

The Greatest
Demon Lord
IS REBORN AS A
TYPICAL
NOBODY

The Lonely
Divine Scholar

4

Myojin Katou

Illustration by
Sao Mizuno

A full-page illustration of the character Verda. She is a young woman with short, spiky blonde hair and large green eyes. She has a wide, enthusiastic smile with her mouth open. She is wearing a black corset-style top with green lacing down the front, a green belt with a heart-shaped buckle, and a long, flowing white coat with gold trim. Her arms are raised high in the air, holding up two large, ornate golden vessels. The background is a bright, glowing white with some green and blue light effects.

Verda

Formerly one of the Four Heavenly Kings. Magic scholar. Brainiac. Works at the research institute in the ancient capital, Kingsglave. Appears before Ard and his friends during their school trip.

"Yoo-hoo!
God is
gracing
this small
woorld!"

The **Greatest**
Demon
Lord **IS**
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The Lonely
Divine Scholar

■ On the sandy beaches of Kingsglave

Ginny

A young succubus who idolizes Ard. Having second thoughts about the harem now that Verda has pointed out its flaws...

Ireena

An elfen girl who loves justice. Returned from their plast to the past physically and emotionally stronger.

Sylphy

Formerly known as the Raging Champion. Keeps wandering off on her own during the school trip...





“Having
fun,
Verda?
Enjoying
yourself?”

“Gweh-
heh-heh!
This is so
awesooome!”

Ard

Formerly known as the Demon Lord,
the strongest entity in the world.
Scrambles after his fearless friends
during the school trip, which is
starting to look like a hot mess.

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Myojin Katou

Illustration by **Sao Mizuno**


NEW YORK

Copyright

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Myojin Katou

Translation by Jessica Lange

Cover art by Sao Mizuno

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SHIJOU SAIKYOU NO DAIMAOU, MURABITO A NI TENSEI SURU
Volume 4 KODOKU NO SHINGAKUSHA

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CONTENTS

The Greatest Demon Lord Is Reborn as a Typical Nobody

Myojin Katou

Illustration by Sao Mizuno

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[PROLOGUE Commence the School Trip](#)

[DAY 1 The Spirit of Ireena](#)

[DAY 2 Rush Hour! Women Incoming!](#)

[DAY 3 The Silly Sylphy March](#)

[FINAL DAY Hopeful Hazard](#)

[EPILOGUE Concluding the School Trip and the Start of Mayhem](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Special Short Story from *Dragon Magazine*](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



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PROLOGUE

Commence the School Trip

Despite having been reborn well into the future, my daily routine was no less chaotic.

All that had reached a climax with an adventure we'd just settled, when a self-proclaimed "god" had blasted me, Ireena, and Ginny *back* in time... where each of our hearts were touched by unforgettable memories.

I honestly think the experience aged me a few years.

I could only hope our school trip would go off without a hitch.

Not that there was any reason to worry. Even though I lived an extraordinary life, it wasn't like I was constantly accosted by trouble. I was just going to stretch out my legs and go with the flow.

I strolled through the main drag of the ancient capital, Kingsglaive, with my classmates. We were heading toward our first location, one of the nation's elite research institutes.

The height of knowledge could be found at these facilities.

Citizens began their educational journeys in academies, where they first experienced being students. For a handful of years, they all engaged in their studies until graduation, when those in pursuit of higher education advanced to universities. Only students who met the prerequisite grades and conditions were offered a chance to join a research institute, where they could devote their lives to the pursuit of knowledge.

These facilities researched a variety of things...though the primary focus was on magic. Apparently, the one in Kingsglaive was the most prestigious research institute in the nation, known for publishing new discoveries every year.

The man who came to greet us was the head of the Kingsglaive Research Institute and universally known for his knowledge of magic. The elderly dwarf sported a bald dome and a very impressive mustache.

"As I'm sure you're aware, I'm Dr. Norman. Genius of the millennium."

He stood at the front of the courtyard entrance at the institute, sunlight gleaming off his head.

Self-proclaimed geniuses weren't anything special...but Norman was an exception. He had managed to do the impossible, including recreating the Lost Skills that no one had been capable of using anymore by developing modern magical equations.

Norman guided us around the institute. The building was designed for the sole purpose of research, and not an inch of the edifice was left unused. Research apparatuses overflowed from the rooms, crowding the hallways.

"The diagram on this wall represents the first Lost Skill I recovered: magic extraction. This completely transformed our world. The rest is history."

It was no exaggeration to say his research was revolutionary on a global scale. This discovery had led to the development of goods powered by magical ore, which have become indispensable to modern life.

"And this diagram is on electrothermal energy. This one is about energy conversion. And this—"

Norman boasted about his own accomplishments.

I noticed everyone looking at him with complete veneration.

Based on the standards of this generation, his feats were exceptional. Still, I kept finding myself wishing there was more.

I must have been an open book, because Norman suddenly glared at me in the middle of his humblebrag...I mean, his explanation.

"You... You're Ard Meteor. Prodigy in the making. Already famous in the royal capital. You're... I wish this wasn't the case, but you're the genius rumored to surpass me... *Me!*"

"What? Um... Erm. No, you must be mistaken..."

"You got that right! The greatest genius in history! A master mage! *My Ard!*" Ireena boasted.

"*Our Ard,*" Ginny clarified. "A higher existence that puts others to shame. Unfortunately, even Dr. Norman cannot contend with him. Uh-huh. *Our Ard* is a marvel to behold!"

Ireena and Ginny glared daggers at each other in between praises.

...Their attitude must have touched a nerve, because Norman's temple started to twitch, making his dwarven features sterner.

"Oh-ho. That makes me less enlightened than an earthworm. Is that what

you're telling me?"

"Not at all! I—"

"Fine! I'll show you true genius!"

"Ah, actually, I—"

"Follow me! I'll regale you with some unreleased research! Let's see if you can declare yourself greater than!"

Listen when people are talking. Norman wasn't even giving me time for a proper reply.

"...It's not on the schedule, but why not?" Olivia decided as our teacher and chaperone.

The students obediently trailed after Norman to check out his research in progress, snaking down the hallway and into a room of the facility—

"Wh-what *is* this?"

"I-I have no idea, but...it's really gross..."

The students whispered among themselves. They were appraising their new surroundings with caution and disgust.

The room was lined with tubes, leading to a series of containers housing baby animals.

Air bubbles bubbled out of their mouths in the semitransparent green solution in which they were immersed... At first glance, anyone would grimace at the sickening sight.

That said, it wasn't anything special to me. But...I was a tad surprised.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Ard Meteor? These are—"

"Homunculi, right?" I finished his sentence, which must have annoyed him.

Norman clicked his tongue in displeasure and kicked air. It didn't take long for him to flash me a triumphant look, though.

"Hmph. A child prodigy, huh. You're not like those commoners. You've immediately grasped my research. Which is why you can't stop yourself from trembling at my genius, I take it?"

"...Yes, you're right."

I wasn't sucking up to him or anything. I really thought it deserved my praise.

To think a modern human would be researching the same field as me! I could hardly believe it.

"This is my life's work! If I'm successful, we will stand head-to-head

with the gods! We will be able to create life! Produce unlimited human capital! Live in immortality! Based on historical references, even the Demon Lord gave up on this challenge! It is this very problem that I am attempting to solve!” The elderly dwarf guffawed, stretching his arms out.

His little speech contained one error: I had not, in fact, given up on this experiment.

I *had* completed my research. From top to bottom. Until there was nothing left for me to study.

That was why I’d spiraled and destroyed my findings.

I had studied Homunculi in an effort to revive my lost companions. I had been under the impression that would free me from my loneliness.

But...even though the forms in which they were reborn were the same, their personalities couldn’t have been more different.

Obviously.

After all, their spirits were mismatched. Since the spirit holds all the information that makes up a person, I could only recreate specimens bearing an accidental resemblance to my companions.

With my hopes dashed, I’d abandoned my research to vent my unfocused rage.

...Well, the past was in the past. It was time to move on.

The important takeaway was that Dr. Norman was an undisputed genius.

According to a certain theory, anyone could create Homunculi through the mastery of all magical subjects. It was the natural end point and took me over a hundred years to get there. This man had achieved it in mere decades.

He really was something else—

“Bwa-ha-ha! Speechless? I don’t blame you! Even though your brain is second-rate, I know you can see me for the genius I am! It didn’t take me long to understand chaos theory, which—I might add—took the Great Demon Lord *years* to develop! I’ve honed my magic and—”

“Wait. Chaos theory?” I accidentally said out loud.

...You know, humans had a tendency to try and fix their mistakes. For whatever reason, they even went out of their way to right other people’s wrongs. It was likely attributable to a particular sin: pride.

That must have been what motivated me...

“Why bring up chaos theory?” I asked. “Homunculi are based on the Third Law of Unpredictability—”

It only took me half a beat to realize I'd said something I should have kept to myself.

"Wait. The Third Law of Unpredictability? That's—Huh?"

Norman froze for a moment before looking down and clutching his head.

"No... Hold on. By applying chaos theory to the Law of the Underworld... Wait. Is the Third Law more efficient...? What? In that case..."

Something bad was about to go down. With that premonition, I hastily tried to make my escape.

"Aaaaard Meteeoor! Are you implying the spirit created from chaos theory is *incomplete*?!"

"Um, no, I, uh—"

"You're telling me you know the flaws of chaos theory, huh? That's why you mentioned the Third Law! Tell me I'm wrong!"

"No, um—"

"You're right! Using the Third Law... Wait. Back up. If we apply the Third Law, the limit... Huh? Is it different from my hypothesis...?"

...The elderly doctor was a genius. A rarity. If he had been born in ancient times, we would have heard about him in myths.

That was why he had managed to reach the same conclusion as me.

Basically, he knew his life's work was more hackneyed than he'd thought.

"But that's only *if* you apply the Third Law... Then I'll just use another... No... There's no other theory to apply... In that case... No way. I can't believe it..." He continued to mumble. "Heh. Hee-hee-hee... Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee..."

He looked up at the ceiling with wide eyes and laughed.

"Heh-heh-heh! Heh-heh-heh! Bwa-ha-ha-ha! I see...! I guess this was the only thing my research could accomplish...! Decades of work—for nothing...! Ha! I wasted my youth in pursuit of an answer...! With nothing to gain...! Ha! Ha! Ha...!"

...Oh, Norman. I sympathize. I was in your shoes once.

Tough luck. It sucked to spend all your time on something, only to find out it was worthless. Trash.

"Ah! That's it! I've got an idea! I'll quit being a researcher and go back to being a child! I'll relive my youth! All righty! First up: hunting for bugs...! AH-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!" Norman started flapping his arms.

“Buzz! Buzz!” he hummed, beelining out of the room. “Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Life’s a big bubble!”

“D-Doctor! Please stop!”

“*Buzz! Buzz! Buzz!* ...Hey! Who put this here?! I can’t hunt for bugs with this here! Hi-yah! Take this!”

“Th-that’s our experiment from last year!”

“Stop him! Somebody! Anybody! Stop the doctor!”

...What a hot mess.

“D-Damn, Ard. I knew you were amazing, but this is something else...!”

“I can’t believe he owned *the* Dr. Norman!”

“He’s got both brains and bewitchery...! Ard Meteor...!”

The students turned toward me with respect.

“Heh-heh! I’ve been telling you all along. Ard is the best of the best! There’s no one ahead of him and no one catching up behind him!”

“Talent by Ard, for Ard, and because of Ard!” Ginny chirped after Ireena.

They flashed big smiles, saying the incomprehensible.

“...Do you think these animals are edible with a little heat?” Sylphy asked, drooling.

“I knew it.” The sister figure in my life, Olivia, gripped my shoulder, beaming down at me. “This brings back some good old memories! I remember when that brat would break down scholars’ souls and add them to his growing pile.”

Even though her smile could have belonged to a goddess...I knew something was lurking behind it, and it wasn’t pretty.

“Ha. Ha-ha...”

I offered a dry laugh as Norman rampaged down the hallway.

...Since we were sidetracked by these surprises, we had fallen behind schedule. By this hour, we were slated to visit the next location, but it would have been too reckless to leave Norman in his sorry state.

I cast a spell to restore his psyche, and he instantly relaxed... As soon as he stopped going berserk, though, he glared at me through his tears.

“D-damn you...! Don’t you dare forget: You’re nothing compared to my masterrr!” Norman howled, the skin on his bald head flushing red. He jabbed

his finger at me. “Perfect timing! The revered scholar is paying us a visit! Any minute now! That will mark your end!”

My master. The revered scholar.

...If his master was from this generation, no one could surprise me.

But for some strange reason, I had a bad feeling in my gut. A sixth sense, if you will. An alarm was blaring in my head, warning me to get out of there.

“Unfortunately, we cannot afford to fall further behind schedule. I hate to inconvenience my classmates, so if you’ll excuse me—”

I tried to wrap things up and make my exit as quickly as possible...

“Yoo-hoo! God is gracing this small woorld!”

...but my fate must have been set in stone, because the master in question was before me, barging through the door and making her entrance.

Though she had the form of a delightful girl, I could see a craftiness in her eyes that was beyond her years.

Norman greeted her with a superficial smile. “Oh, master! It’s been so long!”

“Gweh-heh-heh! Bald as ever, Nor... Erm, what’s your name again?”

“Norman! It shouldn’t take you this long to remember it!”

She gripped her stomach in laughter. No clue what she found so funny. Her golden locks swayed, and Norman sycophantically rushed over to her.

“Well, Ard Meteor?! Are you sorry now?! This is my master. The smartest person in history! God among scholars! The Divine Prodigy! The one who surpasses any genius! Her name is—”

“Verda! Al! Hazard! Or call me God for short! ☆” Verda chanted, looking at me upside down in a bridge pose as if she were ready to do a backflip. For whatever reason.

She flashed me a pearly smile.

Verda Al-Hazard.

A genius. A natural disaster. Invader of the divine sphere. The ultimate brainiac... There was no avoiding the girl with many nicknames.

After all, she used to be my subordinate.

Verda Al-Hazard. In ancient times, she was one of the Four Heavenly Kings.

“Oh me, oh my. What do we have over here? ...Well, if it isn’t Livvy! It’s been forever! How are you?”

“...Good,” Olivia answered, looking like she’d aged a few years. Her beast ears were pressed flat to her head in irritation, but Verda smiled at her before gazing at us.

Ireena and Ginny jolted in place. After all, Verda had given them a hard time during our trip to the past.

It was natural for them to be on guard against the same thing happening again.

“And look what the cat dragged in! Sylphy! A little reunion today, huh?”

“Jeez. I can’t believe I’m running into you...,” Sylphy groaned.

It didn’t seem like there was any connection between this world and the ancient one that we’d been sent back to recently. They must have been parallel timelines, meaning this marked our first meeting with Verda. Consequently, there was no reason for her to go out of her way to ruffle our feathers...or so I thought.

“Hmmmm?” Verda zeroed in on my direction, cocking her head to the side.

“...Can I help you?” I asked in a relaxed stance, but I was a ball of nerves on the inside.

This was bad. With Verda, it wouldn’t be strange if she figured out my identity. If that happened, my hard-won villager persona would have been for nothing...!

Verda stared as my hands grew slick with sweat.

Would she notice?

“Quite the genius! What do they call you?” she asked as a smile spread across her young face.

...I haven’t been busted yet. Huh.

I let out a huge sigh of relief inside. “Ard Meteor. To be in the presence of greatness, Lady Verda, has been my greatest fortune.”

I bowed to her...and she didn’t press me any further.

Am I right to assume she didn’t uncover my identity? I glanced at her face, sweating.

On the other hand, Norman ran up to her in tears. “Master! That brat has an ego! With my very ears, I heard him proclaim himself a god among scholars! Show this rude kid who’s the true prodigy!”

“Oh? I can’t just drop that.” Verda stared at me hard and smirked. “Okay! I accept your challenge!”

“No, please wait, Lady Verda. I—”

“But not right now! I need a few days!”

“Wait! I didn’t—”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh! Enjoy the school trip to your heart’s content! The final day will spell your end! Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Like master, like pupil. Neither listened to a damn thing coming out of my mouth.

“Hey! Did you hear that? Ard got in a fight with Lady Verda.”

“He’s really in for it this time.”

“Nuh-uh! Ard’s gonna show her a thing or two!”

“Yeah! No one can stand against him!”

Nobody around me could have cared less about my feelings.

“Heh-heh! This school trip is going to have us wired from adrenaline!” Ireena predicted.

“Taking down a Heavenly King... Whoops, I’m drooling just imagining it,” Ginny muttered.

“Do your best, Ard! I can’t wait to see Verda get wound up! It’s been a while,” Sylphy cheered.

I managed a dry laugh as they gazed at me expectantly.

—At this point in time, none of us knew Verda wouldn’t be the only one who spelled trouble for me, I started to narrate in my head, pretending to foreshadow the events to come.

I prayed in my heart my thoughts wouldn’t become reality.

DAY 1

The Spirit of Ireena

“I want to be a mom!”

Sunlight flooded the main drag of Kingsglaive, and Ireena shouted this sudden declaration with her whole heart.

“...Um, Miss Ireena? What brought that on?”

“Hey! What’s with that face?! I see you cringing!”

“No. Well... You did just say you wanted to be a mom... I mean...”
Ginny glanced at me for backup.

I nodded once. “What happened? I don’t understand why you want to bear a child... Or did someone get you pregnant? Tell me his name and address. I just want to say hi.”

And dismember him. He deserved to die, obviously.

As I let every evil emotion in me run wild, Ireena shook her head.

“No! I was just really moved by our earlier conversation!” Her round eyes sparkled.

“Which one?”

“You mean the one about the Holy Mother?” Ginny asked, incredulous.
Ireena nodded, and we finally understood.



* * *

It had just happened.

After leaving Norman's research institute, we headed to the next spot on our itinerary, The Statue of the Holy Mother. According to our schedule, this was the final group activity of the day.

A giant sculpture of a woman loomed over us.

The dwarven guide stood in front of it. "Let's see. This is a statue of Lady Aisha, who raised the Demon Lord and Lady Olivia."

She continued. "Everyone knows the Demon Lord and the legendary apostle, Lady Olivia, were like siblings after they met in the slums and bonded... Isn't that right, Lady Olivia?"

"...Yeah."

"In the holy texts, the details of their difficult life are evident."

"...Well, yeah."

"Left without parents, they craved affection. One day, Lady Aisha suddenly appeared and showered them with love as if they were her own children!"

"...You're not wrong..."

"However! The Evil Gods found out about the Demon Lord's existence and set a wicked plan into motion, targeting the lives of the Demon Lord and Lady Olivia! Lady Aisha risked everything to save them...and they were set free—in exchange for her life! There, she met her tragic end!"

Tears streamed down the guide's face. When I looked around me, I saw all the students were in the same condition.

"Aah...! How terrible...!" Ireena sobbed.

"I've read the holy texts more times than I can count...but their parting always brings a tear to my eye..."

Ireena and Ginny dabbed their eyes with handkerchiefs.

"...? This is different from the story I know..." Sylphy was the only one who tilted her head in bewilderment.

As for Olivia and me, we could do nothing more than smile in our sarcastic way. Neither of us had any idea why she came to be known as the "Holy Mother."

It was true we had been raised by a dwarf named Aisha, but she only

taught us how to pickpocket and cheat at gambling. *And* she was a huge cheapskate...

“What?! This is all you earned today? Jeez! You’ve got nothing going for you! I should have just saved up on my own!”

She used to complain we were cheating her out of the money that we earned, subjecting us to one of her inebriated rants as she drowned herself in alcohol. Honestly, no one would have objected to calling her a piece of shit. Obviously, I had no respect for her.

Even the story about parting with her was complete garbage.

Aisha didn’t die. In fact, she didn’t even protect us. She had used every means at her disposal to escape.

I had cleaned up our attackers in a heartbeat. Around that time, Olivia and I had raised our rebel army...but that was a story for another day.

That was the last time I saw Aisha. She either died on the roadside or rose to riches. At any rate, I had zero interest about her whereabouts.

...I seriously never thought she would be revered as a Holy Mother. Aisha! Of all people!

“Lady Aisha is a role model to women of the world! Listen up, young ladies! When you have children, aspire to be a mother like Lady Aisha!”

If Aisha was their mom, any kid would rebel. How did history get the facts all wrong?

...Not that I could do anything about it.

“Lady Aisha is the paragon of motherhood!”

“Let’s buy miniature bronze statues as keepsakes!”

“It’ll remind me to be on my best behavior if I put it in my room.”

In this generation, women saw that lowlife as the maternity gold standard. At this point, what good would it do for me to change their minds? Still, Olivia and I were left with mixed emotions...

After listening to a series of fictions, it was time to break off into small groups.

I was disturbed knowing those fake anecdotes would be handed down across generations.

Ireena felt otherwise. “The story of Lady Aisha made me think of my own mom!”

Ireena had a mother. As we all tended to. Not that I'd ever seen her.

"I always admired my mom. I think she's amazing, like Lady Aisha... which is why I want to be like my mom, too!"

I see.

She didn't want to be a mother. She wanted to be *like* one. The tales about the Holy Mother must have ignited those dormant desires.

I could see where she was coming from. It was like when my old creativity came back after reading books on architecture. It made me dream about building another castle.

"I'm not very confident I'll be a good parent to my children... I'm starting to doubt if I can even be a decent one, let alone one like my mom."

"Well, they say parenting isn't easy. ...But Miss Ireena, I don't think you need to be concerned about that now."

"What do you mean?"

"...Don't you know where babies come from?"

"What? S-stop making fun of me! I obviously know where they come from! It's easy...! Y-y-y-you...kiss the love of your life...and then, boom! Baby time! That's what Daddy taught me!"

"Um... Ireena... Even I know that's wrong. Listen closely... Babies are brought by a stork! Heh-heh!" Sylphy chuckled.

"You're way off the mark, too," Ginny said.

"What?!"

As I watched their exchange, I was thinking the same thing Ginny was.

There was no reason for Ireena to worry about parenting. Not now. I mean, she didn't even know how babies were made.

I didn't have a problem keeping it that way. In fact, I wished she would never come by that knowledge.

Even I knew she would eventually bear children, though.

Imagining it made me want to murder the father...! Ireena was my best friend. She was almost like a daughter to me! There was no way I would let anyone touch her that way.

Even though I wanted her to be happy, this was nonnegotiable.

I prayed she would never meet someone who would have children with her...!

I was in the middle of my thoughts.

That was when the space near us fissured.

All faces tensed as they witnessed the phenomenon, and not just the girls. Everyone in the area went pale.

“...I get that the point of these incidents is they come out of the blue, but I sure do wish they would give us a break during our trip,” I muttered, squinting to observe the sliver floating in empty space.

It was slowly opening... Just as I heard a low thud, someone pounced outside.

A person... An elf, based on the pointed ears.

A girl. She seemed...young, wearing our school uniform, even though she couldn't possibly be a classmate.

The elven girl appearing before us looked like...

“M-Miss Ireena...?!”

Exactly. She looked like young Ireena.

“W-who are you...?!” Ireena hesitantly asked her mirror image, who looked back with a somewhat nostalgic expression.

But that only lasted a second.

Her bearing became determined as she straightened her spine. “My name is Elis! A soldier from the future!”

We all gawked at her. Elis pointed at Ireena.

“On this very day, something awful will befall you! I've come from the future to prevent it and protect you! If I fail...”

“...the world will be destroyed!”



A little girl had popped up unannounced and declared she was from the future.

All eyes were on us.

...How should I say this? This was really bad.

“Umm, Elis? Would you mind coming this way?”

“What?! Are you pitying me? I can see it in your eyes. Don't touch me, perv!”

“Now, now. This way... Follow me, guys.”

We booked it out of there, switching locations to a deserted back alley.

I directed my attention to Elis. “Where did you come from? Tell me who you are and what you want.”

“What?! Do you have no brain cells? I just told you everything! I’m Elis! I’m a soldier who has come to protect Mo...um, Ireena! Jeez! Stop making me repeat myself!” She glared, giving me some major attitude.

“...A soldier from the future, huh? That’s not...,” Ginny trailed off, looking as incredulous as everyone else.

A messenger from the future. It was hard to accept. After all, we couldn’t travel to the past on our own.

That said, it wasn’t impossible. After all, we’d just visited an ancient timeline through the powers of a kid-god. There was a chance Elis had been sent here by that same kid.

I asked her if that was the case.

“What? God? Who?”

It seemed my guess was wrong. Then how did she get here?

“That’s a secret! I’ll never tell! And Da...I mean, that dirty old man told me to keep my mouth shut! Something about a ‘temporal paradox.’ Like, what? Give it to me in layman’s terms!” Elis pointed to me in anger for whatever reason.

“...Ard, do you think she has any relation to the demons?”

It was definitely possible. But...I couldn’t figure out what their motive might be.

If all this was connected to the suspect I had in mind...

I cast a detection spell to investigate that possibility, procuring the location of *a certain someone* before casting a summoning spell.

It only took a moment for a magic circle to manifest on the cobbled street.

Smoke billowed around the summoned. The genius. The walking disaster. The magic scholar. One of the former Heavenly Kings.

Verda...

Plus one.

“AAAAAAAAAAH!”

Norman was sprinting inside a machine that looked like a big wheel.

...What the hell?

Rattle-rattle-rattle. The wheel spun.

Its power source sprayed sweat. “RAAAAH! By the way! What will this experiment prove, master?”

“You’re—well, you know... Something?”

“What do you mean by ‘something’? Don’t tell me this is just for fun!”

“Hey! Obviously not. Who do you think I am? You know me, myself, and I. Get with the program... Erm. What was your name?”

“Norman! It’s Norman! Could you please remember already?!”

“Oh, I suck at remembering the names of boring people.”

“But I’ve been your pupil for decades!”

...Seriously... What the hell was going on here?

My cheek twitched. “Um, pardon me,” I called out to Verda. “May I speak with you for a moment?”

“Hmm? Hey there! If it isn’t Ard! What are you doing here...? Oh. Looks like we’re somewhere else. I guess you summoned us here?”

“Yes... Let me cut to the chase. Time is of the essence. Is she yours?” I glared at Verda, probing her for the truth.

