



AN
ARCHDEMON'S
DILEMMA: HOW TO
LOVE YOUR
ELF BRIDE

11

FUMINORI TESHIMA

ILL. COMTA

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	2
Prologue.....	10
Chapter I: Sometimes the Indoor and Outdoor Factions Are Hopelessly Incapable of Seeing Eye to Eye.....	17
Chapter II: A Daughter’s Lovesickness Is a Calamity Even an Archdemon Will Hyperventilate Over	71
Chapter III: I Thought I Saw You in My Dream, but It Turned Out We Actually Met in Our Dreams and Couldn’t Cope With the Situation.....	131
Chapter IV: The Vampire’s Dream Was So Sad I Had to Scatter Sugar Around	190
Epilogue	252
Afterword	262
Bonus Short Stories.....	265
The Root of Chaos.....	265
Afternoon Sweets	266



AN
ARCHDEMON'S
DILEMMA: HOW TO
LOVE YOUR
ELF BRIDE

11

FUMINORI TESHIMA

ILL. COMTA



**A HIGH-SCHOOLERS'S
DILEMMA: HOW TO
LOVE YOUR
ELF UNDER-
CLASSMAN**



**“Hm?
Is this a
statue of...
Alshiera?”**



Lilith gasped as
Alshiera flashed
her a faint smile.

***“I didn’t
anticipate
vanishing
like this.”***

Half of her hand was
already transparent.
Just touching it left a
vague sensation on
her skin.

***“All those bullets
I made for the
Seraph Hunters
are for nothing
now, huh?”***



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.



Kuroka Adelhide

A blind cait sith. She once served in the church's secret assassination sect, Azazel, and excels in swordsmanship as a result. Currently a resident at Zagan's castle while she gets her eyesight repaired.



Shax

A sorcerer who excels in healing sorcery. He once worked under Shere Khan, but is now estranged from him. He's been getting along with Kuroka recently, which has drawn the ire of her foster father, Raphael.



Alshiera

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



Bifrons

An Archdemon whose gender is a complete mystery. After being crushed by Zagan, they had a curse cast on them. Currently working with Archdemon Shere Khan, but their goal is unknown.



Lilith

The princess of the succubi. Kuroka and Selphy's childhood friend. She's currently living under Zagan's roof. She excels at controlling the world of dreams.

Shere Khan

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

Prologue

“...pai... Sen... Come on, please wake up, Senpai!”

“...Huh?”

Zagan suddenly awoke upon hearing a familiar voice calling him by an unfamiliar name. A girl with white hair was standing before him. She had pointy ears and azure eyes. Her skin was so white that it was as if it had never been touched by the sun. Her modest lips were a faint pink, and her hair was tied up with a bright red ribbon. She had her dainty hands clasped together behind her as she leaned over toward him.

She was most definitely the girl Zagan knew, but her clothing appeared completely different from usual. She didn't have her precious collar around her slender neck. Instead, she was wearing a jacket and tie, which looked much like noble attire. The jacket was tight, matching the width of her shoulders, so it didn't give off the impression of being men's clothing. And some manner of golden insignia was embroidered onto the jacket's left breast pocket.

Her stark white shirt combined with her thighs, which were exposed thanks to her short skirt, were blindingly dazzling. The shock he received from seeing them was especially dreadful, considering her usual maid uniform was far more modest.

Huh? What's going on? She's so damn cute. Wait, no, I mean, what's going on?

Seeing his beloved in unfamiliar clothing was rather refreshing. Plus, she was so cute it hurt, but he couldn't keep up with the situation. And, as he sat there in bewilderment, the girl puffed out her cheeks and glared at him.

“Geez, you were the one who said you'd help me study, so why are you sleeping?”

“Study?”

A simple desk sat between Zagan and the girl. A flimsy-looking book lay open on the desk alongside another book that was composed of blank pages covered in neatly drawn parallel lines. There was also some kind of wooden stick that resembled a pen, as well as some inexplicable soft-looking stone.

It seemed the girl was in the middle of writing quotations and explanations into the blank book while reading from the other. Perhaps that was the studying she'd referred to. She was currently up on her feet, possibly because Zagan had fallen asleep.

Zagan took a look around. There was nobody else present. The room looked somewhat old-fashioned and was made of wood. Rows of identical desks, much like the one he was sitting at, lined the room. They were all lined up to face the same direction, but his chair had been turned the other way to face the girl across from him.

After confirming all the facts, Zagan realized he was also wearing unfamiliar clothing. He wasn't wearing a tie, but the design of his jacket and trousers matched what the girl had. They gave a similar impression to the ceremonial clothes of the church, or even the military uniforms the knights wore. In any case, they appeared to be the uniform of some sort of organization. Zagan failed to hide his bewilderment at the situation, but he still lowered his head to conceal as much of it as possible.

“Um, sorry. Did I fall asleep?”

“You did, Senpai. You said you were going to help me with my studies, so I was looking forw— I mean, I was hoping to rely on you...”

The girl had a gloomy and dejected look on her face, which sent Zagan into a panic.

“Y-You’ve got it all wrong! I also look forward to any time I get to spend with you, Nephy... Actually, it’s unthinkable that I wouldn’t treat my time with you as a precious treasure!”

Zagan ended up jumping to his feet and rambling on, causing the girl to blink her eyes in a daze. She then hung her head shyly and began fiddling with her tie.

“S-Senpai... This is the first time you’ve said something like that to me...”

“Huh? Oh, um, sorry...”

“D-Don’t be!”

He felt like he couldn’t handle any more embarrassment and covered his face.

Hang on? That’s weird. Setting aside when we first met, I’m pretty sure I’ve been properly conveying my feelings to Nephy lately.

But even as such confusing thoughts ran through his mind, Zagan picked up the unfamiliar pen from the desk.

“A-Anyway, we have to study, right?”

“Y-Yes...” the girl replied with a nod before turning red right to the tip of her ears and looking at him in a troubled manner. “But Senpai, that’s, um, my pencil...”

“W-W-W-W-What?! S-S-S-S-Sorry!”

He’d entered a strange world. A world with an adorable girl dressed in strange clothes. And yet, his cognition was incapable of seeing them as strange. Whatever the case, things were still completely different from normal, so he couldn’t help but feel thrown off by it. And, as he sat there in a daze, a familiar voice reached Zagan’s ears.

“...gan... Master Zagan...”

◇

“Master Zagan, breakfast has been prepared.”

“Gwah?!”

“Fueh?!”

Zagan shot to his feet while letting out a strange noise. He saw a surprised Nephy standing in front of him, her eyes open wide as saucers. She was wearing her usual maid outfit and had a boorish collar around her neck that'd been decorated with a ribbon. It was the Nephy that Zagan knew. He felt a sudden sense of relief, which left Nephy rather curious.

“Is something the matter, Master Zagan?”

“No, I just had a strange dream...”

It truly was strange.

“A bad dream?” Nephy asked with an anxious expression.

“Hmm, no, I guess you could say it was a good one...?”

It was actually a most shocking dream where he'd discovered some new form of happiness. But even as he tried to recall it, the details slipped away from him like water cupped in his hands.

“Still, how strange,” Nephy said with a reserved smile. “You rarely sleep so soundly like that.”

His body did, in fact, feel somewhat lighter than usual.

“Hm? Now that you mention it, I feel like the last time I slept deeply enough to have a dream was when you allowed me to use your lap as a pillow.”

“Hwah?! Um... Back then... I wanted to repay you somehow... so...”

“Oh yeah, I feel like I never properly thanked you for that. Your lap truly lulled me into a deep slumber. You have my thanks, Nephy,” Zagan said and nodded deeply, now able to understand her offer was

the best recompense he could have possibly asked for. On the other hand, Nephy was covering her face like she couldn't listen anymore. But setting all that aside, what kind of dream was it, exactly?

It was like... I had something important I had to do...?

Zagan folded his arms and racked his brains over it. And as he did, Nephy finally regained her composure, lowered her hands from her face, and looked back at him quizzically.

Ah! I feel like I remember now!

Zagan cleared his throat, then spoke in an extremely serious voice, saying, "Umm, hear me, Nephy."

"Yes, Master Zagan?"

"You are as lovely as ever today. I truly feel like I've fallen in love with you all over again."

"Fueh?!"

Zagan tried putting his honest feelings into words, which resulted in Nephy resting on the floor, covering her face once more.

"Wh-What's wrong?"

"What's wrong...? Um, I'm happy you'd say that, but my heart wasn't ready for such a surprise attack..." Nephy muttered those words so quietly that it sounded like her voice would vanish at any moment. She peeked up at Zagan through the gap in her fingers. And realizing that his statement had, in fact, come out of nowhere, Zagan began to show remorse.

"Sorry, it just felt like I had to tell you my honest feelings for some reason. I simply voiced the first thing that came to mind when I looked at you... Huh? What's wrong?"

Nephy's entire face, from her forehead right to the tip of her jaw, had turned a bright red. It was as if she was saying his excessive compliments were some form of abuse.

"I-If that is the way it's going to be, then I can also... Huh?"

The girl Zagan loved rose to her feet in resolution as if to say something... and then crumpled down to her knees weakly. Nephy looked to be in shock, then covered her face once more in anguish. It was as if she had thought she'd dodged an attack moments prior, but was struck with a fatal blow. The trembling lips he saw beneath her palms looked awfully slack, so she clearly wasn't in any real pain or anything. Still, it did seem like she'd lost all strength in her legs.

"A-Are you okay, Nephy?"

"...My apologies. It seems I'm unable to look you in the eyes right now, Master Zagan."

The way she spoke in such a quiet voice as she trembled on the spot stirred up an extraordinary desire to protect her within Zagan. And on the spur of the moment, he embraced her.

"Hawawawawa... M-Master Zagan?"

"Breakfast, right? Don't push yourself. I shall take you there."

After giving it some thought, Nephy had been doing her best to be proactive lately. There was the matter of Kuroka's eyes, her studies in celestial mysticism, and, of course, her relationship with Zagan.

He was just so worthless that he had to depend on Nephy whenever it came to doing things most lovers did. If he couldn't support her in her times of need, what kind of Archdemon was he?

Nephy resigned herself and leaned against Zagan's chest.

"Jeez... I'm no match for you today, Master Zagan."

“Then you may simply depend on me. That is what I truly desire,” he replied with a natural smile.

Nephy looked up at him through the gaps in her fingers and said, “Then allow me one thing.”

“Oh? Let’s hear it.”

Zagan nodded with the smile of an affectionate father prepared to accept anything, but his thin veneer of composure was shattered with but a single blow.

“I love you so much, Master Zagan.”

“Hnnngh!”

A tremendous impact ran through his chest, bringing Zagan down to a knee... with Nephy carefully held in his arms, of course. It was a morning just like any other, really...

“Urgh! Such pure love power right before breakfast! Thanks for the meal!”

...And the troublesome granny convulsing on the other side of the door was also an utterly ordinary sight.

Still, the situation signaled the beginning of a rather major incident.

Chapter I: Sometimes the Indoor and Outdoor Factions Are Hopelessly Incapable of Seeing Eye to Eye

“Do you need something from me?”

A grassy plain with countless swords stabbed into the ground. It was the location of a tremendous battle that had taken place just over a year ago. Two groups who should've been mortal enemies, sorcerers and Angelic Knights, fought side by side and were even joined by the Wise Dragon, all dying a noble death.

Two figures stood among the myriad of grave markers. Both of them wore hoods over their eyes, making their faces, physiques, and even genders completely indistinct. The figure who spoke first had their back turned to the other.

“I wouldn't go as far as saying I need something. I simply thought I'd offer you a warning as a fellow Archdemon,” the second figure replied in an insistent and saccharine voice before continuing in an imposing tone. “You mustn't continue past this point. These are Marchosias' words, Valley Cat Furcas.”

The figure named Furcas shuddered at the mention of that name.

“That's quite the unusual statement from Archdemon Naberius, of all people. Or would you prefer Mystic Artisan, or perhaps Lord of Magic Eyes Naberius?”

Furcas' booming voice forced back Naberius' hood ever so slightly, revealing a silver mask. It was made of mithril. There was a single crack running along one side of the mask, showcasing a light within that looked like the darkness of hell combined with a ruby.

It was likely some form of magic eye. Balor's Evil Eye, the King's Silver Eye, the Entangling Gaze. There were many powers, be they by

sorcery or artificial implants, that were classified as magic eyes. However, Naberius' eye was particularly special among all of them.

Exceptional sorcerers were given a second name, but they were only ever given one. That was because the second name was a symbol of the field they carried to the very extremes. This Archdemon held the unique distinction of having two second names.

Naberius' ruby eye narrowed beneath the mask. That simple action would have amounted to nothing if done by any other person, but when performed by the Lord of Magic Eyes, it had enough pressure to cast a curse of petrification on anything with weak enough mana. In fact, the blades of grass at Naberius' feet helplessly transformed into piles of salt and crumbled away.

And yet, Furcas paid this gaze no mind and simply asked, "Naberius, how many centuries has it been since you became an Archdemon?"

"...Who knows? I've forgotten. I'm not so bored as to count such things."

Furcas showed no signs of really paying attention to the answer, and instead simply continued speaking in grief, saying, "It's been 500 years for me. Five centuries since I became an Archdemon. There is not a spot of land left in this world that I haven't tread upon. The northern Holy Land, the Ocean City Atlastia, Iris in the heavens, even the land under the great Wise Dragon's care, Faskomilio. There is nothing unknown left for me to pursue."

Naberius replied with a sigh, then said, "Why does the human brain imagine and daydream? Why does a dragon's breath bring destruction to all creation? Why do mana and aura oppose each other when they're based on the same foundation?" An armored hand stretched from Naberius' mantle, its fingers counting one by one. "Why? Why? Why? There are countless unknown facts yet to be explained out there. Is it not far too arrogant, even for an

Archdemon, to pretend not to see them and act like you know everything?”

Even with a lifespan extended by sorcery, many unknown mysteries couldn't be perused in books. It was unforgivable for even an Archdemon to deny that. Thus, Naberius' voice was filled with wrath.

“I'm not interested in any of that,” Furcas replied with a hollow voice. Though, it wasn't out of scorn, but grief. Furcas then finally turned around to face Naberius and continued, “I'm not interested in the least. Tell me, are you truly fine with that? It's possible to find countless unknowns within the confines of sorcery, yes. And honestly, I even envy those who are satisfied by such pursuits. However, I have no interest in it.”

Furcas looked up at the sky in lamentation, seemingly actually feeling depressed by the thought.

“I honed my sorcery in search of unseen lands. And yet, this world is far too small. Beyond the horizon, beyond the endless sky, even that twinkling sea of stars is naught but a framed picture of gourmet food within a sealed-off world. I'm tired of it.”

Mystic Artisan Naberius and Valley Cat Furcas saw the world far too differently. They never had a chance of seeing eye to eye.

“I truly cannot get along with you, Furcas,” Naberius said with a sigh.

“We're in agreement for once. You're the only one I'm incapable of having a proper conversation with.”

And so, even while knowing it was useless, Naberius looked up at the sky together with Furcas and said, “...It's no different from suicide, you know?”

“I don't care. I've waited a year since Marchosias' death. That's sufficient time to fulfill my obligation.”

“The current head is Andrealphus, though.”

“He’s also vanished. Marchosias is one thing, but I have no reason to mourn his loss.”

Was that the reason Furcas had chosen to take action now, of all times? Naberius let out a sigh for the umpteenth time. A month had passed since Head Archdemon Andrealphus left to purge Archdemon Shere Khan. And in that time, he’d vanished.

Did Shere Khan kill him? Or perhaps Bifrons is to blame?

Naberius believed Andrealphus was the mightiest of the current Archdemons. And the other Archdemons were likely in agreement. It was undeniably true that he had surpassed Marchosias, who’d weakened over his final years due to age.

Still, I suppose that man wasn’t very popular...

Sorcerers didn’t simply learn sorcery because they wished to get stronger. The desire for strength really only took root during the first few years, when one’s knowledge could be easily plundered by others, making it impossible to conduct research until a bare minimum amount of strength was acquired. Unfortunately, strength alone wasn’t enough to inspire respect in other sorcerers.

That was why Andrealphus, who’d devoted himself to acquiring sorcery to make himself stronger than any other, garnered no sympathy from sorcerers. Nevertheless, he was chosen as Head Archdemon because of the power he possessed to act as an enforcer. And yet, he was struck down within a single year.

He’s still an Archdemon, so I doubt getting killed is enough to keep him down...

Meaning he was either weakened to a state where he couldn’t show himself or had been imprisoned. If he truly was dead, then he was utterly worthless. Even Naberius felt an irrepressible sense of disappointment at the thought.

“Forget Andrealphus. That girl won’t keep quiet if you pass through the barrier, you know?” Naberius pointed out, which made Furcas twitch.

“Alshiera... The notorious barrier guardian, huh?”

She was a monster who made even Marchosias claim, “Alshiera is the only one you should never stir up trouble with.” As the barrier’s guardian, she apparently wielded power that rivaled Wise Dragon Orobas, let alone a measly Archdemon.

Despite that, she can be pretty cute...

Regardless, it was true Naberius didn’t want to make an enemy of her.

“Not a problem,” Furcas replied with a shake of the head. “She’s weakened to the point where she had to take the Seraph Hunters in hand, right? She did come to you to repair them, didn’t she?”

This is why I hate speaking with Archdemons. Even a hermit like Furcas is quite cunning.

“...What an indecent man, eavesdropping on a maiden’s secret,” Naberius said, a hand pushing back the silver mask.

Unfortunately, there were no means remaining with which to convince Furcas to draw back. They’d reached a dead end. And just as that thought crossed Naberius’ mind, Furcas grew oddly hesitant.

“Now that I think of it, I never once had such an encounter despite constantly wandering this world.”

“...What does that mean?”

Naberius didn’t understand, but Furcas shook off such hesitation and floated into the air.

“Farewell, Archdemon Naberius. Your frivolous jests were grating to the ears, but it was a good waste of time.”

“Goodbye, Archdemon Furcas. I’ll never understand your hobby, but best of wishes to you.”

With that, Furcas vanished into the sky, slipping into the crevice where that being, the one Bifrons called the Demon Lord, had manifested one year and several months ago.

“...Well, I’d say I’ve paid my debt, right, Marchosias?”

In the end, Naberius had failed to stop Furcas, but had still handled it about as well as could be expected.

Still, to lose a Sacred Sword... and now a Sigil of the Archdemon... This is pretty bad, isn't it?

The seal had remained intact thanks to the lives of Wise Dragon Orobas, Marchosias, and countless Angelic Knights. However, in just over a year, it had started to fray once more. Was the one responsible for this Shere Khan? Or Bifrons? Or perhaps both of them?

It was currently nothing more than the tiniest of cracks, but the ‘door’ was already open. ‘That’ had recognized it as such. The destruction of the seal could no longer be stopped. With the continuous loss of the Sigils of the Archdemon and the Sacred Swords, there was surely no longer any way of stopping ‘that.’ The world had already spiraled toward its inevitable doom.

Still, that was utterly irrelevant to Furcas. He was hopelessly tired of the world already, and Naberius had no way of stopping him. And it wasn’t just Furcas, either. Due to Andrealphus’ disappearance, the other Archdemons who had been keeping quiet were sure to start moving according to their own whims. Naberius let out another sigh and looked up at the sky.

“Marchosias. Do you think this world has changed in just a single year?”

The masked Archdemon at least had the curiosity to go and confirm whether that was the case, even within a world on the verge of extinction, and thus disappeared into nothingness.

With the figures gone, something resembling a scream of despair resounded from the crack in the sky, vanishing into the air without reaching a single ear.



“Haaah, I can’t seem to settle my problems...”

After breakfast, Zagan let out a sigh within his throne room. He’d slept nicely, so his head felt clear. That was why he tried to put his current situation in order, but was unable to hold in his sigh at how troublesome it all was.

“Hm? How strange to see you sighing, Sir Zagan,” Kimaris said.

Zagan had asked the lion to accompany him over the last month to aid in the experimental use of sorcery and training. That was the plan for today as well, which was why he came to get Zagan in his throne room.

“Oh, is it already time?”

“There’s that too, but I’ve yet to see Miss Gremory today. I was wondering whether she’d been a bother again...”

Zagan grimaced with understanding.

“Gremory had another fit this morning, so I forced her to handle something for me. She should return tomorrow.”

“Is it business that’s situated far away? In that case, I do believe it would’ve been faster for me to go.”

There were no sorcerers who could mimic Black Blade Kimaris’ speed. The only one who even came close was Foll, who possessed a

fundamental difference in potential as a species. And yet, Zagan shook his head.

“It’s business suited to her. Regarding Kuroka and Shax, that is.”

“Ah, I see...”

Kimaris narrowed his eyes as if he’d figured it all out, and Zagan gave him an annoyed shrug.

“As for your first question, we started setting things in place to deal with Shere Khan during Alshiere Imera. With three months of continuous squabbles, I can’t help but sigh.”

Zagan wanted to simply clock him in the face and get it over with already, but the conflict had been prolonged pointlessly due to Bifrons’ involvement.

I really need to kill Bifrons already. That pest already got one chance from me, so there won’t be a second.

Leaving the Archdemon alive had brought nothing but harm.

“And... Azazel, I assume,” Kimaris added in a heavy tone.

Zagan nodded back to him with a grave expression. It had all started when he found that name in a note from the hidden elven village. He started pursuing the name Azazel, met the vampire Alshiera, chased leads concerning his old friend Marc, and once he finally discovered that man’s true identity, Azazel appeared before him. On the day construction of the grand bath was completed, Zagan and Barbatos encountered the ‘shadow’ that stole that pitiful girl’s body. Alshiera avoided answering directly, but it was definitely Azazel.

She did say it was her enemy, after all.

Alshiera claimed she planned to deal with it with her own hands, but Zagan wasn’t the type to leave such problems to others.

It seems Andrealphus failed as well...

He hadn't actually expected anything from Andrealphus, but it seemed all important matters really did have to be settled with his own hands. Regardless, even though Andrealphus had handed his Sacred Sword over to his successor, he had his Sigil of the Archdemon. Even without the Seraph Confession, he was still the strongest Archdemon.

Meaning Bifrons did him in...

During his golden age, Shere Khan had rivaled Andrealphus in strength. However, Zagan considered the possibility of him defeating Andrealphus a joke. The only reason Zagan had won their last bout was because Andrealphus wasn't trying to kill him. If that terrifying Archdemon went straight for the kill, nobody stood a chance against him. If he'd been defeated, he must've never even had a chance to fight back.

Bifrons had the ability to transform their body into something akin to debris. Zagan didn't know the true nature of the power, but he believed it was more likely to be part of their inherent nature as a species than something brought on by sorcery or the like. And even Andrealphus stood no chance if such debris encroached into his body.

Naturally, Bifrons had tried the same thing on Zagan many times in their open hostilities. However, Zagan's eyes could vaguely see the debris. That was why he desperately lashed out all the time before they could touch him.

Zagan leaned back into his throne and looked up at the ceiling.

"It seems I have too many enemies muddying the waters."

"It'd be nice if we could simply end things by crushing one head..."

Kimaris agreed with a bitter smile.

I figured I had a heap of problems, but maybe it's quite simple after all? Zagan sank into thought, then put things in order and decided to speak his mind.

“Maybe we can actually get away with crushing one head... for now.”

“For now?”

Zagan raised his fingers one by one as he went through the details.

“Currently, I have three enemies. Shere Khan, Bifrons, and Azazel.”

Alshiera had told him not to get involved with Azazel, but it was too late. Now that it had appeared before Zagan and attacked him, he had to deal with it. Nephy and the others had no shot at true peace while it was at large. Zagan held up two fingers on his right hand and one on his left.

“Among them, Shere Khan and Bifrons are working together, but Shere Khan is the ringleader. Bifrons would surely have come at us in far nastier ways if they were in charge. In other words, if Shere Khan dies, Bifrons won't have a reason to fight.”

The little Archdemon would, of course, continue clashing with them regardless, but that was a separate matter that required a fair amount of preparation on their part. In other words, Bifrons would remain quiet for a while.

Kimaris simply nodded in response. He didn't appear to have any objections.

Zagan then pointed over to his left hand and said, “Next is Azazel. I've set countermeasures in place, but I honestly don't feel like I can win. If it comes again, I don't think we have any choice but to borrow Alshiera's assistance, as much as I hate to do so.”

“...So, it's an opponent that even you cannot overcome?”

Zagan had never mentioned being unable to defeat an opponent on his own up until now. Kimaris' jet black fur trembled at the thought.

“But here’s the thing. Why has it remained silent for a month after appearing before me? Why did it show its face with such timing to begin with?”

“Such timing...?” Kimaris said, sinking into thought and trying to digest the meaning behind this.

“In my opinion, Azazel is incapable of freely moving about in this world. Doesn’t that sound about right?”

Kimaris’ eyes widened, and he responded by saying, “Certainly. In that case, it could explain why it hasn’t appeared since then. But tell me, do you have a reason to believe that?”

“First, it had to use that pitiful girl’s body. When I last saw the brat, Aristella didn’t have anything like that monster Azazel within her. She was possessed in some way on the night Azazel manifested.”

Zagan didn’t know the specific method of possession, but he believed it was Bifrons’ doing.

“In other words, it requires some sort of medium to manifest?”

“...Exactly.”

And that ‘medium’ had been utterly and thoroughly destroyed. Bifrons’ intervention had apparently saved her life by a hair’s breadth, but the Seraph Hunter was a weapon similar to Heaven’s Phosphor. Wounds inflicted by it couldn’t be healed. It was impossible to recover without making an entirely new body, or something else along those lines.

She wasn’t such irredeemable trash that she deserved to go through something like that...

Regret still tore at Zagan’s heart. He’d never imagined that being unable to save someone he wished to help would leave such a bad aftertaste. And that was precisely why he refused to allow Nephy, Foll, Nephteros, or any of the others to experience such a fate.

Kimaris then pointed out an obvious problem with Zagan's theory by asking, "But she has a twin, right? In that case, wouldn't it mean there's one other medium out there?"

"...Not necessarily just one, no."

Dexia and Aristella. Those twins were Shere Khan's subordinates, but they had the same face as the girl Zagan's old friend Stella brought over to the castle. And that was far too convenient to be a mere coincidence. Zagan had sent Stella a warning already, so even an Archdemon wouldn't be able to meddle with her without proper preparations.

"Before I answer your doubts, allow me a question of my own," Zagan said, taking such things into consideration. "What is Shere Khan's actual objective?"

"That's..."

Shax had said he acted as if he was trying to save people, all while attacking rare species like Kuroka. His mismatched behavior was enough for one to suspect him of having split personalities.

"About Aristella... A part of her body was left behind. I tried analyzing it, which led me to discover something rather peculiar."

Her two severed arms had been left behind. Zagan truly was a sorcerer after all. Calmly dissecting them without providing a proper burial was a most sacrilegious act. Luckily, the information he'd garnered from them was great.

"It seems she isn't human. Though, she also isn't an incomplete being like a homunculus. At the very least, she's different from any being I know of, meaning she's probably some original magical life form created by Shere Khan."

"A magical life form...?" Kimaris muttered, staring back in wonder at the unexpected term.

“Don’t you think Shere Khan plans on completing this magical life form?”

“Hmm,” Kimaris murmured with a nod. “You mean, the rare species hunts were conducted in order to gather materials for that purpose?”

“Exactly. And wouldn’t that make the swarm of shadows that popped out during Alshiere Imera the failed experiments who didn’t reach the degree of completion those twins did?”

“Then, you don’t mean...” Kimaris trailed off, stiffening up at the mention of the shadows.

“Shere Khan is likely trying to create Azazel,” Zagan replied, nodding without hesitation.

Zagan still only had theories about what exactly Azazel was. However, he did at least have a general idea. There were two people the twins came in contact with before they vanished from town. Zagan had witnessed one with his own eyes, but there was one other they met before that. Zagan had been informed of how this person had witnessed strange nightmares for a period of time. It was rash to draw a conclusion while lacking positive proof, but if that girl could be considered the first to be possessed, the twins might have reached completion after coming into contact with her.

In other words, Azazel and the Demon Lord are one and the same.

Zagan then reminisced over the events of Alshiere Imera, saying, “Those shadows that showed up during Alshiere Imera shared the forms of murdered rare species. I don’t know how it works, but perhaps it’s possible to use Azazel to resurrect the dead.”

“Then, even after killing the rare species, he plans to resurrect them afterward...?”

“I bet it’s something like that. Though, it’s still intolerable for those who were killed.”

There was no way to prove that the ones who were resurrected were the same as those who’d been killed.

Kimaris put his hand to his head as if hit with a headache and asked, “Is he...? Is he really chasing such an absurd illusion?”

“Huh...? What are you talking about?” Zagan inquired with knit brows.

Kimaris shook his head in a fluster, then expanded on the topic at hand. “Oh, it’s nothing. More importantly, does that mean Shere Khan is using even Azazel as his pawn? That means the remaining twin will...”

“Don’t be stupid. Even if it was destroyed, Bifrons took Azazel’s sample away. They’re surely happily dissecting it right now. They won’t use up a valuable spare all that easily.”

That was most likely the reason those two Archdemons had kept quiet over the last month. Shere Khan could use Dexia to call forth Azazel once more, which was precisely why he was handling her carefully and dearly. Even if she was incomplete, he had to protect the first fruits of his labor with all his strength. That was just how sorcerers were. He wasn’t likely to throw something so precious at Zagan and lose it.

Kimaris shuddered at the dreadful thought. He then muttered something, as if praying for the sanity of someone he was close to, and asked, “What’s the probability that Shere Khan is healing his precious subordinate...?”

“He’s the kind of lunatic who thinks he can just revive people after slaughtering them, remember? At most, he probably thinks he can resurrect her after using her to complete Azazel.”

On the contrary, he was likely keeping them carefully locked up to keep them from dying. Kimaris covered his face, feeling pity upon realizing their tragic fate.

“...We’ve gotten a little off track,” Zagan told him. “In short, it looks like everything is unrelated, but Shere Khan, Bifrons, and Azazel are all tied together by a single line.”

If Azazel truly was the Demon Lord, then Bifrons was the first to attempt to resurrect it. Shere Khan then tried to do the same thing using a different method. That was why the two of them had joined forces and Azazel had started to take action.

“Shere Khan is the one currently directing everything. If we take care of him, Bifrons will quiet down and Azazel can be stopped.”

There was, of course, a need to settle things with Bifrons as well. And though ridding Azazel of its medium seemed smart, there was no guarantee that doing so would seal it away, since it’d started moving already. Nevertheless, defeating Shere Khan seemed like the fastest way to resolve the incident itself.

I’ve played my hand to accomplish this already. All that’s left is to prepare as much as possible before the time arrives.

And yet, Kimaris muttered in resignation, saying, “...I see. That makes sense. It’s the only way, I suppose.”

“Hm...?” Zagan mumbled, knitting his brows once more.

However, Kimaris simply smiled brightly, much like he always did, and replied, “Oops, it seems this discussion has gone on for far too long. The time is upon us.”

“Oh, that won’t do. I’ll be depending on you again today.”

“Of course.”

And so, the Archdemon and his right-hand man exited the throne room.



“Fwaah...” Lilith let out a huge yawn in the kitchen of Zagan’s castle. Her crimson hair was tied up on both sides of her head and she had a tired look in her golden eyes. She had small, bat-like wings sprouting from her lower back and a pointy tail right above her butt, although she had the misfortune of having a flat chest. She was a succubus, as well as the first princess of the Hypnoel royal family. She wore revealing clothing, much like any succubus, but she had a white apron on as well as a white kerchief wrapped around her head.

“Didn’t get enough sleep, Lilith? Staying up all night is, like, totally bad for your health.”



“But I’m a succubus.”

The succubi were a race who lived in dreams. And so, they were most active at night. It was actually stranger for one to be up and cooking during the day, all things considered. The siren next to Lilith merely shot her a cheerful smile in response.

This was Selphy. She had fins where a normal human would have ears and blue hair much like the color of the sea. She was currently standing on two legs, but her natural form was that of a girl with the lower body of a fish.

“But it’s, like, super weird to see you yawning in the middle of work,” Selphy said with a laugh. “Something happen?”

“It’s nothing serious...”

Upon seeing Lilith’s ladle stop moving, Selphy turned to face her.

“I’ll, like, listen if you’ve got something troubling you.”

“I’m not really troubled by it... It’s more... worrying, I guess?”

Selphy gave her an understanding nod and said, “Ah, it’s been three days since Kuroka left and all, huh?”

Lilith, Selphy, and the cait sith Kuroka were all childhood friends. Kuroka had gone through indescribable suffering during the time they were apart. And until recently, though it had been a full two months since she was treated, she was completely blind.

The restoration of Kuroka’s eyesight had gone off without a hitch, so she’d returned to work. She was staying at the Archdemon’s castle during the treatment, but she was originally a priest at the church, an organization that stood in opposition to sorcerers. A sorcerer named Shax went with her to serve as her guard, but that man was hopelessly incapable of reading the mood.

Both of them saw each other in a much better light than they let others believe, yet their feelings always slipped past each other at every moment. Now that the two of them were away from Kianoides, Lilith couldn't help but feel worried for their future.

They've got worries of their own, I suppose... Lilith felt a headache coming and put her hand to her brow.

"It'll be fine!" Selphy reassured her with a cheerful smile. "Kuroka can be kinda unlucky, but isn't Mister Shax, like, a nice old man who'd throw himself in harm's way to protect her and all that? At this point, they've just gotta get their feelings in order."

"I'm pretty sure that's a major roadblock..."

It actually felt like the greatest misfortune of Kuroka's life was falling in love with that man. How did Shax truly feel about her? Wasn't Kuroka going through more hardships with him after having suffered so much already? It pained Lilith's heart to think about it.

"But I think it's gonna be okay, ya know? I mean, Mister Shax is, like, a totally peerless cat lover."

"Huh? He is?"

"Yeah! When stray cats come in through the garden every now and then, he goes off to feed them with a super gentle look on his face. And then, when Kuroka walks by, he turns bright red and totally panics."

"So wait, is he looking at her as a girl or as a cat?!"

That was likely the exact problem Kuroka was worried about.

"Oh, speaking of cats, Miss Nephy said she never even saw a cat before coming here, huh?"

"Oh, I suppose there aren't any cats out in a secluded forest... Wait, that's not the point!" Lilith raised her voice and shook her head. The

conversation always seemed to go off track when speaking with Selphy.

“H-Huh? What’s with you?”

“No, I mean... Lately, His Highness looks strangely tired, doesn’t he?”

“Really? He looks, like, embarrassingly energetic whenever Miss Nephy’s around.”

“Well, that’s the case when they’re together...”

Seeing them so happy made Lilith feel stupid for being worried about him.

“But that’s not what I mean,” Lilith continued. “He’s just forgetting he’s tired. His fatigue isn’t actually going away, right?”

“Well, he’s a sorcerer and all, so isn’t he handling it in some magicky way? Have you ever heard of a sorcerer collapsing from fatigue?”

Their king stood at the peak of all sorcerers, resting on the seat of an Archdemon. Collapsing from fatigue was something even a novice sorcerer would be ridiculed for. Lilith understood this full well, but she still cast her gaze to the floor.

“The color of mana about him looks tired to me...” she muttered.

He didn’t show it on the surface at all, but mana didn’t lie. Selphy suddenly had a serious look and turned to face Lilith completely.

“Seriously?”

“Mmm...”

Zagan was a terrifying Archdemon, but he was also a king who treated a non-sorcerer like Lilith impartially as his subordinate. When she selfishly asked for a large bath one month ago, he even made the grand bath behind his castle. Well, the biggest reason for him doing so was to please Nephy and her mother Orias, but in the end, it was still true he ended up responding to her selfish request. That was

why Lilith wanted to do something to repay the favor as one of the people under his protection.

Just then, the door to the kitchen opened.

“Sorry I’m late.”

A small girl walked in. She had beautiful, vivid green hair with rough-looking horns peeking out from its gaps. Her large eyes were colored amber. She appeared no older than a small child, but in truth, she was both a dragon and the Archdemon’s daughter.

How strange. This girl is never late...

Nephy was often late due to how busy she was, but Foll was always on time. Did she get stuck doing something else?

“Oh, hey there, little lady! Don’t you worry one bit!” Selphy greeted her with a cheerful wave.

“I’ve been wondering this for a while now, but you’re the princess here, right? Why are you helping out in the kitchen?” Lilith asked.

Actually, everyone residing in the kitchen was essentially royalty. Furthermore, the Archdemon’s bride, or at least Lilith assumed she was his bride, also worked away busily in the kitchen. Why was that?

“I’m just doing what I can. It’s better for a meal to be even a little tastier.”

Foll wasn’t a very expressive girl, but the way she helped with the cooking was so lovable that it stirred up a desire to protect her within Lilith.

“You’re honestly a big help. You, Lord Raphael, and Lady Nephy are the best at seasoning,” Lilith said, preparing a stool for Foll to stand on.

The butler Raphael and the maid... the Archdemon's bride, Nephy, were very busy. So lately, Foll had managed everything related to seasoning the food.

Lady Nephy's been spending less time in the kitchen recently...

She was already responsible for all the housework in the entire castle. Plus, she had her own studies of sorcery and mysticism to attend to. It only made sense for her to be busy. She pretty much had no time to herself. This was perhaps the reason Zagan's fatigue stood out lately.

Foll climbed up onto the stool, then shook her head modestly and said, "You've gotten quite good, Lilith. Have more confidence in yourself."

"R-Really? Thanks."

Lilith used to be afraid of the dragon, but that just made her all the happier to be praised by her. Foll's expression just seemed strangely absentminded, however, as if she was zoning out. Did this have something to do with her tardiness?

I wonder what's troubling her? Lilith was unsure if she could be of any use, not being a sorcerer and all, but she still wanted to help. However, right when she was about to speak up...

"Lilith, what were you two talking about just now?" Foll asked.

"Huh? Oh, umm..." Lilith was at a loss, unsure of how to answer when she'd prepared to ask a question herself. She couldn't even remember what they were talking about.

"Oh, Lilith was just mentioning how Mister Zagan looks kinda tired lately," Selphy answered.

"...Lilith?" Foll stared at her with her amber eyes, which made Lilith's body stiffen.

"Umm, it just looks that way to me."

“.....”

It wasn't much of an explanation, so Foll continued to stare at her dubiously.

“I mean, I'm a succubus, so I can see human vitality. Or, I guess you can say it's the healthiness of mana or the like,” Lilith added in a panic.

Succubi manipulated dreams. They could show people nightmares, but the original purpose of their power was to fulfill the desires of others. In recompense, they stole their target's vitality.

