise was reserved not for her intelligent bureaucrats but for her warriors who showed mastery in battle.

To know that adoration, Alvarto would happily march off to war and wager his life. He would do anything to be the most beloved of the woman who was

both his mother and the mistress he served unwaveringly. That was Alvarto Egzex's purpose.

"...You're going to just burst out crying mid-battle. Just so you know, I have no intention of aiding you. I'm your instructor, no more, no less. I haven't accepted you as my master."

Kalmia's irritating words also bolstered Alvarto's determination.

"I never counted on a piece of scrap like you from the start. I'll stand at the summit with my own strength."

"I pray from the bottom of my heart that your arrogance brings a proper reward. Die as you regret insulting me. Or just die right now, damned bastard."

Alvarto's heart skipped as he traded barbs with Kalmia. The image of himself winning on the battlefield. The image of his mother praising him. He felt like he would dance with joy.

There was nothing special about the morning Alvarto faced his first battle. He complained about Kalmia's annoying way of waking him, then changed into his clothing, ate breakfast, then...

"Now, shall we be off, my friends?"

...he departed the city as a member of the army, led by Luminas.

Alvarto was clothed in crimson garb that resembled a military uniform. While the design itself was the same as the uniforms worn by others around him, the outfit had been specially tailored to suit his body. Today marked the first time he'd donned it, but it fit him like a glove. Luminas had even complimented him on his appearance. This kept Alvarto in high spirits and helped him ignore the fact that he'd been assigned as a foot guard to *that man*.

"Heh-heh-heh. In quite a mood, ain'tcha, lad?" The man in question, Lucius, called from atop his mount. Smirking down at Alvarto while astride a powerful wyvern horse, he had a similar air to that devil's, and Alvarto was unable to bring himself to like him.

In fact, Alvarto's one-sided hostility toward Lucius was so great that it showed through in his demeanor.

“...Hearing your voice ruined my mood. How will you make it up to me?”

“Heh-heh-heh. Well, ain’t that a pity?”

The way he so casually accepted Alvarto’s biting remark was irritating. Alvarto hated the idea that Lucius was his superior.

“Why didn’t Lady Luminas include me in her honor guard?”

That’s what Alvarto had assumed his assignment would be. He had been looking forward to it. Unfortunately, the reality was very different, as Luminas had ordered him to fight beneath this despicable man.

“The boss lady has a tendency to lose sight of her surroundings when it comes to battle. She’s not suited to looking after a child.”

“...I’m not a child anymore.”

“Heh-heh. The fact you’re saying that proves my point.”

Alvarto despised Lucius. He far preferred the other pillar of the army, Garp. That silent warrior was worthy of respect and admiration, and Alvarto had always been closer to him than to Lucius.

For whatever reason, Alvarto simply couldn’t bring himself to tolerate Lucius, and it had been that way since their first meeting.

“Eh, no one’s looking for any miracles from a novice in his first battle. Your job is to make sure you don’t get yourself killed.”

That disrespectful attitude riled Alvarto like nothing else. The boy swore to himself that he would accomplish great deeds today to make Lucius eat his words.

At the end of their peaceful road, they arrived at the battlefield.

“Hey, lad. See that? That’s our cemetery.” Lucius said as much with a joking tone, but the glint in his eyes was that of a warrior prepared for whatever awaited him.

Rolling hills ran into the distance before ending abruptly before a gigantic, looming wall.

“Well, well. The great rabble of humanity really can impress at times,” Lucius

mused as he rubbed at his jaw. “High enough to reach the heavens. Thick enough that none can penetrate it. Those structures are a crystallization of their hatred toward us demons.”

The walls and the fortress beyond were constructed by the rebel army that was primarily composed of humans. The barricade around the garrison was not only the key to the rebel army’s defense, but it also served as a spear to counterattack the approaching enemy.

“Breaking through a single one is a pain, but getting to their general requires smashing through three of ’em. Oh, that reminds me. I’ve heard that none but our forces could get through so much as the first wall.”

That was understandable. The walls and the fortress protected by them were key to guarding the city beyond. Thus, the place was run by top-notch commanders who had routed all attempts at invasion.

“Cracking a tough nut like that...is the flashiest way to win, but... Well, no need to get too nervous. Our job’s just to distract them.”

As Lucius noted, he and Alvarto were part of the group with the easier task. They simply had to draw the enemy’s attention. While their foes were occupied, an elite squad led by Luminas would circle the fortress and attack the enemy’s largest strategic asset. The goal was that Luminas’s detachment would kill the rebel army’s leaders and claim the city past the garrison.

“Enjoy the bit of exercise, and when the boss lady sends word, retreat, regardless of whether we’re winning or not. Pretty simple.” Lucius laughed, yet he likely understood this battle wouldn’t be easy. To serve as an effective decoy, Alvarto and Lucius’s group needed to frighten their enemies enough that they’d devote themselves to destroying them. Failure risked the rebel army catching on to Luminas’s detachment, and then the entire plan would collapse.

“Can you truly stoke the enemy’s fears that much, Lucius?”

“Heh-heh. Leave it to me, lad. I’m unmatched when it comes to scaring the piss out of opponents.”

Those were the last words the two exchanged before the fight. It seemed the enemy’s detection net had found them. The rebel army fired the opening salvo

from their position far in the distance. Countless points of light appeared on the surface of the giant wall before brilliant rays filled their entire line of sight.

Flare—a basic fire element attack spell. To demons like Alvarto, such magic was nothing to fear... But that changed when there were this many.

“Defend!” Lucius’s voice thundered at an earsplitting volume. The soldiers responded immediately, and in no time at all, the entire army was encapsulated by a protective dome of conjured shields.

“This is what makes humans such a pain to fight.”

The defensive formation was holding against the *Flare* bombardment. Just viewed on a per spell basis, the enemy’s volley wasn’t enough to break through. However, just as rain and wind could erode a boulder with the passage of time, the sheer number of attacks would eventually pierce even the toughest of magical shields.

“We need to get inside to have any fun. Soooo...all forces, charrrrrrrrrge!”

At Lucius’s second order, all the warriors sprang into action. The infantry kicked off the earth while the cavalry sped through the air.

As they advanced, they continued to repair and maintain the barrier guarding them from the *Flare* spells.

This was a masterful demonstration of why Luminas’s army was considered the best. It was certain that it, unlike other forces in the past, wasn’t going to fall to the enemy’s opening move. While the rebel army’s sheer size was an issue, it wasn’t enough to cripple Lucius’s troops.

“...An attack worthy of one of the Twin Jewels, I suppose.” No sooner had Alvarto muttered those words than he and the rest of the group reached the enemy’s line of defense. The *Flare* spells slowed to a trickle, and the small gates set in the wall swung open.

“Rahhhhhhhhhhh!”

Countless enemies poured from the open doors, roaring like a flood. They outnumbered the demons five to one. Still, none among Lucius’s ranks faltered in the face of the advancing horde. If anything, the sight of their opponents

fired them up, as the warriors bared their teeth in feral grins. Lucius was no different. He sat atop his mount at the front of the pack, beaming with a predatory glint in his eyes.

“All right, you bastards! Who’s the greatest warrior in this army?!”

““““Lucius! Lucius!””””

“Who’s the general known as the Raging Thunder?!”

““““Lucius! Lucius!””””

“What’s the name everyone thinks of when they think first into battle?!”

““““Lucius! Lucius!””””

“And the epitome of reckless bravery?!”

““““Lucius! Lucius!””””

Each time the general shouted to his soldiers, they responded in unison, morale climbing with each cry. Their morale and momentum were enough to carry them into the heavens. A moment later, Lucius charged ahead of his forces.

“Ahh! It’s a good day to die!” His wyvern horse understood its master’s intent and raced forward. “Hee-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh!” As Lucius let out a shrieking cackle, his curved swords danced with terrifying speed—a storm of slashes that cleaved through anything that dared approach. “Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Blood sprayed in a mist around him. Enemy soldiers desperately fought back with weapons and spells, but it was pointless. Their bodies were sliced apart before their swords made contact, and every magic attack was cut in two.

Lucius’s skills were exceptional, but so was his beloved mount that he rode on. The wyvern horse must have shared its master’s warrior heart. The creature’s eyes burned with fighting spirit. It activated its own magic and swept aside any obstacles before Lucius had to deal with them.

It was a glorious display of man and steed as one. This was undoubtedly why Lucius was considered one of the Twin Jewels of Luminas’s forces.

“Follow His Lordship!”

“Raaaaaaaaaah!”

Lucius’s army charged, following in his wake. No one was able to halt their advance.

“Ha-ha-ha! Hello there! Thanks for letting me in!”

The first wall fell. The thick gates were shattered into splinters, and Lucius passed through. His army poured in behind him like an avalanche. It was an overwhelming sight. The battle past the gate degenerated into a hellscape. Foes surged in from all sides, using their numbers to slowly crush one ally to death, then another.

There were no “people” here. Regardless of whether they were human or demon, all of them had lost any semblance of higher thought.

“Shaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaagh!”

Shrieks and screams. These were not the sounds of creatures capable of reason. No, they were beasts. Everyone present had reverted into feral animals.

Although they had surrendered to the roar of battle, they still mustered everything they could to kill their opponents. With magic. With blade. With hand. Ireena could only stare in astonished silence at the gruesome sight.

She felt nauseated and wished to look away from the slaughter. Alvarto, standing amid the chaos, wanted to do the same.

He was embarrassed by his arrogant attitude from before the fight. He could have never imagined what it was truly like. War was such an overwhelming, intense thing. That the battlefield was such a terrifying, horrific place stunned him.

“Haff...! Haff...!”

He hadn’t moved all that much, yet his breathing was labored. The furious shouts and screams that made his eardrums ache shook him to the core. Which meant that he was no longer paying attention to his surroundings...

“Waaaaagh!”

Suddenly, Alvarto detected a hostile gaze from behind. There was no time to react. He was going to—

“Ah, careful!”

What magic technique had been used? The soldier who had tried to catch Alvarto unawares was immediately reduced to heaps of meat. Naturally, *that man* was responsible. It had been Lucius, who was a good distance away, trying to break the enemy encirclement. He took a moment to glance in Alvarto’s direction.

“You’ve left your back wide open. You trying to commit suicide?! Eh?” he called with a sardonic grin as he looked upon Alvarto like the boy was a failing student.

Lucius’s voice and expression lit a fire under Alvarto.

“*Rah... Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!*”

A young man’s roar echoed through hell.

There was no fear in his eyes, nor terror in his heart.

“Answer my call! Sweet death!”

The moment he finished the two stanzas of his chant, Alvarto’s body was engulfed in black flame. In the past, it had been something he created unconsciously. Now, he was able to control it as he wished. Alvarto became a grim reaper, gathering souls on the battlefield.

“I unleash the Blade of the Abyss!”

The dark fire that surrounded him began to move as though it had a will of its own. It split into tens of thousands of tendrils and aggressively attacked the enemy army. All of those touched by the flames lost consciousness and collapsed, their eyes rolling back into their heads.

“Rah!” Alvarto let out a war cry and kicked off the ground. None could stop him. The enemies who approached, the enemies who ran, it made no difference. They were consumed by the burning shadow and vanished.

Alvarto was as a fallen angel spreading his black wings. The black flames released from his body eventually swallowed the entire area.

“Your back is open.”

He stepped behind Lucius just as the man was about to be struck from behind. The dark blaze wrapped around the spear jabbing for Lucius and destroyed it.

“Wha...?!” The poor soldier barely had time to express his surprise before the shadowy flames claimed his life.

Alvarto offered only a single remark. “Are you trying to commit suicide, Lucius?”

“Heh-heh. That’s a good one, lad.” Lucius smiled toothily at the boy, who snorted.

By this point, the battle’s outcome had been decided. The second and third walls, once previously believed to be impregnable, had been taken by a pair seeking to outdo the other.

“I’ll be taking the general’s head!”

“Hey! Hold on! Dammit, lad!”

After outmaneuvering Lucius, Alvarto had put an end to the battle.

Luminas and Garp, who had been part of the other detachment, had also fulfilled their roles perfectly. They had reclaimed the city from rebel hands, returned it to the original lord, and rendezvoused with Lucius’s forces.

Then, as everyone was making their way back to Gladsheim...

“Thy work was instrumental in this victory. It was a truly wonderful debut, my dear Alvarto.”

Alvarto had been given the great honor of sitting upon the same horse as Luminas. She gently embraced him from behind, praised him, and even patted his head...

“Heh. Heh-heh-heh. Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh...”

...surely, this was the peak of happiness. Lucius and Garp laughed dryly as

they watched Alvarto giggle in joy.

“Thought I might admit he’s got some talent, but...still a brat.”

“B-but he’s adorable.”

Alvarto didn’t hear their words.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh. Lady Luminas, I worked hard.”

“Indeed. Even I was surprised that thou claimed the general’s head.”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh. I ended up bringing down a fortress that was considered invincible.”

“Indeed. Thou art a warrior that has exceeded even my rosiest expectations. Wonderful.” Alvarto was a child reporting his success to his mother. For a while, Luminas simply worked to sate Alvarto’s desires, but...out of the blue, she stopped patting his head and asked him a question. “How was it? Thy first battlefield?”

Alvarto thought to put on a brave facade and claim it hadn’t frightened him, but he decided against that. He didn’t want to lie to her, so he gave his honest impression. “It...was terrifying. From the very depths of my soul.”

Immediately after his answer, Luminas once again patted his head. Evidently, that was the correct response. Luminas’s reply was rather cheerful. “Yes, that’s good. That is how thou should be.” Her voice was filled with motherly love, yet there was something else, as well. “Throwing one’s body into bloody battles and seeking Valhalla through battle. We should be the last of those fools.”

The young Alvarto was, in the end, unable to realize that Luminas’s love was also filled with mourning.

It was here that the color drained from the scene and returned to pure white. As she floated in this blank canvas, Ireena softly gave her thoughts.

“I don’t know how to put it, but...he’s completely different from the Lord Alvarto I know...”

Ireena had met him once in the past, when she had been thrown into the ancient world by the power of a strange child claiming to be a god. She had gone with Ard and Ginny to have an audience with the Demon Lord Varvatos

and had encountered the Alvarto of that era.

“His demeanor was completely different then. The way he talked, his expression... How did he end up that way?”

The man she had encountered had seemed like an unhinged battle junkie. It was utterly at odds with the boy she had witnessed here in this blank place.

“He is, in fact, playing a role, pretending to be someone else. That’s because if he doesn’t, his heart would be overwhelmed by sadness and break under the weight. He can no longer live as the true Alvarto Egzex. He can’t stand to live in this world without being someone else,” explained Kalmia.

Ireena still didn’t know Alvarto well enough to understand, leaving her with nothing further to say. She had no intention of asking how it had all happened. After all, she was probably going to have to bear witness, whether she wished to or not. And Ireena had already guessed that it would not be pleasant to watch. The elf girl kept silent as she waited for the re-creation of the past to resume.

Meanwhile, Kalmia gazed up at the empty space and began to speak. She gazed back at the past and wove words of tragedy. “Thinking back...that battle was likely the start of it. A particularly powerful faction within the rebel army. By destroying it, Luminas’s army obtained a great deal of prestige—respected by their allies and feared by humanity...

“It was the beginning of the end. They should never have sought to crush humanity’s hopes. If they had lost that battle... No, even that wouldn’t have been enough to change things. Regardless of how hard they tried, he would have come eventually.

“That man.

“That hated man.

“The Demon Lord Varvatos would have eventually come.”

CHAPTER 99

The Ex-Demon Lord and His Journey in the Underworld (Part 1)

A scene from his past had sprung to life before Alvarto Egzex's eyes. In front of him was a room within the Gladsheim palace dedicated to tea parties. The cozy little chamber lacked opulent decoration and elegant furniture. All that sat in the center of the room was a small table with space enough for a handful of people. Four people, including Alvarto, were seated there.

"Exactly as planned. All is proceeding as I've foreseen." Alvarto crossed his legs as he leaned his weight back against his chair.

"Heh-heh. Well done, lad," said the man across from him. It was Lucius, the great general known as one of the Twin Jewels, who rested leisurely and chuckled.

"No, no. It's all thanks to your hard work. Despite our overwhelming advantage, defeating *the* Lizer Bellphoenix is still quite the feat. I'm impressed, Lucius."

"Yeah. It's a good day to die."

"Indeed, indeed. Truly a great day."

Something was off. Alvarto understood this, yet he continued to indulge in the conversation.

"Garp. I'll have you participate in the next step. I'm looking forward to seeing your great might brought to bear against them."

"Y-y-yes," replied the giant of a man who looked like he might crush the chair beneath him. Lucius's counterpart in the Twin Jewels glanced down with his tiny eyes and nodded.

"Ahh, the tea is delicious. Yes, when enjoyed in your company, it has a

different—”

“Alvarto.” It was the woman who suddenly spoke his name. The woman who was his mother. The one who had once given his life meaning. The one he loved more than anyone. Luminas wol Croft quirked her lips in a gentle grin and gazed affectionately at him. “Alvarto.”

“Yes, yes. Of course, my mistress. I have no intention of boring you. However —”

“Alvarto, Alvarto.” She repeated his name, and she wasn’t the only one. All the others gathered in the room reiterated the same words over and over.

“Yeah. It’s a good day to die. Yeah. It’s a good day to die. Yeah. It’s a good day to die.”

“Y-yes. Y-yes. Y-yes. Y-yes. Y-yes. Y-yes. Y-yes. Y-yes.”

The light had disappeared from their eyes, and there was no trace of consciousness on their faces. Luminas was no exception.

“Alvarto. Alvarto. Alvarto. Alvarto. Alvarto. Alvarto.”

Her face was frozen in a smile as she endlessly repeated his name.

They were broken. Completely, irreparably shattered.

“Yeah. It’s a good day to, well done, lad. Riiiiiiiiii, yeah, to die, tsssssaaaaaah, lad, die, ah, well.”

“Ye...sss. Y-y-y-yes. Es. Es-es. Ye-ye. Yes.”

“Alvarto. Alvarto. Alvarto. Alvarto. Alvarto. Alvarto. Alvarto. Alvarto. Alvarto. Alvarto. Alvarto.”

Voices melded together in a chaotic chorus. Everyone’s expressions were fixed. None of them moved in the slightest.

Continuously, endlessly. They continued to show their shattered selves. The sole witness, Alvarto...

“Heh...heh...ha-ha—ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

...gazed up at the ceiling and laughed. Even as he did, the others continued in their loop.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Alvarito cackled as though he had lost his mind. Madness shone in his eyes, but he couldn’t maintain the act forever. “Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha—haah. Pointless.” All color drained from his face. Alvarito kept his eyes fixed on the ceiling and snapped his fingers. Immediately, the others closed their mouths and froze. “...Perhaps it would’ve been easier if I really had gone insane,” he muttered, arms dangling at his sides. His dim eyes were filled with pain and despair. “Hurry up, Varvatos.”



There was no one to stop our progress. It was all thanks to Lizer’s efforts. As he held that great army at bay, we ran through the desert at night and leaped into the rift in the middle of the sky.

After a brief feeling of weightlessness, the scenery changed dramatically. It was a jungle unique to the underworld. There was a floor, but nothing about the surroundings was normal. The tree trunks were made of the bones from every imaginable living creature, while the grass and flowers were formed from the furs and hides of animals.

It was a nightmarish sight, but it wasn’t enough to throw us off our stride. We remained calm and discussed our next step. The first one who spoke up was Olivia.

“...Should we continue heading west, then?”

“Hrrrm. The direction we’re supposed to go may be different from the last place.”

“Yes. It may not work, but this might be worth a try.”

With that, I activated a detection spell... As expected, it didn’t work. Some of the laws of magic operated differently in the underworld, making several spells like detection or teleportation unavailable. That was why it was impossible to figure out Alvarito’s location or the way to get there.

“All right. For the moment, let’s head west like Lord Alvarito mentioned.”

I looked at each of my companions in turn to check for any disagreements.

