



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

13

FUMINORI TESHIMA

ILL. COMTA

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“Hex Wings.”

Orias held Azazel's Staff across both hands like an offering and quietly whispered. The staff glimmered faintly and light gathered at her back, taking on the form of wings. So this is the true power of Azazel's Staff.





The fleeting black wisps in the air flared up like meteors and crashed down on the zombie dragon. There was no way to properly describe the spectacle other than falling stars.

“Heaven’s Phosphor Starfall.”



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."

CHARACTER



Alshiera

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



Bifrons

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



Nephtheros

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



Dexia & Aristella

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



Andrealphus

The man considered the strongest being in the world, who served as the head of the thirteen Archdemons while also being an Archangel. After having his heart ripped out by Bifrons, his whereabouts are unknown.

The Silver-Eyed King

A title given to the hero from a thousand years ago who's written about in legends among many races. For some reason, Alshiera calls Zagan the Silver-Eyed King. As for his true identity...

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

“When it comes to battle, it seems the amount of preparation done beforehand decides the victor.”

Zagan muttered that to himself grimly as he sat in his throne room. He had countless wounds carved across his body, his black hair was disheveled and dirty, his robe—a sorcerer’s fortress—was torn and muddy, and there was clear exhaustion on his face. Only the strong glimmer in his silver eyes maintained the majesty of an Archdemon.

A few hours earlier, Zagan had fought the being known as Azazel. After stealing his sister-in-law Nephteros’s body, Azazel had handed him an ignominious defeat. The Angelic Knight who’d fallen in love with Nephteros, Richard, was still alive, but was in a comatose state. Zagan’s self-proclaimed older sister, Archdemon Andrealphus’s personal disciple and a wielder of a Sacred Sword, Stella, was severely wounded. The boy who’d been accompanying her, Head Archangel Ginias Galahad II, was also on the verge of death.

To make matters worse, the temporary alliance he’d had with the ultimate vampire Alshiera was now annulled by her declaration that she would kill the Azazel-possessed Nephteros. At least Shere Khan’s familiar, Dexia, and Zagan’s little sister from the streets, Lisette, hadn’t been taken. Still, this was Zagan’s first time being so powerless to do anything. What’s more, the situation was continuing to deteriorate.

“Raphael, have we still not received any word from Gremory?”

The one man Zagan put complete faith in, his butler Raphael, was also present in the room. Even after acquiring an artificial arm, the most dreadful Archangel hadn’t lost the tiniest bit of his true strength. Raphael nodded with a grave expression. This was grave from Zagan’s perspective, mind you, so any normal person would be liable to go into cardiac arrest if they saw the butler’s face.

“I believe she has likely been struck down or captured by Shere Khan. As such...”

This man always remained calm and composed when dealing with any matter unrelated to his daughter, yet here he was letting out a heavy sigh.

“As such...Kimaris has left in an attempt to track her down...”

Raphael paused there, hesitating for an instant before mustering his resolve and continuing, “I find it hard to believe that a sorcerer of Gremory’s caliber could be captured, so I doubt she still lives.”

Gremory was a sorcerer whom Zagan trusted as his left hand. She was a former Archdemon candidate and could be considered the strongest sorcerer on the entire continent with the exception of the Archdemons. As such, not even an Archdemon could keep that granny from running away on a whim. Loss of contact with her couldn’t mean anything but death.

If she was defeated right after informing us of the situation, then I guess Andrealphus is the one who did it.

Even an Archdemon, as a rule, couldn’t capture Gremory if she focused on escaping. The only one capable of doing so was Archdemon Andrealphus, the man who could stop time with his sorcery. If he’d taken her by surprise, not even Gremory would have been able to escape. That was the biggest reason behind Zagan’s sighs.

He wouldn’t do any work when he was an ally, and now that he’s an enemy, he’s a thorn in my side.

In all likelihood, Bifrons’s or Shere Khan’s sorcery was manipulating him like a puppet. Furthermore, if an Archdemon had been reduced to a puppet like that, then he couldn’t possibly be alive. A fresh corpse was easier to manipulate, and a living target could resist the effects of the sorcery.

Gremory had last reported that she'd discovered Shere Khan's supply route and was taking action to obstruct it. It was best to assume that this report was a trap. Knowing of Gremory's disappearance, Kimaris, a sorcerer trusted as Zagan's right hand, had immediately vanished. And that was why Zagan shook his head.

"No, Gremory isn't necessarily dead."

"Meaning...?" Raphael asked.

"If she is, I was the one who brought it about. Kimaris would slit my throat before heading off to kill Shere Khan."

Kimaris was an extremely loyal retainer, but letting Gremory die would betray his trust entirely. In that case, Zagan would be the one who betrayed him, not the other way around.

"But he vanished without so much as seeing me," Zagan continued. "In other words, he has a reason to ignore thoughts related to vengeance and hurry onward."

There was only one reason Zagan could think of.

"That Gremory has been spared and is in captivity?" Raphael asked.

"Yeah. Meaning Kimaris has been lured out. He has no way of refusing, after all."

Shere Khan had likely informed Kimaris of Gremory's survival somehow. Zagan had been completely outwitted. In the worst case, he had to consider Kimaris an enemy now. The situation was growing worse and worse by the second, but even so, Zagan wouldn't abandon his subordinates. His course of action was obvious. If Gremory was alive, he'd save her. And he'd get Kimaris back too, obviously. But that was also why Zagan was incapable of hiding his exhaustion.

"In any case, I must now meet Shere Khan's army of ten thousand when I'm short a left and right hand."

Shere Khan's army was already complete. Ten thousand made it the size of an entire army division. It was said that the Angelic Knights spread across the entire continent were made up of four divisions. In other words, Shere Khan had a force on par with a quarter of the entire church.

Zagan's forces had suffered a crushing defeat due to "Nephteros's" rampage, and now Shere Khan's invasion of Kianoides was close at hand. Zagan had received reports of suspicious individuals in the vicinity of the town. They were probably scouts. Perhaps this incident with Azazel was also part of Shere Khan's plans. Archdemon Bifrons had been directly responsible, but any Archdemon was capable of that level of manipulation. The truly terrifying thing here was the wit to read so far ahead.

Zagan had to save his sister-in-law. He had to protect his subordinates. And on top of all that, he had to meet an army of ten thousand—one likely made up entirely of heroes from the past—which was quite possibly the most elite force in history. Even a great Archdemon would show clear exhaustion in such a situation. As such, he returned to his first statement.

"If the amount of preparation decides the victor, then there's no winning this battle."

For the first time, Zagan, who'd forced every obstacle out of his way with his fist, spoke words of defeat.

Chapter I: Nobody Wants to Fight a Losing Battle

“Are you listening? This world was ruined by the War of Divinity two hundred years ago. Sorcerers have the duty of healing the world’s wounds and entrusting the future to the next generation. If we all snapped at anyone and everyone like you do, this feeble world we live in would perish in an instant.”

With one last “Understood?” the girl, who looked no older than fourteen, tapped my head with her kiseru pipe. She had long, wavy, faintly blonde hair. Her large forehead stood out prominently despite her small face, which was highlighted by her blue eyes. If not for her impudent smile, she would be very beautiful. Her appearance was enough to make anyone believe that she was the daughter of a well-off family.

However, she wore an oversized triangular hat, a magic stone decorated with a ribbon around her neck, and a pitch-black cloak over her shoulders. Her outfit was just like that of a witch straight out of a fairy tale, but due to her young looks, she felt more like a child playing dress-up.



“Sorcerers healed the people and the world, while Angelic Knights guided them. That is how the world finally got back on its feet. It’s gotten peaceful enough for us to forgive a rowdy brat like you for running wild doing whatever you liked.”

I felt unbearable humiliation at being lectured by a child like her. However, I was prostrate on the ground exactly because I hadn’t been able to endure such humiliation, had lunged at her, and had been struck down with ease. I ground my teeth and glared up at her. The girl let out an exasperated sigh. A bizarre sigil marked her right hand, unleashing an enormous quantity of mana.

“Good grief... Do you have no pride as the disciple of the second generation’s Head Archdemon, Lisette Dantalian? You know anyone out there would throw away everything they have just to be taught by me, right?”

Sorcerers who manipulated paranormal phenomena existed in this world...and this girl was one of the thirteen kings who governed them all. The majority of the first-generation Archdemons had died during the War of Divinity, so the current Archdemons were considered the second generation. Unbelievably, the head of this second generation was the little girl before me. Her power surpassed that of the other twelve, which was befitting of her title, and she was even loved because of her appearance and personality. She shone like the sun in the sky. That was why she disgusted me. I hadn’t asked to be her disciple. I roared back at her, and she dropped her kiseru pipe on my head with another clunk.

“Fool. If I hadn’t taken you in, you would’ve been executed, remember? Know your place.”

I’d attacked the villages in the region, committing every atrocity imaginable, and had been beaten black and blue by this little girl.

Ever since then, she'd been calling me her disciple and forcing worthless chores on me. I'd rebelled again today but had suffered utter defeat once more. The girl rested her chin on her hand while maintaining her grip on her pipe and let out yet another tired sigh.

"Haaah... Why are you so defiant? Is this what they call the rebellious phase? Maybe I should ask Mast...I mean, Marchosias, about it next time. But he's got a serious sister complex, so I feel like asking him about children would be a mistake. What to do...?"

I barked at her, asking what kind of arbitrary crap she was spouting and whether she thought she was my parent, when her kiseru pipe came back down...or so I thought, but she gently brushed my head.

"Hmm. That's true. You don't even know what a parent is, do you...? Very well, then. First, I'll love you. I'll provide you with what others take for granted."

I yelled at her, saying it was none of her business and that a stupid brat like her should get off her high horse.

"Hee hee. First, you'll have to learn to respect your elders. I may look like this, but I'm two hundred years old, you know? I'm a living witness of the War of Divinity, after all."

No matter how loudly I roared, she faced me with a pleasant smile.

"There's a country to the east called Liucaon. They have a saying that goes, 'Like a dragon to a tiger.' It means to be strong and equal rivals because a tiger is on the same level as a dragon. I'll raise you into a tiger worthy of that proverb. Be grateful."

Tiger—that was my nickname. Tigers were a race from legends that couldn't be seen in the world anymore. The ones spoken of in stories were avatars of calamity. The tigryn people, whose name was based on those creatures, also possessed an irresistible impulse for destruction.

Faced with such a villainous beast, this girl offered her unconditional love. It didn't take all that much time for yearning to sprout in my heart...and it remained there until the day I lost her...



“Dantalian...”

Inside a gloomy underground room, the dying Tiger King muttered a cherished name as he stared at the Sigil of the Archdemon on his right hand, the one that had once belonged to her.

“I couldn't...become the kind of tiger...you wished for.”

She surely wouldn't have forgiven him for what he had become. He hadn't managed to become strong like her. Mourning the one he loved, he couldn't even accept the burden of her death. After all, a world without her held no meaning in his eyes.

The truly unfortunate part was that Shere Khan had discovered a means of recovering what had been lost. No matter how much blood and resentment he had to smear himself in, he would do anything to accomplish it.

Once she returned, she would never accept him like she once had. She was sure to disdain him. But that didn't matter. The important thing was for her to live. To that end, he would sacrifice anything, even himself.

Still, although she had wished for him to become a tiger that protected the world, he'd spent eight hundred years squirming in this crevice between contradictory ideals and wishes. Archdemons had come and gone so many times over the centuries. Now that Marchosias was dead and Andrealphus had been defeated, Shere Khan was the only survivor left from those days. Even he didn't know how this would end.

“But not a single thing...that has happened to date...has been outside my calculations.”

Andrealphus’s attack, Bifrons’s departure, and even Azazel’s resurrection had all gone to plan. Aside from Shere Khan and Zagan, who were about to clash directly, there were Bifrons and Orias. Depending on the circumstances, even Naberius and Furcas could get involved. Plus, even if he’d been reduced to a puppet, Andrealphus was there too.

How many people out there could read a battle that was to involve a good half of all the Archdemons? Those who could were the true threats.

I suppose there’s Bifrons...and probably Alshiera as well.

Orias was involved, but he wasn’t assertive. Naberius was likely to remain a spectator. Furcas was broken. As for the Angelic Knights... Well, Shere Khan couldn’t understand them.

No one else would even be standing on the stage of battle. The fact that they hadn’t been able to predict these events meant that their preparations were insufficient. They wouldn’t become a threat. Thus, from this point on, all those who were even one step behind were goners.

So, how far had Zagan managed to read ahead? That Archdemon boasted terrifying power that was growing at an unprecedented pace. None of the Archdemons could carelessly clash with him and win. But alas, Zagan was far too young.

This had been the main point of contention among the Archdemons when deciding on Marchosias’s successor. He’d ascended to the seat of an Archdemon precisely because of the power and talent that had allowed him to surpass such a flaw, though. Now then, could Zagan’s diligence and growth truly surpass Shere Khan’s eight hundred years of experience?

No, I cannot win unless I assume that is so.

That man had inherited the blood of the greatest hero to ever grace this world. And just like the heroes of the past, he had an intense craving for strength. But unlike them, he also handled his enemies mercilessly with a cool head. Honestly, Shere Khan feared making an enemy of him more than he had Marchosias.

Marchosias...

Recalling the name brought up melancholic emotions within the Tiger King. That had already ended. That repulsive old man had died by Shere Khan's own hands, after all. Perhaps the rare species hunt had been nothing but a facet of revenge against Marchosias. Gathering the factors needed for Azazel hadn't required wholesale slaughter, but he'd done it anyway. It must've been humiliating to watch the rare species that had been under his protection be massacred like that.

Shere Khan hadn't gotten off lightly either, but that old man's fate, forgotten by all and having his power chiseled away to the end, must've left him with a gaping hole in his heart. Shere Khan had truly beaten him down. The only question remaining was if what little life the Tiger King had left would hold out. His wheelchair creaked as he quietly closed his eyes...when he heard a sudden groan nearby.

"U-Ugh... Where...?"

An enormous stone monument towered behind him. At its center was a half-petrified woman. She was the one who'd groaned, Enchantress Gremory. Archdemon Zagan's left-hand woman and Archdemon Orias's personal disciple. She was also Black Blade Kimaris's mentor and likely had many other connections. She looked to be in her twenties now, but was actually more than 150 years old. Shere Khan unintentionally let out a sigh of admiration as he saw her wake from her slumber.

“To think...you would regain consciousness. I didn’t imagine...it possible.”

This woman possessed power that rivaled that of an Archdemon, but she also possessed the unusual power called Balor’s Evil Eye. As such, Shere Khan had restrained her with a mana absorption device that drained her to the very limits of maintaining her life. The wound she’d received from Andrealphus was fatal. It had been preposterous to even consider that she’d be able to wake up from her comatose state.

“That’s Enchantress Gremory...for you. I can see why...you’re favored...to be the next Archdemon.”

This woman was a former Archdemon candidate. She immediately understood the situation she was in and formed a provocative smile.

“So that would make you Archdemon Shere Khan. Kee hee hee. I am delighted to be honored with the praise of an Archdemon.”

After that, she turned her sad yet affectionate eyes toward him.

“The second generation’s Head Archdemon... Were those your memories?” she asked.

Shere Khan’s eyes shot open.

“Is the Sigil...slipping from my body? Or is that...the influence of a fomorian?”

His body was already at its limit. After getting cut down by Andrealphus, it wouldn’t be strange for him to perish at any moment. As such, it made sense for the Sigil of the Archdemon to look for its successor. There just happened to be an extremely talented sorcerer here, after all. Plus, fomorians were also said to be the ancestors of the succubi, so he couldn’t deny the possibility that

they had the power to interfere with dreams or memories. In either case, she'd seen Shere Khan's memories.

"How...interesting. How are you...maintaining consciousness...in that state? Moreover...how did you...glimpse into...my memories?"

Gremory smiled as if she understood everything just from these questions.

"What a strange thing for an Archdemon to ask. Just as you have caused such an incident by betting everything you have, I too have something more important than my life..." she paused there, then loudly made a proclamation as if unraveling her very reason for existing. "I, Enchantress Gremory, have not lived such a feeble life that I would quietly remain asleep with such love power thrust before me!"

"Huh...? Love...what?"

"Love power!"

Silence fell over the room. A painful stillness spread around them. This wasn't because she'd angered Shere Khan, however.

What to do? Even though it'd be a checkmate if I misread a single move, there's someone here I can't read at all...

Honestly, this was perhaps the very first situation the Tiger King, who'd had everything go exactly as he'd planned, hadn't been able to predict at all.

◇

"If the amount of preparation decides the victor, then there's no winning this battle."

Raphael nodded back to Zagan with a somewhat disappointed look on his face, then smiled slightly.

"My liege... Despite that, you seem to be enjoying yourself a fair bit."

Having just declared defeat, Zagan had a smile on his face as if he found the situation ever so amusing.

“Hmph. That won’t do. It seems it’s gotten a little fun.”

He cleared his throat as if to admonish himself, then faced Raphael once more.

“I can’t slander Bifrons, I suppose,” he told his butler. “A game of wits among Archdemons is rather interesting. If my subordinates’ lives weren’t at stake, I might’ve gotten completely engrossed in it.”

Despite affirming that he had no means of winning, Zagan didn’t have the slightest thought of defeat in his mind.

Raphael gazed at his lord’s terrific mood and asked, “So do you have a way to overwhelm an army of ten thousand?”

Shere Khan’s army wasn’t made up of ten thousand regular soldiers. It was made of ten thousand heroes. The two who’d appeared during the battle against “Nephteros” had power on par with an Archangel. They’d called themselves Asura and Bato. Even if it had been done under Alshiera’s command, they’d been able to fight “Nephteros” on equal terms. If Zagan were to lowball his estimate, they at least had power on par with the Juutilainen brothers he’d fought in Raziel.

It was terrifying to consider that there were men like that all over the place one thousand years ago, but they’d died like weeds being plucked from the ground. It would be conceited to think that the current age could outdo them. According to the information he’d gotten from Dexia, they were Shere Khan’s specially made homunculi. He called them Nephilims, but they were basically attempts at replicating Azazel.

So long as they had Azazel partially planted within them, it’d be better to assume that they possessed more power than when they’d lived. Even if all ten thousand soldiers didn’t meet that standard, the Angelic Knights of Kianoides couldn’t compare to such numbers or

individual quality. Maybe even all the forces of the church on the continent put together wouldn't be able to. It was like facing off against ten thousand Archangels, after all.

"There will be no trouble facing an army of ten thousand," Zagan answered, fully grasping all this information. "We can simply lure them out to an empty location and slaughter them."

This wasn't easy for an Archdemon to do, but it wasn't impossible either. Pretty much the only ones who could clash with an army and mow them down directly were Zagan and Andrealphus, but it was nonsense for sorcerers to accept a challenge head-on like some kind of duel.

For example, if Orias were to seriously challenge an army, they would never come within her reach. Her second name was Calamity. With her powerful sorcery and celestial mysticism, not to mention her demon summoning, it was like fighting the land and nature itself.

So I guess I have to borrow Orias's strength in the fight to come...

Zagan found it disgraceful that he had to beg the mother of his beloved bride to fight. But Shere Khan's schemes were far too intricate and merciless to take any risks. In all likelihood, the Tiger King had prepared for this under the assumption that he would take on all the remaining Archdemons. Zagan had to put everything he had to use to strike him down. It was worth disgracing himself to protect his bride, daughter, and subordinates.

Still, slaughtering all of them doesn't really sit well with me.

Zagan believed that any villain deserved at least one chance to repent. Even if his opponents were artificially created Nephilims, that didn't change. This was war, but ruthlessly slaughtering ten thousand people still went against his core beliefs. It didn't sit well with him, but he likely had no other choice. The biggest problem was that this army wouldn't be attacking Zagan himself, but Kianoides and all of

his subordinates. Keeping them in check would be an extraordinary feat.

“Hmm. So this is all within your expectations, my liege?” Raphael asked, wide-eyed at the news.

“If it was, it would’ve been more appropriate to crush them before they could do anything. Having to act on the back foot means it’s already beyond my expectations. Well, I still figured it would end up like this, so it’s no big deal.”

Even if Shere Khan didn’t possess the strength he once had, he was still an Archdemon, so Zagan hadn’t been the least bit careless. What was possible for an Archdemon? How far would one go? Over the past three months, Zagan had spent every waking hour considering such things.

It’s one of the most terrible situations among what I anticipated, but not the worst.

The worst would have been losing Nephy or Foll. He’d lost Gremory and Kimaris, but it was still possible to reclaim them. Gremory was alive, so the prospect of getting Kimaris back remained. Richard still lived too, and Zagan would prove that he could save Nephteros. Nothing that had happened couldn’t be undone.

Going back to the start of this conversation, when it came to battle, the amount of preparation decided the victor. Zagan himself was tremendously powerful, but there was little that he could do when faced with an entire army. That was why he needed to prepare better.

“If a battle’s preparation were measured by the sheer number of soldiers, then I’d have no shot at winning. I can only ready a measly forty sorcerers to face off against ten thousand heroes, after all.”

“Hmm, then have your preparations gone beyond that?”

Instead of answering right away, Zagan crossed his legs the other way. His face had already regained its vitality, and his silver eyes focused on the state of the war. Zagan hadn't been sitting on his throne to whinge over his current situation. This throne was the nucleus of the castle. And as its lord, Zagan could recover from most wounds in no time at all just by sitting on it.

"There's apparently a game called chess," Zagan stated out of the blue. "In it, you advance pieces with predetermined roles on a board in order to take your opponent's king."

Raphael's brow pricked up as if he found this unexpected before he gave Zagan a wry smile.

"So you have no experience with chess, my liege?"

"Unfortunately not. I'm not skilled enough to amuse myself with such things on my own, you see."

The game required an opponent. And for many years, the only person Zagan even had to talk to was Barbatos, and that undesirable friend of his wasn't the type to take interest in any games. Zagan understood the rules from reading about it, but he'd never actually played. He was no longer alone after meeting Nephy, of course, but he couldn't bring himself to have that lovely girl participate in a game of conflict.

Raphael smiled in amusement. If someone who didn't know him were to witness this, they'd see this as a bloody smile right before he was about to decapitate someone.

"Then one day, I'll serve as your opponent," he said.

"Hmm. I look forward to it."

"It's only a hobby to me. It's a little troubling if you expect too much of me."

Zagan had qualms about using a game he'd never played to move the conversation forward, but kept going anyway.

“Let's get back on track. A battle is much like chess. Even if the board is covered in pieces, you can only move one at a time. You still lose if your king gets taken. As such, the preparation for battle is not simply about gathering more soldiers, but also reading the board state best.”

On Alshiere Imera, when Shere Khan unleashed a massive number of poorly made undead, Zagan had predicted the scale of battle that would come one day. That was why he'd started collecting books related to military strategy.

According to the legends, there were tales of a single hero or strategist reversing the entire tide of war. However, this was not done through the miracles or powers of individuals. They'd read the entire board with a calm and merciless mind. If one could calculate how all the chips would fall, no matter how many there were, any game could be won. Victory in battle was grasped by arranging such matters and hastening them to fruition.

I have a piece strong enough to take the king. The main problem is getting it over there, but that's already been resolved.

However, unlike chess, Zagan couldn't treat his pieces—his subordinates—as disposable. And what's more, Zagan's opponent was the oldest living Archdemon. Shere Khan had overlooked Bifrons's estrangement and rampage, knowing it would happen, and made use of it. That was what had created this situation with “Nephteros” that weighed heavily on Zagan's mind. And by doing so, he'd also restricted Alshiera's movements.

Considering how Shere Khan had premeditated all of this, the Tiger King, who was said to surpass Andrealphus in his prime, was still in good shape. At this stage, he was definitely the one manipulating the entire situation to the greatest effect.

In this field, I can't possibly surpass Shere Khan's experience.

Zagan couldn't match him in terms of military strength or strategy. All he could do to turn the tide was pray for a miracle of some kind.

I only have one hand to play to overturn this situation.

Yes. He would overturn it. He'd prepared enough to do so.

"Now then, Raphael. What do you think I should do in this hopeless situation?"

This man who'd just challenged his lord to a game faced Zagan's test with a ferocious smile.

"Let's see... Calmness within a house of great sympathy and passion is your virtue, my liege. As such, even before an army of ten thousand, you wouldn't treat your subordinates as disposable."

Zagan nodded as Raphael pointed to a map and continued.

"You would focus your defenses around Kianoides to lure in the army, and as our strongest fighter, you'd go and take Shere Khan's head. His location is known to us, after all."

It was a painfully correct answer. So long as they took Shere Khan's head, the battle would end. There was no need to defeat the army. If Zagan's subordinates simply waited out the siege in Kianoides, they could survive several days. And those few days would be the last chance Zagan had.

"That about sums it up. There's nothing else I can do."

If Zagan could bring Shere Khan into a direct confrontation, he could take the Tiger King's head. Thus, Shere Khan would've predicted this. How many obstacles had he prepared to obstruct Zagan's path? Or perhaps it was better to assume that it would be impossible to reach him at all. Nevertheless, Zagan had to give it a go.

“The practical issue is that we have no other choice. The bigger problem is that Azazel, Bifrons, and even Alshiera will stand in our way. We have to fight all of them before reaching Shere Khan.”

It was pretty much guaranteed.

Not that I really care, but I have to put on somewhat of a show that I'm struggling.

He had to put on a visible display that he was interested in the contest prepared for him.

“Okay... Call Nephy, Orias, Shax, and Dexia here.”

“As you wish.”

Zagan's faithful butler was just about to leave the throne room when Zagan called him to a stop.

“Oh, Foll too.”

“Are you sure?”

Calling her here would mean sending his beloved daughter into battle. Zagan let out a grievous sigh, clearly unhappy about the decision, but after a short pause, he returned a resolute nod.

“Yeah. She's needed.”

Several minutes later, everyone gathered in the throne room.

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“That's the gist of it. Nephteros had her body stolen and Shere Khan's army is closing in on us.”

Upon gathering everyone in the throne room, Zagan gave them a brief explanation of the current situation. They were all left speechless for a moment, faced with this hopeless crisis.

“No way... Nephteros...” Nephy muttered in a trembling voice. “I haven't even invited her to go shopping for presents...”

“Nephy.”

The one who called out her name in an unexpectedly strong tone with a grip on her cuff was her beloved daughter.

“Thank you, Foll.”

Brought back to her senses, Nephy wiped her tears and raised her head.

I want to run over and embrace her...

What kind of man was he to not comfort his beloved bride? Zagan endured such urges and depressing thoughts as he moved things along.

“Calm down, Nephy. Nephteros can still be saved. It isn’t too late.”

Perhaps feeling no persuasiveness behind his words, Orias, who’d had her arms wrapped around Nephy’s shoulders, stepped forth.

“Then may I assume you have some way of saving her?” she asked.

“I do. But before that...” Zagan replied, shifting his focus over. “Shax. How are the wounded?”

“R-Right... I’m done treating Stella and Ginias, although they were wounded pretty badly. I don’t know when they’ll wake up... As for Richard, his treatment finished before we came back.”

During the battle with “Nephteros,” Zagan had turned his back to the enemy and focused on Richard’s treatment. Zagan had recreated a heart from scratch. This was an unprecedented method, so even though Shax had helped, they were all in the dark as to what side effects it could have.

“I don’t care so long as they can be moved,” Zagan said.

“Moved...? You wanna carry them somewhere?”

Zagan nodded gravely.

“We’re abandoning the castle.”

They were to evacuate the castle full of memories of Nephy and Foll, all while in the midst of battle. Raphael and Shax were probably the only ones who understood the true weight of his decision. The two of them looked shocked. Orias likely understood, but her focus was elsewhere entirely, so she didn’t show much emotion.

“Raphael. Is abandoning this place that much of a problem?” Foll asked curiously.

“It is. If we vacate the castle, given the current situation, we won’t be able to prevent Shere Khan’s soldiers from trespassing. In other words, an Archdemon’s archives will be laid bare.”

With that, Foll finally understood.

“Zagan. Are you...destroying the castle?” she asked with a gulp.

Nephy’s eyes widened at Foll’s interpretation. Zagan believed that knowledge and techniques were meant to be stolen, but it was a different matter if his enemies were trying to steal *from* him. To protect his knowledge, his only choice would be to destroy the entire castle.

“Don’t make that face,” he said to his sad daughter with a forced smile. “I don’t plan to blow up the castle or anything.”

“Really...?”

“We’ll hide the entire castle in subspace. Having said that, I’m not as skilled as Barbatos at this, so I’ll need everyone out of here. That’s all.”

This was sorcery Barbatos specialized in. Zagan had observed that man’s sorcery closer than any other could. He couldn’t wield it as freely, but he could at least make use of it, though it would take him everything he had just to transfer inanimate objects. And if some kind of accident caused the subspace coordinates to slip, he wouldn’t

be able to bring everything back. As such, in the worst case, if anybody got sent with the castle, there was no guarantee they'd be able to return alive. There was a slight possibility he could lose everything, so he didn't really want to risk it, but he realized it was still far better than letting Shere Khan's soldiers run amok.

"Meaning you're gonna set up your stronghold at Archdemon Palace?" Shax asked with a nod of understanding.

"Yeah. Get it ready quickly."

"You don't mean *that*, do you?" Shax asked with a grim expression. "I don't doubt your power at this point or anything, but ordinary sorcerers like us aren't anywhere near as skilled or strong as you."

Zagan had predicted he would complain, so he answered as if it was no big deal.

"That's right. It'll be a burden for you lot, but that's where you need to show your backbone as my subordinates."

"No matter how much backbone we've got, there are things we can and can't do, ya know? You *really* planning on using that?"

Normally, Shax would've done his job with a frown if Zagan ordered him to do something unpleasant, so this might've been the first time he'd displayed his disapproval so fervently. That was reasonable, however, since he had a grasp of the full picture. Faced with his flustered subordinate, Zagan leaned back into his throne with a sigh.

"I would much prefer to leave it unused, but it will probably have to come into play. I'll buy you some time, so get it ready somehow or other."

"Buy time? You're gonna stall Shere Khan's army?"

"Well, even if I'm not around, I'll make sure they're at least hindered."

“Even if you’re not around... Don’t tell me... You’re not gonna head off on your own to take down Shere Khan, are you?”

This man truly was talented when it came to anything other than Kuroka. It made things easier for Zagan that he’d managed to reach that conclusion without the need for explanation.

“I know his location. Do you truly think I’d let this opportunity slip?” Zagan asked.

If he took the time to face an army of ten thousand, Shere Khan could run away again and Zagan would be stuck chasing him for another few months. This crisis could be viewed as the best chance to take Shere Khan’s head.

“That’s how it’ll go,” Zagan said, shifting his focus again. “Dexia, your role is to guide me to Shere Khan. I assume that won’t be a problem?”

In a sense, this was the fulcrum of the entire battle. Burdened with that unexpectedly heavy duty, Dexia gulped, but still returned a resolute nod.

“If that’s what it’ll take to get you to save Aristella, then I’ll do it.”

“If she’s alive, I will do everything in my power to rescue her.”

In all actuality, it was extremely unlikely that Aristella was alive. Even Alshiera had said it was too late and tried to finish her off. Her decision meant that Aristella was beyond saving. Nevertheless, Dexia’s only option now was to cling to Zagan.

Seeing her driven into such a corner, Raphael plopped his hand onto her head and said, “My liege has stated that he will save her, so there is no need for concern.”

“Huh? Th-Thank you...”

Dexia was bewildered by the kindness behind this man’s frightening face.

Oh yeah, these two have met before.

Dexia had yet to realize it, but when Raphael had snuck into Raziel's treasury, he'd disguised himself as Valefor and went in with Dexia. Contrary to his gruff looks, Raphael was indulgent of children. Zagan forced a strained smile onto his face upon remembering that.

Alshiera had judged that Aristella couldn't be saved, but that was just her opinion. No matter what state she was in, so long as she was still alive, there were ways of working things out. Zagan desperately sought power for the sake of survival...and his acquired skills could obviously be applied to others. However, that also meant that he had to ignore an army of ten thousand and distance himself from Kianoides, which was exactly why he needed someone to protect his subordinates.

"Raphael. I'm entrusting command of Kianoides to you. The Angelic Knights will probably be the ones to take the front. You're the only one who can get that lot to work with our sorcerers. Show me the reputation of this Unification Faction of yours.."

"All is as you will, my liege," Raphael answered with a reverent bow.

"Shax. You are to work under Raphael's command and treat the wounded. I'm sure there will be mountains of casualties to handle. Feel free to order around whatever personnel you need at your own discretion. Keep as many people from dying as you can."

"Roger that, Boss."

Shax was a man too. He knew it would be unsightly of him to continue grumbling, so he gave in.

"And one more thing—"

Zagan's next words made Shax's face contort. This wasn't limited to him either. Both Raphael and Orias clearly reacted. It was the most troublesome problem at hand, after all.

If Zagan were Shere Khan, he'd send that "piece" to Kianoides in Zagan's absence. If used in tandem with the army, he could trample the town to his heart's content. The only ones who could deal with it were Shax and Kuroka. Those two were prized pieces on Zagan's board, much like the aces Shere Khan had prepared for the battle to come.

"Boss..." Shax said with a shake of the head. "You know I can't possibly allow that."

"Regardless of what you want, it'll appear before you. And you don't need me to tell you what Kuroka will do when it does, right?"

"B-But...you've gotta have other ways of dealing with it."

Shax begged for mercy, but Zagan thrust his decision before him.

"I've granted you power...and now I'm telling you to do this because I believe you can handle it."

If not, he would order Shax to shut himself in Archdemon Palace and not take a single step out.

I don't know how Shere Khan values his disciple, but Shax has built enough strength to rival an Archdemon.

That was Zagan's belief, and Naberius had acknowledged it as well. Thus, he needed Shax to do work proportionate to that assessment. Raphael had quite the severe look on his face at the mention of Kuroka, but he still kept his emotions under check before joining in.

"My liege has acknowledged you. Prove to me that he isn't making too much of you."

Just what kind of emotions were behind his words? Over the last few months, Raphael had tried to kill this shameless man on innumerable occasions for walking around with his daughter's underwear.

After a little while, Shax nodded and said, "Got it, Boss."

He was making the face of a man who'd gathered his resolve.

"Then go. And make haste with the withdrawal. Leave everything you don't need behind."

"As you will."

"Roger that."

The two of them nodded and started to leave, but Shax suddenly stopped in his tracks and turned around.

"Boss. I get our roles in this, but what do you plan to do about Kimaris?"

That was an obvious question. Zagan hadn't informed him of anything beyond the fact that Kimaris had likely been lured out by Shere Khan. Still, he shook his head like it wasn't a big deal.

"Don't worry about him. I can picture the script Shere Khan has written already."

Shere Khan's threats to Kimaris and how he would act in response were well within Zagan's expectation.

"But..." Shax muttered, still looking somewhat depressed at the thought.

"I'm telling you not to worry. I even give villains I don't know a second chance, so do you truly believe I won't show my subordinates the same courtesy?"

With that, Shax finally looked relieved.

"I'm really glad you're my boss."

And so, Shax and Raphael left the throne room to get the evacuation of the castle underway.

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With Shax and Raphael gone, Zagan finally turned to face Orias.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Orias.”

“Mmm... Let’s hear it.”

Zagan took in a deep breath, then said, “Allow me to start from my conclusion. I have no way to save Nephteros.”

A crack rang through the air. Once she’d claimed so, Nephteros was without a doubt Orias’s daughter. And, obviously, there were no parents out there who could remain calm after being told their daughter’s life couldn’t be saved. Zagan accepted her wrath as he continued.

“I have no means of saving her myself, but I have an idea how it can be done.”

“That is to say...?”

Orias at least showed the patience to hear him out.

“Well, I never expected things to go this far, but I knew about the imminent danger to her body already. We’ve been acting to save her ever since.”

“We...? Meaning there are others, then?”

“Yes. One of them can’t really be counted on, but I believe the other is trustworthy enough.”

Honestly, it was hard for Zagan to accept, but he had no choice but to admit it. He couldn’t hold back a sigh as he brought up her name.

“Alshiera... She can save Nephteros.”

“Did she not leave after declaring she would *kill* Nephteros?” Orias stated, pointing out the obvious.

Zagan nodded, then replied, “She has already fought with the Azazel-possessed ‘Nephteros.’ The monster wields terrifying power, but Alshiera overwhelmed it with even greater force. If Alshiera hadn’t

had her old wound exposed, she would've killed Nephteros on the spot."

"Then..."

"So it appeared, but it seems she lacks the talent for acting."

"Hm...?"

Alshiera was a true master of battle. She'd rendered her opponent helpless in an instant as if teaching Zagan how to fight, then shamelessly put on a show of hurrying to bring things to a conclusion before letting her opponent slip away. Even an idiot could tell what really happened there.

Back during the incident with Aristella, Alshiera had shown no opening whatsoever when bringing things to an end. Having said that, her acting had Zagan's blood running cold during the incident with Nephteros, almost tricking him in the moment. Rather than mock her talent, it would've been more appropriate to say that her script had simply been bad.

"She still hasn't given up on saving Nephteros," Zagan declared confidently.

"I see. Then those last words from her were simple nonsense?"

Zagan shook his head and answered, "No. She wouldn't resort to that. It was a message for me to lend her a hand. That's how I interpreted it."

"Hmm... If she declares that she will kill her, even if you know it's a lie, you'll have no choice but to do everything you can to protect Nephteros. So...she needs some sort of help?"

Orias's anger finally faded. The Archdemon quietly listened as Zagan offered his observations.

"Bifrons is also chasing 'Nephteros.' What's more, 'Nephteros' spreads destruction indiscriminately. I can't possibly allow my sister-

in-law to dirty her hands like that. And, above all else, if she continues wielding that power, her body won't hold out. As such, even Alshiera can't handle this on her own."

"In other words, you're telling me to go protect Nephteros?"

Instead of nodding, Zagan simply rose from his throne and knelt before Orias.

"I know this is a rather unreasonable request, but please protect Nephteros. I can't possibly allow her to die before she learns of love."

"Raise your head. She is my daughter, so it is a matter of course that I, as her parent, will lend a helping hand to save her. There is no need for you to abase yourself."

"Nephy," Zagan said, turning to his bride.

"Yes, Master Zagan?" she replied with a dignified nod.

Nephy's strength was also necessary to save Nephteros, but Zagan's pride wouldn't allow him to order her into battle. Nevertheless, he didn't believe that leaving her out was the right choice either. He felt deeply conflicted as he bounced between prioritizing a man's pride and a king's duty. Seeing conflict within him, Nephy maintained a firm expression and waited for him to speak.

"....."

"....."

"...Gh."

The two maintained this staring contest for a while, but eventually, Zagan averted his gaze.

"Wh-Why are you blushing?" Nephy asked.

"D-Don't misunderstand. I was simply charmed by how noble you looked. I wasn't thinking of anything untoward, okay?"

“Huh...?! I-It’s troubling if you act like this at such a time... P-Please do so...when we’re alone...”

As the two of them started acting more and more flustered, they realized that Orias and Foll were looking at them with lukewarm gazes, while Dexia appeared utterly perplexed.

“Um, I don’t mind. You two can continue as you please,” Orias said to comfort them. But instead, that just made them feel unbearable shame.

Zagan and Nephy both cleared their throats and straightened their postures.

“Nephy. Please go with Orias to protect Nephteros,” Zagan said. “Her body is near its limit. You’re needed.”

“Certainly,” Nephy responded immediately, smiling like a blooming flower all the while. “I shall definitely save her and bring her back.”

Zagan was incapable of hiding his bewilderment at her reaction.

“Uhhh, it’s...a dangerous role, so...”

“I know. You’ve come to rely on me at such a serious juncture, Master Zagan. How could I possibly be anything but happy?”

“Right... Ummm, I’m counting on you.”

With that, Nephy’s pointy ears turned red right to their tips as her eyes darted about restlessly.

“Um, Master Zagan. I don’t mean for this to sound like payment of any sort, but I do have a request.”

“M-Mmm! Ask for anything you want.”

Was this, perhaps, the first time Nephy pleaded with him for something? Zagan started to feel a strange sense of anticipation building up within him.

“If possible...” Nephy started, her cheeks still dyed red, “I’d like you to finish this battle in three days.”

The request she made—with an expression like a maiden in love on her face the whole time—wasn’t easy for even an Archdemon to fulfill. The sun was already setting, marking the end of the current day.

The battle was likely to begin at dawn. Taking Shere Khan’s head, obliterating an army of ten thousand, and saving Nephtheros couldn’t really be done in three days. Forget an Archdemon, it was impossible even for a god, a dragon, or Alshiera.

Now that I think about it, Alshiera said she doesn’t have much time left herself...

The dots started to connect in Zagan’s head.

I see. Nephy wants to settle things before Alshiera’s life span is up.

She was such a kind girl to pay that selfish vampire so much consideration. What kind of Archdemon would he be if he couldn’t meet her demands?

“Very well, then. I shall settle things within three days.”

“I’m very sorry for being unreasonable.”

“I don’t mind. I can at least understand the desire to give a final parting gift to one who is about to vanish.”

“Huh...?” Nephy mumbled, suddenly realizing that there was a slight dissonance to their conversation. “Y-Yes! I-It’s just as you say!”

She decided that would do. This was also the moment Zagan dispatched any hint of hesitation within himself. Three days. His goal was set. He wouldn’t care about the means he needed to take to accomplish that goal. With a time limit in place, and having witnessed his bride pleading him for something for the very first time, Zagan’s belligerent spirit flared up like never before.

“Are you done?” Orias asked, averting her gaze like she couldn’t stand to watch anymore. “Nephteros’s body won’t hold out much longer. We should get going as soon as possible.”

“Oh, please wait a moment,” Nephy said. “I believe we’ll need Chastille’s strength to save Nephteros. She’s the one who understands that girl best, after all.”

Zagan didn’t overlook the shadow that wriggled in the throne room upon hearing those words. It appeared Barbatos was hiding in Dexia’s shadow.

Chastille really is the most suitable person to save Nephteros, but...

Zagan hesitated for an instant. Nephy was right, but he came to a quick decision.

“Unfortunately, that might prove difficult. As an Angelic Knight, Chastille has a duty to protect Kianoides. It would be hard to get her to yield that role. And, above all else, we won’t be able to hold back the army of ten thousand without her.”

“Oh. That’s...true. Forgive me.”

“It’s fine. There’s no reason for you to apologize.”

In truth, Zagan had considered sending Chastille. Now that Richard was in an unpredictable state, there was nobody else but her capable of bringing Nephteros back from Azazel’s control. There were too many detriments to getting Chastille involved, however. As such, this would become a tremendous debt for a certain someone to owe him.

“Hear me, Nephy. Don’t let Chastille find out about Nephteros. If she finds out, she might get stuck in crybaby mode.”

“Master Zagan, Chastille is the type to keep it together at crucial moments, you know? But...very well. I too do not wish to burden her with more worries.”

Nephy gave Zagan a troubled smile, then walked up to Orias.

“Zagan, there’s one more thing I’d like to ask,” Orias said.

“Hm? What is it?”

“You’re sure the wings sprouting from ‘Nephteros’s’ back are Hex Wings, right?”

She was speaking of the divine yet sinister wings of light that Zagan had witnessed.

“That was what Shere Khan’s subordinates called them, at least,” he answered.

“Hmm. And eight of them at that...” she mumbled. It looked as if she was preparing herself for death.

I suppose I should expect as much of her. She knows what the Hex Wings are.

Even Zagan’s greatest shield, Heaven’s Scale Dragon Form, had been pulverized in ten short seconds. This wasn’t an enemy to be taken lightly, even for an Archdemon.

“Orias. You have an obligation to witness Nephy’s happiness with your own eyes. Don’t forget that.”

“Hee hee. How strict of you. But...I’ll keep that in mind,” she replied, then put her hand on Nephy’s shoulder. “It’ll be a hard fight. Do what you can before we go.”

“Do...what I can?” Nephy asked with a cock of her head before her pointy ears snapped up. “Master Zagan, could you come here for a moment?”

“Hm? Very well.”

Zagan walked up to Nephy just as she'd asked. It was something she had to do given the situation, so it must've been important.

"E-Excuse me!" Nephy yelled as she suddenly threw her arms around him.

"Whaaat?!"

This was no simple hug, however. She plunged her face into Zagan's chest and rubbed her forehead against him.

Zagan felt a significant shock to his heart. It was pounding in his chest with terrifying thumps. Nephy only kept up her hug for a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity. Before long, she let out a sigh of satisfaction and backed away from Zagan with a flushed face.

"Phew... Forgive me. With that, I can head out...at ease...?"

Zagan stared at her with a pale face. Dexia and Orias stared at her in bewilderment. Even Foll, who was pretty used to such things, was frowning as if she'd just witnessed a dirty secret. Finally realizing what she'd just done, Nephy turned bright red to the tips of her pointy ears once more and started protesting in a fluster.

"Y-Y-You... I-I-I-I mean, y-y-y-y-you've got it wrong! I-I-I just thought I wouldn't be able to see Master Zagan for a while, s-s-so I had to...!"

"Well, so long as you're satisfied," Orias said. "Do you mind?"

"Aaaaaah!"

Nephy covered her face in shame as if asking for someone to just kill her as Orias dragged her away.

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After Nephy and Orias left, Zagan, Dexia, and Foll were the only ones present in the throne room. Zagan shifted his focus to Dexia next. Or more precisely, he focused on the shadow at her feet.

"You heard us, right, Barbatos? I've got some work for you too."

“Hmph... Feels like it’ll just be some worthless shit.”

“Eep!” Dexia shrieked as Barbatos manifested from her shadow. Excluding Chastille from the battle with “Nephteros” was a favor Zagan had offered him. That had a tremendous cost to it, and Barbatos understood. His tone remained foul, but it was still reserved.

“So? What’re you gonna make me do?”

“No need to worry. It’ll be a simple matter for you. I want you to take Dexia beyond the enemy army’s siege.”

Barbatos scowled. Such a request wasn’t even really work for him.

“That’s all fine and dandy, but what the hell are you gonna do?”

“I’m abandoning my castle. I need to at least dampen the spirits of Shere Khan’s army.”

In other words, he planned to tear through them directly.

“Well, poor them. So? That’s not all you’ve got in store for me, yeah?”

“I’m glad you understand. That makes things faster. You are to ——.”

Zagan’s command changed Barbatos’s complexion entirely.

“Hey...no matter how you slice it, that don’t balance out the crybaby’s safety at all.”

From Barbatos’s perspective, if he only cared about guaranteeing Chastille’s safety, he could’ve simply taken her to a land far away from the flames of war. With his ability to leap through space, he could’ve brought her somewhere nobody could possibly reach. There was no need for him to go out of his way to obey Zagan.

The reason he hadn’t resorted to that was because it involved disregarding and trampling over her will. If need be, he was willing to go that far, even if she hated and scorned him for it, but he wished to

leave that as a last resort. That was what it meant to be under his protection. That was the case, but...

“Crybaby... Cry... Hnnngh.”

