

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

14

FUMINORI TESHIMA

ILL. COMTA

**“Eek...
Stay back.
Someone
save me...”**

**Just as a pitiful
shriek escaped
Wells’s lips...**

**“Shine!
Azrael!”**

**AN
ARCHDEMON’S
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LOVE YOUR
ELF BRIDE**

The Haunted House’s Doppelganger



**Holding hands like
lovers on a holiday date!**

The Archdemon's Day Off

A character with a white fox mask and red eyes is shown against a night sky with a large, glowing red moon. The character is wearing a blue and white outfit with red accents. The scene is illuminated by the moonlight, creating a dramatic and atmospheric setting.

“Say, Sir Raphael.”

A faint smile
appeared on the
girl’s lips as
she spoke.

**“The moon is
beautiful, isn’t it?”**

A moon the same red as
the girl’s eyes hung in the
night sky.

The Reason I Adopted a Black Cat



Barbatos

Zagan's undesirable friend. A skilled sorcerer who is one of the leading Archdemon candidates. Is constantly troubled by Chastille's crybaby side, but still can't leave her alone.



Chastille Lillqvist

An Archangel known as the Maiden of the Sacred Sword. She's a master of the blade, but is far too serious and easily tricked. Lately, those around her suspect she's in a much deeper relationship with her guardian sorcerer, Barbatos, than she lets on, but she vehemently denies it.



Nephteros

A sorcerer who looks extremely similar to Nephy. Her true identity is a homunculus created by Archdemon Bifrons. Since running away from Bifrons, she's taken up residence in the Kianoides church.



Kuroka Adelhide

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



Shax

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



Raphael

A former Archangel. Feared as the Sorcerer Hunter in the modern era. Currently working as Zagan's butler. He is Kuroka's foster father, so he always worries about her.

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

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Prologue

“Hmm, I’ve never seen this before. Is it cake...or bread?” Zagan groaned as he looked at the food laid out before him.

“It’s called a maritozzo. It’s a sweet bun made of bread that’s packed full of fresh cream. I’ve heard it’s quite popular in Raziell, so I tried making some myself.”

There was a lot of cream in the middle, perhaps even enough that it surpassed the volume of the bread itself, while the exterior was sprinkled with powdered sugar that looked much like snow.

“You’re amazing, Nephy,” Zagan said. “Did you reproduce this after only hearing of it?”

“N-No, Lilith and Selphy also helped,” Nephy replied with a smile, her ears turning red to their tips.

“Uhhh, so how does one go about eating this, exactly?”

“Oh, right. It seems you simply pick it up and bite into it.”

It felt like a strange item that was more suitable for a party, but this was a celebration for sorcerers. Those with proper table manners were rare here.

If Nephy was her usual self, she’d have used a knife to cut it...

Even with that thought in mind, Zagan did as he was told and picked up the large ball of bread. The volume of cream almost had him recoiling, but after he took a bite, he found that it actually wasn’t too rich. The fluffy bread seemed to work as a cushion to balance out the cream. And yet, there was still an explosive sweetness spreading through his mouth.

“I see... There’s a sweet note to it,” Zagan said.

“I’m glad that it suits your tastes,” Nephy replied bashfully. “I wanted to make something that would remain in the memories of your birthdays, even if just a little.”

On the day everything was settled with Archdemon Shere Khan and Bifrons, after returning to Archdemon Palace, it had come to light that this was also Zagan’s birthday. Nephy and a portion of the others had known, so the preparations for a party had already been made. Perhaps the celebration

was somewhat modest for an Archdemon's birthday, but they wanted the subordinates who'd worked in the kitchen during the battle to enjoy themselves as well, so the party took on the form of a buffet where waiters weren't necessary.

Several candles and lanterns lit the entrance hall of Archdemon Palace, while Gremory's golem towered over the area like a guardian. Normally, only thirty or so sorcerers could be found bustling through these halls. Today, however, sorcerers and Angelic Knights alike shared in lighthearted conversation.

Still, the battle had only just ended, so the participants weren't really dressed up. There were those wrapped in bloody bandages, those with their arms in slings, and even those on crutches.

The main stars of today's celebration, Zagan and Nephy, were no longer wearing dirty clothes, but hadn't really dressed up either. They were clothed more like regular civilians taking a stroll through town.

These are the clothes I bought in town with Nephy!

That thought was all that mattered to him.

"How could I possibly forget a celebration you prepared for me, Nephy?" Zagan asked, nodding as he looked over the room. He hadn't even known when his birthday was before this party, yet she'd tried so hard for him. The celebration came right after that intense battle, so he was sure this would remain in his memories forever.

"That's embarrassing, Master Zagan..." Nephy mumbled, bringing a maritozzo up to her mouth as if to hide her flushed cheeks. "Ah..."

The moment she took a bite, the cream squeezed out and stuck to her nose.

Why are you so ridiculously cute?!

Zagan was already on a high, so that was enough to send his spirits soaring. Nephy's pointy ears quivered about as her face turned even redder. She tried shaking the cream off, but quickly realized that wasn't going to accomplish anything. Having said that, her hands were also stained with cream from her overflowing maritozzo. Her eyes darted about in a panic, having no idea what to do. She was utterly adorable.

"I-I'll get it, Nephy," Zagan said, wiping the cream off her nose with his finger.

"Fwah?!"

Nephy froze, looking up at Zagan. A beat later, he realized what he'd done.

“Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-You’ve got the wrong idea!” he exclaimed. He hadn’t really been thinking when he’d acted, so his hand had simply done what was natural upon seeing Nephy panic.

Wh-Wh-Wh-What do I do?! I can’t just lick this off, right?!

He knew licking it off wasn’t an option, but it also felt wrong to wipe something he’d taken from Nephy’s face against a handkerchief or the like. Zagan panicked, but Nephy panicked far more.

“Nom!” she growled as she snapped at Zagan’s cream-covered finger. In his mind, her pink lips felt even softer than the cream. And frozen in that position, Nephy’s ears turned so red it felt like steam would shoot out of them.

“Hwaaah?!”



Unable to stand the shock of the moment, the two Archdemons crumbled to their knees. Yes, the *two* Archdemons. A sigil much like Zagan's was present on Nephy's right hand.

Nephy and Orias had fought Azazel to save Nephteros, and during the battle, Nephy had inherited the Sigil of the Archdemon from her mother, Orias. From then on, Nephy was also one of the Archdemons. Though there was one other new Archdemon present at the party as well.

"Alshiera, why are you hiding out in the corner?"

Two little girls stood together, one with a mountain of cakes and sweets in hand, the other with a glass of wine. They were in the corner of the room opposite the one Zagan and Nephy were in. The one with a plate of food was Zagan's daughter, Foll. Her right hand, which was currently wielding a fork, shone with the light of the Sigil of the Archdemon. This was the Sigil of Zagan's formidable foe, Bifrons.

Archdemon Naberius had delivered the Sigil to her, apparently at Bifrons's request. Foll was Wise Dragon Orobas's biological daughter, as well as Archdemon Zagan and Nephy's adopted daughter. What's more, Zagan had personally recommended her, recognizing that she'd had the power to be the next Archdemon. Thus, this was a natural outcome.

"What kind of face do I make when talking to the Silver-Eyed King now...?" the vampire Alshiera muttered.

"You don't need to worry about that. You're mother and son. At the very least, Zagan and Nephy never did with me."

"You're as harsh as ever."

The vampire was a girl who knew everything yet spoke of nothing, and her true identity was Zagan's birth mother. However, she looked no older than Foll, and what's more, Zagan didn't have a very good impression of her due to her behavior thus far. And yet, he also knew that she didn't have much time left in this world...and that she'd been trying to protect him. With all that in mind, she truly had no idea how to face him. And honestly, Zagan was the same in that regard.

"Alshiera, you're just a coward," Foll said with an all-knowing smile gracing her face.

"You're the only one who says that about me."

Still, it felt pleasant to have a friend who would chastise her. Alshiera took a sip of her wine, looking more satisfied than she would have others

believe.

There was one other sorcerer who'd succeeded an Archdemon in the battle against Shere Khan. Zagan had told him to rest, but there were still many severely wounded patients in need of care. He wasn't present at the celebration due to that, and as Zagan's thoughts drifted to his whereabouts, a voice resounded through the entrance hall.

"Come on, I told you to stay in bed. I'm begging you, just listen to me."

The last new Archdemon came into the room in a greatly perplexed state. It was Shax. He was a specialist in medical sorcery who possessed a keen mind. Foll had the most power among the new Archdemons, but this man was the most knowledgeable. Honestly, Zagan appraised him as someone he would never want to make his enemy, so frankly, it was perplexing that he didn't have a second name. However, for all his positive traits, Shax was devastatingly bad at reading the mood. He was technically another star of today's party. Zagan had told him to enjoy himself, but...

"I'll do just that once Kurosuke is back."

The girl this man wished to protect was currently at the church, so he'd insisted on taking care of the wounded until she returned. His patients included Orias and Aristella, yet neither of them were responsible for his crying and begging. Instead, a beautiful young witch stood there; namely, Enchantress Gremory. Zagan had entrusted her with an infiltration mission ten days ago, during which she'd gotten caught in a trap. He'd rescued her when eliminating Shere Khan, but she'd suffered severe wounds that had brought her to the brink of death.

Gremory was now seated in a wheelchair, a bag of elixir hanging above her. This was apparently a device that continued to supply her with the drug. Zagan and Shax had treated her wounds, but the tremendous depletion of her mana had made it difficult to maintain her life if not for such a measure.

"What a strange thing to say. Take a good look. This venue is filled to the brim with a vortex of love power!"

"I don't see a thing..."

Gremory spun the wheels of her wheelchair and slipped past Shax, quickly making her way into the entrance hall.

"I need a vast quantity of love power right now! Behold our liege! He's unleashing tremendous love power as if he anticipated my arrival!"

Zagan and Nephy averted their eyes, silently pleading for everyone not to

look at them. Gremory then set her sights on the pair sitting near the staircase. The birth of three new Archdemons was a great change among sorcerers, but these two were a great change among Angelic Knights.

The woman was Nephteros. She had once been created as a clone of Nephy, but her body had been lost in the battle against Shere Khan, so now she was a Nephilim. She was infinitesimally close to being human, yet possessed a vessel far stronger than any human. And more importantly, she was Nephy's little sister.

The man was Richard. He was rather skilled with a sword, given that he was just twenty years old, but had still been an average Angelic Knight. Yet now, he had a Sacred Sword hanging from his waist, which was very unbecoming of an average knight.

Gremory's boisterous voice echoed through the entrance hall, but the two of them had their attention caught elsewhere. They simply didn't have the leisure to pay her any mind.

"How is your body, Lady Nephteros?" Richard asked. "Should you not get some more rest?"

"Jeez. I'm telling you that I'm fine. Rather, Richard..."

"Yes? What is it?"

Nephteros poked at a slice of ham with her fork and glared at him bashfully, her ears quivering, as she asked, "How long do you plan to keep referring to me like that?"

"What do you mean...?"

Upon hearing that question, Nephteros dropped her fork and impatiently tugged on Richard's sleeve.

"We're not a lady and her retainer...right?" she said, unable to look him straight in the eyes.

"Oh! Th-Then, um..." he mumbled, trailing off. However, even as Richard gasped and widened his eyes, he remained a perfect gentleman. "Nephteros."

He spoke nervously, yet clearly, making Nephteros's pointy ears dance about happily like never before.

"Mmm..."

Having unintentionally eavesdropped, Zagan and Nephy were brought to tears.

"She's gotten to the point where she can fawn over him like that..." Nephy whispered.

“Indeed. I suppose Richard deserves praise as well,” Zagan whispered back.

Zagan had once disapproved of Richard courting Nephteros because of his lack of strength, but now the knight had obtained a Sacred Sword and had brought Nephteros back from within Azazel. It would have been the height of pettiness to refuse to acknowledge him both from the perspective of a king and a man.

Unfortunately, with such a sight before her, the granny couldn't possibly keep quiet. Her wheelchair skidded across the ground, practically flying toward the two of them.

“What a sight for sore eyes!” Gremory exclaimed. “Has a new sprout of love power started to bud?!”

“Eep!” Nephteros shrieked, jumping back in shock and clinging to Richard's arm. Richard's gentlemanly smile, which he'd been keeping up to try to feign composure, crumbled magnificently as he began panicking. He was red in the face now, just like any other inexperienced young man.

“N-Nephteros, um, you're really...close.”

“Hwuh...?”

This was probably the first time she'd gotten such a reaction from him. Nephteros's mouth popped open, yet her ears quivered happily about.

“Hmm... That damn Gremory. I must admit, that was marvelously done.”

“Master Zagan, quit laughing and stop her. The two of them finally had a good mood going...”

Leaving the granny at large for much longer would have caused trouble in all sorts of ways, so he decided to intervene as per Nephy's request. Zagan wanted to spend just a little more time alone with his bride, but he rose to his feet and started moving toward Gremory. Before he got there, someone picked her wheelchair up off the ground.

“Miss Gremory. Please do not bother everyone.”

It was Kimaris. He was also wrapped in bandages, so it was hard to say he was back in healthy shape, but he was at least well enough to be moving around. Well, he'd exchanged blows with Zagan and had stopped a few thousand Nephilims on his own, so he was obviously an extremely sturdy man. It had all been a rather reckless endeavor, so this only stood to reason.

“I owe you one, chief,” Shax said with a relieved sigh. “I can't stop Gremory on my own.”

“I must apologize for the trouble. However, Sir Shax, you are already an Archdemon who is much higher in status than I am as a sorcerer. You mustn’t lower your head so easily. This is an important lesson you must learn if you wish to protect those who are dear to you.”

Kimaris’s harsh words resonated with Shax.

“You’ve got a point there,” he replied, straightening out his hunched back and nodding with pride. “Thanks, Kimaris.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“Kimaris,” Shax said, straightening himself up somewhat. “There’s something I’d like your opinion on.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Let! Me! Gooo!”

Kimaris cocked his head, ignoring Gremory as she wailed in the wheelchair he still held in the air.

“Now that I’m an Archdemon, it seems I must take on a second name.”

The same had applied to Zagan. He’d been given a second name upon being appointed an Archdemon.

“I’m thinking of inheriting the name Tiger King,” Shax said with determination.

Those words had everyone in the room wide-eyed.

“Why are you telling me this?” Kimaris asked.

“You were my teacher’s old pal, right? That’s why I want your permission.”

“Aaah...”

It seemed Shax had given this a lot of thought. Instead of replying, Kimaris turned a hesitant gaze to Zagan.

“Isn’t it fine?” Zagan said with a nod. “Shere Khan was an Archdemon who committed many atrocities, but also a kind man who only wanted to revive his beloved. There’s no harm in someone taking after just that last part.”

“Another way of giving him a second chance at things, right, Boss?” Shax said teasingly.

Zagan shrugged. This could also be considered a parting gift to the man he’d called a friend.

“I think...it’s fine too,” Gremory added, quite unexpectedly. “You are the only one who inherited the powers they developed eight hundred years ago, a

power that was meant to save the world. So really, only you can inherit his name.”

Her tone was dead serious, far from her usual clamor about love power.

“Gremory, do you know something about Shere Khan’s past?” Zagan asked.

“Well...I’ll give you a report on it later.”

The battle had only just ended, so Zagan hadn’t finished dealing with the aftermath yet, some of which was the substantial information Gremory had brought back from her mission.

“I also have no objections,” Kimaris said with a nod. “Sir Shax, I don’t believe you will err the same way Shere Khan did. Please make use of his name.”

“Then it’s decided,” Zagan declared after confirming Shax returned a nod of his own. “From now on, Archdemon Shax’s second name shall be Tiger King!”

Sorcerers and Angelic Knights alike raised their glasses and cheered in celebration. And among all the clapping, Zagan heard a voice he didn’t wish to hear at all.

“Hnnngh! This is so moving. It really brings a tear to this old man’s eyes.”

The people in the room didn’t react in fear or anger toward the sudden voice, but instead, everyone seemed annoyed. Zagan had no choice but to drive the newcomer away on his own, so he bitterly addressed him, saying, “Andrealphus. I don’t recall inviting you.”

Former Archdemon Andrealphus was the previous owner of the Sigil that was now in Shax’s possession. He wasn’t wearing his Anointed Armor and was instead dressed in a very normal shirt and trousers. There wasn’t a single fragment of majesty to him. Part of this was because he’d been sliced up profusely by Kuroka when he was being controlled like a puppet. There were more scars on his face than before due to that, anyway.

Despite being utterly useless as an ally, he’d been a huge bother as an enemy. Thus, the reaction of those in the room was perfectly reasonable.

“Oh man, you’ve really got some impressive skills,” Andrealphus said, slapping Shax on the shoulder. “Never thought I’d be able to recover from that state. That’s the man who inherited my Sigil for you!”

“Huh? Well, I mean, you were being controlled, but you weren’t actually

dead or anything...”

After the battle, Shax had run around treating all the survivors, regardless of whether they were friend or foe. And among them had been Andrealphus.

Kimaris lowered Gremory’s wheelchair, then bowed before the brazen former Archdemon and said, “It is a pleasure to meet you. You are former Archdemon Andrealphus, correct? My name is Kimaris.”

“Aaah... I’ve heard of you too.”

“I’m honored. Well then, in honor of our first meeting, please allow me this simple discourtesy.”

Kimaris gave the most gentlemanly and calm smile, then grabbed Andrealphus’s shoulder.

“Huh?”

“Graaah!”

He then plunged his fist into Andrealphus’s face.

“I understand you didn’t do so by your own will, but that doesn’t change the fact that you injured Miss Gremory. I’m sorry, but I had to hit you at least once.”

Andrealphus was hunched over face-first on the floor and wasn’t even twitching as Kimaris spoke.

Hmph, I bet he let himself get hit on purpose.

Zagan figured the man had planned to get hit, then laugh it off and call it even or something. However, Kimaris was the one and only man who’d forced Zagan to use his Sigil in a fistfight. What’s more, Andrealphus had none of his usual magically enhanced gear. Thus, Kimaris’s fist had surpassed the former Archdemon’s expectations by a wide margin.

“K-Kimry,” Gremory said in an unusually shaken voice. “I-I’m fine, so you don’t have to get that mad...”

“That won’t do. Your wounds were deep enough that you wouldn’t be alive right now had Sir Zagan not arrived in time.”

“Jeez... You punched him already, so isn’t that enough? Cheer up.”

Gremory tugged at Kimaris’s sleeve. She wasn’t in her usual form as a beautiful woman. Instead, she looked closer to sixteen or seventeen years old, somewhere around Nephy’s age. There was still a certain childishness to her face, yet it also conveyed both dignity and beauty. Zagan found it hard to come to terms with the fact that this was the very same person as that granny. Kimaris looked back at her in shock, then threw his arms around her as if to

hide her.

“Hwah?!”

“Miss Gremory. Your age reverted.”

“Huh? O-Oh. I-I get it. I get it already, so calm down!”

Being seen in that form was apparently a big problem...or rather, Kimaris didn't want anyone to see her like that.

I see. She's exhausted herself to the point that her age manipulation sorcery has come undone.

Zagan figured it was best for her to quietly get some rest to recover her control, but this was Gremory. As a minimal show of pity, everyone averted their eyes. That was when the sound of gulping resounded loudly.

“Mmm! Very good, Comrade Gremory! You are the epitome of a maiden right now!”

It was Manuela, who, having just emptied her tankard, slammed it back on the table, then thrust her finger vigorously. Not at Gremory...but at Selphy, who was cooking on her own in a daze.

“Selphy! My drink is empty. Where's my refill?”

“Hwuh? Empty? I just, like, gave you a new one!” Selphy shrieked.

“I get to have my fill of booze here, so there's no helping it. I'll be drinking like never before!”

Zagan was left with a headache upon seeing the horrendous drunkard in their midst.

“Sorry, can someone go get more to drink?” he asked. “There should be some in the kitchen.”

“Leave it to me, bro!” Furcas replied immediately. He was the last Archdemon in Zagan's camp. Having said that, he didn't have any such memories and was no more than a novice sorcerer at present. Still, despite having fought against the zombie Orobas, he was filled with energy.

“Jeez, you can't even carry it on your own, right?”

The succubus Lilith went with him, acting like she was doing a chore. The two of them had apparently been eating together.

“Aaah... Another unknown sprout of love power!” Gremory yelled as she reached out in frustration, still stuck in Kimaris's hold. She wasn't the only one gazing at the two of them running off either.

“Is it fine to leave them like that?” Zagan asked Selphy, who was stock-still in a daze.

“Right... Just for today, I can lend Lilith to him,” she replied.

Zagan said nothing and simply stood by her side.

After a short while, Selphy spoke up once more, saying, “Mister Zagan, you said that a dragon might attack Kianoides, yeah?”

Zagan had considered the possibility of an undead Orobas appearing on the battlefield near Kianoides. As such, he’d ordered Selphy and Lilith to deal with it on the off chance that an attack was fired at the city.

“When it did, only a single attack came at us,” Selphy continued. “Just blocking it from afar had me, like, totally weak at the knees and scared, but he stopped the rest of them head-on.”

Selphy bit her bottom lip as if holding something in, then smiled like she always did.

“And so, I decided to yield, just for today.”

“You did well too,” Zagan said without looking at her face as he plopped his hand on her head.

“Thanks...”

Later, around the time Furcas and Lilith came back carrying a cask, the door to the entrance hall opened wide.

“I’ve returned,” Kuroka said, her two tails wagging about as she ran to Shax’s side. She’d also been severely wounded, but thanks to the new Tiger King’s highest-priority treatment, she’d gotten back on her feet ahead of everyone else. That was why she’d gone to report things to the church above ground.

“Welcome back, Kurosuke.”

“Yup, I’m back.”

It looked like Raphael had finally approved of their relationship...or maybe it was better to say Shax had finally given in. In any case, Kuroka wordlessly brought her head closer to him, and Shax petted her with familiar mannerisms. Zagan would’ve liked to leave them be, but he wanted to know how things were going at the church.

“Good work. How are things up there?”

“Right. Father has taken charge, so there isn’t really any...ummm, there’s no *major* chaos, at least. I don’t know the exact number of injured knights, but there have been no casualties yet.”

Zagan’s most trusted retainer, his butler Raphael, wasn’t at Archdemon Palace right now. He’d been given command of the battle against the

Nephilims, so he was also responsible for dealing with matters after the fact. Zagan figured it was fine to grant the man and Kuroka some time off to go on a family vacation or something once he was done, given all the hard work he was putting in. Someone else was supposed to take on that role, so he'd really been overworked. Kuroka awkwardly cast a look at the culprits, a pair in the corner of the entrance hall making faces like the world was ending.

"It's all over. I can never return to the church..."

"I was sure I'd get to be an Archdemon this time..."

The girl who was sobbing uncontrollably was Chastille. Next to her was a gloomy sorcerer who looked utterly depressed and had tears in his eyes, Barbatos. Even Zagan felt somewhat awkward upon seeing the two of them.

"Uhhh, I guess things got pretty serious at the church?" Zagan asked.

Kuroka nodded discreetly and answered, "They're saying...Lady Chastille eloped with a sorcerer in the midst of battle..."

Chastille had made the difficult decision to leave Kianoides to help free Nephteros from Azazel. Zagan was grateful, but he hadn't expected her to vanish in the middle of the clash with the army of Nephilims. What's more, she'd bickered with Barbatos about going, so everyone around them had seen it as lovers eloping when they had run off.

"You've got it all wrong! I wasn't eloping with anyone! I just wanted to go save my friend!" Chastille shrieked, shooting up to her feet in tears.

"Fuck off! Who thinks I'd wanna elope?! It's not like I need to run away to get married!"

"Huh?"

"What?"

Barbatos finally realized what he'd just said, so his face turned noticeably red as he mumbled, "That's not what I mean! It's, um... Aaargh! I'm outta here!"

"Huh? You're leaving already...?"

Barbatos tried to run away despite just having claimed he didn't need to, and Chastille looked at him like an abandoned puppy. He'd already made it halfway into the shadows before he came back out, looking like he'd lost everything.

You could've just dragged her along with you, so why are you crawling back out? Zagan thought. But now that he considered it, he realized he'd never seen Barbatos take Chastille through the shadows without her consent.

And in this case, if he tried to get her consent, he would've had to explain his behavior.

“Goddaaaaaammit! Booze! I don't care what! Just get me booze!”

“Here...”

Zagan couldn't stand to watch them anymore, so he handed over a particularly strong bottle of spirit. And as the celebrations reached a peak in chaos, a clap resounded through the room.

“Everyone,” Nephy said with a smile. “Even if this is a moment of reprieve, where you are all free to cut loose, please do keep in mind that there are limits, all right?”

“Yes ma'am...” everyone replied in unison, calming down the chaos in an instant.

Now that things had settled down, other people came to speak to Zagan.

“Things are as lively as ever around you, boss.”

“Behemoth...and Leviathan. Good work out there, you two.”

Two sorcerers stood before Archdemon Zagan. The man had leather belts covering his face, while the woman wore a straitjacket. Zagan had just been looking for them, so he appreciated the fact that they'd come to see him first.

“I heard you did something unreasonable. From the look of it, you're fine, though.”

“Mhm. Shax is very skilled,” Levia answered as Behemoth fed her with familiar movements. “Besides, that girl helped nurse me.”

Levia's eyes turned to Selphy. And upon noticing her gaze, Selphy returned a carefree smile. Both these girls were blue-haired sirens.

“Do you two talk to each other often?” Zagan asked.

“Only once in a while. Whenever we see each other at Archdemon Palace, essentially.”

Levia was probably curious about her as a fellow siren...or rather, as a blood relative. Zagan took a closer look at the two sorcerers, and seeing what he was getting at, Behemoth shrugged.

“Unfortunately, the curse hasn't come undone with Shere Khan's death.”

Behemoth turned into a grotesque monster at night, while Levia turned into a senseless sea dragon during the day. That was the curse Shere Khan had cast on them.

“Don't worry about it,” Levia added. “Thanks to the restraints you fashioned for us, I managed to meet Behemoth again after such a long time.”

The restraints that covered their bodies had been woven from Zagan's Heaven's Scale. They blocked any external source of mana, allowing the two of them to maintain human forms.

"Don't belittle me," Zagan said. "Those restraints are but a stopgap measure. I'll definitely undo this damn curse of yours one day."

A smile naturally came to both Behemoth and Levia when they heard that declaration.

"Heh heh. We're relying on you, boss."

"Thank you. Though honestly, I'd rather you protect her than us," Levia said, stealing another glance at Selphy.

"Miss Gremory...or, I guess li'l Gremory now?" Selphy said in her usual cheerful manner. "Welcome back. There's a whole lot I wanna talk about."

"Kee hee. Indeed. That is exactly why I came to see you. Right, Comrade Manuela?"

Manuela shot to her feet immediately...with another tankard of beer in her hand.

"Let us begin the Kianoides love power appreciation meeting!"

"Yaaay!" Selphy cheered, clapping thoughtlessly.

She really has gotten stronger.

If Selphy acted down, Lilith endlessly worried about her, and in that case, she would end up getting in Furcas's way despite declaring that she would yield for the day. That was why she kept up a cheerful front. But even so, Zagan could sense a terrifying will in her to definitively make up for lost time later.

Manuela and Gremory brought a table and chairs out of nowhere, then began their own little witches convention in a corner of the room. Those who didn't want to get involved quickly dispersed from the area. Kuu didn't have a choice in the matter, though.

"Chief! Why are you dragging Kuu into this?!" Kuu protested.

"Hee hee. It's useless to feign ignorance," Manuela replied. "Kuu, you're already one of us, right?"

Aaah...so she's a goner.

Zagan had faintly realized that Kuu had already been infected by these two.

"No, that's not it. Kuu isn't going to deny it after all this time..." Kuu said, slowly shaking her head. "Kuu has an apprentice nun friend in the church,

and she has a lot more talent for this.”

“Hmm...? How interesting. Bring her along next time, okay?”

There are more of them out there? Zagan thought, suddenly finding himself unable to hide a grimace.

Gremory was apparently the chairwoman for this meeting. After she took the seat of honor, Manuela sat by her side and Kuu took a seat across from them. Selphy then brought a large plate covered in food and sweets over to the group.

“Now then, let me hear all the love stories I’ve missed in my absence!” Gremory exclaimed.

“I’d rather hear more about your current appearance, Comrade Gremory.”

Even though she’d been separated from Kimaris, Gremory still maintained her teenage form. Well, with her mana exhausted, there was no chance of that changing any time soon.

“Wh-Who cares about me?” Gremory asked, plainly averting her eyes. “More importantly, Comrade Manuela, you must tell us at least one love story of your own.”

“I have none! I wonder why...? Everyone runs away when I start toying with them...”

Zagan wondered whether there was anyone out there who could accept Manuela’s odd desires. It was extremely unlikely, but that was the only way anyone could ever become her romantic partner.

“At this point, I’d be fine with a girl.”

“Don’t look at Kuu, Chief.”

Kuu was indeed a rare specimen who’d been continuously toyed with by Manuela and had managed to overcome it.

“Well, wait a moment,” Gremory said with a cough. “Our meeting will go nowhere if we quarrel amongst ourselves. Let’s see... I was the one who suggested this meeting, so allow me to start with a report of my own.”

Her eyes then turned to Chastille and Barbatos. The two of them couldn’t so much as look each other in the eyes, yet they still somehow managed to eat off the same plate.

“Oh yeah, aren’t you gonna have anything to drink?” Barbatos asked her.

“I’m still a minor, you know? Though, I *am* turning eighteen next month.”

“H-Hmmm. Well, it’s not that far off. I can at least teach you a thing or two about drinking, if you want.”

“Ummm...I don’t really trust you when it comes to food...”

“Huuuh? Why not?! I bet I could make *way* better crap than you!”

“That’s the part I trust least...”

It looked like the two of them had at least calmed down enough to have a proper conversation.

Manuela and Kuu corrected their postures, serious expressions on their faces, as they said in unison, “Let’s hear it.”

Gremory then went on to tell them about what had happened a little before the all-out war with Shere Khan, a few days after the evening Zagan had faced Azazel upon finishing the grand bath at his castle.

Chapter I: The Haunted House's Doppelganger

1

“Shit. It’s no good. It won’t stabilize,” a sorcerer cursed in the darkness. There was no light whatsoever in his surroundings. One couldn’t even tell whether this space was wide or narrow, whether it was a cave or a building, or even if the concepts of up, down, left, and right existed within the space.

The sorcerer’s voice didn’t even echo. It was simply swallowed by the darkness. If anyone else was there, it’d have been impossible to gauge how far away this sorcerer was by sound. That was the way this world had been created.

It was called Purgatory—the subspace belonging to the sorcerer who bore the word as his second name. Despite the lack of light, any sorcerer would at least be able to grasp what was there. Dirty test tubes and grimoires were scattered all over a neglected research table. Soot covered the bookshelves, and items such as decades-old skulls and rusty torture devices laid sprawled across the floor as if having been roughly knocked off said shelves at some point.

The sorcerer paced about and stepped on an old sandwich. He then grimaced in irritation, peeled it off his heel, and chucked it into a corner of the room. He was sure to step on it again a few days later.

“It’s not gonna work at this rate,” he mumbled as he let out a sigh and plopped down onto a chair. The many magic circles establishing this space screamed in protest, signaling imminent danger. Left at large like this, Purgatory would collapse in a few hours, destroying the space entirely.

Normally, a hundred average sorcerers could pour all their efforts into trying to repair it, but they still wouldn’t be able to hold out for a single day. However, Purgatory had been in this state for three days already. In other words, this sorcerer had continued to spend time here all on his own, taking

on the daunting task of constantly repairing this world, balancing it in a critical state where any misstep would cause its annihilation. Such mental fortitude was beyond the realm of humanity, but such power, even if focused in different fields, was a matter of course among the Archdemon candidates who'd been selected one year ago.

“Was that *thing* the other day the cause of all this crap?”

It had happened three nights ago. The sorcerer and his undesirable friend had fought against a terrifying calamity. It was a monster beyond Archdemons and something his undesirable friend would one day have to defeat. It would've been a great cause of celebration if the two had killed each other in the process, but that hadn't happened. Thus, there'd been no worth whatsoever in joining the fray. And yet, when the sorcerer had been about to run away, the face of that stupidly honest and awkward girl had come to mind.

She wouldn't have run away in that situation. She would have surely taken up her sword...and she would have surely died in the process. And that girl had been just in the other room behind the sorcerer at the time.

Before he knew it, he'd lent a hand and joined the battle. Just thinking about it now caused some strange clenching sensation somewhere in his chest. It made him feel helpless. He pounded his chest a few times with a fist to try to fix it.

“Man, I did something really dumb, huh?”

And this was the result. The sorcerer had, of course, used this space during the battle with the calamity. This was a fortress loaded with many different kinds of sorcery. If he launched an attack on the outside from here, even his undesirable friend's ability to devour sorcery would be useless. Depending on how it was used, it was a trump card that could kill even an Archdemon.

Despite that fact, however, when he'd launched an attack from Purgatory, the calamity had been the one to encroach on his territory. He'd tried everything he could to deal with it, but nothing worked. Even when things looked all right, several hours later, the corrosion would start again and the danger alarms would ring.

It ain't goddamn simple to deal a blow to this space.

It was said that far too immense a power could distort even time and space. In truth, the stars in the night sky were said to possess such mass that

they twisted space, allowing one to see stars that should've been obscured. It was possible that this calamity's power could surpass dimensions, distorting the ley lines of the world, or even the flow of time itself. Now that it had come to this, it was probably impossible to contain Purgatory within subspace. As such, there was only one option left.

"Oh well... Guess I'll *step outside* for a bit."

And just like that, the little world known as Purgatory bathed in the sun's light for the first time in about ten years.

2

"Zagan, I wanna try going to a haunted house," Foll requested early in the afternoon in Zagan's castle. She'd gone out shopping with Nephy in the morning. Nowadays, trade had been established with the castle, so most goods were delivered directly, but the time spent thinking about what was for dinner was precious to those two. And while doing that, Foll had apparently heard something in town.

"A haunted house...? What's that?" Zagan asked, furrowing his brows.

"Listen to this," Foll answered, puffing out her chest. "It's apparently a place where a whole lot of ghosts chase everyone around. That's what Manuela said."

"That woman again..."

Outside the castle, there was Manuela, while inside, there was Gremory. Those two always caused some sort of ruckus. Zagan questioned what there was to gain by disturbing his peace and quiet. He'd much rather they stopped teaching his daughter strange things. He felt a headache coming to him, then came across a certain doubt.

"Hm? Aren't ghosts harmful to regular people?"

"Are they?" Foll asked, cocking her head and blinking in confusion. They didn't pose much of a threat to the average sorcerer, but regular civilians had no way of fending them off. Actually, even sorcerers didn't have a particularly good impression of ghosts. They didn't really care about the mystery of the magical phenomenon or anything. To them, ghosts were more like pests that wandered into one's home.

So how did making a game of them become popular? No, wait, how does one even play like that? Zagan pondered. Perhaps some sorcerer was using it

as a means of profit? Still, it was rather baffling.

Alas, there was nobody here to point out their misunderstanding. One was an Archdemon who'd spent his childhood fearing humans above all else—specifically, the furious adults who'd chased him for stealing bread. The other was a young dragon who'd only entered human settlements for the very first time one year ago. Nephy had also spent her childhood practically imprisoned in an already hidden village. None of them could possibly have been familiar with the cultural concept of a test of courage.

After giving it some thought, Zagan nodded and said, “Hmm. Very well. Is it in Kianoides?”

“We can go?”

“We haven't really had many chances to play lately because of Shere Khan and Bifrons. Plus, the grand bath is complete now, so it's just about the right time to take a break.”

Foll shot him a beaming smile.

Well, this is no good. It looks like I've had Foll bottle up far too much lately.

One of Zagan's objectives was to allow his daughter to live like a normal child. What kind of father was he to neglect that?