“...We’ll follow you.”

“No objections, none at all.”

“Well, guess we’ll let things fall as they may.”

It was when I checked with Ginny...

“I...” As she spoke, the strength drained from her. Her body swayed forward. “...Ah!” Evidently, she regained her senses at the last moment and stepped forward to keep from collapsing.

“Wha—? A-are you okay, Ginny?”

“Y-yes. I felt...a little faint at that moment is all.”

She made a show of chuckling to demonstrate that she was fine, but...the reality was probably the opposite.

Stepping into the underworld while still in a living body was an act that went against the laws of nature—an unforgivable rule infringement for an ordinary person. Olivia, Verda, Sylphy, and I were far from regular, so we were fine. However...

...as I’d feared, Ginny didn’t have the strength to endure the underworld.

“...We’re probably entering deeper realms with each rift. Meaning the miasma of the underworld grows stronger with each step.” I gazed steadily into Ginny’s eyes with a serious expression. “Miss Ginny. Unfortunately, you don’t have the strength of soul to be able to move in the underworld. At this rate, you might end up being swallowed by these lands, and your existence would be lost forever. Before that happens...when I feel you’re in danger...”

“...Yes, I understand.”

While we couldn’t turn back now, Ginny could still wait somewhere, if necessary. If I felt she was reaching her limit, then I had no intention of worrying about her frustration or regret. I’d take the necessary measures to secure her safety, then leave her as we moved forward.

After she had accepted that...we continued westward. We ran between trees made of bone and over grasslands of fur before we arrived at a riverbank. Of course, calling it a river was generous. The color was a reddish-black, and the air was filled with the scent of rusting iron. It was a familiar smell for those of us

from the ancient world, but it seemed too much for Ginny, because she turned pale at it.

Thankfully, nothing out of the ordinary happened, and we continued on our way. Our legs carried us upstream until we happened upon a waterfall. We climbed up a cliff to resume our westward progress. It was as we started that leg of the journey that black drops began to fall from the sky.

Rain. As it sporadically fell upon us, a thought came to mind.

...Are these Alvarito's tears?

I felt the man's sadness within those dark droplets as I kept running.

Westward, ever westward. We left the river in our wake and found ourselves in a jungle of bones and fur again. At the summit of a barren sheer cliff, we finally found it—another rift in the space.

"Compared to the desert, this is far too easy, so it is," Sylphy remarked.

"Well, that's not a bad thing, right? I mean, no unnecessary battles is—"

As Verda spoke, I felt the presence of someone behind us.

"...Finally."

Turning in reply to Olivia's comment, I faced the new arrival. Two men stood before us. One was lanky and appeared nearing old age...Lucius. The other was a giant warrior who had to be the general that was the second half of the Twin Jewels—Garp.

"...It seems the Twin Jewels are both here this time."

"Wait, wasn't Lizer fighting that white-haired one?"

"If he's here, that means..."

It was easy to imagine what had happened to Lizer. But for whatever reason, I couldn't believe that he had suffered the worst possible outcome.

"I don't have any evidence, but I believe Lord Lizer is fine. So let's keep our hearts level and respond calmly to this situation."

"...That goes without saying."

“We don’t have the time to be fretting about him, no we don’t.” Sylphy readied her Holy Sword, Demise-Argis, her entire body tense. She didn’t know how strong the Twin Jewels were, yet her sharp instincts as a warrior told her that they weren’t opponents to be trifled with.

Then—

“Yeah. It’s a good day to die.”

“Y-y-yes.”

Our foes spoke calmly before striking.

“Scatter!”

Everyone had already been in motion before I gave the order. That was to be expected of Sylphy, Olivia, and Verda, but Ginny also reacted in time with them. It seemed that her exposure to countless battles had helped refine her as a warrior. As the enemies approached, we all spread out and drew back. A moment later...

“Raaaaaah!”

“Grah!”

...twin blades cut through empty air while a giant war hammer slammed into the ground. They had missed. I felt conflicted at that sight.

“...These aren’t even attempts to re-create them.”

While the Twin Jewels looked as they had during their peak, the same could not be said of their combat abilities. There was none of the strength or heart that had made them so formidable.

“It’s a good day to die. It’s a good day to die. It’s a good day to die.”

“Y-yes. Es. Yes. Ess. Ye...”

A closer look revealed a distinct hollowness to the enemies’ gazes.

The sight of them stirred both my and Olivia’s emotions.

“...Pitiful.”

“...Yes, indeed.”

Flesh dolls that had been crafted with the faint remnants of their souls' information that lingered in the underworld. They had no self-awareness or will, which was why they were only capable of reflexive, pre-programmed movements. At best, they spoke words that they had been programmed to say.

"...What a terrible sight. I can't bear to look at them." Olivia had respected these two men in the past. To her, they were both proud, honorable combatants, and they were opponents that she had been proud to face off against. "...To live as a warrior and to die as a warrior. There's not a trace of that fervent, almost mad faith. They're both fakes that only resemble them in appearance."

It was precisely because she had known them as foes that Olivia felt that keen sadness as a fellow fighter. That was the only thing that Olivia saw in them. I, however, sensed something more.

Isolation.

Alvarto's sense of loneliness drove him to create them.

Undoubtedly, he was aware of how futile his efforts had been. Things lost would never return. Despite knowing that, he couldn't help but try. He still dreamed of the past and clung to that bit of hope. Yes. That was the same as my past...when I had chased after Lydia's shadow and revived her in appearance only.

"But whatever his feelings, right now..." I discarded my sentiments and issued instructions to the others. "Miss Sylphy, Lady Olivia. Can you two handle Lucius, please? Lady Verda, please deal with Garp. Ginny and I will support you from the back."

No one argued, and so the second round began. The first ones to act were Olivia and Sylphy. They stood side by side and faced Lucius, drawing him away from Garp. Then Verda moved in front of Garp.

"Hahh. I seem to end up overseeing violent solutions lately. That's really not my role, you know?" Verda sounded less than motivated, but she was doing her best to fulfill her duty.

Just like Olivia and Sylphy, she garnered her opponent's attention and led him

away. Now the preparations were complete. A few moments later...

“Raaaaaaaah!”

“Graaah!”

...the Twin Jewels kicked forward with a loud battle cry. Lucius struck at Olivia and Sylphy, while Garp went for Verda. Each charged in a straight line. The moment they entered range, the battle had begun.

“Follow my movements, Sylphy!”

“Leave it to me, yes indeed!”

Having already seen Lucius’s slashes, they worked perfectly in sync as they dealt with his blades.

“Hrrrrm. There’s no real data I want from him. So I guess I can just improvise,” Verda muttered as she easily dodged the war hammer that was swung in her direction.

As I carefully watched the skirmish, I let out a soft breath. “How overly simple and foolish.” After witnessing the genuine Lucius and Garp in their prime, these fakes broke my heart. The Twin Jewels under Luminas’s command were great warriors and generals who everyone knew and respected.

They were a nightmare to the rebel armies of the human races, and their very presence was said to have slowed the restoration of humanity’s dominance by at least two hundred years. While the pair were skilled generals, they were also nearly unmatched in direct combat.

“Graaaaaah!”

Garp the War Hammer. A man who, despite being a demon, had forbidden himself from using magic of any sort and fought only with his physical strength. There was nothing his powerful arms couldn’t shatter, and the war hammer he swung was strong enough to split a continent in two.

“Raaaaaaaaaah!” Lucius the Sword Apostle. As his nickname indicated, he was the world’s greatest swordsman, both in name and in skill. None could match his extraordinary swordplay. Olivia had fought him countless times... In a sense, he had practically been a mentor to her.

“...Nothing of who they were remains, though.”

The sounds of battle that rang through the air. The sheer intensity of their will. Compared to what the real Twin Jewels had been, these were pitiful imitations, akin to children pretending. Which was why...

“This is the end, imposter.” Having set up a series of flowing attacks, Olivia loosed her final strike, splitting Lucius’s torso in half.

“All right. *BOOOM!*”

...I wasn’t sure how Verda had done it, but at that moment, Garp’s giant body exploded from within, and the scattered pieces of his body were splattered across the area.

The battle was over. At least, that’s what a casual glance suggested.

“Is it truly...over?” Ginny wondered aloud, and I shared the sentiment. There was no way that Lizer would have lost to an opponent this weak. Which meant...

“We’re not done! There’s likely another—” It was right as I was trying to voice my warning.

“D-di-die. G-g-good day to...d-d-d-d-die die die die.”

“Y-ye-ye-ye-yesssssssss.”

Lucius, whose guts had spilled onto the ground. Garp’s head that lay on the ground. They spoke like broken dolls and began to twist and warp. Their bodies wiggled and twisted into grotesque forms, churning like clay figurines before fusing together.

The pieces of Garp’s body and what had been his head collected around what had been Lucius just moments earlier. They combined, they churned, and in the end, they became a single giant monster.

“Such a hideous sight...!” Olivia cried out, enraged. Her usual calm was gone, replaced with anger over what her old rivals had become for the sake of Alvarto’s sick game.

Most demons possessed a human and a demon form. When engaging in all-out battle, it was common for demons to take the latter form, but Lucius and

Garp had never done so. It had led me to believe they didn't possess them. Unfortunately...

"They went out of their way not to reveal them."

To live and die as a soldier. They had concealed their demonic forms to stay true to that ideology. Viewing the horrific entity they became made that conclusion come naturally to mind.

Simply put—it was a giant slug. An ash-colored body that secreted a black ooze. Lucius's and Garp's heads occupied the ends of the eye-stalks, and they continued to utter gibberish. We were all overwhelmed at the nauseating sight.

"Ye, day, day...scree...screeeaaaaah!"

When Lucius's and Garp's mouths let out a piercing screech, the slug's body shuddered...and unleashed a swarm of tentacles.

"Pull back!" I shouted and leaped away. Everyone else had done the same. However, the horde of slimy limbs continued their hunt, arcing menacingly through the air as they sought out prey.

"Danged thing!"

"Take that!"

"...Hmph!"

"Ewww, gross!"

Each of my friends responded with their preferred ability.

Ginny swept away the tentacles with her crimson spear, Sylphy and Olivia stopped them with cuts from their blades, and Verda opened a black gate and summoned the head of some strange monster. It spewed flame from its maw and incinerated the pursuing tentacles.

I managed to avoid any harm by using my *Wind Blade* spell to lop off the tentacles, but...

"As expected, it regenerates."

...the large number of writhing limbs that had been sliced off or incinerated immediately regrew. Defense was meaningless against this sort of enemy.

Destroying the main body with an overwhelming offensive barrage was the best response. Sylphy and Olivia must have come to the same realization. They kicked off the ground in unison and lunged at the hideous monster.

The horde of tentacles danced and lashed out to try to stop them. There were so many of them that they blocked out every other sight, but none of the tentacles so much as grazed their skin. By combining athleticism and swordplay, they dealt with the limbs sent their way, continuing toward the main body. They eventually reached it and...

“Shhph!”

“Take that!”

...their blades flashed. The sharp cuts threatened to split the slug in half—and landed a direct hit.

But at that moment...

““Ah?!””

...Sylphy and Olivia both let out a gasp of shock.

The Holy Sword and Demon Blade. Each weapon was a true masterpiece with few peers, yet even they were unable to damage the slug’s flesh. The gelatinous skin deflected the blows and kicked them backward. Because so much force had been placed behind each blow, they both suffered a massive shock and found themselves exposed in the most dangerous possible position.

This is a problem.

By the time I understood as much, my body was already in motion. I immediately threw up a defensive shield. The barrier protected my allies from harm, and a subsequent wind spell brought them back to me. Even a slight delay, and things could have ended very differently. I looked intently at the enemy’s horrendous visage as I unleashed my next move.

“If physical damage is impossible...then...”

What about magic? In order to test that prospect, I rained down a torrent of attack spells. *Explosive Heat. Flash Freezing. Thunder Strike. Gales...* Not only did I use such simple elemental spells, but I combined them in various ways to

amplify their effects and tried countless variations in my attacks. Unfortunately...

“That doesn’t work, either.”

...none of the magic I cast did the slightest thing.

“H-how are we supposed to...deal with this...?!” Ginny wore a look of terror and despair. Still, it seemed she trusted that I would find something. She looked at me pleadingly, and I nodded softly in response.

“Let’s try them. All the possible steps we can think of.”

Fortunately, the demon slug’s own attacks were extremely simplistic, and defending against them was easy. So we were able to remain on the offensive, but...

“...I see. No wonder Lord Lizer lost.”

...the monster’s toughness was almost unfair. It nullified physical attacks such as sword slashes and kinetic impacts. It had complete immunity to magical attacks, from elemental attacks to others. What’s more, it was immune to alternatives, such as sealing, pushback, or brainwashing. Ultimately, it even deflected my supernatural powers of analysis and domination.

“Is it...invincible...?”

I shook my head at Ginny’s despairing remark.

“No. That’s impossible. Every creature, no matter how powerful, has a weakness somewhere. This is not an exception.”

The issues were the questions of what that vulnerability was, and if we could determine it in time.

Of course, that came with a certain amount of risk. Using all of my power reduced the chance of anything bad happening, but considering what likely awaited us ahead, I wanted to avoid going all out so soon. However, it was also true that this situation could not be solved while holding power in reserve. As I pondered on how to deal with this...

“I’ve fought something like this once in the past, so I have. Honestly, I don’t want to try it...but guess we don’t have any choice, no we don’t.”

Before I could confirm her intention, Sylphy dashed toward the monster. She elegantly repelled the tentacles and quickly closed the distance. Once she circled around to face the creature head-on...

“Hiiiiii-yaaaaaaa!”

...she lunged forward with a stabbing blow that had her entire body weight behind it. The attack struck the slug’s face. Sylphy had succeeded in finally landing a damaging blow against the body that had thoroughly withstood all the attacks leveled against it from the start of the battle.

“Not deep enough.”

As Olivia had observed, Sylphy’s blade had only just managed to puncture the slug creature’s face, and it was far from a lethal blow.

“I figured I’d just poke around until I found a weak spot, but I really didn’t expect to locate it on the first try, that I didn’t.” Sylphy’s expression was lit with triumph.

Of course. The sword she wielded wasn’t simply a masterful piece of craftsmanship. It was Demise-Argis, one of the three Holy Swords. With its power, just getting its tip under a foe’s hide was enough to inflict lethal damage.

As though to prove it, Sylphy said, “*Vel (May Interlopers)! Stena (Vanish with One Stroke)! Olvidius (Of My Blade)!*”

A chant using the ancient language. With it, the blade of Demise-Argis shimmered brightly and loosed an overwhelming wave of energy from the tip. It was an incredible display of violence that could be felt even from where I was standing.

The Holy Sword’s power ran through the demon slug’s body and...caused it to burst. The bloated ashen body ruptured like an overinflated balloon. Chunks of its flesh and black ooze fell upon us like rain, and Sylphy rested her sword on her shoulder.

“Hah! Easy enough with Demise and me working together, so it is!” Sylphy reveled in her triumph. Ginny was probably about to compliment Sylphy, her face brightening as she opened her mouth, but before she could speak...

“Miss Sylphy! It’s not over yet!” I shouted as a shiver ran up my spine.

“Huh?” Sylphy let out a squeak of surprise. She had been entirely confident in her win and was unable to respond to the sudden continuation of the fight.

“Ye...day, day, aaahhraaaaaagh...”

...the chilling voice seemed to come from nowhere. An instant later, the scattered remains of the monster reassembled and came back to life.

“Wha...?!” Sylphy stared wide-eyed as her felled opponent regenerated.

Oh no! I need to help her.

“Ye...screeaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhh!”

Before I could move to help, the giant slug’s face split apart like jaws. And then...

“Ah!”

...with incredible swiftness that left no time to flee, the slug swallowed Sylphy’s compact body.

“T-that can’t be...?!” Ginny covered her mouth. The joy that had colored her expression moments before was gone.

Olivia and Verda both wore tense expressions. I was the only one to remain calm. Sylphy’s situation looked grim, but I immediately understood there was nothing to fear.

As if in answer to my confidence, the monster...

“leeaaaagggaaaaaaah!”

...began to thrash and jump, lashing out in every direction with its tentacles. It looked to be in agony. That had to be her doing.

“...She’s attacking it from the inside.”

“Nice, Sylphy. Seriously, what a tough cookie.”

We had two options in this predicament, of which only one was worthy of serious consideration: We could simply twiddle our thumbs and wait until Sylphy cut through the slug, or we could take the opportunity to make progress

toward our destination.

The one I chose...was the latter.

“All right, it’s time for us to move on.”

“...Huh?” Ginny squeaked in surprise, like she had abruptly been struck from the side. I knew why. I had just said we were going to abandon one of our comrades.

“We’ve no cause to worry for Miss Sylphy’s safety. Instead, we should take advantage of the opportunity she’s created for us.” Before anyone could answer, I broke into a run toward the goal that was the rift in the sky. I hurried toward it at full speed.

“Mmm, yes, it’s logical.”

“Yes, true. But...now’s not the time to be picky.”

Although troubled by my decision, Verda, Olivia, and Ginny followed after me. The monster tried to reach out with tentacles to stop our escape, but...

“Ye...grahh...screeeee!”

...an instant before it could catch us, it began to squirm in pain, and the slimy limbs suddenly lost their momentum.

“We should be able to make it now...”

Ordinarily, it wouldn’t have gone this well. Escaping into the rift while being pursued by vicious tentacles would’ve been impossible if not for Sylphy’s rampage inside the slug.

The tentacles were now clearly slower and less precise, enabling us to reach our target and leap into the air together.

Success.

My body reached the rift.

I felt faintly guilty about abandoning Sylphy, but...that was outweighed by my conviction that she would be okay. I was confident of that.

“Grreee...gyaaaaaah...”

I heard the monster's pained shrieks, but there was no use paying it any heed. It couldn't reach us now.

An unthinking doll could never be anything more than that.

The slug creature's limbs groped in the air futilely...

"Ye...eee...agh...raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!"

...or so I thought. But a split second later, I felt a passion in the enemy's scream. It was only for the briefest moment; however, it was enough for me to wonder: Had that empty flesh doll been imbued with the souls of the real warriors? It seemed determined to keep us from Alvarto.

One tentacle grabbed Olivia's leg.

"Tch...!"

No one could react to the completely unexpected development. By the time we realized what had happened, the rift was looming in front of us.

"I've made an error...," Olivia said regretfully. At that point...

...we had no time to consider how to save her, and our bodies continued into the portal.

CHAPTER 100

The Ex-Demon Lord and His Journey in the Underworld (Part 2)

The moment we arrived in the next area, I quickly checked our surroundings. The place looked to be a battlefield in the aftermath of a fight. At my feet were countless corpses that were lying atop an ocean of blood. In the middle of this place...

“We even lost...Lady Olivia...” Ginny trembled, her face pale. We had started with a party of six. Now, we were down to the three of us.

Lizer, Sylphy, and Olivia. Ginny was clearly shaken after losing them, yet it wasn't because she feared for her own safety. No, Ginny was worried about the lives of those comrades who'd been left behind, and it had started to instill faint distrust in me. While she wouldn't say it out loud, I could tell from her gaze that she wanted to ask why I chose to abandon Sylphy. If I hadn't taken that choice, we might not have been able to avoid losing Lizer, but perhaps we could have kept the other two safe.

“The three of them haven't fallen victim to anything. Our separation is temporary. Once we've taken care of this matter, we'll reunite safely.”

Ginny gave no response. She simply continued to stare at me in silence.

Undoubtedly, a conflict raged within her. She was wavering between a feeling of wanting to put her faith in me and the thought that she couldn't trust my words without solid proof.

Although Ginny had always counted on and supported me, I understood why she doubted my choice. Additionally, the miasma of the underworld was affecting her. It was natural that she'd be skeptical.