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

Barbatos kept repeating the word “crybaby” and suddenly fell to his knees with his hands covering his face.

Uhhh... Did something happen between him and Chastille again? What the hell has he been up to after promising to save Nephteros? Zagan thought, feeling astonished, completely blind to his own shortcomings.

Upon noticing his gaze, Barbatos stood back up and feigned composure.

“I-It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“That so...?”

He was red from his neck to his ears, but Zagan refrained from pointing that out. Barbatos’s turbulent mental state was somewhat unexpected, but his participation in the battle was part of Zagan’s calculations. He did, of course, have the materials ready to make it happen. That was what it meant to read the tide of war.

“This battle will settle things between me and Shere Khan,” Zagan muttered as if talking to himself. “And, depending on how things unfold, it shall conclude matters with Bifrons as well. There are no endings to this where the defeated crawl away with their lives.”

Zagan’s Heaven’s Phosphor Purple Lightning had definitely struck Bifrons...and it was on an entirely different level to the warning he’d once given the Archdemon. Even if they transformed into particles or tried to sever the afflicted limb, they couldn’t escape. Bifrons’s life would only hold out for another few days at most.

But I still can't be careless. Such is what it means to deal with an Archdemon.

Zagan didn't believe the lunatic would go and die quietly somewhere, and he had no intention of letting them live. With that, he turned his gaze to Barbatos once more.

"In other words, at the end of this battle, at least one Sigil of the Archdemon will be available."

It was even possible for more than one to be available. And naturally, there was a nonzero chance that Zagan's would be among them. All of the Archdemons were the same in that they didn't plan on getting killed, but that didn't guarantee anything.

"I'll have my hands full with Shere Khan...and, well, the other Archdemons seem intent on watching from the sidelines. If someone tries to steal one in the middle of the battle, there will likely be nobody to get in their way."

Barbatos looked shocked. Zagan talked of stealing the seat of an Archdemon. He'd already discussed it with Naberius. As such, it would be no trouble for a sorcerer of Barbatos's caliber to steal a Sigil during the chaos of battle. Having said that, so long as he had the power to steal from an Archdemon like that, nobody would complain, anyway.

"Zagan, you being serious...?"

"What? I'm simply stating the truth."

Barbatos ruffled his hair, then burst into laughter like he couldn't take it anymore.

"Hah! I get it now. With such pretty bait out, I've got no choice but to go along with your stupid little scheme, huh?"

It had been quite some time since Zagan had witnessed this gloomy smile of his.

He only ever smiles like this when he's about to do something really horrible, after all... Zagan thought as he grew sure that Barbatos would fulfill his request perfectly.

It wasn't like Barbatos just nodded along in high spirits, however. He sank deep into thought for a bit, then looked up at Zagan.

"Hmph. Although, it's gonna be a little backbreaking to do this on my own. Zagan, you'll have to hand over some of your pawns."

"Very well... Right. There's a pair who work together called Leviathan and Behemoth. They're stationed at Archdemon Palace right now. You may make free use of them."

"Never heard of 'em. Don't they have second names?"

"They don't, but they're very talented."

Barbatos looked dissatisfied, but he knew that Zagan wasn't foolish enough to hand him useless personnel in such a dire situation. All of Zagan's subordinates were sorcerers who'd survived the battle with the Sludge Demon Lord at Bifrons's evening ball, so none of them were truly incompetent.

"Yeah, yeah, fine. I'll have them pull their weight," Barbatos said.

With that, he sank back into the shadows and vanished. Dexia remained confused about being left behind after their discussion, but Zagan figured he would come to pick her up when he was actually ready to go.

He's got bigger things to deal with right now, after all.

Zagan didn't know what had happened between Barbatos and Chastille, and the request he'd forced on his undesirable friend was distressing enough as it was.

Zagan had handed out all his orders, but there was still one person here who had yet to receive any commands.

“Zagan, what should I do?”

Honestly, he hadn't wanted to call Foll here. But what kind of parent would he have been if he didn't acknowledge her growth? Thus, Zagan crouched down in front of her and spoke to her like a father.

“Foll. I don't plan on ordering you to do anything.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

If he wasn't going to order her to do anything, then there was no need to call her to the throne room. Thus, Foll blinked in clear confusion.

“You understand the situation we're in now, correct?” Zagan asked.

“Mhm.”

A battle involving over half the Archdemons was set to begin. There were sure to be schemes revolving around Shere Khan that Zagan couldn't predict. And in that case, Foll was a piece that could turn the entire tide of war depending on where he placed her.

“If you wish to remain as you are right now, then I'll make use of you. Your strength will be of great help to me.”

If Zagan took Foll with him to Shere Khan, it would've been a simple matter to take his head.

“However, if you wish to challenge the future, you must take action based on your own judgment. How will you act in this fight involving multiple Archdemons? You must make that apparent for all to see.”

Zagan took in a small breath before adding one last thing for his beloved daughter.

“After all, the closest to becoming an Archdemon isn't Barbatos, nor is it Shax. It's you, Foll.”

The last Archdemon candidate Zagan had suggested to Naberius had, in fact, been Foll. The beholder wasn't going to involve himself

directly in this battle, but he was going to watch with all ten of his magic eyes. He planned to do so to help select who would occupy the empty seats among the Archdemons created by this chaos. That was why Zagan chose to act like a father.

“Foll, what do you want to do?” he asked, precisely because a selfish part of him wanted her to remain a child.

“I...want...” Foll paused, faltering due to the sudden decision before her. But even so, it didn’t take all that long for her to make up her mind.

“I want...to be stronger. If it’ll get you to acknowledge me, then I want to move much farther ahead.”

A helpless sense of loneliness assaulted Zagan. Nevertheless, he smiled at his beloved daughter from the bottom of his heart and brushed her head.

“Very well, then. Do as you will. You’ve already decided what that is, right?”

“M-Mhm!”

Zagan had gone out of his way to explain the current situation and his plans for Foll’s sake. If not for that, he could’ve simply passed out his orders. Orias, Raphael, Shax, and Barbatos were all experts in their fields, after all.

Foll smiled, tears forming in her eyes, unable to bear the emotions welling up inside her. As if to hide that, she dove into Zagan’s chest.

“Thanks, Zagan. For acknowledging me, I mean... Can I come back here after?”

“Of course you can. No matter how strong you become, you are still our daughter. Make sure you return to us.”

“Mmm... I’m going then, daddy. I love you.”

With that, Foll left the throne room. After seeing her off, Zagan fell to one knee, clutching his chest.

“Huh? A-Are you okay...?”

Dexia, the only person left behind, started panicking, but Zagan didn't have the willpower left to answer her.

Sending one's child away from the nest is such an exhausting affair...

Foll had grown immensely, far surpassing Zagan's wildest imagination. He was delighted to see her growth, but he never thought she'd leave his side so quickly.

Still, I'm sure Foll will one day become the greatest Archdemon in history.

Archdemon Zagan had freely granted her knowledge and power, the high elf Nephy had bestowed her with her blessings and unrivaled affection, and what's more, she had inherited the blood of the world's greatest dragon. One could say she was loved by the world itself. Such a girl had continuously refined her strength in all earnestness, so who could possibly match her?

Still, a father couldn't remain on his knees forever. Thus, Zagan finally rose to his feet.

“Now then, I need to start getting ready myself.”

All the pieces were on the board. No matter what unexpected event occurred, it was impossible to prepare anything new. If he'd misread even a single move, he would be completely and utterly crushed. And just like that, the curtains rose on the collision between Archdemons.

Chapter II: The Opening Shot of a Battle Has to Be Flashy

A command post for the army of Nephilims had been set up in the large prairie located several dozen kilometers to the west of Kianoides. The army was composed of heroes from ages past, but judging by their night patrols, they still needed rest like any others.

Lieutenant Commander Senju poured a cup of coffee in the main tent. Despite his title, he was still a young man in his midthirties, though obviously, the concept of age didn't really make sense to this entire group. He'd died at the age of thirty-five, anyway.

"Here you go, Captain Gariel... Oops, I suppose I should refer to you as Commander Gariel now."

The commander staring down at a map with a scowl was supposed to be the same age as Senju, but looked a fair bit older. This was probably because he'd died at a far later date.

"Just refer to me as Gariel, like before. If you call me Commander Gariel after all this time, I'll feel restless like there's a knife at my back at all times," the commander replied in a disconcerted tone as Senju held out the cup of coffee to him with a wry smile on his face. "To think that I'd get stuck having to team up with you again after passing on."

"It shocks me too... You *did* win the battle after using me as a sacrificial pawn, right?"

"I did... That fight, at least."

"What does that mean?" Senju asked, narrowing his gaze sharply.

"Azazel is a god... Defeating it once or twice wasn't enough to truly destroy it," the commander answered, taking a sip of his coffee and grimacing. "During the second battle, we lost two Silver-Eyed Kings.

In the third, we had no Silver-Eyed King. Me, Bato, and everyone else died.”

“But the world is still intact.”

“Yeah... Marchosias and Alshiera probably figured something out. Bet they paid some kind of unfathomable price too.”

The Marchosias that Senju knew was the sort of man who treated human life as an expenditure to fulfill his goal with little care. He was far more desperate to save the world than any other. That was why everyone had followed him, even if he was inhuman. He would surely have thrown away his own life without any complaints in order to secure the future. That terrifying god didn't exist in this world anymore, after all. That was why Senju and the commander agonized over these facts.

“Now then, what exactly should we be fighting against with the gods gone?” the commander muttered.

Senju had been revived by one of this generation's Archdemons, Shere Khan. Then, he'd been commanded to obliterate the town of Kianoides.

“According to the scouts, Kianoides is a normal, lively town,” Senju reported. “There are no more than a hundred and fifty knights stationed there. People called sorcerers do come and go all the time, but most of the population are ignorant, innocent civilians.”

The commander let out a long sigh and replied, “To think we, who'd staked our lives protecting the world, would have to slaughter innocent civilians.”

The ones gathered here were heroes who'd fought and died for the same cause. Not a single one would happily obey such an absurd order.

“So? What do you plan on doing?” Senju asked.

There was no just cause and no righteousness in this fight. They didn't understand what Shere Khan was thinking, but it didn't seem like this battle was meant to protect anything. Perhaps an inhuman enemy hid in this town, but that still wasn't a reason to slaughter the citizens.

"For now, we have no choice but to obey," the commander stated. "You saw what happened to those guys who defied him, right? As such, we'll pretend to follow orders and wait for the right opportunity."

"Well, I guess there's no other way."

However, doing that meant they couldn't avoid cutting down faultless civilians.

"Haaah... If it was going to end up like this, I'd rather not have gotten promoted," the commander said with a bitter smile. "Let's do our best to keep the deaths to a minimum. For both our enemies and our allies, obviously."

"You remember ordering me to die in battle, right?"

"This time I won't let you die. This time...you'll come back alive."

Despite his cynicism, Senju wasn't all that dissatisfied with the situation. Gariel took far better care of his subordinates than Bato did, at least. Bato was a talented strategist, but his thought pattern closely mirrored Marchosias's, so even though his strategies almost always worked, they often involved many sacrifices. Senju had no intention of dying a dog's death here. Keeping both enemies and allies alive would be quite a strenuous task, but it was one worth doing.

"If we're not killing our enemies, then Sir Kongo won't be taking the front," Senju said. "His Hex Blade can even cross dimensions to cut down his foes, so it's incapable of doing the equivalent of striking with the back of a blade."

“The Sword King? That’s why I’m having him guard our headquarters. He understands this himself, so he didn’t complain.”

Kongo was a master swordsman from their generation who had been bestowed the title Sword King. He hadn’t been chosen by the Seraphic Blades, but he was said to surpass even the Silver-Eyed King in skill. Anyone who saw his golden armor, emblazoned with the heroic emblem of an eagle, believed in their inevitable victory. That same armor still remained in perfect condition, making Senju feel a hint of pity for their enemies. This entire army was made of resurrected heroes. They were the elites who’d fought to the bitter end even after being told they faced a god.

“Gariel... Does it seem almost too quiet to you?” Senju asked, feeling a sudden sense of unease.

“Hm...? Now that you mention it, it does.”

It was the middle of the night, but there were still soldiers out on patrol. Thus, it was far too unnatural to hear no voices whatsoever, let alone the lack of the slightest noise from armored footsteps.

Raiders...? Senju thought. They had a military encampment set up, so one or two enemy attacks wasn’t unexpected. He turned for the exit of the tent.

“Gariel, I’ll go take a look around. You make sure to keep...?”

Even after he called out to the commander, no reply came. Senju turned around and was left utterly speechless. The commander he’d just been speaking to no longer had a head. A second later, a fountain of blood spurted from the decapitated body.

“Gariel?!”

Just as he tried to run over to the fallen commander, Senju felt a dreadful chill and jumped back. Immediately following that, an arm crawled out of the space he’d just been occupying.

What the hell is that?! Is it what killed Gariel?!

The arm looked far too weak to sever a human head, however. Judging that the surprise attack had failed, a body followed it out into the open.

“Tch... What a pain in the ass. Don’t dodge, dammit.”

He was a gloomy-looking man who had a mess of disheveled hair and a sickly complexion. Large bags hung beneath his eyes, while many amulets dangled from his neck, clanging together as he moved.

Is this a sorcerer?! Senju thought as he kept his sword at the ready, fell back, and leaped out of the tent.

“Enemy attack!” he shouted for attention, but suddenly slipped. It hadn’t been raining, yet the ground was wet. Before Senju could question why, a horrible scent assaulted his nose, bringing about an urge to vomit.

This was a scent he’d gotten accustomed to during his life—the smell of blood. He then saw what was around him. Everywhere he looked, soldiers were immobile on the ground. There was no need to check if they were alive.

They’d been annihilated. Senju could tell that he was the only one still breathing here. Furthermore, there was an unbelievable sight mixed in among the bodies—a golden set of armor engraved with the crest of an eagle. It was the symbol of the strongest swordsman. That armor, stained in blood, was also missing a head.

“Impossible. Even Sir Kongo...?”

“Sorry ’bout that. I didn’t mean for it to be a massacre like this, but that’s just how things turned out,” the sorcerer said as he waltzed out of the tent. Senju quaked in fear. Even the man who’d been undoubtedly the strongest of their generation, bestowed with the

Hex Blade, had no way of dealing with this sorcerer. Senju turned pale as the gloomy man looked down at him in pity.

“No need to piss yourself. I actually sympathize with you assholes. I’ll at least make sure you don’t feel nothin’ when I kill you.”

Sweat slicked Senju’s grip on his sword. Even the Sword King had been defeated by this sorcerer without so much as being able to raise his voice. Not only that, but all the soldiers present had been slaughtered without anyone even noticing. Senju didn’t believe even the seraphs of the first Silver-Eyed King’s age were capable of such a feat.

Aaah, it’s the same feeling as back then...

When Senju had first died, it had felt like a knife was constantly at his throat...and he could now feel death right before him, just like back then. Senju took in a small breath. If he was the type to sit back and let himself get killed, he wouldn’t have considered challenging a god in battle a thousand years ago. No matter how hopeless things appeared, these heroes were those who always struggled to the bitter end.

“Don’t belittle me,” Senju said. “Even if I’m no match for you, I can at least drag you down to hell with me.”

“I ain’t belittling none of ya. You guys really are heroes,” the man replied. Despite his tremendous power, the sorcerer didn’t show any pride or carelessness. “That’s why I can’t possibly let you guys fight the crybaby. I don’t got no grudge with you assholes, and I think y’all are pretty damn amazin’, but you’ll hafta die here.”

Nothing he said made any sense, but Senju could still understand. This man had something he had to protect. He was the same as they’d been a thousand years ago. That was what made him strong. That was why he couldn’t afford to lose.

“You face Silver Army Captain Senju Kanno. Prepare yourself!”

“Purgatory Barbatos. I’ll be the next Archdemon.”



The sorcerer swept his arm through the empty air. That was the last thing Senju saw. In the next instant, his entire vision turned red.

What happened?

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't see. He couldn't hear. Yet surprisingly, he felt no pain. And as his consciousness faded, he recalled the sight of the headless Gariel.

Now that I think about it, where did his head go...?

Up until the very end, Senju didn't realize that his head had been sent right next to Gariel's.

◇

“———”

Right around the time Barbatos assassinated the officers, a song reverberated through Shere Khan's military encampment. There were no words. It was a melody made entirely of sound. The beautiful, yet melancholic, tune had an ominous charm to it that made all hearken to it involuntarily. One of the patrolmen even instinctively let out a sigh.

“Is that...singing? What a beautiful voice.”

“We're pretty far from town. Where is it coming from?”

“A battle's about to begin. Someone's probably just immersed in the sentimentality of it.”

Shere Khan's soldiers truly numbered ten thousand. Anywhere from a third to half of them were women, so it wouldn't have been strange for one or two of them to start singing.

“You're right. It does sound like a requiem. It's beautiful, but somewhat depressing as well.”

It felt like something was squeezing on their hearts as they heard the sad song. Perhaps it was a desire to repent the fact that they had to kill innocents. Awoken by the song, several soldiers walked out of their tents.

“Looks like you’re all curious about the singing too,” the patrolman said to them.

“Yeah... What a beautiful song...”

The patrolman furrowed his brow. The soldiers coming out of the tents all had unfocused eyes...and it didn’t look like that was simply because they’d just woken up.

“H-Hey, are you okay?” he asked.

“She’s calling me.”

“What are you—?!”

The patrolman had reached out to shake another man’s shoulders, but was then forced to leap back. The other man had suddenly drawn his sword.

“She’s calling me!” the delirious man yelled, swinging his sword in a frenzy. “I have to go!”

“Gh! What’s going on?! Whatever. Hold him down!”

The remaining soldiers stirred awake upon hearing the patrolman’s voice. They rushed out of their tents in a fluster to pin the frenzied man down.

“Let me go! Let me gooo!”

The rampaging soldier’s strength was abnormal. He swung off all the others who’d tried to hold him down with startling ease.

“What’s going on here?!” a soldier yelled.

“I don’t know! But don’t kill him!” the patrolman ordered.

Among the charms the seraphs used in the past, there'd been one malicious case that could spread death when the victim was killed. Their toys reacted in amusing ways when this happened, after all. Moreover, if they killed him, they wouldn't be able to interrogate him. They had to keep him alive and find out what was going on. Such had been the order, but...

"Hrk?!"

A sword plunged into the rampaging soldier's throat. The one to do it had been the other soldier on patrol.

"What the hell?! Why did you kill him?!"

When the patrolman tried to grab the killer's shoulder, he finally noticed the abnormality.

Who is this...?

The soldier who'd been patrolling with him had suddenly become someone unfamiliar.

"Oh, come on," the unknown man said with a grin. "What kind of question is that? It's kill or be killed, right?"

"A-An intruder!" the patrolman instantly came to that conclusion and screamed. The others reacted immediately. However, the intruder didn't try to run away or put up a fight. Instead, he recklessly dove into the middle of all the soldiers. The unexpected action had several of the soldiers tumbling to the ground. Following that, everyone froze in place.

"Hey, who did that...?"

The intruder was nowhere to be seen.

He's gone...? No! He's pretending to be someone else!

Four of the soldiers who'd fallen to the ground stood back up, but nobody had the time to look for the culprit.

“I have to rush to her side!”

The dead soldier hadn't been the only one to go mad. On the contrary, as the patrolman looked around, he heard similar cries coming from all over the place. It seemed this attack was taking place across the entire encampment. The sudden insanity among the soldiers was already causing many casualties as it was, and there was even an intruder among them maneuvering in the shadows.

“This is the intruder's doing! Find him!” the patrolman yelled.

“Who is it?!”

“I don't know! He's pretending to be one of us!”

Several shouts went around, but that only further spread the chaos. Knowledge of an intruder was made known, leading the sane soldiers to believe that this madness was their doing. However, the intruder was pretending to be one of them.

“How are we supposed to find someone like that?!”

Despite the patrolman's rage, the intruder kept appearing here and there, cutting down his comrades and vanishing each and every time.

What the hell is this...? Is he provoking me?

The intruder was cutting people down, but most of the victims were left breathing. Many of them had only suffered minor scratches for some reason.

Perhaps the time he could spend imitating another was limited in some way, but there was still no need for him to try to stand out. With the ongoing chaos, it would've been simpler to slip away once nobody knew who he was anymore.

“Crap! It's a diversion! Don't be misled! He's a decoy!”

The more yelling there was, the more the chaos spread. Killing people would spread fear, but it would also keep people on guard

and keep the chaos to a minimum. In other words, the intruder was trying to conceal something else by attracting attention to himself. In that case, what was he hiding? The patrolman came to the answer immediately.

The song!

The requiem was still reverberating through the encampment. Thinking back on it, this had all started with that melody. However, nobody around him was calm enough to pay attention to his orders.

I'll have to do it myself!

All the Nephilims resurrected by Shere Khan were heroes of the past. The patrolman also possessed the strength and wit necessary to rival such a title. Thus, he dashed off on his own toward the source of the singing, sure of his victory. After running for a while, he came upon a lake in the middle of all the tents. The encampment had been set up here to make use of the lake as a water source, so that was only natural. There was a girl at the edge of the lake. She looked somewhere around seventeen or eighteen, not yet old enough to call a woman. Her beautiful waist-long blue hair swayed about as she remained seated on a rock and innocently continued her song. He could tell what she was based on the characteristic fins she had for ears.

A siren...?

Illuminated under the half-moon, her figure appeared abnormal. First, she had no arms. Well, she did, but the long sleeves of her overcoat tied her arms up entirely with belts and chains. The belts had ominous crests carved along their length, while an enormous lock hung over her chest as if holding them all together. It looked like some sort of straitjacket, honestly.

“A girl...? You’re the one responsible for this chaos?!”

When he shouted, the girl finally realized he was there and opened her eyes. Blue pupils the same color as her hair peered back at him. Even as the patrolman readied his sword, she continued her song.

“I don’t want to cut a girl down, but I have no choice! Prepare yourself!”

The soldier brandished his sword, but suddenly couldn’t feel the hilt in his hand anymore.

“Sorry. I borrowed her. Touching is off-limits.”

The sword that should’ve been in his hand was somehow sticking out of the patrolman’s own chest.

“Gah... Hak...”

And without even understanding what had happened, he perished.



The soldier collapsed with a thud.

“Hmph. He sniffed this place out pretty quick. I’m sure the guy had skill.”

Barbatos now understood that every single soldier here was elite. It would be dangerous even for a first-rate sorcerer to take them head-on. With that thought in mind, he let out a groan.

“So wait, am I actually really strong...?”

If so, why did he always get punched by Zagan and pushed around? Barbatos nearly let out a long sigh, but he had no choice but to keep at it with the seat of an Archdemon dangling in front of him. The girl in the straitjacket stared at him as he grumbled to himself.

“Oh, don’t mind me. You just keep singing. I still haven’t hit half my quota yet.”

Upon hearing that, the girl nodded and got back to singing her Hex Song.

A blue-haired siren... Is she Zagan and that other siren's relative?

Sirens were already a rare species to begin with, but blue-haired specimens were especially rare. Maybe they were connected somehow. It had nothing to do with Barbatos, but it did pique his interest.

"Levia!" called a voice shortly after Barbatos had finished off the soldier approaching the girl. A strangely dressed man ran toward them. He wore a typical robe, but had several thick leather belts wrapped around his face. From the tiny part of a red eye that was barely visible through the gaps, he could at least be identified as somewhat human.

Barbatos had no idea about his physique, but his voice was that of a young man. The girl's body was covered in bindings, just like the man's face. This was Behemoth, while the girl was Leviathan. Zagan had lent these two sorcerers to Barbatos. Seeing Leviathan hum her Hex Song, Behemoth let out a sigh of relief.

"Barbatos, did you protect her?" he asked.

"I always return what I borrow. No way I'm gonna give you two back broken."

If Zagan had heard Barbatos say that, he'd likely have flown over with Shadow Sever to punch him in the face.

"I thought you were more selfish a man," Behemoth said with a surprised look on his face. "Allow me to apologize."

"Huh? Sorcerers are selfish by nature. The hell are you saying?"

"Ha ha. Let's just leave it at that, then," Behemoth stated as he smiled, perhaps under some kind of misunderstanding. After that, his

red eye shifted to Barbatos's arm. "To think you'd get injured. He must have been quite skilled."

Only then did Barbatos notice the blood running down his right arm.

"Oh. Nah, someone else did this. The commander here had some asshole in flashy gold armor protecting him. He's the one who hit me."

"I guess if they aim for when you come out of the shadows, even you can get hurt, huh?" Behemoth commented with an understanding nod.

"Nope, I got cut while inside the shadows," Barbatos said with a shake of the head. "Honestly, it freaked me the hell out. Thanks to that, I got stuck having to massacre the whole lot of them."

Barbatos would've been fine only assassinating the commander and his lieutenant, but he'd been detected by the man in golden armor. He never thought a sword would reach him inside the shadows, so it shook him pretty badly. And as a result, he'd ended up having to kill every last one of them.

"He cut you *inside* your shadow...?" Behemoth asked in disbelief.

"Was he actually stronger than an Archangel?"

"Who knows? Archangels come in all sorts, apparently."

Barbatos had been under the impression that all Archangels were about as strong as Chastille, but that wasn't at all the case. They had a ranking system based on individual strength. The weakest of them weren't all that much stronger than the average Angelic Knight. On the other hand, Barbatos wasn't confident he'd be able to kill the upper ranks like Raphael. If one took the average, then the golden armored guy had, in fact, been stronger.

In terms of pure skill, forget the average, he might've been better than the crybaby...

The power to cut Barbatos in the shadows likely came from his weapon, but the ability to sense him had definitely been pure skill on the man's part. No knight in this generation could match him, which made it all the more fortuitous that Barbatos had killed him.

"Oh... But I guess we've got that catgirl at the crybaby's place too."

He spoke, of course, of Kuroka. Barbatos's assassination technique involved opening subspace right above his target's neck and closing it. Under the right conditions, he could even kill the likes of an Archdemon. This was Barbatos's arena. One big reason he could unilaterally slaughter the heroes, who probably surpassed the Archangels, was because they didn't truly understand sorcery.

Kuroka, on the other hand, knew sorcerers all too well. Annoyingly enough, that girl specialized in killing sorcerers. Her swords probably couldn't reach Barbatos in the shadows, but unlike these guys, she'd be able to dodge the moment he tried to decapitate her and counterattack. If they fought, he'd be dragged out of his arena. What's more, she was stupidly skilled with a sword. Barbatos feared having to seriously fight Zagan the most, but Kuroka came a close second.

Anyway, this wound is healing awful slow.

It wasn't that deep, but sorcery wasn't having much of an effect on it. If he didn't at least stop the bleeding, the smell and blood trail could give him away. The soldiers here were all elites beyond the average Angelic Knight, after all. Thus, Barbatos tore off a piece of cloth and wrapped up his wound as Behemoth ran over to Levia and put his hand to her cheek.

"Levia, don't push yourself, okay?" he said, turning a gallant gaze toward her. "If you get tired, just take a break."

Behemoth acted as if he was handling the most fragile of treasures. This piqued Barbatos's curiosity.

“You two know each other long?” he asked.

“Hm? Let’s see... Five hundred years, I think?” Behemoth answered.

“It’s only been 498 years,” Levia corrected, her voice sounding like a crystal chime. She stopped her song and leaned against Behemoth’s shoulder.

“You’re right. So it still hasn’t been five hundred years...” Behemoth said, gently stroking her hair.

Five hundred years? Don’t that make them real big-shot sorcerers? Barbatos thought as he groaned.

Sorcerers gained might in proportion to the knowledge they stockpiled. Thus, in their world, the accumulation of knowledge was the same as the accumulation of age. Even Enchantress Gremory was only five hundred years old. The youngest Archdemon before Zagan had just hit three hundred at the time. Even at a somewhat leisurely pace, five hundred years was enough to reach the territory of the Archdemons.

These two did, in fact, possess terrifying power. Levia’s Hex Song had enchanted an army of ten thousand, while Behemoth had fought off elite soldiers who could even wound Barbatos without killing most of them. Zagan hadn’t been lying when he called them talented.

That didn’t only apply to these two either. Shax was so skilled a sorcerer that Barbatos often wondered how he didn’t have a second name. In fact, many terrifying sorcerers with no second names worked under Zagan. How could Barbatos not be curious about them? The Archdemon’s seat was within his grasp, so it bothered him all the more.

“Don’t you two care about building your reputations?” Barbatos asked.

“Hm? Oh... Our reason for wanting power is a little different from other sorcerers,” Behemoth replied.

“What do you mean?”

Behemoth paused for a moment, touching Levia’s cheek once more. He had a nostalgic yet somber look in his eyes as he gave his answer.

“Levia and I had a...troublesome curse cast on us during a certain incident. We became sorcerers in order to dispel it.”

“A curse, huh? Well, that’s no good...”

Several months ago, Barbatos had witnessed the incident with Decarabia/Stella on that uninhabited island. There’d also been the case of Zagan turning into a child—which was honestly hilarious. None of these cases were due to sorcery, and each had been accompanied by a fathomless eeriness that violated their very beings from their roots.

Behemoth undid the bindings over his face a little, revealing what they hid beneath. His skin was densely covered in thick hair.

“A therianthrope...? No...what are you?” Barbatos asked.

“Who knows? I certainly don’t. I’ve got a bit of cow, elephant, and even horse in me, apparently. I can’t even see for myself,” he said. The man was likely some kind of chimera. Barbatos grimaced as Behemoth continued, “We were transformed by this curse. I become like this at night, while Levia changes during the day. When we turn, we forget who we even are and can no longer communicate.”

“So you became sorcerers to fix that?”

Levia nodded, then whispered, “But...it was all for nothing.”

“Our five hundred years of work ended in vain,” Behemoth added. However, oddly enough, both of them were in human form now and could talk, strange as they were. “That’s why our power is just kind

of a side bonus. We didn't acquire strength because we wanted to. It wasn't what we sought at all."

Five hundred years. At twenty-one, Barbatos couldn't even imagine that length of time. This fact was unknown to Barbatos, but even Archdemon Furcas had been crushed by such a length of time and had forgotten what he'd been searching for. Still, for whatever reason, Barbatos felt a sense of affinity with these two.

"How do I put this...? Weren't you scared?" he asked them. "It was five hundred years, yeah? And you couldn't even talk to each other? Forget turning back, didn't you wonder whether you even remembered each other? You lived in different places and times, after all..."

For some reason, Barbatos was reminded of that stupidly serious girl's face.

Oh, right. Sorcerers and Angelic Knights live in different places and times too...

Behemoth and Levia exchanged looks, then answered as if they did not need to give his question any serious thought.

"Even so, we wanted to see each other once more," they replied in unison.

The difference between them and Furcas was that they'd sought each other out. Even if one had been about to give up, they'd stayed strong and endured so long as the other believed in the possibility. By doing so, the two of them had lived for five hundred years, even if it felt like it had all been in vain.

"Because you wanted to see each other... Is that kinda reason enough...?" Barbatos muttered.

“I don’t know who you’re asking that question for, but it was for us,” Behemoth said. “That’s why we’ll continue living until we can see each other properly again.”

Barbatos didn’t even know whom he’d been asking that for himself, but the words still felt like some sort of salvation to him.

“Hmph. You two are kinda fun,” he said, ruffling his hair before forming his usual smile. “You’ve grown on me. When I take the seat of Archdemon, I’ll let you two be my underlings. I’ll treat you good, you hear?”

Before Behemoth could answer, Levia shook her head. She then squeezed Behemoth’s arm tightly.

“I’m fine with working for Zagan...” she said. “That boy’s place is cozy.”

“So she says,” Behemoth added with a shrug. “Sorry, try someone else.”

“Tch... Your loss. You’ll regret this,” Barbatos said, having just finished wrapping up his wound. “Anyway, I’m goin’ back to work now. Gotta off another fifty people before the night’s over.”

An army couldn’t be put into action by one man’s will. Even if there was only one commander, they needed many officers for orders to be relayed properly. Officers went all the way down to the squad level of just a handful of men, so in an army of ten thousand, there were hundreds of them.

Barbatos’s job was to assassinate around a hundred officers. An army without a head couldn’t function as an army, after all. That would buy a significant amount of time until they could reorganize their ranks. Barbatos knew nothing of the art of war, but it still sounded like a good plan to him.

I hate that I’m the one actually carrying it out, though.

Going around assassinating a hundred people in an encampment of ten thousand was the definition of madness. What's more, the soldiers here were all heroes of renown. A single moment of laxity was enough for a former Archdemon candidate to be struck down in the attempt. He had to keep up this dangerous work for an entire night, so he couldn't help but grumble about it once or twice.

Having said that, the more Barbatos slacked off, the larger the burden on Chastille's shoulders would be when she took the front. Thus, his only choice was to give this task everything he had. He'd really gotten baited into this job perfectly. Even while annoyed by it all, he had started sinking into the shadows when a sudden thought came to mind.

"Uhhh... Right. You two, be wary of Gremory," he said. "You get caught up with her, and it'll be a big pain in the ass for you."

He still didn't understand the gibberish that came from that granny's mouth. Getting involved with her was simply far too troublesome. It wasn't like he ever came to any harm due to her antics, but being toyed around with just felt bad. That was why he gave the two of them a warning, since something about them made him think the same would likely happen to them.

"You're a little late," Behemoth said, a look of exhaustion on his face. "I'd rather have heard that warning at the start of the year."

"She's not a bad girl...but her actions are certainly a bother," Levia added, sounding equally exhausted as her partner.

So it was already too late. The beginning of the year was around the time Zagan had that big bath made in his castle and they'd had the encounter with that Azazel creature. Now that Barbatos thought of it, Gremory had been stationed at Archdemon Palace instead of the castle around then. Perhaps Zagan had left these two at Archdemon Palace precisely because he knew how it'd turn out.

“Well...my condolences,” Barbatos said.

“Right, well, you should keep an eye out,” Behemoth replied.

With that, a strange friendship sprouted between the three of them.



“This place emptied out faster than expected...”

While Barbatos’s group wreaked havoc among Shere Khan’s army, Zagan gazed up at his castle. The retreat to Archdemon Palace had been completed within an hour. Teleportation sorcery had already been in place between the two places to begin with, and Zagan’s subordinates were all sorcerers who kept everything important in their back pockets. A retreat could be carried out simply by having everyone move through the teleportation circle.

The castle had once been a graveyard of corpses and torture devices, but after Nephy’s arrival, it had become somewhat cleaner. With Foll, Raphael, that troublesome granny, Kimaris, and his forty subordinates living here, not a hint of its former self could be seen anywhere. Zagan had quickly decided to abandon it, but he still had a sentimental desire to look back on it one last time.

No. I just need to get back here quickly. That’s all... Zagan thought as he faced forward and stepped into the teleportation circle. A vertigo-like sensation akin to floating in the air took him, and the scenery changed to that of the gloomy underground gate to Archdemon Palace.

Light from his sorcery illuminated the enormous cave beneath Kianoides, revealing the palace towering over him. Thirty of his subordinates—those who were not preoccupied with other tasks—lined up in front of the gates to greet him. Raphael stood at their head. He had changed from his butler uniform to Valefor’s armor.

Noncombatants like Lilith and Furcas weren't among them, of course, but they were still listening from a short distance away. Dexia was with that group. Nephy, Orias, and Foll weren't present. They'd already departed to fulfill their respective duties. Kuroka was a member of the church, so she'd gone to help Chastille.

There was no time to spare during such an emergency, but these subordinates of his were about to lay their lives on the line, so he had a duty as their king to give them a proper explanation. Zagan looked each one of them in the eyes, then gave them all a nod.

"Time is short, so I'll make this quick. I'm sure you've all heard that Shere Khan has unleashed an army of ten thousand upon us. They've made camp a couple dozen kilometers away from Kianoides and will march on the town at dawn. We must stop them."

His subordinates had already steeled themselves. Not a single brow twitched when faced with this hopeless situation.

"Given time, we can keep casualties to a bare minimum, but we have no such luxury. Our deadline is in three days at sunset. We'll end everything by then."

Kianoides was Zagan's domain. A barrier protected the town at all times. If he was so inclined, he could cut it off from the outside world and force a siege. If they did that and whittled away at the enemy forces on the outside, they could win while maintaining zero casualties. However, Nephy had pleaded with him to end this in three days. Failing to satisfy her was no different from defeat. Thus, he would step out himself.

"I shall go take Shere Khan's head. Everything will be settled if I kill him, but that won't be so easy. I need your strength, so I'll be putting you to work."

"As you will!" all his promising subordinates yelled in unison.

Such were the fruits of Raphael's daily leadership. This was all he really had to say, but Zagan thought it over for a bit, then faced his subordinates once more.

"Also, this is just a personal matter... In truth, Nephy's birthday is coming up."

Everyone looked at him with lukewarm gazes as if asking if that was why he was in such a rush. He wanted to smack them for it, but held back that urge and cleared out his throat.

"So, um...I've heard of a custom involving a w-wedding ring. In order to give her one with peace of mind, I'm going to need the likes of Shere Khan and Bifrons gone."

In other words, he wanted everything to be settled in this battle. That wasn't exactly what Zagan had wanted to get across, though.

"At that time, there's a need for us to receive the blessings of others, or so it seems. I'd like all of you to do so. I won't forgive any of you for dying. You hear me?"

All of his subordinates turned to look at each other. They all had the vague, wry, yet gentle smile of a guardian watching over a child. Unable to bear the atmosphere, Zagan threw out his arm at them.

"Then go! The rewards shall be plentiful! Live up to my expectations!"

"Kaaay!"

Their childish reply was in complete contrast to their reliable one mere moments ago. The group dispersed to tend to their own duties as Raphael walked up to Zagan.

"My liege."

"Not a word."

Zagan could see it for himself. His speech had been less about encouraging his subordinates and more about bragging about his love life. Nevertheless, Raphael shrugged and shook his head.

“In the end, it worked out fine,” the butler stated. “Their tension is gone, and they’ll be able to do their work as they usually do. Perhaps they have loosened up *too* much, but it’s far better than being mentally exhausted.”

“Well, if you say so...” Zagan said as he covered his face and let out a sigh, then pulled himself together and shook his head. “Raphael. Just as I said, we’ll end this in three days. It might be pointless, but capture anyone who surrenders.”

According to Kuroka’s report, Shere Khan’s underlings—the so-called Nephilims—were incapable of defying his orders. They were being forced to fight even if they didn’t want to. It was somewhat sad, but Zagan didn’t have the leisure to take their feelings into consideration. Raphael understood this as he nodded back at Zagan with a sympathetic look on his face.

“As you will.”

Next, Zagan stood before the noncombatants and found an unexpected face among them.

Oh, I guess she was sticking with Stella... And with that on his mind, he started with Lilith.

“Your Highness? What should we be doing?” she asked.

“You lot will do the same as always. Get to the kitchen. Sorcerers can work for a whole day without food, but morale will drop. Besides, Angelic Knights can’t fight on empty stomachs. It’ll be rough, since you’re short on hands, but your role is an important one. Put in some work and make up for quantity with quality.”

The battle was to go on for three days. That called for provisions and cooks. In a way, one could say they were more important than weapons and military personnel. Both Lilith and Selphy were agape at his order.

“What, dissatisfied?” he asked them.

“No, that’s not it...” Lilith muttered. “I hadn’t even thought of food, so...”

“Everyone is going to be up to their eyes with work. That’s the gist of it... Furcas, you at least know how to peel vegetables, right? Help them out.”

“Yeah! Leave it to me, bro!”

“Lilith, Selphy, I’ll need your strength for more than just cooking. In short—”

Zagan went on to explain his plan, leaving Lilith stiff in the face. That stood to reason. In a sense, this job was far more dangerous than what Kuroka and everyone else at the front line had to do. Lilith trembled at the thought, while Selphy hugged her from behind.

“It’s okay, Lilith,” she said. “I’m with you. I’ll definitely keep you safe.”

Those words brought her trembling to a stop.

“H-Hmph! I-I’m not scared or anything! I was just a little surprised!”

“Heh heh. You’re best when you’re like that, Lilith.”

Selphy went as far as rubbing her cheek against Lilith’s, making Furcas cover his eyes as if he shouldn’t be watching.

“Leave it to me, Your Highness,” Lilith finally replied with a resolute look. “I’ll show you the full strength of Princess Lilithiera of the succubi.”

Pleased with her attitude, Zagan patted the prideful girl on the head.

“Yeah. I’m looking forward to it. Furcas, that goes for you too. Protect them.”

If you don’t show her your good side when it matters, Selphy is seriously going to snatch her away from you...

Selphy had apparently made some kind of breakthrough after consulting Zagan the other day. She was very proactively on the move. At this rate, it would take less than a month for Lilith to capitulate.

“Of course!” Furcas shouted with a nod and a proud thump of his chest. “I’ll be sure to protect them both!”

“Hmm?” Selphy muttered in an overpowering tone.

A cold bead of sweat ran down Furcas’s cheek. Just then, Zagan suddenly noticed something.

“Furcas, what’s that in your hand?” he asked.

“Huh? Oh, this? Miss Alshiera left it with me the other night,” Furcas answered, holding up the white Seraph Hunter in his hand.

“Alshiera did...?”

Zagan found that extremely suspicious.

What is she thinking, leaving this behind at such a time?

Even without such power, Alshiera was the ultimate vampire. However, her prey was none other than Azazel. She wasn’t supposed to have the leisure to share what power she had with Furcas.

“B-Bro, I don’t know what she did,” Furcas started in a trembling voice, “but don’t be too mad at her. I think, just maybe, she still wants to help you...”

Zagan wasn’t the only one looking at him wide-eyed. Even Lilith and Selphy seemed surprised.

Did something come to mind even though he's missing his memories?

Alshiera's true intentions weren't clear, but she'd acted in a way that appeared hostile to everyone around her. Despite this, Furcas could understand her.

"Then go tell her to brush up on her acting skills," Zagan said, averting his gaze as if playing dumb. "Going along with her lousy farce is a huge pain in the ass."

"Y-Yeah! I'll tell her for you!"

If Furcas was the one to tell Alshiera that her acting sucked, it would deal a slight blow to her. Satisfied with getting some unexpected revenge against the vampire, Zagan moved on to the next person in line.

"Lisette. What will you do?"

This girl had the same face as Dexia and was also Zagan's little sister from the streets. Zagan's older sister from the streets was supposed to be watching her, but Stella was severely wounded and unconscious. Shax had brought her and the equally injured Ginias to the church, so Zagan had missed seeing them on their way out of here.

Huh? Now that I think of it, what about that Sacred Sword?

The Archangel named Valjakka had died, so after retrieving the Sacred Sword, Zagan had left it in Ginias's care, but now the boy was unconscious.

We didn't leave it behind in Manuela's shop, did we?

Even if there hadn't really been the time to give it any thought due to the incident with Nephteros, that would've been far too careless of them. An ownerless Sacred Sword was no better than a paperweight,

but if by some chance it had chosen someone, it could turn the tides of battle.

“What should I do...?” Lisette asked, looking up at Zagan with no way of knowing the dilemma going through his mind. “I want to go be by Stella’s side, but...”

Lisette threw a glance toward Dexia, who was standing next to her. These two had the same face. Lisette was probably aware that Dexia’s younger sister, Aristella, who was still a captive, could be dead. Just like Zagan, Lisette had no memories from before she was a waif in the streets. It was extremely likely that Shere Khan was somehow involved in her birth. However, with no way of fighting, there was very little she could accomplish. Zagan hesitated for a moment, then squatted down in front of her to match her eyeline.

“Allow me to provide you with a warning as your fellow sibling of the streets. Nothing interesting will come of constantly ruminating over your past. You’re better off treating the people who stay by your side dearly.”

Zagan had sought out knowledge that revealed the Silver-Eyed King was his father and the true identity of his old friend Marc. But what had he really gained by doing so? All he knew now was that he had an enemy that he had to kill.

Still, I wanted to know whom exactly I had to kill and searched for the answers.

To this day, he didn’t know whether that was for better or worse. Nevertheless, it had been a necessity. But that wasn’t the case for Lisette.

“Mmm...” she muttered with a nod.

It was questionable whether she really understood him. Zagan knew by looking at Dexia and Aristella that Shere Khan was, in some way, connected to her. One could even say the Tiger King had some kind

of fixation on her. There was some meaning behind creating Dexia and Aristella to look the way they did. And now, that Archdemon had Gremory captive.

Huh...? Is Gremory in any way capable of remaining quiet while captive with someone like that in front of her?

A certain anxiety began brewing within Zagan, but he realized when faced with that monster of an Archdemon who'd calculated how everything would go so far ahead with such precision, Gremory couldn't possibly do anything. Probably.

Dexia opened her mouth as if she had something to say to Lisette, but couldn't get her voice to come out. She had her hands full as it was. Her fate was uncertain, so she couldn't possibly think of what she could say for someone else's sake. Instead of providing her any comfort, Zagan addressed her in a strict tone.

"Barbatos will come to get you soon. Get ready to go."

"Okay..."

People were better off not thinking about unnecessary things when they had something they had to face themselves. Now that Zagan had chosen to take her under his wing, he would at least show her that level of kindness. It was about time for him to head out himself, so Zagan sought out his loyal butler once more.

"Raphael."

"Did you need something?" Raphael asked, turning around after passing orders out to the others.

"We lost track of where one of the Sacred Swords went. If you find it, secure it."

"A Sacred Sword...? Missing...you say?" Raphael asked, wide-eyed.

"Yeah. That Valjakka guy's sword. He tried to attack Kuroka and died by accident."

Yes, that had been an accidental death, or perhaps even suicide. He'd ignored Zagan's warning and done it to himself, after all. Kuroka held no responsibility whatsoever. And throwing back at a glance at his speechless butler, Zagan left Archdemon Palace.



Upon returning to the church, Kuroka found the place as busy as a beehive. Well, that *did* make sense. A giant army had suddenly appeared within marching distance of town, after all.

Teleportation sorcery done on a terrifying scale. They probably spent a few months just preparing that alone.

The invasion itself had yet to truly begin, but they were already at war.

"Mister Shax, take care of things here. I'm going to go report to Lady Chastille."

"Kurosuke."

Just as she was about to run off, Shax called her to a stop. Something about his voice sounded different from usual, shocking her for an instant.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Um... Just...don't overdo it, okay?"

"Aren't you the one who's always overdoing it?"

It honestly bothered her. He disliked fighting, but was always getting injured while trying to protect her. Did he understand how badly she fretted whenever she watched that happen? Had something happened during his meeting with Zagan? In any case, she knew he was genuinely worried about her safety. Besides, even if she worried about him constantly, she didn't want Shax to feel the same thing. As such, she returned an honest nod.

“Very well. I’ll only overdo it when you’re around,” she said.

“Oh, come on...”

“Hee hee. Off I go.”

With that, she hurried over to Chastille.

This will be easier if she’s her everyday self... Kuroka thought. She doubted that Chastille would be in crybaby mode during such a crisis, though. As such, the simple act of giving this report would be a backbreaking job.

“All Angelic Knights get ready to move out at any moment! Everyone else guide the citizens in the evacuation! Send word to Raziel for reinforcement!”

