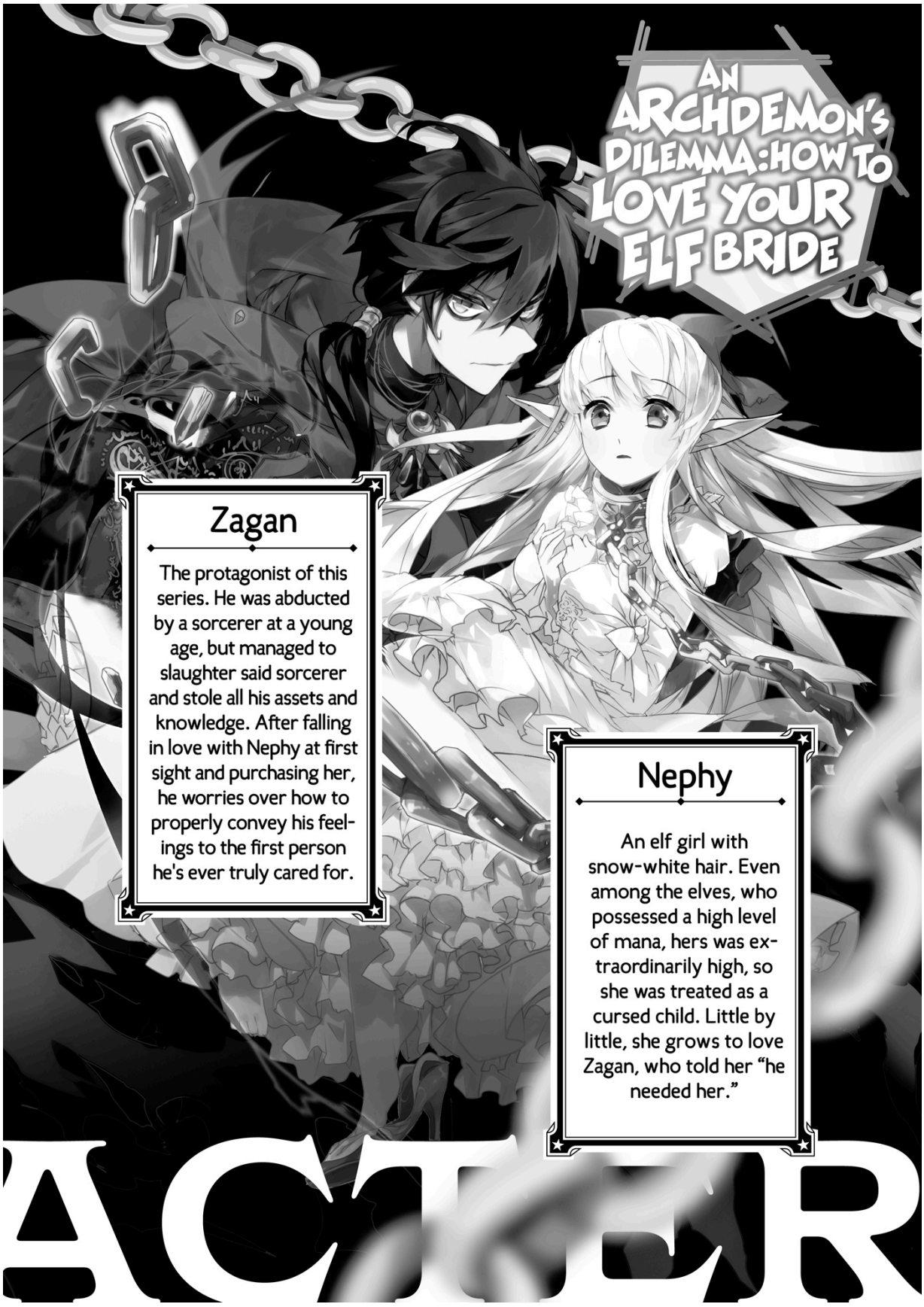

An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride
19
Fuminori Teshima
ill. COMTA


AN ARCHDEMON'S DILEMMA: HOW TO LOVE YOUR ELF BRIDE
19
FUMINORI TESHIMA
ILL. COMTA


Marchosias spread his fingers over the table and quietly glared at everyone present.
In about one year from now, the world will be destroyed. I want to do something to stop it.
AN ARCHDEMON'S DILEMMA: HOW TO LOVE YOUR ELF BRIDE


Valley Cat vs Eldest
The two fight to save people
precious to them!


“I wanna protect Lilith. For that, I’ll fight.”
His fingers grasped the object he was looking for in subspace and pulled it out.
It was an enormous whip, long enough to weave its way through the sky, wriggling like a snake.


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."
ACTER

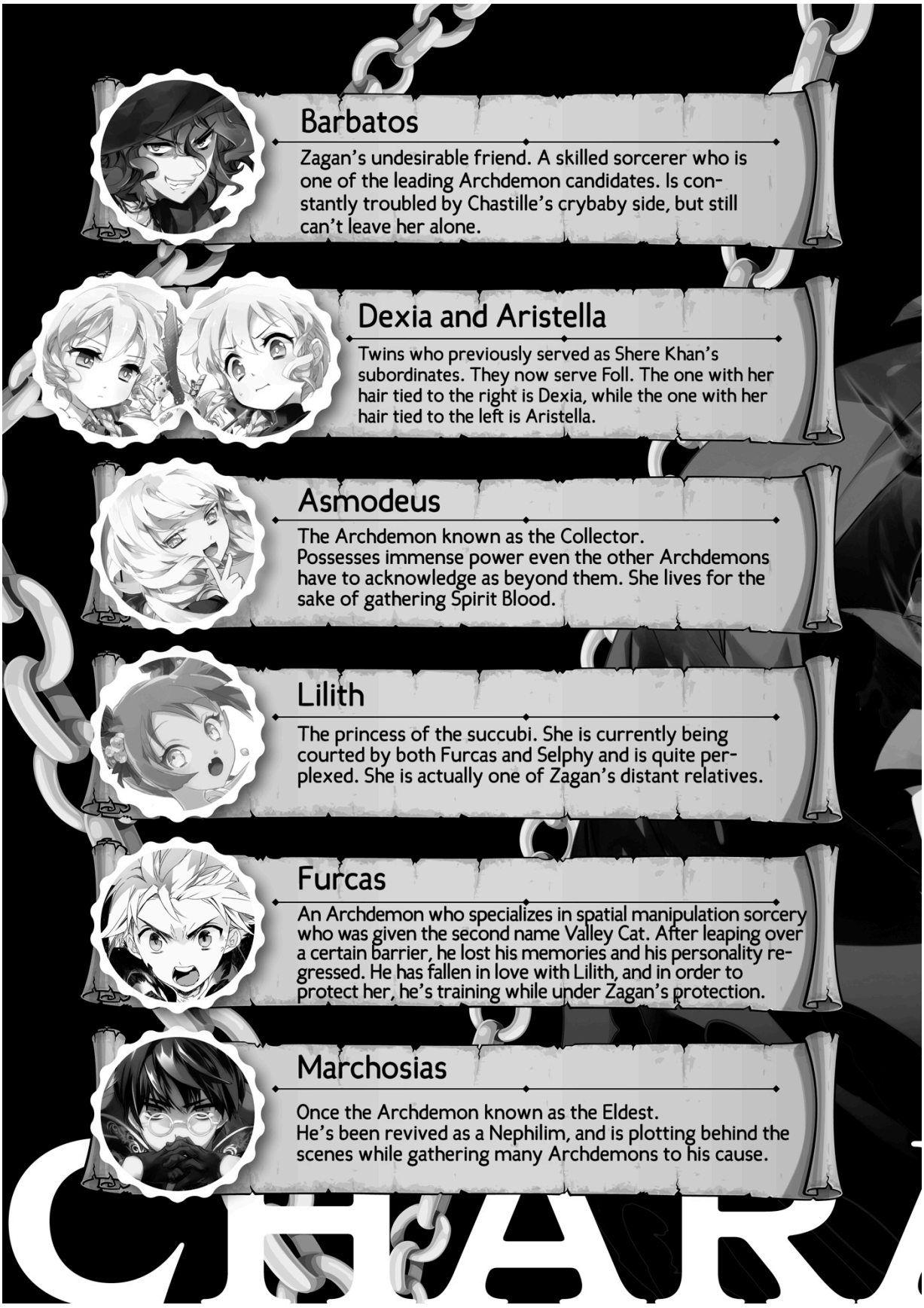

Barbatos
Zagan's undesirable friend. A skilled sorcerer who is one of the leading Archdemon candidates. Is constantly troubled by Chastille's crybaby side, but still can't leave her alone.
Dexia and Aristella
Twins who previously served as Shere Khan's subordinates. They now serve Foll. The one with her hair tied to the right is Dexia, while the one with her hair tied to the left is Aristella.
Asmodeus
The Archdemon known as the Collector.
Possesses immense power even the other Archdemons have to acknowledge as beyond them. She lives for the sake of gathering Spirit Blood.
Lilith
The princess of the succubi. She is currently being courted by both Furcas and Selphy and is quite perplexed. She is actually one of Zagan's distant relatives.
Furcas
An Archdemon who specializes in spatial manipulation sorcery who was given the second name Valley Cat. After leaping over a certain barrier, he lost his memories and his personality regressed. He has fallen in love with Lilith, and in order to protect her, he's training while under Zagan's protection.
Marchosias
Once the Archdemon known as the Eldest.
He's been revived as a Nephilim, and is plotting behind the scenes while gathering many Archdemons to his cause.

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Prologue

The Oblivion Wastelands Kaslytilio—the battlefield where the world was faced with an army of demons half a year ago—was now nothing but an empty wilderness lined with grave markers. Any signs of life were long gone, replaced by an endless expanse of rocks and cracked earth. *His* grave was also among the countless swords pierced into the ground.

It was marked by a plain wooden cross. The name carved upon it was "Eldest Marchosias," which was also the name of the young man looking at it now. He was clad in a solemn robe decorated with gold embroidery, his face accented by his round glasses and a cruel smile. Standing with his arms crossed, he emanated a majesty that compelled all—even those who only caught a slight glimpse of his figure—to serve him. With a thousand years of wisdom in his mind and a powerful young body, he stood at the peak of all sorcerers.

It feels odd looking at my own grave.

Honestly, he wasn't deeply moved by the experience. Having sensed his own death was at hand, he'd chosen this spot to die. Had one of the other Archdemons buried him? This was the only grave here that was marked by a cross instead of a sword.

"Marchosias."

Four other sorcerers were with him. The one addressing him was a sorcerer with a cranium that seemed somewhat akin to a dragon's or goat's...and it wasn't a mask or anything either. He had two twisted horns, but one was broken. He possessed no vocal cords, so it was the skull itself that generated his voice. The hand peeking out of his robes and clasping a staff was also nothing more than bones. His large body stood at around two meters tall but contained no muscle or skin. He was a skeletal undead.

"What is it, Starving Bone Lord Astaroth?" Marchosias asked without turning to look at him.

All the bones in Astaroth's body seemed to creak with discontent.

"We're still waiting?" he asked. "We've been here a week."

"Sorry," Marchosias replied, a bead of sweat dripping down his brow. "I'll tell them to hurry, so please wait a little longer."

"You told them the time and place for the meeting, right?"

"Well, no... It wasn't exactly decided at the time..."

"Why didn't you summon them *after* ironing out the details? Aren't you the Eldest?"

"I have nothing to say in my defense... Eligor, where are they now? How much longer before they arrive?"

"They're still stuck in Opheos," Eligor answered with an annoyed sigh as she tended to her nails. "If they're quick about it, they'll probably secure carriages in the next few days. Either way, it'll be a while longer."

"Is that so? Then I'm leaving," Astaroth said.

"Please don't leave!" Marchosias begged, clinging to the skeleton's waist without a hint of dignity. "I need everyone here for this!"

"Like I care."

It wasn't supposed to go this way. Marchosias had called for a meeting of Archdemons, but for some reason, Zagan had gotten married—well, engaged—along the way. The entire continent had been informed of it, so now tourists had swarmed Opheos.

As a result, all transportation services in the area had been frozen. The carriages and boats were already over capacity, so nobody was left to take a group to a desolate wasteland. It was also too far away to go on foot.

That was why, despite everyone but Zagan's group being present—Eligor, Glasya-Labolas, Naberius, and Astaroth—they couldn't begin.

"Can't you just teleport them here, Eligor?" Marchosias asked.

All of them were capable of teleportation, but setting aside the old Furcas, who'd specialized in it at an entirely different level, Eligor was the best at teleportation among the Archdemons. It would be easy for her to create a path between here and Opheos. And yet, she averted her gaze.

"No way," she refused. "Nothing good comes from getting involved with them."

"Ugh... What about Asmodeus?" Marchosias persisted. "She has Tartaros, right? She can bring them all here."

"I doubt she'll listen," Eligor responded. "She went to play with Phenex."

"Why?! And why exactly is Phenex with them?!"

"Who knows? Maybe Zagan won her over?"

Things were growing pretty dire.

We were aware of the possibility of Asmodeus and Phenex teaming up, but being with Zagan puts them beyond our control.

When it came to that man, everything always fell perfectly in place. Sorcerers were creatures who prioritized themselves even when cooperating. True cooperation should have been impossible for them, but Zagan made it possible. That was why Marchosias hated heroes. They made everyone they met their allies.

Maybe I'm already being drawn in too.

One glance at Zagan's face was all it had taken to bring back memories of his time as a nobody in the back alleys.

No, I threw all that away by choice.

Marchosias shook his head and pulled himself together as an old gentleman enjoying some tea at a table suddenly raised his voice.

"Oh yes, Marchosias? It's a little late to ask, but that grave is yours, is it not?"

"It is..." Marchosias responded. He had a bad feeling about this. "What about it?"

"Did you know there's nothing buried there?" the gentleman asked, driving the Eldest even further into a corner.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Marchosias replied, blinking in confusion behind his round glasses.

"The Collector annihilated your body," Glasya-Labolas elaborated. "I simply placed an appropriate landmark in its stead."

"Just so you know, I carved your name on it," the large muscular man with a feminine voice added. However, Marchosias was already on his knees and no longer listening.

Why'd she do something so cruel?

It made perfect sense that seeing his grave didn't move him in any way at all. His corpse wasn't even there, after all. He was aware that he deserved as much, but in his mind there were still things that people shouldn't do. Actually, the more surprising news was that Glasya-Labolas had placed the cross here for him. Marchosias raised his head to show his gratitude, but spotted Astaroth stepping through a hole in space.

"Don't go, Astaroth!" Marchosias cried.

"I've waited long enough."

Nobody was listening to him.

Zagan! Please get here quickly!

Thus, Marchosias could do nothing but pray as if waiting for his hero to arrive.

Chapter I: A Hero Is Meant to Show Up Late, but Tardiness Still Isn’t Commendable

“The Archdemon Observation Tour...?”

That was what was written on a piece of paper that was fluttering about in the town of Opheos. Turning to where the paper had tumbled from, Zagan spotted a vulpin girl waving a flag around and addressing a crowd loudly. Today, she was once again wearing a maid outfit. Perhaps it was the uniform for Manuela’s store.

“Listen up, everyone! Please register for the Archdemon Observation Tour here! Failure to follow procedure will lead to death, so please be careful!”

There was an orderly line from the harbor. Angelic Knights were serving as security, so it was awfully peaceful.

“Hm...”

Out of curiosity, Zagan joined the line. That said, the tourists around him were astir and yielded their place to him immediately, moving him forward at a rapid pace.

As he proceeded, he read the paper.

Even if gentle in appearance, he’s still an Archdemon. Incurring his displeasure will get you killed, so do not stimulate him.

Do not get within ten meters. You’re very likely to get killed.

Please do not address him directly under any circumstances. It’s highly probable you will get killed.

Do not raise your voice near him. Annoying him will get you killed.

Please observe quietly from a distance. You won’t die that way.

Please sign below to acknowledge the aforementioned rules.

It seemed the person who’d written this was quite well-informed.

“Business seems to be booming,” Zagan commented as he got to the front of the line.

“Of course!” the vulpin replied. “Actually, why does Kuu have to manage the line? The chief should put in some more work.”

“She really should,” Zagan agreed. “By the way, was this Gremory’s idea?”

“Yup. The chief and Kuu worked out the details after that. It was a lot of work thinking of ways not to get people killed.”

“I see. Is that so? Then may I presume you’re one of the culprits?” Zagan asked, smiling gently as he grasped her by the cranium.

Still maintaining a smile, Kuu turned remarkably pale. He lifted her off the ground, and with her legs dangling in the air, the idiot fox started crying meekly.

“Umm, you’ve got it all wrong. Kuu said we should stop, but the chief and Miss Gremory said it paired well with Miss Chastille and Mister Barbatos, so...”

“You should’ve started with that excuse,” Zagan stated coldly. “You’ve already confirmed that you’re in cahoots with them.”



Kuu began flailing wildly.

"Noooooo! Kuu doesn't wanna die! If you have to kill someone, start with the chief!"

She began wailing like a wild beast. Not that she thought that Zagan was seriously angry or anything, of course. There was no real tension behind her screams, so after letting out a sigh, Zagan dropped her.

"Huh? Kuu's alive?"

"It's fine to be enthusiastic about business, but it's about time to wrap things up, wouldn't you agree?"

Having been the subject of so much bullying to date, Archangel Chastille Lillqvist's rebellion had led to the Archdemon's proposal being broadcast to the entire continent. Zagan and Nephy had panicked when they'd seen the paper for themselves in the morning, but it hadn't led to the expected uproar.

No, Manuela and Kuu were likely responsible for that. They were apparently disciplining the rubberneckers so that they absolutely didn't get in Zagan's way. Thanks to that, things weren't all that different from back in Kianoides. Zagan was used to being looked at in this manner. There were, of course, many more people staring now, but Nephy had grown accustomed to it quickly too, so they were able to relax.

That was why he wasn't particularly angry. Still, maybe his whole group was relaxing a bit too much.

It's about time for Marchosias to start pestering us to hurry...

A week had already passed since the newspaper about Zagan's engagement had spread across the continent. The original plan had been to leave that night, but all transportation services had ground to a screeching halt, keeping them stuck in the city instead.

They could, of course, have secured one or two carriages, but Zagan's group was rather large. It would be difficult to get enough for everyone to ride in. This was all out of his control, but he couldn't fault Marchosias for criticizing him for his tardiness. It had been a great excuse to extend their sightseeing trip, but they were reaching the limit. So, owing them in a way, Zagan had come to inform Manuela and Kuu of his departure.

"Aww, leaving already?" the little vulpin said, her ears drooping as she stroked her fluffy tail despondently. "Kuu was stuck working and didn't even get to do any sightseeing..."

"I'll tell Manuela to give you a break," Zagan said. "Now, put an end to this farce already."

"'Kaaay."

She pattered off, then suddenly came to a stop.

"But how're you leaving?" she asked. "All the carriages and boats are full."

"Don't worry about that. I've made arrangements."

Marchosias had designated the Oblivion Wastelands Kaslytilio as the meeting place. It would take a week by carriage to get there. Using Foll's wings, it could be done in a day or two. However, the group of thirteen had expanded to sixteen. And including Asmodeus, they numbered seventeen, so they couldn't all fit on Foll's back.

Well, what's a sorcerer to do without sorcery?

After nodding along, Kuu ran off again.

"Everyone! It's a little abrupt, but today is the last day for the Archdemon Observation Tour! We're cutting off registration here! Everyone still participating, please be sure to follow the rules! You could die!"

She was apparently planning to make one last day of profit. Kuu had quite the indomitable spirit—in a bad way. That was a bit of a concern, but it wasn't something for a sorcerer to worry about. Ignoring it, Zagan spun on his heels and started walking.

"Now for the idiots who didn't gather..." he grumbled to himself as he went to collect his subordinates.

◇

"I never thought you'd invite me to have some tea, Phenex. What brought this whim about?"

On the top floor of a certain high-class inn in Opheos, two girls sat around a small table on the terrace. Incidentally, this wasn't their room, but Zagan and Nephy's. Smiling, narrowing her eyes as she tried to search for the true meaning of the situation, was Asmodeus.

This girl with violet starry eyes and dazzling silver hair was the last surviving carbuncle.

Sitting across from her, tipping back a cup of tea, was Phenex. She had golden hair and eyes and wore a crimson dress over her dainty body. This was starkly contrasted by her brass gauntlets and boots. She was the only firebird in the entire world.

Both looked around fifteen years old, but they were far older and in contention for being the strongest Archdemons.

"It's nothing serious," Phenex said, her lips twisting into a smile. "My beloved king has been rather cold to me, so I wanted someone to talk to."

"I suppose he did tie you up and leave you dangling from the terrace."

"Don't you think he's a bit *too* merciless? I'm not trying to steal him or anything. I was just staring at them flirting, and this is how he treats me."

"I'm pretty sure anyone would get angry over that," Asmodeus replied with a sigh of exasperation. Not that she really cared, of course.

Any intruder staring from the window during one's private time with a lover was bound to get yelled at.

I'm surprised Zagan managed to tame Phenex.

Phenex revived immediately if she was killed, so he'd knocked her out without killing her. Asmodeus had just happened to notice her dangling there and had come over to release her. Either way, Asmodeus understood why she acted this way.

"I'm more surprised you let Zagan go," Asmodeus said.

To Phenex, Zagan was the salvation she'd sought for over ten thousand years. If she let him slip through her fingers, she might never find it again. A little stalking was reasonable. It was a wonder that a slight beating was all it had taken for her to let him out of her sight.

"My king is the only one who can kill me," Phenex said, shrugging as she put down her cup. "That remains the same, but he's a far better person than I imagined. He gave me a reward and ordered me to behave."

"What do you mean?" Asmodeus asked, cocking her head.

Phenex held up a finger, creating a small black flame.

"Huh? Isn't that...?" Asmodeus muttered, her eyes wide in shock.

"Heaven's Phosphor. I'm bound by contract not to use it for anything but suicide, but with this, I can die. Even if my king perishes, I can still be saved."

Zagan had already yielded the only means of keeping Phenex in check. This was bad news for Asmodeus.

I wanted her to be my lifeline...

That was why Asmodeus had gone out of her way to make contact, but it had all become moot. Still, much like the retrieval of all core jewels was Asmodeus's greatest desire, finding death was Phenex's. Not even Asmodeus could deny her that.

"So, do you intend on leaving us soon?" Asmodeus asked despondently.

"That was the plan, but..."

Asmodeus raised a brow.

"Now that I can die whenever I want, I feel the urge to take a good look at my surroundings first. Before dying, it doesn't sound like a bad idea to walk around the world and take in all the sights it has to offer." She paused there, taking another sip of her tea before continuing. "So, I'm thinking of accepting your deal."

"Um...Phenex?"

Asmodeus was extremely grateful, but saying it aloud could lead to Eligor finding out.

"I bet Eligor is the one watching you, right?" Phenex said with a smile. "If she is, there's no point being sneaky about it. She's not using sorcery to watch or listen."

Asmodeus gulped. Lies would never work on Eligor. She knew this but had never figured out how or why.

"She traces cause and effect based on the future," Phenex explained. "No matter how skillfully you hide it, if there's a future where I help you, the fact that we had these clandestine talks will be exposed."

In short, Eligor derived the details after seeing the final answer. There was no point in hiding anything in that case. The reason her

“fortune telling” was sometimes vague was because she misread how cause and effect led to the outcome.

“What the heck?! That’s cheating!” Asmodeus complained. “I’m a total clown for trying so hard to hide this!”

“Isn’t being a clown your greatest skill?” Phenex commented with a laugh.

“Acting the fool and being the butt of a joke are totally different.”

Clowns chose to be laughed at. Being laughed at against her will was unbearable...setting aside the fact that Asmodeus did it to others all the time.

Well, that makes it worth doing in its own way.

If Eligor was looking at the future, Asmodeus just had to make sure there was nothing to see. If anything, she didn’t have to be so careful about countermeasures now, which made it easier to move around.

“I actually like that part of you,” Phenex said quietly, taking another sip of tea. “That’s why I’ll help. Oh, but I swore to devote everything I have to my king. You come after that.”

“How unexpected,” Asmodeus said, catching her breath. “I figured you hated me.”

“You really believe that? You’re not as hated as you think you are. It’s not just me either. Behemoth and Levia don’t hate you as much as they let on.”

“Um, I seriously doubt that.”

She was at least aware of what she’d done. In the process of stealing Spirit Blood, she’d used those two as scapegoats more than ten or twenty times.

“Not enough for you to be friends,” Phenex said. “But in a sense, they respect you.”

“How so?”

“Because you’re a fellow rebel against fate. They at least feel some affinity with you.”

Asmodeus felt her cheeks flushing. Unable to identify this emotion, she twirled her finger through her silver hair and averted her eyes.

“You’ve totally mellowed out, Phenex,” she said.

"Speak for yourself."

Asmodeus was well aware of this fact, so she could do nothing but pout in response.

"Let's get back on track," Phenex said. "Sneaking around is meaningless against Eligor. If you want to scheme, you'll be okay doing it more openly."

Asmodeus clenched her skirt beneath the table. For some reason, a certain face immediately came to mind.

Foll...

That girl was so endlessly obstinate and so endlessly honest. Even after finding out about Asmodeus's evil deeds, she still called Asmodeus "Lily" and chased after her. It didn't matter how much Asmodeus rejected her either. If there was no point hiding it, Asmodeus didn't need to avoid her. However, that was when a sudden realization came to mind.

If what Phenex says is true, then why hasn't Eligor noticed that Foll has Mercurius...?

If Eligor unraveled the truth by analyzing the future, it meant she hadn't seen a future where Foll had Mercurius. If so, Asmodeus had to change her approach.

"In that case, I'll have to treat her to some delicious tea," Asmodeus said, taking a sip from her cup.

"Oh? You have a taste for tea now? How unexpected."

"Well...I was treated to some fantastic tea recently."

And for some reason, nothing else she'd tried since had tasted anywhere near as good.

Will it taste better if I'm with Foll?

Oddly enough, she imagined that old butler being there too.

"If you want the ideal tea, how about asking Starving Bone Lord?" Phenex suggested. "He's a self-proclaimed gourmand. He should know a lot about that topic."

That Archdemon was of Food King Caesar Kaldia's lineage.

"Astaroth? Does he even have a sense of taste?" Asmodeus asked. "He's made of bones and is a horrible eater."

He put anything into his mouth, regardless of whether it was good or bad. He didn't even have a tongue, so it was questionable if

he was capable of tasting anything.

"I don't know much about that," Phenex said, cocking her head. "He'll eat anything, though. He kept pestering me about wanting to eat firebird meat too."

"Is he a baby...? So, what did you do?"

"He was so insistent that I let him eat my arm. He called it the ultimate bird meat, so I broke his horn."

"*You* did that...?"

Starving Bone Lord Astaroth possessed two twisted horns, but one was broken. And for whatever reason, he didn't try to fix it. Even as a skeleton, those horns were a symbol of his race's pride. It seemed Phenex had told him not to heal it in exchange for her arm, or had broken it in a way that it couldn't be mended. That was when a certain thought came to mind.

"Is it all right for an undead to eat a firebird? Aren't you pretty similar to beings like elves and spirits?"

"Oh, right," Phenex said and nodded as she remembered the event. "He totally burst into flames. He just called it an extra spice to the dish, though."

"He really is a horrible eater..."

That was when a knock came at the door.

"Hey, Phenex. We're leaving. Get ready."

It was Zagan. This was his room, so he didn't really need to knock, but he'd probably heard voices inside. Despite acting so haughty, he was awfully polite.

"Hee hee, I'll comply with any of your commands, my king."

Watching Phenex stand up, Asmodeus addressed Zagan from across the door too.

"Oh, can you wait a bit? I have some business to attend to."

"Make it quick."

By the time the softhearted king replied, Asmodeus had already vanished into thin air.

◇

"Haaah..."

Around that time, Nephy found herself sighing. It wasn't out of melancholy or anything. On the contrary, it was a sigh of exaltation from her excessive happiness.

"Nephy. You're smiling weird," Foll said, a tinge of exasperation in her voice.

"Eep!"

Nephy pressed her hands against her cheeks in a fluster and straightened her back, but returned to smiling limply in seconds.

They were currently in Foll's inn room in Opheos. Farther inside, Dexia and Aristella were busily packing everything for their departure. Nephy had come to inform them that they were leaving, and after taking a seat on the sofa, she'd been like this the whole time.

Her eyes were fixed on her left ring finger. The ring she wore there was fashioned to look like two intertwining laurels and glittered like pale moonlight. It'd been created by Mystic Artisan Naberius using mithril. Even after hundreds of years, it would maintain its mirrorlike sheen. What was more, it worked as an amazing mana amplifier. Simply wearing it was enough to create a powerful barrier capable of repelling almost any sorcery. As both a work of art and a magically charged item, it had extraordinary value.

However, what had Nephy smiling like a fool were the words engraved on the inside of the ring.

"I am with you for all eternity—Zagan."

That was Zagan's vow. The ring he wore also had Nephy's vow engraved on it. It was the work of the Mystic Artisan, so holding it had been all that was necessary to engrave it with her vow. It was a little embarrassing, but those were unmistakably her true feelings, so it made her happy.



A week had already passed since she'd received this ring from Zagan. Nephy had been like this ever since, so her daughter's exasperation was perfectly reasonable. In Nephy's defense, because of her training as an Archdemon and as a high elf, she hadn't really been able to speak with him much lately. Receiving this gift—or rather, this confession—made it feel like all her patience had been rewarded. She was too happy to be able to control her facial muscles.

Having spent a week staring at it, she'd already memorized the ring's finest details. If someone made an elaborate fake, she would be able to tell in an instant. That didn't stop her from staring at it more, though.

"So, have you been fine sharing a room with Zagan?" Foll asked.

"Not at all, but that's the same as usual."

They'd actually been sleeping in the same bed ever since coming to this inn. Despite that, while agonizing over all sorts of things the whole time, morning would come before Zagan had even tried to make a move on her. Nephy had also grown tremendously nervous the moment they were in bed and wasn't able to take the initiative.