Elis had to be Ireena’s clone of sorts. I wouldn’t put it past Verda to use her for some sort of stupid scheme.

...That had been my guess.

“What? Not to my knowledge.” Verda cocked her head.

Ireena and the others eyed her suspiciously.

Meanwhile...I had broken out in a cold sweat.

Verda wasn’t lying. I had cast a number of undetectable spells on her. They told me whether her statements were true or false, and those spells... proved she’d been honest with me.

“Is she actually from the future...?”

“What? Who’s from the future? Where? Oh! Could it be this little girl? Hmm? I can feel her spirit is out of the ordinary. All right. We need to start dissecting—”

“Sorry to bother you. That was all. Please return to wherever you came from.” I cast another spell and sent Verda and Norman on their way.

...Next up.

“Elis. Who are you?”

“As. I. Said. I’m a soldier from the future, birdbrain!”

...She wasn’t lying either.

“C-could it be true, Ard?” Ginny asked.

“Yes. It seems safe to say she’s from the future.”

“That means...” Ireena started piecing things together.

“Something awful is going to happen!” Sylphy yelped.

We exchanged a look before staring at Elis.

...How on earth did this happen?

...There was no way around accepting it was the truth.

“Okay, Elis. And what might that bad thing be?”

“No clue!”

“...Cool. And when will it happen?”

“Beats me!”

“.....”

“Hey! Stop looking at me like that! It’s not my fault! It happened out of the blue, okay? The world started collapsing out of nowhere, and when Da... I mean, when the pervert checked out the situation, he realized the world was gonna fall into ruin because Mo... I mean, an elf named Ireena got caught up in some trouble!”

“You’re saying you don’t know anything else?”

“Uh-huh! And something about ‘disturbances in space-time’ and some ‘observations’...but I tuned it out because I didn’t get it!”

“...I see.” I couldn’t stop a long sigh from leaving my lips. “My instinct is...to lock ourselves away in another dimension. We can wait there until the day ends. How’s that?”

“That won’t work! That’s what Da... I mean, that creep told me. Even if we isolate Mo... erm, Ireena, we can’t alter the incident because of causality and facts or whatever!”

Causality and facts, huh. Unless we rewrote destiny, any effort would be in vain. The incident would be set in motion, even if we resisted. Which meant we couldn’t alter the danger set to befall Ireena.

Then there was only one solution.

“When it all goes down, we will take out the ones who intend to harm Ireena... That’s our only option.”

“Great! Finally, something I can understand!” Sylphy exclaimed.

“We have Ard with us, so I don’t see an issue,” Ginny added.

Everyone except Elis seemed relieved. I knew Ireena had more faith in me than anyone else. There wasn't so much as an ounce of fear on her face. In fact, she let her lips form a gentle smile.

"We'll wait until it happens. That's all we can do. We can't change anything by worrying. There is one thing we can do to pass the time, though," Ireena suggested. "Travel! And you're coming, too, Elis!"

"...Okay!"

For whatever reason, Elis warmed up only to Ireena. With a huge smile, she buried herself in Ireena's chest.

We left the back alley and started on a new journey with Elis in tow.

"Hmm. So this is what Kingsglaive looked like."

"Does it look different in the future?"

"Yeah. Not as many people... This feels new!" Elis's eyes sparkled as she eagerly took in her surroundings, like a typical tourist. "Hey, Mo...Ireena! I'm hungry! Ooh, I wanna eat that!"

"Honey bread? Sure, I'll buy it for you."

"Yay! I love you, Mo...I mean, Ireena!"

Ireena and Elis trotted over to the stall.

I watched this exchange feeling as though...

"*Nom-nom...* This is great!"

"Is there bread in the future?"

"Yeah. I mean, our time periods aren't too far apart."

"Huh. You seem to be enjoying it."

"*Nom-nom...* That's because... *Om-nom...* eating is... *Munch...* my second-favorite thing... *Nom.....* Bleh! My throat!"

"Here. Have some water."

"...Aaah. I thought I was gonna die."

"*Chew.* Didn't your mother teach you that?"

"...Yeah. Sorry, Mo...um, Ireena."

"You don't need to apologize to me. By the way, you just said eating is your second-favorite thing in the world. What's better than eating?"

"Spending time with Mo... I mean, Iree... Um. I think I can say this... Spending time with my mom makes me happier than anything else in the world!"

"...Me, too."

The two smiled at each other.

It made me feel as though...

"They're like mother and child," Ginny said.

...Well, that was true. They were basically doppelgangers and had immediately developed a bond that gave no indication they were strangers.

...On the outside.

Maybe Elis was just her doppelganger. It was still in the realm of possibilities.

"I wanna eat that one next! Please, Mom...? Oh! S-sorry! I meant—"

"Ha-ha-ha. Don't worry about it. When I was your age, I accidentally said that to ladies in the village, too."

"Y-yeah! It was an accident! Sorry! Hee-hee-hee!"

...Nothing was definite. Not yet.

"Ah."

"Whoa! Elis! Are you okay? You need to watch where you're going. Otherwise, you'll trip again!"

"Ah... Waaah! Oww! I scraped my knee!"

"Oh, don't cry! Did you know tears wash away joy?"

"Hngh..."

"Yes, that's it. Stay strong."



“...Am I a good girl?”

“Yes! Pain, pain, go away! All better! Right?”

“Uh-huh! Thanks, Mom!”

...So much for hiding it.

I found it hard to believe. Or maybe I just didn't want to accept it as truth.

This Elis girl had to be... Well, it more than likely wasn't the case.

But there was a small possibility...that she was Ireena's daughter.

There was no way. It couldn't be true. Obviously.

After all, Ireena was the living embodiment of innocence—an angel walking among us. If she received some random guy and bore his c-c-child...!

It was absolutely inconceivable! I would never let that happen! If it did, I would never consent to Ireena becoming anyone's wife!

Never! Ever!

“H-hey! What's wrong, Ard? You look so...ogrely,” Sylphy observed.

“Don't worry about me. Just planning to rip the limbs off an imaginary enemy...*cough*, future husband, *cough*.”

“...Now I'm even more curious. What's up with you?”

Ignoring her dubious stare, I let my imagination run wild for a long time...

Day fell into evening.

Under the darkening sky, Elis was no longer smiling and chatting exclusively with Ireena. Ginny and Sylphy had managed to infiltrate her inner circle as well. It didn't take Elis long to open up to them.

...But even though Elis had warmed up to practically everyone, I was somehow the exception.

“Elis, careful where you're walking. You'll trip again.”

“...I don't need you telling me that.”

See example above.

“Elis, want anything else to eat?”

“Jeez. Didn't you just watch me shovel food in my mouth?”

And another case.

“Eli—”

“Can it. Your breath stinks.”

Case. In. Point.

Where did I go wrong?

“If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all!” Ireena scolded her between these episodes, causing Elis to tear up, but it wasn’t enough to check her attitude.

...Not that I cared if some random kid hated me.

Even though Ard Meteor was an average nobody, I used to be the man known as the Demon Lord. I wasn’t about to spend my time currying the favor of some little girl—or worse, worrying what she thought about me.

...So it should be understood that the following question was posed only out of pure curiosity.

“Elis. Do you dis-*ngh*...dislike me?”

So I might have fumbled midway, but I wasn’t on edge or anything.

In fact, I didn’t even care if she revealed she actually hated my guts. I wasn’t at all torn up that I was the odd one out or that this could be bad for... reasons.

...And the weather was warm, so it was totally normal to sweat a little.

Elis turned and stared at me. “What would you think of a married man who has tons of women waiting on him?”

“What? Um...pardon my language, but he would be a piece of shit.”

“So you agree?”

“Yes. A married person should never have relations with anyone other than his or her spouse.”

“And if his cheating makes her cry?”

“That would be unforgivable.”

“And the man?”

“Should obviously die.”

“Yeah. There’s your answer.”

What was that supposed to mean?

...In the end, our free time came to an end without Elis ever warming up to me.

“I guess we should return to the inn.”

“Nothing has happened yet. I think,” Ireena observed.

“We still have five hours until the end of the day. I assume it will happen then,” Ginny reasoned.

“Let’s bring Elis back to the inn with us!” Sylphy suggested.

As I walked behind Elis on our way there, I let myself get carried away by my thoughts.

Strolling along, my thoughts turned as I looked at Elis from behind.

There hadn't been a single moment where I'd felt something was about to go down. Not even the tiniest of omens. I'd been keeping an eye on the town with a detection spell, but it hadn't picked up on anything or anyone suspicious.

The demons weren't lurking in wait. Even Verda was on her "best" behavior. I really didn't get the vibe that a showdown would happen within the next few hours.

Which made me suspect one thing: Was Elis lying?

There was no doubt she was from the future, but what if she'd lied about something bad happening today? What if that was her way to get closer to Ireena...?

That would make Elis the real enemy.

...I couldn't deny that possibility but knew it was just conjecture at this point.

Staying vigilant was the only reasonable course of action.

Possibly because I was trying to convince myself of this...

...my body immediately reacted to my sixth sense blaring the alarm.

Something was wrong. I cast a defensive spell as soon as felt it.

A magic circle fanned out of the ground, manifesting into a semitransparent barrier around us.

"What's happening?" Ireena seemed baffled.

At the same moment, water bullets exploded against the wall. From the impact, I could tell it wasn't a serious attack. Even without our defenses, we wouldn't have been in real danger.

But something was off about this. The attack wasn't aimed at Ireena but... Elis.

What in the world was going on? Before I could ask, my attention was directed upward.

The orange sky had ruptured. Racing across the void was a young girl in a robe, its hood masking her face.

"...I take it you're an enemy?"

No response. She just looked down at us.

That seemed to touch a nerve with Elis.

“You’re the culprit! Right?!” she started to yell. “I dunno what you’re planning, but I won’t just let you do whatever you want! I’ll take you down and save the future!”

The girl in the sky trembled...as if she were the embodiment of rage itself.

“Rude. This is all your fault, you know.”

When I looked closer, I could see her mouth under her hood twitching.

“Come again? Speak up!” screamed Elis.

That had apparently pushed the girl to her limits. She clicked her tongue in irritation.

“Yeah? Well! Can you hear me now? My generation is in shambles! Because of you! There’s been a shift in the space-time continuum, creating a paradox! Because you meddled with time!”

“What are you talking about?!”

“Oh, come on! Did you have no brain cells when you were *younger*? Fine! I’ll explain it in a way even you can understand!” The young girl grabbed her hood with her hand and yanked it down.

One look at her face and...

“I’m Iris! A soldier from the future to make you return to your own time! It’s time to go back to the future, Mo... I mean, Elis!”

Iris was the spitting image of Elis and Ireena.



“What do you mean...you came from the future...?!”

Elis was shell-shocked by this unexpected twist. The rest of us were more or less shaken.

“H-hey, Elis. Is she your friend?”

“I... I have no idea who she is...” Elis started to perspire.

Iris glared daggers at her. “Duh! I’m from further in the future than you!”

“What?” This only seemed to confuse her.

Meanwhile, I was beginning to get a grip on the whole picture.

“Iris, right? Can I ask you a few questions?”

“...What?”

“About the paradox created by Elis. I think that’s what you said.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Meaning...this incident occurred because Elis traveled across time. Is that right?”

“Hey! What are you trying to say?!” Elis went bug-eyed.

Iris nodded. “Exactly. I assume Mo... I mean, Elis told you there would be an incident concerning Gran... I mean, Ireena. And that it would bring the world to extinction.”

Spot on. I nodded.

Good grief.

Iris shrugged, hovering above us. “There will be an incident, but I don’t know the details. There is one thing for certain: This is all happening because Mo...*cough*, Elis traveled to the past.”

“Wh-what?! That’s impossible!” Elis screeched in a panic.

I ignored her, focusing my attention on Iris. “If that’s true...are you implying that nothing will happen if Miss Elis returns to the future?”

“It’s possible. At the very least, it’ll cancel out the paradox in my own generation.”

“Then—” I started to say, but Elis interrupted.

“Are you telling me to go back to the future?!” she barked at Iris. “Peabrain! There’s no way! I mean, you could be the enemy!”

Elis had a point, but this bickering would never settle anything.

“*Sigh*. I never knew you were so stubborn when you were young,” Iris said. “I guess there’s no way around wrestling you back to your own time.”

“I’d like to see you try...!”

I guessed this was the only natural conclusion. They became militant, preparing to fight it out right there.

Ireena planted herself between them. “W-wait! If you make a mess here —”

In the middle of her sentence...*rumble-rumble-rumble-rumble*...the ground started groaning and shaking violently.

“I-is this an earthquake...?!”

“I-I’ve got a bad feeling about this!”

Sylphy was right on the money.

When the vibrations settled down, the cobbled road nearby began to crumble...and the earth split open.

In a mass panic, people started scrambling away. I cast a spell, saving

those who were late in escaping before they could plunge into the chasm.

As this was happening, a golden ray blasted out of the crater, stretching toward the heavens like a pillar.

It started to dim...revealing a certain someone.

“Erm, hello! I’m Uriel. I’ve come to save the original universe from annihilation.”

This young woman was another duplicate of Iris, who had the same features as Elis, who looked exactly like Ireena.



“Umm...Uriel, right? I’m sorry, but would you mind repeating that?”

“Sure thing. Erm, hello! I’m Uriel. I’ve come to save the original universe from annihilation,” she repeated in a downbeat tone.

This woman had the appearance of Iris, Elis, and Ireena in a few years.

“Did you come from a time after Iris?”

“Nope. Lady Iris is from Universe 187,582. I’m from 98,545.”

“Uh, so in other words...you’re from a parallel world?” Ireena asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“This is getting bigger than I thought...”

“Hey, guys? I’m not following...”

I sympathized with Ginny and Sylphy, but somebody had to get the ball rolling.

I must have looked like I was wasting away. “And...what’s your goal?”

“Oh, right. I need to stop Elis and Iris from fighting. By engaging in battle, Universes 84,858,817,422 to 108,548,758,445 will be annihilated. If you continue, all original universes will continue to die out...until every reality is destroyed. Including this one, Universe 487.”

I could feel my head pounding, but I couldn’t afford a headache now.

“So basically, nothing will happen if Iris and Elis don’t fight, and they return to their own worlds and their own time periods,” I guessed. “And...that will save these ‘original universes,’ or whatever, from annihilation.”

“Exactly.”

If I was being honest, this talk about infinite universes was a situation all on its own. Welp. No use worrying about that now. There was a greater problem that needed my immediate attention.

“W-who are you?! I swear you popped out of nowhere!” Elis exclaimed.

“You’re suspect. I don’t trust you,” Iris added.

This was an issue.

“Hm... This could be a problem. Yggdrasil was right. I can’t stop the two without trust, so I’ll have to resort to force. I was hoping we could end things without a scuffle, but...well, I suppose this is out of my control.”

In that moment, Uriel seemed thirsty for blood. Shining blades flashed behind her.

“This is going to sting, but please try to endure it,” she suggested, facing Elis and Iris and raining down the blades.

“Hah! Bring it on!

“This doesn’t change my goal...!”

A three-way melee broke out.

Uriel looked just like Iris, who bore a resemblance to Elis, who was basically Irenea’s clone. Their battle ravaged the ancient capital of Kingsglaive.

“I’m guessing this is Elis’s ‘dangerous incident,’” I murmured.

I cast a detection spell to gather the status of the town and a defensive spell over any signs of life. This would prevent any casualties. As seconds passed, though, the surrounding buildings started to crumble.

We were standing in the very center of the main road, observing the mayhem, but...our view started opening up as more edifices were blasted into smithereens. We eventually ended up with a panoramic view of the vanishing city, even though we were on flat ground.

“A-Ard! We have to stop them! O-or else the town will...!” Ginny pressed.

“You’re right...” I crossed my arms, looking conflicted.

I could have stopped them in about two seconds.

But...I actively chose not to intervene.

Why?

Because watching this capital burn felt so good.

...Obviously, Kingsglaive wasn’t built overnight. It had taken a great deal of work, and I had grown attached to it.

But...this place was the source of my trauma.

And it was all Lydia's fault!

See example below.

"Ack! Watch out for the stage where the Demon Lord was once a jester!"

They were referring to the tiered stage in the middle of the road, destroyed just a moment ago. As the story went, the Demon Lord had dressed as a jester for the people's amusement...but they couldn't have been more wrong.

It hadn't been of my own volition! I was forced into the role after losing a game...!

There had been a time when Lydia would frequently pop in to pick fights with me. Back then, I hadn't been used to her ways, so I was always the loser... That was where this stage came into the picture.

"I win! As your punishment, I order you to dress up as a clown and put on a show."

"...Don't be ridiculous. A ruler would never."

"Bok-bok! Chicken! I guess you're a ruler with no talent in the arts! My bad! I never would have guessed you didn't have a funny bone in you, since you walk around with that huge ego and—"

"Who are you calling a chicken?! I can do anything!"

She'd totally set me up. I had a stage constructed in the most crowded part of town and put on the performance of a lifetime.

Lydia had been the only one in the audience who'd laughed. The general public had cringed at their king's desperate show.

My heart had been crushed.

At least now one of the reminders of that traumatic event had been destroyed... To be honest, I was feeling pretty good.

"Ack! Look out for the bridge where the Demon Lord streaked!"

Amazing! That thing could split in two.

"Ack! Not the legendary restaurant where he dined and dashed!"

And now it was out of business. Hooray!

I was shocked it hadn't gone under for thousands of years. Now that was

impressive.

“Ack! Spare the hole he wanted to crawl in!”

Not a trace left! Heh-heh. This was turning out to be the best day of my life!

“Ack! Watch out for the statue commemorating one of his explosions!”

And there it went, into teeny-tiny smithereens. I mean, what was there to commemorate? An explosion was nothing to celebrate.

“Ack! Not the memorial hall exhibiting his somersaults!”

Good riddance.

“Ack! Save the statue of the Demon Lord yelping in pain after his kneecap was kicked in by the Champion!”

Only Lydia’s face was smashed to pieces. Served her right.

Heh-heh-heh-heh. I was ready to tell the trio to kick it up a notch—

“Ack! Watch out for his castle!”

.....Hold up.

“Ack! All their attacks are concentrated on it!”

Wait!

“Ack! One of the towers has been blown into oblivion!”

Wh-wh-wh-what...?

What the hell do you guys think you’re doing?!

My castle! Castle Millennion! Smashed beyond recognition!

How could they?!

After all the love and labor that had gone into creating it!

After all the times Lydia had split it in half...and Sylphy had blown it up...which was so...many...times...!

I’d repaired and remodeled the castle until it was perfect!

How could they turn it into a junkyard?!

Some crimes could never be forgiven! They needed to be subjected to the punishment of a serious ass-whooping!

My nerves had set my legs into motion...but something happened before I could take a single step.

“What the heck are you donkeys doing?!”

That almost ruptured my eardrum. It could be heard across Kingsglave.

In an instant, Elis, Iris, and Uriel trembled in fear and stood still.

Ireena sprinted toward them. “Elis, lower your sword! Iris, put away your magic! And Uriel! You come down right now!”

No one dared defy Ireena, whose face flushed red in anger.

The three of them meekly obeyed.

“On your knees!” Ireena barked.

“““Y-Yes, ma’am!””””

“I’m not saying you can’t fight, okay? But you need to learn to restrain yourselves.”

“B-but they—,” Elis started.

“And don’t talk back!”

“I’m sorry!”

“And you, Uriel! You know it’s dangerous to throw knives! What if someone got hurt?”

“E-erm, actually, this is hardly considered dangerous in my world...”

“My house! My rules!”

“R-right on...”

“Jeez! Stop being a downright public nuisance!”

“...Says the one shouting,” Iris pointed out.

“*Excuse you?!* ”

“Eeek! I-I’m sorry!”

“And no nitpicking!”

The young woman and two little girls shrank back.

“You’ll each be spanked one hundred times! Elis, you’re first!”

“What?! N-no way!”

“Don’t talk back! I swear this girl will be the end of me...!”

Ireena looked downright pissed as she doled out their spankings.

She really had the makings of an actual mother.



After a round of parental punishment, peace returned to the town.

We made a speedy decision for Elis, Iris, and Uriel to return to their respective eras.

Elis was hesitant at first, but...

“Are you...disobeying?” Ireena threatened.

“Eek! But! Even if I return, there’s no guarantee that everything will be fine—”

“We’ve got a guarantee.”

“What? Wh-where?”

“My intuition! There’s nothing to top it!”

“Ummmm...”

“What’s with that look? Are you *asking* for another spanking?”

“O-of course not!”

Ireena was invincible. With no further objections, the three girls returned to their respective times and worlds.

Iris and Uriel practically dived into the fissure, trying to escape Ireena as fast as humanly possible. On the other hand, Elis floated above hers.

“...It was a short run, but I had a ton of fun.”

“Me, too. Hang out with me whenever you’re free. You’re always welcome here,” Ireena assured her with a grin.

Elis returned a smile, though she didn’t seem too convinced, scratching her cheek sheepishly.

“Umm... I hate to tell you this, but I can’t do that. Traveling across time requires so much magic, I can only do it once in a lifetime.”

“What? Does that mean...we’ll never see each other again...?” Ireena was crestfallen.

Elis giggled for some reason. “That’s not true. We’ll definitely meet again.”

She trotted up to Ireena, giving her a big hug...and pecked her on the cheek.

“We’ll see each other again someday, Mom.”

Elis beamed, joy bursting like flowers, before returning to her own time.

“I knew it. She’s Miss Ireena’s daughter.”

“What? Excuse me? Elis? M-my child?”

“Ooh. That actually makes sense. I mean, they’re basically twins!” Sylphy agreed.

Ginny and Sylphy had reached the same conclusion. Ireena’s eyes darted in confusion.

Well, I guess that confirmed it. There was a future waiting for me where some random man sweeps Ireena off her feet...!

No! I haven’t given up just yet. The future was for me to decide.

I would never back down! I was ready to crush my horrible destiny in my grasp!

I raised my fist with new hope, thrusting it into the heavens.

“Waaah! This is horrible! Everything is going to shit!” I heard someone shout.

It was Verda. She raced toward us with heavy footsteps, golden hair bouncing.

“Phew... I’m beat. Hm? Where’s the little time traveler?”

“She just returned to her time.”

“What?! That’s too bad. I would have loved to dissect her. Even just the tip,” Verda moaned.

I shrugged my shoulders. “Can I help you? I believe you were shouting about something.”

“Oh, right! I think I told you a few hours ago that I didn’t orchestrate this whole thing.”

“Yes, and it seems you actually had nothing to do with—”

“My bad! That was a lie!”

“...Come again?” I felt a bead of cold sweat trail down my cheek. “Um, what are you saying?”

“Well, I just found out about it! Hmm... Where to start? Maybe with the birth of this wonderful scholar prodigy?”

“...I would appreciate it if you focused on the most important points.”

“Come on... Fine. I’ll start...with what happened three hundred years ago. I was creating magical tools to interfere with parallel worlds, but I gotta say, it was pretty tricky. Even my divine intellect was having a tough time.”

“...And you abandoned your experiment?”

“No way! A good scholar never knows when to give up! I trudged forward with my studies. I finally managed to figure out a prototype...but

something went wrong, and the thing wouldn't work."

"I see. You were ready to begin the experiment, but it wouldn't cooperate."

"Uh-huh. Even though I'm as mild as they come, I totally blew my fuse! I started screaming at it, you know: 'Why can't you listen to what I'm saying?' 'Why do you make eyes at other people?'"

"...Sure."

"But it wouldn't budge! So I reached the end of my rope. I was like, 'Fine! See if I care! I never want to see you again!' I kicked it to pieces and then found a new lover...*cough*, experiment to help me forget all about it..."

"This is about an experiment...right? Because you're making it sound like a love story."

"It's been three hundred years. I've moved on. But one look at Elis...and all my feelings came rushing back. I thought I was over it! But...it's been eating away at me."

"You are talking about some device...right? Because it's starting to sound a lot like an ex."

"I went to go see it for the first time in a long while...and I found out it had turned on! While we were taking a break for all those years, it had started to operate! I had to ask if it was trying to toy with my feelings, but I got no response."

"I mean, it's an inanimate object. Just a magical tool."

"But it was too late for us to get back together! Because I had something new in my life! Still, it refused to talk to me... I was starting to feel like I was crazy, you know, but—"

"I'm sorry. Could you explain this better? I can't tell if this is about your love life or your experiment."

"*Sigh*. Fine! I'll wrap things up." Verda paused for a moment. "I made a magical device to meddle with parallel worlds...three hundred years ago. It works now! The little time traveler must have come around then."

"...Did her arrival impact the machine?"

"Yep. Now I have a question for you: Has anyone else dropped in?"

"Two people. Is something the matter?" I asked.

"...Oopsie." There was a bead of sweat forming on her cheek.

In that moment, I started to see the entire picture.

We thought we had solved everything by returning Elis to her own time.

But we were horribly wrong.

We weren't even close to resolving the issue... In fact, it hadn't even begun.

"Uh-oh. Seems like it's rampaging."

"...Explain yourself. Now."

"Well, in layman's terms, the machine can bring entities from the other side to their counterparts in this world."

"Are you saying it rewrites causality and fact? Does it forge a connection between entities in both worlds? And the target just happened to be Ireena this time? Is that why her close relatives came here?"

"Well, you're not wrong, but listen closely. This is important... I designed the device to summon one entity at a time. Except there were three people this time. Which means the machine is defective. If this keeps up—"

"You can't mean..."

I immediately imagined the worst possible future.

A second later, the darkening sky started to split in half, opening to the void...

"I am God Ireena. I have come to purify this world."

Before us was something giant, divine, and resembling Ireena.

And that wasn't the end of it. Something else ripped through space.

"I am Memory Ireena. I've come to document this world's affairs."

That wasn't the end of it, either. Something else ripped through space.

"Aaaaaah! It is I! Royalty of the Underworld! Blood Ireena! Blergh!"

That still wasn't the end. Something else ripped through space.

"Raaaah! I'm Mountain Ireena! Oh yeah!"

And so on...[INTENTIONALLY OMITTED]

"'Tis I—Mysterious Ireena!"

"'Ello there! I'm Thousand Ireena!

"Hiya! Metamorphose Ireena at your service!"