On the other hand, Verda seemed to be of the same mind as I was. “I also think there's no need for concern about the others. After all, I don't think Al's

after revenge or victory.” Verda glanced down at the countless bodies and pools of blood on the ground before turning her eyes to the gray sky. “This is part of the underworld and is a manifestation of Al’s mindset. I sense a great deal of obsession with the past and sadness...and an extreme desire for death. While Al isn’t trying to lose intentionally, he has no intention of winning.” She was right. I’d felt the same the moment we’d arrived here. The sight of the fake Lucius and Garp had only reinforced that notion. “I don’t know what it was like at the beginning. At the very least, though, I don’t think Al harbors any malice toward us now.”

“Yeah. If there was any hatred within him, even if he was trying to get us to destroy him, he’d make sure to find a way to eliminate our own prospects of future happiness and take enjoyment in that... But his heart no longer holds those emotions. He’s just that worn and exhausted.”

Ginny remained dubious of my and Verda’s remarks.

“How can you be so certain?”

“Well—” Had she asked that in the past, I would probably have tried to deflect the question. Actually, I would have probably behaved in a way that ensured she carried no doubts of this kind. There was no need to do that anymore, however. Ginny wouldn’t fear me now, regardless of what she knew of my identity. There was nothing that would harm our friendship, which was why—

“Miss Ginny. I’ve kept it a secret until now, but, I’m...”

—I was going to correct the lie I had told in the past.

“Ard, are you the Demon Lord?”

I had denied it when Ginny had asked that in the past because I was worried that she would be frightened of me. The incident at the Megatholium had changed my mind, though.

True friendship wasn’t so fragile that it would be shattered by fear. So I had no intention to deceive my friends any longer. I would reveal my identity, explain my relationship with Alvarto in detail, get Ginny to understand, and remove any uncertainty plaguing her heart.

“While I’m Ard Meteor, I’m also...” I didn’t hesitate in the slightest, and I was about to confess the truth, when...

“Hey, you two, looks like now’s not the time for a chat.” Verda’s voice was unusually tense.

...the sea of blood at our feet began to swell, shoving aside the many bodies. Slowly, the red liquid began to swirl and form into the shape of a person.

Crimson. That was all that I saw at that moment. Hip-length hair, eerie eyes, full lips, an outfit that looked like a military uniform, the aura that emanated from her body—all of them were crimson. I felt a sentimental twinge at the sight of her, and something like sadness stirred in me as I spoke her name.

“...Luminas wol Croft.”

An Evil God...no, an Outer One I had slain by my own hand. She looked just as she had in life, but...

“Alvarto. Alvarto. Alvarto. Alvarto.”

...she was the same as the others. This Luminas was a facsimile of the real thing, an artificial creation that had been built from the faintest echo of her information that lingered in the underworld.

“...Even if she looks exactly like the genuine article, she’s still not real. Even though he knows that it won’t restore her to life...I guess he had no choice but to try.”

Yes. You and I are both hopeless.

How would the women we loved react if they were here right now? If Luminas and...Lydia were here? Would they shrug their shoulders in exasperation? Or would they weep with pity? Regardless, we were both fools who couldn’t let go of our weakness, our desperation.

“...Ard. Now’s not the time to dwell on sentiment.”

“...Yes, that’s true.”

While she appeared to simply be standing still, Verda had already completed her preparations for battle. Ginny, who stood next to her, readied her crimson spear and glared at our opponent.

I needed to switch my mindset. Fake or not, we were facing an Outer One. She was on a completely different level from Lucius and Garp.

“First, we need to figure out just how much of her power he’s been able to re-create.”

“Yes. Let’s focus on defense at the start. Miss Ginny, you have no objections?”

“I’ll follow your lead...!”

It seemed that any of the doubts she’d harbored earlier had been blasted away. She needed to concentrate all of her thoughts on fighting. Ginny had intuitively detected that Luminas was a foe that demanded as much.

As though to prove that our judgment was right, the crimson monster made her move. “Alvarto. Alvarto.” Luminas continued to repeat the same words as she spread her arms.

“Ah! Miss Ginny! Jump to the side!”

Ginny responded to my shout and reflexively leaped sideways. No sooner had she done so than a crimson bolt of lightning fell upon the spot where she had stood.

“...As expected, he’s re-created the basics.”

“Yes. At least in that respect, she’s at a comparable level to the original.”

Luminas’s powers were relatively simple. In essence, she was able to command crimson lightning. It was hard to predict when it would manifest, which made it extremely difficult to avoid, and a direct hit vaporized the target, soul and all. The speed and power were both extraordinary. However...

...when viewed by the standards of the ancient world, Luminas’s ability was a weak one. She and her forces had built a reputation as a peerless and powerful army based upon the overwhelming talent for battle that Luminas herself possessed.

She was able to read the enemy’s moves perfectly, always find the right course of action, and execute it in an instant. Her tactics were varied and numerous, and she would switch them from appearing finely calculated one moment to being completely incomprehensible the next. I, too, had once been

caught up in the web she weaved with her tactics and had struggled several times as a result.

“That’s not something he could re-create, though.”

“I agree, but...the thing that’s so scary about Luminas is that even a fake copy of her makes you believe she might pull off the impossible.”

I couldn’t deny that, which was why I stuck to moving cautiously. I focused on trying to read the enemy’s thoughts while defending.

“She’s nowhere near the real thing.”

Because this Luminas was a copy, she had no ability to think.

All she did was blindly fire off bolts. The crimson lightning was first-rate in terms of power and speed, and it couldn’t be nullified, even with my special power. However, it could be easily managed by full-powered defensive magic. Thus, we held an overwhelming advantage in this battle from start to finish.

“Al...varto...A-Al...varto...Alvar...to...”

Luminas had suffered a great deal of damage. The uniform she wore was torn in multiple places, and the skin that peeked out from the tears was dyed red from her blood.

Without her intelligence, she was far too easy to defeat. As someone who knew Luminas at her peak, I felt a pang in my heart. Yet at the same time...her perseverance evoked a healthy respect from me.

“Al...varto...Alvar...to...Al...Alvarto.”

Her gaze remained fixed in my direction. Luminas was looking only at me. However, the creature was only an automaton, so that had to be a coincidence. Still, I couldn’t help but feel guilty.

“You’re going to break the promise we made, aren’t you?”

It seemed like that was what she was saying to me. Her gaze appeared accusatory.

“...Forgive me, Luminas. There’s no other way.”

Conflicted though I was, I tried to land the final blow to finish off the fight.

The least I could do was use full-powered magic to make sure she didn't feel any pain. My heart stung as I took aim at Luminas—

“Al...var...ra...va...Al...va...ra...”

—the split second before I was going to unleash my attack spell. The aura. The dangerous presence that emanated from her entire body. It swelled in power.

“Va...Var...Va...”

No. That's impossible.

I tried to reject the possibility as absurd, but the automaton paid that logic no mind.

“Var...vatos...!”

Crimson lightning lit the area, and a thunderous *boom* rang through the air.

The immense bolt from the heavens didn't hit us. It fell, instead, upon Luminas.

“Urr...Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Crimson energy flowed from her entire body. That alone posed no danger, but I recognized that the power was growing with every passing second.

“This is bad. She intends to self-destruct.”

“If we let that happen...”

“She'll definitely annihilate all of us.”

Verda fell into thought, rubbing her chin with her hand... However, I had no time to worry about that.

Luminas. Have you also done it?

When Sylphy lost control of herself, Lydia's soul that lingered within me had regained a sense of self and saved Sylphy's heart. Was this the same?

Luminas. Have you also brought a miracle into being?

To protect Alvarto. To make sure he wouldn't die. Faced with such emotion, I...felt an extraordinary surge of anger.

“If you loved him that much, why didn’t you take him by the hand...?!”

There were limits to selfishness. She had chosen a path that left behind those she loved. Luminas decided on crushing loneliness, taking a gamble based on delusions. She selected an impossible future—happiness after death.

“If you had done something different...! Had you cared for that man first and foremost...! Then it all could’ve been avoided...!” Luminas, like myself, was one of the main causes of this entire incident. She had driven Alvarto into solitude, crushed his heart, and crafted him into the man he was today. What right did she have to get involved now?! “Luminas wol Croft...! There’s no place for you on this stage any longer!”

My compassion and sadness had evaporated, replaced with fury as I pelted her with every attack spell at my disposal. However...she was unharmed. Luminas absorbed my magic, her aura only growing stronger.

“Var...vatos...!”

I felt a strong will emanating from Luminas’s crimson eyes, even as it appeared that she would explode at any moment. She seemed determined not to let me break my promise and kill Alvarto.

A mother protecting her child. I found that more infuriating than anything.

“Stop with the foolishness! You have no right to take that stance!”

My mind and heart were utterly swallowed by rage. There wasn’t a single part of me that was calm. Naturally, I wasn’t able to make the right decisions in that situation...so Verda stepped in.

“You know, you’re usually so relaxed, but you become an uncontrollable ball of anger when something ticks you off... You really haven’t changed, have you?” Verda commented with a chuckle before she leaped from the ground.

“Ah!”

“Lady Verda...?!”

She jumped at Luminas.

“I won’t let you get your way.”

Verda used her momentum to push the crimson woman to the ground. Waiting below them was a black hole...

...that the two women plunged into.

“...!”

As Ginny and I stared in astonished silence, the black hole immediately closed shut and vanished.

A moment later...

“Ahem, one, two, test, test. Can you hear me? Both of you?”

...I heard Verda’s voice in my head.

“First off, communication from a parallel dimension is one-way. So there’s no point in responding to me.” With that out of the way, she launched into her main topic, retaining her usual nonchalance. *“I did the calculations, and by my math, I concluded that if Luminas self-destructed, our chances of survival were zero. Meaning there was only one choice.”*

“You understand, right?” Her tone filled in what she had left unsaid.

“The one who’s expendable dies and saves the others. Now, I suppose it’s a cliché, but there’s one thing that’s different... I’m...an immortal god of scholars...”

Something must have happened on the other side. Verda’s voice began to break up.

“Even if this me...is...era...ed...there’s...still...hun...s of mill...of me...left... So don’t...sad...okay...?”

I had no idea what was happening, but she would probably be smiling whatever the situation. Her voice remained bright until the very end.

“Leave...in your hands...I’m...take...nap...”

That was the end of her communication.

“Lady Verda...!”

Ginny’s face twisted in despair as she processed the shock of what had just transpired.

I...also struggled to deal with it. Verda seemed to be convinced she would be safe, but...there were no absolutes. I believed Alvarito would save Lizer, Olivia, and Sylphy before they were killed. But with Luminas...it would be difficult. She had regained her own will. She wouldn't accept Alvarito's control.

Unlike the others, I couldn't say for sure if Verda would survive.

"...If I had remained calm, would I have been able to find another way?"

No, Verda's choice was probably the best one, and there was nothing else I could have done. Even then...the doubt, the second-guessing, the self-reproach swirled in my chest.

"Ard..."



When I heard Ginny's anxious voice, I forced myself to set my own feelings aside. Her anxiety had to be much greater than mine. To encourage Ginny, I needed to act as confidently as possible.

"Lady Verda won't go down from something this minor. She herself said as much, right? All we can do is to trust those words and keep going." I smiled gently to show that the current situation wasn't anything out of the ordinary. And then...

"Let's keep going, Miss Ginny."

"...All right."

...we stood side by side as we continued.

Just how long had it been since that moment?

The two of us marched onward toward the next rift in the west. Even when the battlefield was behind us, the land seemed to continue forever.

At times, we crossed mountains of needles. At times, we crossed a blazingly hot wasteland. At times, we walked through torrential downpours.

We walked ceaselessly until we finally arrived at the middle of a snowy plain buffeted by a blizzard. Blinding white winds tore through the air, and frigid cold sapped our bodies of heat... I had nothing to base the feeling on, but this felt like our final destination.

He was nearby. Alvarito was waiting.

But...

"Ard. It seems. I can't. Go any. Farther."

...it was here that Ginny gently sank to her knees and then collapsed into the snow.

I lifted her slender form and peered into her face.

She had long since exceeded her limits. Her eyes were sunken and her cheeks gaunt. Heavy breaths escaped her mouth. It was remarkable that an ordinary human born in this modern age had gotten this far. Her strength of will was worthy of praise.

“Miss Ginny. Please leave the rest to me.”

When she heard my words, tears formed in the corners of her eyes.

“I don’t want to stay weak...or remain a burden... That’s my wish, but...it seems some things can’t be helped...”

Her voice was filled with strong frustration and regret. She must have wanted to reclaim what she had lost with her own hands. Ireena, her best friend. Her daily life and the story that she shared with her classmates. Those were the most important things to Ginny, and they were precious beyond all measure.

Thus, she seemingly refused to entrust everything to another, even someone like me, who she had great faith in. Ginny declined to say, “I’ll leave it to you.”

“You might think it foolish, but...I have my pride as a woman...” She wanted to see that through to the end. I felt Ginny’s emotions from her dim gaze. “Oh...I only wish... But...Ard...”

There was no need for me to hear the rest of her statement. I understood the intent. All that remained was for me to see it through.

“Please, wait here and rest. Wait for all of us to return.”

Without a word, Ginny slumped her head backward. I took the necessary measures to ensure her safety. Then I continued onward alone toward the opponent who waited for me.

“...Cold. It’s so very cold.”

My breath came out as white fog in the freezing air. I let my mind wander as I trudged forward. The first thing that came to my mind...was Ginny’s expression. It had all but implored me to defeat the hated enemy.

To her, that’s what Alvarto was. He was the wicked monster who had destroyed her life and the lives of her friends. That was all he was. Still, I couldn’t bring myself to hate him. How could I? I was one of the causes that had led him to these actions.

“It’s so thoroughly cold. Not a shred of warmth. I see. So this is how you truly feel.”

This frigid world of white was probably a reflection of Alvarto. He had lost his

companions one by one until nothing remained. Ultimately, his heart had become a frozen wasteland, and he was forced to suffer an existence in that state. I could easily imagine how agonizing that must have been.

I had fled from facing Alvarto's reality.

The promise I had made to him. The promise I had made to Luminas. I had been caught between the conflicting promises and had been torn... In the end, I'd given up on finding an answer and had run.

"I, too, am a self-centered fool. I truly regret everything, from the bottom of my heart."

At first, I was only angry over this entire situation. That was selfish, however—wholly irrational and unfair. I had no right to despise him. Thus, what I was about to do wasn't vengeance. It was merely tying up a loose end that I'd neglected. To bring an end to the heart of a comrade I had once abandoned. Which was why now...

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Alvarto Egzex."

...in the middle of this snow-swept plain, I faced my fate.

INTERLUDE

The Deathless Monster and a Fleeting Dream III

Instability had come to the space. The pure white zone was creaking, wavering, shaking, and rippling. As the change came upon the area, Kalmia murmured and narrowed her eyes.

“...Not much time left.”

Having heard the anxiety in Kalmia’s voice, Ireena strengthened her conviction.

The end was undoubtedly coming, and Ard was fighting Alvarto.

To put an end to this chapter, to put an end to this long saga.

Ireena wondered: Was it right to leave this to Ard? She was confident he would win. Ard would triumph and save the world. But at the end of this series of events, Kalmia wouldn’t be among those smiling and rejoicing.

Ard’s victory and Ireena’s rescue...would mean tragedy for Kalmia. Was that right? Should she just stay here and not do anything? Ireena pondered that question.

“I...”

She couldn’t find an answer. What she needed to do, what she wanted to do. There was no foundation from which to draw a conclusion.

Like Kalmia, Ireena began to feel a strong sense of unease. She needed to find a solution quickly, or it would all be too late. Alvarto and Ard were now in a situation where they might clash at the very next moment. Perhaps they already were, as the rippling white space began to take on color again.

A scene rapidly formed. It was a bloody spectacle that appeared to be the immediate aftermath of a battle. Enemies and allies alike lay scattered on the ground within a sea of blood. Lucius and Garp looked to Alvarto and smiled.

“Yeah, you’re different from us.”

“B-but...that’s what’s...good about you.”

They regarded him as they might their younger brother. What were they thinking? Before that became clear, the scene in front of Ireena’s eyes was quickly overwritten by another.

“What...is this?” In a large room, Kalmia held a hair ornament of lapis lazuli, her head tilted quizzically.

“It’s a gift. I’m told girls like these sorts of things, right?” Alvarto furrowed his brow and started scratching his head.

“I don’t understand why you would give me a gift.”

“...You helped me the other day. It’s in thanks for that. Don’t make me say it aloud!” Alvarto refused to meet Kalmia’s gaze and instead muttered his reply, leading Kalmia to react with a single word:

“Creepy.”

After her blunt opinion, the two fell into their usual pattern of an argument that escalated to fist-fighting, but...in truth, Kalmia seemed pleased by the gesture. After all, she still wore the hair ornament that Alvarto had given her.

Scenes from the past continued to appear and vanish in succession.

They were all fragments that helped Ireena comprehend what Alvarto felt as he battled Ard.

“...He intends to die.”

It was as though Alvarto were settling accounts with his past. The memories kept appearing, then fading. Appearing, then fading. They were all happy recollections.

The time he spent with the woman he loved. The time he spent with the comrades who had accepted him as one of their own. The time he had spent with his frustrating but beloved best friend.

Always, they vanished as quickly as they came, and then...a long period of darkness began.

Ireena squinted her eyes at the disturbing colors that began to swirl in front of her.

The new shades that made up the new scene were all filled with a haunting amount of malice. The portrait they created...was a dark and depressing one that seemed to hint at the beginning of a great tragedy.

“Ur...gh...!”

Beneath a cloudy sky, a badly injured young man walked alone across a barren wasteland.

Over the years, Alvarto Egzex had grown into a beautiful young man. However, there was no elegance to his bloodstained beauty.

“How did this...?! I should be stronger...than him...!”

Who was “he”? How had Alvarto wound up like this?

Evidently sensing Ireena’s questions, Kalmia quietly began to explain. “A great allied army of rebels centered around the Demon Lord Varvatos and the Champion Lydia. Luminas’s army had been fighting them for a long time by this point.” Her calm tone belied the sharp glint in her eyes as she beheld the battlefield. “Most of the alliance was a disorganized rabble. They weren’t opponents that Luminas and the others would ever lose against. However... Varvatos’s and Lydia’s forces were a different matter.” Kalmia made a tight fist as she went on. “Even common soldiers among their ranks were skilled veterans who could turn the tide of combat independently. Their commanders...were all veritable monsters. And the two in command...were on a completely different plane altogether.”

The Demon Lord and the Champion. The villain and the great hero from fairy tales. Their titles weren’t just for show.

Varvatos was the man who had used his absolute power and ruthless judgment to conquer both humans and demons.

Lydia was the woman who rivaled Varvatos in strength and possessed a charisma that endeared her to all.

Kalmia explained that no one could defeat that pair.

However, while Varvatos was an overwhelmingly powerful foe, Alvarto was still able to hold his own against him.

Unfortunately...

“...This was the fourth time that Lydia had completely dominated Alvarto on the battlefield.”

...Alvarto had never lost so many times to the same opponent before. He was so strong that even the Demon Lord had problems dealing with him, and he was a presence worthy of being hailed as the greatest warrior in Luminas’s army.

Yet he kept getting overwhelmed and utterly crushed by an opponent who was, at best, equal to Varvatos and possibly even a step beneath him.

“Damn...it...! Talking down to me like that...!”

At that moment, *her* voice sounded in Ireena’s head. It was the woman known as the greatest hero in history, Champion Lydia.

“You’re just a damned mewling, spoiled little brat.”

“You can’t do a damn thing on your own.”

“You’re living by putting someone other than yourself in your heart and clinging to them for meaning.”

“Of course, I’m not going to lose to a loser like that.”

That must have been what Lydia had said to him.

Ireena was able to grasp what Lydia was trying to say, if only vaguely. To Alvarto, though, it all sounded like mockery.

“Haff...! Haff...! Dammit...! Dammit! Dammit! Dammit...!”

Alvarto ground his teeth together and sobbed. Eventually, he ran out of energy and fell to his knees. Amid the barren wasteland, he shed bitter tears of rage. Then Kalmia approached.