Regardless, they'd been able to spend the whole week sleeping while holding hands, so that was progress, in a sense.

Master Zagan is so adorable and wonderful like that.

Nephy didn't have Kuroka's aggressive personality, so this was simply how her relationship with Zagan worked.

"Maybe that way works best for you two," Foll said, smiling.

"I believe so too."

"Please have some if you'd like, Lady Nephy," one of the twins said, holding a cup out to her.

"Thank you, Aristella."

Aristella wore the same clothes and had the same face as her older sister Dexia, but their ribbons were on opposite sides and differed in color. They were at ease indoors, so Aristella wasn't armed, even though she usually had twin swords at her hip. After losing her memories in a brush with death, she'd become far quieter and was a girl of few words. She was similar to Foll in that respect.

"Today's tea tastes terrific," Nephy said with a smile after taking a

sip. “You’ve greatly improved.”

“You honor me with your praise, Lady Nephy.”

Aristella was under Zagan’s patronage, and they had to be more careful with her than anyone else.

Marchosias is targeting her...

It wasn’t clear why, but Nephy had witnessed Glasya-Labolas making an attempt on her life. On a side note, Nephy didn’t feel right addressing Zagan’s enemies with any formality, so she referred to Marchosias only by his name.

“Are you sure you don’t need to be with Zagan today?” Foll asked curiously.

“Oh, about that... I was shocked by Lady Phenex clinging to the terrace and backed away...”

She’d missed her chance to follow him. Well, while Phenex had attempted to seduce Zagan at first, she’d immediately come to an understanding and had stopped trying. Even after that, she’d never gotten in Nephy’s way. Besides, Nephy owed her for forcing her to act somewhat aggressively. That was why she didn’t feel it was quite right to tell Phenex to stay away and had let her be.

Foll sank into thought, then nodded in understanding.

“Birds perch on terraces.”

“Is that really why...?”

Phenex was a firebird, so it was natural for her to have a bird’s tendencies. In that case, it would be illogical to get angry over it.

But she looks like a person...

As Nephy remained in total confusion over the matter, a knock came at the door.

“Who is it?” Foll asked. However, the door suddenly opened without an answer.

Foll and Nephy were wide-eyed at the visitor.

“Lily?”

Peeking through the door with an awkward look on her face was the girl with starry eyes.

“Um...hi,” she said.

“Is it okay for you to come see me?” Foll asked, holding back the urge to hug her.

“Umm, it’s more like it doesn’t seem to matter what I do...”

“Welcome back, Lily!”

“Hey! What?!”

With tremendous vigor, Foll leaped forward and tackled Asmodeus.

“You’re such a hopeless girl...” Asmodeus said, stroking Foll’s head.



You've made a wonderful friend.

Nephy couldn't hold back a smile for an entirely different reason now. She rose to her feet to give them some space when Asmodeus suddenly shot her a serious look.

"I've got a request to make," she said.

As for the contents of said request...

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"Okay, that's everyone."

After checking out of the inn, Zagan stood outside the building. His initial group was composed of Nephy, their daughter Foll, her attendants Dexia and Aristella, Shax and Kuroka, Furfur and Micca, and Furcas, Lilith, Selphy, and Ain—numbering thirteen in total.

Furthermore, after having entered his service one week ago, Phenex was present too, along with Behemoth and Levia, who'd sent Phenex to make contact with Zagan. Lastly, for some reason, was Asmodeus, who had Foll stuck to her like glue. All of them increased the count to seventeen.

"Your family has grown awfully large," Chastille commented.

She was here with her fellow Archangel, Hartonen, to see them off.

"Unfortunately, we could only secure two carriages," Hartonen added, grimacing. "You won't all fit inside it."

This was likely his face when he was apologizing. In contrast to his behavior and outward appearance, he was a true gentleman—enough so to extend his courtesy to sorcerers.

Do all Archangels end up like this with age?

Zagan's butler had a similar temperament. Spending some proper time with Raphael was all it had taken to realize his intent. With that experience under his belt, Zagan was able to understand Hartonen as well.

The carriages they'd prepared were only large enough to fit six people. Thirteen could probably cram themselves inside, but Zagan's group had grown while staying in Opheos. Even with an Archangel's authority, it was impossible to obtain more carriages. And yet, Zagan

shook his head like this was no big deal at all.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "Sorcerers can just rely on sorcery."

"Hmm. And by that, you mean?" Hartonen asked curiously.

"Teleportation. It's troublesome to use and beyond my means, but we happen to have a specialist in the field in our group."

"Hang on a sec," a voice from the shadow at Chastille's feet said. "By specialist, you don't mean me, do you?"

Barbatos popped out of the shadow. As always, his hair was unkempt and he had shadows around his eyes. Zagan didn't like relying on this man—either as a sorcerer or as a human being—but he was among the best of the best when it came to spatial manipulation. Despite this, Zagans shook his head.

"Not at all."

"Hmph. I ain't no handyman or deliveryman or nothin', but you always come cryin' when... Huh?"

Barbatos was in the middle of constructing a magic circle and looked ready to say, "Man, you're totally useless without me," but was left wide-eyed in shock. Figuring he could just leave this tiresome idiot to Chastille, Zagan plopped his hand on the shoulder of the youngest boy in the area.

"Give it a try, Furcas."

"What?! M-Me?!"

Furcas had lost all his memories and was beyond any hope of recovery as a sorcerer, but he was still the person who'd reached the seat of an Archdemon by standing at the peak of all specialists in spatial manipulation.

"I know you've been zealously studying sorcery these last four months," Zagan said, ignoring Barbatos's frozen and despondent expression. "Let's see your power."

This boy had returned alive from a place that had shattered an Archdemon's mind, yet he was still trying to march forward. Thus, Zagan wanted to verify how much of the power that had made him an Archdemon had returned.

If he regains his memories, he'll likely leave us.

Zagan needed to be constantly aware of how to keep Furcas on a

leash. Though, a part of him also wanted to show appreciation for the boy's efforts.

"No pressure," Zagan said with a relaxed smile. "Even if you fail, we still have the carriages."

Only thirteen people could ride in the carriages, but Asmodeus and Phenex were capable of reaching their destination on their own. Unfortunately for Behemoth and Levia, Zagan would have to ask those he hadn't planned to bring along to stay back. While the carriages would take longer, the only person who would be troubled by their tardiness was Marchosias.

Furcas still hesitated, seeing this as a rather important task.

"Just give it a try," Lilith told him. "I know how hard you've been training. I believe in you, so do your best."

"Th-Thanks, Lilith! I'll try!" the boy replied, his face changing to that of a determined man. "Where do you wanna go, bro?"

Zagan pointed straight south and said, "There is apparently a wasteland covered in forgotten swords far that way that overlooks the sea. That's our destination—Kaslytilio."

"Okay!"

Furcas had an air of conviction now, having somehow discerned a location from such a scant description. He created a square with his thumbs and index fingers, a projection of another place taking shape within it.

No, not a projection. That's a hole in space.

It was too small for anyone to pass through, but Furcas had still managed to create a door with ease. On its own, it was already astounding sorcery. Beyond the hole was a lonely expanse of stones and dead trees. No, those weren't trees. They were swords—tattered grave markers dirtied by sand and rust. Zagan could tell that it was their destination.

He can really locate the coordinates with such accuracy with little more than a vague direction?!

This was enough to shock even Barbatos. If anything, as a specialist in the field, he understood how terrifying this display of power was more than anyone else present.

Furcas continued shifting his hands about while scrunching his

face, and before long, five sorcerers were displayed through the hole.

"Bro!" he exclaimed. "Is this the right spot?"

"Y-Yeah... Splendidly done. Can you open a door?"

"Of course!" the boy replied with a huge grin.

"How'd you determine the coordinates?" Barbatos asked, disbelief clear in his expression.

The hard part about spatial manipulation was perceiving the correct coordinates. The slightest mistake could lead to immediate death, after all. The average sorcerer handled this by fixing the coordinates at both ends using magic circles, but that required going to the destination and preparing one ahead of time.

That was why specialists completely devoted themselves to defining said coordinates. Barbatos's use of shadows was one such technique. In his case, he used them as a medium combined with the detection of other people's mana to determine the correct areas. That gave a glimpse of how terrifying it was for Barbatos and Furcas to create a path to a place they'd never visited with such ease.

It wasn't clear whether Furcas truly understood the question. He answered while making exaggerated motions with his arms.

"I just kinda looked for the place with a whiz, gathered power all brr like, then put it together with a pop!"

Barbatos fell to his knees, having no idea what that meant.

"You kiddin' me...? Can you really identify coordinates purely on instinct?"

"Wh-What's wrong, Barbatos?" Chastille asked. "Do you want some water?"

"Why? I'm the only one being left behind too. Why?"

It seemed this was a major blow to his pride and confidence. He kept mumbling to himself, refusing to accept reality as Chastille comforted him by rubbing his back.

So this is true talent...

Zagan hated the word genius because it was meant to identify people who possessed abilities far beyond the norm without ever having to put in any effort. That was ridiculous. The vast majority of such people who'd been labeled geniuses had reached that stage

after an endless accumulation of effort and dedication, so Zagan couldn't tolerate them being summed up in such a shallow word.

Above all else, that was how a sore loser spoke. "He's a genius. He's different from me. That's why it's only natural for him to be better." The weak used those words to console themselves. Still, there was something here Zagan could only describe as talent—a huge stride in progress driven by imagination and instinct.

Sorcery was built on an accumulation of logic and defined theories, but there were people who ignored that process entirely and came up with an answer out of thin air. Strictly speaking, the process was followed somewhere in their minds, but regardless, they found the answer to questions others would take years to discover as if it were as simple as one plus one being two.

That was exactly what Furcas had done here. The coordinates for teleportation required massive formulas. These constantly flowing equations were what had Barbatos at a complete loss for words. That amount of information would overload a normal brain in an instant.

And yet, Furcas could do it. If he were forced to explain, it could be summed up as an extremely abnormal optimization. In a sense, he'd further developed the established formulas. He wasn't sifting through all of the gathered information. Instead, he was somehow processing it as a large lump. That was what Furcas meant by "whiz, brr, and pop."

I'm guessing a big part of it is probably his original mental processing capacity too.

There was no explaining something he couldn't remember, which was what made Furcas seem even more talented. In that sense, he was very similar to Selphy. She always behaved like there wasn't a single thought in her mind, but she often identified the true nature of things entirely by intuition.

Maybe the reason she sees him as such a rival isn't only because of Lilith, but partly due to an aversion to someone so similar to her.

Both of them wielded miraculous powers. Maybe they were at odds with each other precisely because of that. However, a certain thought came to mind.

Their talent comes with an entirely different kind of hardship.

Such people were typically incapable of explaining things logically to others. Sorcery was knowledge, after all, so a spell was only completed after being passed on to someone else. Those with talent were incapable of doing that. There were even times when a grimoire meant to pass on their knowledge remained undeciphered after decades of attempts by multiple sorcerers.

That was why, despite Furcas's tremendous abilities, he'd never had a disciple. That was an absolute flaw as a sorcerer. Still, the thought of this boy retrieving his five hundred years of memories and knowledge was a terrifying possibility.

"I did it, Lilith!" Furcas exclaimed, throwing a peace sign toward her. "It's all thanks to you."

"D-Don't be silly! I didn't do anything."

"That's not true. I managed 'cause you believed in me. I definitely couldn't have done it alone."

Selphy pouted for just a moment, but she acknowledged Furcas's efforts too. She sighed as if to say she would allow it just this once. At any rate, Zagan's bad friend had yet to recover as the young boy hopped around in joy.

He's actually the only sorcerer out there who can kill me right now, though...

Furcas was capable of something similar in the sense that he specialized in teleportation, but Barbatos used shadows as a medium, which made it the most efficient technique for assassination.

Thinking back on it, the first time Zagan had witnessed Barbatos's teleportation, he'd trembled to the point where he hadn't been able to sleep at night. That was exactly why Zagan had so desperately built countermeasures until he'd finally gotten on equal footing with him.

But look at him now...

Zagan sighed and kicked his bad friend in the back.

"Gwah?!"

"Barbatos?!"

He bounced off the ground like a ball before standing up in rage.

"The hell's that for?!"

"How long do you plan on moping around?" Zagan reprimanded him. "Aren't you the man who's going to defeat me?"

"Tch..."

Barbatos understood exactly what he meant.

There's no way Marchosias's meeting is going to end after a simple chat.

Zagan's group was sure to fall into some predicament. And when that happened, Barbatos was the only person from the outside who would be able to help. This was largely why Kimaris and the others who could be considered Zagan's closest confidants had remained in Kianoides. Gremory, in particular, was the type to easily create miracles that could have heroes turning pale in the face—depending on certain conditions. There was no greater lifeline.

All the Archdemons had abandoned their territories to attend this meeting. That opening was obviously going to be exploited. In the worst case, Barbatos had to be in proper shape to get Zagan back in an instant.

Marchosias has shown no signs of starting anything there...yet.

Part of this was because Zagan was still close enough to immediately get back on his own. Still, there had been no suspicious movements around Kianoides. Well, even without any Archdemons present, there were still three former Archdemon candidates, Nephteros, and two Sacred Swords ready to defend it. In terms of defensive capabilities, the town likely surpassed the Holy City.

"You're really *that* Furcas, huh?" Barbatos said, finally free from his stupor.

"Hm? Yeah!" the boy replied energetically, still looking a little lost.

"Hah, I'll let you have it this time," Barbatos said, flicking his head. "Don't get full of yourself."

"I don't really understand why you're doing that, but I'm happy to hear praise from an amazing guy like you!"

Barbatos was completely taken aback.

"You remember me?"

Zagan raised a brow.

Did he know him before Furcas lost his memories?

Furcas had been the one to recommend Barbatos for the seat of an Archdemon one year ago. It made sense for them to be acquainted. Regardless, Zagan was astonished by how well-connected Barbatos was.

"Isn't it obvious?" Furcas asked with a huge grin, unable to read the room. "You're the only guy I've ever met who's as amazing as Zagan! You carried that lady there like a princess as if it was totally normal! That's Zagan's best friend for you!"

"Awagopwopahgwpoeiuhg?!"

The two idiots in question were now screaming incoherently.

What the hell were they doing in front of a brat...?

Zagan had no idea what kind of situation it had been. Either way, Furcas had apparently caught the two of them flirting.

"You're such a man! I've gotta lear—"

"You don't need to learn from him!" Lilith shouted, her face bright red as she covered Furcas's mouth. Watching them, Zagan wondered whether his worries were completely unnecessary.

Furcas has Lilith.

Even if he regained his memories, he would never betray her. And on the off chance that he did, Lilith would slap him and wake him up. At the same time, Zagan understood this was also the reason he was more wary of Furcas than he needed to be. Lilith was like a little sister that Zagan didn't remember. It wouldn't be fun to see her hurt and crying.

Remembering nothing really does make me feel like I owe her.

Lilith wasn't actually his sister, but she'd been given the name Lilithiera, so Zagan couldn't help but care for her.

"Now then, we have our means of transportation," Zagan said, clearing his throat and shaking off such thoughts. "We're off to meet the most malicious sorcerers in the world. Are the lot of you ready?"

Zagan's group had been forced into a desperate fight to the death against Shere Khan, who'd long been past the point of no recovery as a sorcerer. It would be naive to believe that the Archdemons they were going to meet now would be in any way inferior. They couldn't overlook the slightest gesture or a single word. That was what they were getting themselves into.

Zagan glanced around at those gathered here. Some were stiff with tension, while others looked like they were just going on a stroll. Some were scheming, while others were determined to protect someone else. Some were forced to watch everyone else leave. Despite all these differences, they were all resolved for what was to come. They all understood that what awaited them would determine not only their future, but that of the continent—or even the world itself.

The enemy was the man known as the Eldest, the Archdemon who'd dominated the world for a thousand years. There was no way this would end peacefully. Not everyone was liable to return home safely.

No, quit thinking that way. Like hell I'll lose anyone here. I'll bring them all back with me.

In Zagan's mind, that was how a king was meant to be.

After confirming that they'd all nodded in return, Zagan flung back his robe.

"Then let us depart."

Furcas opened the hole in space, letting a dry wind blow in from the wastelands. Zagan stepped through first, followed by Nephy, Foll, Shax, and all their companions.

As expected, a young Marchosias was waiting for them with his arms folded. The man the whole world feared pushed up his round glasses.

"Huh? Why are there so many of you?"

Those were the first words that left the greatest Archdemon's mouth, spoken in an utterly exhausted voice.

Chapter II: Probing Fellow Archdemons Is Both Tiresome and Unproductive

"It seems Lady Lillqvist is on her way back."

Nephteros let out a sigh of relief at Richard's report. The dark elf had silver hair, golden eyes, and dark skin, her face exactly the same as Archdemon Nephelia's. She used to wear a robe like any other sorcerer, but was now in the church's formal uniform. She was completely accustomed to wearing it in Chastille's stead at this point.

A part of her questioned the logic behind the high elf Nephy being an Archdemon, while she as a dark elf was Lady Oberon's successor as the church's exclusive technician. Still, Nephteros was here today because of her mother's and sister's love, so she didn't care much.

"I see," Nephteros muttered, smiling to herself without thinking about it. "It took quite some time."

"I believe Lady Lillqvist needs time to let loose and relax once in a while," Richard replied with a gentle smile.

He was clad in Anointed Armor. The thirteen Archdemons were currently gathering for a meeting. With all of its major sorcerers absent, there were far fewer people to defend Kianoides, so there was no telling what could happen. As an Archangel, Richard remained vigilant. Incidentally, now that he was an Archangel, he was no longer Chastille's subordinate. That was why he now referred to her as Lady Lillqvist.

"She's returning by ship," Richard said, continuing his report. "She should arrive tomorrow afternoon."

"She has work waiting for her when she arrives," Nephteros said. "Let her take her time."

That was when the nun Rachel put down some tea on the desk. This girl, who often appeared out of nowhere with a bleeding nose, was actually Richard's little sister.

"You've also worked enough for today, Lady Nephteros," she said.

"Jeez... It's still early."

Only Nephteros and the Flammarak siblings were in the room. Thinking that was going to end today, Nephteros felt a little sad.

Chastille's expedition had taken about half a month. She'd sworn to take revenge on Zagan in Opheos, but Zagan hadn't moved quickly at all, forcing her to wait there for quite a while. This had felt like a truly long time for Nephteros, who'd taken over her office work in Kianoides.

She's been doing such important work all this time...

One wrong choice could adversely affect the citizens' lives, so she couldn't sign any of these papers callously. It had worn out Netpheros's nerves every single day.

"But the hard work is only just beginning," she muttered.

"True," Richard agreed.

The meeting between thirteen Archdemons was set to start...and it was very unlikely to end only with words. There had to be villainous schemes in motion. It was possible some wouldn't make it back home. However, that wasn't the only thing weighing on Nephteros's mind.

"I'll need to muster my courage too..." she said.

"Regarding *that* matter?" Richard asked, smiling as he pulled her into an embrace. "You'll be fine. I'll be right there by your side too. I'm sure it'll work out."

"That would be embarrassing on its own..." Nephteros mumbled, covering her flushed face. "To think it would take such bravery to call Nephelia 'sis...'"

If Richard was with her when she first did it, that would mean he would witness it all as well. Either way, it would be utterly embarrassing.

Richard and Rachel narrowed their eyes as if watching the most charming thing in the world. Nephteros wanted to complain about them being so similar in the strangest ways. She cradled her head,

then voiced what was truly bothering her.

"Will Nephelia even be pleased if I call her that...?"

Nephy had always treated her well, so Nephteros was very grateful. That was exactly why she wanted to convey that in words somehow. This was the reason she'd settled on calling her "sis." However, considering Nephteros's circumstances, wouldn't being referred to like that trouble her?

Nephteros was growing more and more anxious about the matter by the second. Watching this, Richard and Rachel exchanged troubled looks. The first to make a decision and raise their voice was Rachel.

"Then how about this, Lady Nephteros? I'll call you big sis."

Nephteros and Richard were both shocked by the sudden suggestion.

"Wh-What do you mean...?" Nephteros asked.

"You're worried because you don't know how your sister will react to being called that, right? Then how about you decide how it feels by having me refer to you the same way?"

Nephteros had never even thought of that. She nodded in understanding but still had a question.

"A-Are you really okay with that? Calling me your big sister is, um..."

Rachel was Richard's little sister, and Richard and Nephteros were in love. Referring to Nephteros that way was akin to calling her a sister-in-law.

"My faith demands that I quietly watch over the miracles our lord bestows upon us," Rachel said, a bead of sweat running down her brow as she put a hand to her chest with a smile. "It isn't my duty to touch upon said miracles."

She paused there before her eyes shot wide open.

"However, for your sake, I will gladly spend my life here and now. I don't know whether my heart will hold out, but bring it on!"

Hearing all that didn't help Nephteros's anxiety in the least, but now that she thought of it, Zagan and Nephy often seemed to groan due to chest pain. Maybe that was actually normal and Nephteros simply didn't know about it.

“Um...Nephteros? My sister has a...special...disposition. Please don’t take what she says at face value.”

It felt as if Richard had read her mind. Regardless, Rachel’s suggestion made a little sense.

There’s no telling how someone will react until you actually try it.

“Th-Then please go ahead, Rachel.”

“Yes!”

Rachel closed her eyes, took a deep breath, then flashed her the most innocent smile possible.

“Thanks for everything you always do for me, big sis!”

“U-Ugh...”

Nephteros toppled back in her chair, the destructive force behind those words proving to be far greater than she’d imagined. Anticipating this, Richard kept her from falling over.

Rachel. You’ve taught me everything I need to say.

What she needed to convey to Nephy was her gratitude. After all, Nephy had put her life on the line to save her.

“I-I get it now,” Nephteros said, putting a hand to her heart. “This might please Nephelia. Thank you, Rachel... Rachel?”

The nun had completely stopped moving, her hands still held together in prayer. She honestly looked like a hallowed martyr but for the blood dribbling down from her nose. Richard waved his hand in front of her face, then shook his head.

“She’s dead.”

“Racheeeeeel!”

Even though she screamed, Nephteros wasn’t actually surprised because this was a daily common occurrence as of late. And so, after a short break, Nephteros returned to work. It took Rachel several hours to return to life. It had been quite the shock for this girl who’d called Nephteros her sister-in-law too.

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“Sorry. It seems there aren’t enough seats.”

Right in the center of the wasteland, thirteen chairs were prepared around a large circular table. They were the seats for the

Archdemons, each with a name carved into the back.

A dark sea stretched to the south. Unlike in Liucaon, the area had the smell of a salty ocean. There were also large quantities of rotten wooden planks on the shore, perhaps from shipwrecks farther out at sea.

As exposed to the elements as the place was, it was far too crude for a gathering of Archdemons. However, the pallid flame at the center of the table didn't even sway from the strong wind blowing through the wasteland. The fire was created using sorcery and was responsible for making the environment suitable for visitors.

"It looks like the meeting room under Raziel," Micca muttered.

The treasury wasn't the only thing underneath Raziel's grand cathedral. It apparently also housed a room exclusively for the use of Archangels.

"Well, that's only natural," Zagan commented. "The same man created both."

Micca froze for a moment, then jumped in place and yelped, "What?!"

As that went on, each of the Archdemons took their seats, while their companions stood behind the chairs. Behemoth and Levia took their place behind Phenex. Zagan had arranged it that way, seeing how they were apparently good friends. Furcas had three people waiting behind him, making him stand out quite a bit.

I don't see that Bato fellow anywhere...

The other Archdemons hadn't brought any attendants. According to Alshiera, Bato was quite talented. Had Marchosias died a thousand years ago, he would've taken Marchosias's name. If he wasn't present now, he had to be taking part in some other scheme, but there'd been no sightings of Bato in Kianoides either.

He might have already been used and disposed of, but that seemed unlikely because Marchosias had a clear lack of pawns right now. It was unlikely for him to throw away a valuable subordinate so easily. Maybe he'd been sent to keep an eye on Kianoides's surroundings.

The Marchosias of the past was exactly the type of Archdemon to do that, but whatever the case, Zagan had no way of tracking Bato.

There was no choice but to leave the man at large. More importantly, there was something else here that was far more baffling.

Did Marchosias not know we were coming in such numbers?

At the very least, Eligor should've known, which meant she hadn't reported it to him. Perhaps something had happened between them that displeased Eligor. Regardless, the fact that she hadn't disclosed this information gave the impression that Marchosias didn't have a proper grasp on human nature.

Well, he was a man who'd bound the entire world through fear, so that only made sense. His was an easy form of rule with little room for failure. The only real problem was having the power to actualize it, but Marchosias possessed such power. Looking at things from that angle, he was no longer ruling through fear at present.

Did he not have time to instill fear since reviving? Or is there another reason...?

It was best to pay attention to this radical change. Zagan kept a careful eye on Marchosias as he took his seat.

"Oh, you're next to me? It is good to see you again, my dear friend."

Zagan's chair was next to Glasya-Labolas, of all people. Furfur was seated on Zagan's other side, her robotic face showing clear hatred for the Lord of Murder. Micca was already trembling and on the verge of tears. Even so, the boy stood his ground. Zagan admired that.

At any rate, they hadn't come here to kill each other—not yet, at least.

"So you really are alive, Glasya-Labolas," Zagan replied, taking a diplomatic approach. "Wait, hang on, how exactly am I your friend?"

"You too pay respect to life and death," Glasya-Labolas answered. "As such, is it not only appropriate for us to be friends, no?"

"I see. Well, the feeling isn't mutual."

"Oh, how cold," the old gentleman said, laughing as he removed his hat.

Zagan took a look around the table. Going clockwise from his seat were Glasya-Labolas, Naberius, Furcas, Asmodeus, Nephy, Shax,

Eligor, a skeleton who had to be Astaroth, Phenex, Marchosias, Foll, and Furfur. There had to be some meaning to this seating arrangement. After thinking it over, Zagan saw that it had to do with the order of the Sigils of the Archdemons. He recalled the list Orias had once taught him.

Starting with Zagan, the seating arrangement went heart, intestines, left hand, left leg, right leg, right hand, lungs, ears, nose, spine, brain, eyes, and mouth. Marchosias was the Archdemon's brain, and with him at the center, everything was lined up to the left and right based on distance from the brain. That was why the eyes and spine, which were directly connected to the brain, were seated right next to him. Likewise, the left and right legs—Furcas and Asmodeus—were the farthest. In other words, this round table formed a body.

I got separated from Nephy...

She was now a sorcerer who was in no way inferior to even the Archdemons, but there was no telling what an Archdemon was capable of beyond just simple sorcery. Still, Shax and Kuroka were right next to her, while Asmodeus was seated on her other side. Asmodeus was technically in Marchosias's camp, but she was cooperating with Zagan. With them right next to Nephy, Zagan would be able to make it if something happened.

Zagan also had Furfur and Foll to his right, so if anything happened on that side, he likely had the advantage. Nephy was, of course, his top priority, but if he ignored those two to help her, she would surely get angry at him.

I don't like the fact that Foll is next to Marchosias.

She had Dexia and Aristella behind her and Marchosias was after the twins. It wasn't good to have them so easily within his reach. That said, Foll already possessed the power of a full-fledged Archdemon. Even if something happened, she could at least protect her subordinates. Besides, Marchosias's side hadn't shown any signs of making a move yet.

Either it's not that important or he's waiting for the perfect opportunity to capture them.

Or maybe it was both. Marchosias had the power of precognition

through Eligor, so she had to know the perfect time to attack. That was exactly why Zagan had judged it would be safer to bring them with him rather than leaving them in Kianoides, where his defenses were weaker now.

If anything, his biggest concern was Furcas's position. He had no allies next to him, while two civilians meant to be protected—Lilith and Selphy—were standing behind him. It would take Ain everything he had just to guard them. Furcas was the most isolated, so special attention had to be paid to him.

"Allow me to put up a barrier first," Marchosias said. "I'm surely not the only one who'd like to avoid having anyone butt in. The barrier will isolate us and prevent anyone from entering or leaving."

This was a meeting between Archdemons. Considering how it involved the secrets of the world itself, there were sure to be those who would try to take advantage of the situation. It was only natural to forbid anyone from entering or leaving, so none present objected.

With the barrier going up, the wind came to a stop. Soon after, the salty scent of the ocean vanished. Things became as quiet as being indoors, making it easy to hear others talk. Marchosias's barrier seemed to almost quarantine this section of the wasteland within subspace. The scenery hadn't changed, but it was clear they were somewhere else now. Simply destroying the barrier wouldn't make escaping possible, so it prevented any conflict on the inside too. It was Zagan's first time seeing this kind of barrier.

Pretty impressive.

And just as Marchosias finished creating the barrier, something suddenly happened. The Sigils of the Archdemon rumbled greatly.

"Hm?!"

All the Archdemons were plainly affected by it. The ones who'd served for a long time, like Glasya-Labolas, had probably experienced this before. They reacted as if it was a minor annoyance.

"Ugh..." Asmodeus groaned, shaking her right hand with disgust. "As creepy as always. This is why I hate Archdemon meetings."

That was when Zagan finally remembered that this was resonance. A similar phenomenon had occurred in Raziel when the

twelve Sacred Swords had gathered in one place. That had also been a lot more solemn, though. This was more like something unidentifiable ominous pulsating feeling.

"This is resonance between the Sigils of the Archdemon," Glasya-Labolas explained with a friendly smile. "It happens when all thirteen Sigils gather in one place. The last time it happened was during your inauguration."

"Hmm. So these truly were originally one," Zagan said.

"I believe so too," Glasya-Labolas agreed.

It was said that the Demon Lord or the first Archdemon or the like was sealed within the Sigils. Judging by this pulsation, it could even still be alive.

And he's gathered such a thing at this precise time. Something is definitely going to happen.

As Zagan had expected, this gathering wasn't going to end peacefully.