“Yoo-hoo! It’s me! Sparkling Ireena!”

“Greetings! Metallic Ireena!”

[INTENTIONALLY OMITTED]

“I’m Ultimate Ireena!”

“I’m known to all as Gigantic Ireena!”

“What’s up, guys? It’s your girl, Cosmetic Ireena!”

They just kept jumping out of their parallel dimensions.

If our first day on the trip was this chaotic, how would we handle the next few...?

I could feel myself burning out as I stared at this living nightmare.



DAY 2

Rush Hour! Women Incoming!

Even with all that went down, our first day of the school trip had come to an end.

The students entered the inn and found their assigned three-person rooms before gathering for dinner and taking their baths.

It was time for bed.

“Good night, Miss Ireena and Miss Sylphy.”

“Night.”

“I’m pooped!”

The lamp light went out, shrouding the room in darkness. Ireena and Sylphy tucked themselves in. Ginny pulled the blankets over her head.

“Zzz...! Zzz...! Whoa! Lydie! That’s not the Demon Lord’s head! That’s a pineapple!” Sylphy sleep-shouted between snores after immediately knocking out.

Ginny could already tell this would be a sleepless night.

“...Are you awake, Miss Ireena?”

“...I don’t think anyone can sleep through this.”

“True. Should we try reducing the noise?”

About 15 minutes later...

“GAH...AAAH! BAH! BLERGH!”

“““Yeah...no.”””

Nothing had worked: gagging her, blocking her nostrils, scribbling on her face... Everything had made the problem worse.

“*Sigh.* I guess we just have to deal,” Ginny lamented.

“...Let’s stay up until we can fall asleep.”

They nodded and began to make small talk. Even though it seemed they were at odds all the time, they had no reason to get heated without Ard.

...Just as long as he wasn’t involved...

After two hours, there was nothing more for them to talk about...until

Ginny finally broached the forbidden subject.

“Hey, Miss Ireena. Do you have a crush on anyone?”

“It wouldn’t feel like a sleepover without that question.” Ireena chuckled sarcastically, falling into silence.

She didn’t need to say anything. Ginny made no attempt to press her.

They started chatting about their romantic experiences that didn’t involve the guy in question—everything from their first loves to their ideal partners.

Eventually, though, it all circled back to him.

“I just can’t find it in myself to cosign your dream. Just the thought of a harem makes me sick.”

“I doubt we’ll ever see eye to eye on the matter.”

“...I just don’t get it. How can you be okay with other girls hanging around your crush?”

“I don’t think one person is enough for him.”

Ginny had thought she was certain about this...but something in her heart made her unsure.

“Gosh. If you’re actually okay with that, then I don’t have anything else to tell you. Except for one thing: This is the one time I won’t let things go your way.”

“Right back atcha,” Ginny replied.

The conversation started to die out, leaving them heavy with drowsiness.

Even with Sylphy causing a racket, they might have been able to sleep now.

“Let us save this for another time.”

“Night.”

Ireena and Ginny closed their eyes, and the commotion started fading further away...until Ginny let her consciousness slip away completely.



When she came to her senses, Ginny was standing in a forest. There was a warmth that made her feel as if she’d landed in a fairy tale.

The place was far from normal.

The sun in the sky had a chiseled face and a smile that was way too bright.

The bugs in the forest chirped in a peculiar way.

Dum. Du-du-dum-dum. ♪ Dum. Du-du-du-du-du-du. ♪
Dum. Du-du-dum-dum. ♪ Du-du-du-du-du. Dum. ♪

This blaring chorus rang through the air as small animals danced madly on their hind legs.

“...This is a new kind of nightmare.”

Ginny frowned. She just wanted to wake up. Despite trying every means available to her, though, she couldn’t manage to rouse herself.

“Oh, jeez. What am I supposed to do now?”

With the chorus of bugs and dancing animals in the background, Ginny crossed her arms.

“*Hyuck-hyuck-hyuck*. Hello, little lady. Would you like an appl—”

“I’m good.”

“Let me finish, buzzkill!” someone barked back, kicking the ground in rage.

...Surprisingly, it wasn’t an old woman in a black cloak.

“Why are *you* in my dream, Lady Verda?”

Verda. One of the former Heavenly Kings and legendary troublemaker.

“Heh-heh. Even though this seems like a dream, you aren’t dreaming, Ginny. I’ve entered your subconscious for a certain plot... Hey! Listen to me! Stop climbing that tree!”

“I thought I might wake up if I jumped.”

“Jeez! I can’t believe you’d even try! I mean, you barely know where we are! You should fear the unknown! Holy shit! Even I’m surprised. Modern humans are out of their damn minds!”

“Says you... Anyway, how can I help you?”

“Oh, right. I veered off on a tangent... Let’s get down to business.” Verda broke into the creepy smile that was constantly gracing her childish face.

She lifted her right hand toward the sky, her palm facing up. It immediately began to shine.

“Whoopsie. Wrong one.”

Ginny watched as a sacred sword or something materialized and Verda chucked it to the side.

Her palm began glowing again...and a few moments later, a tiny bottle

appeared in her hand. It was filled to the brim with a clear liquid.

“What’s that?”

“Something you’re dying to have. A love potion.”

Ginny raised a brow. “A love potion? ...Don’t need it.”

“Oh, really? I can practically see your heart on your sleeve.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Don’t you want to be everything to Ard?”

Ginny went silent. If Verda had asked her earlier, she would have immediately retorted it was impossible! Now, though, something was stopping her.

What was it?

Verda seemed to be listening to Ginny’s internal monologue, flashing a wide smile and answering for her.

“Because you finally found some confidence, Ginny. You used to be a negative Nancy before you met him. Even after you became acquainted, things didn’t immediately change. You had a weird way of approaching things. By that, I mean your harem.”

Ginny tried to argue, but realized she had nothing to say. After all, she couldn’t refute Verda’s assessment.

“It was all because you were dunking on yourself. You never thought you’d be enough for him. You didn’t let yourself think you could be the only object of his affection. There was no way. You used to think backward, but now...things have changed.” Verda pointed at Ginny. “You’ve grown in body *and* soul. More than anyone else. More than Ireena, your rival. That’s why you’ve stopped hating yourself...and you’ve been freed from those strange thoughts.”

Verda approached slowly. “You’re not who you used to be,” she whispered. “That’s why... You have the right to make him yours and become his everything.”

What a sweet temptation. It certainly didn’t make her feel bad about herself.

But...she just couldn’t bring herself to admit this.

“I don’t intend...to make him mine. He should be a lover to...everyone. And I think...I’m most attracted to him...when he’s surrounded by other girls.”

It sounded like Ginny was just stringing random words together. None of

it seemed to come from her heart. Verda gave voice to the shadows of doubt that she'd clearly recognized.

The corners of Verda's mouth curled up, as if she could read Ginny's mind. The scholar held out the small bottle in her hand.

"Well, it's up to you. No harm in taking it. Right?"

Do I take it or not? Ginny hadn't made up her mind, but her body started to answer honestly for her.

Before she could stop herself, her left hand went for the bottle as if drawn to a lure...and accepted the love potion.

"Nice choice." Verda smirked like a witch from a fairy tale. "Okay! Now that that's out of the way, allow me to lay out the rules!"

"What rules?"

"My love potion isn't your run-of-the-mill snooze fest. It won't work just by chugging it! If you want the other person to love you back, you gotta follow the rules! I'll only say them once, so listen carefully!"

"Um, oh, okay."

Verda began rattling off the steps.

PREREQUISITE ACTIVITIES

Number 1: You must drink half of it yourself!

Number 2: You must complete any of the three Basic Actions within 12 hours!

Number 3: You will be given one point per completed Basic Action listed as follows.

Once you have three points, the potion will work its magic! Please note the exception related to Action Number 3! Details as follows.

BASIC ACTIONS

Number 1: Make your target say "love" in any way! It doesn't have to be in the romantic sense.

Number 2: Kiss your target!

Number 3: Make the target drink the potion directly! If successful, you'll earn all three points in one go!

"With that out of the way, we'll commence a fair fight. Follow the code of

sportsmanship and engage in a battle for love! See you around!”

As soon as she started to wave, Ginny began feeling woozy. Verda knew it wouldn’t even take three more seconds before she woke up.

“Oh! Shoot!” Verda swore. “I forgot to tell you! There are hidden rules to the Basic Actions—”

But Ginny’s consciousness cut off midsentence.



“N-ngh...,” groaned Ginny, furrowing her brow.

When she slowly blinked her eyes open, she realized she was no longer in the strange forest, but back in her assigned room at the inn.

“Was that...a nightmare...? It had to be a dream... I find it hard to believe the real Lady Verda would understand my true feelings...,” she murmured to herself.

Just then, she noticed a strange sensation in her hand. Ginny slowly withdrew it from under the covers.

“This is...”

Her fingers gripped the small bottle Verda had given her in the dream. The clear liquid swished in the darkness.

“I...,” whispered Ginny, her voice melting into the night.

Before she realized it, she found herself recalling their conversation.



* * *

*You've been freed from those strange thoughts...
Don't you want to be everything to Ard?*

...Verda had hit the nail on the head.

Ever since she'd met Ard, Ginny had grown in mind and body after experiencing a series of unbelievable events.

Gone was that weak, pessimistic girl.

Deep in her heart, she had let herself acknowledge...that she wanted him to notice her.

I want him to look only at me.

I don't care if we're surrounded by the riffraff. As long as I always come out on top.

"...All I need for my wish to be granted is this potion," Ginny said, gulping as she stared at the tiny bottle. "...But I won't use it."

There was true grit in her voice.

If she used the love potion, it would be all too easy to steal his heart. Ginny wasn't weak enough to employ this spineless tactic, though. Her pride wouldn't allow it. She would use her own charm to capture his heart. It was part of her identity as a succubus, passed down for generations.

"Apologies, Lady Verda, but I need to decline your offer."

Ginny got up to toss the potion away.

"N-ngh...", moaned Ireena in the bed next to her as she slowly opened her eyes.

For a few moments, Ireena shifted under the covers before sitting upright. She must have needed to use the bathroom or something.

Ginny didn't think anything of it...until...

"Hm? What's that bottle?"

"A-ah, this is—" Ginny scrambled to come up with an excuse.

Before she could think of something, Ginny's eyes caught a glimmer in the dark coming from Ireena's hand.

It was...a small bottle filled with the love potion.

"M-Miss Ireena...! I-is that bottle...?!"

"...I guess I wasn't the only one who dreamed about Lady Verda."

For a few moments, all they could do was breathe and take in the situation before they sat down on their beds across from each other. Befuddled, they clutched their little vials.

Silence hovered over them...until Ireena nervously piped up.

"What should we do?"

After a little sigh, Ginny decided to share her thoughts. "I'm getting rid of mine."

"Yeah?"

"Obviously. What satisfaction would I get out of being loved this way?"

"I hear you."

"I want him to choose me on his own. Don't you agree?"

"I'm totally with you."

"Only a coward would use this potion to steal his heart."

"Exactly. I don't have anything else to say."

"Miss Ireena. Let's throw these out together."

"No thanks."

.....

.....

...What did she just say?

"U-um, I must have misheard you."

"Which part?"

"Ah, well... I thought I heard you say, 'No thanks.'"

"Uh-huh. What about it?"

"What?"

"What?"

"...Let's clear this up. I don't intend to use the love potion. It's the coward's way, after all. And you agree...right?"

"Right."

"Then...you know what we need to do about these bottles. Are we going to use them? Let's say it together... No."

"Says you, and you have every right to choose that path. But don't force your decision on me."

"...That's not what I'm trying to do. Didn't you just agree with me? Don't you think it's pathetic to use this potion?"

"Yeah."

"And what would be the logical thing to do?"

“Throw it away, I guess.”

“You *do* understand! Okay. Let’s get rid of them!”

“Nah.”

“Why not?!”

“Why wouldn’t I use it? With this, Ard will only have eyes for me. That would be a huge weight off my shoulders. Nothing you dangle in front of him will tempt him anymore, and I won’t have to be annoyed by you. It’s perfect.”

“...Please wait just a second.”

Ginny’s head was starting to pound. She pressed her temples.

“Don’t you have any pride? Won’t that break your heart? You just said you knew it would be pathetic. Then why would you choose to use it?”

“Well, yeah, it would hurt my pride. And my heart. I wouldn’t want to use it if I had another choice. But...”

“But?” Ginny repeated.

Ireena sighed, forming a belligerent smile. “If this crushes your plans, my pride can go to the dogs.”

Ginny’s cheek twitched involuntarily as she processed this challenge.

...Right. This had always been the case.

Such was the nature of their relationship.

They weren’t necessarily on bad terms, but...they refused to compromise once their minds were set on something. Until this issue with Ard was resolved, nothing would change.

“Hey, Ginny. I don’t know how you feel about me, but I think...”

“Oh-ho. Don’t bother. I feel the same way.”

They snarled at each other, sharing the same sentiment.

She’s my enemy!

“Miss Ireena. I’ve always hated you. After all, you’ve always been his... favorite. You’re lounging in the place that I want to be.”

“Yeah? Well, I hate you, too. You keep wedging yourself in between me and Ard. You’re the most annoying person in the world.”

Heh-heh-heh.

Hee-hee-hee.

Though chuckles poured out of their lips, their eyes shot death glares at each other.

“I’ll take you down, Miss Ireena.”

“I’m gonna crush you, Ginny.”

The curtains rose, commencing a bloody battle between two maidens in love with the same man.



Early that morning, the students started waking up and filling the inn with chatter.

Ginny and Ireena each held their love potion to their lips, downing exactly half of it.

READY? START!

A dialogue box popped up above their heads.

“I hope you won’t regret the next twelve hours.”

“Oh, please. I’d bet my life I’ll beat you!”

Victory will be mine. Both girls wore the stern look of a general heading to war.

After that, they shook Sylphy awake and headed for the cafeteria side by side. The other students had already made their way to the dining hall...

“Good morning, Ard!”

Ireena dashed forward as soon as she caught sight of him, like a happy puppy welcoming her master.

“Good morning, Ireena. You’re in a good mood as always.”

“Uh-huh! Because I’m with you!” Ireena grabbed his arm with a smile as

bright as the sun...and pressed up against him.

His arm was squished and squashed between her breasts...as if she was trying to show off to Ginny.

This is normally where I'd grab his other arm and turn up my charm...but not now.

Miss Ireena. You've made a poor choice.

Ginny intentionally kept her distance from Ard as they ordered breakfast and brought full trays back to their table. Even as they went to put them down, Ireena remained glued to him.

"Hey, Ard, can I sit next to you?"

"Of course."

"Yay! Thanks!" Ireena planted her tray, inching close enough to rub shoulders with him.

...Then she looked at Ginny and snorted.

She's clingier than usual. She's trying to provoke me.

How pathetic. The race has just started, and she's already made major miscalculations.

Ginny sat across from Ard with Sylphy.

"...Is something wrong, Ginny?"

"What?"

"Um, nothing. It's just that you usually..."

Ard must have picked up on the fact that she wasn't sitting next to him.

She answered him with a smile... "Oh. I just want to sit *here* today. It gives me the perfect view."

...because she could respond appropriately to any situation.

If she were on the offensive, she would glue herself to his side, too, because it would give her an advantage to catch him saying "love," kissing him, or making him drink the potion.

However...offense wasn't the only part of the game. Defense was just as important in this equation.

In that case, Ginny was in a prime position. By maintaining a moderate distance, she could keep an eye on her opponent. Ginny could react instantly if Ireena exhibited any suspicious behavior, and she could switch to the offensive if the opportunity presented itself.

The biggest downside was that she couldn't go in for a kiss...but this was part of her elaborate scheme.

I'll start with Basic Action Number 1...and focus on getting him to say "love."

My opponent will let her guard down if it's obvious I can't kiss him. That's when I'll go for a surprise attack and plant one on him! Even though this distance doesn't make things easy, I have my ingenuity.

The key is balancing offense and defense.



In that regard, Ireena was in the worst possible position.

Even though Ireena was in the perfect spot for offensive action, Ginny had placed her in check. Her advantage meant nothing if she couldn't score points.

You'll pay for provoking me, Miss Ireena. Ginny smirked.

Something about her attitude must have touched a nerve...because Ireena immediately made her move.

"Hey! Ard! Look!"

"At what?" Ard asked, turning away.

Ireena immediately yanked the bottle from her cleavage, and in one fluid motion, she popped off the lid, ready to dump it on his plate.

Basic Action Number 3... She was going in for the kill.

But Ginny refused to let that happen.

"Oh! A fly—" With a small smile, Ginny grabbed a knife...and threw it at Ireena's fingers without hesitation.

"!!" Ireena managed to dodge it on instinct, but she didn't succeed in drugging him.

The knife whizzed past the students across from them, lodging into the wall with a *zing*. They went pale, but Ginny couldn't care less.

"...? Um, Ireena? What did you want me to see? ...Hello? Earth to Ireena. Are you listening?" Ard asked.

Ignoring him, Ireena glared at Ginny.

"Hee-hee-hee. Maybe it was a figment of your imagination," Ginny suggested. "I don't think you got a wink of sleep because Miss Sylphy was snoring all night."

"Huh?! Wa-was it that bad?" Sylphy whimpered.

The vibe was still mild, but something was brewing between Ireena and Ginny—something violent and murderous.

...A cycle unfolded of Ireena trying to drug Ard and Ginny wedging herself between them. It took about eight attempts before Ireena seemed to realize this endeavor was fruitless and switched tactics.

"Hey, Ard! Wasn't yesterday just the worst?"

"Yes. The world was nearly destroyed, after all..."

“But you saved all of us! You were so cool. I got goosebumps when you delivered your finishing line to Healing Ireena. Can you say it again?”

“Hm? ...What did I say?”

“Come on! Don’t you remember? You looked at her and said you were going to yank her by her...”

“Hips?”

“Nope! Here’s a hint: It starts with the letter ‘L.’”

“An ‘L’? Oh. I said—”

“—Lower back,’ right?” Ginny interrupted.

Ireena slammed her head on the table.

“I-Ireena?”

“...It’s nothing.”

Ginny remained perfectly composed even as Ireena glared at her. After all, she’d just given the wrong answer. The correct response was “love handles.”

Ireena’s switched to Action Number 1...but that won’t do her any good, because I’m ready to keep fending her off.

It was a war of wits.

“Hey, Ard! I know it’s early to start thinking about winter break, but do you have any plans?” Ireena asked.

“Hmm... I think I’ll go home for a short while. It’s been a long time since I enjoyed village life.”

“I think I remember hearing it’s surrounded by mountains,” Ginny added.

“I used to hunt in those mountains all the time.”

“If it’s snowing...won’t you get cold?”

“Hm? Well...then I can just wear a pullov—”

“AAAAAAAACK!” Ireena screeched, clinging *onto* Ard for some reason and cutting him off.

“Wh-what’s wrong?”

“...Nothing. I could just...feel it.”

“Feel what?!”

Ginny chuckled in her head. *You’re so obvious, Miss Ireena. You were so close to making him say “pullover.”*

But Ginny had seen through Ireena’s plan and tried to seize it for herself.

Even though she’d failed, Ginny had figured out the trick to completing Action Number 1.

Hee-hee-hee. You don't understand a thing about Action Number 1, Miss Ireena.

The key is predicting your opponent's next steps—finding out where they want to take the conversation or how you can catch them off guard. It tests your deduction and improvisational skills. That's the name of this game.

The strategy is easy: Be a closed book and weaponize her topics to get him to say it. It's about being resourceful, and that's...my forte.

Ginny's lips curled as she planned her next move.

"Oh yeah. Did you hear the news about that actor, Ard?" Ginny asked.

"About Reybach?"

"Yes. Weren't you shocked? I never imagined the esteemed performer basically lived in a pig sty!"

Ireena's face lit up when Ginny broached this subject. She knew her next move!

What an open book.

"Totally. I was stunned!" Ireena exclaimed. "I didn't peg Reybach as slov..."

"Slov..." Ard started

"...Slovenly!" Sylphy shouted.

"...Sylphy, you're getting spanked later."

"Why?!"

"Enough of that. Anyway, I was floored. He may have been a mess in his personal life, but his performances were stellar," Ginny said.

"Tell me about it. As an actor, he's beloved—"

"PLERGH!" Ireena dove at Ard like a wild animal and used her entire body to cut him off.

"Wh-what's with you, Ireena?"

"...Oh, you know. I saw a feral plergh and got startled."

"What in the world is a feral plergh?" Ard asked, understandably confused.

Ireena broke out in a sweat.

Ginny was the only calm observer. *Oh dear. I almost had him... He was just about to say "beloved"...but she thwarted me.*

She hasn't gotten a good read on me, though. Her panicked responses prove that.

As long as I keep trying to get him to say the unexpected...she'll fail

sooner or later.

And then I'll score my first point...!

Ginny skillfully employed the art of conversation to mess with Ireena. The succubus intentionally dropped hints for the young elf but kept shifting the topic away when Ireena got too close. The fake-outs were starting to drive Ireena crazy...

“BLERGH?!”

“O-ow! I don't think my elbow joints can take that, Ireena!”

Ireena had started injuring Ard. Everything was going according to Ginny's design. At this rate, she would score the first point.

Confident in her approach, she continued pestering Ireena...

“AY-YO!”

“Ouch! That soup is burning hot!”

...and Ireena's behavior was starting to border on the extreme.

“HI-HO!”

“Yow?! You got p-p-pie in my eye!”

Meanwhile, Ard was beginning to hate his predicament.

She's a tenacious one. I didn't expect Miss Ireena to be this stubborn...

Ginny needed a final push to give her an edge.

Ireena scraped chunks of pie off Ard's face, wiping him down with a handkerchief.

“All better. I'm sorry, Ard.” Ireena gave him a big hug *for whatever reason.*

“It's all right... That aside, Ireena, you're acting...”

Something rocked Ginny's entire body.

Time stretched on forever.

One phrase flashed in her mind.

...Lovey-dovey.

...Damn it! Ginny whipped around toward Ireena, who stared back at her.

Her smirk was enough to tell Ginny this had been her plan all along.

It suddenly dawned on her.

S-she got me! It was all an act! She wanted me to block her attempts at Action Number 3. She toyed with me for Action Number 1! Miss Ireena played dumb to accomplish her true goal!

It explained the excessive PDA. Ginny had thought it was to provoke her. It never crossed her mind that the act might be contrived.

Why had she missed it?

...Because Ginny had arbitrarily decided Ireena was below her.

She didn't think the elf stood a chance against her mind games.

"Heh-heh." Ireena narrowed her eyes and laughed.

Ginny swore she could read her thoughts:

They always warn against being too sure of yourself. 'A cornered fox is more dangerous than a jackal.' Haven't you heard that saying?

When it comes to intelligence, I'm the fox, which makes you the jackal. But even a fox will rack its brains when it's cornered.

You didn't anticipate that, though. Your ego got in the way...and basically spoon-fed me a point!

Those confident eyes made Ginny wince.

Shit. Ard was already opening his mouth. There was no time to stop him.

She was going to lose. The point would go to Ireena. A single point, but an incredibly important one. Ginny would have to stomach that...and accept that Ireena was better at everything than her.

That would signal the end for her. If she spiraled out of control, the tide would shift in her opponent's favor.

"How should I put it?" Ard asked.

No. Stop. Don't say anything else.

Please!

No-no...!

"You're acting...very assertive."

.....

.....

.....

...

It felt like the silence would never end.

“Ugh! I’ve had it!” Ireena slammed her fist on the table with tears in her eyes.

She was the first to accept the reality of the situation.

“What’s wrong, Ireena? D-did I say something...?” Ard worried.

As Ginny watched Ireena take her frustration out on the table, it finally hit her.

“Hee-hee-hee. Justice prevails once again...!”

She had no idea why she said this.

At the moment, though, she was euphoric.

Ginny sipped a spoonful of soup. “Delicious...! Divine...! Want some, Ard? Miss Ireena? Though I suppose we have completely different tastes.” Ginny did her best to suppress a giggle.

“Grr!” Ireena bit her lower lip.

It was the anguished cry of failure. Her expectations had been crushed, and neither of them had managed to score any points. What an amazing feeling.

“Is the soup that good?” Ard picked up his spoon, startled by Ginny’s mood.

She watched him from the corner of her eye.

Phew... The luck of the draw. I never thought he would call her “assertive.” Seems the Demon Lord is on my side! The fate of this battle lies with me!

It’ll take Miss Ireena some time to recover from that one...!

She’ll find no fortune this time around!

There is no way she could possibly recover from—

Ginny was certain of her victory...

Ard spooned the soup into his mouth...

ACTION COMPLETED!

IREENA SCORES ONE POINT!

The dialogue box appeared above their heads.

“.....What?”

“Are you all right? Ginny? Um, Ginny? Can you hear me? Hello? Anyone home?”

Ard waved a hand in front of her, but Ginny couldn't see him.

How...did Miss Ireena score that point?

...When?

“M-Miss Ireena!!” Ginny barked, facing her enemy.

What did you do? Did you plan to fail earlier to get this point now?

But Ireena didn't look triumphant. In fact, she appeared downright confused.

Even the victor had no idea what had just gone down.

Was this part of her act?

She wasn't that good of an actress.

...Then, how did this happen?

How did Ireena earn that point?

This mystery was starting to chip away at Ginny's psyche.



The end of breakfast meant the official start of the second day.

They kicked it off with group activities, the same structure as the previous day. Each class visited their assigned sites to enjoy old Kingsglave.

During these activities, Ginny and Ireena were still locked in battle, but they weren't attempting to complete any more Actions after the morning's events. Instead, they were theorizing what had happened, and both were absorbed in their own thoughts.

As quickly as they'd started, the group activities for the day came to an end, which meant it was time for them to break off into smaller teams.

It was just before noon. Six more hours left.

“Sorry, guys! I need to take care of some business, so I need some alone time,” Sylphy announced, hurriedly trotting off on her own.

Under normal circumstances, her sudden exit would have raised some brows.

Their current priority, though, was...figuring out what had happened this morning.

“Where do you want to go?” Ard asked.

“Your choice, Ard!”

“Wherever you want to go, Ard!”

Though nothing about their conversation was unusual, their behavior told another story.

