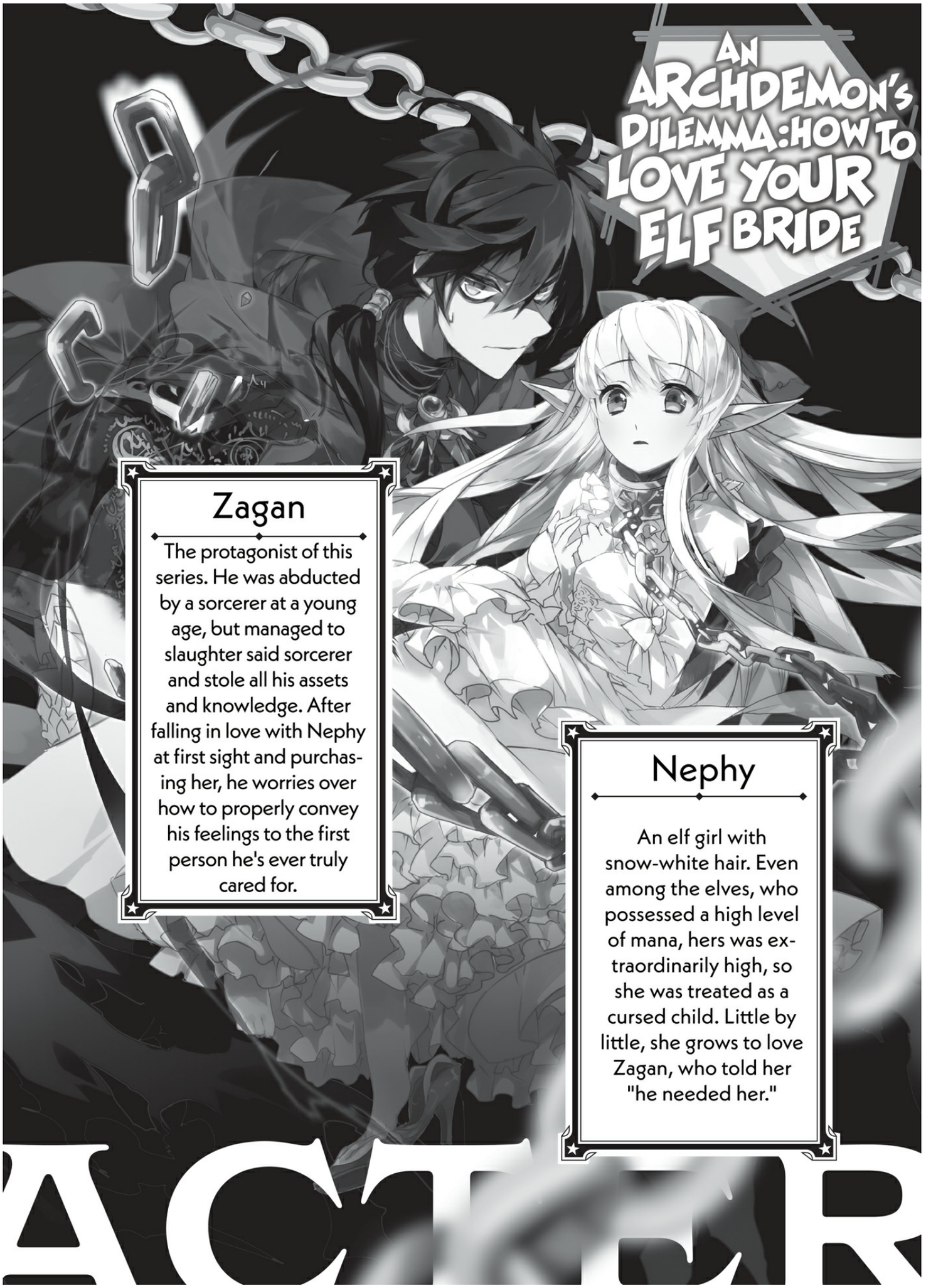

AN ARCHDEMON'S DILEMMA: HOW TO LOVE YOUR ELF BRIDE
12
FUMINORI TESHIMA
ILL. COMTA


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ILL. COMTA


"Allow me to get straight to the point. Are you aware of the exact date of Master Zagan's birthday?"
This was more of a shove off a cliff than a small push on the back. Alshiera's moon-like eyes spun about in a panic, but after a short time, she finally gave up.
AN ARCHDEMON'S DILEMMA: HOW TO LOVE YOUR ELF BRIDE


“Oh! Th-
Thank you.
That would
be great.
I was just
hoping to talk
to someone
myself...
I think.”
Perhaps crybabies attracted each other? Whatever the case, they were meant to cross paths. And so, it came to be.
“Um, if you’d
like, could we
talk a little?
Only if you
have the time,
of course.”


“Hey... what the hell is going on?”
She floated in the air with her eyes closed. It didn’t look like there was anything wrong with her body. However, wings of light protruded from her back. They were divine, yet sinister, and numbered eight in total.


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



## Alshiera

A girl of the Night Clan who has actually lived for an extremely long time. Calls Zagan the Silver-Eyed King. She has an understanding of history that has been lost to man, but tends to refuse to answer any questions about it for some reason.



## Bifrons

An Archdemon whose gender is a complete mystery. After being crushed by Zagan, they had a curse cast on them. Had an alliance with Archdemon Shere Khan, but ended it.



## Nephteros

A sorcerer who looks very similar to Nephy. Her true identity is a homunculus created by Archdemon Bifrons. After running away from Bifrons, she lives at the church.



## Dexia & Aristella

Twins who serve as Shere Khan's subordinates. They targeted Kuroka's group under order of Shere Khan, who has been continuing the rare species hunt. Dexia ran away on her own to save her sister Aristella, who was swallowed by the sludge.

## Shere Khan

One of the Archdemons. The mastermind behind the rare species hunt, and also the one who destroyed Kuroka's hometown. He was supposedly purged by Archdemon Marchosias, but somehow survived and is now scheming with Bifrons.

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# Prologue

“Nephy’s...BIRTHDAY?!”

The entirety of the castle shook violently due to its lord’s inner turmoil.

One resident screamed, “Eek! I’m so sorry, My Lady...! Huh?” while getting out of bed.

Another muttered, “Hm, it seems today will be a noisy one,” while readjusting the cooking schedule.

A third said, “Thank goodness Miss Gremory is away on business,” with a sigh of relief.

Zagan sat at the center of the tremor, facing an old high elf in his throne room...namely, Archdemon Orias.

“Oh my, it seems you really didn’t know,” she said with a troubled smile.

“Orias, allow me to ask you one question,” Zagan said, timidly wiping the cold sweat from his brow all the while. “Could it be that in regular society, there’s some sort of custom for celebrating birthdays?”

The old Archdemon’s smile suddenly shifted to a pained grimace.

“Oh... Well, I suppose I should have started from there. Sorry.”

“I mean, it’s not like I’m completely ignorant. Upon thinking back to my old days as a waif, I can say I’ve definitely seen something a little like that before.”

From time to time, Zagan had seen certain children receive bread or random junk that could be sold for a reasonable sum of money without much of an explanation. Even when he’d asked the others why, they’d never answered him and only made faces as if to tell him to figure it out.

Looking back on those days now, they had definitely been birthdays. However, in his mind, such occasions came hand in hand with clearly bitter memories, which was precisely why he faced a huge crisis.

*How exactly does one celebrate a birthday?*

Zagan didn't even know the date of his own birthday, so he'd never had the opportunity to celebrate, nor had anyone ever celebrated for him. The way waifs did things couldn't be used as a reference at all. The most he could tell from them was that it was typical to give some sort of present.

"Don't worry," Orias said with a nod, reading the immense sense of confusion running through Zagan's mind. "It isn't all that complicated. You simply offer words of congratulations along with a present."

"I-Is that truly enough? The day Nephy was born is the most blessed day in the world, isn't it?"

Orias narrowed her eyes pleasantly upon hearing that and replied, "I believe my daughter is truly blessed that you hold her in such high esteem."

"Don't make light of me, Archdemon Orias. I promised you that I would make Nephy happy. And I assure you, I have barely even begun my work," Zagan declared with all the majesty of an Archdemon.

For some reason, Orias covered her face with both hands. It looked like the tips of her pointy ears were dyed the slightest bit red.

"Why are you averting your gaze?" Zagan asked.

"You two are far too dazzling..." Orias mumbled. Then, she struck her chest a few times to try to calm her heart before pulling herself together. "My daughter's birthday is on the twenty-fourth of Arnaki."

Arnaki was the fourth month of the year. It was currently the beginning of the third month, Thalassa, so there was plenty of time to prepare. Still, hearing that she was born on that specific day made Zagan's eyes widen in shock.

"The twenty-fourth of Arnaki... Are you certain?" he asked.

"Uh, yes? Is something the matter?"

Zagan scratched his head, finding it somewhat hard to answer, before saying, "That's...the day Nephy and I met."

*Or, well, the day I bought her...*

In hindsight, he found it baffling that Nephy had actually fallen in love with a sorcerer who had spent his entire fortune purchasing her.

“What...? Really?” Orias asked in wonder.

“Yeah.”

“Then perhaps you’ve already fulfilled your promise,” she said with a gentle smile.

“Meaning...?”

“In my daughter’s mind, the day she met you is the most joyous day in the world.”

Zagan felt his face getting hotter upon hearing those unexpected words.

“An Archdemon shouldn’t be spouting such frivolous words. Um, I mean...even I get embarrassed at times,” he muttered.

“Huh? Ooh... I see,” Orias said, though she made a face as if to say he was telling her far too late; not that Zagan had the composure to see that, of course. She then suddenly folded her arms in a troubled manner.

“What’s wrong?” Zagan asked.

“Speaking of my daughter’s birthday, I wonder when Nephteros was born.”

Nephteros—the dark elf who was now considered Nephy’s little sister—was actually Nephy’s clone. As a homunculus, it was unlikely she had a specific birthday. However, despite all that, Zagan shook his head like it was no big deal.

“She’s Nephy’s identical twin. Isn’t it reasonable for them to share the same birthday?” he said.

“Yes... You’re right. Let’s go with that. Her birthday is the twenty-fourth of Arnaki.”

“Yeah.”

Even as Zagan agreed, dark clouds shrouded his heart.

*A birthday... But with the time she has left...*

Faced with the dire need to resolve Nephteros’s problem before their

birthday, Zagan uncharacteristically felt something close to anxiety. This was the starting point for the incident to come.

# Chapter I: My Bride's Birthday Is Far More Important Than the Fate of the World

"Check it out, bro! I learned how to float!"

Several hours after receiving the shocking information about Nephy's birthday and having breakfast, a cheerful voice resounded throughout the throne room. Only Zagan, Kimaris—who was summarizing reports for him by his side—and a young boy making a fuss in front of them, Furcas, currently stood in the room.

*I want to prepare for Nephy's birthday in secret and surprise her.*

That was why Zagan had kept quiet about it as he attempted to start preparations, but his normal duties kept springing up and getting in the way. In this specific instance, he had requests and reports and such from his subordinates, as well as the boy in front of him.

The boy who clamored about, floating a couple centimeters off the ground, looked somewhere shy of fifteen. He wore a hempen shirt and trousers along with a worn-out overcoat. His outfit was completely out of place in an Archdemon's castle. In fact, he looked like little more than a perfectly normal boy. Sadly, he was actually one of the sorcerers entrusted with the title of Archdemon. As proof of that, the Sigil of the Archdemon glowed on his right hand.

"I see. Good for you," Zagan said with a nod, unsure of exactly how to feel about this situation.

"Right on! It's all thanks to you teaching me, bro!"

It had been three days since they had saved this boy from a certain nightmare. Furcas had lost his memories in there, and they showed no signs of resurfacing. Having said that, he still had the Sigil of the Archdemon, meaning he possessed more mana than any ordinary sorcerer. On the off chance that he regained his memories, it was highly likely he would become an enemy. But even if he didn't, there were tons of reasons for other Archdemons and

sorcerers to manipulate him.

*I feel like it'd be way faster to just finish him off...*

So Zagan thought, but for whatever reason, the boy had gotten attached to him to the point of constantly referring to him as "bro." If he were a canus or the like, Furcas would probably be wagging his tail about. Seeing him like that, Zagan's desire to kill him faded away.

As such, Furcas was now under his protection. With the condition that he was to remain confined within the castle—only to leave when accompanied by Zagan, Kimaris, or the like—he even received training in simple sorcery.

Honestly, even if he had no memories, his body probably remembered. He was learning at a terrifying speed.

"I'd expect nothing less of you, Sir Furcas," Kimaris said with a pleasant smile. "I don't know of any others who have mastered sorcery so quickly."

Despite his gentle voice, Kimaris had an enormous body. He possessed a firm physique, the face of a lion, and a splendid mane. Standing several steps up, right next to the throne, he struck a fairly imposing figure, but Furcas didn't mind any of that. He simply expressed pure delight.

"Thanks, Kimry! You've got a scary face, but you're actually a *really* nice guy!"

"That's normal in this castle," Kimaris replied.

Well, even without any memories, this boy was still an Archdemon. Perhaps he just had nerves of steel.

*It would be far better if he just felt like living as a normal civilian...* With that thought in mind, Zagan addressed the boy.

"Answer me, Furcas. Why exactly do you wish to learn sorcery? I hope you're aware that it's not particularly useful if you desire to live an ordinary life."

Zagan didn't want to give the boy any unnecessary stimulation. If Furcas were to spend the rest of his natural life span living normally, Zagan was fine with looking after him.

Furcas looked back at him, blinking in confusion, before replying, "Huh? I mean, I can't protect Lilith unless I get stronger."

“Just so you know, Lilith is also under my protection. So long as that’s the case, she won’t be exposed to danger.”

Unexpectedly, Furcas gave Zagan a look of exasperation.

“You just don’t get it, bro. Lilith is sure to keep trying her best to help you, yeah? I know best how amazing a girl she is. That’s why I have to get stronger to protect and support her.”

*How did such a serious and upright guy become a damn Archdemon?* Zagan thought, cradling his head. He believed Furcas had gone off the right course in life because of Alshiera, but he hadn’t the slightest idea how.

“I’m frightened of what will happen when Miss Gremory returns...” Kimaris muttered gravely.

“Don’t even mention that, Kimaris. You’re hurting my head.”

The granny was currently out on business, but it was about time for her to return. It was clear as day that if she were to see Furcas and Lilith now, she would start following them around and dancing in joy. Nothing good would come of it. Furcas had never met her, so he was left staring in confusion. Seeing this, Zagan shook his head to pull himself together.

“Uhhh... So? How’s life here? Think you’ll get by?” he asked.

Currently, Furcas was little more than a regular civilian. Due to that fact, Zagan had to consider him in the same realm as Lilith and Selphy.

“Yeah!” Furcas replied with a smile. “Everyone’s so kind! Nothing’s really bothering me at all! About the only thing worth mentioning is that Lilith is kinda avoiding me, and her mermaid friend keeps glaring at me with *super* cold eyes, I guess?”

Zagan’s eyes widened at the completely unexpected news.

*Huh? By mermaid, does he mean Selphy? Why would she be glaring at him?*

Kuroka—who was currently far away on business—Selphy, and Lilith were childhood friends from Liucaon. The three of them were all of rare species and got along well within the castle. In complete contrast to the succubus Lilith, who was always filled with worries, the siren Selphy was always so optimistic

that she almost always failed to read the atmosphere, though she often also managed to cheer up everyone around her. Zagan couldn't even imagine her acting coldly toward anyone.

Furcas didn't seem to be questioning it at all, however. Instead, he simply made a thoughtlessly cheerful expression when he suddenly raised his voice.

"What is it now...?" Zagan asked.

"Oh, I was just wondering... What are you fighting against? I don't even know what that monster from last time was."

Now that he thought of it, Zagan realized he hadn't explained anything to him.

*Well, I guess Bifrons or the like will end up manipulating him if I keep quiet.*

He didn't like having to do that, but Zagan knew it was better to fill Furcas in on the details properly.

"My current enemy is a sorcerer named Shere Khan," Zagan started in an irritated tone. "He's an Archdemon just like me. We've been skirmishing over the last few months."

Having said that, Shere Khan hadn't made any moves over the last month. Considering the reports he had gotten from Shax and his other subordinates, Zagan believed the Archdemon had decided to focus on reinforcing his strength, so Shere Khan would probably be making the next move soon. It was just a matter of when.

Kimaris kept quiet, a complicated expression on his face. His fate had also been intertwined with Shere Khan.

"An Archdemon?" Furcas asked with a shudder. "There are other people out there like you?"

*You're one too...*

Zagan wanted to confiscate the boy's Sigil of the Archdemon already, but unfortunately, it was a terrifyingly complex system that employed Celestian. The ritual to usurp ownership required the consent of twelve Archdemons, meaning every Archdemon other than the one being robbed had to agree.

It was far quicker to simply kill the owner and steal the Sigil of the Archdemon instead of going through the trouble of invoking such a ritual, so it had never actually been done. It was apparently possible to have the owner willingly transfer the Sigil to someone else, but with Furcas in his current state, that would prove difficult. With all that in mind, Zagan decided to keep him close at hand. Not that Furcas could understand any of this.

“So what did this Shere Khan guy do to you?” Furcas asked.

“There’s a whole lot... First, he destroyed Kuroka’s hometown. You haven’t met her, but she’s Raphael’s daughter. He’s also trying to kill Alshiera. Oh, and there’s also Kimaris’s case... Well, in short, he’s brought unspeakable harm to my subordinates.”

After enumerating all of the reasons aloud, rage began building up within Zagan, causing his voice to grow unintentionally rough. Overawed by this, Furcas gulped.

“S-So he’s a fiend...”

Sorcerers were fundamentally monsters at their core, but Zagan figured he didn’t have to delve into that level of common sense.

“Well, all those acts give me sufficient reason to kill him, but there’s something else he did that’s utterly unforgivable,” Zagan added with a shake of the head.

“There’s more?! Wh-What terrifying thing did he do?”

Zagan thrust his finger at the trembling boy and resolutely declared, “That bastard dared to interrupt my date with Nephy.”

The other day, things had finally calmed down to the point where he and Nephy could go on a date, but they’d been stopped from doing so. It was bad enough that simply killing Shere Khan felt like a half-hearted measure in Zagan’s eyes. This was pretty much completely unjustified resentment on his part, verging on a persecution complex, but he didn’t doubt that it was all Shere Khan’s fault for a single minute.

“Huh...? Y-Your date?” Furcas said in total astonishment. “You mean when lovers go out together...right?”

“Precisely.”

Furcas glanced over at Kimaris for help, but Zagan’s talented right-hand man returned a nonchalant look as if to tell him this was nothing out of the ordinary.

“I-Is that *really* more important than your subordinates?” Furcas asked in disbelief.

He had an extremely good point, but Zagan made a contrary declaration with all the majesty of an Archdemon.

“Do you believe such measly dedication is a sufficient way to display your love?”

Furcas clasped his chest and bent backward as if struck by lightning.



“Y-You’re right. If anyone out there were to make Lilith sad, I would fight them to the death. I’m such a fool...”

The boy fell to his knees, chastising himself all the while, at which Zagan smiled like an affectionate father.

“Don’t worry. Ignorance is not a crime. However, staying ignorant is, so you must study. Understood?”

“Hnnngh! I’ll do my best!”

With no way of knowing that this was, in fact, the very moment he began walking off the proper course in life, Furcas choked on the sincerest of tears. He then wiped his face and rose to his feet.

“So after taking care of this Shere Khan guy, everything will be settled?! I’ll give it my all!” he exclaimed.

“Yeah... You can... Right. Go stay by Lilith’s side. Protect her.”

“Leave it to me!”

Zagan didn’t want the boy to do anything unnecessary and get in the way, which was why he had given him that order while averting his gaze.

*Sorry, Lilith, I’ll give you some kind of reward later.*

He felt somewhat guilty about pushing such a nuisance on her. From next to him, Kimaris seemed to be imagining the chaos that would ensue once Gremory returned, clutching his stomach in pain.

“So was that monster also one of Shere Khan’s underlings?” Furcas asked with a cock of his head.

“No... In a way, you could say he was responsible, but that’s a separate matter. If left at large, the entire world was liable to be destroyed, let alone my immediate surroundings. That’s why I dealt with it.”

Zagan had ended up coming across it, so he’d had no choice but to do something. Honestly, it had only been repulsed to the other side of Alshiera’s barrier, and that had only been thanks to Lilith and the others. All Zagan had done was buy time. He really had no right to claim he’d dealt with it. Kimaris

hadn’t been present at the time, so this also seemed to attract his attention. He directed a sharp gaze at Zagan, but Zagan didn’t answer him.

*Things that mustn’t be understood. Things that mustn’t be spoken of...*

This world was akin to a dream to that thing. It could see it every now and then, but everything was vague. Even when it tried to grasp the world, it seemed like everything slipped through its fingers. That was how the world was protected from it. Such was the true nature of the barrier that had to use someone as powerful as Alshiera as a human sacrifice to maintain itself.

If that thing ever realized it was in a dream, if it started dreaming lucidly and evolved to a stage where it could move as it willed, the world would immediately be destroyed. That was why it was forbidden for anyone to research it and why it was taboo to even speak its name.

When Zagan and Nephy met inside that dream, all it had taken for them to start dreaming lucidly was realizing that it was, in fact, a dream. Now that he half-understood all that, Zagan had to put in the effort not to think about it more than he already had; until he found a way of dealing with it, at least.

Zagan shook his head to cast such thoughts aside as the young boy looked up at the ceiling with squinted eyes.

“You really are amazing, bro. Doesn’t that mean you protected the world?”

“Huh? No, that wasn’t really how it went...”

In fact, he had actually thought of destroying the world more than protecting it, just like when he thought some pest had gotten attached to Foll.

*Anyway, is this guy really all right? Why is he so moved?*

It was up to Furcas how he interpreted everything, but Zagan felt like he was tricking the boy, since he was taking everything in such a positive light. It made him feel somewhat restless. In the worst case, it’d be troubling if Furcas realized it had all been a misunderstanding and betrayed him out of unjustified resentment, so perhaps it was a good idea to give him a warning now.

Zagan cleared his throat, then said, “I don’t mind you getting all excited, but at least consider what’s right and wrong on your own. I don’t believe myself to

be righteous. When balanced on a scale against Nephy or Foll, I would cast you away without question.”

“But didn’t you nearly die to save both Lilith and me?” Furcas asked with a confused blink.

“Uh, no, you’re not listening to me...”

Nephy and Foll’s lives hadn’t been at stake, and he felt it would’ve been disgraceful to go back to Nephy without doing anything. His reasons had all been selfish. Nevertheless, Furcas smiled as if everything was clear now.

“If you ever abandon me, that means it’s my turn to save you!” he exclaimed.

Zagan was left dumbfounded by his innocent gaze.

*Damn, this guy is hopeless. He’s decisively unsuited to being a sorcerer. He reminds me of... Right, him. He’s like Head Archangel Ginias II, that guy I squabbled with in the holy city. Maybe I should talk to Stella and have Furcas work over there...*

With Stella’s help, they could gloss over the fact that he used to be a sorcerer. The same could be said about Chastille and her Unification Faction, but they had a difficult position in the church, so an ex-Archdemon could cause major trouble among their ranks. There was still the problem of the Sigil of the Archdemon, but perhaps it was still a good idea to contact Stella about it when he had the time.

Zagan scratched his head as he thought of such things. Kimaris, however, let out an amused laugh.

“Ha ha ha. You should really try to be more conscious of how others view you, my liege.”

“Hmph... How rude,” Zagan said with a sigh before turning back to Furcas. “Whatever. More importantly, I should give you a warning. I don’t think they’ll appear before you, but if you ever meet a sorcerer named Bifrons, plug your ears, try not to look at anything, and run away.”

“Bifrons...? Another one of your enemies?”

“Yeah. Bifrons looks like a little brat but is actually an Archdemon with three

decades of experience under their belt. Their hobby is watching others suffer. I'd say they're an expert at complicating matters, so it'd be better to die than get involved with that sorcerer."

That Archdemon was pretty much the only person Zagan spoke of with such hatred, perhaps in part due to his failure to finish them off.

*Not that I think Bifrons will have any interest in Furcas as he is now...*

Bifrons seemed far more gleeful at the thought of people struggling for survival in the depths of chaos they'd brought about, fulfilling their desires while being a major nuisance to everyone at the same time.

Without any memories, and with the power of an Archdemon, Furcas could perhaps be thought of as a slightly interesting toy, but his nature was far closer to a civilian like Lilith. Perhaps that was peculiar behavior for an Archdemon, but he no longer possessed any factors that delighted Bifrons. Even if Bifrons tried to use him, Furcas wouldn't be able to keep the Archdemon's attention. And in the off chance that Furcas got involved, Bifrons wouldn't become obsessed with him like with Nephteros.

*In that sense, Bifrons is probably already obsessed with Aristella...*

She was the pitiful girl who had become Azazel's worldly medium, and Bifrons really had tried to save her. From their perspective, retrieving her corpse should've sufficed, but Bifrons had gone above and beyond that. Zagan wasn't sure whether or not she was still alive, but he hoped she wasn't getting involved in anything strange.

*I failed to save her back then, after all.*

He at least felt compelled to save her next time, if the chance ever came along. Zagan's thoughts were then brought to a grinding halt when he noticed Furcas had turned completely pale.

"There's no need for fear. I'm just saying such bastards exist out there," Zagan stated.

"B-But...don't you think this Bifrons will be interested in Lilith? She's such a charming girl."

“Oh... Mmm... Well, Bifrons is obsessed with someone else right now, so it’s probably fine.”

Or so Zagan said, but another thought came to mind.

*It’s been several months since Bifrons and Shere Khan teamed up, meaning...*

It was about time for them to break the Heaven’s Phosphor curse Zagan had cast on Bifrons. It would’ve held a little longer had Bifrons been on their own, but there was no way they’d been helping Shere Khan out of a sense of charity. It seemed safe to assume that breaking Heaven’s Phosphor had been the condition for offering their hand in whatever Shere Khan wanted, and cooperation between two Archdemons never lasted long.

*I guess I really should tell Nephteros...*

That girl was currently burdened with a major problem. Plus, there was the matter of her birthday, meaning the problem had to be resolved before then.

Zagan’s impatience seemed to get across. Furcas took a single step back to leave, but he almost immediately raised his face upon thinking of something.

“Oh yeah, can I ask you one last thing?”

“What?”

“These Archdemons you’re talking about are important people, right? So...who is this Silver-Eyed King that Alsh—I mean, Miss Alshiera speaks of?”

Even without his memories, something seemed to remain within Furcas. The moment he spoke Alshiera’s name, his expression turned somewhat listless.

*The Silver-Eyed King...* Zagan instinctively averted his gaze at the thought.

“That’s the name of a hero from a country called Liucaon,” he answered. “If you’re interested in learning more, go take a look through my archives. I have a collection of books describing his legends.”

Zagan now knew this legend was his father. However, he’d failed to gather any meaningful information about him. At the very least, two people had gone by that name. If they had been the first and second generations, that would make Zagan the third-generation Silver-Eyed King. And in that case, it would be appropriate to consider the second generation his father, but there were

practically no clues as to whether he had been Liucaon's hero or someone else entirely. It wasn't even clear what age he had lived in.

Furthermore, Zagan questioned the accuracy of Liucaon's legends. None of them mentioned seraphs, Azazel, the Demon Lord, or even Alshiera. Pretty much the only name that connected to the present day was Foll's father, Orobas. Either all of the important information had been intentionally concealed or everything had been transformed into a literary work. Even if things had conformed to reality in the beginning, it was very likely that the story had warped over time. Zagan had ordered every book relevant to Liucaon's legends, but none of them contained the information he desired.

"So you read books other than grimoires, huh?" Furcas said with a surprised look on his face.

"Of course I do. Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

Zagan was a king. So long as he reigned over others, he would learn everything that he ought to. Many books from Liucaon documented the knowledge of military strategists and other people of great wisdom. Such books weren't normally found on the continent, where all the literature in circulation was managed by the church, so there was worth in reading them even disregarding his search for information on the Silver-Eyed King.

Furcas nodded in admiration, then suddenly cocked his head and said, "Sooo...does that mean you're from Liucaon?"

"Who knows? I was gathering trash in Kianoides by the time I grew aware of my surroundings. I don't know anything about my birthplace, nor do I have any interest in the matter."

Zagan had investigated it simply because of the likelihood that it would become an unnecessary obstruction in the future. Even if he did identify his father, he didn't think it would move him in any significant way.

*But who was that person I saw at the end inside Alshiera's barrier...?*

Zagan was certain of what he had seen at the end of the dream, right as he was being driven out of the barrier. There had been three people standing there: Alshiera, giving off a different impression from how she was now; his old

friend Marc, who had been serving as the church's pope until five years ago; and lastly, a young man with silver eyes.

A bombastic title like Silver-Eyed King seemed completely unsuitable for the young man. Besides, even though silver eyes were rare, they weren't entirely unheard of. Searching an entire city would likely yield one or two people with them. Nevertheless, Zagan had a hunch as to who that young man was.

*If I'm right, that was the second generation...*

However, the outward appearance of the people Zagan had seen him with couldn't be relied on whatsoever, so he had no way of knowing for sure. He sighed at that thought.

"Sorry. Should I not have asked?" Furcas said, shrinking back from Zagan's somewhat blunt tone.

"It's nothing you need worry about," Zagan replied, rising to his feet. "I have business in town. Go dedicate yourself to your studies."

"Right!"

The boy who was once an Archdemon waved his hand innocently as he exited the throne room.

Right when Zagan prepared to depart as well, he found an unexpected visitor waiting for him.

"Mister Zagan, could I, like, bother you for a sec?"

It was a siren who appeared to be brooding deeply over something.

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Around the same time, Nephy was tidying up the kitchen after breakfast. Lately, the sorcerers of the castle had been taking more regular meals, so putting everything away took a fair bit of time. Having said that, everyone always ate absolutely everything on their plates, so there was never a need to deal with leftovers.

Nephy had her white hair tied up in a bun so that it wouldn't get in the way of cleaning. That was something Lilith had done for her quite a lot recently. She wore her usual ultramarine dress, white apron, and sorcery-blessed boots. With

her in the kitchen were Raphael, Foll, Lilith, and Alshiera.

“Oh? Where is Selphy?” Nephy asked everyone upon realizing someone was missing.

“She said she had to see Zagan,” Foll answered.

The little girl had green hair much like the color of spring grass, through which two horns poked out. Her amber eyes had vertical slits for pupils. To be more specific, she was a young dragon, not a little girl. She had her favorite native dress on with her sleeves rolled up and wore an apron much like Nephy’s as she washed the tableware. She was Nephy and Zagan’s precious daughter.

This girl was actually one of the most talented sorcerers in the castle, probably the entire world. She could clean all the tableware in only a few seconds if she used sorcery, but she seldom did so. Times like these, when she could chat and laugh with everyone, were precious to her. That was why Nephy also cleaned up just like everyone else without relying on sorcery.

“How unusual,” Nephy said with a cock of her head. “Does she have something to ask him, I wonder?”

“Yes...that’s probably the case,” Lilith answered meekly. “It seems something’s been on her mind lately.”

She had twisted horns coming from scarlet hair, wings like those of a bat poking out of her back, and a long and narrow tail. She was a charming succubus with golden eyes much like the moon. Lilith was a normal person, utterly incapable of using sorcery, inside a castle of sorcerers, but she wasn’t powerless either. After the other day’s incident, it could be said that she was the person who had to be protected the most, in a sense.

“Usually, she comes to me whenever something bothers her...” she muttered, a dark expression hanging over her due to the complicated position she found herself in now.

Nephy returned an ambiguous smile.

*So even Selphy has things she worries about...*

That girl spent her time in an Archdemon’s castle with a completely optimistic

outlook, never even showing any hint of timidity. Nephy couldn't even imagine her worrying about anything. Still, Selphy was actually a genius in a single aspect. They said normal people couldn't understand the concerns of a genius. Selphy's worries might have been incomprehensible to her.

"Is there anything that girl actually worries about?"

Nephy had wisely sensed that she should keep her thoughts to herself, but the butler Raphael mercilessly spoke his mind. He was tall enough that she had to look up at him. Despite the fact that he was approaching fifty years of age, his spine was perfectly straight. His armored left arm was artificial, but his unarmored right arm was still equally thick. His gruff language could make him hard to understand, but he was actually flawless when it came to cooking and cleaning. The old gentleman was a former Archangel. His Sacred Sword was currently stored inside his artificial arm. Zagan put his trust in Kimaris and Gremory as sorcerers, but he put unrivaled trust in Raphael as his right-hand man.

Lilith's eyes widened somewhat unexpectedly upon hearing the butler's words.

"She actually worries quite a bit, you know? Well, usually it's over relatively meaningless things, but..."

"Like what?" Raphael asked.

"Urk..." Lilith groaned with a frown. "Um... There are these insects called ants, right? They carry off small pieces of dessert sometimes, so she wondered what they do with them, since it definitely can't be split up between all of them... And how if she were an ant, she would leave the colony if she didn't get a portion every time... And then she wondered how the ants who leave live outside the colony..."

"How...philosophical."

This was the answer Raphael came up with after desperately trying to read the atmosphere, in his own way.

Silence followed.

All gazes then naturally converged on Alshiera, who had been keeping

strangely quiet the entire time. Or perhaps rather than keeping quiet, it was more like her mind was somewhere else entirely. The fact that she still managed to clean up the tableware properly was rather impressive.

Alshiera had the same golden eyes as Lilith, as well as golden hair tied up in two pigtails, which Nephy knew were hiding her broken horns. She had pale skin and two fangs poking through her slender lips. She was the world's strongest vampire. The creepy stuffed toy she always carried preciously to her chest was now sitting atop a chair right by her side.

"What do you think, Alshiera?" Foll asked.

"Huh? Oh, I wasn't listening. What are you discussing?"

Alshiera returned to her senses and cocked her head as everyone else exchanged looks.

"Um, we were talking about how Selphy seems to be acting odd," Nephy said. "Are you aware of anything?"

"Well... She is a growing girl, after all. Not that I really understand..."

"Alshiera, did something happen?" Foll asked, staring fixedly at the vampire all the while.

"No, um... I was just lost in thought."

"If it has nothing to do with Selphy, then is it about what happened this morning?"

All the residents of the castle knew that Zagan had made a ruckus in the early hours of the day. It had to be quite significant, seeing that it had pierced the barrier around the throne room.

"The Silver-Eyed King is also a growing boy," Alshiera answered, quietly averting her gaze.

"What happened? You eavesdropped through the barrier, didn't you?" Foll asked, suddenly closing in and causing Alshiera to bend backward.

"Could you not speak of me as if I'm so disrespectful?"

"But you did listen in on their conversation."

Alshiera didn’t answer and kept her silence. She really had been eavesdropping, apparently.

Nephy folded her arms and fell into deep thought.

*Hmm, I’m reluctant to dig into her secrets, but it seems to involve Master Zagan.*

Whenever this girl kept silent like this, it had to do with her duty—meaning it was related to the great existence that threatened the entire world—and if not, it had to do with Zagan. Thinking back on recent circumstances, Nephy keenly came to a certain conclusion.

“Master Zagan was talking to my mother at the time, I think.”

“Something Zagan and Granny were talking about in secret... So it’s about you, Nephy?” Foll added.

“Perhaps, but in that case, Lady Alshiera wouldn’t be reacting like this.”

“Could you girls please stop reading that much from a single expression...?” Alshiera complained. Nephy was now certain that she was on the mark.

“Nephy, can you think of anything?” Foll asked, looking up at her while washing a dish.

“Let’s see... The only thing that comes to mind is that it’s been nearly a year since I met Master Zagan.”

Nobody overlooked the fact that Alshiera averted her gaze again.

“Looks like we’re close to the heart of the matter,” Nephy remarked.

“Hm?” Lilith suddenly muttered with a curious look.

“Is something the matter, Lilith?”

“I mean, it’s been about a year since you met His Highness, right?”

“Yes.”

“I was just wondering when his birthday is...”

Nephy clearly saw Alshiera jolt in place upon hearing that.

“I see...”

The elf put on a gentle smile, then backed up as if sliding across the floor and silently closed the kitchen door.

“Why are you shutting the door?” Alshiera asked.

It wasn’t like that could actually prevent Alshiera from leaving. The vampire was just about to transform into a swarm of bats, but Foll firmly gripped her shoulders and stopped her. Lastly, Raphael unsheathed his Sacred Sword as if he suddenly wanted to polish it, then stabbed it into the ground. From what Nephy would hear later, this was apparently an anti-undead barrier that only Archangels could employ.

Nephy was ready to unleash celestial mysticism at any moment. Even the world’s strongest vampire couldn’t easily break this siege. With the sudden tension in the room, the only non-combatant, Lilith, let out a quiet scream, but that was but a triviality.

“Masterfully done, Lilith,” Nephy said, clapping her hands with a nod. “We wouldn’t have noticed on our own.”

“Augh... Uhhh... Y-You’re wrong. I-I didn’t mean to...”

After praising the succubus, who was now trembling violently with teary eyes, Nephy surrounded Alshiera alongside everyone else in the room.

“Now then, shall we have a little talk?” she asked the vampire.

“I suddenly feel rather frightened of you, though...”

It was strange to speak of a vampire’s complexion, but it was as if Alshiera had turned pale while staring a hole into the ground. If she had been capable of perspiring, she would have had a cold sweat pouring down her face.

Nephy believed that she at least understood Alshiera’s nature after spending so much time with her, even if not to the extent that Zagan did. If she really didn’t want to speak, or if she couldn’t, she wouldn’t have reacted like that. After all, she could’ve easily escaped before being surrounded. In that case, Alshiera actually wanted to tell everyone or believed that she had to.

*Does that mean it’s simply hard for her to say it herself, I wonder?*

Well, so long as she intended to talk about it, it meant she just needed a little

push on the back to get going. Nephy clasped her hands in front of her chest in supplication, then smiled with a slight tilt of the head.

“Allow me to get straight to the point. Are you aware of the exact date of Master Zagan’s birthday?”

This was more of a shove off a cliff than a small push on the back. Alshiera’s moonlike eyes spun about in a panic, but after a short time, she finally gave up.

“I don’t mind telling you...but I have a condition.”

“Of course. What is it?”

“Don’t pry or even try to guess as to why I know. That’s my condition.”

That was apparently the reason she hadn’t spoken up immediately.

*I don’t really mind so long as it doesn’t become a hindrance to Master Zagan...* Nephy thought, then exchanged looks with the others. Raphael and Foll saw the look in her eyes and returned a nod. Lilith... Well, she seemed to have blanked out from the unpredictable situation, so there was no point in asking her.

After confirming that, Nephy nodded back to Alshiera and said, “Very well. I promise we won’t pry or even think about it.”

“Thank you...” Alshiera mumbled as she calmly got her breathing in order—not that she was really breathing or anything—then said, “The Silver-Eyed King was born on the ninth of Thalassa.”

“The ninth of Thalassa...?” Nephy repeated.

*Isn’t that this month? What day is it again...?*

Nephy’s eyes shot open and she practically screamed, “That’s in a week!”

If Alshiera hadn’t informed them, she would’ve missed it entirely. Nephy was so shaken by that fact that weeds began sprouting between the cracks in the stone tiles at her feet.

“Nephy, calm down. Weeds are growing,” Foll said.

Ignoring her completely, Nephy approached Lilith with dizzy and uncertain steps, then grasped her by the shoulders.

“Eek! Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What is it?!”

“Lilith! Please tell me! What do you do to celebrate a birthday?!”

“H-H-H-Huh?!”

Lilith was completely perplexed, whereas Alshiera was left cradling her head.

“You also don’t know...?” she muttered to Nephy.

“Oh, no, I don’t. I’ve heard of such festivities in the village, but on such days, I was never allowed out of the cellar...”

Obviously, Nephy had no way of knowing when her own birthday was either.

*Huh? Does that mean Master Zagan and mother were talking about...*

However, Nephy had just promised not to pry or even think about the details. The conversation between those two could be considered prying, so Nephy consciously brought such thoughts to a halt. Due to that, she forced a smile, leaving everyone completely taken aback.

“What a hard life...” Foll groaned.

This also brought Lilith back to her senses.