I have quite a few customers in this castle, in fact... Lilith actively worked as a succubus ever since coming here from Liucaon. She resolved the desires of Zagan's sorcerer subordinates in their dreams. That was one of the reasons she'd been yawning earlier. And she did, of course, have Zagan's permission to do so.

When exposed to Zagan and Nephy, as well as Kuroka and Shax, each and every day, anybody would want a partner of their own. It was Lilith's job to show the spectators their ideal dreams at night. But gazing at those glacially slow relationships from afar spurred on strange feelings within people, so the residents of the castle all had unusually wholesome desires, like nestling up against someone in the town plaza all day.

They were such peaceful thoughts for heinous sorcerers serving directly under an Archdemon. Even so, the quality of the vitality she received in payment was quite high, seeing as they were all top-class sorcerers. It was enough for Lilith to feel strangely guilty, since it felt like she was ripping them all off.

“...I completely forgot. I thought it was just me and Zagan,” Foll said with a surprised look on her face.

“You mean being able to see mana?”

Foll returned a small nod.

Is there a problem with being able to see mana?

“Can Selphy and Kuroka see it too?” Foll asked curiously.

“Me? Nope. Not at all. Kuroka never mentioned anything like that, but she probably can’t? Actually, she couldn’t even see normally, huh?!”

“Right...” Foll murmured. Then, she shifted her focus to Lilith with an overly-guarded expression. “Lilith, how much can you see?”

“How much? Like... whether or not... it’s healthy, I suppose?”

Since she fed on human vitality, it was better to target humans in good health. That was why she could see the quality of mana. Was there anything else to it? Lilith cocked her head curiously as Foll blinked at the anticlimactic answer.

“That’s it? What about the flow and connections?”

“Connections? I don’t really get what you mean...”

With that, the young dragon finally let out a sigh of relief and replied, “Sorry for asking something weird.”

“Um, I don’t really mind...?”

Lilith didn’t really understand what was going on. Seeing how clear her bewilderment was, even Foll could tell she wasn’t being clear enough.

“Seeing the flow of mana is an outrageous ability for a sorcerer to possess. I wanted to know if you had it.”

“Oh, that? Sorry, it’s just a normal sense we succubi have. Well, the royal family prides itself on our ability, but I’m pretty sure it’s useless for sorcery.”

“Zagan can see it,” Foll replied in a deadly serious tone. “That’s why he became an Archdemon at such unprecedented speed.”

It was apparently that amazing of an ability. Lilith was quite moved to learn that fact.

“Sooo... could the Silver-Eyed King see it too?” Selphy asked curiously.

Lilith’s eyes shot open.

“However, he was also known as such... The Silver-Eyed King.”

It happened about a month ago. On the day the grand bath opened, Alshiera unveiled the name of Zagan’s father. Lilith felt like she finally figured out what was weighing on Foll’s mind.

I mean, our three royal families are the direct descendants of the Silver-Eyed King...

Additionally, Alshiera mentioned the Silver-Eyed King was the former wielder of Kuroka’s Moonless Sky. Foll might have hoped for some kind of clue or connection from Kuroka’s childhood friend Lilith. Having said that, Lilith had nothing of the sort on hand, so she could only shrug her shoulders.

“The Silver-Eyed King might have had such powers, but he was our great ancestor from over a thousand years ago. I’m pretty sure we haven’t inherited any of... Huh? Hang on.”

Lilith noticed a slight inconsistency in what she was saying.

“What’s up?” Selphy asked curiously.

“It’s just... The Silver-Eyed King was a hero from over a thousand years ago, right? So if he’s His Highness’ father... Huh? Isn’t that weird?”

Lilith had heard before that Zagan looked exactly his age, which was somewhere around 18 or 19 years old.

“Uhhh? Wasn’t the last Archdemon, like, over a thousand years old? So, the Silver-Eyed King would at least be older than that, yeah? Even setting that aside, dragons and the like live tens of thousands of years,” Selphy commented.

“But the Silver-Eyed King wasn’t a sorcerer.”

“...Maybe people just kept inheriting the name?” Foll added in astonishment, bringing Lilith back to her senses.

“R-Right. That would make sense... But still, I’ve never even heard of anyone inheriting the title Silver-Eyed King.”

Even if it was simply being kept from the public, it was somewhat unthinkable for the first princess of one of the three great royal families to be left in the dark.

Meaning... Wait, what does that even mean? Lilith was left completely confused, unable to get her thoughts in order, when Foll shot her a glance.

“Lilith, get it off the fire. The stew’s burning.”

“Ah!”

Lilith lowered the cauldron from the fire in a panic. After that, she had to focus on her cooking and was unable to continue their conversation.

Maybe I should try asking His Highness in his dreams tonight? Lilith had no way of knowing at the time that her idea would trigger a major incident.

◇

“Good day to you. Is it time for work?”

After entering the office, Nephteros was greeted by the small girl seated within. The girl had blonde hair tied up on both sides and golden eyes like the moon. Her dress was black, as if a symbol of the

night, and she had a creepy stuffed doll in her arms. Two sharp fangs could be seen peeking out from her lips. Upon seeing this vampire, who didn't spare a single thought for the window's sunlight, Nephteros let out a sigh.

"You came again? I don't think you'll find anything interesting by sticking around me, Alshiera."

It had been about a month now. Ever since she was invited to the party celebrating the completion of the grand bath at Zagan's castle, this girl had followed Nephteros around. She wondered what she'd done to offend or attract her, but Alshiera didn't really do anything in particular. Nephteros already knew the girl acted in a way to make her intentions completely unreadable.

"Indeed, it isn't interesting at all," Alshiera replied with a giggle.

"So, how about going back to the castle? Aren't you being targeted by Shere Khan? Let me just tell you now, I'm not strong enough to protect you from an Archdemon."

Alshiera narrowed her gaze pleasantly at that and said, "Teehee, it isn't interesting, but watching you is rather enjoyable."

"...I don't get it."

"You don't need to."

The girl acted however she pleased in Zagan's castle, and she was no different in front of Nephteros, who couldn't tell whether she was being friendly or hostile, or whether she could let her guard down at all. But in any case, it was exhausting. As always, she was unable to read the girl's intentions.

"Has your condition been stable lately?" Alshiera asked.

"My health? Well, I've been feeling much better ever since you started coming here."

Nephteros had had an episode where she collapsed right before the grand bath was completed.

I don't really remember what happened back then...

According to Richard, she'd apparently shown symptoms akin to sleepwalking. Feeling that she would be a bother to everyone around her like that, she made sure to never be alone. But perhaps as a result of that, she'd been in strangely great condition lately.

Setting that aside, Nephteros was somewhat troubled that Alshiera wasn't getting out of the office chair, And so, she waved her hand to drive the girl off.

"Anyway, that's Chastille's seat. Could you move? It's about time for her to start her duties."

They wouldn't be able to finish their work if they had to have this discussion during office hours. And yet, Alshiera showed no signs of getting off the chair, as if she didn't even hear Nephteros to begin with. Having said that, their little exchange had gone on for a whole month already. Due to that fact, Nephteros no longer had a sense of reservation toward her. She brought over another chair with familiar movements.

"Here, use this one."

"...Very well."

"You can have some of the macarons we were gifted, so don't make that face."

"...Do you perhaps take me for one of the neighborhood children?"

At first, Nephteros found the girl to be ominous and a complete mystery. But after seeing her at Zagan's castle, all such feelings were completely dispelled.

It seems she saved Kuroka and the others as well... Nephteros believed she wasn't a bad person. At the very least, she didn't

appear to bear any hostility. And as she shot her a smile with such thoughts in mind, a sour look graced Alshiera's face as she bit down on her lips. Nephteros actually found that part of her rather cute.

After carrying the chair, with Alshiera still in it, over to the reception table of the office, Nephteros saw the girl eat the snacks set aside there with a composed expression.

"I would prefer some fine wine rather than macarons."

"Giving you wine when you look like that feels immoral."

With that, Nephteros began organizing documents.

"If wine is no good, then your blood will also do," Alshiera replied with a bewitching smile.

Nephteros raised her head at the disturbing thought. A second later, Alshiera peeled back her lips and revealed her two fangs.

What's this strange sense of déjà vu...?

There was no hostility in those words, and yet she looked awfully aggressive. It was rather confusing... But after thinking it over, Nephteros arrived at an answer right away.

"I don't really mind," she said with a shrug of her shoulders. "Not that I know whether my blood will taste any good."

Alshiera looked back at her in a daze as said, "Oh my? I thought you'd be more opposed to the idea."

"I know you're injured. This stuff is important to a vampire, right? I don't really mind if it's not going to hurt. I do owe you one."

"...You remember?"

Alshiera's voice took on a sharp tone, as if she were raising her guard. Nephteros grimaced, then brushed back her silver hair from her face.

“I don’t really get what you mean, but you protected Kuroka, didn’t you? It’d be problematic for me if she wasn’t around.”

That single fact was more than enough reason for Nephteros to feel indebted.

“Hmm... I see,” Alshiera replied, sinking into thought.

Nephteros’ answer was apparently beyond her expectations. And seeing her sink into silence, Nephteros thought of asking something she always wanted to hear from the girl.

But I suppose she won’t give me an answer... In that case, she figured it was better to close in by prodding at Alshiera’s interest inoffensively. After sorting out the right questions to ask, Nephteros cast her line and waited to see if she would take the bait.

“Hey, can I ask you something?”

“About?”

“You’ve known Big Bro for a long time... You knew him before you even met him in Liucaon, right?”

Alshiera narrowed her eyes. Nephteros couldn’t tell whether that was out of wariness or admiration, but she’d at least succeeded in taking the first step in drawing her attention.

“Now, why do you believe that?” Alshiera asked, urging her on.

“I mean, didn’t you say ‘we meet again’ or something like that?”

“Alas, how truly surprising. To think the day would come where I would meet you once more.”

That was what Alshiera had said when they first met her in the Atlastia. Nephteros didn’t understand the meaning of those words back then, but now that she knew about Zagan’s father, it made sense. The reason she called Zagan Silver-Eyed King was because

she'd overlaid the image of his father on top of him... and because she was acquainted with Zagan himself.

Perhaps... she was in love with this Silver-Eyed King. However, that was an entirely unfounded theory, so Nephteros didn't mention it aloud.

Alshiera averted her gaze for an instant, yet it seemed her self-respect didn't allow her to dodge the question. She let out a small sigh and acknowledged it, saying, "Well, it isn't something to keep hidden after all this time. Indeed. I knew the Silver-Eyed King when he was a child."

Nephteros was already convinced of that, but hearing it from Alshiera's own lips somehow made it feel unreal. What exactly did she know about Zagan?

Should I cut to the chase? Or should I try adding in one other topic? Nephteros hesitated over how to proceed. Getting the answers she wanted out of Alshiera was no simple task. If she didn't shake her up a little more, she felt the girl would simply gloss over everything. As such, Nephteros prepared her next lure while prodding a little more.

"Oh? So, can I ask one other thing?"

"...I don't plan on answering even if you ask, just so you know."

It appeared she really didn't want to be asked about Zagan. In a rare showing, Alshiera's agitation was clear in her behavior. That left Nephteros a little happy, which was why she ended up saying something rather careless.

"Weren't you the one who asked this Marc person to look for Zagan?"

Marc was the name of Zagan's childhood friend who was much like an older brother to him. And yet, he once wielded the Seraph Hunters, much like Alshiera. It was also said that his true identity was

the pope, the head of the entire church. He'd apparently acted like an alley waif to stay at Zagan's side at someone's request. Such was the case, but...

The air froze over with a crack. A bead of sweat ran down Nephteros' cheek.

Did I go too far...?

Even if it was over 200 years ago, Alshiera had handily defeated Archdemon Andrealphus. Touching the wrong nerve could have led to Nephteros being strangled to death with ease. The difference in power between them was just that large. As such, a major prerequisite to drawing her interest was to not anger her.

Alshiera returned to her senses upon seeing Nephteros so frightened, then let out a deep sigh. At the same time, the frozen atmosphere dispersed.

"I don't recall asking for such a thing. He simply made it a promise all on his own," Alshiera practically spat out.

"...Sorry. That was rather thoughtless of me," Nephteros said upon reflecting over how she got caught up in the moment.

"I don't really mind."

The way Alshiera huffed to the side gave a glimpse at how she felt somewhat guilty for acting immaturely. Seeing such a reaction, Nephteros suddenly smiled.

"What is it now?" Alshiera asked.

"Nothing. I don't mean this in a bad way, but I just thought you really resembled Big Bro."

"...What exactly are you looking at to think such a thing?"

Alshiera blatantly averted her gaze, but her fingers twiddled about over her skirt. Apparently, she didn't hate the comparison.

This girl gets happy over the strangest things...

Zagan's adopted daughter, Foll, was similar in that regard.

Now that I think of it, she gets along with Foll, doesn't she?

Was there something that tied them together, perhaps? Putting that thought aside, Nephteros decided to elaborate and praise her as a form of apology for what she'd said earlier.

"Right, that face you were making just now is a good example. In general, your affection is kind of hard to understand. Even though you treat others kindly, it can feel somewhat misleading. That part of you is just like him."

After saying that, she started doubting whether her statement was actually praise, but Alshiera didn't seem to be offended. She twirled her finger proudly through her golden hair while shooting glances at Nephteros as if asking for more. That reaction also reminded Nephteros of Zagan's adopted daughter.

"I do believe the Silver-Eyed King is quite easy to understand, though."

"You mean recently, right? He was quite different when I first met him..."

Recently, he'd learned how to voice his honest feelings for Nephy and talk to other sorcerers without inviting any misunderstandings. But when Nephteros first met him, his conversation skills were abysmal. In a sense, his butler Raphael was easier to understand.

And now that they'd touched on this topic, even Alshiera made a sullen expression.

"I don't try to be that difficult to understand..."

"Is that so? You were quite odd yourself when we first met, just so you know. I was completely under the impression you were lunging in to attack."

When a certain accident had turned Zagan into a child, he went to the underwater city to look for a solution. At the time, Alshiera closed in behind the small Zagan and gestured like she was going to suck his blood. Because of that, she ended up getting into a dispute with the grown-up Foll. It was just four months ago, but it felt like an eternity. It felt somewhat nostalgic, even.

Alshiera smiled dubiously at this and said, “Oh my, perhaps I truly intended to attack him back then...”

The small vampire tossed another sweet into her mouth. It seemed her wariness from earlier had dispersed as she settled into a good mood once more.

And still feeling somewhat nostalgic, Nephteros replied, “Hm? In truth, weren’t you so happy you suddenly wanted to hug him?”

In the early days, Zagan often demonstrated such an attitude around Nephy.

“Hgk— Hak! Ack!”

“A-Are you okay?”

Alshiera broke into a splendid coughing fit as Nephteros hurried over in a fluster and rubbed her back. The undead didn’t have beating hearts or a need to breathe, so Alshiera must’ve been shaken by her statement. There were even tears in the corners of her eyes.

Nephteros only meant to reminisce over old times, but she’d apparently accidentally hit a bullseye.

“S-Sorry. I didn’t think you would be so surprised...”

“No, it’s fine...”

Alshiera raised her head and brushed back her hair as she regained her composure. She then stared reproachfully at Nephteros, putting her up guard.

I guess that one did make her angry...

It wasn’t enough to freeze the air like before, but it wouldn’t have shocked her to learn that she’d ruined Alshiera’s mood. And after tensing up... Nephteros was left feeling rather let down.

“Hm...?”

She thought Alshiera would hurl harsh insults at her, but nothing came from her mouth at all. Her eyes showed a desire to complain, but her mouth remained open as if she’d been rendered mute. From one perspective, it was like she’d received a shock and her heart couldn’t keep up.

“.....”

“Umm...? What’s wrong?”

Had she offended her again? It didn’t look like it, but something about Alshiera’s behavior felt strange. Nephteros cocked her head when Alshiera suddenly squeezed her stuffed doll tightly and hung her head.

After a little while, she finally regained her voice and muttered, “Yes... It’s just as you say.”

“What do you mean?”

“...I wanted to hug him. Even though I knew I wasn’t allowed, I couldn’t endure it,” Alshiera said in a muffled voice, as if she was repenting.

“You weren’t allowed...?”

Zagan was definitely surprised back then, but it wasn’t something he would be so obstinate as to disallow.

Alshiera didn’t seem to pay attention to Nephteros’ bewilderment as she continued her soliloquy by saying, “I mean, the Silver-Eyed King looked just like the child I knew... It was so nostalgic, so unbelievable... It may be laughable for an undead like me to say this, but it was a miracle...”

What manner of feelings were behind those words? The way she held her stuffed doll and curled her back reminded Nephteros of a lost child left all on her own. Or perhaps it was more apt to say she resembled a girl carrying the burden of having destroyed a country or something. She looked ever so helpless, like she would break down into tears at any moment.

I wonder what happened between her and the Silver-Eyed King..?

Nephteros couldn’t even begin to imagine, considering it hadn’t even been a year since she was born. She was created as a copy of Nephelia, a toy for Archdemon Bifrons. If she hadn’t ended up finding a friend in Chastille, she would’ve broken down long ago.

Alshiera’s behavior reminded her of how she’d acted when there was no salvation in sight. No, Alshiera looked even more fragile than that, as if she was walking all alone down a far darker path. It made Nephteros believe that the girl’s usual flippant attitude was a shell to desperately keep herself together amidst the hell she lived in.

This girl had lived in isolation for a thousand years, and had likely spent her time before that suffering a great deal as well. Nephteros didn’t mean anything by what she said, but she ended up creating a crack in this girl’s protective shell.

“.....”

She couldn't think of what to say. About the only thing she was capable of was embracing the small vampire in front of her. That was why she couldn't ask. She couldn't ask the real question she'd hoped to get an answer for. About that time they met in the underwater city.

Hey, were you referring to me back then?

"Then I shall bid you adieu, my beloved Silver-Eyed King, and—Azazel."

That was the name of the enemy this girl had dedicated the rest of her life to fighting. It was the secret Zagan was searching for. And, in all likelihood, it was something outrageously bad. Nephteros wondered whether she was somehow involved with it... and if that was the reason this girl was staying by her side. She wanted to press Alshiera for answers, but after seeing her like this, she couldn't say a thing.

Time passed in complete silence just like that, and before either of them knew it, a knock came at the door.

"Do come in," Alshiera said, raising her head.

"Is that up to you?"

The way Alshiera acted like this was her own room left Nephteros astonished. It seemed she had managed to calm down.

A girl entered the office accompanied by a young Angelic Knight. She had gallant, scarlet eyes and hair of the same color tied up by a butterfly hair ornament. She was wearing the vestments of a bishop and had a sword hanging from her waist.

It was Chastille, one of the twelve Archangels and the leader of this church. The other Angelic Knight was a young man named Richard. He was currently serving as the bishop's private guard, so he was wearing his Anointed Armor.

They were the only two who entered, but Nephteros shifted her focus to Chastille's feet. He didn't show himself while she was working, but that gloomy sorcerer was surely hiding with the shadows stretching out beneath her.

Upon spotting Nephteros, Richard smiled and said, "So this is where you've been, Lady Nephteros... Oh, and Miss Alshiera, too."

"Pardon the intrusion," Alshiera replied with a nonchalant smile.

Oh well...

Seeing Alshiera not act flippant had thrown Nephteros for a loop. After recomposing herself, she rose to her feet to return to work when something tugged on her robes. Alshiera had gripped on her sleeve while keeping her gaze averted.

She then muttered in the quietest of voices, "Please keep what you just heard a secret."

"...Sure."

Seeing them like that, Richard strained a smile and stated, "You two are getting along quite well now, I see."

"Yes, of course we are. In fact, we're on friendly enough terms for her to say it's okay for me to suck her blood."

"Blood...?"

The disturbing phrase had Richard lowering his hand to the sword at his waist. Seeing that, Chastille stopped him like it was no big deal.

"That's just Miss Alshiera's brand of humor. She doesn't mean ill by it, so don't pay it any mind, Richard."

It was office hours already, so Chastille was in work mode. As such, she handled Alshiera's misleading behavior with familiarity.

Meanwhile, Richard still hesitated, wondering if it was truly fine to let his guard down.

“...Is that so?”

“She probably meant ‘we’re friendly enough not to get angry over such jokes.’”

“...I’m surprised you inferred that from what was said.”

“I’ve known Zagan and Lord Raphael long enough to figure that out. You should get used to it yourself.”

Richard was left perplexed at the heartless declaration, so he simply replied, “I do believe it will be rather difficult for me.”

That was perfectly natural, but for some reason, even Alshiera looked confused.

“What...? Is something the matter, Miss Alshiera?”

“...No. I was simply wondering whether I looked that way to you as well. I mean, that I resemble the Silver-Eyed King, or that I’m difficult to understand.”

“Yes. In fact, you’re similar enough that I would suspect you were Zagan’s sister.”

Alshiera suddenly covered her face.

“Umm, what is it now?” Nephteros asked.

“...Please leave me be. I’m just feeling somewhat responsible for this.”

“Is that so...?” Nephteros muttered in confusion. She had no idea what Alshiera felt responsible for, but she returned a vague nod anyway.

Does it have something to do with when they met further in the past, I wonder?

She had such a quirky personality. If she met Zagan while he was a child, it wouldn’t have been strange for him to have been unconsciously influenced by her in some way. Still, that clearly

wasn't a topic to touch on carelessly, as Nephteros had learned mere moments ago.

Nephteros forced her conjecture into the corner of her mind as nothing more than fantasy and continued her work.

A short while later, when she looked back up from her work, Alshiera was no longer there. She truly was an incomprehensible girl. And even as she questioned that, Nephteros continued the work she had on hand.

With thoughts of the mysterious vampire now in the corner of her mind, she immersed herself in work, and noon arrived before she knew it.

Suddenly, a violent knock resounded from the door to the office.

"L-Lady Chastille! This is serious!"

It was a familiar and irritating voice that belonged to one of the three idiots. Namely, the one who used a shield.

"What happened?" Chastille asked as she rose to her feet with a grim expression on her face.

The door to the office burst open.

"A-About that..."

The large man with the shield entered the room hesitantly. He seemed strangely inarticulate as he directed Chastille's attention behind him.

"Foll?"

Hiding behind the large man, merely because they were far too different in size, was Zagan's little daughter. Since she was out in town, she had her hood on, which resembled a cat's head. She got along with Chastille about as well as cats and dogs, although that was mostly due to one-sided prejudice from Foll.

“Horsehead... No, Chastille. There’s something I want to ask you.”

“...Did something happen?” Chastille asked, tensing up as she heard Foll’s suddenly respectful attitude.

“Chastille, listen—”

On that day, Chastille... no, the entire office of Kianoides’ church was thrown into unprecedented chaos.



A dull shockwave spread out as a cloud of dust rose to the air.

“Are you okay, Sir Zagan?!”

Underneath Kianoides, far down within a large grotto in Archdemon Palace. The space was similar to the cave beneath Zagan’s castle, but this one was larger and the walls and ceiling were scrupulously reinforced.

A sorcerer with the face of a lion ran up to Zagan. His body was covered in muscles that looked as hard as steel. In terms of simple physical strength, he was a giant who far surpassed Zagan. He was Black Blade Kimaris, Zagan’s trusted retainer and right-hand man.

Zagan got up from within a pile of rubble, shook his head, and said, “Don’t worry about it. It was my mistake. I should have gotten out of the way in time.”

Blood dribbled down his head, but the bleeding itself had already died down. The wound would close in a few more seconds. The dripping blood was simply the remnants of what he’d already bled running down his hair.



Zagan was a specialist amongst sorcerers who focused on reinforcing his own body. Even if his entrails were torn out, he could regenerate in under a minute. Having said that, there were faint signs of fatigue within his silver eyes.

“...Sir Zagan. This really is reckless. I know this sounds like hubris, but I believe it will be difficult to catch my figure using a human’s kinetic vision, even when enhanced with sorcery.”

“I know. That’s why I’m relying on you.”

Normally, a sorcerer’s skill in sorcery determined their strength. And because of that, there was absolutely no need for normal physical strength. For example, say there was an Angelic Knight who wielded a sword which could cut anything and moved as fast as light. There was absolutely no need whatsoever for a sorcerer to fight such an opponent head-on. Things could be brought to a simple end by mixing a tasteless, odorless, colorless poison that could kill with a single whiff, then administering it in secret. It could even be settled by simply dropping the target into a bottomless pit.

A sorcerer’s true ability was the knowledge to cook up such schemes and carry them out. The time Barbatos kidnapped Nephy, back when Zagan first became an Archdemon, clearly showed that. If Barbatos had ignored Zagan entirely and stuck to running away, how would things have turned out? Who in the world could possibly have cornered a teleportation specialist like him? Perhaps an Archdemon who specialized in the same field, like Valley Cat Furcas, but there were surely no others. That was what a difference in strength meant between sorcerers.

Zagan won simply because Barbatos stubbornly attempted to beat him in a fight. And he understood this well. In short, so long as he

showed his face, he knew Barbatos would be dragged into Zagan's field of expertise.

That's precisely why I respect Kimaris...

Such power traditionally didn't have much meaning to sorcerers. Kimaris wasn't nominated as an Archdemon candidate because he possessed some otherworldly power like Zagan did. He simply possessed that much raw strength. Even though sorcerers would normally not have even spared him a glance, he had to be acknowledged. In other words, the sorcerer known as Kimaris was an expert who surpassed Zagan in the field of violence.

How's this guy such a gentleman despite specializing in this kind of sorcery?

Kimaris was a man of far better character than most Angelic Knights, let alone sorcerers.

"Sorry, but I need you to keep me company a little longer. It seems this sort of technique can only be gained through endless repetition."

Kimaris returned a troubled smile and replied, "As you will. But first, I'd like to suggest a break."

"...Hmph. If you say that, I can't possibly ignore such counsel."

Zagan was unable to deny his fatigue had been accumulating. If he returned to the castle in such a state and caused Nephy unnecessary worry, he would be putting the cart before the horse. And so, he obediently accepted Kimaris' advice and sat himself down on top of the rubble.

"Can I ask you something while we rest?" Zagan asked.

"Yes. Ask anything you wish to know."

"Why did you gain such power?"

Kimaris' eyes widened. Much like Zagan, his specialty seemed abnormal for a sorcerer. Nobody would choose such a path unless they had a very good reason. It also required a reasonable amount of resolve to reach such a stage without dying.

"...Hmm. Consider that question a result of my curiosity. It's fine if you don't wish to answer."

To that, Kimaris shook his head and responded, "No. I'd like to keep it a secret from Miss Gremory, though. Will that do?"

"Yes. Of course."

Having said that, it was strange for Kimaris to keep secrets from Gremory.

"Very well. At first, I desired power in order to enact revenge," Kimaris said as he took a seat on one of the larger chunks of rubble.

"I see. That makes sense," Zagan replied with a nod. It was a truly easy reason to sympathize with and understand.

"I had a close friend when I was little. At the time, I was conceited and violent in all sorts of ways. In contrast, my friend was a very kind person. Whenever he saw someone injured, he would treat them. Whenever he saw someone in trouble, he would save them. That sort of behavior felt perfectly natural to him."

This sounded somewhat unbelievable coming from the Kimaris that Zagan knew.

Meaning he was influenced by this friend of his?

Whatever the case, it wasn't hard to imagine this was deeply related to his desire for revenge.

"But..." Kimaris paused, grinding his teeth. "But one day, my village was attacked by a sorcerer. The leonin were a race who could fight on equal terms with sorcerers without even needing any sorcery. We

were a strong race. This went for my father, my brother, and even the village elder... However, only my friend and I survived.”

The leonin were a rare species already said to be extinct. Considering this event was from Kimaris’ childhood, it had to have taken place around 70 to 80 years ago. And yet, Kimaris’ eyes didn’t contain even a hint of resentment as he spoke. Rather, they looked despondent.

“My conceited self learned just how powerless I truly was. I felt bitterness, shame, and cried for hours on end. But I didn’t lose myself completely to despair, just rage. And I think that was because my friend was with me. After all... he was the one who attacked the village.”

Zagan’s eyes widened in surprise as he asked, “...Why did he do that?”

Kimaris shook his head and replied, “ I don’t know. Even on that morning, we fought as usual and helped out around the village. Perhaps he only got close to me simply to investigate the ins and outs of the village.”

This likely wasn’t something as simple to understand as betrayal. In contrast to his gruesome past, Kimaris’ voice sounded completely hollow.

“Soon after, I lost all sense of reason from my rage and wandered the world for years as nothing more than a monster. That was when Miss Gremory picked me up and taught me sorcery.”

So that’s where Gremory came in...

Honestly, she really was a troublesome granny. Though, his memory at least meant there was a period where she lived a diligent life.

“Even after learning sorcery, I didn’t forget about my revenge. Rather, I learned sorcery so that I could defeat my friend and Miss

Gremory. But she trained me ruthlessly despite my desire... It was irritating, but I didn't hate it."

Listening to that part made Zagan feel awkward. But Kimaris' expression quickly turned gloomy once more.

"After around ten years, Miss Gremory collapsed."

Huh? Was it her usual love power overload or whatever? Zagan barely managed to keep those words to himself.

"...What happened?"

"Miss Gremory was the one who stopped my violent rampage. But in truth, she suffered serious wounds from the encounter. By then, it had aggravated to the point where even her teacher couldn't heal it, and I only knew sorcery used for battle..." Kimaris paused there and covered his face. "...And that's when he showed his face once more. That friend of mine."

He spoke as if the complex relationship between them had still yet to become clear.

"My friend told me. He told me he could save Miss Gremory. But in exchange, he wanted me to part with the power I'd gained to help enact my revenge. I had to choose. Revenge... or Miss Gremory."

Zagan wondered what kind of power he'd had, but it was clear what he'd picked. Gremory was still by Kimaris' side, after all.

"I made my decision right then and there. I had Miss Gremory to thank for my life, so I decided to grow strong enough to protect her. That's what I fight for."

"...I see. So that's why you're so strong."

That was how he managed to become an Archdemon candidate.

Zagan went on to poke fun at him and say, "And Gremory has no idea about any of this?"

“I haven’t told her, but I believe she’s noticed by now.”

Well, that granny was still a former Archdemon candidate. She was an outstanding sorcerer who rivaled Barbatos. In fact, it wasn’t even clear which of the two was more talented. She must’ve realized that something had happened after a fatal wound she’d suffered suddenly healed.

I see. That’s why Gremory acts like such a late bloomer only when it comes to Kimaris... Zagan presumed that she felt indebted to him because he had to give up on his revenge for her sake. Though, from his perspective, that was nothing more than an excuse. In any case, she hadn’t sorted out her feelings in over half a century, which left him rather puzzled.

Wait...? Hang on. Half a century isn’t all that long, is it...? Zagan thought. He was completely incapable of picturing himself in an intimate relationship with Nephy in 50 years. On the contrary, he could easily picture himself blushing and writhing over the smallest thing even after 100 years.

“Um, I don’t believe this is anything for you to worry about, is it?” Kimaris asked as he cocked his head.

“Oh, well... how do I put it? I was simply reflecting on myself. Don’t worry about it.”

“Oh... Right.”

The way Kimaris looked fully convinced by his words made Zagan feel a little down. And that was when he came upon a sudden realization.

That means this friend of his is still alive?

And considering how he hadn’t revealed his name...

“I don’t mind if you refuse to answer, but let me ask you one more thing,” Zagan said.

“What is it?”

“This friend of yours... Was his name Shere Khan?”

Kimaris fell silent, which was an answer in and of itself. Thus, Zagan silently rose to his feet.

“We’ve spent a little too much time chatting. We’ll be late for dinner if we don’t head back soon.”

“...Right,” Kimaris replied in a gloomy voice.

Zagan gave the lion’s chest a good slap.

“It’s my principle to answer the hopes of my subordinates as best I can. If you so desire it, I’ll serve up Shere Khan’s head on a platter for you. And if you wish it to be so, I don’t mind leaving him with just his life, either.”

He seemingly yielded all power over Shere Khan’s life over to Kimaris.

Kimaris blinked in surprise, then returned a small smile and said, “I really am glad to have entered your service, my king.”



“Welcome home, Master Zagan.”

Zagan was greeted by Nephy upon returning to his castle.

Hm? Foll’s not here today?

Usually, Zagan’s daughter would be right alongside Nephy to greet him, but it seemed she had much she wanted to do. Quite a bit of time had unintentionally passed due to his chat with Kimaris. It left an insignificant amount of time for training, so he brought things to an end earlier, but he still failed to get back in time to see his daughter.

It was quite unlucky that he couldn’t see Foll’s face, but Nephy’s lovely smile was more than enough to immediately disperse the entire day’s fatigue. He lived for that sight.

No! This is no good! I need to proceed further!

He'd just experienced a moment of bliss, but if that went on for 50 years without changing, he could never apologize enough to Nephy or Orias. And above all else, Zagan himself wouldn't be able to endure it. But in that case, what was he to do?

My only option is to invite her on a date...

It had been about a month since their last date. Moreover, Nephy was the one who invited him last time. And yet, because he fully realized how lacking he was in the fight against Azazel, his private life died during the month he spent thinking of countermeasures and training.

He did, of course, still have time for his family, like Nephy and Orias. But peaceful and tranquil times spent with Nephy were Zagan's starting point. That didn't change even after he'd gained new family members in Foll and the others. On the contrary, it was precisely because his family grew that he had to cherish time with Nephy above all else. He couldn't call a relationship where his own happiness had to be put on hold the same as being family.

Azazel, Shere Khan, and Bifrons weren't just threats to his life. Zagan wanted to live peacefully with Nephy, so he simply fought those who got in his way. But that meant his priorities were backward, since preparing for them had kept him away from her for so long.

"Hear me, Nephy!"

"Yes, Master Zagan?"

However, just as he was about to invite her on a date, he suddenly realized something.

"Hm...? You look rather pale. Have you been resting properly?"

"Hwah? Huh...?" Nephy touched her own face in a fluster. "My apologies. I didn't think it was bad enough to show on my face..."

“There’s no need to apologize. More importantly, did something happen?”

Nephy stared back in wonder, shook her head, and said, “No, that’s not it... Um, my lessons with my mother are so enlightening that I end up staying up late studying without even realizing it.”

“Is that so?”

A developing relationship with Orias was favorable, so it wasn’t something for Zagan to caution her about.

“I tried using sorcery to maintain my health, but when I lose my concentration, it just...” Nephy trailed off, covering her face with both her hands shyly.

“Don’t worry about it. Anyway, rest a little tomorrow. We’ve supplemented our personnel enough for you to take some time off without any issues, haven’t we?”

She hadn’t shown her face much in the castle lately, but Alshiera was also capable of housework. Unfortunately, Nephy drooped her shoulders in shame upon hearing those words.

“Right... We have... I’ve failed you by making you worry, so I’ll take some proper rest.”

Nephy understood her position and that of those around her. She knew that trying to burden herself with everything didn’t help others, but actually troubled them. That was why she complied.

“Oh,” Nephy said, suddenly realizing something. “I will get some proper rest, but what were you about to say, Master Zagan?”

Nephy was a sharp woman, so she didn’t let that pass.

“Uhhh... Actually, I’ve gotten quite hungry from moving around so much. I’d like something hearty to chew on tonight.”

Even Zagan knew not to suddenly invite her on a date tomorrow in such a situation.

“Of course! I’ll be sure to make your portion somewhat larger.”

It was unusual for Zagan to make any particular requests about his food, since he found everything delicious, so Nephy replied in a joyous tone as she ran off.

Nephy’s happy face really is cute... Zagan thought as he waved his hand until his beloved couldn’t be seen anymore, then suddenly fell to his knees.

“S-Sir Zagan? Is something the matter?” Kimaris inquired in a shaken voice.

This is no good! I haven’t been able to do anything that normal couples do with Nephy lately!

His Nephy-deficiency had rendered him short of breath. That was the one thing he couldn’t satisfy with sorcery. It was possible to temporarily abate the symptoms by using Memorandum to view a picture of her, but without hugging her, then sitting her on his lap and rubbing cheeks and playing with her ears, he fundamentally couldn’t solve the problem.

Aaah... How long has it been since we talked about going into town and finding clothes for each other? Two months? What are you even living for, Zagan?! He felt like he was going to be driven mad by his own worthlessness and his yearning for Nephy. Why did he have to experience such suffering?

“...Sorry, Kimaris. I might just kill Shere Khan after all.”

“Wh-What...?! D-Did he do something?”

The sorcerer known as Shere Khan was still breathing, so Zagan and Nephy couldn’t enjoy their time together as lovers. It was all his fault. The only choice left was to kill him. And while Zagan was at it,

he figured he would kill Bifrons, seeing as that Archdemon was also liable to do something bothersome. There was already the previous offense of getting in the way of his (fake) honeymoon in Raziel, too. Bifrons would most likely get in the way in the middle of another date, so Zagan had to deal with them in a definitive manner.

And as the Archdemon writhed about, he failed to notice something rather important. Lilith stood in the shadows of the kitchen Nephy had just entered, staring at him.

Chapter II: A Daughter's Lovesickness Is a Calamity Even an Archdemon Will Hyperventilate Over

"In that case, I'll inherit the name of the Silver-Eyed King," the boy with silver eyes said without hesitation.

I couldn't understand him. No, I couldn't believe him. After saying that, he hugged me with a truly apologetic expression on his face.

"...From here on out, I'm sure you'll go through many painful and bitter experiences in the time you spend in this world, Ashy. And unfortunately, I won't be able to stay by your side at such times. So..."

The boy would die before I did. It was perhaps possible for him to throw away his humanity and live eternally as an undead, but he didn't choose that path. Even I couldn't wish such a thing upon him. And though I understood that, the boy said something completely unexpected. I replied to him with a trembling voice, asking if he truly understood the meaning of what he said.

"Mmm... That's why I'll become the Silver-Eyed King. I don't need a name on my gravestone. So long as the world speaks of the Silver-Eyed King, I'll be right there with all of you. That's the one and only thing I can leave behind for you, after all."

This boy was a hero who'd saved the world. Even if it was a short time compared to me, he could've spent what was left of his life basking in the glory of his accomplishments. And yet, he said he would throw all of that away and inherit the name of the Silver-Eyed King.

"Let's cook up a story together, Ashy. An adventure that anyone can get engrossed in. I mean, the Silver-Eyed King is a hero of legends,

right? Oh, I know! How about hunting down an evil dragon? And then, you can have the role of the princess who needs to be saved.”

The boy spoke with the innocence of a child. I found myself incapable of responding right away. I knew if I tried to say anything, I would no longer be able to hold back my tears. That was why I did my best to smile and tell him that Orobas would be angry if he made a dragon the villain.