◇

"Here it is."

While the thirteen Archdemons gathered in Kaslytilio, Alshiera was in a faraway desert. The wind was strong, sweeping up her blonde hair and wrapping it around her face. She pressed it down in irritation with one hand while the other held her creepy stuffed doll. She wore a black mourning dress that was at complete odds with her outward appearance as a thirteen-year-old girl.

The desert was near the center of the continent, about half a day's ride by carriage to the east of Raziel. This was where Zagan and Nephy had encountered Oberon on their (fake) honeymoon. A ruined temple was buried in the sand. The fleeting glimpses through the blowing wind looked like walls or pillars. Although worn out, delicate symbols—Celestian—were carved on its surface. Judging by the melted cross-sections, it was clear it hadn't collapsed due to natural causes.

The boy with scarlet hair and eyes next to Alshiera sat down, an exhausted expression on his face.

“Man...that was rough to find,” he grumbled.

“You have my praise,” Alshiera told him. “We wouldn’t have found it if not for you.”

Now that demons were appearing in greater numbers and Marchosias had resurrected, Alshiera could no longer stand idly by as a spectator. Relying on the bats that were a part of her very being and her old friend Asura, they’d quietly searched this area without anyone noticing.

“Heh heh, then gimme a reward!” Asura exclaimed with a huge grin, his displeasure vanishing as if it had never even existed in the first place.

It was the same casual remark as ever. In response, Alshiera wordlessly lifted his chin with a finger.

“Hwuh?!”

She then planted a kiss on his cheek. Asura’s face suddenly flushed as he reeled back.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What’re you doin’?!”

“Why are you even asking? You’re the one who wanted a reward.”

“Yeah... Well...I did...but my heart wasn’t ready...”

Ignoring Asura’s maiden-like mumbling, Alshiera held up her stuffed doll. The stone pillars and the remnants of the temple emitted a faint light and the earth began trembling.

“H-Hey? What’s goin’ on? Is the temple floatin’...?”

Asura was clearly bewildered. The buried temple was slowly rising to the surface. There wasn’t enough power left for it to float in the air, but it was more than enough to reveal everything. It wasn’t a temple, but an entire town.

Towers rose in a line at fixed intervals. Traces of enormous pillars created the outlines of ruined buildings, each with countless planks that seemed to form shelves. Due to the many years of being buried in sand, they were in far greater shape than the parts that had been exposed to the elements. Alshiera seemed to be standing in the center of the town where a small hill protruded upward.

“This is the library city Bibliotheque. Not that there’s anything left.”

There wasn’t a single book in sight. All of them had likely been

burned. The buildings that had retained their shape showed signs of burn marks. Any books would've turned to ash before all else.

"Marchosias thoroughly destroyed all traces of seraphs," Alshiera explained. "There's no way he would've left a single book intact."

"Then what're we lookin' for here?" Asura asked, cocking his head.

Alshiera held up her stuffed doll once more.

"Bibliotheque, heed my words. Your master has returned. Reveal your true form."

At her command, the floor in front of her opened, revealing a staircase that stretched far down into the darkness.

"The books weren't important," Alshiera said. "This is a device where the seraphs stored their ancient records. It was kept a secret even from the high seraphs, so it should have a record of what happened a thousand years ago."

Not even Camael and the others who'd become the foundation for the Sacred Swords had been told about it. It was a secret among secrets. The device itself seemed to have come to a halt with the destruction of the city above, but it should've still maintained a record of the world up to that point.

"A thing like that exists...?" Asura said, gulping. "Why didn't you look for it earlier, then?"

"Because I couldn't do it alone. Besides, if I carelessly prodded around for it, Marchosias would've erased everything. That's why I never bothered."

Alshiera hadn't been informed of its exact location either. In other words, this was a legacy of the seraphs that not even Marchosias knew existed, a dangerous location that he would've destroyed before all else. However, right now—with the thirteen Archdemon gathered in one place—Alshiera was free to look for it openly.

"I mean, that's amazin' and all, but why do you know about it?" Asura asked, grimacing. "Even Marc knew nothin', yeah?"

Alshiera smiled, putting a finger to her lips.

"It's a secret hideout for me and a dear friend."

Yes, a dear friend—the one who made me this doll...

The doll she always carried around was made of that girl's hair,

which was why this place reacted to her.

"A dear friend, huh...?"

Asura narrowed his eyes as if that was an utterly fishy statement, but he didn't ask who it was.

I like that trusting part of you.

Though, she would have it a little easier if he wasn't so noisy all the time.

"Okay, let's get going," Alshiera said, taking a step down the stairs.

"Right. It's time to show me what exactly went on while I was dead!"

With that, the two delved deep underground.

◇

"I'll start by introducing myself. Some may think I'm a fake, but I am indeed Marchosias."

Back in Kaslytilio, with all the outside noise gone, Marchosias rested his elbows on his chair and began the meeting. The first to react to his overbearing pressure was Phenex, who sat to his right.

"Huh? You're obviously a fake. You have none of your past dignity. You're like a totally different person."

Marchosias's glasses dipped at her rather insensitive words, but he maintained his arrogance and crossed his legs.

"You have nothing to stand on when it comes to dignity. What's with your appearance? You're supposed to be the oldest one here."

Phenex looked no more than fourteen or fifteen years old at the moment. Her crimson dress was ill-matched with her gauntlets too. Frankly, she looked nothing like an Archdemon.

"Based purely on age, I'm no more than a chick who was born a week ago," she said, spreading her arms. "It's far more of a burden to return to my previous age than letting myself grow naturally. This is the limit of what I can force."

Thinking back on it, Foll had only managed to advance her age to about fifteen by using the Sigil of the Archdemon. Maybe that was the limit Phenex was talking about here. Taking it further, when Foll

had advanced to around twenty, things had turned into a disaster where she and Zagan had been cursed to switch ages, which had also happened to be when Zagan had first met Lilith.

"Hmm..." Phenex muttered with a pensive look. "The fact that you have to explain things means you haven't regained anything in that young form of yours."

"I simply had no more need to be that old anymore," Marchosias replied. "After living a thousand years, I've realized there are great pains that come with manipulating age. In the end, it's a lot smoother to just stall the aging process entirely."

"To only figure that out at your age... How pitiful," Asmodeus remarked.

"You're such a hateful person..." Marchosias grumbled.

Asmodeus wasn't the type to manipulate her age. Instead, she halted it.

If I'm to live a long life, I'll have to stall my age soon too.

His bride and daughter were of long-lived races. As a simple human, Zagan had to put in the most effort to share time with them.

This topic of age manipulation seemed to pique Foll's interest. That was because she'd once failed to advance her own age. Zagan thought back on what Marchosias had looked like during their fight.

He's supposed to be a thousand-year-old man.

That had apparently been the limit to manipulating his own age. It was possible his old mind wasn't able to keep up with some parts like his current youthful state. The nephilim he'd been revived as had been an old man, but regardless of his outward appearance, the body itself was young. That was why maintaining his current youth wasn't a burden. However, another possibility came to mind.

The guy here is a nephilim. The soul might be from before he obtained any of his dignity.

Shere Khan had stuffed the bodies with all the memories of the originals from birth to death, but there were a few rare confirmed examples of nephilim who had no idea who they were. That was how things ended up when one had such vivid memories of the past. Humans were the type to forget things as they aged. If they couldn't forget the painful memories of the past, it would eventually break

their minds.

Phenex was a good example. Having continuous memories of a never-ending cycle of life and death, she'd been unable to bear it and had ended up seeking a permanent end. In other words, the reason Zagan saw this Marchosias more as Marc was because his mental state matched that period. However, a part of it had to also be an intentional attempt to throw off Zagan's emotions.

"Right. We have many new faces here," Marchosias said, turning to Foll. "How about you all start with introductions."

"Um...do I have to?" Foll asked, plainly put off by his suggestion.

She didn't trust Marchosias. If anything, he was an enemy who was liable to hurt Asmodeus and the twins, so she didn't want to hand him any information. Seeing the little girl glare at him so hatefully, Marchosias looked somewhat hurt. That said, they weren't going to get anywhere like this, so Zagan intervened.

"Just give your name and second name."

Foll nodded reluctantly.

"Fine... I'm Apparition Valefor. I like mandrake pudding."

"Mmm, I get that," Naberius said. "It's delicious."

"I also like raw beholder slices."

Naberius's face clearly twitched beneath his mask.

Come to think of it, Foll did *just have her birthday.*

It'd taken place during their time off in Opheos. Zagan had rented out the entire cathedral to hold a party, but hadn't been able to prepare much in terms of gifts. Perhaps it was best to get her another present. Sensing Zagan's gaze, Naberius refused to meet his eyes.

Furfur was next in line. Dressed in her maid outfit, she sat perfectly straight with an air of dignity, bringing no shame to her title as an Archdemon.

"I am called Thunder God Furfur. I like...my master and Micca?"

Micca choked right behind her at the sudden confession.

Hmm, not bad.

Nobody had expected her to play up her love life in front of this crowd. She truly was an Archdemon Zagan had acknowledged.

Next was Zagan's turn. He crossed his legs and announced

himself with all the majesty of a king.

"Sorcerer Slayer Zagan. I love my bride Nephy and my daughter Foll."

"Can you not get all competitive about this?" Marchosias grumbled, but Zagan ignored him.

Incidentally, Nephy covered her face, turning bright red right to the tips of her ears, while Foll puffed out her chest in satisfaction.

Next up was the old gentleman.

"I am Lord of Murder Glasya-Labolas. My hobby is killing."

"Go change your second name," Phenex told him. "You haven't even managed to kill me."

"Oh? I do believe I did as you asked," he responded, cocking his head. "It was my first time assisting a suicide, but also my first time murdering an Archdemon. It had my heart dancing."

"I resurrected. That doesn't count."

"By resurrected, you mean you died properly, yes? If you so desire, I will kill you as many times as you like."

"Haaaaaah... Me resurrecting means you didn't kill me at all! I'm not getting through to you, am I?! This is why I hate you!"

"Oh, how cold. By all rights, you should only have been able to experience death once, but you get to enjoy it over and over. I'm truly envious."

They had a complete difference in values. Phenex wanted to be freed from the endless cycle of death and rebirth, whereas Glasya-Labolas had an obsession with physical death. He had no interest in the soul or anything that happened afterward.

As the two finished their noisy chatter, the giant with one visible eye behind a mask clenched his muscles.

"Mystic Artisan and Lord of Magic Eyes Naberius. My hobby is making myself beautiful."

"You've got amazing muscles!" Furcas exclaimed. "I wanna be a man like you!"

"I'm a *lady*," Naberius said with murderous intent. "Do you want to be one too?"

Furcas jolted, then introduced himself next.

"Umm, I'm Furcas. I'm called, uh...Valley Cat? Also, I love Lilith!"

"You don't need to compete!" the girl in question protested as quietly as possible. She didn't have the courage to join the conversation at the table.

"So your memories really haven't returned..." Asmodeus said, a mixed expression on her face.

"Oh, but yours have, huh?" Furcas replied. "That's great!"

"You're really throwing me off..."

Did Furcas know Asmodeus before he lost his memories?

Asmodeus's reaction to him was clearly different. There was almost even an air of affection to it that Zagan hadn't thought she could show to anyone aside from Foll.

"Collector Asmodeus," she moved on, sweeping back her silver hair and smiling. "My hobby is collecting works of art...and enjoying tea, I suppose?"

"The mouth on you..."

"How about we have some together, Eligor?" Asmodeus asked, smiling as if she were ready to rip out Eligor's eyes at a moment's notice.

"I'll pass," Eligor responded with a depressed sigh.

Next was Nephy, who took a huge breath to prepare herself.

"I'm Fairy Queen Nephelia. I love, um...Master Zagan!"

"Hnnngh!"

Zagan grabbed at his heart and fell prostrate on the table.

No matter how many times I hear it, those words have such destructive power!

Nephy had clenched her hands to hype herself up and put everything into that confession. How could Zagan not be delighted by it? Marchosias's eyes were completely dead by this point, but nobody cared. Nephy then took a small breath and smiled beautifully.

"And my daughter Foll," she added.

"You really don't have to go along with all this, you know?" Shax quipped, seeing how things were derailing from what the introductions were originally meant to be. "I'm the second Tiger King, Shax. I'm a specialist in medical sorcery."

As expected of him, he hadn't gone with the flow and had done

his introduction seriously. However, the girl behind him couldn't accept that. One part of her wanted to praise Shax for being so serious, but another wanted him to brag too. Her expression remained composed, but she puffed out her cheeks, focusing her gaze on him as if begging for attention.

"...And I'm engaged to Kuroka."

"Yay!"

Thus, the new Archdemon capitulated to the tremendous pressure behind him. Kuroka leaped in joy and satisfaction.

Next came the beautiful woman with charms blocking her eyes.

"Astrologian Eligor... I just want to go somewhere quiet..."

"Um...I'll give you some proper time off once things here finish up," Marchosias said in a fluster, sensing he was being criticized.

After that came the skeleton.

"Starving Bone Lord Astaroth. My life's desire is the pursuit of delicious food."

His voice came from his goatlike skull, but his mouth wasn't moving.

This is my first time seeing a talking skeleton.

"Umm, just to satisfy my curiosity," Zagan asked, unable to hold back, "how do you even taste anything?"

He'd hesitated over whether it was really all right to ask, but he just couldn't help himself. Plus, the other Archdemons had to be equally curious. They all acted composed, but were clearly paying attention.

"You know the expression 'seeping into one's bones,' yes?" Astaroth answered casually. "Anything I touch, I can taste."

"I see... How interesting."

Zagan was pretty sure that wasn't what that expression meant, but it still made sense. The others at the table were pretty taken aback, however.

"My king," Phenex cut in, "he eats humans too. Are you fine with that?"

"Hmm? Well, that's just a difference of race."

Beholders and dragons ate humans too, after all. It was wrong to criticize a skeleton for doing the same.

“Well, aren’t you an understanding one...” Astaroth said, admiration clear in his voice. “Though honestly, what I really want to try right now is a young dragon.”

The air froze. It was clear who he was referring to, but Zagan maintained his composure nonetheless and smiled.

“How unfortunate,” he said. “You’ll have to defeat three Archdemons, including me, to even reach Foll. Not only that, but my daughter is in no way such a weak Archdemon that she’d lose to the likes of you. It seems you’ll never accomplish your goal.”

Sorcerers were free to fantasize about eating dragons, but it was impossible to actually do it. After all, Zagan would never allow such a thing.

“That itself sounds rather amusing,” Astaroth replied cheerfully. “I look forward to it.”

And so, the last to introduce herself was Phenex.

“None of you are worth naming myself for, but I’m Golden Lord Phenex. My hobby is... Well, I’ve never really thought of it before. I guess suicide? I especially like getting other people involved in it.”

“Commit suicide on your own!” Marchosias roared, finally snapping at how horrible a statement that was.

“Now, now, you should know that all those with lord in their second name have terrible personalities,” Phenex proclaimed. “Why get angry about it?”

All four Archdemons that that applied to made a “Have you ever looked in a mirror?” face, but Phenex didn’t even notice them.

“I can’t take this anymore...” Marchosias mumbled.

“Sorry,” Foll said, patting his head sympathetically. “It’s ’cause I talked about my favorite things.”

“No, it’s fine...” he said, shedding tears at the little girl’s kindness. It seemed his anger no longer had anywhere to go. “It’s not your fault.”

And with that strange mood in the air, the Archdemons completed their introductions.

◇

"W-Well then, I think it's about time to get down to business."

After wiping his glasses with a handkerchief and putting them back on, Marchosias finally regained his composure. The mood was awfully strange now, but with all the introductions finally complete, he judged it was appropriate to start the meeting for real. Zagan couldn't help but admire his grit.

Marchosias spread his fingers over the table and quietly glared at everyone present.

"Being indirect about this would just be a waste of time with you lot, so I'll give it to you straight. In about one year from now, the world will be destroyed. I want to do something to stop it."

The place fell silent as if the previous chatter had all been imaginary.

"This is a defined future that Eligor has observed. Consider it inevitable."

The futures the Astrologian observed couldn't be changed—not by an Archdemon or even Eligor herself. All the Archdemons reacted to this fact in their own way.

One year... I suppose that's about when Alshiera's barrier will no longer be able to maintain itself.

Zagan had already had an inkling of this. It was a bit of a shock, but not enough of one to shake him. Some of the others also seemed to have had an idea or had already known outright. Their reactions were subtle. This was the case for Zagan, Foll, and the sorcerers in Marchosias's camp.

In contrast, the new Archdemons—Nephy, Shax, and Furfur—were completely taken aback. In a sense, this was Zagan's failure for not informing them of the possibility beforehand. It wasn't because they were too inexperienced or anything.

Some—Phenex and Astaroth—also scoffed at the fact as if they weren't taking it seriously. The first to break the ensuing silence was none other than Phenex. She was the Archdemon who had the least interest in the fate of the world.

"You want to do something about it? That means something can still be done?"

"I believe so," Marchosias told her.

If not, there would be no purpose to this gathering. There was also one Archdemon present who showed no understanding of what was happening.

"I don't really get it, but is that something to panic over?" Furcas asked.

"If the world ends, not even an Archdemon can survive," Marchosias answered, a true look of pity in his eyes.

"That's not what I mean," Furcas clarified. "You're all strong like Zagan, yeah? With thirteen guys like that, this isn't really a big deal, is it? I mean, Zagan has already saved the world once."

"I suppose that's true," Naberius confirmed. "You are survivors from *that* side. That fact is a major boon to us."

Zagan quietly clicked his tongue.

Dammit, Naberius, you didn't have to say that...

Honestly, Zagan wanted to keep that part quiet. Nephy also seemed to realize this and let out a quiet "Ah."

"I'd like to hear more about that," Astaroth said. "What did you see, and where?"

It was pretty pointless to try and dodge the topic, so Zagan sighed before elaborating.

"Some time ago, a little accident took us across Alshiera's barrier."

Using the power of Lilith's Holy Treasure—the Mirror of the Afterlife—Zagan had crossed the barrier that covered this world. That was because Lilith herself had gotten lost and had wandered to that side. The three who'd gone there were Zagan, Lilith, and the one who'd been the cause of the whole incident, Furcas. However, some had also seen it through the Mirror of the Afterlife. Namely, Naberius, Nephy, Foll, and Selphy.

This was the reason Foll had already had an idea of the world's end. Lilith probably understood what they were talking about too. Her face went stiff. In short, they'd seen the area outside the world. Astaroth and all the other Archdemons who'd only been watching were now paying full attention.

"What did you see?" Astaroth asked.

"The demons' king...or god? Something along those lines, anyway."

He'd seen Azazel, a calamity that'd threatened the world countless times and had inflicted tremendous casualties on its population.

"Wh-What?!" Phenex exclaimed, slamming the table and rising to her feet. "The demons' king?"

"Hm? Do you know something?" Zagan asked.

Zagan couldn't say much on the topic. If Phenex was capable of elaboration, he would gladly let her take over. However, without looking the slightest bit sorry about it, Phenex shook her head.

"Nope. I just wanted to try saying that."

"Shut up and sit down..." Zagan told her as if addressing a troublesome child. "We aren't getting anywhere like this."

This was just the kind of person Phenex was. Getting angry at her was futile. Behemoth and Levia forced her back into her seat.

"However, I can't say much more than that," Zagan added before any of the Archdemons could ask. "It has its eye on me precisely because I saw it. If I carelessly let things slip, it'll perceive it and may break the barrier immediately."

Everyone seated at this table was an Archdemon. This was surely enough for them to understand. Thus, nobody pressed him for further explanation.

In short, the truly special part about that barrier isn't its strength, but its coordinates.

Alshiera's barrier was created using dreams as a medium and her body as its pillar. To those sealed within it, this world was like an illusionary haze. Even if they tried to grasp it, it slipped right through their fingers.

That was exactly why it'd lasted a thousand years against such a being. Those gathered here stood at the peak of all sorcerers. There were those among them who could surmise the truth from Zagan's words. Asmodeus was even staring at him with murderously serious eyes, trying to squeeze out every last drop of information.

"Am I right to assume that this *thing* Zagan saw is tearing through the barrier?" Astaroth asked Marchosias.

"Yes, that's right."

"Then if we finish it off, we'll prevent this end of the world, won't

we?”

Marchosias didn’t nod back to the skeleton. Instead, he spoke softly.

“In theory, yes. Eligor only saw *it* appearing on this side of the barrier.”

So it was a question of whether it could actually be killed.

“Eligor,” Phenex said, cocking her head at that peculiar turn of phrase. “Why haven’t you looked further than that? Is it because the future will be set in stone once you do?”

“Simply because I can’t,” Eligor answered. “By that time, I’m already dead.”

Nephy gulped. Zagan felt like he knew what was going through her mind.

That’s why she was acting rather ostentatious when giving Nephy that warning.

Eligor had told her that Nephy would destroy the world, which meant Eligor had an idea of when she was going to die. There wasn’t even a year left of her life. That was why she was so desperate to do everything she could.

Unexpectedly, Shax chimed in at this point, discontent clear in his voice.

“That doesn’t make sense to me. Why did you have to kill Forneus, then? His power would’ve been useful here. That loss is unrecoverable.”

He should’ve been protected. Zagan should’ve had his help. Marchosias had ruined that in the worst way possible. The whole talk about saving the world couldn’t proceed while this matter remained unsettled.

He’s developed quite a sharp tongue.

Zagan was moved by Shax’s growth.

“It was necessary,” Marchosias answered, staring straight into Shax’s eyes. “He succeeded in creating an artificial soul, which distorted the world’s laws and thereby shortened the lifespan of Alshiera’s barrier greatly. So long as his knowledge existed, the barrier wouldn’t last even a year. I had no choice but to kill him to buy time.”

"To buy time? That's a pretty messed up claim," Shax retorted. "You had a thousand years. Buying such a tiny amount of time at the last second is awfully inconsistent of you, isn't it?"

As one would expect of Shax, he identified the point of contention with perfect clarity. Even before any of that, if Eligor's foreseen end was fixed in one year's time, nothing done was going to destroy the world earlier.

Zagan planted his elbows on the table, ready to move at a moment's notice. Shax was making too much sense. His words could mark his end.

Marchosias isn't so narrow-minded that he'd lose his temper and go wild, but there's still no telling what he'll do.

Kuroka understood that too. She had relaxed her muscles and was poised to leap into action at a moment's notice. And at this critical junction, Marchosias's next action was something nobody had expected.

"Sorry. This is all a result of my indiscretion," he said, bowing his head. "I knew Forneus's knowledge was dangerous. Maybe I could've warned him before killing him. Nevertheless, I left him at large until it was too late. It was my mistake."

Shax clenched his teeth hard, holding back his anger. Even Zagan was dumbstruck by how ridiculous that statement was.

The bastard's blatantly trying to sweep things under the rug.

Shax didn't say anything. Marchosias claimed he had to kill Forneus, but refused to elaborate.

In other words, he has no intention of revealing his true motives here.

The only things he was willing to share were the fact that there was a time limit and his overall objective. His true purpose was being kept deliberately hidden.

Also, now that he'd lowered his head like this, the newcomer Shax wasn't able to prod any further. It was a truly nasty tactic. However, this also stripped the meeting of any meaning. If Marchosias wasn't going to provide any additional information, then Zagan had nothing to gain. He'd already been forced to share more than he'd wanted to, so maybe it was best to just leave.

But he's not an idiot. He has to have predicted this outcome.

Zagan was capable of leaving at any moment, but a part of him wanted to observe Marchosias's behavior a little longer. The same surely went for the other Archdemons.

Asmodeus laughed, fiddling with her silver hair.

"Umm, you don't really believe that's going to fly, do you?" she asked. "If someone did the same thing to you, you would've purged them."

Things had already reached the point where she could cut ties with Marchosias. She had the option of instigating the other Archdemons into action and running away too. And so, she was merciless in her approach.

"Sorry, but I can't explain," Marchosias said, remaining firm. "Zagan, I'm sure you understand why."

"Hmm..."

Zagan grimaced at being so shamelessly dragged into the middle of the conversation, but still sank into thought.

He's talking the same way as Alshiera.

She wasn't able to say much for the same reason as Zagan. If they mentioned Azazel, it could break the barrier. If Marchosias was looking for Zagan's agreement now, it meant the circumstances behind Forneus's murder involved Azazel.

So what exactly could it be? Was it the method behind creating an artificial soul? Or was it the existence of Furfur, a living puppet? Or perhaps it was the power behind his words, which could manipulate the world itself. After going over numerous possibilities, Zagan finally figured it out.

Oh, that's why.

Why had Marchosias needed to kill Forneus at exactly that time after leaving him at large for so long? Because Zagan had come in contact with him, of course.

Meaning destroying the Sacred Swords or freeing those trapped within them would be a hindrance to him.

Azazel's name had once been associated with the Sacred Swords, so Zagan's research was going to touch upon that truth sooner or later. That was the reason Marchosias couldn't answer. To stop it,

he'd had to kill either Zagan or Forneus, and Marchosias had chosen the latter.

I guess he's telling me to cooperate, since he let me live.

Honestly, Zagan had no obligation to go along with his schemes. If Marchosias made an attempt on his life, Zagan would retaliate with all his strength. If that wasn't enough, it would simply mean Zagan was too weak. He didn't have to thank Marchosias for letting him go.

Zagan's conjecture was based entirely on Marchosias stating that he *could not* explain. If that was a lie, that meant Zagan had misunderstood on his own. Marchosias was exactly the type of man to resort to such methods, so that was a distinct possibility.

Zagan thought it over for several seconds, then decided to turn to the girl sitting next to him.

"Furfur, what do you think? About your master's death, I mean."

If anyone had a claim over Forneus's case, it was Furfur. She didn't seem to think she would be asked for her opinion, though. Her purple eyes widened, but she still had an answer.

"My master died of his own will," she replied, determination clear in her voice. "He decided on it and chose that course of action. No matter what this man did or didn't do, I'm sure it would've ended the same."

The direct cause of Forneus's death had been Micca's resurrection, so Furfur was implying that he would've done the same even if Marchosias hadn't made a move. This was an unwavering truth to her. There wasn't the slightest hint of regret in her voice.

"Then there's no point lingering on this subject," Zagan said with a smile. "You're the only one with the right to smack Marchosias over it, after all."

"Oh, I'd like to hit him," Furfur said, raising her hand immediately.

"So she says."

Zagan glanced over to Marchosias.

"Very well. If that will satisfy you, then go right ahead."

Marchosias removed his glasses and stood up, then walked briskly over to Furfur. His expressionless and quick stride was frightening, making Dexia and Aristella jump out of the way in a panic.

"Do whatever you— Bwah?!"

A sharp bang rang through the area. Before Marchosias could even finish grumbling, Furfur's palm met his cheek with all of her might behind it.



The rotation of her hips, the whiplike snap of her arm, and the splendid shifting of her center of gravity as she stepped in were so beautiful that they stole Zagan's breath. It was such a sharp strike that, despite walking to her with the intent of taking a hit, Marchosias hadn't been able to prepare himself for it. It was proof that Ain and Kuroka's guidance in martial arts was taking root.

Marchosias rotated a hundred and eighty degrees. Furfur didn't even spare him a glance as she returned to her seat. Her expression had remained constant the entire time, but there was a certain hint of cheerfulness to it now.

"A good slap," Zagan said, grinning. "It was quite refreshing."

"Thank you for the praise."

Micca was frozen behind her with his mouth agape.

Marchosias sat back down, pushed up his glasses, and said, "Well then, let us continue."

"Your nose is bleeding," Asmodeus pointed out.

A neat hand imprint remained on his face and a line of blood ran down from his nose. The meeting once more had a short intermission while he wiped the blood off with a handkerchief.

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Marchosias started the meeting again after regaining his composure.

"Let's get back on track. In one year, the barrier sealing the demons will shatter. This future cannot be changed, but if we can stop the demons' king, we may be able to save the world."

"Is it something like Samyaza?" Asmodeus asked, cocking her head. "I'm pretty sure something of that level won't be much of a problem if all of you work together."

The majority of those present were taken aback by her unexpected statement. At a glance, it sounded like she thought it wasn't her problem. However, this was actually a message from her, stating "I'm sure I won't be able to fight."

So she's choosing now to suggest she might be killed.

She wasn't saying this out of a sense of self-preservation or

anything. In a year's time, Asmodeus could be dead or reduced to a state where fighting was impossible. A strategy built on the assumption that she would be participating was sure to fail. That was what she was suggesting.

In other words, Asmodeus was considering a future where she wasn't present. For anybody who knew her before this, such a thing was unthinkable. In the past, she was an Archdemon who would sooner destroy the world than leave her lifelong desire unfulfilled. Not that Zagan had any intention of letting her die, of course.

"Who's Samyaza?" Furcas asked. It wasn't clear if he was actually keeping up with the conversation or not. "That's not one of the people here, right?"

In truth, many of those gathered here didn't know. They just didn't want to admit it. The Archdemons didn't laugh at the boy. Instead, they paid careful attention. Zagan and Asmodeus were capable of answering, having fought against it. Asmodeus wasn't the type to offer information for free, however.

"An intelligent demon," Zagan said, seeing that he had no other choice. "It's an amalgamation of ten thousand demons, apparently. It took a lot of work to kill it."

"I know nothing about that entity," Astaroth said. "How strong was it, exactly?"

"Let's see... Strong enough that me or Phenex could barely manage one-on-one."

Zagan had prepared a means of opposing it already, so the next battle wasn't going to be as unsightly as the last. Incidentally, Asmodeus had a hand to her chest, making an annoying face that blatantly claimed "I could easily defeat it." Zagan refused to meet her eyes.

"Are we to assume the next one will be even more powerful?" Astaroth asked.

"I'm not sure it'll even be in the same dimension of power..."

Honestly, Zagan hadn't been able to see the depths of what it was truly capable of. Even with powerful allies like Asmodeus and Phenex, it didn't seem like he had any chance of winning.