“Ummm, in my case, I usually got clothes and accessories and the like,” the succubus said. “Look, I even got this ring from Alshiera when I turned five.”

Lilith held up her hand, showing a golden ring with a delicately carved crest adorning it. Seeing this, Nephy and Foll held their breaths.

“That’s amazing...” Nephy said. “Even I can sense a strong blessing from it that can’t be carelessly meddled with.”

It seemed closer to mysticism than sorcery, not that Nephy could really tell. She didn’t know what it was specifically, but she could sense a strength within it that even the spirits wouldn’t dare challenge.

“Alshiera. So overprotective,” Foll said in astonishment.

“S-Such an old tale has nothing to do with the present, right?”

Ten years was practically yesterday to a vampire, but Nephy had promised not to pry, so she let it be.

“Others celebrated my birthday for me every year, but I really do consider this

my greatest treasure," Lilith added.

"How nice. Now that you mention it, when is your birthday, Lilith?" Nephy asked.

"Me? The thirty-first of Klimaka."

"Oh dear..." Nephy muttered apologetically. That was the day they had all traveled to Atlastia. "Please forgive me for not congratulating you at the time."

"Huh? No, I mean, it wasn't really the time for that. Besides, my parents celebrated with me normally, so don't worry about it. Wh-What about you, Sir Raphael?"

Lilith shot a pleading gaze over to the butler. He was, in fact, another valuable non-sorcerer in this castle. He could've had experience with celebrating birthdays, but Raphael looked troubled by the question.

"In my case, my subordinates celebrated with me several times. Having said that, it was common for us to entertain ourselves at the tavern, so I don't believe I'm a suitable reference," Raphael said, then paused for a bit and nodded upon suddenly remembering something. "Oh, but I have celebrated someone else's birthday. I gave Kuroka her cane on one such occasion."

The cait sith Kuroka had lost her vision in the past. That had already been the case when she met Raphael.

*I see. No wonder Kuroka treats that cane so dearly.*

"Foll, what about you?" Raphael asked.

"Me? Hmm... Oh. On the day I was born, my father would go out and get me a feast. Stuff like beholders and salamanders. They were super tasty."

Upon seeing her daughter with an unusual sparkle in her eyes, Nephy smiled.

*Oh, I suppose "go out and get" means hunted in this case.*

Even Nephy knew that beholders and salamanders were far beyond the means of the average sorcerer. It really spoke volumes of a dragon's true strength.

And just then, Nephy was suddenly shocked.

*Now that I think of it, I don't know Foll's birthday either! Isn't this a major failure as a parent?!*

"Um... When is your birthday, Foll?" Nephy asked her timidly.

It seemed somewhat shameful to ask that question after all this time, but Nephy had been left panicking because she hadn't known Zagan's birthday. Now wasn't the time to worry about such shame.

Foll thought it over for a bit, then nodded and said, "Then...I'm fine with the sixth of Didymo."

Nephy and Raphael's eyes widened at her answer.

"That was the day I became my liege's butler."

"Mhm. And the day Zagan and Nephy adopted me."

"Are you really all right with that?" Nephy asked in bewilderment. "You were born on a different day, weren't you?"

Foll shook her head as if it was no big deal, then said, "I mean, I've never counted it on a human calendar, so I don't know when it actually is. So yeah, that day is fine."

That made sense. There was no way a dragon would live in accordance with a human calendar. Her father, Orobas, had likely known exactly what day it was, but Foll had apparently never really given it any thought. Nephy crouched down to meet Foll's eyes and patted her head with a smile.

"Very well, then. Then let us have a wonderful celebration that day."

"Mmm! Sounds fun!"

Nephy then turned her gaze up to Raphael.

"So when is your birthday?"

He didn't seem to expect that question. Raphael looked somewhat amazed for a moment before answering, "The twenty-first of Kori."

That was around the time Nephteros had first stumbled into the church.

*Birthdays... Why haven't I wondered about them before?*

Nephy was ashamed of her own ignorance for missing such precious opportunities.

“Let’s get back on topic,” Nephy said, returning her gaze to Alshiera. “Do you happen to know how birthdays are meant to be celebrated, Lady Alshiera?”

“Huh? Me? Umm...” Alshiera trailed off. Her body stiffened, then she put her hand to her brow as if holding back a headache. “Um, Alshiere Imera ended up a national holiday, and before that would’ve been a thousand years ago... Did we do anything special?”

Nephy knew that Alshiere Imera was on the same day as this girl’s birthday, but it turned out having one’s birthday overlap with a national day of celebration was a bit of a hardship. According to Zagan, the church and vampires were in opposition, so that all seemed odd.

*Does this have something to do with Alshiere Imera sounding an awful lot like her own name, I wonder?*

It wasn’t possible that the church’s holy day actually celebrated the vampire herself, was it...? In any case, this girl had gone through a much harder life than Nephy or Zagan.

“However, there was, in fact, something I wanted to do to celebrate for someone...” Alshiera whispered. “Uh... What?”

Nephy had wrapped herself around Alshiera’s arm, while Foll grabbed the other one.

“Then it’s decided,” Nephy said.

“What is?”

“Whatever it is you wanted to do, we’ll do for Zagan,” Foll answered. “I mean, we don’t even know how to celebrate birthdays.”

A shudder ran through Alshiera as if she had fallen headfirst into a trap.

“Th-This is different from what we discussed!” she protested.

“No, we simply want to answer your feelings, Lady Alshiera. We have neither pried nor guessed at anything.”

Raphael then took his apron off and folded it neatly before saying, “Hm. If we are to make preparations out of sight from my liege, would it not be better to change locations? We have already finished cleaning up here.”

Raphael had finished putting away all of the tableware while the others had restrained Alshiera. That was Zagan’s butler, the pinnacle of efficiency.

“Thank you very much, Sir Raphael. Well then, shall we?” Nephy said.

“Where are you taking me?” Alshiera asked.

“Archdemon Palace will do. Zagan can’t hear us there, and I want to explore.”

“A wonderful suggestion, Foll. Let us invite Nephteros and Chastille as well. I think Nephteros in particular will be delighted by all this.”

With that, a brand new calamity had befallen Alshiera.

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Back in the throne room, with no way of knowing of the dire calamity in the kitchen, Zagan and Selphy faced each other. Based on the atmosphere, Kimaris knew this was no trivial matter, so he excused himself, saying he had work to do.

Now alone in the throne room, Zagan had Selphy close the door and take a seat. Her natural lower body was that of a fish, but she normally walked around with human legs. Despite coming here to talk, she remained silent and didn’t speak up.

*Mrgh, I’d like to start getting ready for Nephy’s birthday already...* However, this optimistic girl had come to none other than Zagan for advice. It had to be something rather serious. And as a king, he couldn’t simply forsake his subordinates.

Zagan patiently waited for her to speak, but since she refused to begin, he tried starting the conversation himself while refraining from acting in an overbearing manner to the best of his abilities.

“So? What happened?”

“Yeah... About that...”

Zagan was ready to punch her if she was going to complain about the side dishes that came with breakfast, but for the time being, it appeared to be a far more serious matter. After a short while, Selphy finally gathered her resolve.

“I don’t really know where to start... Ummm... There’s that, like, Furcas guy, right?”

That name coming up was pretty much to be expected.

“Right. I suppose I should tell you about him as well.”

After all the fuss that happened in the nightmare, Zagan had informed Lilith of the entire situation, but hadn’t explained anything to Selphy. This girl was Lilith’s best friend. Even if she didn’t need to know, she had the right to.

“Let me start by saying you mustn’t speak a word of this to anyone. If you let it slip with a ‘whoopsie’ like usual, you’ll face a suitable punishment.”

He ended up threatening her, but unexpectedly, Selphy nodded back, looking completely serious. After confirming this, Zagan cut to the chase.

“He’s an Archdemon, just like me.”

“Oh, that so?”

She didn’t sound interested at all, which left Zagan with a grimace.

*Uhhh... That’s not why she’s wary? Then why’s she concerned about Furcas?*

He didn’t really get it, but he still had more to say. Thus, Zagan cleared his throat and continued.

“Well, he is, in fact, still an Archdemon, but due to certain circumstances, he lost his memories. An ignorant Archdemon can be manipulated in countless ways, so I can’t simply throw him out. That’s why I’m looking after him.”

“Isn’t that, like, kinda dangerous?” Selphy asked in wonder. She finally recognized some danger in Furcas’s presence.

“A natural concern,” Zagan replied with a nod. “We don’t know when his memories will return, and there’s a pretty high chance he’ll turn hostile if they do.”

“Sooo...why are you sheltering him?”

“As I said, there’s a major risk in throwing him out. Besides, he was on the verge of death when he lost his memories, but Lilith saved him. Killing someone my subordinate risked her life to save can’t be done at my own discretion. Such is not the act of a king.”

A ruler of such poor caliber would be even worse than a tyrant.

*Well, I did make preparations to deal with him if need be, however.*

So long as Furcas possessed the Sigil of the Archdemon, nothing would be resolved by simply disposing of him. This made him somewhat annoying to deal with, but Zagan was at least prepared to protect Lilith and his other subordinates.

“So Lilith saved him...” Selphy muttered, putting her hand to her chest. “Does that person, like, actually love Lilith?”

Zagan cocked his head at the entirely unexpected question. He then took another look at her face. Her cheeks were flushed, she let out a pained sigh, and she even had tears forming in her eyes.

*Hm? Uh, what...?*

Well, Furcas had, in fact, boldly confessed his feelings to Lilith in the middle of a packed room. Selphy had even been there herself, so Zagan didn’t think she really needed to ask.

“I don’t really get it,” Selphy continued with ragged breaths. “When I watch that person court Lilith, it kinda makes my chest hurt. My eyes get, like, all hot and stuff, and I even start crying... I just don’t get it...”

Zagan’s mind went blank upon hearing her shocking confession.

*Doesn’t that mean...? Wait, no... Huh? Why?*

Those were phenomena he was all too familiar with. There was no mistaking it. In other words, Selphy had come here for none other than...love advice.

It was a serious problem that far surpassed his imagination. Even with the intelligence of an Archdemon, he had yet to grasp the matter entirely. Had anything even happened to make Selphy fall in love with Furcas? Well, maybe there wasn’t a logical reason at all, but it still seemed far too sudden.

Honestly, Zagan couldn't help but think she had come to the wrong person for advice. Why didn't she ask Nephy? Still, objectively speaking, Selphy's feelings were pretty clear, even to him. Having said that, she seemed to be suffering because she herself didn't see the answer.

Zagan folded his arms, looked up at the ceiling, and closed his eyes.

*Is this really something I can say to the person in question?*

He worried for about a full minute—this being the first time he had ever considered something that had nothing to do with Nephy for such a large amount of time—then finally arrived at his answer.

"Right, how to put this..." he started. "I believe I know what this feeling you harbor is. Actually, from an objective standpoint, this is nothing more than my opinion."

Selphy didn't respond. Instead, she kept her eyes fixed on Zagan and waited for him to continue. After taking in a small breath, Zagan said exactly what he thought in a heavy tone.

"I believe this emotion in your heart is love."

Her eyes shot wide open at the shocking revelation before she gave Zagan a limp and resigned smile.

"Ha ha... So it really is, huh?"

She had vaguely realized it herself already. She simply hadn't wanted to acknowledge it.

*Well, nobody wants to admit they fell in love with the man trying to court their best friend.*

That was why she couldn't discuss it with Nephy, let alone Lilith. Kuroka was currently away from the castle, and Gremory was out of the question. In that case, Zagan really was the only person Selphy could speak to openly. He couldn't even begin to guess how heavily such a choice had weighed upon her. That being the case, he wanted to be of as much use to her as he could.

*But what should I even do?*

"I actually thought that may have been the case," Selphy said with a self-

deprecating smile, ignoring Zagan's inner turmoil. "No... I probably knew the answer a long time ago."

"Hmm... Hang on, a long time ago?"

Hadn't Selphy and Furcas only met three days ago? Something felt amiss, but Zagan couldn't put his finger on what.

Selphy continued speaking as if looking back at distant memories, saying, "I think I started feeling like this when I was, like, around eleven? Back then, that smile wishing me a happy birthday was so pretty. It had my heart thumping, and hurting, but for some reason, only my face felt like it was on fire..."

That would've placed this around five or six years ago. How had she met Furcas back then? At the time, Liucaon had been under Marchosias's protection, so not even an Archdemon could've meddled in that region.

"That's why I ran away from home. It's true I was sick of the old customs saying our songs couldn't be heard outside the royal family, but this was probably the bigger reason... I mean, isn't this, like, kinda weird?"

*Hang on, who exactly is Selphy talking about?*

Zagan's bewilderment deepened. He thought she had been talking about Furcas, but considering the circumstances, that seemed impossible. So who was it that Selphy had fallen in love with? She continued telling her tale with an awkward smile, sounding like she would cry at any moment.

"I knew I shouldn't feel this way, so I couldn't stay there anymore. After a few years, I thought I got my feelings back in order, but after seeing that person court her, my heart felt so murky..."

"Sorry... Can I check something with you real quick?"

Zagan knew it was wrong of him to interrupt her, but there was something he just had to confirm.

"Is this person you're in love with...Lilith?" he asked her timidly.

Selphy's cheeks turned bright red upon hearing that.



*Ah... So it really is her?*

Zagan bent backward on his throne out of pure shock for the second time that day. If pushed to say it, he actually felt there were more signs of this nature coming from Lilith. He never thought Selphy would be the one who was seriously in love.

*Wait, hang on. Is it possible she's confusing friendship with romantic interest?*

Although, judging from her expression, there wasn't much room for doubt. Still, taking a wrong step here could lead to something that couldn't be undone, so he had to ask.

Zagan took in another deep breath, then said, "Umm, well, how to put this... It'd be troublesome if I have it wrong, so I want to ask you something. I don't know anything about how women feel, so it might sound strange. If I offend you, just ignore me. Is that fine with you?"

Selphy nodded at his lengthy preface, so Zagan threw his question at her immediately.

"Well, you know, love is different from friendship... Um, I mean, like the desire to kiss... It usually involves such feelings, I think. How are you on that front?"

"You mean, do I see her with, like, sexual interest?"

Despite Zagan's extremely roundabout approach, the person in question replied in an utterly frank manner. Having said that, Selphy likely hadn't given it much thought before this point. She had both her hands clasped over her lap as she gave it serious consideration. Before long, however, she replied with clear resolution.

"I do. I mean, I think she'd satisfy me way more than any man."

*S-So strong...!*

Her powerful statement even earned the respect of Archdemon Zagan. Actually, Lilith was supposed to be a specialist when it came to matters of the night, so that made sense.

*Hang on, is it okay for these two to share a room?*

Pulling them apart now felt cruel, but it'd be troublesome if something were to happen. Zagan felt like Lilith would actually accept her, though.

*Huh...? Doesn't that mean their love is mutual?*

He hadn't confirmed Lilith's feelings quite yet, but she didn't seem dissatisfied with the idea. In any case, there was no mistaking Selphy's feelings. Zagan let out a groan when suddenly, Selphy's expression clouded over.

"Ha ha... I guess it really is gross..." she said.

"Gross? How so?"

Zagan was left wide-eyed by the unexpected direction of her worries. This time it was Selphy's turn to be confused.

"I-I mean, we're both girls, right...? So feeling like this is kinda..."

Zagan shook his head in astonishment and replied, "If there can be love between species, then why can't there be love between the same sex?"

If Nephy were to turn into a man due to some sort of accident, would Zagan stop loving her? Or if he were to turn into a woman, would Nephy no longer love him? He didn't believe either case to be true.

He did want Nephy to remain as she was, but Zagan would still love her even if she was a man. That wouldn't change at all if he turned into a woman either. Considering the curse that had afflicted Stella and Decarabia, sorcery that changed genders did, in fact, exist, even if only temporary. Well, Zagan had never heard of anyone doing it intentionally, but there was normal transformation sorcery as well, so it wasn't a completely impossible situation.

Honestly, Zagan still didn't have a complete grasp on normal romance, but even disregarding that, he felt that once someone came to harbor such feelings, race or gender had nothing to do with it.

Rather, with that troublesome granny running about all the time, gender seemed like a trivial matter. At the very least, there was no need to deny Selphy's feelings. That was especially the case after seeing Kuroka and Shax lately... Though, in their case, there were obstacles completely unrelated to race to overcome, but there was no choice for them but to do their best to

surmount them.

*Actually, if her feelings are considered gross, then what about me?*

He was a man who had spent a million gold to buy his bride. It wasn't clear how many of his thoughts had gotten across to her, but Selphy flashed him a smile filled with gratitude.

"Thanks... I feel like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders."

"I-I see. That's good."

Zagan didn't really think he had given her any useful advice, but Selphy stood from her seat as if fully satisfied already.

"Umm, so what do you plan on doing?" he asked her.

"I still don't really know what I want to do," Selphy replied, scratching her head. "So I guess I'll, like, treat my feelings with a little more care for a bit."

"I see... Well, if you feel at a loss again, feel free to come to me whenever you want. I'll at least hear you out."

He still felt that talking to him wasn't much better than talking to a wall, but just having a face to speak to must've made a world of difference.

Selphy gave him a small nod, then turned around and said, "I'm really glad I came to see you, Mister Zagan."

With that, she smiled. She looked just as carefree as usual, but also somewhat more mature. Zagan didn't know whether he was of proper use, but Selphy was back to her normal self as she left the throne room.

*Poor Furcas has some pretty grim prospects, huh?* Zagan thought to himself as he plopped back onto his throne. Did the boy have any chance of beating Selphy? He wasn't exactly rooting for him or anything, but seeing him faced with such a towering and mighty obstacle, he at least felt sympathy.

Zagan let out an exhausted sigh. He wanted to start preparing for Nephy's birthday right away, but he didn't feel like he could stand at the moment.

# Chapter II: When Crybabies Attract, Everyone Else Has It Rough

“My name is Asura! Hex Arm Asura! The Hero of the West, Asura! Carve it into your mind!”

That was what the boy exclaimed as he revealed himself to me. I had never seen him before. He was a human with scarlet hair and crimson eyes, which meant he was a grigori. They were quite common among Solomon’s team. They were a rather tragic people who were used as tools by the seraphs.

In this world, where all people but seraphs were undesirables, attention from seraphs didn’t make the grigori a symbol of envy. They were disposable tools. The seraphs killed them without any particular rhyme or reason. They were just toys to be played with.

Born under the management of the seraphs, they didn’t even have the choice of running away like all the other races. Those who had survived this long were, without exception, granted life at the cost of another. In that sense, it could have been said that they were the race the seraphs hated the most.

The grigori boy stood in an imposing stance, blocking my path and gazing at me with hopeful eyes. After several seconds of standing there in a confused daze, I realized he was apparently introducing himself to me.

I found it a tremendous pain to remember names and faces. I mean, even if I tried to remember, everyone vanished rather quickly. Thus, I did my best to avert my eyes and walk past him. I was still carrying Murdock around. It was heavy, and I had to go maintain it, so I was rather busy.

“Hey, hang on! Why’re you ignorin’ me?!”

He clung to me with teary eyes. Most people understood when I ignored them and didn’t try talking to me, so his reaction was rather unexpected. Upon closer inspection, I noticed that he looked to be somewhere around fourteen or fifteen years old. Perhaps such behavior made sense for a child. I stopped

walking and turned around with an extremely displeased look on my face. The boy stared at me blankly for a moment, then shot back to his feet with vigor and puffed out his chest.

“Heh. You’re the ace around these parts, yeah? Well, I’m the man who butchered the seraphs to the west. Let’s get along as fellow leaders!”

I gave him a nod that was accompanied by a sigh of understanding. Newcomers showed up here every now and then. They tended to say inexplicable things when driven by the high of knowing they were going to fight seraphs, so his act didn’t surprise me in the least.

Having said that, I was still a child myself. I had no reason to live except for a burning desire for revenge. I wasn’t such a remarkable person that I could look down on him for his excitement. As such, I gave him the minimal courtesy of a slight nod—something Orobas and Solomon never got off my back about—and turned on my heel.

“Hey! At least tell me your name!”

I couldn’t answer him on the spot. This wasn’t because I found it troublesome, however. I simply couldn’t remember my name. Solomon and my older brother called me Ashy, but that was but a nickname. I had a proper name of some kind, but for whatever reason, I couldn’t recall it.

Still, it didn’t make much of a difference. If anyone needed me, they could just say “Hey” or “You there.” Everyone eventually died while fighting the seraphs, anyway. If we were to bury each of the deceased and carve their names on tombstones, they would probably fill the entire continent to capacity.

I wasn’t sure how the boy interpreted my reaction. All I knew was there was suddenly a look of extreme sorrow in his eyes. He probably thought I was ignoring him. Well, I was used to people thinking that way. I was aware of how little I thought of being cooperative. And yet, the boy lowered his head as if he had committed an irredeemable mistake.

“Sorry...” he said, then laughed it off with a troubled look. “So how ’bout this? When I make it back alive after the next sortie, you tell me your name. Will that do?”

The boy left me behind without even waiting for my answer. After that, he came back from the next battle just as he had declared so proudly. I ended up having to rely on Orobas so that I could remember my own name. It then became a habit for this boy to make arbitrary demands of me every single time he did battle with the seraphs.

*When I get back, have a meal with me.*

*When I get back, tell me what you like.*

*When I get back, let me hear you sing.*

*When I get back... When I get back...*

At first, I found the whole thing unpleasant, but eventually, I got used to it and all feelings of discontent had since vanished. The boy was certainly strong. The grigori boasted of great strength by nature. His wounds healed quickly, and above all else, a single strike from his Hex Arm broke a seraph's barrier with the same ease as the Seraph Hunters.

He was, in fact, far stronger than I was, seeing as I could only shoot my targets from a safe distance. It looked like he wasn't going to vanish from my life. Just like Solomon and my brother, it seemed he would continue fighting with us. When I first began to believe that, we ended up going to battle with one of the high seraphs.

*High Seraph Camael.*

In general, seraphs had a pair of wings made of light that sprouted from their backs. These were called Hex Wings. They were also the true nature of a seraph's barrier. Two wings already gave them powers akin to gods, but high seraphs had six wings.

Each additional Hex Wing apparently multiplied their powers greatly, far more than just double per wing. With six of them, a high seraph was at a level far beyond three regular two-winged seraphs.

My role was to destroy at least three of the high seraph's wings before Camael wiped out the vanguard. This was sure to lead to many sacrifices. The vanguard was being supported by that boy—by Asura.

Despite the odds, they were confident they could hold out for thirty seconds. Still, that was very little time to shatter three Hex Wings. If I missed even one shot, everyone was sure to die. Plus, the seraph obviously wasn't going to simply stand still and offer me the perfect shot.

When the battle began, I desperately lined up my sights and squeezed the trigger. There was no point in surviving. I always dreamed of fighting, struggling, leaving even a single claw mark on a seraph, then dying. But in that moment I knew I couldn't die. I knew I couldn't die until I fulfilled my role. At the very least, Asura and his warriors were staking their lives, trusting wholeheartedly that I would shatter those wings.

I shot out one wing, and taking advantage of the seraph's agitation, I lined up a second shot and fired. With two wings gone, even the high seraph had to begin taking evasive maneuvers. Once a seraph focused entirely on dodging, their movement far surpassed human perception. It was impossible to cope with this at short range, which was why we needed to deal with them through long-range sniping.

The high seraph cut down my comrades one after another. Sweat began soaking my palms as I gripped my Seraph Hunter. My finger trembled on the trigger. However, I shook off my panic by taking a deep breath.

*It's okay. I can do it,* I reassured myself. The high seraph was fast, but it hadn't vanished entirely. I simply had to predict my target's trajectory.

I fired a third shot. A third wing shattered. Twenty seconds had passed. However, after taking three shots from the same spot, I had attracted the high seraph's attention. A single strike from a seraph's attack could easily obliterate a small village. That was the case for one with two Hex Wings, so a high seraph with three could unleash devastation on an entirely different scale. I had no hope of fleeing to safety.

The three remaining wings on the high seraph's back radiated light as it held a luminescent spear aloft. There was a thousand meters between us. The Seraph Hunter had a muzzle velocity of 853 meters per second, which meant it would take just over a second for a bullet to reach my target. In contrast, this spear of light erased its target the instant it was released.

I would be annihilated by the time my bullet landed. I couldn't intercept the attack or evade it.

*In that case, I'll just shoot!*

I couldn't be saved, but the seraph couldn't dodge while attacking either. I found myself surprised by my composure as I took in a breath. My finger trembled. I had the fourth Hex Wing in my sights. The hammer fell on the striking pin, unleashing a bullet from the muzzle.

A sudden thought came to mind.

*What did Asura say this time? When I get back—*

I watched through my scope as the spear of light extended, when suddenly...

"I won't let you kill Ashy!"

I felt like I saw a boy dive in front of the light. And then, I passed out. When next I awoke, I found myself atop a bed in Orobas's castle. The dragon, who'd taken on the form of an old man, sat by my side. He had apparently been caring for me.

I tried sitting up, which sent waves of pain coursing through my body. I had over twenty fractured bones, including three of my ribs, my upper arm, my collarbone, my femur, and my tibia. What's more, my entire body was covered in high-degree burns. And yet, I was somehow alive.

Orobas gave me a brief summary of what had happened since I collapsed. Three days had passed. High Seraph Camael had been defeated. We had won.

He told me that Murdock's barrel was broken. And then, he told me Asura hadn't returned.

At that time, Asura's Hex Arm had managed to deflect the seraph's spear ever so slightly. That was why I had barely managed to survive.

What was it that boy had wanted me to do when he got back this time...?

*When I get back...*

*When I get back, show me your smile.*

Pain that was completely unrelated to any of my broken bones surged

through my heart. My mind turned into a mess, and before I knew it, hot tears streamed down my cheeks. The old dragon said nothing and stuck close by my side.

I had always wished for death, but in the end, he had also died before me. He had been another one of the irresponsible ones. However, considering the fact that my heart was in a state where I hadn't even bothered to remember my own name, recalling how to cry had definitely saved me.

This was one of the precious memories that supported me over the years of my long life to follow.

◇

"Alshiera, are you listening?" Foll asked, bringing Alshiera back from her memory trip.

"Oh, sorry about that. I've been remembering many things since coming here."

They were in the entrance hall of Archdemon Palace, where the golem made out of a demon had previously resided. Nephy and Lilith were also with them. Looking up, Alshiera saw enormous stone statues lording over the hall just as they had in the past. These were golems that could fire Heaven's Phosphor that had been modified exclusively for Gremory's use.

Raphael had remained in the castle. There was apparently a need to scheme a little to keep Zagan from figuring out what they were up to, and the butler also had housework to attend to. All the people in charge of such tasks couldn't leave the castle at the same time.

Several hours had passed since Alshiera was abducted from the kitchen. During that time, she had given them an explanation of how birthdays were celebrated—or, well, Lilith did, mostly—but it was still questionable whether any of it had truly gotten through to them.

*They really are such adorable children.*

They were all so brave, so pure, so earnest that Alshiera wanted to protect them, even if they weren't Zagan. She had started to feel like she no longer wanted to part with them. Her remaining time was already nearing its end,

but...

*How unsightly of me.*

A thousand years ago, they had also fought while believing they didn't have much time. Alshiera shook off her sentimentality as Foll shot her a puzzled look.

"What did you remember?" she asked.

"Nothing, really. Just recalling some memories of an old friend."

Zagan's subordinates were also at Archdemon Palace. Of the forty or so personnel who worked under him, around thirty percent served at the castle, sixty percent at Archdemon Palace, and the remaining ten percent were dispatched to the church and various other missions. Shax was part of that last ten percent.

In other words, the entrance hall had sorcerers passing through it at all times, so Alshiera opened one of its doors and proceeded further within. A long corridor stretched before her with many doorways lining its walls. They primarily served as guest rooms in the modern era, but a thousand years ago, they were sickrooms, storerooms, and waiting rooms for Seraph Hunter wielders, among other things. She walked down the hallway with the three other girls behind her. After passing three, then four doors, she stopped at the fifth.

"This room will do."

The walls around it were thick, which kept the sound inside, so it was the perfect place to talk in secret. Nothing of the past remained here, but this was once the sickroom Alshiera had spent time in. She proceeded to open the door without so much as knocking.

"H-Huh? What?"

A masked sorcerer with a large build was already inside. He seemed to be in the middle of working on something, seeing as he wasn't wearing his robes, exposing his muscular upper body. He had his back turned with a hammer in hand, and the moment he saw Alshiera enter, his single eye darted about in confusion.

“Um, Lady Alshiera?” Nephy said in bewilderment. “It seems to already be occupied, so should we not look for another room...?”

Nephy took a peek inside, meeting the gaze of the baffled sorcerer.

“Um, you are Lord Naberius...right?” she asked. “I’m sorry for the sudden intrusion.”

She had never properly introduced herself to him, so Nephy gave him an elegant curtsy alongside those words.

“O-Oh, you’re...Nephy? Zagan’s bride?” he asked in return.

Her pointy ears turned red upon hearing that.

“Oh... Um... Yes... But we’re still only at the stage of dating, so...”

Despite being glued to each other day and night, she apparently still felt embarrassed when others pointed out how close they were. Well, the people of the castle only ever watched those two from afar, so there nobody ever really said it to her face. In a sense, her timid nature when confronted was perfectly natural.

Nephy blushed, a happy yet embarrassed expression on her face. In contrast, Alshiera could tell that Naberius had turned deathly pale under his mask. Throwing aside the tool in his hand, he rushed over to Alshiera, grabbing her by the arm and dragging her into the room.

“A-Aha ha ha ha. I’ll be borrowing this girl for a moment, okay?” he said, then slammed the door shut without waiting for a reply. This room had been assigned to Naberius to use as his workshop. He had been tasked with the duty of repairing Alshiera’s Seraph Hunters and fulfilling an order from Zagan.

Taking a closer look, Alshiera could see one Seraph Hunter sitting on a table in the room. The chair Naberius had been seated at was in front of a hammer and anvil, along with a high output furnace that could be controlled with mana. She couldn’t spot exactly what he was working on, however, perhaps because it was in the middle of being cleansed in chemicals.

Even with his mask on, she could tell Naberius made a ghastly expression as he closed in on her.

“Are you insane?!” he yelled. “What are you thinking, bringing that girl here?!”

He shook her shoulders back and forth. A muscular man was shaking a little girl who had a stuffed doll in her arms, which didn’t exactly paint the prettiest picture. In any case, Zagan had requested that Naberius prepare Nephy’s present in secret. It would be troublesome for Nephy to see him making it. Alshiera knew this, of course. She had also known he would be here. However, she simply looked up at the ceiling, feigning ignorance.

“I wanted someone to share the unreasonable misfortune that has suddenly fallen into my lap,” she shamelessly admitted.

“Like I care!” Naberius wailed, grabbing her by the collar with tears in his eye. “Didn’t you bring this on yourself due to your habitual mischief?! Why do you have to drag me down with you?!”

“Speak for yourself. Is this not all a result of your usual mischief?”

Things had gotten somewhat hazy because of Zagan’s intervention, but Alshiera hadn’t forgiven the man for putting Lilith in danger. Well, Lilith had technically already gotten involved, but he had still tried to egg her on without knowing that.

Whatever the case, Naberius knew that Alshiera was still mad at him. If Zagan’s request were to be revealed, Naberius would no longer have his protection from Alshiera, and Zagan would become his enemy. There would be no way for him to survive.

Still, Alshiera hadn’t been the one to propose talking in secret at Archdemon Palace, so Naberius could only resign himself to his bad luck.

“Nothing about you aside from your face and voice and personality is cute at all!” he spat out, grinding his teeth.

“Are you complimenting me or disparaging me?” she replied in astonishment.

“Lady Alshiera?” a reserved voice called out from the other side of the door. “Would it not be better for us to go to another room after all...?”

“It’s fine,” Alshiera answered. “This man is simply shy. Don’t worry, he’ll

kindly provide you with advice on a present to pick."

"Noooooo!" Naberius's quiet shriek was music to Alshiera's ears. He seemed to have given up, so she went to open the door. With a snap, all the tools in the room vanished thanks to sorcery before anyone could see them.

"Um, is it really all right...?" Nephy asked timidly.

Having just managed to hide everything, Naberius placed his hand on his mask and turned around at the waist with a laugh. His incomprehensible mind apparently allowed him to quickly regain his composure, so no one questioned his actions.

"You're rather polite, aren't you? Unlike a certain vampire. I was in the middle of working, so it's a bit of a mess, but don't mind me and come on in."

"Th-Then, please excuse us..." Nephy mumbled and bent back slightly, overwhelmed by Naberius's behavior, before stepping into the room.

"May I also come in?" Foll asked, peeking into the room all the while.

"Foll. You are the Silver-Eyed King's daughter, meaning you're practically the master of this castle. There is no room you may not enter freely," Alshiera told her.

"Really?"

"I'm surprised you have the nerve to so calmly indoctrinate someone else's polite daughter with such nonsense. What happened to you not being allowed to get involved with the comings and goings of the living?"

Alshiera thought she heard someone complaining, but it was probably just her imagination. Foll gave her a quick nod, then entered the room. Lastly, Lilith timidly looked inside.

"Oh... Um, you're the person who helped save me that time...right? Uh, I haven't properly thanked you for that yet. So, well, thank you. My name is Lilith."

Now that Alshiera thought of it, Lilith and Naberius had met, but had never had the opportunity to speak to each other, let alone do proper introductions. Lilith gave him a bow, and for some reason, Naberius pushed his hand against

his mask—likely where the corner of his eye was—and hung his head.

“Um, are you okay?” Lilith asked him.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry... My heart was simply shaken by the fact that there’s a girl who can show proper gratitude here...”

Alshiera shut the door, sealing off all sound from the outside. It was a spacious room, befitting its former use as a sickroom. It had about as much space as the entrance hall. Half the room was lined with tattered beds, while the other half had become Naberius’s workshop, where all sorts of tools were set aside.

Alshiera walked up to the bed closest to the workshop side, pulled a handkerchief out of her beloved stuffed doll, placed it atop the bed, and took a seat. Everyone else followed suit and started sitting down as well.

Naberius leaned against the wall opposite Alshiera. Foll plopped down on the chair to her right. There wasn’t a chair on the left, so Lilith restlessly took a seat on the next bed over. Nephy hesitated over where to go before deciding to take a seat on the same bed as Alshiera, right next to her. Thus, they all formed an impromptu circle.

Just then, a rumble erupted from Foll’s stomach.

“Oh my. Are you hungry, Foll?” Alshiera asked.

“No, but something smells really good here.”

“A smell...?”

Foll’s amber eyes sparkled as she stared at Naberius.

*Oh, she did mention being treated to beholders on her birthday...*

An adult beholder was far beyond the reach of a young dragon, but age actually accented their vast mana and flavorful meat. Foll wasn’t just any young dragon, though; she also had power on par with an Archdemon, granting her more than enough strength to challenge the strongest of beholders. Given her growth at such a young age, she would likely surpass Wise Dragon Orobas by the time she grew up.

“I’d rather you not look at me with the eyes of a predator...” Naberius

grumbled, his eye quaking behind his mask.

“Don’t be so stingy. Come now, why not offer her one of your arms?” Alshiera suggested.

“I’m already running a deficit here. Why must I cut off pieces of my own body on top of that?”

Just looking at Naberius’s annoyed face—or, well, his mask—Alshiera felt satisfied.

“It’s unfortunate we couldn’t invite Nephteros, but shall we begin?” Nephy said, getting things back on track now that everyone was seated.

“Zagan was headed for the church. It would’ve been dangerous to try to let her know,” Foll said.

The girls had tried to head to the church before coming to Archdemon Palace, but Zagan had just been on his way there as well. There was a fairly high risk of bumping into him, so they had given up on contacting Nephteros and gone straight to their final destination instead.

*I could’ve always contacted her with bats...*

Still, Alshiera had no obligation to cooperate to that extent. More importantly, Zagan had gone to see Nephteros because of the problem she was burdened with. It was a heavy subject. Alshiera knew this, having spent the last month glued to Nephteros’s side, but she didn’t have a solution either.

Given the situation, they couldn’t possibly call Nephteros over so brazenly just to celebrate Zagan’s birthday. These girls did not need to know of that situation for now, however. Foll was the only one giving Alshiera a curious look, but she figured the topic was better left untouched and kept her silence.

“So, do we celebrate birthdays by holding a party much like we did for Alshiere Imera?” Nephy asked as she turned toward Lilith.

At the sudden mention of her own birthday’s name, Alshiera let out a groan. Naberius gave her a curious look, then seemed to realize what was bothering her, a look of joy gracing his face in response.

He brought both his hands in front of his chest and shamelessly declared,

“You’re right. Alshiere Imera is a ritual to celebrate the holiest of maidens who’s revered by the church. Even if they are antipodes, it isn’t a bad idea to imitate such a celebration for an Archdemon’s birthday.”

Alshiera grit her teeth while maintaining a pleasant smile. That was apparently his petty form of revenge for her recent behavior. Her teeth creaked under the pressure, almost liable to shatter. And with no signs of noticing this animosity behind the scenes, Nephy raised her head as if remembering something.

“Alshiere Imera... Now that I think of it, we found an inscription in the holy city’s treasury that might have been related to it in some way.”

“Huh...?” Alshiera muttered, completely dumbfounded by the unexpected remark.

“What did it say?” Naberius asked, leaning forward with great interest. “Anything related to Alshiere Imera could be a reference for a birthday party, right?”

“No, wouldn’t imitating a church event for an Archdemon’s birthday be a questionable choice?” Alshiera protested coldly. However, Nephy didn’t pay her any mind.

Nephy knew that Alshiere Imera was on the same day as Alshiera’s birthday, but she didn’t know that it was an actual celebration of it. It seemed that was a miscalculation on the vampire’s part. Nephy put her finger to her lips as she tried to remember the inscription.

“Ummm, I think it was ‘Please save the endlessly pitiful one. If you are the one who wields the thirteen swords and Sigils, we shall yield the path to you.’”

Alshiera’s face burned in embarrassment. She wanted to turn into mist and vanish from Kianoides entirely.

*What are you carving into your treasury, you stupid brother of mine?!*

“Hmmm. Heh heh. That’s quite the inscription,” Naberius said, scratching his chin with a knowing look.

All Alshiera could do in protest was direct her bloodlust at him, implying she

would kill him if he said anything unnecessary. It was a complete waste of effort with this Archdemon, though.

“The thirteenth...” Naberius muttered in an unexpectedly serious tone.

Nephy had only said thirteen. Alshiera’s brow shot up at the mention of this word.

*“That” was fixed in Naberius’s generation, if I recall correctly...*

He’d ended up finding out something unnecessary, it seemed.

“Ha ha ha. What an amusing story,” he said with a pleased nod. “As thanks... Oh, you’re deciding on Zagan’s present, right? I’ll help you prepare anything, so long as it’s within my capabilities.”

“Really? Thank you very much, Lord Naberius,” Nephy replied.

“Don’t worry about it. We should help each other out in our times of need, right?”

It took Alshiera everything she had to keep her right hand from drawing her Seraph Hunter and aiming it at the sorcerer’s detestable gaze, which peeked through his mask. Having noticed the burning rage behind her smile, Lilith let out a quiet shriek and jumped up.

“Is something the matter, Lilith?” Nephy asked with a cock of the head.

“I-I-I-I-I-It’s nothing,” Lilith replied, vigorously shaking her head before lifting a finger to change the subject. “More importantly, you wanted to decide on a present, right? Is there anything in particular you want to give him?”

“A present... Well, the kiseru pipe I gave him last time seemed to please him greatly.”

“Oh, you mean the one he puffs at whenever he’s in a great mood? He really does seem to like it, yeah.”

He didn’t smoke much in front of others, but he’d clearly taken a shine to that present.

*Well, I’m pretty sure he’d be overjoyed by anything Lady Nephy gives him...* Alshiera smiled at the thought.

“Naberius, what can you make?” Foll asked.

“Oh, right. I can make pretty much anything out of metal, ranging from small jewelry like a ring to larger items like swords...or even magical machinations like Seraph Hunters.”

He gave Alshiera a pointed gaze, to which she returned a girlish smile.

*I really should just kill him here.* The temperature in the room dropped at the thought, leaving Lilith trembling and on the verge of tears.