Upon entering the office, Kuroka was greeted by Chastille barking out orders restlessly. She had a grim expression on her face, which made her usual crybaby self seem like a lie. Once she spotted Kuroka, though, her expression brightened up just a little.

“Kuroka, you’re back,” she said.

Work-mode Chastille was firm and resolute, but she still couldn’t hide the relief in her voice. Her best friend, Nephtheros, was nowhere in sight, and Barbatos probably wasn’t responding to anything she said right now. Nephy had also left Kianoides on some mission of her own.

This girl was burdened with the responsibility of protecting the citizens of this town while faced with an army nearly a hundred times the size of her own forces. That was far too heavy a burden for a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old girl, and yet, not the slightest hint of such a weight bearing down on her could be seen in her features. She had a will of steel. She truly did possess the caliber to stand above others, which was something Kuroka sorely lacked.

“I apologize for arriving so late, Lady Chastille,” Kuroka replied with an affectionate and grateful smile. “Kuroka Adelhide, here to give my report.”

After taking a light bow, Kuroka glanced around the room. The Three Knights of the Azure Sky and a few priests were present. The knights wouldn't be a problem, but she couldn't pass on word from an Archdemon in front of the priests. She wanted to get her report out of the way quickly, but this stalled things.

“Don't worry about them,” Chastille said with a smile upon noticing Kuroka's gaze. “They're members of the Unification Faction.”

“Very well. Then, to keep it brief—”

Barbatos would usually have been the one bringing this kind of news over, but that man was currently extremely busy fulfilling Zagan's orders. Kuroka summed up the situation quickly. She told Chastille that they'd located Shere Khan's hiding place, that they'd taken Dexia into custody in the process, and that Archdemon Zagan had taken the girl in. She then told her about Archangel Valjakka's death. This rendered Chastille wide-eyed and speechless.

“No way... Someone as strong as Lord Valjakka...killed?”

Kuroka felt like she was telling a lie, which pained her heart.

Not that I actually lied...

Zagan and Shax had emphasized to her multiple times to pin the blame for Valjakka's death on Shere Khan. Well, in the end, he'd actually been the one to kill himself, so it was questionable to say that Kuroka had done so. Still, she'd definitely been the one to set the stage for his death.

“Could you tell me...how his last moments went?” Chastille asked in a trembling voice, trying to hide how shaken she was by the news.

“Huh? Umm...he fought bravely to the bitter end.”

That was the answer Shax had prepared for her beforehand.

Now that's a complete and utter lie...

In truth, the man had been tormenting a helpless little girl and was just about to kill her, and then, when it came time to cross blades, he'd been defeated the very instant his hand touched his sword. Saying all that meant treating the despicable man, one she loathed from the bottom of her heart, like some kind of hero. Kuroka clutched at her chest, tortured by pangs of guilt. And perhaps interpreting this as an act of grievance, Chastille covered her mouth and cried.

It looks like she never even doubted him...

With no way of knowing the man had tried to ruin her, Chastille cried genuine tears of sorrow. Kuroka didn't dare to make her feel even worse and instead remained extremely uncomfortable.

"What of his body?" Chastille asked after pulling herself together.

"Forgive me, we left it behind in Feo. We retrieved his Sacred Sword and have entrusted it to Lord Ginias."

"Ginias? You met Lord Galahad too?"

Now that she mentioned it, Kuroka realized she hadn't finished her report.

"Head Archangel Lord Ginias Galahad II and Archangel Lady Stella Diekmeyer are in Kianoides. However—"

Kuroka went on to explain how the two of them had been heavily injured in battle, leaving out any mention of Nephteros.

"Impossible. Even Stella was defeated?"

Chastille knew of Stella's strength. She was only number two in the Archangel rankings, but with the power of both a sorcerer and an

Angelic Knight, she was essentially the strongest Angelic Knight in active service. Chastille staggered as if struck by a dizzy spell.

“How are the two of them now?” she asked, urging the conversation forward.

“We’ve brought them to the church. Mister Shax is treating them, so they are in no danger of dying.”

Chastille sighed in relief, then turned to the three knights.

“Two of you should go check on their condition. It’ll be like whipping up the wounded, but right now we need every fighting hand we can get.”

The spearman and the shieldbearer quickly dashed out of the office. Everything up until now had gone well, but Kuroka’s report still wasn’t over.

I can’t possibly leave out Lady Nephteros and Sir Richard, can I...?

Zagan had told her not to speak of Nephteros, but she at least had to tell Chastille that the dark elf wouldn’t be returning. She took in a deep breath, then quickly cut to the chase.

“Also, about Lady Nephteros and Sir Richard...”

“D-Do you know something?! Don’t tell me they’re...”

Chastille worried about Nephteros more than any other. Her absence definitely weighed on Chastille’s mind. She simply hadn’t been able to bring herself to broach the subject. Now that Kuroka had mentioned her name, Chastille lunged at the opportunity to find out what had happened to her dear friend.

“Sir Richard is in bad shape after taking a hit from Archdemon Bifrons. We’ve managed to keep him alive somehow, but his condition is uncertain, so Archdemon Zagan is sheltering him.”

“Bifrons...you say?”

Chastille stiffened at the mention of that Archdemon. Nephteros's former master, the one who'd created her as a homunculus based on Nephy, was the ringleader behind all the misfortune that had befallen the poor girl. Kuroka suppressed any and all emotion and continued her report expressionlessly.

"Bifrons is chasing Lady Nephteros. Lady Nephy and her mother are headed that way as well. She can't return here, but there's no need for concern."

She'd resorted to mentioning Nephy. Would that actually be enough to get Chastille to believe her? Chastille stared at her for a while. At times like these, Kuroka actually found her rather frightening. Chastille was calm and collected and extremely sharp, completely contrasting her usual crybaby behavior. Kuroka was sure that Chastille knew that she was hiding things in her report. The question was how much she could tell was a lie.

"Nephy and Lady Orias have gone to save her?" she asked after a while, her voice chillingly cold.

"They've gone after her."

Silence fell over the room. Everyone aside from the two girls gulped.

That's the head of the Unification Faction for you. She's not accepting the whole story.

Kuroka recalled how Shax had told her not to overdo things. Something had likely happened during his meeting with Zagan. Regardless, perhaps those words had also been meant for this meeting with Chastille.

Chastille knew that Nephteros was in danger. She also knew that Nephy and Orias had gone to save her. There was an intense air of hostility in Chastille's eyes, knowing that Kuroka was hiding the truth about her friend's predicament. If Kuroka relaxed her focus even a little, cold sweat would surely run down her face. However, if she

allowed even a single bead of sweat to show, Chastille would press her for answers about every single detail. Their fierce staring contest went on for just a few seconds. Before long, Chastille let out a small sigh.

“Fine. I’ll put my faith in your words, Kuroka.”

“Thank you very much.”

Kuroka bowed gracefully before letting out a secret sigh of her own.

That was scary...

Chastille was often called a crybaby and a softhearted fool, but at the moment, Kuroka saw a coolheadedness in her that reminded her of Zagan. Things simply never deteriorated to such a state because of her character. Once this girl decided to do something, she always resolved to get it done by any means necessary.

Kuroka could understand why that was, just a little.

Someone who is kind to everyone doesn’t actually love them all, after all.

This girl thought more dearly of her friend than anyone else. That was why a certain doubt came to Kuroka’s mind.

She should be necessary to save Lady Nephteros. So why...?

Nephteros was in despair after witnessing Richard’s heart get gouged out before her eyes. Now that a monster had usurped her body, wasn’t Chastille the only one who could bring her back and give her some hope in living? And yet, Zagan had decided not to get her involved. He had his own idea in mind, apparently, so he was sure to save Nephteros. Kuroka believed in him, but still found the situation extremely confusing.

“Thus concludes my report,” Kuroka said.

“Understood. I’m sorry for not giving you any time to rest. Please get ready to head out.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Just then, hurried footsteps approached the doorway.

“Lady Chastille.”

One of the Angelic Knights who’d gone to check on Ginias and Stella entered the office.

“Torres, how are they?” Chastille asked him.

“Lord Galahad has regained consciousness and is preparing for battle. Lady Diekmeyer’s wounds aren’t fatal, but she has yet to awaken.”

Stella had taken a blow from “Nephteros” head-on. Thanks to that, Kuroka and all the others had been saved, but Stella had suffered far greater damage than even Ginias had in exchange. She’d lost a significant amount of blood. It was questionable whether she would wake up before the battle was over. Chastille scowled at the loss of the Angelic Knights’ strongest combatant.

“Also, Lord Galahad mentioned something a little concerning...” the spearman continued.

“What about?”

The spearman hesitated for a moment, then timidly said, “According to him, Lord Valjakka’s Sacred Sword is nowhere to be found.”

Both Chastille’s and Kuroka’s eyes widened upon hearing the news.

“What do you mean?” Kuroka asked.

“Exactly what I said,” the spearman answered. “It was gone when he woke up, apparently. Ryan stayed behind to look around, but it’s hard to miss a Sacred Sword.”

“That can’t be...” Kuroka said, shaking her head. “When we brought them here, it was definitely by Lord Ginias’s side. Mister Shax should’ve been with him. Did he see anything?”

“The healer? No, he doesn’t seem to know either.”

There was no way a man of Shax’s abilities would miss someone stealing something right in front of him. Sure, he had no means to stop a sorcerer like Barbatos, but he’d definitely have noticed the act itself.

“Then the Sacred Sword took off on its own...?” Chastille muttered, lowering her gaze to the sword at her waist in bewilderment.

“What do you mean...?” Kuroka asked.

She’d heard of Sacred Swords having wills of their own—probably from the seraph within—but she’d never heard of one moving on its own.

“Oh, right,” Kuroka said, suddenly coming up with a great idea.

“Can’t we just ask the person at your feet about that?”

It wasn’t clear whether he was listening, but Barbatos’s shadow was open. If Chastille asked, he would likely answer. Or so Kuroka thought, but...

“My feet...? U-Uhhh, h-h-h-h-he’s, um, I mean...right now...it’s a little...”

“Hm...? Did something happen? If you’d like, I can cut his head off between jobs.”

Now that I think about it, I feel like she’s been avoiding talking about him this whole time.

Kuroka’s hate for sorcerers had faded significantly, but Barbatos was still the worst of sorcerers. She’d gladly finish him any time Chastille wished for it.

“Th-That’s not what I meant! I-It’s okay. It’s okay, so don’t...”
Chastille said. She didn’t look okay at all, though. “A-Anyway, forget about the Sacred Sword for now. Let’s consider the town’s defense as our number one priority.”

From the church’s perspective, this was the second Sacred Sword that had gone missing. The first had been Raphael’s Metatron. It was a serious matter that shook the church to its core, but Chastille’s decision was still correct. And just as everyone was about to return to their posts, another set of hurried footsteps approached the doorway.

“Th-This is serious, Lady Chastille!”

The shieldbearer of the three knights burst into the room. He was supposed to be out looking for the missing Sacred Sword, but didn’t appear to be doing that at all.

“What is it now?” Chastille asked.

“The Archdemon!”

Which Archdemon was he referring to? The man calmed his breathing down, then relayed the unbelievable to them.

“Archdemon Zagan has gone to challenge the enemy army directly!”

“What?!”

An Archdemon could slaughter an army of ten thousand. However, that was only when making full use of sorcery and trickery. There was no way his mana would hold out fighting them head-on.

“No, hang on... Zagan might actually be able to punch all ten thousand of them...” Chastille muttered with a serious expression on her face.

That Archdemon was simply so mighty that she believed it possible. Kuroka then remembered that she’d forgotten to mention something.

“Oh, excuse me, I forgot to pass you a message from Zagan,” she said.

“What message?” Chastille asked. She was no longer able to parse all this information, so her eyes were twirling about.

“‘I’ll buy you a day. Take your time and get ready,’ so he said.”

Taking a look out the window, they noticed dawn had broken before anyone knew it. The sinister attack on the enemy army had quietly progressed throughout the night. However, that had all been behind the scenes. The battle had yet to begin. Only when an Archdemon made a move did things take center stage.

Thus, the opening shot of the battle was a ferocious raid by Archdemon Zagan himself.



“Don’t let him get any farther!”

“Is he really human?!”

“Shit! What are the higher-ups doing?! Why aren’t we getting any orders?!”

“Uoooh! Protect ou— Aaaaaargh!”

Zagan lightly threw out his fist and sent one of the soldiers who’d bravely charged at him flying. It was more akin to gently brushing him aside than any kind of punch, but the soldier’s armor still shattered to pieces and the others he crashed into tumbled to the ground spectacularly.

Cries of confusion filled the air.

Looks like Barbatos’s team did their job properly.

There were, of course, those who used their own judgment to challenge Zagan now that he’d taken the field, but the army as a whole was so scattered that this could hardly be called a proper

response to his raid. These weren't the movements of an army. This was simply a swarm of talented warriors. Thus, all Zagan had to do was punch them one at a time.

“Compared to facing those damn seraphs, this is—”

A sword came whizzing through the air down at Zagan. He brushed it aside with his arm, shattering the blade like glass and bending the arm of its wielder like a piece of wire.

“Gaaaaaah!”

Leaving the soldier writhing on the ground, Zagan continued his march forward.

“You bastard! Then how about this?!”

Seeing that swords were useless, one of the soldiers resorted to martial arts and unleashed a kick. Even if it was a technique from a thousand years ago, it had been used to fight seraphs or gods or whatnot. Zagan leisurely caught the man's foot with his palm, but the shock wave of the impact dug deep cracks through the earth.

“Grr. Even that's not enough?!”

“Hmm. I didn't mean to underestimate you, but that was a far sharper blow than I had imagined. It's been a while since my hand has gone numb.”

Zagan honestly praised the man, then crushed the foot in his hand as if returning the favor.

“Aaaaaargh!”

It had been a terrifying technique, but an Archdemon's head wasn't so easy to take that an art with no sorcery behind it would be enough to harm him. Zagan walked on, leaving behind a trail of soldiers with broken weapons, arms, and legs. And yet, not a single soldier had died. Furthermore, Zagan didn't have the tiniest of scratches on him, nor were his clothes disheveled in the least.

This deed was only possible when the gap in strength was akin to that of a grown adult to a baby. And such experienced soldiers were definitely aware of that fact. Fear and despair clung to their expressions. Still, they were all heroes, so they were used to facing enemies far mightier than they were.

The moment they decided no individual had a chance of winning, their movements changed. Five or six of them quickly surrounded Zagan and slowly began circling him. Their peculiar movements left afterimages, even to an Archdemon's eyes. He had no idea which ones were real people, or even how many people had surrounded him.

This was an art similar to Kuroka's Misty Night. There was a difference in skill, but they weren't that far behind her. Having so many of them using it at once made it impossible for the enhanced perception of a sorcerer to see through it.

The soldiers eventually rushed in with their swords. The terrifying part was that they didn't do so all at once. Each one slashed at him one after the other. Once one came in, the next would follow half an instant later. By the time five slashes chained together like that, the first attacker could take another swing. It truly was like pouring rain. Even an Archdemon had no hope of dodging, defending, or counterattacking when faced with such an unending chain of blows.

What a fascinating technique. Unfortunately, I don't have the time to play with them right now.

Faced with this impossible-to-evade attack, Zagan responded by stomping his foot on the ground while maintaining his forward pace. That was all he did.

"Gh?!"

The earth caved in, throwing off the heroes' footing. They immediately regained their balance, but that immeasurably short

instant left an opening to exploit, which was more than enough for Zagan to defeat them all. Pebbles were floating up into the air due to the earth's destruction as Zagan casually swung his mantle at them.

“Gah!”

“Ugh!”

The pebbles struck down the heroes with the force of cannonballs. The deadly projectiles penetrated the ones who'd carried out the rain of attacks and mercilessly cleared out the other soldiers in the area as well. Surrounded by sprays of blood and fallen enemies, Zagan took another composed step forward.

“No way! That didn't even get him to slow down at all?!”

Even when struck by despair, the heroes didn't give up the fight. This time, several soldiers carrying an enormous spear that almost resembled a battering ram charged at him. It was probably a weapon meant to break a seraph's barrier or the like. Mana converged into the spear from everyone carrying it as they lunged with terrifying agility and destructive force. This was also a futile attack, however. Zagan lightly tapped the tip of the spear with a tired sigh. That was all it took to pulverize the mana-charged weapon.

Next, a giant clad in what looked like multiple layers of iron-plated armor charged in. Several soldiers followed in his wake, each one armed with a sword or spear. It looked like their plan was for the giant to sacrifice his life to stop Zagan's movements, granting the other soldiers a chance to strike the Archdemon directly.

How nostalgic. It's like what the three idiots tried to do.

He'd treated those three like rabble at the time and hadn't really paid them any mind, but the technique they'd wielded was in no way inferior to what these heroes were doing now. Despite his initial impressions, the three idiots were apparently strong enough to stand

as equals to the heroes from a thousand years ago. Deeply moved by the thought, Zagan flicked the giant before him.

The giant tumbled like a ball and flew backward, sending all the soldiers behind him screaming and flying in every direction. Zagan nearly burst into laughter at the sight, but he managed to endure the urge by remembering that he had to maintain his majesty as an Archdemon. He still wondered if Foll would enjoy a game based on the sight, though.

Zagan treated them like weeds, but these soldiers all possessed power that didn't shame their reputations as heroes. Any average sorcerer would probably have been helpless before them in a one-on-one fight. Even a former Archdemon candidate would eventually be defeated if faced with their coordinated attacks. They were working together so well despite losing their entire command structure, after all. It was honestly terrifying.

The reason they were so helpless before Zagan was because their strengths mainly focused on fighting against seraphs and gods or whatever they were doing battle with back in the day. Seraphs had a known weak point in their Hex Wings. Zagan didn't have any information on gods, but those were also inhuman beings who wielded inhuman powers. These heroes hadn't given much thought to fighting against a single powerful human.

In contrast, all of Zagan's usual enemies were human, be they sorcerers or Angelic Knights. It was clear who had the advantage between the anti-human specialist and the anti-monster specialists.

Zagan casually marched forward with the rising sun at his back and made it all the way to the center of the enemy formation. His current objective was breaking through to Shere Khan's hiding place.

Things are going well so far, I suppose.

Zagan wasn't here to flaunt his power, nor had he suddenly awoken to the idea of philanthropy. This was all necessary in order to keep the army pinned down.

Fear can only be conveyed to the living.

Zagan had believed in that creed even before he was an Archdemon and had always acted on the premise. This was a battlefield, though. There was no point in spreading the futility of challenging an Archdemon here. All the enemies he spared would surely move on to attack Kianoides. And yet, he still went through the troublesome process of defeating them without killing anyone.

The wounded drag down an army more than the dead, apparently.

The dead would weaken the army considerably, but they could also be ignored from that point on. However, the living had to be accommodated, treated, and given rest...and the personnel needed to handle that would be several times that of the wounded. This was knowledge Zagan had acquired from Liucaon's literature. This battle was, of course, his first time putting it into practice, but he could already see how effective a strategy it was.

Zagan didn't lay a hand on those who stayed back...and all who challenged him remained among the living. Chaos spread among the soldiers due to their disadvantage in a one-on-ten-thousand match where the one had gone as far as to show them such consideration.

The more people there were, the better the chaos spread. They were all fighting at their own discretion right now, but after the tempest known as Zagan passed them by, there would be no way of calming the mayhem without any real leaders among them. What's more, keeping them alive meant that Zagan wasn't driving them into a corner. The more cornered people felt, the more desperate they became. They would throw away all hesitation and immerse themselves in battle. They could display far more strength than

normal in that state, all for the sake of survival. That would've been problematic, as he needed them to hesitate, to be confused, to act disorderly, and to exhibit less power than normal.

Unfortunately, Zagan's enemy was the oldest living Archdemon, Shere Khan. The Tiger King could easily see through Zagan's hastily assembled knowledge of military strategy.

"Gh!"

Zagan, who'd been marching forward casually as if he was taking a light stroll through an empty field, leaped back for the very first time since the battle began. The very next instant, a black wind blew through the area.

"I thought you'd show up a little later..."

"I'll make no excuses. I'm going to take your head, Sir Zagan."

Standing before him was the sorcerer regarded as Zagan's right-hand man, Kimaris.

◇

"Oooh, they're really goin' at it."

Three people gazed down at the Archdemon marching his way through the army of Nephilims from atop a hill a short distance away from Kianoides. The one who raised his voice at the sight was a boy with red hair and eyes, Asura. He was dressed like a cheap mercenary, wearing the bare minimum of necessary armor, but didn't have a sword. Next to him was a lanky young man with narrow eyes. This was Bato. He used a sword, but his primary post was that of a strategist. A step away from the two was a girl who was taking a small sip out of a teacup. She had eyes like the moon and blonde hair. Her creepy stuffed doll sat atop her lap, and she wore her usual frilly dress. She looked somewhere around twelve or thirteen, making her appear rather out of place on a battlefield, but two fangs

could be seen peeking out of her lips. This was Alshiera, who was enjoying some tea after going as far as setting up an entirely out-of-place table.

“How goes the battle?” she asked.

“Zagan, the Silver-Eyed King, is overwhelming them,” Bato answered, still watching the battle unfold through a pair of binoculars. “It seems he did something last night. The Nephilims are in complete disarray and aren’t really putting up any sort of combat formation. From what I can see, there don’t appear to be any officers among them.”

“Tee hee! The Silver-Eyed King is resourceful. He may have had all the officers assassinated before the battle.”

“I see. That’s practically Marchosias’s modus operandi. Quite splendid, I must say.”

“Bato... You’d do well not to provoke a shot in the back.”

“What have I done?!”

“So, Ashy, what’cha got in store for us?” Asura asked as he stood up and ignored the pale Bato.

“Hmm, let’s see...” Alshiera mumbled, setting down her cup on her knee as she raised her slender fingers one at a time. “The current forces that are hostile to us are Azazel, Shere Khan and his ten thousand soldiers, and though they’ve broken ties with Shere Khan, there’s also an Archdemon named Bifrons.”

She then hesitated a bit before raising a fourth finger and adding, “And finally, Archdemon Zagan.”

“Well, you did pick a fight with him. I doubt he still considers you a friend.”

“.....” Alshiera fell silent. She was annoyed at having it so bluntly pointed out to her, but Asura simply smiled as if he couldn’t read the mood at all.

“But you still wanna help him, yeah?” he said.

“Well, I suppose I do...”

“Ha ha ha! Even after a thousand years, you can never just be honest with yourself, huh?!” Asura exclaimed as he ruffled her hair roughly. Alshiera let out a weak sigh in response.

“I’d rather you grow up a little, though,” she said.

“Don’t be unreasonable. I mean, I was dead until a week or so ago!”

Alshiera scrunched up her face upon hearing that...and Bato then turned an unexpected look at her.

“What, you too...?” she grumbled.

“Oh, no... This is the first time I’ve seen you make a face like that in front of anyone besides the Silver-Eyed King. The one I knew, I mean.”

Thinking back on it, Asura somewhat resembled the second Silver-Eyed King. Perhaps Furcas did as well. Over a thousand years, it was possible to meet several people who possessed the same soul at heart. It seemed Alshiera was fated to encounter such boys.

Oh, I get it now... Those children really do possess the same “soul.”

Perhaps that was why she’d met them so many times over the ages.

“He never listened to others,” she said with a shrug and a bitter sigh. “I feel exhausted by the mere thought of having to go through such struggles again.”

“I see. Despite that, you still listened to all my requests, didn’tcha, Ashy?” Asura said.

Alshiera was once more left at her wits’ end by the comment.

“Oooh? Lady Alshiera listened to the requests of others? What were they, exactly?” Bato asked, clearly interested.

“Nothin’ serious,” Asura answered. “Whenever I set out to battle and came back alive, I had her do somethin’ for me.”

“Asura...” Alshiera complained.

Bringing up such memories was far too painful for her. But even though she’d tried to stop him, the boy didn’t know the concept of reading the mood. Plus, the one who’d asked was a man who’d gone down in history for his awful personality.

“What was the first thing again? Oh yeah, her name. I asked her to tell me her name. And listen to this, Ashy couldn’t even remember her full name, so she had to go ask Orobas.”

“Hmm. Now that’s interesting.”

“It looked like she hated it every single time, but she kept responding to my requests. Still, even though we’d spent a lot of time together, I never got to see her smile. So, for the last battle—”

“Asura. That’s enough chatter out of you.”

Alshiera’s tone changed completely, but that actually seemed to make Asura happier.

“Heh heh! I feel like I finally got to see the good ol’ Ashy again.”

“Haaah...”

Unfortunately, Alshiera’s suffering didn’t end there.

“Lady Alshiera’s smile... Ohhh, I get it now!”

“What are you implying...?” Alshiera muttered.

“Oh, nothing. By the time I knew you, you were always giggling. Was that perhaps because of your promise with— I’m sorry please forgive me I didn’t say anything.”

Alshiera had drawn her Seraph Hunter, which silenced Bato mid-sentence.

“It’s about time to get things back on track,” she said. “We have many enemies barring our path, but there are only three of us. And yet, they’re all wary of us. Unless we outwit them skillfully, we’ll be dancing to their tune and it’ll all be over.”

What’s more, she’d yielded one of her two Seraph Hunters to someone else. Alshiera had already lost a large majority of her power due to her past wounds. Even with her new allies, the decline in her strength was undeniable. And yet, in her eyes, the situation wasn’t all that bad.

“As I said last night, my goal is to help celebrate the Silver-Eyed King’s birthday. To that end, Azazel must be stopped.”

“The Silver-Eyed King...”

Asura appeared to have something to say, but Alshiera ignored him for now. Zagan would do something about this battle with Shere Khan if left at large. Currently, the only thing he couldn’t handle on his own was Nephteros.

“Hmm... I suppose pretty much the only thing we’re capable of doing for him is pursuing Azazel,” Bato stated firmly.

Alshiera remained in this world for the sole purpose of stopping Azazel. Naturally, doing so was her long-cherished desire. But for some reason, she shook her head.

“We’re certainly capable of killing her, but not saving her.”

“The possessed girl, you mean?” Bato asked.

Nephteros was fated to an untimely death due to Archdemon Bifrons’s schemes, but Alshiera had promised to save her.

“Is it possible to save her?”

“Yes, it is,” Alshiera answered. “The conditions to do so are steadily falling into place. Bifrons turned out to be unexpectedly useful.”

Alshiera had faced Bifrons before the Archdemon attacked Richard. In all honesty, she'd originally planned to render Bifrons a cripple much like Shere Khan. Looking at things in hindsight, so long as they still lived, doing so wouldn't violate Alshiera's principles. Bifrons was by far the worst sorcerer she'd ever known, after all. However, they seemed appropriate for the scenario Alshiera pictured, so she'd decided to let them live.

Thanks to that, I have one less thing to do.

In other words, Alshiera had one more hand she could play.

"However, Shere Khan expects us to chase Azazel," she added.

That was probably why he'd had Azazel revived to begin with. Bifrons had been the one to actually do it, but even if the little Archdemon hadn't done anything, Azazel would've returned. Still, Azazel was too dangerous to leave at large. There was a need to stop it somehow. That was Asura and Bato's original purpose, after all.

"Sooo, we gotta outwit him and not go along with his plan?" Asura asked.

"That's one way to do this, but he must have something else prepared for us in case I don't comply."

"Somethin' else? As you are now, isn't Azazel pretty much the only thing that can actually take you on? Even a high seraph was nothin' to you."

Asura was right. In this age, nothing existed that could slow her down, let alone put up a fight. Even an Archdemon using all their strength wouldn't be worth her attention. And if she didn't want to deal with things directly, she could simply vanish.

"You have a point there. Nobody can face me *in this age*."

“In *this* age...? You don’t mean...” Asura turned pale upon realizing whom she was referring to. “I see... It’s been a thousand years. I guess the old man kicked the bucket?”

“Precisely. If we clash, Kianoides would vanish in an instant. We must avoid that.”

“Having said that, *they* will surely be at Shere Khan’s base,” Bato added gravely. “I see. No matter where you decide to show yourself, something has already been prepared. He’s our enemy, but I can’t help but admire his skill.”

There were enemies that Alshiera had to fight in three separate places. Having confirmed the current situation, she smiled.

“That’s how it goes. We shall split up into three,” she concluded.

“Ha ha ha! What a slave driver,” Asura said cheerfully.

“There’s no need to worry. The Silver-Eyed King will have something in place as well. You two can simply go along with his plans.”

“Okay!” Asura yelled, giving his palm a good punch as he straightened his back. “Then I’ll take on Azazel. Seraphs are my specialty!”

“Then I will head *their* way,” Bato added. “I have no way of managing on my own, but if the Silver-Eyed King’s pawns are on the move, I most likely have a chance.”

However, Alshiera shook her head.

“No, you stay behind in Kianoides,” she said. “I shall face them.”

“*He’s* among them, you know?”

“That’s why I have to go. Who else is capable of stopping him?”

Besides, they all knew it was dangerous to have Asura or Bato get so close to Shere Khan. They had to be sent elsewhere. He had

complaints regarding her decision, but before long, Bato reverently lowered his head.

“As you wish, my lady.”

“Oh yeah, you wanna save the girl who got possessed by Azazel, right, Ashy?” Asura asked. “What should I do? I don’t got a delicate enough hand to save someone in a fight, ya know?”

Moreover, that also happened to be Bifrons’s destination. The Archdemon couldn’t have gone anywhere else.

Well, I doubt they have any schemes left at this point...

Still, winning despite such odds was an Archdemon’s specialty. Thus, Asura couldn’t afford to be careless.

“Please focus entirely on protecting the Silver-Eyed King’s family. I’m sure he sent the girl he cares for most.”

“And she’ll save the possessed girl?”

Instead of answering, Alshiera simply shoved her hand in the back of her stuffed doll, then pulled out a sword.

“No. This sword’s wielder will surely be the one to save her.”

“What’s that? A Hex Sword...? It sure don’t look like one. Definitely seems impressive, though.”

Alshiera giggled, then answered, “Sacred Sword Camael. One of the swords we called the Seraphic Blades in Bato’s era.”

It was the Sacred Sword that had vanished from Ginias’s side despite Shax being with him the whole time.

He was an unexpectedly sharp boy. It was quite troublesome sneaking this away from under his nose...

There was probably a big fuss going on at the church now due to the theft, but that didn’t really matter to her.

“Hmm...” Asura mumbled as he stared at the Sacred Sword, eyes full of interest. “Camael’s the name of the last high seraph I fought, right? Is this thing somehow related?”

“It’s not just related. This is the very same Camael.”

“...Wuh?”

Alshiera paused at that, caressing the blade with sympathy.

“These relics were born of the seraphs’ final vain struggle after being broken by the Silver-Eyed King. They are the ultimate blades forged by offering up the bodies and souls of the high seraphs. Thus, Seraphic Blades. That is their true identity.”

After Marchosias had thoroughly purged the seraphs from all records, they’d been renamed Sacred Swords. That was the truth behind these blades. The sword in Alshiera’s hand then started floating in the air on its own.

“I see. So you’ve finally made your resolve, then? Please, go ahead. Lend that child your strength.”

The Sacred Sword soared off, almost as if in response to her words, and vanished into the distance like a shooting star.

“Asura. You may simply punch the seraph like you always have. However, be wary of the Archdemon known as Bifrons. If that one gets involved—”

After she explained the way Archdemon Bifrons operated to Asura, he nodded back to her.

“I get it! What an asshole. Right on. I’ll definitely protect them.”

“I’m sure you will,” Alshiera said, taking a final sip of her tea. “Now then, it’s about time for us to get moving.”

“Yeah... Oh, right...” Asura paused as he started running off, then turned around. “Let me just say this now, while I’ve still got the chance. I loved you, Ashy.”

Why does he always say things like they’ll be his final words...?

Now that she thought about it, he’d been like this ever since she’d met him. She felt like grimacing at the thought, but his confession must’ve required a lot of courage. Alshiera hadn’t forgotten about how she’d once ruined a boy’s life by refusing to answer when he confessed. That was why she decided to give him an honest reply.

“Thank you. You were also my first love.”

If not, she would never have cried when he’d died.



“Hwuh?!” Asura gasped as his feet tangled up and he tumbled over splendidly. He probably hadn’t expected her to give him such a straight answer.

Watching over this with a charmed smile, Alshiera continued talking with an unexpectedly sincere expression on her face, saying, “No matter how you two were created in this age, you are both living beings. Anyone else may deny that, but I deem it so.”

They hadn’t expected her to say such a thing. Asura and Bato exchanged looks and paid close attention to her.

“As such, please do not toss aside your lives carelessly. I will grieve if you do not return, after all.”

Asura grinned upon hearing those words, then said, “Sooo, when I get back, go on a date with me.”

He didn’t look the least bit shy as he repeated his behavior from a thousand years ago.

“Are you attempting to seduce a married woman?” Alshiera asked with a wry smile on her face.

“A widow, right? I don’t see the problem.”

“If you return, I’ll give it some thought,” she answered, letting out a resigned sigh.

“All right! It’s a promise, got it? I’m gonna butcher that seraph, save the girl, and then we’ve got a date!”

With that, Asura ran off, screaming in joy all the while. After seeing him off in mute amazement, Bato returned to his senses and bowed before Alshiera.

“Thank you. I do not deserve your kindness. Returning alive will be quite the difficult task for me, however.”

“You’ll be fine. Once I’m done on my end, I’ll head your way. Besides, that child will be there. The situation isn’t all that bad.”

“I see... And who do you mean by ‘that child’?”

“I’ve made a friend in this era,” Alshiera answered with a giggle.

She already knew what battlefield the child would choose. That was why she’d yielded one of her Seraph Hunters despite the situation.

Still, it will be a tough battle.

She felt like Bato was somewhat unsuitable to support that child, but it was the best Alshiera could offer.

Despite hearing all that, a worried expression remained on his face.

“Will it really be all right?” he asked.

“What weak words coming from you of all people. Have our battles not always been about beating the odds?”

“I was speaking about you, Lady Alshiera.”

Alshiera touched the wound at her waist. As she’d expected, Bato had noticed the injury. That was exactly why she answered by asking a question of her own.

“Are you aware of what weapon has killed the most people throughout all of history?”

“Malice. Swords and sorcery have only killed tens of thousands. Or perhaps a few hundred thousand at most. However, malice is an entirely different matter altogether. Ever since the dawn of history, it has permeated throughout the people from paupers to kings. As a weapon, it could steal tens of thousands of lives in a single instant.”

Alshiera nodded after hearing his answer.

“Exactly. And there are two sides to the coin known as malice. Those who make use of it only reach perfection when they command both of them.”

It was precisely because of this other side that humanity had survived despite being cut down by malice.

“Then, do you mean...?” Bato muttered as if trying to swallow those words.

“The Silver-Eyed King has completed the ultimate form of malice, known as Heaven’s Phosphor.”

That was why she knew it’d be fine. She just had to hold on a little longer.

He may no longer need my strength... With that thought in mind, she set down her cup and rose to her feet.

“Now then, I should really get going. I’d like to see his face sooner rather than later. It’s been so long.”

“Best of luck to you, my lady.”

Alshiera transformed into countless bats and headed off toward her own battlefield.

“The life I have now is my own...” after muttering those words to himself, Bato ran off as well. All that was left behind was the out-of-place table and tea set.



“I’ve been looking for you, Bifrons. So this is where you’ve been, hm?”

“Yo, Naberius. Did you come here with some funny news? Not that I’ve ever laughed at your stupid jokes.”

Bifrons was in a certain deserted village far away from Kianoides. Their face was completely pale, and dark blood continuously poured

out of their right shoulder. Zagan's Heaven's Phosphor had encroached all the way up their arm and was making its way across their chest now. They no longer possessed the strength to really say anything witty.

Their back was pressed against the wall of a dilapidated building. They couldn't even stand up anymore and weren't budging an inch. Even a single breath sent intense pain shooting through their body. And so, they knew that losing consciousness meant never waking up again.

How did that vampire suffer this kind of wound and remain completely composed?

Alshiera had supposedly been afflicted with a similar injury, and it had been delivered by a being who far surpassed Zagan at that. Nevertheless, she hadn't shown a single hint of pain. Bifrons had no choice but to admit that she truly was the strongest, and not just when it came to simply enacting violence. Her unwavering spirit was in a league of its own. Nobody could match her.

"Hee hee hee! How cold. I'm actually rather fond of you, you know?"

This sorcerer, who spoke with a sweet voice and looked down at Bifrons with a single eyeball, was the person Bifrons wanted to involve himself with the least in the world. It wasn't even a problem of being fun or not, or hating him or not. It was simply impossible for them to ever get along.

Despite his sweet voice, he hid an extremely buff frame beneath his robes. Only a single large eye peered out of the mask that covered his entire face, but he had more than one on his face. In fact, his true form possessed ten magic eyes. He was a beholder. And to top it all off, he was an eccentric who could make even Bifrons reel back in terror.

Archdemon Naberius. He was apparently in the middle of working on something at Zagan's request, so what could such a man possibly need with Bifrons?

"If you don't need anything, could you leave?" Bifrons said. "As you can clearly see, I'm in lousy shape. I'd rather be on my own right now."

"That's *exactly* why I'm here," Naberius replied, a sorrowful look replacing his jovial one. "Sorry... It doesn't look like I can save you."

Bifrons was taken aback by the unexpected statement. They knew their own body better than anyone else.

"How sweet of you, Naberius," they said with a quiet snort. "Those don't sound like the words of an Archdemon, though."

"Even Archdemons can show affection for others. You know this too, don't you?" Naberius said, holding out a thick arm covered in steel-like muscles from his robe all the while. "We're opposites in every single way. Like two sides of a coin, even. However, that also means we resemble each other."

"Could you seriously cut me some slack...?" Bifrons pleaded, feeling disgusted. Naberius *was* speaking the truth, though. Neither of them listened to people when they spoke, after all.

"There's our sense of beauty, for example. The way you carry yourself so that nobody can tell whether you're a man or woman is the complete opposite of my sense of aesthetics, but they are, in fact, very similar. Two sides of the same coin, wouldn't you say?"

With that, Naberius put his fists together and pumped up his muscles with a grunt of effort. The sight of his pectorals throbbing made Bifrons want to vomit.

"I really hate that part of you," they said with an unintentional sigh.

“Hee hee hee! And I rather like that part of you,” Naberius replied with a shrug. “Well, that’s enough preamble.”

“Are we finally cutting to the chase?” Bifrons asked in a somewhat disconcerted tone.

Naberius faced the Archdemon with an unexpectedly serious gaze, then said, “If there’s somebody you would like to yield your Sigil of the Archdemon to, then I’ll hear you out.”

There really was no other reason for Naberius to come all the way out here to see Bifrons. Though, his words seemed to imply that he meant to respect Bifrons’s will.

“How kind of you. Won’t Zagan get pissed at you for this?”

“Oh my. Are you worrying about me now? It’ll be fine. Handling your Sigil isn’t part of my contract with him.”

He was apparently being serious. Bifrons hesitated a little.

Fundamentally, they hopelessly rejected the idea of yielding their fate to another. They would die by their own will, at a time and place of their choosing. Even if they were already done with the world at that point, handing something of theirs to another felt questionable.

Well, whatever...

They no longer had the leisure to spare any thought for such things. If Naberius was truly willing to hand the Sigil of the Archdemon over to a person of Bifrons’s choosing, it was something to be grateful for. The fact that they were being used in the process didn’t really matter anymore.

“I really do despise you,” Bifrons said, flashing a smile as a minimal show of defiance. “Still, I have to acknowledge that you have an eye for others.”

“Oh?”

“I’d like my Sigil to go to —.”

Upon hearing that name, Naberius narrowed his eye happily. The one they'd named was the sorcerer Naberius had recommended to succeed Marchosias one year ago, after all.

"Hee hee hee! So you *do* understand how charming she is, I take it?"

"Heh heh... I'm offended to agree with you, but she *is* a rather fascinating child. If I were to play with her again, I might lose even if I were in perfect shape."

One year ago, Zagan had been the only candidate with such potential. However, the girl had grown far more than Bifrons had anticipated. Perhaps that had been the only time that they'd been so deeply moved by another since becoming an Archdemon.

"Very well, then," Naberius answered with a theatrical bow. "When you die, I shall deliver your Sigil of the Archdemon to her. I promise you on the honor of Archdemon Naberius."

He then paused, shamelessly acted as if he'd just remembered something, and added, "Now then, that's all the business I have here, but I do wonder why you've secluded yourself in this place?"

You obviously know already. How utterly shameless.

That shamelessness was what made these two Archdemons so similar, but Bifrons didn't seem to like that. Seeing that Bifrons remained silent, Naberius took a look around the area in admiration.

"For whatever reason, that thing is drawn by the Sigil of the Archdemon. You plan to call it using yours, don't you?"

Even having lost their right arm, Bifrons's disembodied hand marked with the Sigil sat atop their lap. Naberius may have been an eccentric, but he was still a six-hundred-year-old Archdemon. Thus, he read Bifrons's intentions in an instant.

"I didn't think that you'd gotten so senile that you'd need to go out of your way to confirm such a thing," Bifrons said with a grimace.

“Hee hee hee! No, you’ve got the wrong idea. I’m asking why you chose *this* place in particular. There are no people nearby. In fact, there’s nothing you can even make use of. Doesn’t that put you at a severe disadvantage?”

“Well...Archdemon Orias hates having others see her true identity and strength. Aren’t I awfully considerate to clear the place out for her?”

Yes. There was no need for Bifrons to fight at all. So long as they snatched away victory in the end, nothing else mattered.

“You truly are always dishonest with yourself,” Naberius replied with a mirthful smile. “Well, that *is* what I would expect of you, I suppose.”

He then took a seat next to Bifrons in a resigned manner.

“What are you doing?” Bifrons asked.

“I’ll lend you a hand. Honestly, you’re a little uneasy about whether a single Sigil is enough to fish that thing out, right?” Naberius answered with a giggle. “Also, I *do* have some time to kill. *Watching* this battle may be the Lord of Magic Eyes’s job, but that just leaves me a lot of time to spare. I can at least hear you out.”

“But I’ve been telling you to leave me alone...”

Realizing once more that they truly hated this man, Bifrons let out a sigh.

Chapter III: Some Things Can't Be Avoided by Putting on Airs

“You saved someone of your own accord! I’m so proud of you, Shere Khan! It was a flawless performance too. You truly have talent as a healer. Though really, I expected no less of my disciple.”

The girl was delighted, acting almost as if she had done a great deed herself. Several years had passed since she’d picked me up. After a few years, I understood the gulf in power between us, so I no longer snapped at her about one thing or another.

The incident this time had just happened on a whim. I’d found a therianthrope child on the ground, probably injured after being attacked by something. An unfamiliar, dirty, dying child didn’t really have anything to do with me. Or at least, that was supposed to be the case, but before I knew it, I’d started healing them.

I’d probably just wanted to test out my new power. That had been the only thing driving me, yet this girl came running over and started making a fuss about my deed. She ruffled my hair and even hugged me and rubbed her cheek against mine. She was truly annoying.

The therianthrope child stared at us all the while. I was used to being feared. I was well acquainted with disgust and hatred. However, this child’s gaze contained none of that. I stood there in bewilderment as the child gave me a huge smile.

“Thanks, mister tiger!”

The child waved and ran off. I was taken aback by such behavior, but the girl next to me simply peeked at my face with a smile.

“How does it feel to be thanked? Is this, perhaps, your first experience?”

Yes, that was indeed a first for me, but I didn't say anything and averted my gaze. The girl hugged me as if to praise a child. I was nearly double her height, though...

"It's not a bad feeling, is it?"

After my bewilderment faded, I did, in fact, feel somewhat happy. I couldn't really explain it. But when I told her so, she whispered some rather interesting words to me with a captivating expression on her face.

"That feeling was my starting point. If you reach out a helping hand to someone in need, they can smile and keep moving forward. Is that not a wonderful thing?"

How stupid. That was a lofty ideal. It was delusional. Reality was far too filthy and wretched to condone it. People like me stole from others and trampled them underfoot. That was simply how the world worked. I understood her feelings, but how many fools would truly respond in kind? And yet, despite knowing all that, the girl smiled as if she accepted it.

"There are, of course, those who pay back kindness with resentment. Nevertheless, those who commit such deeds are also capable of doing things I never can. That is how the world keeps turning."

Those didn't seem like the words of the second generation's Head Archdemon.

"Oh my," she said with a curious giggle. "I'm not all-powerful, just so you know. I fail sometimes, and I don't have the strength to save everyone. Saving someone doesn't end after merely curing their wounds and illnesses, after all. Sorcery cannot heal wounds to the heart, and people need many things, from food to shelter, to continue surviving."

Food required fields and livestock. Those who wanted clothing needed someone who could weave it for them. Houses required

someone to cut stone, saw lumber, draw up plans, and in some cases, smelt iron. And clearly, all of that was far too much for a single person to manage.

“I won’t demand you live the same way,” the girl said, stretching up on her tiptoes to touch my cheek. “But I’d like you to at least understand how I do things. Once you do, you can decide how to live for yourself. I will accept it, and if you go down the wrong path, I’ll stop you.”

My chest hurt. It burned. For some reason, I felt like crying. Why did this girl go so far for someone like me? What was in it for her? She cocked her head curiously, and just as expected, she smiled as she always did.

“That’s what it means to love someone.”

I stood there in a daze, unaware of what that even meant.

“Haven’t I said this before? I will love you. Did you not believe me?”

It would’ve been far stranger to believe such a declaration out of the blue. She wasn’t offended by my remark, but instead nodded in comprehension.

“Well, maybe you’re right. That’s how I was when Marchosias picked me up.”

That was the first I’d heard of it. I did already know that she was the personal disciple of the first generation’s sole surviving Archdemon, Marchosias, but any further information eluded me.

“Now that I think about it, I never told you about my past, did I? Before becoming a sorcerer, I lived in the alleys and got all my food from the scraps thrown away by the roadside. It isn’t all that uncommon a story. In that age, countless people had lost everything they had to the War of Divinity.”

She paused there and shot me an impish smile.

“After Marchosias picked me up and taught me sorcery, I was full of myself and went about causing mischief. I was being pretentious, claiming I had to take revenge on the world... Well, I did, of course, go through some serious pain because of it.”

I grimaced at the familiar story. The girl continued, a smile on her face as if she found my reaction ever so lovely.

“Maybe that’s why I didn’t see you as a stranger and picked you up on a whim.”

Perhaps tired from standing on her tiptoes, the girl leaned against me.

“That’s why I can love you.”

I refused to believe in unconditional love. There was nothing so convenient in the world. And even if there was, anyone would’ve been fine for her. However, she apparently had a reason to look at me. She didn’t want just anyone. She chose me.

“You don’t need to believe me right now. You don’t even really need to come to understand me. But I’d like you to know one thing. There’s someone here who loves you.”

At first, I thought she was just spouting nonsense. I thought it was the arrogance of the strong showing pity for the weak. But I was wrong. She was honest to a fault. She truly did love a ruffian like me.