"Samyaza is the king from several generations ago," Marchosias

said. “The current king has a considerable gap over it. Making any sort of comparison would be imprudent.”

“So the demons change kings with the ages?” Asmodeus asked keenly.

Marchosias nodded and replied, “It has been confirmed several times.”

The next to speak was Ain, who was standing behind Furcas.

“Marchosias, I don’t know what you’re planning, but if you keep putting on airs like that, this conversation will never get anywhere.”

Oh... I suppose he was *the one who actually defeated Azazel a thousand years ago.*

Strictly speaking, the second Silver-Eyed King Lucia, whose memories Ain had inherited, had done it. Unexpectedly, the first to react to this statement was Glasya-Labolas.

“Forgive me. Who might you be?”

As a fellow swordsman, he had to have noticed Ain’s strength. There was an excitement in his voice like he’d been waiting for the opportunity to speak with him the entire time.

“Apologies for the late introduction. I’m Ain. I have the memories of the Silver-Eyed King who defeated Azazel a thousand years ago.”

“Oooh!”

Ignoring Glasya-Labolas’s delight, Zagan returned Ain’s gaze.

“Let’s hear your opinion, then,” he said.

“I don’t know how strong you all are, but based on my memories from a thousand years ago, the thirteen of you won’t be able to do anything about it.”

Ain paused there, sinking into thought before continuing.

“Umm, do you know Lake Suflaghida? It’s a mass of demons around that size. Does that help visualize it?”

The Archdemons were clearly perturbed by his words.

“Aha, something that size isn’t entirely unkillable,” Asmodeus said, smiling frivolously.

“Don’t,” Zagan interjected. “The continent would vanish.”

Asmodeus’s greatest sorcery, Calamitous Moon of Hades, possessed enough destructive force to turn the entire continent into an enormous hole. A hollow sphere of that size could even reach the

planet's core, destroying the world itself.

She was sure to understand this too. She shrugged and stuck out her tongue. Zagan found her face utterly annoying in that moment.

"A terrifying power, for sure," Ain said, his expression still grim. "However, I'm speaking of how things were a thousand years ago. There's no guessing how enormous it is today. It's also possible that it has evolved with each generation. Honestly, it's probably a better idea to discard any notion of opposing it through sheer force."

The truth he relayed was unbelievable. Not even half the Archdemons present took him seriously. But to those who understood the truth, his words invited despair.

"Well, say a mass of such demons truly exists," Phenex said. "How does it sustain itself? Living creatures need food, while divine beings require faith to maintain their spiritual bodies. Such a large mass would take a huge amount of energy to live a thousand years."

Divine beings really exist? And what's a spiritual body?

Phenex had gone through the cycle of death and rebirth for ten thousand years straight. It felt like she was casually leaking some tremendous secrets, but she did have a point.

Sorcerers were creatures of logic and theory. Their minds weren't empty enough to accept the existence of some inexplicable monster with no real proof. If it couldn't be explained, then it was no more than a groundless fantasy.

"I...don't know," Ain said.

He only had memories of fighting and defeating it, so he didn't understand everything about Azazel.

At this point, Zagan came to a sudden realization of his own shortcomings.

I was told not to think about it, but it still totally slipped my mind.

Even now, the fact remained that there was no way of defeating it. Regardless, refusing to think of a countermeasure was just escapism.

For example, if several instances of the planet-destroying Calamitous Moon were slammed into the demon, it was sure to be annihilated. Asmodeus was probably the only one capable of casting it on her own, but multiple Archdemons would surely be able to

invoke it together. The problem then was how to prevent it from damaging the planet. If they could solve that issue, then there was a guaranteed means of killing it.

I need to find out more about Azazel.

Even if doing so posed the risk of destroying the barrier, he couldn't think up countermeasures without doing so.

Ain remained unsure how to respond when someone on the opposite side of the table who was standing behind a chair spoke up.

"Hatred."

With a hand to her head as if it was throbbing with pain, Aristella's expression twisted in agony.

"Aristella?! What's wrong?!" Dexia screamed, keeping her from falling over.

"That's what it possesses... A fathomless hatred capable of engulfing the whole world. You can't afford to get involved with it."

Aristella continued muttering in a daze, her eyes flickering between blue and gold.

"I see. So it's you."

The image of a somewhat buffoonish young man suddenly vanished. Marchosias glared at her as if beholding his greatest enemy.

Marchosias was after someone who shared Lisette's face. Everyone within Zagan's camp was already aware of that fact.

Marchosias casually raised his arm, and before Zagan could rise to his feet, Foll took action.

"Don't touch my subordinates."

She swatted away his hand. The power behind it created a transparent black veil between them. Zagan knew this was Black Dragon Marbas's wing.

A perfect reaction. About what I'd expect of my daughter.

Flung back by the blow, Marchosias lost his balance...and Phenex took advantage of that moment to grab his arm.

"Hey now, I don't condone violence when we've gathered to talk. Do you want to try dying? You don't mind if I defeat him, yes?"

This girl had sworn to devote everything she had to Zagan. There

was no falsehood behind that claim. She was immediately taking action to protect Foll.

"Marcho—"

Eligor tried to stand up, but a thread wrapped around her neck.

"Whoa there. I'd rather you remain seated."

It was Shax. His judgment was as quick as ever. Behind him, Kuroka had her hand on her sword cane. Glasya-Labolas was sitting next to Zagan, so he couldn't make a move. Asmodeus wasn't going to help either side. Perhaps Zagan could get her to join his side with a promise of a reward, but that seemed pretty unlikely. Naberius averted his eyes as if to say he didn't want to get involved, so he could be ignored.

Furfur and Nephy stood up too and everyone focused on Marchosias. The situation was ready to explode. Even Eldest Marchosias wouldn't be able to overturn this advantage. However, this was also the exact instant when everyone revealed an opening.

With a heavy thump, the Sigils of the Archdemon rumbled once more. Before anyone knew it, the ground beneath them had suddenly vanished.

Dammit, he got us!

The last thing Zagan saw was a repulsive mass of demons creeping up from below like sludge. It was the same thing Bifrons had once named the Demon Lord in Suflaghida.

Chapter III: They Say a Girl in Love Is Unbeatable, but Boys Can Overcome the Impossible Too

"This might be bad."

Back in Archdemon Palace's throne room, Gremory put on a rare display by sullenly grumbling to herself. Kimaris, Vepar, and Raphael were with her. The four of them were the strongest left in Kianoides at present.

Several hours had passed since Zagan's group had entered Kaslytilio. Due to some kind of barrier, it was no longer possible to contact them, even with telepathy. Regardless, Barbatos's shadow remained connected.

Or at least, it had until now, signaling that something had definitely happened.

With all of them there, I doubt the worst came to pass, but still...

Barbatos simply might have been detected, leading to the barrier being strengthened as a result. But in that case, Zagan would've left behind some kind of clue. In other words, Zagan was in a situation where he couldn't act freely. If anything was to happen to Kianoides, now was the time.

"Kimaris, Vepar, be extra vigi—"

Before Gremory could finish talking, Vepar picked up his staff and stood up.

"It seems we're already under attack," he stated, a bead of sweat running down his cheek.

Gremory noticed it a beat later. Something was in front of Archdemon Palace. It had quite literally appeared out of nowhere. She'd detected nothing of the sort mere moments ago, but now, she was practically choking on the mana blowing in from that direction

despite being all the way in the throne room.

That's no human... What is it?

Whatever it was, it was bizarrely powerful.

"Is that a demon...?" Kimaris asked cautiously.

Vepar shook his head and replied, "Not exactly. I remember this sensation. It appeared right before I came here... Samyaza, was it? It seems to be the same as that one."

That was the name of the intelligent demon that even Zagan had been unable to defeat on his own.

"That's the worst-case scenario," Gremory said, her expression grim, "Still, it's one we predicted."

They'd assumed Samyaza wasn't the only intelligent demon. Maybe it was best to call them Samyaza-class demons. It was unlikely to be under Marchosias's command, but the demons had their own ambitions. That was why it'd been highly likely for them to take action exactly at a time when nobody could interfere. As such, Gremory was quick to make her decision.

"We're abandoning Archdemon Palace. Lord Raphael, take command of the evacuation."

"Understood."

The butler had already relayed the message. All the sorcerers inside the palace had stopped their work to evacuate the premises. Zagan's subordinates had returned from their assignments from across the continent, making for quite a lot of people to get out of the building, but there was more than one exit they could use.

"Well done," Gremory said. "Then I suppose it's our job to stall the intruder."

It was pretty bad to leave Zagan with nowhere to return home to, but he was the type of king to prioritize his subordinates' safety.

Heaven's Phosphor doesn't work too well against a Samyaza-class demon, after all.

Gremory's golem was located at the palace, but even with that, she wouldn't be able to defeat such an opponent. Now that all of the Archdemons were absent, it was impossible to beat a Samyaza-class demon. That was why their highest priority was getting everyone out alive.

To accomplish that, Gremory and Kimaris, who could both use Heaven's Phosphor, had to remain behind. Vepar had only recently entered Zagan's service, so he couldn't use that sorcery. Regardless, he had the skills of a former Archdemon candidate. By all rights, Gremory wanted Raphael to fight as well, but it was common to have an ambush lying in wait for anyone trying to escape, so she couldn't neglect the evacuation's defenses.

"Vepar, don't worry about damaging the palace," Gremory said, trying to fire him up.

"I don't even have the leisure to consider that," he responded. "I don't have much mana stored in my eyes."

By keeping his eyes sealed, Vepar was capable of storing enough mana to rival an Archdemon. However, he'd used it all up the other day and hadn't had the months necessary to store enough for anything particularly powerful.

Archdemon Palace was a defensive fortress while also being a cage of sorcery. Even if they used anything powerful enough to destroy a whole town, the barrier would prevent any damage from reaching Kianoides.

"How much can you manage?" Gremory asked.

"Hades I can use only once...maybe twice if I push it," Vepar answered. "Blackest Black I have some leeway with, but no more than ten times. Either way, it's still a complete mystery whether they'll work against a Samyaza-class demon."

These sorceries were Archdemon Asmodeus's specialties. Hades was powerful enough to annihilate the entirety of Kianoides in one shot, while Blackest Black could defeat the average demon with a single blow.

He's been hiding that kind of power all this time?

Had he taken it seriously, the fight with Eligor might've ended very differently. Gremory understood why he hadn't, of course, but still, Vepar getting serious would've destroyed the entire town. No sorcerer would perform such a foolish act in someone else's domain.

However, the truly terrifying part was that Asmodeus was capable of using those sorceries hundreds of times at once. Even accounting for her Sigil, the other Archdemons were unlikely to be able to do

the same thing.

Despite such powerful assistance, Gremory's expression remained grim.

"My Heaven's Phosphor apparently doesn't have much of an effect either. Let's both prioritize surviving, all right?"

"The evacuation should take about five minutes," Kimaris added. "Don't be too reckless, you two."

"You're the one who should avoid being reckless," Gremory replied, smacking his chest. When her life was on the line, this leonin was the most reckless person there was.

And so, the three former Archdemon candidates marched off to battle.

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"He really outplayed us..." Zagan groaned. Was he inside the sludge now? There was no light. Even with a sorcerer's eyes, he couldn't see anything.

Despite being a void, there was a strange scent in the air like gunpowder, burning meat, or even rum. The ground beneath his feet pulsated like a living being and seemed to possess heat like a warm body. The first thought that came to mind was being inside some creature's stomach, but there was no stench of blood or entrails present.

Zagan had been sealed within this pitch-black space. He could sense several others breathing around him, but there were clearly fewer than those who'd been at the round table.

Only those within my camp... No, there are still too few for that. Some were separated from us...

There was no light here, but sound carried just fine.

"We were the only ones swallowed, I suppose," Astaroth mumbled in irritation.

"Master Zagan, Foll and I are safe," Nephy said.

"Mmm... But Aristella and Dexia aren't here," Foll added. "We got separated."

They were a small distance away. He could tell that they were

using their hearing to draw closer to him.

"Kurosuke's not with me either," Shax said. "Actually, seems like there are only Archdemons in here."

The thread he'd had around Eligor's neck had also been severed.

"Micca...isn't here either," Furfur said.

And last of all was Phenex...

"What's with this place? You think I'll just sit here quietly?! I'm leaving!"

She dashed off in a random direction, where she seemed to slam into a wall.

"Gaaaaaaaaah!"

She was crushed flat as a result.

Does she need to do that to calm down?

That said, she wasn't going to die from just running into a wall. It was fortuitous that there was nothing around here that would kill them if they moved around carelessly.

A golden fire expanded and illuminated the area. Including Zagan, there were only seven people here—the Archdemons who weren't in Marchosias's camp. It seemed Naberius had gone over to that side.

Phenex was reviving, so she was perfectly fine. Dying was her greatest wish, anyway. Now that they could see, everyone gathered in one spot. That was when they noticed one person was missing.

"Wait, where's Furcas...?" Zagan said, then paused and sighed. "Dammit, he was the target all along."

Marchosias needed a sorcerer capable of spatial manipulation. He'd been after Barbatos to that end, but apparently, he hadn't given up on Furcas either.

"Zagan, what do we do?" Foll asked anxiously. "Aristella was acting weird. I was supposed to protect her..."

"Don't worry," Zagan told her, gently patting her head. "Aristella is probably fine. We totally fell for their trap."

"What do you mean...?"

"It was unnatural that Glasya-Labolas was trying to figure out whether Dexia or Aristella was his actual target," Zagan explained, exasperated with himself. "If he really wanted to kill his mark, he

would've happily murdered them both."

"You've got a point there," Shax said, having fought the man before and knowing a bit about his disposition. "He would've rejoiced at the chance to kill two people who are so alike."

Glasya-Labolas wasn't the type to hesitate over taking a life beyond his target. He murdered people for the simple reason that he wanted to see death. Zagan had first assumed that it'd been too difficult to kill both of them because he'd been in Zagan's domain, but he was mistaken.

He's a sorcerer who'll resort to anything when it comes to killing.

This was plainly evident considering what had happened in Aristocrates. That Archdemon even possessed the ruthlessly powerful sorcery City of Swords. Using that, he could've easily murdered both Dexia and Aristella using the small instant it would take for Zagan to break it. And yet, he hadn't. Thus, he'd likely been ordered *not* to kill his target.

"His role was to make us conscious of the fact that they're after Aristella," Zagan said.

That was what the Lord of Murder was for. The simple fact that he was targeting her made them obstinately conscious of the fact. That was why they'd prepared themselves to protect Aristella during the meeting. It was precisely because of this that they'd been easily outwitted.

"I can't say anything in my defense after being deceived so thoroughly," Zagan continued. "If they showed any signs of targeting Aristella, we had no choice but to reveal an opening elsewhere."

He simply had to accept it. It had been a disgustingly effective tactic.

"That happened two months ago," Foll said, disbelief clear in her voice. "They knew this would happen all the way back then?"

"That's the gist of it," Zagan confirmed. "It seems that's what it means to make an enemy of Astrologian Eligor."

"I understand that's what they were aiming for," Foll said, anxiety still clear on her face. "But how does that guarantee they aren't still after Aristella?"

Zagan wanted to praise his beloved daughter for properly

evaluating the situation despite being in such dire straits.

"It's just as you say," he told her. "They have a reason to go after Aristella. We'll need to be careful of that from now on. However, Marchosias doesn't currently have the time for that."

"Hm...? Why? We've been separated."

"Marchosias's target this time is likely Furcas," Phenex answered, still burning with golden fire. "If so, he has to focus entirely on that task. Even if Furcas is nowhere near as powerful as in his heyday, he's the only sorcerer here who can easily leave this barrier."

Phenex then frowned.

"By the way," she added, "aren't all of you being a little too heartless? Shouldn't you show some concern for me?"

"Oh, um, I'm glad you're all right, Lady Phenex," Nephy told her.

"You're the only one who says such things," the annoying girl said with tears in her crimson eyes. "It makes me want to be cared for by you."

"Huh? Um, that's a little..."

"Aww..."

Now that even Nephy had rejected her, Phenex slumped over dejectedly. Setting all that aside, Foll finally figured it out.

"If he can't get him to do what he wants quickly, Furcas will get away?" she asked.

"Exactly," Zagan confirmed. "Besides, Behemoth, Levia, and Ain are still out there. Even an Archdemon might lose the upper hand if this isn't handled carefully."

Marchosias's camp wasn't completely united either. Asmodeus and Naberius were likely to leave him depending on how things played out. In the sense that he was unable to show any weakness, Marchosias was the one who'd been driven into a corner.

"Meaning I got dragged into this," Astaroth said with an annoyed sigh...not that he looked like he was breathing.

"What are you even saying?" Zagan retorted. "Do you think Marchosias is the type of man to leave someone alone just because they've got nothing to do with it? From the very moment you refused to submit to him, this outcome was plainly evident."

"True... Marchosias can be quite irritating like that..."

Astaroth shook his goatlike cranium in resignation.

"Well, we have no reason to quietly sit down and take it either," Zagan added with a smile.

One year ago, he'd led dozens of sorcerers in a hard battle against the Sludge Demon Lord. The sludge here was far less dense than what he'd fought at the time. Back then, Zagan had been rather powerless, but he'd spent the last year building his strength. And just as he was about to light the black flames of the Fivefold Grand Flower at his fingertips...

"Wait," Astaroth said. "The walls started moving."

There was no way this was just a simple prison. Countless cracks ran through the wriggling sludge.

No, not cracks. They were eyes. Giant eyes opened one after the other, and before they knew it, the walls, floor, and ceiling were all covered in blue eyes.

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"We've been separated from Zagan..." Ain groaned., gripping his Hex Blade.

They got away... I definitely hit something, though.

He was still at the roundtable, but every single Archdemon had vanished.

"Aristella! Aristella!"

Dexia was supporting her unconscious twin, while Behemoth and Levia were hurrying toward them. Having been left on his own, Micca was in a fluster, but as an Angelic Knight, he'd judged that he should prioritize looking after the unconscious girl and dashed toward the twins as well.

Kuroka was also some distance away. She had her childhood friends on her mind and made her way toward Ain. Selphy and Lilith were unharmed right next to him, but Furcas was gone. The moment Marchosias had sprung the trap, Ain had prioritized protecting the two girls, but perhaps that had been a mistake.

It felt like he was aiming for them, though...

Zagan's group had decided on protecting Aristella beforehand, so

Ain had realized Marchosias's behavior had been a diversion.

"For now, let's make our way to the others too," Ain said to Selphy and Lilith as he sheathed his sword. "It'll be dangerous to remain scattered."

"Wait! Furcas is gone!" Lilith protested.

"Furcas is right there," Ain said, pointing straight up.

The mana that had been pulled away from the round table was connected to the sky above them. Six Archdemons were floating there; four of them were huddled together, while Furcas and Marchosias were some distance away from them. It seemed Marchosias was negotiating with...or rather, threatening him.

"I'd love to go help, but some kind of barrier is blocking the way," Ain explained. "We need a sorcerer's aid."

The round table was currently suspended in subspace. If they destroyed the barrier, it would throw them into said subspace. And in there, anyone who wasn't a sorcerer of significant strength would die.

Ain actually knew sorcery. He also had the knowledge necessary to have once served as the Head Archdemon. However, this was knowledge from the dawn of sorcery a thousand years ago. Unlike swordsmanship, sorcery had made terrifying advancements over the ages. It was doubtful his knowledge would be applicable.

The only ones who could survive were likely Behemoth and Levia. Lilith understood how powerless she was in this regard. She didn't look convinced, but nodded.

"F-Fine..."

They started going over to where Behemoth was, but for some reason, Selphy wasn't moving.

"Selphy?"

"Ain... What're those people gonna do with Furcas?" she asked.

This girl, who was supposed to be an infinite well of cheerfulness, was for some reason completely pale.

"What's wrong? Do you know something?" Ain asked.

"I don't," she said, shaking her head with her hands held tight around high shoulders. "I just have a really bad feeling about this. It feels like...Furcas is gonna disappear..."

Ain gasped.

It can't be!

Ain had been granted the hero Lucia's memories and body from a thousand years ago, but where had those memories come from? What method had been used to grant them to him?

"Ain," Selphy said, tugging on his sleeve. "I wanna save Furcas. At this rate, I feel like something really bad will happen."

"I want to as well..."

However, Ain had no idea how to save him.

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"Was this whole thing about just talking a lie?"

Having been separated from everyone, Furcas tried to act tough. It was a bluff, though. In truth, he was hopelessly afraid.

He felt very strange. Despite being in midair, it was like there was solid ground beneath his feet. He figured some kind of magic circle was serving as a foothold, but there were no traces of anything like that. Furcas was incapable of using such intricate sorcery.

Zagan and some of the others had been swallowed by some sludge thing and were gone. Ain, Behemoth, and the rest had been left behind at the round table. The remaining Archdemons were some distance away from Furcas. It seemed they were far enough away that they couldn't overhear the conversation.

Furcas was completely alone.

I'm scared, but at least Lilith looks fine.

In all likelihood, Ain had protected her. This was the most important thing to Furcas.

Having apparently been slashed by Ain, blood dribbled down Marchosias's arm.

"Good grief, even when a nephilim, silver eyes are still silver eyes," he said, shaking off the blood before finally turning to Furcas. "Now then, it's been a long time, Furcas... That said, you're not the one I have business with."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Furcas grimaced as Marchosias reached out with his right hand,

the Sigil on it on prominent display.

"You do not need to know," Marchosias said. "Memories of the Archdemon, demonstrate your power."

"Gyaaaaaah!"

Furcas suddenly felt like his head was being torn apart.

I-It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts!

He couldn't speak. He couldn't breathe. It felt like his very sense of self was being shattered. In fact, that was exactly what was happening. Deep inside, he felt *something* that wasn't him rising to the surface. Engulfed in pain, it hadn't even taken ten seconds for what had once been Furcas to vanish.

"That's quite the rude awakening..."

He still looked like a young boy, but his voice was clearly far older.

"It's your fault for being such a deep sleeper, Archdemon Furcas," Marchosias replied, scoffing at him.

This was the Archdemon who'd once crossed Alshiera's barrier, leading to the destruction of his mind.

"It's rather depressing to have to look at your gloomy face right when I wake up..." he muttered with a sigh. "What do you want from me after all this time?"

"A foolish question. I woke you up because I require your power. You're the only sorcerer to have ever crossed Alshiera's barrier without bearing her blood."

While they'd crossed Alshiera's barrier by accident, Zagan and Lilith were the two people of the present age in whom Alshiera's blood ran the thickest. Thus, Furcas was the only one to have gone there without any of her blood at all.

"How worthless," Furcas spat out. "I wasn't able to withstand the other side. My trip was nothing but a failure."

"Nobody can withstand it," Marchosias told him. "And yet, you survived that place. Can't you just accept my praise for managing that?"

Furcas shook his head and replied, "It doesn't have to be me. One day, Purgatory or the like will reach that place as well."

That was why Marchosias had tried to make contact with Barbatos through Eligor. The oblivious Furcas knew that, so this one did as well through his memories.

"Perhaps, but he turned me down," Marchosias said, shrugging indifferently. "Besides, we don't have the time to wait for 'one day.' More importantly, you're the only one who knows that place's exact coordinates."

"That's why you woke me up? Unfortunately, that isn't enough of a reason for me to obey you."

Furcas had been defeated without achieving his dream, so he no longer cared if he was erased.

"No, you'll cooperate with me," Marchosias claimed baselessly, an unexpectedly serious look in his eyes. "You're the one person I'll reveal my true objective to."

"Hmm...?"

The next words from Marchosias's mouth were something Furcas—or anyone—could've predicted.

"I want to save my little sister...to save Alshiera."

Furcas's eyes widened.

"You've crossed the barrier," Marchosias continued. "You must have seen it. Alshiera has been sealed in that place for a thousand years as the pillar to protect this world."

In that barrier was a stone pillar that supported the iridescent sky, and embedded within it was a pitiful girl whose body had been transformed into a substance that was neither stone nor metal.

"Alshiera doesn't have much time left," Marchosias said. "So at the very least, I want to save her from the place before the end. *That's* my true objective."

"Why are you telling me this...?"

Marchosias gazed right into Furcas's eyes before answering.

"Because you're the man who dedicated his life to her."

This was an invitation Furcas could never refuse.

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"Is this...Kaslytilio?"

Zagan could see the ocean. However, there was no driftwood and the water wasn't polluted. The coastline wasn't quite the same either. Above all else, there were hundreds of soldiers in formation behind him.

They weren't wearing the armor of Angelic Knights, as there was no detailed ornamentation. Instead, it looked like the armor had been made in a hurry out of necessity. The unarmored portions of their bodies were covered in nothing more than thick flax clothing. They had the appearance of militiamen from the countryside.

While some wielded swords with sharp edges, there was a large variety of weapons in their hands, such as blunt axes. The majority of these weapons looked like little more than metal that had been shaped into rough approximations of blades.

The strange thing was that there didn't appear to be any middle ground of functional but lousy weapons. What was more, all the proper swords looked like antiques. It was as if smithing technology had been lost, leading to this random mishmash.

This seemed to be an older age. The armor they wore was new, but the style was ancient. The clothes hidden beneath the armor had emblems and crests sewn on them as a symbol of their tribe or race or something. In the current day under the church's rule, such traditions had been completely lost.

Where exactly is this?

The moment those countless blue eyes had opened within the sludge, he'd found himself with this sight before him.

"Master Zagan..."

"Nephy, you're okay."

He took a look around. The others were here too. They were in the same position relative to each other as they'd been inside the sludge, which meant they hadn't actually moved to another place.

Is this an illusion?

Zagan tried touching a nearby soldier. As he'd expected, his hand went right through. However, with the sticky sensation of the salty sea breeze and the stench of iron and oil from the soldiers, it was hard to see this as just an illusion.

"It's like...we're being shown the sludge's memories..." Zagan

conjectured.

A memory included what was felt by the five senses.

Heaven's Phosphor can probably break it.

However, something inside Zagan was telling him that he had to see this memory through.

The important part right now is that we're by the ocean.

The formation of soldiers was clearly facing the sea, which meant they were waiting for an enemy that was coming from the other side. There was nothing beyond the ocean, though. At the very least, nobody in the past thousand years had discovered anything. And yet, the soldiers were waiting for their enemy.

Looking at the lines of soldiers, Foll raised her voice.

"These are the nephilim...?"

She was referring to the ones who were living in hiding in the capital of the oppressed. Zagan wasn't entirely sure due to the helmets, but he spotted some familiar faces here and there. These were the people Zagan had once mowed down, not that he knew their names.

"Meaning this is a memory of a battle from a thousand years ago?" Zagan guessed.

"Probably," Phenex said. "Judging by the emblems on their armor, I suppose this is the army led by the Second Silver-Eyed King Lucia."

Meaning "that" is going to appear?

Did the soldiers here even understand what they were about to fight? Their faces were stiff with fear, but mysteriously, none chose to run away. Going only by that fact, they were already heroes. This scene also presented another important fact.

"That" comes from beyond the sea. Is that where the demons live?

It was the location of the enemy that had to be defeated. Alshiera's barrier protected the world, but so long as it existed, it was impossible to leave. So then, what was the state of the world beyond the barrier? Were there other lands or islands out there? If there were, were they the same as the continent, or did they have other cultures and technologies? Above all else, how had they handled the demons?

Or maybe...

As he considered all that in an instant, Zagan gripped Nephy's and Foll's hands.

"Nephy, Foll, this is going to be a cruel display," he told them. "Stay strong."

"Y-Yes."

"Mmm..."

Before long, a wave crested on the horizon as if drawing a faint arc. To be precise, it undulated like a wave, but wasn't one. It was far too distorted and had no regularity to its movements.

"Are those...demons?" Astaroth mumbled.

Now that they were within visible range, it was clear that they were hundreds upon thousands of demons. There were some with indefinite liquid forms, some with sharp angles like folded paper, some with countless tentacles like some aquatic life-forms, some with angular crystal bodies covered in fur, and many more. It was a complete mess of bizarre and inexplicable beings forming a giant army.

That by itself would've been nothing to fear. A few Archdemons would be able to stop them. Zagan or Asmodeus could likely do it on their own, even.

The problem was what came next. A giant shadow suddenly swelled up in the center of the bizarre army. It looked like a hand with five fingers like a human's. It slapped down against the water and an enormous head surfaced.

"A woman...? Wait, it can't be... That's..." Shax mumbled before covering his mouth as if holding back the urge to vomit.

The enormous head had something akin to long hair, twisted horns pushing up through it. This part was unfamiliar, but there was no mistaking the face's young features for anyone else.

"Alshiera...?" Zagan muttered in a daze.

There was also one other name that came to mind upon seeing that form.

It's just like what happened to Nephteros.

During Bifrons's evening ball, the Sludge Demon Lord had eaten Nephteros and had then copied her form. The main difference here

was that it wasn't just sludge now. Instead, it had the color of bottomless hatred and despair, its surface covered in gloomy blue eyes.

Does this mean she was absorbed by Azazel itself?

In that case, he could understand why her reactions were so extreme whenever things involved Azazel. While she was the pillar who sealed it behind a barrier, she was also the greatest factor for calling it into this world.

No, it's the opposite. It's because she's so deeply connected to Azazel that she can be the barrier's pillar.

Thinking back on it, no matter how powerful she was as a succubus, was it really possible to seal Azazel for a thousand years? Lilith was the most powerful succubus of the current age, but she didn't seem anywhere near capable of it. If they'd used Alshiera's connection to Azazel as a linchpin, then it made sense.

Even as Zagan ruminated over this new revelation, the memory continued playing out. The first to jump into combat was a boy with black hair and silver eyes. His long hair was tied up to the back and he wore unfamiliar armor.

"Ain... No, that's Lucia!"

The Second Silver-Eyed King Lucia was a hero who was said to have slain Azazel. He wielded what looked like a Sacred Sword in his right hand—one that didn't have the crest from any of the twelve existing swords—and a Hex Blade in his left.