“Oops. Angering Orobas is kinda scary, huh? Okay, then let’s make Orobas my companion who fought by my side. I’ve actually fought while riding atop his back, so it isn’t exactly a lie, right? As for the evil dragon... Oh, how about Marbas?”

After that, we thought up many stories. We were both still young, so they were all silly and common stories. Nevertheless, those stories had our very lives poured into them.

“I hope you can forgive me for pushing everything onto you,” the boy said some time later, apologetic to the very end.

I shook my head, as unchanged by time as ever.

I had received plenty of love, I told him.

I had been left so many things, I told him.

And so, he didn’t need to worry anymore, I told him.

I didn’t know whether I’d managed to maintain a proper smile at the time. But even so, the boy touched my cheek and said, “Take care of Zagan and Lilith.”

Those were his last words.



Alshiera woke up. She was inside the cave beneath Zagan’s castle. That was the space she had borrowed to maintain her Seraph Hunters and refine ammunition for them. And because she had been

monopolizing this space lately, its owner spent much of his time away from the castle at Archdemon Palace instead.

“...Another dream.”

She had been having dreams of the past quite often recently. Alshiera touched her abdomen. It was still wet with a dark liquid. Death encroached upon her. However, she felt no fear. Instead, she simply recalled many nostalgic memories. She had continued to exist in this world as an undead for a thousand years. So, in a sense, her time spent in the world was akin to an extremely slow revolving lantern.

“If you live, you’ll surely...”

He was also one of the people who’d said such a thing to Alshiera. And she answered such a request with foolish honesty by ‘living’ for a thousand years. It was about time for her to rest. However... Alshiera made a bittersweet smile.

“I suppose it wasn’t all that bad.”

During those thousand years, Alshiera was in no way alone. She giggled as she reminisced over her past.

“Yes, you’re right. The same goes for you, doesn’t it? Azazel.”

I also managed to meet that girl once more... Alshiera realized that she was in no way alone. She had managed to fulfill her promise with the Silver-Eyed King. She had decided on a place to die. All that was left was to prepare and spend her remaining time in leisure.

When it came to the final hours of free time she had in her thousand years of life, she really had nothing to do. She had spent such a long time in this world that she had done everything she could think of. All that was left was to sit in the corner of a room and gaze absentmindedly as her family enjoyed themselves.

Perhaps that’s all there is to the final years of human life as well...

Although, she still looked like a child, unfortunately.

Two Seraph Hunters and empty ammunition casings rested atop the table in front of her. The bullets for these Seraph Hunters were specially made. Alshiera was the only one capable of creating them. And at most, she could make ten a day. So, in a month, she could maybe make a little over 300 bullets. Though, she couldn't just spend every day sitting there making ammunition.

On that day, during Alshiere Imera, she had exhausted what little ammunition was left in Stern and Mond. In the time since then, she had been making bullets from scratch, which resulted in the creation of over a thousand shots.

Even when her body could no longer maintain itself, these Seraph Hunters would remain behind. If someone took them in their hands, they would surely be of use to Zagan.

"Just a thousand shots..." Alshiera mumbled with a sigh.

How long would such a small supply of bullets last in the fight against Azazel? Currently, Alshiera was the one who possessed the most power in the world. She was fully capable of slaughtering the thirteen Archdemons, even in her weakened state. And yet, it wasn't enough.

She could only truly buy a little more time. Even though she went on and on about how this was her fight, she had no choice but to entrust it to Zagan in the end. Perhaps that was simply the limit of what a person could do on their own.

In any case, Alshiera was the dregs from a thousand years ago, a mirage. Only those who truly lived in the moment could make the necessary choice, not her.

It's awfully irresponsible of me not to tell them anything despite that...

Alshiera let out another giggle.

“Yes, yes, I know. It’s just as you say, Azazel. But it’s inevitable now that Orobas is gone.”

Just then, footsteps resounded through the cave as someone walked down the staircase. A short while later, a small girl appeared before her.

“Welcome home, Alshiera.”

“I’m home, Foll.”

Alshiera’s relationship with this girl felt rather complicated. When they first met, Foll had despised her. Still, she was the daughter of Alshiera’s benefactor, Orobas, as well as the adopted daughter of the Silver-Eyed King’s son, Zagan...

Those were all facts, but it was difficult to say that they were sufficient to describe their relationship. If she had to choose just one word to describe it, however...

I suppose that would make us... friends?

She never thought she’d gain such a thing at her advanced age. Life truly was full of surprises.

“You’re back early today. Did something happen?” Foll asked.

It was late at night, around the hour when dinner was being prepared. It was also precisely the time when Nephy went to greet Zagan as he returned from Archdemon Palace.

And yet, she’s here to see me, not the Silver-Eyed King. That must mean she has something to say that she doesn’t want the two of them to hear.

Normally, Foll would’ve been out hugging her father at that hour. But on this particular day, Alshiera had returned to the castle earlier than

usual. She often came back well into the night, since she spent the entire day hanging around the church, but not this time.

Alshiera shrugged her shoulders and replied, "I prodded right where it hurt most while talking to that girl, so I came running away back here."

Foll nodded as if scrutinizing the true meaning behind her words, then steadily concluded, "You mean Nephteros?"

"Teehee. I wonder?"

It wasn't something she had to hide, but it had become a habit of hers to evade questions. Foll had likely grown accustomed to that facet of Alshiera's personality. The little girl carried over a chair and plopped herself down next to Alshiera.

"I heard my father's name," Foll said.

"Oh my, did that slip from my mouth?" Alshiera asked as she put her hand to her lips. Though it didn't matter now that she had been heard. "Indeed. I was just feeling a little nostalgic."

"I want to hear about my father."

Even though she called Zagan her dad, Orobas was still Foll's precious father. It was natural for her to want to hear more about him after hearing his name escape Alshiera's lips, seeing that she was acquainted with the wise dragon.

"I don't have any stories as interesting as what you're hoping for, just so you know."

"I still want to hear them."

Foll was quite the stubborn girl.

Well, I can sympathize with the Silver-Eyed King's desire to respond to such willfulness... That was why Alshiera decided to answer in a harmless manner.

“Let’s see... Every survivor from a thousand years ago had their own role to fulfill.”

“Is this about how you’re some kind of guard?”

“...Oh my.”

She wasn’t sure if Foll had figured it out on her own or Zagan had seen through her. Alshiera didn’t believe she had let it slip, but...

In any case, they were sure to arrive at the answer sooner or later...

Having said that, it was nothing more than the past to both Alshiera and Orobas. The important part was what they would choose to do once they discovered the answer.

Alshiera nodded slightly before continuing by saying, “Precisely. I am, so to speak, a watchman. The words I speak are fairy tales. I am a bystander who doesn’t mingle with the present world.”

She wasn’t even an actress. She had no right to stand on a grand stage. Well, for a bystander, she felt like she had gotten quite heavily involved, but it was still within permissible limits. At the very least, she didn’t do anything to guide the actions of Zagan or the people around him.

After thinking for a moment, Alshiera returned to Foll’s original question and stated, “Orobas’ role was that of an evangelist. He was the one who was supposed to speak about what happened a thousand years ago.”

But he ended up dying in the battle last year.

We couldn’t afford to squander all of the power left in the world in that battle... That was why Marchosias, whose power was already waning, and the Archangels who were already beyond their prime, were the only ones to participate. The other Archdemons and the young Archangels who still had room to grow had to be preserved.

The Wise Dragon took action to fill in the gap in power, but even he was incapable of surviving the conflict. With Orobas lost, it was incredibly difficult for the people of this age to unravel the truth of what had happened a thousand years ago. That was why Alshiera was stuck with answering reluctantly.

Foll looked up at Alshiera, who was making a trouble expression, and asked, "Alshiera. Are you... mad at my father?"

"Me? Why would I be...?"

"I mean, he was supposed to help you, right?"

Alshiera started brushing the head of the rather innocent girl.

"Oh, I don't know. Honestly, he's aided me more than enough over these one thousand years. He truly was a splendid man."

If she had one regret, it was that she was unable to repay his favor.

"Can I ask... what was my father to you?"

That was quite a sudden question.

"It's somewhat difficult to explain... but I suppose he was something like my guardian?"

"Guardian?"

"Yes. Back then, there were many children without any living relatives. And there were just as many children who fought for the sake of petty revenge. Orobas was a teacher who showed all of us the proper way to fight. He was a parent who taught us the means to survive."

"Oooh. What else?" Foll let out a sigh of admiration and leaned forward with sparkling eyes.

"Well, to put it simply, he was strict, I suppose. When I fought like I was trying to die, he grew angry at me. He had no intention of

teaching me how to commit suicide, so that was perfectly reasonable, in hindsight.”

“I can’t even imagine him getting angry.”

Perhaps Orobas was nothing more than a taciturn parent in front of Foll.

“Is that so? In my memories, he often roared in such a loud voice that it felt like my heart would stop. Though, nowadays, my heart really has stopped.”

It was a vampire’s cynical joke, but Foll didn’t even chuckle. Perhaps she found it difficult to understand.

“He truly was quite the noisy worrywart. I honestly believed he hated me. But...”

“Did something happen?”

Seeing Foll so anxious to hear more, Alshiera answered in a reluctant tone, “...When I failed to save a precious friend, I was at a complete loss because I couldn’t even remember how to cry. He stood by my side and said it was okay now, since he was there with me. He said it was okay now, so I could go ahead and cry. And then, he gently brushed my head.”

Everyone revered Orobas as the great Wise Dragon. But to Alshiera, he was nothing but a naggy and kind old man. Back then, she’d never imagined she would be comforted by his daughter in the exact same way a thousand years later.

“...It’s okay. It’s okay now.”

Two months had passed since Foll hugged her while saying that.

Alshiera strained a smile and continued, “It’s not much of a story, I suppose.”

“That’s not true. I’m happy to hear more about my father.”

“...You truly are a good girl,” Alshiera replied, petting her head once more.

“What kind of place did you and my father live in?” Foll asked timidly.

“Oh my, you haven’t heard?”

Now that Alshiera thought of it, nobody had ever asked her, but she figured someone would’ve realized already. Foll cocked her head while Alshiera looked down at her as if this was somewhat unexpected.

“Archdemon Palace. We lived there with Marchosias a thousand years ago.”

It was nothing more than a cave at first, but they’d dragged buildings down from the surface to make it inhabitable. Being underground was convenient when hiding from seraphs, after all. That was the origin of Archdemon Palace.

The chair clattered as Foll stood... or rather, jumped to her feet.

“I wanna go see it.”

“Right now? It’s about time for dinner.”

“Mrrgh...”

Foll was one of the helpers who prepared the meals in Zagan’s castle. Alshiera was also responsible for housework, so she could at least fill in for her, but there was no way both of them could leave at such a time.

Foll drooped her shoulders in a crestfallen manner, looking positively depressed.

“Shall we go after dinner?” Alshiera suggested with a smile.

“I can’t stay up late at night. Zagan will get angry,” Foll answered. She was a strangely serious girl when it came to such matters... despite being a sorcerer.

“Then we can go tomorrow.”

“Mmm!”

“Is that all you wanted to ask?” Alshiera inquired with a charming smile.

“Huh?”

“Did you not have something to ask that you wanted to keep from the Silver-Eyed King and Lady Nephy?”

Foll likely forgot after hearing about Orobas. And so, Alshiera decided to prod her as a big freebie, seeing how she was such a good girl. However, she regretted it dearly the very next instant.

“...Right,” Foll said, scratching her cheek in embarrassment before speaking up with a completely serious expression on her face. “I want to hear about your love life.”

Thus, Alshiera’s new hardships began.

◇

“Hnnngh! What was that explosive accumulation of love power?!”

A fomorian sorcerer with twisted horns began making a fuss. Kuroka and Shax were currently in the mining town of Orycheio, located about a day’s ride by carriage to the west of Kianoides. It was officially under the influence of the church, but mining was overwhelmingly faster with sorcery.

As a result, a remarkable town was born where sorcerers and the church worked together. The large majority of miners were, in fact, sorcerers. Not only that, but there were also shops aimed at

sorcerers lined with drugs, golems, tools, and even grimoires without showing a single hint of trying to hide it.

After Kuroka entered a desolate-looking bar within this mining town, she found the troubled granny shouting and making a fuss within. Seeing her, Kuroka put her hand to her brow, holding back a headache.

“Um, what are you doing here...?” she asked.

Gremory didn't seem to hear her. The granny fell to her knees in a crestfallen manner. She was drawing a lot of attention, so Kuroka would've liked it if she stopped acting like that.

Enchantress Gremory, in sharp contrast to her absurd behavior, was Archdemon Zagan's trusted retainer, placed at his side as his left hand. She normally went around looking like an old granny, but currently, she had the form of a beautiful woman. She took on such a form when she was being serious, but she didn't look serious in the least.

Giving no heed to how she was being a nuisance to the other customers by making a fuss right in the middle of the bar, Gremory unsteadily rose to her feet. It was as if she couldn't see her surroundings at all, such was her consternation.

When she was in this form, she was without a doubt a tremendous beauty—so long as she kept her mouth shut—so a hooligan-looking sorcerer at a nearby table stretched his hand out toward her butt.

“Gyah!”

The pervert's body caved to the ground before his fingers could reach. It was as if he was crushed by an enormous hand.

This is the sorcery Zagan used back then against that chimera...?

Zagan had crushed that grotesque chimera that Bifrons had sent into town by lightly waving his hand. Gremory replicated that feat here

without even making so much as a gesture. She simply pointed her gaze at the man.

She was quite the oddball, but she was the cream of the crop when it came to being a sorcerer. Even a non-sorcerer like Kuroka could tell this with ease. So, any sorcerer would be able to tell this granny—well, beautiful woman—was far beyond the norm.

“Those horns... That screwed up behavior... Crap, that’s Enchantress Gremory.”

“Fuck, what’s she doing here? Isn’t her stronghold in Kianoides?”

“Don’t make eye contact. You don’t know what she’ll do to you!”

“Noooo! I’ll be mistaken for a pervert if I’m seen so close to her!”

The surrounding customers didn’t really show awe for Gremory. It was more like they wanted nothing to do with her as they took their distance. The disappointed granny was still muttering something or other to herself.

“It’s coming from... It can’t be... My liege’s castle? This love power isn’t his. The only one there who could possibly possess so much love power... Ah! No! Lady Alshiera?!”

“Lady Alshiera?”

Kuroka inadvertently reacted at the mention of this name. Her voice seemed to bring Gremory back to her senses. The granny finally took a seat. The other customers at the table ran away in a panic.

“Ugh. Now that I think of it, that girl is basically a cluster of fetishes. There’s no way she doesn’t have any love stories of her own! I should’ve observed her more carefully. Why is everyone seething with love power while I’m not around?!”

She didn’t come back to her senses at all. Kuroka let out a sigh.

I wonder if Mister Shax can just get back here already...

Kuroka and Shax were in the middle of an investigation in this town. She didn't know why this granny had come. Kuroka was getting information from the church, while Shax was getting information from sorcerers. That's why they were acting separately from each other.

Just as the situation in the bar would imply, Orycheio was a town where sorcerers could throw their weight around. The church was nothing more than a public front, so there wasn't much information to glean from them. That's why Kuroka had finished getting everything she could already.

After coming back to the bar they had planned on rendezvousing at, she found this granny throwing up a fuss. She didn't want to get involved with her now, so Kuroka took a seat at the counter further within the bar.

"I'll have a glass of milk please."

"...You know this is a bar, don't you?"

Apparently, she had to order something alcoholic.

That stuff is so bitter I can never come to like it... She didn't even know the names of any drinks. The bar was basically a gathering point for ruffians, so they didn't have anything which resembled a menu either.

"Then please give me something easy to drink," she said with no other choice.

She wondered whether there was any alcohol meant for beginners, but the bartender didn't show any hesitation as he filled a tankard with some sort of golden liquid. The color resembled beer, but there were no bubbles. Was it some kind of distilled spirit? Kuroka unfortunately didn't possess the knowledge to tell by sight. He then took out a big spoon and began pouring in a hearty amount of honey.

I don't need that much honey...

She wanted to complain about being treated like a child, but perhaps this was simply the kind of drink it was. Kuroka decided to keep quiet and let the bartender mix away.

“...Here you go. A summer plum wine.”

Kuroka brought her face closer to the tankard he had set out in front of her. She took a sniff and was met with a peculiar scent which was both sweet and sour.

Ah, I feel like I've smelled this back home before... maybe?

She couldn't identify where the scent was from, but she had multiple memories of smelling such an aroma before. It was nostalgic, causing the triangular ears atop her head to twitch about. She knew nothing about the quality of liquor, but she liked this smell. And just as she put the tankard to her lips to try some...

“Brandy for me!”

Gremory's fit was apparently over. She sat down next to Kuroka without a single hint of restraint.

“...Um, did you need something from me?” Kuroka asked.

“Keehee, what a foolish question. There's only one possible reason for me to come out here, don't you agree?”

“Stalking?”

“The king's errand...”

Kuroka was somewhat bewildered by her unexpectedly proper answer.

In that case, you should act a little more seriously... She did see this woman every now and then at Zagan's castle, but Kuroka just couldn't get used to her. Every time they met, the granny would say something or other about love power and make a fuss, much like she

had done just moments ago. It would be unreasonable to ask Kuroka to get along with her.

Gremory gave her a deep nod. "Well, I don't deny one of my goals is exactly as you say!"

"Could you please deny it?"

Kuroka waited for a tankard to be placed in front of Gremory before cutting to the chase.

"So, what do you need? Mister Shax is still out in town if you need him."

"That's it. Seriously. I thought that man had potential, but he let something so horrible happen. Leaving a lady all alone in a town like this is the same as asking for her to be abducted, don't you agree?"

"Th-That's...!" Kuroka suddenly raised her voice in a rough tone at the unexpected statement. "Because... I said it would be more efficient to split up and work separately..."

"Even so. No matter how skilled you are, you're a rare species in a town of sorcerers."

"Ah..."

A sorcerer wouldn't even spare a glance for a tabaxi, but Kuroka was a rare species called a cait sith. Not only that, but she was also a four-ears. She had the protection of both the church and Archdemon Zagan, but it still didn't change the fact that she was in a precarious position.

Did she maybe come to protect me?

Gremory's eccentric behavior did in fact drive off any who would try to approach Kuroka. If this granny was actually worried about her, then she couldn't complain about her oddities.

“I admit that my judgment was rather careless, but it’s not Mister Shax’s fault,” Kuroka timidly said.

“Hmph. I wonder about that,” Gremory replied, narrowing her eyes in irritation as she stared at Kuroka. “So, try telling me what he has done during these last three days.”

“He’s helped me out quite a bit. On the ride here, he hid my tails and such using his robe. And when I was shivering at night from the cold, he gave me his mantle. Also...”

“Hm! Hmmm! And?! And?!”

Gremory’s eyes glittered with a fiery blaze as blood dribbled out of her nose.

“Um...”

“Hrm?! Oh dear. It seems too much love power has accumulated here. No need to worry about me. Keep telling me of your lo... I mean, tell me more of what he did!”

“.....”



It seemed she was being strung along nicely. Kuroka glared back at Gremory. But the old granny paid her criticisms no mind and brought her face even closer.

“So? He lent you his mantle? Let me hear more about that.”

“H-He just lent it to me! There was nothing untoward...”

“Nay! This is important! Does he walk around with a spare mantle! Nay! He doesn’t! That means he lent you the mantle he was wearing!”

“What’s wrong with that?! It was a little dirty, but it wasn’t that...”

“Hnnnng! He wore it! I want to hear more about how you dangled the long sleeves going, ‘Hm, Mister Shax, this is a little big,’ or ‘It smells like you,’ and how he reacted!”

“Wh-Why do you know that?! Were you watching?!” Kuroka yelled as she shot to her feet.

Gremory was right down to the wording. Kuroka then suddenly realized she was drawing the attention of the other customers by shouting like this. Her cheeks flushed red as Gremory closed in for the finishing blow.

“Hmm? So, you really said that?”

“Ahhhhhh!”

Unable to take it anymore, Kuroka collapsed face-first onto the bar.

“Um, don’t get me wrong. I’m not making fun of you. I simply wanted to provide advice that such an approach is a valid way of cleverly accumulating love power which will work even on a dolt like that...”

Stop! Don’t act kindly all of a sudden!

Kuroka felt like crying while trembling on the bar when Gremory's hand fell on her shoulder.

"Just let me say this... Nice love power. You're beautiful."

I really do hate sorcerers!

Even as she cursed Gremory in her mind, Kuroka had no energy left to speak aloud. Just around that time, Shax finally came back. He had a tall, lanky figure, but the way he hunched over made him appear strangely short. His reddish-brown hair was unkempt and he had quite a bit of stubble, giving this young man a rather unappealing outer appearance.

"...Hey, what's all this fuss about?"

Kuroka had no energy to reply to him and remained sprawled on the counter.

"It's nothing," Gremory answered in an upbeat mood. "I simply asked her about your progress over the last few days. It truly was a delicacy, is about all I have to say on the matter."

"Try not to pick on Kurosuke too much, Gremory. Even though she's got a sword on her, she's still a normal girl, ya know?"

"Hrk... Ugh," Kuroka groaned as a terrible blow struck her heart.

Then please try and treat me like a girl on a more regular basis... But, huh? I guess he was treating me like a girl when he lent me his mantle, right? Huh?

Kuroka only just noticed this and felt her face turn bright red. She was glad it was hidden against the bar.

"Ooh... Lady Kuroka, your ears are bright red. Are you alright?" Gremory asked.

She wasn't. Not at all.

“Leave it at that...” Shax cut in. “So? What’re you doing here? This is a little extravagant for a regular report.”

Exactly. Despite her behavior, this granny was still the left hand of the Archdemon. It had to be a big deal for her to personally take action. And yet, Gremory smiled like it wasn’t.

“It’s simple. Three days have gone by since you two left. My liege assumed it was about time for you to find something and require aid, so he commanded me to come.”

Kuroka and Shax were in the middle of tracking Shere Khan and Bifrons’ whereabouts. It had taken a full day to get here, so their actual investigation had gone on for two days now. That wasn’t much time, but because they were acting under the orders of the alliance between Chastille and Zagan, they managed to gather information much faster than expected. Orycheio being a town built on the collusion between the church and sorcerers was a major factor behind this. They were capable of exhaustively gathering information from both sides.

“...Our boss is as terrifying as usual, huh?” Shax said, ruffling his hair with a sigh.

“Keehee, he assesses you highly. How about gratefully accepting it?”

“Aah, by terrifying, I mean he’s got a full grasp of our situation even though he isn’t watching or anything. Why do you think he sent you over instead of your buddy Kimaris?”

Gremory looked at him curiously and replied, “You have a point. Kimaris would certainly have been faster as a messenger.”

Kuroka was also beginning to understand what Shax was getting at and joined the conversation, saying, “...It was best to hide our identities until we grasped the trail. But the sorcerers being prodded at when they believe they haven’t done anything wrong will surely try to get rid of outsiders soon.”

Back when she worked for the dark side of the church, she had used a similar method to lure out her targets. With that, Shax brushed Kuroka's head as if praising her. His hand was big and warm, but his fingers were rough. She couldn't really describe what she felt from it. It was somewhat like her agitation was beginning to calm down, much like a cat being groomed.

"In which case, the messenger that gets in contact with us should stand out as much as possible. The Enchantress is famous for being Zagan's trusted retainer, and anyone dumb enough not to know that who picks a fight won't be much of a hindrance," Shax concluded.

This granny was in fact kicking up a fuss before even coming in contact with Kuroka. In other words, the fact that Kuroka was cooperating with someone directly related to Zagan was thrust before everyone's faces. No sorcerer scraping up pocket change in a place like this would risk Zagan's wrath by attacking her.

And yet, Gremory let out an astonished sigh. "How can you be so sharp and such a dolt at the same time?"

"The hell did I do to deserve that?"

Even as he grumbled, Shax brushed aside Gremory and sat in between her and Kuroka. He was serving as a wall while Kuroka recovered. He then picked up the tankard which was placed in front of her.

"Also, don't make her drink this stuff. It's too early for her."

"...Mrgh."

She was being treated like a child once more. Kuroka let out a groan in a minimal show of criticism, but it didn't seem to get through to him. He just sat there with a curious look.

It was about time for the other customers to get tired of watching their group. The tumult of the bar was back to normal. Seeing this, Shax cut straight to the point.

“‘If we can’t follow the mana, follow the trail of goods.’ The boss’ read on this was spot on. Someone’s been buying up a selection of magical goods in large quantities over the last three months.”

Kuroka and Shax were searching for the whereabouts of two Archdemons. It was apparently impossible to trace them using sorcery. Especially considering Bifrons had already gone through something terrible after being traced, so there were even more countermeasures in place than usual. That’s how the stalemate had been maintained for several months. So, Zagan decided to track them using means other than sorcery.

“Sorcery isn’t capable of creating something out of nothing.”

Bifrons and Shere Khan had to stockpile catalysts and tools meant for sorcery worthy of two Archdemons. Depending on the circumstances, they could even have manufacturing facilities. In which case, this was much like a multi-year siege. However, though it was somewhat contradictory, it seemed they couldn’t operate for several continuous months without contacting the outside world.

Simple sorcery like physical reinforcement and conjuring attacks could be constructed using nothing but mana, but creating chimeras and homunculi required catalysts and drugs. Refining such necessities at one’s own expense not only required a tremendous amount of mana to maintain, but also required a facility about the size of a town. Getting such an operation to run smoothly required manpower, and such a workforce needed goods to be preserved as well. This was regardless of them being sorcerers or regular humans. All living beings required food and generated waste.

What's more, the two of them weren't waiting for the storm to pass with bated breath. They were preparing to take action... or had already taken action. In which case, they were definitely being resupplied from somewhere. That's what Zagan was focusing on.

And with the conversation getting serious, Kuroka finally raised her head. "That's an awfully un-sorcerer like idea for an Archdemon."

"Aah, about that. The boss started a whole enterprise just to acquire that tapioca stuff, yeah? That's where he got the idea from."

What kind of face would Bifrons and Shere Khan make if they found out their plans were discovered because of a desire for tapioca? Even Kuroka felt a little sympathy for them.

"Seems they're buying goods up from all over the place, but everything's being transported using the church's routes. Small shipments would be one thing, but they can't rely on the public trade routes for transporting so much stuff."

This was a bit of a flaw among sorcerers. For better or worse, they tended to work in complete isolation. That made it difficult for them to form working relationships with others. Not only that, but they also had a tendency to hide their craft, so they weren't suited to the fields of commerce and negotiation. As such, the distribution of goods for necessities like water and food was dominated by the church. Even an Archdemon would have to rely on such routes.

"Hmm. What did they get?" Gremory asked, narrowing her eyes with interest.

"Elixir. It can be used as medicine, but its primary use is as preservation fluid for homunculi and the like."

Elixir was developed by a sorcerer from ancient times called Hohenheim. He was the man who established the field of alchemy. It was said that homunculi were also his invention. The church taught

that he was a heartless devil, of course. Strangely enough, they still used his abominable drug as medicine.

The reason for this was actually rather boring. Even the populace knew of the effects of elixir. So, no matter how much the church tried to restrict its distribution, smuggling and illicit production ran rampant... Not that there was a legal way to produce it, since it had to be created by sorcerers. It was impossible to get rid of the flow of goods. That was why they simply decided it was best for the church to treat it as merchandise instead of trying to deal with all the smuggling.

“Elixir? Now that you mention it, there were those failed homunculi wandering around during Alshiere Imera,” Gremory commented.

Kuroka’s mother was among those failures.

I decided back then that I would continue living with a smile. Even so, the image of her mother’s last moment didn’t vanish from the back of her mind. Kuroka unconsciously squeezed down on her arms when Shax placed his hand atop hers without saying a thing... She felt like she was able to calm down just a little from that.

“Elixir isn’t all that rare a thing itself,” Gremory said with a groan.

“Does them buying it from several places mean they’ve predicted we would try to trace them in such a manner?”

“Not necessarily. I think the main reason is that nobody’s got a stockpile big enough for the amount they want,” Shax said as Gremory widened her eyes.

“They bought that much?”

“Yeah. It’s enough for them to make some ten thousand homunculi if they were so inclined. Well, it’d be pretty rough to prepare a facility to create so many of them, even for an Archdemon.”

“Ten thousand?”

Gremory was taken aback. Having said that, it wasn't a simple matter to create and manipulate ten thousand homunculi. Furthermore, production on such a scale was problematic, just like Shax said. Elixir was used in the creation of homunculi, but it didn't seem this was their goal.

Shax put his hands together behind his head and reclined in his chair. "The boss said Shere Khan is planning on making enemies of even more Archdemons and fighting them. I didn't think it'd be the case back then, but seeing how much stuff he's gathering, it might actually be true."

Considering Shere Khan and Bifrons' current situation, it was difficult to see this mass procurement of materials as some sort of distraction.

"I don't think they're making homunculi, but I'm pretty sure they're starting to prepare some kind of army," Shax added.

An Archdemon raising an army was unheard of. Zagan was considered abnormal for having a few dozen subordinates, so there was no way the church could digest the idea of an Archdemon gathering an army in the thousands.

Gremory sank into thought to get all this information lined up in her mind, then said, "If that is, in fact, true, it might not just be Shere Khan and Bifrons working together. They need at least one more Archdemon with sufficient mana to make use of... Oh, I get it."

After hearing that, all three of them were left with headaches.

"That's where Andrealphus came in, huh?"

"I bet so."

"That would be appropriate to believe."

One month had passed since Archdemon Andrealphus went missing. Zagan concluded that he was struck down when he went to kill Shere Khan.

That terrifying Archdemon lost...

Kuroka herself had witnessed Andrealphus wield the power to stop time and unleash the true strength of the Sacred Sword. It was practically foul play how strong he was. It was the first time she saw Zagan confront someone and end up shedding so much blood. What could have possibly happened for that man to be defeated?

Silence fell over the three of them for a while before Shax spoke up. "That's how it is, so we're thinking of obstructing the flow of goods."

"Rejected. Your job is to find where Shere Khan and Bifrons are."

"So you say, but we can't just ignore this, right?" Kuroka added.

"Isn't that why I was sent here?" Gremory replied in astonishment.

"Oh."

Just how far ahead did he read this situation...?

Whenever Zagan was at the castle... or anywhere in Kianoides, he was always a pleasant man just fretting over Nephy. But he truly was terrifying when made an enemy of like this.

Gremory rose to her feet and said, "Good grief. I thought I'd get to return to the castle by nighttime, but it seems I'll be running a little late."

She cranked her shoulders around as Kuroka looked up at her with an awkwardly sincere gaze and mumbled, "...Um, be careful."

"Keehee. You do your best too. I expect wonderfully rich love stories when I get back."

"Do you think anything of the sort will actually happen?" Kuroka replied in a cold voice.

Even the granny made a grave expression over this before shooting a glare at Shax.

“Let me just confirm before I go. How are you handling your rooms here? I’m pretty sure it’s beyond you, but are you sharing a room with Lady Kuroka?”

“Gimme a break. Old Raphael would murder me if I did.”

Kuroka’s face twitched with a cramp.

I understand that, but ‘Gimme a break,’ is going too far, isn’t it?

It was true her adoptive father, Raphael, was a little too overprotective of her, but it sounded like he hated being by Kuroka’s side when he put it like that.

Gremory gave him a suspicious look. “Is that so? Didn’t you lend your mantle to the sleeping Lady Kuroka?”

“Uh, I mean, we couldn’t get an inn on the first day, so we didn’t exactly have a choice, so, well...”

And even as he broke down in a fluster, Shax steeled himself and said, “Just let me tell you this now. I haven’t fallen so far that I’d lay a hand on a kid like Kurosuke.”

Kuroka heard something snap in her head.

“God! Why do you always treat me like a child?!” Kuroka yelled as she suddenly slammed her hands on the counter and stood up.

She wasn’t going to allow him to say that he didn’t notice her feelings at all despite being so kind and protecting her. Even though he faintly noticed, he only ever said cruel things like this while pretending like he didn’t. It was unforgivable.

She didn’t really want to cry, but tears began to blur her vision. Kuroka looked like a mess before she even knew it. Seeing her face like that, even Shax was startled and lost his presence of mind.

“H-Hang on. You’ve got it wrong. That was just a figure of speech...”

“Y-You dolt! Apologize already! I didn’t do anything wrong here, just so you know!” Gremory shouted.

“You’re abandoning me?!”

He was cut off and cast away like a tumor at the final hour. Kuroka violently grabbed the tankard Shax had taken from her. A fair amount of liquid spilled because of the overenthusiastic action, but she didn’t care.

“I’m well past the age of being called a kid! I can drink wine too!”

“Ah, you idiot, that’s—!”

“This is bad!”

The two useless sorcerers tried to stop her, but Kuroka already had her lips to the tankard. About half of its contents had spilled out, so she really did end up gulping down all of its contents in one go. But Kuroka had forgotten she was cursed with terrible misfortune.

Huh...? It tastes... weird...

It was sweet because of the large amount of honey in it. But the sweetness differed from candy. The bartender had said something about plums, but there was no plum flavor to it. Did adults find this kind of thing tasty? She couldn’t really tell what it tasted like, but it wasn’t all that impressive.

“See...?” Kuroka’s vision warped as she tried to speak. “Hwuh...?”

The back of her mind was throbbing. No, it wasn’t just her mind. Her chest, her belly, her entire body was hot. Unable to stand anymore, she sank to the floor as Shax supported her back in a panic.

“Huuuh?!”

The moment he touched her, a chill ran down her spine... Or perhaps chill wasn’t the right expression. It was intense. Like lightning. Yet

somewhat itchy. It made her want more. It was the first time she had ever felt this kind of sensation.

“What are you doing?! Puke it out!”

“Wry wad I... Mya...”

Kuroka wasn't capable of just puking on command. She tried to complain, but her words came out in a slur.

Gremory scratched her head as she picked up the tankard. “What a blunder. I should've had it before she could.”

“No, it's not your fault. I should've explained it to her properly.”

She was being treated like a child again, but she couldn't object after ending up like this. She really was a child for being reduced to such a state after a single gulp of wine. And yet, Shax's next words were somewhat different from what she was expecting.

“If you want to try some wine out, I'll teach you next time. But this stuff is bad.”

“Mya...?”

“Summer plum wine is made of silver vine.”

Kuroka didn't understand what he was saying.

Silver... vine...?

Kuroka at least knew that was something cats loved. There were many ways to prepare it, like wringing it out into a powder or having it as it was. It was said that cats would get intoxicated upon coming in contact with the stuff. The tabaxi and cait sith weren't an exception. Now that she thought of it, they cultivated the plant back in her hometown. It was considered an indulgence for adults, though, so children were forbidden from approaching the silver vine plantations. Because of that, she never had any for herself.

“Uuh... Haaah... Haaah...”

The voice spilling from her lips was so strangely coquettish that Kuroka couldn't believe it was her own. She was even finding it difficult to sit down now, so all she could do was cling to Shax. Her heart was beating like a hammer. Every rough breath she took sent a tingling through her head.

But the bigger problem was her underwear. She didn't think she had wet herself, but she felt like she couldn't stand up anymore. Was this really what they called intoxication? She looked up with tears still blurring her vision. In an unusual turn, she could see Shax bright red and faltering.

"U-U-U-Uh, c-c-c-calm down, Kurosuke."

And unable to stand by and watch, Gremory stepped forth. and stated, "Haaah... You keep your mouth shut. Listen to me, Lady Kuroka. Calm down and listen."

With that, she brought her face close to Kuroka's human ear and whispered in a hushed voice, "Summer plum wine has a slightly curious taste to us, but in felines, it spurs on sexual excitation."

Kuroka's mind started to blank out.

Sexual... excitation...? Meaning, what? That's what this weird feeling is?

Kuroka remained in a daze as Gremory slapped her shoulder.

"Well, how do I put it? Nobody can treat you like a child now, can they? Keeheehee."

"Qawsdrfgtyf?!"

Kuroka let out an unintelligible scream before Gremory pushed Shax's back.

"Farewell, then! I have the mission entrusted to me by my liege to accomplish, so I'll be excusing myself here! Relay me a detailed report later!"

“Quit your yapping! The hell are we going to do about her?!”

“...We have rooms on the second floor,” the bartender cut in.

This type of bar usually had rooms to serve as an inn as well. Kuroka at least knew they were used for ‘those kinds’ of situations. Gremory was laughing as if she found this endlessly amusing. Shax looked completely shaken with his bright red face. The bartender was grimacing as if to tell them to take their lover’s quarrel elsewhere. All of this spun in circles around Kuroka as her vision gradually blacked out.

God! Whatever happens, happens!

With that, Kuroka let go of her consciousness.



“I want to hear about your love life.”

Alshiera was confronted with an ordeal, just like Kuroka. Her thoughts hadn’t yet caught up with reality. She cocked her head at Foll, wondering what exactly a ‘love life’ was.

Love... life...? Is that some kind of fad amongst youngsters these days?

After spending a thousand years cooped up in Liucaon, she often found herself out of touch with modern vocabulary. Was this one such a case?

“What exactly do you mean?” Alshiera asked, unable to arrive at a proper conclusion after thinking about it.

“Stories about your experience with love. Information about people you fell in love with, basically.”

“Ooh, I see,” Alshiera replied with a nod. “Stories of my romances... Hwah?”

She let out a sound she hadn't made in the last few centuries. In response, Foll nodded with a hopeful look in her eyes and stated, "Mmm. I want to know all about the kind of people you loved."

"Heh... Hehehe... It's impossible to wed the undead, you know? Besides, considering my appearance, do you really think any gentlemen out there would try to court me?"

An undead's body was just a corpse. It was cold to the touch and couldn't bear children. And so, any man who dared to approach her when she couldn't return a proper embrace and had the appearance of a little girl had to have quite the twisted sexual disposition. Generally, that notion was all it took to skillfully dodge this question, but Foll had no intentions whatsoever of letting her get away with it.

"I know you had one."

"...Oh, yes, I suppose you do."

This girl was the one and only person who'd found out her secret.

Well, I didn't want to answer in front of the Silver-Eyed King, so this is fine...

Alshiera hesitated for a bit, but eventually gave in and shot Foll a bitter smile.

"I assure you, I've never had such a relationship after becoming undead."

She put on airs, but Foll showed no signs of being dissuaded by that fact.

"Why? A sorcerer could live with you."

Upon hearing such a pure response, Alshiera brushed the little dragon's head.

"Foll, the sorcerers around you are all quite abnormal."