Ginny maintained her distance three steps behind Ard. Ireena did the same, refusing to be attached to his hip so she could keep an eye on Ginny.

“Um, guys? Please don’t take this the wrong way, but...you’re both really far away. And I don’t think I’m making this up.”

“I’m good!”

“Perfectly fine.”

“...With what?”

They weren’t even listening to him anymore, though. They were lost in their own worlds.

How to Turn On the Effects of the Love Potion... Or “How to Turn Him On” for short.

For this, we must choose from three Basic Actions.

Action Number 1: Make the target say “love.”

Action Number 2: Kiss the target.

Action Number 3: Make the target drink the potion directly.

For the first two options, we must successfully complete them thrice. The last option is the only exception, but it’s also the most obvious, which means Miss Ireena can block all my attempts at it.

...But when Miss Ireena scored, she didn’t fulfill any of the necessary conditions. What happened?

Ginny recreated her conversation with Verda.

Just as she was waking up, Verda had said, “*There are hidden rules to the Basic Actions.*”

Miss Ireena must have completed one to get that point.

What was the hidden rule?

Ginny started replaying the events in her head.

Ireena had earned the point when Ard sipped his soup.

I'm curious about that soup...and his spoon. I imagine it has to do with the latter.

Just before he took a sip, Ireena was slamming the table. That must have mixed up their spoons.

As a result...Ard gave her an indirect kiss, which must be the hidden rule...!

Ireena must have reached the same conclusion. Gone was her antagonistic glare.

Even though I've discovered this loophole, nothing has changed if she's realized it, too. It means she knows to block any indirect kisses. I guess I shouldn't bother trying this method.

...I thought this game was all about strategy and deception...but I guess it comes down to creativity. The one to puzzle out and weaponize these secret advantages will win!

All the other mind games are the cherries on top. I need to be more aggressive in my approach...!

Ireena must have been on the same page.

On their way to the next location and on site, they tried to play out their unique strategies.

“I GOT YOU!”

“DIDN'T THINK SO!”

Was this coincidence or fate?

“Help, I'm falling! I might accidentally kiss Ard—”

“Ah! My hand slipped! Watch out! It's going to smack your face, Miss Ireena!”

“Yeek?!”

They kept coming up with the same ideas and countering each other. That meant they couldn't test out their new theory. They were only wasting time.

A standstill, huh, Ginny thought, biting her nails as they traveled to their next destination. I need to devise an unforeseen attack. Otherwise, she'll continue to foil me.

But any crafty scheme would mean nothing if it isn't part of the rules.

...I have to change my approach. I need to remain one step ahead of my opponent.

I need to take a gamble...and put all my chips on a single plan...!

It only took a second for Ginny to find another tactic, and she immediately began laying its foundation.

“Oh! I’m feeling faint!” Ginny announced, sinking to her knees on the cobbled road.

She was seconds away from touching the ground.

“G-Ginny?! Are you all right?!” Ard swiftly supported her dainty body.

Ireena’s eyes flared. *Any funny business, and I’ll crush you.*

But Ginny didn’t shrink back, boldly moving forward with her plan.

“I-I’m fine. I may be slightly anemic...” Ginny hid her face from Ireena, whispering to Ard. “...If...I...please...roll...”

“What’s that supposed to—”

“I’m already feeling better. Sorry for worrying you!”

Ginny separated herself from Ard, flashing him a bright smile. Ireena seemed to have her suspicions, but...it was unlikely she’d guessed Ginny’s intentions.

The groundwork is done. All I can do is wait, Ginny prayed, reengaging in their battle of blockades.

Even though they’d discovered this new rule, the two girls were focused on tripping each other up...and no one had succeeded in scoring another point.

This, however, was still part of Ginny’s plan.

It’s about time. She’s starting to lower her guard to my earlier actions.

It’s now or never...!

Ginny closed the distance between them. She was aiming for a kiss...but not on the lips. Her target had a greater surface area: his torso.

Action Number 2 says to kiss your target...but with no specified location. Meaning I can score a point with any area. That could be another hidden rule!

But a simplified plan with reasonable doubt...allowed the enemy to get one step ahead.

“Did you think I’d let you?” Ireena asked, easily blocking her.

Just as the succubus drew near her target, Ginny was hammered by a gale of magic that blasted her away.

An unforgiving attack...

...but exactly what Ginny wanted.

“I-Ireena?! Wh-what’re you doing?!” Ard shouted.

“...I felt something gross in the air.”

“What does that even mean?” Ard turned his attention on Ginny. “A-are you all right? Are you hurt?”

“...I’m fine.” With a smile, Ginny looked into his eyes...then promptly glanced to the side. “Having fun, Miss Ireena?”

“Yeah. I had a flash of inspiration.”

Ireena’s arms were crossed, and her feet were planted firmly on the ground. Ginny’s eyes narrowed as she crawled along the earth.

“Um. What’s with the tension? Why are you looking at each other like that?”

They both ignored Ard.

“What do you mean by ‘a flash of inspiration’?”

“Um, could you please answer my question—?”

“I’ll tell you since you’re dying to know! I found a certain way to win!”

“Wait... Ireena. Win what?”

They froze him out of the conversation.

“What is it?”

“I used to think the same way as you: that the one to ‘turn him on’ would win.”

“Turn *what* on?”

“But I was wrong the whole time.”

“Hello? Can you hear me? You’re not listening at—”

“I’m not like *you*, Ginny! I’ve got two options!”

As the cold-shoulder treatment continued, Ard started feeling self-conscious.

Not that the girls noticed.

“What two options?” Ginny asked.

“Your only choice is to ‘turn him on’ first! But I can just wait out the clock!”

“...Huh. And this is your strategy? Cool. It’s been hard to turn him on with you in the way. If time runs out, you’ll have succeeded in stopping me. But...” Ginny giggled when she saw the triumphant look on Ireena’s face.

“What’s so funny?”

“Hee-hee. You just have no clue. I find you so hilarious... You’re pathetic, Miss Ireena.”

Ireena frowned, twisting her lovely face.

Ginny smirked at her. “You’re the one who challenged *me*, yet you consider running away a victory? It’s as if...you’ve admitted your defeat.”

Ireena’s face flushed.

Ginny’s smile seemed to widen. “Oh, Miss Ireena. You realized you couldn’t beat me, hence this choice. You only want to play this game while you’re ahead, and now that things are looking bad for you, you’re ready to call it quits. How sad. Hee-hee.” She chuckled haughtily.

Ireena’s cheek twitched...but she managed to hold back her anger, electing to straighten her back and proudly cross her arms instead.

“Who cares what you think?! I win regardless. Too bad, so sad. You’ll never beat me, Ginny! Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” She let out a fit of laughter.

She knew how this would end. All she had to do was wait.

“I’ll prove you wrong right now.” With a crescent smile, Ginny turned to Ard. “Hey, are you ready to start?”

“...Can you see me now? Have you stopped ignoring me?” Light returned to Ard’s sad eyes.

Ireena looked nervous.

She has no idea. She’s studying my next move! Ginny thought to herself.

Nonetheless, Ireena’s eyes were bright with the confidence that she could put a stop to anything.

Except there was one thing she couldn’t have guessed.

“Okay, Ard. Come here. *Like I told you before.*”

Ginny wasn’t the actor in this situation.

It was...Ard Meteor.

Ginny waved him over...and he got on the ground to...

“...Rollover?! ...Oh no!”

By the time Ireena realized this, it was far too late.

Ard reached Ginny’s feet...

ACTION COMPLETED!

GINNY SCORES ONE POINT!

Ginny had earned her point.

An instant later, Ireena's eyes grew wide, and her knees sank to the ground.

"N-no way...! That's...!"

"Wh-what's wrong, Ireena?" Ard asked.

"Hee-hee-hee. How unsightly, Miss Ireena."

"Can you stand up on your own?" he asked.

"Ginny...! You've been planning this all along...!"

"Not really. It just occurred to me. I didn't know if it would work. It was a gamble."

"...And I'm back to receiving the cold shoulder. Very cool," Ard sulked, but no one seemed to care.

Ginny displayed an easy smile. "I got him to act out the word *love* instead of saying it. I thought it might be another one of those secret rules. Obviously, I could only test it out to see if I was right. I got lucky this time... but that isn't the important takeaway. I was able to execute the plan in my head. Do you get it now?"

"Ngh!" Ireena gnashed her teeth.

Ginny's smile broadened. "You thought the game would be in a standstill when we both switched to defense. But you were wrong. You can outmaneuver your opponent with full use of your intellect. In this battle, at least. This score proves my point...and another thing."

Ginny raised a finger to direct at her enemy.

"There is no certain path to victory, Miss Ireena. Capiisce?"

All Ireena could do was groan. In this game, Ireena couldn't win just by blocking Ginny. She needed to keep an eye on Ard, too...which Ginny had realized...and Ireena had not.

Her path to victory was a castle built on sand.

“Grrrr...! This doesn’t mean you win! We still have three hours! Your little tricks won’t work on me anymore!”

“You’re such a sore loser. I think this is an important lesson for you: Your dreams are over when you give up, but with persistence...they’ll come true someday.”

“Got it. I *am* persisting, Ginny,” Ard begged. “Please stop ignoring me.”

“A resilient spirit will bring you victory.”

“I commend your heroism, but this is so cruel. I mean, look! You’re being mean to me! Right now!” Ard protested.

Ginny and Ireena glared at one another, gearing up for their climactic battle...!



Kingsglaive was home to many tourist attractions. The strangest of all was the *ocean* in the middle of town. It was a vestige of the ancient world.

Kingsglaive had served as the battleground of a war between the Demon Lord and one of the Evil Gods. It had been a struggle of life and death.

One attack from the Evil God had been enough to split the continent in half. Ocean water had flooded the great divide, creating the city’s unusual terrain. Sandy beaches faced the waters, and it was a popular summer destination.

This day was no different. People came in droves to enjoy the summer sun.

But in the evening, the beach was completely deserted. It was like the earlier crowds had been some kind of mirage.

No audience meant no casualties.

It was the perfect place for their final battle.

“Wh-what do you think, Ard?”

“W-well, I think you look lovely,” he told Ireena as blood rushed to his head.

“Take a look at me, Ard. How is this swimsuit?” Ginny asked.

“I-I like how bold it is?” He kept looking away, refusing to make direct eye contact with either of the girls...

...because the swimsuits in question were very risqué.

Ginny wore one that was crimson and high-cut. It was basically just

straps. Her white skin was on full display...including her plush butt and slightly breasts.

Ireena's swimsuit was equally racy. Her white micro-bikini top and thong left almost nothing to the imagination. It barely covered the essentials, leaving her thick ass completely exposed.

However, they hadn't selected these swimsuits for his enjoyment.

"Um... I... I don't know where to look."

"Hee-hee-hee. If that's the case..." Ginny started.

"It's the perfect time for a blindfold!" Ireena cried.

Their unbelievable chests closed in on Ard, and then...the girls blindfolded him.

"Oh. Are you going to spin me around? Is this where I smash a watermelon with a baseball bat? I know it's a summer pastime, but..."

There was no watermelon.

It was never about breaking a watermelon.

"Okay, Ard. Open up your mouth nice and wide," Ireena prompted.

"*A-Ahh*. Like this?"

"Uh-huh. Now, I want you to cover your ears."

"...Um, what are we playing?"

"Don't worry about it."

"I have a bad feeling about—"

"“Don't worry about it.”"

"...Seriously?"

Nevertheless, Ard obliged, even though he looked miserable.

Eyes blindfolded. Mouth wide open. Ears covered.

Without sight or sound, he had no clue what they were up to.

Then, he sensed no one around him at all.

"...I think we're ready."

"Let's get this show on the road."

They backed away from Ard and faced each other.

Their bodies felt light, unrestricted by their school uniforms. This was the reason for their swimsuits. The closer to nude, the more fluid their motions. To prepare for this moment, they needed to eliminate all other factors.

They were ready to fight...literally.

No more time for logic and reason. This was going to be a violent smackdown.

“We should have done this from the beginning,” Ireena said.

“Uh-huh. This is as straightforward as it gets.”

They had one hour left and two points each. In the end, they had chosen a resolution that was pure in every sense of the word.

“The winner of this duel can make Ard drink the love potion. That’s the plan, right?”

“No objections. After all...I’m going to win this one.” Ginny’s smile was almost insulting.

Ireena snarled at her.

“Giga Flare!!”

“Windstorm!!”

Their high-level spells canceled out each other’s attacks, creating a violent shock wave.

It was time for a showdown between two maidens in love with the same man.

“TAKE THIS!”

“AS IF!”

They were evenly matched. The stalemate must have vexed the girls because their bickering intensified.

“ARD IS MINE!”

“NO! HE’S MINE!”

They had gone berserk in this magic battle, casting high-level spells that carved out craters on the beach, but neither was winning. Meanwhile, the war of words between the aggravated girls was nearing its climax...

“I CAN LIST MORE THINGS ABOUT ARD THAT I LIKE THAN YOU!”

“NO! ME!”

This started a fight over who could heap more praise on her crush.

The compliments had reached more than a hundred...

“Hff-hff. Looks like...you’re out of magic.”

“Says...you.”

Magic was no longer an option, but so what?

Didn’t they have their own arms and legs?

“Here I come, homewrecker...!”

“Bring it, musclebrain...!”

They pounced on each other for the catfight of a lifetime.

These were budding young ladies, though. Punching and kicking was out of the question.

“Owie! Wat oor ou oing?!”

“Hee-hee-hee! What stretchy cheeks you have!” Ginny laughed, pinching Ireena’s face.

“Take dis!”

“Glerck?!”

“Ha-ha-ha! Little Miss Piggy!” Ireena squealed, shoving her fingers up Ginny’s nose.

Honestly? A fight between kids might have been more mature.

Still, they were bound to get exhausted after a protracted period of this.

“*Huff...Hff...* Why don’t you just... give up...?!”

“No... You...!”

Both were pushing their limits. Even their catfight had failed to give either of them an edge.

In the end, the difference between victory and defeat would come down to mental stamina...

NOT.

It’s almost time...! Ginny steeled herself, observing Ireena and stepping forward.

Ireena had used all her energy and was covered in wounds...but Ginny had some power to spare.

This wasn’t coincidental... It had been her plan all along.

“*Haaah!*”

“AAAH?!”

Ginny crouched to execute her leg sweep, sending Ireena tumbling to the ground. She didn’t even have the energy to pick herself up. Ginny saw this window of opportunity and fished something out from between her boobs.

It was the love potion.

“What?! No way! You can’t possibly...?!”

“Oh, but I am...!” Ginny popped off the lid and launched it toward Ard’s open mouth with her last shred of energy.

“Hey! Ch-cheater!” Ireena barked.

“According to who? Call me a strategist!”

This was the final phase of Ginny’s scheme. No self-proclaimed intellectual would agree to participate in a barbaric duel. The whole

altercation had been an elaborate ruse to deceive Ireena and clear Ginny's path to certain victory: Action Number 3!

"Miss Ireena! You can't even move! Which means I wi—"

"Don't think this is over yet!" Ireena broke past her physical limits, cutting short Ginny's verbal victory lap.

She leaped to her feet. Who could say where this energy came from? Ireena whipped out her vial from her cleavage and yanked off the lid.

"Heh! Don't even bother," Ginny said. "Even if you throw it now, it would never reach him in—"

"*HIYA!*" Ireena belted, letting go of the bottle.

Ard, however, wasn't her target. The vial...dropped in front of her foot, which she drew back to deliver a kick.

"What?! Oh...! Our legs are three times stronger than our arms...!" Ginny observed. "B-but mine will still reach him before yours! And that's a fact!"

"Nuh-uh! See for yourself!"

Every last shred of ardor was directed at their projectiles.

"*COME ON!*"

The vials went whistling through the air and...entered Ard's mouth at the same time.

"*BLERGH?!*" Ard gasped as the foreign objects flew in his mouth.

In the next moment, he gulped.

His Adam's apple undulated up, then down.

"Who made it in first...?!"

The girls looked on with bated breath...until the judge handed down the verdict.

BOTH CONTESTANTS HAVE COMPLETED AN ACTION.

THIS GAME IS A DRAW!

THE CONTEST IS NULL AND VOID!

Null and void.

In other words...there was no winner or loser.

The two absorbed this news.

“Hee-hee.”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee.”

““HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!””

Ireena and Ginny howled with laughter. Who knew who started laughing first? They had depleted all their energy and were left without an ounce of strength in their bodies.

That was why huge smiles settled on their faces even after they’d fought to the bitter end.

“Ginny.”

“Miss Ireena.”

Their battle had been a desperate one. Now that it was over, they had newfound respect for each other.

“There’s no messing with you.”

“Right back at you. I’d expect no less, Miss Ireena.”

They stepped in for a hug, gushing over each other’s strategies.

“Phew. I’m getting hungry.”

“Me, too. Want to buy something from one of the food vendors?” Ginny suggested.

Under the glow of sunset, the two beamed as they walked along the beach.

The battle between the maidens had come to a close.

No winner. No loser.

Just two happy girls.

“...Can someone please tell me what’s going on?”

No one was around to hear Ard beg for an explanation on the empty beach.



DAY 3

The Silly Sylphy March

BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

...Peace had no place on our school trip.

Half of it was Verda's fault. The other half could be attributed to...

"Sylphy! Where the *hell* are you?!"

You heard that right.

It was morning of the third day.

As all the students chatted over breakfast, an explosion came from the kitchen.

The damage was extensive...

It basically turned the entire inn to rubble.

In the middle of the crumbling cafeteria, Olivia smashed Sylphy's skull with a clenched fist.

"What the hell were you thinking? I want to know why you thought it was a good idea to set a magic trap in the kitchen."

"Well... They had a Handle with Care sign near the knives."

"Uh-huh. And?"

"...I thought the knives might be magical weapons in disguise. Wouldn't it suck if a demon got ahold of them?"

"What 'sucks' is this situation! Why would you think knives would be magical weapons in disguise? They didn't even have those in the ancient world! Even if they *were*, why would you set an explosive next to them? What if it went off from the heat and impact?!"

“...Your comeback is too long. And too boring.”

“Excuse you?!”

“Eek! I-I’m sorry!”

The vein on Olivia’s temple was starting to pulse in anger. Sylphy flung herself to the ground.

Olivia’s beast ears twitched in irritation. “It’s your fault the inn is a mess! Who sets a trap in the *kitchen*? Now all the potatoes are ash! How could you?! They only use potatoes from my garden at this inn! And you go around —”

“Ooh. Things are adding up now,” Sylphy muttered to herself.

“...What’s that supposed to mean?”

“...Sorry, my tongue slipped. Forget it.”

“Why won’t you look at me? Hey. What’s adding up? I promise I won’t get mad. Tell me.”

“Do you *promise* you won’t get mad?”

“Pinkie swear.”

“Okay. Let me take a breath... I was wondering why the potatoes sucked at this inn! I guess it makes sense, though, if they’re using *your* potatoes...! That’s what’s adding up.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! I see! Ha-ha-ha-ha. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I’m going to kill you!”

“But you promised!” Sylphy whined, booking it out of there as Olivia brandished her sword.

This was their *modus operandi*.



The third day of our trip officially started after the inn was repaired with magic.

The schedule was basically the same. After group visits and hands-on activities, we’d break up into teams.

Our first stop was the local cathedral.

Since I’d left the ancient world, the Demon Lord had become a convenient symbol for politicians everywhere. They’d created a religion with me as the major deity—which I bet had been an attempt to incite the public in an act of demagoguery. The sect was called the United Creed.

Its namesake came from...my unification of the entire world.

It boasted the largest following on the planet, which was fine and all, but their main deity had some...issues.

“And thus the Demon Lord bestowed great wisdom unto his subordinates: *‘Their movements were as undetectable as a shadow in the dead of night.’*”

I hated that my most embarrassing lines were passed down verbatim as proverbs...!

The priest wore a look of reverence as he preached about my cringiest moments... I wanted to die.

“The Demon Lord stood atop the hill and shouted to the refugees: *‘To the innocent, there is nothing to fear. Why? For I am here with you. And nothing in this world is more fearful than me.’*”

Please! Have some mercy!

I mean...it had been the right time and the right place for bravado. I also knew my ego had gotten the best of me...but I swear I would never say those things sober...!

“Wow. It’s just like I remembered. He was always so cringy. Lydie and I used to laugh at him behind his back. He looked so serious! *Pfft*... Still gets me every time,” Sylphy chortled.

“...Cut it out. He was dealing with a lot back then,” Olivia snapped.

“Like what? Coming up with those cheesy lines?”

“No. He was going through puberty.”

“Gotcha. Yeah. That was a rough time.”

...I was mortified that they had been there.

But what did you expect? Everyone goes through an awkward stage. I couldn’t have been the only one who had a tough time with it.

All adolescent boys have a tendency to be sarcastic, refer to their vision as *demon eyes*, name their spells *Ultimate Thunder*, and rebrand themselves as *the Destroyer*. Right?

I’m sure we all had a time in our lives when we unironically said, “Don’t mess with this guy,” or “You don’t want to piss me off.”

So why was I the only one facing public embarrassment?

I knew I only had one choice: to reveal humiliating secrets of my subordinates. Maybe that would shut the priest up.

...Except...then Olivia would know I was the Demon Lord.

“And the Demon Lord said: *‘Heh! This world is becoming an extension of*

me.’”

“Bweh-heh-heh-heh! There it is! Cringe!”

“And the Demon Lord said: *‘This eyepatch has taught me that losing sight in one eye lets me see much more.’*”

“Pfffft! What? He just thought the eyepatch was cool! I mean, I watched him sizing up his subordinate, the One-Eyed Dragon, and heard him say he was gonna try it out tomorrow...!”

“And the Demon Lord said: *‘These eyes are red from sin. As I fall farther from heaven and commit...acts of valor, they will become even redder.’*”

“Yeah, right! He was changing them with magic! Even Lydie thought he should stop because it was *so* embarrassing! Did he think it made him look cool or something?”

You know what? I was starting to think exposing my identity wasn’t such a bad idea after all. Then, I could shut up the priest *and* Sylphy. Nothing else mattered in this world.

What was the point of this ceremony anyway? Did they want us to be touched by the words of the Demon Lord? Did they want us to take a good, hard look at ourselves? How could I possibly reflect on my actions when I had to relive a compilation of my worst memories?

“And the Demon Lord said—”

“Bweh-heh-heh! I remember that one! That was good!” Sylphy rolled around in laughter.

“I haven’t said anything yet.” The priest cast her a displeased look. “I’ve been wondering what’s wrong with you. What are you trying to do? How can you roar with laughter at the sound of his word? He is to be revered. This will send you straight to hell.”

A typical clergyman comment.

Who would send someone to hell for laughing at some random nonsense?

...Well, I would do it if I could, but I knew when to restrain myself. See? I could control myself, even if I wanted a certain someone to go to hell.

...Whatever. Sylphy was the real problem. I was worried she would unleash a tirade on the priest (“Excuse you? I could care less about what *you* think!”) and cause us double trouble.

...I could already see it ending with an explosion at the cathedral.

To prevent that from happening, I was ready to admonish her...

“*Hmph*,” Sylphy sulked. “What’s so great about the Demon Lord? But...

I'm sorry. You have to forgive me now that I apologized!"

She wasn't acting respectful, but...she was expressing some remorse.

I was honestly surprised. I even managed to catch a glimpse of Olivia's eyes widening.

"H-hey, Sylphy. Do you have fever?"

"What? Stop looking at me like that. I'm apologizing because I'm wrong. Big deal."

"Yeah, but..." Olivia didn't look entirely convinced.

I felt the same, frowning with the sense that something was off.



After that little incident at the cathedral, we needed to make our way to the next location.

The Colosseum.

An untamed battle was unfolding in the huge stadium. Every seat was occupied, and the crowd was roaring. We were among them.

"W-wow! This is getting the crowd going!"

"It's been this way since ancient times."

"Really? Didn't the Demon Lord build this arena?"

I nodded, listening to Ireena and Ginny's conversation. As they mentioned, I had designed and built the Colosseum, which still made audiences go wild, even in this generation.

At the time, I had been scheming to collect taxes, spread propaganda, and discover elite fighters...which had led me to build the Colosseum.

These epic fights made the audience thirsty for war. Nothing about that had changed.

The spectators egged on the warriors. Even Ireena and Ginny were joining in.

...But I was already over it.

Back in the old days, the battles hosted here used to excite me...but these were hardly dynamic. I just couldn't bring myself to get pumped.

"Oh, come on! Are you dawdling? For what? This is an easy job! One and done! Aim for the eyes! That's right, the eyes! ...Aaaaaah! No! You missed the perfect chance to kick him in the ass!" Sylphy spat.

It appeared she was rooting for a specific fighter...which I found

surprising. I would have thought she'd be bored out of her mind, too.

Back in ancient times, Sylphy would come to watch games at the Colosseum, but these were aggressively mediocre. At the very least, I didn't think they were enough to warrant her interest.

Why was she getting worked up? Add that to the incident at the cathedral, and it was easy to guess something wasn't right.

"Be more aggressive! I know you can take him—come on! Get up and fight!" Sylphy cheered...or lamented.

Ultimately, her cries were in vain. Her favorite struggled to get back up. The match ended, and Sylphy slumped in her seat.

At the center of the ring, a man rushed over to the victor with a magic speaker. This match had been the main event of the morning. Now that it was over, the champion was accepting interviews and smiling through chipped teeth.

"You got that right! This guy was just another pipsqueak!" he boasted.

Either he was playing up his role as a villain or this was his true character. The warrior didn't show an ounce of respect for his foe, openly criticizing him. This earned him a long boo from the crowd, but he laughed off their jeers.

"If you've got a problem with me, I'll be happy to take you on! Come one, come all! Get your ass down here and fight me! I'll give you my prize money if you can take me down!" he crowed, surveying the audience smugly.

He was brimming with confidence. No one dared challenge him. In truth, there was no one who cou—

"I can't stand him! I'm gonna smack him down a few pegs!" Sylphy practically jumped out of her chair, her face flushed.

"Wh-what does she think she's doing?!" Ireena yelped.

"I-if Miss Sylphy participates...!" Ginny screamed.

Their fears were about to become reality.