Lucia charged straight into the tidal wave of demons. The soldiers behind him raised a battle cry and crashed in after him. The battle was ferocious.

Even in Zagan's age, having several Archangels and former Archdemon candidates would just barely be enough against demons. Anyone weaker would take an army at a company strength just to defeat a single entity.

A thousand years ago, while swordsmanship had developed fully, sorcery was still in its infancy. That surely couldn't have been enough to oppose demons. Regardless, the soldiers did exactly that. They blocked body-rending blows with their swords, dodged them, and charged in to cut down their foes. Even those who got hit and

lost half their bodies raised their swords to strike down their killer in return.

So these are heroes.

According to Phenex, their power was obtained by burning away their very life. Even if they survived this battle, they wouldn't live long. Nevertheless, they followed Lucia, burning away what little life they had to protect him and cut open a path.

Their titanic efforts only worked against the demons, however. Azazel screamed, and that simple act ruptured the bodies of the nearby soldiers. The sound had likely been charged with mana. They'd been pulverized from the inside out.

"That's...celestial mysticism," Nephy said, trembling.

"What?"

Zagan doubted his ears.

Alshiera shouldn't be capable of that.

She was capable of reading Celestian, though. If so, was this Azazel's power?

The moment Azazel reached the shore, the tides turned. Soldiers died instantaneously and the horde of demons trampled over their corpses. That, in and of itself, brought endless despair, but the nightmare only got worse.

"Zagan, demons are pouring down!" Foll exclaimed.

Tears dribbled from Azazel's many blue eyes. They were demons. They were small, but still had several times the mass of humans. The simple act of falling brought about considerable destruction. Zagan recalled seeing this before.

It's the same as in Alshiera's barrier.

Back then, an endless stream of demons had fallen from the tiniest crack in a single eye. Just as Ain had said, Azazel had the power to create demons.

"So this is the battle from a thousand years ago?" Astaroth muttered in astonishment. "I see. This is more than enough to destroy the world."

The battle was already completely in the demons' favor.

"Is that...Azazel?" Nephy asked, clearly baffled by the scene before her. She'd fought against the Azazel who'd stolen Nephteros's

body and had heard the name from Asura at the time. “The Azazel I saw had golden eyes. Why does this one have blue eyes?”

Whenever Azazel had appeared inside other people’s bodies, their eyes turned golden as if to highlight its presence. The same had happened to Nephteros, Aristella...and probably Alshiera. However, the demon before them now had blue eyes—the same azure that Nephy and other high elves possessed. The one to answer her was the only person here who’d personally witnessed the battle.

“Because Azazel is a high elf,” Phenex said. “You must’ve vaguely realized that already, right?”

Nephy gasped. That much was clear from the fact that it was using celestial mysticism.

“The inverse color of azure is a reddish yellow—in other words, gold,” Phenex explained. “It’s likely that the process of possession causes an inversion. That’s how it worked with Alshiera.”

“So that really is her...?” Zagan asked.

Phenex shrugged and replied, “You’ll see soon enough. It’s about time.”

Reinforcing her words, a boy leaped forward. It was Lucia. Several soldiers charged in behind him. They served as his shields and swords to clear a path forward. These soldiers all pulled off superhuman feats, but some in particular were on an entirely different level. One was wielding a Sacred Sword too. However, their strength didn’t hold for long. One after the other, they fell, shielding Luca and opening the way for him all the while.

Before long, Lucia was the only one left. He jumped up high, closing in on Azazel. Countless tentacles blocked him, but he severed them all before finally reaching the top of the enormous black mass.

So strong...

The Second Silver-Eyed King specialized in reading the future. Zagan had known this already, but this was more than just that. In the battle against Shere Khan, had this man truly stood against him, Zagan would’ve been defeated before having the chance to invoke Showers of the Wailing Dead. In all likelihood, Lucia could overwhelm even Samyaza.

This is my father?

He didn’t want to admit it, but Zagan felt a tremendous sense of admiration toward him.

Lucia screamed something and split Azazel in two. Zagan couldn’t make out what it was, but it almost sounded like a name. A lone girl was revealed within the torn mass of demons. She only looked around twelve or thirteen years old. Her loose golden hair was accented by two broken horns. Her eyes were closed due to being unconscious, but her face was identical to Azazel’s just moments ago.

This was none other than Alshiera from a thousand years ago. Lucia took her hand and pulled her out of Azazel. After losing its core, Azazel started losing its form and crumbled to pieces.

This is also the same as the Sludge Demon Lord.

During Bifrons’s evening ball, it had taken a clear shape by absorbing Nephteros and had dissolved upon losing her.

No wonder Bifrons discarded Nephteros so easily...

It wasn’t clear how much of it had been calculated beforehand, but the Archdemon had tried replicating this exact scene.

Even as it crumbled, the blue eyes remained open. Lucia also seemed to have used the last of his strength to land that strike. He was on his knees, unable to get back up.

Like a giant mass of fluid, Azazel’s body poured down to engulf Lucia and Alshiera. The one who stood against it was someone Zagan recognized all too well.

“Marc?” Zagan uttered his name unconsciously.

His glasses were cracked and blood flowed from wounds all over his body. And yet, he swung a sword with a desperate expression on his face. His tenacity might’ve even surpassed Lucia’s. As he swung, lightning coiled around his body.

Is that sorcery? No, that’s from the Sacred Sword...

The young Marchosias wielded a Sacred Sword. What was more, the name engraved on the blade—Camael—was the same as the one Richard had inherited.

According to Richard, the talkative Sacred Sword—or rather, the seraph sealed within it—had said that she had to see something through with her own eyes before being destroyed.

Does it involve Marchosias?

It seemed Zagan had a lot of questions to ask once he was back in Kianoides.

Thanks to Marchosias's efforts, Lucia managed to retreat. The battle itself was lost, but because they'd retrieved Alshiera, Azazel's power had been greatly diminished.

"I doubt that's all there is to Azazel..." Zagan muttered. "Is this just a spawn?"

"Exactly," Phenex confirmed. "It's nothing but a small piece that broke off from the main body."

"And there are multiple of these?"

"That's right. There weren't that many, though. About three or four? This was the most special among them."

"Because it ate Alshiera?" Zagan asked, grimacing.

"You're half-right," Phenex replied, pointing at Lucia. "It seems the Second Silver-Eyed King Lucia could hear a voice ever since his birth."

"A voice?"

"Yes. The voice constantly begged him to save someone. However, Lucia chose to save the voice's owner instead. As a result, Azazel wasn't destroyed and is still accumulating power even now."

Zagan glared at her.

"If you knew the Azazel from a thousand years ago, why did you poke holes in Ain's argument earlier?"

"Out of habit," Phenex replied unapologetically.

Well, those who said things like that in such situations did seem liable to die first.

She really is a pain in the ass.

"This much power from just a spawn?" Astaroth said, letting out a sigh. "If there are multiple of these and the main body is even stronger, we basically have no choice but to accept what Marchosias said."

That was exactly why he was showing them this memory.

"Hmph! This is enough reminiscing," Zagan said. "It's about time for us to leave."

Furcas was Zagan's subordinate, so it was a king's duty to protect

the boy. Zagan lit the black flames of the Fivefold Grand Flower at his fingertips, but wasn't exactly brimming with confidence.

Now then, how many of these do I have to fire off to escape this place?

While it was possible to destroy their prison, that didn't mean it was going to be easy.

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"One thousand years ago, Alshiera died in battle. Then, Azazel devoured her. We saved her through the sacrifice of many, but that is exactly why she was made to be the pillar that protects the world."

With that, Marchosias bowed his head once again.

"We lost absolutely everything a thousand years ago. We sacrificed everything, but I was unable to save anything. However, if there's one thing left that I might be able to save, it's my little sister, so please lend me your strength."

This man had ruled the world both publicly and from behind the scenes for a thousand years, had committed every atrocity imaginable, yet had also protected and saved the masses and many rare species. His life had been full of contradictions. Furcas couldn't even begin to imagine what he'd seen and how he'd agonized over his decisions. However, he understood that there were no falsehoods in Marchosias's plea. After all, Furcas had also worn himself out to the point of losing his mind doing little more than chasing a single girl. Marchosias was the same as Furcas. That was what he now knew.

"I'm sure you're telling the truth," Furcas replied gravely. "She saved me. If she needs help, then that's more than enough of a reason for me to risk my life."

"Then—"

"But before that," Furcas said, interrupting Marchosias as he raised his head again. "There's one thing I don't understand."

"And that is...?"

Marchosias should've already known what Furcas was about to ask. And yet, he cocked his head with a baffled look spreading

across his face.

"Save Alshiera. That goal, I support wholeheartedly," Furcas said. "However, wouldn't that mean destroying her barrier? Without the barrier, the world will surely end."

Was that not why Marchosias had called for this gathering?

"It'd be meaningless to save Alshiera only for her to be killed shortly after," Furcas continued. "I assume you have some scheme to deal with that."

Furcas could guess as to what exactly that was. Still, there was a need to hear Marchosias say it himself.

"Of course," Marchosias confirmed. "I'll save Alshiera and I'll protect the world. That's why I went as far as degrading myself to a nephilim to return."

"Then answer me. How will you save the world?"

Marchosias's gaze remained unshakable.

"Arrangements have been made for a substitute to become the barrier's pillar," he replied. "Alshiera's cherished descendant—Lilithiera."

There wasn't the slightest hint of malice in his voice. To this man, this was the undeniable correct choice. It was the right sacrifice to make. In all likelihood, Marchosias had tried to secure both Furcas and Lilithiera in the surprise attack, but Ain had gotten in his way, leading to the wound Marchosias had suffered.

"Alshiera's blood runs thicker in Lilithiera than any other," Marchosias continued. "She's the only being capable of entering and exiting the barrier. In all of history, there has never been a better substitute. In fact, it's precisely because she was born that Alshiera can be saved."

Furcas didn't so much as twitch at that answer. On the contrary, he asked yet another question on the assumption that this method made sense.

"Even if she's inherited Alshiera's blood, will the Azazel factor in her be sufficient? I thought the barrier's strength was due to Alshiera's connection with Azazel."

Marchosias smiled and responded, "Impressive. You understand that much? There's no need for concern. Azazel's factor can be

bestowed. The experiment to do so has already succeeded."

Furcas looked at the four people behind the man who was speaking to him. Marchosias was supposed to have one other subordinate named Bato. If he wasn't here, then he'd most likely already been disposed of in said experiment.

"It's just as you say, the barrier will fall once Alshiera is separated from it," Marchosias confirmed. "The thirteen Archdemons' role is to hold back Azazel until the pillar can be replaced."

Even the Archdemons could achieve little more than buying time. That was simply how mighty Azazel was.

"Are those all your questions?" Marchosias asked, looking straight into Furcas's eyes.

Furcas paused, looking up before saying, "Yes."

Living up to this being the land at the end of the world, the sky was ominous and cloudy. Though, he felt like he could see the faintest hint of an iridescent light through those thick clouds. One and a half years ago, Azazel had torn through the barrier and Marchosias and many others had fought it back at a great cost.

This sky was likely connected to that place. Furcas wouldn't be able to withstand it a second time. He wouldn't get away with simple memory loss if he tried it again. He would definitely die. But even so, if he could save that lonely girl, he would gladly sacrifice his worthless life.

"Five hundred years ago, Alshiera saved me, but I haven't been able to do anything to repay her," Furcas said. "Perhaps my five hundred years of wandering wasn't entirely fruitless. Perhaps I was born for this exact purpose."

The reason she'd left him behind back then was because he'd been so powerless. He was different now, though. He'd reached the pinnacle of all sorcerers in the field of spatial manipulation and had been granted the seat of an Archdemon for it. He was even capable of striding over her barrier. And so, it was time to pay back what he'd been given.

"You're most welcome among us, Archdemon Furcas," Marchosias said, holding out his right hand.

Furcas smiled like he had when he'd been no more than a boy.

And then, he gave a clear answer.

"Get bent."



Marchosias fell silent, his hand still outstretched, then pushed up his glasses with his other hand before finally speaking.

"Sorry...I seem to have misheard. What did you just say?"

"Not used to the slang? I refused." Furcas smiled nostalgically. "Alshiera was my aspiration. That hasn't changed, even now. However, if I drag her out of there like this, she won't be happy. I wouldn't actually be saving her."

He then turned an utterly disappointed look toward Marchosias.

"I was hoping you would say I had you wrong," Furcas continued. "I was hoping you would know another way, one where nobody would have to be sacrificed."

"Such a convenient method doesn't exist..." Marchosias replied, hatred clear in his bitter voice.

Furcas slumped over and said, "I bet it doesn't. Still, I want to search for another way. I want to become a man those girls could be proud of, after all."

"*Those*...girls?"

"You know, Marchosias," Furcas said, an air of pity in his voice, "no man would ever agree to let the girl he loves be sacrificed."

The first time had been in that cold ocean, the girl with eyes like the moon had reached out for him when he'd been fated to drown. The second time had been in an even darker and colder place. His heart and mind had shattered to pieces, but she'd come to save him.

"The path won't ever open to you if you just sit around."

Even though she was completely incapable of fighting, she'd shown him the way forward. He wanted to become a man he wouldn't be ashamed of in front of her. The memories of the young boy were also inside Furcas, so he couldn't possibly betray them.

Furcas held up his right hand, his Sigil of the Archdemon shining with a dazzling light.

"I love Lilith. No matter what happens, that will never change. I haven't changed...and that's why I refuse to obey you. I'll save Alshiera another way."

Marchosias's mouth opened slightly as if to speak, but he remained silent. Instead, he let out a deep sigh. When he next raised his face, his eyes contained nothing but cruelty within them.

This was the gaze of the man everyone on the continent feared—Eldest Marchosias.

"It seems I've miscalculated..." he said. "Such infidelity. What a worthless man."

"Don't call it infidelity. Call it finally recovering from five hundred years of unrequited love."

Even though both these men wanted to save the same girl, they couldn't agree on how.

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"Infinite Gates."

Furcas was the first to act. A transparent rectangular distortion took shape in front of him. It had the one and square root of two proportions of the silver ratio, then multiplied like hundreds of thousands of opposing mirrors. Before long, it formed a corridor of infinite distortions between them.

Marchosias turned his sharp gaze to the corridor, then clicked his tongue.

"A barrier that cuts and pastes space on top of itself? I'm surprised you can create such a domain inside someone else's barrier."

"It's my first time showing it to anyone..."

Furcas was honestly impressed that he'd seen through it at a single glance. This barrier connected each mirrorlike distortion to each other. It was sorcery that led to nowhere.

I'm the one at a disadvantage here, so I have to start by buying time.

Striking Furcas would break the spell, but even though he looked like he was so close, there was an enormous gulf between them. Marchosias could never reach Furcas. Or at least, that should have been the case, but Marchosias placed his hands against the empty air at his feet.

"Snaking Nimbus."

A serpentlike light extended and coiled around the infinite distortions. It seemed to be an extremely intricate magic circle. In

the blink of an eye, it corroded all of the distortions and unleashed a flash.

"Tch!"

Now it was Furcas's turn to click his tongue. Nimbus was a spell that Marchosias used when he needed to annihilate an entire town. The terrifying part about this sorcery was its precision. Despite exterminating every last living being, it didn't leave a single mark on the town itself. It wasn't at all rare for an Archdemon to be able to blow up a city, but very few were capable of damaging only the people within one.

This was a variation of that sorcery. It destroyed every single distortion of Infinite Gates.

By penetrating the innumerable overlapping space all at once, he's capable of crossing right through to me!

The light formed an arrow aimed right at Furcas, leaving him no choice but to dodge. The terrifying sorcery failed to strike Furcas, but that wasn't the problem here.

"I see... So this isn't even enough to stall you," Furcas stated. "I suppose my sorcery is nothing but child's play to you."

The circuit for Infinite Gates cracked and shattered to pieces. What was supposed to be a perfect barrier had been torn apart through sheer force.

"Not at all," Marchosias responded, shrugging. "Infinite Gates, you called it? What terrifying sorcery. I can't even imagine how you came up with it, let alone copy it. In terms of spatial manipulation, I am nowhere near your level. However, all of today's sorcery began from me. I can weigh the merits and demerits of anything that takes the shape of sorcery. What's more, there is no perfect sorcery. After all, even as its progenitor, perfection is a completely foreign concept to me."

Furcas naturally understood what he was implying.

"I see. So the Eldest is a signifier for he who knows everything."

"To be precise, he who knows all sorcery," Marchosias corrected, pushing up his glasses, his expression completely unchanging. "If I knew everything in the world, I could handle most situations better."

Even when displaying a completely unique sorcery for the first

time, doing so in front of this man was equivalent to revealing all of its secrets. It was like providing him with a detailed report of all the work done to produce your results.

In other words, it was impossible to beat this man using sorcery. He was the natural counter of all sorcerers in an entirely different way from Zagan. If not for that, he wouldn't have spent the last thousand years standing at the summit.

However, that wasn't enough of a reason for Furcas to run away. Watching him invoke his next sorcery, Marchosias let out a sigh of exasperation.

"A sorcerer of your level should already understand the vast gulf between us," he said.

"Do you only pick fights you have a chance of winning?" Furcas replied with a childish grin.

"You really know how to get on a man's nerves..." Marchosias grumbled, perhaps reminded of someone else's behavior.

"When I became an Archdemon, there was one other candidate," Furcas said. "He was strong. Far stronger than I was at the time, in fact."

He was well aware that there were plenty of people who were stronger than him out there in the world. Furcas had become an Archdemon simply because the other candidate hadn't. He'd taken his place. Hence, he couldn't possibly bring shame to his name as an Archdemon.

"No matter how far you drove him into a corner, he always smiled calmly," Furcas continued. "He said that was his style."

That was why Furcas smiled now. Perhaps Marchosias was reminded of the same person. He narrowed his eyes, then carefully raised his guard.

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"Oh dear, it looks like negotiations have failed," Asmodeus muttered as if it had nothing to do with her.

The four Archdemons who'd been dragged along behind Marchosias were separated from him by a barrier. They couldn't hear

what he was saying, and because Marchosias's back was turned to them too, it was also impossible to read his lips.

That made sense, since he'd created that barrier precisely because he didn't want to be heard. However, since Furcas was facing Asmodeus, she had largely been able to get the general gist of the conversation.

He plans to sacrifice that Lilith girl so that he can get Alshiera out of that barrier.

Both were targets of Furcas's infatuation, so he hadn't been able to go along with a plan that required sacrificing one for the other.

Good grief. A busybody as always.

It seemed Marchosias had forcefully revived Furcas's old memories. Furcas had gone out of his way to verbalize what was going on to pass that information to Asmodeus. If not for that, he was the type of sorcerer to skip such a dialogue and strike immediately. Now that the battle had begun, Asmodeus and the other Archdemons could only watch.

The sorcery Furcas had used was unlikely to ever be reproduced. It was so advanced that it was practically a work of art. Only a genius would be able to wield it. The space between the two men had been sliced into planar pieces and made a complete mess. Much like it was impossible for something two-dimensional to become three-dimensional, it would be impossible to escape that barrier no matter how many years one was given to try.

And yet, Marchosias had broken it in a single glance. The Eldest's name wasn't just for show. Seeing his strength for herself was perhaps the greatest boon Asmodeus could get from this display.

"This is bad..." Eligor mumbled, an air of panic in her voice. "It's going to take a while."

What kind of future did Astrologian Eligor see beyond this battle? It didn't sound like she fancied the outcome.

"Hee hee hee, he's facing Furcas, after all," Naberius said. "Even Marchosias won't be able to defeat him so easily."

"If he takes too long, Zagan will escape," Eligor said. "I don't really want to, but we'll have to h—"

Just as Eligor was about to say something, her complexion

suddenly turned a ghastly shade. With her arm still stretched into the space Eligor had just been occupying, Asmodeus shamelessly cocked her head.

"Are you betraying us, Asmodeus?" Eligor asked.

"You wound me. I still haven't been paid, so of course I'm not betraying you," Asmodeus replied with a grin, fixating her starry eyes on Eligor. "But if I'm not going to be paid, it's the Collector's way to simply take what's owed."

There were two things Asmodeus had dedicated her life to finding. One was all the core jewels that had been stolen from her people, the other was the eyes that had been gouged out of her sister's corpse. Eligor was likely in possession of one of these. If she exposed her defenseless back to Asmodeus by joining the fight against Furcas, Asmodeus wouldn't be able to hold back any longer.

"Glasya-Labolas, go help Marchosias," Eligor ordered, grinding her teeth.

"Oh? Are you not in need of help, my lady?" he asked.

"I don't die here," she told him. "Just go already."

It was a gallant act on her part, but he simply shrugged without making a move.

"Glasya-Labolas!" Eligor bellowed.

"Forgive me, but I cannot move," he said. "After all, I too possess something the Collector wants."

The Hex Katana he wielded was from Asmodeus's collection. She'd parted ways with it temporarily in a trade with Shere Khan, but it was still one of her precious treasures. Given the chance, she would surely steal it.

"Just use Night Curtain!" Eligor yelled.

"Non. It is pure conceit to try to use the same sorcery twice against the Collector and expect it to work," he retorted with a smile. "The next time I do, she will surely strike me down."

Asmodeus was quite annoyed by that observation.

So he really has seen through me.

Even though she'd planned the whole thing, Asmodeus had once lost to Night Curtain. After that, it had always been clear that she would make an enemy of this man again, so naturally, she'd formed

countermeasures using the information she'd obtained from their encounter. Had he casually tried to take her down, she would've killed him, but it seemed things wouldn't be that easy.

Eligor turned to her last hope.

"Naberius."

"No way," he said, immediately averting his eyes. "Fisticuffs aren't a part of the contract, remember? I'd rather not get people angry at me when I don't have to."

"I don't hate how you understand your place in things, Naberius," Asmodeus said with a friendly smile.

"I also don't hate how tenacious and merciless you are," he told her in turn.

Three hundred and fifty years ago, having just become an Archdemon, Asmodeus had launched an attack on Naberius but had been forced back. At the time, he'd smiled just like this and had treated it as water under the bridge.

Eligor clenched her fists. She understood that she was incapable of making a difference on her own. And yet, Asmodeus had done this half on a whimsy simply because she wanted to tease Eligor. But somehow, that whim had sealed the movements of three Archdemons.

Asmodeus suppressed a sigh.

That's the best I can do for you.

The battle between Furcas and Marchosias continued on the other side of the barrier. Asmodeus could do no more than this while still not technically betraying Marchosias and being refused her reward.

"Anyway, I'm surprised you're supporting Furcas," Naberius said with an annoying look. "I thought he was your teacher's enemy."

Asmodeus cackled.

"A teacher's problem isn't a student's problem. It has nothing to do with me."

"How shameless..." Naberius mumbled.

Nobody took Asmodeus's words seriously. She didn't reveal her true intentions to anyone, which was just how she liked it.

"In a prolonged battle, Furcas will be the one at a disadvantage,"

Naberius said. “Marchosias can bring it to an end at any time he wants, after all.”

“We’ll see about that...”

This hadn’t turned the tables in Furcas’s favor, but it did protect him from an instant loss.

Thus, Furcas’s lonely battle continued.

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“I’m impressed that you can keep running. Nimbus.”

A tremendous magic circle covered the sky and rained arrows of light. Ever since Infinite Gates had been destroyed, Furcas had been unable to do anything aside from run around. By distorting space and bending it, he was somehow able to withstand Nimbus’s barrage. He still had to resort to evasive maneuvers for the rays of light that got through, but that was approaching its limit. His body was now covered in wounds.

“This sorcery’s selling point is its accuracy,” Marchosias said, a hint of awe in his voice. “But honestly, I’m starting to lose confidence with how much you’re dodging it.”

He didn’t ease up on the attack, though.

Despite having a complete advantage, he’s refusing to show his hand. He’s such an unpleasant guy.

Marchosias was only using a single spell, yet that was more than enough to pulverize Furcas on its own. It seemed he was intentionally keeping what information he gave away to a minimum. Little by little, with absolute certainty, Furcas was being driven into a corner. Despite this, he shifted his focus to the four Archdemons standing behind Marchosias.

Looks like they aren’t going to join in.

It seemed Asmodeus was holding them back. Despite having a valid reason to hold a grudge against Furcas, she’d never once shown him any hostility. She had something that she absolutely had to accomplish, which she hadn’t lost sight of over the past four hundred years. She was a splendid sorcerer. In that case, Furcas’s only enemy was Marchosias. Coming to that conclusion, he finally

stopped running.

"Hm? Is the game of tag over already?" Marchosias asked shamelessly.

"I was at a disadvantage from the start," Furcas replied, wiping the blood from his brow. "Everything I can do requires preparation."

It was doubtful that Marchosias had been under the impression that Furcas had simply been running.

"Hmm? Then I suppose you're done preparing, yes?" Marchosias asked, a smile of amusement on his face. "I don't enjoy picking on an unarmed opponent, after all."

In other words, Marchosias had allowed him to prepare his sorcery.

Well, I was woken up out of the blue, so this is the only shot I have of winning.

As Furcas was now, he had nothing prepared at all. He had to weave all of his sorcery from scratch. While Zagan was capable of invoking sorcery in an instant to erase his opponent's spells, that was done by tracing what he saw. Creating sorcery from scratch would still take him a few seconds. The Showers of the Wailing Dead he'd used during the previous battle had even taken him a whole day to prepare. That was what it meant for a sorcerer to be unarmed. And yet, for some reason, Marchosias had been waiting for Furcas to arm himself.

I see. This is a form of education.

Trampling over an opponent who gave everything they had made the despair from defeat all the greater. Still, Marchosias was treating this too much like a game. If he dragged his feet for too long, Zagan would break free from wherever he'd been imprisoned. Marchosias was using this limited time to try to get Furcas to submit to him.

Meaning Marchosias hasn't given up on using me yet.

He'd simply changed the approach from cooperation to subjugation. In that case, there was still a way of handling this. Furcas took a quiet breath, then held up a finger on his left hand. There wasn't anything magical about the gesture. He didn't gather any mana, nor did he create any magic circles.

"What are you doing...?" Marchosias asked, grimacing at the

meaningless act.

"The key to spatial manipulation is having control of the coordinates," Furcas explained. "In a contest between sorcerers who are using the same type of sorcery, it's a scramble for said control. So, this is a landmark—one to make sure I don't lose sight of my own coordinates."

He kept his finger up, lowered his hips, and clenched his right fist. It looked like he was getting ready to launch himself and throw a punch. However, this was a fight between sorcerers, and Archdemons at that. Plus, Furcas wasn't the type who fought with his fists like Zagan. If anything, any sorcerer fighting with their fists was total nonsense.

Marchosias didn't have a read on what Furcas was doing, so he simply quietly raised his guard. This didn't turn into a prolonged staring contest, however.

With an explosive boom, Marchosias was suddenly sent flying backward.

"Gah!"

Marchosias coughed up blood and bounced midair. He'd been struck by something invisible. It didn't seem like any sorcery was at work, though. Eligor and the other Archdemons were clearly shocked by the mysterious attack as well. If Asmodeus hadn't been holding them back, they might've charged in.

"What was— Agh?!"

However, Furcas's opponent was the man who'd dominated the world for a thousand years. He recovered immediately, but was met with yet another mysterious impact.

I won't give you the chance to retaliate.

Furcas continued launching invisible attacks. Keeping Marchosias from even falling from the sky, Furcas bumped his body around midair like a bouncy ball. Sprays of blood turned into a red mist that filled the area.

Marchosias was trying to defend himself. Some kind of magic circle glimmered, but was broken before it could accomplish anything. That was how accurate this attack was. Even when Marchosias tried to dodge, it still hit him. He had to be confused.

It was impossible even for the man who knew all sorcery to be able to react on the spot to something he couldn't see. And so, he couldn't defend or evade this assault, which meant his next choice of action was limited.

"Nimbus, Heaven and Earth!"

Enormous magic circles stretched out to cover both the sky and ground. Nimbus already boasted tremendous accuracy and volume, but now it was coming from both above and below. If he couldn't defend or evade, the only choice was to attack.

"It's useless," Furcas declared, unperturbed by the attempt.

His invisible attack slammed into the magic circles in the dozens, destroying them before they could unleash their terrifying sorcery. However, that had relaxed the attack on Marchosias for just an instant.

"Hm?!"

By the time Furcas refocused on his target, Marchosias was already right before him.

"Trembling Lightning."

His arm was wreathed in lightning, closing in like a scythe. Furcas could tell that this was extremely advanced lightning sorcery that could end him in an instant.

"Gah?!"

Luckily, it didn't reach. Unable to finish his attack, Marchosias hacked up blood and was blown back yet again. Furcas had both pinpoint targeting and an impregnable defense. He hadn't moved the slightest since taking a stance. Regardless, the man who was supposed to be the greatest sorcerer hadn't been able to do a single thing to him. Still, by the time Marchosias was back on his feet, all the damage had already been undone.

I guess it takes more than that to finish him off.

The reason Marchosias looked like he was taking a one-sided beating was because this sorcery was invisible. However, this was the man who knew all sorcery. Even if he couldn't see it, he would see through its weaknesses after getting hit so many times.

In truth, the last thing he'd tried was something that prodded at said weakness. As if to confirm that fact, Marchosias spoke the

sorcery's name.

"Destruction Quake... Is that not its name?"

Furcas turned his eyes not to Marchosias, but Eligor.

"I see. Barbatos used it against her, didn't he?"

It was likely telepathy. Sending a message across this barrier required significant skill. Among the four Archdemons on the outside, only Eligor was capable of it. The other three weren't the type to devote time to learning such sorcery, after all.

Just as Marchosias had said, this was something Furcas had passed down to Barbatos. It was sorcery that shook space itself by slamming subspace into it. It shook everything, including any defenses, the impact shooting straight to the innards.

All I did was reward him with a grimoire for completing a request...

This had happened before Furcas had tried crossing Alshiera's barrier. What had allowed it to reach the stage of practical use was without a doubt the skill of the sorcerer known as Barbatos.