Foll nodded, not really showing any signs of noticing Lilith’s panicked state, and said, “Jewelry or a weapon? Which would be better?”

“Hmmm...”

The three girls groaned in unison. They likely wished to pick something memorable for a birthday present, but Zagan was an Archdemon, so he would surely continue to throw himself into battle. As such, they also had to consider getting him something more practical to help guard his life. Whatever the case, the greatest blacksmith in the world stood before them.

Alshiera gazed at them as they pondered the problem, but her thoughts were elsewhere entirely.

*His bride, his daughter, and...* Her focus was on Lilith, but she didn’t look directly at her. Excluding Naberius, what fate could have brought those who were so closely related to Zagan together like this? Even without any blood relations, they were his family.

*How much does the Silver-Eyed King remember, I wonder...*

He hadn’t even recalled Alshiera’s face. Which meant, in all likelihood, he didn’t remember anything. But still, even so, even if it was just her own selfish desire...

*I want him to remember Lilith...*

Zagan wasn’t responsible for any of this. He was the biggest victim, if anything. The fact that he was still alive was something to be endlessly thankful for.

*But still, the Silver-Eyed King entrusted those two to me.*

And yet, Alshiera hadn't been able to meet his expectations. The life she had thought completely exhausted had been extended once more, so unnecessary desires were beginning to form within her. That was the real reason she had been so engrossed in her memories as of late. It had, in fact, been a necessity for her to tell the others of Zagan's birthday too. As she racked her mind over the matter, Lilith gave her a puzzled look.

"U-Um, My L— I mean, Alshiera?"

"What is it?"

She clearly hadn't gotten used to calling Alshiera by her name yet.

"Have I maybe met His Highness somewhere before?" she asked.

Alshiera's eyes widened in shock. She never thought Lilith would be the one to ask such a thing. The vampire was unnerved by the question, but she simply shook her head as if it was no big deal.

"Tee hee hee. There's no need to worry. You haven't met him."

"Really...?"

Alshiera was dodging the question but wasn't lying. Lilith could likely discern that fact. Even though she didn't look satisfied with the answer, she quietly backed down. Naberius also gave Alshiera a probing look.

*It seems that when I give myself up to the flow of events, I end up handing out too much unnecessary information. That won't do.*

It went against her principles to interfere in their lives, but Alshiera decided to correct the course of the conversation without bending the girls' wills.

"Let's see..." she said. "Wouldn't the Silver-Eyed King like something he could bring on a date with Lady Nephy?"

"Th-That's...certainly true..." Nephy said, the tips of her ears turning slightly red.

That was enough to get the girls to arrive at the correct answer.

"I see," Lilith said with a nod. "Why don't we get him a case for the kiseru pipe?"

“What an excellent idea! In that case, I’d like to try blessing it with mysticism,” Nephy exclaimed.

“It’s immediately become a legendary treasure...”

The girls sounded excited now. Things were heading in a good direction. Alshiera let out a sigh of relief when she noticed Foll was staring at her.

“Alshiera. What did you want to do?” she asked.

The vampire was left wide-eyed by the unexpected question.

“What do you mean?”

“You wanted to do something for Zagan, right? Well, we haven’t heard what yet.”

Foll really was a smart little girl. She’d brought that up even though Alshiera had forgotten about it herself. This was the reason they had all left the castle for Archdemon Palace to begin with. Before she knew it, Nephy and Lilith were now focusing on her. As for Naberius, well, she would rather he didn’t look at her.

Despite hesitating for a moment, Alshiera shrugged and resigned herself, saying, “It isn’t anything particularly significant. I just...”

She couldn’t find the right words. She knew this better than anyone, but Alshiera whispered as if remembering a dream, “I just want to hug him...and tell him congratulations. That’s all.”

However, past experience had proved that the act of wanting to hug him looked like nothing more than an attempted attack in Zagan’s eyes. Besides, even if she asked for such a thing, Zagan would surely hate it. She could easily hear him saying “What the hell are you planning?” And yet, the moment she began deriding herself, Nephy grasped her hand.

“Please tell him, Lady Alshiera.”

“It will only court suspicion. There’s no point in doing that on his birthday.”

This was karma, in a sense. Alshiera smiled bitterly.

“Master Zagan will be the one to decide that,” Nephy said with a reassuring

shake of the head. “Besides, he’s never experienced anyone celebrating his birthday before. If you know even a little of his past, then please offer him your congratulations.”

This bride of his was endlessly stubborn and overbearing when it came to Zagan. Alshiera suddenly raised her head, seeing that Foll and Lilith were also nodding along with her.

“Well...I’ll at least put in the effort,” Alshiera muttered.

“Please do. It’s a promise,” Nephy said.

She truly was merciless. After confirming that Alshiera had given in, Lilith turned to Naberius.

“So the idea is to make something to store the kiseru in. Do you happen to have any knowledge of this? None of us have ever smoked.”

“I do. Well, there are many different kinds of cases out there, so I’ll draw up some plans for you. I did get to hear about all sorts of amusing things today, so I owe you.”

Alshiera started giving some serious thought to bringing today’s matter to an end with this...when Naberius suddenly recalled something.

“Now that I think of it,” he said, “I haven’t spoken with you about this, have I, Lilith? How are things going with Furcas?”

Lilith’s face stiffened up splendidly when faced with the manifestation of a brand-new calamity.

◇

Around the same time that a calamity was befalling Lilith at Archdemon Palace, Zagan was walking the streets of Kianoides.

*Argh! What should I do about Nephy’s present?!*

She was sure to be happy with anything he got her, but that was exactly what made it tremendously difficult. Naberius was already making a ring for Zagan to give to Nephy. It was a wedding ring, which was a necessity between a normal husband and wife. However, that and her birthday were entirely different matters.

*As far as something Nephy's liked before... There were those gloves I gave her, I suppose?*

She had been rather delighted by the present he gave her for Alshiere Imera. She'd even gone as far as wearing them and rubbing them against her cheek when she slept. Simply trying to imagine such a thing was liable to have Zagan's heart bursting. Still, it was a bit of a problem that she treated them too dearly and didn't use them regularly.

*In that case, what about a ribbon?*

Nephy always had her beautiful white hair tied up in a red ribbon. If he got her one, she could actually use it every day, and she would most definitely wear it.

*But is a ribbon a suitable present from a man?*

Zagan didn't have the knowledge necessary to discern that. Perhaps it would've been better to honestly rely on Manuela or the like, but at times like these, he preferred to try and think things through himself. New clothes were another option, but when it came to clothing, he preferred to pick them out alongside Nephy, which would make it impossible to avoid getting Manuela involved.

As such thoughts crossed his mind, Zagan arrived at the church.

*Now then, I need to do something about this so that I can celebrate Nephy's birthday with no reservations.*

This was a problem that needed to be prioritized over Shere Khan's disposal. And just as he raised his hand to knock on the door...

"Huh? Zagan?"

"Hrm? Chastille?"

The door opened on its own from within, revealing a familiar face. Chastille—with scarlet hair and eyes—wore a dignified expression. She was apparently in work mode. When it came to her private life, she always turned into a complete wreck, but the same couldn't be said during work. She wasn't wearing the clothes of a bishop, but was instead clad in Anointed Armor.

“Judging by your appearance... Did something happen?” Zagan asked with a grimace.

This girl not only carried the title “Maiden of the Sacred Sword,” but was also the one in charge of this church. She usually dedicated herself to office duties, so she didn’t step onto the front lines often. It must’ve been an emergency for her to take up her sword.

Chastille shook her head with a troubled expression before replying, “No, it’s nothing all that serious yet. We’ve just been receiving multiple reports of a suspicious individual appearing on the outskirts of town. Given the current circumstances, I’m a little worried, so I’d like to go take a look with my own eyes.”

“On the outskirts, eh?”

Kianoides was under the rule of the church but was also Zagan’s domain. Multiple barriers that would react to any trespassing sorcerers protected the town. That only applied to the inside of the town, however. They couldn’t detect anything on the outskirts.

*Meaning someone with a who knows the exact location of the edge of my barrier is sneaking around to scope it out?*

At minimum, that required the skill of an Archdemon candidate to pull off. Zagan’s hunch was probably the same as Chastille’s.

“Do you think it’s one of Shere Khan’s subordinates?” she asked him to be sure.

“That would be the logical assumption...”

“You speak as if you have another idea.”

When it came to work, this girl really was rather capable.

Zagan nodded with an irritated look, then said, “It’s about time for Bifrons to take independent action. We should assume the worst-case scenario if that’s what’s going on, though; that bastard will surely take things one step further than that.”

“Did you come here to tell me that?” she asked with a grimace. She had

experienced this for herself already.

“Oh... No, I came to discuss a separate matter,” Zagan replied wearily. “I’d like to see Nephteros...”

He hadn’t come to town today to pick a present. His goal was to see Nephteros.

“Nephteros? She should still be in my office,” Chastille stated with a confused look. “Is it urgent? She said she was going to go to your castle in the afternoon.”

Nephteros visited the castle on a regular basis to get lessons in celestial mysticism from Orias. However, the topic he wanted to discuss would be difficult to broach in that situation. She was certain to hate the idea of Nephy overhearing them, and Zagan wanted to resolve this before her birthday. He believed Chastille should also know all about it, but she was heading out on patrol. Shaking her up too much could cause her work mode to crumble, so he decided not to involve her.

“Uhhh, oh right... Actually, I learned the date of Nephy and Nephteros’s birthday.”

“Huh? Their birthday?” Chastille mumbled, looking utterly confused. But then she pressed her hand against her brow upon figuring it out and said, “By that, you mean you didn’t know until now...?”

“I didn’t even know birthdays were meant to be celebrated...” Zagan muttered defensively.

The shadow at Chastille’s feet shook. Based on the unease Zagan could sense from within it, it seemed the master of this shadow also didn’t know that...or had completely forgotten. Zagan felt like he could even hear the rippling shadow say, “I’m begging you, ask the crybaby when her birthday is.”

*Ask her yourself, dammit...*

Having said that, it was clear as day that this man would ridicule Zagan for making a big fuss over Nephy’s birthday. If he shared the same concern, it would keep such behavior in check, to a certain extent.

“Now that I think of it, when were you born?” Zagan asked, seeing no other

recourse.

“Huh? I didn’t expect you to care.”

“I’ve got a reason to ask you about it now. It’ll make things easier down the line.”

Chastille cocked her head in bewilderment, but still answered, saying, “I was born on the nineteenth of Arnaki.”

“Hmm? That’s rather close to Nephy’s birthday. How convenient.”

The way the shadow at Chastille’s feet squirmed in desperation was ever so pleasant.

“Is that so? When is Nephy’s birthday?”

“The twenty-fourth, apparently... Don’t tell anyone, okay? I want to surprise her.”

“You two are the same as ever. Okay. I promise,” Chastille said...before pausing and asking, “So, when exactly is your birthday?”

“Does it look like I know?”

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

She quickly averted her gaze, figuring out the general gist of things right away. Then, she suddenly recalled something, turned back to Zagan, and asked, “Th-Then, do you happen to know when Barbatos’s birthday is?”

“Do you really think I know such worthless information?”

“I-It’s not actually worthless, right? Even he has the right to be congratulated on his birthday.”

The shadow jumped at the unexpected stray bullet.

“I see...” Zagan muttered with folded arms. “So one really must offer congratulations on a birthday.”

Chastille’s eyes shot open. A second later, she gave Zagan a gentle smile and said, “It’d be nice if we could figure out when your birthday is one day. I’m sure Nephy and all the others will want to celebrate it with you.”

“Perhaps you’re right...”

However, that could only happen if there was someone out there who knew the exact date. Zagan smiled bitterly, not knowing that the others were already panicking about what to do for his birthday.

“Now then, I should get back to work,” Chastille said. “I’ll get someone to call Nephteros for you... Torres, do you have a moment?”

She called out to someone inside the church, and one of the three idiots waltzed over. It was the spearman. He walked away to get Nephteros, and Chastille went on her way. Several minutes later, Nephteros came out of the church.

Her features were extremely similar to Nephy. She had pointy ears like an elf, and her hair was silver. In contrast to Nephy, however, her eyes were golden, and her skin was dark. She had settled down in the church but wasn’t actually a part of it, so she remained dressed like a sorcerer. The woman was now considered Nephy’s little sister but was actually her clone.

“It’s unusual for you to have business with me, Big Bro. Did something happen?”

“Yeah...” Zagan said as he walked his sister-in-law over to the plaza in front of the church and sat her down on a bench. “There’s something important I need to tell you. This might be somewhat harsh for you to hear, but...”

Nephteros stiffened up. However, perhaps having faintly realized this already, it didn’t take her all that much time to prepare herself.

“Okay... Let me hear it. What’s happening to my body?” she asked.

Zagan took a deep breath, then said in a clear voice, “Nephteros. You’re going to die in a few more months.”

Such was the problem Zagan had been racking his brain over to the point that he had to put thoughts of Nephy’s birthday celebration on hold.



◇

With no way of knowing the anguish Zagan was experiencing, Lilith found herself in an entirely different dilemma within Archdemon Palace. Nephy and Foll didn't appear disinterested in Naberius's question either. They weren't meeting her gaze, but were very clearly listening intently.

Silence reigned. Lilith did, of course, have the right to keep this to herself, but her heart wasn't able to withstand the pressure from an Archdemon's bride and daughter, another Archdemon, and the vampire who served as her home's protector.

Yes, even Alshiera, who'd feigned disinterest, was actually quite interested in the matter. She never thought that boy would become an Archdemon. Honestly, she had been quite surprised when she reunited with Furcas inside the barrier. Their paths had crossed five hundred years ago, and here he had reappeared before her with the Sigil of the Archdemon in his possession. Alshiera felt somewhat dejected that he didn't remember her. Even if long-lived beings like sorcerers could be seen everywhere, reuniting with someone after several centuries was a rare event.

And now, that boy was trying to seduce her cute little fawn. There was no way she would be disinterested. Such peer pressure could crush the faint of heart, yet Lilith squeezed out her words between ragged breaths.

"Ummm... Uhhh... I haven't...answered...yet..."

"Oh my. Is he not to your tastes?" Naberius asked, his eye wide as he shamelessly acted like this surprised him.

"No, that's not..." Lilith muttered, twiddling her fingers all the while.

"Do you hate sorcerers?" Foll asked, bending forward in her seat.

"N-No! The people of the castle are all sorcerers, and they're a lot nicer than I've heard. I don't have that kind of prejudice..."

Well, the lord of said castle spent every single day squirming over how he could get along with Nephy despite declaring she was his bride. Witnessing such a thing on a daily basis would make even the most jaded of sorcerers remember

their humanity.

“So is it his age, then?” Nephy asked. “Um, I’ve heard Lord Furcas is far older than he appears.”

“Huh? He’s that old?” Lilith asked.

“Oh! No! Please forget I ever said anything.”

“What?!”

This troubled Lilith even more. Nephy covered her mouth with both hands and averted her gaze. She was pretty bad at keeping secrets, so this was pretty much to be expected. In any case, what exactly did Lilith find inadequate about him? She didn’t look like she could withstand any more questions.

“Um! I mean...” Lilith muttered before anyone else could say anything. “I don’t really know what to do...when he so suddenly tells me he loves me...”

This innocent maiden with flushed cheeks was actually a succubus who gathered vitality by showing others obscene dreams. She also happened to be the princess of all succubi who boasted of the greatest strength among her people.

*Well, I would feel bad if we kept pushing the subject.*

Now that she had seen something so nice, Alshiera decided it was about time for her to mediate. However before she could say anything, Lilith quietly continued.

“Besides...I’m not the one he really loves.”

Alshiera scowled, unable to read the true intentions behind those words. It was pretty much impossible for Furcas to be in love with anyone else given his current state.

“Lady Alshiera,” Nephy whispered, leaning over to her ear. “Lilith saw that dream on the boat.”

Alshiera blinked a few times in confusion, unable to understand what that meant, then figured it out.

*He’s still clinging to that nightmare from five hundred years ago so zealously?*

Back then, a certain incident had brought Alshiera and Furcas together. They had acted together at the time, but were never reunited. She remembered him every now and then, only ever wondering what kind of life he had lived after that, but had never once tried looking for him. She'd already sworn not to get involved with the living, and the time they had in this world as a vampire and a human was far too different, anyway. However, this was a different matter for Furcas. The fact that they had seen that dream meant it was his very last memory. In other words, it held that much weight to his life. Alshiera rose from her seat and stood in front of Lilith, pressing her palms against her cheeks.

"Lilith, you've got it wrong," she said. "You're the only one in Furcas's heart right now. It's far too sad for you to doubt that."

However, Lilith shook her head, then looked right into Alshiera's golden eyes and said, "You didn't see what I did... He spent his entire life chasing after you."

"Oh, I get it now," Naberius chimed in with a nod. "I suppose that would trouble you, wouldn't it?"

"Can you not act like you know everything?" Alshiera replied, glaring at the Archdemon.

"Oh my. Perhaps you're the only one who doesn't know," he said teasingly before continuing as if singing a song. "The Valley Cat. The greatest master in the world of leaping through space. There was no land that Archdemon couldn't step foot on. And the last challenge he took up was passing through the barrier around the world. However, in the very end, he fell victim to the throes of despair."

"Despair...?" Alshiera repeated.

"Yes. He despaired at how he'd failed to find what he was looking for, even though he had already scoured the entire world. He despaired at how he had forgotten what he was even looking for to begin with. Though honestly, I never thought you'd be it."

Furcas had searched for Alshiera until all of his memories and emotions had shattered. Those words stabbed at Alshiera's heart.

"I see... Then I'm the one who killed him, huh?"

*If I'd stayed by his side until the end, none of this would've happened.*

She had meant to not get involved with the living but had ended up treating him far more brutally than she could imagine. She now had one more sin to carry before disappearing, but that was also exactly why it had to be this way.

Alshiera gripped Lilith's hand and said, "In that case, now that he has finally found a new love, I'd like you to properly answer him."

"Are you really fine with that, Alshiera?" Lilith asked.

"I never intended to accept him..."

When they had parted ways on that boat, she knew he had called out to her. However, Alshiera hadn't turned around. As a result, Furcas had lost everything. His past couldn't be changed. His future was a different matter, though.

"You may reject him. You may accept him. In either case, I'd like you to give him a proper answer."

Pushing what she hadn't done on children seemed extremely selfish and irresponsible of her, but that boy was finally able to look at the future now. The price for that was losing all of his memories, which was far too heavy a burden, but at least he was finally free. Regardless, Zagan had taken on the role of looking after him. So long as Furcas didn't betray him, Zagan would never abandon him.

"A new love..." Lilith muttered.

"Yes. People fall in love. There are times when it can't be realized, but that doesn't mean they aren't allowed to find a new love, right?"

So she said, but Alshiera found it very inconsistent with her own experience. Despite living for a thousand years, she would never forget her one and only love. Was it really possible to find another one? Love was a onetime thing in her mind. Once was more than enough. But that was also exactly why she wanted to affirm the boy who had found his next love.

"Okay. I'll give it some proper thought," Lilith finally said with a nod.

"Thank you."

Alshiera was sure this would cause Lilith a great deal of worry. Nevertheless,

the way the succubus nodded firmly to her request was so utterly beautiful.

◇

Come nighttime, after leaving the church, Zagan remained in Kianoides and went to a tavern. It was rare to see him alone with such a grim expression on his face, brooding in silence, which made the townsfolk realize once more, for the first time in a while, that this man was an Archdemon. As a result, nobody tried to speak with him.

Zagan had told Nephteros everything. He had tried not to shock her as much as he could, but just a year ago, he hadn't even understood the concept of being considerate. It wasn't clear how well his intentions had gotten across.

*"Nephteros. You're going to die in a few more months."*

She had apparently had a vague notion of this already, since she hadn't appeared terribly shaken by the news itself. However, she hadn't approved of Zagan's plan to resolve the matter. Not much could be done about that. Zagan was an Archdemon, a king among sorcerers. Any resolution he had to offer involved sorcery. Being born of sorcery to begin with, it was very difficult for her to accept such a thing.

*Nephteros is my sister-in-law. I must save her...*

Such thoughts drove Zagan, but keeping her alive through a means she didn't wish for couldn't be called saving her. That would be forcing his own beliefs on her, which was something Zagan despised the most in the world.

There was, of course, also the view that she could one day be saved so long as she survived. But in Zagan's opinion, such a view was simply a way to cope with troubled times. It wasn't justification for prolonging someone's life by forcing them to take medicine they didn't want. That was why he was left agonizing over the problem.

*I have no way of saving her.*

How could he possibly celebrate Nephy's birthday under such circumstances? He left the drink that had been brought to him untouched, completely immersed in his own sorrows, when an idiot took a seat across from the Archdemon without asking.

“Get lost, Barbatos. I’m in a bad mood.”

Sitting before him was a young man with the same unhealthy-looking face as always, enhanced by the large bags under his eyes that made it seem like he hadn’t slept for several days. He had many amulets dangling from his neck, a worn-out robe, and unkempt hair. This was one of the former Archdemon candidates and Zagan’s undesired friend, Barbatos.

Zagan failed to hide the irritation in his voice as a crack ran down the glass in front of him. He wasn’t exuding enough pressure to outright kill the faint of heart, but it would likely render them unconscious. The waitress, who had been waiting for the chance to take his order, gasped, but didn’t collapse. Now that he looked at her, he realized it was the same girl who had fainted when he’d first met Raphael.

Zagan’s anger could pretty much be considered an attack, but his grim friend didn’t even flinch, taking the cracked glass in hand. The ice inside had completely melted. Barbatos gulped its contents down in one go, then slammed the glass down in front of Zagan, shattering it to pieces.

“Like I give a shit about your mood,” Barbatos said.

“Do you want me to kill—?!”

This time Zagan spoke with clear killing intent, but Barbatos was the one to grasp him by the collar, flipping over the table. Silence dominated the tavern.

“What’s with your half-assed grumbling?! You wanna pick a fight? Then do it like you actually give a shit!” Barbatos yelled, then spat in rage. “The hell are you looking so goddamn depressed for?! You mad that elf rejected your stupid idea?!”

Zagan looked daunted by the unexpectedly straightforward words coming from this man’s mouth. He was the sorcerer known as Purgatory, capable of appearing anywhere through shadows. He had, of course, overheard Zagan’s conversation with Nephteros.

“Then can *you* save her?” Zagan asked, grinding his teeth.

“Hah! Why the hell do I gotta save that haughty woman? That’s what you want, not me.”

He had a perfectly reasonable point. Zagan was the one who wished to save Nephteros when not even the person in question did. He was out of his mind to ask this man for help.

“I’m begging ya, man... You’re the one who fired me up and all,” Barbatos continued, slumping his shoulders. There was a pleading tone to his voice as if his anger from before had all been a lie. “I don’t even know whether it’s okay to celebrate her birthday or not, and here you are moping about like it don’t even matter!”

The tension in the tavern dispersed in an instant. The customers returned to their seats, going back to ordering food and drink and having friendly conversations. The fear they had for the Archdemon had been reduced to lukewarm gazes watching over a growing young man. There was something about this that didn’t sit right with Zagan, but he hadn’t even intended to frighten them, so he simply endured before turning back to Barbatos.

*Ah, so this guy came here for advice regarding Chastille’s birthday...*

Well, after fanning the flames so much, it did make sense that it would piss him off to see Zagan act like he didn’t care about birthday celebrations at all. Actually, seeing Barbatos’s grief-stricken face, it was clear he only had Chastille on his mind. He didn’t care about Nephteros in the least. What a terrible human being.

*But I guess I’m in the same boat.*

Zagan was only trying to save Nephteros so that he could enjoy Nephy’s birthday to the fullest. Of course, he had no intention of abandoning Nephteros, but Nephy was still a higher priority to him. These two men were the worst sorcerers, the very height of selfishness, but as a result, they were in agreement that Nephteros had to be saved.

Zagan let out a small sigh, twirling his finger in the air to enact sorcery. The flipped-over table and broken glass went back to how they were as if time had been rewound. Fortunately, the glass was still empty, so there was no need to worry about disposing of the contents. After that, he called over the waitress.

“Brandy.”

“Beer. Also, smoked meat and cheese,” Barbatos added.

“You’re going to pay for that yourself...”

And just as they sat themselves back down at the table...

“Tee hee. And I’d like some wine.”

Zagan and Barbatos turned to face the sweet and familiar voice. Before they knew it, a young girl who looked completely out of place in a tavern had taken a seat with them. She placed another chair next to her, where she sat her creepy stuffed doll down. It was apparently far heavier than it looked. The chair, and even the ground beneath it, creaked under the pressure.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Zagan asked.

After finding out about her pitiful past and knowing that he couldn’t save her during that nightmare, he felt a fair amount of relief when she had been saved by someone else. However, he still couldn’t guess what was going through her mind and he was bad at dealing with her. Furthermore, this vampire was worse than Zagan at reading the mood. In such a serious situation—serious to the people here, at least—he didn’t want to see her.

Alshiera shrugged, feigning ignorance, before saying somberly, “I’m also well aware of Lady Nephteros’s circumstances.”

After sticking by her side for a month, it was only natural that Alshiera had noticed the irregularity. However, Zagan remained on guard. It would be problematic if things got even more complicated.

“I still don’t know why Nephteros weighs so heavily on your mind,” he said.

This girl only moved when it involved the direct descendants of the Silver-Eyed King or Azazel. Nephteros was more closely related to Azazel, so she was actually someone Alshiera should’ve wished dead.

And yet, Alshiera replied with a pitying whisper, saying, “Even I can’t help but sympathize with such a pure and straightforward girl.”

Zagan was about to retort, but oddly enough, it didn’t feel like she was lying. Noticing his puzzled gaze, Alshiera elaborated a little more.

“I actually intended to remain no more than a mere spectator, but the

situation has changed a little.”

He could only imagine turbulent times to come when this vampire was involved.

“Fine then,” Zagan said with a snort, remaining cautious of her. “Now that you’re here, I’ll have you lend your damn help.”

This was the moment these three, who had lived lives completely unrelated to the act of celebrating birthdays, formed an alliance to save Nephteros for the exact purpose of celebrating the birthday of others. In any case, Zagan had been at a complete loss on his own, so he welcomed any and all advice.

As their conversation reached this point, their order arrived.

“Excuse me...? This is grape juice,” Alshiera said to the waitress.

“Yup. How about you give wine a try after you grow up?”

Alshiera puffed out her cheeks as the waitress casually treated her like a child. Giving her a sidelong glance as the waitress consoled her with a pat on the head, Zagan emptied the contents of his glass in one gulp, then cut to the chase.



“So? You at least have some useful information after bothering to come here, right?”

“Hah! What kinda convenient crap are you hoping for? Like hell I can do anything ’bout a homunculus’s life span,” Barbatos said, taking a vigorous gulp from his tankard. Still, he looked Zagan right in the eyes. This man didn’t think of human life as anything more than weeds by the roadside, but continued in all earnestness. “I’ll lend you a hand, at least. The crybaby will start putting in a bunch of wasted effort if she finds out that elf’s gonna die. She’ll go as far as throwing everything away for it, then end up all depressed like an idiot for not being able to save her.”

An Angelic Knight had no way of saving a homunculus. Chastille was sure to know that, but would still recklessly try to do something. Barbatos took another swig of his drink, emptying it and slamming the tankard back down on the table with a thud.

“I’m sick of seeing her face like that.”

It was an astonishing reason for him to lend Zagan a hand. Blind to his own shortcomings in this regard, Zagan gave his friend an exasperated look as Alshiera raised a question.

“Sorcery is outside my area of expertise, but...I thought the extension of one’s life span was a sorcerer’s specialty.”

Zagan and Barbatos’s eyes widened at the completely unexpected statement. Well, apparently, even a thousand-year-old vampire didn’t know everything.

“We have to start from there...?” Zagan said. “Whatever. I’ll explain it to you. Nephteros is Nephy’s clone. In other words, she’s a homunculus.”

Alshiera looked like she understood this much. She returned a nod without any further questions.

“However, homunculi live short lives by nature. At most, they only live a few years. If they hold out, perhaps ten. There are various theories as to why their life spans are so short, but I’ll leave those out for now.”

Among sorcerers, living beings were considered to be composed of minuscule

spheres called cells. A homunculus took these cells, split them up, and multiplied them to create a human form. This multiplication caused damage at a level that couldn't be observed through sorcery, or perhaps there was a limit to how many times these cells could be divided. Either way, a homunculus's body always self-destructed within a decade.

"Allow me to jump straight to the conclusion," Zagan continued. "It's possible to extend their lives with sorcery, but the most we can do is help her reach that decade limit."

Zagan knew this full well. He didn't only have sorcery at his beck and call. He had high elf mysticism, dragon sorcery, and even all the Holy Treasures of Liucaon. Given a few more years, he could likely find a way to extend her life further.

*But the deterioration of Nephteros's body is going far faster than I had imagined.*

Azazel was the probable cause. Back in the underwater city, and when she came in contact with Aristella, Azazel had encroached on Nephteros's body. Counting the Sludge Demon Lord at Suflaghida, that would make it three times. This had fatally shortened the already brief life she had as a homunculus.

"Seriously... The hell is that woman's problem with your solution?" Barbatos grumbled in discontent.

"There's a way to save her?" Alshiera asked, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Well, yes. There's no reason to throw out a finished homunculus unless it's a total failure, so there's a special way of handling them."

Alshiera looked completely lost, which made Zagan supplement his explanation.

"Normally, a homunculus is just an apparatus meant to do nothing but obey the orders of its creator. Nephteros is an exception among exceptions. Still, ordinary homunculi do accumulate knowledge and experience, so it's far less efficient to give orders to a brand-new homunculus."

A homunculus was just a tool to a sorcerer, but they were still supremely valuable creations that needed to be handled with care. Even Head Archdemon

Andrealphus had maintained a homunculus of himself for several centuries. Considering the amount of work that went into their creation and cultivation, only an enormous idiot or self-destructive fool would throw one away.

*Nephteros is Nephy's little sister before anything else.*

Zagan had never seen the girl as a tool. He saw her as an individual. Regardless, her body was, in fact, that of a homunculus. He had to properly recognize this to find a solution.

The creation of homunculi had already gone on for centuries. Sorcerers had obviously spent much of that time developing the technology further. It was impossible to extend their life spans, but there were ways of keeping them alive.

"So, when a homunculus's life span runs out, they swap to a new body," Barbatos concluded.

If the vessel was to break, they simply needed a replacement. By creating a new homunculus, it was possible to transplant the original's mind. That was the current method used by sorcerers to maintain their homunculi.

"I already knew she wouldn't accept that..." Zagan said with a shake of the head.

"Why is that?" Alshiera asked.

"Nephteros was created by Archdemon Bifrons," Zagan answered. "While I don't think there are any upstanding people among sorcerers, that asshole is the worst among all the ones I know."

Barbatos scratched his head, realizing the answer with a sigh.

"What did Bifrons do?" Alshiera asked.

Zagan let out a heavy sigh, then said, "All of Bifrons's failed trials were turned into chimeras half for fun and then thrown away."

When Nephteros ran away from her master upon finding out her origins, Bifrons had sent those monsters after her. If not for Chastille, Nephteros would have perished by their hand. Zagan could've protected her, but he doubted she would be able to smile like she could now if he had. He believed that Nephteros

had managed to overcome that incident, but there was no way she would accept swapping out her body for another homunculus.

Alshiera placed her hand up to her mouth as if holding back an urge to vomit, then said, “I’ve seen many worthless things after wandering this world for a thousand years, but that is among the worst I’ve ever heard.”

Her tone seemed to imply that she would go and finish Bifrons immediately were they not counted among the living.

“It’s not realistic to think that we can find a solution in the one month we have left when others have spent centuries researching the matter,” Zagan muttered, trying to get his thoughts in order.

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing,” Barbatos agreed.

If they couldn’t save Nephteros within a month, they wouldn’t have time to prepare for Nephy’s birthday. Seeing as Chastille’s birthday was also around that time, Barbatos let out a deep groan.

“We don’t have that much time...” Alshiera said, shaking her head.

“What?”

“One week... No, I need to resolve it in a few days, if possible.”

Impossible was the first word that came to mind, but Zagan knew why this girl was in such a rush.

“I see... You also...”

Zagan cast his pity-filled eyes downward. During the nightmare the other day, Zagan had discovered Alshiera’s secret. He had seen her true form, which had been used as a human sacrifice to maintain that temple. Her body, which seemed somewhere between stone and lead, had continued to support the entire world in that terrifying and cold space for a thousand years. However, despite all that, her body was still alive. Even if Alshiera’s life were to come to an end here, she would likely never be released from her role as the barrier’s keystone for all eternity. The temple’s destruction should’ve caused the Alshiera before them to vanish, but Lilith’s power had managed to maintain her existence... However, it hadn’t restored her lost life span.

*Meaning the last thing she wants to do is save Nephteros.*

This was probably the last time she could vanish. There was no resurrecting anymore, even though she was of the Night Clan. That cold space would become her everything for eternity. She was an irritating vampire, but he wanted to at least grant her final wish.

“Huh? No, that’s not really...”

Alshiera tried to say something in a panic, but couldn’t deny him.

“Meaning we have to save Nephteros in the next few days,” Zagan said, turning to Barbatos.

“Hah... What a pain in the ass.”

Even as he grumbled, Barbatos had likely realized what was going on, so he didn’t object. Alshiera made an awkward expression, feeling even more guilty about this than before, but that was pretty much the same as usual with this girl. Zagan showed great consideration by pretending not to notice it.

“In that case, the means with which we do so is even more of a problem than ever. At worst, we might even have to consider making her undead like you.”

There was a method of turning a sorcerer into a vampire. Zagan had never heard of a homunculus becoming one, but it was possible for any race, apparently, so it seemed worth a try.

“Undead... Oh, maybe...” Alshiera muttered.

“What is it? Just speak. I’ll take any information at this point.”

Alshiera showed signs of hesitation, but nodded after a brief pause and said, “I might have an idea. However, there are two hopeless disadvantages that come with it...”

“Quit dragging your feet. You’re the one in a hurry here, yeah?” Barbatos said.

Alshiera looked annoyed at him, but still answered, “You’ve witnessed it yourself, my Silver-Eyed King. My true body, I mean. Using that, it might just be possible to grant Lady Nephteros a new body. One that isn’t a homunculus, that is.”

“Really?!”

“However, there are some major hurdles in our way,” Alshiera said, raising a finger. “First, even I don’t know how to release my body from that place.”

“You don’t?”

“Well...we never really had time to consider what came afterward.”

Alshiera had become a human sacrifice one thousand years ago. Zagan couldn’t even begin to imagine what had happened back then to necessitate such an act.

*Still, if that’s all, there’s hope.*

Analysis of sorcery was Zagan’s field of expertise. He had even touched her body directly before, so he knew it definitely wasn’t impossible. However, Alshiera then raised another finger.

“Second is the biggest problem of all,” she continued, holding her tongue for a moment before resolving herself to say it. “If my body is released, the barrier will collapse.”

*Oh, in other words, the world will end...*

Zagan cradled his head in his hands at the thought. The destruction of Alshiera’s barrier would lead to Azazel’s invasion. The world wasn’t likely to last three days in that situation. Even if all the Archdemons and Archangels worked together, they wouldn’t be able to buy any time. Nephy’s birthday would vanish entirely. That was one thing Zagan couldn’t counteract at the moment.

“Huh? I don’t really get it, but don’t that mean it’s impossible?” Barbatos said with a click of his tongue. “Damn, you’re useless.”

“I simply spoke because I was asked to provide any information I had...”

Actually, considering how this girl would usually brush off pretty much any question thrown at her, she was being surprisingly cooperative.

*A new body... I’ve heard this somewhere before...*

A sudden thought came to Zagan. He felt like the dots were starting to connect. What was Shere Khan’s objective to begin with? To remake Azazel and

bring back the dead...

“My Silver-Eyed King.”

Alshiera’s voice brought Zagan’s thoughts grinding to a halt. He shook his head to clear his mind. Giving Azazel any more thought would be dangerous. Now that he understood what it was, even if just a little, drawing any closer to the truth could awaken it.

“It’s nothing... Don’t worry about it,” he said.

In any case, Alshiera’s information did bring up a means to save Nephteros, but it wasn’t something that could be accomplished in just a few days. He was at an impasse.

Zagan folded his arms and looked up at the ceiling. There appeared to have been a spill on the upper floor, causing mold to spread between the cracks in the wood. If that board wasn’t replaced entirely, then the erosion was liable to spread further. Considering the inconvenience he had caused them earlier, Zagan held up a finger and twirled it around. He incinerated the mold completely, along with the damaged portion of wood, then sealed the gap with materialized mana. It was the same sorcery he had used to repair Alshiera’s statue the other day. He had done all of this in a daze before coming to a sudden realization.

*Can’t I use this to remake Nephteros’s body from a cellular level?*

Recreating a person using only mana would require the mana of hundreds of average sorcerers. The mere thought was ridiculous, but Zagan had something that could be considered a furnace of pure mana...namely, the Sigil of the Archdemon. Using it, maybe it was possible. Still, it would be extremely difficult to bring such a technique to a practical level within several days.

It wasn’t impossible, but it wasn’t realistic either. There was worth in trying it, but he couldn’t say that such a method would be able to save Nephteros on its own, especially with only a few days to develop it. At best, it was worth considering as a secondary option. He really did have to prepare some other plan in parallel.

As the three of them continued to draw blanks on any good ideas, Barbatos

let out a groan and said, “I guess the only way really is to swap out her vessel? It’s more realistic to think of a way to get that woman to agree rather than finding some weird solution that might not actually even work.”

It was an unexpectedly sound argument coming from this man. Creating a new body for her was a simple matter. If Zagan called back Gremory or Shax, they could easily create a homunculus and base its cells on Nephy using a strand of her hair. It wouldn’t even take three days.

“We’re agonizing over it because we can’t do that,” Zagan said with an astonished shake of the head.

“No point in just bitching and moaning about it, right? What’s with her, anyway? Why’s she rejecting a means of survival? She suicidal or something?”

Alshiera grimaced at his words, but that didn’t really have anything to do with the current problem.

“She doesn’t want to die,” Zagan said, shaking his head once more. “But she also doesn’t want to live if it means making another homunculus.”

“Haaah... What a nice problem. I’m jealous.”

It seemed about time to give this man a good punch to the face. Zagan clenched his fist as Alshiera suddenly raised her hand, coming upon some sort of revelation.

“Oh my, that’s a terrific idea,” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Convincing Lady Nephteros, I mean.”

Zagan grimaced. He didn’t think the vampire was as stupid as Barbatos, so she must’ve had something to base this claim on.

Alshiera placed her hand to her chest, then confidently said, “In short, we simply need to make her want to live so badly that she won’t care about the means, right?”

“Is there a way to do that?” Zagan asked.

“Dear me, I never thought you’d be the one to ask that, my Silver-Eyed King. It

is but a simple matter, really."

Zagan cocked his head upon hearing that, to which Alshiera proudly declared, "We just have to have her fall in love."

"What the hell are you saying?!" both Zagan and Barbatos exclaimed with matching serious looks on their faces, sighing in unison.

"Alshiera... I'm being serious here," Zagan added.

"Haaah... Why are women all roses and daisies up there? Even the crybaby can do things properly when she tries, ya know?"

"That's true. Nephy would never joke around when I'm seriously troubled over something."

"Could you two gentlemen try saying that one more time while putting your hands to your chests?" Alshiera asked in utter astonishment.

Both of them averted their gazes.

"Still..." Zagan said, trying to put up a minimal show of resistance, "Isn't it somewhat outlandish to try to guide someone's thoughts using love?"

"That's not entirely true. Lady Nephteros is the same as Foll was not too long ago. She has an interest in love. What's more, there's already a gentleman who's perfect for her."

Rage and despair dominated Zagan's mind at the thought of his daughter falling in love with a man. Setting that aside, however, he did understand what Alshiera was getting at.

"Richard, you mean."

That was the name of the Angelic Knight who had been assigned as Nephteros's guard. He was an honest man at heart. Even Zagan didn't have any complaints about his character. If he did have to fault Richard for something, it would be that he'd prefer he obtained the strength of an average Archangel so that he didn't cause him any unnecessary concern.