I believed she was necessary to this world. I knew my wish was far beyond my station, and I hadn’t forgotten what I’d done before meeting her. Nevertheless, I prayed that I could walk by her side. Spurred by an unexpected impulse that I’d never experienced before, I embraced the girl spontaneously. Her cheeks turned red and she smiled up at me.

“Thank you. I’d also like to walk by your side.”

I would stay by her for all eternity. And then, I would become strong enough to protect her. That had been my greatest desire, and yet...

“Why?! Marchosias?!”

The world betrayed her.



“Sooo bittersweet! Meaning you’ve wandered around for eight hundred years, carrying these feelings that could never be conveyed?! What love power! This far surpasses anything I imagined!”

This took place several hours before Zagan clashed with the Nephilim army, around the time Barbatos, Behemoth, and Leviathan were wreaking havoc among the army.

How is she so...energetic?

The device restraining Enchantress Gremory was functioning properly. The petrification was steadily spreading across her entire body. It had even covered half of her face. About the only thing left was one of her eyes and her mouth. It should’ve taken everything she had just to breathe, let alone talk, but despite this, she’d been talking continuously ever since she woke up. What’s more, she’d been giving her impressions about Shere Khan’s memories that were apparently leaking out through the Sigil of the Archdemon. Some indiscernible sense of shyness swelled up within him, making him want to cover his face in shame. This was a first for him in all eight hundred years of his life.

“Umm... Could you...be quiet...already?”

“Kee hee hee! Are you embarrassed, Archdemon? You, who have exhausted every possible good and evil deed over these last eight hundred years? To think you’d show me such an adorable reaction. What do you intend to do by delighting me so?”

“No... I mean to say that...my subordinates...look troubled... I’d like you...to keep it down.”

The Tiger King’s body was already beyond recovery, even for a sorcerer. Just casting a simple spell required tremendous effort. He couldn’t send telepathic orders to the panicking Nephilims with so much noise around him. Gremory probably hadn’t noticed this, but she was contributing greatly to the chaos spreading among his army. Not only that, but she was a hostage, so he couldn’t kill her. Normally, she should’ve been fully petrified by now, but for some reason, it was going very slowly.

This woman was incapable of using sorcery at present. Balor’s Evil Eye required mana, so naturally, that was out of the question as well. These were facts. In that case, was she truly keeping the petrification at bay and continuously talking so energetically through sheer willpower alone? The thought was far more terrifying than the threat of any Archdemon.

Save me, Bifrons...

She seemed to be too much for Shere Khan to handle. He had nobody else to turn to for help, so he unintentionally prayed to Bifrons. He hadn’t sought aid from anyone even when Andrealphus had launched an attack on him, yet this situation made him want to resort to that. This was the very first time in his life that he implored the aid of another.

Just then, help arrived from an extremely unexpected source. The doors blew open with a thunderous roar, and the Nephilims who’d been standing guard flew into the room. Their mangled bodies struck the ground. There was no need to check whether they were alive.

“You’ll be returning Miss Gremory to me.”

A heroic leonin with a black mane entered the room. And upon seeing his old enemy burning with rage, Shere Khan felt relief fill his heart.

“Kimaris! You...came for me?” he exclaimed unintentionally.

“Huh...? Wait...why do you seem so happy?”

Kimaris looked utterly bewildered. He hadn't expected this. That was all. Still, the situation wasn't so simple that it could be summed up with such a cheap word. Things had far exceeded Kimaris's expectations two or three times over. The situation had long since surpassed his capacity to understand. He'd come to save the woman he loved, yet here she was in high spirits while her abductor had his hands over his face like he was barely holding back tears.

Kimaris's eyes had been filled with rage as he'd entered the room, but now they were steeped with a mix of emotions. He didn't know whether to be angry, laugh, or sympathize. What's more, he didn't know whom to direct which emotions at. And so, he simply let out a resigned sigh. This was inevitable, in a sense. On the contrary, he was now aware of how much he'd lost himself for not considering this possibility. He managed to regain his composure...and before long, he turned his eyes to the restrained Gremory further inside the room.

“Mrgh, Kimaris?” she grumbled. “I'm busy right now. Hnnngh. It seems I've been directly connected to the Archdemon's memories, you see. I'm being filled with *unprecedented* love power!”

Shere Khan still didn't understand what she was saying, whereas Kimaris put his hand to his forehead as if he knew all too well.

“Um...I heard you were captured,” Kimaris said, “so...I was actually really worried.”

“Huh? Captured? Me?” Gremory asked, blinking in confusion for a moment before coming to a sudden realization. “Oh...right. I was captured. I’ve been treated with such grand hospitality that I forgot.”

She apparently had no awareness of being a prisoner here. Gremory coughed to gloss that matter over, then muttered meekly, “H-Hmph... Your concern is uncalled for. Who do you think I am? I can escape from this level of predicament on my own.”

Shere Khan held down his stomach, feeling a sudden pain from within. Unable to watch the Archdemon anymore, Kimaris flattened his ears apologetically.

“Ummm...it seems Miss Gremory has forgotten her manners. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t... I was the one...who captured her...”

“But it seems you’ve been treating her rather well, so...”

“What?!” Gremory cried in dissatisfaction. “I’m half-petrified here! And my mana’s getting sucked to the point where it feels like I’m dying!”

“But...I mean, it probably also serves as a life support system, so...”

Shere Khan was the culprit behind the atrocities of the rare species hunt, but he was also the sorcerer who’d taught Shax the art of healing. Regardless of its other functions, this device ensured that Gremory lived. The wound dealt by Andrealphus was fatal, and sorcery was slow to repair the damage. She’d been in a state where she was liable to pass away before recovering, so she’d been treated with her body in a near-death state this entire time. The petrification was one facet of the healing process.

The atmosphere had completely ruined the moment, but it wasn’t like Shere Khan had called Kimaris out to do battle. After taking a

deep breath and judging that he couldn't show his enemy such pitiful behavior, Shere Khan cut to the case.

"Let's make...a trade...Kimaris."

"R-Right. I thought it'd come down to this. Go ahead."

Shere Khan understood Bifrons's despair. Bifrons was supposed to hate him, so being looked at by the little Archdemon with sympathy, or even pity, had been unimaginably agonizing. He'd have preferred to be disparaged in every way possible. And yet, this was the very first time since he mourned Dantalian that he seriously felt like crying.

Nevertheless, the Tiger King mustered his willpower and held up a finger. With that, eight knife-like blades floated up in front of Kimaris. No, they weren't blades... They were nails. Kimaris, and even Gremory, opened their eyes wide. They both knew exactly what these were.

"Hex Nails... The power...you once developed...to take revenge on me."

It was also the power he'd offered to Shere Khan in a certain trade. There used to be ten of them, but two had already been used. It had been about seventy years now. Back then, Kimaris was just a child and Shere Khan had acted like a close friend before destroying his village in front of his eyes. That incident had made Shere Khan Kimaris's sworn enemy.

"They were once the symbols of my power during my days as a monster..." Kimaris groaned. "You destroyed my entire village and left me alive so that I could develop them."

"Indeed."

After seeing his village destroyed, Kimaris had gone mad with hatred and devolved into a monster.

“The blood of ancient lions flows more densely in me than any other due to a case of atavism...and my hatred toward you allowed this power to fully blossom.”

“That’s...right.”

The blood of ancient lions was one of the most important factors of Azazel that Shere Khan had coveted. Many victims had been required to perfect it. By turning into a monster and bathing in the blood of thousands, the Hex Nails had fully manifested.

“And after this power manifested, you pillaged it from me.”

“Exactly.”

Kimaris hadn’t been the only victim of this plan. Recently, when Shere Khan had obliterated the cait sith village, he’d also left a single survivor with strong blood. Five hundred years ago, he’d cursed members of a rare species with strong blood to grant them unbearable agony. That method had proven unreliable, however, so he’d switched to the single survivor approach ever since.

Wounds inflicted by the Hex Nails couldn’t be closed. When Gremory stopped Kimaris’s rampage, she’d been torn up by those same nails. But in spite of that, the terrifying witch had acted like it was nothing, restored Kimaris’s humanity, and loved and educated him. Then, ten years ago, she’d finally collapsed from the damage. That had been a godsend for Shere Khan. In exchange for the Hex Nails, he had saved Gremory. Just how humiliating had it been for Kimaris to have the power he’d developed to take revenge on his nemesis stolen from him? Even now, Kimaris’s body boiled with rage over the thought.

Kimaris’s life has somewhat resembled my own.

When he was but a child, Kimaris had been quick to pick fights that were beyond him and caused trouble for all those around him. This was actually proper conduct compared to Shere Khan’s childhood, but perhaps he’d actually felt sympathy with the boy back in those

days. He'd never imagined Kimaris would end up being saved by a witch too, though.

Maybe we're not all that similar in the end.

The glaring difference was that Kimaris wasn't yet mourning the witch he loved.

"Use these...to take...Archdemon Zagan's...head," Shere Khan said, holding up the Hex Nails all the while. "If you do...I'll save...this woman. It's the...same trade...as before."

It was the same act of humiliation. Kimaris's hatred for Shere Khan surpassed his loyalty to Zagan. Or at least, that should've been the case.

"It'll be all right, Miss Gremory," Kimaris said, narrowing his eyes nostalgically. "I won't do anything foolish this time."

Shere Khan shot Gremory a curious glance. Her noisy mouth had turned to stone and only a single eye could move now.

"It will be fine, I promise," Kimaris repeated with a gentle smile. "Please don't worry. Believe in me, the one to whom you showed love. And believe in our king."

It was questionable whether his words had actually reached her. As if she had exhausted the last of her strength, the terrifying witch turned completely to stone. It had been eight hundred years since Shere Khan had become a sorcerer, yet he'd never felt so driven into a corner before meeting her. It hadn't really been a crisis or anything, but the plans that had gone exactly as Shere Khan had envisioned were now noticeably thrown off for the very first time.

"There's no need to worry. I'll put all my strength into fighting Sir Zagan," Kimaris said as he accepted the Hex Nails. "Even if I kill you now, I have no way of treating Miss Gremory. Thus, I have no choice but to obey you."

Kimaris would challenge Zagan just as Shere Khan had planned. But this wasn't what he truly wanted. The Hex Nails were fueled by hatred, so in this state, Kimaris wouldn't be able to touch Zagan. Everything up until now had been ideal, but Gremory's behavior had returned Kimaris to his senses. The leonin still had an important role to fill in his plans, so this threw things off. And as Kimaris started to leave, he turned to tell Shere Khan one last thing.

"Oh, right, it seems you see yourself in me, but from my perspective, I believe my liege is the one who understands you best."

Kimaris had seen through him, but what did that mean? How could Zagan have possibly understood Shere Khan? With unease building in his heart due to a mountain of burning questions, Shere Khan was left all alone atop his throne.



And so, Kimaris blocked Zagan's way. Zagan had been betrayed by his trusted right-hand man, but he smiled wryly in relief nonetheless.

"From the look of it, Gremory is fine..." he said to the leonin. "Well, she's not the kind of woman to die from a simple attempt on her life."

Kimaris nodded with a pained expression on his face, then replied, "Umm...yes. How do I even explain? It seems she was quite the bother after being captured."

"I see... How unfortunate for Shere Khan."

Even though Shere Khan was a sworn enemy who'd done so much harm to them, the two men present felt honest sympathy for the Archdemon.

I get it now. Gremory was the one who accomplished such a splendid feat.

There was no way Kimaris would've sat still if Gremory had been hurt. And yet, he'd returned from the confrontation with his usual temperament intact. Even once captured, the terrifying witch had protected him.

"Are you not angry?" Kimaris asked, blinking unexpectedly at Zagan's reaction.

"Gremory was captured because I failed to see through my enemy's trap. I have no intention of faulting your actions after she's been taken hostage due to my negligence."

"I truly am glad to have served you," the kind leonin replied with a smile.

"I'm telling you not to worry about it. More importantly, I'm in a hurry. I'm not telling you to lend me a hand, but could you stand aside?"

Kimaris showed no signs of yielding the path, however, and he responded, "Sir Zagan. You seem to be misunderstanding something."

"Hmm...?"

"I have not been reduced to a pitiful, feral beast due to a hostage. Nor have I lost myself to rage due to Miss Gremory's injuries," Kimaris paused there and held out his hand, clenching his fist. "My liege. Please forgive this misguided sorcerer. I want to know... I want to know who is stronger between us."

His voice was gentle despite the ferocious smile on his face. His words shook the air, causing the heroes surrounding the two men to take a step back. Faced with the hardy challenge, Zagan returned a smile of his own.

"*That* is what makes you my right-hand man. I wouldn't have awarded the post to someone who lacked ambition."



Kimaris probably would've never seriously bared his fangs at Zagan if not for something of this scale. As such, this was a perfect opportunity. These two had made their names as Archdemon candidates using only their fists. What's more, they were driven by similar things. The question of who was stronger in a straight fight could only be answered by clashing. And without ever getting a definitive answer, the thought would've lingered in their minds for all eternity.

Zagan stomped on a broken sword at his feet. The weapon bounced up into the air and settled itself in his hand.

"Come at me as you will. I'll hold nothing back," Zagan declared, throwing the sword high above him. It drew a gentle arc, looking strangely slower than it should've been.

The soldiers in the area all forgot the situation and held their breaths. The falling sword blocked Zagan and Kimaris's line of sight to each other for a single instant, which acted as the signal to start.

The sword shattered with a deafening clang. Zagan's and Kimaris's fists collided where the weapon had just been. The two of them had aimed for the exact same spot. The sword had been one wielded on a battlefield of heroes. It was of no simple make. Despite that fact, however, it had been reduced to atoms like crumbling sand without leaving so much as a scratch on either man's fist.

Zagan stepped in with his right foot and thrust out his left fist. The difference in their statures was clear. Kimaris brought his left fist downward to meet the blow. A second collision caved in the ground beneath them and sent the soldiers around them flying back. A dull crack could then be heard mingling with the terrifying shock wave.

"Gh!"

Both their fists had broken. Well, not just their fists. Their arms were crushed all the way up to their elbows, laying muscle bare and exposing bones. When copying Zagan's punch, Shax's arm had been unable to withstand the force, but this was different. This had happened precisely because Kimaris's punch had exactly the same destructive force behind it as Zagan's.

Even when Zagan refrained from using sorcery and exchanged blows with Decarabia, he hadn't suffered such damage. Sharp pain pierced his brain, threatening to overwhelm his consciousness, but Zagan gritted his teeth and clenched his right fist. He then swung and connected with Kimaris's jaw, but at the same time, Kimaris slammed his fist into Zagan's face. Fresh blood splattered across the ground. The impact shook his brain and caused his knees to buckle, but he had his left fist ready again soon enough.

Being the strongest at reinforcing one's body was synonymous to being the best at regenerating one's body. Zagan's broken hand had already been repaired, while his cracked cranium was in the middle of being restored. However, the same went for Kimaris.

Looks like I can't devour his sorcery fast enough.

Zagan had said that he wouldn't hold anything back, so he was, of course, giving this battle everything he had. The ability to devour sorcery was one major aspect of Zagan's strength, so he was more than willing to put it to use. He wasn't only devouring bold moves like the Black Claws and Heaven's Phosphor Tornado the moment they were cast, but even sorcery employed for reinforcement and healing. And yet, he couldn't devour all the sorcery reinforcing and mending Kimaris's body. The lion's fists were too fast and couldn't be stopped. In other words, as someone who rendered his opponents powerless by absorbing any and all sorcery, Kimaris was his natural enemy. Though, one could also have said that Zagan was abnormal

for having the mental capacity to even devour sorcery during such a vicious exchange of blows.

Zagan's fist dug into Kimaris's flank. He could feel ribs breaking and stabbing the leonin's lungs, but a fist still plunged into Zagan's liver as if ignoring such damage completely. Nevertheless, Zagan stood his ground and headbutted Kimaris in the jaw, and was then met with a double ax-handle punch from above.

"Ha ha!"

Zagan let out an unintentional laugh, much like some innocent boy. This was the first opponent he had ever faced who wouldn't collapse from a full-strength punch. Barbatos never died from such a blow, but he also couldn't retaliate so ferociously. Decarabia had just been a rampaging brat, and it hadn't even been a fight. Andrealphus was mighty, but had still collapsed after getting hit. This man was the only one who'd taken a full-force blow from Zagan and responded in kind.

The audience didn't share in Zagan's delight, however.

"Run away! You'll get caught in the cross fire!"

"Aaaaaargh!"

"They're coming this way!"

"Eeek! They're not human!"

"Save the injured!"

Every single strike triggered a shock wave capable of shattering an Archdemon's fist. The earth caved in and the air burst around them. Their fistfight became a storm that ravaged the battlefield. Simply being there was the same as forfeiting one's life. Even as the soldiers tried to run away with their injured comrades in tow, the shock waves blew over their backs, sending them tumbling to the ground.

Oddly enough, Zagan's strategy of using the injured to hamper the healthy soldiers now gave birth to a tremendous wave of casualties.



Several sorcerers on the very same battlefield watched the fistfight from afar.

"Tch... He sure seems to be having fun," Barbatos said.

Now that the battle had begun, their job was pretty much done. All that was left was to observe the situation and kill anyone who tried to organize a command structure. Still, if they retired now, Barbatos could claim to have fulfilled Zagan's request sufficiently. That was why he chose to sit back and enjoy the show. However, he seemed displeased with what he was watching.

"Oh my. You look awfully annoyed by that," Behemoth said teasingly, having already finished his job as well.

"Hah! How could I possibly feel good watching that asshole play around at a time like this?"

"Is that really all it is?"

"What're you trying to say?"

Why does he look like he's having so much more fun than when he's punching me?

Well, it would've also been a problem if Zagan enjoyed punching Barbatos to that extent, but for whatever reason, he felt extremely dissatisfied by the sight.

"Don't worry," Behemoth said with a chuckle. "I'm pretty sure you're Zagan's only fighting buddy."

"Huuuh? Who the hell is that asshole's buddy?!"

"What? You're not?" Behemoth replied with a curious smile.

“Still, I don’t get why he looks so happy...” Levia said with a cock of her head. “Kimaris betrayed him.”

“Right, being close enough to fight...isn’t quite the case here,” Behemoth answered. “I suppose it’s something like his relationship with Barbatos.”

“Mhm. I can tell just by looking.”

“I’m telling ya I’m not really pals with him or nothing,” Barbatos complained.

However, Behemoth ignored him and continued, “Well, it’s a little different from that as well... How do I put this...? Men are stupid creatures. We get engrossed in fisticuffs. That’s what’s happening to Zagan now.”

“Hmm...” Levia muttered in confusion. “I don’t get the instinct behind it...but I do think he looks cool.”

“Huh?!” Behemoth exclaimed, clearly shocked. However, Levia simply continued to stare at the fistfight unfolding before them.

◇

Meanwhile, in another place far away from the battlefield.

“Zagan is certainly entranced with an awfully savage game...” Bifrons said in a fed up tone.

“Oh? I was under the impression that you actually liked being hit,” Naberius replied, finding Bifrons’s words somewhat unexpected.

“An opponent who exceeds your expectations and strikes you is fun.”

In truth, Zagan always came in and struck Bifrons from an unexpected direction. And it wasn’t like Bifrons was simply sitting around defenselessly waiting to get hit either. Such unexpected blows brought so much pleasure that even the pain felt endearing.

“But what’s so fun about a fistfight?” Bifrons added. “It just hurts, and it isn’t a sorcerer’s way. There’s nothing smart about it.”

During one of their many clashes, Bifrons had dived toward Zagan and prepared to take a hit. However, that plan had involved enduring a single strike to get one up on him. Thus, they couldn’t understand the meaning of such a thoughtless exchange of blows.

“Hee hee hee. Men are charmed by such manly acts.”

“Charmed, huh...?” Bifrons replied with an astonished sigh.

One year ago, Shere Khan had recommended Kimaris for the seat of Archdemon. From Bifrons’s point of view, the leonin was a boring sorcerer like Andrealphus who had nothing going for him but brute strength. After it had been decided that Zagan would take the seat, Bifrons hadn’t really paid Kimaris any mind. Yet now, the sorcerer was strong enough to stand his ground in a head-on fight with Zagan. Thus, Bifrons had to admit that he’d grown.

I still don’t understand what’s so fun about it, though.

Bifrons touched their own cheek. Back when they’d messed with Zagan in Raziel, he’d punched Bifrons mercilessly in the face. Bifrons had tried to gouge out Zagan’s heart in turn, but had only got as far as lightly digging their nails into his skin. Thinking back on it now, had that stinging sensation been fun? Either way, the way the two men were enjoying themselves appeared different.

“I just don’t get it...” Bifrons mumbled.

“Hee hee hee. A well-trained body is a beautiful thing. Men are creatures who can’t be satisfied with leaving such a thing as mere decoration.”

Bifrons prayed from the bottom of their heart that this laughing beholder would just leave them alone.

◇

Zagan and Kimaris's fight dyed the soil red with blood, but it showed no signs of reaching its conclusion.

Going at it with all my might is fun, but I'm starting to run out of time here.

Before Zagan knew it, the skies had started to darken. He'd been exchanging blows all morning. Even a sorcerer would feel some fatigue from all that work, so it was about time to settle things. With that thought in mind, Zagan changed his approach. As Kimaris's fist closed in on him, he warded off the blow with an almost gentle motion.

"Hm?!"

Kimaris's body carried its momentum and twisted through the air, slamming his back onto the ground. The impact caved in the earth and even carved canyon-like cracks through their surroundings, swallowing the hapless soldiers around them into their depths. This hadn't been the work of Zagan's strength, however. It was simply how much destructive force Kimaris's fist possessed. But oddly enough, it was Zagan who was left wide-eyed in the aftermath.

He still managed to break his fall?!

It had looked like a defenseless tumble, but Kimaris had managed to curl his back and stave off the impact. He then followed that up with an attack of his own by lunging for the back of Zagan's neck.

"Gah!"

This time it was Zagan being thrown through the air. It was a one-handed throw that couldn't really be called an art, though. Zagan rolled through with ease and rose to his feet.

"What's wrong? You seem to be lacking the means to deliver a decisive blow," Zagan said. Though, he was clearly putting on airs. Zagan was the one lacking such a thing.

I said I wouldn't hold anything back, but I can't use Heaven's Phosphor on my precious subordinate.

That power was meant for killing Archdemons and Azazel. It wasn't a tool to be used in a brawl. Having said that, applications of Heaven's Scale such as the Eastern and Western Sky couldn't keep up with Kimaris's speed. Heaven's Ring could, but that merely increased Zagan's speed without doing anything to boost his offensive potential. In other words, he had nothing at hand to deal with an opponent who couldn't be felled by his fist.

"Heh heh, I wonder about that..." Kimaris said with a smile as if he'd been waiting for those words. "Maybe I still have something up my sleeve."

With that, pitch-black nails stretched out from Kimaris's hand.

I see. So he's been the one matching my pace, not the other way around.

It was standard for a beast to fight using their fangs and claws, yet Kimaris had been fighting with just his fists thus far. The nails seethed with ominous mana. Just looking at them brought on a bout of dizziness. This wasn't sorcery. Having said that, he couldn't sense anything natural about them either. It might have been something similar to Gremory's Balor's Evil Eye, but that seemed suspect... Before long, however, Zagan realized exactly what these nails truly were.

"Don't tell me... Are those Hex Nails?"

Zagan had seen a reference to them in ancient legends. Just as its name implied, they were cursed nails that only a small fraction of leonins were said to be able to manifest. They said that wounds inflicted by these nails couldn't be healed and would bleed for all eternity.

I see. This curse must be the thing connected to Azazel that Shere Khan covets.

There were similar powers across many races throughout the ages. Liucaon's three royal families were prime examples of that: the cait siths' great fortune, the succubi's ability to manipulate dreams, and the sirens' Hex Songs.

"I expected as much. You already know its name," Kimaris said as he steadily poised himself for battle with the nails held forward. "Will you be able to dodge this, though?"

Zagan had been fighting the entire day. There was fatigue to consider on top of the difference in physical strength and endurance between a human and a leonin. As a species, humans had no way of competing...and that fact sent an instinctive shudder through Zagan's body. It wasn't due to fear, though. It came from delight. Kimaris had been hiding something that could overturn the entire situation. He'd been waiting for the instant when he would definitely be able to reach Zagan with these nails.

So he'll do everything in his power to win, huh?

That made Zagan happy. Zagan had approached this like a brawl, but in contrast, Kimaris had paid no heed to appearances and had challenged Zagan with his body and spirit on the line.

"Very well, then. Come at me!" Zagan declared.

"Take this!" Kimaris roared as he held the nails high in the air, far beyond where it looked like they could reach.

"Huh?!"

The black nails rushed toward Zagan, creating gales in their wake. But even when faced with this fierce attack, he didn't suffer any direct hits. Though his robes were in tatters and the exposed skin of his face and hands were wet with fresh blood, they were caused

entirely by the destruction of his sturdy barriers. Four fissures ran through the earth behind him and stretched out as far as the eye could see.

Having spontaneously focused entirely on defense in the heat of the moment, Kimaris was now right in front of him, swinging in with one more nail.

“Like that’d work!” Zagan exclaimed as he brushed aside the blow by the wrist.

I won't suffer a lethal blow so long as I keep the nails away from me.

With his all-out attack repelled, Kimaris’s balance was broken. His abdomen was wide open, so Zagan drove his fist in with all his might. He aimed the strike precisely at Kimaris’s vital organs, but the leonin’s massive body didn’t budge an inch.

“What...?”

Zagan’s fist could even reduce steel to atoms, but it did nothing to Kimaris’s muscles. Not only that, but even the wounds caused indirectly by the nails weren’t regenerating.

“It seems you’re out of mana.”

Zagan had developed his sorcery so that he could fight alone. His greatest spells like Heaven’s Scale were excessively efficient. No matter how many enemies he faced, he could continue striking them until they were all gone. That was Zagan’s way of fighting. However, at its roots, this advantage was borne of devouring sorcery...and Zagan’s opponents hadn’t been using sorcery during this battle. Even Kimaris had only poured all his mana into reinforcing his own body, so the amount of mana to be devoured was minuscule.

In other words, Zagan had depleted his own reserves of mana. This was a first for him. Perhaps that was why Shere Khan had resurrected these heroes from an age before sorcery.

He really got me...

Zagan's body was still strengthened somewhat, but he no longer possessed the destructive force required to damage Kimaris's body. At this final hour, even his fist had been sealed.

Kimaris mercilessly brought down another nail. Zagan dove to the ground in order to avoid it, but was greeted by a kick to the face, sending him flying backward. The reinforcement to his body was wearing out, so he could no longer react to Kimaris's movements. Kimaris also rivaled Zagan when it came to martial arts, so Zagan had nothing left to help him stand on even ground with the leonin, let alone get the upper hand on him.

I can't win?

Defeatist words came to his mind, but that only brought exaltation. No man had ever cornered him so badly. Kimaris's next thrust came in without showing any hesitation or carelessness.

Just two more! Hold it together! Zagan thought as he gathered his resolve and prepared to meet the blow.

"It's over!" Kimaris roared.

"Hmph! Bring it on!"

Zagan no longer had a means of evading. Thus, Kimaris's Hex Nail plunged into his torso with a dull thud.

"Gah..." Zagan gasped as he vomited blood. With that, everyone was sure the battle was over. "Aaargh!"

Mustering the last of his strength, Zagan struck the Hex Nail in his torso from the side. Intense pain ran through his brain as it gouged open his wound further before snapping.

“What?!”

By the time Kimaris’s eyes shot open in shock, Zagan was already behind him. He then wrapped his right arm around the leonin’s neck, grabbed his left elbow, and pressed his left forearm into the back of his neck. He caught Kimaris in a rear naked choke using the tiniest opening born from the surety of victory.

Kimaris’s thick neck creaked like an enormous tree cracking apart. This technique wasn’t some half-hearted choke meant to simply starve his opponent of oxygen. It was meant to cut off the flow of blood and crush the windpipe and hyoid bone at the same time.

Kimaris did, of course, try to tear Zagan away, but his arm stopped halfway up. A Hex Nail still extended from his hand. If he tried grabbing the arm around his neck now, he would tear open his own throat.

“Gaaargh!” Kimaris yelled as he thrashed about violently, jumping back and slamming Zagan into the ground. However, even exhausted of mana, Zagan refused to relax his hold. Any attempts by Kimaris to restore his blood flow or respiration by use of sorcery were devoured, in turn granting Zagan more strength. The leonin could only rely on brute force.

To a sorcerer, battle was all about dragging an opponent into your arena. In the very last moment, Zagan had been the one to do so. Kimaris mustered the last of his will to resist, but struggling simply tightened Zagan’s choke hold.

“Gah... Agh...”

Before long, Kimaris’s tongue went limp and his eyes rolled into the back of his head. The gallant leonin’s enormous body sank to the ground with a thud.

“Haaah... Haaah...” Zagan released his hold and fell to his knees with ragged breaths.

I would've lost if that didn't work...

It had truly been Zagan's very last resort. He had nothing left in the tank after that, so he simply let out a long breath as Kimaris broke into a coughing fit.

"Gak! Hak... Ugh..."

"Haaah... Haaah... That's my win...Kimaris."

"But...with that wound... Hak!"

Zagan smiled, looking down at the Hex Nail still lodged deep in his torso. Seeing that, Kimaris's expression clouded over.

I'll definitely die if this is left in me.

Even though he'd won the fight, dying would be the same as losing. Kimaris would be the survivor, after all. But even so, Zagan smiled.

"I told you to come at me with everything you had. This is nothing for you to worry about."

"But...!"

Instead of saying anything else, Zagan held up his right hand.

I don't have enough mana myself, but...

The Sigil of the Archdemon glowed faintly, unleashing a tremendous amount of mana. With his reserves replenished, Zagan's wounds began to heal. This brought further despair upon the soldiers in the area.

"No way. What the hell is that...?"

"Has everything up until now not even been a fight in his eyes?"

However, even if his mana could be replenished by use of the Sigil, the wounds dealt by the Hex Nail couldn't be healed. Nevertheless, Zagan pulled the nail out of his stomach.

"Sir Zagan! You'll bleed out!"

Without the nail there, his wound opened, pouring a large quantity of blood out onto the ground.

“I told you not to worry. Heaven’s Scale Prayer’s Shell.”

“The wound dealt by the Hex Nail is closing...?” Kimaris muttered, his eyes wide in shock.

It should’ve been impossible to heal, but the wound closed in an instant. This wasn’t an act of healing after all, but an act of creation. Zagan had learned to do this when restoring Alshiera’s statue. When used on the spur of the moment, the materialization of mana had made it necessary to take mana from Furcas. However, at the time, Zagan had learned the technique to materialize mana to imitate real organs. He’d hypothesized that this could be used to save Nephteros and had hence used it on Richard as a trial run.

Still, the mana conversion rate was poor, and it couldn’t be put into practice on Nephteros. That was why Zagan had focused his research on Heaven’s Scale, his invincible shield that strengthened itself ad infinitum by absorbing mana from its surroundings. With such strength, the shield was endlessly close to being physical matter. And by using it and his two prior experiences with mana materialization, he’d managed to complete the development of the sorcery known as Heaven’s Scale Prayer’s Shell.

This sorcery materialized mana to replace lost body parts. It could even recreate anything lost to powers like Heaven’s Phosphor, which devoured all existence. In this instant, Heaven’s Scale truly became the counter to Heaven’s Phosphor.

Seeing a wound that should’ve brought certain death close in an instant, Kimaris fell to a knee before Zagan.

“You have utterly defeated me, my liege. You surpass me in every regard.”

“That’s not true. This is the first time I’ve ever been cornered so badly. Come at me again whenever you wish.”

Even if he had done so after the fight was over, this had also been the first time that he’d had to resort to using the Sigil of the Archdemon.

“Of course... Really, you’ve bested me outright,” Kimaris said with a troubled smile before standing up unsteadily and turning his back to Zagan. “My liege. Please leave the cleanup to me. I’ll at least put in an effort to make up for the time you spent for my sake. You may go on ahead.”

“I’ll leave this in your hands, then. Come after me when you’re done. You have a duty to see the conclusion to this battle.”

“As you will.”

Many of the Nephilims had gotten caught in the clash between Zagan and Kimaris. In the aftermath, thanks to Kimaris’s efforts, over fifteen hundred soldiers perished. Counting those dealt with by Barbatos’s team, that number reached two thousand.

All of this combined to roughly twenty percent of their total forces, so they still numbered eight thousand. Nevertheless, as Zagan marched onward, looking perfectly composed, they could do nothing but tremble and watch.

With that, the curtains fell on the first day of battle.



Several hours had passed since Zagan and Kimaris’s clash. Now draped in the utter darkness of the night, Nephy and Orias found *that* in a deserted town.

“Kee hee hee. Aaah, alas, what naughty children. Where have you hidden my beloved’s eye and left hand? I’ll never let you get away.”

A girl with a face identical to Nephy's floated in the air. Eerie black crests colored her once beautiful tan skin like blood vessels. There was no hint of sanity behind her golden eyes, and her disheveled silver hair was rapidly losing its luster.

Her most abnormal features, however, were the eight wings of light sprouting from her back. Alshiera and the others had destroyed some, but the monster had apparently regained her power since that battle. As such, these cursed wings unleashed sinister mana that far surpassed the Sigils of the Archdemon. Simply looking at them weighed heavily on Nephy's heart.

"Nephteros...!"

Nephy called her little sister's name. She thought back to the time Bifrons had once treated this girl as a sacrificial pawn and thrown her away, back when Nephy first wished to save her. Even now, she couldn't forget the look of utter despair on Nephteros's face when she'd been swallowed by the sludge.

Why does she have to go through all this?! Nephy thought as resentment boiled up within her heart.

"Zagan claimed that he would save her," Orias said, placing a hand on Nephy's shoulder. "Believe in your lover."

"Right..."

The word "lover" made Nephy red to the face, but she still managed to give her a reassuring nod.

"Besides, it seems there's more hope than I thought there'd be," Orias added quietly.

"What do you mean, mother?"

Orias pointed up at "Nephteros" and replied, "Although she's rampaged around, there's strangely little damage done to the area. It

seems someone's scheming has lured the thing to this spot, but that's not all there is to it."

"D-Do you mean Nephteros is still conscious?"

"I can't be sure, but I believe it means she's still fighting."

With that, Orias flung off her robes, revealing the Anointed Armor beneath. She had a crest of a cross and a lion on her chest and a slender sword hanging from her waist. This was her figure as a knight, the one she had when Nephy had met her in the Holy City Raziel. This wasn't Archdemon Orias, but Fairy Queen Oberon Nimueh Titania.

"I didn't think I would ever appear like this again," Orias said with a sigh, transforming from an old woman to a young lady that was about the same age as her daughter. "Nephy, lend me Azazel's Staff."

"Y-Yes."

Nephy held out the worn-out broom that contrasted its name.

"I've explained how it works during our lessons in celestial mysticism, but this will be my first time actually showing it to you. Watch closely," Orias explained. She held Azazel's Staff across her hands like an offering and quietly whispered, "Hex Wings."

Azazel's Staff glimmered faintly...and light gathered at Orias's back, taking on the form of wings.

So this is the true power of Azazel's Staff...

The tool amplified a high elf's power beyond their limits. And in doing so, they manifested what were called Hex Wings. This was how she'd defeated the preceding Archdemon Orias. However, unlike "Nephteros," Orias's wings glowed, exuding a beautiful, pallid light, and she only had six of them.

“To think that I’m of lower rank...” Orias said with a smile. “It seems this will be quite the task.”

When Zagan had told her of the number of wings, Orias had looked like she was resolved for death. Just two extra wings meant that much of a difference in power, apparently. However, this time, Orias had something that she hadn’t had when challenging her predecessor. She took the staff in her left hand and held out her right.

“Now then, will the Sigil of the Archdemon make up for two Hex Wings? I suppose I’m about to find out.”

Mana flooded out from Orias’s body as she floated into the air.

Amazing! Her power is on par with that thing...

Nephy could sense that, with the Sigil, Orias rivaled “Nephteros’s” power. However, in the next instant, Nephy was made to realize that Azazel was no seraph, but a god.

“Seraphs...? Aaaaaah!”

“Gah!”

“Nephteros” suddenly shrieked, elevating her mana even further. A destructive force accompanied it, rivaling the Sludge Demon Lord and forcing Nephy to cover her ears.

“Aaah! You wretched seraphs! You dare to stubbornly cling to this world?! Alas! How repulsive! How filthy! Every single breath from your ilk is the gravest of sins!”

Despite being several hundred meters away, her voice shook the air to such an extent that Nephy could hear it resounding directly in her head.

“Seraphs... The ones Master Zagan spoke of?”

But why would such a word be directed at Nephy and Orias?

Elves inherited the blood of ancient gods.

His life could be said to have been a battle against such beings.

The high elves' numbers decreased drastically, and now they're on the verge of extinction.

Azazel, Marc, and Alshiera's lifelong enemy.

There are no gods in this world. If there are, then they are within us.

The answer had been presented to her long ago.

Oh, so that's what it means. Elves are... No, high elves are... Nephy came to realize the truth of the matter. But a single question remained in her mind: Did Zagan know of this?

"Nephy! She's coming!"

Orias's voice brought her back to her senses. "Nephteros" was already drawing nearer with a spear made of light in hand. Orias lunged forth with her sword to intercept.

"Ugh! What power...!"

"Nephteros," powered by her eight Hex Wings, overwhelmed Orias. The Sigil of the Archdemon wasn't enough. Having reacted late, Nephy had no time to get anything ready to help.

It's no good!

And just as her body froze at the thought...

"Not on my watch!"

A crimson fist cut in between Orias and "Nephteros."

Chastille? No, it's someone else.

It was a boy with the same red hair and eyes as Chastille. A gauntlet made entirely of mana had forced its way between the crossing blades and stopped them.

“Kee hee hee...” “Nephteros” chuckled, then smiled with an expression of both hatred and joy. “Oh my, we meet again. What a naughty child. This time I shall pulverize you properly.”

“Hah! Let’s see you try!” the boy exclaimed as he twisted his fist, sending the tip of the spear and sword springing upward.

A parry!

His fighting style used those arts that Zagan seldom demonstrated.

“Ugh?!”

“Hup!”

“Nephteros” lost her balance, allowing the boy to swing his gauntlet at her wings. However, she dodged it by flying up into the sky.

“Tch! Guess I won’t get one so easy, huh?” he mumbled to himself. And now that “Nephteros” was some distance away, the boy glanced over to Nephy and Orias. “Erk... Seraphs on this side too? Dammit, Ashy, say that kinda stuff beforehand.”

Being faced with such disgust, Nephy actually regained her presence of mind.

Somehow, being faced with such contempt is rather nostalgic.

Back in the day, during her years in the hidden elven village, everyone looked at her like she was filthy trash. Compared to those gazes, the boy’s eyes were those of someone looking at her like a proper person—even if there was something of a grudge behind them. Also, it turned out her guess about seraphs was right.

His actions felt like something of a rebuke for losing her presence of mind earlier. And so, although it was a little out of place, Nephy decided to bow lightly to the boy.

“Thank you for your assistance. Were you sent by Lady Alshiera?”

“Y-Yeah...” the boy answered with a confused look. “I’m Asura. Ashy told me to protect you two.”

“Then, though it seems that it doesn’t sit right with you, we’ll be in your care for a little while. We must save that girl,” Nephy said with a smile.

The boy—Asura—ruffled his hair like he’d been completely thrown off by her behavior, then replied, “Looks like you’re awfully different from the seraphs I know. Sorry for saying somethin’ so rude.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

Thanks to him, she’d managed to regain her composure, so she didn’t feel like complaining at all.

“So wait, does that make you this friend Ashy mentioned having?” Asura asked with a grin.

“Huh? Umm...”

Nephy did, of course, see Alshiera in a good light, but could she claim to be a friend?

I think he’s probably referring to Foll...

Nephy pondered over how to answer for a bit when Orias cut in for her and answered, “A friend? Perhaps that would be me?”

“Hmm? How’re you related?” Asura asked.

Orias’s lips twisted in amusement and she said, “To borrow a childish term, I suppose you could call us mom friends.”

Asura wasn’t the only one taken aback by her answer.

Mom friends...? Does she mean they are fellow mothers? Lady Alshiera...a mother? Whose mother, then?

Nephy had promised not to pry at or ponder Alshiera’s identity, but she couldn’t stop her instincts in the moment.

“The time for small talk is over,” Orias said, turning a stern gaze toward “Nephteros,” who was brandishing her spear once more.

“Don’t take it head-on!” Asura shouted. “Aim for the Hex Wings. Oh, and don’t bother trying your seraph songs. It’ll be plundered by a higher-ranking seraph.”

“Seraph songs... Do you mean celestial mysticism?” Nephy asked.

Nephy had once stolen control of Nephteros’s celestial mysticism...and a similar phenomenon had apparently happened during the face-off with Orias.

If I can’t use celestial mysticism...then what can I do?

What could she do for Nephteros’s sake? With that thought in mind, Nephy came to a sudden stop.

“Hey! What’re you doin’?!” Asura yelled.

Nephy stood completely still out in the open. She then held out her hands toward “Nephteros.”

“Please come back to us, Nephteros.”

Both Asura and Orias looked on in shock at her pointless appeal.

This is the reason I came here!

Nephy didn’t truly believe her voice would reach, but “Nephteros” came to a sudden stop as she heard her continued pleading.

“I’ve learned when Master Zagan’s birthday is. Shall we go look for presents together and celebrate for him? I haven’t told Chastille about this yet, but Foll, Lilith, and even Lady Alshiera have all helped think up a plan to surprise him.”

Her words were completely out of place when directed at this divine monster. Nevertheless, Nephy kept talking.

“You have to be there with us, Nephteros. I don’t want to do this without you, so—”

“Tee hee hee... What a foolish child. What a pitiful child. Could you be quiet?” “Nephteros” said, tossing her spear of light.

“Nephy!”

Nephy saw the spear. She also heard Orias’s voice. But even so, she maintained her steadfast gaze on “Nephteros.” The spear pierced the ground, boiling the earth in a deep shade of red...far, far behind Nephy.

“I...missed?” “Nephteros” muttered, confused.

The spear had passed by Nephy by the tiniest margin. Seeing this, “Nephteros’s” insane smile had vanished and her face now displayed clear bewilderment.

“Gotcha!”

The crimson-haired boy charged in with another swing of his gauntlet, but “Nephteros” dodged into the air.

“Almost had you! Really thought I’d get one there.”

“What an irritating little fly.”

“Nephteros” swung her arm. That was all it took to create a shock wave capable of destroying the entire deserted village. In response, Asura’s gauntlet spread out like feathers, letting him float away from the blow and land right next to Nephy.

“Heh heh heh... That’s quite the fun way you’ve got of fightin’! Lemme give ya a hand!”

Nephy had no idea what Alshiera had in mind when she sent the boy over, but despite showing disgust at first, Asura stood to the fore to protect her.

“Did Camael not come this way...?” Asura muttered.

Nephy figured that was the name of a Sacred Sword, but due to the next spear of light being let loose, she didn't have time to pay his words any mind.



“Is he still not awake?”

Back in one of Archdemon Palace's rooms, Lisette sat by a certain Angelic Knight's prone body. His name was Richard. After having his heart gouged out, he'd been saved from the brink of death by Archdemon Zagan. However, even though his treatment was done, he showed no signs of waking up.

As a noncombatant, Lisette was also helping out in the kitchen, but it wasn't like they were all working around the clock. They took shifts, so Lisette used her break to check on Richard's condition.

The one who called out to her was the girl who shared her face. She had the same blonde hair, the same blue eyes. Even her small nose, her thin lips, her angled brows, her somewhat tanned skin, all of it was the same. She was apparently a sorcerer, but she wore a simple breastplate along with a longsword at her waist, making her appear more like a bandit.

“Miss Dexia.”

“Just Dexia is fine. It seems we're not strangers and all.”

“Mmm... Dexia.”

According to Dexia, there was another girl out there with the same face as them, one that Dexia had to save.

“Are you heading out already?” Lisette asked.

“Yes. I just wanted to get another look at you before I left.”

Archdemon Zagan was mighty and dutiful. Now that he'd declared that he would protect Dexia, he was sure to do so. But even so, the

enemy they were going to face was far too powerful. There was no guarantee that she would return safely. There was also no guarantee that they could save her sister. Lisette returned Dexia's gaze, unable to find the right words to say to her.

"You can't become like us," Dexia said curtly, joining her hands behind her back.

"Huh?"

Lisette was left wide-eyed at the sudden change of topic.

"We were something like assassins," Dexia muttered as if talking to herself. "Back then, we didn't think anything of it. And after all the foul things we've done, there was no complaining if someone killed us at any moment. Even if this thing with Aristella didn't happen, it would've ended up bad one day."

Dexia paused there, then continued with a gloomy expression.

"I'm going to kill my master."

Lisette gulped at the powerful declaration.

"I really only have the power to help out a little, of course..." Dexia added. "But that's what I have to do if I wish to save Aristella...go to another Archdemon for help. I'm enacting revenge on my master by my own will."

Dexia claimed to be artificially created, but what of it? As she was now, she possessed a far stronger will than Lisette ever had, and Lisette was wholly human.

"Our hands are already dirty," Dexia said, finally looking straight at Lisette. "But you're different. Yours are still clean, so I want them to stay that way. You can't become like us."

Her words were far too pure for someone with sullied hands, causing Lisette to clasp her hand tight against her chest.

“I-I’ve been living in the streets, you know?” she said. “I’m not as clean as you think I am.”

“No, you’re still clean. We were wrong, but if you can stay pure, I feel like we’ll be saved. It’s like a sign that we could’ve had such a future, so...” Dexia, a girl who’d once gone around killing people at her master’s command, spoke as if in prayer.

Before answering, Lisette embraced her, then said, “The Archdemon told me something once. No matter who you are, you deserve at least one chance to walk another path. You believe you were wrong, don’t you? You truly want to change, don’t you? Isn’t that why you chose this path?”

“Yeah...”

“So you can’t call yourself dirty. In my eyes, you look noble and pure.”

Dexia wrapped her arms around Lisette and began sobbing quietly. Lisette said nothing and gently stroked Dexia’s head in response. After a while, Dexia pushed herself back.

“I need to get going...” she said.

“Mmm...”

Dexia turned around to leave, but suddenly turned back as if remembering something. She then unwound the blue ribbon that was around her wrist and asked, “Hey, could you hold on to this?”

“Isn’t that important to you?” Lisette questioned, somewhat bewildered by the act.

“It is... This is Aristella’s ribbon. I’m the older sister, but I couldn’t protect her. She’s the one who helped me get away...” Dexia mumbled as she held the ribbon tightly to her chest, then smiled with tearful eyes. “When I returned to where she should’ve been, all

that was left was this ribbon. And when I found her later, she wasn't Aristella anymore..."

"Dexia..."

Despite the subject, Dexia's expression wasn't as gloomy as Lisette had expected.