Like Alvarto, she, too, was grievously injured.

“I’m sorry, Kalmia... It’s my fault that you’re hurt...”

“...How unlike you. You should laugh at me as always, telling me that I look

terrible.”

“I can’t manage that... At least, not now...”

There was a deep sadness in her eyes as she looked down at Alvarto. Both the Kalmia of Alvarto’s memories and the one standing next to Ireena had the same cast to their gazes as they peered down upon their partner.

“...Say, Al. Can you give a clear answer on why you fight?”

“Huh?”

Alvarto spent a moment considering the inquiry. “I want to see Lady Luminas smile. That’s why. Whenever I do well, she always—”

“I believe that’s why you lose.” Alvarto looked shocked at the fact that Kalmia seemingly rejected his reasoning. He stared wide-eyed at her. “That isn’t something that can be called a cause or a belief. It’s not enough of a purpose to fight. Al...I think Lydia Viigensgeight is right. Right now, you’re just a damned mewling—a spoiled little brat.”

Why would she say such a thing?

As Alvarto stared at Kalmia, his expression turned sad and disappointed. While on the surface, they spent all their time bickering, he had believed that the truth was different, deep down. The pair had spent a long time together and had started to understand each other. Which was why...

...Alvarto had thought Kalmia was his best friend and the partner he could trust without reservation.

“How...? How can you say such a terrible thing...?”

Kalmia knew that Luminas was everything to him, yet she had dismissed the importance of that feeling. It wasn’t something he could forgive.

“If you’re done with me, then say so clearly! Why would you go to such lengths to delegitimize my entire existence...?! How can you do such a terrible thing...?!” Alvarto spat venomous recriminations at Kalmia and glared balefully at her. In response, Kalmia narrowed her eyes.

There wasn’t anger there, only sorrow—a deep sadness that her words hadn’t reached her friend.

“I don’t deny your purpose or your existence. I just want...you to grow up. From a child to an adult. From a frail boy to a proper man. I have faith that you can do it. If you can, then you can do for Luminas what...”

It was here that Kalmia’s words failed her. Perhaps because she was a woman, Ireena was able to intuit Kalmia’s emotions. Regrettably, Alvarito clearly hadn’t comprehended.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying in the slightest, Kalmia!”

Ireena reflexively clenched her hands into fists. It felt like she had discovered a hint of what she needed to do, what she wanted to do.

It was just then that someone suddenly appeared near Alvarito and Kalmia. From her perspective as a third-person observer, Ireena was able to see the identity of the newcomer clearly.

But Alvarito didn’t notice her until it was too late.

“—Ah?!”

He took a hand chop to the back of his head and immediately lost consciousness.

Immediately, the scene underwent a drastic shift.

It became a warm grassy plain in spring bloom. Yet although the vista seemed beautiful, the sky was an ominous reddish-black. In that inexplicable place, countless shards floated in the air.

Appearances suggested they were fragments of broken glass, and each of them reflected a different event. They were Alvarito’s memories. The precious days he had spent with Luminas shone in the constellation of glittering shards.

“What is this...?”

As confusion took hold, what came next happened abruptly.

All of the fragments hovering in the air began to audibly shatter.

Ireena couldn’t consciously divine the meaning, but she intuitively comprehended that something frightening was about to occur.

And when the final shard splintered...

“I’m sorry. I’ve reached my limit, Alvarto.”

...Luminas’s voice echoed through the entire area, and again, the scene transformed.

Alvarto had regained consciousness and was presently lying in his bed in the Gladsheim palace. All of the wounds he’d taken during his latest encounter with Lydia had healed, leaving Alvarto wondering for a moment if it had all been a dream.

“Al...!”

His partner’s voice brought him back to reality. Her tone informed him that it had been no illusion. He turned his head and saw Kalmia. Sadness and anxiety showed plainly on her face, just as it had in her voice earlier.

“Please...! You’re the only one who can...!”

She was like a terrified child. Her features were pale, and her teeth clattered in fear. He had never seen Kalmia like this.

“...What happened?”

As the words left his lips, she replied simply, “Please, stop Luminas...!”

The moment he heard that, Alvarto found himself leaping from the bed, his body moving unconsciously. Something terrifying was happening. He needed to help. Pulled by that strong urge, Alvarto hurried to his destination, the small room dedicated to tea parties.

He nearly tore the door off its hinges before he leaped inside. And there...

“Alas. You woke up.”

...Luminas sat with a cup in hand, her expression blank.

There was something truly off about the way she was sipping tea on her own. It was obvious from a single glance at her clothing. She wasn’t wearing her usual crimson military uniform.

Instead, her body was covered in a heavy outfit that was lavishly decorated. The fabric was a dark red that bordered upon black. This attire held a special meaning within Luminas’s army. It was the garb of death, designed for warriors

who were about to set off for a suicidal mission.

Luminas had dressed herself in something thoroughly foreboding.

“What...? Why...?”

This was beyond Alvarito’s comprehension. How could Luminas do such a thing? Why did she look at him and sigh? There was no way this was—

“Indeed. Well, if this is how it is, then there is nothing to do about it.”

Luminas set her cup on the table and stood, making her way to Alvarito. There was no hostility or malice in her face. If anything, her features expressed love and compassion for him.

“Thou truly hast grown into a fine man.” She tipped her chin up slightly to gaze at Alvarito, presumably taking pride in her child’s progress. “When thou first arrived here, thou truly were a small boy. And now... Heh. Thou hast grown so much that I need to peer up to see thy face.”

Why that expression? Why those words? Something was off. Something was completely, truly wrong.

“...This is the whim of the fates. Sit down. Then, I shall tell thee everything.”

Luminas made her way to the shelf by the window, retrieved a single teacup, then returned to her seat. Alvarito, following her lead, walked to the table and sat down.

“It will be a bit of a long story, but...let us begin with me revealing who I am.” Luminas took a sip of tea, wetting her throat, before she began to tell her story. “As the name ‘Outer One’ implies, we are beings that originally had no connection to this world. We are all entities that have come from other worlds...and we’re similar to humans at our core.”

Luminas then added that this meant they were not gods, creators, or anything exceptional.

“While in this world, we all reign as rulers...most of us lived completely different lives in our original worlds. I am no exception.”

She then began to describe her own upbringing.

“The land I was born to was called South German. Together with the northern region, it had once been known as the German Empire, but that had long since passed by the time I was born.” Luminas narrowed her crimson eyes and smiled as she fondly recalled the past. Her homeland had been like hell, however. “It had once been a single country, one of the most advanced in the world, but... once divided into northern and southern halves, it devolved into a truly foolish, blood-soaked place. A land of constant conflict.”

There was no longer a single soul there who could recall the reason for the battle, making the fighting meaningless, and yet...

“People don’t always value logic. After centuries of death, the hatred had grown as high as the mountains. The Germani no longer sought any purpose or meaning from combat. The ends and the means had completely swapped places. We fought not to gain anything. Instead, we tried to gain things to keep the conflict going. All had become irredeemable warmongers.”

...it was within this nightmare that Luminas had been born to a family known for its great warriors.

“According to my dear father, our line had the blood of the Vikings, a great group of raiding peoples. That helped us rationalize who and what we were. No doubt, the madness within us came from our blood.”

She described her entire lineage with a single descriptive phrase, effectively labeling them deranged war junkies.

“We were put to sleep with the shouts and cries of the battlefield as our lullabies, and we were nurtured by the blood and flesh of our enemies. All of our kin were the same. I, too, am no different. If there was one thing that set me apart, it was my tendency for sentimentality.”

Luminas explained that her attitude, aesthetic principles, and philosophy toward conflict were particularly complex and distinct. She was explaining her own personality and character.

“To me, fighting is the greatest method of communication. Upon the battlefield, people discard everything of artifice. The shackles that come from living as an intelligent creature. Ethics. Morality. They cast off these things and act purely on instinct. They slaughter, invade, and pillage. Opponents that let

me bring those primitive desires to bear were my dearest friends.”

It was nearly impossible to understand. Alvarto simply listened to Luminas speak and wasn’t able to grasp the core of what she was telling him. It seemed Luminas was aware of that fact and chuckled rather self-deprecatingly.

“Yes, thine reaction is natural. Alvarto. I am not asking that thou comprehend me. If anything, I believe that thou should stay that way. No, I should rephrase it. I believe that is how thou must always be.” Luminas paused to take a deep breath. “Regardless. To me, my enemies were my friends in ways no ally ever could be. To kill and be killed, to hate and be hated, to wrong and to be wronged... It was only against such foes that I could feel friendship. I am that much of a horrendous, broken creature, dear Alvarto.”

With a cold smile, she confessed this was why she had always been consumed by terrible isolation.

“The objects of my admiration were my opponents. There was no way for the relationship to last, and so I slew those I considered my friends. Even the only man I have ever loved fell by my hand. Despite thinking I didn’t want to, that was always how it ended. As I struggled with that maddening self-contradiction, I...began to wish for death.”

A sharp pang. The words had gouged a wound into Alvarto’s heart.

“Lady Luminas...! You...!”

Luminas glanced down to avoid seeing Alvarto’s frightened trembling.

“In my own world, I continued to engage in suicidal conflicts. Yet, as thou can see, I survived. If all I wished for was my destruction, there were plenty of ways to do it. Unfortunately, I had my pride and principles as a warrior. I couldn’t simply commit suicide. It had to be a death in battle. A struggle where I fought with all of my might and failed. That was the only method I could accept. If that was not how I died...I would not be able to go to Valhalla, the warrior’s paradise.”

Valhalla. Stories of that mythical place had been passed down in her family. It was a realm for those who died honorably.

“There, I would reunite with the people that I had been separated from and

indulge in a never-ending war. That was my only wish and my only hope.”

As Luminas gazed up at the ceiling and sighed, Alvarto replied with trembling lips. “There’s no way such a place could...”

No such world rightly existed. Salvation after death could not be real in such a ruthless world.

“...Heh. Yes, I know. Of course it is a fantasy. But even then...I want to cling to that impossible dream.”

“Why would you...?!” Alvarto wheezed out the words. It was hard for him to speak. In reply, Luminas gave a thin, exhausted smile.

“In the end, there were no warriors who could slay me. Later, a quirk of fate brought me to this world...and I sought the same thing here.”

War. War. War.

Luminas had continued to fight, taking on the Old Gods who had ruled at the time, seeking her own destruction. However, even the powers of a different world were unable to slay her.

“And with that realization, my heart was nearing its limit. It was around that time that I met Kalmia.”

The extraordinary existence that was Kalmia had been the first being with which Luminas was able to form an ordinary, healthy friendship.

“To me, she was hope. I prayed that her presence would let me turn away from my madness, to find some sense of normalcy... Alvarto, thou art the same. Thou art the first being I was able to properly love in all of my life.”

Kalmia and Alvarto. The two had soothed Luminas’s soul and had restrained her madness.

“But it wasn’t enough. I couldn’t change.”

Her words of resignation brought Alvarto a fresh sense of despair. All her days with him held no meaning. Before he knew it, Alvarto was weeping as he realized the implication of Luminas’s words. She dropped her gaze to the floor, perhaps to avoid the sight of him. The next moment, more words came. Suddenly, completely unexpectedly. They hammered Alvarto anew.

“...Just a little earlier, Lucius and Garp fell.”

Alvarto's tears stopped. “What?” As he stared in open-mouthed shock, Luminas took a sip of tea and continued.

“It was immediately after I put thee to sleep. The pair pushed deep into enemy territory and...they met a glorious end at the hands of the Demon Lord and his right arm.” The reality that Luminas's statement crafted left Alvarto in stunned silence. She regarded him sadly, but went on. “Demons were created using the genetic information from us, the Outer Ones. In a sense, they are truly my own children. Maybe that's why all of the people in my army have a death wish. Lucius and Garp were particularly notable among them. The two were like a mirror for my heart. They always sought a place to die... And at last, they have found it.”

Luminas drank down the rest of the tea.

“...The place of their death can, at the same time, be mine as well. After a long time, after an eternity of waiting, he has finally come. He is the one. The Demon Lord. He will be my final opponent.”

Those words meant that...

“...No! I refuse to allow it! I refuse!” Alvarto cried with an extraordinary amount of longing and conviction. It was the same emotion that Kalmia had shown earlier. He would stop her. At all costs. Whatever it took.

“Alas, so I expected. That's why I had put thee to sleep. But...it seems the gods truly do hate me.”

Luminas and Alvarto sighed and stood. Then each took several paces...and stopped. They leveled glares at one another.

“For things to go as I wish, this is the only option.”

Luminas spread her arms and smiled as though inviting Alvarto to her. “Come, Alvarto.”

And so, it began. A battle where each sought to impose their will upon the other. They clashed at full strength. The scene was one out of legends. No palace could endure the exchange of overwhelming power unscathed, and the

gorgeous structure was an utter mess in no time at all.

After which, the pair continued their battle, switching stages several times... It was in the middle of the plain where the duel was decided.

Luminas was only fighting for herself. Meanwhile, Alvarto carried the hopes of two people—himself and Kalmia. He had thought that, with their feelings combined, even Luminas wouldn't be able to break through. Yet when the struggle concluded, Alvarto was the one lying on the ground.

"Urr... Ah..." He couldn't move a single finger. It was hard to even speak. Despite that, Alvarto watched her, even as his vision grew hazy. "La—dy... Lumi...nas..." He tried to reach out to her, but his body refused to listen. "...I'm sorry."

How did she react? Alvarto's vision was so blurry that he could not say. The woman who had saved him from hell and turned him from beast to man began to walk away. She was the only person he loved in all the world...

"Wa...it... Wa..."

...and she was leaving him. Her body. Her heart. Alvarto despaired at his inability to hold her here, weeping bitterly. His flickering awareness eventually sank into darkness.

"Urrgh... Ah... Ahmph..."

A tear fell from his cheek to the ground. He wasn't able to maintain a clear consciousness, which was why...the word he called next came from his very soul.

"Mother...!"

It was the first time he had called her that. While he had always thought of her that way, in the end, he hadn't been able to say it to her. It was the only term that could express what Luminas meant to Alvarto.

She stopped in her tracks.

"..."

Her shoulders trembled, her lips quivered, and she clenched her fists. However, the doubt in her heart must have been fleeting.

“...I’m sorry. I truly am.”

Love was, in the end, unable to overcome ego.

“Ah... Ah...”

Alvarto slipped away at last. And by the time that light returned to the world, it was all over.

Someone must have carried him there. Alvarto once again awoke in his room in Gladsheim palace. He pushed aside the pain that had been carved into every inch of his body and leaped out of bed.

He felt it. His presence. Her presence. Varvatos and Luminas were close by. They were in the courtyard.

Alvarto felt the faintest sliver of hope that Varvatos had talked sense into Luminas and that she had chosen to live... Perhaps they’d created the alliance of humans and demons that Varvatos had yearned for.

The courtyard was filled with all the military officers and bureaucrats from the palace, who stared at the spectacle before them.

Their mistress was in the arms of the beautiful Demon Lord.

Luminas looked as though she were sleeping, her eyes gently closed. She remained as still as a doll and as pale as a corpse.

“Warriors. Your mistress was a great woman.” Varvatos called, his even voice tinged with feelings of regret. “Her character was just and fair. There was much to learn from her rule. She preached the value of democracy and equality... which is why I had always felt we shared the same values... I will now communicate her final wishes.”

Final wishes. Her desires for the world after her departure.

Alvarto gasped.

Final wishes? Final wishes?! What was he going on about?! How could he speak as though Luminas was dead? She was right there! Alvarto could see her!

“...Luminas wol Croft does not desire for you to continue resisting. After you pay respects to her body, her hope was that you would join my forces.” With

that, Varvatos laid Luminas's body upon the grass. "...I pray that you will follow your mistress's last request."

Having said all he could, Varvatos vanished.

"...No, that's not possible."

One day and one night. Two days and two nights. The silence and stillness dragged on forever.

No one approached or spoke to Luminas. They turned from the reality they could not face. Yet no matter how much they resisted, some finally succumbed and accepted it. There were two responses.

"Glory to Lady Luminas...!" Some shed great tears, shouting praise of their leader before they plunged daggers into their chests.

"Gather the entire army! It's time to prepare for a great war!" Others vented all their anger and readied for battle.

While many struggled with what to do next...

...Alvarto didn't hesitate for a moment, biting off his own tongue.

Excruciating pain and massive bleeding. He eventually drowned in his own blood and was unable to breathe... His consciousness ebbed away. Death approached, but he did not fear it. If anything, he wanted to die and disappear as quickly as possible.

The despair and sadness that filled his chest were too intense to express... Yet at the moment that an ordinary person would have accepted their demise...

...the scenery around Alvarto dramatically changed. He had glimpsed this realm once before, when he had lost consciousness to a blow from Luminas.

Alvarto stood alone in the chilly air of a featureless plain beneath a red-black sky. He retained a clear sense of awareness and was now totally unharmed.

"Where...?" He was confused for a moment. Then...hope sprouted within him. "Could this be...Valhalla...?"

The afterlife that he had dismissed. A dream that shouldn't exist. If it was real...

“Lady Luminas...?”

...she had to be here. No, he wanted her to be here. Alvarto was about to start exploring this mysterious space, with hope simmering in his chest, when...

“Nope. Wrong. This isn’t the sort of place you think it is.”

...a voice rang out.

It was familiar, but not at all welcome, for it was that of the devil he had wished never to meet again.

“Mephisto Yuu Phegor...”

Alvarto reflexively spoke the name and turned to face the one who had spoken to him. There stood the devil with an amused smile on his lips.

“Your wish will never, ever come true.” The irritating grin on Mephisto’s lips steadily widened. “Here you are. It’s the continuation of your nightmare, Alvarto. Amuse me with your suffering.”

Immediately after the devil waved his hand in a parting greeting, everything returned to normal. The scenery around him. His own body’s state. It all became as it was before.

Alvarto was now standing in the palace courtyard. Around him were the bodies of his comrades who had voluntarily ended their lives. He was the only one unharmed.

“...No, that can’t be.”

Having guessed at the situation, Alvarto felt a cold shiver run down his spine. In a desperate attempt to reject the despair, he bit off his tongue again. Unfortunately...the results were unchanged. He awoke in an eerie place, then returned to where he’d been a moment before. That meant...

“N-no...! I can’t...! I can’t accept that!”

...he killed himself once more, and the result was the same. Even then, Alvarto could not accept it. To know that the salvation of death was beyond him was...too much to bear. Thus, he committed suicide.

Suicide. Suicide. Suicide. Suicide. Suicide. Suicide. Suicide. Suicide. Suicide.

There was no purpose in living in a world without her. Only the end of his existence could bring him peace. However, some mechanism that devil had created repeatedly denied him his dearest wish. No matter how many times he perished, Alvarto could not stay dead.

He would wake up in that mysterious location, then return to reality. It was an endless repetition.

Eventually, he gave up on suicide and threw himself into combat.

The remaining warriors had slain the messenger sent to negotiate peace and an alliance with the remnants of Luminas's army. They set out wearing death suits and intended to fight to the last man.

Although they had lost their leader, Luminas's forces remained mighty and peerless. Everyone had built themselves into the best state of their lives for the approaching final battle. Yet they were thoroughly bested at the hands of the Demon Lord.

Varvatos faced the entirety of Luminas's army, a force numbering over twenty thousand alone. Although he suffered countless wounds, he paid his respects to the souls of the enemy, never backing down. Ultimately, countless fighters perish...and one man remained. Alvarto rose as the only survivor amidst an ocean of blood.

Of course, this wasn't the desired outcome. Alvarto hadn't come seeking vengeance. Varvatos was a man he'd clashed with countless times, and the Demon Lord had proved to be the ultimate adversary. To one so great, surely deathlessness was only a minor setback he would swiftly overcome.

That was why Alvarto had given such a show of fighting and, naturally, was defeated. He sank into the crimson river that flowed from his comrades.