“Can Nephy join us?” Foll asked, jumping up and placing her hands on Zagan's lap.

“Yeah. If you go get her now, we should be able to go visit it by the evening.”

“I'll go do just that!”

Zagan watched his daughter happily run off without realizing he was smiling. When she was out of sight, though, he suddenly frowned.

“But...ghosts? Seriously? I should prepare myself.”

If ghosts were being used by a facility for fun, he had to be sure not to accidentally eradicate them. No matter how skilled one was, when given the mana of an Archdemon, a mere ghost could be obliterated with ease. Zagan, Foll, and Nephy all had to be careful not to let their mana leak out, not to mention the mana from their Sigils of the Archdemon.

Foll had personally shown interest in this attraction, so Zagan had to let her enjoy herself as much as possible. Due to that fact, Manuela's expectation of “Foll and Nephy getting scared and causing a funny scene” had pretty much flown out the window. Instead, someone else would suffer, but that is a

different story.

3

“What’s wrong, Chastille?”

In her office in Kianoides’s church, Chastille had her scarlet hair tied up to the side like always, a butterfly ornament holding it in place. She was in the middle of her official duties, so there wasn’t a single hint of her crybaby self about her. Instead, she had the dignity of a splendid bishop. The one speaking to her was a dark-skinned elf, Nephteros, who worked as her assistant. Not too long ago, Nephteros’s condition had looked pretty bad, but now her complexion was great. Thanks to that, Chastille had no qualms about relying on her for work.

Without even realizing it, Chastille’s writing hand had come to a halt, leaving the mountain of documents undiminished for several minutes. No, the mountain had, in fact, actually grown larger. Normally, she was just a little careless, but in work mode, it was very rare for her to make such mistakes.

“I just felt a strange chill for some reason... Never mind; it’s nothing. I’m fine.”

Well, that chill had also brought her back to her senses. Nephteros had clearly been worried about her not working, though. And so, Chastille slapped her cheeks to refocus herself.

“Worried about something?” Nephteros asked considerately. “If you’d like, I can hear you out.”

“No, I wouldn’t really call it something I’m worried about...” Chastille mumbled somewhat evasively, looking down at her feet—or more precisely, at her shadow. “Barbatos hasn’t shown up the last few days. It’s not like he’s completely unresponsive, but...”

When she tried talking to him, he rarely answered. And even when he did, he’d be inattentive. He hadn’t vanished from her shadow, but it felt like he was far away. In fact, she felt like he’d been acting strange ever since the day Zagan had built the grand bath in his castle.

Despite what his behavior would suggest, Barbatos was a sorcerer who could fight on equal ground with Archdemon Zagan. She didn’t think he was in any danger, but she still couldn’t help but worry.

“He’s not dead or anything, right?” Nephteros asked with a dubious frown

on her face.

“N-No. Well, he answers every now and then, and he doesn’t seem to be hurt or sick at least.”

“Then there’s no use worrying about it. Isn’t this actually a good thing from the perspective of the church?”

“B-But...”

“Chastille. I don’t know what you think of him, but he’s the type of sorcerer you’re better off not getting involved with.”

Having an argument so sound thrown directly at her made Chastille groan. Kuroka had pointed out the same thing to her once before.

“I mean, on really rare occasions, he shows his good side too, you know?”

“For example...?”

“Huh? Uhhh...”

Nephteros had a look of pity in her eyes, as if she was looking at someone who believed in utter fantasy.

If I can’t prove he has a good side, who in the world can?! Chastille desperately got her thoughts in motion as if challenging the most difficult of calculations.

“Uhhh, oh! Right! When I knocked over a cup of tea at home, he fixed the broken cup for me and then cleaned up the floor all nicely to boot!”

It had been in the middle of the night, so Chastille had started panicking when Barbatos came out of the shadows and said, “Goddammit, the hell are you doing, crybaby?” before taking care of everything. That should’ve proved he was a good man at heart, and yet, Nephteros looked even more exasperated with her.

“You do know that means you let him into your room like it was perfectly fine, right? Are you really okay with that?”

“Huh...?”

Now that she put it like that, Chastille felt like it had, in fact, been a pretty precarious situation, which sent sweat pouring down her forehead.

“Th-That’s not... Um, but...”

“Hey, are you really all right?”

And just as Nephteros started to lose her composure over Chastille’s careless remark...

“Tee hee hee. Lady Nephteros, you mustn’t pry into another’s private life.”

Before anyone knew it, a small girl was seated on one of the office's sofas. She had golden eyes and hair, and a creepy stuffed doll sat atop her lap. She'd even helped herself to a cup of tea that was meant for visitors.

"Alshiera...? Why are you here?" Nephteros asked.

"Oh my, *now* you ask? I've been here the last three days..."

Chastille hadn't noticed that either, so she stiffened spectacularly at the thought.

The vampire who handily defeated Lord Michael...or should I call him Archdemon Andrealphus?

Honestly, if this girl got serious, Chastille wouldn't have been able to do anything at all without her Anointed Armor. It was questionable if she could even buy Nephteros the time to escape. Why was Alshiera here instead of staying put at Zagan's castle? And how had she gone unnoticed for three whole days?

Chastille thought she'd already had an understanding of how utterly terrifying this vampire was, but she was made to realize how lightly she'd taken things. She was suddenly alert, but Nephteros squeezed her hand calmly.

"It's fine," Nephteros whispered. "If she was planning something, she'd have already done it. And if big bro is letting her live, then she's not our enemy... So long as you believe what Nephelia says, that is."

"Aaah... I know. Thank you, Nephteros."

For some reason, it was Alshiera who looked awfully bewildered.

"Um, what is it?" Chastille asked timidly.

Alshiera placed her hand to her forehead as if deeply conflicted over something, then said, "It's nothing... I haven't gotten that reaction in quite some time, so it felt rather nostalgic. I'm not sure how to react myself."

"Aaah..."

Chastille and Nephteros both sympathized with that. They figured it out from that simple explanation. Spending three months in Zagan's castle would have made pretty much anyone feel like they were being messed with and manipulated.

I get it! Everyone who goes to Zagan's place gets reduced to a crybaby! It isn't just me!

Chastille's group at the church wasn't all that familiar with Alshiera, but just as Nephy had said, it looked like she wasn't a bad person.

“Um, then may I ask what business brought you here?” Chastille asked.

“Oh, yes... There’s something I’d like to confirm. Though, I don’t intend anyone any harm, so please don’t mind me.”

“But...this is my office.”

The people of Zagan’s castle really did act far too freely. Chastille couldn’t keep up with them. She let out an exasperated sigh as Alshiera giggled once more.

“More importantly, weren’t we talking about your worries?” Alshiera said.

“Huh? Ummm...do you know what’s going on with Barbatos?”

“I do at least know where he is and what he’s doing.”

Doesn’t that mean you know everything?

Why did this vampire go about things in such a roundabout fashion? Chastille could feel a headache coming, but right now, she was in work mode. And so, she pulled herself together and got the conversation moving.

“Has something happened to him? Um, he usually helps me out, so if something is troubling him, I’d like to be of use...”

Alshiera casually took a sip of tea before answering, saying, “There is no need for alarm. A problem has occurred in his research lab, so he’s simply swamped with work trying to deal with it. As a knight, you wouldn’t be of any use even if you went there... Well, you could at least comfort him, I suppose.”

“C-C-C-C-C-Comfort?!”

D-Does she mean what I think she does?! Chastille thought, her face turned bright red as Alshiera let out an amused laugh.

“Oh my. And what exactly did you just imagine, I wonder? I meant that in the sense that he would probably cheer up if he saw your face, just so you know.”

“O-Oh! Right! That! What else could it mean?!” Chastille’s voice cracked, leaving Nephteros utterly confused.

“Is there another meaning to the word?” she asked with a cock of the head.

“Hwuh?! U-U-U-U-Ummm...”

Was Nephteros simply ignorant? Or did she know and couldn’t put two and two together? Her innocent reaction left Chastille feeling even more flustered.

“Well, there are many things a young maiden can’t speak of. You shouldn’t pry,” Alshiera said.

“Is that so?”

It felt like such a merciless act to be saved by someone who looked at her like she was extremely pitiful.

Chastille cleared her throat, then got things back on track by asking, “Um, is it nearby? I’m a little curious. I think I should at least pay him a courtesy call once I’m done with my work.”

“Yes. It’s within walking distance, even.”

Just as Chastille was about to ask for the exact location, Nephteros made a troubled expression.

“What’s wrong, Nephteros?” Chastille asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing, really. This report simply caught my eye, but I can look into it myself. It shouldn’t be a problem if Richard goes with me.”

“Was there an incident? What happened?” Chastille asked as she took a peek at the document Nephteros was staring at, which detailed information on a mansion on the outskirts of town.

“A haunted house...?”

“Yes. It seems ghosts show up even in the domain of an Archdemon. I’m pretty sure any Angelic Knight can deal with one, but there are cases where sorcerers enslave ghosts. It also seems like the neighborhood children have been sneaking in, so just in case, I’ll go take a look.”

“H-Hang on, if children are wandering in, then I’ll—”

“Aren’t you bad with ghosts?”

“Wh-Why do you know that?!” Chastille exclaimed. She was speechless at being seen through so thoroughly. With that, Alshiera half rose from her seat to take a look at the document herself.

“Oh... Oh dear, now this is...” she trailed off, smiling as if she was looking at something awfully amusing. “This may be none of my business, but I believe it would be better for Lady Chastille to deal with it personally.”

“Huh?” Chastille mumbled and froze, prompting Alshiera to avert her eyes awkwardly.

“Well, people are cut out for different things. I won’t force the issue, but I believe you going will provide better results.”

Honestly speaking, Chastille still didn’t know what was going through this girl’s mind, but she didn’t sense any malice behind those words.

“Fine... I’ll go.”

“Are you sure?” Nephteros asked. “Even if you don’t force yourself to go, I can handle it.”

“No, she must have a reason for saying that. I’d like to go, even if just to verify her temperament.”

“Is that so...? Well, don’t push yourself too hard.”

Nephteros didn’t look entirely satisfied by this conclusion, but she didn’t press the issue. Instead, she looked at Alshiera and said, “I don’t get it. What do you gain from helping Chastille? We don’t know you well enough to believe this is purely out of some sense of goodwill.”

“I see... You do have a point,” Alshiera remarked, sinking into thought for a moment. “Well, in a sense, the trouble that has befallen that man was caused by getting involved with me. As such, I’d like to lend a hand, even if just a little.”

“That man...? I was talking about Chastille, though...”

“It’s the same thing.”

With that, Alshiera sat back down as if losing interest in the conversation and took another sip of tea.

I don’t know what awaits me there, but I’ll just have to go take a look... or so Chastille thought, but she didn’t really understand. She had no idea how long it’d been since she’d experienced the distress of having to fight on her own.

4

“So? What brought this on? It’s weird for you to lend me a hand—Enchantress.”

Inside Purgatory—which was now back outside and just a decrepit old mansion—Barbatos stood face-to-face with an old fomorian in a room on the second floor. Her name was Gremory...and she was one of the former Archdemon candidates and also Zagan’s trusted left hand.

“Kee hee hee! There’s no need to act like a stranger. We’re not all that unfamiliar with each other, now are we? If you have a problem, I’m fine with lending you a hand.”

The old woman smiled, revealing yellow teeth, to which Barbatos returned a twisted smile of his own.

“Hah! About the only idiot who’d trust a sorcerer saying that would be our crybaby.”

For some reason, Gremory reeled backward before smiling in satisfaction as she held up a finger.

“Kee hee! To be greeted with such love power...! Even with my eyes, I couldn’t have predicted such growth from you.”

“I’ve got no clue what the hell you’re saying.”

So this is the granny who’s always causing trouble for Zagan?

Barbatos was already up to his neck in work trying to repair Purgatory, so he didn’t want to be bothered with any other kind of nuisance. It was only when he looked like he had no choice but to drive her away that the old woman’s face turned serious.

“Well, observing you and your current situation up close will be quite beneficial for me,” she said, holding up a bony finger. “First, there’s the incident that happened on the day the grand bath was built. My liege has told me all about what occurred, but I’d like to confirm as much as I can with my own eyes.”

This did, in fact, make sense coming from one of Zagan’s subordinates.

Not that my grasp of it is all that different from that asshole’s.

“Second,” Gremory continued, raising another finger, “I get to personally see your research lab. That, in itself, has worth to a sorcerer, doesn’t it?”

“Well, you’ve got a point there.”

Barbatos was a former Archdemon candidate, and even the Archdemons couldn’t match him when it came to leaping through space. Getting an opportunity to steal his sorcery was an alluring proposition, even for another former Archdemon candidate. And on his end, Barbatos would be able to observe Gremory’s sorcery up close, making this equally lucrative in his eyes.

“And third, well, comes the most important reason,” Gremory said, raising a third finger. She then narrowed her eyes, nearly drawing an overawed utterance out of Barbatos’s mouth. And so, the sorcerer who only ranked lower than the Archdemons solemnly declared, “My instincts tell me I’ll be able to witness a massive swell of love power here!”

Barbatos didn’t really understand what that meant, so he asked, “Hey...this love power you keep rambling on about... The hell is it?”

“Kee hee! You need not worry about that. You may simply remain as you

are. I shall benefit just like that.”

He still didn't really understand what she was saying, but he felt like he was being toyed with.

Oh, it's that. That thing I feel from everyone around me whenever I get involved with the crybaby.

Their gazes always made him feel uncomfortable, though he'd never sensed any hostility to go with it. This sorcerer had never once believed that the baffling phenomenon of “being loved” would ever involve him. As such, he could never understand.

“Well, do you see now that I have more than enough to gain by helping you?” Gremory asked.

“I guess...?”

The old woman held out her right hand with an unpleasant smile on her face. In any case, Barbatos was at the end of his rope handling this on his own. And as such, he reluctantly shook her hand.

“Now then, what should I do?” she asked.

“Well, you can start by identifying all the anomalies in the mansion. I'm too busy restoring Purgatory to get around to it.”

“Hmmm...? Is this mansion not your base? It seems...a little defenseless.”

Gremory had a point. The mansion had nearly no defenses whatsoever against intruders.

“What do you expect? Trespassing is normally impossible.”

This building usually existed inside the subspace of Purgatory. Thus, it was pretty much impossible to invade, and if someone did by some kind of happenstance, he could just throw them out. Due to that fact, defenses were meaningless, especially since bringing the mansion out wasn't even supposed to be in the realm of consideration.

Well, maybe that's why the monster managed to encroach on it...

“The inside has at least been turned into a labyrinth,” he said as if making up excuses. “Well...you'll take less than a second to break through it, though. There's also a reasonable number of ghosts around. I released them in here under the command of a lich. They've been ordered to throw out any intruders.”

Liches were high-ranking ghosts known as undead kings. They possessed considerable intelligence and could dominate other kinds of ghosts. When using the spirits of dead sorcerers as a base, it was even possible for them to

use sorcery. And it was, of course, also possible to get them to obey detailed instructions.

Necromancy was outside Barbatos's field of expertise, but his teacher had been familiar with it, so Barbatos could at least put it to use. The mansion had only just come out of Purgatory, but the neighborhood waifs who'd wandered by had already started settling in, so he'd ordered the lich to deal with them.

"You're just throwing them out?" Gremory asked with a confused look on her face. "How gentle a response for the one known as Purgatory."

"Huh? If I kill a buncha kids, the crybaby...I mean, that asshole Zagan will never shut up."

"I see! Nice love pow...I mean, how logical!"

"Right?!"

It was questionable whether they really understood each other, but Barbatos's instincts warned him not to delve too deeply into the matter.

"Hrm? An intruder already...?" Gremory suddenly muttered. "Huh? Wait, what is this...?"

"What? Is it bad?"

"Um...what do you make of this?"

Barbatos turned his attention to his barrier, then froze.

"Hey...the hell's going on?"

An abnormality that the mansion's owner had never once expected had begun to take shape.

5

"Hmm... We haven't found anything yet. Do people really enjoy this?"

Zagan's group was the first to step foot inside the haunted house. The dirty interior was littered with skeletons, experimentation tools, rusted torture devices, and other such things.

"Mmm... They say you get to play tag with ghosts," Foll answered with a reassuring nod, clenching her hand tightly in front of her chest.

"Well, I suppose the environment is just right for ghosts."

As they possessed no corporeal form, ghosts couldn't actually touch anyone, but they could possess people and manipulate them to attack others. That made them seem somewhat troublesome, but in truth, they had more glaring weaknesses than the average vampire.

First, they couldn't go out under the light of day. It was also easy enough to destroy them using anything charged with mana. Simply touching them with the church's so-called holy power—also known as aura—would erase them entirely. As such, a dirty mansion like this, where everything seemed to be disconnected from the concept of sunlight, was very agreeable for ghosts.

That's why the clean freaks among sorcerers really hate them, I guess.

A house haunted by ghosts gave off an unclean impression. Zagan was indifferent to such things, but even he reflexively tried to squash any ghosts he found near him. Even if they weren't dangerous, it simply felt unpleasant to have them around. With such thoughts in mind, Zagan started to get a little anxious and turned to Nephy.

“Are you all right, Nephy? Um, places like this are a little...”

“Yes, I'm fine. It reminds me of your castle when we first met, Master Zagan.”

“Hngh...! I-Is that so?! Good, then.”

Now that he thought about it, his castle had pretty much been in the same state back then. Well, it may have actually been worse, considering how much more space there was. Ghosts had, of course, settled in there as well. They'd all been strays of a sort, not in Zagan's employ. However, once they'd been exposed to the aura of a high elf, they'd all been exorcized by Nephy without her even realizing it.

Hang on, doesn't that make it extremely difficult for us to meet any ghosts?

Zagan could sense the presence of what appeared to be ghosts inside the building, but they'd all scattered when his group had entered. He'd told Nephy and Foll to suppress their mana already, but at this rate, it would be difficult to enjoy these games Foll had mentioned.

Just then, Zagan's foot kicked something on the ground.

“Hm...?”

He looked down and picked up the book he saw on the floor. It was a grimoire.

Wasn't this stolen from my archives...?

There weren't even five people in the entire world who could steal a grimoire from Zagan's castle. What's more, there was only one idiot out there who would actually attempt the task. Taking a closer look, it seemed the cover was smeared with the culprit's blood.

Zagan wanted to complain about him not treating his property with care, but he knew this had probably happened because of the trap he'd set. That man was a habitual criminal in this regard, so Zagan had set up particularly fiendish traps near the grimoires he was likely to try and filch. All things considered, it was pretty impressive that he'd kept trying despite getting beaten half to death every time.

If this was Barbatos's mansion, then at the very least, it wasn't a place for children to come and play. Zagan had finally arrived at the possibility that they'd made a mistake. However...

Nephy and Foll are having fun, so whatever!

Regardless, he decided to stay in the spirit of being here to play and enjoy their time together.

6

"Eep... Why am I all alone in a place like this?" Chastille muttered to herself, having gotten cold feet.

It was already past midnight, and a veil of darkness enveloped her surroundings. The investigation of a haunted house was, in fact, an Angelic Knight's duty. Plus, that vampire girl had told her to come here, so there had to be some reason why she had to go instead of the other Angelic Knights.

But scary things are still scary!

The mansion in question was rather old. There was a terrace by the wooden door, where a small table was placed with two chairs. Large windows lined its walls, looking as if they welcomed the light of day. That description made the house seem classy, but in truth, the majority of the wooden walls were blackened and covered in moss. The windows were cracked, and the wind shook the curtains behind them. What looked like skeletons occupied the two chairs, and the terrace's floorboards were discolored and peeling.

Chastille could definitely understand how children who sought the thrill of being scared would be attracted to the place, but she personally wanted to get out as soon as possible.

Lady Alshiera vanished without me noticing too...

Chastille was currently dressed in a simple shirt and skirt, much like any regular civilian. She had her Sacred Sword with her, but no Anointed Armor.

It was past office hours, so she was in her casual clothing, rendering her completely in crybaby mode.

Alshiera had actually recommended this. This was an investigation, but there weren't any charges pressed against the owner of the house. Being dressed like someone from the church would make this seem like an abuse of power. Or so she'd said, anyway. Now that Chastille thought about it, she'd been coaxed into doing this with a pretty vague excuse.

What's more, Alshiera had spoken like she'd planned to tag along, but before Chastille knew it, the vampire was nowhere in sight. Even if it was unreasonable to resent her for this, Chastille would've preferred to be told beforehand if she wasn't going to have any company.

She took another look at the mansion. It had apparently been built here around seventy years ago. According to the church's records, its last owner was a man named Randall Wells, who'd been dead for several decades now. He'd died of old age and had no relatives, so the house had been abandoned, as there was nobody to inherit it. Thus did the building remain here without a problem for decades. Thinking back on those details, Chastille cocked her head.

Huh? I feel like it's actually kind of clean, considering it's been abandoned for so long and all...

It was rather run-down due to a lack of maintenance, but it wasn't as dusty or rotted as she'd expected. Decades were more than enough for an abandoned house to become dilapidated. Buildings needed regular maintenance to prevent them from falling apart, after all. Perhaps, much like Nephteros had inferred, a sorcerer or the like had settled in.

In that case...I'd rather they keep the place a little cleaner.

Now that she'd come this far, she couldn't go back without doing a proper investigation. Having said that, however, she needed the courage to enter all on her lonesome.

"Barbatooos... *Hic*... You're really not around?" she said as she started talking to her own shadow without even realizing it. However, she didn't get a response. Normally, he would've at least said something, even if he spat curses all the while. She didn't think it would be so disheartening not to hear his voice.

I guess he's in the middle of his own crisis, right?

Considering his personality, he was too stubborn to go to anyone for help.

And yet, she also felt like he would come save her if she got in any real danger. They didn't really have a special relationship or anything, but she didn't want to burden him either.

“*Hic...* Pull it together, Chastille! The people's safety rests on your shoulders! What kind of Angelic Knight would you be if you didn't put in some work here?!” Chastille exclaimed, firing herself up even while trembling violently enough for her scarlet hair to jiggle about at the side of her head.

“Excuse me...” she whispered, barely squeezing out her voice as she knocked on the door. “Is anyone home?”

From the way Lady Alshiera talked, she seemed to imply someone's living here...

It was like Alshiera had sent Chastille here as a form of apology for causing that person trouble. Well, that could've also been Alshiera's way of deceiving her. Still, Chastille hoped that whoever lived here was a normal, upstanding person.

No reply came even as she waited, however. And after nervously staying put for a few more minutes, Chastille stepped into the haunted house.

7

“What the hell? Why is that asshole Zagan here? And now the crybaby too?!” Barbatos yelled from his second-story study.

Not even an hour after Gremory reported the discovery of a first intruder, a third had entered. Had they mistaken this place for some kind of theme park?

Zagan was sure to figure out that this was Barbatos's base eventually. It was even possible he already had. Well, he wasn't likely to destroy it just to show off, but that undesirable friend of his wasn't such a softhearted soul to come out here out of consideration either. And honestly, the particularly horrible part about this was that Zagan's bride and daughter were with him.

That asshole suddenly turns into a fucking idiot whenever the elf and brat are with him...

Zagan's wariness as a sorcerer simply vanished into thin air somehow when it concerned them. He would take action based on his current whims, and in most cases, it brought misfortune to those involved. Barbatos had been

the greatest victim of this. He could claim that title with ease. In other words, Zagan was more ruthless than usual in these cases. It was unlikely that the mansion would get by this passing storm unscathed.

“This is bad, Purgatory! My liege has started eradicating the ghosts!”

“That’s why I hate him!”

He really did choose the best times to harass Barbatos. Was he actually keeping him under surveillance? And then there was Chastille. She had her Sacred Sword, but for some reason, she was in casual attire instead of her Anointed Armor. She’d been so busy with work lately that it made her look rather dazzling...no, defenseless. If caught off guard, even a ghost could be a danger to her. What’s more, when Barbatos listened through the shadows, he heard something rather distressing...

“I’m not scared. I’m not scared. I’m not scared... Hgggh, Barbatooos... No! I’m okay! I’m not scared. I’m not scared...”

She was continuously muttering to herself, clearly panicking all the while. Barbatos felt a sudden pang of guilt for leaving her alone at a time like this, then some other indescribable emotion overwhelmed him upon hearing her call his name. Due to all that, he slammed his head a few times into a pillar.



“What’s the matter, Purgatory?! I felt a sudden surge of love power!”

“It’s nothing! I’m perfectly sane!” Barbatos replied as he shook his head casually, even as blood dribbled down his forehead.

“Wonderful! The love power I feel from you rivals my liege’s! Oh! May I use Memorandum to record this moment?”

“I’ve got no clue what you’re jabbering about, but don’t you dare!”

Every time he agonized over something, this stupid granny would go crazy like this. Barbatos was starting to understand Zagan’s daily hardships.

“Each and every last one of these assholes... Fuck! Anyway, this one’s the biggest problem, huh?” Barbatos murmured as he stared at the image in his crystal ball. It reflected the third intruder—the one Gremory had first reported to him.

“Hmm...” Gremory muttered with interest, peeking at the crystal. “Is that a variant of a doppelganger?”

For some reason, the intruder resembled Barbatos greatly. He wasn’t identical, though. There was one aspect that decisively differentiated the two.

“I’ve been a sorcerer for some hundred and fifty years, but it’s my first time seeing one,” she added.

“How do you think we should deal with it?”

Normally, Barbatos wouldn’t even have considered asking someone else for advice. However, he was actually still twenty-one. He prided himself on rivaling the Archdemons when it came to his specialty, but Gremory was far beyond him in every other field. And despite her ridiculous behavior, this granny was a first-rate sorcerer of the highest class.

“I remember reading about similar examples in an old book,” she said with a nod.

“And how’d they get resolved?” Barbatos asked, a hint of hope in his voice.

“They didn’t,” Gremory replied gravely. “It only documented the aftermath.”

Barbatos was speechless. The answer was far heavier than he’d imagined. The sorcerers of the past weren’t all incompetent. In fact, there may have even been some who’d been more powerful than he was now. And yet, this detail implied that there’d been no survivors.

“In one case, it resulted in a fight to the death the moment the two met. Both parties struck each other down. In another, even after killing the

doppelganger, identical wounds to the ones dealt to the doppelganger appeared on their body, leading to their demise.”

“So it’s a bad idea to kill it...? How ’bout just throwin’ it out?”

“There was a case of one causing an incident without the original knowing it and bringing calamity upon them. In the end, they attacked the doppelganger to try to stop it, then died.”

Barbatos was about to suggest capturing or sealing it, but immediately realized it would be meaningless. If the doppelganger died, he would as well. It would be extremely difficult to seal one and keep it alive for an extended period of time. Also, considering the fact that the doppelganger possessed the same power as him, the seal would eventually be broken. Capturing it would just buy time, nothing more.

“Goddammit! Is this one of the reasons things are going out of whack here?”

“Hmm... I can’t deny the possibility that the doppelganger is responsible for the distortion in space-time. Having said that, we don’t have a way of dealing with it.”

Gremory was utterly clueless. Barbatos had no way of dealing with this situation as it was, and here Zagan and Chastille were loitering around the area. If either of them encountered the doppelganger, nothing good would come of it.

In that case, he considered sending Gremory after it. However, taking her behavior just moments ago into account, that sounded like a recipe for disaster. Something even worse was likely to happen.

Seriously, what the hell do I do here...?

After agonizing over the matter for a few minutes, the light of reason suddenly vanished from his eyes.

“Aaah, whatever. Let’s just blow up the whole goddamn mansion.”

He decided to order the lich to self-destruct and blow the place to kingdom come. He’d given the thing enough power to control all the ghosts, so if the lich were to self-destruct, everything even remotely magical would be obliterated. After that, he could just create a new Purgatory.

Zagan’s group could stave off an explosion of that scale one way or another without any help. And as for Chastille, Barbatos could get her away through the shadows. If the mansion was responsible for the doppelganger, then maybe the thing would vanish along with it. In the worst-case scenario,

this would kill Barbatos too, but at this rate, he didn't really care anymore.

"Gremory. Get the lich to—"

"Oh. The lich just got killed."

Barbatos collapsed to his knees.

"How can anyone be so cruel after busting into someone else's house...?"

Well, those words could've been turned right back at him, considering his habitual behavior. In any case, just when Barbatos was finally reduced to tears, Gremory suddenly threw him a thumbs-up.

"Nice love power!"

"Shut your trap!"

8

"Haaah... Haaah... The hell is going on?! Why's my house full of goddamn ghosts?!"

A young boy, just a little older than ten, hid in fear, trembling as he cursed his luck. He had some knowledge of sorcery, so his teacher had even praised him for his talent.

But this is nuts!

He was capable enough to handle a ghost or two on his own, but there were far too many of them in this place. He'd already bumped into more than ten of the things. The entire mansion was probably filled with more than a hundred of them. What kind of accumulation of sin would call forth so many evil spirits? Still, if handled patiently, it was possible to take care of them all. The problem was the one specimen among them that was on an entirely different level.

The boy sensed a presence behind him and cupped his hands over his mouth, holding his breath. Immediately after that, an eerie shadow appeared behind him, swaying down the hallway. It wore a robe like a sorcerer, but the arms peeking through its sleeves were bleach-white bones. The most dreadful aspect of it, however, was that its face had no skin but was still covered in meat. Its wide-open eye sockets looked like portals into the depths of hell. It was as if its face had been peeled off. Its skeletal transformation progressed more toward its lower half. There weren't even bones left from its knees down.

A lich—a high-class undead monster that used a sorcerer as its base—had

appeared before him. The boy had no chance against it.

Teacher...

The boy desperately killed off any such thoughts. His teacher wouldn't save him. Perhaps he would protect the boy, but not save him. He didn't have a teacher to rely on anymore. He was all alone, so he was trembling violently when suddenly, he heard a hair-raising voice.

"Hic... Is anybody there...? Sob... I wanna go home..."

The voice made the boy jerk upright, knocking over something nearby. The lich that had been passing behind him suddenly turned his way as a result. He knew those pitch-black eye sockets captured his figure perfectly.

"Eek... Stay back. Someone save me..."

And just as a pitiful shriek escaped his lips...

"Shine! Azrael!"

A beam of light bisected the terrifying lich. And it wasn't just the lich either. It was as if the gloomy atmosphere enveloping the entire mansion was torn open. A refreshing breeze blew through the broken window, allowing the faint moonlight to pour in. The light illuminated a girl wielding a sword. She was a fair bit older than the boy and was dressed like the daughter of a well-off family. Contrasting this was the unbecoming large sword in her hands. An Angelic Knight... Well, she didn't really look like one, but she didn't look like a sorcerer either.

So pretty... A woman...?

The boy felt a sudden throbbing in his chest. She'd cut down the lich with a single blow, the moonlight shining over her noble figure. She was like a maiden of war. However, that noble image only lasted for an instant. The boy spotted her trembling hands and the tears filling her eyes.

How lame... he thought, his evaluation of her plummeting immediately.

"A child...?" the girl said, running his way. *"A-Are you okay?"*

With that, the boy finally noticed that he'd shamefully fallen on his butt.

"Th-This ain't nothing!"

He was a little astonished at himself for acting all haughty despite having to be saved, but the girl smiled without looking like she really took any offense.

"Mmm... Looks like you've got plenty of energy in you," she said, holding out her hand. *"This place is a little dangerous. Do you want to leave with me?"*

“Y-Yeah...”

Was this what people called magnanimity? The boy had never had anyone like this in his life. He timidly took her hand. It was unbelievably soft and warm for a hand that could wield such a large sword. And yet, it also trembled ever so slightly.

Huh? Ain't she just as scared as me?

Even so, she'd stood against that terrifying lich and saved him, whereas he'd only been able to fall backward and scream for help.

Man...I'm the lame one here...

The boy stood back up, and then the girl flashed him a relieved smile.

“I'm Chastille.”

“I'm...Wells.”

“Wells?” the girl repeated in a surprised tone. “Are you related to Randall Wells?”

“Huh? Uhhh, yeah. I guess...”

“Related” wasn't quite the right word. That was one of the names his teacher had given him. Though, perhaps it was actually the name of someone from the past. Whatever the case, the boy hadn't heard any of the specifics.

“A sorcerer does not so carelessly reveal their true name.”

That was what his teacher had said upon giving the boy this name. The boy respected...*had* respected the man.

The boy—Randall Wells—nodded to the girl.

“Okay then, Wells. For now, let's get out of here,” Chastille said, walking the wrong way.

“Not that way. The exit's over there.”

“Huh? But...”

Things had gotten somewhat out of hand, but this house was still his home. Wells pulled back his hand and walked down the hallway, immediately coming upon the door to the entrance hall. He opened it, then suddenly froze.

“Huh...?”

There was no entrance hall there. Instead, a dirty room covered in creepy torture devices and experimentation tools entered his field of vision.

“No way! This is supposed to be the exit!”

“Are you certain?”

“I ain't lying!” Wells spontaneously yelled.

“I’m sure you aren’t,” Chastille said, kindly ignoring his outburst and brushing his head. “I’ve heard there’s sorcery capable of twisting space. Isn’t it something like that?”

“Ain’t that kinda sorcery stupidly complicated? That’s enough for someone to get picked as a candidate for the next Archdemon.”

Wells’s teacher had once brought him to an audience with the Archdemon who ruled this town, Marchosias. The Archdemon possessed a terrifying presence, and Wells hadn’t been able to look him straight in the eyes. Why would a sorcerer powerful enough to stand on that level be in his house?

“I see, an Archdemon candidate,” Chastille repeated with a serious nod. “It’ll be a little tough without any Anointed Armor.”

“You...don’t doubt me?”

Even considering the abnormality of what was going on, it would’ve been fair to ridicule him for thinking an Archdemon candidate was involved. And yet, there wasn’t a shadow of doubt in Chastille’s eyes.

“I know a sorcerer who can manipulate space,” she said. “You’re definitely not wrong.”

What a weird woman...

Seeing her take the words of a child at face value, Wells felt his cheeks getting hotter.

“Sorcery may look like haphazard nonsense, but I’m told there are proper laws that govern it,” Chastille said, searching the ground with a troubled look. “So then, there must be something here regulating the abnormality.”

“It’s useless. Any first-rate sorcerer would make it impossible to find. Someone who can bend space ain’t gonna leave such a simple trail.”

“Are you perhaps a sorcerer yourself?” Chastille asked curiously.

“Who knows...?”

Wells averted his eyes, and Chastille smiled at him again.

“Let’s take a look around,” she said in a comforting tone. “We might find a clue of some sort.”

She tried opening a few doors, but all of them led to similar rooms. Obviously, none of them led outside, and there wasn’t even a staircase anywhere leading to the second floor either. She tried looking for a window or something that they could slip through, but none looked like they could be opened. It just felt like they were going in circles.

Chastille ran to another door, opened it, then slumped her shoulders

dejectedly.

“I thought I came through this door... It’s also a dead end.”

She said that she’d come in from the outside. Nevertheless, the door she’d used led elsewhere. Just then, the two of them heard the sound of a door behind them shutting.

“Hm?! Did you hear that?” Chastille asked, going out into the hallway with her sword at the ready.

“Y-Yeah.”

Ghosts couldn’t open doors. So then, who else was in this mansion aside from them? And just when Wells tried peeking into the hallway himself..

“Hide!” Chastille exclaimed as she suddenly threw her arms around him and pushed him back into the room. He ended up with his face buried in her chest. It was really soft. He could feel her heart beating like a hammer. She looked slender, so the unexpectedly large bulges covering his face had him all the more flustered.



“Wh-Wha—?!”

“Shhhhhh!”

An instant later, a swarm of ghosts ran by them.

Wh-What the hell is that?!

He’d never heard of ghosts working in groups. The only time they could was when something was dominating them, but Chastille had killed the lich.

No way... Is there something in here beyond the power of a lich?!