"I will definitely save Aristella," Dexia said. "And then, I'll come back here with her. That's why I'd like you to hold on to this."

"Okay."

Lisette couldn't possibly refuse after hearing all that, so she carefully accepted the precious ribbon like the most fragile of treasures.

"Hey, Dexia?"

"Yes?"

"What kind of person was the master who made you two go through all this?" Lisette asked hesitantly.

"What kind of person was he...?" Dexia repeated with a lonely smile and a distant gaze. "I don't even know anymore. He was kind, he praised us when we fulfilled our missions, he treated us when we got hurt...but he never taught us what exactly it was that we were doing. Even after *that* happened to Aristella, he looked far happier than sad."

Dexia paused and shrugged to hide her unease.

"It might be unreasonable to begrudge him for that. We're Shere Khan's familiars, after all. But he's a curse to me. I feel like me and Aristella will only truly start living once we're free of him." Dexia smiled as she said that, putting on a show of bravado. "When I set out into my new life, cheer me on, okay?"

"Mmm... I will. So don't push yourself, got it?"

"Sure thing. I'm off, then."

With that, Dexia left. After seeing her off, Lisette held her hand to her chest in grief.

What should I do...?

Her oldest memory was one of a large hand gently petting her head. She couldn't remember the person's name or face, let alone what kind of person they were, but she knew it was most likely an adult. She also remembered a few words. The person had taught her that people who were kind for no reason shouldn't be trusted. Those words had saved Lisette during her five years in the alleys...and the person who'd said them to her may very well have been at Dexia's destination.

Perhaps it was Shere Khan...?

If so, what was Lisette to do? Was he a good person? Was he a bad person? Well, he definitely wasn't a good person. After all, Lisette had heard of the atrocities Shere Khan had committed, even if only in fragments.

But he knows who I am.

Zagan and Dexia had told her not to pry into her past. They'd told her to stay in the present. But if she let this chance go, she'd never get to meet him again.

Lisette turned around to look at the injured Angelic Knight, who showed no sign of waking up. Staying by his side was her role right now.

"But even so..."

Lisette stood up and walked out the door.

◇

"Archangel Arvo Juutilainen and Archangel Julius Juutilainen, hereby reporting for duty."

Come morning, all the Angelic Knights in Kianoides deployed in the western region of the city. By going as far as including those who'd been off duty and those who had already retired, they'd gathered a hundred and fifty men. Two Archangels from outside Kianoides stood before Chastille and the gathered men now—Arvo Juutilainen and his younger brother Julius.

“We’ve brought those who can take up arms immediately. They may be inadequate when faced with such numbers, but use them as you see fit.”

Around a hundred Angelic Knights accompanied them. It wasn't much compared to an army of ten thousand, but they were still reassuring reinforcements.

“Thank you for your assistance,” Chastille muttered in disbelief. “But why are you two here? And so quickly at that?”

“We have no choice but to respond when commanded by the Head Archangel.”

“The Head Archangel...? You mean Lord Galahad?”

As if in response to that question, Ginias walked out of the cathedral.

“We’re faced with ten thousand foes,” he said. “We have to treat this as an all-out war.”

He was still wrapped in bandages, but exuded a resolute air that one wouldn't expect from a thirteen-year-old boy.

“How are your wounds?” Chastille asked.

“They’re fine. It seems you have a skilled sorcerer among your helpers. I’m sure that I can hold my own in battle now.”

“W-Wait a—!”

Chastille was already in a precarious position within the church. Even though she'd regained some trust after the incident with Raphael,

mentioning that she had sorcerers in her employ before other Archangels could court suspicion. And yet, another voice, which was accompanied by hoofbeats, cut her off.

“We face this battle on a united front with sorcerers, so we should demonstrate that fact beforehand.”

“Lord Raphael?”

Raphael was wearing Valefor’s armor. His horse was also armored, making him stand out among all the Angelic Knights.

“Lord Hyurandell is the one who said to use my name when requesting reinforcements,” Ginias stated with a strained smile.

“Though honestly, I didn’t expect you to respond so quickly.”

“Protecting this town means putting Archdemon Zagan in our debt,” Arvo replied, averting his gaze awkwardly. “Considering the blow to our honor the other day, we had no choice but to respond.”

“Uhhh, this Unification Faction of yours, was it? We’ve decided to join it,” Arvo’s brother added.

“Julius...”

“There’s no point in simply worrying about keeping up appearances, is there?”

Arvo sighed, then looked around the area and asked, “Is Lady Diekmeyer not here?”

Ginias shook his head and replied, “She suffered worse wounds than I did. She hasn’t regained consciousness yet.”

“I see...”

“But she should recover quickly. She’ll definitely come.”

Arvo went from finding this unbelievable to smiling pleasantly for some reason.

“Is that so?” he said. “She’s your precious partner and all, so that’s good to hear.”

“Wh-Why do you think that?!”

Chastille didn’t quite understand what he meant, but after thinking it over for a bit, she turned to Ginias and said, “Lord Galahad, I believe you should take command of this battle. I’m the one in charge of this town, but you’re the Head Archangel.”

Now that several units had rendezvoused, they needed to make the chain of command clear.

“Morale among the Angelic Knights won’t improve with a figurehead in charge,” Ginias said with a shake of the head. “There’s someone more suitable than me right here.”

With that, he pointed at Raphael.

Chastille nodded and responded, “I see. He possesses the most experience among us...and is also well-known among the sorcerers. Are there any objections?”

“None here,” Arvo answered. “We understand that Lord Hyurandell is being pursued by the church over false allegations, but even if it is just this once, I would like to fight by his side as an ally.”

His response almost made it sound like this had all been prearranged.

If Lord Raphael is to take command, then I’ll need to explain things to my subordinates.

Normally, as the one in charge of Kianoides, Chastille should’ve been the one to take charge of the troops, but there were far more suitable people present. What’s more, Chastille had experience leading small units, but she’d never taken command of over a hundred knights in battle. As such, nobody was more suited for this role than Raphael.

That was exactly why they'd gone out of their way to talk about this right before the battle. The Juutilainen brothers' arrival was unexpected, but as members of the Unification Faction, they would've gotten notice of this already, so they'd gone along without needing any explanation.

Chastille turned back to all the Angelic Knights and yelled, "It's just as you've all heard! I'm sure there are those among you who disagree, but I'd like your cooperation on behalf of this town!"

"Yes, ma'am!" they all replied reassuringly, saluting in perfect unison even though this force had been hastily assembled.

With that, our preparations are complete.

All that was left was to take on an army of ten thousand—well, eight thousand after what Zagan and Barbatos had done. Before long, a tremendous cloud of smoke rose from the enemy formation along with an explosive boom. That was the signal for the start of the battle.

"They're coming!"

It was as if a mountain had begun moving. Their numbers were vast, but still far too little to be ten thousand.

"So few? It looks like there are only around a thousand of them or so," Chastille said.

"There's no need to attack fewer than three hundred enemies with their entire force," Arvo observed. "It seems they plan to hit us in waves."

"There's that, but I believe the main reason is because my liege has removed all of their officers," Raphael suggested. "What's more, he should have destroyed some twenty percent of their forces. That's more than enough to paralyze an army. As such, there's only so many of them that can rise to the occasion."

Even though they'd lost twenty percent of their forces, only two hundred or so of them were actually dead. The vast majority were only wounded. It took even more than those two thousand wounded to handle treating and moving around the injured, so compounded with the loss of every officer, it wouldn't have been strange for the entire army to rout. In other words, this was all the enemy army could muster.

Still, they nearly outnumber us four to one.

The one advantage on Chastille's side was that the enemy didn't field much cavalry. There were fewer than a hundred horsemen.

Archdemon Shere Khan could easily acquire weapons and armor, but preparing warhorses was another matter entirely.

"I see. So a battle really is determined by prior preparations," Raphael said with a wry smile.

"What do you mean?" Chastille asked.

"Everything is playing out according to my liege's tune," Raphael said, then held up his Sacred Sword and raised his voice. "Juutilainen brothers, take your company and form a solid pack on the left wing before charging in. Galahad, your company will meet the enemy from the front. Lillqvist, your forces are to spread out thinly over the right wing. We'll take on an echelon formation. Medical sorcerers join each group and support them."

The echelon formation focused forces on the left wing. The idea was to break through the enemy's flank. The dispersal of units was heavily weighted to the left, though, so this rendered the center and right wings somewhat weak. Plus, even without any officers, their enemies were heroes, veterans of many battles. It would be difficult to break through their lines just by concentrating their forces to one side. Also, if Galahad's company taking on the enemy from the

center were to fall back, Chastille's company would be split apart and left with no choice but to scatter. It was a dangerous plan.

Well, here's hoping it goes well... Chastille thought. She believed in Raphael, but most Angelic Knights hadn't even considered a battle on this scale, let alone trained for one. Angelic Knights most often faced sorcerers, who weren't the type to form large groups. No matter how perfect a plan was, executing it successfully was a different matter altogether.

"Very well," Chastille said, swallowing her unease.

The Juutilainen brothers rushed off to the left wing. They were the cavalry, while Ginias and Chastille's forces were the infantry. As everyone got into position, Kuroka stood next to Chastille.

"Kuroka, are you sure you don't need Anointed Armor?" Chastille asked.

"I don't. Zagan cast his sorcery on these clothes, so while they may look flimsy, they can at least repel any regular blade."

"Ha ha... If Zagan has blessed them, then I trust that you'll be safe."

Zagan was mercilessly brutal toward his enemies but soft to the point of being overprotective of his family. He considered Kuroka family, so there was no need to doubt his blessings. Despite all that, there was no strength behind Chastille's smile.

I wonder if Nephtheros is okay... she thought as she recalled the face of her best friend. It was clear that something had happened to her. And yet, Kuroka and Barbatos wouldn't tell Chastille what. When she realized they were hiding something, she'd nearly pressured them to spill the beans. However, she understood why they were hiding it.

This was Chastille's battlefield. There were Kianoides's hundred and fifty Angelic Knights, the reinforcements the Juutilainen brothers had brought, as well as Ginias's company. If her mind was preoccupied

with unnecessary thoughts, it would expose all their lives to danger. Even if she cast away her responsibilities and ran off to save her, Nephteros wouldn't be pleased.

Right now, I have to focus on bringing this battle to a swift end.

Maybe she wouldn't be able to accomplish anything by running to Nephteros's side. Nevertheless, winning here was Chastille's fastest path to her. Despite that, even if it had only been for a few moments, she'd gotten angry at Kuroka when the girl had taken all that into consideration and spoke to her.

"Um, Kuroka?"

"Yes? What is it?"

"Sorry about last night... I understand you were being considerate at the time."

Kuroka stared back in wonder, then giggled.

"I didn't take any offense," she said with a smile. "I didn't mention it last night, but I have many interesting stories of my travels. Some of them should please Lady Nephteros too. Once everything is over, let's all celebrate together, okay?"

"L-Let's! To that end, we'll need to win this fight first."

Kuroka really was a reliable girl. Having pulled herself together, Chastille addressed her forces.

"I'll take the center. Kuroka will be on the right. Alfred, you three will take the left and support the other group."

The right wing was thinly dispersed, so those in command had to be spread out as well. What's more, Ginias was putting on a strong front despite not being in peak condition. Even disregarding his injuries, he must've felt something from Stella's absence. After all, it was clear that he admired and was in love with her. Thus, she determined that

the Three Knights of the Azure Sky were capable enough to keep up the fight while supporting him.

“Yes ma’am!” the Angelic Knights responded reliably and each dispersed to their own posts.

“Archers!”

The call came from Ginias’s company. The enemy formation was loosing arrows before the armies collided. There were a few hundred projectiles in the sky. Keeping forces in check with arrows was apparently a standard tactic in large battles in the days of antiquity. That was before the development of sorcery, however. The hundreds of arrows suddenly lost their momentum while still in the sky and tumbled to the ground pitifully without reaching their targets.

How reassuring it is to have sorcerers as allies.

Angelic Knights didn’t use bows because they were useless against sorcerers. The enemy probably possessed that level of knowledge already, as they showed no signs of wavering and continued their march.

“Charge!” Ginias’s voice rang through the air. A moment later, his company boldly collided with the enemy army. As the center of the formation, Raphael was there too, but the enemy still surpassed them in quantity and quality. Morale was high, but they were clearly being pushed back. And there were, of course, enemies rushing in on Chastille’s side too.

“Outta the way!”

A huge armored man led the enemy vanguard. He looked even larger than Raphael. Chastille was like a child before him, but he was the one left screaming in the aftermath of their collision.

“Wh-What?!”

The huge man had charged in with a shoulder tackle. Chastille's slender arms should've never been able to stop such an attack, but the man had lost completely and had been blown back. Thanks to the blessings of Anointed Armor and her Sacred Sword, Chastille possessed physical strength capable of rivaling Zagan's. With the enemy soldier now lying belly up like a frog before her, Chastille struck him across the face with the flat of her blade. His helmet shattered to pieces and he stopped moving completely.

"Don't push in too far! Stop the enemy advance first!" she yelled as she swung her sword.

Enemy morale was low. It was enough for Chastille to be able to fight in her Anointed Armor. So long as they didn't push too far, she could keep things on even ground while protecting her subordinates.

Unfortunately, the dent in the center affected the entire formation. The left wing of Chastille's company being managed by the Three Knights of the Azure Sky was being pushed back. Due to that, Chastille's forces in the center of her formation were also forced to slowly retreat.

Only the right wing being led by Kuroka didn't yield a single step and somehow held its ground. If Chastille unleashed the full power of her Sacred Sword, it would be possible to cut her way through, but Angelic Knights weren't as almighty as sorcerers. Doing so would exhaust her considerably, making it hard to keep up the fight. Ginias refrained from using his Confession as well and fell back precisely because he knew that.

We can't hold out much longer!

Chastille's subordinates were putting up a good fight for now, but they had far less experience than their enemies. Anointed Armor and medical sorcerers helped keep casualties under control, but they could no longer ignore the injured completely. Just as they started to

lose their composure, the sound of stampeding horses thrummed over the battlefield.

“You made it!” Chastille cried.

It wasn’t the enemy cavalry.

“You’ve held out well! Juutilainen Company, here to assist!”

It was Arvo’s company, the ones who were supposed to be on the opposite side of the battlefield on the left wing. The left and right wings had met in a deployed echelon formation, which could only mean one thing.

“Hey, isn’t this really bad?”

“Tch! When the hell?!”

“What’s going on...?”

The enemy army stopped upon realizing the situation. Before they knew it, the force of less than three hundred Angelic Knights had completely encircled Shere Khan’s force of one thousand.

“As I’d expect of Lord Raphael, he commands splendidly,” Chastille said in admiration.

Cavalry didn’t really stand out much in battles against sorcerers, but they possessed unrivaled mobility in open field battles. Having come from afar, Juutilainen’s entire company was inevitably composed of cavalry, so they’d used the mobility to quickly encircle the enemy formation.

No matter how many enemies there were, only the front line could fight when encircled. The ones in the center wouldn’t be able to help with those in front of them blocking the way. They’d already proven that projectile weapons like bows were completely useless in this battle, after all.

Each hero might've been stronger than an Angelic Knight, but armed in Anointed Armor, the knights weren't too far behind. Their equipment put them on equal ground.

If they had proper officers among them, they might've foreseen the movement of the cavalry, but...

Barbatos had assassinated every last one of them. An army without any command structure was pretty much only capable of endlessly charging forward. That was why they'd gotten encircled so easily.

"To all enemy forces," Raphael shouted. "I understand that this is a battle you do not wish to participate in. Surrender. I guarantee all of you fair treatment as prisoners of war."

His voice was probably being amplified by sorcery. It reached every corner of the battlefield with ease.

Now then, what will they do?

Even if they were exhausted, a force of ten thousand was being told to surrender by no more than three hundred knights. Normally, this would've been laughable, but it was possible now that they knew they were in a completely inferior position.

Zagan was a heartless king to his enemies, but he wasn't a cruel man. Raphael had chosen this method to bring about the least number of casualties, having read his king's intent.

Silence fell over the battlefield. Even the sound of the wind could be heard clearly for a while before it was broken by screams.

"Don't fuck with us! Who the hell do you think you are? How dare you say that after carrying out that night attack?!"

It was rage born of struggling against the unreasonable. These heroes, who'd used their anger as a driving force to fight, had already crossed the point of no return. The encircled army took heart and gathered its strength.

“Hmph. Very well. You leave me no choice.”

Raphael had only offered to negotiate. Doing so didn't really trouble anyone. He likely knew it would turn out like this. Nevertheless, he'd at least tried to respect his king's desire.

Sorry, Nephtheros. It looks like this is going to take some time.

The fight was only just beginning, and it was sure to be fierce. Even as her friend's safety pained her heart, Chastille tightened her grip on her sword again...when suddenly, something fell from the sky. It landed between the encircled army and the seven thousand remaining soldiers in their camp. It had black scales darker than the dead of the night, giant wings that looked like they could cover the sky, and a tremendous tail that sprawled across the ground with the solemnity of a thousand-year-old tree.

“Back Dragon Marbas...!”

It was smaller than what Chastille had once witnessed, but Black Dragon was definitely here, its enormous body and majesty more than enough to shake the entire battlefield.

“Graaargh—!”

Its voice was far too frail to call a roar. It was more like a cry of grief, shaking the very sky. While holding her Sacred Sword tight, Chastille could tell that this was the concurrent chanting of several complicated spells at once.

“Defensive formation!” Chastille screamed.

Immediately following that, lights rained down from the heavens. The lights were as thin as threads. However, everything they touched burned and evaporated in an instant. Looking up, she spotted countless gigantic magic circles deployed over the entire open field. They didn't only cover the battle either, but spread over the enemy

camp to the rear where the remaining seven thousand soldiers remained.

Chastille knew the name of this destructive power. It was the wide-area annihilation sorcery, Nimbus—the lights of destruction that wiped out entire towns, which had courted Archdemon Marchosias's wrath.

The truly terrifying part was that, despite the rain of light, not a single person was getting hit. Finger-sized holes drilled into the ground just ten centimeters to the right of everyone's foot with deadly accuracy. She possessed destructive potential rivaling divine punishment, unimaginable precision, and the mana to aim at over eight thousand targets. Was there a single soul here who wasn't awed by such power?

After mulling over it for a second, Chastille finally understood the situation.

Oh, she's finally reached the realm of Archdemons.

The small girl riding atop the black dragon's head spoke in a cold voice reminiscent of her father, directing her words toward everyone on the battlefield.

"Nobody move. Next time...I'll strike you directly."

A brief demand, but everyone present understood what she meant. Every single life on the battlefield was in the grip of her tiny hands. The heroes couldn't so much as budge. Even the Angelic Knights, who were supposed to be her allies, remained rooted in place.

With the entire battlefield frozen due to tension and fear, the little dragon let out a yawn, then curled up on top of the black dragon's head.

"Hang on! Don't you have any demands?!" Chastille screamed inadvertently.

“Oh. You’re here...Horse Head,” Foll replied with a sleep look. She was supposed to be kilometers away, but it sounded like she was right next to Chastille. It was sorcery a little different from telepathy.

“And who do you think will protect this town if I don’t?!”

What did this girl think she was? Despite the current situation, it took everything Chastille had to desperately hold back her tears. However, Foll merely shot her a cold gaze before speaking.

“That’s not what I mean. Is this where you should be fighting?” she asked reproachfully.

“Wh-What are you...trying to...?”

“Nephteros is in the deserted town south of here.”

Chastille’s eyes shot open as soon as she heard those words.

“Foll, is that—?”

“Goddammit! You stupid little brat!”

Barbatos suddenly appeared above the black dragon’s head and grabbed Foll by the collar. Since she was much smaller than him, he held her up completely in the air, but she showed no signs of discomposure and grabbed his arm.

“Shut up, Barbatos. Chastille is the one who gets to decide.”

“Gaaah!” Barbatos howled in pain and fell to his knees due to her mana-charged words. With her feet back on the black dragon’s head, Foll shook off Barbatos’s hand and turned her eyes toward Chastille.

“There’s nothing you can do here. If you still want to protect the town, then stay for all I care. Decide on your own.”

“Foll...” Chastille mumbled with a troubled smile.

She really is becoming more and more like Zagan...

She’d come all the way here just to let Chastille leave.

“Please go ahead, Lady Chastille,” Kuroka said, running over to Chastille’s side. “I shall handle things here.”

Seeing that she rushed over to say that, Chastille knew that Kuroka had been fretting over having to keep quiet.

“Sorry, I’ll have to leave this to you,” Chastille told her.

“Of course.”

She then turned to the black dragon and said, “Foll...and Barbatos, thank you.”

“Tch...” Barbatos muttered in resignation. “You’re definitely not gonna live a long life.”

“I think you’re right,” Chastille agreed casually.

“Why do you gotta be so—?!”

“But!” Chastille yelled, cutting him off earnestly. “But...it’s not like I want to die. There’s a mountain of things I have to do. So...it’ll be okay. I’ll come back to you.”

Silence. Barbatos didn’t reply. Instead, the shadows at her feet wriggled.

“Come on... You’re going, yeah?”

“Yes!”

Chastille jumped into the shadow and hurried to Nephteros’s side.

“We should pretend we didn’t hear any of that...right?”

A strange awkwardness hovered over the Angelic Knights and enemy soldiers, but that story is better reserved for another time.

◇

“I see... That is...Orobas’s daughter... How terrifying.”

Shere Khan genuinely admired how the little dragon had suppressed an army of ten thousand soldiers with ease. Her tremendous mana, talent, and endless ambition had driven her to evolve remarkably. Her power was already in the realm of Archdemons, even. If she were to inherit a Sigil, it was entirely feasible for her to become an Archdemon who surpassed Zagan. One year ago, none of the Archdemons foresaw such a possibility for growth within her...except for Naberius, of course.

No...I suppose her meeting with Zagan was what drove her to such heights.

Perhaps that was the true power of the one who inherited the title of Silver-Eyed King.

Four crystal balls sat before Shere Khan. One displayed the Nephilims' battle, while the one next to that showed Kimaris. Even after being broken by Zagan, the leonin had continued fighting and had crushed a thousand Nephilims. Now, it looked like he was exhausted and waiting to recover.

Kimaris has also shown strength far beyond what I imagined possible.

Contrary to expectations, Kimaris had managed to corner Zagan and had even stabbed him with a Hex Nail. Even though this hadn't been enough to stop the Archdemon, this too was power gained through contact with Zagan.

The bestower. That is what Alshiera called the Archdemon's heart. The one Zagan possesses.

This was likely a result of that power. Though, that clearly wasn't all, as they also displayed the talent to form connections with others and manifest strength that surpassed what they were originally capable of. It was different from religious fanaticism. Perhaps it was a power

that came to him precisely because he continued to identify himself as a king.

“The bestower... The quality...of a hero.”

The Nephilims Shere Khan had created were all heroes who represented the past. They were those who'd shown no fear in the face of death and had subsequently faded away into obscurity. However, martial strength wasn't enough to change the world on its own. Simply being brave wasn't enough either.

During each of their generations, there'd always been one true hero who'd guided them in the battle to change the world. There'd always been one who had changed all those who walked with them into heroes. Such a hero had been required one thousand years ago in the battle against the third Azazel, but had never appeared. That was why the world had devolved to its current state. That was why Dantalian had been erased from existence. If a true hero had shown up in that era, it wouldn't have ended like that. Shere Khan let out a sigh of envy and grief at the thought.

There's no changing what's already happened. Instead, I shall save those who couldn't be saved using my own methods.

To that end, Zagan was a hindrance.

“Now then...let us...rebalance...the scales.”

The battle currently favored Zagan. The Nephilim army had been completely suppressed. Even Asura and Bato, who'd been released to keep Bifrons in check, had become Alshiera's pawns. Thanks to Dexia's betrayal, Zagan was already right on top of his hiding spot. Shere Khan's predicament could be called absolutely hopeless—exactly as he'd predicted.

First, I must rally the Nephilims.

He hadn't created them as sacrificial pawns. He'd created them to become the first inhabitants of his new world. It would be troublesome if they didn't survive. And as he was about to relay instructions, another crystal ball suddenly caught his attention.

"Oh. Looks like...the scales have...already balanced out here."

Reflected in this ball was the scene of Azazel's battle with Orias.



"[The lights in the heavens are all stars. All that shines far and wide plummets into a conflagration. With no compassion, no grief, it simply judges and brings forth destruction. This is the prayer of retribution]—Asteri Exkrixis!"

"[The lights in the heavens are all stars. All that shines far and wide plummets into a conflagration. With no compassion, no grief, no fear, and no suffering. This is the prayer of forgiveness]—Astraea Exkrixis!"

Celestial chants overlapped. One brought forth a light of destruction that mowed down all in its path, while the other brought a quiet light that erased everything. The two opposing lights enveloped "Nephteros" at once. She flew away to escape them, but one of her left Hex Wings was destroyed in the process.

We finally got one!

A single song could be plundered from them, but singing in unison staved off that possibility. Nephy and Orias were of one mind in wanting to save Nephteros, after all. Despite having fewer Hex Wings, Orias had managed to drag the fight down to even ground. She really was an Archdemon. If she weren't here, Nephy would already have been defeated. What's more, the quick wits of Asura, who was intimately familiar with seraphs, were a major help in this battle.

“Hee hee hee... Hah hah hah!” “Nephteros” cackled despite losing a Hex Wing. “How scary. How frightening. You’ve really done it now.”

“This time I’ve got you!”

Using the light of celestial mysticism as cover, Asura leaped into the sky directly above “Nephteros” and brought down his gauntlet on a second Hex Wing.

Now they’re equal!

No, Orias had the Sigil of the Archdemon. With its assistance, she easily possessed more power than “Nephteros” in her current state. All that was left was to take out the remaining Hex Wings and render her powerless. However, “Nephteros” showed no signs of faltering and created a spear of light in her hand once more.

“Tch... Her power’s the same even though we’ve taken two Hex Wings. The hell’s goin’ on?” Asura asked, sounding baffled by the unknown phenomenon. Unfortunately, the answer to his confusion came shortly after.

“Huh...?”

Whose voice was that? Nephy? Or perhaps Orias? The right hand holding up the spear of light quietly crumbled away. It was like the hand of a broken clay doll, and it vanished into ashes before reaching the ground.

That power is born by sapping what remains of Nephteros’s life!

It seemed that life-draining power had finally reached the stage of physically destroying her body.

“Nephteros!” Orias screamed.

“Dodge it, woman!”

Was any parent in the world capable of remaining calm when faced with their beloved daughter’s body crumbling away irrecoverably

before them? At the very least, Nephy would've been unable to bear it if the same thing happened to Foll. As such, that surely applied to Orias as well.

Orias had stretched out her hand to "Nephteros." This had surely been but a momentary lapse in judgment. However, even though "Nephteros's" hand was gone, the spear remained and had promptly been unleashed, aimed directly at the mother reaching out to her daughter.

Orias was unable to dodge or block the attack in her current state. Asura had noticed right away, but was too far away to do anything. The light capable of evaporating an entire town pierced right through Orias's body.

"Mother!"

When the smoke from the explosion cleared, Orias was down on the ground without any of her Hex Wings.

"Ugh... Agh..."

She was somehow still breathing, but a red puddle quickly spread beneath her and her limbs were bent the wrong way. It was clear as day that she needed treatment immediately, so Nephy started running to her side without a moment's hesitation.

She's so far away!

Orias had been blown back by the explosion. No matter how fast Nephy ran, it would take more than ten seconds to get there.

"Tee hee hee! That was quite the pesky fly. But its life ends here," "Nephteros" proclaimed as she held up her handless arm to finish Orias, forming another spear of light.

"Stop! Nephteros!" Nephy screamed in vain as "Nephteros" unleashed the spear.

“Tch!” Asura clicked his tongue and leaped in, but the spear was aimed downward. Even if they could evade a direct hit, it would be impossible to escape the explosion. Plus, Orias was already in a dangerous state where simply moving her would be a bad idea.

Asura faced the spear and intercepted it with an uppercut. His gauntlet wasn’t enough to defend against such an attack, which he understood quite well. His crimson fist didn’t meet the spear head-on, but instead struck the tip of the projectile from beneath. The airborne light, fully capable of melting the earth, bent at an acute angle, shooting off into the sky.

“Heh... Heh heh... I failed a thousand years ago, but this time I really pulled it off.”

However, Asura hadn’t gotten through unscathed. The gauntlet made of mana was now in tatters and the arm beneath it was a crumpled mess. That was when Nephy finally reached the two of them.

There was no way she could heal them in this situation. She knew that, but she was the only one who could save them. So Nephy held up Orias in her arms and prayed with all her might. Healing through mysticism was extremely effective, but it couldn’t possibly heal such a grave wound in so short a time.

“Sir Asura, your hand...!”

She attempted to heal Asura’s arm at the same time, but “Nephteros” was already preparing a third spear in the sky. She knew she wouldn’t make it in time...and the tragedy didn’t stop there.

“What’s going on here...?”

Chastille, who should’ve been on a faraway battlefield, froze in place as “Nephteros” adjusted her aim toward the new interloper.

◇

“RAAAAAAH!”

In the large open field outside Kianoides, the soldiers who'd been completely suppressed by Foll suddenly let out a loud war cry.

“What's up with them?!” Kuroka yelled.

Their eyes... They've gone insane.

Kuroka couldn't sense any reason in the enemy soldiers' vacant eyes. It was a state commonly seen among those being manipulated by sorcery.

“They're being controlled? This many at once?”

The war cry could be heard from both the thousand soldiers encircled by the Angelic Knights and the enemy headquarters far to the rear. In all likelihood, those who'd been rendered incapable of fighting by Zagan were also in a similar state. The Archdemon responsible for this was beyond the point of recovery, even for a sorcerer, making this feat all the more terrifying.

“How pitiful...” Foll muttered. She then deployed Nimbus once more, threatening to rain light from the skies. Nothing happened, however.

“GraAaAaaaAAAaaaaAAAAH!” an ominous and jarring roar boomed in the air. Due to the fact that she possessed far sharper hearing than most people, Kuroka immediately covered her ears and squatted to the ground. That was when it came into sight.

A hideously decayed dragon had its jaws clamped around Black Dragon Marbas's windpipe. It possessed an enormous body that made even the black dragon look small in comparison. Judging by its size, it had to be centuries old. It probably had vibrant scales in life, but now those scales had rotted off, exposing its bones. It was a zombie dragon.

Was the reason it couldn't be resurrected in as complete a state as the Nephilims because its power far surpassed the sorcerer's

capabilities? Or was it because the dragon's tremendous resistance against sorcery hindered the process? In either case, the zombie dragon was stronger than the black dragon.

"Foll!" Kuroka screamed.

The little girl was shaken off the black dragon's head and fell without even unfurling her wings.

She fainted?

Perhaps the zombie dragon's attack had been more than meets the eye. Foll wasn't even using sorcery to float. Not only that, but the black dragon's massive body began crumbling away.

Kuroka had no way of knowing that the appearance of this zombie dragon was enough to shake Foll to the core so badly that she couldn't maintain Marbas. She only understood why this was when she heard Raphael mutter something in a trembling voice next to her.

"It can't be. Is that...Orobas?"

Kuroka felt the blood drain from her face. That was the name of the great Wise Dragon extolled in tales from a thousand years ago. It was also the name of Foll's father.

"Ginias! Take care of things here!"

"Lord Hyurandell?!"

Raphael ran straight toward Foll without sparing anyone a backward glance, but unfortunately, an enemy soldier came down at him from the side.

"Out of the way you mindless slave!"

In contrast to his usual gentility—on the inside, at least—Raphael roared with unimaginable rage. He mercilessly swung his sword, but the soldier easily blocked the blow.

“Impossible... He blocked father’s sword?” Kuroka muttered.

Nevertheless, the power of a Sacred Sword backed by rage was dreadful. The enemy soldier’s helmet split in two. And with the helmet gone, a familiar scent suddenly assaulted Kuroka’s nose.

What...? What is this...?

Identifying the owner of the scent, Kuroka felt a sudden bout of fear overtake her. Locked in combat with the man, Raphael definitely realized who it was too. His eyes shot open in shock once he figured out what was happening.

“Y-You’re— Gh!”

“Lord Hyurandell! Leave him to—”

“Stay back, Ginias!” Raphael shouted. However, he was blown back in the same instant.

With that, everyone could see whom he’d been fighting. The man wore battered Anointed Armor with a gaping hole in the middle. He wielded a ceremonial sword blessed by elves, one that had been granted to him by the church. His hair and beard had grown long and unkempt, but none could mistake his face for anyone else.

“Archangel Michael Diekmeyer...?” Ginias muttered in a daze.

But this man had another name too—Head Archdemon Andrealphus. He was considered the strongest both as an Angelic Knight and an Archdemon. There was presently no vitality to his features, however. His eyes were vacant like all the other soldiers, showing no hint of reason behind them. The strongest had fallen into the hands of the enemy. None could keep their composure when faced with such a brutal reality. Not the Angelic Knights, and certainly not the sorcerers.

“Burn to ash—Orobas!”

Raphael was the only one to stand and fight as everyone cowered in fear. Despite being blown back, he held out his prosthetic arm and unleashed a violent blaze. This was the breath of the Wise Dragon that even surpassed his Sacred Sword. It was the divine providence of a dragon that could even overwrite the laws of the land. No substance in existence could maintain its form when burned by it. Unfortunately, the act only added to the hopelessness of the situation.

“Argh...” Michael muttered and swung his sword, splitting the surging blaze in two.

“Wha—?!”

It looked like some kind of sorcery had charged the sword, but that alone wouldn't be enough to stop Raphael's attack. Even if he couldn't reach Alshiera's level, his sword technique was the result of eight hundred years of diligent study, allowing him to cut even a dragon's divine providence. Zagan had said that the power he'd granted Raphael could defeat *any* opponent, but it had failed to do so in this case. Thus, there was no mistaking his strength.

Even this monster couldn't defeat Shere Khan...?

It was a little late, but the reality of whom exactly they were fighting was thrust before them. Still, even when faced with such an utter sense of despair, Raphael didn't falter. He gripped his Sacred Sword in both hands and stood to face the human-shaped calamity, even though his face was that of a man resolved for death.

You can't, father! If you fight like that, you won't be able to come back!

“Take up your swords!” Kuroka screamed with all her might. “Assist Lord Raphael! He cannot fall!”

Her rebuke snapped the frozen Angelic Knights back to their senses.

“F-Fight! Protect Kianoides!”

The Angelic Knights roared and boldly set off to battle, but their opponents were heroes who no longer felt fear. Even if they were fully encircled, they didn't feel any pressure.

Michael's dull eyes slowly turned to Kuroka.

Back on that island, I couldn't do a thing.

Kuroka had been completely overwhelmed by the pressure of the fight between Zagan and Andrealphus. It had taken everything she had to simply stand and watch without fleeing. However, if she stepped down now, she would lose everything precious to her—Raphael, the Angelic Knights, and above all else...Shax.

“Lord Hyurandell! I'll fight with you!” Ginias, who was the closest, exclaimed as he started running to Raphael's side. But before he got there, another enemy forced their way in between them. He was an old knight who looked about the same age as Raphael. He had chestnut hair with gray streaks and a mustache of the same color. His vacant eyes were green. He somewhat resembled Ginias...and upon seeing this man, Ginias turned white as a sheet.

“What...? No... Father...?”

The preceding Head Archangel Ginias Galahad I, the man said to have died in battle by Raphael and Wise Dragon Orobas's side one year ago, appeared before them. The Nephilims were heroes of the past, the deceased of the past. And so, there was no reason to exclude someone who'd died a year ago. Even if he conducted himself with firm resolution, the young Ginias was a boy just shy of thirteen years old who'd only lost his father a year ago. How could he possibly remain calm when that very same father suddenly appeared as an enemy? The boy's sword trembled in his hand as he let out ragged breaths. It was clear that he was hyperventilating.

“Hyahaaa! I’m the best! The best, I tell ya!” another strange voice screamed all of a sudden.

A storm of mana broke out and blew away dozens, friends and foes alike.

“That’s...Decarabia?”

It was the madman Kuroka had encountered on that uninhabited island in Liucaon—Archdemon Andrealphus’s personal disciple. One year ago, he’d been rejected as an Archdemon candidate due to his lunacy, but his strength was genuine. Kuroka felt something odd about this man’s arrival, though.

Nephilims. Resurrected heroes. Huh...? Isn’t that weird?

She didn’t have the time to ponder the thought, however.

“It’s no good. Things are falling apart.”

Three tremendous enemies had appeared at the same time, quickly surrounding Raphael. Maybe there were even more that Kuroka didn’t know about. There were likely those that the Angelic Knights recognized too. They were clearly shaken, and their encirclement of the enemy army was falling apart.

Once broken, the enemy army would surge toward Kianoides. Even if these heroes didn’t wish to do so, Shere Khan would make them. This was the one scenario Zagan had wanted to avoid the most.

If they break through here, Lilith, Selphy, and Kuu will be in danger.

With that thought in mind, Kuroka started running and bellowed, “Knights of the Azure Sky, I’ll leave things here to you! I’m going to protect Lord Raphael and Lord Galahad!”

Arvo Juutilainen was close by as well. Together, they’d be enough to fill in the gap caused by Kuroka leaving.

Kuroka ran through the chaotic battlefield. She plunged between an Angelic Knight and a soldier, bisecting the enemy as she passed. She jumped forward toward a knight who was losing his fight and had fallen backward, landing on the enemy he was fighting and using their face as a stepping stone to move forward. She then landed in the middle of an enemy formation, halting their momentum. They weren't going to sit still and let her cut them down, of course, so they rushed her all at once. The wall of spears left no opening, threatening to tear Kuroka apart. And by all rights, they should have.

“Adelhide School—Misty Night.”

With exquisite footwork, she left afterimages in her enemies' eyes. Even the kinetic vision of heroes wasn't enough to help them keep up with her movements. She was like a black tempest. After cutting through the entire enemy formation, she landed among Raphael's company, where she found a boy trembling as his late father pointed a sword at him.

“W-Waaah...! Huh?”

“Excuse me.”

Kuroka kept her grip on her shortsword and scooped up the young Ginias in her arm, pulling him away from the former Head Archangel.

“B-Behind you!”

Even if he was a puppet, this was still the former Head Archangel. He wasn't one to let his enemies escape in the thick of battle. He caught up to Kuroka easily and swung his sword.

“Sorry. I'm in a hurry.”

Kuroka dropped Ginias...and rather than running, she slammed backward into her enemy. Caught by surprise, the old Galahad could no longer hit her with his sword. Kuroka then twisted around with her shortswords brandished.

“G-Gah!”

The old Galahad stopped her first sword, but the second followed shortly after.

“Hmph!”

With a high-pitched clang, the man’s sword snapped in half. This was the Adelhide School Sword Hunter technique. Just as the name implied, it aimed to break an opponent’s weapon. It was also the technique her late mother had specialized in.

It seemed even a puppet could be shaken. The old Galahad appeared to have no idea what had happened as Kuroka then put all her might into a roundhouse kick to his waist. His armor shattered with a dull crack, and the former Head Archangel flew back into a pack of enemy soldiers.

“She defeated Lord Galahad that easily...?” someone muttered in disbelief.

From the sidelines, everything had happened in an instant. All they’d seen was Galahad swinging his sword before his blade snapped in half and his body went flying. The strongest Archangel was undoubtedly Michael, but Kuroka was the strongest samurai. Her skills with a blade had already reached the peak of this era. Still, even if the battle with Galahad had only lasted an instant, Kuroka had shifted her focus away from another enemy.

“Look out, Kurosuke!”

“Huh?”

She thought she heard Shax yelling, but before she could even react, lethargy suddenly assaulted her. Michael’s ceremonial sword had plunged into Kuroka’s chest.





“Hmph. So we’re finally going to meet in person.”

As both battlefields fell into hopeless situations, Zagan stepped foot into Shere Khan’s hidden base. He had his guide Dexia by his side. He couldn’t just toss her into this unarmed, so he’d given her a chainsword and basic enchanted equipment. That way, she had enough to at least defend herself.

Zagan looked up at the darkening sky and thought, *I have one day left to fulfill my promise with Nephy...*

As such, he planned to settle everything in one day. There was one major problem that stood in his way, however.

This is bad... My telepathic link with Orias was severed.

He’d set up a telepathic link to Raphael and Orias so that they could share information, but it had suddenly stopped functioning. He questioned whether Archdemon Orias could lose, but her opponent was “Nephteros”—Azazel. And so, he had to consider the worst. As such, he had to hurry.

He was at an abandoned mining facility a short distance from the fortress city Feo. It was only a small hill, so it probably hadn’t yielded much in its time. There were deserted buildings all over that had been used by the miners, so at a glance, it looked like there was nothing here at all. However, the path in front of him continued into a cave, which was where Shere Khan’s underground workshop was hidden—one that apparently used to belong to Bifrons.

“Master Shere Khan should be in the cave at the center of the mine. However, the layout is complex and there’s sorcery cast on it to turn it into a labyrinth, so—”

Ignoring Dexia’s warning, Zagan took a step into the mine.

“Ah, wait—!”

“Aren’t you in a hurry? Let’s just get going.”

The entire mine creaked in response to that single step, then let out a sound like shattering glass.

“No way... The whole labyrinth...?”

This maze had been created by an Archdemon, yet was broken with a single step. So long as it was sorcery, Zagan could devour it. Shere Khan surely didn’t believe that this would slow him down. Now that the labyrinth was broken, a Nephilim immediately charged out of the mine.

“Now then, time to do your job. Which way is it?”

Dexia raised her guard in a fluster as Zagan gently waved his hand as if warding off an incoming ball, striking the Nephilim in the head.

“Gyaaah!”

The Nephilim flew back and slammed into a wall, where he remained immobile. Zagan really had warded off the attacker casually, but that was no surprise, as any riffraff would’ve been crushed by his mana before getting close to him. The fact that he had to touch him at all meant that he had considerable strength. Dexia trembled in confusion, while Zagan briskly strode forward.

“Oh, p-please wait. I’ll lead the—”

“You stay behind me,” Zagan said, cutting her off. “They’re too much for you with the equipment you have.”

Dexia froze in place with her mouth agape.

“What...?” Zagan asked.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just, um...I didn’t think...that you’d protect me.”

Upon hearing that, Zagan realized that this girl had come here resolved for death. He let out a sigh. If he meant for her to die, he wouldn't have gone out of his way to provide her with equipment.

"I told you that you're under my protection. If you came here intending to die, then stop thinking such useless thoughts. You're the one who keeps saying you want to save your sister. Tell me, do you plan on having her wake up only to find your corpse before her?"

"S-Sorry..."

The two of them proceeded through the mines, eventually coming upon an open room. There were rusty mine carts and pickaxes all over the place, while magic lights illuminated the most important spots. There were rails for the carts pointing in every cardinal direction, while the walls were reinforced with cut stone. Despite being in the center of a small deserted mine, this dimly illuminated room had a solemnity to it akin to a temple. It had likely been the core of the mining operations in the area.

"That path leads to Master Shere Khan's laboratory," Dexia said, pointing down one of the railways. "It's also the cornerstone of his barrier, so he shouldn't be able to leave that place. Also...Aristella is farther down the other path."

It sounded like she would bolt off toward her sister at any moment. However, Zagan held up his arm to bar her path.

"Step back. It seems we'll have to do some cleanup before we proceed any further."

"Huh?"

Before Dexia even had time to process what he'd said, an ambusher leaped at them from the shadows. Zagan intercepted the attack with his fist, but he didn't feel his blow connecting with some weakling. Instead, he felt cold and sharp steel.

“I see... I suppose the stronger ones are placed here.”

“Archdemon Zagan, your hand...”

Blood flowed from Zagan’s hand. The Archdemon’s fist had lost in the exchange. The one who’d attacked was still a boy who appeared to be around fifteen or sixteen years of age. His features somewhat resembled Ginias and Furcas. Seeing as he was a Nephilim, it meant that this boy had died at that age.

In his hand was a sword of light, similar to the one the man who was accompanying Alshiera had—a Hex Blade. Zagan could see why it was capable of injuring his fist. And after taking a look at the boy’s face, he furrowed his brows in confusion.

Silver eyes...?

The boy’s eyes were the same color as Zagan’s, and he had the same black hair as Kuroka. He should’ve been a complete stranger, and yet, his features remained stuck in Zagan’s mind.

The boy backed off to put some distance between them, allowing several others to line up alongside him as if obeying his commands. There were thirteen of them, including the boy, and every single one wielded a Hex Blade.

“Dexia. Keep your distance. This will take some time.”

“O-Okay...”

Seeing how Zagan’s fist had been injured, Dexia could tell that these opponents had strength far beyond her abilities. She retreated out of the room entirely. Once Zagan confirmed she had, he addressed his thirteen assailants even though it was questionable whether anything he said would get through to them.

“Nephilims are heroes from a thousand years ago, so I figured you’d appear...first-generation Archdemons.”

The fact that they all wielded swords backed Zagan’s prediction.

I see. This is why Shere Khan was confident he could take on all the other Archdemons by himself.

They were history's strongest combat force—a group who'd once defeated Azazel. And if these were the first Archdemons, then that man had to be among them. Even Archdemons had feared incurring his wrath. Even Andrealphus had had no choice but to obey him.

Zagan shifted his gaze to the old man standing next to the silver-eyed boy and flatly said, "Eldest Marchosias."

The previous owner of the Archdemon's Heart that now dwelled in Zagan's right hand appeared. He was the one who had placed that collar on Nephy...and in all likelihood, a man who Zagan would have had to risk his life to defeat, even in a one-on-one battle. And yet, he stood among twelve other Archdemons who matched his skill. Even as Zagan smiled arrogantly, he couldn't halt the cold bead of sweat that ran down his cheek.

Chapter IV: Overcoming All Odds Is What a Hero Does

“Something’s wrong. No sorcerer or Angelic Knight could’ve done this.”

Dantalian’s adorable face twisted in consternation as she bit her thumbnail. The end had suddenly come. In just a single month, several Archdemons had been killed. When the world was at peace, those who wished to rebel against the established order always appeared. And there were, of course, sorcerers among such villains. That was why the Angelic Knights were there to keep the peace.

However, Archdemons were another matter entirely. Even if they weren’t comparable to Dantalian, every other Archdemon possessed enough power to overwrite the laws of the world itself. Killing them one after the other so easily was unthinkable.

What’s more, it was said that Dantalian’s master in sorcery, Marchosias, was next on the kill list. Thus, Dantalian had, of course, gone out to resolve the incident and save her master.

“Do you hear me, Shere Khan? Save any surviving sorcerers, even if it’s just one.”

I knew that already, so I didn’t need her to give me those orders. Still, I was happy to be brought along on such a dangerous mission. If we could find even one survivor, it would be possible for us to gather clues regarding this incident. We had headed to Marchosias’s castle with such intentions in mind, but it was already a ruin by the time we arrived. There was a mountain of sorcerers, and not a single one still drew breath.