Regardless, Zagan shook his head and explained, "She hasn't noticed his gallant approaches at all thus far. Do you really think something can be done about that in a few days?"

“Tee hee hee. Now that you’ve unveiled the truth to her, my Silver-Eyed King, I do believe it will be possible.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, just watch and see,” Alshiera answered with a suspicious smile, refusing to say another word on the matter.

However, reluctant as he was, it seemed like the most likely plan to succeed, so Zagan had no choice but to get on board with it.

◇

Around the same time, Lilith found herself wandering aimlessly around Kianoides. Naberius had ended up taking up the task of preparing everyone’s presents for Zagan. They had simply told him what they wanted to offer, which was apparently enough for him. Lilith had wondered why an Archdemon was being so generous, but he had laughed it off, saying he had already received more than enough of a payment.

All that was left was to make preparations for the party behind Zagan’s back. Luckily, they had more than enough time to do so. Lilith didn’t have any other business in town. It would have been better for her to head right back to the castle, but she knew if she did, she would end up seeing Furcas.

She had promised to properly face Furcas’s confession, yet she still felt like it was really awkward being around him, which prevented her from holding a proper conversation. As such, even after the others had returned to the castle, she was here walking around town with heavy steps.

*I need to get back soon and help out in the kitchen... I’m also worried about Selphy...*

Her childhood friend had been acting rather odd that morning. Lilith remembered seeing that expression on Selphy before. It was the same face she had made right before running away from Atlastia without informing a single soul. If Lilith had properly realized Selphy’s state of mind at the time, perhaps she wouldn’t have run away. Selphy did, of course, have her own issues to deal with back then, but even so, Lilith endlessly regretted being unable to be there for her childhood friend. This time, she had to speak with her.

“I need to give Furcas an answer, so why is Selphy the only thing on my mind...?”

Perhaps this was just a matter of course, considering both problems arose at the same time. Regardless, it made Lilith feel heartless. With no actual destination in mind, she continued walking through the streets and let out a heavy sigh.

“Haaah... Seriously, what should I do?”

Lilith raised her head when she heard someone else say the exact same words as her in unison. An Angelic Knight with scarlet hair and eyes stood before her. The girl appeared to be one or two years older than Lilith. Her splendid armor was a little dirty, perhaps because she had engaged in battle outside the town. Lilith had seen this girl a few times at Zagan’s castle. The girl returned Lilith’s surprised gaze in kind.

“Oh? You’re...um, the Angelic Knight who stops by the castle every now and then...?”

“Chastille. And you’re the succubus staying at Zagan’s place, yes?”

“Mhm. I’m Lilith.”

Thinking back on it, despite seeing each other fairly often, they had never had the opportunity to speak. After introducing themselves, Lilith felt a strange sense of kinship with her. The same seemed to apply to the Angelic Knight. She looked at Lilith with an affectionate gaze as if she had found her long-lost sister. Perhaps crybabies attracted each other? Whatever the case, they were meant to cross paths. And so, it came to be.

The Angelic Knight, Chastille, cleared her throat, then said, “Um, if you’d like, could we talk a little? Only if you have the time, of course.”

“Oh! Th-Thank you. That would be great. I was just hoping to talk to someone myself...I think.”

Chastille made her way to a nearby shop with Lilith close behind her. It appeared to be some kind of teahouse that served simple meals like sandwiches. Drinks were their primary business, judging by the large variety on display. Inside, there was even a mountain of desserts that didn’t seem possible

for one person to finish. The shop was rather crowded with customers, so they took a seat around a small table. Oddly enough, they both ordered herbal tea.

“Oh, do you also drink chamomile, Miss Angelic Knight?”

“Just call me Chastille. I’ve only ever had a taste for black tea, but a good friend of mine who worried about my anxiety recommended this, and I’ve been drinking it ever since. I feel like it really soothes my soul.”

“Doesn’t it? I sleep very well when I have some before bed. The aroma is quite wonderful as well.”

The two of them smiled at each other upon immediately finding a common interest. Chamomile was rather famous for being used to relax and recover from anxiety, and crybabies lived on an accumulation of anxiety, so their affinity for it made perfect sense. Lilith didn’t know about such effects, but she raised her face at the mention of a good friend.

“Do you mean Miss Nephy?” Lilith asked. “She was the one who recommended it to me.”

“Oh... No, I’m sure we both got it from the same person, though. Manuela told me about it. She works at a clothing store.”

Lilith stiffened at the mention of that name, then asked, “Do you mean the avian who comes to the castle to play every now and then...?”

Manuela was a non-sorcerer, much like Lilith and Selphy. What’s more, despite being a complete outsider, she boldly entered the castle freely as she pleased. She was quite the mystery.

“Are you another one of her victims...?” Chastille asked.

“No, I’m not. She seems to be quite taken by my childhood friend Kuroka, though...”

Every single time they met, Kuroka would scream about being forced to put on all these weird clothes. Nephy was strangely accustomed to it too, so she never really intervened. Having said that, she did put a stop to things when she thought Manuela was having too much fun. Incidentally, whenever the sorcerer Shax saw the clothes Kuroka was made to wear, he looked terribly shaken, and

the butler Raphael would chase him around.

“She’s not a bad person,” Chastille said, covering her face as if she could see all of this clearly. “I hear Nephy and one of our church’s workers often fall victim to her schemes, however.”

Apparently, Chastille hadn’t fallen victim to her yet either. Judging by how Manuela had been the one to recommend chamomile to Chastille, perhaps the avian paid special consideration to crybabies.

*Not that we’re crybabies.*

Lilith tried hard to convince herself of that fact. Regardless, it felt like she had opened up completely to Chastille in such a short time. It looked like this went both ways too.

“Let’s set Manuela aside for now,” Chastille said with a gentle expression. “You look rather depressed. Did something happen at the castle?”

This was the first time they had actually spoken to each other, yet Chastille was worrying about her. Seeing Lilith stare at her in wonder, she went on to explain things slowly in a considerate tone.

“It’s not that I don’t trust Zagan, but you’re no sorcerer, and you’re living in a castle full of them. I’m sure there are things you can’t discuss with them, right? If you’d like, I could lend you an ear.”

*What a wise and generous person.*

Chastille surely had worries of her own, but she still understood Lilith’s anguish at a single glance and kindly offered a helping hand. The corners of Lilith’s eyes turned hot.

“Th-That’s not really the case,” Lilith replied, trying to brush things off to hide her tears. “It also looks like you’re worried about something, Chastille. I’m not sure what kind of troubles people of the church face, but I think I understand a little about how heavy the responsibilities of an Archangel are.”

Lilith was a member of one of Liucaon’s three great royal families. She was the first princess of the Hypnoels. She had put great effort into her duties as royalty to evade the crisis of the extinction of her people and the other rare

species of Liucaon. Negotiating with an Archdemon all on her own had been one such duty, in fact. Due to that, she understood the difficulties of those in high positions quite well. For some reason, Chastille put her hand to her chest and staggered at those words.

“A-Are you all right?” Lilith asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. Um, it’s just, there are so few people who see me in such a light...”

Lilith marveled at that fact. They were both still in their teens and carried a heavy burden that most normal people would never experience, yet there was nobody around them who realized that. Lilith leaned over the table and grasped Chastille’s hand.

“I think you’re a wonderful person,” Lilith said. “There might not be much I can do, but I’d like you to talk with me about anything on your mind.”

“Th-Thank you!”

Tears of joy blurred Chastille’s eyes as if she had found her kindred spirit. It was then that Lilith realized that she had yet to answer her first question despite having just confirmed their friendship.

“Um... I guess you can’t really consider my problem something worth anguishing over... Recently, a new resident moved into the castle.”

“Hmm. A sorcerer?” Chastille asked.

“Umm, I wonder? He was apparently a sorcerer before, but he doesn’t actually remember any of that now. I don’t think you can really call him a sorcerer anymore.”

He was still one of the Archdemons, though. To Lilith, Archdemons were like Zagan and Marchosias, sorcerers who possessed tremendous power and majesty. Orias seemed to be a kind Archdemon, but the moment she stopped smiling, she was also capable of unleashing so much pressure that it was impossible to look her in the eyes. Lilith couldn’t imagine Furcas doing the same thing at all.

“Did that person cause some sort of trouble?” Chastille asked.

“I guess you could call it trouble...” Lilith paused there, then took a deep breath before continuing. “He confessed to me...and I have no idea what to do.”

Chastille’s eyes shot open. Then, she nodded as if she fully understood and said, “I see... That’s why you’re troubled.”

“I’m sure he’s serious, but I ended up finding out that he was in love with someone else before losing his memories...” Lilith mumbled. When she said it aloud, Lilith’s chest suddenly hurt. “The person he loved is a precious friend of mine. She’s really awkward, and it seems she’s trying to hide it from me, but she went through some horrible experiences, yet still continues to do her best...”

Lilith couldn’t even imagine how hard it was to live in a country with no sorcerers for a thousand years. Still, she knew it had to be painful to immediately part with everyone she met. It should’ve been fine for Alshiera to obtain some amount of happiness for herself.

“Hak, gak, hnnngh...”

For some reason, Chastille clasped her hand to her chest and broke into a coughing fit as if Lilith had been talking about her.

“I-Is something the matter, Chastille?”

“No, it’s nothing. Nothing at all... Please continue.”

Judging by the cold sweat pouring down Chastille’s brow, it didn’t appear to be nothing, but Chastille stubbornly refused to say anything more on the matter. Lilith worried whether it would be okay not to call a doctor, but decided to continue as requested.

“I can’t help but wonder if the feelings he has for me now should be directed at her... She says it’s not the case, but I feel like I’m snatching away something she should’ve accepted...”

“That’s not true!” Chastille yelled with conviction, grabbing Lilith’s shoulders. “If that man truly has fallen in love with you as a replacement for your friend, then he’s the scum of the earth.”

Lilith could tell that Chastille knew that this wasn't the case. Chastille continued as she gazed into Lilith's eyes.

"But if he hasn't, then that means he has fallen in love with you after properly resolving his feelings," she said. There were even tears in her eyes as she then declared earnestly, "I'm sure his feelings for you are far greater than what he felt for your friend!"

Lilith was completely overwhelmed by her passion. Chastille's answer appeared to come from her own experiences.

"H-Have you also gone through something similar?" Lilith asked.

That brought Chastille back to her senses. Her face turned bright red from her chin all the way to the tips of her ears.

"Augh... No, um, I'm, um..."

It seemed older women truly were far more experienced when it came to love. Lilith accepted her words with unexpected ease.

"I see... I never once thought of it that way," Lilith muttered.

"M-Mmm! I'm sir that's the cate!"

Chastille bit her tongue as she panicked. It didn't look like she knew what she was even saying. Still, Lilith believed these greater feelings really were meant for Alshiera. Didn't it seem dirty to snatch it away from her? The more she thought of facing Furcas, the more guilt she felt not only toward Alshiera, but also toward Furcas. It was like she was tricking him. But perhaps Lilith had only been convincing herself that to make things easier for herself.

"I don't think I can give him an answer right away," Lilith replied after a long pause. "So first, I'll try learning more about him."

Chastille's expression loosened up with relief. She was still bright red and had tears in her eyes, however.

"I think that's a good idea," she said. "I mean, who knows, you might end up falling in love with someone else."

"Someone else...?"

For some reason, Lilith's carefree childhood friend suddenly came to mind.

*Wh-What am I thinking? We're both girls.*

She shook off such thoughts immediately.

"Um, thank you for hearing me out. So you really do have such experience, Chastille?"

"Huh? No, um, not really, but maybe just a little, so..."

Chastille's face looked ready to burst into flames at a moment's notice. She shook her head, then cast her gaze down.

"Right, you opened up to me about a difficult to broach subject, so I should also tell you about mine..." she said.

"You don't need to! I just wanted someone to listen to me! You shouldn't force yourself to tell me!"

Lilith was very grateful already. However, Chastille shook her head once more and began talking with a fleeting expression of sadness on her face.

"Um... There's a girl named Foll living with Zagan, right?"

"Huh? Yes. She's a good girl."

Lilith was left dumbfounded at the mention of an unexpected name. Foll was Archdemon Zagan's daughter, yet she still worked in the kitchen with her. She had also taken part in today's fuss and seemed to be having a lot of fun. Honestly, it was hard to believe that she was actually a sorcerer, let alone a dragon. She acted like any other normal child. Lilith couldn't imagine Foll causing someone else trouble. Had something happened with Chastille? Lilith cocked her head as Chastille twiddled her fingers and timidly got to the point.

"She visited me the other day..." she said, then paused. Evidently, the next words were stuck in her throat, but the Angelic Knight eventually covered her face and continued, "Sh-She asked me all about love!"

Lilith's eyes shot open at the shocking news. Then, she asked, "W-Won't things get really serious if His Highness hears of this...?"

"M-mmm. I think so as well, so I haven't told him."

In truth, Zagan had already heard about the matter, and it had turned into a family gathering of the most powerful forces in his camp, but these girls had no way of knowing that.

Chastille had managed to calm down a bit after opening up. She finally brought her hands down from her face before continuing, “She asked me all sorts of embarrassing things, but we can leave those out. I’m sure she’ll fall in love one day, so such behavior is merely proof of her growth.”

If that was all, then it could certainly be laughed off as the precocious curiosity of a child. The Archdemon might make such a big fuss about it that the world could end, though. In any case, what was it about this that had worried Chastille?

“Um, until a little while ago, there was someone I loved,” Chastille continued. “However, by the time I met him, he already had a lover, so he was someone I couldn’t be with. But he had gone through such hard times that I wanted to be there for him to rely on.”

Lilith cocked her head at the oddly familiar story.

*Not that I think there’s anyone out there who’s had it as hard as Alshiera...* So Lilith convinced herself, unable to identify her king, Nephy, or even herself.

“Well, in the end, he never once looked back at me. He didn’t even notice me, in fact. I also didn’t want to get in their way, so I thought I had settled these feelings within me... I thought I had, but...”

Chastille’s smile couldn’t exactly be described as bright, but it wasn’t clouded over either. Just as she said, she had already come to a clean decision regarding this matter. Lilith still didn’t truly know much about love, so she couldn’t really imagine the pain of having an unrequited love.

*Meaning Furcas suffered for a long time after meeting Alshiera...*

She wasn’t really sympathizing with him, but the thought pained her heart.

After that, Chastille’s face turned red once again as she returned her gaze downward and said, “Well, that’s enough of that... Um, when Foll came to ask me about love, someone else’s face came to mind...”

Lilith was left wide-eyed at the unexpected remark. Back during Alshiere Imera, she had passed out from drinking. During the vacation on the uninhabited island, she had been with Selphy. Thus, on both occasions, she hadn't seen Chastille spend time with Barbatos.

"Wh-What kind of person is he?" Lilith asked, bending forward over the table.

"Huh? Um, even if you ask me...he's...not much of a gentleman, I guess? He always makes fun of me and calls me a crybaby...and treats me like an Amazon. Also, he probably does bad things when I'm not looking, I think? Mmm. He's the worst."

Lilith felt like he was the sort of man an Angelic Knight shouldn't get involved with, or should arrest, but she wisely kept that thought to herself.

Saying it aloud seemed to irritate Chastille. Her voice had grown rougher during the latter half of her statement. And yet, perhaps thinking she had gone too far, she began muttering.

"But...sometimes he's a good person. Only sometimes, though. Oh, and he also gave me a cute hair ornament."

Now that she mentioned it, Lilith noticed that Chastille had a cute butterfly pin decorating her hair. It looked to be made of real gold rather than bronze, showing it was definitely a gift that had been given serious consideration.

"Besides, he's always protecting me. It was apparently Zagan's request to begin with, but he'll probably save me completely disregarding that fact now. I mean, he's even helped me out with things unrelated to that request..."

Lilith finally understood why Foll had gone to this girl with questions.

*I get it! This is what it means to brag about your love life!*

Now that she gave it some thought, there was a tacit understanding among the people of the castle that Zagan and Nephy were meant to be gazed at from afar, so there weren't many opportunities to ask them about their love life directly. She was sure both would talk at length if asked, but that would cause a sugar overdose.

On that point, there were things Chastille was unable to keep hidden as she

honestly played up her love. This was terrific for anyone interested in love. But in that case, what was it that troubled her? Lilith patiently waited for her next words.

"And yet..." Chastille started with a troubled expression. "He hasn't shown himself at all today. He won't answer me even when I call him... It's not like I'm lonely or anything...so why do I feel this way...?" Chastille said before falling silent. A second later, she clenched her fist tightly by her chest, then spoke as if gasping for breath, "I'm not really the most considerate person, so I can't help but wonder whether I did something to anger him. And once I start thinking that, I get really worried, and it starts to hurt... I don't want him to hate me... I-I don't want him to leave my side... I start to feel all these selfish things..."

It sounded like she was on the verge of tears. This matter seemed to trouble her greatly, but a certain question came to Lilith's mind.

"Is it weird to be selfish...?" she asked.

"I-I mean, love isn't something you're meant to want compensation for, right?" Chastille said as if she had committed a grave sin.

*Oh, I get it now. That's what's got her stuck.*

Chastille was talking about love with no compensation. That was, of course, noble, but Lilith believed it was different from actual love.

"I'm just borrowing my friend's words here, but..." Lilith said. "Desire and affection are different things."

"Desire and affection...?"

"Yes. Affection is something you give to another, like a mother to a child," Lilith explained. That was clearly what Chastille had been talking about. "But desire is different. You *want* to know more about them, to have them with you. That's why you fervently cry and smile over them."

Lilith couldn't imagine that vampire so head over heels in love like that, but that was how Alshiera had described love to her.

"When those two emotions come together, that's love. You can't only have one. It has to be both."

This was only secondhand knowledge from Alshiera. It didn't come from Lilith's own experience or anything.

*Still, I feel like I had to tell her.*

"Only when you have both is it love..." Chastille mumbled. It wasn't clear how much of it had gotten across to her.

Lilith suddenly recalled what Chastille had said earlier.

*I'm sure his feelings for you are far greater than what he felt for your friend!*

Perhaps those words actually reflected Chastille's own experience. In any case, it was clear that she was worrying over how grand her feelings were. Chastille slumped her shoulders, finding that concept rather difficult to accept.

"But I don't even really know if I love him..." the Angelic Knight said, sounding like the textbook example of a maiden in love. "And above all else..." she continued with a sigh, "falling in love with someone even though I had been in love with another rather recently makes me seem like a frivolous girl, doesn't it?"

"That's not true!" Lilith yelled on reflex. "There's no rule saying that you can't find a new love when your first fails to bloom. Isn't it amazing to be able to properly move on?" she said, grabbing both of Chastille's hands in hers. "The person I know wandered around forever, unable to move on to his next love. He even forgot who he was looking for. My friend won't admit it, but I think she's always been in love with someone she can never see again."

Perhaps it was a wonderful thing to love a single person for such a long time. That was the relationship Zagan had with Nephy, after all.

"I still don't really know much about love," Lilith continued, "But I think when such love goes unrequited, it's really painful. So isn't it amazing to overcome that and fall in love with someone else?"

That thought sounded laughable coming from a girl who knew nothing of love. However, after seeing Alshiera and Furcas, that was what she truly believed. She was sure falling in love took a great amount of courage. Just then, tears started streaming from Chastille's eyes.

“H-Huh? Um, I’m so sorry...” Lilith said.

“Y-You didn’t do anything. I just didn’t think...anyone would ever put it like that...”

*I’m sure it’s been hard for her...*

Chastille had likely fretted about this all on her own. Her tears of relief looked ever so beautiful.

“You’ve been worrying about this for a long time, haven’t you?” Lilith asked.

Was this enough to dispel some of Chastille’s anxieties? As Lilith wondered about that, Chastille wiped her eyes and shook her head.

“No, not really,” she said.

“You haven’t?”

So what was all this about? Lilith was left dumbfounded.

“Um, the topic of birthdays came up today,” Chastille muttered awkwardly. “I got this hair ornament from him, and when I thought about it, I realized that I never gave him anything in return...”

“Ooh. So you want to get him a birthday present, then?”

Chastille nodded shyly, then replied, “But I don’t know when his birthday is... I don’t think he’ll tell me if I ask, and considering his friend, it’s possible he doesn’t even know when it is himself.”

That did, in fact, make it dangerous to try to ask him about it directly.

“The best person to ask didn’t even know that birthdays were meant to be celebrated,” Chastille continued. “Honestly, I’m at a complete loss as to what I should do.”

“I-I see...”

In all honesty, none of this sounded serious to Lilith compared to the shock of Chastille’s unrequited love and her new love, but the succubus nodded along anyway. She then recalled how Foll had picked the day Zagan and Nephy had adopted her as her own birthday and had an idea.

“Umm, if you don’t know his birthday, then maybe you don’t really have to

look into it too deeply?”

“What do you mean?” Chastille asked.

“How about giving him a present to commemorate some kind of anniversary between you two instead? I’m sure that’d make him happy.”

“O-Our anniversary?!” Chastille yelled, the hair tied to the side jumping up in shock. Shortly after, she nodded in understanding, still red in the face, and said, “I see. That makes sense. But what should I pick as an anniversary...?”

“How about the day you met?”

“The day we met...” Chastille muttered, a sudden cloud darkening her expression.

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

“I just remembered that he abducted me when we first met...”

“Why did you fall in love with him, exactly?”

“I-I-I-I-I-I still don’t know if I’m in love with him!”

*You can’t even say that with a straight face...*

Well, that was a rather delicate subject to broach, so it seemed best to leave it alone. Lilith decided to simply watch over her. She strained a smile and looked to the shop’s entrance, realizing that the sun had set before she even knew it.

“Oh no! I completely skipped out on preparing dinner!” Lilith exclaimed.

“Sorry I ended up keeping you here for so long.”

“It’s not your fault. You also listened to my worries, after all.”

“But it’s so late now... I’ll at least see you to the castle. Nobody around these parts is foolish enough to lay a hand on you, but lately, there have been those incidents with Shere Khan, so it could be dangerous.”

With that, she couldn’t possibly refuse. And just as Lilith was about to accept...

“Don’t be stupid, crybaby. Office hours are over. You really think you’re not gonna screw up somehow?”

Lilith had no idea where he'd come from, but a sorcerer with a pale complexion suddenly ruffled Chastille's hair. Lilith had seen him several times before at Zagan's castle and in Liucaon.

"B-B-Barbatos?! Where have you been all day?! You wouldn't answer me when I called!" Chastille yelled.

"The hell? Don't go calling me for some stupid patrol. Reserve that for when things get outta hand."

"S-So you knew I was out on patrol!"

"Haaah... Quit yapping already."

She didn't think it was possible, but was this the man Chastille had been talking about? Lilith was left in a daze as the sorcerer turned her way with a tired look.

"Uhhh... What was your name again? Well, whatever. That asshole Zagan says you should get back to the castle. I ain't no handyman, dammit... I'll send you there, so get going already."

He was apparently going to use sorcery to send her back.

"Umm, thank you..."

After honestly expressing her gratitude, Lilith noticed something. The sorcerer's ears were red. Chastille also seemed to have noticed because of Lilith's gaze, which made her face stiffen up with a cramp.

"Um... Barbatos?" she said.

"What?"

"Were you listening in on us?"

"Huuuh? It's not like I can hear everything through the shadow! Like hell I'd eavesdrop!"

"R-R-R-R-really?! You didn't hear anything?!"

That was precisely what someone would say after listening to everything from the very beginning, but Chastille didn't interpret it like that, which made perfect sense. People believed what they wanted to believe, after all. Chastille was

desperate to calm herself down, so she accepted any explanation, no matter how wild it seemed.

“O-Oh yeah...” Barbatos muttered, staring far off into the distance. “I was born on the fifteenth of Kavouras.”

He was clearly also shaken to the core. There were far more casual ways of bringing this up, given the time, yet it came out extremely unnaturally. And unfortunately, that was enough to bring Chastille back from her flight from reality.

“Um, so you really did hear everything?” she asked.

He couldn’t come up with an excuse now. The sorcerer averted his gaze and kept his silence.

The next instant, Chastille fainted.

“C-Crybaby?!”

Lilith couldn’t watch them anymore. The sorcerer panicked and held Chastille in his arms, but her eyes had already rolled back and she showed no signs of coming to.

“H-Hey! Wh-What do you want me to do about this?!”

*Oh, so he’s at least human, huh?* Lilith thought to herself upon seeing the flustered sorcerer. Noticing her gaze, he turned back to look at her.

“E-Eep?!” Lilith screeched and jolted upright on reflex. For some reason, the sorcerer looked around restlessly. Everyone in the shop avoided his gaze, not wanting to get involved.

“Uhhh... You didn’t see nothing, got it?” he muttered quietly to Lilith.

“U-Umm...”

Seeing her hesitate, the sorcerer placed something on the table. It was a sword with a delicately carved crest on it that appeared small enough that even Lilith could handle it.

“I’ll give you that, so act like you never saw this. Got it?”

“Umm, okay.”

Lilith didn't dare to ask what it was, so she simply accepted it without a second thought. With that, the sorcerer remembered why he had come here to begin with and set out to fulfill his task.

"I'm gonna go toss her into the church, so gimme a sec," he said, then stood up and suddenly looked relieved. "Oh, guess there's no need. Someone else is here to get you."

Upon hearing that, Lilith looked out the window and spotted an all too familiar boy.

"Oh, is now a good time?" Furcas asked, a smile on his face as if he didn't have a worry in the world. "I noticed you were out late, so I came to get you!"

*I need to properly face my problems as well...* With that thought in mind, Lilith realized her trials were far from over.

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Lilith and Furcas took a carriage to get back to the castle. Nephy and Foll often went shopping, while Chastille and Manuela made frequent trips from the town, so there was actually a decent demand for carriages between Kianoides and Zagan's castle. That was why Zagan had hired an exclusive carriage for their use. However, there was only a single carriage assigned to the task, so once it arrived at the castle, it couldn't be used again until it made the return trip.

Quite a bit of time had apparently passed while Lilith and Chastille talked. It took the carriage two hours to make a one-way trip, or one hour if it hurried. Despite this, it was already back in town for Lilith to ride it to the castle.

The inside of the carriage was large enough to fit six people, but the only passengers were Lilith and Furcas. She lacked the courage to sit beside him, so they were seated facing each other.

*Uhhh, I should say something...*

Silence dominated the carriage. Lilith had decided to properly face this boy, who was at least worried enough about her to come all the way from the castle so late at night just to pick her up. Thus, she knew she had to consider his affections with a sincere heart. In truth, Kimaris was keeping watch over them from a short distance away, but neither of them had any way of knowing this.

In any case, Lilith had no idea what to talk about. She was groaning about the problem when suddenly, Furcas struck up a conversation on his own.

“Hey, Lilith? What’s that you’ve got in your hand?”

“Huh? Oh, this? His Highness’s servant...I think? He gave it to me...” Lilith mumbled before trailing off and pausing. It was something like hush money, so she couldn’t really dive into the details. “Something like carriage money, I guess?”

“Huh? Carriage money?”

Zagan paid a monthly fee for the exclusive carriage, so there wasn’t actually a need for them to pay anything.

“Can I take a look?” Furcas asked, still somewhat shocked by her answer.

“Uh... Sure, go ahead.”

Lilith handed over the shortsword. He unsheathed it halfway up the blade, then whistled in admiration.

“This is amazing! It’s got crazily complex sorcery engraved onto it. I’m guessing it cuts open space itself? I’m pretty sure this would be hard even for Zagan to make... I’d still bet he can, though!”

“Have you remembered your sorcery?” Lilith asked, staring in wonder at his unexpectedly specific analysis.

“Huh?” Furcas cocked his head, apparently not aware of what he’d even said. “Oh yeah, what am I saying? I’ve never seen this circuit before.”

Despite losing his memories, he was still an Archdemon. He might have been remembering his sorcery skills while studying under Zagan.

“Hmm. So wait, is this really that amazing?” Lilith asked.

“Yeah, beyond amazing. You could probably sell it for the cost of a small castle.”

“A castle?! Wh-Why did he hand over something like that...?” Lilith muttered. She now questioned her choice of calling it carriage money.

“I mean, yeah, it costs a lot, but the sorcery here is the really amazing part,”

Furcas replied. “In theory, I’m pretty sure it can cut anything in existence.”

“R-Really...?”

Lilith had seen that sorcerer by Zagan’s side on numerous occasions. It always looked like he was on the receiving end of harsh treatment, getting punched by the Archdemon in the face pretty much every single time. And so, it was a matter of course that he would be among the greatest sorcerers out there.

*That old man Kuroka likes is apparently quite amazing as well.*

The sorcerer named Shax was dreadfully bad at reading the mood. Kuroka always grumbled about this whenever she visited the castle. However, he apparently possessed such outstanding talents that Zagan kept him close at hand despite his shortcomings.

In any case, Lilith’s focus right now was on the shortsword.

“Is it really okay for me to accept this?” she asked.

“You got it from Zagan’s servant, right? That means it’s for your protection. I think you should keep it!”

“W-Well, in that case...”

It was actually hush money, and apparently a tremendous amount of hush money at that. Perhaps that was just how badly he wanted to keep it a secret. Well, an Archangel being in love with a sorcerer had to be kept secret, so Lilith wasn’t ever going to let that slip, anyway. Besides, she could even sense similar feelings coming from the sorcerer, which meant they were all set. She truly hoped Chastille’s love would be reciprocated this time around.

Furcas returned the shortsword to Lilith, who placed it atop her lap. She decided to get some sort of sword belt prepared so that she could carry it around with her.

“I barely know any self-defense techniques, though...” she muttered.

“Hmm. You know some self-defense?”

“I learned a little from Kuroka... Oh, you haven’t met her yet. My childhood friend showed me a few examples...is all. Don’t expect anything like an Angelic Knight out of me.”

That was when Lilith realized she was able to keep up a conversation with him rather naturally. Once things had gotten started, it felt like her tension had just melted away.

“Now that I think of it, what were you up to today?” she asked, trying to start a discussion on her own now.

“Me? Well, I’ve been studying sorcery and the legends of Liucaon!”

“Liucaon? Why?”

“Zagan is called the Silver-Eyed King, right? I want to know what meaning there is behind that!”

Lilith nodded in understanding.

*This guy is really attached to him...*

Not that there was anything bad about that, of course. She simply found it mysterious.

“Besides...” Furcas paused before continuing bashfully, “I heard Liucaon is your hometown, so I wanted to know more about it.”

Lilith bent backward at the unexpected frankness of his affection. She could tell her face was getting hotter.

“U-Umm, did you find any interesting legends?” she asked, trying to get off that topic.

“Sure did! The fight with Black Dragon Marbas was super cool!”

“Isn’t it? It’s one of my favorites among the Silver-Eyed King’s legends. I often pestered Alshiera to tell it to me when I was little.”

After saying that, Lilith covered her mouth at the careless mention of Alshiera’s name, but Furcas paid it no mind. His eyes were sparkling with interest.

“Really?! Maybe we actually have a lot in common!”

“M-Maybe...” Lilith replied with mixed feelings clouding her heart.

“Also, the stories of Hex Arm Asura were really cool.”

“One of the heroes who served the Silver-Eyed King, right? He died killing a monster to protect a single girl.”

“Yeah! That one! Also, the stories of Clairvoyant Bato!”

“The strategist who was known as the Silver-Eyed King’s right-hand man. In his dying moments, he made it seem like an army of ten thousand was under siege, when in fact he was all on his own, granting an opening for the Silver-Eyed King to escape through.”

Lilith had read the legends of the Silver-Eyed King hundreds of times. She threw in proud remarks every now and then as Furcas brought things up. He also seemed to enjoy this and smiled at her amicably.

“They’re both so cool!” he exclaimed. “That’s the way a man is meant to live!”

“You dummy. Nothing good comes from dying, understand?”

Once in a while, Lilith considered how pretty much all of the legends of Liucaon’s heroes ended with their deaths. And she often wondered whether Alshiera had been present in those moments. Lilith didn’t believe that the legends had gone exactly as they were told, of course. Nevertheless, it was fairly likely that they were all based on events of the past. If so, what kind of feelings had Alshiera gone through after getting left behind by everyone? Lilith’s expression had turned unintentionally dark at the thought when suddenly, Furcas tightly gripped her hand.

“I won’t die! I definitely won’t leave you behind, so don’t worry!” he yelled, closing in on her rapidly.

“E-Eep! C-C-Close! Too close!”

“Oh! S-Sorry...”

Furcas returned to his senses and jolted back. Silence fell over the carriage once more. It was clear that they were both red in the face.

*Wh-What do I do? That sure got my heart pounding...*

It was a little late to realize this, but it was somewhat careless of Lilith to ride in a carriage all alone with a man who had already confessed to her. Luckily, the carriage arrived at the castle the very next moment. They passed through the

gate and stopped in front of the entrance.

“Heya, Lilith. Welcome back.”

When the doors opened, they found Selphy waiting there.

“Selphy!”

Lilith’s childhood friend had been acting strange that morning, but now her smile was as bright as ever. Lilith jumped down from the carriage, a sudden liveliness to her voice. She then returned to her senses and pouted to the side with folded arms.

“H-Hmph. From the looks of it, you’re feeling better now. Not that I was worried about you looking out of it in the morning or anything!”

“Oooh, were you worried about me?”

“I-I-I-I-I-I said I wasn’t worr— Waaah?!”

Selphy suddenly gave Lilith a great big hug.

“Sorry for worrying you,” Selphy said. “I just had, like, a little something on my mind.”

She even went as far as rubbing her cheek against Lilith’s.

“Huh?! Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What’s wrong, Selphy?! Y-You seem kind of closer than normal or like a little clingier, I mean, um...!”

“Mmm... Just a little longer. I was totally lonely without you around today, so I need my Lilith resupply.”

Lilith was left at her wit’s end as Selphy hugged her like a stuffed doll.

*I-If this goes on any longer, my head will boil over!*

Lilith’s heart pounded like a hammer, her vision went blurry, and her mind went blank. It felt so good being hugged by this childhood friend of hers, and she smelled good—she could even tell that Selphy’s heart was also pounding—but in any case, Lilith’s mind couldn’t keep up with any of it.



“Um, uhhh... C-Could you let me go now...?” Lilith pleaded, mustering what little willpower she had left.

“Mrgh... Oh well... Oh, you okay, Lilith?”

Selphy gave her one last squeeze, then finally let Lilith go. However, Lilith’s knees gave way, and she weakly sank to the floor. Seeing this, Furcas put on an astonished and cramped smile.

“Y-You two sure are close,” he said.

“Well, duh! We’re, like, childhood friends and all,” Selphy replied with a laugh. She had the same carefree smile as always. Or at least, it was supposed to be the same, but Lilith felt like there was a tremendous ferocity behind her smile now that verged on bloodlust.

“Mine! Got it?” Selphy declared.

“Huh? What is...?” Furcas asked in wonder.

“Mine!”

This boy, who was burdened with the title of Archdemon, could do nothing but shrink back from the smile of a girl who supposedly possessed no power at all.

# Chapter III: Some Things Change, but a Villain's Fate Is Set in Stone

"Hmph. A traitor's fate sure is pitiful."

Looking down over a certain desolate town, Valjakka sneered as he derided himself quietly. He was one of the Archangels, but had been demoted to Shere Khan's hound. Upon finding that out, Archdemon Zagan had given him a warning that had all his hairs standing on end. That in itself left him stuck between a rock and a hard place, yet after the attack on Raziel's treasury the other day, he was under suspicion for betraying the church and guiding the sorcerers into the hidden areas.

*Why?! Why am I the only one going through all this?!*

He hadn't actually participated in Zagan and Bifrons's intrusion, so he didn't really deserve the full brunt of the church's suspicions.

*If I pick the wrong people to work with here, it'll all be over.*

He had to get all of his bets on the right horse in this race...or else.

"Hey there, mister knight. So, what do we gotta do?"

A boy called out to him from behind. Much like Valjakka's former adjutant and his adjutant's younger sister, the boy had scarlet hair and eyes. Looking at his face made Valjakka feel like the world was thrusting his sins before him. The boy also appeared to be in his late teens, reminding Valjakka even more of Chastille.

A tall and lanky young man stood next to the boy. This one was also grinning, but Valjakka couldn't read him at all. These two were the subordinates Shere Khan had granted him to help with his task.

*They're probably here to keep an eye on me. I need to win over his trust through them if I hope to survive.*

Thus, Valjakka put on the very image of a gentlemanly smile and turned

around to face them.

“The mission Lord Shere Khan has entrusted to us is to capture a traitor,” he told them.

“What kinda person is this traitor?” the boy asked.

“She appears to be a lass around the age of fourteen or fifteen, but don’t be fooled by her appearance. She’s a powerful sorcerer. She’s apparently quite the valuable specimen, so even though it doesn’t matter if she’s killed, be sure to collect the corpse. The less damaged she is the better.”

In truth, Valjakka had been told that she was pretty much incapable of sorcery at present. Nevertheless, one never knew what tricks a sorcerer had hidden up their sleeves. It was better to go in for the kill assuming they would resist. This was all Valjakka had left, after all.

“Wow. So we’re rushing down a little girl with three guys?” the boy spat out, looking like he was holding back an urge to vomit. “Isn’t the person who ordered that ashamed of himself?”

“Watch your tongue. Lord Shere Khan is simply being cautious.”

That was a bald-faced lie. Shere Khan was being driven into a corner. Bifrons had broken their alliance, so once Zagan found his hideout, it would all be over. With such trouble looming over him, one of his trusted retainers ended up deserting—one of those twins. That pitiful Archdemon was further down at the end of his rope than Valjakka, but the knight had still placed all of his bets on him.

*I have no choice but to believe in him after being shown that.*

Shere Khan was seriously intent on dominating the world. Or perhaps it would be better to say that he was going to remake the world. In any case, once that Archdemon took action, Zagan and the church would have no way of winning. Besides, Shere Khan had promised to finally dispel the sorcery on Valjakka. One condition for fulfilling that promise was the absolute retrieval of the missing twin, however.

*Still, having these two watchdogs is a complete nuisance.*

“There is, of course, no need to chase a single girl with these numbers,” Valjakka added firmly. “However, someone’s dogs are currently in that town, so you two will keep them confined.”

The dogs were Zagan’s subordinates. Shere Khan’s current hideout was in the vicinity, so unfortunately, the terrifying Archdemon’s hand was practically grasping at Shere Khan’s throat already.

“Keep them confined?” the lanky man asked with a cock of the head. “And here I thought you’d tell us to kill them.”

That was, of course, what Valjakka truly wanted.

*That damn Zagan! He’s even using people from the church!*

Killing such people would be a poor choice. Zagan’s warning would take effect, and the knife implanted in Valjakka’s head would manifest.

Valjakka cleared his throat, then shook his head and replied, “It’s already a dirty job. There’s no need to steal more lives than necessary.”

“Hmmm...”

Both of Valjakka’s subordinates mumbled incomprehensibly, distrustful looks on their faces all the while. He’d just about had it with these two.

“These are Lord Shere Khan’s orders, you know?” he added in a rough voice.

“Yeah, yeah... We won’t disobey. Not that we can, anyway,” the boy said.

With that, the two of them vanished. Valjakka took another look down at the town. He saw a pitiful robed girl running about. Just like him, she was surrounded by enemies and couldn’t turn to anyone for help. How pitiful she was. Valjakka saw some of himself in her, which irritated him even more.

“You’re going to have to let me vent to my heart’s content.”

Upon seeing someone as weakened and driven into a corner as he was, Valjakka didn’t feel sympathy or compassion. This simply stimulated his sadistic heart.

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“That’s the gist of it, Boss. Shere Khan’s definitely in the vicinity of Feo.”

The day after Zagan and Nephy found out about each other's birthdays, Shax gave his report using telepathy sorcery. It had been about a week since Zagan had dispatched him and Kuroka to find Shere Khan's hideout. This man, who was truly talented aside from his ability to read the room, had finally succeeded.

"Well done," Zagan said. "You may finish things up there and return. There's something I'd like you to do here. Your strength is a necessity."

"You sure are a slave driver, Boss," Shax replied in an exhausted tone. "I don't really care, 'cause I'm a sorcerer and all, but Kurosuke is just a normal girl, ya know?"

"Try telling her that... But you do have a point. Once your next mission is over, you may take Kuroka out on a vacation or something. I'll prepare an excuse for you. I've heard there are nice hot springs in Raziel."