Sorcerers were, by nature, beings who only ever thought of themselves. Most of them were incapable of loving another. Having said that, though, it wasn't odd for there to be a few eccentrics within thousands of years. Some had pitied her, and some had truly loved her. Denying their existence would have been far too arrogant, even for Alshiera.

"...But I suppose you're right," she said with a nostalgic nod. "There were, in fact, some who called out to me in such a manner."

"I want to hear those stories."

Foll didn't really believe Alshiera would talk about her true love, but hearing at least something sounded good to her. Alshiera felt like she was getting strung along splendidly, but gave up and decided to talk about just one such story.

"Let's see... How about the story of a ghost ship?"

"Ghost ship?"

"Yes. I suppose it's been a few centuries now. There was once an incident in Liucaon's coastal waters where sailors would go missing without any signs of conflict.

"Was a sorcerer to blame?" Foll asked curiously.

"Teehee. You mustn't hurry to the conclusion."

Alshiera placed her index finger to Foll's lips and was struck by a sense of *deja vu*.

I often spoke with Lilith like this after she was left all alone.

It had only happened a few years ago, so it hadn't been long enough for her to truly feel nostalgic over it, yet it felt like it was. Alshiera tucked away such sentimentality into the corner of her heart and continued her far older story.

“At the time, the then daughter of Neptunia had also gone missing, so they asked for my help finding her. I had nothing to do and was quite bored, so I decided to lend them a hand.”

“By Neptunia, you mean Selphy’s ancestors?” Foll asked as she stared back in wonder.

“Yes. Though, that girl has become quite the oddball, unlike them.”

Despite living in a den of sorcerers, she failed to read the moods of the people around her almost every single time. And yet, there were rare moments where she seemed strangely keen.

That part of her is just like him.

Her appearance and personality differed entirely, but she still had that part of her and her song in common with her ancestors. In a sense, that girl needed to be watched over the most attentively among those three childhood friends from the three royal families. However, that had nothing to do with the current story.

In an attempt to get back on track, Alshiera cleared out her throat and continued, “We couldn’t just abandon Neptunia’s daughter, so I ended up boarding that ghost ship. And let me tell you, I went through quite a lot of trouble just trying to locate it..”

As she listened to her story, Foll noticed a detail that confused her and asked, “Are vampires safe on the ocean?”

“Not most, no. And that’s part of the story.”

Vampires were the ultimate undead, but they also had many weaknesses. First, they were weak to sunlight. Those with insufficient strength would instantly turn to ash under it. They were also incapable of crossing flowing water, which meant the ocean was completely out of the question.

“I’m still classified as an ancient vampire, so I won’t turn to ash or anything. Still, boarding a boat makes me feel rather nauseous,” Alshiera said. Simply remembering it gave her a headache.

Seeing that reaction, Foll clapped her hands together as something dawned on her and said, “I’ve heard about this before. Some humans feel sick on the ocean because the boat’s swaying around.”

“Could you not confuse it with seasickness?”

“It sounds pretty similar to me.”

“.....” Alshiera fell silent, losing confidence in her words after having that fact pointed out to her.

“W-Well, in any case, I somehow managed to find the boat, but after boarding it, I lost much of my strength.”

Having said that, she still had enough power to completely obliterate the entire boat, but her attentiveness had suffered. She had been hard-pressed to find the missing people, which placed enormous stress on her mind and body. In fact, her unsteady footsteps showed what a miserable state she had been in.

I’m sure he also saw me in such a light...

Alshiera didn’t proactively distance herself from others. Over a thousand years, she had chanced upon uncountable special meetings. And among all of them, that boy’s face still remained vividly clear in her memories.

“That’s where I met that boy.”

“Inside the boat, you mean? Was he a survivor?”

She was likely trying to question how that was possible. It was a natural reaction, really, so Alshiera let out a giggle.

“It just so happened to be the night of a storm. Perhaps it was the ghost ship itself that brought the storm, but as great misfortune

would have it, I found a boy who had gotten thrown from his ship and was drifting in the sea.”

“You saved him?”

“Perhaps. But I must have been quite the nuisance from his perspective.”

Foll blinked in confusion at her words and said, “But you saved him?”

“He got picked out of the water and ended up in a ghost ship completely devoid of passengers. Don’t you think drifting about in the ocean would’ve been far better?”

Alshiera had picked him up because abandoning him would have sat poorly with her, but after doing so, she reflected over how it would’ve been better to simply send him a lifeboat. Foll didn’t seem fully satisfied by her answer, but urged her to continue.

“What was he like?”

“He was 15 or 16 years old. And I believe he was either in the middle of a long voyage or was some kind of stowaway, judging from his dirtied features. But his blue eyes were lovely. With a little polish, he had the making of a handsome man.”

“Hmm.”

Despite showing interest in love stories, Foll didn’t seem to have any particular interest in boys. Her reaction sounded indifferent, as if she simply wondered how girls her age felt about the matter. Alshiera couldn’t really make such a conjecture herself, seeing as she didn’t go through that sort of period herself.

Well, I’m sure things will get rather chaotic when this girl begins to show interest in the opposite sex.

Her father, that old man, and perhaps even her grandmother would surely become enraged. When it came to love, there was even the problem of whether or not the other party would be human or

dragon. Most people assumed dragons were already extinct, and Foll might have been the last of her kind. Alshiera had many opinions on that matter as her friend, but decided to continue her current story.

“It was fine that I saved him and all, but I still had a duty to fulfill. And so, I went on to search for the missing crew of the ship and simply took the boy along with me.”

“Was he a normal human?”

“Indeed. From his view, he looked older than me. The way he tried his best to serve as my escort was rather adorable.”

“Male, but cute?”

“Even males have their cute parts.”

“I don’t get it. It’s better to be paired with a strong mate. Isn’t cute the opposite of strong?” Foll’s response sounded far more innocent than expected, which made Alshiera’s cheeks slacken.

“Teehee. Those are merely the sensibilities of a dragon. Tell me, was Lady Nephy attracted by the Silver-Eyed King’s strength when she chose him?”

“...Probably not.”

Alshiera patted the honest girl’s head.

“I’m glad you understand. What one finds dear within others differs depending on the individual. That’s why even the person in question has no idea how they feel when they’re in love. That’s just how it is.”

“...Love sounds really complicated,” Foll said with a grimace.

Alshiera shook her head as if to tell her that wasn’t the case at all and stated, “Not in the least. You could say it’s one of the simplest concepts in the world.”

“It doesn’t sound like it...”

“No, it’s simple... and thus unyielding. And sometimes, it can become a power strong enough to save or destroy the world. It’s the best and worst emotion people possess. Such is love.”

Alshiera had witnessed it for herself. The world being destroyed by love. The world being saved by love. That was why she still believed in it, even now. The ones who could save the world, who could change it, were those who lived in the present. It was something only those who lived and loved could accomplish.

Foll leaned back into her chair, seemingly worn out by thinking it over, and asked, “...So, what happened on the ghost ship?”

“Right. The culprit was another vampire who had grown arrogant after obtaining a peculiar item,” Alshiera continued with a sigh. “King Neptunia surely realized this. He had such a bad personality.”

There were no vampires who came anywhere close to Alshiera. Despite the entire ordeal, the end to the incident had come ever so swiftly.

“Did you save Selphy’s ancestor?”

“The dead cannot possibly steal the life of the living before my eyes.”

After bringing her story to an end there, Alshiera gave Foll’s head one more pat.

“You are still at the stage where you are in love with love.”

“Huh...? In love with love? I don’t get it.”

“You surely will one day.”

Alshiera felt certain that a tremendous uproar would take place when she did... Mostly due to those around Foll, of course.

After cleaning up the Seraph Hunters she had left on the table, Alshiera rose to her feet.

“Now then, that’s enough chatter for today. Isn’t it about time for dinner?”

“Mmm...”

Both of them had ended up slacking off from their duties. Raphael would scold them if they didn’t make up for it by cleaning up afterward.

Foll stared fixedly at Alshiera as she got up herself and asked one final question, “Next time, will you tell me about your true love?”

Alshiera’s eyes widened before she returned a bitter smile and responded, “...It’s a little hard for me to speak of such things.”

That was because it was a story that was far too large a part of her thousand years of life. And upon seeing Alshiera’s reaction, Foll’s eyes sparkled as if she was surprised, even though she’d finally seen what she wanted all along.

“I see... That’s the face people make when they’re in love.”

“Ah...!”

“Oh, you got redder.”

Like father, like daughter. These two poked her buttons all they wanted. Alshiera made a sour expression before recalling the conclusion she didn’t speak of to the story she just told. After that, they parted ways and never met again, which made her wonder how the boy lived and died.

I pray you had a bright life.

Thus, Alshiera reminisced over memories of the boy whose name she didn’t even know, back to her life 500 years ago.

◇

After dinner, Zagan sat atop his throne while pinching his brow.

This training is really getting to my eyes...

He had been training with Kimaris for an entire month. There was the physical damage he took from getting thrashed about much like on that day, but the larger strain came from trying to chase the Black Blade with his eyes. It felt like his optic nerves were in tatters.

Still, knowing of a weakness and leaving it be is the action of a fool.

Zagan's defeat would be synonymous with the demise of a peaceful future for his family. He had to conquer his weakness and get stronger to protect them.

"You seem tired, my liege," his butler, Raphael, said to him.

"It's nothing serious... Do I really look that tired?"

"Hmm. You don't appear so, since you usually look like this, but that gesture is one humans use when they're tired."

"...I see. I'll be careful."

Zagan had used sorcery to heal his fatigue, but he hadn't paid enough attention to his mannerisms. It seemed his mind hadn't kept pace with his intentions.

Nephy will scold me if she finds out what I'm doing.

It would be nonsense for the person who had told her to get some rest to be tired himself. Zagan reminded himself to get some proper sleep that night, then cast a gaze over to Raphael.

"So, what did you need?"

Raphael wasn't one to drop by for no reason. In a rare showing, his expression clouded over. Anyone outside the castle would surely have mistaken his countenance as one of intense rage.

"Hmm. About that..."

Right when Raphael started to answer, a knock rang out from the throne room's door.

I don't know who it is, but I'll have them save their questions for later.

But before Zagan could raise his voice, Raphael stepped to the side to open the way. It seemed he was fine with waiting.

"Enter," Zagan said.

Orias walked into the throne room. Another rare visitor came to see him so late at night.

"...Did I catch you at a bad time?" she asked.

"No, it's fine."

Orias also seemed to be somewhat hesitant, since she shot a nervous glance over to Raphael. Her matter appeared to be something to discuss in private, but she didn't want to ask Raphael to take his leave after he put off his own business for her. And as she ruminated over what to do, a swarm of bats came flapping into the throne room.

"...Alshiera?"

"Oh my, perhaps I should come back later?"

The bats crowded together and took on the form of a girl. Her heel came down on the ground with a tap as the vampire shamelessly gave him a curtsy. She then hugged her creepy-looking stuffed doll and looked up at the back of the throne.

"Although, it seems I'm not the only unwanted nuisance here."

Her gaze fixed on the wriggling shadow of the throne.

"...Tch. I didn't mean to eavesdrop or anything. Actually, who the hell would come here willingly?"

As Zagan had expected, Barbatos crawled out of the shadow. He had slovenly, long black hair, deep bags clouding his eyes, and a myriad of amulets hanging from his neck. It seemed he also had business with Zagan, or a report to make. And just then, heavy footsteps entered the room.

“Oh? It seems everyone has already gathered.”

Kimaris was the last to make his entrance. He stepped into the throne room, then pointed to the door behind him.

“Shall I close it?”

“...Uh, wait, what? You mean everyone’s here for the same thing?” Barbatos asked.

Orias shrugged her shoulders and answered, “Hmm. It seems so.”

Zagan leaned back into his throne and casually crossed his legs. He then looked over the people in his throne room one by one. The former Archangel and current butler of the castle, Raphael. One of the Archdemons and Nephy’s mother, the high elf Orias. The wielder of the Seraph Hunters and the strongest vampire, Alshiera. The former Archdemon candidate and the one and only sorcerer capable of exchanging blows with Zagan, Purgatory Barbatos. Another former Archdemon candidate and Zagan’s right-hand man, Black Blade Kimaris.

Setting aside Nephy and Foll, this was a gathering of the five greatest figures in Zagan’s camp. So, what had happened for all of them to gather with poor complexions? Zagan pushed his wariness to its limits as he questioned them.

“Let’s hear it. What happened?”

The five of them exchanged glances, checking on each other’s behavior, before Orias cut to the chase.

“Then excuse me, but I’ll go first. I had something I wanted to tell you aside from that case. Zagan, I’ve been in your care for quite a while, so I think it’s about time for me to leave.”

Those words had Zagan wide-eyed. Orias was, of course, a guest, not his subordinate. She also had her status as an Archdemon. She must’ve had her own circumstances, but Zagan didn’t expect her to say that at all.

“That’s rather sudden. Is there a problem?”

“There’s not really a problem, so to speak...” Orias hesitated to say any more. It seemed it was difficult to talk about here.

Zagan thought it over a bit before replying, “You are Nephy’s mother. I don’t mind if you consider this your castle, and I do plan on at least lending a hand if anything troubles you, just so you know.”

Orias stared back in wonder. She then put on a slightly bitter smile, shook her head, and said, “It’s nothing like that. I’ve been treated well by the people of this castle. There isn’t any trouble, either.”

“So, why? I thought things were going well with your daughters.”

“Yes, that’s the point,” Orias said with a sigh.

“What do you mean?”

Orias placed her hand to her chest and expressed herself as if weighed down by long years of anguish.

“My two daughters and my granddaughter are far too cute. I don’t think my heart can hold out any longer.”

Her shocking confession had the throne room astir. What was this Archdemon saying? There was even sweat running down Barbatos’ forehead as if he’d failed to understand the meaning of her words.

Zagan put his left hand over his face in great sorrow as he threw his right hand out, pointing at Orias with vigor. He then declared with all the majesty of an Archdemon... "I get it!"

"You do...?"

Unfortunately for Barbatos, he was the only one who remained confused. Raphael nodded deeply in agreement, Alshiera looked at them with a sympathetic gaze, and even Kimaris narrowed his eyes as if saying this was inevitable.

Zagan understood Orias' feelings so well it hurt him, but that didn't mean he was just going to see her off in peace. He shook his head to calm himself down before speaking once more.

"However, you must remain calm, Orias. I can sympathize deeply with your feelings, but try giving it some thought. Say you left for such reasons. What would Nephy, Foll, and Nephteros think after being left behind? They would all feel responsible, wondering if they had perhaps done something wrong."

"Urgh... That's... true. That would be problematic."

"...Hey. Is this something two Archdemons should be seriously discussing?" Barbatos grumbled. However, nobody paid attention to him.

Orias looked up at the ceiling in grief and asked, "Zagan. You continue living on while continuously barraged by such shocks to your heart, don't you?"

"Yeah. But do not fear. These palpitations come from joy. Happiness and pain are simply getting mixed up in your head. Your family isn't something you should abandon simply because of that feeling."

"...You truly are strong."

"If I am, then it's all thanks to Nephy. As such, you could say it is also thanks to you," Zagan stated, his words filled with respect.

At that point, Barbatos began picking his nose as if to ask if this was going to continue much longer.

“I see... You’re right,” Orias said while shaking her head, giving in. “I’ll try hanging in there a while longer. Forgive me for making you listen to such a trifling complaint.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve had the same experience.”

Now that the Archdemons had confirmed their relationship, Barbatos cut to the chase.

“Are you done yet...? I’d like to get my business out of the way already.”

“Speak.”

Barbatos had something important enough to discuss that he’d bothered coming all the way here.

Well, I can more or less guess what it’s about.

After being urged on, Barbatos turned a somewhat angry gaze over to Alshiera.

“It’s that vampire over there. It’s a total pain to have her loitering around the church every day, understand?”

Alshiera hugged her stuffed doll up to hide her mouth, giggled in joy, and asked, “Teehee, I don’t think it’s something for a sorcerer to be troubled by, is it?”

“Nope, you’re a total pain. I mean... you’re totally directing your bloodthirst at that elf woman all the damn time, ain’t you?”

The room fell silent at that. Barbatos then ruffled his hair before continuing, “Thanks to that, the crybaby’s been on edge around the clock. See, she ends up even more of a mess after bracing herself for so long. And who the hell do you think has to support her through all that?”

Zagan didn't care at all about the latter problem.

"Bragging about your love life...?" Alshiera asked dubiously, annoyed at the criticism he was pointing at her.

"H-HUUUH?! The hell do you mean, love life?!"

"Huh? Well..." Alshiera trailed off at that point and glanced over to Zagan for help. He averted his gaze in a troubled manner.

"Oh, well, um, how do I put this...? Keep that kind of talk between you and Chastille."

"Zagan, the hell are you saying?! I-I-I'm not going steady with the crybaby or anything! That ain't what I'm talking about!"

"...Are you aware you're making the same face that bastard Shax makes?" Raphael said, his artificial arm letting out a creak.

"I'm not as dense as that asshole!"

Shax was basically a lost cause, since even Raphael regarded him as dense. Kuroka's anguish came to mind. And standing next to Barbatos as he ranted and raved, Kimaris covered his face, unable to continue watching.

"It's a good thing Miss Gremory is out on business."

"Kimaris, I thought you were my ally?!"

"It's alright. I *am* your ally. I'll keep it a secret from Miss Gremory."

"That ain't my point!"

Honestly, Zagan did sympathize with him for being toyed like this, but the uproar would have been far greater if Gremory were around. Having said that, there was one thing Barbatos mentioned that he couldn't laugh off as a joke.

"Tell me about that in more detail," Orias cut in.

"Why're *you* joining in on this crap?"

“...No, I mean what you said about my daughter.”

Barbatos fell silent from the awkwardness of it all. His hollow gaze, which burned a hole into the floor, made it seem like he was just asking to be killed already. Even Zagan felt pity for him after he received such treatment just for saying something somewhat serious. Still, Orias couldn't let it off as a joke.

“Well, I suppose it's better to ask the person in question directly.”

With that, she turned her azure eyes over to Alshiera. This was a matter involving the life of her daughter. It didn't need to be said that an overwhelming amount of mana swelled up as she kept a sharp gaze on the vampire.

“Ugh...”

There was so much pressure that Barbatos and Kimaris, who weren't even directly looking into her eyes, shrank back. Seeing that the two of them were reduced to such a state, the faint of heart would've likely died on the spot. And with such animosity pointed at her, Alshiera simply cocked her head as if enjoying a cool breeze.

“Oh my, how frightening. This frail little vampire is going to die from fear because an Archdemon is pointing such hostility at her.”

“...I don't enjoy such jokes.”

The floor beneath Alshiera's feet caved in. And yet, her dark dress didn't show a single tear, putting on display how abnormal an existence she truly was. Although, at the rate they were going, the entire throne room would collapse.

“Leave it at that. Both of you.”

Orias' mana was repelled with a light snap. And at the same time, Alshiera stumbled a step. Zagan had filled his words with mana and slammed it against the two women. Then, he glared at Alshiera.

“Can you not have a regular conversation without resorting to such worthless provocations, Alshiera?”

“Teehee. You’re misunderstanding things, my Silver-Eyed King. It was just a little jest...”

“You know it doesn’t come across as a joke at all, right? You should cut that out.”

“Wha—?!”

It really did seem to get through to her when he said that with a completely serious look on his face. Alshiera found herself at a complete loss for words.

“And you, Orias. She’s not going to do anything like kill Nephteros, so relax.”

“...On what basis can you make that claim?”

Her question seemed obvious. Zagan returned a nod and answered, “First, the reason she’s staying by Nephteros’ side is to finish off Azazel.”

“My Silver-Eyed King, could you please not speak that name so frivolously?”

“...You’re so obstinate.”

“This is a *request*.”

Zagan sighed upon hearing her sound uncharacteristically serious for once.

“Well, whatever. In short, her goal is to finish off something that might possess Nephteros. She isn’t targeting Nephteros herself.”

“I don’t believe that’s enough of a reason to assume she won’t kill Nephteros in the process, is it?”

“Won’t kill... Rather, she can’t kill her. She’s seemingly charged herself with a vow not to lay a hand on the living.”

Thus far, Alshiera had only killed the shadows Shere Khan had set on her and ‘Aristella.’ The Shadows were dead to begin with, while ‘Aristella’ was already in a state where one couldn’t say she was alive.

Alshiera scratched her head with a grimace. It seemed he’d hit the nail on the head. Orias was somewhat persuaded by her reaction, so her attitude softened to an extent.

“Regardless, it’s true that this girl is trying to finish off this enemy of hers. And frankly, I don’t believe there’s any guarantee she won’t end up having to choose to kill Nephteros in order to accomplish that goal.”

“I’m telling you that she won’t. She possessed the power to easily kill her, yet she didn’t. Instead, she saved her, losing her power in the process and getting stuck over here just to protect her.”

This fact had remained on Zagan’s mind for quite a while. Who was it that Nephteros had fought against, who was the culprit who had made Foll go berserk back in the underwater city of Atlastia? Nephteros had said that she felt like it was Alshiera, and that was precisely the case.

The only difference between her cognition and reality was that Alshiera hadn’t attacked Foll. It was Nephteros herself. Her consciousness at the time was likely fuzzy, however. She had seen the reality of Foll being attacked and had seen Alshiera facing off against her. Thus, she recognized the situation as Alshiera attacking Foll.

“If she had to kill her after that, she’d be far more likely to throw aside her shame and look for help.”

Alshiera couldn't help but look at Zagan with a reproachful gaze when he started stating facts that he shouldn't have known one after another.

"...Did you hear that from Foll?"

"Hmm, you told Foll? I simply arrived at that conclusion due to the circumstantial evidence."

Judging from her reaction, he now understood why Foll had opened her heart to Alshiera faster than everyone else.

Orias' eyes widened as if struck with a sudden impact, and she asked, "Is that wound one you received because you saved Nephteros?"

"Oh my, I'm not so shameless that I would blame my own mistakes on others."

She didn't deny it. After realizing that, Orias lowered her head deeply.

"I directed inappropriate suspicions toward my daughter's benefactor. Please forgive me."

"...It isn't something you need to worry about."

Seeing that the two of them had reconciled, Zagan felt secretly relieved. He didn't say it to Orias, but there was, in fact, one situation where Alshiera would kill Nephteros. There was precedent with 'Aristella,' who had gone beyond saving. And there was a non-zero probability that Nephteros' case would eventually become just as severe.

Plus, even if that doesn't happen, Nephteros might not have much time left.

And the one who had the responsibility of protecting her foisted upon them was Chastille. That girl would undoubtedly protect Nephteros. She was capable of staving off at least one shot from the Seraph Hunters, which would only buy a single instant of extra time,

“By human standards, Foll is ten! Are you saying some shameless knave is trying to court her?! Bring him before me right now! I’ll reduce him to mincemeat!”

Barbatos looked perplexed as he pondered over how it felt like he’d once made Zagan snap like this, then gave him a nod.

“I dunno if there’s an actual man involved, but it’s true. I think it was around noon? She dropped by the church to see the crybaby and asked about her love life. Thanks to that, she’s been stuck out of work mode this whole time.”

Zagan easily pictured her disastrous state.

“Upon returning, she also asked about the state of my romance with Miss Gremory. I ended up telling her the same story I told you,” Kimaris added in confirmation.

“My case happened just before noon. I was at a loss for how to reply and ended up being late for my duties in the kitchen,” Orias explained.

Would Orias’ love life have been mostly stories of Nephy’s father? Zagan felt somewhat interested in that himself, but he realized it wasn’t the time or place to pry.

And finally, Alshiera let out a sigh and said, “In other words, she went around questioning everyone around her who seemed to have fallen in love at some point.”

“Love? You?”

The very idea shocked Zagan to his core. And naturally, his reaction angered Alshiera.

“I used to be human once, you know? I’ve at least had one experience with love.”

“I can’t imagine it...”

“I’ll have you know that it was extremely passionate,” the vampire replied with a suspicious giggle.

Zagan looked back at her with a dubious gaze and asked, “So, did you tell Foll about it?”

“Huh?! No, that’s a little...” Alshiera muttered with a blush, trailing off. What kind of love could she have possibly experienced when she was reduced to such a pathetic state after being questioned about it?

Setting that aside, Zagan covered his face with both his hands and spoke, saying, “Impossible... Does this mean Foll has already fallen in love with someone?”

What pest had gotten attached to his daughter? The only ones who could have talked to her were his subordinates... or perhaps a citizen in Kianoides. If it happened to be someone like the three idiots, just killing them wouldn’t be enough.

In any case, he felt a need to locate this man and kill him. No, there was no need to even search. He simply had to erase all the pests who’d shown traces of approaching Foll, removing them entirely from the very face of the world. It didn’t matter whether or not they were sorcerers. Those who’d gotten mixed up with her just had to accept their fate and give up. It seemed like simple work, as long as Zagan put all his might into it, which was precisely the problem.

I’ll never forgive any lecher who approaches my daughter, but I can’t stand the idea of her hating me for killing them!

Alas, even though he felt enraged, he was still capable of calmly understanding the likely outcome of taking such a drastic measure. What was he to do? Why did he have to taste such anguish? He lamented over his great misfortune from the very bottom of his heart.

Alshiera refused to just stand by and keep watching, so she said, “Um, my Silver-Eyed King? It probably isn’t that serious, just so you know.”

“How exactly is this not a serious problem?! It feels like I’ve just learned that the world will end even if I kill Shere Khan!”

“Don’t you have Lady Nephy?”

“My bride and daughter are different!”

Sharing a happy life with Nephy was Zagan’s number one priority, while matters involving his daughter couldn’t be explained through logic. Zagan unleashed his mana in agitation as if to bring down the castle as Raphael, Orias, and Alshiera all nodded like he had a point.

“Sir Zagan! Please calm down! She means to say the little lady doesn’t necessarily have a particular partner in mind!”

“...R-Really? I won’t be pleased if you’re simply trying to comfort me.”

“This is the first time I’ve seen you so agitated...”

Zagan realized Kimaris was correct. That was the first time he’d encountered a problem he could do absolutely nothing about, which frustrated him to no end.

“Hah, way to throw a fit over something silly,” Barbatos said with a snort.

“...You’ll be spouting the same stuff within the next ten years.”

“H-Huuuh?! I haven’t even tried to have kids yet!”

Zagan wanted to question who exactly he’d imagined having children with, but he lacked the composure to do so. He realized a strange wheezing had escaped his mouth. He was hyperventilating. Zagan had to use sorcery to suppress his pulse. And after finally calming his mind by doing so, he raised his head.

“So, what do you mean when you say Foll hasn’t actually found a partner yet?”

“Essentially, she hasn’t fallen in love, but has instead become interested in the way you’re in love,” Alshiera answered.

“What do you...?”

“Foll has witnessed the way you and Lady Nephy rejoice over the most trivial things closer than anyone else. I think she probably wishes to know if other lovers are like that, and why they have such feelings,” Alshiera paused there and pinched her brow as she recalled something. “It felt more like she was observing me instead of taking in what I had to say...”

“...Oh, mmm... That’s, well, sorry.”

She had likely gone through something rather embarrassing. Well, Foll had certainly witnessed Zagan seating Nephy on his lap and rubbing cheeks well over twenty times. It would have been astounding if she didn’t show any interest after all that.

“Now that you mention it...” Raphael said with a nod. “She reacted somewhat incomprehensibly to my story. I honestly wasn’t sure if she had any interest in it.”

“...Oh? What did you tell her?”

“An old story from around twenty years ago. Our circumstances differed and we were quite far apart in age. Nothing interesting came of it, but I held feelings you could more or less call love.”

Huh? Seriously? I kind of want to hear more... Those words came all the way up to his throat, but Zagan somehow managed to swallow them back down. Asking about it would have made him no different from Gremory. It would have made him more of a failure as a human than he was already.

Once he calmed down, however, his curiosity piqued. And so, Zagan feigned composure and decided to ask anyway.

“Umm, do you mind if I ask who it was?”

After a short pause, Raphael responded curtly, “A woman named Himika.”

Zagan realized something from the name, which clearly originated from Liucaon.

Huh? Wait, when he calls her his daughter, does he actually mean it literally...? Zagan shook his head to clear such thoughts and calm himself down.

“Then allow me to confirm once more. Foll merely wished to hear love stories. She hasn’t yet found a partner or anything, correct?”

Some were certain and some were only half-convinced, but everyone nodded. Zagan felt relief from the bottom of his heart upon seeing that, so he smiled.

“I’m glad I don’t have to kill all my subordinates and the people in town.”

He’d almost hit a point of no return where he had no choice but to do it even though he knew he would regret it later.

“...It’s a good thing we managed to stop you, Sir Zagan.”

It felt like Kimaris seemed rather exasperated, but Zagan didn’t have the leisure to show any interest in that.

“But why’d she ask the crybaby, then?” Barbatos inquired with an unconvinced snort. “It doesn’t add up.”

Isn’t it because you two are the most amusing of the bunch? Zagan wasn’t the only one who had such a thought. In fact, everyone present pointed lukewarm gazes at Barbatos, but he didn’t seem to realize.

“Well, why do you think Foll turned to Chastille for advice?” Zagan asked, just to be sure.

“Huh? Uh, ‘cause it’s hard to ask a bunch of sorcerers, I guess?” he answered as if it were perfectly obvious.

Everyone looked at Barbatos dubiously. In any case, all those aside from him had gathered out of concern for Foll, which was good.

Zagan leaned back in his seat. The throne was crumbling to pieces, but he didn’t really care right now.

“I suppose the only choice, for now, is to pray there’s nothing more to it...”

“Wouldn’t her never finding anyone be a cause for concern?” Alshiera pointed out heartlessly.

“.....”

Zagan once more curled up and put his hands to his head.

If the world is full of fools who are incapable of understanding the charm of my lovely daughter, then there’s no point in it existing... No! But...

Thus, Zagan began to seriously consider destroying the world.

“Oh yeah,” Barbatos suddenly cut in, “Why’d that little brat only start to show an interest in this crap now? Shouldn’t she be used to Zagan and that elf already?”

“Now that you mention it...”

It was a surprisingly sound point coming from Barbatos. Had something caused that change?

Kimaris grimaced as an unpleasant idea floated to the top of his mind. A second later, he replied, “...Now that I think of it, Miss Gremory isn’t here today, is she?”

“Yeah. I sent her over to Kuroka and Shax after breakfast.”

“...Meaning Foll came to me right after that,” Orias said, not really wanting to admit it.

The air in the throne room turned heavy.

“.....”

That damn granny again!

Zagan and Nephy’s plans to flirt while Gremory was away had been completely seen through and she had stirred up Foll in an unnecessary way to mess with them.

Orias gravely bowed her head.

“I truly must apologize for my stupid disciple...”

“No, that has been Miss Gremory’s personality for as long as I’ve known her. I don’t believe it’s your fault, Miss Orias,” Kimaris chimed in apologetically.

“Yeah, I should’ve also given her a warning myself. Sorry,” Zagan added.

It seemed everyone involved with Gremory felt somewhat responsible. They now all lowered their heads to each other.

“I really am sorry for all the concern I’ve caused you,” Orias said to Kimaris.

“I’m used to it by now, so don’t be...” Kimaris’ tired voice gave a hint of his endless sorrow.

And just like that, the curtains fell on the first assembly of the Zagan family. Those were all the topics for the day. Everyone returned to their duties, leaving him alone in his throne room. He repaired his broken throne, then let out another sigh.

I’m tired. Just... tired.

How many times had he gotten riled up in such a short period of time? He had woken up feeling rather happy, yet events completely unrelated to his training had gotten him strangely tired.

I want another lap pillow from Nephy, just like that one time... And as such delusions came to mind, Zagan yielded himself to his drowsiness.

Chapter III: I Thought I Saw You in My Dream, but It Turned Out We Actually Met in Our Dreams and Couldn't Cope With the Situation

"...pai... Sen... Senpai," Nephy's voice tickled his ears. A reserved hand brushed against his brow.

Zagan realized she was gently stroking his head. He opened his eyes and was met with a girl's face, her white cheeks ever so slightly tinged red. Nephy wasn't wearing her maid uniform, but was instead dressed in some sort of strange outfit that was present in last night's dream. Sunlight poured through a large tree behind her as she sat against it.

Zagan took a look around. There was a building made of stone... or rather, some kind of quicklime-like material he had never seen before. He was apparently in an open space adjoined to the large structure.

There was a somewhat soft sensation against the back of his head. He remembered what this tranquility-inducing feeling was.

Nephy's thighs... It's been a while...

He had just been thinking of how he yearned to take a rest on her lap again.

"Huh? Wait, what?!"

He finally came to his senses and jumped up. And as he'd thought, Zagan was also wearing the same uniform he had on in that dream. Also, the white thighs peeking out from Nephy's short skirt were dazzling.

Nephy covered her mouth in shame, looked up at Zagan, and said, “S-Sorry, Mas... Senpai. I didn’t mean to surprise you...”

“N-No! It’s fine! I’m the one who should be apologizing. It looks like I fell asleep without realizing it.”

“P-Please don’t worry. I also enjoyed watching your cute face as you... Hwah?!”

Zagan felt like he just heard something he couldn’t let pass, but the two of them were far too flustered when Nephy suddenly let out a yelp.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, no, my legs are just a little numb...”

It seemed he had slept on her lap for quite some time. He didn’t have any memories whatsoever of it, and yet, he strangely felt nothing out of place about it.

“A-Are you okay?” Zagan asked, holding out his hand in a fluster.

“Yes... Augh, this didn’t happen at all last time...”

“The throne room has sorcery cast on it to constantly soothe its occupants.”

“I see. That must be why I was fine with it,” Nephy muttered those words. Then, both of them cocked their heads.

“Last time...?”

“Throne room...?”

It felt like something wasn’t quite clicking to a terrifying degree, but also like that wasn’t the case... Even as he remained bewildered by this, Zagan had to help Nephy out.

“Stretch out your legs for now. The numbness should go away once your blood gets flowing... Can you manage?”

“I’ll try... Hyah?!”

“Wawawawa!”

Zagan tried to support Nephy as she moved her legs, but he didn’t ready himself enough due to the unrest in his heart. The two of them ended up falling over. Zagan fell face up with Nephy still in his arms. In other words, Nephy found herself mounting Zagan. Her pointy ears flushed red in the blink of an eye.



“Hwah! I’m so sorry, Senpai.”

“I-I-I-I-It’s fine. Are you hurt?”

Nephy tried to get off in a panic, but her legs were still numb. And so, she couldn’t move very well.

“D-Don’t push yourself, okay? Um, I’m fine... I don’t feel bad at all!”

Actually, it was already extremely soft and warm to begin with, so having Nephy glued to him and squirming about smashed Zagan’s sense of reason to pieces.

She eventually gave up and yielded her body over to Zagan’s chest as if all strength had left her.

“The teacher will scold us if she finds us like this.”

“Y-You can’t move, there’s no helping it. Besides, she’s not Raphael. Orias won’t get angry over this much.”

“Y-You’re right. She’s my mother, after all.”

“...Huh?”

The two of them cocked their heads once more. Was Orias Nephy’s mother and a teacher at this school? Raphael was a butler... and a teacher? No, how did that make any sense? Something was remarkably wrong, but Zagan couldn’t tell what.

“U-Um... Um, Senpai!” Nephy suddenly raised her voice.

“Hrm, what’s wrong?”

Nephy’s expression appeared tense, as if she had just realized some terrifying secret.

“Um... Why are you petting my head...?”

Zagan had decided there was no point in worrying about something he couldn’t figure out, so he had started petting Nephy’s head while

she remained in his arms. Her lush white hair felt really soft and smooth as he ran his fingers through it. What's more, a slightly sweet scent drifted over him.

Having something like that right in front of him and not petting it was hard to do, even for an Archdemon. Hence, he'd done it.

Zagan looked at her curiously with the most serious of expressions and said, "I can't?"

"No, it's not that you can't... It's just, um, embarrassing."

"Don't worry about it. Nobody's watching."

Probably...

Nephy seemed to give in to Zagan's stubbornness and stopped putting up any resistance, letting him pet away. She then let out a small giggle upon recalling something.

"What's up?"

"Heehee, not much. It just feels like it's been a while..."

"Oh... You're right. We've been so busy ever since Alshiere Imera... er, Christmas, was it?"

"Christmas, I think?"

"Hm...? Hang on. Christmas doesn't really have anything to do with Alshiera, right...?"

What even was 'Christmas'? Zagan had never heard the term before, but he felt like it was perfectly normal for him to know of it.

"....."

How many times had it been now? Even Zagan couldn't continue to ignore the sense of discomfort that assailed him. Nephy also seemed to realize something and timidly opened her mouth.

"...Um, Senpai?"

“...What is it?”

Zagan kept himself alert as Nephy took a deep breath to calm herself down.

“...What does ‘Senpai’ even mean?”

Zagan and Nephy recomposed themselves and rose to their feet.

“So, you also found that strange?”

“Yes... But for some reason, it felt perfectly natural to refer to call you that.”

“Don’t worry about it. I only felt something was off a few moments ago.”

Besides, somehow, it felt really comforting to hear that from her mouth. He would’ve enjoyed hearing it all the time, honestly.

“Ummm, where exactly are we?” Nephy asked as she looked around timidly.

“I don’t know. We were trying to study or something, so it would be natural to assume it’s an institute of knowledge.”

Only the legitimate children of nobles gathered in such places, so Zagan had absolutely no relation to them. The church spearheaded many so-called schools, and there were even some in Kianoides. Zagan had never seen one himself, but that was what this place felt like.

Now that I think of it, Foll is about the age where she should attend one of these places... He had let it slip his mind, since it had nothing to do with sorcerers, but he wondered whether his daughter would be interested. She had started to show an interest in love too, so if she felt like it, then it was worth considering.

“Is our clothing related to that?” Nephy inquired, lifting the hem of her skirt.

“P-Probably.”

Seeing her lift such a short skirt made him think he would end up seeing even more than her thighs... but it was just out of view, which shook Zagan’s heart greatly.

“...Um, that’s a little, uh...”

Nephy realized how perilous her actions were upon seeing Zagan’s reaction. Her ears reddened right to their tips.

A moment later, Zagan took a deep breath to calm himself down as he nodded and checked Nephy’s outfit once more. Nephy’s cheeks flushed even more under his serious gaze.

“I-Is something the matter?”

“No, I was just thinking about how these clothes suit you, Nephy. It’s different from usual... and rather refreshing.”

“I-If you’re going to go that far, then I have to admit that your clothes are also dignified... and they suit you very well, Master Zagan.”

Both of them clasped their chests and writhed in agony, letting out ragged breaths.