He was battered and no longer able to fight, but death eluded him still. Alvarto clung to the belief that the man who had carved fear into his heart would yet be able to finish the job. He gazed up at Varvatos with that faith in his eyes.

"..." The Demon Lord looked down in silence as Alvarto lay sprawled upon the ground. When he took a step forward...

“Stop...”

...a girl appeared between the two of them. It was Kalmia. Her beautiful features were twisted in anger as she stood before Varvatos.

“I won’t forgive you if you approach any closer...” She spread her arms to protect Alvarto, who lay behind her.

Peering up at Kalmia, Alvarto muttered flatly, “Stay out of this.” Plainly and without affectation, he pleaded, “Varvatos. I beg you. Kill me. Please. Please kill me. Now.” There was no way for Alvarto to know what expression Kalmia wore at that. The broken man was focused on his own wish, and he saw only the one capable of granting it. “You’re the only one who can kill me. So please. Kill me. Now...”

As he pleaded for mercy, the Demon Lord responded coolly, “No.”

Alvarto was shocked at the devastatingly curt refusal. “...What?”

“Your presence is necessary to rule Gladsheim. From here on, you will join my army and take rulership of Gladsheim—”

“Screw that!” Soul-rending agony tore through Alvarto as he forced himself to sit up.

“Al...”

He made no effort to respond, for he was unable to care about what Kalmia felt as she ran over to him. Alvarto shoved her aside, glaring at Varvatos as he shouted, “You! This was all your fault! This happened because you took her from us! She was everything to me! There’s no value to this world without her! Which is why—” Alvarto crumpled and fell forward again. “Please...kill me... I can’t do this...” He cried like a child, no pride left in him.

Varvatos’s reply...

“Change your sadness to hatred, Alvarto Egzex. That is what you need to do, what you *must* do. Despise the man who took your mistress from you. Throw all of your anger at me. Stand by me as my closest adviser and look for the moment, the opportunity to kill me...and choose to live in this world.”

...made it evident he held no intention of granting his wish. Sadness seemed

to cross the Demon Lord's face. Then he appeared to hesitate, and contradicted his statement. "When my ideals come to fruition. When all of the conflict is done. If you still desire death..."

Then.

"...then, I will kill you."

Once Varvatos had departed, Alvarto wept and thrashed around as though madness had finally claimed him.

"Al..."

When he had exhausted himself and was unable to move, Kalmia picked him up and carried him on her back. And having returned to Gladsheim, he met with the remaining bureaucrats. After some deliberation and a convoluted process, he was chosen as the new ruler. The officials had elected to respect Luminas's last wishes.

On the following day, Luminas's death was revealed to the residents of the city. In the morning, people gathered in the city's great square, and all of them gazed up at the top of the palace. They watched him as he stood upon the platform that stretched from a spire. A man dressed in the crimson outfit that Luminas had once worn. Those assembled waited for the words of their new king with bated breath.

He peered down upon them with Kalmia at his side. Alvarto forced a smile onto his lips, as his mistress once had.

"Ahh, a beautiful sight, is it not? A beautiful sight indeed. Don't you agree, Kalmia?"

"...Yes."

He spoke like her. He behaved like her. Like her. Like her. Like her.

"The scenery I see through a mask is quite peaceful...and thoroughly irritating." The fate of having to live despite being driven by a deep desire for death. There was no way to bear that fate while retaining a normal mindset. Thus, Alvarto had chosen insanity. He donned the guise of madness and played the part of someone else. "Now, let's tell the people what my wishes are. The

birth of a new king. The birth of a new self.”

The madness eased the pain. The madness stopped the tears from flowing.

And so, Alvarto...

“My people! I’m sure that your hearts are filled with great anxiety and fear! But rest easy! There is nothing in this world that is without end! In time, your hearts will heal!”

...wore his facade and made his declaration.

“Until the day my lifeblood is exhausted, when my eyes dry and can no longer see, I...I will enjoy this living hell.”

This marked the end of the memories.

The world immediately lost all of its color and returned to the white, featureless space.

“...Ireena Olhyde. There’s really no time left.”

Ireena nodded, noting the anxiety plain on Kalmia’s features.

“Yes... Their battle has started.”

Ireena had no proof, but she was convinced. Ard and Alvarto’s duel had begun. Were she to continue here idly, it would end in a way that neither she nor Kalmia wanted.

“Once again, I ask you to save Al. I’ll give you anything you desire if you would only accept. So—”

Don’t let him die. The desperate plea and Kalmia’s determination to do whatever needed to be done. Ireena wanted to help, but she still had a lingering question.

“Why me? I’m sure Ard would be able to...”

She had been wondering as much for a while. Why her and not Ard? Why would Kalmia seek her assistance when she was not nearly as capable?

Kalmia answered that question without any hesitation or pause. “You and that man view life and death differently. In the ancient world, everyone sought salvation in the concept of death. That’s true of both Al and that man. They

have experienced similar lives, and that is the issue. He believes that death will bring Al peace.”

After hearing Kalmia’s answer, Ireena...

“But being born in the modern world, you don’t carry that notion. You can say with certainty that death isn’t salvation. It’s because you trust that so powerfully that I believe you can help Al.”

...felt a strong surge of doubt, and a new question began to form in her mind. As she dissected Kalmia’s statement, she couldn’t help but conclude that Ard had been born in the ancient world. What did that mean?

“Admittedly, that is only half of the reason why I entreat you. I also...refuse to ever bow my head for a favor from the man who killed Luminas.”

Kalmia answered the question before Ireena could pose it. She clarified the mystery concerning this string of events and all the secrets surrounding Ard.

Why he was so powerful.

Why he was so gentle.

Why he was so frightening.

Why...he was so alone.

“—I see. Ard’s the reborn Demon Lord.”

Ireena didn’t feel much surprise or shock. At some point, she had begun to suspect it. The first time had been right after he’d resolved the incident with Sylphy at the Academy Festival. Once the daily routine had returned to the academy, Ginny had asked if Ard was the Demon Lord.

He’d denied it, of course, and Ginny seemed to accept that answer, yet... Ireena had felt it. She, who had been by his side for longer than anyone, couldn’t help but sense the lie.

“At the time, I thought it was impossible that Ard was...well, you know...” Still, the more she compared the two, the more it made sense.

Ard was the reincarnated Demon Lord. There had been nothing to prove that hypothesis until now, but...she had felt somewhere in her heart that it was the

truth. And now that she had the evidence, the only thing to do was accept reality.

“...Yes. If Ard was the Demon Lord, that’s what he’d do.”

Ireena had constantly watched Ard accomplish great things. She understood that he was far too dismissive and uninterested in his life. Ard took on any risk if it meant winning. People who continued to fight that way all had some sort of death wish. Undoubtedly, he had become like that because he had sought his own demise in the past. Once, it had been like salvation, which is why Ard would kill Alvarto. He thought it would grant the other man peace. While convinced he was doing the right thing, he was about to commit a terrible crime.

“...This might be the first time that I’ve wanted to reject Ard’s plan.”

Ireena let out a soft huff before she looked Kalmia in the eyes. She made certain of what they both wanted.

“You’re fine with me doing it, right? You want me to help Alvarto. That’s what you’re saying, right?”

“Affirmative. You are the only one who can resolve this situation. Which is why—”

“No. I can’t.” Kalmia stared in mute shock at Ireena’s interjection. The elf peered into her eyes. “As I watched those memories, I kept thinking that you really needed to be more honest about your feelings. If you had, maybe it wouldn’t have come to this.”

It seemed that struck close to home for Kalmia. She offered no response, instead pursing her lips and falling silent.

“I have no intention of granting your wish. Not this fake one.”

There was no Alvarto in Ireena’s mind. He was not the one before her. No, the only person there...was a pitiable girl.

Ireena looked solely at her and proudly puffed out her chest.

“Kalmia. I’ll save you. You have my word.”

The result that this girl wanted. The daily life that she sought to reclaim.

Ireena Olhyde would give it back to her. Ard's wants didn't matter. She would not disappoint the one who had come to her. Kalmia's tears would cease.

"Besides, I've got a whole lot of things I want to say and do." Ireena beamed at Kalmia. Dedication and resolve swelled within her.

"Leave everything to me."



CHAPTER 101

The Ex-Demon Lord Breaks His Promise

“Your mistress should never have been called an Evil God.” A great expanse of silver. A frigid space where snow and souls danced in the air. Staring at the man who was my opponent, I continued. “She did have a tendency to revel in conflict. However, she never did anything to provoke it, and the lands under her rule were a veritable paradise. That’s why I respected Luminas. I’d hoped to join forces with her and create a better world.”

I made it clear that I never hoped to kill her. Even now, I regretted how things had turned out.

The man who faced me, Alvarito Egzex, remained silent as I described what had driven me all those centuries ago. His features weren’t colored with any emotion. It was as though all human feelings had drained from him, leaving an empty doll.

It was clear that no matter what I said, he wouldn’t change. Still, I needed to make a final confirmation of intent to make sure that breaking an oath was my only option.

“I promised you then, didn’t I? That if you still desired death at the end of it all, I would kill you... At the time, I hadn’t been able to tell you, but there’s no point in concealing it any longer.” With that, I began to describe the other promise that I had kept secret all this time. “From the time you joined my ranks to today, your wishes have remained constant. You seek your doom, which is why you repeatedly tried to goad me into action. Despite that, I always ignored your taunting and refrained. That has ever been the case. I’d hoped to achieve a resolution that allowed you to live.”

That was because...

“I swore an oath with your mistress, Luminas wol Croft.”

Despite the revelation, Alvarto remained still, not even raising an eyebrow.

“As she lay dying in my arms, you were the only person in her thoughts. She smiled nostalgically as she spoke of her memories of you... And at the end, she pleaded with me to spare your life—to show mercy for her son.”

It was the last request of an opponent I deeply respected. There was no way I could ignore it.

“Luminas doesn’t want your death. If there’s even the faintest yearning within you to respect your fallen mistress and turn your eyes to the future...then put down your weapons. I’ll ignore everything that you’ve done, and I won’t make an issue of it in the future.”

Alvarto’s answer was a long sigh of exasperation. “...I don’t care anymore. Her final wish means nothing to me.” The words that came from his hollow expression reflected the emptiness of his heart.

He discarded the mask of madness and showed his true self. All this tribulation would only cease if he perished.

Alvarto did nothing to change how things were proceeding.

“Long ago, you told me...to hate you. To use my anger to fuel me and live... If I could, I wouldn’t have suffered. Ultimately, I was unable to despise you fully. All that filled my heart were disappointment and despair. There was no room for any other emotion.” With hollow eyes cast to the ground, he went on, nearly whispering the words. “Why didn’t she choose me? Was that all I was to her? Why couldn’t I have stopped her? Why couldn’t I save her heart?”

Each word was cold and biting, like the frigid wind.

“Those were the only things that I thought about. There was no space for you to come between her and me. If there was malice or evil there...that was solely mine.”

Alvarto must have directed all of his negative feelings inward. He couldn’t bring himself to blame me for destroying their world. No, the responsibility was on Luminas and Alvarto. That was how he interpreted things. In that way... Alvarto was like a mirror of myself.

“Surely, Varvatos, you of all people can understand, yes? Or perhaps I should say that you are the *only* one who can understand.”

“...Yeah, that’s true.”

“You, too, lost a person you loved. You claimed her life yourself. Undoubtedly, you have sunk into the same pit I have.”

“That’s right.”

When Lydia died, I experienced the same self-hatred as Alvarto. Why couldn’t she have chosen me? Why did she prioritize her suicidal decision? Was I not enough? And more than anything...how had I let it happen? That regret still lingered in my heart.

“I understand, Alvarto... I was the same way. After I lost her, I pursued a continual path of self-destruction. It’s why...I always wanted to know what defeat was like.”

Someone, please stop me. Someone, please kill me.

Given that I couldn’t simply end my own life, I had no choice but to rely on another. Yet no such person appeared...

“With no other option, I fled, through reincarnation, from the constant suffering, from the isolation... When I think about it now, that was probably born of a deeply hidden desire to stay alive. Although I had sunk so far down, as low as one could, a part of me wanted to look forward to the future.”

...and then I was born into this era, and I was able to meet an irreplaceable friend. However, Alvarto lacked that support. He had tried to continue, regardless of his suffering. He, who had no choice but to wish for destruction. While we were the same, we were polar opposites. But even then, I, more than anyone else, could sympathize.

That’s why I felt compelled to grant his request.

“Varvatos. I don’t know what you think of me, but if you pity me in the slightest...if you have any sympathy for a man who fought alongside you...then release me from this suffering as you recover your precious companion.”

“...Your death will bring everyone’s salvation?”

“Yes. The moment my life comes to an end, you’ll regain everything you value. I can guarantee it.”

“...And death is the only freedom for you?”

“It is. That’s my only wish and my only hope.”

There was no other choice. No room for doubt. I looked straight at my former comrade and declared without hesitation...

“I accept.”

I would break one promise and fulfill another. To save everyone. To save this pitiable man. I steeled my resolve, and so began our final battle.

“...I’ll vent everything I hold against you.” Even if the results were a foregone conclusion, Alvaro didn’t want to show any weakness or be humiliated. The warrior’s pride within him was screaming to fight with all his might and perish gloriously. As though to prove that point, he made the first move.

In an instant, a giant collection of magic items appeared in the center of the silvery expanse. They totaled six hundred sixty-six. They were the trump card that he had taken from me—the Armor of the Demon Lord.

“Going for the kill with the first move.”

“Don’t die on me.”

We exchanged words, and then...

...they attacked.

The blades sliced through the air, the staves loosed their energy waves, and the shields shimmered. It was no different from our duel at the capital of the Asylas Federation. The sight was just as overwhelming as it had been then, and it was enough to inspire dread in my heart, but...

“No creator would ever unwillingly be destroyed by his creations.”

...the last time, I had no intention of actually responding. Which was why it had been so one-sided. Things were different now.

I chose to destroy the weapons.

As I evaded a blade that swept at me, I grasped and crushed it. Then I fired a

counterattacking spell of the five great elements into a wand that unleashed destruction magic and wiped it out, magic and all. The shields and armor that moved on their own all met their end by my fists.

“You only took control of them. That’s not enough to bring out their true strength.”

As the name implied, the items in the Armor of the Demon Lord were all designed for me and me alone. Without adjusting the spells imbued into the equipment, it was impossible for anyone else to utilize their maximum potential. Even the greatest of the Four Heavenly Kings was no exception. Alvarto had successfully wrenched control of them from me, but that was all.

“A slaving horde made up of nothing but mere curs. No matter how large that rabble, it is ants trying to move a mountain.”

While their collective appearance was overwhelming, the many powerful objects would still scatter with a strong enough blow. Thus, the entire set could not land so much as a flesh wound upon me. All Alvarto achieved was their destruction.

“...Ahh, yes. Of course this isn’t enough to defeat you.” The words contained a deep sense of relief. Alvarto then moved to his second attack. “I am the one born in chaos, who lives with cursed hatred and embraces the void at his end.” He intoned a chant as he controlled the Armor of the Demon Lord. It was the prelude to one of his trump cards. Alvarto was about to unleash the ultimate *Original* spell. One known as the savage godslayer. ***An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth...!***

The only way to catch someone who had spread his wings was to do the same, and I did so without hesitation.

“That past of old is pain. That is the life of a pathetic man.” I destroyed the pieces of equipment that flew at me and began reciting in time with my opponent.

No meaning hath my life. If my life must epitomize waste. Then the least I beg...

That one is alone. Even though there are those who follow him. None rule

together with him.

As silvery snow fell from the sky and souls flittered in the air.

He looked only at me.

I looked only at him.

That my body be a jester that dances for death. Even if that were to bring more pain.

No one understands. Everyone leaves him.

Where ordinary chants were all manually spoken, *Original* ones were completely automatic.

The moment you chose to use them, the words spilled from your lips as though to express all that you were and to throw your existence against your opponent.

I abandon pain and sadness. I discard hatred. And thus, I sink into a sea of madness.

Even his one and only friend tossed him away. He sinks into a sea of madness and isolation.

Our chants melded together, as did our thoughts. We deepened our understanding of one another.

There is no rest in this life. I instead await salvation. Hiding the pain and despair behind a mask.

There will be no relief in such an end. It will be a drowning death of anguish and despair.

Alvarto Egzex. I will not let this drag on any longer.

Ahh, this indeed is—

Surely that will be...

I readied myself as I unleashed my final stanza at the same time as he unleashed his.

The truth of the epitome of hollowness. Black Mirror Bandersnatch...!

The tale of a lonely king. A Private Kingdom!

Activation.

The two spells activated at the same time.

Next to my body, Lydia, restrained in darkness, colored her restraints. She transformed into an onyx black aura and wrapped around my right arm. Meanwhile, Alvarto also underwent a change. Black flames burst from him, as though consuming him. The shadow that engulfed my arm became chains and began to form into a great sword.

“Raah. Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah.”

Creation. Inflation. As though unleashing the energy from his soul, Alvarto let out a cry of pain as black fire spewed from his back. It expanded in the blink of an eye and lashed out toward me as the sword finished forming in my hand. The flames approached as a pair, one mass arcing from the left and the other, the right. They resembled the wings of a fallen angel or an abyssal flood.

“Nrrrrgh.”

Darker and darker still. Blackness filled my entire line of sight. The abyssal ebon swallowed the falling snow, the souls wandering the air, and the pieces of equipment that were in the midst of attacking me. The darkness went on a savage rampage.

“As dangerous as ever...!”

I felt a chill run up my spine. My body tensed as I evaded the wildly undulating inferno. Dodge. Dodge. Dodge. At times I leaped, at others, I flew, all to avoid the deadly attacks. I couldn't allow the blaze to touch me. Even a glancing blow would be lethal. The black flames were an instant kill spell.

It didn't matter if it was organic or non-organic, living or dead. Thus, the souls and equipment consumed by the fire were eradicated, never to be restored. And so, the man who sought the end more than anything, who yearned for it more desperately than anyone in the world had now...transformed into a god of death.

“Fwohhhhh...”

As though answering his deep breath, the rampaging flames began to draw back. It was like watching time flow in reverse. The fire moved along the same path it had when attacking me, returning to Alvaro. The vague cloud of energy slowly began to take on a clear shape, and the simmering sensation of power began to crystallize into a more concentrated form. It was the greatest strength that Alvaro Egzex possessed, and it was his ultimate fighting form.

With a pair of bony wings protruding from his back, he loomed like the personification of doom from a fairy tale. The jet-colored blaze that enveloped his entire body gave off a pressure that was incomparably greater than it had been a few moments earlier. This power, the epitome of excess, also ate at its wielder's body. The black flames slowly seared Alvaro's skin, but his charred flesh always healed. The endless cycle of destruction and regeneration should have been agonizing, but in spite of that, Alvaro didn't so much as flinch, instead simply staring in my direction.

"...Here I come." With that declaration, Alvaro vanished. When I next caught sight of him, he had appeared in front of me. "Ffft." He let out a sharp breath and attacked with blades of fire sprouting from each of his arms.

I somehow managed to avoid them by a hair's breadth, and retreated a bit.

"Still just as ludicrously dangerous," I muttered, glancing at the left side of my body. It was scorched.

My entire left arm, the left side of my chest, my flank, and my left thigh were all blackened. Alvaro, with his *Original* active, was truly a human-shaped supernatural disaster. His mere presence would consume everything around him. That was why, even if they avoided his attacks, almost every creature in existence would be reduced to cinders.

When Alvaro had been a member of my army, he'd used this power to rampage across the battlefield and had destroyed everything in his path, whether friend or foe. That strength seemingly embodied his isolation.

"...It inspires sadness more than it does fear."

I was not so easily consumed, however. That's why I alone was the only person who could rescue him.

A growing burn zone spread out from Alvarto. Yet I maintained my own existence and made it possible to continue fighting.

“Lydia. Change the settings for regeneration state. Remove limits on durability. Cut off any warning signals on overtaxing the soul. Further, disable safety margin layers one through six.”