"Bwah?! Hang on a sec! That's not what I'm trying to say!"

"You want to show Kuroka some gratitude, right?" Zagan replied coldly. "Then this should be appropriate."

"You've gotta be kidding me!"

Zagan sighed and replied, "Give it up, Shax. I don't mean to say anything about your relationship with her, but allow me to provide you with a warning as a man. Be honest with her. It's up to you whether you accept or reject her, but it's pitiful to leave her on the hook for so long. This is what Raphael has been taking offense to the most."

Perhaps Zagan was barking up the wrong tree by trying to urge Shax on. However, even though she hadn't told Shax directly, it had been three months since Kuroka began showing clear affection for him. During that time, Kuroka had had her eyes treated, and Shax had gallantly taken care of her. There was more than enough subtext in her behavior to suggest that he was on her mind. And yet, he continued to pretend that he didn't notice her feelings at all. Frankly, at this point, it was far too pitiful to watch.

There was, of course, that case with the underwear, but in Zagan's eyes, this negligence was actually what had enraged Raphael so. If Shax seriously bowed

his head and asked for her hand, Raphael probably wouldn't get angry. Well, he would still get angry, but he would at least stop brandishing his sword every single time they met. In any case, Shax didn't seem to expect a lecture right after his report. He was clearly flustered by this turn of events.

"S-So you say, Boss, but Kurosuke's still a minor, ya know?"

This one statement was enough to make it clear that he had noticed Kuroka's feelings and that he didn't find her disagreeable.

"That's just an excuse," Zagan told him. "If you're going to use that as a reason to defer your decision, then it's only proper for you to tell her to wait."

"Ugh... Y-You've...got a point there..."

Zagan came across as somewhat high-handed, but that was what it took to convince this man that he couldn't just let things be. Shax didn't object any further.

*Actually, does this mean things have developed to the point where he can't even object?*

Zagan had decided to send them out together because Raphael would always flare up when they were in the castle. Perhaps it had turned out rather well. Still, he did understand Raphael's feelings to a painful degree, so he couldn't really fault his butler for his behavior. Regardless, perhaps he had gone too far.

"Well, perhaps I'm projecting a little too much," Zagan said. "You may forget about it. Taking care of Shere Khan is a priority right now. In any case, I do plan on giving you a holiday for your distinguished service when things are over."

"Roger that, Boss."

Shax was a man too. He was sure to do something in good faith after being told this much. Zagan had planned to give him a break even if this matter with Kuroka wasn't an issue anyway. If he didn't, it wasn't clear when Shax would ever get a break.

Now that he knew Shere Khan's location, it was Zagan's turn to act. Alshiera had told him to leave Nephteros to her, but he wasn't sure how much he could trust the vampire. Furthermore, he had to keep vigilant of Bifrons's movements

and he didn't know when Azazel would appear again. Above all else, though, there was the matter of Nephy's birthday.

Zagan had had his hands full with Nephteros's case yesterday, so he still hadn't picked out a present. There was a mountain of problems before him with no room to breathe.

*What do I do? I want to cling to Nephy right now and rub her head...*

He had been running about the entire day, and Nephy was apparently also busy with something, so they had had pretty much no time to cuddle. However, they were in each other's thoughts the entire time, so their love for each other had just endlessly accumulated.

"All right, then, we'll head back now," Shax reported. "Go ahead with the Transfer."

Just as its name implied, Transfer was sorcery that could instantaneously transfer things from one place to another. It unfortunately couldn't go anywhere and everywhere like Barbatos could, but Zagan could at least connect his castle to a fixed location like, for example, the place Shax had been staying. Only a handful of people including Zagan could use this freely, however.

*Yesterday, I only got to have Nephy sit on my lap once. I'm not going to be able to calm down unless I at least get to rub her cheeks.*

Zagan's mind was filled with worldly desires, but he still managed to make a declaration with all the majesty of an Archdemon.

"No, return as you are. There shall be no Transfer."

"No Transfer? But it'll take us a whole day. I thought you were in a rush. Is that okay?"

"Once you get back, I'll work you to the bone, so use the trip to get a breather."

Zagan didn't believe his subordinate would do a good job without being given any rest. Besides, judging from his reaction earlier, Zagan could surmise that Shax had made some kind of progress with Kuroka. If they knew things were going to get busy, the two of them were sure to change the way they spent

their time. If Kuroka's frustrations could be abated, it would end up relieving some of Shax's anxieties and make him more efficient at work as well.

After relaying that command, Zagan no longer had anything to do in the throne room. It seemed about time for him to check in on Nephteros. Plus, he had to go search for Nephy's birthday present.

*But first, I need to cuddle with Nephy!*

He felt like he would say something careless if he opened his mouth, but he still wanted to be with her. And just as he opened the door to the throne room to leave...

"Hyah!"

Someone tumbled over on the other side, letting out a cute yelp. Zagan caught them on reflex.

"Huh? Nephy?"

Zagan had his beloved in his arms. She'd apparently been leaning against the door, causing her to lose her balance when he opened it.

*Huh? What's going on? Did I want to see her so badly that I'm hallucinating?*

The moment he thought that he wanted to cuddle, she ended up flying into his arms. Things had developed so conveniently that he was doubting his own cognition. As for Nephy, she was looking up at Zagan like she had no idea what had just happened.

The two of them stared at each other as a gentle aroma tickled his nose. It was a sweet scent, yet it had a refreshing air to it like fresh vegetation. It made it feel like spring had come early. It appeared that Nephy had changed her perfume with the coming change in seasons. It was just like her to apply such attention to detail. And as Zagan enjoyed the slightly different aroma, Nephy finally returned to her senses.

"H-Hawawawa?!"

"A-A-A-A-Are you okay?!"

Her ears turned bright red right to their pointy tips.

“U-Ummm, it’s not that I really need anything, but, um...” Nephy started, her azure eyes darting about. “We didn’t get to spend much time together yesterday, so I feel a little lonely!”

“Huuuh?!”

Her lovable complaint struck Zagan’s heart with significant force. Seeing him so shaken by this, Nephy looked up at Zagan with a hint of resignation in her eyes.

“Master Zagan.”

“Y-Yes?”

“Just for now... Just for a little bit...I’d like to...be with you.”

Zagan had no way of knowing that Nephy was troubled by what to do for his birthday much like he was for hers. What’s more, she had far less time, so it left her far more restless than he was.

“Very well!”

“Hyah?!”

Zagan scooped Nephy up into his arms and returned to his throne. He did, of course, make sure to seal the door shut with sorcery. Nephy stiffened up at the sudden event, but she’d built up a resistance to such things now—mostly because of Zagan.

“E-Eheh heh heh...”

She let out a slovenly laugh as she enjoyed being carried like a princess, rubbing her head against Zagan’s chest. Her pointy ears quivered with joy.

*Hnnngh! So quick to act!*

Moreover, even though she looked like she was acting boldly, her arms weren’t wrapped around him, but were instead bashfully gripping the clothing at his chest. Her timid restraint nearly had him swooning. Zagan almost fell to his knees, but resolutely remained firm. He used the tremendous strength in his arms to lift Nephy a little higher.

“Ack!”

As Nephy blinked repeatedly in confusion, he rubbed his cheek against her forehead.



“Ah...!”

Nephy let out a light shriek at the bewildering action. Her ears flailed about wildly against Zagan’s chest, tickling him in the process. His heart pounded so hard it felt like it would leap out of his mouth. This was true bliss.

*Mmm! With this, I feel like I can at least keep going until I’m done dealing with Shere Khan!*

Zagan then realized that Nephy was looking up at him, her face so red that it seemed like she could burst into flames at a moment’s notice. Rubbing his cheek against her brow had gone far beyond her expectations, so her thoughts couldn’t keep up with the situation.

“Uhhh, you know...I also really wanted to spend more time with you. I was so happy that you came to me, so I moved without thinking and...”

Zagan expressed his feelings with all honesty. Nephy’s lips trembled, either out of uncontrollable shyness or delight. Still, she mustered the last of her strength to smile back at him.

“Master Zagan. I feel like this is the first time you’ve spoiled me like this.”

“R-Really?”

“Yes. So I’m...really satisfied...”

It had only been a few seconds, and they had only gotten a few steps into the throne room, but with those final words, Nephy had used up all her strength, which made her lose her grip on consciousness.

“Nephy!”

Even though she’d built up a resistance to the unexpected, she couldn’t withstand the impact of having her pent-up desires fulfilled so rapidly, which made perfect sense, since Zagan had even used sorcery to withstand the shock of how loveable Nephy was at times. Even Archdemon Orias had thought of leaving the castle behind after experiencing something similar.

And now, Nephy’s innocent reaction assaulted Zagan’s heart in a counterattack. Gazing at her tranquil sleeping face, he once more sank to his knees.

◇

“Man, the boss sure can be trouble sometimes.”

The real trouble, however, was that the Archdemon was currently on the verge of collapsing just from clinging to Nephy, but for better or worse, Kuroka and Shax had no way of knowing that fact. They were currently stuck in the fortress city, Feo. It had a grand title, but it was actually a desolate town surrounded by the ruins of a fortress wall. According to rumors, the walls stood tall over a thousand years ago. But now, at the best of times, the local populace didn’t even inhabit a fourth of the town, and even the vegetation in the area was sporadic and withering.

Despite all this, judging by how it had been built upon bedrock and had wells dug in place, it had clearly once been a prosperous stopover in the middle of a land route through the continent. Apparently, when the concept of countries had vanished, the walls had lost their purpose, which led to the fortress’s quick demise. Now few passed by, and most who came were ruffians and drifters living in destitution.

This desolate town was where Kuroka and Shax’s pursuit of Shere Khan had taken them. Upon searching the area, they had found their quarry. The Archdemon’s hideout was either in the city or its surroundings.

Seeing Shax mutter to himself with a grimace after finishing his regular report, Kuroka looked at him in confusion. Zagan wasn’t one to give people unreasonable work. Shax had been traveling to complete his tasks the last few days, so his stubble was more rampant than usual. His hair was also about a third longer and rather unkempt. Despite his height, he looked unreliable due to his bent back. Still, he was the sorcerer Zagan trusted the most right after his two immediate retainers.

*He grumbles a lot, but he always ends up doing something about it.*

Kuroka looked up at Shax, the triangular ears atop her head twitching. She was a cait sith, so she possessed both cat and human ears, as well as two tails. She wore clothes modeled after a native dress of Liucaon, but in sharp contrast, she had a cane from the church in her hands.

Over the last few days, they had finally traced the goods Shere Khan had been

ordering to their final destination.

“Is there some sort of problem?” Kuroka asked with a cock of her head.

“Oh, no. Nothing that serious. He just said a new job is waiting for me when I get back.”

“That just goes to show how much he relies on you,” Kuroka replied with a smile. “He isn’t the type of person to rely on others unless he truly trusts them.”

Tracing Shere Khan’s whereabouts was a high-priority task as well. Seeing this sorcerer, who didn’t even have a second name, being regarded so highly made Kuroka feel as happy as if it had directly involved her.

“So if there’s another job waiting, that means we’re going back already?” Kuroka asked.

With teleportation, they could be back at the castle in an instant. Kuroka and Shax had been gone for a week now, so it’d been a long absence. Honestly speaking, though, she was very happy to have time alone with him. It was a little unfortunate to have to return so soon.

It wasn’t clear to Kuroka how Shax interpreted her current state of mind as he reached his hand out to her head. She was already used to this, so her cat ears reflexively folded down over themselves. Shax then plopped his hand on her head a few times to comfort her. His warm palm was pleasant, causing her to squint involuntarily.

“Don’t be like that. The boss told us to take our time and use the whole day to get back.”

“Huh? Is that really all right?”

“He wants us to take a breather.”

“Yay!” Kuroka exclaimed and jumped up on the spur of the moment. Using that momentum, she clung to Shax’s arm.

“H-Hey! D-Don’t cling to me like that!”

“Come on, it’s fine, isn’t it?”

Not only had he seen her underwear, but he’d even seen her naked. This was

nothing to falter over.

*It's still really, really embarrassing, though!*

It was a little vexing that the sound of her pounding heart was loud enough for him to hear. Shax was an expert in medical sorcery, after all, so he noticed even the smallest things about people's bodies. In any case, he looked troubled by this, but didn't try to shake her off.

"Seriously... Is it really that fun to hang out with someone like me?" he asked.

"Yes. It's plenty fun," Kuroka replied.



Shax's ears turned slightly red upon hearing that. That small reaction actually made her happier.

"Oh. right, Mister Shax, if we have time to play, then I'd like to try having a proper drink."

She had, in fact, had alcohol before. Back during her training in the dark side of the church, she'd tasted some. There was also that summer plum wine from the other day that resulted in her shameful display. Shax and Zagan always seemed to enjoy sharing a drink, so Kuroka wanted to be able to enjoy it in the same manner. Seeing her like this, Shax ruffled her hair about gently.

"Wh-What are you doing?!"

"Don't be stupid. Wait until you're an adult for that."

Kuroka puffed her cheeks in response to being treated like a child again.

"What are you saying?" she protested. "I'm already eighteen. According to the church, that's the right age to start drinking liquor, isn't it?"

"I'm telling you a minor can't... Huh? Eighteen?"

Shax found himself at a loss for words. The definition of adulthood differed by region, but the church taught that eighteen was the age of an adult. One could drink alcohol and get married at that age.

*And yet he still treats me like a child all the time...*

She wanted him to understand how frustrated that made her.

"Uhhh, Kurosuke...?" Shax muttered, still finding the revelation hard to accept. "I thought you were seventeen."

"I turned eighteen last month."

That was why she'd complained about not being a child anymore a few days ago. Kuroka's birthday was on the twenty-second of Kanata. She'd had a modest celebration with her two childhood friends before departing on this trip. Now that her home was gone, those two, and perhaps Alshiera, were the only ones who knew the date of her birthday.

Shax staggered as if his last line of defense had crumbled, then suddenly

shook his head as if trying to regain his senses.

“You should’ve told me earlier...” he said.

“That I became an adult?”

“No. Your birthday. There’s no way I could’ve helped you celebrate if I didn’t know.”

With that, Shax looked somewhat ashamed, as if it was his own fault for not knowing. Kuroka hadn’t thought he would actually want to celebrate with her, so her cheeks suddenly grew hot.

“Umm, sorry about that. My birthday was the twenty-second of last month.”

“Don’t apologize, it’s my fault for not checking,” Shax replied, then nodded reluctantly. “Well, I guess I can treat you to some liquor as a late celebration. Not that I really want to or anything.”

“Okay!”

It seemed like the trip back was going to be enjoyable. However, just then, the hairs on Kuroka’s tails stood on end.

“Mister Shax, enemies.”

It appeared their fun little break would have to be postponed.

◇

“Yo. Sorry ’bout that. Guess we interrupted you.”

Feo’s populace was concentrated in the heart of the city. The majority of its outer rim was uninhabited. After moving out to this abandoned portion of town, Kuroka and Shax’s pursuers revealed themselves.

One was a boy with scarlet hair and eyes who appeared to be a sorcerer armed with some kind of gauntlet. He didn’t have a blade on him, but the leather chest protector he wore made him resemble a bandit. The other was an armored swordsman wielding a longsword. His thin eyes, which almost looked like slits, stood out the most. He had long hair for a man, and it was difficult to pin down his exact age. He definitely wasn’t in his teens, but he looked anywhere from twenty to fifty.

The first to speak had been the boy, though he didn't seem apologetic in the least. From the looks of it, they seemed to be mercenaries rather than sorcerers. Mercenaries were largely made up of wannabe Angelic Knights and novice sorcerers who'd only been able to learn cheap tricks. Their trade relied entirely on letting their brute strength talk for them. Small trade firms and nobles in poor standing with the church who couldn't employ competent sorcerers tended to hire them instead. The skills of such thugs were, of course, nothing to boast of.

*Shere Khan is using mercenaries as assassins?*

It was very likely that Shere Khan was preparing an army in the tens of thousands. And even disregarding that force, he had subordinates like Dexia, so it was difficult to believe he would send any number of mercenaries to do the deed.

"Are you Shere Khan's underlings?" Kuroka asked.

"Oh, figured us out, huh?" the boy said, raising his hands in surrender. "I'm glad. That makes things quick, but I kinda wanna chat a bit first."

"Chat...?"

"Yeah. He ordered us to finish you two off, but honestly, killing you when I've got no clue who you are kinda puts a sour taste in my mouth."

The boy put a strong emphasis on "finish you two off" and "killing," perhaps in an attempt to intimidate them. It also sounded like he was trying to confirm something. Kuroka squared herself so that she was ready to draw her swords from her cane at any moment as Shax stepped forward.

"Come on, you don't mean that you're going to let us go if we say we're plain old citizens, do you now?" he asked them.

"Aaah, well, I kinda wanna test if we could," the boy said with a smile, as if killing people didn't make him feel a thing.

*Test? Test what?* Kuroka wondered. She couldn't read her opponent, but this kind of negotiation was Shax's specialty. Thus, Kuroka decided to quietly watch over them. Shax brought his hand to his waist and replied to the boy with a weak smile.

“Gimme a break, man. We’re just worthless citizens, as you can see. She’s a frail little girl that’s never so much as thrown a punch, ya know? How could she possibly have offended anyone?”

“Ha ha ha. See, that’s what I thought too...” the boy responded with a wry smile, but suddenly sharpened his gaze. “But based on experience, people like you who pretend not to stand out are the scariest of ’em all.”

*Maybe they’re actually good people!* Kuroka suddenly exclaimed in her mind, pumping her fists and nodding repeatedly.

“Kurosuke... Don’t act all proud at that,” Shax said with a sigh.

“Oh. Sorry. I just felt so happy...”

“Sir Asura, it seems you’re being ridiculed,” the slit-eyed swordsman snorted out.

“Huh? Really? Dammit! Why’d you gotta make fun of me when I’m actin’ all modest?!” the boy roared with tears in his eyes.

Kuroka actually felt somewhat sorry for him, but her mind sharply analyzed what she’d heard.

*The boy is actually the superior of the two, then?*

The swordsman was clearly older, but referred to the boy as “Sir” regardless, so it was highly likely she was right. Besides, even though his tone had been somewhat teasing, there was a certain air of respect behind his words.

“Well, in either case, we can’t allow Shere Khan’s subordinates to escape,” Kuroka declared, readying her cane and lining herself up next to Shax.

“I would’ve liked to get a little more information outta them, though,” Shax said.

Kuroka and Shax had no choice but to prepare themselves for battle. Seeing this, the boy slammed his gauntleted fist together.

“Let’s rock this! Bato, I’ll take on the spindly lookin’ guy. You restrain the woman.”

“Waaah...? But I never point my sword at women.”

“I also don’t make a habit of hittin’ girls!”

“Haaah... Sir Asura, are you perhaps a virgin? Your face is bright red.”

“It’s red ’cause I’m pissed the hell off!”

The two of them didn’t seem even the slightest bit scared by the life-or-death situation before them.

“Let’s go,” Kuroka said.

*Even if they don’t look all that impressive, it could just be for show.*

They were assassins sent by an Archdemon, so Kuroka had no intention whatsoever of being careless. As she stepped forth, Shax tapped her back with two fingers.

*“Take them alive.”*

*“Understood.”*

She acknowledged his silent instruction with a gaze, then closed in on the slit-eyed swordsman. She drew one of her shortswords from her cane with her right hand, twisting her body as she stepped in, performing a full rotation and unleashing a slash.

In exchange for using her full body weight, this strike left a big opening. The swordsman drew the blade at his waist at his leisure and caught Kuroka’s blow, pushing back down on her with his body.

“Hmm, that’s quite the strike considering your physique,” the swordsman hummed in admiration.

Their swords scraped against each other, trembling from the impact. Judging by the simple fact that he’d managed to stop that blow, this swordsman was no ordinary person. However, Kuroka hadn’t performed such a long stroke without reason.

“Hmph!”

She’d drawn her second shortsword in the middle of her twirl while her back had been turned to him. Using the momentum of her twist, she brought down the shortsword in her left hand on top of the other. The swordsman’s

longsword shattered to pieces halfway down with a loud clang.

“It seems that was quite the blade,” Kuroka said.

Pretty much any sword would shatter if met with a serious attack from Kuroka. To date, the only sword that hadn’t was Chastille’s Sacred Sword. It was quite significant that she had to draw both blades in a single stroke to break his. It was somewhat pitiful to so mercilessly break his sword right off the bat, though.

Without giving him the time to counterattack, Kuroka thrust a shortsword at the man’s throat. He looked down at his broken blade, then up at Kuroka, and repeated this cycle several times before forcing a smile.

“Uhhh... Umm, I surrender, so...”

He raised both his hands, his broken sword still in his grip.

“Could you let go of your sword, then?” Kuroka asked.

“Thought so...”

Even if it was broken, it could have some sort of trick to it. The swordsman reluctantly let go of his broken weapon. After kicking it far away, Kuroka finally turned to Shax. She would’ve liked to tie this man up, but she didn’t have anything like rope on her. The only thing she could do to keep him restrained was hold her blade out in front of him, but that was likely enough in this case.

“Mister Shax, I’m done subduing him.”

“Nice. Well done.”

It seemed even Shax had a cold sweat coming down his brow. Regardless, his praise had Kuroka’s tails standing on end.

“The hell are you doing, Bato?” the boy said in exasperation.

“I mean, what do you want me to do with a broken sword...?” the man replied pitifully. However, Kuroka still refused to lower her guard.

*He didn’t take our fight seriously at all... No, he never even intended to.*

She didn’t know what their goal was, but it was better to assume this was all within their expectations. In fact, even though Kuroka had rendered the man

helpless, she also couldn't budge an inch. It was as if he'd sealed her movements.

The boy looked like the superior of the two. If possible, Kuroka wanted to support Shax, but her instincts were telling her not to give this swordsman any openings. Shax also appeared to sense this. He held up his palm, telling Kuroka not to move. Having said that, the boy's partner had been beaten in an instant. He stamped his feet about in complaint, yet narrowed his gaze sharply.

"Tch! What an unreliable partner! Listen up! You're in for a world of hurt if you think I'm gonna go down like Bato!"

Despite his childish behavior, which even exceeded his childish appearance, Kuroka and Shax were forced to realize that he wasn't being vainglorious. The boy held out his right arm as a tremendous amount of mana suddenly swept over the area.

"Sorcery!" Kuroka yelled.

"It's not!" Shax immediately disagreed.

The boy smiled with an unyielding spirit, then said, "Heh heh. Looks like you get it a li'l. This is the Hex Arm. And I'm Hex Arm Asura! Carve that into your thick skulls, dammit!"

"Hex Arm Asura? Impossible...!" Kuroka exclaimed, doubting her ears.

"Kurosuke, do you know something?"

There were none in Liucaon who didn't know that name. Kuroka had heard the fairy tales many times over, even.

"It's the name of a hero from a one-thousand-year-old Liucaon legend."

The air suddenly froze at her response.

"A-A thousand years?!" three voices yelled in unison.

"Hang on, why are you two acting all surprised?" Shax asked.

"I-I mean, I didn't hear nothin' about a thousand years passin'. Y-You're kiddin' me, right?" the boy said in shock.

"Uhhh... Judging by this little lady's reaction, I do believe it must be true..."

the swordsman said.

Kuroka had thought it was a lie to throw them off, but these assailants were far more shaken than she or Shax was to hear her response. The swordsman had been acting aloof all this time, but suddenly had a shadow lurking behind his expression as cold sweat ran down his cheek. It would be impressive if this was all an act, but it looked far more like he was incapable of hiding his astonishment.

*Now that I think of it, he called him Bato... Does that make this man Clairvoyant Bato?*

That was the name of a famous strategist in the legends of the Silver-Eyed King.

*But is it even possible for these two to be heroes from a thousand years ago?*

Sorcery was capable of creating the undead, but it was impossible to perfectly resurrect the dead. It was perhaps possible using Nephy's mysticism, but could such a thing be achieved after a thousand years without so much as the ashes of the dead left?

*I can't read their intentions at all.*

If they'd aimed to throw off Kuroka and Shax, it would've made sense to use names closer to their hearts. Still, even if it was possible to resurrect the real heroes, would they be made to act like mere mercenaries in a place like this?

"H-Hmph! It's a li'l surprising, but it don't change what I've gotta do!"

The boy had no intention of giving up. Even more mana wrapped around his extended right hand. Before long, a crimson gauntlet took shape around his arm. It was transparent like glass. Although it wasn't as big, Kuroka saw a resemblance to Heaven's Scale Eastern Sky, the sorcery Archdemon Zagan wielded. A shiver of dread ran down her spine as all the fur on her tails stood on end.

"Mister Shax! That arm is dangerous!"

"I can see that... Materialized mana? No, he called it Hex Arm. Is it some sort of curse?" Shax muttered, carefully analyzing the situation.

“A curse?” the boy muttered, his eyes wide in shock. “Hmm, I see... So this is called a curse?”

He nodded in understanding, reading some sort of hidden meaning out of that word. He looked like he was playing the fool, but it turned out he wasn’t so dim.

“Now then, shall we?” the boy, Hex Arm Asura, said with a ferocious smile, holding up his crimson gauntlet.

Kuroka had a bad premonition, so she tried to dash in and exclaimed “I won’t let—!”

“Whoa there, are you going to let me go?”

Just as she tried to run off, however, the swordsman grinned at her.

*I can’t move.*

Kuroka had fallen into the swordsman’s trap. She couldn’t read him at all, seeing that he’d surrendered right away. Things could be settled quickly if she killed him, but she wasn’t an assassin anymore. More importantly, Shax didn’t wish for that.

“Kurosuke, don’t worry ’bout me,” Shax said with a smile. “I’ve at least got enough talent for the boss to trust me, ya know?”

He ran forward as if to catch the boy’s crimson gauntlet head-on.

“That’s the spirit!” Asura yelled.

“Whoa!”

The moment it looked like Shax charged forth with vigor, his legs tangled up and he fell over splendidly. The boy froze completely, his gauntlet still held aloft, unable to believe what he’d just seen.

“The hell are you up to...?”

“Hang on! Gimme a sec! Let’s start over!” Shax yelled.

“Quit screwin’ with me!”

Shax retreated pitifully, still sitting on his rear. This seemed to rub Asura’s nerves even more. The boy’s face was bright red with rage. Obviously, he closed

in to punch Shax, but to do so, he had to chase the retreating sorcerer. And so, his foot came down right where Shax had tumbled over so unnaturally.

“Eat shit!” the boy yelled.

“Make me,” Shax replied.

The ground exploded beneath the boy’s feet. Shax had apparently set up an impromptu trap there. Any normal sorcerer would’ve been handled with ease by the explosion, but when the dust settled, the boy appeared to be completely unharmed. It turned out the shape of his gauntlet could be freely manipulated. It had scattered into pieces and formed a shield to withstand the blast.

“Tch! Don’t think that kinda crap can take me down!”

“Oh, I’ll take you down all right.”

“Wha—?!”

Shax used the dust to slip behind Asura. He then grabbed the boy’s unarmored left arm, twisted it, and pushed him down.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!”

“Okay, you’d better not move. Human joints aren’t meant to bend this way. It’ll break if you’re not careful.”

Thanks to his specialization in medical treatment, Shax’s arts were based on a full understanding of the structure of the human body. With this, things were settled... Or so Kuroka wanted to believe, at least.

“You really think I’m gonna get done in by such underhanded crap?!”

The boy grasped the ground with his gauntlet, lifting his body off the ground with his other arm still twisted behind him.

“H-Hey!”

“Raaah!”

Astonishingly enough, Asura lifted both of them off the ground with a one-arm handstand. He then rolled his body forward and escaped Shax’s grasp.

“Seriously...?” Shax muttered. Then, without even waiting for them to land, he used the boy’s body as a stepping stone to jump away from him.

“I’m not gonna get caught by that lame trick again!”

“I bet you won’t...”

Shax had wanted to finish things off with that trick, but Kuroka knew that wasn’t all there was to his strength. She could see multiple magic circles wrapped around his arm as he readied himself.

*It can’t be! Those are...!*

Shax lunged at the boy again. This time, however, he really was charging in straight from the front. His fist collided with the boy’s gauntlet. Mana turned into a shock wave, spreading out into the surroundings. Shax’s foot sank into the ground...and the glass windows in the area shattered.

“The hell—?!”

The boy lost the clash. The shock wave blew him back, sending him crashing into the wall behind him and turning the dilapidated house to rubble.

“How’s that? My boss’s fist hurts pretty bad, huh?”

If it had to be given a name, the Archdemon’s Fist would be appropriate. This was the punch of Archdemon Zagan, reinforced by endlessly eating the sorcery of others. It was a strike that had even defeated Purgatory Barbatos and Archdemon Andrealphus. Shax had reproduced it himself without having to devour sorcery. However, the price of using such an attack wasn’t trivial. A horrible sound resounded from every bone between Shax’s fist and bicep as blood burst into the air.

“Gah! Ugh...”

Archdemon Zagan could swing such a fist because he was the most skilled when it came to reinforcing his body. Shax also specialized in such things as a medical practitioner, but he couldn’t withstand the recoil. On the other hand, the boy got up from the rubble looking fairly fine, his gauntlet remaining undamaged.

“Ow... You son of a bitch! You really did it now!”

Shax had already started to heal his broken right arm. He’d gotten far enough to clench his fist again, but if he tried to repeat that punch, this time his entire

arm would be lost. Nevertheless, he stood ready to attack.

“You can’t!” Kuroka yelled, clenching her teeth hard.

“Whoa there, I’m not going to let—!”

The swordsman tried to block her path, but his slit-thin eyes shot open. As Kuroka broke into a run, her body crumbled away. It was somewhat similar to how the vampire Alshiera transformed into bats. The fundamental difference was that Kuroka hadn’t transformed into bats, but countless butterflies instead.

The butterflies were made of light, glittering with a rainbow glow. This wasn’t an art like Moonlit Night, but a phenomenon closer to mysticism.

*What’s going on... Did the Moonless Sky do this?*

This was a first, even for Kuroka. However, despite the mystery of the phenomenon, Kuroka understood how to move in that form. The butterflies gathered in front of Shax as if to protect him and reformed Kuroka’s body.

“What?” Asura muttered in bewilderment, but still brandished his crimson gauntlet.

“You mustn’t, Sir Asura!” the swordsman yelled, bringing the boy to a halt. “We’re retreating.”

“Fine...” the boy nodded, sounding unexpectedly obedient, then struck the ground with his gauntlet.

A massive amount of dust blew into the air, obscuring the two mercenaries. By the time the dust settled, they were both gone. They were clearly rather shrewd, as even the broken sword Kuroka had kicked aside had vanished.

“They got away... Or I guess, they let us go?” Shax said, blood still running down his arm.

Upon seeing that, Kuroka quietly declared, “I’m going to hunt them down.”

◇

“We’re probably fine all the way out here.”

Asura and Bato came to a stop near the ruins of a church because there didn’t seem to be anyone in the vicinity. There were walls all over that could be used

as cover, but the buildings in the area had all collapsed, leaving it rather open. It was impossible to get within twenty paces of them without being spotted.

*Impossible if I hadn't gone around the back ahead of them, that is.*

Even after regaining her sight, Kuroka's senses of smell and hearing had far surpassed those of any regular person. What's more, she'd investigated the area beforehand, so she could immediately predict where they would retreat to. She hid behind a wall, erased her presence, and pricked up her ears.

"So what, was that woman's ability that hard to tango with?" Asura asked.

"Yes. Its form was rather different from what I know, but...that was probably Azazel," the swordsman answered cautiously.

Kuroka nearly made noise upon hearing the unexpected name spill from his lips.

"You've gotta be kiddin' me..." Asura said, putting himself on guard as well. "Ain't that the name of those fuckin' seraphs' god?"

Kuroka was no longer able to hide her agitation due to the continuous series of surprising words.

*I wish I could've brought Mister Shax with me...*

She did at least possess some skill as an intelligence operative, but Shax could've gotten far more information out of this conversation than her. Kuroka had taken chase on her own because he was injured, but she should've had him cast some sort of communication sorcery on her.

"I see," the swordsman replied, raising his head and realizing his own thoughtlessness. "In your era, that's what Azazel was."

"You talk like it was somethin' else in your era."

Kuroka scowled at the bizarre conversation. It was as if the two had come from different ages and were cognizant of that fact.

*Does that mean they're really the heroes from a thousand years ago...?*

Hex Arm Asura and Clairvoyant Bato were both names that appeared in the legends of the Silver-Eyed King. Back in her hometown, Kuroka had read many

such tales with Lilith. According to the legends, the two of them didn't live in different eras, though.

Deciding that she would leave uncovering the authenticity of their identities to Zagan and Shax, Kuroka focused on listening under the assumption that they were, in fact, those very same heroes.

"Yes," the swordsman answered. "In my era, Azazel was split in two by the Silver-Eyed King. One half remained the dreadful god, while the other turned into a sword. We called it the Seraphic Blade."

The Seraphic Blade Azazel...meaning it was a seraph's sword? However, Zagan had been searching for Azazel under the assumption that it was the thirteenth Sacred Sword. Kuroka lowered her gaze to the Moonless Sky in her hand. According to Alshiera, this sword had once been wielded by the Silver-Eyed King.

*What exactly is this sword, then?*

If the Adelhide village were still around, there might've been some sort of legend left to investigate, but none of this sounded familiar to Kuroka.

"If she is its current wielder, I suppose that makes her this generation's Silver-Eyed King," the swordsman continued. "Even if we both took her on at once, I believe that burden is a little too heavy for us."

Unbeknownst to them, someone else went by that name right now, but Kuroka felt like she couldn't ignore that as a simple misunderstanding. She would find out the full details sooner or later. In any case, these two were under the assumption that Kuroka was the current Silver-Eyed King.

"She has red eyes and is a girl, ya know?" Asura muttered dubiously.

"It could've turned into a simple title after a thousand years."

"By Silver-Eyed King, you mean ——, right?" Asura asked just to be sure. "That woman doesn't have silver eyes, but maybe she's one of his descendants?"

Kuroka couldn't hear the name he said very well.

*No, it's not that I couldn't hear it... It feels more like it was blocked by some manner of sorcery.*

“Sorry, what did you just call him? I couldn’t really hear you,” the swordsman asked, apparently blocked from hearing it as well.

“Huh? I said ——. Our leader.”

The swordsman sank into thought and murmured, “This may sound strange, but I can’t perceive the name you’re saying, Sir Asura.”

“What’s that mean...?”

“If the name you speak is that of the Silver-Eyed King, then that means he had cut down a god. He must’ve paid some sort of price, meaning it’s highly likely he was burdened with some sort of curse.”

“A curse... That guy said the same thing when he saw my Hex Arm.”

“Marchosias completely and utterly wiped out the seraphs after they lost their powers, after all,” the swordsman said with a wry smile. “The seraphs’ hexes started getting called curses out of hatred.”

“Your Hex Sword too?”

“So you did notice, eh? Yes, this too.”

His sword had, in fact, been a weapon with an interesting history to it. If Kuroka hadn’t forced him to drop it, she might’ve been driven into a hard fight.

“So if we can’t hear his name, then the Silver-Eyed King will have to do, yeah?” Asura said. “You got any idea why it ended up like that?”

“No... I mean, none returned from that place alive, after all.”

“So you were annihilated...” Asura mumbled, then added in a grief-stricken voice, “Does that mean Ashy died too...?”

“By Ashy, do you mean Lady Alshiera?”

Kuroka nearly let out a sound again upon hearing a familiar name mentioned.

“You may rest at ease. She was still alive in my era. Or at the very least, she still was when I died in battle.”

“I see... Mmm. That’s good, then...”

There was genuine relief in Asura’s voice, but Kuroka could sense that the

swordsman was still hiding something in his silence. The two men talked as if they had already died. It made Kuroka's head hurt. There was too much information for her to convey to her allies.

"Let's organize all the information we've obtained for now," the swordsman said, pulling things back together. "First, this is the world a thousand years after we died."

"Meanin' I've got another twenty or thirty years on you? Well, guess it makes sense that the world is totally different, then."

Asura really had come from an earlier era than the swordsman. How much had the world changed over a thousand years? Kuroka couldn't even imagine it, but the differences must've been astonishing.

"Yes," the swordsman continued. "Second, sword techniques haven't advanced much since our era."

"Huh? I only saw her take a single swing, but it looked like she had enough skill that it's kinda a waste that she's a girl, ya know?"

"Agreed. Even if she fought the Silver-Eyed King of my era, I don't think she would be outdone by him. However, she wouldn't greatly exceed him either. In all likelihood, sword techniques had already reached completion in our age."

Meaning that so long as the tools they used didn't change, the development of an art had its limits. Hearing there had been no progress saddened Kuroka, but that emotion didn't matter right now, so she drove it out of her mind.

"Third," the swordsman said, tension now thick in his voice. "In complete contrast, sorcery has advanced to a terrifying level."

"That thing the guy used? Well, despite clashing head-on with my Hex Arm, it looked like combat was actually that guy's weak point."

"That's not what I mean. The destructive potential of his punch was amazing, yes, but I'm referring to his healing speed. His arm was nearly torn off by the clash with your Hex Arm, yet in but a few seconds, it was almost back to normal. Is he really human? If he can cast the same healing on others, there'd be no defeating them."

Kuroka was astonished. These two had been observing her and Shax even more than she'd been observing them. They even understood the level of Shax's medical sorcery at a single glance.

"Fourth," Asura said this time. "That knight's orders have no compelling force on us."

"Yes. We could both surrender and retreat. There was no effect when you lied either."

Kuroka narrowed her eyes upon hearing that part.

*That knight...? An Angelic Knight, perhaps?*

Some knights weren't Angelic Knights, but in this day and age, the term normally referred to the knights of the church. The two of them talked as if they were under the command of this knight they'd mentioned.

"I hate that guy," Asura proclaimed. "I mean, it kinda feels like he'd abandon his friends to get away."

"Ha ha ha. You think so too, Sir Asura? I also find it hard to like such shady characters."

"You hate people who are like you, huh? I get it."

Upon seeing the swordsman stumped by his remark, Asura cackled before continuing the conversation by saying, "Still, I don't really get what's goin' on. We're completely bound by Shere Khan's orders, yeah? And here, we got ordered by Shere Khan to obey that knight, so why can we defy him? Judgin' by what we saw of the others, that absolute obedience ain't somethin' you can just ignore on a whim."

Kuroka cocked her head curiously when she heard that.

*Does this mean Shere Khan can brainwash people with sorcery?*

It appeared that Asura and Bato were in a position where they couldn't disobey Shere Khan.

"If I had to guess..." the swordsman muttered, clearly lost in deep thought. "I would say there's no effect unless it's a direct order from Shere Khan's mouth. Or perhaps..."

“That wasn’t no order to begin with?”

“Precisely.”

Kuroka couldn’t understand anything at this point, so she made sure just to listen. Things would be easier to decide on if she knew a little more about their circumstances.

“In that case, what’s in it for Shere Khan?” Asura asked dubiously. “Dependin’ on how things go, we could even betray him. This don’t make no sense.”

“You have a point there. Still, he seems to have his own circumstances to consider. Regardless, I can think of two possibilities. First, that knight has a grasp of Shere Khan’s weakness.”

“Looked more like it was the other way around to me. What’s the other?”

“There’s a need for us to act independently.”

“I mean, that’s the part I don’t get.”

Kuroka could understand where the swordsman was coming from.

*If Shere Khan dominates them completely, there’s a danger their actions will be predictable.*

That meant Shere Khan was expecting them to act in unforeseen ways. Or, in other words, the Archdemon had made an enemy aside from Zagan that he had to be wary of to such an extent. Kuroka had just heard of this from Shax after his report to Zagan.

*So these people are meant to keep Bifrons in check? I see... That’s why they were hesitant to recognize us as enemies. Oh, then the lie was that they were ordered to kill us.*

Their focus had been largely on gathering information. From beginning to end, they hadn’t done anything unnecessary. All their actions had a terrifying refinement to them.

“So that’s how it goes,” Asura said with a laugh. “That’s more than enough info to apologize for havin’ ya keep us company in figurin’ all that out, yeah?”

Those words were clearly directed at Kuroka. They’d noticed she was hiding in

the area. In other words, they had spoken of all this knowing that she was eavesdropping the entire time.