“S-So, what’s going on? It feels a little different from an illusion,” Nephy said.

Zagan felt the grass beneath his feet and touched the large tree behind him. And in his last dream, he’d actually held that pen-like object. It probably wasn’t an illusion. Furthermore, the Nephy before his eyes wasn’t likely a fabrication. She was the real deal. She felt out of place being here as well, so Zagan’s sixth sense was convinced of that fact. And in that case...

“Hmm, this sensation is likely that of a dream.”

“A dream...?”

“Yeah. You don’t feel any suspicions toward most contradictions and inconsistencies within a dream. You can also touch things within them.”

When he had woken up in the morning, he’d identified it as a dream without any doubts.

Sensing something out of place means this has entered the stage of a so-called lucid dream, I suppose.

After coming into contact with Nephy and having it happen twice, he was fully capable of recognizing this as a dream. It was a different state from a normal dream, but not unpleasant.

Nephy cocked her head in thought. Her white hair smoothly spilled down onto her chest.

“In other words, this is my dream, but also your dream?”

“Yes. It means our dreams are somehow being connected.”

Being able to so clearly communicate with someone else within a dream was a strange sensation.

There’s pretty much only one person who could accomplish this... He had an idea who the culprit was, but didn’t know why they’d done it. Zagan thought it over for a bit, then laid himself down on the ground.

“Well, this is a rare chance to relax. We might as well make use of it.”

“Is that fine?”

“Yeah. You’ve been pretty worn out lately too, right? Let’s just take it easy.”

Zagan interpreted this as a service rather than an attack. As such, accepting it was his duty as a king.

“I’ll have to pick out some sort of reward for her later,” Zagan casually muttered to himself.

Upon hearing that, Nephy seemed to understand the situation as well.

“Heehee, it’d be nice if we could properly remember this after we wake up.”

“...Well, it *is* a dream.”

Even the best dreams and worst nightmares could be forgotten once a person woke up. They wouldn’t necessarily remember this one, even if it was a lucid dream. That thought had Zagan coming upon a sudden realization.

Isn’t anything possible within a dream...? Wouldn’t daring actions he normally would’ve been too embarrassed to try fair game? Weren’t all sorcerers self-centered villains who didn’t reflect on others?

All things considered, Zagan at least possessed as much carnal desire as the average man around his age. He’d entered a romantic relationship with this adorable girl, so there was no way he lacked a desire to touch her. Rather, he thought of nothing but Nephy around the clock. He was in a dream now, so he wanted to try touching her all over... and hugging her... and rubbing his cheeks against hers.

Thus, Zagan unleashed his very desires.

“.....”

He remained still atop the grass and suddenly stretched out his arm. Not toward Nephy, but to his side.

“Th-This is...”

It was likely that most people who saw this wouldn’t understand the meaning behind it, but Nephy gulped as something dawned on her.

Nephy will understand! I think!

If Barbatos were present, he would likely shout, “Who the hell can tell, you dumbass!” Fortunately for Zagan and Nephy, they were the

only ones in the dream. As for Nephy, she had completely stiffened up as if there was an extraordinary decision she had to make closing in on her.

Oh, I guess this is too unreasonable a demand, even for a dream...

He could no longer look her in the eyes and averted his gaze. Perhaps having interpreted that as him pressing her for a decision, Nephy gathered her resolve and nodded. She then laid down next to him. She then placed her slender neck down on top of the arm that Zagan had inexplicably stretched out.

It was a so-called arm pillow.

I got a lap pillow from her earlier, so fair's fair! This was repayment, or thanks, in his mind, at least. He didn't dare to do something that bold in reality, especially since the chance to make such an offer never came. Zagan usually slept in a seated posture on his throne. Plus, his heart wouldn't be able to withstand doing something as shameless as crawling into Nephy's bed in the middle of the night.

Hmph... So, even something like this is possible within a dream.

It was, in fact, something he had managed just once before. However, by the time morning came, they found themselves completely incapable of looking each other in the eyes. And here he was able to accomplish it so naturally—natural in his eyes, at least—and somehow withstand it. Zagan admired this fact as he snuck a glance over at Nephy.

“Ah!”

Nephy had also just turned to check on Zagan, bringing their gazes together.

“...H-Hehehehe...” he let out a limp laugh, unable to withstand it anymore. Seeing such a loose smile on her face was quite the rarity.

Compounded with the fact that she was wearing different clothes from usual, Zagan's pulse doubled in one beat.

"Master... Zagan."

"Y-Yes?! What is it?"

"Oh, nothing. I just felt strangely happy and suddenly wanted to say your name..."

Her startling and meager coaxing might've brought Zagan's heart to a momentary stop. That was just how tremendous an impact it had. His body trembled, but he was still an Archdemon. Thus, he resolutely opened his mouth to respond in kind.

"N-e-p-h-y."

"Augh..."

He tried calling her name while savoring every last letter. Now it was Nephy's turn to clasp her chest and bend backward.

Hnnngh! What's with that embarrassed act?! Even I feel flustered now!

Nephy was terrifying for coming up with this so naturally, and endlessly endearing at that. All they had done was call each other's names, yet they were both beaten down mercilessly by the act.

No! We have to talk about something or it'll be a waste!

He was spurred on by the tension of having consciously created this situation.

"H-Hehehe! Being in a dream is, how do I put it... quite nice! There's nobody to hinder us!" Zagan squeaked out in a cracked voice.

"R-Right!"

Nephy had also searched for some opportunity to distract her mind, which explained why she nodded exaggeratedly, her ears bright red to their very tips.

“But... it seems like you’re quite sweet on that girl, Master Zagan,” Nephy muttered curiously.

He could tell this was out of pure curiosity. Though, his keen senses helped him hear the slightest amount of envy in her voice. Zagan had absolutely no intention of treating that girl in such a way, so he ended up rather flustered.

“Huh? Is that so? I’m not trying to treat her any differently from my other subordinates...”

“That’s not true... How do I put this...? I feel like you treat her with about half the kindness you direct toward myself or Foll.”

“Do I spoil her *that* much?”

Zagan felt a disappointed gaze on him that seemed to say, “So you’re both aware that you’re stupidly sweet on each other...” but he paid it no mind.

“I mean, she’s a normal civilian and all. I just thought she’d accidentally die if I didn’t pay her some amount of consideration.”

It was also clear that she was even more of an emotional wreck than Chastille, so he took care not to stress her out too much. Nephy didn’t seem entirely convinced by this answer, though. She puffed out her cheeks and poked Zagan’s side with her finger repeatedly.

Stop! What’s with that adorable attack?! Are you trying to still my beating heart?!

He’d already faced one impact which seemed capable of sending him into cardiac arrest, so he wouldn’t be able to withstand a second. There wasn’t anything as severe as anger in her reaction, but even so, her meager jealousy, which could be misinterpreted as simple discontent, possessed an unexpectedly tremendous force behind it.

“That might be all you intend, Master Zagan, but in that case, you should be a little kinder to Selphy.”

“Oh, now that you mention it, she’s a civilian too...”

He didn’t really know what to say. That siren had such a tough spirit that he felt sure she wouldn’t die just because he treated her a little roughly. The one other girl from their group wasn’t exactly a civilian, but Zagan treated her kindly as well. In her case, he had a clear reason to, seeing as how she was Raphael’s daughter. That was likely why Nephy didn’t feel any envy in that regard.

Now that he thought of it, he didn’t have a reason to spoil that girl so much. When he’d first met her, he had taken a liking to the courage she displayed for speaking sharply to an Archdemon. But in that case, he should’ve just treated her like his other subordinates. He hadn’t given this reality any thought before, and now that it was thrust before him, Zagan pondered over it for a while before saying anything.

“I know this sounds odd... but it didn’t feel like that was my first time meeting her.”

He hadn’t thought about it until Nephy pointed it out, but that was how it felt when he tried putting his feelings into words. Nephy’s eyes widened in surprise, perhaps because his explanation was far too vague. And due to that, Zagan realized he hadn’t said enough, so he decided to clarify.

“Ummm... It’s kind of like I was looking at one of my alleyway siblings...”

“Oh, I see...” Nephy nodded, finally getting an explanation she understood.

“Now that I think about it, you showed a similar reaction to Lisette, didn’t you?”

Lisette was the little waif his childhood friend Stella had picked up. Zagan had only met her that one time, but he had acted remarkably

kind to her, knowing that she was one of his little siblings from the streets.

“Did you have many siblings like her?” Nephy asked curiously.

“Well, we were all brats who acted haughty despite being weak. We knew we were truly powerless though, so even if we fought amongst ourselves, we lived shoulder to shoulder.”

There were, of course, those who were faint of heart or had better social dispositions, but all of them were children who lived off of trash after being betrayed and abandoned by someone. That was why, despite their individual differences, they all possessed a distrust toward those on the outside.

There hadn't been many children who'd stayed by Zagan's side because of his personality, but Marc and Stella had still found their way into his life. Thinking back on it now, he might have seen a little of his alleyway siblings in the way that girl had trembled while still speaking sharply to him.

After thinking for a while, Zagan then shifted his attention back to Nephy and said, “So, you really do worry about that kind of thing. Um, about me being kind to other girls, I mean.”

“Hyah?” Nephy finally realized what she was saying. She was red from the tips of her ears right down to her cheeks. “Umm, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...”

“It doesn't feel bad at all. I'd like you to do this once in a while. Umm, get jealous, I mean...”

Nephy covered her face, unable to take it anymore.

“Master Zagan, you bully...” she mumbled. But even so, she peeked out between the gaps of her fingers and timidly continued their conversation. “I just thought of this now, but perhaps you have met her before.”

Zagan looked up at the sky as he pondered her statement.

“...Is this about my father?”

The hero of Liucaon, the Silver-Eyed King, was apparently Zagan’s father. He might have encountered that girl, since she’d been born in that country.

“For as long as I remember, I simply picked up trash off the streets, so I don’t have such memories myself...”

“I see... I didn’t even know what a mother was when I first met mine...”

“Yeah. Even if I had met this father of mine once, I doubt I would recognize him,” Zagan stated that fact and nodded earnestly.

The sky suddenly clouded over as if to tell them to stop reminiscing over their tough lives, and droplets of water fell on their faces.

“...Hrm? Rain?”

“Oh no, the laundry—” Nephy sat up in a hurry, then came back to her senses. “Oh, right. This is a dream.”

They still had their memories up until the moment they had gone to sleep. The laundry for the day had surely already been taken in and folded properly. Nephy’s cheeks flushed as she gave her head a cute little knock.

Hnnngh! What’s with that adorable gesture?! Are you trying to make my heart rupture?!

Actually, he wanted to see even more of it, but he knew he wouldn’t be able to take it. His bride’s flustered behavior was endlessly cute. It honestly felt like it was going to send Zagan to heaven, but...

“Hyaaaah!”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What’s going on?!”

The rain suddenly started pouring like a waterfall. It felt like a giant bucket had been emptied overhead.

Zagan rose to his feet in a hurry and said, "Let's get inside the building quickly, Ne...phy..."

"Yes, Master Zagan... Huh?"

Zagan was left completely dumbstruck. There was no school-like building there anymore. The tree Nephy had been sitting against, the grass beneath their feet, everything had disappeared. In their stead was a wet, wooden floor creaking away, torn sails, and a steering wheel rotating around wildly on its own.

Before they knew it, Zagan and Nephy found themselves aboard a ship in the middle of a storm.



"Wh-What's going on...?"

"Nephy, it's dangerous out here. Let's get inside the ship!"

The boat rocked greatly as waves washed over the deck. The wind was so cold that it didn't feel like a dream at all. Getting swept away into the ocean seemed like a prevalent threat.

Even if this is just a dream, dying in spirit is the same as dying for real... Such sorcery existed. It was used to kill its target in their sleep and render them crippled. Even a fairly powerful sorcerer could be killed before being able to put up much resistance.

Zagan immediately unbuttoned his jacket, spread it out like a robe, and placed it over Nephy as he sheltered her in his arms and searched for the entrance. But where was the door leading into the ship?

The sky was covered by dark clouds, making it unclear whether it was day or night. Visibility was poor and a wrong step could have sent them tumbling into the ocean.

“This way!” a voice suddenly called to them from a short distance away. Zagan turned his attention toward it, spotting a light coming from a slight depression in the deck. He could see a small shadow beckoning him from within.

“Over there. Let’s go, Nephy.”

“Yes, Master Zagan.”

He didn’t know who it was, but they headed toward the figure anyway. They couldn’t run on the swaying deck and nearly fell over several times, but somehow, the two of them managed to stumble into the doorway.

“Teehee, it is good to see you unharmed.”

Nephy’s eyes shot open upon seeing a familiar face.

“Miss Alshiera?”

It appeared the vampire had beckoned them into the ship.

Oh yeah, she was apparently a succubus once...

Perhaps because they were in a dream, Alshiera wasn’t wearing her usual dress. Instead, she had a glamorous red kimono on, which was a variation of the Liucaon-native yukata he had seen before. Also, because they were on a boat, her face seemed even paler than usual.

I heard that the Night Clan isn’t good with flowing water... Is it because of that? Was that a weakness she couldn’t avoid, even in a dream? Alshiera didn’t seem to notice what was going through Zagan’s mind as she unfolded a golden fan and covered her mouth.

“That was quite the dangerous spot you found yourself in, Lord Zagan.”

Both Zagan and Nephy cocked their heads. But then, he nodded with understanding.

“Oh, Lilith. Sorry to trouble you.”

“H-How could you tell?”

She had forgotten she was putting on an act and let out a shocked voice while remaining in Alshiera’s form.

“Miss Alshiera only refers to Master Zagan as the Silver-Eyed King,” Nephy told her with a smile.

“She’s also far more impudent when she giggles.”

Furthermore, Lilith was about the only person around them who could visit people in their dreams. It was very likely that Alshiera had similar abilities, but so long as this wasn’t actually Alshiera, there was nobody else that fit the bill.

“Ugh...” ‘Alshiera’ groaned in despair and sank to the floor with her head in her hands. Combined with her Liucaon-style clothes, it was unreasonable for anyone to try to claim that was her.

“I didn’t think Lady Nephy would see through me as well...”

“I don’t really get it, but why don’t you abandon that ridiculous disguise? It makes it hard to talk to you.”

“I can’t do that,” ‘Alshiera’ said with a shake of her head. “I’ve come here to play the part of an actress. And I can’t do that in any other form.”

“Actress?”

“...Let me explain from the beginning.”

Just as Zagan was about to nod, he realized Nephy was trembling in his arms. Her body had grown rather cold from all the rain and waves on the deck.

“Before that, do you have something we can change into?”

“Right. I do have some spare clothes on hand.”

'Alshiera' suddenly wrenched open the featureless wall of the boat's interior. Inexplicably, there was a closet there. Zagan wasn't all that familiar with boats, but he could still tell why that existed right away.

"Dreams are rather absurd, huh?"

"...Yes. It has indeed gotten rather absurd."

It seemed she was imitating the real thing. Her tone was heavier than usual. In any case, the closet was filled with clothes. There were plain shirts and trousers much like what the townspeople wore, the ceremonial clothes of Angelic Knights, and other formal attire that Zagan had never seen before. There was no sense of unity at all.

"Hmm, so you've got this as well," Zagan said as he spotted something he recognized. Then, he picked out his usual robe and mantle. Wearing formal outfits was fun in its own way, but his usual clothing gave him the greatest sense of relief. And as he was about to put it on...

"Ah!"

"What is it, Nephy?"

"Oh, no... Um, if possible, I'd like to try on those clothes you're holding..."

Her pointy ears burned bright red and jiggled about as she made that request. She had apparently mustered up all her courage to voice that desire.

"I don't mind, but are you fine with these? There are other more suitable dresses, right?"

"No, I'd like that one..."

"G-Got it. Do as you please," Zagan said as he handed his robes over. Nephy put them on in a hurry soon after.

"Hwah, they're big."

That made perfect sense. The sleeves were so long he couldn't even see her fingers. Zagan could only tell where her hands were based on how the sleeves were folding. Nevertheless, Nephy pressed them against her cheeks with a happy smile.

"Heehee, I always wanted to try wearing this."

"I-Is that so?"

"Yes!"

It clearly didn't fit her, but Zagan couldn't say anything after seeing how satisfied she looked in them. She was still wearing that uniform underneath, so once in a while, he caught a glimpse of her dazzling thighs peeking out from the gaps in the robes.

What's this pounding in my chest?! If Gremory were here, she would surely be spouting blood from her nose while shouting about the dense gathering of love power in the air.

The world truly was vast. There were blessings abound that Zagan still didn't know of. After yielding the robe over to Nephy, he began searching for something else to wear... when a black tailcoat suddenly came into sight.

"Hrm? This is..."

"Ah..."

It was a butler outfit much like the one Raphael always wore. For some reason, Nephy stared at it with rapt attention.

"Umm, I suppose I can try wearing something like this once in a while."

"Will you?" Nephy asked with a clear hint of expectation in her voice.

"H-How does it look...?"

"It really, *really* suits you!"

“That’s good to hear. I can’t tell what’s good or bad myself,” Zagan muttered casually.

Nephy’s expression suddenly turned resolute as she stated, “With all due respect, the clothes you usually wear are always the comfortable and loose type. This tailcoat is much tighter around your body. It’s a very fresh look.”

Zagan was overwhelmed by her unexpected insistence on the matter.

Well, Nephy’s maid outfit is so cute that it always makes my heart throb.

Nephy’s impression of his current outfit was perhaps something similar.



“I-Is that so...? That suits you well too, Nephy. I never imagined the unfashionable robes of a sorcerer could become so drastically different based on the wearer.”

“Augh...”

Zagan had simply said exactly what was on his mind, sending Nephy crouching to the floor and clasping her chest. All they were doing was wearing different clothes from usual, but that was enough to put them through a rollercoaster of emotions. Upon realizing that ‘Alshiera’ was staring at them as if they were in an isolated world of their own, Zagan and Nephy jumped apart from each other in a fluster.

“M-Mmm! I have no objections to these clothes. You’ve done well.”

“Oh, thank you.” ‘Alshiera,’ who was making a look with eyes like a dead fish, said that and shook her head to pull herself together.

“First, the two of you have realized that we’re inside a dream already, correct?”

“Yeah. Did you connect our dreams somehow?”

“I did. But...” ‘Alshiera’ paused, then continued in a somewhat humiliated tone. “When I connected your dreams, some kind of foreign body got mixed in.”

“A foreign body?”

“Yes. I don’t know who exactly it is, but someone has lost their way inside your dreams.”

Zagan didn’t understand the logic that drove dreams, but judging from ‘Alshiera’s’ expression, he could tell that wasn’t good. He just didn’t know what it meant.

“Do you mean another succubus?”

'Alshiera' shook her head and replied, "A succubus who connects to a dream this poorly would be a complete failure... Still, they somehow possess enough power to rudely barge into the dream of the princess of the succubi. I don't understand."

"Is that supposed to be impossible?"

"It is... To put it in your terms, Your Highness, it would be like someone who doesn't even know what sorcery is breaking through your barrier."

"I see. That certainly is a ludicrous thought."

Obtaining the Sigil of the Archdemon granted a person the power of an Archdemon. It was a mass of mana dense enough to make even a demon prostrate before it. If a commoner were given such power, their spirit would be crushed, rendering them a cripple.

What's more, sorcery was similar to very complex numerical formulas. Breaking through a barrier using brute force would require surpassing Zagan's calculation capacity a hundredfold. And carrying that out meant there was a gap in power that resembled the difference between a king and a commoner. So, simply possessing power on par with an Archdemon wasn't enough to do so. That was why 'Alshiera' was making a bitter expression despite being inside a dream.

"And the one other troublesome matter is that this foreign body is in the midst of a nightmare."

"Well, there are no good dreams Alshiera would appear in."

There was a storm outside and he couldn't see a single sailor around. It wouldn't have been strange for the boat to sink at any moment... Actually, it was more of a mystery that it hadn't sunk yet. Claiming to have anything but a nightmare on such a ship would be unreasonable.

“Is there a problem with it being a nightmare?” Nephy asked timidly.

“...Originally, delivering nightmares was a means of attack amongst succubi.”

The succubi were a race who stole vitality from others by interfering with their dreams. Angering them would mean getting killed within one’s own mind. That was what ‘Alshiera’ referred to when she used the word nightmare. A power that top-class sorcerers could spend an entire lifetime obtaining was something they possessed from birth. To a sorcerer, they were like living treasure. That was how the succubi ended up on the verge of extinction. If not for Zagan’s protection, Lilith likely wouldn’t have been able to take a single step outside Liucaon.

‘Alshiera’ continued even though she found it hard to do so, stating, “Furthermore, the owner of this dream possesses a pointless amount of power. Interfering with it poorly could cause the entire dream to collapse... And if that happens, the dreamer won’t get off lightly.”

It seemed their lives were at risk. That was why he couldn’t hear fear or anger in her voice, just pity.

I see. Destroying someone else’s dream without meaning to is a great sin to a succubus, I imagine.

She surely felt the same regret as someone who tried to save someone, but failed to do so.

“So, is that form you’re taking also out of consideration to the dreamer?” Zagan asked.

“Yes. It seems they are acquainted with her. She also seems to have a particularly important place within this nightmare.”

Well, thinking about it rationally, getting involved with a vampire was a terrible nightmare in itself.

“In other words, this is already an extremely abnormal situation, so it requires you to take such steps to interfere as little as possible.”

“Yes. You may not know this, but a succubus within a dream possesses enough power to charm a person at first glance.”

“Does that mean Master Zagan and myself were also affected?”
Nephy asked timidly.

‘Alshiera’ stared back at her in wonder. She then waved her hands about with a strained smile.

“Oh, no, not at all... I mean, that’s impossible. How was I supposed to get in between you two when you were glued together like that?”

She nearly dropped her charade as she pointed that out to them. Zagan and Nephy were left in a complete fluster.

“W-W-W-W-W-We weren’t glued that closely together!”

“Th-Th-Th-That’s right! We showed proper moderation!”

‘Alshiera’ narrowed her eyes, questioning what they were even saying, before clearing out her throat.

“Oh, I mean, having a sweetheart drastically drops the efficiency of the charm. That’s all.”

She’d clearly decided to just tell them exactly what they wanted to hear, which made both Zagan and Nephy cover their faces. ‘Alshiera’ then shook her head to get things back on track and gave them a quick bow.

“I’m so sorry. This dream was meant to help you two relax... but I ended up landing myself into your debt even more because of my incompetence.”

Seeing such a meek expression on that face threw Zagan off, so he wanted her to stop.

'Alshiera' suddenly took on a strangely resolute attitude and said, "Well, please be at ease. I shall send the two of you back even if the worst comes to pass."

The dream from earlier had been the very definition of something unnecessary, but she had still granted Zagan such a sight because she believed he yearned for more time with Nephy. As such, he wished to honestly express his gratitude.

"Don't worry about it. I got to spend a relaxing day with Nephy for the first time in a long while."

"Yes. Thanks to you, we managed to enjoy ourselves a lot."

'Alshiera' blushed as she averted her gaze and murmured, "Th-That's good, then..."

That was a reaction that fit both Lilith and Alshiera.

"Oh, right, what was with that dream earlier?" Zagan asked curiously.

"What do you mean...? I didn't go as far as concerning myself with the contents of the dream, you know?"

"Is that so? I thought you'd be able to manipulate it however you wanted."

'Alshiera' covered her mouth with her folding fan and gave them a brilliant smile in response to that statement.

"Just getting you two to meet within your dreams without asking was already pushing it. Going as far as controlling the dream you saw would be far too impertinent, even for a succubus, don't you think?"

Zagan and Nephy nodded in admiration.

"You resembled Alshiera quite a bit there."

"Yes. It was quite wonderful, Lilith."

“But I wasn’t trying to mimic her or anything?!”

She had been imitating everything from Alshiera’s appearance to her speech, but that had apparently been her trying to act like herself.

Meaning she’ll end up like Alshiera when she grows up?

Alshiera had the appearance of a little girl, but this was more a matter of her personality and behavior. Ever since she’d started living in the castle, that vampire had exposed her awkward side somewhat. However, when he’d first met her, she was someone unreadable who acted both suspiciously and craftily. She didn’t act that way any longer, but he had even harbored a fear that he couldn’t make light of her as a simple vampire. If he asked the person in question, she was liable to strongly protest and say, “I only ended up this way because of you, my Silver-Eyed King.” Still, the resemblance was seriously there.

“Was it that strange a dream?” ‘Alshiera’ asked curiously.

“Strange doesn’t sum it up. We’d never seen that sort of place before, we were wearing unfamiliar clothes, and we were even thinking things we’d never even thought of.”

There were theories that dreams were based on one’s memories. But in that case, was it truly possible to see and think of something you’d never seen before? ‘Alshiera’ thought it over for a bit before saying anything.

“Some say that dreams are possibilities. Images of what could’ve been, essentially.”

“Possibilities?”

“Yes. ‘If only I did something different back then.’ It’s quite common to see dreams based around such thoughts, right? When such possibilities are combined, it can construct a dream you would’ve never even thought of yourself.”

She was the expert when it came to dreams, so Zagan could only nod in agreement.

I see. That dream just now was, "What if sorcerers never existed."

Sorcerers would refer to such a thing as a parallel world.

'Alshiera' then staggered as if pulled by something and said, "Oh my, it seems My Lady's turn has come."

It seemed she had to play the role she'd been cast in for this dream.

"Is it better for us to remain hidden?"

"Yes. Please do. I would like to bring this dream to an end as peacefully as possible."

With that, 'Alshiera' walked out onto the stormy deck.

◇

Zagan took a look around. The hallway within the boat was narrow. There was no way of hiding aside from going into one of the rooms, but in the off-chance they ended up coming to the same room, there would be nowhere to run. The closet that had appeared inside the wall had also disappeared before he knew it.

Well, in the worst case, I guess I can break the wall and force my way outside...

After checking for an escape route, Zagan glanced over 'Alshiera's' way. She was out on the deck, leaning on the boat's railing and looking down at the ocean. It seemed someone was drifting about down there. However, even though her exterior appearance resembled the real Alshiera, it was still Lilith on the inside. Wasn't it dangerous for her to be leaning against a railing like that? Zagan watched over her in suspense as countless chains crawled out of her arms.

Oh yeah, she has that kind of power, huh?

Was it something particular to vampires? It looked like she was using them to pull up the castaway.

“Oh, hey, uh-oh.”

The moment she said that, ‘Alshiera’ slipped. Zagan had no way of knowing the truth, but the original Alshiera was in the worst possible condition when this moment had originally happened, so ‘Alshiera’ was simply imitating that state. However, it looked like she was about to tumble into the ocean, so Zagan immediately stretched out his hand.

“Hyaaah! Uh... Huh?”

‘Alshiera’s’ posture straightened back up for no reason. Not only that, but her chains were pulled up too.

“Is that inertia control sorcery?” Nephy whispered.

“Correct. You’ve grown rather accustomed to sorcery, Nephy.”

Zagan praised her as her teacher for properly understanding what was going on. He had just manipulated the directionality of physical forces. Most sorcerers learned how to do that right after strengthening their bodies, so it was essentially intermediate-level sorcery. When developed to its extremes, though, one could fly into the sea of stars. In theory, at least. In any case, it was because such sorcery was so common that projectile weapons like bows had completely lost their purpose.

So, I can still use sorcery within a dream...

Zagan didn’t have his robe or mantle, so he knew it would be difficult to do anything large-scale, but it was still possible to use sorcery itself. ‘Alshiera’ didn’t seem to realize what had happened, but the castaway had been pulled up by the chains onto the deck. And so, she knelt down to help him in a hurry.

“Are you hurt?”

“Urgh... Ugh...”

It was a boy somewhere in his teens, about the same age as the actual Lilith. He had tawny hair and gaunt cheeks. His clothes were in complete tatters from being swallowed by the waves, giving him a very dirty and pitiful appearance. ‘Alshiera’ tried to lend the boy her shoulder to bring him inside the ship, but he fell unconscious. And it was difficult for a girl to move him all on her own. She couldn’t even take a single step.

Is she really trying to imitate Alshiera?

The casting seemed off, but it wasn’t like there was any other character within the dream. Unable to just stand by and watch, this time Nephy stretched out her arm.

“...May I lend her a hand, Master Zagan?”

“Yeah, please do.”

Nephy focused her mind and the downpour weakened. A moment later, a gust of wind pushed ‘Alshiera’s’ back. This was mysticism. Just as they’d suspected, she could still use it within a dream.

The kimono-clad vampire and the boy tumbled into the interior of the ship with unsteady steps... or rather, they were completely blown over to it by the wind.

Zagan and Nephy hid in the next room to make sure they weren’t found. It looked like the sailors’ room. The only things inside were beds piled up three-high and a small table. There were also what looked like uniforms and coats hanging by the window.

“...I’m starting to understand why you’re unable to leave her alone, Master Zagan,” Nephy stated in a somewhat astonished, yet sympathetic tone. In a sense, this girl was more of a mess than Chastille, so it was perfectly natural.

No, I guess they're about the same, but Lilith's physical specs are far lower... She was a non-sorcerer. Even within a dream, where she could put her real abilities on full display, her physical strength appeared tremendously weak. Well, it was only natural that a civilian couldn't measure up to Alshiera's superhuman standards.

The person in question looked like she was putting in the effort to overcome such shortcomings, but that only made it all the more pitiful. Even Nephy couldn't leave her be. It was also possible that the original Alshiera was in poor condition because she was on a ship, though, so it may not have been entirely her fault.

Zagan and Nephy nodded to each other as the boy regained consciousness.

"Ugh... Wh-What are you...?"

"Oh my, is that how you greet your savior? You were drifting about in the sea, you know?"

"Huh...? You... saved me?"

She somehow managed to at least reproduce Alshiera's tone. As such, their conversation progressed smoothly.

"So, this is a ghost ship?"

"Teehee, those are simply the rumors. But it's true that there's nobody around."

Zagan and Nephy exchanged looks upon hearing that.

"If nobody's supposed to be around, does that mean we would ruin things if we let ourselves be found?" Nephy whispered.

"I'd assume so. I'm not exactly sure what happened here, but we might be mistaken for the culprits or something."

He'd been told they couldn't afford to be discovered, but he didn't think the conversation would get so serious. Zagan wished that Lilith

had properly explained the setting of the dream beforehand, since he felt extremely confused. He didn't blame her, however, since this was apparently an unforeseen circumstance for her as well. It seemed entirely possible that she didn't have a full grasp of the contents of the dream.

Just then, 'Alshiera' and the boy drew closer to the room Zagan and Nephy resided in.

"Oh, this is bad. Nephy, hold onto me tightly."

"Yes, Master Zagan."

He held Nephy in his arms and floated into the air as if sticking to the ceiling. 'Alshiera' and the boy entered the room without noticing them and grabbed one of the coats by the window.

"You'll feel better after putting this on."

She'd apparently been searching for dry clothes for the freezing boy. Despite that, he didn't put on the coat and instead placed it on 'Alshiera's' shoulders.

"Aren't you drenched yourself?"

"Huh...? Umm, I'm fine..." 'Alshiera' replied, looking flustered due to his unexpected reaction.

"I-It doesn't look that way to me. Come on, just take it."

Perhaps sensing that the boy was also quite embarrassed, she suddenly turned red in the cheeks.

Hey, there's no way Alshiera reacted that way... It felt like she was ruining Alshiera's image in all sorts of ways. For a supposed nightmare, Gremory would likely have been delighted to witness such a scene.

After watching the boy take 'Alshiera's' hand and lead her out of the room, Nephy let out a sigh of relief.

“We managed to remain hidden.”

“Yeah... Is she really okay, though? It didn't look like she was keeping up her act at the end there.”

He had a hunch that she'd already failed.

“This is rather fun. It's like when we watched Chastille and Lord Barbatos back on that island,” Nephy said with a smile.

That had happened back in Liucaon. There was a time when Barbatos had managed to seriously anger Chastille. Zagan, Nephy, and the Angelic Knights had watched over the two of them when they reconciled. It was a fond memory.

Well, it was true he had gotten used to watching something that charming, so Zagan nodded with a smile.

“Well then, shall we continue watching over them from afar like we did back then?”

“Yes.”

‘Alshiera’ and the boy went on to investigate the interior of the boat, but perhaps because of who was on the inside, it didn't give off the atmosphere of a ghost ship or nightmare at all. Along the way, shelves collapsed for no reason and knives flew out toward them without being touched. It almost seemed like Kuroka's constitution had infected her, but Zagan and Nephy stopped such things before the two of them even noticed.

After a while, ‘Alshiera’ and the boy found the culprit behind the incident. They confronted a man who was brazenly sipping away at a glass of wine in the middle of the mess hall.

“Have you enjoyed the festivities aboard my vessel?”

“Quit screwing around! What festivities?! Why are you targeting her?!”

Zagan and Nephy had ended up watching over the two of them pleasantly, but apparently 'Alshiera' was the culprit's true target. Zagan didn't even notice because he had been spending the entire time saving her from her own clumsy behavior.

"Will Lilith really be okay?"

"Uhhh, maybe...? Should we help her?"

He didn't think Alshiera would have been in any danger, but that was Lilith. He couldn't afford to let this turn into a real nightmare.

"I'll be right back."

With that, Zagan invoked the time-halting sorcery that was unique to Archdemon Andrealphus called the Void. It didn't actually stop time, it just made it flow very slowly. Anyone struck by Zagan in that state would feel like they came in contact with something moving far beyond the speed of sound.

He carefully marched forward, making sure not to damage the ship, and stood before the man. Then, Zagan lightly tapped his nearly comically relaxed face from the side. He made sure to hold back so that his head wouldn't be smashed completely, but the shockwave was already enough to rupture his brain. Once time moved normally again, all the contents of his head would burst out of his opposite ear. He was honestly worried whether 'Alshiera' would be fine seeing that, though. He took a look around, thinking he had to do a little more, when he spotted the folding fan 'Alshiera' had just dropped.

I guess I can make it look like she threw this... Zagan picked up the fan and lightly chucked it toward the man's chest. Within that slowed time, a light tap was enough to burst a brain. And so, a thrown folding fan could at least break a rock.

After confirming there were no other threats, Zagan returned to Nephy's side and undid the Void. A terrifying boom accompanied the

man and half the mess hall getting blown away. The folding fan had far more destructive power than Zagan had initially imagined.

“Huh...?”

The boy and ‘Alshiera’ were left completely in shock.

“Master Zagan, don’t you think you overdid it a little...?”

“Oh... I just thought the real Alshiera would at least do that much... Yeah, that’s it!”

He felt like he had just completely messed up someone else’s dream, so Zagan feigned composure. However, the destruction didn’t end at the mess hall. In fact, a crack spread open in space itself.

This is really bad, isn’t it...?

The moment he thought that, however, he immediately realized it wasn’t the case.

“Hm, it seems the dreamer is waking.”

It was akin to someone jumping awake upon seeing something ridiculous in their dreams. Lilith likely hated that outcome, though. ‘Alshiera’s’ figure crumbled away, returning her to her original form. The boy raised his voice in a fluster upon seeing that.

“H-Hey! What’s going on here?!”

“It’s okay. This is just a dream. You won’t even remember it when you wake up. It’s just a bad dream.”

It was more of a weird dream than a bad one, but Zagan read the mood and kept quiet.

Lilith then smiled at the boy and said, “Come now, the bad dream is over. Return to where you came from.”

The boy stood there, clearly at a complete loss for words.

“Return... to where I came from...?”

It almost sounded like he had no idea where that was.

At that moment, the dream world vanished. Deep darkness that seemed to signify certain doom surged up behind the boy as Lilith stretched out her arm to pull him back.

Unfortunately, Zagan and Nephy didn't see that happen... because they'd already woken up.



Zagan stretched his arms lightly as he woke up on his throne.

"Hmm. That was some good sleep."

Fortunately, he properly remembered the contents of his dream. Both the time he had spent with Nephy and the fun sideshow which followed.

"I'll have to get Lilith to pick out some kind of reward for this."

He was aware that she did business by relieving his subordinates within the castle of their frustrations. But let alone give her any vitality as payment, he felt like he had actually been supplied with some. He couldn't possibly go without thanking a subordinate who worked so hard for him. And as he considered what he could give her, a knock came from the throne room's door.

"My liege, are you awake?"

"Raphael? What is it?"

He thought it would be Nephy, but it turned out to be his butler. It was still early in the morning, a little too early for breakfast. Raphael opened the door with a guarded expression.

"...What happened now?"

It seemed it was something abnormal in a completely different sense from the previous evening's family meeting. Raphael took a small breath before saying anything.

“A guest.”

It was a brief, yet shocking report.

“...What?”

Zagan doubted his ears. That was because he didn't sense anything himself. His barrier enveloped the entire forest around the castle. It was his domain. It didn't just amplify his power as a sorcerer, it also possessed the ability to detect any intruders. It was thanks to this barrier that Foll and Raphael were able to detect intruders from afar. Regardless of Zagan being asleep, the barrier itself hadn't recognized this guest Raphael spoke of at all.

It didn't even let Bifrons' intrusion slip... That Archdemon had gotten past the barrier by breaking down their body into mist-like crystals, but the intrusion itself was detected. In other words, this guest was someone who surpassed Bifrons in the field of barriers.

“Who is it?”

“I didn't get a name. She demanded to be able to see you first.”

That was astonishingly arrogant, meaning she possessed power that backed it up.

If that kind of person runs wild, there'll be casualties among my subordinates. It was rather unconventional to take a stranger who snuck into someone else's domain straight to the king without even getting a name, but in this case, Raphael's judgment was correct.

“Got it. Let her in.”

“Very well. How should we prepare?”

“That's unnecessary. She's an Archdemon, anyway.”

Only an Archdemon could serve as an Archdemon's opponent. And just as he gave Raphael that answer...

“Keeheehee, quite the quick conclusion, for a little boy—Sorcerer Slayer Zagan.”

A creepy shadow crawled out from behind Raphael.

“...! Impudence!”

Raphael immediately readied himself to draw the Sacred Sword from his artificial arm.

“I don’t mind. Let her in.”

Challenging an Archdemon on his own would be too heavy a weight to bear, even for Raphael. Allowing some discourtesy to pass was worthless compared to the risk of losing such a faithful retainer.

The guest was a sorcerer wearing a mask. She wore a bulky robe that completely hid her physique. Zagan narrowed his gaze upon spotting a single light behind her silver mask.

“A cyclops... No, a beholder. I see. You’re Lord of Magic Eyes Naberius.”