“But where’s Marchosias...?” Dantalian muttered, unable to find his corpse among them. “Oh, right. He wouldn’t get beaten so easily. He’s obviously still alive somewhere around here.”

As I nodded along with her idea to go look for him, a group of Angelic Knights suddenly surrounded us. Her usual innocent smile vanished as she sharply addressed them.

“I don’t know what you’re planning, but could you step aside? I doubt you’ve forgotten who I am.”

Despite her childish appearance, she was the Head Archdemon. Even if they challenged her with twelve Sacred Swords, they’d be no match for her. There were only around a hundred knights present, so there was really no need for Dantalian to do anything. Even I could’ve easily handled such numbers.

Or at least, that should’ve been the case. In the next instant, she was defeated. The one who’d fought her was the man leading these knights. I didn’t recognize him, but Dantalian was remarkably shaken.

“Why are you standing there...? Why, Marchosias?!”

If there was anyone out there whom Dantalian couldn’t defeat, it was her master who’d taught her sorcery, Marchosias. And that very same man was leading the Angelic Knights.

“It’s your fault that it’s come to this. You’ve made this world too damn peaceful.”

She believed more than any other in a world where nobody had to be hurt. She desired peace more than any other. And yet, that was what her master told her.

“Why...?! Weren’t you the one who told me to save the world?! That sorcerers could heal the world?!” she screamed in sorrow.

“I did,” Marchosias answered with a sigh. “But who told you to create such a half-assed, lackadaisical world?”

The word “evil” was made for men like him.

“It was a mistake to leave this to you,” he said. “Angelic Knights and sorcerers must hate and kill each other. And yet, you sought harmony. You even actualized it. That is your sin.”

I never remembered much of what happened after that. Before I knew it, the Angelic Knights were gone...and Dantalian and I were on the verge of death. I knew that the only reason I still breathed was because she'd protected me.

“Sorry...Shere Khan... Maybe...I was wrong...”

There was no way she was. By saving someone, and in turn having that person save someone else, the world would continue to turn. I believed in that ideal as well. There was no way it could be wrong. I gripped the hand she held out to me and could feel the pulse vanishing from it. Her life was fading away. But even so, Dantalian spoke in earnest.

“Shere Khan...eat...me...”

Even as she cried, she forced herself to smile.

“This is it...for me... But you can still... If you ingest...my mana...you can...survive...”

As a tigryn, I could absorb the mana of anyone I ate. If I ate Dantalian, I surely would have survived.

“Please...stop Marchosias... I don't want...a world...where everyone...kills each other...”

In the end, I found myself incapable of refusing my beloved's dying wish.

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On the third day of the battle, Shere Khan rocked in his wheelchair while watching four crystal balls. The first showed the Nephilims who'd set out for Kianoides, pushing forward without any fear as

they tried to break the Angelic Knights' encirclement. That part was going well.

The second showed Orias losing to Azazel in a deserted town, and Orias's daughter driven into a corner. Azazel had somewhat too much of a commanding position there, but it wasn't a problem. The vessel was already falling apart. She clearly wouldn't last past this evening. Azazel would vanish if left at large.

The third showed Kimaris...and this one was a little unexpected. Shere Khan's script hadn't included him coming in contact with *that*. But this actually saved Shere Khan the hassle. It was a necessity to him, after all.

Finally, the fourth showed Zagan's battle with the thirteen Archdemons happening directly overhead.

"How...does it feel? Having...what you wanted...to protect...suffer...by your own hands... Or perhaps...you don't...feel anything?"

If that was true, Dantalian would never have met that painful end. He was the one who'd betrayed her and ruined this world. Having Zagan clash with him was, in a sense, a meager act of revenge. Shere Khan leaned back into his wheelchair as he recalled that fateful day.

I was far too late in every imaginable way.

Shere Khan had eaten Dantalian. However, by the time he'd dragged his wounded body back to town, everything had already ended. With the murder of Head Archdemon Dantalian, the remaining Archdemons took action against the Angelic Knights on a grand scale. They'd roused the Archdemons' wrath. Their revenge was beyond description.

Conversely, this gave the Angelic Knights a reason to brand all sorcerers evil. The masses then entrusted their faith in the neat and pure Angelic Knights rather than the terrifying sorcerers, which led to

the alienation of sorcerers. No matter how much Shere Khan shouted, nobody listened to him.

All he had left was the Sigil of the Archdemon from Dantalian's right hand. He felt tremendous emptiness. Nothing awaited him after killing his beloved and eating her just to survive. He'd considered destroying the world many times over ever since that fateful day. However, Dantalian had wanted to save the world. And among all that despair, Shere Khan managed to find a way to bring her back, as well as a way to create a peaceful world where nobody fought...and nobody killed each other. He found a way to put all the cogs that had fallen out of place back to where they belonged.

And so, he'd created it—a copy of that girl from the days of yore. However, he'd lost her once again. He never once cared about his own life, but in the battle against Marchosias, he'd failed to protect her.

But the vessel I lost survived these last five years.

The vessel didn't possess Dantalian's memories, but she still had the same body and name as her. Thus, Shere Khan had no idea what to do with the girl.



“Hey. Hey you. How about waking up already?”

He could hear someone's voice. He didn't recognize it. Were they speaking to him? His body felt heavy and his thoughts were slow. He tried opening his eyes, but couldn't see anything. It was pitch-black. And within that darkness, a white silhouette suddenly appeared and looked at his face.

“Finally. You woke up. Can you understand me?”

“Umm, yes...”

She sounded like an adult, but looked like a little girl. She couldn't have been more than fourteen or fifteen.

An elf...?

Her ears tapered to a point. Her long white hair was fluffy like cotton candy, while her eyes were blue like a clear lake. She wore a simple, old-fashioned dress decorated with dignified ornaments, and had similar features to the girl Archdemon Zagan was deeply in love with. However, the first person to come to this man's mind was someone else entirely.

"Lady Nephteros!"

"Hyah!"

He got up with so much vigor that the girl fell backward. Without even having the composure to try to help her, Richard remembered what had happened to him. After learning of how little time Nephteros had left in the world, when he'd had her in his arms, something had suddenly pierced his chest. The last thing he remembered was Nephteros screaming in despair.

"I have to go—!"

"Hey now, stop right there," the girl said, cutting him off. "Do you even know where this is?"

"Huh...?"

Richard regained his senses when the girl suddenly tugged on his sleeve. Everything was pitch black as far as the eye could see. The sensation at his feet was nebulous. It was questionable whether there was even any solid ground beneath him.

"Where are we...?" Richard asked.

"Good question. To put it frankly...I suppose you'd call this hell?"

Richard couldn't refute that claim.

“So I died...?” he asked.

“No. It seems you didn’t. You’re pretty popular, apparently. Those around you put in a lot of effort to save you and managed to keep you alive. Congratulations.”

“Oh... Thanks...”

This girl spoke in circles and remained vague, throwing him off a little. She didn’t seem to be trying to tease him, however. Just then, Richard finally realized that the girl was still sitting on the ground.

“Oh, forgive me. Are you hurt?” he asked as he held out his hand.

The girl stared at him as if criticizing him for a moment, then took his hand and replied, “Nope. You’re as much of a gentleman as you seem. That’s a relief.”

Richard felt ashamed. Even considering the sense of urgency driving him, he’d knocked down a girl and hadn’t even offered her a hand. As she stood back up, Richard realized that she was more petite than he’d thought. In fact, she only came as high as his stomach. She might’ve been taller than Alshiera, but just barely. He wasn’t sure how she’d interpreted his inquisitive gaze, but the girl broke into laughter.

“Oh, there’s no need to worry too much. My people are generally short of stature. Besides, despite appearances, I’m actually far older than you.”

“I-Is that so?”

Where was he? And who was this girl? With those thoughts in mind, Richard suddenly realized something.

Is she a prisoner here? If so, I can’t simply leave her.

As such, he held out his hand to her once more.

“I need to get back,” he said. “I don’t know which way to go, but would you like to accompany me? I believe it would be better than staying here.”

“Oh? You’ll help me? From the look of it, you don’t even have a sword.”

“Swinging a sword isn’t all there is to fighting. I’m still inexperienced, but I’ll exhaust myself to my fullest.”

“Then...I suppose I’ll have you escort me,” the girl said. She then took his hand and suddenly started walking.

“Um, where are we heading?” Richard asked.

“Tee hee! Aren’t you the one who said we’d be better off moving than staying still? Don’t worry, I doubt anything bad will happen.”

“Right...”

As they walked, the girl turned to him with a teasing look and asked, “Hmm. I thought you’d be barraging me with questions. Don’t you want to ask me anything?”

“Pushing a lady for answers on a first meeting is not the way of a knight.”

“Ha ha ha! I admire your refined senses, but there are times when women want to be asked questions. If there’s someone you have your heart set on, then you should keep that in mind.”

“Umm, that sounds rather difficult to differentiate.”

A woman’s heart was very complex indeed.

“Then you can just think of this as me talking to myself,” the girl started. “Let’s see, where to begin? Oh, right. I referred to this as hell, remember?”

“Yes.”

“I’m talking to myself. You don’t need to answer.”

“.....”

She was a tiresome girl. Richard forced a smile onto his face, and after seeing that, the girl continued to speak, sounding almost satisfied with herself.

“In truth, I’m a sinner. Well, I suppose rather than just me, I should say that *we* as an entire race are. I’m certain we exhausted every villainy possible. I’ve even burned innocent citizens many times... Truly, many, many times...”

The girl’s smile turned hollow.

“Rebellions happened every day, and every time we suppressed them with our power. Alas, if only we’d fallen to ruin faster. However, we sinners still had families and friends. We had things we wished to protect. Thus, we couldn’t allow ourselves to quietly perish by their hands. How foolish we were.”

The girl slumped her shoulders, looking even frailer than before.

“That’s why we were destined to perish. And so we did. What I’m going through now is simply my due punishment. Still, there’s just one thing I can’t stand.”

Urged on by her resentment, the girl’s strides sped up.

“I can’t stand my power being used by someone to oppress others.”

Who exactly is this girl...?

As a humble knight, Richard didn’t possess enough information to take a guess. If Chastille or Kuroka were here instead, they would’ve been able to identify this girl as a seraph, but he didn’t even know that word. Nevertheless, he felt like she needed saving, just like Nephteros did.

“Humans are prone to errors. That goes the same for everyone. The best intentions could still lead to tragedy. Even if I’d had hope in someone, they could walk off the right path. My last master wasn’t like that at first. He was a gentleman just like you. But...”

What exactly had this girl experienced? She tried to continue earnestly pouring her heart out with trembling shoulders, but Richard cut in as if to tell her he’d heard enough.

“I’m just talking to myself here,” he said as she turned around with a blank look. “There’s a woman I’m in love with, but she doesn’t have long to live and needs to be saved. I’m certain I’d dirty my hands with any deed if it would save her.”

The girl drooped her shoulders in disappointment upon hearing his statement.

“However,” Richard continued, “even though I believe that, no matter what happens to her, I do not wish to be someone I would be ashamed of, especially in front of her. I wish to be a man who corrects wrongs and lives as an example to the people.”

Everyone in the world had a conscience and malicious intent. The two continuously affected one’s life. Any choice made by one person could seem correct to them, but wrong to someone else.

“People make mistakes. I know that for a fact. I mean, you never know if something you did is right until far later.”

Nobody out there always did the right thing in every single situation. If someone truly never made a mistake, they would’ve been beyond understanding, more god than human.

“That’s why I think if you try to live true to yourself, even if what you do is wrong, someone will surely respond in kind.”

The girl cracked a smile as she pondered his words.

“Hee hee! I’m grateful for your comforting words, but there are horrors out there that the world can definitely declare as firmly wrong.”

“Is that so? Didn’t you just tell me that you sinners had something you wished to protect? That you had no choice but to do so for their sake?”

“But burning innocent civilians is clearly an unjust act.”

Perhaps. But even so, Richard shook his head.

“Maybe. But maybe it’s precisely because you committed that unjust act that someone appeared to correct it. So, in a way, doesn’t that mean they appeared to ease your suffering?”

Angelic Knights disparaged sorcerers as evil and subjugated them. That was a virtue the masses desired from them. That was how it had been in the beginning, even if some distortions had developed over the course of history. However, those evil sorcerers also had families. Maybe they had people who were precious to them that they were just trying to protect.

And yet, while claiming that such things didn’t need consideration, the church took that virtue to an extreme and declared them an evil that had to be purged. That was what the late Cardinal Clavwell had done, and he had subsequently met his end as a result.

“You mean to say that everything that goes around comes around?” the girl asked.

“Yes. I believe even your suffering should come around to summon someone who can answer your hopes. Or at the very least, I would like to be that person.”

Perhaps Richard had made a mistake. Nephtheros had been driven to the edge because he’d told her he loved her.

Still, I wanted to support her.

Even if it had been a mistake, even after getting lost in this place, that feeling hadn't faded in the least. He wanted her to be happy...and he wouldn't let anyone call that a mistake. He wouldn't let anyone say it was meaningless. The same went for this girl's suffering.

"How simplistic of you," the girl muttered in exasperation.

"I'm ashamed to admit it, but you're right."

"But you have a point," she said with a light nod. "That's why we lost a thousand years ago."

"A thousand years...?"

The first thought that came to Richard's mind was Alshiera. Had this girl lived for such a harsh amount of time too? If so, words from someone like Richard wouldn't provide any comfort whatsoever. And yet, the girl nodded in an unexpectedly pleased manner.

"Hee hee! Your little soliloquy was rather amusing," she said. "It wasn't what I hoped for, but it wasn't bad either."

She spun around on the spot cheerfully, then faced Richard once more.

"What awaits you from here on out is sure to be full of hardships that can be likened to hell," she said. "Perhaps you yourself will be the one to create that hell. I wonder, will you still believe in what you just told me even considering that?"

Now that he'd been reminded of Alshiera, he couldn't help but liken this girl's behavior to hers. That was why he could understand. Her question wasn't one meant to be answered with some half-baked resolve. Thus, Richard quietly closed his eyes and began questioning himself.

Even the choice one believed was best could go horribly wrong. There were cases where that could beckon a calamity akin to hell. When that time came, would someone truly be there to stop him?

“Yes,” Richard answered with a smile of conviction. “A man incapable of at least believing that much stands no chance of saving her.”

“In that case...please make me believe in those words as well,” the girl said, stretching out her hand as if asking for help. Seeing that, Richard took her hand firmly. “If you’ll answer my hopes, then I shall become your blade. Sacred Sword Camael shall be yours.”

With those last words, the girl vanished as if melting away into the darkness. The hand he’d had in his grasp was gone, and in its place was a greatsword.

“This is...!”

“I pray that this power shall not be the blade that cuts open the gates of hell.”

Richard held up the sword, which peeled away the darkness. There was now a body of water before him. Many fragments of shattered boats floated atop the lake of darkness. At its center was a mountainous wriggling shadow. It was a shadow of sludge, mimicking the form of the one he held dear to his heart. It was an incarnation of despair that was far beyond the power of a single Angelic Knight.

“Lady Nephtheros. I’m coming to get you.”

Nevertheless, Richard dashed toward it.

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“Now then, which way should I go?” Kimaris mumbled to himself while pulling out the last sword that was sticking out of his shoulder.

He was in enemy territory, where Zagan had forced his way through. There were countless dead foes all around him. Shortly after Foll’s

power had brought the battle to a halt, Shere Khan's intervention had transformed the Nephilims into combat puppets. They could no longer be stopped through words or fear. The only way to stop them now was to meet them directly with a show of overwhelming strength.

During this time, Kimaris had exhausted himself by stalling the enemy headquarters. Even from afar, he could tell that the Angelic Knights were at a disadvantage. If he were to step aside, the remaining seven thousand soldiers would surge toward them. That was why he'd chosen to stand and fight.

He'd paid an appropriate price for such a choice, of course. He'd slain so many enemies that simply trying to count them would've been a ridiculous endeavor, and he'd had swords and spears stabbed into his arms, legs, and back to match that number. Even so, none had made it past him.

Reduced to mindless puppets, the Nephilims no longer possessed the capacity for independent thought. Though, they followed Shere Khan's every command. Having judged that neither hundreds nor thousands of them would be enough to break through, the enemy advance had finally ground to a stop. Kimaris needed time to heal his wounds, but he could do that on the move.

Now that the enemy had stopped, he had to decide whether to follow Zagan's orders and head to Shere Khan or not. However, he couldn't ignore the Angelic Knights' disadvantageous position either. He had been pondering over what to do for a while, when suddenly, he heard light footsteps approaching.

"That's... Hmm, well, that won't do."

Kimaris's sense of smell identified who was approaching him. He forced his wounded body up and turned toward the sound, spotting a little girl. It was the girl Zagan, or rather, Zagan's friend Stella, had

taken in as a little sister. Her name was Lisette, if Kimaris remembered correctly. She was running, apparently searching for something.

Suddenly, one of the surviving Nephilims swayed back to his feet in front of her. The girl's face twisted in fear, but before anything else happened, Kimaris's hand had already reached the soldier's head.

"Rest in peace. Your fight is already over."

The enemy soldier let out a shriek and quickly fell face-first into the dirt. Lisette's mouth flapped open and shut as Kimaris smiled at her as gently as he could manage.

"Are you hurt?" he asked. "It's dangerous out here."

Lisette was scared, but her delayed response was more likely because she was out of breath.

"I have... I have to go," she said between ragged breaths as she shook her head.

"Go? Go where?"

"To the man named Shere Khan," she said in a rush, as if just calming down would be a waste of time.

Kimaris stared at the girl sternly.

Is she being manipulated? No, it doesn't seem like it...

He'd already heard that this girl was very likely related to Shere Khan's subordinates, Dexia and Aristella. Nevertheless, she was a civilian. She couldn't fight. That was why she wasn't one to run into a place like this spurred only by emotion.

It must have taken her significant resolve to make it this far.

Zagan was sure to hate the idea of letting this girl reach Shere Khan. Still, Kimaris sympathized with Lisette's courage and determination. And so, he squatted down to match her eyeline.

“It’s very, very dangerous that way, you know?” he asked, just to be sure.

“I know.”

“I’m sure it’ll only hurt you to go there.”

“I know that as well.”

There was no hesitation whatsoever in her response.

“I see. Very well. Do you know who I am?”

“Mhm... You’re one of the Archdemon’s friends, right?”

“Yes. I’m going to be heading toward Sir Zagan now. The man you’re looking for, Shere Khan, will also be there,” Kimaris said, then paused for a moment and held out his hand. “Will you come with me?”

“Yes,” she answered immediately, taking his hand.

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“A-Archdemon Zagan!” Dexia screamed in sorrow.

How long had his battle with the first-generation Archdemons lasted? The sun had already set outside and it was currently in the middle of rising again. The former Archdemons were all sorcerers, which meant Zagan could devour their sorcery. His reserves of mana had held up thanks to that, but blood still poured from his body, so he’d finally been brought down to a knee.

I could beat them one at a time...

Present-day sorcery hadn’t advanced so little that it’d lose to sorcery from a thousand years ago. When it came to reinforcing his body, Zagan was several stages beyond them, and he’d been eating whatever sorcery they could manage, anyway. Despite this, they reacted fast enough not to be outdone by his movements and even managed to strike back at him. Even when he used his Shadow Sever, they dodged his fist. It was like a nightmare come true.

“Stay back. You’ll get dragged in— Heaven’s Phosphor Autumn Lightning.”

Black lightning poured down all around Zagan. It didn’t possess enough penetration power to cut through the abandoned mine to the lower levels, but there was enough lightning to cover the entire room. Every fork of electricity was made of Heaven’s Phosphor. A single graze would spell the end of anyone’s life.

Regardless, when the black lightning faded, not a single Archdemon had been defeated. The Hex Blades they wielded had no substance to them. They were blades of mana, so cutting off their supply of mana could make the blade vanish. Even if they were about to be struck by Heaven’s Phosphor, the Archdemons could simply erase the blade before the corrosion reached the hilt.

They’d fended off Autumn Lightning by striking the bolts out of the air and erasing their blades. Even the Archangels wouldn’t be able to mimic such a feat. In other words, these Archdemons all surpassed the Archangels in swordsmanship. Still, Zagan had known that they’d be able to block his attacks. He hadn’t fired Autumn Lightning in some vain last-ditch effort.

By the time the black lightning settled down, he’d reached the boy with silver eyes. He knew the boy’s Hex Blade wouldn’t reactivate in time, so Zagan’s fist mercilessly plunged toward his face.

“Gah!”

However, his fist grazed the boy’s cheek, and in return, he took a blow from the hilt of the boy’s sword. The other Archdemons finished reactivating their Hex Blades and came surging in, leaving Zagan with no choice but to get away from them.

Two figures were the central pillars of this fight.

Marchosias and this silver-eyed boy just won’t go down.

Marchosias had survived to the present era and developed his sorcery all the while. Thus, Zagan's knowledge couldn't compare to his at all. This old man gave the other Archdemons strength, healed them, and commanded them in battle. All attempts to deliver a fatal blow with Heaven's Phosphor were avoided, and any other wounds had no lasting effects.

Zagan's ability to devour sorcery meant that he could imitate any sorcery he saw, but this terrifying sorcerer was mixing easy-to-see sorcery with difficult-to-see sorcery to complicate his spells to the point where Zagan couldn't devour everything.

However, even more troubling was the silver-eyed boy. This boy's Hex Blade could tear apart Zagan's fist. What's more, even without Marchosias's support, he could react to Zagan's Shadow Sever and go on the offensive with deadly accuracy. Plus, even if the other Archdemons weren't at their level, they still weren't all that far behind.

I can't break the puppetry at work either...

They were being manipulated by sorcery, but also not by sorcery. They'd definitely been created by sorcery, but they'd been crafted in such a way that a single word from Shere Khan could dominate the functions of their mind. They'd been made to function that way biologically. The only way to undo the control he had over them was to break down their minds, or their entire beings, and then remake them. It was theoretically possible, but not practical against opponents he couldn't even touch.

Before he knew it, Zagan had been forced on the defensive and had used up all his power. Still, there was another reason for his inferior position aside from a simple gap in strength.

"I thought you were a complete stranger. How unexpected. I'm pretty shaken by all this."

Zagan knew far too much to be unable to identify the silver-eyed boy.

This man is my...

What kind of man was he? What kind of life had he lived? Did he know of Zagan's existence? What did he think when he first saw Zagan? None of that mattered. Or at least, it shouldn't have. And yet, bewilderment, hatred, and other indescribable feelings welled up within Zagan.

Without giving Zagan the time to ponder such thoughts, the silver-eyed boy closed in.

"Shadow Sever!"

Zagan's body accelerated so fast that he left his shadow behind. In an instant, he was behind the silver-eyed boy, lunging toward him with a killing blow, but the boy smoothly dodged as if he had eyes on the back of his head and swung his Hex Blade at him in response.

That reaction was enough to convince Zagan. This boy's silver eyes were the same as Zagan's. Much like how Zagan read the flow of his opponents' sorcery to overwrite and absorb them, this boy read the flow of mana to predict any and all movements. That was why he could dodge Zagan's fist so thoroughly and even counterattack. Their powers were hopelessly similar. So similar, in fact, that he could feel a connection to this boy.

Zagan gritted his teeth and used Shadow Sever to get away from the silver-eyed boy, lunging instead toward Marchosias, who was supporting the other Archdemons from the rear.

"MARCHOSIAS!"

Zagan didn't want to say his name, but he screamed it. This man was an Archdemon and a hero from a thousand years past. Having taken

a direct line to approach him, Marchosias was obviously capable of reading Zagan's trajectory and blocking him.

Zagan dodged the first Archdemon to attack him by lowering himself beneath their blade. The next Archdemon ate his fist. It was a definite hit, but the feedback felt light. The Archdemon had jumped back to reduce the impact. Still, that was enough for Zagan to get through.

He met the next Archdemons in his way with punches and kicks or slipped by them. Zagan made it all the way to Marchosias and was now in range. At this point, no matter what the other Archdemons did, Zagan's fist would reach first. Or at least, that was what he'd expected.

"Gah... Hak!"

Marchosias gently brushed aside Zagan's killing blow. In the next instant, Zagan found himself upside down, slamming into the ground. He'd been warded off by martial arts. Even Stella and Kimaris weren't this skilled. And yet, this reversal technique was one Zagan's body knew to a bitter extent. It was how he'd had his arts drilled into his body, after all. He'd been trained by this very hand, the one that had given him bread when the only thing awaiting him had been dying of starvation in the alleys.

I already knew all this!

He'd already considered the possibility, but he'd hoped it wouldn't be the case. He'd come here knowing he'd most likely meet him, yet he couldn't help but feel betrayed. And now, having missed his killing blow, Zagan was left wide open.

"Ah..."

By the time he'd regained his senses, the thirteen Archdemons had swung their Hex Blades at him. Red droplets gushed into the air like a fountain. Bifrons had once said that the Sigil of the Archdemon was a

seal created by cutting the Demon Lord's body into chunks with twelve Sacred Swords. Right here, right now, thirteen Hex Blades plunged into Zagan's flesh as if mimicking that tale.



"Chastille!"

"I'm...okay. I can still...fight."

Having faced "Nephteros's" spear of light the moment she'd appeared, Chastille had suffered significant wounds. Had Barbatos not protected her from the shadows, quite literally, she'd be long dead. Chastille now used her wounded body to fight so that the others could get away.

"Hee hee hee! Will you keep playing with me? Oh, what an adorable child. What a lovely child. Just like my little fawn, you dance and dance without ever breaking!"

"Gh... Stop!" Chastille screamed. "Stop this already, Nephteros! You'll really die!"

Following in the wake of her right hand, "Nephteros's" left leg was starting to crumble away.

I can't allow her to keep fighting!

Nephy was desperate, but the fighting wouldn't stop. Orias's wounds were deep. She was alive, but she couldn't fight anymore. Asura's right arm was broken. Chastille bought time while Nephy healed the two of them, but she was nearly at her limit. Even worse, the two Hex Wings Orias had staked her life on destroying had already reformed.

"That's enough, missy."

"But..."

Asura stood up. Nephy had somehow managed to stem the bleeding, but his right arm was still in shambles.

“My Hex Arm is back. A thousand years ago, this woulda been nothin’.”

With that, Asura charged toward “Nephteros” once more. As Nephy watched his back shrink into the distance, a voice called out to her from her shadow.

“I’m warnin’ ya... If it gets dangerous, I’m gettin’ outta here. I’ll take the crybaby with me too. Surviving is more important and all, you see.”

“I know. Please take care of Chastille.”

He was already going so far out of his way to help them out. Nephy was honestly grateful. She couldn’t possibly criticize him.

“Hey, ain’t it enough already?” Barbatos added bitterly. “You’ve done good. You even lived up to that idiot Zagan’s ridiculous request. Even if you back down now, nobody’s gonna complain or nothin’.”

Barbatos didn’t mention running away or giving up. Nephy truly did believe he was a kind man, even if Zagan claimed otherwise.

“I’ve got plenty of space,” Barbatos continued, opening the shadows. “When I take the crybaby, I can at least take all of you along for the ride as a freebie, ya know?”

Nephy was grateful for the offer, but she firmly shook her head.

“She’s my little sister.”

“Tch... Come on. Sure, you might feel that way, but she’s actually—”

“She’s my sister,” Nephy repeated in a tone far stronger than she’d imagined.

With that, Barbatos understood.

“You noticed...?” he muttered.

Nephy didn't answer him. Instead, she smiled and said, “She really is kind, and cute, and my one and only little sister. She doesn't even know her own birthday yet. After we celebrate Master Zagan's birthday, we'll try to find hers out next. And then, we'll all celebrate together. To that end, she must survive!”

“Hah! You spout the same crap as the crybaby.”

Nephy found those words unexpectedly comforting.

“I'm happy to hear that. Chastille was my very first friend, after all.”

Just then, someone gripped Nephy's hand.

“Ne...phy...”

“Mother!”

Orias had woken up, but was still seriously wounded.

“I'm...fine now... Save her...”

“R-Right!”

It was clear that she still required treatment, but Nephy nodded nonetheless. Orias then placed her other hand atop Nephy's.

“I may have...been mistaken in my approach... This hand...might not have...been one...destined to take up a sword...”

“Mother...?”

“Nephteros reacted...when you reached out to her... Your hand...may reach her...”

The Sigil of the Archdemon on the back of Orias's hand glowed and floated away from her body.

“H-Hey. The hell are you up to?” Barbatos murmured in bewilderment.

It was as if the Sigil of the Archdemon was looking at Nephy. She felt such pressure from it that it took all her focus just to breathe. Zagan and Orias suppressed such power on a daily basis. Any normal person wouldn't have been able to withstand possessing it.

"Do you have the resolve to accept it?" Orias asked.

"Yes!" Nephy answered without hesitation.

If I can reach Nephteros like this, then I'll accept anything!

Nephy held out both her hands, just like she once had out on that balcony in the castle. Zagan, who'd held out his hand with her that day, wasn't with her now. Still, her desire to be by his side drove her to reach further. It felt like her body would be crushed. It felt like she would faint. Nephy gritted her teeth to rebuke her weakness for even considering such thoughts, then continued to stretch her hand out for the Sigil of the Archdemon.



“Gah...! Hey! Get away from there! It’s comin’ for you!”

She heard Asura’s voice. Nephy didn’t have the leisure to shift her gaze, but she knew “Nephteros” was coming toward her. She’d also reacted to the Sigil of the Archdemon, it seemed.

“Ugh...! I don’t get paid enough for this, dammit!”

Barbatos popped out of the shadows and constructed a barrier. Transparent shadowy walls surrounded “Nephteros” on all sides, halting her movements. No, technically, she remained in motion. Upon touching one wall, she appeared on the other side. That space was apparently an enclosed loop. In this alliance to save Nephteros, of all people, the one who risked his life at the very last moment was none other than Barbatos.

However, cracks rapidly formed on his barrier. It clearly wouldn’t last long.

You’ve bought more than enough time. Thank you very much, Lord Barbatos.

Nephy’s finger touched the Sigil of the Archdemon. Her right hand burned. Mana went wild inside her as if she suddenly had a second heart. And then, light burst out all around her.

“Go, Nephy... You’re the newest Archdemon... Use that hand to take hold of her...”

“Right!” Nephy yelled, the Sigil of the Archdemon glowing on her right hand.

Picking up Azazel’s Staff, Nephy ran off—

“Oh, Hex Wings.”

—with six wings at her back.

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The Archdemons' Hex Blades mercilessly tore through all of Zagan's limbs, but his eyes were never once tainted with the light of defeat.

I've been waiting for this!

The wounds appeared fatal, but every single blade had missed his vitals.

"Hm...?"

Bewilderment spread among the Archdemons. Small lights, which were akin to flowers, wrapped around their swords.

Heaven's Scale Snowfield. It was an application of Heaven's Scale with a focus on accuracy. That was what had caused the thirteen Hex Blades to deviate ever so slightly.

Zagan stiffened his muscles, using his own body to lock the Hex Blades in place. Zagan knew the Archdemons would reveal an opening once they were convinced they'd delivered the finishing blow. And when he spotted it, he rose off the ground and drove his fist toward the Archdemon in front of him—the silver-eyed boy.

"Gah!"

The punch easily blew the boy away.

Finally... I finally landed a blow!

Zagan had to crush him before he regained his composure.

"Wh-What...the...?"

However, the moment Zagan tried to give chase, his knees buckled. Even if he was an Archdemon, this was his third continuous day of fighting. Despite the constant healing and reinforcement of his body, the accumulated damage had reached a point that he could no longer ignore.

My body...won't move...

Luckily, it seemed Zagan hadn't been the only one waiting for this moment. Just as the silver-eyed boy regained his balance, countless bats swarmed down in front of him.

"Alshiera?"

The incorrigible vampire had apparently been observing this battle. A slender arm stretched out of the bats and wrapped around the silver-eyed boy's face, and then...of all things, Alshiera's face popped out and locked lips with him.

A crack resounded in the air as something had shattered.

"It's time for you to wake up, my dearest. This boy is not the one you're meant to point your sword toward."

Her voice was ever so sweet, yet ever so sorrowful. Had she reached him? The boy's silver eyes glimmered with the light of reason. But Zagan had no time to simply sit there and watch. He was on his knees...and the other Archdemons were bearing down on him once more.

"Tch! Snowfield!"

Wounds left behind by Hex Blades were slow to heal, much like with Sacred Swords. This stalled Zagan's reaction by the smallest of seconds. One of the swords he'd failed to avert closed in on his heart.

I can't stop it!

The moment that thought crossed his mind, Zagan suddenly felt his body float into the air.

"Good grief. I don't quite understand what's going on, but I'm pretty sure I know *exactly* who you are."

The voice was even more childish than the boy's appearance would suggest. The silver-eyed boy had Zagan in his arms as he landed a good distance away from the other Archdemons. The boy—who was

clearly younger than Zagan—placed Zagan down gently, then gave him a pat on the head.

“You hung in there very well. You’ve done better than anyone could’ve hoped for, really. I don’t think I have the right to say this after all this time, but I’m proud of you.”

Why was this strange boy he’d never met before acting so haughty? That thought should’ve run through Zagan’s mind, but his heart was filled with an incomprehensible sentiment instead. The corners of his eyes turned hot as he slapped the boy’s hand away.

“I’m plenty proud of my own life. I don’t need praise from the likes of you.”

He’d lived like a glutton in the alleys. He’d stolen from others and had killed people simply because he hadn’t liked them.

But even so, Nephy still loves me.

As such, no matter how dirty he got, he couldn’t possibly reject the life he’d lived.

“Heh heh... You resemble your mother,” the boy muttered.

“.....”

Zagan didn’t even check to see whom the boy was looking at.

What has she felt all this time while staying by my side...?

The true meaning behind that compassionate yet lonely gaze she’d directed his way from time to time was...

“You can leave the rest to me,” the silver-eyed boy said, stepping forth with his Hex Blade at the ready. “You’re far too injured.”

“Mind your own business... I don’t know what era you’re from, but sorcery has advanced plenty since then.”

Zagan rose to his feet with the utmost composure. A faint light filled in the wounds that had been dealt to him by the Hex Blades.

Heaven's Scale Prayer Shell had even repaired wounds dealt by Hex Nails, so this was nothing.

With that, Zagan stood by the boy's side.

"I see," the boy said with a delighted grin. "Then let's start over. We can fight them together—Zagan."

Zagan had never given him his name, but the boy still referred to him by it.

"Hmph! Don't hold me back."

Zagan didn't notice that, even as he spoke such cold words, a smile rose to his face. And upon seeing the two of them like that, the vampire in the distance silently shed tears.





“Why...? Father...?”

Black Dragon Marbas had been pulverized in a single blow. Foll plummeted from its head and even forgot all about the wings on her back. The enormous wings and scales of the dragon before her weren't even a shadow of their former selves, but she still knew who it was. There was no way she wouldn't recognize him. That revolting and festering zombie dragon was none other than Foll's father, Orobas.

Zagan and Nephy were her current parents...and both of them accepted and loved her as if she were their real child, perhaps even more than Orobas had. She knew this full well, but having such a being thrust before her—and attack her at that—made it impossible for her to maintain her composure.

As the ground drew nearer, she finally realized that she was on the verge of dying, but it was far too late to start flapping her wings. Just when she was sure she was dead, someone suddenly caught her in their arms.

“Are you all right, little lady?”

It was a young man with slit-thin eyes. He didn't look like a sorcerer, yet he somehow twisted his body in the air and landed smoothly, absorbing the momentum from falling back to the ground in a splendid aerial maneuver.

“Who are you...?” Foll asked. She couldn't recognize his face or scent, but there was a faint whiff of someone she did recognize wafting off him. “You smell like Alshiera...”

“Hmm, you can tell? As you’ve surmised, I have come at Lady Alshiera’s command. My name is Bato. I may not be all that strong, but I’ve come to support you.”

Support? As in fight? Against who?

Even though he’d been reduced to such a state, that was still her father. He was the legendary Wise Dragon Orobas, the closest being to a god. As his daughter, she knew his greatness better than anyone else. Was this man going to challenge such overwhelming strength? Foll trembled, unable to utter a word, as the zombie dragon opened its mouth.

“OoOooOOOoOooOoOH!”

She could see light gathering in its maw, so all the blood drained from her face. His breath attack wasn’t pointed at the battlefield, but at Kianoides.

“Sto—!” Foll roared, stretching out her hand and clawing at the air as the light of destruction poured forth.

“In the name of Hypnoel and the Silver-Eyed King, demonstrate your strength—Mirror of the Afterlife.”

“Neptunia’s Ainselph sings for you—Neptune’s Tear.”

A dome of light spread over Kianoides as if shielding the city.

Liucaon’s Holy Treasures?

Foll had seen this same scene when she’d been taken over by a curse. The breath of destruction collided with the shield of light. In an instant, a crack formed over the shield, but the breath attack also bent and shot off randomly into the sky.

“Are those the Silver-Eyed King’s descendants?” Bato asked in admiration.

Foll enhanced her eyesight with sorcery, spotting Lilith on the cathedral spire being supported by Selphy. Lilith smiled as she weakly sank to the floor.

“Heh. Heh... Heh... How’d you like that? The rest...is up...to you...”

She was too far away to be audible, even with sorcery, but that was what Lilith’s lips seemed to be saying.

“Right on! Leave it to me, Lilith!”

Following that, a black sphere burst into existence in front of Orobas.

“Furcas.”

The boy who should’ve forgotten all of his sorcery soared through the air and stood before Orobas, wielding a white Seraph Hunter in his hand.

“My friend. Allow me to put you to rest—Angelic Confession Metatron.”

The crimson flame took on the shape of a knight with none other than Raphael riding on its back.

Everyone’s fighting...

Zagan had said that Foll was the closest to being an Archdemon. In terms of strength, that was surely the case. This wasn’t arrogance. It was simply reality.

But everything’s suddenly turned upside down...

Overreaching could lead to failure. Even reduced to such a state, that was still Wise Dragon Orobas. Challenging such a being was the very definition of recklessly overreaching.

“But...” Foll muttered, putting her feet back on the ground. “But even so, that’s my father.”

Nephy and Zagan loved her and gave her a place to belong. They were her beloved mommy and daddy. But it was also true that Foll

was a dragon, and the dragon she looked up to as her ideal was her real father. Thus, she couldn't possibly allow him to be desecrated.

"I'm the one who mourns most for Wise Dragon Orobas."

That was why Foll would fight.

"I shall accompany you," Bato said with a reverent bow.

And so, Foll spread her wings and returned to the battle.

"Oh! Please wait a moment, little, I mean, my lady! I can't fly!"

She felt like she heard someone screaming behind her, but Foll didn't stop.



"Kurosuke! Keep it together, Kuroka!"

A few moments earlier, Kuroka had opened her eyes upon having her shoulders shaken.

"G-Gah! Hak!"

Suddenly feeling that she couldn't breathe, she broke into a coughing fit.

I fainted?

At most, she'd been out for ten seconds or so. The situation around her hadn't changed all that much.

Shax let out a sigh of relief. With that, she finally realized she was in his arms. She unintentionally blushed due to that, but his next words brought her back to her senses.

"Raphael! Kurosuke is fine. Looks like her swords' power protected her."

Kuroka looked down at her own chest, where she saw a swarm of rainbow-colored butterflies fluttering about.

Right. I got stabbed, but...

Even though she was sure the sword had gone right through her heart, Kuroka was still alive. Moonless Sky had apparently protected her. Still, she hadn't gotten away unscathed. A sharp pain still ran through her body.

Shax's eyes were directed at the battle between Raphael and Andrealphus. Raphael swung his flame-wreathed Sacred Sword, but Andrealphus caught the blow easily enough. The ground at their feet caved in, but this didn't agitate the Archdemon whatsoever as he took a swing of his own. The Angelic Knights around them were trying to provide Raphael support, but none were capable of getting close, let alone forcing their way into the battle.

"Take Kuroka and get the hell away from here!" Raphael yelled. "I'm the only one who can serve as his opponent!"

With Raphael's swordsmanship and the flames of purification that obstructed sorcery, he just barely stood on equal ground against Andrealphus. Even Ginias and the two Juutilainens wouldn't be able to pose a threat to the Archdemon.

Father...!

Kuroka gripped her shortswords and tried to get up, but Shax strengthened his grip on her shoulders to halt her movement.

"Well...I figured you wouldn't run away," he said with a feeble smile, sounding more understanding than resigned. "You got this, Kurosuke?"

"Yes!"

After answering him, she suddenly realized what had happened earlier and started darting her eyes about.

"Umm, but it hurts a little, so I'd like...um, some cheering up," she whispered so that Raphael wouldn't hear her.

“Huh?”

“You...called me by my name earlier, right?”

Shax’s face turned noticeably red, which was actually enough to cheer Kuroka up on its own. Shax’s mouth flapped open and shut while he oscillated between blushing and turning pale, but after a short while, he gave in and brought his mouth close to Kuroka’s human ear.

“I’ll do something about that geezer’s sorcery, so go wild to your heart’s content, Kuroka.”

“R-Right!”

Her heart thumped like a hammer had been taken to it, while her head was suddenly clear as could be.

As I am now, I can even defeat an Archdemon!

In the next instant, Kuroka lunged straight at Andrealphus.

“Kuroka?!” Raphael yelled.

The sword in her right hand was aimed at Andrealphus’s sword, while her left swung in an arc from his legs up to his head. Andrealphus twisted his body to dodge, but a spurt of blood spilled from his cheek. Now that his balance was broken, Shax came in next. His fist was layered in magic circles and cleanly struck Andrealphus’s wide-open flank. The Archdemon’s armor shattered with a dull crack. Unable to endure the blow, he tumbled across the ground and gained some distance from the trio.

“Kurosuke and I will take him. You go help the little lady. If Foll goes down, we’ve got no shot of winning.”

“Shax, you bastard...” Raphael muttered, both in anger and bewilderment.

“I’ll protect Kuroka!” Shax yelled as if steeling himself for what was to come. “I’ll definitely protect her! No matter what happens! She’s the one person I’ll never let die!”

Kuroka could feel the blood rushing to her face. Raphael’s eyes shot open, but then he let out a short sigh.

“Very well... I’ll leave her to you,” he said. Then, he turned to Kuroka and added, “Don’t die, Kuroka.”

“It’ll be fine. As I am now, I won’t lose to anyone.”

“Hmph, is that so?”

With that, Kuroka returned her gaze to Andrealphus. It appeared his Anointed Armor was no longer functioning, but such equipment was pretty much decorative when worn by an Archdemon. She couldn’t compete with him in terms of brute strength.

In that case, I’ll have to rely on my speed!

Andrealphus charged in with a thrust, the tip of his blade aimed precisely at Kuroka’s heart.

“Is that all?!”

Kuroka dodged by a paper-thin margin and swung both her swords. However, given his skill, it was hard to make up for her shorter reach. The tips of her blades carved through his armor, but she was one step short of reaching his flesh. Rainbow-colored butterflies then danced about as if to protect her.

“Moonless Sky...?”

She’d seen this phenomenon before when crossing blades with Asura and Bato the other day. And now, Kuroka felt like she knew how to use this properly.

Andrealphus rained down a chain of slashes. His sword rent the air. Even if she got away from its edge, she was sure it would still cut her

apart. As such, Kuroka dared to step in toward her enemy. Naturally, this meant that Andrealphus's blade would cut her clean in two...or, it was supposed to. Kuroka's bisected body crumbled away into a swarm of butterflies, and she manifested right in front of him. She then immediately swept her sword up toward the sky. Andrealphus threw himself to the ground to get away, but she still managed to carve a deep gash across his jaw.

It's a little different from teleporting. Feels like my body is shifting to another space.

She could definitely feel that her limbs and swords were there, but it also felt like they were somewhere else entirely. It was like the parts of her that shifted away were being supplemented by butterflies. As such, it became clear that this was a power that swapped out her body with these luminous butterflies. Perhaps Papillon would be a fitting name for it.

With this, I can make up for my reach!

Andrealphus continually delivered fatal blows, but each time, Kuroka used Papillon to nullify them and close in to strike in turn. Still, her opponent was the one lauded as the strongest Archdemon and Archangel, so naturally, he managed to block all her attacks too.

Clad in butterflies, Kuroka stood on equal ground with the strongest. Some of the mindless puppets even stopped fighting and were entranced by the spectacle. Or maybe it was Shere Khan who was watching through their eyes.

Sparks scattered. Butterflies danced. And as the fantastic crossing of blades continued, Andrealphus suddenly changed his approach.

"Aaargh..." he muttered, and glowing mana enveloped his sword. This strike had been the one to sever a dragon's breath. Kuroka had no choice but to defend herself with Papillon.

No, he's obviously predicted I'll do that. He probably has something ready for the moment I use it. In that case, I'll step in instead!

Kuroka reversed her grip on the sword in her left hand and used her right to intercept the slash. It was impossible for her to actually stop the mana-charged sword like this, of course, but she kicked off the ground and rode the momentum of Andrealphus's attack to spin like a top and counterattack with her left sword. Andrealphus dodged hastily and brought his sword back to block Kuroka's follow-up attack.

"Gah!"

The moment he blocked, her other sword struck the exact same spot. That was her Sword Hunter technique. When used from both sides like a scissor, even the most finely crafted blades could be snapped in two.

But it still won't break...!

She failed to break his sword, but the intense attack sent Andrealphus's body flying.

"Myaaah!"

Seeing that as a perfect opportunity, Kuroka unleashed a storm of slashes with both her swords. Andrealphus managed to block the first three strikes with his blade, but that was his limit. Even an Archdemon was incapable of defending against Kuroka's unending barrage without at least having his feet planted on the ground. The fact that he'd even blocked three blows was actually worthy of praise. Blood flew every which way, but Andrealphus wasn't the only terrifying enemy present.

"Kurosuke, behind you!"

The older Galahad closed in from behind, wielding a sword he'd picked up from another fallen soldier. Kuroka blocked the attack, but

that meant one of her swords was no longer on the offense. Using that chance, Andrealphus rolled across the ground and got out of her range. Another voice then resounded in the air.

“Hya haaa ha! You’re strong, yeah? Like, really strong? But I’m the strongest!”

“Ugh! Decarabia!”

When last they’d fought, Kuroka had lost. As she was now, she was confident she could beat him, but taking on these three at the same time was another matter entirely.

“I won’t let you—Angelic Confession Raziel!”

A green gale blew through the area, and a moment later, a massive knight wielding a greatsword rammed Decarabia and pinned him to the ground.

“Owowowowow! The hell’re you?!”

Is he still right of mind...?

The other Nephilims were puppets deprived of their egos, but Decarabia was talking like normal. Well, he was pretty incomprehensible to begin with, so nothing he wailed about made any sense anyway.

“Father!”

The boy who’d been trembling and unable to hold his swords just moments ago now boldly took a swing at the older Galahad.

“I’ll hold things down here! You take care of Lord Diekmeyer!”

“Understood!”

Entrusting her back to the unexpectedly reliable boy, Kuroka charged at Andrealphus. Still, her opponent was an Archdemon...and the Head Archdemon, at that. His sorcery, which rendered all his opponents immobile, had already been completed.