"AAAAAAAAAAAH!"

"Eeek! Help!"

The fool had lost all control, rampaging with her Holy Sword.

Predictably, after a huge commotion, the Colosseum had turned to a pile of rubble...!



Somehow or another, we managed to survive the maddening events and approached our free time.

Sylphy was acting suspicious again.

“Um, I just remembered... I need to take care of business! I need some time to myself! Go and enjoy the sights! Later!” she announced, dashing off in a hurry.

We watched with narrowed eyes as she sprinted into the distance.

“How should I put this?”

“Her behavior has been...”

“...really fishy lately.”

Lately, as in since we’d arrived in Kingsglaive. Something had been up with her.

Even though she was never far from chaos...this was distinctly strange behavior. She didn’t sound like herself at the cathedral. She had a tantrum at the Colosseum. Now, she’d run off two days in a row.

“Do you think she’s up to something?” Ginny asked.

“Maybe...the demons brainwashed her?” Ireena speculated.

“Unlikely. But she has to be hiding something,” I said.

There had to be some sort of reason for the way she was acting. We couldn’t just leave this alone.

““““Let’s spy on her!”””” we collectively agreed, hurriedly readying ourselves to pursue her.

Maintaining our distance, we sneaked along behind Sylphy, taking note of her whereabouts.

She had trotted off to...

“An orphanage, I think?” Ireena asked.

“Seems that way,” agreed Ginny.

The building was visibly rundown and decrepit.

It was one of several orphanages in Kingsglaive. Sylphy entered the lot and gave the door knocker a few quick raps. After a moment, someone came to the door.

It was a withered old woman, likely the headmistress.

“I’m back! And I brought presents!”

“Oh. Welcome. The children will be happy to see you.”

Sylphy slipped into the facility.

“Wh-what should we do?” Ireena asked.

“Sneak in?” Ginny suggested.

“We can use mirror magic,” I offered, redirecting my energy and casting a spell.

It manifested into a large object that was reflective like a mirror, displaying an image of Sylphy as she walked through the building.

Sylphy and the headmistress made their way toward the children.

“Look! It’s Sylphy!”

“Hey, Sylphy!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! You’re all balls of energy! Glad to see it—*gweck*?!”

The unruly children closed in on Sylphy, beating her up. It was a little hard to tell whether they were playing with her or downright bullying her.

After she enjoyed spending some quality time with the children, she called out to them.

“I need to talk to the headmistress! Adult business. Go off and play!”

“Okay!”

“Tiny tits! Adult, my butt!”

“Who just called me ‘tiny tits’? I’m watching you. I’m gonna kill you later.”

As soon as everyone left the room, Sylphy turned toward the headmistress.

“What do you need to talk to me about?” asked the headmistress.

“Like I said, I brought presents.” Sylphy fished through her pouch and took something out.

It was prize money. She’d earned it from beating the crap out of the fighter at the Colosseum.

“This is all for you.”

“Oh...! W-where did you get this...?!”

“I’ll have you know that I used honest methods. Nothing shady. This money is ‘clean.’”

...I doubted any money could be *clean* if it was earned by turning the Colosseum into a disaster zone and threatening an opponent.

Sylphy pushed the bag of gold coins onto the headmistress. “I think this will be enough to cover your costs. If anything, you can upgrade your meals!”

“U-uh-huh. This would certainly help...but are you sure, Sylphy?”

“Obviously! What other use would I have for it? I’ll be happy if I can see

all the kids... I mean, if I can see *you* smile.”

“Oh, Sylphy...! Thank you so much...!”

“Hee-hee! I’ll come back when I have more! I promise to make this the world’s best orphanage!”

Sylphy smacked the headmistress’s back when the woman started to cry.

“I’ve gotta go,” she announced, leaving the orphanage.



Sylphy looked like she was walking on air, but we had no idea where her feet were taking her.

“Hm... This is it.” Sylphy halted.

Before her was a single shop. Based on the sign out front, I guessed it was a cheap restaurant.

“Maybe she’s hungry?” Ireena asked.

As if to answer, Sylphy entered the building.

I cast the magic mirror, and she appeared on its display again.

She wasn’t trying to find a seat among the other customers, electing to call out to a worker instead.

“Hey! I wanna speak to the manager!”

“One moment, please.” The worker headed to the kitchen looking puzzled.

It took no time for a dapper man with a suave mustache to greet her.

“Can I help you? What do you want with m—”

“Waaaah!” Sylphy sobbed.

Her behavior was...eccentric. As soon as she saw his face, she burst out into tears...and buried her face in his chest.

“Bleeeeh!”

“Hey! O-ow...! You’re hurting my back...! You’re seriously gonna snap my spine...!”

Before she could cause fatal damage...Sylphy seemed to get a grip on herself.

“S-sorry. I got too excited.”

“Do you always snap spines when you’re excited?! Are you out of your damn mind?! What do you want from me?!”

“Um, well... Do you have any worries in life?!”

“Yeah. One thing. And she’s standing right in front of me.”

“*Urp*. S-sorry. Anything else?”

“I guess we have too many customers.”

“...Do you want me to stab them?”

“What?! In what world?! I meant I’m short-handed with staff! Damn! What’s wrong with you?!”

“Ooh! No problem! I’ll help you out!”

Obviously, the manager was reluctant, outright refusing her offer multiple times. When push came to shove, though, Sylphy was relentless...and the manager finally caved in and hired her.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

Well, what did you expect?

After a string of events, the restaurant was in flames.

In the mountain of rubble, the charred manager turned to Sylphy and offered her two final words.

“You’re fired.”

No surprise there.



After Sylphy left, I returned the restaurant to its previous state.

The manager wept tears of joy...which upset me even more.

Sylphy continued causing trouble wherever she went, and I had to run around cleaning up after her every time.

“Jeez... What’s the point of living...?”

“G-good work, Ard.” Ginny tried to cheer me up.

“H-hey! Chin up! We figured something out by following her. And now we know what she’s after.”

Ireena was right.

Sylphy was hitting up spots that had been in the area for generations. In other words, she wanted to support the community.

...Nothing strange about that. Kingsglaive was her second home. I

couldn't blame her for trying to volunteer.

...But that didn't explain the incidents at the cathedral or the Colosseum.

Was she acting on a whim?

Even as I tried to gather my thoughts, Sylphy was stomping across town.

She must have been hungry, because she stopped by a vendor and bought a bunch of honey bread before continuing on her way.

When she arrived at her next destination, all our previous theories were turned on their heads.

Sylphy wasn't trying to contribute to the neighborhood.

After all, she'd just entered...

...the largest prison in Kingslaive.

Its eerie exterior loomed above her.

"Om-nom... Dis hunny bwead is dewicious!"

Sylphy was strolling the grounds like it was her own personal garden.

After watching her go inside, I cast the magic mirror for a third time to observe her.

She headed for a certain room with a single reception desk. It was cluttered with tables and chairs, where people were sitting and chatting among themselves.

However, these weren't average citizens. There were prisoners among them.

It seemed to be some sort of visitation room. Sylphy went up to the counter as she continued chewing on her bread.

"Om-nom. Do I have permission to see Daniel?"

The man at the desk looked stressed. "I'm afraid that won't be possible."

Sylphy frowned. "...Why not?"

"As I informed you the other day, he's a danger to society...awaiting his execution, which is in a few days. There's no saying what he'll do."

"No problem. I'll take full responsibility for his actions. Just let me see him."

"...Unless you have explicit permission, I'm afraid I can't allow that."

“Please,” she begged.

He gently shook his head.

Her young face soured as she banged on the window bars. “I have every right to see him!”

“How?”

“I’m the Raging Champion! Sylphy Marheaven! I came to redeem him! Let me see him!” She continued pounding the bars separating them.

The man quietly clicked his tongue at the troubled child.

“...Listen. Even if you were Lady Sylphy, by some miracle, you wouldn’t be able to redeem him.”

“You don’t know that! He has a good heart!”

“People with ‘good hearts’ don’t become rapists or serial killers. His heart is rotten, which is why he’s going to be executed.”

“That’s not true! I—”

“Enough. Your request is rejected. Forever. Could you please let the adults handle adult business?”

He tried to cut off their conversation, but Sylphy wasn’t having it.

At a certain point, she must have realized she wouldn’t get through to him.

“...I’ll never give up,” Sylphy declared, and with slumped shoulders, she left the prison.



Sylphy started to trudge back dejectedly.

She must have realized this was out of character, because she stopped in her tracks and sucked in a deep breath.

“AAAAAAAAAAH!!” she shrieked from the bottom of her chest.

This seemed to help her feel better about the situation. A little pep returned to her step.

As she clutched her bag full of honey bread, Sylphy headed for her next stop.

It was a corner of the slums. Stagnant air blanketed this hub for drifters.

There was one reason why Sylphy had come here.

“I’m back, old man!”

“...Hmph. You’re a weird one.”

It was an elderly man with white hair, a white beard, and white eyebrows. Sylphy joined him, sitting on the bare ground.

“Here you go, old man. I got you some grub.”

“Honey bread? Thank you.”

He accepted it from her outstretched hand and sank his teeth into a piece.

“...You know, you should stop coming around these parts.”

“‘Cause it’s dangerous?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Hee-hee. You don’t know me! I’m super strong!”

“You don’t look it. You seem like a weak little girl to me... Something about you reminds me of my wife. She—”

“Aren’t you gonna eat your bread?”

“Yes. Thank you. You know, my wife—”

“Aren’t you gonna eat your bread?”

“Uh-huh. One sec. Where was I? Ah, yes. My—”

“Aren’t you gonna eat your bread?”

“...Hey, you’re not going to let me talk, huh?”

“Guilty as charged.” Sylphy stuck her tongue out playfully.

The old man shrugged his shoulders and took another bite.

“*Hff*... I don’t have many years left. Let me tell you an old tale or two.”

“Sorry. No can do. I don’t feel like listening to any sad stories... But if you want to tell me your dreams for the future, I’ll be happy to lend an ear.”

“Heh. My dreams for the future?” The old man cleared his throat, stifling his laughter. It was self-deprecating. “I can’t say our conversations are boring. I’ve never felt this way before.”

“...Are you some sort of pedophile?”

“Hell no. I just get nostalgic when I’m talking to you.”

“Huh.”

“Well, I guess it’s weird for some brat to remind me of the good old days.” He chuckled, opening his eyes to get a good look at Sylphy. “Did I ever tell you I used to be a knight?”

“Yeah.”

“I see. Heh. I don’t want to get any older. You stop remembering the things you said yesterday... But there are some things you’ll never forget even when you die: your feelings of pride and longing.”

“.....”

“Hey. You said you’re Sylphy Marheaven, right?”

“Yep.”

“The real Sylphy Marheaven?”

“Yep.”

“In that case... Please grant me one wish. Won’t you kill me right here?”

Sylphy didn’t answer.

The old man chuckled. “I became a knight because I admired Sylphy from the holy texts. But...look at me now. A great knight has become a beggar on the streets.”

“.....”

“Hey. If you’re the real deal, I want you to put yourself in my shoes. My ego won’t let me waste away and die a failure... I’d rather be killed by someone I admire,” he explained.

“Are you stupid?”

Sylphy jumped to her feet and glanced down at him.

“An ego that eats you up from the inside isn’t worth shit. Listen. It takes pride to live. You don’t need pride to die... Lydie agrees with me, too.” Sylphy stared into the old man’s eyes. “Play dirty. Be ugly. Struggle until the end. Keep on fighting...and then you can die.”

A smile played across Sylphy’s lips. “And when that time comes, I’ll laugh over your death. That’s right. The Raging Champion will see you off with a smile.”

Sunlight shone down on the slums, illuminating Sylphy...who looked the image of a knight worthy of her title.

“...Heh. I see. You’ll see me off, huh? I couldn’t ask for a better end.”

“Hee-hee! Quit talking about shit and live! Hold on to it for dear life! I promise to visit from time to time!”

With this, Sylphy started to walk off, turning away from him.

Her cherubic face instantly became crestfallen. Without looking back, she spoke to the old man, offering him the entreaty of a young child.

“...I hope you’re cursed with a very long life, old man.”



Sylphy continued her trek until it was dusk.

There seemed to be no connection between the stops. We had initially

suspected her of revitalizing the local community, but we had completely abandoned this theory...with no other leads.

Our free time was wrapping up. I imagined this would have to be her last stop.

When she stepped closer to the edifice...I suddenly realized her intentions.

She had come to a stone mausoleum surrounded by graves.

I was the one who had this place built. It was the final resting place of our forces...including Lydia.

"...I kept telling myself to stop by, but I couldn't bring myself to come," Sylphy admitted quietly, approaching the stone monument with a bouquet of flowers in hand.

She gently placed the bundle in front of it.

"It's been a while, guys. It doesn't feel like it's been that long to me, but...I guess it's been thousands of years, huh?"

Sylphy managed to smile, but...it was a tragic one.

"It still feels like a dream. And how I wish it was... I still can't believe thousands of years had passed when I came back. I trained so hard for you guys. I'd give anything to wake up from this nightmare."

...Oh. I'd overlooked her terrible burden because she seemed so cheerful all the time.

Sylphy had gone off on her own journey to train...right before our forces were wiped out in battle.

There had been almost no survivors. But...there had been some people who were saved. Those had been the ones that Sylphy would give everything to protect.

But they weren't here any longer.

It had been thousands of years. They had moved on to the next life, including Lydia, who was like a big sister to her...

Sylphy was the sole survivor. She never even had the chance to say good-bye. She was the last one standing.

"...This place was our second home. I thought you would have left some part of you behind. I searched everywhere for you."

This explained her erratic behavior.

"I went out and met your descendants. They're nothing like you... Well, some of them are."

She wanted to see her old friends in some way—to feel their presence. That was the truth behind her madness.

“Well, it’s no surprise... You aren’t here. After all, they’re just your descendants.”

Sylphy’s lips trembled, and she reached out to touch the monument.

“Hey. What was your life like after I left? How did you die? Sometimes, I wonder...if you thought of me.”

No one said anything.

This town held nothing more than faint traces of her friends. She would do anything to see them, but they just didn’t exist anywhere anymore.

“...Lydie, you always told us to smile through everything. That was our motto. You taught us to smack the back of anyone who was anxious. We made sure to do that. But...there’s no one here to slap my back. And honestly...”

Her fists were balled tight. Tears pooled in her big eyes.

“I’m not sad at all! Not one bit!”

Sylphy didn’t cry. Instead, she’d put on a giant grin.

“I’ve still got my old friends! Like Olivia! And Verda...sort of. And Alvaro and Lizer...? If I can just find them. Whatever! I’ve got my old friends...and new ones from this generation.”



Sylphy rubbed her eyes and beamed.

“And that’s why I’m not sad at all! I know you must miss me, but I’m not ready to join you! My new friends are all doozies! They’d be totally lost without me!”

She looked up at the heavens.

“Watch me succeed! I’m desperate to live! I want to hang on to life as long as I can! And when I’ve had enough, I’ll kick the bucket with a smile...”

Her grin was directed up to her friends.

“Then...I want you all to greet me and laugh over my death!”

Sylphy closed her eyes and began to say a prayer.

...I knew we couldn’t leave her like that.

“Sylphy...!” Ireena cried out, and we all dashed toward her.

We wanted to console our friend, who had become like a little sister to us.

Beep.

Right when we took a step toward the mausoleum, a strange sound echoed beneath our feet.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

...We were blasted by a ginormous explosion.

Sylphy whipped around toward us. “Well, well, well! I got you now, demons! I’ll protect...this...place...?”

Protect what? She’d blown the graves out of the ground...!

I had to stop myself from screaming at her.

Sylphy looked at us blankly. “What are *you* doing here? Look at your clothes! You’re practically in tatters! Is this what the kids are wearing these days? It’s not doing you any favors, if I’m being honest. I think you should ___”

““SHUT UP!””

“What?!”

Ireena and Ginny pounced on Sylphy. The explosion had singed their hair. They shoved her to the ground.

“Way to ruin the mood!”

“I can’t believe I got emotional! For what? I demand a refund!”

“What are you talking about?!”

As they struggled, the three of them kicked up a violent cloud of dust. The mausoleum was inching closer to complete annihilation, but...I imagined its residents were probably laughing at us.

I sighed and looked up at the sky, sending a heartfelt message to my sworn companions.

We’ll take care of this fool.

Just...watch over us and laugh.

...Inside me, Lydia’s spirit started to beat.

“*She’ll never change,*” Lydia seemed to giggle.

“...Tell me about it.”

I smiled back at her.

FINAL DAY

Hopeful Hazard

“Hello! Come one, come all! I’m about to start a fun little presentation on magical studies!” Verda chirped under the clear blue sky.

Her peppy voice rang though the large plaza in Kingsglaive.

...It was the last day of the school trip.

Obviously, that meant Verda had appeared at our inn in the wee hours in the morning...

“Yoo-hoo! It’s me, God! Remember what I said to you on the first day? Well, that old man...whose name escapes me right now...set up a stage for me to beat Ard! Come to the plaza in two hours!”

She didn’t even wait for a reply before dashing off.

I went to appeal to Olivia directly. I mean, we already had a set schedule. I thought she would be on my side and tell me to ignore her.

Here was our exchange:

“Change of plans,” Olivia said. “I’ve scrapped the entire schedule to do Verda’s thing.”

“What?! Wh-why?!”

“Why not? She’s actually smart, you know. The students can learn a lot from her.”

“No! What if she turns us into slime?! It’s totally possible if we entertain her!”

“...How do you know her so well?”

“Um, well... I-I can just tell!”

“Hmph. Let’s say you’re right. That doesn’t change my decision. We’re going to see Verda’s challenge. I’ve got a feeling we might see something interesting...”

Damn it...! I knew she was planning to use Verda to prove I was the Demon Lord...!

...I needed to stop her somehow, but it was out of my control. I ended up

going with everyone to the plaza.

Verda and Norman stepped forward to greet us.

“Hey! Thanks for coming! We’re set and ready to go!”

“With my master’s support, I’ve completed my research projects! Allow me to give you a demonstration!” The bald doctor pointed at his experiments.

I managed a sarcastic smile before turning my attention...to the large stage behind them.

“I have a question. You mentioned earlier that there was going to be a presentation on magic. Will it take place up there?” I asked.

“Uh-huh! And for the public to watch you lick my shoes in defeat!”

“...Cool.”

This was already looking bad. After all, they’d constructed this excessive stage, *and* one of the former Heavenly Kings was planning to usher more people here. There was no way to avoid a growing crowd.

There was already a decent audience gathered around us. I estimated there was anywhere from a thousand to two thousand people there. I could only imagine what would happen if we started casting spells at each other.

“You got this, Ard!” Ireena cheered.

“May your name be known across Kingsglave!” Ginny said encouragingly.

I was going to have to let them down. Nothing good would come of drawing attention to myself.

For example, Olivia might start smiling. Or Olivia might start smiling. Or Olivia might start smiling...

These three reasons were enough to stop me.

“Hmm. I’d say it’s time to get started,” said the old man.

Next to him, Verda nodded once and turned toward me.

“Okay...Ard and...um... Belman? Get on the stage!”

“It’s Norman... Heh-heh-heh, the time has finally come.”

“Fine,” I said.

Escape wasn’t an option. Even if I tried, it would only make Olivia smile.

I let out a long sigh as I trudged up on stage with Norman. The audience started to stir in anticipation, picking up that the show was about to start.

“You got this! Whatever this is!”

“Ard wins in the looks department!”

“I think I’m rooting for the bald guy!”

The crowd started to cheer in the plaza. Verda went up on stage.

“Hello, Kingsglaive! It’s me! Thanks so much for coming!”

“OOOH! LADY VERDA!”

“I LOVE A GOOD AGELESS ADULT!”

“Get ready to learn about some magical studies...aka A Battle of Lectures! Let’s get this show on the road!”

What in the world was a Battle of Lectures?

“The rules are simple! This bald guy will present first! If Ard admits defeat, the clash is over! But if he manages to show us something *better*, Ard will win! We’ll keep this up until the bald guy loses!”

...Huh. I wasn’t sure how this was going to play out, but it seemed I’d be able to get myself out of the woods this time.

All I needed to do was admit defeat during the first round...in the clumsiest way possible. That would certainly ruin my good reputation!

I was starting to think this was the perfect opportunity to change my situation for the better.

“That’s it for the introductory stuff! Let’s get started!”

“Feh-heh-heh! Here I come, Ard Meteor!” Norman bellowed, turning his palm toward the ground. “Behold the genius of the great Dr. Norman!”

When he cast his spell, a sweeping magical circle manifested in front of him. Its size was incredible, spanning the entire plaza.

“Oh? Is this...?” I involuntarily murmured to myself when I grasped his intentions.

“...A flight spell?”

Just as I voiced my guess out loud, the entire audience and I were lifted into the air...for an impressive...twenty celti.

“W-whoa?!”

“I-I’m floating!”

“Hey...isn’t this...”

“...a Lost Skill?!”

The corners of Norman’s mouth curled up when he heard their reactions.

“Yes!” he shouted. “Any spell involving flight had been impossible in our generation! But I have managed to recreate this Lost Skill with modern knowledge!”

He was almost looking up at the heavens in pride. “It’s not perfect! But the future is here! It won’t take long before we all soar across the sky! When

that happens, you can thank me, Dr. Norman!”

He roared with laughter.

...If I was being honest, this was...not a big deal. I would have expected a “wow factor” if Verda was backing him up. I could basically beat him in my sleep.

Nevertheless, I was going to admit my defeat, falling to my knees.

“I’ve...lost...!” I would cry with tears streaming down my face.

I was ready. Watch out! I had picked up a thing or two for that performance at the school festival.

I embodied the image I’d conjured in my mind.

“Wow. Dr. Norman...”

Now, I needed to fall to my knees...

...but then the unexpected happened.

“Your presentation was weak. I couldn’t stand to watch it.”

...Huh?

“Wh-what was that?! You call my work...*weak*?!”

Hold up. Hold up. Hold up. Don’t get mad. I didn’t mean that!

I needed to explain myself.

“You heard me. That spell was garbage. Sloppy. Third rate.”

What the...?! Why was I saying stuff I didn’t want to?

Oh no! This stage...must have been the source of my problems...!

I glared at Verda, looking visibly annoyed.

She must have read my mind because her lips curled into a satisfied smile.

“Oh yeah! I forgot to tell you! That stage is a magic device made by yours truly! All lies become truths! No losing on purpose!”

Damn it! I’d screwed up! I’d let myself go soft, thinking this generation offered no real obstacles. I should have known no amount of caution would be enough when dealing with Verda!

“Ard Meteor! How dare you insult me! Garbage? Sloppy? Third rate? Come over here!” Norman screeched.

Wait! Just give me a second! This was all a misunderstanding! I want to

admit defeat!

...That was what I'd wanted to say.

"I'm merely stating the facts," I quipped instead.

My body wouldn't listen to me. I involuntarily flashed him an arrogant grin, pointing at Norman.

"As you know, the study of magic relies on three main components: conceptualization, construction, and application. We test the propriety of a new spell by using magic to construct it and applying it in a practical setting. Basically, it's about getting the spell as close to the original concept as possible. It's just how it works. But your spell, Dr. Norman, is riddled with holes."

"NGH-WHAAAAAT?! What are you talking about?!"

"You speak of a future where people can fly, but your spell only lifts people twenty celti off the ground. You shouldn't talk big when this is your limit. I mean, it's just stupid. And—"

Crap! Abort! Abort mission! I needed to shut up!

...Aaaaaaaaah! I couldn't stop myself! My body was moving on its own!

"I'll show you my vision for the new generation."

...This sucked.

My body cast magic on its own, working up a flight spell that seeped out to encompass the entire audience...

"Whoa! I'm... I'm flying through space!"

They had vanished from sight, whizzing into the air. I controlled them from the ground, making them do a lap around the continent before returning them to the plaza.

"Holy shit!"

"Wh-what just happened?!"

"It was incredible! I was the wind! I was a bird! I was a bird in the wind!"

The crowd was euphoric, gushing about their experiences.

...I just needed to comment while watching their reactions.

"Huh. I'm floored this would even surprise you. You must not have

interacted with magic much.”

Is he... I mean, am I an idiot?

Acting all high and mighty. For what?

Oh no...don't ruffle your hair and close your eyes! Don't sigh with ennui!

I was starting to make myself sick.

I'd had enough. I needed to die. Someone needed to put me out of my misery.

...That was what the heart wanted.

“I hope you don't think you've won! I've got plenty more where that came from!” bellowed Norman.

“Heh. Do you think you can top me? I'd love to see you try.”

I guess I was trapped in hell...forever.

“How's this?!” Norman challenged. “I've developed a magic device that allows anyone to perform a *Double Cast*—”

“Oh. Cool... And now it can do an *Eight Cast*.”

“*SHIT!*”

Please... Please stop...!

“Fine! In that case, what about this spell for full recovery? Look! Even if you cut your nails too short, it immediately—”

“Anyway, would you like a spell to revitalize dead hair roots? Like this?”

“What the—? New life has been found on my desert of a skull!”

Someone...! Anyone...! ...Help!

“D-damn! Wh-what about this?! Here's a spell for anti-aging! There's no way you can beat this!”

“Oh my. You call that anti-aging? I can still see those laugh lines. I'll show you what an anti-aging spell can really do.”

“WHOA! I... I can feel my body getting stronger... I feel invincible!”

“Take a look in the mirror.”

“...What? Is this what I look like? No way. Really? You've got to be lying. I'm so young! And...handsome?”

“I also cast a spell for plastic surgery.”

“...What...?!”

This competition was becoming a big mess now that my subconscious was going berserk...!

“I've lost, Lord Ard. Please make me your pupil. What do you say? I'll lick your shoes if that's what it takes! Please!”

Norman was practically unrecognizable, declaring his defeat.

We didn't really *lecture* on anything, I realized. I just administered some cosmetic procedures on Norman's face.

"Gweh-heh-heh! I knew you had it in you, Ard!" Verda commended as she mingled with the crowd beneath the stage.

"...Can you please tell me this event is over?" I asked.

"Sure! The bald guy is the loser. I don't mind calling it a day. *This time.*"

This was more anticlimactic than I'd expected. Knowing her, I would have bet she'd join in on the fun.