"Destruction Quake Crumbling Skies," Furcas answered quietly.

Because it was sorcery that was woven in subspace, it was impossible to see the flow of mana or its magic circle. Thus, not even Zagan could devour it. If Barbatos truly mastered this power, he would surely surpass Zagan. If anything, Marchosias was abnormal for taking so many hits from it.

This sorcery required an exact point in space to shake, which was what Furcas had prepared by running around earlier.

There's only one way to break it. Endure the pain and defeat the caster.

In other words, to drag things into a war of attrition. Still, even if Marchosias knew how to overcome this sorcery, the battle would take time. It was the perfect way to stall.

Marchosias fixed his cracked glasses with sorcery and let out a sigh of resignation.

"I see. It'll be hard to break through before Zagan returns," he said. "I'll admit it, you've surpassed my expectations. Truly, you are a terrifying sorcerer."

That was when Furcas noticed his mistake.

Crap, I overdid it!

He tried to invoke Crumbling Skies, but this time he was one step too slow.

"I'll stop trying to discipline you," Marchosias said. "Begone."

This Furcas was a transient being created thanks to the Memories of the Archdemon. Marchosias had been free to create or erase him at his leisure from the very beginning. It was only natural this would happen if Furcas showed enough strength to make Marchosias throw in the towel. Much like when he'd crossed Alshiera's barrier, Furcas's consciousness was ripped to shreds and vanished.

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"Can't you do anything?!"

In a rare display, Ain raised his voice in anger. Furcas was fighting Marchosias high in the sky. Despite being incapable of hearing any sound from up there, the tremors of the battle could be felt even on the ground.

Selphy knew nothing about sorcery, but she could tell something was happening too far away for her to see or hear anything. The battle was so intense that the shock waves reached all the way to her position.

"Don't be unreasonable!" Dexia yelled. "I would've done something already if I could. The guy who built that barrier has a rotten personality. It's like he knows everything we can possibly try and set countermeasures in place ahead of time."

Though it could be rude to call it unexpected, Dexia was actually the most experienced in spatial manipulation among this group. Behemoth and Levia were amazing sorcerers, but they were instead focused on supporting her. A small distance away, Kuroka had her shortsword drawn and pointed toward the sky.

"I don't think I can break through either," she stated. "I can probably break the barrier itself, but Furcas is too far away... Not even Butterflies can slip through."

Micca had the Sacred Sword drawn next to Kuroka, but he also shook his head.

"Sorry, the same goes for me," he reported. "Even if I use Confession, I can at most break the barrier, but it'll probably backfire on us."

Dexia's little sister Aristella had yet to regain consciousness. Unable to help in any other way, Selphy was letting her rest on her lap.

"What do we do...?" Lilith said tearfully. "Furcas is going to vanish... He's going to disappear..."

Much like Selphy, Lilith felt that the Furcas they knew was disappearing. The Furcas who was engaged in battle high up in the sky right now was someone they didn't know.

I wonder why he's fighting...

Selphy could at least tell that Furcas was fighting with his life on the line. Based on what Ain had said, she vaguely understood that Furcas had regained his memories. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to fight like that.

However, the old Furcas was in love with a girl other than Lilith. The old Furcas had no reason to fight here. And yet, that was exactly what he was doing.

"He's holding out precisely because of who he is now," Ain said, unable to hide his panic. "If that Furcas is erased, all hope is lost."

"Calm down, Ain," Behemoth said. "By that logic, you'll be in danger too if you get close to Marchosias."

"Well..."

Selphy didn't really understand, but Ain was apparently something called a nephilim, and all nephilim could have their memories erased like Furcas.

Everyone was desperately trying to save Furcas.

I don't really like him...

After all, he was a third wheel who was aggressively trying to court Lilith. The sight of him getting intimate with her and slowly getting her to lower her guard burned Selphy's heart.

Still...he's a good person.

No matter how much Selphy snarled at him, he'd never returned her enmity in kind. If anything, he'd treated her like a true friend. Above all else, the time she'd spent with Lilith, Ain, and Furcas

hadn’t been in any way uncomfortable. Even Selphy had enjoyed herself.

But I’m scared...

One day, he was going to take Lilith away from her. Even though Selphy had fallen in love first, Furcas was going to take her, which frightened Selphy. That was why Furcas vanishing should have been convenient for her.

So why do I feel so bad...?

A part of her hated the idea of Furcas disappearing. She recalled the events in Opheos’s spire. Selphy had overheard Lilith and Furcas speaking with each other.

“If your memories return, will you remain as you are?”

There’d been clear anxiety in Lilith’s voice, and Furcas had told he didn’t know. He’d then said the following with nothing to back his claim.

“But I’m pretty sure my feelings for you are the one thing that won’t change.”

A tear suddenly ran down Selphy’s cheek.

“Oh...I get it.”

He’d spoken the truth. She at least knew that Furcas wasn’t the type of person to lie. He’d believed that, had taken action, and was proving it.

The sky suddenly grew quiet. The shock waves had stopped, though the radiant magic circle had vanished. Looking up, Selphy saw Furcas tumbling to the ground.

“This is bad. The old Furcas was erased,” Ain said.

Selphy reached out with both her arms as if to catch the falling boy. She didn’t do so because she had some kind of plan in mind or anything.

But I hate the idea of Furcas vanishing!

Perhaps she was too late. Perhaps this was a mistake. Regardless, Selphy’s lips trembled as she poured all over her emotions into her voice.

“Can you hear my song?”

She sang, but not like usual. There were no words, just a melody. And yet, there was clear intent being conveyed by her song.

After all, singing is the only thing I can do.

Selphy didn't understand the meaning of what came out of her mouth. She simply sang, praying with all her heart for her song to reach that boy.

"Is that a Hex Song...? No, Selphy, what in the world are you singing...?" Kuroka asked, turning pale as she looked at her childhood friend.

Not a single one of them noticed that the girl lying on Selphy's lap opened her golden eyes.

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His head was in pain. No, not just his head, it was as if his entire being had been ripped apart.

Did I faint...?

The pain was nowhere near mild enough for him to simply faint, but his mind was in a daze and he couldn't think properly.

"Open your eyes! Weave your sorcery! Get back on your feet!"

Furcas's eyes snapped open as a voice echoed through his head.

"H-Huh? Why am I falling...? Forget that, I need a foothold!"

He somehow managed to create a magic circle and halt his descent. Furcas took a panicked look around him. Overhead, some distance away, a man with round glasses floated in the air. He was some kind of amazing sorcerer named Marchosias.

Oh yeah. He did something to me. And then...?

What had happened after that? He couldn't see who'd spoken to him just now either. He was pretty sure it hadn't been his imagination.

"Can you hear my song?"

He then heard a beautiful and pleasant melody.

"Singing...?"

This voice, he recognized.

"Is that Selphy?"

He looked around for the siren and spotted her down at the round table, singing. Furcas wasn't the only one looking at her either.

"Impossible... That song... It can't be... Why is anyone capable of singing it...?"

What had he recognized in it? Marchosias's face was filled with fear, all blood having drained from his cheeks. He ignored Furcas, kicked off a magic circle, and dove toward the round table.

"Stop him. Right now, you're the only one who can."

He heard that voice in his head again. It seemed that it wasn't his imagination. Furcas didn't need to be told that. He moved to block Marchosias's way.

"I don't know what you're planning, but I won't let you have your way!" Furcas cried.

"Out of the way," Marchosias told him, narrowing his eyes as if looking at trash. "I no longer have the time to play with you."

There was a seething rage combined with a hint of fear in his voice. Furcas nearly faltered at the intense anger behind it.

"No, I can't afford to run away!"

He had no idea what Selphy was doing. However, he had a feeling some kind of extraordinary miracle was happening thanks to her. He was alive right now because of her.

"Don't falter. You can fight. I'll teach you how."

The voice really was coming from directly inside his head.

I wonder who that is...

"There's no need to worry about that," the voice said as if answering his thoughts. *"I'm nothing more than a remnant. This song has given me a little time, but I'll vanish soon."*

With that, Furcas finally figured it out.

I see... You're me, aren't you?

The somehow familiar voice was Furcas's own.

"It's good that you understand. Take hold of my five hundred years of memories and experience before I disappear."

"Right!"

Furcas entered a stance, holding his index finger straight up and clenching his other fist.

"What are you doing...?" Marchosias said, repeating what he'd asked when he first saw this stance.

The first time was because he hadn't been able to see the true

purpose behind it. This time, he couldn't understand why Furcas was doing it.

"Good. You only have one chance. Don't ruin it."

The old Furcas sounded like he was about to vanish at any moment, yet still seemed so utterly reliable.

"Destruction Quake Crumbling Skies..." Marchosias said in irritation. "A terrifying sorcery, but it could only be pulled off by Archdemon Furcas. Do you think a mere husk is capable of the same?"

Marchosias had to know how meaningless that question was. After all, this stance wasn't something the young Furcas should have even known. The fact that he was taking it all already answered that question. That was why Marchosias was unable to push his way past him.

"Destruction Quake Crumbling Skies! Goooooo!" Furcas roared.

"Argh!"

Marchosias was blown away. However, Furcas suffered an even greater blow.

It hurts! It hurts...!

How had the old Furcas used such a thing? Using it once made it feel like he'd torn his arm off.

"Don't wield it using brute strength. Manipulate it with your mana instead. That's the kind of tool it is."

That's a lot harder than you make it sound!

Furcas was desperately holding back his tears.

"Well, whatever. That's good enough for a bluff."

The old Furcas knew that the young him was incapable of mastering Crumbling Skies. However, this display was a necessity. Having taken a hit from his sorcery multiple times before, Marchosias regained his balance, skillfully landing midair.

"I can't believe you really used it..." he said. "But judging by how there's no follow-up, you haven't mastered it."

"You sure about that?" Furcas said and smiled, a bead of sweat running down his brow from the pain. He then raised his finger once more.

"Don't think the same sorcery will work on me indefinitely,"

Marchosias told him with a sigh of exasperation. He then hardened his guard. No matter how great the impact was, it was possible to withstand it by putting enough strength into his body. He was well aware of the pain that would be accompanied by that, but the pain wasn't enough to stop this man.

"Here it is. It's your first and last chance. Finish him!"

"Yeah, I've got this! Vacuum Blade Dancing Mesh!"

He didn't unleash the invisible shock wave. This was sorcery Barbatos used to cut the air by using a dislocation in space. Furcas's version was a mass of dislocations crisscrossing with each other, forming a mesh screen that pushed forward. Eldest Marchosias was the man who knew all sorcery. By all rights, he should've been able to defend against it with ease.

"Wha—?!"

However, having been prepared for Crumbling Skies, his reaction was a beat too late.

Destruction Quake is amazing, but it lacks definitive stopping power.

Even though it was impossible to block or dodge, the impact was dispersed across the amount of space being shaken. Crumbling Skies had been a way of compensating for that flaw, but in terms of impact, it was nowhere near the level of Zagan's fist.

Naturally, there was enough force to turn the average sorcerer into mincemeat with a single blow, but it was clearly inadequate when it came to a fight between Archdemons. In other words, while Crumbling Skies was good at buying time, it was unable to finish things off. That was why the old Furcas had used it with this exact plan in mind.

There's actually no reason to hold my finger up.

However, by persistently making that gesture when using Crumbling Skies, Marchosias grew unconsciously focused on it. He hadn't expected another sorcery to be used when Furcas took that stance.

Even if he was capable of seeing through how any sorcery was constructed, prejudice had brought his thoughts to a halt. All had been for this one exact moment.

Marchosias immediately jumped back, but there was nowhere to run to as the Dancing Mesh closed in. There was nothing in existence that a dislocation in space was incapable of cutting. With a wet splash, bright red blood sprayed into the air.

"You've done it now..." Marchosias spat.

It wasn't enough!

Everything from his left shoulder down, his right knee, and his left foot had all been severed. Only his right arm was intact. Regardless, Marchosias remained floating in the air.

Right before the moment of impact, he'd thrown himself directly into the Dancing Mesh. There was no way of escaping the sorcery, but there were at least gaps between the blades. However, those were only large enough to barely fit a head through one. The slightest touch led to immediate amputation by guillotine. Marchosias had, in fact, cleanly lost a few limbs. He was mad to have thrown himself directly into such a gap. Nevertheless, he'd avoided any fatal wounds to his head and heart by sacrificing his arms and legs.

That's not the kind of decision you should be able to make in an instant...

Was this the gulf in experience between them? Marchosias's thousand years had been in no way peaceful. If he spoke the truth, it had been a never-ending loop of setbacks and failures. Having survived a thousand years in spite of this, none possessed more experience than him. What was more, with a single casual swipe of his intact right arm, Marchosias restored all of his lost limbs and torn clothes. Unfortunately, even this desperate plan had inflicted nothing but a flesh wound on him.

Or perhaps the truly terrifying part was his ability to instantly recover from the most grave injuries. Marchosias always claimed to be a common man. There was only one way for such a man to defeat the strong—to avoid dying. This man's sorcery was entirely devoted to preventing death. Ironically, the immortality that Phenex had been tormented by was the most valued treasure Marchosias had used his thousand years of wisdom seeking.

"Sorry...that's all I have."

Furcas shook his head.

"Don't worry about it. If not for you, I wouldn't even have been able to fight," he told the voice in his head.

"You did well," the old Furcas said, seemingly smiling despite having no form. *"I'm proud of you."*

"Say that after I win."

Furcas reached out his hand through subspace.

"What are you doing? No sorcery will work on him. We can't defeat him. You can't—"

"Can't win? Maybe. I mean, it was never even going to be a fight against the likes of me."

He was fully aware of that. He'd come here while already knowing it.

"But that doesn't mean I've gotta open the path for this guy just 'cause he's intimidating."

And so, Furcas smiled. He smiled and fought as hard as he had to.

"That's true... You're exactly right. In that case, I'll keep you company right to the end."

The old Furcas had stood his ground with the same resolve mere moments ago.

"I know people who are very similar to you..." Marchosias said, irritation clear on his face. "People who casually cast away their lives to open the way."

However, there was neither anger nor grief in his voice.

"Back then, everyone longed for them, but they never showed up. And here, you stand in my way... What a joke."

Who did Marchosias see in Furcas's figure? There was even an air of pain behind his words.

Nobody was there to save him...

Despite knowing that, Furcas couldn't back down. His fingers grasped the object he was looking for in subspace.

"I wanna protect Lilith. For that, I'll fight."

He then pulled it out. It was an enormous whip, long enough to weave its way through the sky, wriggling like a snake.

"The black whip, Star Eater... I see. That's the identity behind

those ridiculous shock waves."

It was woven of steel wire and was far too long and heavy to really call a whip. Its total length surpassed two kilometers and it weighed over thirty tons. If swung at full force, it was said to be able to pulverize a meteorite falling from the heavens. That was why it was named Star Eater.

By all rights, it shouldn't have been able to move like a whip. However, the spells woven into its fabric allowed it to be manipulated using mana. If mastered, it could exceed the speed of sound. Destruction Quake worked by slamming an object in subspace against real space, creating a shock wave. Barbatos apparently used his own mansion as ammunition, whereas Furcas used this.

But it's too heavy for me.

Controlling such a large object perfectly was impossible, even when relying only on the memories that had been granted to him. He could use it once on a defined spot like he had before, but he couldn't control it remotely through subspace over and over.

"So?" Marchosias scoffed. "Do you really think you can harm me with that thing?"

"Probably not. I'm sure you'll dodge."

However, he'd probably seen through Crumbling Skies completely. If Furcas tried to use it again, he would be defeated before he could even finish casting it. Furcas had to resort to a different approach, but he had no idea what that could be.

"Still, here I come!"

"Bring it on."

Nevertheless, he'd decided to fight. Furcas swung Star Eater at an opponent he had no chance of beating.

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"Furcas..."

Lilith looked up at Furcas's battle from the round table.

Dummy. Why didn't you just run...?

Lilith didn't understand much about sorcery, but she did know

that Furcas was capable of leaping through space. He very well could have run away on his own. And yet, he chose to fight. He was standing against someone who might possibly be the strongest sorcerer. The other sorcerers were trying their best to go help Furcas, but they'd yet to break the barrier or whatever it was that was impeding them.

Selphy was singing to support Furcas. Kuroka was tending to Aristella in her stead. And just then...

"Erk... Hak!"

"Selphy!"

She'd been singing this whole time, but suddenly coughed up blood. Lilith rushed over to her in a fluster and kept her childhood friend from falling.

"What the...? Your body is burning up... Selphy, you've been singing in this condition this whole time?"

Going by Ain and Behemoth's conversation, Selphy's song was apparently sustaining Furcas's battle. It was unthinkable for such power to come without a cost.

"Let me see," Levia said, running over to them.

Her arms were bound, so Lilith held Selphy up for her to see. Levia muttered something, probably healing sorcery, and Selphy's breathing calmed down just a little.

But she can't sing anymore...

She wasn't bleeding too badly, but her throat seemed to be ruined. It really didn't look like she could even speak. Nevertheless, Selphy got up and her lips began trembling.

"It's useless," Levia told her. "Stop that, Selphy."

"I can't!" Selphy protested, wiping blood from her lips. "I can't stop now. I don't really get it, but like, this is something I have to do."

"Selphy..."

"Got it," Levia said, plopping down next to her. "Sing. I can't help much, but I should be able to ease the burden a little."

Selphy began singing once more and Levia added her voice to the melody. Everyone was so desperate to do whatever they could to help Furcas.



So then, what am I doing...?

A succubus's power could only be manifested within dreams. Lilith had no strength in reality.

Please, someone save them!

She could only pray. Luckily, the answer to her prayers came from a vaguely familiar voice.

"Huuuh? And just as I was wonderin' who it was. If it ain't Zagan's succubus. Where is he, anyway?"

The crude voice seemed to echo out from the shadow at Lilith's feet.

Chapter IV: A Hero Is Nothing More than Someone Who Stubbornly Refuses to Give Up

"This is Ashy. Marc, much like you, she appears to be High Seraph Abaddon's child."

Orobas had introduced Marchosias to his little sister when he was fifteen. She was five years younger than him, and during a seraph attack, Orobas had picked her up. The first thing that immediately caught his eye was her torn and dirty dress. Perhaps having been dragged across the ground, her knees were scraped and bloody. Some of her nails had been torn off her fingers and those that were left were packed with dirt. He didn't need to be told what kind of hell she'd gone through.

Her scarlet eyes reflected no light. She was so expressionless that it was questionable if she was even breathing. Her dirty hair might've been blonde and was accented by what looked like horns that had been snapped off at their roots.

"She had bad luck and Abaddon discovered her. Her mother was a succubus, but I didn't make it in time."

The cruel state this girl was in and the fact that her mother wasn't nowhere to be found made it all too clear what had happened.

Seraphs sometimes took women of other species for fun. To them, everyone who wasn't a seraph were either cattle or slaves. Picking out their women was just a game to them. Seraphs had a very low birth rate, but when they did this all year round, they sometimes impregnated these women. However, it was very rare for the children to inherit the seraph's powers. The characteristics of their mothers' species were usually far more prominent. What was

more, they never used the same toy twice. The only time they did was when they broke them. That was why they threw them away. The abandoned mother and child never met a good end. The seraphs didn't spare them a single glance, while the other races avoided them because they'd been tainted by the seraphs.

Marchosias's mother was human, and due to him having none of a seraph's characteristics, he'd lived a relatively peaceful life for ten years. Even so, there'd been no stopping the rumors about him from spreading. One person talking behind his back had been all it had taken for him to be driven out of his village.

After that, he'd ended up drifting to the abandoned castle of an old man named Orobas. It wasn't exactly an orphanage, but a place where those who had nowhere left to go due to the seraphs naturally gathered. Marchosias's mother hadn't gotten that far, however. She'd died during their vagrancy, cursing everything in the world, including her own son.

Unlike him, the girl holding Orobas's hand must've still thought well of her mother. There was utter despair in her eyes. Species with horns took great pride in them, so breaking them was the equivalent of trampling on their dignity. Having their broken horns exposed was apparently a horrible humiliation.

Marchosias knelt before her and tied her hair on both sides to hide her horns. He was the oldest kid at the castle, all the other children were his little brothers and sisters, so he was used to tying hair like this. Perhaps it wasn't good to use a shoelace to do so, though.

"Okay, how about that?" he said with a smile. "Ashy, I'm Marchosias. You can call me Marc. I'm your big brother. You're not alone. I'm here for you. If anything ever troubles you, feel free to come to me."

The girl didn't respond, but she finally turned her vacant eyes his way.

I want to give this girl hope.

Maybe that was why he'd so naturally called himself her brother. The girl still didn't open her mouth, so he switched places with Orobas and took her hand. She timidly squeezed back. Then, he

started guiding her inside when she muttered something in the quietest of voices.

"Al...shiera..."

"Hm?"

"My...name. Alshiera."

"Oh! Is that so? Well, that's a good name. Let's get you to your room... Or maybe you'd prefer to take a bath first? Can you go in on your own? Want me to wash you."

"Perv..."

"It's not like that."

Both of them had no living relatives. To add to that, they'd both been dragged down into the same nightmare. Or perhaps the girl's hell had been even crueler than his. That was why he chose to protect her until the day she could cry when she wanted to cry and laugh when she wanted to laugh.

Maybe Marchosias was the one who'd been granted hope that day. He'd been the one who'd gained something priceless, after all.

This was the starting point for the man named Marchosias. It was also the day he'd decided on his final destination.



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"I don't get it... How can you still stand?"

The man who'd once devoted his life to his little sister but was ultimately unable to fight for her sake was yet again being obstructed. The Furcas before him was not Archdemon Furcas. Perhaps due to the Hex Song still resonating in the air, he'd inherited some sorcery and knowledge, but he was nowhere near the level required to fight against Eldest Marchosias. He'd been burned by lightning, pierced by arrows of light, struck by Marchosias's fists, and wasn't even able to regenerate his wounds. It was hard to tell because they were floating in the air, but Furcas was actually bleeding enough to create a significant puddle at his feet. And yet, he remained standing and ready to fight.

"Ugh... Aaaaaah!"

Furcas swung his black whip even though his eyes could no longer focus. Due to its abnormal mass and speed, it was hard to stop this attack using sorcery. Since it was a tool, it was difficult to analyze for weak points like Marchosias could do with sorcery too. In that sense, it was a little troublesome, but the difference in experience between these two was far too large. A small sway of the body was all it took to evade the whip completely. However...

"What?"

The black whip's trajectory curved and snapped back at him like a living creature. Unable to dodge it again in his current position, Marchosias swung his arm, repelling the whip with a thunderous boom that sounded like it could shatter the atmosphere. Despite defending successfully, Marchosias's expression turned grim.

He's starting to master Star Eater in that state...?

These snakelike movements were how this weapon displayed its true worth. What was more, the whip's speed couldn't be followed using human kinetic vision. Not even a sorcerer could do it. Why, even Furcas in his heyday hadn't been able to wield Star Eater to such a degree. And yet, for some reason, he was starting to master it now.

The black whip's destructive potential was frightening. Just touching it once had torn Marchosias's defensive barrier completely apart, even though he already knew this fact and prepared for it. Above all else, despite defending using sorcery, his right arm was numb from blocking and he couldn't use it anymore. He could recover from this, but he wouldn't get off lightly if attacked in quick succession.

He couldn't dodge attacks he should've been able to dodge. A simple graze was all it had taken to leave him in this state. If not for his sorcery, he would've died from the lightest contact with the thing.

I suppose I can't afford to waste more time here.

He wanted to capture Furcas alive, but at this rate, recovering the Sigil of the Archdemon would have to be good enough.

In the worst case, I can remake him as a nephilim. I don't really want to resort to that, though...

Marchosias possessed Shere Khan's Sigil and knowledge, so it would be a trifle for him to create some nephilim. However, he was reluctant to do that because, on rare occasions, there was a risk the nephilim didn't fully adapt to their new body. The Second Silver-Eyed King Lucia was a prime example of that. He now went by a different name.

"I commend your tenacity," Marchosias said, pushing up his glasses and clenching his fist. "But it's time to end this."

With one arm still numb, Marchosias closed in on Furcas.

"Trembling Lightning."

He created a scythe made of lightning. Archdemon Furcas had obstructed its activation using Crumbling Skies, but the husk Furcas had no way of stopping him. Or at least, that was supposed to be the case, but Marchosias's lightning suddenly vanished.

"Hm?!"

In the next instant, the lightning scythe appeared behind Marchosias. The blade that was meant to decapitate Furcas was now aimed at Marchosias. Furcas had teleported the attack to redirect it.

There was no dodging an attack like that. What was more, this was Marchosias's own sorcery. He doubted anyone in existence was

capable of handling such a thing at first sight.

Spatial manipulation again?

However, this was the third time Marchosias's sorcery had been redirected at him. He calmly modified the flow of his mana and altered the scythe's trajectory. The lightning buzzed past his back without hitting its target. Using that opening, Furcas jumped out of range.

Holding back a bead of cold sweat, Marchosias sighed.

He really is a genius...

Anyone who practiced spatial manipulation would be able to see how terrifying Furcas's stunt was. The difficult part of this type of sorcery was having perfect spatial perception. Even on perfectly still objects, connecting one place to another was a matter of life and death. That was why magic circles were typically used to stabilize the coordinates. People capable of freely wielding such sorcery without any stabilization were already monsters, yet Furcas had taken this a step further and used it on a moving object. Not only that, but it had been an attack from the greatest sorcerer. The word talent couldn't sum it up sufficiently. One could say it was the work of a god.

Marchosias had managed to evade because of its nature as sorcery, but a single misread would have proven fatal, which was why he didn't use sorcery like Nimbus that relied on multiple attacks. The moment he did, he would die.

That said, Furcas wasn't unscathed either. He'd redirected the scythe at Marchosias, but hadn't been able to fully defend against the stray arcs of lightning, so his entire right forearm was burnt and dripping blood.

"Star Eater and spatial manipulation... Quite a troublesome combination," Marchosias admitted.

Furcas smiled defiantly and replied, "It's called Echo. Pretty hard to handle, yeah?"

Sorcery that teleported an enemy's attack to hit back at them from an unexpected direction. It was a terrifying spell worthy of being called the quintessence of spatial manipulation. Marchosias was unable to replicate the feat himself.

If he got too far away, Star Eater would attack him. If he got too close, Echo would reflect his attacks. It was a terrific combo. This was the third time he'd lost the clash.

The first time he'd used his fist. Upon noticing that his own arm had vanished, it'd hit him right in the face and had sent him flying back.

The second time he'd used wide-area lightning sorcery. Several arcs had struck Furcas, but the main body of the sorcery had been sent right back at Marchosias.

The third time he'd focused on speed with Trembling Lightning, but that too had been sent back at him with deadly accuracy.

He's strong...

There was no winning until he admitted that. That was simply how powerful Furcas was.

"I fear it'll take a while."

Just as Eligor had predicted, Furcas had far surpassed his limits and was refusing to back down.

Heroes truly are so utterly annoying.

No matter how hopeless the situation, they refused to give up. By burning away their very lives, they overcame a gulf in power no matter how large it was and accomplished the impossible. They were such unreasonable beings.

Frustratingly enough, Furcas had the makings of a hero. Much like the old Silver-Eyed Kings, he cleared the way for hope to take root.

Marchosias shifted his focus to the round table far below him. A siren named Selphy was singing a song that shouldn't exist. She was definitely granting Furcas power, but Furcas had also been the one to allow her to do so.

A hero's spirit awakened dormant potential. Marchosias was really fed up with it. Heroes were contagious. Simply by accompanying one, even the riff-raff became heroes. Where had it all begun here...? Marchosias didn't even need to consider that. It had all started with Zagan. His group had already surpassed their limits several times to overcome unreasonable adversities.

Heroes were so reliable as allies, but there was nothing more

irritating to have as an enemy. Still, even taking all of that into consideration, something was strange. Some distance away, Furcas took a quiet breath before his eyes snapped open.

"All right... Let's do this!"

After seemingly talking to himself, he swung the black whip once more. Star Eater coiled far around Marchosias and swooped in from a blind spot. This was the right way to use this weapon, which was exactly why this was strange.

Furcas never managed to master Star Eater because it didn't suit his personality.

For better or worse, Furcas was an extremely honest man. That applied both during his heyday and after losing his memories. He shouldn't have been capable of such crafty attacks.

I've got it all figured out now.

Marchosias was better off renouncing his name as the Eldest if he couldn't come up with a countermeasure after seeing the same attack three times.

"How long do you think that will keep working?" he declared quietly.

He could stop one or two successive attacks from the black whip. He already had a way of dealing with Echo. Next time, Furcas wasn't going to get away. And just as Marchosias stepped forth to clash with the whip for the umpteenth time...

"Huh?"

He was left dumbfounded. The whip that had been closing in on him had suddenly vanished. He couldn't understand what was happening, which was why he acted entirely on instinct using his thousand years of experience.

Marchosias had charged his fist with sorcery to defend, but instead swung it behind him in a backhand blow. He didn't even have the leisure to look. His fist was blown back by an abnormally heavy impact. Somehow, the black whip was attacking him from behind.

He can teleport his own attacks too?!

It didn't stop at only one attack either. The whip exceeded two kilometers in length. Tremendous masses of metal came swooping

down on Marchosias from chopping up the huge whip into teleported chunks.

Now Marchosias remembered. When he'd used Nimbus Heaven and Earth, Crumbling Skies had pulverized it with a chain of attacks before he'd been able to activate it. That had been accomplished using Star Eater, so the same could naturally be done here. Marchosias felt the blood draining from his face. He'd long forgotten this sensation—fear.

A ridiculous number of black whips manifested before him.

"OOOOOOOOH!" Marchosias roared. He could only properly defend a single blow from each side using his fists. After that, he desperately swung his broken hands around to weather the storm.

I can't stop it!

With his entire body breaking apart, Marchosias turned his attention to Furcas.

"Flames of Indignation."