“Void.”

All color vanished. All sound dissipated. A soundless and ashen world spread out with Andrealphus at its core. Even the butterflies protecting Kuroka stopped moving and faded to gray like they were simply a part of some old painting.

Time stopped. No, to be strictly accurate, Andrealphus accelerated to the point where it looked like time had stopped. When she last witnessed this power, Kuroka hadn't even been cognizant of what was going on, but here and now, she definitely saw it and could tell clearly.

“I've been waiting for this—Void.”

She heard Shax muttering behind her.

“I've granted you power. I'm telling you this because I believe you can do it.”

Kuroka had no way of knowing that, before the battle, Zagan had told Shax that Andrealphus would probably appear on the battlefield. The power Zagan had granted Shax was exactly what was being employed now. Shax used Void, the very symbol of this Archdemon's power. And he wasn't just using it, he'd seen through it in the tiniest of instants so that Kuroka could move in this world. This man had also reached the realm of Archdemons.

“Hold nothing back and get him good!”

Urged on by Shax's voice, Kuroka charged at the Archdemon once more. Andrealphus tore off his Anointed Armor. Kuroka lowered her body all the way to the ground and stepped in in a single stride.

Andrealphus's blade came straight down. Kuroka intercepted it, stopping the blow and even pushing it back. That simple collision split the earth and sent electric bolts of mana running through the air.

Speed was strength. And here, Kuroka's sword was even faster than Andrealphus's. Facing someone even faster than he was inside this world had to be a first, even for him.

But I can't let this continue for too long!

As they clashed at a speed so fast it looked like time had stopped, the shock waves wreaked havoc on their surroundings. Once this space came undone, Angelic Knights and enemy soldiers alike would get caught in the blast.

Kuroka suddenly plopped to the ground and kicked Andrealphus's feet out from under him. Having been caught off guard by that, Andrealphus lost his balance. Using her momentum, Kuroka twisted her upper body and struck with her shortswords. She aimed for Andrealphus's sword-wielding wrist. He saw through this, however, and held up his left arm. Thus, she sliced his left hand with a crunch, sending torn fingers flying through the air.

He sacrificed his hand?!

Andrealphus then used his fingerless hand to grasp one of Kuroka's swords, halting her movements entirely. His sword-wielding hand was still fine. At this range, she wouldn't be able to evade even if she let go of her sword, and Papillon couldn't be activated in this world.

Andrealphus swung with all his might. She tried to stop the blow with her remaining sword, but couldn't withstand the force and dropped it. Blood spurted into the air. His sword had cleaved her from her chest to her waist.

Not yet!

Her clothes had been blessed by an Archdemon and a high elf. Even after being cut up in such a brutal manner, Kuroka still had the strength to move. She pulled her shortsword free of Andrealphus's grasp with brute force, mustering the last of her strength for one final slash.

Andrealphus's sword arm fluttered into the air, severed from the elbow down. With that, Void came undone. Color returned to the world and intense pain ran through Kuroka's body.

"Gah..."

She vomited blood. Her knees went weak. She couldn't stand. The burden of entering that world mercilessly assaulted Kuroka's body, paying no heed to her injured state. But even so, Andrealphus remained on his feet. He raised his fingerless hand overhead, bringing it down on Kuroka.

I can't get away!

And the moment her body froze at that thought...

"I won't let you touch Kuroka!"

...Shax's magic-circle-covered fist dug into the Archdemon's jaw. Andrealphus tumbled violently across the ground, bowling over soldiers as he went. When the dust settled, he remained on his feet atop a mound of corpses.

"He's still standing...?"

Kuroka was down for the count. And having used the Archdemon's Fist, Shax's arm was a total mess. Shax had placed himself in front of Kuroka, resolving himself for certain death, when Andrealphus's massive body started swaying.

"Gah... Gah..."

Andrealphus's eyes peeled back, and he collapsed face-first onto the ground. This time, the terrifying Archdemon stopped moving entirely. Still, left with no time to bask in their victory, Shax cradled Kuroka in his arms.

"Kurosuke! Show me your wound!"

Now that he mentioned it, she remembered being cut. However...

“Huh?”

The wound was unexpectedly shallow. Her clothes had been torn apart completely, but the cut across her skin wasn't all that deep. She'd actually suffered more damage from the burden of being inside Void than anything else. Kuroka then shifted her gaze to the ceremonial sword Andrealphus had dropped.

The blade had snapped halfway down, and what remained of its edge was covered in nicks, reducing it to nothing more than a metal stick. During their vicious crossing of blades, Moonless Sky had apparently ravished the elf-blessed sword.

“Ha ha... Dammit, Boss, how much defense did you pack into this thing?” Shax muttered, sinking to the floor weakly.

Nephy had bestowed her clothes with the power of Anointed Armor, and Zagan had woven his defensive sorcery into it as well. Relieved by that fact, Shax's face suddenly turned red. He then took off his coat in a panic and placed it atop Kuroka's shoulders. One beat later, she figured out exactly why he did that. The fact that he could see her wound clearly meant that he could see her skin.

“I-I-I-I-It's okay! The wound is shallow...and nobody's looking!”

“I-I-I-I-I know! I know! So don't say it aloud!”

The two who'd brought the strongest Archdemon to his knees were blushing and huddled in the middle of the battlefield. Neither of them noticed the Sigil of the Archdemon floating away from Andrealphus's right hand behind them, nor did they notice that Kuroka's eyes had turned silver during her battle with Andrealphus.

◇

Around the time one battle was coming to an end, Ginias stood with his sword at the ready, facing his own family.

“Father...”

By the time Ginias was aware of his surroundings, his father hadn't been home. The man was always swamped with work, so he'd return only once every year or so. Ginias's father was the great man who'd served as the Head Archangel and had bestowed his own name to his son. The only image of him that Ginias really knew was his silent back as he led the Angelic Knights. Thinking back on it, he could easily count how many times they'd spoken. Nevertheless, on his birthdays—even if they didn't meet—he'd always received a present from his father. Whenever he wrote to his father, he'd always receive a reply, even if it had taken some time. Yes, letters. That had been Ginias's primary form of communication with his father.

In those letters, his father wasn't the great Head Archangel; he was just a commonplace, gentle, and somewhat silly man. He had often complained about having unreasonable demands pushed on him by his superior—probably the pope at the time—which prevented him from enjoying his favorite liquors.

Anytime Ginias would succeed at something new, his father had praised him to the moon. Anytime Ginias opened up about his troubles, his father had cheered him up with awkward words—likely after spending much time pondering over what to write. They'd rarely seen each other, but Ginias truly felt loved.

The last letter he'd gotten was one filled with frivolous everyday chatter. His father had written that after his current mission was over, he'd be able to take some time off, so the two could have dinner together. At the end of the letter, he'd finished with an "I love you dearly," as he always had.

Ginias crossed blades with the old Galahad. He could just barely put up a fight after wreathing his sword in Raziel's wind. If his father was also wielding a Sacred Sword, this wouldn't even have been a match. Nevertheless...

“Father. I’ve come this far. I now wield the same sword you once did. I reached the same status as you. I...I can finally stand alongside you!”

He wanted his father to look at him. He didn’t want to be looked at through those hollow, manipulated eyes. He wanted his father to see him properly.

“Ghhh! Shut your noisy trap already!”

Decarabia freed himself from Ginias’s Confession and charged in from the side.

“Back off! This is a battle between father and son!”

Ginias turned and slammed his fist into Decarabia’s face. He was somehow taking on the former Head Archangel and a former Archdemon candidate at the same time, making it clear that Ginias wasn’t first among the Archangels’ rankings due to his heritage.

“Oooooow! That hurt, dammit!”

However, Decarabia was a sorcerer who’d even injured Zagan’s hand. Despite his cheekbone caving in, he regenerated in an instant and charged at Ginias again without pause.

“Come back, Raziell!”

Ginias called his Confession, but was, unfortunately, a step too late. Decarabia’s fist closed in on Ginias’s wide-open back.

“Sorry. Looks like I overslept a bit.”

Someone’s hand caught his fist with absolute ease. She had the same scarlet hair and left eye as Chastille, but her right eye was silver and artificial. She’d caught Decarabia’s fist with her right hand and wielded a Sacred Sword in her left. She wasn’t wearing any Anointed Armor and was instead clad in torn ceremonial clothes that revealed the bandages wrapping her body beneath them. It was as if she’d flown out of a hospital.

“Stella!”

Ginias unintentionally raised his voice in delight, but he noticed that a look of bewilderment dominated Stella’s face.

“Big bro...?”

“Huh?”

Bro? She has a brother?

If he was among the Nephilims, that meant he was already dead. Stella stabbed her Sacred Sword into the ground and held up her bangs, revealing her silver eye.

“No, you’re not. He’s in here...so what’s this?” she wondered. She then took a look around her and said, “These guys are... Oh, that’s what’s going on. That’s pretty cruel...”

There was pity and lament in her eyes, an expression of sorrow that Ginias had never seen from her before.

“Ginias. You take care of that one. I have to fight this one.”

“Please leave it to me.”

Stella’s languid smile sent pain shooting through Ginias’s chest. After she turned to face her enemy once more, Decarabia flashed her an insane smile.

“A woman! Hey, you strong? You super strong? In that case, I’ll be the strongest if I beat you!”

Decarabia unleashed a vicious high kick as his fist remained in her grip, but Stella didn’t dodge. She took a direct hit to her temple, which made blood spurt from her brow.

“It’s okay... You don’t have to be the strongest. You’re more than strong enough. You protected me properly.”

“I don’t get what you’re spoutin’!”

Decarabia kicked and punched and kicked and punched, but Stella showed no sign whatsoever of trying to defend herself.

“You’ve done enough already,” she said, pulling out her Sacred Sword from the ground and thrusting it into Decarabia. “You can rest in peace. There’s nobody out here that you have to fight anymore.”

Decarabia stared at the Sacred Sword in his stomach curiously as Stella suddenly hugged him.

“Huh...? That’s weird. Did I wanna be the strongest...? Oh, right. My little sis. I’ve got a little sis. I wanted to get stronger. I wanted her to eat nice food, wear fancy clothes, and live a good...”

Stella held Decarabia in her arms until he finally perished. The expression on his face was far too peaceful for the last moments of a madman. And as Stella brought things to an end, Ginias exchanged blows with his father.

Stella is going through such a painful battle! I can’t afford to put on a shameful show!

Ginias kicked off the ground and put all his might into a downward slash. The old Galahad caught the blow and angled his blade to the ground. As a result, Ginias’s sword slipped down its edge. Using that opening, the old Galahad retaliated with a sharp sweeping slash. It was as if the attack was identifying the flaw in Ginias’s overly serious personality.

“How do I put this? Ginias, your sword is just way too honest. That’s why it’s easy to counter you.”

He’d had that pointed out to him many times already. Ginias pulled back his sword and blocked with his hilt.

“Aha! Pretty good. That’s right, you can use your hilt to block, huh?”

After being told that, Ginias had had his hair ruffled roughly. Having struck the solid lump of iron that was Ginias's hilt, the old Galahad leaped back with a groan.

"Aaah, no, no, no. Don't give chase just 'cause your opponent stepped back. They could be luring you in."

Ginias held his ground and recalled his Confession. Seizing that chance, the old Galahad threw a knife at him. It was a wily trick one wouldn't expect from the symbol of righteousness that was an Archangel. Still, this attack was one that reproached Ginias, telling him that a fight wasn't just about locking swords head-on. Ginias calmly repelled the knife and sent his Confession forth. The enormous green greatsword mercilessly drove down toward the old Galahad.

"Confession is strong and convenient, huh? But don't put all your trust in it. People like Zagan could dodge it easily."

His opponent was the preceding Head Archangel, which meant he'd most likely wielded a Confession of his own. In that case, he was already familiar with its weaknesses. And just as expected, the old Galahad evaded the Confession's strike with ease and thrust out his sword.

Ginias met the thrust with his blade. A loud clang echoed, and a broken swordpoint twirled in the air. Sacred Sword Raziel found itself firmly planted inside the old Galahad, having dug its way from his shoulder down to his heart.

"Father..."

"Aaah... How splendid. You've truly...grown strong..."

The father touched his son's cheek with a blood-soaked hand.

"Father! Your mind!"

"You fool. Who cries like that in the middle of a battlefield?"

Ginias gritted his teeth, stopping the tears from spilling from his eyes.

“That’s much better,” the old Galahad said. “The one before you now isn’t your father. He’s your enemy. You fulfilled your duty splendidly and defeated your enemy. Puff your chest out with pride.”

With that, his father smiled at him one last time. After laying him down on the ground, something soft suddenly wrapped around him.

“Didn’t I tell you before? You don’t have to act that well-behaved.”

It was Stella. Once he’d been enveloped by her large breasts, everything he’d tried to hold back slowly leaked out.

“That man...was my father...”

“Mhm.”

The moment Stella had shown up, Ginias’s head had cleared up to a surprising extent. And then she’d entrusted this fight to him. He’d managed because he’d wanted to live up to her expectations. And yet, when she acted so kind to him, he couldn’t hold back his tears anymore.

“I wanted...to speak with him more... I wanted him...to praise me more... Waaaaaah!”

“Mhm... You did good, Ginias.”

Ginias could do nothing but cling to Stella and cry as he dropped his Sacred Sword.



As the Angelic Knights’ battle neared its conclusion, Foll was fighting a battle of her own. The light of destruction built up once more inside the zombie dragon’s mouth.

“I won’t let you use that again!”

Furcas's Seraph Hunter erased the light before the zombie dragon could unleash it. Even if the power of a dragon's breath was immense, it could be stopped in its preparatory phases. The one who'd given them such information was the slit-eyed man running around beneath them.

"Please keep him from firing again! Boy, keep your distance and prepare for the next salvo!"

Foll spread out her wings and glided out in front of Raphael. She then took in a short breath as Raphael supported her back and held out his artificial arm. Immediately following that, two intense lights shot out. Foll's and Orobas's breaths mixed, surpassing mere incandescence and turning into plasma. However, when the light faded, the zombie dragon still stood there, appearing completely composed.

"He blocked it with sorcery!" Bato yelled.

Despite the fact that he'd been reduced to mere living dead, it was still possible for him to exercise his tremendous mana and wield sorcery. Not only that, but he could completely block the two instances of dragon breath. Dragons had tremendous resistance to all things magical, which was likely the reason Bato had Furcas stay back and focus entirely on obstructing the zombie dragon's breath.

"Ranged attacks won't work," Bato said.

"Then we must strike it up close!" Raphael shouted.

There weren't more than five people in the entire world who could surpass Raphael in close-quarter combat.

But Raphael won't be able to reach him on his own.

Even though it'd been reduced to a zombie, this was still the world's greatest dragon. Even an Archdemon couldn't defeat such a being alone.

“Close combat, you say? I’ll help.”

A familiar voice resounded in the sky. Foll looked up and spotted a girl with both her arms restrained by her clothes.

“Levia?”

She was one of Zagan’s subordinates. Foll had spoken with her several times on the occasions she’d gone to Archdemon Palace to play with Alshiera. She was a siren just like Selphy, so she’d left quite the impression on her.

“Levia. You’ve got three minutes.”

“I know.”

Two people fell from the sky. One was Levia, while the other was a man with leather straps covering his face. If Foll remembered right, this was Behemoth. He suddenly put a key in the lock at Levia’s chest and undid her restraints.

“Graaaaaah!”

Levia shrieked as her body transformed into something surreal. She turned into a dragon with the long body of a snake. Much like how Behemoth transformed into a grotesque beast at night, Levia transformed into this form during the day.

“That’s a sea dragon?” Foll muttered.

The sea dragon snapped at the zombie dragon’s throat, slamming into the ground at the same time. The zombie dragon tumbled without hesitation, using his claws and tail to put up fierce resistance. However, the sea dragon wrapped around his enormous body, constricting down on him. The sound of something creaking and breaking could be heard, but this zombie dragon could wield sorcery.

“This isn’t good! Get back!” Bato yelled.

However, the sea dragon kept her hold. It wasn't that she wasn't paying attention to him or anything. She simply seemed to have lost all control of herself.

"Levia! Time's up! Come back!"

These two lost their egos and turned into monsters when held by their curse. Levia's limit for fighting while keeping her sanity was apparently three minutes. Behemoth ran toward her, but he was one step too late. The zombie dragon let out a deep groan as lightning burst from his body.

"Gah!"

Smoke billowed from the sea dragon's entire body as she crumpled to the ground.

"Levia!"

Chains and straps wrapped around the sea dragon's entire body. Her body shrunk rapidly, and in a few seconds, she was back to the Levia that Foll knew all too well.

"Sorry... That was the best I could do."

"It's okay. You did good."

After giving Levia her thanks, Foll shot into the air right above the zombie dragon.

"Good grief... Don't be so reckless," Behemoth said to Levia.

"But...I wanted to help her..."

"Well, I get why."

Levia withdrew from the battle in Behemoth's arms. The sea dragon's self-sacrificing attack hadn't been in vain. The zombie dragon staggered to his feet and flapped his wings hard.

"My lady! He's trying to take to the skies!"

“I know!”

If long-range attacks were ineffective, then allowing the zombie dragon to just fly away would spell doom for them. Foll swooped down and tore apart his wings with the black dragon’s claws. She ripped holes big enough to reveal bone, rendering the wings incapable of catching the wind.

However, dragons didn’t actually use their wings to fly in the traditional sense. It was a different matter for a youngling, but a dragon’s wings were simply too small to keep them afloat. So, how did a dragon soar through the skies? They did so by creating a torrent of mana with their wings and riding the flow of mana rather than the wind. Having lost a wing, the zombie dragon couldn’t lift off the ground. Not only that, but it lost control, sending mana rampaging in the air and throwing it off balance. However...

“He jumped?!”

With his rotten limbs, which were firmly planted on the ground, the zombie dragon rode the chaotic mana and leaped into the air. If this giant were to land, he would bring about unimaginable destruction. Even avoiding a direct hit wouldn’t help one escape from the shock wave and billowing earth that would follow. Even a Sacred Sword or Seraph Hunter wouldn’t be enough to slow such momentum. As such, Foll swooped down into the zombie dragon’s direct path.

“Run! Foll!” Raphael roared.

“No,” Foll said with a firm shake of her head. “If I don’t stop him, everyone will die. Heaven’s Scale!”

She held up both her hands and immediately invoked sorcery. It wasn’t Snowfield, since Snowfield wouldn’t be able to bring such mass to a stop. This was Heaven’s Scale in its original form. It had no defined shape. It was simply a sturdy shield.

“Zagan’s sorcery?” Furcas said, his eyes opening wide.

“But that won’t be enough!” Raphael yelled.

The zombie dragon crashed into Heaven’s Scale. The shield absorbed his mana, strengthening in a flash, but cracks quickly formed over its surface. It was unable to withstand the impact. However, Foll knew this would happen.

“Heaven’s Scale Threefold!”

Three layers of the invincible shield overlapped. The first shattered, scattering its mana, which was then subsequently absorbed by the second and third layer, strengthening them past their initial limits.

“Can it hold...?” Raphael muttered.

The second shield shattered. Only the third was left, but this one was strengthened by the mana from the previous two. The massive dragon’s descent seemed to halt, but he wasn’t simply waiting to reach the ground either.

“Graaah!”

A massive claw, its bones exposed through rotting flesh, slammed into Heaven’s Scale. The shield had already been at its limits, so cracks now covered its entire surface.

“Foll! That’s enough! We’ve escaped!”

Raphael and the others had managed to retreat.

But I won’t make it in time.

Even if she somehow escaped the impact zone, the zombie dragon would chase her. Foll had no means of getting away anymore. As such...

“No! Meet it head-on, my lady!”

Yes. She had no choice but to meet her enemy head-on. A second blow shattered the last shield. By that time, Foll had clenched her fist

tightly and thrust it forth. This wasn't Black Dragon Marbas's claw. It was her own fist—one taught to her by Zagan.

Even as a young dragon, perhaps it would've been possible for her to get away by returning to her original form. Regardless, Foll chose to remain in her human one.

This is who I am now!

Her tiny fist collided with the zombie dragon's claw.

"Graargh!"

The impact blew the zombie dragon's massive body into the air once more. Foll flapped her wings and flew above it. She then linked her hands together and put all her strength into striking his back, sending him crashing down into the ground and obliterating the open plain. The dead had no sense of pain, however, so he quickly got back up and charged light in his mouth.

"I won't let you!"

Furcas's Seraph Hunter obstructed the breath attack once more.

"Boy! How many shots left?!"

"Two more!"

Furcas had already fired five times since he'd appeared. The Seraph Hunter possessed outrageous power, but it was limited by how many times it could be used. Thus, he couldn't afford to waste a single shot.

"GraaaaaAaaaooooOOooOOr!"

The zombie dragon unleashed an ear-shattering roar. It was the chant for some distorted sorcery.

"Ah..."

Foll could see Nimbus—the wide-area annihilation sorcery she had used to suppress an army of eight thousand—from her vantage point in the sky. It spread out in the skies above the battlefield, enshrouded by sinister mana.

“I won’t let you!”

Why had Foll chosen this battlefield? She had, of course, wanted to give Chastille the chance to go save Nephtheros, but that hadn’t been a reason to stick around.

This is where the most people could die.

And if people died, Zagan and Nephy would grieve. That was why she’d decided to come here.

“Please! Snowfield!”

Fragments of light danced about the battlefield. Unfortunately, they were far too fleeting to stop the rain of destruction entirely. Nevertheless, the sorcery developed for Foll’s sake spread far and wide to cover the entire area. And so, light poured down. The protective petals resolutely repelled the beams as they came, but it wasn’t enough to block them all.

“Dance! Gabriel!”

“Whirl! Sandalphon!”

A vortex of water and freezing air flew up from the ground. Crashing into each other, they created a block of ice that caught the light that had made it past Foll’s Snowfield. This was the work of the Juutilainen brothers. Foll didn’t know them, but they were Archangels who possessed Sacred Swords. They’d been the ones to grasp the flow of the battle and protect the other Angelic Knights.

The zombie dragon was now immobile, with his sorcery blocked. The first to take advantage of that fact was none other than Raphael.

“Let’s go! Orobas!”

Riding atop a flaming knight, he quickly closed in on the zombie dragon.

“Graaawr!”

Raphael was met by the zombie dragon’s remaining front claw as he held out his artificial arm.

“Burn to ash—Orobas!”

Raphael unleashed a dragon’s breath from his arm. Even if it was technically a long-range attack, he’d fired it at point-blank range, piercing the zombie dragon’s leg. With that, both the dragon’s forelegs were out of commission. Still, he paid no heed to the damage and snapped his massive jaws at the flaming knight. The Confession stabbed its sword into the gaping maw, but failed to stop the fangs from piercing it.

“Raphael!” Foll screamed.

By that time, Raphael was already up in the sky.

He used his Confession as a decoy and jumped?

Flames of purification wreathed around his Sacred Sword.

“Orobaaas!”

He rammed his Sacred Sword into the zombie dragon’s brow. After that, all light vanished from the dragon’s hollow eyes and he stopped moving completely. No blood flowed from the already dead corpse. His enormous body simply slumped over silently, stretching pitifully over the battlefield.

Foll had once believed this old man to be the target of her revenge and had tried to kill him. And here and now, he had definitely killed her father.

“Raphael...”

Nevertheless, she felt no anger. The old man who'd slain his precious friend silently shed tears of sorrow, after all. However...

"Not yet! There's still something to it!" Bato screamed.

He was right. This was Shere Khan's ace in the hole for dealing with Alshiera. Sheer size wasn't enough to hamper that girl. There had to be some other kind of trap. Taking a closer look, they noticed destructive light pouring from the zombie dragon's body.

"What...is this...?"

"It's self-destructing! Finish it, quick!" Bato shouted.

Tension ran high through the battlefield. Even if it was now nothing more than a corpse, it was still Wise Dragon Orobas's body. Despite being reduced to such a horrific state, he possessed mana beyond human comprehension. If that were to run wild and explode, just how much destruction would it cause? This wasn't just a matter of friend or foe anymore. Kianoides, and perhaps even far more, was about to be reduced to a gaping hole.

"Confession—Metatron!"

Raphael reformed his Confession and slashed at the corpse. It was just too large, though. What's more, the rampaging mana kept the blade from its mark.

"Tch! In that case, burn to ash—Orobas!"

The dragon's breath drilled a hole through the body, but didn't stop the rampaging mana.

"Gah!"

"Raphael!"

Raphael coughed up blood and fell to a knee. Dragon's blood ate at his body. He'd used far too much of his strength.

“Uoooh!” Furcas yelled as he ran over. The Seraph Hunter shaved away some of the rampaging mana, but that wasn’t enough to reach the zombie dragon’s body. “Just one more...”

If he used his last bullet now, it would just be a waste. These three weren’t the only ones on this battlefield, though.

“Angelic Confession—Raziel!”

“Angelic Confession—Zachariel! With a little Antipode Wave!”

It was Ginias and Stella. Having finished their own battles, they’d formed their Confessions and charged at the zombie dragon. Three Confessions attacked in unison from all sides, but even so, not a single blade reached its mark.

“Even this isn’t enough?!” Raphael yelled.

The three Confessions were definitely slowly carving their way through the wall of mana, but they wouldn’t make it in time. The rampaging mana would reach its critical point far before they could.

Foll spread her wings and took to the skies, swooping back down at the corpse.

“My lady, what are you—?”

“Heaven’s Scale Snowfield.”

Petals of pure light surrounded the zombie dragon. Foll then spread out her arms and quietly quivered her lips.

“Divine Echo.”

The world trembled without a sound. Black Dragon Marbas and Foll’s roar resonated within Snowfield. The shock wave shook everything within its range and crushed the expanding mana, condensing it.

But it’s still not enough!

No matter how much of the outer layer of mana she shaved away, the raging furnace inside the corpse wouldn't stop. Foll held both her arms forward and clenched her fists tightly as if to crush the very sky.

“Heaven's Phosphor Starfall.”

This wasn't Zagan's Heaven's Phosphor. It was one Foll had created herself, one only she could use. Zagan had taught her the fundamentals, but that was all. He'd freely given his own subordinates this power in the shape of Kimaris's Typhoon and Gremory's golem. He'd given them a blade capable of killing even an Archdemon, yet he'd never taught them the fundamentals. He'd never taught them Heaven's Scale, the point of origin. That was because it had been Zagan's starting point. He'd developed everything else by rearranging and adjusting Heaven's Scale. If anyone else had that knowledge, it would be possible to create Dragon Form, Eastern and Western Sky, or an even greater power without Zagan's instructions. This did, of course, mean it would also be possible to develop Heaven's Phosphor. Heaven's Scale was the very core of the Archdemon's secrets, after all.

And yet, Zagan granted it to me.

He'd taught her Heaven's Scale, not Heaven's Phosphor...and now she understood why. It had been necessary. He'd already given her the secrets to developing Heaven's Phosphor and even Heaven's Ring all on her own.

Foll's roar-amplified Snowfield turned black. She then brought it all down to bear upon the zombie dragon. Heaven's Phosphor was sorcery that devoured all mana in its surroundings to create an eternal flame. This space was dominated by Foll's roar and the zombie dragon's rampaging mana. There was an unlimited supply of nutrition, causing the fleeting black wisps in the air to flare up like meteors and crash down onto the zombie dragon. There was no real way to describe the spectacle other than comparing it to falling stars.

Countless holes tore their way through the corpse. It was already caving in, having lost its shape as a dragon entirely.

Still?! Why's it still going?!

And yet, the mana kept rampaging. The three Confessions continued hacking and slashing, but it still wasn't enough.

"It's no good... Everyone, run away..."

Foll had nothing left up her sleeve. And the instant that thought crossed her mind...

"I'm sorry for being late."

The sound of countless flapping wings heralded the advent of a swarm of bats.

"Alshiera?"

"Foll. You've got it all wrong. This power—the power of destruction—is used like this."

The vampire appeared in midair and placed her hand atop Foll's. Starfall's movements suddenly shifted. Even after piercing through the zombie dragon's corpse, the meteors didn't stop. Instead, they converged in one place, right over the heart at the core of all the mana. But if she did that...

"No... Stop. Alshiera. I can't...suppress this...!"

The converging balls of Heaven's Phosphor began devouring each other, and each and every one began swelling. Foll knew very well that it would eventually grow to a size that would bring about greater devastation than the zombie dragon's self-destruction. And yet, Alshiera didn't stop.

"It's fine like this. The converging Heaven's Phosphors will become so dense that they can no longer withstand the pressure, then burst, much like a dying star."

Foll was scared. She knew now that this power shouldn't exist. Even Zagan hadn't reached this stage...or perhaps he had, and simply hadn't given it shape yet. Regardless, this power was capable of destroying absolutely everything in the truest sense.

"Please don't be scared. This is the god-killing power I used in my final battle. I'm sure you'll be able to wield it. I'm sure you'll be able to use it far better than I ever did."

Foll looked at Alshiera's face and noticed that her expression wasn't one of a terrifying destroyer. The vampire only looked back at her with the affection and trust of a friend, which brought Foll's trembling to a stop.

I see. Alshiera is entrusting it to me...

The girl didn't have much time left. What kind of friend would Foll have been if she couldn't respond to her wish under such circumstances? With that, Foll began controlling Starfall by her own will.

"Everyone, take cover! Get away from here as fast as you can!"

Perhaps Raphael could tell what was going to happen thanks to Orobas's blood. He practically screamed his orders to the others. Everyone complied and promptly ran away from the zombie dragon. After confirming that, Foll looked at Alshiera, then gave her a slight nod.

"Heaven's Phosphor Starburst," the two said in concert.

A black light erupted, but there was no ferocity to it like Foll had feared. The color of nothingness, the void simply stretched out to the heavens and quietly vanished, leaving absolutely nothing in its wake. The enormous zombie dragon, the land covered in greenery, and even the atmosphere had all disappeared.

"Gah!"

Then the wind blew. It felt like a blast against Foll's back.

No, this is actually the wind being sucked into the center of the explosion.

As the one who had invoked Starburst, she understood. The entire world had vanished there. That was why everything in its surroundings was trying to fill the gap.

This is the power Alshiera originally possessed...

When Alshiera had fought back in Atlastia, she'd used a power similar to Heaven's Phosphor, or perhaps one even greater than it. She hadn't even had her Seraph Hunters on hand, since she'd lost that power precisely because she'd tried to protect Foll.

Foll remained in a daze at the tremendous spectacle before her as Alshiera wrapped her arms around the little dragon's shoulders.

"Foll... Let's see him off."

"Huh...?"

A single light remained at the center of the blast site. It was neither human nor dragon, nothing more than a small glowing sphere. Even its contour was vague, so fleeting that it seemed the wind could blow it away. And yet, Foll could tell exactly what it was.

"Fa...ther..."

His body had been annihilated. Not even his mana was supposed to be left. But what remained here was the final fragment of the great dragon, a tiny ball weighing a scant twenty-one grams. Supported by Alshiera, Foll gently descended toward it and touched the light.

"So warm..."

She could feel a gentle warmth pour into her. Foll's father loved her just like Zagan and Nephy did. Being able to confirm that once more, the girl managed to answer him with a smile.

“I really loved you too. Bye-bye, father.”

The light flickered against her chest as if smiling, then faded away.

“Goodbye,” Alshiera said, still holding Foll in her arms as she saw off the light with a fleeting smile.

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As the battles between departed fathers and their children came to an end, another fight involving a father and child who should never have met raged on.

“Amii, Ose, Caym, Vine, Ronove.”

The silver-eyed boy swung his sword as he called the Archdemons’ names. There shouldn’t have been a big difference in swordsmanship between them, yet the five Archdemons were being overwhelmed.

Or not... I suppose this is his original strength.

Even if they had their memories from life, puppets weren’t capable of drawing all the power they’d once had. However, those known as heroes were troublesome types who calmly wielded more power than they actually possessed. The trigger for this was in the heart. To put it plainly, the last key for a hero, the very thing that made them a true paragon was...guts.

Five Archdemons were understandably enough to keep the silver-eyed boy occupied, so the sixth rushed in with a sword at the ready.

“Your movements are far too obvious, fool.”

Zagan planted his fist into the side of the Archdemon’s face, sending their Hex Blade flying. The silver-eyed boy caught it with his free hand.

“I’ll be borrowing this, Stolas.”

Now armed with a second Hex Blade, the silver-eyed boy struck his own sword, which had been locked in place by the other

Archdemons. This blew them away, opening a path. His style really did resemble Kuroka's.

"Western Sky, Eastern Sky."

With his enormous gauntlets made of Heaven's Scale at the ready, Zagan ran through the opening. He crushed the Archdemons charging at him with Eastern Sky's palm, then warded off the next with Western Sky. It didn't matter whether they tried to block with their Hex Blades or not. The Archdemons struck by Heaven's Scale ceased moving.

"Foras, Berith...and Aym."

The silver-eyed boy bisected the third Archdemon leaping at Zagan's back.

"Bune, Ipos."

Upon defeating one, two more attacked the silver-eyed boy. Their sword strikes were sharp and heavy. It took the silver-eyed boy everything he had just to stop them with both his Hex Blades. However, that also exposed their backs to Zagan.

"Out of the way."

Zagan swung Eastern Sky, slamming the two defenseless Archdemons into the wall. Since they possessed the same silver eyes, the two of them could read each other's movements with ease. They'd just met, but this father and child duo understood each other like comrades who'd fought by each other's sides for a lifetime. Now, there was only one left.

"Marchosias!"

The silver-eyed boy charged straight at Marchosias. His opponent was Eldest—the man who'd reigned atop all Archdemons for a thousand years straight. He warded off the silver-eyed boy's two swords and counterattacked with swordsmanship to match.

But with the two of us together...

Zagan closed in with Eastern and Western Sky, along with both his own fists. And yet, somehow, Marchosias warded off Eastern Sky and turned it back on Zagan. Luckily, Zagan blocked it with Western Sky in time.

“You think I’ll keep getting caught by that?!”

Marchosias didn’t have enough hands to handle more than Eastern Sky and the silver-eyed boy’s two swords at once. Zagan’s fists caught the old man on the jaw, then the torso, and then the face. He rained down blows on him like bullets.

“This is no time to be looking elsewhere.”

With Marchosias’s focus forced onto Zagan’s fists, the silver-eyed boy’s two swords closed in, and Marchosias was no longer able to stop them.

“Gah...! Hgggh!”

Zagan didn’t care if he was facing the greatest Archdemon to ever live. Nobody in history could possibly fight against two Silver-Eyed Kings at once. The silver-eyed boy pushed back Marchosias’s Hex Blade, finally creating a definitive opening. Finding his torso wide-open, Zagan drove in Eastern Sky.

I’ll end this here and now!

Zagan was about to take chase, but suddenly, the silver-eyed boy’s sword barred his path.

“No, keep moving! This isn’t your battlefield!”

“What are you...?”

Zagan turned around as the other Archdemons rose back to their feet. Some of them were actually down for the count, but more than

half remained intact. Marchosias had been brought to a knee, but he was already upright again with his Hex Blade firmly in hand.

Even with two Silver-Eyed Kings present, defeating all of them would take more than a single minute. As such, the silver-eyed boy planned to take them all on alone.

“You can tell, can’t you? We were granted the same body, powers, and memories that we originally possessed, but that’s all. We’re...different from the originals.”

Zagan couldn’t respond. It was a question based on the notion of the soul. In the end, if one created a person with the exact same body and memories of the dead, would they truly be the same person?

If a person’s thoughts were composed of their memories, then the answer was yes. If one replaced the original and had them live the same life, they could surely continue their life without anyone around them feeling something out of place. Not even the original would’ve been able to tell the difference.

However, that was only if the person in question didn’t know. Once they knew the truth, the fabricated duplicate would resent the original. They wouldn’t be able to accept the truth of their existence.

Consider a case where the original was still alive. Even if the two shared the same memories, it didn’t mean they shared the same thoughts. And so, neither could recognize the other as themselves.

At the very least, the silver-eyed boy didn’t recognize himself as himself. Perhaps this was the reason Shere Khan had slaughtered blameless civilians despite claiming he wanted to save the world. If the originals still lived, the Nephilims would become a problem.

So he already understands...

In all likelihood, he'd felt something out of place during the battle and had ended up realizing it. Both he and Zagan could see the entire flow of mana, after all.

"Things are fine now," the silver-eyed boy continued as he crossed swords with Marchosias. "But as time passes, we'll slowly deviate from our original state. Since we possess false memories, we can't amount to anything. So...this is enough."

Zagan didn't have the knowledge necessary to properly respond to that theory. So instead of answering, he pulled his pipe out from his breast pocket. He then brazenly lit it in the middle of the battlefield and inhaled deeply as if etching the taste of burning tobacco into his mind.

"This is...the first time I've felt so assured when leaving my back to someone in battle."

Having someone understand how he would move, and being able to understand in kind was truly euphoric. It wasn't something acquired through constant fisticuffs like with Barbatos. They hadn't spoken, and they shouldn't have known anything about each other. And yet, they just knew instinctively. It had been so pleasant it could be called serene. Just maybe, that was what it meant to be father and child. As such, Zagan was able to make a clear declaration.

"No matter who you actually are, I can accept you as a friend."

The silver-eyed boy looked shocked, and then he gave Zagan an innocent smile befitting his appearance.

"A friend... Yeah. That sounds nice. Until we meet again, my friend... And one more thing. If possible, please take care of her. My original... No, I ended up pushing all my hardships on her."

Zagan wasn't so ignorant as to not know whom he was talking about.

It's hard to accept, though...

Still, there had been plenty of clues hinting at that fact already. He probably only hadn't realized sooner because he hadn't wanted to accept it.

"Hmph..." Zagan sighed with a puff of smoke. "Don't worry about such frivolous things."

"Thank you, my friend."

With that, Zagan turned his back to him.

"Archdemon Zagan! This way!" Dexia yelled from a hallway. She'd been staring at the battle with bated breath this entire time. "Hurry! It's starting to collapse!"

The battle between Zagan and the thirteen first-generation Archdemons—as well as the battle between the silver-eyed boy and the remaining Archdemons—had caused the tunnels to cave in. Nevertheless, Zagan didn't pick up the pace. He simply walked as if he was reluctant to part with the man who could very well have been his father, or perhaps as if he wanted to see the last moments of the first man he'd called his friend.

Even if you are a fake, the hand you placed on my hand was warm.

And as Zagan stepped into the tunnel where Dexia waited for him, the path behind him caved in completely.

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"Master Shere Khan..." Dexia called his name with trembling lips.

At the end of the gloomy tunnel, Shere Khan waited for them in an open space that had likely once been rich with minerals. He was seated with a stone pillar behind him, which was apparently some kind of device for sorcery, where the figure of a petrified Gremory could be seen.

"Should I say 'long time no see'? You're Shere Khan, right?"

“Indeed. I am...Shere Khan,” he replied, slowly turning toward Zagan as his wheelchair creaked. He then shifted his gaze. “You may...return to me, Dexia.”

“Eep...”

His mana-charged words blew toward Dexia. A crack echoed in the air as the mana flew back at him. Zagan had repelled it with his fist before it reached her.

“Don’t go trying that repulsive crap. She came here of her own free will to stand against you. I won’t allow you to trample over those feelings.”

Much like the other Nephilims, Dexia had obviously been implanted with the means to force her obedience. Zagan had known this from the very first moment he saw her. That was why the first thing he’d done after declaring he would protect her was to prepare a way to defend her from such domination.

“It won’t stop him if you’re already being manipulated, but it’ll block any new order he tries to convey.”

That was what he’d told her. It would be too difficult to intervene with existing orders, so it was impossible to devour sorcery to get rid of the order forcing the Nephilims to fight as well. Even Alshiera hadn’t been able to do anything until an uninterrupted opportunity had presented itself. Still, being able to prevent any new orders was more than enough. The equipment he’d given Dexia was armed with a barrier to reject Shere Khan’s mana, even.

“How...unfortunate,” Shere Khan said with a sigh. “She’s actually...my precious...subordinate.”

“Then...” Dexia started with a murmur. “Then why did you do that to Aristella?! Aristella said that she didn’t want to die! She cried because she hated the idea of being used like a tool! So why?!”

“I can just...remake her later. Relax,” Shere Khan answered as if that fact were obvious.

As always, the difference in common sense between Archdemons and others was far too large.

“Master Shere Khan, don’t you know?” Dexia said, sinking weakly to the ground. “There’s no replacement for the current us... Even if you make the same thing again, you won’t save Aristella and me.”

The same could be said for those who’d already been remade. The Silver-Eyed King also didn’t accept his current self as his old self. So really, this wasn’t salvation for them either.

“Well done. Your voice came out splendidly,” Zagan said, plopping his hand onto Dexia’s head. He then stepped in front of her and took a provocative puff of his pipe, and for some reason, Shere Khan narrowed his eyes nostalgically. Zagan couldn’t read the meaning behind that reaction as he quietly addressed the Archdemon.

“You’re twisted.”

“I never thought...I’d hear that...from an Archdemon,” Shere Khan said with a shrug.

“You’re twisted...but you’re right,” Zagan added. Dexia immediately doubted her ears, but he ignored her and continued. “I don’t know what you lost. But if it was someone near and dear to your heart, and there was a way to maybe bring them back, then it has to be attempted. That’s what it means to be human. In fact, I’m certain I would do the same.”

If he ever lost Nephy or Foll, Zagan might mimic Shere Khan’s actions. No, he definitely would. He was convinced of that, so even if the man before him was twisted beyond all hope, he couldn’t deny his logic. That was why Zagan continued to speak to him in a regretful tone.

“If we hadn’t met like this, I would’ve liked to talk about correcting your methods over a drink or something.”

He would’ve gone over the problems with the current method and helped search for an improved alternative. He could’ve even improved the quality of the Nephilims. By establishing such a method, would he have been filled with a sense of accomplishment? Or maybe a sense of hollowness?

Setting aside whether he would try to actualize it or not, there weren’t many theories that tickled Zagan’s inquisitiveness as a sorcerer more than this. He was sure he’d have lost himself in such research.

“I see...” Shere Khan said with a look of shock on his face. “Kimaris told me...that you...understand me.”

“That’s right. Today’s been a day of meeting people who could’ve been my friends,” he mused. Though, it was also a day filled with painful partings. “You’re right, but unfortunately, I’ll have to trample over your dreams and live up to my name as a king.”

That was why he couldn’t possibly leave Shere Khan at large.

“The suffering of my subordinates must be repaid in kind. It truly is unfortunate.”

“I also...find it...regrettable. You could...have been...my foremost friend.”

With those words as a signal, figures began appearing from the surrounding shadows.

“The power you used...to get past...the first Archdemons...was splendid. The ones here...are the Archdemons...from the second generation...onward...”

There were more than fifty of them around Zagan and Dexia.

“A-Archdemon Zagan...” Dexia said, trembling at Zagan’s side.

“Do not...fear. You will be...remade too...along with...my friend...”

Zagan cocked his head upon hearing them, as if he didn't understand.

“What are you saying? I have no intention of becoming a Nephilim or anything of the like.”

“What...?”

The sound of a flame puffing into existence resounded through the room.

“Huh...?”

It fell from the ceiling. One puff, then another. The sounds kept coming down one after another.

“I truly could do with a watch. That'll do for Nephyl's birthday present.”

“What...are you...talking about...?”

“Time's up,” Zagan said with a shrug. “I told my subordinates I would end this by sunset. I can't see the sun from here, but I suppose it's about that time now.”

One puff, and then another. The sounds of fires forming and falling from the ceiling kept multiplying endlessly.

“Heaven's Phosphor Showers of the Wailing Dead.”

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“The sun's setting,” Foll said, looking up at the reddening sky all the while.

“Angelic Knights, return to formation!”

“It's useless, we can't fight anymore!”

“Are you suggesting we should simply abandon the town?!”

The Angelic Knights were shouting. They'd won the battle against the encircled Nephilims. The zombie dragon had been defeated. Kuroka and Shax had managed to strike down Andrealphus. Everyone had exhausted their strength to achieve these spectacular results.

Kuroka was badly wounded. The three Archangels had resorted to the continuous use of their Confessions and couldn't fight anymore. Foll had used all the ammunition in his Seraph Hunter. Foll no longer even possessed the strength to use sorcery to float.

Nevertheless, there were seven thousand remaining enemy soldiers—though Kimaris had defeated a sizable chunk of them already. Even Zagan had no hope of surpassing the eight-hundred-year-old Shere Khan on the field of war. And yet, the only ones panicking were the novice Angelic Knights and Ginias.

"All Angelic Knights," Raphael said, somehow rising to his feet to relay orders. "Gather the injured and begin withdrawing. Aid any enemies that are still right of mind. If there are any, that is."

"Lord Hyurandell! Why are you acting so calm?! The enemy army will be here shortly!"

Raphael returned Ginias's gaze as if something had slipped his mind.

"I see... The message was for the Unification Faction, so it didn't reach you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Erk," Stella groaned. "What the heck is that? Zagan's sorcery?"

"Huh?"

Multiple enormous magic circles coated the sky above them.

"Have you ever considered that there are far too few sorcerers here for a battle my liege gladly accepted?" Raphael asked.

“I-Is it not because they were forced to stay back, defend the town, and treat the wounded...?” Ginias answered.

There was that, but Zagan still had thirty other subordinates. Among them were those like Shax and Levia, who rivaled the former Archdemon candidates. If they had participated, this battle would’ve been far easier from the start. So, in that case, what exactly had they been doing this whole time?

“Time’s up. This battle is already over,” Raphael said as he gazed at the magic circles above them.

As if in response, something came dripping down.

“Rain...?”

Yes. The only way to describe the sight was rain. However, it was a sinister black rain. It heavily resembled Foll’s Starfall. And yet, unlike that, it poured down with the density of rain. They’d been unleashed from two thousand meters in the sky like falling arrows.

“Heaven’s Phosphor Showers of the Wailing Dead. The power Zagan created to annihilate everything,” Foll muttered.

Everything that had a physical form, no, even everything that didn’t, such as mana and aura, was thoroughly and utterly destroyed. Those touched by the black rain shrieked like crying devils. However, even though the rain poured over the entire battlefield, not a single drop so much as grazed the Angelic Knights or Zagan’s subordinates.

Zagan had said that he would bring this battle to an end. And coming from an Archdemon, those words implied the utter annihilation of all enemy forces. In other words, he planned to destroy every last person complicit with Shere Khan, leaving no exceptions whatsoever.

“That’s why our boss wanted all of Shere Khan’s forces dragged out into the open,” Behemoth said, holding Levia in his arms.

The goal in this battle was to get rid of all the Nephilims Shere Khan had created. And yet, Zagan wasn't present for that. The Showers of the Wailing Dead was a collaboration of the thirty or so sorcerers left behind in Archdemon Palace. Its activation required Zagan's consent, but he'd already granted Heaven's Phosphor to all of his subordinates.

If possible, I wanted to bring the fighting to a stop before this had to be used.