It was true that the abnormality in this mansion could only be explained as an act of sorcery. However, could a sorcerer so powerful that they were capable of manipulating space itself really be involved? Wells shuddered at the thought as the swarm of ghosts quickly passed by.

“Looks like they’re gone...” Chastille said, letting the strength out of her arms.

“Wh-What the hell was that?”

“I’m not sure, but they seemed to be running away from something...”

“Running...?”

Wells was horrified. Ghosts dominated by a lich or sorcerer didn’t possess a sense of self. Ghosts were just spirits clinging to the world based on some grudge or regret, after all. The only thing they were really capable of was possessing the living to try to kill someone. But then, what kind of monster could make them ignore the living completely and run away? Chastille seemed to understand this too. As such, she stood with a stern expression and pointed a sharp gaze down the hallway.

One of the doors was repeatedly opening and closing on its own. And it wasn’t like the doorknob was broken and the wind was pushing it around or anything either. Someone was clearly responsible for this phenomenon. Wells gulped and looked up at Chastille, clearly distressed.

“Let’s go take a look,” she said. “Stay close behind me.”

“R-Right.”

Chastille held her sword in one hand and took Well’s hand in her other as she slowly walked down the hallway. Standing before the door in question, she raised her voice in bewilderment.

“Wh-What? What’s going on here?”

Wells peeked inside after she did and saw a clean room he’d never seen before. When they’d last looked in here, it had been filled with bleach-white skeletons and torture devices. Not even sorcery capable of manipulating

space could explain this change. The abnormalities within the mansion had far surpassed Wells's understanding already.

9

"Hmm... Cleaning things up yourself once in a while feels nice."

Archdemon Zagan wiped the sweat off his brow with a cheerful smile, a rag and a feather duster in hand. He was trying out some cleaning like a normal person would without relying on any sorcery.

"Yes. It feels wonderful to make a room all tidy," Nephy replied, smiling before cocking her head. "But should we really be doing this? They say this is a haunted house..."

"Ghosts aren't showing up at all..." Foll added, puffing her cheeks out in disappointment.

Zagan plopped his hand onto her head, then continued petting her for a while. No longer able to keep it up, Foll let the strength out of her cheeks.

Well, with an Archdemon, a high elf, and a dragon here, ghosts will avoid us like the plague.

Their original goal of exploring a haunted house had been impossible from the start. As such, they had ended up cleaning instead.

Thanks to that, we at least recovered some of my stolen grimoires.

After going through several rooms, they'd retrieved somewhere around a hundred books. Zagan had thought that his collection had grown smaller every now and then, but he hadn't believed it'd been to this scale. He was the type who had no attachment to any particular book he'd already read, but they were still useful for his subordinates. Thus, he considered tightening the management of his archives as a result of this shocking revelation. The reason he'd suddenly started cleaning was also a form of punishment for himself.

"Nephy, you don't need to worry about that," Zagan said with a bright smile. "Ghosts aren't coming out, and we've even gone as far as cleaning the place up. We should be thanked for it, if anything."

"I see. I suppose you're right."

The virtuous girl didn't look fully satisfied with his explanation, but she didn't object either.

"At least this place works as a maze," Foll said. "This door goes

somewhere else each time you open it.”

She noisily opened and shut the door repeatedly for fun to showcase that point.



That was probably due to a barrier Barbatos had set up to turn the place into a labyrinth. If they got separated, it would be extremely difficult to meet back up. When it came to manipulating space, that man really did have magnificent skill. The construction of such an intricate circuit was fascinating. Zagan could overpower and destroy it by devouring the sorcery or using Heaven's Phosphor, but breaking through it with proper means would have been backbreaking work, even for him.

"What purpose is there in turning a haunted house into a labyrinth, though?" Nephy asked with another cock of her head. Since she'd come here to enjoy it like an entertainment facility, that was an obvious question.

"Maybe it's fun to get lost while running away from ghosts?" Foll suggested.

"How does one have fun getting lost?" Nephy asked, shuddering as if recalling a bad memory.

"Have you ever gotten lost before?" Zagan asked.

"Um... Yes. When I was little, I tried running away, as I found myself unable to stand my treatment in the village. But I couldn't find my way out of the forest, so I ended up back at the village. When I returned, everyone looked at me with hateful eyes," Nephy answered, smiling bitterly as if talking about the silly mistake of a child before continuing. "Thinking back on it now, perhaps the spirits of the forest were worried and guided me back there. However, at the time, it felt like the reality that I could never run away from the village was thrust before me, so I gave up on ever trying to escape again."

As she had the ability to speak to the spirits of nature, Nephy could've asked them for directions, but it would've been difficult for a child to survive alone in the forest. People called them the northern holy lands, but those forests were still filled with fiendish wildlife, and there was also the problem of finding food. Thus, the spirits had shown her the way back.

"I see. I've had a similar experience," Zagan said, a nostalgic look in his eyes. "I was in the middle of running away after snitching some food, but I got lost in the town's sewer. It was pitch-black. I spent a few days wandering around without knowing left from right."

What's more, when he'd gotten tired and tried to sleep, rats had crawled out and snapped at him, mistaking him for prey. He hadn't resorted to eating or drinking the sewage, but he'd had to make do with drops of water falling

from the ceiling and what seemed like discarded meat from local taverns. It had, however, left him on the verge of death from food poisoning the next week.

“From my point of view, you must have both wisdom and strength to enjoy getting lost,” he said in deep admiration.

“Yes,” Nephy agreed. “Had I been smarter, perhaps I could’ve had more fun back then.”

“You two have had it so rough...”

Zagan felt that his daughter was looking at them in astonishment again, but he ignored her as he earnestly nodded along. After that, Nephy crouched down in front of Foll and gently brushed her head.

“Still, seeing how you’re able to have fun getting lost, I’m sure you’ll become a far more amazing sorcerer than even Master Zagan.”

“Heh heh heh heh heh...”

Zagan gazed at his beloved daughter, who was squinting in pleasure, as a sudden thought came to mind.

“Oh, right. They say labyrinths often guard treasures. For the time being, I suppose we can say this grimoire is the treasure.”

Foll’s eyes sparkled as he held the book out before her.

“I haven’t read that one before,” she said.

“Then I’ll give this to you.”

“Yaaay!”

The sight of his daughter throwing her hands up and jumping about for joy brought a smile to Zagan’s face.

“Are you certain it’s all right to just take it?” Nephy asked.

“Of course. It must have been placed here as some sort of prize. It isn’t booby-trapped in any way. If losing it would bother the owner, something would’ve been set in place, right?”

“You...might be right.”

Well, they had all been stolen from Zagan’s castle to begin with, so it was more appropriate to say that he was simply reclaiming his property. Looking through the stacks of recovered grimoires, Zagan found one that looked like it would interest Nephy.

“Would you like this one? It’s a grimoire written in the last years of the Fastidious Cao Lainen’s life that’s about drying wet clothes.”

“That’s...! Thank you very much!”

It was a scene of gentle bliss. The three of them had no way of knowing that Chastille and the boy were trembling in fear just one room over.

“Well, it’s about time we get going,” Zagan said. “It’s gotten late with all this cleaning we’ve done.”

“Yes. We still have to tidy up after dinner too,” Nephy added.

“This was fun,” Foll said.

And so, after having cleaned up the dirty mansion and retrieved Zagan’s stolen belongings, the curtains fell on the Archdemon’s endlessly wholesome invasion.

10

“Gimme a sec... I’m gonna go butcher that fuckin’ brat.”

Around the same time, Barbatos trembled in anger on the second floor of the mansion. The doppelganger reflected in his crystal ball had been holding Chastille’s hand this entire time. Depending on the circumstances, it had even buried its head in her chest when she grabbed it. When this happened, the doppelganger would act all bashful and turn red, looking awfully satisfied with the situation despite trying not to. How could Barbatos possibly forgive such a transgression?

That asshole! Don’t get all cocky just ’cause you’re my doppelganger!

It didn’t matter if he died as a result; he simply had to stake his life on killing that thing.

“Calm down, Purgatory. Remember, you’ll most likely die if you kill it.”

“So what? There’re times a man just has to kill somethin’.”

The doppelganger had the form of a ten-year-old Barbatos. It was apparently too dark for Chastille to realize that, however, leading her to defenselessly try to cheer it up and let it cling to her. Even without the use of Purgatory, Barbatos was a famed sorcerer who’d been chosen as an Archdemon candidate. He tried to pierce that irritating doppelganger with a Shadow Needle immediately, forcing Gremory to hold him back.

“I’m telling you to stop! If you kill it in front of Lady Chastille, it’ll scar her for life!”

“Ugh... Wait, no... If she’s in work mode, she might be strong enough to handle it.”

“Out of the question.”

Upon hearing Gremory's firm declaration, Barbatos finally gave in.

"Goddammit... Why do I hafta put up with this shit?!"

"Do you hate what it's doing that much?"

"Of course I do... Wait, do I...? Why do I feel like this? The hell...?"

Now that he thought about it, it shouldn't have mattered whom Chastille was kind to or clung to. That should've been the case, but he simply found the sight before his eyes unforgivable. It being himself but not quite himself made it even harder to accept.

"Mmm... I get you, Purgatory. Such is the manifestation of hidden love power."

"You tryna comfort me or not?"

Barbatos collapsed to his knees, then suddenly felt something out of place.

"Oh yeah, when you first met the crybaby, didn't you hate her?"

Yet here she was, trying to protect Chastille from getting traumatized.

"Haaah... I was so immature back then," Gremory said, staring off into the distance. "No matter how much love power it possessed, I thought a raw ore I learned nothing of in my studies held no value, yet here is one that shines greater than any other... Even my clouded eyes can see that now."

Barbatos still had no idea what she was getting at.

"In short, I thought she was an item meant only to be fawned over,"

Gremory continued unprompted. "But after taking a closer look, I realized she's a hard worker who grew and put her true value on full display through her own efforts."

"Uhhh, guess I get it? The crybaby's still a crybaby, but she puts in more effort than others, so your opinion of her got better?"

It didn't really matter to Barbatos how Gremory saw Chastille, but for some reason, he suddenly felt better, as if he was the one being praised.

"Indeed. Terrifyingly enough, she actually has the love power to bring a fiend back to the path of righteousness. If that was done unconsciously, then she is a genius."

Nothing she said made any sense, but being able to rephrase her words in a somewhat understandable way was an improvement in their conversation.

"Oh," Gremory suddenly said as she raised her head, "It seems my liege's group is leaving."

"Finally... He didn't break nothing, did he?"

"On the contrary, it looks like he cleaned the place up?"

“What? The hell is he cleaning for?! I won’t know where anything is! Does he think he’s my goddamn mom?!”

“A mother?” Gremory repeated, narrowing her eyes with interest. “Did you have one?”

“You think I fell outta a tree or somethin’?” Barbatos sighed and shook his head. “If you can call a bitch who sold me off to my teacher for dirt cheap my mom, then yeah, I guess I did.”

“Good grief. Well, I suppose pretty much all sorcerers have similar stories.”

Very few sorcerers led proper, happy lives. For example, Barbatos’s undesirable friend didn’t know what his parents looked like, and even Nephy had known nothing about hers until very recently. That cheeky dragon brat had a father, but Barbatos hadn’t heard anything about a mother.

“What about you?” Barbatos asked.

“Me? I don’t really remember the days before my village was burned down. I suppose the only person I would consider a mother is my teacher.”

Well, he didn’t really want to dig deeper. In any case, one thorn in his side had left after cleaning up without being asked to, but another was still at large.

“A doppelganger...” Barbatos muttered, putting his hands to his face. “Is there nothing we can do from here?”

“Hmm... Doppelgangers are considered a horrible omen for sorcerers. All we can really do is keep an eye on it.”

“Haaah... Doesn’t look like it plans on hurting the crybaby. Guess that’s the only saving grace here.”

“Mmm...! I’m so glad I came here today. I haven’t been able to chase any girls around lately because of my teacher, but this has given me plenty of energy!”

“Is it that fun to watch me suffer?!”

Gremory ignored Barbatos’s screaming, cocked her head, and asked, “Oh yes, didn’t I hear before that you were more interested in older women?”

“Huh? Well, yeah. When it comes to women, a ripe beauty is way better than some flat little brat, right?”

“I’m surprised you fell for Lady Chastille with tastes like that.”

“What?! I-I-I-I-I didn’t fall for nothin’!”

Having said that, he still didn’t know why Chastille weighed so heavily on

his mind.

She ain't my type. This is definitely some sorta mistake.

His type of woman was far more generous, kind, and gentle.

11

I never thought women could be so generous, kind, and gentle...

This haunted house had a lich and an unidentifiable “something” loitering around it, but before he knew it, Wells found himself unable to suppress the pounding in his chest due to the girl holding his hand.

Upon going through the door, they'd found it completely changed into a perfectly clean guest room. As a novice, Wells had no idea what that meant, but it was clearly beyond the work of any human. Having said that, he couldn't see the intention behind using sorcery to do this. What could possibly be accomplished by showing them this room? There was so much to think of, yet Wells's head was utterly filled with thoughts of Chastille instead.

Chastille took a sharp look around the room, then slowly stepped inside.

“H-Hey. It could be dangerous,” Wells said.

“No. I don't sense anything suspicious. Besides, aren't you tired? It'd be better to get some rest. Don't worry, I'll fight off anything that shows up.”

Chastille smiled gently, and Wells could feel his cheeks heating up in response.

“Wh-What are you, stupid? I'm not so weak that I need a woman to protect me!”

“Hee hee... How reliable.”

Having said that, he was actually rather tired. Wells laid down on a clean-looking sofa and suddenly felt his body grow heavier. He could compensate for his stamina with sorcery, but there wasn't much that could be done about mental exhaustion. His teacher had told him he had talent, but inexperienced as Wells was, he was pretty much at his limit. The candlelight dimly illuminating the room lulled him to sleep. He had started dozing off when his teacher's words suddenly came to mind.

“You have far more talent than any other of my blood. Study sorcery under me.”

He'd been six at the time. Back then, Wells had been a hopeless child who

failed at everything. What's more, he had a gloomy personality and was quick to pick fights. Every single time he got in a fight with the neighborhood children, his mother had beaten him. And so, his teacher was the first person to ever praise him.

Every time he learned some new sorcery, his teacher brushed his head and applauded his efforts. Thus, Wells had devoted himself to his studies, wanting to receive more praise. He'd completed his studies of elementary sorcery within a year. And the next year, he'd been able to put it to practical use and create his own sorcery. Now that he was ten, Wells had begun dabbling in sorcery that would allow him to leap through space.

However, his teacher's archives had no grimoires to learn that ability from. That was why he'd pretty much established the theories on his own. When Wells had gotten his sorcery in a suitable state and went to show his teacher...he saw something he should never have seen—his teacher's thesis. It was sorcery that transplanted one's soul into another's body. It allowed a person to transfer their accumulated knowledge and techniques into a new vessel. If actualized, it would render him effectively immortal. However, the sorcery his teacher had created could only transplant his soul into the body of a blood relative.

In that case, one simply had to create an ideal vessel from a blood relative. That had been his teacher's conclusion. Thus, the one his teacher had placed all of his grand expectations on for this purpose...was Wells.

He never loved me... He just wished to raise me to be his vessel.

Once he realized that harsh truth, Wells had run away. However, his teacher was a sorcerer with a second name, so there was no way he could actually escape. And so, in order to survive, Wells knew he'd have to fight. Sorcery that allowed him to leap through space, the kind he'd yet to show his teacher, was his ace in the hole. That was why he'd taken refuge in this mansion, preparing for the battle to come, when he'd gotten caught up in this abnormality.

“...lls. Wells... Wells!”

Wells's eyes suddenly shot open upon hearing someone call his name. And soon, he was met with the face of a worried girl.

“Huh? Wh...at...?”

“Are you all right? You were writhing about pretty badly.”

Now that she mentioned it, Wells realized he was drenched in sweat.

“Did you have a bad dream?” Chastille asked.

“O-Of course not!” he snarled back.

“I guess you’re fine if you’ve got that much energy,” she said with a sigh of relief, taking a seat next to him.

“...Hey. Why aren’t you pissed?”

“Have you done anything I should be angry about?”

She spoke as if protecting him was her oath-sworn duty. Wells cradled his knees at how pathetic he felt.

“In truth...I’m a runaway.”

“Oh...”

“I tried my best to get my teacher to praise me, but he only ever saw me as a tool.”

“Hm...”

“But I’m no tool! I just wanted him to acknowledge me, yet...!”

Even Wells could tell that he was screaming incoherently, but Chastille didn’t laugh or scorn him for it. Instead, she pulled him into a tight embrace.

“You know, somehow you resemble someone I know. I don’t really respect him as a human, but he’s very strong and reliable, so I’m sure you’ll become a splendid sorcerer.”

“How can you say that...?”

She didn’t know the first thing about him.

“I know,” Chastille answered with a smile. “At the very least, I know you’re not so cruel that you’d leave me behind to try to run away. I know you have such high aspirations that you cry and agonize over them. So, with that in mind, I’m sure your efforts will bear fruit. I guarantee it.”

Those few words felt like salvation for him.

“What a weirdo...”

“I get that a lot,” Chastille said, getting Wells back up to his feet. “Now then, it’s about time for us to get going.”

“...”

Wells found himself unable to respond.

Even if I do get outta here, I can’t escape my teacher’s grasp.

Now that Wells knew his teacher’s goal, his teacher would surely kill him. After that, his body would be stolen from him.

Can I really win? Wells felt a wave of despair overwhelm him as such thoughts ran through his mind.

“It’s all right,” Chastille said, reliably grasping his shoulder. “I’m here with you. And hey, I’m actually pretty strong, you know?”

He knew that much from how she’d slain the lich with a single strike.

Still, there’s no way she’d survive an attack from my teacher.

Before he knew it, Wells found himself worrying about her safety more than his own future.

“Wells, have courage,” Chastille said with an earnest look on her face.

“Courage...?”

“Yes, courage. You’re already clever and perceptive. I don’t know anyone else your age as capable as you are. So long as you have courage, there’s nothing you can’t do.”

For some reason, those words made tears run down his cheeks.

She only just met me, but she properly acknowledges me...

As such, he couldn’t possibly do something as lame as run away in front of her.

Wells wiped his tears away, nodded, and replied, “Yeah! My teacher ain’t nothin’! I’ll beat the crap outta him!”

What exactly did he have to fear? Wells possessed power now. And so, with his newfound courage, he took Chastille’s hand and left the room.

“Huh? Aaah, I get it now...” Chastille muttered to herself. “Wells, this way.”

It looked like she had been muttering to her own feet—toward the shadow beneath her. She led Wells by the hand down the gloomy corridor, and mysteriously, a door opened as if the labyrinth were revealing its exit to them on its own. After passing through a few doors, they found themselves in the entrance hall. The door leading outside was also slightly ajar, letting in a faint beam of light.

“We can get out! We did it! Let’s go, Chastille!”

“Yeah.”

And then, just as they passed through the door, the sensation in Wells’s hand slipped away.

“Huh...?”

He turned around, but all he saw was the gloomy entrance hall. The girl who’d been holding his hand was nowhere to be found.

“Hey! Where’d you go, ——?!”

He tried calling out her name, but couldn’t. Why was that? He’d said it

just a few seconds earlier. The memories he had of her were slipping through his palms. Even that gentle expression she had grew hazier by the second, and eventually, he could no longer remember who she was at all. That was when he figured it out. The mansion was filled with ghosts and a lich who commanded them. And then, there was a woman. Wasn't she something similar, then?

"You said you'd be with me..."

His tears poured out uncontrollably as a sense of helplessness began to dominate his mind. Nevertheless, he didn't remain still for long.

"Have courage."

The woman whose face he couldn't even remember had definitely said that, so there was no way he would get killed by stopping here.

If I can't win in a straight fight, then I've just gotta assassinate him.

That was an entirely possible scenario if he mastered the sorcery to leap through space. He only had one chance though, so he had to finish his teacher in a single blow before he caught on.

However, Wells had failed to notice something. Several days had passed since he started wandering around the haunted house. To be more precise, the coordinates he came back out at had slipped forward a few days. After using his sorcery to try to assassinate his teacher, Wells found the man already dead. He then found out that it had been done by a boy who was even younger than him.

12

"Wells? Where did you go? Wells? Huh...? No way... Was he...a ghost?"

Barbatos heard Chastille's bewildered voice through his crystal ball. After giving it some thought, he realized his shadow was always connected to her. And so, giving her directions through it was child's play. After getting her out of the mansion like that, for no reason whatsoever, the doppelganger had vanished.

Chastille was panicking because the boy she'd been holding hands with had suddenly disappeared, but for the time being, it seemed the crisis was over.

"Haaah... So, uh, what the hell was that?" Barbatos asked, plopping down into a chair.

“Hmm... Seeing how it vanished the moment it left the building, I suppose we can conclude the cause was the mansion itself. How interesting.”

The power of that calamity called Azazel seemed to even affect time and space.

“So...my past self got lost here?”

“I think it’s quite likely. Do you have any such memories, Purgatory?”

Barbatos put his hand to his head. The doppelganger had looked somewhere around ten years old. That was just around the time Barbatos had started harboring the ambition to kill his own teacher, and when Zagan had killed him before he could.

“No idea... I feel like maybe I met someone, but I can’t remember.”

There were very few sorcerers who studied time. And even among them, those who’d produced any results had only managed to slow the flow of time. At the very least, there’d been no cases of anyone successfully leaping through time. The main reason for this was apparently because time automatically repaired itself.

Even if someone succeeded, reality would reassert itself so that they never had. In the worst case, it could erase the caster’s existence entirely. If that doppelganger had actually been Barbatos’s past self, such memories would’ve been erased by time’s restoration.

“We can theorize, but it’ll be impossible to prove anything,” Gremory stated with a groan.

Barbatos turned to the crystal ball and saw that Chastille had fainted while they weren’t watching. In her mind, the Barbatos doppelganger had been a ghost.

“Sorry, Gremory. Can you toss the crybaby into the church or somethin’?”

Due to the enormous number of trespassers, he hadn’t gotten any repairs to Purgatory done. And yet, he already felt exhausted.

“Kee hee hee... Very well,” Gremory replied with a nod. “I’ve already enjoyed a full medley of love power today.”

In the end, the granny left with a satisfied expression on her face, having done nothing other than make a racket. Well, if Barbatos had been on his own, he’d have killed the doppelganger. Stopping him had, in a sense, been a useful contribution.

After leaning back in his chair for a while, Barbatos suddenly felt a presence approach him.

“And what do *you* want?” he snarled without turning around. “Pretty sure you can tell there’s nothing interesting going on here today.”

“Sure seems that way.”

He didn’t have to check to know who it was. His undesirable friend was definitely in the room.

“So?” Barbatos grunted.

“It’s simple, I managed to enjoy this haunted house of yours, so I came by to give you a suitable reward.”

“Hah! Splurge all you want.”

With that, Zagan silently began manipulating the mansion’s barrier.

“Hey. The hell’re you doin’?”

“Azazel broke it, right? I’m sure this problem was caused by that thing’s power corroding the barrier. As such, burning its traces away should fix things. With that, you can get this filthy house back into subspace sooner rather than later.”

“Hmph! I didn’t need your help,” Barbatos spat, then shot to his feet. “Don’t touch nothin’ you don’t need to, got it?”

“And *you* should give me back the grimoires you stole. I’ve retrieved a few already, but I bet you’ve got more hidden away somewhere.”

“Oh, come on, I only took what I was owed for all the damn chores I’ve done for you.”

“Like hell you did. I already paid you properly for those.”

The two reluctant friends kept up their work as they continued bickering. By the time the morning dew had wet the weeds outside, the public nuisance of a haunted house had vanished into subspace.

The sudden disappearance of the haunted house had Chastille panicking like never before, but that is a story for another time.

Interlude 1

“So to sum things up, that’s why Mister Barbatos, like, totally digs older women?”

“That’s definitely the case.”

“Hnnngh! That sure hits the spot!”

Unable to continue watching the four of them make a ruckus, Kuroka walked up to the witches’ convention.

“Come now, at least don’t get Kuu and Selphy involved in your weird gatherings.”

“Oh, Kuroka. Kuu heard you managed to land that older guy you like? Congrats!”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Why do you know that, Kuu?!”

“Oh! Me! I told her!”

“Why would you do that, Selphy?!”

“Hee hee... Shax, was it?” Manuela said, pulling out a chair for Kuroka. “To think he’d become an Archdemon. Kuroka, you’ve got a good eye for men.”

Kuroka could feel a smile forming on her face upon hearing Shax get complimented like that.

“Th-That’s not true. Mister Shax simply tried his best.”

“Oh? I’m pretty sure your support played a big role. Let me congratulate you too. Say, you’re old enough to drink now, right?”

Manuela placed a cup in front of her without waiting for a response and poured some wine from Liucaon for her.

“W-Well... Just a little, okay?”

And so, Kuroka tragically capitulated.

“Stop it, Kurosuke! If you join them, you’ll never come back!” Shax exclaimed, trying to call her back. However, he was powerless before these four.

“Lady Kuroka, you had a pretty good atmosphere going with Shax during your journey,” Gremory added. “Why don’t you tell us about it?”

“Yup, yup. Mister Zagan also said that Mister Shax totally has guts too.”

“O-Oh, all right, fine!”

Now seated at the table, Kuroka was easily coaxed into talking about what happened during her travels with Shax.

Chapter II: Black Cat Capriccio

1

“Mister Shax, dinner is ready.”

Kuroka and Shax were on their way to perform an investigation on behalf of Archdemon Zagan. All the clues pointed them to the mining city Orycheio. It was a few days away from Kianoides, so tonight, they were camping outdoors. Fluffy grains cooked inside a pot hanging over the campfire, while a strongly flavored soup boiled in another pot next to it.

Kuroka scooped some of the grains into two cheap metal bowls, then added some small wrinkled fruits. They looked about the size of cherry tomatoes and weren't really well-known in this region of the world.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks. Huh? What's this?”

“It's a pickled plum from Liucaon called umeboshi. Oh, I guess you don't really have pickled vegetables on the continent... Um, I suppose you can call it a kind of spice?”

“Something like a dill pickle, perhaps?”

“More or less. That's the closest thing to it. Try breaking it apart with your fork and mixing it with the grains. Hopefully, it suits your tastes.”

Kuroka smiled, and Shax glanced around in bewilderment.

“O-Okay. I'm fine with anything so long as it's edible.”

The redness of his face wasn't just because of the light from the fire. And seeing that, Kuroka was overjoyed on the inside.

The offensive tactic Nephy taught me is really effective!

No matter how much she tried to appeal to him, Shax had never noticed. It had felt like an utter waste of effort. When Kuroka had lamented over this fact, Nephy had provided her with advice.

“To capture a man, it's good to start by conquering his stomach.”

Kuroka hadn't had many opportunities to get involved in romance in the past, but she'd also heard of this method. Nephy had told her that the tactic

had helped in making great advances on Zagan.

Fortunately for Kuroka, Shax was pretty much incapable of cooking. If left alone, he was liable to eat the weeds in their surroundings. Sorcerers were capable of functioning without any food whatsoever for a few days, after all. Due to that fact, he was somewhat indifferent when it came to eating. However, that could also be interpreted as a lack of defenses in that area. Zagan had prepared this rare chance for her to be alone with Shax, so, using the opportunity of having to camp out, Kuroka started her fierce offensive.

However, umeboshi came from Liucaon. Thus, he was unfamiliar with this kind of food. Shax tried to pierce it with his fork, but there was a large seed in the middle. And so, all he managed to do was vainly poke at the exterior. Even as he tried to break it up, he only managed to sink it into the soft grains beneath.

“Hm...? Grrr... This is pretty tough.”

It does look difficult to handle with a fork...

She'd clearly made a mistake, but Kuroka took this chance to push her advance harder. She gave a strained smile and took the bowl from Shax.

“Sorry. It's a little hard to do with a fork. Please hand it over for a minute.”

With that, she reached down into her top and pulled out a small pair of iron sticks. Shax stiffened at the motion for a second.

“Is something the matter?” Kuroka asked.

“N-No. It's nothing. Anyways, what's that?”

“These are chopsticks. They're utensils used for eating. Well, it's pretty much obsolete in Liucaon too, so you only see them in really old villages and settlements nowadays.”

Kuroka's family was considered one of the three great royal families, but they'd actually lived in a small settlement in the mountains. They hadn't owned a castle like the Neptunias or Hypnoels, so Kuroka had considered herself more of a local landlord than royalty. And as a result, they'd also been the only royal family who still used chopsticks. Naturally, there was no way Zagan's castle would be furnished with any, so Lily and Selphy had gifted her a pair for her birthday the other day along with some umeboshi.

Kuroka pierced the umeboshi with one chopstick and skillfully broke it up with the other.

“H-Hm...? That's quite the skill.”

“Anyone can do it once they learn how.”

Having said that, she was happy to be praised, so her cat ears twitched about.

“Chopsticks...” Shax muttered, still glancing around restlessly. “Oh, I remember now. I’ve seen them in some old literature about Liucaon.”

“Hmm? You’ve read books about Liucaon’s culture?” Kuroka asked, looking up at Shax with her red eyes, still moving her hands all the while. “I’m a little interested in what was written.”

“Well, they were just medical journals.”

“Medical journals?” Kuroka repeated, cocking her head at the unexpected answer.

“Yeah. On the continent, we use forceps to fix things in place and for surgical excisions, but Liucaon didn’t have any such tools at the time. Chopsticks were unexpectedly versatile, so there was a sorcerer who researched whether they could be applied for medical use.”

“Mister Shax... I know I’m the one who asked, but we’re eating here.”

The simple thought of using chopsticks for surgical excisions had Kuroka grimacing. It wasn’t a topic for mealtime. Shax was a man who knew nothing of tact, so this came as no surprise to her. After all, that was one of the major reasons Kuroka had yet to make any progress with him despite being rather aggressive.

Still, Kuroka had no intention of backing down today. After breaking up the red fruit and spreading it out in the grains, she pinched a mouthful with her chopsticks and held it out in front of Shax’s mouth.

“Here, open wide.”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What’re you doing?!”

His agitation was so pleasant to hear.

“Open wide,” she repeated slowly and deliberately.

“Ugh... But...”

He looked extremely conflicted, but he was still someone who wished to treat Kuroka dearly. She could tell that he wanted to meet her expectations by his anguished expression and the cold bead of sweat on his cheek, but it was simply too embarrassing for him. This brought a refreshed smile to Kuroka’s lips, and her cheeks turned red as she trembled in joy.

Her foster father, Raphael, would probably have taken a swing at Shax’s neck immediately if he’d seen this, but he wasn’t around. Kuroka pushed

forward without hesitation. Faced with such determination, Shax finally capitulated and opened his mouth.

Kuroka happily fed him. The intense battle had only lasted a few seconds and had ended with Kuroka as the victor.

“Hee hee... How is it?”

“A-Ah... Good...I think.”

It looked like he couldn't even taste anything, but that reaction was enough to satisfy Kuroka.

I won't let him treat me like a child anymore!

“This is kinda sly. You should cut it out...” Shax said, ruffling his hair and averting his eyes.

“Oh? What's sly about it? Nephy and Zagan do it all the time.”

They did so boldly in the castle's dining hall every chance they got, so Shax had definitely witnessed it before. The two of them apparently only did so when they thought nobody was watching, but all the residents of the castle were elite specialists in their own fields. Even Lily and Selphy, who weren't sorcerers, often noticed two out of three times. That wasn't what Shax was getting at, though.

“No, not that...” he mumbled.

“Hm...? Oh,” Kuroka mumbled as she cocked her head, then realized what he was implying.

Because I'm going to use these myself afterward...?

She stiffened at the thought. In other words, it would be an indirect kiss. Did the Archdemon and his bride fight such a high-level battle on a daily basis?

Kuroka suddenly felt like she was doing something really naughty, but it also felt like she couldn't possibly let this opportunity pass. She started panicking, letting out incomprehensible sounds, when Shax realized what he'd suggested.

“H-Hang on! That's not what I meant! Well, that's a problem too, but...”

“H-Hwuh? It's not? But what else could you...?”

Is there something even greater than an indirect kiss at play?

Seeing Kuroka so flustered, Shax concluded that it'd be more troublesome to have her worry about the unknown and resigned himself to tell her.

“Um, I mean, those chopsticks you're holding...”

“Yes?”

“Where did you keep them?” he asked hesitantly.

“Against my... Huh?”

He had a point. Kuroka had kept the gift she'd gotten from her childhood friends preciousy tucked away in her clothes, directly against her chest. They were, of course, dear to her, but the metal chopsticks were also sturdy enough to be used as weapons. They were a last resort if she was ever rendered unarmed. As such, she'd kept them in a place where they would never fall out while also being easy to reach.

In other words, she'd just coerced a man into eating food using chopsticks that had been warmed up by direct contact with her skin. Kuroka possessed tremendous mental fortitude, but she couldn't withstand something that severe. She set down the bowl calmly and placed her chopsticks on top of it, then plunged her face between her hands and writhed about in embarrassment. Her triangular ears even flattened down in shame.

“Um, sorry for being so thoughtless...” she muttered.

“I-It's fine. It's my fault for not pointing it out sooner...”

Silence fell over them. Only the sound of the crackling campfire could be heard. After a while, Kuroka suddenly came to a realization.

Huh? Then did he eat it despite noticing already?

Not only that, but he'd called it sly. Kuroka felt her cheeks burn so hot that she thought they'd catch fire.

Who's the sly one here...?

He'd done as she wanted despite knowing where the chopsticks had been, then showed her how shaken he was by it, and not only that, he didn't seem to hate it at all.

What do I do? I can't stop smiling!

She'd dug quite the grave for herself, but it was like someone had scooped her right out from the bottom. She couldn't look Shax in the eyes, but the emotions swelling inside her couldn't be contained either.

“U-Um, Kurosuke...?”

Kuroka looked up at the sky and resisted the urge to roll on the ground, then decided to take a seat next to Shax. Her two tails playfully brushed against his back, completely ignoring her own will, but he didn't seem to pay that any mind.

“Mister Shax,” Kuroka said, her face still in her hands. “Please take the soup off the fire. It'll burn.”

“R-Right...”

Her hands were occupied, so she couldn't do it herself. Shax took the pot off the fire, then poured out portions for the two of them without saying another word.

“Uhhh, can you eat...?” he asked.

Kuroka shook her head vigorously.

“Guess not. Well, you can have it later,” Shax muttered to himself. But then, suddenly, Kuroka's stomach grumbled loudly.

They'd been walking for an entire day and had had to prepare this campsite. This brought on both fatigue and hunger. Now that he'd heard her stomach growl, even Kuroka's human ears turned bright red. With her hands still pressed against her face, Kuroka peeked through the gaps in her fingers with teary eyes and glared at Shax.

“Hey, that wasn't my fault, right?”

“...me.”

“What?”

“I can't use my hands, so please feed me.”

“Wuh?!”



Kuroka was beyond any hope at this point, so she tried coaxing him in utter desperation. Shax was clearly shaken, but he could tell that it would be pointless to try to protest. And so, before long, he let out a helpless sigh.

“Don’t tell anyone, okay?”

He’s really going to do it?!

Kuroka returned a small nod, the ears atop her head jumping up and down in joy.

Shax scooped a mouthful of soup with a spoon, then blew on it to cool it down. He then moved the spoon before Kuroka.

Simply waiting had her heart pounding so hard she thought it’d leap out her throat. She timidly opened her mouth and closed it over the spoon. She still had her hands on her face, so some of the soup dribbled down her chin and onto her chest. And with a loud gulp, she swallowed what was in her mouth.

“Uhhh... How is it?” Shax asked.

“...Good.”

Honestly, she couldn’t really taste much of anything.

“In that case, you can at least show me your face,” Shax said with a faint smile on his face.

She was pretty sure anyone would be able to hear her pounding heart at this point. Still, those words granted her the determination she needed. Kuroka lowered her hands, and keeping her eyes pinned to the floor, she touched Shax’s face.