I was right to stop Raphael. Several races naturally possessed magic eyes, but this was the worst among all of them. She had the shape of a human right now, but her real form was that of a grotesque monster composed of a bulbous sphere with a single giant eye and countless tentacles. The most troublesome feature of a beholder was its magic eyes.

At a glance, it looked like her silver mask was hiding a single eye, but beholders were said to possess ten magic eyes. Every single one of them hid a different unusual power, each of which had the power to easily destroy a whole country without even using any sorcery.

They weren’t on the level of dragons, but they were still a calamity-class being that far surpassed humanity. Those who possessed particularly powerful abilities by nature were the kind of opponents Zagan had the most difficulty with, as well.

I see. So she saw a gap in the barrier with one of those magic eyes and snuck in. Nephteros had once slammed her mana against the barrier to wrench an opening for her to get inside. That was a superhuman feat already, but Naberius' talent made it look like child's play. Honestly, Zagan admired such ability as a fellow sorcerer.

Zagan kept his gaze fixed on the Lord of Magic Eyes as to not overlook a single movement. He readjusted himself on his throne and crossed his legs.

"Should I say, 'Long time no see?' Archdemon Naberius."

"It doesn't matter either way. You didn't have the leisure to really look at me back then, did you, now?"

"Andrealphus put on quite the show front and center, after all."

"Keeheehee, he definitely *was* strong..."

Judging from her tone, she knew Andrealphus was missing.

Now then, what's her goal? Zagan didn't think this was about getting revenge for Andrealphus or attempting some kind of rescue. Still, he couldn't think of any reason for Naberius to visit him at such a time.

Zagan only knew three things about this Archdemon. First, Naberius was an exception, even among Archdemons, who possessed two second names: the Lord of Magic Eyes and the Mystic Artisan. Second, she needed to ignore the danger of coming here and deliberately setting foot inside Zagan's domain, with whom she wasn't on friendly terms with. Coming here without a single subordinate meant braving the danger of being killed for a single mistake, after all. And last, she was apparently an eccentric that even Bifrons and Andrealphus avoided contact with.

The only choice here was to start by acquiring information from a conversation. Zagan snapped his fingers. A chair appeared from the

shadow of a pillar and slid in front of Naberius. At the same time, he shot a look over at Raphael.

Back down for now. It would be troublesome for Naberius to go on a rampage here. It was better to keep his other subordinates far away. He also didn't want Nephy and Foll to see this eccentric among sorcerers. He felt like her gaze would dirty them.

Raphael accurately read Zagan's intentions and gave a quiet bow before leaving the throne room and closing the door. Once his butler was gone, Zagan turned his gaze to address Naberius.

"Well, seeing as you came all the way here for a visit, why don't you relax?"

"Oh my. I completely thought you were going to suddenly attack me."

"I would consider it if it were a good idea, but I'm not such a savage that I'd attack someone out of the blue without knowing their intentions."

Rather, if people drew back from Nephy because her lover was such a violent man, it would end up being a burden on her.

The light behind Naberius' silver mask narrowed in admiration.

"Keeheehee. I see you've grown significantly in just one year. I wouldn't have it so hard if Bifrons and Furcas were as composed as you are."

Zagan was taken aback.

"How unexpected. I didn't think any of the Archdemons were capable of such lip service."

"Oh my, how mean. Patrons are precious to an artist. This much is only natural."

Judging from how she answered sarcasm with sarcasm, it seemed she wasn't here to pick a fight or curry favor.

So, is she looking to negotiate some kind of deal? There's nothing in it for me, though... Zagan held to the doctrine of obtaining anything he wanted with his own hands. He wasn't troubled enough to need help from others when it came to dealing with Shere Khan, either.

Actually, he planned on getting rid of all the Archdemons to begin with. Orias was an exception, seeing how she was Nephy's mother, but he did in fact intend to finish off Andrealphus eventually.

The sorcerer before his eyes now was in fact an Archdemon with dreadful power, but that didn't mean there was any benefit to getting along with her. Furthermore, anyone who claimed to be an artist was generally a good-for-nothing. It was better not to get involved with them.

So, I guess I'll just finish her off. She did brazenly waltz in here on her own and all. Just as Zagan quickly decided on a course of action, Naberius opened her mouth to put a stop to his plan.

"Keeheehee. I suppose that's enough for introductions. Anyway, I came here because there's something I'd like to discuss with you. I'd like you to take my departure from my studio to do so as an act of good faith."

"Mrgh..." Zagan grimaced. It was problematic to kill her on the spot like this. It would be the correct course of action as a sorcerer, but it was far too feeble-minded for a king. That wasn't the ideal image of a ruler that Zagan aspired to be.

It's a hateful act of good faith, but that's about what I should expect from an Archdemon. Zagan urged her to continue with his eyes, and Naberius' single eye deep behind her silver mask squinted.

"There's a vacancy among the Sigils of the Archdemon. We Archdemons need to decide on someone to fill this opening."

This was rather unexpected. Zagan let out a sigh of admiration.

It is, in fact, the job of the active Archdemons to select a successor.

“Hmph. Is this about Andrealphus? He is missing, but I doubt he’s dead. Isn’t it a little early to look for a successor?”

“Keeheehee, how optimistic. Andrealphus served as Head Archdemon precisely because of his strength. And here he was so easily defeated. Nobody will want to follow him now. Actually, it’s more likely for someone to take his head within the day, isn’t it?”

Zagan nodded and recognized his stupidity on the matter.

Well, it’s in a sorcerer’s nature to want to finish him off once they know he was defeated. Some didn’t find it amusing that Andrealphus was an Archdemon. There were also sorcerers aiming to take his seat. It wouldn’t be strange for someone to quickly finish him off and become an Archdemon in the process.

If the Archdemons were forming strange cliques amongst themselves, it would be better to simply choose a new Archdemon before this could happen. Thinking back on it, when Andrealphus said that he was going to finish off Shere Khan, he might have been planning this to be his final job. By that point, he had already been defeated by Zagan. Handing his Sacred Sword over to Stella and coming to talk of old times with Zagan could be taken as him cleaning up his affairs before vacating his seat. Zagan knew this, but still couldn’t understand.

“So, why did you come here to discuss it with me? If someone is now in possession of Andrealphus’ Sigil, it would be Shere Khan.”

Regardless of the outcome, it was only proper to decide on the successor of the Sigil with its current owner. And yet, Naberius let out a curious chuckle.

“That’s the case for *Andrealphus’* Sigil.”

Zagan's expression finally turned grim. Naberius didn't actually say anything about this being related to Andrealphus.

"...There's another vacancy?"

"I'm not so sure about that. It'd be fine if it was vacant now, but in the worst case, we may have to consider it completely lost."

Naberius let out a sigh, rather inconvenienced by the current situation.

Some other Archdemon fell? It was difficult to believe an Angelic Knight had done the deed. It was certainly possible if all twelve of them joined forces, but Raphael served Zagan, and Chastille didn't make any moves. Michael was missing, and Stella was keeping her distance from the other Angelic Knights.

Even with some clever scheme, it would be pretty much impossible for the remaining Archangels to take down an Archdemon. Meaning this had to be a result of a conflict between Archdemons or someone dying of old age. Zagan at least knew the names and second names of all Archdemons, but he didn't know them personally. Besides, according to Naberius, the Sigil itself was possibly lost entirely, so he couldn't even imagine what had happened.

Regardless, he repeated his question. "That's a serious matter, but why did you come to me? You've surely realized by now that I plan to get rid of all the Archdemons, including you."

It hadn't even been a year since Zagan ascended, and he already surmounted three battles with other Archdemons. What's more, Zagan faced Naberius with clear hostility the moment she arrived. No Archdemon was so incompetent as to let down their guard after that. Naberius narrowed her gaze as if she had been waiting for that exact question.

“Isn’t it obviously because you’ve been hoarding all the previous Archdemon candidates to yourself? Rumor has it you’ve even won over Decarabia.”

Now that she mentioned it, all of the previous Archdemon candidates were in Zagan’s employ. It had only been a year since then, so it only made sense for the same list of candidates to be considered for the next Archdemon.

“Decarabia...?” Zagan muttered with a grimace before continuing with a dead-serious expression. “Oh, I killed him. He can’t come back.”

Naberius sat there in a daze for a moment.

Decarabia wasn’t only killed. Foll ate him.

His existence had been completely annihilated from the Eye of the Silver King. Both his body and mind were now back to being Stella. A high elf wouldn’t even be able to revive him. Even a genuine god wouldn’t be able to do so. It wasn’t even possible to bring him back as the undead.

Naberius squinted as if peering into Zagan’s mind before letting out a sigh. “It seems you aren’t joking. Poor Andrealphus. That means his sorcery has reached its end.”

Sorcerers only thought of themselves through and through, but they also wanted to leave behind their greatest inventions: their sorcery. That was why Archdemons still took on disciples. They wanted to carve proof of their existence into the world after they passed away.

Well, Zagan had learned some of it, so it wasn’t completely lost. In any case, if Andrealphus hadn’t recorded all of his sorcery within grimoires, it would be lost in the near future.

“Let me get straight to the point,” Naberius said as she stared at Zagan. “If you had to pick one of your subordinates to be the next Archdemon, who would it be?”

Zagan felt a sense of discomfort from her wording.

It's like she's saying she'll support whichever sorcerer I endorse. With that in mind, his thoughts went back to his earlier thoughts. This Archdemon had come here to negotiate some manner of trade with Zagan.

In other words, she's got a big enough problem hounding her that it's worth putting me in her debt to get me to solve it. That's definitely why she's here. Not that I need an Archdemon as a subordinate...

Considering the possibility of some other hostile sorcerer becoming an Archdemon, this deal at least had the merit of saving him some hassle. Zagan considered feigning ignorance, but decided it was fine to give his honest opinion.

“Any of the Archdemon candidates from a year ago would do. But if I had to pick one, it'd be Purgatory... or Apparition,” Zagan answered with a shrug. He honestly didn't want to mention Foll here.

Foll possesses strength that wouldn't shame the title of Archdemon.

Even if Bifrons had been somewhat careless, she still managed to drive them away when the Archdemon had been serious. What kind of parent would Zagan be if he couldn't acknowledge his daughter's growth?

As for his other choice, Barbatos was about the only sorcerer out there who wasn't already an Archdemon who could exchange blows with Zagan in a head-on confrontation. In a simple fistfight, Kimaris would be able to manage as well, but that kind of combat wasn't even Barbatos' specialty. That deserved praise.

However, Naberius was waiting for a different answer. “A proper choice, but isn’t there another appropriate candidate?”

I don’t really want to mention him, though... There was, in fact, one other sorcerer worthy of being a candidate.

“Shax,” Zagan said reluctantly. “Shere Khan’s former disciple.”

The eye deep within Naberius’ mask widened.

“Hmm...? That’s the first time I’ve heard that name. What’s his second name?”

“He doesn’t have one. His skill with sorcery is actually pretty bad compared to Gremory and Kimaris.”

“Why back such an unknown sorcerer?”

“He doesn’t possess much strength, but he’s smart. His skill with sorcery is inferior to the other candidates, but he’s still first-class. What’s more, he’s very talented...his inability to read the mood is a major weakness, though.”

Zagan actually found sorcerers who understood their weaknesses like Shax did to be far more troublesome than mighty Archdemons like Andrealphus. Such sorcerers would never show negligence as a result of self-conceit and put great efforts into conquering their weaknesses. Honestly speaking, Zagan assessed Shax highly enough that he didn’t want to make an enemy of him.

It was precisely because he regarded Shax so highly that Zagan had sent him to do reconnaissance on Shere Khan together with Kuroka. Shax being so unknown that Naberius didn’t even know his name was another major reason for this. The Angelic Knights paid more attention to sorcerers the more famous they were.

“You don’t seem to really want any of them to be Archdemons,” Naberius said dubiously.

“Of course I don’t. One is my enemy. The other’s my daughter. As for the last, I can only see a future of hardships if he becomes an Archdemon.”

Any hardships which burdened Shax would also inevitably burden Kuroka. That in turn would lead to Raphael’s anguish, so Zagan didn’t want to endorse him as an Archdemon.

It irritates me that I have no choice but to acknowledge him as a candidate.

Naberius was completely perplexed by this answer. This defied her expectations. It really did seem she was here to put Zagan in her debt.

“Now then, I’ve told you what you want. Get to your damned business already,” Zagan said, glaring down at Naberius.

“Oh my, I’ve already stated my business, you know?”

“Quit screwing around. Like hell there’s a sorcerer out there who would do something as charitable as supporting the Archdemon I’d want to back for nothing in return. I don’t have enough free time to sit here probing around for answers any longer than this.”

Zagan was quite busy. Frankly speaking, he wanted to mercilessly lop off this Archdemon’s head and go celebrate on a date with Nephy. Even if he wasn’t in open hostilities with Naberius, the Archdemons were all sorcerers who would inevitably bring trouble to his doorstep.

“Haah... You’ve seen through that much and still, you treat me so coldly. You truly have a terrible personality.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“I shouldn’t have done something so out of character like trying to negotiate.”

Zagan knew this Archdemon held the second name of Mystic Artisan. However, he was the type to create anything he wanted on his own. He didn't have any interest in the work of others, even from the Mystic Artisan. It was precisely because Naberius knew this that she came here with such a shoddy proposition to begin with.

Naberius opened her mouth very reluctantly, but she was no longer addressing Zagan. "You're there, right? Stop keeping to yourself and show your face, Alshiera."

At her call, a swarm of bats gathered together in the center of the throne room.

"Teeheehee. That was quite an amusing show."

The vampire's body took shape and the bats vanished like a haze. Alshiera's heel tapped on the ground as she curtsied.

"My apologies for getting you involved with such a troublesome matter, my Silver-Eyed King. I invited Naberius here. Although, I had no intention of having this meeting here in the castle."

This was enough for Zagan to largely figure out the situation.

"I see. One of Mystic Artisan Naberius' specialties is maintaining the Seraph Hunters."

"...How astute of you."

"Not really. I can largely guess based on how persistently you disassemble them."

Alshiera was likely self-aware of this. All she could do was return an ambiguous smile. She then turned her gaze to Naberius.

"Now then, that was quite fun, but what do you intend to do with such a roundabout approach? I do believe I've already paid you properly, haven't I...?"

This girl had lived for a thousand years. She surely knew of countless ways to torment someone without killing them. Zagan didn't know what kind of contract the two of them had, but Alshiera was smiling as if to emphasize how foolish it would be to annul it.

Naberius didn't answer right away. Her jawbone ground about as she hesitated to say anything. After a little while, the eye deep within her mask turned to Alshiera.

"Valley Cat Furcas has passed through your barrier."

The air trembled with a buzz. Zagan kept himself on guard. He knew Furcas was the name of one of the Archdemons, but he didn't know what this barrier was.

Alshiera's barrier...? Is that the same barrier that encloses the world?

The continent and its surrounding ocean were all there was to this world. Countless sorcerers had tried to leave this sealed territory, but all of them failed. Even if some succeeded, not a single one had returned. Zagan believed this barrier was originally created to seal the Demon Lord and demons within this world. He also believed Alshiera was the guardian of said barrier.

The way Naberius phrased it makes it sound like Alshiera was the one who created it.

Alshiera did possess strength which surpassed even the Archdemons, but she wasn't a sorcerer. It was questionable whether a vampire like her could create such an outrageous barrier. Even with the three Holy Treasures of Liucaon, it was hard to fathom.

Alshiera's eyes were shaking with a rare show of blunt anger.

"...That's not funny."

"I don't have the leisure to come all the way here just to tell a joke," Naberius replied in a disconcerted tone.

Alshiera sighed deeply. "...How?"

"The aftermath of last year's battle. He jumped through the crack. I don't know whether he got through safely, though."

Last year's battle? Is that the one where Marchosias and the Wise Dragon Orobas died? Strictly speaking, it was a year and a few months ago. Marchosias didn't die in the battle itself, but Zagan believed he suffered fatal wounds there.

Was the fighting back then violent enough to create a crack in this barrier of Alshiera's...? Or perhaps the fighting happened precisely because something had broken it? There was a good amount of eye-opening and beneficial information here. But all of that had already passed. Such a citation didn't require this Archdemon to expose herself to danger. The dangerous part was how she was providing all this information without looking for something in return.

I see... She's planning on getting me involved gradually!

This was clearly the kind of information even the Archdemons who were involved with the very secrets of the world shouldn't know. This was a reckless plan being undertaken precisely because Zagan didn't take her earlier deal. And yet, Zagan had no way of silencing her.

Zagan scowled at the two of them unpleasantly as a minimal show of protest for them to take it outside, but one side was the vampire who didn't seem like she had ever bothered reading the mood in a thousand years, and the other was an eccentric even Archdemons kept their distance from. It was as futile as trying to move a mountain with his breath.

"So, what do you want me to do about it?" Alshiera asked with a wrathful voice.

“Could you bring him back? If you can’t bring back Furcas himself, then just the Sigil of the Archdemon is fine. Losing it would be troublesome for you too, right?”

This was the lost Sigil Naberius hinted at earlier.

Alshiera shook her head with a grim expression. “You seem to be misunderstanding something here. I’m a guardian, not a manager. I’d rather you not think that I’m capable of freely passing through the barrier.”

Naberius grinned with a detestable smile.

“But there’s someone who can, right?”

All expression vanished from Alshiera’s face.

“I don’t mind killing you right here, just so you know.”

“That’s a lie. You hesitate to even provide guidance to the living. A sorcerer is still a living being. *You*, kill one? Impossible.”

She was pretty much spot on with that assumption, but Alshiera drew a Seraph Hunter from beneath her skirt and aimed it at Naberius.

“I *don’t* kill. It doesn’t mean I *can’t*.”

“This doesn’t seem like such an outrageous request that you’d break an oath you’ve protected for a thousand years over it.”

“Oh,” Zagan suddenly muttered. Naturally, Naberius smiled as she looked back up at him.

“My, what is it, Zagan? Feel free to speak your mind.”

Naberius was all smiles at finally dragging Zagan into this.

“...You’ve misread the situation, Naberius,” Zagan said in pity.

“Huh?”

“First, Alshiera will vanish soon. That’s why she’ll act somewhat rashly.”

Naberius likely had no idea Alshiera’s wound was so severe. Her eye shot open in shock.

“And one more thing,” Zagan continued. “What you just mentioned is likely a taboo worth breaking a one-thousand-year oath over.”

It was so pitiful Zagan sympathized with her somewhat. It had been around three months now since Alshiera came to this castle. Zagan could at least tell what touched her nerves. Forcing the topic of Azazel and her past, a topic she avoided ever speaking of, was taboo. In other words, Alshiera wasn’t aiming her Seraph Hunter as a bluff. The only reason she hadn’t fired yet was because she was considering the repairs the Seraph Hunters needed. Naberius would vanish from this world if she chose her next words poorly.

And finally, Naberius realized how poor her choice of action was. Her eye showed clear signs of panic.

“Umm, aren’t you going to save me?” she asked Zagan.

“Me? Why would I?”

He did find her somewhat pitiful, but Naberius had brought this on herself. Besides, she forcefully dragged him into this. Zagan was fine with getting it over with without having to get involved. Moreover, it would mean getting rid of one of the Archdemons without having to do anything. Everything about this was advantageous for him.

Furthermore, Alshiera was a guest here, not his subordinate. He didn’t have any authority over her. It was far too late now, but Naberius started to seriously panic over her sudden predicament.

“Zagan, you’d be better off helping me, you know?”

“Don’t bother. I don’t need anything from you.”

“Oh dear. Is it really okay for you to cast me aside? I happen to know exactly what you want.”

Everyone had something they wanted. Trying to incite unrest in another by fishing for such a desire was the common practice of swindlers and fortune-tellers. Coming from an Archdemon, they were deceitful words meant to bring down their opponent. Zagan didn't have any interest whatsoever. He already had his bride and daughter.

“I see,” Zagan replied with a snort. “I'll consider it if it has more value than Nephy's cooking.”

To others, most anything would have had more worth than that. But in Zagan's eyes, the meals made by his beloved bride and daughter were far more valuable than any fineries. It was possible something out there did exist which surpassed such pricelessness, but Zagan couldn't think of anything himself. And yet, Naberius flashed a detestable smile as if Zagan finally threw her a lifeline.

“A wedding ring. Mystic Artisan Naberius can create the greatest ring in the world for you.”

The armrests of Zagan's throne shattered. All sorcerers knew that Zagan had spent his entire fortune of one million gold buying Nephy. Naturally, Naberius knew of this as well. That was precisely why this was her last gamble. It was a villainous trump card befitting of such desperation.



“...Repeat that once more,” Zagan said in a trembling voice.

Naberius was completely taken aback, wondering why he was stuck there, then immediately held up both her arms provocatively.

“A wedding ring. Do you not know the custom of bestowing a ring of oaths when getting married?”

Zagan had at least heard of this, but he never saw anyone around him wearing one. Well, everyone he knew were either sorcerers or unmarried. At most, he might have seen someone wearing one in town.

A w-w--w-w-w-w-w-w-wedding ring?! Thinking back on it, Zagan should've given Nephy one from the very beginning. Nephy said she treated her collar like a ring of oaths, so he ended up being simply content with that.

What a failure. Why hadn't I noticed until now? He wanted to smack himself for calling her his bride without ever having given her a wedding ring. Alshiera was completely taken aback as she watched Zagan cover his face in outstandingly clear shame.

“Let me ask you one thing, Naberius,” Zagan said in a fearful tone. “What exactly does one give as a wedding ring?”

“The more expensive the better, of course. Don't you think a ring given by an Archdemon needs to be the best there could possibly be? For example... a ring made of mithril.”

“Mithril?!”

Even Archdemons would find it impossible to refine mithril. The manufacturing method for this metal was long lost. Zagan himself had only ever seen it in Nephy's pendant and that staff in Raziel's treasury. However, the reason Lord of Magic Eyes Naberius was

given another second name was because she was the one and only Archdemon who could refine mithril.

A mithril wedding ring! That would match Orias' pendant, so I feel like Nephy would love it... But will she find it heavy? Mrgh... I don't get it. I don't get it, but that's not a good enough reason not to have a wedding ring prepared for her!

Seeing Zagan so clearly flustered, Naberius whispered to him in a sweet voice.

“Oh yes, I have yet to give a present to my newly inducted sworn friend, haven't I?” Her dreadful words were the whispers of a devil. “How about I prepare one for you two? A mithril wedding ring made by the Mystic Artisan would be suitable for an Archdemon.”

With that, the eye within Naberius' mask turned to Alshiera.

I see. I can't possibly allow Alshiera to kill Naberius now. Zagan stood up from his throne and pushed down Alshiera's Seraph Hunter.

“Sorry. I'm siding with Naberius here. Put that away.”

“Fine...” Alshiera said with exhaustion.

She knew it would turn out like this the moment the wedding ring was mentioned. Naberius didn't seem to think Zagan would really mediate for her over this. She was looking at him as if she couldn't quite understand the situation... Well, the fact that she didn't play this card from the very beginning showed she never thought it would be enough to placate him.

“You'll regret this, just so you know. Nothing good comes from getting involved with this man...” Alshiera said in exasperation as she holstered her Seraph Hunter.

“I'll manage... Hang on, what did you just say?”

Didn't this vampire just mention something unbelievable? Alshiera let out a sigh as if she was fully expecting this.

“Sexually speaking, this beholder is a man.”

“Huh...?” Zagan turned to Naberius.

“That’s right. Is there a problem with that?”

“No, but what’s with your voice?”

“Obviously because I’m more beautiful this way,” Naberius replied with a grin. “Aah, but don’t you worry. I don’t care about my partner’s gender.”

“Shut that mouth of yours.”

Zagan finally caught a glimpse at why this Archdemon was called an eccentric that even Bifrons avoided.

Isn’t there one decent person among the Archdemons...? Presenting Nephy a wedding ring was a wonderful idea, but he felt like it was far too pricey now. Just as he started to regret it, the door to the throne room was violently thrown open without so much as a knock.

“Mister Zagan! This is bad!”

Unexpectedly, Selphy rushed into the room. What was even more unexpected, however, was that she had a serious expression and was very clearly panicking.

“...What’s wrong?”

Something had happened. Naberius was still here, but Zagan ran over to Selphy. She clung to him with ragged breaths without even trying to calm herself down.

“Lilith... Lilith hasn’t returned from her dream!”

Zagan suddenly realized that troublesome matters come from the most unexpected places.

Chapter IV: The Vampire's Dream Was So Sad I Had to Scatter Sugar Around

It was an entirely black world. She couldn't even see her own arms as she stretched them out. In fact, it wasn't even clear whether there was a sky or ground. So, where exactly was she standing? Or collapsed, perhaps? Her body felt heavy. She couldn't put any strength into her limbs.

Ah, this feeling is the same as back then.

She'd once experienced this same sensation back during Alshiera Imera. It made it feel like her body didn't even belong to her. Thinking back on it now, did that mean her body was going through the same thing? She thought of that in a daze as a small shadow gently floated up in front of her. The figure was quite familiar, so she tried to call her name.

"_"

Her voice refused to come out. Nevertheless, the shadow noticed her and turned around in astonishment.

"...Are you Kuroka?"

The shadow took on the vague contour of a very familiar face: Lilith, the princess of the succubi.

"How surprising. I heard about this from His Highness, but anything goes when you're like that, huh?" Lilith said that, then brushed her head in a troubled manner.

"Still, it's dangerous past here, so you can't come."

A dark *something* spread out behind Lilith. It was a dreadful presence that possessed a will of its own. And she knew Lilith was walking toward it. No matter how much she tried to scream at her not to go,

however, her voice remained silent. Still, Lilith understood and strained a smile.

“I see. You’re worried about me... Thanks,” Lilith stated as she hugged her tightly. “Do you remember when His Highness was making the hot spring and we were attacked by twin sorcerers? Back then, I was too scared to do anything, but you handled them on your own. I feel a little pathetic admitting this, but I felt super relieved back then. You were really cool.”

She felt a tremendously fast beating from Lilith’s chest. The girl’s arms trembled ever so slightly. Nevertheless, Lilith mustered her courage.

“You know what? I truly respect you for protecting me without any hesitation,” she said, then swiftly turned around.

“There’s someone beyond here who’s unable to return and is rather troubled... And I’m the only one who can save them... It’s probably even impossible for My Lady. It’s useless for anyone other than the princess of the succubi to try.”

None of that mattered to Kuroka. Lilith was her precious childhood friend. In her eyes, it was far more problematic to have her run off into danger. And so, Kuroka stretched out her arms toward Lilith in order to stop her, but she couldn’t feel a thing. It wasn’t even clear whether she had arms. Regardless, she desperately stretched out to try and stop her childhood friend, even if she had to bite her and drag her back with her teeth. Yet, all Lilith did was smile back at her with a troubled look.

“I don’t know who’s over there. Leaving them won’t affect my life in any way whatsoever. But I’m sure I’ll regret it if I don’t save them. Sitting back and doing nothing is definitely the wrong choice.”

With that, she put Kuroka down.

“That’s why I’m going. So that, when I come back, I can take pride in being your childhood friend.”

◇

“Lilith!” Kuroka exclaimed as she jolted awake and found herself in an unfamiliar room. She tried to get herself up, but her vision was blurry. She felt a tremendous urge to vomit and reflexively gasped for air.

“You okay, Kurosuke?”

“Mister... Shax?”

She had a terrible headache and couldn’t focus her eyes. Still, she was confident the one in front of her was that awkward sorcerer. She threw herself into his chest and pleaded with him.

“Contact... Zagan. Lilith... Lilith is in danger!”

“I-I-I get it! I get it, okay?! So get off me! Y-Your clothes!”

“My clothes...?” Kuroka mumbled as she looked down at her body. She had a cheap-looking blanket over her lap that hurt a little when it rubbed against her, meaning it was touching her skin directly. And just as her focus returned, she noticed two bulges above her lap. She knew they were her breasts, but for some reason, their pink tips were clearly visible. Nothing covered them. That would have been normal in the bath, but it was rather improper at the moment.

Kuroka spent several seconds blinking repeatedly, thinking about her current situation. She didn't need to, however, as the answer was quite clear from the very beginning. For some reason, Kuroka was completely naked and exposing herself.

“Hyah?!”

She screamed and covered her breasts in a panic. That was when her memories returned. Last night, in the middle of discussing the results of their investigations with Shax and Gremory, Kuroka drank some summer plum wine. She also remembered it contained silver vine, which was an aphrodisiac to the feline races such as the tabaxi and cait sith. And now, she found herself the following morning without so much as her underwear on. Judging by the crumpled cigarettes on the table, she could guess how someone had spent the entire night here in distress.

“...Huh? Wah! Wah?! Hyah?!”

Her mind and body failed to keep up at all as she let out meaningless screams. Something soft was suddenly placed on her shoulders. It seemed Shax had put his outerwear on her.

“Ah... Um, you know? I did my best not to look, at least.”

Even though Kuroka knew in the corner of her mind that his consideration showed he had treated her kindly the night before, whys and hows still flooded her thoughts. She understood that she was completely at fault for ignoring Shax and Gremory when they warned her about the drink, but she still couldn't come to grips with her current situation. It was supposed to be the greatest event of her life, but she couldn't remember a thing. The reality that she couldn't remember struck Kuroka down far harder than anything else.

“M-Mister Shax? Wh-What did I, um...?”

“C-C-C-Calm down, okay? Everything is fine.”

She didn't know how that was true, but she returned a stiff nod all the same.

After that, Shax took a deep breath and said, “By the looks of it, you don't remember anything, do you?”

“...I don't. Sorry.”

“Don't be, it's fine.”

Seriously, nothing was fine. It was utterly laughable that she couldn't remember her first time.

“Just so you know, you're probably misunderstanding something here,” Shax added in a comforting tone. “What you're worried about didn't happen, so relax.”

“Huh...? Meaning...?”

She looked up at him, unable to understand, when Shax's expression turned grave.

“Last night, after you had that drink, you turned into a black cat again.”

A piercing silence filled the room.

A... cat?

She understood the words, but it took her more than ten seconds to digest them.

“Ummm, a cat...?” she asked, still doubting her ears.

“Yeah, the same as that time during Alshiere Imera.”

Kuroka was a fairy known as a cait sith. It was troublesome that she couldn't control it, but she was capable of turning into a black cat. Just to make sure, she folded her thumb in and lightly gripped her hand like a cat's paw next to her face.

“Umm, by cat... you mean like this?”

“...Y-Yeah! That’s it!”

For some reason, that gesture had Shax clasp his chest, but Kuroka didn’t have the composure to question why.

“Kurosuke, that was the first time you had silver vine, right? That’s probably why your body reacted. You started shrinking after you collapsed, so I carried you here in a hurry.”

Kuroka didn’t know what it looked like when she turned into a cat. Shax had surely been stumped about what to do when she suddenly started transforming. The reason she was naked suddenly seemed apparent.

After taking a look around the room, she saw that her clothes were spread out over the bed as if she had crawled out from within them.

She sat there in a complete daze as Shax continued, “This is a town of sorcerers. It’s entirely possible some guys noticed you’re a rare species. That’s why, umm, sorry, but I stayed here overnight.”

Even though he’d stayed in the room, there were dark shadows beneath his eyes. He had seemingly stayed up watching over her the whole time. In other words, *that* didn’t happen. Kuroka felt like dying from embarrassment.

“...Um, sorry for being a bother,” she told him.

“Don’t be. It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

Kuroka covered her face in shame.

“So, what was that you were saying? Lilith? That’s the girl the boss is looking after, right?”

“Oh! Right! Lilith might be in danger! We have to hurry back to Zagan’s castle!”

“Calm down. How far away do you think Kianoides is? Let’s tell the boss through sorcery first.”

Some kind of terrifying and dreadful darkness existed within that dream. Kuroka didn’t believe it was just a simple vision, which left her unnerved.

Shax gently brushed her head to calm her down.

“I’m telling you to relax. Believe in the boss. He’s not the type to let his subordinates get killed. He’ll definitely save her.”

Those words were enough to reassure her.

That’s right. Zagan’s there with her.

He was the Archdemon who’d accepted an Archangel, his supposed enemy, and took the brunt of Kuroka’s revenge without question. He was the one who saved her.

“Also, believe in yourself,” Shax said.

“Um... why?”

She didn’t know what there was in herself to believe in, given this situation.

Shax placed his hands on both her shoulders as she sat there in bewilderment.

“You’re a cait sith. You bring good luck. Plus, you’re the most loved fairy in the world. Just by believing in her safety, you should be able to help her.”

I’m really no match for him...

Even though he was normally so dense, he served as Kuroka’s pillar of support at times like this. That was why she gave him a firm nod.

“Right. I’ll believe in Lilith’s safety and pray for her.”

“That’s the spirit,” Shax said as he averted his eyes. “Uhhh... I’ll go contact the boss, so, um, you should, you know... Get dressed... I mean.”

Kuroka clearly saw Shax blush. She had Shax’s outerwear on her shoulders, but was still essentially naked. His reaction made total sense.

“...Um, Mister Shax?” she said his name and grabbed his sleeve to stop him from leaving.

“Wh-What is it?”

“Does your, um, heart throb? When, um, you see me like this, I mean.”

It didn’t feel like she’d be able to recover if he said he had no interest. Nevertheless, she decided to boldly ask for an answer. Shax’s face twitched, but he could figure out that she had no intention of letting go until he answered.

“Of course it does!” he shouted.

That was the first time she’d gotten the answer she wanted from him. In response, she pulled Shax’s outerwear up over her mouth and smiled.

“Then I’ll forgive you for last night.”

He had treated her like a child and disregarded her as a member of the opposite sex, but his answer just now was satisfying enough for her to forgive it all.

◇

“Got it. We’re also aware that Lilith is missing. Tell Kuroka not to worry about anything. It’d be more troubling if she brought on some kind of misfortune from her end,” Zagan stated as he walked over to Lilith and Selphy’s room.

He was communicating with Shax using sorcery. Zagan had made Shax learn how to do that before sending him out with Kuroka. Selphy was in a rush in front of him, while Alshiera and Naberius tagged along behind him. Setting aside Alshiera, Zagan didn't really want Naberius loitering around the castle, but this was an emergency.

"I'm counting on you, Boss. So, what should we do?"

"Continue your investigation after Kuroka calms down. Wait... No, never mind. Rest for the day. I'll send you instructions after we clear things up over here."

"Roger that."

In a sense, Kuroka's power was stronger than Nephy's, but far more unstable. Zagan knew nothing good could come out of her acting unreasonably in such a volatile situation. So long as he didn't know Lilith's exact situation, any additional trouble from her would just increase his workload.

Shax seemed to agree on this point. He honestly backed down. By the time he ended the communication, the group had arrived at Lilith's room. She wasn't there. Her bed wasn't particularly messy. It was as if someone had been sleeping there normally moments ago and simply vanished.

Zagan looked over to Selphy and asked, "So, when did she disappear?"

"I don't know. She was, like, totally there last night when I went to sleep, but she wasn't around when I woke up. Also, I found this on her bed..."

Selphy held out a mirror. It was just big enough to hold in both hands. Zagan recognized it. This was one of Liucaon's three Holy Treasures, the Mirror of the Afterlife. Upon looking into it, he saw Lilith running through the darkness.

“Is this reflecting where Lilith is right now?”

“That’s what I think. Lilith’s probably in, like, a dream right now.”

A succubus was capable of physically entering a dream. That was the reason they were able to do as they pleased within them. And it also meant it took a lot of work to drag them out of one.

“Alshiera. Lend me a hand. We need to pull Lilith back.”

“...It’s no use. Lilith is already beyond my domain. I can’t reach her.”

“Beyond your domain...? What do you mean?”

Alshiera bit down on her thumbnail and answered bitterly, “I explained this to Naberius earlier. I can’t leave this world.”

Zagan grimaced.

Wasn’t that regarding Furcas leaving the boundary of the world?

Lilith was in a dream. Nevertheless, Zagan came to a realization.

“The world ended there. That’s what it felt like.”

“To me, it was more like she was the guardian of that place.”

That was the scenery Lilith had once seen within her dreams. It was likely a view of the boundary of the barrier that enclosed the world. After that discussion, Zagan hypothesized that the barrier used intangible dreams as a medium.

In other words, to cross Alshiera’s barrier, you need to travel through a dream?

Lilith wasn’t a sorcerer, but she was one of the most powerful succubi in the world. She might have had the ability to cross the barrier. That would explain why Alshiera had kept close to that girl and always paid attention to her, even when Kuroka’s village was attacked. But was there truly another world beyond there? Or perhaps...

We have to hurry. This is getting bad!

If it was as Zagan suspected, Lilith was in an extremely dangerous place. There was even a chance that he wouldn't be able to do anything on his own, even if he acted fast.

But that's not enough of a reason for a king to abandon his subject...

Zagan shifted his attention to the mirror in Selphy's hand and said, "So, this is our only clue...?"

He then tried to grab the Mirror of the Afterlife, but his arm sank right into the mirror itself.

"Wh-What?"

There was absolutely no mana at work, yet a terrifying force that he couldn't resist at all drew him in.

"My Silver-Eyed King!"

"Mister Zagan?!"

Alshiera grabbed Zagan's arm, while Selphy tried to pull back the mirror. However, it refused to let him go and swallowed his arm inch by inch.

I can't hold my ground, it seems...

Zagan turned to Alshiera and said, "It's fine, let go. This is the perfect opportunity to bring Lilith back."

The expression Alshiera made at that moment seemed all too anguished... and all too memorable. She bit down hard on her lip and twisted her face as if she was going to cry, but forced a smile.

"I pray for your good fortune..."

It was a simple phrase, but what kind of emotions lay behind it when coming from this girl? The secret Alshiera had been trying to hide all

this time was likely on the other side of this mirror. And so, Zagan answered plainly and clearly.

“Yeah. I’ll be right back.”

He slipped through Alshiera’s grip, and in the very next instant, the mirror started to swallow Zagan’s entire body. Mysteriously enough, there was one thing that convinced him he could bring Lilith back.

So long as Kuroka is praying for her safety, I’m sure Lilith is still alive.

And with that, Zagan vanished into the mirror.

◇

He wondered where he was. He didn’t even know *who* he was. All he had was an accumulation of regrets and lingering attachments.

I’ve been searching for something all this time, I think?

He had no idea what that was anymore, either. And precisely because he didn’t know, he ended up stepping foot somewhere he never should have on his quest for an answer. As a result, he ended up as he was now.

It was an entirely dark world. A voice could be heard. It was one that sounded much like the embodiment of eternal resentment. He couldn’t see a thing, he couldn’t say a thing, and he couldn’t feel his arms or legs. All he could truly sense was that eternal wail inside his head, screaming in both lamentation and hatred.