He unleashed a heat ray with the power of a dragon's breath. An Archdemon could easily block such sorcery, but it had more than enough strength to defeat Furcas as he was now. And yet, Furcas extended an arm as if to block it.

"Right back at you!"

Instead of hitting Furcas, the heat ray vanished the moment before impact and came down right above Marchosias's head.

That's the only thing he could've done.

This was Marchosias's own sorcery. He'd already proven he could twist its trajectory. One reason he'd used such a conspicuous projectile was because a part of him still wanted to take Furcas alive. The other reason was because it was so easy to aim.

Bending space to redirect an attack means a path exists back to the source.

By twisting the trajectory of the beam, he could send it right back down that path to Furcas. That was the theory, at least.

"What?!"

The heat ray didn't bend at all and instead pierced right through Marchosias, which froze him for an instant. The storm of black whips wasn't going to leave such an opening unexploited. Hundreds of

destructive impacts rained down on Marchosias's body. His arms were torn off, his legs shredded, his cranium crushed, and his innards ruptured.

"I see... I thought something was off."

When the raging black whip finally settled down, nothing of Marchosias remained.

"He's still alive...?" Furcas said, despair evident on his face.

Despite being reduced to a cloud of meat, Marchosias regenerated.

"Unfortunately, I've lived a thousand years. I've been on the verge of death like this many times."

So long as he was alive, he could regenerate from any wound. By the time he finished his sentence, ninety percent of his body was already back to normal.

That was close. If Star Eater was just a bit more destructive, or if I used something slightly more powerful than Flames of Indignation, I wouldn't have been able to endure.

Marchosias was still alive for a simple reason. Furcas's aim had been off.

"Gravity sorcery..." Furcas muttered, looking down at his hand.

"So even you can tell as you are now?"

Star Eater was a weapon with overwhelming mass that moved faster than the speed of sound. It was a very simple weapon, which made it all the more difficult to deal with. If it had one weakness, it was its tremendous mass.

Marchosias had amplified gravity on it tenfold. As a master of gravity sorcery, this would've been child's play to Asmodeus. Still, it was enough to throw off any control of the black whip. If not, Marchosias would've been scattered to the winds without leaving behind so much as a lump of meat.

Marchosias took a look around him. Straining his eyes, he could see tears in space. These were wedges to pry open space to evade or launch attacks. They'd all been prepared to unleash this ferocious storm. It'd been extremely close. Had he used a more fatal spell like Vacuum Blade or Nimbus instead of Flames of Indignation, he wouldn't have been able to use gravity sorcery.

Well, it's because it was only at the level of Flames of Indignation that he copied it so easily.

Marchosias extended his hand to Furcas—or rather, the shadow at his feet.

"Come out, you thieving rat."

Marchosias manifested a hand of gravity, yanking the dark figure out of the shadows.

"Whoa!"

A man tumbled into the air, letting out a bewildered yelp.

"Who the hell are you...?" Marchosias asked. He didn't recognize this unhealthy-looking sorcerer.

"Oh, c'mon, you tried to recruit me and you don't even know who I am?" the sorcerer said, ruffling his hair. "I'm the guy you wanted so badly, the great Purgatory Barbatos."

"Oh, the sorcerer who ranks next after Furcas in spatial manipulation," Marchosias said, finally remembering. "Now that I think about it, Andras brought you before me once. I see. You do possess some measure of skill. Few can infiltrate this barrier successfully."

Even an Archdemon would find it difficult. Among the four behind him, only Eligor and Asmodeus could do it.

And yet, this man pulled it off without me noticing.

In terms of spatial manipulation, he really had surpassed all the Archdemons aside from Furcas. What was more, Barbatos had the black whip clenched in his hand. He'd been the one swinging it around, not Furcas. Furcas had been able to focus on spatial manipulation precisely because he'd relinquished control of Star Eater.

Two specialists in spatial manipulation—the two best of not only this age, but all across history—were working together. That explained why Marchosias was having such a hard time.

"Was that Flame of Indignation yours?" Marchosias asked.

It had been a mistake to use such simple sorcery. Any sorcerer of a certain level was capable of copying it. He'd failed to notice that his own sorcery had been swapped out with another. The barrage of attacks from Star Eater had prevented him from doing so.

Marchosias had fallen for their trap.

"Don't go callin' it dirty," Barbatos said, shrugging. "You're the one tryin' so hard to bully a weakling. We're both pathetic, so let's call it even."

With that, he grabbed Furcas by the crook of the arm. Furcas was on the verge of collapsing. Marchosias could see Barbatos was using healing sorcery, but he wasn't particularly good at it. It would be impossible to get Furcas back into the fight at this point.

He's finally down.

That barrage had exhausted the last of his strength. It would take a miracle for him to use any sorcery after losing so much blood.

However, as much as it annoyed him, Marchosias couldn't help but be impressed by this man Barbatos. He was acting so casually before the Eldest. He knew no fear...and his skill with spatial manipulation was also spectacular. It was unprecedented for a mere twenty-year-old sorcerer to reach such heights.

Eligor was right to choose him.

It was regrettable that they'd failed to attract Barbatos to their side. That was why he forgave this behavior.

"It's ridiculous to fault the weak for swarming together," Marchosias said with a smile.

It was a cheap taunt, but Barbatos didn't bite.

"That so? Then you're gonna stay all open-minded and forgive what I do next too, yeah?"

"Hmmm...?"

It seemed he had a trick up his sleeve. Marchosias smiled in amusement as Barbatos swung the black whip. It took a complex snaking trajectory, but Marchosias dodged it with measured composure. However, the tip of the whip was nowhere in sight. It had already vanished and was closing in on Marchosias's back.

Regardless, Barbatos was the one left groaning.

"Even if it's not to Furcas's level, you can use Echo too?" Marchosias said, catching the whip bare-handed. "And at such a young age to boot. You continuously impress me."

"You're kiddin' me..."

This tactic had worked because he'd been controlling it secretly

from Furcas's shadow. Now that he was out in the open, his attacks were readable, even if they passed through space. Barbatos should've known this already. Supporting that theory, he wasn't disturbed at all that the whip had been stopped. If anything, he seemed to be smiling.

"Now! Do it!"

Marchosias felt a heavy thud against his back. He looked down to see a pitch-black blade sticking out of his chest.

"Hee hee hee, naughty children deserve punishment."

He saw golden eyes and hair. This girl had features very similar to Alshiera, but wasn't Marchosias's little sister.

"Impossible...! You're...Azazel!" Marchosias exclaimed, hatred and fear clear in his voice.

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"Huh? No way! It don't matter how much you pay me! That don't balance out!"

A few minutes earlier, Barbatos was throwing an unsightly tantrum after appearing at the round table. How could he not? They were asking him to pick a fight with Eldest Marchosias to save Furcas, the latter of which was already half-dead. No sane person would agree.

All I did was respond when I heard a crybaby. Why do I gotta put up with this shit?!

Marchosias's barrier was so complex and finely detailed that it was worthy of admiration. Even Barbatos's shadow wouldn't be able to break through it easily. In fact, when the thirteen Archdemons had entered the barrier, Barbatos had lost sight of them. While chasing his bad friend's presence, he'd heard a voice out of nowhere.

"Please. Someone save them...!"

For some reason, it had reminded him of Chastille. He'd made his way to the voice in a hurry and had ended up at the round table.

"There's no point expecting anything from this person," the cat lady said, looking down at him as if he were utter trash. "He's a

despicable sorcerer when it comes to anything that doesn't involve Lady Chastille."

"What's she gotta do with this?" he protested. "Want me to kill you?"

"Oh yes... Perhaps forcing him into submission could work."

They must've been at the end of their rope. She seriously sounded like she was going to kill him. Barbatos nearly faltered.

This is why I hate dealing with her.

She always had that murderous aura about her, even in the office in Kianoides.

"Stop that, Kuroka," the newcomer Ain said. "Barbatos, you're capable of crossing that barrier, yes? You don't need to fight. Just bring me to Furcas's side. Can you manage that?"

Barbatos looked straight up. It didn't look that far, but the space was isolated. The path there was stupidly complicated and there were traps everywhere—ones that would toss intruders into subspace. Barbatos had managed to reach the round table, but he doubted any sorcerer in the world could get through that.

"Well, I guess that much is fine," he answered, nodding casually.

The girl named Dexia was at a loss for words. She and two of the others were top-class sorcerers. They hadn't been able to break through the barrier, but it wasn't even an obstacle for Barbatos. Even if no sorcerer in the world could do it, he could. He did add one caveat, however.

"So I say, but I can't get all of you there. It'll take time."

"Were you planning to take everyone?" Behemoth asked, completely taken aback.

"Huh? I thought that was what you guys were askin'."

"Umm, then how many people can you take with you immediately?" Dexia asked. Her skills were so-so, but she wasn't as good as Behemoth or Levia.

"I won't know until I give it a go... I guess one should be easy?"

"So you really can do it right away..." Dexia mumbled, utterly dumbfounded.

"So? I've just gotta take you there?" Barbatos asked Ain.

"Yeah."

"Wait, Ain," Behemoth cut in. "As I said before, there's a high chance that Marchosias will erase your memories."

"But I'm the only one who can fight him," Ain retorted.

Even from Barbatos's perspective, Ain was the most skilled among them. At the same time, there was no way he could just toss the man in without any countermeasures.

Something about him reminds me a lot of that asshole Zagan... Makes me hate him.

Behemoth and Levia were powerful enough for Barbatos to want to recruit, but they were too unreliable against Marchosias.

"Then I'll go," the cat lady said. "I may not be able to defeat him, but I should be able to buy time until Zagan arrives."

"Huh? And what're you gonna do, exactly? You can't even fly. Or what? Want me to carry you around?"

"Grr...!"

The slightest provocation was all it had taken to get her to grind her teeth. Her chilling murderous rage was so refreshing.

Well, she's still pretty much the only choice.

He didn't like to admit it, but she was the most skilled after Ain. Barbatos could at least throw her a bone and provide some footholds. He was sure to be able to request quite the reward once Zagan returned. He cackled at the thought when suddenly, someone tugged on his robe.

"I shall go."

Barbatos felt a chill run down his spine.

The hell is wrong with her?!

He jumped back and turned around to see a girl with golden hair and eyes like the moon. She had the same face as Dexia. Barbatos could tell they were twins. Now that he thought about it, he'd seen the two of them with Foll every now and then. That wasn't the problem, though.

"You're..."

Barbatos knew this girl.

"I... No, Aristella isn't a tool," the girl said. "I won't let things end with her being used as bait against her will and trapping everyone. I'll fight."

Such words were unimaginable coming from the girl who'd hidden behind Dexia before their departure from Opheos.

"Aristella!" Dexia yelled.

She ran over as if she couldn't believe her ears. This twin's eyes were a deep blue.

"Dexia..." the girl said.

"Your...memories are back?" Dexia asked, hugging her twin.

"Keep your eyes forward, Dexia," the girl said, pressing her forehead against hers. "The Aristella who's here now is like a dream. She is no more than an illusion, given just a little time thanks to this song. Don't look back."

Barbatos felt like he understood now.

They're merging...

He'd fought her with Zagan before. The two had barely managed to defeat her—partially because that idiot Zagan had hesitated. Barbatos thought he'd grown more powerful since then, but he couldn't say for sure whether he could defeat her alone now.

Back then, she'd been possessed by something called Azazel. They'd saved her from the dilemma, but the entity hadn't disappeared. It'd simply grown fainter. She seemed to have regained some of her mind, but she was no longer human. Once this Hex Song was over, she would surely vanish.

It wasn't clear how much of this got through to Dexia. She held back her words and tears, casting her eyes down before raising her head with clear resolve.



“O-Of course. I’m the big sister, remember?” she said, her face a complete mess. And yet, she still managed a smile.

After touching Dexia’s cheek, “Aristella” turned to Barbatos. He felt like she’d also shot a glance at the cat lady, but hadn’t said anything to her.

“It’s decided, then,” the girl told him. “Take Aristella there.”

“Lemme check one thing first,” Barbatos said. “Whose side are you on?”

“Aristella” blinked in confusion and replied, “You can’t tell without asking?”

She was implying she’d already answered that question. It was perfectly obvious without having to hear her say it. That wasn’t what Barbatos meant, though.

“In that case, is this really what you should be doing?”

This time, “Aristella” looked at him, wide-eyed.

“How surprising,” she said. “I never thought anyone would say such a thing to me.”

Zagan had struggled to the end to try and save this girl during their battle. Barbatos had insisted they kill her the whole time. Seeing her appear before him once more, Barbatos felt the slightest bit of remorse.

“I’ve always wielded my sword as commanded,” the girl said, shaking her head. “Right to the bitter end, there was nothing I could ever take pride in. That’s why I want to fight for something I can be proud of for once. Dexia taught me this.”

“That so...?”

“But thank you,” the girl said, smiling faintly. “The people here are all so kind.”

“Um, shadow man,” the succubus girl who was so similar to the crybaby said timidly. “Let me thank you too. For saying you’ll help Furcas... I’ll believe in him until the end. Please tell him that.”

“Just tell him yourself after,” Barbatos responded.

He pushed back the annoying crying succubus. She looked at him in shock before smiling wryly.

“You’re an unexpectedly good person,” she said. “I can see why Chastille fell in love with you.”

"Huuuuuuh? What's the crybaby got to do with anythin'?"

What kind of misunderstanding were these people under? He sighed, but a certain thought came to mind.

If she can fight like last time, things might just work out.

It would be a great way to get back at Zagan too. Throwing a wrench into Eldest Marchosias's plans when Zagan had fallen right into his trap so spectacularly would be a big win for him. Barbatos donned an evil smile at the thought.

"I'll take you there, but you've gotta do as I say," he told "Aristella." "You wanna smack the shit outta that haughty asshole too, yeah?"

"I couldn't ask for more."

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"Impossible...! You're...Azazel!"

Connecting to Furcas through his shadow, taking control of Star Eater, swapping out Marchosias's Flames of Indignation with his own, and drawing Marchosias's attention so that "Aristella" could catch him by surprise—this was the job Barbatos had pulled off perfectly, even though the pay was nowhere near worth it. Incidentally, he'd also conveyed the succubus's message to Furcas. He didn't know whether that'd actually paid off, but it seemed like Furcas had gotten far more tenacious afterward.

Haaah, I'm beat!

Bluffing against this monster had been mentally draining. Barbatos then looked down at Furcas, who he was still holding up by the arm.

Crap. He needs treatment now or he's totally gonna kick the bucket.

Furcas was gravely wounded. He still had all his limbs, but his bones and muscles were in tatters. Several of his internal organs were damaged too. Honestly, it was a miracle he was still alive. Barbatos was impressed he'd managed to use a delicate sorcery like Echo in that state.

Barbatos was capable of basic healing sorcery, but he was unable

to do anything about extreme blood loss and completely destroyed organs. They needed someone like Shax to handle this. He was doing what he could, but Furcas wasn't going to be able to contribute to the fight any longer.

Meanwhile, "Aristella" swung her sword in pursuit. She'd successfully landed that surprise attack, but her opponent was Marchosias. He wasn't going to die from that. After pulling out the twin swords that had pierced him, he immediately drew a weapon with no blade.

Is that the Hex Katana? No...a Hex Blade?

The Hex Katana capable of cutting even subspace was in Archdemon Glasya-Labolas's possession, which would make this one of the multiple Hex Blades. They possessed similar names and features, but this one created a blade entirely of mana that glowed with a pale light.

"You're still clinging to that body?"

"Hee hee hee! Do you enjoy a waltz? Dance with me!"

After letting out a creepy laugh, "Aristella" descended straight down like an arrow before leaping perpendicularly to the left. Even a decent sorcerer would think she'd vanished. Her speed was that terrifying.

The magic circle she was using as a foothold was blown away. Did she use it to accelerate?

Sorcery that constructed a foothold midair was elementary. However, this one was modified to send her flying with explosive acceleration. It was quite a dangerous application. By stopping for an instant while stepping on the magic circle, she even left an afterimage and accelerated all the more. Before long, countless shadowy "Aristellas" were dancing all over. It was quite the waltz.

It's a whole lot like that damn cat lady.

The fact that she was using two swords was also similar. The one difference was that she had no hostility toward Barbatos.

It kinda looks like she's intentionally copying her. Am I imagining things?

After keeping up that dance for a while, "Aristella" went on the offensive. With overwhelming speed, her two scimitars closed in

from both sides. It was nonsense to challenge a sorcerer with a sword, but Barbatos doubted there were any sorcerers in the world capable of following those blades. And yet, Marchosias stood firm and clashed with her terrifying technique using his own weapon. Still, these swords had once overwhelmed Zagan. Marchosias didn't have the leisure of a counterattack. His movements were also clearly slower than before.

That pitch-black blade had an effect.

Similar to Zagan's Heaven's Phosphor, it was likely cursed to obstruct any healing sorcery. The bleeding from that one surprise attack had yet to stop. Added to that were her eyes—the ones that glowed like ominous moons. Just being within her gaze dulled one's movements. During his own battle against her, those eyes had been a constant pain for Barbatos.

Countless afterimages swooped down on the sluggish Marchosias with black blades. Knowing that he would die if he stopped moving, Marchosias dashed through the air while defending himself. However, at that speed, there was no escaping it. Slashes closed in on him from all directions, including from above and below.

Marchosias did his best to fend them off, but there was no way a single Hex Blade would be enough. His arms, legs, shoulders, and chest were torn open one after the other. It was like he had switched places with Furcas from just moments ago. "Aristella" was definitely driving Marchosias into a corner.

She's got this!

That said, Marchosias wasn't just going to sit back and let her do whatever she pleased. Within the countless clashes, he suddenly slashed upward with all his might.

"Hee hee!"

"Aristella" blocked with both her swords, but there was nothing she could do about the difference in physique. She'd stopped the Hex Blade but lost her balance. That was when Marchosias followed up with a horizontal slash aimed at her neck.

"Too obvious!"

Barbatos twisted space using the shadow coiling around "Aristella." This was Echo. The blow meant to decapitate her instead

came down on Marchosias's own back...or at least, it was supposed to.

"How obvious," Marchosias said, repeating Barbatos's taunt and pulling back his sword before it landed. He then plunged it into the shadow that was still open behind him. It was as if that had been his plan all along.

He read me? No, he lured me into this?!

The sword passed through the shadow and manifested right next to "Aristella's" neck.

"Gah!"

She pulled back her swords and blocked but had to come to a complete stop to do so. Marchosias delivered a roundhouse kick right to her torso, bringing "Aristella's" breathing to a stop.

"Gah... Ah..."

At this point, it was completely one-sided. With two swings of the Hex Blade, her black swords were repelled, leaving her defenseless neck open for him to grasp. He then let out a sigh of disappointment.

"I thought you would be able to draw out more 'power' by possessing a nephilim... I suppose that's all you've got."

"Gah... What...are you talking about?"

He had her by the neck, but apparently wasn't squeezing it. "Aristella" could still speak.

"The abilities usable through possession depend on the entity being possessed," Marchosias explained. "Knowledge and power unknown to the entity cannot be wielded."

Barbatos recalled the battle with "Nephteros." Her being able to use celestial mysticism at the time was normal, but she'd also used eight Hex Wings and a spear of light. Those were the powers of a high elf from the age when they'd been referred to as seraphs. Nephteros had never used such powers before, but she definitely had the qualities necessary to possess them. She simply hadn't been able to withstand them as a homunculus.

"But things are different with a nephilim," Marchosias continued. "You can become anything by implanting memories into your mind."

In other words, he'd been testing whether Azazel's powers could

be drawn out. However, “Aristella” had come here as Aristella, so she wasn’t capable of wielding the power Marchosias was hoping for. He looked bored.

“You were...testing me...?” “Aristella” asked, grinding her teeth.

There was no greater insult to someone who’d done everything she could in a fight. Tears even formed in “Aristella’s” eyes, and Marchosias spat back at her.

“How many centuries do you think I’ve been fighting Azazel for? Do you truly believe I would take a lowly possessed husk seriously?”

Barbatos sensed he’d made a mistake. This man had devoted a thousand years of his life to fighting Azazel. In other words, he’d fought “Aristella” more than he could possibly ever want. “Aristella” had faced her natural enemy. Even though it’d looked like she’d had the advantage, it had been nothing more than a performance to test whatever power he was speaking of.

No, that’s not quite right. Even without all that, this guy’s just genuinely stronger.

Perhaps that was to be expected of the Archdemon who’d ruled the world both publicly and behind the scenes for a thousand years. If anything, Furcas was the weird one for being able to put up such a long fight.

“I have no more need of you.”

“Hgggh... Gah...”

With a terrifying cracking sound, he started squeezing “Aristella’s” neck.

“Like I’ll let you!”

Knowing he was trying to snap her spine, Barbatos swung the black whip.

“Yes, yes, I know. I’ll return this to you, so don’t get so angry.”

Speaking like an adult comforting a spoiled brat, Marchosias tossed “Aristella” at Star Eater.

What an asshole!

The true worth of this weapon was in manipulating it like a living creature. Barbatos somehow managed to pull it back before it struck “Aristella” head-on, but it wasn’t enough to avoid her entirely.

“Gyah!”

"Aristella's" dainty body went flying, sending bright-red blood splattering through the air.

"Fuck!" Barbatos swore at the fact that he'd struck her himself. And with his focus on her for a moment, he'd stopped paying attention to Marchosias.

"Ah..."

By the time he raised his head, Marchosias's fist was already right in front of his eyes. Due to an impact that felt like it'd shattered his skull, Barbatos's brain shook violently. He blacked out in an instant but somehow managed to withstand the pain and preserve his magic circle.

"Hmm? I actually put everything into that punch. You're surprisingly tough to be able to stay on your feet like that."

Marchosias praised his tenacity. Barbatos's vision was swimming and unable to focus. Blood dribbled down his brow and seemed to have gone into one eye. Half of his vision was bright red now. Nevertheless, he remained standing.

"Hah! It don't make me happy to admit it, but I'm used to getting punched."

He'd never wanted to get used to it. However, Barbatos was accustomed to being punched far harder than this. Marchosias was quite tough as well for withstanding the barrage from Star Eater, but Barbatos still had no intention of losing when it came to taking punishment.

"In deference to your toughness, I'll let you go," Marchosias said, an air of pity in his voice. "Leave Furcas here and get lost. You're not the type of sorcerer who can bring out your best when fighting alone."

Barbatos heard something snap inside of him.

Aaah, I'm gonna kill this guy. I'm gonna fuckin' murder him. I don't care who's weaker or stronger. I'm definitely gonna kill him!

He wouldn't have cared if he'd had to pathetically beg for his own life, since that would've been of his own will. However, being shown mercy was the one thing he could never tolerate. He wasn't going to be picky about things anymore. Only that idiot was allowed to talk down to him like this—well, maybe that wasn't fine either, but still.

Barbatos wasn't obedient enough to back down quietly after being made light of. With blood pouring from his nose, he smiled provocatively.

"Well, ain't that nice. As thanks, lemme give ya a warning. If that was everythin' you could put behind a punch, then turn your ass around and go home. You do that...and I'll overlook all this."

"I don't hate men like you," Marchosias said with an amused laugh. "But regrettably, you don't have the ability to back up your words."

There was no falsehood in that claim. Marchosias punched again, holding back just enough so as not to kill Barbatos.

That's what I can't stand about this!

Barbatos clenched his teeth and took the punch to the face.

Aaah, that's right. That idiot never gives me the time to square off when he punches me. He always slugs me seriously too.

As such, this unmotivated punch was nothing. The impact was strong enough for him to see sparks before his eyes. He felt some of his molars break and tumble around in his mouth, then vomited blood as he flipped over in the air. Even so, Barbatos glared at Marchosias and flipped him the bird with a smile.

"Here's a present! Enjoy, asshole!"

"Wha—?!"

Marchosias raised a brow; then suddenly, a fist appeared out of nowhere and slammed into the side of his face.

"It seems my subordinates have been in your care during my absence."

Barbatos's lifelong enemy and friend had finally arrived, an expression of pure wrath on his face.

◇

"Zagan..." Marchosias groaned, a bead of sweat running down his cheek. "I thought it would take you a little longer to escape."

"Unfortunately, we've got a meddlesome idiot here."

Breaking the barrier made of Azazel's sludge hadn't been all that difficult. Several uses of Heaven's Phosphor had successfully

destroyed it. The problem had come afterward. Beyond the barrier, subspace was twisted into a complex labyrinth, so Zagan had been hard-pressed to find a way through it. That was when Barbatos had suddenly yanked him out. If not for that, he would still be fumbling through that maze.

This guy seriously found me wandering in subspace while fighting Marchosias?

Judging by the situation, he'd connected his shadow to the space near Zagan while Aristella had drawn Marchosias's attention. He really was a formidable master of spatial manipulation.

Zagan couldn't see the others he'd been sealed away with. It must've taken Barbatos everything he had just to grab him. However, that wasn't the reason Zagan was so angry. He didn't care why Barbatos was here either. After all, him being covered in blood was the same as usual, so that didn't matter. No, that wasn't the problem at all.

Furcas was currently being held up by Barbatos and was on the verge of death. Aristella was slumped against a black whip drifting through the air and wasn't so much as budging. Zagan's subordinates had been tormented during his absence, and a man who ignored such an act was no king.

"Hey! I yanked your ass out, so why didn't you cover me, you ass?!" Barbatos wailed.

Zagan did, of course, owe him for that, but he'd prioritized punching Marchosias.

"What, you wanted me to protect you?" Zagan asked, wide-eyed. "Sorry about that. I never knew you were such a delicate man."

"Screw you. Who the hell needs your lame-ass protection?"

This was exactly why he'd chosen not to shield him. Had Zagan protected him, Barbatos would've flared up about not needing any help.

"Feel free to take a break," Zagan said, smiling provocatively as he watched his bad friend bleed profusely from the head. "I'll take care of the rest."

"Butt out. I'm gonna be the one to take him down."

The two glared at each other, then spoke in unison.

“First come, first served!”



Zagan stepped in as Barbatos swung Star Eater. The black whip reached first. Leaping through space, multiple sections of the weapon rained down on Marchosias.

"I've already seen this."

As to be expected, Marchosias stepped forward while weaving through the gaps. However, he was walking straight into Zagan's fist.

"Hey now, don't look away. I'm your opponent here."

"How futile."

Zagan's punch was capable of shattering the earth, yet Marchosias brushed it aside lightly at the wrist.

"A parry...?"

"I'm the one who taught you how to use your fists, remember?"

Marchosias was Zagan's teacher when it came to the arts. He effortlessly flowed from one move to the next into a throw. Zagan twisted in the air and landed on a magic circle. However, doing so naturally left him open. Marchosias closed in to exploit this, but was once more assaulted by a rain of blows from the black whip.

"Tch, what a nuisance."

He'd seen this attack multiple times already, so it really was nothing but a minor annoyance to him. Marchosias didn't slow down as he weaved his way through the countless whips by doing little more than swaying his body.

Still, that had given Zagan enough time to regain his balance. Sensing this, Marchosias kept his distance to weave his sorcery. Barbatos let out a vulgar cackle at having saved Zagan.

"Hee hee, you're being careless, Zagan."

"Shut up. I didn't ask for your help."

Marchosias must've seen Barbatos as a hindrance because of this.

"Trembling Lightning, Stormy World."

Countless overlapping blades of lightning flew at Barbatos. Star Eater was split into many sections, but was still connected as one whip. He couldn't pull it in to defend. There was no time to escape into subspace from an attack that moved at the speed of light either. Barbatos turned pale, knowing he had no means of enduring this attack.

"Whoa!"

"Don't falter. How careless of you, Barbatos."

However, the lightning blades vanished before reaching him. Zagan had devoured them.

He sees through everything at first sight. I suppose the Eldest's name isn't just for show.

Marchosias really was strong. Zagan had managed to overcome him with Ain's help before, but he wasn't an opponent who could be beaten in a fair fight. What was more, Marchosias had used sorcery to fight Zagan back then. As for what that meant...

"Nimbus, Heaven and Earth."

Enormous magic circles took shape both high in the sky and far below.

"The hell're you doin', Zagan?!" Barbatos yelled, clicking his tongue. "Stop him!"

"I already am..." Zagan replied bitterly.

He was, of course, devouring it. Regardless, the magic circles remained as they were.

He's using a twofold layer of magic circles to get past my technique.

By making the first circle more prominent than the second, he could deceive Zagan's silver eyes. Zagan had experienced this more than he'd ever wanted to during the battle in Shere Khan's base.

"Don't trust in your silver eyes too much," Marchosias coldly declared. "There are plenty of ways to fool them."

Zagan's ability to devour sorcery was, in and of itself, sorcery, so it only made sense for the man who knew all sorcery to be able to see its flaws. Arrows of light soared in from both above and below.

"Wha—?!"

However, these arrows didn't attack Zagan. No, they were aimed at Marchosias.

"Whew... Casting the same sorcery three times at once is somewhat exhausting."

Marchosias had tricked him by using the same sorcery atop itself, so Zagan had simply done the same. However, simply stopping the spell would be too boring, so he'd added one more layer on top of that. Oddly enough, this was the same theory behind how Barbatos

had reversed Marchosias's Flames of Indignation. The only real difference was that the circuits were inconceivably more complex and he'd done it three times at once.

Marchosias was forced to dodge the tens of thousands of arrows coming from above and blow. He wasn't panicking at all, however. Instead, he smiled as if praising a little brother.

"To so perfectly counter Nimbus... You've grown strong."

"Mind praising me only after you lose?"

Faced with his old friend, Zagan almost felt his expression softening. But Zagan was a king. He couldn't falter in front of his subordinates, so he stepped forth.

"Heaven's Ring, Shadow Sever."

Leaving his own shadow behind, Zagan charged in like a meteor, putting all of that momentum behind a punch.

"Hgggh!"

Marchosias tried to parry it, but this was sorcery that converted the mana in the air into pure speed. It couldn't be stopped so easily. Marchosias was forced to block with both arms.

"Whoa there, you're wide open."