"Welp, I have to take care of something. Gotta go! Will I make it in time? ♪ Or will I be behind? ♪" Verda sang, bouncing off with a spring in her step.
...Weird.

I had a feeling the walking nightmare was planning to further subject me to her powers.



Verda's Battle of Lectures made me stick out like a sore thumb. It meant I had to deal with Olivia's annoying smile.

After the debacle, we resumed our normal schedule, wrapping up our tours for the day. We were about to move on to free time, the last one on this trip.

"Yoo-hoo! God's back!"

Verda had appeared again before us.

"Oh... Are you here to put on another silly performance?"

"Nope! I just figured I'd take you to a few local spots since it's your last day here!"

Though her offer seemed genuine, there was no way of knowing what was going on in her head. Based on my sources, she had not only been responsible for the chaotic incidents on the first day, but also the head-spinning events of the second. Though there had been none of her traps the day prior...I had a sneaking suspicion she'd been busy preparing for today.

I refused to take any part in her pesky plans. My friends seemed to agree with me, since I could feel them begging me with their eyes to find a way out of this.

"...We don't want to take up your precious time, Lady Verda. I'm

honored that you even—”

“No need to be shy! ...Or are you trying to ditch me? Because if you are, I’ll air your dirty laundry to the world! Just what *is* Ireena doing to Ard every night in his sleep? What’s Ginny always up to during class? Or...what is Sylphy doing to Livvy’s—”

“L-let’s hang out, Lady Verda!” Ireena exclaimed.

“Nothing would make me happier than walking next to you!” Ginny shouted.

“I’ve been dying to play with you, Verda!” Sylphy yelled.

As blood drained from their faces, the three of them closed in on Verda.

...Just what did she have on them?

I was especially concerned about Ireena’s secret. What *was* she doing to me every night?!

“I take it you’re not trying to ditch me, Ard?”

“...I’d never dream of it, Lady Verda.”

After all, I had a few secrets I wanted to keep myself.

This was how we were roped into spending our last free period with Verda.



...Our guide, Verda, led us to local spots that were unexpectedly ordinary.

The first was a restaurant.

“I imagine you’re all getting hungry. It’s almost noon... This is my local haunt!”

According to her, this hole in the wall was known for its tomato pasta.

She was right. The food was really good.

“Welcome, Lady Verda.”

“Hey! If it isn’t the head chef! Compliments to you! The pasta was amazing...um... remind me of your name?”

“Welb.”

“Riiiiight! Welb!”

After we ate with relish, Verda led us to the next location, a smallish theater. It seemed to be run by a minor troupe that put on a number of short comedic skits each day.

Verda’s recommendation had us roaring in laughter and clutching our

stomachs as we wheezed.

“I love these guys. Especially that one actor... Aw, shoot. I can never remember their names,” muttered Verda, breaking out into a smile as the comedy worked its magic.

It could have been a figment of my imagination, but...I swore I could see sadness touch her young face.

Verda guided us to another place after our cheeks stopped hurting from laughter. This spot wasn't a local secret, but a famous attraction.

...I had purposefully tried to keep my group away from here.

The National Museum of Kingsglaive.

It had been around for five hundred years, and no other institution on the continent could top its reputation...according to the sign at the entrance.

It was true that the museum exhibited ancient artifacts...and a decent collection of objects connected to the Demon Lord.

...To this generation, they were considered priceless historic materials. To me, they were just plain embarrassing.

“T-the Demon Lord's toothbrush...!” Ireena whispered.

“His bathwater...!” breathed Ginny.

“What a blast from the past. He loved this spoon,” Sylphy remembered.

...I had something to say to the curators. Haven't you ever heard of respecting someone's privacy? I could easily interrogate them for a hundred days, if not more.

This was a nightmare. My used personal effects lined the walls.

I wouldn't have cared this much if I were alone, but I was with Ireena, Ginny, Sylphy, and Verda.

“Gweh-heh-heh! And his erotica! I take it this was his fetish, huh? Hilarious!”

“I-I didn't realize the Demon Lord was into smut ...,” Ireena observed.

“*Steamy Night with a Seductive Succubus*... Hee-hee. A man of culture, I see,” Ginny giggled.

“I remember this! I was the one who discovered this book! It made my skin crawl, and I realized I shouldn't be fooled by Var's cute face! He was a real perv,” Sylphy confided.

...This had been why I was avoiding this place like the plague.

Someone needed to strike me down. My stomach was in knots.

“H-heh, guys? Want to go to see his subordinates’ effects?” I asked, cheek twitching as I forcefully tried to pull them away.

...Far, far away from this corner of the exhibition to a room where my subordinate’s things were on display.

“Oh, wow! I haven’t heard this name in ages!” Verda exclaimed, peering into a glass case.

“*An Article Belonging to General Locke...? Um... Like your pupil Locke?*” Sylphy asked.

“Bingo! Locke was an interesting one, though he didn’t really have anything going for him.”

I remembered him, too. Verda’s criticisms were right. The guy had no real talent.

He was cunning in the worst ways, and no one had a better eye for people than him. He had enough of a silver tongue to foist his work onto others and then take the credit... Basically, he was human trash.

“What? Are we talking about the same Locke?” Ireena asked.

“Isn’t he known as the Father of Convenience? He was a great inventor.”

He’s known as *what*? Who gave him that nickname?

“I mean, look at all his inventions on display. This magical stone revolutionized the lives of the people and—”

Hold on. I could have sworn I’d seen this stove and all his other inventions somewhere before...

Oh yeah... C-come to think of it, he *had* pestered me in the past...

“*What’s up, Your Majesty? So I was thinking I’d like to leave my mark on history.*”

“...*That’s random.*”

“*It’s all I’ve been thinking about lately. Like, you’re all cool as shit. I want my name to go down in history, too! Which is where you come in. Can you help me come up with a plan? Pretty please? Like... oh, I don’t know... maybe an idea for a sick invention?*”

“*You’re so shortsighted. If you don’t come up with it yourself, what’s even the—?*”

“*Hmm? Could it be you’re out of ideas? Ha-ha! I guess our ruler is only good on the battlefield, huh. Just another meathead. I guess that makes you*

the same as Lady Lydia!”

“...Pause. Did you just say I’m on the same level as that dipstick?”

“Yeeeeeah. But I might change my mind if you give me a list of new inventions.”

“...Fine. How about...a magical stove?”

“Ooh! Nice! Another one!”

“Hmm... A magical fireplace?”

“You never let me down! You’re the greatest inventor in the world! I knew you were nothing like Lady Lydia!”

“Heh. Told you so. You could also invent a magical staircase and a magical printer.”

“I’ll take it!”

“...Take what?”

“Just talking to myself. Another one!”

...He had taken all my ideas!

I could almost see him smiling... I guess he managed to leave his mark, even though he contributed nothing to the world.

“Is something wrong, Ard? You seem...frustrated.”

“...You know, Ireena, I used to wish I’d experience defeat...but it seems I’ve lost without realizing it.”

My emotions were all jumbled together.

“Oh! This brings me back! I thought I lost it, but I guess it’s been on display the whole time!” Verda chirped, bringing me back to earth.

Everyone headed toward the glass case where she chattered excitedly. There was a painting on display that Verda had commissioned in ancient times. It had been painted by the finest artist in the nation.

Our first and final group portrait.

Lydia was next to me. The key members surrounded us.

The Four Heavenly Kings. The Council of Seven. The Champions, Sylphy included.

All my irreplaceable companions.

“I-i-i-t’s like going back in time!” Sylphy managed to say, tears streaming from her eyes as she faced the images of the dearly departed.

I could feel the tiny seed of nostalgia blooming within me.

...I was the most surprised to see Verda gazing at the painting with a far-off look in her eyes.

“Those were the good times. You know...I think those were the best years of my life.”

She didn't have on her usual eerie grin. Her young face went somber as she tried to piece together her emotions.

“I used to think I stuck by Var's side to satisfy my own intellectual curiosity. That I was happy as long as I could experiment. That I didn't care about anything else. But...” Verda sighed a little, narrowing her eyes. “I finally realized the truth when he was gone. I didn't stick around to perform my experiments. I wanted to...hang out with my friends...who had also been rejected by society.”

Friends, huh. I never thought I'd live to hear Verda say it.

I'd only ever thought of her as a mad scientist who saw everyone else as lab rats. Whenever we used to see each other, she would try to slice through my guts or make me stick around to watch her weird experiments. I thought she hung around me merely as a means to an end.

But I guess it had gone deeper than that.

“I was a loner before I met Var. Not that it ever bothered me. All I needed were experiments to satiate my inquisitive nature. After he was gone, though...it suddenly hit me. I was lonely.”

Ireena and Ginny weren't sure how to respond. They just exchanged a confused look.

Meanwhile, Sylphy and I were shocked by this revelation... Our eyes were as round as saucers.

“With Var gone, we basically disbanded. Livvy blamed herself and wandered off... Even Lizer claimed to have lost faith in Var and went off on his own. Al...took it really hard. I mean, Var was his whole life. Without him...Al had a breakdown. It was the same for all of us. Even I was an empty husk.”

“You...?” I asked without thinking.

Verda offered me a strained smile. “Yeah. And you know, I finally realized something. That I loved Var from the bottom of my heart. After all, he was my best lab rat...and my best friend.”

Best friends, huh. I couldn't stop myself from staring at her in wonder. I never expected her to say that... I found it hard to believe, but her expression was dead serious.

“Var gave me some of my best years. Never in my life had I felt so alive. I

got to hang out with my strange friends. But...that's not the case anymore. I can't even remember names now. I can't manage to find anyone interesting. That's why...I've become a loner again."

Desolation settled in Verda's eyes. She almost resembled...me when I'd been crushed by the weight of my solitude as the Demon Lord.

She sighed and looked at me. "Hey, Ard. Are you enjoying your life *now*?"

Verda managed a sad smile.

I nodded. "Yeah. I'm having a good time, thanks to Ireena and Ginny, Sylphy, and Lady Olivia...and everyone else."

"Cool. I'm jealous. I'm not having fun at all. I didn't realize life without friends could be this boring... Things might have been different if I'd figured that out when Var was still here."

"Lady Verda. If that's the case—"

It was a decision even I found hard to believe. My past self would never have let me say such a thing, but this was something I needed to say to Verda right now.

I needed to ask her to be my friend.

Just before I could...

"Well..." Verda started, letting the disturbing smile creep onto her face again. "I imagine my life is about to get more interesting."

Her twisted lips let out a little giggle...

There was no warning for what was to come.

Our eardrums rang when something exploded.

"...?! Wh-what was that?!" Ireena yelped.

"It sounded far away from the museum," Ginny observed.

"Let's go outside!" shouted Sylphy.

We scrambled after Sylphy toward the exit, parting through the confused visitors. When we stepped back out onto the main road...the situation unfolded before our eyes.

"Eeek?!"

“D-Demons! The demons are coming!”

The public was swarming in mass panic. Their screams were canceled out by the explosions.

The entities directed their magic to the ground and buildings, setting off a chain of annihilation. They were half-human, half-beast, and terribly repulsive.

“A flock of morphed demons? That was out of the blue.”

I could feel doubt and suspicion taking root in my heart.

It was an impossible situation.

From the beginning of the school trip, I had been casting a detection spell to keep an eye on the entire city, but hadn’t picked up anything that could indicate demons.

Plus, it was weird that the demons were rampaging. I’d heard their population had dipped to an all-time low. It would have been reckless for them to carry out a random attack.

That was why they always had a reason for their raids.

There had been no suspicious activity before this. That was fact.

“Huh. Something’s fishy...but let’s focus on deescalating the chaos,” I murmured, casting attack spells, five per enemy to cover the five elements.

In total, sixty-eight sets of spells, each with five magic circles, manifested in the empty sky and below their feet...

Lightning. Fire. Icicles. Wind blades. Boulders.

They pummeled the demons, though I held back from killing them.

I didn’t reap lives unworthy of taking. My pride meant I would limit my powers to suit this need.

When the magic touched my targets, though, their bodies practically disintegrated into shiny dust.

“...What?”

“...Oh?”

“Um, wh-what’s going on?”

“A-all I know is the demons disappeared.”

“It was like, *shling!* And then *bam!* Gone!” Sylphy explained.

I placed my hand on my chin, thinking through this unexpected phenomenon. Even the demons left behind corpses. They didn’t just dissolve into nothing.

They had to be...

“Homunculi! They’re definitely Homunculi! Not demons!” Verda exclaimed, bouncing up and down as she voiced my theory.

“H-Homunculi...?”

“Then this incident...”

“...was orchestrated by that bald guy...Norman?!”

The memory of Norman explaining his research was still fresh in our minds.

But the offender couldn’t have been Norman.

“His findings were based on chaos theory, but these entities had to have been created by another theory altogether. I hate to say this...but Norman doesn’t have the knowledge to produce those Homunculi. I find it hard to believe he’s behind this,” I explained.

Then who could it be?

I cast my gaze on a certain individual.

At that moment, my ears started ringing from the blast.

...Crumbling into chaos, the entire town seemed to be overrun with demons.

“I guess there’s no way around it. We have to focus on saving the city first. Then we can search for the offender.”

We were all on the same page. No one raised any objections.

“Okay, let’s go—”

We were about to race over to suppress the rampaging demons when...

AWOOOOOO...

Echoing through the streets came a monster’s ominous howl.

My body instantly broke into a cold sweat.

“It can’t be...”

Please be wrong, I begged myself, turning to the south.

My vision was flooded by the worst scene imaginable.

“Ngh?!” Ireena gasped.

“Wh-what is that...?”

“...We’re donezo,” Sylphy breathed.

Ireena and Ginny gaped, eyes wide in terror. Sylphy started to perspire as the reality of the situation dawned on her.

Something was rising in the far distance, parting with the ground and floating toward the sky...

...My beloved castle. Castle Millennion.

“Gweh-heh-heh! Oh boy! Bad news! We’re in for it now! Castle Millennion is in Battle Mode!”

“B-Battle Mode?”

“Wh-what does that mean, Lady Verda?”

“Hm? Var’s castle is the greatest piece of architecture...*and* the strongest magic weapon in the world! It usually functions as a normal castle, but when its surroundings are under attack, it enters Battle Mode! It’s absurdly overpowered. It has enough magic to annihilate an Evil God!”

“R-really...?!”

“I-if the demons ever control it...!”

“Then humanity will go extinct in the blink of an eye! Gweh-heh-heh!”

“This is no time to joke!” Sylphy snapped.

She was right. This was no laughing matter...

But neither was it a time to cry out in despair.

“If the records are correct, there are two stages of Battle Mode.”

“Uh-huh. Battle Mode serves as the castle’s safety net to prevent the enemy from seizing it! We’re seeing the first phase! It shows the enemy that it’s about to take the offensive by going airborne. After a set period, it’ll start transforming itself. That’s the second phase!” Verda explained.

“I-in other words, we still have some time before it completely enters full Battle Mode,” said Ireena.

“We should infiltrate the castle to stop it,” Ginny continued.

“Then we better hurry! At this rate, the whole town...no...the entire world will be in danger!” Sylphy shouted.

“I imagine Lady Olivia and the knights can handle the civilians. We’ll pay the castle a visit,” I declared.

We looked at each other and nodded in unison. Sprinting as fast as our legs would take us, we headed for the Demon Lord’s castle.

I wanted to teleport there, but...the Homunculi had set countermeasures. The entire city was under a sealing spell that prevented any type of mobilization magic, including teleportation. I was rendered useless.

I could probably manage to find an exception to the rule if I took the time to analyze their spell...but the clock was ticking. It made more sense to set off for our destination on our own two feet.

On our way there, we took care of the demons and secured the citizens' safety.

But...the people technically weren't *saved*. After all, the enemy hadn't even laid a single scratch on the populace.

It was so peculiar. The Homunculi destroyed only the buildings, showing no aggression toward humans. They would occasionally unleash spells on fleeing crowds...but only to make craters on the ground.

It was like they were toying with us.

...I was starting to think my theory was right as I continued racing forward with everyone else.

I stopped when I saw a group of human-shaped shadows whizzing toward us.

Homunculi.

"Well, well, well. Isn't this a nostalgic lineup?" Verda said.

They were my late subordinates. Our formidable enemies were ones I had dispatched myself. There was no mistaking them.

Standing before us were the heroes of the ancient past.

"I-I remember some of these faces from the ancient world," Ireena observed.

"That's Lady Lydia's former slave...!"

Ireena and Ginny started to sweat, petrified.

"Hah!" Sylphy laughed instead. "Fakes will always be fake! You're an easy job compared to the real deal!" Her chest puffed up in pride.

She was right. Even though their appearances suggested otherwise, it seemed unlikely their power could replicate the originals'.

But in any case...there were enough of them to keep us preoccupied. We'd run out of time if we stopped here.

Which meant...

"Ard! And Verda! Leave this to us! We'll take care of these guys!"

...This was our only option.

"Ireena. Ginny... Will you be all right?"

They straightened their shoulders and looked at me.

"Duh! Three of us will be more than enough!" Ireena boomed.

“Miss Sylphy is right. You should go ahead. If there’s another surge of Homunculi, I trust you’ll come save us.”

...They had really matured during our trip to the past. I had full faith in them.

“Got it. Let’s go, Lady Verda.”

“You got it, buster!”

We launched ourselves at the same time, vaulting over the heads of the crowd. The Homunculi stood ready to shoot us down, but...

“Don’t even think about it! *Demise-Argis!*” Sylphy summoned the Holy Sword, gripping it tight and furiously rushing in.

“I won’t let you steal the limelight!” Ireena shrieked.

“I got your back, Miss Sylphy!”

The other two girls unleashed *Mega Flare* on the horde, and Verda and I were able to safely land on the other side.

“May victory smile on you...!”

Even though I was concerned for their welfare, I elected to trust them, dashing forward without looking back once.

The road ahead was relatively quiet. No formidable opponents barred our way...

“Let’s jump, Lady Verda.”

“Aye-aye, captain! Time for a little infiltration!”

We were still unable to cast any flight spells because of their countermeasures. We weaponized our strengthening magic to enhance our physical abilities and vaulted forward.

We leaped through the blue sky until we reached the castle.

“Pardon us.”

In that instant, I struck the gate with a lightning spell and blasted it to smithereens.

We entered Castle Millennion.

“Our destination is the center of the castle. Hurry, Lady Verda.”

“I can *feel* you’re anxious. But that’s what makes it fun! Gweh-heh-heh!”

Side by side, we ventured further inside.

...Something about being with her made me miss the old days. We’d done this sort of thing together back then, too. Hard to believe I was forced to relive these experiences in modern times. *Déjà vu*.

The circumstances back then had been a little different. If my theory was

correct, we'd—

I never got a chance to finish that thought.

The wall in front of us was pulverized, stopping us from progressing down the wide corridor.

“Look at that! A wild Champion has appeared!” Verda squealed.

The dust settled to show...sweeping silver hair. Unruffled composure. An ethereal beauty.

It was my former best friend and Champion.

Lydia.

“.....” She remained wordless as one hand gripped her special weapon.

The Holy Sword Vald-Galgulus...or at least a perfect replica.

Homunculus Lydia carried it, nimbly rushing at us faster than the speed of sound.

Good grief. I wanted to sigh.

Did the mastermind of this whole plot think I'd have a mental breakdown? Because they were selling me short, if that was the case.

“.....Ngh!”

When I was within her range, Homunculus Lydia swung her sword over her head, crashing it down on me.

I stepped slightly to the side to dodge her supersonic slash and quickly returned the favor, striking her delicate chin.

She stumbled back. I took her powerless arm and snapped it at the joint.

...She was so feeble. No clue how to fight.

Real Lydia would have headbutted me before I had the chance to go for her joints. This one was nothing more than a cheap counterfeit.

“Pardon me.” I took the sword that had fallen from her broken arm. “Return to the dumpster.”

Without hesitation, I slashed Homunculus Lydia diagonally from the shoulder, splitting her in two. She instantly burst into dust.

“...Let's go.”

“Gweh-heh-heh! You never let me down, Ard! Looked as easy as pie!” Verda gripped her stomach, practically crying from laughter.

We hustled farther into the castle, running up to the second and third floors until we finally arrived at the very top. We made our way to the inner sanctum, and...flung open a large door leading to a certain room.

It was Castle Millennion's Mode Control Room.

The open space only contained an altar-like device at the very center and nothing more. In the utilitarian room...stood an earlier visitor.

“As I suspected, Castle Millennion changed modes because of a Homunculus made in *his* image.”

It wasn't really my place to say this, but the form silently staring at us was...beautiful.

Pure white hair cascaded down his back. Skin nearly translucent. Beauty forged by heaven. God must have spent extra time on him.

With every step, flowers bloomed from the ground. Any eye contact that lasted longer than three seconds was sure to make anyone swoon.

He was a Homunculus of the Demon Lord...which made him a Homunculus of myself when I was Varvatos.

“...According to the texts, only the Demon Lord can control Castle Millennion. Only he would have the rights necessary to switch to Battle Mode. I suspected his Homunculus might be operating the castle...”

“Home run, baby... Do you think we can take this guy?”

Verda's query sounded like a challenge.

I smiled at her. “What a silly question.”

Our opponent stuck out his right palm in our direction, manifesting a magical circle that surged in crimson. Red swirls gathered together to form a serpentine dragon that rushed us.

From a modern point of view, this was top of the line. Special-class magic. It was right up there with the magic of my current parents, the Great Mages.

From the perspective of those born to this generation, this attack was close to overpowered.

“This should be easy if this is all you can manage.”

I cast the low-level *Wall*, summoning a semitranslucent shield in front of us. Its large barrier put a halt to the flame dragon. The fiery monster opened its maw and crashed into the wall...creating cracks in our defense.

Still, that seemed to do the trick. The dragon burst into red dust and vanished.

“I believe it's my turn,” I announced, and a magic circle appeared beneath my enemy's feet.

If he was real or possessed the power of the real Varvatos, he wouldn't move an inch. After all, he'd evaluate that my attack wasn't even worth

dodging.

The Homunculus before us didn't lift a finger. Not because he was so formidable.

Because he couldn't react to my counter.

"*Radiant Retribution*," I chanted, and a brilliant white light shot up from underneath him.

It blasted toward the sky like a pillar, scorching a hole through the castle ceiling from its heat. I didn't want to harm my precious castle, but this would be a simple enough fix.

The pillar seemed to thoroughly annihilate our enemy, leaving us with a gentle breeze in the newly ventilated room. Not even his particles were left behind. It must have snuffed out his existence entirely.

"Phew. I guess a counterfeit can't compete."

I sighed a little and approached the magical altar device. If I could take control of my Castle Millennion and return it to its usual setting, things would settle down for the time being.

First, though, I was dying to confirm a certain theory that had formed in my heart...

It seemed there was no need. My *opponent* had already proved to be one step ahead.

I shrugged at the presence trembling right behind me.

"So, you were the mastermind..." I said, looking over my shoulder.

"...Lady Verda."

Her childish features perked up to form her eerie smile. A shadowy hole swirled directly above her small body...

"You planned to attack me if I touched the device, right?"

"Gweh-heh-heh! Guilty as charged! Bummer! But I'm stoked! This is how we play!"

"...If I may ask: Why?"

"You shouldn't need me to tell you. You already know. But if you insist...! I wanted to test out which would win—my divine gifts or your untamed power! Well, I guess the experiment is still going!" she boomed.

More black holes opened up with Verda serving as their epicenter.

"My heart started racing as soon as I laid eyes on you! Even though I was a loner for thousands of years, I finally had a new lab rat to toy around with!"

"...So, that's why you took an interest in us. Or should I say, me. You

worked your roundabout ways for the first two days, and now, you're ready to make direct contact."

"Bingo! You were a riot! I loved seeing you get dejected over Ireena! You were a hoot when they messed with your head during the battle of love potions! Show me more! Let me play with you until I'm bored!"

I could feel Verda's entire body playfully dripping with bloodlust. She was like a small child giggling as she pulled the wings and legs off a bug.

She rushed at me with her innocent smile.

"Come on! Let's get this experiment started! Let the games begin!" Verda shouted, making a declaration of war...

Two things clattered out from the dark holes surrounding her.

They were hard to describe. You could say they looked like toy ocarinas with handles on them. She gripped one in each hand.

"First up are my Destruction Ray Guns! They can blast anything into smithereens with one clean shot!"

She thrust them in my direction and pulled the trigger, firing crimson beams.

The two shots zigzagged toward me like wriggling caterpillars. If this were a different situation, I'd have nullified the attack with a defense spell and evaluated my position...but my opponent was Verda. It was best that I completely dodge all her attacks. If I got careless, she might instantly end me.

Fortunately, I didn't need to worry about their speed. I hopped to the side to evade them.

"Scary monster! Come here!" Verda commanded.

Just before I made my landing, I felt a presence behind me. Sensing immediate danger, I cast a defense spell partly out of reflex.

It was the high-level *Giga Wall*. A compact version of it, really.

A translucent gold curtain armored my entire body.

A monster beyond words reared its heavy head from the black hole behind me. The dragon appeared to be a grotesque mash of muscle and steel.

It opened its repulsive mouth, blasting out blue light waves. Because I had cast a defense spell just beforehand, I didn't take any damage. My sphere barrier took the brunt of the hit, leaving it fractured with fissures.

The interior of my beloved castle was riddled with holes.

"Look what you have done to Castle Millennion...! What do you think the Demon Lord would say about this...?!"

“Gweh-heh-heh! Don’t worry about it! He’d just laugh and forgive me!”

Who in their right mind would shrug this off? In fact, I was boiling with rage!

“I believe you mentioned earlier that you wished to play until you were bored...! If that’s the case...I’ll entertain you...!”

I was going to make every fiber of her being regret damaging my castle.



I handed over the reins to my anger, casting a new spell to surround myself with one hundred and eight magic circles.

Verda let out a giant smile, looking at the glimmering mix of geometric patterns.

“Wow. Can’t say I saw that coming.” A bead of sweat trailed down her skin.

I started laying the foundation for my best attack.

“Atone with your life for destroying this castle.”

Angry bolts of lightning came crashing down. The explosions were brutal. Stormy winds had turned to blades gone berserk. Boulders started pitching down on us.