“Huh...?”

After that, she forcefully turned his face her way, then slowly looked at him with upturned eyes.

“W-Will...this do...?” she asked, her voice somewhat shrill.

Her emotions were soaring. She even had tears in her red eyes. Her nervousness seemed to be contagious. Shax was clearly shaken. She could tell that his eyes were being drawn toward her lips.

What’s going on? At this rate, I feel like it’ll work out...

Kuroka drew closer, pulling Shax toward her at the same time. Shax didn’t resist. Because of their journey, his stubble was more prominent than usual. Would it prickle if it touched her face? Kuroka slowly closed her eyes, and just as she was about to press her lips against his...

“*Achoo!*”

“Hwuh?!”

Kuroka sneezed as if no longer able to endure the tension in the air. In an instant, the two of them returned to their senses and reeled away from each other with incredible vigor.

“S-S-S-S-S-S-S-S-S-Sorry!”

“I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-It’s fine!”

Perhaps she’d taken that a bit too far.

Wh-What was I trying to do?!

The mood seemed to indicate that Shax would accept her. It had been the opportunity of a lifetime. However, if she’d actually succeeded, Kuroka was sure her heart wouldn’t have been able to hold out.

Still, Kuroka didn’t dare to try again. What’s more, the pleasant atmosphere had been completely ruined. Her own blunder had caused this. The night wind was cold enough to have her shivering, but it was powerless to cool the heat in her cheeks. Kuroka let out an incoherent groan, then something warm suddenly covered her back.

“Huh...?”

She looked up and saw that Shax had placed his mantle over her shoulders.

“It’s...um, you know...cold if you get too far from the fire.”

Despite her extremely careless blunder, Shax still acted nice to her as if it were perfectly natural for him to do so.

I messed up again...

Kuroka returned to the fire and sat back down, then leaned against Shax.

“It’s cold...so can I stay next to you?” she asked.

“Yeah, yeah, sure thing.”

He was treating her like a child again, but she couldn’t argue after her earlier display.

“Come on, eat up. It’ll get cold,” Shax said.

He had a point. He’d poured soup for the two of them, and she’d only had a single bite. And so, Kuroka restlessly continued having her meal.

“Hee hee...” Kuroka giggled.

“What...?”

“I was just thinking...this isn’t bad.”

“That so?”

Their food had grown cold, but Kuroka’s cheeks remained hot the entire

time.

Interlude 2

“Holy crap! You flirted like crazy!” Kuu yelled as she shot up to her feet, panting with excitement.

“N-Not really...? We haven’t even held hands, and in the end, I didn’t manage to get a k-kiss or anything...”

He’d led her by the hand before when treating her eyes, but that wasn’t the same. Kuroka knocked back a swig of her drink at the thought, then muttered, “I want to try walking around town while holding hands...”

“Wouldn’t that be super easy for you?” Kuu asked, cocking her head.

“Kuu, you’re still so immature even though you participate in these meetings,” Gremory said. “We rejoice precisely because she’s stuck on this step! Hnnngh! Nice love power!”

Despite all the fuss around her, Kuroka’s triangular ears folded down limply against her head.

“Wh-What’s the matter, Lady Kuroka?” Gremory asked.

“I want to try holding hands...but I figured he wouldn’t squeeze back even if I took his hand, so I tried hugging his arm instead. That wasn’t enough for me, though...”

Manuela had been constantly refilling Kuroka’s cup, so she’d had a lot more to drink than she was aware of. She’d had no intention of talking this much to begin with, but her mouth simply kept moving on its own. As for Shax, who should really have been trying to stop her, he was bright red in the face, squatting down behind Zagan.

“I-It’s okay,” Kuu said in a panic. “Kuroka, you’re doing way bolder things than holding hands, right? If you take his hand, Kuu is pretty sure the old guy will respond.”

“B-But at the time, we aren’t really dating or anything... Wait... Huh?”

Kuroka suddenly froze in place.

“What’s wrong?” Kuu asked.

“Now that I think about it...he never said he loves me or anything. Father has acknowledged him, but it doesn’t mean we’re actually together...”

“...”

Having realized something that they should never have realized, every single person at the meeting was struck dumbfounded. As for Shax, he was faced with Zagan’s eyes silently telling him, “You still haven’t given her a response after all that?”

Pierced by sharp gazes from all over, Shax finally gathered his resolve, straightened his posture, and said, “Kurosuke, you’ve had too much to drink. I told you I’d teach you how to do it properly, remember?”

“Yes...”

“I said I’d protect you no matter what,” he added with resignation, ruffling his hair. “I meant it in that sense, so there’s no need to be so worried, Kuroka.”

Shax could feel his cheeks growing hotter. He then rubbed his hand clean against his robes and held it out to Kuroka.

“Come on, we should get going.”

“Yes!”

Kuroka squeezed his hand, which felt hot enough to burn her.

As the two of them left, Gremory called out to her once more to say, “Kee hee hee. Lady Kuroka, allow me to tell you one thing.”

And as Kuroka raised her guard for whatever nonsense was to come...

“Congratulations.”

“You look so happy, Kuroka. I’m relieved,” Selphy added, clapping her hands.

“Ummm... Thank you...very much.”

She was sure she would continue to fret over more misunderstandings to come, but in that moment, Kuroka could clearly declare that she was happy.



“Everyone’s got their own troubles, huh...?” Selphy muttered to herself as she watched Kuroka leave. “I’ve gotta try my best too.”

“Hrm?! You possess quite the keen air of love power about you! You must tell—”

“Oh yeah, how did Kuroka end up being Mister Raphael’s daughter, anyway?”

Selphy likely hadn’t put much thought into what she’d asked, but she’d

done more than enough to attract the attention of everyone in the room.

“That’s a good question,” Manuela replied. “For such a taciturn man, he gets strangely overprotective whenever it comes to Kuroka. This sounds so amu—I mean, interesting. There must be a story behind it.”

“Chief, it’s way too late to try to keep up appearances,” Kuu said with teary eyes.

“He told me the story,” Foll said, clambering up onto the seat Kuroka had been using.

“Foll!” Manuela exclaimed, energetically hugging the little girl, who pushed her back like she was used to this behavior.

“Gremory. I got love stories out of everyone,” Foll said.

On the day Gremory left the castle, Foll had gone around to everyone she could think of to listen to their love stories. The act had triggered an emergency family meeting in the castle, but that was a different matter entirely.

“Splendid!” Gremory shouted, her golden eyes glimmering as she accidentally stood from her wheelchair. “Well done, Lady Foll. Oh, here’s the grimoire and Elvish dictionary I promised you.”

Gremory handed over two books written by the ex-Archdemon Orias. The woman in question was currently recovering from her injuries suffered during the battle with Azazel, so she couldn’t participate in today’s celebration. Foll had gone around asking everyone for love stories out of personal curiosity, but the reward Gremory had promised her had been equally attractive.

“Thanks. I still can’t read Elvish,” Foll said as she held the books tightly to her chest and let out a sigh of satisfaction before staring at Gremory.

“Hm? Is something the matter?” Gremory asked.

“It’s my first time seeing you this age.”

“Oh. Um, I don’t really like showing people this form.”

Gremory used a plate to hide her face. Her reaction was rather unusual for the granny, which only attracted Foll’s attention more. Having said that, she was still here to give her report on love stories.



“Raphael’s love story was super interesting.”

With that, Foll started telling the story that eventually led to Raphael and Kuroka’s first meeting.

Chapter III: The Reason I Adopted a Black Cat

“The moon is beautiful, isn’t it?”

I remember it clearly to this day. The girl who’d overwhelmed me, even though I was an Angelic Knight, smiled as she posed that question with a small sword that was pretty much the size of a knife in hand.

1

The hustle and bustle of the inn town quieted down to an unbelievable degree. It even felt like the mountain wind blowing through the area left a ringing in one’s ears. Many people passed through here, but since it was in such a mountainous region, there weren’t many streetlights to provide illumination. Plus, a strong wind was all it took to blow out what few torches were available, drawing the surroundings into utter darkness.

Vivid sparks scattered into the air. They broke out two, then three times, letting ear-piercing metallic clangs loose each time. The sparks were dazzling in the dead of the night, burning afterimages of the two clashing figures in one’s eyes.

One was a giant man wearing heroic armor. It had to be heavy all on its own, but he even wielded what could only be classified as a greatsword with a single hand. His armor was called Anointed Armor, and it was blessed to give its bearer peerless strength. But even taking all that into consideration, there were no more than ten warriors across the entire continent who possessed the skill to strike three times in a single breath like he could. This man wielding his enormous sword with such refined swordsmanship was an Angelic Knight, a soldier trained to fight against the abnormal powers of sorcerers.

The one crossing blades with the man was a curiously small shadow. With the man’s large frame, the two were like an adult and a child. Perhaps the

shadow was simply of a race that had naturally small statures like dwarves, however. The shadow wielded a short single-edged blade, somewhat akin to a kitchen knife. It wasn't an appropriate weapon to catch blows from the man's greatsword. Nevertheless, the shadow fought on par...no, was almost overwhelming the man.

This only stood to reason. The shadow wore a black robe, its face hidden by an animal mask and a hood. Despite this, the man couldn't hear the slightest rustling of clothes from it in battle, let alone any footsteps. Its mask was decorated in crimson paint, making it seem less like a sorcerer and more like a monster or some sort of apparition. The only way of describing it was as a shadow.

Every single time they crossed blades, it would melt back into the dead of the night. No matter how badly the man strained his senses, the attacks oozing back out of the darkness couldn't be perceived. The Angelic Knight actually deserved high praise for being able to cross swords with an enemy he couldn't see.

The battle for supremacy didn't last long. After the umpteenth crossing of blades, the Angelic Knight's foot got caught on something in the darkness, so he lost his balance. The shadow wasn't one to let such an opportunity pass. It closed in without hesitation and swung its shortsword. The sharp ring of metal scraping against metal rang through the air and the Angelic Knight's sword flew out of his hand.

"Gah!"

It was the masked shadow who was left gasping, however. The Angelic Knight rose from his knee and swung his left hand, wielding his sheath. It wasn't so simple to detach such a thing from a sword belt, but he'd feigned this opening to lure the shadow in.

Having stepped too far in, the shadow couldn't get out of the way even if it bent back as far as it could. The animal mask it wore clattered against the ground.

"You won't escape—damnable Sword Hunter!" the Angelic Knight roared and gave chase, but the shadow was far too experienced to allow a second strike to get through. It smoothly dodged the man's sheath and jumped backward.

"How surprising... You still stand in defiance after having your sword plucked away from you?"

It was the voice of a girl, young enough to call a child. Having lost her mask, she covered her face with a hand. The eyes peeking through her fingers were colored much like the moon hanging over them, while her lips bent into the shape of a crescent moon.

“Tee hee hee... May I hear your name?”

She spoke with such composure and intimacy that one wouldn't think they'd been fighting mere moments ago. And yet, there was an unnatural air of intimidation to her voice. Even while puzzled by that fact, the Angelic Knight answered.

“Raphael Hyurandell...”

“I see. Say, Sir Raphael,” the girl said as she gave him a faint smile, then pointed up at the sky with a finger from her sword-wielding hand. Despite not knowing her intentions, the Angelic Knight's eyes followed the gesture. “The moon is beautiful, isn't it?”

A moon the same red as the girl's eyes hung in the night sky. When the Angelic Knight lowered his gaze again, he was left grimacing.

“She got me good...”

The girl was no longer within eyesight. He couldn't even sense her presence anymore, as if she truly had melted away into the night. He let the strength escape his shoulders. The mountain wind came to a stop, while the torches lit the road back up. With that, the hustle and bustle of the inn town started back up as if remembering it had previously existed.

Was this some kind of sorcery? It was as if the battle had been just a dream. However, the animal mask on the ground proved that the girl had been there. It truly had been a night with a red moon in the sky.

2

No way! No way! No way! What the heck was that?!

A girl ran away with all her might in the dead of the night. She was so scared that her two neatly groomed tails stuck out the back of her black clothes. She really was running away without caring about her appearance as she leaped from rooftop to rooftop like the wind without making a single noise. She wore black clothing that didn't show any of her skin and a black hood. She was a tabaxi, known among the many races to be the best at erasing their presence, and she was the most skilled in her village at that.

Well, strictly speaking, she was a variant called a cait sith. She also had the blessing of her beloved kodachi, Moonless Sky, that granted her power.

She wasn't even fifteen yet, but when wielding Moonless Sky in the darkness of the night, not even a sorcerer could perceive her. Nevertheless, that Angelic Knight had completely held back her deadly blows and even struck back at her in kind. The cait sith possessed nimble bodies, but in exchange, they were rather fragile. Even without a sword, it was pretty easy to break their bones with a solid blow. She had naturally learned techniques to break her fall and such, but getting hit to begin with often left her helpless. She'd put on a smile as a show of composure, but her back had been soaked in cold sweat and her lips, half-hidden by her hand, had been stiff with fear. Even now, completely unrelated to the exertion of having to run, her heart was pounding nonstop.

Didn't they say Angelic Knights are barely able to match a sorcerer when you get a bunch of them together?!

No matter how she looked at it, it would take several *sorcerers* just to be able to barely run away from that man. Winning was out of the question.

“Maybe...he was an Archangel?”

Twelve knights stood at the peak of all Angelic Knights...and these individuals were given special swords called Sacred Swords. Any blade struck by the girl's beloved Moonless Sky would break, which was why they'd labeled her Sword Hunter. Despite that, however, the Angelic Knight's sword hadn't broken.

Apparently, if all twelve of them gathered, they'd even be able to defeat an Archdemon. One of those superhumans might be able to perceive her presence. Honestly, the girl had no reason to antagonize any Angelic Knights, but that didn't apply both ways. It was their role to safeguard the town's public order, after all.

“It's just as the lady told me. The continent sure is a scary place...”

The girl wasn't a native to the continent. She came from a small island country named Liucaon, which was far to the east.

Aaah! I ended up mimicking her on the spur of the moment! What'll happen if she finds out?!

She'd desperately tried to come up with some way of creating an opening to escape, and the only thing that had come to mind was the lady—Liucaon's guardian. The girl had only met the lady once, but she clearly remembered

how frightening and incomprehensible she was. In fact, it was far more frightening to incur her wrath than to get chased by this Angelic Knight.

Well, it was questionable whether she'd pulled off a good impression to begin with. Still, at the very least, she'd managed to create that opening to get away. After recalling what she'd said, the girl covered her face.

"The moon is beautiful, isn't it?"

These words had been used by an old poet from her hometown when courting women. Why had she chosen to say such a thing? At any rate, agitating her foe had been a necessity. She'd racked her mind for anything she could say to shake up an Angelic Knight who was capable of blocking her soundless and imperceptible strikes...and in the end, that phrase was what she'd come up with.

Well, she had, in fact, managed to get the Angelic Knight to look up at the moon, giving her the chance to run away. She didn't think someone from the continent would understand the reference. It wouldn't trouble her in any way to be thought of as an eccentric, but she couldn't properly express the embarrassment she felt. The girl agonized over the matter as she continued running and managed to arrive at her base in this town. She then took a quick look around to check whether anyone was chasing her and came to a stop like a fluttering leaf. The girl was dressed for stealth and had run with all her might, so not even a skilled sorcerer would be able to track her.

Her base was a desolate inn at the edge of town. The meager meal tasted bad and the rooms were dirty. What's more, the roof leaked. As such, only the poorest people stayed there. The girl took a light jump up to the roof, placed her hand on the edge, and twisted down into the room beneath her. She then closed the window, quickly stripped out of her black clothes, changed into a shirt and skirt typical for a regular town girl, and put on a white apron. After letting out her long black hair down to her waist, she groomed her beautiful triangular ears and completed her transformation into an entirely different person. After that, she folded her black clothes and threw them into her bag, then raised her voice.

"Oh, crap. I left my mask behind..."

There was no way of retrieving it at the time. The mask had been used for festivals back in her hometown. Thus, it would be possible to figure out her origins with a little investigation.

Wh-What do I do? C-Can I get it back somehow?

She wanted to pray for the off chance that the Angelic Knight hadn't picked it up, but she knew that was out of the question. She had agonized over the matter for some time before she heard a voice from outside her room. It was the innkeeper.

“Yo! Heidi? You awake? We've got a guest. Get out here!”

Heidi was her alias, or rather, her nickname. Her name would stand out too much on the continent. As such, she'd introduced herself by her family name, Adelhide. The innkeeper had claimed it was too long, so he called her Heidi instead. She didn't really like it, but it worked out just fine, so she let it stick.

“Yes! I'm on my way!”

She'd crossed blades with, and had even overwhelmed, that terrifying Angelic Knight, but here she was a regular employee and a freeloader at the inn. When ordered by the innkeeper, she could only reply with a smile. Heidi took a deep breath to suppress the fear that still dominated her heart—not that it did anything about the pounding after running so much—then left her room.

Just then, a certain question came to mind and she cocked her head.

Huh? A guest at this hour?

It was already around midnight. It wasn't really the time for a new guest to be showing their face. Regardless, she was the only employee here right now, so she hurried to the entrance.

“Welcome! A room for one?”

She put on the business smile that'd been drilled into her, then felt all the blood drain from her face in an instant.

“Indeed. Are any available?”

The one standing before her was none other than the terrifying Angelic Knight.

He actually chased me all the way here?! Hoooooow?! Heidi screamed internally.

3

“Sword Hunter...you say?”

Early in the morning, inside the church's chapel, an Angelic Knight and a bishop faced each other. The bishop was an old man nearing his sixties. With

his potbelly and drooping cheeks, he was the type of man who found it exhausting to simply walk up a flight of stairs.

Raphael knit his brows at the mention of an unfamiliar name. Such an action from a man who seemed to have forgotten how to properly use his facial muscles gave off an intimidating air, as if he could kill someone using only his eyes. The bishop started and bent backward, but still nodded with a bead of cold sweat running down his cheek.

“Do you know of the inn town Mercator? It’s located about a day south of Kianoides in the mountains. It’s somewhat remote, so while there is a church, there are no Angelic Knights stationed there. It is, however, an important stopping point for peddlers, so it’s rather lively.”

In other words, the church was there in spirit, but it was outside their actual sphere of influence. Such towns usually ended up under the control of sorcerers. As such, this Sword Hunter was most likely the second name of a sorcerer ruling that town, or something close to that. It wasn’t all that unusual a story.

With the help of Anointed Armor and Sacred Swords, Angelic Knights possessed the power to defeat sorcerers, but they were still only human. It was difficult to take on a sorcerer alone, having to face fire, lightning, and other far more unimaginable attacks. In a proper head-on confrontation, it would at least require a squad to take on a single sorcerer. What’s more, Anointed Armor was a limited resource and there were only twelve Sacred Swords, which was clearly insufficient for protecting the entire continent.

Raphael remained silent and urged the bishop to continue.

“A sorcerer with the second name Sword Hunter is responsible for a string of violent incidents in Mercator. I don’t know if he’s collecting trophies or what, but he’s taken all of his victims’ swords.”

“Hm...? Deaths beyond the reach of the church are the locals’ problem. Just let the damn sorcerers kill each other.”

“W-Watch your tone, Hyurandell!”

The bishop acted brave, but he trembled uncontrollably and couldn’t even look Raphael in the eyes. Well, that was partially Raphael’s fault for wording it poorly. There happened to be proper rules and such in a sorcerer’s domain too.

In areas beyond the reach of the church, powerful sorcerers ruled. If incidents were happening in their region, it would affect their reputation. As

such, the sorcerer in charge would set forth to get retribution on their own. If an Angelic Knight were to butt in, it could end up as a battle on two fronts. Thus, it was prudent to take caution when dealing with areas ruled by sorcerers. That was what Raphael had intended to convey, at least. Unfortunately, none of that got through to the priest.

“I-In a turn of misfortune, a passing Angelic Knight was attacked,” the bishop continued grimly. “Luckily, he still lives, but the church cannot let this be.”

“So you’re telling me to eliminate this sorcerer, then?”

“To pass judgment on them. The church is not a house of assassins.”

The end result was the same, so what was the point in cherry-picking his words like that? Although, without the support of the populace, Angelic Knights weren’t any different from sorcerers, and it was the bishops’ job to gain their support. Raphael wasn’t really convinced, but he could at least understand.

“In short, a subjugation,” Raphael corrected himself, sounding utterly indifferent. “What about the others?”

“About that...” the bishop started, clearly flustered by the question. “It will take time to form a subjugation squad. We’d like you to go ahead on your own to Mercator and start investigating.”

In other words, they want to get rid of the nuisance in their house.

Raphael sighed. This wasn’t a first. He was aware that the bishop...or rather, everyone around him, shunned him. Well, he knew that he wasn’t sociable by the laxest of standards. Nobody would pick a fight with him directly, but he could tell when others were only pretending to show him respect while keeping him at a distance.

Having said that, this order was basically the same as telling him to go die somewhere out of sight, so it gave him a bit of a headache. As such, Raphael’s already frightening countenance turned even more dreadful. Sweat poured down the bishop’s forehead as if he had a blade held at his throat. The bishop wiped it off with a handkerchief, soaking the cloth through in an instant.

“I-I can only ask this of an Angelic Knight as skilled as you are,” he added quickly. “If we take too long, innocent civilians will be exposed to danger. This threatens the church’s dignity.”

Those innocent lives were the ones in danger, yet the church wouldn’t

have done anything had one of their knights not been a victim to begin with.

“Are you not the one who should be watching your tone?” Raphael said in a low voice, fully intent on criticizing the bishop.

One granted the lofty position of a bishop had to properly set the populace’s safety as their number one priority. However, seeing how Raphael didn’t really pick his words correctly to convey that idea, and adding the fact that he’d consciously lowered his voice, it was as if he intended to kill the man. Unfortunately, Raphael wasn’t aware of that fact.

The bishop fell flat on his rear, blood draining from his cheeks in an instant, and mumbled, “P-P-P-P-P-Please don’t k-k-k-kill...”

“Hm...? What a strange thing to say. Do you think me capable of anything *but* killing?”

Well, it would be best if it simply ended with an arrest, but taking sorcerers alive was difficult. Seeing how they were forming a subjugation squad, the church shouldn’t have had any qualms about bloodshed.

“Eek...”

Such was the case, but the bishop turned so pale that it was as if the death sentence had been passed on him. A second later, his eyes rolled back as he fainted.

“In the end, we couldn’t understand each other...”

The bishop was actually Raphael’s direct superior. He’d thought it’d only be right to at least say a proper farewell before departing, but he couldn’t stand around waiting for him to wake up. If this Sword Hunter possessed the skill to defeat an Angelic Knight, then it wouldn’t be strange for him to go on an indiscriminate killing spree.

If I take a fast horse now, I should get there by nightfall.

It was on that night that Raphael met the animal-masked girl.

4

Raphael walked toward an inn on the outskirts of town as he recalled the details of his departure from Kianoides.

Sword Hunter ended up getting away from me...

He wondered whether it was good or bad fortune that he’d encountered her the moment he’d arrived in Mercator. In any case, he wanted to defeat her, but that was difficult to do with no allies and with no familiarity with the

land. He'd hoped he could get some kind of information out of the mask he'd picked up, but he had no means of investigating it at the moment. As such, he'd decided to walk around and look for a place to rest.

The inn's signboard was so dirty that he couldn't even read its name. The wooden outer walls of the building looked old, and upon taking a glance upward, he noticed a portion of the roof's shingles had peeled off. Any rain was sure to provide the interior with quite the shower. The first floor was a tavern, but there was hardly anybody inside, and those he saw all had the faces of traveling hoodlums and the like. This inn town had been constructed for the sake of peddlers who traveled the lands. As such, the majority of buildings here were inns. However, this one, in particular, seemed to be rather desolate, with very few customers.

Still, there were a few reasons he'd picked this inn. For one, it was close to the church. Secondly, the damage to the surroundings would be scant if any trouble occurred. And finally, seeing their regular clientele, even he wouldn't make the people around him feel uncomfortable. That last part was especially important. There was, in fact, a church in town, so as an Angelic Knight, he could've arranged for lodgings there. However, the treatment he'd gotten from the bishop was anything but new. No matter where he went, people treated him like that. It was unpleasant to have people fear him needlessly when he simply wished to rest his tired body.

After he knocked on the door, before long, a girl who looked like she was an employee came out.

"Welcome! A room for one?"

A young tabaxi girl greeted him with a bright voice. She looked around fifteen, or perhaps even younger. Her glamorous black hair went down to her waist and the ears atop her head were the same color. Her skin was so white that it was as if she'd never been under the sun's light, making her seem like the daughter of a noble or a wealthy merchant. She was attractive enough for even Raphael to find her rather charming.

Hm? Red eyes...and I feel like she's around the same height as that Sword Hunter...

Well, it was pretty unlikely that the criminal who'd escaped from him just so happened to be an employee at the inn he'd chosen on a whim.

The girl looked up at Raphael's face...and her smile convulsed tremendously.

“Hawawawawa?!”

Well, his face was a little too stimulating to witness in such darkness. The girl fell back onto her rear with tears in her eyes.

“W-W-W-Wait. P-P-Please don’t kill me! I-I still haven’t...!”



Not only was it dark, but Raphael's face was covered in mud from the earlier fight. The girl started tearfully, begging for her life as if confronted by a bandit or monster. Seeing a response so similar to the one the bishop had given him before his departure, Raphael failed to hold back a sigh. The girl turned pale, having apparently interpreted that as a sign that she couldn't escape him.

"Heidi! What're you doing?!"

As Raphael struggled over how to handle the girl, a man yelled from inside the building. He came out, picked up the girl by the scruff of her neck, and stood her back up on her feet forcefully.

"Just go inside and help at the tavern."

"Eep... I'm sowwy..."

After shooting a backward glance her way as the girl scurried away, the man, who appeared to be the innkeeper, glared at Raphael. His eyes weren't really filled with anger, though. It was more like there was a flickering light of desperation, like he was risking his life to buy time.

"An Angelic Knight? Whaddya want?"

"I'd like a room, please. Do you have one available?"

For some reason, the man's eyes widened. He then heaved out a sigh of relief.

"Oh, a customer... Don't scare me like that."

Raphael had no intention whatsoever of scaring anyone, but this man had apparently raised his guard because of the girl's screaming.

Well, Angelic Knights aren't exactly a welcome sight in a sorcerer-ruled town.

In truth, his face and armor were dirty and the fatigue had his expression grimmer than normal. He looked like he was here to execute a sinner and their entire family...not that he was actually aware of that fact, though.

The innkeeper guided him to the reception desk. The man was still nervous, but properly received Raphael as a guest.

"For one night?" he asked.

"No, I'd like to stay a few days. I'm not sure how many yet."

Honestly, staying at the church would've been more convenient in several ways, but being treated that way again would've left Raphael feeling restless.

"Hmm, you really fine with an inn like this?" the innkeeper asked with a surprised look. "Pretty sure you get nicer beds at the church."

“I don’t get much better treatment there with a face like mine.”

In contrast, at an inn like this, people with Raphael’s countenance weren’t all that rare. He was being treated unexpectedly normally.

I suppose I’ll be in his care while I stay here.

The innkeeper’s reception was soothing enough that he was fine with the condition of the building. However, the man suddenly seemed to remember his employee’s reaction, so he awkwardly stroked his mustache apprehensively.

“Well, try not to be offended by her. I only just hired the lass recently. She’s not from around here, so she’s pretty ignorant about stuff. I’ll scold her later.”

“I’m used to it,” Raphael said with a shrug. “By not from around here, you mean she’s a wanderer at that age?”

“Aaah, well, how do I put this...? She’s an unlucky one. I dunno if it was bandits or monsters or what, but her caravan got attacked. She managed to run all the way here, but didn’t have any of her stuff with her, let alone any money, so I decided to give her a place to stay.”

Raphael nodded. That explained why she looked so out of place in this kind of inn. Peddlers didn’t really like Angelic Knights to begin with either. Pretty much all of them dipped their toes in one or two shady deals, and the church tended to target merchants to collect donations from them. What’s more, not even an hour had passed since Raphael had crossed blades with that terrifying shadow, so he was even grimmer than usual. It was natural for a young girl to be scared of him.

It’s regrettable that I startled her so badly...

It was an Angelic Knight’s duty to protect such unfortunate civilians. Even if he couldn’t do anything about his countenance, it truly vexed him.

“By the way,” Raphael asked as he signed the guest register and took out some money to pay, “Do you know anything about a sorcerer they call Sword Hunter?”

“Sure do,” the innkeeper answered with a gloomy look on his face. “Someone got done in by him right in front of my inn three days ago. You come to subjugate him?”

“Indeed.”

The actual formation of a subjugation squad would take some time, but Raphael was here to protect the people until they arrived. He gave the

innkeeper a firm nod, and the man's expression relaxed with relief.

"Well, ain't that good to hear. Looks like the church is finally getting off its fat ass. Even the sorcerers have started shivering in their boots, so I was wondering what was going to happen to us out here."

Raphael's expression darkened upon hearing that unexpected information. The innkeeper jolted and began trembling, but didn't try to run away. Sorcerers possessed more power than Angelic Knights. It usually took a squad to take down a single sorcerer. The only exceptions were Archangels, but even then, they couldn't defeat an Archdemon on their own. And yet, the innkeeper implied that such powerful sorcerers had already given up the idea of fighting Sword Hunter.

"There must be a sorcerer who's in charge around here. Have they been staying silent and watching?" Raphael asked carefully.

"He was the first to get killed by these random attacks. Name was Resentment. His underlings apparently went looking for revenge, but they all got killed as well."

Raphael couldn't help but grimace upon hearing that. The local ruler had already been struck down. It was the worst-case scenario he'd anticipated. Sorcerers who ruled over any region were basically feudal lords. They were high-ranking, even among those who possessed second names, and some even held enough power to become one of the next Archdemons. They said Enchantress Gremory, a sorcerer who was currently expanding her influence in the north, had even beaten back an Archangel.

If they were dealing with a sorcerer more powerful than one of these rulers, a squad of Angelic Knights would be in above their heads. It would even be foolish for a wielder of a Sacred Sword to challenge such a foe alone. The bishop had mentioned a subjugation squad being dispatched, but considering his attitude, Raphael didn't expect much in that regard. At the earliest, it would take several weeks, or perhaps even over a month, which would be far too late.

I suppose I must take on this fight alone.

In addition to his natural countenance, Raphael wasn't very skilled in conversation. He was fine when it came to simple battles, but he was far from good at gathering information and finding a culprit. Regardless, he knew he was the only one capable of protecting this innkeeper and his pitiable employee. Raphael held back an oncoming migraine at the thought.

“Resentment was the worst kind of sorcerer,” the innkeeper added. “Rumors claimed that church assassins got to him, but then an Angelic Knight got hit. Now, everyone’s scared out of their minds, thinking sorcerers aren’t the only ones being targeted.”

“Church assassins...? What do you mean?” Raphael asked, furrowing his brows.

“Oops. You didn’t hear that from me, okay? They’re just rumors.”

The innkeeper was apparently under the impression that Raphael was glaring at him. That made sense, considering the flow of the conversation and all.

“I didn’t hear a thing,” Raphael said with a shrug.

“Thanks.”

It felt like the misunderstanding had only deepened, but at least the innkeeper was less wary of him now.

Still, that’s a little concerning. I’ve heard nothing of the church having any armed forces aside from the Angelic Knights...

Still, much like any other organization, the church was managed by people, and it was unreasonable to assume that a gathering of people would be devoid of shady elements.

“Do you have any other information you can share?” Raphael asked.

“I wouldn’t really call it information, but nobody’s seen the guy. All the victims are dead. It mostly just looks like wanderers with swords are being targeted. That’s why they’re calling the killer Sword Hunter.”

Angelic Knights weren’t the only ones who wielded swords. There were actually quite a few sorcerers who carried blades that were enhanced with sorcery.

Now that I think about it, it looked like she was targeting my weapon.

That was probably why she’d revealed an opening when Raphael had let go of his sword. With that thought in mind, something suddenly felt out of place.

“You said all of Sword Hunter’s victims were killed, but I’ve been told that the Angelic Knight survived.”

Not that it was particularly clear whether the bishop’s words could be taken at face value, of course.

“Oh, the circumstances around that one are a little different,” the innkeeper replied with a nod.

“Meaning?”

“I mentioned we had an attack right here three days ago, yeah? That was where the Angelic Knight got hit. There were actually two victims back then.”

After further questioning, Raphael learned that all the victims up until that point had been alone. And during this last incident, the other victim had died.

“That’s the gist of it. We’re guessing the Angelic Knight just happened to pass by and got caught up in it. Also, after hearing the scrap outside, our guests came running out. Maybe Sword Hunter didn’t get the time to finish him off?”

“Is that so...?” Raphael mumbled, nodding. His discomfort only grew stronger, however.

I didn’t sense any desire to kill behind her strikes, though.

A homicidal maniac would’ve gone for the kill once Raphael had dropped his sword, even after he’d made that careless mistake. And yet, the animal-masked assailant had stopped her attack. On the contrary, it was more like she’d aimed for his sword so as to avoid killing him. Her swordsmanship hadn’t looked like that of a murderer. She was probably a sorcerer, given that she could fight on par with a knight in Anointed Armor, but something didn’t add up.

“When did this Sword Hunter first appear?” Raphael asked.

“Hmm... About a month ago, I think?”

“I see. That helps. You have my thanks.”

“Your room’s on the second floor,” the innkeeper said as he passed him a key with a room number carved into it. It was questionable how useful such a key was in a town full of sorcerers, but it was still better than nothing.

Raphael thanked the man once more, then took a step up the staircase, which let out an ominous creak. Raphael was over a hundred and ninety centimeters tall, so when combined with his armor and sword, he weighed well over a hundred and fifty kilos. He prayed the floor wouldn’t give in as he ascended the staircase, spotting the tabaxi girl hiding in the first-floor hallway as he did so. Once she realized she’d been spotted, she ran away with tremendous vigor.

I’d like to ask her for information as well, but...

Considering the timing, it was more than likely that her caravan had been attacked by Sword Hunter. Judging by her reaction, though, it would be

meaningless to question her at the moment.

5

The next morning, Heidi sighed as she looked at her reflection in a hand mirror. She had horrible shadows under her eyes. She couldn't possibly go out and serve customers like that. Plus, even ignoring that fact, her hair was a ruffled mess, she had her blanket pressed over her head, her beautiful cat ears sagged like shriveled lettuce, and she was curled up like a turtle. She couldn't appear in public in such a state.

That Angelic Knight didn't try to kill me... But why? Didn't he chase me here?

She'd prepared to meet her end when he'd showed up at the inn, but the knight hadn't drawn his sword on her. Apparently, he hadn't actually tracked her here. She'd gotten by with the innkeeper's help, but now, if she ran away, he might be considered complicit. That was why she was stuck here, clutching Moonless Sky and waiting for dawn. Though, in truth, all she'd really done was tremble beneath her blanket.

Seeing how he's left me alone for the night, he probably hasn't realized who I am, right?

If he had, he would've arrested or killed her already. That was the impression Heidi had, but it was also possible he was trying to lure her into a false sense of security...or perhaps he wasn't certain yet and merely suspected her true identity.

In the eyes of someone who was carrying out illegal acts, everything looked suspicious...and once Heidi had started down that destructive spiral, she lost any hope of resting.

"Okay... Let's calm down and think about this. He didn't see my face back then...I think. Or did he?"

She started talking to herself in an attempt to calm down. She'd had her mask knocked off, but she'd immediately covered her face with her hand to keep her identity hidden. It had also been dark and she'd jumped a fair distance away from him. Thus, because Angelic Knights didn't possess the preposterous eyesight of sorcerers, it was unlikely that he'd seen her face. Also, upon their encounter at the inn, she'd already changed into her disguise, so there was no way he'd noticed.

So then, how the heck did he come straight to this inn?!

Well, he was a terrifying knight who'd perceived her near-invisible presence, then struck her with a blade—well, sheath—that should never have been able to find its mark. It wouldn't have been strange if he'd made it here based purely on instinct.