AFFIRMATIVE. CONDUCTING TYPE II LIMITER RELEASE. RECOMMENDED TIME OF USE: SEVEN MINUTES, TWENTY SECONDS.

Her voice rang from the black sword in my hand...and the next instant, the burnt portions of my body instantly healed.

Although there was a limit on the time I could sustain it, this now meant I could approach Alvarto without danger. Even if my body and soul were reduced to ash, it was fine, because I'd be immediately restored.

Another step closer.

“Given the enemy has shown his full strength, I can't afford to hold back. Lydia, Initiative: Phase III.”

AFFIRMATIVE. SWITCHING TO BRAVE DEMON FULL BODY: PHASE III.

A black aura enveloped me. It swiftly took on an egg-like shape... Within, my existence itself was reconstituted.

Then...

...I burst out of the aura and emerged with a completely different form than I'd possessed moments earlier.

“So, you've finally become your true self, Varvatos.”

Yes. The one that wore the mantle of darkness was not Ard Meteor. Pure white hair that stretched down to my hips. A beauty that everyone praised as worthy of a goddess. The Demon Lord Varvatos now stood before Alvarto.

“I won't let this drag on. I'll end this with all of my strength.” Grasping Lydia in her gigantic sword form, I lunged forward. That alone created a massive gust of wind that slammed into my opponent's body and threw him backward.

“Guh...”

He wasn't even able to react. As Alvarto floated in the void, I closed the distance in an instant.

"Ffft."

A slash. Such a blow would've finished most opponents, but...there was a reason he was the greatest of the Four Heavenly Kings.

"Raah."

Not only did he respond, but he crossed his black flame swords to try blocking my swipe. It didn't matter, though.

Darkness clashed and the air shrieked as the energy tore at existence itself. The enemy's blades annihilated all they touched. Any divine or magic weapon would've been destroyed the moment they touched those flames. However...

...that logic didn't apply to me.

The Brave Demon Full Body: Phase III was the very definition of unfairness. Whatever the reasoning, whatever the mechanics, it would crush the opposition beneath the strength of my will. It was the ultimate ego. The ultimate hubris. And so the strike unleashed by my hand shattered Alvarto's defenses, cutting him down, black flames and all.

"Guh...!" As a diagonal wound split his torso, Alvarto let out a yelp of pain. He toppled into the snow, and I wasted no time mercilessly delivering another attack. "Grr..." When my sword threatened to split his face, Alvarto held out his right arm to defend against it.

Now I understood that the fire around him was armor, in addition to being his armament. Still...

"It's futile."

...I lopped off his arm, then split his face at an angle. I had ruined Alvarto's beautiful visage, but I hadn't reached his brain.

"Raaaaaagh!" He let out a piercing roar, and with his left arm, he tried to pierce my stomach. That, too, was a worthless effort. All of his motions were too slow.

I slowly moved my blade, and after chopping the approaching dark fire sword

to ribbons, along with Alvarto's arm, I then kicked his chest.

"Oomph...!" The massive impact definitely destroyed all of his internal organs. Blood spurted from his mouth as his body was hurled into the distance.

A few seconds later, he hit the ground and stained the fresh snow a dark shade of red.

"Haff...! Haff...!"

Even as his legs threatened to give out from under him, he stood up. However, he was now in critical condition. Blood flooded from the stumps of his severed limbs, and crimson was caked on his face like a mask. His restoration ability had slowed. The cockiness had drained from his features.

Alvarto was no longer an immortal. He was an ordinary creature who would die when cleaved in two.

"It's time to bring down the curtain, Alvarto Egzex." I stepped in to land the final blow. My opponent was in the midst of regenerating. Undoubtedly, he'd be whole again by the time I reached him. Yet I was certain that my blade would cleave him in two before that happened. It was at that very instant...

"I won't let you...!"

...that a third person entered the fray. A girl materialized between Alvarto and me. She looked familiar.

"It's like a replay of that moment from all those years ago."

She stood as though to protect Alvarto and glared up at me. Then she held out her right hand and released a flash of light. I neutralized the attack with a magic shield. It wasn't enough to stop the massive shock wave that came from it, though, and my body was thrown back like a leaf in the wind. I landed upon the snow and looked closely at my enemies.

"...Yes, that's right. I haven't shown you everything yet."

Alvarto's eyes, those that had seemed to accept the end just a moment before, burned with a fiery resolve.

These two had maintained their bond over so many years. The true battle was about to begin. Alvarto, the god of death, had finally acquired his scythe.

“This is the last time. Lend me your strength.”

“...Okay.”

With her consent, Alvarto placed his regenerated hand upon the girl’s back.

“Let’s go together. Kalmia—No...”

He said her true name. The words for the one who would end the world.

“...Dilga Zervatis.”

Transformation.

The moment her name was called, a shimmering ball of seven colors swallowed the girl’s body...and she began to change, becoming a sword. The gorgeous decorations upon its hilt and the rainbow glitter of its blade gave off an appearance of sheer elegance and pride.

As far as I knew, that weapon had only ever recognized two wielders—Luminas and Alvarto. The various legendary exploits of those two were connected to that blade, as though it protected its beloved family.

It was among the greatest pieces of equipment in the world, a peerless weapon.

Dilga Zervatis, one of the three Great Holy Swords.

The moment Alvarto gripped its glittering argent hilt, I was overwhelmed by an enormous pressure that made me shudder.

“One more act. Just stay with me for one more act, Varvatos.” The bloodstained body leaped forward. It was not the movement of a man who was near death.

Ascendant Martial Strength—one of the seven powers of that blade.

With it, Alvarto had now become a warrior without equal in the world.

Which was why—

“Nraah!”

—he was fast. An attack so fast that my eyes were unable to follow it. A veritable storm of slash.

The effect of Ascendant Martial Strength was, as the name implied, ascendance. It forcibly pulled the physical abilities of the wielder several tiers above the opponent's. Thus, I stood no chance in close combat.

"Yah!"

"Tch!" I had no choice but to go on the offensive when faced with the barrage of deadly strikes. With each passing second, another wound appeared upon my skin. The flow of the battle had completely flipped.

"Raaah."

A kick that had been hidden among the slashing blows connected with my side. The impact ran straight through my entire body and made my organs burst. With a pain that was difficult to describe, my body flew away.

There was no winning this way. Ignoring agonizing aches, I created countless magic circles. I cast tens of thousands of elemental spells. However...

"Not enough, Varvatos."

...another feature of Dilga Zervatis was Magic's Assured Destruction. The array of spells that would have wiped a giant mountain off the map instantly evaporated.

No path to victory, even from a distance.

"A union of blade and wielder. It's been a while since I've seen it in such perfection. Nothing else could be so troublesome."

The truly dangerous thing about Dilga Zervatis was its extraordinarily powerful sense of self-awareness. While the other two blades were also sentient, they never showed their own thoughts when they were wielded. Dilga Zervatis would impose its will upon a duel and guard its wielder. Meaning—

"It's pointless to try to catch us unawares."

A moment after the voice spoke out from the blade, the magic circle I had hidden behind Alvaro under the cover of their barrage of attacks released its power. Unfortunately, the *Wind Blade* was immediately changed to a slight breeze.

I felt a strong will from the sword. The will to protect her partner at all costs.

To win, I would need to break her resolve and remove the threat of the union between weapon and wielder. That would require a certain amount of sacrifice on my part, though. One heavy enough to risk destroying my existence.

“...You can’t pretend you have nothing left to try.”

It seemed Alvaro had detected my hesitation. To demonstrate his determination, Alvaro began a relentless attack. He activated Ascendant Marital Strength to overwhelm me at close range. When I gained some distance and tried to use spells to turn the tables, Magic’s Assured Destruction erased whatever I cast.

This was enough of a problem on its own. Yet it was only the merest hint of the true danger the blade posed.

“Sedia! Ulgu. Falmecant. Forbel. Cada Sedia!”

It meant, *“I Pray! For Rebirth, for an Epiphany, for Creation. Those Things I Wish!”* in the ancient tongue.

“Firma. Ober. Maduc... El Cadia. Bel Dinis.”

This part was, *“I Know, The Memories, The Tragedy... Thus I Ask. The Creation Of Illusive Dreams.”*

The pair wove together chants in the ancient tongue. Then...the third power, Gatekeeper of All Creation. It was the greatest cheat ability of them all. It was an absurd ability that created everything the wielder or the sword itself desired. And with that ability, the pair created.

“A re-creation of the full-scale war...!”

Innumerable warriors appeared around me. Clad in red and black clothing, they looked exactly as they had on the day they had fought me to avenge their fallen mistress.

“...I’ll stake it all. Everything I ever had.”

The moment after I felt the meaning behind his words, the army attacked from every direction. Although a reconstruction of something from the past, this situation was far more perilous.

The Gatekeeper of All Creation was essentially a power that could rewrite

reality. Meaning, if the wielder and sword wished it, anything could come true. Thus, all of the warriors who attacked, from the highest ranking to the lowliest line, were strong enough to kill me.

“Blast it!” I felt an extraordinary pressure as the pike phalanx approached. I needed to avoid a direct hit at all costs. It was clear they would easily run me through.

But...even when I managed to escape their grasp, there waited a deadly set of blades.

“Tch...!”

A squad of warriors struck with a combination of swords and magic. I parried the blades, canceled out their spells, and replied with searing heat. I incinerated several hundred of the enemy in front of me, but it was a wasted effort. The army’s fighters regenerated from the ashes. It was a frightening thing to see.

“This is...!”

No matter how many I took down, they were resurrected in an instant. They were invincible—immortal. There was only one option...

...but even if I did...

...as I was hesitating...

“Damn you, Varvatos!”

...a voice and blade filled with rage flew at me from one side. I swiftly blocked the Holy Sword with my own black one. Then Alvarto and I exchanged strikes in the middle of a massive military force.

“Do you intend to make me cry again?! Are you going to disappoint me again?!” Rage. Anxiety. Sadness. Those emotions came pouring from Alvarto’s gaze. “I’m not here to kill you. I’m fighting to die. I won’t let you claim you don’t know how that feels!”

The words were a desperate plea, heavy with mourning. At this moment, Alvarto was the greatest combatant to ever live, and yet he wept. There was no warmth for him to turn to. The urchin shivered alone in the cold.

“Please, I beg you, Varvatos.” The man in front of me, my former comrade,

pleaded for what only I could give him. “Don’t make me wait any longer.”

Salvation. His expression and voice both tugged at my heart.

Oh, I’ve been a fool.

What was there to hesitate about at this point? This battle wasn’t one of half measures. It wasn’t one that permitted compromise. It would either end with me taking back everything or losing it all. In which case...

“Yes, you’re right. I should bet everything, too.”

I will save you. I will give you death.

...I steeled myself. Even if it would destroy me, I had to do it.

“Lydia—release all safety protocols.”

WARNING. RISK OF SOUL DISINTEGRATION.

“I know. But there’s no other choice.”

I moved to step into the realm beyond my ultimate power.

Meaning...

“Lydia! Activate Final Phase!”

...as I shouted that with iron resolution, she responded.

ACKNOWLEDGED. BRAVE DEMON FULL BODY—MOVING TO FINAL PHASE.

Then, the moment that a sign of change appeared upon my body...

“Ah!”

...perhaps driven by his instinct as a warrior, Alvarto leaped backward as though he had been tossed. My absolute power was enough to frighten one who sought death.

It started quietly.

As powdered snow fell around us, a dark aura formed over me. Then it turned to one of pure white. Despite being in the middle of a world of white snow, it was somehow a purer shade. The energy enveloped my body and infused everything with its light. The black sword in my grasp. The dark mantle I wore. It turned everything on my body into a bright pale color.

When the transformation was complete...

“...End.”

...it wasn't a chant. It was only a statement.

And yet. Such a simple word had an effect on the world now that I was in Brave Demon Full Body: Final Phase. The scene in front of me proved it.

Quietly, the warriors began to collapse one by one into the snow. Not a single one of them budged.

“This is beyond ridiculous...!” a girl's voice cried from the Holy Sword.

Alvarto opened his mouth in response. “That's exactly what it needs to be.” His wish was coming true. He gazed at me with eyes convinced of that fact.

I then stepped forward and ended everything in that instant.

Alvarto wasn't able to do anything, and neither was his Holy Sword.

As a great horde of warriors lay dead in the snow, I remained standing, while Alvarto was now on his knees. This had ever been the outcome.

It was something that was beyond expression, far ahead of simply being described as unfair. This was what came from Brave Demon Fully Body: Final Form. About the only being who could fight this power was that devil.



Even the greatest warrior of the Demon Lord's army, armed with the most powerful blade in creation, could not put up the slightest resistance.

However, all that might took a toll on the body of one who was a mere commoner.

"Guh..."

Even the merest exercising of that strength ravaged me. My vessel of flesh was falling to pieces. Even my soul was on the verge of destruction. Blood began to flow from my ears, nose, mouth, and the corners of my eyes. It was difficult just to keep myself together.

Still, I hadn't yet slain Alvarito, and for a good reason.

"...Have you any final words?"

This was the duty of the one who was going to end the battle.

In response, although he was on his knees...

"I know it was to make you want to kill me, but...I truly am sorry for all that I've done."

...he gave words of apology. Those were the words he needed to leave at the very end.

"...There is nothing to regret. It was all due to my own failings, my weakness."

And then, I prepared to finally do it.

"Farewell, my friend."

I held up my pure white blade, ready to bring it down and give this deathless monster what had evaded him for so long.

And it was at that moment...

"Hooooooooold iiiiiiiiiiit!"

...that a voice came from Alvarito's body, but it wasn't his.

That's... No, it can't be, I thought.

"Urgh."

Alvarto let out a pained grunt before his chest shimmered with light. And from that radiance, *she* leaped out into the world.

“I’m not going to accept this! Not this sort of ending!”

There was no mistaking her.

It was my best friend. It was Ireena.

CHAPTER 102

Ireena Litz de Olhyde Takes a Stand upon the Dawn-Lit Battlefield

Ard Meteor and Alvarto Egzex.

Both were completely taken by surprise at this latest development. Alvarto stared with a dumbfounded expression...at Ireena, the young woman who had leaped out of his own chest.

Ard, too, was making a similar face. He froze with his blazing white sword held aloft, staring slack-jawed and stock-still.

Ireena used her momentum from her arrival to embrace her best friend as he stood there, frozen in shock. Was it a hug to commemorate their reunion...? Evidently not. She had done it to separate Ard and Alvarto.

“Ah?”

Ard was garbed in a pure white outfit that, at first glance, resembled a dress. His body was slender and he seemed almost a stranger in Ireena’s arms as the two of them flew off to a distance.

Eventually, Ireena shoved Ard into a snowbank. Only then did she release him and move a few steps back to take in the sight.

“M-Miss Ireena...?” Ard appeared confused. Perhaps it had all happened too quickly.

At the same time, Ireena was puzzling over how her childhood friend looked.

Oh, so it really is true. Ard really is the reincarnation of the Demon Lord. It wasn’t a lie.

He was very different from the person she had known all her life. Ireena didn’t know why. What was important was...that he was identical to the Demon Lord Varvatos she had seen when she had been transported to the ancient

world.

She had been informed of the truth ahead of time, and her mind had accepted it. However, her heart hadn't digested the emotions stirred up from getting visual confirmation.

Still, she had no intention of placing much priority on those feelings. Ard was Ard. Ireena's mind was made up about that. Thus, she took a breath...

"Sorry, Ard. I'm sure you were worried sick."

...and smiled as she usually did. Ireena addressed him like on any other day. There was no nervousness or fear in either her expression or voice. If anything, Ireena felt a certain wistful sadness as she gazed upon the Demon Lord crouched on one knee.

"I'd love to spend time chatting, but...I need to take care of some things first."

With that, Ireena looked away. Alvarto Egzex. His body, the one that had been on the verge of death a moment before, had completely regenerated. He stood there in silence, staring at her.

His beautiful visage was locked in intense confusion.

"Why...? How...? That's...?"

Splitting off from a fused soul. How had she managed it? Undoubtedly, that was the source of bewilderment eating at Alvarto's mind.

Ireena accepted his gaze confidently and answered his question. "I wanted to leave. When I desired it strongly enough...I could." It almost sounded like she was mocking him.

Ard tilted his head, puzzled at the explanation. Yet Alvarto suddenly seemed to have all the necessary information to make sense of her statement. He must have hit upon some reasoning that made sense to him.

"...Oh, that's right. She has *his* blood running through her veins. It goes to explain why she also possesses his powers... I had no idea it had grown this strong..."

Alvarto slowly regained his composure and took several deep breaths.

“...This is indeed unexpected. But it’s not a true complication. We have a new spectator. That’s all it is. Nothing to worry about.”

To him, Ireena was like a pebble lying on the side of the road. He had kidnapped her as a hostage to force Ard to kill him, and she had already fulfilled that purpose. Her breaking free now changed nothing.

Ireena Olhyde was, in the end, a fragile young woman born in the modern era. All Alvarto had to do was ignore her.

It was easy for Ireena to understand what he was thinking. “A spectator? Yes, I suppose. That’s what I had been until now. I was okay with that, too. Hide in Ard’s shadow, watch his accomplishments, and laugh with everyone at the end. I thought I was fine with playing that role. But...this time is different,” she declared defiantly to both Alvarto and Ard. She made no apologies and displayed no fear in expressing her own intent.

“Ard isn’t the one who’ll put an end to this dumb fighting. I, Ireena Olhyde, will guide things to the right conclusion. I’m not letting anyone stand in my way. And I mean *anyone*.”

The two duelists looked at Ireena with expressions of such dumbfounded shock that an observer would swear they heard crickets chirping in the background.

Alvarto’s face all but screamed, “*What the hell is she going on about?*” Even Ard, who was Ireena’s closest friend...no, *because* he was her closest friend, felt the same. To them, Ireena was the damsel in the story, not one of the protagonists. That was the role she fit. She couldn’t become the knight in shining armor.

Alvarto’s and Ard’s responses made their opinions plain.

“...What can a mere girl like you even do?”

“...Miss Ireena, this is a deadly field. Please, step back.”

Both essentially told her to know her place and stay out of this. Ireena’s reply was curt and to the point.

“Screw that.”

Then she acted upon her intent, stretching her hand out to the cloudy sky.

“Come to me! Vald-Galgulus!” Lightning surged out from Ireena’s palm. The air quivered, and the void echoed with the noise.

Vald-Galgulus, one of the Three Holy Swords.

“Go get ’em, Ireena.”

When she gripped the hilt, she felt the sword speak to her.

Yeah, I will.

There was not a trace of doubt in her mind. Ireena calmly opened her mouth and began chanting.

“Arstella. Glisten, O Soul! Fotoblis. Become My Light... Tenneblicke. And Dispel The Darkness!”

Her bold, dignified voice shook the very air itself, and in the next instant, Ireena’s body was enveloped in argent light. It then formed into the shape of armor...and materialized into a majestic silver plate.

“If you can beat me, you can do as you like. But if I win...I’m making you discard that stupid death wish.”

Alvarto furrowed his brow and responded with a faint note of irritation in his voice. “You’re forgetting your place, Ireena Olhyde. Enough is enough. A Holy Sword isn’t sufficient—”

“—for you to manage anything.” No doubt that’s what he’d wanted to say.

There was no reason for Ireena to listen to him, however. As her opponent continued to speak, she lunged forward with a slashing strike.

Alvarto was unable to react.

A single diagonal cut. A wound opened from his left shoulder to his right flank.

“Ah?”

Alvarto wasn’t the only one who let out a yelp of surprise. Ard, too, was staring in open-mouthed astonishment.

Ireena proudly proclaimed, “Don’t underestimate me.”

Alvarto blinked at the sheer intensity behind her statement and, after several moments, leaped backward. He was getting out of her range. That was, in essence, an acknowledgment that the young woman posed a threat.

“M-Miss Ireena...!”

Ard must have intuitively realized as well that she was no longer a frail girl. But even then, it seemed his sense of responsibility as her guardian drove him to try to stop her. However, his fatigue from the battle had reached a far greater level than even he realized. Before Ard could take his second step, both his legs gave out from under him, and he crumpled to the ground.