Aah, this is surely the end of the world. I’m going to vanish here. But what’s this feeling? It’s like this isn’t my first time here.

This had happened before. It could’ve been years, decades, or even centuries ago. Or perhaps it was yesterday. Regardless, he recognized this. It was painful, agonizing even. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t speak. No matter how much he tried to write about, it

felt like he had sunken deep within the ocean. Back then, it was the first time he'd prayed with all his heart, wishing to live.

Oh, I see. Back then, I was saved by...

Someone had stretched out their hand to him as if granting his wish. He couldn't remember their face anymore, or even what they sounded like. There was one thing he remembered, though: beautiful eyes, which were golden like the moon. He searched the entire world hoping to find them again, but never did. He had even forgotten who he was searching for and ended up all alone.

"I want... to see her... just once more..."

He was fine with simply vanishing, but at the very least, he wanted to see that face one more time. And just as he tried stretching out his arm to grasp at that fragment of a memory, he saw a faint light within the darkness. They shined just like those eyes did, with a golden glint.

He didn't care if it was just an illusion. He continued stretching his hand out toward the light, and then...

"I finally found you," a voice said.

A small hand grasped him. It was a girl's hand. Her eyes were the same gold as in his memories. She had vivid scarlet hair, bat-like wings growing from her lower back, and twisting horns on her head. Her white skin was marked by small cuts here and there. She was in a dreadful state, covered in blood and dirt.

The girl gave him a relieved smile and mused, "So, it really was you."

"Who are you...?"

Why did she know him? Did he know her? He continued staring at her face, not understanding the situation at all.

"Do you remember me? We just met in a dream," she said.

A dream? What does that mean?

He tried cocking his head, only to realize his entire body was in so much pain that he couldn't move a muscle.

"By the looks of it, you don't remember," the girl said with a sigh. "Whatever. I'm saving you, so come with me."

"Why... save me...?"

He could tell by her wounds that this place was dangerous. She must've gone through quite the ordeal to reach him.

The girl knit her brows and replied, "Why, you ask...? Hmm. I wonder..."

She then gave him a bitter smile and declared, "Well, if I had to say, it's because His Highness and my friend would surely do so. I don't have any reason other than that... Huh?"

Her eyes suddenly shot open in surprise.

He felt something warm coming down his cheek. Without even realizing it, he had started crying.

I feel like I've finally found what I've been looking for.

This girl might not have been the same person as back then. Regardless, he had surely been searching for her this entire time.

"C-Come on. I'm just doing it for myself, so you don't need to cry," the girl said, pulling on his hand to start walking. "In any case, we'll talk later. We have to get out of here first."

"Get out...? Where's the exit...?"

The world around them was black as far as the eye could see. There was no path in sight. He didn't even know what direction they could walk in. Did this girl truly know how to get out?

“I don’t know,” she replied with confidence, “But the path won’t ever open to you if you just sit around. If we get walking, His Highness will surely come to save us.”

As they walked, five cracks in space appeared before them. The girl turned around and flashed him a triumphant smile in response.

“See?”

Her face, illuminated by the light pouring from the cracks, looked terribly dirty, yet endlessly beautiful.



What is this place? It’s like hell...

Zagan found a world of mud-like darkness on the other side of the mirror. There was something dreadful about this world, since simply looking at it chipped away at his spirit. The stench of putrid corpses filled the air as fear assaulted his sanity.

Any living being, regardless of whether or not they were a sorcerer, would die in spirit far before their body could expire. And yet, not seeing anything at all was precisely what kept him sane. If he could see what was here, he was sure he wouldn’t be able to endure.

Zagan could tell his hand was trembling. Zagan, an Archdemon, felt genuine fear.

I haven’t felt this sensation since I first saw that demon.

On the day Zagan succeeded the title of Archdemon, he witnessed the summoning of a demon, though incomplete, during his clash with Barbatos. That was the very first time he had felt such dread. Although, what he felt now made that seem like a gentle breeze. His body was frozen up completely.

“Don’t screw with me.”

Zagan raised his voice and brushed away the terror. He didn't throw himself into the mirror just to stand here and do nothing. A king had to march forward to save his subject. Fear was nothing but a pebble on his road to achieving that.

However, he required some manner of path to be able to march forward. As such, his first question came back to mind. Where was this, exactly? This world didn't seem to actually exist. If he had to guess whether this was a dream or reality, he would go with the former. But in that case, whose dream was it?

In other words, some sort of will exists here.

The fact that Zagan was still fine meant the dreamer was still asleep. He was left to live precisely because this was a dream. To put it simply, this was something like the early stages of a nightmare.

He had to find Lilith quickly and get out of here. With no sight, he had to rely on his hearing. Zagan strained his ears and heard something akin to a faint breeze. Or not. That wasn't wind. It was a voice. He couldn't hear the words themselves, but he knew what this was: fathomless resentment.

The voice couldn't forgive the very existence of the world, including itself, and thus sought to repent for its sins by destroying the world and itself altogether. There was desperation, hatred, and grief all mixed together as the voice cursed continuously.

Upon noticing the voice, a sharp pain ran through Zagan's entire body. It assaulted all those who heard it, much like a strong wind tearing at one's skin. The sense of pain immediately vanished, but that didn't mean the pain itself was gone. It simply meant he had lost the ability to feel pain. At the same time, a chill ran through his body as if all heat was being torn away from him.

Zagan finally understood. He knew what the identity behind this sensation was. If such a thing began spilling into reality, that would

be all it would take to destroy the whole world. That was what this cursed world was.

I see. So, this is Azazel...

He had felt a similar fear in 'Aristella's' eyes. She had manifested just a fragment of the power here by being a spiritual medium. This nightmare could render any normal person insane just by touching upon it. This was the will of Azazel. That was why Alshiera acted so uneasily despite possessing so much power. It didn't feel like this could be extinguished with a thousand shots of the Seraph Hunters. And after being confronted with the true nature of this dreadful world, a sudden thought came to mind.

A cursed voice becoming power...?

Wasn't there something else rather similar to this? Zagan didn't have the time to linger on that thought, however.

I won't be able to take this for too long.

He decided to march forward, but the more he moved, the more the cursed voice ate at his mind and body. Zagan was beginning to panic.

Regardless of how powerful a succubus is inside a dream, can she really withstand this...?

He had to find Lilith quickly, before it was too late. He couldn't see anything. All he could hear was that resentful voice. What was he supposed to rely on to find her?

No, there must be some sort of clue.

When Lilith had consulted Zagan about her dream of the end of the world, he had ordered her to live. If she survived, he would save her. Zagan knew that even though she wasn't a sorcerer and was weak-hearted, that princess still had the resolve to speak sharply when faced with an Archdemon. That will to live would surely be completely foreign within this nightmare. He had to find her.

Search... Find her! She's definitely here!

He strained his eyes and ears and even focused on the sensation tearing at his skin.

How long had he kept this up? It felt like forever, but Zagan suddenly found another voice within that continuous cursing.

“—the path isn't going to open if you just sit around—”

It was a silly voice, much like someone was just gossiping. That was exactly why it felt completely out of place here.

“Found you! Heaven's Phosphor Fivefold Grand Flower!”

Zagan unleashed his greatest attack without hesitation. The five blades of Heaven's Phosphor shot from his fingers and tore apart the darkness, opening a path. He could see golden eyes in the distance. They were still far away. It was as if those eyes were on the other side of a torrential canal. Nevertheless, Zagan took a step forward.

“Heaven's Wheel Shadow Sever.”

He gathered the mana in the area and transformed it into a propelling force. This was his third form of power. He lunged down the path torn open by Heaven's Phosphor and managed to find Lilith.

Just being a succubus didn't seem to be enough to get through here safely. Her already revealing outfit was torn up, and countless cuts ran across her white skin. Honestly, he felt like it was because of her powers as a succubus that she managed to get off so lightly. Just looking at her pained his heart. He then spotted someone else with her: a boy in tatters.

He's the boy who showed up in that dream on the boat?

She had apparently done something unreasonable so that she could save this boy.

“Your Highness!” Lilith yelled in joy.

“Don’t make me put in so much extra work.”

Now that he reached them, he had to get back quickly. Zagan didn’t even pause to catch his breath, carrying both Lilith and the boy under his arms. Shadow Sever was still in effect. However, the path he had torn open was already starting to shut. Not only that, it felt like the darkness itself was staring at Zagan.

I guess it found me.

It was like punching someone while they were sleeping. It was only obvious for them to wake up, and also natural for their anger to be directed toward him. Actually, this was more like lightly poking a dreamer with a fork, so it was still half asleep and not fully aware of the three intruders. As it was now, escape was still possible.

“It’ll get a little rough. Keep your mouth shut, okay?”

After checking that Lilith quickly gave him a nod, Zagan glanced at the boy. That was when his face stiffened up completely. There was a very familiar symbol carved on his right hand.

“It can’t be... Are you...? No, that can wait.”

The darkness was already showing Zagan animosity. It was already eating away at his spirit while the dreamer was asleep; he’d be done for in an instant if it were to awaken.

“Heaven’s Scale Eastern Sky, Western Sky.”

I can’t see where the exit is. Heaven’s Phosphor is a poor choice since it vanishes after being fired. This was his invincible shield, the first spell he developed so that he could face off against Sacred Swords and demons. Zagan slammed his shield against the darkness in front of him. There was a dull sensation like sticking his arm into a bog. A crack formed on the Eastern Sky. At the same time, a fissure formed in the muddy darkness and burst open with a crack of sound.

This’ll work.

Heaven's Scale absorbed the mana around it to continuously strengthen itself. This space was much like an infinite supply of mana. The crack in the Eastern Sky repaired itself in an instant. Zagan clenched his fists once more and lashed out with the Western Sky, extending the path further.

So, my limit really is three at once.

Shadow Sever, Eastern Sky, and Western Sky were all in effect. Heaven's Scale continuously devoured the darkness, but Zagan couldn't control more than three of these spells. If he had just one more means of attack, he could open the path completely.

Fortunately, Shadow Sever was faster than the closing darkness. It wasn't clear where he should be headed, or whether there was even an exit to begin with, but Zagan continued pushing forward, smashing the darkness before him. As he continued slamming his tattered fists to make a path forward, he saw a light in the distance.

"Your Highness! Over there!"

"I see it!"

It was the Mirror of the Afterlife's light. Zagan knew this by instinct after having stepped foot in here through it. The instant he lunged toward it, he took a single glance behind him. A white slit was opening in the world of darkness. Beyond it, he could see a blue sphere tumbling about in place. The moment he recognized this as an eyeball, another identical fissure split open.

◇

"Haaah, haaah, haaah..."

After passing through the light, Zagan fell to his knees and gasped for air.

What the hell was that?

The dreamer, Azazel, might've woken up, but what exactly *was* it to see such a dreadful dream? It clearly wasn't meant to be witnessed by anyone normal. It was likely something that must never be understood. After arriving at that conclusion, he finally figured out why Alshiera would never talk about it.

Within a dream... something which mustn't be understood. Ah, goddammit, so that's what it is.

There was no way she *could* talk about it. If she did, and someone figured it out completely, that would be all it would take to destroy the world. Even if all thirteen Archdemons cooperated, it didn't feel like they could do anything about it.

Zagan let Lilith and the boy down on the ground.

"Sorry, this is about all I have," Lilith said, tearing a piece of her tattered sleeve off with a worried look. She wiped off Zagan's forehead. That was when he first realized that sweat was pouring down his brow like a waterfall.

This isn't an expression I should be showing my subordinates.

Zagan accepted the scrap of cloth from Lilith and stood up.

"Don't worry. The sorcery I used just had poor energy consumption."

Heaven's Scale was about as efficient as sorcery could get. He was being superficially vain, but Lilith let out a sigh of relief. There was worth in putting on that act if he could get her to relax. He then took a look around him.

"It seems we're not back at the castle..."

They were now in something like a temple, surrounded by countless pillars. The pillars were simply-made with vertical grooves carved into them. There was an opening every few meters where a statue of a winged-human was enshrined. They somewhat resembled avians, but were strangely divine.

No, that's no avian.

It was some other race, but he hadn't been taught what exactly. Zagan suddenly pinched his brow.

Taught? By who? Do I know this statue... this place?

Even as he searched his memories, he couldn't find anything which corresponded. Zagan had no way of knowing whether this was some delusion, déjà vu, or a memory he possessed.

He took another look at the pillars. They appeared quite old. He couldn't make out the details because they appeared weathered. There were signs of letters carved into them, but they were difficult to interpret. Each pillar stretched far off into the heavens.

There was no ceiling. There wasn't even a sky. Only a dreadful and iridescent space that wasn't quite the darkness of night spread out above him. This didn't seem to be reality. Meaning he was still within a dream.

"I know this place..." Lilith suddenly said with a gasp.

"Where are we?"

"I told you about the weird dream I had before, right? This looks the same..."

"...I see."

Zagan looked up. That dreadful space made him think of the world he had just been in.

If this is the boundary within that world, then Alshiera's reaction makes sense.

When Lilith first wandered into this place, Alshiera had gone pale bringing her back. She never explained why. Now that Zagan knew what lay beyond, it was perfectly understandable.

“So, this is something like the halfway point between that darkness and our world.”

Meaning this was Alshiera’s barrier. The strange structure of this temple made sense if these pillars were supporting that space beyond the distance.

“Can you get us back from here?” Zagan asked Lilith.

“Umm... Sorry, it’s no good.” Lilith shook her head apologetically. “I’m pretty sure this is the inside of a dream, but it’s not *my* dream... Last time, My Lady was the one to bring me back, I didn’t make it back on my own.”

“Hmm. Well, that makes sense.”

It likely hurt her pride as a succubus. She looked clearly downtrodden as Zagan plopped his hand on her head.

“Don’t worry about it. This is probably Alshiera’s barrier. Seeing how that vampire is involved, it isn’t so simple to break out.”

At the very least, it was an important place that supported the space above. It didn’t make any sense if someone could freely come and go.

Is the reason I was able to go directly to where Lilith was because she’s the master of the Mirror of the Afterlife?

Despite opening the path to its wielder, it couldn’t bring them all the way back. Still, it actually deserved great praise, since it could cross the barrier around the world for its wielder’s sake.

Now that Zagan confirmed the situation, he looked down at the boy lying on the ground. “Now then, it’s about time you start talking.”

He had been inside the darkness far longer than Zagan or Lilith. He was covered in wounds and breathing raggedly, but he was still alive. He was at least conscious enough to look up at Zagan.

“You’re Furcas, right?”

The boy had the Sigil of the Archdemon on the back of his right hand. He wasn’t wearing a robe or any amulets like a sorcerer would, and didn’t seem like anything more than that young boy on the boat in that dream, but Zagan wouldn’t mistake a Sigil of the Archdemon for anything else. It was much like the one on Zagan’s hand. The inner details were somewhat different. Orias would likely be able to tell him which part of the body this one indicated.

Well, this did make some sense. Lilith had mentioned a foreign body within Zagan and Nephy’s dream with abnormally strong power. If he was within the world of dreams with his real body, much like Zagan and Lilith were now, then he truly was a troublesome foreign body.

That, combined with the information Naberius had brought about Archdemon Furcas’ disappearance after trying to cross the world’s enclosure, made it highly likely this was Furcas. Meaning Zagan had gotten involved before Naberius even made his request. He glared down at the boy with an annoyed look.

“Fur...cas...?” the boy replied with an imploring gaze. “Is that... my name? Do you... know me?”

“Huh?”

Both Zagan and Lilith sounded stupefied. The boy held his head.

“I don’t... know. Why... am I here? Who... am I?”

Zagan exchanged looks with Lilith.

I see. From what Naberius said, quite some time has passed since this guy tried to cross the barrier.

It had been several days, perhaps even a week. At the very least, the time he spent there couldn’t be measured in mere hours. Spending several days within that nightmare was enough to destroy the mind of even an Archdemon.

Zagan finally understood why nobody was able to leave this world. To get out, one had to pass through Azazel's dream. The succubi were pretty much the only ones who could bring their physical forms into dreams to begin with. That was why nobody managed to break through the barrier, and why any who did never came back. Even Archdemon Furcas had been reduced to such a state, after all.

By the look of it, he doesn't even remember how to use sorcery.

It didn't seem like he'd be of any use in escaping this place. Furcas held the second name Valley Cat. He was supposed to be a specialist in leaping across rifts in space who even surpassed Barbatos.

"Do you remember anything at all?" Zagan asked.

"...Nothing. Or maybe... I feel like I've met her somewhere before," the boy said, giving Lilith a look.

"I think he's referring to My Lady," Lilith whispered into Zagan's ear.

"Is that so? What about that dream we were just in?"

"Oh... right. I met him there too, huh?"

Having said that, it was true this boy had been with Alshiera in that dream atop the boat.

If he remembers Alshiera in this state, does that mean she did something to him?

That dream on the boat was supposedly a nightmare, so even though he was an Archdemon, Zagan sympathized with the boy a little. However, he still grabbed the boy by the back of the neck and lifted him in the air.

"Wha?!"

"What are you doing, Your Highness?!"

Both the boy and Lilith yelled as Zagan let out a sigh.

"We can't stay here forever. Let's look for any clues for a way out."

“You have a point, but why are you lifting him like that?”

“Hm...? So we can walk around, obviously.”

Zagan wanted to get rid of the Archdemons, but after seeing him like this, his desire to kill the boy had faded. Besides, Lilith had risked her life to save him, so it would leave a bad aftertaste to abandon him here. The boy’s mouth was wide open in shock, but he eventually strained a smile.

“I feel like I understand what you said earlier, just a little. He’s a good king.”

“What’s this about?” Zagan asked with a grimace, but Lilith turned bright red without answering him. He then took a look at the pillars around him.

“What’s wrong?” Lilith asked.

“...This really isn’t the first time I’ve seen this place.”

Lilith’s eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I just feel like I’ve seen this palace before. I remember something like being led by the hand by someone. Maybe when I was very young.”

Who was it who had led him by the hand? He couldn’t remember their face or clothing, but that person had definitely been an adult. He vaguely recalled having to look up at them. There was one other person with them at the time. Someone around the same age as him, a small girl with red hair and horns. Her face overlapped with the girl right in front of his eyes.

What? Does that mean Lilith was here too?

In other words, did that mean Zagan had met Lilith in the past? It was certainly possible, considering who his father was. He had just spoken of the possibility with Nephy while inside that dream.

“The pillars back then weren’t this big,” Zagan said as he raised his eyes.

They had looked enormous to him back then, but they hadn’t been so tall that their ends weren’t in sight. Zagan suddenly started walking.

“H-Hang on, Your Highness. Where are you going?”

“I don’t know if this is the same place I know of, but I feel like there was something over that way.”

He didn’t know whether he had seen something or whether he had walked in that direction and found nothing. Regardless, Zagan simply marched forward.



“Hm? Is this a statue of... Alshiera?”

He found it after proceeding further into the temple. There were statues all over, but only this one was placed in the center of the path. It was a step higher, much like an altar, and the pillar it was a part of was far more elaborately detailed. This was likely the very center of the entire temple.

At the very least, I don’t remember seeing anything like this before.

His sense of deja vu had faded in the middle of walking and he had lost all conviction. Regardless, he found this pillar by relying on his memory to walk in this direction. It was a strange pillar with the statue of a girl at its base.

That statue’s hairstyle was different and its eyes were shut, but Zagan could never forget that impudent face. Having said that, that statue depicted the girl sleeping, so he couldn’t actually sense any of her usual maliciousness. It looked to be made of something which

resembled both stone and metal. It had a color like lead and a luster like a well-polished stone.

Much like a figurehead, the lower body of the statue was buried in the pillar, so the statue only depicted the girl from the waist up. Was her body beneath that fluffy dress truly that dainty? He knew she had modest breasts, but her neck and arms were so slender it felt like they would break at first touch. He could even see her ribs.

Both her arms were held up with chains around her wrists, making her slender, naked body even more prominent. Her long hair covered her nipples and groin, but exposed what she normally had hidden on her head: two broken horns.

Having her miserable scars fully laid bare like that made this look more like a sacrifice than a divine idol. Her silky hair had been scrupulously reproduced down to the last strand, making her almost seem alive.

“Does this mean this is My Lady’s temple?”

“I wonder about that. Is this your first time seeing it?”

“Y-Yeah... The last two times, My Lady stopped me.”

Zagan sank into thought.

“Last *two* times... huh? Was Alshiera the only one with you those times?”

“Huh? Well, yeah...”

“Was it possible there was someone else?”

“Hmmm, judging from her state at the time, I don’t think anyone else would’ve gotten off lightly...”

If this had been exposed to anyone, Alshiera would probably kill them, despite her oath. So, even if there was somebody here back then, Zagan didn’t believe they were still alive. It seemed the

possibility that Zagan had been here at the same time was rather low.

It was possible that because she had been in a dream, Lilith mistook the experience as her own memory. She had, however, connected to someone else's dream by playing another role in that dream on the boat.

"Hey, do you recognize her?" Zagan asked the boy as he thrust him forward in front of the statue.

"No, I don't think so," the boy said as he stiffly shook his head, still gripped by the back of the neck by Zagan. "It's like... I recognize her just a little, maybe. Sorry. I can't tell."

It seemed his actual memory of Alshiera didn't remain. At this rate, it was questionable whether meeting the actual person would make any difference.

"But... I feel kind of sorry for her, since she's broken like that," the boy added.

"Broken?"

"Look, over there."

Zagan hadn't noticed because it was covered by her hair. There was a crack on the statue's abdomen. It was the same place Alshiera was wounded. At the sudden realization, Zagan dropped the boy.

"Hwah!"

The boy shrieked in pain, but Zagan didn't pay him any mind and tried touching the statue's neck.

What's going on here...?

"Is she alive...?"

It was cold and hard. Just by its feel, this was no more than a statue. However, he could feel a pulse against his fingers. She was breathing.

This was a statue of a member of the Night Clan, but for some reason, it had a pulse and breathed like a living human.

“Your Highness? What do you mean? It’s a statue,” Lilith asked in bewilderment.

“...Exactly what I said. It looks like stone, but it has a beating heart and is breathing.”

“Huh...? But... My Lady’s a vampire, right? Vampires don’t breathe, do they?”

A vampire’s body wasn’t actually alive. They didn’t have a pulse and didn’t need to breathe. They were cold to the touch and didn’t have any blood flowing through them. Furthermore, their bodies were something like a heat haze, which was why they could turn into mist or break up into bats. They vanished when their powers were lost, but revived over time as if nothing happened.

Zagan looked up at the statue with pity in his eyes.

“There are several ways for a human to turn into a vampire. The most well-known way is having your blood sucked by a vampire, but that isn’t possible if no vampires exist.”

In other words, some had turned into vampires without requiring another vampire to exist. Those who did were called pure vampires.

“As far as I know, there are three ways of turning into a vampire. The first is to use sorcery to transcend the human body. The second is to drink the blood of a sacred beast and get cursed.”

Zagan stopped there.

“And the third...?” Lilith timidly asked.

“Human sacrifice. To be offered up as a sacrifice, but not die.”

Lilith and the boy gulped.

“So... My Lady was sacrificed here...?”

“...Probably.”

In short, this was Alshiera’s real body.

“Is there any way to save her?” the boy asked sadly.

“Who knows? She’s definitely tied up here, but doing something careless might kill her.”

“What do you mean?”

Zagan almost felt like sighing at the boy’s ignorance. He was supposed to be an Archdemon.

“I don’t know what role she’s serving here. I’m pretty sure she’s the cornerstone of the temple that allows it to function. It’s also possible the temple itself is connected to her life. Even if we bring her out of here safely, there’s a danger her accumulated years will flow in a single instant.”

Alshiera had spent a thousand years as a vampire. If such a long period of time flowed all at once, no human would leave behind so much as ash. It was only barely possible with a paranormal being like a dragon.

The boy drooped his shoulders. “I see... So, we can’t do anything for her...?”

Zagan didn’t know how much of that dream on the boat was faithful to this boy’s past, but Alshiera had been his savior. Even without his memories, some lingering emotion remained within him.

“Hey, give me your hand,” Zagan said with an irritated sigh.

“Huh? Sure.”

Zagan grabbed his hand and pushed it against the wound on the statue.

“W-Wawawawawa!”

“Your Highness?! What are you doing?!”

Lilith and the boy turned bright red. Zagan didn't know what had them in such a fluster. This boy was the one who said he wanted to do something for her.

“Isn't it obvious?” Zagan replied in exasperation. “This guy can't even remember how to use sorcery. So, this is the only way.”

Zagan forcefully drew mana from the boy's Sigil of the Archdemon and poured it into Alshiera's statue.

“Keep your hand there. It'll mess up if you let go,” Zagan told the boy, then focused on repairing the damage.

What's this material?

It was a simple matter to repair a human body, but he couldn't analyze what made up this statue now that it was a human pillar of the temple. Regardless, the crack in the statue sealed itself in about ten seconds or so. By the time the light of mana faded, the statue had been splendidly repaired completely.

“Hmph. That about does it... What's wrong?”

The boy sank to the floor with bright red cheeks.

“Wh-What's wrong...? She's a girl, you know...? T-Touching her like that is a little...”

Her body was made of something which was neither stone nor metal, but the boy knew she was alive now. He was apparently shy about touching her because of that. It truly was a sad state to be in for an Archdemon.

“Like I care. There are only two kinds of women in the world: my bride, and all others.”

Why did he have to care about the naked bodies of all the other rabble? If this was Nephy's naked body, he would be shaken far more than this boy was, but Zagan still looked down on him arrogantly.

"Umm... What about Lady Foll?" Lilith pointed out.

Zagan folded his arms. "...There are three kinds of women in the world."

After he corrected himself, she gave him a tepid look before returning her gaze to Alshiera's statue.

"What did you do?"

"All I did was fill in the gash with mana. Well, it was quite difficult to give mana physical substance, so I used this guy's mana to do it."

He didn't know the true nature of the material, so he had tried to create living matter out of mana and filling the crack with it to make the repairs. The work to do so was rather precise, so it was a bit of a bother to do. Normally, this would require drugs like elixir, other tools, appropriate catalysts, and a facility to match all that. It was beyond Zagan's capabilities on his own, so he had forced the boy to serve as his assistant. That didn't mean Alshiera's wound had actually healed, however.

"Let me just tell you now, all I did was mend the appearance. There's no meaning beyond that."

Azazel's sword has the same kind of power as Heaven's Phosphor.

Alshiera didn't possess a real body in substance, yet had suffered such a severe wound. Zagan knew better than anyone that such a wound couldn't be healed. And yet, the boy smiled.

"Still, thank you. I feel like I've finally been able to pay back some of the debt I owe her. I don't even remember what it was, so it may sound kind of weird coming from me."

How did this guy get so twisted that he became an Archdemon?

It felt like he would've become an Angelic Knight had he lived properly. Zagan then returned his gaze to Alshiera's statue.

Well, I guess she really does look pitiful exposed like this.

It didn't look like it, but this statue was apparently alive. She wasn't aware of her surroundings, so looking at her body like this didn't feel good. Zagan removed his mantle and wrapped it around Alshiera's statue.

"Well, it doesn't quite fit, but it's better than nothing."

And just then, something shattered as the space above them tore open.

◇

"What?!" Zagan exclaimed as he looked up. A massive eye was looking down from the iridescent sky.

"...What a persistent bastard."

It seemed Azazel had noticed them. One beat later, he identified the true nature of the shattering he heard. Several of the pillars closest to the eye had cracks running down them. It was clear that each and every one of them served some important role. If they were destroyed, Azazel was very likely to encroach past the barrier.

Is it because I touched Alshiera? Or maybe...

Zagan's mind focused on the Sigil on his right hand. The Sludge Demon Lord that Bifrons had summoned possessed a fixation on the Sigil of the Archdemon. 'Aristella' also seemed to covet the Sigil. It was still unknown whether a portion of the Demon Lord's body was sealed within it, but there was no mistaking that Azazel wanted it.

This space was within Alshiera's barrier, however. And so, even Azazel couldn't invade through sheer strength. It simply looked down at him, unable to get any closer.

Eventually, something fell from Azazel's eye. It was a black tear. It crashed to the ground and splattered into the surroundings. What followed was a repulsive wind that felt like the very spirits of the dead, which coiled around them. There was a discomfort in the air as if human entrails were churning about.

The boy trembled violently, while Lilith was unable to endure and collapsed to the ground with her hands over her mouth.

They'd been struck by a wave of miasma.

"Wh-What?" the boy muttered in fear.

"...Stand back," Zagan ordered as he held out his hand and stood at the front.

Now that I think about it, Barbatos and Orias managed to summon this.

Zagan recognized the figure that had fallen. It was a creature without form. It was different from any being in existence; a grotesque being whose very power existed outside the laws of the world. This was a demon.

Only a few demons had formed from the droplet. As Zagan was now, he could defeat such numbers, but tears continued to drip from Azazel's eye. Each droplet gave birth to multiple demons, beating down on the ground like rain. At this rate, there would be thousands, if not tens of thousands, of demons.

"They're trying to destroy the place!"

The demons didn't even pay the three of them any mind. Instead, they began attacking the pillars. Some shot pebbles from their bodies, some wrapped themselves around the pillars to try and wrench them apart, and some simply struck them. Dozens of demons all attacked at once. The first pillar broke in no time at all and began crumbling to pieces.

This is useless...

An unmitigated disaster unfolded before his eyes. It was impossible to protect the entire temple, so instead, Zagan groped about for a means to survive.

“Y-Your Highness...”

Zagan came to a sudden realization as he heard that fading voice. He turned around and saw Lilith trembling in terror. The boy she had risked her life to save was standing next to her. And behind them was the statue of that annoying yet pitiful vampire. If he stepped aside, all of them would be lost.

Zagan sucked in a deep breath to calm his nerves, then said, “There’s no need to sound so pathetic. You stand behind your king. Keep it together.”

His obstinacy verged on humor. He had no way to defeat so many demons. Plus, it was entirely within the realm of possibility that Azazel’s true body would eventually descend from that fissure in the sky. All Zagan could do was buy a little time. No matter how much he struggled, the only thing that awaited them was an inescapable death.

Still, a man who can’t show some spirit in front of his subordinates isn’t a king.

That was why he chose to fight. There was a chance he could’ve survived if he escaped on his own, but that wasn’t the kind of king Zagan wished to be. After all, how could he possibly embrace Nephy after doing so?

“I forgot to mention this, Lilith,” Zagan said to encourage himself. “After we get back, I’ll let you pick a reward for that dream you gave us. Spend the time until then thinking of your wish.”

That’s right. I have a mountain of things to do once we get back. Now then... what shall I do about this?

He'd hardened his resolve, so he needed a plan. His foes already counted in the hundreds. And out of his arsenal, Heaven's Phosphor Autumn Lightning was most efficient for handling multiple enemies at once.

No, that won't do. This temple likely serves as Alshiera's life-support.

It was already under attack by the demons. If he unleashed Autumn Lightning, the temple itself was liable to be destroyed. This structure was supposedly a means to seal Azazel in the sky. As such, he had to avoid using any sorcery that would damage it.

Then how about Heaven's Scale Dragon Form? No... that won't do, either. It's good for long battles, but it's only one dragon. He had no objections to its ability to fight forever, but it was far too small-scale to exterminate this many demons while protecting Lilith, the boy, and the temple.

Fivefold Grand Flower could only be fired once before dissipating, while Will-o-the-Wisp didn't pack enough of a punch. As such, he wanted to use Eastern and Western Sky, but doing so would consume two of his resources at once. It wasn't bad for defending, but it wasn't suitable for defeating opponents. The situation would just get worse and worse until he lost.

Meaning I only have one choice left... Even if there were multiple better options, nothing would be resolved so long as the eye remained above them. In his current form, Zagan couldn't do anything about it. But even so, he took a step forward.

"Can you... really defeat that thing?" Lilith asked in disbelief.

"I *have* to win and return to Nephy's side... Oh, right. This is a battle I can't forfeit, for Nephy's happiness... and mine."

He had just failed to invite her on a date, so he had to get back right away and do it properly. Zagan was suddenly filled with motivation.

He had faltered for a moment, but after thinking about it properly, he realized there was no reason for him to waver before some lowly demons.

Scattering every single one of them and returning like nothing had happened... That was the kind of scene he wanted to show Nephy. There was no way he was letting their relationship end after clinging to her in a dream.

Zagan snapped his fingers. Countless firefly-like lights floated up around the boy and Lilith.

“Heaven’s Scale Snowfield. You two, don’t move from there. If you spread out, I won’t be able to protect you.”

“Y-Yes!” Lilith replied positively, returned a firm nod, and grabbed the boy’s hand, backing up next to Alshiera’s statue. She fully understood the appropriate action to take in that situation. Now that everything he had to protect was clustered together, Zagan could strengthen his defense to obstruct several demons swarming at them at once. That was his first priority. Next, Zagan weaved sorcery into his own feet.

“Heaven’s Wheel Shadow Sever.”

He was far outnumbered. And so, he had to overcome that by acting more quickly. In other words, speed was paramount. That was his second priority. And finally, Zagan thrust out his fist to start the third.

“Heaven’s Phosphor Purple Lightning.”

A mass coated his hand. It wasn’t as large as the Eastern and Western Sky, since it only covered his arm from the elbow down. However, unlike his invincible shield, this was made of Heaven’s Phosphor, which burned everything it touched to ash. In that nonsensical fist form, it could only be used for attacking, so it would’ve been far more efficient to shape it into a blade or simple flames, but Zagan didn’t care.

This shape is necessary. It helps enable my arts.

It was a form of Heaven's Phosphor that Zagan had developed to use in conjunction with the martial arts he always avoided using. But then, why was it called Purple Lightning?

Zagan took a step forward using Shadow Sever. That one step accelerated his body to the extremes and covered ten strides in an instant. Heaven's Phosphor left a pale trail behind in a vivid, purple streak. Shortly after, he took a second, then a third step, finally closing in on the closest demon. It had a repulsive appearance akin to a tar-like substance that imitated the shape of a human. There were several eyeballs spread out irregularly across its head, all of which turned in Zagan's direction, but they didn't actually catch sight of him.

Zagan twisted his shoulder and thrust out his fist. This punch worked in conjunction with the extreme speed of Shadow Sever. It wasn't quite on the level of Andrealphus' Void, but it still came close to it in terms of pure speed.

The tar-like demon didn't even react. Zagan's fist touched what looked like its abdomen. A light pop resounded in the air as its body burst like a balloon. The scattered remains of the demon turned to ash in an instant. And best of all, Heaven's Phosphor remained wrapped around his fist.

I can break through!

Zagan took his next step. The demons were now advancing like a swarm, but he was already right in front of his next enemy. This time he drove in an uppercut, making the demon vanish from the chest up before it even realized what had happened.

He hit the next one... and then the next one. Every time Zagan took a step with Shadow Sever, he left a purple trail behind him that drew

acute angles like lightning through the sky. Zagan himself was like a bolt of lightning trampling through the demons.

That was the origin of this new form of Heaven's Phosphor. It was sorcery Zagan had developed to use in conjunction with Shadow Sever. Only when the two were combined did it become Purple Lightning. However, to move at a speed beyond a demon's reaction time, he needed tremendous speed and accurate perception to properly control himself. The continuous training over the last month that he'd dragged Kimaris into had been for this purpose.

By the time he defeated his tenth demon, a dull pain ran through his fist. He was unleashing punches beyond the speed of sound. Any normal person would've lost their arm from the first blow, so even an Archdemon couldn't remain unscathed.

Luckily, Zagan specialized in reinforcing his body. And that particular skill of his had helped him become one of the few Archdemons in the world. His shattered fist regenerated in an instant and smashed through his next enemy. What's more, he used his arts to manipulate his body to its utmost capabilities. His godly strikes were unleashed in the most efficient manner possible in order to keep the burden on his body to a minimum.

In short, Purple Lightning was sorcery that helped Zagan unleash a fist of Heaven's Phosphor so long as he had mana. Still, that wasn't enough. The demons obviously weren't going to let him punch them all without putting up any resistance.

The first ten demons had tried to strike back, but they had all missed. However, with ten of their brethren slain, the demons now knew they couldn't keep up with Shadow Sever. A flimsy demon with a paper-like body—the same type as the one Orias had once summoned—fired a hail of pebbles without any preparatory movements.

“Tch...”

Zagan escaped the range of the projectiles. He could block them with ease using Heaven’s Scale, but he had already deployed it to protect Lilith and the boy. The only means he had of protecting himself were Shadow Sever’s speed and the defensive movements of his martial arts.

Seeing Zagan take evasive action, the demons realized this was a valid means of attack. Following up on the paper-like demon’s barrage, the others also unleashed countless projectiles in the shape of pebbles.

These things can even fight in unison?!

They fired blindly. Only a few attacks actually almost hit Zagan, but any single one had enough power to easily blow away one or two limbs. He struck down anything he couldn’t dodge with his fist. Then, he slipped through the gaps in the rain of projectiles and smashed down one demon after another.

He couldn’t relax his focus for a single instant. He couldn’t even blink. A single mistake would cost him his life. It was like doing acrobatics over a pit of spears.

There was an even bigger problem at hand, however.

The demons are multiplying a little faster than they’re dying.

In the time that it took Zagan to obliterate ten demons, ten more demons formed. It looked like he was putting up a fight, but at this rate, he would be overwhelmed. What’s more, around ten pillars had collapsed since Zagan had started his offensive... and he didn’t know how this affected Alshiera in reality. Nevertheless, Zagan didn’t give in to despair.

There’s still hope.

There was one other person who could enter to help them. Also, if Kuroka was praying for their good fortune, something unexpected could happen. That was why all Zagan could do was protect everyone until that moment arrived.



“Lady Alshiera!”

A short moment after Zagan vanished into the Mirror of the Afterlife, Nephy and Foll came into Lilith and Selphy’s room.

Nephy had been told to rest for the day, but it was difficult to get rid of ingrained habits. Besides, after being so bold within her dream, she couldn’t possibly sit still. That was why she’d woken up like normal that morning and attempted to simply offer some help with her usual work. But even when preparations for breakfast began, Lilith and Selphy didn’t show up. So, she went with Foll to check in on them, where they found Alshiera and the others brooding over something.

Currently, there were five people in the room: Foll, Nephy, Selphy, Alshiera, and some unfamiliar sorcerer. It was rather cramped.

According to Alshiera, Zagan and Lilith were at the edge of the world... at the boundary between the inside and outside. And that boundary was within a dream. Thanks to Zagan, they had somehow managed to come back to a point of potential return, but Alshiera had suddenly collapsed.

Her already white skin turned completely pale and she trembled violently. The first to step forth and hold her in her arms was Foll.