No, no, no, I mean, if he suspects me, shouldn't he be trying to question me in some way?

She'd been on guard for the entire night, but there'd been no signs of anyone even trying to approach her room. It was like he didn't suspect her at all.

But...! But...!

She'd spent the entire night at a mental impasse just like that, leaving her haggard in the morning.

“Anyway, he definitely saw me committing a crime...”

There was a reason Heidi was so far away from Liucaon...and she'd killed to accomplish that goal. She'd failed yesterday, but that hadn't been her first attempt. Multiple people had died by her blade.

“If I don't cut *him* down soon, he'll get away.”

Heidi lowered her gaze to the kodachi she'd been clutching all night. Moonless Sky was a pair of swords, but she only had one with her at present. A certain sorcerer had stolen the other. She'd rushed out here acting like a mad warrior, seemingly killing random people on the street, to retrieve it...though perhaps there was a better way. She knew nobody would applaud her efforts. Why, even the people of her hometown would scorn her if they found out. Nevertheless, Heidi couldn't think of a plausible alternative.

Heidi looked up. The sun was rising. She could hear the innkeeper starting to prepare breakfast downstairs. She hadn't gotten a wink of sleep, but so long as he was providing her with a place to live, she had to do her job. She crawled out of her blanket, washed her face, and slapped her cheeks. Incidentally, she'd already been dressed in case she needed to make a quick exit. Heidi tried forcing a smile in front of her mirror, then finally went down to the kitchen...where she saw the innkeeper heating a pot.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Yo... You look like crap. You wash your face yet?”

“Ha ha... Yeah, I have...” she answered with a vague nod.

“Well, that's the kinda inn this is. We get customers with all sortsa weird

circumstances. Get used to it.”

“Understood... I’m fine, really.”

She didn’t sound fine at all, however.

“Go get the desserts ready or something,” the innkeeper said, sighing. “I’ll handle this.”

“Huh? But...”

You’re an awful cook...

It was bad enough that she and the other staff were responsible for cooking for the tavern at night. Luckily, she just barely managed to swallow her words, or she would’ve angered him. Instead, she gave him a quick bow. The desserts had already been made the previous night, so all she needed to do was get them out. In other words, he was telling her to rest.

“What a dumbass. You should’ve just run away...”

She heard a whisper behind her. Heidi turned around with a troubled smile on her face, then bowed once more.

6

Raphael had decided to drop by Mercator’s church in the morning. He had breakfast at the inn before leaving, and the meal was composed of a single bun that was hard enough to break someone’s tooth and some sticky mess in a bowl that was apparently oatmeal. There were other guests there too. All of them quietly ate their meals with dead eyes. The taste...was something Raphael didn’t wish to ever recall.

The innkeeper handed him a cup of coffee, which he hadn’t offered to any of the other guests. It was apparently to help Raphael on his subjugation mission. The coffee, however, was dreadfully strong. Raphael was forced to secretly slip in three cubes of sugar to get through the cup. In contrast, the dessert that came with breakfast looked delicious. It was an unfamiliar little ball—apparently a dish from Liucaon called ohagi. He’d wrapped it up in a handkerchief and kept it in his pocket. He planned to enjoy it when he needed to get some rest during the day.

Mercator’s church doubled as an orphanage, so many children were running around on the grounds. Judging by the laundry baskets and brooms they were holding, they weren’t playing, but rather helping out with chores. Raphael prayed that none of Sword Hunter’s victims were among them.

I'll probably scare them if I get too close...

He'd harmed that employee last night, which he greatly regretted. At the end of the day, Angelic Knights were a means of protecting public order. They were given the power to accomplish that task...and rewarded for doing so. They weren't meant to frighten the populace, even if by accident. And just as Raphael tried to proceed without being noticed by the children...

"Hm?"

He spotted one child who stood out among the others. Even though it was early in the morning, she held a parasol. She hugged a creepy stuffed doll in one arm, wore a headdress, and had her splendid blonde hair tied up into pigtailed. When all that was combined with her extravagant dress, she didn't look like an orphan at all.

Having noticed his gaze, the girl turned toward Raphael, meeting his eyes with her gold ones. She then flashed him an amused smile. Her lips curved like a crescent moon, presenting a glimpse of what looked like fangs.

"Tee hee hee..." she giggled, and Raphael froze. It was just like what he'd heard the previous evening.

"Are you the Angelic Knight who was dispatched here?"

Raphael suddenly turned back toward the church and spotted an old priest. He was apparently the man in charge here. The man had thin limbs like withered branches and wore a plain white habit. In complete contrast to the bishop of Raphael's church, this old man was the very picture of honorable poverty. Raphael had the same standing as him in terms of rank, but he straightened his posture and saluted him regardless.

"Angelic Knight Raphael Hyurandell at your service. I've been dispatched to subjugate the sorcerer known as Sword Hunter."

"I'll leave it in your capable hands. Sorry... I should be the one dealing with this issue, but embarrassingly enough, I've never even held a sword."

"Don't fret. It is my job to resort to force. I expect nothing of you."

This was an orphanage, and this man had an important role in protecting the place. He couldn't possibly confront this Sword Hunter and expose himself to danger. The priest widened his eyes in astonishment, but soon returned a gentle smile.

"You're right. I have my own duties to attend to," he said, casting a look at the energetic children with tranquil eyes.

He'd apparently understood what Raphael was trying to say. This

might've been the very first time that someone had not only felt no fear of him, but even understood him. Raphael turned to look at the children as well, but could no longer spot the parasol-wielding girl anymore.

"They're all good children," the priest continued. "Please resolve this case so that they can continue smiling."

"Understood. I heard an Angelic Knight was attacked the other day. Is he here?"

"Yes, you're talking about Sir Ino. He's recuperating in one of our spare rooms. Thanks to a doctor who came in from town, he's stable now."

The priest didn't mention who exactly this doctor was, so Raphael didn't pry.

"Can he speak?"

The priest shook his head and replied, "Unfortunately, he has yet to regain consciousness."

Even so, Raphael asked to check on the man. Acquiescing, the priest guided him into the chapel. Getting closer to the building risked scaring the children, but he knew wouldn't stand a chance of removing the threat to this town without conducting a proper investigation. The best Raphael could do was solve this matter as quickly as possible and then leave.

The priest gave him the general summary of the incident on their way to see the injured knight, saying, "The Sword Hunter incidents started approximately one month ago."

That information matched what the innkeeper had told Raphael the previous night. He wasn't really doubting anyone, but a single account of something couldn't be wholly trusted.

"In just one month, six people have been attacked. It turns out even the town's sorcerers are watching idly from the sidelines. Not that it's right for us to count on sorcerers, admittedly."

Considering the last incident involved two victims, there'd been five attacks.

"Hmph! The sorcerers have their own damn rules," Raphael said. "What's wrong with making use of them?"

On the contrary, carelessly disturbing their rules could lead to unnecessary resentment forming. Thus, the priest's hope that the sorcerers would do something wasn't exactly misplaced. Well, none of that got across due to the way Raphael had phrased it, but the priest merely smiled gently with a

slightly astonished look on his face.

“It puts me at ease to hear you say that... Getting back on track, have you heard that all the victims were wielding swords?”

“Indeed.”

Having said that, sorcerers could hide even a greatsword inside their robes with ease. It was hard to predict who the next victim would be. And yet, the priest’s next words were totally unexpected.

“They didn’t have their swords stolen from them, however. They were all destroyed.”

“Destroyed?” Raphael repeated, wide-eyed.

“Yes. I do wonder how it’s done. They were discovered smashed to bits, leaving only part of the grip behind.”

The priest mimicked holding a sword as he explained that point. They’d apparently identified them as swords only by their hilts and the shattered bits of metal.

“What of the broken swords? Have they been disposed of?” Raphael asked.

“No, they’re stored in the church. Do you think they’ll serve as a clue?”

“I can’t say for sure until I’ve seen them.”

It was apparently possible for a sorcerer to accurately identify the owner of an item, but the church considered sorcery evil, so they could never resort to such methods. Regardless, he couldn’t afford to overlook anything that could lead him toward the culprit.

“Very well. I’ll show them to you later... Oh, right, I don’t know what purpose they have in destroying their swords, but that’s the reason the culprit is known as Sword Hunter.”

“I see...” Raphael mumbled, then grimaced as his attention shifted to the sword on his back. “By the way, what happened to the Angelic Knight’s sword?”

From what he’d heard, the knight had merely gotten caught up in an ongoing incident, which was why he’d gotten out alive. Thus, his sword may have also been intact.

“Now that you mention it, it wasn’t broken,” the priest answered with a slight cock of the head.

“In that case, I’d like to borrow it. Unfortunately, you can see the state mine is in.”

Raphael pulled the sword off his back, belt and all. He drew it slightly to show the blade, revealing nicks and chips all over its edge. The sparks that had scattered during the clash last night had all come from the metallic fragments that fell off his sword.

Next time...it might break.

If the other Angelic Knight's sword was intact, then he wanted to take it as a spare. The priest narrowed his eyes to take a closer look at it; then, after a short while, he looked up at Raphael in shock.

"It can't be... Was this done by Sword Hunter?"

"Indeed. I fought a thug who appeared to fit the profile last night. I'm sure that was Sword Hunter."

Well, not that anybody would have believed him if he claimed she was actually a little girl.

If only I'd gotten a better look at her face...

The only thing he'd managed to identify about her was her red eyes.

And then there's that employee at the inn...

He hoped she was completely unrelated to this string of murders, but her physical features lined up far too well with those of the culprit. He had to check to be sure, even if only to prove her innocence. He tucked away this matter as something to resolve later, then turned back to face the priest, who had his eyes narrowed as if troubled over something.

Noticing Raphael's gaze, the priest smiled bitterly, looked up at him, and said, "Forgive me. My eyesight is very poor. I'm not completely blind, at least."

Now it all made sense. The priest was unable to see Raphael's face properly due to his poor eyesight. That was why he'd shown no fear when facing Raphael. Still, even if that was the only reason, he'd treated Raphael like a proper person on their very first meeting. That was more than enough reason for Raphael to put his life on the line to protect this man.

"Have you tried using glasses? I'm sure the church would prepare a pair for a priest."

"I did have a pair made for me once," the priest answered with a shrug. "However, I ended up selling them. As you can see, we're not exactly wealthy out here. So, well, I can't possibly ask for another pair to be made."

This priest was so serious that it brought a tear to Raphael's eyes. Why was such a man of character suffering in a remote region, while the bishop

from his church lived in luxury?

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” the priest asked. In other words, he wanted to get all the questions out of the way ahead of time so as to not burden the injured Angelic Knight.

“Hmmm... What type of sorcerer was the first victim, Resentment?”

“Ah...” the priest mumbled. His expression darkened at the mention of that name. “I don’t know anything about his sorcery, but he was the type of man who gained power by inflicting suffering on others. There’s no small number of people who were killed due to his indulgences. Several of the children here were orphaned by him, in fact.”

“I see. Plenty of people despised him, then.”

If the culprit was a person—after all, there were cases where the culprit was a monster or chimera—then it was possible to approach the matter by searching for people who had a score to settle, but that would prove difficult under current circumstances. Raphael was short on hands to conduct a proper investigation, after all.

“Oh, I don’t know whether this will be of any use, but I have heard something,” the priest said as if suddenly remembering a potential lead.

“They say Resentment spent some time away from Mercator before he was killed. Let’s see...I think he was absent for about half a month or so.”

“Hmm? Do you know where he went?”

“No...unfortunately not. The sorcerers might know, however.”

However, very few sorcerers would answer an Angelic Knight’s questions. In any case, it was possible Resentment had brought the culprit with him from wherever he’d traveled. But in that case, why was Sword Hunter still out killing people when Resentment was already dead?

The priest had provided him with all the information he had on hand, but unfortunately, it wasn’t all that different from what Raphael had heard from the innkeeper. Still, at least it’d allowed him to verify the details. About the only new information he’d gotten was that the incidents occurred in unpopulated areas late at night.

I suppose it’ll be rather difficult to find the one Sword Hunter was fighting before me.

The attacker had actually been in combat with someone else before Raphael had interrupted their battle. He’d charged in to help the victim of the serial killer, but he hadn’t seen who it was because of the darkness. Though,

judging by the shirt and trousers they wore, it had likely been a civilian. There was a fairly high probability of Sword Hunter targeting that victim again. Raphael wanted to find them and protect them, but...

Just as they were about done talking, Raphael suddenly remembered something important.

“Now that I think about it, the Sword Hunter I crossed blades with last night said something strange.”

“And what was that?”

““The moon is beautiful, isn’t it?””

A painful silence sank over them.

“What meaning is there to such a question...?” the priest asked meekly.

“It could’ve just been a ploy to distract me. That’s how Sword Hunter managed to escape, after all. Still, those words are rather unsettling. I’d like to know if there’s any deeper meaning behind them.”

“Well, I’m not sure if this is related,” the priest started, casting his eyes down with a muddled look, “but I feel like I’ve seen a similar phrase in old literature from Liucaon.”

“Hm? Liucaon?”

Raphael pulled the animal mask out from his pocket. Now that he looked at it under a light, he could tell it was modeled after a fox...and such animals were rare on the continent.

“Then is this, perhaps, also from Liucaon?” Raphael asked. The priest then moved in to get a closer look at it.

“Oh, now this I’ve seen before,” he replied. “It’s used in a festival in Liucaon where they worship one of their gods. There are some statues that look like this too, apparently.”

Liucaon was a country where many rare species resided. The church kept contact with them under the pretense of keeping them from going extinct, so there was no small number of high-ranking priests and bishops who’d actually visited the country.

In that case, this Sword Hunter was definitely from Liucaon. In all likelihood, Resentment had done something to incur her wrath there, leading to this series of events.

But...Liucaon?

Raphael had heard they possessed different values and a different religion from the continent. He’d also heard that many races who were close to

extinction on the continent lived there, so the church had to be careful about how they interacted with the area.

“We’ve gone off track,” Raphael said, remembering he still hadn’t gotten an answer to his earlier question. “What does that phrase mean?”

“I’m sorry. I’m afraid I don’t know that much... I do remember it being akin to a verse of poetry, but that’s all. Though, I might be able to find out with some research.”

“Poetry, you say? Hm, then perhaps these crimes are imitating some story.”

“If that’s the case, I’ll look into it.”

“I leave that to you.”

They’d gotten a little lost in conversation, but suddenly remembering what they were actually here for, the priest knocked on a door.

“Excuse me.”

Inside, a young man was resting in bed. He looked around twenty. Even unconscious, it was clear he was in pain due to his intense groans. Raphael went up to take a closer look at him. The knight had bandages wrapped around his face, so he wasn’t able to see his wounds. The bandages appeared to have been changed out frequently, but even though they were new, he could see blood soaking straight through them.

“What of his Anointed Armor?” Raphael asked the priest.

“His armor? It’s being held in the chapel. Why?”

“Leave it by his side. It’ll speed up his recovery.”

“Oh! Understood. I’ll bring it here immediately.”

The priest seemed ready to run off in a hurry when Raphael stopped him. Anointed Armor weighed nearly thirty kilos, so an old man was liable to break his back trying to carry it.

“Like I’d leave that job to a decrepit old husk. I can find it if I just take a good look around, right?”

And then, without waiting for a reply, Raphael left the room. The priest gave him a deep bow in thanks.

7

“Yaaay! It’s Heidi!”

Heidi dropped by the church with a cloth bundle in her arms. The children

ran over to her and cheered as she entered the grounds.

“Did you bring sweets?”

“Sweets! Sweets!”

“I love you, sweets lady!”

“I see... You guys only recognize me for the sweets, huh?”

There weren't that many guests at the inn she worked at, so there were leftovers all the time. That was why she always snuck out the excess desserts and brought them here to feed the orphans.

I'm pretty sure the innkeeper's already noticed, though...

Perhaps he had ordered too many on purpose *because* he'd noticed.

“Okay, come on now. Form a line and take your turns. Has everyone been listening to the priest like good kids? Naughty kids won't get any snacks, you hear?”

With that, the children formed an orderly line. That was about what she'd expected from children raised by that kind priest. Even if they were being tempted with sweets, they were polite to a fault. After passing out a portion to each child, just as the last one came up to her...

“Huh?”

There were no ohagi left even though she was sure she'd brought enough for everyone. Heidi seemed to almost attract bad luck, but she usually acted like it didn't bother her. Her parents and the elders often told her to think of it as a coincidence. She didn't think it would rear its ugly head here, of all places, however.

“There's...none for me?”

The child realized there were none left from Heidi's reaction and started crying.

“No. I've got one for you too, okay? Ummm, uhhh...”

No matter what she did with the cloth in her hands, she couldn't make something appear out of nowhere. She was panicking over what to do...when suddenly, the children began trembling. It was as if they were too scared to even scream—as if they'd just witnessed a monster even more frightening than a sorcerer. Their eyes were fixed behind Heidi...and just as she was about to turn around to look...

“Hmm? Well, aren't you up to something amusing?”

A voice that seemed to resonate from the very depths of the earth had Heidi's heart thumping like crazy. How could she possibly forget the voice of

the dreadful Angelic Knight she'd fought last night?

Eeeeeek?! What?! How?! Why here?! Well, duh! He's an Angelic Knight!

Where else would a knight be other than the church? This was obviously his normal habitat. Heidi was the foolish one for coming here without realizing that simple fact. Staying up all night had apparently dulled her senses.

I-I-I-I-I-Is he here to kill me after getting a good night's rest?!

Heidi couldn't turn around. She merely trembled violently as the Angelic Knight stretched his arm past her shoulder...and revealed a cloth bundle in his palm.

"You dropped this. Be more careful."

"Hwuh?! U-Um..."

Without waiting for a reply, the knight forced the bundle into her hands. His footsteps then lumbered off into the distance. Judging by how the children sighed in relief, she could tell that he was gone.

"Hey, sweets lady, you okay?"

"Oh, um. Y-Y-Y-Y-Yeah...I'm p-p-perfectly fine."

Her voice quaked so pathetically that the children looked at her with eyes full of sympathy. She then suddenly focused on what the Angelic Knight had passed her.

"What's that?" one of the children asked.

"Hm? I wonder..."

It was small enough to fit in Heidi's palm and the contents felt soft. The carefully wrapped silk handkerchief had some blackened stains on it, however.

I-It's not a dead animal or anything, right...?

She grew anxious, wondering whether it was okay to unwrap this in front of the children, but timidly did so anyway. As for what was inside...

"Oh! Sweets!"

It was none other than what Heidi had been passing out, ohagi.

Huh? Why? I made this, right? Did I drop it? No, no, no. I mean, why would it be inside a handkerchief if I had?

If she'd dropped it, it would have been covered in dirt. What's more, Heidi had kept hers bundled together until she'd started handing them to the children.

In that case, there was only one other possibility.

Um...I didn't drop this...meaning it belonged to that knight?

That made more sense, but then why was he walking around with it? The revelation only deepened her confusion. Ignoring that, though, the child in front of her waited with sparkling, expecting eyes. Heidi held out the ohagi, still somewhat perplexed by the whole situation.

“Here you go.”

“Yaaay! Thanks!”

Heidi waved as the child ran off, then remained frozen in place for a while longer. Her heart still pounded heavily, but it was now due to confusion instead of fear.

8

On his way back after retrieving the injured knight's Anointed Armor, Raphael found a tabaxi girl handing out sweets to the orphans in a corner of the church's courtyard. The sweets appeared to be the ohagi that had been served for his breakfast.

The employee from the inn?

The story went that she'd been attacked by someone and had lost everything of value. This incident wasn't officially counted among Sword Hunter's attacks, but considering the timing, it was still possible she'd gotten caught up in things. Also, if she was the one who'd made the ohagi at the inn, then it would mean she had some sort of connection to Liucaon. As such, Raphael wanted to ask her some questions, but he couldn't figure out how to do so without scaring her. When he found himself completely still, the priest came up behind him.

“Oh, that girl. She's here again, I see.”

“You know her?”

“Yes. She's a rather kind girl. She comes here to bring the children sweets all the time, just like now. As shameful as it is, we don't have the funds to allow the children to indulge in such delicacies ourselves.”

According to the innkeeper, the girl had arrived at the inn utterly penniless. Thus, she shouldn't have had any financial leeway...and yet, here she was doing charitable work. Her gallant behavior had the corners of Raphael's eyes heating up.

“Huh...?”

Just then, the girl muttered in bewilderment. Judging by how she was frantically flipping over the cloth in her hands, there most likely weren't enough sweets to go around. An abrupt choice was presented to Raphael. From what he could see, there was only one child who hadn't gotten any, while Raphael had one of the same ohagi he'd tucked away in his pocket to enjoy later. However, there was still his outer appearance to consider.

Whenever he talked to people, they felt excessively frightened of him, so when he had to gather information, he had to put in double the work of any other person. Sweets provided solace for the soul when mentally worn down by such solitude. In short, he'd put in his best effort this morning with the thought of that reward awaiting him at the end in mind. However, if he handed it over now, there was someone he could save. It was a harsh choice, but Raphael made his decision quickly.

What kind of Angelic Knight would I be if I ignored an innocent bystander in need?!

Raphael put down the Anointed Armor he'd been carrying.

"Excuse me, would you mind waiting here a moment?" he asked the priest.

"Huh?"

Raphael left the priest behind and approached the girl. He tried to keep his footsteps quiet so as to not scare the children, but his face was enough to turn theirs pale. He couldn't just throw the ohagi, so there was no choice but to have them endure the sight of him for a little while. After reaching the girl's back, he came to a sudden realization.

Hm, wait...how exactly does one talk to someone when not pressing them for information?

People generally didn't approach him...and Raphael had no idea how many years it'd been since he'd struck up a conversation with someone on his own. However, continuing to stand in silence would soon have the children bursting into tears, so the words he chose in a panic were...

"Hmm? Well, aren't you up to something amusing?"

It felt like the air cracked around him. He'd clearly misspoken yet again. He'd wanted to praise how admirable she was, but Raphael couldn't think of the right words to convey that sentiment. As expected, the girl froze, her black fur standing on end. He was now sure that saying anything else would make the situation worse. As such, he forced the bundled ohagi into her hand.

“You dropped this. Be more careful.”

If he'd had the composure to think about the matter a little more, he would've realized that something that had fallen on the ground was unsuitable for consumption, but this was the limit of Raphael's communication skills. With that, he quickly returned to the chapel.

“You truly are far kinder than you look,” the priest said with a smile.

“So you can actually see me?”

“My eyes are bad, but not to the point where I can't distinguish your features when you're standing right next to me.”

Raphael grimaced.

“Once we bring Sir Ino his armor, why don't we share a cup of tea?” the priest said, then followed up with a smile by saying, “I happen to have some terrific black tea on hand.”

“I'll have to pass,” Raphael answered after a moment's hesitation. “Such things are not part of my mission.”

The priest nodded as if he understood Raphael perfectly, then replied, “I pray that your mission ends safely.”

Raphael returned a shrug.

I must protect the people here, even if that means sacrificing my life.

His sense of duty to fulfill his mission of bringing down this Sword Hunter flared in his heart—with no way of knowing their true identity.

9

That evening, Heidi went out into town to do some shopping. The Angelic Knight had apparently gone around asking questions after leaving the church, so she managed to hear quite a few rumors. Everyone trembled in fear at the arrival of such a terrifying Angelic Knight, but Heidi found this strange.

It's not like they're all as shady as I am... Why are they so scared?

Well, the knight did have a rather frightening face, but he wasn't exactly a hoodlum who resorted to violence as a first resort. Besides, wasn't the church an organization that protected the populace from sorcerers? Or did they believe that getting involved with an Angelic Knight in a sorcerer's town would draw unwanted attention? In any case, it didn't seem like the knight was a villain. After all, at the very least, he was kind enough to give away his ohagi for a child's sake. So then, how was it fair to whisper about him like he

was some kind of homicidal maniac? Heidi wasn't in a position to complain if he killed her on the spot upon discovering her identity, but that wasn't the case for the townsfolk. Thus, their attitude toward him didn't sit right with her.

As such thoughts passed through her mind, Heidi finished getting everything on the innkeeper's shopping list. And just as she started heading back to the inn...

"Oh."

"Hrm?"

She happened to come across the knight in question. She could hear a violent thumping coming from her heart. Sweat poured down her brow like some kind of conditioned reflex.

Wait! No! I'm no different from the others if I react like this! or so she thought, but she was the prey he was hunting. It was a little hard for her to smile on the spot in such a situation.

"Hmph! I'm unwanted here, I see," the knight said, turning to leave like he was used to such reactions. His movements were so natural that Heidi could tell that he'd been treated like this before even coming to this town. He obviously still had work to do but showed no signs of even taking a glance back.

"Um...please wait a sec!" Heidi said, reaching out to him before she knew it. She had no idea what she was doing. Nevertheless, she grabbed the edge of his armor and called him to a stop. The knight looked back at her in astonishment and waited for her to continue.

"Um, I mean..."

She didn't really have anything in particular to say to her enemy. Rather, the more she spoke to him, the more likely it was for her to be exposed. It was honestly in her best interest to just let him go.

Suddenly remembering something, Heidi pulled a handkerchief from her pocket. It was the one the knight had given to her earlier in the day with the ohagi.

"Um, thank you very much for this. Because of you, that child wasn't disappointed."

The knight's eyes widened. He apparently hadn't expected her to say that.

"Mmm... Um, how do I put this...? Did the children...seem uncomfortable after that?" he asked in a troubled tone.

Now it was Heidi's turn to stare back at him in wonder as she replied, "Th-They were fine. Everyone was really happy. If one of them didn't have any to eat, then the others would have felt bad about it. You really saved me."

"I see. Good, then. There was worth in sacrificing one of the few pleasures I had."

"Yes. Thank you very... Huh?"

Heidi thought she heard something unexpected come from the knight's mouth. Thus, she needed a moment to organize her thoughts.

"Um... Do you like sweets?" she asked.

"Can't I?"

"N-No! I mean! Yes! You can! It's just...a little unexpected."

It felt like she'd rephrased it a little rudely, but she was too bewildered to pay that any mind.

"Hmph! Such is my appearance, but there are still times I desire company," the knight said, deadly serious. "Choosing sweets as a form of comfort is a valid choice."

His phrasing was somewhat roundabout, but in other words, he was saying, "When I get lonely, sweets soothe me."

Huh? In that case, doesn't that mean he gave away something really precious...?

And yet, she and the children had been too scared to even thank him. Now that she realized this, an overwhelming sense of guilt dominated her mind.

No, hang on a sec...

Heidi was Sword Hunter, and this Angelic Knight must have gotten some kind of clue after investigating all day, so wasn't it possible that this was some kind of act to make her drop her guard? Heidi started coming up with all sorts of excuses to run away from her guilt.

"What's wrong?" the knight asked dubiously.

"Oh, um...it might be a little rude to say this, but I feel like the townspeople don't really see you in a good light, so I was just wondering why you'd do something like that when it doesn't really benefit you..."

"I'm paid and granted status to protect the likes of you," he replied with an indifferent shrug. "There's no logic in refusing to protect those who don't like me, even when it's something so damn frivolous as being short a single treat."

There was no hesitation whatsoever in his answer. He would surely reach

out to lend a hand to anyone, not just a child in need. He would do so even though he knew people were more likely to run away than take his hand. Heidi was so ashamed of herself upon realizing that fact.

He's a really good person!

Despite that fact, she'd looked at him with unjust suspicion. She'd long left the path of righteousness, but she wanted to preserve her sense of compassion. Heidi held back her tears, then made a decision.

"U-Um, are you staying at the inn again tonight?" she asked.

"Hm? Indeed. I plan to, at least."

"Then, if you'd like, I can make this morning's ohagi again for—"

"Really?!"

Heidi bent back upon witnessing his unexpectedly vigorous reaction.

H-He must really like sweets...

How much determination had it taken to hand over his ohagi? Simply imagining the sight of him agonizing over the decision brought a smile to Heidi's face. She then remembered that he'd yet to take back his handkerchief, so she held it out once more.

"So, um, here..."

"Right. Sorry about that."

The knight took his handkerchief, then stared at her in surprise.

"Um, what's wrong?" Heidi asked.

"It's nothing... Hm? Did you wash this?"

Ohagi was a sweet filled with a cream called anko. Heidi had never seen a similar type of food on the continent. The cream had, naturally, dirtied the handkerchief, so she'd cleaned it in the afternoon.

It was pretty hard to get all the stains out...

Still, she couldn't possibly return it back to him dirty, so she'd wanted to clean it as best as she could. Heidi nodded back to him to answer his question, then froze.

"I see. You have my thanks. It's been so long since anyone has done something of the sort for me."

The Angelic Knight gave her a gentle smile.

So this is what his smile looks like...

She was completely taken aback.

"Farewell, then."

The knight turned around and walked off, leaving Heidi standing there in

a daze. Her heart pounded heavily in her chest. Was it because of fear, though? Or perhaps confusion? Or maybe, just maybe it was something else entirely? She couldn't even tell anymore.

10

Come nighttime at the inn, the tabaxi girl really did make some ohagi for Raphael. Looking at the other tables, he didn't spot anyone else with the same dessert, so he could tell that she'd gone out of her way to make some for just him.

"Keep it a secret from the others, okay?" she whispered, throwing a glance at the guests spooning inexplicable substances into their mouths with dead eyes.

Raphael had to eat the same thing as them, but the saving grace of having something sweet to look forward to at the end of his meal made a world of difference. The ohagi was ever so sweet. After taking a bite, a paste-like substance with a mysterious texture squeezed out, bewildering him. He put in some effort to tear through it, and a rich flavor spread over his tongue as a result. After finally getting his teeth through it completely, the torn paste went wild in his mouth as if to override all other tastes, and before he knew it, a pleasant sweetness overwhelmed him. The mysterious texture and surging tide of flavor gave him a sense of exaltation akin to standing on the battlefield.

The innkeeper offered Raphael another cup of coffee. This was actually just the right stimulus after the ohagi. Thanks to that, he only needed two cubes of sugar.

"I'm glad you liked it," the girl said with a charming smile as she walked over to clear his table.

Perhaps she'd simply grown used to him over the course of the day. Regardless, her gutsiness was worthy of praise.

Maybe I'll be able to ask her my questions now?

The story went that she'd been attacked by someone a month ago and had then fled to this inn. Considering the timing, there was a fair chance that the Sword Hunter attacks were related. Having said that, those attacks weren't the only things going on in town. There were thefts and fights just about every day, so it was more likely that she was unrelated. Nevertheless, she

might have had some kind of clue that could aid him.

“Girl, I have something to ask you,” Raphael said.

The girl started and trembled, then asked, “Wh-What is it?”

“You were attacked by someone before you came to this town, right? I’d like to hear the details.”

“Oh, that? Don’t scare me,” she replied with a sigh of relief.

“What do you mean by ‘that’?”

“O-Oh! Um! N-No! Uhhh...” she said, then shook her head in a panic and lowered her voice as if wary of her surroundings before continuing, “Um, we shouldn’t really talk here... May I drop by your room later?”

“Very well.”

Raphael had some places he wanted to check during the night but still gave her a nod. She surely had her own work to do at the inn at the moment, such as cleaning up. Plus, he wanted time to sort out things about this incident, so he was grateful that she was willing to make some time for him.

After all, I’ve already gotten a lot of information today.

He was still just working off conjecture, but it didn’t look like it was going to be difficult to resolve this case. All that was left was to piece things together in a logical manner.

Once he returned to his room and waited for one or two hours, the girl finally dropped by.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting.”

She stood there with her lips tightly pursed. Her expression was like that of a cornered sinner ready to confess. Raphael wanted to start questioning her, but it looked like it was better to wait for her to calm down. There were two small chairs in the room. He pointed her over to one of them. She sat down, took a deep breath, then finally began speaking.

“Um, there’s actually something I want to show you.”

Raphael gulped as she held out the item in question. He couldn’t have mistaken it for anything else. It was the blade used by Sword Hunter.

“It’s called Moonless Sky. It’s a kodachi passed down in my hometown... Originally, it’s part of a pair of blades, though.”

She only had one sword with her, however.

In other words, the culprit possesses the other?

According to what he’d heard over the course of the day, there was no

commonality among the victims except for the fact that they'd been armed with swords. None were famed sorcerers like Resentment. Why, the majority were travelers who weren't even locals.

"A certain sorcerer stole the other. I had to retrieve it by any means, so I went searching for the thief."

Judging by her bitter expression, it must've been something like a memento in her mind.

"Unfortunately, the thief noticed I was making a move," the girl continued, hanging her head. "At the time, I'd been given a ride by a certain caravan's carriage. It was almost like a stagecoach...and everyone was so kind to me. Yet..."

She paused, biting her lip.

"I may not look it, but I've been taught how to use a sword. I even thought it was a good chance to catch the culprit. And yet, when he attacked, I couldn't do anything."

That was understandable. It wasn't strange even for Angelic Knights who'd had perfect grades during their time in training to not only fail to achieve anything in actual combat against sorcerers, but to die right in their first battle. Raphael didn't know how long this girl had trained, but if she was capable of defeating a sorcerer in her first real battle, then Angelic Knights wouldn't be necessary. Honestly, she was lucky to have survived the encounter.

"A sorcerer attacked us and killed everyone. The culprit had the other half of Moonless Sky. I had to fight, but I was so scared... I couldn't move... I managed to escape unharmed because the others helped me, but I was the only one who survived."

Things are finally falling into place.

Raphael nodded to himself. After his time at the church earlier in the day, he'd carried out a straightforward investigation of this case, as well as the attack on this girl's carriage one month ago. The incident itself was real. There were testimonies of a ravaged carriage, all of its cargo stolen or destroyed, and many bloodstains. However, no bodies had been discovered, so it wasn't counted among Sword Hunter's attacks.

Considering the timing, things line up.

The girl gripped her apron tight, then raised her head as if resolving herself for the worst. At the same time, Raphael pulled a certain object out of

his pocket.

“That’s why I—”

“Then what about—?”

With poor timing, the two spoke at the same time.

“Hm? Sorry, what was that?” Raphael asked.

“Oh, no, um, please go first...”

The atmosphere was a little awkward now, so with the wind taken out of her sails, the girl couldn’t bring herself to admit the whole truth.

“Very well, then. What about this?” Raphael repeated. “Do you recognize it?”

He held out Sword Hunter’s mask.

“Oh! That’s my—uh...”

She quickly covered her mouth in a panic, but it was already too late.

“I see...” Raphael sighed quietly.

The girl was clearly perturbed...and sweat poured down her brow.

“Um, you’ve got it all wrong. I was going to tell you myself. It’s just...” she started mumbling unintelligibly, but Raphael simply tossed the mask to her.

“A villain called Sword Hunter had it. It was probably stolen from the carriage you traveled on. If it’s that dear to you, then make sure to hold onto it so that it isn’t stolen again.”

“Huh? Ummm...what?”

The girl was utterly bewildered, unable to understand what was going on.

“That mask and kodachi... You’re from Liucaon, aren’t you?”

“Huh? Oh, yes.”

“Then allow me to ask you one thing.”

Raphael’s tone was utterly serious, so the girl straightened her posture and nodded. She wasn’t able to clear the bewilderment from her expression, however.

He stared right into her eyes, then asked, “What does the phrase ‘The moon is beautiful, isn’t it?’ mean?”

“Hwuh?!” the girl shrieked, turning visibly red in the cheeks. “N-No! Um...about that...!”

Judging by her reaction, she knew exactly what it meant. Well, that only made sense, since she was from Liucaon.

“Um...well, I do know what it means, I guess, but...” she somehow

managed to wring out.

“Hmm... Is it the kind of crude phrase you’d hesitate to describe aloud?”

If it was some form of foulmouthed slang, then it was cruel to force a young girl to explain the meaning to him. That was enough for Raphael, but the girl shook her head in a fluster.