*They might really be the heroes from a thousand years ago.*

It was vexing, but she'd clearly been on the back foot the whole time.

"You have my thanks..." she replied.

"Sir Asura, it appears she was behind us."

Kuroka came out of cover and spotted Asura looking in the opposite direction. They knew she'd managed to cut them off, but hadn't grasped her exact location.

"Oh right," the swordsman added cheerfully. "About the knight who sent us here to buy time... He seems to be chasing a girl who's running around this town. Could she perhaps be a comrade of yours?"

He was basically telling her, "Our employer is a nuisance, so could you go take care of him for us?"

*But...a girl?*

Kuroka had no clue who that could be. If it was someone in Zagan's camp, he would definitely have noticed already, meaning Shax would've heard of it earlier during their regular report. As for people outside of Zagan's camp, Kuroka hadn't the slightest. There was nobody who would come out to such a desolate town, let alone a girl.

*No, maybe, just maybe...*

She had no proof and didn't think it was possible. To begin with, she'd been told that those girls possessed fervent loyalty to Shere Khan. Even if they had been forsaken for failing their mission, it had been so long ago now, making it even more doubtful.

*But if it is them...*

Kuroka didn't really have any obligation to save them. In fact, she had more of a reason to resent them. It was possible to get some information out of them if she brought them in alive, but their survival had nothing to do with her. Besides, Shax was injured, so Kuroka didn't want to get saddled with more

trouble. Or at least that was...supposed to be the case.

“Who knows? I wonder about that.”

After leaving those words behind, Kuroka dashed off.

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“That’s a hit! Stop!”

Back in Kianoides, a wooden sword flew high into the air in the plaza in front of the church.

“Oooh! Alfred lost!”

A lean knight in brilliant blue armor faced a young man wearing Anointed Armor. The knight in blue looked up at his wooden sword in a daze, then finally came to his senses upon hearing it strike the ground.

“How splendid...” he muttered with a sigh of admiration. “You’ve grown strong, Richard.”

“Thank you very much!”

The victor’s name was Richard. His opponent was one of the Three Knights of the Azure Sky, the longsword wielder Alfred. Once upon a time, the Three Knights of the Azure Sky had been little more than the elites of Kianoides. However, after challenging Archdemon Zagan and failing, they had risen to the ranks of the best among the best of all Angelic Knights in the region. Among them, the Angelic Knight named Alfred was second only to Chastille. In other words, he was the strongest knight in town excluding any Archangels.

That was why Richard had asked a big favor of Alfred in helping with his training. And today, Richard had finally landed a hit on him.

“Hngh...” Alfred groaned, looking up at the sky as if holding back his tears. “From now on, my seat among the Three Knights of the Azure Sky is yours! Protect Lady Chastille until the end of your days!”

“Huh? No, that’s a little...” Richard trailed off, sounding somewhat troubled, but the other Angelic Knights paid him no heed and gathered around Alfred.

“You did well, Alfred!”

“This is just how the old guard passes on, I suppose... It’s going to get lonely without you.”

“Don’t say that, Torres. A man of Alfred’s caliber has recognized his successor, so we must accept it!”

It felt like Richard couldn’t cut into their conversation anymore, leaving a cold sweat running down his brow.

*Wh-What should I do? It’s not like I was looking for a promotion or anything...*

The Three Knights of the Azure Sky were the strongest Angelic Knights in Kianoides. The missions they were burdened with varied widely, and they devoted themselves to their harsh duties day and night. To put it bluntly, they were extremely busy.

On the other hand, Richard simply wanted to be stronger so that he could protect Nephteros better, and so that Archdemon Zagan, who had her under his patronage, would come to accept him. There was no point if he could no longer stay by her side. If he were promoted, he would no longer be able to remain as her personal guard.

Despite that, it looked like Alfred had already resigned from his post, and the others were all deeply moved by his manly display. Richard did, of course, respect him greatly as an Angelic Knight, but this was an unwelcome favor. And as he remained flustered about what to do, a sweet giggle resounded out of nowhere.

“Tee hee hee, my, what a festive mood they’re in.”

A swarm of bats unbefitting the midday plaza gathered together. Then, a girl in black clothing swooped down with a light tap on the ground, a creepy stuffed doll in her arms. This was the vampire Alshiera.

“Mrgh! You’re that damn vampire who’s been lurking around the church!”

“What are you doing here?!”

“We even left macarons out in the office!”

The Three Knights of the Azure Sky immediately got into formation, Alfred picking up his fallen wooden sword in the process. It felt like there was an

unrelated complaint in there, but Richard pretended not to notice. As for Alshiera, she failed to let that last line slip, so she strained a smile at a slight loss.

“Umm... I shall enjoy them at a later time.”

“I made the ones today using rare fruits from passion flowers. The taste will deteriorate over time, so you should eat them as soon as possible!”

“Have you been making them by hand all this time?”

The vampire Alshiera possessed eyes that seemed to see through every truth, but here was one she hadn’t been able to reveal. Ryan, the greatshield wielder, covered his blushing face awkwardly.

“Please forget everything you just heard...” he said.

Perhaps the Three Knights of the Azure Sky weren’t as busy as Richard had initially believed.

Even with the wind blown out of her sails, Alshiera smiled gallantly and said, “Well, I came over because there’s something to celebrate. My favorite little pet has gotten more guards, hasn’t she?”

“Hrm...? What are you talking about?” Alfred asked with a grimace.

“Oh my, is that gentleman not Lady Nephteros’s guard?” Alshiera asked with an exaggerated look of surprise. “Now that he’s been promoted, his squad should be taking on that responsibility with him, no?”

She then narrowed her eyes with a villainous smile and added, “At any rate, she is a high elf, a member of the race regarded as the most sacred beings in the church, and the little sister of Archdemon Zagan’s beautiful bride, Lady Nephelia... In other words, she is the very symbol of the Unification Faction.”

“Hrk!” Torres, the spear-wielder, grunted and suddenly fell to one knee.

“What’s wrong, Torres?!”

“N-Nothing! It’s nothing! I just recalled something horrible. There’s nothing wrong with me!”

Cold sweat poured down Torres’s brow and his hand trembled violently as he

clung to his spear. This was a fit that assaulted him every now and then. Richard didn't know the details, but it happened whenever the topic of elves came up. This was the second time Richard had witnessed it himself. He'd heard the fits had calmed down as of late, however.

Richard stood there in bewilderment as Alshiera then directed a meaningful gaze toward him. He couldn't read her intentions, but decided to go along with it.

"Ummm, Lady Alshiera," he said. "That still hasn't been decided. Above all else, I believe the Three Knights of the Azure Sky are only what they are when composed of these three men."

Alshiera's eyes widened in faux surprise and she replied, "Oh dear, then I must have jumped to conclusions. My deepest apologies."

Upon hearing Richard's casual refusal of the position, Alfred bowed his head regretfully.

"Forgive me, Richard! But the path to glory is now open to you!"

Torres then led the other Angelic Knights back to their posts, dispersing the group. The only ones left were Richard and Alshiera.

"Should I be thanking you?" he asked.

"Oh? All I did was misread the situation, right?"

Richard nodded in understanding.

*According to Lady Chastille, she isn't a bad person, but...*

He still struggled to read her intentions. It was unreasonable for him to lower his guard against this vampire.

"So? Did you need something from me?" he asked warily.

Alshiera didn't respond right away. Instead, she scooped back her golden hair, finding it difficult to find the right words, and after a brief silence, she finally began speaking.

"I do... Allow me to be quite frank. Have you noticed anything abnormal about Lady Nephteros?"

“Abnormal...? Like how she feels sick every now and then?”

Nephteros had suddenly collapsed once. What’s more, when Richard had gone to get her a drink, she ended up vanishing, causing him to panic pretty badly. She’d looked stable over the last month, but she still had bouts of dizziness and headaches. Nephteros had stoutly kept it all to herself, so it pained Richard’s heart to watch her.

“So you have noticed,” Alshiera muttered anxiously.

“Yes... Is there perhaps something happening to her body?”

Alshiera nodded with a grave expression on her face, then quietly said, “Yes. I’ll get straight to the point. I’d like you to stay away from Lady Nephteros.”

Richard’s eyes shot open at the sudden pronouncement. Confused, he asked, “What do you mean by that?”

“Exactly what I said. You have feelings for her, don’t you? That isn’t good.”

“I-I can at least separate my private life from my duties!”

“I’m not criticizing you,” Alshiera said with a listless sigh. “If you get further involved with her, you will experience only painful memories. You would be better off getting away from her as soon as possible.”

For an instant, Richard felt blood rushing to his head, but then he realized that Alshiera’s warning was related to Nephteros’s health. Thinking back on it, Nephteros had seemed absentminded this morning.

*Painful memories...? It can’t be!*

Richard prayed that his intuition was wrong.

“Do you mean to say that her condition is that severe?” he asked.

She hadn’t collapsed recently. It even looked like she was steadily recovering.

“I gave you my warning,” Alshiera told him, shaking her head. Then, leaving those last words, the vampire vanished within a swarm of bats.

*What should I do...?*

With nobody left to answer him, Richard stood stock still in the empty plaza.

◇

“Haaah... Haaah...”

A girl ran through the alleyways near some abandoned buildings. She had blue eyes and her face was smeared with dirt. Her trademark red ribbon was gone, while her blonde hair was a disheveled mess. She had her little sister’s blue ribbon wrapped preciously around her left wrist.

This was one of the twin sorcerers who served Shere Khan, Dexia. She was wearing a fine robe that was far too large for her, but underneath it, she had nothing more than old rags she’d managed to find to cover her chest and waist. She was essentially naked. She wore no shoes, causing her toenails to peel off at some point during her flight, so every single step she took left droplets of blood on the ground.

*This is the worst. Getting chased by a thug like him in a place like this is just...*

She’d awoken in the hideout near Feo and ran for her life just the other night. She’d somehow managed to make it to town, but she had no clothes, let alone money, which left her with few options. She couldn’t get any food or water, but somehow still maintained a minimal amount of reinforcement to her body and had finally managed to move around properly when a pursuer had found her.

Dexia pretty much couldn’t use any sorcery as she was now. The robe she had on had some spells inlaid within, but she couldn’t activate them because it wasn’t hers. In other words, she couldn’t use any sorcery without drawing the complex and unintelligible magic circles from scratch.

Even if she had the mana, it would take her hours to use anything. And a large-scale spell would take days, even months. The trump card she’d been granted by her master, the Entangling Gaze, required years of preparation.

Archdemon Zagan had replicated such a magic circle after seeing it only once, and even though he’d started drawing it second, he still completed it at the same time as her. Dexia couldn’t even imagine the speed at which his mind worked.

The only saving grace she had was that she’d managed to reinforce her body in time, but that had taken her an entire night. Still, if not for that, she wouldn’t

have been able to even attempt to run away.

“Aristella...”

The first word that left her hopeless mouth was the name of her other half, the girl who was no longer with her.

*This all happened because I’m stupid and weak and didn’t have enough resolve...*

That was why her other half had become the sacrifice. She had to stake her life to save her sister. The last Dexia saw of her had been nothing but a lump of meat without a hint of the lovely features she once possessed.

*“I’m scared of dying... I don’t want to... I hate the idea of being thrown away.”*

That had been their last conversation. Aristella had noticed the mistake before Dexia. That was why she’d worried about the size of the mistakes they’d committed and suffered for it. And yet, Dexia couldn’t come to understand her. She meant to protect her little sister, but had instead been protected by her.

*Even though I’m the big sister, I failed her!*

She felt so pathetic that she started to cry. Saving Aristella was the one and only thing Dexia desired. It was the only thing left to her after running away from Shere Khan, after all.

But even if she managed to get away from here, what could she do to help her? Was it even possible to get close to the place Shere Khan was storing her to begin with?

Regardless, if Dexia didn’t survive, that girl would suffer forever. Nobody would ever think of saving a half-assed sham of a sorcerer assassin, especially if she was their enemy. And so, Dexia continued running with such thoughts in mind as she turned a corner and ran into a wall of debris.

“A dead end?!”

She’d been running with no familiarity of the land, so she suddenly found herself with no way forward.

*I can at least jump over a wall of this height.*

The majority of the buildings in this town were ruins. Walls had collapsed everywhere, making it possible to surpass such obstacles with sorcery-enhanced leg strength. However, the moment she prepared to jump...

“Gah!”

A sudden shock struck the back of her head, sending Dexia tumbling across the ground.

“Ow... Ugh...”

A cut to the brow sent blood dribbling down her eyes, painting her vision red. She’d been running over a distance that would’ve burst any normal person’s heart, which had thoroughly exhausted her. Her limbs trembled. She couldn’t stand up again.

“Our game of tag is over, little girl,” a voice said from behind her as she gasped for air.

It was an unpleasant voice filled with hatred and scorn. Simply listening to it gave her the chills. Dexia somehow managed to raise her head and spot an Angelic Knight with a large sword hanging from his waist. She recognized him.

Archangel Valjakka, Sacred Sword Camael’s wielder. However, his glorious title was all a sham. Five years ago, after suffering an embarrassing defeat at Shere Khan’s hands, he’d been spared in exchange for his servitude and leaking information about the church’s core circle. Dexia and Aristella had even pushed him around like a worthless pawn.

He’d struck her with the metal glove of his Anointed Armor. Despite the reinforcement of her body, such a blow could’ve easily shattered her head. Dexia was assaulted by a terrible sense of nausea and could no longer focus her eyes. Nevertheless, she somehow managed to get air into her burning lungs and sat herself up straight.

“Hah. The petty underling who flattered this little girl with a stupid smile sure is acting haughty today,” she stated, disparaging him in a minimal show of resistance.

“Haaah... Do you understand the position you’re in right now?”

After saying that, the Angelic Knight immediately grabbed Dexia's hair and pulled her up.

"Ow! Ugh... Gah!"

The moment she bent backward in pain, a fist dug into her exposed abdomen. She could no longer breathe. Her vision went entirely white. She could hear her hair being torn from her scalp. Her consciousness began fading, but a shock ran through her entire body and suddenly woke her back up. She couldn't understand that she'd been thrown into a wall with tremendous force. Following that, she was assaulted by pain from the inside of her body.

"Hak... Haaah... Blurgh..."

It felt like her stomach had turned inside out. She vomited without hesitation, but all that came out was blood mixed with bile. She continued vomiting, holding down her stomach as Valjakka kicked her hands, breaking her fingers and sending her flying through the air once more.

She couldn't breathe. Her limbs lay sprawled across the ground, twitching with convulsions. A second strike sent blood bursting from her mouth. She could tell that some of her innards had burst. She could no longer move as a foot ground down on her head.

"Be mindful of the way you speak. Did you really think I wasn't mad at you?"

Perhaps this was simply what they called karma. The man she'd looked down on when she was Shere Khan's subordinate had cornered her the very moment she'd betrayed Shere Khan. It was a suitable end to a pitiful traitor.

*Like hell it is! I need...to save...Aristella!*

Even if her reasons were beyond selfish, Dexia had to survive. This life was one Aristella had shared with her, so she couldn't possibly die in such a place. Dexia was in tears, glaring up at Valjakka from beneath his heel.

"Hmm? What an impertinent brat..." he said, raising a brow in amusement. "But that only makes what's about to happen all the more fun."

"Huh...? Urgh!"

Dexia didn't understand what he meant by that, but he suddenly kicked her

shoulder, leaving her unable to think further. She no longer had the strength to resist. Her body languidly rolled over, which made her face the sky. That was when she realized that her small breasts were completely exposed. The rag she'd had at her waist was gone. Everything she'd been wearing aside from the robe had come off while she had been tossed about.

Dexia felt her face turn red with shame. She stretched out her trembling arm to try to cover her chest, but the Angelic Knight pinned it down, putting an end to her pitiful show of resistance.

"Ha ha! How's that? Try running your impertinent little mouth off now!"

He mounted her and began taking off his belt with a sneer. With that, Dexia understood what was going to happen to her. For the first time, she felt true, unbridled fear.

*I'm scared...but I have to go save my little sister!*

That was right. She had a reason to stay alive. She *had* to survive. All she had to do was pretend to be docile and give in, licking the back of his boots or whatever else he wanted. Even if he was rotten, he was still an Angelic Knight. If she dolefully begged for her life, he might even forgive her. What was a moment's humiliation in the face of death?

Countless similar thoughts floated to Dexia's mind to persuade her. And yet...she spat a mixture of saliva and bile onto his face. She no longer possessed the strength to push him off. Simply trying to talk with her cut lips hurt her greatly. She was in a pitiful state now, incapable of doing anything as she was made sport of. Nevertheless, Dexia smiled scornfully.

"You want me...to cuss you out...? What a fucking masochist..."



Even as fear dominated her heart, Dexia's spirit chose to rebel. In response, all expression suddenly vanished from the man's face.

"Ee—"

By the time she tried to scream, the man's fingers had already wrapped around her neck. His thumbs sank into her windpipe. She could hear her own spinal cord cracking. Her neck would break, or even be torn off, before she could suffocate.

*Sorry, Aristella... Even though you gave me life... Even though you helped me escape...I couldn't repay you at all. I'm so sorry for being such a bad big sister.*

Dexia's vision turned into a flickering sandstorm of black and white as death creeped up her feet. There was no way salvation would come for a strangled villain. The sound of something snapping echoed in her ears as darkness dominated her field of vision.

But for some strange reason, right at the end, she felt like she saw the profile of that straightforward girl who had once scolded them back when they had been so conceited, back in a time Dexia could barely even remember anymore.

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A crack resounded through the air as Kuroka drove the tip of her shoe into the face of the man straddling the girl, breaking his nose.

"Bwah!"

She'd put all her strength into that roundhouse kick, sending the large man clad in Anointed Armor flying away like a scrap of paper. He bounced off the ground like a ball, then collapsed at the edge of Kuroka's vision. She immediately kneeled down, putting her hand to the girl's throat to check her pulse.

*How cruel...*

The girl wasn't breathing. Blood stained her mouth and there were deep imprints where she'd been strangled mere moments ago. She had horrible bruises stretching over her abdomen, and Kuroka could tell that her innards had been devastated.

*At least she still has a pulse.*

"Mister Shax," Kuroka called out, still gripping her cane all the while. "I'll leave this girl to you. Please save her."

"I'm on it," the reliable sorcerer answered, starting his treatment of the girl immediately.

After overhearing Asura and Bato's conversation, Kuroka had immediately returned to Shax, then began her search for the girl who was being hunted. She already possessed superhuman senses of hearing and smell, so when enhanced by Shax's sorcery, it wasn't hard for her to pick out the sound of someone running away in a panic. There had, of course, been footsteps everywhere, but only one set could be matched to a scent of dripping blood.

Even after the footsteps had halted, Kuroka had heard the sounds of fighting and the dispute they were having. That was why she'd been able to beeline her way to them. Kuroka hadn't lost sight of her target precisely because Dexia had struggled to the bitter end.

Kuroka's mind focused on the girl who'd had all of her clothes torn off. She truly was mere moments away from being raped and killed. The thought of it had her stomach boiling. The sorcerers Kuroka had assassinated in the past were mostly despicable people. However, despite being an Angelic Knight, the man before her now was far more despicable than any of them.

She'd dealt him quite the blow, but he was still a knight clad in Anointed Armor. Even as blood poured from his nostrils, he rose to his feet immediately. She recognized him.

"Gah! Hak! Y-You bitch!" he screamed with bloodshot eyes. "Do you have any idea who I am?! You're not going to get off lightly after assaulting me!"

"Yes... I know exactly who you are, Sacred Sword Camael's wielder, Archangel Valjakka," Kuroka answered while pulling a mask out of her pocket.

The mask had the church's cross engraved onto its surface. She'd never thought she would wear it again, but she had brought it along because it could've been of some use in connection to their investigation. It was proof that she was part of the church's dark side.

“My name is Kuroka Adelhide. I’m a survivor of Special Enforcement Squad Thirteen, Azazel, under direct command of the pope. Do you understand what that means?”

The long-winded title sounded nice and all, but they had been nothing more than assassins. They killed, so it made sense for them to be killed. They weren’t meant to exist, so it was inevitable for them to be destroyed one day.

The people of Azazel had been given a holy mission to carry out the church’s vision of justice, but not all of them even cared. Many of them had killed purely for money or because of a personal grudge. It had at least been a professional place, so none of them had been murderers for the sheer pleasure of it, but that didn’t mean much in the end.

However, betrayal was an entirely different matter. Azazel had been annihilated because an Angelic Knight had leaked information to an Archdemon. The department wasn’t supposed to exist to begin with, so the traitor could live on shamelessly without being faulted by anyone. And that Angelic Knight was Valjakka, the Archangel who had fallen to the position of Shere Khan’s underling.

“Hmph! So what if you’re some filthy assassin?” Valjakka said with a sneer. “Are you looking for some loose change or something?”

His reaction was pretty much what she’d expected.

*Well, if he was capable of remembering all the details, he wouldn’t have betrayed us in the first place.*

In his eyes, the dark side of the church was nothing but rabble he’d kicked aside. No matter who died in the process, he didn’t care in the least.

“I don’t really care about vengeance,” Kuroka said, quietly donning her mask. “However, the people who died there weren’t villains who deserved death.”

Many of them had been like Kuroka, driven mad by their thirst for vengeance. They had been broken people who couldn’t live as anything other than assassins. Nevertheless, they had all been kind to their youngest member, Kuroka.

There had been those who cared for her wounds when she was injured; a

woman who'd taken her out to buy food on days off; a man who'd shown her a locket with a picture of his dead family inside. Thinking back on it, perhaps they had all been trying to get Kuroka to turn away from their path. If only they hadn't gotten involved with sorcerers; if only their lives hadn't been thrown into chaos. If only they'd stayed civilians, those people would surely have enjoyed happy lives with normal families.

*I won't let anyone deny the fact that they lived.*

"As the sole survivor of Azazel, I shall finish things here."

Kuroka drew her shortsword from her cane. Valjakka responded in kind, placing his hand on the blade at his waist.

"Quit acting all pretentious, you little bitch! Tear her limb from limb—Camael!" he roared, unleashing the power of his Sacred Sword without hesitation. Or at least, that was what he'd meant to do. "You're done for! Do you really think a pathetic little assassin can defeat the pinnacle of Angelic Knights?! I'll pluck off your limbs and torment you until your heart beats its last!"

Valjakka continued shouting, not even noticing that the battle had already ended. Kuroka let out a sigh and swung her sword lightly to the side to shake the blood off. A splash of red stained the ground, but even after that happened, the sound of viscous liquid dribbling to the ground continued to echo through the alley. Valjakka finally looked around in confusion, as if he was only just noticing the blood.

*Now that I think about it, I've heard there are times you don't feel any pain when cut by an extremely sharp blade.*

That would explain why he hadn't noticed.

"Umm... You should try to stop the bleeding," Kuroka told him, sheathing her sword. "You still have your left hand, right?"

"Huh...?"

He looked down in a daze, spotting his handless right wrist dribbling blood onto the ground. His severed hand was still at his waist, dangling from the hilt of his Sacred Sword.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

This man was armed with a Sacred Sword. Back when Kuroka had faced another such wielder, Chastille, she wasn’t able to bring her down, and Valjakka was a veteran among the Archangels. In terms of rank, he was far above Chastille. Thus, Kuroka never had any intention to go easy on him.

That was why she’d cut off his hand before he could draw his blade. That was the difference in strength between Kuroka as she was now and an Archangel. In terms of pure sword technique, she could likely even stave off Michael Diekmeyer’s Angelic Confession. The power granted to her by Archdemon Zagan—one that was on par with Anointed Armor—elevated her to such heights.

“I won’t go as far as taking your life, but I’ll have you die as a knight.”

This man couldn’t continue being an Angelic Knight without his dominant hand. Sure, he could have it healed with sorcery, but that would be considered heresy. In any case, the church had to decide how to best deal with him, so Kuroka turned her back to him as he began wailing in rage.

“You...bitch... You bitch! You fucking bitch!”

He clamped his right wrist, squirming on the ground as he continued screaming words he couldn’t afford to say.

“I’ll never forgive you! I’ll chase you to the ends of the world and butcher you! You! Zagan! Chastille! I’ll kill you all! I’ll...kill... Huh?”

Blood spurted out from his forehead. In his rage, Valjakka had forgotten all about the warning that had held a firm grasp on his life. Cursing Kuroka, who had been part of the church’s dark side, and hence not really part of the church, was still okay. However, the moment he’d expressed the intent to harm Chastille, there was no way he would be spared. By the time his face was covered with blood of his own making, the Archangel was already dead.

“Even when given a chance, some people never change...”

Archdemon Zagan had certainly given him a chance to redeem himself. That made it entirely possible for him to make amends. And yet, he hadn’t changed at all. Not everyone was capable of reform. There were tons of villains who

were beyond redemption. Kuroka already knew this, but seeing it happen before her eyes made her feel helpless.

“Kurosuke... That guy went and killed himself. You didn’t do it,” Shax told her.

She somehow managed to take off her mask and nod back to him.

“Your sins have been redeemed. May your soul find peace...”

The prayer offered only by the dark side of the church after finishing off a target echoed in vain among the ruined buildings before quietly vanishing into the air.

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“So? What’s with the mood in here?”

After giving Richard her warning, Alshiera visited Chastille’s office in the church.

*I’d planned to instigate Lady Nephteros into action next, but...*

There were currently three people present. One was the person Alshiera had been looking for, Nephteros. Having recently been informed of her short life span, she wasn’t really in a state to be smiling. Alshiera could understand that much, since she’d come here to do something about that to begin with.

However, the office’s resident, Archangel Chastille, was for some reason covering her bright red face and wouldn’t budge an inch. It was as if she was experiencing the very heights of shame. This girl was very capable in work mode, but it seemed something had happened that prevented her from flipping that switch.

And then there was the last person in the room, the gloomy sorcerer who usually hid himself in the shadows. Barbatos was sitting on a sofa, covering his face without so much as twitching, just like Chastille.

“Umm... It looks like something happened. Did you two, uh, do it last night or something?” Alshiera asked.

“We didn’t!”

She finally got a reaction out of them, but the moment they realized they’d

yelled at her in perfect unison, they both began writhing about.

“No, nothing happened. I...believe in Barbatos...I think,” Chastille muttered.

“H-Huh? What kinda embarrassing crap are you spouting?!”

“So you really did something?!”

“I-I didn’t! I didn’t do nothin’!”

It turned out this was one more reason that Nephteros was in a complete daze.

*Why are they having a lover’s quarrel when someone’s life is at risk?*

Barbatos had promised to cooperate to save Nephteros, yet here he was in a sorry state. Honestly, Alshiera wanted to tell them to do this stuff in private.

Incidentally, as for the other person helping with Nephteros’s problem, Zagan had collapsed just from getting a little intimate with his bride. Nephteros’s fate now fell on Alshiera’s slender shoulders, but there were things in this world that were better left unknown.

“It seems Chastille exhausted herself last night somewhere, and after bringing her back, this guy stripped her or something...” Nephteros finally said, still at a complete loss as to what to do about the situation.

“I-I didn’t strip her! I just took off her armor! I couldn’t possibly have left her to sleep in it, yeah?!”

“I-I had dirt on my face, but woke up all clean!”

“I-I felt sorry ’cause your face was all filthy, so I wiped it down! That’s all!”

“F-Filthy?! A-Am I that ugly...?”

“Huh?! We’re talking ’bout dirt! I didn’t say nothin’ about you being ugly! You’re actually, um...”

“A-Actually...what?”

“Forget it, dumbass!”

“Why are you suddenly so angry?!”

*Now that I think about it, does this girl even understand what “doing it”*

*means?* Alshiera wondered, ignoring the annoying quarrel going on in the background.

Nephteros had far more important matters at hand, but she didn't seem agitated by that part of the conversation. Zagan and Nephy would've turned red to the face and become incoherent, so that seemed odd.

Alshiera gave it some thought and tried to interpret it in her own way. According to Zagan, a homunculus could be implanted with knowledge upon its creation. In Nephteros's case, she likely had knowledge of the phrase, but didn't have any specific emotion attached to it.

Things finally seemed to quiet down, but then Chastille suddenly raised her head, tears still in her eyes.

"Huh...? Wait a minute, what did you wipe?"

"Uhhh... Well, you know..."

"Answer me, Barbatos!"

Apparently, this had repeated endlessly, making them sink back into self-loathing silence.

"You really have it tough..." Alshiera said to Nephteros, sympathy dripping off her tongue.

"Well, I'm used to it."

"So very tough..."

Alshiera couldn't imagine watching something like this so often that she got used to it. In any case, it didn't look like she could get to her business in this room. And so, she picked up the entire plate of macarons that had been left on the table—which was her other reason for coming here—and pointed to the door.

"Shall we have a little talk?"

"I suppose we can..."

The two of them left the office and headed to the chapel.

"So? Why the confession booth?" Nephteros asked.

Alshiera had walked right into a confession booth because of all the people surrounding them in the area. It was a small space with only two chairs and a partition between them. A priest was supposed to sit on one side while the faithful sat on the other and confessed their sins. There was a curtain sealing the booth, so it was perfect for talking in secret. It was also the best place to avoid bumping into Richard, whom Alshiera had just fired up earlier. Thus, Alshiera took a seat on the priest's side, while Nephteros sat on the faithful's side.

The petite vampire tossed a macaron into her mouth. Just as she'd been told, it had a peculiar acidic fragrance to it. Macarons were a particularly difficult dessert to make. The surface was baked, but couldn't be allowed to burn lest it lose the soft moisture contained within. She had no choice but to acknowledge how well-made these ones were.

"So that you can tell me what troubles you, of course," Alshiera answered as if it were perfectly obvious.

"By the sound of it, you also know... About my life span, I mean."

Alshiera had observed this girl up close for a month. In a sense, she knew more about the matter than even Zagan.

"It seems you do not wish to prolong your life," Alshiera said affectionately.

"That's...right," Nephteros mumbled, an air of resignation behind her words.

*Well, this won't do. This won't do at all.*

Nephteros's thoughts and emotions had come grinding to a halt. It wasn't easy to cope with one's death without doing so, but it still wouldn't do.

Alshiera began putting together a plan to break this deadlock while throwing entire macarons into her mouth, appreciating the somewhat peculiar fragrance and delectable sweetness the entire time.

Honestly speaking, Alshiera didn't much like poking her head into other people's romances, but she knew she didn't have time to spare. That was why she'd chosen to step in even though this contradicted her beliefs.

"Then how will you use the remaining time you have left?" she asked. "I'll at

least help with anything I'm capable of."

"The time I have left..."

Even now, that time was slowly ticking away. That reality had Nephteros's mind moving again. Even if Alshiera didn't do anything like this, Nephteros was a strong girl. She would've gotten back on her feet in a few days to search for a purpose behind her remaining life. All Alshiera was doing was giving her a little push to accelerate that course of events.

"How do normal people pass such time, I wonder...?" Nephteros asked in a daze.

"A good question. Based on what I've witnessed, there are those who pass it the same as any other time, those who act selfishly, and those who give their thanks to everyone they feel they owe. There are many ways to pass such time."

Nephteros forced a smile. That was at least proof that her emotions were beginning to function again.

"That's quite the wide variety..." she said.

"I've been watching this world for a rather long time, after all," Alshiera replied. She'd witnessed the lives and deaths of so many people.

"But everyone is the same in the end," she added with that thought in mind. "They yearn to spend what little time they have left with their loved ones."

"Love... I don't really get it..." Nephteros muttered in a trembling voice, as if that had been the exact problem on her mind.

Alshiera could tell from across the partition that Nephteros was trying to muster her courage to make some kind of decision.

"I don't really get it...but I think...I want to know more about it."

*Like I thought, the foundation is already in place. There's just one thing missing that's keeping her from moving forward.*

That was why this girl had never noticed that the answer was already right in front of her. And so, as if to enlighten her, Alshiera whispered like a devil in her ears, saying, "Tee hee hee. Then allow me to give you one word of advice. You

cannot love anyone if you do not first love yourself. You'd do well to begin with that."

"Love...myself...?"

"It isn't all that hard, really. If you turn back and look at the modest joy that's always remained by your side and the things that support you as if it were only natural, then you should find your way."

"What about you, Alshiera?" Nephteros asked, seemingly doubting whether she put her own words into practice. "Do you...um...properly love yourself?"

It was a rather sharp comeback, but Alshiera accepted it with a smile.

"Of course I do. I've been loved by so many people. Because of that, I can't possibly make light of my own existence. I mean, everyone wished for my happiness. They helped keep me alive, all the while believing I could one day enjoy my life with a smile on my face."

That was why Alshiera had spent over a thousand years "living." Remembering that, she tightly squeezed her hands in front of her chest as if embracing those memories.

"I will disappear before you do," she said. "Still, it isn't all that bad. I managed to meet someone I thought I'd long since lost, that I thought I would never see again, and I managed to spend time with them. So now, I'd just like to go to sleep in peace."

She was more than satisfied, but that wasn't the case for Nephteros. It was far too early for her. So even if it was a little mean, Alshiera continued her speech despite it being none of her business.

"I pray you also meet a peaceful end."

Even after Alshiera had left the confession booth, Nephteros remained frozen in her seat.

# Chapter IV: A Tea Party between Devils and Angels Is the Very Picture of Hell

“Hmph. This isn’t amusing at all. In the short time since I last saw her, another pest has gotten attached to my precious doll.”

While making preparations to squash an enormous pest, a small one had joined the fray. What was that doll trying to do with so many pests around her?

Bifrons floated high above Kianoides, far beyond the detection radius of Zagan’s barrier. They were around six thousand meters in the air. There was almost no oxygen that high up. Violent gales blew about, strong enough to scatter Bifrons’s particulate body in an instant if not for their sorcery. With Zagan keeping an eye out for them, Bifrons couldn’t even get close to Kianoides without taking such a measure.

“Hee hee hee. It’s not amusing to have pests around her, but the situation has gotten rather interesting. I suppose there was a reason for that old geezer Marchosias to set up his base here, huh? Well, not that it really matters now.”

Several actors had gathered in Kianoides. Obviously Nephteros was among them, but then there were the people of the church and Zagan. Outside town was the Azazel girl, whom Bifrons had once thrown away, and who was currently serving Zagan. Furthermore, there was a team of two who seemed to be Shere Khan’s pawns. There was even the lab rat Bifrons had let escape just to harass Shere Khan. It was the perfect assembly to start a mad tea party.

“Come now! Let’s start the tea party! Let’s dance our broken dance!”

However, the very moment Bifrons made that declaration...

“Go do that on your own,” a voice said.

It was a quiet voice—practically like a whisper—yet it had a sharpness like a rending gale. The moment Bifrons tried to turn around, an illusion of a thousand blades cutting their body burned into their mind. Bifrons hadn’t felt it for a long time, but still immediately knew this was fear—fear caused by a

bloodlust so absurd it was in an entirely different dimension from the likes of Archdemons like Zagan or Shere Khan.

“Ah... I see. Now that I think about it, you’ve also been staying in this town.”

A girl floated before them with a weapon called a Seraph Hunter in her hand. Bifrons was supposed to be invisible to the naked eye, having turned into a mass of floating crystals, but the weapon’s muzzle was pointed directly at them nonetheless. This was the world’s greatest vampire, Alshiera. Bifrons didn’t think she would come out onto the stage by herself, but perhaps she considered this particular spot backstage.

*Ugh, this might be hopeless. I can’t beat her.*

If Bifrons had strength in spades like Andrealphus, they could manage somehow. If they had Shere Khan’s cunning, the gap in strength would just be a slight disadvantage. However, they had none of that. Alshiera was so powerful that Andrealphus looked cute. She was so merciless that Shere Khan looked compassionate. Even an Archdemon would be obliterated for the slightest slip of the tongue.

*She’s so scary that I’ve got chills!*

Playing with her would probably have been the ultimate thrill. Simply imagining it made Bifrons moist. This could be the last game of their life...and the pleasure of winning an unwinnable game seemed far greater than any sorcery. Bifrons felt an irresistible urge to fight, but now was not the time. Thus, they maintained their self-restraint with what little sense they had left.

“Are you taking a walk up in this airless space?” Bifrons asked. “If so, care to have a chat with me?”

“I’m in a bit of a hurry. If you’d like to play, then come back in a week or so.”

Each and every word she spoke held traces of soul-rending mana. At that strength, someone at the level of an Archdemon candidate would have had their mind destroyed in just a few minutes. Even so, Bifrons dared to try to push things for the thrill of it.

“And what if I said I didn’t want to?” they asked.

Alshiera didn't reply. Instead, she simply returned a refreshing smile. There was even an air of affection to her, as if she was about to teach a child how to make candy. Was there anyone out there who would smile like this when they were about to kill someone? Bifrons was aware that they were the worst of sorcerers, but it somehow felt like she was telling them that they were still far too soft.

*Aaah! I can't get enough of this! I can't even sit at the same negotiation table as her!*

Bifrons's body took on a human shape. Then, the sorcerer who couldn't be identified as a boy or a girl gave Alshiera a reverent bow.

"Heh heh heh. Please do forgive my discourtesy. I don't dare make an enemy of you."

"If you don't try to lie a bit better, it doesn't even come off as a bad joke."

"Heh. How harsh. But it's true that I don't want to make an enemy of you. I don't have much time either, you see."

Bifrons started by shaking things up lightly. After all, this game couldn't even be established until they changed the situation from that of a killer and her victim. Alshiera retained her smile at this, her expression completely unchanging as she began to speak.

"Now that I think about it, I haven't heard your answer yet. Will you wait one week or not?"

Bifrons didn't feel like they were speaking with a human. Even Zagan would have lent an ear if they revealed themself and showed some sincerity. That was meaningless before this girl, however, as she simply dominated this place. Bifrons had no way of making her budge. There wasn't even room to consider the option.

Alshiera maintained her smile, exposing Bifrons to her soul-rending bloodlust. If they hadn't taken on the form of a human, their particulate body would've started falling apart from its extremities already. This was probably the last chance for Bifrons to back down, but they still dared to step forth.

"Don't you think we can cooperate?" they asked.

The Seraph Hunter's hammer cocked back with a click. Bifrons understood the situation by instinct. They had crossed the line and could no longer step down. No matter what sorcery they used, there was no way of escaping this terrifying girl's aim. She already had her finger on the trigger, so all that was left was to pull it.

She wouldn't let Bifrons escape anymore. It was like they had a knife pressed against their skin both in body and spirit. Bifrons knew of sorcery quite similar to this—the Entangling Gaze, for example. Simply meeting the eyes of a sorcerer casting it could destroy one's mind. Alshiera's pure bloodlust had a similar effect. Even as cold sweat ran down their cheek, Bifrons dared to speak.

"Switching vessels as a homunculus. My doll didn't wish for that, correct?"

If those words weren't enough to attract Alshiera's interest, it would be game over. Bifrons would be erased from the face of the world. And yet, despite their desperate attempt, Alshiera pulled the trigger without hesitation.

*I screwed up?!*

It looked like the hammer slowly fell down toward the firing pin. Nevertheless, Bifrons screamed in one final struggle of desperation.

"I can prolong her life!"

Silence followed. Unexpectedly, no bullet came flying at them. Timidly looking up at the weapon, Bifrons saw that Alshiera had stopped the hammer with her thumb the moment before it struck. Sweat ran down Bifrons's face like a waterfall. However, there was the tiniest sliver of hope on it as well.

"Let's hear what you have to say," Alshiera whispered, shutting one eye as if giving it careful consideration. She kept her weapon raised as she waited for them to speak.

Bifrons tried to calm the terrified beating of their heart and got to the point eagerly.

"Even after swapping vessels, a homunculus is still a homunculus. Even if that extends her life, the same thing will keep happening every few years. In the end, she'll be nothing more than a disposable tool—" Bifrons continued frankly, revealing every card in their hand and presenting all of their goals and means of

achieving them. Naturally, all of this incurred Alshiera's wrath. Even as they spoke, Bifrons caught a glimpse of their own death several times over. Regardless, they were allowed to talk to the very end.

After hearing them out, Alshiera fell deathly silent, maintaining her smile the entire time. Bifrons had been talking for ten or so minutes. During that time, Alshiera hadn't lowered the Seraph Hunter even once. And above all else, she'd maintained her bloodlust the entire time. It was like being exposed to the Entangling Gaze nonstop. That was enough to exhaust even an Archdemon to the point where they couldn't move a muscle.