That was why Foll had gone as far as unleashing Marbas to end the battle. Having said that, it had been far too impromptu a solution when faced with an Archdemon.

"Is this the work of the Silver-Eyed King...?" Alshiera muttered in bewilderment, looking up at the powerful sorcery falling from the sky.

"Alshiera, do you find it...unacceptable?" Foll asked.

She didn't answer.

"I think this is another answer," Foll said as she nested up against her friend. "To show no compassion to your enemies, but to refuse to abandon a single subordinate. To protect them absolutely. This is proof of that. That's why he granted them this power."

"He who binds people together... So this is another way to live, eh?"

"I'm sure it is."

Before long, the slaughter concluded. Nothing was left in its wake. It was as if the ten thousand soldiers hadn't existed to begin with.

"Do you not want to celebrate his birthday anymore?" Foll asked, squeezing Alshiera's hand.

"That would be unthinkable..."

“Then you need to get ready. It’s time for Zagan to learn who you really are.”

“Yes, though that’s quite the distressing thought...” Alshiera replied with a troubled smile.

The red sky mixed with the darkness of the night, dying the world a faint purple.



The constant downpour of Heaven’s Phosphor penetrated the mines and burned everything in the underground room. The Shower of the Wailing Dead that Zagan’s subordinates had put together was only active in the skies above Kianoides. The one happening here was what Zagan had spent the whole day preparing during his battle against the first-generation Archdemons.

Taking on thirteen Archdemons while only using Heaven’s Scale twice had been quite the handicap.

Well, it’s all over now.

Every last one of the terrifying Archdemons crumbled without being able to resist whatsoever.

“No matter how you roll the dice, this battle has been in your arena. No sorcerer would be foolish enough to brave the risk of facing you under such conditions.”

As a king charged with the lives of his subordinates, charging headlong into a battle with no prospect for victory would be the height of folly. In that case, he simply had to refuse the challenge from the beginning. In other words, Zagan hadn’t overturned the flow of the game atop the board. He’d knocked over the entire board and punched his opponent instead.

Still, I couldn’t let Shere Khan’s pawns slip by.

That was why he had to appear in person.

“Well, I didn’t think you’d revive *all* the Archdemons throughout history.”

Zagan had predicted clashing against the first-generation Archdemons, but he hadn’t thought Shere Khan would go this far. If he’d taken them all on fair and square, he would probably have died. This was the reason he so brazenly puffed at his pipe in the middle of enemy territory.

“What a...terrifying man... Meaning...I was the one...who got dragged...into your arena...?”

Upon hearing that, Zagan held his palm faceup, gesturing Shere Khan to move, before saying, “Stand. A man of your caliber must have something prepared for this eventuality.”

The Showers of the Wailing Dead had burned absolutely everything it had targeted without leaving a trace, but not a single drop had even so much as touched Shere Khan. Zagan hadn’t avoided hitting him, obviously. Shere Khan was an Archdemon.

“So you’ve...even seen...that far ahead...?”

Countless threads crawled out of Shere Khan’s body. They had caught the black raindrops for him. And whenever they burned out, he’d created more.

He must have put together this countermeasure using the Heaven’s Phosphor I once planted on Bifrons.

He did, of course, have a limit to how many threads he could create. If Zagan simply allowed the rain to continue pouring, he would eventually exhaust Shere Khan’s strength. He didn’t dare grant the man who might’ve been his friend such a pitiful death, though.

“Just one part...” Shere Khan said, the mana threads piercing his body and crawling under his skin. “After my body was destroyed by Marchosias...I could only move one part.”

The threads crawled through his entire body and fused with his nerves and muscle fibers. His withered limbs were suddenly filled with vitality as if rejuvenated, bulging with muscles as hard as steel. This was puppetry. This Archdemon, who'd manipulated thousands of Nephilims at once, could even use puppetry to manipulate his own body.

Shere Khan slowly rose from his wheelchair. His hood lowered, revealing the face of a man with such resolve that one wouldn't believe he was on death's door.

"But even though I only have that single part of me left, I am still the Tiger King."

"Your revenge will be fulfilled now," Zagan said to Dexia, keeping his gaze fixed on his enemy. "Don't miss a single moment."

"Understood..."

"How regrettable. It seems my little smoke break is over," Zagan said, holding out his pipe upside down. He then tapped the pipe, sending burned-up tobacco falling from the bowl.

In that instant, both Archdemons kicked off the ground simultaneously.

"Hmph!"

The Tiger King swung his right arm. He had villainous claws sprouting from his fingers.

A variation of Hex Nails?

Zagan could sense the curse dwelling within them, one that would devour his body with a single touch.

"It's useless!" Zagan yelled.

"Huh?!"

Zagan smashed the nails with a left punch, crushing the log-like arm behind them into a stump. Disregarding his broken right arm, Shere Khan swung with his left. However, Zagan still had his beloved kiseru pipe in his right hand. And he'd never once considered tossing his bride's present aside. Thus, he took another step in and used his elbow to shatter Shere Khan's wrist. He'd stepped too far, though, and was now in range of the Tiger King's fangs.

Looks like I can't dodge.

Shortly after confirming that fact, Zagan held out his right arm, his pipe still in his hand. Shere Khan's fangs clamped down on his forearm, tearing through meat and piercing bone, but that was all.

"Gah...!"

Zagan strained his muscles with all his might, affixing Shere Khan's fangs in place. With both his arms broken and his fangs stuck, Shere Khan could no longer move.

"It's over."

Zagan slammed his left fist into Shere Khan's defenseless chest. He broke the Archdemon's sternum, pierced his trachea, shattered his spine, and plunged his fist straight through him and out Shere Khan's back.

"Spln...did..."

With those last words, Shere Khan coughed up a fountain of blood. As Shere Khan slowly fell to his knees, Zagan swung his right arm to the side, freeing it from the Tiger King's fangs.

Even his fangs were cursed? How terrifying.

Despite that thought crossing his mind, there were no wounds left by the time Zagan finished checking on his pipe. He'd treated the bite with Prayer's Shell.

Now prostrated on the ground, Shere Khan muttered something with a nostalgic look in his eyes, saying, “An easy victory...with a kiseru pipe in one hand... You were...always like that...”

“Hm...? What are you talking about?”

Shere Khan didn't answer. The Tiger King simply had a tranquil expression on his face like a little boy. Zagan then suddenly remembered something as he gazed down at the dying man.

“Oh, right. I almost forgot to tell you the primary reason I had to defeat you.”

“What...is it...?”

If Alshiera or the like were here, they'd likely have stopped him, saying Shere Khan was already on his way to the afterlife. Unfortunately, the only one present to witness the battle was Dexia.

Zagan thrust his finger directly at Shere Khan, then declared, “Do you have any idea how many damn times my dates with Nephy went to waste because of you? *That* is the reason you had to die.”

Shere Khan was dumbfounded by the far too cruel declaration.

“Da...tes...?”

“You don't know about them? It's an excursion where you gallivant about with your loved one. It appeases the heart. It truly is time well spent.”

“Hah... Hah hah...” Shere Khan laughed vacantly. “To think...I'd be struck down...because of that... Aaah... I see... It's because I couldn't understand this...because I couldn't predict *why* you fought...that I lost...”

Who in the world could've predicted that an Archdemon would come to kill him because he wanted to go on a date? Pretty much the only person out there was Barbatos.

“Archdemon Zagan... I could never...have beaten you...”

With that, the long battle against Archdemon Shere Khan came to an end.



“[Thou art the one who governs the sun, the one who looses the arrow to avert calamity.]”

Straddling a broom, Nephy sang her song of celestial mysticism and flew toward Chastille.

“Nephy?”

She held out her hand, and Chastille immediately read her intention and grasped it, twisted her body in the air, and slung herself onto the back of the broom. “Nephteros” noticed the celestial mysticism in action, of course, but she remained there with a bewildered look and didn’t sing a song of her own.

“Hee hee... Apollon Diatrissi? What are you planning?”

With Nephy singing on her own, if “Nephteros” sang, she could hijack her celestial mysticism easily, and yet, she chose not to. No, she *couldn’t* sing. Instead, she wove a spear of light with her crumbling right arm.

“How foolish. How dreadful. You’d do better to vanish completely.”

“Nephy! It’s coming!”

The spear came flying in. Nephy skillfully manipulated her broom to evade “Nephteros’s” direct line of fire, but the spear simply changed directions and chased after her.

I can’t dodge it! In that case...

Nephy signaled Chastille with her eyes, then shot off high into the skies.

“[Thine harp can even charm the gods. Thine words sing of the future.]”

Golden lights spread out around Nephy as she rose toward the sun. As if converting the far too strong sunlight into an inferno, the radiance shaved away at the spear of light.

“Nephteroooooos!”

And then, slipping by the spear, Chastille leaped from the broom.

“How wretched!”

“Nephteros” tried to create another spear in her left hand, but that had started crumbling as well. This time, the destruction didn’t end at her wrist. It went all the way up to her bicep.

“Please—Azrael!”

Chastille twisted her body, swinging her Sacred Sword down in a circular arc. She didn’t realize that her own blood was running down its blade from the wounds she’d suffered thus far. And due to that, the light of purification that poured from her Sacred Sword took on the shape of a knight.

“This is...”

Clad in pure white armor, the knight wielded a slender sword and a shield. Angelic Confession. Chastille had learned swordsmanship from the legendary Angelic Knight Oberon and had fought her way out of multiple deadly situations at Archdemon Zagan’s side. She wasn’t self-conscious of it, but her power had long reached the point of Confession. However, it was actually “Nephteros” who looked utterly bewildered by the sight.

“Sister...”

Had Chastille unconsciously intended this? Or had the Confession acted of its own will? The white knight gently wrapped its arms around “Nephteros,” attempting to soothe it.

“Come back to us, Nephteros!” Chastille screamed, landing on the knight’s back. She then held out her empty left hand and placed it on her friend’s cheek.

“[Crowned by laurels, accompanied by deer and wolves, the one who circles around to night. With the moon as a sister, thine bow is both plague and medicine. Both poison and solace. Pour down upon all creation, and scatter blessings and ruin over the land.]”

While Chastille struggled to reach “Nephteros,” Nephy let go of her broom and started free-falling through the air. The radiance in the sky had likely thrown off “Nephteros’s” aim. Nephy passed right by the spear as it shot off and vanished into the distance. She then stretched out her arm, and her broom returned to her. A moment later, she stood herself up on the broom while continuing her descent. She needed both her hands for this. And so, Nephy held her left arm straight out and pulled her right hand back to her jaw.

“[This is both destruction and salve]—Apollon Diatrissi.”

A bow and arrow of celestial mysticism took shape in her hands, then rained light down onto “Nephteros.”

“Tee hee hee... What are you playing at?”

There was no destructive power behind the arrows. That was because Nephy had come here to save Nephteros. By exorcizing evil, the healing arrows of purification stopped the decay happening to “Nephteros’s” body by piercing her.

But it’s not fixing her!

The best the arrows could do was stop her body from crumbling more.

Nephy landed atop of Chastille’s Confession, then held out her right hand.

“Give Nephteros back to us...!”

Nephteros looked up at Nephy's hand with eyes that Nephy definitely recognized. She reached out with her stump of an arm, which was missing everything from the elbow down, and both Nephy and Chastille grasped it firmly.

"How filthy! Don't touch meee!"

"Nephteros" began struggling once more, shaking off the white Confession. Nevertheless, these two weren't going to give up so easily.

"I'll never—"

"—let go!"

No matter how much she struggled, how much she hit them, no matter how much mana she slammed into them, "Nephteros" couldn't break their hold on her.

I'll never let you die!

The healing light of mysticism poured down from Nephy. The more "Nephteros" struggled, the more her body destroyed itself, which Nephy was desperately trying to hold back.

"Unhand me at once! Unhand— Please! Please just let me go!" tears formed in Nephteros's eyes as she wailed. "I can't stand it anymore! Everyone's going to die! Even though...he said...he loved me... Why are you trying to save me?!"

"Because you're my sister!"

"Because you're my friend!"

Nephy and Chastille's answers overlapped splendidly.

"Aaah... Why did you come all the way out here...?"

Whom were those words directed at? Nephteros's eyes didn't reflect Nephy or Chastille's figures.



A girl cradled her knees as total darkness surrounded her. She couldn't remember her name. Who was she? Why was she cowering in a place like this? The sound of a drop of water splashing echoed through the air, allowing her to realize that she was surrounded by water. Was it a lake? It seemed fairly wide and deep at least.

The sound of a splashing droplet echoed once more. It was getting on her nerves. She wanted it to be quiet. She didn't know why, but she was extremely drowsy.

“—”

The sound of water grew more incessant. It almost sounded like a voice. It wouldn't bother anyone if she just went to sleep, would it?

Oh, right. I feel like I've always been bothering others.

Hadn't things gone past the point of no return due to her heinous deeds?

No. Please. I don't want to remember.

She buried her face between her knees and blocked the sound of water from her ears.

“—teros—Neph—os—Lady Nephteros!”

She wanted it all to just stop. She didn't want her name to be called. Getting involved with anyone would just cause them trouble and lead to a terrible outcome. Her living would just bring misfortune upon others. What purpose was there in a life like that?

“I won't give up! I'll definitely get you back!”

The sound of the water grew louder. Why wouldn't it quiet down? Why was that gentle voice drawing nearer? She didn't want to see that kind of thing anymore.

What kind of thing...?

She didn't want to give it more thought. She knew that, but felt like it was something important that she shouldn't have forgotten.

"Give Nephtheros back to us...!"

She could hear a different splashing now. Give what back? If they wanted it back, they could just take it.

"I'll never—"

"—let go!"

More splashes joined the cacophony.

No. Stop. I don't want to hear this. I don't want to remember. I don't want to understand. I'm sure I loved them. I really, truly loved them. I was happy by their side. I was saved when she cried for me. He told me he loved me. They all accepted me. And yet, everything went to waste. Why? Why are you still trying to save someone like me?

"Because you're my sister!"

"Because you're my friend!"

Aaah, it's really getting noisy.

It was getting so noisy that she tried opening her eyes a little. However, she regretted doing so immediately. Her body was sticky, filthy, and crumbling to pieces. She couldn't even tell which parts were her own anymore.

It's just like back then...

After being abandoned by her master and absorbed by the dreadful sludge, all she had been able to do was wait to vanish. Thinking back on it, she'd been tormented by nightmares ever since. The great Archdemon Zagan had saved her from the sludge and obliterated it, but he hadn't gotten rid of the part corroding her spirit. She didn't even know whether she was sludge or a person right now.

Suddenly, a man's hand stretched out to her filthy figure as he said, "I'll say it as many times as you want. I won't give up on you. I love you. I won't let you go without hearing an answer!"

He was covered in wounds and smeared in blood, but he kept speaking. Why was this person so desperate?

"It means you're loved. How enviable."

Before she knew it, there was an unfamiliar girl by her side. Who was this? She had no recollection of anyone who looked like her.

"Oh, don't worry about me. This is akin to a dream, right? So isn't it fine to have one or two fairies around?"

I don't know what she's saying, but I suppose she's not here to hurt me.

"Tee hee hee... Not just me. This man here desperately reaching out to you, those calling you from the outside all this time, none of them will hurt you."

So why does it hurt so much?

"Hmm... It's probably because you've been through so many painful experiences. But that's exactly why you deserve happiness."

And how do I even accomplish that?

"Oh, that? It's not all that hard. He's reaching for you, so all you need to do is grasp his hand firmly. Simple, right?"

For some reason, her cheeks felt sopping wet. Why was that? She tried wiping her face and found crimson stains on her hands.

Oh, I remember now... This is blood. Richard's blood... The blood of the man who died because he said he loved someone like me. That's why I just have to disappear.

"Nephteros!"

That was the first time he'd ever said her name in such a strong tone, which made her jolt and raise her face.

"I've returned for you. Didn't I promise? I won't let you be alone ever again."

His voice was so gentle that she spontaneously stretched her hand out toward him, but the arm she held out had no shape. Nevertheless, he grabbed her by that inhuman arm and pulled her whole body into an embrace. Held firmly in his arms, the depths of her chest felt helplessly warm.

I also...want to be with you...forever...Richard...

She didn't even know whether she had a mouth to speak with anymore, yet he lovingly stroked her head.

"Let's go back, Lady Nephteros."

He had a sword gripped in one hand. It was a sword, but for some reason, it looked like the little girl who'd been there mere moments ago.

"—[This is both destruction and healing]—"

The little girl hummed a song and light fell from the sky as if in response, dyeing the pitch-black world pure white.

◇

"Nephy! That's enough! You'll die at this rate!"

Nephy had been continuously casting mysticism to keep Nephteros's body from falling apart.

"No. I can't. If I stop now, we won't be able to hold it back anymore."

After being struck by Apollon Diatrissi, Azazel's presence had vanished. Nephy had no evidence to back her suspicions, but she was convinced that Azazel wouldn't appear inside Nephteros ever again. However, the damage to Nephteros's body had been grave. Zagan

definitely had some means of saving her, but Nephteros wouldn't hold out until he arrived. What's more, after the battle with "Nephteros," Nephy didn't have any energy to spare.

"Nephy!"

Nephy's vision warped as she finally fell to the floor.

"Please...don't...vanish..."

"Nephy..."

That was the one and only instant Chastille had averted her attention from Nephteros.

"I've been waiting for this moment."

A swarm of crystals that rustled like falling sand surged toward them.

"Bifrons?!"

"Hee hee... Too slow!"

Chastille swung her Sacred Sword, but Bifrons slipped past it and snatched Nephteros.

"Not on my watch!"

However, there was one other person present who'd been wary of Bifrons. Asura brought his battered gauntlet down on the crystals coiling around Nephteros. A blow from his Hex Arm could have even damaged the crystallized Bifrons, yet...

"Sorry. Could you please stand down and let this child go?"

A muscular arm halted Asura's strike.

"Who the hell are you?!"

"Archdemon Naberius. I'm friends with Alshiera too, you know?"

“Don’t fuck with me!” Asura roared. However, he couldn’t move. In fact, he couldn’t even muster enough strength to pull his Hex Arm free from Naberius’s vise-like grip.

“I never imagined you’d lend me a hand...” Bifrons said.

“Oh my, didn’t I tell you? I actually rather like you.”

“.....”

Bifrons said nothing in response as he vanished with Nephteros in tow.

“No... Give her...back... Neph...teros...!”

They’d struggled so frantically. They’d exhausted every last ounce of their strength. She’d thought they’d finally gotten her little sister back, and yet, at the very last moment, everything had been stolen from them.

Epilogue

“Hee hee hee... Aaah, that was fun.”

Bifrons returned to their hideout, dragging their beloved doll along all the while. Zagan’s Heaven’s Phosphor had devoured the whole right half of their body. It had even eaten half their face. It was bizarre that the Archdemon could still stand, let alone walk around.

I won.

Alshiera had even sent a pawn to get in their way, but it hadn’t mattered in the end. It was a little annoying that they’d been saved by Naberius, but it really had felt good to escape that place successfully.

Bifrons chucked their doll onto the ground. They’d thought the hair they’d been grasping had torn off, but it was actually Bifrons’s own left hand that had fallen apart.

“Oh. It’s finally reached this side... Well, whatever.”

The right hand they’d been hauling around had also finally crumbled not long after the Sigil of the Archdemon transferred to its new owner. Well, it was good that it had held out until they’d succeeded in drawing Azazel out at least. Bifrons had no use for it anymore.

They reached their destination. This was Bifrons’s laboratory. At its center was a standing glass vessel big enough to snugly fit a person inside that was filled with elixir. A human figure floated idly within. It was a girl with dark skin, her silver hair spreading out like a curtain. It was, without a doubt, Nephteros.

“Shere Khan’s Nephilims are incomplete because he failed to get cait sith blood to the very end.”

Created forcefully with the mana of mithril, those Nephilims were just a little stronger than conventional homunculi, but couldn’t really

be described as having reached the next stage of progress. He'd gotten close to completing them by including Aristella's cells after she'd transformed into Azazel, but that still hadn't been enough. They could function without being supplied with mana, but their life spans were at most four or five years. The greater the power they wielded, the shorter their lives lasted. They weren't vessels fit for wielding celestial mysticism.

It seems he conquered that flaw five years ago...

However, Marchosias had destroyed that work. Thus, there wasn't a single usable specimen left.

Above all else, the Nephilims couldn't defy their creator. Even if Shere Khan died, someone would one day appear that would make use of this system built into them. There was no possibility for the future there. That was why Zagan had also had no choice but to grant them a warrior's death.

However, even if it had only existed for a short while, Kuroka had worked as Bifrons's pawn. They had already secured her cells. They also had cells from "Aristella" and Dexia. In other words, the vessel in front of Bifrons contained a completed Nephilim, the very thing Shere Khan had been reaching for but could never obtain.

"Creating a reproduction of Nephelia as a Nephilim. That's karma for you."

Bifrons chuckled, then started the last step—the transplantation of the soul. The method for doing so with a homunculus had been established centuries ago. Bifrons, having toyed with and ruined many homunculi to date, could do it with their eyes closed. They could even do it with no arms.

Yes, the most important part here was the whereabouts of the soul. Shere Khan had made light of this, but the soul was proof of the ego. This didn't change even if one replicated all memories perfectly. The

soul was the record where one's very existence was engraved. That was why Bifrons never truly accepted Shere Khan's Nephilims. The Archdemon refused to believe a simple tool could become human after implanting someone else's memories into it. Even disposable homunculi were several times more charming than that.

On that point, Aristella and Dexia were pretty interesting.

Despite being Nephilims, they'd opposed Shere Khan's expectations, showing Bifrons the slightest glimpse of a miracle. If Bifrons had cornered them even more, perhaps they would've produced an even greater miracle. However, that wasn't what Bifrons wanted to see. The will of Azazel that had forced its way into Nephteros had been excised by those high elves. As such, her homunculus body was starting to crumble away into nothing. Bifrons's body was in an even worse state, but they didn't really care about that.

In the end, they'd upstaged Zagan, Shere Khan, and even Alshiera. Bifrons was the only actual victor in that battle.

It really was the funnest of games.

If death was the price of that, then what of it? They doubted they would ever taste such satisfaction again, even after a couple more centuries of life.

Before long, the transplantation of the soul was complete.

"Now then, I've done everything on my list."

Leaning against a wall, Bifrons slid to the ground. The remnants of what had once been Nephteros rested next to them, but after Bifrons's leg touched it, the last vestiges of human shape crumbled away.

Elixir emptied from the vessel, and the new Nephteros groaned.

Now then, what kind of face will you show me?

This Nephteros was no longer “collared” by her creator. If she was so inclined, she could easily throttle Bifrons to death. So, released from her shackles, what would go through her mind? How would she act? Would the first thing to come out of her mouth be curses? Or would she stubbornly ignore Bifrons’s presence? Returning to their service would’ve been the most boring of choices. She would’ve been fine as a regular old homunculus in that case.

If possible, Bifrons wanted her to say something totally unexpected. And faced with the former Archdemon’s selfish affection, Nephteros finally opened her eyes. Upon spotting the source of all her trauma right upon waking up, she stiffened. Seeing such an adorable reaction, Bifrons returned a smile that seemed to have no ill will behind it whatsoever.

She quickly realized that she was inside a glass vessel. She tapped the glass a few times to check it, then took a small breath and stretched out her arm. The vessel shattered noisily, sending glass fragments tumbling to the floor.

“Yo. How does it feel to wake up, Nephteros?” Bifrons asked with a sneer. “I’ve made a new body just for your adorable sake.”

Did she truly understand what kind of body she had now? Nephteros gritted her teeth, then, for some reason, all strength drained from her body.

“...Are you dying?”

Those were her first words upon waking up.

Hee hee hee... Now that’s a question I never expected.

Bifrons shrugged. Or, well, they tried to shrug, but they didn’t really possess the shoulders to do so.

“Hee hee... Zagan is merciless, after all. He really retaliated with quite the harsh blow.”

Nephteros stomped on the ground with long strides as if swelling with rage. Bifrons figured she would keep up that pace and punch them, but then she let out a deep and exasperated sigh as she walked up to Bifrons's side, said nothing, and sat down.

"What are you doing...?" Bifrons asked.

"You're dying, right?" Nephteros answered as if she'd been left with no other choice, still refusing to meet Bifrons's gaze. "I'll at least keep you company to the end."

Bifrons's eyes turned to saucers upon hearing her utterly unforeseeable answer.

"Oh? What's this? You've grown to be rather kind, haven't you?"

"Not really... It's just, my big bro once told me...that it's okay for any villain to get at least one chance to redo things," she mumbled. She then turned her gaze to Bifrons with neither scorn nor sorrow and continued, "It looks like you never even got that chance, so I'll stay with you... It's pretty painful to be alone at times like this..."

Bifrons actually felt deeply moved by her actions.

Aaah, she truly is wonderful...

Even after experiencing three hundred years of life, Archdemon Bifrons hadn't been able to predict a single one of this girl's actions. For some reason, what kept going through their heart now was joy mixed with loneliness due to this girl leaving the nest and becoming independent.

I see. She really has become human in the truest sense...

"Hee hee hee... About your new body, you don't need to worry," Bifrons said, suddenly feeling great. "You don't need maintenance or a supply of mana. You can even have sex. In theory, you should be able to birth children as well."

"You truly are insensitive..."

“Oh? I figured you’d be happy. More importantly, I didn’t think your ego would remain in such a complete state. How did you restore it? Give me a full report.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Ha ha ha... That’s why I want to know. Come on, quit putting on airs and tell me.”



Their frivolous conversation continued for just a few minutes.

“Bifrons...?”

Before she knew it, nothing but a pile of sand remained in the spot Bifrons had once occupied. Watching the pile crumble away into nothing, Nephteros muttered in a low whisper, “I really, really hate you, but I don’t regret you giving birth to me.”

And with that as their last memory, Archdemon Bifrons’s consciousness vanished.



“This is your sister...?”

Zagan stood in a room filled with human flesh. After settling things with Shere Khan, he’d immediately gone to save Aristella. Dexia was, of course, behind him, and Kimaris also stood next to her with Gremory in his arms. Gremory had been in serious danger after being released from her petrification, but Zagan had already finished treating her with Prayer’s Shell, so she would regain consciousness soon.

I didn’t think he’d bring Lisette along, though.

That girl was probably watching over Shere Khan in his final moments.

“It hadn’t spread this much when I escaped...” Dexia said with a gulp. “Aristella...”

This lump of meat had apparently propagated.

So this is the Nephilims’ womb, eh?

It was a repulsive scene, reminiscent of hell itself. Zagan took a step into the room. There didn’t seem to be any defensive sorcery in place, so he managed to enter without any opposition. He then tore

apart the meat in front of him. Pink fluids splashed about, giving off a whiff of noxious meat. After digging through for about a meter, he finally found a familiar face.

“Aaau...uugh... Ah...”

“Ari...stella...?”

It was an atrocious sight. She likely hadn't been treated at all. She was covered in flesh, but the damage to her torso from Alshiera's Seraph Hunter and the arm she'd torn off at the time were exactly the same as when Zagan had last seen her.

She had no limbs, so only her body from the chest up remained. Her throat throbbed in sync with the pulsations of the flesh in the room, and once in a while, she let out a groan. Her vacant eyes were golden and didn't reflect anything. It didn't look like she had an ego left at all.

Can she really be described as alive? Dexia is convinced she is, at least.

As such, his only choice was to live up to his promise. He tried touching Aristella's neck, where he felt a pulse. It turned out this mound of meat worked as some kind of life support system. Thus, it was possible to regenerate her body. The main problem, however, was her ego. This girl had been eaten by Azazel. When last he fought her, it hadn't looked like she had an ego left at all.

But back then, Dexia tried to keep a hold on Aristella's soul.

It had looked like sorcery that made use of a sort of resonance between twins. If the decay of Aristella's ego had truly been held back by that act, then there was still a chance to save her.

“Good grief... I developed this power for Nephtheros's sake, not this.”

How many times was he going to use it before he got around to applying it for its intended purpose? Zagan placed his hand against the girl's slender chest and resolved to do it at least one more time.

“Heaven's Scale Prayer's Shell.”

He went on to create her lost limbs, entrails, nerves, bones, and muscles in minute detail.

It really is a lot of work to create nearly an entire human from scratch...

Even so, he reconstructed her body within a few minutes. Heaven's Scale Prayer's Shell had been an emergency measure, but after unexpectedly running trials multiple times now, it could be considered complete.

Zagan pulled the pitiful girl out from the mass of flesh. Her brand-new limbs were still transparent and colored like Heaven's Scale. Still, she'd been physically resurrected. Her heart was beating, and she was breathing again. All that was left was her soul.

“Aristella!”

Zagan laid her down on the ground, prompting Dexia to immediately run up and cradle her sister in her arms.

“The rest is up to you,” he said. “Call her back.”

“Yes!” Dexia exclaimed, then gripped Aristella's hand and muttered as if in prayer. “Please come back to me, Aristella.”

Dexia placed her lips against Aristella's. A “path” opened between them as a light similar to mana flowed from Dexia into Aristella. Zagan's eyes could see it. Perhaps this was what a soul looked like. It felt far too fleeting and far too pure to be some fabricated being's soul, anyway.

“Aristella...” Dexia called out to her, and Aristella’s eyelids trembled. Aristella faintly opened her eyes, revealing not golden pupils, but the same deep blue eyes Dexia possessed.

“Aristella. Can you tell who I am?”

“De...xia...” she mumbled. Her voice was hoarse, but her answer was unmistakable.

Dexia’s lips quivered, and unable to withstand it anymore, she threw her arms around her little sister.

“Aristella... Aristella! Waaaaaah!”

She began bawling at the top of her lungs, and Aristella placed her still-transparent hand on Dexia’s head to comfort her.

With this, I now have one less thing to worry about...

Zagan’s thoughts then shifted to the other girl who shared their face.

◇

“Lisette...” the tigryn lying on the ground called out before she’d even introduced herself. He had a huge hole in his chest, so it was clear he couldn’t be saved anymore.

This man has done a lot of bad things.

Even though she’d only heard of it in passing, it had been enough for her to want to cover her ears. But even so, he was someone who knew her.

“You know me, right...?” she asked timidly.

They’d said that Dexia and Aristella had been created by him.

So does that make me the same...? Am I not human?

Perhaps that was actually a trivial matter for someone who’d lived by crawling through the alleyways. In all likelihood, she would’ve been

fine even if she wasn't human. She just wanted proof of who she was.

"You're...an orphan...I picked up..."

She hadn't expected that answer.

"An orphan...?"

"Yes. You look...a lot like...a certain girl... That's why...I kept you...by my side... That's all..."

His trembling hand reached out to Lisette's cheek. She grasped it, and for some reason, felt like this had happened before.

No. Back then, I was the one holding my hand up to him.

Hadn't she been injured just as badly as he was now, and knowing there was a chance to save him, she'd offered a terribly cruel suggestion? But her unfamiliar memory ended there. No matter how hard she tried to dig up what had happened next, she couldn't remember.

"Sorry," Lisette said as a tear rolled down her cheek. "I'm supposed to know you... I was supposed to be there for you...but sorry, I can't remember."

She was supposed to love him with all her heart. He was blunt, but couldn't be left alone, so she was supposed to give him everything she could.

I don't know. None of this makes any sense. But...

But he was supposed to be something dear to her. Lisette covered her face and began sobbing as that thought crossed her mind.

"Even though I told you I'd love you... Even though I told you I'd stop you if you made a mistake..."

Lisette didn't understand the meaning behind her own words, but Shere Khan's eyes widened.

“Why...do you...?” he muttered, before sighing in understanding. “I see... The whereabouts of the soul... So you...kept your...promise...”

The tigryn then flashed an affectionate smile and concluded, “You...are you... Please...live a happy life...”

The hand pressed against Lisette’s face fell to the ground limply. His dying expression was far too tranquil for a genocidal villain.



By the time Zagan returned to Archdemon Palace, it was the next morning. Even though the damage to the town had been kept to a bare minimum, traffic to and from the outside had been shut down during the battle. Having been cut off from trade for three days, supplies such as foodstuffs were running low. It seemed martial law damaged a town that much on its own.

The Angelic Knights were beyond busy, so he hadn’t seen Ginias or Stella yet. By the time he gathered his subordinates to give them his thanks, Nephy had returned. She wasn’t just accompanied by Orias either. Chastille was with her too. In the end, Chastille had learned of Nephteros’s predicament and had gone to save her. The three of them looked gloomy, however.

“Master Zagan...”

“Welcome back, Nephy.”

Thinking back on it, perhaps this was the first time Zagan had welcomed Nephy back. For the most part, Nephy always went straight to the kitchen after returning from town, whereas Zagan was usually the one going out. Zagan’s welcome had come out rather awkwardly, after which Nephy looked up at him like she was about to start crying at any moment.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Nephy?” Zagan asked. “I’ve settled everything in three days, just as promised, right?”

After he said that, a lone tear finally ran down Nephy's cheek.

"I'm so sorry, Master Zagan... Nephteros... Nephteros is..."

Zagan blinked in confusion before replying, "Nephteros? She got back ahead of you."

Zagan pointed to where Nephteros was standing awkwardly. Nestled right next to her was Richard, who'd woken up before anyone knew it.

So Valjakka's Sacred Sword chose him...

The missing blade was now hanging from his waist.

"Umm, I'm back," Nephteros muttered.

"Nephteros!" Nephy and Chastille cried in unison.

"Eep?! Wait!"

The two of them hugged Nephteros without hesitation. The three girls fell to the floor as Nephteros began flailing about.

Shortly after Zagan had returned to Archdemon Palace, Nephteros had also returned. Her body wasn't that of a homunculus now, but apparently that of a Nephilim.

Bifrons outdid me... No, maybe that damn Alshiera made use of them?

Zagan wasn't sure when the two had conspired, but Alshiera probably knew of Bifrons's plan beforehand. That was why she'd made use of that to grant Nephteros a new body. As for the state of Nephteros's mind...

"It seems we don't need to worry about her anymore," Orias said with a wry smile.

Her charmed gaze was fixed on Nephteros being jostled about by Nephy and Chastille, as well as Richard.

“H-Hang on, you two! Let me go!”

“No! I’m never letting you go again!”

“That’s right! Do you know how worried we were?!”

“No, I mean, you’re smothering me... I’ll die. Richard, save me...”

Zagan then noticed the Sigil of the Archdemon glowing on Nephy’s hand.

“Sorry... I gave it to her,” Orias said.

Honestly, Zagan didn’t approve of that, but...

“If you had no other choice, then there’s no helping it.”

He had no intention of blaming her if that was the price to save Nephteros.

Exactly how many Archdemons were replaced over these last few days...?

The same Sigil shined on the right hand of Shax, who was running about treating the injured, and Foll, who was running up to Nephy.

“Nephy, it’s time,” Foll whispered quietly as she helped Nephteros to her feet.

“Oh no! What should I do? I haven’t gone to retrieve it yet...”

“It’s okay. We have a substitute.”

“Really?”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Nephteros. Actually...”

“Huh? Hang on. I haven’t prepared anything...”

The group continued whispering to each other out of earshot, then lined up in front of Zagan. They’d even dragged Lilith and Selphy along.

“Come on, Alshiera, you too,” Foll said.

“...Do I really have to?”

“Just give up and join us already.”

For some reason, Alshiera was now standing front and center.

“What’s this about?” Zagan asked.

“Look, Zagan is confused. Do it quick,” Foll said, mercilessly urging Alshiera on.

Alshiera grimaced as if she’d been placed in an unprecedented crisis. But even so, she resigned herself shortly after and started whispering with trembling lips, saying, “M-My Silver-Eyed K— What?!”

Foll relentlessly jabbed her elbow into Alshiera’s waist.

Isn’t she wounded there?

She wouldn’t die from it, but Zagan still sympathized with her.

“Alshiera?” Foll said with slow emphasis.

“F-Fine... I get it already!” Alshiera yelled with tears in her eyes, then took a deep breath despite being undead. And then... “Zagan.”

She spoke his name for the very first time. She then continued as if she’d committed the gravest of sins by stating, “Today...is your birthday...”

“Really...?” Zagan asked with wide eyes.

“Yes.”

Zagan scratched his head, having no idea how to react to that statement.

“That’s a rather sudden confession from you...” he said.

“I had some circumstances that held me back...” she said before timidly hugging him. “Happy...birthday...”

Nephy had surely wanted to be the first to say those words. Seeing how she'd yielded that to Alshiera, he could guess that she'd realized the truth as well.

In that case, I can't act cruel...

Having said that, he didn't exactly know how to respond.

"Ummm. I suppose...I should say thanks?"

"Yes, please do as you like."

"I see. Then..." Zagan paused, then brushed Alshiera's head. "Thank you, Alshiera..."

"Um, Master Zagan," Nephy began hesitantly. "Lady Alshiera is..."

"Ah... Well, yeah. I know."

Honestly, all of this was far too sudden, so he had no idea how to react. However, unfortunately for him, there was someone here who had no idea what was going on and was incapable of reading the atmosphere.

"Huh? Hey, Lilith?"

"Shhh! What's up, Selphy?" Lilith whispered back.

"Hey, is Miss Alshiera maybe Mister Zagan's mom?" Selphy asked with no ill intent whatsoever.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What in the world are you saying? That can't possibly be... Huh?"

Lilith was the only one trying to deny it. Nephy covered her mouth as if saying, "Oh, as I figured," while Orias watched everyone with a knowing gaze and a wry smile. Foll looked at Alshiera with a lukewarm gaze as if relieved that someone had finally said it. It seemed everyone had had a faint idea already.

"Until we meet again, my friend."

Zagan recalled the promise he'd made to the father who wasn't his father, but a friend.

"If possible, please take care of her."

If not for that, he would've rejected her. Still, as he continued petting Alshiera's head, Nephy began fidgeting with her skirt restlessly.

"Um, Lady Alshiera...? Is that not enough already?"

Wanting to monopolize me at a time like this? Nephy's so damn cute...

An extraordinary throbbing assaulted Zagan's chest, while Alshiera jumped away from him with a start as if sensing an imminent threat to her life. Realizing the absurdity of her own behavior, Nephy covered her face, but still stood before Zagan with determination.

"Happy birthday, Master Zagan. But, um...I still haven't gotten your present..."

"Uhhh, well, in that case, there's one thing I'd like. Do you mind?"

"Not at all! Ask anything of me!"

Nephy smiled like a blooming flower as Zagan pulled her in for an embrace. He then kissed her on her pink lips. Nephy's eyes shot open in shock, but she still tightly wrapped her arms around his back. The first birthday he'd ever experienced was a truly happy and special occasion.



In the deepest tunnels of the now abandoned mine, two sorcerers gazed down at the corpse of the man who had once been the Tiger King. One was a man wearing a mask that revealed a single eye, while the other was an old man.

“Hee hee hee... I’ve been waiting for you. Though honestly, I never thought you’d actually return.”

The old sorcerer didn’t respond.

“Good grief, you’re as unsociable as ever. Well, whatever. Here’s your order.”

With that, the masked sorcerer handed over a pair of round glasses. The old man put them on, his figure rapidly turning youthful as a result.

“What should I call you? The Great Eldest Marchosias? Or perhaps...Marc, just like the good old days?”

The now-young old man didn’t spare the other sorcerer even a single glance as he adjusted the position of his glasses with his right hand, revealing a sigil glowing with sinister mana, the Sigil of the Archdemon that had once belonged to the Tiger King.

Afterword

It's been a long time. I have come to deliver *An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love your Elf Bride Volume 13*. My name is Fuminori Teshima.

This volume concludes the Shere Khan arc! There's so much I want to talk about, but I have no pages to do so! As such, we'll keep it short and simple ! I'm sorry this volume was so thick!

First, volume 7 of the manga version has also gone on sale. That one completes the evening ball arc and is full of bonuses for both old and new readers alike!

Next! Plans are moving forward for a spin-off of the manga. The protagonist will be Barbatos! Momo Futaba is in charge of the art! It's scheduled to start in the winter, so look forward to more news on it!

Thank you to everyone who helped with this volume, and to all of you, my dear readers, who are holding this book in your hands. And to my chief editor, K, whom I've owed a lot to ever since Elf Bride began, thank you so much for all your hard work.

August 2021: On an Evening When My Children Have Returned from the Dormitory, Thus Starting the Summer Holidays for Real

Fuminori Teshima

Bonus Short Stories

Lisette's Home

“In the end, I never found out anything about myself...”

After watching over Shere Khan's final moments, Lisette had returned to Kianoides. It looked like Dexia had found her little sister. Those two had regained their place in the world. In contrast, nobody would tell Lisette who she was. She had no idea where to go. The first place her feet took her was the church, where Stella was supposed to be, but...

“You bastards! Explain things properly! What the hell was that with Lillqvist?!”

Lisette was startled by the sound of a seething Angelic Knight. They had also been fighting a battle of their own. What was going on now? She looked at the crowd in front of the church from afar, eventually finding a familiar face.

“Hm? Oh, Lisette. It's you.”

“Ginias? What happened?”

Apparently, he had also been in quite the serious fight, as he was covered in wounds.

“Umm, how do I even begin to explain?” Ginias said. “There was a bit of trouble with Lady Lillqvist during the battle.”

“By Lillqvist, you mean the lady with the same hair as my big sis?”

If Lisette remembered correctly, her name was Chastille. She'd never spoken to her, but Lisette knew what she looked like, and that woman was currently nowhere in sight. Had she deserted during the battle or something?

“An Archangel fraternizing with a sorcerer is unheard of!” one of the knights roared.

“Uhhh...” Lisette groaned in astonishment.

“Y-You’re wrong. That guy’s just a guard.”

“Yeah! Like hell Lady Chastille would fawn over such a lousy man!”

“What the hell were you two watching?! They practically eloped!”

“Our Chastille would never elope with a scoundrel like him!”

“Stop turning your eyes away from reality!”

As the knights continued shouting, Lisette continued to wonder what had happened. She didn’t really get it, but if Chastille returned while things were like this, it could get pretty bad for her.

“Ha ha...” Lisette laughed dryly. She felt silly for worrying about her origin when things were like this.

“Are you all right?” Ginias asked with a serious expression on his face. “You look horrible.”

“It’s insensitive to say that to a girl... It’s not my problem if my big sis hates you for it.”

“I-I was just wondering if something happened to you...”

As the awkward boy started panicking, Lisette noticed the blood running down his arm.

“Hey, you’re bleeding, you know?”

“Huh? Oh, this is nothing. The blessing from my Anointed Armor will stop it shortly.”

His Anointed Armor was also a mess though, making it questionable whether this blessing was actually working.

“Haaah... Come here,” Lisette said. “I’ve at least learned how to treat simple wounds like this.”

She tore up her sleeve—something that was unexpectedly possible due to her strength—and used it as a bandage to stem Ginias’s bleeding.

“Have a doctor take a proper look at it later,” she said.

“R-Right. Thank you,” Ginias replied before flashing her a relieved smile.

“What?”

“It’s nothing. I’m just glad to see you back to your usual self.”

“Hmph...”

“Oh, right, I almost forgot. Welcome home, Lisette.”

Lisette’s eyes shot wide open, then she pouted to the side before saying, “Thanks. I’m back...”

She never did learn who she truly was, and that was sure to remain unknown in the future as well. And yet, perhaps she actually did have a home to return to. Still pouting, Lisette didn’t even realize that she was also smiling.

Reminiscing

“Master Bifrons. Do you know what it means to clean up?”

“What a strange question, Nephteros. Of course I know of the concept. Do you require an explanation?”

There were grimoires, experimental devices, drugs, and clothing scattered all over the place. The Archdemon smiled at their grimacing attendant amidst that mess.

“So long as you understand,” Nephteros replied. “I only hope you can put that knowledge into practice.”

“Ha ha ha. Another strange thing to say. What do you think you’re here for?”

A fist woven of sorcery suddenly flew out, forcing Bifrons off their chair. This was a fragment of the power Archdemon Zagan had created to kill the other Archdemons. The chair Bifrons had been occupying shattered into tiny pieces. This girl had been acting this way ever since Bifrons had used her in a certain experiment the other day.

“Can you stop dodging already?” she asked. “You’re just making the mess worse.”

“H-Hee hee... Nephteros, it seems you still need to learn to respect your master.”

“I’ve learned that thoughtlessly paying respect to someone is the act of a fool. You should learn to behave like someone who deserves to be my master first.”

“Hmmm...” Bifrons muttered, wide-eyed with admiration.

“What is it?”

“Oh, nothing. Hee hee hee... I get it. Telling me to learn, huh? What a refreshing complaint.”

“I believe it’s normal for people to hope for better treatment.”

This only improved Bifrons’s mood even more. It was pleasant enough that they regretted dodging the earlier attack.

Even if they possessed an ego, a homunculus was still a puppet. One would never rebel against their master, yet here was one giving their master this much lip, and even attacking them when angered.

Homunculi who possessed egos were rare, but Bifrons had never heard of one like this. It was ever so interesting. They wanted to see all sorts of reactions from her. They even started wondering how to mess with her next as a result.

Just then, Bifrons woke up. They’d apparently passed out at some point in time. The wound they’d suffered from Archdemon Zagan

was fatal, devouring their right arm and continuing to encroach on their life.

“A dream... It feels like that was all so long ago.”

Those events had only taken place half a year prior. For someone who'd lived for three hundred years, that was practically yesterday. And yet, it felt like the distant past. What kind of reaction would that puppet show after everything ended?

Bifrons prayed that all their expectations would be overturned as they continued waiting for the end.

Mother and Daughter

“M-Mother, may I have a moment?”

“What is it, Nephteros?”

After finishing her daily lesson in celestial mysticism, Nephteros called out to her mother Orias. Orias's other daughter, Nephelia, had already excused herself to prepare dinner.

“I-I tried baking these things called cookies. If possible, I'd like you to sample them for me...”

Despite apparently being for a taste-test, the cookies were neatly wrapped up with a cute little ribbon, so Orias could tell that Nephteros had made them as a present.

“Hmm, then allow me to try one,” Orias replied. “May I open it?”

“Y-Yes!”

She undid the ribbon, revealing several cookies that were resting within. They were somewhat uneven, conveying the hardships her daughter had gone through to make these. Orias took a bite, and a mild sweetness spread through her mouth.

“Mmm... They're very good, Nephteros.”

“Really? Thank goodness...”

“But why do this all of a sudden?”

Nephteros’s dark skin turned red as she twiddled her fingers.

“I’m learning celestial mysticism from you, but I haven’t given you anything in return. Also...” Nephteros paused there to gather her courage, then said, “I-I felt very happy...when you called me your daughter.”

“Hnnngh!”

Orias clasped her chest and nearly fell to her knees.

What do I do?! My daughters are way too cute!

Had Zagan always been on the receiving end of such shocks? Orias got her ragged breathing back in order, then returned a gentle smile.

“Nephteros, if you have the time, would you like to accompany me? Some tea would go well with these cookies.”

“Yes, mother!”

Nepheleia and Nephteros. The two of them were Orias’s beloved and irreplaceable daughters. This had taken place several months before Orias would risk her life for their sake.



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