“N-No! You’ve got it all wrong! It isn’t an insult or anything!”

“Then what does it mean?”

“Ugh... Um, it’s...”

She turned even redder. Raphael folded his arms. He still didn’t know what it meant, but he could at least tell it wasn’t a message passed in malice or as any kind of warning.

Well, I suppose I can only pray that the priest figures it out.

It was somewhat odd to force an old man with poor eyesight to read, but Raphael decided he would pay the man another visit in the morning. Although, it looked like this incident would be solved well before that.

“I’ve kept you long enough,” Raphael said, rising to his feet. “I thank you for the information. I’ve pieced together a lot now.”

“Huh? Oh... I-Is that so?”

She stared at him as if he’d completely misunderstood everything, but Raphael didn’t notice her expression. Just as he was about to leave the room, she raised her voice in confusion and asked, “Um, where are you going?”

“I’m an Angelic Knight. It is my duty to subjugate evil sorcerers.”

Having said that, sorcerers weren’t meant to be fought one-on-one.

Regardless, I can’t afford to let this drag on...

If he left Sword Hunter at large, there would be more victims. Raphael wrapped his sword belt around his back, then left the room as the girl collapsed to her knees.

“What do I do...? I didn’t tell him...”

In the end, her distraught voice failed to reach anyone’s ears.

11

Heidi stepped out into town at night, an animal mask covering her face. She held Moonless Sky in her hand. Clad in black clothing, she had taken the form of last night’s Sword Hunter.

I have to cut him down.

If she were to let him escape, all those she'd killed would have died in vain. That was one thing she couldn't allow. That was why she had no choice but to take up her sword, even if it meant having to fight that gentle Angelic Knight.

Can I even win...?

The knight was strong. She hadn't been able to cut him last night, even though she'd practically ambushed him. Now that he was fully prepared for battle, victory seemed like an impossibility.

Will he...let me win?

She knew she was in the wrong. Nevertheless, it was too late to stop now. She'd already given her answer, so she wanted to entrust the outcome to his hands.

She waited in silence beneath the nearly full moon, and before long, the Angelic Knight appeared before her.

"Hrm?"

His face, illuminated by the moonlight, was just as frightening as when she'd first seen it, but for some reason, she felt no fear.

She was wearing the mask he'd just given back to her. With that, he would definitely notice. Would he show anger? Or maybe disappointment? Heidi had gone to his room to confess on her own. And yet, be it through bad luck or due to his inability to recognize the situation, he hadn't come to the right conclusion. Thinking back on that brought a strange smile to Heidi's face.

The Angelic Knight widened his eyes just a little upon realizing it was Heidi, and then...he immediately averted his gaze as if he'd witnessed something he shouldn't have seen, then started walking off.

"H-Hang on! Why are you ignoring me?!"

Heidi's tragic resolve had been thrown out the window, and unable to endure it, she clung to him.

"Gah! Unhand me! I have no business with the likes of you!"

"What do you mean?! Didn't you come here to subjugate Sword Hunter?!"

"I came to subjugate a sorcerer named Sword Hunter, not some civilian."

With that, Heidi finally realized that this knight wasn't as dense as she'd previously thought.

"Ummm... Did you...realize it was me?"

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

His answer came immediately, showing that he definitely knew already. Heidi sank weakly to her knees.

Huh? Why? He knows it’s me, but he’s still ignoring me? Even though he totally refused to understand me when I tried to open up to him about the truth?

Why would an Angelic Knight who’d come here with the express purpose of subjugating her do that? Heidi remained frozen, unable to recover from her bewilderment, so the knight started walking briskly again.

“Farewell, then.”

“I’m telling you to wait!”

She grabbed his mantle, his momentum dragging her feet across the ground. There was far too tragic a gulf between their physiques.

“Hgggh! Th-Then how about this?! Look—myaaah?!”

She had no idea why she was getting so worked up. Heidi ripped off her mask to show him her face, but the knight slammed it back into place. The blow flattened her nose, bringing tears to her eyes.

“O-Ow... What was that for?”

She rubbed her nose over her mask—not that it did anything—when finally, the knight turned around, no longer able to let this charade continue.

“Do you wish to be thrown into protective custody, you damn fool? Keep quiet.”

“Fine...”

Heidi thought that she was used to his face by now, but when dimly illuminated by the moon, his threatening gaze was a little too much for her. Still, she knew that he understood everything. It was precisely because he understood that he pretended not to. But...was it really all right for an Angelic Knight to be doing that?

Hang on, where is he trying to go, anyway?

“Um...then what are you doing out so late at night?” Heidi asked timidly.

Instead of answering her, the knight pointed off into the distance with his jaw. He was apparently telling her to keep quiet and follow him. Still confused, Heidi did as he suggested and walked behind him.

The Angelic Knight eventually started talking, addressing nobody in particular. “Hmm. A night like this makes you want to talk to yourself.”

“Does it...?”

“Surely, nobody is coincidentally listening to me mumble. No one will reply.”

In other words, he was telling her to just listen to him.

“People have died. The Angelic Knights must capture the culprit. It doesn’t matter whether they’re a sorcerer or not...but who exactly is this culprit?”

Heidi didn’t know what he was trying to say. She was none other than the Sword Hunter in question. Didn’t he understand that already?

Still walking, the knight pulled a stick out from his pocket that was just a little longer than the palm of his hand.

“This was left behind at the five crime scenes. You can interpret Sword Hunter’s objective as the destruction of these blades, but for some reason, no other commonality could be discovered among the victims. In other words, this must be some kind of clue the church has missed.”

“...”

The knight definitely knew the answer already. The stick had the same shape as Moonless Sky’s hilt, after all.

“They’re Moonless Sky’s...replicas.”

Heidi had been told to keep quiet, but she answered that question nonetheless. None were the stolen half. They were some kind of copy instead. Heidi’s Moonless Sky resonated with them when nearby for some reason, which was why she’d spent the last month hunting these swords.

“This was made through sorcery. I pressed some sorcerers for answers, and they say it’s imprinted with a spell to manipulate its wielder,” the knight said, then paused and cocked his head, shooting a meaningful look at Heidi. “Hmm... In that case, Sword Hunter killed the people who were being manipulated by these.”

Heidi bit her lip and hung her head. Yes, that was her sin.

Those people did nothing wrong, but I had no way of saving people from being manipulated by a sorcerer.

Even when she’d simply broken their swords, they’d still died. And even when she’d come to understand that, Heidi had had to cut down swords and wielders alike. As such, the next words to come from the knight’s mouth were completely unexpected.

“No, I suppose that’s not quite right.”

“Huh...?”

“Controlling the living is very advanced sorcery,” he continued indifferently. “People possess egos, after all. It isn’t a simple matter, even for a sorcerer with a second name. So then, what was being manipulated, exactly?”

Heidi could sense that the answer to that question was something repulsive, but the knight didn’t continue. In any case, he wasn’t just a gentle simpleton. He’d calmly investigated the incident and had come to a definite conclusion. He’d even discovered an aspect to it that Heidi hadn’t.

The knight’s steps then suddenly came to a stop.

“Now then, it seems the answers lie here.”

The two of them stood before the cemetery next to the church.

12

“That masked girl...came to my rescue. Sir Raphael, please save her.”

After giving the ohagi to the girl at the church, Raphael had returned to find the injured Angelic Knight, Ino Valjakka, awake. Ino had been chasing a sorcerer on an entirely different mission and had been in the middle of an investigation to help form a subjugation squad. His target had noticed him, then struck him down. That had happened three days ago—during the last Sword Hunter incident.

Raphael was surprised by Ino’s words.

Sword Hunter was fighting someone else when I ran into her.

On the evening Raphael had met her, Sword Hunter had already been in combat. He’d barged in, unable to let such aggression pass as an Angelic Knight, and had ended up crossing swords with her. As a result, her original opponent escaped and the sixth Sword Hunter murder had been prevented. As for the name of the sorcerer Ino had been pursuing...

“Resentment Andras—the first sorcerer to be killed by Sword Hunter,” Raphael spoke the name aloud as he stood before the cemetery. He knew the girl next to him gulped behind her mask.

So it really is true...

“The sorcerer who attacked our caravan...” she started, as if recalling a nightmare. “No...the one who stole Moonless Sky gave that name.”

That was why Sword Hunter had gone straight after Resentment. When he’d first attacked, she’d been too scared to move, so on their next encounter,

she had to do something. That was surely what had gone through her mind.

“But the incidents didn’t end after Resentment’s death,” Raphael said.

Sword Hunter nodded silently. Raphael undid his sword belt and drew his blade partially. He then vigorously slammed it back in. A sharp clang rang in the air, then a pale film of light spread over the dark cemetery.

“Wh-What’s that...?” Sword Hunter mumbled in bewilderment.

“Our swords are bestowed with the spirits’ blessings. It apparently counteracts those sorcerers’ damned powers. When they clash, there is always a visible reaction.”

It was said that a genuine Sacred Sword could pulverize a sorcerer’s barrier. Unfortunately, it took everything an average Angelic Knight had to get a reaction, and it was so faint that it was invisible during the day.

“Hmm... Over there.”

The light spread from a fixed point...and at its center was a magic circle just big enough for a person to stand inside.

“Is this some kind of sorcery...?” Sword Hunter asked. People from Liucaon were more estranged from sorcery than the average citizen on the continent.

“The remnants of some...kind of door, I suppose.”

Raphael drew his sword and stabbed it into the center of the circle. The air cracked, then an old wooden door took shape beneath him. It looked like it led underground.

“It’s really a door...” Sword Hunter mumbled in disbelief. “But how did you find this? The church shouldn’t be able to find something a sorcerer is hiding.”

“Resentment may have been this town’s ruler, but he wasn’t a very popular man.”

He’d apparently been a master of some worthless sorcery that turned the resentment of those he abducted and tortured into mana. Getting marked by him meant getting tortured to death, and he didn’t consider anyone his ally. He’d simply had enough power to rule over the area, so nobody had defied him.

“If anyone goes sniffing for information on him, then all the sorcerers here will casually leak what they know.”

“But don’t sorcerers hate Angelic Knights?”

“An enemy of an enemy is a friend, as they say.”

He'd gotten all the information he could from the church during his visit there. If he wanted to get anything else without any support, he had no choice but to make use of the internal strife among sorcerers. There were times the church and sorcerers made use of each other because of their open hostility, after all.

Luckily, he had his natural appearance going for him. And so, after going around egging on sorcerers, the town's citizens were even more afraid of him than usual. That was rather unfortunate, but it was a simple price to pay to solve this incident.

Raphael opened the door, revealing a staircase leading underground. It was pretty old. The stone stairs were covered in moss and it looked like he had to be careful not to trip. There were small cracks all over where weeds grew from the ground.

"Now then, what will you do?" Raphael asked, finally turning to look at Sword Hunter's face.

"...I'll go with you."

The two of them carefully descended the ominous staircase. They didn't go that far down, though. After ten steps, they found themselves in a wide-open space where they could only see as far as their feet with the dim moonlight pouring down behind them. The damp air was teeming with a rotten stench. Raphael grimaced as he held up a lantern to illuminate the room.

"Is this...a crypt?" Sword Hunter muttered.

"Looks like it."

Cubbies crammed with white bones lined the walls. Judging by the number of skulls, more than a hundred bodies rested here. Not a single bone was left undamaged either. The damage might have occurred naturally, but in all likelihood, those marks had been carved while the victims were still alive.

"Seems this is the right place."

Raphael held his lantern forward, revealing another passageway further within. He glanced at Sword Hunter, and she returned a brief nod in turn. Raphael then carefully proceeded forward. There were damaged bones all over the floor too, so even if he tried to keep his footsteps quiet, the bones cracked beneath his tread. There were also rusty saws, nails, and other such tools unbecoming of a crypt scattered all about.

After proceeding further within, they came upon an even larger space.

“Tch...” Raphael clicked his tongue and held up his hand, signaling Sword Hunter to stop.

“...I already saw.”

There were lines and lines of glass tubes, each taller than Raphael and filled with what he assumed was elixir. Large shadows floated lazily within the pale liquid. Raphael strained his eyes...and could now see that these were all people. The majority were regular humans, but there was one with twisted horns who appeared to be a succubus, a lizardfolk with hard-looking scales, and even one with long ears who was most likely an elf. All of them had frozen, agonized expressions. They were all dead.

“The people from the caravan!” Sword Hunter shrieked.

“You know them?” Raphael asked, keeping a keen eye on his surroundings.

“Not all of them,” she answered, sounding like she would vomit at any moment. “But those ones are the people from the caravan who let me ride with them to this town.”

“I see...”

No corpses had been found at the site of the attack. That now made sense, since they’d apparently been brought here. Raphael quietly signed a cross in front of his chest. It was a simple prayer to wish the dead happiness in the next world. He then smoothly drew his greatsword. Thick pipes connected all the glass tubes. He didn’t know whether this whole setup was meant for preserving the corpses or for some kind of sorcery, but cutting the pipes would surely put everything to a stop. And just as he raised his sword overhead...

“Whoa there, I’d rather you not break those.”

Raphael turned to face the source of the voice behind him, where a shadowy figure stood in the center of the crypt. The door leading back outside then shut on its own. Raphael quickly stood in front of Sword Hunter and held out his lantern, revealing a harmless-looking young man. He was dressed in a hempen shirt and trousers—a very common sight in town. He wore no talismans or other ornaments typical of a sorcerer. In fact, nothing about him stood out, so it would’ve been hard to identify him in the middle of town. He was the very picture of mediocrity. It was precisely this mediocrity that convinced Raphael that this was the one Sword Hunter had attacked the other night.

“You’re...the one who helped me escape the caravan?”

From her reaction, Raphael now knew she hadn’t attacked him because she’d seen his face. She’d traced him by some other means known only to her.

“That’s right, little lady. You did tell me all about those childhood friends of yours from your hometown, after all. Heh heh heh, I’m the one who told you to run away, but I didn’t really think you would. I should’ve just captured you back then.”

There wasn’t an ounce of malice behind his gentle smile, but his eyes were so dark that they sent shivers down Raphael’s spine.

“So you’re Resentment?” Raphael asked.

“That can’t be!” Sword Hunter yelled, turning around in disbelief. “I killed Resentment! I checked that he was dead and everything!”

“What a troublesome little lady,” the man said with a shrug. “I put so much work into that artificial body, but you went and wrecked it. Thanks to you, I’m stuck using this still-experimental one instead.”

The Resentment she’d killed hadn’t been the real thing. Perhaps all the ones Sword Hunter had killed had, in fact, been puppets manipulated by him as well. The true identities of those puppets were the bodies in the glass tubes behind Raphael. The young man—Resentment—pulled a kodachi from his back.

“That’s...Moonless Sky!” Sword Hunter exclaimed.

“The real thing?” Raphael asked quietly.

She nodded. In other words, this was probably also the real Resentment.

“This blade is rather interesting,” Resentment stated. “It seems one governs life while the other governs death. This one, in particular, governs life. It can give breath to the dead, allowing the body to move again. Well, it simply stimulates movements, so the bodies aren’t actually alive again, but that’s still plenty useful.”

It looked like Resentment was having fun explaining this.

“There isn’t much meaning to the average person’s life,” he continued. “However, to me, this is the ultimate research subject. If I can unravel this power, I can create a new artificial body on an entirely different level from those that use corpses or homunculi as a base. Even an Archdemon’s seat will no longer be just a dream.”

Raphael focused on the hilt of a broken sword in his pocket.

So that's why there were so many replicas of her sword.

"Now then, little lady, let's make a trade," Resentment said with a respectful bow.

"A trade?"

"Indeed. It seems this kodachi doesn't really work if you're not the one using it. It may depend on blood or some other key inside you, I guess. Well, in either case, I want your body. If you obediently do as I say, I won't mind returning those corpses to their graves."

"You're out of your mind!" Sword Hunter screamed. She then drew her kodachi and took a swing at him. Resentment moved to block with his matching blade, but his movements were nowhere near her level. Or at least, that should've been the case, but...

"Gah!"

The kodachi flew out of her hand. She gripped her wrist in shock, leaving a large opening.

"Gah!"

A string snapped, and her mask fell to the ground. Before she could regain her senses, Resentment grabbed her by the throat and lifted her into the air.

"Heh heh heh... Allow me to teach you a lesson, foolish little girl. You shouldn't cross blades with an armed sorcerer. You'll break your hand."

"Agh... Gah..."

"Oh dear. Your neck will snap if I'm not careful."

A sorcerer's physical strength transcended human limits. Ambushing one in the darkness of the night was one thing, but there was no way anybody would be okay after clashing with one head-on without the aid of Anointed Armor.

"Sword Hunter!" Raphael yelled as he drew his weapon.

"Oh no you don't! You go amuse yourself with them," Resentment said, holding up his kodachi.

The sharp sound of glass cracking resounded behind Raphael as the cylinders in the other room shattered. He turned toward them to see several of the corpses crawling to their feet.

"Tch! Undead monsters!"

"Hey now, don't belittle my work. Those are my precious artificial body candidates. Well, I still haven't tuned them yet, so they're just corpses for now, but they're still important."

Raphael ignored Resentment's sneering and swung his sword to mow down the undead.

"Hgh?!"

However, his sword came to a stop, crashing into the narrow corridor.

"Ha ha ha! What an idiot. How can you possibly swing a greatsword around in a space this narrow? Can't you see? You've walked right into a trap."

Raphael didn't interpret the sorcerer's ridicule as a sign of defeat. He wasn't the one being cornered down here, after all. He pulled back his sword and went for a thrust instead. The corpse he ran through stopped moving, but Raphael's sword had been badly chipped during the battle with Sword Hunter. After thrusting it halfway through, he was no longer able to pull it back out.

"Awww, you're in real trouble now," Resentment snickered.

The room was spacious, but the passageway was narrow. The corpse he'd stabbed couldn't attack him anymore, but the next one came flying straight at him. No longer able to pull out his sword, Raphael couldn't dodge.

"Hmph!"

Instead, he twisted his greatsword with all his might. The large blade snapped in half, letting out an unexpectedly gentle clang.

"Hmm... Now it's just about the right length."

It had already been in a state where it could break at any moment, so with the addition of the physical strength granted to him by his Anointed Armor, this was the obvious result. Now half as long as it was before, it was more than light enough to intercept the incoming attack. Raphael took a swing and sent the corpse's head flying.

"Just sit back and be quiet."

Raphael kicked the headless body back into the room. As he possessed enough strength to compete with a sorcerer, his kick sent the body flying back like a tumbling ball, knocking over the other undead. This wasn't enough to defeat them, but it was more than enough to stall them. Without even taking a breath, Raphael turned around and stepped toward Resentment.

"Whoa there, you sure you should be swinging around something so dangerous?"

However, Resentment still held Sword Hunter aloft by the throat. He didn't hesitate to use her as a human shield. He had her by the front of her

neck, so her back was naturally turned toward Raphael.

“I figured a sorcerer would do that!” Raphael exclaimed as he kicked the ground, sending bone fragments and rusty torture implements flying at Resentment’s face. The girl’s body was in the way, so it was unlikely for any of the projectiles to strike home, but it was still more than enough as a distraction.

“He vanished?!” Resentment yelled.

In the next instant, Raphael stepped into range as if slipping underneath Sword Hunter’s shadow.

“Got you!” Raphael roared as he slashed upward, severing the sorcerer’s arm cleanly.

“Aaaaaargh!” Resentment screamed in agony.

“Gah! Hak!”

Raphael caught Sword Hunter as she stumbled from the grip of the severed arm, prompting her to break into a coughing fit. She was at least still alive. However, now that he had her in his arms, he was the one left wide-open to attack.

“Behind you!”

“You bastaaaaaard!”

By the time Sword Hunter warned him, Resentment had a kodachi held high and ready to strike. Raphael pulled her in tight and huddled over her to guard her from the blow.



A dull pain ran through his body. Warm liquid spurted from his shoulder. By the time he realized he'd been cut, Raphael and the girl slammed into the wall.

"Why...?" Sword Hunter asked in a trembling voice as they slipped down the wall. "You could've dodged that on your own!"

Raphael didn't really have the breath to give her an answer. Instead, he simply replied, "He's the one...who's been driven into a corner. At this rate...we can...kill him."

Resentment acted composed, but he likely hadn't expected his laboratory to be discovered. That was why he wasn't really armed with any equipment typical of a sorcerer, and instead came wielding his trump card, Moonless Sky, and exposing his true body. As proof of that, he hadn't used any of his power aside from manipulating the corpses.

Raphael turned his eyes toward Resentment. Or to be precise, his gaze was fixed on the ground a few steps in front of the sorcerer. The kodachi Sword Hunter had dropped was stuck in the ground there. That was enough for her to understand. She gave Raphael a resolute nod, and then he rose to his feet. He could still move. The wound was deep, but he could still wield his sword. The undead farther in the back were also getting back up and closing in. This was their last chance.

"Raaah!" Raphael roared and charged right for Resentment. He gripped the hilt of his sword as if to crush it in his hands and poured all his strength into one final blow.

"You fool!" Resentment, now one-armed, proclaimed as he caught Raphael's blow with the other half of Moonless Sky. Even without his enhanced strength, the sword in his hand was so sharp it could chip away any blade it struck. Raphael's greatsword shattered, leaving him with only his hilt.

The wound on Raphael's back split open, gushing out a fountain of blood. Resentment sneered down at Raphael as the knight collapsed to his knees.

"Despite the sharp blade you stole, your skills are dull..." Sword Hunter said as she slipped in behind him like a shadow, wielding the half of Moonless Sky she'd picked back up. Raphael's attack hadn't been a mindless act of brutality. He'd simply been buying time for her to retrieve her weapon.

"And what of it?!" Resentment yelled, turning to meet her attack. "Huh...?"

However, there was no kodachi in his hand. Rather, he didn't really have a hand at all. Everything from his wrist down was a mangled mess. Raphael hadn't meant to break the kodachi with his strike. No, he'd instead aimed to break Resentment's hand. Anointed Armor granted its bearer physical strength to match a sorcerer...and an amateur couldn't block a blow backed by such strength, no matter how fine a blade they wielded.

"W-Wai—!" Resentment tried to beg for his life as Moonless Sky plunged into his neck, but with a quick flick, his head went flying from his body. In that instant, the Sword Hunter incidents that had been going on for an entire month finally came to an end.

13

"Are you sure you don't need to see a doctor?"

The Angelic Knight had suffered a serious wound from covering Heidi. He'd treated it after coming out of the crypt under the moonlight, then said he had something else to do, so he wouldn't go to see a doctor.

After Resentment's defeat, the many undead stopped moving. Heidi didn't really understand how sorcery worked, but the knight assured her they wouldn't move again. He said the church would handle burying them in the morning, so she decided to leave that job to them.

"Anointed Armor grants a blessing that hastens the recovery of wounds. A cut this small will seal after a little rest."

"But..."

"More importantly, keep those swords safe so that they aren't stolen again."

Heidi had finally recovered Moonless Sky, so she wasn't going to allow them to be used for evil ever again. She gingerly hugged the two swords tight to her chest as she heard his words.

"Why did you cover me...?" she muttered. "You could've just defeated that sorcerer on your own."

"You merely disposed of some empty husks that were being manipulated by Resentment," the knight answered with a tired look. "They weren't alive, so you didn't kill anyone. As such, you're a civilian who's meant to be protected by the Angelic Knights."

Heidi had been under the impression that she'd been killing people during

her pursuit of Moonless Sky. And yet, this man had so easily absolved her of such sins.

He's really so...

Heidi looked up at the night sky, where an almost-full moon hung above them. A sixteen-day-old moon, in fact. In Liucaon, they also called it the hesitant moon.

“The moon is beautiful, isn't it?”

“Hwah?!” Heidi shrieked as she sprang up at the knight's sudden remark. “Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you saying?!”

“I don't know, really. I was just wondering what the phrase meant,” he answered with a cock of his head.

Heidi covered her face and replied, “Before telling you that, I have a question.”

“Hmm? What?”

“When did you first notice...that I was Sword Hunter?”

The knight sank into thought for a moment before answering, “I grew sure of it last night when you returned my handkerchief. You have sword calluses unbecoming a lowly inn girl. I was certain you had significant talent.”

“Aaah...”

That had been careless of her. If not for that, maybe he wouldn't have saved her.

Or not. I think he would've saved me regardless.

Behind his frightening exterior, this knight was astonishingly honest and kind. Heidi admired that aspect of him.

“Though, I first suspected something when I saw you at the inn,” the knight added.

“So...right away?” Heidi asked in shock.

“You have the same stature...and even the same eyes. How could I not have at least suspected you? After that, I did some digging and there was circumstantial evidence all over the damn place that pointed your way. Frankly, I was at a loss as to whom I should be arresting.”

“And yet...instead of arresting me, you saved me?”

“...”

As expected, the knight gave her no response to that question.

He really got me... Heidi thought as her heart pounded like crazy. No, it had been that way ever since she'd first met this man. At first, it was due to

fear. After that, it turned to surprise. And then, it came from bewilderment. During the battle, it hammered from tension. But what about now? Why did she feel so warm?

“Hee hee...”

“What?”

Heidi suddenly giggled, and the knight looked at her curiously, clearly confused. The urge to get one up on him started to well up inside her. Right now, she was sure she could pull it off. Thus, Heidi held up a finger and looked at the moon.

“Hmm?”

Lured by that gesture, the knight followed her gaze and looked up.

An opening!

Since his face was now left defenseless, she pressed her lips against his.

“Hrm?!”

The knight toppled backward with a look of shock on his face. It was the first time she’d ever seen him so surprised, which had her heart dancing with a sense of accomplishment. The mountain breeze blew her hair over her face, and she brushed it back with a finger and smiled in satisfaction.

“The moon is beautiful, isn’t it? *That’s* what it means.”

When she’d first said it, she’d hadn’t had the slightest hint of such emotions. But what about now? At this point, she could express her feelings in no other way. The knight’s face was so red that it was visible under the faint moonlight, granting Heidi an indescribable sense of intoxication.

“Just so you know, I’m serious,” she said as if singing, clearly in high spirits. “This is my first time doing such a thing with a man.”

The knight was left speechless, a reaction that made her feel unbearably happy.

“May I hear your name?” she asked, imitating the tone she’d once used.

The knight stared back wide-eyed, then ruffled his hair and grumbled, “Raphael... Raphael Hyurandell.”

“I see. Sir Raphael.” She repeated his name as if she was recalling the events of that night, and as if she was confirming the feelings in her heart.

“My name is Himika. Himika Adelhide. I’m a cait sith of Liucaon.” Heidi—no, Himika—then smiled with all her heart. “Please smile, Sir Raphael. Your smile is ever so wonderful. If you do so more often, nobody will fear you.”

It looked like he understood that those were words of parting. The knight

—Raphael—closed his eyes as if digesting that fact.

In truth, she wanted to stay here with him. Perhaps it wouldn't have been so bad to work as an Angelic Knight at his side. She was sure she'd be happy being with someone whose mere presence made her heart dance. However, the Adelhides were one of Liucaon's three royal families, so as the eldest daughter, Himika had a duty to return to her homeland and bear a child. Thus, she couldn't remain away from home any longer.

Before long, Raphael opened his eyes once more, flashed her a smile, and said, "Farewell then, Himika."

"Yes. Until we meet again, Sir Raphael."

With that, Himika vanished as if melting into the night.

I'm sure, one day...

That promise went unfulfilled, as the two of them never reunited. By the time she heard news that Raphael had inherited a Sacred Sword, promoting him to the ranks of the Archangels, ten years had passed.

14

"Damn that little bitch!"

In the church's chapel, a priest spat out curses unbecoming of his countenance. The girl had been on the hunt for him, but she'd also been the best of research subjects if he wished to clarify the power behind Moonless Sky. He'd wanted to capture her and use her as an artificial body, but after some measly Angelic Knight exposed his research lab, all of his artificial bodies had been destroyed. It was especially painful to lose his prized artificial body, which he'd created from an elf. That set Resentment's research back at least ten years.

No, not yet. That little girl hasn't realized I still live.

This was Resentment's domain. To protect his research lab, he'd had no choice but to manipulate a corpse wielding the real Moonless Sky, but that didn't matter now that the artificial body was no more. There was nothing to lose from blowing up the entire town.

With the proper preparations, a swordless Angelic Knight was nothing to him. Even if she wielded both blades of Moonless Sky now, the girl would be easy to capture. And just as he rose to his feet...

"Are you all right, Father?" a little girl asked as she peeked in through the

chapel's door, perhaps having woken up in the middle of the night.

Resentment immediately put on a good-natured smile and replied, "Yes, I'm fine. How about you? Did you have a bad dream, perhaps?"

Resentment's true sorcery wasn't one that granted him strength by inflicting pain on others. It was, in fact, one that unshackled him from his physical flesh, allowing him to evolve into a spiritual body that lived on a higher plane of existence. Through this, he'd discovered a means of stealing bodies by using powerful emotions as a medium—such as suffering and despair. If he could perfect this sorcery, so long as humans existed, he had eternal life. However, as it was now, he could only possess specially made artificial bodies or his own blood relatives, which was why he'd started this string of incidents.

Among all of them, this priest's body is close to perfection.

The priest was still alive. Rather than being manipulated, it was more like their souls coexisted in one shell. In a way, it was like having split personalities. The man who'd worried about the children when talking to the Angelic Knight during the day had definitely been the actual priest's personality. However, gnawed away by disease, his life span was nearing its end. That was how Resentment had managed to slip into the priest's flesh. It had been a simple matter to get this overly serious priest to feel tremendous rage. All he had to do was kill some children in front of his eyes.

After I capture that little girl, I'll use all the stupid brats here to make my next artificial bodies.

But then, a sudden doubt came to mind. Resentment could perceive the priest's memories as if they were his own, so he couldn't help but wonder...was this girl before him someone he knew? Yes, she was. She'd suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and before anyone knew it, she'd vanished again. It was clearly strange, but nobody had paid it any mind. On the contrary, they'd all acted like she was a longtime friend.

What the hell is this feeling...?

Just as he was about to jump back on instinct, countless blades plunged into Resentment's face. He let out a soundless scream, which was when he realized that despite being minced to bits, he still remained conscious. Upon closer inspection, he hadn't been cut up. The priest's body was completely uninjured, in fact. However, he still felt intense pain as if he had been torn to pieces.

This is bloodlust! One on an entirely different level that makes you feel dead!

Resentment shivered, cold sweat pouring down his brow like a waterfall. He remained completely still as the girl slipped past the door and slowly approached him. She wore an extravagant dress, one far too unnatural for a young orphan, carried a creepy stuffed doll in her arms, and had her blonde hair tied up in pigtails. Her eyes were the same color as her hair, and they harbored a cold light behind them as if she was looking at the lowliest of trash.

“Tee hee hee... You look rather pale, Father. It’s as if you just had a bad dream.”

Resentment now understood the cold, hard truth. That wave of bloodlust had come from this little girl. He also knew full well that even if he was in perfect condition, he’d be nowhere close to being strong enough to defeat her. She was death, an absolute death that even Moonless Sky came nowhere close to manifesting. Even when he’d met Archdemon Marchosias in the past, he hadn’t felt this much despair.

The girl put something in her mouth as she walked forward as if she didn’t care at all about the current mood in the room. She was eating one of the snacks that the inn girl had been handing out during the day.

“Ohagi have such a sweet and nostalgic taste. I borrowed one to punish her for leaving. In any case, she’s gotten rather good at making these. I wonder if she remembers that I taught her how to do it.”

After fitting the rather large ball into her petite mouth, the girl licked her fingers with her red tongue as if savoring what was left before standing in front of Resentment.

“Now then, you’ve been quite the nuisance. To think you stole Moonless Sky from the Adelhides’ village, of all things.”

The girl held out her free hand, which was empty. The gesture was so gentle it was as if she was about to pet his head. Perhaps being permitted to do so, Resentment took a short breath...and felt even more fear.

“Agh... Gah!”

The girl lightly clenched her hand, and Resentment felt a sharp pain as if his heart had been clutched. This wasn’t physical pain. His mind...no, his very soul was screaming.

“You’re possessing him, yes? I don’t normally meddle with the affairs of

the living, but I wonder, do you even currently qualify as a living being?”

Resentment felt his very existence creaking under the pressure. He only continued to exist at this girl’s whim. If she squeezed just a little harder, no, even if she just so much as sneezed, Resentment’s soul would shatter. In that state, restoring it would be out of the question. He would be eternally severed from the cycle of life and death itself.

“A parasite who possesses no body of its own and latches onto others is close to being undead. *That* I can simply sweep away. However, if one has the proper will to live out a natural life span, then perhaps that can also be considered living... So? Which are you, I wonder?”

Her golden eyes drew closer. Even though she maintained the same grip on his soul, he felt an even more tremendous pressure than before. It was as if the moon itself was crushing him.

“*H-Hah... Hak... A-Alive. I’ll live...as a person.*”

“Oh my?” the girl said with a teasing smile. “Is it not every sorcerer’s desire to be freed from the mortal coil and become undead?”

Resentment finally understood. This terrifying manifestation of death saw through everything. That was why she’d been staying at the church. Just as she’d said, she’d simply been there to watch over the fate of the living—of that girl and the Angelic Knight. Now that it was over, though, she had to clean things up.

Resentment used all his remaining strength to shake his head. His soul was cracking from the top down. If he so much as offended this girl, it would all be over. The girl narrowed her eyes as if looking at the filthiest clump of mud, then finally weakened her grip.

“Very well, then. I shall let you go this one time. However, if you ever lay a hand on those children again... Well, I don’t need to explain, do I?”

Resentment nodded vigorously, even as he trembled in fear. The girl brought her eyes closer to be sure one last time...and just moments before his soul shattered, she finally released him. He didn’t even have the strength left to remain latched to this priest’s body, so he instead vanished without hesitation to return to where he belonged—to his true body.

This incident had deprived Resentment of the majority of his power and had reduced his life span significantly. After about a decade, he once again utilized the sorcery that this girl had forbidden him from touching, then met

his ultimate end at the hands of a boy who went on to become an Archdemon.

The priest opened his eyes and saw a dark room. It was nighttime. He appeared to be in the chapel, taking a nap in a chair.

“Are you all right, Father?”

He turned to the source of the voice and saw a young girl with golden eyes looking up at him anxiously. He couldn't remember her name for some reason, but he knew she was one of the orphans under his care. That alone he knew with certainty.

“Yes. Forgive me. It seems quite some time has passed during my nap. Has everyone brushed their teeth properly?”

“Of course. Pete told everyone to, and even though Helena and Genie complained all the while, everyone is clean and in their beds.”

“I see. I'm fortunate to be blessed with such well-behaved children.”

They were more than he could have asked for as a man with only a few years of life left.

“Father, you must live much longer,” the girl said as if reading his mind. “Pete is the oldest and he's trying his best, but he still depends on you.”

“Mmm... You're right. I have to watch over them until they grow older.”

He couldn't afford to show such weakness to the children.

“That's for the best,” the girl said with a motherly smile. “Tomorrow, a doctor will come from the holy city. Please let them inspect you so that you can live a long life.”

With that, the girl rose to her feet with her stuffed doll in hand.

“Well then, have a good night, Father.”

“Yes, good night.”

A moment later, the girl vanished.

“Huh...? Was I speaking to someone just now?”

As the mountain breeze blew through, a swarm of bats flew toward the moon and disappeared.

15

“It's been somewhere around twenty years since that happened, I suppose. I was about thirty at the time.”

With the passage of time, Raphael, now a middle-aged man, ended up

serving at the castle of a certain sorcerer—no, an Archdemon. And by some twist of fate, it was the castle of the very sorcerer he'd failed to kill twenty years ago, Resentment. Though, it was now the base of the Archdemon who'd killed Resentment.

A girl with amber eyes sat before Raphael as he recounted his fondest memories. She had thick horns, which poked through the gaps in her green hair as she nodded with great interest. She was considered a princess in this castle, and to Raphael, she was also the daughter of an irreplaceable comrade in arms.