However, Zagan wasn't his only opponent. Barbatos swung Star Eater, snaking it through the air to strike Marchosias's back.

"You never learn."

Zagan had also been forced to stop moving by the collision. Marchosias grabbed his arm and kicked off the magic circle at his feet. Having had his entire weight pressed against his opponent, Zagan lost his balance from the sudden shift and was sent tumbling head over heels. It was a variation of an overhead throw. With their positions now reversed, Zagan's back was exposed to the black whip.

"You're about to hit your own ally again," Marchosias said scornfully. "What now?"

This was apparently the second time this had happened. Regardless, Zagan's bad friend smiled as if this was a terrific stroke of luck.

"Hya ha ha! I'll just kill both of you assholes at once!" he bellowed, putting all his strength behind the whip.

He truly was a horrible friend. And yet, Zagan found himself smiling.

That's exactly what I expected of you.

Zagan twisted his body calmly and landed on the whip feet first.

"A good stepping stone. Not bad, Barbatos."

Even as the star-shattering impact pulverized several of his defensive barriers, Zagan used the blow to jump forward. The enormous whip remained in motion as well. It writhed like a snake and closed in on Marchosias in multitudes.

Not even Eldest Marchosias could stave off such a combination. He swayed to dodge several of the black whips, but had to immediately resort to parrying with his Hex Blade. However, defending in this manner meant he'd had to plant himself in place, which was why Zagan's punch found its mark.

"Gah!"

Slamming into him like a bullet, Zagan's fist gouged into Marchosias's cheek. His round glasses shattered and were blown off as the Eldest was sent flying away. He tumbled a few times over a magic circle, but still managed to land on his feet. Then, before even standing upright, he whipped his right hand out to the side, where his broken glasses fell snugly into his fingers. After repairing them with sorcery, he calmly put them back on and stood up.

"You get along so well," he said, spitting out a wad of blood and broken teeth.

"It's an undesirable yet inseparable relationship," Zagan told him, shrugging.

He smiled and stood before Marchosias. Only a few seconds had passed since the use of Nimbus. Before they knew it, the rain of light had vanished and a silence followed without so much as a gust of wind.

Standing in that quiet sky, these two old friends were now in striking distance of each other.

Marchosias released his hold on his Hex Blade and clenched his fists. Zagan responded in kind. Sorcery could no longer reach Zagan. However, that went both ways. Within hands reach, punches were faster. In the battle that was about to begin, not even Barbatos

could interfere. Fists ultimately had the last say in a fight between men.

"You sure?" Marchosias said with an air of concern. "You're at a disadvantage like this."

"How so...?" Zagan asked, not sure what he was implying.

"Have you ever beaten me in a fistfight?"

"Hmmm... I suppose not."

Back in Zagan's days as a waif, this man had been the one to save him from a dog's death by teaching him how to survive. They had, of course, fought multiple times, but Zagan had never defeated the older boy. In terms of brawling, Marchosias was a cut above.

That was exactly why Zagan laughed.

"Then I'll be able to experience what victory feels like for the first time."

"Just try it," Marchosias said, smiling nostalgically. "Can your nineteen years surpass my one thousand?"

Zagan was the first to make a move.

"Hmph!"

With a sharp exhalation, he delivered a perfectly straight punch. There was no strategy behind it.

"I don't hate such honesty, but you should learn some craftiness."

Marchosias was the one who'd taught him with that punch. He calmly swayed his head to the side to dodge it.

I figured you'd do that!

Noticing that Zagan's silver eyes had perceived he would dodge, Marchosias's composed expression vanished.

"Wha—?!"

Zagan forcefully twisted his arm, changing the trajectory of his punch and slamming his fist into Marchosias's face.

"Hmm, I suppose it took everything just to hit you."

Marchosias touched his slightly bleeding cheek and replied, "I was sure I dodged..."

"Must've been a lucky hit, then."

Marchosias narrowed his eyes, then launched himself forward. Just like Zagan, he delivered a straight punch, but his strike was far sharper. Faced with such a superior attack, Zagan didn't hesitate at

all to step forward. His teacher's mighty fist did little more than brush past his black hair.

Zagan returned the favor with his left fist. Reading this, Marchosias smoothly moved to press his wrist against Zagan's.

He tormented a ton of people with this move when I was a brat.

Before their wrists touched, Zagan quickly pulled back and switched to a sharp blow to the ribs. It felt like striking a bulky tree. He could tell Marchosias's muscles were hardened to an unimaginable degree considering his outer appearance.

But I'll push through!

Zagan's fist was capable of shattering bedrock, let alone a tree trunk.

"Ghhh!"

With his armor of muscle penetrated, Marchosias's expression twisted in agony. Things would be too easy if this was all it took to bring this man to a knee, though. Defying the pain, Marchosias answered with a punch from straight above. And yet, it didn't hit. Zagan stepped hard on the magic circle beneath him, pitching himself forward and holding his ground. Marchosias's iron fist hit nothing but air.

"Hmm..."

As if to confirm what had just happened, Marchosias switched from killing blows to a series of light jabs—light for Marchosias, anyway. They possessed enough force to reduce the average sorcerer to mincemeat with the slightest graze.

Despite the terrifying rain of blows, Zagan casually swayed his body to avoid every hit. Marchosias aimed three consecutive strikes at Zagan's face. Then, the fourth was a feint, switching into a backhand blow on the opposite side.

These punches flowed into each other seamlessly. Even if they didn't hit, Zagan had to stop moving his feet to dodge them. Marchosias turned his back to him, twisted his body violently, and delivered a roundhouse kick like a guillotine. Not even the greatest masters could react after having to stiffen up from a feint that was followed by a sudden shift from punches to a kick.

"It's futile."

The kick meant to decapitate Zagan passed in front of his throat in vain. It was as if Marchosias's aim had been off the entire time. Recognizing this phenomenon, Marchosias pushed up his glasses and sighed.

"Lucia's foresight, I take it?"

Silver eyes were said to be able to perceive the flow of mana. Using that, one was capable of predicting attacks.

"Fortunately, I've been blessed with a good teacher," Zagan replied with a smile.

Having awakened to the silver eyes in her bloodline, Kuroka was learning how to use them. Zagan had entrusted this task to Ain, but that didn't mean he was entirely out of the loop. Him teaching her how to read the flow of mana had been a good learning opportunity for Zagan too. After all, when it came to reading the future, Zagan was the most inexperienced among them.

It was pretty useful against Glasya-Labolas.

Though it wasn't to the level of Ain's silver eyes, Kuroka had been able to read his movements without relying on her sight at all. That was why Zagan had been the one to learn the most among them. However, now that he knew this, Marchosias was the type to come up with a countermeasure immediately.

"Let me say this once more. Don't trust in your silver eyes too much."

The very next instant, Marchosias's palm glowed vividly.

No, that's not light. He's emitting mana!

It was precisely because he could see the flow of mana that it looked like Marchosias was doing more than just unleashing his power. This was akin to shining a bright light within complete darkness. His silver eyes were scorched and disoriented by the display.

"Gah!"

Marchosias drove his fist into Zagan's jaw, shaking his brain. Exploiting this opening, he punched over and over as if to pay Zagan back for earlier. Zagan's molars shattered and fresh blood colored the sky.

"Silver eyes are amazing, but simply seeing can be a weakness

too."

Those were Kuroka's words, coming from someone who'd once lost her eyesight.

You often talk about needing to repay me, but you've already done so long ago.

Zagan closed his eyes and threw himself forward toward a powerful punch. His cheek split open with a spurt of blood, but nothing more.

"What...?"

The blow had slightly missed Zagan despite him being so defenseless.

I guess I can't do it as well as Kuroka.

He read the air on his skin and perceived the world through sound. By doing so, he could sense the most trivial movements. He could read where a punch was going before it was even delivered. However, even after using sorcery to amplify his sense of touch and hearing to the extreme, he couldn't do it as well as Kuroka. She was a specialist when it came to fighting blind. He'd practiced with her several times, but had never once even touched her. Still, this was enough to avoid a fatal blow from Marchosias. It was precisely because he tried fighting without his sight that Zagan noticed something else too.

"I see... This is a fight you started, isn't it?"

He wanted to settle things with his old friend. He wasn't going to yield that to anyone else, but Zagan had been the one to butt in, so he unclenched his fists and put his hands in his pockets.

"What's the meaning of this...?" Marchosias muttered in bewilderment.

"Very well," Zagan said, addressing someone else entirely. "He's all yours... Don't miss."

He inclined his head slightly to the side as a loud bang resonated behind him. Seeing what was there, Marchosias froze. An instant later, a bullet punched through him.

"I'll...protect...Lilith..."

It was Furcas, who was still being held up by Barbatos. The Seraph Hunter in his hands was smoking. He'd been waiting for this

moment. The bullet he'd shot had grazed by Zagan's head and had pierced Marchosias's shoulder.



“Y-You little...”

Marchosias’s eyes shot open in shock as a black sphere suddenly expanded from his shoulder.

“GYAAAAAAH!”

These were the void bullets Alshiera had created. One hit swallowed everything from Marchosias’s left shoulder down.

“Ugh... Haaah... Haaah...”

And yet, somehow he was still alive...or maybe still breathing was more accurate.

The wound took his heart. He’s beyond saving.

This bullet was the same as Heaven’s Phosphor. Marchosias was capable of regenerating his lost limbs in an instant, but a wound dealt by this weapon couldn’t be healed. He wheezed for air as he smiled at Zagan.

“Magnificent... Your fists truly did surpass my thousand years. Even without the Seraph Hunter, you would’ve defeated me.”

The space around them started crumbling noisily.

“Marchosias!”

“Furcas!”

They could now hear Eligor’s and Lilith’s voices. The barrier was gone.

“Master Zagan!”

A moment later, Zagan heard Nephy. He turned around to see her and the other Archdemons who’d been sealed away. It seemed they’d escaped safely as well.

“It’s over...” Zagan said in a grim voice. “I know you’re trying to save Alshiera, but that doesn’t mean I’ll approve of you sacrificing Lilith.”

Zagan’s group had also discovered Marchosias’s plan after seeing those memories. However, he could never permit the girl who shared his little sister’s name to be sacrificed for that.

The Archdemons on Marchosias’s side could move now that the barrier was gone, but there was too much of a difference in numbers. Thus, they were unable to stop Zagan.

“Good grief...” Marchosias said with a smile. “Eligor was right on the mark.”

He had an ally who could see the future, which meant he'd taken on this fight knowing it would end like this.

But even so, he was compelled to do it.

Zagan understood that this man's one thousand years had gone unrewarded. He felt both sympathy and sorrow regarding that fact. This man had sacrificed everything and hadn't even stopped when it came to sacrificing himself. But now...it was over.

Right as that thought crossed his mind, a sudden chill ran down Zagan's back.

"Hang on..."

Marchosias removed the glasses he'd been protecting the entire battle. Before anyone knew it, he suddenly had what looked like a test tube with a needle attached to it in his hand. This was a syringe, a tool sorcerers used to extract blood and the like. Inside it was an ominous dark liquid. Seeing that, Zagan knew why he was feeling chills.

"Stop! Marc!"

"In that case, I'll give up my humanity."

Marchosias jammed the syringe straight into his own neck.

"You idiot!"

Marc was Zagan's old friend. Even if his true identity was a repulsive and evil Archdemon, Zagan was incapable of discarding the relationship from his youth. After all, that was Zagan's first memory of warmth. And so, Zagan's next action was inevitable. He wasn't able to ruthlessly kill Marchosias. He didn't charge his fist with Heaven's Phosphor. His punch shattered Marchosias's jaw and delivered a heavy blow to the brain. However, that wasn't enough to kill him.

In the end, Zagan's fist didn't resonate with what had once been his closest friend. With a wet thud, a distorted black blade plunged through Zagan's chest.

Epilogue

"I don't really remember much after that."

Inside the sickroom of Zagan's castle in the Forest of the Lost, Furcas recounted the events of the day from his bed. He turned to look at the next bed over. There, Zagan laid with bandages wrapped over his shoulder and around his chest.

The black blade that had protruded from Marchosias's chest had pierced Zagan's heart. Shax and Foll had treated him immediately, but much like Heaven's Phosphor and Alshiera's bullets, the blade had cursed the wound to be unhealable.

Treatment by sorcery was impossible, so Foll had used Heaven's Scale to recreate his heart from scratch. Regardless, he showed no signs of regaining consciousness. At a glance, it looked like he was sleeping. However, the Sigil of the Archdemon no longer glowed on his right hand. It had automatically removed itself from Zagan's body the moment his heart was pierced. In other words...

"That makes three losses..." Kimaris said, his voice gentle yet bitter.

"Cut the shit!" Barbatos yelled, grabbing him by the collar. A Sigil of the Archdemon now glowed on his right hand. It was the one that had once belonged to Zagan. "This dumbass hasn't kicked the bucket! He's gonna wake up! Ain't no way he's backin' down after takin' a beating from that asshole!"

"But..."

"Stop that, Purgatory," Gremory cut in. She too was wrapped in bandages all over. "This is a sickroom."

"Tch..." Barbatos clicked his tongue and released Kimaris.

"It was a horrible battle..." Furcas continued, his head hung low.

The being that had once been Marchosias was dreadfully strong, to the point where even the Archdemons had been powerless before it. Nephy and Foll had fought but hadn't been able to accomplish

anything. They too were resting on beds in the sickroom.

To add to that, it hadn't been some rampaging monster. It was apparently moving in accordance with Marchosias's will. After defeating the Archdemons, it had immediately targeted Lilith. Ain and the others hadn't been able to stop it.

"Sorry... It's all my fault..." Lilith muttered, tears down her cheeks.

In the end, Lilith had returned unharmed. That was because someone had saved her right when it seemed she was about to be taken away.

"Kuroka... Kuroka..."

Lilith squeezed a cane against her meager chest. When Marchosias had snatched Lilith, Kuroka had swapped places with her using a technique called Butterfly. However, even though she'd managed to save Lilith, she hadn't been able to protect herself. That was why only her cane was left behind.

"I'll bring Kuroka back..." Shax said. He too was covered in wounds. The only reason he wasn't running off to immediately get her back was because there was a mountain of people here that only he could treat. As for the last casualty...

"'Go ahead without me. I'll handle things here.' That's what Phenex said. She looked so happy about it."

While she'd attracted Marchosias's attention, Furcas and Barbatos had taken everyone else back to this castle.

"Phenex is immortal. She won't die, but..."

"She might get sealed away..."

The only way of defeating something unkillable was to imprison it. With Eligor on their side, they had to have known that Phenex was going to remain behind. If so, it was highly likely they'd had a countermeasure prepared.

"From the way you're talkin'...did your memories come back?" Barbatos asked.

"Kind of... The original Furcas is still gone, though."

Furcas said that, then turned his attention to Aristella. Her wounds were severe, but she'd been the first to be treated, so she was now back on her feet. Her left eye was back to its original blue,

while her right was still golden.

She's the same as me.

Selphy's Hex Song had restored her memories. This was the one saving grace of this situation. Aristella had returned, partially mixed with the amnesiac girl.

"So what happened here?" Furcas asked, turning to Gremory.

"We were attacked by a Samyaza-class demon... Or maybe it was a chimera? Whatever the case, it had a human shape right from the start."

That was why the beds in the sickroom were full.

"We lost Vepar," she said. "I doubt he'd die so easily, but he hasn't come back."

"I see..."

They had no choice but to accept this outcome.

We were defeated...

They had no intention of letting things end like this, however. Furcas vowed to his unconscious king that he would continue the fight.

◇

"Falsehood Compass Antikythera—so this is what my disciple was killed for."

The golden fire in the air vanished. Phenex spat as a hole in reality that was opened behind her. Even an immortal hero had no way of escaping this.

"Don't think you've wooooooooon—!"

While yelling like an idiot right to the end—and saying something that sounded like she would actually return for once—Phenex vanished into complex space.

"Sorry that took so long... Acheron was quite the genius for mastering this thing."

The one using Antikythera—the compass stolen from Gaoler Acheron—was Eligor. As to be expected of an immortal hero, Phenex had kept up the fight for a whole twenty-four hours after Zagan's group had escaped. Even taking Marchosias's unfamiliarity with his

new power into consideration, her strength was far beyond any human understanding.

If Eligor hadn't activated Antikythera, Phenex would probably still be fighting. Not even Marchosias could fully kill her, after all. She was a truly terrifying Archdemon.

Thanks to that, we lost one trump card we could use against Asmodeus...

Marchosias had obtained a fragment of Azazel, which granted him the same power as the demon amalgamation Samyaza and Alshiera. When wielded by the Eldest, backed by his thousand years of wisdom, he became the strongest being in the world. However, that still wasn't enough to take down Asmodeus with full certainty.

Antikythera had been a guaranteed means of sealing Asmodeus, so revealing its existence to her was a huge loss. However, Asmodeus didn't make a move. She was supposed to be in league with Phenex but didn't help her in the slightest. Maybe she'd decided that now was a bad time. Or maybe she'd abandoned her at the eleventh hour. Or maybe she just wanted to get paid.

Nobody used Mercurius either.

That was the weapon Asmodeus had failed to retrieve. For a sorcerer, it was somewhat difficult to use, thus serving as little more than a powerful mana amplifier. However, for Marchosias, it was indispensable. It could even be said to be the crux of his entire plan.

If someone in Zagan's camp had it, Marchosias figured they would've used it in that situation, so it seemed it wasn't in the hands of anyone who'd been present. That said, Asmodeus didn't appear to be hiding it either. Or at the very least, she hadn't had it upon returning from her mission.

Where could it be?

The staff's whereabouts was the only—and greatest—cause for concern.

Marchosias shook his head. For now, he decided that eliminating Phenex was good enough. If she and Asmodeus conspired, he doubted he could win even with the help of Eligor and Glasya-Labolas. It was a great boon to defeat Phenex here.

Now that things were finally settled, Eligor came running over to

him.

"Let me check your condition, Marchosias."

"Unnecessary. Thanks to Bato's sacrifice, it has taken hold without issue."

The Azazel fragment Marchosias had injected into himself was a remnant he'd collected during the battle one and a half years ago. Even an Archdemon would break apart and die from such an injection. However, the nephilim Shere Khan had created were exceptions. At a cellular level, they were technically pseudo-Azazels. They'd been created using Azazel's factor, after all. That was why he'd been cautious of Aristella, who was a possessed nephilim. Though ultimately, she'd been utterly insignificant.

I had to die once to obtain this body.

That battlefield had been Marchosias's last stop.

After thinking for a moment, he turned his attention to the one man who'd remained behind.

"May I assume you're on our side, Astaroth?"

Starving Bone Lord Astaroth hadn't gone with Zagan's group.

"At present, you're the only one who has any means of opposing this Azazel you speak of. It seems I have no other choice."

"We welcome you among our ranks."

"So, what're you going to do with this girl?" Naberius asked. He was carrying a cait sith in his muscular arms. "Wasn't your plan to abduct Lilith?"

If her sword possessed Azazel's original power, I might've died.

Marchosias felt a chill run down his spine from the mere memory of it. Moonless Sky had been forged from the broken fragments of Sacred Sword Azazel, so its power was nowhere close to the original's. That was why Marchosias still lived.

He hadn't even noticed her approach until she'd been close enough to stab him in the neck. Part of this was likely due to Haniel's wielder, but even then, that blade shouldn't have been enough to pierce Marchosias's skin in his new state. Despite that fact, the girl had jammed her shortsword right through him.

Due to her actions, he'd failed to secure Lilith and had even allowed Zagan's subordinates to escape. If not for that surprise

attack, they wouldn't have gotten away, even with Phenex obstructing him. Perhaps it was to be expected of one who'd inherited those silver eyes. She had an awe-inspiring talent for the blade.

The Fourth Silver-Eyed King, Kuroka Adelhide—there would be no greater asset on the battlefield if he could make her his pawn. This hadn't been the plan, though.

Lilith's capture was a predetermined future...

Eligor had seen it. And yet, this girl had overturned that future.

"Can a cait sith's luck twist even fate itself?"

If so, it was a frightening power indeed. Seeing how she'd fallen into his hands, she couldn't properly control it. However, it could become a trump card in the battle against Azazel.

"The future hasn't changed," Eligor said, shaking her head. "Things have simply sped up."

"I see..."

Meaning her time of death had moved up as well. Marchosias sank into thought for a bit before responding.

"Keep her captive. We'll use her as a hostage against Zagan. In the worst case, we can tamper with her head a little to make her our pawn."

Naturally, over the thousand-year history of sorcery, countless methods of twisting someone's personality or manipulating them against their will had been developed.

It'll be rather difficult to force her to obey while keeping all her powers intact, though.

Still, if it was necessary, Marchosias was the type of man to resort to such methods.

"Then how 'bout I look after her?" Asmodeus suggested with a smile. "I haven't been cleaning up any demons lately, so I have a ton of free time."

"What are you scheming...?" Marchosias asked, raising his guard.

"How rude. She's a hostage, right? Don't you think I'm the only one here a poor captive could feel safe around?"

You're the most untrustworthy out of all of us...

Everyone was likely thinking the same thing, but since it was a

hassle, they didn't say anything.

I suppose the fourth without Moonless Sky doesn't pose a threat...

They'd failed to retrieve the twin swords. The newcomer Archdemon, Shax, had taken them. That was the man Marchosias had brought along during the hunt for Shere Khan five years ago. He'd already had a sharp mind at the time, but after becoming Zagan's subordinate, he'd grown even more quick-witted.

Still, even without her swords, she was the Fourth Silver-Eyed King. She was harmless as she was now, but there was no telling what could happen if he left her to Asmodeus. That said, Marchosias was short on hands.

Eligor didn't foresee this development.

Marchosias agonized over his decision a while longer before making up his mind.

"Very well, then. Keep a close eye on her."

"'Kaaaaaay!"

He had a horrible feeling about this. Still, this woman only did things out of self-interest. While he was sure she was going to try to use Kuroka to some end, she wasn't going to let her escape. With no one else to turn to, Marchosias reluctantly left Kuroka to her.

Just a little longer, Ashy. I'll save you soon.

That was this man's final and only wish—and he would see it accomplished no matter what he had to sacrifice.

Afterword

It's been a long time, everyone. I'm Fuminori Teshima, and I have come to deliver *An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride Volume 19*.

Marchosias ended up being degraded to a punching bag, but is it finally time for him to redeem himself? This volume, the mastermind behind everything, all the way from the very first volume, is doing his best to gather all the Archdemons for a meeting! As the enormous conspiracy unfolds, Furcas takes a stand for the sake of his beloved.

Anyway, that's the gist of the story. To tell you the truth, Barbatos had absolutely nothing to do with the plot this time. And then, for some reason, he ended up making a grand entrance and things ended up pretty chaotic... As an author, I'd prefer it if he stuck to the plan.

Oh, also, the anime successfully finished airing! Everyone was so cute and cool! Seeing them animated was so moving! It was such fun. Zagan was perfectly Zagan both inside and out, Nephy's voice really sounded like a chiming bell, and Barbatos was just Barbatos. It was so exciting watching it every week. We've got merch like acrylic stands and sweets in the works now too, so please look out for them.

Oh, I've decided to make a doujinshi for the first time! It's an April Fool's story that didn't show up in *Elf Bride*'s main plot. It all came together with the help of COMTA, Hako Itagaki, and Momo Futaba. It's available for purchase now, so please check it out if that idea piques your interest.

And lastly, I might be publishing a new series with HJ Bunko! It'll be a modern rom-com, a genre I've never worked in before. Please look out for that too!

Now then, allow me to give my thanks to everyone. To my chief

editor, who put in so much work to make all kinds of adjustments, to COMTA, who provided such brilliant illustrations (the twin cover with volume 18 was awesome!), to everyone involved with the cover design, proofreading, and PR, to my children, who ended up having to worry about me a bunch, and to you, my dear readers, who are reading the book at this very moment, thank you very much!

October 2024: On What Truly Feels like an Autumn Day

Fuminori Teshima

Bonus Short Stories

Some Things Haven't Changed Even After Proposing

"H-Ha ha ha..."

"H-Heh heh heh..."

Sitting around a small table, Zagan and Nephy laughed awkwardly. Each had a ring made of mithril on their left hand. These were the wedding bands Zagan had ordered and had gifted to Nephy following a shocking confession on the day of Archdemon Phenex's attack.

"I am with you in body and heart. Nephelia."

Those were the words engraved on the inside of Zagan's ring. Nephy had chosen them. It was proof that she'd accepted his proposal.

A tremor ran through Opheos. A huge wave took shape within the lake, nearly capsizing a sightseeing boat if not for Levia's sorcery calming the waters.

Hnnngh! What euphoria! I can't control my power!

Nephy's ring also had an engraving of Zagan's vow. He was endlessly excited that she'd accepted his proposal, and Nephy seemed to be in the same state. Every now and then, she looked down at her ring and her cheeks went completely limp. She was so lovely and adorable like this, which made him all the happier that she loved his present.

That said, this was Zagan and Nephy. The proposal was so recent that they were still overly conscious of it and hadn't been able to really say anything to each other.

Gaaah! How long do you plan on acting like this, Zagan?!

Zagan clutched at his heart to calm its beating and fired himself

up. He then raised his head with determination...only to find Nephy had just done the same.

"..."

Their eyes met and Nephy's face turned remarkably red, her pointy ears flushing to their very tips as they twitched about.

"Hnngh!"

Unable to suppress the pounding in his chest at that sight, Zagan averted his gaze once more. Nephy also seemed to be embarrassed at being seen like that and hurriedly turned away. Still, her profile was beautiful.

What do I do? Nephy looks even lovelier now that I've confessed to her.

Nephy was always unbearably pretty and endearing, but those aspects of her seemed to have been polished to an even finer degree following Zagan's confession. It was a source of great agony for him.

"Um, Master Zagan."

"M-Mhm! What is it?"

Nephy fiddled with the white hair running over her chest with both hands, then gathered her resolve.

"Th-There is much I still cannot do. I'm always at a loss for words and find it difficult to express my feelings."

Her ears always conveyed her feelings perfectly fine, but Zagan kept that to himself and continued listening.

"But even so, little by little, I want to get closer to you. My pace may be slow, but will you wait for me?"

Zagan smiled.

"We're both slow," he replied. "There's no need to panic. Let's just take things at our own pace. There's no need to worry about how long we take."

With that, he finally managed to squeeze Nephy's hand atop the table. He felt a surge of warmth overtake him upon doing that.

Yes. There was no need to rush. He could simply savor every single moment he spent with Nephy to its utmost.

"So? What do you think we should do for the ceremony?" he asked, despite just telling her not to rush things.

“Hwah?!”

Nephy’s pointy ears quivered as her eyes darted about. She then replied in the quietest of voices.

“I don’t know yet...but I’d like Chastille to officiate.”

“Hmm... I doubt she’ll let anyone else do it, so there are really no other options.”

The two nodded to each other earnestly.

This whole time, tourists had been staring at them keenly. They were used to being looked at this way, and the tourists were keeping an appropriate distance as if they’d been trained to, so they didn’t find it unpleasant. Still, there seemed to be *a lot* of them.

It wouldn’t be until nighttime that they found out that the shocking proposal of one Archdemon to another had become one of Opheos’s top gossip topics.

The Three Knights Want to Watch over Them

“Ugh... I cannot accept this!”

“Alfred...it’s been two months already. You’re still saying that?”

Torres, the spear wielder, looked at his sword-wielding partner in exasperation.

“Our Lady Chastille was taken by *that* sorcerer! It’s unforgivable!” Alfred yelled.

The day’s gossip rag was spread atop the table. The title “A Friendly Couple” highlighted a page showing Chastille and Barbatos enjoying some tea. Still, thanks to Archdemon Zagan’s shocking proposal hogging all the headlines, this article was on the smaller side.

“Quit acting so unsightly, Alfred,” said the shield-wielder Ryan. “You already knew this. If anything, Lady Chastille has grown more honest about her own feelings. If we do not give her our blessings, then who will?”

“Well, I now understand what a father feels like when his precious daughter is being taken away by a horrid man,” Torres added, clearly having mixed feelings about it.

Ryan nodded and added, “Lady Chastille was thirteen when we first met her, after all.”

“Indeed. It was so cruel for a child to be burdened with the heavy responsibilities of an Archangel. That is exactly why we swore to protect her.”

That was why, without being asked to, they’d done everything they could to reduce her burdens. That was how these three had become inseparable friends, and before they knew it, they’d become known as the Three Knights of the Azure Sky.

“I suppose that chimera incident was the decisive moment,” Ryan said, an air of nostalgia in his voice.

“No, I believe it was when Lady Nephteros joined the church,” Torres said. “She was the one who pointed out that he had an interest in Lady Chastille, remember?”

“Meaning she fell in love because she was told she was loved? That may have been the trigger, but what built the foundation for that has to be the chimera incident.”

Alfred had remained silent during this whole conversation, then suddenly, he raised his voice in shock.

“Y-You two knew about Lady Chastille and that man already?”

“Huh? Wait...you never noticed?” Torres asked.

“When Lady Kuroka... Ahem, I mean, that assassin attacked her, we failed to do anything,” Ryan added. “He was the one who put his life on the line to protect Lady Chastille, remember? I had a hunch after seeing Lady Chastille’s face at the time.”

“I thought that was more genuine gratitude and concern, not love,” Alfred said.

“He doesn’t even work for her and he went that far to save her,” Torres countered. “How could Lady Chastille not be moved?”

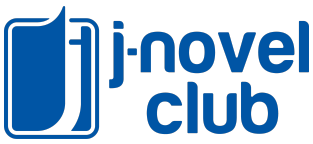
“You could’ve told me!” Alfred wailed.

“I mean, something is seriously wrong with you if you never noticed.”

“Indeed. You’re a year too late to object.”

It would be one thing if they’d only just noticed, but after watching the pair like that for nearly a year, Torres and Ryan felt their opposition to it waning. Only Alfred was left in tears, so they

decided to treat him to some drinks.



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An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride: Volume 19
by Fuminori Teshima

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