I forced Verda into taking a defensive stance, pounding her with a stream of excessive force.

“Whoa! Hey! Pause! Ard! Time out!”

“No.”

“It’s my turn! Hey! I get to go now! It’s my—”

“You’ve run out of turns. I will continue until I’m finished.”

“Hey! That was a close one! I almost just died! By the way, Ard, your stray bullets are damaging the castle! If you keep demolishing the walls, we’re going to have an open floor plan on our hands! I think Var might get mad at us...!”

“It’s fine. I’m the only one allowed to destroy it.”

Even during our silly banter, I didn’t weaken my offensive intensity.

...Typical. Though her moves bordered on comedic, she deftly managed to avoid every strike...! That was why my perfect castle had now become practically decrepit...!

I didn’t *want* to kill off this extension of myself. The hard truth was I had no other option.

Verda was wielding something that was at the border of magic. Just as I was born with the unusual ability to analyze and control every situation, she had been blessed with a strange talent.

She could alter anything. Since the day she was born, her gift allowed her to transform any magical concept. This meant she could freely shuffle them to create absurd and unknown powers.

On top of that, she could combine them with her magical weapons, dipping into an infinite well of tactics... That was where her true powers

lurked.

I couldn't analyze or control her. That alone made us the worst possible match, but I had a plan.

That plan was brute force.

"Hold up! Hold up! I'm sick of dodging!"

"Might I suggest taking a direct hit?"

"Gweh-heh-heh! That's cold, my kindred spirit!"

Her spells lagged slightly behind standard magic. If I hammered her with dozens or hundreds of magic attacks, there was a chance I could seal her movements. Even the wildest of spells was useless if it couldn't get its foot out the door.

"Damn it! If it's come to this, I'll cast my *Origi*—"

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that." I pressed into her with even more intensity, giving her no time to chant an spell.

An Original Technique unleashed the power in one's soul. In other words...an ability that elevated one's innate talents to their highest level.

Mine heightened my abilities to analyze and control to their extremes. Verda's Original Technique pushed her powers to transform magic to their limits.

Tremendous didn't even come close to describing the extent of this power. It was no exaggeration to say she could destroy the world in an instant if the thought crossed her mind. And not just this planet. It could wipe away the entire universe, space and galaxies included.

But that meant nothing if she didn't get the chance to cast it.

For reasons beyond me, casting an Original Technique required an Aria. If I could stop her from finishing her chant, I could stop her from casting her spell.

"Oh, come on! This is no fair! You're making me do all the running! Why don't you try dancing for once?"

"I'm afraid I must pass. These awkward moves suit you."

"Nnnnnghhhh! You're nasty!"

"You are the last person I wish to hear that from."

"You know what? Fine! Nothing will be settled at this rate!" Verda stopped in her tracks. "I hate to waste things, but *this* body has got to go!"

With both arms raised, Verda took on the swarm of magic and was absorbed by one of the whirlpools eating away at the castle. Within an

instant, her petite figure was no more.

Normally, this was where things would end. But I knew better.

Da-da-da-da-daaa-da-da-da-daaaaa! 

A strange sound rang out behind me...

“Ta-da! I’m baaaaaaaack!” Verda singsonged from somewhere.

I guess she wouldn’t die so easily. Not that I was surprised. If she was going to keep respawning, I’d just keep killing her until she was dead.

She could atone for obliterating my castle...in hell!

I turned around to attack her once again...but before I got the chance...

“Here come my two trump cards!” Verda shouted energetically, tapping her chest with her left fist.

Light radiated from within her...and spread throughout her entire body.

“...! Lady Verda! Tell me this isn’t happening...!”

“Heh-heh-heh! Oh, but it is, Ard!” she cackled...even though sweat broke out on her forehead.

It was a suicide mission only she could carry out.

“You’re altering your spirit...! If you do that, you’ll...!”

“Be effed, if I’m honest with you. But, Ard...” She beamed like she was having the time of her life. “Anything to beat you! As you can tell, I’m the sorest of losers! Gweh-heh-heh-heh!”

As she gave a crazed laugh, she laid hands on the magic device nearby.

This was bad.

Her spirit began transforming into a version of something equal to my own. In other words—

“No outsiders allowed! And...time to pull off an old switch-a-roo!”

I tried to stop her, but it was too late. Before I realized it, I’d been thrown outside. As I floated through a sea of clouds, I stared at my beloved castle.

“For goodness sake...! Playing with you is bad for my heart, Verda...!” I whispered as if I didn’t want anyone to overhear.

I frowned.

Right before my very eyes...Castle Millennion was transforming into the

final phase of Battle Mode.

“Woo-hoo! Var’s toy is mine now! Gotta catch ’em all! Nothing is impossible with my genius! Ya-hoo!” Verda’s voice boomed, resounding through the blue sky with some sort of acoustic magic.

It triggered the castle to break down into a million parts, which continued to assemble and reassemble together...until it formed a titanic humanoid shape, a steel giant with a jet-black body and twinkling golden ornaments. It was my magnum opus and the greatest magical weapon.

It was Castle Millennion in full Battle Mode.

“I warned you on the first day that I’d show you, Ard!”

The mega-circle behind the metallic hunk began shining like a halo.

Megalo Sol Ray, I remembered, reciting its name in my head...and the magic circle discharged a nearly infinite stream of wide light beams.

Even in the ancient world, this would have wiped out an enemy army in one strike. I never imagined the day would come when I’d be considered the enemy...!

“Out of all the hands-on activities on this trip...this one takes the cake...!” I said sarcastically, darting around the sky.

The cluster of concentrated beams rushed at me at a ludicrous speed. Sometimes, I dodged them, and other times, I warded them off with defense magic.

...Leave it to Verda to pull off something like this. I thought only I could control Castle Millennion, but she’d managed to hijack it like she’d been born to operate it.

Still, I could see Verda had her hands full. The proof could be seen in the fact that she was focused on releasing attacks with Castle Millennion instead of weaponizing her unique gift.

If she’d been able to use her talents, I’d have been screwed.

“I should give *Tempest Flare* a try,” I muttered, barely managing to avoid the oncoming beams as I constructed the spell in my head.

I cast a Special-class *Tempest Flare*, summoning a flood of magic circles around the steel giant.

After a moment, they erupted with volcanic fury. A real firestorm. There was no way anything could handle such an attack, meant to reduce all it touched to char.

“Gweh-heh-heh! This castle is amazing! Var’s hideous progeny!”

The magic reached its limit, and the red-hot fury started to peter out.

Castle Millennion was perfectly fine. Not even a single scratch could be found on the edifice, which continued operating with pride.

Ngh...! I should have known my castle would withstand it...!

Despite the severity of the situation, I found that I was...happy.

My castle was incredible.

“Time for round two!” Verda chirped.

We were getting ready to resume the escape theater featuring me and a million light beams.

It looked like she was casting another spell this time. The piece of armor covering the castle’s knee propped up...revealing a magical circle that dispatched a throng of gold rings.

Negative Happy Ring.

A binding spell. Once caught in its clutches, even I would be frozen for all eternity.

Both beams and rings tore through the air, trying to capture me. I tried to fend them off with a number of counterattacks...but in the end, that meant nothing.

“Ngh...! I can’t believe I’m...happy about being driven into a corner...!”

I felt something like parental pride for a dear child.

...But at this rate, I would never succeed in toppling it.

Which meant I was out of options. If I wanted to turn the tide in my favor, I’d have to use something else...

I prepared to chant the Aria to cast the ace up my sleeve...but something happened before I could finish...

“What’s wrong, Ard? Already at your limit?”

“...Maybe.”

I didn’t really think anything of my answer. It was just what popped into my head.

But...it seemed to signal something more to Verda.

“...Wait, what? Are you joking?”

All her attacks stopped.

“You can’t be serious. You’re not throwing in the towel yet, right?”

There was fear in her trembling voice.

...She’d never spoken like that before. At least, not to me.

What was she scared of? I frowned.

“But... I finally got to meet you! But you’re trying to just...!”

Now she sounded angry, and her attacks resumed. It was the first time I’d ever heard her this emotional.

...Thinking back on it, she always had an smile on her face.

In my memories, Verda was always snickering, with a creepy little smile plastered on her face. I thought that was her true nature and that it would never change...but I’d been proven wrong.

“I was lonely for thousands of years...! No one would actually play with me...!”

We had been the ones who’d placed that unnerving smile on her face...

Me. Olivia. Monsters of the ancient era.

We were the ones who had kept her smiling. But now that those monsters were essentially all gone...there was no longer anyone in this world who could make that happen for the beast known as Verda.

“When I saw you, it was like I’d traveled back in time! Are you *still* planning on betraying me?!”

A lonely behemoth. No other words suited her.

...*I see*. It finally hit me...that she hadn’t changed... Neither had her feelings of isolation.

“Please...don’t...leave me here all by myself!” Verda shouted, her voice thick with emotion.

I had finished preparing the answer I knew I had to give.

All roads lead to despair.

That is the way of life for a pitiful man.

I began my Original Technique through the deluge of her attacks, beams and rings blasting toward me, but I managed to hedge them.

My heart went out to Verda.

In complete solitude is he.

For there are those who follow his lead,

But none to rule together with him.

She was just like me. Rejected by society. A strange monster like no other.

There is not one who understands.

That was why...

All are eager to leave his side.

Verda had always been alone. But by meeting those as weird as her...she

finally found some friends.

...And I had unknowingly taken that from her...by reincarnating, which only benefitted myself.

*Cast away by his one and only friend,
He sinks into a sea of madness and isolation.*

Verda, you can rest at ease now.

Rest without peace.

Drowning in anguish and despair.

You'll never be alone again, I thought. I won't allow it.

That which guides this tale.

As a flood of emotions welled within me, I vocalized the last stanza.

Private Kingdom—the story of a lonely king.

Even if this meant I'd have to live a more isolated life...if I could just save her...!

"I'll play with you until you get bored...!" I shouted, obliging her as dark particles covered my right arm.

They twined around into a chain and...formed a large black sword.

"Lydia. Phase: II."

UNDERSTOOD.

SWITCHING TO STAGE II OF FULL BODY TRANSFORMATION.

ACTIVATING BRAVE DEMON.

The snaking light beams and whizzing rings all closed in on their target—me. I glared at them as my body began changing. Shadowy armor shielded me, and my hair turned white.

My transformation was complete. I hummed with absolute power.

"The fate of all creation is in my hands."

I drove away the magic headed right for me.

One swing was all it took to eliminate the destruction aiming to land the final blow.

"...Heh. Hee-hee. Heh-heh-heh," chuckled Verda from the steel giant,

sound bouncing off the metal. “Gweh-heh-heh-heh! This is what I’m talking about!”

Overjoyed, she continued roaring with laughter, resuming her furious offense all the while. Beams and rings flooded the sky, and Castle Millennion attacked me, weaponizing everything in its arsenal.

“You should know you’re powerless against me.”

I didn’t dodge. I didn’t even defend myself. I just charged in.

Wailing for death and destruction, the grim reaper met me head-on.

The unending rush of attack magic pounded down on me...but I remained uninjured.

“Whoa! Wild! Gweh-heh-heh-heh! Stay away!” Verda shrieked between laughs, moving the metal behemoth.

Its titanic steel fist came crashing down on me. It could have pulverized a mountain, but I side-stepped it...and spiraled around the forearm to the upper arm, cutting it into ribbons.

“N-no way?!” She retreated in a panic, putting distance between us. “How about this?!”

She launched more attacks at me, and I blocked them all.

“Oh! I didn’t expect this damage!”

My last counterattack had done a number on the steel giant. Slowly but surely, Castle Millennion was heading toward total destruction.

Which meant Verda was inching closer to defeat.

“Gweh-heh-heh! This is so awesooome!”

She was grinning.

“Having fun, Verda? Enjoying yourself?” Before I could stop it, I found myself smiling, too. “You’ll always be a handful.”

Back in ancient times, I’d thought hanging out with Verda was a chore.

For the very first time, I was having fun. It felt like I was messing around with a friend. This moment between us stretched on.

“Oh. I guess this castle is on its last leg.”

The left side of Castle Millennion had been torn down. The right side had lost its leg. Anyone could tell it had been beaten to hell and back. This round would be our last.

“Okay! Time for my killer technique! Let ’er rip!!”

The castle’s remaining arm stretched out an open palm. In that next moment, the giant began to rumble...and the entire hand began glowing gold.

“I see what you’re about to do. In that case...!” I prepared to cast another major technique.

“Code: Sigma. Ready.”

UNDERSTOOD.

ULTIMATUM ZERO. PLEASE STAND BY.

Seven magic circles layered on top of each other before me.

CHARGING MAGIC ENERGY. 30%... 40%...

They began to rotate, gonging like giant bells.

“Gweh-heh-heh-heh! No hard feelings, Ard!”

My opponent seemed ready. The golden glimmer in the center of the palm shielded its entire body.

I faced the steel giant...

MAGIC ENERGY HAS REACHED 100%. READY TO FIRE AT ANY TIME.

I pointed the black sword’s tip at my beloved castle.

A beat hadn’t even passed between us.

“*Ultimatum Zero*, fire!”

“*Violent Bloom*, shoot!”

Two waves broke out at the exact same time.

A cascade of black and gold. A waterfall.

They collided to generate a shock wave across the world. The city of Kingsglave received the brunt of it, causing many of the buildings to fall to rubble. The two waves maintained their competitive torrent of destruction.

Finally, the equilibrium shifted. My dark wave started to drown out the golden one...

“Gweh-heh-heh-heh! I lost this ti—”

It swallowed Verda’s voice coming from the giant.

...A few seconds ticked by. The magic had reached its limit, and the jet wave died out. Castle Millennion had been in the direct line of fire from the destructive maelstrom...

...and not even a trace of its original form remained.

The giant’s stomach containing the control room was the only section left. Everything else was gone. We couldn’t continue the battle if we tried.

As if to prove my point, Castle Millennion began to crumble. Debris rained down.

“...Back to the castle site, huh?”

There was no one around the giant hole the castle had left behind. There was no need to worry about people getting caught up in the dust that settled back on the earth.

I sighed and canceled my spell. Reassuming my usual form, I used a flight spell to descend.

Rising from the center of what was left of my castle...

“Gya-ha-ha-ha... Seems I lost big time...”

I turned my head in the direction of the voice.

“It would appear that way.”

A petite body sank to the bare earth. Verda was disintegrating into particles... Half of her had already vanished.

...It was the price for restructuring her spirit.

Even for Verda, it had been reckless. At this point, there was no way to save her. Even if she resisted, Verda would die.

...She must have known that better than anyone.

“Ah, that was fun! I have the most fun when I’m hanging out with you.”

Verda looked at me and smiled. It was flippant and weird.

“...You know, I’ve always found your expression creepy. But it’s so strange. It never ruined my mood.”

Verda’s smile grew even eerier.

“Finally... Took long enough. I’m back to living in my self-indulgent... wa...”

Her words cut off. Verda’s entire body turned to dust, spiraling up toward the sky.

Eventually, even the smallest fragments of her disappeared...and returned to nothing.

“...Verda.”

I looked up at the horribly blue sky.

“You can’t just bail and leave me to clean up the mess.”

I chuckled to myself.

“You’re a terrible friend.”

EPILOGUE

Concluding the School Trip and the Start of Mayhem

Finally...after such a long time coming...following days that felt like they bordered on eternity...the school trip was over.

It was the morning of our departure.

There were no casualties in the last incident. Though a handful of civilians had been injured, they were all fully healed now. I made it my personal responsibility to patch up the crumbled buildings. There was nothing left for us to do.

“I thought school trips were supposed to give us a break,” I sulked.

“I’m exhausted...,” Ireena admitted.

“I can’t wait to rest when we’re back...,” added Ginny.

“I thought it was fun! ...Well, I can’t say I’d wanna do it again,” Sylphy corrected herself.

My friends chatted as they boarded the carriage. I was about to step inside.

“Heeeey! Arrrrrrrd!”

...I picked up on a voice that I desperately wished I wasn’t hearing. I accidentally clicked my tongue in irritation, turning around.

...There was a face I didn’t want to see for a while.

“*Hff. Hah.* I’m beat! But I made it in time!”

Verda Al-Hazard.

Her existence had been snuffed out because she reconfigured her spirit, but...she stood before us as if that never happened.

Not that I was surprised. She wasn’t the type to just die. If she was weak, she wouldn’t have become a Heavenly King in the first place. In fact, she was

more persistent than even the most stubborn parasite.

“...Thank you for coming to see us off personally.”

“Gweh-heh-heh! You don’t *look* thankful!” Verda clutched her stomach as she laughed.

It didn’t take her long to straighten her back.

“Hey, Ard. Do you believe in fate?”

“...Not sure. But I accept the idea of strange coincidences.”

“I see. Well, I believe in them. That’s why...I don’t think it’ll take much time before we meet again. Can’t say I know what our next reunion will look like, though.”

She broke into an hair-raising grin, drawing close to me and standing on her tiptoes.

“It was fun playing with you for the first time in forever.”

Then she whispered into my ear.

“See you around, *Var*.”

With these parting words, she padded off.

...I was busted, huh. Now I had another problem to add to my list.

...Well, I guessed this was my lot in life. Not that I wanted to accept it.

I had gained a friend from all this, though, so I figured I’d come out even.

I climbed into the carriage, thinking over Verda’s fixation on fate...



A week after we returned to the royal capital, things were back to being calm. We had eased away our exhaustion from the trip.

Well, calm, I guess, in air quotes.

“WHERE ARE YOU, SYLPHY?!”

“EEEEEEEEEP?!”

The fools were back at it again.

“I don’t think Sylphy will be able to go back to the dorms anytime soon,”

Ireena noted.

“Why don’t you wait for Miss Sylphy? You’re basically her big sister,” Ginny suggested.

“I would, but I’m busy keeping an eye on a homewrecker,” Ireena snapped back.

They fumed. Nothing had changed between them.

Classes were over for the day. We had left school as the sun set, returning to the dorms on campus.

“Excuse me. Are you Ard Meteor? And are you Baroness Ireena?”

He stood out like a sore thumb on the school grounds, covered from head to toe in armor. The crest of the royal family was engraved on the chest plate.

“...Are you one of the knights who serves under the direct orders of the queen?”



“Indeed. She has summoned both of you. Please come to the palace immediately.”

Ireena and I looked at each other.

“I gotta say, there hasn’t been a dull moment since we got here,” she said.

“Yes. I long to have too much time on my hands,” I replied.

We shrugged our shoulders.

“We’ll visit posthaste. Will you guide us?” I asked.

“Of course. Let us go.”

We braced ourselves to get mixed up in more chaos...

AFTERWORD

Readers of the third volume, it's been a while.

New readers... I don't suppose anyone would start at Volume 4, right?

I'm Myojin Katou.

What did you think of this volume? I tried my hand at a new style and structure.

If I could have it my way, I would like to deep-dive into explaining all the tiny details about the events leading up to the fourth day, but I only have, like...three pages to wrap up this section.

Instead, I'll attempt to summarize my ten-page explanation into one sentence.

Oh, what I would do to write a dark comedy about the Divine Prodigy!

...Okay. This is the part where I make my closing remarks. But before that, I'd like to share some news.

Following this section is a short story that was published in *Dragon Magazine*. It was my first time writing one. To put it simply (and keep it spoiler-free), it's like a one-shot manga that you'd find in Shonen J—mp.

It's about thirty pages, which isn't exactly short, but I hope you enjoy it.

On to the next matter of business. Drumroll, please...

The Greatest Demon Lord is getting...a drama CD!

It'll go on sale on August 20, 2019, and accompany the next volume... (I think?)

The cast is made up of some A-listers. I almost wanted to ask if they were serious when they told me. It'll feature exclusive content, and I hope you'll pick up a copy...!

That wraps up my personal news.

It's finally time to express my gratitude.

To my editor, I only have words of apology to offer. Like, I seriously think I deserve a written detention.

To Sao Mizuno, I thought Verda's design was stellar. Out of this world. I know I sound like a broken record, but allow me to say it again:

Professional artists are on another level.

To all the readers who have picked up this book, thank you!

I'm putting pen to paper and praying we'll meet in the next volume.

Myojin Katou

SPECIAL SHORT STORY

FROM DRAGON MAGAZINE

Presented by Myojin Katou and Sao Mizuno

I want to experience defeat.

I didn't even know when this thought first materialized in my mind, but I'd been going through life desperately clinging to this wish.

I'd wasted most of my earlier days freeing humanity from divine beings and their devout followers. It seemed conflict trailed after my every move: Raise the army. Seize the country. Slaughter the heroes. Spread my influence. Exterminate the gods.

And by the time I'd reached the end of that journey, I was known as the Demon Lord—treated as though I was a monster straight out of a fairy tale. The general population and most of my underlings didn't see me as human but as an understudy for a god meant to be revered.

After all those years, I had only loneliness to show for my efforts, which was why I'd started to wish for my own defeat. If I pathetically fell to my knees, I figured someone would see me as human, too. At least, that'd been my line of thinking.

But my greatest wish was never to be fulfilled... There were no enemies left to defeat me.

It was inevitable that my life would reach a checkmate. But I couldn't give it up.

In the end, I knew that the Demon Lord Varvatos would die a lonesome beast. He'd been born to carry out this fate. But I could make up for it in my next life. I could chuckle in good company and live out my days in silly merriment as I'd done in the past. It was still possible. When I couldn't bear the idea of spending another solitary moment, I'd scrambled to create a

reincarnation spell and left a will behind for my underlings.

Then I'd let myself be whisked away.

...Yep. And now we're here. I was a brand-spankin'-new baby with tears rolling down my face.

With my brilliant technique, I'd reincarnated far off in the future as a normal human. I was no longer the Demon Lord Varvatos, but Ard Meteor—just your average villager.

How time flies! I was three years old in the blink of an eye.

I'd retained my personality and intelligence from my previous life, which made acquiring language easy.

And I'd been blessed with a great constitution. In fact, it didn't take long after my birth for me to stand and walk around, and by three years old, I was already helping my mother with farm work.

"Mommy needs to go out for a bit. Will you be okay on your own?"

"Yes, I will watch the house for you, Mother."

My mother in this new life was stunning.

She smiled and nodded. "All right. Be right back! Don't worry too much about the fields! Be careful not to push yourself too hard."

With these considerate words, she waved and walked off somewhere.

After I watched her depart, I continued tending to the farm, turning the soil with my hoe. This made me feel like a real nobody out in the boonies. I couldn't hold in my chuckle.

"Nice. I'm just a typical villager. You could find someone like me anywhere. Even if I slip up in the worst way, I won't be able to blow away an entire continent anymore. Nothing about me will charm or frighten others."

With this body, I was sure I could make a hundred friends, which was a plan I'd come up with just before I died.

...But before that, I was going to focus on developing the essential skills to live.

First, I needed prowess for battle. At present, my abilities were unreliable.

Though this village hadn't been ravaged by war, that didn't guarantee

there wouldn't be an attack in the coming days. What would be the point of making friends if I couldn't even protect them?

Which meant I also needed knowledge. I had no interest in becoming great in life, but I figured I would attract more people if I was a stand-up citizen. In fact, I knew children were naturally drawn toward brains and brawn.

From then on, I elected to hide away in the house to read every book available to me or train in the mountains. I would begin making friends as soon as I was satisfied with myself.

...There was no need to rush. It was better that I took my time. Easy now.

My mother had returned as I swung the hoe, absorbed in my own little world.

"Oh, welcome back, Mother. That was fast."

"Well, I just needed to run a...little...errand...?"

...? Why was my mother looking at me like she couldn't believe her eyes?

"H-hey, Ardy. Did you take care of this field?"

"I did..."

Oh, gosh. I must have plowed it wrong.

"I'm sorry, Mother. I'm not used to this work."

"That's not what I meant...How did you cover such a large area so quickly...?"

My mother spoke so quietly that I couldn't really hear her, but she didn't appear to be angry.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

...Heh-heh. Oh, to be thankful that your parents weren't angry with you! That seemed to fit the bill for a nobody. I couldn't wait to be raised like an average person.

Fast-forward some seasons. I turned ten.

As I'd planned, I had spent that entire time either holed up in my house or training in the mountains. I was sufficiently pleased with my strength and intelligence.

But naturally, I hadn't made a single companion.

I sat up in bed one morning, thinking that over.

“Huh. It might be time to set my plan into motion to make a hundred friends.”

However, I ran into a major problem.

“...But where do I start?”

That was my first question.

I hadn't been *born* the Demon Lord in my past life. My past childhood had been turbulent, but I hadn't done anything to turn the world on its head. I'd been a perfectly ordinary guy who spent my time playing with friends.

Unfortunately, that was in the distant past. Memories tended to grow hazy after a thousand years...

“How *did* I make friends back then?”

I had no idea.

Hrm... This wasn't exactly the same thing...but I remembered something Alba the Silver Tongue used to say to me.

“Your Majesty, if you wanna pick up girls, all it takes is a good opener! Then you've already completed the first step! After that, you can just feel out the vibe.”

He had been a huge player. I kept him around because of his skills, but... he was as irritating as they came.

I imagined my insufferable subordinate's advice could be applicable to making friends.

Now that I think about it, nearly all human connections begin with basic communication.

“In that case, I'll approach all the children in the village and t...talk...”

That presented another problem.

“...How do I talk to them?”

I-I really didn't know! I had absolutely no idea what normal people talked about...! After all, I had lived so many years as a king, playing the role to act high and mighty. Because of that, any normal interaction was beyond me...

“M-maybe I should research and practice carrying on a regular conversation first? ...It'll take too much time to skirt around the issue. I have no choice but to dive in headfirst.”

I'd probably fail initially, but I would devote myself to the task without shirking away to achieve victory! That was how I rose to power in my past life. If I repeated it again here, there was no doubt I'd manage to do the same...!

The time is now! I need go out and make some friends! I thought.

...As soon as I finished eating breakfast with my parents, I left the house and roamed through the village, where I found my first target. She was a lovely girl around my own age. Her chestnut hair was plaited, and her features were simple. I went to speak to her.

Say something, I willed myself. Anything... Just speak!

“Wh-why am I so nervous...?!”