“When Kuroka lost her eyesight and was brought to me, I knew at first sight that she was Himika's daughter. The Himika I knew was around fifteen...and, well, Kuroka looked just like she would have had Himika grown a little. She even had Moonless Sky with her.”

And then, after asking about her upbringing, he'd learned of Himika's death. She'd risked her life and had succeeded in protecting her daughter. As such, he wished to praise her for that feat rather than wallow in sorrow.

“Is that why you adopted Kuroka?” the little dragon asked hesitantly.

“I think so... After learning that she had no relatives, I claimed responsibility for her before I even knew it.”

“So then, what did that phrase mean?” the little girl asked, leaning back into her chair with a sigh. “You know, ‘the moon is beautiful, isn't it?’”

Raphael's eyes widened for a moment before he flashed her a bitter smile.

“Foll, it's still too damn early for you to learn that.”

Raphael looked out the window...where a round moon hung over the sky. It'd been a full moon the previous night, so it was a sixteen-day-old moon tonight. In Liucaon, it was known as the hesitant moon. Who was it who'd hesitated to step forth back then?

At the time, I didn't even consider the idea of chasing after her.

She was the princess of the Adelhides. Either way, she wouldn't have been able to marry him, but he'd still wanted to be by her side. Wouldn't it have been possible to live a happy life in Liucaon, watching over Himika and Kuroka from nearby? The thought seemed unfitting at his age, but he still felt such regrets.

“I'm sure...Himika was happy to have met you,” Foll said. Raphael's eyes shot open at the unexpected encouragement. “I think she was able to give it her all because she met you. That's why Kuroka survived and ended up

meeting you too.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Raphael replied, a tranquil smile on his lips.

Now that his story was over, the little dragon left her seat. However, just as she was about to leave the room, she came to a stop and said, “Oh yeah, Himika told you to smile. What did you do after that?”

“Hm? Well, I took her advice and tried smiling whenever I met anyone. It didn’t have much of an effect, though.”

“Oh... Mmm...”

To this day, Raphael didn’t know that his smile had been so fierce that those he faced had felt they were going to die, which was how he’d ended up with 499 sorcerers attacking him.

After seeing off the little girl, who was making quite the complicated expression, Raphael rose from his seat. The only thing that sat on his table was a worn-out fox mask.

Interlude 3

“H-Hey, Foll? Does Kuroka know about this?” Kuu asked, pale to the face upon hearing the end of Foll’s story.

“Probably not. At the very least, I don’t think Raphael has told her.”

“Whaaat?! W-We have to tell her! W-We shouldn’t be the only ones hearing this! Kuroka has to know!”

“Nope! You can’t!”

Unexpectedly, Selphy was the one who stopped Kuu from running off.

“Selphy? Why?”

“I don’t really know how to put it... I mean, if Kuroka doesn’t know, it means auntie and Mister Raphael never told her, yeah? I feel like we can’t go and tell her ourselves in that case.”

“I agree with Selphy,” Foll added with a nod. “I didn’t ask Raphael about it so that I could tell her or anything either.”

With that, Gremory spun her wheelchair over to Foll’s side.

“Lady Selphy! Lady Foll! You really get it! I’m so moved by your growth!”

Tears spilled from her golden eyes as blood ran down from her nose.

“In other words, this was a secret love affair between those two?”

Manuela chimed in. “I mean, Kuroka’s dad was a different man, right? Wouldn’t it be bad to tell her about that?”

“A secret love affair...! Kuu gets it now. Kuu thought that kinda thing only happened in stories,” the vulpin said as she nodded along, red to the cheeks. “If Kuroka finds out, Raphael should be the one to tell her, or she should ask him about it herself.”

“Indeed,” Gremory replied. “Love power is enriched by the aspect of secrecy, which brings about a tremendous new force. That is precisely why it is so beautiful. That was a wonderful manifestation of love power. As such, the love power all of you put on display today in understanding that is so very pure!”

“Really...?” Foll asked, not truly understanding anything she said.

“Especially you, Lady Selphy,” Gremory continued. “I feel a dense love power from you that is incomparable to what you possessed just ten days ago!”

“Yaaay! I don’t really get it, but hooray!”

Selphy threw up both her hands in innocent joy. Foll averted her gaze, wondering whether it was truly all right to have told this group the story, but it was too late now.

“Well, I guess it’s my turn next, huh?” Manuela said.

“Oh? Comrade Manuela, do you possess a love story worthy of this stage?” Gremory asked.

“Of course. Why, just look at those two over there,” Manuela replied, then pointed to Zagan and Nephy. The two had just finished eating their maritozzi. Zagan was taking a puff from his pipe, while Nephy leaned against him...and they were both wearing unfamiliar clothes.

“Don’t you wanna hear about the time they bought those clothes?”

Kuu got back in her seat and Gremory returned her wheelchair to her original spot.

“Very well, then. Let’s hear about my liege’s love power.”

With that as the signal, Manuela started telling them all about what happened the day after Foll went around asking for love stories.

Chapter IV: The Archdemon's Day Off

1

Extreme tension gripped Zagan's body as he walked through Kianoides's shopping district. There were many shops here he was familiar with, such as Manuela's place, so he was used to the area. Nevertheless, Zagan was so tense that he couldn't move his right arm and leg forward properly. He awkwardly looked to his side where his beloved bride Nephy was. Her pure white hair was tied up with a splendid red ribbon. Her lovely little face was highlighted by azure eyes. She wasn't wearing her usual maid uniform and was instead clad in a white dress and a soft-looking fur coat. The very same dress she'd worn in Raziel, in fact.

Nephy happened to look up at Zagan at the exact same time, so their eyes met unintentionally.

"H-Ha ha ha!"

"Heh... Heh heh..."

The two of them averted their gazes in a hurry and let out dry laughs. Today, Zagan was out on a date with Nephy. He'd left his duties at the castle to Raphael and Kimaris, while Nephy was taking a well-earned break. What's more, he'd sent that troublesome granny out on business. Nobody could get in their way now—and if they did, he'd simply get rid of them. And yet, despite how blessed a time this was, the two of them were stuck repeating this interaction over and over again.

It was just around noon. They'd planned to return to the castle by sunset, so they didn't actually have all that long, even if they used up the entire afternoon. The date had been a sudden event, and they'd gotten caught up in a certain incident that morning, so it'd taken some time just to head out.

Grr! Even though I finally got to go on a date with Nephy...!

Zagan thought back on how long it'd been since their last outing. It was during his (fake) honeymoon to the Holy City Raziel, which was about two months ago. He'd sworn to make Nephy happy, but this was the current state

of affairs.

All of this was Shere Khan's fault, so Zagan had to be rid of that Archdemon quickly. Though, Naberius was equally guilty for bringing a troubling matter to him first thing in the morning. Still, if not for the incident inside the dream, it was possible Zagan wouldn't have been able to invite Nephy on a date like this. With that in mind, there was room for consideration. As a result, he'd also gotten the chance to request a wedding ring to be made, so he decided to forgive the beholder.

The main problem was Zagan himself. Even though he was finally on a date, he was stiff with tension. He knew the reason for that, of course. When he'd invited her on a date in the morning, partially due to the incident moments before, he'd impulsively pulled Nephy into an embrace. This hadn't been their first embrace, of course. He had her sit on his lap all the time, and just a few days ago, he'd even carried her like a princess. Why, there were even rare occasions when he rubbed his cheeks against hers. He actually wanted to do such things every day, but with how busy the two of them were and all the obstructions in their way, he just couldn't find the time. However, that hug in the morning felt emotionally different, even if he couldn't quite explain it.

He'd caused her to worry so much, and then she'd even saved him, and when he returned, she'd welcomed him back with a smile without showing even the slightest hint of such hardships. He'd felt a difficult-to-categorize mix of peace, satisfaction, and guilt pressing down on his chest and had hugged her on impulse. After that, he found it very hard to look at Nephy. Whenever he tried to force himself to look at her, she seemed so blindingly radiant that not only his heart, but even his entire body was liable to shatter into a million pieces. He'd used sorcery to control his blood flow and heart muscles, somehow warding off having to faint. If not for that, he'd have long since collapsed. This maddening pounding of his heart required the full use of an Archdemon's sorcery to withstand.

Perhaps this is what they call falling in love all over again?

Zagan's nervousness seemed to be infectious, so even Nephy had turned rigid before he knew it. Thus, despite finally getting the time to go on a date, they were both in this useless state.

At this rate, we'll have done a round and gone back home without even being able to talk!

Well, that in itself didn't sound all that bad, but it felt somewhat dull for their first date in two months. Nephy looked like she was of the same opinion. She opened her mouth, unable to say anything, her pointy ears jumping up before drooping down. All Zagan could do was writhe over how cute her ears were. He felt so powerless.

All the passing pedestrians nodded at how peaceful things looked, smiling warmly as they watched the two of them. Not that Zagan and Nephy noticed, of course. Instead, they realized that the townsfolk had started changing from winter to spring clothing. Today was the last day of Kanata, so while the nights were chilly, it got rather warm during the day. Nephy's outfit was intended for winter. It wasn't strange to wear it now, but it was probably a good idea to shop for some spring clothing. And so, Zagan cleared out his throat and finally struck up a conversation.

"Uhhh, Nephy!"

"Y-Yesh?!"

Both of their voices cracked, and they covered their faces in shame. Still, this time, they managed to regain their composure in a matter of seconds.

"Um, you know, it's gotten kind of warm now, so how about...looking at some spring clothing?"

"R-Right! We spoke of going out to pick some clothes too!"

"E-Exactly!"

Back on their first date, they'd discussed picking out clothes for each other. This had, tragically, been left undone for two months. Zagan felt overwhelmed by his own ineptitude, but this was enough to undo some of the tension and soften Nephy's expression.

Great. Nephy finally smiled at me.

Nephy was adorable when embarrassed, but her natural smile was far better. Zagan nodded in admiration as Nephy cocked her head.

"Is something the matter, Master Zagan?"

"Oh, no, um...about this morning... Sorry for surprising you."

He knew bringing it up was a poor move, but ended up answering her on reflex. It was a horrible slip of the tongue, but Nephy still smiled at him.

"It's quite all right. Didn't you bring Lilith and Lady Alshiera back safely?"

"No, that's not what I mean..."

Zagan would never have abandoned any of his subordinates when they

worked so hard on his behalf. This morning's incident had involved Lilith getting trapped inside the dream world and Zagan going to save her. However, that wasn't what was on his mind. Well, he was also sorry to have made Nephy worry about him, but that wasn't the point.

Before long, Nephy finally realized what he was getting at, so both her ears and her cheeks turned bright red.

"A-Auuh... That was...um, surprising, but I didn't dislike it or anything..."

She covered her rosy cheeks with both hands, leaving her eyes unobstructed as she returned Zagan's gaze.

"Um, Master Zagan. What I mean to say is...that was the first time you ever hugged me so passionately."

"I-Is that so?"

"Yes."

Now that she mentioned it, perhaps it had been the first time he'd embraced her without warning. Even that time Nephy was abducted, all he'd been able to do was timidly return her embrace. Now he felt sorry for never having done so after so long.

"S-So today, I feel somewhat ecstatic," Nephy said with a gentle smile. "As such, I can hardly look you in the eyes..."

"Hnnngh!"

He didn't know it had pleased her so. Upon learning it had, Zagan found himself unable to endure the heart-wrenching sensation and fell to a knee. However, he was still a sorcerer among the ranks of the Archdemons. Thus, he used the secret arts of his sorcery to get himself back up as if nothing had happened.

"If you didn't dislike it...then do you won't mind if I do it again?"

"Oh! Um... Uhhh... Feel free," Nephy replied with a nod, her entire face bright red. "If you do it all the time, though...it will be far too stimulating. So...only once in a while."

"R-Right. If I do it too much, I doubt my heart will hold out."

"Hee hee... We're the same, then."

"I-Indeed... You could say that."

Zagan's face still felt a little stiff when he smiled, but it was far better than when they left the castle.

"Ah..."

Their hands brushed against each other, prompting them both to let out

audible gasps. Now that he thought of it, even though they were on a date, there'd been enough space between them to fit another person. Well, if any daredevil actually had tried to stand between them, Zagan would have ripped off their head.

Zagan held out his hand, and Nephy shyly wrapped her fingers around his pinky. This was the same as usual, but it wasn't going to pass muster today. Nephy shook her head to brace herself, then strongly gripped Zagan's hand.

O-Oooh! N-Nephy is assertively clasping my hand!

That was enough to have his heart pounding like a hammer. Blood rushed through his system as if to rupture all of his capillaries. If not for his specialty in body-strengthening sorcery, he would have dropped dead.

Unknown to them, far away from Kianoides, Gremory muttered, "Hgh! What massive love power... What's happening to my liege?" However, that is a story for another time.

2

"I'm not really one to talk, but that's why you ended up coming to my shop?"

Zagan and Nephy ended up going to Manuela's store. She was an avian with great talent when it came to fashion. However, she had a horrible habit of using anyone who matched her tastes as a dress-up doll. Zagan obviously didn't want to visit her store on his date, but he and Nephy had nowhere better to go when it came to picking clothes.

Manuela looked astonished by his choice of date, whereas the vulpin girl, Kuu, ran about serving customers in a panic. Zagan had never seen Manuela serving customers properly, so he wondered whether she actually ever did any serious work here.

"I find it rather irritating myself," Zagan said bitterly. "Still, I don't recall ever being dissatisfied with whatever the hell you pick out for us."

Honestly, he would've preferred not having to come here, but there was no doubt that Manuela had a great sense for fashion when she wasn't playing around. Nephy was, of course, planning on choosing what clothes Zagan would wear, but she could do so with peace of mind precisely because Manuela took care of what to show her in the first place.

"Sorry," Nephy said with a strained smile. "There really is no better place

to pick out clothes, knowing that whatever we get will be good.”

“Well, when you put it like that, I just have to toy—I mean, I can’t refuse, can I?”

“Hey... What the hell were you about to say there?” Zagan asked, turning a sharp glare toward Manuela, who shamelessly averted her eyes and started whistling.

In any case, if Zagan was the type to lose his temper every time she did this, he wouldn’t have even come here.

“Hmph, whatever,” he continued. “More importantly, we’re looking for spring clothing. Where do you keep that?”

“Our spring goods are lined up on the shelf over there. *Night* clothing we keep further back in the secret room...”

“We don’t need any of that.”

Well, he couldn’t deny having some interest in the subject, but this wasn’t the appropriate time. Zagan headed to the shelf in question before she started doing anything unnecessary.

“Manuela, where do you keep the men’s clothing?” Nephy asked. “I don’t see any.”

“Men’s clothing is this way on the shelves further to the back... Huh? Hang on, are you here to look for clothes for Mister Zagan?”

“Um, yes... We wanted to pick clothes out for each other,” Nephy said as she smiled bashfully, which had Zagan’s heart pounding again. In contrast, Manuela’s expression turned grim.

“Oh yeah, you’re here on a date, right?” she asked.

“Um, yes...” Nephy answered, nodding as her reddened ears quivered.

Manuela turned an incredulous look toward Zagan and said, “Well, there’s no helping looking a little rough around the edges if you’re here to buy clothes, but don’t you have anything better to walk around in on a date?”

Zagan was dressed in his usual robe, so she did have a point. It wasn’t very appropriate for a date. All he could do was groan at the fact.

“Wh-What can I do? A sorcerer’s clothes are crammed with a multitude of sorceries. I can’t swap them out for something else at a moment’s notice.”

To a sorcerer, clothing was a fortress of sorcery. Zagan’s ability to devour sorcery came from overwriting his opponent’s spell after seeing what they were casting and invoking the exact same thing at the exact same time. However, in order to make it possible for him to process so much information

so quickly, he had to accelerate the signals rushing through his nerves and reinforce their strength so that they could withstand the burden. Only by overlapping such sorceries atop each other, sorceries that would overwhelm any normal person, was it possible for him to put his power on display.

Kianoides was Zagan's domain. Removing his robe didn't leave him completely unarmed, but it would have been the equivalent of throwing away the sorcery he always had at the ready. Someone around Barbatos's level would take two, or maybe even three serious punches to kill in that case. Plus, even if nothing was going on now, Zagan was at war with Shere Khan, so he wasn't going to do something so foolish even when on a date with Nephy.

"Haaah," Manuela sighed ostentatiously. "Those are your circumstances, not Nephy's, right?"

"M-Manuela. We decided to go on a date just this morning, so Master Zagan didn't have time to prepare."

"Don't defend him, Nephy. This is a matter of etiquette. Aren't you dressed up all cute?"

The unexpectedly sincere words had Nephy wide-eyed and taking a step back.

"Grr. How dare you..."

Seeing Zagan clearly thrown off by Manuela's comments, Kuu started panicking.

"Chief! You said too much! Mister Zagan's an Archdemon, you know?!"



The world was vast, but Manuela was probably the only civilian out there who would dare speak so harshly to Zagan's face.

Zagan's shoulders shook as he angrily thrust his finger toward her and declared, "There's no room for argument! It is just as you damn well say!"

He then stood to his full height, cursing his own weakness, and turned to Nephy.

"Sorry, Nephy. I brought shame on you."

"Not at all! I don't mind. On the contrary, because of that, I get to enjoy picking out clothes for you, Master Zagan."

"I see... Nephy, you're so kind. Okay, I've decided. I'll try on everything you want me to today. I'll even buy anything you like."

"O-Okay!"

He hadn't forgotten his goal of picking out clothes for Nephy, of course. But before that, Zagan had to become a man suitable for her. Seeing the two of them clasp hands and lock gazes, Manuela grinned as if she'd found the most amusing of toys... Not that Zagan noticed.

3

"So, Nephy, what kind of clothes do you want Mister Zagan to wear? Personally, I think these spiky shoulder pads look really Archdemon-like!"

"Come now, don't play around, Manuela. I have to find something that suits Master Zagan."

Nephy's suddenly strong tone brought a sarcastic smile to Manuela's face.

"Hee hee... Clothes that suit him, you say? Well, what kind of things do you have in mind?"

"Let's see... In yesterday's dream...um, I mean, the tailcoat he wore for me the other day left a nice impression. It suited him perfectly."

She fancied that one quite a bit. Nephy's cheeks turned slightly red as she looked back at the moment like she was dreaming.

"Wait, what? Mister Zagan wore a tailcoat? What brought that on?" Manuela asked, gripping Nephy's shoulders firmly.

Nephy instinctively averted her gaze and replied, "Um, it's a little hard to explain."

Well, it would have been pretty difficult for any normal person to understand the dream Lilith had shown them. However, the evasive answer

only stimulated Manuela's imagination all the more. Zagan really would have preferred for her and Gremory to learn some self-restraint.

"Hnnngh! This is the type of situation Comrade Gremory adores! How about you, Nephy? What kind of outfit did you wear? Can you tell me in detail?"

"Eep? M-Me? I, um..." Nephy trailed off. She then twiddled her index fingers and answered with a satisfied look, "I wore...Master Zagan's clothing..."

Despite her voice practically vanishing into the quietest of whispers at the end there, Manuela's eyes shone like those of a bird of prey.

"The boyfriend shirt! Why didn't you call me over to see that?! I would've coordinated you the perfect outfit!" Manuela screamed, clutching her head in despair.

"Um, Chief, didn't they get to let loose precisely 'cause you weren't there?" Kuu muttered from the side.

"Kuu? Would you like to try serving customers in a micro bikini this afternoon?"

"Chief! Kuu is a good girl! Kuu didn't say anything!"

The poor little vulpin begged for her life with tears in her eyes. With that, Nephy returned to her senses and let out an intentional cough.

"R-Right now, we're discussing Master Zagan's clothes, Manuela."

"Yeah, yeah. Hmm... Would you like to have him wear something slim fitting?"

"That's not really the case...or wait, no, perhaps it is. Master Zagan has a lovely figure, after all."

Somehow, listening to the two of them talk about him had Zagan feeling itchy all over.

If I had to say, then I'm actually happy about it, so why do I feel so embarrassed?!

Nephy seemed to be getting shy just speaking about it, as she covered her red cheeks with both hands. Her adorable behavior nearly had Zagan clutching his heart and squatting to the ground. On the other hand, Manuela, who was enjoying Nephy's bashful figure from up close, made an unexpectedly serious expression.

"I see. Well, finding something that suits him *is* important, but how do you want him to look while you walk around town together? What kind of

outfit would you like him to wear for that?”

“How do I want to look while we walk around...?” Nephy mumbled, sinking into thought with an endlessly serious look before her pointy ears sprang up. “I want to try walking around dressed like the other townsfolk!”

Zagan’s eyes widened upon hearing that totally unexpected answer.

Now that I think about it, Nephy has never worn clothing similar to what the regular townsfolk wear.

The same applied to Zagan, naturally. He’d always been under the impression that he couldn’t make Nephy wear shabby clothing, so he’d ended up picking dresses and high-class shirts for her. However, though such clothing was standard for nobles and the like, it wasn’t typical for regular townsfolk.

What kind of clothing do regular townsfolk wear, anyway?

He’d walked by plenty of people on the way here, but the image of them remained hazy in his mind. Perhaps having no particularly distinct features was the point?

Normally, when he walked around with Nephy, he only ever had eyes for her...and when he was on his own, he never bothered paying attention to anyone around him. This was the end result of such actions. Not that Zagan really understood this facet of himself, of course. Setting aside the Archdemon as he pondered such things, Manuela nodded in agreement.

“Mhm. I get it. Let’s go with normal clothing as today’s concept.”

“Normal clothing?” Zagan and Nephy repeated, both cocking their heads even though the words made sense individually.

“Now that you mention it, we don’t possess anything you would consider normal,” Zagan replied.

“Yes, what a blind spot,” Nephy agreed.

During his time as a waif, it would’ve been absurd to call the rags he’d worn proper clothing, and the stuff he’d stolen or found had mostly been torn and dirtied, so none of them could be considered “normal clothing.” Now that he thought about it, Zagan realized that he was so unfamiliar with the concept that he would’ve never come up with the idea himself. He nodded in understanding as Manuela brought out a full set of clothes.

“How ’bout something like this to start? Try it on.”

He thought she was going to start changing his clothes without asking—terrifyingly enough, this avian was no sorcerer, yet could change someone’s

clothes so fast that his senses as an Archdemon couldn't keep up—but instead, she led him to the dressing room. What was she scheming?

“Take your time, Master Zagan.”

“Y-Yeah. I'll be right back.”

Nephy saw him off with a hopeful look on her face as Zagan stepped into the dressing room. The space was only large enough for one person to stand in. There was a full-length mirror in front of him and several hooks and hangers on the wall.

Zagan removed his mantle and robe and hung them up. They were Zagan's fortress, so they were implanted with severe traps that would activate if any stranger touched them. He doubted Manuela would try anything, but just in case, he set up a barrier so that they couldn't be touched at all. It required suitable effort and consideration for an Archdemon to frolic among civilians, after all.

Zagan removed his shirt, and, now topless, he tried putting on what had been given to him, then came to a sudden stop.

“Hm...? How does one wear this?”

Manuela had given him a plain shirt, trousers, outerwear that had no sleeves—a vest, if he remembered right—and a jacket. He knew that much, but there were two cord-looking items he had no idea how to use. One had metal fittings on its ends. It looked like they were meant to clip onto something, but he couldn't tell exactly what. The other was thicker on one end, but there were no other discernibly different traits about it. He didn't have a clue what it was for.

“Master Zagan, is something the matter?” Nephy asked, worried after hearing Zagan groan.

“Mmm... There are a few things here I don't know how to use.”

“Oh...”

“Oh my, how terrible. Nephy, lend me your ear for a sec...” Manuela said. Zagan couldn't hear what Manuela was telling Nephy.

I'd rather she not plant any weird ideas in Nephy's head... he thought as a hint of anxiety rushed through his mind.

“Okay! That's the gist of it! Give it your all!” Manuela yelled.

“Y-Yes!”

After Zagan heard what sounded like a deep breath from outside the dressing room, Nephy raised her voice once more.

“M-Master Zagan, excuse me.”

And with that preface, Nephy opened the curtain guarding the dressing room.

“...”

“...”

Their eyes met...and Nephy froze.

“Eek!”

Shortly thereafter, Nephy yelped and closed the curtain.

“A-Are you all right, Nephy?”

“F-F-F-F-Forgive me. I didn’t know you were still changing.”

Now that she mentioned it, Zagan had only put on the shirt and had yet to button it. Obviously, Nephy had lost her presence of mind after seeing such a sight.

“I’m not showing off anything that should trouble you,” Zagan said.

“Well, I am troubled.”

Having said that, it was senseless to continue talking about it from across the curtain, so Nephy made up her mind.

“Master Zagan, I’m opening it.”

“Go ahead.”

Zagan wanted to stare at Nephy, since she was acting all shy, but he didn’t really want to tease her, so he buttoned up his shirt as he answered her. Nephy opened the smallest of gaps in the curtain and poked her head inside. Her head wrapped tightly by the curtains, combined with the way her white hair bundled up around her face, made Nephy look like she was buried in a bundle of fluffiness. Her absolutely overflowing charm had Zagan feeling dizzy, but he stood his ground resolutely.

“Sorry to take your time,” he said. “Do you know how to use these?”

“Ah...”

Despite Zagan feeling uneasy, Nephy stared with her mouth half-open and let out a sigh as if she’d seen something unusual. Her attention seemed to be solely focused on Zagan wearing a shirt and trousers.

Now that I think about it, I’ve never been dressed like this in front of Nephy, have I?

Was this what people called casual clothing? Normally, he was fully equipped with his robe and mantle, and on rare occasions, he dressed up in the prim and proper clothes of a noble. He was embarrassed by how untidy he

seemed, but Nephy devoured him greedily with her eyes. It was fun to continue watching her do so, but now he was the one starting to grow bashful.

Unable to bear it any longer, Zagan spoke up first, saying, “Uhhh, Nephy?”

“Oh! Y-Yes? What is it?”

“Well, I mean, I was asking about these...”

Zagan showed her the two cords and Nephy nodded immediately.

“This one is a necktie and these are suspenders.”

“Hm? This is a tie?”

Zagan knew about ties, but he’d only ever used bow ties and neckerchiefs. It was his first time seeing one shaped like this.

“It seems this is the type that the average person uses.”

“Hmm, I see... Being ‘normal’ truly is difficult. It’s all unknown to me.”

“Hee hee... I’m a little nervous about it as well.”

Led along by Nephy’s smile, Zagan returned a smile of his own.

I get to see Nephy in “normal clothing” next, so this should be a treat!

After he finished dressing up, it would be Nephy’s turn. He then remembered the other cord in his hand.

“How do you use this one, then? I’ve never heard of suspenders.”

“It’s a type of belt. It’s a means of holding up your trousers so that they do not fall. It seems you affix these clips to your pants, then loop the cords over your shoulders.”

Zagan was familiar with belts that went around the waist, but he could use sorcery to adjust the size of any pants that didn’t fit, so he’d never actually had the chance to use one. This was also the first time Nephy had seen a pair herself, which was why she looked at the suspenders with great interest.

Zagan used the mirror to check his back and adjust the position of the suspenders in order to fix his trousers in place. It felt like the pants didn’t quite fit properly, making him feel somewhat restless, but this was apparently how normal people did things. After that, he picked up the tie, but came to an abrupt halt.

Wait, I know it goes around my neck, but how?

The shape was unsuitable to form a bow, and it was far too stiff to use like a neckerchief. He’d never seen one before, so he had no idea what it was supposed to look like when worn.

“Um, would you like me to tie it for you?” Nephy asked, seeing his confusion.

“You know how?”

“Yes, Manuela just taught me.”

That was enough for Zagan to realize the truth of the situation.

That damn Manuela! She chose this specifically because it was unlikely I knew how to wear it!

She’d set it up in a way so that Nephy had no choice but to peek while he was changing. Well, Nephy was pleased by the turn of events, so that didn’t really matter.

“Then please do,” he said, obediently handing Nephy the necktie.

“Yes!”

Zagan hadn’t given much thought to what exactly it meant to have Nephy tie it for him.

“Th-Then...excuse me.”

It was obviously too hard to do from outside the dressing room, so Nephy stepped inside.

What’s this? It feels like something immoral is about to begin.

It was just the two of them in a narrow space. His heart pounded. Nephy stood on her tiptoes to wrap the tie around Zagan’s neck while he lowered his head slightly to make it easier for her. That was when they realized how close they were to each other.

Their faces nearly touched. Nephy had her arms stretched, so it was like she was half-embracing him. The far too narrow space of the dressing room brought a sense of immorality to the situation.

There was a slight flowery scent in the air. Perhaps having chosen to emphasize the start of spring, a sweet and refreshing smell tickled Zagan’s nose. He felt like he was in a dream as he admired how cute those long white eyelashes in front of him were.

Nephy’s face then turned noticeably red as she yelled, “H-Hwaaah?”

“Wh-Whaaaaaat?”

The two of them felt it was wrong to raise their voices, so they screamed as quietly as possible.



“Ah!”

“Nephy!”

Nephy was so thrown off that she pitched forward and nearly fell, so Zagan supported her by the back in the spur of the moment. Thus, he now had her in his arms. His heart beat like a hammer. He could feel vigorous thumping coming from the girl in his arms as well. Still, even though they were both flustered, Zagan tightened his embrace. Nephy stiffened at the sudden movement, but the very next instant, she leaned in and rested her head against his chest.

Silence reigned.

If only time would stop right now...

That unsorcerer-like thought went through Zagan’s mind as Nephy shyly giggled.

“Hee hee hee... It feels like it’s been a long time since this kind of thing has happened.”

“Y-You’re right... Th-This sort of narrow space might not be so bad.”

The thought of building a little hidden room like this in the castle came to mind. Although, even if he did make one, he’d be too embarrassed to use it and it would go neglected.

“Master Zagan, shall I do up your tie?” Nephy asked, looking up at him.

“Mrgh... Well, fine.”

A part of him wanted to remain like this, but they were in a dressing room. If they spent too long in it, there was no telling what kind of unjust suspicion Manuela would throw at him. Not that there was anything unjust about such suspicions, but Zagan didn’t think of that.

He reluctantly released her. The tie was still around his neck, so Nephy took hold of it and corrected its position. She folded his collar over the tie, then adjusted its two lengths over his chest. The thicker side seemed to be the longer one, stretching down to about double the length of the thinner side. Nephy then began skillfully tying it up.

What’s going on? Somehow, I feel both embarrassed and tempted.

He was ashamed as a man to have the girl he loved fix up his appearance, yet he also felt exaltation at the sense that they were acting like newlyweds. He looked up at the ceiling to try to endure this mysterious sensation, then took a quick peek at Nephy’s face.

“...”

She looked just as embarrassed as he was, judging by how her pointy ears were red from base to tip.

Before long, she finished doing up his tie. It was a little suffocating to have something squeezing on his collar, but it also felt fresh compared to his usual robe.

“H-How is it?” Nephy asked.

“M-Mmm... Not bad,” Zagan answered with a nod.

In truth, Zagan had no idea what a properly done-up tie looked like, but how could he possibly hate something Nephy had done for him?

“It suits you, Master Zagan,” Nephy said with an entranced smile gracing her lips.

“Hmm... I don’t really get it, but if you say that, it must be true.”

He looked himself over in the mirror and in response, Nephy suddenly averted her eyes in a panic.

“Th-Then, I’ll wait for you outside!”

“O-Oh, really? I don’t mind if you stay...”

Nephy twiddled her index fingers bashfully, then looked up at Zagan with a somewhat reproachful gaze.

“Um, it already felt like I was doing something very wrong tying your necktie, so if I stay any longer, my heart won’t be able to take it.”

“I see. I can sympathize with that.”

If their roles had been reversed—if Zagan was standing here while Nephy changed—he was liable to die on the spot. It’d have been a little cruel to have her stay any longer. It was because they were like this that simply holding hands had them teetering on the brink, but there was nobody there to point that out to them.

Nephy left the dressing room as Zagan saw her off with a slack expression on his face.

“...”

Now that he was alone, he slowly brought both his hands up with the smoothest of motions and covered his face. The embarrassment of being glued together in a private room combined with the happiness of having her do up his tie formed an inexplicable swelling sensation within his chest. Zagan squatted down, silently screaming in his mind like a maiden.

Incidentally, Nephy had fallen into the exact same state outside the dressing room, separated from him by only a single curtain. For better or

worse, Zagan didn't notice.

4

“H-How do I look?”

Several minutes later, Zagan somehow managed to return to his senses and finish changing, then left the dressing room. He had a khaki jacket over his black shirt, his trousers were also khaki, and his vest was a slightly darker shade of brown. The tie Nephy had done up for him, however, had a checkered pattern.

“It suits you so well!” Nephy replied, nodding with sparkles in her azure eyes.

“R-Really? I've never worn anything like this before. I can't tell what's so good about it.”

“I think it matches your silver eyes extremely well, Master Zagan. It's very stylish and gives off a calm impression. You look wonderful.”

Her straightforward praise had Zagan feeling rather daunted.

Manuela then came back to check up on them and exclaimed, “Nice! My choice was right on the money, huh?!”

She nodded in satisfaction, then brought her face closer to Zagan's ear.

“Did you enjoy your time in the dressing room?” she whispered.

“Quiet, you!”

He pushed her back cruelly, and Manuela used her green wings to escape into the air.

“Aha! Come on, it was just a little prank! Anyway, how about this to top things off?”

She tossed over a greenish-black gentlemen's cap.

“A hat? I don't recall seeing any people in town with one on.”

Well, perhaps there were a few, but not many, at least.

“Oh? This is a necessity for a gentleman on a date, just so you know.”

“Grr...”

He couldn't refuse when she put it like that. He was the one who'd gone out on a date without caring about his appearance. As such, Zagan reluctantly put the hat on.

“Hmph... Will that do?”

Now that he thought about it, he realized this was his first time wearing a

hat. Unlike a robe's hood, it just didn't seem stable, which had him feeling somewhat restless. However, Nephy clasped her hands in front of her chest, overcome with emotion as her pointy ears quivered.

"It's wonderful!"

"Right?"

The two girls nodded in satisfaction, while Kuu made a meek expression behind them.

"Mister Zagan's the type who shines when polished," the little vulpin whispered. "Miss Nephy would be so happy if he just dressed like this normally..."

Zagan had a feeling Kuu was growing more impertinent as of late. In any case, it was true that he was better off reconsidering his outer appearance.

"Anyway, this is quite rare," he said, shifting his focus back to Manuela. "I never expected to see you taking your job so seriously."

This was Manuela, after all. He'd come here resolved to be constantly stripped and dressed up like a toy.

"I mean, even I can tell Nephy would hate me if I messed around right now," Manuela replied with a forced smile. "Comrade Gremory might dare to do so, but I don't like the idea of making Nephy mad."

"I-I wouldn't really get angry or anything, you know...?"

Nephy's eyes darted about, whereas Zagan nodded in great admiration.

"I see. You mean to say Nephy thinks so strongly of me that you fear for your own safety."

What kind of Archdemon would he be not to respond to such feelings in kind?

"Yup, yup. Figured you'd get it. The way you casually brag about your love life really does show the talent that fascinates Comrade Gremory so much."

"I don't really get what you're saying. All I do is treat Nephy dearly."

He didn't know whether he was being praised or teased, but Zagan wisely decided not to delve any deeper into the matter.

"Auuugh..."

To the side, Nephy covered her face, unable to bear her embarrassment. For the time being, she seemed to like his new clothing. Just as Zagan was about to speak, another grin rose to Manuela's face and she asked, "Okay, then how 'bout something like this next?"

“Hey, wait a minute. What do you mean ‘next’?”

She pulled out a thick shirt and loose-looking pants. It looked a fair bit sloppier than what he was wearing at present.

Well, I'm sure Nephy will stop her...

However, Zagan had no idea that Nephy was in far higher spirits than usual at the moment.

“Yes! I'd love to see it!”

“Huh?!”