“Alshiera. Don’t push yourself.”

“I’m... fine...”

“What happened?” Foll asked meekly.

“My body... has been found... by Azazel.”

“Wait, hang on, isn’t that really bad?” the masked sorcerer asked in shock.

“...Well, it’s certainly... not good.”

Alshiera held up her hand, which had become transparent starting from her fingertips. She also happened to be the only one capable of bringing Zagan and Lilith back.

Nephy turned pale as she took in the sight and Alshiera flashed her a smile.

“There is no need for you to worry. I’ll show you that I can at least bring the Silver-Eyed King and Lilith back here.”

“That won’t do,” Nephy said without hesitation.

“Huh...?” Alshiera muttered, staring back at her blankly.

“Master Zagan and Lilith are within a dream, right? And your body is over there and exposed to danger, under attack by some unknown enemy.”

Alshiera nodded.

“Then, it would be a problem if you did something as unnecessary as extracting them.”

“I thought you loved the Silver-Eyed King...?”

“I do love him. And I know *because* I love him. Master Zagan considers it a disgrace to abandon someone just so he can survive.”

He was fine with killing someone to accomplish his goals... and he also didn’t care if someone he didn’t know died somewhere out of sight. However, he would never allow someone he was trying to protect to die. Zagan would never admit it himself, but that was the kind of man he was.

In truth, I’d prefer it if he considered himself the highest priority and rushed back to me.

However, that awkward and obstinate man was sure to lend a helping hand when he saw someone in need. After all, the girl he went to save wasn't a contemptible weakling who wailed for help. Lilith was a strong girl who did everything she could on her own despite her weakness.

Zagan was a king who extended his hand to those who refused to give up and continued struggling. If he knew Alshiera's life was in danger, he would definitely protect her. On the surface, he showed disdain for her, but when he had first found Alshiera on the verge of disappearing, he'd given her his own blood to extend her life.

In that case, Nephy's only option was to accept that part of him and support him. She bit down hard on her lips, suppressing all selfish urges

"Master Zagan doesn't wish for you to retrieve him. Instead, he wants assistance," Nephy said, then paused and took a deep breath. "That's why it would be a problem if you went to bring him back and got in his way."

"That's true. Zagan would definitely feel that way," Foll said with a hearty nod. "I mean, Lilith and Alshiera are both family."

Foll then hugged Alshiera tightly and whispered in her ear, "Alshiera, you can't die until Zagan knows the truth."

Her voice was so quiet that only her lips moved. Nobody should've been able to hear her without sorcery, but Nephy definitely did.

The truth...?

What did that mean? What was Foll hiding, exactly?

"Also, you promised," Foll continued, as if to gloss over her whispering. "You're coming to explore Archdemon Palace with me. You're not allowed to back out now."

"...How harsh."

Nephy still had a mountain of questions, but that wasn't her main priority.

"Lady Alshiera, is it possible for us to go help Master Zagan?" she asked.

"No. The Mirror of the Afterlife has vanished, and only a succubus can enter another's dream. Even if you enter the dream with only your consciousness, you won't be able to do anything."

Was the reason she could use mysticism within the dream on the boat because it had been connected to Nephy's own dream? Whatever the case, it seemed Zagan and Lilith found themselves in different circumstances.

"I'm the only one who can go," Alshiera said as she clasped her chest.

However, it was precisely because Alshiera's 'body' was in danger that it was difficult for Zagan to take action. It didn't seem like she could fight in that condition.

Unexpectedly, it was Selphy who raised her voice at that point to say, "Um, I, like, don't know nothing about sorcery, but can I say something?"

"What?" Foll asked curiously.

"If they're inside a dream, isn't it fine to just, like, call Lilith?"

Foll let out a disappointed sigh and replied, "And how do we do that when Zagan went in to save her?"

According to Alshiera, it was difficult for Lilith to return using her own strength. And yet, Selphy stood there with a puzzled look and cocked her head, acting like it was the simplest thing in the world.

"Huh? You can't? I don't think it's all that hard..."

Everyone doubted their ears.

“...Can you do it?” Alshiera asked timidly.

“Totally? I mean, Lilith’s, like, a total sleepyhead, so I have to wake her up in her dream all the time.”

“Inside a succubus’ dream? How?”

“By, like, calling her really, *really* loudly?”

It was a mistake to expect an intellectual explanation from this girl. Nephy didn’t understand what she was saying at all, but it was apparently perfectly natural to her. This made her recall a phrase Zagan had once used.

“There’s a paper-thin difference between idiots and geniuses.”

Selphy surely resided within that minuscule gap. That was why nobody could understand her usually and why she looked so thoughtless all the time. This also rendered her statement rather convincing.

Selphy is the one who taught me how to sing.

“...This is the first time I’ve found you frightening,” Alshiera said in amazement.

“That so? Hehehehe, that’s totally embarrassing.”

Alshiera got back to her feet with Foll’s help.

“Then our course of action is set. You’re also going to help, Naberius. You brought it, right?”

The masked sorcerer shrugged and replied, “Well, since I’m the one who got him involved in all this, I’ll just treat it as a necessary expense.”

With that, Naberius pulled what looked like a long cylinder from his robes.

“That’s...!”

This was the first time Nephy had ever seen it, but she gasped when she realized what it was.



“Ah! They’re over here, too!” the boy screamed.

Zagan was mowing down the swarm of demons like a bolt of lightning, but he was still just one person. He was, in fact, holding back their advance, but a few of them managed to encroach upon Lilith’s position.

“Don’t move,” Lilith said, hugging the boy closer to her. “This is the only safe spot.”

Her king had said he would protect them. And in her mind, so long as they didn’t do anything unnecessary, he would definitely keep his word.

Needle-like tentacles and pellets flew from the demons’ bodies, but the Snowfield placed around Lilith obstructed all projectiles.

Is there anything I can do to help him?

Zagan was putting up a brave fight, but there was no way he could protect the entire temple. Dozens of pillars had already been destroyed. In fact, every single one might have been damaged in some way.

Still, it was terrifying that he was even capable of protecting Lilith, the boy, and Alshiera’s statue all at the same time. Though, she felt like she shouldn’t have needed protection. It was far too late now, but Lilith regretted not learning sorcery like Nephy.

The fact that she was completely powerless within a dream, within her own domain, was pathetic. Lilith clenched her teeth in frustration.

“—”

A voice resounded out of nowhere. It was a song. There were no words to it, but the melody carried through.

“Selphy’s singing?”

She could never mistake it for anything else. This was the song of her thoughtless and kind childhood friend. Simply listening to it seemed to heal her frozen body. And that was also when she first realized that she was so wounded that her body had frozen up. The song soaked into her very heart, rekindling her spirit.

For whatever reason, Selphy’s voice could always reach Lilith inside her dreams. When she put her mind to it, she was even capable of surmounting Alshiera’s barrier.

“Selphy!” Lilith called out to her childhood friend when a new melody joined the song.

“[He who blows over death. He who blows over the reeds, and passes wisdom to man.]”

“Nephy?” Zagan muttered while still smashing the demons apart.

The demons who were swarming around Alshiera’s pillar were blown away as if repelled by the song.

Amazing...

Nephy had cast celestial mysticism by using Selphy’s song as a medium. And she wasn’t the only one making use of it, either. Her celestial mysticism had cleared the area around the pillar, giving birth to a temporary safety zone. The Snowfield began moving as if it was waiting for that exact moment. The lights moved away from the pillar and deployed around all the demons Zagan was fighting.

“What...? Foll?”

That wasn’t by Zagan’s will, since Lilith could hear bewilderment in his voice.

“Divine Echo.”

The space around them shook. Moments later, the amorphous demons stopped moving completely and crumbled away like sand.

Zagan had nearly hit his limit. His Purple Lightning vanished and Lilith could finally see him properly. It looked like he had dodged everything, but his body was covered in wounds and his breathing was ragged. And as she took in the sight, a light tap resounded behind her.

“My Lady?”

“What a troublesome fawn. How many times have I told you not to come here?”

She was pale, and the usual teasing tone of her voice was nowhere to be found, but this was definitely the same Alshiera that Lilith knew.

The vampire turned a sudden look over to the boy next to her and asked, “...A-And you are?”

She looked at him in shock as he returned a blank stare.

“Huh? Oh, I don’t know myself. These people saved me...”

Alshiera had surely met him before.

What do I do? He doesn’t even remember anything about her...

Alshiera looked surprised, but she eventually gave him an understanding smile.

“I see. You have terrific luck. You should give them your thanks.”

The boy returned a bewildered nod while shifting his gaze between Alshiera and the statue behind her.

After a second, Alshiera shifted her focus to Zagan, who noticed her arrival and turned her way.

“You’re here, Alshiera.”

“It is wonderful to see you well, my Silver-Eyed King.”

“Cut the useless flattery. You have a plan, don’t you?”

Alshiera gave him a troubled smile and replied, “I can bring you two... and one other back right away, but I was scolded and told not to do anything unnecessary.”

“Obviously. We haven’t finished taking care of that thing above us yet. Like hell I’ll let you drag me out this early.”

They’d eradicated the demons, but the eye in the sky was still completely unharmed and leaking out tears.

“Oh my,” Alshiera said with a giggle. “You two really do understand each other perfectly. How enviable... If we can shut the seal, then we can still make it in time. Lilith and I will stop *that*.”

“...Huh?” Lilith mumbled. It felt like she just heard something completely outrageous. “U-Uhhh, me? What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. Aren’t you the world’s most powerful succubus?”

“Wh-What about you, My Lady?”

Lilith knew that this vampire used to be a succubus. And yet, Alshiera shook her head to reject that idea and gripped Lilith’s hand.

“I don’t come from a prestigious line of succubi or anything. You’ve already grown far stronger than I ever was.”

“B-But...”

She didn’t know what to do when faced with such uplifting words. Right now, she wasn’t capable of anything more than trembling in fear.

“Take heart. There is nothing you cannot do within a dream.”

Lilith looked down at the hand which was squeezing hers tightly... and took in a shocking sight.

“My Lady, your hand...” she said with a gasp.

Half of it was already transparent. Just touching it left a vague sensation on her skin.

“All those bullets I made for the Seraph Hunters are for nothing now, huh?” Alshiera said with a faint smile. “I didn’t anticipate vanishing like this.”

Lilith understood what was happening.

She’s going to disappear...

This temple truly couldn’t afford to take any damage. Each blow shaved away at Alshiera’s very existence.

Lilith had been manipulated by this girl and asked to fulfill unreasonable demands all her life. But when Selphy ran away from home and Kuroka was presumed dead, she’d stayed by her side. Before she knew it, she had grown taller than the vampire, but Alshiera was her older sister, her mother, and her friend.

Alshiera gave Lilith’s forehead a little smack and said, “Don’t make that face. My long dream is simply coming to an end. After sleeping a little, the Night Clan always comes back.”

That’s a lie...

Lilith had learned that Alshiera’s real body was right there. The collapse of this temple meant Alshiera would face ‘death.’ Once she vanished, it would truly be over. Still, what kind of princess would she be if she couldn’t grant her last wish? Lilith felt tears threaten to overflow from her eyes, but she fought them back to provide a proper answer.

“Okay...”

“Thank you, my cute little fawn.”

It felt like that was the very first time Alshiera had ever thanked her. And upon hearing that, Lilith ruminated over what she'd said.

“Take heart. There is nothing you cannot do within a dream.”

“My long dream is simply coming to an end.”

Lilith formed a baseless theory around those words, but she at least found solace in it...

If what she says is true... I should be able to do it.

Thus, Lilith nodded.

“I'll try. This time, I'll be the one saving you, My Lady. I'll definitely succeed.”

It wasn't clear how much of that got through to Alshiera, but she still nodded and cast a glance over to Zagan.

“That's how it is, my Silver-Eyed King. Please protect this area until we seal that eye in the sky.”

“That's fine and all, but is it really going to just sit there and let you seal it? Demons are still dribbling down as we speak.”

Nephy and Foll's attacks had obliterated the vast majority of them, but the demons still multiplied rapidly. Alshiera nodded, knowing this full well.

“I've played my hand. Do it, Naberius.”

“Yeah, yeah...”

The Archdemon fired at the eye. Immediately following that, a sphere that was as black as that nightmare burst above their heads.

“Huh? Is that a Seraph Hunter?”

“It’s the large-caliber sniper-type Seraph Hunter: Marduk II. It is the only Seraph Hunter here in this world aside from my Stern and Mond.”

“...I see. That was the fee you paid Naberius to repair your Seraph Hunters, huh?”

Lilith couldn’t follow the conversation at all, but she noticed that Alshiera shrugged and silently affirmed Zagan’s suspicions.

A second later, Nephy’s song resounded in the air once more.

“[The golden bridge runs a thousand miles for but this instant, and the serpent’s staff shall bring forth news of prosperity and ruin.]

[The reeds are tempted to an eternal slumber. Such is the divine scythe whose might can even reap the progenitor.]”

The moment Lilith saw the air tremble like rippling water, the demons’ bodies were smashed to bits. Since they were using Selphy’s song as a medium, their attacks were all sound based. Assaulted by the sudden and invisible onslaught, even demons had no means of evading. Zagan gave the sight a sidelong glance and broke into a run.

“Heaven’s Phosphor Purple Lightning!” he roared, once more activating the sorcery he had used to single-handedly hold back hundreds of demons.

“Now then, let us begin,” Alshiera said.

“...Right!”

The vampire gave Lilith’s forehead a light smack at that point.

“Your job is quite simple. You just need to make that thing sleep. You need to make it understand that this is just a dream.”

For a succubus, getting someone to sleep within a dream was child’s play.

But... sleep? That thing?

The eye resided amidst a vortex of hatred and despair that could render one insane through touch alone. The boy who had gotten stuck in there completely lost his mind to the point where he didn't even remember who he was. It was a nightmare even for an Archdemon. How was she supposed to get it to sleep?

"You'll do fine. All it's doing is grieving. So, all you have to do is hush it back to sleep gently."

Lilith understood now. To get rid of a nightmare, all she had to do was give the dreamer kind and gentle thoughts. It wasn't simple to hush such despair, but it was possible if Alshiera was by her side.

"Ugh..." Alshiera let out a small groan. The eye in the sky was pouring down its nightmare in opposition. Thus, Lilith called out to it.

I don't know what kind of monster you are, but so long as it's dreaming, I can even get a god to sleep!

The eye began shutting as if dozing off, but at the last moment, it shot wide open in a final display of resistance. Black tears poured down from above, escaping its edges.

"This is bad. Naberius!"

"Don't be unreasonable!"

Several of the tears burst in his firing line, but he didn't possess the power to burn all of them. Alshiera moved to pull her iron weapons from beneath her skirt, but—

"Oh..."

Her transparent hands failed to grip them. The lump of iron fell to the ground with a thud. There was a clear sense of panic on Alshiera's face. One of the tears was falling directly toward them, putting Lilith in danger.

Zagan was retracing his steps backward, but even with the speed of Purple Lightning, he wouldn't make it in time. Nephy and Foll were still giving continuous support, but they didn't have a precise grasp of the situation. Nobody could come to save them, meaning Alshiera's next course of action was clear.

"Get aw—! Huh?!"

Alshiera tried to push Lilith away, but Lilith pulled her into a hug.

"No way! *This time, I'm saving you!*"

That was the first time Lilith had ever spoken to Alshiera in that manner. She wasn't going to let her simply vanish on her watch. The two of them tumbled to the ground together. It didn't look like they would be able to escape the falling teardrop.

Lilith hugged Alshiera tightly and shut her eyes. However, the pain she feared never came. Instead, she heard a certain voice.

"I'm always the one being protected! I hated not being able to stand tall during times like this! That's why I wanted power!"

The boy stood over Lilith and Alshiera to cover them. He had the fallen Seraph Hunter gripped in his hand and thrust it out toward the teardrop. It was a mystery whether a demon actually had the same mass as its size suggested, but the teardrop came to a complete stop upon coming into contact with the Seraph Hunter.



This boy really is an Archdemon...

“Pull the trigger!” Alshiera screamed.

The boy did as he was told. A dull bang accompanied the black sphere that appeared. The demon’s massive body was engulfed by it before it even got the chance to scream.

The boy limply sank to the floor after that happened.

“Hah... Haha... That’s amazing.”

And with that, the eye in the sky slowly shut and vanished.



“My goodness. I’d rather you not act so recklessly.”

It didn’t even take Zagan thirty seconds to annihilate the remaining demons. After confirming that none remained, Alshiera finally began grumbling. Her reproachful voice made Lilith avert her gaze with a headache.

“You’re the one who acted reckless. You shouldn’t have tried to protect me with your body like that.”

“...Well, I’ll at least thank you for giving me the time to say my farewells.”

Both of Alshiera’s arms and legs had vanished. She was no longer even capable of standing up. Lilith was hugging her from behind with Alshiera on her lap.

“U-Um, can you save her?” the boy asked Zagan.

“...Sorry, that’s impossible. Giving you blood won’t do anything at this point, right?”

The demons had trashed a fair bit of the temple. Thus, Alshiera could no longer maintain her body.

She simply gave Zagan a listless smile as a response.

“Do you have anything you wish to say?” he asked her.

“...Alas, what to do? How troubling. When you put it like that, I actually can’t think of anything.”

That was a lie, surely. She definitely had things she wanted to say, things she wished for. And yet, she couldn’t speak of them even in her final moments. All she could do was give Zagan a troubled smile.

“Oh, right. Tell Foll I’m sorry for breaking my promise...”

“...Fine. I’ll do that. Anything else?”

“Hmm... Nothing comes to mind.”

“...Liar,” Lilith cut in.

Zagan never knew what ran through this vampire’s head, but Lilith had been with Alshiera her whole life. The princess could at least tell when she was lying.

“Teehee, I’ve always been a liar.”

“My Lady... Don’t you feel anything about pushing me around all the time?”

“Well, of course I do...”

Lilith let out a sigh and replied, “You really don’t get it, do you?”

She then hugged the vampire tightly, passionately, and said, “I don’t have the slightest intention of letting you die, Alshiera!”

They were inside a dream. And as Alshiera had said, Lilith could do anything in there.

She’s vanishing because this place is broken. In that case, I just have to fix it, right?



This was now the third time Lilith had seen this place. It was a frightening dream. It was a dream she could never forget. And so, it was far easier to return it to its former state than showing someone a nightmare.

The crumbled pillars stretched back out toward the sky and the cracked earth filled itself in. In just a few moments, the temple returned to its original state. At the same time, color came back to Alshiera's body. The limbs she had lost regrew, and Lilith could feel her weight in her lap. Alshiera froze up in shock. She always looked down on others from above, so it was honestly exciting to see her in such a state.

"I-Is this truly possible...?"

"It is. Didn't you tell me yourself? There's nothing I can't do here."

Alshiera looked up at Lilith in resignation and stated, "...You really got me there."

"Ehem," Lilith touted triumphantly.

"Tell me, when exactly did you become important enough to address me by name?" Alshiera asked with a dubious gaze.

"Eeek?! U-U-U-U-Um, My Lady! It was just... a slip of the tongue..."

Lilith murmured and began trembling violently as Alshiera touched her arm and laughed.

"How long do you plan on continuing with these formalities? There's no need to force yourself to do so anymore."

"My La... Alshiera."

After she finally said her name, the scenery of the temple began swaying.

"Huh? Wh-What is it now?" the boy asked in a panic.

“It’s time to wake up from this dream,” Zagan answered.

Alshiera had apparently shut them out of the place. And as the scenery gradually vanished, Lilith took one last look around.

“Huh...?”

Next to Alshiera, who was hugging the same creepy stuffed doll as always with teary eyes, was a boy with round glasses. And with those two to his back, a young man with silver eyes stretched his hand.

Who...?

With nobody to answer that question, the dream world vanished into nothingness.

Epilogue

“Welcome home, Master Zagan.”

Before he knew it, Zagan saw his beloved bride before him once more. Nephy greeted him with her usual smile, but the area around her eyes had clearly reddened. The apron she was gripping tightly was wrinkled. He could tell she’d forced herself to greet him as she always did despite knowing of everything that had befallen his body.

“I’m home.”

“Hyah!”

Zagan felt his heart constrict on itself as he spontaneously hugged Nephy.

“...Sorry for worrying you.”

“It’s okay, I understand.”

She rubbed her forehead against his chest as if to tell him not to worry her all the time. And upon feeling that, he truly felt sorry for doing so.

“Umm, I don’t really mean this as an apology...”

“Yes?”

“Want to go on a date now?”

Nephy’s face shot up in excitement. She had been told to rest, so she had no plans at all. In that case, it wasn’t a problem for her to go on a date right away.

“...With pleasure.”

Her ears turned bright red right to their tips and she poked Zagan in the chest.

“But, um...”

“What is it?”

“...If possible, I’d rather you do such things when we’re all alone.”

Zagan cocked his head and took a look around. They were currently within Lilith and Selphy’s room. Nephy, Selphy, Foll, and Naberius were all present. Furthermore, Lilith, Alshiera, and even the boy had popped out of the dream in the same place, so it was crowded enough that it wasn’t possible to move around. After confirming all that, Zagan turned back to Nephy.

“Is this a problem for you?”

“It’s embarrassing, Master Zagan.”

Honestly, it felt like he had only said such a thing because he wanted to see her embarrassed expression.

Just then, Foll tugged on his sleeve and said, “You should have breakfast first.”

“Oh, you make a good point.”

“I’m, like, totally stuffed, though.”

“Huh?”

Both Zagan and Nephy were the only ones confused by this.

Selphy then called out to Alshiera as she slowly sat up in bed and said, “Good work in there, Miss Alshiera. Was I, like, any use?”

“Yes. If not for you, I wouldn’t have managed to reach them.”

“Heheheh, that’s good. What’cha want for breakfast?”

“I’d like some wine.”

“Sir Raphael will get angry at you, so that’s a no.”

Selphy surely knew that Alshiera had almost vanished, but she acted no differently. Being treated the same as always by the siren was

salvation in a sense to the vampire, and it showed on her face. Giving them a sidelong glance, Zagan sank into thought.

What did I see at the very end?

Zagan thought he spotted an Alshiera who appeared quite different, a boy who closely resembled Marc, and a young man with silver eyes. He had seen the scene as if watching it through somebody else's eyes as the silver-eyed man stretched out his hand toward him. If that was truly a memory of the past, whose memory was it?

"Allow me to give you my thanks as well," Naberius said. "It looks like you brought Furcas back in one piece."

"...I'm not sure you should be thanking us."

"Whatever do you mean?"

The boy did have the Sigil of the Archdemon on the back of his hand, but he no longer had any memories. And it didn't seem like he remembered anything upon seeing Alshiera, either. He was beyond recovery as a sorcerer. As for the boy himself, his face was bright red and his jaw was wide open.

"Are you okay?" Lilith asked him. "Well, I'm sure you're confused, seeing it for the first time, but those two are always like that, so get used to it, okay?"

"B-But, I mean, are you... okay with that? Don't you...?"

The boy clearly misunderstood something as he shot looks at both Lilith and Zagan. Seeing this, Lilith burst into laughter.

"No way, not at all. Don't make things weird. I do respect His Highness, but do you really think that can develop into love after seeing that every day?"

Zagan felt her words stab at him, but he decided to let it go considering her efforts earlier.

“Ummm, do you really... not love him?” the boy asked her timidly.

“Not at all. It’s better to watch someone like His Highness from a slight distance.”

“So... is there anyone else you love?”

Zagan cocked his head, wondering why the boy was asking her such questions.

“Nope. Everyone here’s a sorcerer and all.”

Nothing good could come out of falling in love with a sorcerer, so Zagan couldn’t admonish her statement.

The boy then gathered his resolve and asked, “So... want to go out with me? I’m in love with you.”

“...Huh?”

Everyone in the room let out a stupefied sound in unison.

Oh... Now that I think of it, she did say that succubi naturally attract others in dreams.

Setting aside the nightmare on the boat, she had been with him the entire time. Compounded with the fact that she had been protecting him and his lost memory, this was somewhat inevitable, even if Lilith weren’t a succubus.

Realizing that nothing could be done about such a conclusion, Zagan looked up at the ceiling, losing himself in thought.

◇

“Hak! Gah... Urgh...” Dexia fell to the cold floor with a splash, coughing violently.

Where... am I? What happened to me...?

Her consciousness was a haze. She couldn’t think properly. Normally, nobody could escape death with liquid in their lungs. Not even a

sorcerer could perform such a feat. Nevertheless, she could breathe. She could remember. This was the medicinal liquid used when her or Aristella received adjustments.

“Oh yeah... Aristella...”

Her precious sister. Her other half. Aristella’s body had been stolen by a monster, so Dexia desperately brought her back to their master. And then... What had happened after that? Dexia writhed on the ground with her limp limbs and somehow managed to raise her head... when she spotted a familiar face.

“Hey there. How does it feel to be awake? Hahahaha!”

She felt all the blood leave her face. The one before her was neither her sister nor her master, but that repulsive Archdemon, Bifrons. The Archdemon had an enormous smile on that androgynous face. And with despair thrust before her the moment she woke up, Dexia’s mind fell into utter chaos.

Why am I...? Where’s Aristella? Where’s Master Shere Khan?

The last thing she remembered seeing was a terrifying sorcerer wearing the armor of an Angelic Knight standing over Shere Khan after cutting him down. Her mind began to imagine the terrifying thought that perhaps she was the only one still alive.

She shuddered as Bifrons clapped their hands in understanding and said, “Ooh! Sorry, I didn’t realize. I’m sure you’re cold, drenched like that at this time of year and all! Well, let me lend you my robe.”

With that, Bifrons placed their robe on her shoulders as if having nothing but good intentions. That was when Dexia realized she wasn’t wearing anything. Her hair was undone and clinging to her soaking wet body.

“Um, what happened to me after that...?” she asked timidly.

“Oh dear, isn’t there something you should say before that? I’ve been saving people quite a lot lately, but nobody’s been thanking me. Isn’t that sad?”

“Th-Thank... you... for this... and Aristella.”

At the very least, she remembered Bifrons trying to save Aristella. And she was, in fact, grateful for that. Bifrons returned a broad smile with a blush, satisfied with her response. Even Dexia could tell this Archdemon was in a strangely good mood. The childish sorcerer stood up and spun on the spot as if dancing.

“See! That’s it! It feels great to be thanked by others. I’m starting to understand why Zagan has so many servants waiting on him. But what’s this? How weird. I feel like my little doll never thanked me properly. What’s up with that?”

It felt like Bifrons wasn’t even looking at Dexia. The Archdemon was terribly creepy. She took a look around her in a fluster in an attempt to avoid their gaze.

Where am I?

The room around her looked rather dreary. She couldn’t even tell whether it was cramped or wide. She had no equipment on hand and couldn’t freely enhance her own vision. Regardless, her eyes slowly got accustomed to the dark, so she knew it was some sort of research facility.

She didn’t recognize it. There was a bed used for experiments and lines of maces and saws used for torture. Broken flasks and drugs were sprawled across the floor. She couldn’t spot anything used for treating wounds. After confirming all this, Dexia let out a quiet scream.

“Eek...”

Behind her, she saw a ghastly lump of meat wriggling around. It had no skin, and thick veins pulsed on its surface. There were several tubes connected to it. She could tell it was some sort of device to keep this lump of meat alive. Dexia had been thrown into this room together with that thing.

What was done to her here, she wondered. She wanted to see Aristella and Shere Khan quickly to calm her nerves. She trembled as Bifrons peered in at her face as if to thrust the fact that her wish would never come true before her.

“Oops, that won’t do. Now that I think of it, you’ve been sleeping all this time and don’t know the situation, huh?”

“What? Sleeping? All this time...?”

She doubted her ears. In response, Bifrons simply nodded with a kind smile.

“That’s right. It’s been about a month, I think?”

“A month?!” Dexia exclaimed, her eyes widening in shock. Bifrons took her hand as if inviting her to dance and stood her up gently.

“Yeah! A month! A whole lot has happened. Shere Khan made tons of splendid soldiers, then finally fulfilled his promise with me.”

“P-Promise? What...? No, wait, Master Shere Khan made soldiers? What do you mean?”

Shocking words came from Bifrons’ mouth one after the other, and Bifrons let go of Dexia’s hand, unbuttoned their shirt, and showed her their chest.

“Look! Isn’t it amazing? I fiiiiinally got rid of Zagan’s annoying contract. Even I’d die if Heaven’s Phosphor hit my heart directly! Hahahahaha!”

That was apparently the reason for Bifrons' cheerful mood. The childish Archdemon span on the spot once more, turning their back to Dexia and looking over their shoulder.

"Well, that's how it is. It's about time for me to head home. Oh, I guess this is technically my house as well..."

"Hey, wait a minute. Didn't you form an alliance with Master Shere Khan?"

"I sure did! And we cooperated a whole bunch. But now that my business is done, it's time to break it. Isn't that obvious for a sorcerer?"

What was obvious about that? Dexia couldn't understand.

"Still, I guess I racked up a bunch of expenses. Well, either way, your other half entertained me a whole lot, so I figured I'd lend you a helping hand."

"My other half? What happened to Aristella?!"

The Archdemon hadn't been answering any of Dexia's questions this entire time. Nevertheless, she felt compelled to ask. Bifrons grinned then pointed behind Dexia... toward the wriggling lump of meat.

"Heeheehee, what are you saying? Hasn't she been right there all this time?"

Dexia failed to comprehend Bifrons' words. She didn't want to understand.

A cold droplet ran down her cheek. Shamefully, she couldn't stop her tears from pouring out. She couldn't even turn around.

"Haha, Shere Khan looked so happy when he saw this. It was an amazing sight. He was like a child in high spirits over his centuries-long wish being fulfilled. A sorcerer's initial goal truly is the most important thing to them."

Dexia remained in a stupor... when suddenly, the smile vanished from Bifrons' face.

"Your sister is quite amazing. I thought of erasing both of you, but she managed to keep you safe. She should never have had such courage or talent... I must say, Aristella truly surpassed my expectations. Just the tiniest bit, at least. She's worthy of my respect."

The Archdemon's praise was so direct it was difficult to believe. And yet, the gaze Bifrons cast over Dexia was akin to a man looking at garbage.

"I gave you a chance because you might be connected to her. *That* is the fate that awaits you. In Shere Khan's eyes, you're nothing more than his precious Aristella's spare body. That's why you've been carefully stored here the past month."

Bifrons then pointed straight toward the exit and explained, "Shere Khan is obsessed with his new toy. You can probably escape without him noticing if you leave now."

The Archdemon told her to run away.

But... what do I do after that?

Moreover, was it really okay for her to leave Aristella behind? Bifrons had taken an interest in Aristella, not Dexia. The Archdemon vanished into the darkness, as if already forgetting her very existence.

She remained still, unable to determine what she should do, when suddenly, her eyes stopped at her feet. There was a tattered ribbon on the floor there. A blue ribbon.

This wasn't Dexia's. It was the one Aristella used.

Dexia picked it up and hugged it to her chest. She then took a single look behind her, as if to burn the current state of her precious sister into her eyes.

“...Wait for me, Aristella. I’ll definitely come back to save you.”

And so, Dexia set off down a dark, unknown path.

Afterword

Hey there, it's me again, Fuminori Teshima. It's been a long time, hasn't it? It took a little while, but I'm here to deliver *An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride Volume 11*. In a complete turn from last volume's shocking conclusion, Shere Khan and Bifrons have vanished and fallen silent. Zagan needs to chase after their whereabouts and find a way to deal with Azazel, so he has no time to flirt with Nephy. And just then, a family meeting suddenly takes place in Zagan's castle!

It's the "Zagan is exhausted, so Lilith repays him. Let's meet in our dreams!" volume.

And that's why the stage this time is mostly set inside dreams. As such, the cover this time features our civilians, Lilith and Selphy, who I tried to feature prominently in the text. Does friendship tie them together? Or maybe... (I love yuri, but the "will they, won't they?" phase is my favorite part of it.)

We've also got the appearance of Archdemon Naberius, but the story went contrary to my expectations and I started a love comedy for Lilith, so Naberius didn't get featured much. I'm reflecting on it heavily at this very moment. Well, he's got that contract going on, so I'm sure he'll run wild in the next volume.

In any case, having things in dreams means it's possible to use a setting I normally can't. So, I consulted COMTA and Hako Itagaki before writing this volume. The school uniforms were COMTA's idea, while having the two swap outfits was Itagaki's.

I honestly wanted to try doing Elf Bride School Edition, but it seemed way too out there, so I threw away the idea. I'm glad I consulted them! I'm really grateful.

Now then, strangely enough, I've got plenty of pages for the afterword, so let's talk about the setting. Here's hoping it doesn't get as long-winded as volume 9!

First, about the collar Nephy wore in volume 1. Who put it on her to begin with? I missed the opportunity to properly explain it, so let me expand on some details here. Marchosias was the last one to officially own her, as of the auction, but it was Bifrons' underlings who attacked Nephy's village. In truth, Marchosias got a step ahead and snatched Nephy away.

However, Bifrons is still an Archdemon, even if a young one. Not only that, but Marchosias was in the final years of his life, so his powers were weakening. As such, he had a collar prepared to cut off her mana and hide her. In other words, the collar was actually there to protect Nephy.

But that was when Marchosias went to his final battle with Orobas. In that battle, where many members of the church, including the Head Archangel, all died, the continent was thrown into chaos. And as a result, Nephy never reached Marchosias and never had her collar removed.

Next, about Raphael's love life, which we didn't dive into at all. This was actually a major turning point for many people... and it even lightly involved Alshiera. But honestly, it doesn't really have anything to do with Elf Bride's main story at all. This story is a rom-com focused on Zagan and Nephy that doesn't deviate much. Everyone involved with his romance is pretty much dead now, so it's kind of hard to touch on it in the same manner I did for the beginning of Kimaris and Gremory's relationship. It also doesn't fit into an afterword.

So, I was thinking of writing a short story for this on my own. I'm hoping it can be published before this volume is released. There's also Kimaris' story, and judging by the progress of the main plot, I'd

like to write Alshiera's story as well. There are plenty of details to expand on in all of them.

Oh, right, volume 5 of the Elf Bride manga goes on sale August 27th! It dives right into volume 3's evening party, where Zagan and Nephy's relationship deepens, so please check it out!

Now then, allow me to offer my thanks to all parties. To my chief editor, K, who I must apologize to for having the page count increased even when we were already going over. To COMTA, who once again provided the cutest illustrations for the costumes this time around. To Hako Itagaki, who goes into the finest details every time for the manga. To the editor for the manga. To everyone involved in the cover design, proofreading, publicity, and such. To my daughter, who made me omelet rice for Father's Day. And to you, my dear readers, who are holding this book in your hands.

Thank you very much!

July 2020: On an Evening When the Planets of the Solar System Align
—Fuminori Teshima

Bonus Short Stories

The Root of Chaos

“Gaaah! What should I do?!”

Right after breakfast, just as Foll started heading back to her room, a troubled granny began making a fuss.

“What’s wrong, Gremory?”

“Ooh, little lady. My liege has asked me to support Lady Kuroka.”

“Did something happen?”

“Nothing yet, but I’d say it’s about time.”

Zagan really did have a tremendous sense of foresight that had nothing to do with being able to see the flow of mana.

“So, what’s the problem, exactly?” Foll asked.

“I’m happy that I get to directly observe the two of them squirm about, but I can’t enjoy the joyous and embarrassing sprouts of love power here at the castle when I’m sent far away, now can I?! My comrade can’t frequently stop by to visit, either.”

Foll believed that was precisely why Gremory was being driven away, but wisely kept her mouth shut.

“Oh, I know! Little lady! Could you survey the state of the castle while I’m away? We have this sorcery called Memorandum that can project what you see. It was created by my liege, Purgatory, and myself. I’ll reward you by teaching it to you. Not a bad offer, is it?”

Foll faltered. She was honestly interested in the sorcery the three of them had created. However, pretty much everything this granny did resulted in trouble.

“There’s no need to give it so much thought. You can even consider it a social study. Nobody here is on guard against you. They may speak of things they can’t discuss with others, you know? Regarding their love life, for example.”

“Love life? What’s that?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. Stories of love throughout their lives. The relationship my liege shares with Nephy isn’t unique to them. Those who’ve lived long like Raphael and Lady Alshiera are sure to have rich love lives.”

“Raphael and Alshiera...? Mmm... I’m a little curious...”

“Keehee. Contract sealed. Okay, I feel a sudden rush of motivation! Wait for me, Lady Kuroka!” Gremory exclaimed, then walked away with light footsteps.

“Love life... I don’t really get it, but I’ll try asking around.”

That was the beginning of an unprecedented uproar that spread from the castle all the way to the church.

Afternoon Sweets

“Lisette, this one’s also tasty. Say ‘aah.’”

“Mmm! It’s really good...! Sis, try this one, it’s really sweet!”

Stella scooped up a part of the frozen treat with her spoon and fed it to her little sister Lisette. The little girl blushed and smiled broadly in return.

“Um... Lady Diekmeyer?” a troubled boy watching them said.

“Just call me Stella. What is it, Ginias?”

“Well, what about sword training...?”

“Sword training? I promised to share sweets with Lizette today, so I’ll do that later.”

“Ugh... Is it really the time for this...?”

“If you have any complaints, why don’t you just go?” Lisette asked flatly with a cold glare.

“You should learn how to take a break before any training,” Stella said with a strained smile, watching Ginias tremble with shame.

“Otherwise, you’ll just end up like before. Come on, try some.”

“N-No. I’m an Angelic Knight. I don’t need such things!”

“Don’t be like that. Come on. Say ‘aah.’”

“W-W-W-Wait a moment. What do you mean aammmp?!”

Ginias began wailing about something or other, but Stella ruthlessly jammed her spoon into his mouth all the same.

“What’cha think? Isn’t it sweet?”

Ginias said nothing as he chewed away in silence. Seeing Stella’s carefree smile had turned him bright red.

“Um... Yes. It’s very delicious.”

And, as expected, Lisette treated him coldly.

“What’re you turning red for? You’re the worst.”

“Is my face... really that red?”

“Huh? Oh, uh...”

“Sorry...”

“Oh, no. I’m sorry too. I said too much.”

Stella didn’t really get it, but seeing the new little sister and brother of hers opening up to each other somewhat helped make this a satisfying afternoon.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride: Volume 11

by Fuminori Teshima

Translated by Hikoki

Edited by DxS

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2020 Fuminori Teshima

Illustrations Copyright © 2020 COMTA

Cover illustration by COMTA

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by Hobby Japan

This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo

English translation © 2020 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: December 2020

*Download all your fav Light
Novels at*

Just Light Novels