This wasn't because Bifrons was weak. Archdemon Furcas had also been exposed to this level of bloodlust for several days, and that had caused his mind to shatter, making him forget who he even was. It was a form of torture that could even pulverize an Archdemon who'd lived for centuries. As such, Bifrons was left wheezing for air.

"I said I would hear you out," Alshiera said in an annoyed tone. "But I never said I would go along with your plans."

*Guess I'm done for...*

Bifrons didn't even have the spare energy to resist at that point, let alone escape. Perhaps they could fake their death by sacrificing half their body? No, such petty tricks wouldn't work on this foe. Bifrons had failed to win this game. The fear they were hoping for didn't even well up within them. Their mind had been shaved down to the point where they couldn't even feel that basic emotion.

*It was a fun gamble, but I still wanted to win...*

Bifrons resolved themself to death, but for some reason, Alshiera didn't fire her weapon. On the contrary, she actually lowered the Seraph Hunter.

"Tee hee hee. I don't like your idea at all, but you may do as you please," she said.

Bifrons was utterly shocked by the unexpected answer.

"Hmm...? You don't like it, but you'll let me proceed?"

“The greater the tragedy, the more passionately love burns.”

That statement had Bifrons bursting in laughter, even forgetting their own exhaustion.

“Ha ha ha. You really do have similar tastes to me, don’t you?”

“Quit it with your jokes. I simply believe in them. They’ll surely overcome this.”

In any case, it seemed Bifrons had won this game. There was no basking in victory, though. All they felt was exhaustion and relief. And with the tension in the air gone, the girl decided to whisper a warning.

“How unfortunate. If you had tried saying something as insincere as ‘I want to save her,’ then I would’ve gotten to pull the trigger for you.”

In other words, one single lie would have led to Bifrons’s death. The vampire smiled gently, twirling the Seraph Hunter in her hand, then put it away beneath her skirt. At the same time, her body dispersed into countless bats. When they could no longer see her, Bifrons collapsed into the empty air.

“Haaah... That was terrifying. I’d rather not face her for another hundred years.”

Even Bifrons didn’t understand Alshiera’s true intentions. In the end, perhaps she was only using them as a stepping-stone. Nevertheless, they could move on to the next game now. Bifrons would prove they could win the next round. Even if it would be a living nightmare for Nephteros, there was nobody left to stop them.

◇

Dexia’s body jolted as her surroundings clattered, waking her up.

“Ugh...”

An unfamiliar sturdy ceiling hung overhead...and something like a curtain draped across a window off to the side. After a short while, she figured out that she was inside a luxurious carriage. However, the moment the sleeping face of the black cat girl came into view, Dexia’s body stiffened up completely.

There was a tender sensation behind Dexia’s head. It seemed she was resting

on the girl's lap. Now that she knew this, her bewilderment only deepened. It looked like the shaking carriage had also woken the girl up. She rubbed her eyes slowly, peeking down at Dexia with red pupils.

"Mmm... Hm...? Oh, are you awake?" she asked.

"Umm, why...?" Dexia mumbled, barely able to wring out her voice. It was hoarse and her throat hurt terribly.

"You don't need to force yourself to speak," the girl said. "You've been on the verge of death for a whole day now."

Now that she mentioned it, Dexia noticed that her body felt as heavy as lead. It was difficult for her to even raise her arm. She couldn't even turn over in her sleep. Resting atop this girl's lap had unexpectedly been rather helpful in this regard.

"This is our carriage," the girl explained. "We're currently on our way to Kianoides. For the time being, you're under our protection as a prisoner. You're safe for now."

Seeing that the girl was speaking in plural, Dexia took a look around the carriage...and as she did, she spotted a young man sitting across from them who looked like a sorcerer. This one had apparently been awake the entire time. He directed a sharp gaze at Dexia. There was a large greatsword leaning against the wall next to him.

"Its wielder is dead," the girl said upon noticing Dexia's gaze. "We couldn't just leave it there, unfortunately, so we retrieved it."

"Personally, I think it would've been better to leave it behind," the sorcerer said with a sigh.

"Aren't you the one who said Shere Khan's subordinates would probably retrieve it?"

"That's true, but if we handle this poorly, you might not be able to return to the church."

"If that happens, then so be it. Either way, I killed an Archangel. There's no making excuses for that."

Dexia couldn't get a certain question out of her mind.

*Why did she save me?*

The girl had even gone as far as threatening her own position in the church. Back in Kianoides, she'd beaten Dexia soundly and had even punched Aristella. The twins had been the ones to steal the light from her eyes to begin with, which meant she should've hated them, so why save Dexia? Having sensed what was going through her mind, the girl flicked Dexia's forehead.

"Well, I'm still somewhat angry," she said. "Our day off vanished into thin air thanks to you."

Despite what she was saying, there was a kindness to her tone as if she was speaking to a troublesome child.

"But the person I respect most once told me that any villain should be given at least one chance to redeem themselves. That's all this is. Oh, right, I forgot to tell you something."

Dexia started imagining what kind of abuse this girl would hurl her way. She trembled in fear as the girl stretched out a hand, then gently brushed Dexia's head.

"Way to hang in there. The way you fought to the bitter end was inspiring."

A tear streaked down Dexia's cheek. She didn't think she wanted to cry, but her tears wouldn't stop.

"*Hic*... Please...save her. Please...save Aristella. Save my sister. I couldn't do it on my own."

The girl exchanged glances with the sorcerer, then nodded.

"Get some rest for now," she said, still gently brushing Dexia's head. "I'm sure things will get very busy soon."

This girl should've held a grudge against her, and yet, she'd saved Dexia without a single complaint and was being so kind. The thought "This is what a big sister is like" came to mind.

*I should've been like this to Aristella... No, it still isn't too late. She's still alive.*

Thus, Dexia swore to save her. She didn't want anyone to see her pathetic face right now, so she draped her arm over her head. She was wearing a habit from the church, perhaps lent to her by this girl.

Dexia closed her eyes so that she could regain her energy. The drowsiness she'd barely been able to stave off overwhelmed her immediately. It didn't take long for her to let go of her consciousness, but the moment she fell asleep, she felt like she heard a voice.

"Kurosuke... Are you actually the type to hold a grudge?"

"I'm not, but I was thinking maybe this is like a baptism for the people who come to this town."

Dexia wouldn't understand the meaning of those words until the carriage reached Kianoides, where they disembarked in front of a clothing store named Pulycla.

"Yahoooooo! I haven't had someone new worth teasing in a long time!"

"Chief! She looks injured, so please take it easy on her! Huh? Eeep! Nooo! Why Kuu too?!"

The last thing Dexia saw was flapping green wings and a screaming vulpin girl. The true terror of the town required no special powers at all.

◇

"Heya, Zagan! How've ya been?"

Zagan came to a stop in the middle of Kianoides's shopping district with a grimace. He was there to check on Nephteros when he suddenly encountered a familiar face.

"What are you doing here, Stella?"

"Nothing serious. I mean, we didn't really get to talk when you came to Raziel, right?"

Stella had officially become an Archangel after Michael had vanished. Perhaps because she wasn't here on business, though, she wasn't wearing Anointed Armor. She wore a uniform much like Chastille's and had Sacred Sword Zachariel hanging from her waist, but it didn't suit her at all. Lisette was next to

her, and for some reason, Ginias was as well.

*Why did this troublesome bunch have to stop by when I'm so damn busy?*

Checking in on Nephteros was his primary goal, and then he had to go see Shax and Kuroka before going to pick out a present for Nephy. That last point had him especially troubled, seeing that he still hadn't come up with any good ideas for a gift.

"Sorry, Archdemon. Are we a bother?" Lisette asked upon seeing him appear so dejected.

In complete contrast to when he first met her, she was wearing a finely made silk shirt and skirt. She had a thin blazer-like jacket on as well. Nobody would doubt her if she introduced herself as the daughter of a well-off family. She didn't look like one of his alleyway siblings at all.

"You don't need to worry about it," Zagan said, ruffling his little sister's hair upon seeing her act anxious. "She's the one to blame for suddenly showing up like this."

"Whaaat? Is that how you talk to your big sis?!"

"Shut it. I'm busy right now. Go home."

"How brazen!" Ginias cut in. "Is Stella not your elder sister? How can you treat her like that? Family, and women especially, are meant to be treated with respect!"

This one was wearing his Anointed Armor much like he had been when Zagan had first met him. Perhaps it had nothing to do with being on duty. His chestnut hair looked somewhat longer than before, and his green eyes brimmed with an extremely serious light, not showing a hint of lingering over any past failures.

Zagan cocked his head at what he'd just heard.

*A guy with this personality called her by name?*

The last time he'd met this boy, Ginias had always referred to the other Angelic Knights as Lord or Lady followed by their surnames. Judging by how he wasn't referring to Stella as Lady Diekmeyer, he probably got along with her rather well.

“Huh? Are you attached to Stella now?” Zagan asked with a dubious look.

“Wh-What?! I-I’m not attached! I simply respect her!”

“That’s called being attached...”

That was all Zagan needed to hear.

*Oh, right, now that I think of it, Stella’s the type to comfort any depressed brat she sees, huh?*

It was easy to picture this boy being another victim of hers. At the same time, he now knew that it was thanks to Stella that Ginias had managed to recover after having been horribly tricked by Zagan and nearly beaten to death.

Zagan pinched his brow for a while, and after giving it some thought, he decided to treat Ginias the same way he treated Lisette. And so, he ruffled his hair.

“Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!” Ginias protested.

“I just figure she must’ve been a bother...”

“I haven’t been a bother!” Stella cried.

“Didn’t you beat him to a pulp?” Lisette chimed in coldly.

Apparently, something had actually happened. Ginias blushed, a complicated mix of emotions on his face. Honestly, it looked like the two little ones didn’t really get along. In any case, the four of them were standing in the middle of the road, so they decided to move over to the side. After taking up a position at the entrance to an alley, Stella spoke up with a strangely serious expression.

“So, uh, what’s got you so busy?”

“Haaah...” Zagan let out a languid sigh, then answered while covering his face. “I figured out when Nephy’s birthday is, but I can’t think of a good present!”

Stella’s group froze in place, wide-eyed at the shocking confession. Unexpectedly, the one who understood him right away was Lisette.

“I get it... Must be hard,” she said.

“Hm? You understand me?”

“Yup. I mean, I’ve never had my birthday celebrated...”

Ginias suddenly bent backward as if he’d been punched from an unexpected direction.

“I guess I’ve had mine celebrated once, I think...?” Stella added. “I got that picture book my brother stole.”

“Oh, that’s where it came from...?”

During their days as waifs, Stella had always carried around a picture book. She’d even used it to teach Zagan how to read and write. However, Zagan had killed this big brother of hers, so he felt a little awkward talking about that.

“Does that mean you know when your birthday is?” Zagan asked her.

She’d gotten a present from her actual brother. If she knew the proper way of celebrating birthdays, then her help was more than welcome. For some reason, Ginias’s ears pricked up at this, but Stella scrunched up her face.

“Uhhh...? When was it again? It’s been so long that I don’t really remember.”

Well, Zagan had never seen Stella’s birthday being celebrated in the alleys. Besides, after the Decarabia incident, a portion of her memories was missing. There wasn’t much that could be done about that, so he’d mostly expected it to turn out this way.

“Everyone from the streets is like that, I guess,” Zagan said with a wry smile.

“Yup...”

“How does one even celebrate a birthday...?” Zagan muttered. He’d pondered that question countless times over the past few days.

“This really is a difficult problem...” both Stella and Lisette said, nodding along seriously.

“W-Waaah!”

Despite the serious conversation, Ginias suddenly fell to his knees and burst into tears.

“What’s wrong with you? Keep quiet.”

“Your lives have been so hard...! I’m so powerless...” Ginias said, clutching

Zagan's hand. "I'm not sure how much I can help, but allow me to be of assistance. At the very least, my father has celebrated my birthday with me."

"Really?!"

Zagan never imagined he would get any help from this group. The three of them crowded around Ginias. Stella in particular was practically glued to his side, turning the pure little boy's ears bright red.

"So? What do you do for a birthday?" she asked him.

"U-Umm, in my case, I've been giving pens and watches and such as presents. Up until two years ago, at least."

"Up until two years ago? Why?" Lisette asked curiously.

"Two years ago, my father died in battle. I didn't have anyone to celebrate with last year..." Ginias answered with an awkward smile.

There had been a major battle just over a year ago. Many Angelic Knights and sorcerers had died there, along with Wise Dragon Orobas. That was also when Archdemon Marchosias had suffered his fatal wounds. It seemed Ginias's father had been among the deceased. Feeling somewhat bad for broaching this topic, Zagan plopped his hand atop Ginias's head once more. Stella, and even Lisette, placed their hands on his shoulders to assist him.

"Umm, right. Sorry about that time in Raziel," Zagan said.

"Don't be. In the end, I'm actually rather indebted to you."

The ill feelings of the past had long since vanished.

*Hmm... A watch, huh?* Zagan sank into thought. It wasn't a bad idea. He'd only considered clothing and the like thus far, but more practical items like pens and watches could also work.

"Ummm, though it may be somewhat presumptuous of me to say this, would you like to go search for something with us now?" Ginias asked bashfully.

"Ah... I'd like to, but I must go meet my subordinates."

Zagan gave Stella an eye signal. He'd already received a report that Shax had Dexia in custody. Was it really all right for her to meet Lisette? None of this

actually got across to Stella, though, so she simply stared back in confusion. As such, Zagan squatted down in front of Lisette to match her eyeline.

“Someone who might be related to you is with the guys I’m going to meet. It’s just a possibility, however. It’s very likely she doesn’t know you at all. What do you want to do?”

“I-I don’t really know...”

“Nothing good can come from digging up your past. If that’s what you believe, then just kill time with Stella around here. But if you wish to know more, you can come with me.”

Lisette’s gaze wandered about in bewilderment due to the sudden question, but she still returned a firm nod.

“I want...to try meeting her. I don’t know what will come of it, but I want to know more.”

“Got it. Then come with me.”

Lisette nodded stiffly as Ginias walked up beside her.

“What do *you* want?” she asked.

“Stella and I are your allies. No matter who you are or what happens, that won’t change.”

“H-Hmph!”

It was hard to tell whether they got along or not, but at the very least, there was less tension in Lisette’s expression after she heard that. The four of them began walking when suddenly, Zagan turned to Stella.

“Oh yeah. Stella, I heard you ended up becoming an Archangel. How are things actually going?”

“Hmm? Well, my teacher went missing after leaving his Sacred Sword behind, so it just kinda happened really fast. I’m a complete amateur with a sword, so I wonder if this is really okay.”

That Archdemon had apparently taught Stella how to use sorcery, but not swordsmanship. Being told she was free to choose in that state was sure to

confuse her. And yet, Ginias chimed in as if he'd heard something unthinkable.

"Stella. That's not modesty. You're mistaking reality."

"What? You mean she can actually use a sword pretty well?" Zagan asked.

"Of course. We Angelic Knights are ranked according to our skills with a blade. Only one month after being inaugurated as an Archangel, Stella has reached second in the rankings. That's the same rank Lord Diekmeyer held. As far as I know, no active Angelic Knight can hold their ground against her."

By saying no active Angelic Knight, he was probably excluding Raphael. Zagan had never actually seen her wield a sword, so he had no way of measuring her abilities himself.

*I suppose that makes sense, though, considering she has the powers of a sorcerer and an Angelic Knight.*

Andrealphus/Michael had also been called the strongest due to that.

Seeing that Zagan understood him, Ginias continued proudly, "Even Lady Lilqvist, who is extolled as a woman of terrifying talent, is only ranked number four, so this isn't normal by any standard."

Hearing that, Zagan shot Stella a surprised look.

"If you went at it with Chastille with a sword, how would it turn out?"

"Hmm? Just a sword? I think it'd be an even match."

*I can see why all the Angelic Knights would be pissed at her for calling herself an amateur...*

Stella was apparently on par with Chastille even without the use of her sorcery and martial arts skills.

"Setting that aside, you've got that Kuroka girl at your place, right?" Stella continued with a shudder. "Even if I went all out, I doubt I could beat her."

By all out, she was implying the use of the Sacred Sword, her martial arts, and her sorcery. That was apparently the reason for Stella's poor self-evaluation.

"She's more at Chastille's place... Wait, is she really that strong?"

"Mhm. I mean, not only are her eyes healed now, but you even made her

Anointed Armor, right? In that case, she might be a little outta my reach."

"Someone that far outstrips Stella? Who is she?" Ginias asked in shock.

Now that Zagan thought of it, he realized Ginias had never met Kuroka. He couldn't quite find the right words to explain it.

*Would it be a problem to say she's Raphael's daughter?*

During the incident in Raziel, it had been made clear that Raphael had killed a cardinal. The Archangels seemed to understand the circumstances, but he still couldn't be considered innocent by the church as a whole. If Zagan declared that Kuroka was Raphael's daughter, it could bring unnecessary trouble to her doorstep. And honestly, she already had enough misfortune to deal with because of her disposition.

"She's a knight from Liucaon," Zagan said, deciding that was the safest answer. "One they refer to as a samurai. She's currently working for Chastille as a member of the church."

"Liucaon..." Ginias muttered with a slight tremble. "I see. It's precisely because they possess such power that they can stand as equals to the entire continent."

"If you're interested, we're actually on our way to meet her now."

Ginias jolted on the spot and shuddered violently. Well, in truth, Liucaon's ongoing independence was mostly because of the three Holy Treasures and the protection Marchosias had been providing them.

Incidentally, Head Archangel Ginias held first place in this ranking of theirs, while Valjakka had apparently been third. Setting aside Ginias, who could use Confession, Zagan had had no idea the traitor actually possessed that much skill.

*Finishing him off might've been a bad idea...*

He'd already received the report of Valjakka's demise from Shax. The idiot had ignored Zagan's warning, so it was essentially suicide, though.

The group continued to walk and talk as they made their way toward their destination.

“Nooo! No more! Someone save meee!”

Upon arriving, they were greeted by the screams of a completely brokenhearted girl.

“Ah... Maybe I should’ve gotten here sooner,” Zagan said with a tremendous sigh.

◇

Around the same time, Nephteros found herself in the plaza in front of the church, gazing up at the sky in a daze.

*Love myself...huh?*

She didn’t think she’d abandoned self-care entirely. She meant to put in the effort to live properly. Was that perhaps different from loving herself? She couldn’t come up with an answer by thinking it over, but she still remembered her conversation with Alshiera the other day.

*Just spend my time as usual... That’s an option too, right?*

That was one of the options Alshiera had presented to her. And honestly, it seemed more productive than wasting her time away in a daze.

Nephteros walked through the side entrance of the cathedral and made her way to Chastille’s office. The Archangel had spent the entire day yesterday out of work mode. The question was, had she managed to recover yet? The paperwork was going to start piling up if she hadn’t.

“Chastille? I’m coming in,” Nephteros said, knocking on the door.

“Oh. Please do,” Chastille replied reliably.

Nephteros entered the office and saw the mountain of work on the desk that had been awaiting Chastille. Nephteros had already sorted it out to an extent, but she’d also been unable to get her feelings in order, so it was hard to say whether she’d done a good job of it.

Judging by the slight blush still on Chastille’s face, it would be more appropriate to say that she’d been pulled back to reality by the work before her rather than say she’d recovered. After giving this some more thought, Nephteros realized Barbatos was nowhere to be found. Having said that, he was

probably hiding in the shadows. She could see Chastille's shadow rippling unnaturally, even.

*Looks like it'll be useless to ask for advice here.*

After hearing about her life span from Zagan, the first person Nephteros had thought to consult was Chastille. She wasn't a sorcerer, however, so she had no way of knowing how to save a homunculus and would surely end up worrying about it even more than Nephteros herself. When that thought came to mind, Nephteros had decided not to ask her.

*Still, seeing that things are the same as usual is actually somewhat relaxing.*

She felt like it was okay for her to be here, for her to pass her time as always, and that was a massive relief. That was why Nephteros forced a smile as she always did.

"Good grief. Do your work properly today, okay?" she said.

"Ugh... Sorry."

Nephteros went on to split the mountain of documents into things that needed Chastille's signature, things she had to confirm, and things that required neither. When it only needed confirmation, Nephteros read the contents aloud to her. Nephteros handled documents that didn't require Chastille's attention all on her own.

"Oh yeah, Nephteros," Chastille said, raising her head from the documents. "I missed my chance to ask you yesterday. Did something happen?"

Nephteros twitched due to the sudden surprise attack.

"What do you mean...?"

"Oh, don't mind me if it's nothing. I just thought you had something on your mind the last few days. If I can be of any help, feel free to talk to me about it."

This girl really was sharp at times like these despite her habitual behavior. Nephteros knew that trying to brush this off poorly would actually make Chastille worry more. And in the end, she would find out anyway, so after hesitating a little, Nephteros shook her head.

"I've been worrying about something...but it's a little hard to put into words

right now...”

“I-I see... Mmm... That happens every now and then, I guess.”

Nephteros couldn’t tell what was going through her head as Chastille’s blush deepened. Still, this was the same as always. If Nephteros were to spend her last moments with her loved ones, then this felt like the right place. After thinking of it like that, she suddenly realized something was missing. She looked around the office and arrived at the answer quickly.

“Oh, how strange. Is Richard late?”

Richard was the knight Chastille had assigned as Nephteros’s guard. He was basically always with her, so it was strange not to see him in the office.

“Richard requested a break today,” Chastille said with a grim expression and a shake of the head.

*How strange. Usually, he’d at least say something to me...*

Nephteros felt that something was wrong, but that quickly transformed into guilt due to Chastille’s next words.

“It seems he’s also troubled by something...”

“Huh?”

Nephteros had been so preoccupied with herself that she hadn’t even noticed.

*Now that I think of it, Richard didn’t come back after his sword training yesterday.*

He usually came to the office in the morning, so that was odd. Nephteros was embarrassed for only realizing now. Back when she’d collapsed, he’d also saved her without saying anything and had remained by her side the entire time. All things considered, her behavior was far too heartless.

“Chastille, do you know where Richard is?” Nephteros asked, putting the mess of documents back down on the table.

“Umm, sorry. I don’t... Oh, wait. Barbatos, you should know, right?” Chastille asked while looking down at her feet. The shadow there wriggled about in

response.

“Huuuh? Why do I gotta...?”

“Please, Barbatos. This involves my subordinate. I’m also worried.”

“Tch... Fine, guess I can help.”

After a short while, the shadow returned with an answer, saying, “He’s out in the forest outside town for some reason.”

“The forest?”

Nephteros asked for more details and learned that he was at the location where Chastille had saved her during the incident when Bifrons’s chimera had attacked her.

*Now that I think about it, isn’t that also when I first met Richard?*

That location was where he’d lost several of his comrades, so something significant had to have happened that made him take a break all of a sudden to visit such a place.

*If something is troubling him, I’d like to help.*

She owed Richard a great debt. Plus, she still had no idea what she wanted to do regarding her own problem, which was perhaps why she wanted to try helping her friends. Yes, it was precisely because she had so little time remaining that she turned her attention to her surroundings.

“Um, Chastille...”

“You don’t need to worry about me. Kuroka will be back in the afternoon. Please go.”

“Thank you... You too, shaggy.”

“Who the hell’re you callin’ shaggy?!”

With that, Nephteros ran off toward the forest.

◇

“*Hic*... Why...? Why me...?”

After entering the shop where he was to meet his subordinates, Zagan found

a girl crouching in the corner. She'd been thoroughly used as a dress-up doll. There was underwear made entirely of string—or perhaps it was some kind of swimsuit—some kind of suit with rabbit ears and a tail, that clothing made only of belts that Nephy had been made to wear before, some kind of animal costume, and many other such articles scattered all over the place.

It seemed playtime was over for now, so the girl was wearing a proper outfit. Beside her, Kuroka was pale to the face, as if she'd just witnessed something pitiful, while standing in front of Shax and covering both his eyes. There were clothes scattered about that men couldn't be shown, so this made sense. The avian clerk Manuela's satisfied face stood out in complete contrast to the disastrous scene.

Lisette gasped at the ghastly sight, then suddenly raised her voice upon spotting the crouching girl's face.

"Huh...? She looks just like me...?"

Reacting to her voice, the girl's head snapped up and her eyes shot open.

"Aristella! You're safe?" she said, rising to her feet like she couldn't believe it. She walked up to Lisette and embraced her with tears in her eyes. "Thank goodness... I thought I wouldn't be able to save you!"

She even went as far as rubbing her cheek against Lisette's, but Lisette could only look back at her in bewilderment.

"U-Um, sorry. You're probably mistaken... My name is Lisette..."

The girl had likely noticed upon hugging her. She let go of Lisette in a daze and stared at her face.

"You're...someone else?"

"Sorry."

The girl looked like she was about to collapse to her knees upon coming to this understanding, and Lisette caught her in a panic.

"A-Are you okay...?"

"Yeah... Sorry. You look just like my little sister."

Watching the two of them, Ginias had his hand on the greatsword on his back, but Zagan signaled him to stand down and shook his head. Ginias then lowered his hand.

“Okay then, how about you try out some clothes too?” Manuela said, walking up to the two girls to comfort them.

“Restrain yourself,” Zagan warned her.

He believed that people who couldn’t read the mood were a necessity sometimes, but this wasn’t one such time. Honestly, he felt like looking for something here that could work as Nephy’s present, but he decided to come back later.

Zagan’s group were regulars at this shop by now, so they were easily lent the use of the office in the back. It was a reasonably spacious room. There were two sofas facing each other with a small table between them. Shields and other such ornaments decorated the walls like a proper equipment store, along with some sort of certificate.

“My name is Dexia. I am...was...Shere Khan’s subordinate,” the girl said after managing to calm herself down.

Zagan, Shax, Kuroka, Dexia, Lisette, Stella, and Ginias were in the room. It was a little cramped with everyone present, but the room was sufficient for their needs. Zagan and Stella sat on one sofa, while Dexia and Lisette sat on the one facing them. Unfortunately, Zagan had to have Shax, Kuroka, and Ginias stand up. This was technically an interrogation, so this seating order was a requirement.

After listening to her simple introduction, Zagan turned to Kuroka and Shax.

“Did they follow you?” he asked.

“Yes, we were properly followed here,” Kuroka answered.

There had of course been a reason for the two of them to return by carriage instead of using Transfer despite having custody of a key figure like Dexia.

*I can’t discard the possibility of extracting information from Shere Khan’s hounds.*

Kuroka and Shax had naturally informed Zagan of the two men they had clashed with who appeared to be Shere Khan's subordinates. Their goals and abilities were all a mystery, so there was a danger the carriage could've been attacked, but it was far too valuable an opportunity to overlook.

That was why he had them return in a way that made it easy for anyone to pursue them. Once they reached Kianoides, they were in Zagan's barrier. Anyone who thought they could escape from an Archdemon's palm could go ahead and try. Zagan searched the barrier for anyone who could fit the bill and had a grasp of two positive hits. It seemed they were watching this shop from afar. He didn't have any intention of getting Manuela's shop involved, so he was already prepared to launch a preemptive attack if it looked like they were going to try something.

"So? You were once Shere Khan's subordinate, the one loitering around this town one month ago, right?" Zagan asked Dexia.

"Yes..." Dexia answered, nodding stiffly.

That had been the first time Zagan faced Azazel.

"I have a ton of questions for you, but let me check one thing first," Zagan said, waiting for her to ready herself. After a short while, Dexia timidly nodded back to him. "Are you aware of what exactly you are?"

Lisette and Ginias were the only ones who looked like they had no idea what that meant.

"I'm a familiar created by Shere Khan," Dexia answered, putting her hand to her chest. "My sister Aristella is the same. He calls us Nephilim. We were created with the purpose of serving as his arms and legs after he lost the use of his body... Or, it *was* our purpose..."

Lisette's eyes shot open at this revelation, but Zagan decided to leave that for later.

*Nephilim...?*

It was eerily similar to Nephy's full name, Nephelia. Zagan's expression turned grim. He didn't think Shere Khan was targeting Nephy directly, but was there still some kind of relationship there? It was better to be wary of the possibility.

In any case, unlike Nephteros, Dexia had a firm grasp of what exactly she was. Although, in the end, she was pretty much in the same situation after being abandoned.

“You said Shere Khan made you. Do you know something about her?” Zagan asked, pointing his eyes toward Lisette.

Dexia shook her head. “I don’t... I’ve never heard of having any predecessors. If there had been a deserter before us, I don’t think I would’ve been able to get away like this either...”

Shere Khan was an Archdemon. It would be ridiculous for him to have zero countermeasures in place if one of his pets had already slipped their leash. In that case, Lisette was different from the twins. Regardless, she’d been attacked on Alshiere Imera. That was still a mystery, but at the very least, Dexia hadn’t been informed of it.

*I guess it’s possible Lisette was used as a model to create them?*

That was about the only conjecture Zagan could make based on what information he had.

“Lisette. How long ago did you start living in the alleys?” Zagan asked.

“Umm, I don’t really remember. I guess...about five years ago?”

Zagan held back a scowl.

*The answer is always five years ago...*

She had definitely gotten involved with Shere Khan somehow.

“Next question. What is your goal now?” Zagan asked Dexia.

“I want...to save Aristella.”

That was the girl Zagan had once failed to save. Back then, he’d barely managed to maintain her life, but the majority of her body had been blown away by Alshiera’s Seraph Hunter.

“Is she alive?” Zagan asked.

“I think so...”

“I see. Then, next question. If Shere Khan told you, ‘I’ll save your sister, so

come back,’ what would you do?”

Dexia stiffened up. It was a cruel question, but a necessary one. Her answer would decide how Zagan would deal with her. She clenched her fists tightly over her lap and trembled, her fingers turning white from her grip. Lisette leaned over and extended her hand out to her, gently clasping Dexia’s hands. Dexia’s eyes widened in wonder, then she gathered her resolve and gave Zagan her answer.

“Aristella...cried. She said...that she didn’t want to die. She said she hated the idea of being thrown away. Despite that, Shere Khan used her as a tool. So...I can’t forgive him.”

She stared straight into Zagan’s eyes without any hesitation. It was as if she truly no longer had any other purpose for living.

“I see. Very well. I’ll place you under my protection. I’ll give you a hand in saving this sister of yours.”

“R-Really...?”

“You’ll spit out everything you know, of course. That’s my condition.”

“Thank you...very much...” Dexia said with a bow.

“Isn’t that great?” Lisette said with a smile.

“M-Mm.”

Watching the two of them, Stella poked Zagan’s ribs.

“Ha ha, it really is great,” she said with a nod, then lowered her voice so that only Zagan could hear her. “Zagan, you were planning on killing her depending on her answer, right?”

“Hmph. Of course I was. I’m not the type to protect some frivolous idiot who only says something for appearance’s sake in such a situation.”

Zagan wasn’t a philanthropist. He’d simply given her a chance because Shax and Kuroka had picked her up. If not for that, he had no need to save the likes of Shere Khan’s familiar. Actually, there was a ton of information he could get through dissection and experimentation. Now that he had a grasp of that Archdemon’s location, such information clearly outweighed Dexia’s life.

*Well, I ended up saving her instead, though.*

He had one more troublesome matter to handle now, but once he made this decision, Zagan wouldn't abandon her.

"Boss, Bifrons was apparently the one who let this little miss get away," Shax said from his position by the wall. "What do you think of that?"

The little Archdemon was a genius at harassing others. If they were involved, then there was no telling if Dexia was some sort of trap, but Zagan shook his head regardless.

"You don't need to worry about Bifrons," he said. "Judging by that guy's personality, Dexia isn't all that interesting. There's probably no deeper meaning to this other than harassing Shere Khan a little. At most, Bifrons is probably hoping for something interesting to come from it."

Be it against Zagan or Shere Khan, if Bifrons was seriously intent on harassment, they would create a situation with far fewer choices available. For example, throwing Dexia into town in such a way that Zagan was obliged to save her. Zagan had decided to save her mostly on a whim. The probability that he would do so had been far too low for it to be part of Bifrons's scheming.

*Well, now that she managed to get this far, it's possible we attracted Bifrons's interest, though.*

Frankly, Zagan found it pretty unlikely that Bifrons would sprout some kind of plot at this point in time.

"If you say so, Boss. I'll just do as you say," Shax said with a shrug before pulling out a greatsword. "So what about this?"

"A Sacred Sword? Whose is it...?" Ginias said in a trembling voice.

"A guy called Valjakka. There was a bit of trouble..." Shax started.

"He was apparently killed by Shere Khan's subordinate. It was highly likely it would get stolen, so I ordered them to retrieve it."

Zagan pushed all responsibility on Shere Khan without hesitation. Kuroka was taken aback by this, but Shax immediately saw where this was going and feigned a sorrowful expression.

“Sorry,” he said. “We might’ve been able to save him had we got there a little faster, but we didn’t make it. That’s why we thought to at least take back his sword. Please use it for his memorial.”

“I’m in your debt... You have my thanks,” Ginias said, taking the Sacred Sword with a pained expression even though these words had come from a sorcerer.

*This guy is really talented when it comes to anything except dealing with Kuroka...*

Zagan’s instinct had been right on the mark when it came to recommending him as the next Archdemon. Zagan didn’t actually want to do so, but Shax was already capable enough to be one.

“Ginias, do you mind dealing with this?” Zagan asked, a look in his eyes as if he was respecting a departed Angelic Knight.

“Of course not... Still, to think such a skilled man could lose in battle...”

Valjakka had apparently been popular among his coworkers. There was true lamentation in Ginias’s voice.

*Well, I guess I’ll keep the fact that he was Shere Khan’s spy under wraps.*

Zagan didn’t have an ounce of sympathy for the man, but there was no need to rub salt in the wounds of the living. It was something like a samurai’s mercy—so the saying went in Liucaon. Kuroka seemed to find this somewhat questionable, but things settled down nicely like this.

*There’s now an open seat among the Archangels. How will this affect things given the timing...?*

Despite his rotten nature, Valjakka had apparently been quite skilled. Zagan couldn’t tell what kind of shadow this would cast over the church. And just as he started giving that thought...

*Hm? Where the hell is Nephteros going?*

The barrier covering town detected his sister-in-law heading into the forest.

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After running through the forest for a while, Nephteros managed to find

Richard. Relieved to see that he was safe, she called out to him.

“Richard.”

“Lady Nephteros...?”

He turned around. Since he was on break, he wasn’t wearing his Anointed Armor. It was the first time Nephteros had seen him dressed casually, not even wearing the ceremonial uniform of the church. Judging by the simple bouquet of flowers in his hand, he was here to pay his respects to the dead. Seeing Nephteros out of breath, Richard ran over to her in astonishment.

“What happened?” he asked.

“What? I mean, you...”

He...what? He’d only taken a break. Taking another look at him, Richard was the same as usual. Nephteros couldn’t tell whether he was worrying about something.

*But I suppose he also doesn’t know what I’m worrying about.*

There was no time to dawdle about meaninglessly. Nephteros hadn’t really gotten her thoughts in order, but cut to the chase anyway.

“I heard you were worried about something... You ended up taking a break without saying anything, and you didn’t come back after training yesterday. It bothered me.”

“Oh, um, I’m truly sorry,” Richard said, his cheeks turning red.

“There’s nothing to apologize for, is there?”

Richard scratched his head, then took a look around the forest.

“I come out here whenever I’m troubled,” he said.

“It’s the spot where we fought Bifrons’s chimera that one time, right?”

After finding out about her origins, Nephteros had run away from her master Bifrons and ended up using all her strength in this exact spot, leaving her with no choice but to wait for her death. Back then, the Angelic Knights had been the ones to save her.

“Oh yeah, you were the one who first offered me water, weren’t you?”

“That did happen, didn’t it...?”

“Honestly, I never dreamed Angelic Knights would save me. It was a shock.”

Her environment nearly made her forget, but Angelic Knights and sorcerers were supposed to be mortal enemies. The knights would use whatever opportunity they had to kill a sorcerer. That was supposed to be the case, but Richard had said nothing of the sort and offered her water. That was followed by painful memories, though...

“Back then, if you... No, if all of you hadn’t saved me, I wouldn’t be here today.”

Several people had died just to save her. Among the survivors, there was one who was beyond any hope of recovery too. They had all been so young and were supposed to have bright futures ahead of them.

“That’s why, um... Thank you. Now that I think of it, I never said that.”

There was no complaining if anyone called her heartless for this.

“Thank you,” Richard returned with a nod. “I’m sure the men who lost their lives would be thrilled to hear you say that, Lady Nephteros.”

“Did you...know them well?”

“Yes... One was my childhood friend. The other I was close to ever since my days as an apprentice. After our patrols, we often horsed around with everyone in the platoon.”

They had been far more irreplaceable comrades to Richard than Nephteros had imagined. That thought sent throbbing pain through her heart.

“Sor—”

“Please,” Richard said, cutting her off before she could apologize. “Please don’t apologize. They fulfilled their duty splendidly. You shouldn’t be apologizing to them, but honoring them. So please, honor their memory.”

Nephteros couldn’t say anything about such a state of mind.

“But... It’s still sad for people to die...” she said.

*I wonder if Nephelia feels this way too?*

Zagan was deeply troubled when he told Nephteros about her life span. She was supposed to be nothing more than a tool that could be replaced, but he agonized over the thought the same way he would for Nephy or Foll. She knew he'd truly accepted her as part of his family.

Everyone else was surely the same. Chastille, Kuroka, Foll, Orias, Raphael, and even that weird granny. Perhaps even that shaggy sorcerer...or not. In any case, there were many people who would feel sorrow if Nephteros were to die.

*Is it really okay for me to let it end like this? There's a way to...*

The moment she considered the alternative, a violent urge to vomit assaulted her. Chimeras made by plastering together bodies in an absurd manner, all with the same face as Nephteros. Those had been the unlucky Nephteroses. She'd been the slightly lucky one. They had killed Richard's friends. She didn't want to die, but using those bodies was an impossibility. She wouldn't be able to bear it. Nephteros staggered, and Richard quickly supported her shoulders in a panic.

"Lady Nephteros?!"

"I-I'm fine. I just remembered something unpleasant..."

She'd come here out of concern for Richard, so why was she making him worry about her instead? Still, there was no way her pale complexion would return to normal right away. Richard didn't really look flustered by this. Rather, his face was steeped in despair. Did something happen? A dizzy spell or two was actually rather common for her. Richard's expression seemed somewhat excessive.

"I'm really fine," she said, stretching her hand out and touching his cheek. "More importantly, did something happen to you? Something to make you come all the way out here?"

She had her own crisis to deal with, so she had no idea why she was saying this.

*Maybe I want others to remember me as a good person before I die...?*

She couldn't deny that such shallow thoughts came to mind. Still, Nephteros felt like she couldn't possibly ignore this man when he was so troubled by something. Her plea only made Richard look like he was going to burst into

tears.

“I’d like to help you if I— Hyah?!” she started to say, when he suddenly embraced her. “Wh-What are you...? Are you crying?”

“I’m so, so sorry. I have...no way of saving you,” Richard replied in a trembling and muffled voice. That was enough for Nephteros to figure it out.



“Did you...hear about my circumstances?”

“Yes...”

That was why he was out here all on his own. He’d agonized and worried over how he couldn’t save her.

“I see...” Nephteros said, then tightly returned his embrace without really knowing why she did. “Sorry. Even though all of you saved me...”

“Please don’t apologize.”

“Mm... But I’m a little happy. About someone who will cry for me, even if only out of sympathy, I mean.”

Richard let go of Nephteros, then grasped her shoulders so hard it hurt her.

“It isn’t sympathy!” he roared. “It’s because I love you!”

Nephteros couldn’t understand that those words had been directed at her.

*Huh? What did he just say...?*

Love. This was what she’d been searching for ever since learning of Zagan and Nephy’s relationship. And now, it was being presented right before her.

“Wh-Why...?” she said. “There’s nothing about me worth loving...”

“Didn’t you cry for our sake too?”

Those words caused her heart to thump to a surprising extent. During the chimera attack, Nephteros had been unable to do anything but cry as she watched the Angelic Knights die before her. She’d cried at the fathomless pain of others dying for the likes of her.