“Ah...!”

He scrunched his face in exertion as he tried to brush aside his limitations. It was no use, though... He returned to his usual form.

“Tch...! Not yet, not now...!” Ard sounded ashamed of his weakness.

Ireena kept her eyes on the opponent in front of her, even as she addressed Ard. “Hey, Ard. Up until today, I’ve always felt that everything you did was right. I really believed there was no room to doubt anything of it. But...this time, I’m going to have to say it.” From that brief disclaimer, she went on. “Ard, you’re walking down the wrong path. I need to set you right.”

This was her role, her responsibility, and no matter what anyone said, it was what she needed to do. Ireena cast Ard a smile from over her shoulder.

“Leave the rest to me.” A single sentence. Ireena had concentrated the entirety of her unshakable will into that phrase. Now that she’d delivered it, she turned her attention back to Alvarto. “All right. Shall we dance?”

“...Do you really think you can win?”

Both combatants gripped the hilts of their respective Holy Swords.

“Stop babbling and come fight already, little crybaby.”

“Don’t let this go to your head, you modern-born weakling...!”

They exchanged barbs, then...

...clashed.

“No mercy for anyone who dares get in my way!”

“You better prepare for a *proper* spanking, Alvaro Egzex!”

The true final battle began with a vicious exchange.



When was the last time I felt this much confusion? This much panic? The shock had simply been too much. My mind was as blank as the untrodden snow around me.

“Ard, you’re walking down the wrong path.”

Words that rejected the choice I’d made. She had never, ever uttered such a thing until now. The reality that she had done so ravaged my heart and froze my mind. Before I could even respond, the fight had commenced.

“No mercy for anyone who dares get in my way!”

“You better prepare for a *proper* spanking, Alvaro Egzex!”

As they made their hostile intentions clear, the pair stepped in toward each other with amazing speed.

The split second when they entered striking range, both lashed out with their weapons.

The Holy Sword Vald-Galgulus.

The Holy Sword Dilga Zervatis.

Two of the three Holy Swords met in midair, producing a shower of sparks and a gale-force blast of wind.

Ireena showed incredible skill with her sword against the greatest of the Four Heavenly Kings, and as I bore witness...

...a strong sense of danger carried away the bewilderment I felt and brought a new sense of dread into my heart.

“St-stop...!”

I needed to end this or Ireena would die. If she were simply facing a first-rate

opponent, that wasn't an issue. But not against Alvarito. There was no way that Ireena, who was born in the modern era, could stand a chance against one of the mightiest warriors of ancient times.

"Guh...!"

Stop them. Stop them. Stop them.

It repeated in my mind, yet my body refused to budge. The price for activating the Brave Demon Full Body: Final Phase had been far too high. It was hard for me to move so much as a finger. I was left standing on the sidelines, and the situation continued to develop at breakneck speed without me.

"You're such a brat!"

"Blasted girl! I've had enough of your attitude!"

The two engaged in a dizzying exchange of strokes. Blades rang like a cacophony of bells, and sparks flew through the air. All the while, the impact from the clashes sent snow flying.

They remained locked in a stalemate.

It seemed that this vexed Alvarito, and a faint touch of color began to tint his pallid features.

"That's..."

With each swing, he grew wilder and more enraged. Although it was impressive to look at, it left him far too exposed.

And that's why...

"Raaagh!"

...Ireena evaded the punch handily and caught him as he was most exposed after the frenzied swing. She delivered her own fist right into his face. The iron-hard blow crumpled his beautiful features...and cast him far into the distance.

"Guh...! You damned nuisance!"

Blood poured from Alvarito's nostrils as he roared with rage... It was out of character for him—very much so. He brandished his weapon ferociously, looking like a grumpy child in a playground spat.

“This...is odd...”

Alvarto’s feelings were completely leading him. Perhaps it was helping me reflect upon myself, because the panic burning in my chest cooled, allowing me to see things as they were.

“Why...?! Why, why, why, why...?! Why am I...?!”

The battle had become one-sided since that punch. As Alvarto wildly hacked at Ireena, she glided around his attacks and...

“Raaah!”

...socked him in the face.

Alvarto took the blow that was enough to deform his skull and flew through the air. He landed and, while he wobbled in place, glared at Ireena.

“You daaaaamn biiiiitch!” Alvarto let out another cry of anger and charged right back toward Ireena, like a lemming. His beautiful visage was painted red, but it wasn’t just because of his nosebleed. And as he stepped in, he exposed another hole in his defense and was clobbered for it.

This was impossible. There was something clearly wrong here.

A calm appraisal of the situation made it clear this shouldn’t have been achievable.

After all, Alvarto’s Holy Sword, Dilga Zervatis, granted its wielder ultimate skill in melee. Ascendant Martial Strength, one of its seven abilities, had to still be active. So why was he being bested by Ireena?

I recalled there was a time when I’d wondered the same thing in the past. In my last life, before Alvarto had put on the mask of madness. If I remembered correctly, that was when he and I had just started our fourth duel.

Lydia had suddenly burst in on the battle...and punched Alvarto, utterly clobbering the man.

I’d faced him three times prior and had never beaten him. The union of blade and wielder was a godly level of skill that even I had difficulty dealing with. That’s why we’d always ended things in stalemates where one of us withdrew.

How had Lydia won so easily? When I asked her, this was her answer: “It’s a difference in intensity. That milk-breathed brat has nothing on me in terms of intensity.”

Explain it in a way that makes sense, you idiot. That had been my reaction at the time, but...later, I understood.

Lydia was the daughter of Mephisto and had inherited his powers. Meaning... she, too, possessed the extraordinary and completely absurd cheat ability of granting any desire through force of will. Undoubtedly, she had unconsciously been making use of it.

It seemed that something about Alvarto angered Lydia, convincing her that he was an opponent she couldn’t afford to lose to. The power of the Evil God had reacted to that intense emotion and completely neutralized her opponent’s abilities. Hence...

“Nrrrrgh. Raaaaaaaah!”

...this situation, with Ireena dominating Alvarto.

The only explanation I could think of...

“Does she have the same power as Lydia...?!”

...well, it was true that Ireena’s family was descended from an Evil God, but surely that couldn’t be it... No, given what I was seeing, I needed to accept that was the reality. Her form. Ireena in this form.

“Go take another flight, little boy!”

She looked identical to Lydia in her prime. From the moment I’d met her, I’d glimpsed a faint glimmer of Lydia in her, but now she was a full-blown reflection. Maybe that was why...

“Ard, you’re walking down the wrong path.”

...I took those words of criticism as a sign of friendship.

“To keep me going the right way...”

Once, I’d longed to hear those words from another.

After losing Lydia, I’d continued along the incorrect road. And I did so until the

very end. Through it all, I'd yearned for someone who could stop me. Someone who could put me back on the right path. Yes...like Lydia had once done. I desired a person who would stand next to me and stop me from making an error, even if it meant beating me over the head.

In the end, I never found that person in the ancient world, but...several thousand years later, she had appeared.

"...Thinking back on it, I don't think I ever made the right decision when it truly counted. Meaning, in this case, the decision I've made was, as you say, Ireena, the wrong one."

I had no idea what the proper choice was. I couldn't begin to imagine the decision she had found.

But that was exactly why...

...Ireena was truly my dearest friend, the one who could stand next to me, shoulder to shoulder.

The protectiveness and anxiety I had felt earlier had vanished. I elected to observe the events unfolding until the very end.

"...I'm counting on you, Ireena."



How had this happened?

As he heard his own skull groan at the impact, Alvarto felt irritation well up within him. He took another blow to the face and went soaring.

This was the forty-seventh time. Since this battle had started, Alvarto had been on the losing side.

"Damn...it...all...!"

He landed upon the snow-covered ground and glared through the falling snowflakes at the girl beyond. Ireena Olhyde. Everything about her appearance—the silver armor, the Holy Sword in her hand, her demeanor—all of it reminded him of *that woman*.

"Lydia Viigensgeight...!"

In Alvarto's long, long life, she was the only opponent he had never defeated.

Lydia seemed to loom alongside the girl in front of him.

"Curse you...! Curse you, curse you, curse you...!"

He was vexed. It annoyed him to no end.

Those eyes. He hated those eyes more than anything. She wasn't looking down at him, hating him, or offering him compassion. No, she simply gazed straight into him, understood him, and continued to watch. It made his frigid heart burn.

"Don't look at me that way, dammit!"

He was acting completely unlike himself. Although he realized that fact, he wasn't able to stop. Alvarto stepped forward. His motions were no longer those of a warrior. No, they were of a child who was bawling and swinging his arms in wide circles. Ireena calmly regarded his actions, and...

"And another one!"

...she waited for the perfect moment. Then she lashed out with an intense burst of anger through her fist. And so Alvarto took the forty-eighth hit to his face and arced through the air.

As his body felt weightless in mid-flight, his mind went back to the same question. Why was this happening? And how? Try as he did, no answer came.

Rinse and repeat. He landed, and he charged forward again. Alvarto let his anger drive him to attack. He attempted to engage in close combat...and another blow from Ireena sent him soaring.

"Why...?! This shouldn't be possible...!"

He wasn't holding back in the slightest. He was putting everything he had into his attacks.

The one-hit one-kill black flames from his *Original*. The absolute power from the ultimate Holy Sword. He utilized them as best as he could to kill Ireena, yet she neutralized every effort and decked him each time.

It was all due to her bloodline. The absolutely overpowering and absurdly

supernatural ability that had started with Mephisto Yuu Phegor and had been passed down through the generations. It was truly the power of a god.

However absolute a presence Alvarto was, he was still a deity's creation—he would never surpass one. And repeatedly being reminded of that made him furious. With each passing second, his heart filled with white-hot rage. In stark contrast...

“Phew. I feel a bit better now after venting like that.”

...Ireena let out a satisfied breath, unclenching her fist.

While Alvarto grew more heated, Ireena became calmer. Yet at the same time, the intimidating aura that emanated from her body climbed in intensity, seemingly unconstrained by any limits.

The situation verged on the incomprehensible. One of the most powerful beings of the ancient world was being intimidated and overwhelmed by a frail young woman from the modern era.

Ireena paid no heed to that fact as she addressed Alvarto. “A damned mewling, spoiled little brat. It’s been thousands of years since Lady Lydia said as much, but you haven’t changed at all. That’s why you’re getting beaten up.”

An expression of complete exasperation and a long sigh. Alvarto found her attitude to be superbly irritating. Fortunately, he had managed to keep from completely losing himself to the fury. Some shred of his dignity remained. But the very next moment, that final bastion of calm...

“If you were sulking a little bit, I’d feel like helping you. But you’ve blown everything completely out of proportion, which just pisses me off. Spending thousands of years brooding, living all those centuries nursing your wounds. Then not only do you cause all sorts of havoc for everyone else, but you’re also oblivious to the feelings of the person closest to you.”

...was shattered by Ireena.

“Just because your mom died doesn’t give you the right to quit living.”

Snap.

Alvarto heard something break. It was the sound of collapse. The final line,

the last thread that was preserving his composure, had been broken.

“...Kill...you...” There was nothing left in Alvarto’s mind to preserve his decorum as a person. All sense had abandoned him, and what remained was a beast. “I’IIII kiiiiIIII yooooou!”

Searing heat burned at his heart and body. The hotness flooded out of his body like a cloud of steam and melted the snow around him.

“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” He furiously roared as he charged. All of Alvarto’s movements were purely instinctive. There was no rational thought behind them. He thrashed as though he was once again a scared, savage child. “ARRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!” He let out a high-pitched shriek as he wildly swung his blade with no skill or refinement. It was pure violence, stripped of all intelligence.

While his berserker rage made him more intimidating...his actual attacks were undisciplined to the point of worthlessness, and he didn’t bother incorporating his abilities into his strikes.

From Ireena’s perspective, this was a tantrum, and she did not fear it. “You truly are pathetic,” she said with a cool expression, burying her fist into Alvarto’s stomach.

“Guh...!” It stopped him in his tracks, but only temporarily. The frenzy swiftly returned. “You know nothing...! HOW DARE YOU SAY THAT?!”

Just because his mother died. He couldn’t forgive such a remark. To Alvarto, Lumina was everything. She was the one irreplaceable entity in his life. There was no way that Ireena could comprehend the pain of his loss.

In reply, Ireena said with serenity, “Know nothing? If anything, I know everything. Your rage, your sadness...all of it. I said that with total comprehension.” She imbued her quiet anger into her hands, then hurled both words and her fist. “As Lady Lydia said, you’re a damned mewling, spoiled little brat, Alvarto!”

She punched him in the face. This time, however, he remained standing. Alvarto wasn’t thrown into the air, and with his feet still planted on the ground, he swung his sword. Not one of his slashes connected, though.

“Your mom was everything to you. You’re not unique in that way. There’s no shortage of people like that in the world. I was the same way when I was a child. Mom was the only person who seemed to make life worthwhile.”

Her family was true royalty, a lineage descended from an Evil God. There was no way that children born to such a fate would grow up in an ordinary environment. It was difficult to imagine, much less understand, how it felt to conceal that lineage from all others and live as petty nobles. Just how much isolation was involved in that sort of life?

“Everyone felt like an enemy. No matter how friendly they were, they’d turn on me immediately when they found out who I was. Because I was so certain of that, the only people I could be myself with were my family members—my mom.”

Ireena’s father, Weiss, had been swamped with his responsibilities as a noble and as true royalty, leaving him with no time to spend with Ireena. But because her mother was with her, Ireena was never lonely.

At the time, Ireena’s social circle consisted solely of her mother, and the only place that Ireena felt at home, like she belonged, was at the woman’s side.

“It’ll be all right so long as this person is here. I don’t need anyone but her. I felt that way about my mom. But...at some point, parents will disappear from their children’s lives. My mom was no exception.”

Ireena’s mother sometimes accompanied her father when he left the house. That was what had happened on that fateful day. Ireena had waited alone in the massive manor for her mother’s return. However...

...only her father, Weiss, arrived home. Her mother never showed up after that day. Instead, Ireena’s father, who had never been able to be at her side, kept her company, as though to fill in for her missing mother.

Ireena had repeatedly asked her father, “*What happened to Mom? When is she coming home?*”

He never answered her.

“...Even though I was little, I understood. Mom wouldn’t return.” The despair upon that revelation was beyond expressing. “I wanted to disappear. Truly, just

vanish.” The moment she said those words, Ireena’s and Alvarto’s blades clashed, and the two locked swords and gazes as they struggled. “There was no way I could survive in a world without Mom. I saw no meaning in the world. Which was why...I attempted to kill myself. I tried to stab myself in the neck with a knife. But, right before I could do so, someone stopped me... It was the first time I’d ever seen my dad look that way.”

When her father had kept her from taking her own life...

...Ireena had gone into a hysterical, weeping frenzy. Just like Alvarto was doing now.

“When I kept screaming that I wanted to die, my dad embraced me. He said I was all he had left... Although a part of me didn’t care, I also wondered if it was right to leave him alone.”

Undoubtedly, her father was a mirror of her own heart at the time. Ireena’s beloved mother was, to him, his beloved wife. She was gone, but he needed to keep living. He likely wished to vanish like his daughter, but he’d chosen to persist for his child. The sight of her father clinging to that last hope had been so pitiable that...

“Which is why I gave up on dying. Because if I died, my dad would be devastated by my death. I felt at that moment that I needed to get over my sadness so that I could live for his sake.” Ireena kept her blade locked against Alvarto’s and gazed unflinchingly into his eyes. “You have someone, too. A person who would be left behind. One who would mourn and miss you when you’re gone.”

At those words, Alvarto just barely managed to squeeze out his reply. “There’s no one...! There’s no one in this world like that...!” He’d said as much without hesitation, which prompted a deep, heartfelt sigh from Ireena.

“That’s the thing that I really hate about you.” Although it was Ireena who responded, she did not do so with her own words. They had come from the girl who couldn’t speak them. “Why don’t you even think about Kalmia?”

Her sadness. Her agony.

Ireena, in Kalmia’s stead, laid it all upon Alvarto. “You’re holding her in your

hand right now. What is she to you? Just a tool? A useful bit of power? Perhaps a worthless piece of equipment? Answer me, Alvarito Egzex. What do you think when you hear the name Kalmia?"

The pressure behind the blade. The increasing presence bearing down upon him. It possessed such passion that it brought Alvarito back to his senses, freeing him from anger. Hesitating, he took a nervous step back.

"What do you think when you hear her name?"

Before Alvarito could grasp what was occurring, his body trembled.

He wasn't sure why. Was his opponent's aura that intimidating? Or maybe it was something else? Regardless, he shivered, his forehead slick with sweat. All he could manage was to stare at Ireena in silence.

Perhaps she lost patience with his lack of a response, for she burst out, "Why?! Why can't you answer that question?! What is wrong with you?!"

The force Ireena placed behind her blade reached an extraordinary level, and by the time Alvarito realized what was happening, he had been shoved off-balance and took the seventieth punch.

He was thrown into the air and, after a moment, landed forcefully upon the snow. Immediately, Ireena tossed aside the Holy Sword in her hand and quickly stalked forward, grabbing Alvarito by the collar.

"Think back to your days with Kalmia! The expressions she showed you! Don't you care about those memories?"

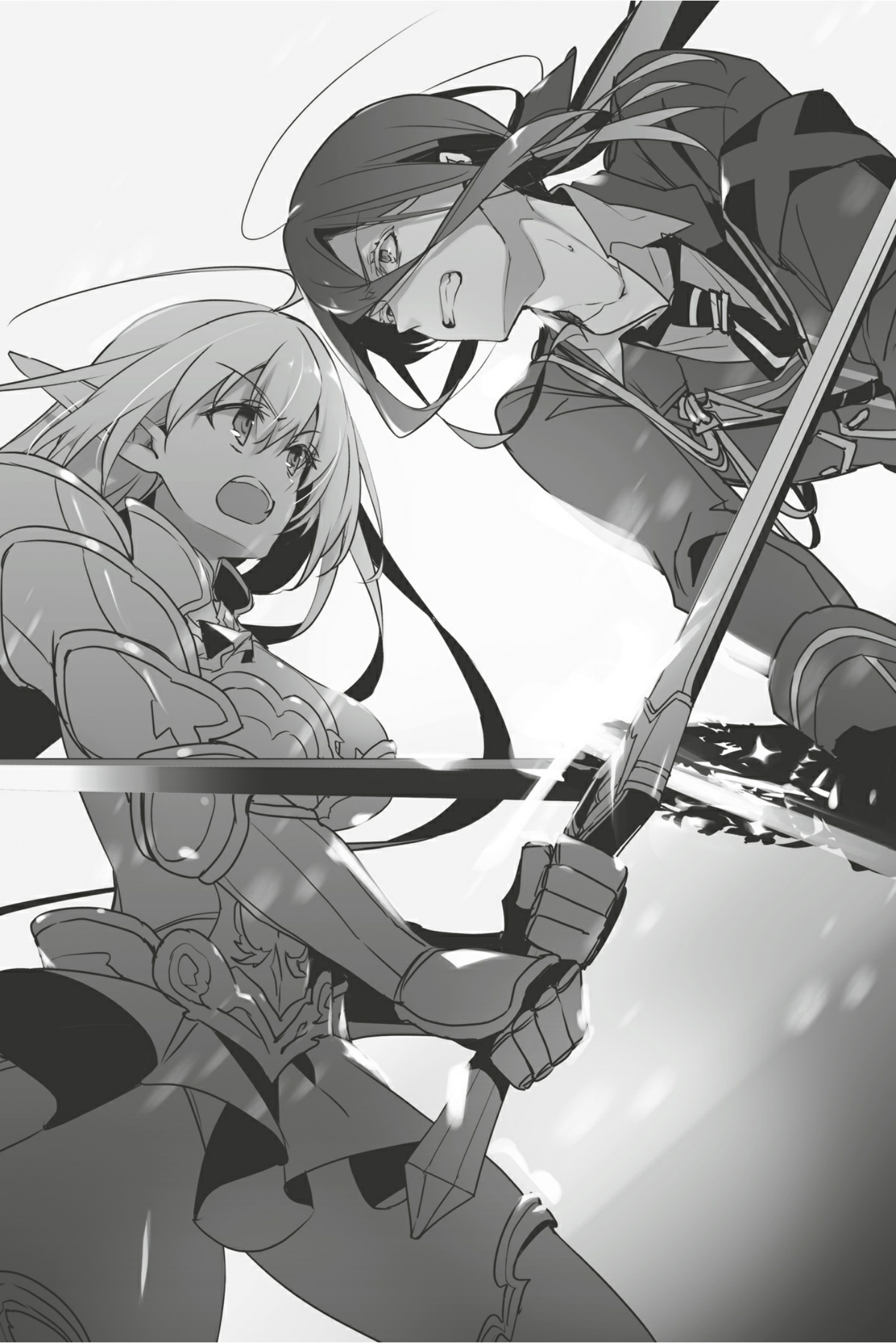
Overwhelmed by Ireena's sheer anger, Alvarito meekly acquiesced to her demand, recalling the past.