I was experiencing a level of discomfort I hadn’t felt in a very long time.

“M-my stomach hurts...! I-I can’t stop sweating...! Th-this is absurd. I didn’t even raise a brow when warring against gods...! Why would this little girl make me freeze me in my tracks...?!”

I didn’t want to admit this was the situation.

I’m...scared. She’s...terrifying. Well, I guess I’m more petrified about her response...!

How would I live with myself if she brushed me off? I couldn’t help but be filled with dread.

Tch...! Well played, girl...! This is the first time I’ve been driven into a corner...!

What should I do? Retreat?

...No! That would be pathetic! *Retreating* wasn’t in the Ard dictionary! Even if the situation wasn’t not ideal, I was a former sovereign! And kings did not flee!

Sweating like a pig, I forced myself to take a step forward, calling out to the girl from behind.

“Y-you over there! Look at me!”

Oh... My voice was so tinny... Either that, or I called out to her wrong. She’d turned around but looked put off.

Come on, Ard! There’s no time for worrying!

I needed to push ahead!

“Y-you’ve answered my summons. I-I offer you praise.”

“...Sure.”

“Y-y-y-you, umm...”

“...Uh-huh.”

“Well, uh...”

Why are you getting flustered?! Just ask her already!

Say it! Go on! Out with it! Muster up some courage! Be a hero!

I was going to be a hero! I had this in the bag!

“B-be my friend. And I’ll give you half the world...!”

...I could already tell I’d failed.

“.....Ew,” she said, looking at me with disgust and running off in what had to be an attempt to escape.

...It had only been ten years since I’d reincarnated...

...and I already wanted to die.

After that, I dashed home, locking myself in my room to play back the events in my mind.

“Give you half the world”? What did that even mean? I’d never heard anyone say that before.

But failure was the mother of invention. It had been a huge step for me.

I knew things could only go up from here. I would proceed with optimism.

I continued approaching people in the hopes of making a hundred friends, day in and day out.

Every day brought in a new deluge of experiments...and failures.

“BWEASE! BWEASE BE MY FRIEND! THAT’S ALL I WANT!”

“.....Ew.”

My heart had been shattered into a million pieces.

A year passed, and I turned eleven. My heart had healed enough for me to consider giving my plan another go. The former Demon Lord would not be discouraged!

My previous strategy proved to be no good. I learned I wouldn’t get anywhere on my own.

Which was why I decided to get the opinions of the successful people nearest to me.

My parents.

Finding each other to have a child was a natural process but a difficult one. There was no question they would have some insight on making friends.

I sought out their opinion.

First, I asked my father.

“Making friends? Ha-ha, that’s easy! First, whoop them in the ass, then say, ‘We’re friends starting today!’ and—”

“Isn’t that how you make underlings?”

Cut to my mother’s answer: “Hmm. Making friends... I can tell you how to make sex slaves, but friends...”

“I’m sorry, what kind of life do you live, exactly?”

It seemed they weren’t doing so hot on the social-acceptability scale.

When I finally realized I was looking in all the wrong places, I turned to Weiss—a handsome elven father and family friend of ours. He’d stayed at our house from time to time.

“I can’t say I have a lot of friends...but I think it would be good to show them that you have manners and take care not to offend others? If you treat everyone with respect, I’m sure you’re bound to win someone over.”

Weiss could teach my folks a thing or two.

With his advice in mind, I hurried off to put my friend-making plan into motion.

I see. Be polite, act like a gentleman, and never cause anyone discomfort.

Who would have thought?

I adopted Weiss’s suggestions and multiplied my efforts.

“What? Be friends with you, Ard...?! Ew! No way...!”

Why? What did I ever do to you? There’s no reason for you to be disgusted by me.

I did all the right things. I kept my speech as polite as possible and my actions graceful.

To convey my highest regard for my potential friends, I investigated their addresses, ages, genders, hobbies, preferences, family members, etc. I wanted them to *feel* my passion. I wanted them to know I knew everything about them.

Did...I look like a creep to them?

That couldn’t possibly be the case.

Then why did they cringe when they saw me?

I could see no reason for their disgust.

But it always ended the same way.

I would try to be friends, and they would tell me I was gross.

“Maybe I should just annihilate this world.”

I could feel my heart turning to stone with each passing day. To release my stress, I’d started hiding away in the mountains, home to monsters and dungeons. I could vent my frustration there without any guilt.

Not that I could go all out. If I went too crazy, I could easily ruin the ecosystem.

I had to be especially careful in the dungeons. The ones in the forest were at the lowest level, which meant they couldn’t handle much magic.

If someone with powerful abilities got carried away, a dungeon would overload its core, causing it to go wild. That would create abnormalities in the monsters and become a huge headache for everyone. It was under these conditions that I merrily slaughtered, minding my manners like a gentleman.

It was just before noon, though the trees blocked the sun, casting it in shadow. Like my heart.

It was time for me to run from reality with more monsters. Another awful day.

“AAAAAAAAAAGH!”

A scream echoed in the distance. It sounded like a little girl...

When I came to my senses, I was rushing to the scene. I detected magic nearby and cast the teleportation spell *Dimension Walk*. An instant later, I was transported to her location.

There was no change to the scenery. I was still in the dim forest...except there were a girl and a monster there.

As I’d suspected, the former was very young, an elf with white hair and stunning features.

The latter was a large monster in the shape of a boar. It was rather sizable compared to the girl’s small stature.

A young girl against a giant monster. It was evident that immediate aid would be necessary, but—

“Come, flames of fury! Embodiment my wrath! Scorch all to ash!”

The girl extended her left palm toward the monster, calling out a complex

formation of magic circles...

An instant later, a raging hellfire started to blaze.

Its savage trajectory left the monster no room to scamper away. The boar was immediately swallowed up by the firestorm, letting out a final squeal of agony.

But she didn't let up.

"Come, thunder! Gather on my hand! Lightning, rain down on the target before me!"

If she had let it be, the monster would have died on its own, but she chose to follow up with another attack. Purple flashes fired out from the circle above its head, piercing its body.

Charred inside and out, the monster perished without any death throes. The girl sighed in exhaustion.

...Her final attack must have been to put the suffering monster out of its misery.

But I didn't see it that way.

I could not help but feel she was like...me, beating monsters as a form of stress relief.

And her form and features...reminded me of a time past.

How could that be?

...Oh. This girl looks like her.

My best friend in my past life...known as the Champion.

It felt like I had reunited with my lost companion. That must have been why I could approach her without hesitation.

I rustled through the underbrush, triggering her to look my way.

"...What do you want?" she snapped, glaring at me suspiciously.

As I was instantly reminded of all my past rejections, I almost started to break down...but I wasn't about to lose heart. I wanted her to be my friend, no matter what.

"I-it's nice to meet you. I'm Ard Meteor. What's your name?"

I offered a gentle smile and spoke as politely to her as I did with everyone

else.

It did nothing to change her expression. She continued glaring and said nothing.

“Um... I-I witnessed your fight! It was something else! It isn't every day you see someone so young accomplish something of that caliber!”

I could see flattery was getting me nowhere. She remained silent, continuing to glare daggers at me.

I had a feeling her expression had grown more hostile. Did praising her abilities do the opposite of what I'd hoped? Maybe she was the type who hated bringing attention to her powers?

If that was the case, I completely understood. I used to be the same way.

It was starting to bother me more and more. I really just wanted us to get along.

I knew I was being eager and a little pushy, but I had to just go for it.

“U-um...if it's all right...W-will you be my friend?!”

“...Your friend?” Her expression changed slightly, cocking one eyebrow.

For the first time, I was happy with what I was seeing.

Could something happen if I kept pressing on?

My heart was about to burst from anticipation!

“Yes! Friends! I think we have some things in common! I imagine we can grow to understand each other and become friends! And—”

I was fervent.

But she immediately put out the fire in my heart.

“...You think you can understand me? Give me a break.”

She looked at me like I'd murdered her parents. Her eyes held sorrow, hatred, displeasure, and...resignation.

I instinctively backed off.

“What do you think you know about me...?!” she spat, like I had left a bad taste in her mouth.

Her silver hair bristled, and she dashed off.

It might have been a figment of my imagination...but I swore I'd seen tears in her eyes.

I stood there for some time before finally dragging myself home.

I was far from accomplishing my original goal and relieving any of my stress. I was left only with the memory of that beautiful elf...

Although I had been rejected, I had no plans of giving up. I'd make sure we became friends, even if it killed me.

...And I wouldn't let myself fail. Not again.

My next journey was to befriend that elf.

"Hello, Ireena! You appear to be in an excellent mood!" I called out.

"...How the hell do you know my name?" she snapped when we'd accidentally met again in the mountains.

"Isn't it normal to research a potential friend?" I asked. "Small world, huh? To think you were Weiss's daughter—"

"Ew! Ew! Get lost, stalker!"

She looked at me like I was garbage.

"Happy Birthday, Ireena!" I chirped during another encounter. "I brought your favorite red roses from Celine!"

"...How did you know that?"

"Ha-ha-ha. I know everything about you, down to the number of moles on ___"

"I hope you die, pervert!"

She burned my present to ash.

"Good evening, Ireena!" I greeted her when we met again. "The moon is lovely tonight!"

"...Hey, why do you know where I live?"

"Ha-ha-ha, simple! I followed you home from the mountains!"

"Ah, I see. And...why are you in my room? It's locked, and no one was supposed to stop by today."

"I wanted to surprise you! I entered through the window!"

"...You're so beyond creepy, it's starting to scare me."

After that, Ireena boarded up her window with a piece of wood so I

couldn't get in.

I tried to stroll through the front door instead.

"Ard," warned her father. "Don't go to the extreme. Be more...mindful."

For whatever reason, he was mad at me.

What did I do that was so wrong? All I did was spy on Ireena around the clock, trying to persuade her to accept my friend-posal!

...It had been a year since I'd first met Ireena, and our relationship had hardly progressed.

In fact, I was beginning to get the vibe that she was avoiding me. She was starting to bad-mouth me and give me the cold shoulder, which was tough, coming from a potential friend.

But I refused to back down.

I needed more true grit in difficult times. Only then could I find a solution.

I needed to believe in myself!

If I chased my dreams, I was certain they would one day become reality. I'd faithfully held onto this conviction since ancient times.

But...I knew I wouldn't see any progress by continuing with my current approach.

It was evening. I threw myself down on my bed, trying to rack my brain.

"Hmmm. What should I do? Based on my old life, maybe I could..."

I dug through my memories. Alba came to mind. A triple threat: he had been a sleaze, louse, and womanizer.

"Your Majesty! All women love a good surprise!"

I had approached my underling since I needed to attract women for... certain reasons...at the time.

"A surprise, huh. I've already given her a gift 'just because,' and nothing changed. I mean, I went out of my way to bring her the soul of an Evil God. Imagine my surprise when she said she wasn't the least bit interested."

He had smirked, *tsk-ing* me. *"You have no clue. Girls love romantic situations more than just stuff. You've fought your fair share of battles, so I imagine you know of some places to go with sick views. If you take her there as a surprise and whisper some sweet nothings, she'll totally be yours,*

dude!”

...Hmph. This situation was similar to the instance above.

Maybe I needed to change direction and find a picturesque place to bring her as a surprise.

Everyone needed a good subordinate in their life.

...Oh yeah, I'd forgotten Alba had been a virgin until the day he died, even though he talked big about knowing women inside and out.

I remember our companions used to laugh at him behind his back. Even after he died, he had been the butt of their jokes. *Ha-ha*, they would chuckle. *I can't believe he died a virgin.*

...Was it safe to take advice from him?

My memories were hazy. Yet another reason this gave me pause. Had I gotten the girl after I followed his advice? There was a possibility it had been so traumatic, my mind had erased all trace of it...

But the truth was I didn't have any more ideas. I kept telling myself that this would work out fine and it wouldn't hurt to give it a go.

“For now, I should start by picking out a nice place to show her. Maybe a scene from the old world...? Hmm. But I'll have to prepare for all the monsters for *that*. But the forests and mountains around the village don't have that many beasts...”

I was starting to think I should compromise and choose someplace else.

“AAAAAAAAAAGH!”

Someone was screaming.

Under the orange evening sky, evil spirits were rampaging in the village.

“E-eeeeek?!”

“H-help me!”

Bloodcurdling shrieks and angry shouts started to emerge, fusing with monstrous war cries.

“What in the world...?!”

What was this? As I tilted my head, I saw a girl about my age scrambling to escape in my periphery—

A wolf monster was about to pounce on her from behind, ready to tear through her with its claws.

Of course, I couldn't let that happen. Just as I was about to cast magic on the beast...

"RAAAH!" someone roared, splitting the monster in two.

It was my father, Jack.

Gripping his double-edged sword, he saved the girl, letting out a ferocious shout. After saying a few words to her, he turned toward me.

"Ard! Stay inside! Be a good boy and take this girl with you!"

His expression was tense, covered by sweat that poured down his forehead and cheeks.

From what I could tell, this wasn't anything to stress about, but yeah, the average villager might consider it an emergency situation.

"By the way, Father. Why is this happening?"

"Ard...?! How can you be so calm?! Listen to me. Hurry and—"

"Before that, I would appreciate it if you answered my question." I stared him down.

He must have figured I wouldn't back down, or he'd been scared by my intensity. Either way, he quickly explained the situation.

"You know about the dungeons in the mountains, right? Well, apparently, the core just went crazy."

Hmm? A wild dungeon core?

I knew all about them. They went berserk for whatever reason, causing the population of monsters in the dungeon to explode. As a result, the overflow of creatures would be pushed out of the dungeon, laying waste to the surrounding area. It was known as a "dungeon hazard," but...it was strange. If that was the situation, there should have been ten times more monsters.

"The villagers predicted it wouldn't go wild for another year...! Why now...?!" my father lamented.

I felt a little guilt at the sight of his anguished face.

Ireena and I...had been responsible for this disaster.

The dungeon core wouldn't have been triggered if it had just been me, but the two of us had been hunting monsters as a way to let off steam. I had warned her not to go overboard, but it was clear she hadn't listened.

...Whatever. This sort of thing was right up my alley.

“H-hey! Where do you think you’re going?!” My father yanked me back by my shoulders as I tried to pass him.

“To see Ireena, of cou—”

Just then, we saw a figure sprinting toward us from the road, and I stopped mid-sentence.

My father called out. “Weiss! Where are you going?! You’re supposed to be intercepting the monsters with us!”

Us. Excluding Ard Meteor.

He was referring to him and his wife. Weiss was also a part of this team, but...he was clearly heading outside the village.

I didn’t imagine he was so frightened that he was trying to run away. From the fear on his face, there was a possibility that it had to do with—

“Ireena! My daughter is in the mountains!”

That turned me to stone.

...This was bad.

The number of monsters in the village couldn’t compare to those running wild in the mountains. Taking them on would be a heavy burden for someone at Ireena’s level. We were looking at a worst-case scenario...but I could safely declare it wouldn’t come to that.

After all, they had me on their side.

“Let me go, Jack! I’m going to save Ireena!” Weiss shouted.

“Calm down! She’ll be fine! She can get away on her own!”

I watched them push and shove out of the corner of my eye before casting a spell to whisk me to Ireena. A flight spell. *Sky Walker*.

My body started to float in the air.

“Please stop fighting. I’ll bring Ireena home,” I declared.

“What?! What are you sa...”

“...Huh?”

All the energy they’d had a moment ago seemed to seep out of them. They gaped at me.

I didn’t have time to entertain them any further, though.

“Well then, I need to go.”

I vaulted into the orange sky, heading toward the nearby mountains.

“...Hey, Weiss. That was a flight spell, right?”

“Uh-huh. Sky Walker, a Lost Skill.”

I could only pick up bits and pieces of this conversation. I had to be

mistaken.

There was no way a random flight spell would be a Lost Skill.

“Hold on, Ireena. When I finally save you...”

...I'll have a fun surprise waiting, I thought to myself, aiming for the mountains and cutting a beeline across the sky.



She had to be cursed.

Ireena swore at the scene before her, gnashing her teeth. Deep in the mountain, it could have been any time of day.

The monsters were interlaced between the trees and weeds, camping around her. Their numbers had to add up to a ridiculous sum...

Her predicament was more than enough to make the girl accept her imminent death.

“Heh-heh. Look what we have here. A pretty little lady...,” cooed a goblin, taking a step toward her.

Ireena was shocked. It was rare for monsters to be born with a modicum of intelligence...except for the super overpowered. That meant this goblin could easily destroy a village or two, even though goblins were the bottom-feeders on the monster food chain.

If this rare breed had any form of compassion, she would be saved...!

“Ah! I’m so lucky... I didn’t think I’d find fresh meat so soon after being born...” Its green face twisted with sadism and ecstasy.

...This is it for me.

Maybe this was her punishment. She’d come into the mountains every day, slaughtering to relieve her stress. She must have angered the gods here.

If that was the case...it made her despise them all the more.

It wasn’t as if anyone would form a habit of killing just for fun. Ireena was certain others would find themselves in her position if they had been cursed from birth like her.

She had suffered from the hand the gods dealt her, which she imagined would continue to give her grief until the day she died.

Compared to that, getting eaten alive didn’t seem so bad.

“Okay... Hm? What? Do you guys want a piece of this meat, too? Fair enough. But leave some for me.”

The monster army hooted, causing the earth to rumble. Ireena accepted her death.

“Okay, girl. Resist and let me have some fun.”

A vulgar smile spread across the goblin’s green face, but she wasn’t going to oblige. She’d already accepted she was going to die.

She braced herself for the pain, knowing it would only be a few minutes at most.

It was a better end than spending decades in hell on earth.

The goblin looked at her with disappointment. *“I was hoping you would yell for help from friends and family.”*

Friends, huh. Ireena’s heart stung.

“I don’t have anyone. They’ve all...left me.”

She hadn’t always been alone. When she was younger, she’d had her own friends during a time in her life when she could be carefree.

Things changed, though, the moment her secrets came to light...

“What...? No way...”

“Ireena...”

She had trusted her friends with her secret, but disgust was written on their faces...which felt like the ultimate betrayal.

“D-didn’t you say we’d always be friends?!” she had asked.

“...Are you joking? Why would we be friends with a monster?”

From that moment forward, Ireena knew she would never be friends with anyone again.

“...Boooring. Do your worst, guys,” the goblin said.

The monsters whooped before attacking.

Staring at the death horde, Ireena pursed her lips.

She was better off this way. She would be released from her cursed fate.

But...she wasn’t happy. On the contrary, she was sad...and afraid.

I can end it all, but...

...But the prospect of death was too terrifying. That was why she had to let her lips voice the phrase she’d been whispering her entire life.

“Someone, help me...!”

In that instant...a translucent golden wall appeared before the pack of monsters diving toward her. The mad deluge crashed into it, squealing like crushed pigs as they came to a sudden halt.

“Huh. There aren’t as many as I’d hoped,” a familiar voice remarked,

devoid of any fear.

When she conjured his face in her mind, he alighted in front of her.

“A-Ard...?!”

“It’s the first time you’ve called me by name.” He flashed her a smile.

“W-why are you...?!” Ireena murmured belligerently.

The turn of events was so unbelievable, she couldn’t get her thoughts together. Her sentences were fragmented. Even Ireena didn’t know what she wanted to say.

That was when the intelligent goblin rubbed its chin with interest.

“Humans are like moths to a flame. I never thought they would voluntarily come to be eaten—”

Right. They were still in dire straits. At this rate, they would die.

She couldn’t allow that.

Even though Ard was out of his mind, she didn’t hate him. In fact...she liked that he stuck around, even when she was mean to him. Ireena didn’t want him to die.

She was about to yell at Ard to run...but before she could... something felt off.

The goblin had been standing there, straight as a rod, doing nothing for some time now. Its words were cut off mid-sentence, and it didn’t even attempt to make the slightest movement.

What happened? She wondered.

“Huh. Intelligent specimen or not, a goblin is still a goblin. It can’t even fend off this level of magic.”

Magic? What was he talking about?

A moment later, beams of light pierced the goblin’s body...nerfing it into blood and sinew, which plopped on the ground.

She had no idea what was going on. Her mind was filled with questions, but no one could have comprehended these events.

Ard had just unleashed a sleight of hand that was impossible in *this* era.

Through the use of instant magic processing, a circle had formed at supersonic speed without a chant. It was a maneuver that was lightning-fast...and far beyond the realm of normal.

And Ard Meteor had accomplished it as if it were child’s play.

He offered her an easy smile. “There’s something special I’d like to show you.”

She had no idea what he was talking about. In fact, she didn't know anything about anything, like she'd been caught in a trance.

Ard glanced at her before turning back to the monsters.

In that instant, their survival instincts kicked in. The entire group made a break for it, spinning around to be the first to get away, but—

“Demon Lord knows, you can never escape *me*.”

The monsters didn't seem to be able to move another inch. It wasn't clear what he had done.

While fleeing for their lives, they had been frozen by some cruel trick, like the goblin... It was too difficult to understand, so Ireena stopped trying.

Ard gave her another side glance. “Hmm, the trees seem to be in the way. This isn't a very good view,” he muttered to himself.

With those words, the dense vegetation disappeared in an instant. From this open space, they could survey the area around them. The expanse of sky above was unobstructed.

Of course, Ireena made no attempt to process this, either. It was useless to try.

“Well then, Ireena.”

Ireena jumped when he pulled her back to her senses.

Ard held out his right palm toward the monster army—then lifted it upward. The beasts synchronized with his movement, whizzing high into the sky.

“I thought this might put a smile to your face,” Ard murmured, grinning. He clenched his open palm.

In that next moment, a brilliant glimmer flashed across the dark heavens.

The monsters exploded in time with Ard's gesture. It was spectacular. The world had been falling into evening, but now, it was bright as day.

It was otherworldly.

“What do you think, Ireena?! Look! Fireworks! Ha-ha-ha! They never get old!”

Ard Meteor had a smile that could have made flowers bloom.

He was just like...a great hero from myth. A monster in a fairy tale.

He was just like...the Demon Lord Varvatos.



I'd managed to save *and* surprise Ireena.

Far from being delighted, though, she seemed to have been pushed farther away.

Where did I go wrong? I wondered.

Ireena balled her hand into a fist and glared at me. "Why...why did you save me...?! I wanted to die...!" she snapped.

I stared into her teary eyes.

"...Please don't say that. Why would you want to die? If you'd like, we can talk it over toge—"

"No thanks! You'll never understand! I bet you don't even know what it feels like to be lonely!"

Tears rolled down her cheeks.

I responded in all seriousness. "...I don't know your circumstances. When it comes to loneliness, though, I understand it better than anyone else. That's why..."

"...I want to be friends with you."

We'll grow to understand one another, I thought. I wasn't sure if that came through.

Because Ireena...rejected my request.

"No...! I bet you'll betray me someday, too...! Just like everyone else! That's why I—"

"I'll never give up on you. I'll never betray a dear friend again," I declared, casting a certain spell.

A magic circle appeared before us, transforming into a spear.

"I, Ard Meteor, swear to never make Ireena Litz de Olhyde cry. If I break this promise, I will pay for it with my life."

Upon this vow, I pierced my breast with the magic spear, causing it to vanish within me.

"Was that...?"

"A contract spell? Yes. It was originally meant for slaves and prisoners of war. I'll suffer if I go back on my vow. If I betray you, I'll die. That's all."

Ireena grew flustered. “A-are you stupid?! W-why would you go that far...for me...?!”

I could feel my chest tighten...

I hung my head. “I can’t go into detail, but I once betrayed a friend. Because of that, she...”

I didn’t want to go any further. I shook my head, gazing straight into Ireena’s wide eyes.

“You remind me of her. She was the only person who understood me. You’re practically identical in looks and personality. That’s why I want to be friends with you... I know you might find me annoying, but I think we can relate to one another on a personal level. I’ll never betray you. And I don’t think you’ll ever do that to me. Won’t you please be my friend?” I implored.

Her cheeks were wet with tears.

“But I-I’ve got a rotten personality.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I’m selfish...and stupid...and boring.”

“Lies. You’re wonderful, Ireena.”

“Y-you’ll definitely...end up hating me someday...”

“Impossible. I won’t ever hate you—not even for an instant. I can take a vow if you want.”

“B-but I-I...!”

She must have been dealing with her own set of circumstances, but I elected not to probe into them. All I cared about was her answer.

After some time, Ireena seemed to resolve the discord in her heart.

“A-are you sure you want to be...friends with me?” She nervously held out her hand.

I never dreamed I’d see this day. My eyes snapped open, and I broke into a goofy grin. Overcome with my emotions, I took Ireena’s hand and nodded enthusiastically.

“Of course. I can’t wait for what the future holds for us, Ireena.”

“Y-yeah... M-me, too, Ard!” She offered me an awkward smile.

I thought it was adorable.

And I knew I was just starting life in this world.

It had been years since I made my first friend. I was fifteen years old.

Ireena was still my only friend, but I didn't feel like I was missing out on anything. In fact, she was so cute, she was all I really needed.

I couldn't afford to write out my fond memories of her. I'd need millions of words to do it justice, and our families were getting together that night.

At fifteen, all citizens became productive members of society and began planning out their life goals. That was why Ireena and Weiss were joining us for a family meeting.

It was seven in the evening. There was a knock at the door. I answered for my mother, greeting our two guests.

"Hello there, Ard. I'm looking forward to our chat today." Weiss flashed me a radiant smile.

"Evening, Ard!" chirped Ireena from next to him, beaming at me.

It had been a rarity when we'd first become friends, but now, she smiled freely.

Ireena was so adorable...more than anyone else in the whole wide world. Good luck convincing me otherwise.

I ushered them inside to get everyone seated at the dining table.

"I made your favorite today, Ireena. Curry."

"Yay! Love you, Ard!"

"That makes me so happy."

Digging into my curry, Ireena was basically an angel on earth.

After we all finished enjoying our meal together...

"Why don't we get started?" my father suggested.

"So about your futures...", my mother started.

The two glanced at Weiss. He shrugged his shoulders. *Good grief*, I imagined he was thinking.

"I'd hate to force you to take a path against your will. Think of this as my personal suggestion," Weiss prefaced.

He looked at me.

"Ard... How do you feel about attending the Academy of Magic?"

To which I replied...

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