Nephy went as far as jumping on the spot in joy, an innocent sparkle in her eyes.

Aaah... Now that I think about it, we've both been on an abnormal high since the start of our date.

And here she was in a situation where she could dress Zagan up as she pleased. He'd said he would wear anything she wanted him to, so he couldn't exactly refuse either.

Oh well. Nephy's cute like this, so it's fine.

So long as he got to see that expression on her face, letting her dress him up was a small price to pay.

“Uhhh, then, I'll go get changed.”

Zagan took the new set of clothes from Manuela, accepting his fate as a dress-up doll for a little while longer.

5

An hour later, Zagan ended up changing back into the first khaki outfit he'd tried on. He'd gone through five or six outfits before Nephy finally came back to her senses.

“Forgive me, Master Zagan. I lost control of myself in the moment...”

“It's fine, I don't mind. This might've been the first time I've seen you so delighted.”

“Auugh...”

Honestly, he didn't think she'd make him wear so many outfits, but each time he tried something on, she looked so pleased that he didn't care. Nephy gave him a smile, completely red to the face.

“Okay, so next is Nephy's clothes, right?” Manuela said, turning to her. “What kinda clothes do you want her to wear, Mister Zagan?”

“Hmm, let’s see... It’s spring, so perhaps something bright. Also, since we’re going for ‘normal clothes,’ I’d like to see something that Nephy doesn’t usually wear.”

Manuela’s eyes widened at his answer.

“...What?” Zagan asked.

“Oh, I’m just surprised you gave me such a specific request.”

“These clothes are for Nephy. Like hell I’d give some half-baked request!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Manuela shrugged with an amused smile and immediately brought some clothes over from the shelves.

“How about this ensemble? Nephy often wears blue and monotone outfits. She hasn’t worn much green. There was just that one time you all went to Liucaon on your vacation, I think?”

That was the time Zagan had turned little. Honestly, he didn’t really want to remember much about it. In any case, as expected of Manuela, she properly remembered the clothing they’d worn.

She held up a set of clothes centered on a dress and a cardigan. The cardigan had no buttons, and the color matched Zagan’s jacket, although more beige than khaki. The dress was a deep green, much like a forest. The shirt was black and had a collar. This was a good color to bring out Nephy’s white hair.

“What do you think, Nephy?” Zagan asked.

“Right, ummm, I suppose I have to change into it?”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Zagan clenched his fist, and Nephy resigned herself and entered the dressing room. His heart was dancing at the thought of how she would look when Manuela whispered into his ear like she couldn’t bear it anymore.

“Haah... Haah... Um, Mister Zagan. I really do think surprises are important for this kinda event. Won’t it be more thrilling not knowing what clothing she’ll come out wearing?”

“You have a point, but I don’t trust you’ll do it seriously.”

“What?! You can trust me a little more than that! Come on, look at how serious my eyes are!”

“Your eyes are impure and dominated by lust,” Zagan answered honestly.

“Aaaaargh! I finally got a fun toy! What kinda torture is this to force me

to do regular customer service?!”

“Can you try a little harder to hide your damn motives? You just did something unnecessary moments ago too.”

“That was just a light jab! I want to make you two wear more embarrassing clothes and see you both act all flustered!”

This woman was the worst. Zagan was dumbfounded by this aspect of her. And as that went on, the curtain to the dressing room opened.

“Um, it’s rather noisy out here. Is everything all right?”

Nephy came out with a bewildered expression. Upon seeing her figure, Zagan let out a sigh of admiration. Her cheeks were slightly flushed as she made a show of spinning on the spot, making her forest-green dress flutter. It was like something out of a dream.

“H-How is it?” she asked.

“M-Mm!” Zagan withstood his urge to hug her and nodded with as much false composure as he could muster. “This is something else! It gives a different impression from the dress you usually wear with your maid outfit. How refreshing! The simplicity of the clothes actually brings out how lovely and sweet you are with great effect. Damn that Manuela. She really does a good job when she tries. Why doesn’t she do this normally?”

Hmm, I can’t really put it in words, but it really does suit her. Zagan was in just as excited a state as Nephy had been when she’d been the one picking clothes. The Archdemon was incapable of hiding how shaken he was and had completely mixed up his inner thoughts and speech. He was so deeply moved by Nephy’s appearance that his heart hammered, while for some reason, Manuela sank to her knees next to him.

“Aaaaah! I should’ve snuck in some fun clothes! It all fits together so well that I can’t mess with it! I wanted to dress you up waaaaaay more!”

“You really are the worst,” Zagan said. “What is there to be dissatisfied with when Nephy is dressed up so wonderfully?”

Kuu, who just happened to pass by again, made a look like that was the wrong thing to nitpick, while Manuela slammed her hands on the ground in frustration.

“It’s the end once everything’s put together nicely, right? I wanted to make her cuter and cuter one step at a time!”

“I see... That might’ve been worth witnessing.”

“Please leave it at that, you two!”

Unable to take it any longer, Nephy covered her face and squatted down. Zagan somewhat wanted to see her dressed up in all sorts of clothes, but with her in this state... And from what he could see of Manuela, it was about time to leave. Zagan held out his hand and helped Nephy back up.

“Then will these clothes do?” he asked.

“Y-Yes. Um, this is my first time wearing anything like this, so I don’t really know much about it, but I really like it.”

“Mm. I like it too. Let’s go with this.”

In the end, Manuela had picked out the clothes for them, but because she’d properly listened to their requests this time, they’d found clothes that perfectly matched what they were looking for. This was likely a far better outcome than if they’d stubbornly tried to pick things out themselves.

After they had paid, just as they were about to leave, Manuela called to them once more.

“Hang on a sec. You two are on a date today, right?”

“I-Indeed.”

It was somewhat embarrassing to admit outright. Zagan and Nephy nodded awkwardly.

“Let me give you one last piece of advice. Well, before that, you two can at least hold hands, right?”

“Don’t belittle me. We did that properly on the way...right?”

“Hwah? Um, yes,” Nephy confirmed.

Seeing them fidget and avert their eyes, Manuela sighed.

“Well, that might be enough for you two, but...” Manuela paused for a moment, then continued like there was no choice but to help them. “Your big sis will teach you how lovers hold hands.”

“H-How lovers hold hands?!” Zagan and Nephy repeated in unison.

They were shaken to the core by the mere thought that such a thing existed.

But wait, this is Manuela. She might be trying to make us do something weird again. Zagan put himself on guard as Manuela opened her hand in front of her.

“All right, first, spread out your fingers.”

“L-Like this?”

Nephy did as she was told, and Zagan followed along, lured by the prospect after all.

“Okay, next, put your palms together.”

“Hmm, like this?” Zagan said, matching his left hand to Nephy’s right.

“That makes it hard to walk, right? So wrap your arms together... Yup, like that.”

She adjusted the position of their hands, and their arms were now linked. This level of physical contact already had Zagan’s heart thumping loudly.

“Right, now stay like that and give your hands a good squeeze.”

They did as she said, and Nephy and Zagan’s fingers interlaced.

“Wh-What?!” they both exclaimed in shock.

There was a distinct sense of being connected that couldn’t even be compared to holding hands normally. Everything from their palms to each of their individual fingers was pressed against each other. There was essentially zero distance between them.

Is this...unity? Nephy’s fingers were in between his. If he put too much strength into his grip, it seemed like he would hurt her, but if he weakened it too much, it felt like their hands would come apart. That raging conflict over the slightest adjustments seemed to be conveyed to Nephy through his minute movements, and her nervous trembling was also passed back to him. In the end, a tremendous flood of power poured out, and a vortex swirled with their connected hands at its center.

Well, this was simply the loss of control of mana and aura from an Archdemon and a high elf due to their mental state, but if Gremory saw this, she’d be exclaiming, “Y-Your love power has given birth to a power spot!”

Neither of them were actually using sorcery or mysticism. At least, they didn’t think they were. In any case, they could feel each other so much from holding hands this way.

“Wh-What is this? Did you use some kind of sorcery?” Zagan asked, trembling in fear.

“That’s how lovers hold hands!” Manuela exclaimed, snapping her fingers at them. “Remember it well.”

She looked utterly pleased with herself.

“Hnnngh. How splendid,” Zagan said in deep admiration. “The world is so vast. To think such a method of holding hands existed!”

“U-Um, a-are we...walking outside like this?” Nephy asked, bright red and clearly shaken by the idea.

“This is all I can do for you,” Manuela said with a satisfied smile and nod.

“You two enjoy yourselves now.”

Zagan wondered if it was even possible for them to walk like this, but instantly shook his head to ward off such weak thoughts.

Don't act timid now! You call yourself a man, Zagan?! He rebuked himself and bravely straightened his posture before turning to Manuela.

“I seem to have misunderstood you. You have my thanks.”

“It's fine. I just want Nephy to be happy,” Manuela said cheerfully.

With that, Zagan and Nephy walked out of the shop.

“Chief, will they really be okay? They made a huge ruckus just from holding hands...” Kuu whispered.

“Who knows? Well, it's fun, so isn't it fine?” Manuela whispered back, neither of their voices reaching Zagan's ears.

6

Because they'd had a little too much fun in Manuela's shop, the sky had started to turn red by the time they stepped outside. If they were going to go around town, there weren't many places they could drop by. Zagan and Nephy walked through the shopping district with even more awkward movements than earlier in the day.

It's no good. I'm so nervous my head isn't working at all. Even when Zagan used sorcery to control the dopamine to his brain, his heart wouldn't stop pounding. What's more, his palm was getting sweaty, so he questioned whether it was all right for them to continue holding hands. However, he felt like if he let go now, he'd be too embarrassed to do it again.

The same went for Nephy. Even as the tips of her ears quivered, she kept a tight grip as if to never let go. The sensation of her slender and soft fingers was enough to send him to heaven.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Where shall we go next?”

“R-R-R-R-R-Right! U-Ummm!”

Perhaps because of the escalating tension, both their stomachs suddenly growled. Despite his intense shame, the sound had Zagan letting the strength out of his shoulders.

“Now that I think of it, we haven't had lunch yet,” he said.

“Hee hee, you're right.”

It looked like their next destination was decided on. Although, if they ate

too much at this hour, they'd lose the chance to savor the dinner Foll, Raphael, and all the others were preparing. Simply eating something and savoring it were two different matters, after all.

With that in mind, Zagan remembered there was a place with outdoor seats that offered light meals. The restaurant's main selling point was sweets, so they targeted a younger demographic. It was the place Nephteros and those twins who worked for Shere Khan had met some time ago.

Zagan started making his way toward it, and this time, he had enough composure to at least pay attention to his surroundings.

"Hmm. There's nobody dressed like I am. Are these really 'normal clothes'?" he said with a hint of suspicion.

At the very least, he had a vague understanding that these weren't clothes a noble would wear.

"According to Manuela," Nephy said, "those clothes are popular in Raziel."

"In Raziel, huh? That reminds me, even the common masses there were relatively prosperous."

Kianoides was the largest town Zagan knew of, but the goods lining Raziel's shops had looked of higher quality. Many of the people he'd passed by there had also been wearing pricey-looking silk clothes.

I guess that's the difference between a trade center and a metropolis. Zagan had recently learned that a metropolis also set current trends. Manuela really was worthy of the trust they put in her for so quickly grasping what said trends were.

Incidentally, no matter what kind of clothes Zagan and Nephy wore, they were far too well-known in Kianoides. The simple act of walking around in high spirits wearing trendy new clothes made them the center of attention, but they had no awareness of this fact. Well, not that they had any experience knowing how out of place they ever were to begin with.

Shortly after, they reached the restaurant in question. The owner came out in a hurry for some reason, saying something about having VIP seats ready for them, but Zagan requested regular seating along the road. Today, he wanted to enjoy "normality."

Taking a seat meant having to let go of Nephy's hand. Zagan did so reluctantly and sat down across from her as he was presented the menu.

"Now then, what to get. Hmmm..." he muttered.

“Yes... Ah.”

The two peered over the same menu, and his cheek unintentionally came into contact with hers. He didn't have to look to know that her ears turned red. His cheek was probably the same color.

A dish stuffed with fresh cream was being carried to the next table over, but the customer waiting for it made a face like they already suffered from heartburn just from watching the two of them.

Zagan pulled back immediately in a fluster.

“Uhhh, sorry.”

“D-Don't be! I didn't dislike it or anything...”

Customers further to the back who'd been about to order sweets couldn't stand it anymore and switched their orders to bitter coffee. Having judged that they'd no longer be able to sell any sweets in this sweets-focused restaurant, the shop owner quickly came before Zagan and Nephy and pointed out a menu item for them.

“I recommend this for young customers such as yourself.”

“Hmm. Then we'll go with that. Does that work for you, Nephy?”

“Yes, please go ahead.”

The shop owner left, and Nephy's cheeks suddenly flushed.

“Wh-What's wrong?” Zagan asked.

“Hwah?! No, um... We ended up ordering a matching dish.”

“Uhhh, yeah, we did!”

It was normal for them to have the same meal at the same table in the castle, but for some reason, ordering the same thing here felt immoral. At this point, the other customers felt like their endurance was being put to the test. Some daredevils had even started ordering extraordinarily sweet dishes. Zagan and Nephy were smiling at each other, not noticing the state of their surroundings, when suddenly, an inconsiderate voice interrupted them.

“Hah. You look awfully pleased with yourself, Zagan.”

Having suddenly come out of nowhere, Zagan's undesirable and unhealthy-looking friend stood before them.

“Hm? Barbatos? How rare to see you here.”

Normally, Zagan would scowl at the man, telling him to get lost, or just punch him without warning. However, Zagan was in an abnormally great mood from being on his first date in a while, so he greeted Barbatos with a smile. Barbatos reeled back as if having witnessed something creepy, then

grimaced.

“Uhhh... What’s with that getup?” he asked in disbelief, checking Zagan out from head to toe. “Huh? Oh man, you gotta be kidding me. Those aren’t totally normal clothes, are they?”

It could be said that Zagan was marching around town with Nephy, essentially unarmed. Barbatos, despite appearances, was a former Archdemon candidate. He was a sorcerer who could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Zagan. He could tell at a glance that this was the case.

“Well ain’t this a riot! As you are now, I can totally—”

In the next instant, Barbatos saw his life flash before his eyes. He saw Chastille panicking as Foll asked for love stories. He saw the battle against the terrifying monster called Azazel that he fought at Zagan’s side. He relived the day he looked for a hair ornament that would suit that girl on Alshiere Imera. He once more tasted the disgrace of his lousy friend beating him to the seat of an Archdemon. He felt that first touch of an older woman’s warmth from that day during his childhood, wondering who she was. And thanks to that flash of memories, Barbatos came to a certain conclusion.

Oh. I pick a fight with him now, and he’ll seriously murder me. Naturally, Zagan hadn’t shown any hostility. He hadn’t even thought of killing Barbatos. He was in such a good mood that he’d allow some amount of discourtesy with a smile, even if it came from Barbatos.

However, the euphoria from experiencing how lovers held hands had fried some of the circuits in his brain. Right now, he had no idea how much to hold back so that someone wouldn’t die from his punch.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Barbatos?” Zagan asked with a smile.

“Uhhh... It’s nothing. You two have fun.”

“Okay?”

Barbatos left without giving them another glance.

“Is something the matter with him?” Nephy asked, cocking her head.

“Who knows? Well, maybe he’s just being considerate in his own way.”

Normally, Zagan would never think such a thing, but now, that thought came to mind with ease. It could also be said that Zagan simply had no interest in why Barbatos acted like that, though.

A short while later, their order arrived.

Oh yeah, I didn’t even check what we ordered.

After seeing what was placed on their table, both Zagan and Nephy were

wide-eyed in shock.

“Wh-What is this?!” they exclaimed in unison.

It was a large cup with two straws sticking out of it. Not only that, the straws were twisted together to form a heart. The cup was filled with colorful fruits and packed with fresh cream, hiding what was probably some kind of drink deeper down. What’s more, they’d also been given two spoons, but just one cup.

The old Zagan would’ve probably stupidly asked why there was only one. However, through Manuela and Gremory’s great efforts, he’d been taught what was typical for lovers to do together. As such, he understood this was meant to be shared. This was the moment that rewarded the hardships of their constant yammering about love power.

“Gh!”

“Hawawa!”

The two flinched at the sudden trial before them. Nephy was the first to come to her senses. She gulped, then timidly picked up a spoon and scooped up some cream.

“P-Please go ahead, Master Zagan,” she said, holding it out to him.

“Hnnngh!”

In other words, she was feeding him. He was already suffering from the shock of having to eat from the same cup, and here she was taking it a step further. However, Zagan didn’t feel embarrassment welling up inside him. Instead, he felt nostalgia.

This reminds me of the first time I came into town with Nephy. Back then, she had simply referred to Zagan as Master. Well, feeling nostalgia didn’t mean he remained calm, though. Zagan suppressed the violent pounding of his heart and opened his mouth.

The cold and sweet cream spread over his tongue.

“...It tastes good, huh?”

“...Yes,” Nephy said, then continued in the quietest of whispers. “Master Zagan, are you not going to give me any orders?”

She’d asked him that so long ago. Nephy was also recalling that day. He understood the meaning behind this and immediately nodded.

“That’s right...” Zagan said, repeating the conversation from back then.

“Master Zagan, could you forgive me for thinking that I want to be with you forever?”

It was similar to what she'd said back then, yet was so much clearer a desire.

"I'll allow it. Please stay by my side forever," Zagan answered as if it were perfectly natural.

The two of them laughed. It was nearly a year since they'd met. Had they been able to grow over that one year? Well, considering their date today, one could say their progress was slow, but the two walked down this path together. There was no need to hurry. Still, it felt like they were taking it a little *too* easy.

Before they knew it, the sun had set completely. They ended up returning to the castle after only having a single bite of their parfait for two.

After that, because of the uproar of the Archdemon's visit, rumors spread that any lovers that shared the parfait at this restaurant would be together for eternity, boosting the restaurant's sales greatly.

7

By the time the Archdemon was panicking in front of a parfait, Barbatos was back in the church's office, staring up at the ceiling in a daze. It was getting late, so that fussy dark elf and her Angelic Knight attendant weren't around. The only other one here was Chastille, working hard at her desk after hours.

"Did something happen, Barbatos?" she asked, still quickly going through her work.

"Aah... It's nothing," he replied halfheartedly.

"It doesn't look like nothing... I'll offer my advice if you want."

"Dumbass. Say that after you can actually take care of yourself first."

"I do of course try to take care of myself, but I also feel indebted to you. If there's anything I can do to help with your problem, I'd like to."

"...Just shut it," Barbatos said as he covered his face upon hearing her unexpectedly embarrassing statement.

"Well, I won't force it out of you," Chastille continued, used to his curt behavior by now. "Don't try to take it all on yourself for no good reason, okay? Not that I think you, of all people, will do that."

Her unwanted consideration and slight sarcasm restored enough of Barbatos's energy for him to give her a bitter smile. He'd grasped

information that two new Archdemons had visited Zagan's castle. What's more, one was Valley Cat Furcas, the supreme champion at jumping through space.

Some kind of incident involving two Archdemons had definitely gone down, and yet, Barbatos had no clue whatsoever what it was.

If I haven't sensed it, does that mean it happened in some kinda other dimension? As a sorcerer who manipulated space, it was humiliating for him to fail to perceive it. He'd gone to Zagan to press him for answers, but Zagan and his bride acted like nothing had happened... Actually, they'd been flirting even more than usual.

If Barbatos had failed to suppress his anger and asked anyway, he'd really be dead by now. He was fed up with pretty much everything about this. That was when two problems suddenly came to mind.

Today, those two were dressed differently from usual. It was as if they weren't sorcerers. It was as if they were "normal."

Don't the crybaby ever dress up like that...? This overly serious girl wore her ceremonial uniform even when she was at home. When she didn't, she wore some stuffy-looking outfit meant for nobles. About the only other thing she wore was her sleepwear. In complete contrast, that was some tattered-looking old thing. Even Barbatos worried that an Archangel should wear something a little nicer.

He felt a sudden curiosity about what she would look like in "normal clothes." He shifted his gaze her way. Chastille's pen continued working through the substantially reduced stack of documents on her desk.

"Hey, Chastille."

"...?"

He called her by her name on the spur of the moment, then covered his face at the slipup. Because of that, she sensed that this was no trivial matter. She brought her pen to a stop and raised her head.

"Yes?"

She said nothing more and simply waited.

Aah, that was unnecessary... He'd really done something bothersome now. With Chastille like this, she wouldn't touch her work again until he spoke his mind. What's more, she had no ill intent and was ready to wait for as long as it took for him to get his thoughts in order. It really was undue consideration. Barbatos had brought this upon himself, though. Around the

time the clock's second hand made two full rotations, he finally cut to the chase.

“Uhhh... Do you...wear clothes?”

In response to his magnificent slip of the tongue, Chastille hugged her shoulders tight and pulled back with vigor.

“H-H-H-H-H-H-H-How do I look to you right now?!”

One single blow sent her work mode mask flying, and her chair tumbled behind her.

“Th-That ain't what I mean!”

“Then what do you mean?!”

Chastille screamed in both bewilderment and shame as Barbatos flared up and yelled back at her.

“You're always wearing those stuffy-looking clothes, so I'm asking if you don't got some cuter stuff!”

“Huh...? Cute...?”

Chastille blushed because of an entirely different emotion now.

“Huh?! I didn't say nothing like that!”

“Y-You just did!”

“I'm talking 'bout clothes!”

And so, much like every other day, their unproductive quarrel echoed through the church's office.

Epilogue

“Seriously, that lot. They even got Foll and Kuroka involved... I hope they didn’t indoctrinate them in some weird way.”

Some time earlier, Shax had managed to retrieve Kuroka, but now Foll had been added to Gremory’s little assembly. Zagan let out a sigh.

“Miss Gremory has been away from the castle for a while, so she must’ve felt lonely,” Nephy said from his side.

“I can at least understand that much...”

That was why Zagan hadn’t stopped them. He forced a smile as Nephy held out a dish to him. A partially eaten maritozzo sat on it. Because of the fuss Gremory had started, he’d only eaten about a third of it.

Well, nothing weird will happen with Foll there. A part of him was worried as a parent, but she was an Archdemon now. He understood he needed courage to believe in her and simply watch over proceedings. Even as he felt anxiety, he continued eating his maritozzo. A happy sweetness spread through his mouth, and his stern expression slackened.

“The desserts you make really are the best, Nephy.”

“Hee hee, thank you very much.”

She leaned in close enough to touch Zagan’s shoulder.

“This reminds me of the time we went to buy these clothes,” he said.

“It does. Back then, the dessert we had was also delicious.”

When would their next date be? Shere Khan had been defeated, but there was significant chaos among the Angelic Knights. This meant there was an equal amount of chaos in Kianoides. Seeing as it was his domain, Zagan’s group couldn’t remain detached from such affairs.

Most importantly, there’s the problem of what to do with the survivors... It looked like it would take a little more time before things calmed down enough for him to go on a date.

As such thoughts passed through his mind, Nephy looked up at him restlessly.

“What’s wrong, Nephy?”

“Huh? Oh, um... I was just gazing at you.”

“Hnnngh!”

Zagan clutched his chest, nearly buckling at the knees. When she put it like that, he had the sudden urge to stare right back. Well, he would only last a few seconds before his pounding heart would be too much to handle, though.

But it doesn't seem that's the only reason. He knew that her desire to look at him was real, but Nephy's ears twitched about restlessly as if she was waiting for something.

It looks like...her mind's on the maritozzo? She knew Zagan liked it, so what was still bothering her? Setting that aside, Nephy being so restless was an unusual and adorable sight. Zagan squinted happily, and then...his teeth clanked against something hard.

“Hm? What's this? There's something hard inside. Do I eat this?”

“Hyah?! Y-You can't! Please take it out!”

Zagan was an Archdemon who excelled at strengthening his body. If he really tried, he could chew through metal and diamonds. Considering the difficulties of getting food during his childhood, it was natural for him to have developed such an ability. Nephy hadn't expected him to react like this and started panicking.

Meaning she put this in here on purpose? He took it out, just as she said, and found a small metallic circle in his hand.

“Is this...a ring?”

“Yes. Master Zagan, happy birthday.”

Zagan blinked and stared at the ring.

“Meaning...this is a b-birthday present?”

“Um... Yes.”

“Oooh!”

Zagan had never so much as thought about birthday celebrations until recently, but a present from his beloved bride had him shockingly ecstatic. He held it up to the candlelight and stared at it. It was a simple ring, yet it also had an intricate incantation and magic circle carved along its surface. Even Zagan, who was ignorant about jewelry, found it beautiful. The incantation looked to be part of a circuit, and the ring shined with a pale light, highlighting the mysterious metal it was made of.

“Is this mithril?” he asked.

“Yes. Lord Naberius made it for me.”

“Hmm. Mystic Artisan Naberius...”

Zagan sighed with admiration, then nearly fell to his knees. *It overlaps with my present!* He had something else in mind for her birthday present, but he'd also asked Naberius to make him a wedding ring for Nephy.

“M-Master Zagan?”

Nephy was flustered. Perhaps she was under the impression that he didn't like the ring.

“I-It's nothing,” he said, standing straight and shaking his head. “Anyway, can I try it on?”

“Yes! Oh, please put it on your dominant hand.”

“My dominant hand? Hmm, very well.”

He'd been under the impression that rings went on the left hand, but that apparently wasn't the case. He did as she said and put it on his right ring finger. It fit perfectly and settled neatly on his digit. Unless he focused on it, he couldn't even feel it.

“Can you try gathering your mana into it?” Nephy asked.

“Like this?”

He did as he was told, and light poured from the ring, nearly forcing him to shut his eyes. When the light died down, the ring had changed shape. It took on a rough shape like a flame. Covering all four of his fingers, it was both a weapon and a protective shield.

“It's a weapon meant to protect your fist. Its name is Sonne. You always fight with your fists, so I thought it would be of some use to you...”

It was a mithril knuckle. Nephy had likely worked on it as well. It was hard to imagine a more suitable weapon for an Archdemon.

With this, I can probably withstand clashing directly with a Sacred Sword or Hex Blade. In truth, he was incapable of recklessly swinging around a present from Nephy, but her desire to protect him was properly conveyed.

“I see. How splendid. I like it. Thank you, Nephy.”

“Y-You're welcome!”

This was her most brilliant smile of the day. He was about to hug her, when suddenly, an unwanted voice came from behind.

“Whooeey, that's a terrifying weapon you got there. You use that, and you truly will be the strongest... Uh, hang on, you hit me with that now and this old man will die!”

Andrealphus was awake again, so Zagan reeled back his fist with his mithril knuckle at the ready.

I don't really want to dirty Nephy's present with this guy's filthy blood. That single thought from deep in his heart was the only thing that spared Andrealphus's life.

“What do you want?” Zagan asked. “I’m pretty sure you know there’s nothing I hate more in the world than having someone butt in on my time with Nephy.”

He was sure to kill this man shortly. Zagan was just asking if he had any last words. Andrealphus's face spasmed as he put on a smile.

“It’s nothing all that serious. I said I’d go take care of Share Khan and ended up getting beaten up, so I figured I’m dead if I don’t at least put in some work now.”

“So...?”

Andrealphus shrugged. “Those few hundred surviving Nephilim you didn’t kill... Mind leaving them to me?”

Vexingly, this was the biggest problem that had been bothering Zagan.

Afterword

It has been a long time, everyone. I have come to deliver *An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride Volume 14!* My name is Fuminori Teshima.

We're all the way to volume 14. I ran out of pages last time so I couldn't write it in the last book, but 13 is actually my record for my longest running series.

The Shere Khan arc was coming to a conclusion, so things have been very serious lately...and while that was going on, I've actually been writing short stories mostly focused on romantic comedy on Fanbox (blame my inner Gremory).

This was a completely private endeavor, almost like writing fanfic, but for this volume, I've been given a chance to collate them into the main series. To my editor, A, who managed to bring things to this stage, thank you very much!

"The Haunted House's Doppelganger" is first chronologically. This is Barbatos's story after the fight with "Aristella" in volume 10. It was actually a script I prepared for a drama CD. It ended up getting rejected, but I really wanted to write it so I put it together as a short story. The artist for the Elf Bride manga, Hako Itagaki, even drew an illustration to go with it. If you're interested, then please check out their Twitter and pixiv.

"Black Cat Capriccio." Shax and Kuroka finally went on a trip on their own, but there was no space to give them more pages! So, I wrote it as a short story. I wanted to use metal chopsticks as a punch line, and it came out pretty good. Chronologically, it takes place at the start of volume 11, the night before Gremory heads out on her business trip.

"The Reason I Adopted a Black Cat" is actually the first short story I wrote. I called these all romantic comedies, but this one's actually a serious love story. This was what Raphael told Foll when she went around gathering love stories in volume 11, eventually leading to the emergency family meeting. It's the reason the old man treats Kuroka so dearly, enough so that

he tries to cut off Shax's head every time he sees him. I really wanted to write about it.

It just wouldn't fit into the main story, though, so I figured I'd just write it on its own, which was how I started putting things on Fanbox. Incidentally, I was really pleased to have Hako Itagaki draw a cute illustration for this one too.

“The Archdemon's Day Off” is a story that came from wanting to write about Zagan and Nephy, but Shere Khan's stuff kept getting in the way. As such, my feelings synchronized with Zagan's, giving birth to this short. Chronologically, it comes immediately after the end of volume 11. After returning from Alshiera's barrier, Zagan and Nephy promptly go on a date.

In the epilogue, I wanted to properly write about Nephy giving Zagan his birthday present, so I couldn't think of much else to add. On that topic, Hako Itagaki had put up a drawing of Zagan and Nephy munching on maritozzi on Twitter, so I just had to write about it in the main story. I don't regret anything. I found quite the amusing anecdote after looking into it, so I worked that into the story too.

That's about all regarding this volume.

Also, just as I reported in volume 13, we've got a spin-off manga with Barbatos as the protagonist! I'm pretty sure it should be out by the time this volume goes on sale.

Now then, allow me to offer my thanks to everyone involved.

To my editor, A, who gave me the green light to put this short story collection together. To the illustrator COMTA, who once again offered gorgeous and lovely illustrations for the book (Zagan and Nephy's date clothes are so adorable! The two-page spread is a masterpiece of explosive cuteness!). To Hako Itagaki, to whom I'm truly sorry for having them do a storyboard for the manga spin-off on top of their other work. To Momo Futaba, who does the art for the spin-off. To the manga editor. To everyone who worked on the cover design, proofreading, advertising, and everything else. To my children, who made delicious sweets for me all the time. And to you, my dear readers, who are holding this book in your hands at this very moment.

Thank you very much!

November 2021: Listening to “Osorezan Revoir”
Fuminori Teshima

Bonus Short Stories

The Archdemon's Birthday Party ~Their Diary~

“Behemoth! Today, you shall finally tell me your story!”

During Archdemon Zagan's birthday party, Gremory had finally caught Behemoth. With nowhere left to run, he reluctantly took a seat and Leviathan took her place in his lap.

“There's not much of a story... We spent five hundred years apart, remember? I'm pretty sure it's not the type of tale you'd enjoy.”

“No, it is interesting precisely *because* that's the case. Despite spending five hundred years apart, she sits on your lap as if it were perfectly natural...and you're even feeding her without pause! That is what makes you two truly wonderful!”

Levia had been looking at a dessert on the table with interest, so Behemoth had naturally picked up a fork and fed it to her.

“Hnnngh, five hundred years without even being able to speak, and you've developed such marvelous love power! You must tell me all the details!”

Behemoth and Levia had been cursed to lose their egos and turn into monsters, one during the day, the other during the night.

“There aren't many details either... It was, like, through letters, I guess?”

“Rather than letters, more like a memorandum...or a diary?”

“Yeah. A diary. We filled out a book a page at a time, writing what we learned each day.”

When one felt like they were going to break, the other would write something to cheer them up. Even if they tried to bury their anxieties or suffering, after five hundred years of writing and reading, they knew each other too well to hide anything. That was how they'd endured for so long.

“Wow. You mean, like, an exchange diary?” the carefree Selphy asked as she joined the conversation. “That's so nice! I totally wanna try that with Lilith too!”

“No, it wasn’t really... Well, whatever.”

The contents hadn’t been quite as cheerful as what one would expect out of an exchange diary, so Behemoth grimaced beneath the leather bands covering his face.

“How delightful!” Gremory exclaimed. “Let me read that diary too! I’ll pay any price!”

“Oh, come on, you really think I have it on hand? It’s got five hundred years of letters in it, you know?”

“But then, where is it? I’ll chase it to the very end of the world!”

He was never going to tell her. That was Behemoth’s decision, but Levia pointed into the distance with her chin.

“Mmm... Ashy should have it.”

Alshiera had been the one to suggest that arrangement to them. Everyone at the table turned to stare at the little girl at the exact same time, and the world’s strongest vampire shuddered.

Well, not like Alshiera will ever hand it over...right?

Several minutes later, Behemoth deeply regretted making light of the situation.

The Archdemon’s Birthday Party ~Lilith’s Agony~

“Lady Lilith! I wish to be blessed with your love stories!”

During Archdemon Zagan’s birthday party, Gremory called out to Lilith, who was bringing more to drink into the room.

“Hwah? Love stories? I’m not like those two, so I don’t have any...” Lilith mumbled.

But then, Furcas, who was carrying a cask with him, suddenly yelled, “Huuuh?! Lilith, you have someone you’re in love with?!”

“I-I don’t!”

Even as she denied it, Lilith couldn’t look directly at Furcas for some reason.

He’s pretty amazing, considering he’s lost all his memories...

Lilith had witnessed the battle against the dreadful zombie dragon. At the time, she hadn’t protected Kianoides; Furcas had. Seeing her like that, Gremory and Manuela smiled villainously while Selphy’s smile turned to one filled with bloodlust. Not that Lilith noticed any of it, of course.

“Hmm, Furcas, was it?” Manuela started. “I hear you put in quite some effort this time around.”

“Oh, now that is deserving of a reward,” Gremory joined in. “Now then, I wonder what we can do for you?”

“I don’t need a reward,” Furcas stated. “My bro praised me already, and I got to see Lilith acting all cheerful, which is more than enough!”

Lilith felt her cheeks flush red upon hearing his immediate reply. This only pleased Gremory and Manuela all the more, while a crack ran down the glass in front of Selphy despite nobody touching it, and Kuu hid in the shadow of a chair, the fur on her tail standing on end.

“Then how about this? You tried your best for her, so why not have the cute little Lilith thank you?” Manuela suggested.

“Wh-Why do I have—?” Lilith started to object, but quickly realized that Furcas had probably fought for that exact purpose. “Now that you mention it...I haven’t said thanks yet. Furcas, th—”

“Oh, hang on. I said ‘the cute little Lilith,’ didn’t I?”

By the time Manuela was standing behind her, Lilith had already been swiftly changed into a bunny suit.

“Hwaaah?! What?! What did you do?!”

“Come on, forget about that. You’re thanking Furcas, aren’t you?”

Manuela pushed her forward, prompting Lilith to look up at Furcas. The outfit was pretty much skintight, but the portion at her chest had a large opening, so she held down her breasts as she spoke to him.

“Um, thank you, Furcas. You did your best... Hey, why is your nose bleeding?!”

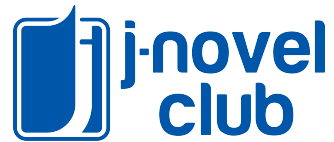
“I-I mean, come on, Lilith! That outfit is too stimulating for me...”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you saymghph?!”

She turned bright red, but suddenly, something soft covered her face.

“I totally planned on lending you Lilith today, but I didn’t say anything about letting you go this far!”

Selphy puffed out her cheeks in rage, keeping a tight embrace on Lilith until the party was over.



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An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride: Volume 14
by Fuminori Teshima

Translated by Hikoki
Edited by DxS

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Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan,
Tokyo
English translation © 2022 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2022