Kalmia. Kalmia. Kalmia.

He could hardly call his initial feelings for her positive. She was an irritating, annoying girl. That was his first impression, and it had only grown worse over time... Yet he'd never tired of her or wished that she'd leave.

"Who was the one who was always at your side?! Who have you spoken to the most?! Who has fought by your side the longest?! Who shared feelings with you more than any other?! Say it! Say who it is!"

It was Kalmia. She was every answer. Although she complained, Kalmia always lent Alvaro her strength. Despite her acerbic comments, she had always stayed at his side. Yes, it was her. She had never, ever abandoned him.



“If you were truly alone, Ard’s choice wouldn’t be a mistake. I don’t think it’s wrong for someone who would genuinely find salvation in death to perish, but...” Ireena grabbed Alvarto by the collar again, her grip on his shirt tightening as she spoke. “...you have Kalmia. You’re not alone. Think! What will happen to Kalmia if you disappear?! Do you really not care about how much she’d mourn and suffer? Do you want death’s freedom so badly that you’d subject Kalmia to what you’ve endured for ages?”

Alvarto’s teeth began to clatter.

“I...”

Once the memories had been called to mind, there was no way to stop them. His life with Kalmia. The memories they shared. It felt natural for her to be at his side. She had always, always been on hand for him, been at his side.

In the beginning, Alvarto had found her repugnant, and even hated her. However, by the time he realized it, she had become like a part of his own body and mind. Yes, Kalmia was the one and only person left to him...

“You idiot, it’s taken you long enough to notice.” Ireena sighed as though speaking to a foolish kid, then she let go of Alvarto’s collar. “You’re not the only one who’s lost someone dear, and neither am I. It’s something everyone’s got to deal with. I’m convinced it’s a trial that we all have to experience to grow. And it’s long past time you grew up, Alvarto. If not for yourself, then for the sake of your dearest friend who, like you, lost someone she loved and was left behind.”

Ireena’s words struck Alvarto’s heart harder than any of her blows. Curiously, something warm bloomed in his empty heart. At that moment...the Holy Sword, Dilga Zervatis, in his hand glowed and began to change its shape, returning to that of a girl.

Kalmia looked down at Alvarto. “I wasn’t able to stop Luminas. After you lost consciousness, she ordered me to keep living at your side.” Kalmia, who ordinarily maintained a level of stoicism, now allowed her sorrow to fill her beautiful features. “While I don’t consider myself a tool, it doesn’t change my fate. I’m still a piece of equipment at heart. The wishes of one that I’ve truly accepted as my wielder weigh me down like a curse. Which is why...I couldn’t

die with you.”

Kalmia’s face twisted with pain. Her fingers trembled and her lips quivered as she vented everything she had kept hidden for so long.

“No matter what, I’m unable to die. But you’re different. You can prioritize your own aspirations and seek peace...and I wanted to stop you. I couldn’t bring myself to say it. You were just so sad and pitiful. Which is why I helped you to achieve your goal, but...” Kalmia choked on her words.

She had definitely struggled over the last several millennia as she was caught between her friend’s last chance and her own desires.

It was precisely because Alvarto was dear to her that she wanted him to find solace. However, she still prayed that he would live. Who could say how much torture Kalmia suffered over the years because of that contradiction?

Alvarto had remained oblivious to those feelings—unable to comprehend them.

“...Kalmia.” He called to her as he gazed upward. There was regret in his eyes, and sorrow, too.

Perhaps seeing these emotions, Kalmia scrunched up her lovely face as she held back tears. “You are...to me...the last remaining...precious thing... So... please...please...don’t leave me alone.” A tear ran down Kalmia’s pale cheek. Alvarto felt a sharp pang of pain in his heart when he saw it.

What have I been doing? Thinking only about myself. I wasn’t able to see what she felt... I didn’t even try to. Yes, it’s true...I really am a damned, mewling spoiled little brat.

What Lydia had once told him. What Kalmia had once told him.

Alvarto couldn’t understand at the time, but now he did. No matter how powerful, Alvarto was still a needy child. That’s why Lydia hadn’t accepted him as a warrior, while Kalmia had hoped he would grow from a child to an adult. Maybe *she* had wished he would become a man who would change her. One who would free her from her infatuation with death.

If only I had realized this. Had I faced her as a man... No. It’s pointless to linger

on that now.

Changing the past was beyond Alvaro. He couldn't recover what had been lost. That was why he needed to act for the loved one before him.

"I truly, truly am sorry for everything I've done to this point." Alvaro reached out and wiped the tear from his partner's face. Then, he turned. "...Ireena Olhyde." No anger remained on his face.

"Living with the pain of loss is difficult, but...you're not alone. If you support each other, you'll be able to overcome it. And, if you can't...then come to me. Then..." Ireena smiled gently, looking as radiant as a goddess. "...I'll save you... and find a path to live by. I swear it."

Alvaro gazed down at the ground and grunted. As Ireena had said, it wouldn't be easy. He would have to throw away his thirst for death and face off against despair. There could be no straying from the path, even if he regretted his own birth.

It was a choice that was so full of suffering and obstacles that the mere notion was depressing. In comparison, perhaps it'd be better, easier, to die. He wasn't able to let go of that desire completely.

However, when he looked up, the blizzard had stopped, the clouds had parted, and sunlight streamed through.

"Ireena Olhyde." Alvaro looked at her and smiled for the first time in millennia. His next words marked the end of this battle and were a testament to his newfound determination.

"You win."

CHAPTER 103

The Ex-Demon Lord and the R3t%\$urN 0F N0rM4LCy

It was all over.

The tangled web of fate that had lasted for thousands of years was settled at last, though not by my doing. The one who had brought this trouble to the best possible conclusion was my dear friend, Ireena.

Making Alvarto live rather than killing him. We owed this happy ending to her bright personality and strength of character—two things I lacked. The recent trouble had made that plain, and I came away from it with a renewed and deepened respect for her.

Now...

...with the final battle over, we gathered and left the underworld together.

Lizer, Sylphy, Olivia, and Ginny, who had been separated from us during the journey, were alive and completely unharmed. Alvarto had only been seeking his own death, and never sought revenge. Thus, he'd worked to minimize the possibility of anyone perishing.

Immediately after we returned to the material world, we activated the Strange Cube and returned the world to normal...

...and reclaimed our peaceful everyday lives.

The first priority was to enjoy what remained of our summer vacation. This entire incident had occurred right in the middle of it. We'd lost half of our break getting things back to normal. To reclaim our lost time, we used the Strange Cube to rewind stuff while making it so that the meddlesome events had never happened.

Then, Ireena and I returned to our homeland. And after enjoying a wonderful summer vacation, we returned to the academy to resume our studies.

At the beginning of the new semester, we took part in the opening ceremony, then went to our dorm rooms. It appeared that they had been maintained in our absence, allowing us to resume our life at the academy with little effort.

I spent the day in my dorm room for the first time since before the break.

On the following day, I awoke, along with my roommates Irenea, Ginny, and Sylphy, and headed for the cafeteria to get breakfast. It was on our way there that it happened.

“Oh, Elrado. Are you getting food as well?”

“Y-yup...” Elrado had been turned into a monster during the recent unpleasanties, but he was back to his usual self now. After looking at my face, he immediately turned to Ginny. “That reminds me, I had—”

“A lovely coincidence. Why don’t we go together?” I grabbed his arm before he could flee and pulled him along with us.

Ever since the incident with the Asylas Federation, Elrado and Ginny had mostly settled their differences, but not completely. It was a deeply rooted problem, after all, and if we left it to the two of them, it would take forever. So I elected to play mother hen for a bit.

Elrado was a classmate and friend. I wanted him to enjoy his time at the academy unburdened by awkwardness. Shortly after we had conscripted him into our party...

“The most important thing when standing behind the lectern is how much you can care for the students. Are you even capable of that?”

“...I don’t know yet. Still, I’ll do my best. That’s why I’m here.”

...we heard two people chatting at the end of the hall.

One was Olivia. The other...

“Well, this academy really is becoming a ridiculous place. We have a history-making prodigy among the students, and we’ve also now got two legendary apostles in the faculty.” As Elrado’s remark indicated, the man next to Olivia was another of the Four Heavenly Kings.

It was Alvaro Egzex, dressed in the uniform of a male teacher. He glanced

briefly in our direction and then tried to avert his gaze, but...

“Oh! Lady Olivia! Alvarto, too!” Ireena called with a bright smile before running to them.

“S-she just addressed Lord Alvarto without a title...?!”

To Elrado, who was ignorant of recent events, Ireena’s casual greeting must have seemed exceptionally rude. But Ireena paid that no mind and beamed.

“You totally flubbed your lines at the ceremony,” she said.

“...I did not.”

“If that’s enough to get you nervous, it’s going to be a long semester.”

“...I wasn’t nervous.” Alvarto looked away and returned with an attempt at seeming cool.

While Ginny watched the exchange, she asked, “Will this...be all right?” Undoubtedly, Alvarto still seemed like a dangerous enemy to her. Now he was going to be a teacher and involved in her daily life. Her caution was understandable.

“There’s no issue. He’s changed quite a bit.”

That was clear from the fact that he’d discarded the mask he’d worn for so long and was displaying his genuine personality. His attitude made plain that he was discarding the desire for death and now looked to the future.

“That reminds me. Where’s Kalmia?”

“She was right there a minute ago... But she disappeared because she saw someone she didn’t like.” Alvarto’s eyes shifted to me. There was no malice or hostility there, yet...it seemed his partner thoroughly hated me. While I couldn’t blame her...

“I was hoping to have breakfast with her, too.”

“...If that’s what you want, I’ll try asking.”

“Really? Thanks!”

“Speaking of which. I, erm...haven’t eaten, either.”

“Oh? Then let’s go together!”

“...Okay.”

This is all pretty adorable, Alvarto.

Although he had been my enemy, I carried no lingering ill will toward him. If anything, I hoped life at the academy would help him discover how to live.

Once that happened...I thought I’d like to host a drinking party with the Ex-Four Heavenly Kings and Ex-Demon Lord.

While we had shared meals in the ancient world, our relationship was quite complicated. I now found myself hoping that we could move past all of that and become friends who could laugh and share memories. Ireena was the one who made it possible for me to think that way. She really was an amazing girl.

“Oh, would you also like to come, Lady Olivia—?”

“No. I need to fetch the transfer student. I’m afraid I’ll have to miss breakfast.”

With that, she walked away.

“Let’s get going, everyone!” At Ireena’s cheery statement, everyone else relaxed and smiled in return, nodding.

Our life continued to change with each passing moment.

I couldn’t help but pray that it would bring everyone happiness.

After breakfast, I got ready for class and left the dorm. I walked through the quad with my friends for the first time in a while, entered the school hall, and headed toward our classroom.

We exchanged greetings with acquaintances from other classes before going in and taking our usual chairs.

“Elrado. There’s no need to sit so far away. There’s an open seat here.”

“W-well, I...”

Elrado briefly looked to Ginny for approval.

She sighed at his unvoiced question.

“That strange consideration is unnecessary. Honestly, it’s a bit unsettling.”

“O-oh, th-thanks?”

Elrado looked a bit flustered, but he took the seat I recommended. Apparently, improving their relationship would be the highest priority for the immediate future. While thinking as much, I caught some gossip between a few classmates.

“I wonder what the transfer student is like.”

“Well, if they’re coming here, they must be pretty promising.”

“Mysterious origins, right? Lady Olivia found him or something?”

A transfer student? Oh, right, Olivia did mention something about that.

It wasn’t unheard of to get a fresh face or two at the start of the semester. For some reason, though, the notion troubled me.

“Elrado, I believe your family is closely involved in the running of the academy, yes? Perhaps you might have some information about the new arrival?”

“Hmm? Oh, I didn’t know you were the type to care about that sort of thing.”

“Well, I suppose I am.”

My eyes urged him to tell me what he knew. Elrado rubbed his jaw with his palm.

“It’s true that we handle the entrance exams and oversee the approval process for transfer students. Usually, I only know the grade they’re joining and stuff like that. But this time...the person coming to our class is truly ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous?”

“Well, see...a transfer student needs to pass a test to get into the academy. And, well, it’s harder than the entrance exam. It’s why transfer students are all prodigies of one sort or another—exceptional ones, even. Of course, I suppose that makes it easier for odd or eccentric types to get in, but...”

Elrado’s expression said it all. The new classmate was clearly more odd than usual.

“And?”

“What’re they like, exactly?”

It seemed our conversation had piqued the curiosity of Ireena and the others. Elrado kept rubbing his jaw as we pressed him for more.

“First, I have no idea where they came from, or whether they’re a commoner or the child of a noble. There’s no data at all related to their past. Ordinarily, that sort is dropped during the application phase, but...Lady Olivia sponsored them, so that didn’t happen.”

“Her support is concrete proof they’re legit, so it is.”

“Yeah... It’s hard to put into words. Even though Lady Olivia is backing them... there’s something strange.”

“...Strange?”

“Erm... Well, the first thing is their appearance...”

“Are they super ugly or deformed?”

“No, the exact opposite. I saw their picture from the portrait spell, and they’re truly extraordinarily beautiful, or maybe I should say pretty...”

“Oh? She’s that pretty?” Ginny asked.

“She may very well end up being a bit of a wild card in terms of relationships,” remarked Ireena.

“...Ahh, yes, but...no one knows their gender.”

“Really?”

“Like, they appear vaguely feminine, but there’s something masculine about them, too.”

“That certainly sounds like a person with quite the air of mystery.”

“Right? I’m pretty sure you’d be surprised, too. In particular, they have a unique smile. One glance is enough to burn it into your mind.” Elrado scratched his head. “Then there’s the test results... They were insane as well. The first one since you, Ard, to get more than a perfect score. And that’s on a substantially harder test than the one you took.”

“Oh? Sounds like quite the prodigy.”

“Yeah. Evidently, they wiped an entire mountain range off the map during the skills exam. Crazy stuff. Word is, they did it by accident, but... Who could possibly eradicate mountains unintentionally?”

“...Oh?”

No humans from the modern era could manage that feat. Which meant...the transfer student in question must have been born in the ancient world. As for those who could accidentally wreak mass destruction... I knew a few former subordinates who met that description.

“History unknown. Gender unknown. That set them apart already, but their written and skill test scores were off the charts like Ard’s... Seems this semester’s going to be interesting in a lot of ways.”

“Yes, but that’s just part of the fun, isn’t it?”

Mild problems would be a good stimulant for me.

“To be compared to Ard, though... Just what sort of person are they?”

Immediately after Ireena voiced that question, the door to the classroom opened, and Olivia entered. In response, all eyes went to her. Clearly, everyone was eager to catch a glimpse of the transfer student.

Whether aware of the class’s feelings or not, Olivia slowly walked over to the lectern. “Before we begin homeroom, let me introduce you to a new face joining our class,” she stated frankly. “Don’t fight one another. Make sure you learn from and with each other as we go forward. All right...” Olivia signaled for the transfer student waiting in the hallway to enter.

The moment they did...

Shudder.

...I felt an intense shiver run up my spine.

Upon seeing the new member of our class, I asked, on reflex, “What’s going on?”

This couldn’t be happening. It was way too strange. Why was he here, of all

places?

“Wow. Really beautiful, or maybe really pretty.”

“Huh? What are you talking about, Miss Ireena? He’s clearly a very handsome and rugged young man.”

“Huh? Are your eyes okay? They’re a child shorter than I am.”

People who should have recognized him did not, and they found nothing at all amiss with the situation. Thus, he sauntered through the room wearing the skirt from the girl’s uniform and the blazer from the boy’s uniform. His long, shimmering hair waved with his steps. The moment he reached the lectern, he caught us all in his golden eyes. A devilish smile spread on his angelic face.

“...Now, introduce yourself.”

At Olivia’s instruction, he gave a nod and glanced around at the students.

Stop it. Don’t look at them with your eyes. Don’t look at their faces. Don’t—

“Don’t taint their faces with your eyes!” I shouted at him without thinking, unable to bear it any longer.

The room went silent immediately, and everyone looked at me. Their gazes were cold, and their faces seemed hollow, devoid of personality.

“Why would you say such a terrible thing?” Ginny questioned, without the faintest inflection in her voice.

That started it.

“That’s going too far, isn’t it?”

Everyone...

“They did so much for you. You’re such an ingrate.”

...spoke words...

“The whole reason we have a normal life is thanks to him.”

...that tossed me...

“Hold up—”

...into a pit of despair.

““““Who are you?””””

I couldn't manage a reply. All my friends had changed, utterly transformed by his curse.

The scene unfolding drove home the fact that the triumph of regaining my ordinary life...had been an illusion. Chaos had crept up on me while I was distracted, tainting everything precious.

“Why...?! How could...?!”

I felt faint at the nightmarish display.

He smirked, as though mocking me for my astonishment.

“Hello everyone. I'm happy to see you. It's been quite a while since I've had this sort of life, and I don't really remember the basics... So I ask that you help me through it.”

At his words, the doll-like expressions of my classmates shifted. Everyone in the room gazed at him and blushed.

“Such a beautiful voice! It reminds me of vomit!”

“What a small body! How could they be so stupidly absurd...?!”

“There's a nauseating contradiction between the formality and casualness in the greeting.”

Everything was broken and had gone mad, likely beyond repair.

I held back a shiver of nausea as I looked at him.

“Since it seems we're short on time, let me make my introduction short. I would have liked to talk about my hobbies so you'd all know me better. I guess that can wait for later, though.”

Then he gave his name. It was one I could never forget, for it was that of my worst enemy. The name of the fated opponent who I had hoped never to meet again.

Yes, it was...

“Mephisto Yuu Phegor. Please affectionately call me Mephy.”

As everyone applauded...

...I heard the sound of destruction. Everything was collapsing.

The peace that we had regained. The ordinary days spent with my friends. It all was being irrevocably altered at the hands of that devil.

“Have you forgotten my sweet words, my darling?”

As though to reply, my mind called up the statement he was referring to. Each revolting syllable was its own curse. The words floated into my head and repeated incessantly.

“You can’t escape from the past. You can’t escape from me.”

“I won’t...the past won’t...ever let you go.”

AFTERWORD

Hello everyone, it's been a while. It is I, Myojin Katou.

Plans have been made to turn this series into an anime.

It didn't feel real when this news was first presented to me.

But as time has passed...

...nothing has changed, and it's still hard to believe.

All I feel is appreciation.

Appreciation for Mizuno, who has provided all of the illustrations.

My first editor, to whom I caused so many problems.

My second editor, to whom I am currently causing many problems.

And you, the reader, who has supported this series.

I've gotten this far only with effort and help from many people.

I really can't do anything but thank you for the privilege.

I pray that we'll be able to see each other again in Volume 9, as I lay down my pen for now.

Myojin Katou

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