*I see now, someone who doesn’t love themself isn’t even able to realize something so simple...*

Alshiera’s advice had been right on the mark. Nephteros had to properly love herself. By doing so, she would’ve realized long ago that he faced her with love, not just simple kindness. That was why Nephteros could do nothing but give him a troubled smile.

“Sorry... I’m going to die in two or three months, so...”

“If so, I’ll stay by your side until the very end. I won’t let you be alone.”

“Why...? Won’t that just bring you pain?” she asked, unable to believe what she was hearing.

“Isn’t that what it means for people to love each other?” Richard answered, finding her response somewhat curious.

A tear ran down Nephteros’s cheek as she clung tightly to Richard’s chest.

“I don’t want to die... I want to learn more... I want to do more... There’s so much more out there...”

“I know.”

“But I can’t stand the thought of prolonging my life like that...”

Richard didn’t laugh or get angry at her unsightly willfulness. Instead, he simply returned her embrace gently.

“Let’s look for a way,” he said. “I’m sure there must be one.”

She looked up at his face, frightened at the thought of whether it was okay to believe him. She had no idea how to answer his confession.

*But if I can survive...*

If her life could be prolonged, perhaps she could reply when the time came. After all, he said he would stay by her side forever despite how awkward a person she was. With him, perhaps she could truly learn what love was. In a sense, this emotion was maybe too fleeting and vague to be called a first love. Nevertheless, Nephteros finally found herself standing in front of the door with all the answers to her questions.

“You know, Richard...”

And just in that moment...

“How despicable it is, laying a hand on someone else’s doll without permission.”

A red flower bloomed in front of her with a dull thud. Warm liquid ran down Nephteros’s face. Richard froze up completely with no idea of what had just happened. She timidly lowered her gaze, spotting a hand soaked in red piercing

out of his chest. It was a small hand, one that closely resembled the one of her former master. And within its grasp was a still-beating heart.

She'd yet to even give him a reply, but the man who'd professed his love to her was having his heart crushed right in front of her eyes.

*Again... It's all because you tried to save someone like me, that once more...*

Thus, despair tore Nephteros apart from within.

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"Bifrons! You bastard!"

The first thing Zagan saw upon catching up to Nephteros was Richard getting his heart gouged out. The Archdemon who couldn't be identified as a boy or girl transformed from particles to human form, then burst into laughter.

"Ha ha ha ha ha! I'm so happy to see you make a face like that!"

Richard crumbled to his knees. Nephteros caught him, still completely lost as to what was happening. Bifrons savored every last second of this, then turned to Zagan.

"Heaven's Ring Shadow Sever."

Zagan was the first to move. He absorbed the inexhaustible supply of mana from his surroundings and converted it all into speed. Bifrons was still clinging to Richard's back, and Zagan got in range in a single step. He carried this momentum to drive in his fist, but the repulsive sorcerer transformed into particles to avoid a direct hit. This was still within Zagan's range of expectations, however.

"Gak! Hak!"

Even if Bifrons managed to dodge his fist, they couldn't withstand the mana accompanying it. Transforming back into human form, Bifrons keeled over and tumbled to the ground.

"Shax!"

"On it!"

Richard couldn't be treated until Bifrons was torn away from him. Zagan's

talented subordinate understood this, so he immediately ran over to Richard once the opportunity presented itself. Zagan kept an eye on this and charged in at the Archdemon once more.

“AAAAAaaaaAAAAAaaaaAAAAAH!”

He turned around to the sudden otherworldly shriek. Pitch-black darkness poured from Nephteros. He recognized this phenomenon.

*No way! Azazel?!*

It was the calamity that had once taken over Aristella and had also once seeped into Nephteros’s body. It was supposed to be sealed by Alshiera, but here it was, overflowing from Nephteros. The light of reason had long vanished from her eyes, and the darkness poured out as if to swallow Richard whole. Had Nephteros’s despair been the trigger? In any case, it was dangerous to get close to her now.

“Shax! Get away!” Zagan yelled.

Shax wasn’t the type of man to escape on his own and abandon a patient, however. He was done for. The moment that thought crossed Zagan’s mind, a blade tore horizontally through the darkness, enveloping Shax.

“Kurosuke!”

“Mister Shax! Now!”

Kuroka was the girl who understood Shax even better than Zagan did. She predicted he wouldn’t try to run away and had already unleashed her shortswords. Her terrifying blades cut apart the darkness without touching Nephteros, revealing Richard’s body once more. In that instant, Shax grabbed him and leaped back.

Immediately following that, the darkness once more enveloped the spot Kuroka had torn open. Even a moment’s hesitation would’ve been too slow. Kuroka and Shax had managed to escape the darkness because of their decisiveness. However, this dilemma had also distracted Zagan’s focus for a single instant.

“Hee hee hee! You’ve brought along an interesting one! I’ll be taking it as a

souvenir!” Bifrons exclaimed and lunged forth, heading straight for Lisette.

*What?! Why her?! What could he possibly want with her?*

“Eek!”

Lisette screamed as crystals wrapped around her body. This imagery dug up a certain girl’s emotional scars.

“Nooo!”

Dexia jumped into action faster than anyone else. Seeing the danger facing the girl who shared her sister’s face, Dexia’s body moved before her mind could process the situation.

“No way!”

Bifrons froze in shock and delight at having their pretty snatched away by someone they had once deemed worthless, and Zagan wasn’t one to let such a moment of turmoil pass.

“Heaven’s Phosphor Purple Lightning!”

This fist made of Heaven’s Phosphor had once trampled over a swarm of demons. Zagan left a vivid purple trail behind him and aimed his fist at Bifrons. Their bodies crossed for a single instant. Zagan’s fist came down, while Bifrons’s body twisted. The moment they passed each other, something fell to the ground with a splat. It was a slender severed forearm.

“AAAAAARGH!”

Zagan’s purple lightning had reaped Bifrons’s right arm.

*I failed. That was far too shallow.*

Heaven’s Phosphor had immediately burned Bifrons’s arm, but hadn’t reached their body. The little Archdemon had severed their own arm before it could. Looking down, the arm was also intact from the wrist down, where the Sigil of the Archdemon was.

*Still, now that right arm can’t be regenerated.*

“Hee hee. Having to pay an arm for this is rather pricey,” Bifrons said, the severed hand floating in the air before settling itself in their other hand.

“Do you think I’ll leave it at this?”

“Yes. You will. You’re out of time. You’ve got a fight waiting for you, after all.”

Just as Zagan was about to drive in the finishing blow, ignoring all this nonsense, he heard a scream behind him.

“Sis!”

It was Lisette. He turned around to see Stella strangled by the darkness. Judging by how Lisette and Dexia were on the ground behind her, Stella had leaped in to protect them.

“Hak... You little...”

Even as her face twisted in agony, Stella grabbed the shadowy arm and twisted it at the thumb joint with all her strength. There was enough force to yank off a human head, pulling away the darkness from her and sending it flying into the air.

By that time, Bifrons had already transformed into particles and vanished. Zagan had taken their arm, whereas Bifrons had greatly hurt Richard and Nephteros, two people he couldn’t let be. He’d been completely defeated, yet the true battle was only getting started.

“Hey...what the hell is going on?” Shax muttered in shock.

Before anyone knew it, the darkness that had covered Nephteros’s body was gone. She floated in the air with her eyes closed. It didn’t look like there was anything wrong with her body. However, wings of light protruded from her back. They were divine, yet sinister, and numbered eight in total.

◇

*What the hell are those wings?!*

Zagan could see their true nature through his silver eyes. Each was a crystallization of mana that stood equal to a Sigil of the Archdemon, and there were eight of them. It was like being in possession of eight Sigils at once, but Zagan didn’t believe things were as simple as that. The power here made him truly understand that the Sludge Demon Lord Bifrons had summoned once before really had been nothing but residual thoughts. He had to focus just to

breathe in its presence. What could this tremendous power possibly be?

“Nephteros” opened her eyes. Her pupils were gold like the moon, and within them was darkness akin to the pits of hell. A single flap of her wings had Zagan, Stella, and Shax groaning. That was all it took to blow away all the sorcery they had prepared. It was especially bad that Shax’s sorcery had been erased, seeing how he’d been treating Richard.

“Alas...what foolish children. But I’ll still pity you,” “Nephteros” said, then began singing. “[To thee, I grant benevolence.]”

Crystal pebbles shot out of her eight wings.

*Selini Chavliodous?!*

This was the celestial mysticism Nephteros favored in combat, but its power was now on an entirely different level.

“Heaven’s Scale Dragon Form!”

Zagan wove his greatest shield without hesitation. Its giant wings covered all of the noncombatants like Lisette, but Zagan was left wide-eyed in shock. Selini Chavliodous pierced through the dragon-shaped armor. Even Orias’s celestial mysticism had been completely blocked by the Dragon Form, but here it was riddled with holes in an instant. Even with its armor pierced, it still ate the aura of the celestial mysticism and grew larger, but it was breaking apart faster than it grew. It was sure to shatter in just a few seconds. Still, he’d managed to buy some time.

“Keep your mouth shut or you’ll bite your tongue!”

Zagan had gone right for Lisette and Dexia in the middle of the raining crystals. Dexia was supposedly a relatively talented sorcerer, but in her current state, she was like any other unarmed noncombatant. He had to protect her.

As for Shax, who couldn’t move much with Richard in his arms, Kuroka was shielding him by cutting down the incoming crystals. The Dragon Form was at least slowing down the projectiles going through it, but even disregarding that, this girl really showed why Stella didn’t want to fight her. The two blades of the Moonless Sky shattered countless crystals. Stella and Ginias had also drawn their Sacred Swords to focus on defense.

*I can't get close to Shax!*

That one flap of the wings had erased all sorcery. Richard's current state was too much for Shax on his own. However, due to the constant rain of crystals, Zagan couldn't get close to them while carrying the two girls.

"Angelic Confession Raziel!" Ginias shouted, springing into action.

The Head Archangel held his Sacred Sword aloft as knightly armor took shape in the air.

"Go! You can save him, right?" the boy declared, despite having been tricked, tormented, and disgraced by Zagan in the past.

"I owe you one. Don't die," Zagan said to the boy he'd once spared simply because it would've been a bother to kill him.

The green Confession lunged through the crystal rain toward "Nephteros." Zagan used that chance to run over to Shax. Richard's chest still had a gaping hole in it. Shax had stopped the bleeding and was using mana to manipulate Richard's blood flow in place of the missing heart. This was the best stopgap treatment one could possibly ask for, but it wouldn't heal him.

"What are you doing? You can't treat him?" Zagan asked as he lowered Dexia and Lisette down onto the ground.

"Don't be unreasonable, Boss. You can't just regenerate a lost organ in this little time. This guy's body won't hold out long enough for us to remake his heart."

A man of Shax's caliber could treat damage to internal organs easily. However, Bifrons had cleanly plucked Richard's heart out whole. Replacing the missing organ wasn't just treatment, it would be an act of creation.

"Fine. I'll do something about that," Zagan said. "Kuroka, I'll leave my back to you."

"Y-Yes!" Kuroka replied in an excited tone, contrasting the desperation in the air.

Zagan began weaving the sorcery he'd meant to use for Nephteros. It was still incomplete, so he didn't even know whether it would work. What's more, doing

this kind of work in this muddy mess was beyond foolish. Nevertheless, he'd made his decision as a king.

He drew mana from the Sigil of the Archdemon and materialized it, forming each cell and blood vessel one at a time. A normal person's brain would be liable to rupture from the stress of the calculations he was doing. This was the most delicate of sorceries.

Behind him, Ginias made free use of his Confession to challenge "Nephteros," but it wasn't much of a fight. The Head Archangel's use of Confession was in no way clumsy, but blocking the crystal rain was the best he could do. He hadn't been able to attempt a single strike this entire time. He was still enduring the onslaught when suddenly, the crystals stopped coming.

"H-Here's my chance!" Ginias shouted.

He readied his Confession once more and was just about to charge in as a spear of light took shape in "Nephteros's" hand.

"Dodge it, Ginias!" Stella screamed.

"Huh?"

The instant the spear left her hand, a giant hole took shape in the middle of the Confession's torso. By the time anyone realized it had been caused by the spear, a band of light had gone past them and reached all the way to the horizon. A moment later, a pillar of flame burst in the distance. If that had been fired toward Kianoides, the entire town would've been torn asunder.

"U-Ugh..."

Ginias had just barely managed to react thanks to Stella's warning. He'd somehow escaped the spear, but his Confession had been easily defeated. He vomited blood and fell to the ground. His Anointed Armor crumbled to bits, and he couldn't even get back to his feet. The tiniest of grazes was all it took to reduce him to such a state.

Following that, "Nephteros" closed her eyes and her lips quivered.

"[Thou art the one that shines like the stars. The one who embraces balance, and arbitrates over good and evil.]"

*Celestial mysticism...and Asteri Ekrixis at that?!*

Zagan's face stiffened. This spell had once eradicated the Sludge Demon Lord. If fired by Nephteros in her current state, Kianoides was liable to get obliterated despite its distance from their battlefield. But this wasn't the reason for Zagan to freeze. Nephteros had once attempted to cast this and had been unable to bear its power, ultimately collapsing because of it.

*If she keeps using celestial mysticism like that, her body won't last!*

A tremendous light poured down over the area in reaction to the Celestian prayer. However, Zagan couldn't move right now. If he stopped his work, Richard was doomed.

Zagan stretched out his hand, continuing Richard's treatment all the while. He wouldn't abandon Richard. He would protect his subordinates. He wouldn't let the town be destroyed. That was the method of rulership Zagan believed in. And just as he began weaving Heaven's Scale, Stella pushed his arm back down.

"Zagan. At least try relying on your big sis at times like these," she said with a smile, her profile much like the one she had whenever she was up to no good back in the old days.

"What are you—?"

"Okay! Let's give it a go, Zachariel! Confession!"

Stella gripped the blade of her Sacred Sword, letting her blood run down its length. A jet-black knight carrying a spear and shield took shape behind her. It was the Angelic Confession Archdemon Andrealphus had once put on display. There was precedence for this in Ginias and Michael, so her swift mastery of it wasn't a total surprise. Stella had already reached the stage of Confession.

"Go!"

Stella held her Sacred Sword aloft, and the black Confession charged "Nephteros." However, unlike Andrealphus, Stella rode on its back.

"You do your best too, big brother!" Stella shouted, holding her hand up to her silver artificial eye. "Antipode Whirling Wave!"

The sorcery she unleashed closely resembled the Whirling Wave her brother

Decarabia had once used. It created an enormous vortex of mana, crushing everything within its range. However, what Stella used here also included the aura of the Sacred Sword within the swirling mana.

It was a raging tornado of mana and aura, a power only Stella could use as the wielder of a Sacred Sword and the King's Silver Eye. Even Zagan wouldn't be able to break through it. The vortex swirled with the Confession's spear at its center, swallowing even the light of celestial mysticism. Faced with this ultimate attack, "Nephteros" continued her prayer and held up her right hand.

"[Be that as it may, balance is broken. Order is lost, and the earth is dyed in blood. Thus, this merits retribution. By the hammer that pardons all sin.]"

The light from her celestial mysticism gathered into the shape of a spear. Just a single graze had rendered a man of Ginias's caliber incapable of standing, so how much destruction could it bring about when accompanied by celestial mysticism?

"Ugh! Just one more time! Please endure, Raziel! Confession!"

The green Confession took shape once more as if to protect Stella. Its armor was cracked and it looked like it would fall apart at any moment, but it challenged "Nephteros" alongside the black Confession.

The spear of light collided with the two Confessions, crushing them both ever so easily.

"Stella!"

Riding the back of the black Confession, Stella had no means of escaping the impact. Her body flew through the air leaving a trail of blood before someone gently caught her.

"God... That Shere Khan sure has a shitty personality. He fuckin' sent us here 'cause he knew this would happen."

It was a boy with scarlet hair and eyes.

"You two..." Kuroka muttered in astonishment.

"Yo, we meet again."

The boy shot Kuroka a troubled look, then laid Stella on the ground. She was

unconscious and in tatters, but still breathing. After confirming this, Zagan let out the slightest sigh of relief.

*I can't keep up with more than this...*

Richard's treatment still wasn't done, so neither Zagan nor Shax could leave his side. They wouldn't be able to save anyone else suffering from serious wounds.

"I do not know who you are, but it seems your enemy is one tied to us by fate," a slit-eyed swordsman said as he walked up next to the boy with scarlet hair. "We shall provide our assistance."

The swordsman was about to turn around, but his eyes shot wide open in shock.

"It can't be... Are you Zagan?" he asked.

Zagan couldn't understand the implication behind his words. How did a hero from a thousand years ago know his name upon seeing his face?

"Who the hell are you?" Zagan asked, grimacing dubiously.

The swordsman nodded, his face resolved for the inevitable.

"Sir Asura. I have found my place to die. It seems I'll be returning to the land of the dead before you."

"I don't really get it, but we're butcherin' that goddamn seraph, yeah? I'll keep you company."

So the boy declared as he threw a glance at "Nephteros."

*Does that mean Azazel really is a seraph?*

The swordsman had a broken sword in hand. The blade slipped out of the hilt. By the time it clanged against the ground, light poured out of the bladeless hilt. It then took the shape of a sword of light. It was closer to the aura of a Sacred Sword than any kind of sorcery. The boy also had a gauntlet of light wrapped around his right hand.

"You listenin'? The main theory for fightin' a seraph is destroyin' their Hex Wings. So long as they have those, no human can match them."

“Having said that, with only two of us, getting rid of one wing would be considered most satisfactory, I suppose.”

Perhaps those words were meant for Zagan. The two of them seemed to be rather strong, but he didn’t think they could come anywhere close to stopping “Nephteros.” If so, perhaps they were trying to leave behind their knowledge. Disregarding their resolve entirely, though, “Nephteros” continued her prayer into its final verse.

“[The lights of the heavens are all stars. All that shines far and wide plummets into a conflagration. With no compassion, no grief, it simply judges and brings destruction. This is the prayer of retribution] — Asteri Ekrixis!”

And thus did the light of destruction rain down on them...or it was supposed to. Following several heavy bangs, black spheres burst around “Nephteros” and everything vanished. The clanging of several small metal cylinders falling to the ground followed a moment later.

A vampire in a black dress stood there, her hands clenching black and white Seraph Hunters. Judging by the spent cartridges at her feet, she’d fired six times. Her bullets had managed to erase Asteri Ekrixis.

“Alshiera,” Zagan said.

“Sorry I’m late.”

If the one inside Nephteros right now was Azazel, this would be a chance meeting between Alshiera and her archenemy.

“Alas, I see you stand in my way once more. What a naughty child. What a lovely child. But it’s over. I won’t forgive you anymore,” “Nephteros” said, narrowing her gaze.

“Tee hee hee. Say that after you manage to beat me once,” Alshiera said, provoking her enemy.

“Are you...Ashy?” the boy called Asura muttered in disbelief.

“We’ll talk later. Will you two lend me your aid?”

“Leave it to us!”

“As you will.”

Hearing their replies, Alshiera smiled nostalgically.

“Now then, it’s our first seraph hunt in a thousand years.”

The three of them leaped into action simultaneously. Crystal rain once more poured down from “Nephteros’s” eight wings.

“Too slow.”

Black spheres burst in front of all eight wings.

*She’s suppressing them the moment the power manifests!*

Zagan knew that this girl could draw the Seraph Hunters faster than any sorcery. It was the culmination of an art built over a thousand years of dedication. “Nephteros” wasn’t allowed to fire a single crystal as Asura and the swordsman leaped in at both her flanks.

“And that’s—”

“One each!”

Mana erupted from the elbow of the boy’s gauntlet, accelerating his fist with explosive force. His entire arm became a loosed arrow, piercing through one of the wings on the right. On the other side, the swordsman swept up his sword of light and cut off one of the left wings. The boy’s movements were boisterous, while the swordsman’s were quiet. Their tandem attack had succeeded in destroying two wings.

“Tch!”

“Nephteros” clicked her tongue and fell back. Seizing that opportunity, Alshiera dropped the empty magazines from her Seraph Hunters. Zagan was wondering how she would manage with both her hands occupied when black chains came out of her sleeves, pulling new magazines from her skirt. The chains then went on to reload her weapons.

That meant she was going to follow up with her quick shots that far defied human understanding. Her enemy understood this too. “Nephteros” floated through the sky, soaring in an arc to get around Alshiera, but the vampire’s eyes tracked her perfectly.

“Kee hee hee. A pampered fawn as always! You should learn to keep your

distance!” “Nephteros” shouted with scorn.

“Thanks to that, you haven’t been lonely these last thousand years, have you?” Alshiera replied, a hint of affection in her voice.

“[He who rules over the journey to death. He who blows over the reeds, and passes wisdom down to man.]”

“Nephteros” started singing the verses to Algea Pathi. It had less destructive force than Asteri Ekrixis, but as it was shapeless noise, it couldn’t be blocked. The barrier of sound obscured “Nephteros’s” figure, and Alshiera fired without hesitation. However, both her shots were slightly off target.

“Where do you think you’re aimi—?!”

The two bullets collided right in front of “Nephteros’s” eyes. Unable to withstand the force, the bullets let out an ear-shattering roar and burst apart. Even Algea Pathi couldn’t withstand the sound, so cracks formed on its surface. It wasn’t enough to break through completely, but that was enough of an opening for the two seraph-hunting heroes.

“Number two!” the two shouted as they shattered another wing each.

*That’s what he meant by aiming for the Hex Wings?*

Zagan was amazed. He could tell that “Nephteros’s” power was dropping drastically with each wing lost. With only four left, her power was far below half of what it originally was. Nevertheless, her total output was still tremendous.

*Is this how they fought a thousand years ago?*

Alshiera closed in as if in a rush to bring an end to the fight. It would be no trouble for Alshiera’s quick shots to shatter the remaining four wings now that “Nephteros” was so drastically weakened. Or well, that was supposed to be the case...

“Please. Save me. Alshiera...” “Nephteros” said in the elf’s actual voice.

Alshiera averted her aim on reflex, pointing her barrels at the empty sky. Using that decisive opening, “Nephteros” drove her knee into Alshiera’s waist...right where her old wound was—the one that constantly sapped her immortal life span.

“G-Gah...!” Alshiera groaned in pain.

“Don’t approach so carelessly, Ashy!”

Asura caught Alshiera as she was blown back. By that time, however, “Nephteros” had escaped from the Seraph Hunters’ effective firing range. Alshiera fell to her knees, her weapons still held at the ready.

“Hee hee hee... Kee hee hee... Ha ha ha ha!” “Nephteros” cackled. “You’ve gotten rather soft. My old fawn would have never fallen for that.”

With that, “Nephteros” flew up into the sky.

“Wait!” Alshiera screamed.

“How cute. How lovely. My dear Ashy. Even having lost your power, you’re such a strong child. Even with this body, I’m at a disadvantage,” “Nephteros” said before flashing a nightmarish smile. “Chase me as you will. Until I destroy this very world. Aaah ha ha ha ha ha!”

Leaving those last words behind, “Nephteros” vanished, taking Zagan’s precious sister-in-law’s body. So much had been stolen from him here, but all he could do was gnash his teeth so hard that it felt like they would break.

# Epilogue

“Heh heh heh... Zagan truly is merciless.”

Bifrons staggered down a dirty alley. Their right arm was missing. They couldn’t possibly afford to lose the Sigil of the Archdemon, so they carried their severed right hand, but it couldn’t be used like this.

The Archdemon tossed the hand into the air. Fiber-like metal stretched out of their shoulder and connected the severed hand to their stump. They had used sorcery to create an improvised artificial arm, but the moment it looked stable, it fell right back off.

*Cutting it off wasn’t enough to block it completely, huh...?*

This was a forbidden spell Zagan had developed to help kill Archdemons. Bifrons had escaped instant death by immediately cutting off their arm, but even now, Heaven’s Phosphor was gradually crawling up their body from the open wound. It eroded anything it touched in an instant, so Bifrons couldn’t even attach an artificial arm to the opening.



It had been a mistake to face Alshiera right before their clash. If not for that, Bifrons likely wouldn't have suffered such a deep wound.

*No, Zagan is obstinate. He'll never let someone off lightly after they kill his relative.*

Bifrons would've suffered some kind of wound either way. Actually, taking precautions against Alshiera's intervention beforehand might've brought the best outcome possible. Bifrons could hold out for a few days. Once the erosion reached their heart, however, the Archdemon would die.

"Hee hee. So this is poison that can kill even an Archdemon, eh...? You truly do plan to kill all thirteen Archdemons on your own, don't you?"

This power could allow Zagan to achieve his goals, but Bifrons had no means of learning it. It was frustrating, but they had no way of breaking this spell.

*But...not yet. I can't die yet.*

The Archdemon dragged themself across the ground, chasing Nephteros's tracks. One could also call her Azazel now, but they preferred not to. Bifrons couldn't possibly afford to lose sight of her. They were pathetically out of breath, being devoured slowly to death, but still had a twisted smile on their face. Everything was going well. Not a single thing had gone against their will. Even their own death was exactly to plan.

"Oh... I suppose there's one thing I didn't plan for."

*What was her name again? Dexia?*

Bifrons had only considered her one of Shere Khan's toys, but she'd gone as far as obstructing Bifrons. It was like striking upon a treasure they had buried somewhere and forgotten. A world where everything went to plan was endlessly boring. That was why people who showed them unexpected miracles were ever so beautiful.

*Aah, I get it now. I love humanity.*

Bifrons found their miracles so unbearably lovely. That was why they would drive people to the very depths of despair to witness these miracles. After three hundred long years of being a sorcerer, they had finally found the answer. That

was why Bifrons dragged their crumbling body across the ground. They wanted to witness the ultimate miracle. They wanted to witness the tool they had created surpass her origins and bring about a miracle.

This Archdemon was exceptionally evil, yet perhaps purer than any other. And with unsteady steps, the sorcerer who couldn't be identified as either a boy or girl chased their favorite doll.

◇

"Is everyone okay? It looks like there was a huge explosion near the town," Furcas muttered, looking at the forest from Zagan's castle.

He'd been reading a grimoire in the archives, but upon sensing an abnormal presence, he'd come out into the hallway. He couldn't see Lilith or the others, meaning it was about time for dinner to be prepared. If possible, Furcas wanted to help, but if he tried entering the kitchen, the siren girl would glare at him with a dreadful smile, so he didn't dare.

*Does she maybe hate me?*

Furcas didn't remember doing anything to offend her, though. He folded his arms and gave it some thought as Kimaris looked up at the sky with a stern expression.

"Is this...Azazel?"

Kimaris checked in on Furcas whenever he had the time. That was why Furcas had grown attached to him.

*This is my first time seeing Kimry making such a scary face...*

He looked more anxious than angry. Furcas didn't understand the subtleties of leonin expression, but that was how he felt. That was why, despite not really knowing what was going on, he tried cheering Kimaris up.

"I-It'll be fine. Zagan definitely won't lose. I'm sure he'll protect everyone."

"Yes... You're right."

Kimaris smiled, but his expression was still clouded. With no idea what to say now, Furcas fidgeted about.

“I’m not particularly worried about Sir Zagan and those with him,” Kimaris said, seeing the boy’s unrest. “But I feel like Miss Gremory is late...”

“Gremory is one of Zagan’s comrades...right?”

Furcas had yet to meet her, but he’d heard her name mentioned several times in the context of someone Zagan trusted deeply.

“Yes. She’s my benefactor. She’s important to me.”

“O-Oh!”

Furcas wondered what Kimaris meant by that, but before he could ask, Kimaris gave him a wry smile.

“She is to me what Miss Lilith is to you.”

“Th-Then you must be worried!” Furcas exclaimed, his eyes wide-open in surprise. “If only we could contact her somehow...”

He was so moved to tears that it almost seemed like this involved him directly.

“Despite her behavior, Miss Gremory is a talented sorcerer,” Kimaris said with a troubled smile. “I’m nowhere near her level. So really, I’m sure it’ll be all right.”

Furcas could sense a steel-like will behind those words.

*Aah, if things weren’t all right for this person, he’d go make it all right on his own.*

Even an Archdemon wouldn’t be able to stop him from doing so. He was shuddering at the thought of that when he suddenly sensed someone behind him and turned around.

“Huh? You’re...Miss...Alshiera, right?”

The young girl carrying a creepy stuffed doll loitered around the supposedly empty archives.

“Yes. Good day to you, Furcas. And to you too, Kimaris.”

“Should I take my leave?” Kimaris asked with a gentlemanly bow.

“Not at all. I’ll be done in a moment,” Alshiera said, opening her eyes wide in an exaggerated manner.

With that, she turned to Furcas. Looking at her made him feel great sorrow for some reason. He was sure he was supposed to know her, but he didn’t. As he tried to remember, she held up a finger.

“Furcas, thinking of another woman’s past when you have your mind fixed on someone already is insincere for a gentleman.”

“I-I didn’t mean to...”

He winced at her guessing exactly what he was up to.

“Tee hee. Let’s leave the jests there. In truth, I have to take my leave from this place for a while.”

“Huh? Are you going somewhere?”

“Yes. I have incurred the Silver-Eyed King’s wrath. I’ll be going far away until he recovers his temper.”

The Silver-Eyed King—Zagan—was a compassionate ruler, but once infuriated, he showed no mercy. Furcas knew this well.

“Um, will you be okay?” he asked her. “I don’t know what happened, but I’m sure he’ll forgive you if you apologize. If you’d like, I can go with you.”

He meant to comfort her, but she simply laughed it off.

“Oh, right. Before I part ways with you, I thought I’d hand this over,” she said, pulling out the weapon called a Seraph Hunter that Furcas had once used inside that dream. “This is the close combat Seraph Hunter Stern. I do believe you already know the destructive potential it possesses. It only holds seven bullets, so do be careful how you use each one.”

“What do you mean? Isn’t this really important to you?”

“I still have Mond, so I’ll be fine,” Alshiera replied with a smile, showing her black Seraph Hunter. “Please protect Lilith.”

Furcas was stunned silent for a moment, then struck his chest and yelled, “Yeah! Leave it to me!”

Seeing him that way, Alshiera brushed his head affectionately.

“H-Hey!”

He raised his voice in a fluster, but strangely, it didn’t feel bad even though he was being treated like a child.

“Don’t walk off the right path this time, okay?” she said.

“I don’t really get it, but okay.”

“Farewell, then,” Alshiera said with a relieved smile. A second later her body turned into countless bats and vanished.

◇

“Yo. Done with your errand?”

Asura was waiting with Bato off the main road some distance from Kianoides when Alshiera transformed back into a girl.

“Ashy... What happened to your body?” Asura asked gravely.

“Much has transpired since you died,” she answered with an ambiguous smile.

“Sorry... I couldn’t keep my promise,” he said, hugging her cold vampire body.

“You always pushed them on me without asking. You don’t need to worry about that.”

Nevertheless, Alshiera had definitely been saved by his promises back then. That was why she forgave him.

“You really are Lady Alshiera...right?” Bato asked in disbelief.

“Yes. The same one you know all too well,” she answered.

The swordsman then presented his Hex Sword to her.

“What is the meaning of this?” she asked.

“I must be judged by you.”

“H-Hey, Bato. What’s going on?” Asura asked in a fluster.

“Back then, I was the one who proposed to Marchosias that Zagan be used as

a sacrifice," Bato muttered.

A painful silence spread around them. Even the wind came to a complete halt as if nature had forgotten to breathe.

"You called that guy just now Zagan, yeah?" Asura said, unable to endure the silence. "Who's that?"

Bato remained silent as if he couldn't possibly say. With no other choice, Alshiera answered for him.

"Zagan is my —."

Asura's eyes opened so wide it seemed like his eyeballs would fall out.

"Huh? You're kidding me, right...? You...? Waaah...?"

The boy fell to his knees with slumped shoulders, looking rather pitiful.

"He's proof that I wasn't a misfortunate woman," Alshiera said with a smile. "Is there a need to lament like that?"

"No, I mean... Haaah... Well, it's my fault for up and dyin' like that..."

After casting a sidelong glance to Asura as he mumbled to himself to sort out his feelings, Alshiera turned to Bato.

"I know of everything you've done."

"Then—!"

"Then there's no need for this anymore," Alshiera said, putting her hand on his shoulder. "Even if you didn't say anything, Marchosias would've done it."

"But it still didn't work, did it? Isn't that why you ended up with that body?"

Alshiera looked down at her own palm. In the battle one thousand years prior, the Silver-Eyed King had definitely won, but the war hadn't come to an end. The world had been ruined by the battle with the seraphs. Someone had to be sacrificed or the world would've been destroyed.

*Marchosias chose to sacrifice that child to protect me.*

That Archdemon's one thousand years of life were one thousand years of atonement. That was why he'd protected the Silver-Eyed King's bloodline and

had watched over Liucaon. Nevertheless, Alshiera had ended up becoming a sacrifice, and everything ended up back where it had started. Thinking about it all, she couldn't help but smile.

"You probably don't know this, but he continued to apologize to me for a thousand years. I'm honestly tired of hearing apologies at this point."

The late Archdemon Marchosias had died in despair. He didn't deserve more condemnation from anyone.

"Then how can I possibly atone for what I've done?" Bato asked.

"I'd like that child's birthday to be celebrated," Alshiera said with a mean smile.

"What do you mean...?" Bato asked, his slit eyes opening at the sudden confession.

"His birthday is quickly approaching in but four days. That's why I'd like his birthday to be celebrated. That is my one and only wish right now," she explained. Everything she'd done was for this purpose. "So long as you work to that end, I could ask for nothing more."

This only left Bato with an even bitterer expression.

"Then why did you part ways with him like that?" he asked.

Alshiera recalled what had occurred several hours ago, during her final conversation with Zagan that had led to their separation.

◇

"Next time, I'll kill her," Alshiera said after losing sight of "Nephteros."

"Do you think I'll allow that?" Zagan asked.

"I don't...so this is where I shall bid you farewell."

If Zagan had wanted to save Nephteros, then he was better off killing Alshiera right then and there, but he didn't move. This wasn't because he sensed a gulf in power between them.

*Am I hesitating?*

She'd stayed at his castle for nearly half a year and caused plenty of trouble.

Despite all that, however, only worthless memories came to mind when he clenched his fist. Making her help with building the grand bath, seeing her back as she went here and there with Foll, and above all else, that helpless and lonely smile he suddenly noticed she was making now. Taking advantage of his inaction, Alshiera vanished.

“Damn it all...”

Nephteros had been taken over by Azazel and disappeared...and now Alshiera had vanished in pursuit of her. Stella and Ginias were in tatters. He’d lost everything despite it happening before his own eyes.

*No...not everything.*

Kuroka and Shax were unhurt, and Lisette and Dexia hadn’t been taken. Above all else...

“Boss, that’s enough. Richard is past the worst of it.”

The heart woven of mana in Richard’s chest was beating. The artificial organ pumped blood through his veins, and shallow breaths came from his mouth. Zagan gave Richard’s head a good thump.

“Boss... He’s injured, so cut him some slack...”

“Like I care. Everything’s gone to hell because of him.”

If he’d simply forsaken this man, perhaps the result would’ve been different.

*But maybe this guy can bring Nephteros back...*

If his death had caused her to plunge into despair, then it was also his duty to pull her back out of it. She wasn’t completely lost yet.

However, the situation was getting worse somewhere completely out of Zagan’s sight.

◇

“What a blunder...” Enchantress Gremory muttered, her voice containing none of its usual carefree tone.

It was her duty to obstruct the transportation of the vast amount of goods being sent to Shere Khan. It wasn’t a particularly difficult task, as all she had to

do was dispose of the cargo from wagons on the church's transportation routes without being noticed. And yet, Gremory found herself lying in a pool of her own blood. A single man stood before her. He wore tattered armor. It was questionable how much power remained within it, but it was definitely Anointed Armor from the church. His eyes were hollow. It wasn't even clear what he was looking at. His right hand had a familiar crest on its back—the Sigil of the Archdemon. Gremory knew the letters within symbolized the Demon Lord's lungs.

"Hak..."

Burning pain assaulted her chest. She couldn't heal the wound at all. The sword in the man's hand had been blessed by the church. Even if it wasn't as strong as a Sacred Sword, it was difficult to heal any wounds inflicted by it with sorcery.

She knew who this was even when she'd spotted him from far away. She'd made sure not to get close no matter what. Despite this, however, by the time she'd turned on her heel, she'd already been cut down.

*I must...inform...my liege...*

Gremory tried to weave her sorcery together, but the last thing she saw was the strongest Archangel-cum-Archdemon raising his sword overhead.

# Afterword

It’s been a long time, everyone. I have come to deliver *An Archdemon’s Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride Volume 12.* I’m sorry for the delay this time around.

In this volume, Zagan and Nephy’s birthdays come to light! They both want to celebrate each other’s birth, but also want to keep it a surprise, leaving them completely confused. We also have Kuroka reaching adulthood without us knowing it and a calamity befalling Chastille as she tries to find out Barbatos’s birthday. It’s the birthday volume! On the flip side, Nephteros faces an imminent crisis... Well, that’s the gist of it.

Right, so...I do apologize for making this volume rather thick. Next time... Next time for sure I...have no confidence I can make it thinner! Sorry. Really. Sorry.

Actually, when it came to composing this volume, no matter how hard I tried, the latter half got really dense. Thanks to that, even though this series is mostly a rom-com, I had to cut some parts of Kuroka x Shax and Barbatos x Chastille. Incidentally, some of those cut segments are published on my Fanbox. Please take a look if you’re interested.

Also, due to the flow of the story, I put a lot of thought into the cover. Right! The cover! It’s Bifrons! It gives off a really uneasy feeling. Nephteros is in big trouble, so how can Bifrons smile like such a villain? It’s really the best! Thank you very much, COMTA!

We never know what Bifrons is thinking, but I’m satisfied with their portrayal in this volume, which unveils some of the difficult-to-understand bits of the character for the average reader.

Now then, I guess that’s everything I had to write down. I have quite a few pages this time, so let me give an update on my current state of affairs for the first time in a while.

Actually, I bought a new house! As such, I’ll be very busy moving around the

time this volume is out. Thanks to that, even though I haven't published anything since last summer, I've been busy this entire time.

Anyway, my new house is rather large. The study is spacious and I even have my own bedroom! With this, I can decorate the place with tons of plastic models. I hear an air purifier will help manage the dust, so I'm debating getting one.

Also, for the first time in a while, I made a plastic model under my pen name. I usually go by another alias, but this time I've had the honor of getting my model put on display in a certain shop. By the time this volume comes out, the exhibit should be over, though.

What else... Oh, right, I've been so busy staring at my PC and documents all day that I've actually put on a little weight. The numbers have gotten into the danger zone, so I've been spending time on an exercise bike since the fall, but I overworked the thing and broke it at the end of the year. Ummm, I think I lost about four kilos in two months. I haven't put any dietary restrictions on myself whatsoever, and I actually ate out quite frequently, so I really had to put in some effort to make my weight go down. The new exercise bike should come in soon after the new year, so I'll be getting intimately familiar with it when it does.

Well then, that leaves us at a good page cut-off point, so allow me to offer my thanks to everyone involved.

To my chief editor, whom I bothered quite a lot this time around, K. To COMTA, who offered the best illustrations in these trying times. To the manga artist, Hako Itagaki, who even lent me some assistance over the internet. To the editor for the manga. To everyone involved with the proofreading, publicity, and cover design for this volume. To my children, who helped with all sorts of housework during the winter break. And to you, my dear readers, who are holding this book in your hands at this very moment.

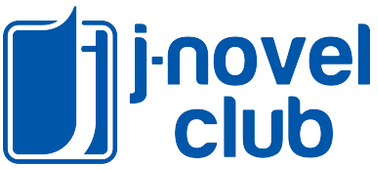
Thank you very much!

Join us next time! Of all things, the troublemaking granny has turned into a captured princess! Where has Nephteros gone, and what of Richard's fate? Do Furcas and Lilith have a future when such a formidable enemy stands in their

way? And above all else, will Zagan and Nephy actually get their birthday parties? Oh yeah, and there's an army of ten thousand closing in too. Please look forward to volume 13, the Shere Khan edition!

December 2020: In a Bustling Coffee Shop at the End of the Year

Fuminori Teshima




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An Archdemon’s Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride: Volume 12

by Fuminori Teshima

Translated by Hikoki Edited by DxS

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